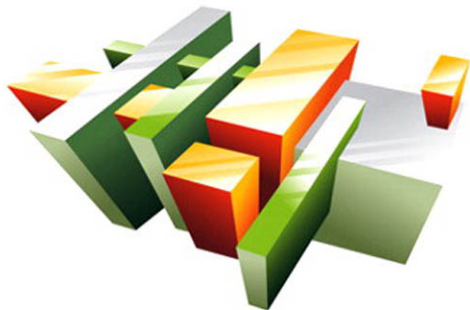


BUILD A WEBSITE FOR FREE

Third Edition

Personal Site • Blogs • Wiki
Multimedia Based Site
Small Business Site



que

Mark Bell

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER



SHARE WITH OTHERS



Build ^a Website for **Free**

Third Edition

Mark Bell



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Build a Website for Free

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7897-5023-5

ISBN-10: 0-7897-5023-6

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 2012

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About the Author

Mark Bell is a Ph.D. candidate at Indiana University. He studies media and its effect on social relations. Before returning to school, Mark worked for 15 years in the software industry as a technical writer, trainer, and developer. He started his first web design company in 1993 and has been making pages and managing websites ever since. He is the father of Jackson, 10, stepfather of Morrigan, Teagan, and Xander, and the husband of Sarah “Intellagirl” Smith-Robbins. You can find him on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Dedication

To three people:

To Sarah, my wife, who because she believes in and fuels my strength and determination. She gives me energy, life, and love. I am damn lucky to have found her.

To my son, Jackson, who is a constant source of joy and inspiration. He surprises me every day with his warmth and intelligence. Son, I give my best to you.

To my friend, Davin, who has always stood by me and loved me no matter what. He is a true friend who has joined me in this digital journey from the beginning with a Timex Sinclair 1000 in his living room.

Acknowledgments

This book was written by one person, but it contains the contributions of thousands from the Web via Twitter and Facebook. It also comes with the help of Sarah, my wife, and mental collaborators Matt, Norbert, and Joshua. Without these great minds around me, I would never get anywhere.

Special thanks to Matt for working with me on this book, finding holes and rough patches, and taking screen shots. It's been an honor to work with you.

Special thanks to Indiana University and my advisor, Harmeet Sawhney, for understanding that I need to make money doing “other” projects. To John Dailey, for letting me learn how to teach the Web from a master.

Thanks to Tim Berners-Lee for creating the web and for Richard Stallman for being the father of open source, and to all the open-source developers who put in millions of hours so that we all can share amazing free software.

Thanks to my high-school computer teachers, Mrs. Todd and Mr. Cooper, who let me run wild in a digital playground.

To my mother, brothers, sisters, and all their families.

Most special thanks to my friends and family, who are patient with my writing schedule.

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Introduction

So, you want to build a website for free?

If you are reading this book, you probably want to build a website (even though you might not know exactly what that is), and you want to do it for free. If you have no idea what a website really is and need some basic information, you'll learn this later in the Introduction. If you know what a website is, you probably are more interested in the "free" part. All the software and tools discussed in this book are free of charge. If at all possible, I choose the best free alternative to commercial software. In the past decade, the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, has grown considerably.

There are now millions of websites on the Internet covering all sorts of subjects, from family and business to education and entertainment. Some websites have been long-lasting and useful (Yahoo! and Google), and others disappear as quickly as they come. You might have plans to create a website that you hope millions of people will visit, or your site's purpose might be just to stay connected with your family members.

IN THIS INTRODUCTION

- Why This Book?
- For Free, Really?
- I Can't Really Do This... Can I?
- Note on This Third Edition
- How to Use This Book
- Web 101
- What Is a Website?
- What Is a Web Browser?

Why This Book?

You probably picked up this book because you have an idea in your head—an idea you want to share on the World Wide Web in the form of a website. You might have a fully formed idea or just a kernel of that idea, but you have a starting point. Maybe you have been given the job of creating a website and have no idea where to start, or maybe you have a burning desire to connect with other people.

Regardless of your reason for creating a site, this book will help you understand the process of how those ideas become a website and then walk you through creating five different sites for specific purposes. These sites include a basic website, a blog, a content management system, a wiki, and a multimedia website. You might not know or care about all these, but this book shows you how to build them for free. This book covers how to plan, design, build, and maintain a website, and to do it using free tools. With simple step-by-step instructions, you will be up and running on the World Wide Web before you know it.

