



FREEDOM COSTS LESS

**A guide to losing the 10%
revenue cut and moving to
a WordPress-based paid
newsletter site**

CHAPTER 1: WHY WORDPRESS MEANS MORE CONTROL, AND MORE CONTROLLED COSTS

The truth is simple: if you're publishing on Substack, Beehiiv, Patreon, or any similar platform, you don't fully own your business.

These services make it dead simple to get started, and in some cases you can run a free newsletter at no cost, but their convenience and free service comes at a cost once you go pro — it's a cost in collars, but more importantly in control.

WordPress flips that equation. It's the tool that powers over 40% of the internet for a reason: it puts you in charge.

You Own Your Site, Your Brand, and Your Audience

On a hosted platform, you may very well live at their address. Your URL is “yourname.that-service.com,” your design options are limited, and your subscriber data sits on their servers. If they change the rules, introduce new fees, or shut down tomorrow, you and your audience is trapped with them.

With WordPress, you own the entire stack (or at least all that parts that matter):

- Your domain name (yourname.com) is yours, not rented.
- Your brand isn't constrained by template sameness — you decide how your site looks and feels. There are templates
- Your subscriber list belongs to you. Export it, move it, integrate it — no permissions needed.

That independence isn't just philosophical. It's practical security for your livelihood.

Substack's model looks simple — free to start, 10% of your revenue once you charge. But run the math:

- At \$50,000 in annual subscriptions, that's \$5,000 a year just in platform fees.
- Add payment processor fees (around 3%), and the bite grows.

Patreon works the same way: 10% cut.

Beehive and Ghost are more attractive in that they charge flat rates. Both are, on the whole, more expensive than WordPress, but not necessarily a lot more. With these, the downsides are more about having options, having a single home base, and having control.

WordPress works differently:

- You pay for hosting (typically \$10–\$30/month for a robust newsletter site).
- You pay for plugins/services that fit your business (a couple hundred dollars a year, depending on needs).
- You do pay for payment processing. It's like death and taxes, sadly.
- But beyond these costs, that's it.

There's no revenue skim. Whether you have 100 subscribers or 100,000, your costs remain relatively flat (you'll have to pay a bit more for the mailing service as your subscriber list grows). Growth goes into your pocket, not into a platform's cut.

FLEXIBILITY TO EVOLVE

Platforms define what you can do. Substack = newsletters. Patreon = memberships. Teachable = courses. This is a bit of a simplification, but the basic point holds: If you want to do more than whatever a given platform focuses on, you're forced to juggle accounts, integrations, and fees.

WordPress is the opposite: it's a foundation you can expand as your creative work expands. Start with a newsletter. Add a podcast, a members-only archive, a course, or a shop — all within the same site. WordPress has plugins for nearly everything, and with tools like Paid Memberships Pro and Newsletter Glue, the pieces can fit together seamlessly.

That's not to say that figuring out how to hook things together (or even which pieces you should be hooking together) is simple in WordPress. When people say that Substack is easy from the get-go and WordPress is confusing from the get-go, they're not exactly wrong. And WordPress can be frustrating because there are lots of people out there talking about how easy it is to get started with WordPress, and that's not exactly honest.

In this guide, we'll talk through the broad strokes of what you need to do to get a paid newsletter going on a WordPress site, starting from getting the WordPress site in the first place. It's our view that knowing what the broad strokes are puts you in a much better place to search for the specific elements you want to understand and to

see how the various tasks fit together to make a coherent website presence. Part of the problem with WordPress is that when you start, you don't necessarily even know how to ask for what you're looking for.

It's worth a bit of trouble to get going, though, because at the end of the day WordPress is powerful and flexible—that's exactly why such a huge percentage of websites use it (and the alternative contenders don't even come close to having the same market share).

