

# How to Pick a WordPress Theme

Everything You Need to Know About WordPress Themes



---

# How to Pick a WordPress Theme

Everything you need to know  
about WordPress Themes

---



Brought to you by iThemes  
Your one-stop shop for WordPress themes,  
plugins & training

PUBLISHED BY

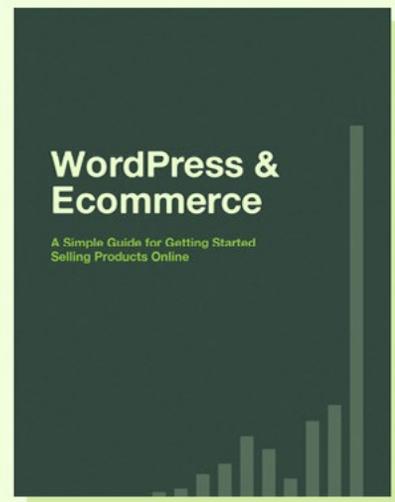
iThemes Media  
1720 South Kelly  
Avenue  
Edmond, OK 73013

Copyright © 2014 iThemes  
Media LLC. All rights  
reserved.

May be shared with  
copyright and credit left  
intact.

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

*WordPress is a registered  
trademark of Automattic Inc.  
This ebook and its author  
are not affiliated with or  
sponsored by Automattic or  
the WordPress open source  
project.*



FREE EBOOK DOWNLOAD

## WordPress & Ecommerce: A Simple Guide for Getting Started Selling Products Online

Get the latest iThemes  
Exchange news & updates,  
helpful WordPress  
ecommerce tips — and our  
*WordPress & Ecommerce* ebook  
— sent straight to your inbox.

[Sign up & download](#)



# About iThemes

iThemes was founded in 2008 by Cory Miller, a former newspaper journalist and public relations/communication practitioner, turned freelance moonlighting web designer, turned full-time entrepreneur. Miller founded iThemes in his home, fulfilling a lifelong dream of running his own company. Since then, iThemes has grown into a full enterprise providing professional, premium themes, plugins and professional WordPress web design and developer training at [WebDesign.com](http://WebDesign.com).

# Contents

Introduction.....	6
Theme Basics.....	9
20 Tips for Picking Themes.....	14
Theme Best Practices .....	41
Resources .....	48

# Introduction

So you need a new theme for your WordPress site. Good luck. Finding themes is easy. There are loads of them out there. Choosing the right one? That's hard.

While WordPress runs the backend, the theme is responsible for everything your web visitors see. If the fonts are goofy, the colors off or it doesn't fit on the screen, that's all about the theme. No pressure.

The theme delivers your style and your brand. It has a vibe and an energy that (hopefully) separates you from the rest. It communicates so much about your organization. No pressure.

Certainly your site visitors will see and interact with your theme. But so will you. No matter how much you try to hide in the WordPress admin, you'll still need to visit the front end. You'll be previewing content, grabbing links to share and more. You're going to be riding your own theme every day, so you better make sure it's something that won't get real old real quick. No pressure.

While a theme is all about the front end, the real beauty of a good theme is on the backend when you're building your site.

Remember those headache inducing errors and bleary nights of code wrangling? Beating your head against the keyboard because of a stray <div> tag? Pick a crummy theme and you could be in for more of those. But choose wisely and you won't need to pull an all-nighter. No pressure.

Yes, choosing a WordPress theme is a big job. Are you up for it?

Don't worry, we can help.

We live and breathe WordPress themes. We launched iThemes in 2008. We've learned a lot since then and we're still learning. Themes have changed a lot since then and they're still changing. We're continually amazed at the cool things you can do with a theme.

Our current library has over 180 themes and we're adding more all the time. And that's just the themes we sell. There are thousands of themes available out there. That makes finding the perfect theme for your site a daunting task.

Our mission is to solve problems and make life easier for our customers. We've been doing just that, cranking out themes and sharing our WordPress know-how. We know a thing or two about themes. We've got tips, ideas and best practices to get you a theme with as few headaches and late nights as possible. Hopefully we can help you choose the right one.

# Theme Basics

Before we help you pick the perfect theme, you need to know a little about WordPress themes. They come in every color in the rainbow, with just as many options and features. So let's cover some theme basics before diving in.

## Types of Themes

WordPress themes come in all kind and varieties. There's a stripe for every style, a ticket for every taste. They vary wildly, from the very basic theme that simply displays blog posts to an elaborate theme that gives you the power to customize the entire look without touching the code.

