UK SEO - A Beginner's Guide

2018

V5: By Shaun Anderson

Foreword

This book is my collected thoughts about SEO in 2018. It is made up of notes and references, experiments and observations made over the last decade or more.

It contains hundreds of tips.

Hopefully after reading it you will be more informed about modern SEO.

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Hire Me

My technical SEO Audit service provides website-owners with the direction on how to improve their organic visibility and rankings in Google. By using my audit service you can easily identify what you need to improve on your website to rank higher in Google.

We tailor your SEO audit specifically to your site, whichever audit is purchased. See here for costs for an SEO audit:

1. **Small SEO audit service** - Designed for you if you are **a small business with a very small website**. If you have a very small site we can up our analysis in other areas maximising the usefulness of our audit to you. See SEO costs for small businesses with small sites.
2. **Medium SEO audit service** - Designed for you if you have a **slightly larger site with up to 10,000 pages on the site**. These sites take more time to crawl and analyse. See SEO costs for medium-sized sites.
3. **Large SEO audit service** - Designed for those **sites over 10,000 pages in size**. These sites take more time to crawl and analyse. See SEO costs for large sites.

My team has worked to improve rankings for hundreds of small businesses with small sites and many larger companies with websites with many millions of pages. Our service is suitable for businesses of any kind who operate online including business websites, affiliate websites and e-commerce websites.

We complete a typical review of your website within 5 working days of purchase. See an example SEO audit report we publish.

My SEO audit service is suitable for any English language sites and we have clients in Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland, as well as from all over the world including the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. We can also analyse foreign language sites from a technical point of view. We work with almost all modern CMS systems from bespoke systems to the more common *WordPress* and *Magento* e-commerce stores.

See here for SEO consultation services.

Spy On Your Competitors Rankings & Perform Keyword Research FREE for 30 Days (Worth Over 100$)

Get free access to keyword research and competitor research reports for 30 days**.**

Use the following link to trial SEMrush free for 30 days and get the information on your competitors you need to compete in Google organic or PPC listings:

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With SEMrush, you can easily see the keywords you and your competitors rank for, and you can access this information for free for 30 days.

I use SEMrush daily - you should check it out.

What is SEO?

Search **E**ngine **O**ptimisation (SEO) in 2018 is a technical, analytical and creative process to improve the visibility of a website in search engines. The primary function of SEO is to drive more unpaid useful traffic to a site that converts into sales.

The free SEO tips you will read in this book will help you create a successful SEO friendly website yourself.

I have nearly 20 years experience making websites rank in Google. If you need optimisation services - see my [SEO consultation service](#), [website migration service](#), [SEO audit](#) or [small business SEO services](#).

Why Should I Submit My Website to Google, Yahoo And Bing?

Getting listed on Google and the other popular search engines is one of *the* most effective ways of directing free (or more accurately unpaid), targeted traffic to your website.

Organic traffic is still the most valuable traffic in the world, in 2018, with search engines *still* rated the most trusted source for finding news and information:
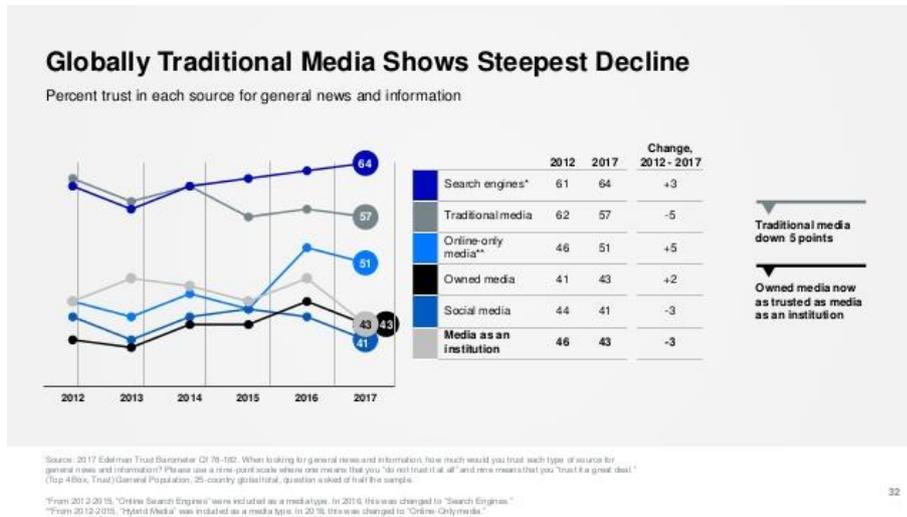
Here are some tips to help you if you're a beginner in all this.

What Are The Top Search Engines To Submit My Site?

The most popular search engines in the UK are *Google*, with around 90% of the market share, *Bing*, and *Yahoo*. It is a similar picture worldwide. All search engines serve nationwide results, based on the *reputation* of a website and local results, based on the proximity of the user to the business.

Google, for example, has many country-specific engines (e.g. www.google.co.uk) that help Google deliver more accurate results for UK based users.
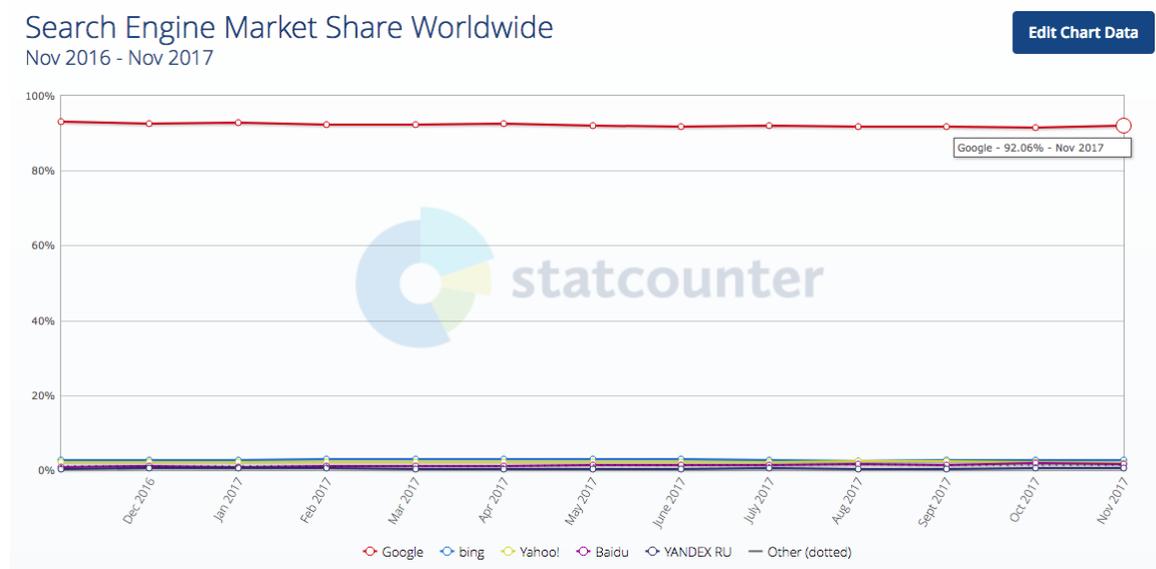
How Do I Check If My Site Is On Google?

