

WordPress Tips and Tricks – November 6, 2010

Welcome to WordPress Tips and Tricks. I'm Lauren Orsini, and I'll be your guide as we navigate this magical realm.

You'll notice that I haven't given you a handout. That's because we're going high tech today. Go to <http://tiny.cc/WPcheatsheet> to follow along. I'll also have links on my blog later today so you can download the cheat sheet, the slideshow, and even this speech.

Now before I begin, I'd like to ask a few questions:

- 1) How many people here already have a WordPress blog?
- 2) How many have experimented with customizing your WP blog?
- 3) How many are absolute beginners?

No matter what you answered, I assure you that you WILL learn something within the next two hours. Whether you're just getting your feet wet or you're a WordPress pro, there will be something new for you in this speech. And if not, you get your money back. We're going to start with the very very basics and go all the way to developing our own WordPress blogs! And THEN even if I don't touch on what you want to know, I've saved some time for us to have a Q&A at the end.

So... why should you listen to me? It says I'm a "Word Press Guru" on the ad for this speech which is flattering, but anyone who's on Twitter knows that a "Guru" is just a regular person who wants more Twitter followers. Here's why I'm qualified to tell you about WordPress:

- 1) I'm a WordPress blogger myself. I run my blog, my friends' blogs, my portfolio, my mom's portfolio, and the sites of my freelance clients all using the WordPress system.

I've run into nearly everything that WordPress can do.

- 2) I've been using WordPress for the last six years. My college webmaster at the University of Mary Washington, Jim Groom, swore by WordPress and made it so every online project I had to do implemented WordPress in some way. And in these past six years, I've seen the way the system has changed and grown.
- 3) Finally, this isn't my first time teaching WordPress tips. As a TA, I've helped fantastic American University professor Lynne Perri run two student sites using WordPress. That led to doing plenty of tutorials about how to sign up, log in, create blog posts, and add images to WordPress blogs.

And now that I've given you my street cred, let's get started. I've divided today's presentation into six parts, starting with...

Part 1: What is Wordpress? Dot Com vs. Dot Org

We're starting at the very beginning today in order to catch everyone up to speed. What is WordPress? It's a piece of software you download on the web, but what kind? At its heart, WordPress is an open source content management system (CMS). That's a bit of a mouthful, so let's break it down.

Open source means that WordPress is a free download for everyone. Even better, anyone who wants to can take the original source of the program, edit and mess with it, make changes to it, and put those changes back online again. Now usually when I do this, I mess something up, but let's think of the outcome of millions of people collaboratively tweaking and perfecting and troubleshooting a product over and over again. It really improves the product, right? That's exactly what makes WordPress great – it's the result of not one or two but millions of people working to make it better all the time. If you've heard of the Drupal CMS, which is also open source, you know how this helps.

Content management system means any sort of environment that organizes, stores, and regulates content and the publication of that content by a variety of users. We're going to call it CMS for short. In a blogging sense, we use WordPress as a CMS to create, store, and publish our blog posts in one environment. When you're looking at the WordPress dashboard, you're looking at the heart of the content management system. On the dashboard's workstation, you can control the process of your blog posts from conception to publication.

You can access WordPress in two ways: Wordpress.com and Wordpress.org. What's the difference? When you go to WordPress dot com and set up a blog, your blog address becomes yourname.wordpress.com. In other words, you are being hosted on the WordPress server. You don't need to store your blog anywhere else to use WordPress – it keeps it right there for you. Pretty convenient, right?

However, dot com has its limitations. Let's look at the dashboard and see. For me, the biggest fault is that you don't have total control over the appearance of your blog. You need to choose from free themes already hosted on Wordpress, and if you want to do something like change this title or that image, you're usually out of luck. You can change the colors of links and other things on the blog's style sheet (more on that later), but nothing big. As a perfectionist, this irks me. It's probably the reason I started coding back in middle school, when the GeoCities themes weren't quite up to my tastes. Ah, memories.

So what I use is the Wordpress dot org side. When you access WordPress this way, it takes the form of a free download to your computer. It's all yours and you can edit it in any way you like. You can add all sorts of features to customize your blog. Want new widgets?