Let's take a quick look at some of the different types of themes:

### **Free vs. Premium**

There are two primary types of themes: free and premium. Free themes are obviously free—you can download them without any cost. You have to pay for premium themes, either as part of a package membership or a per theme price.

There's usually a vast difference between free and premium, but it also depends on the theme. Generally you get what you pay for and free themes tend to be pretty basic while premium themes offer a lot of extras. Plus most premium themes come with support to help you out in a pinch.

We'll talk about specific things to keep in mind with both free and premium themes later.

### **Custom Themes**

Another option is to hire a designer or developer to make a custom theme just for you. As with any custom work, this is going to be more expensive than pre-made options. But if you can't find what you're looking for, this might be a good choice for you.

Theoretically you're getting everything you want with a custom theme. But that assumes you thought of every feature to request upfront. Otherwise you might be paying extra. While most of the tips in this ebook are geared for picking out a pre-made theme, they might give you some extra guidance when going custom.

### **Theme Frameworks**

Some themes are designed to be the foundation for other themes. These are often called frameworks and they allow for quicker and easier development by giving a solid starting point.

This can be helpful when a developer is creating a custom theme and it also allows a theme creator to maintain consistency between multiple themes.

Often theme frameworks are used to create parent and child themes.

### **Parent & Child Themes**

It's always helpful in software development to separate the look from the functionality. That separation makes life easier for everyone. Parent themes generally handle the functionality of a theme and allow the child theme to customize more of the look. A major advantage to the parent-child framework is that when the parent theme is upgraded you don't lose any customizations you've made to the child theme.

One example of a theme framework that uses parent and child themes is [iThemes Builder](#). The Builder theme allows you to literally build your own layout without knowing code. Upon activation, Builder allow you to generate a child theme so you can make customizations that won't be lost if the parent theme is updated.

# Where to Find Themes

There are a lot of places you can get quality themes. That's the easy part. Picking the right theme for your site from the thousands of available choices? That's not so easy. We'll spend the rest of this ebook helping you with that choice. But first a few of the obvious places to get WordPress themes:

- [WordPress Theme Directory](#) - The official source for free WordPress themes.
- [Commercial Theme Providers](#) - WordPress also maintains a list of commercially supported GPL theme providers. (What's GPL? We'll cover that on page 35.)
- [iThemes](#) - Of course we offer loads of themes in different styles and configurations, including the [Builder](#) framework, [Flexx](#) and more. You can even get an [all-access pass](#) to every theme we sell for one low price.

# How to Install Themes

Once you finally pick a theme you'll need some help installing it. Here are a few resources to get you started:

- [Installing Themes](#) - A two-minute tutorial video from iThemes that covers the basics.
- [Getting Started With WordPress](#) - A free ebook from iThemes that covers all the details for WordPress beginners, including how to install themes.
- [WordPress Codex](#) - WordPress offers an overview of themes, including a quick overview of how to install themes.

# 20 Tips for Picking Themes

There's a lot to say about picking themes, but we've tried to condense our advice and wisdom into 20 tips.

## **1. Goals & Objectives**

What are the goals and objectives for your site? What do you want it to accomplish? What will people do on your site? How will you achieve those goals?

Browsing through pages and pages of themes is kind of fun, but it's not the first thing you need to do. First things first, you need to sit down and answer some questions. You need to figure out what you want out of your site before you can even think about what kind of theme you want.

It's easy to skip this step and start theme shopping, but the more time you spend thinking about your site the easier time you'll have picking a theme.

- What's the call to action on your site? What do you want people to do?
- What's your primary goal? You can have multiple goals and objectives, but you're likely going to have a primary one that supersedes everything else. That should be reflected in the theme design—whether it's front and center in the header or available in a sidebar and viewable on every page.
- Are you selling stuff on your site? Then you'll need a theme that works with your chosen ecommerce plugin. Are you building a community? You'll probably be working with BuddyPress and need a theme that's compatible. If you're creating a niche site there are plenty of niche tools available and you'll need a niche theme.
- Will you be using a blog to draw people in and showcase your expertise? Then the traditional blog elements will be important. If not, then you'll probably want a design that moves away from the typical blog layout.
- Think clearly about what your goal is. If you're a photographer your goal isn't to have a fancy website. Your goal is probably to make more money. Think through how you can achieve that with your website. It may not be showcasing the most amazing photos you've ever taken (since anybody online can do that). Maybe what sets you apart is a scheduling system that makes it easy for families to book a photo shoot.

