

How to...

Write XML



XML can be a great tool when used correctly, but it does sometimes suffer from being a development buzzword. The trick to understanding how best to use XML is to remember that its focus is to provide an independent structure for a collection of data. What happens with that data is a problem for other programming languages that need to work with it.

1 Create a stylesheet

XML can be viewed in many different formats but creating a stylesheet is a great way to ensure that the data is displayed in a readable way. Using tools like Microsoft InfoPath it's possible to create a customisable view that will allow users to make updates to your XML document using familiar form based controls like textboxes and dropdown menus.

2 Group data

When using elements that belong in a group it's best to create an element to represent that group. For example, if you wanted to create an XML document to show information on a series of books, you would want to create an element labelled "books", then create sub-elements within the group to hold the information on each specific book.

3 Use elements and attributes appropriately

When choosing between elements and attributes, try to remember that elements should be used to group or hold data and attributes should be used to store meta-information for a specific element. Also try to avoid starting any names in your document with the letters XML or any punctuation characters.

4 Ensure compatibility

There are various ways to encode XML, such as ASCII and ISO/IEC 8859, but to ensure greater compatibility it's generally best to make sure your documents are saved encoded as UTF-8. You can usually see how your document is encoded by opening your XML document in a simple text editor and checking the encoding attribute on the first line.

5 Experiment with your software

You don't always have to have expensive dedicated software to edit your XML documents correctly. Programs like Microsoft Word are capable of transforming an XML document directly into a familiar looking editable document that you can save onto your PC.