How to Start a Website Guide

First: let's address what this guide *isn't*. It's not a step-by-step of what links to click in order to get a blog up-and-running in ten minutes. It's not a place to troubleshoot what's wrong with your website. It will not teach you how to export a Wordpress site into a new Squarespace account ([that's here!](#)). It's *definitely* not going to teach you how to code.

(We've got a pretty good Google game, but we would never claim to be techies.)

But this *is* a guide that can help you create a website so that it can be your home away from home on the Internet. Almost everything else about you online can live there: [your blog](#), your social media handles, your newsletter signup, your contact info. It's a place you control: no algorithms necessary.

This guide will help you decide what's important to you and give you a bit of information on the platforms we as a team have used and find *use-able*. It will at least narrow down the never-ending list of options and give you a place to **just start**.

Ask Yourself Some Questions:

1. Decide what your website needs to do for you. We're going to basically insist that you have a page where people can read your bio, see a photo of you, and learn what it is that you do. Everything else is negotiable.

Is it a place to write consistently as you build a habit? A place to sell physical or digital items? A place for people to sign up for your newsletter? A place for people to land when they Google your name to help establish you as an expert in what you do? Does it need to do all of that and more? What purpose will your website serve?

Example: The public-facing Exhale website needs to tell people what Exhale is, answer any FAQs, allow people to sign up or join a waitlist, and purchase things in the marketplace. This means we need a couple of pages of info, a newsletter signup embedded, and a site that allows purchases.

2. Decide on your budget. There are lots of free options out there. There are also lots of paid options. Is this a pure hobby that you want to invest zero extra dollars in? That's great! There's something out there for you. Is it something you want to plug a couple of hundred dollars into (and are willing to keep spending that money each year) as an investment in a business or personal goal? Decide what you can spend and that will inform what platform you start using. You can always upgrade or transfer to a different one later.

3. Pick a platform. There are two kinds of websites: self-hosted, where you own the domain + setup hosting yourself, and hosted, which is more of an all-in-one experience where the domain + hosting is taken care of by a single company and all you do is pull out your credit card. More info on all of that [here](#), but mostly just know: Wordpress.org is self-hosted, and everything else we talk about is hosted (including Wordpress.*com* -- yes, internet, thank you for being confusing.).

We as an Exhale/C+C team have experience with these -- click the link for their setup tutorial:

- All-in-one like **Squarespace**: buy your domain and hosting here, too.
    - **Pros:** Provides a "What You See Is What You Get" (WYSIWYG) approach to website design—you are largely adding and dragging text, image, and other types of blocks around to create the website you want; lots of built-in designs and colors and options; provides the domain registration + hosting all-in-one.
    - **Cons:** Can be limiting if you want to really dig into customizing the code yourself; the most expensive option we've got listed.
    - *Example: Coffee + Crumbs and Exhale both use Squarespace.*
- Self-hosted **Wordpress.org**: buy domain and hosting separate. If you are reading this particular how-to on the Exhale website, we're guessing you don't want to dig as deep into the tech necessary to run a Wordpress.org site.
    - **Pros:** The sky is literally the limit. So many design options, so many themes, so many resources for learning the how-tos -- and it can be relatively inexpensive to build and run a very customized site.
    - **Cons:** There is a learning curve. And the limitless options really can bog you down.

- **Wordpress.com**: This is Wordpress's easier option.
  - **Pros:** Lots of the features of Wordpress.org, but much more plug-and-play like Squarespace. Very affordable.
  - **Cons:** Not as infinitely adaptable as Wordpress.org.
- **Substack**: newsletter-style, words-only, super-simple approach for someone who wants no frills.
  - **Pros:** All you need is an account. It's very low-maintenance. There's the option to add a financial subscription feature if you desire. You will not get distracted by design options. It automatically builds in a newsletter-style subscription so you are collecting email addresses from Day One.
  - **Cons:** It's a very, very basic website -- no current options to add a shop, etc. Also: you don't own it like you would own a domain. It's a newer platform, so we're not 100% sure what kind of longevity it will have. But we could say that about this whole internet thing, huh?!
- **Medium**: this site has been around for awhile, and feels like it's in-between a simple Substack and starting a full-on website. The site acts like a network and promotes creators' work, but it's gotten pretty large and is easy to get lost in it.
  - **Pros:** Easy. Simple designs, very few bells and whistles. No distracting questions of form and function.
  - **Cons:** Very little customization available, and we're not sure if you can export and own your audience or mailing list or not—something necessary if you ever wanted to change platforms but not lose your audience.

Other popular website-builders we don't have personal experience with so can't tell you how easy or hard: Weebly, Blogger, Tumblr, Typepad.

4. Set up your site. We recommend keeping it simple at first. Pick 3-5 pages to make: blog, about, newsletter sign up, contact form… use your answer to the first question (what does your website need to do for you?) to decide which pages are necessary to get started.

Some tips from someone who spends a lot of time trying to find people on the internet to link to their site for podcast interviews:

- **About:** Make sure we can see YOU. Who you are, where you are from, what people can expect in your space. A photo doesn't hurt!
- **Blog:** Can be set as your "homepage" so anyone who lands on your site can start reading right away.
- **Contact:** How can visitors to your site get in touch with you? Even better, how do you *want* them to get in touch with you?
- **Newsletter Signup:** If you've got a list going, make sure people can see where to subscribe! Being able to link to this page as a standalone where people can easily see where to sign up is also helpful.
- **Social:** If you share your work anywhere online, make sure to link to your profiles so people can connect with you there.

Maybe your site isn't a straightforward blog: if not, your "Shop" page could be your homepage so people can start shopping when they land on it.

5. Add to it. Get comfortable using your site. Learn how to add photos, schedule a post for a specific date and time (essential to being able to participate in our blog hop each month!), and edit URLs (if applicable). If your site is serving to show off your art or writing, add a few posts so that when people land there, they have things to see and read right away.

6. Share it with us! If you use this guide to help you build a blog or website, please pop into the Exhale Facebook Group and share it so we can see, read, and subscribe. ;)

Image ideas from Unsplash:

https://unsplash.com/photos/MNd-Rka1o0Q

https://unsplash.com/photos/YoadQb46v6k

https://unsplash.com/photos/FHnnjk1Yj7Y