

Review of Cascading Style Sheets: The Definitive Guide  
Contributed by Sue Helfand

Eric Meyer's Cascading Style Sheets is, as the second part of the title states, "The Definitive Guide". He provides a thorough and detailed explanation of everything involved in the use of cascading style sheets (CSS). In the first chapter Meyer explains that handling the presentation of web pages with style sheets will enable HTML to fulfill its original goal—that of structural organization. He also points out the efficiency of centralizing style information in one place; not only is it easier to set up the rules initially, but styles can be modified much more quickly. For example, Meyer notes that if you decide to change a heading tag from purple to green, you can do so with just a few keystrokes. Previously you would have had to go through the entire document and change each reference. (As Meyer states, search and replace would not work if there were other purple fonts).

In Chapter 2, "Selectors and Structure", Meyer talks about the structure and the syntax of the rules themselves. He explains that there is a selector, usually though not always an HTML element such as Body, H1, P, etc, and a two-part declaration. The declaration consists of a property, and the value of the property. (i.e. H1 {color: purple;}). He goes on to explain how both selectors and declarations can be grouped, and how styles can be assigned independently of document elements through the use of class and ID selectors.

These first one and one-half chapters are essential to understanding CSS, since they show the value of style sheets and explain the fundamental concepts and syntax. In the second part of chapter 2, Meyer discusses the factors involved in resolving conflicts that could occur when more than one style could apply. He talks about inheritance and specificity, and about the order that is followed when styles "cascade together." These are important concepts, but not the kind of information that a beginner would be able to absorb easily. Particularly for someone who is just learning about CSS and HTML, this section and much of the remainder of the book would probably best be used for reference, rather than as a tutorial.

The book goes on to explain everything a style consists of: colors, text, units of measurement, fonts, etc. Meyer presents the information logically and carefully, pointing out general cases and exceptions, advantages and disadvantages of every aspect of the styles. He guides the reader step by step through the complexities and contradictions, of which there can be a great number. As a reference for someone who has become comfortable with HTML and with the fundamentals of CSS, and wishes now to learn the subject in depth, the book is outstanding. However, a novice who wants to begin learning how to use style sheets would probably get lost in all the details; at least, that was my experience. I found myself trying to skim the chapters in order to pick up the general ideas. But the precision and accuracy with which Meyer treats the material makes that difficult to do. Skimming can cause the reader to miss very important information; it frequently becomes necessary to go back, read carefully, and think about what is being discussed in order to fully understand.

Books published by O'Reilly and Associates generally contain not just 'cook book' how-to discussions, but thoughtful and intelligent analyses of the subject. This book is no exception, and it is this very strength that makes it more appropriate for readers whose background knowledge enables them to learn all that Meyer has to teach.

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