

Writing Tools for Web Pages

BY STEVE ROSENTHAL

Pages on the Internet's World Wide Web might look and act like simple multimedia titles, but for now their creation requires very different tools. Unlike most multimedia projects, whose building blocks are primarily graphical, Web pages are

constructed using text blocks punctuated with symbolic "tag" strings in the highly stylized HTML (hypertext markup language).

Your best bet for constructing Web pages is to use one of the dedicated programs flooding the market that allow you to create documents for the Web. For this review we picked a representative seven programs on both Windows and Mac platforms that cover a range of features, editing styles and prices (free to \$195).

Most HTML tools are distributed via the Internet, with upgrades coming seemingly daily as programmers post their latest "builds." And more than a dozen new products or major upgrades are announced each month on the Web, so be sure to check the sources on page 67 if you want to consider a wider range of possibilities or check out the latest releases.

A QUICK PRIMER

Because Web documents must be able to be presented on many different types of computers with varying display screens and capabilities, the HTML paradigm divides documents into two basic elements: the data (text, pictures, audio, video) and instructions for

the presentation of that data. With HTML, instead of presenting a headline by specifying a certain type size, you tag the text as belonging to the appropriate level of a six-layer hierarchy of heading sizes—and leave it to the local system (normally a Web browser) to determine whether a Level 3 heading is 13 points, 30 points or 300 points high. Similarly, other tags let you specify roles such as emphasized text, paragraph breaks, hyperlinks and citation formats.

Some recent implementations of HTML offer limited forms of direct presentation tagging as well, where instead of generalized hierarchies of text, specific tags are available for centering, line width and so on. Since "direct" tags are not completely hardware independent, it is not clear whether they will be widely adopted.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

HTML editors vary widely in their approaches. Some, such as Hot Dog and HTML Web Weaver, are primarily tag editors; you work directly with an HTML source document (the HTML "code") rather than directly with the resulting Web page. In most cases, you pair these programs with a browser running in local mode so

you can see what the result will be on a user's screen.

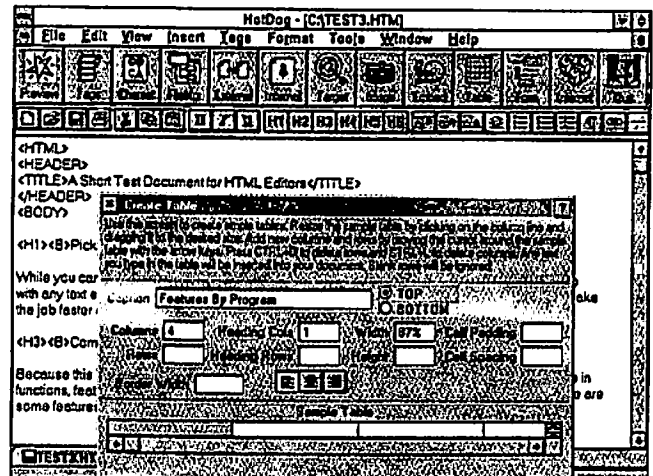
However, many packages offer a more direct approach. In programs such as NaviPress and Web Author, you work with the Web page image and the program translates your selections back into the HTML needed to produce it.

There is a big difference in the level of HTML the different programs support. Programs that conform with the HTML 2 specification followed by most browser programs only need to support about 50 tags and commands. (HTML specifications are set by the Internet Engineering Task Force, the protocol engineering,

Until HTML 3 is adopted and widely supported, you have your choice of HTML 2, different interpretations of HTML 3, HTML with specific browser extensions, or an unspecified format you'll have to identify. Moreover, the HTML 2 spec leaves a number of issues open to interpretation. With any of these editors, the final test for widespread readability is to run your HTML files through as many browsers as you can.

Assuming users' browsers can display tables and forms, the ability

Hot Dog features a three-level menu bar as well as this WYSIWYG table-construction editor.



development and standardization arm of the Internet Architecture Board.) Packages that support Netscape Communications' extensions to HTML add more than a dozen new tags (mostly dealing with tables and page formatting). And programs that support the proposed HTML 3 specification add a few dozen more.

to format them can be valuable. Automated table tools let you specify simple parameters rather than enter the HTML statements. A forms feature generally lets you add simple elements such as blanks for fill-in checkboxes, but you'll have to turn to Complex Gateway Interface programming tools for interactivity that goes beyond hyperlinking.

