



Mac Basics

by **JOE KISSELL**
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2ND
EDITION

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Read Me First

Welcome to *Mac Basics, Second Edition*, version 2.1, published in December 2025 by alt concepts. This book was written by Joe Kissell and edited by Caroline Rose.

This book explains the basics of how to use a Mac, starting from scratch. It covers both the Mac hardware and macOS, as well as Apple’s built-in apps.

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If you bought this ebook from the Take Control website, it has been added to your account, where you can download it in other formats and access any future updates.

What's New in Version 2.1

This update addresses just one small change in macOS 26.2 Tahoe: a new Tinted option for the Liquid Glass interface. See the sidebar [About the Liquid Glass Setting](#).

What Was New in the Second Edition

The second edition of this book was revised to cover macOS 26 Tahoe, including new apps and settings and a new visual design, which Apple calls Liquid Glass. Many of the new topics were adapted from my book [Take Control of Tahoe](#). Here are the major changes:

- Removed instructions and screenshots pertaining only to macOS 13 Ventura through macOS 15 Sequoia, and replaced nearly all of the remaining screenshots (but don't worry if you're still using an older operating system; see the sidebar just ahead)
- Added [Your Mac's Processor](#) to describe the differences among different chip types
- Updated [Control Center](#) to reflect the new design and customization options introduced in Tahoe
- Explained how to [Customize Folders](#) with user-selected colors and icons
- Added topics about several new apps ([Apps](#), [Games](#), [Journal](#), and [Phone](#)) and the new [Magnifier](#) utility
- Expanded the description of [iPhone Mirroring](#)
- Completely overhauled the discussion of Spotlight (see [Find \(Almost\) Anything with Spotlight](#)), including coverage of several major new features (see [Use Actions and Quick Keys](#) and [Use Clipboard History](#))
- Revised [Manage Notifications](#) to reflect settings changes in Tahoe

- Added coverage of [Themes](#) to the System Settings discussion
- Mentioned AppleCare One as an option in [AppleCare+](#)

Downloading the Previous Edition of This Book

Because the user interface changed significantly in macOS 26 Tahoe, I decided to rework this second edition to cover only Tahoe or later. Otherwise, the book would have been full of cumbersome instructions and extra screenshots to cover the variety of ways things look and behave in different versions of macOS.

However, if your Mac is not running Tahoe, you can still download and read the previous edition of this book, which fully covers any Mac that can run macOS 13 Ventura through macOS 15 Sequoia. To do so, use the link in [Ebook Extras](#), near the end of the book or, in the PDF format, click the Ebook Extras badge on the front cover. The resulting page shows download links for both the current version of the book and version 1.0.1.

How to Navigate This Book

Whichever app you’re using to read this book—for example, [Preview](#) or Adobe Acrobat Reader on a Mac, or Apple’s [Books](#) app on a Mac, iPhone, or iPad—it likely offers an array of navigational tools, such as icons or buttons you can use to flip to earlier or later pages, a Search field to look for a particular term, and possibly a list of page thumbnails or a table of contents shown in a left-hand sidebar. (You can find advice about getting this book onto various devices, and opening it in various apps, on our [Device Advice](#) page.)

In addition, you’ll notice many blue links, such as “Preview,” “Books,” and “Device Advice” in the previous paragraph. Some of these are *internal* links; click them to jump directly to another topic in the book. Others are *external* links, which open webpages in your default browser. The external links are underlined to help you distinguish them from the internal links.

Which Macs Does This Book Cover?

As I mentioned just above in the sidebar [Downloading the Previous Edition of This Book](#), the second edition of this book covers only Macs running macOS 26 Tahoe or later. (Read [Understand macOS and Version Names](#) for more on version numbers and names.) That means any of the following:

- MacBook Air (2020 or newer)
- MacBook Pro (16-inch, 2019)
- MacBook Pro (2020 or newer)
- iMac (2020 or newer)
- Mac mini (2020 or newer)
- Mac Studio
- Mac Pro (2019 or newer)

Note: Of the supported models, only these use Intel processors: MacBook Air (Retina, 13-inch, 2020), MacBook Pro (16-inch, 2019 and 13-inch, 2020), iMac (Retina 5K, 27-inch, 2020), and Mac Pro (2019). Apple has stated that Tahoe will be the last version of macOS to support Intel-based Macs.

All Macs released in October 2025 or later should already come with Tahoe or a newer version of macOS. The other Macs on the list above can be upgraded to run Tahoe.

Not sure what kind of Mac you have, when it was released, or which version of macOS it's running? I cover that in [Get Basic Info About Your Mac](#). If your Mac can run Tahoe but you haven't yet upgraded its operating system, that should be your first step. see [Software Update](#) or the Apple article [Update macOS on Mac](#).

Introduction

Back in the 1990s, a company hired me to come in and teach their employees how to use a certain word processor. The first thing I asked was what level of computer knowledge my students would have, because I wanted to make sure I tailored the material to the audience. The company told me that everyone was experienced in using Macs and already knew all the basics; they just needed to learn about this one specific program. So, I prepared my lessons with that in mind.

On the first day, I had been talking for less than 10 minutes when I started noticing confused expressions. People asked me questions about seemingly irrelevant things, like why there was a clock on the menu bar. They seemed not to understand how to perform tasks that should have been simple for anyone who had been using a Mac for more than a few days.

I asked one woman, who seemed especially confused, how long she had been using a Mac. She told me that she had never touched a Mac—or any other computer—before that morning. My class, which was supposed to build on existing skills, was in fact her first introduction to using a computer *at all*. What the company had told me beforehand didn't match reality.

Needless to say, I scrapped my lesson plans on the spot and started at square one. How do you turn this thing on? How does a mouse work? How do you run apps? My students left the two-day training knowing enough to get around their Macs comfortably, but we never got into much detail about that word processor.

