



all about domain names

## What is a Domain Name?

Imagine if everybody in the world used their National Insurance number or their telephone number instead of their name. If names didn't exist, we would have to invent them or we would never be able to identify my friends, let alone casual acquaintances! Domain names were invented to fill a similar need on the Internet. Most computers connected to the 'net are identified by a unique number called an IP address (an IP address is simply a string of numbers like this: 224.208.13.149). IP addresses are neither intuitive (they don't correspond to a geographical location) nor easy to remember (you can prove that by glancing away from this page and trying to quote the example IP address I have just given!) If you type the IP address into the URL bar of your browser you will be taken to the web site it relates to.

As well as being hard to remember, however, IP addresses are also FIXED (i.e. if you change web hosting companies you'll need to get a new IP address for your site). Domain names offer a more intuitive way to name and find a website. Each domain name replaces the string of meaningless numbers with a simple word or expression.

That's the theory. In practice, domain names can be pretty obscure too.

## The Structure of a Domain Name

Let's look in more detail at a domain name, using my site as an example. My site's domain name is **keithjones.net**.

(.net) is the top domain under which my domain name is registered. There are many different top domains out there, from commercial (.com) through to non-profit (.org) and even country-specific top domains such as the UK (.uk), France (.fr) and Italy (.it). Every domain name is registered under a top domain of some kind. The top domain is often known as the domain extension - these are the same thing. I hope I'm not confusing you!

### Don't be caught out:

.com is pronounced "dot-com". Other international domains, such as .net or .org are pronounced "dot-net" and "dot-org" respectively. Country-specific domain names, on the other hand, tend to

get spelled out. Japan's top domain (.jp) is pronounced "dot-jay-pee"

**keithjones** is the sub-domain of my domain name. This is the part of the domain name that I was able to choose. The top domain and sub-domain together make up what people call a domain name. If you asked me what my site's domain was, I would reply "keithjones.net" (pronounced "keithjonesdotnet") One of the best things about domain names is that they are unique. I can relax in the knowledge that there is nobody else out there who owns the domain name "keithjones.net". This is because all domain names are recorded in a central database, and each record in the database must be unique. This is also what makes some domain names quite valuable (more about this later).

Remember: when we talk about "owning" a domain name, we are really talking about the exclusive right to use that name. It is not possible to own a domain name outright and you will have to pay a periodic renewal fee to keep the "right to use" your domain name. Also, since you don't own the name itself, under certain circumstances a court can take away your right to use a domain name.

## Some slightly technical stuff

Earlier I referred to the "central database" for domain names. This database is stored on several very large computers scattered around the world. When you buy a domain name, your details (name, company name, address, etc.) are recorded in the database along with the domain name, the date you purchased the name and the date you will be due to pay a "renewal fee" for the domain name. (If you buy a domain through me I will let you know, automatically, when it is due for renewal). Depending on how - and through which company - you bought the name initially, you will own the right to use the name for between 1 year and 10 years before you have to pay this renewal fee (each company has different policies, so read the small print carefully when you register a domain name!)

When you buy a domain name, it is said that you are "registering" it (since in fact all your details are being registered, or recorded, in the central database). This is why the companies that let you buy domain names are called "registrars".

One thing you may come across when registering a domain name is a request for information about the 'name servers' you will be using. You remember we talked about domain names being a substitute for IP addresses? Well, there has to be somewhere a computer can go to find out what IP address is associated with a particular domain name, since computers use IP addresses to locate data around the Internet. This association information between domain names and IP addresses is stored on a name server (or nameserver - both spellings are used!) Think of a website as a shop, set well back from a road, behind some trees. To find the shop you're going to need a sign. You can think of the domain name as that sign - and the IP address as the direction in which the sign is pointing. If the workmen who were hired to put up the sign don't know where the store is, they will leave the sign pointing in a random direction. This is why many domain names do not seem to lead anywhere: they do not have a particular IP address associated with them. Now think of the name servers as foremen who tell the workmen in which direction to point the sign. Once the sign is pointed in the specified direction, it will not be moved unless the workmen are given new instructions. Each name server is responsible for maintaining the master record of the information associated with certain domain names. A domain name record requires two name servers: a primary name server (also known as a domain name server, or DNS for short) and a secondary name server. Name servers are scattered all over the Internet - there are thousands of them - and each one passes on requests for information ("where's the shop?") until it reaches the primary name server, which replies ("it's over there... see, where that sign is pointing to") and maps the domain name to the IP address, letting your computer find the right website.

