Introduction to Tables

**A Brief History of Table Use**

A lot of the information we consume on a daily basis is made up tabular data, that is, descriptive information on a subject or multiple subjects, usually alphanumeric, that can be stored and organized using rows and columns. Any good programmer know that the world runs on databases these days. The simple act of going grocery shopping sends your name and a slew of ancillary data about you through multiple databases. All this information is stored in tables somewhere.

This week we will be looking at HTML tables that allow us to store and organize information on our web site. The purpose of HTML tables is to provide a simple and efficient way to markup structured information on web pages. This allows us to display that information in a format that is easy for users to both read and understand.

In the early days of HTML tables, CSS wasn't as prevalent on the web as it is today. That meant that it wasn't not widely supported in browsers. At that time tables were the primary means by which a web author would layout their entire site. Back then HTML tables were used for positioning content, creating unique looks, organizing the site map, and pretty much anything that impacted the overall layout of a page. It worked great back then and you could still use a lot of those tricks today, but why would you? CSS is easier for styling and the fact is that layout and positioning was never the intended purpose of table markup.

**Organizing Data - The Job of Tables**

Today's savvy web author uses a variety of CSS tricks coupled with scripts and plugins (*not to mention entire content management systems*) to create beautiful web pages. Tables are now used specifically for the job they were meant to do - organizing data, and CSS in turn can even dress up those tables so that the data is not only easy read and understand but it is attractive and engaging.

This week we will be focusing on building data tables. Yes, the process does still have its challenges but it is a far better process than in the past. Determining exactly how you will build your table requires having a basic idea of what information you wish to store and how you want that information displayed. We will start this week by building a basic table and then move to styling that table with CSS to make the information more user-friendly.

**Table Basics**

Just as there are basic pieces that make up every building (walls, floors, ceilings, foundation, etc.) Tables are made up of some basic pieces. These pieces are required to store the data and help it make sense (columns, rows, headers, etc.) To create, organize, and display these pieces we will use some basic structure supplied by the use of several different elements.

At bare minimum we will need the following elements to build our table:

* <table>,
* <tr> (table row)
* <th> (table header)
* <td> (table data)

We will Discuss those first and then move on to elements that allow us to define a more complex structure and increase the clarity for users. Our goal is to be able to build a solid, understandable table by the time we are done.

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