

# Using StringTemplate To Generate Web Pages

**StringTemplate** is a template engine carefully designed by myself and Tom Burns (CEO jGuru.com) over many years of experience building commercial sites. Here are 3 sample sites:

- <http://www.jguru.com>
- <http://wwwantlr.org>
- <http://demo.schoolloop.com>

StringTemplate evolved from a simple "document with holes" to a sophisticated template engine with a functional programming flavor. I chose the simple name StringTemplate to reflect my minimalist approach (its jar is about 120k with source, and class files), but to compete with other tools' names, I should have called it the *He-man's Velociraptor Toolkit for Positive Text Generation Experience*. <wink>

Here is the [ST documentation](#) and an academic article that might help [A Functional Language For Generating Structured Text](#).

## Simple example

StringTemplate is extremely simple to use and assumes no special relationship with a web server or "engine." Further, it does not assume anything about the structure of the template text. The template can be for HTML, XML, Java, SQL, or whatever. For example, here is a trivial example that I actually use for generating SQL

```
import org.antlr.stringtemplate.*;
class Simple {
    public static void main(String[] args) {
        StringTemplate query =
            new StringTemplate("SELECT $column$ FROM $table$");
        query.setAttribute("column", "subject");
        query.setAttribute("table", "emails");
        System.out.println("QUERY: "+query.toString());
    }
}
```

You compile with the StringTemplate and ANTLR jars, which I have placed in /home/public/cs601 in your CLASSPATH:

```
/home/public/cs601/stringtemplate-3.2.jar
/home/public/cs601/antlr-2.7.7.jar
```

```
javac Simple.java
```

and run like it like any other java program:

```
java Simple
```

The output you'll see is:

```
QUERY: SELECT subject FROM emails;
```

## Characteristics

In my experience, the most useful characteristics of StringTemplate proved to be:

- **dynamic.** You can change the templates on-the-fly w/o restarting the server. Further, conditionals are evaluated dynamically so that the look can change depending on arguments. For example, compare <http://www.jguru.com> with <http://www.jguru.com/?noGutter>.
- **structured.** The components of your system such as a search box template are neatly organized into separate components. Each page is a hierarchy of nested templates. Analogous to good functional decomposition.
- **reusable components.** With a good structured design, you are encouraged to reuse components.

- **templates groups.** To have multiple looks for jGuru, we used a `StringTemplateGroup` that essentially provides a scoping mechanism. When you reference template `searchbox`, for example, you will get the search box template associated with your group/look. Organizing your site look into structured, reusable components makes inheritance possible.
- **strict model-view separation.** Allows programmer and graphics designer to work independently and in parallel. We verified this ability many times.

To illustrate these characteristics, consider the very real problem of having to change the way every link in your system appears. In an early version of `StringTemplate`, I had no way to factor out the "link" concept into a separate component. I had to change literally thousands of links by hand. With the current version of `StringTemplate`, I can change a single file. Changing template file `link.st` in my <http://www.antlr.org> site, for example, changes the way every link looks on the entire site. Instead of HTML HREF tags, I now use `$link(url="...", title="...")$`. Such easy maintenance work derives from `StringTemplate`'s dynamic and structured nature, which supports reusing the link component.

## Sample Separation Violations

Here is the kind of thing that I've seen in manuals for template engines that encourage rather than enforce strict separation. These all violate the rules I have outlined and represent model-view entanglements.

```

if(user=="parrt" && machine=="yoda")$
$price*.90$, $bloodPressure>130$
$a=db.query("select subject from email")$
$model.pageRef(getURL())$
$ClassLoader.loadClass(somethingEvil)$
$names[ID]$

```

In code, you should avoid passing in any kind of output HTML:

```

st.setAttribute("color", "red");

```

## Selected Features

While `StringTemplate` has evolved to support a number of advanced features, the most surprising conclusion I can draw from experience is that you need only the four features mentioned below to generate sophisticated dynamic websites while enforcing strict separation of model and view and, equally crucially, avoiding HTML and manual template creation in the controller.

### Attribute references

The most common thing in a template beside plain text is a simple named attribute reference such as:

```

Your email: $email$

```

The template will look up the value of `email` and insert it into the output stream when you ask the template to print itself out. If `email` has no value, then it evaluates to the empty string and nothing is generated for that attribute expression.