TEST DRIVE

Maximum file size is another distinguishing feature. Programs built using languages such as Visual Basic for Windows or SuperCard on the Mac often restrict file size to 32KB, which can be limiting if you want to produce a large interactive document in one file.

Prices also vary widely. Many of the first HTML editors were labors of love or academic projects given to the Internet community free. That's also frequently been the case for beta copies of shareware and commercial programs. Now, most programs are either shareware, with prices ranging from \$25 to \$100, or commercial packages. But as a bow to the spirit of the original efforts, several firms offer a free or low-cost downloadable version of their package as well as a more sophisticated, better-supported and more expensive version.

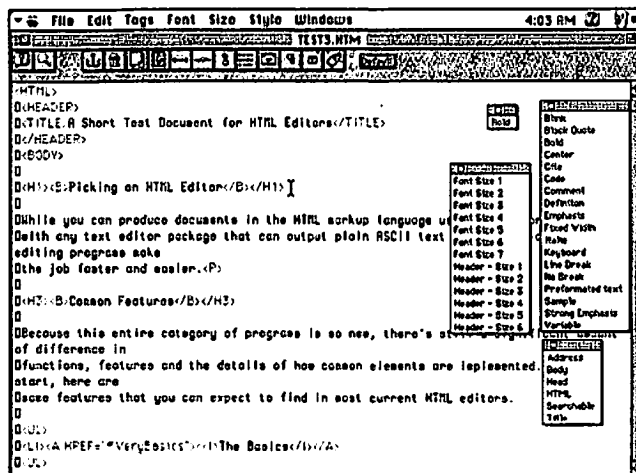
HTML Web Weaver is a prototypical tag editor: You mark up your document by picking tags from the menu bar or the pop-up palettes.

HTML WEB WEAVER



If you're working on a Mac and want to produce only the most basic HTML documents—or if you want the HTML editor to do the basics and you'll fill in the rest—you will be well-served by HTML Web Weaver. This is the latest incarnation of one of the earliest Web editors, and although each version is more sophisticated than the last, the emphasis here is on utility rather than polished presentation.

HTML Web Weaver lets you read and write text files, insert standard tags by pressing on-screen buttons on a menu bar or lines in floating palette-style lists, and find and replace text strings.



Only HTML 2 tags are supported.

Compared to similar Windows-based programs, the button bar is noticeably elegant. But only the Mac's awkward balloon help explains what each icon means.

Files are limited to 32KB, but you can open multiple documents at a time. As with most programs that limit file size, transaction time is nearly instantaneous.

You can download HTML Web Weaver from a number of sites

on the Web; the program is shareware, with a registration fee of \$25.

HOT DOG



If you like the basic text-and-tag method but prefer Windows, Hot Dog supports HTML 3 tags and a more complete help system. Hot Dog is a good choice.

Although there is a 32KB file-size limit, the program's designers have done an excellent job of

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTERNET ASSISTANT DOES HTML BEST

Because HTML editing is such a new arena and products are literally changing daily, you should make use of the freeware or shareware status of some of the editors and the evaluation period of others to try out likely choices.

Thumbs Up: No program here was worthy of an "Awesome," but if we have to pick a winner, that honor goes to Internet Assistant, the free add-on to Microsoft Word 6 for Windows that lets you tag documents easily and view the results. It lacks HTML 3 support, but that should be remedied soon.

Two close seconds on the Windows platform are Quarterdeck's Web Author and HTML Pro, but Web Author is so much like Internet Assistant that its \$99 price will probably doom it. HTML Pro is just \$5 shareware and can edit in both HTML tag and browser modes, although it is not as polished as Internet Assistant.

HotMetal, for Mac and Windows, which is free, provides strict HTML checking capabilities and a browser window, but without a lot of bells and whistles.

