

Macromedia Flash 4

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Introduction

Macromedia Flash 4's online help system consists of four different options: Flash Help Topics, which holds the bulk of the help information; Flash Developers Center, which covers more technical issues; eight lessons to give the user an introduction to the different things that Macromedia Flash 4 can accomplish; and 24 sample movies that give further examples of what the program can do.

Macromedia Flash 4 is a program that allows users, referred to as "Flash developers", to create flashier and more interactive web sites through the use of vector graphics. The program creates a movie that can have features much like a regular HTML page, such as multiple pages, buttons that change when you run a mouse over them, sound, and the ability to collect information from visitors through the use of a form. Additionally, a Flash movie can allow the visitor to interact with features of the movie itself, such as making an object larger, making it move, or even dragging and dropping items, none of which can be done as easily with regular HTML.

Though Macromedia Flash 4 is mostly intended for a user who is experienced with graphics manipulation, anyone who can use a computer can go through the lessons and at least get a feel for what the program can do.

Physical Features

Flash Help Topics

Though the program is set up much like any other Windows-based applications, the online help system does not look like one you might expect. Rather than the usual fare, the Macromedia Flash 4 help system is set up using a series of web pages and Flash movies.

The main help option in Macromedia Flash 4 is simply titled “Flash Help Topics”. When chosen, the program opens a web site within the developer’s default browser. The developer does not need to be online to use this help, because the pages are stored locally within the program’s files.

When Flash Help Topics first loads, the developer is faced with several options. First, at the top of the screen, there are options to view the contents of the help system, view an index of the help system, or search the help system. Listed down the left side of the screen are the main help topics.

Help Topics

- Getting Started
- Tutorial
- Flash Basics
- Drawing and Painting
- Working with Objects
- Using Type
- Using Imported Artwork
- Using Layers
- Using Symbols and Instances
- Creating Animation
- Creating Interactive Movies
- Creating Interface Elements
- Adding Sound
- Publishing and Exporting
- Keyboard Shortcuts
- Flash Help Credits

When clicked on, each major help topic breaks down even further. Sub topics that are deemed most important are bolded.

When the developer begins to look past the topic headings into the help information itself, he will find several features to aid him even further. There is ample use of numbered

procedures and lists. Sections are cross-referenced to other sections through the use of hyperlinks. Screen captures are also used in places to enhance explanations.

The index is set up in the same manner as the list of contents. When “Index” is clicked on at the top of the screen, the list of topics loads in the left side of the browser. The topics are listed alphabetically with the letters bolded. Indentation is used to separate sub-topics from the major topics.

The third option within Flash Help Topics is the search. Because Flash Help Topics lives within a browser, the search option functions using Java. When the Launch button is clicked, another window opens that looks more like a traditional Help search. The developer can type in a word or phrase and be given a list of topics that contain it. There is an option to have the search be case sensitive, and another option to list all 291 help topics.

Flash Developers Center

In addition to the Flash Help Topics, Macromedia Flash 4 also offers a Flash Developers Center. To use this section of the help, the developer must be connected to the Internet. This option takes the developer to a section of the Macromedia Flash web site. Here, more technical topics are covered, such as printing from a Flash movie, detecting if a computer has Flash without using JavaScript, and possible problems with a virus detection program. Also available are technical notes, discussion groups, and a section where the developer can download updates and add-ons.

Lessons and Samples

Macromedia Flash 4 includes with the program eight introductory lessons and 24 sample Flash movies. The lessons cover features under the headings Introduction, Drawing, Symbols, Layers, Type, Buttons, Sound, and Animation.

Each lesson is a step by step procedure showing how to complete a basic task. The lessons themselves are Flash movies. Graphics are heavily used and the lessons are broken into several pages. The developer can work within the lesson and try the techniques himself using the Workspace.

Strengths

Macromedia Flash 4's online help has several things going for it. First, it uses the familiar form of a web site to ease the navigation. Menu choices are always to the left, so there are no surprises. Additionally, the information is broken into bite-sized chunks, so that the developer isn't faced with a huge page of text to read and decipher.

Within each "chunk" of information are more strengths. Entries are cross-referenced with each other through the use of hyperlinks. Minimal amounts of color are used to emphasize important terms. The lessons are helpful and easy to follow, and the graphics within them are of great assistance to the user.

Weaknesses

Some of Macromedia Flash 4's online help strengths can also be viewed as weaknesses. Though the browser-type presentation may be familiar to some users, it may also be unfamiliar to others. Most users are accustomed to the more traditional "Windows-style" of help, such as Microsoft Word's online help. Because it is in a browser, the user may be confused and think they have to be online in order to use the help, which is not true.

Also, though the online help does use color for emphasis, there could be some improvements there. Overall, the web site is very bland. Gray appears to be the "highlighting" color of choice, which tends to be harder to read on a white background than a color such as blue or red would. Continuing with the aesthetics, more screen-captures and graphics would be helpful too.

The search option has more than one weakness. First, it failed to work in Microsoft Internet Explorer, yet nowhere in the help did it say that the user should be in a Netscape browser. Additionally, the search results are listed in no particular order, which leaves the user stranded with no idea of which topic they should look for first.

Finally, although the samples contain very useful examples, there is no way to tell what sort of examples they are. All that is listed in the menu is the titles of the samples, with no indication of a description. The user is forced to look at each one to determine if it will be of assistance.

Suggestions for Improvement

The best ways that the Macromedia Flash 4 online help can be improved lie within its weaknesses. One improvement would be to add more graphics within the Flash Help Topics section. Also, added color could improve this section.

Another area that especially needs improvement is the search. It would increase its usefulness if the results were listed in an order of importance.

Overall, the Macromedia Flash 4 online help is a capable help system. The user can find nearly any information they need about the program in a reasonable amount of time. With the few minor suggested improvements, this system would be exactly what it should be – a great help.

Appendix: Assessment Criteria

- Does it look familiar to the user?
- Is the information broken down into sections?
- How accurate is the search?
- Are graphics used?
- Does the user know where to go if they need more information?
- Does the user know which option to use first?
- Is the terminology appropriate?
- How easy is it to navigate?