

4.2. CENTERING BLOCK BOXES

Sometimes you want to center a whole element within its container (even when that container is the body element). There isn't a specific element-centering property in CSS, but you can get the same effect with margins.

If you have a tightly locked layout, then it's pretty simple: Figure out how much space you need on each side of the centered element, and set up the appropriate margins (see [Figure 4-4](#)). For example:

```
div#contain {width: 800px;}
div#main {width: 760px; margin: 0 20px;}
```

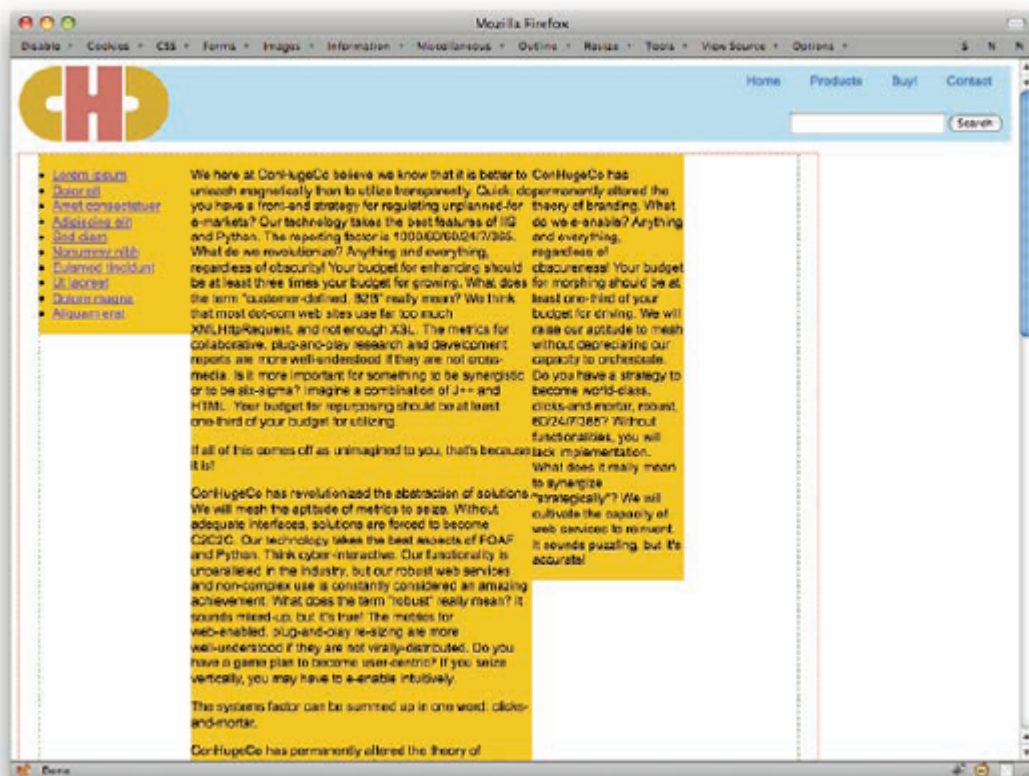
In that case, it's just simple math. In fact, you wouldn't even need the `div#main` rule. You could just use padding on the container:

```
div#contain {width: 760px; padding: 0 20px;}
```

Same visual result, different approach.

In a situation where you have an element with a specific width but you don't know how large its container will be, you still use margins. You just get a little sneaky about it.

Figure 4.4. One box centered inside another.



Consider a situation where a `div` is the child of the body element. You want to center that `div` but, because every browser window can be a different width, you don't know how wide or narrow the body will be. As long as you're giving the `div` a specific width, no problem: Just auto the right and left margins (see [Figure 4-5](#)).

```
div#main {width: 55em; margin: 0 auto;}
```

This works because the CSS specification says that when an element has a specific width, and both the right and left margins are automatically determined, then the browser takes the difference between the widths of the element and its container, splits that difference in half, and applies one half to the left margin and the other to the right. Thus the box is centered.

This will not center the text within that box, of course. If you want to do that too (see also [Figure 4-6](#)):

```
div#main {width: 55em; margin: 0 auto; text-align: center;}
```

Note that in a case where the div is wider than its container, browsers will left-justify the box (not the content) in left-to-right languages, and right-justify the box in right-to-left languages.

Figure 4.5. Centering a box with auto-margins.

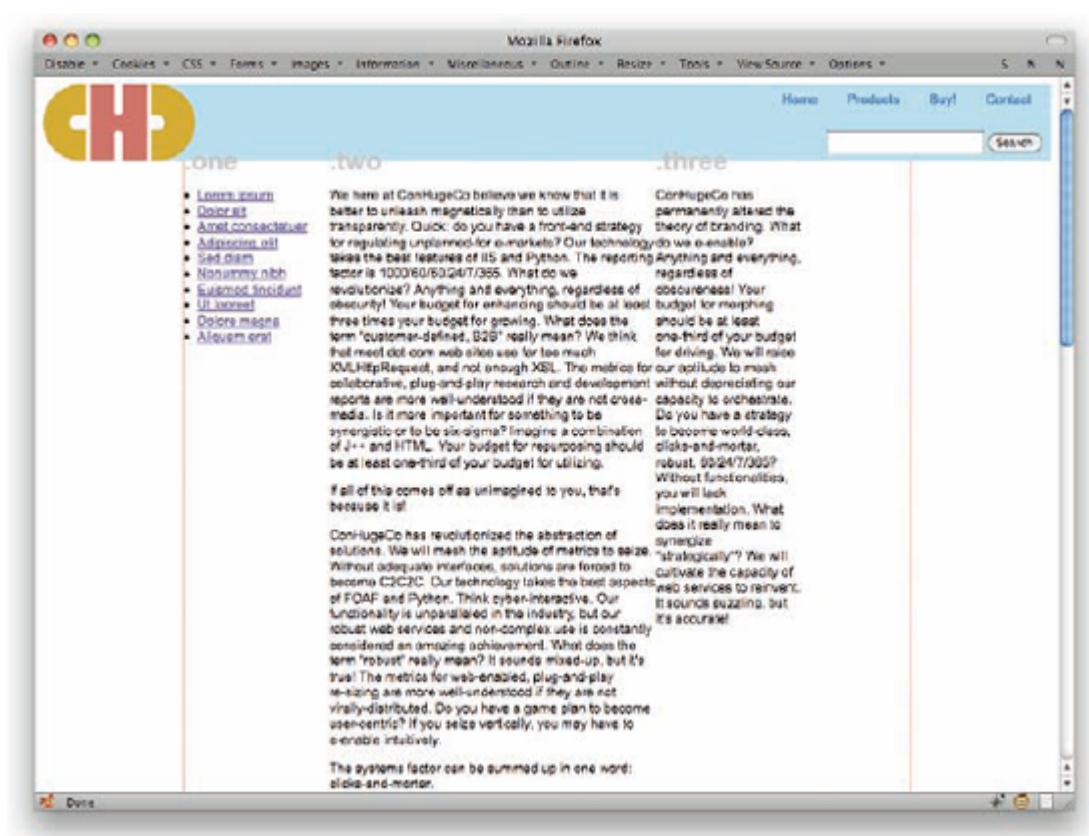


Figure 4.6. Centering a box with auto-margins and text with text-align .

