What is CSS?

CSS is the language used to *style* an HTML document. CSS is a separate language from HTML. It is a rule-based language with its own syntax (or way of typing the code). It describes how the HTML should be displayed. It's what will make our web pages more attractive. Remember HTML is about structure and what element is used for what content, and CSS is all about presentation and how the elements on the page will look and how they will be laid out on the page.

A great example to see the power of CSS is on csszengarden.com. Every page featured uses the exact same HTML but with different CSS applied to it.

CSS stands for Cascading Style Sheets. The term 'cascading' refers to the fact that one style rule can be set up for multiple elements and even work on multiple pages of your website. This makes it very efficient and requires less coding to style your pages. Cascade can also refer to the hierarchical order in which different styles interact with elements. More on this later.

Here is a page rendering with just HTML, no CSS. Here is the same page with CSS applied to it.

There are a few different ways we can use CSS with HTML. The first is with inline CSS. This is not the preferred way because it takes out the benefit of reusing our CSS rules in many different areas and can be hard to edit later. For example, if I wanted to make the background of my entire page a light blue, I could go into the body element's opening tag and add style as an attribute. As is shown here. This is referred to as inline CSS. I would avoid using inline CSS if possible.

Another way to apply CSS to your HTML is to embed the CSS in the <head> section of your HTML page inside <style> tags. Again, this is also not the preferred way because you can't reuse your CSS on multiple pages of your website.

The best way to apply CSS to our HTML is in a separate CSS file. You should always keep your HTML and CSS separate if possible. They both have different purposes and it's best to keep them in separate files. Also, other advantages, of having a separate CSS file, is so different web pages can share the same style sheet, then the same code wouldn't have to be repeated on every page. It makes less code and faster load times. Also, if you have a style change to make on several pages, the CSS would only have to be changed in one place.

The HTML <link> element is used to tell our HTML page which CSS file to use to style our page. You can have multiple CSS files effecting one HTML page but our site will be simple enough for just one CSS file. Notice the <link> element has no closing tag. Everything it needs is inside the tag. The link element is placed in inside the head section of our page. It has two required attributes that show the relationship of the linked file and the hypertext reference of what CSS file we are using.

Now we can type all our CSS in the external file and it will apply to the HTML.