

Meta Tags

Meta tags are used to specify information about a document, rather than giving document content. For example, I could use such a tag to identify the author of a page.

```
<meta name="author" content="Russell Martin" />
```

Note the the final “slash” in the tag corresponds to the closing element of the tag (there actually is no `</meta>` closing tag).

Meta tags should appear in the document `<head>` element, and, according to the standards I have read should “appear as early as possible in the header” (primarily when the character set isn’t an English character set, see below). Any meta tag essentially consists of two elements, a property and a value for that property. Most meta tags (but not all) are of the form

```
<meta name="property" content="value" />
```

So some examples might include

```
<meta name="description" content="Russell Martin's home page" />
```

```
<meta name="keywords" lang="en-us"
      content="Russell Martin, Liverpool University, computer science" />
```

```
<meta name="keywords" lang="fr"
      content="Russell Martin, &Eacute;coles d&apos;Informatique" />
```

```
<meta name="copyright" content="&copy; 2008 Acme Ltd." />
```

Most meta tags have no explicit meaning to a browser (or other agent) reading an HTML document. Some of them might be used by web search engines to help identify content (such as the “keywords” example given above). As such, meta tags are (mostly) optional in a document.

There are some meta tags that do contain directives (or suggestions) to a browser. Some of these are ones of the form

```
<meta http-equiv="property" content="value" />
```

These tags have significance when the document is retrieved via the Hyper-Text Transfer Protocol and servers can use this information to generate HTTP headers (see <http://www.w3.org/TR/html401/struct/global.html>). For example, many documents use the so-called Latin-1 character set (suitable for most Western European languages), also known more esoterically as ISO-8859-1. Suppose that a page has characters encoded in Japanese, or more specifically the EUC-JP character encoding (there’s more than one encoding for Japanese characters). To specify this to a browser you can include the directive

```
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=EUC-JP" />
```

This will automatically generate a header that states “Content-Type: text/html; charset= EUC-JP” when the server sends the document to a client requesting the document through the HyperText Transfer Protocol (i.e. most typically when someone requests the page through a web browser).

Another meta tag that can be useful is this one.

```
<meta name="Cache Control" content="no-cache" />
```

As the property suggests, this is (generally) understood by modern browsers to disable caching of the current web page.

Similarly, you might include a meta tag such as the following:

```
<meta http-equiv="Expires" content="Tue, 2 Nov 2010 14:00 GMT" />
```

This can be used by caches to determine when to fetch a fresh copy of the document.

Another meta tag that you have likely encountered is one of the form

```
<meta http-equiv="refresh"
  content="5; url=http://www.csc.liv.ac.uk/~martin/my-new-page.html" />
```

Such a meta tag directs the user to the appropriate URL after the specified time (5 seconds in this case). It’s likely to be used when a page has moved to a new location, in conjunction with a message (in the <body> section) notifying the user of such a move like

This page has moved. You will be redirected in 5 seconds.

Warning! Despite the fact that you can use a tag such as the one above to redirect a page, the W3C recommends that you don’t do so as it makes the page unaccessible by some users. They suggest you should use a server-side redirect to forward a user to a new webpage.

The main point I wish to make here is that meta tags (might) have their uses, and in some situations are strictly necessary for proper display of some documents or are useful in other situations.

As with most anything I discuss in this course, much more information can be found online about meta tags.