



Commissioning Author Websites with WordPress: Ten Things We Learned (So You Don't Have To)



The world of WordPress is booming. In fact, it's estimated WordPress now runs 25% of all websites that have a Content Management System (CMS)¹. For your WordPress project, you can choose to work with any of a wide range of designers, developers, agencies and hosting companies; not to mention a thriving ecosystem of good-value themes, free and premium plugins and other goodies. This cornucopia of choices can be overwhelming.

So, we've tried to make it easier for you. Next time you commission a WordPress project, or recommend to your authors that they explore the possibilities of WordPress, here are ten tips for you to consider.

1. WordPress-dot-what?

To start, it's important to be clear about the difference between self-hosted WordPress and WordPress.com:

- Self-hosted WordPress is the full WordPress CMS. This can be used with any theme (including bespoke themes), any plugin and on any one of thousands of potential hosting companies. It's available to download for free at WordPress.org.
- WordPress.com is a 'stripped down' version of WordPress - provided as a service - on which only a limited range of themes and plugins can be used, and no modifications can be made to the software.

It's very common for this to cause confusion, especially because the term 'WordPress' - when entered into a search engine - returns WordPress.com as the first result! Unless you're happy to accept a limited range of features and customisations, WordPress.com is best avoided.

¹ Source: Venturebeat

2. Make content king

When designing a website, it's important to consider the ability and inclination of the author(s) to create relevant, interesting content.

The thought of having to constantly feed a website with new material can be off-putting for some authors. If blogging is not a realistic proposition, then look for alternative ways to update content that suit the author's writing style and schedule. Possibilities include news, bulletins or quarterly letters from the author to his or her readers.

PRO-TIP: If an author attends lots of events, keeping an event listing section updated can be a chore. We use a family of plugins called [Toolset](#) to display this kind of content – the Views plugin can be set up to automatically hide all events once they are in the past. It's one less thing for authors (or their teams) to worry about!

It's fine to tailor sites to authors' interests. There might be a particular angle they find exciting. Perhaps they want to talk about their research, yet they're reluctant to give too much away about themselves. It's important for the author to be comfortable with the content he or she provides.

Don't allow sections of content to sit empty, out-of-date or rarely updated, whether they contain a blog, an events section or a news feed. It's better to start without these sections than have a website which doesn't meet the user's needs. WordPress is flexible, so these sections can usually be added later if needed.

3. Be social but smart

Social media can be both a blessing and a curse to modern authors. It's a way for them to connect with readers and raise awareness, but it's also another thing they have to remember to do and a distraction from their day jobs.

However, social media feeds can be a great way to keep a website fresh and engaging, even if the author isn't able to blog or create other content. There are plugins that offer easy and attractive displays or feeds from Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and more. And, for the truly sociable, plugins like [Taggregator](#) (free) and [Twine Social](#) (premium) consolidate updates from across a selection of platforms.

Don't embed social media channels in a website if all they do is promote new content on the website. It's repetitive and potentially a waste of valuable screen real estate.

Make sure the author and his or her team are clear about the unique strengths of each social media platform, and that the social media platforms you choose to embed complement the author and his or her website.

4. Feed the thirst for insider info

One of the main attractions for visitors to authors' websites, especially those of established authors, is information about their books. So it's vital to offer content to visitors that they can't get on any book retailer site or publishers' sites.

This content can include extra information about the background to a book or how it came to be written, photos of locations, research notes or other insights. The author can also add contextual metadata, such as series reading order or character profiles.

Authors may also want to include information about out-of-print books and overseas editions and translations, depending on their market.

Under no circumstances should the author's site offer less information than readers can find on mainstream retailers' sites. And try to make sure book information is never incomplete or missing. The user will have little incentive to come back.

