
Building Your Professional Digital Presence

A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Your Personal Website,
GitHub Portfolio, and Online Brand

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This guideline is part of a series designed to support students' professional development beyond the classroom, fostering self-directed learning, technical fluency, and career readiness.

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1 Why Your Digital Presence Matters

In today’s professional landscape, your online presence is often the first impression you make on potential employers, graduate admissions committees, and professional contacts. A polished resume is necessary but no longer sufficient. Recruiters, hiring managers, and academic committees routinely search for candidates online before making decisions. What they find—or do not find—shapes their perception of you before you ever walk into an interview.

The good news is that building a strong digital presence has never been easier or more affordable. Using free tools and platforms, you can create a professional personal website, showcase your projects and skills, and establish yourself as a thoughtful professional in your field. This guide walks you through the entire process, from creating your first GitHub account to launching a personal website and building a cohesive online brand. The most important step is the first one, and you can complete it in less than an hour.

Key Insight

You do not need to be a web developer or designer to build a compelling online presence. The tools described in this guide require no prior coding experience and can produce professional results within a single afternoon.

2 Setting Up Your GitHub Account

2.1 What is GitHub?

GitHub is the world’s largest platform for software development and version control. However, its utility extends far beyond coding. GitHub serves as a portfolio platform, a project management tool, and a free hosting service for personal websites. Having a GitHub account signals technical literacy and a commitment to professional development, even if you do not consider yourself a programmer.

2.2 Creating Your Account

Visit <https://github.com> and click “Sign up.” Choose a username that is professional and easy to remember. Your GitHub username will become part of your website URL, so select something clean and recognizable (e.g., `firstnamelastname` rather than `coolgamer2003`). Use your preferred email address and complete the verification process. Once your account is created, fill out your profile: add a professional photo, a brief bio, your location, and a link to your LinkedIn or other professional page.

2.3 GitHub Student Developer Pack

As a student, you are eligible for the GitHub Student Developer Pack, which provides free access to dozens of premium developer tools, cloud services, and domain names. Apply at <https://education.github.com/pack> with your university email address. Among the many benefits, you will receive a free `.me` domain name (via Namecheap), free cloud hosting credits, and access to GitHub Copilot, an AI-powered coding assistant.

3 Building Your Website with GitHub Pages

3.1 What is GitHub Pages?

GitHub Pages is a free static site hosting service that publishes websites directly from a GitHub repository. Your site will be accessible at `username.github.io`, where `username` is your GitHub username. GitHub Pages supports custom domains, HTTPS encryption, and Jekyll (a static site generator that makes it easy to create professional-looking sites without writing HTML from scratch).

3.2 Step-by-Step Setup

The process of creating your GitHub Pages site involves four straightforward steps.

Step 1. Log into your GitHub account and create a new repository. Name it exactly `username.github.io` (replacing `username` with your actual GitHub username). This naming convention is what tells GitHub to treat this repository as a personal website.

Step 2. Clone the repository to your local machine (or use GitHub’s web editor) and create an `index.html` file. This file will be the home page of your website. You can start with a minimal HTML template and build from there, or you can use a Jekyll theme for a polished look immediately.

Step 3. Push your changes to GitHub. Within a few minutes, your site will be live at `https://username.github.io`. Visit the URL in your browser to confirm.

Step 4. Visit your repository’s Settings page, navigate to the Pages section, and verify that your site is published. You can also configure a custom domain here if you have one.

3.3 Using Jekyll Themes for Instant Polish

Jekyll themes transform a basic HTML page into a professionally designed website with minimal effort. GitHub Pages natively supports Jekyll, meaning you can select a theme and have a polished site within minutes. Two themes are particularly recommended:

Theme	Best For	Description
Academic Pages	Graduate students, academics	Includes sections for publications, teaching, talks, and CV. Built specifically for academic personal websites. Fork from https://academicpages.github.io .
Minimal Mistakes	Business students, portfolios	Clean, modern layout with excellent documentation. Highly customizable and well-maintained.

Table 1: Recommended Jekyll themes for personal websites.

Quick Win

Fork the Academic Pages template on GitHub, rename the repository to `yourusername.github.io`, edit the configuration file with your information, and you will have a professional personal website live on the internet within 30 minutes.

Official documentation: <https://pages.github.com>

4 Designing Your Personal Website

4.1 Essential Pages and Content

Your personal website should include, at minimum, the following elements: a **home page** with a professional photo and a concise personal statement that communicates who you are and what you do; an **about page** that expands on your background, interests, and career objectives; a **resume or CV page** with a downloadable PDF version; and a **projects or portfolio page** that showcases your best work. If you are a graduate student, include a **research page** that describes your research interests and any publications or working papers.

