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Slow queries: how to find them and the fixes that work most often

Engines & Performance

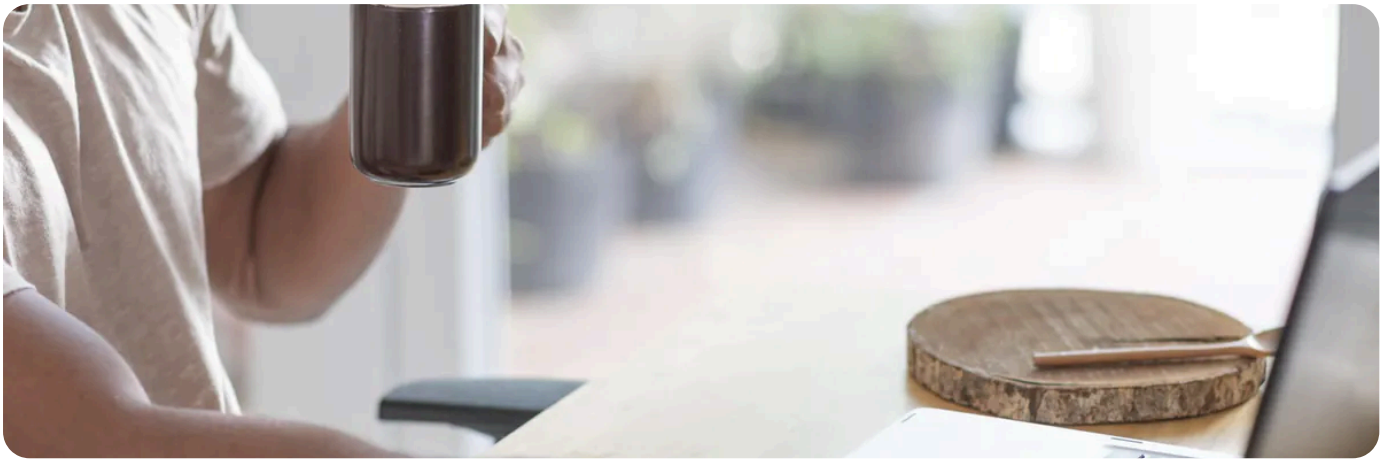
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Slow queries: how to find them and the fixes that work most often

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A site that is slow because of the database almost always has **one or two queries** doing all the work, and the most frequent fix is a missing **index**. The route is this: find *which* query it is, ask MariaDB to explain how it runs it (`EXPLAIN`), and only then fix it. Poking blindly, or changing plan, rarely helps.

Finding the guilty query

1. **In WordPress,** install the **Query Monitor** plugin: it shows each page's queries, slowest first, and the plugin or theme that asked for them.

2. **In another application,** watch the running queries in phpMyAdmin, under **Status**, then **Processes**, while the page is slow. A query that keeps appearing is the suspect.

3. **On a VPS of your own,** you can switch on the slow query log in the engine (`slow_query_log` and `long_query_time`). On shared hosting those settings belong to the server, not to you.

Asking MariaDB to explain

On the phpMyAdmin SQL tab, type `EXPLAIN` before the suspect query and run it. A **type** column with the value **ALL** means the engine read the **whole** table, row by row. A value such as **ref** or **const** means it used an index. The **rows** column shows how many rows it expects to read.

Fix	When it works
Create an index on the `WHERE` or `JOIN` column	`EXPLAIN` shows `ALL` on a large table. The most common one.
Ask only for the columns you need, and add `LIMIT`	The application does `SELECT *` and shows ten rows out of a million.

Fix	When it works
Shrink the database	Tables full of old records, revisions, sessions and temporary data. See **where to see its size and what can go**.
Clear the options loaded on every page	In WordPress, a `wp_options` table with a lot of data marked `autoload`.
Page cache	The same query runs on every visit. See **installing and tuning a page cache**.

More indexes is not always better.
Each index speeds up reading and slows down writing, and takes space. Create one at a time, on the column `EXPLAIN` pointed to, and measure. And make a copy first: see **exporting with phpMyAdmin**.

An example, start to finish

A shop is slow to list orders by status. You run `EXPLAIN SELECT * FROM orders WHERE status = 'paid';` and the **type** column says **ALL**, with many estimated rows. You create `CREATE INDEX idx_status ON orders (status);` and repeat the `EXPLAIN`: now **type** is **ref** and the estimated rows drop sharply. The page that took a while to open now answers at once. It was a single index, chosen because `EXPLAIN` asked for it. That is the idea: measure, change one thing, measure again.

The brake may not be the query.
If the account uses a lot of CPU in the database, the server may slow it down, which looks like a slow query but is too much consumption. See **what eats CPU on a website** and **cleaning and optimising the database in phpMyAdmin**.

NEED A HAND?

Found the query but not sure what to do next? Send us the EXPLAIN output and the application and we will look at it with you.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **Cleaning and optimising the database in phpMyAdmin** →
- **What eats CPU on a website, and how to bring it down** →

The site is slow: what to measure before you change plan

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