For running a newsletter, the other alternatives for platforms are closed systems. If Substack doesn't integrate with the tool you want, too bad. If they sunset a feature you rely on, you're stuck. Ghost is open source, actually, but almost everyone uses it almost as a closed platform, because it's not a platform that has lots of books and YouTube videos explaining the ins and outs of it, nor is it nearly as straightforward to set up your own, independent server that's running it. It's intriguing and has a lot of pretty desirable features, but if you don't like how they handle, say, video, you're stuck because that's your only option.

WordPress is an open ecosystem. Thousands of plugins, themes, and integrations exist, with a global community constantly expanding the possibilities. You're not dependent on one company's decisions — you can pick and choose the tools that fit your business. If you need help, there are lots of people who can help, often for free, but if you need something more complicated, there are developers, designers, and agencies who do nothing but work on WordPress sites.

The history of the internet is full of shuttered platforms and broken promises. Medium pivoted. Facebook throttled organic reach. Patreon changed fees. Substack might be a great partner today, but you don't control tomorrow (and if you don't like the short-form social media twist they just laid over the top of it, that's too bad). WordPress is different. It's open-source, not owned by any single company, and it has thrived for two decades. That stability gives you a future-proof foundation. Even if specific plugins come and go, the ecosystem ensures you'll never be stranded.

In Short

Choosing WordPress means choosing ownership, predictable costs, flexibility, and stability. It's not the easiest starting point — and that's exactly why services like PeakZebra exist, to make it creator-friendly out of the box. But PeakZebra is certainly not an absolute requirement for running a newsletter on WordPress. Thousands of people were doing it before PeakZebra came along. The thing is: once you're running on WordPress, you've quit renting space and started owning your digital home.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT YOU REALLY OWN (AND DON'T) ON SUBSTACK

Substack makes a seductive promise: “You own your work and your audience.”

It's true — but only up to a point.

When you look closely, what you actually control on Substack (or any platform like it) is limited. Yes, you can write freely. Yes, you can download your subscriber list. But the foundation you're building on isn't really yours. It's theirs.

1. The Subscriber List: Yours, but with Caveats

Substack advertises loudly that you can “take your subscribers with you.” And technically, that's true. You can export email addresses and import them elsewhere.

But here's what gets left out:

- Your email deliverability reputation is tied to Substack's sending infrastructure, not your domain. Move away, and you start from scratch.
- Your subscriber payment history lives on Substack. If you move, recurring payments have to be cancelled and re-subscribed through a new system. Some readers won't follow.
- Substack controls the flow of growth inside its platform — the recommendation engine, discovery feed, and network effects are theirs to give or take.

So yes, the list is yours — but the business around it is harder to extract.

2. Your Domain: Whose Address Are You At?

Most Substack newsletters live at `yourname.substack.com`. That's not ownership. That's a sublease.

- If you move away, your links break unless you've had the foresight to map a custom domain.
- Even with your own domain, Substack still controls the hosting and infrastructure. Your domain just "points" to their house.

Without a domain you control, your newsletter is permanently branded as theirs, not yours.

3. Your Brand: A Uniform That's Not Yours

Substack's simplicity is its charm — but it's also its lock-in.

- Fonts, layouts, and colors are standardized.
- All Substack sites look like Substack.
- Even if you add a logo, your brand lives in their template.

The result? A reader isn't just reading you. They're reading you on Substack.

Contrast that with WordPress, where you can tailor the design to match your voice and your market. Your site becomes a reflection of you, not just another tenant in someone else's apartment block.

4. The Rules: Always Someone Else's

Substack is free-press friendly today. But platforms can — and do — change.

- Medium shifted priorities multiple times, leaving creators stranded.
- Patreon altered fee structures, sparking backlash.
- Facebook throttled organic reach after years of encouraging publishers to build audiences there.

When you don't own the infrastructure, you're always vulnerable to rule changes you didn't vote for. Pricing, discoverability, what's "allowed" — all of it is subject to change.