PRO-TIP: When Bookswarm set up a Books section within WordPress (using the Types component of Toolset), we included the data fields that work best for each author, which can include publisher name, RRP, ISBN and cover, as well as tailored fields such as reading order. We can make key fields mandatory (so the author can never add a new book without essential information present) and use the ISBNs to dynamically build links to a wide range of retailers including Amazon, Waterstones, Hive, WH Smith and Kobo. We can even allow tailored design elements for each book like we did on this site for [Patrick Ness](#).

5. Get SEO savvy

There is no single trick for achieving optimum search engine performance, but WordPress is a good place to start because of the search engine-friendly way it's built. And the power can be ramped up with software like the awesome (and free) [Yoast SEO](#) plugin.

Yoast includes the ability to add keywords and descriptions to your metadata, 'score' your content to see if it will perform well against target keywords, and add additional text and images that can be shown when a page or post is shared on social media.

However SEO-friendly WordPress is (especially with Yoast installed), don't forget that there are always things you can do to positively influence search engine performance, including:

- Adding relevant and useful links within blog posts and pages
- Linking to the author's site from your publisher website, social media feeds and relevant book community sites
- Adding descriptive captions or alt text to images

PRO-TIP: The [Facebook Debugger](#) may not sound like much fun, but it's an excellent way to preview how posts and pages will appear in Facebook, allowing you to fine tune your metadata without actually having to post anything to your Facebook feed.

6. Ramp up your responsiveness

In 2015, 96% of adults aged 16-24 in the UK access the internet "on the go"², so any new website should be designed to be fully responsive – that is, optimised for mobile and tablet devices.

Whether building bespoke sites or using off-the-shelf themes, it's vital to test how sites look and work on a range of different devices. If you haven't got access to all those gadgets (and who does have a drawer full of different types of smartphones, tablets and laptops running a range of operating systems and browsers?), there are great tools to help, such as the excellent [Responsinator](#).

Don't forget that a website's responsiveness depends on much more than its responsive theme. You also need to check:

- Image file sizes are optimised as much as possible (we use [Kraken](#) for this – its WordPress plugin will automatically optimise every image as you upload)
- Any other technologies used are compatible with mobile operating systems – so Flash is out, and sound and video should be used with care

7. Show them the cache

Caching involves generating static versions of some or all pages of a WordPress website. This way, users can view pages faster because it's not necessary for any database activity to take

² Source: [Office of National Statistics](#)

place. Cached sites can cope with many more visitors and deliver a speedier user experience.

The optimum cache approach depends on a site's hosting setup. The premium [WP Rocket](#) plugin is very simple and, even if no settings are adjusted, it will make an immediate difference to page speed. The freemium [W3 Total Cache](#) has more settings to try, and is compatible with a range of server technologies that are offered by some specialist WordPress hosting providers such as Varnish Cache and Memcached. Meanwhile, some specialised hosting companies such as WPEngine have caching built in to their WordPress hosting offer.

If you want to take it a step further, a modest fee will buy you the use of a Content Delivery Network (CDN) to serve all the static files (images and stylesheets) from your website so your web server doesn't have to shoulder the load.

8. Stay ahead of security

The downside of the growing popularity of WordPress is the increasing incidence of security threats which can lead to sites being defaced or compromised. Failure to keep plugins, themes or core WordPress files up to date is the most common cause of vulnerabilities.

The most recent version of WordPress generates strong passwords for all users, which means user passwords are no longer the weak link in the security chain. There are also a number of tools which can help ensure security compliance. We use [WordFence](#) on all of our sites, but [Simple Security Firewall](#) is also good. A security plugin should be one of the first things installed on any new WordPress site. It blocks attempts to gain admin access and offers the ability to scan WordPress files and detect suspicious changes.

Although WordPress makes it easier than ever to update the WordPress 'core' to the most recent release, this can become more onerous if multiple sites need to be managed. For this reason, Bookswarm uses [ManageWP](#) with all of our live 'production' sites, allowing a top-down view of all the sites we host.