Just type your website address into the Google search box. If Google knows about your site, it will tell you. If your site doesn't feature as the number 1 result, you may need to submit your site to Google.

Another way to check if a page is in either of the search engines is to lift a piece of unique text from the page, put it into the search box "in quotes".

Your page *should* come up if Google is indexing your site.

Us the "*site:*" command operator - e.g. simply type "**site: www.hobo-web.co.uk" into the Google Search Box** (Bing too) as the "info:" command was deprecated (2016).

You can use the site command on your homepage or any internal page on your site.

Do I Need To Pay to Get Into Google, Bing or Yahoo?

No. You do NOT have to pay a penny to get your site into any of the major search engines.

You can submit your URL to all the main global search engines entirely for free.

You can pay for placement in Google through Google Adwords (PPC) but this tutorial is specifically for free listings.

How Do I Connect My Site To Google Search Console?

At some point, to rank better in search engines, you are going to have to get other sites to link to it, so you may as well think about that first link on external sites.

In 2018 - that usually means creating useful, accurate and in-depth content that attracts links naturally.

If you want to bypass all that, for now, you can submit your website and verify it in Google Webmaster Tools. The procedure to connect your website is very simple with a little technical knowledge.

How Do I Verify A Site with Google Webmaster Tools?

You have a number of options to verify that you own your website:

- Add a meta tag to your home page (proving that you have access to the source files). To use this method, you must be able to edit the HTML code of your site's pages.
- Upload an HTML file with the name you specify to your server. To use this method, you must be able to upload new files to your server.
- Verify via your domain name provider. To use this method, you must be able to sign in to your domain name provider (for example, GoDaddy.com or networksolutions.com) or hosting provider and add a new DNS record.
- Add the Google Analytics code you use to track your site. To use this option, you must be an administrator on the Google Analytics account, and the tracking code must use the new asynchronous snippet.

How Do I Automatically Get Modified Web Pages Updated on Google?

https://youtu.be/bjbaDP-P7PA?t=41m4s

You can ping Google (and other engines) using RSS or XML. Most CMS systems have some support for this.

If you have a blog, In the past, I've found registering a site with FEED BURNER is useful in happy, instant indexing of new content on a site.

If your website publishes an XML sitemap, this is even better. It's amazing how fast Google indexes and ranks pages.

I've seen pages get into Google and rank in the top ten for a phrase in less than 1 minute and I recently tested just how fast Google publishes your content if you're *well connected*.

Wordpress, for example, pings Google when you post new content, which is very handy with a blogging system. Most modern open source content management systems of note do something like this.

You can add your website direct to Google Webmaster Tools, too.

> **"QUOTE**: "in the sitemap file we primarily focus on the last modification date so that's what we're looking for there that's where we see that we've crawled this page two days ago and today it has changed therefore we should recrawl it today we don't use priority we don't use change frequency in the sitemap file at least at the moment with regards to crawling so I wouldn't focus too much on priority and change frequency but really on the more factual last modification date information an RSS feed is also a good idea with RSS you can use pubsubhubbub which is a way of getting your updates even faster to Google so using pubsubhubbub is probably the fastest way to get content where you're regularly changing things on your site and you want to get that into Google as quickly as possible an RSS feed with pubsubhubbub is a really fantastic way to get that done." John Mueller Google*

Read my article on how to get your entire website crawled and indexed by Google.

TL; DR - What Really Matters if you do SEO?

QUOTE: *"There aren't any quick magical tricks that an SEO will provide so that your site ranks number one. It's important to note that any SEO potential is only as high as the quality of your business or website so successful SEO helps your website put your best foot forward."* Maile Ohye, Google 2017

In my opinion, here are the things that really matter if you do SEO in 2018, and I would wager that both white-hats and black-hats would agree on these:

- Don't block your site
- Don't confuse or annoy a website visitor
- Don't block Google from crawling resources on your site or rendering specific elements on your page
- Have a responsive design that works on mobile and desktop
- Be situated local to your target customer
- Geotarget your site in Search Console AKA Google Webmaster Tools (unless you have a country specific domain)
- Put your keyword phrase at least once in the Page Title Element
- Put your keyword phrase at least once in the Main Content on the page (at least once in page copy (in Paragraph tags)
- Avoid keyword stuffing main content
- Optimise your meta description to have a clickable useful SERP snippet
- Ensure the Main Content of the page is high-quality and written by a professional (**MOST OF YOUR EFFORT GOES HERE - If your content is not being shared organically, you may have a content quality problem**)
- Ensure the keywords you want to rank for are present on your site. The quality of competition for these rankings will determine how much effort you need to put in
- Use synonyms and common co-occurring words throughout your page copy
- Add value to pages with ordered lists, images, videos and tables
- Optimise for increased 'user intent' satisfaction (e.g. increased dwell times on a page or site)
- Keep important content on the site updated a few times a year
- Trim out-dated content from your site
- Avoid publishing and indexing content-poor pages (especially affiliate sites)
- Aim for a good ratio of 'useful' user-centred text to affiliate links
- Disclose page modification dates in a visible format
- Do not push the main content down a page unnecessarily with ads etc.
- Link to related content on your site with useful and very relevant anchor text
- Use a simple navigation system on your site
- Create pages to basic meet W3C recommendations on accessible HTML (W3c) (H1, ALT text etc.)
- Create pages to meet basic usability best practices (*Nielsen*) - Pay attention to what 'annoys' website visitors
- Create pages where the main content of the page is given priority, and remove annoying ads and pop-ups (especially on mobile)
- Develop websites that meet Google technical recommendations on (for example) canonicalization, internationalisation and pagination best practices
- Ensure Fast delivery of web pages on mobile and desktop

