



Premium Theme Buyer's Guide

Helping you pick the right premium theme



Experience Real Success With Life Purpose

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Introduction

A premium WordPress theme can be one of the best ways to take advantage of the open-source WordPress platform (<http://wordpress.org>). It gives you all the bonuses of a solid content management system, but because WordPress is free you don't have to spend money on the backend. With the money you'll save you can afford to spend more on the design and get a premium theme—and it'll still be cheaper than a custom-designed site.

Buying a premium theme means you can avoid the shoddy work that so often shows up in free themes. Not to say free themes aren't a fine way to go, but often a lot of the detail work that really makes a theme shine is missing. Anyone can slap together a free theme and throw it out to the masses, but it takes a little more care and dedication to build themes people are willing to pay for.

But just because you pay for a theme doesn't mean it's worth the money. Not all premium themes are created equal. And not every top-notch theme is going to work for your needs. This guide is all about helping you sort through the sometimes murky waters of premium themes.

In this guide, we'll cover:

1. What you should know before you even start looking at themes.
2. How to assess a theme's quality.
3. What you should be getting when you purchase a theme.

This guide should take some of the mystery out of premium themes and give you the confidence to choose a theme that will work for you.

Part 1: Needs and Expectations

The first step to selecting a premium theme is to gauge your own needs and expectations. You can't pick the right theme if you don't know what's right for you. So before you start looking at cool themes and get excited about fancy designs, you need to sort out what you need. And before you even do that, you should probably understand what you're getting.

What is a Premium Theme?

No guide to premium themes would be complete if it didn't answer one question: What is a premium theme?

There are a lot of different opinions on what a premium theme *should* entail, including customization, documentation, support, higher quality code, better "design" work, etc. But the reality is that a premium theme is a theme you pay for, and nothing more. All the other potential extras and goodies depend on the creator of the theme. Not all premium theme creators are equal.

Everyone has a different idea of what makes a theme great. Where one premium theme creator may have a lot of professional experience dealing with design, interacting with clients and carefully considering the theme's uses, another may only produce themes as a hobby. Both themes may be equally good but you'll get a different experience from each.

If you buy a theme from a hobbyist you can't expect the always-on levels of support a pro-theme creator can offer. And if you buy a theme from a giant corporation that offers premium themes as a second thought, you might get crummy or non-existent service. Neither of these examples mean you won't get a great theme. You could get an incredible theme and impeccable service from a hobbyist or a faceless corporation.

The point is to be aware of the differences, to not be swayed by slick marketing, and to ultimately do your research. There are some excellent premium themes out there that can do great things for you. And there are also some not-so-great themes out there. The most important thing is to do your research and make sure you know what they mean by "premium theme" so you can be sure the theme

you buy will work for you.

What Do You Need in a Website?

Before you start picking themes you need to make some big decisions. If you don't think things through now, you may end up regretting it later. The biggest thing to figure out is what you need your website to do.

- What kind of content do you need to manage?
- Do you need a blog or blog-like capabilities (news, portfolio, press releases, catalog, etc.)?
- Does your site need a specific call to action (like an e-commerce component)?
- How many pages will your site need?
- Will those pages need a hierarchy? (Do you have only five pages or do you have a few dozen pages where some will be filed under others?)
- What do you want to feature on the homepage?

These are the kinds of questions you need to answer. Basically you're trying to figure out what you need from your website. Once you have that sorted out, it's easier to find a theme that offers what you need.

What Kind of Theme Should You Buy?

One of the common mistakes in picking a theme is assuming it will fit your needs. Premium themes come in all shapes and sizes. Some focus on a specific need while others focus on generic blogging.

Some themes are designed to put the focus on the content. **Magazine/news-style themes** are intended to put as much content out there as they can for your readers to choose from; however, if you can't generate that level of content then they also do a great job of highlighting your lack of content.

