

DIY WordPress Guide

Updated 2026 Edition — Including AI Tools & Modern Workflows

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Contents

Contents

Introduction.....	3
WordPress.com vs WordPress.org	4
Installing WordPress	5
Choosing and Installing a Theme	7
WordPress Plugins	8
Security — Protecting Your WordPress Site	10
SEO — Getting Found on Google	11
Using AI Tools with WordPress	12
Which AI Tools to Use	13
FTP and Direct File Access	14
Moving a WordPress Website	15
Staging Sites	16
Should I DIY or Hire a Professional?	17
Ongoing Maintenance.....	18
About Leonie	19
Further Resources.....	20

Introduction

This guide is for anyone who wants to install, configure and maintain their own WordPress website. Whether you're completely new to WordPress or picking up where you left off a few years ago, this updated 2026 edition will walk you through the essentials — including some exciting ways AI tools can now help you work smarter.

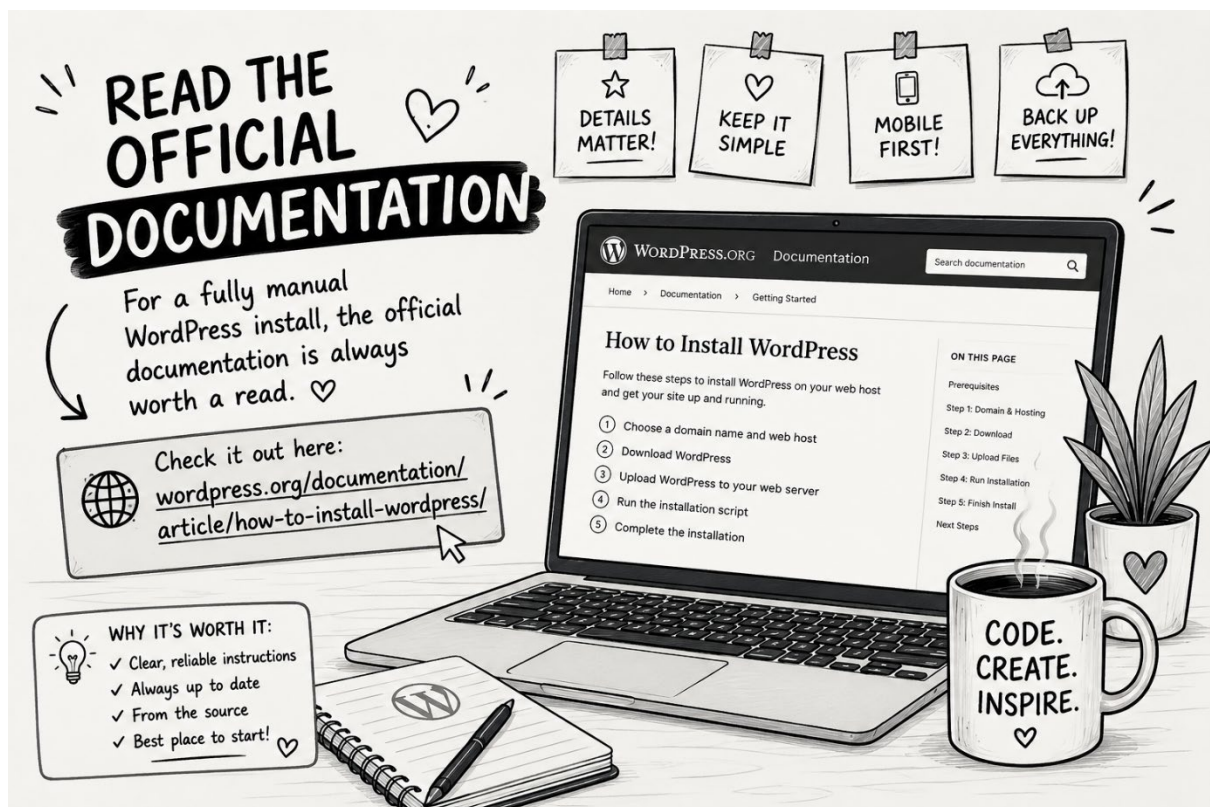
I won't cover every single installation step, since most web hosts now offer a one-click install for WordPress. Instead, I'll focus on the things that really matter: configuring your site correctly, choosing good themes and plugins safely, maintaining security, and getting the most out of the modern tools available to you.

