

Review of Learning Web Design, 2nd Edition by Jennifer Niederst  
Submitted by John Davey

I recently reviewed *Learning Web Design* by Jennifer Niederst for the Web Design SIG web site (<http://www.tangoangel.com/learnwebdes.pdf>). The book was only copyrighted in 2001, but I wondered whether the author might take different positions on certain subjects in view of the changes in Web technology since then. My answer came shortly thereafter when I received a copy of the new version of this excellent text, *Learning Web Design: A Beginner's Guide to HTML, Graphics, and Beyond, Second Edition* (O'Reilly 2003).

The new edition is an update rather than a rewrite. The core text is essentially the same as in the original version, effectively bringing a new web designer from a dead stop through the basics of web design and into some more advanced concepts and technologies. Physically, the book contains 444 pages, excluding the index, versus 377 pages in the first edition. This edition is slightly taller than the original, and the larger pages plus a new format improve readability over the first edition. I found the Linotype Birka text font to be easier to read than the ITC Legacy Sans Book used previously. The pages have been redesigned so that the sidebars are easier to read, in large part because they extend into the margins of the pages and thus make better use of the full page. The color scheme has been changed, and the graphics have been improved. These changes improve the general usability of the entire work.

At the end of the chapters there are now Test Yourself sections, with the answers in the Appendix. There is also a CD that has materials for all the exercises in the book as well as trial versions of several web design applications, both Mac and PC.

The most significant addition is a new chapter on using cascading style sheets, a subject that was referenced in the first edition, but now rightly has assumed a more prominent stature. Ms. Niederst, I think wisely, limits the chapter on style sheets to formatting text, and advises the reader that it might be better to read that chapter last, after becoming comfortable with HTML in general. There are references to style sheets interspersed in other parts of the book as well, showing the reader the CSS way of performing certain tasks.

Another new chapter is on Slicing and Rollovers, a topic that was merely a section of a chapter in the first edition. This new chapter has a section on how to slice an image using the ImageReady software, and a trial version of that application is included on the book's CD.

Some of the updates are just that. For instance, a useful features of both editions is the occasional sidebar description of how to do a task with an HTML editor, such as Dreamweaver. Those sidebars have been updated to reflect new versions of the editors.

More interesting are some of the practical suggestions that Ms. Niederst is so good at including. I noted, for instance, that she now suggests that the least common denominator to design for is an 800x600 pixels screen, not 640x480 as in the first edition. I think that probably has been the best standard to use for a couple of years, but recent sales statistics suggest that it will not be long before we are upping that to 1024x768. She has also kept the section about using a 1 pixel graphic for spacing, but she now considers that trick to be an historical artifact to be used if necessary, now that style sheets can handle the formatting chores.

There is a new section on XHTML, with enough information for the beginner to know what is and why it will be important, but not so much as to be confusing. The chapter on building useable web sites has generally been beefed up and reorganized. Finally, the chapter on The Web Design Process has a new section on maintaining a site, with sage advice on keeping a site up to date not only in content but also in technology.

Designers who own the first edition would not need to purchase this new edition, unless maybe you never got around to reading the first one at all and you want to be sure you are right up to date. For others who are just starting out, though, this new edition maintains the status of *Learning Web Design* as an excellent training resource. I would recommend it without hesitation to beginning designers.

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