5. The Revenue Stream: Shared, Not Yours Alone

On Substack, 10% of your revenue goes to them. That's the cost of admission. For some, it feels reasonable. But once you scale, it becomes punishing:

- \$100,000/year in subscriptions = \$10,000 lost to fees.
- Plus 3% or so to Stripe.

You never truly stop paying rent.

And there's more: Substack recently created a payment option through the Apple App Store, but without consulting their writers. To keep the revenues the same, they add 30% to a subscription if it's bought through the app--not exactly a service to your readers--and they that revenue stream is tied permanently to the App Store.

With WordPress (and the right tools), costs stay mostly flat whether you have 100 subscribers or 100,000. Growth belongs to you.

In Short

On Substack, you own:

- Your words.
- Your email list (with caveats).
- Your basic connection to your audience.

But you don't own:

- The infrastructure your work runs on. Unless you're paying extra.
- The domain where your brand lives, at least not without paying an extra fee to Substack.
- The design and look of your publication.
- The rules that govern your revenue and growth.

That's why the next step is so important: building a true home base — one you control from the ground up. And that's where WordPress comes in.

CHAPTER 3: BUILDING A CREATOR HOME BASE ON WORDPRESS

If Chapter 2 was about what you don't own on Substack, this chapter is about what you can own when you build your digital home on WordPress. The beauty of WordPress is its flexibility: it's not just a blogging tool, it's the foundation of a professional-grade publishing business. And with the right pieces, you can launch quickly without technical headaches.

Let's walk through what goes into a modern creator home base — and how to put it together.

1. Start with the Foundation: Your Domain and Hosting

- Domain name → Buy a domain that's yours, not tied to any platform. (Example: yourname.com).
- Hosting → Choose a reliable host (options like SiteGround, WP Engine, or Kinsta).
- With PeakZebra, hosting and setup are bundled — but if you're DIYing, make sure your host offers SSL, daily backups, and WordPress auto-updates.

Why it matters: this is the digital land you own. Platforms can't revoke your domain, and you control the front door to your brand.

2. WordPress Core + Creator Tools

Once WordPress is installed, you'll need a few key plugins to make it newsletter- and subscription-ready. One of the great things about the WordPress ecosystem is that you have multiple options when choosing plugins for a given function, but here is a sample set of plugins to get the job done:

- Newsletter Glue → Connects WordPress posts directly to your email service (Mailchimp, ConvertKit, MailerLite, etc.). Write once, publish everywhere.
- Paid Memberships Pro (PMPPro) → Handles free and paid subscriber levels, payment gateways (Stripe, PayPal), and content restriction.
- PeakZebra blocks & toolkit → Prebuilt design blocks for subscription forms, pricing tables, and creator-friendly layouts. This keeps things consistent without custom coding.

Why it matters: these tools turn WordPress into something more than a blog — they make it a business platform for creators.

3. Design Without the Overhead

Creators often stall here, thinking they need a custom theme or expensive designer. You don't.

- Starter themes → Choose a template (theme, in WordPress parlance) that fits your vibe: minimalist text-first, bold and visual, classic magazine, portfolio hybrid, or membership-focused. There are literally thousands of premade free templates to start from. If you need something more design forward, there are low-priced paid options as well.
- Customize the basics → Upload your logo, set brand colors and fonts, and configure your homepage. Replace the text in the theme you've chosen with the text that describes what your specific media business does.
- Focus on clarity over flair → The most important thing is that readers know who you are, what your newsletter is about, and how to subscribe.

Why it matters: your “digital home” doesn’t have to be fancy to be professional. Simple + clear beats ornate + slow-to-launch.

4. Essential Pages

At launch, you only need a few pages:

- Homepage → A clear pitch for your newsletter, with a subscribe form front and center.
- About → Who you are, what readers can expect, why you write.

- Newsletter Archive → Past issues, so new visitors see what they're signing up for.
- Contact → A form or simple email address.

