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A helpful 404 page: what it should say and how to check it works

SEO & Marketing

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A helpful 404 page: what it should say and how to check it works

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The short answer: the 404 page is what a visitor sees when the address does not exist. A good one **says so clearly, keeps the site's menu and shows a way on** (home, search, contact). And underneath, the server must really answer "404": if it answers "200", Google treats it as a normal page.

What it should have

Element	Why
One clear sentence	"This page does not exist or has moved." No blaming the visitor, no jokes that leave them stuck.
The site's menu and header	Someone who lands on a page with nothing around it leaves.
Ways on	A link to the home page, the main sections, a search box and contact.
The right code (404)	Neither a redirect to the home page, nor "200". A blind redirect hides the error from Google.
Light	Few images. It is a page opened often and should be quick.

➞ Making it and checking it, step by step

1 In **WordPress**, the theme handles it: in a classic theme, the 404.php file; in a block theme, the "404" template in the site editor. **Block theme or classic theme.**

2 On a **static site**, create a 404.html page and tell the server to use it: in .htaccess, the line `ErrorDocument 404 /404.html`. In cPanel there is also the "Error Pages" tool.

3 **Write the text** and put in the ways on.

4 **Test with an invented address** (your-domain.com/this-does-not-exist). Look at the page.

5 **Check the code:** in the browser's tools (Network tab) you should see 404; or on the command line, `curl -I https://your-domain.com/this-does-not-exist`.



Do not redirect every error to the home page.

It seems friendly, but Google calls it a “soft 404” and flags it as an error: **Crawl errors in Search Console**. If the address really moved, use a 301 redirect to the new page.



A 404 page that visitors see a lot is a sign of broken links. Look for them: **Error 404 on a page that should exist** and **Permalinks and the 404**.



NEED A HAND?

Want help setting up your site's 404 page? Open a ticket with the address.



Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

Error 404 on a page that should exist: the causes, in order



301 redirects when you change a page or a domain



Crawl errors in Search Console: 404, soft 404 and server errors, one by one



What goes on your home page: five things a visitor looks for in the first ten seconds



Internal links: how to link your own pages so nothing stays hidden





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