Suddenly you're not just another hot photographer with a portfolio.

- If you're a writer selling books and running a blog, you may need a space to hype your books that's more prominent than the blog. Maybe you want a header with easily editable areas to drop in your latest book. Think through these kinds of issues ahead of time.

Focus on what you're trying to accomplish and how your website can help you get there. Don't be distracted by pretty designs and fancy tools.

## **2. Content First**

What content will your site have?

It's important to answer this question early on. It's tempting when you're shopping for themes to just dive in and check out all the flashy features. The next thing you know you've fallen in love with a shiny theme that doesn't even match the content you create.

Now it's OK to browse through themes and get big ideas. But you need to think honestly and realistically about the kind of content you create and how the theme can serve up that content.

- That giant HD video on the homepage may look awesome, but if you don't have any video you're going to be in trouble.
- The image slider at the top of the homepage is a great way to cycle through content, but only if you have good images to go with each post.
- The opposite is also true: A text-heavy theme that doesn't show images well isn't going to work for a designer trying to create a portfolio site.

Your goals and objectives should drive your content, not flashy features in a theme.

You need to be brutally honest when you're assessing what kind of content you're going to have. Everybody has a blog these days and it's worth asking if that's the best fit for your organization. Do you have the time and bandwidth to keep it updated? Is that the best use of your time? For many organizations the answer is a solid yes. But not for everybody. For some folks it's too much of a distraction to keep a blog updated and it really doesn't help the bottom line.

Maybe you don't like to write, but video is more your style. There's nothing that says you can't have a daily video as your content. Maybe it's a daily special or a product of the week or an inspiring quote. The potential is limitless, but you need to think it through now.

There's nothing worse than trying to shoehorn an idea into an existing site when it really doesn't fit.

Think long and hard about your content and how that relates to your theme.

### **3. What Can You Handle?**

A big part of picking a theme is knowing what you can handle.

Are you down with PHP?

Can you slice and dice some CSS?

If you're comfortable with code, then you have a lot more flexibility in picking a theme. If there's a something you don't like in a theme, you can probably change it without too much trouble. Obviously you want to pick a theme that involves as little customization as possible, but having the skills means you can be less picky.

If you can't handle the code you may need to live with some limitations. You've got two choices:

1. Learn the very basics so you can do things like change background colors. This doesn't have to be as hard or as scary as it sounds.

There are loads of resources to learn some code, including free [video tutorials](#) from iThemes and premium training from [WebDesign.com](#).

2. Pick a theme that comes just the way you like it or offers user-friendly controls to make those changes. Most free themes won't have those handy user-friendly controls, so be prepared to go premium.

Know your limitations and pick something you can work with. Managing expectations is key to getting a theme that works over the long haul.

#### **4. Structure**

What kind of structure will your site need? How many sidebars do you want? What goes on the front page?

The structure of your site is important because it can be one of the harder things to customize. While you can usually change the colors pretty easily, changing how many sidebars there are or where the menu is located can be a lot more involved, depending on how complicated the design is. Even if you're willing to do some custom coding, changing the structure of a theme is a lot of work.

Some big structure questions to ask:

- What's on the front page? Do you want the standard list of blog posts? Do you want static content? Do you want a few graphical highlights?
- How many sidebars do you want and where are they located? Single sidebar, double sidebar, no sidebar? Left side? Right side? Some themes can make these kinds of changes pretty easily, but most can't. If you're picky about sidebars, this is something you need to pay attention to.
- Is the menu located above or below the header? Is it vertical or horizontal?

## **5. Features You Want**

What kind of features does your site need?

- Simple customization - Change colors, backgrounds, header images and more without touching code.
- Homepage slider - A featured section on the homepage that cycles through a series of images, videos or more.
- Advertising space - Ready-made spots to run and track advertising.
- Featured image integration - Add an image to a post and have a featured image automatically resized to multiple dimensions for use on the homepage, sidebar, archives, etc.

