

Business Software

part four

Part Three of our *Business Software* series (*Import Service*, October 2000) described how to export data from shop management programs with built-in export utilities. This month's column describes how to retrieve data when your shop management program lacks an export utility, as well as how to import data into Microsoft *Excel* and Microsoft *Access*.

When your shop management system has no built-in export utility, you have to hunt down and load the data from the management system files themselves. This requires the answers to a couple sets of *What?*, *Where?* and *How?* questions. The first set is: "*What* is it you hope to retrieve? *Where* is it stored? And *how* is it stored?" The second set is: "*What* do you import the data with? *Where* do you import it? And *how* do you import it?"

For purposes of this article, *what* we hope to retrieve is a customer list. In my experience, the most 'retrievable' lists are your customer, vehicle and inventory lists. Retrieving repair history lists is usually not feasible due to the complexity of the database structures.

Discovering *where* the list is stored depends upon having some idea of how it's stored. In turn, discovering *how* it's stored depends upon knowing what to look for. Here's where Microsoft *Office* and the second set of *What?*, *Where?* and *How?* questions come into play. The import utilities in Microsoft *Excel* and Microsoft *Access* tell you *what* to look for, *what to do* with the list once you've found it, *where* to import it, and *how* to import it.

Excel's import utility is less powerful than the one provided by *Access*. *Excel* can import ASCII text files only. (If you missed last month's article, ASCII text files are files that include the standard characters of the alphabet and the Arabic numerals).



Despite this limitation, *Excel* is an excellent importation tool because ASCII files are the most common form of database file exchange.

Access can import a number of different file formats in addition to ASCII text. File formats are generally, but not always, identifiable by the "filename extension," the set of characters to the right of the period in a filename. For example, file "CUSTOMER.DAT" has "DAT" as the filename extension. Filename extensions are usually three characters long, but sometimes they're shorter.

A list of filename extensions to look for is shown in **Figure 1**. Although the extension usually identifies the type of file, it doesn't have to. The extensions listed exist according to common usage only, not according to a standard imposed by the operating system. Files can have virtually any extension, even no extension at all.

/,,-:)+ - , : A; -7)/-7:

: A;)+ : A; -7)/-7:
, &+)16 % 5 =5 "6 15 < %5)15 22-

P P

; 7 : 1)#) :)+ : A; -7)/-7:
, &+)16 % 5 =5 225 965)65 =5 < %-5

P

P

)+ : A; -7)/-7:/:)&-/6 :
, &+)16 % 5 =5 "6 1-5

P

"75(& 7 5 5

" 91 5*

=VP Q2 QP X=TIJ'P J9'%P V4Q2P 746'7XP -47': 9'
'WQ':K4=:K#P X=TIJ'P J' %XP Q=P KQ JQP 2T:Q4:0P
-P X=TJP 2T:QP 4KP KT!!'KK-T7#P X=TP 0 4:P Q2'P
Q=P TK'PX=TJP% Q P2=V'U'JPX=TPV4K2BP -PX=TJ
4KP T:KT!!'KK-T7#P X=TI77P 2 U'P 7=KQP :=Q24:0P =
Q2 :P Q49'P :%P 'DT :494QXP *P 4-P X=TP -=77=VP Q
K49?7'P?J! TQ4=:K"

!6T?P X=TJP=J404: 7P% Q ,P 77P% Q K'PKXKQ'9K
4:!'7T%'P K=9'P 4:KQJT!Q4=:KP -=JP !64:0P T?P X=TP
% Q BP 4:%PQ2'9P :%P=-77=VPQ2'9P-4JKQB

7V XKP !7=K'P P -47'P V4Q2=TQP K U4:0P 4QP -Q'JPX
=?':%P 4QP -=JP U4'V4:0BP 2'P - !QKP :%P -40TJ'KP 4:
K2=?P9 : 0'9':QP% Q K'P J'PKQ=J'%P KP-47'KP=:PQ2'
2 J%P%J4U'BP -PX=TJPK2=?P9 : 0'9':QPKXKQ'9P2 KP :

