



HOW TO BE A

ROCKSTAR

WordPress Designer

Build Themes and Use WordPress
to Create Amazing Sites

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Foreword

So often it is the simplest concepts that are the most compelling. Email is just sending a message, XML is just a way of wrapping information up and blogging is just regularly updating content. But what might be simple to explain often has far-reaching and complex consequences.

In a few short years blogging has gone from geek-speak to mainstream web, appearing in online media portals, social pages, corporate sites and of course the thousands upon thousands of blogs.

To blog however, you need something to blog with. And though there are scores of options available, it is a handful of platforms that stand out - Blogger, Typepad, and of course WordPress.

That WordPress excels at blogging is obvious. It's fast, quick to learn, exceedingly easy to use and takes next to no time to install. Moreover it is everything one could hope for in open source software: well supported, well loved and well used.

But what makes WordPress extra special, so much so that I find myself writing a book about it, is that above all else WordPress is customizable.

Of course a lot of software lays claim to being customizable, but often this amounts to little more than changing some colors and rudimentary options. With WordPress, extensibility reaches from the admin system to the front end to the very functionality of the software.

Like many web users I am pretty handy with a bit of HTML and CSS, and I even know a little of languages like PHP, but there are unfortunately plenty of things that are way beyond me to build on

my own. The reason I love WordPress is that using my regular skill-set I am able to build much, much more than I could before. In this book Harley and I will show you how you can flex themes, code hacks and plugins to fit your needs. We'll take WordPress from blogging platform to flexible content management system.

I hope that you get as much fun and utility out of WordPress as both Harley and I have!

Collis Ta'eed

Notes: Example Themes and Files

Packaged with this book you will find a directory of example files made available for your reference. These files correspond to the example designs, HTML and WordPress themes used in the book. Specifically you will find:

- Photoshop files for the Creatif Design
- HTML/CSS files for the example Creatif build
- Creatif Blog Theme for WordPress
- Creatif Portfolio Theme for WordPress
- Creatif Site Theme for WordPress
- Example plugin from Chapter 6

These files and themes may be used freely in your projects both commercial and non-commercial. However they may not be redistributed or resold in any way.

As you work through the book you may choose to either construct your own set of files from scratch, or to look through the example files as a guide.

Themes Online

In addition to the example files, you can find the three working themes setup on working WordPress installations online. These are made available so that you can see what the working end-result should / could look like. You will find the themes at:

Creatif Blog <http://superpreviewer.com/creatifblog>

Creatif Portfolio <http://superpreviewer.com/creatifportfolio>

Creatif Site <http://superpreviewer.com/creatifsite>



Getting Familiar with WordPress

In this chapter we'll skim through the basics of WordPress, getting an install, how it works, where you find out more and the technical skills you need to work with WordPress as a web designer/developer. If you are already familiar with the software you can skip ahead to Chapter 2 or read on for a quick refresher.

Introduction

WordPress is an open source, content management system made specifically for blogging. That means it is a program that you install, free of charge, on your server to build a website – usually a blog.

Once installed WordPress has two parts. First the password-protected admin system where you can put up posts, edit content and manage the site. And second the public site where people can view the posts and content.

WordPress is written in the PHP language and has had 2 major version releases to date as well as lots of sub-releases. At the time of writing we are up to 2.7.x, though this number updates frequently.

What Makes WordPress Popular

Though initially falling in the shadow of SixApart's Moveable Type and Typepad products, WordPress has been steadily gaining in popularity and is now arguably the most popular blogging platform for serious bloggers.

This popularity is due to a number of factors, most notably WordPress' ease of use and its flexibility and customization. Installation of the software takes just minutes and a blogger with very little savvy can get up and running in next to no time.

Once installed, WordPress offers a huge range of customization options from the default modifications to custom themes and plugins.

WordPress.com vs WordPress.org

One common confusion arises between the two main WordPress sites, WordPress.com and WordPress.org. To understand the difference you first need to know about Automattic.

Automattic is the company behind WordPress. Although the software is open source, Automattic manages the servers, the distribution and the management of the product. They also operate WordPress.com which is a hosted version of WordPress.