Even though decades have passed since then, I keep having similar experiences. Someone buys one of our books on a more advanced topic and then tells me they're lost because no one ever explained the basics to them. It's as though we were trying to teach them calculus but they hadn't learned fundamental arithmetic yet.

Macs don't come with instruction manuals anymore. (Too bad!) Although someone new to a Mac—or even new to computers altogether—can get introductory training at an Apple Store (if they live close enough to one) or on Apple's website (if they know exactly where to look), my experience has shown me that far too much still slips through the cracks. People end up learning a handful of things, enough to fake their way through most tasks, but they don't even know what they don't know. They sometimes get stuck, unable to learn any more because they never had a solid foundation to build on in the first place.

This book is my attempt to provide that foundation. If you're brand new to Macs, welcome! This book will help you get started. If you've been using a Mac for months or years but have been frustrated because you still don't know how to do things you'd like to do, since you never had any systematic training, this book is also for you. I'll do my best to fill in those gaps. And even if you're comfortable using your Mac, if you sometimes feel that you're on shaky ground or unclear about how things work, you can probably find the answers here.

But, when I say “basics,” I mean it! I'm deliberately leaving out *lots* of information because *it isn't basic*. I ignore many features, and simplify what I do cover, in ways that might annoy and exasperate experienced Mac users. They'd say, “Yeah, but you didn't mention that you could *also* do it like this!” That's right, I didn't, because this isn't that sort of book. It's not intended to be comprehensive. It doesn't show you all the cool tricks you can perform and shortcuts you can take, because those things are (say it with me) *not basic*. Fair enough?

To learn which Macs and macOS versions this book covers, flip back to [Which Macs Does This Book Cover?](#). And, if you're not even sure what an operating system is, be sure to read [Understand macOS and Version Names](#).

Note: Years ago, the former editor-in-chief of Take Control Books, Tonya Engst, wrote a terrific book called *Take Control of Mac Basics*. This book replaces that one, which we discontinued after it had gone long out of date and Tonya's schedule prevented her from updating it. I cover many of the same topics but approach them a bit differently.

Finally, if you're interested in a comparable book but for iPhones and iPads, I can recommend one: [*iPhone and iPad Basics*](#) by Glenn Fleishman!

Is This Whole Book Just an Ad for Other Books?

Scattered throughout this book you'll see *many* references to other Take Control books that cover specific apps and features in vastly more detail. You'll see so many of them, in fact, that you may wonder whether this book is little more than a ploy to get you to buy our other books!

Well, of *course* we'd like you to buy our other books. We put a lot of work into making our catalog as thorough and helpful as possible. However, the real reason for all those references is that I'm trying to do just what the cover says and stick to the basics. A book that covered every app and feature in detail would be thousands of pages long. (No kidding! Add up the page counts of all the books I reference and you'll see a number approaching 5,000 pages.)

So, feel free to explore the other books if a particular topic strikes your fancy, but don't feel you have to learn every last detail (or buy lots of other books) to be a competent Mac user.

Mac Basics Quick Start

Although I’ve tried to arrange the topics in this book in a logical order that builds, as you go, on previous knowledge, I’ve also provided plentiful cross-references that let you jump from one place to another as needed. Beginning users will benefit from reading the book in order; those with some experience should feel free to jump directly to any topic of interest.

Find your way around:

- Learn about your Mac’s hardware and the main things you’ll find on its screen. See [Get to Know Your Mac](#).
- Make friends with the Finder, the one app you can’t use your Mac without. See [Understand the Finder](#).
- Understand what’s located where in macOS. See [What’s on Your Disk](#).
- Discover how your Apple Account and, more specifically, iCloud are woven into macOS. See [Learn Apple Account and iCloud Basics](#).

Use apps to get stuff done:

- Find out how to perform all the basic activities in apps (including installing and deleting them). See [Work with Apps](#).
- Learn about every single one of the dozens of apps included with macOS. See [Use Your Mac’s Built-in Apps](#).

Learn more Mac fundamentals:

- Learn how to perform actions that work across macOS. See [Explore Systemwide Features](#).
- Discover what you can change in System Settings and how. See [Customize Your Mac](#).
- Keep your Mac safe from numerous threats. See [Protect Your Mac and Its Data](#).

- Attach and use input devices, storage devices, displays, and more. See [Use External Devices](#).
- Moving to a Mac from Windows? Get extra help in [Appendix A: Migrate to a Mac from Windows](#).

Get to Know Your Mac

Can you imagine trying to drive a car without knowing how the gearshift works, which pedal to press if you want to stop, or how to use your turn signals? All these things, and more, quickly become second nature, but at some point you have to learn what all the components are and how to use them. Likewise, you should be intimately familiar with both your Mac's hardware and what you see on the screen. This chapter helps you get oriented to the major elements of using a Mac.

Your Mac's Processor

In 2020, Apple introduced the first Macs that were based on their own custom-designed chips rather than Intel chips, referring to the new architecture as “Apple silicon.” These chips were essentially fancier and faster versions of the A-series chips Apple had been using in iPhones, iPads, and even Apple TV boxes for some years. But, since they were being used for Macs, these new variants had names starting with M: M1 at first, followed by M1 Pro, M1 Max, and M1 Ultra, then an M2 line, an M3 line, and an M4 line, with many more iterations expected in the future. All current and future Macs use Apple silicon, and Apple plans to phase out support for Intel Macs by 2027.

Tip: Unsure what kind of chip your Mac uses? See [Get Basic Info About Your Mac](#).

Even though Apple wants everyone to call these devices “Macs with Apple silicon,” that always seemed excessively clunky to us, so in *Take Control* books we've consistently used the shorthand “M-series Macs.” That has worked fine so far.