At the other end of the scale are the **corporate themes**. These tend to focus on static pages and relegate the blog content to a small news section. Not great for daily blogging; but if you want a normal site with a small news section then it's ideal.

Of course there are a lot of steps between these two extremes. The key is to not make assumptions about what the theme can or can't do. Don't assume that because WordPress is a blogging platform that any theme will be great for blogging. WordPress is extremely flexible and more and more themes are focusing on sites that don't revolve around blogging.

What Features Do You Need?

Before you start looking at any themes you should decide what features you need. Some features may seem fascinating when you read about the theme and view the demo, but if you don't really need them then you may be paying for something you'll never use. In the worst case those fancy features could interfere with what you do actually need. Finding the right theme for your needs is a much better approach than finding a cool theme and bending your needs to make it work.

Below are examples of some features that are available on premium themes:

- Featured post on the home page
- Featured photographs from Flickr
- Featured video(s) from YouTube
- Advertising integration (AdSense / 125 squares / banners)
- Advertising management
- Optional color themes
- Control panels for adding tracking code or feed URLs
- Header image replacement, resizing, and cropping
- Contact form functionality
- Tabbed sidebars
- Tabbed featured posts

- Multiple positions for optional widgetized sidebars
- Multiple page layouts
- Menus auto generated from WordPress pages
- Menus auto generated from categories
- Menus generated from the blogroll
- Manual menu control
- Drop down menus
- Built in asides / sideblog
- Advanced search functionality
- Niche specific templates; e.g. real estate
- E-commerce integration
- Image / banner rotation
- Reordering the home page
- Alternative graphics packs
- And more...

There are so many choices that you have your work cut out for you.

How Much Customization Are You Comfortable With?

A final question in assessing your needs and expectations is how much customizing are you prepared to do? If the thought of tweaking code or installing plugins makes you dizzy, you better pick a plugin that has everything you need out of the box. But if you're fine with tweaking code, installing plugins or adjusting the CSS, then you can be a lot more flexible when you pick a theme.

A lot of the features mentioned above are built into some premium themes, but many of them can easily be added to themes with simple plugins. If you're up for making some of those changes yourself, it might give you more flexibility to pick a theme you like for other reasons.

In the next part of the guide we'll cover specific details to look for when choosing a premium theme.

Part 2: Assessing Quality

In part 1 we looked at setting expectations and deciding on what you actually need from a theme. In this section we're going to look at some areas you should examine when you find a theme you like.

We mentioned in part 1 that there is no standard for premium themes; the term means different things to different people. But it's still reasonable to expect a high level of quality. But what is a high quality theme?

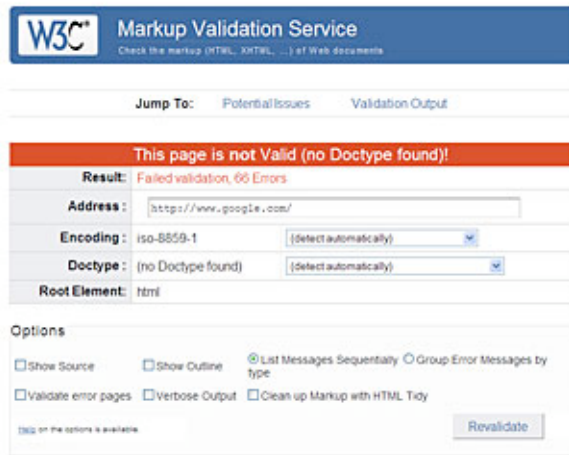
As ever, the devil is in the details. So scour the demo page, source code, tutorials and any details a premium theme creator offers looking for the measures of quality below.

Valid code

The quickest and easiest way to assess a theme's quality is to see how it stacks up to the industry standards. You can use online tools to compare the page construction to specific code standards.

The HTML markup validator (<http://validator.w3.org>) should be run on the key pages: the home page, single post page, category page, etc. If all goes well you will see a prominent statement that the page has passed.