For Free, Really?

You're probably wondering how much this is going to cost. The book title says "free," but you have never believed anything was really free. This book is unique.

Different people and websites will promise you the lowest prices possible on website tools, hosting, and creation. Conventional wisdom says nothing is free. Generally, the more you invest in a project, the more options you have.

In the past five years, however, open-source and free software have been flooding the World Wide Web and allowing people to create fun, interesting, dynamic web pages for little money. This book uses free software as much as possible. If people are giving away quality software, you should use it.

Open-Source Software

In the previous section, I threw out the term "open-source software," and you're probably wondering what the heck that is.

Most software, including your operating system, word processor, and web browser, is more than likely developed according to a traditional software model. Software is traditionally created by a bunch of people who run a software company, which runs on money. The people who run the company pay programmers to write and test software, and they employ marketing and

salespeople to sell their products to you, the consumer. Most software has been developed this way since the 1980s.

The Internet is in a constant state of flux. Some people call this a revolution and others just a fad, but in reality, open-source is here to stay. Open-source software is created by teams of people working for free, and it is given away to anyone for free. More than that, open-source projects also give away the parts that make up software, or “source code,” which a traditional company keeps secret. The theory behind all this is that the more people programming, editing, and using the open-source software, the better it becomes. Also, when the work is distributed among thousands of people, most of whom will never meet, the workload per person is drastically reduced. Don’t tell the traditional software industry, but their programmers are working for them and then going home at night and doing the same thing for free!

In this book, as much as possible, we will be using open-source software because it is usually free and, surprisingly, is some of the highest quality stuff available. There are open-source operating systems, web browsers, graphics applications, and even website management tools. All these are covered in this book.

With each piece of software I recommend, I list where to find the latest version and its major features.

Is This Legal?

Your next question might be, “If I am getting this stuff for free, isn’t that stealing?” I am not advocating or recommending that anyone steal or pirate software. All the software I recommend is given away for free. The software industry is full of hard-working people who deserve to be paid for their work. If there is a price for software, I tell you about it. Where there is a cost, I provide a free alternative and let you know the differences.

I Can’t Really Do This...Can I?

In my years of teaching software in the corporate and academic world, I have heard people say they can’t do some computer task that they need or want to do because of this or that reason. Some people say they are afraid of computers or “just don’t get them,” some blame the hardware, and some just say they can’t understand these crazy things. This book is designed to get even the most apprehensive would-be website developer, who has no special qualifications or knowledge, up and running in no time. I explain each task using easy-to-understand instructions.

Note on This Third Edition

Any book about the web or the Internet in general is out of date as soon as it is finished. The World Wide Web continues to change at an accelerated rate. This book is no exception. For this reason, a new edition has been created to update the text.

This third edition has been greatly expanded. There are two new chapters: One centers on the latest version of HTML and the improvements it offers, and the other chapter discusses JavaScript. Every existing chapter has been updated with the latest information. The updates center on mobile and tablet computing, new open-source software, and updated links.

My Site

If you go to <http://www.markwbell.com>, you will find my website (see Figure I.1). Throughout this book, I reference my site as an example of what I am talking about in the text. It covers my latest books, media information, and contact information.



FIGURE I.1

The author's website.

How to Use This Book

Throughout this book, you will find special notes to help you along the way.

Tips and Cautions

tip

Tips contain little bits of information that will give you extra knowledge or save you time or money. They don't present mandatory information, but you should pay attention to them.

caution

Cautions, on the other hand, are important to pay attention to. A Caution is must-read information that you need to know before proceeding with the task at hand. Please pay close attention to them.

Geek Speak

The world of computers and the culture that surrounds them are full of jargon. It is almost as though acronyms and arcane terms are the fuel that the software industry uses. When the terminology gets techy in this book, the Geek Speak sections decipher the lingo for you and use common, simple words to explain what's going on.

Whenever a line of code is too long to fit on one printed line, we break it and use a code-continuation arrow to indicate the continuation, like this:

```
<param name="movie" value="http://www.youtube.com/v/
➡-xL7YSsEyOs?fs=1&hl=en_US"></param>
```



Geek Speak

These notes act as a mini-translator into the world of computer geeks.

Web 101

This book makes it as simple and cheap as possible for you to create a website. To make sure that this can happen, it's important to cover some basics, including how the Internet and web work. You may use the Internet every day but not know what it really is. For me, a basic understanding of the building blocks of the web helps me build better websites.

