Chapter 1

What WordPress Can Do for You

In This Chapter

▶ Understanding the benefits of WordPress

▶ Getting acquainted with the basic features of WordPress

*I*f you believe that your ideas are important enough to publish on the World Wide Web for the entire world to see, then you, my friendly reader, are the perfect blogger, and WordPress is your perfect tool! How else can you get your message out with the potential of reaching a vast audience of millions worldwide for the cost of exactly nothing? There might be no free lunch in this world, but you can bet your bottom dollar that there are free blogs to be had. And WordPress serves it all up in one nifty package.

The software's ease of use and the speed at which you can get your blog up and running on the Internet are the best reasons to use WordPress to power your personal or business blog. In this chapter, I introduce you to the WordPress software so that you can begin to discover how effective it is as a tool for creating your blog or Web site.

Discovering the Benefits of WordPress

I work with first-time bloggers all the time, folks who are new to the idea of publishing on the Internet. One of the most frequently asked questions I get is, "How can I run a blog? I don't even know how to code or create Web sites."

Enter WordPress. You no longer need to worry about knowing the code, because the WordPress blogging software does the code part for you. When you log in to your blog, you have only these simple things to do in order to publish your thoughts and ideas:

1. Write your article.

2. Click a button to publish your article.

And that's it!

WordPress, which is open source blogging software, is uniquely positioned to be the blogging tool of choice for many new bloggers — as well as for those who already have blogs, because migrating to a new blogging tool is a common occurrence. *Open source* means that the code used to power the software is completely open for public consumption. So you, or I, or the lady who serves your kid lunch in the school cafeteria can take the WordPress code and play with it, change it, adapt it, repackage it, and redistribute it if we have the technical ability and means to do so.

Open source also means that the use of the software, in all of its forms, is free. Anyone can use WordPress. It doesn't matter whether you're using it to start a blog about how a really good cup of espresso can make you weak in the knees, or to build a Web site for a Fortune 500 company. And whether you decide to use the hosted version of WordPress at WordPress.com, install the WordPress software on your own hosted account, or use WordPress MU (MU stands for Multi-User) to run a network of blogs, the cost of WordPress itself is absolutely nothing.

At times, there can be some costs associated with running a WordPress blog. For instance, if you choose to host your own blog on your own domain, you have the costs associated with Web hosting and domain registration (see Part III for more about hosting your own domain). And, of course, if you hire a designer to create a custom template for your blog, you need to pay that person as well. (See Chapter 11 for information about hiring a design professional for your WordPress blog.)

In addition to being open source, WordPress brings the following competitive advantages with it as the most popular blogging tool on the market:

- **Diversity:** Three versions of WordPress are available to suit nearly every type of blogger: a hosted turnkey solution; a version to install on the Web server of your choice; and a multi-user version that allows you to offer blogs across a group or organization.

- **Ease of use:** WordPress setup is quick and the software is easy to use.

- **Extensibility:** WordPress is extremely extensible, meaning that you can easily obtain plugins and tools that let you customize it to suit your purposes.

- **Community of users:** WordPress has a large and loyal members-helping-members community through public support forums, mailing lists, and interactive blogs geared toward the use of WordPress.

The following sections fill in a few of the details about these aspects and point you to where in the book you can find out more about them.

A little something for everyone

One of the most satisfying benefits of choosing WordPress as your blogging platform is the fact that WordPress supplies you with three different flavors of blogging software (well, four flavors when you count the Enterprise version, which isn't free). The developers of WordPress are forward thinkers and provide something for everyone. Find out which variety is likely to fully meet your blogging needs:

✔ **WordPress.com (see Part II):** This version is a hosted, turnkey solution for WordPress bloggers. You can go to `http://wordpress.com`, sign up for a blog hosted by WordPress, and be up and running with several key WordPress features within a matter of minutes. You can choose your own username to individualize your new blog. For example, if you want the username *souptonuts*, your WordPress.com blog is assigned the following domain: `http://souptonuts.wordpress.com`. That is, of course, if someone hasn't already beaten you to the punch in nabbing the souptonuts username. If someone has, you need to choose one that is available in the WordPress.com system.

✔ **Self-installed WordPress (see Part III):** Available at `http://WordPress.org`, this version is software that you download from the WordPress Web site and install on your own Web server to run on your own domain. It requires you to get into the inner workings a bit, but it also offers much more flexibility than the hosted version. The nice thing about this version is that just about anyone can use it, from novices to experts. You can get as involved with the code as you want — or avoid the code altogether and still run a fully functional blog on your own domain.

