

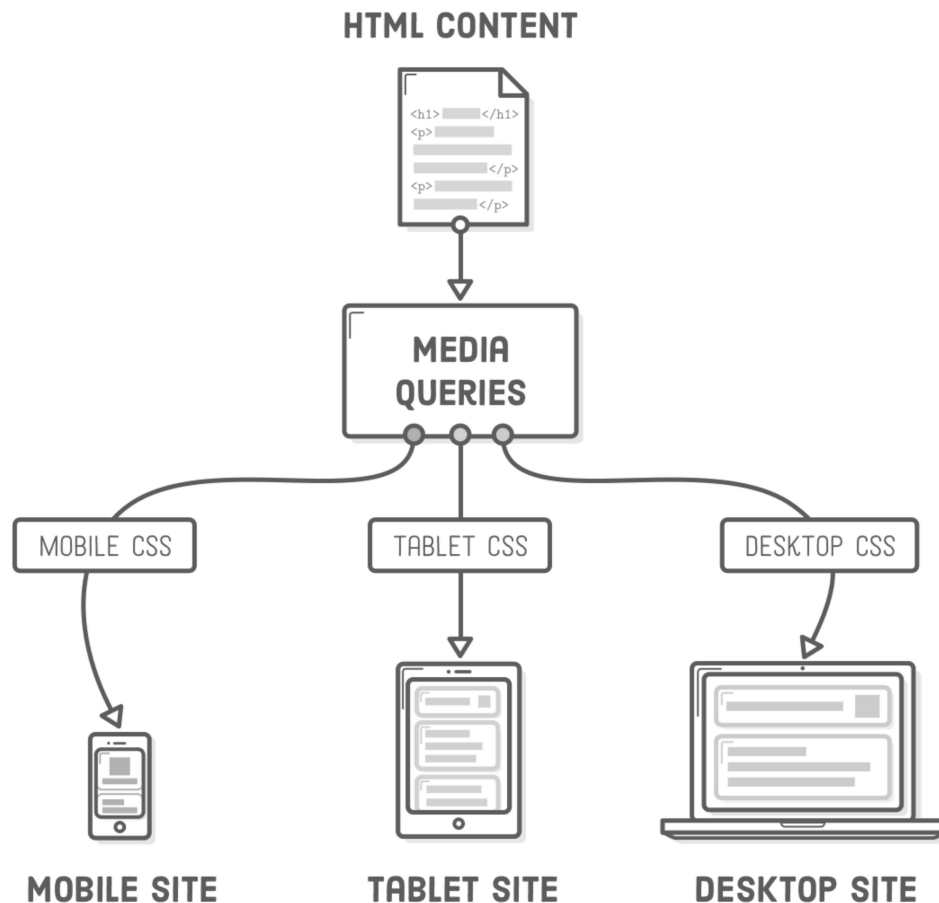
Responsive Design | HTML & CSS Is Hard

13-17 minutes

The Wayback Machine - <https://web.archive.org/web/20230327153805/https://www.internetingishard.com/html-and-css/responsive-design/>

“Responsive design” refers to the idea that your website should display equally well in everything from widescreen monitors to mobile phones. It’s an approach to web design and development that eliminates the distinction between the mobile-friendly version of your website and its desktop counterpart. With responsive design, they’re the same thing.

Responsive design is accomplished through CSS “media queries”. Think of media queries as a way to conditionally apply CSS rules. They tell the browser that it should ignore or apply certain rules depending on the user’s device.



Media queries let us present the same HTML content as distinct CSS layouts. So, instead of maintaining one website for smartphones and an entirely unrelated site for laptops/desktops, we can use the same HTML markup (and web server) for both of them. This means that whenever we add a new article or edit a typo in our HTML, those changes are automatically reflected in both mobile and widescreen layouts. *This* is the reason why we separate content from presentation.

