Book Review: 
Programming with Visual Basic

REVIEW BY
Dr. Larry Nelson
Curtin University of Technology
nelson@educ.curtin.edu.au

I liked the initial version, and have used it with several undergraduate university classes. The new version is not radically different, having some enhancements which add value to an already-useful book. I'd use this version too, although, as I mention below, I am not sure that one couldn't use Visual Basic for Applications to accomplish as much with programming tyros.

Contents
First of all, what's in the book? Eight "sections": (1) problems and algorithms; (2) Visual Basic fundamentals; (3) branching; (4) Visual Basic variables; (5) counted and conditional loops; (6) lists and text files; (7) Visual Basic arrays; (8) random access files; and (9), recursive functions and procedures.

The first section includes a useful overview of problem solving techniques, and illustrates the use of Nassi-Shneiderman diagrams. N-S diagrams are used throughout the book, but they are never the main focus; rather, they're used as an unobtrusive tool to help explain how one might go about structuring a solution to a given problem. When I say "unobtrusive" I mean that it's entirely possible to use the book without having to dwell on its use of N-S diagrams. They're there, and some lecturers will find them useful. Others may choose to ignore them.

One of the book's great strengths has to do with the number of questions and problems presented in the sections. There are many questions which I have found very useful in leading class discussions. There are also 20 distinct programming exercises, and these have been well thought out. The exercises are generally quite concise, having explicit sample screen designs, with control layouts exemplified in an informal hand-drawn style, much as we teachers might draw on a whiteboard.

Answers to the questions and problems are found in two places: in the book itself, and on a companion CD-ROM. The book gives answers to the discussion questions posed in the sections, while the CD has solutions to the programming exercises. The CD also has useful graphics files which make it unnecessary for students to spend time designing images on their own. As an example, one of the programming exercises involves simulating the toss of a die; images of six die faces may be found on the CD. Another exercise simulates a car race, and the CD has images of small race cars which may be used. The CD-ROM has a pre-GST list price of $59.

Changes from Version 1
The publisher does not list the changes made from the first version of the book. They don't seem to be that many in number. The sections are the same, and the new version has the same number of pages as the former one (220). Some of the questions and exercises have been slightly modified. The single major change, having not much to do with actual content, is that this version is based on VB5 whereas the first featured VB3.

The CD-ROM is new to this version, replacing the floppy diskettes available as a complement to the first version. The CD has just under six megabytes of material recorded on it, with two folders: "Projects", and "Reviews". The first of these has the programming solutions, some extra examples, and the bit-mapped graphics files mentioned above. The Reviews folder presents more discussion questions for the text's sections. These are contained in Word documents, and seem well done. The CD may be copied within a school, with students allowed to take home personal copies.

VBA as an alternative?
Visual Basic for Applications has matured rapidly. It has a programming environment very much like that found in VB itself. For my own teaching, VBA has one major advantage: it's not an add-on. If I have Microsoft Office installed, I have VBA. Students are very likely to have it at home; they don't need to get a separate product.

Having said this, I don't want to detract from the book under discussion here. I have high regard for the book. If you have VB installed at your school or university, and students eager to learn what programming is about, I think this text is likely to meet your needs very well. Be sure and get a copy of the CD-ROM.