

# Why do 404 Errors Happen on Websites?

## What a 404 Actually Means

A 404 is an HTTP status that says the server is working, but the specific page is not there. It is not the same as a server outage. It is a routing or content location problem. Search engines understand that 404s happen, but a pattern of 404s can signal quality and maintenance problems.

## Why 404s Matter for SEO and Sales

- **Lost authority and internal link equity:** Links to a missing URL stop passing value unless you redirect them.
- **Wasted crawl budget:** Crawlers spend time on dead ends instead of useful pages.
- **Worse user experience:** Visitors hit a wall, bounce, and trust you less.
- **Analytics blind spots:** Broken journeys hide what would have converted.

## Common Causes of 404 Errors

### 1. URL changes during a redesign or content cleanup

Slugs get renamed, directories shift, or a CMS migration changes the permalink structure. Old links in menus, blogs, emails, or other websites still point to the old path.

### 2. Pages deleted without a redirect plan

Content gets removed and nothing takes its place. If the topic still has search demand, send visitors to the most relevant alternative with a 301 redirect. If it is truly gone, consider a 410 status.

### 3. Typos, case sensitivity, and trailing slashes

`/Services/` vs `/services/` can matter on some servers. So can `/page` and `/page/` if your config expects one format. Tiny differences break links.

### 4. HTTP to HTTPS and www vs non-www mismatches

If you force HTTPS or prefer non-www, every variant should redirect neatly to the canonical version. Miss one path and you get pockets of 404s.

### 5. CMS permalink or routing changes

Switching from *Plain* to *Post name* or adjusting category bases will change URLs. Rebuild rewrite rules and map old URLs to new ones.

## 6. Plugin or module conflicts

Plugins that register routes or custom post types can collide. Poorly coded plugins may hijack slugs or break rewrites. Disable suspects to confirm and check their route registrations.

## 7. Cache and CDN issues

Edge caches can serve outdated 404s after you publish a page. Clear the stack in order: page cache, opcode cache, server cache, then CDN.

## 8. Bad external links

Other sites link to a mistyped URL. You cannot fix their site, but you can add a redirect on yours if the target is clear.

## How to Find 404s



- **Google Search Console:** Go to *Indexing ? Pages* and review *Not found (404)*. Use *URL Inspection* to test specific URLs.
- **Server access logs:** Filter for status code 404 to spot high-traffic misses and referrers.
- **Analytics:** Track your 404 page as a content view. Capture the requested URL and the referrer so you can fix the source link.
- **Site crawlers:** Use a crawler to scan internal links and sitemaps for dead ends before users find them.

## How to Fix 404s (Step by Step)

1. **Reproduce it cleanly:** Test logged out, private window, and with query strings removed. Try both trailing slash variants and both www/non-www versions.
2. **Choose the right remedy:**
  - o **Restore** the page if it should exist.
  - o **301 redirect** to the best replacement if intent still exists.
  - o **410 Gone** if the content should be removed on purpose.
3. **Implement redirects:** Map old to new. Keep it one hop when possible.
4. **Update internal links:** Fix menus, footers, blog posts, and sitemaps so new traffic flows to the right place.
5. **Clear caches in order:** App cache, server cache, CDN. Then retest.
6. **Request recrawl:** Use URL Inspection in Search Console to fetch the fixed URL and submit for indexing.
7. **Monitor:** Watch 404 counts over the next few crawls. New errors should trend down.

## Redirect Examples

### .htaccess (Apache)

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```
# Single page redirect
Redirect 301 /old-page https://www.example.com/new-page

# Force HTTPS and non-www
RewriteEngine On
RewriteCond %{HTTPS} !=on [OR]
RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^www\.example\.com$ [NC]
RewriteRule ^(.*)$ https://example.com/$1 [R=301,L]
```

### Nginx

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```
# Single page redirect
location = /old-page {
    return 301 https://example.com/new-page;
}

# Force HTTPS and non-www
server {
    listen 80;
    server_name www.example.com;
    return 301 https://example.com$request_uri;
}
```

## Prevention Checklist

- **Maintain a redirect map:** Before any redesign or move, export all current URLs and plan 301s.
- **Lock down slugs:** Limit on-the-fly slug changes or auto-create redirects when editors rename pages.

- **Automated link checks:** Crawl weekly and alert on new 404s. Add it to your maintenance routine.
  - **Keep sitemaps current:** Regenerate after launches and major content changes.
  - **Test plugins on staging:** Verify routes and permalinks before pushing to production.
  - **Use a helpful 404 page:** Include search, key links, and a short explanation. Do not redirect all 404s to the home page.
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## Design a Helpful 404 Page

A custom 404 page turns a dead end into a detour. Instead of a blunt error, give visitors a simple explanation, a few clear options, and a way to continue. That reduces bounces and protects conversions.