💡 What's New in This Edition

This 2026 update adds a brand-new section on using AI tools (including ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini) to help you write content, troubleshoot errors, improve SEO and plan your website strategy. Technology moves fast — this guide moves with it.

For a fully manual WordPress install, the official documentation is always worth a read:

<https://wordpress.org/documentation/article/how-to-install-wordpress/>



WordPress.com vs WordPress.org

One of the most common points of confusion for beginners — and it's important to get this right from the start.

WordPress.org	WordPress.com
Free, open-source software you install on your own hosting	Hosted service — WordPress manages the servers for you
Full control over plugins, themes and code	Limited plugin/theme options unless on expensive plans
Requires your own hosting (£5–£20/month typically)	Free tier available but shows WordPress ads; paid plans from ~£4/month
✓ What this guide covers	✗ Not covered here

Use WordPress.org

For a professional business website with full flexibility, always go with WordPress.org (self-hosted). WordPress.com is fine for a personal blog, but the restrictions make it unsuitable for most business needs.

Installing WordPress

One-Click Install via Your Hosting Control Panel

The quickest way to get WordPress up and running is to use your web host's one-click installer. Most reputable hosts provide this as standard.

Common installers by host type

- cPanel hosts — look for Softaculous, QuickInstall or Site Software in the Software/Services section
- SiteGround, Kinsta, WP Engine — these have their own dashboards with WordPress pre-installed or easily installable
- Krystal, Heart Internet, 20i — use their own control panels, usually labelled 'Install WordPress' or 'Managed WordPress'

During setup, always:

1. Choose a strong, unique username — never use 'admin'
2. Use a long, complex password — a password manager is ideal
3. Uncheck 'Allow search engines to index this site' until you're ready to launch
4. Note down your login URL: yourdomain.co.uk/wp-admin/

AI Tip: Let AI Help You Choose Hosting

Not sure which host to pick? Ask an AI assistant like Claude or ChatGPT to compare hosts based on your budget, expected traffic and technical comfort level. Something like: 'What WordPress hosting would you recommend for a small UK business website with around 500 visitors a month?' You'll get a useful shortlist to research further.

First Steps After Installation

Settings to Configure Immediately

Once you're logged into your dashboard (yourdomain.co.uk/wp-admin/), work through these settings before you do anything else.

Settings > General

- Uncheck 'Anyone can register' — this prevents unwanted open registration
- Set your site title and tagline to reflect your brand
- Set your timezone to London/UK
- Confirm your admin email address is correct and one you check regularly

Settings > Reading

- Decide whether your homepage shows your latest posts or a static page (most business sites use a static page)
- Set the number of posts shown per page (10 is a sensible default)

Settings > Discussion

- Consider whether you want comments enabled on posts and pages — many business sites turn them off to avoid spam

Settings > Permalinks

- Change from the default (`?p=123`) to 'Post name' — this gives you clean, readable URLs like yourdomain.co.uk/about/ which are better for SEO and usability

Don't Skip Permalinks

Changing your permalink structure after your site is live and has been indexed by Google can break links. Set this correctly from day one and it will save you a headache later.

Choosing and Installing a Theme

A theme controls the visual design and layout of your WordPress site. A well-chosen theme saves huge amounts of time — but a poor choice can create security risks and make your site look like everyone else's.

What to Look For in a Theme

5. Download count and ratings — popular, well-reviewed themes are safer
6. Regular updates — check the 'Last updated' date in the theme directory
7. Compatibility — ensure it works with your current version of WordPress
8. Responsive design — it must look good on mobile, tablet and desktop
9. Page builder support — does it work with your preferred page builder?
10. Developer reputation — visit their website and check their support forums

Where to Find Themes

Free themes

- WordPress Theme Directory — wordpress.org/themes — free, reviewed, and safe

Premium themes

- Elegant Themes (elegantthemes.com) — stylish, includes the popular Divi builder
- StudioPress/Genesis (studiopress.com) — clean, well-coded, great for SEO
- ThemeForest (themeforest.net) — huge marketplace, research the developer carefully
- Astra (wpastra.com) — lightweight, very popular, works with most page builders

One Theme Only

Install only the theme you actually intend to use. Even inactive themes can be a security vulnerability. Delete any themes you're not using, including the default ones WordPress installs.

