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Moving a very large site: when FTP is too slow and what to use instead

Moving a Website

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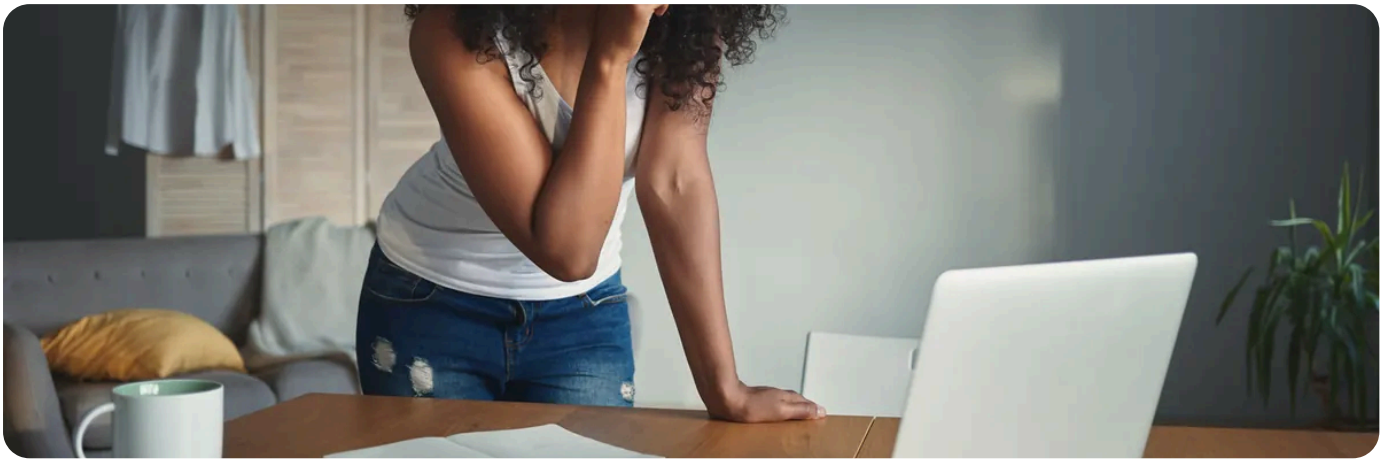

On a site with many thousands of files FTP is slow because **every file is a separate request**, and the time goes on opening and closing connections. The way out is to move **one big file**: compress everything into an archive, send it over a connection that resumes if it drops, and unpack it on the other side. If both ends have SSH, `rsync` does the same job with no archive at all.

The methods, side by side

Method	Good when	Weak spot
One archive (.tar.gz or .zip) + SFTP	You have the file manager or the Terminal on the old side.	Needs space for the archive **and** for the unpacked files.
FTP file by file	A few files, or one large file.	Very slow with thousands of small files.
rsync over SSH	Both ends have SSH. It resumes where it stopped and, on later runs, sends only what changed.	Needs SSH on both sides. See **copying files to another server with rsync, safely**.
Ask us to do it	You would rather not handle it yourself.	Talk to us first, to say what it is and where it is. See our **migration** page.

Step by step with an archive

1. **Clean up before you copy.** Cache, logs and old copies only add to what has to travel. See **the limits nobody advertises: inodes, processes and memory**.

2. **Export the database separately**, already compressed. In phpMyAdmin use the custom method with compression; if the database is big, see **exporting a database with phpMyAdmin** and, on the other side, **importing a large database over SSH**.

3. **Compress the site folder into one archive.** In File Manager use **Compress**. In the Terminal: `tar -czf site.tar.gz public_html`. Include hidden files, or the `.htaccess` stays behind.

4. **Check the archive is whole** before you move it: `tar -tzf site.tar.gz` lists the contents and fails if it is damaged.

5. **Move it over SFTP**, which resumes if the connection drops. See **SFTP instead of FTP: when you can, and why it is better** and **day to day in FileZilla**. If the old side has no SFTP, use its file manager to download it.

6. **Unpack on the new side** and check: the number of files and the size should match (`du -sh` shows a folder's size).

7. **Test before changing the DNS**: **testing a migrated site before you change the DNS**.

With rsync, if both ends have SSH

On our shared hosting SSH uses port **2299** and depends on the account having command-line access (not all do: see **the cPanel Terminal**). Run it on the **new side**, pulling from the old one, swapping the values for yours:

```
rsync -avz --partial -e "ssh -p PORT" user@old-server:public_html/ ~/public_html/
```

You can repeat the command as often as you like: repeats only send what changed. So the good tactic is **one big pass days beforehand** and **one small pass on moving day**.

Do not leave the archive where everyone can reach it.
A site archive includes configuration files with passwords. Never put it in `public_html` under an easy-to-guess name, and delete it from both sides when you finish.

Do the sums on space.
During extraction the archive and the files coexist: you need room for both, and enough file allowance (inodes) for all of them. If space is short, unpack in parts or ask us before you start.

On moving day, freeze changes.

Put the old site in maintenance, export the database a second time, import it, and only then change the DNS. The full order is in **how to migrate a site without downtime**.

NEED A HAND?

Is your site big and you would rather not risk it? Tell us where it is today and how much it weighs, and we will tell you how we would do it.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- Moving a site by hand: files by FTP and the database →
- Importing a large database over SSH →
- Copying files to another server with rsync, safely →
- How to migrate a site without downtime →

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