Chapter 1

What WordPress Can Do for You

In This Chapter

▶ Seeing how WordPress can benefit you

▶ Participating in the WordPress community

▶ Understanding the different versions of WordPress

*I*n a world in which technology advances faster than a speeding locomotive, WordPress is blogging made easy — and free! How else can you get your message out to a potential audience of millions worldwide and spend exactly nothing? There may be no such thing as a free lunch in this world, but you can bet your bottom dollar that there are free blogs to be had. WordPress serves them all up in one nifty package.

The software's free price tag, its ease of use, and the speed at which you can get your blog up and running are great reasons to use WordPress to power your personal or business blog. An even greater reason is the incredibly supportive and passionate WordPress community. 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 questions I'm most frequently asked 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 to do only two simple things to publish your thoughts and ideas:

1. Write your post.

2. Click a button to publish your post.

That's it!

WordPress offers the following competitive advantages 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 multiuser version that lets you offer blogs across a group or organization. I go into detail about each of these versions later in this chapter, in the "Choosing a WordPress Platform" section.
- ✔ **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 via public support forums, mailing lists, and blogs geared to the use of WordPress.

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

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! Signing up for the hosted version of WordPress takes approximately the same amount of time.

Mind you, five minutes is an *approximate* installation time. It doesn't include the time required to obtain domain registration and Web hosting services or to set up the options in the Administration panel.

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

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

Extend WordPress's capabilities

I've found that the most exciting and fun part of running a WordPress blog is exploring the flexibility of the software. Hundreds of plugins and themes are available to let you 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. When you add them to your vacuum cleaner, however, you add to the functionality of your vacuum, possibly improving its performance.

All WordPress blogs are pretty much the same at their core, so by using plugins, you can truly individualize your blog by providing additional features and tools to benefit yourself and your readers. When you come upon a WordPress blog that has some really different and cool functions, 98 percent of the time, you can include that function in your own blog by 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 usually are eager to share the great tools they discover.

Most plugins are available at no charge. You can find out more about WordPress plugins and where to get them in Chapter 10. Chapter 17 lists my choice of ten popular WordPress plugins available for download.

In addition to using plugins, you can embellish your WordPress blog with templates and themes. WordPress comes prepackaged with two themes to get you started. Figure 1-1 shows the famous Kubrick theme, created by Michael Heilemann from `http://binarybonsai.com`, which is displayed by default after you install and set up your blog.

The theme's default form is blue and white, but a handy application built into the preferences lets you change the color of the top header.
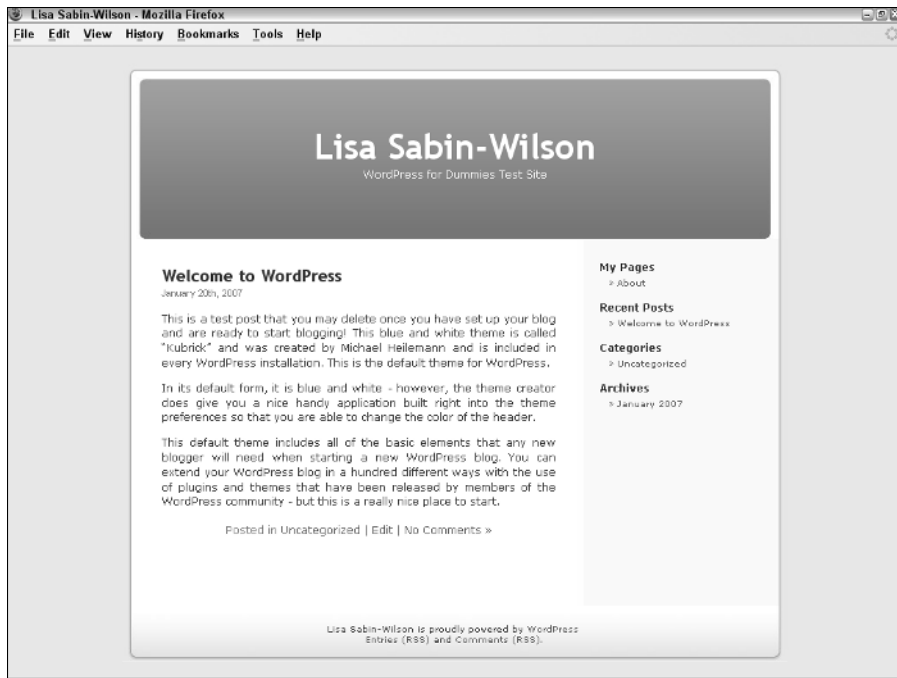
This theme includes all the basic elements that you need when starting a new WordPress blog. You can extend your WordPress blog in a hundred ways with the use of plugins and themes that have been released by members of the WordPress community, but the Kubrick theme is a nice place to start.