So if you didn't have your own server or didn't know anything about web development you might sign up there and get an account which would give you access to your own WordPress blog. The accounts are very limited in options for customization however, so we won't be too concerned with WordPress.com in this book.

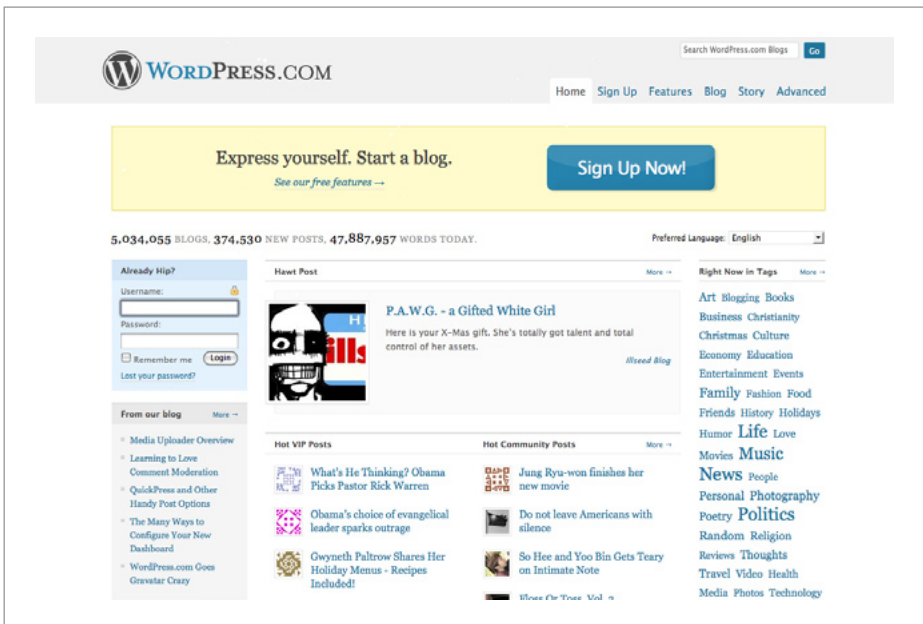


Fig 1-1 – The WordPress.com landing page.

WordPress.com actually runs a special version of something called WordPress Multi-User (WPMU) which allows you to operate a hosted blog platform. Automattic turns a profit by, among other things, offering upgrades and occasional ads on WordPress.com.

So in other words WordPress.com is a service that runs the WordPress software.

WordPress.org on the other hand is the home of that software, in the form of an open source project. This is where you can chat to other people about WordPress, download the latest install, find plugins and themes and access the official help and documentation – also known as the Codex.

In this book we are only interested in WordPress.org and the software you download and install on your own server.

Getting a WordPress Install

In order to get acquainted with WordPress you will first need a copy to experiment with. There are three ways you can do this:

Method 1: Get an Account with a Web Host with Auto-Install for WordPress

Because WordPress is so popular, many web hosts have begun packaging auto-installers with their services. You can find some well-known web hosts doing this via WordPress.org's hosting page: <http://wordpress.org/hosting>.

Once you have an account with one of these web hosts you generally log into their control panel and find the list of auto-installers. Installation is then simply a matter of clicking through a form or two. If you run into any problems with this method you can simply contact your web host's support team.

If you use an auto-installer, it's a good idea to check the version of WordPress being used to ensure it's an up to date edition.

Method 2. Install WordPress Manually onto an Existing Web Host

WordPress can be installed on any web host supporting a reasonably recent edition of PHP and MySQL. Assuming your web host doesn't provide an auto-install facility, you will need to do the work yourself.

You will need to first download the latest release of WordPress from: <http://wordpress.org/download>

You can find full installation instructions for WordPress at:

http://codex.wordpress.org/Installing_WordPress

The installation process is relatively easy, though you will need to create a database on your server. This can usually be done through the control panel your web host provides.

Method 3. Install MySQL, PHP and WordPress on Your Local Computer

Your final option is to create a local WordPress installation on your computer. This is great for quick testing and development of themes and plugins.

