



Getting Started HTML

The internet user's guide
to HTML & CSS

Andy Bell • <http://gettingstartedht.ml>

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This version was published on 2013-11-21



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Contents

How the Internet Works	1
Step One: Typing an Address In	1
Step Two: DNS	1
Step Three: Going There...	1
Step Four: At the Destination	1
Step Five: ...and Back Again	2
Step Six: Putting it Together	2
Chapter Summary	2
How Web Hosting Works	3
What is a server?	3
What types of web hosting are available?	3
Why should you buy web hosting?	4
What should you look for in a web host?	4
Chapter Summary	6
Extra Credit	6

How the Internet Works

The internet often feels like magic, but it's really based on a bunch of different technologies that all work together so you can watch videos of cats chasing lazer pointers anytime, anywhere. By the end of this chapter you'll have a basic understanding of the process it takes for you to see a webpage!

Step One: Typing an Address In

The first step in this process is you actually typing the address in. This address is called a URL, or Uniform Resource Locator. Just like how it would be hard to find a building in an unfamiliar city without an address, your computer needs to know where it's going.

Step Two: DNS

There's just one wrinkle. Every computer's location on the internet is determined by its IP (Internet Protocol) address. IPs look like this: 74.125.224.72 . That looks nothing like "google.com", but they are, in fact, the same thing. The computers identify each other using numbers, but there's no way we humans would remember that that string of numbers is Google.

That's why there's the DNS, or Domain Name Service. A domain name is a bunch of letters that make up a web address people can actually use and remember. Google.com is one domain name. This book's website's domain name is gettingstartedht.ml.

The DNS takes those domain names and translates them into the IP address for the computer. When you type in "google.com", your computer talks to a DNS server (usually provided by your internet provider), the DNS server tells your computer "that's 74.125.224.72" and then your computer can get started on step 3.

Step Three: Going There...

Now that your computer has the address it needs, it sends a request for whatever page it is you wanted off into the internet. Your request goes from your computer to your internet provider's computers, and from there it hops between many different computers until it finally reaches its destination. It will often hop between dozens of different computers on its way to where it's going!

Step Four: At the Destination

Now that the server (you'll learn more about those in the next chapter) has your request, it gets to work giving you the page you want. It takes a look at your request, finds the page you want, and prepares to send it back to you. Then it's off again!

Step Five: ...and Back Again

The page you want makes its way back to you. It may again hop through dozens of different computers before getting to you. It may even take a different path to get back to you! The point is, it journeys back through the internet to find your computer.

Step Six: Putting it Together

Your computer gets the page you want and then your web browser starts putting it together. It takes the bits of computer code (that you will soon learn how to write) it gets and puts the pieces together. Soon, you're looking at a webpage!

Chapter Summary

From the time you type in the URL, to when you're looking at the webpage can take less than a second under good conditions. To summarize: you type in a URL, your computer finds out what its IP address is, your request travels through the internet, the server processes your request, its response travels back through the internet, and your browser takes that and makes your page show up!

Not quite as magical as it seemed before, right?

What comes next? In the next chapter, you'll learn how to get yourself a server so that people can type in your URL and see your stuff!

How Web Hosting Works

What exactly is web hosting? In this chapter you'll learn about the following topics:

- What is a server?
- What types of web hosting are available?
- Why should you buy web hosting?
- What should you look for in a web host?

What is a server?

Essentially, a server is just a computer. It's not even necessarily a special computer. Any computer could work as a server, even yours! However, when we refer to servers, we're usually talking about a specialized computer, built just to run web sites.

A quick refresher on how the internet works: when you visit a site, your request travels through a bunch of computers until it gets to the server the web site is on. Then the information you want travels back. Popular websites can get hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of visits every second, so these companies build computers that are made only for running websites (and they may even have thousands of these computers!).

You're just starting off. You're not going to be that popular to start with (sorry). You don't need to build thousands of specialized computers, or even one! That would be pretty expensive. That's why you need to get web hosting, which is essentially a way for you to rent a part of one of those specialized computers.

What types of web hosting are available?

There are three main types of web hosting available. Let's go over them and then focus on what you'll probably want. I'll start with the most powerful (and expensive) and work down.

Dedicated Servers

With a dedicated server, you're renting the whole machine. You have the entire machine to yourself, but the hosting company provides the electricity, connection to the internet, and other things like that (including building it). Naturally, this is very expensive because you've got the whole thing to yourself. You won't find dedicated servers for less than \$100 a month.

Dedicated servers are great for sites that need 100% control over the server and can expect a huge amount of visitors. That's not you, so let's move down.

VPS (Virtual Private Server)

Get ready to have your mind blown: computer scientists have found a way to essentially split one computer into multiple computers! That's what VPS hosting is. They take one server and split it into multiple servers. From your view it looks like just one computer, and you have total control over it.

The main advantage of VPS hosting is that what the hosting company tells you you're getting is what you're going to get. If another person on that same server gets slammed with visitors, your site isn't affected. It's great if you need complete reliability and control. While I've seen VPS hosting for \$5 a month, the more typical starting point is \$15-30 a month.

Shared Hosting

Spoiler alert: this is what you want to get. With shared hosting, the hosting company takes a server and carves out many many little spaces for people's websites to live. This makes it the cheapest of the options, which is great when you're first starting out.