However, in mid-2025, [rumors began to circulate](#) that Apple would release a low-priced MacBook using not an M-series chip but rather an A-series chip. Are these rumors true? I have no idea. But if and when that does happen, it will be the first “Mac with Apple silicon” that isn't

an M-series Mac, in which case we might have to rethink how we describe such Macs in our books. But, at least for this version of this book, we're sticking with "M-series" with the understanding that anything we say about M-series Macs *should* also apply to hypothetical future A-series Macs.

Parts and Ports

Most of the visible components of your Mac are, for the typical adult living in the 21st century, obvious and well understood. I know I don't have to tell you, for example, what a keyboard or a mouse is. However, some things aren't entirely self-explanatory, and even those that are may have features you're unaware of. Let's take a look.

Keyboard

Mac laptops have built-in keyboards, while desktop Macs have external keyboards. Either way (and especially if you have an Apple-branded keyboard), it has some controls that deserve a special mention.

About Third-Party Keyboards

The keyboard connected to your Mac need not have been made by Apple. Virtually any USB or Bluetooth keyboard can work with your Mac, but you should be aware of a few qualifications:

- ✦ Third-party keyboards may have a different selection or arrangement of keys than Apple's keyboards, and may use different labels.
- ✦ Keyboards designed for Windows work on a Mac, but some keys may not do what you expect. In particular, the Windows  key is roughly comparable to the  key on a Mac keyboard but it may or may not function as  without additional software supplied by the keyboard's manufacturer. The Alt key on a keyboard designed for Windows functions as the Option key on a Mac.
- ✦ Although macOS automatically prompts you to pair Apple's wireless keyboards, pairing a third-party Bluetooth keyboard may require manual steps in System Settings > Bluetooth (see [Customize Your Mac](#) to learn more about System Settings).

Understand the Finder

In this chapter we explore the Finder, an app that's central to the use of macOS because it shows you all your files, folders, and apps. You'll use the Finder many times a day to manage documents, open apps, and much more.

What Is the Finder?

When you turn on your Mac, even without opening any apps, you can see a bunch of elements on the screen as described earlier in [Tour Your Mac's Screen](#), such as the menu bar, the Dock, and your desktop. But what about everything else—your folders, files, and apps? To see, open, and work with those items, you use an ever-present app called the Finder. The Finder is always running, and it's the app that (among other things) enables you to navigate your disk and, yes, *find* things. (If you've previously used Windows, you can think of the Finder as being similar to File Explorer.)

As usual, you'll know that the Finder is the active app because its name appears on the menu bar next to the Apple  menu. You can switch to the Finder by clicking its icon in the Dock (**Figure 11**).



Figure 11: The Finder's icon in the Dock.

Nearly everything you do in the Finder happens in a window (see [Windows](#), just ahead). You can have as many Finder windows open as you like, each with its own view, settings, and contents. As this chapter progresses, I show you what to use the Finder for and how to perform the most common tasks (including managing files and folders).

Why We Call it *the* Finder

We normally call an app by its name—Mail, Preview, Safari, or whatever. But when it comes to the app named Finder, nearly everyone (including Apple) precedes it with *the*. We don't say, "Open a window in Finder"; we say, "Open a window in *the* Finder."

The Finder has been around since the very first Mac running [System 1](#) back in 1984. Back then, it wasn't a separate app like it is today. It was simply a feature, like the menu bar: a part of the Mac's operating system that was always there. In those days, it sounded natural to the people who created the original Mac to call this feature "the Finder."

Although today's Finder looks almost nothing like the one from 1984, that naming convention has remained a constant, and it has become so much a part of the Mac experience that even Apple's official style guide, which says not to put *the* before other app names, carves out a special exception for the Finder!

Files, Documents, and Folders

In the real world, we might use the word *file* to refer to a paper folder or envelope containing a number of papers, photos, and other materials. For example, a teacher might have a file on each student in a class. In the computer world, a file is a chunk of data, which may be in the form of text, graphics, audio, video, or something else. When a file is something you can view and edit, we call it a *document* (see [What's a Document?](#)). A *folder* is a container that can hold any number of files.

Windows

Almost everything you do in the Finder happens in a *window*—a rectangular area that shows the contents of a folder. You can have as many windows open as you like (including multiple windows showing the contents of the same folder), and each one can have its own characteristics. **Figure 12** shows a simple Finder window.

What's on Your Disk

In this book, when I use the term *disk*, I generally mean your Mac's primary internal storage device—whether that's a mechanical hard drive, an SSD, or other solid-state storage. In any case, your disk is where all the data on your Mac is, and since there's so much of it, it's carefully organized in a hierarchy of folders. In this chapter I acquaint you with what's on your disk and where.

The Structure of macOS

Fresh out of the box, before you open a single app or create a single document, your Mac already contains many hundreds of thousands of files, organized carefully in an elaborate hierarchy of folders. You'll never see most of these, as they're hidden inside apps, located in invisible folders, or kept in locations you'd have to go far out of your way to encounter. I could probably write 50 pages detailing where all the major bits are and what they do, but that would be as boring for me to write as it would be for you to read.

Instead, let me just give you a brief, high-level overview of what's where in macOS. (You can follow along by opening a Finder window and selecting Macintosh HD in the sidebar, and then opening each of the folders I mention.)

At the top level of your disk, there are four main folders:

- **Applications:** The Applications folder contains most, if not all, of your apps—those that come with macOS (see [Use Your Mac's Built-in Apps](#)) and those you install yourself (see [Add Apps to Your Mac](#)).
- **Library:** In a series of subfolders within the Library folder are resources that certain apps need to access regardless of which user is logged in. Examples include desktop pictures, fonts, and preference files. Ordinarily, you should not have to manually change anything in this folder.

