What is SQL?

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SQL ("ess-que-el" or "sequel") is the standard language that allows you to communicate with a database easily, intuitively and quickly.   SQL is the acronym for Structured Query Language and is the language most often used to create, alter, delete and work on a relational database. The information stored in these databases can be manipulated and extracted into a variety of formats.

In the 1970s IBM invented and implemented SEQUEL, the precursor to SQL used by many database systems today. Since 1986 the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) jointly publish guidelines establishing standards for SQL. There have been many updates and additions to the ANSI-SQL standard since the original guidelines were established.

- SQL86.   This standard was the first published. It tried to incorporate common functionality for existing products.
- SQL89   Added support to enforce referential integrity for foreign key relationships. Otherwise the standard is similar to SQL86.
- SQL92   This release was a major update to the standard. The standard included much more functionality and included three distinct levels of conformance (Entry, Intermediate and Full). Entry level contains a set of features that characterize basic conformity.
- SQL99   This is the newest release and was developed to address advanced issues such as object oriented approaches.

SQL was not intended to be used as a full fledged programming language in the traditional sense. It was intended to aid in the development of database applications in conjunction with established programming languages such as C or COBOL. SQL is a more correctly defined as a data management language not a programming language. Programming languages tend to be difficult to easily master and complex in structure and use. SQL's main purpose is to generate and manipulate tables.