

# PlainTalk Spoken Commands

In Mountain Lion, the Mac's speech abilities fall into three categories: reading text aloud using a synthesized voice; transcribing spoken words into typed text; and taking commands from your voice.

That third item, known as PlainTalk Speakable Items, is the subject of this appendix. It's what's known as a *command-and-control* technology. It lets you open programs, trigger AppleScripts, choose menu commands, trigger keystrokes, and click dialog box buttons and tabs—just by speaking their names.

Few people use speech recognition. But if your Mac has a microphone, it's worth at least a 15-minute test drive. It may become a part of your work routine forever.

## Your First Conversation with the Mac

The on/off switch for speech recognition in OS X is the Accessibility→Speakable Items pane of System Preferences (Figure 1). Where you see “Speakable items,” click On.

### ***The Feedback window***

Check out your screen: A small, microphone-like floating window now appears (Figure 2). The “Esc” in its center indicates the “listen” key—the key you're supposed to hold down when you want the Mac to respond to your voice. (You wouldn't want the Mac listening all the time—especially when you said, for example, “Hey, it's cold in here. *Close the window.*” Therefore, the Mac comes set to listen only when you're pressing that key.)

You can specify a different key, if you wish, or eliminate the requirement to press a key altogether, as described in the next section.

When you start talking, you'll also see the Mac's interpretation of what you said written out in a yellow tooltip just over the Feedback window.



**Figure 1:** Turn listening on and off here. The PlainTalk commands have been moved in Mountain Lion to this new location in Accessibility preferences.

**The Speech Commands window**

The only commands the Mac understands are listed in the Speech Commands window. (If it's not open, see Figure 1.) Keeping your eye on this window is essential, because it offers a complete list of everything your Mac understands. As you can see, some of the commands represent shortcuts that would take several steps if you had to perform them manually.

Here are a few examples of what you'll find in the list at first:

- **Phone for [Madonna].** Displays Madonna's phone number in huge digits across your screen—the fastest way yet to look up somebody's number in your Address Book program.

You can also say "Chat with Madonna" (or whomever) to begin a new chat session in iChat, "Mail to Madonna" to send the current document as a Mail attachment, or "Meet with Madonna" to add an iCal appointment with this person's information attached.

- **Set alarm for 30 minutes.** (You can say any number of minutes or hours—"Set alarm for 2 hours," or whatever.) The Mac asks you to type a little message, which will serve as the iCal dialog box that appears at the specified time.

**Tip:** Check out the complete list of iCal and Address Book commands in the Speech Commands window.

**Figure 2:** Left: The Feedback window lacks the standard Close and Minimize buttons. If it's in your way, just double-click it (or say, "Minimize speech feedback window") to shrink it into your Dock. If you choose Speech Preferences from its bottom-edge triangle, you open the Speech Preferences window.



Right: Choosing Open Speech Commands window, of course, opens the list of things you can say.

- **Close this window.** Closes the frontmost window instantly.
- **Empty the Trash.** Works only when you're in the Finder.
- **Switch to Safari.** Brings Safari to the front. (Actually, you can say, "Switch to" and then the name of *any* running or recently used program.)
- **Log me out.** Saves you the trouble of switching into each program and choosing Quit.
- **Open the Speech Commands window** or **Show me what to say.** Opens the Speech Commands window, of course.
- **What day is it?** Tells you the date.
- **Tell me a joke.** Begins a pathetic/funny knock-knock joke. You've got to play along, providing the "Who's there?" and "So-and-so *who*?" answers.

OS X *updates* the listing in the Speech Commands window in real time, according to the context. When you switch from one program to another, you see a list of the local commands that work in the new program. You'll discover that when you use the "Tell me a joke" command, for example, you don't necessarily have to say, "Who's there?" You can also say, "Stop," "Go away," or "Stop with the jokes!" (It must really be fun to work at Apple.)

Speaking to the Mac

Still on the Accessibility/Speakable Items pane of System Preferences, use the Microphone pop-up menu to specify which microphone you’ll be using (if you have a choice). Click Calibrate to adjust its sensitivity.

Now you’re ready to begin. While pressing the Esc key (if that’s still the one identified in the Feedback window), begin speaking. Speak normally; don’t exaggerate or shout. Try one of the commands in the Speech Commands list—perhaps “What time is it?” If your mike is set up properly, the round Feedback window displays animated sound waves when you speak.