If it fails, the validator will report the number of errors.



The CSS validator (<http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator/>) only needs to be run on the home page, as the style information will be the same across the entire site.

The CSS validator will list both errors and warnings. Generally, you can ignore the warnings. And getting errors doesn't necessarily mean the theme is a bad one. There are times when errors simply cannot be avoided; however, you would generally expect few errors. Also, the author of the theme should be able to explain why the errors are there.

Browser Compatibility

All themes should be compatible with the major browsers. The author should be quite clear about the browsers their theme is compatible with. If the author's website doesn't state that it is compatible, you should ask rather than assume.

Internet Explorer 6, Internet Explorer 7, Firefox, Safari and Opera are the main browsers it should be compatible with; however, being compatible doesn't mean everything will work the same. It is common to offer a more basic version for Internet Explorer 6 users because of the bugs in the browser itself.

It's worth testing the theme in as many browsers as possible to find out if there are things that don't quite work the way they should on any particular browser. If a theme isn't compatible with one or more browsers, you'll need to consider whether it's worth buying.

Styling

In any website there are a lot of elements that can be designed with a specific look and style. Maybe there are different styles for each level of header or maybe pull quotes are treated with a special graphic. Check to see if these elements are styled in any theme you're considering. This will give you an idea of the level of detail the theme author has included.

Look through the demo pages for examples of the following:

- Headers, levels 3 to 5
- Blockquotes / pull quotes
- Code blocks
- Tables
- Numbered lists
- Bulleted lists
- Nested lists
- Definition lists
- Images, particularly the spacing around them if they are included within the text
- Links (click on links to see how they behave and how they look afterwards)

If the demo site doesn't have an example of these in one of the posts or pages, then ask the theme's author to add a post that contains them. You never know when you might need to include a table, and there is nothing worse than a poorly styled table.

Browsers come with default styles for all of these items, so it is unlikely they will be unstyled; but you're really checking to make sure you're happy with the way these elements are styled.

You should also try printing the site. Ideally a dedicated set of styles for printing will remove the areas you don't need such as menus, graphics and advertising and leave you with the content of the document at the right width for printing to standard paper sizes.

Typography

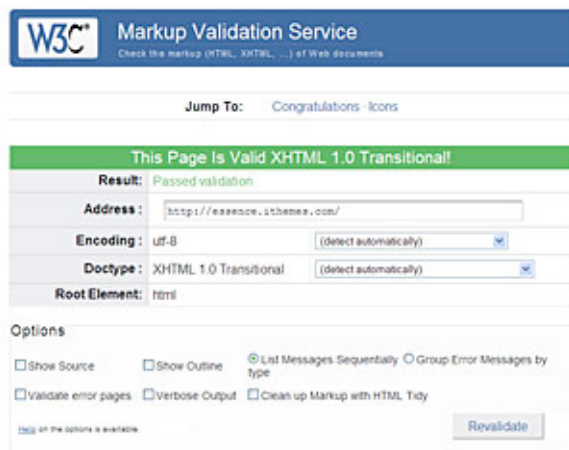
One thing any theme should do well is make your content easy to read. A good theme designer will have considered the type in some detail to decide on an appropriate font size and line spacing, among other things. The following points are a general guide to help you think about the type.

First of all, just read through a few of the pages. If you find it difficult, then that's an obvious indication that something isn't right.

There may be a number of reasons for poor legibility. For example, if the length of each line of text is too long horizontally you may lose your place when you try to move to the next line. Or if each line of text is too close to the one above it (leading) it can take too much effort to read.

The other thing you are looking for is a regular rhythm. Consistent spacing between paragraphs, headers, and lists will create a rhythm on the page that makes it easier to read. Frequently asked questions (FAQ) pages can be very useful for judging rhythm, since they often have a number of headers and short answers all visible on screen at the same time.

Finally, it is a good idea to compare the theme's typeface to some sites you regularly read. See how it stacks up and decide whether or not any differences are warranted.



