

How To Pick Web Hosting Without a Computer Science Degree

Choosing a Web Host
Doesn't Have To Be Hard

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Introduction

Web hosting is likely the most confusing, anxiety-ridden part of launching your own site. It's highly technical, completely foreign to most people, and yet your entire site depends on it. Fun!

So, what is *hosting*? It's the physical computer where your website resides. It's the servers that deliver your files to your site visitors.

Basically, you can't have a website without a host.

Hosting is often the very first step in setting up your site. After all, you need someplace to put your website's "stuff." It's also one of the primary factors in determining how fast your site operates and whether or not your site will suffer downtime. Simply put, a good host equals a speedy site.

While hosting is a huge aspect of setting up a site, most people don't want to think about it. Why? Because it's highly technical and most of us don't get it. PHP Load times? suPHP? Apache? Huh? Techies may love this stuff, but the rest of us are quickly lost.

But don't worry. We can help. We'll start with the basics and move through the technical lingo with easy-to-understand translations for those of us who don't speak "server." We'll also walk through many of the major considerations when looking for a host to help you figure out exactly what you need. It doesn't have to be scary. We promise.

So, what is *hosting*?

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The One-Page Overview

Much of the material covered in this eBook is highly technical. We'll do our best to break it down for the average person, but if you want the quick version, this is it. Each of the following recommendations are covered in more detail later, so if you have questions, read on. But if you want to skip the technical specifics, just use this list when evaluating potential hosting providers.

Basic Features

Some must-haves you'll want to explore in more detail.

- Email
- Upgrade options
- FTP Access
- Control
- Security
- Customer Service

Numbers

Most of these numbers depend on your specific needs, but this can be a good starting point. Remember that unlimited is not really unlimited.

- Storage: 150 MB is a bare minimum
- Data Transfer: 20 GB/month
- PHP Memory: 256 MB or more
- PHP Runtime: at least 30 seconds
- mod_rewrite Apache module
- suPHP or something similar
- HTTP Loopbacks

Server Requirements

These are minimum technical requirements your host must offer if you're planning to run WordPress.

- Linux server running Apache
- PHP 5.2.4 or greater (5.3 or better is best)
- MySQL 5.0 or greater
- mod_rewrite Apache module
- suPHP or something similar
- HTTP Loopbacks
- Command Line ZIP

Extra Features

These aren't must-haves, but they are nice additions.

- Hosting multiple sites
- Domain registration
- Backup
- Reselling
- Domain parking
- One-click Wordpress install

Understanding Your Needs

Know thyself. It's a good rule in life and it's a good first step in picking a web host. But before you start evaluating different hosting options, you need to understand your needs.

Answer these basic questions about your current (and future) needs.

You may not have answers for everything, but gathering this information ahead of time will make the hosting selection process easier.

- If your site goes down, do you lose visitors or do you lose income?
Consider the ramifications of potential site downtime. How much is a little extra piece of mind worth to you? Your answer should influence your level of hosting investment.
- What's your site's traffic level?
Evaluate your site's current level of traffic and make a realistic projection for future travel levels.
- What's your "need for speed"?
Is a slow site going to be a minor inconvenience or a major problem?
- How much storage does your site require?
Think about your site's "stuff." If your site contains a significant amount of media-rich content like photos and videos, storage space is an important consideration.
- Do you have specific needs?
Do you have several different sites that need hosting? Lots of URL redirects? Do you have e-commerce needs? Do you want email? All of these specific needs impact hosting choices.
- How much control do you need?
Will you be testing different configurations or making advanced installations? Or are you a more average user?
- What's your preferred way of getting help?
Sure, there are plenty of options (phone, email, ticketed support systems, online forums, etc.) — but what support avenues do you prefer?

Types of Hosting

All hosting isn't the same. Here's a basic overview of the different types.

Shared

Typical pricing: \$4-15/month

The most common (and cheapest) form of hosting is *shared* hosting. Most people start with shared hosting and it's perfectly fine for most websites. Shared hosting is exactly what it sounds like — many different sites sharing one single server. Each customer gets their own little slice of the server, but within certain limits (we'll discuss this more later).

