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What is CSS?

The language that makes a web page look like a design, not a first draft.

MDN's beginner article opens: "CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) allows you to create great-looking web pages, but how does it work under the hood?"[1]

What it is for

"Using CSS, you can control exactly how HTML elements look in the browser, presenting your documents to your users with whatever design and layout you like."[1] The official glossary adds: "CSS is one of the three core Web technologies, along with HTML and JavaScript." It usually styles HTML, and can also be used with other markup languages such as SVG or XML.[2]

A CSS rule, in one glance

The glossary says: "A CSS rule is a set of properties associated with a selector."[2] Its official example makes every paragraph yellow on black:

```
p {
  color: yellow;
  background-color: black;
}
```

The selector `p` is the first part of the rule. It tells the browser which HTML elements the property values should apply to.[3]

Browser default styles

Even with no stylesheet of your own, headings look larger than regular text, paragraphs break onto a new line, and links are colored and underlined. MDN calls these the browser's default styles, "defined in default CSS stylesheets contained within the browser — they have nothing to do with HTML."[1]

Is there a CSS3?

> MDN's CSS landing page says you might have heard about CSS1, CSS2.1, or even CSS3. Then this official sentence: "There will never be a CSS3 or a CSS4; rather, everything is now just "CSS" with individual CSS modules having version numbers."[4] After CSS 2.1, the work split into modules. The W3C now takes a snapshot of the latest stable state, and modules have levels — for example, CSS Color Module Level 5.[4]

The anatomy of a rule

MDN calls CSS a rule-based language. You define rules by specifying groups of styles that should be applied to particular elements. This official example would style the main heading as large red text:[1]

```
h1 {
  color: red;
  font-size: 2.5em;
}
```

- **Selector** — here `h1`, which selects level one headings.
- **Declaration block** — the curly braces and what they contain.
- **Declarations** — property and value pairs, such as `color: red`. The property comes before the colon; the value comes after it.[1]

A CSS stylesheet contains many such rules, written one after the other.[1] MDN also notes typical uses: text styling (including the color and size of headings and links), layouts such as grid or multiple-column layouts, and special effects such as animation.[1]

Quick quiz

1. Do browser default styles come from HTML, or from CSS inside the browser?
2. In a CSS rule, what does the selector do?
3. According to MDN, will there be a CSS3 or a CSS4?

Answers. 1. From default CSS stylesheets inside the browser; they have nothing to do with HTML.[1] 2. It tells the browser which HTML elements the property values should apply to.[3] 3. No — everything is now just "CSS", with modules and levels.[4]

Sources, checked 17 November 2026. 1. MDN Learn: What is CSS? https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Learn_web_development/Core/Styling_basics/What_is_CSS 2. MDN Glossary: CSS https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Glossary/CSS 3. MDN Learn: Basic selectors https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Learn_web_development/Core/Styling_basics/Basic_selectors 4. MDN: CSS https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Web/CSS

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