AJAX Tutorial

AJAX is a web development technique for creating interactive web applications. If you know JavaScript, HTML, CSS, and XML, then you need to spend just one hour to start with AJAX.

Why to Learn Ajax?

AJAX stands for **A**synchronous **Ja**vaScript and **X**ML. AJAX is a new technique for creating better, faster, and more interactive web applications with the help of XML, HTML, CSS, and Java Script.

- Ajax uses XHTML for content, CSS for presentation, along with Document Object Model and JavaScript for dynamic content display.
- Conventional web applications transmit information to and from the sever using synchronous requests. It means you fill out a form, hit submit, and get directed to a new page with new information from the server.
- With AJAX, when you hit submit, JavaScript will make a request to the server, interpret the results, and update the current screen. In the purest sense, the user would never know that anything was even transmitted to the server.
- XML is commonly used as the format for receiving server data, although any format, including plain text, can be used.
- AJAX is a web browser technology independent of web server software.
- A user can continue to use the application while the client program requests information from the server in the background.
- Intuitive and natural user interaction. Clicking is not required, mouse movement is a sufficient event trigger.
- Data-driven as opposed to page-driven.

Rich Internet Application Technology

AJAX is the most viable Rich Internet Application (RIA) technology so far. It is getting tremendous industry momentum and several tool kit and frameworks are emerging. But at the same time, AJAX has browser incompatibility and it is supported by JavaScript, which is hard to maintain and debug.

AJAX is Based on Open Standards

AJAX is based on the following open standards −

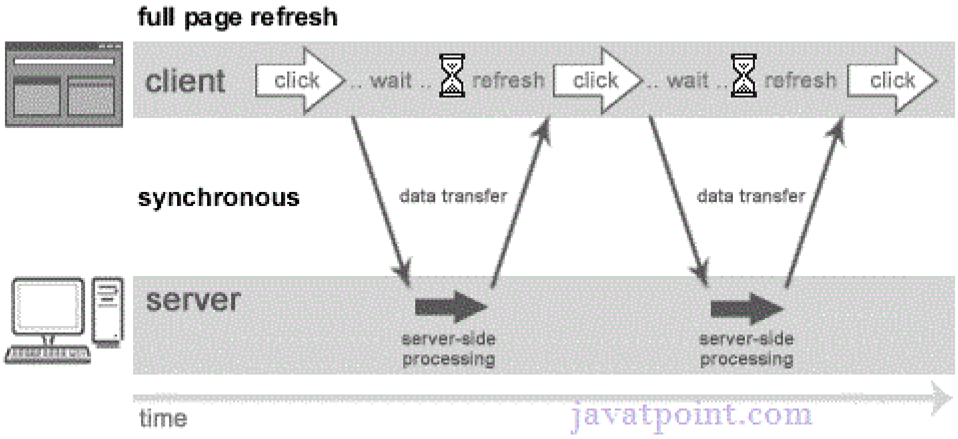
- Browser-based presentation using HTML and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS).
- Data is stored in XML format and fetched from the server.
- Behind-the-scenes data fetches using XMLHttpRequest objects in the browser.
- JavaScript to make everything happen.

Understanding Synchronous vs Asynchronous

Before understanding AJAX, let’s understand classic web application model and ajax web application model first.

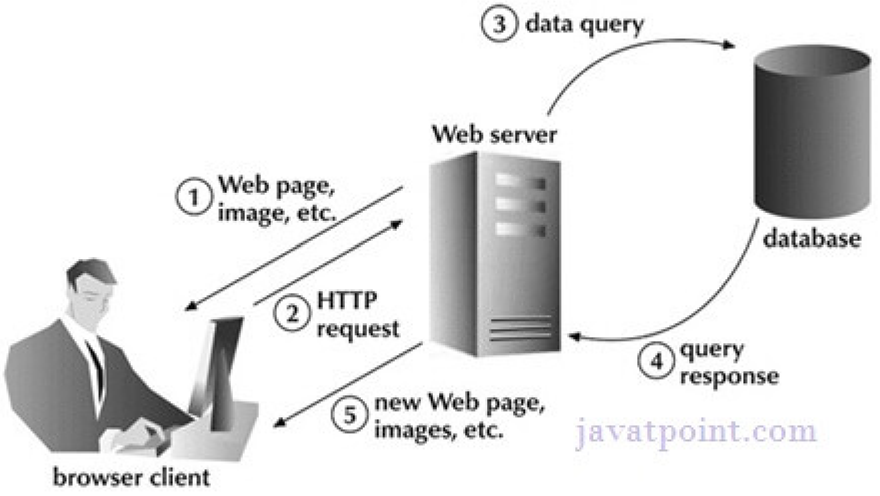
Synchronous (Classic Web-Application Model)

A synchronous request blocks the client until operation completes i.e. browser is unresponsive. In such case, javascript engine of the browser is blocked.



