Fixed, Elastic, Liquid and Hybrid Layouts in Dreamweaver


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The "fixed" layout in Dreamweaver uses pixels as its unit of measure for specifying the width of your content. As such, it has the same meaning as that mentioned in the above section on "What is a Fixed Layout?".

Both the "elastic" and "liquid" layouts in Dreamweaver are actually relative layouts. The developers of Dreamweaver probably wanted to give users the freedom to choose between "em" and "%" as the unit of measurement for a fluid layout. As such they decided to call the relative layout that uses em an "elastic" layout, and the layout that uses percent a "liquid" layout.

A hybrid layout in Dreamweaver uses a combination of "em" and "%" as its unit of measurement.

I know that the above explanation only raises new questions for most of you, like "what's the significance of using 'em' and '%'?" and "When do I use a fixed layout? When do I use a liquid layout? (etc)". If so, read on.

When to Use a Fixed Layout with the Pixel as a Unit of Measurement

You will want a fixed layout for your web page when you have many items on your web page that need to be aligned with one another. For example, you may have a picture in one column of the page that must be aligned with another picture or some words in another. Using a fixed layout gives you a greater measure of control, making sure that the things in your page will appear in the same position as you designed it, since your page will not be resized even if your visitor resizes his/her browser.

When to Use a Relative Layout with the Em as a Unit of Measurement ("Elastic" in Dreamweaver)

When you create a web page that uses the em to specify the width of a column, or what is termed "elastic" in Dreamweaver, the size of your columns depend on the size of the fonts used on your page. Some of you may be wondering at this point, "In what sense is such a layout relative? Can't I specify the font and thus effectively create a fixed width page?"

While it's true that you can specify the font that you use on your web page, remember that users can (theoretically) also override your font selection in their browsers. Few people do this of course, but the few who do are often those who really need to, often because their eyesight is poor and they need larger fonts. (With today's extremely small computers, it is also possible that some people specify larger fonts because their monitors are too small for them to read the text.)
As such, if the user chooses a larger font, your columns on your page will be wider. If they choose a smaller font, the columns will shrink. In other words, your page width, specified in em, is relative to the size of the font.

- **Possible Advantage of Using Em for Your Relative Layout**

  If the column on your web page contains only words, with no pictures or other elements, and your visitor specifies a larger font for the page, your page will appear to be perfectly zoomed in, with every sentence appearing in the exact relative location you designed it. That is, if you have a sentence that says "This sentence spans from the left margin to the right" that occupies the entire width of the column when you designed it, it will continue to occupy the entire width in the user's resized window. It will not have some portions of it moved to the next line or anything, since both the width and the text that appears is tied to the font size.

- **Possible Disadvantage of Using Em for Your Relative Layout (Compared to Percent)**

  Depending on how many ems you specified for your page width and how small your visitor's window is, it's possible for a user to specify a font so large that your page width becomes larger than their browser window.

  Note that this is not as significant a disadvantage as it appears, even though it creates a horizontal scrollbar which users hate. If you design your web page well, and not be too ambitious in specifying a gigantic number for your page width, the situation will not occur for most visitors using your site normally. (Don't worry about the minority who create very small browser window sizes: those are usually the power users who will automatically be able to figure out what the problem is and know how to resize the window bigger to read your content.)

**When to Use a Relative Layout with the Percent ("\%") as the Unit ("Liquid" in Dreamweaver)**

If you specify your page width in percent, its width is tied to the size of your visitor's browser window.

Its advantage lies in the fact that if you make sure that the total width of your page adds up to less than 100%, the majority of your visitors will never see a horizontal scrollbar on your page (the bane of many users).

Note that I say "majority" and not "all". This is because, like all layouts, it's entirely possible for a visitor to resize his/her browser window so small that the browser has to display a scrollbar. This is particularly so for web pages that have images (pictures) in them, which is probably most websites. Pictures have a fixed width, specified in pixels, and thus will occupy a fixed amount of space in a page. However, it is possible for you to design your site so that the scrollbar does not
show under the normal resolutions that most visitors use (usually 1024 pixels and above). (The simplest way is not to place an image so wide that it takes a large window for it to be displayed in its entirety.)

**When to Use a Hybrid Layout**

Hybrid layouts are basically layouts that use a combination of different units of measurement to specify the width of various columns on the site.

Dreamweaver's hybrid layout uses percent for the total width of the page and em for the width of the side bar (the navigation column). It has the advantage of making sure that your web page fits within the confines of the browser window, avoiding horizontal scrollbars as far as possible, while at the same time ensuring that your navigation menu is always wide enough for all the words to appear in the positions you placed them. It is an attempt to get the best of the percent and the em relative layouts and minimizing the disadvantages of either.

On the other hand, thesitewizard.com's hybrid layout, at the time this article was written, uses a fixed width for its left column (ie, in pixels) while a relative width for the right. It was my attempt to make sure that the left column has enough space for the words in my navigation menu. (It didn't occur to me to use em for the left column the way Dreamweaver did. Anyway, everybody has their own way of solving the same problem.)

Although in theory, hybrid layouts may seem better than the other relative layouts, in practice, it has no advantages over them. Yes, none. Let's face it. In order for the space in the navigation menu column to be too small for the words, the browser window has to be resized to an abnormally small size. Real users don't surf with windows shrunk to such a small size. If they did, practically every site on the Internet would be unusable. The only people who test with such ridiculous sizes are the owners of the websites themselves. Besides, when windows are shrunk to such small sizes, even sites that use a hybrid layout will appear to have its elements skewed. In other words, the benefit of such a layout over the other traditional relative layouts is probably zero.