How to Set Up a GitHub Account

The right way: including what not to do

Before You Create the Account

Three decisions to make before you sign up. Changing them later is possible but annoying.

Username. This appears in every URL for every repo you create: github.com/yourusername/your-repo. Choose something professional and permanent. If this is for your law firm, use your firm name or your name. Avoid random strings, underscores, and numbers you'll regret.

Email. Use a real email you control long-term. Your firm email is fine if you own the domain. A personal Gmail works too. Avoid using a client's email or a temporary address.

Public vs. professional presence. Decide before you start whether this account will be personal, professional, or both. GitHub is increasingly used as a professional portfolio. Lawyers and legal tech people use it. If you plan to share your tools publicly, your account name matters.

The Setup Steps

Step	What to Do
1	Go to github.com → Sign up
2	Enter email, create password, choose username
3	Verify your email address (check inbox for link)
4	Choose the Free plan (it includes unlimited private repos)
5	Skip the onboarding survey or fill it in; doesn't matter
6	Go to Settings → Profile and add your name, bio, and location
7	Go to Settings → Emails and confirm your email is verified

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Step	What to Do
8	Enable two-factor authentication (Settings → Password and authentication)

> **2FA is not optional.** GitHub accounts without two-factor authentication are routinely compromised. Use an authenticator app (Google Authenticator, Authy, or 1Password). Do not rely on SMS; SIM swap attacks are real and GitHub supports app-based 2FA.

Setting Up Git on Your Computer

GitHub is the website. Git is the tool on your computer that talks to it. You need both.

```
# Check if Git is installed:
git --version
# Install on Ubuntu/Debian Linux:
sudo apt install git -y
# Install on Mac (installs with Xcode command line tools):
xcode-select --install
# Windows: download from git-scm.com
```

After installing, tell Git who you are:

```
git config --global user.name "Your Name"
git config --global user.email "you@yourdomain.com"
# This name and email appear on every commit you make
```

SSH vs. HTTPS Authentication

When you push to GitHub, it needs to verify it's really you. Two options:

Method	How It Works	When to Use
HTTPS + Personal Access Token	Generate a token in Settings, use as password	Quick setup, occasional use
SSH Keys	Generate key pair, add public key to GitHub	Daily use, servers, automation

For daily work and servers, SSH is the right choice. See the SSH on Linux guide for key generation. Once your key is added to GitHub (Settings → SSH and GPG keys), pushing and pulling happens without passwords.

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```
# Generate SSH key (if you don't have one):
ssh-keygen -t ed25519 -C 'you@yourdomain.com'
```

Copy the public key to paste into GitHub:

```
cat ~/.ssh/id_ed25519.pub
# Test the connection after adding to GitHub:
ssh -T git@github.com
# Should say: Hi username! You've successfully authenticated.
```

Free vs. Paid Plans

Feature	Free	Pro ($4/mo)
Public repos	Unlimited	Unlimited
Private repos	Unlimited	Unlimited
Collaborators on private repos	Unlimited	Unlimited
GitHub Actions minutes	2,000/month	3,000/month
GitHub Pages for private repos	No	Yes
Advanced code search	No	Yes

The free plan covers everything a solo practitioner needs. Don’t pay for Pro unless you specifically need one of those features.

> **Using AI to help with this.** You don’t have to fully understand this to use it. Here are prompts that work: "Walk me through setting up SSH key authentication with GitHub on [Windows/Linux/Mac]. I have Git installed already." "I need to create a Personal Access Token on GitHub for use with [specific tool]. What permissions do I need and how do I create it safely?" "Review my GitHub profile setup and suggest what to add or change to make it look professional for a lawyer who builds legal tech tools."

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