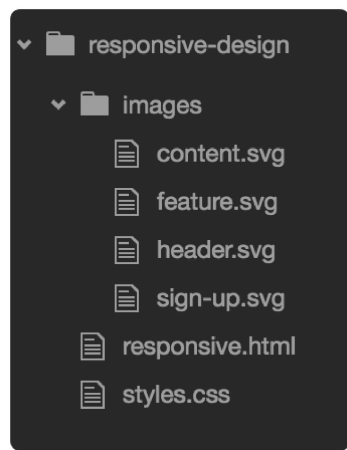
In this chapter, we'll learn how media queries are really just a thin wrapper around the plain old CSS that we've been working with up 'til this point. As we'll soon discover, it's actually pretty easy to implement a responsive layout. (Responsive Images, on the other hand, are an entirely different story).

Setup

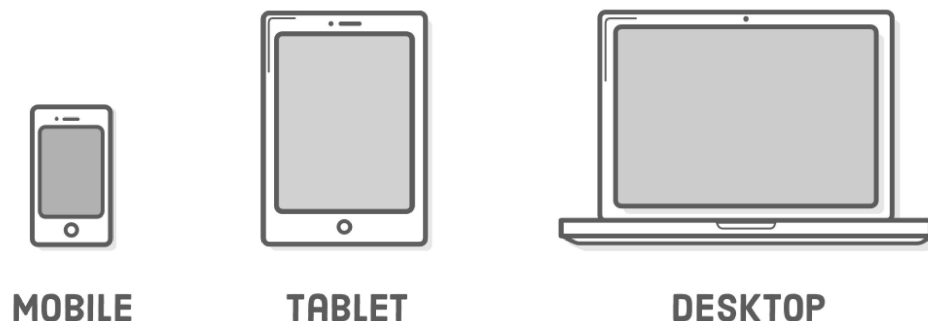
Create a new project called `responsive-design` and a new file called `responsive.html`. It's the emptiest web page that we've seen in awhile, but it'll help us demonstrate something very important in the next section:

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html lang='en'>
  <head>
    <meta charset='UTF-8' />
    <title>Responsive Design</title>
    <link rel='stylesheet' href='styles.css' />
  </head>
  <body>
    <!-- There's nothing here! -->
  </body>
</html>
```

You'll also need to download some images for later in the chapter. Unzip everything into the same folder as `responsive.html`, keeping the parent images folder. Your project should look like this before moving on:



We'll start small by simply updating the background color on the `<body>` element based on the device width. This is a good way to make sure our media queries are actually working before getting into complicated layouts.



Let's differentiate between narrow, medium, and wide layouts by creating a new `styles.css` stylesheet and adding the following:

```
* {
  margin: 0;
  padding: 0;
  box-sizing: border-box;
}

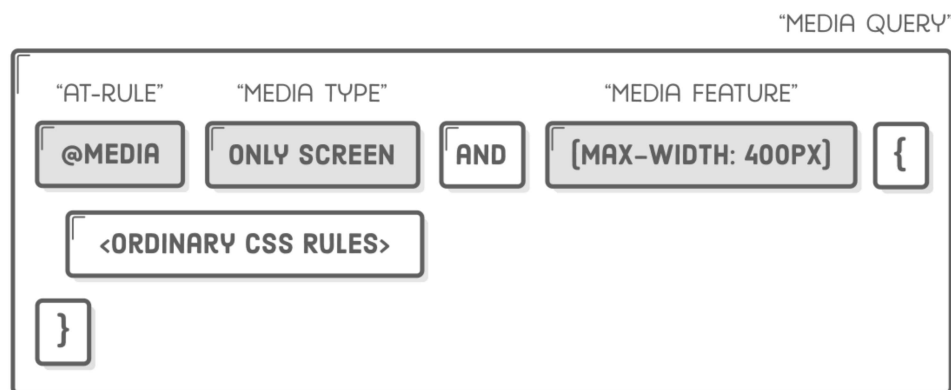
/* Mobile Styles */
@media only screen and (max-width: 400px) {
  body {
    background-color: #F09A9D; /* Red */
  }
}

/* Tablet Styles */
@media only screen and (min-width: 401px) and (max-width: 960px) {
  body {
    background-color: #F5CF8E; /* Yellow */
  }
}

