



Starting with teaching herself HTML in 1996, Denise R. Jacobs has worked with the web in a range of capacities, from localization project management to instructing web design/development. At present, Denise is a Web Solutions Consultant in Miami, Florida, helping businesses transform their web presence. In addition to writing about the web, she develops curricula for the Web Standards Project (WaSP) Education Task Force and is an organizing member of Social Media Club South Florida.

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# CHAPTER 3

# Learning on the Web

by Denise Jacobs

Just because you use a tool every day doesn't necessarily mean that you are using it well—especially if you've never learned what using it well means. This is certainly true with computers, as there are countless people who use computers daily but only to the degree of their limited knowledge. The same can be said for the Web, as many—even the generations who became familiar with computers before they were familiar with books—probably don't use the Web and the vast numbers of useful tools contained therein to their fullest extent.

This chapter aims to provide a guide to using the Web better in order to more efficiently find the answers your own questions, locate new sources of information, and retain said new information. Further, we will look at good reasons and venues for getting help, knowing how to participate online, making and maintaining connections, organizing the information found, organizing yourself, and expanding your learning through working with others.

## Getting guidance

One can feel isolated sitting in front of a computer all day, and also feel overwhelmed by the vast quantity of resources available on the Web—with more being created every moment. How can you know what to pay attention to and what to ignore? Which trends are worthy of following and which are on their way out? What are the latest standards and what is passé? This is where teaming up with others and asking for guidance comes in.

### From peers

Peers are great for kicking ideas around with, for developing partially-formed ideas into those more concrete, and for having compatriots in the field. You can get a lot of great concepts and resources from peers, and peers often develop into business partners and colleagues down the line.

### From a mentor

If there is someone that you know who is advanced in the field and who does work that you admire, then it is worth it to see if they would be willing to mentor you. Maybe they would be willing to look at your designs and give you feedback, or help you with information architecture that you develop, or show you a great code repository. Potentially, they can help you solidify your skills and even tap into hidden strengths. They might even be the person who helps you get your first great job or project.

Here are some tips for setting up a mentor relationship:

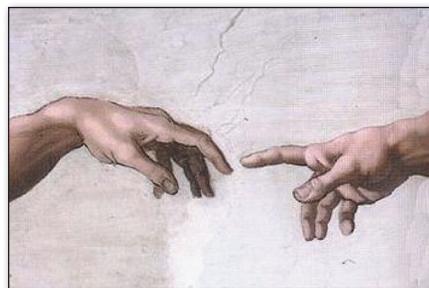
- Do some introspection before you reach out to someone to become your mentor. What do you want to become better at? What skills do you want to build on? How do you want to grow and expand in your work? What do you aspire to and what opportunities do you want to gain exposure to? Knowing this will facilitate the mentor being able to help you progress.
- Draft a list of potential mentors. Be open to unlikely people as well, like people in different industries but with whom you have a good rapport—they might be an ideal mentor for you. Look for someone who embodies the traits that you want to develop. Good potential mentors are friends and family, teachers/instructors, and leaders of groups that you are affiliated with.



**Tip:** Some of the qualities that a mentor should have are: accomplished, available, flexible, demanding, accepting and encouraging. This mix of qualities will ensure that the mentoring relationship will help get you to the next level in your career.

- Devise a plan for contacting your prospective mentor. Learn about them and get an idea of what their needs are so that you will better know how to approach them and potentially help them. Once you have this information, go ahead and reach out to your future mentor and see if she or he is interested in setting up a mentoring exchange. If they turn you down, thank them and ask another person on your list.
- Once you have found a willing mentor, you both should agree to the terms of the relationship, with regard to the frequency and logistics of meeting, the content of the meetings, the parameters of the relationship and how you will both benefit from the interaction.
- Once the parameters of the relationship are established, start to ask your mentor for advice and guidance on the issues and in the areas that you have determined you are going to work on. This is the time to really listen to what your mentor has to say and to take their advice to heart, even if you may not entirely agree.
- Remember that your mentor is there to give overall guidance; your mentor is not there to walk you through every little step or to fix things for you.
- Put effort towards the relationship and keeping it reciprocal, and regularly express your appreciation for their time and efforts.

Your relationship with your mentor can be short-term, long-term, or somewhere in-between; the most important thing is that you both get benefit from the interaction. Frequently what happens is the mentor develops into a close friend and colleague (**Figure 3.8**).



*Figure 3.8: Reaching out to those you admire: you never know what might come of it.*

### From web “rock stars”

Say you have been following the work of a designer or developer. You really admire them and love everything that they do. You read their

blog regularly, you find articles they write for other sites, and you keep abreast of the conferences they present at and the topics they speak on. Do you think you could actually try to make contact with this person? The answer is an unequivocal YES. Many folks who seem to be web superstars are really just normal people who, like you, are passionate about the Web and all of its potential. If you do reach out to them, most likely they will be happy that you did and will respond favorably. It is definitely worth taking the chance.



### Resource // Maintaining Connections

Once you start creating connections with people online, it's helpful to maintain and strengthen them however possible. The best way is to turn the online connection into a face-to-face connection by tearing yourself away from the computer and attending social gatherings such as conferences, BarCamps and Meetups. Meeting people in these venues is often both career- and life-changing.

[Upcoming.org](http://Upcoming.org) and [Meetup.com](http://Meetup.com) are great places to start looking for local groups as well as world-wide conferences. More resources for connecting and interacting are listed on [interactwithwebstandards.com](http://interactwithwebstandards.com).