Experimental plugins? Actually, ANY plugins? Then this is for you. It's all there on the dashboard. And not surprisingly, dot org is what I recommend for everyone. Even if they are absolute beginners, it's better to grow into dot org and use all the features as they start to feel

comfortable. Otherwise, when they grow out of using dot com, they have to go through the annoying task of transferring their blog over to a new server.

I've just touched on the catch with dot org. Namely, you have to host your blog somewhere other than WordPress. So you need to know a thing or two about picking a hosting service. I use BlueHost and adore it, but American University uses DreamHost for their websites. The cheapest option is GoDaddy, but in my opinion, you get what you pay for. And these aren't the only options by far!

Hosting can cost anywhere from \$20 to over \$100 per year. So you're going to have to weigh your options and pick which one you like best, (which will probably be BlueHost if you ask me). The next step is getting a domain name (that's YourName.com), so people will know what to type in to find your blog. After that, it's a matter of installing WordPress. As we saw on the dot org home page, WordPress is a free download to your computer. Then, when your server is ready, you need to upload it there. You can do this by using Simple Scripts, which is BlueHost's one-touch WordPress installation, or calling your host's tech support. Don't be afraid to call – you're paying for this service! I used to have a Dell computer and absolutely dreaded calling tech support because I'd be on hold for hours. But whenever I call BlueHost, whether at noon or 3 AM, a human always picks up on the second ring.

Now that I'm done with free advertising for BlueHost, let's move on. Either way, you've set up your blog. Whether you've set it up simply on dot com or have risen to the challenge of dot org, let's move on to...

Part 2: Picking and using themes on WordPress

Each WordPress blog already is set up with a theme called Twenty Ten. You can leave your blog just like that and start writing, or you can change up the look. You might want your blog

to have a green background, or two sidebars, or no sidebars, or a navigation bar below the header image. That's where themes come into play.

So what is a theme? *Theme* is a fancy word for template. It is basically a gussied up PowerPoint slide. See how this ugly slide has a title location, a content location, and a hideous background? These all go together to form a basic theme. Luckily, WordPress themes look better and have more functionality.

There are millions, maybe billions of themes. They can transform your WordPress page in so many ways. There's blog themes of course, but also portfolio themes, photoblog themes with huge spaces for images, even web comics themes where you can have a comic show up every day instead of a text post. I use WordPress for sites that aren't even blogs, like an apartment information and rental site I created for my family's apartment complex.

One of the places I like to look for themes is Smashing Magazine, but the WordPress free themes database doesn't hurt either. If you're on dot org, you can upload any theme that you find online. On dot com, you need to stick with the 20 or so themes WordPress provides. Just another nudge to get dot org!

Once you find a theme you like, just download it to your computer and then upload to WordPress in the dashboard. You go to Appearance/Themes/Upload New Theme. This is great since while it's on your computer, before you upload it, you can play around and customize it before it ever sees the Internet.

A lot of themes cost money. But unless it's a theme you reaaaally want, why bother? We can simply take a free theme and customize it. I'll show you how to do that now.

Here's an example of a theme I customized. On the left is the original theme I downloaded, on

the right is my blog. Same theme, different style sheet. They may look different, but they share a skeleton. That skeleton, which is made out of PHP, is telling them both to have three columns with a header image at the top and text in the center column. It is NOT telling them what color their links should be, what image is inside the header, or anything like that. That's all customizable.

An important note: even though most themes are free to download, somebody worked very hard making them. It's the right thing to do to give them credit, even if you really customize the theme. When I use somebody else's theme as a base for my websites, I write "Using X Theme customized by Lauren Orsini" with a link to X theme. Or "Theme by John Doe, Customized by Lauren Orsini." It gives the creator credit and encourages other people to download the theme by showing how versatile it is.

So let's try something simple, like adding a header image to this plain WordPress theme. All we want to do is exchange this image of some trees with something more personal. I'm going to use a banner depicting my full name which I created with PhotoShop. Hope you guys like Helvetica!

