

The Free Hosting Decision Checklist

How to Choose a Web Hosting Provider Without Regret

A practical worksheet for business owners, developers, and designers who are tired of migrating websites at 2 AM.

How to Use This Checklist

1. Print this page or open it in a split-screen next to your browser.
2. Fill in Section 1 before you start shopping.
3. For every provider you're considering, fill in Section 2.
4. Score each provider in Section 3.
5. Only sign up after Section 4 is complete.

Golden rule: The cheapest host is rarely the cheapest in year two. Optimize for total cost of ownership, not first-year sticker price.

SECTION 1: Know Your Site Before You Shop

1.1 Describe What Your Site Actually Does

In one sentence, what does your website do?

Examples:

- “A WooCommerce store selling handmade ceramics to US customers.”
- “A portfolio site for a freelance photographer with a contact form.”
- “A SaaS landing page with a blog, pricing page, and Stripe checkout.”
- “A membership site with video courses and community forums.”

Why this matters: A static portfolio has wildly different hosting needs than a WooCommerce store processing 500 orders a day. Your description determines everything — server type, bandwidth, storage, caching, and security requirements.

1.2 Estimate Current Traffic (and Add 50% for Growth)

Monthly visitors today: _____

Monthly visitors in 12 months (current $\times$ 1.5): _____

Break it down further:

Metric	Current	12-Month Target
Monthly visitors	_____	_____
Peak concurrent users	_____	_____
Average page size (MB)	_____	_____
Database queries per page	_____	_____

Quick bandwidth estimate:

Monthly Bandwidth (GB) = (Monthly Visitors × Avg Pages/Visit × Avg Page Size in MB) ÷ 1024

Why the 50% buffer? Because “unlimited” bandwidth is a marketing term, and because traffic spikes (a viral post, a holiday sale, a press mention) will happen when you least expect them. You want a host that can absorb a spike without throttling you into oblivion.

1.3 Match Your Answer to a Hosting Type

Use this table to narrow your search before you even open a browser.

If your site is...	Choose this type	Expected monthly cost	Examples
A simple portfolio, brochure site, or blog with <1,000 visitors/month	Shared Hosting	\$3–\$10	Bluehost, Hostinger, SiteGround
A growing blog, small business site, or light ecommerce with 1K–10K visitors/month	Managed WordPress / Shared Plus	\$10–\$25	Kinsta Starter, WP Engine Startup, Cloudways
An ecommerce store (WooCommerce, Shopify-alternative), membership site, or high-traffic blog with 10K–100K visitors/month	VPS or Managed Cloud	\$25–\$100	Cloudways, DigitalOcean + ServerPilot, Linode
A SaaS app, large ecommerce store, or site with 100K+ visitors/month	Dedicated Server or Enterprise Cloud	\$100–\$500+	AWS, Google Cloud, Vultr High Frequency, bare metal
A site with unpredictable traffic spikes or global audience	CDN-Fronted Cloud Hosting	\$20–\$200+	Cloudflare Pages, Vercel, Netlify, AWS CloudFront
A developer who wants full control and doesn't mind server management	Unmanaged VPS / Cloud	\$5–\$50	DigitalOcean, Hetzner, Vultr

My hosting type: _____

My budget range: \$_____ / month

SECTION 2: The Six-Feature Checklist

For each provider you're evaluating, score them 1–5 on each feature. A perfect score is 30.

Provider name: _____

Plan name: _____

Price (first year): \$_____ / month

Price (renewal): \$_____ / month

Contract length: _____ months

Feature 1: Uptime & Reliability

What to look for:

- Guaranteed uptime SLA (99.9% minimum, 99.99% preferred)
- Proactive server monitoring and failover systems
- Data center redundancy (multiple locations)
- Historical uptime data (check independent reviews, not marketing pages)

Red flags:

- No SLA mentioned
- “Best effort” uptime language
- Frequent downtime reports on review sites
- Single data center with no backup

Score (1–5): _____

Notes: _____

Feature 2: Speed & Performance

What to look for:

- Server response time (TTFB) under 200ms
- SSD or NVMe storage (not HDD)
- Built-in caching (OPcache, Redis, Varnish, or CDN)
- PHP version selection (PHP 8.2+ available)
- HTTP/3 and Brotli compression support
- Data center location close to your primary audience

Test before you buy:

1. Find 3–5 sites hosted by this provider (ask in forums or check their showcase).
2. Run them through Google PageSpeed Insights and GTmetrix.
3. Check TTFB using KeyCDN's TTFB test or WebPageTest.

