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Semantic HTML as a shared description of the page

By Gyata Tabiri · Revised November 2, 2026

HTML gives us a way to say what the parts of a page are doing. I find that useful because the visual arrangement can change while those relationships still need to make sense.

Describe the relationship that exists

A list groups related items; a label identifies a control; a data table connects information across rows and columns. Choosing the element is easier when that relationship is understood. If it is difficult to explain, I would examine the content before reaching for a more impressive-sounding tag.

Leave neutral containers available

A `div` or `span` can be exactly right when the need is grouping or styling without a more specific meaning. Replacing every container with a section does not make the document more thoughtful. It can create structure the content has not earned.

Compare the visual and reading orders

A layout may place an action beside the paragraph that explains it, while the source separates them with unrelated content. I would follow both sequences. The relationship should remain understandable when someone reads linearly or uses navigation that does not depend on the visual arrangement.

Keep the claim proportionate

Meaningful markup supports understanding and navigation. It does not, by itself, establish that a page is accessible or effective. Controls still need behavior, text still needs clarity, and the task still needs testing. The element describes part of the solution rather than certifying the whole experience.

The document should be explainable without pointing at a screenshot. That is a useful test of whether the structure carries its own meaning.

Read alongside: When a section is warranted · Reviewing the page beyond its finish.

Reference: HTML sections.

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