Let's go into my test site – please excuse the jibberish. This is what I call my laboratory, where I like to test out different themes before they show up live for everyone to see. Nobody can see this except people currently accessing my computer We'll go over this later, don't worry!

So we've got our tree header already up there. Let's go into the WordPress Dashboard again, where all our editing magic happens. Let's click on Appearances. And click on Header under that. Here, the theme gives us a ton of different options for replacing the image... and even guidelines for substituting our own, if we happen to be adept at PhotoShop! Any photo of this width and height will fit right on your header. And ta-da! A custom header for a custom you.

What if your theme doesn't have this handy header tab? Well, that's when we have to get our hands a little dirty. If you have a dot org site, you can go back to the Dashboard and then Media Library.

Upload the picture you'd like to be your header image to the WordPress Media Library. Once you've uploaded it, you'll see the URL code at the bottom. Copy this to your clipboard with CNTRL C.

Now click on Appearance again, and this time, click on Editor. Now we've got a whole list of jibberish looking pages to edit. Wait a second, you're thinking. Isn't our blog just one page?

Think of a WordPress theme as a puzzle piece. All these different pages go together to create the whole. So this is the footer, the header, the style, the sidebar and the single page, for when you click on just one post. They all go together to make a nice looking theme that doesn't break whenever you click on a link. We're not going to go to any of these PHP pages though. We're just going to go straight to Style.CSS.

We want to edit the header, so that's exactly what we're looking for in the stylesheet. Go to #header. You can press CNTRL F and find it right there in the document. Notice where I've underlined in red – there's a URL of an image there, just like the one we copied to our clipboard! Exchange the two, save, and refresh.

And now we've got our new header with only a little extra work. And now, let's move on to making a lot of customization with only a little effort with...

Part 3: Freaking widgets, how do they work?

Just FYI, I am looking for employment, hi! My dad is a salesman and he's been giving me a lot of advice on my job hunt. I bring this up because all his examples to me involve the word "widgets" as in, "not all resume material can be quantified down to how many widgets you can make per hour, Lauren!" When my dad was in business school, "widget" just meant a product without a real purpose. A doodad or knickknack.

However, with the rise of computer programs, the word widgets now has meaning. The definition of a widget as we're using it here is "a small application which can be installed and used inside a webpage." It's a standalone application that you embed into a larger website. You probably already use a clock widget, a weather widget, and a calculator widget from time to time on your Mac or PC.

WordPress already comes with a lot of widgets without you having to download any. If we go to Appearance and then click on Widgets, we see a whole host of them. Here's some of the most useful:

- **Links:** This widget attaches directly to the blog roll you create through WordPress under the Links tab. You can even pick only certain links to show up here. It's completely code free and saves you the time of having to individually list all your links in your sidebar.
- **Text:** This plain text widget is SO much more versatile than you'd imagine. You can put text here, sure, but you can also put code in it. Like images, an RSS feed, even your TBD blogger banner! I keep my TBD banner as a widget so I can move it around on my sidebars without cutting and pasting or messing up code.
- **Tag Cloud:** This collects all the tags you use on your site and arranges them in an almost artistic display. If you use the tag "blogging" a lot, it will appear very big on the tag cloud. When you click the word, it will direct you to a list of all the posts marked with that tag on the entire site.
- **Meta:** This allows you to log in and log out straight from the sidebar of your blog. This is

great if you have a lot of people contributing to the blog because it's easy for new users to sign up with this and old users to log in without having to go to the admin panel.

- RSS: You can follow somebody else's RSS feed, or an RSS of your blog posts under one category, or anything really, and a list of the most recent items in that feed will show up on your sidebar.

And widgets are ridiculously simple to use. Just drag the widget you like and drop it where you like it. On this site, Lauren's Laboratory, we have 3 visible spots for widgets, and this will be different with every theme. Some will have only one, or more than four places to insert widgets. Just insert and refresh your page to see how they look. What won't change is the WYSIWYG – what you see is what you get – aspect of using widgets.

And remember how we talked about customizing themes? Widgets can be customized too! You do have to do it the so-called “hard way” though in most cases. But it doesn't take CSS expertise to do it. For example, if you want to customize the Calendar widget, just scroll down in your Style.CSS page to #calendar. There you'll see where to input different sizes and colors.