Red flags:

- HDD storage only
- No caching options
- Forced to use outdated PHP versions
- Data centers only on one continent when your audience is global

Score (1–5): _____

Notes: _____

Feature 3: Security

What to look for:

- Free SSL certificate (Let's Encrypt or equivalent, auto-renewing)
- Web Application Firewall (WAF)
- DDoS protection
- Automatic daily backups (with 30-day retention minimum)
- Malware scanning and removal
- Two-factor authentication (2FA) for hosting account
- SFTP/SSH access (not just FTP)
- Isolated hosting environment (not shared across all accounts on a server)

Red flags:

- SSL costs extra
- No backup guarantee
- No 2FA on account login
- Shared IP with spammy neighbors (check the IP reputation)

Score (1–5): _____

Notes: _____

Feature 4: Support Quality

What to look for:

- 24/7 support via live chat (not just tickets)
- Phone support available

- Average response time under 5 minutes for chat
- Technically competent agents (not just script readers)
- Proactive monitoring alerts (they contact YOU when something breaks)
- Public status page for transparency

Test before you buy:

1. Open live chat at 11 PM on a Sunday.
2. Ask a technical question: *“If I need to switch from PHP 8.1 to 8.2, how do I do that?”*
3. Time how long until a human responds.
4. Grade the answer for accuracy and helpfulness.

Red flags:

- Only email support on lower tiers
- Support outsourced to teams with no technical depth
- Long hold times during off-hours
- Deflection instead of resolution

Score (1–5): _____

Notes: _____

Feature 5: Scalability & Migration

What to look for:

- Easy plan upgrades without downtime
- Free migration service (or clear documentation)
- Staging environment included
- Ability to add resources (RAM, CPU, storage) on demand
- Clear path from shared → VPS → dedicated
- No proprietary lock-in (standard cPanel/Plesk or SSH access)

Migration checklist (if switching hosts):

- Will they migrate for free? If not, cost is: \$ _____
- Estimated downtime during migration: _____ hours
- Do they handle DNS cutover?
- Is email hosting included or separate?
- Can you test the new site before going live?

Red flags:

- No upgrade path within the same provider

- Proprietary control panel that makes leaving hard
- Migration costs more than the first year of hosting
- No staging environment

Score (1–5): _____

Notes: _____

Feature 6: Transparency & Fair Terms

What to look for:

- Clear pricing with no hidden fees
- Prorated refunds or money-back guarantee (30+ days)
- Transparent renewal rates (not buried in fine print)
- Clear resource limits (CPU, RAM, inode limits) even on “unlimited” plans
- No automatic renewal without notice
- Easy account cancellation process

Red flags:

- “Unlimited” everything with no fair-use policy
- Massive price jump after first term (e.g., \$3 → \$15/month)
- No refund policy or restocking fees
- Auto-renewal with no email reminder
- Difficult cancellation process (must call, must chat, can’t do it online)

Score (1–5): _____

Notes: _____

SECTION 3: Provider Scorecard

Compare up to 3 providers side by side.

Criteria	Provider A	Provider B	Provider C
Name / Plan			
First-year price	\$_____/mo	\$_____/mo	\$_____/mo
Renewal price	\$_____/mo	\$_____/mo	\$_____/mo
1. Uptime & Reliability	____/5	____/5	____/5
2. Speed & Performance	____/5	____/5	____/5
3. Security	____/5	____/5	____/5
4. Support Quality	____/5	____/5	____/5

Table 3 – continued

Criteria	Provider A	Provider B	Provider C
5. Scalability & Migration	____/5	____/5	____/5
6. Transparency & Fair Terms	____/5	____/5	____/5
TOTAL SCORE	____/30	____/30	____/30
Support test response time	_____ min	_____ min	_____ min
Support test quality	____/5	____/5	____/5
Backup access confirmed?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Refund policy read?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Fair-use terms read?	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Export/lock-in risk?	Low High	Low High	Low High

SECTION 4: Final Verification (Do Not Skip)

4.1 Search Reviews for These Three Words

Before you buy, search Google for:

- "[Provider Name] refund"
- "[Provider Name] throttling"
- "[Provider Name] support"

What did you find?