If your controller sets an attribute more than once, then that attribute is *multi-valued*. Imagine the following controller code:

```

StringTemplate t =
    new StringTemplate("Your email(s): $email; separator=\"\", \"$;$");
t.setAttribute("email", "parrt@antlr.org");
t.setAttribute("email", "parrt@cs.usfca.edu");

```

where I have specified an optional separator here.

All elements are converted to text and generated in order. The output would look like:

```

Your email(s): parrt@antlr.org, parrt@cs.usfca.edu;

```

If a named attribute is an aggregate with properties (ala JavaBeans), you may reference a property using *attribute.property*. For example:

```
Your name: $person.name$
Your email: $person.email$
```

where you have set attribute person to be some Java object. `StringTemplate` ignores the actual object type stored in attribute person and simply invokes `getName()` and `getEmail()` via reflection (`StringTemplate` will also find fields with the same name as the property).

If an attribute reference is not resolved by looking in the associated template's attribute table, then `StringTemplate` searches for it in the `StringTemplate` enclosing template. In this way, you can set attribute `fontTag` once in the outermost template, perhaps `page`, and have all embedded templates find the value.

## Template includes

Instead of defining a single template per HTML page, `StringTemplate` encourages you to break up your pages into structured, nested templates that together combine to become a full page. This is directly analogous to how you should break down an algorithm into subprocedures. For example, if you were writing a program to generate a web page, you could make a single monolithic method:

```
class HomePage {
    ...
    public void generate() {
        out.println("<html>");
        out.println("<head>");
        out.println("<title>" + getTitle() + "</title>");
        out.println("<body>");

        // banner
        out.println("...");
        out.println("...");
        ...

        out.println("<hr>");

        // body
        out.println("...");
        out.println("...");
        ...

        out.println("</body>");
        out.println("</html>");
    }
    public String getTitle() {...}
}
```

But, here is a better, structured approach where the banner and body are factored out:

```
class HomePage {
    ...
    public void generate() {
        out.println("<html>");
        out.println("<head>");
        out.println("<title>" + getTitle() + "</title>");
        out.println("<body>");

        banner(); // replace prints with method call

        out.println("<hr>");

        body(); // replace prints with method call

        out.println("</body>");
        out.println("</html>");
    }
    public void banner() {...}
    public void body() {...}
}
```

```

    public String getTitle() {...}
}

```

The `StringTemplate` approach looks almost the same minus the surrounding Java infrastructure. Here is a generic `page.st` template file containing the overall page layout:

```

<html>
<head>
<title>${title}</title>
<body>

$banner()$

<hr>

$body()$

</body>
</html>

```

The template files `banner.st` and `body.st` are automatically included when a page is rendered.

All mutually-referential templates must be in the same `StringTemplateGroup`, which for websites loads the templates from the same directory. You will create a group object that specifies a root directory containing your templates:

```

StringTemplateGroup templates =
    new StringTemplateGroup("mygroup", "/home/parrt/templates");
// manually ask for an ST instance
StringTemplate t = templates.getInstanceOf("page");
// t loaded from /home/parrt/templates/page.st

```

In this case, if the page template references another template, it will be looked up in page's group and, hence, from the same directory. You may store templates in subdirectories and reference that as `$templates/misc/searchbox()$`, for example.

Here is test rig:

```

import org.antlr.stringtemplate.*;
class ST {
    public static void main(String[] args) {
        StringTemplateGroup templates = new StringTemplateGroup("mygroup", ".");
        StringTemplate t = templates.getInstanceOf("test"); // load test.st
        ... insert t.setAttribute(...) calls here

        System.out.println(t.toString());
    }
}

```

This structured approach is better as the overall page template is reusable for every page and provides a single point of change for the entire site's look. For example, to add a search box to every page, just add a reference to `$searchbox()$` above the body. Further, this structuring encourages reuse of the various template subcomponents.

## Template arguments

`StringTemplate` allows parameters on template includes just like method calls. An unexpected benefit of this appeared when I had to manually build a page of download items. Rather than cut-n-paste the required formatting for each download item, I used a template reference with static parameters. I still get the benefits of reuse and single-point-of-change for even manually entered information!

```

$download_list_item(
    title="Atlassian JIRA bug tracking and project management",
    companyLogo="/images/jira_logo_80_35.gif",
    companySite="www.atlassian.com/software/jira/try/",
    src="/download/index.jsp",
    url="www.atlassian.com/software/jira/try/",
    date="September 19, 2003",
    description="Atlassian JIRA is a J2EE-based bug tracking ..."
)

```

```
)$  
<br><br>  
$download_list_item(  
    ...  
)  
<br><br>  
...
```

Note that I am specifying just the information and none of the formatting, which is hidden in template `download_list_item`.

