

HTML & XHTML: The Definitive Guide (5th edn)

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A casual search at amazon.com turns up almost a thousand titles relating to HTML. This book, as part of O'Reilly's *Definitive Guide* range, may wish to be seen as a class apart, which, to a certain degree, it is.

Now in its fifth edition, the book has seen many changes to web markup standards since it was first published (as *HTML: The Definitive Guide*), most significantly the emergence of XHTML. Despite that recent addition to its title, this is still a book largely about HTML.

The authors present a clearly organised, extensive tour of HTML and its features. They include along the way many useful tips and hacks for achieving desired behaviour, as well as advice on browser support and functionality. There are helpful notes on obsolescent and obsolete features of both language and browsers. This body of knowledge, together with some sensible stylistic pointers, commends itself to novice and seasoned web author alike.

XHTML is mentioned where appropriate, although the authors' attitude towards the newer standard seems to be one of grudging acceptance. It is true that much of what can be said about HTML 4.01 also applies to XHTML 1.0, but XHTML (and indeed XML generally) receives perhaps less coverage than one might expect. In this respect, the book addresses the past and present of web markup, but is cautious regarding its future.

Similarly, the use of deprecated features is sanctioned at the outset, and antiquated or obsolete ones (JSS, Netscape 4 Layout Extensions) are documented, if only for historical reasons. HTML authors should produce XHTML where possible, but there is no real incentive to embrace it at present, the authors imply. To a great extent, therefore, the book is concerned with producing HTML web pages that work on the current popular browsers, while adherence to standards and best practice, although advised, is left to the web author's conscience.

That said, the authors are elsewhere forward-looking: the survey of CSS occupies the longest chapter in the book, and some esoteric portions of XHTML 1.1 also receive a mention.

While the advice the authors give on authoring web content is mostly sound, it may have benefited from clearer separation of technical and stylistic aspects. Indeed, some of the most useful material - on browser support - may well have merited an appendix to itself.

There were some disappointing factual errors to be found here, most notably the repeated assertion that XHTML attributes must be enclosed in *double* quotes, and that attribute length is limited to 1,024 characters (not the case since HTML 3).

Ultimately, the authors succeed in demonstrating how to achieve viable and portable web content and cover the requisite knowledge thoroughly, while adding a mention of where the technology is heading for good measure. As such, this book provides valuable guidance, but I would hesitate to call it definitive.