The bonus? All that sharing means cheap prices. The bummer? Sometimes sharing one server degenerates into a sort of "pushing and shoving." It happens with kids and it can happen with websites, too. If one site on a shared server gets a ton of traffic, it can slow down the other sites. Sometimes hosts will even oversell their servers and pack in too many sites, slowing everybody down. Server overloading shouldn't be a problem with a good host, but it's the main problem with shared hosting.

Virtual Private Server

Typical pricing: \$15-150/month

The next step up from shared hosting is a *virtual private server* (VPS). This type of hosting uses software to run several sites on the same server, as if they were dedicated servers. You're still technically on a shared server, but software is in place to offer the feel of a dedicated server. VPS hosting costs more, but it's usually faster, more secure and highly customizable. You're also less prone to slowdowns due to other sites. A virtual private server is a great step up for growing sites.

Dedicated Hosting

Typical pricing: \$100-250/month

Welcome to the “big boys.” *Dedicated hosting* gives a site its very own server, so no more sharing with anybody else. This means faster speeds, a more secure site, no impact from other sites, more customization options—all at a much higher price tag.

With dedicated hosting, you can have a *managed* or *unmanaged* dedicated host, depending on your needs. Managed hosts provide technical staff to help you manage the server, perform upgrades and more. Unmanaged hosts let you perform upgrades or work on your own.

Cloud Hosting

Cloud hosting is a fairly new method of hosting and means your site isn't tied to a single server, but copied to multiple servers in multiple locations. This minimizes potential downtime and your site can always be available “in the cloud.” Cloud hosting is a bit more complex to set up, so it can be more expensive — but it's ideal for sites that can't tolerate downtime.

What type of hosting do I need?

Let's make it simple: You'll probably want shared hosting. Shared hosting fits the needs of most sites and that's what most of our advice will cover.

Why might you need something more than shared hosting? Here are a few reasons:

- **High Traffic**
If your site is getting tons of traffic — and we really mean *tons* (like 250,000+ visits per month), you should consider a hosting option more equipped to handle the traffic.
- **Zero Downtime**
If even a minute or two of downtime at 2am once a year is a problem for your company, you probably need to upgrade to another form of hosting. But most sites won't notice that kind of minimal downtime and most shared hosts do offer 99% uptime.
- **Custom Features**
If you need customized features or have specific special needs, shared hosting might not be for you. Again, consider upgrading to another form of hosting.

WordPress Requirements & Recommendations

WordPress.org offers a set of [minimal hosting requirements and recommendations](#), but here are a few additional things your host should offer if you want the best experience.

Apache on Linux

A server running the Linux operating system with Apache software is the most common setup and offers the least trouble. Most of all: avoid a Windows server. They are less reliable, more expensive, more finicky and offer fewer popular features. Unless you need some special setup, go for Apache on Linux.

HTTP Loopbacks

WordPress and some plugins (like [BackupBuddy](#)) run scripts (bits of code) in the background. This makes sites run more smoothly and reduces wait time. They're called loopbacks because the server is connecting or looping back to itself to run something else.

HTTP Loopbacks are a must-have. The good news is most hosts offer HTTP Loopbacks. The bad news is most hosts' sales or technical support may not be familiar with HTTP Loopbacks if you ask them, so they'll often give a vague or even incorrect answer. The folks who actually work the servers know these specifics, but they're not usually answering the phones.

Command Line ZIP

Servers can run all sorts of programs, just like your computer. The command line is a simple way to run those programs in Linux. ZIP is a program that compresses files, creating .zip files (for example, most WordPress themes and plugins come as .zip files). Some plugins, including BackupBuddy, require *command line ZIP*. Sometimes a host will turn this off by default, but they'll be willing to turn it on if you ask.

Numbers

Hosts will offer a whole set of numbers when bragging about speed and memory. It can be bewildering, especially when hosts start boasting about unlimited memory, storage, etc. (just remember that nothing is unlimited — read the fine print).

Here are some specific numbers to consider:

Storage Space

Storage space is the amount of available hard drive space on the server for storing your site's files (like images, HTML files, PHP files, etc.). The amount of storage space you need depends on type of site you have: a simple site with a few pages could easily get by with less than 5 MB, but a more realistic minimum number might be 150 MB. If you have lots of files, you might want more storage space. If you upload a ton of photos (especially if you upload originals and don't resize them first), you may easily run out of storage space.

