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Plug It In, Plug It In

By Mark Costlow

We are frequently asked to recommend plugins for [WordPress](#) sites, so this month we will list some of our favorites.

But first, what is a WordPress plugin and why should you care? WordPress (WP) is a popular website building platform. As of this month, it is used to power [43% of the world's web sites](#), the single most used web software by far. There are a few reasons WP is the most-used:

- It is possible to build a web site without having deep knowledge of web technologies like HTML, PHP, CSS, and other 3- and 4-letter words.
- After a site is built, it is possible for someone with NO knowledge of those technologies to maintain it by adding, removing, and changing content.
- The system uses themes to control the look and feel, separate from the core code of the site. That means the site software can be updated without breaking the appearance.
- WP uses a modular plugin architecture so that new functionality can be added without changing the core code. Plugins can add any web functionality you can imagine: ecommerce, photo galleries, membership management, staff directory, newsletter archives, real estate listings, you name it.

As the web has matured (or at least, aged) WP has kept up with the times. Some of the benefits above have caveats imposed by the evolution of the environment, and we'll touch on them later. For now, let's focus on plugins and how to choose them.

The Plugin Repository

The [WP plugin repository](#) has almost 60,000 free plugins available. [Envato](#), a popular directory and marketplace of paid plugins lists almost 1,000. When you start to look for plugins to use on your site, that list of 60,000 possibilities is daunting. Even the 1,000 paid ones at Envato is a bit much. How do you know which are good? Should you pay for one, or hold out for a free one to serve the purpose?

There are a few models of paid plugins:

- One-time license purchase that gives perpetual use and update rights.
- One-time purchase that gives perpetual use

rights, updates and support for a limited time, usually 6-12 months.

- Subscription, pay a monthly or yearly fee for updates and support.

All of the plugins in the WP repository have to be free. What we find is that many of the "free" plugins have "Pro" versions which provide more functionality, for a price. One must be careful when choosing such plugins to determine if the Pro version is worth the cost, or if the free version will satisfy the need. You can always start with the free version and go pro later if the plugin does its job well, or move on without having dished out the license fee if it doesn't.

If you have no prior information about a plugin, the repository provides metrics to help choose:

- Last updated time - when the plugin was last updated in the repository. Be wary if it hasn't been touched in a couple of years.
- Active installations - how many times it has been installed. 10's of thousands is a good sign. Under 100 is a slight red flag, unless it is a niche item.
- WordPress version and Tested up to - indicates the oldest and newest WP versions it will work with.
- PHP version - the required PHP version.
- Star rating - take with a grain of salt like all Internet product ratings, but can be an OK guide to general quality.

These data points will give you a good idea of the viability of the plugin. You want one that the developer is interested in maintaining for the long term. If it hasn't been updated for months or years, or hasn't been tested with recent WP versions, consider other options.

Another place to look is to click the Support link. The support forums for the plugin will give you an idea of how many problems there are with it, and whether the developer is responsive to their customers.

Specific Plugin Recommendations

"[Decision Paralysis](#)" is real, and staring at a screen with 300 plugins that match your search terms is enough to cause anyone to freeze up.

One way out of "analysis paralysis" is to ask a trusted source for advice, so we find ourselves being asked to recommend specific plugins quite often. Here are some that we recommend frequently.

Contact Forms

Most sites need at least a simple contact form to collect comments or requests from site visitors. [Forminator](#) is a great free option. [Gravity Forms](#) and [Formidable](#) are both great paid options. Formidable has a fairly capable free version, and a Pro version for more advance use. Gravity Forms is only available as a yearly subscription.

[CAPTCHA](#) is a method to verify the humanity of someone submitting a web form. Almost every form should have a CAPTCHA to prevent [bot spam](#). Google makes the most popular CAPTCHA, and there are many plugins available to make it easy to

install. Google's CAPTCHA can be problematic though, because it siphons off an unknown amount of data about your site visitors for Google's own use. In fact it might not be legal to use a Google CAPTCHA if your site needs to conform to European GDPR laws. An up-and-coming alternative is [Turnstile](#), made by Cloudflare. Turnstile does not harvest your visitors' data. The [Simple Cloudflare Turnstile](#) plugin makes setup easy and is compatible with many contact form plugins.