If the primary name server is inaccessible (broken, switched off, behind a slow connection, etc.) then the request for information will be sent to the secondary name server. In practice, things are more complicated than the rather simplistic picture I've painted. For instance, many name servers cache information about commonly requested mappings between domain names and IP addresses (= record that information locally so that it can be reused again for later requests). This is why, when you change the information on a particular domain name, such as the IP address it points at, it can take several days for people all

over the Internet to find your site at its new address (since the information cached on their local name servers is out of date and takes a while to get refreshed). This is known as 'propagating' new domain name information. Most domain name registrars like me will set up your new domain name on their name servers - at least until you want to "move" it somewhere else. If you move a domain name, you are essentially transferring the right to maintain the association between that domain name and its IP address to a different name server. This is often necessary, for instance, when changing web hosting companies. Again, the technical support staff at your web hosting company should be able to help you on this issue in more detail.

## Domain Name Characteristics

A domain name can contain the numbers 0-9, the letters a-z and the hyphen character ("-"). Note however that domain names cannot begin or end with a hyphen. You can use UPPERCASE or lowercase letters when registering a domain name, but you may occasionally run into problems if you mix cASes, depending on the exact configuration of the web server that will be hosting your website.

**TIP:** The easiest way to make sure your domain name will not cause problems is to register it using all lowercase letters.

A domain name can contain up to 67 characters. This 67 character limit includes the "." (dot) and the top level domain. So in the case of a ".com" name, for instance, you'll be able to specify up to 63 characters yourself.

**ANOTHER TIP:** You can include two consecutive hyphens in a domain name ("--") This will make it harder for people to remember and/or type correctly but you could consider it if your 'dream domain' has already been snatched up. "Not a lot of people know that" - as Michael Caine might say.

One final proviso: many domain name registries forbid domain names that contain so-called "taboo" words. I am not going to list these here, but most have to do with sexual or bodily functions. If one of these words shows up in a domain name the name will be automatically rejected.

It's time to dispel two of the most common misconceptions about domain names...

### **Two common misconceptions:**

1. When I register a domain name I own it.

Wrong. You own the right to use the name for a defined period of time, usually 1 or 2 years. You will have to pay a renewal fee after your initial registration period expires, or face losing control of the domain name. You do not automatically have the right to keep the name forever, although in practice as long as you keep on paying for the name (and it does not infringe on somebody's trademark or brand name) it is essentially yours to do what you want with.

2. I need a website to secure a domain name.

Wrong again. I can register a domain name for you even if you don't have a website. I can 'park' the name for you and later, when I construct a website for you, I can "move" it where required.

Now let's have a look at some of the most common kinds of domain name...

### **Different kinds of Domain Name**

There are many different types of domain name. By far the most popular (and hence "valuable" are the domain names ending in .co.uk, .com, .net and .org. These names are used by the vast majority of large companies and organisations and are regarded as prime real-estate on the Web. Most countries now have their own top domains, such as .fr for France. The rules for buying domain names under each country top domain vary from country to country; always check before you buy! Some countries have essentially sold their 'cyber-rights' to enterprising entrepreneurs. For instance, anyone can pick up a (.tv) domain but not many know that it is the 'Top Level Domain' for the country of Tuvalu, a small island in the Pacific. Through an agreement with the country of Tuvalu, a California company, dotTV, became the exclusive registry for .tv domain names. Some companies sell 'sub-domains' of memorable domain names. For instance, you can buy a sub-domain of (.uk.com) if you can't get the (.uk) domain name you want. These are NOT official, internationally sanctioned top domains, just companies chopping up their own domain names into

smaller pieces. The choice of which top domain to register your domain name under depends on availability, on the impression you want to give, and on the reason why you are registering a domain name. Country-level top domains are often firmly associated with that particular country, so if you are working in an international company or organization, you're better off buying a .com name. However, millions upon millions of .com names have already been registered, so supply is very tight. If you do business in one country but you also want to appear as international as possible, reserve both the .com and country-level top domain versions of your new domain name.

If you are buying domain names as an investment and you are VERY confident that the name you have chosen is valuable, it can be worthwhile securing the .com, .net and .org forms of the domain name. That way, nobody can "undercut" you when you come to sell the name by offering a different extension cheaper. The downside, of course, is that you'll be paying 3x the registration fees. Prices have dropped over the last few years, however, so it is no longer the expensive proposition it was. You can follow the same approach to secure your company or brand name against people trying to cash in on its popularity.