Optional (but powerful):

- Pricing/Membership → For paid newsletters, with PMPro handling tiers. Most newsletter startups go with all free to begin with, adding a paid layer once a base of subscribers has been build.
- Recommendations → Other creators you endorse (this builds trust and network effect).

Why it matters: too many creators delay launch waiting on a dozen polished pages. Four to six core pages are enough to start.

5. The Subscription Flow

Your reader's journey should be frictionless:

1. Visitor lands on homepage.
2. Subscribe form is immediately visible.
3. If free tier → instant welcome email.
4. If paid → checkout with Stripe → auto-redirect to a welcome page.

PMPro + Newsletter Glue make this seamless. And because it's WordPress, you can tweak every step: what pages they see, what emails they get, how they're welcomed.

Why it matters: this is the engine of your business. Controlling it means you can optimize, not just accept defaults.

CHAPTER 4: DESIGNING FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

One of the biggest mistakes creators make when spinning up a WordPress site is overthinking design. Substack works partly because it's simple — black text on white background, no fuss. Move to WordPress, and suddenly the entire internet of themes, templates, and plugins is open to you. That freedom is powerful, but it can also paralyze.

The truth? You don't need a masterpiece. You need a clean, functional design that serves your audience. Let's break down how to get there without sinking into endless tweaks. Let's walk through what goes into a modern creator home base — and how to put it together.

1. Choose a Template or Theme

Rather than drowning in thousands of themes, start with a simple question: What kind of creator am I, and how do I want readers to experience my work?

Here are five tried-and-true design archetypes for newsletter creators:

- **Minimalist:** Clean typography, white space, text-first. Perfect for essayists, journalists, or anyone whose words are the main event.
- **Bold & Visual:** Big headlines, strong colors, hero images. Great for personal brands, lifestyle writing, or anything that thrives on personality.
- **Classic Magazine:** Serif fonts, structured sections, and archives visible on the homepage. Ideal for commentary, analysis, or more formal publications.
- **Portfolio Hybrid:** Newsletter plus other media (podcast embeds, videos, galleries). Best for multi-channel creators who publish in multiple formats.
- **Community / Membership Focus:** Pricing tiers and subscriber benefits emphasized on the homepage. Aimed at educators, coaches, or membership-driven businesses.

The key is not to pick the “prettiest” template, but the one that matches your audience’s expectations and your publishing style.

2. Personalize the Essentials

Once you've chosen a base template, make it yours with just a few elements:

- **Logo:** Even a simple text logo can anchor your brand. Don't overcomplicate.
- **Colors:** Choose one primary brand color (for buttons/links) and a neutral background. More than two or three colors will clutter things fast. This isn't the place to spend a lot of time on the importance of brand identity, but do keep in mind that consistent use of a small number of colors can be very powerful. Think of Home Depot or T-mobile.
- **Fonts:** Pick a clear body font and one accent font for headers. Resist the urge to experiment endlessly — legibility wins. Readers are used to this when reading longer-form pieces.

This is 80% of your design. Get these right, and the rest is just polish.



Don't make the logo thing harder than it needs to be.

3. Make Subscribing Effortless

Design isn't just about looks — it's about flow. For newsletter creators, the single most important design element is the subscribe form.

- Put it front and center on the homepage.
- Repeat it at the end of posts.
- Use clear, friendly language (“Join free” or “Get the newsletter”) instead of generic “Submit.”
- Make sure the button stands out in your brand color.

If your site looks great but your subscribe form is buried, you've missed the point.

4. Resist the Tweak Spiral

It's easy to get lost in font pairings, button shapes, or header image swaps. Remember: readers come for your writing, not your gradients.

Set yourself a rule: one round of adjustments after launch, then freeze design for three months. That way you can focus on publishing and growth, not fiddling with page margins.

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5. Remember: Done > Perfect

Your design will evolve over time. What matters now is getting a site that's clear, functional, and aligned with your voice. Perfection is a moving target, and chasing it delays the real work: publishing and connecting with readers.

