

Tables instead of DIVs [duplicate]

Asked 16 years, 3 months ago Modified 6 years, 4 months ago

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116



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Possible Duplicate:

[Why not use tables for layout in HTML?](#)

Under what conditions should you choose tables instead of DIVs in HTML coding?

html

css

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edited May 23, 2017 at 10:31



Community Bot

1 • 1

asked Aug 27, 2008 at 14:19



Krishna Kumar

4,864 • 13 • 47 • 46

1 I found [this answer](#) very helpful – [Juanito](#) Mar 11, 2015 at 8:42

24 Answers

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198

The whole "Tables vs Divs" thing just barely misses the mark. It's not "table" or "div". It's about using semantic html.



Even the div tag plays only a small part in a well laid out page. Don't overuse it. You shouldn't need that many if you put your html together correctly. Things like lists, field sets, legends, labels, paragraphs, etc can replace much of what a div or span is often used to accomplish. Div should be used primarily when it makes sense to indicate a logical **division**, and only appropriated for extra layout when absolutely necessary. The same is true for table; use it when you have tabular data, but not otherwise.

Then you have a more semantic page and you don't need quite as many classes defined in your CSS; you can target the tags directly instead. Possibly most importantly, you have a page that will score much better with Google (anecdotally) than the equivalent table or div-heavy page. Most of all it will help you better connect with a portion of your audience.

So if we go back and look at it in terms of table vs div, it's my opinion that we've actually come to the point where div is over-used and table is under-used. Why? Because

when you really think about it, there are a lot of things out there that fall into the category of "tabular data" that tend to be overlooked. Answers and comments on this very web page, for example. They consist of multiple records, each with the same set of fields. They're even stored in a sql server table, for crying out loud. This is the exact definition of tabular data. This means an html table tag would absolutely be a good semantic choice to layout something like the posts here on Stack Overflow. The same principle applies to many other things as well. It may not be a good idea to use a table tag to set up a three column layout, but it's certainly just fine to use it for grids and lists... except, of course, when you can actually use the ol or ul (list) tags.

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[edited Jul 26, 2017 at 5:10](#)

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[Joel Coehoorn](#)

16 Agreed. Years ago when I was first stepping away from table-based layouts, I had the whole "use divs" mantra drilled into my brain. The resulting code was even less semantic. Once you get to know HTML and all it offers, you learn to write meaningful code and it all becomes simple. – [nickf](#) Sep 16, 2008 at 5:08

However, if you have to use a non-semantic div to get your layout, but it would be easier to use a non-semantic table, use the table. If you're forced to break semantic purity for

layout, use whatever works best for your scenario. – [nezroy](#)

Jan 29, 2009 at 19:48

3 It's interesting to see where the big sites use tables. Get the WebDeveloper plugin for Firefox and use the feature that lets you outline tables. Then go to the big sites. You'll see tables in some interesting places. For example, Amazon has a table that shows a variable number of products depending on how wide the window is stretched. Almost everything is best done as a div, but some tricky cases are better with a table when you consider old browsers. – [Nosredna](#) Jun 10, 2009 at 14:21

3 I must disagree about the StackOverflow uses of table to separate the post and the comment. Basically, I have a thumb rule: if the table have only `tr` tags, use `div` s instead. – [Fitzchak Yitzchaki](#) Mar 7, 2010 at 20:09

2 @Joel Coehoorn Even though I agree on the DIV abuse I would stick to TABLES on TABULAR data. Though SO's layout today may be a bit on the tabular side, the DATA itself is not TABULAR. So tables would be out of the way.
– [Frankie](#) Jun 14, 2010 at 4:59



When the data I am presenting is, indeed, tabular.

52

I find it ridiculous that some web designers used divs on tabular data on some sites.



One other use I would have for it would be forms, particularly label : textbox pairs. This could technically be done in div boxes, but it's much, much easier to do this in tables, and one can argue that label:textbox pairs are in fact tabular in nature.





13 Label/Textbox pairs should use the `<label>` tag. With a little work `{display:block;float:left;}` you can style all the labels in a field set to have the desired width. – [Joel Coehoorn](#) Sep 8, 2008 at 14:31

I agree with Joel on this one. The pairing is built into the semantics (`<label for="txtMyTextBox" />`) and with the proper css this can be handled very cleanly – [Rob Allen](#) Sep 17, 2008 at 16:58

1 While you don't have to use a table, it is "tabular data". Imagine "Field Name" and "Value" headings on top of the columns. I have also seen it done with definition lists, which express a similar key-value relationship. – [Roger Pate](#) Nov 30, 2009 at 3:48

2 No, the difference is that the Label/TextBox combination allows you to present it as tabular layout if you want, or not if you want something different. Using a table *forces* it into tabular layout, making it that much harder to change it later if you decide to go a different direction. – [GalacticCowboy](#) Jun 30, 2010 at 20:35

