Getting Started with WordPress

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WordPress is a powerful, yet simple-to-use web site making tool. You just choose a template, modify the text and upload your images and you can have yourself a fully-featured, beautiful web site with an hour.
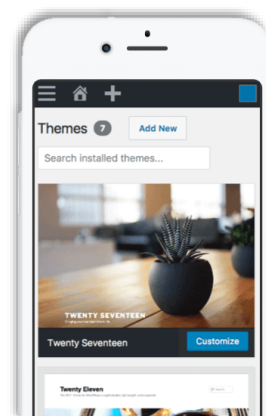
Why is WordPress so popular?

In 2019, WordPress claimed that 35% of public web sites were WordPress sites.

The main reason for its popularity is that you can build a wonderful and dynamic site in mere minutes, for free, and without writing any HTML, CSS, JS or PHP code. Even experienced web coders choose to use a tool like WordPress wherever possible, rather than coding from the ground up.

Just as importantly, WordPress gives the site owner, who typically has little web technology knowledge, the ability to manage and update their site even after coders like you have fulfilled your contract and have left them to their own devices.

WordPress is the most popular "web site builder". It comes in 2 versions: as a free download from WordPress.**org** which is intended for advanced users like you who want to use their own web host; and as a service offered on the WordPress.**com** computers.

There are many companies that offer similar web site builders as WordPress.**com**, such as:

- webflow
- Wix
- Squarespace
- Weebly
- duda
- Those offered by web hosts, such as GoDaddy's and HostGator's web site builders
- Those concentrate on being a shopping cart, such as Shopify

WordPress.**org** is a bit different. You download it to your computer or to your own Webhost and install it there. So, you aren't tied to WordPress.com's computers and you have complete freedom. It is the same fully-featured WordPress code, but is a bit difficult for those without a basic understanding of web hosting to use. In this space it competes with other CMS (Content Management System) that at one time were nearly as popular as WordPress, such as:
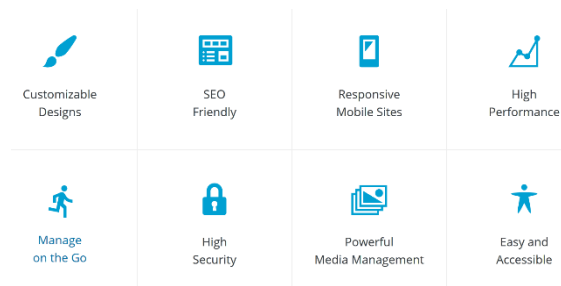
- Joomla
- Drupal
- Magento

Each web site builder has its own set of advantages and disadvantages around such as issues as:

- Cost
- The number of paid and free templates and plugins
- Free, default features and have-to-pay for features
- Ease of use, trading off against control and flexibility
- Level of security, in terms of services offered and the security of the software itself.
- Whether you can download your site and shift it to another company's hosting service. Of those mentioned, only "webflow" allows that
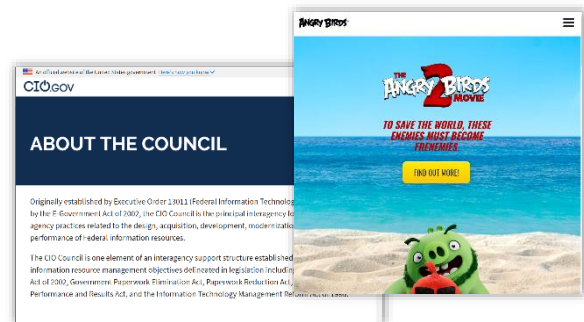- Open source or locked.

What's inside WordPress?

The default installation of WordPress has powerful tools for modifying the look and functionality of your site. What's more exciting about it is that it can be extended with plugins, themes, and widgets:

- **Widgets** are small addons for a web page. Examples are calendars or a Google map.

- **Themes** give you the basic look of the page. They are templates, giving you the basic layout and colouring of your site.

- **Plugins** can be thought of as powerful apps. They can be as simple as a widget, or a multi-media tool, or something so powerful that it rebuilds your entire site into a fully-functioning shopping cart. Other examples are SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) tools, pop-up calendars, and shopping cart tools like an Australia Post plugin that performs postage calculation and the Commonwealth and ANZ bank plugins (which will shift customer payments directly into your own bank accounts).

