

# Learning ActionScript 3.0

## The Non-Programmer's Guide to ActionScript 3.0

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### A review by Mark Repp

As a technology trainer, I know how difficult it is to teach to all levels of computer users at the same time. The book entitled *Learning ActionScript 3.0: a Beginner's Guide* from the Adobe Developer Library (and O'Reilly) tries valiantly to do this. It tries to be all things to all Flash developers. And if you're planning to use ActionScript for Adobe Flash CS3, I think this title comes as close to accomplishing this feat as any other book I've found.

In this book you will find practically everything you need to know from a Web Designer's point of view, as well as for the GUI-based Flash developers who want to create their own mini applications. Flash can do this, and this book will show you how with the newest version of the scripting language, version 3.0. Although it has "A Beginner's Guide" as part of its title, it is much more than a "Getting Started" guide. True, it has an ActionScript overview section to get the user started, especially if he/she is not familiar with what ActionScript is, and what it does. The Flash platform is discussed briefly, and that is exactly what Flash is now...a platform. This book focuses primarily on developing ActionScript 3.0 applications using Flash's CS3 environment. So, if you do not have Adobe CS3 or Flash CS3 in particular, this book is not for you, or you'd better quickly go out and get an upgrade, because ActionScript 3 is completely different than any version of ActionScript you may have used in the past. The book is presented within a Flash CS3 Professional context. Therefore, it does not include examples of Flex, Flash Media Server, AIR or any other evolving Flash platform technologies. However, most readers will not be looking for these additions. Instead, they will probably be looking for what this book does best, which is teach ActionScript programming. Right away on page 8, there is a discussion that focuses on Procedural vs. Object-oriented Programming (OOP), and most chapters end with an applied OOP example. This is very helpful.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter jumps right into such Core Language Fundamentals as Variables and Data Types, Loops, Arrays, Conditionals, Functions and distinguishes between Absolute vs. Relative Addresses. All of these are very important in learning how to use this completely different programming language. And since Flash is an object-oriented language, there is a helpful section in Chapter 2 that covers Custom Objects. Chapter 6, for example, is a 27-page

look at OOP (object-oriented programming). Examples are given of actual scripts in every section, demonstrating the use of each element in ActionScript 3.0. The Core Language Fundamentals are clearly laid out, with definitions and examples of each. There is a nicely-organized example of Variable Types that helped me a lot. Various “If” conditionals are given as examples, showing the painstaking effort that the authors used to get the basics down pat for the reader.

Although ActionScript is not for the faint of heart, or the average ever-day animator, if you read this book the way it was intended to be read (in the order that the chapters are laid out), it is better than any ActionScript 3.0 course you will ever take. Everything is neatly organized. It covers as many ActionScript essentials as could possibly be included. Such topics as “Graphics and Interaction” (part 2 of the book); “Text” (part 3 of the book); “Sound and Video” (part 4), “Input/Output” (part 5) and “Programming Design and Resources” (part 6). All of it is here, and I think the examples are wonderful. Not a lot of GUI screenshots, but there are many scripts that you could use as a jumping-off point or as reference examples.

One question that came to mind while I went through the different sections was “Is this a reference book?” Well, it can be used this way, definitely. However, even the authors recommend other titles, such as *Essential ActionScript 3.0* by Colin Moock (O’Reilly) as the ultimate reference book, and for the die-hard AS 3.0 programmer, look at the *ActionScript 3.0 Cookbook* by Lott, Peters and Schall (also from O’Reilly). What this book is, however, is a combination of both, and it would be a great companion for either of the aforementioned titles, particularly if you are an advanced user.

There is also a companion Web site for the book, found at [www.LearningActionScript3.com](http://www.LearningActionScript3.com) which includes supplemental materials and all of the exercises found in the book itself in a downloadable/printable format. Just click on the “Print This Post” link at the bottom of each Web section. Additional exercises are also available on this site, as well as self-quizzes, ongoing learning suggestions and reader comments. The authors say that additional community resources will be added to the site, such as a forum where they will participate. I find that with today’s computer and application-oriented books, this nice Web addition is essential to making a book more current in a world where computer books have a very short life.

So, what exactly are you looking for from ActionScript 3.0? Just an update on how it differs from previous versions like 2.0? How to create text (text fields, formatting text, triggering ActionScript from HTML and CSS)? All of this is in Chapter 10, one of my favorite sections in Part 3 of the book. How about “Loading Assets” such as sound and video, loading text, displaying objects or even communicating across virtual machines? All of this is covered in Part 5 of the book. XML and E4X are also covered in this section. Never completely understanding XML before, this book helped to clarify for me how it can be used

in Flash and general application. For instance, there is a section that goes into the actual structure of XML, making it clearer to the reader. I never understood white space very well until I saw the table on page 299. Page 302 provides a section called “Creating an XML Object” with a full-page scripted example.

Without going into further technical detail about ActionScript and computer programming, rest assured that this is the book for you – if you want to dive into Adobe ActionScript 3.0, and discover what it can do in each of the areas mentioned. The chapter on Video alone (chapter 12-part 4) is worth the \$39.99 price tag alone. If you’re more of an animator trying to bring out the power of this environment, look at “Chapter 5: Timeline Control” right away. It has some nice tips on topics like “Frame Rate”, “Frame Labels” and “Playhead Movement.” But what you will definitely find about ActionScript more than anything else is that it is part of a platform. Flash is no longer used just for animation. It is a platform all its own, with many applications fulfilling various needs both on and off the Web. *Learning ActionScript 3.0* is a perfect place to start uncovering the power of Flash CS3, and you will be amazed at how much you will learn in 350 pages (plus Index). It is the discovery of a solid programming language that is ever-changing and cutting edge. This is, overall in my opinion, the very best book in which to discover it.