Customizing Speech Recognition

You can tailor the speech recognition feature in two ways: by adjusting the way it looks and operates, and by adding new commands to its vocabulary.

Changing when the Mac listens

Having the microphone “open,” listening full-time, is an invitation for disaster. Everyday phone conversations, office chatter, and throat clearings would completely bewilder the software, triggering random commands.

Therefore, you must explicitly *tell* the Mac when you’re addressing it. When you first turn on the speech recognition feature, the Mac expects you to alert it by pressing a key, like Esc, when you speak. To do that, visit the Listening Key tab on the Accessibility/Speakable Items pane of System Preferences.

**Tip:** To change the key you hold down when you want the Mac to listen, click Change Key. A little message prompts you to press the keyboard key you’d prefer to use. Your choices are Esc, Delete, F5 through F12, or the keys on your numeric keypad—with or without the Shift, Control, or Option keys.

If you’d rather not have to press some key whenever you want the computer’s attention, click “Listen continuously with keyword.” Now to get the computer’s attention, you must speak the keyword—which you type into the Keyword box—before each command. For example, you might say, “Computer, open Numbers,” or “Hal, what day is it?” The word you specify appears in the middle of the round Feedback window.

**Note:** This method of getting the computer’s attention is less reliable than the push-a-key-to-talk system. Especially if you name the computer “Hal.” Although that’s hilarious in theory, polysyllabic words work better in practice.

By using the “Keyword is” pop-up menu, meanwhile, you can specify how big your window of opportunity is:

- **Optional before commands.** If you work alone in a quiet room, this is the choice for you. It means you don’t have to press a key *or* say the Mac’s name when issuing a voice command. *Everything you say* is considered a command.

- **Required before each command.** Nothing you say is interpreted as a command unless you say the computer’s keyword first, as in, “*Macintosh*, switch to Microsoft Word.”
- **Required 15 seconds after last command, Required 30 seconds after last command.** Sometimes you want to issue several commands in a row and would feel foolish saying, “Computer, close all windows. Computer, empty the Trash. Computer, switch to Calculator.” When you turn on this option, you can say the keyword just once; all commands you issue in the next 15 or 30 seconds “belong to” that first salutation. The push-to-talk key and the spoken keyword, in this case, serve as a master on/off switch for the Mac’s listening mode.

**Tip:** If you’re not using the push-to-talk method, you can still turn speech recognition off temporarily by saying, “Turn on push to talk.” (Now the Mac listens to you only when you’re pressing the designated key.) When you want to return to listening-all-the-time mode, say, “Listen continuously.”

Changing the feedback

Another set of options on the Settings tab governs what the Mac does when it understands something you’ve said. For example:

- **Play sound.** The Mac generally makes a sound whenever it recognizes something you’ve said. Use this pop-up menu to control which of your built-in beeps you want it to use—or choose None.
- **Speak command acknowledgement.** Sometimes the Speech Feedback window shows you a message of its own. When you use the “Empty the Trash” command, for example, text in the Feedback window may inform you that a locked item prevents the emptying. The Mac generally reads this text aloud to you; turn this checkbox off if you’d rather have the Mac be silent.