There are hundreds of thousands of free widgets, themes, and plugins, so you can probably find what you need for free. You may decide to pay though, because it saves you so much time and money in development, or because they offer you better support and functionality.

WordPress was initially created as a web blog creation tool, but it can now be used to create any type of site you can think of, including a Wiki, a shopping cart, a chatting site, or a video site. You can achieve great things in an hour or two that would take you otherwise take weeks to achieve in a tool like Notepad++ or Dreamweaver. Some examples:

- Sites where attractive presentation is crucial, like Angry Birds

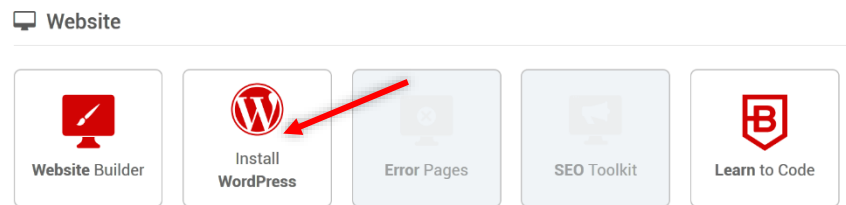- Sites we trust, like this US government web site www.cio.gov

And best of all, it's free! **Or at least, it *can* be free**, depending on how you install it and depending on which extensions you choose to use.

Installing and editing your site?

You can think of WordPress as a piece of software.   It is not an ".exe" though; it's just folder containing over 5MB of PHP, HTML, CSS and JavaScript code, plus some images.

Most self-hosting web sites offer you WordPress installation tool. And note that by "self-hosting" sites we mean sites like 000webhost and 000webhost's paid service hostinger.com, which allow you to upload your own files, not "web hosts" like Wix, webflow, or Weebly that only allow you to use their templates.

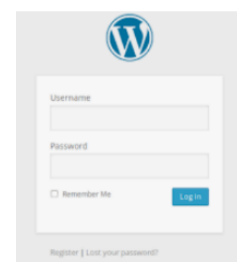This screenshot from 000webhost shows that it offers a WordPress installer, plus its own web site builder:

Each new WordPress copy/folder is a single web site. The default installation gives you a home page and a link to several others. WordPress starts life looking a bit tired and ugly, but it only takes a few minutes to dress it up into something more presentable. You, as the web site owner, will have access to your site's "Dashboard". From the dashboard you get to make use of the 5MB of code behind those simple pages to quickly and easily create any type of site that you want. These 2 screenshots showed how the default sites looked in 2010 (the "Twenty Ten Theme"), 2017, and 2019 (the "Shapely Theme"):