This is the same benefit you get from using a `link.st` template so you can say:

```
Please visit $link(url="http://www.usfca.edu", title="USF's website")$  
for more information.
```

## Applying templates

The single most interesting and powerful feature of `StringTemplate` is the notion of applying a template to a list of attributes. This feature single-handedly alleviates the need for all the traditional programming constructs like loops found in other template engines.

You might ask, "How can I build a table without a loop?" Internally `StringTemplate` employs loops as a primitive operation, but provides the user with a much richer construct: template application.

First, let's look at how to format single-valued attributes. Imagine you have a template called `bold` defined in `bold.st` as:

```
<b>$it$</b>
```

where `it` is the name of the default iteration attribute. You may bold any attribute as follows:

```
$name:bold()$
```

It's like saying `$bold(it=name)$`, but with a different syntax. You can apply multiple templates in a row too:

```
$name:bold():italics()$
```

which yields the following if `name` is "Alexey":

```
<i><b>Alexey</b></i>
```

One of the key subtle points here is that your controller code is not manually creating subtemplates or inserting HTML code. Your controller merely sets attribute values.

Now to make a list of names into a bullet list, you need a template like `listItem`:

```
<li>$it$</li>
```

Then you can say:

```
<ul>  
$names:listItem()$  
</ul>
```

For each element of attribute `names`, `StringTemplate` will apply the `listItem` template to the value. If you set attribute `names` to Boris and Natasha in your Java code, then the output would be:

```
<ul>  
<li>Boris</li>  
<li>Natasha</li>  
</ul>
```

For simple templates, you may also use "anonymous templates":

```
<ul>
$names:{<li>$it</li>}$
</ul>
```

Or you can set your own template application iteration variable name:

```
<ul>
$names:{ n | <li>$n</li>}$
</ul>
```

## Conditional subtemplates

There are many situations when you want to conditionally include some text or another template. `StringTemplate` provides IF-statements to let you specify conditional includes. For example, in a dynamic web page you usually want a slightly different look depending on whether or not the viewer is "logged in" or not. Without a conditional include, you would need two templates: `page_logged_in` and `page_logged_out`. You can use a single page definition with `if(expr)` attribute actions instead:

```
<html>
...
<body>
$if(loggedin)$
$top_gutter_logged_in()$
$else$
$top_gutter_logged_out()$
$endif$
...
</body>
</html>
```

where attribute `loggedin` is set by the controller. Crucially, for separation, `loggedin` is the result of a computation done in the model. You can only test the result in a template.

You may only test whether an attribute is present or absent, preserving separation of model and view. The only exception is that if an attribute value is a `Boolean` object, it will test it for `true/false`.

Technically speaking nested IF blocks represent an AND condition, which I'm pretty sure violates my rules, but in practice you really need this "grey area" feature.

## Fill-a-Table Example

The manner in which a template engine handles filling an HTML table with data often provides good insight into its programming and design strategy. It illustrates the interaction of the model and view via the controller. Using `StringTemplate`, the view may not bypass the controller and go straight to the model.

First, imagine we have objects of type `User` that we will pull from a simulated database:

```
public class User {
    String name;
    int age;
    public User(String name, int age) {
        this.name = name;
        this.age = age;
    }
    public String getName() { return name; }
    public int getAge() { return age; }
    public String toString() { return name+":"+age; }
}
```

Our database is just a static list:

```
static User[] users = new User[] {
    new User("Boris", 39),
```

```

    new User("Natasha", 31),
    new User("Jorge", 25),
    new User("Vladimir", 28)
};

```

Here is my simple overall page design template, `page.st`:

```

<html>
<head>
<title>${title$}</title>
</head>
<body>
<h1>${title$}</h1>

$body$

</body>
</html>

```

The body attribute of `page.st` will be set to the following template `users_list.st`:

```

<table border=1>
$users:{ u |
    <tr>
        <td>${u.name$}</td><td>${u.age$}</td>
    </tr>
}$
</table>

```

Identifier `u` is the *iterator* parameter that will be set to each value of the users list. `u.name` gets the name property, if it exists, from the `it` object ala JavaBeans or simple field reference. That is, `StringTemplate` uses reflection to call the `getName()` method on the incoming object. By using reflection, I avoid a type dependence between model and view.