- Provide clear disclosure of affiliate ads and non-intrusive advertising. Clear disclosure of everything, in fact, if you are focused on quality in all areas.
- Add high-quality and relevant external links (depending if the query is informational)
- If you can, include the Keyword phrase in a short URL
- Use the Keyword phrase in internal anchor text pointing to this page (at least once)
- Use Headings, Lists and HTML Tables on pages if you show data
- Ensure on average all 'Main Content' blocks of all pages on the site are high-quality
- Ensure old SEO practices are cleaned up and removed from site
- Avoid implementing old-school SEO practices in new campaigns (Google is better at detecting sites with little value-add)
- Consider disavowing any obvious low-quality links from previous SEO efforts
- Provide Clear website domain ownership, copyright and contact details on the site
- Share your content on the major social networks when it is good enough
- Get backlinks from real websites with real domain trust and authority
- Convert visitors (whatever that 'conversion' may be)
- Monitor VERY CAREFULLY any user-generated content on your site, because it is rated as part of your own site content
- Pay attention to site security issues (implement https, for example)

What really matters in SEO in 2018 is what you prioritise today so that in 3-6 months you can see improvements in the quality of your organic traffic. I lay this out in my comprehensive SEO audits (see an example SEO audit here).

> **QUOTE**: "*In most cases **the SEO will need four months to a year** to help your business first implement improvements and then see potential benefit.*" Maile Ohye, Google 2017

You will need to meet Google's guidelines and recommendations in every area in 2018 (and, if you are like me with this site, you eventually avoid bending any rule and just focus on serving the user useful and up-to-date content).

Read on for a more meandering look at modern SEO in 2018.

An Introduction to SEO

> **QUOTE**: "*Search engine optimization is often about making small modifications to parts of your website. When viewed individually, these changes might seem like incremental improvements, but when combined with other optimizations, they could have a noticeable impact on your site's user experience and performance in organic search results.*" Google Starter Guide, 2008

This article is a beginner's guide to effective white hat SEO.

I deliberately steer clear of techniques that might be 'grey hat', as what is grey today is often 'black hat' tomorrow, or 'shady practices', as far as Google is concerned.

> **QUOTE**: "S*hady practices on your website [...] result in a reduction in search rankings*" Maile Ohye, Google 2017

No one-page guide can explore this complex topic in full. What you'll read here are answers to questions I had when I was starting out in this field 20 years ago, now 'corroborated with confirmations from Google.

> **QUOTE**: "*My strongest advice when working with an SEO is to request if they corroborate their recommendation with a documented statement from Google*" Maile Ohye, Google 2017

The 'Rules.'

Google insists webmasters adhere to their 'rules' and aims to reward sites with **high-quality content** and **remarkable 'white hat' web marketing techniques** with **high rankings.**

> **QUOTE***: "Creating compelling and useful content will likely influence your website more than any of the other factors discussed here." Google SEO Starter Guide, 2017*

Conversely, it also *needs* to penalise websites that manage to rank in Google by breaking these rules.

> **QUOTE**: "*Basically, we figured that site is trying to game our systems, and unfortunately, successfully. So we will adjust the rank. We will push the site back just to make sure that it's not working anymore.*" Gary Illyes, Google 2016

These rules are not 'laws', but 'guidelines', for ranking in Google; lay down *by* Google. You should note, however, that some methods of ranking in Google are, in fact, illegal. Hacking, for instance, is illegal in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia.

You can choose to follow and abide by these rules, bend them or ignore them - all with different levels of success (and levels of retribution, from Google's web spam team).

White hats do it by the 'rules'; *black hats* ignore the 'rules'.

What you read in this article is perfectly within the laws and also within the guidelines and will help you increase the traffic to your website through organic, or natural search engine results pages (SERPs).

Definition

There are a lot of definitions of SEO (spelled Search engine optimi**s**ation in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, or search engine optimi**z**ation in the United States and Canada) but organic SEO in 2018 is still *mostly* about getting free traffic from Google, the most popular search engine in the world (and almost the only game in town in the UK in 2018):
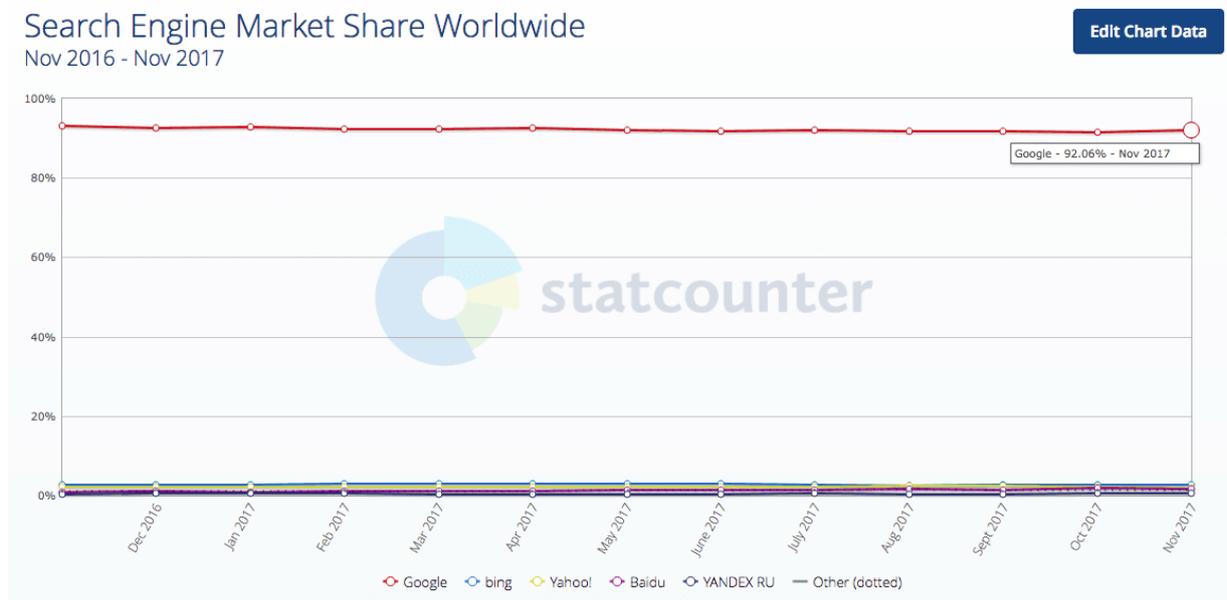
Opportunity

The art of web SEO lies in understanding how people search for things and understanding what type of results Google wants to (or will) display to its users. It's about putting a lot of things together to look for opportunity.