### **What can I do with a Domain Name?**

There are many uses for domain names, both active and passive.

1. Domain names can be used to establish a unique identity in cyberspace

Companies often choose a domain name that corresponds to their company name. For instance, IBM's web site is at ibm.com and Microsoft is at microsoft.com. People who register domain names that are (or contain) common trademarks that belong to other companies are known as 'cybersquatters'. BEWARE: there are more and more cases of large companies winning back the rights to "their" domain names - and in some cases cybersquatters have faced hefty fines.

2. Generic domain names

A generic domain name is one that would not immediately be associated with a company, but instead is a name that defines an entire category

of business. Some examples of generic names include books.com, music.com and art.com. Companies have gone on to create successful brands based on a generic domain name and these names tend to be very valuable if the word is a common one.

### 3. Domain names can be resold, leased and bartered

As well as being used to identify a website, domain names can be resold to other companies or people, leased or even bartered for other names or for goods or services. A whole industry has sprung up around the resale of domain names, with domain brokers acting as middlemen. The profits from a successful sale can be enormous compared to the original cost of registering the name. However, there are many more sellers than buyers, and the market for domain names is still relatively immature, making it difficult to locate a potential purchaser for a given domain name. There are also too few 'quality' names and these often get buried in a mass of worthless listings on domain brokerage sites. If you want to dabble with making money from domain names, go ahead and speculate... but don't expect a quick return unless you have picked some exceptionally good names!

### 4. Domain names can be used to give yourself a unique, permanent email address

I can set you up with 'email forwarding' so that messages sent to you@yourdomain.co.uk will be redirected to your existing mailbox as provided by your ISP. This not only looks cool and professional it enables you to keep the same email address regardless of how many times you may change your ISP in the future. A 'personalised' email address like this is considered quite prestigious by many (and a good deal less expensive than a 'personalised' car number plate!)

### 5. Domain names can be used to improve a site's ranking in certain search engines

The rules by which search engines "rank" sites when returning search results are changing all the time. Some search engines have recently been favouring sites with their own domain names over sites that don't. Some search engines even give increased relevancy to domain names that contain "keywords" that people search for. For ex-

ample, a search engine might rate a site with the domain name "freestuffguide.com" more highly than a site with the domain name "freebieguide.com" for the search "free stuff" since the former domain name contains the search terms being searched for.

Time to finish this introduction with a look at why you should consider buying a domain name...

### **Why should I buy a Domain Name?**

There are many reasons to buy a domain name and, now that they are not so expensive, securing your own is more affordable than ever.

#### 1. Domain names build credibility on the Web

If you are trying to do business on the Web a domain name is essential. It's like the difference between setting up a stall in the corner of a warehouse, shared with dozens of other shops, compared with owning your own premises. The registration fee is a small price to pay for increased credibility in the eyes of current and potential customers.

If your site is just a personal homepage set up for fun or as a hobby, you don't actually need a domain name. But you'll still find it easier to get your site noticed if you register one. Unlike the "real world", on the Web there is no such thing as a "prime location" in which to set up a store or business. No matter how small you are, a good domain name can put your business on an equal footing with corporate giants. That's the wonder of the Web: nobody knows if your site is run by a large team from elegant offices, or by one person in a corner of the bedroom. A business website without a domain name screams "small time operator!" Domain names are being bought up at the rate of several thousand a day. However, it is still possible to find some nice names as long as you apply a little lateral thinking. My consultancy service can help you come up with a domain name you will be happy with. The longer you wait to register a name, the more limited your choice will be. Think of a domain name as an unavoidable cost of doing business online.

#### 2. Domain names are 'portable'

As we have already seen, a domain name is like a sign pointing to your site. "It's over there" the sign says. You can move the underlying site (change web hosting services) and with some minor tech-

nical adjustments (I take care of this for my clients) the domain name will point to your “new” site. This way, you are free to change hosting services whenever you wish. The important thing is that none of your clients’ or visitors’ bookmarks will need to change, nor will the move break any links to your site!

3. Domain names improve your promotion chances and therefore your site’s “visibility” on the Web. As discussed earlier, domain names which include common keywords can improve a site’s ranking in search results returned by major search engines. However, this is only the beginning of the benefits as far as web promotion is concerned. Many large Directories (sites listing or reviewing other sites) will not list sites that don’t have their own domain name. Yahoo! for example has a tendency to “favour” sites with their own domain name. There are various reasons for these policies, but it doesn’t matter WHY the search engines and directories are doing this - the fact is that they ARE! As the Web continues to grow at a breakneck pace, the situation is bound to get worse for sites that do not have their own domain names.