Most hosts offer plenty of space and it's not a big concern. Many hosts are also now offering unlimited hosting — but don't be misled. There are always limits to "unlimited." Just make sure the number is one that works for your site.

Data Transfer

Also called bandwidth, *Data transfer* is the amount of data your site is serving up to visitors. Unless you're hosting many of your own large video files (you're not using YouTube or some other service for embedding), this usually isn't a problem. Many hosts are now offering enormous amounts of data transfer, so it's usually not an issue. In general, 20 GB per month is a good baseline number for data transfer. But make sure you know the costs for exceeding your bandwidth.

You should also know what happens with a traffic surge — will they take your site down or will they just bill you? Either one could be scary, so know what you're getting into. You don't want to be surprised by the cost of a sudden surge in traffic. Traffic surges can happen at any time and be provoked by the oddest combination of current events and search engine results.

Maximum PHP Runtime

PHP scripts have a limited amount of time to run on servers. Hosts don't want scripts running for hours and slowing things down, so they cap the process with a maximum PHP runtime. Once a script hits this limit, the server will kill it. And that's bad. Sometimes a host will allow specific scripts to exceed the maximum runtime, but they'll still put a cap on it.

Thirty seconds should be the bare minimum PHP runtime cap. Some hosts will try to use twenty or even fifteen seconds, but this is way too low. Look for at least thirty seconds.

PHP Memory

PHP memory is the amount of memory (RAM) a script is allowed to use at once. This number can vary depending on your host from as low as 16 MB to as high as 1024 MB. A number around 256 MB is generally a good amount, but more is always better.

Real Example

A surge in traffic can come from the most unlikely of places.

For example, a client once had a celebrity quote site with a Britney Spears quote about how she'd "never show my crotch or anything."

The site exploded when a certain photograph of the celebrity appeared on the web.

Although the site had nothing to do with the actual event, it got a very high Google rank for "Britney Spears" and "crotch" and was positioned to be the top result.

Thankfully, the traffic surge was well within the client's allotted data transfer. And it did result in a windfall of Google ad income.

At least something good came from a celebrity mishap.

Basic Feature Considerations

Aside from basic server requirements, here are a few more basic feature considerations when evaluating hosts.

Customer Service

It's 2am and your site just crashed. What are you going to do?

Most of the time customer service isn't something you worry about. But right now, it's everything. And unlimited web space is worthless if you have problems and can't get help.

Problems should come up very rarely, but when they do (and they probably will), you need to know you have solid support. Your host should offer *24/7 customer service that's prompt, helpful and in the format that works best for you.*

- **Prompt:** The best customer service should respond instantly. Depending on the severity of your issue, a wait time of around a few hours for a response should be reasonable, but you certainly don't want to wait 24 hours for a response. That's bad.
- **Helpful:** Customer service should actually resolve your issue. It's no good if they're evasive, give bad information or flat-out don't care.
- **Your preferred format:** How do you want to get help? Some companies offer ticket-based web support and others offer full-blown phone support. Know what type of support your host offers and what works best for you.

Control

You're paying money to host your site and you should have a reasonable amount of control over it, right? Makes sense.

But not all hosts will offer you the same level of control. Since you may have shared hosting and not a dedicated server, you may not be able to control everything. But a good host will give you the necessary access to do what you need to do.

Most hosts offer a control panel that includes a lot of backend functionality — more control than you probably need. But you want to have that kind of control. You never know when you'll need it.

The most common control panel is cpanel and frankly, it's the best. Since cpanel is so popular, you'll find loads of tutorials and how-to information, even if your host doesn't provide this information directly. Because of cpanel's popularity, you probably won't have to relearn a new system if you ever switch hosts.

Another common control panel is plesk, but it's known to have problems, so avoid it if you can. Also, avoid hosts with a custom control panel. These custom control panels are often lacking features, buggy and hard to use.

Security

Like customer service, we don't usually think about security until something bad happens. And when it does, you'll appreciate good security.

You'll find that most hosts don't talk about security. It's not so secure if you tell everyone what you're doing. But one good sign is if a host brags about their security — they have something

What kind of security should a user look for?