**25**

I used to do pure CSS but I abandoned that pursuit in favor of hybrid table/css approach as the most pragmatic approach. Ironically, it's also because of accessibility. Ever try doing CSS on Sidekick? What a nightmare! Ever seen how CSS-based websites are rendered on new browsers? Elements would overlap or just don't display correctly that I had to turn off the CSS. Ever try resizing CSS-based websites? They look awful and often



detrimental to the blind if they use zooming features in the browser! If you do that with tables, they scale much better. When people talk about accessibility, I find that many have no clue and it annoys me because I am disabled and they aren't. Have they really worked with the blind? The deaf? If accessibility is a main concern, why the hell are 99% of videos not closed captioned? Many CSS purists use AJAX but fail to realize that AJAX often makes content inaccessible.

Pragmatically, it's ok to use a single table as a main layout as LONG as you provide the information in a logical flow if the cells are stacked (something you'd see on mobiles). The CSS theory sounds great but *partially* workable in real life with too many hacks, something that is against the ideals of "purity."

Since using the CSS with tables approach, I've saved so much time designing a website and maintenance is much easier. Fewer hacks, more intuitive. I get fewer calls from people saying "I inserted a DIV and now it looks all screwed up!" And even more importantly, absolutely NO accessibility issues.

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answered Jan 29, 2009 at 19:00

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netrox

432 ● 4 ● 8

-
- 1 Yeah, I've found that scaling the text up is not handled well by many DIV-based sites. Tables handle that better. – [Nosredna](#) Jun 10, 2009 at 14:23
-

The blind use visual zooming features in the browser? (What browsers have non-visual zooming?) – Roger Pate Nov 30, 2009 at 3:51

@Roger: Blindness is not boolean; some blind people can see, but can't make out fine detail very well. Obviously, making the details bigger is helpful to them, so they use zoom (when it isn't horribly broken). – [SamB](#) Jun 16, 2011 at 21:00



Usually whenever you're not using the table to provide a layout.

21

Tables -> data



Divs -> layout



(mainly)



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:22

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[Jorge Córdoba](#)

52.1k ● 11 ● 82 ● 130

But data can be displayed in other ways besides a grid, and to do so, with CSS, you can make `<table>` not look like a grid. However, I instead reserve `<table>` only for data in gridform. Otherwise I use `<div>` because fancy CSS on `<table>` can be tricky with cross-browser compatibility. – [JohnB](#) Jun 22, 2010 at 0:12



Note: At the time the question was asked, there were practical reasons for using tables for some layout

20



purposes. This is not necessary anymore due to browser improvements, so I have updated the answer.

HTML `<table>`-elements should be used when the data logically has a two dimensional structure. If the data can be structured in rows and columns and you can meaningfully apply headers to both rows and columns, then you probably have tabular data.

If you only have a single row or single column of data, then it is not tabular data - it is just linear content. You need at least two rows and two columns before it can be considered tabular data.

Some examples:

Using tables for placing sidebars and page headers/footers. This is not tabular data but page layout. Something like css grid or flexbox is more appropriate.

Using tables for newspaper-style columns. This is not tabular data - you would still read it linearly. Something like css columns is more appropriate.

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edited Aug 14, 2018 at 7:34

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answered Sep 15, 2008 at 21:37



JacquesB

42.6k ● 13 ● 75 ● 88

This is one of very few comments that actually makes a good point, tables are exactly the ONLY tool for any layout management (similar to Java AWT/Swing, or any other constraints-based GUI layouts pieces). – [StaxMan](#) May 3, 2009 at 2:24

IE supports display:table in 8+. Using it is pretty feasible now, especially since you can supplement with conditional stylesheets if older IE is a consideration.

quirksmode.org/css/display.html – [Andy](#) Apr 20, 2011 at 21:54



13

I would make a distinction between HTML for public websites (tables no-no-no, divs yes-yes-yes) and HTML for semi-public or private web applications, where I tend to prefer tables even for page layout.



Most of the respectable reasons why "Tables are bad" are usually an issue only for public websites, but not so much of a problem with webapps. If I can get the same layout and have a more consistent look across browsers by using a TABLE than a complicated CSS+DIV, then I usually go ahead and approve the TABLE.

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answered Sep 3, 2008 at 19:34

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[Radu094](#)

28.4k ● 16 ● 65 ● 80



As many posters have already mentioned, you should use tables to display for tabular data.

11

Tables were introduced in [HTML 3.2](#) here is the relevant paragraph from the spec on their usage:



[tables] can be used to markup tabular material or for layout purposes...