✔ **WordPress MU (see Part IV):** Found at `http://mu.wordpress.org` and pronounced *em-you,* where MU stands for Multi-User. With this version of WordPress, you can perform one installation of WordPress MU and run several hundred to thousands of blogs on one domain. WordPress MU isn't meant for the individual blogger, but it's perfect for corporations, groups, and organizations to maintain a network of blogs on one server and one domain. There is an enterprise version of WordPress MU, known as the "KnowNow WordPress Enterprise Edition" (KWEE). This version of WordPress MU caters to the corporate world and Fortune 500 companies, is not free, and comes with consulting fees and services to help you manage and maintain your WordPress MU environment.

Easy to set up and use

WordPress is one of the only blog platforms that can brag about a five-minute installation — and stand behind it! Choosing to sign up for the hosted version of WordPress yields approximately the same amount of time during the signup process. WordPress MU takes a bit longer to install and get it up and running. I recently installed it in approximately 20 minutes from start to finish.

Mind you, those are *approximate* installation times, which don't include the time it takes to set up the different options and settings within the Administration panel.

After you complete the installation, the world of WordPress awaits you. The design of the Administration panel is intuitive, well organized, and easy on the eyes. Everything is clear and logical — easy for even a first-time user to see where to go to manage settings and options.

The WordPress software surely has enough meat to it to keep the most experienced developer busy and happy. However, at the same time, it's intuitive and friendly enough to make a novice user giddy at how easy it is to get started. Each time you use WordPress, you can find out something exciting and new.

Flex and extend WordPress capabilities

I've found that the most exciting and fun part about running a WordPress blog is the flexibility of the software, with hundreds of plugins available to create a blog that functions the way *you* need it to.

If you think of your blog as a vacuum cleaner, plugins are the attachments. The attachments don't function alone. However, when you add the attachments to your vacuum cleaner, you add to the functionality of your vacuum, possibly improving the performance of your vacuum. By and large, plugins are available at no charge to you. You can find more about WordPress plugins and where to get them in Chapter 10. Also, in Chapter 18, you'll find a listing of my choice of the ten popular WordPress plugins available for download.

For the most part, every WordPress blog is the same at its core. By using WordPress plugins, you can truly individualize your blog, making it stand out by providing additional features and tools to benefit you and your readers. When you come upon a WordPress blog on the Internet and see some really different and cool functions on it, 98 percent of the time you can include that

function on your blog using a WordPress plugin. If you don't know what plugin that blog is using, feel free to drop the blog owner an e-mail or leave a comment. WordPress blog owners are usually eager to share the cool tools they discover.

You can also embellish your WordPress blog with templates and themes. WordPress comes prepackaged with two default themes to get you started. Shown in Figure 1-1 is the famous Kubrick theme, created by Michael Heilemann from `http://binarybonsai.com`, which is the default theme that is displayed after you've installed and set up your blog.

Its default form is blue and white, but the theme creator gives you a handy application built right into the theme preferences so that you can change the color of the top header.