- Custom page templates - Multiple page layouts—right sidebar, left sidebar, no sidebar, half-page sidebar, etc.
- Slideshows or image galleries - An organized way to easily display lots of images, either with a slideshow that cycles through the images or a gallery that lays images out automatically.
- Responsive - Mobile friendly responsive design that stretches or shrinks to fill the users' screen. We talk more about this on page 24.
- eCommerce - If you're planning to run a shop you'll want a theme that's compatible with your favorite ecommerce plugin.
- Social media buttons - These can take on a couple forms:  
1) A place to show off your social media hangouts, usually a list of icons for your social sites that appear in a sidebar or footer. 2) A row of social media icons that allow users to 'like,' 'tweet' or 'pin' your content (pick the appropriate verb).
- Widgets - If you need extra spaces to share your fun goodies, you'll want some widget spaces, probably in the sidebar and maybe elsewhere on the homepage.

## **6. Features You Don't Want**

There are a lot of features for theme providers to brag about. But that's not always a good thing.

Some theme providers are caught up in a features arms race, struggling to offer more and more. The result is feature bloat. Lots of junk you don't need and actually shouldn't be there in the first place.

There are two types of features to watch for here:

### **Feature Bloat**

A lot of themes pack in extra features you'll never use. This isn't a horrible thing, but it can slow your site down and add needless complication. If you've got folks using the backend who are less technically savvy, you don't want extra confusion.

Sometimes it's easier and better to get these same features with a plugin. The calendar feature included with a theme may not have as many options as a dedicated plugin can provide.

### **Stuff You Can Lose**

What's worse is stuff you can lose. Some themes pile on extra features that shouldn't be in the theme at all. It's functionality that's better left to a plugin.

Some themes will offer custom post types, like a portfolio item. Awesome, right? Not so much. It's content that should be part of your core WordPress installation, like your posts and pages.

But it's not. It's tied to the theme. Which means if you ever change your theme, bye-bye portfolio.

Custom post types should be part of a plugin, not a theme. You'll have similar problems with SEO tweaks or shortcodes. Anything that adds content to your site that you'll want to keep for the long haul shouldn't be tied to your theme.

### **The Exception**

One justifiable exception is the case where you don't want to do any extra work. Maybe you're not tech savvy and want an all-in-one solution. Or maybe you're working for a stingy client and it's not worth your time to track down several plugins. In these cases a theme that includes all these extras might be worth the risk of losing your content. Just be aware of what you're getting into and know that you're going with a short-term solution. If you ever want to change themes in the future you could end up throwing away your content.

## **7. Design Elements**

Don't be afraid to get into the nitty gritty. Look closely at your potential theme and pay attention to the design elements. These are the details that can give a theme a professional polish and really make it pop—if they're done right.

We're talking boxes, gradients, rounded corners, title styling, metadata layout and more. Do you like how the blockquotes are displayed? How about the comments? Is it clearly showing replies the way you want? Do you like the horizontal rules or the way spacing is used?

Some of these details—like blockquotes—are relatively simple to change with some basic tweaks to the stylesheet. Others can be more complicated, requiring a complete overhaul. Knowing what kind of code tweaks you can handle, make sure these elements either work for you or you're willing and able to change them.

## **8. Mobile Friendly**

Mobile browsing is exploding. More people are expected to use the Internet on mobile devices than desktops by 2015. Your site needs to work on mobile. But you can't just focus on mobile devices—there's an entire range of devices your site needs to work on: 4-inch smartphones, 8-inch tablets, 12-inch laptops, 24-inch desktops and everything in between.

You need a solution that works on every device.

Responsive design is probably the way to go. It allows your site to shrink or expand to fill the available space on any device, dropping or moving pieces as necessary.

Responsive design allows your site to respond to whatever device the user is on and just work.

Responsive is becoming a default standard for WordPress themes, but it's not there yet. Not every theme is responsive and not every responsive theme works just the way you want. You'll want to try a theme out and see how it stretches and shrinks. Take a look at what kind of control (if any) you get over how it works.

We talk more about responsive themes in our ebook [Go Mobile With WordPress](#).

## **9. Case Specific Themes**

There's a theme out there for every situation: Photographers, realtors, churches, bands, sports teams, restaurants and more. While these case-specific themes can offer some nice features, don't allow yourself to be pigeonholed by your industry.

These themes can be a good place to start. They're geared for specific situations, so they have just the features you need. They can be good solutions for beginners. There's nothing wrong with a case-specific theme.

But case-specific themes are also a way to unnecessarily limit yourself. If you're a realtor and you only look at themes designed specifically for realtors, you're missing out on a wealth of themes that could serve you as well or better.