Obviously there's nothing much to look at with the 2019 theme. Your site though can quickly come to life once you get your site's dashboard and activate a new theme or customise the current one.
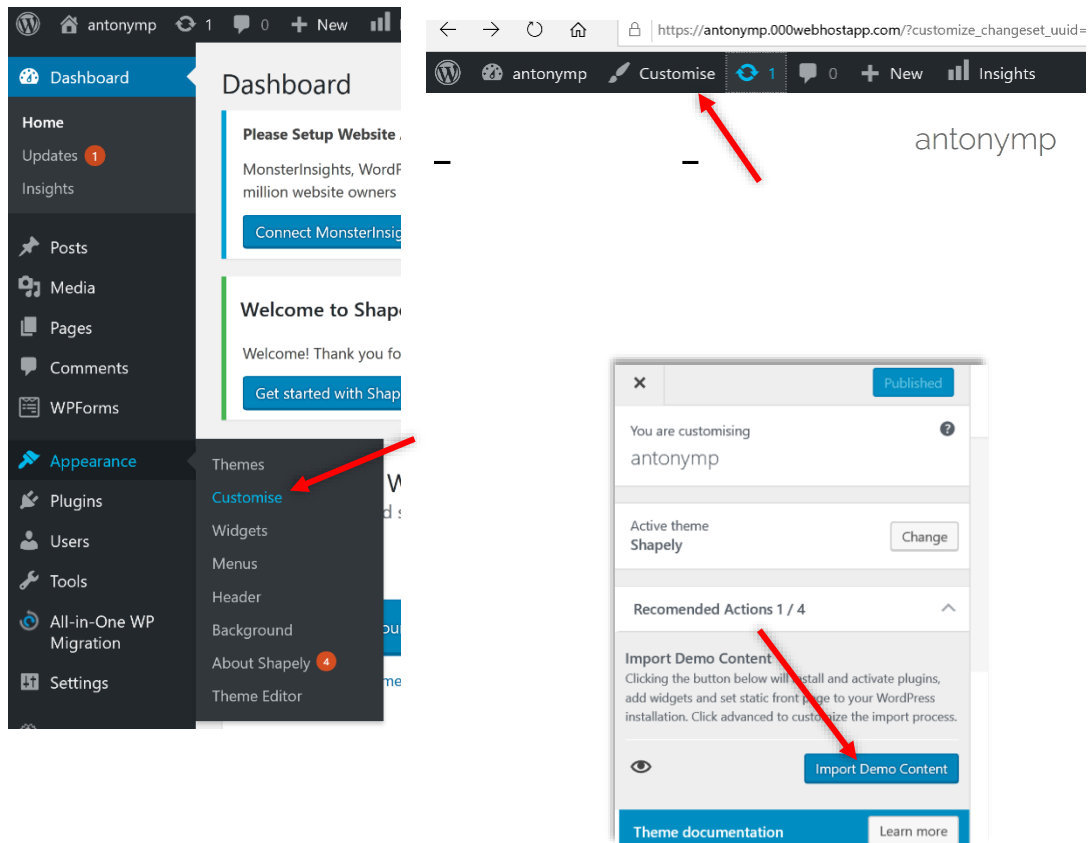
To get into the dashboard, you simply visit your page on the web, and then tack "\wp-login.php\" onto the end of your site's URL. You will then be prompted to enter your site's username and password
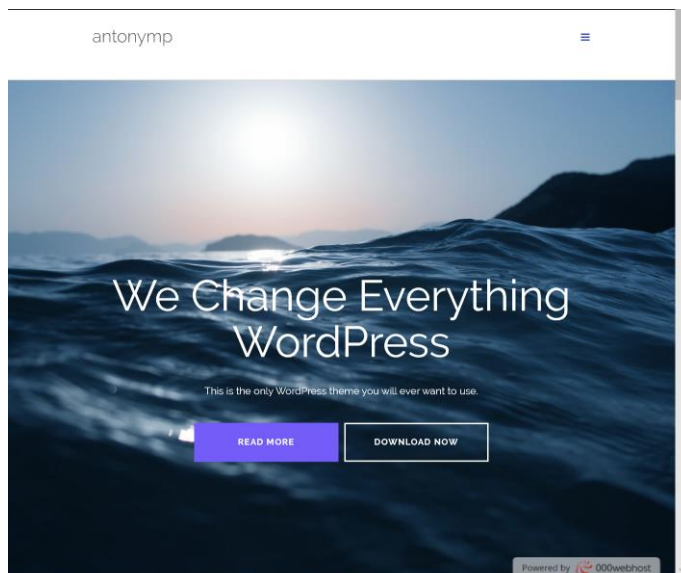

Customising WordPress's Shapely Theme

One option to you is to "customize" the WordPress' default theme - Shapely. These screenshots show 2 ways of getting to the "Customize" settings. From there you can press the "Import Demo Content",

