

The Homelab Starter Checklist

From empty desk to running home server — every step, in order.

{ 01 } Pick Your Hardware

- Choose your box:** mini PC with Intel N100 (best all-round), Raspberry Pi 5 (cheapest), or an old desktop (free counts).
- 16GB RAM minimum** if buying new — the cheapest upgrade you'll never regret.
- SSD for the OS, always.** SD cards and old spinners are where homelabs go to die.
- Ethernet, not Wi-Fi.** Servers don't roam.
- A permanent spot with airflow** — not sealed in a cabinet.

{ 02 } Lay the Foundation

- Install Debian or Ubuntu Server** (or Proxmox if you want VMs from day one).
- Set a static IP** (or DHCP reservation) — services need a fixed address.
- SSH with key auth**, then disable password login.
- Install Docker + Docker Compose** — the official convenience script is fine.
- One folder tree for everything:** `/srv/appdata/<service>` — future-you says thanks.

{ 03 } First Services — in this order

- Pi-hole** — network-wide ad blocking. The whole family notices this one.
- Jellyfin** — your own Netflix from files you already have.
- Uptime Kuma** — know when things break before anyone else does.
- Portainer** — a dashboard for all your containers.
- One rule:** one new service per week, not five per night.

{ 04 } Network & Privacy

- Point your router's DNS at Pi-hole** — every device benefits, zero per-device setup.
- Add Unbound** for fully private, self-resolved DNS.
- Remote access via WireGuard or Tailscale** — never port-forward a service raw.
- Reverse proxy with Nginx Proxy Manager** for clean HTTPS on everything.

{ 05 } Protect It

- Backups before ambition:** compose files + appdata folder, weekly, to a second drive.
- RAID is not a backup.** Deletion and ransomware mirror instantly.
- Test one restore.** An untested backup is a hope, not a plan.
- Write down what you built** — a plain notes file beats your memory in six months.

>>> THE GOLDEN RULE

Homelabs die from ambition, not hardware. Ship **one service a week**, back it up, write it down — and in six months you'll have a stack you actually understand instead of a pile of half-configured containers.