

Book Review

Getting to Know the XSL Family of Standards: A Review of The XSL Companion

Neil Bradley. Copyright 2000 by Addison-Wesley. \$34.95 US, softbound, 317 pages. ISBN: 0-201-67487-4. Reader Level: Intermediate.



Review summary: ★★★☆☆

Let's begin with the most obvious question: Why bother with XSL at all? If you are sure that you will never need to get involved with e-publishing systems using XML, then you need not bother with XML or the XSL family of standards (yes, XSL embraces XSL proper, XPath, and XSLT). However, an increasing number of electronic publishing systems, like BroadVision's One-to-One Publisher (formerly BladeRunner) use XSL. And XSL is also increasingly becoming an important technology in web development and delivery. In fact, if you're familiar with XML itself, XSL is probably the next set of standards you should learn.

Now if you know you need to learn XSL, or think it might be a career-enhancing move, there are currently very few books describing XSL and some of them can be overwhelming in size and programming detail. This book is different, and aptly called a "companion."

I found it to be a gentle introduction to XSL, an otherwise imposing topic. The book's overview provides a clear introduction to the XSL standards and such tools as "XSL processors," explaining what they do and how they do it. I actually copied the stylesheet example in the overview and --using Microsoft's freely-available XML parser and my favorite integrated development environment (XML Spy)-- I

quickly produced a styled result and viewed it in my browser. This kind of quick success is key to learning XSL. The author then explains in much greater detail the essentials of XSL, and he manages to keep the descriptions and examples as simple as possible.

I definitely recommend this book, although I did find one disappointing shortcoming: The book lacks a companion CD, and the author's web site does not make examples available (instead of re-typing them) or details wisely omitted from the companion. And if you're like me --you need to try things out to understand them-- you'll also need to get some companion software. Some is free, and some is modestly priced. For a resource sheet with suggestions, go to <http://world.std.com/~bboeri> where I've posted handouts and InterChange presentations to help you get started.

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