

The Comparative Guide to WordPress in Libraries

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The Comparative Guide to WordPress in Libraries

A LITA Guide

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Preface

If you're interested in this book, you've probably made the decision that a website is the best way to implement your library project. Congratulations! You have a myriad of choices available from hosting a simple one page site through your Dropbox account to hiring an outside company or using free tools to build your own website. Fortunately, you do not have to build a website from scratch—to do that, to paraphrase the great Carl Sagan, you would first need to invent the Web. Instead, you can rely on the powerful and customizable WordPress for your website development needs.

WordPress is free software that allows you to build a website with no coding experience required. However, a successful website does involve some elbow grease, as you must understand the needs of your users, figure out how to best meet their needs, and then implement a solution that gives them the information or experience they are looking for. WordPress is a tool that can help you make a website, but it needs you to make the site great.

Alongside Polly-Alida Farrington, I have cotaught hundreds of students on how to use WordPress to build library websites. While our six-week courses were focused primarily on getting librarians comfortable with the software, I want to go beyond the simple mechanics of WordPress in this book. Our students were often beginners who were directed to or had discovered a need to build a website for their library. However, the desire for a website does not mean that these students possessed the big-picture view of structuring a site that is useful for the end user. This book is therefore the next step in introducing people like my students in how to create a WordPress website that works. WordPress is built to make web development easy—and with help from the libraries surveyed for this book, anyone can build a website to achieve their library's goals and objectives.

In the first part of this book, you will learn about the WordPress software and some of the competitors. In the second part, you will get an overview of web design and how to use WordPress. The third part of this book illustrates how libraries are utilizing WordPress for their web projects. I describe these profiles as faithfully as I could from survey responses and my observations of their website. If there are any mistakes, they are my own. I attempted to contact international libraries with mixed results. While some library types are cut-and-dried (e.g., school libraries), some library projects can cross multiple dimensions. In organizing the websites, I tried to keep library websites of the same type together; however, I deemed some websites special enough to be better classified in another grouping. Additional library WordPress examples may be summarized at the end of certain chapters. These examples may not have been included in-depth due to a lack of space or because the library was unavailable to complete the survey.

Some libraries used WordPress to build their first online presence, while others used it to revamp their website, and still others for a special project. Each library revealed the details of how their website was produced, describes their patrons, and evaluates how the website has fared since launch via a survey. To conclude each library's section, special features are shared that you can use in building your own website. These libraries serve communities that are too small to have a name or are located in the suburbs of a major city, while others support an entire state. From these libraries' examples, you will be able to build a case for using WordPress for your website thanks to the variety of projects that were achieved using this software.

The versions of the software and websites described in this book are the most up-to-date versions available when this book was sent off to print. WordPress or the websites featured may have changed by the time you are reading this text. I acknowledge these limitations but aim to present a firm foundation that will be useful long after these websites are no longer updated.

This book will not give you the complex skills needed to go out and build all the twenty-one library websites from scratch. You will learn the basics of WordPress and web design. You'll also learn about WordPress's capabilities, which will help you plan for launch and future direction. If you are interested in learning more about the topics covered, an annotated list of suggested readings are included in the appendix for further study.

Now, let's get started with WordPress!

Acknowledgments

When I undertook this endeavor, I was unaware of how writing a book really does take a strong community of support. My Twitter friends have been supportive as I tweeted about #bigproject.

My thanks to my mentors—Dr. Nora Bird, David Gwynn, Lauren Pressley, and Beth Filar Williams—who supported me when I was a graduate student and as a librarian.

Polly-Alida Farrington gave me a priceless gift when she approached me to coteach online WordPress classes with her. I had just graduated, and she reached out at that uncertain time and set my feet on the path that I am on today. Thank you, Polly.

From the roster of those online classes, I sought and found welcome feedback and guidance in developing the survey I sent to libraries. Thank you, Susan Hansen, Stacey Hayman, Valarie Massulik, and Robin Salthouse. I wrote this book for you.

Thanks to my colleagues at Darien Library, who inspire me to work harder and do better. They are shaping who I will become as a professional.

My thanks also to Thomas, who has the saintlike endurance to hear me out every night as I chatter on about my work and my projects. And to Jessica, who has been reading my writing for ten years.