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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:26

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Pat

36.7k ● 18 ● 74 ● 87

"or for layout purposes" - that kind of busts that myth that tables were never intended for layout by the HTML designers – [Matthew Lock](#) Mar 9, 2010 at 9:33

2 @Matthew: HTML 3.2 is full of presentational html, like the FONT-tag, BGCOLOR-attribute etc. This was a compromise at the time (because these tags were introduced by Netscape and in wide use), but presentational html were never considered good practice, and most of it were deprecated again in HTML 4. – [JacquesB](#) May 29, 2011 at 17:39



8

Agree with Thomas -- the general rule of thumb is if it makes sense on a spreadsheet, you can use a table. Otherwise not.



Just don't use tables as your layout for the page, that's the main problem people have with them.



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:23

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P.J.

1,557 ● 1 ● 12 ● 16



7

I can see the argument for tables for forms, but there is a nicer alternative... you just have to roll up your sleeves and learn CSS.



for example:



```
<fieldset>
  <legend>New Blog Post</legend>

  <label for="title">Title:</label>
  <input type="text" name="title" />

  <label for="body">Body:</label>
  <textarea name="body" rows="6" cols="40">
</textarea>
</fieldset>
```

You can take that html and layout the form either side-by-side labels, or labels on top of the textboxes (which is easier). Having the flexibility really helps. It's also less HTML than the table equivalent of either.

For some excellent examples of CSS forms, check out these excellent examples:

<http://jeffhowden.com/code/css/forms/>

<http://www.sitepoint.com/article/fancy-form-design-css/>

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2006/11/11/css-based-forms-modern-solutions/>

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edited Jun 16, 2011 at 21:46



SamB

9,205 ● 5 ● 50 ● 57

answered Sep 5, 2008 at 16:52



Ben Scheirman

40.9k ● 21 ● 103 ● 139

-
- 1 I've read dozens of articles on why CSS is better than tables, and even examples on how to do a layout. Half the time, the example doesn't work. And many times they don't address simple issues anyway, like vertical spacing, etc. Believe me, I've been studying the CSS, and sometimes the div method works for me. But many times after hours of frustration I just go back to a table and I have a simple solution that works with every browser. – [lurker](#) Mar 18, 2013 at 16:19
-



6

I will usually opt for tables to display form-type information (First Name, Last Name, Address, etc.) where lining labels and fields across multiple rows is important. DIVs I use for layout.



Of course the table is wrapped in a DIV :)



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:22



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user1921

My understanding is that this is one of the situations where table use is discouraged - it will flip out screen readers for starters. It is preferable to use `<div><label for="firstName">First name:</label><input id="firstName" /></div>`. CSS can then be used to fix the width of the label elements. – [Richard Ev](#) Nov 27, 2008 at 11:49

2 But isn't it even more wrong to fix width? Width should be a product of font size, esp. to account for accessibility and differences on output media. And it's more width ratios (and perhaps min/max sizes, in suitable unit) that should be defined, not absolute sizes. – [StaxMan](#) May 3, 2009 at 2:21

1 And fixing the width is awkward when you have to internationalise a site and don't know how long the label will be in each language. At least using a table it will be (ironically) more fluid. – [Damo](#) Jun 12, 2009 at 8:27

1 This is my problem with div layouts. Until you can make a set of divs that automatically flow like tables do I find it strange to recommend divs over tables. – [jmucchiello](#) Nov 13, 2009 at 20:51

@Richard, IMO, lists are better than a series of divs. The OL/LI combo is more semantically correct. @Damo, fixed width does not mean fixed height. So long as each row can expand to accommodate wrapped text, it's usually a non-issue. How do you think non-web apps handle field labels when it comes to translation? – [Chris](#) May 20, 2010 at 2:52



4

Tables were designed for tabular content, not for layout.
So, don't ever feel bad if you use them to display data.



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:23



FlySwat

175k ● 75 ● 248 ● 314



4

I use tables in two cases:

1) Tabular data



2) Any time I want my layout to dynamically size itself to its contents



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:43



17 of 26

27.4k ● 13 ● 68 ● 85



3

If your data can be laid out in a two-dimensional grid, use `<table>`. If it can't, don't. Using `<table>` for anything else is a hack (though frequently not one with proper alternatives, especially when it comes to compatibility with older browsers). *Not* using `<table>` for something that clearly should be one is equally bad. `<div>` and `` aren't for everything; in fact, being completely meaningless on a semantic level, they are to be avoided at all costs in favor of more semantic alternatives.



