The anatomy of a WordPress theme

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Post author

[Joost de Valk](#)

Tag

[WordPress Themes »](#)

With all the WordPress theme frameworks that arose over the past few years, you'd almost forget what a normal WordPress theme looks like. Almost, because Yoast has got your back and we're about to remind you!

Check out our anatomy of a WordPress theme infographic:

Anatomy Of A WordPress Theme

The cheat sheet for how your blog works

Joe's Website!

home   about   cat pictures

header.php
Global file that displays headers and navigation. Also contains HTML head code.

The Loop
The display of contents of the main area of your site are controlled by individual template files using what's called "the loop."

sidebar.php
Sidebar display is controlled in this file. Multiple sidebars can be set up in functions.php, and contents of sidebar widgets are set up from the WordPress wp-admin panel.

footer.php
Contains instructions for global footer and closes HTML tags.

WordPress themes are made up of a folder of template files, each of which controls a specific piece of your theme. Parts of your site that remain static no matter what page you're on are controlled by header, sidebar, and footer files. You can hack these files so they detect what page you are on and serve different content accordingly, such as displaying different navigation on posts than on pages; however, it is most common for these sections to look the same throughout the site.

home

Joe's Website!

home   about   cat pictures

index.php
The index file controls what the home page looks like. By default it contains a loop that queries and then displays the most recent blog posts, with a link at the bottom to view previous posts.

Alternately, you can specify in wp-admin>settings>read to have the home page be a page you created yourself in WordPress. In that case, you specify a different page/URL for the regular blog posts to appear on, and that page is generated by index.php

posts

single.php

The display of individual posts is controlled by a little file called single.php. It contains a loop that queries just one post and displays it.

You can specify if you want sidebars (and which you want), if you want it to look different than other pages on the site.

pages

page.php

Page.php controls what WordPress pages look like. You can choose to eliminate sidebars or other elements, or add other unique elements for pages alone.

WordPress also allows you to create different page templates for different types of pages. To create a page template simply copy page.php, rename it to whatever you want, then add this code to the top:

```
<?php
/*
Template Name: YourNameHere
*/
?>
```

archives

archive.php, category.php, tag.php

You can control the look and feel of different archives using template files also. If there is no archive file, the archives will look like index.php; however, you can create an archive.php to override that. If you create a file called category.php, it will override archives.php for categories only. If you create a tag.php, you can override it for tag archives only.

The Loop

The Loop is perhaps the most powerful part of your WordPress theme. It starts with a query (which determines which posts or pages to grab), and ends with a php "endwhile" statement. Everything in between is up to you. You can specify the output of titles, post content, metadata, custom fields, and commenting all within the loop, and each element is output for each post or page until the query is done. You can set up multiple loops and queries on a single page; for example: on a single.php you could have the loop showing the entire content of a single post, with a loop outputting just titles and thumbnails for related posts below it.
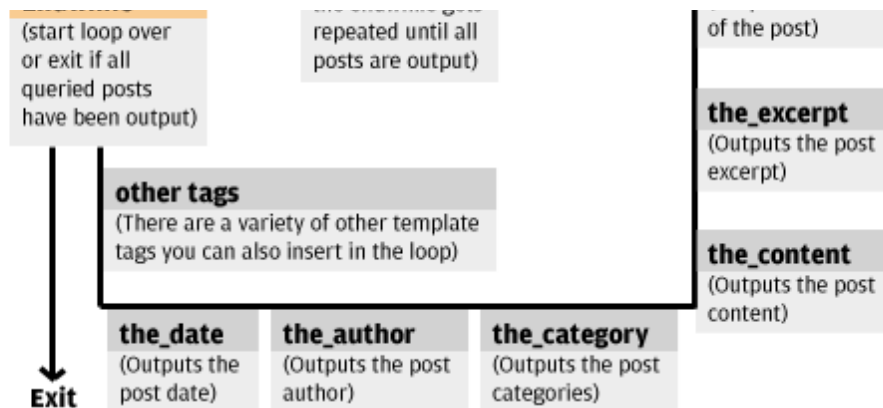
Query Posts or Page

Start loop
(Everything between this and the endwhile gets

Endwhile

the_title
(Outputs the title

(start loop over
or exit if all
queried posts
have been output)

repeated until all
posts are output)

of the post)

the_excerpt
(Outputs the post
excerpt)

other tags
(There are a variety of other template
tags you can also insert in the loop)

the_content
(Outputs the post
content)

