



A demonstration of what can be accomplished visually through CSS-based design. Select any style sheet from the list to load it into this page.

#### SELECT A DESIGN

##### Gardenias de Perfume

by Armando Sosa

##### Pneuma

by Adam Polsehl

##### Birdhouse

by Justin Vilela

##### Defiance

by James Ehly

##### Mediterranean

by John Whittet

##### Austrian's Dark Side

by Rene Grassegger

##### Invitation

by Brad Dally

##### Odyssey

by Terrence Conley

#### ARCHIVES

next designs =>

View All Designs

#### RESOURCES

View This Design's CSS

CSS Resources

FAQ

Submit a Design

Translations

Download the sample [html file](#) and [css file](#).

### The Road to Enlightenment

Littering a dark and dreary road lay the past relics of browser-specific tags, incompatible DOMs, and broken CSS support.

Today, we must clear the mind of past practices. Web enlightenment has been achieved thanks to the tireless efforts of folk like the W3C, WaSP, and the major browser creators.

The css Zen Garden invites you to relax and meditate on the important lessons of the masters. Begin to see with clarity. Learn to use the (yet to be) time-honored techniques in new and invigorating fashion. Become one with the web.

#### So What is this All About?

There is clearly a need for CSS to be taken seriously by graphic artists. The Zen Garden aims to excite, inspire, and encourage participation. To begin, view some of the existing designs in the list. Clicking on any one will load the style sheet into this very page. The code remains the same, the only thing that has changed is the external .css file. Yes, really.

CSS allows complete and total control over the style of a hypertext document. The only way this can be illustrated in a way that gets people excited is by demonstrating what it can truly be, once the reins are placed in the hands of those able to create beauty from structure. To date, most examples of neat tricks and hacks have been demonstrated by structurists and coders. Designers have yet to make their mark. This needs to change.

#### Participation

Graphic artists only please. You are modifying this page, so strong CSS skills are necessary, but the example files are commented well enough that even CSS novices can use them as starting points. Please see the [CSS Resource Guide](#) for advanced tutorials and tips on working with CSS.

You may modify the style sheet in any way you wish, but not the HTML. This may seem daunting at first if you've never worked this way before, but follow the listed links to learn more, and use the sample files as a guide.

Download the sample [html file](#) and [css file](#) to work on a copy locally. Once you have completed your masterpiece (and please, don't submit half-finished work) upload your .css file to a web server under your control. [Send us a link](#) to the file and if we choose to use it, we will spider the associated images. Final submissions will be placed on our server.

#### The Benefits

Why participate? For recognition, inspiration, and a resource we can all refer to when making the case for CSS-based design. This is sorely needed, even today. More and more major sites are taking the leap, but not enough have. One day this gallery will be a historical curiosity; that day is not today.

#### The Requirements

We would like to see as much CSS1 as possible. CSS2 should be limited to widely-supported elements only. The css Zen Garden is about functional, practical CSS and not the latest bleeding-edge tricks viewable by 2% of the browsing public. The only real requirement we have is that your CSS validates.

Unfortunately, designing this way highlights the flaws in the various implementations of CSS. Different browsers display differently, even completely valid CSS at times. and this becomes gardenia ubaeo, a fix for:

Ryan Sims, Designer

[www.csszengarden.com/085](http://www.csszengarden.com/085)

# Oceans Apart

Simplicity in type leads to lasting, effective design

THE WONDERFUL COLOR PALETTE used in **Oceans Apart** emerged from a photograph that designer **Ryan Sims** took during a visit to Southern California. As calm as the Pacific itself, the colors and imagery of the design provide a slight contrast with the sense of gentle movement from the image that draws the visitor in.

Oceans Apart is not abrupt or loud. Part of what helps create this subtle feeling is the design's simplicity. Instead of adding multiple images, colors, and typefaces, Sims kept to a Hemingway-like philosophy: Take out the fancy stuff. For him, the beauty was in watching his design come to life as things were removed, rather than added.

## Type Conventions

Typography is a specialty area of design. Many designers spend their entire career focused on the study, use, and creation of type. And while there's no single approach to creating effective type, there are some important conventions every designer should know.

### TYPE FORM

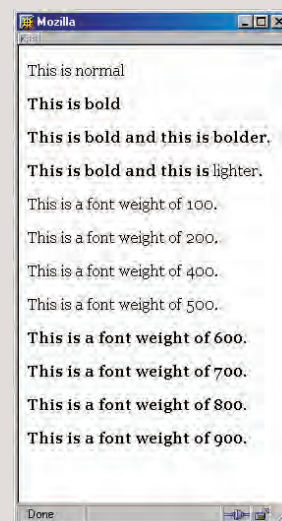
*Type form* is a general term that includes aspects of a typeface's appearance such as weight, width, and posture.

*Type weight* refers to how heavy or light a given typeface is. In CSS, this relates to the `font-weight` property, which allows you to define how heavy or how light the text will appear. **TABLE 1** shows examples of the `font-weight` property and its possible values.

