

A Smashing Guide To The World Of Search Engine Optimization

SEO is an ever-changing world. Blink and you'll miss the latest best practices, thought leaders, and tools. Feeling out of touch is natural. This guide is your way back into the groove, baby.

Search engine optimization is essential to most websites. [The industry is worth more than \\$70 billion a year](#), and it's only going to grow. It has specialists, sub-specialists, thought leaders, dedicated publications, fantastically complex tools, and constant uncertainty at its heart. As Bob Dylan says, it's just a shadow we're all chasing.

All the more reason to stay sharp, no? Every tweak to major search engine algorithms sends shockwaves throughout the web. For those who don't follow the SEO space it can be easy to lose track of the latest trends, authorities, and resources.

That's what this page is for. It will break down SEO's hot topics, common questions, and the best resources for staying up to date with that world. As such, this isn't so much a guide to SEO as it is a guide to *the world of SEO*. Think of it as a cliff-notes, a primer for those looking to top up their knowledge and understand the latest trends.

For those really in a rush to get back into the groove, skip ahead to the [cheat sheet](#) rounding up all the resources included in this piece. As for the rest of you, on we go. It's quite Google-heavy, because [Google currently holds 85%+ market share](#), but rest assured the points apply to the likes of Baidu and DuckDuckGo as well.

And remember, this is a live document. If there's something we've missed, tell us. In a world as fast-changing as SEO no resources can afford to sit on their hands.

Why SEO Matters

We won't linger on this point, but it's useful to remind ourselves what SEO is, why it's important, and how it has evolved over the years. Keeping the foundational principles in mind allow you to see the woods rather than the trees.

So, in a nutshell, search engine optimisation is the means by which websites appear in search engines like Google, Bing, Baidu, and DuckDuckGo. It remains one of the best ways for websites to be found. [More than 90% of web traffic comes through search engines](#), with Google alone processing trillions of searches a year. If you want your website to be seen, you want to be appearing in relevant search results.

Although SEO [isn't controversy-free](#), it is in principle the great equalizer. Positions can't be bought; they're based on relevance and quality. It is in the interest of search engines to deliver the best results possible, so SEO is the process by which a site becomes the best results possible.



In a word, the appeal of SEO is **traffic**. It's getting people to drop by and hopefully stick around. More traffic means more readers, more viewers, more customers, more attention.

Whatever your motivation is, the game is fundamentally the same. From content to site design, implementing makes websites better. Design is clearer and content is more focused, with visitors' needs always front and centre. In a sense it gives you a 3D vision of the

web, seeing web experiences from both human and computer perspectives.

Despite quick-fix guides to the contrary, SEO is best not retrofitted. As Suzanne Scacca writes, [SEO belongs at the heart of the web design process](#). It can't — and shouldn't — be pushed off to writers or SEO executives. It is a sitewide concern, requiring sitewide attention.

Hot Topics <#>

If you're not comfortable with the basics of SEO — meta tags, alt text, [link building](#), etc. — this page is not for you. This piece assumes a certain amount of foundational knowledge. Don't panic, though, we won't leave you hanging. Here are several terrific resources for getting started from scratch:

- [Moz's Beginner's Guide to SEO](#)
- [SEO for Beginners](#) by *Search Engine Journal*
- [SEO Made Simple](#) by Neil Patel
- [Google's SEO Starter Guide](#)

As for the rest of you, what follows are some of the SEO space's slightly more technical hot topics, complete with conventional wisdom and resources for keeping up with their evolutions.

GREAT CONTENT <#>

I had to put this first. The sheer amount of data involved in SEO makes it easy to lose sight of an important fact: **you're making websites for people, not search engines**. As corny as it sounds, in the long term the best way to perform well in organic search is to be the best you possible.

Search engines value good content above all else. However much the intricacies of SEO change, this remains true. It's a rock solid foundation for SEO. Optimising a brilliant website is easy; optimising a bad one is hard, and often leads to black hat

behaviour. (More on that below.) Yes, there are poorly optimised websites that perform well in search, for a variety of reasons, but grumbling about will get you nowhere.