Exit

the_date	**the_author**	**the_category**
(Outputs the post date)	(Outputs the post author)	(Outputs the post categories)

Behind The Scenes

In order for a WordPress theme to work, it needs a few essential background files. These files can be modified to your needs, and can quite powerfully affect the custom look and functionality of your site.

comments.php

This controls the output of comments, which can be included in the loop if you desire comments on your theme. Comments.php can be overridden by plugins such as Disqus, which then take over comment functionality for your site.

functions.php

Functions.php allows you to put your own custom php code in order to modify core elements of your theme. It is often used to specify multiple sidebars, change the number of characters in the excerpt, or add custom admin panel options from wp-admin.

style.css

This is the main CSS stylesheet for your theme. It also contains text at the top which tells WordPress what your theme name is, who the author is, and what the URL of your site is.

The Extras

Beyond the core functionality of Wordpress, extras like plugins, custom fields, and widgets allow you to further customize your site.

Plugins

A massive community of open source developers has built a plethora of plugins that you can add on to your theme for free, including e-commerce, slideshow, cacheing, and social media plugins.

Custom Fields

Custom fields are special boxes below the main post box in the wp-admin when you are creating a post. They let you create your own options, which can then be displayed in the theme. Common uses include thumbnail images and javascript includes.

Widgets

Widgets are little modules that go in your sidebars. From within the wp-admin, you can mix and match preset widgets, and add your own via plugins or php code. Widgets inlcude things like search forms, popular posts lists, and advertising blocks.

For reference, here is the copy in the infographic:

Anatomy of a WordPress theme

The cheatsheet for how your blog works

WordPress themes are made up of a folder of template files, each of which controls a specific piece of your theme. Parts of your site that remain static no matter what page you're on are controlled by header, sidebar and footer files. You can hack these files so they detect what page you are on and serve different content accordingly, such as display different navigation on posts than on pages; however it is most common for these sections to look the same throughout the site.

Our *SEO for WordPress eBook* guides you through every aspect of Search Engine Optimization »

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- **The Loop**

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- **sidebar.php**

  Sidebar display is controlled in this file. Multiple sidebars can be set up in functions.php, and contents of sidebar widgets are set up from the WordPress wp-admin panel.
- **footer.php**

  Contains instructions for global footer and closes HTML tags.

index.php – home

The index file controls what the homepage of your WordPress theme looks like. By default it is a loop that queries and then displays the most recent blog posts, with a link in the bottom to view previous posts.

Alternately, you can specify in wp-admin -> settings -> reading to have the home page be a page you created yourself in WordPress. In that case, you specify a different page/URL for the regular blog posts to appear on, and that page is generated by index.php.

single.php – individual posts

The display of individual posts in your WordPress theme is controlled by a little file called single.php. It contains a loop that queries just one post and displays it.

You can specify if you want sidebars (and which you want), if you want it to look different than the other pages on the site.

page.php – individual pages

Page.php controls what pages look like. You can choose to eliminate sidebars or other elements, add other unique elements for pages alone.

WordPress also allows you to create different page templates within your WordPress theme for different types of pages. To create a page template, simply copy page.php, rename it to whatever you want, then add this code to the top:

```
1   &lt;?php /* Template Name: YourPageNameHere */ ?&gt;
```

archive.php, category.php, tag.php – archives

You can control the look and feel of different archives using template files also. If there is no archive file, the archives will look like index.php; however you can create an archive.php to override that. If you create a file called category.php, it will override archive.php for categories only. If you create a tag.php, you can override it for tag archives only.

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- Query post or page
- Start Loop
- `the_title` (outputs the title of the post)
- `the_excerpt` (outputs the post excerpt)
- `the_content` (outputs the full post content)
- `the_category` (outputs the post categories)
- `the_author` (outputs the post author)
- `the_date` (outputs the post date)
- other tags (there is a variety of other tags you can use in the loop)
- `endwhile;`
- Exit the loop

Background files of a WordPress theme

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Joost de Valk is the founder and CEO of Yoast. He's a WordPress / Web developer, SEO & and an Open Source fanatic. He's also (and more importantly) the father of three sons called Tycho, Ravi and Borre, a daughter called Wende