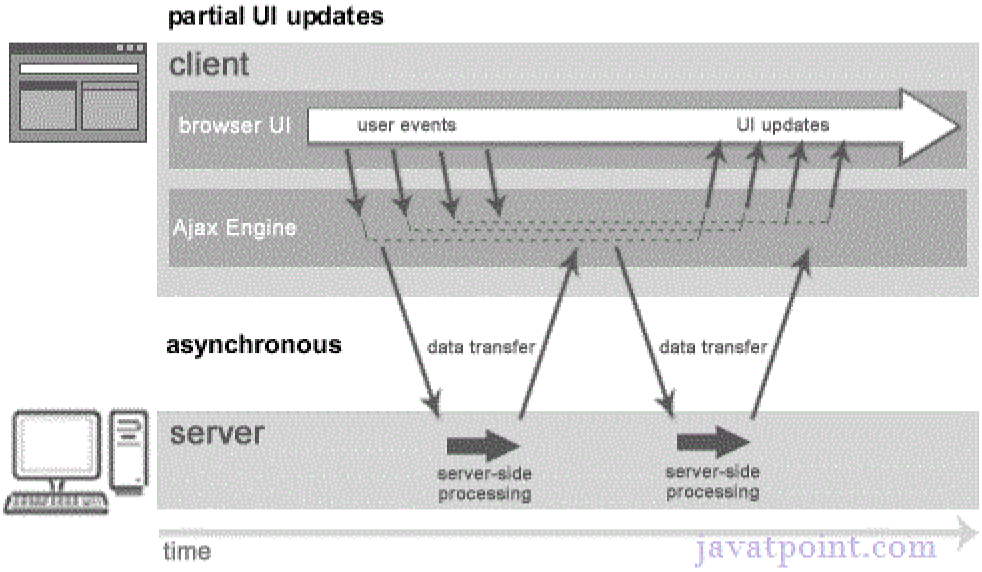
As you can see in the above image, full page is refreshed at request time and user is blocked until request completes.

Let's understand it another way.



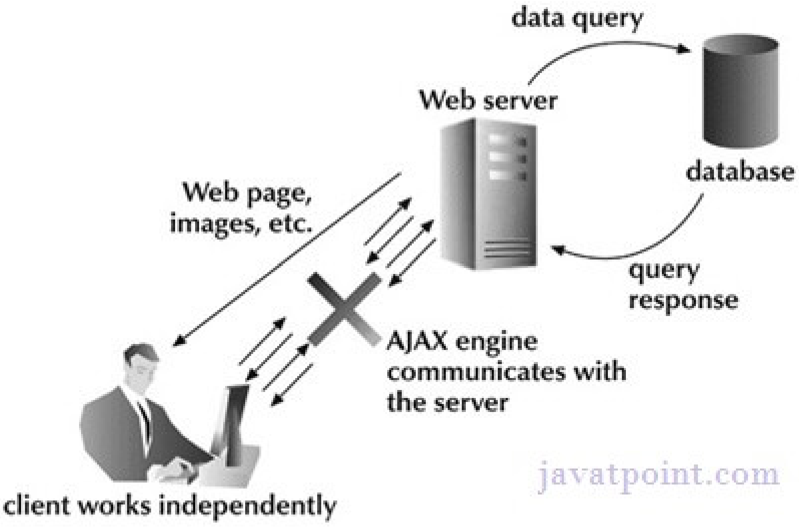
Asynchronous (AJAX Web-Application Model)

An asynchronous request doesn't block the client i.e. browser is responsive. At that time, user can perform another operations also. In such case, javascript engine of the browser is not blocked.



As you can see in the above image, full page is not refreshed at request time and user gets response from the ajax engine.

Let's try to understand asynchronous communication by the image given below.



AJAX Technologies

As describe earlier, ajax is not a technology but group of inter-related technologies. AJAX technologies includes:

- HTML/XHTML and CSS
- DOM (Document Object Model)
- XML or JSON
- XMLHttpRequest
- JavaScript

HTML/XHTML and CSS

These technologies are used for displaying content and style. It is mainly used for presentation.

DOM

It is used for dynamic display and interaction with data.

XML or JSON

For carrying data to and from server. JSON (Javascript Object Notation) is like XML but short and faster than XML.

XMLHttpRequest

For asynchronous communication between client and server.

JavaScript

It is used to bring above technologies together.

Independently, it is used mainly for client-side validation.

Understanding XMLHttpRequest

An object of XMLHttpRequest is used for asynchronous communication between client and server.