Depending on your platform (Mac/Win/Linux) there are a selection of tutorials on how to get setup available at: http://codex.wordpress.org/Installing_WordPress

After Install

Once you have your copy of WordPress installed, log in to the WP-Admin dashboard and click around to get familiar with the system. If this is your first time using WordPress we recommend you try creating a post, updating your profile, logging out, adding a comment to the post you made, logging back in and then approving it. Once you've done that, try clicking on *Appearance > Themes* and change the theme you are using. WordPress comes with two themes by default and often more if you have used an auto-installer.

This book will make a lot more sense if you are familiar with the basic mechanics of how WordPress works. So it's really worth spending a couple of hours trying things out.

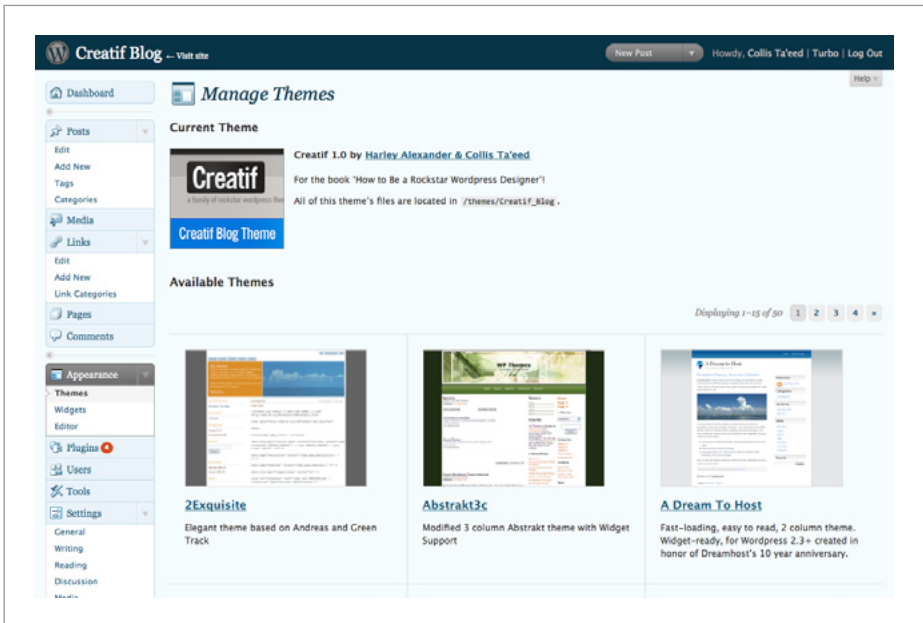


Fig 1-2 – WordPress' Appearance page lets you switch themes with just a few clicks.

Main Concepts

WordPress is fundamentally a blogging platform. Although later in the book we'll look at how to make WordPress do other things, initially we'll just assume that everything you are doing is for the purposes of creating a blog.

There are a few core concepts in WordPress, they are:

Posts

A Post is a time stamped piece of content. Posts are what a blog is made of and appear on the homepage in sequential order. They can also be categorized and tagged, have an author, a date and comments attached. Posts are the building block of WordPress. Throughout this book we will capitalize the word Posts when referring to an actual WordPress Post.

Pages

WordPress Pages are for high level content that is more permanent and static. Things like about and contact pages are usually made with a Page. Pages don't have a timestamp and appear separate from Posts. Again throughout this book we will capitalize the word Pages when referring to WordPress Pages.

Comments

Comments are small messages left on a blog by users or the public. Comments are comprised of a name, email address, URL and comment message. Comments have an approval system that by default lets through comments from any registered user and from anyone who has previously had a comment approved. First time commenters will have their comments held for approval. You will need to log in and check through the list to sort the spam from the legitimate discussion.

A very well-known plugin that will make your comment approval life much easier is *Akismet*. Akismet is made by Automattic and is a very good spam filter. WordPress comes installed with Akismet by default, although you need to get a (free) key from WordPress.com.