which will fill your site with images and text. With these images and text serving as placeholders you'll find it easier to insert your own content
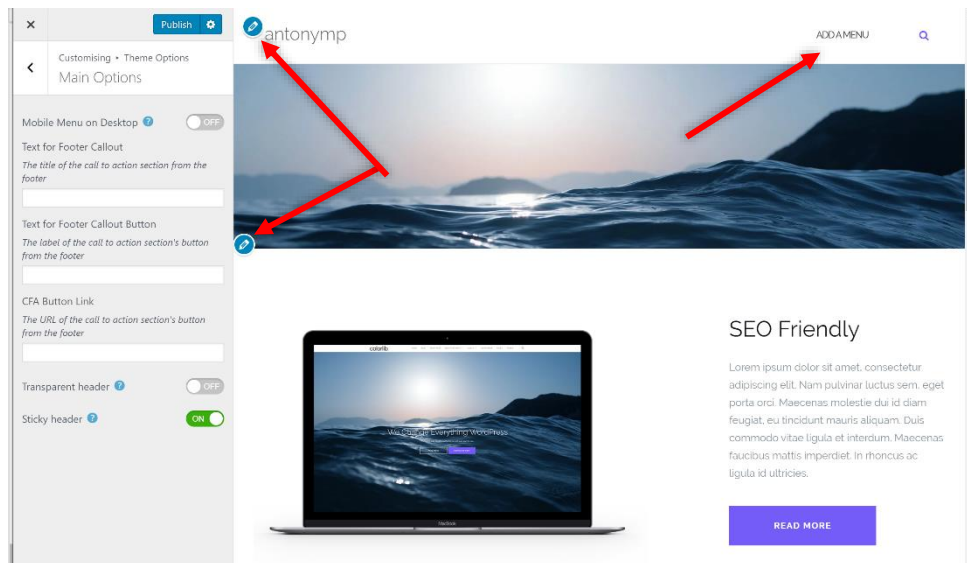
Shapely will have now given you some images and changed the layout of your site by introducing new and changing existing PHP, JavaScript, CSS, and HTML:
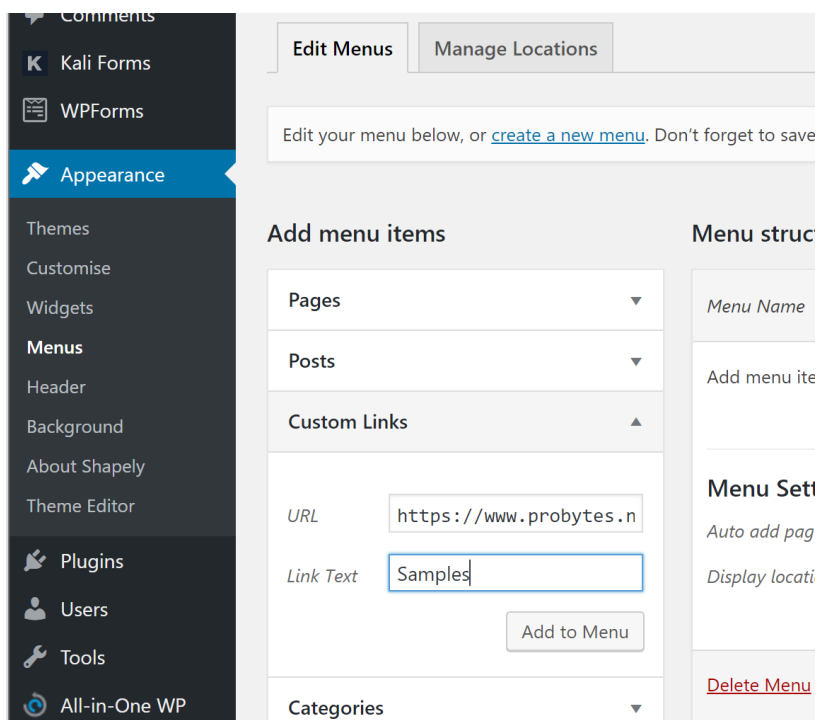
From the Customize link, you can now start playing with your site by editing sections by clicking on the blue pens in the top left corner of sections, adding menu items by clicking "Add Menu" link in the