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—Amanda Goodman

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PART 1

Understanding WordPress

An Introduction to WordPress

So, what can WordPress do for you? To start, the key term of this software is *free*. As in, you can either download it to put on your server or you can start a hosted website within minutes, all without digging out your credit card. WordPress is open source software that is free for you to download, customize, and use for your website. Open source software is released under a license that allows the end user—that's you—to continue to develop it without paying fees to the original creator. For WordPress, this means that you are free to download WordPress and tinker with the code to make it fit your project's needs. You can learn more about WordPress's license and the official statement on derivative works on their website.¹

Second, WordPress is a rather simple web development platform that anyone can use to build and maintain a website. You can create a powerful site without ever poking at any code! Of course, your website will be better suited to your needs and tastes if you do dig around in the back end, but with WordPress you don't have to. In fact, as of summer 2013, there are nearly sixty-nine million WordPress websites in existence.² This means thousands upon thousands of users have already built nearly anything you can think of. There are also free modules called plugins to extend what WordPress can do. You can change the appearance of your website as often as you change book displays with thousands of free themes. In practice, though, you probably will not change your site's theme so often. The community that supports WordPress is so strong that you can usually find something to help fulfill your website dreams and not pay a dime for it.

The third reason to consider WordPress is that it makes content management easy. WordPress is a content management system (CMS) that centralizes content creation, publishing, and editing. *Content* means text, images, audio, or video files that you want to publish online. In the past you would have needed to create a new web document in HTML for every single page on your website. If something were to change, such as your site's slogan, you would need to go to *every single page* to change it manually. For a small website this is not entirely unreasonable, but for library websites, this is usually not a sustainable practice. Enter the CMS. To manage content in WordPress, you log in to a web interface where you have access to create new content or even to edit, search, or delete older content. Your website's appearance and functionality is managed by the software, so all your writers need to worry about is creating content—not coding web pages.

All of the above is exciting for a cash-strapped library that may or may not have a dedicated webmaster. (You can create a free website that is easy to develop? Sign me up!)

BENEFITS OF WORDPRESS

Quick to Set Up

Got five minutes? If you are installing WordPress on your server, you can get started in as little as five minutes—as soon as you set up your MySQL database. By having your content stored in a MySQL database, your data can be easily backed up or exported to another system. Then to set up the site, you just need to download the files from WordPress.org, upload them to your server, and click on the install URL. Or you can simply go to WordPress.com to sign up for a website. Enter minimal information such as your desired username, e-mail address, and password, and you have your own WordPress website.

No Coding Skills Necessary

Whether you have never written a line of code or are a seasoned coding guru, WordPress allows you to work in the way you prefer. You can build a complete website without ever looking at the code that runs the website. From downloading a new appearance to adding content, you will never be forced to type code. If you do like to code, you can switch the content editor over to HTML mode and format your post to your exact specifications.

Web Interface

In the past, you may have had a dedicated computer in your library for the webmaster. With WordPress's web interface, you can work on your website from any Internet-enabled device. This may be your desktop, laptop, tablet, or even your smartphone. WordPress makes it easy to administer your website at the location of your choosing.

Content Control

There are a lot of ways to control your content in WordPress. You can easily schedule posts to not publish until a set date, which allows posts to be written ahead of time and be published without additional oversight throughout the month. Do you need to protect content with a password? Just mark off a check box and you suddenly have a members-only content area. Images can also be uploaded and displayed in a variety of layouts. Or if your site is going in a new direction, it is easy to select large amount of content and either unpublish it or delete it as needed.

Modular

WordPress is a modular system, designed for the user who is setting up a blog-style website—that is, all the tools are already set and available to publish a blog. However, if a blog is not what you desire, you can download additional components, called plugins, to expand WordPress's functionality. This modular method allows you to add only the specific pieces you need for your website. For example, one website may need a way to RSVP to events, while another site needs complex image galleries. By using WordPress without every function imaginable, your website will not suffer unnecessary “code bloat”—and thus won't be slowed down by supporting features that you will never use.

User Management

Users come in two forms: internal and external. Your internal users are people who are contributing content to your website and/or staff members. WordPress comes with roles and permissions to help you manage your editorial workflow. This way the author who is writing content cannot publish without the editor's permission. (If that feels too constraining, you can download plugins that give you more fine-grain control over what different internal users can do.) Similarly, WordPress comes

with great support to help you deal with your external users—those who read and comment on your website. You can allow anyone to respond to posts, blacklist words unacceptable to your community, and more, all without you needing to approve each comment.

