



*iChat AV 2 for Mac OS X:
Visual QuickStart Guide*
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Quick Tips for Better Chats

Spend more time talking and less time troubleshooting with this selection of top tips excerpted from Jeff Carlson's *iChat AV 2 for Mac OS X: Visual QuickStart Guide*. In just a few easy steps Jeff shows you how to build better buddy icons, save your chat transcripts, hook up to a Web cam, and solve those niggling problems that can make online chatting a chore.

Obtaining a Screen Name

To use iChat, you must have either an Apple .Mac (pronounced dot Mac) account or an AOL Instant Messenger (also known as AIM) account. Both services allow you to sign up for free screen names.

.Mac

Apple's .Mac is a subscription service that offers remote file storage, shared iCal calendars, online photo albums, and special software discounts and giveaways, as well as an iChat screen name. It also costs \$100 per year. If you already subscribe to .Mac, use your mac.com email address (such as ichatvqs@mac.com) as your iChat identity.

However, if you aren't currently a .Mac subscriber, and don't particularly want to shell out the \$100, you're in luck. As of this writing, Apple is offering a free 60-day trial subscription to .Mac; if you decide not to pay for the full service, you still get to keep your .Mac address to use with iChat. Go to Apple's Web site (www.mac.com/1/ichat.html) to sign up.

AIM

If you already have an AOL account, your screen name is also used as your iChat identity. If not, and you'd prefer to use an AOL screen name, go to the AIM Web site (www.aim.com) to sign up for a free account.

Text Chat Etiquette

Although text chatting occurs in real time, it's not the same as talking on the phone or in person. Here are some general rules and words of advice for when you're chatting with someone:

- * As with email, don't write in ALL CAPS. It gives the impression that you're SHOUTING.
- * iChat gives you the option of setting a default font and text size, but don't abuse it by setting your chat font to 24 point Arial Black. Other people see the font you choose, and though they can set their iChat preferences to format all incoming text, they shouldn't have to.
- * If someone's status is set to Away, don't initiate a chat with them. I was (rightly) bawled out by a colleague for chatting while he was on a deadline once.
- * It's often better to post in bursts of a sentence or two, rather than composing a long paragraph of text before sending it off.
- * Because there's often a slight delay between posts, usually when someone is composing a response, it's not unusual to have a few different topic threads going on at the same time. Sometimes it helps to introduce a new subtopic in parentheses. Then again, you'll find that you pick up on multiple threads fairly easily once you're in the midst of them.

Making Better Buddy Icons

Apple has made it easy to add just about any image to iChat by performing the calculations required to shrink an image to a 32 by 32 pixel icon. However, the reduction process often makes images blurry, or sometimes doesn't zoom as close as you'd like.

Using an image editor such as Graphic-Converter (www.lemkesoft.de), Adobe Photoshop (www.adobe.com/photoshop/), or iPhoto, you can perform some easy edits to improve the appearance of your icons.

To make better buddy icons:

- Zoom in. In iChat or an image editor, crop the photo tight around a person's face to show the most features. This also ensures you don't hit a zoom limit when using a larger photo.
- Resize to fit. iChat uses two icon sizes: 64 by 64 pixels for the icon that appears in the Address Book application and iChat's Get Info windows, and 32 by 32 pixels for the icon in iChat's Buddy List. Rather than leave the resizing up to iChat, do the work yourself in an image editor so you know what you'll end up with.

Note that if you import a 32 by 32 pixel version, you'll need to use the zoom slider to zoom in on the icon to avoid seeing extra white space that appears.

- Sharpen. Resizing an image tends to blur its details. After resizing your picture in an image editor, use its sharpening tools to bring back some details (Figure 1).
- * Tip Even if your source image is at a higher resolution, you need to save your icons at 72 dots per inch (dpi), or iChat will resample it for you.



Figure 1 Improve the appearance of your buddy icon by cropping the image, resizing it to match iChat's measurements, and sharpening to bring out details.

Set the bandwidth limit

1. Open iChat's preferences, and click the Video icon.
2. Choose a speed from the Bandwidth Limit popup menu. 100 Kbps (kilobits per second) is less capacity than 2 Mbps (megabits per second).

*Tip Changing the bandwidth limit is usually a good first troubleshooting step.

Working with Chat Transcripts

Although it all starts with the written word, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, the word ends up being ephemeral and fleeting—once you close your chat window, the words disappear. If you'd rather keep your words around, save the transcripts of your chat sessions.

To save chat transcripts automatically:

1. Open iChat's preferences, and click the Messages icon.
2. Select the checkbox marked "Automatically save chat transcripts" (Figure 2).



Figure 2 iChat can keep a record of every text chat for later reference when you enable this preference.

iChat saves the sessions as text files that contain special formatting so that when you open them later in iChat, you get the full visual formatting.

The files' titles are the names of the people you chatted with, and can be found in the iChats folder within your Documents folder. Click the **Open Folder** button in iChat's preferences to automatically open that folder.

To save a chat transcript manually:

1. Choose Save a Copy As from the File menu, or press **Command-S**.
2. Choose a location on your hard disk, give the file a unique title, and click Save.

To open a chat transcript:

Double-click the file in the **Finder** to open it in iChat. You can also choose **Open** or **Open Recent** from the **File** menu, and then locate the file.

*Tip Frankly, it's insane to try to find a chat transcript by rooting around in the iChats folder. To work effectively with transcripts, check out Logorrhea (www.spiny.com/logorrhea/), an application that offers a sensible way of browsing chats plus a search feature for scanning the conversations. Logorrhea (which means "pathologically excessive talking") is freeware.

Helpful Tips for Better Chats

- *Is the quality of your audio degrading as you talk? Mute the connection, then un-mute it. iChat re-evaluates the bandwidth that's available and improves the connection.
- *For a strictly bare-bones message window, choose **Show as Text** and **Show Names** from the **View** menu; set all incoming messages as one uniform font and size; and set the sender's balloon color as Clear.
- *Audio chats operate one-on-one; you can't have multiple audio chats going on at the same time. If someone in your **Buddy List** is currently involved in an audio or video chat, their audio or video status icon appears dim.
- *Audio chats are full-duplex, which means you and your buddy can speak at the same time without getting cut off (by the technology anyway; whether one of you tends to cut off the other in conversation is beyond the help I can offer).
- *You can minimize the audio chat window to the **Dock** and continue your conversation without interruption.
- *To find out how long you've been chatting, open the **Connection Doctor**, which displays the call duration.
- *Who stopped the music? If iTunes is running in the background, your music is automatically paused when an audio or video chat begins. When the chat ends, the music starts again where it left off.
- *Does the audio coming out of the built-in speakers of your PowerBook G4 or iBook sound tinny or flat? This is by design: to reduce audio feedback from the internal microphone, the sound from audio and video chats comes out of the left speaker only, and in mono. Connect a set of headphones or speakers to improve the quality (though it's still mono). See Apple's support Web site for more information (docs.info.apple.com/article.html?artnum=93214).
- *If you're using a DV camcorder as the video source, and it's shutting itself off after a few minutes, remove the tape.

Using a USB Webcam?

Although not officially supported, you can use some USB webcams, thanks to Ecamm Network's \$10 iChatUSBcam (www.ecamm.com/mac/ichatusbcam/). In fact, according to the developers, it enables you to use iChat videoconferencing on machines that fall below Apple's recommended guidelines.

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