"Make sure they have multiple layers of security: network firewalls, access-lists, intrusion prevention systems and server firewalls. Also, make sure they keep up to date with server patches that relate to security."

-Scott Everhart,
BuildaWebsite.com

to live up to, so check out reviews to see what others have said about their security.

In addition to reviews, what are some other ways to know if a host is secure? Look for network firewalls, access lists, intrusion prevention systems and server firewalls. Basically, you want to see multiple layers of security protecting your site. Also, make sure they're updating server patches in a timely manner.

Not Overloading Resources

One of the biggest problems you could encounter in the hosting world is overloaded servers. Many hosts try to cram too many sites on a shared server to maximize profits. Overloaded servers make sites slow or unavailable due to other sites on the same server hogging resources and bandwidth.

Unfortunately, there's really no way to check if your host is overloading resources. Check out the speed of other sites using the host or even check out the host's own site to see how fast it's running. The best you can really do is ask around, read some reviews and get a general feel for the resource quality they offer.

FTP Access

Check to see if your host offers *FTP access*. FTP access is one of the easiest ways to connect to your site and upload files (you'll just need a separate FTP program). If you want to install WordPress yourself, you're going to want FTP access.

If a host doesn't offer FTP access, they will allow you to transfer files through a web interface. This method still works, but it's often not as quick and easy as FTP access.

What's the best way for a user to know if a host is oversold and servers are going to be slow?

"I would visit some forums online, like [Web Hosting Talk](#) and search for topics related to host performance, server speed, etc.

You can also contact the host directly to ask for some examples of websites they host so that you can test for performance. Some web hosts will have examples of these sites on their website."

-Scott Everhart,
[BuildaWebsite.com](#)

Upgradable Plans

Everybody hopes the tiny site they're launching today won't be so tiny in the future. But if that dream becomes a reality, can your hosting make it work?

Check out what kind of upgrade options your host offers. You don't want to pay for more than you need right now, but one day you might need to upgrade. Growing pains are bad enough without having to switch hosts.

Just be wary of hosts offering unlimited everything. Just because your data transfer is "unlimited" doesn't mean you won't need to upgrade. Read the fine print.

Email

You probably already have an email address, but if you're setting up your business website, you'll probably want to use your business email. Most hosts do offer email, but confirm this to make sure they offer the email features you need. You use your email daily, so you'll want to make sure it works well. Here are a few examples of email features a host should offer:

- **Catch-all email accounts:** Allows any email sent to your domain to be rerouted to you
- **Autoresponders:** Automatically sends a reply when someone emails you
- **Mail forwarding:** Forwards your email to an existing account (especially helpful if you already have an email address and don't want to check multiple accounts)
- **Accessibility:** How can you access your email? Ideally you want IMAP and/or POP3 access (allows you to check your email through Outlook or another email program), as well as a web-based solution.

Pro Tips:

"Email is a large part of the web hosting equation so I'd advise making sure the plan comes with email that's easily configurable on smartphones, etc.

Anyone who has a small business or plans to start one should have their own email at their own domain."

-Scott Everhart,
BuildaWebsite.com

Extra Feature Considerations

These aren't must-have features, but they could help you decide between two otherwise similarly equipped hosts.

One-Click WordPress Install

WordPress installation is pretty easy, but it gets even easier when hosts offer *one-click WordPress installation*. Literally, WordPress gets installed with a single click.

More hosts are offering one-click installs and it's great for users who want a simple, no-hassle approach to setting up a site. But be aware of the trade-off: You're giving up control for simplicity. Sometimes these one-click installations have drawbacks, like slower upgrades and security issues.

Reselling

Host *reselling* is a feature that's probably more for advanced users that wish to resell hosting to others. Reselling is common for web developers because it allows them to offer everything from building the site to actually hosting it. If this sounds like something you'll need, you'll want to look into what kind of reselling options your hosts offers. Some hosts even offer unbranded solutions so you can make the hosting environment match your own branding.

Real Example:

In 2010, one well-known host drew criticism because their one-click WordPress installation was adding a link to the footer.

