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A website form that is safe and spam-free: honeypot, captcha and validation

Security

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<https://www.meu.mozout.co.mz/knowledgebase/1525>

A website form that is safe and spam-free: honeypot, captcha and validation

📁 Security 📅 Created on **October 10, 2026** ⌚ 3 min read



The short answer: a form is a door that anyone, and any robot, can try. To keep it **spam-free**, add a trap field (a *honeypot*) and, if needed, a captcha. To keep it **safe**, validate everything on the server, never trust what arrived, and do not let a text field go into the e-mail or the database as it is. The two kinds of care go together.

🔍 Against spam: from the quietest layer to the most visible

Defence	How it works	Annoyance to the visitor
Honeypot	A field hidden with CSS. A person does not see it or fill it in; a robot fills in everything. If it comes back filled, you discard it.	None.
Minimum time	A form sent one second after it opened was sent by a robot.	None.
Rate limit	Few messages a minute per address. It slows down whoever insists.	Hardly any.
Captcha	Asks the visitor to prove they are a person. Some versions do not even ask for clicks (reCAPTCHA, hCaptcha, Cloudflare Turnstile).	Medium. Some visitors give up.
Moderation	Nothing is published without approval. It applies to comments and reviews.	A delay in publishing.

Start with the first two: they cost little and stop most simple robots. Add the captcha only if the spam carries on. In WordPress, most form plugins have these options as tick boxes; for comments, see **stopping spam comments in WordPress**, and for a shop, **fake orders and spam sign-ups**.

🔄 For safety: what the code has to do

- 1 Validate on the server.** Validation in the browser (the field that says “invalid e-mail”) is only a courtesy: a robot never goes through it. On the server, confirm the e-mail is an e-mail, the length is reasonable and the required fields exist.
- 2 Never let the visitor’s text touch the database as it is.** Use prepared statements, where the instruction and the data travel separately. It is the defence against “SQL injection”, where a field filled in with an instruction becomes part of your query.
- 3 Neutralise the text before showing it** on a page, by converting special HTML characters. It is the defence against scripts inserted by whoever filled in the form (XSS). In PHP, the `htmlspecialchars` function does this.
- 4 Watch the e-mail header.** If the sender address and subject come from the form, anyone who puts a line break there can add recipients and use your server to send spam. Strip line breaks from those fields, and prefer sending with authentication, as in **sending e-mail with PHPMailer**.
- 5 If you accept files,** accept only the types you need, limit the size, rename them and never store them in folders where code can run. A “resume.pdf” that is really a PHP program is an old class of attack.

! Do not put the destination e-mail in the form as a hidden field.
Anyone who sees it can use your form to send messages to anyone. The destination stays on the server.

💡 If the form’s messages do not reach the inbox, the cause is rarely spam: see a contact form that actually reaches your inbox. And if you have to store personal data sent by visitors, read **personal data protection: what applies to your website**.

🗣️ NEED A HAND?

Receiving hundreds of fake messages, or was the form used to send spam? Tell us the domain.

 [Open a support ticket →](#)

🔗 SEE ALSO

[A contact form that actually reaches your inbox](#)



Stopping spam comments in WordPress



Sending e-mail from your own code with PHPMailer



Personal data protection: what applies to your website



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