Pushing factorization further, you could make a `row.st` component in order to reuse the table row HTML:

```

<tr>
    <td>${it.name$}</td><td>${it.age$}</td>
</tr>

```

where `it` is the predefined iterator when no parameter is defined.

Then the user list template reduces to the more readable:

```

<table border=1>
$users:row()$
</table>

```

So now the server and templates are set up to format data. My page definition is part of the controller that pulls data from the model (the database) and pushes into the view (the template). That is all the page definition should do--interpret the data and set some attributes in the view. The view only formats data and does no interpretation.

Here is a generic page object in my server that has loads templates from the `templates` subdirectory (in other words, when you ask for an instance of the "page" template, it will look for it in file `templates/page.st`):

```

public abstract class Page {
    /** My template library */
    static StringTemplateGroup templates =
        new StringTemplateGroup("mygroup", "templates");

    static {
        templates.setRefreshInterval(0); // don't cache templates
    }

    public void generate() {
        StringTemplate pageST = templates.getInstanceOf("page");
        StringTemplate bodyST = generateBody();
        pageST.setAttribute("body", bodyST);
        pageST.setAttribute("title", getTitle());
    }
}

```

```

        /* Uncomment to view graphically
        StringTemplateTreeView viz = new StringTemplateTreeView("viz",pageST);
        viz.setVisible(true);
        */

        String page = pageST.toString(); // render page
        System.out.println(page);
    }
    public abstract StringTemplate generateBody();
    public abstract String getTitle();
}

```

A page simply subclasses and overrides getTitle() and generateBody(), which returns a StringTemplate object.

```

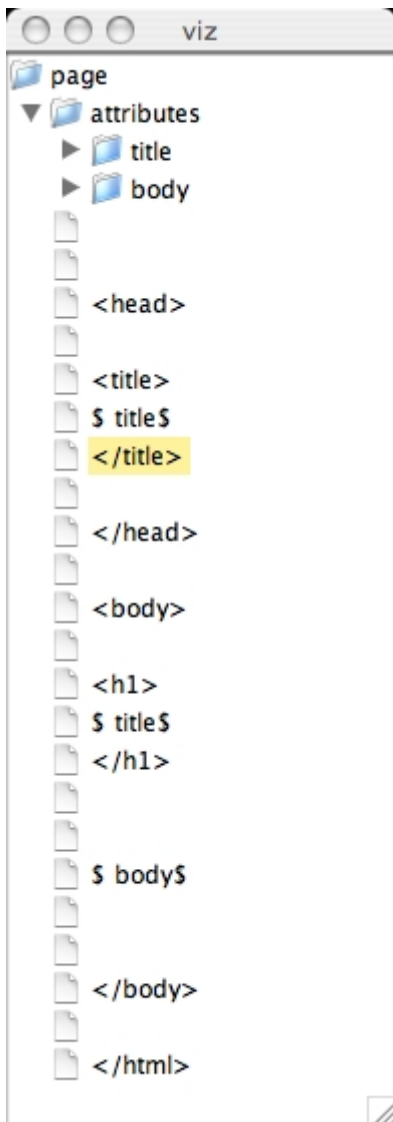
public class UserListPage extends Page {
    /** This "controller" pulls from "model" and pushes to "view" */
    public StringTemplate generateBody() {
        StringTemplate bodyST = templates.getInstanceOf("users_list");
        User[] list = users; // normally pull from database
        // filter list if you want here (not in template)
        bodyST.setAttribute("users", list);
        return bodyST;
    }
    public String getTitle() { return "User List"; }
}

```

Notice that the controller and model have no HTML in them at all and that the template has no code with side-effects or logic that can break the model-view separation. If you wanted to only see users with age < 30, you would filter the list in generateBody() rather than alter your template. The template only displays information once the controller pulls the right data from the model.