What does 'good content' mean in concrete terms? It's not as arbitrary as you might think. Search engines generally keep their cards close to their chest, but where content quality is concerned they're as transparent as you could hope.

For those out of the SEO loop there are few better ways of getting up to speed than reading through [Google's latest Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#). Why guess what search engines want when they've written a book's worth of documentation on the subject? Topics covered in the latest edition include:

- Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness (E-A-T),
- Your Money or Your Life (YMYL) Pages,
- The reputation of websites and creators,
- Mobile user needs,
- Auto-generated content,
- Deceptive page design,
- What low quality pages look like.

Whether you're a designer or a copywriter, this is all valuable information.

Say what you like about Google's more nefarious practices, but where organic search is concerned they want websites to be goodie two shoes. Write brilliant articles; build fast, practical sites; use beautiful visuals; design ethically; be transparent about who you are and what you do; and never, ever let SEO be the tail that wags the dog. Quality will win out in the end.

ACCESSIBILITY

Happily, the web development space seems to be warming up to talk of accessibility. There is plenty of natural overlap between SEO and accessibility, though sadly there is currently little evidence that *super* accessible websites get a boost in search. Accessibility barely features in Google's mammoth Search Quality Guidelines document.

There is, however, a huge amount of overlap between accessibility best practice and SEO best practice. These include:

- Image alt text,
- Descriptive title and header tags,
- Video transcriptions,
- Content sections,
- Clear, logical sitemaps,
- Colour contrast,

Almost everything worth doing for its own sake becomes SEO best practice eventually, so I'm inclined to endorse accessibility on both counts. The [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) are a great place to start, especially the [Four Principles of Accessibility](#).

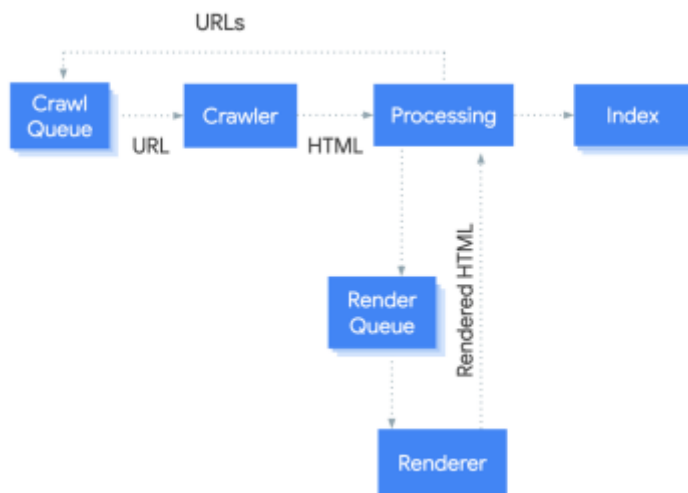
[WebAIM](#) publishes annual reports on web accessibility, and [Global Accessibility Awareness Day](#) is a fantastic hub for events and campaigns. Also, to get a Smashing plug in, [Steven Lambert's piece on designing for accessibility and inclusion](#) breaks the topic down splendidly.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF JAVASCRIPT

JavaScript has grown into the third pillar of web design — joining HTML and CSS. The language allows for all manner of fancy interactive features that aren't possible on static sites. That sophistication has brought with it some confusion where SEO is concerned.

Can JavaScript-heavy websites perform well in search? Yes, they can and do. When issues arise it's almost always in the indexing process, when search engines crawl and render web pages for their databases.

Google has a finite crawl budget. If your page takes ages to load, there's a decent chance search engines will skip over it. [Render-blocking JavaScript is also frowned upon](#), especially for above the fold content. If possible, execute scripts after the page is loaded.



([Large preview](#))

In short, let search engines see pages the way people see them. Google Search Console has a [URL Inspection Tool](#) that will show you what it retrieves, what it renders, and any glaring issues.

Developers should not shy away from JavaScript for fear of angering the SEO gods. Yes, bloated, slow, gratuitous JavaScript will hurt your website's search performance, but applied properly the language can also improve it. Indeed, formats like JSON are a staple of more sophisticated SEO markup, like Schema.

