



Unused vs orphaned media: the decision worksheet

Hey! A quick word about Mediapapa first: the whole reason we built it is that WordPress does not tell you whether a file is actually used. Mediapapa classifies every file (unattached, unused, orphaned, in-use) and shows you where each reference lives, so you delete the right thing.

Step 1 - Identify what you have

Three questions, three paths. Answer them in order.

- Is the file visible in the WordPress media library?** If no → server-orphaned, investigate carefully.
- Does the media library show it as Unattached?** If yes → not proof of unused; verify usage.
- Is the file referenced anywhere on the site?** If you cannot confirm no, treat as in use.

Step 2 - Group the candidates

Sort your suspect files into one of three baskets before acting.

- Safe-ish:** clearly old demo content, test uploads, files matching deleted features.
- High-risk:** descriptive names (hero, banner, logo, bg-), recent uploads, WooCommerce assets, featured images.
- Server-orphaned:** files in /uploads that the media library does not know about.

Step 3 · Verify usage at the right depth

Match the verification to the risk.

- Level 1** (low risk, 5 minutes): copy URL, search in home page and 2–3 top pages.
- Level 2** (medium risk): search the URL across all posts, pages and post meta.
- Level 3** (high risk or large site): use a usage index that covers builders, ACF, customiser.
- Confirmation logged for each file before it moves to the trash.

Step 4 · Delete safely

Small batches and the trash. Never delete more than fifty files at a time. Never bypass the trash.

- Backup confirmed and restorable.
- Batches of 10 to 50 files maximum.
- Trash first, never permanent delete.
- Front-end browsed and tested after each batch.
- Console checked for 404 errors before emptying trash.
- Cache cleared and CDN purged after the session.

Skip the decision tree. Get the answer.

Mediapapa Pro classifies every file in your library against every usage context WordPress knows about. Unattached, unused, orphaned, in-use: each file labelled, each reference shown, each deletion guarded.

[See Mediapapa Pro plans →](#)

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