Yes, take a look at those themes designed for your industry. They might be perfect.

But don't discount other themes. A more generic theme may not have restaurant imagery (which you'd replace anyway) or a built-in calendar, but it may give you more flexibility and power to do what you want. You can always add extras tailored for your situation with plugins.

## **10. Free Themes**

WordPress has more than 1,500 free themes in their official [WordPress Themes Directory](#). It's a great place to start your search for a theme.

But you get what you pay for. Not all themes are created equal and with free themes you're more likely to find places where developers took shortcuts.

You're also mostly on your own. Free themes come with little or no documentation or support.

That's not to say you shouldn't use a free theme. Some of the best themes out there are the free, default themes that come with WordPress, like [Twenty Thirteen](#) and [Twenty Fourteen](#). Just be aware of what you're getting. And be appreciative: Someone put a lot of work into that theme and they're kindly giving it away for free.

You can find loads more free WordPress themes if you just turn to your favorite search engine. But don't. There's a lot of junk out there that best-case scenario is sloppy code, worst case is malicious. Some free sites even include links back to the developer that you're not allowed to remove. That's a WordPress no-no. Stick to the official WordPress Theme Directory to avoid that kind of garbage.

### **Live Preview**

If you're not sure what you want, just try out a bunch of free themes like you're trying on clothes. Install a bunch of themes you like and use the 'Live Preview' to get a quick taste of what your site would look like. WordPress lets you access the theme's customization options so you can see what it would look like live without actually activating it.

Good fit? Save your tweaks and activate from the preview.

Not so flattering? Cancel the preview and try something else.

The live preview works with any theme you install, but it's especially handy with free themes since they're, well, free. You can check out as many as you like. You can preview premium themes the same way, but you'll have to pay for them first, so it's not quite the same.

Just remember to delete the extra themes you don't want (see more on page 44).

## **11. Premium Themes**

Premium themes don't have to be expensive. Most themes are under \$100, sometimes more if you're getting a license for multiple sites or access to loads of child themes. Compared to the cost of hiring a developer and building a custom site, that's a bargain.

It's also a great value considering the support and all the extra features developers will pack into a premium theme as opposed to a free theme. Customization tools are much more common in premium themes as well as extra features that go above and beyond.

You get what you pay for.

A few things to look for when dealing with premium themes:

## **Support**

One of the biggest advantages of going with premium themes is the support they often offer. This is a major bonus. If you have questions about how to change something, premium theme support will often walk you through it. Be sure to look closely at what kind of support they're offering: What does it cover? When is it available? How is it accessed? How quickly do they respond?

## **Documentation**

Premium themes are often more complicated, which means you need a little more help figuring them out. Look to see what kind of documentation they offer, whether it's tutorials, videos or instructions.

## **Feature Bloat**

A lot of premium themes stick in all kinds of extra features you don't need. Don't think that just because it's shiny it's going to be awesome. Often those extra features are just barebones offerings and you'll be better served with a more full-featured plugin. (See page 21 for more on features you don't want.)

## **Quality**

While it's true that you get what you pay for, it's also true that just because you're paying for it doesn't mean it's going to be better. There are premium themes with shoddy code and security holes.

But because they cost money, some people assume it's all good. Not quite. Make sure the code is solid.

## **Pricing**

When you're shopping for premium themes it's tempting to do some price comparisons. A \$40 theme might seem like a steal compared to that fancy \$200 theme. But in the end, this is all peanuts in the world of web development. **Don't worry about the price.** You'll likely be able to use a theme for several years and in that time even a few hundred dollars doesn't amount to much.

What really matters is getting what you want out of a theme. It's worth it to pay five times as much for a theme that's exactly what you want rather than settling for something else. Settling means you'll probably need to upgrade before too long and the time and hassle will mean you should have spent the "big bucks" upfront.

## **12. The Look**

This is probably the hardest advice to take: **Don't pay any attention to a theme's look.**

This may sound idiotic, but hear me out.

That amazing theme you think is awesome?

Take a closer look. What you're responding to is the icy blue color that fits your company and the slick photos with the fancy Photoshop effects. The look is perfect. But everything else sucks. The structure won't work, it's missing features, the design elements are poorly done and it's not even responsive. FAIL.

But that hot pink design you dismissed instantly? Take a closer look. It has the structure you need, the features you want and the design elements are top notch. The only thing that's not working is the color and the cutesy picture of the poodle. Change the color, add your slick photos and suddenly it's perfect.