Part 4: Plugins – the widgets that do your coding for you

Who was at the Online News Association conference last weekend? Awesome. Yeah, I was there too. I was volunteering with the Student Newsroom, where we used WordPress as a platform to publish all the students' reporting on the conference. Needless to say, there wasn't a lot of time to spend messing around with the code. So when Lynne Perri asked me how we were going to do double bylines, I froze. WordPress does NOT automatically let you make double bylines on blog posts!

Luckily, WordPress expert Daniel Bachhuber was there and he had the common sense to say,

“Why don't we just download the Co-Authors Plus plugin?” Co-Authors Plus is a downloadable add-on to WordPress that makes double bylines easy to do. And thus, plugins saved the day!

So what's a plugin? It's a computer add-on that works with an existing piece of software to create new functionality. Basically, it's like putting a patch or an update on software you already have. Think computer games. Downloading the latest plugin for your game can open up new areas to explore or fix bugs you're experiencing. Plugins in WordPress do these same things.

Co-Authors Plus is an example of a WordPress plugin that adds new functionality and makes WordPress do things it couldn't do on its own. Another example of a plugin that adds functionality is Sexy Bookmarks. I know, I know, the name is racy. But it's the best plugin out there for connecting your blog to as many social media sites as you like.. for free! Makes me want to make a fantastic plugin with a naughty name so people have to use it... Oh wait, somebody already did! It's called Tweet that....Stuff.... and it automatically tweets your blogposts to Twitter. Anyway, here's Sexy Bookmarks in action on my blog.

I've listed 4 other plugins that I really think are essential – I can NOT blog without them! With WordPress Database Backup, I have a copy of my complete site sent to my email every Friday morning. This is perfect in case I experience a server crash or, more likely, I mess up my website myself.

Greg's High Performance SEO is great for people who want to have good SEO but don't want boring titles. With Greg's SEO, I have two titles for each blog, one my readers read and one Google reads. So basically, I might write a blog called “Every dog has its day” which is fun and witty, but my SEO title will be “Where to find dog walkers in the DC metropolitan area.”

WP Super Cache... It caches your blog just like Google does, and ultimately makes it load ten times faster. And Askimet is so essential that WordPress puts it in your plugins folder without requiring a download! It's a pain to set up – you need to make an API code and everything, but it's actually dangerous to blog without it. I've had my blog for a year, and Askimet has protected me from over a thousand spam emails.

In order to add plugins, just go to Dashboard/Plugins, and Upload new plugin. Since it's so simple, it's silly not to take advantage of all the great ones out there!

Part 5: Getting crazy with CSS

We've hinted on this a tiny bit so far. We've already talked about using CSS twice in this presentation – with header theming and with widgets. Really, you don't need to be a pro to mess around with it. CSS is a really flexible language. Unlike PHP. I was once editing some PHP and crashed my whole site. It just went blank. When I went back to see what happened, I had forgotten a single semicolon!

So what does CSS stand for? It stands for Cascading Style Sheets. Cascading because we can make them overlap on top of one another. Like, WordPress already has its own default styles of font, color and stuff already in the program, but we can stick a sheet over it. It's the scripting language used to create and customize the look and format of a webpage. Without CSS, the site is just a skeleton.

I've put up my website and my website's base theme again because this shows how just changing the style sheet and nothing else can change the whole feel of a website. That's why it's important to download themes for their skeleton and change the colors later. Don't say “I don't want a purple site so I won't download this theme.” You can change that in the style sheet!

So let's take the next five minutes to completely master CSS. I'm serious, it's not that complex. Here's a snippet of CSS code:

```
#header {  
    background: #FFFFFF;  
    width: 965px;  
    margin: 0px auto 0px;  
    padding: 5px 0px 0px 0px;  
    text-align: center;  
    text-transform: uppercase;  
}
```

OK, let's talk about the red part first. This is called the selector. This determines the style of what thing is being customized. In this case, we are customizing the page header. We could also customize the body (`#body`) or titles (`h1`) or hyperlinks (`a`) or many other things. But right now we're talking about the header since we remember it from earlier in this presentation.