4.2 Writing Your Personal Statement

Your personal statement is the single most important piece of text on your website. It should be concise (three to five sentences), clearly communicate your current role and academic affiliation, highlight your key interests and competencies, and convey what makes you distinctive. Avoid generic language. Consider the contrast:

Weak: “I am a business student interested in analytics.”

Strong: “I am a supply chain management student at Rutgers Business School, specializing in healthcare operations analytics with a focus on how workforce coordination affects patient outcomes.”

The strong version communicates your affiliation, specialization, and the specific impact of your work in a single sentence.

4.3 Showcasing Projects

Your projects page is where you demonstrate what you can *do*, not just what you know. Include two to four of your strongest projects with a brief description of the problem, your approach, the tools you used, and the outcome or key finding. If the project involved code, link to the GitHub repository. If it produced a report or visualization, include screenshots or embed the deliverable. Each project entry should tell a story: what you did, why it mattered, and what you learned.

5 Beyond the CV: Online Self-Branding

A traditional CV lists your qualifications in a static format. An online presence brings those qualifications to life. Self-branding is the practice of deliberately shaping how you are perceived in professional contexts. It is not about self-promotion in the superficial sense; it is about making it easy for the right opportunities to find you.

Think of your digital presence as a system with multiple interconnected components. Your personal website is the hub. Your LinkedIn profile, GitHub repositories, and any published writing or media

are the spokes. Each component should be consistent in messaging and professional tone, and each should link to the others. When a recruiter finds your LinkedIn, they should be one click away from your personal website. When a professor visits your website, they should see a link to your research repository on GitHub.

5.1 Content Creation as Branding

One of the most effective ways to build your professional brand is to create and share content. Write a blog post about a concept you learned in class. Publish a data visualization project on your website. Share a summary of an interesting research paper on LinkedIn. These activities accomplish two things simultaneously: they deepen your own understanding of the material, and they create public artifacts that demonstrate your competence to anyone who discovers them.

5.2 The Compounding Effect

Digital presence compounds over time. A website you launch today will be indexed by search engines within weeks. A blog post you write this semester may be discovered by a recruiter next year. A GitHub repository you maintain during your studies becomes a living portfolio that grows more impressive with each contribution. The earlier you start, the more value you accumulate.

6 LinkedIn and Professional Networking

LinkedIn is the de facto professional networking platform, and a complete, well-optimized LinkedIn profile is essential. Your profile should include a professional headshot, a compelling headline (not just your job title, but a statement of what you do and the value you bring), a summary that mirrors your personal website's about page, and detailed entries for your education, experience, and skills. Request recommendations from professors and supervisors, and engage with content in your field by commenting thoughtfully on posts and sharing relevant articles.

Link your personal website prominently in your LinkedIn profile's contact information and featured section. Similarly, add your LinkedIn URL to your personal website. This cross-linking creates a coherent professional ecosystem that reinforces your brand from multiple directions.

7 Maintaining and Evolving Your Presence

Launching your website and profiles is not a one-time event. Schedule a monthly review to update your content, add new projects, refresh your CV, and ensure all links are working. As you complete courses, earn certificates, or finish projects, add them to your portfolio. Keep your personal statement current with your evolving interests and objectives.

Consider setting up Google Analytics on your personal website to track visitor behavior. Understanding who visits your site and which pages they view provides valuable insight into how your professional brand is being received. Over time, these analytics will help you refine your content strategy and focus on the elements that resonate most with your audience.

8 Quick-Start Checklist: Your First 48 Hours

The most important thing about building your digital presence is simply starting. The following sequence can be completed in one to two focused sessions. Do not aim for perfection on the first pass; aim for a professional foundation that you can improve iteratively.

Timeframe	Tasks
Hour 1	Create a GitHub account with a professional username. Complete your profile with a photo and bio. Apply for the GitHub Student Developer Pack.
Hour 2	Fork a Jekyll theme (such as Academic Pages or Minimal Mistakes) and rename the repository to <code>yourusername.github.io</code> . Edit the configuration file with your name, photo, and basic information.
Hour 3	Write your personal statement (3–5 sentences). Draft your about page. Upload a PDF of your current resume. Customize at least two project entries for your portfolio page.
Hour 4	Review and polish your LinkedIn profile. Add your new website URL to LinkedIn’s contact information and featured section. Cross-link all your professional profiles.
Follow-up	Within the next week, write and publish one blog post or project showcase on your new site. Share it on LinkedIn. <i>Congratulations: you now have a professional digital presence that sets you apart from the vast majority of your peers.</i>

Table 2: 48-hour quick-start action plan for building your digital presence.

Final Thought

Your digital presence is a long-term investment in your professional future. Every hour you spend building it now pays dividends for years to come. The students who take this step today are the ones who will be most visible, most discoverable, and most prepared when opportunities arise.