Here are some resources for getting into the weeds of JavaScript and SEO:

- [Understanding the JavaScript SEO Basics](#) by Google
- [Fix Search-related JavaScript problems](#) by Google
- [Technical SEO – Fundamental Principles](#) by Tom Bennett

- For the visual learners out there, [Google Webmasters has a series dedicated to JavaScript SEO](#).

Remember also that the more solid your SEO foundations are, the less pressure there is on JavaScript to perform. Think of it as something that enhances the browsing experience rather than carries the water.

STRUCTURED DATA

Metadata has come a long way since the early days of SEO. Meta titles and descriptions remain important, but there's a whole other level becoming increasingly difficult to ignore — structured data.

Structured data, more specifically [Schema](#), has been adopted by all the major search engines. Part of the Semantic Web push to make online data machine-readable, it allows you to label content with specificity that simply wasn't possible before. Structured data is how search engines display rich results like recipes, reviews excerpts, event details, and more.

Schema vocabulary works alongside Microdata, RDFa, and JSON-LD formats, and there are plenty of free tools to help you learn the language and how to implement it. These include:

- [Google's Structured Data Markup Helper](#)
- [Google's Structured Data Testing Tool](#).

Search engines are ominously clever, but they're not *that* clever. Structured data removes much of the guesswork from the crawling process, making it easier to understand and index content for relevant searches.

For a more in-depth introduction to the topic I humbly point you towards my article on [Baking Structured Data Into the Design Process](#).

SITE SPEED

Search engines like fast websites. They're easier to crawl, and they're easier for users to browse. It doesn't matter how wonderful

your site is, if it takes ages to load people aren't going to stick around to find out. Search engines are similarly impatient.

Like most things SEO, site speed best practice covers a spectrum all the way from common sense to highly technical tinkering. On the common sense side, don't upload 12MB images when 200KB ones look exactly the same. If you absolutely must have massive high resolution images, link away to them instead. [Images are the most popular resource type on the web](#), so don't skimp on the compression. Most people will be browsing on their phones anyway.

Beyond that you get into more technical waters, though the goal remains the same: load quickly and smoothly. Streamline your code, cut out superfluous HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. Most importantly, as always, test what you've done. Site speed isn't a theoretical concern; it's a practical one.

Typically, Google has a dedicated tool for that purpose:

- [PageSpeed Insights](#)

It will tell you exactly what's wrong with a URL's content and what you can do to improve it. Site speed is no great mystery; more often than not it's simply a case of trimming the fat.

MOBILE FIRST <#>

Most web browsing now takes place on mobile devices, not desktops. It is for this reason that [Google will move to mobile-first indexing for all websites in September 2020](#). What that means is mobile renders of a page are what will be indexed, not desktop. That's where you need to bring your A-game.

People are understandably drawn to the broad canvas offered by desktop-first design, but it's not where our skills are most useful. If your website is a work of art on desktop but a mess on mobile your SEO will suffer — and that's to say nothing of user experience.

More Articles On Mobile Usability <#>

- [How Mobile Web Design Affects Local Search \(And What To Do About It\)](#) by Suzanne Scacca
- [Assessing Mobile Usability With Google Webmaster Tools](#) by Tim Jenen

Think with your mobile cap on. Are ads monopolising above the fold space? Google dedicates 20 pages of its [Search Quality Guidelines](#) to understanding mobile user needs, covering everything from search engine result pages (SERPs) to location-specific search queries. Again, what search engines want needn't be a mystery.

The Dark Side Of SEO <#>

It would be remiss not to address the seedier side of SEO. There's a lot of money to be made from ranking well for popular search terms. One of the main reasons search engines are so secretive about how they work is they know a number of websites will try to game the system in the name of Quick Wins™.

Black Hat SEO is quite a vibrant world in its own mustache-twirling way. From cramming keywords out of sight to purchasing backlinks from reputable websites, there's an almost cartoonish instinct among some to avoid the hard work and self-improvement that good SEO entails.

