

Do web applications need HTML header tags?

Asked 16 years, 2 months ago Modified 2 years, 7 months ago

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4



The question is, should we design applications/forms using headers or stick to spans and divs? When the world was using html to link documents, these header tags looked like the 'Table of contents'. In the new era where html is used for applications, using header tags in the orthodox fashion (i.e. h1 contains h2, h2 contains h3 ...) doesn't make sense. Or does it?

The one place where these seem to make sense is in the context of text browsers or those with CSS disabled. Are there any implications of violating the nesting order (for e.g: h2 being the top level element instead of h1)

Edit By 'New era' I meant usage of html for interactive web applications. The notion of a header tag in a form or a mail application or a file sharing application is what I was questioning. I should avoid fancy names I guess, and I don't actually mean `<h1><h2>...</h2></h1>` It is more like the content organisation in MS Word.

I did work on some W3C compliant and AA compliant web pages, if it helps. The screen readers like dolphin supernova, just read the content, I fail to recognise how

they distinguish headers or I may be missing some rather important feature.

html

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edited Oct 14, 2008 at 14:29

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asked Oct 14, 2008 at 13:28



questzen

3,287 ● 20 ● 21

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17



h1, h2, h3, etc. are semantic. Divs and spans are not. Using headers means that agents can easily determine which pieces of content are headers, giving precedence to them in, for example, screen readers or search results. You can read more about the specific accessibility importance of header tags at the [MDN web docs HTML section heading elements reference](#).

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WhooNo

990 ● 2 ● 14 ● 30

answered Oct 14, 2008 at 13:31



Dan Dyer

54.4k ● 19 ● 135 ● 166

Yep. Semantics are key. There is no such thing as the 'new era', only standards and compliance. There are no "implications" but that doesn't mean it is right. Use the tag for the job it was designed for. CSS can handle the styling.

– [willasaywhat](#) Oct 14, 2008 at 13:42

Semantics, yes, but who interprets these semantics/ developers or machines? For fellow developers sake I would like to stick to the semantics, but are headers and html tags suited to convey semantics? a different question perhaps.

– [questzen](#) Oct 14, 2008 at 14:33

I find semantic code usually turns out to be cleaner and more readable to be honest. – [Ross](#) Oct 14, 2008 at 15:30



Firstly, the header tags shouldn't be nested. Ideally, h1, h2, etc, should only contain text, not other tags.

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Secondly, as a guiding principle, you should only have one h1 tag per page, and ideally that should match your document title.



It's good practice to use header tags for headers, rather than spans or divs. Many search engines will weight keywords from these tags more highly than from inside other tags. Page summarizers will also make use of this structure.

Generally, if you have an odd ordering of header tags, or don't have any, you may be doing something wrong with your page structure. (Of course, you don't have to use them all, but a h1 tag is almost always a good idea).

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answered Oct 14, 2008 at 13:35

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stusmith

14.1k ● 8 ● 58 ● 89

1 I doubt he actually meant "nested" the way you've understood it ;) – Bobby Jack Oct 14, 2008 at 13:46

1 I don't agree with the "one h1 tag per page" matching the document title. I don't understand why. – Guido Oct 14, 2008 at 13:59

It's generally accepted as good practice - you'll see this advice repeated time and time again. Here's a bit more info:

topicobserver.com/blog/web-development/2008/...

– Bobby Jack Oct 14, 2008 at 14:03

Stusmith, please see the edit. The other comments were also helpful. Thanks everyone – questzen Oct 14, 2008 at 14:41



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It does make MUCH sense. Your code should have a meaning (from a semantic point of view). If you want a header, hX is the tag you should use. A span or a div will work, but it is not a header.



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edited May 23, 2017 at 11:49



Community Bot

1 • 1

answered Oct 14, 2008 at 13:32



Guido

47.6k • 28 • 124 • 177



3



Why do you feel structured markup doesn't make sense? Just because you can style any element according to your design wishes doesn't render semantics obsolete. For one thing, don't forget that search engines actually assign a different value to text which is inside important semantic elements, such as headers.



To answer the question in your title (Wow, that's a header! And google uses that!): **yes**.

By the way, what's this “new era” you're speaking of?

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answered Oct 14, 2008 at 13:32



Konrad Rudolph

545k • 139 • 956 • 1.2k

Konrad, I have rephrased my question, please have a look at the edit. Thanks for the google pointer, a very practical one.

– [questzen](#) Oct 14, 2008 at 14:53



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Note that headers are unnecessary in some web applications, as HTML was designed to semantically describe the structure of *documents*, not web apps.



Ideally, there would be a separate XML-based language that all browsers support the rendering of specifically for web applications. Something like XUL or XAML would probably suit the requirements. But since that's not the environment we make web applications in today, you're often stuck with HTML, which is generic at best (div, span) and irrelevant elsewhere (you don't need semantic headers in a web app).

The best approach from a pragmatic point of view, therefore, is to ignore semantically meaningful HTML tags in many cases and instead use classnames and id's to define structure. This way you'll still be developing your own semantic environment and programming in a way that separates presentation from content, which is one of the benefits of HTML and CSS, but not needlessly attaching yourself to the format "just because that's how it's done".

Hence, some answers in this thread miss the point: you're developing a web app, for which HTML was not designed. Don't force a square peg into a round hole.

Edit: Bobby Jack commented that there are, of course, still some web apps that define document-like views, such as Stack Overflow. So in those cases, of course, where relevant, use the correct semantic markup.

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edited Oct 14, 2008 at 15:28

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answered Oct 14, 2008 at 14:12



Rahul

12.2k ● 5 ● 45 ● 64

The question says "applications/forms"; forms can very easily fit into a traditional document structure. Also, many, many webapps fit a document model, stackoverflow being a prime example. – Bobby Jack Oct 14, 2008 at 14:20

I wouldn't qualify stackoverflow as a web app, it's more of a forum with more complicated logic. There are documents (articles) that fit the design of HTML just fine. – Rahul Oct 14, 2008 at 14:36

My point was that most webapps (how are we defining webapps, anyway?) will produce output that is structured in such a way that shares similarities with documents, in the very least, having a main heading which should be marked up with an h1 element. – Bobby Jack Oct 14, 2008 at 15:23

OK, I agree with your point that my wording is a bit too global. I'll fix it in my post. – Rahul Oct 14, 2008 at 15:25



Other than the browsers where settings are such that the browser style overrides your CSS (user styles), I don't

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think that there are any other problems if you use h2 before h1 or vice versa.



Also, as you said using headers formats your document to an extent without even having CSS.



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answered Oct 14, 2008 at 13:31

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[Adhip Gupta](#)

7,153 ● 7 ● 35 ● 46

Actually there seems to be an implication of using tags interchangeably. Please see this link shared by a fellow SOer topicobserver.com/blog/web-development/2008/...

– [questzen](#) Oct 14, 2008 at 15:00



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Use header tags for headers and style them with CSS as needed to achieve the look you want. The ordering should reflect the organization of the document, but you can give whatever look and feel to them that you want with CSS. I would say, though, that I'd use typography to reflect the organization rather than confuse it.



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answered Oct 14, 2008 at 14:05

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[tvanfosson](#)

532k ● 102 ● 699 ● 798

Very much what I felt, users notice the visual cues but not the underlying tags. I can very well style a h6 to show up like a h1 or vice versa, the visual hierarchy gets butchered (so would my work). We don't have alternative semantic model and hence are stuck with html, and milking the most of it!

– [questzen](#) Oct 14, 2008 at 14:58