A good optimiser has an understanding of how search engines like Google generate their natural SERPs to satisfy users' **navigational**, **informational** and **transactional** keyword queries.

> **QUOTE**: "*One piece of advice I tend to give people is to aim for a niche within your niche where you can be the best by a long stretch. Find something **where people explicitly seek YOU out**, not just "cheap X" (where even if you rank, chances are they'll click around to other sites anyway).*" John Mueller, Google 2018

Risk Management

A good search engine marketer has a good understanding of the short term and long term risks involved in optimising rankings in search engines, and an understanding of the type of content and sites Google (*especially*) WANTS to return in its natural SERPs.

The aim of any campaign is more visibility in search engines and this would be a simple process if it were not for the many pitfalls.

There are rules to be followed or ignored, risks to take, gains to make, and battles to be won or lost.

Free Traffic

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNHR6IQJGZs

> QUOTE: "*Google is "the biggest kingmaker on this Earth.*" Amity Singhal, Google, 2010

A Mountain View spokesman once called the search engine '*kingmakers*', and that's no lie.

Ranking high in Google is VERY VALUABLE - it's effectively 'free advertising' on the best advertising space in the world.

Traffic from Google natural listings is STILL the most valuable organic traffic to a website in the world, and it can make or break an online business.

The state of play, in 2018, is that you can STILL generate highly targeted leads, for FREE, *just* by improving your website and optimising your content to be as relevant as possible for a buyer looking for your company, product or service.

As you can imagine, there's a LOT of competition now for that free traffic - even from Google (!) in some niches.

You shouldn't compete with Google. You *should* focus on competing with your competitors.

The Process

The process that is SEO can be practised, successfully, in a bedroom or a workplace, but it has traditionally always involved mastering many skills as they arose including diverse marketing technologies including but not limited to:

- Website design
- Accessibility
- Usability
- User experience
- Website development
- PHP, HTML, CSS, etc.
- Server management
- Domain management
- Copywriting
- Spread sheets
- Backlink analysis
- Keyword research
- Social media promotion
- Software development
- Analytics and data analysis
- Information architecture
- Research
- Log Analysis
- Looking at Google for hours on end

It takes a lot, in 2018, to rank on merit a page in Google in competitive niches, due to the amount of competition for those top spots.

User Experience

> **QUOTE**: "*At Google we are aiming to provide a great user experience on any device, we're making a big push to ensure the search results we deliver reflect this principle.*" Google 2014

The big stick Google is hitting every webmaster with (at the moment, and for the foreseeable future) **is the '*USER EXPERIENCE*' stick**.

There is no single 'user experience' ranking factor, we have been told, however poor user experience clearly does not lead to high rankings in Google.

> **QUOTE**: "*I don't think we even see what people are doing on your website if they're filling out forms or not if they're converting to actually buying something so if we can't really see that then that's not something that we'd be able to take into account anyway. So from my point of view that's not something I'd really treat as a ranking factor. Of course if people are going to your website and they're filling out forms or signing up for your service or for a newsletter then generally that's a sign that you're doing the right things.*". John Mueller, Google 2015

Note what Google labels '*user experience*' may differ from how others define it.

Take for instance a slow page load time, which is a poor user experience:

> **QUOTE**: "*We do say **we have a small factor in there for pages that are really slow to load** where we take that into account.*" John Mueller, Google, 2015

Or sites that don't have much content "above-the-fold":

> **QUOTE**: "So **sites that don't have much content "above-the-fold" can be affected by this change**. If you click on a website and the part of the website you see first either doesn't have a lot of visible content above-the-fold or dedicates a large fraction of the site's initial screen real estate to ads, that's **not a very good user experience.**" Google 2012

These are user experience issues Google penalises for, but as another Google spokesperson pointed out:

> **QUOTE**: "*Rankings is a nuanced process and there is over 200 signals.*" Maile Ohye, Google 2010

If you expect to rank in Google in 2018, you'd better have a quality offering, not based entirely on manipulation, or old school tactics.

Is a visit to your site a *good* user experience? Is it performing its task better than the competition?

If not - beware the manual 'Q*uality Raters'* and beware the *Google Panda/Site Quality* algorithms that are looking to demote sites based on what we can easily point to as *poor user experience signals* and *unsatisfying content* when it is presented to Google's users.

Google raising the 'quality bar', year on year, ensures a higher level of quality in online marketing in general (above the very low-quality we've seen over the last years).

Success in organic marketing in 2018 involves investment in higher quality on-page content, better website architecture, improved usability, intelligent conversion to optimisation balance, and 'legitimate' internet marketing techniques.

If you don't take that route, you'll find yourself chased down by Google's algorithms at some point in the coming year.

This '*what is SEO*' guide (and this entire website) is not about churn and burn type of Google SEO (called web spam to Google) as that is too risky to deploy on a real business website in 2018.

> **QUOTE**: "*Black hat SEO fads: like walking into a dark alley, packed with used car salesmen, who won't show you their cars.*" Matt Cutts, Google 2014

What Is A Successful Strategy?

Get relevant. Get trusted. Get Popular. Help a visitor complete their task.

SEO is no longer *just* about manipulation in 2018.

It's about adding quality and often useful content to your website that together meet a PURPOSE that delivers USER SATISFACTION over the longer term.

If you are serious about getting more free traffic from search engines, get ready to invest time and effort in your website and online marketing.