There are disadvantages to this: if one website gets a ton of visitors it can slow down the other sites on that same server. The hosting company also restricts some of the things you can do on the server so that you don't slow things down for everyone else. However, it's relatively easy to move up to a higher tier of hosting when you need to, so shared hosting is the perfect place to start. Shared hosting usually includes a control panel of some sort, making it easy to manage your web hosting service.

You'll typically find shared hosting for \$5-10 a month. (If you're paying more than \$10 a month for shared hosting you need to find a discount code!)

Why should you buy web hosting?

Remember how I said "any computer could work as a server, even yours?" If that's the case, then why should you buy web hosting? There's a few really good reasons:

- Their computers are fast. Web servers are built to host websites, and nothing else. That means that they run very fast for that purpose. You can probably play some cool video games on your computer. A web server can't do that: it wasn't built for it. Servers are good at one thing, and they do it very well.
- Their computers are always connected to the internet. Hosting companies have very good internet connections that can handle millions of people per second. You don't. They also have backup systems in place so that if one internet connection goes out, they can just use a different one.
- They take care of the technical stuff. Do you know how to apt-get, or configure PHP, or wire enterprise networking equipment together, or configure an FTP server? Probably not. But your web hosting company does! They take care of the super-technical stuff so that you don't have to be a computer expert to have a site on the internet.

What should you look for in a web host?

There are a ton of web hosting companies out there. Most of them are rubbish. It's become very easy for anyone to start up a web hosting company at very little cost, so there are tons of companies out there that aren't worth it. There are a few main things I would look for in web hosting to find a good company.

Cost

You're just starting out, and I doubt you want to spend a ton of money. Since you're going to want shared hosting, let's talk about how much money you'll need to spend.

Quite frankly, you shouldn't need to pay over \$10 a month. In fact, the amount you end up paying will probably be around \$5-6 per month. However, there is a catch.

Most hosting companies don't offer a month-to-month plan. Typically you'll have to pay for an entire year's worth of web hosting up front. You should plan for that. Make sure you've got \$50-100 ready to go when you sign up. Thought you ought to know.

Reputation/Age

Bad news: you're going to have to do some research. Check out the reviews for the company, but don't put too much stock in reviews either. Many reviews for web hosting companies are either glowing (because they have high commissions for referring new customers) or awful (because it didn't work 100% of the time always and give the customer a pony). Every web hosting company is going to have problems from time to time.

Combined with reviews, another indicator that's often useful is the company's age. I'm not saying a company that was started this year is automatically bad (it could even be very good!), but many fly-by-night hosting companies come and go very quickly. If a company's been around for 5 years or longer, that's a good sign of their financial stability and makes it very likely they'll be around for a while to come!

Service

You'll likely run into trouble at some point. Something just isn't going to work the way you want it to. Something may even break. Does the hosting company have your back when that happens?

Take a look at the service options they have. Do they offer free phone support? How about live text chat options? Do they only have email support available? What do they claim their response times are? Do they have a helpful knowledge base full of answers to common questions?

If you don't like talking on the phone, maybe phone support isn't important to you. Only you can answer those questions, but if you can't find any clear support options, you should probably stay away.

Country

This one won't be too relevant for most people, but there are some situations where you should pay attention to which country your site is hosted in.

By default, you should probably just get hosting from a company in the same country you're in. However, if your website is appealing to a foreign audience, you may want to consider choosing a server in the same country your audience is in. This will make your site faster for those visitors, since the data won't have to travel as far to get to them.

The hosts I mention in the Extra Credit are all US-based, so you'll need to research things out on your own if you're in a different country.

What I've left off

Those are the two main things I'd consider. But those aren't the things you'll see hosting companies advertising. So what about all that other stuff?

Let's talk about "unlimited" for a minute. Most web hosting companies offer unlimited bandwidth and storage. Those aren't useful indicators of quality because they don't offer unlimited "resources." Bandwidth and storage are cheap, so they offer unlimited on those. However, if your site is using too much of the computer's processor or RAM, they'll still ask you to upgrade to a VPS or better. Quite frankly, your site is going to run out of "resources" long before bandwidth or storage becomes an issue for your hosting company. So don't worry about "unlimited" too much (most of the reputable companies offer that anyway).

"Support" for WordPress or other web software like that is another thing to not worry about too much. Basically every hosting service out there has support, and most will advertise it. All it really means is "yeah, that'll run," and often "yeah, we have an easy 'one-click' installer for it." These things are so common among hosting companies that it's basically useless to look for.

Chapter Summary

Now you know that a web server is just a computer (though usually a fancy purpose-built one). You also know that there are several different types of hosting out there, but that you'll want to get shared hosting to start out. You also know that the hosting company's reputation and service are the two most important factors to look for when shopping around. Other things don't matter as much.

So what comes next? You don't need web hosting to start learning and writing HTML, but if you want others to be able to see what you've created on the internet you'll need to! Go do some research and shop around to find the hosting service you want to use so you can show off the skills you'll have by the end of this book!

Extra Credit

Choosing a domain name

This section is coming in a future update, but I do have some advice for you right now:

If YourName.com is available BUY IT RIGHT NOW. This will help you have greater control of your name and identity on the internet. YourName.com is perfect for a personal site, and is great for having a completely professional email address. Don't hesitate: check right now.