- **System:** The System folder contains mostly lower-level components that macOS needs to run (but not those used to *boot*, or start up, your Mac; those are kept in a user-inaccessible place). macOS won't let you change anything here, but you're allowed to look, and if you do, you'll see interesting things such as:
 - ▶ *Applications:* Wait, another Applications folder? Yes indeed. In fact, you may notice that the apps in this folder are all (and only) those that come with macOS (see [Use Your Mac's Built-in Apps](#)). But didn't you just see them in the top-level Applications folder? Yes again. In fact, the apps in this folder are the originals; macOS does some behind-the-scenes trickery to make them appear in the main Applications folder too, without duplicating them.
 - ▶ *Library:* This Library folder contains resources macOS itself needs in order to operate.
- **Users:** Possibly the most important folder, Users is where your personal files (and those of anyone else using your Mac) are stored. This folder contains:
 - ▶ *Home folder(s):* Every user with an account on your Mac (see [Add Other User Accounts](#)) has a folder here featuring a shortened or simplified version of their name—whatever they chose when the account was first set up. (Refer back to [Run Through Setup Assistant](#).) If your name is Jack Sprat, your home folder might be labeled [jacksprat](#), [jack](#), or [js](#), for example. I explain what's in here just ahead, in [Your Home Folder](#).
 - ▶ *Shared:* The Shared folder is a common area that all users on your Mac can access. If you're the only person using your Mac, you can ignore it entirely. If other people have their own accounts on your Mac and you want to put something where everyone can see it, put it in Shared.

You can create other folders here too, and there are also many hidden folders here (see [Hidden Stuff](#), later), which you will never encounter or have to think about under normal circumstances.

Learn Apple Account and iCloud Basics

Much of what you do on your Mac is likely to involve interacting with Apple in some way—even if only subtly, behind the scenes. To keep track of who you are, what Apple products you own, and numerous other pieces of information relevant to how you use your Mac, Apple relies on an identifier called an Apple Account. One of the many uses of an Apple Account is to enable you to use iCloud, Apple’s suite of online services.

In this chapter I want to lay out the fundamentals of your Apple Account and iCloud; I refer you to other books for far more details.

Understand Your Apple Account

To oversimplify, an Apple Account is a collection of information about you that’s stored on Apple’s servers, and that you can access with a username (your email address or phone number) and a password. That information includes your name and address, a record of everything you’ve purchased from Apple (hardware, apps, media, services, and subscriptions), one or more payment methods, and potentially other facts (your birthdate, health data, emergency contacts, and more).

Your Apple Account is different from your Mac’s user account. Your user account is something stored on your Mac itself—a way to keep your data separate from that of anyone else who uses your Mac. By contrast, your Apple Account applies to every Apple device you own or use, but does not, by itself, give you access to the folders, files, and settings on your Mac.

In a variety of situations—including when you sign in to apps like FaceTime, Messages, Music, Books, TV, or the App Store—your Mac (and other Apple devices) will prompt you to enter your Apple Account

username and password, so you'll want to be sure to memorize those (or keep them handy). If you're one of the very few people who don't already have an Apple Account, you can set one up in the process of enabling iCloud, as I describe ahead in [Set Up iCloud](#).

How does iCloud relate to your Apple Account? iCloud is one of the Apple services that relies on your Apple Account as the “glue”; when you sign in to iCloud, you sign in with your Apple Account. It is possible to have an Apple Account that's not also an iCloud account, but for the vast majority of Apple customers, having one implies having the other. If you try to sign in to iCloud with an Apple Account that isn't already set up for iCloud, Apple corrects that on the spot and—since your Apple Account username will, in that situation, be a non-Apple email address, Apple prompts you to pick an address ending in @icloud.com (which you can use or ignore, as you prefer).

One last thing I want to say about your Apple Account before we move on to iCloud specifically is that you'll need to have at least one payment method (such as a debit or credit card, PayPal, or Apple Pay) associated with it. This payment method will be used for purchases you make from the [App Store](#), [Books](#), [Music](#), and [TV](#) apps, and can be used for other things as well. To set up a payment method, go to account.apple.com and sign in. Click Payment & Shipping on the left, click “Add a payment method,” and follow the prompts.

Note: For vastly more detail about your Apple Account, including how to prevent and solve problems of various kinds, see Glenn Fleishman's book [Take Control of Your Apple Account](#).

Learn About iCloud

Apple uses the name iCloud to cover an ever-growing broad collection of features, services, and settings. The common thread is that they rely on communication among Apple devices (Macs, iPhones, iPads, Apple TVs, HomePods, and Apple Watches), Apple's servers in the cloud, and the broader internet.

Work with Apps

For many years, Apple and the rest of the computing world have used the word *application* to refer to any program with a graphical user interface—in your case, every program you’re likely to encounter on your Mac (unless you start digging into command-line programs with [Terminal](#)). More recently, the industry started shortening *application* to *app*. At first, the term *app* was used only for applications running on mobile devices, but as time went on, it started to apply to desktop applications too. I use the term *app* in this book, except when referring to places (like the Applications folder) where macOS still uses the older term.

By whatever name, apps are where you’ll spend all your time while using your Mac—working, playing, browsing, communicating, and so on. This chapter explains the basics of working with apps, including how to find and install new ones. The next chapter, [Use Your Mac’s Built-in Apps](#), provides an overview of the many apps included with your Mac.

Open an App

There are many ways to open (that is, launch or run) an app. Here are a few:

- If the app’s icon is in your [Dock](#), click it. (Remember, no need to double-click Dock icons.)
- In the Finder, navigate to your Applications folder (for example, by choosing Go > Applications, or by clicking Applications in the sidebar). Locate the app you want and double-click its icon.
- Open [Apps](#) by clicking its Dock icon. Find the app you want (which may require scrolling or using the search field at the top). Then click its icon. (Again, a single click is all you need here.)