Quality Signals

> **QUOTE***: "**Another problem we were having was an issue with quality** and this was particularly bad (we think of it as around 2008 2009 to **2011**) we were getting lots of complaints about low-quality content and they were right. We were seeing the same low-quality thing but our relevance metrics kept going up and that's because the low-quality pages can be very relevant. This is basically **the definition of a content farm in our in our vision of the world** so we thought we were doing great our numbers were saying we were doing great and we were delivering a terrible user experience and turned out we weren't measuring what we needed to **so what we ended up doing was defining an explicit quality metric which got directly at the issue of quality it's not the same as relevance**. And it enabled us to **develop quality related signals separate from relevant signals** and really **improve them independently** so when the metrics missed something what ranking engineers need to do is fix the rating guidelines… or develop new metrics." SMX West 2016 – How Google Works: A Google Ranking Engineer's Story (*[VIDEO](#)*)

In short, it was too easy (for some) to manipulate Google's rankings at the beginning of the decade. If you had enough 'domain authority' you could use 'thin content' to rank for anything. This is the definition of a 'content farm'.

Web spammers often used '*unnatural*' backlinks to build fake '*domain authority*' to rank this 'thin' content. I know I did in the past.

So Google raised the bar.

Google decided to rank HIGH-QUALITY documents in its results and **force those who wish to rank high to invest in higher-quality content** or a **great customer experience** that creates buzz and attracts editorial links from reputable websites.

These high-quality signals are in some way based on Google being able to detect a certain amount of attention and effort put into your site and Google monitoring over time how users interact with your site. Quality signals are much harder to game than they were in 2011.

Essentially, the 'agreement' with Google is if you're willing to add a lot of great content to your website and create a buzz about your company, Google will rank you high above others who do not invest in this endeavour.

> QUOTE: "*high quality content is something I'd focus on. I see lots and lots of SEO blogs talking about user experience, which I think is a great thing to focus on as well. Because that essentially kind of focuses on what we are trying to look at as well. We want to rank content that is useful for (Google users) and if your content is really useful for them, then we want to rank it.*" John Mueller, Google 2016

If you try to manipulate Google, it will penalise you for a period, and often until you fix the offending issue - which we know can LAST YEARS.

If you are a real business who intends to build a brand online and rely on organic traffic - **you can't use black hat methods**. Full stop. It can take a LONG time for a site to recover from using black hat SEO tactics and fixing the problems will not necessarily bring organic traffic back as it was before a penalty.

> QUOTE: "*Cleaning up these kinds of link issue can take considerable time to be reflected by our algorithms (we don't have a specific time in mind, but the mentioned 6-12 months is probably on the safe side). In general, you won't see a jump up in rankings afterwards because our algorithms attempt to ignore the links already, but it makes it easier for us to trust the site later on.*" John Mueller, Google, 2018

Recovery from a Google penalty is a 'new growth' process as much as it is a 'clean-up' process.

Google Rankings Always Change

Google Rankings Are In Constant Ever-Flux

> **QUOTE**: "*Things can always change in search.*" John Mueller, Google 2017
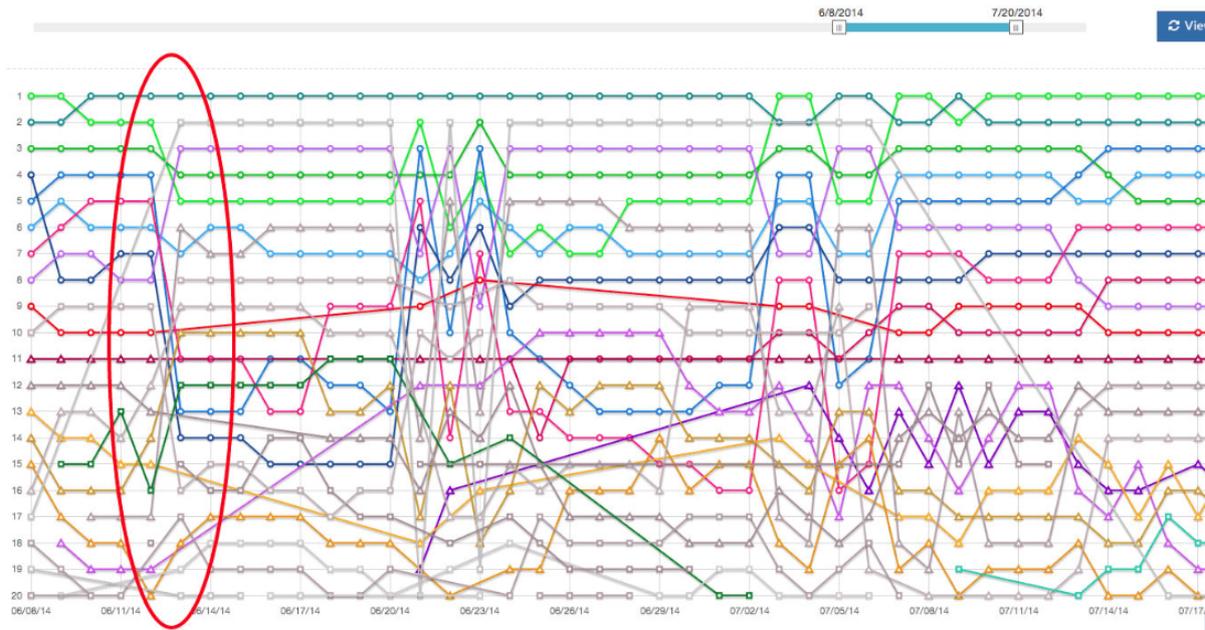
Put simply - It's Google's job to MAKE MANIPULATING SERPs HARD. It's HARD to get to number 1 in Google for competitive keyword phrases.

So - the people behind the algorithms keep 'moving the goalposts', modifying the 'rules' and raising 'quality standards' for pages that compete for top ten rankings.

In 2018 - we have ever-flux in the SERPs - and that seems to suit Google and keep everybody guessing.

Fluctuating Rankings

> **QUOTE**: "*nobody will always see ranking number three for your website for those queries. It's always fluctuating.*" John Mueller, Google, 2015

This flux is not necessarily something to do with a problem per se and

> **QUOTE**: "*that's just a sign that our algorithms are fluctuating with the rankings.*" John Mueller, Google 2015

Fluctuating upwards could be a good sign as he mentioned: "*maybe this is really relevant for the first page, or maybe not.*" – then again – the converse is true, one would expect.

