Chapter 9

How Do I Style Tables?

Tables seem to be the most divisive of all HTML elements—you either love ’em or hate ’em. For years, they were the only way to build a grid structure to lay out web pages. But tables work in a unique way. The height of each row is determined by the tallest object in the row, and the width of each column is determined by the widest object in the column. Just when you think you have everything nicely aligned, you add something slightly bigger in a table cell, and the whole table structure shifts.

Thankfully, tables are no longer necessary—or indeed recommended—for page layout. Normally, they should be used only for the display of data that needs to be presented in a grid format—timetables, price lists, sports results, and so on. That’s the focus of this chapter: styling tables that contain data.

In this chapter, you’ll learn about the following:

- Styling borders around tables and individual cells
- Moving the position of the table caption
- Suppressing the display of empty cells
- Adjusting the space between table cells and inside them
- Preventing columns from exceeding a fixed width
- Styling table columns

Most of this chapter is descriptive, but there are numerous examples in the download files demonstrating the effect of different style rules. The chapter concludes with an exercise that puts all the information to practical use styling a table of weather data.

Before diving into the details of styling tables with CSS, it’s important to understand the basic structure of tables and how browsers lay out the various components.
Understanding the anatomy of a table

Assuming you’re not a complete beginner at web design who happens to have opened this page at random, you should be familiar with the structure of an HTML table. The first section covers very basic knowledge, so you might want to skim through it very quickly. However, I also describe the role of less frequently used table elements—including `<colgroup>` and `<tbody>`—that play an important role in styling tables with CSS.

Basic table structure

In an HTML table, everything is wrapped in a pair of `<table>` tags; each row is contained in `<tr>` tags; and individual cells are created using `<td>` tags. The following code produces the table shown in Figure 9-1 (the code is in `table_01.html` in the download files for this chapter):

```html
<table width="200" border="1" cellpadding="5">
  <tr>
    <td>Row one - cell 1</td>
    <td>Cell 2</td>
  </tr>
  <tr>
    <td>Row two - cell 1</td>
    <td>Cell 2</td>
  </tr>
</table>
```

![Figure 9-1. A simple table](image)

Notice that the opening `<table>` tag has the `border` attribute set to 1. This puts a 1px border around the whole table and each individual cell, producing the effect of a raised double border around each table element. The other attribute in the opening tag, `cellpadding`, is set to 5, adding 5px of padding around the content of each cell.

If you increase the value of `border` to 10, you get the result shown in Figure 9-2 (the code is in `table_02.html`):