"W?=JQPTQ474QX#PQ2'K'P- !QKP :%P-40TJ'KP! :P 'P!=""
Q=PK'? J Q'P-47'KPQ2 QP J'PK -'PQ=P'W?'J49:QPV4Q2BP -#

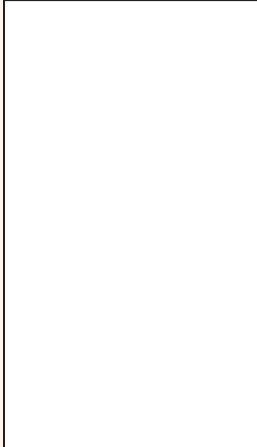
2=V'U'J#PQ2'P9 : 0'9':QPKXKQ'9P%='KP:=QP2 U'P : 2'K'P J'P Q2'P 2=JQ!TQP J=?'JQ4'KP=-P Q2'P 4!J=K=-Q

"W?=JQPTQ474QX#PQ2'P% Q K'P-47'KPQ2'9K'7U'KP9TKQP=JP 4!:=BP 2'P F J0'QGP -4'7%P @ 3 K'%P

'W 94:'%BP -PX=TP4: %U'JQ:Q7XP!2 :0'P='P=-PQ2'K' ?J=0J 9K'P F 9%P 74:'GAP K2=VKP Q2'P ?J=0J 9IK
-47'KP 4:P Q2'P ?J=!KKP =-P 'W 94:4:0P 4Q#P Q2'P % Q7=K'Q4=:BP2'P !6K7 K2P!2 J !Q'JKP @F GAP%'K40: Q'
9 XP:=P7=:0'JP 'PTK 7'BP -PX=TIJPT:KTJ'P=-P2=VPQ==7%'JP 7'U'7KBP 2'P 7=V'KQP 7'U'7P 4KP =:P Q2'P J402

K -'7XP'W 94:'P P-47'#P?7' K'PJ'U4'VPQ2'P4:KQJT!Q4=:K2TK#P F " B GP 9' :KP Q2'
=-JPTK4:0P 4!J=K=-QP 4:P7 KQP9=:Q2IKPF J=:Q?J=0J 9P B P 4KP 4:P Q2'P 4:%=VKP -=7%'JP =:
=T:Q'JP !2 :4!KGB

'QIKP0'QP KQ JQ'%BP =TP6:=VPQ2'P% Q PX=TPV4K2P
J'QJ4'U'P4KPKQ=J'%PK=9'V2'J'P=:PX=TJP!:=9?TQ'J#PQ2'
QJ4!6P 4KP Q=P -4:%P 4QBP =JQT: Q'7X#P X=TJP K2=?P 9
9':QP KXKQ'9IKP 4:%=VKP 'K6Q=?P 4!:=:P ! :P J'U' 7
V2'J'P Q=P KQ JQP7==64:0BP 7 !'PQ2'P9=TK'P ?=4:Q'JP=:
Q2'P9 : 0'9':QPKXKQ'9IKP 'K6Q=?P4!:=:#PQ2':PJ402Q3
!74!6P=!'BP@ =Q""P 2:'U'JPQ2'PK4:07'PV=J'8B' \$4K
? JQP=-PQ2'P4:KQJT!Q4=:KP4:PQ2'P-40TJ'KPQ2 QP=-77=
7V XKPJ'-'JKPQ=P PK4:07'P!74!6P=-PQ2'P7'-QP9=TK'P TQ
Q=:BP 4947 J7X#P!%" \$ J'-'JKPQ=P P%=T 7'P!74!6
=-PQ2'P7'-QP9=TK'P TQQ=:BA



" 91 58

24KP ?=?3T?P 9:TP %4K?7 XK
V2:'U'JP P 4:%=VKP 'K6Q=?
4!:=:P 4KP J402Q3!74!6'%P =:'B
74!6P Q2'P J=?'JQ4'KP TQQ=:PQ=
U4'VP P 9:TP K4947 JP Q=P Q2 Q
K2=V:P 4:P)&>6 : <BP =Q""P -
X=TJP ?J=0J 9P 4KP 3 K'%#
K'7!QP Q2'P F J=0J 9GP Q
4:KQ' %P =-P Q2'P F 2=JQ!TQGP Q
4:PQ2'P J=?'JQ4'KP9:TB