If you already know how the Internet works and what a web page and website are, skip ahead to Chapter 1, "The Order of Things." But, if you want a quick refresher on some basic Internet facts, read over this Introduction first.

What Is the Internet?

Can you even remember a time before the Internet existed? Depending on your age, the answer may vary, but how did we ever get along without it? Think about trying to find a new restaurant to go to before the Internet was around. You would have to look in the Restaurant section of the *Yellow Pages*, use a map to find the street where the restaurant was, and then devise your own directions to get there. With the Internet, you can not only do most of that with the click of a button, but you can read the menu, see pictures of the interior, and maybe even make reservations—all without leaving the house or picking up the phone. But, what is this incredibly useful thing we call the Internet?

The Internet is simply the largest network of computers in existence. All these computers speak a similar language and easily share information. That's it. You don't need to know the history or the technology beyond that. When your modem connects you to the Internet, your computer becomes part of the computer network known as the Internet. You might have a local network at work or home, but that local network is connected to the Internet.

What Is the World Wide Web?

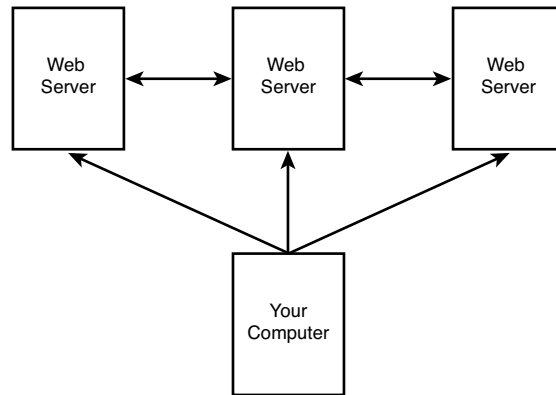
People talk about the web and the Internet as if they were the same thing. They aren't. As mentioned previously, the Internet is a network of computers. The World Wide Web is a method of viewing the information on those networked computers. The World Wide Web is a collection of certain files on certain computers in the network of computers. These files contain information that, when referred to collectively, is called the *World Wide Web* (see Figure I.2).



Geek Speak

www

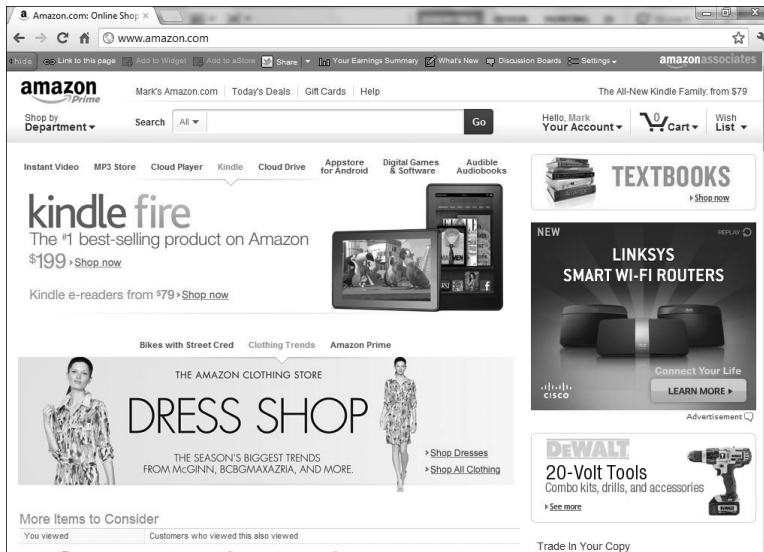
Ever wonder why so many pages start with www? Those letters are technical shorthand to tell your web browser you are looking for something on the World Wide Web. The www isn't even needed, however. Most web browsers will find the site whether you type www or not.

**FIGURE I.2**

The Internet is made of web servers to which you connect with your computer.

What Is a Web Page?

The World Wide Web is then made up of web pages. A *web page* is a file of information that can be accessed and displayed on your computer. When you access the file, it is downloaded to your computer. When you go to Amazon.com (see Figure I.3), you are accessing a file on an Amazon computer, it is downloaded, and the information in that file is displayed on your computer. When you surf the web, you are connecting to a bunch of different computers, which are all transferring files to your computer.