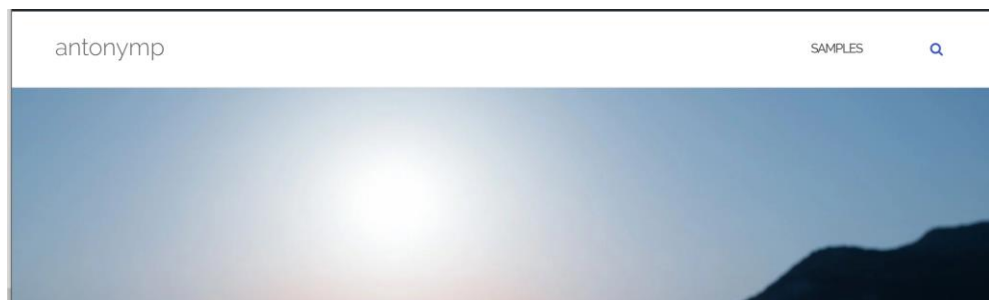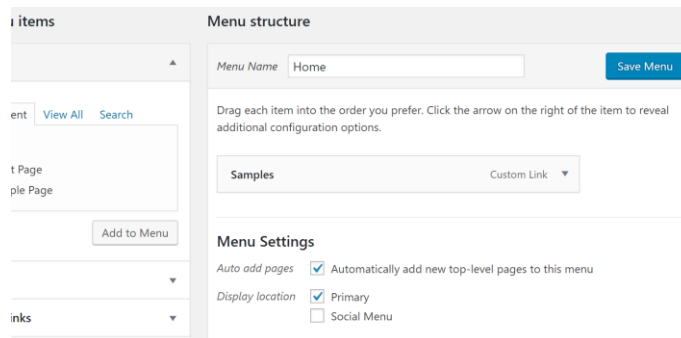navigation bar, changing the way the navigation bar behaves by looking in the "Main Options" menu, and so on:

If you were to click on the "Add Menu" link, it would take you into the WordPress Dashboard and to WordPress' Menu settings. These settings belong to WordPress, not the Shapely theme. From here you could, for example, create a menu item that links to another website, by adding a "Custom Link" to your site:

You can then ask that your new menu item be added to the "Primary" menu, and it will appear on your Home Page:

You could continue working with the wonderful and powerful Shapely theme, but we will move away from it and install an even more powerful plugin named "Elementor" instead. It has more options than Shapely and is better suited to our skills because we have some CSS knowledge that we can take advantage of.

Two versions of WordPress?

There is a free version of WordPress and a paid one. We will use the free one in our course. The paid and free versions are identical – they are both full versions. The only difference is where they live, and that location affects how much you can do with it. The paid version lives on WordPress.com, and they restrict what you can do until you pay money to release the feature you want.

Using WordPress.com

To use the paid version, you create and account on www.wordpress.com. When you build your site, that site will stay on WordPress's web hosts. You won't be able to download a copy of it and shift it to another host.

WordPress.com is like other popular web site builders like Wix. They are great for people who don't have the time or knowledge to set things up by themselves.

The first steps on wordpress.com are free, but you won't get too far before you hit a roadblock and find that you must pay perhaps between $5 or $50 for the extra flexibility you need. This is how Wix and all the other "free" web site builders make their money.

Using WordPress.org

WordPress will also allow you to download their entire, fully-featured software and use it for free. You can download it from www.WordPress.org (not .com). That 7MB zip file that you download is classified as open source software. It's just PHP, JS, HTML and CSS code and you can read through it all and change the code directly if you wish.

By moving away from the wordpress.com computers to your own PC or to your own web host, you lose some of the benefits of staying within the WordPress ecosystem. For example, you won't get the same level of support, you will have to do a little setting up yourself, and you will have to manage security issues yourself. But what you get is total control and freedom, plus, typically, a cheaper web site.

Installing is a 1-minute process if installing using an installer that your web host offers you (as most do, and as shown above for 000Webhost).

If you don't have access to an installer, it can take about 5 minutes:

- If you are installing on your host, but your host doesn't offer an installer, then you will need to download it yourself from wordpress.org, upload it to your host, and then step through instructions, such as these: https://support.hostgator.com/articles/how-to-install-wordpress-manually].