"W?=JQPTQ474QX#PQ2'K'P- !QKP :%P-40TJ'KP! :P 'P!=""
Q=PK'? J Q'P-47'KPQ2 QP J'PK -'PQ=P'W?'J49:QPV4Q2BP -#
2=V'U'J#PQ2'P9 : 0'9':QPKXKQ'9P%='KP:=QP2 U'P : 2'K'P J'P Q2'P 2=JQ!TQP J=?'JQ4'KP=-P Q2'P 4!J=K=-Q
'W?=JQPTQ474QX#PQ2'P% Q K'P-47'KPQ2'9K'7U'KP9TKQP=JP 4!:=BP 2'P F J0'QGP -4'7%P @ 3 K'%P
'W 94:'%BP -PX=TP4: %U'JQ:Q7XP!2 :0'P='P=-PQ2'K' ?J=0J 9K'P F 9%P 74:'GAP K2=VKP Q2'P ?J=0J 9IK
-47'KP 4:P Q2'P ?J=!KKP =-P 'W 94:4:0P 4Q#P Q2'P % Q7=K'Q4=:BP2'P !6K7 K2P!2 J !Q'JKP @F GAP%'K40: Q'
9 XP:=P7=:0'JP 'PTK 7'BP -PX=TIJPT:KTJ'P=-P2=VPQ==7%'JP 7'U'7KBP 2'P 7=V'KQP 7'U'7P 4KP =:P Q2'P J402
K -'7XP'W 94:'P P-47'#P?7' K'PJ'U4'VPQ2'P4:KQJT!Q4=:K2TK#P F " B GP 9' :KP Q2'
=-JPTK4:0P 4!J=K=-QP 4:P7 KQP9=:Q2IKPF J=:Q?J=0J 9P B P 4KP 4:P Q2'P 4:%=VKP -=7%'JP =:
=T:Q'JP !2 :4!KGB

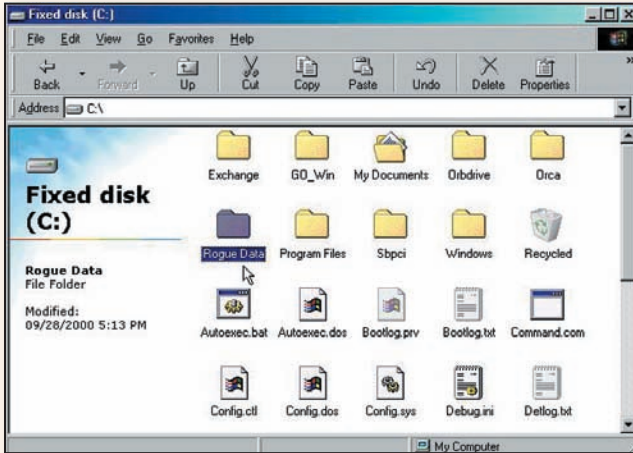


Figure 4

For the purposes of this example, I'm saying the files of interest are in the Rogue Data folder on the C: drive. The screen shown above was reached by first double-clicking the "My Computer" icon on the Windows Desktop, then double-clicking the C: drive icon. Double-clicking the Rogue Data folder revealed the screen in Figure 5.

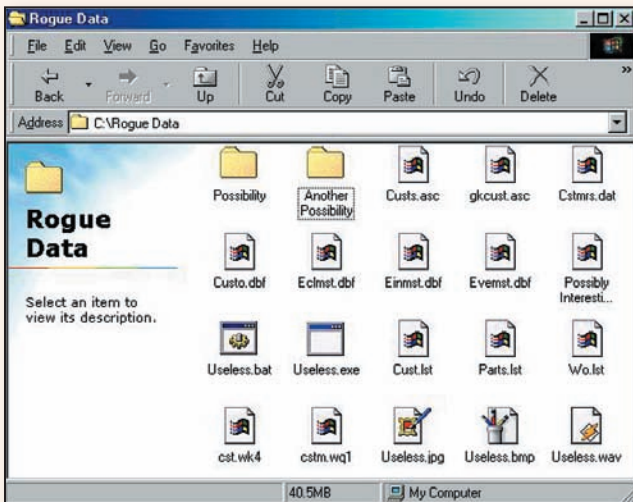


Figure 5

The Rogue Data folder contains several files with extensions that match the ones listed in Figure 1. It also contains two other folders. If I don't find what I'm looking for in this folder, I'll want to open and explore the other two folders. The file "Cstmrs.dat" looks promising. Double-clicking it revealed the screen in Figure 6.