He says "*a little bit of a push to make your website a little bit better, so that the algorithms can clearly say, yes, this really belongs on the first page*." which I thought was an interesting turn of phrase. 'First page', rather than 'number 1'.

Google is very secretive about its 'secret sauce' and offers sometimes helpful and sometimes vague advice - and some say offers misdirection - about how to get more from valuable traffic from Google.

Google is on record as saying the engine is intent on 'frustrating' search engine optimisers attempts to improve the amount of high-quality traffic to a website - at least (but not limited to) - using low-quality strategies classed as web spam.

> **QUOTE**: "*If you want to stop spam, the most straight forward way to do it is to deny people money because they care about the money and that should be their end goal. But if you really want to stop spam, it is a little bit mean, but what you want to do, is sort of break their spirits. There are lots of Google algorithms specifically designed to frustrate spammers. Some of the things we do is give people a hint their site will drop and then a week or two later, their site actually does drop. So they get a little bit more frustrated. So hopefully, and we've seen this happen, people step away from the dark side and say, you know what, that was so much pain and anguish and frustration, let's just stay on the high road from now on*." Matt Cutts, Google 2013

At its core, Google search engine optimisation is still about **KEYWORDS** and **LINKS**. It's about **RELEVANCE**, **REPUTATION** and **TRUST**. It is about **QUALITY OF CONTENT**, **VISITOR SATISFACTION & INCREASED USER ENGAGEMENT**. It is about users seeking your website out and completing the task they have.

*A **Good USER EXPERIENCE*** is a key to winning - and keeping - the highest rankings in many verticals.

Relevance, Authority & Trust

> **QUOTE**: *Know that 'content' and relevance' are still primary." Maile Ohye, Google 2010*

Web page optimisation is in 2018 STILL about making a web page relevant and trusted enough to rank for any given search query.

It's about ranking for valuable keywords for the long term, on merit. You can play by 'white hat' rules lay down by Google, and aim to build this *Authority* and *Trust* naturally, over time, or you can choose to ignore the rules and go full time 'black hat'.

MOST SEO tactics still work, for some time, on some level, depending on who's doing them, and how the campaign is deployed.

Whichever route you take, know that if Google catches you trying to modify your rank using overtly obvious and manipulative methods, then they *will* class you a web spammer, and your site will be penalised (you will not rank high for relevant keywords).

> **QUOTE**: *"Those practices, referred to in the patent as "rank-modifying spamming techniques," may involve techniques such as: Keyword stuffing, Invisible text, Tiny text, Page redirects, Meta tags stuffing, and Link-based manipulation." Bill Slawski, Google Rank-Modifying Spammers Patent*

These penalties can last years if not addressed, as some penalties expire and some do not - and Google wants you to clean up any violations.

Google does not want you to try and modify where you rank, easily. Critics would say Google would prefer you paid them to do that using Google Adwords.

The problem for Google is - ranking high in Google organic listings is a real social proof for a business, a way to avoid PPC costs and still, simply, the BEST WAY to drive VALUABLE traffic to a site.

It's FREE, too, once you've met the always-increasing criteria it takes to rank top.

'User Experience' Does Matter

Is User Experience A Ranking Factor?

User experience is mentioned 16 times in the main content of the quality rater guidelines (official PDF), but we have been told by Google it is **not, per say, a classifiable 'ranking factor'** on desktop search, at least.

> **QUOTE**: "*On mobile, sure, since UX is the base of the mobile friendly update. On desktop currently no.*" (*Gary Illyes:* Google, May 2015)

While UX, we are told, is not literally a 'ranking factor', it is useful to understand exactly what Google calls a 'poor user experience' because if any poor UX signals are identified on your website, that is not going to be a healthy thing for your rankings anytime soon.

Matt Cutts (no longer with Google) *consistent* SEO advice was to focus on a satisfying user experience.

What is Bad UX?

For Google - rating UX, at least from a quality rater perspective, revolves around marking the page down for:

- Misleading or potentially deceptive design
- Sneaky redirects
- Malicious downloads and
- Spammy user-generated content (un-moderated comments and posts)
- Low-quality MC (main content of the page)
- Low-quality or distracting SC (supplementary content)

In short, nobody is going to advise you to create a poor UX, on purpose, in light of Google's algorithms and human quality rater who are showing an obvious interest in this stuff. Google is rating mobile sites on what it classes is frustrating UX - although on certain levels what Google classes as 'UX' might be quite far apart from what a UX professional is familiar with in the same ways as Google's mobile rating tools differ from, for instance, W3c Mobile testing tools.

Google is still, evidently, more interested in **rating the main content of the webpage** in question and **the reputation of the domain the page is on - relative to your site, and competing pages on other domains.**

A satisfying UX is can help your rankings, with second-order factors taken into consideration. A poor UX can seriously impact your human-reviewed rating, at least. Google's punishing algorithms probably class pages as something akin to a poor UX if they meet certain detectable criteria e.g. lack of reputation or old-school SEO stuff like keyword stuffing a site.

If you are improving user experience by focusing primarily on the quality of the MC of your pages and avoiding - even removing - old-school SEO techniques - those certainly are positive steps to getting more traffic from Google in 2018 - and the type of content performance Google rewards is in the end largely at least about a satisfying user experience.

TAKE NOTE: Google is Moving To "*Make our index mobile-first*"

Now that Google is determined to focus on ranking sites based on their mobile experience, the time is upon businesses to REALLY focus on delivering the fastest and most accessible DESKTOP **and** MOBILE friendly experience you can achieve.

Because if you DO NOT, your competition will, and Google may rank those pages above your own, in time.

> **QUOTE***: 'To make our results more useful, we've begun experiments to **make our index mobile-first**. Although our search index will continue to be a single index of websites and apps, **our algorithms will eventually primarily use the mobile version of a site's content to rank pages from that site**, to understand structured data, and to show snippets from those pages in our results. Of course, while our index will be built from mobile documents, we're going to continue to build a great search experience for all users, whether they come from mobile or desktop devices.*

If you have a responsive site or a dynamic serving site where the primary content and markup is equivalent across mobile and desktop, you shouldn't have to change anything.' GOOGLE, [2017](#)

NOTE: Google has a *'Page-Heavy'* Penalty Algorithm

Present your most compelling material above the fold at any **resolution** – Google also has a 'Page Heavy Algorithm' – In short, if you have too many ads on your page, or if paid advertising obfuscates copy or causes an otherwise frustrating user experience for Google's visitors, your page can be demoted in SERPs:

> **QUOTE***: 'sites that don't have much content "above-the-fold" can be affected.'* [Google](#):

Keep an eye on where you put your ads or other sponsored content – get in the way of your main content copy of the page you are designing and you could see traffic decline.