/* Desktop Styles */
@media only screen and (min-width: 961px) {
  body {
    background-color: #B2D6FF; /* Blue */
  }
}
```

When you resize your browser, you should see three different background colors: blue when it's greater than 960px wide, yellow when it's between 401px and 960px, and red when it's less than 400px.

Media queries always begin with the `@media` “at-rule” followed by some kind of conditional statement, and then some curly braces. Inside the curly braces, you put a bunch of ordinary CSS rules. The browser only pays attention to those rules if the condition is met.

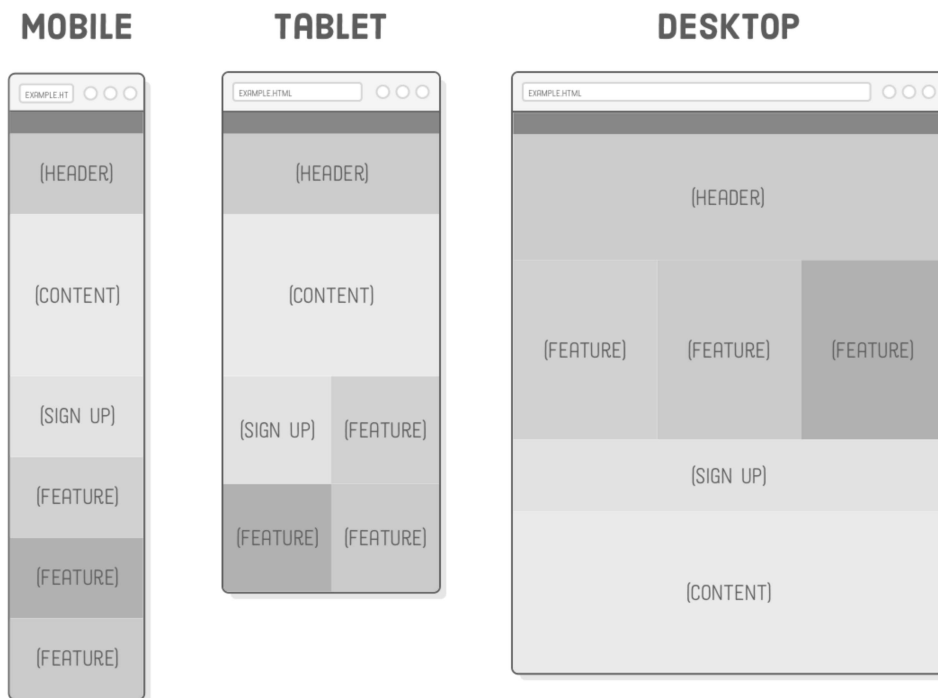


The `only screen` “media type” means that the contained styles should only be applied to devices with screens (opposed to printed documents, like when you hit **Cmd+P** in a browser). The `min-width` and `max-width` parts are called “media features”, and they specify the device dimensions you’re targeting.

The above media queries are by far the most common ones you'll encounter, but there are a lot of other conditions you can check for, including whether the device is in portrait or landscape mode, the resolution of its screen, and whether it has a mouse or not.

A Few Notes on Design

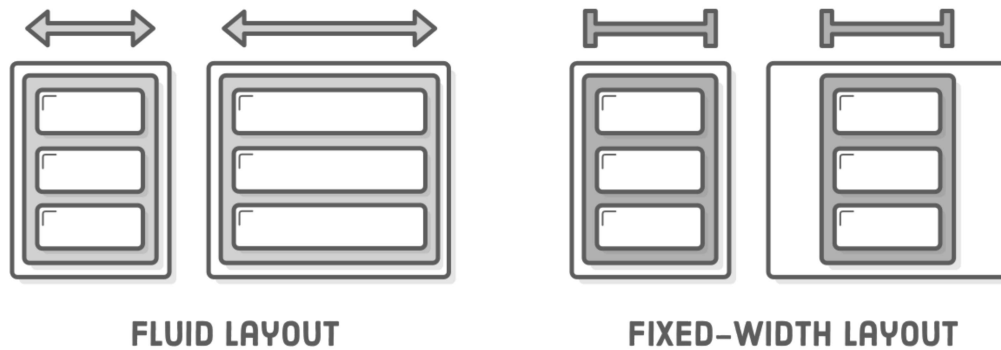
Ok, so `@media` is how we define different layouts for specific device widths, but what layouts are we actually trying to implement? The example web page for this chapter is going to look something like this:



In the real world, it's up to your web designer to supply you with these kinds of mockups. Your job as a developer is to implement the individual layouts using media queries to separate out the various CSS rules that apply to each one.

There's a few well defined patterns for how a desktop layout collapses into a mobile layout (we're using "layout shifter"). A lot of these decisions are in the realm of design, which is outside the scope of this code-oriented tutorial; however, there are two concepts that you must understand as a developer:

- A "fluid" layout is one that stretches and shrinks to fill the width of the screen, just like the flexible boxes we covered a few chapters ago.
- A "fixed-width" layout is the opposite: it has the same width regardless of the screen dimensions (we created one of these in the CSS Selectors chapter).



In our example web page, the mobile and tablet versions are fluid, and the desktop version is fixed-width.

Choosing Breakpoints

Most of those responsive design patterns have similar behavior, using fluid layouts for mobile/tablet devices and fixed-width layouts for wider screens. There's a reason for this.

Fluid layouts let us target a *range* of screen widths instead of specific mobile devices. This is very important for web designers. When they set out to create a mobile layout, they aren't trying to make something that looks good on an iPhone 6s, Galaxy S7, or iPad mini—they're designing a fluid layout that looks good *anywhere* between 300 pixels and 500 pixels (or whatever).

In other words, the exact pixel values for the min-width and max-width parameters in a media query (collectively known as the “breakpoints” for a responsive website) don't actually matter. Our website doesn't care about the specific device the user is on. All it needs to know is that it should display a layout that looks pretty at 400 pixels wide (or whatever).

Mobile-First Development

Let's dive right into implementing the above screenshots. It's always a good idea to start with the mobile layout and work your way up to the desktop version. Desktop layouts are typically more complex than their mobile counterparts, and this “mobile-first” approach maximizes the amount of CSS that you can reuse across your layouts.

First, we need to fill in `responsive.html`'s `<body>` element with some empty boxes. Each box has an image in it so we can tell them apart a little bit easier.