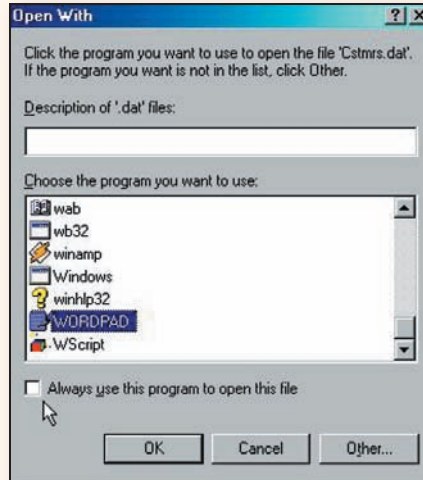


Figure 6

Windows is asking how to open the "Cstmrs.dat" file. I've scrolled down the list and clicked WordPad. Note that I've also clicked (un-checked) the "Always use this program to open this file" box. Otherwise, Windows would always try to open a "DAT" file with WordPad — something I may not want. Clicking the "OK" button revealed the screen in Figure 7.

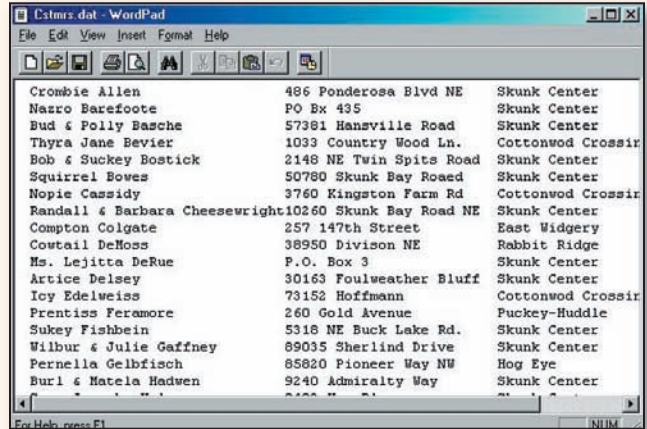


Figure 7

This is the easiest of files. It's an exported list of the names I used in last month's "Front Counter Mechanics," but it's also a useful example of how to import an ASCII text file into Excel. This file is "fixed-width," meaning everything is neatly arranged in columns. The next four figures show how to import it into Excel.

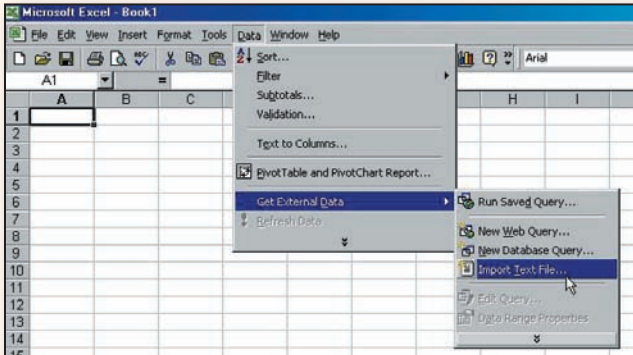


Figure 8

Now that I know which file to import, I open a new Workbook in *Excel*, then select “Data” from the menu bar, then “Get External Data,” then click “Import Text File.” The Windows Browse window pops open. I navigate to the Rogue Data folder using the down-arrow button in the “Look in” field (Figure 9).