### Why build one?

- **Better UX:** A friendly message with next steps feels professional instead of broken.
- **Lower bounce rate:** Offer popular links, a site map, or a search box so people can recover.
- **SEO safety:** A proper 404 response with helpful navigation prevents “soft 404” issues and keeps crawlers moving.
- **Debugging:** You can log the requested URL and referrer on this page to find and fix the source link.

## How to set up a 404 page in WordPress

### Block themes (Site Editor):

1. Go to *Appearance ? Editor ? Templates ? +* and add or edit the *404* template.
2. Add blocks: a concise headline, a short explanation (one sentence), the *Search* block, and a small list of popular pages (Home, Products/Services, Contact, Blog).
3. Optionally add *Latest Posts* or a link to your site map page.
4. Save and test a non-existent URL (e.g., `/this-does-not-exist`).

### Classic themes (PHP template):

1. Create `404.php` in your (child) theme if it doesn't exist.
2. Use something like this minimal template:

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```
<?php get_header(); ?>
<main id="primary" class="site-main" style="max-width:720px;margin:4rem auto;padding:0 1rem;">
  <h1>Page Not Found (404)</h1>
  <p>Sorry, we couldn't find that page. Try a search or use the links below.</p>
  <div><?php get_search_form(); ?></div>
  <nav aria-label="Popular links">
```

```
<ul>
  <li><a href="<?php echo esc_url( home_url('/') ); ?>">Home</a></li>
  <li><a href="/services/">Services</a></li>
  <li><a href="/contact/">Contact</a></li>
  <li><a href="/blog/">Blog</a></li>
</ul>
</nav>
</main>
<?php get_footer(); ?>
```

*Pro tip:* Track your 404 page in analytics and capture the requested URL and referrer as parameters. That makes fixing sources (menus, posts, external links) much faster.

## How to set up a 404 page without WordPress

If you're not on WP, point your server to a simple, branded HTML page. Keep it light and helpful—short message and links to top pages or your site map. (No search form unless you've built one.)

### Apache (.htaccess):

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```
# Place this in your site's root .htaccess
# Serve /404.html and keep the HTTP status as 404
ErrorDocument 404 /404.html
```

Create `/404.html` in your web root, for example:

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```
<!doctype html>
<html lang="en">
<head>
  <meta charset="utf-8">
  <title>Page Not Found (404)</title>
  <meta name="robots" content="noindex">
  <style>body{font-family:system-ui,Arial,sans-serif;max-width:720px;margin:4rem
auto;padding:0 1rem;line-height:1.5}</style>
</head>
<body>
  <h1>We can't find that page.</h1>
  <p>The link may be outdated or the URL mistyped. Try one of these:</p>
  <ul>
    <li><a href="/">Home</a></li>
    <li><a href="/services/">Services</a></li>
    <li><a href="/contact/">Contact</a></li>
    <li><a href="/sitemap/">Site Map</a></li>
  </ul>
</body>
</html>
```

### Nginx (server block):

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```
# Inside your server { } block
error_page 404 /404.html;

location = /404.html {
    root /var/www/example.com/public; # adjust to your web root
    # optional: add_cache_control headers here
}
```

Make sure `/var/www/example.com/public/404.html` exists and is styled like the Apache example above.

*Notes:* Keep the HTTP status as **404** (don't "redirect" to the home page). If you remove content on purpose, consider a **410 Gone** for clarity. And if you later restore a page, remove any redirect or 410 you added for that path.

## Make Your 404 Page Memorable (Optional Fun)

404 pages don't have to be boring. A little humor can take the sting out of hitting a dead end. You can even drop in a meme image or a witty one-liner. Here are some classics you can borrow:

- "Well, this is awkward..."
- "You had one job, URL!"
- "404: The page you are looking for has left the chat."
- "Oops... looks like someone broke the internet again."
- "This is not the page you're looking for. (Jedi hand wave)"
- "Error 404: Coffee not found."
- "The page ran away. We're chasing it down."
- "404: Like socks in the dryer, this page is missing."
- "Our web developer swears this page existed yesterday."
- "You broke the internet! (Just kidding... but seriously, this page isn't here.)"

Add an image or meme if it fits your brand. A laugh makes a broken link a little easier to forgive.

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## FAQs About Fixing 404 Errors

### Do 404s hurt SEO?

Some 404s are normal. Persistent 404s on important pages waste link equity and damage user experience. Fix the ones that get traffic or have backlinks.

### Should I redirect every 404 to the home page?

No. That creates a poor experience and can look like a soft 404. Redirect only when you have a relevant replacement. Use 410 for content that is intentionally gone.

## **What is a soft 404?**

It is when the server returns 200 OK for a page that looks like it does not exist. Search engines treat it as low quality. Return a proper 404 or 410 instead.

## **How fast do fixes take effect?**

Users see fixes right away. Search engines usually pick them up after the next crawl. Use URL Inspection to speed things up for high value pages.

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## **Bottom Line**

404s happen. The difference between a healthy site and a messy one is response time. Find them, fix them with the right status, and prevent new ones with a redirect plan and routine monitoring. Do that, and search engines will be more confident sending traffic your way.

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