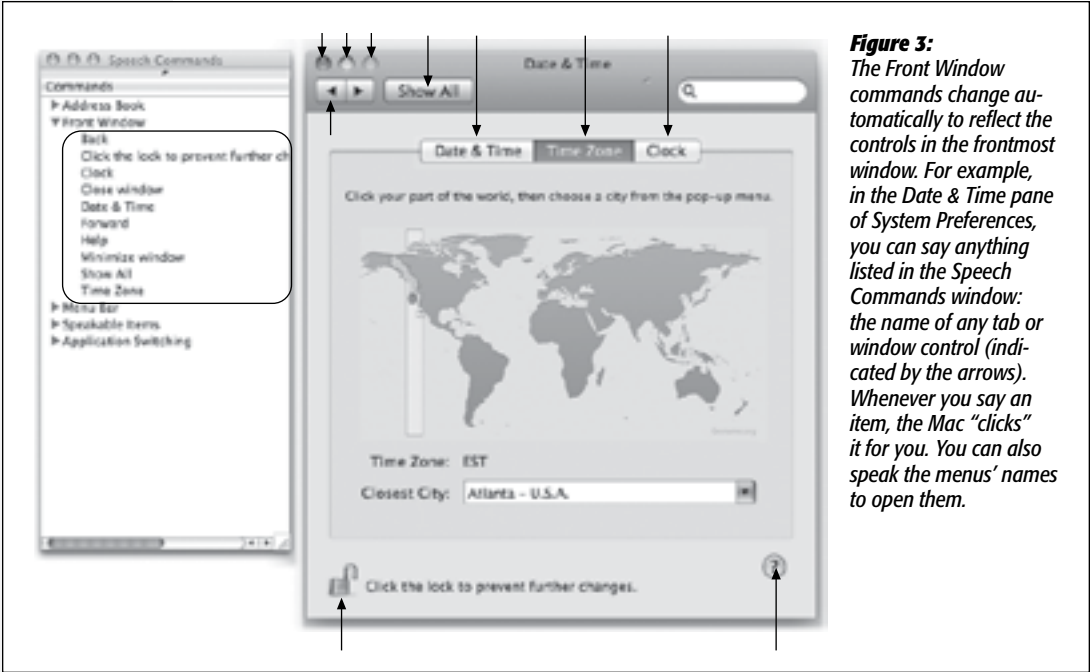
Triggering menus by voice

On the Accessibility pane of System Preferences, click Speakable Items, and then click the Commands minitab. Here you find a list of the command categories that Speakable Items can understand. As you turn each checkbox on or off, watch the Speech Commands window. Giant swaths of commands appear or disappear as you fool with these checkboxes, giving you a good indication as to their function. Here’s a rundown:

- **Contacts.** These commands let you look up numbers; add appointments to Calendar; set up alarm reminders for yourself; mail things to people; and begin text, audio, or video chats with people whose names are already in your Address Book.
- **Global Speakable Items.** This is the master list of Speakable Items, shown in Figure 2.
- **Application-Specific Items.** Certain OS X programs come with preset lists of commands that work only when you’re in the relevant program. For example, whenever you’re in the Finder, you can say, “Empty the Trash,” “Go to my Home directory,”

“Hide the Dock,” “Minimize all windows,” “Make a new folder,” and so on. When this checkbox is off, the Mac no longer recognizes any of these handy commands.

- **Application Switching.** This is the command category at the bottom half of the Speech Commands list—“Switch to Address Book,” “Switch to Firefox,” and so on.
- **Menu Bar.** This command lets you open menus (in the menu bar) by speaking their names.
- **Front Window.** In your Speech Commands window, note the appearance of a new category of commands, called Front Window. The idea here is to provide you with quick speech-recognition access to the most prominent buttons, tabs, and icons in whichever window is before you. Figure 3 elaborates on the idea.



**Figure 3:** The Front Window commands change automatically to reflect the controls in the frontmost window. For example, in the Date & Time pane of System Preferences, you can say anything listed in the Speech Commands window: the name of any tab or window control (indicated by the arrows). Whenever you say an item, the Mac “clicks” it for you. You can also speak the menus’ names to open them.

Once you say its name (“File menu,” for example), the menu opens. Now you can say any command in the open menu (“New Playlist,” “Save,” or whatever). The Menu Bar category of the Speech Commands window changes to remind you of what you can say at any given moment.

The combination of Front Window and Menu Bar commands lets you do quite a bit of work on your Mac without ever needing the mouse or keyboard.

