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Build & Operate with AI

A practical starter playbook for making a small website — without becoming its accidental release operator.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO YOUR FIRST SITE

Human-led. AI-enabled.

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Start with what somebody actually needs

You have an idea worth sharing: a local group, a family project, a small organisation, a collection of work or something you've made. AI can help you turn it into a website. It can also help you turn a modest idea into a much bigger technical undertaking than you ever wanted.

This guide comes from building and operating Grey Matters, a real public website developed through human–AI collaboration. It is not a promise that any AI can operate any account, and it isn't an instruction to copy our technical setup. It's a set of practical questions and starting points, including some we learned by getting things wrong.

For the experience behind the advice, see the companion case study, *Building Grey Matters — and Becoming Its Accidental Release Operator*. You don't need to read it first.

1. Begin with one useful public outcome

Imagine you're putting a small community project online. You might need a welcoming home page, an explanation of what the project does, one or two examples and a simple way to contact the people involved. That is enough to test whether the website is useful. It isn't necessary to start with visitor accounts, a custom database or elaborate forms.

Write down who the site is for, what they should be able to find or do, and what can wait. Then give AI permission to challenge the plan, not just expand it.

Try this conversation:

> “I'm planning a small website about [subject] for [audience]. Visitors mainly need to [do or understand something]. Suggest the smallest useful first version, what I can safely leave until later and three questions I should settle before building. Explain any unfamiliar terms.”

Human decision: Choose what matters and what it is worth maintaining. A feature that is easy to imagine may still be expensive to run.

Before you commit to a tool, ask a slightly awkward question: who will keep the website running when the novelty has worn off? A ready-made editor may be less impressive than a custom-built application, but it can be a better answer for a small group. Ask the AI to compare costs, maintenance and the simplest workable route — then check current details with the provider.

> Try this conversation: “Compare two realistic ways I could build and maintain this small site. Which can a newcomer operate safely? What would each cost now and later? Can I keep my content, preview privately, control access and restore the previous version? Separate confirmed provider features from assumptions.”

2. Know what is a draft and what is public

You don't need to become a software engineer to understand three places. The *draft* is where you experiment. The *approved version* is the last version you have looked at and accepted. The *public website* is what visitors can actually see. In a simple publishing tool, a saved draft and a published page may be enough. On a more involved site, those places may be separate systems.

Ask AI to explain which is which in the tools you're using. Don't let a test or an interesting experiment replace the working public site without a deliberate decision. Save a copy of anything important before making changes.

Try this conversation:

> "Explain in plain English where my website drafts, last approved content and live pages are kept. Show me how to preview a change privately, how to publish it and how to restore the previous working version. Tell me which steps you can actually perform and which need me."

Human decision: Keep publication permission under your control. A system's ability to describe an action isn't proof it can carry it out safely.

Now create the first real content. Use your chosen editor to make a welcome page, one page explaining the activity and a contact route you control. Give the AI only verified facts; have it draft clear paragraphs, not a collection of slogans. Check every claimed service, event, address, photograph and quotation yourself. If it has no direct connection to your editor, it can still help produce copy for you to paste and review.

> Try this conversation: "Draft a short Home page and About page using only these facts: [facts]. Leave placeholders for anything missing. Use warm, ordinary language, not advertising copy. Tell me what I must verify before putting it online, and wait for my approval before changing any agreed wording."

3. Make one clear change at a time

> "Make the website better" sounds inviting but is difficult to check. A smaller request is easier: fix a broken link, replace one picture, improve an introduction or add one downloadable guide. State what should change and, equally importantly, what must stay as it is.

Copyable change card:

PROJECT / PAGE: [what is involved]
STARTING VERSION: [the last version I approved, or where it is saved]
CHANGE I WANT: [one clear outcome]
DO NOT CHANGE: [pages, text, images or settings to protect]
I'LL KNOW IT WORKED WHEN: [two visible checks]
STOP AND ASK IF: [access is missing; the change affects something else; a check fails]
WHO APPROVES PUBLICATION: [human decision-maker]

This card works just as well in a shared document as in a technical project tool. You don't need to adopt anyone else's filing system to use it.

4. Inspect what people will actually experience

AI can find misspellings, broken links and missing files. Those checks are useful. They don't tell you whether a photograph has chopped off the subject on a phone, a page feels exhausting to read or the wording sounds nothing like you.

For Grey Matters, viewing the Learning Library on a laptop and phone exposed an awkward banner crop and sentences broken into a staccato sequence. The fix came from human reading and taste, not a claim that a technical test had passed. The same review found that certain layouts needed a warmer, clearer visual rhythm.