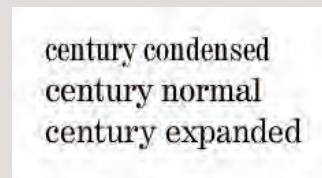
Now of course there are caveats galore here, the primary one being that some fonts won't have intermediary faces to support the CSS requirements (**FIGURE 1**). What's more, even if the font does have those options, it doesn't mean the browser will display them.

Practically speaking, you can rely on a font to have at least two faces (normal and bold) that can be used for display. Figure 1 shows how the browser, in this case Mozilla, renders a list of supposedly varying weights using only bold and normal variants.

*Type width* refers to the width of the letterforms within the face. A *condensed* face will have compressed letterforms; an *expanded* face will have extended letterforms (**FIGURE 2**). There is a corresponding property in CSS for this, known as `font-stretch`. However, it's not used, as none of the common browsers support it.



**FIGURE 1** With no intermediary faces available, the browser does its best, often defaulting to normal and bold only.



**FIGURE 2** Condensed, normal, and expanded versions of a font.

## note

If a bold, italic, or oblique version of a font exists on the user's computer, the typical browser behavior is to display that actual font. If it's not available, a forced bold, italic, or oblique form will occur—where the browser is altering the regular font electronically. The difference between the two is often noticeable to a designer's sharp eye.

**TABLE 1** Exploring Font Weight in CSS

Property and Value	Result
font-weight: normal	Displays the type in its normal state. It corresponds to the numeric weight of 400.
font-weight: bold	Displays the font in bold, which usually corresponds to the numeric weight of 700, although in some faces bold might start at 600.
font-weight: (300)	Displays a lighter than normal font weight, on a scale ranging from lightest (100) to boldest (900).
font-weight: bolder	Displays the font weight as bolder than an inherited value. For example, if a paragraph's weight is already bold, and then a style for a strong element used within that paragraph is set to be bolder, the strong element will appear as darker. The only exception to this is if the parent weight is set to 900, in which case no bolder values exist, so the resulting weight remains 900.
font-weight: lighter	Displays the font weight as lighter than an inherited value. If the inherited font weight is 300, the calculated value will be 200, if a variant exists at that weight. If the parent value is 100, the same issue as with the bolder value occurs, and the font will display with a weight of 100.
font-weight: inherit	Ensures that a font's weight is inherited from its parent element.

Another type form is *posture*, which corresponds to the CSS property `font-style`. Type posture is the angle at which the typeface is set. The two postures are the following:

- ❑ Italic—A specially designed slanted variation of regular upright letters within a typeface, with extra handwriting-style flourishes.
- ❑ Oblique—A slanted variation of regular upright letters, different from italics because they aren't necessarily specially designed. Most people use the term *italic* when what they're actually referencing is *oblique* type.

The `font-style` property supports values of `normal`, `italic`, `oblique`, and `inherit`.

## TYPE CONTRAST

*Type contrast* is the variation between thick and thin lines within each letter. Different fonts have widely varying proportions between thick and thin, including some that have no variation at all.

In standard print design, a common practice is to use one typeface for headers and another for all body text. Typically, sans serif type was used for headers, as the rounded, generally low-contrast letterforms are perfect for gaining attention. Serif type has long been the preference for body text in print, especially for long text sections. Most books you read follow this practice, but it's something that's still debated when it comes to the Web.

## TYPE COLOR

*Type color* is a typographic term describing the overall shading of a block of text. A thin font like Helvetica Light has a light color because there is very little black ink in the block; a thick font like Cooper or Arial Black has a dark color because there's much more ink. Type color, then, is not just dependent on the typeface itself; other type properties such as *tracking* (*kerning*) and *leading* (*line height*) all influence the perceived color.

Along with contrast, another element that adds interest to type design is the color chosen for the fonts used. *Type hue* comes into play with contrast, too, because you can have contrasting fonts as well as contrasting colors, creating a lot of options for the designer.

Typically speaking, it's good for most designers to go easy on how many colors they use for their fonts. Of course, there are instances where multiple colors may make sense—such as on a site for kids. But in most cases, overuse of color in type leads to unprofessional results.

## Type Conventions in Oceans Apart

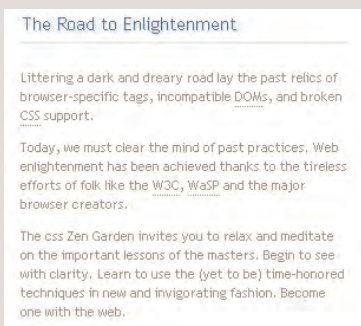
Sims's philosophy of simplicity is portrayed very clearly in *Oceans Apart*. All of the HTML-based text is set to Trebuchet, with several other sans serifs as fallbacks:

```
body {font: 11px "trebuchet ms", arial, helvetica, sans-serif;}
```

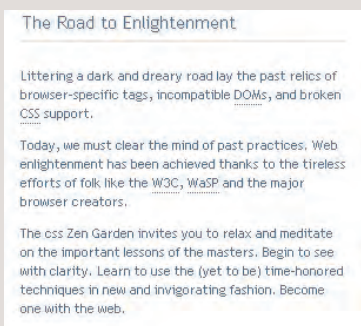
Trebuchet is a sans serif font that was part of the Microsoft core Web fonts and also comes as part of Microsoft Office. This means support for it is fairly broad, although having fallback fonts is always important.