Comment Styling

If you plan to let users comment on your site, you should check the way the comment section works. You might need to leave a few comments on the demo theme

to see how it handles comments.

Trackbacks are generally useless when they appear within a comment thread. Readers hate wading through piles of trackbacks to find the comments in between them; so you would expect a well-thought out theme to separate them, or at least provide that as an option.

It's also good practice to make the authors' comments appear different than those of visitors and to include gravatars (**g**lobally **r**ecognized **a**vtar) for every comment. But if you're planning to use the site for business, you might want the option of turning the gravatars off. Be sure to find out how the theme handles that. Does it leave an empty space, or does it adapt as though the gravatars were never there?

You should also look to see how a theme handles a post with comments turned off and whether or not the theme displays a message when comments are moderated.

Pages

The WordPress theme API allows specific page types to have their own templates. This means the

information that is displayed can be tailored specifically to the need. You should visit the following types of pages and see how the author has used this functionality:

- The home page (is it the same as a single post?)
- Any single post
- A category page
- A tag page
- A static page (such as the about page)
- The search page
- Monthly archive page
- Sitemap (If there is one)

With all of these pages you should pay particular attention to the content of each post; i.e. is it an excerpt or is it showing a full post? Full posts can make your site less effective with search engines since you can have multiple pages with the same content.

You should also pay attention to the way you navigate between the pages. Are there links from each post on the category page to the monthly archive page, or to the tag page for the tags that apply to that post? If there is more than one page of results, are the default next/previous page links used? Or has the theme author gone that little bit further and included a list of page numbers so you can navigate straight to page five?

Once you have checked the normal pages, check the error pages. What happens if you search for a term and there are no results? What happens when you change the URL to try to access a page that doesn't exist, or a post that doesn't exist?

Be sure to pay attention to the details as well. In addition to post titles, does it also display authors, dates, categories, etc.? When it gives an excerpt of a post is there a user-friendly "read more" link of some type?

Most of these special cases apply to blog-type content, but even if you're not concerned about blog functionality you'll want to see how the pages use the sidebar or widgets. Is the sidebar the same on every page or is there variation?

Theme Options Panels and Commented Code

It is fairly likely that you will want to amend the theme to some degree, so you need to know how easy it is going to be to do that. Ideally, the theme will provide a comprehensive Theme Options (administrative) panel that will let you swap out images, change the feed URL, add in tracking code, choose between color schemes or control your menu. You should definitely ask for details of the functionality that would be available without changing any code.

In the event that you do need to change the code, a great theme will have detailed comments in the source code to make it as easy as possible. These comments will rarely show up in the source view, so you won't be able to check this without the original files. But it doesn't hurt to ask for a sample—perhaps a relatively standard section of code so that you can see what kind of comments it contains.

There's a lot to think about here. Not every theme will be perfect in all the points raised, and different authors will have different views on the importance of each one. You might have to compromise on one to get the best of another. Or you might realize that some of these points don't concern you very much. Either way you should know how to gauge a theme's quality, which will be a tremendous help in picking a theme.

In the final part of the series we'll consider the value of a good theme.

Part 3: What Do You Get For Your Money?

In part 1 we discussed finding out what your needs are and setting your expectations. Part 2 looked at how to determine the quality of a theme. In this section we'll look at what you actually get when you buy a premium theme.

What you get will vary significantly between sellers. Some are simply selling themes while others are building a business around it and want to provide everything you will need to get the best out of a theme. The prices will differ between the two, although not necessarily in the way you would expect.

There seems to be little correlation between the price of the theme and the extras you get, and the extras aren't always listed, so you may need to ask what's included.

Page Templates

Page templates are technically part of the theme and you'll get them anyway, but we're including them here because it's not always clear what kind of page templates are included.

When you create a page in WordPress you have the option of applying a page template to it. The templates can be minor variations on the basic theme. For example, it might have the sidebar on the opposite side of the page, or no sidebar at all.