Does the Job: HotMetal Pro (for Windows and soon Mac) adds a spelling checker, thesaurus, and table and form definition tools. But at \$195, it is unlikely to find many takers considering the good selection of freeware tools out there.

Hot Dog for Windows and HTML Web Weaver for Mac are good, basic tools at reasonable prices, and HotDog is one of the few packages that supports HTML 3 (though that may have changed by the time you read this). NaviPress is part of a suite of Web tools from NaviSoft that includes a server and a coming object-oriented authoring system. If you're setting up a server as well as a site, check it out.

SCOREBOARD

	Hot Dog 1.0024	HotMetal 2.0	HotMetal Pro 2.0	HTML Pro 1.08	HTML Web Weaver 2.5.2	Internet Assistant 1.07	NaviPress beta	Web Author 1.0
Overall Value	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
Features	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
Performance	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
User Interface	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
Learning Curve	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
Price	\$29-\$129	Free	\$195	\$5	\$25	Free	\$99	\$99

comparison

including all the proposed HTML 3 tags in a three-layer interface showing menus at the top, categories of actions in a large menu bar, and frequently used individual tags and actions in a smaller menu bar.

Other notable features include a table builder that displays an interactive prototype

as you set parameters (illustrating cell structure without the data), and click-and-insert pop-ups that display the complete list of HTML entities (special character abbreviations) and the list of all HTML 3 tags.

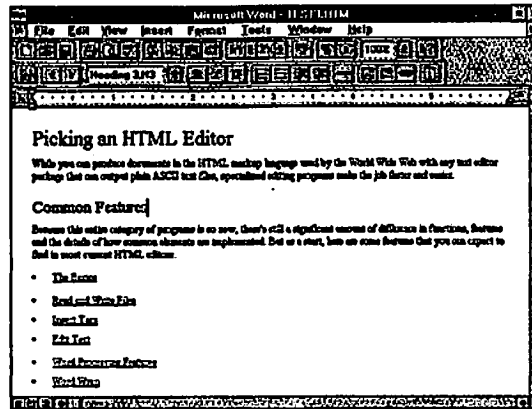
You can download a 30-day evaluation copy—full registration for a single version is \$99—or you can sign up for various subscription plans.

INTERNET ASSISTANT

If you're less interested in HTML than in its ability to deliver your documents across the Web, you can skip most of the code stage by creating Web pages in Microsoft Word 6.0 for Windows combined with Microsoft's Internet Assistant. This free add-in turns Word into a fair HTML creation tool and a very basic Web browser. Internet Assistant adds templates (combinations of styles and added commands) for a Web Edit and a Web Browse mode.

In Web Edit mode, Word interprets documents as HTML files. By default, HTML tags are hidden, but a menu button lets you see or hide tags much the way Word normally lets you see or hide paragraph marks.

You can use all of Word's editing features on the text, but if you have tags hidden, you won't be able to change the text of anchors or other tag elements. Internet Assistant only reads in or writes out doc-



Microsoft's Internet Assistant uses a template to change the default Word menu bars.

ument elements that meet the HTML 2 specification. As a result, if you translate and save a document, the HTML version and any other versions translated back from them lose many formatting elements.

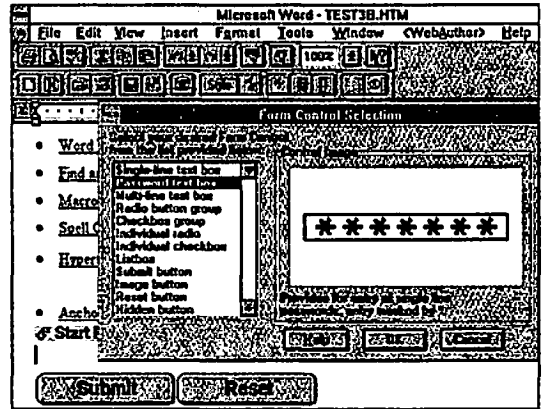
In the Web Browse mode, you can follow links but you can't make changes. If you don't have an Internet connection, you can still use the browser mode to view and move between local HTML documents.