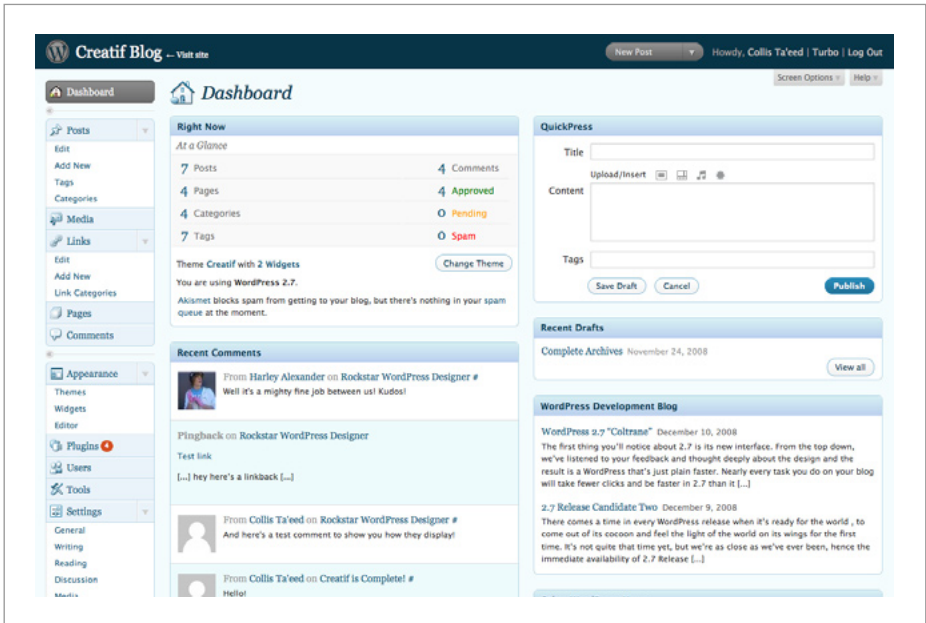


Fig 1-3 – WordPress' WP-Admin Dashboard

WP-Admin

When you install WordPress there is the front-end of the site which everyone sees and an admin area for managing and updating the site called WP-Admin, or sometimes referred to as the Dashboard, or the admin area. If you have a blog at `example.com`, then the admin will be at `example.com/wp-admin`.

Users

A WordPress install can have multiple registered users who each have different roles. The first user will always be the *admin* account having the role of Administrator. Other possible roles are: User,

Contributor, Author, Editor, Administrator. Depending on a user's role, they will be able to do different things like post, edit, and approve comments.

Users can be created in WP-Admin or if you make it possible, from the front end. So for example you could choose to make a blog such that anyone wishing to comment would need to register. You might also then hire an author or two and create user accounts for them set to Author. Finally you might hire a WordPress developer to fix a bug and give them Administrator access.

Themes

A theme is a package of PHP and CSS files that determines the front-end design of your WordPress install. When you install WordPress it uses a default theme. This book will show you how to make your own themes.

Themes can radically alter how a WordPress install works and are one of the main tools a WordPress developer uses.

To install a theme you simply place a directory containing the theme files into the `wp-content/themes/` directory of your WordPress install.

Plugins

Plugins are add-ons or extensions that change or add to WordPress' existing functionality. Examples of plugins are: *Akismet* which helps you filter spam comments and *WP-Cache* which caches your pages to make your install run faster under heavy load.

There are thousands of plugins, almost all available freely on the web. Along with Themes, Plugins are one of the main tools you will use to customize WordPress.

To install a plugin you upload the relevant files to the `wp-content/plugins` directory. If the plugin is packaged in a directory, you simply place the entire directory in the `wp-content/plugins` directory.

Linkbacks / Pingbacks / Trackbacks

When another blog links to your site, WordPress will register a linkback, sometimes referred to as a pingback or trackback. Generally linkbacks appear mixed in with a Post's comments. Linkbacks serve as a way to interconnect sites and continue conversation from one blog to another.

Blogroll

Along with posts, WordPress lets you post links to other sites in your Blogroll. A Blogroll is simply a set of categorized links. Traditionally these links would be to other blogs which is where the name comes from.

Tags

WordPress Posts can be tagged with keywords to help users find similar posts. A user will click on a tag and see all posts that have been tagged with that word. Tagging is a recent addition to the default categorization that WordPress uses.

