Chapter 7

Page Layouts with CSS

In this chapter:

- Explaining CSS workflow
- Positioning web page elements with CSS
- Creating boxouts and sidebars
- Creating column-based layouts
- Amending layouts, depending on body class settings
Layout for the Web

Although recent years have seen various institutions offer web-oriented courses, the fact remains that many web designers are not “qualified” per se. What I mean by this is that plenty of them have come from some sort of design or technology background related to—but not necessarily a part of—the Web. Therefore, we often see print designers moving over to the Web through curiosity or sheer necessity and technologists dipping their toes into the field of design.

This accounts for the most common issues seen in web layouts: many designers coming from print try to shoehorn their knowledge into their website designs, despite the Web being a very different medium from print. Conversely, those with no design knowledge lack the basic foundations and often omit design staples. Even those of us who’ve worked with the Web almost from the beginning and who also come from a design or arts background sometimes forget that the best sites tend to be those that borrow the best ideas from a range of media and then tailor the results to the desired output medium.

In this section, we’ll take a brief look at a few layout techniques: grids and boxes, columns, and fixed vs. liquid design.

Grids and boxes

Like print-oriented design, the basis of web page design tends to be formed from grids and boxes. Regardless of the underlying layout technology (previously, tables; then, CSS; and now HTML5 and CSS3), web pages are formed of rectangular areas that are then populated with content.

Grid layouts can add visual rhythm to guide your user’s eye, making your design look clean and ordered, and provide consistency. They enable stability and structure into which you can easily drop new elements and rearrange existing ones without the time and energy it would take to do so in a nongrid layout.

A grid is a division of layout with vertical and horizontal guidelines that incorporate margins, spaces, and columns for organizing your content. The grid container should be evenly divisible. For example, a 960-pixel total width is a good starting point, because it provides a massive amount of scope for divisions (960 is divisible by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20, 24, 30, 32, 40, 48, 60, 64, 80, 96, 120, 160, 192, 240, 320, and 480).

That said, too many columns can result in excessive complexity, so when working on initial grid designs, stick to about a dozen columns. The reason for working with 12 columns (rather than, say, seven or ten) is because of the flexibility it affords you in being able to divide the layout evenly (2 \times 6, 3 \times 4) and also in various other combinations.

A good rule of thumb for web design is to keep things relatively simple. Plan the layout on paper prior to going near any design applications, and simplify the structure as much as possible. Always design with mobile and legacy browsers in mind, and use progressive enhancement to add the advanced styles supported by desktop browsers. A typical web page contains as few as three or four structural areas (such