If you have Word, and you don't need HTML extensions or added HTML 3 features such as tables or forms, Internet Assistant is a good pick. It's definitely the leading candidate when you have to maintain HTML 2-compatible documents that need frequent updating plus regular translation between HTML, RTF and Word formats. We hope Microsoft adds HTML 3 capability soon.

WEB AUTHOR

Quarterdeck's Web Author is similar to Internet Assistant. It is an add-in to Word 6.0 for Windows that lets you work in page view rather than with codes. But in this case it has a \$99 price tag.

You bring up Web Author's menu bar by assigning the special HTML60.DOT template to a new document with the normal Word template commands or by opening a document that had



Quarterdeck's Web Author provides its own menu bar, as well as an excellent form-creation tool.

been saved with that template.

Web Author lets you open and save files in Word or HTML formats, assign HTML styles, and manage links and images. Files can also be checked for HTML 2 conformance.

Web Author provides an excellent capability to create forms: After you use the tool bar Forms button to insert a Form skeleton, you can add special forms elements using the Insert menu or regular display elements with the standard editing tools. But the program limits any discussion of how those forms might be processed

(i.e., how the input can be used and interpreted) to a suggestion to ask your site administrator.

The slim manual for Web Author lags behind the actual program. Fortunately, there's extensive and generally clear online help. If you're a beginner, you'll appreciate the step-by-step tutorial that leads you through the basics of creating your first document.

Overall, with only the forms capability to make up for the lack of a browser and a substantial disadvantage in price, Web Author is no competition for Internet Assistant.

CONTACTS

Hot Dog

<http://www.sausage.com> ☎580

HoTMetaL, HoTMetaL Pro

SoftQuad Inc. (800) 387-2777

<http://www.sq.com> ☎581

HTML Pro

<http://www.w3.org/hypertext/WWW/Tools/htmlpro.html>

HTML Web Weaver

<http://www.student.potsdam.edu/web.weaver/about.html>

Internet Assistant

Microsoft Corp. (206) 882-8080

<http://www.microsoft.com/msoffice/word/ia> ☎584

NaviPress

NaviSoft (703) 918-2137

<http://www.navisoft.com> ☎585

Web Author

Quarterdeck Corp. (310) 392-9851

<http://www.qdeck.com> ☎586

ONLINE RESOURCES

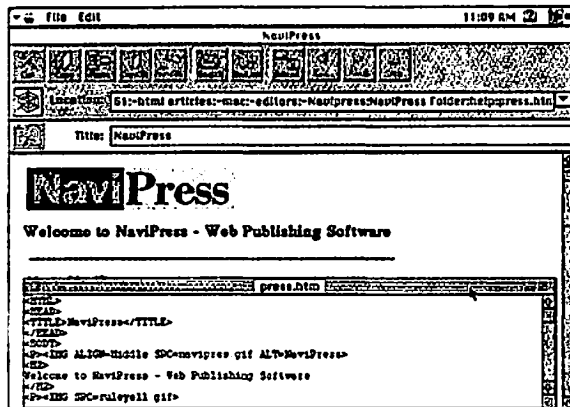
<http://www.w3.org/hypertext/WWW/Tools>

http://www.yahoo.com/Computers/World_Wide_Web/HTML_Editors

<http://uff.latrobe.edu.au/~medgiw/editors/index.html>

http://www.utirc.utoronto.ca/HTMLdocs/intro_tools.html

TEST DRIVE comparison



NaviSoft's NaviPress can show both HTML source and page views, but you can only edit in the page view.

NAVIPRESS

Like Internet Assistant and Web Author, NaviSoft's stylish NaviPress Web editor for the Mac lets you create documents using a WYSIWYG-like window. And you can use the program as a browser as well as an editor.

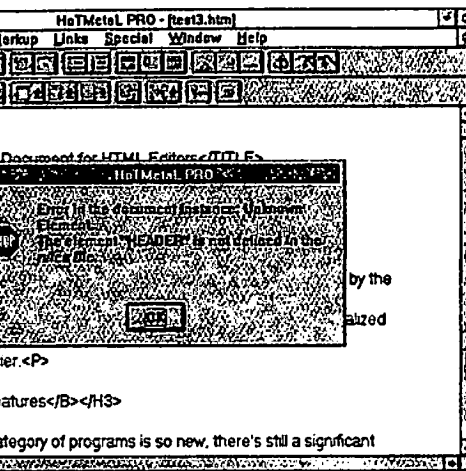
NaviPress gets high marks for its clean design. Text choices are limited to sizes and styles corresponding to HTML 2 options, but it looks like a good, simple word processor with extra buttons.