When you're shopping for a theme your eye is instantly drawn to things like color and photos. We're visual people and these are likely the first things you see and react to.

But they don't matter.

You won't be using the stock images displayed in a theme's demo. The colors can also be changed pretty easily. So as hard as it may be, you can't let these visual pieces sway you.

### **13. Take It For a Spin**

We've covered a lot of the big picture basics. You know what to look for and what to avoid. Now it's time to start testing out themes. Take the demo for a spin and see how you like it.

Here's what you need to look for:

- Don't just look at the homepage—try everything. Test the dropdown menu (including how secondary and tertiary pages are handled), click through every page, leave a comment, the works. You don't want any surprises later.
- Your theme needs to work on all kinds of browsers. This is basic stuff any respectable theme developer should cover, but you need to double check. Test the theme out on different browsers and make sure there aren't any surprises.
- Don't forget mobile. Try the demo out on a few different devices. If you're specifically looking for a responsive theme this is huge. See how the site shrinks or expands and make sure that works. But even if you're not looking for a responsive theme, you should still try the theme out on a mobile device and see how it's going to look. No surprises.
- Notice how fast or slow the demo is. Keep in mind that this is probably an optimized, best-case scenario. If you use the theme it'll likely be bloated with content, analytics and sidebar goodies. There's a lot you can do to speed up your WordPress site (try a caching plugin such as [W3 Total Cache](#)), but a lot of it comes down to the theme's baseline speed.

- Remember that the look doesn't matter. Superficial design choices like highlight images and colors can be changed pretty easily. Try to look past the surface. Squint if you have to.

#### **14. Figure Out How Things Work**

Now that you've taken a theme for a test drive, you need to understand how it works before making it yours. That's something you probably won't be able to figure out from a demo. This is especially important for more complicated themes that do more than list the most recent blog posts on the homepage. If you've got sliders, featured posts, highlights or other slick upgrades, you need to understand how they work.

Some themes are set up better than others. Some are built intuitively, some are not. Some of these themes will work for you, and others won't.

One theme might add customizations for a homepage highlight in a special theme settings page. This might sound great, until you realize that special settings page requires straight HTML to update, meaning you need a coder to keep it current. That could be a deal breaker.

Another theme might use widgets to power callout boxes on the homepage. That can be a slick solution. But what if you don't know code and want to add images to those boxes along with text? Suddenly you need to know HTML again and it's not working so well.

Or you could have a theme that populates a homepage slider with the most recent blog posts. That's great if every single blog post is something you want highlighted on the homepage. Or maybe that slider is a little smarter and it only pulls in posts from a specific category. Better, but what if you don't want that extra 'featured' category cluttering up your blog?

The bottom line is that you need to know how these fancy features work. You could be choosing a solution that's going to back you into a corner. That's no solution at all.

Unfortunately, not every theme makes it clear how things work. You might need to poke around in the documentation or ask the theme creator. If it's a free theme you can always install it and see for yourself. But don't just assume it will work the way you want. That never ends well.

## 15. Licensing

One of the unique things about WordPress is that it's open source software. It has a **basic licensing agreement** that grants freedom to the user, instead of limiting what you can do with your own software. This has caused some controversy as WordPress encourages 100% GPL-compliance for all themes and plugins, but that compliance isn't required.

What does that mean? It means some folks who create WordPress themes are releasing them with a partial license, which in some ways hinders what you can do with the theme. It's not technically wrong, but it is frowned upon by the WordPress community.

In a nutshell, it goes against the open source spirit of WordPress. So when you're shopping for themes, look for full GPL compliance—or at least be aware of how the lack of GPL compliance will limit your use of the theme.

## 16. Code Compliance

You want your theme's code to be well structured, free of errors and valid. Nobody wants sloppy code. Clean code works better and faster on a wider variety of machines. It makes coding tweaks a lot easier. Even if you're not planning to do any customizations, it's better to have clean, organized code.

Themes should be run through **W3C** validation and if a theme provider isn't advertising that fact they should be happy to tell you if their code is validated. The code should also be properly commented so it's easy to see what's happening. Make friends with a coder and ask for their opinion.

If you're not sure, run the theme's demo through the [validator](#). Though note that code compliance is pretty picky. Most themes will come up with a few minor issues. For example, WordPress's default theme, Twenty Twelve, came up with 31 errors. You're looking for major red flags. If you're unsure what's worth worrying about, share the results with the theme's developer and see how they react.

