HTML 4

Released 1997

HTML 4 extends HTML with mechanisms for style sheets, scripting, frames, embedding objects, improved support for right to left and mixed direction text, richer tables, and enhancements to forms, offering improved accessibility for people with disabilities.

HTML 4.01 is a revision of HTML 4.0 that corrects errors and makes some changes.

HTML4 was released by the World Wide Web consortium (www.w3.org) for web pages. Making sure that your pages comply with standards like HTML4 will allow your site to be viewed by the maximum number of visitors. Since HTML4 was published, browsers have moved on and support for HTML4 is becoming much more consistent between updated browsers. Previous versions of browsers had to provide variations within the HTML4 standard because not all visitors had upgraded their browsers to the latest versions. Changes in browser support have led to a significant change in site design for many sites. Code can be written to fit the HTML4 standard without concerns about browser bugs or extensive testing on multiple browsers / platforms.

HTML4 is the first version to include cascading style sheets as part of the HTML standard - HTML4 is now reliant on style sheets to provide precise control of data within the page. HTML4 also makes the issue of deprecated tags much more important. As browsers continue to develop and later versions of HTML are published, deprecated tags and attributes will be dropped from browser support - pages relying on them will simply fail to work. It is all part of a move away from ad-hoc development of HTML (led by the browser designers) as with HTML3 to an organised and structured development that all browsers follow consistently. To achieve the transition, the W3C provide three versions of HTML4 - transitional, frameset and strict. The intention is for sites to move first to transitional (using frameset for pages that still use frames) and on to strict in time. (Strict requires the removal of all deprecated tags and attributes for validation). Achieving transitional validation is all about good coding practice. Tags must be nested properly and all end tags must be present.

XHTML 1.0

Released 2000

In 1998, a language called XML was published. Its purpose was to allow people to write new markup languages. Since HTML was the most widely used markup language around, it was decided that HTML 4 should be reformulated to follow the rules of XML and it was renamed XHTML. This meant that authors had to follow some new, more strict rules about writing markup.

For example:

* Every element needed a closing tag (except for empty elements).
* Attribute names had to be in lowercase.
* All attributes required a value, and all values were to be placed in double quotes.
* Deprecated elements should no longer be used.
* Every element that was opened inside another element should be closed inside that same element.