A simple private-preview check: Read the opening as a stranger would. Check a phone and a larger screen. Follow the main links. Try copying any prompt or opening any download. Ask whether the result is actually understandable and whether it sounds like the people behind the project.

Try this conversation:

> “Review this draft as a new visitor. What is unclear, out of order, hard to scan or too technical? Show me your concerns first. Do not rewrite approved wording until I agree.”

Human decision: Editorial acceptance belongs to the person responsible for the message. The AI's confidence is not your approval.

When the AI knows more than you

This is often the hardest part for somebody building outside their field. The AI can move from design to hosting, permissions and security faster than you can absorb the terms. Do not let that pace make the decision for you. Ask it to explain why this step matters, what is changing, how you would know it worked and how you could undo it. Have it answer one question at a time. You do not have to become a developer, but you do need enough understanding to make the decision you are taking.

> Try this conversation: “I am responsible for this result but I am not a specialist. Explain this one decision without jargon. What changes if I approve it? What could go wrong? Which parts have you checked, and which are guesses? What would require a professional or the provider to confirm? Stop rather than make the choice for me.”

If you still cannot assess an important security, privacy, accessibility, financial or legal consequence, that is a reason to stop and get qualified help. Perseverance matters; pretending to understand does not.

5. Let tests stop a doubtful release

The important thing about a check is not that it runs. It's that it checks something relevant and refuses to wave a problem through. During a Grey Matters Learning Library update, a test stopped because a necessary PDF tool was missing on the actual build computer. A second attempt exposed a difference between software versions in the testing environment. Both failures happened before an uncertain package reached the public hosting service.

You probably won't need those technical tools yourself. The general lesson is simple: a trial on your own computer isn't always the same as a test in the place where the real work will run. If AI says a check has failed, ask what failed, where, and whether anything public changed. Don't tell it to keep trying until the warning disappears.

Try this conversation:

> “The check failed. Explain what is known, what is only suspected and whether the live website changed. Do not bypass the check or alter access permissions. Tell me the smallest safe way to investigate and what evidence would show the problem is fixed.”

Human decision: Decide when unresolved risk is acceptable. Don't turn a blocked permission into an invitation for the AI to find a route around it.

6. Publish something exact, then look at the live result

Before making a page public, identify the version you approved. Confirm that the private preview looked right and that you know how to return to a working copy if necessary. Then approve the release yourself. Afterwards, visit the real public page, not just the completion report.

First-publication checklist:

For a very small site, “a version” can simply mean dated approved text, a saved site snapshot or the publishing service’s revision history. “Recovery” means a route you have actually checked, not a button the AI assumes must exist. Before making anything public, also check consent for pictures and quotations, privacy of contact details, and whether a visitor can use the main content without relying on tiny text or difficult navigation.

- ☐ The purpose and audience are clear.
- ☐ The wording, images and permissions are approved.
- ☐ Links, downloads and contact route work.
- ☐ I've inspected a private preview, including on a phone.
- ☐ I know which exact version will become public.
- ☐ A credible previous-version recovery route exists.
- ☐ I've made the publication decision.

After-publication check:

- ☐ The public address opens the intended page.
- ☐ The important links and downloads work for a visitor.
- ☐ The page looks right on a phone and larger screen.
- ☐ I know what went live and where the previous version is kept.

A green tick is welcome. The actual public result matters more.

7. Keep operating it — but don't make it your second job

A website is not quite finished when it goes live. Contact messages may show what confuses people. A broken link or unreadable mobile layout may matter more than a new feature. Basic visit counts can suggest what is being found, but they do not prove that anybody understood, benefited or returned.

Agree a sensible check-in rhythm. Review real problems and reader comments. Record changes worth making. Resist the temptation to add a new system every time somebody thinks of an interesting possibility.

For ordinary content changes, aim for a repeatable human-friendly process: agree the edit, review the version, inspect a private copy, approve the public change and check the result. More involved or consequential changes need correspondingly stronger safeguards. Grey Matters is still working towards proving that its routine publication process can be made lighter; that is a current improvement goal, not a finished achievement.

Three levels of care

Conversational: You're exploring a design or asking what might work. Enjoy the discussion; there is no need to invent bureaucracy.

Structured: You're choosing an approach or planning work over several sessions. Save your priorities, constraints, alternatives and decision.

Governed: The AI will change a live site, publish content others rely on or operate a system that is hard to reverse. Identify the exact version, protect what mustn't change, check it independently and keep a human go/no-go decision.