## **17. Security**

Themes and plugins can introduce security problems for WordPress so it's important to make sure you're getting a secure theme. There have been issues in the past with themes including code that inadvertently led to security issues, like the TimThumb image resizing script, which was used by several dozen themes in the WordPress Theme Directory. You need to know the theme you're using is up to date on security issues and won't leave your site open to hackers.

Of course you can't know how secure a theme is just by looking at a demo. One approach is to try the [Theme Authenticity Checker](#) plugin, though that requires installing the questionable theme in the first place.

You can also ask a trusted web development professional who's worked with WordPress sites. They'll likely have horror stories and can steer you away from the iffy themes.

Another approach is to simply Google the name of the theme or theme creator and the words "security issues" to see what kind of online chatter there is.

For serious security peace of mind, install our free WordPress Security plugin, [iThemes Security](#), or invest in our [Pro version](#) of the plugin for expert support and updates.

## **18. Current**

We just finished talking about security. One of the most common security lapses for WordPress is when users fail to keep their installation current. And that includes themes and plugins.

But users aren't the only ones who need to keep a theme current. The theme developer has to first make the necessary upgrades and patches so a user can update the theme.

But there's rarely an obligation for a developer to fix a theme, especially for free themes.

So you need to make sure the theme you're buying has a history of being kept current. If it's a brand new theme, check out the creator's history with their other themes. If the theme you're considering hasn't been kept up to date, you should probably steer clear. It might be an antiquated theme the creator isn't supporting anymore.

WordPress is always being updated with new features and security fixes. Likewise, themes need to be kept up to date if they're going to take advantage of those new features and work properly with the latest version of WordPress. Plus new security holes are often discovered and can easily be exploited without the proper fixes. The prettiest theme is useless if the developer isn't keeping it current.

## **19. Trust**

Many of the issues we've talked about come down to trust. You want quality code that's secure and kept up to date. If you're paying big money for a premium theme, you need to know the support is going to be there when you need it. **Picking a theme comes down to trust.**

That can be a little disconcerting when we're talking about some stranger on the Internet.

Here are a few ways you can check up on a theme developer and build a foundation for trust:

- Ask around. Talk to people you know and trust who are knowledgeable about WordPress and get their opinion.
- Look at a developer's history. How long have they been creating WordPress themes? Are they an established company that's been around for a while or an upstart college kid who might fall off the radar when the course load gets heavy?
- Google the name of the theme or theme creator and add a negative word such as 'sucks,' 'problems' or 'known issues' to see what comes up. Look for widespread patterns. It's possible you'll find a vocal but isolated disgruntled user. Take these search results with a grain of salt, but you should get an idea of any bad experiences with the theme you're considering.

## **20. Never Perfect**

Finally, remember that there's no such thing as perfect. You'll never find a theme that has everything exactly the way you want it. Every theme will have something you don't like or aspects you need to customize.

The idea is to pick something that's as close to perfect as you can get. Find something that best matches what you need and its weaknesses are as trivial as possible. That's the key to finding something that will work long term.

If you're really that picky then you shouldn't be buying a pre-built theme but hiring someone to build a custom theme just for you. That kind of solution gets pricey pretty quick. Plus, there's no guarantee of perfect happiness.

Pick your battles, know what's worth fighting for, and then be content with what you get.

# Theme Best Practices

Now that you know how to pick a theme, there are a few important best practices you should keep in mind for dealing with themes.

## Using Child Themes

Themes are often updated by developers, especially premium themes, and you can benefit from upgrades and improvements. It's a slick process that happens inside WordPress and you just have to click a link. Easy upgrades!

But there's a problem.

If you've customized your theme at all you risk losing those changes in an upgrade. Not cool.

One simple way around that is to create a child theme.

### **What's a Child Theme?**

Some WordPress themes use parent and child themes to allow for easy upgrades and more options.

The parent theme offers the framework and engine of the theme while the child theme handles structure and style.

This allows you to separate the basic elements of a theme and keep your customizations safe. It also means you can have a core theme that's very powerful and have countless iterations of child themes to change the look.

iThemes Builder is one example of a theme that takes advantage of the parent/child theme relationship. Builder allows you to design different looks for different pages, moving sidebars, menus, widget boxes and more, effectively creating your own layout for any page. It's pretty slick. As the parent theme, Builder handles all that code-crunching muscle.