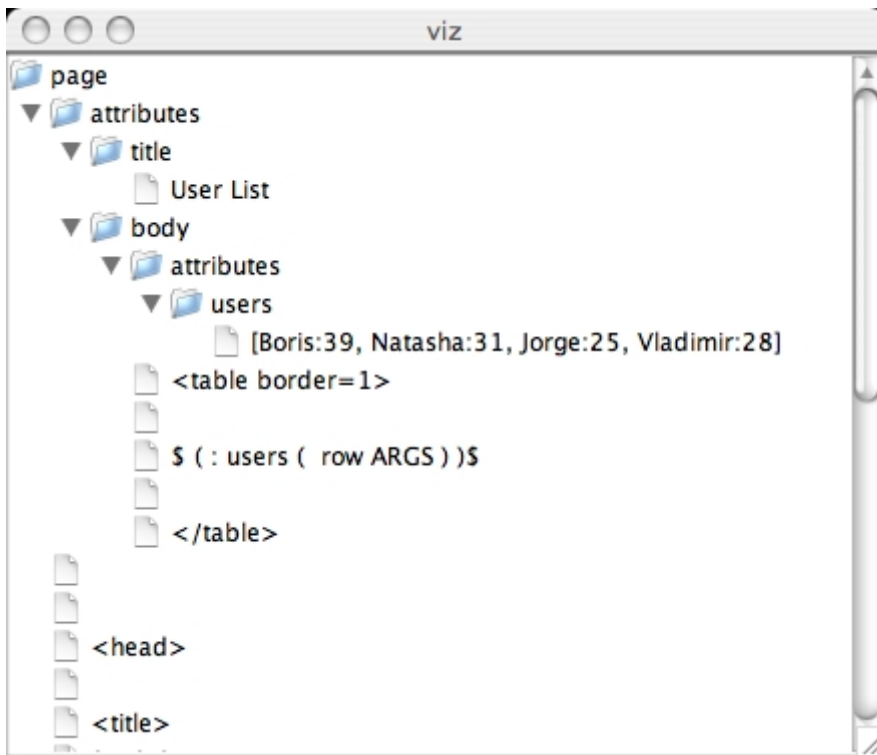
Graphically the overall outermost template, page, looks like the following:





where the blank elements represent whitespace found in the template; they need to be separated for reasons too detailed to go into here.

Drilling down into the attributes you can see that the body attribute is set to another template with the users attribute etc...



Those graphical debugging windows are pretty handy and are conveniently generated via:

```
StringTemplateTreeView viz = new StringTemplateTreeView("viz",pageST);
viz.setVisible(true);
```

Naturally, you could go one step further and make another component for the entire table (putting it in file `table.st`):

```
<table border=1>
$elements:row()$
</table>
```

then the body template would simply be:

```
$table(elements=users)$
```

Here is the complete source code:

- [Test.java](#)
- [Page.java](#)
- [User.java](#)
- [UserListPage.java](#)

and here are the templates:

- [page.st](#)
- [row.st](#)
- [users\\_list.st](#)

## StringTemplateGroup

The other important feature is called a `StringTemplateGroup`. `StringTemplateGroup` is a self-referential group of `StringTemplate` objects kind of like a grammar. It is very useful for keeping a group of templates together. For example, jGuru.com's premium and guest sites are completely separate sets of template files organized with a `StringTemplateGroup`. Changing "skins" is a simple matter of switching groups.

Groups know where to load templates by looking under a `rootDir` you can specify for the group or by simply looking for a resource file in the current class path. So, if you reference template `foo()` and you have a `rootDir`, it looks for

file rootDir/foo.st.

If you want to use a different set of templates, you can simply point the `StringTemplateGroup` file at a different directory:

```
public abstract class Page {
    /** My template library */
    static StringTemplateGroup templates =
        new StringTemplateGroup("mygroup", "anotherTemplateDir");
    ...
}
```

## StringTemplateErrorListener

`StringTemplateErrorListener` is an interface you can implement to specify where `StringTemplate` reports errors. Setting the listener for a group automatically makes all associated `StringTemplate` objects use the same listener. For example,

```
static class ErrorBuffer implements StringTemplateErrorListener {
    StringBuffer errorOutput = new StringBuffer(500);
    public void error(String msg, Exception e) {
        if ( e!=null ) {
            errorOutput.append(msg+e);
        }
        else {
            errorOutput.append(msg);
        }
    }
    public void warning(String msg) {
        errorOutput.append(msg);
    }
    public void debug(String msg) {
        errorOutput.append(msg);
    }
    public String toString() {
        return errorOutput.toString();
    }
}
...
StringTemplateGroup group = new StringTemplateGroup("mysite");
ErrorBuffer buf = new ErrorBuffer();
group.setErrorListener(buf);
```

## Using StringTemplate in your Page classes

Ok, let's tie it all together: `StringTemplate` and servlets. Let's reuse the `page.st`, `users_list.st`, and `row.st` templates plus construct the dispatch servlet and some page infrastructure.

We want `http://machine:8080/mail/users` to yield a list of users.

