

Stylin' With CSS: A Designer's Guide, Second Edition

by Nathan Spicer (published at toptenreviews.com)

Stylin' with CSS has a cheesy title (it goes along with Wyke-Smith's other books, e.g. *Codin' for the Web*), but its low price, simplistic style, technique practicality, and deep exploration of the subject matter make this text very valuable. *Stylin' with CSS* is not as sophisticated as many other CSS books, but that is not its intent. Instead, it aims to teach novices and intermediate CSS designers the broad and finer points of designing with CSS, and it achieves this goal well considering such a low price (usually, the higher the price, the greater the content's value. *Stylin' with CSS* disproves that equation).

The text's title hints at author Charles Wyke-Smith's writing style. Over the 312 pages of the book, Wyke-Smith uses concise, articulate writing that engages readers without getting overly caught-up in jargon and excessive descriptions or theories. Many authors of web design texts forget their audience at times, resulting in phrases and vocabulary that may not be immediately understood. Wyke-Smith seems to always consider that many readers of his book are not nearly as familiar with CSS as he, so he makes sure to accurately describe the reasoning behind his choices. His descriptions are clear because he doesn't resort to overly-complicated explication of such reasoning.

The price of the text, only about \$27 on Amazon (\$39.99 suggested retail), does not convey the depth of the product; it is worth far more than even \$39.99. Most other CSS-related instructional products can reach the \$80 or \$100 mark (e.g. *CSS for Designers*), so this is a welcome change for anyone requiring an instructional text but lacking adequate funds to purchase one of the larger ones (*CSS Mastery*, for example).

Standout Features

- Code Examples
- Cross-Browser Support
- Online Content
- Project Files

Features:

According to *Stylin' with CSS*'s biography section, author Charles Wyke-Smith has been developing web pages since 1994. In the world of the internet, that's quite a long time. Authors of other books got started around the year 2000, so Wyke-Smith has a head-start on them in terms of experience. Granted, those extra years of experience were spent with simple HTML code; CSS didn't exist back then, and the notion of "centralized text" as the book's summary puts it, was not on anyone's radar.

My presumption is that Wyke-Smith's familiarity with the simplicity of web code back then has transferred to the current development process, and transferred to his writing style. He can be funny, inserting funny quips about subjects (the fourth subsection of the first chapter is a Bob Dylan song: "The Times They Are A-Changing"), but reverts back to serious teaching. The value of good writing cannot be underestimated when trying to learn something new, especially in the technology field, so Wyke-Smith's personality is appreciated after reading countless dry texts on CSS, and will be

appreciated by anyone new to the subject. After all, weren't you more interested in school when you had a teacher that made learning fun?

The opening sentence of the first chapter reads "Stylin' with CSS is all about building standards-compliant Web sites in the most efficient, streamlined way possible, while making those sites accessible to the widest audience and easy to update." The book exhibits one word from that sentence well: "efficient". CSS is all about removing excessive work, and the text demonstrates that objective by removing excessive, obscure techniques, while retaining the fundamental practices that are applicable to all designers, regardless of skill level.

After Wyke-Smith's introduction, he jumps into Chapter One ... XHTML. No, it's not CSS, but it is related. The most useful portion of the chapter is the hierarchal properties of XHTML (called "Meet the XHTML Family"), which presents a general outline of the dynamics of XHTML.

Chapter two is where the author delves into CSS: "How It Works". He goes over the three kinds of CSS styles (Inline, Embedded, and Linked), then proceeds to CSS rules (e.g. syntax, selectors). The rules are of critical importance; constructing an error-filled CSS element will result in an unorganized and incomprehensible mess. He dedicates the remaining portion of the chapter to classes, IDs, the difference between the two, and ends by dissecting the rules of how proper Cascade and Rule declarations (e.g. color values: #006600).

Chapter three deals with fonts and text (Stylin' Fonts and Text). Like other CSS texts, most common applications are explored, such as font properties (e.g. font-weight) and text properties (e.g. line-height). The opening section of the chapter goes font collections, which are vital to understanding how a site will appear to visitors, because such a large discrepancy exists between the fonts installed on users' computers (hey, that almost rhymed).

Positioning elements are the focus of the fourth chapter. I still maintain positioning is the most important aspect of CSS, because a site's layout affects the flow of user interactions, how well they navigate the page, how easy it is to find content, etc, and positioning elements are what create layouts. Many books have trouble detailing the difference between relative, absolute, static positioning, etc., but Wyke-Smith's writing style (clear and concise) details the correct contextual usage of each.

Chapters four and five could have been combined because positioning elements relate to layout, which is the concentration of Chapter 5. Wyke-Smith goes over floated versus absolutely-positioned elements, the difference between them, how to decide which to use, etc. He also gives examples and describes liquid layouts, which are more and more prevalent because of, again, the discrepancies between site visitors' systems.

"Designing Interface Components" is the title of chapter six. This portion of Stylin' with CSS details handling data by using tables, forms, lists, and menus. This is the most technologically-advanced portion of CSS, because managing data has the most similarities to traditional computer programming, which is tedious and complicated. Wyke-Smith handles the explanations well again by keeping his descriptions amusing and simple, yet still thorough.

The final chapter goes over constructing an entire page using all knowledge gained to this point and incorporates obscure subjects (e.g. the @import rule and making a side panel transparent). Wyke-Smith also introduces the Architectural details.

Two appendixes, one for XHTML and one for CSS, are the penultimate sections. An index concludes the text.

Ease of Use: .

Wyke-Smith's writing style makes the book easy to read and easy to understand, but doesn't insult readers' intelligence by skimping on deep vocabulary or over-simplifying. The author also balances text and images to create visual appeal and maintain thorough descriptions. All chapters relate with each other, but are separated depending on content, resulting in an easily-flowing read.

Support: .

Stylin' with CSS's home site (linked on scriptinwithajax.com) has a page for contacting Wyke-Smith. Unlike many other authors, Charles says, "I answer all my mail, even if that takes a few days sometimes." Pretty much every other author claims they try to answer all their mail, but very, very few claim they answer all of it. He does mention that he cannot devote large quantities of time to debugging, however.

Summary:

Stylin' with CSS explores the same information and lessons as other CSS texts, but does so in a refined, clear, amusing, and thorough method. Plus, the book is cheap considering how well the content is distributed, how well Wyke-Smith writes and explains, and how easy it is to learn CSS from this text. I recommend **Stylin' with CSS**: one of the few pedagogical texts that mixes humor with knowledge.

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