- Open Spotlight (by clicking the magnifying glass  icon on your menu bar or pressing ⌘-Space), type a few letters of the app's name, select it in the list, and press Return. I cover Spotlight later, in [Find \(Almost\) Anything with Spotlight](#).

As I mentioned in [The Application Menu](#), the active app—the one you're currently using—displays its name on the menu bar just to the right of the Apple  menu.

Switch Apps

You're using one app and you want to use another; how do you switch? There are many ways, but let me start by saying that you should avoid the impulse to *quit* the app you're in before moving to another; as I explain ahead in [Quit an App](#), it's generally no problem at all to have a bunch of apps running all at once.

If the app you want to use isn't already running, you can open it as I described just above. For that matter, those very same procedures also switch to the app if it's already running. In addition, you can use any of these methods:

- Click any portion of one of the app's windows, if you see it somewhere on your screen. (If you can't see any windows from the other app, you can use [Mission Control](#) to display an overview of all open windows from every app, then click the one you want.)
- Press ⌘-Tab to switch to the open app that was most recently the active app. (You can then press ⌘-Tab again to switch back to the app you started with.)
- Use the *app switcher* to switch to any open app. Instead of pressing (and immediately releasing) ⌘-Tab, hold down ⌘ while you press and release Tab. The app switcher—a large row of icons—appears in the middle of your screen (**Figure 27**). While continuing to hold ⌘, you can then either click the icon of the app you want to use or press Tab to highlight the next icon in this list (or Shift-Tab to highlight

Use Your Mac's Built-in Apps

Your Mac includes dozens of built-in apps, which enable you to accomplish a wide range of tasks right out of the box. Some of these apps (for example, Clock and Stickies) are quite simple and straightforward, while others (such as Mail, Preview, and Shortcuts) are complex enough to warrant an entire book of their own.

In this chapter, I give you a quick introduction to the built-in apps, telling you what they do and offering a few usage tips. To learn more, you can use the Help menu in any app (refer back to [Get Help](#)) or, where applicable, read one of our Take Control books.

Note: The majority of these apps also come in versions for other Apple platforms (iOS, iPadOS, visionOS, watchOS, and tvOS). Although the appearance and capabilities may vary somewhat from one device to another, most of what you learn about an app is transferable to other platforms.

App Store

App Store is the name of both an app on your Mac and a service provided by Apple. It gives you a convenient way to download and install apps that Apple has checked for any malicious behavior or security risks, making them quite safe to use. Don't let the word "store" mislead you: many of the apps here are free! The App Store also includes apps that require a one-time fee, apps that require an ongoing subscription, and apps that use in-app purchases to unlock extra capabilities.

When you pay for an app in the App Store, you're entitled to free updates too. Those updates may go on indefinitely or be limited to your subscription period, depending on the developer's policies. However, it sometimes happens that an app undergoes a major upgrade that the

developer can't afford to offer for free, in which case the older app may be replaced or supplemented by a new one with a slightly different name.

For instructions on downloading, purchasing, and updating apps from the App Store, refer back to [The Mac App Store](#).

Apps

For a long time, macOS included an app called Launchpad that did nothing but show you icons for all the apps on your Mac. Besides opening any app with a single click, you could rearrange them, group them into folders, and search them, but that's it. Launchpad disappeared in Tahoe; in its place is a new app for viewing and opening apps called—wait for it—Apps.

The Apps icon looks similar to the Launchpad icon, and if you had Launchpad in your Dock previously, Apps replaces it seamlessly. Open it by clicking its Dock icon or double-clicking its icon in the Applications folder. When you open Apps, you see something like **Figure 35**—which is identical to what you see if you open Spotlight and then press ⌘-1; refer to [Find \(Almost\) Anything with Spotlight](#), later.

Explore Systemwide Features

Near the beginning of this book I introduced you to the [Menu Bar](#) and [Dock](#), which are available all the time, no matter what app you're using. In this chapter I call your attention to several other key features and capabilities available nearly everywhere on your Mac.

Use the Clipboard: Cut, Copy, and Paste

Your Mac—like every other modern computer, smartphone, and tablet—has a behind-the-scenes, temporary storage space for information you want to copy or move: the Clipboard. Although the Clipboard is usually invisible, it's an essential conduit for information. By analogy, if you grabbed a piece of paper and stuck it in your pocket, then later pulled out that paper and handed it to someone, your pocket would serve the same role as the Clipboard.

You put something on the Clipboard by *copying* it (which leaves the original in place) or *cutting* it (which removes the original), using the commands Edit > Copy or Edit > Cut, respectively. (You can also use the keyboard shortcuts ⌘-C for Copy and ⌘-X for Cut; see [Use Keyboard Shortcuts](#), below.) For example, say you open [TextEdit](#), type a few words, select one of them, and choose Edit > Copy; that word is now on the Clipboard, though it also remains in the document. If you click somewhere else to move the insertion point and choose Edit > Paste (⌘-V), the word you previously copied appears there too. Pasting doesn't remove the word from your Clipboard; you can keep pasting it, if need be, until you copy or cut something else. Only the act of putting something new on the Clipboard removes whatever was there previously. (However, you can optionally access items that were on your Clipboard recently; see [Use Clipboard History](#).)

Tip: To see what’s currently on the Clipboard, switch to the Finder (see [Understand the Finder](#)) and choose Edit > Show Clipboard. A new window appears, showing the Clipboard’s contents.

