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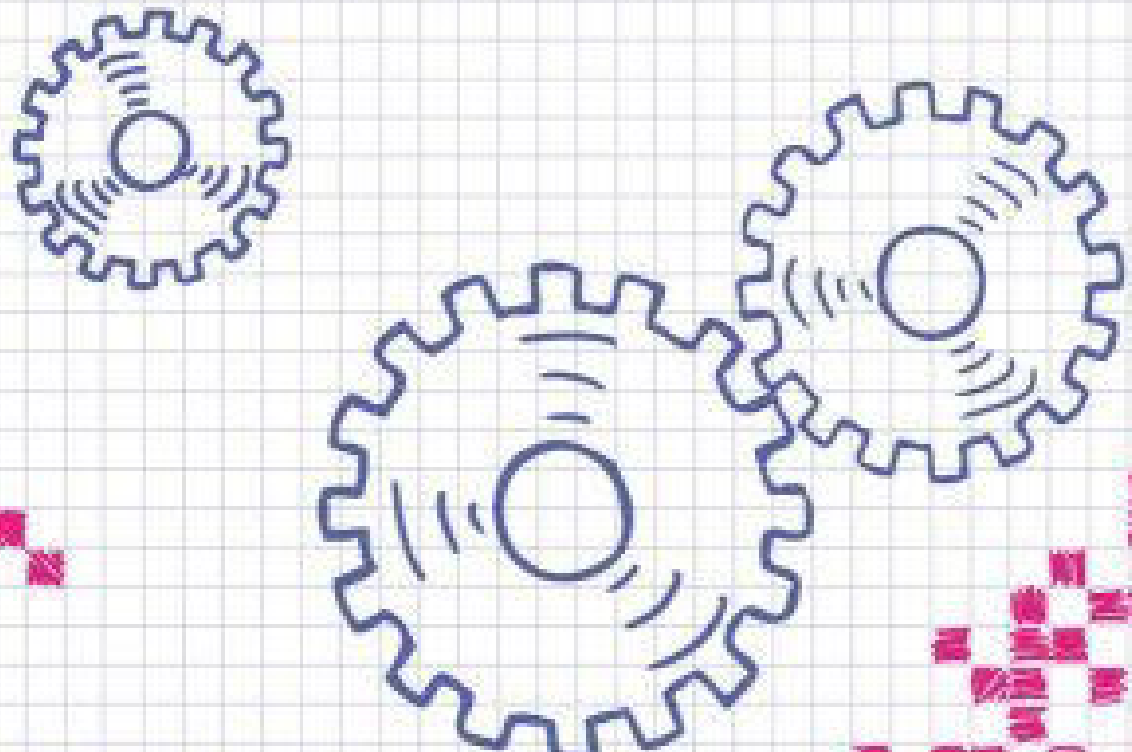
Getting StartED with CSS



by David Powers

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Getting StartED with CSS

David Powers

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GETTING STARTED WITH CSS

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About the Author

David Powers is an Adobe Community Expert for Dreamweaver and author of a series of highly successful books on web design and development, including *The Definitive Guide to Dreamweaver CS4 with CSS, Ajax, and PHP* (friends of ED, ISBN: 978-1-4302-1610-0) and *PHP Solutions: Dynamic Web Design Made Easy* (friends of ED, ISBN: 978-1-5905-9731-1). He also served as the technical reviewer on *Cascading Style Sheets: SeparatingContent from Presentation, Second Edition* by Owen Briggs, Steven Champeon et al (friends of ED), and *Head First HTML with CSS & XHTML* by Elisabeth Freeman and Eric Freeman (O'Reilly).

As a professional writer, he has been involved in electronic media for more than 30 years, first with BBC radio and television and more recently with the Internet. What started as a mild interest in computing was transformed almost overnight into a passion, when David was posted to Japan in 1987 as BBC correspondent in Tokyo. With no corporate IT department just down the hallway, he was forced to learn how to fix everything himself. When not tinkering with the innards of his computer, he was reporting for BBC TV and radio on the rise and collapse of the Japanese bubble economy.

David has also translated several plays from Japanese. To relax, he enjoys nothing better than visiting his favorite sushi restaurant.

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About the Technical Reviewer

Peter Elst is a freelance web 2.0 consultant and Founding Partner of Project Cocoon — a collaborative project of web designers and developers based in South India. As a respected member of the online Flash platform community, Peter has spoken at various international industry events and published his work in leading journals.

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Introduction

Most people who build websites fall into one of two categories: geeks (like me) who take great pleasure in working with code, and artistic types who think in terms of overall design. Of course, that's a sweeping generalization. To be successful in modern web design, you need an element of both. But most people will be stronger in one field than the other.

If your main strength lies in visualizing an overall design and you find code a bit of a turn-off, learning how to style websites with Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) might seem a daunting task. But it needn't be. . . . Think of CSS as the *language of design*. The code in a style sheet is simply telling the browser how you want your pages to look. It defines the fonts, colors, and layout of the various elements on the page. You might find yourself despairing at how long it takes to put together a style sheet to reflect your visual design. Take heart; even if you're an expert, it's not something you can dash off in a few minutes. Attention to detail is important—and, as always, it shows in the results. Moreover, once you have created the style sheet, the visual design is automatically applied to every new page that you build. That's the magic of CSS.