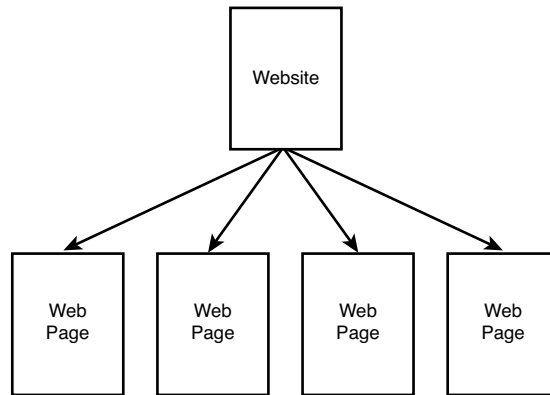
**FIGURE I.3**

The Amazon.com homepage.

Not all web pages are the same, however. Some sites dynamically create the web pages you see. When you do a Google search, the search results are compiled, and a web page is created on the fly to display the results. This book deals mostly with static pages, but some websites—like blogs, wikis, and social networks—are all created with dynamic pages.

What Is a Website?

A website is basically a collection of web pages (see Figure I.4) stored on a particular computer (called a web server) and accessed by outside computers. The site creator puts the files on the web server. A web server is just a computer with special software that allows others to view your web page when they go to the address of the web server. When you go to cnn.com, there is a collection of pages that make up the website for the CNN television network.

**FIGURE I.4**

A website is made up of web pages.

What Is a Web Browser?

A web browser is a piece of software on your computer or mobile device that you use to access web pages on websites. All desktop computers include at least one web browser as part of the preinstalled software. A web browser is the tool you use to view websites, and more and more often it is also a tool to help you create websites.

All browsers work essentially the same way. You enter a website address into the browser or click on a link. This tells the browser to go to that Internet address and download the files (images, text, videos) to your computer, mobile device, or tablet. Don't forget that when use the web on your phone you are still using a browser. Then these files are displayed in a way that looks good (hopefully) and allows you to interact with them.

Several browsers are available to you. A good website developer (you!) will be familiar with all the major types, and more than likely will have them installed on a computer used for testing. More than ever, people are using mobile browsers to view the web. Your phone probably has a web browser in it. Keep in mind, Safari on a Mac is not the same as Safari on the iPhone. If you are serious about web development, you need to get and keep the latest

versions of browser software on your computer. You also need to be aware of each browser's unique features and limitations. The most common browsers are

- **Internet Explorer (Microsoft)**—<http://www.microsoft.com/ie/>
- **Chrome (Google)**—<http://chrome.google.com>
- **Firefox (Mozilla)**—<http://www.firefox.com>
- **Safari (Apple)**—<http://www.apple.com/safari/>
- **Opera (Opera)**—<http://www.opera.com/>
- **Konqueror (Linux)**—<http://www.konqueror.org/>

Designing Your Site

If you've spent much time surfing the web, you've probably noticed some sites that are well designed and others that are not. The design of your site is important, because it sets the stage for your content and has the potential to keep visitors from leaving your site too quickly and to keep them coming back. This is sometimes called sticky content, because it keeps visitors stuck to your website. The design involves colors, fonts, images, and layout.

This chapter shows you how to make decisions about developing an effective design and where you can find some ideas that will help spark your design creativity.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- I Can't Make a Website That Looks That Good!
- Content Before Design
- Overall Design
- Colors
- Fonts
- Images
- Cascading Style Sheets
- Design Best Practices

I Can't Make a Website That Looks That Good!

If you're reading this book, you're probably not a professional web designer. Neither am I. But, you don't need to be to create a well-designed website. You can learn from the work of others—those with great talent and ability who create true works of art (see Figure 4.1).

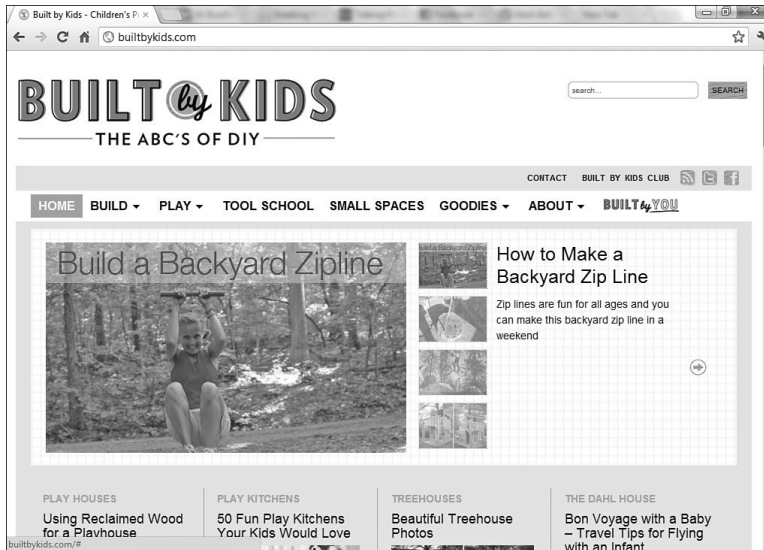


FIGURE 4.1

Built By Kids (<http://builtbykids.com/>) is a well-designed DIY site for kids.