NOTE: Google has an '*Interstitial and Pop-Up*' Penalty Algorithm

Bear in mind also Google now (since January 2017) has an Interstitial and Pop-Up 'penalty so AVOID creating a marketing strategy that relies on this.

QUOTE*: 'Here are some examples of techniques that make content less accessible to a user:*

*(1) **Showing a popup that covers the main content, either immediately after the user navigates to a page from the search results, or while they are looking through the page**.*

(2) Displaying a standalone interstitial that the user has to dismiss before accessing the main content.

(3) Using a layout where the above-the-fold portion of the page appears similar to a standalone interstitial, but the original content has been inlined underneath the fold. Google'

EXIT POP-UPS (like the one I use on the Hobo site) evidently do NOT interfere with a readers enjoyment and access to the primary content on a page. At the moment, these type of pop-ups seems to be OK for now (and do increase subscriber signups, too).

What is the PURPOSE of your page?

Is it to "*sell products or services*", "*to entertain*" or " *to share information about a topic*."

MAKE THE PURPOSE OF YOUR PAGE SINGULAR and OBVIOUS to help quality rater and algorithms.

The name of the game in 2018 (if you're not faking everything) is VISITOR SATISFACTION.

If a visitor lands on your page - are they satisfied and can they successfully complete WHY they are there?

Ranking could be based on a '*duration metric*'

> **QUOTE**: "*The average duration metric for the particular group of resources can be a statistical measure computed from a data set of measurements of a length of time that elapses between a time that **a given user clicks on a search result included in a search results web page that identifies a resource in the particular group of resources and a time that the given user navigates back to the search results web page**. ...Thus, the user experience can be improved because search results higher in the presentation order will better match the user's informational needs.*" [High Quality Search Results based on Repeat Clicks and Visit Duration](#)

Rankings could be based on a '*duration performance score*'

> **QUOTE**: "*The **duration performance scores can be used in scoring resources and websites for search operations**. The search operations may **include scoring resources for search results, prioritizing the indexing of websites, suggesting resources or websites, protecting particular resources or websites from demotions, precluding particular resources or websites from promotions**, or other appropriate search operations.*" [A Panda Patent on Website and Category Visit Durations](#)

What Makes A Page Spam?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHpRlextjL0

What makes a page spam?:

- Hidden text or links - may be exposed by selecting all page text and scrolling to the bottom (all text is highlighted), disabling CSS/Javascript, or viewing source code
- Sneaky redirects - redirecting through several URLs, rotating destination domains cloaking with JavaScript redirects and 100% frame
- Keyword stuffing - no percentage or keyword density given; this is up to the rater
- PPC ads that only serve to make money, not help users
- Copied/scraped content and PPC ads
- Feeds with PPC ads
- Doorway pages - multiple landing pages that all direct user to the same destination
- Templates and other computer-generated pages mass-produced, marked by copied content and/or slight keyword variations
- Copied message boards with no other page content
- Fake search pages with PPC ads
- Fake blogs with PPC ads, identified by copied/scraped or nonsensical spun content
- Thin affiliate sites that only exist to make money, identified by checkout on a different domain, image properties showing origination at another URL, lack of original content, different WhoIs registrants of the two domains in question
- Pure PPC pages with little to no content
- Parked domains

There's more on this announcement at SEW.

If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam, to Google

QUOTE: "*If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam*" GOOGLE

That statement above in the original quality rater guidelines is **standout** and should be a heads up to any webmaster out there who thinks they are going to make a "fast buck" from Google organic listings in 2018.

It should, at least, make you think about the types of pages you are going to spend your valuable time making.

Without VALUE ADD for Google's users - don't expect to rank high for commercial keywords.

If you are making a page today with the sole purpose of making money from it - and especially with **free traffic from Google** - you obviously didn't get the memo.

Consider this statement from a manual reviewer:

QUOTE: "*…when they DO get to the top, they have to be reviewed with a human eye in order to make sure the site has quality.*" potpiegirl

It's worth remembering:

- If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam
- If A Site Exists Only To Make Money, The Site Is Spam

This is how what you make will be judged - whether it is fair or not.

IS IT ALL BAD NEWS?

Of course not and in some cases, it levels the playing field especially if you are willing to:

- Differentiate yourself
- Be remarkable
- Be accessible
- Add unique content to your site
- Help users in an original way

Google doesn't care about search engine optimizers or the vast majority of websites but the search engine giant **DOES** care about **HELPING ITS OWN USERS**. So, if you are helping visitors the come from Google - and not by just directing them to another website - you are probably doing one thing right at least.

With this in mind - I am already building affiliate sites differently, for instance.

Doorway Pages

Google algorithms consistently target sites with doorway pages in quality algorithm updates. The definition of a "doorway page" can change over time.

For example in the images below (from 2011), all pages on the site seemed to be hit with a -50+ ranking penalty for every keyword phrase the website ranked for.

At first Google **rankings for commercial keyword phrases collapsed** which led to somewhat of a "*traffic apocalypse*":

The webmaster then received an **email from Google via Google Webmaster Tools (now called Google Search Console)**:

> **QUOTE: "*Google Webmaster Tools notice of detected doorway pages on xxxxxxxx - Dear site owner or webmaster of xxxxxxxx, We've detected that some of your site's pages may be using techniques that are outside Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Specifically, your site may have what we consider to be doorway pages - groups of "cookie cutter" or low-quality pages. Such pages are often of low value to users and are often optimized for single words or phrases in order to channel users to a single location. We believe that doorway pages typically create a frustrating user experience, and we encourage you to correct or remove any pages that violate our quality guidelines. Once you've made these changes, please submit your site for reconsideration in Google's search results. If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please see our Webmaster Help Forum for support.*" Google Search Quality Team**

At the time, I didn't immediately class the pages on the affected sites in question *as* doorway pages. It's evident Google's definition of a doorways changes over time.