However, the buttons on "pre-release version 1.0" were mostly limited to adding connection features such as links, anchors and

URLs. A Forms menu item lets you pick a forms processing program, but it doesn't have any other capabilities. The Special Tag option lets you insert a tag that NaviPress doesn't know about, but you can't build up a library of them. And there was no support for tables.

NaviPress can show you what your document looks like in HTML, but you can't make any changes in the HTML window or keep it open while you make changes in the main page-view screen. But since you can copy from the HTML view window, you can always bring the results into another editing program if you need to make some manual adjustments.

Judging NaviPress strictly as an editor, though, may not be fair. It's really meant to be the front end for NaviSoft's NaviServer. Working



HoTMetal leaves no doubts about whether it has found any HTML errors in imported documents.

a well-regarded maker of SGML (standard generalized markup

language) tools. Both programs look like fairly standard HTML editors, with the ability to read and write files and add markup tags with the usual menu bars. If you want to see what your document looks like, HoTMetal will also show you your text in a built-in browser (although you can't edit in page mode).

HTML PRO

At the time of this review, HTML Pro boasted the only true bidirectional WYSIWYG editing actually shipping. Distributed as shareware over the Net, HTML Pro is a stand-alone HTML editor for the Macintosh by Niklas Frykholm.

Although the interface isn't pretty and the tags are limited to HTML 2, you can type text in an HTML source window or a simulated browser window and see the corresponding results immediately in the other. The results aren't always perfect, but they're fast and usually correct. An outstanding bargain for just \$5, HTML Pro is one of the best interactive tools on either platform for learning HTML basics.

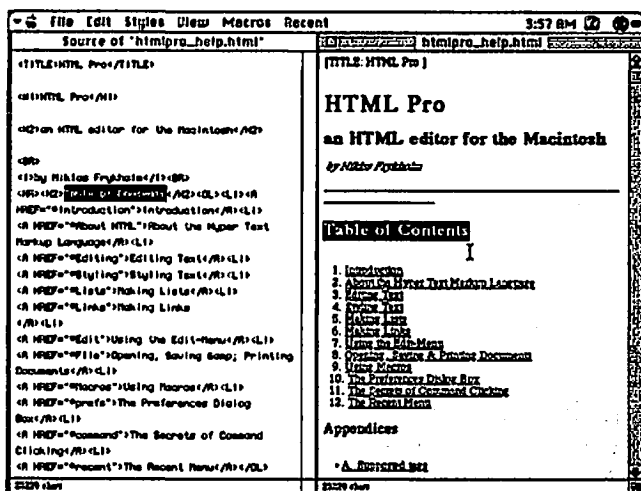
But the big difference between HoTMetal and the rest of the pack is that HoTMetal can actually check your HTML statements for proper form and balance, reflecting SoftQuad's SGML experience.

Unfortunately, HoTMetal insists on starting with a clean document, so you have to fix imported documents before you can work on them. Error messages are not always very helpful, but they do seem to reflect real violations of the HTML format specifications.

HoTMetal Pro, the commercial version, includes a good range of table and form definition tools, as well as a spelling checker and thesaurus. As we went to press, however, SoftQuad had not yet added full HTML 3 support or all defined Netscape extensions, and it is overpriced at \$195.

You can download HoTMetal from several Web sites, but HoTMetal Pro must be ordered from SoftQuad.

Steve Rosenthal is a multimedia producer and writer based in Berkeley, California.



HTML Pro can display both the HTML source and the resulting Web page—and you can edit the document in either view.



HoTMetal for Windows or Mac and HoTMetal Pro for Windows (soon for Mac) are true HTML editors, but for better or worse they reflect SoftQuad's heritage as