The Clipboard (and, thus, the Cut, Copy, and Paste commands) can be used with almost any type of data—not just text, but also graphics, movies, audio clips, and so on (pretty much anything you can select with your mouse or keyboard). Copy and Paste (but *not* Cut) can also be used to perform those actions on files and folders in the Finder. For example, if you select a file on your desktop and choose Edit > Copy, then open up a different folder (perhaps your Documents folder) and choose Edit > Paste, a copy of that file appears in the second folder.

Find (Almost) Anything with Spotlight

Spotlight is Apple’s omnibus search engine. You can activate Spotlight, type anything from a few letters to a phrase, and almost instantly see results matching apps and files on your Mac, messages in Mail, notes in Notes, images in Photos, songs in Music, dictionary definitions, websites, news stories, map locations, and much more. Spotlight searches not just the *names* of items on your Mac, but also their *contents*—even text shown in photographs!

To use Spotlight, either click the magnifying glass  icon on your menu bar or press the Spotlight keyboard shortcut, which is ⌘-Space by default. In the small window that pops up on your screen (**Figure 50**), type what you’re looking for. Spotlight begins searching for results, typically filling in some of them immediately and taking a few seconds to produce a longer list (**Figure 51**).

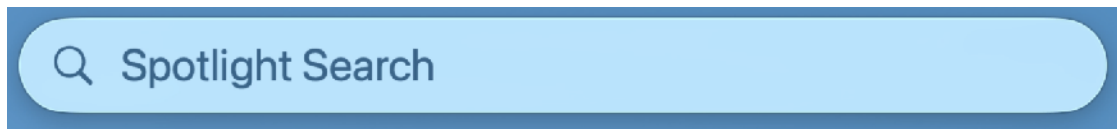


Figure 50: The Spotlight overlay as it looks when you first invoke it.

Customize Your Mac

You can change a huge number of things about how your Mac looks and acts to suit your personal needs and preferences. The vast majority of systemwide changes you may want to make can be configured in the System Settings app. (To change the behavior of an individual app, refer back to [Change an App's Settings](#).) In this chapter I take you on a brief tour of this app and explain how to find settings you might want to adjust.

Find and Open System Settings

[System Settings](#) is an ordinary app that, like other apps, lives in your Applications folder. You can open it from there, or from [Apps](#), just like any other app. In addition, you likely have an icon for System Settings in your [Dock](#) (and if you don't, you can add one). Yet another way to open System Settings is to choose Apple  > System Settings.

Navigate the System Settings App

Once open, System Settings looks something like **Figure 66**. A sidebar on the left lists major categories of settings; select one to view your options.

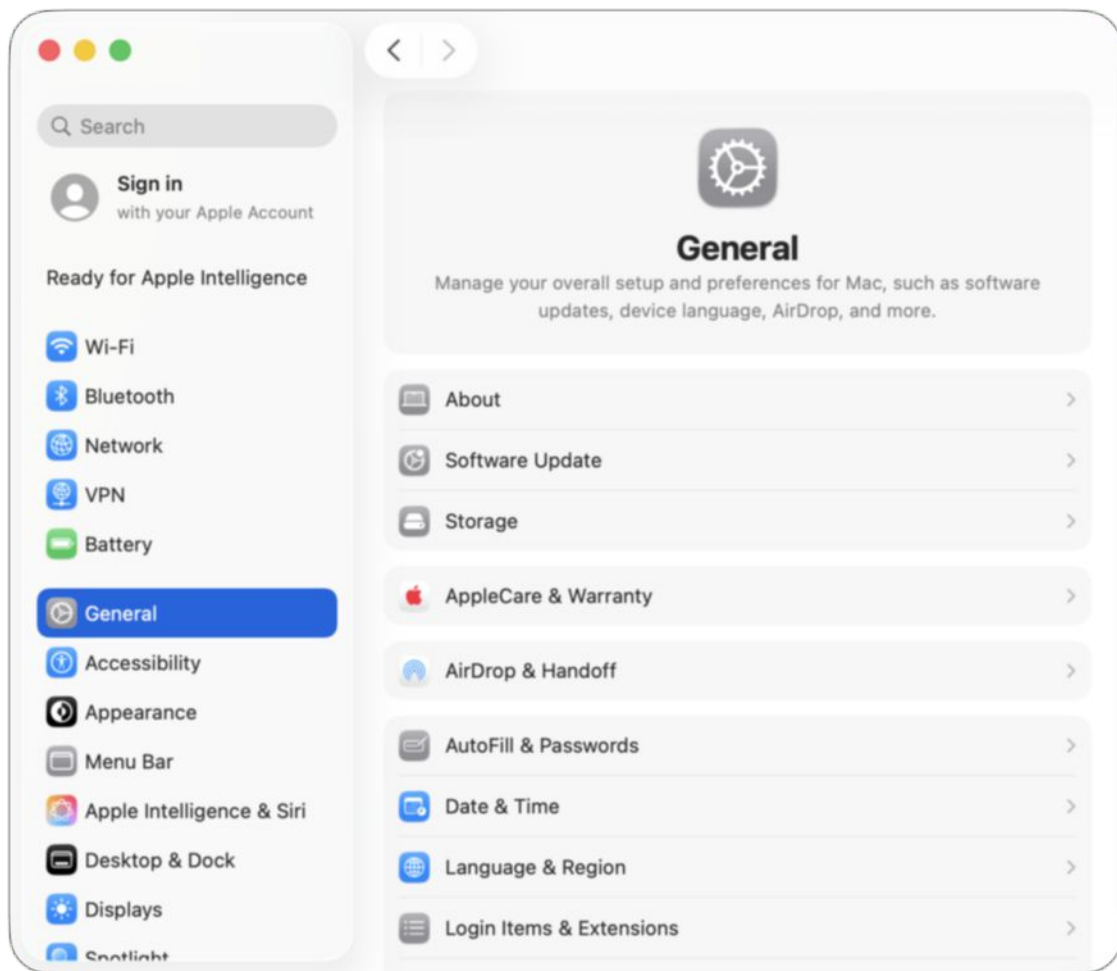


Figure 66: A portion of the System Settings window.