AI Tip: Using AI for Theme Decisions

Describe your business and goals to an AI: 'I run a boutique photography studio and want a clean, minimal WordPress theme. What would you recommend?' AI assistants can suggest themes based on your sector and requirements, saving you hours of searching.

WordPress Plugins

Plugins extend what WordPress can do — from contact forms to e-commerce to booking systems. There are over 60,000 free plugins in the official directory, which is both a strength and a risk. Quality varies enormously.

Before You Install Any Plugin

- Check download numbers — hundreds of thousands of installs is a good sign
- Read recent reviews — especially anything about conflicts or broken updates
- Check the 'Tested up to' version — it should be close to the current WordPress version
- Look at when it was last updated — anything over 2 years without an update is risky
- Visit the developer's website if possible

DON'T INSTALL TOO MANY PLUGINS
Avoid Bloat. Keep Your Site Fast, Safe & Happy! ❤️

TOO MANY PLUGINS = BLOAT

- ✗ Slower site
- ✗ More conflicts
- ✗ Security risks
- ✗ Harder to manage

Plugins extend what WordPress can do — from contact forms to e-commerce to booking systems. There are over 60,000 free plugins in the official directory, which is both a strength and a risk. Choose wisely! ❤️

BEFORE YOU INSTALL ANY PLUGIN

- ✓ **CHECK DOWNLOAD NUMBERS**
Hundreds of thousands of installs is a good sign.
- ✓ **READ RECENT REVIEWS**
Look for real feedback, especially about conflicts or broken updates.
- ✓ **CHECK 'TESTED UP TO' VERSION**
It should be close to the current WordPress version.
- ✓ **CHECK LAST UPDATED**
Anything over 2 years without an update is risky.
- ✓ **VISIT THE DEVELOPER'S WEBSITE**
Shows professionalism and support options.

SMART PLUGIN CHOICES = A BETTER SITE

- ✓ Faster loading
- ✓ More secure
- ✓ Fewer conflicts
- ✓ Easier to manage
- ✓ Happier visitors

TOP TIP: You rarely need dozens of plugins. Most things can be done with a few good ones — or built in! ❤️

A SIMPLE, POWERFUL SETUP

Examples:

- SEO (e.g. Rank Math)
- Security (e.g. Wordfence)
- Backup (e.g. UpdraftPlus)
- Contact Form (e.g. WPForms)

Quality over quantity every time! ❤️

Every plugin you add:

- Adds code
- Uses resources
- Creates potential conflicts

SLOW & STRESSED

FAST SAFE & FOCUSED

Recommended Plugins — 2026 Edition

SEO

- Yoast SEO — the industry standard, helps you optimise every page and post
- Rank Math — a newer alternative with a generous free tier

Security

- Wordfence Security — firewall, malware scanner and login protection in one
- WP 2FA — adds two-factor authentication to your login (highly recommended)
- Limit Login Attempts Reloaded — blocks repeated failed login attempts

Backup

- UpdraftPlus — reliable, free tier backs up to Google Drive, Dropbox and more
- BackupBuddy (premium) — excellent for full site migration as well as backup

Performance

- WP Rocket (premium) — the gold standard caching plugin, easy to configure
- LiteSpeed Cache — excellent free option if your host runs LiteSpeed servers
- Smush or ShortPixel — image compression to speed up page loading

Forms

- WPForms — user-friendly, drag-and-drop form builder, free tier is solid
- Contact Form 7 — still popular, free, lightweight
- Gravity Forms (premium) — powerful for complex forms and integrations

Page Building

- Elementor — very popular visual page builder, free and premium versions
- Bricks Builder — increasingly popular with developers for its clean code output
- Gutenberg (built-in) — WordPress's native block editor has improved enormously

E-commerce

- WooCommerce — the go-to plugin for selling products online, free and extensible

Less Is More

Every plugin adds potential security exposure and can slow your site down. Only install plugins you actually need. Regularly audit your plugin list and remove anything you're not actively using.