The link sent people back to the host, giving the host a boost in their search engine rank, free advertising and loads of potential customers. Too bad they never had permission to do it.

Their current customers never authorized the link and most were never even knew it was there. It was a violation of WordPress plugin guidelines and just bad business.

Thankfully this host backpedaled and started notifying customers about the link and showing them how to remove it.

Affiliate Cash

Even if you're not planning to resell hosting, a host might offer affiliate dollars. *Affiliate cash* can pay off if you have a lot of people asking you about hosting. Plus, you don't have to manage anything other than ads or links and you still get to make some money.

Domain Name Registration

Many hosts will also offer *domain name registration*. While it can be simpler to combine your hosting and domain registration, there's usually a catch — it can make switching hosts more difficult.

Some hosts actually own your URL and license it to you, so other hosts might refuse to transfer the URL if there are any outstanding bills or issues. There's nothing worse than being fed up with a host but unable to switch because they're holding your domain name hostage. Yikes.

Either use a different company to register your domain or make sure your host registers the domain in your name so you'll be able to freely transfer the domain name.

Domain Parking

This is the practice of buying up several domains and redirecting them to your main site. Companies will buy domains that are very similar to their domain name (even misspellings of the URL) in order to catch every bit of traffic. Most hosts will allow *domain parking*, but sometimes they'll set limits on how many URLs you can redirect. Make sure you can work within these limits.

Backup

Who has your “back”? You should have some type of *backup* system in place to protect your site. It can be easy to accidentally delete a folder if you’re poking around in an FTP program, and it happens to the best of us. Some hosts offer daily backups and you can restore what you deleted in a matter of minutes. But don’t merely rely on whatever your host may offer. It’s nice to know they have your back, but you should also take care of yourself. For serious protection, you should have your own backup system in place, like BackupBuddy.

E-Commerce

Do you need extra site functionality like *e-commerce*? You should evaluate the capabilities you need up front, since many hosts offer out-of-the-box e-commerce solutions. They may not be as customizable as some available WordPress plugins, but if you’re needing something fairly basic, they may work just fine.

Hosting Multiple Sites

Are you a serial website junkie that launches a new site every week? Can’t stop buying up crazy domain names? If that’s you, it would probably be smart to host all your sites in the same space and not buy new hosting for each one. Some hosts will let you host multiple sites and it’s usually called *addon domains*. But you need to check. Not every company offers it.

What’s something that continually surprises you about customers?

“It’s pretty common for customers to make no backups of their own for their website or database.

[Making backups] is a good idea no matter how solid your host is; it’s good to keep versions of website files in case you need to go back to a particular day before something got messed up.

We’ve saved quite a few customers from disaster with our snapshots but elsewhere they might not get so lucky.”

-Scott Everhart,
BuildaWebsite.com

More Hosting Wisdom

Picking a good host is more than checking off a list of features, so explore the company and their services thoroughly to know what you're getting. Here are some general nuggets of wisdom that can save you some headaches.

Reputation

A company's reputation matters. How long has the company been around? Do they have fifteen years of experience or two? How do they respond to complaints? What do other folks say about this company? If any of the answers you find to these questions make you uneasy, you should probably keep looking.

Unlimited Has Limits

We've said it before and we'll say it again: *Unlimited is not really unlimited*. Don't be fooled by hosts offering unlimited storage or data transfer. It's really just bait. They're trying to lure you in.

In reality, they do have limits. They might be buried in a terms of service agreement or contract, but they're there. If you don't see them, ask. Sometimes hosts will leave their limits completely undefined, or worse, redefine them from time to time without warning. In many cases, the storage and data transfer numbers aren't what's important — you'll hit other resource limits first, like PHP memory.

A lot of hosts are offering unlimited everything. How are customers supposed to know what they're really getting?

"Unlimited is a word that is thrown around a lot in the hosting world these days. What customers need to do is make sure to read the terms. The 'unlimited' plan will usually have restrictions as to what type of content can be hosted there, etc."

-Scott Everhart,
BuildaWebsite.com

Uptime Guarantees

What kind of uptime guarantees does the host offer? 99.9% sounds great, but that still allows for eight hours of downtime per year. Can your business handle that? For many small businesses that's an annoyance, but for other businesses, that can be a deal breaker.