- If you are installing WordPress on your own PC, you should first install 3 software – a server, MySQL, and a PHP interpreter. You can install all 3 in one hit by installing a WAMP stack such as WampServer or XAMPP. You would then follow installation instructions, such as these for installing WordPress: https://themeisle.com/blog/install-xampp-and-wordpress-locally/
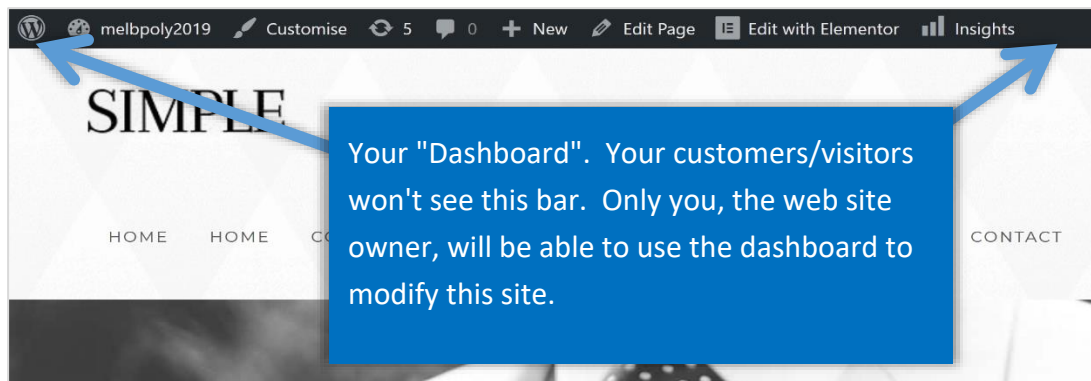
Editing your WordPress site

After you have successfully installed WordPress, you will find that you have a file named wp-login.php in your WordPress folder. If you open this file (by tacking it on to the end of your site's URL (e.g. http://www.my_wordpress_my_host/**wp-login.php**) you will be presented with a login page.
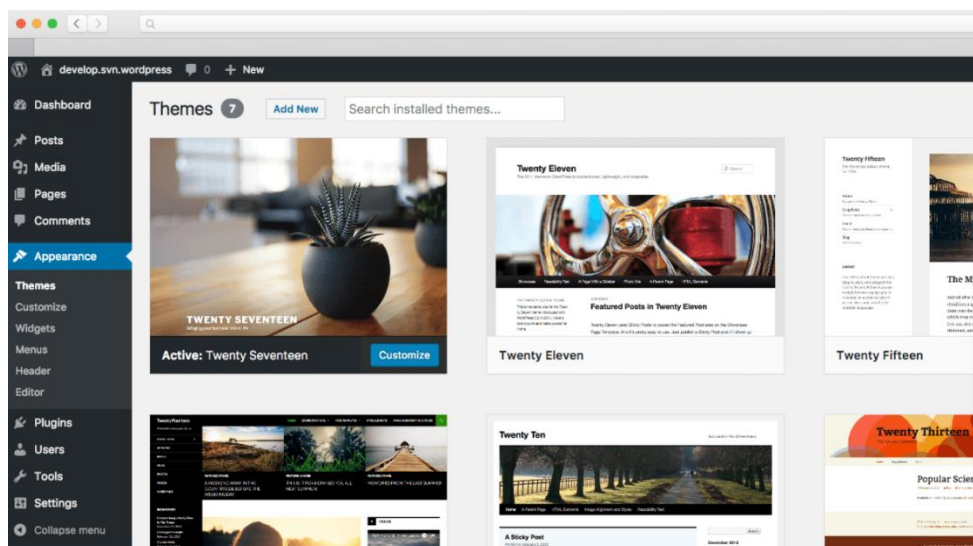
You enter the username and password that you created when you first set up WordPress and this will take you to your site's WordPress "**Dashboard**".

The Dashboard is a collection of tools that the web site owner can use to modify their site. This image shows what the website owner will see – the website plus a dashboard bar:

The above image shows a minimised Dashboard bar. By default, the site owner will see the Dashboard in full-page mode, as seen here:

How much does it cost?

Using WordPress.org

People who have just a little web host, HTML, CSS, JavaScript and PHP knowledge, won't find it too difficult to implement the **free** version of WordPress. Your costs need only be:

- Finding a Webhost, which can be as little as $5 a month, but is more likely to be around $12 to $25 per month (so perhaps budget for $200 per year).

- If your site is going to accept credit card payments and process other sensitive information, you would want to spend $150 or more per year on an SSL certificate.