REMEMBER

This default theme includes all the basic elements that you need when starting a new WordPress blog. You can extend your WordPress blog in a hundred different ways with the use of plugins and themes that have been released by members of the WordPress community, but the Kubrick theme is a nice place to start.
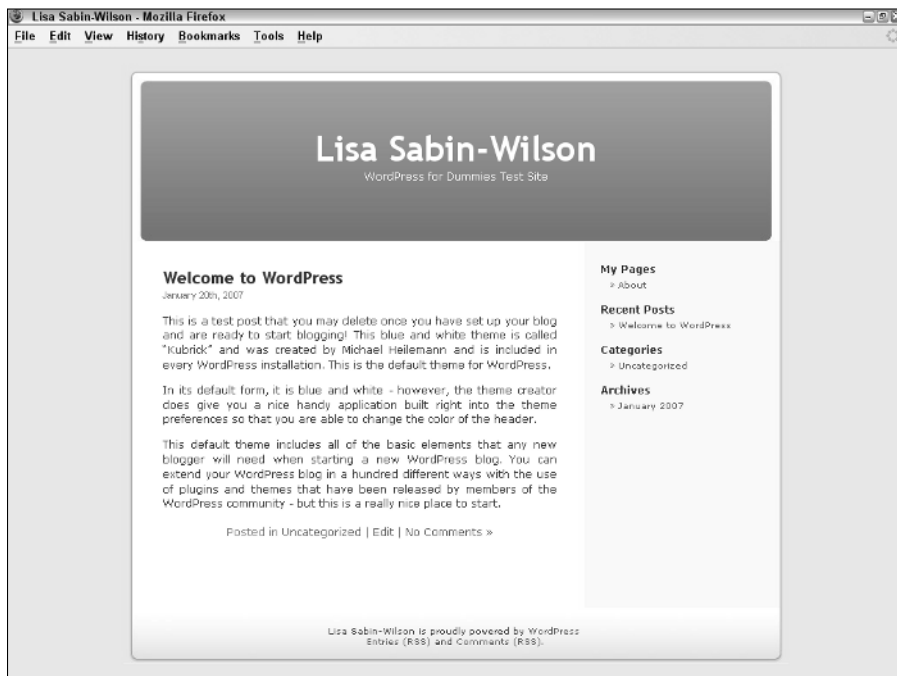
Figure 1-1:
Kubrick theme, the default WordPress theme by Michael Heilemann.

Taking part in the community

Allow me to introduce you to the fiercely loyal folks who make up the user base, better known as the vast WordPress community. This band of merry ladies and gentlemen comes from all around the globe, from California to Cairo, Florida to Florence, and all points in between and beyond.

By March 2005, Matt Mullenweg of WordPress proudly proclaimed that the number of WordPress downloads had reached 50,000. This was an exciting landmark in the history of the WordPress blogging software. By August 2006, the real excitement occurred when WordPress logged 1 million downloads.

Don't let the sheer volume of users fool you. The WordPress community has the bragging rights to the most helpful blogging community on the Web today. You can find users helping other users in the WordPress support forums at `http://wordpress.org/support`. You can also find WordPress users contributing to the very helpful WordPress Codex (a collection of How To documents) at `http://codex.wordpress.org`. In the blogosphere, you can find multiple blogs written on the topic of WordPress — users sharing their experience and WordPress war stories, published in the hopes of helping the next user who comes along.

You can subscribe to various mailing lists, too. They offer WordPress users the opportunity to become involved in various aspects of the WordPress community, as well as the future development of WordPress software.

Don't worry if you're not yet a member of the WordPress community. It's easy to join by simply starting your own WordPress blog using one of the three software options WordPress has available. If you're already blogging on a different blogging platform, such as Blogspot or Movable Type, WordPress makes it simple for you to migrate your current data from that platform into a new WordPress setup. (See Chapter 15 for information about moving your existing blog into WordPress.)

Your publishing history

WordPress lets you sort and organize everything you publish in an order that you, and your readers, can access by date and category. This archiving process occurs automatically with every post you publish to your blog.

You can create as many categories as you want for filing your blog posts away by topic. However, you don't have to use the Category feature if you'd rather not.

Engaging in blog talk

Want to engage in a lively conversation with your readers? For many bloggers, that's what blogging is all about. With WordPress you can get instant feedback from your readers the moment you make a post to your blog. People can leave a note for you that gets published to your site, and you can respond and engage your readers in conversation about the topic at hand. Having this function included on your blog creates the opportunity for others to expand on the thoughts and ideas that you presented in your blog post.

You have full administrative control over who can and can't leave comments. In addition, you can edit the comment or delete it altogether. You're also free to choose not to allow any comments on your blog.

Many blog users will say that a blog without comments is not a blog at all. This is a commonly held belief among those in the blogging community because experiencing visitor feedback through the use of comments is part of what has made blogging so popular today.

Feeding your readers

An *RSS feed* is a basic standard that readers of blogs have come to expect from blogs on the Internet today.

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication. An *RSS feed* is a basic standard that blog readers have come to expect. The resource site WebReference.com (`www.webreference.com/authoring/languages/xml/rss/intro/`) defines RSS as "a lightweight XML format designed for sharing headlines and other Web content. Think of it as a distributable 'What's New' for your site."

WordPress has built-in RSS feeds in several different formats. Because it's built in to the software platform, you don't need to actually do anything in order to provide your readers with an RSS feed of your content. Check out Chapter 8 to find out more about using RSS feeds within the WordPress program.