HTML, CSS & Basic PHP

This book is aimed at web designers and developers looking to make use of WordPress as a flexible content management system. As such there is some coding knowledge required. In particular there are three principal types of code we will deal with when using WordPress: HTML, CSS & PHP.

HTML & CSS

Because this book deals with the creation of themes and websites using WordPress you'll need a very solid understanding of HTML and CSS. In particular you should be used to coding in a text editor. It is difficult to use a WYSIWIG editor like Adobe Dreamweaver on WordPress themes because the pages are broken up into multiple files.

So if you're not used to hand coding, it's a good idea to start doing so. Try coding some static HTML websites before you start building WordPress themes. If you're really unfamiliar with coding websites, you can find many great HTML and CSS tutorials on the web.

Basic PHP

WordPress is written in PHP, however you don't need to know a great deal simply to work with themes and even plugins. This is because much of the hard functionality like database access is handled by WordPress.

Nonetheless when editing a WordPress theme you will need to work with and around small snippets of PHP code.

If you've never used or seen PHP, you should read through an introductory course and make some basic programs to get familiar with how it looks and feels. Although you don't need to know much, it will make working with PHP tags a lot less stressful and avoid small unnecessary mistakes like deleting a character or statement without understanding the consequences.

The screenshot shows the PHP.net website with a navigation bar at the top containing links for downloads, documentation, FAQ, getting help, mailing lists, wiki, reporting bugs, php.net sites, links, conferences, and my.php.net. A search bar is also present. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- What is PHP?**: A brief introduction to PHP as a general-purpose scripting language.
- Windows PECL binaries**: A notice dated [10-Dec-2008] stating that Windows binaries for PECL extensions will no longer be available on <http://pecl4win.php.net>. It mentions that work is being done to incorporate these binaries into pecl.php.net.
- PHP 5.2.8 Released!**: A notice dated [08-Dec-2008] announcing the availability of PHP 5.2.8, which addresses a regression from 5.2.7 regarding the `magic_quotes` functionality.
- PHP 5.2.7 has been removed from distribution**: A notice dated [07-Dec-2008] stating that PHP 5.2.7 has been removed due to a security bug, and users are encouraged to upgrade to 5.2.8.
- PHP 5.2.7 Released**: A notice dated [04-Dec-2008] announcing the availability of PHP 5.2.7, focusing on stability improvements and security fixes.
- Security Enhancements and Fixes in PHP 5.2.7:** A list of fixes including:
 - Upgraded PCRE to version 7.8 (Fixes CVE-2008-2371)
 - Fixed missing initialization of `BG(page_uid)` and `BG(page_gid)`, reported by Maksymilian Arciemowicz.
 - Fixed incorrect `php_value` order for Apache configuration, reported by Maksymilian Arciemowicz.
- Stable Releases**: A sidebar section showing the current stable version as 5.2.8 and historical versions like 4.4.9.
- Release Candidates**: A sidebar section showing the current release candidate as 5.3.0alpha3.
- Upcoming Events**: A sidebar section with a link to add more events.
- December**: A sidebar section with a link to view events for the month.
- User Group Events**: A sidebar section listing various user groups and their events, such as Kansas City, Miami Linux Users Group, and Twin Cities PHP.

Fig 1-4 – PHP.net is a good source for syntax and help on PHP.

Fortunately PHP is a simple language and you only need to understand a basic subset of how it works. Most of what you do in theme work is to call functions, place variables and very occasionally work in a loop or if statement.

Some important things you need to know:

1. What PHP tags look like

PHP is code wrapped in either `<? ... ?>` or `<?php ... ?>`. When the server sees these tags it knows to interpret all code in between as PHP and execute it on the server before serving up the page to the end-user's browser.

2. How If Statements work

PHP, like most programming languages uses special statements that check whether something is true or

not and depending on the outcome then execute different pieces of code. The most common variety of these so-called conditional statements are if/else statements – <http://www.php.net/manual/en/control-structures.else.php> – however you may also run into switch/case statements – <http://php.net/switch>.