The level should follow the consequences, not how impressive the AI sounds. A simple website might use ordinary publishing-tool drafts; a larger site may need specialist release automation. Neither one should inherit Grey Matters' full engineering arrangements simply because we used them.

A worked example: a small site visitors can actually use

Imagine a community gardening group wants a modest online home. This is an illustrative exercise, not a Grey Matters project or a claim that a particular AI product can complete every step. Success means a visitor can find out what the group does, see how to join an activity and use a genuine contact route. A polished draft on somebody’s laptop is not the finished result.

1 / Agree the minimum. Decide on three pieces of information: a welcome, what the group does, and how to contact it. These can be three short pages or sections on one page. Leave calendars, member accounts and fundraising systems for later. Ask AI to list every fact still missing; do not allow it to invent meeting times, events, testimonials or people.

2 / Choose somewhere practical to build. Compare a simple hosted website editor with a more hands-on AI-assisted coding route. For a first project, prefer the option you can maintain yourself. Check the full cost, domain arrangements, accessibility features, ability to export your material and how to restore an earlier version using information from the provider, not an AI guess. You create the account and control its permissions.

3 / Make the actual pages. Open the chosen website editor, create the empty site and add the reviewed wording. Add plain navigation, descriptive page titles, and only images you have a right to use. If the editor offers a private preview, use it. AI can draft and suggest improvements, but it must be clear whether it can genuinely edit the chosen service or is only giving instructions for you to carry out.

4 / Try it as a visitor. On a phone and a larger screen, read the opening without your project knowledge. Follow every link. Check that the contact route really reaches the right person and that nobody's personal details or photographs are being shared without permission. If a feature depends on a paid plan or extra access, establish that before approving it.

5 / Publish deliberately. Save the approved copy and record the date. Know what you would do if the page were wrong or unavailable. Then use the publishing service to make the exact approved version public. Visit the public address without relying on the editor's success message; check the important links and the contact route again.

6 / Keep it useful. Decide who will read messages, correct errors and make updates. A simple monthly check may suit an occasional community site; urgent faults need attention sooner. New requests are evidence to consider, not automatic instructions to add new features.

The finished outcome is modest but real: somebody unfamiliar with the group can use the site, the group controls its content and access, and there is a safe way to change it. If you only have a private draft, that is progress — but it is not yet a public website.

Copy this project-start prompt

> "I want to publish a small website for [group or purpose]. It is for [audience]. People must be able to [three useful things]. I have these verified facts and materials: [facts]. Help me choose the simplest suitable website-building route, explaining costs, limitations, access, privacy and how I could restore an earlier version. Do not assume you can sign in or publish. Then work with me one step at a time to produce and check the actual site. Do not invent missing facts or publish without my approval."

A useful finish-line test

☐ A new visitor can understand the site and do the main thing it promises. ☐ Content and images are approved and permitted for use. ☐ The contact route and links work in the live site. ☐ I control access and know how to make a correction. ☐ I saved the accepted version and checked what was actually published.

Your first half-hour — then finish the job

For your first half-hour, pick a subject you would genuinely like to share. Write one sentence explaining who the site is for. Ask AI for a simple structure and first draft; challenge it on what is missing or unnecessary; save a copy. That is a useful beginning, not a completed website. Continue through a private preview, human approval, real publication and live checks when you are ready. There is no need to race a stopwatch.

You have already practised the most important skills: setting the purpose, questioning a suggestion, inspecting the result and making the decision.

Keep a simple record of the site you have built

If the work lasts beyond your first session, save this with your content. You should be able to answer these questions without reopening a long AI conversation. It is a record for the person who has to live with the website, not a technical report.

> SITE / WHO IT SERVES: [name, intended visitors, one useful thing they should be able to do]
> APPROVED CONTENT: [which pages, verified facts and image permissions]
> TOOLS / RUNNING COST: [chosen editor or host, who owns the account, what it costs]
> SAFE COPY: [where the current approved version is saved; how to restore it]
> PRIVATE CHECKS: [mobile, links, contact route, accessibility and privacy; date checked]
> PUBLICATION DECISION: [who approved, exact version, when]
> LIVE RESULT: [public address, what was checked after publishing, any unresolved problems]
> NEXT CHECK: [who will maintain it, when they will look again, what would trigger an update]

If a field is unknown, don’t ask the AI to fill it with a convincing guess. Mark it unknown and settle it before publication if it affects visitors or your ability to recover the site.

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This guide draws on one ongoing human–AI project and an illustrative small-site exercise. It is a practical starting point, not a guarantee that your AI or publishing service has particular capabilities, a proven universal method or a substitute for specialist security, legal, accessibility or privacy advice when needed.