## note

On the Web, many feel the opposite holds true: Sans serifs are better for body text on-screen. But, the debate continues. Read more about the controversy at [www.digital-web.com/news/2004/06/serif\\_vs\\_sanserif](http://www.digital-web.com/news/2004/06/serif_vs_sanserif).



**FIGURE 3** The design uses fairly low-contrast type.



**FIGURE 4** Improving contrast by selecting a darker hue from the palette doesn't express the design in quite the same way.

## tip

Undoubtedly, the lower-contrast type can cause problems for people with compromised vision. For professional design scenarios where a broad audience is expected, sticking with more conventional color and contrast choices is important for maximum readability.

## HUE AND CONTRAST CHOICES

The hue and contrast choices you make are critically important, not only for the design's integrity but also for the purposes of *readability*, which is the degree to which type can be read easily.

Conventional type design suggests that designers should go for high-contrast foreground and background hues, such as black text on a white background or vice versa. This—along with other techniques listed—is supposed to enhance readability.

In *Oceans Apart*, Sims departs from firm convention and chooses a very subtle tan for his body text:

```
color: #9F927F;
```

The contrast against the white background would be considered fairly low in this case (**FIGURE 3**). Interestingly, the links in both the body and along the links sidebar are a darker blue. Many designers would have chosen to use the blue for body text, because of its higher contrast (**FIGURE 4**).

Admittedly, the contrast is improved when the body text is blue, but the subtle contrast that results from using the tan is compelling. In fact, it is the choice of tan for the body text that causes the page to be so soothing to look at, and therefore reasonably easy to read.

What's more, the use of the blue for the in-text and main links adds contrast to the overall design. This helps add to the interest—a subtle approach but one that in this case is extremely effective.

Type contrast also comes into play in the use of reverse type within the header section of the page. The type of the header image is set in white against a translucent field that lies on top of the photograph (**FIGURE 5**). Directly beneath that, white type has been set against a dark tan background graphic, which provides interesting shapes and movement, enhancing the overall effect (**FIGURE 6**).

## SIZE CONTRAST AND COLOR

Using a range of type sizes adds extra interest, providing a contrast between various type blocks on the page. In *Oceans Apart*, the effect is once again simple and subtle, but it works.

The HTML-based text on the page features the default body text set to 11 pixels, along with the links in the primary link list. The secondary links are set to 9 pixels as are all the ancillary text items. It's amazing, though, what a difference 2 pixels can make when the type hues are contrasting too (**FIGURE 7**).

In the case of the #linklist2, section Sims uses an olive green, which contrasts well with not only the link list background, but also the blue and tan used on other parts of the page.

## SIZE CONTRAST AND WEIGHT

Returning again to the header image in Figure 5, you'll notice that in this graphic-based type, Sims used size and weight to create contrast. “css” is in lowercase and contrasts with the initial capitals of “Zen Garden.” The tagline is a perfect example of weight contrast, where the word “beauty” is bold, but the surrounding text is normal weight.

This carries through in the graphic directly beneath the photo, where the first seven words of the text are bold and the remainder of the sentence is normal weight, which you can see in Figure 6.

## RELATIONSHIP OF HEADERS AND TEXT

A final point to be aware of is the relationship of headers and text in Oceans Apart. Headers within the main body are graphical and use the blue mentioned earlier. The type is set with a very subtle drop shadow—just a hint—which gives a polished look to the type and helps draw the eye to the headers.

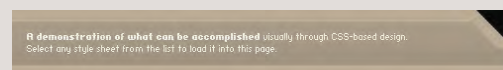
Speaking of drawing the eye, you'll notice one bit of type that is unlike anything else within the design—the header for the links section (**FIGURE 8**). Here you see graphic type in uppercase, a dark heavier blue in all capital letters against a blue background that contrasts with the soft tan backgrounds beneath it. This header stands out and provides an excellent visual grounding for the navigation options within the design.

## Learning from Simplicity

While at first glance Oceans Apart seems straightforward, the nuanced simplicity evokes a calm and easygoing feel within the design. Extra subtle touches—many of which are found in the type—provide some great lessons to consider while working with our own designs.



**FIGURE 5** Examining contrast in the header image for Oceans Apart.



**FIGURE 6** Reverse type was used below the header.



**FIGURE 7** With the visual effect provided by contrast in both size and hue, 2 pixels seems more dramatic than one might expect.



**FIGURE 8** Graphic type in uppercase, placed on a different background, stands out because it's the only place within the design where that distinct combination appears.