

Inside Microsoft Windows: NETWORKING EDITION

Tips & techniques for Microsoft Windows

Shortcut keys enhance productivity— Program Manager trick unlocks secret

By **Chris Morton**

Let's say you're running several applications when you realize you need to open Notepad. If you're like most Windows users, you waste precious time and steps switching to Program Manager, locating or opening the Accessories window, and finally locating the Notepad icon and double-clicking it. Whether it's Notepad or some other program you frequently access, wouldn't it be great if you could eliminate all of those intermediate steps?

By itself, Windows 3.1x can't help you make accessing Notepad or some other program a one-step process. For that, you'd need a third-party freeware utility or other accessory (see the sidebar "Simplify Keyboard Shortcuts with HotKey 1.2," on page 3). However, Windows is capable of reducing such a task to a pair of steps, regardless of which application you want to access.

Introducing the Shortcut Key property

If you've surmised this method somehow involves the Shortcut Key property, you guessed correctly. When the Shortcut Key text box was added to the Program Item Properties dialog box in Windows 3.1, we initially thought the Microsoft development team had answered our prayers for quick program access. To the contrary, what we discovered was a promising feature that the team had seriously disabled by limiting its scope!

It didn't take long to uncover the problem. Let's say you assigned a shortcut key sequence of [Ctrl][Alt]N in Notepad's Program Item Properties dialog box. Had the feature been coded with more forethought, you'd be able to press this key sequence at any time—with any series of windows open on your desktop—to immediately launch Notepad. Instead, no action occurs unless you first go to the trouble of

making Program Manager the active window! Our understanding is that Microsoft programmers considered this a safety feature, but because it doesn't save as many steps as it should, many users feel they've been effectively handcuffed. As a result, few have bothered with shortcut keys.

A workaround that's good from the start

There's a workaround solution to this problem that even adds a few benefits. The trick is to make the operating environment recognize a shortcut key sequence for Program Manager as soon as you start a Windows session. Let's take a look at the procedure.

The Program Manager Program Item Properties dialog box

To begin, open the StartUp group window within Program Manager. If you don't have a StartUp group, choose New... from Program Manager's File

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menu, select the Program Group radio button, and click OK. Name the group StartUp and click OK.

Then, again choose New... from Program Manager's File menu, select Program Item, and click OK. (The faster method of opening a new Program Item Properties dialog box is to hold down the [Alt] key while you double-click a blank spot within the StartUp window.)

Whatever you type in the Description text box will replace *Program Manager* in the title bar, so here's your opportunity to be creative.

Figure A



Create a new Program Item in the StartUp group for Program Manager, naming it whatever you like (we suggest assigning [Ctrl][Alt]P as the shortcut key).

Windows itself is located. If so, type your Working Directory choice in this text box. We used `c:\cobbgrp` in our example.

Now, click once in the Shortcut Key field or press [Tab] once more to advance. Here, we suggest simply pressing P—Windows will assign [Ctrl][Alt]P as the shortcut key for

Feel free to have some fun if you'd like to personalize Windows on your PC; we used *Inside Microsoft Windows* in this example, as shown in Figure A. When you've entered a name, the fastest way to advance to the next field in the dialog box is to press the [Tab] key.

Although you want this icon to engage Program Manager, you don't have to type the full `C:\WINDOWS\PROGMAN.EXE` path and filename in the Command Line text box. The `\WINDOWS` directory is already in the path of the underlying DOS operating system, so the Windows environment can access `PROGMAN.EXE` without your specifying the path. Also, you don't need to include the file extension, since DOS is coded to look for a file that has a COM, EXE, PIF, or BAT extension and a name that matches whatever you've entered in the Command Line text box. It's your option—you may either type the full path and filename or simply type *progman*.

You may want to type a preferred directory in the Working Directory field—otherwise, the default is your Windows directory. For example, you may always save notes created in Write, Notepad, or some other Windows accessory to a specific directory, or you may want windowed DOS sessions to default to a directory other than the one in which

Program Manager. You may choose another key if you prefer, but we find this to be the easiest sequence to remember (most users prefer mnemonic key assignments).