- You will probably also decide to pay for plugins, themes, and widgets instead of using free ones. The main reason may be that it saves you money because it shortens development time. They may also give you extra functionality and better support. Or maybe you don't feel you have a choice e.g. you want the ANZ bank plugin because you want customer payments to go to your

ANZ bank account instead of PayPal. You can expect you'll want to spend an extra $50 to $500. There are always free options though.

Using WordPress.com

If you are going to create an account on wordpress.**com**, it too is initally free, but you'll soon find that you need to pay for plugins, themes, and other changes that you could have been achieved for free using wordpress.org. Where you save money:

- No hosting costs (for simple web sites that don't generate much traffic)
- Free SSL certificate

No Coding Required, but…

WordPress experts like your good future-selves have an advantage over newbies. You will have the ability to get total control over all aspects of your site because you will be able to get your hands dirty and dip into the PHP, JavaScript, and CSS code that constitute WordPress.

This coding is *not* typically done by changing the native code. Rather, it is done by adding code *on top* of WordPress. We add code to WordPress using techniques like "hooks" for JS and "child CSS" for CSS, and we will discuss these later. We use these techniques so that we can update WordPress and our plugins without losing the code changes we make.
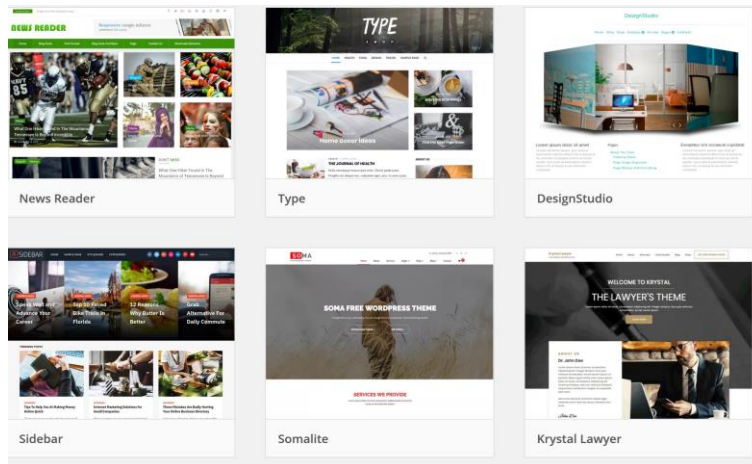
Such changes can only be easily made if you used WordPress.org, not WordPress.com.

Choosing your theme

There are 1000's of themes available, both free and paid. They are the starting point for your site: You first choose a theme that is as close as possible to what you want, and then you modify it with the theme's own settings and with plugins and widgets.
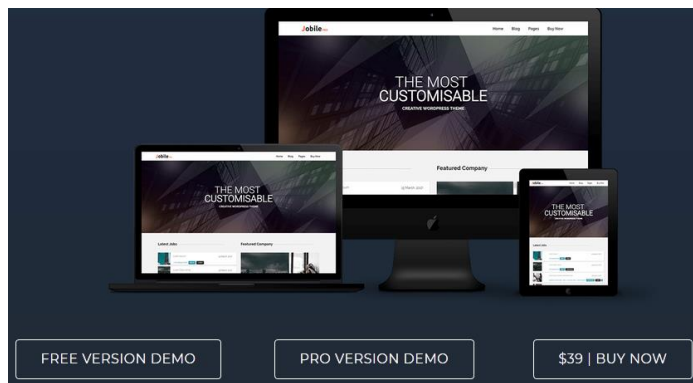
The paid themes usually cost between **$30** and **$100**. You could also buy one custom made for you by a Web developer where prices may start at perhaps $300 but typically start at $2000.

You can install themes directly from inside WordPress by searching within the "Themes" section of your dashboard and then installing and activating them. These are themes that are stored on the wordpress.org computers:
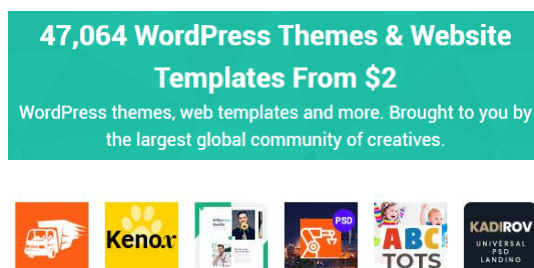

