

SOFTWARE REVIEW

DIMDI's GRIPS-Learn. Aberystwyth: Information Automation Limited, Deutsches Institut für Medizinische Dokumentation und Information, 1989. 2 disks (5¼"). Manual 6 pp. £90.

GRIPS-Learn is a training package for the German online host DIMDI. DIMDI (Deutsches Institut für Medizinische Dokumentation und Information) offers a collection of over 50 databases in the life sciences and social sciences. All the major life sciences databases are available, including Biosis, CAB, Medline, Embase and Scisearch as well as other smaller databases. GRIPS is the command language used by DIMDI. GRIPS-Learn is designed to train a user who has no experience of online searching to the level of being able to carry out quite complex searches.

The software for this review was provided on two 5¼" diskettes, for use on any IBM PC XT or AT compatible computer. I understand that 3½" diskettes are also available.

The 'User Manual' consists of three double-sided sheets, of diskette size (5¼" × 5¼"), which could easily be mislaid. As the training package is menu-driven and largely self-explanatory, the instructions for using the package are adequate, but the section on using and loading the diskettes is not entirely clear. The instructions refer both to using the system from the diskettes and from a hard disk, and separate sections for these two methods of use would be an improvement. Also, for loading the software on a hard disk, an elementary knowledge of MS-DOS is necessary to create a directory and copy the files. Although most users are likely to possess this ability, more detailed instructions for hard disk installation, or better still, the provision of an installation program, together with a batch file to run the package from the root directory, would be useful for users unfamiliar with MS-DOS.

GRIPS-Learn can be used with either a colour or monochrome monitor, the type of monitor being identified when the program is first run. For the purpose of this review, a colour monitor was used, and it was found that there was not always sufficient contrast between the text and the background (for example, orange type on a red background), so that the monitor brightness and contrast controls had to be altered to an extreme setting to enable some sections of the text to be read more easily.

On entering GRIPS-Learn, the user is given the option to run through a short tutorial lesson which explains how to use the training package. This explains the keys to be used to move around GRIPS-Learn. When this tutorial lesson has been completed, or if the option to run through the tutorial lesson is not taken, the main menu appears which gives the choice of five chapters or to return to the operating system.

To access a chapter or leave the menu, the user is asked to press the appropriate number and then to confirm the choice by typing the number again, which some users might find rather tiresome. Pressing the number for the first time causes the computer to 'bleep,' which could cause annoyance to others if the system were to be set up in a quiet area. Each chapter starts with a summary of the uses of the various keys.

Chapter 1 is an explanation of the services offered by DIMDI and an explanation of the principles of online searching. The structure of databases and records is clearly explained and the concept of Boolean logic is introduced. There are several questions involving the use of Boolean logic to ensure that the concept is understood.

Chapter 2 gives an explanation of basic search strategy and this is expanded in Chapter 3 to include the use of controlled terms and author searching.

Chapter 4 introduces masking, proximity searching and the Extract command, and Chapter 5 covers cross-file searching, downloading, printing and online document ordering.

Information in the chapters is shown a screen at a time, the user pressing a key to progress to the next screen. It is also possible to move backwards or move to a particular page.

At various points, a question must be answered correctly in order to proceed. The program is set up so that if a wrong answer is typed a new explanation is given followed by a repetition of the question. If the question is still answered incorrectly, the user is taken back over the relevant section.

All chapters are followed by simulations of actual searches without user input. In addition, Chapters 2–5 are followed by interactive search simulations which require the user to type the correct command at the appropriate point to allow the search to proceed. If the user types an incorrect command, the system gives a response indicating the error, but this is not always entirely clear. After three wrong answers, the system inputs the correct command and the simulated search proceeds.

An on-screen dictionary is also provided so that definitions of online terms, GRIPS commands and explanations of DIMDI databases can be obtained. This can be accessed at any time and the user is returned to the original screen after use.

GRIPS-Learn provides an introduction to online searching and a thorough coverage of the DIMDI system. Although at the end of the final chapter it is suggested that many commands have added capabilities not covered and that reference should be made to the relevant manuals, unless the user is likely to make regular use of DIMDI, the information supplied should be sufficient for efficient searches to be carried out. For users who only require a general introduction to the principles of online searching that is not host-specific, this package is probably too detailed, as it does cover the DIMDI system in some depth.

GRIPS-Learn is structured in such a way that a user with no experience of online searching could use the package during a number of sessions, a chapter at a time, possibly repeating the previous chapter(s) before going on to the next, and at the end of Chapter 5 should be able to log on to DIMDI and perform an effective search.

GRIPS-Learn could be used as part of a course in librarianship or information studies to enable students to develop competence in online searching. The only drawback is that DIMDI is not so commonly used as hosts such as Dialog, and if students are to be introduced to online searching using a particular host, DIMDI would probably not be a first choice.

GRIPS-Learn can be recommended for information workers who decide that they want to access DIMDI and wish to obtain a detailed knowledge of how to use it. It is equally suitable for searchers familiar with other online hosts and newcomers to online searching. For some organizations, GRIPS-Learn would enable a number of users to be trained for a much lower cost than that of attending formal training courses. It also has the advantage of allowing users to proceed at their own pace. GRIPS-Learn costs £90, and considering its complexity, represents reasonable value.

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DIMDI's GRIPS-Learn is available from:

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