Now you have another choice to make: Would you prefer Program Manager to appear in an open window or as a minimized desktop icon when you

Skip to next page, then return here for conclusion...

You can add to this list, of course. We recommend that you don't go overboard, however, since it becomes difficult to remember more than about a dozen or so shortcuts. Infrequently used shortcuts aren't worth having on your machine. If you must refer to a printed list, your shortcuts may be cutting your productivity. ❖

Chris Morton is a long-time Windows professional. He has been writing about the subject for eight years, with credits including Cadence, Windows Shopper's Guide, Windows Tips & Secrets, Opening Windows, and Advanced Windows Tips & Secrets. He is also an accomplished Windows instructor and seminar leader, having presented Windows sessions across the US.

start a Windows session? If you decide on the latter, click the Run Minimized check box to activate it—otherwise, leave this option cleared. Click OK when you've finished filling in the dialog box information.

Sequential loading in the StartUp window

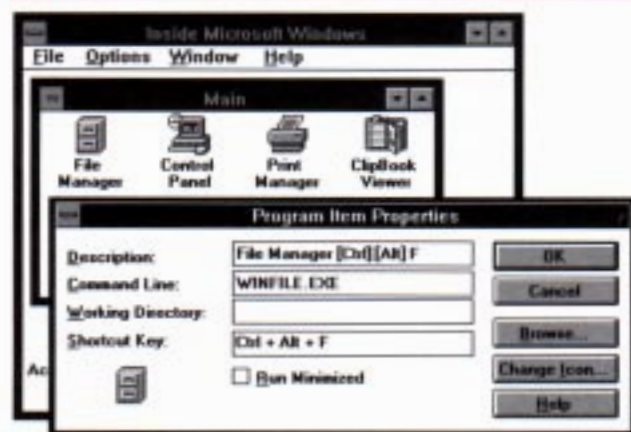
Applications are loaded sequentially within the StartUp window at boot time. If you like to launch Windows with a certain application—such as Word for Windows—always active, drag your new Program Manager icon to the upper left of the StartUp window. This will result in Program Manager staying out of your way as you begin a new Windows session. On the other hand, place the Program Manager icon in the lower right of the StartUp window if you want it to have the focus once Windows has loaded completely into memory. You see this icon only if you run Program Manager minimized because Program Manager normally opens first, even if it's not in the StartUp group.

Activating your changes

You don't have to restart Windows in order to activate your new Program Manager settings. If the Program Manager icon is still selected, you can simply press [Enter] to engage it; otherwise, double-click the icon. Your changes become effective immediately.

You might think that you're running two copies of Program Manager at this point, thereby unnecessarily consuming memory and system resources. Fortunately, this isn't the case. If you're in doubt, engage the Task List by pressing [Ctrl][Esc]. You'll see that only one copy of Program Manager is running.

Figure B



Open File Manager's Program Item Properties dialog box to assign a shortcut key.

Mnemonic shortcuts speed access

So far, you haven't accomplished too much, except perhaps to cause a unique name to appear in a window whose title bar once read *Program Manager*. The next step is to assign mnemonic shortcut keys to those items you access most frequently. As you do, plan ahead to avoid conflicts between your individual shortcut key assignments as well as with macro assignments in your applications.

Modifying File Manager

We'll use File Manager as an example to get you started. First, locate File Manager's icon in Program Manager's Main window and click it once. Now, press [Alt][Enter] to display File Manager's Program Item Properties dialog box. Tab to or click the Shortcut Key text box and press F. Windows prefaces the key sequence with [Ctrl] and [Alt] by default, so the assignment becomes [Ctrl][Alt]F.

Here's another tip: To help you remember the shortcut, add the key sequence in the Description field—for example, File Manager [Ctrl][Alt]F, as shown in **Figure B**. The assignment will always appear below the icon, serving as another memory aid.

How shortcuts enhance your productivity

Let's say you're running Excel and need to quickly locate another item using File Manager. The process we just set up is to press [Ctrl][Alt]P to immediately activate Program Manager. Now, when you press [Ctrl][Alt]F, File Manager instantly appears, whether or not it has been previously engaged during this session. When you set up shortcut keys this way, we think you'll find them to be a fantastic productivity enhancement.