Refund complaints: _____
 Throttling complaints: _____
 Support complaints: _____

Pro tip: Check Reddit ([r/webhosting](#), [r/webdev](#)), Trustpilot, and Web Hosting Talk. Look for patterns, not one-off rants. Every host has angry customers — what matters is whether the same complaint shows up repeatedly.

4.2 Read the Fair-Use Terms Behind “Unlimited”

What to search for in the Terms of Service:

- CPU usage limits (usually expressed as a percentage or “CPU minutes”)
- Inode limits (number of files, not just storage size)

- Bandwidth fair-use clauses
- What happens when you exceed limits (throttle? suspension? forced upgrade?)
- Email sending limits (if hosting email)
- Database size limits or query limits

What I found for my top choice:

CPU limit: _____
 Inode limit: _____
 Bandwidth policy: _____
 Overage policy: _____

The truth about “unlimited”: There is no such thing. Every host has a breaking point. The question is whether they tell you upfront or surprise you when your site goes down during a traffic spike.

4.3 Confirm Backup, Restore, and Export Access

Before signing up, verify:

- **Automated backups exist:** How often? Daily? Weekly? On-demand?
- **Backup retention:** How many days of backups are kept?
- **Restore process:** Can YOU restore a backup, or do you have to open a ticket?
- **Off-site backups:** Are backups stored on a separate server or data center?
- **Export access:** Can you download a full site backup (files + database) anytime?
- **Database export:** Can you export your database directly via phpMyAdmin or SSH?
- **No vendor lock-in:** If you leave, can you take everything with you?

Test this before you need it: After signing up, create a test backup and restore it to a staging URL. If the process is painful now, imagine doing it at 2 AM when your live site is broken.

My backup verification:

Backup frequency: _____
 Retention period: _____
 Self-service restore? Yes No
 Full export available? Yes No
 Tested restore process? Yes No

4.4 The Pre-Purchase Gut Check

Answer honestly:

- I have filled out this worksheet for at least 2 providers.
- I tested live chat support before buying.
- I searched for refund, throttling, and support complaints.
- I read the fair-use policy behind any “unlimited” claims.
- I confirmed backup and export access.
- I know the renewal price, not just the intro price.
- I know how to cancel if I’m unhappy.

- I have a staging environment or migration plan.

If you checked fewer than 6 boxes, stop. Do the homework. Switching hosts is expensive in time, money, and SEO ranking loss. An hour of research now saves 20 hours of migration later.

SECTION 5: Quick Reference — Red Flag Checklist

Red Flag	What It Means	Walk Away?
No uptime SLA	They don't guarantee your site stays online	Yes
"Unlimited" with no fair-use policy	They'll throttle or suspend you without warning	Yes
No live chat or phone support	You'll wait hours for email replies during emergencies	Probably
Renewal price 3× the intro price	Classic bait-and-switch	Consider carefully
No money-back guarantee	You're locked in even if they're terrible	Yes
No SSL included	Basic security costs extra in 2026	Yes
HDD-only storage	Your site will be slow	Yes
Forced to use PHP 7.x	Security risk and performance penalty	Yes
No staging environment	You'll test changes on your live site	Probably
Proprietary control panel	Hard to migrate away later	Consider carefully
No SSH/SFTP access	You can't automate or secure file transfers	Probably
Shared IP with spam reputation	Your emails go to spam, SEO may suffer	Yes

SECTION 6: My Final Decision

Provider selected: _____

Plan selected: _____

Monthly cost (year 1): \$_____

Monthly cost (renewal): \$_____

Contract length: _____ months

Total first-year cost: \$_____

Cancellation process: _____

Date signed up: _____

Next review date: _____

Why I chose this provider:

What I'll monitor in the first 90 days:

- Uptime (use UptimeRobot or Pingdom — free tier)
 - Page speed (monthly PageSpeed Insights check)
 - Support response time (log every interaction)
 - Backup restore test (week 2)
 - Traffic handling during first spike
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About This Checklist

This checklist was designed by a professional web designer who's migrated dozens of sites off bad hosts at 2 AM. It prioritizes **practical verification** over marketing promises. The goal isn't to find the "best" host — it's to find the host that matches your site's actual needs, your budget, and your risk tolerance.

Remember: The best time to choose a good host is before you need one. The second-best time is now, methodically.

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