Has black hat SEO worked in the past? Sometimes, yes. Sometimes very well indeed. However, search engines are always on the watch for bad behaviour, and [they will punish it when they find it](#). The damage can be irreparable and besides, nobody likes a sleazeball.

There's no substitute for quality long-term SEO strategies. Which brings us to...

Playing The Long Game <#>

SEO is a marathon, not a sprint. Implementing best practice can produce immediate results, but long-term performance requires

long-term maintenance. Besides, the journey is more important than the destination, isn't it?

This article does not presume to give you a comprehensive guide to SEO. This is a resource for those who want to stay up to date with the industry as part of long-term self-improvement. In that spirit, the cheat sheet below is one of documentation, tools, journalists, thought leaders, podcasts, and other resources.

A reminder also that this is a live document, so don't be shy about suggesting adjustments and additions as the SEO world continues to change.

Happy searching.

A Smashing SEO Cheat Sheet <#>

This is not an exhaustive list, but hopefully there is enough for you to fall down the SEO rabbit hole. Please note that this cheat sheet will be updated occasionally, so if something/someone is missing, feel free to let us know! We'll consider it for inclusion the next time we update the sheet.

DOCUMENTATION <#>

- [Google's Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#)
- [Bing's Webmaster Guidelines](#)
- [W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#)
- [Overview of Google crawlers](#)
- [Schema.org documentation](#)
- [Rendering SEO Manifesto](#)

AUTHORITIES AND JOURNALISTS <#>

- [Google SearchLiaison](#), the public face of Google Search
- [Danny Sullivan](#), the public face of the public face of Google Search

- [John Mueller](#), Webmaster Trends Analyst at Google
- [Gabriel Weinberg](#), founder of DuckDuckGo
- [Neil Patel](#), clear, accessible SEO marketing whiz
- [Jamie Alberico](#), technical SEO guru
- [Loren Baker](#), founder of *Search Engine Journal*
- [Barry Schwartz](#), SEO journalist extraordinaire
- [Women in Tech SEO](#) is a fantastic resource for experts across the SEO spectrum

PUBLICATIONS, BLOGS, & FORUMS <#>

- [Google Webmaster Central Blog](#) (not as ominous as it sounds)
- [Search Engine Journal](#)
- [Search Engine Land](#)
- [The SEM Post](#)
- [Search Engine Watch](#)
- [Search Engine Roundtable](#)
- [WebmasterWorld](#)
- [SEO by the Sea](#)
- [SEMrush blog](#)
- [DuckDuckGo blog](#)
- [The Moz Blog](#)
- [Yoast's SEO blog](#)
- The [/r/SEO](#) subreddit
- The [/r/TechSEO](#) subreddit.

TOOLS

Free

- [Google Search Console](#)
- [Google Analytics](#)
- [Google Trends](#)
- [Google Rich Results Test](#)
- [Google Mobile-friendly Test](#)
- [Merkle's Schema Markup Generator](#)
- [Web Vitals](#)
- [Lighthouse](#)
- [PageSpeed Insights](#)
- [ahrefs Keyword Generator](#)
- [ahrefs Broken Link Checker](#)
- [Keyword Surfer](#) plugin for Chrome

Freemium/Paid

- [MozBar](#)
- [SEMrush](#)
- [Screaming Frog](#)
- [Yoast](#)
- [Keyword Hero](#)
- A number of [ahrefs tools](#)

PODCASTS AND VIDEO SERIES

- [Google Webmaster hangouts](#)
- [Crawling Mondays](#) by Aleyda Solis
- [The Search Engine Journal Show](#) podcast

- [Whiteboard Friday](#) at Moz
- The [EDGE of the Web](#) podcast
- [Search News You Can Use](#) by Maria Haynes
- [JavaScript SEO video playlist](#) by Google Webmasters

CONFERENCES

- [SearchLove](#)
- [BrightonSEO](#)
- [Search Marketing Expo \(SMX\)](#)
- [MozCon](#)
- [SearchCon](#)