Most of the beautiful and well-designed sites out there were created by a staff that is well trained and well paid. Compared to these sites, your site will look unpolished and unprofessional. However, it's important to remember that this is a learning process and your budget is probably zero, so keep things in perspective. Learn from the sites that are well done and, most importantly, don't get discouraged! Have fun and be creative.

Content Before Design

If there is one core principle that guides all my website design, it's content before design. This means collecting the content for your website and then letting that guide and inform your design. For example, if you are building a website for your bowling team, consider the content first. Your team wants to have member profiles, a schedule, results from past matches, and the team logo. Let those things guide your design of the website.

Websites that put design before content usually have design elements that feel wrong for the content. For example, you might really love the color and flavor of chili peppers, but they are not the design element to base your local zoo's website on. On the other hand, the bowling site could use pins, bowling balls, or lanes in interesting ways that tie the design to the content (see Figure 4.2).



FIGURE 4.2

Bowl.com is an example of using content to drive design.

Overall Design

To start, let's consider the overall design of your site. What mood do you want to evoke with your website—do you want it to be fun and bright or dark and brooding? Maybe you don't even know. The best place to start is by looking around at sites that are well designed.

Design Ideas

I am always looking for design ideas. When I find a site that is well designed, I *bookmark* it so that when I am beginning a new design, I can review it to get ideas for my own site.

I also look at the winners of design awards and web designers' sites. Because these sites are well designed, you can learn a lot from them.

Here are a few to consider:

- Webby Awards (<http://www.webbyawards.com>)
- Design Licks (<http://www.designlicks.com/>)
- Razorfish (<http://www.razorfish.com>)



Geek Speak

bookmark

Most browsers enable you to *bookmark* sites, which means you keep a record of a particular website so you can go back to it later. Check your browser's documentation to learn how to bookmark with your browser.

Colors

The web is a visual medium, so color is important. It invokes mood and can make one site dynamic and interesting and another bland and boring. Millions of colors are available to you, so let your creativity and personal style be your guide.

The Magic Four

If you go to your local newsstand and look at the colors used on magazines, you will most likely see the following dominant colors:

- Red
- Yellow
- Black
- White

These are the magic colors in advertising. These colors all attract the eye, are easy to read text off of, and are familiar to all visitors (see Figure 4.3). They immediately give your site an air of polish and professionalism, but overdoing it on any of them will lead to a mixed-up muddle instead of a well-designed website.

If you are unsure about what colors to use, start with one of these. On the other hand, if you're looking for something different and want a color that matches certain images or other design elements of your site, you have a multitude of options.

**FIGURE 4.3**

The website for the magazine GQ (<http://www.gq.com/>) uses the magic four colors.

Hex Color

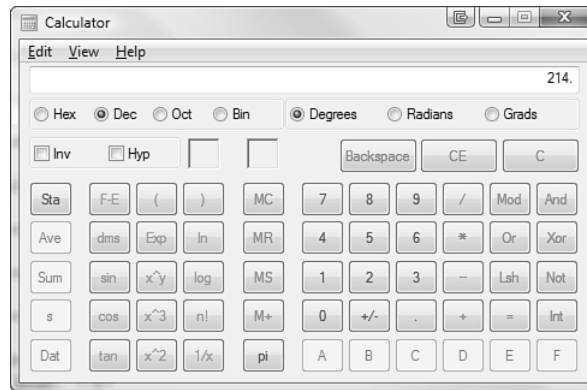
When you are dealing with color on the Internet, you need to understand that roses are not “red” but “#FF0000.” This is called hex color, and you have to get used to it when you’re using color on the web. The strange notation is really three sets of numbers: FF, 00, and 00. (FF is actually a number, in this case.)

