

## Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) By Example by Steve Callihan Reviewed by John Davey

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) By Example teaches CSS in a way that should be easy for anyone with reasonable facility using HTML. It is not a tome like Eric Meyer's Cascading Style Sheets: The Definitive Guide, but it is nonetheless a technically rigorous work. The emphasis is on getting readers up to speed in a step-by-step manner.

I reviewed the online version at Safari (<http://safari.oreilly.com/>) and downloaded the sample documents from the author's web site at <http://www.callihan.com/cssbook/>. The theme of the book is "by example," and it delivers on that theme. The samples are well thought out from a teaching point of view. Each contains elements that gave a good look at the concepts being taught. As with HTML, CSS is best learned by doing, and the examples allow the reader to use already prepared documents and add CSS to them. Readers should be able to stay on track and not get discouraged by too much typing. I confess that since I was reading an online version, I generally copied and pasted the CSS code into the downloaded examples--a slight cheat, but I don't think it seriously detracted from my learning experience.

The author starts off with an overview of how to use CSS and in subsequent chapters steps back to the beginning to go through the training from the start. The first section thus has a lot of references to what is to come in later chapters, but I think it is helpful for a beginner to see the big picture before getting into the details. I thought the balance was about right, and the order of topics was logical.

The book builds to the point of using positioning to create a page with three columns, one of the most challenging aspects of tables-free design. I found that the example of three columns did not work in Mozilla browsers, though it did in Opera and Explorer. I posted a question on the example to the author, and he responded within a day with the explanation and a corrected example. Any author giving that much attention to his work deserves support.

Real-world advice on what works or doesn't and what is best practice is interspersed throughout the lessons. I value these kinds of features as they save time in trial and error, particularly with different browsers. Obviously, the advice will change over time as browsers develop, but the basics will remain true for a long time.

The appendices include a useful CSS reference, a section on using CSS with other technologies like DHTML, and an overview of CSS software tools. The author's web site has errata, links to additional resources, and the sample pages described above.

As with so many books on web design now on the market, this one is about two years old, and it could use a second edition. There have been browser developments even in that short time, such as the release of Internet Explorer 6.0, that would change some of

the advice. I suspect that the author also might have a different perspective now on how far back to go to accommodate older browsers. Considering that sites like ABC.com and ESPN.com no longer display in version 4 browsers and instead tell visitors to upgrade, it would be interesting to see what Mr. Callihan has to say to current web designers. Within the vintage of browsers covered, though, the book has plenty of suggestions on which styles work and which are problematic. Hopefully, this edition has had sufficient readership to encourage the author and the publisher to produce an updated version.

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) By Example is an excellent introduction to CSS. It is slightly dated in terms of browsers, but it effectively takes the reader from the basics of CSS through advanced techniques. I would recommend this book for individuals at the early through intermediate level of CSS experience and as a reference for CSS training classes.

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