Security — Protecting Your WordPress Site

WordPress powers over 40% of all websites, which makes it a popular target for automated attacks. The good news is that most vulnerabilities are completely preventable with a few sensible habits.

Essential Security Practices

Strong credentials

- Never use 'admin' as your username — change it during setup
- Use a unique, complex password — at least 16 characters with mixed characters
- Use a password manager (Bitwarden is free and excellent)
- Enable two-factor authentication with the WP 2FA plugin

Keep everything updated

- Update WordPress core as soon as updates are released
- Update plugins and themes regularly — outdated plugins are the most common attack vector
- Enable automatic updates for minor WordPress releases

Backups

- Run daily backups using UpdraftPlus or your host's backup tool
- Store backups somewhere separate from your server — Google Drive or Dropbox are fine
- Test your backups occasionally by doing a restore in a staging environment

Hosting-level security

- Use a host with SSL included (nearly all good hosts do now) and keep HTTPS enabled
- Enable a Web Application Firewall — Wordfence or Cloudflare's free tier both work well

AI Tip: Troubleshoot Security Issues with AI

If you see a warning in Wordfence or notice suspicious activity, you can describe the issue to an AI assistant to get plain-English explanations of what's happening and suggested next steps. For example: 'Wordfence is showing failed login attempts from multiple IP addresses. What does this mean and what should I do?' AI won't replace a security professional, but it's a great first port of call.

SEO — Getting Found on Google

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) helps your website appear in search results when people look for what you offer. WordPress is well set up for SEO, especially with the right plugins and content strategy.

Technical SEO Essentials

- Set up Yoast SEO or Rank Math and fill in the meta information for every page
- Use the Post Name permalink structure (Settings > Permalinks)
- Submit your sitemap to Google Search Console — Yoast generates one automatically
- Ensure your site loads quickly — use a caching plugin and compress images
- Make sure your site is mobile-responsive

On-Page SEO

- Give every page a clear, descriptive title that includes your key phrase
- Write a compelling meta description for each page (Yoast will prompt you)
- Use headings (H1, H2, H3) to structure your content logically
- Include your target keywords naturally in your content — don't force them
- Add descriptive alt text to all images

AI Tip: AI for SEO Content

AI tools have transformed content creation for SEO. You can ask Claude or ChatGPT to help you: research what questions your audience is asking, suggest blog post topics, draft outlines and first drafts, write meta descriptions, and improve the clarity of existing content. Always edit AI output to add your own voice and expertise — search engines value originality and genuine authority.

A note on AI-generated content and SEO

Google's official position is that it doesn't penalise AI-generated content as long as it is helpful, original and written for people rather than to game search rankings. That said, mass-produced generic AI content rarely ranks well. Use AI to accelerate your writing process, not to replace genuine expertise and personality.

Using AI Tools with WordPress

Artificial Intelligence has become a practical, everyday tool for WordPress site owners. Whether you're writing content, troubleshooting errors or planning your website structure, AI assistants can save significant time.

What AI Tools Can Help With

Content creation

- Drafting blog posts, service pages and About pages
- Suggesting headlines and meta descriptions
- Rewriting existing content to improve clarity or tone
- Creating FAQ sections based on common customer questions
- Repurposing blog content for social media captions

Technical help

- Explaining error messages in plain English
- Suggesting which plugin to use for a specific task
- Walking you through configuration steps
- Helping you write custom CSS tweaks
- Reviewing and explaining snippets of PHP or HTML

Strategy and planning

- Brainstorming website structure and navigation
- Identifying gaps in your content compared to competitors
- Suggesting keyword clusters for an SEO content plan
- Helping you write a website brief for a developer