Each two-digit number is a hexadecimal value of a much larger number. The three sets of numbers in a hex code represent red, green, and blue (referred to as RGB). HTML tags use the hex number to define colors.

Each color (red, green, and blue) has 256 possible values, and the three of them together make all other colors. To determine the hex value for a number, you use a scientific calculator. For Windows, follow these steps:

1. Press the Windows key and R.
2. In the Run box, type **calc.exe**, and click OK.
3. From the View menu, select Scientific (see Figure 4.4).
4. Type 214, and click the Hex option.

The Hex value of 214, which is D6, is displayed. Many HTML tags and other applications use hexadecimal to describe colors.

**FIGURE 4.4**

The scientific calculator.

As practice, find the RGB numbers of your favorite color and convert them to hexadecimal.

Color Schemes

A set of colors that complement each other is called a color scheme. These colors simply look good together and probably contain one of the four magic colors. Sometimes, you might have something like a company logo that has a set color. You can use a color scheme to find colors that go well with that set color and don't overpower or conflict with it. Above all, with color, go with what feels and looks right. You may also want to show your site to a number of people and get their input. I use the color scheme of my latest book cover for my website; that way, people know they are at the right site for my book. A couple of tools on the web can help you match colors:

- **Color Combos** (<http://www.colorcombos.com/>)—This website is all about creating color combinations for the web (see Figure 4.5). You can use it to pick existing color combinations, test combinations, and browse its color combination library.
- **Color Palette Generator** (<http://www.degraeve.com/color-palette/>)—If you have a central image around which you want to build your website, all you need to do is load it into this website, and the tool determines the colors used in the picture (see Figure 4.6).
- **ColorBlender** (<http://colorblender.com/>)—This tool enables you to create matching colors and a color palette based on a color you select. If you know the central color you want to use, this site gives you options to use with it.

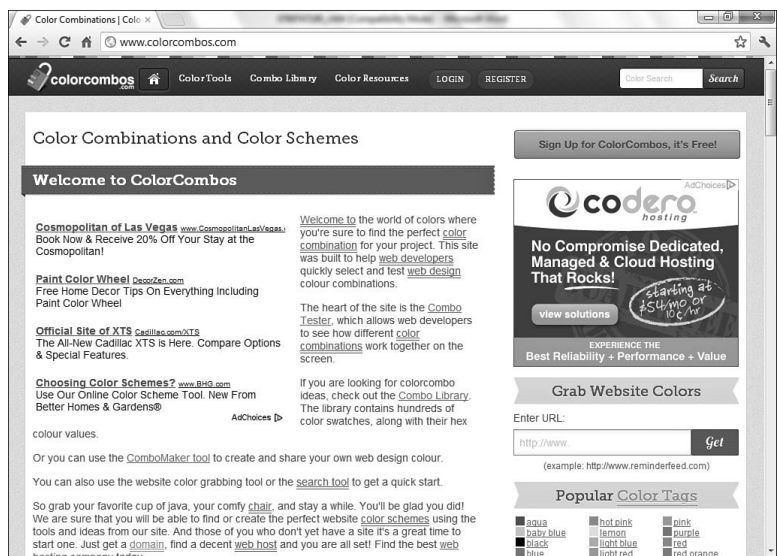


FIGURE 4.5
Color Combos is a site with many color tools.

