Customizing the Drupal Look

D rupal out of the box is pretty nice. It is certainly ready for use as a personal blog or a basic community site. Chances are, though, that if you are using Drupal, you want to do more: you want a design that represents your organization, you want functionality specific to your community, you want to make your site your own. To get there, you need to take the next step and start leveraging the Drupal themes and modules that have been contributed by the Drupal community.

Figure 12
The Drupal.org Web site.

The Drupal.org Web Site

Just as Drupal is extremely flexible and can serve many purposes, the Drupal.org Web site demonstrates this flexibility, serving many different functions. First, it is a landing pad for information about Drupal. Second, it provides documentation and support for using Drupal. Third, it provides a Web interface for Drupal project management and integration into the project's CVS (Concurrent Versioning System, a management tool for collaborative development). Navigating through Drupal's documentation and downloading files for Drupal is a little different than on many other open-source projects. Everything is done right from the one site (see figure 12).

You will often find this very convenient, but you can also look at the Drupal.org Web site as a case study in putting too much into one site. What usually gets lost in the thousands of nodes is the documentation. There is a lot of documentation on the site, but it is not always easy to find. It is easy to search for specific pieces of information (in addition to Drupal's search, use site:drupal .org in Google), but many helpful guides have be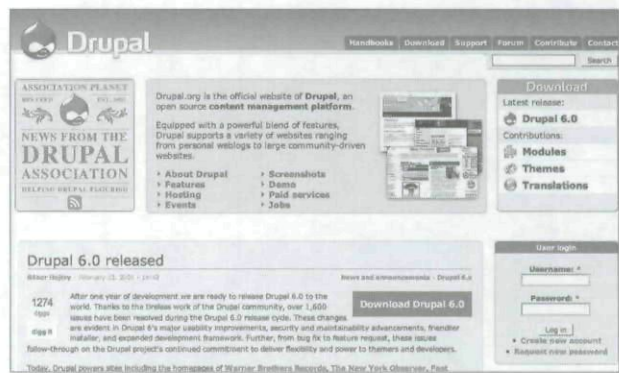en created by Drupal veterans and subsequently overlooked by Drupal newcomers. In addition, much of the documentation on the site is very version- and time-sensitive. When you read documentation, be sure that it is relevant to the version that you are using, and if it discusses an issue or bug, be sure that the issue has not been patched since the post was put up.

Navigating through the site, you will immediately be drawn to the various projects on Drupal.org. Projects are their own node type and managed by the Project module. There are several different kinds of projects: themes, theme engines, modules, installation profiles, and translations. As you're setting up your site, the most important of these projects will be themes and modules.

There are already folders in your Drupal site called themes and modules. Do not, however, put your downloaded files there. Those folders are for the core set of themes and modules that come with a default Drupal installation. If you put your modules there, they will work, but when you need to upgrade, it is going to be a little messy. Instead, create new a folder in your /sites folder

called `all`. Then, make new folders in `/all` called `modules` and `themes`. In each of the modules and themes folders, you can add a folder called `contrib`. Put your downloaded Drupal modules and themes in the two contrib folders. For more information about this suggested folder setup, read the `readme.txt` file in the `/sites` folder.

Themes

Themes define the look and feel of the Web site. They establish the layout of the page, the navigation, the font styles, and all other graphical display elements for your site. Remember that the theme—the format of the site—is separated from the content in Drupal. This means that we can adjust the theme without having to modify any content. The content will simply appear under the new display rules of the changed theme.

If you have used blogging tools such as WordPress, you will be familiar with the concept of themes. You may also notice that Drupal's selection of themes is not close to the quantity and quality of WordPress themes. The Drupal community recognizes that this is often an issue for users who are looking for a new CMS, and so groups are working hard to bolster the contributed themes. The flexible nature of Drupal, however, also makes it hard to create the sort of generic themes that work on everyone's sites. Choosing a Drupal theme is like choosing a suit off the rack. You will see a lot of themes that look nice, but will find that few of them still look as nice when you download them and try them on your site. In the end, chances are you are going to need to do some alterations to make them fit your site perfectly (see figure 13).

To get started with a new theme, you will first need to go to the Drupal.org Web site for themes. Most themes have a screenshot, so you will quickly notice that beyond colors and graphics, there is a wide variety of layout choices. Some themes only have one sidebar, while others offer two or more sidebars. Since themes are tied so intrinsically to the layout of your blocks by defining block regions, consider how many blocks you want to make available on your site.