Keep shortcuts simple

If you prefer to use [Ctrl][Shift] or [Alt][Shift] to preface individual key assignments, note that you have to press all the desired keys at the same time. **Table A** shows a few suggested key assignments we find most useful.

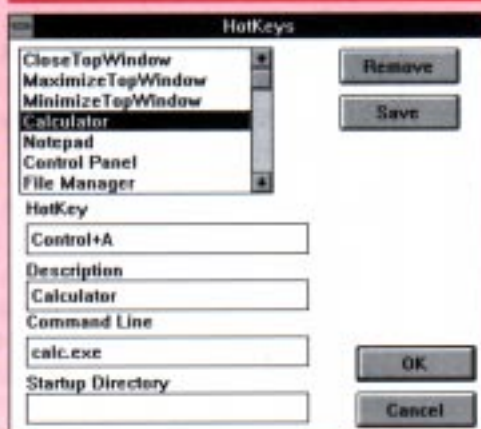
Table A: Suggested shortcut keys

[Ctrl][Alt]A	Calculator (A for add)
[Ctrl][Alt]C	Control Panel
[Ctrl][Alt]D	DOS window
[Ctrl][Alt]F	File Manager
[Ctrl][Alt]M	Character Map
[Ctrl][Alt]N	Notepad

Simplify keyboard shortcuts with HotKey 1.2

If you'd like to take the keyboard shortcut idea a step further, there's a wonderfully simple utility, HotKey 1.2, that runs any shortcut with a single key sequence. For example, you can press [Ctrl][Alt]N at any time—even with several application windows already open—to instantly launch Notepad. Pressing [Ctrl][Alt]D immediately launches a DOS session, and so forth.

Figure A



It's easy to assign shortcut key sequences in HotKey 1.2.

HotKey has been around since the days of Windows 3.0. Its author, Greg White, has placed it in the public domain, so it's available to you free of charge. (Some older versions of the utility that ask for a shareware fee are still circulating on the Web.) We've run it with many Windows sessions on multiple machines for years and have never encountered an operating system error that we could attribute to HotKey, so you don't have to worry about potential conflicts. It also consumes very little memory.

Where to find HotKey 1.2

The compressed file you're looking for is HOTKEY.ZIP. World Wide Web surfers need look no further than the search engine at <http://castor.acs.oakland.edu/cgi-bin/vsl-front>. If you're a CompuServe member,

you can find HOTKEY.ZIP in Library 6 of the WINSHARE forum.

Setting it up

First, unzip HOTKEY in your Windows directory. Now, open Program Manager's StartUp group and press [Alt] while you double-click a blank spot in the window. In the Program Item Properties dialog box, type *HotKey 1.2* in the Description text box, then press [Tab] and type *hotkey.exe* in the Command Line text box. Now, click OK and then double-click the completed HotKey icon to load it on your current desktop.

You'll want to create your shortcuts next. To do so, click the HotKey 1.2 icon and choose the Edit Keys... option from its pop-up menu. In the HotKeys dialog box, shown in Figure A, click the HotKey field and enter your first shortcut by pressing the desired shortcut key sequence. To create a Notepad hotkey, for example, press [Ctrl][Alt]N. Next, press [Tab] to advance to the Description field and type *Notepad*. Press [Tab] again and type the complete path of the executable file. You must also tell HotKey the file extension, so you'd type something like *C:\windows\notepad.exe*. You may choose to add a reference to a preferred working directory in the remaining field (this is where files created by this executable file will be saved by default). Click Save to save your HotKey assignment. Click OK once you've entered and saved all your hotkeys.

Conclusion

HotKey makes shortcut key assignments work the way most users wish they had in the first place. In other words, engaging a shortcut at any time becomes a single-step function. You may use the same key sequence assignments we suggested earlier, and you don't need to run Program Manager from the StartUp group unless you want to change its title bar or Windows' default working directory. HotKey is a great Windows add-on, and we've found it to be an indispensable part of our everyday toolset.