Which AI Tools to Use

For general assistance

- Claude (claude.ai) — excellent for longer documents, careful reasoning and nuanced writing
- ChatGPT (chatgpt.com) — popular, versatile, good for brainstorming and drafts
- Google Gemini (gemini.google.com) — integrates well with Google Workspace

WordPress-specific AI

- Jetpack AI — built into the Jetpack plugin, writes directly in the WordPress editor
- Bertha AI — WordPress plugin specifically for marketing copy and page content
- Many page builders (Elementor, Bricks) are adding AI features directly

Always Review AI Output

AI assistants can make mistakes, produce outdated information, or write in a generic way that doesn't reflect your brand. Treat AI as a very fast first draft — always read, edit and personalise the output before publishing.

AI Tip: Getting Better Results from AI

The more context you give an AI, the more useful the response. Instead of 'Write me a blog post about web design', try: 'I run a small web design agency in Nottingham called Line and Form. I help small business owners build professional WordPress websites. Write a 600-word blog post aimed at local business owners who are wondering whether to build their own site or hire a professional.' Specific, detailed prompts produce far better results.

FTP and Direct File Access

While most WordPress tasks can be done through the dashboard, there are times when you'll need to access your site's files directly — for example, when troubleshooting a broken plugin or editing theme files safely.

Setting Up FileZilla

FileZilla is a free, reliable FTP client available at filezilla-project.org. To connect you'll need:

- Your FTP hostname (usually `ftp.yourdomain.co.uk` or your server IP)
- Your FTP username and password (available from your hosting control panel)
- Port 21 for standard FTP, or Port 22 for SFTP (more secure — use this if available)

Connection steps

11. Open FileZilla and go to File > Site Manager
12. Click 'New Site' and give it a name
13. Enter your hostname, username and password
14. Set Protocol to SFTP if available, otherwise FTP
15. Click Connect

Use SFTP Not FTP

SFTP (SSH File Transfer Protocol) encrypts your connection and credentials. Standard FTP sends your password in plain text, which is a security risk. Most modern hosts support SFTP — check your hosting control panel for the SFTP port (usually 22).

Key Files and Folders to Know

- `wp-content/themes/` — your active and installed themes live here
- `wp-content/plugins/` — all your plugins are stored here
- `wp-content/uploads/` — all media uploaded to your site
- `wp-config.php` — database credentials and core configuration (handle carefully)
- `.htaccess` — server configuration, including permalink rules

To show hidden files in FileZilla

Go to Server > Force Show Hidden Files. This reveals files starting with a dot (like `.htaccess`) which are hidden by default.

File Permissions

WordPress file permissions should generally be set to:

- 755 for folders
- 644 for files

If a plugin or theme asks you to change permissions temporarily, change them back afterwards. Permissions of 777 (full read/write/execute for everyone) should never be left in place.

Moving a WordPress Website

Moving a WordPress site to a new host or domain is one of the more complex tasks you'll encounter, but with the right approach, it's very manageable.

Option 1 — Use a Migration Plugin (Recommended)

For most people, a dedicated migration plugin is the safest and quickest approach.

- All-in-One WP Migration — extremely popular, drag and drop simplicity, free for sites under 512MB
- Duplicator — reliable, widely used, good free tier
- BackupBuddy (premium) — excellent for complex migrations
- Prime Mover — also supports WordPress Multisite even in the free version

Option 2 — Manual Migration

If you prefer the manual route (or need to for technical reasons):

16. Export your database from phpMyAdmin on your old host
17. Download all WordPress files via FTP
18. Create a new database on your new host
19. Upload all files to the new host via FTP
20. Import the database to the new host
21. Update wp-config.php with the new database name, username and password
22. Update any references to the old domain using a search-replace plugin
23. Test everything thoroughly before pointing your domain

Always Keep the Old Site Working

Don't delete your old hosting until you've fully tested the new site and your domain has propagated (which can take up to 48 hours). Run both in parallel until you're certain everything works.

AI Tip: AI for Migration Troubleshooting

If something goes wrong during a migration, describe the exact error message to an AI assistant. For example: 'I've migrated my WordPress site and now I'm seeing a white screen. My error log shows: [paste error]. What should I check?' AI is often able to identify the cause and walk you through a fix.