```
<div class='page'>
  <div class='section menu'></div>
  <div class='section header'>
    <img src='images/header.svg' />
  </div>
  <div class='section content'>
    <img src='images/content.svg' />
  </div>
  <div class='section sign-up'>
    <img src='images/sign-up.svg' />
  </div>
  <div class='section feature-1'>
    <img src='images/feature.svg' />
  </div>
  <div class='section feature-2'>
    <img src='images/feature.svg' />
  </div>
</div>
```

```
</div>
<div class='section feature-3'>
  <img src='images/feature.svg'/>
</div>
</div>
```

And here's our base styles, which should apply to *all* layouts (mobile, tablet, and desktop). Make sure to add these above the @media rules we created earlier and below the universal selector rule that resets our margins and padding:

```
.page {
  display: flex;
  flex-wrap: wrap;
}

.section {
  width: 100%;
  height: 300px;
  display: flex;
  justify-content: center;
  align-items: center;
}

.menu {
  background-color: #5995DA;
  height: 80px;
}

.header {
  background-color: #B2D6FF;
}

.content {
  background-color: #EAEDF0;
  height: 600px;
}

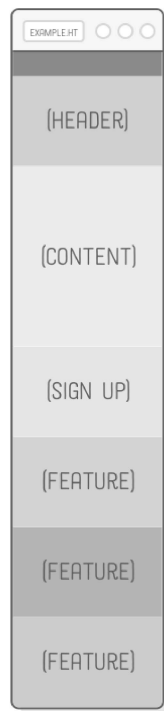
.sign-up {
  background-color: #D6E9FE;
}