With the [Builder 5.0 update](#) changed the way it handled parent/child themes as separate files. Now, all Builder themes come bundled with the parent Builder theme. This may sound confusing, but this change actually made the installation process much easier.

Upon activation of your Builder theme, you now have the option of creating a custom child theme. So when Builder gets an upgrade, you can just upgrade the Builder theme and your child theme stays intact, no need to worry about any of your customizations disappearing.

## How to Create a Child Theme

Some themes, like iThemes Builder, come with parent and child themes already set up, so you're good to go. But other themes aren't built that way.

Thankfully, it's not too difficult to create a child theme from a standard theme. It will get a little tech heavy, but if you know enough to do simple customizations—and you want to protect them—then this shouldn't be too difficult.

[How Themes Work](#) - This helpful tutorial video gives an overview of how themes work. Skip ahead to 18:11 for a quick explanation of how to create a child theme.

For a more detailed explanation, check out this [tutorial](#).

## Dev Server

It's not a good idea to experiment with new themes while your site is live. That's a good way to confuse your visitors and mess up your site.

The ideal solution is to set up some kind of development space where you can try out new themes, make tweaks and test before going live.

There are a lot of ways you can accomplish this, but one of the easiest is to set up a new installation of WordPress in a separate folder or subdomain. If privacy is a concern, you can either password protect the folder or subdomain from your host's control panel or use a WordPress plugin to require membership to view the site.

Now you've got a handy place to try on different themes. Take them for a test spin and see how they feel.

When you're ready to go live, you can even use a migration tool such as [BackupBuddy](#) to move your entire development site to your live site—simple and easy.

Hang on to that development space—it's a good place to play around with new plugins or tweaks. It may be tempting to try out new stuff on your live site, but that's a good way to break things. You've got a private space to test, so go ahead and use it.

## Delete Old Themes

If you've tried out a bunch of themes and have them sitting around in your WordPress installation as available themes, get rid of them. If you're not going to use them they're not doing you any good. They're cluttering up your installation, they're taking up space and they could even make your site vulnerable.

Themes and plugins can both introduce vulnerabilities to your WordPress site. Even when they're disabled. Any files in your WordPress folder are accessible from the Internet unless you block them. So even uninstalled themes can be exploited.

If you don't need them, delete them.

If you feel like you have to hang on to those themes, move them off your site and onto your hard drive.

## Before You Switch Themes

If you'll be switching from an old theme to a new theme (and not just starting from scratch) then it's important to make that transition as seamless as possible. Here's a quick checklist of things to do before switching themes:

### **What Tweaks Did You Make?**

Look through your current theme for changes and customizations that you made. Some of those might be modifications for the old theme that you won't need anymore, but some might be stuff you want to keep. If that's the case you need to make sure you'll hang on to them. If you added code to the functions.php file or stuck something in the footer.php, you'll lose it when you switch themes.

## **Tracking**

If you added any kind of tracking code to the template files, you'll need to be sure to add that code to your new theme. An easier way to handle a tracking code is with a plugin.

## **Backup**

We've mentioned it several times already, but in case you haven't gotten the message—backup your site! Anytime you tinker with your site you risk losing things, so give yourself a safety net. Backup your entire site. Check out plugins such as [BackupBuddy](#) that make the process smooth and automatic.

## **Maintenance Mode**

We've already talked about using a development server and that will vastly decrease any downtime when you're switching themes or making tweaks. But it's also a good idea to enable a maintenance mode while you're transitioning themes. A [maintenance mode plugin](#) will allow you to display a friendly message to any users who happen to hit your site while you're down.

# Take It Slow

As you get your site up and running with a theme it's important to take your time. It's tempting to keep adding plugins and turning things on and getting your site just the way you want it. But if you go too fast you could miss something that's broken, making the task of sorting out what happened that much harder.

Make each change and test your site out carefully. Try it out in different browsers and on different screens.

Make a checklist of everything you need to do and check it twice. Go slow and make sure everything works.

When your new site is up and you didn't pull your hair out, you'll be glad you took it slow.

# Resources

Want to learn more about working with themes? There are plenty of resources available.

Check out the free [Web Developer tutorial videos](#) from iThemes to learn more about customizing your theme.

[WebDesign.com](#) offers a vast library of premium training videos, including a series on building a theme from scratch:

[Session 1](#)

[Session 2](#)

[Session 3](#)