Staging Sites

A staging site is a private copy of your website where you can safely test changes before they go live. It's one of the most underused features available to WordPress site owners — and one of the most valuable.

Why You Need a Staging Site

- Test plugin updates before applying them to your live site
- Try out a new theme or major redesign without risk
- Experiment with new features or custom code safely
- Restore a broken staging site without affecting real visitors

How to Get One

- Most good hosts (SiteGround, Kinsta, WP Engine, Krystal, 20i) offer free one-click staging environments in their control panel
- The WP Stagecoach plugin creates a staging site on your existing hosting
- Local by Flywheel (free) lets you build and test WordPress sites on your own computer before going live

Always Test Updates on Staging First

Before clicking 'Update All' on a live site, push the update to staging first. A plugin conflict that breaks your site takes minutes to fix on staging — and potentially hours to recover from on a live site with real visitors.

Should I DIY or Hire a Professional?

This guide gives you the knowledge to manage WordPress yourself — but there are times when hiring a professional is the smarter choice. Here's an honest checklist to help you decide.

DIY is probably right for you if...

- You have time to learn and enjoy the process
- Your site is relatively simple — a few pages, a blog, a contact form
- Your budget is tight and you're comfortable troubleshooting problems
- You're happy to maintain and update the site yourself on an ongoing basis
- You don't rely on the website for the majority of your income

Hiring a professional is probably worth it if...

- Your time is better spent running your business than managing a website
- You need complex functionality — bookings, memberships, e-commerce, custom integrations
- Your website is central to generating revenue and downtime or errors are costly
- You've tried DIY and found it frustrating or overwhelming
- You want a site that looks genuinely distinctive rather than template-based
- You need an ongoing strategy, not just a technical build

Ongoing Maintenance

A WordPress site isn't a 'set and forget' tool. Regular maintenance keeps it fast, secure and working properly.

Monthly Maintenance Checklist

- Update WordPress core, plugins and themes
- Check that backups are running and test restoring one
- Review Wordfence or your security plugin for any alerts
- Check Google Search Console for any crawl errors or manual actions
- Review your site speed using Google PageSpeed Insights
- Check all contact forms are working and sending correctly
- Look for and remove any plugins or themes you're no longer using

Content Maintenance

- Review and refresh older pages and posts — Google favours fresh, accurate content
- Add new blog posts or news items to show your site is active
- Update any pricing, team or service information that has changed
- Check that all links still work — the Broken Link Checker plugin can help

AI Tip: AI for Ongoing Content

Use an AI assistant to help you maintain a consistent content calendar. Try: 'I run a small Nottingham-based web design business. Suggest 12 blog post topics that would be useful for my audience of small business owners, and help me write a brief outline for each one.' Review and personalise the suggestions, then use them as a production plan for the year.



About Leonie

I'm Leonie Winson, founder of Line and Form — a web design and digital content studio based in Nottingham. I've been building websites and helping businesses communicate better online since 2006.

I specialise in WordPress websites for small and medium-sized businesses — from initial strategy and design through to build, launch and ongoing support. I also run workshops and training sessions for business owners who want to understand and manage their own sites with confidence.

This guide started life as a handout for one of those workshops back in 2014. It's grown considerably since then — and the world of WordPress has grown with it. I hope it's useful, wherever you are in your website journey.



Further Resources

Official WordPress Documentation

wordpress.org/documentation

SEO

[Yoast SEO Blog — yoast.com/seo-blog](https://yoast.com/seo-blog)

[Google Search Console — search.google.com/search-console](https://search.google.com/search-console)

Security

[Wordfence Blog — wordfence.com/blog](https://wordfence.com/blog)

Performance

[Google PageSpeed Insights — pagespeed.web.dev](https://pagespeed.web.dev)

AI Tools

[Claude — claude.ai](https://claude.ai)

[ChatGPT — chatgpt.com](https://chatgpt.com)

[Google Gemini — gemini.google.com](https://gemini.google.com)

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