Take 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.

Figure 1-1:
The default
WordPress
theme,
Kubrick, by
Michael
Heilemann.

In March 2005, Matt Mullenweg of WordPress proudly proclaimed that the number of WordPress downloads had reached 900,000 — an amazing landmark in the history of the software. But the real excitement occurred in August 2006, when WordPress logged more than 1 million downloads, and in 2007, when the software had more than 3 million downloads.

Don't let the sheer volume of users fool you: WordPress has bragging rights to the most helpful blogging community on the Web today. You can find users helping other users in the support forums at `http://wordpress.org/support`. You can also find users contributing to the very helpful WordPress Codex (a collection of how-to documents) at `http://codex.wordpress.org`. Finally, across the blogosphere, you can find multiple blogs about WordPress itself, with users sharing their experiences and war stories in the hope of helping the next person who comes along.

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

The origins of WordPress

Once upon a time, there was a simple, PHP-based blogging platform called b2. This software, developed in 2001, slowly gained a bit of popularity among geek types as a way to publish content on the Internet. Its developer, Michel Valdrighi, kept development active until early 2003, when users of the software noticed that Valdrighi seemed to have disappeared. They became a little concerned about b2's future.

Somewhere deep in the heart of Texas, one young man in particular was very concerned, because b2 was his software of choice for publishing his own content on the World Wide Web. He didn't want to see his favorite publishing tool go to waste or to face a tough decision about moving on to something new and unknown. You can view the original post to his own blog in which he wondered what to do (`http://ma.tt/2003/01/the-blogging-software-dilemma`).

In that post, he talked briefly about some of the other software that was available at the time, and he tossed around the idea of using the b2 software to "to create a fork, integrating all the cool stuff that Michel would be working on right now if only he was around."

Create a fork, he did. In the absence of b2's developer, this young man developed from the original b2 code base a brand-new blogging application called WordPress.

That blog post was made on January 24, 2003, and the young man's name was (and is) Matt Mullenweg. On December 26, 2003, with the assistance of a few other developers, Mullenweg announced the arrival of the first official version of the WordPress software. The rest, as they say, is history. The history of this particular piece of software surely is one for the books, as it is the most popular blogging platform available today.

Don't worry if you're not a member of the WordPress community. Joining is easy: Simply start your own blog by using one of the three WordPress software options. If you're already blogging on a different platform, such as Blogspot or Movable Type, WordPress makes it simple for you to migrate your current data from that platform to a new WordPress setup. (See the appendix for information about moving your existing blog to WordPress.)

Choosing a WordPress Platform

Among the realities of running a blog today is choosing among the veritable feast of software platforms to find the one that will perform the way you need it to. You want to be sure that the platform you choose has all the options

you're looking for. WordPress is unique in that it offers three versions of its software. Each version is designed to meet the various needs of bloggers. The three different versions of WordPress are the following:

✔ The hosted version at WordPress.com. (Part II of this book focuses on this version.)

✔ The self-installed and self-hosted version available at WordPress.org. (Part III focuses on this version.)

✔ The multiuser version, WordPress MU, available at `http://mu.wordpress.org.`

Certain features are available to you in every WordPress blog setup, whether you're using the software from WordPress.org, the hosted version at WordPress.com, or the multiuser version of WordPress MU. These features include but aren't limited to the following:

✔ Quick-and-easy installation and setup

✔ Full-featured blogging capability, letting you publish content to the Web through an easy-to-use Web-based interface

✔ Topical archiving of your posts, using categories

✔ Monthly archiving of your posts, with the ability to provide a listing of those archives for easy navigation through your site.

✔ Comment and trackback tools

✔ Automatic spam protection through Akismet

✔ Built-in gallery integration for photos and images

✔ Media Manager for video and audio files

✔ Great community support

✔ Unlimited number of static pages, letting you step out of the blog box and into the sphere of running a fully functional Web site

✔ RSS capability with RSS 2.0, RSS 1.0, and Atom support

✔ Tools for importing content from different blogging systems (such as Blogger, Movable Type, and LiveJournal)

Table 1-1 compares the three WordPress versions.

