

HTML 5

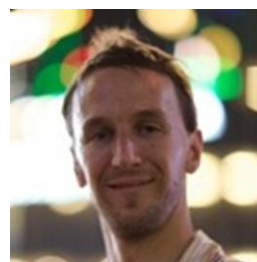
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HTML5 structure—div, section & article

It seems my HTML5 id/class name cheatsheet article interested a few people, so here's the start of an in-depth look at the document structures that fall out of the HTML5 spec. First, let's introduce three easily confused HTML5 structural elements:

1. `<div>`—the generic flow container we all know and love. It's a block-level element with no additional semantic meaning (W3C:Markup, WhatWG)
2. `<section>`—a generic document or application section. A `<section>` normally has a heading (title) and maybe a footer too. It's a chunk of related content, like a subsection of a long article, a major part of the page (eg the news section on the homepage), or a page in a webapp's tabbed interface. (W3C:Markup, WhatWG)
3. `<article>`—an independent part of a document or site. This means it should be able to 'stand alone', and still make sense if you encountered it somewhere else (eg in an RSS feed). Examples include a weblog article (duh), a forum post or a comment. Like `<section>` these generally have a header, and maybe a footer (W3C:HTML, WhatWG)

About Author



I like web stuff—especially HTML5 & CSS3. I'm fermenting web app revolution, writing html5doctor.com & a book on HTML5/CSS3.

The difference between `<div>`, `<section>` and `<article>`

In writing semantic HTML we should use the most suitable or semantically accurate element. In HTML4 `<div>` is a general block-level container element; it doesn't have any semantic meaning beyond being block-level, and is used when there are no more appropriate elements (ie all the time). There is no requirement for the things inside the `<div>` to be related to each other.

The new HTML5 `<section>` element is similar to `<div>` as a general container element, but it **does** have some semantic meaning—the things it contains are a logical group of related content:

The section element represents a generic document or application section. A section, in this context, is a thematic grouping of content, typically with a header, possibly with a footer.

It is also a 'sectioning content' element. Along with `<article>`, `<nav>` and `<aside>`, it indicates a new section in the document. Imagine making your page into a bulleted list of related parts—sectioning elements create a new bullet point in the page's outline, with indentation reflecting nesting. Note `<div>` isn't a sectioning element.

The new HTML5 `<article>` element is like a specialised kind of `<section>`; it has a more specific semantic meaning in that it is an independent, self-contained part of the page. We could use `<section>`, but using `<article>` gives more semantic meaning.

To think about HTML4, we can compare this (kind of ;-)) to `<p>` and `<blockquote>`. Both are block-level elements for text, but using `<blockquote>` gives more semantic meaning (this is a block of quoted text). The same with `<section>` and `<article>`; `<section>` means related content, but `<article>` means one piece of related content which makes sense on it's own, even outside the context of the page (the page's header and footer etc).

The potentially confusing part of this is that `<section>` can be used for parts of a page (eg the main content column, the news section on a homepage) and contain `<article>`s, and also for sections of a long `<article>` (ie inside an `<article>`).

To decide which of these three elements is appropriate, first think if the enclosed content would make sense on it's own in a feed reader—if so use `<article>`. If that's not the case, is the enclosed content related? If so use `<section>`. Finally if there's no semantic meaning use `<div>`. Except for occasional use to provide a hook for styles, I expect the humble `<div>` will mostly be superseded by `<section>`, and where required more specialised HTML5 elements.

We use `<section>` and `<article>` just like `<div>` is used in HTML4—eg these elements can't be used inside `<blockquote>` or `<address>`. Also avoid nesting an `<article>` inside another `<article>`—use `<section>` for indicating logical parts of an `<article>` instead.

Document structures

Let's describe some common document structures as bulleted lists:

A weblog article

- Weblog article
 - Title
 - Content...

In HTML4 we'd most probably wrap the article in a `<div>`. Obviously we should use `<article>` instead in HTML5.

A long article with subsections (like a thesis)

- Article
 - Title
 - Content
 - 1. Subsection
 - Subtitle (section title)
 - Content
 - 2. Subsection
 - Subtitle (section title)
 - Content
 - 3. Subsection
 - Subtitle (section title)
 - Content

Again the article would generally be wrapped in a `<div>` in HTML4, and the subsections would only be suggested by `<h1>`–`<h6>` elements. In HTML5 the article should be wrapped in `<article>`, and the

subsections of the `<article>` should be explicitly indicated by wrapping them in `<section>` elements, perhaps in ordered list items if you'd like section numbering.

A weblog homepage

- Weblog header
 - Logo
 - Search
 - ...
- Site navigation
- Main content
 1. Weblog article
 - Title
 - Summary
 2. Weblog article
 - Title
 - Summary
 3. Weblog article
 - Title
 - Summary
- Secondary content
 - Blogroll, photos, other content...
- Footer

All the main block-level sections of this structure would generally be `<div>`s in HTML4. Using our pieces from above, in HTML5 the `<article>`s should all be inside one `<section>` (for main content), with the secondary content also inside a `<section>`. Any independent ('can stand alone') chunk of content in the secondary content might also be marked up with an `<article>`. Note that the semantically hardcore might consider choosing to wrap the list of articles in `` list items if they are sorted by date, which articles on weblog homepages normally are :)

However `<section>` and `<article>` aren't all the new structural tags! Stay tuned to see what becomes of the header, navigation and footer.

Browser Support

Element	IE	Safari	Mozilla FF	chrome
Div	Supported in all browsers			
Section	IE9+	Safari 5+	FF 9+	Chrome 13+
Article				

Changes:

2009-06-30 Added sectioning content link and improved explanation

2009-07-02 Improved explanation of nested articles