



GitHub Actions Quick Guide

For WordPress Freelancers

Automate your staging deployments in minutes — no DevOps degree required.



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Why Manual Deployments Hurt

The Problem

- ⚠️ Zipping and FTPing files is slow.
- ⚠️ Easy to miss files or overwrite the wrong folder.
- ⚠️ Staging often lags behind live.



Clients can't review properly if staging is out of date.

- ✅ CI/CD solves this by updating staging every push, every time.

The Minimal Workflow

How It Works

Push code

- GitHub runs workflow
- Files auto-deployed to staging

Minimal YAML example (checkout + SFTP):

```
on: push
jobs:
  deploy:
    runs-on: ubuntu-latest
    steps:
      - uses: actions/checkout@v3
      - name: Deploy via SFTP
        uses: wlixcc/SFTP-Deploy-Action@v1.2.4
        with:
          server: ${ secrets.STAGING_HOST }
          username: ${ secrets.STAGING_USER }
          password: ${ secrets.STAGING_PASS }
          local_path: "./wp-content/plugins/my-plugin"
          remote_path: "/var/www/html/wp-content/plugins/my-plugin"
```

✓ You only need two steps: Checkout your code and deploy via SFTP. That's it.

Even a few lines of code can replace hours of manual FTP.

Set Up In Four Steps

Steps To Get Started

- ✓ Create a GitHub Repository
→ Store your plugin or theme code here.
- ✓ Add a workflow file
→ GitHub looks in `.github/workflows/`.
- ✓ Add GitHub Secrets
→ Keeps server credentials safe and out of your repo.
- ✓ Push code
→ Actions deploys automatically to staging.

1
Repository

2
Workflow

3
Secrets

4
Push

Pre-Deploy Guardrails (Optional)

Why Add Checks Before Deployment?

- CI/CD isn't just about shipping files — it can also protect you from silly mistakes.
- Think of these as “safety checks” before your code hits staging.

Examples Of Guardrails

- ✓ Lint PHP or run WordPress coding standards (PHPCS).
- ✓ Export a quick DB backup with WP-CLI.
- ✓ Minify CSS/JS before pushing.

Freelancer Benefit

Even adding one check builds confidence with clients. They see you have a process that goes beyond “just uploading files.”

 **Pro tip:** Start with the simplest one, a linter or code sniffer. You can always add more later.

Real-World Workflow Options

Option 1: Non-Profit / Larger Clients

- Deploys go to staging only.
- Internal IT or devs review code, run compliance checks, and push to production on their side.
- Clear separation of duties → reduces risk for sensitive projects.

Option 2: Freelancer-Owned Projects

- Work on a **staging** branch → deploys automatically to staging.
- When the client approves, merge into **main** → triggers deployment to live.
- You control both staging and production, but the process keeps staging-first discipline.

Why Staging-First Matters

- Reduces risk: nothing untested hits production.
- Builds trust: clients feel safe knowing their live site won't break suddenly.
- Saves time: fixes caught in staging = fewer messy rollbacks.

Common Gotchas & How to Avoid Them

Don't Deploy Media Libraries

- They're huge, and clients often add/change media on live.
- Best practice: deploy code only, handle media separately (CDN, manual sync, or one-off copy).

Beware Of Database Drift

- Clients update live (new posts, orders, users).
- Overwriting the live database from staging will wipe those changes.
- Rule of thumb: code moves via CI/CD, content stays on live.

Hosting Quirks

- Shared hosting may block SSH ports, throttle SFTP, or change file permissions.
- Test small, adjust workflows, and don't assume every host behaves the same.

CI/CD is powerful, but not magic.

Plan around WordPress' quirks.

Recap & Next Steps

Key Takeaways

- ❑ Manual deploys waste time and cause errors.
- ❑ GitHub Actions = safer, repeatable, and consistent.
- ❑ Start small: SFTP + Secrets is enough.
- ❑ Always go staging-first before production.
- ❑ Automation builds client trust and saves you time.

What To Do Next

- Try the minimal YAML workflow.
- Deploy your next theme/plugin update to staging with CI/CD.
- Keep iterating: add guardrails, scale when needed.

Stop dragging files.

Start pushing confidence.

About The Author

Wil Brown has been running a successful business since 2005 with clients such as Nikon, Google, Verisk and Queensland Health.

He helps WordPress developers and designers **get more clients, increase monthly revenue,** and build a **sustainable, profitable business.**



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Get The Freelancer's Edge

Tired of chasing clients and second-guessing your next project?

You're not alone. Most WordPress freelancers struggle with feast-or-famine work and projects that don't pay what they're worth.

That's why I created **The Freelancer's Edge**, a short, practical email every fortnight with strategies to:

- Land clients who value your work
- Escape scope creep and low-ball offers
- Grow a business that's actually sustainable

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