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How to Build a Website for Free

Get a real, working website live using only free tools — and know exactly which limits you're accepting and when they'll start to matter.

3-day guide · 3 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Every guide on this site is produced with the Self-Directed Learning Framework: instead of an article that explains a topic at you, it turns the topic into a structure you work through — each chapter with one outcome, a starting action under twelve minutes, the minimum you actually need to know, a worked example, a checklist, and exercises using your own situation. No filler, no re-reading required.

WHAT'S INSIDE

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Choosing a Free Platform and Knowing Its Real Limits

> **Outcome:** "I've picked a free platform knowing exactly what its free tier does and doesn't include, instead of finding out by surprise later."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write down the three things you actually need your site to do this month — nothing more. A free platform only needs to cover those three things, not every feature you might eventually want.

The minimum you need to know

Nearly every free website tier shares the same four trade-offs, and they're worth knowing before you build rather than after: a free subdomain instead of your own domain name (yoursite.platform.com, not yoursite.com), the platform's own branding somewhere on the page (usually a footer badge you can't remove without paying), limits on storage and monthly visitors (fine for a small personal or portfolio site, a real constraint for anything with photos, video, or growing traffic), and a reduced set of templates, plugins, or features compared to the paid tiers. None of these make the free tier bad — they make it fit certain situations (a portfolio, a hobby project, a test before committing) and not others (a store, anything client-facing where a stuck-on badge looks unprofessional, a site expecting real traffic). Decide which situation you're actually in before picking a tool, not after you've already built three pages in one.

Worked example

Worked example: matching the situation to the tier. A student building a portfolio to show in job interviews: the subdomain and badge are a minor cosmetic cost, traffic will be low, free tier fits fine. A local business owner trying to look established and take payments: the subdomain and badge actively undermine the goal — this is a case where "free" isn't actually free once you account for what it costs the business in credibility.

Checklist

- [ ] Three must-have features for this month written down
- [ ] Free tier's subdomain, branding, storage, and visitor limits all checked before building
- [ ] Honest answer given to whether this project can tolerate a subdomain and platform badge
- [ ] A platform chosen that covers the three must-haves, not the longest feature list

Exercises

1. Find your shortlisted platform's actual free-tier limits page (not the marketing homepage) and write down the three limits that matter most to you.
2. Decide, in one sentence, whether your project's situation tolerates a subdomain and visible platform branding.

Building Your Free Site Without Hitting the Walls Later

> **Outcome:** "I've built a lean, working site that doesn't quietly depend on features that only exist on the paid tier."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

List the pages your site needs using the smallest possible number — most free sites need three pages (Home, About or Offer, Contact), not ten.

The minimum you need to know

The biggest free-tier trap isn't a hard limit — it's building half a site around a feature (a contact form with conditional logic, a members area, an online store) only to discover it's locked behind a paid plan once you try to publish. Avoid this by checking which specific features your free tier actually includes before designing around them, not after. Keep the page count minimal: fewer pages means less chance of silently running into a storage or page-count cap, and a smaller site is also easier to rebuild elsewhere later if you do outgrow it. Use the platform's own built-in contact method (a simple form or a mailto: link) rather than trying to bolt on a third-party tool that may need a paid integration to work properly. Images are usually the fastest way to hit a storage cap — compress images before uploading rather than uploading originals straight from a phone or camera.

Worked example

Worked example: avoiding a locked feature mid-build. Someone builds three pages and a contact form, then discovers at publish time that the form's email notifications are a paid-only feature on their chosen platform — meaning submissions arrive with no alert. Checking this on day one (per Chapter 1) would have avoided a wasted afternoon; the fix now is switching to a plain mailto: link instead, which works on every tier.

Checklist

- [ ] Site built with the minimum page count that covers the goal — usually three
- [ ] Every planned feature (forms, galleries, bookings) checked against the free tier before building it
- [ ] Contact method uses a built-in free feature, not a paid add-on
- [ ] Images compressed before uploading to avoid storage caps
- [ ] No page built around a feature later discovered to be paid-only

Exercises

1. Build your three core pages using only features confirmed as free in Chapter 1.
2. Compress your largest image file before uploading it, and compare the before/after file size.

CHAPTER 3 OF 3 · DAY 3 · 10 MIN

Knowing When (and How) to Upgrade

> **Outcome:** "I can recognize the specific signs that mean it's time to pay, and I know how to move without losing what I've already built."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Check your current site against one question: has anyone ever commented on the subdomain or the platform badge, even once? If yes, that's your first real signal.

The minimum you need to know

Four signals reliably mean it's time to upgrade, and none of them are "I feel like it should look nicer": you need a real domain name because the subdomain is costing you credibility (client-facing work, anything selling something), you've hit the storage or visitor cap and the site is actually failing to load for some visitors, you need a feature that's genuinely paid-only and there's no free workaround (e-commerce checkout, a members area), or the free branding is actively confusing visitors about who runs the site. When you do upgrade, most platforms let you move within the same tool — same pages, same content, just unlocked limits and a connected custom domain — which is simpler than migrating to a different platform entirely. If you do switch platforms, export your content first (text and images, saved locally) so a slow new build doesn't mean retyping everything from scratch.

Worked example

Worked example: one clear upgrade trigger. A free portfolio site starts getting genuine client inquiries through the contact form — at that point, the subdomain and badge are costing credibility with exactly the people the site is meant to convince, which is the specific "is it hurting me" signal that justifies paying, rather than upgrading just because a bigger plan exists.

Checklist

- [ ] Checked whether a subdomain or platform badge has actually cost credibility with a real visitor
- [ ] Confirmed whether any storage/visitor cap has actually been hit, not just approached
- [ ] Identified whether a needed feature is genuinely paid-only with no workaround
- [ ] Decided whether upgrading within the same platform is possible before considering a full migration
- [ ] Content backed up locally if a platform switch is being considered

Exercises

1. Write down which, if any, of the four upgrade signals currently apply to your site.
2. If none apply yet, write down which one you expect to hit first, so you're not caught by surprise.

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