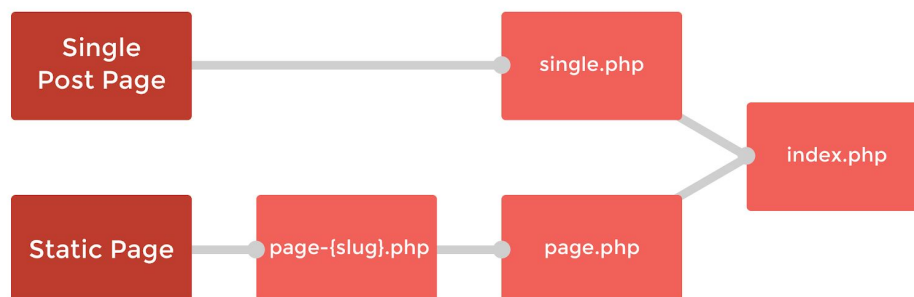# skillcrush

The WordPress Hierarchy

cheatsheet

WordPress themes can be very complex, with many template files. Or they can be simpler, with fewer template files. With such variety between themes and a number of template file options, how does WordPress know what template file to apply to a page? HOW?! Is it magic?

It's not magic! WordPress looks at something called the **query string** to determine what type of page and what content type is being displayed. (Is it a single post page? An archive page? A category page? Search results? etc.) The query string is information contained in the link to each part of your website. Typically, you won't see this information because you'll have set URL rewrite rules when you change the permalinks. But WordPress sees it!

WordPress will then apply a specific template based on the information in that query string. WordPress looks to a **hierarchy** to decide which template file takes precedence if more than one eligible template exists in the theme for any given page.

Here are two simplified examples:

- For a single blog post page, WordPress will look to see if a single.php file exists in the theme. It isn't there? Then WordPress will use the default index.php file to output the page.
- Or for a static page, WordPress will look for a page-{slug}.php file. Doesn't exist? It will look for a page.php file. Doesn't exist? It will use the index.php file.

Everything defaults to index.php. This is why even the simplest theme will need *at least* an index.php and a style.css file.

You can read more about the hierarchy [in the Codex](). Or check out the [Visual Hierarchy]()!

WordPress moves through the visual hierarchy from left to right looking for a matching template file in the theme. (HINT: click on a file name to see more information!)

Some things to keep in mind as you study the hierarchy are:

- in general, certain theme files are used much more frequently than others
- many template files are applied automatically if they exist, like front-page.php

We see examples of these and more in the *103: Introduction to WordPress* lessons. And just like WordPress itself, the theme hierarchy evolves over time, so keep an eye out for new template files!

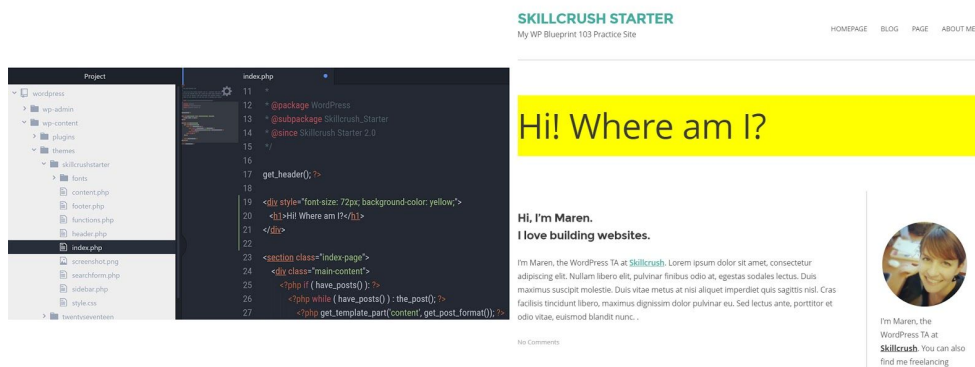Wowsa! The hierarchy is a beast of a thing! But we have a handy hint to help you tame it.

HOT TIP!

While working in a template file, try putting in some HTML with obnoxious styling. Something like this would do the trick:

```
<div style="font-size: 72px; background-color: yellow;">
    <h1>Hi! Where am I?</h1>
</div>
```

Now click around your site to see where this div presents itself. It could show up in a few places, so keep that in mind!

Of course, you'll want to remove the dummy code afterwards!

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You could also use a plugin like these to show you which file or files are in use:

- [Which Template File](#)
- [Show Current Template](#)

There are more, feel free to experiment!

Once you understand the WordPress theme hierarchy, you'll be able to build more sophisticated themes and better understand and manipulate other developers' themes.

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