There are also many thousands of other themes available that you can download from other web sites and manually upload into your WordPress' "wp-includes/themes" folder and then "activate" from your WordPress dashboard. (You can also make money yourself by building your own theme and having them sold through these sites). Examples are:
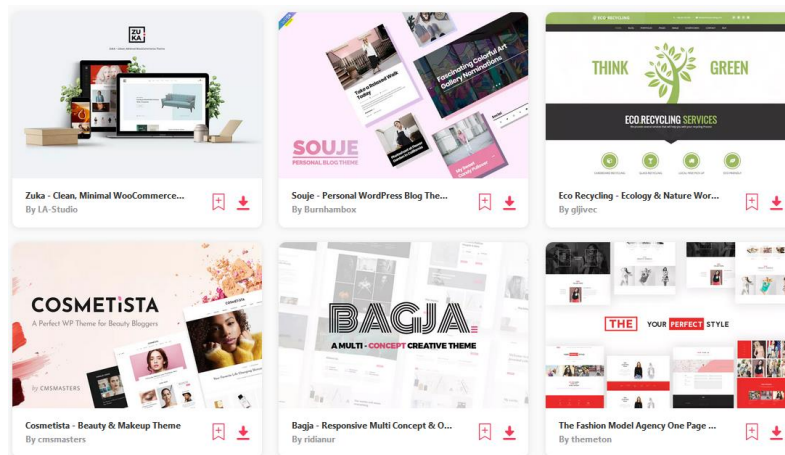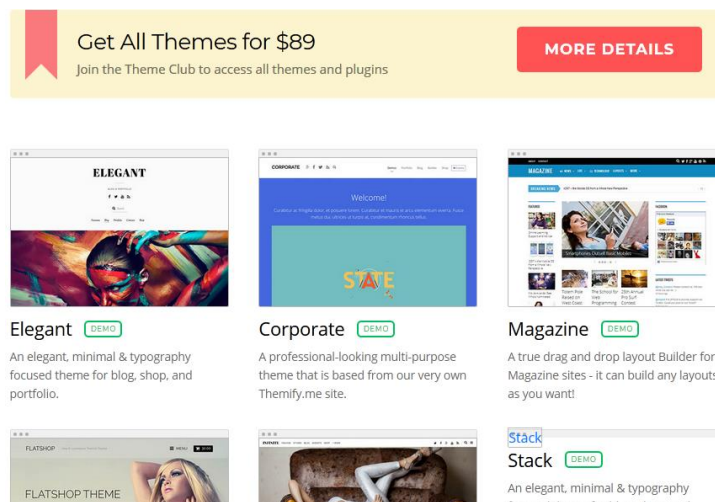
- Fasterthemes 🔗

- Themeforest 🔗

- EnvatoElements 🔗

- Themify.me 🔗

What are these "Themes"? A theme is a combination of PHP and CSS files that change the look of your site, but also add functionality. For example some themes will have a photo gallery as part of it, while others will come with wiki capabilities.

The better quality themes are typically the ones you have to pay for. We will be using fantatistic free themes in this course that are as good as any paid one (such as Elementors wpOcean theme). When you do pay for a theme, you would generally expect that you'll receive:

- ✓ More default functionality, and more tools for modifying the theme
- ✓ A more modern design
- ✓ A higher chance the theme will accommodate all different browsers and browser versions on all types of devices
- ✓ A higher chance the theme is well written and so will work smoothly and respond well to your modifications and re-configurations
- ✓ Better support (usually in the form of user forums) and documentation from the theme developer, which makes redesigning your theme and overcomign obstacles much easier. Givne the popularity of some of the paid for themes, there will be more likelihood of a Google search turning up help too.

- ✓ A higher chance the theme developers provided mulitple *hooks* that are well documented. (Hooks are one of the main tools available to you for modifying a theme's appearance and functionality – see later)
- ✓ Regular theme updates
- ✓ Unique designs
- ✓ A higher chance there isn't any malicious code or advertising tricks in the code

Considering too that there are more paid themes than free ones, it is generally in the web developer's own best interests to purchase a theme. This is true only if for the reason that the developer will save time and money - a theme's cost might be the equivalent to half an hour's wages!