3. How Loops Work

Another essential piece of the puzzle are loops. A loop tells the server to execute the same bit of code a set number of times usually with a changing variable. Common loop types include for loops – <http://www.php.net/manual/en/control-structures.for.php>, while loops – <http://www.php.net/manual/en/control-structures.while.php>, and foreach loops – <http://www.php.net/manual/en/control-structures.foreach.php>.

There are many aspects of PHP that you can get by without knowing including: how to work with databases, how to read files and advanced topics like object oriented programming.

Naturally the more you know, the easier your life will be. Happily PHP is quite an intuitive language and you can expect however to pick up a lot about PHP by working with themes. In this book you will find a medium level of explanation for the PHP code we use, so you need not be as familiar with the language as you should be with HTML and CSS.

The WordPress Codex

The WordPress Codex is the documentation and help for WordPress. It is stored at WordPress.org and is extensive and helpful.

To access the Codex visit <http://codex.wordpress.org>

You will use the Codex mostly to look up function names and find out how things work. For example if you were working in a theme file and you wanted to show who a blog post's author was, you might search the Codex for the words 'Post Author' and find the page: http://codex.wordpress.org/Author_Templates which tells you that to show the author you simply need this piece of code:

```
<p>Written by: <?php the_author_posts_link(); ?></p>
```

There are often a few functions to achieve the same results, and the Codex pages will link to related functions for a specific topic. So for example when looking up functions for authors, you will see links to other functions to display author information.

Using the Codex is often a good way to find out things you didn't know you could do. For example you might start reading about author functions and realize that you can link to a bio page for authors. When you are getting started with theming, it's worth making it a habit to always take some time and looking up a few related pages as an exercise in broadening your knowledge of WordPress.

Preparing WordPress for Use Checklist

After installing WordPress there are several things worth doing to get WordPress ready to go. These are just options to change in the WP-Admin system, one or two essential plugins to install and some other modifications and checks. Here's a checklist, along with explanations of what each does:

Activate Akismet Spam Protection

Akismet is a spam filter plugin for comments. It is automatically installed with WordPress, so you simply need to go to your WP-Admin Dashboard and click on *Plugins*, find Akismet in the list and click *Activate*. A message will appear asking for your WordPress.com API key, simply click the link and create a WordPress.com account and then copy and paste the key back into your Dashboard.

Install WP-Cache Plugin

When a page is accessed on your site, WordPress performs some database lookups and executes a bunch of code. Ordinarily this isn't a problem, however if you happen to have a lot of traffic all at once, this can slow your site right down. WP-Cache is a plugin that caches your pages periodically to dramatically reduce the load on the WordPress server. You can find the plugin at <http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/wp-cache/>

Once installed, click on *Plugins* in the Dashboard and click *Activate*. You then need to click on *Options* in the dashboard menu and find *WP-Cache* in the menu. This leads you to a page where you can enable the caching. Don't enable just yet, because it's best to do this after you install your theme and have everything working, otherwise you can sometimes have trouble testing changes.

Note that to get WP-Cache working you may need to create some directories for it to write to. The plugin will give you details of what to do.

Set Permalinks

Every post you create has a permanent web address that WordPress creates called a *permalink*. You can select how WordPress should structure your Permalinks by clicking on *Settings* in the dashboard menu and then clicking on *Permalinks*.

There are five options to choose from:

1. **Default** – The default URL structure is a mix of odd characters and ID numbers
2. **Day and Name** – Suitable for news and time centric blogs
3. **Month and Name** – Suitable for news and time centric blogs
4. **Numeric** – An incrementing number rather than the post's actual title.
5. **Custom** – By specifying a variable in %% signs you can choose the structure

A good format to use is to click on *Custom* and write:

```
/%category%/postname%/
```

This will create links that have the category of the post and title of the post in the URL. These links will not only be more readable and memorable, but are also better for search engines.

WordPress uses a file called `.htaccess` to create the permalinks, if this is not writable by the server, WordPress will give you instructions on creating the file yourself.

Update Your Profile

Click on *Users > My Profile* in the WP-Admin menu and take a moment to fill out your profile. You may wish to untick *'Use Visual Editor When Writing'* if you prefer to write in HTML as the Visual Editor has been known to mess with code, though more recent versions of WordPress are getting better in this department. This is just a preference however.