Settings for the selected category appear in the pane on the right; note that you may have to scroll to see them all. For categories with a great many settings, the right pane may be further divided into subviews, each denoted with a greater-than > symbol, indicating that you can click it to show more.

Because you can go several steps deep in the hierarchy of System Settings this way, Apple provides back < and forward > arrows at the top to help you navigate; these work just like the back and forward buttons in a web browser.

With over 30 main categories, dozens of subcategories, and hundreds of settings altogether, you may have a hard time finding the particular setting you want to change. The easiest way to do so is to use the Search field at the top of the sidebar. Even if you don't know the exact name of the feature you're looking for, type in a word or two that

Protect Your Mac and Its Data

Most of us have several kinds of insurance. We also do common-sense things to protect ourselves and our possessions, such as locking our doors, wearing a seatbelt in the car, and putting money in a bank rather than under a mattress. In the same way, your Mac and the data on it can benefit from several kinds of protection. This chapter introduces you to a few of them.

AppleCare+

When you buy a new Mac, it comes with a one-year limited warranty (covering repairs for hardware defects and the like) plus 90 days of technical support. After your warranty expires, any needed repairs or tech support can be quite expensive, so if you'd like to extend those benefits, you can optionally purchase [AppleCare+](#) coverage. It provides not only the same benefits as the initial warranty but also deeply discounted prices on repairs of *accidental* damage (like dropping a laptop and breaking its screen).

You can purchase AppleCare+ at the same time you purchase your Mac, or within 60 days thereafter. You have the option to buy a single, non-renewable, three-year plan or an annual plan that's renewed automatically until you cancel it. (The three-year plan is slightly less expensive than three years of an annual plan, but if you plan to use your Mac longer than three years, the annual plan gives you the option to keep it going as long as you need.) Pricing depends on your Mac model.

I always buy AppleCare+ for my Macs (and my other Apple devices too, including iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch) because, over the years, it has saved me many thousands of dollars on repairs. I find it comforting to know that whatever might go wrong with my Mac, it won't break the bank to fix it.

In 2025, Apple also introduced a program called [AppleCare One](#) (available only in the United States initially), which lets you add multiple devices to a single plan, potentially saving a significant amount of money. Plan prices start at \$19.99 per month for three devices, and you can add more devices for \$5.99 each per month.

Back Up and Restore Data

Have you ever accidentally deleted an important file? Whether due to a simple mistake or something more serious, such as a software bug, malware, theft, fire, or some other disaster, nearly everyone loses data at some point. Having a backup—an extra copy of your data, stored somewhere besides on your Mac—protects you when that happens, by giving you a way to restore whatever has gone missing. Having lost important files more than a few times myself, I strongly encourage every Mac user to back up!

You can use any of numerous apps to back up your Mac, and you can store your backups in lots of different places. To delve into all the details, you might want to check out my book [Take Control of Backing Up Your Mac](#). However, in the interest of sticking to the basics, I'll briefly share the quickest and easiest way to back up your Mac, which is to use Apple's [Time Machine](#) app.

Before you begin, you'll have to obtain an external hard drive or SSD with a suitable USB or Thunderbolt connection (see [USB and Thunderbolt Ports](#)). You can find such drives at any computer or electronics store, or at your favorite online retailer. Look for a drive with at least twice as much capacity as your Mac's disk. Once you have that, plug it into your Mac and click Allow when asked whether that device can connect (see [Attach an External Device](#)).

Now, to set up Time Machine, go to System Settings > General > Time Machine. Click Add Backup Disk, select the device you just attached, and click Set Up Disk. Your Mac may ask whether it can erase the entire backup drive, and you must agree to this if it does.

Use External Devices

As we saw back in [Parts and Ports](#), your Mac has a variety of connectors, which may include (depending on the model) USB-A, USB-C/Thunderbolt, HDMI, a headphone jack, and more. You can, if you like, connect any of a huge variety of devices to your Mac to increase its capabilities.

For the most part, external displays attached to an HDMI port, and headphones or speakers plugged into a headphone jack, begin working immediately with no further configuration required (though you may want to adjust display settings to your liking; refer back to [Display Settings](#)).

Different rules apply, however, when you plug something into a USB or Thunderbolt port, such as:

- External displays
- Input devices, including keyboards, mice, trackpads, trackballs, and game controllers
- Storage devices, such as hard drives, SSDs, and USB flash drives
- Digital audio input or output devices (for recording audio, say)
- Printers
- Scanners
- Digital cameras of various sorts

Some of these devices also come in wireless varieties (refer back to [Connect Bluetooth Devices](#)), but in this chapter I want to specifically discuss devices you physically plug into your Mac. Using such a device *can* be as simple as plugging it in, but there's nearly always a bit more to it than that, at least the first time you use it.

Attach an External Device

These days, nearly all USB and Thunderbolt devices are plug-and-play, which means you don't have to download and install special software called a *driver* to tell your Mac how to interact with the device. (There are some exceptions, and if you come across such a device, the manufacturer should provide instructions for installing the necessary software.)

However, for most devices, you will see an alert like the one in **Figure 73** the first time you attach it. This is a security feature to ensure that you know what the device is and are attaching it deliberately. Click Allow to give your Mac the OK, and from then on you'll be able to disconnect and reconnect it without interference.