.feature-1 {
  background-color: #F5CF8E;
}

.feature-2 {
  background-color: #F09A9D;
}

.feature-3 {
  background-color: #C8C6FA;
}
```

If you make the browser window narrow, you'll see that this gives us our entire mobile layout. Pretty easy, huh? No media queries required. That's why it's called "mobile-first"—the mobile version doesn't require any special handling. Also notice that `flex-wrap` property in the containing `.page` div. This will make it very easy to implement our tablet and desktop layouts.



By keeping these base styles outside of the media queries, we're able to override and add on to them as we implement our specific layouts. This is really convenient when, for instance, your designer wants to tweak the color scheme for the entire website. Instead of tracking down redundant `background-color` declarations in several `@media` rules, you only have to update it here. That change automatically applies to the mobile, tablet, and desktop layouts.

Tablet Layout

On to the tablet layout. The only difference between the mobile and tablet mockups is that the **Sign Up** and **Feature** sections form a 2×2 grid instead of a single column.

Flexbox makes this real easy. Simply adjust the widths of the `flex` items to be half the screen and `flex-wrap` will take care of the rest. Of course, we only want this behavior to apply to tablet-sized screens, so it needs to go into an `@media` rule. Replace the existing `/* Tablet Styles */` media query with the following:

```
/* Tablet Styles */
@media only screen and (min-width: 401px) and (max-width: 960px) {
  .sign-up,
  .feature-1,
  .feature-2,
  .feature-3 {
    width: 50%;
  }
}
```

To see these changes, make sure your browser window is between 400 pixels and 960 pixels wide, then scroll down to the bottom of the page. You should see a colorful grid:



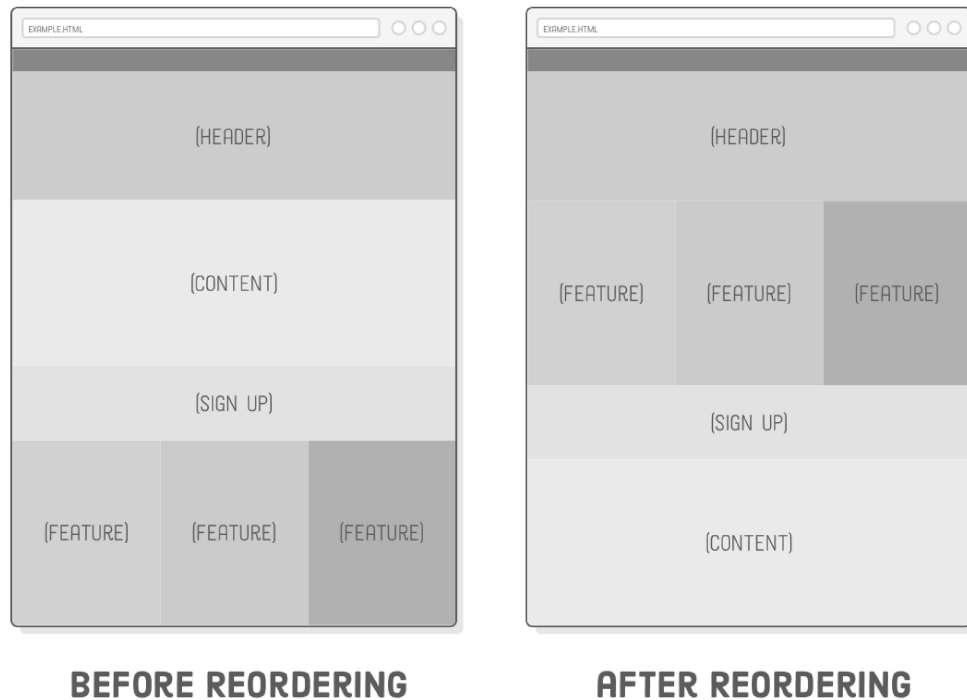
Again, it doesn't matter what the exact width of the screen is: this layout will fluidly respond to any width in the media query's range. Our mobile layout is also fluid, so we now have a website that looks beautiful (if a bit empty) in every device smaller than 960px wide.

Desktop Layout

And that's where our desktop layout comes in. We don't want our web page to expand endlessly, so we're going to give it a fixed width and center it with auto-margins. As with tablet styles, this needs to go into a media query. Replace the existing `/* Desktop Styles */` media query with the following:

```
/* Desktop Styles */
@media only screen and (min-width: 961px) {
  .page {
    width: 960px;
    margin: 0 auto;
  }
  .feature-1,
  .feature-2,
  .feature-3 {
    width: 33.3%;
  }
  .header {
    height: 400px;
  }
}
```

This gives us the correct widths for everything, and we have more real estate to play with, so we made the header a little taller, too. Almost there, but our desktop layout calls for some reordering: the **Sign Up** and **Content** boxes should appear *underneath* all the **Feature** sections.



This is where flexbox really shines. Trying to create this combination of mobile and desktop layouts would be very difficult with floats. With flexbox's `order` property, it's just a few lines of CSS. Append these rules to the desktop media query:

```
.sign-up {  
  height: 200px;  
  order: 1;  
}  
.content {  
  order: 2;  
}
```

Ta da! A responsive website! Not bad for less than a hundred lines of CSS. More importantly, we didn't have to alter a single line of HTML to accommodate our mobile, tablet, and desktop layouts.

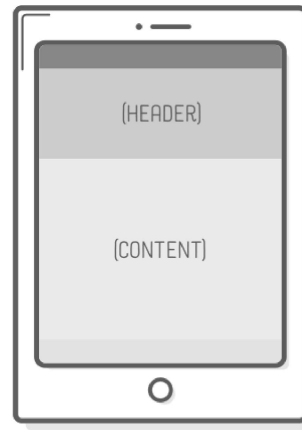
This was just one example of laying out a responsive site. You can use these exact same techniques to implement all sorts of other designs. Start with the base styles that apply to your entire site, then tweak them for various device widths by selectively applying CSS rules with `@media`. You could even add another media query to, say, create a dedicated layout for ultra-widescreen monitors.

Disabling Viewport Zooming

We've got one final task for making a responsive web page. Before responsive design was a thing, mobile devices only had a desktop layout to work with. To cope with this, they zoomed out to fit the entire desktop layout into the width of the screen, letting the user interact with it by zooming in when necessary.



ZOOM ENABLED

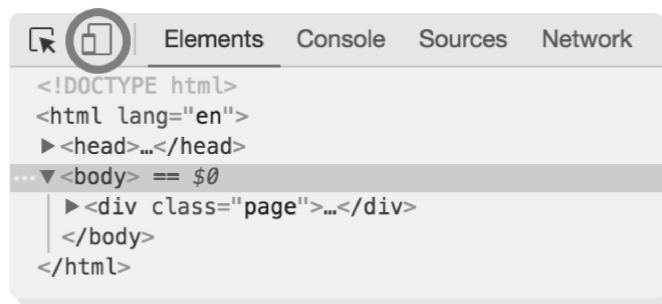


ZOOM DISABLED

This default behavior will prevent mobile devices from using our mobile layout, which is obviously very terrible. To disable it, add the following element to the `<head>` of our document. Just like `<meta charset='UTF-8' />`, this is a critical element that should be on every single web page you create:

```
<meta name='viewport'
      content='width=device-width, initial-scale=1.0, maximum-scale=1.0' />
```

To see this in action, we'll need to *simulate* a mobile device in our desktop browser. This is a little advanced for where we're at right now, but we can give it a shot. Open up `responsive.html` in Google Chrome, then hit **View > Developer > Developer Tools** in the menu bar. Then, to simulate a mobile device, click the **Toggle Device Toolbar** icon, highlighted below.



You should see the zoom-disabled version of the above diagram in your browser, since it's now pretending to be a mobile device. (We'll save the in-depth discussion of Chrome dev tools for a future tutorial.)

Alternatively, if you're reading this chapter on a smartphone, you can navigate to the [live before and after versions of our example project](#) to experience the effect of our viewport changes.

Summary

Believe it or not, that's actually all you need to know to create responsive websites. If we boil it down, we're really only concerned with three things:

- The responsive *design* (the mockups for each layout)
- CSS rules for implementing each of those layouts
- Media queries for conditionally applying those CSS rules

We started this chapter by learning about the difference between fluid layouts and fixed-width layouts. Then, we went on to create a mobile-first stylesheet that used media queries to build tablet and desktop layouts on top of a shared set of base styles. Finally, we disabled the default viewport zoom behavior of mobile browsers.

So, that was the easy part of responsive design. In the next chapter, we'll discover the hard part: images. Presenting different CSS to specific devices isn't too bad, but optimizing images for those devices requires a bit more planning.

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