The Benefits of CSS

By Lindsay Roberts

The web has come a long way since its initial development by Tim Burners Lee in 1991. It's evolved from simple markup language to an extensive collaboration of languages including HTML, CSS, JavaScript, PHP and more. But this paper isn't about all that. It's about CSS, and why it plays such an important role in the web today.

When we think about the benefits of CSS, what is it in regards to? CSS doesn't have any competition, so to speak. At a glance, it seems like a duh-factor to use CSS, because there isn't any other way to do it. However, for years, people have styled websites using nested tables, inline CSS, and the 'font' tag…

Don't get me wrong; tables are great. They allow you to display data in a nice little chart and encourage scanning. (People don't read websites entirely; they scan them.) However, using them for layout rather than CSS can begin to clog up your code. It takes about four lines to position something using margins. If you're using a table, you've already gotten to two lines of code just by inserting the table element, and everyone knows that the more code you have on your website, the slower it's going to be.

In the world of Computer Science, there's this term: Separation of Concerns. It's usually referred to in more complex matters (Java, C++, OOP, etc.) however it still applies to the disjunction of HTML and CSS. There lies a multitude of reasons why you should separate your style from your content, almost all of which benefit you, the designer. Above all, using style sheets rather than inline CSS gives you the ability to quickly edit multiple pages of your website than having to waste the time of day to edit each page individually. For example, if you had a blog with hundreds of posts, you wouldn't want to have to edit every single post, just to change the font color, right?

Sources:
http://www.codingforums.com/archive/index.php/t-221899.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separation_of_concerns
http://cssvideos.com/css-basics/css-syntax/

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There are other factors, too. Page loading times will be significantly slower, because you're using significantly less code. As web designers, we all know that every second counts, so this is a crucial aspect of keeping your code segmented. There are also other small things, like highlighting. Highlighting allows you to see errors before they turn into bugs, and gives you the opportunity to fix them. If you embed your CSS and JavaScript in the HTML document, then sometimes, you may not see the code hinting and have to figure out what's wrong later, when things start to break.

That being said, embedding your code does have some use. HTML newsletters are a great example. These newsletters are a single HTML page, no JavaScript and a little CSS to make it look pretty. There's no harm in embedding the CSS in the head of the document when it only has a handful of declarations. It eliminates the need for the HTTP request for a separate style sheet.

Linking style sheets, however, is the best (and, if this were a perfect world, only) way to style your website. When you have something that's going to be a little more than a few declarations of CSS, it needs to be in a CSS document, with comments segmenting groups of like-minded selectors.

"So what are these declarations and selectors?" Declarations and selectors are both part of the CSS syntax, which is known for being easy. The great think about CSS is that unlike most computer languages, it's written for people to understand. Figure 1.1 illustrates the different parts of the CSS syntax.

The **selector** identifies the element or group of elements that will be changed. The selector can target HTML elements, ids, and classes to give them a style.

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Figure 1.1

The curly brackets come after the selector. Anything inside these brackets is the **declaration block.** The declaration block can include many declarations. The **property** is the first part of the declaration. It describes what we want to change and is always followed by a colon. For example, if we want to change the color of something, the property would be "color". The **value** describes the property and tells us what, or how much of that property should be applied. For example, if we want to change the color of something, we would need to specify the value of "red". Following the value is a semi colon, which ends the declaration. Both the property and the value make up the **declaration**.

See, the basics of CSS aren't actually all that hard. By understanding the syntax, writing CSS should seem much easier than writing inline CSS in your HTML document, and the idea of editing multiple pages of HTML versus a single style sheet should make you cringe. So from now on, forget about writing CSS in your HTML document and begin to write semantic CSS in a separate style sheet! Oh, and don't forget to /*comment*/!

Sources:
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