**HTTP/1.1 vs HTTP/2**

The Hypertext Transfer Protocol, or HTTP, is an application protocol that has been the de facto standard for communication on the World Wide Web since its invention in 1989. From the release of HTTP/1.1 in 1997 until recently, there have been few revisions to the protocol. But in 2015, a reimagined version called HTTP/2 came into use, which offered several methods to decrease latency, especially when dealing with mobile platforms and server-intensive graphics and videos. HTTP/2 has since become increasingly popular, with some estimates suggesting that around a third of all websites in the world support it. In this changing landscape, web developers can benefit from understanding the technical differences between HTTP/1.1 and HTTP/2, allowing them to make informed and efficient decisions about evolving best practices.

**HTTP/1.1**

Developed by Timothy Berners-Lee in 1989 as a communication standard for the World Wide Web, HTTP is a top-level application protocol that exchanges information between a client computer and a local or remote web server. In this process, a client sends a text-based request to a server by calling a method like GET or POST. In response, the server sends a resource like an HTML page back to the client.

For example, let’s say you are visiting a website at the domain www.example.com. When you navigate to this URL, the web browser on your computer sends an HTTP request in the form of a text-based message.

This request uses the GET method, which asks for data from the host server listed after Host:. In response to this request, the example.com web server returns an HTML page to the requesting client, in addition to any images, stylesheets, or other resources called for in the HTML. Note that not all of the resources are returned to the client in the first call for data. The requests and responses will go back and forth between the server and client until the web browser has received all the resources necessary to render the contents of the HTML page on your screen.

**HTTP/2**

HTTP/2 began as the SPDY protocol, developed primarily at Google with the intention of reducing web page load latency by using techniques such as compression, multiplexing, and prioritization. This protocol served as a template for HTTP/2 when the Hypertext Transfer Protocol working group httpbis of the [IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force)](https://www.ietf.org/) put the standard together, culminating in the publication of HTTP/2 in May 2015. From the beginning, many browsers supported this standardization effort, including Chrome, Opera, Internet Explorer, and Safari. Due in part to this browser support, there has been a significant adoption rate of the protocol since 2015, with especially high rates among new sites.

From a technical point of view, one of the most significant features that distinguishes HTTP/1.1 and HTTP/2 is the binary framing layer, which can be thought of as a part of the application layer in the internet protocol stack. As opposed to HTTP/1.1, which keeps all requests and responses in plain text format, HTTP/2 uses the binary framing layer to encapsulate all messages in binary format, while still maintaining HTTP semantics, such as verbs, methods, and headers. An application level API would still create messages in the conventional HTTP formats, but the underlying layer would then convert these messages into binary. This ensures that web applications created before HTTP/2 can continue functioning as normal when interacting with the new protocol.

The conversion of messages into binary allows HTTP/2 to try new approaches to data delivery not available in HTTP/1.1, a contrast that is at the root of the practical differences between the two protocols. The next section will take a look at the delivery model of HTTP/1.1, followed by what new models are made possible by HTTP/2.

**HTTP/1.1**

In HTTP/1.1, flow control relies on the underlying TCP connection. When this connection initiates, both client and server establish their buffer sizes using their system default settings. If the receiver’s buffer is partially filled with data, it will tell the sender its receive window, i.e., the amount of available space that remains in its buffer. This receive window is advertised in a signal known as an ACK packet, which is the data packet that the receiver sends to acknowledge that it received the opening signal. If this advertised receive window size is zero, the sender will send no more data until the client clears its internal buffer and then requests to resume data transmission. It is important to note here that using receive windows based on the underlying TCP connection can only implement flow control on either end of the connection.

Because HTTP/1.1 relies on the transport layer to avoid buffer overflow, each new TCP connection requires a separate flow control mechanism. HTTP/2, however, multiplexes streams within a single TCP connection, and will have to implement flow control in a different manner.

