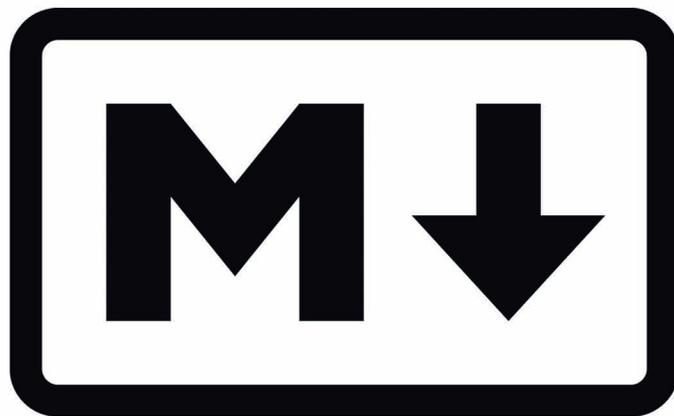# LEARNING MARKDOWN
SCOTT NESBITT

1 Attacking the Body

The blank page. As a writer, it's your canvas. That sounds a bit pretentious, I admit, but it is true. When writing for the web, you need to focus on two aspects of that canvas. The first aspect is, obviously, words that are worth reading. The second aspect is *structure.*

Web pages are structured documents. That structure is defined not only by paragraphs, but also by headings. Creating that structure with Markdown is easy. Here's how to do that.

Headings

Let's begin at the beginning. Of a document, at least. Most documents start with a **heading**.

Headings have several uses. They're titles. They indicate where sections and subsections begin. They provide structure by breaking up what you're writing into distinct chunks. Headings group ideas together, help you focus your writing, and give readers a logical break where they can pause or where they understand new ideas and thoughts start.

No matter what you're writing — whether it's an article or a blog post or a chapter of a book or a web page — you should break it into sections.

Considering that Markdown's focus is creating content for the web, it's no surprise that the way it deals with headings is based on HTML. As with HTML, Markdown has six levels of heading — Heading 1 is biggest, and Heading 6 is the smallest. In HTML, those headings are labeled **h1** to **h6**

While there are six levels of heading, you rarely need to use more than three of those levels.

Markdown offers several ways to indicate the level of a heading. I find using the hash symbol (#) to be the easiest way to create headings. The number of hash symbols indicates the level of the heading.

To create a heading, type one or more hash symbols, followed by a space, followed by the text of the heading.

Let's say you're writing a blog post. The title of that post is *Taking notes using Twitter.* To create the title as a Heading 1, type:

```
# Taking notes using Twitter
```

In that post, one of the sections is titled *Taking notes effectively*. The section will start with a Heading 2. To create that heading, type:

```
## Taking notes effectively
```

The two hash symbols before the text tell you it's a Heading 2.

Using Headings Properly

I've been formatting documents of all sorts for a long time. During that time, I've learned there are many people who don't know how to use headings properly. They often don't use headings at all, or mix them up in ways they shouldn't be mixed.

Here's a good rule of thumb when using headings in **any** document:

- Heading 1 is always title of your web page, document, or chapter. You should only have one Heading 1 per web page or chapter.
- Heading 2 denotes a major section in a document or chapter. You can use as many of these headings as you need to.
- Heading 3 is a subsection (a section within a section). Again, use as many as you need to.

Occasionally, very occasionally, you might find a need to use Heading 4. A Heading 4 will, obviously, come after a Heading 3.

Paragraphs and Line Breaks

You've got your headings. Now what? Leave a a blank line after the heading and start typing. The text you type, without formatting, becomes a paragraph. You'll need to indicate where the paragraph ends, or where a line break happens. Why? If you don't, your document will be one long mass of text that's hard to read.

There are two types of breaks: *paragraph breaks* and *line breaks*. A paragraph break does what it says on the tin: it puts space between two paragraphs.

A line break, on the other hand, ends a line or sentence at a point you choose and continues it on a next line. There are no spaces between the lines.

To create those breaks, do this:

- Press Enter on your keyboard twice after a block of text to add a paragraph break.
- Add two spaces at the end of a sentence, then press Enter to add a line break.

You won't use line breaks very often. You will, however, find them useful when you create lists. I'll be discussing lists in the chapter **Making Lists**.

Pulling It All Together

Open a text editor on your computer. Create a new file and save it with the name *markdown-book-exercise.md*. You can use a different name and a different extension. The file extensions that most people use with Markdown files are *.md*, *.txt*, and *.text*. I prefer to use *.md* because I have a number of other files, not formatted with Markdown, on my computer with the extension *.txt*.

In that file, create the structure of a basic document. Add the following elements:

- A title
- A paragraph or two of introductory material following the heading
- Two major sections
- One of those sections includes a subsection

What you wind up with should look something like this:

```
# My Title

[add your introductory text here]

## Section 1

[some text]

### Subsection

[more text]

## Section 2

[text]
```

Replace what's between the square brackets with actual text. I'll leave what that text is up to you.

We'll build on the skeleton above in the coming chapters.