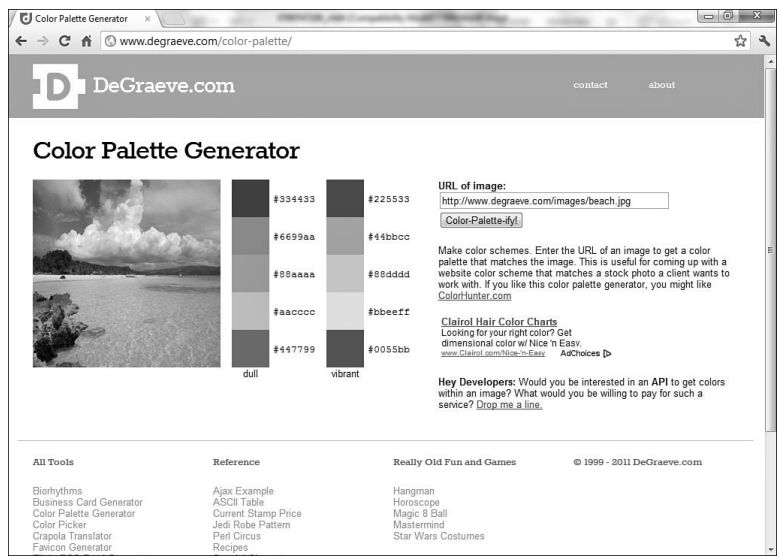
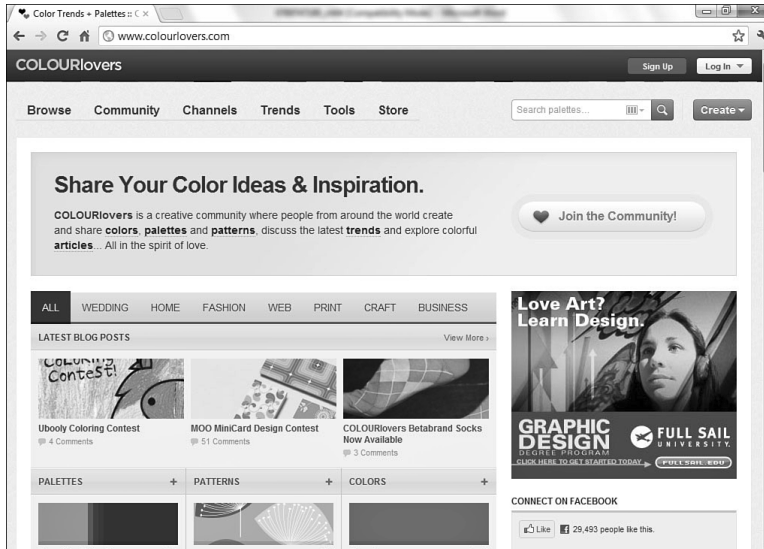


FIGURE 4.6
The Color Palette Generator finds the color palette used in an image.

- **colrpickr** (<http://www.krazydad.com/colrpickr/>)—This site finds pictures on flickr that match the color you choose.
- **COLOURlovers** (<http://www.colourlovers.com/>)—This is a website and community dedicated to color on websites (see Figure 4.7). These people take color seriously and have a lot of fun doing it. They also follow trends of web color. You can find some good color advice on this site.

**FIGURE 4.7**

COLOURlovers is a colorful community.

Color Blindness

One thing to be wary of when working with color is that a portion of the population is color blind and might not see website colors as you do. This is especially relevant with RGB. Try not to mix red, blue, and green text and red, blue, and green background colors. Text and background like this may prevent color blind people from seeing the text at all.

If you are color blind, make sure a person who is not color blind checks out the colors on your site.

The Colorblind Web Page filter (<http://colorfilter.wickline.org/>) can show you what your site looks like to a color-blind person, so take the time to run your page through the filter. If you use this tool on some popular sites, like cnn.com and huffingtonpost.com, you will see that the site is still easy to read and use.

Fonts

There is usually some amount of text on a web page. Some pages have little text, and others have a huge amount of text. This text can either be actual text or graphics that appear as text. To begin, I will deal with text as text and then move on to text as images.

System Fonts

When using text on a website, you might be inclined to use some type of fancy font. Avoid this if at all possible. Several system fonts have been created to display well on web pages. If you use a special font and the person viewing your page does not have that font on her computer, your text reverts to a system font. Also, system fonts are different on Windows versus Apple computers. (Some things are never easy!)

The following are the default system fonts on Windows systems:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| ■ Arial | ■ Matisse ITC |
| ■ Book Antiqua | ■ Modern |
| ■ Calisto MT | ■ MS Serif |
| ■ Century Gothic | ■ MS Sans Serif |
| ■ Comic Sans MS | ■ News Gothic MT |
| ■ Copperplate Gothic Bold | ■ OCR A Extended |
| ■ Copperplate Gothic Light | ■ Small Fonts |
| ■ Courier | ■ Symbol |
| ■ Courier New | ■ System |
| ■ Fixedsys | ■ Tempus Sans ITC |
| ■ Georgia | ■ Terminal |
| ■ Impact | ■ Times New Roman |
| ■ Lucida Console | ■ Verdana |
| ■ Lucida Handwriting Italic | ■ Webdings |
| ■ Lucida Sans Italic | ■ Westminster |
| ■ Lucida Sans Unicode | ■ Wingdings |
| ■ Marlett | |