Make a `Page` subclass called `UserListPage`:

```
public class UserListPage extends Page {
    /** Our simulated database */
    static User[] users = new User[] {
        new User("Boris", 39),
        new User("Natasha", 31),
        new User("Jorge", 25),
        new User("Vladimir", 28)
    };

    public StringTemplate body() {
        StringTemplate bodyST = templates.getInstanceOf("users_list");
        User[] list = users; // normally pull from database
        // filter list if you want here (not in template)
        bodyST.setAttribute("users", list);
        return bodyST;
    }
}
```

```

    }

    public String getTitle() { return "List of users"; }
}

```

The page infrastructure, class `Page`, creates the outer page template (site look) and requests the body. It fills in the body of the page template with the result of the `body` method:

```

public class Page {
    /** My template library */
    static StringTemplateGroup templates =
        new StringTemplateGroup("mygroup", "templates");

    static {
        templates.setRefreshInterval(0); // don't cache templates
    }

    HttpServletRequest request;
    HttpServletResponse response;
    PrintWriter out;

    public void generate() throws IOException {
        out = response.getWriter();
        StringTemplate pageST = templates.getInstanceOf("page");
        StringTemplate bodyST = body();
        pageST.setAttribute("body", bodyST);
        pageST.setAttribute("title", getTitle());

        String page = pageST.toString(); // render page
        out.print(page);
    }

    public StringTemplate body() { return null; }

    public String getTitle() { return null; }
}

```

We have the same Jetty servlet start up that maps URLs of the form `/mail/*` to our `DispatchServlet`:

```

public class DispatchServlet extends HttpServlet {
    public void doGet(HttpServletRequest request,
        HttpServletResponse response)
        throws ServletException, IOException
    {
        Page p = null;
        String uri = request.getRequestURI();
        if ( uri.equals("/mail/users") ) {
            p = new UserListPage();
            p.request = request;
            p.response = response;
        }
        if (p==null) {
            System.err.println("can't find "+uri);
        }
        else {
            p.generate();
        }
    }
}

```

Note that I've modified the constructor for `Page` subclasses so they does not require a constructor.

Here is the complete source code:

- [DispatchServlet.java](#)
- [Page.java](#)
- [ServletServer.java](#)
- [User.java](#)
- [UserListPage.java](#)

and here are the templates again:

- [page.st](#)
- [row.st](#)
- [users\\_list.st](#)

**Note:** Make sure to save these in a templates subdirectory under where you save the Java code.

## How is StringTemplate different than CSS?

CSS is a very nice and flexible style specification for the various XML or HTML tags found in a web page. For example, I use it to alter the style of my course notes. This is what [my notes looked like in March of 2004](#) compared to today. Literally the only difference is that I have added

```
<link rel=stylesheet
      href="http://www.cs.usfca.edu/~parrrt/lecture-wiki.css" type="text/css"
/>
```

to the top of the page. That URL specifies a series of rewrite rules such as:

```
ul, ol {
  margin-top: 2px;
  margin-bottom: 2px;
  padding-top: 0px;
  padding-bottom: 0px;
}
```

that specify how various tags get formatted.

Sounds great! Why do I need StringTemplate then?!

The first big reason is that you still need to generate a structured document (XML or HTML) from a servlet. You cannot use print statements, right?

Secondly, while CSS does support some content positioning, it does not support the wholesale reorganization of the data as StringTemplate does. It allows you to say how something appears relative to another element on the page or at an absolute position, but it is focused on pixels and visual-display-oriented units. StringTemplate allows you to completely reorder data. Imagine a simple template:

```
<html>
<body>
<h1>${title$}</h1>
<ul>
$names:{n|<li>$n$</li>}
</ul>
</body>
</html>
```

If you wanted the title at the bottom, you can just move it in the template:

```
<html>
<body>
<ul>
$names:{n|<li>$n$</li>}
</ul>
<h1>${title$}</h1>
</body>
</html>
```

In CSS, you could probably specify the proper x, y coordinates to get the title on the bottom, but it's a long process of trial and error.

You'll also find that CSS implementations are very browser-dependent even on the same operating system.

CSS is purely for display of a specific page; there is no notion of factoring out common substructures.

CSS is XML/HTML-centric and is not suitable for generating any other kind of structure text.

From a practical point of view, CSS is like the prolog language. You are listing a series of rules whose emergent behavior is a displayed page. When it's not working, you have to just fiddle with the rules and hope to find the right combination. With `StringTemplate`, what you see is what you get--it **is** the HTML page that will be displayed.

**Recommendation:** use CSS only to alter how individual tags are formatted.