It performs following operations:

1. Sends data from the client in the background
2. Receives the data from the server
3. Updates the webpage without reloading it.

Properties of XMLHttpRequest object

The common properties of XMLHttpRequest object are as follows:

Property	Description
onReadyStateChange	It is called whenever readystate attribute changes. It must not be used with synchronous requests.
readyState	represents the state of the request. It ranges from 0 to 4. **0** UNOPENED open() is not called. **1** OPENED open is called but send() is not called. **2** HEADERS_RECEIVED send() is called, and headers and status are available. **3** LOADING Downloading data; responseText holds the data. **4** DONE The operation is completed fully.
reponseText	returns response as text.
responseXML	returns response as XML

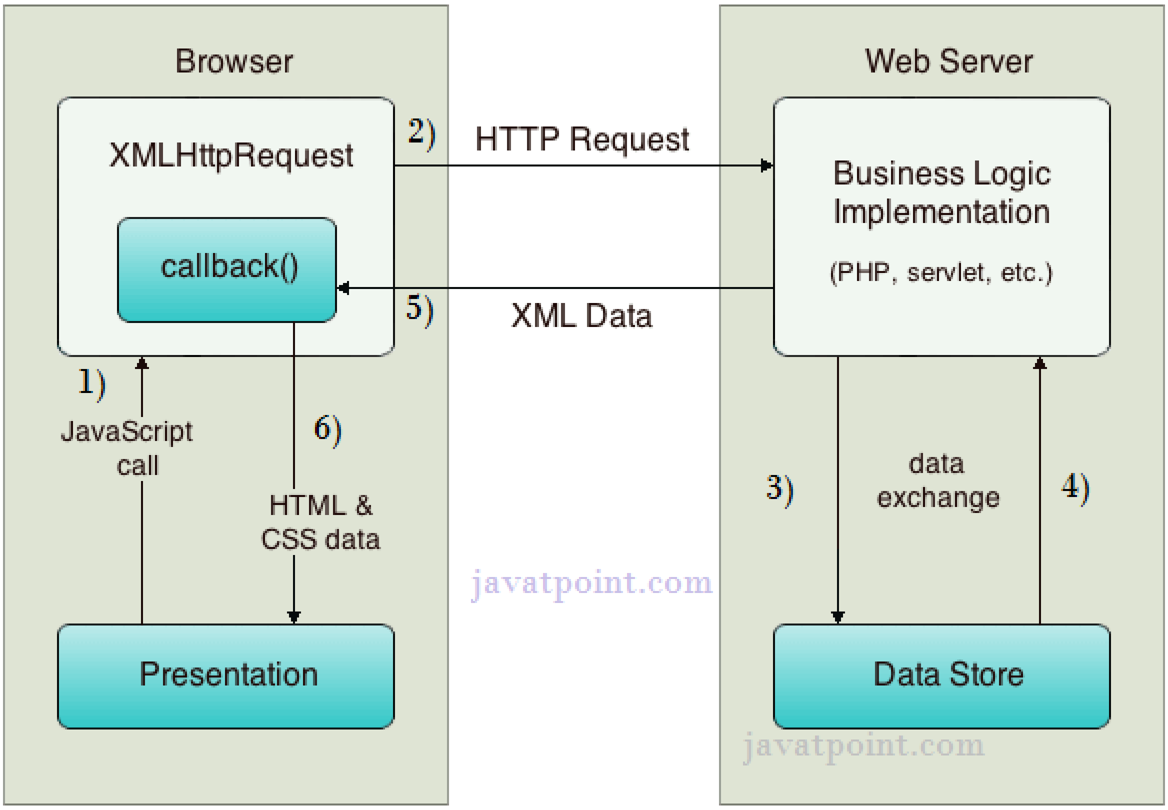
Methods of XMLHttpRequest object

The important methods of XMLHttpRequest object are as follows:

Method	Description
void open(method, URL)	opens the request specifying get or post method and url.
void open(method, URL, async)	same as above but specifies asynchronous or not.
void open(method, URL, async, username, password)	same as above but specifies username and password.
void send()	sends get request.
void send(string)	send post request.
setRequestHeader(header,value)	it adds request headers.

How AJAX works?

AJAX communicates with the server using XMLHttpRequest object. Let's try to understand the flow of ajax or how ajax works by the image displayed below.



As you can see in the above example, XMLHttpRequest object plays a important role.

1. User sends a request from the UI and a javascript call goes to XMLHttpRequest object.
2. HTTP Request is sent to the server by XMLHttpRequest object.
3. Server interacts with the database using JSP, PHP, Servlet, ASP.net etc.
4. Data is retrieved.
5. Server sends XML data or JSON data to the XMLHttpRequest callback function.
6. HTML and CSS data is displayed on the browser.