

Beginning CSS Web Development: From Novice to Professional,
by Simon Collison
Reviewed by John Davey

Beginning CSS Web Development is a thorough tutorial on designing websites with cascading style sheets. The subtitle of this book, *From Novice to Professional*, is a reasonably accurate description -- it might overstate how much an expert would get out of this volume, but there is plenty of knowledge and insight to benefit most CSS users.

Simon Collison starts by covering concepts such as class and ID selectors, what he calls "technical theory." It is not until chapter 4 that he gets to styling text. There is a question in my mind as whether this is the most effective way to present CSS for beginners. I do not think the technical concepts mean anything to novices until they have actually worked with CSS. Collison recognizes this dilemma and says at the start that you can skip the beginning and go back afterwards. I would second that suggestion, though I can't say how the book would flow if a reader starts in the beginning, nor would it be clear when to go back other than when things get too confusing.

That general point aside, this book is not only a very effective introduction to CSS, it is also a trove of insight into web design and the judgment calls that are part of the process. The book gives one the viewpoint of an experienced designer sharing his experience and his received wisdom from other designers. There are numerous references to websites for additional information, particularly on more advanced concepts.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is about styling the appearance of a page, and the second is about layout. Collison very concisely teaches the basics of CSS in the first section and give some good examples of page templates in the second.

The book as a whole covers a lot of ground efficiently with well thought out examples, but the value in this book for experienced as well as beginner designers is the perspective on how to put the techniques together for good design practices. Often the ideas are drawn from other sources, and Collison gives appropriate credit when due.

Some items that are particularly instructive:

- Commenting and organizing style sheets, and the concept of "flagging" to make it easier to find specific declarations in a sheet.
- Developing a work flow with lists of ID and class names, using borders to wire frame pages, and setting up a library of CSS to reuse.
- Use of color and color palettes -- these are topics where the author has a good touch, and he gives a practical overview of the websafe color issue.
- Styling lists, including a discussion of the under-used definition list, and using lists for navigation menus.

- Reusable templates for liquid and fixed page layouts, and faux columns.
- Designing for accessibility, a subject that is discussed at several different points, especially in the sections on tables and forms. This topic is extensive, but the author does a good job of showing how anyone can begin to employ appropriate practices right from the start.
- The font section is an excellent introduction to the subject in general as well as to the use of CSS.
- Lists and their use for navigation menus are handled well, as are contextual selectors.

There are subjects that could be treated more thoroughly, though maybe at the risk of giving too much information to the beginner:

- The book discusses the fact that an ID selector should be used on only one element in a document, but it would be useful to point out that browsers let you get away with not following that rule. And at least a sidebar explanation of the reason for this specification would be instructive.
- I would emphasize the importance of declaring a DOCTYPE in order to improve the chances of having predictable results and to be able to validate. And maybe a sidebar on the subject of validation, just to give beginners a way to check what they are doing.
- Some minor items, such as always declaring a background color, ought to be noted as standard practice for most webpages.
- The drop cap example was instructive, but does not work quite correctly across browsers.
- Toward the end of the book, there was a reference to generated content that said the subject had been discussed before. I confess I could not find the earlier reference.
- Given the emphasis on accessibility and the misuse of HTML for presentation, I was surprised at the suggestion to use the blockquote tag to create a pullquote. The specification for blockquote is that it allows text quoted from another source to be rendered specially (<http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/1995-archive/Elements/BLOCKQUOTE.html>). Since the goal of a pullquote is just to make a section of text stand out, I would argue that using blockquote is not semantically correct, and a search on the W3C.org site seems to support that argument (<http://www.w3.org/TR/2005/WD-WCAG20-HTML-TECHS-20050630/> -- 5.8 Misuse of blockquote).

The chapter on tables starts with a good perspective on why and when to use tables. I found this chapter, which also covered definition lists, particularly instructive, and accessibility was addressed as well as appearance.

The concluding chapters of the book are valuable for anyone. The writer has a good review of accessibility from the perspective of an experienced designer, and he keeps it realistic as far as what one can accomplish, at least at the beginner level. The final chapter on process emphasizes starting with Photoshop or even a pen and paper to

wire frame a page before getting into the coding. In the age of GUI editors, it can be tempting to skip this step.

The appendix is a well-organized listing of CSS 2.1 properties with a particularly useful section on shorthand properties.

The book has minimal but useful sidebar interruptions. The source can be downloaded from the publisher's website, and the examples are nicely annotated to let you easily relate them to the corresponding text. I spent a great deal of time trying to make a couple of examples work across browsers until I found that the body tags had not been closed (chapter 5 and chapter 11, in case you want to be prepared; I submitted an errata report). One browser ignored the error while another choked on it, so it would be very difficult for a beginner to catch. I reported another possible error in the faux column example, which I think has to be redone entirely.

Generally, I would prefer more consistency in the sample code, such as the use of DOCTYPE, links to external sheets, and inclusion of the text of a page itself. These inconsistencies might confuse a beginner who is copying and pasting. The examples probably need one more edit, so check the Errata section of the publisher's website or subscribe to the author's mailing list for notification of updates to the samples -- a very courteous offer on the part of Mr. Collison.

A beginner can pick this book up and get a good education on CSS, but I suggest starting with the text section first. An intermediate can breeze through the basics but will find a lot of value in the more advanced examples. Even experienced designers can benefit from the insights on process and on some of the fine points of CSS.

The British references might throw you -- tea and biscuits on this side of the Atlantic would more likely be Starbucks and Krispy Kreme -- but at least with David Beckham signing to play over here, the soccer (football?) example will not be unfamiliar. All in all, *Beginning CSS Web Development* is a good first CSS book for beginners, but designers up to advanced intermediate will also find it instructive and perceptive.

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