#### 4. Domain names evoke an air of professionalism

This topic goes hand-in-hand with the credibility produced by a domain name. Rightly or wrongly, there is a perception that sites hosted under their own domain names are more professional than other sites. This perception arises from two factors: (1) all the major, famous sites have their own domain names... and (2) there are a lot of ‘down-market’ sites hosted on free or ISP hosting services. Sadly, it really doesn’t matter what you or I think about this; a certain amount of prejudice has already built up against commercial sites without their own domain names. So, while you CAN be successful with a free site or an ISP-hosted site, will be MORE successful with your “own” site.

#### 5. Domain names are memorable

Which of the addresses below is the easier to remember? Which would be easier to type without making a mistake? Which looks more professional?

**<http://www.freebieserve.co.uk/sites/your-companyname/index.html>**

or

**<http://www.yourname.co.uk>**

## Buying Domain Names

First you choose a name - and then you find out if that name is available. There are many different ways to research domain names and to find inspiration for new names to register. The way you go about it will depend largely on the intended use for the name - i.e. is it being registered for a new or existing site or to “protect” an established brand or trademark.

For a new website

You’re looking for a domain name for a new website you’ll need a few blank sheets of paper, a thesaurus (or browser opened to thesaurus.com) and a little patience...

Start by noting down what the site will be about, in a paragraph or two. Then boil down this description into a maximum of two sentences. Don’t worry about covering all the details - just make sure you’re addressing the essentials of what the site will be about.

Now take your short description, and underline all the “key” words that describe your site. Let’s take a (fictional) example: “Our website will be the leading source of information on weaving and knitting, providing knitting patterns and design ideas, an introduction to weaving, a guide to selecting and caring for looms, and a store for people to buy wool, yarn and books.” Now try to come up with a domain name that addresses the one fundamental concept of the site - or one that marries two or more key concepts in a single name. In my example: [weavingandknitting.com](http://weavingandknitting.com), [knittingandweaving.com](http://knittingandweaving.com), [knittingpatterns.com](http://knittingpatterns.com), [knittingworld.com](http://knittingworld.com), [weavingworld.com](http://weavingworld.com) etc.

Once you’ve drawn up a short-list of domain names test them for availability. Send them to me at **[domains@keithjones.net](mailto:domains@keithjones.net)** and I will tell you which are available. (I do not charge for this service and there is no obligation to buy). If you’re having difficulty coming up with useful domain name combinations from your keywords, try a single keyword and add prefixes or suffixes.

Here are some examples of prefixes and suffixes:

e, e-, i, i-, the, online, net, web, internet, world, site, web, net, resource, business, company, shop, store, directory, guide

If you still can’t find any names you like, why not

take advantage of my consultancy service? For a fixed fee (currently £32) I will provide you with a comprehensive list of (available) names from which you can choose. The fee is fully refundable against the cost of any web design, domain name purchase or hosting charges you subsequently incur with me. If you have a substantial budget for your new domain name, then you need not be restricted to available, unregistered domain names. You may be able to buy the perfect domain name off its current owner. Most sales take place for a few hundred pounds - although some have been known to reach 6 figures for extremely desirable domains.

### **Looking for a domain name for an existing website?**

If you are looking to buy a domain name for a website that is already up and running, your options are fewer than if starting from scratch.

First: have you already been operating the site under a clearly-recognisable "name" or "title"?

Even if your site is hosted on cheap space at an ISP you may have given it a short title in large letters. This is the obvious place to start when looking for a domain name. For instance, if your site is called "The Knitting Expert" then your search is over: "theknittingexpert.com" is available (at least it was at the time of writing!) If your site's name (as given in its title) is generic, you may well find one (or many) other sites already using it and the corresponding domain name(s) long since gone. In that case, you must decide whether you will make a bid to buy the domain name from its current owner, look for an alternative extension (see examples of prefixes and suffixes" above)

Well, there you have it. Everything you wanted to know about domain names - and possibly some things you didn't want to know! Once you've drawn up a short-list of preferred domain names, send them to **domains@keithjones.net** and I'll advise you which are available. (this is a free service and there's no obligation to buy). Remember, my starter special offer includes domain name registration.

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