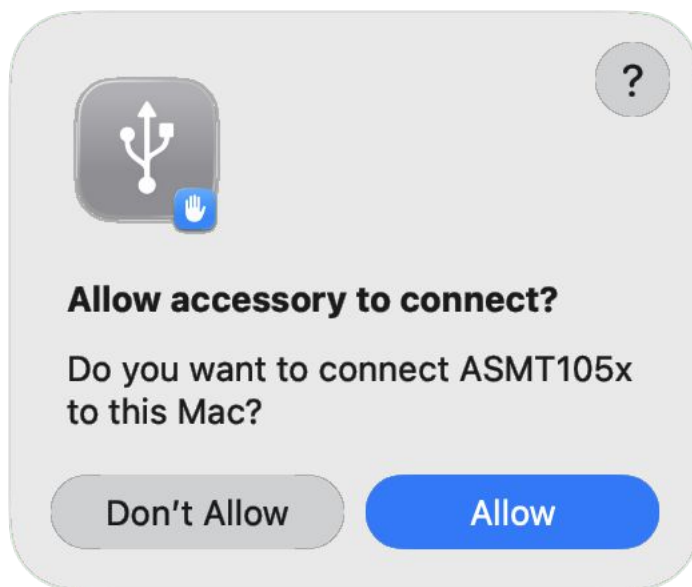


Figure 73: An alert like this appears the first time you connect a new USB or Thunderbolt device to your Mac.

Some external hard drives or SSDs may have been formatted in a way that your Mac can't read. If you attach one of these, you'll see an additional alert saying that to use the drive you'll have to initialize (erase) it. Follow the prompts to open [Disk Utility](#) and erase the drive.

Appendix A: Migrate to a Mac from Windows

If you're accustomed to using Windows and are new to using Macs, let me first say: Welcome! In my experience, Macs are a bit easier to use than PCs, require less maintenance, and are generally less fiddly. But, despite many similarities, they are different in numerous ways, and it may take time to get used to new names, locations, and techniques. In this brief appendix, I want to offer some advice to help smooth that transition.

Windows Migration Assistant

As you begin using a Mac, wouldn't it be great if all the important stuff from your PC—your contacts, calendars, email, tasks, browser bookmarks, documents, and so on—were magically transported to your Mac, converted to the formats your Mac expects, and put in the right locations so you can start using them right away? Apple helps you do just that with a utility called [Migration Assistant](#). You can use this to move data from one Mac to another, to restore data to your Mac from a backup, or move data from a Windows PC to your Mac.

This data transfer can happen either during the initial setup process when you first turn on a new Mac (see [Run Through Setup Assistant](#)) or later on. Either way, the basic process is:

1. Download [Windows Migration Assistant](#) to your PC.
2. Make sure your Mac and your PC are connected with a USB/Thunderbolt cable, or at least on the same Wi-Fi network.
3. Run Windows Migration Assistant on your PC.
4. Run Migration Assistant on your Mac, follow the prompts, select the items you want to transfer, and let it run.

That's the quick overview, but the full process involves a number of detailed steps. You can read all about them in Apple's article [Transfer from PC to Mac with Migration Assistant](#).

Equivalents, Approximations, and Differences

Some things in Windows have close to exact equivalents on your Mac; others are in the same ballpark but not identical; and still others may be different enough to stop you in your tracks. Here are some of the highlights:

- **Menu bar:** In Windows, each window within an app has its own menu bar; in macOS, there's just one menu bar at the very top of the window, and its contents change depending on which app you're using. See [Menu Bar](#).
- **Desktop, Documents, and Downloads:** These folders exist in both Windows and macOS and serve the same purposes.
- **Applications:** Many apps built into Windows have corresponding Mac apps with exactly the same names—for example, [Calculator](#), [Calendar](#), [Clock](#), [Mail](#), [Maps](#), [News](#), [Photos](#), [Terminal](#), and [Weather](#). Others have Mac counterparts with different names (and somewhat different features), such as:
 - ▶ *File Explorer:* [Finder](#) (see [Understand the Finder](#))
 - ▶ *Films & TV:* [TV](#)
 - ▶ *Notepad:* [TextEdit](#)
 - ▶ *Paint:* [Preview](#) (though it lacks similar drawing tools)
 - ▶ *Settings:* [System Settings](#), which also incorporates items you would find in the Windows Control Panel (see [Customize Your Mac](#))
 - ▶ *Sound Recorder:* [Voice Memos](#)

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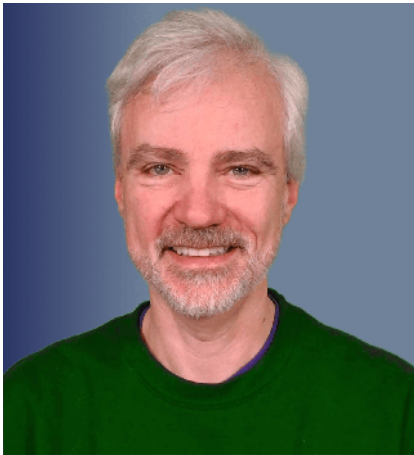
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About the Author and Publisher



Joe Kissell is the author of more than 75 books about technology. In 2017, he also became the publisher of Take Control Books, when alt concepts—the company he runs along with his wife, Morgen Jahnke—acquired the Take Control imprint from TidBITS Publishing Inc.’s owners, Adam and Tonya Engst. Before he began writing full-time in 2003, Joe managed software development, a *totally normal* profession for someone with degrees in philosophy and linguistics.

In his rare non-work hours, Joe likes to walk, cook, read, and practice tai chi. He lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, with Morgen and their sons. To contact Joe about this book, [send him email](#) and *please* include [Mac Basics](#) in the subject. You can also sign up for [joeMail](#), his low-volume mailing list, follow him on Mastodon ([@joeKissell](#)) or Bluesky ([@joeKissell.com](#)), or visit his blog at [JoeKissell.com](#).

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