Now we've got a curly bracket. Everything inside the curly brackets is being **SELECTED** by the **SELECTOR**. Get it? Let's see what those are. We've got background, width, margin, padding, text-align, and text-transform. These are called properties. These are the things we are changing to customize the header. For example, if we change text-transform to lowercase, width to 960 pixels, and the hex code to my absolute favorite color, 0099FF, we're definitely going to change the look of the header.

About that hex code. If you know any HTML, you know that's how computers read color. You don't have to memorize these since if you just google "hex code" you'll find a cheat sheet for all the web safe colors you can think of. And yes, one of those cheat sheets is on my cheat

sheet.

And that's really all there is to it. Now you know enough to edit CSS. However, you do not know enough to BUILD CSS, so if you're curious to learn how to do that, check out the beginner's guide on the cheat sheet. That's where I learned how to do it. I'm not linking stuff I haven't personally used, by the way!

One REALLY great tool for editing CSS is a little plugin called FireBug. This isn't a WordPress plugin! It's a Firefox plugin. You just look up Firebug and download it. It's probably the simplest and most useful web editing tool I know of, so much that Google is trying to develop a similar one for Chrome because they know people like me won't switch browsers until there is one! It just splits the screen and lets you point and click to see what object coincides with what CSS. Here's a screenshot.

Part 6: PHP... and BEYOND!

Maybe you've been sitting there during this whole presentation and thought, "This is kid stuff." Well then, this section of my speech is for you. I wrote it on the off chance that someone like you would show up!

Many WordPress designers never have to actually design a theme. There's a host of design and customization friendly WordPress templates already out there. But when customizing themes isn't enough anymore, it's time to build your own theme. And that means learning PHP. I can't teach you PHP because I'm not an expert, but I can go over a few of the basics with you.

PHP stands for Hypertext PreProcessor (I know that doesn't make sense! It used to stand for Personal Home Page, which DID make sense, but then they changed it.) It's a free scripting

language used to produce and edit dynamic web pages. Dynamic simply means it's not a static page. You know how a blog is always being updated and changing? That makes it dynamic, and makes PHP the perfect code for it.

Did you notice the side of the edit screen when we looked at style.css? There are a LOT of different files there, from index.php to single.php to header.php to footer.php! Like I mentioned in Part 2, the theme is like a big puzzle and all of those different PHP files work together and interact to create the one theme you see on your WordPress blog. Dividing it up like this makes load times faster and coding easier. It also makes customizing easier, if you want to just customize the look of footer.php for example.

However, PHP is a very inflexible language. One mistake, like my errant semicolon, and your whole site is down. Seriously, you get a blank screen. That's why it's really important that, before you start messing around with PHP, you get yourself a sandbox.

A sandbox is a term for a local version of WordPress. Remember how I was talking about Lauren's Laboratory on my localhost. That's a version of WordPress that only I can access on my computer. However, it looks exactly how an online version of the site would appear. Before I launch any custom theme, I test it in my sandbox.

In order to set up a sandbox, you need to download a program like MAMP or XAMP and a good html editing program like Smultron or TextMate. I realized that it'd take a very long time to explain how to install MAMP, so just read the tutorial on the cheat sheet. MAMP is an open source platform that makes it easier to use MYSQL, a database management system. You know, the step before content management system. It helps you harness control of your localhost and set up WordPress in a table there.

Once you've got it set up, you can play with PHP without crashing the site... though if you're

like me, you might crash the one on your localhost irreversibly and have to re-download again! Seriously, I somehow broke the Dashboard as well as my theme. PHP is a powerful, dangerous beast.

And at this point, we've reached the end of my WordPress knowledge. I am in the midst of building my own WordPress theme just so I can say I've done it, but I haven't done it yet so I can't tell you how to do it. In the meantime, I refer you to the multiple walk-throughs on my cheat sheet by people who have created themes and lived to tell the tale.

We're going to take this next chunk of time for questions and I'm just praying you don't stump me! Ask away.