Table 1-1	Exploring the Differences among the Three Versions of WordPress		
Feature	*WordPress.org*	*WordPress.com*	*WordPress MU*
Cost	Free	Free	Free
Software download	Yes	No	Yes
Software installation	Yes	No	Yes
Web hosting required	Yes	No	Yes
Custom CSS control	Yes	$15/year	Yes — for the MU administrator, not for the end user
Template access	Yes	No	Yes — for the MU administrator, not for the end user
Sidebar widgets	Yes	Yes	Yes
RSS syndication	Yes	Yes	Yes
Access to core code	Yes	No	Yes — for the MU administrator, not for the end user
Ability to install plugins	Yes	No	Yes
WP themes installation	Yes	No	Yes
Multiauthor support	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unlimited number of blog setups with one account	No	Yes	Yes
Community-based support forums	Yes	Yes	Yes

Choosing the hosted version from WordPress.com

WordPress.com is a free service. If downloading, installing, and using software on a Web server sound like Greek to you — and are things you'd rather avoid — the WordPress folks provide a solution for you at WordPress.com.

WordPress.com is a *hosted solution,* which means it has no software requirement, no downloads, and no installation or server configurations. Everything's done for you on the back end, behind the scenes. You don't even have to worry about how the process happens; it happens quickly, and before you know it, you're making your first blog post using a WordPress.com blog solution.

WordPress.com has some limitations. You can't install plugins or custom themes, for example, and you can't customize the base code files. But even with its limitations, WordPress.com is an excellent starting point if you're brand new to blogging and a little intimidated by the configuration requirements of the self-installed WordPress.org software.

The good news is this: If you outgrow your WordPress.com hosted blog in the future and want to make a move to the self-hosted WordPress.org software, you can. You can even take all the content from your WordPress.com-hosted blog with you and easily import it into your new setup with the WordPress.org software.

So in the grand scheme of things, you're really not that limited.

Self-hosting with WordPress.org

The self-installed version from WordPress.org (covered in Part III) requires you to download the software from the WordPress Web site and install it on a Web server. Unless you own your own Web server, you need to lease one — or lease space on one.

Using a Web server is typically referred to as *Web hosting,* and unless you know someone who knows someone, hosting generally isn't free. That being said, Web hosting doesn't cost a whole lot, either. You can usually obtain a good Web hosting service for anywhere from $5 to $10 per month. (Chapter 6 gives you the important details you need to know about obtaining a Web host.) You need to make sure, however, that any Web host you choose to work with has the required software installed on the Web server. Currently, the minimum software requirements for WordPress include

✔ PHP version 4.3 or greater

✔ MySQL version 4.0 or greater

After you have WordPress installed on your Web server (see the installation instructions in Chapter 6), you can start using it to blog to your heart's content. With the WordPress software, you can install several plugins that extend the functionality of the blogging system, as I describe in Chapter 10. You also have full control of the core files and code that WordPress is built on. So if you have a knack for PHP and knowledge of MySQL, you can work within the code to make changes that you think would be good for you and your blog.

You don't need design ability to make your blog look great. Members of the WordPress community have created more than 1,600 WordPress themes (designs), and you can download them for free and install them on your WordPress blog (see Chapter 11). Additionally, if you're creatively inclined, like to create designs on your own, and know Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), you have full access to the template system within WordPress and can create your own custom themes (see Chapters 12 and 13).

Running a network of blogs with WordPress MU

Although the WordPress.com hosted service runs on the WordPress MU software, and the end-user configuration settings are very similar, setting up, administering, and managing this version of WordPress differ a great deal from the same processes in the WordPress.com or WordPress.org versions.

WordPress MU lets you run thousands of blogs on one installation of its software platform, on one domain. Its biggest claim to fame, of course, is the hosted version of WordPress.com, which uses the MU platform to run more than 1 million blogs and climbing.

When you install and use WordPress MU, you become administrator of a network of blogs. The administration interface for WordPress MU differs from WordPress.com and the software from WordPress.org, in that you're configuring options and settings for your blog as well as for multiple blogs across your network.

WordPress MU does everything the original software from WordPress.org does, so you can provide bloggers all the functionality that WordPress users have come to expect and enjoy.

WordPress MU isn't meant for the casual user or beginner. It's also not meant for bloggers who want to run five to ten of their own blogs on one domain. Who is it meant for, then?

✔ Blog networks (such as Edublogs.org) that currently have more than 150 blogs.

✔ Newspapers and magazines, such as *The New York Times,* and universities such as Harvard Law School that currently use WordPress MU to manage the blog sections of their Web sites.

✔ Niche-specific blog networks, such as Edublogs.org, that use WordPress MU to manage their full networks of free blogs for teachers, educators, lecturers, librarians, and other education professionals.

If you're interested in that software, check out more details at the WordPress MU Web site at `http://mu.wordpress.org`.