E-Commerce

The 400 pound plugin of WordPress E-commerce is "[Woo Commerce](#)". Automattic, the company behind WordPress, bought Woo Commerce so it is tightly integrated with WP. The plugin itself is free, but any medium or large ecommerce site will likely need some paid Woo Commerce plugins to handle certain things like payment gateways, shipping calculators, or sales tax managers.

If you need to set up a small shop on the cheap, the Forminator plugin can be used to do just that. The authors wrote a [blog post about how to do it](#).

Plugins to Aid Troubleshooting

These are largely directed at web developers. Sometimes a site is slow or misbehaving and you need a little help to find out why. The [Query Monitor](#) plugin shows you how long every database query takes, and which plugins account for the most time in each page load. [Debug Bar](#) also lets you look at database queries and other under-the-hood processes.

Another troubleshooting plugin that many sites find useful is [Simple History](#). It records every login to the site and what they do. On a site with several contributors, it can be hard to know who did what and when. For example if someone accidentally deletes a post, Simple History will pinpoint the action, which saves a huge amount of time.

Page Caches

In a complex web site, things can get a bit slow. A page cache helps by saving the pages it renders for visitors, so it can serve them up more quickly when another person requests the same page. Two good page caches are [WP Rocket](#) (paid only) and [Fastest Cache](#) (free and paid options).

Web Site Documentation

The most-overlooked aspect of any computer system is documentation. The fast-paced patchwork nature of modern web sites only exacerbates the problem. The most valuable thing a web developer can do for their client, after delivering a site that meets their needs, is to also provide documentation about the site. It doesn't have to be elaborate. A few words about the major components used, a rundown of the plugins installed and where they are used, and notes about the license status of each one is all it takes. This meager bit of information can save many wasted hours down the road. Without it, you will eventually find yourself with questions that are hard to answer after the fact.

A common scenario is a plugin that develops a

problem, such as being discontinued by its developer. If it's installed on your site but you don't have notes about what it is used for, you may be in for a time-consuming side quest to determine if it is safe to just remove it, or need to find a replacement.

The [WP Help](#) plugin solves this problem. It lets you and/or the web developer document the site within the site itself. It's a great way for the developer to explain site maintenance procedures like adding new items to a shopping cart or updating the information in the page footer. Often that information is conveyed to the site owner at completion time, but then it is up to the owner to take good notes or keep track of documentation they receive. After a personnel change, someone new can adopt a task much more quickly if the documentation for it is right there in the site.

Anyone developing sites for others should consider providing this kind of documentation. Anyone having a site built for them should insist on it. Your future self will thank you for it.

Miscellaneous

If you have a lot of images, or some that are simply too large and slow to load, image optimizers can help. An excellent free option is [EWWW Image Optimizer](#)

Sometimes you need to redirect visitors to different locations, for example after a site redesign or product re-launch. The free [Redirection](#) plugin lets you manage all your redirects.

Want to get fancy with your text? [Animated Text Block](#) is a free plugin that applies animation effects to your text.

"Coming Soon" plugins will hide your site from the world while you are working on it. They can give a countdown to opening day, collect email addresses from interested visitors, or just tell them to try back later (in a more sophisticated way than the old "Under Construction" images from the 1990s). [Nifty Coming Soon](#) and [Website Builder by Seed-Prod](#) are both good options, with Nifty being a little more streamlined and easy to figure out.

Potential Plugin Pitfalls

Here are four things to keep in mind when choosing plugins: **[1]** Understand the cost (one-time or subscription) and save the license information (use [WP Help](#)). **[2]** If a plugin causes conflicts with the site, test it on a "dev site" to avoid problems on your live site. **[3]** Plugin quality varies greatly. If one has a bad/inconvenient interface, look for another with higher ratings. **[4]** Keep plugins up-to-date. It's easy and will save you from the most common cause of site hacks: new security holes discovered in old plugins or themes.

Hopefully the plugins listed here will help your WordPress sites thrive!

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