After you click Update, go back and find the select box which reads *"Display Name as"* and select a new option other than 'admin'.

Make Sure File Uploads are Working

One of the neatest things about using WordPress is that when you are creating a Post you can upload files directly in WordPress and not need to ever touch your FTP program. This is great if you have multiple writers or non-tech writers, however you may need to double check that uploads are working on your server.

In *WP-Admin*, click on *Posts > Add New* to bring up the Add New Post screen then click the image icon to add assets using WordPress' Uploader. Enter a file and try uploading. If all goes to plan the file will appear there successfully. If not, you will most likely need to create a directory for the upload facility to upload to, or set permissions for the directory to be writable. You can do this through your FTP program, the error message will tell you what folders to create.

Options for the uploads are controlled via *Settings > Miscellaneous* in the Dashboard.

Install Sitemap Plugin

The Sitemap plugin automatically creates an XML sitemap prepared to Google's specification and then contacts the Google servers every time you create a new post or change the sitemap. You can download the plugin from <http://tinyurl.com/2bbwmg>.

Clear WordPress and Create Categories

WordPress comes with a lot of default content in the form of a sample Post, a comment, categories and a blogroll. Although these can be quite good for testing, generally speaking you will want to go through, delete them all and then create your own content. This is particularly true in the later chapters of this book where we will need to match content with our themes.

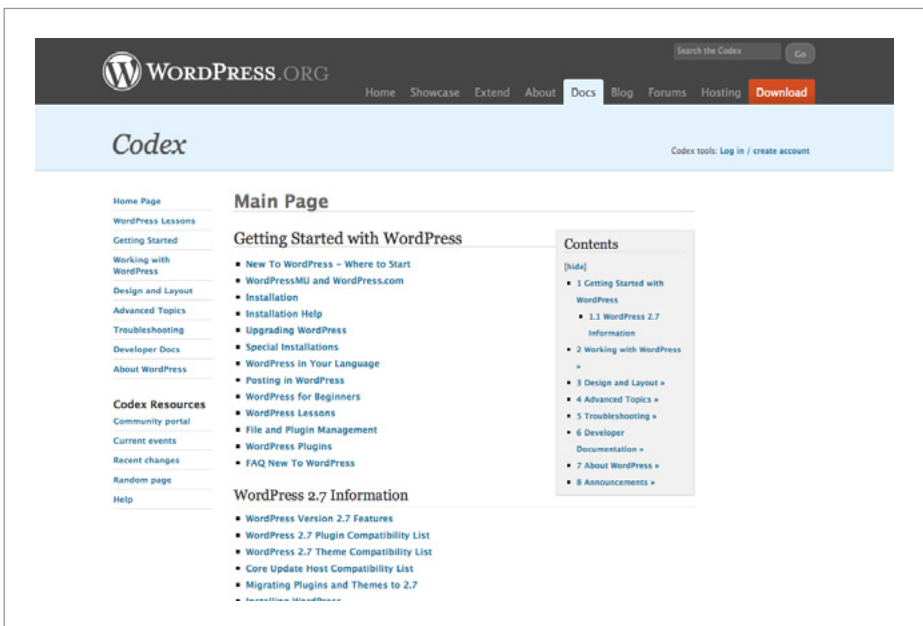


Fig 1-5 – The WordPress Codex, a definite bookmark in any theme developers favorites.

Further Resources for Getting Started with WordPress

You can find resources on FTP, installation, and blogging with WordPress at:

Changing Permissions:

http://codex.wordpress.org/Changing_File_Permissions

FTP:

Transmit (Mac) <http://www.panic.com/transmit/>

SmartFTP (Win) <http://www.smartftp.com/>

FileZilla (Cross Platform) <http://filezilla-project.org/>

Basic WordPress Lessons:

http://codex.wordpress.org/WordPress_Lessons

Absolute Blogging Basics:

<http://www.prologger.net/archives/2005/02/05/what-is-a-blog/>

<http://www.prologger.net/archives/2006/02/14/blogging-for-beginners-2/>