

Web alert

Creating Web pages

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Although the Internet is becoming increasingly commercialised, its roots are in academia and many research groups and laboratories have their own Web pages. The aim of this Web alert is to help you create a home page or simple Web site.

There are two main ways of writing Web pages yourself (rather than seeking professional help). Web pages are written in hypertext markup language (HTML) and the two methods differ in whether or not you need to know anything about HTML before you start.

HTML editing

One way to create Web pages is to write your pages in HTML using a basic text editor, such as Notepad on a computer running Windows or SimpleText on a Macintosh. HTML is relatively easy to understand. It consists of tags that define the content of the Web page, so that, for example, one set of tags might denote that the enclosed text is a paragraph, whilst other tags might define headings or hypertext links.

There are many online resources intended to help you learn HTML. A simple introduction is provided by the 10 minute Guide to Writing HTML (<http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/Guide/>), produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the group that develops Web protocols. A more detailed tutorial, called A Beginner's Guide to HTML (<http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/WWW/HTMLPrimer.html>), is available from The National Center for Super-computing Applications (NCSA).

These two guides should equip you with the basic skills for writing your own home page, but you can

continue to learn about HTML by looking at impressive Web sites and viewing the 'source' of these pages to see the underlying HTML from which they are created.

WYSIWYG editing

The second method of writing Web pages is to use a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor. Such editors take care of all the HTML, leaving you to worry solely about the design and the content of your Web pages. Many WYSIWYG editors are available and you will need to find one that suits you. WinFiles.com maintains a huge list of Windows-based HTML editors on the Web (<http://www.winfiles.com/apps/98/html.html>), many of which are WYSIWYG, although some require HTML knowledge. Thomas Boutell's World Wide Web Frequently Asked Questions has a list of HTML editors (<http://www.boutell.com/faq/oldfaq/htedit.htm>) that covers all the major platforms, including Macintosh.

Page design and content

Knowing how to write Web pages is just the first step towards producing good Web pages. The most important aspect of a Web site is the content, but good design makes a huge difference. If your Web pages are badly designed then they will be difficult to read, which can be very distracting or even deter the reader completely. Again, there are plenty of good Web sites offering design advice. Often it is best to keep your pages simple, but if you want to create a flamboyant site that uses all the latest Web technologies (e.g., Dynamic HTML and Java, two techniques that allow the creation of interactive Web pages, or video or audio) then make sure that using these innovations does not render your Web pages inaccessible to much of your potential audience, by taking note of the advice that the Yale C/AIM Web Style Guide (<http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/>) offers on graphic site design. For instance, some multimedia options require you to download and install a

'plug-in' program before they can be viewed, an inconvenience that might deter many users.

Many Web pages share common design faults, so it is worth detailing two that should always be avoided. Firstly, dark coloured or patterned backgrounds make pages difficult to read — this article is black type on a white background for a very good reason. Secondly, make sure that your pages are easy to navigate. It is all too easy to get lost on some Web sites: a simple navigation bar in a consistent position on all pages can be a big help.

As mentioned above, the content of your home page is paramount. For many research groups, the basic information of a list of the people in the lab and how to contact them, details of the group's latest publications, and links to interesting Web pages is sufficient. For those who are a little more ambitious in Web page design, some unique content will attract more visitors to your site. What this interesting or novel content could be is obviously dependent on your area of research. It could be videos of cells in motion (e.g., <http://skye.med.harvard.edu/>), moving images of the protein structures (e.g., <http://www.cryst.bbk.ac.uk/~ubcg16z/chaperone.html>) or novel protocols and procedures (e.g., <http://www.hhmi.swmed.edu/Labs/dc/DCHome.html>).

Another important aspect of the content is to ensure that it is fresh by updating the Web pages regularly. For example, publication lists look more impressive if the latest papers are included and external links need to be checked frequently to make sure they still work.

This Web alert gives only a brief introduction to creating Web pages. If you want more advanced information then you could consult one of these sites: <http://www.htmlhelp.com>; <http://www.webreference.com>; <http://www.builder.com>. All of these specialise in providing help for Web designers.

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