Drupal.org themes page
http://drupal.org/project/themes

While looking at possible themes, consider layout and the flexibility that a theme will give you, as well as the aesthetic value of the theme. It is much easier to change images and colors to make a theme suit your needs than it is to change the layout, so select for layout first. Of course, if you are more comfortable with dealing with HTML and a little PHP, it may be easier for you to tweak the layout.

Screenshot	Name	Enabled	Default
	ability: sites/all/themes/ability	☐	○
	andreas02: sites/all/themes/andreas02	☐	○
	bluemarine: themes/bluemarine	☐	○
	chameleon: themes/chameleon	☐	○
	dreamy: sites/all/themes/dreamy	☐	○

Figure 13
List of themes on the Drupal.org Web site.

Fixed Width versus Fluid Width

Most themes are either fixed width or fluid width. A fixed-width theme has a defined width in pixels, and all of the content for the site is displayed within that predefined space. Users with higher resolution displays see the same thing as users with lower resolution displays; the content does not expand to fill the display but stays at the fixed width. Generally, the extra space is filled up with pleasing colors and patterns, so the user hardly notices. Fixed-width themes are very popular with blogs and other sites that are suited to a less complex, more streamlined interface. Fixed-width themes can also be easier to design, as the designer does not need to worry about what happens to the theme as it is presented in different resolutions. You will often find that the most attractive Drupal themes are fixed width, as their designers were able to apply more complexity to the theme without having to worry about the variability of browser sizes (see figure 14a).

Fluid-width themes are more complex to design but often preferred by users, especially users with larger displays and using higher resolutions. Fixed-width sites can often

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feel outdated, or at least unnecessarily small, if they had been designed for older monitors. Fluid themes are often designed to mimic a fixed-width theme with colored borders that surround the page, but are expandable at the same time. The fluidity in the name reflects the ability of the theme to expand as a window grows while maintaining the appearance of being fixed width. This allows users with newer widescreen displays to see more of the site and minimize scrolling (see figure 14b)

With either fixed- or fluid-width themes, you will want to decide what resolution displays you are committed to supporting. Some fixed-width themes are fixed to 1080, which will cause your users with 800 x 600 to need to scroll left and right. Some fluid-width themes will compress awkwardly when faced with a low-resolution display. Be sure to test your new theme on several different resolution settings as well as in different browsers.

After you download your theme, extract it, and put it in your /sites/all/themes/contrib folder, you just need to go to your Drupal Themes Admin page and turn on you new theme. If you are trying a new theme, you are probably still in the development phase of your project and can just set it to be your site's default theme. You will notice, though, that you also have the option to enable your theme without making it the site's default theme. This allows users with the proper permission to change the theme for themselves so that they see the same content displayed in a different theme. It also allows other modules to use these other themes for specific pages or sections of the site. For example the YA section of a public libraries Web site might use a different theme than the main page. This lets a library establish more artistic zones without compromising the need to follow Web conventions on the main site.
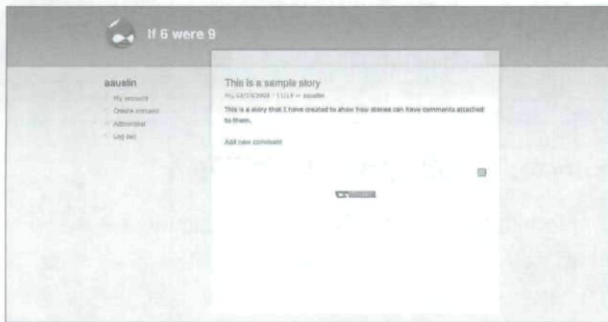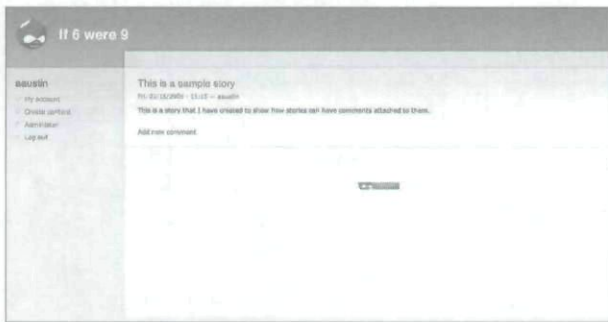

Figure 14a
A fixed-width Drupal theme.

Figure 14b
A fluid-width Drupal theme.