Where these templates really start to work for you is when they represent alternative core functionality. WordPress allows you to replace the default home page with a new page. If the theme author has included page templates with different styles of home page, you can apply these to a WordPress page and assign it to your home page to change the way the theme works.

If you buy a theme that was intended to be used as a normal website instead of a blog, the default home page might not show any of your posts. If you decide you want a normal blog in the future it's simple to make the change if the theme's author has included a blog style page template.

If the theme includes any page templates they may be restricted to different styles of home page, or could include more variations such as pages with a featured post at the top, variations on sidebar position, multiple posts in different layouts or any variation of the theme.

Instructions

With a new theme comes new ways of putting your content together. Features like adding an image to represent the post, changing the header or using images with captions can be difficult to figure out without a little guidance.

The quality of the instructions that come with a premium theme can differ widely. There may be nothing more than a "read me" file in the theme itself, or you could get multiple video demos of the functionality.

Although you are not really paying for these instructions, and often they are available free on the website in the form of tutorials (making them an excellent source of information before you buy), they can make the difference between a new theme that works and one that just causes frustration, so it's worth considering what kind of instructions are available as part of the cost.

Photoshop Files

Even if the instructions are incredible and you know how to change the header, actually changing it without the original Photoshop files can sometimes be difficult.

You may need to find the correct dimensions, figure out what typeface the original is in, replicate all the styles involved, etc., so having a Photoshop file to work from can make it much easier.

In some cases a Photoshop file is included by default, and may not even be mentioned as a selling point, which it should be. In other cases you have to pay extra for it and you will need to decide whether it is worth the extra cost.

For simple themes where the header is a regular background image, there isn't necessarily a need for it. But for more complicated themes, especially those where the header text is a key component, it may be difficult to do without it.

Compatibility with Feature Upgrades?

The theme you buy should be compatible with the version of WordPress you are using, but what happens with WordPress upgrades?

If a feature is changed in WordPress or a new feature is added (tagging and sidebars are good examples of relatively recent feature additions) the theme should be updated to incorporate it. The question is whether you are entitled to a free upgrade.

The themes themselves won't stand still either. Customer feedback and new trends mean that themes will get new features or change their look over time.

You may be entitled to get new versions that have been upgraded for compatibility, or you may be entitled to any new version that comes out, or you may have to pay extra to upgrade to the next version. While it's easy to save future worries for the future, this is definitely a cost you should consider now.

Support

When you ask people what a premium theme includes, the answer usually mentions support. If you pay for something, you generally expect support if it doesn't work. How much support and on which issues can vary, though.

Some premium theme sellers offer forums to cover basic support issues. These forums usually aren't something you pay for and they are a way of deflecting support away from the author, but they can also be very helpful for finding your answers.

If there aren't any forums or they fail to answer your question, you'll need direct support from the author. If you're using the theme as intended on a compatible version of WordPress and something simply isn't working, then basic support is usually available.

If, however, you have made changes to the theme or are trying to change it to suit an earlier version of WordPress, it is by no means certain that you will get help. If this is something you'll be doing then you need to figure out ahead of time if you'll be able to get support.

Providing support is time consuming and expensive for the theme creator. A few hours a day providing free support can put a significant dent in their income. Therefore you shouldn't automatically expect a theme author to provide endless support on everything you want to do simply because you have purchased a theme from them. Like insurance there may be fine print. Find out what you will or won't get and what the cost is.

Summary

There's a lot to consider if you want to get the most out of a theme.

- First you have to sort out your own needs and expectations.
- Next you need to assess what a theme has to offer.
- Finally you need to know what you're paying for.

The good news is that most premium themes are not very expensive; however, despite being inexpensive, not all premium themes live up to that cost. A little searching should let you know how well respected an author is or if they're an unknown. Consider your needs, do your research and it will be hard to go wrong.

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