

# BOOK REVIEWS

BY JAMES MOHR

## Perl Best Practices

I have a co-worker who codes like a plate of spaghetti, with the flow of his programs winding in and around and through itself. It is extremely frustrating to figure out why his programs are not working, especially at 2 AM. Unfortunately, for him, I know where he lives.

If you have ever wanted to scream loudly in a coworker's face because of his or her code, this book is for you. One of the biggest problems with Perl is that there are typically several different ways of solving a particular problem, some more elegant than others. This book addresses many situations where a certain solution may not be the best choice.

Much of this book can apply to any programming language – topics include important considerations such as code layout, naming conventions, and documentation, as well more esoteric concepts like “efficiency,” “maintainability,”

and “portability.” On a number of occasions, I found myself reading things that *should* have been obvious to me years ago.

Unlike books that are trying to actually teach Perl, this book does not start with basic features of Perl and build upon them. Instead, the book is organized by topics, such as “Naming Conventions,” “I/O,” and “Objects.” This design makes *Perl Best Practices* a great reference, as specific information is always easy to find.

Admittedly, the author is expressing his opinion about what is “right” and “wrong.” Still, the opinions are always based on logical arguments. You may have different personal preferences, and you may do some things differently from the author. The author even states that it is not his intention to provide *the* solution to every problem. Even so, this



book gets you thinking about the validity of your decisions.

If you are looking for a book to teach you how to program Perl, this is definitely not what you need. Also, if you are cranking out

quick Perl scripts to solve one-time tasks, it might not be worth the effort to read this book. However, if you are fairly comfortable with the language and are looking for ways to improve your code, this book would be a wonderful addition to your bookshelf.

**Damian Conway**

**517 pages**

**O'Reilly Media, 0-596-00173-8**

**£ 28.50, US\$ 39.95, EUR 36.50**

## Shell Scripting Recipes: A Problem-Solution Approach

If you are just starting to learn how to write shell scripts, this book is probably not for you. Though the first chapter does give a brief overview of useful commands, shell keywords, and script syntax, you might be intimidated by this book unless you have a good understanding of shell programming.

The author does employ good programming practices, so you can get a number of good tips if you pay attention. At quite a few places in the book, it is obvious the author is “old school,” as he tends to create scripts names with extremely short names. The names fall in line with



traditional Unix names, such as *wfc* for his script to find words that contain a specific pattern. (I personally feel that if you are going to write a script, the name should be long enough to at least give you a clue of what it is about.)

One nice aspect of the book is the way the discussion of each script is laid out. There is a brief introduction to the problem the script is trying to solve, a look at how the script works, and finally the script itself. This format fits well with the part of the title that promises “A Problem-Solution Approach.”

You are not likely to find every single script in this book useful – at least, not useful in the form presented in this book. I work in a classical data center environ-

ment, and we have very little need for scripts that create anagrams, determine if a word fits in a crossword puzzle, or figure out how many days are in a given month. A number of scripts perform functions that, in my experience as an administrator, are easier to pound out at the keyboard rather than going through all of the work of creating the script.

Still, if you overlook the fact that many of the scripts probably won't be useful for you on the job, you'll find a lot of good information in the book. Even those scripts you may never use provide a number of nice tricks.

**Chris F. A. Johnson**

**421 pages**

**Apress, 1-59059-471-1**

**£ 27.99, US\$ 39.99, EUR 36.50**

## A Practical Guide to Linux Commands, Editors, and Shell Programming

This is one of the few books I have read where buzzwords in the title really apply. This “Practical Guide” guides you through practically everything you need to know about commands, editors, and shell programming. It is a tutorial and reference all in one.

There a couple of really bright spots to this book. The first is the way the book progresses from topic to topic, with each section building on what came before it. Added to Mark’s writing style, this makes understanding the material even easier.

One of the brightest aspects of the book is the two sets of exercises that are found at the end of each chapter. The first set is basic exercises, which you should have no trouble working out if you read the material. The “advanced” exercises typically require a little bit more thinking. The exercises are often

practical tasks that you should try on your system to see what happens. Some are along the lines of “why does this happen?” or “what would this do?” In each case, the exercise gives some very useful insights into how Linux and the various commands and programs work. Answers to the even numbered exercises are available at Mark’s web site (<http://www.sobell.com/CMDREF1/answers/>).

At several points, the book covered material not directly related to the subject of “Linux Commands, Editors, and Shell Programming.” For example, the chapter on programming tools was a bit too much, as it covered the C programming language, including things like debugging. This, along with a number of other topics, could have been left out without sacrificing the overall goal of the book. Fortu-

nately, the book is still small enough to use efficiently, so consider the extra material a bonus.

The last part of the book before the appendices is a classic “command reference,” covering the same commands that one often finds in any book of this type. My initial impression was that this is simply the same stuff that is repeated over and over again. While the information is generally a rehash of existing material, Mark does a good job of addressing those issues that tend to cause misunderstanding or other problems. I felt that he reduced the mountain of information into easy-to-read pieces that cover all the necessary topics.

If you are looking for a book that starts with the basics and then goes beyond, this book is definitely worth considering.

**Mark G. Sobell**

**960 Pages**

**Prentice Hall, 0-13-147823-0**

**£ 28.99, US\$ 39.99, EUR 36.50**