Code warriors face a different challenge. The amount of code involved in CSS is quite small. There are fewer than 100 properties to learn, and most of them are intuitively named. It doesn't take a genius to work out that the `border-top` property defines the top border of an element. The syntax is also very simple. As a result, an experienced developer might expect to have the whole thing licked in a couple of days. You won't.

Regardless of your background, learning CSS takes time. It's not because CSS is hard—far from it. What takes time is understanding the infinite number of ways CSS properties can be combined with each other, providing a stunning degree of control over the look and layout of web pages. The other challenge—although it's becoming less significant by the day—comes from the way different browsers interpret CSS. Older browsers, particularly Internet Explorer 6 and 7, don't understand all CSS properties or have bugs. However, all other browsers in widespread use (including Internet Explorer 8) have excellent support for CSS. As long as you build your style sheets to work in a modern browser, you can usually fix any problems in older browsers at the end of the design process.

Although you won't become a CSS master overnight, you can achieve impressive results quite quickly. I have organized the chapters in this book in a logical sequence to lead you from simple beginnings to progressively complex concepts. Even if you already have some experience of CSS, I recommend that you read the chapters in the order they are presented. Each chapter contains a mixture of reference material and hands-on exercises that build on what you have learned previously. The appendix at the end of this book also serves as a quick reference to all the properties in the current version of CSS (CSS2.1), as well as CSS selectors used in all mainstream browsers.

Take things gradually. You'll get there in the end, and you'll discover the time invested eventually repaid in websites that not only look good, but are much easier to maintain.

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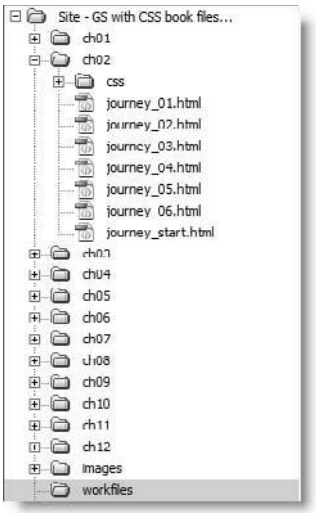
Who this book is for

This book is aimed at anyone involved in building websites using HTML (or XHTML). It assumes no prior knowledge of CSS, but I do expect you to understand the basics of HTML and web page construction. After the first couple of chapters, the book moves at a fairly rapid pace, so this book should also appeal to readers who have dabbled with CSS, but still haven't quite "got it." If you already know some CSS, I strongly urge you *not* to skip the early chapters, because I try to steer you away from overreliance on CSS classes and other bad habits.

Although I show you a lot of cool tricks on the way, throughout this book I concentrate on teaching you how CSS works. Cool tricks are fine, but if you don't understand why something works a particular way, you'll find it difficult to adapt the CSS to achieve the particular effect that *you* want. As far as possible, I steer away from hacks. The primary emphasis is always on how CSS should work in a standards-compliant browser. But until Internet Explorer 6 and 7 finally disappear, you need to know how to deal with the problems they cause. So, I include workarounds for all the major problems with those browsers.

Using the files for this book

The files for all the exercises and examples in this book can be downloaded from the friends of ED website at `http://friendsofed.com/download.html?isbn=9781430225430`. The files are organized into a separate folder for each chapter, and all the internal links are document-relative. To ensure that the internal links continue to work, I suggest that you create a new folder called `workfiles` at the same level as the individual chapter folders, as shown in the following screenshot:



Copy each file as you need it into the `workfiles` folder. You should also create a `css` subfolder inside `workfiles`, and build or copy the style sheets there. This will maintain the correct relationship between the files and the images in all the pages.

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Chapter 1

What Is CSS, and Why Should I Learn It?

In the beginning, the Web was simple. Figure 1-1 shows what the first-ever public web page looked like. As you can see, it consisted of plain, unadorned text. Headings were in large, bold type; links were blue and underlined—and that was it.

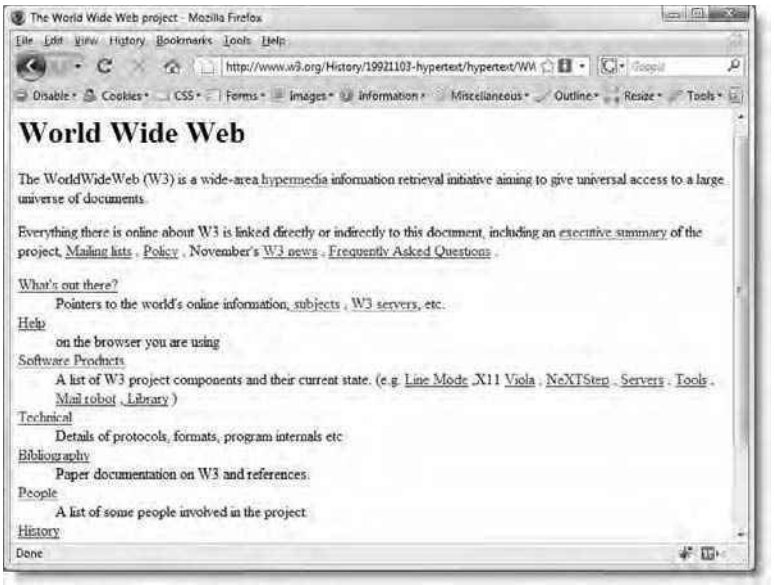

Figure 1-1. The first-ever web page contained just text and links.

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