**HTTP/2**

HTTP/2 multiplexes streams of data within a single TCP connection. As a result, receive windows on the level of the TCP connection are not sufficient to regulate the delivery of individual streams. HTTP/2 solves this problem by allowing the client and server to implement their own flow controls, rather than relying on the transport layer. The application layer communicates the available buffer space, allowing the client and server to set the receive window on the level of the multiplexed streams. This fine-scale flow control can be modified or maintained after the initial connection via a WINDOW\_UPDATE frame.

Since this method controls data flow on the level of the application layer, the flow control mechanism does not have to wait for a signal to reach its ultimate destination before adjusting the receive window. Intermediary nodes can use the flow control settings information to determine their own resource allocations and modify accordingly. In this way, each intermediary server can implement its own custom resource strategy, allowing for greater connection efficiency.

This flexibility in flow control can be advantageous when creating appropriate resource strategies. For example, the client may fetch the first scan of an image, display it to the user, and allow the user to preview it while fetching more critical resources. Once the client fetches these critical resources, the browser will resume the retrieval of the remaining part of the image. Deferring the implementation of flow control to the client and server can thus improve the perceived performance of web applications.

In terms of flow control and the stream prioritization mentioned in an earlier section, HTTP/2 provides a more detailed level of control that opens up the possibility of greater optimization. The next section will explain another method unique to the protocol that can enhance a connection in a similar way: predicting resource requests with server push.

**HTTP/1.1-Resource inlining**

In HTTP/1.1, if the developer knows in advance which additional resources the client machine will need to render the page, they can use a technique called resource inlining to include the required resource directly within the HTML document that the server sends in response to the initial GET request. For example, if a client needs a specific CSS file to render a page, inlining that CSS file will provide the client with the needed resource before it asks for it, reducing the total number of requests that the client must send.

But there are a few problems with resource inlining. Including the resource in the HTML document is a viable solution for smaller, text-based resources, but larger files in non-text formats can greatly increase the size of the HTML document, which can ultimately decrease the connection speed and nullify the original advantage gained from using this technique. Also, since the inlined resources are no longer separate from the HTML document, there is no mechanism for the client to decline resources that it already has, or to place a resource in its cache. If multiple pages require the resource, each new HTML document will have the same resource inlined in its code, leading to larger HTML documents and longer load times than if the resource were simply cached in the beginning.

A major drawback of resource inlining, then, is that the client cannot separate the resource and the document. A finer level of control is needed to optimize the connection, a need that HTTP/2 seeks to meet with server push.

**HTTP/2-Server Push**

Since HTTP/2 enables multiple concurrent responses to a client’s initial GET request, a server can send a resource to a client along with the requested HTML page, providing the resource before the client asks for it. This process is called server push. In this way, an HTTP/2 connection can accomplish the same goal of resource inlining while maintaining the separation between the pushed resource and the document. This means that the client can decide to cache or decline the pushed resource separate from the main HTML document, fixing the major drawback of resource inlining.

In HTTP/2, this process begins when the server sends a PUSH\_PROMISE frame to inform the client that it is going to push a resource. This frame includes only the header of the message, and allows the client to know ahead of time which resource the server will push. If it already has the resource cached, the client can decline the push by sending a RST\_STREAM frame in response. The PUSH\_PROMISE frame also saves the client from sending a duplicate request to the server, since it knows which resources the server is going to push.

It is important to note here that the emphasis of server push is client control. If a client needed to adjust the priority of server push, or even disable it, it could at any time send a SETTINGS frame to modify this HTTP/2 feature.

Although this feature has a lot of potential, server push is not always the answer to optimizing your web application. For example, some web browsers cannot always cancel pushed requests, even if the client already has the resource cached. If the client mistakenly allows the server to send a duplicate resource, the server push can use up the connection unnecessarily. In the end, server push should be used at the discretion of the developer. For more on how to strategically use server push and optimize web applications, check out the [PRPL pattern](https://developers.google.com/web/fundamentals/performance/prpl-pattern/) developed by Google. To learn more about the possible issues with server push, see Jake Archibald’s blog post [HTTP/2 push is tougher than I thought](https://jakearchibald.com/2017/h2-push-tougher-than-i-thought/).