In Short

Design your site so it's a home for your audience, not a playground for endless tweaks. Choose a template archetype, personalize the essentials, build just the key pages, and make subscribing effortless.

The rest? You can refine as you go. Launching is better than perfecting.

The bad news: as with content export, Substack does not make user export all that easy on you, despite their marketing. They do allow you to export your users in CSV files from your Substack membership management interface, but I discovered that these CSV files are formatted slightly differently than the ones Substack spits out if you use Ghost's Substack migrator tool. Critically, the ones Substack spits out from its membership interface are missing the Stripe IDs of paid subscribers, which are crucial to keeping subscriptions linked as you migrate! But the export from the members interface includes a lot of additional data I need, too, like the subset of my newsletters^f a member person has opted to receive.

– Molly White, citationneeded.news (that's not a note to myself... the newsletter is called "citationneeded")

CHAPTER 5: GROWING BEYOND NEWSLETTERS

One of the biggest advantages of owning your platform is that you're no longer confined to "just a newsletter." Once you've established your home base, you can expand in several enticing directions (though maybe not all at once...).

Think of your newsletter as the foundation of a larger creative business. From there, you can layer on new formats, new revenue streams, and new ways of connecting with your audience.

1. Add a Podcast or Audio Content

Podcasts and newsletters pair beautifully: one for the inbox, one for the ears.

- Integrate a podcast player right into your posts so subscribers can listen without leaving your site.
- Offer transcripts for accessibility and SEO.
- Bonus content: paid subscribers get extended interviews or ad-free episodes.

Tools like Seriously Simple Podcasting, PowerPress, or Podlove make WordPress podcast management, presentation, and hosting straightforward.

2. Expand into Courses and Workshops

Your expertise doesn't have to stop at free or paid essays. Turn your knowledge into structured learning.

- Offer self-paced courses using an LMS plugin (LearnDash, LifterLMS, TutorLMS). There are a lot of options in the WordPress space.
- Run live workshops via Zoom or another platform, with registration handled on your site.
- Create a paid members-only library of resources.

3. Build a Community Space

Sometimes readers want more than to read or listen — they want to talk back, and to each other.

- Add members-only forums or chat groups (bbPress, BuddyBoss).
- Offer subscriber-only comment threads under posts.
- Create a private Slack or Discord linked from your site.

Community turns readers into invested members. It also makes your site a destination, not just a feed.

4. Sell Digital Products

Newsletters can be the top of your funnel for products:

- Ebooks expanding on popular posts.
- Toolkits and templates for your niche.
- Audio packs, photography, or music downloads if you're a creative artist.

WordPress plugins like WooCommerce or Easy Digital Downloads handle the store side with ease.

5. Sponsorships and Partnerships

As your subscriber base grows, you don't have to rely only on subscription revenue.

- Offer sponsored placements inside your newsletter.
- Run sponsored posts on your site.
- Partner with aligned creators for cross-promotions.

Unlike Substack, you control the terms — who gets access, how it's presented, and what you charge.

6. Think Like a Media Business

When you control your site, you're no longer just "a writer with a newsletter." You're running a media property.

- Diversify income streams so no single change can derail you.
- Build archives of evergreen content that keep paying dividends.

Position yourself for long-term resilience — because you own the whole stack.

CONCLUSION

The big idea of this book is simple: when you build your creative business on someone else's platform, you're always a tenant. Your content, your subscribers, even your revenue are shaped by rules you didn't set and fees you can't avoid or shape to your needs. Quitting Substack — or any similar platform — isn't just about leaving one service. It's about a mindset shift: from renting to owning, from following someone else's roadmap to charting your own.

Yes, it's more responsibility. Yes, it takes more work. But the payoff is freedom. When you own your platform, you own your fate.

Think of your newsletter as the foundation of a larger creative business. From there, you can layer on new formats, new revenue streams, and new ways of connecting with your audience.