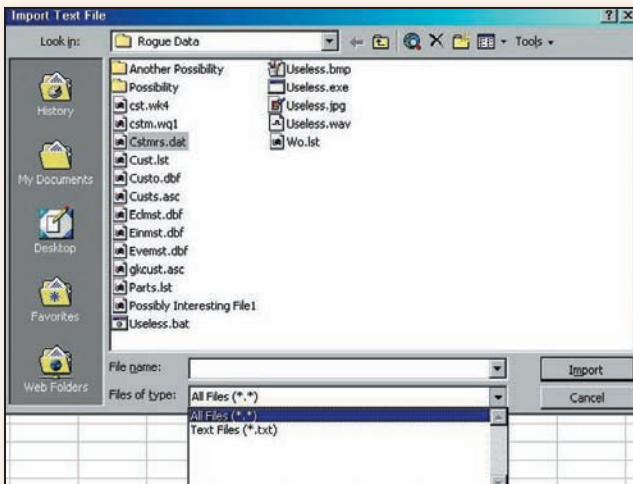


Figure 9

At first, no files displayed when I opened the Rogue Data folder because the “Files of type” field was set to “Text Files (*.txt).” I clicked the down-arrow button in the “Files of type” field, then clicked “All Files (*.*).” Double-clicking “Cstmrs.dat” revealed the screen in Figure 10.

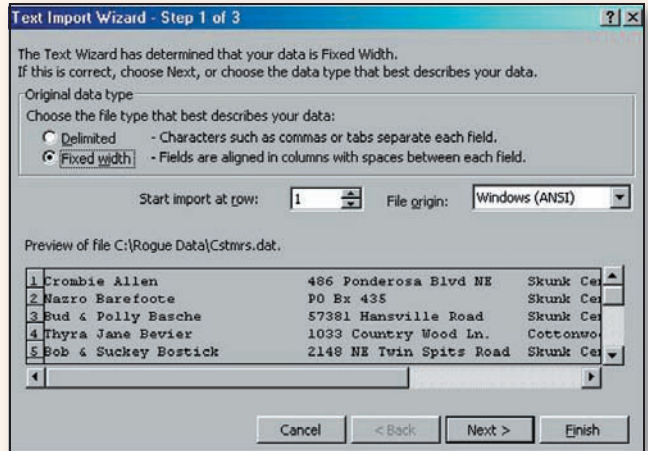


Figure 10

This is the first of four *Excel* Import Wizard screens. It lets you preview the data you wish to import and change how it’s imported. In this case, the Wizard calculated everything correctly. I simply clicked through the four screens with “Next,” “Next,” “Finish,” then “OK” to reveal the screen shown in Figure 11.

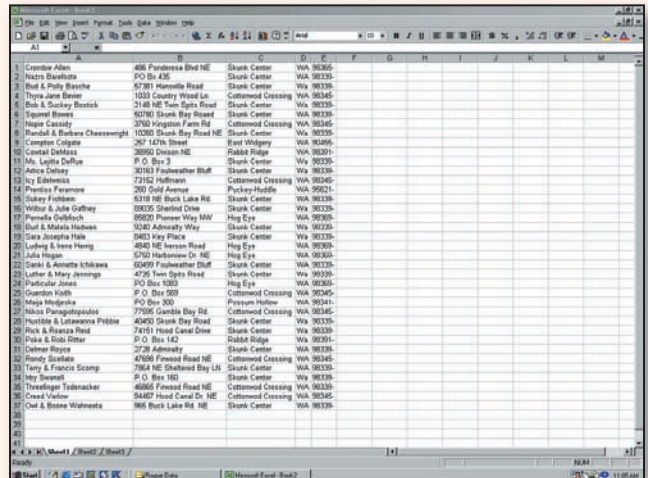


Figure 11

Here is the finished customer list, accomplished with no typing, just clicking. All that remains is to click the floppy disk icon on the toolbar to save the list to a file. Data import is rarely this easy, though. So let’s try something more challenging next.

