What is HTML?

All Internet browsers, such as Internet Explorer and Netscape, are capable of displaying any document placed on the Internet so long as it is:

- in plain text, i.e. no native formatting commands as used by all leading word processing packages. This type of file is often called an **ASCII** text file. (**Example**)
- marked-up with appropriate HTML tags
- Or the appropriate "plug-in" has been added to the browser, for example Flash.

Plain text documents do not look particularly spectacular and after reading page after page of bland ASCII text, produced in a typewriter-like screen font, they even get boring and not very inspirational!

The Hypertext Mark-up Language (or HTML) is the language used to create documents for the World Wide Web. As the name implies it is a mark-up language - the original (ASCII) text is edited and new (text) codes are added to indicate how (and where) the text should appear.

When an HTML document is read by a suitable Web browser specifically designed to understand HTML codes, such as Internet Explorer or Firefox, the formatting codes are interpreted and the text is displayed in an attractive and more dynamic way. HTML documents can include graphics, and, more importantly, links to other documents - **hypertext**.

An HTML document can be produced in free-format, i.e. it doesn't matter what the text file looks like it is the browser that does the formatting. HTML is not so much concerned about the appearance of the documents but about the structure of a document.

HTML documents contain codes that mark headings, paragraphs, lists (3-types), tables etc.. Many formatting codes are available and many of them will be introduced in this course.

However, unlike other mark-up languages, such as **LaTeX**, HTML need NOT be concerned with other layout terms such as the typeface, font size, and style of the text in a document. These can be left to the capabilities of the local browser. However, as your experience grows you will want to take more control over the look and presentation of your individual documents or your whole Web site and this will be covered towards the end of this course.

HTML editors are useful, especially if you have a large number of documents to write, but they are not essential to the creation of a HTML file - all you need is a simple text editor or a word processing package capable of writing (or saving) ASCII text files. However, as your experience and your Web sites grow you should consider using a Web site editor and management tool such as Microsoft's FrontPage or Adobe's Dreamweaver.

Note: One of the best ways to get to know HTML is to save and edit an existing HTML document. When you are viewing a Web page that has a similar layout to the one you want, use the **Save as...** option available from the **File** menu of your browser. Make sure you save the file in its original HTML source form.