You should also ask what happens if your host can't live up to their guarantee. If they screw up and their server crashes, can you get a refund? If you're really concerned about downtime, you should also ask about their disaster planning. Things like earthquakes, tsunamis and even thunderstorms happen and they've been known to take down websites. Your host should be prepared for the worst. It happens.

Location

The Internet is obviously global. But location still matters. If your site's servers and primary audience are on opposite sides of the world, that can slow things down. If speed is a major concern for your site, pay attention to location. A global *Content Delivery Network* (or a large distributed system of servers in multiple data centers) can eliminate the location issue, but the location of your host is still worth considering.

It's OK To Switch

Don't be afraid to switch. It's fairly easy to move your site (especially if you use BackupBuddy!) and your site is probably going to be around for years. So if you feel like your monthly bill is too high, you're going to be paying that bill for years. If it's too much, shop around and switch. Likewise, the service you're getting now is what you can expect to have for years. So if it's subpar, is that something you can live with for years? You don't have to put up with it. So don't. It's OK to switch.

BackupBuddy Hosting Requirements

BackupBuddy is a powerful backup plugin for WordPress that makes it easy to backup, migrate and restore your site. While BackupBuddy packs a punch, it also has some specific hosting requirements to work well. Here's a quick overview of what your host will need for BackupBuddy to run smoothly.

- **Linux Server**
This is a must. Stay away from Windows — it's not officially supported for BackupBuddy, so you'd be on your own.
- **HTTP Loopbacks**
We recommended these in general, but it's a real necessity for BackupBuddy.
- **suPHP (or something similar)**
Does the server run PHP process as hosting user id (using suPHP or similar)? This is recommended by WordPress.org for operating WordPress sites and will minimize issues with file/directory ownership/permissions when working with the site.
- **64 Bit Server Running 64 Bit PHP**
Without this, you'll run into limits on your backup file size.
- **Command Line ZIP**
This is another general recommendation that you really must have for BackupBuddy. It makes file compression faster and more efficient.

- **mysqldump**
This is a script your host may or may not allow you to run. It's not a deal breaker, but not having it can cause problems with large database tables.
- **256 MB PHP Memory**
This is another general recommendation that's very much-needed for BackupBuddy. BackupBuddy requires huge chunks of memory to process the backup files, so make sure you have enough memory.
- **Maximum Server Timeouts**
We talked before about getting a decent PHP runtime, but you'll want to get long limits for any potential server timeouts. Again, servers may timeout when different processes take too long, whether it's PHP, browser or database activity. The specific time range will vary greatly depending on the site and the host, but the longer the limits, the better. BackupBuddy is crunching a lot of data, so you want to give it room to work.
- **No External Storage Restrictions**
Sometimes hosts won't allow you to connect to external storage solutions such as Amazon S3, Rackspace, Dropbox or FTP. This can mean your simple, automatic backup process is no longer simple or automatic. That's no good.
- **File Download Restrictions**
Some hosts have security measures in place to stop files from being downloaded. It's not a deal breaker, but it can limit certain BackupBuddy features. This is also something many hosts will remove by request.

Top 6 Things To Look For in a Host

Scott Everhart from BuildaWebsite.com offered his top six things to look for in a host:

- 1. Company standing:** How long has the hosting company been in the hosting business?
- 2. Customer service:** Is it 24/7 live U.S. support? Are the techs just answering the phones or actually fixing the issues presented?
- 3. Location:** Is the server central to your core visitor group?
- 4. Reliability:** Do they have a good reputation for uptime, latency, performance?
- 5. Smoke and mirrors:** Do they have a world class homepage that makes them look like a huge company but are hosting your sites on a server in a garage somewhere?
- 6. Pricing:** What's the actual cost? Is the cost on the homepage much less than the actual cost?

Additional Resources

iThemes.com

Your one-stop shop for WordPress themes, plugins and training.

[BackupBuddy](http://BackupBuddy.com)

Protect your content. Back up, restore and move WordPress.

BuildeWebsite.com

Your solution for fast, secure, easy-to-use WordPress hosting.

WebDesign.com

Master leading-edge web design skills and techniques
and increase your business bottom-line.

iThemes.tv

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