



Free-Form Notes

by Sal Alfano

When I made the switch to computers back in the early '80s, I first learned to use word processing and spreadsheet software. As I began to spend more time at the keyboard, however, I realized that I also needed software that would keep track of the hundreds of pieces of random information that crossed my desk. The first electronic "desk accessories" I looked at could handle names, addresses, and phone numbers easily, but I needed something I could use during phone conversations to take notes that I could refer to later.

After a couple of false starts, I finally found *Info Select*, a paperless note-taking system designed to handle random information. *Info Select* is memory-resident, which means you can hot-key in and out of it while working with another application (in the Windows version, you can simply leave *Info Select* open on your desktop and activate it as needed with the mouse). It can be loaded from the keyboard or from the AUTOEXEC.BAT file, and takes up as little as 7k of RAM.

Info Select stores and displays information in numbered rectangular windows that can be expanded and contracted to show as much or as little of their contents as you choose (Figure 1). Just like a pile of paper on your desk, the windows are



Figure 1. Instead of using predetermined data "fields," *Info Select* stores free-form information in rectangular "windows," and displays as many windows as will fit on screen at one time. Although a pull-down menu bar is always on display (top of screen), all commands can be executed with a single keystroke.

grouped together into "stacks" labeled with whatever name you choose to give them. You can store all of your notes in one giant stack, or you can create separate stacks for different kinds of information. I have a stack called "Products," for example, that holds information on construction materials manufacturers; another stack called "Phone" that holds the address and phone number of everyone I've talked with in the last three years, along with notes on our conversation.

The beauty of *Info Select* is that you can enter information exactly the way you want to — there are no name and address "fields" to be filled out (or skipped over). And because each window usually occupies only part of the screen, you can keep several windows visible at once, using information from one to prompt input into another. For example, you can save a list of questions for an architect or supplier in a window at the top of your stack. Later, while you're on the phone, you can use this window as a checklist to make sure you ask all of your questions, and open a new window right beside it to input the answers. If you want to keep a running record of a series of conversations, you can open and reopen the same window, and time- and date-stamp each entry.

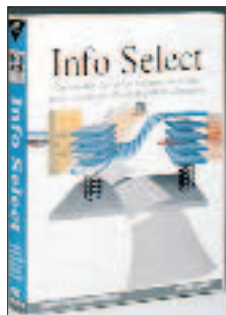
Search and retrieve. Once you get information into a stack, *Info Select* provides several ways to retrieve it again. First, since windows are arranged chronologically, a window created today is "higher" in the stack than a window created yesterday. This means that the most recent window is always at the top of the stack. Often, the information you need is staring you in the face when you hot-key into the program. (You can also rearrange the order by moving windows to the top or bottom of a stack.)

If you don't immediately see the window you want, you can "step" through the stack of windows one at a time with the cursor keys, and one screen at a time with PGDN and PGUP. (HOME and END move directly to the top and bottom of a stack.)

But both of these methods take too long if your stack holds several hundred windows. Fortunately, Info Select has the slickest search feature I've ever seen. Here's how it works.

Let's say you've had several conversations over the past year with Harry, a salesperson for a material supplier. If you wanted to call Harry again and all you had was an address book, you'd have to remember his last name, and possibly the name of his company. Using Info Select, however, all you need to remember is some part of the name "Harry." After loading the appropriate stack (the Phone stack, for instance), begin the search by typing "G" (for GET). The screen instantly changes to a display of a series of small white squares, each of which stands for a window in the stack (Figure 2).

As you begin to type the search keyword "Harry," Info Select searches every window in the stack. Unlike other search engines, however, Info Select performs the search sequentially *on each letter* as you type it. The display updates progress by removing squares that don't contain the letter combination in the keyword — first only squares containing



Info Select (\$149.95) from Micro Logic (P.O. Box 70, Hackensack, NJ 07602; 800/342-5930 ext. 112) is available for DOS and Windows in versions for single users and networks.

"h" remain on the display, then only "ha" squares, then only "har" squares, and so on.

Eventually, one of two things happens. If only one window contains the letter combination in the keyword, Info Select ends the search automatically and immediately opens the window. This often occurs long before you finish typing the complete keyword. Otherwise, you can interrupt the search at any time, and Info Select will display all remaining windows.

This whole process takes about two seconds to perform, even on a stack with several hundred windows. There are also several ways to look for more than one keyword (called a "compound" search), and to manipulate sorted windows into substacks.

Tip of the iceberg. The search feature alone is worth the purchase price, but Info Select is packed full of other handy features. For instance, you can "capture" screens and swap text between Info Select and any foreground application. You can also import and export files, create a calendar, set up a "tickler" file, and use an automatic dialer. And if you like to enter information into preassigned "fields," there's a form-creation feature as well.

Info Select is a breeze to install, and the manual is one of the best I've seen. The on-screen tutorial, which uses a stack of prefilled windows to step you through the basic commands, will help you learn the fundamentals in less than half an hour. You could easily spend twice that long looking for the scrap of paper with Harry's phone number on it. ■

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Figure 2. During a text search, Info Select displays a series of small squares, each of which represents a window containing data. As you type each letter of the search string, groups of squares disappear until only those remain that contain the information you're looking for.