Appearance

Web designers may be a dime a dozen, but your library may not have one on staff. Instead of taking the time to learn how to design WordPress, you can download a new theme to change the appearance of your website. Finding, installing, and activating a new theme is very simple. Your staff time can then be spent tweaking the theme to customize it to your needs instead of starting from scratch.

Large and Supportive Community

As previously mentioned, WordPress powers millions of websites. The community releases thousands of free themes and plugins each year to help make WordPress your own no matter your project type. If you get stumped, you can find support on WordPress's support forums. Users also document their achievements, developments, and struggles on their own personal websites, so make sure to look outside of the official online community as well.

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DRAWBACKS OF WORDPRESS

WordPress is great at what it does. However, as with any web solution, it cannot be everything to everybody. It shares problems common to all CMSs; for example, creating a theme from scratch can be complicated, as you need to learn the specific quirks of this platform. Second, WordPress's most basic purpose is to run blog-style websites. (A blog is a website where content is posted in chronological order, with the focus being strictly on the writer's thoughts or interests. These sites share similar visual characteristics, including a long list of posts that can be navigated forward and backward chronologically. Blogs are usually simple in design, structure, and features. Nonblog websites are usually the opposite: more complex in appearance and utility.) In recent years, WordPress has been building in features to allow greater customization, but more sophisticated systems will take a lot of work to implement.

Advanced Customization Requirements

While coding knowledge is not necessary to build a great WordPress website, you will inevitably run into a problem that requires you to work with PHP. While the official online handbook and community offer lots of sample code for you to copy and paste into your installation, you will often need to tweak the code. For example, on a complex home page, you may want to show only the latest event-related post. You will need to dig into the files that run WordPress to add this function.

Difficulty When Building Very Complex Websites

While WordPress has made it easier to make more complex websites in recent years, the platform is still behind a much more customizable CMS such as Drupal.³ For example, it is difficult—if not impossible—to aggregate content in different displays based upon specific conditions. Say you have posts about different children’s events that contain information about the age groups, date, location, and so on for each event. In Drupal, it would be easy to make this information sortable based on a single characteristic (e.g., age group). This is not a built-in feature of WordPress, so you would have to use complex plugins or code to do the same task as of this writing. You could invest a lot of time to reconfigure WordPress to achieve these goals, but if your website needs very complex interactions, you may wish to investigate other options.

Accessibility Issues

Websites are used by people with a variety of abilities and difficulties. WordPress is working on improving their accessibility to all users. One issue noted by librarian and accessibility advocate Holly Mabry is that she has to “enlarge the [WordPress] admin to navigate and write posts/pages, and it crowds everything, or cuts it off.”⁴

More to Sort Through When Something Breaks

When you are running a traditional HTML and CSS website, if something breaks it is easier to track down the issue and fix it if you know a little about coding. With WordPress and other CMSs, if something breaks, you have to sort through PHP files, perhaps log in to the database to correct an error, or worry about plugins

breaking your website. (Fortunately, if your website has trouble after you install a new plugin, you can usually fix the problem by deleting the plugin from your website's server.)

More Attention from Hackers

Similar to how the Windows operating system is targeted by viruses and malware because of its popularity, WordPress is in the same situation thanks to hackers and spammers. Many people keep the default URL of their log-in page and then use very common usernames such as *admin*, which makes it easier for their site to be hacked. WordPress fights back with frequent updates to fix any bugs and vulnerabilities in their code. Updating the software is painless to do because it is just a button-click away to a safer system. As the webmaster, you can avoid many attacks just by keeping your software updated, keeping your passwords strong, and always thoroughly reading the documentation and forums of new plugins and themes before you install them.

NOTES

1. WordPress.org, "The WordPress License," <http://wordpress.org/about/license/>.
2. WordPress.com, "WordPress Sites in the World," <http://en.wordpress.com/stats/>.
3. Drupal, <http://drupal.org>.
4. Holly Mabry, Twitter post, November 18, 2012, 7:48 p.m., <https://twitter.com/hfmabry/status/270327748621369344>.

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