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 16:34

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[Sören Kuklau](#)

19.9k ● 8 ● 55 ● 90

Well, table is also has no explicit semantic value, nor much implicit. It belongs to structural tags, not semantic ones. Granted, div and span are even more abstract, being anonymous block/inline placeholders more than anything else. – [StaxMan](#) May 3, 2009 at 2:22



3

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answered Jan 29, 2009 at 22:01

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[codemonkey](#)

2,665 ● 2 ● 25 ● 34



Especially since the site itself uses tables for layout.
– [Robert Harvey](#) Jan 20, 2010 at 20:19

It does not use tables for data it uses a <h1> tag with css
– [Plippie](#) Sep 16, 2011 at 11:52



2

1) For displaying tabular data. A calendar is one example of tabular data that isn't always obvious at first.

2) I work for a medical billing company, and nearly all of the layout for our internal work is done using CSS.



However, from time to time we get paper forms from insurance companies that our billers have to use, and a program will convert them to an html format that they can fill out and print via the intranet. To make sure the forms are accepted they need to match the original paper version very closely. For these it's just simple to fall back to tables.

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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:23



[Joel Coehoorn](#)

415k ● 114 ● 577 ● 813



2

Tables are used for tabular data. If it makes sense to put it in a spreadsheet then use a table. Otherwise there is a better tag for you to be using such as div, span, ul, etc.



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edited Nov 18, 2009 at 5:28



[MikeJ](#)

14.6k ● 22 ● 74 ● 89



answered Sep 9, 2008 at 4:46



[Matthew M. Osborn](#)

4,783 ● 4 ● 27 ● 27



1

I believe just tabular content. For example, if you printed out a database table or spreadsheet-like data to HTML.



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:21



[Thomas Owens](#)

116k ● 99 ● 317 ● 436



1



If you would like to have semantically correct HTML, then you should use tables only for tabular data.

Otherwise you use tables for everything you want, but there probably is a way to do the same thing using `div`s and CSS.



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answered Aug 27, 2008 at 14:22

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Peter Stuifzand

5,084 ● 1 ● 25 ● 28



1



@Marius:

Is the layout tabular data? No, while it was standard a few years ago it's not now :-)



One other use I would have for it would be forms, particularly label : textbox pairs. This could technically be done in div boxes, but it's much, much easier to do this in tables, and one can argue that label:textbox pairs are in fact tabular in nature.

I tend to give the label a fixed width, or display it on the line above.

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answered Sep 3, 2008 at 19:10

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Ross

46.9k ● 39 ● 123 ● 173



1

@Jon Limjap

For label : textbox, neither divs nor tables are appropriate: `<dl>` s are



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answered Sep 5, 2008 at 16:59



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Slartibartfast

8,815 ● 6 ● 43 ● 45



0



One other use I would have for it would be forms, particularly label : textbox pairs. This could technically be done in div boxes, but it's much, much easier to do this in tables, and one can argue that label:textbox pairs are in fact tabular in nature.

I see that a fair amount, especially among MS developers. And I've done it a fair amount in the past. It works, but it ignores some accessibility and best-practice factors. You should use labels, inputs, fieldsets, legends, and CSS to layout your forms. Why? Because that's what they are for, it's more efficient, and I think accessibility is important. But that's just my personal preference. I think everyone should try it that way first before condemning it. It's quick, easy, and clean.

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answered Sep 3, 2008 at 18:37

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CarmineSantini

294 ● 3 ● 6



0



When ever a page containg tables is loaded by any browser it takes more time for the browser to render properly the tag. Where as if the div is used ,the browser takes less time as it is lighter. And more over we can apply the css to make the divs appear as table,



The tables are normally heavy wieght and div are light weight.



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answered Jun 10, 2009 at 14:16

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Biranchi

16.3k ● 23 ● 126 ● 163



0



It is clear that the DIV are used for Layout but It happened to me to being "forced" to use spreadsheets to do a grid layout within a div structure for this reasons:



the addition of percentage values did not allow a proper alignment with the div, while the same values expressed on cells of tables gave the expected result.

So I think that tables are still useful not only for data, but also for the situation above, on top of that, tables are still

W3C compliant browser and alternative browsers (for the disabled for example) interpret theirs correctly.

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answered Jun 30, 2010 at 20:30

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[Amirouche Douda](#)

1,564 ● 1 ● 21 ● 30



0

Divs are simple **divisions**, they are mean't to be used to group sections of the page that are in a semantic sense linked. They carry no implicit meaning other than that.



Tables were originally intended to display scientific data, such as lab results on screen. Dave Raggett certainly didn't intend them to become used to implement layout.



I find it keeps it fairly clear in your mind if you remember the above, if its something you would normally expect to read in a table, then that's the appropriate tag, if its pure layout, then use something else to accomplish your needs.

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edited Feb 23, 2017 at 10:49

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[Abhishek Pandey](#)

13.6k ● 8 ● 40 ● 72

answered May 10, 2010 at 10:40



[Guy W](#)

1 ● 1



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requirement helps protect this question from spam and non-answer activity.