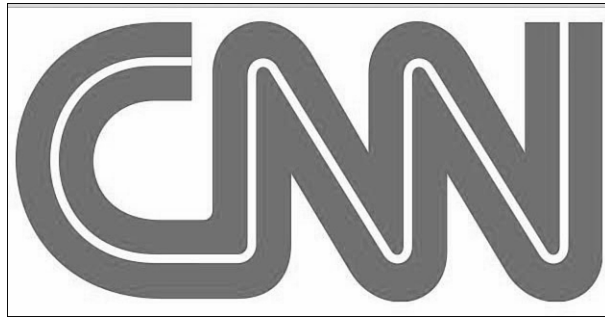
The following are the default system fonts on Apple systems:

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| ■ AmericanTypewriter | ■ Georgia |
| ■ Andale Mono | ■ Gill Sans |
| ■ Apple Chancery | ■ Helvetica |
| ■ Apple Symbols | ■ Helvetica Neue |
| ■ Arial | ■ Herculanum |
| ■ Baskerville | ■ Hoefler Text |
| ■ BigCaslon | ■ Impact |
| ■ Brush Script | ■ Marker Felt |
| ■ Chalkboard | ■ Optima |
| ■ Charcoal | ■ Papyrus |
| ■ Cochin | ■ Skia |
| ■ Comic Sans MS | ■ Symbol |
| ■ Copperplate | ■ Times New Roman |
| ■ Courier | ■ Trebuchet MS |
| ■ Courier New | ■ Verdana |
| ■ Didot | ■ Webdings |
| ■ Futura | ■ Zapf Dingbats |
| ■ Gadget | ■ Zapfino |
| ■ Geneva | |

A good rule of thumb regarding fonts is not to specify fonts at all unless necessary. If you have to use a font, make sure it is a system font. Finally, if you need to use a font you know is not a system font, turn the text into an image.

Fonts as Images

So, what happens if you have found the perfect font to use in your logo or central image that is not a default system font? Or you want to use a non-system font for effect that would be ruined if you used a system font? You may want to consider making the text an image. What this means is you create a graphic that contains the text in the font you want and present it like it was text, but it is actually an image. You might want to do this for something like the header of your site. The CNN font (see Figure 4.8) is not a system font, so the logo is an image.

**FIGURE 4.8**

The logo for CNN.com is an image, not text.

There are some problems with this approach, however. The text is no longer selectable, and search engines cannot find it. Also, these images may slow down your page's load time. Text as an image can be used to great effect but should be used sparingly.

Fonts and Color

You can also color the text on your web page.

When dealing with text, try to use black text on a white background. Colored text and colored backgrounds can make things difficult to read. It is best to avoid using colored text and colored backgrounds, but at the very least, contrast the color of the text and the color of the background in such a way to make it easy to read. Some okay examples are green text on a black background or blue text on a white background.

Images

Images probably will be an important part of any design you create. However, it's a good idea not to include too many images in your web pages, because they can slow down the rate at which the pages download and visually overwhelm the pages. Try to find a few strong images that support your content well. I cover images and working with them in Chapter 12, "Working with Images."

Cascading Style Sheets

The best way to keep your web page's design consistent is to use a cascading style sheet (CSS). This acts as a guide for your web page to format certain elements in certain ways. If you want all your links to be red and underlined, you can set up an element in the CSS and control the formatting of all the links.

→ I cover how to set up and use CSS in Chapter 14, "Building a Site Using HTML."

Design Best Practices

There are no hard and fast rules in creating a design for a web page, but there are some best practices to help you avoid common mistakes. Remember to keep your design simple and consistent, and your site will look great.

Content Is King

More than anything let your content guide you in the design of your site. If you are trying to sell helmets for motorcyclists and your website has no pictures of your helmets or people wearing your helmets, no one will come to your site again.

Put What Is New Front and Center

One common mistake of beginning web designers is making new content on their website inaccessible to visitors. Put anything new front and center. Also, tell your visitor that it is new and your site is up to date. This is how your website will create return visitors.

Keep It Simple

Keep your design as simple as possible. You don't want a visually confusing or complex site that loses or overwhelms your visitors.

Don't Use Attention Grabbers

Resist the urge to use attention-grabbing design elements, such as neon colors and blinking text. Like Times Square all lit up, attention grabbers can be overwhelming and off-putting to visitors.

Be Consistent

Keep your colors, fonts, and images consistent. For example, if you use certain colors on one page of the site, use the same colors on the other pages. Also, if your organization has an established logo or color scheme, stay consistent with a proven or already-accepted design. You don't want to confuse your visitors.

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