These types of WordPress dashboards typically provide additional services like uptime monitoring (we even get a text message if a website goes down), basic web stats and, in some cases, backups. If you are responsible for multiple WordPress sites, they can make your life a lot easier.

9. Be safe and back up

No matter how well managed and secured a WordPress website is, it's always important to back it up regularly for peace of mind. Some specialist hosting providers, including WPEngine and Cloudways, include backups in their offerings, but many don't. In this case, plugins like [BackWPup](#) can handle your author's backups too. Using a plugin is important because backing up the WordPress database is, in many ways, the most important part of any backup. It contains all of a site's content and settings which normally change far more frequently than the site's files. Unlike the files that make up your site, it can't just be backed up using FTP.

PRO-TIP: If an author and his or her publisher both have administrative access to the website, it's not always possible to know who has made changes. An audit trail plugin such as [Simple History](#) allows you to see who has done what and when (and reinforces the need for each WordPress administrator to have a unique login).

10. Read The Fine Manual

Most WordPress developers won't provide a user manual (we certainly don't). Why? Because the regular evolution of WordPress and its plugins would mean the information in a manual was out of date before we had even finished writing it (and in our experience, most users will ignore the manual anyway).

The success of WordPress means that search engines provide an amazing resource for anyone who wants to learn basic and advanced techniques – from video how tos to blog posts. There are also plenty of WordPress developers and power users who want to share their knowledge with the world. Whether you want to understand basic WordPress-fu (adding a link or embedding a YouTube video) or more advanced techniques (such as preventing image theft), sites like [WPBeginner](#) and WordPress's own [Codex](#) have got you covered.

PRO-TIP: If you need a manual, the splendid people at [Easy WP Guide](#) have created one which can be downloaded for free! At 34MB and 138 pages, it's a comprehensive user guide to all of the core functions of WordPress – although remember, it may not reflect the ways a specific WordPress site has been customised by its developers.

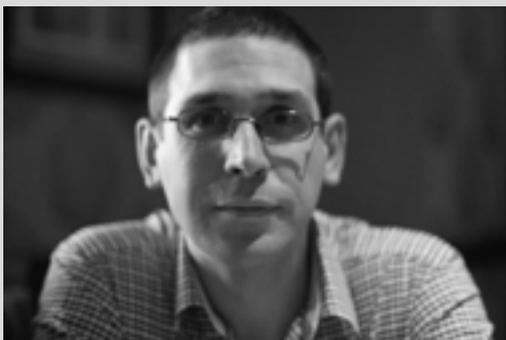
In conclusion, WordPress is cool. WordPress is powerful. WordPress can do everything you could possibly need an author website to do, and these ten tips only scratch the surface of all the things we've learned about the wonders of WordPress.

Whether you're commissioning a WordPress project for the first time, or you're looking to make your WordPress projects smart and stress-free in future, we hope you found something useful in this white paper.

About Bookswarm

Bookswarm designed its first website for an author in 2009 and we've used WordPress to create author websites ever since (and loved every minute of it). In that time we've worked with writers across a wide range of genres, from children's picture books to poetry, and from crime and thriller to historical fiction. We've created projects for everyone from self-published authors to bona fide household names. Our clients are based all around the world, which means an occasional Skype call in our PJs (webcam switched off, naturally) is necessary.

About the author



Simon Appleby is the founder and Managing Director of [Bookswarm](#), the only digital agency in the UK dedicated to delivering projects for publishers, authors and others in the world of books. Bookswarm has unrivalled experience in meeting the communications needs of publishers and authors in a way that is both excellent value for money and very easy to use, and specialises in WordPress development.

Sometimes working with publishers and sometimes directly with authors, Bookswarm has delivered author websites for a wide range of writers, including Stephen King, Patrick Ness, Penny Vincenzi, Raymond Khoury, Clare Furniss, Hanif Kureishi, Katy Birchall and Marcus Chown.

You can e-mail Simon – simon.appleby@bookswarm.co.uk – or call him on +44 (0) 7847 912989.