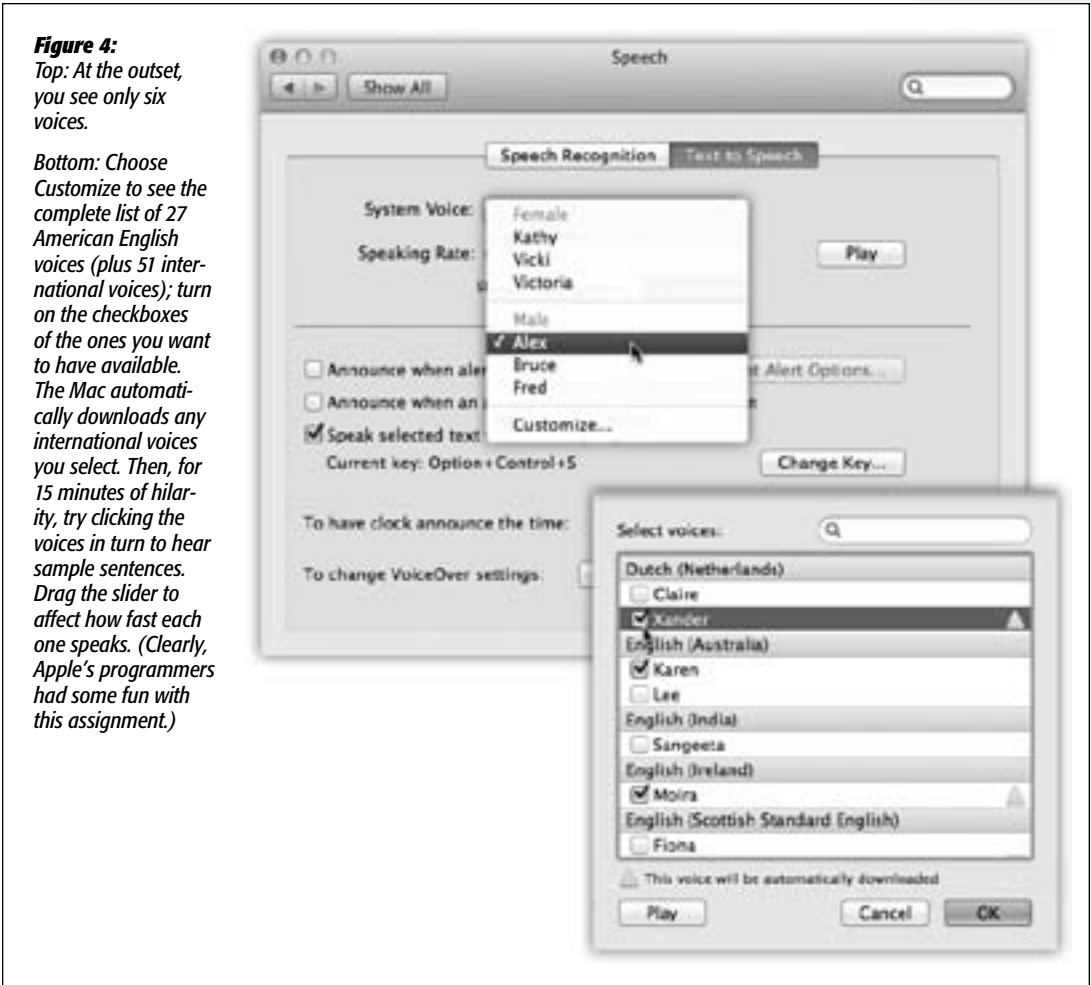
**Improving the Mac’s vocabulary**

By putting an alias of a favorite document, folder, disk, or program into your Home→Library→Speakable Items folder, you can teach the Mac to recognize its name and open it for you on command. You can name these icons anything you want.

**Note:** The Library folder in your Home folder is generally invisible, but you can jump right to it by pressing Option as you choose Go→Library.

You can also rename the starter set that Apple provides. You’ll have the best luck with multiword or polysyllabic names—“Microsoft Word,” not just “Word.”

One kind of icon your voice can open is an *AppleScript* icon (see Chapter 7). The point is that you can make the Mac do almost anything you want, especially in the



**Figure 4:** Top: At the outset, you see only six voices.

Bottom: Choose Customize to see the complete list of 27 American English voices (plus 51 international voices); turn on the checkboxes of the ones you want to have available. The Mac automatically downloads any international voices you select. Then, for 15 minutes of hilarity, try clicking the voices in turn to hear sample sentences. Drag the slider to affect how fast each one speaks. (Clearly, Apple’s programmers had some fun with this assignment.)

Finder, simply by creating AppleScripts or Automator workflows and putting them into the Speakable Items folder.

### ***Application-specific commands***

Most of the preinstalled commands work in any program. You can say, for example, “Open iTunes” to launch iTunes from within any program.

However, you can also create commands that work only in a specific program. They sit in your Speakable Items→Application Speakable Items folder, inside individual application-name folders. For example, Mac OS X comes with commands for Mail that include Forward This Message, Get New Mail, and Reply to All.

If you get good at AppleScript, you can create your own application-command folders in the Speakable Items→Application Speakable Items folder.

Then open the program for which you want to create special commands and say, “Make this application speakable.” The Mac creates a folder for the program in the Speakable Items folder; fill it with the AppleScripts you’ve created. (Not all programs can be AppleScript-controlled.)

---

**Note:** If you give an application-specific icon the same name as one of the global commands, the Mac executes the application-specific one—if that program is running.

---

### ***Speech tips, tricks, and troubleshooting***

When you’re creating new commands, click the Helpful Tips button at the lower-right corner of the Commands pane (of the Speech Recognition pane of the Speech pane of System Preferences).