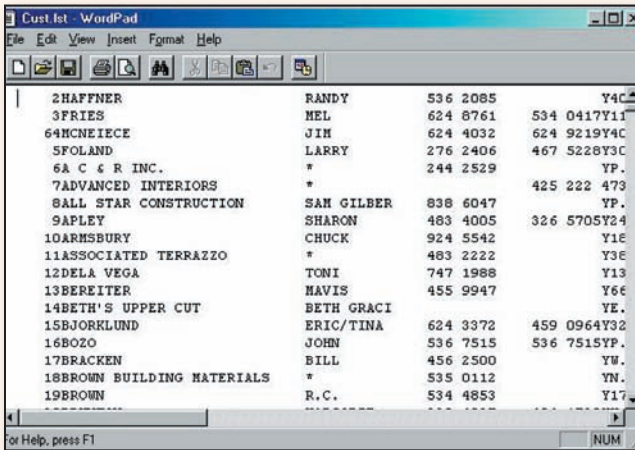


Figure 12

Here is the WordPad display of the “Cust.lst” file, which is an actual database file from a formerly popular but now defunct management system. It’s a “fixed width” file like the one shown in 6

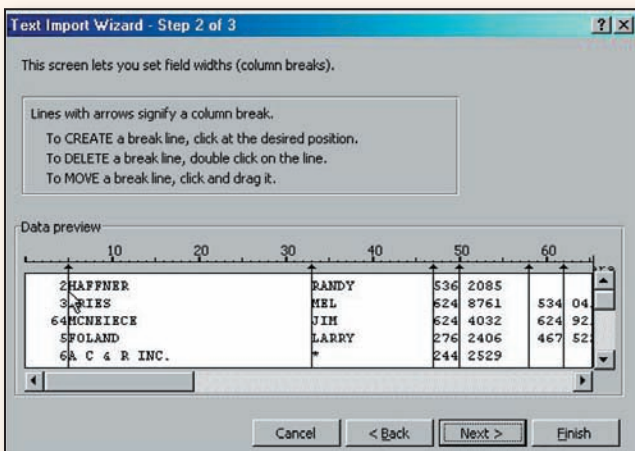


Figure 13

In this screen, I’ve placed the cursor between the “2” and “HAFFNER” and clicked to insert a column break. This enables me to tell the Wizard to ignore the first column in the next step, shown in Figure 14.

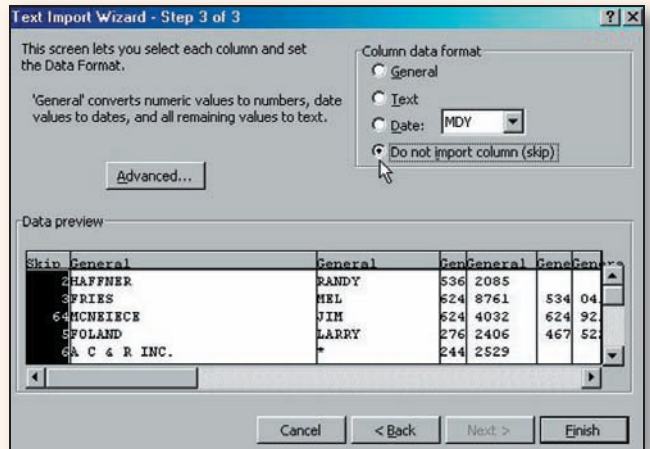


Figure 14

Here I’ve clicked inside the first column to highlight it, then clicked the “Do not import column (skip)” button. I’ll repeat this process for the columns that show telephone numbers, then click the “Finish” button to reveal the screen shown in Figure 15.

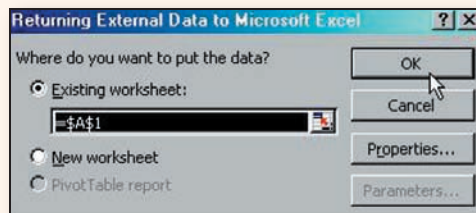


Figure 15

Excel is asking where to put the data. I’ll click the “OK” button to put it in the current spreadsheet, starting at column A, row 1. Once I’ve done that, the “Cstmr.lst” file will be imported and displayed. As in Figure 11, the only remaining step will be to click the floppy disk icon to save the list.

That’s all there is to importing ASCII files. Next month’s “Front Counter Mechanics” will describe how to import non-ASCII files. ■

— By Chip Keen