

# What Are Gatsby Themes?

**Gatsby themes** are plugins that include a `gatsby-config.js` file and add pre-configured functionality, data sourcing, and/or UI code to Gatsby sites. You can think of Gatsby themes as separate Gatsby sites that can be put together and allow you to split up a larger Gatsby project!

## Introduction

To introduce themes, let's walk through the journey that led to the creation of themes.

If you've ever created a Gatsby site completely from scratch, you know that there are a number of decisions to be made. Take, for example, creating a blog. You need to decide where your data will live, how it's accessed, how it's displayed and styled, etc.

## Gatsby starters

One existing way to quickly create Gatsby sites with similar functionality is to use "Gatsby starters". Starters are essentially Gatsby sites with pre-configured functionality for a particular purpose. You download an entire Gatsby site, pre-built for a particular purpose (e.g. blogging, portfolio site, etc) and customize from there.

These traditional starters take a first step toward reducing the level of effort involved in creating a new Gatsby site. However, there are two main problems with traditional starters:

- Sites created from a traditional starter have basically been "ejected" from the starter – They maintain no connection to the starter, and begin to diverge immediately. If the starter is updated later, there's no easy way to pull upstream changes into an existing project.
- If you created multiple sites using the same starter, and later wanted to make the same update to all of those sites, you'd have to do them individually, site-by-site.

## Gatsby themes

Enter themes. Gatsby themes allow Gatsby site functionality to be packaged as a standalone product for others (and yourself!) to easily reuse. Using a traditional starter, all of your default configuration lives directly in your site. Using a theme, all of your default configuration lives in an npm package.

Themes solve the problems that traditional starters experience:

- Sites created using a Gatsby theme can adopt upstream changes to the theme – themes are versioned packages that can be updated like any other package.
- You can create multiple sites that consume the same theme. To make updates across those sites, you can update the central theme and bump the version in the sites through `package.json` files (rather than spending the time to tediously update the functionality of each individual site).
- Themes are composable. You could install a blog theme alongside a notes theme, alongside an e-commerce theme (and so forth)

A Gatsby theme is effectively a composable Gatsby config. They provide a higher-level approach to working with Gatsby that abstracts away the complex or repetitive parts into a reusable package.

## When should I use or build a theme?

### Consider using a theme if:

- You already have an existing Gatsby site and can't start from a starter
- You want to be able to update to the latest version of a feature on your site
- You want multiple features on your site, but there is no starter with all the features – you can use multiple themes, composed in one Gatsby site

### Consider building a theme if:

- You plan on re-using similar functionality across multiple Gatsby sites
- You would like to share new Gatsby functionality to the community

## What's next?

- Using a Gatsby Theme
- Using Multiple Gatsby Themes
- Shadowing
- Building Themes
- Converting a Starter
- Theme Composition
- Conventions

## Related blog posts

For additional context, check out blog posts published during the development of themes:

- [Why Themes?](#)
- [Themes Roadmap](#)
- [Getting Started with Gatsby Themes and MDX](#)
- [Watch Us Build a Theme Live](#)
- [Introducing Gatsby Themes by Chris Biscardi at Gatsby Days](#)
- [See all blog posts on themes](#)