A lot of people do not realise they are building what Google *classes* as doorway pages..... and it was indicative to me that ..... **what you *intend* to do with the traffic Google sends you may in itself, be a ranking factor not too often talked about**.

What Does Google Classify As Doorway Pages?

https://youtu.be/jk2AXKiKSqE?t=38m6s

Google classes many types of pages as doorway pages. Doorway pages can be thought of as lots of pages on a website designed to rank for very specific keywords using minimal original text content e.g. location pages often end up looking like doorway pages.

Its actually a very interesting aspect of modern SEO and one that is constantly shifting.

In the recent past, location-based SERPs were often lower-quality, and so Google historically ranked location-based doorway pages in many instances.

There is some confusion for real businesses who THINK they SHOULD rank for specific locations where they are not geographically based and end up using doorway-type pages to rank for these locations.

What Google Says About Doorway Pages

Google said a few years ago:

> **QUOTE***: "For example, **searchers might get a list of results that all go to the same site**. So if a user clicks on one result, doesn't like it, and then tries the next result in the search results page **and is taken to that same site** that they didn't like, that's a really frustrating experience." Google*

A question about using content spread across multiple pages and targeting different geographic locations on the same site was asked in the recent Hangout with Google's John Mueller

> **QUOTE***: "We are a health services comparison website...... so you can imagine that for the majority of those pages the content that will be presented in terms of the clinics that will be listed looking fairly similar right and the same I think holds true if you look at it from the location ...... we're conscious that this causes some kind of content duplication so the question is this type ... to worry about? "*

Bearing in mind that (while it is not the optimal use of pages) Google does not 'penalise' a website for duplicating content across internal pages in a non-malicious way, John's clarification of location-based pages on a site targeting different regions is worth noting:

> **QUOTE***: "For the most part it should be fine I think the **tricky part that you need to be careful about is more around doorway pages in the sense that if all of these pages end up with the same business then that can look a lot like a doorway page** but like just focusing on the content duplication part that's something that for the most part is fine what will happen there is will index all of these pages separately because from from a kind of holistic point of view these pages are unique they have unique content on them they might have like chunks of text on them which are duplicated but on their own these pages are unique so we'll index them separately and in the search results when someone is searching for something generic and we don't know which of these pages are the best ones we'll pick one of these pages and show that to the user and filter out the other variations of that that page so for example if someone in Ireland is just looking for dental bridges and you have a bunch of different pages for different kind of clinics that offer the service and probably will pick one of those pages and show those in the search results and filter out the other ones.*
>
> *But essentially the idea there is that this is a good representative of the content from your website and that's all that we would show to users on the other hand if someone is specifically looking for let's say dental bridges in Dublin then we'd be able to show the appropriate clinic that you have on your website that matches that a little bit better so we'd know dental bridges is something that you have a lot on your website and Dublin is something that's unique to this specific page so we'd be able to pull that out and to show that to the user like that so from a pure content duplication point of view that's not really something I totally worry about.*
>
> *I think it makes sense to have unique content as much as possible on these pages but it's not going to like sync the whole website if you don't do that we don't penalize a website for having this kind of deep duplicate content and kind of going back to the first thing though with regards to doorway pages that is something I definitely look into to **make sure that you're not running into that so in particular if this is like all going to the same clinic and you're creating all of these different landing pages that are essentially just funneling everyone to the same clinic then that could be seen as a doorway page or a set of doorway pages** on our side and it could happen that **the web spam team looks at that and says this is this is not okay you're just trying to rank for all of these different variations of the keywords and the pages themselves are essentially all the same and they might go there and say we need to take a manual action and remove all these pages from search** so that's kind of one thing to watch out for in the sense that if they are all going to the same clinic then probably it makes sense to create some kind of a summary page instead whereas if these are going to two different businesses then of course that's kind of a different situation it's not it's not a doorway page situation."*

The takeaway here is that if you have LOTS of location pages serving ONE SINGLE business in one location, then those are very probably classed as some sort of doorway pages,

and probably old-school SEO techniques for these type of pages will see them classed as lower-quality - or even - spammy pages.

Google has long warned webmasters about using Doorway pages but many sites still employ them, because, either:

- their business model depends on it for lead generation
- the alternative is either a lot of work or
- they are not creative enough or
- they are not experienced enough to avoid the pitfalls of having lower-quality doorway pages on a site or
- they are experienced enough to understand what impact they might be having on a site quality score

Google has a doorway page algorithm which no doubt they constantly improve upon. Google warned:

> **QUOTE***: "Over time, we've seen sites try to maximize their "search footprint" without adding clear, unique value. These doorway campaigns manifest themselves as pages on a site, as a number of domains, or a combination thereof. To improve the quality of search results for our users, we'll soon launch a ranking adjustment to better address these types of pages. Sites with large and well-established doorway campaigns might see a broad impact from this change." Google* 2015

If you have location pages that serve multiple locations or businesses, then those are not doorway pages and should be improved uniquely to rank better, according to John's advice.

Are You Making Doorway Pages?

Search Engine Land offered search engine optimisers this clarification from Google:

> **QUOTE***: "How do you know if your web pages are classified as a "doorway page?" Google said asked yourself these questions:*
>
> - *Is the purpose to optimize for search engines and funnel visitors into the actual usable or relevant portion of your site, or are they an integral part of your site's user experience?*
> - *Are the pages intended to rank on generic terms yet the content presented on the page is very specific?*
> - *Do the pages duplicate useful aggregations of items (locations, products, etc.) that already exist on the site for the purpose of capturing more search traffic?*
> - *Are these pages made solely for drawing affiliate traffic and sending users along without creating unique value in content or functionality?*
> - *Do these pages exist as an "island?" Are they difficult or impossible to navigate to from other parts of your site? Are links to such pages from other pages within the site or network of sites created just for search engines?"*

Barry Schwartz at Seroundtable picked this up:

QUOTE*: "Well, **a doorway page would be if you have a large collection of pages where you're just like tweaking the keywords on those pages** for that.*

I think if you focus on like a clear purpose for the page that's outside of just I want to rank for this specific variation of the keyword then that's usually something that leads to a reasonable result.

*Whereas if you're just taking a list of keywords and saying I **need to make pages for each of these keywords and each of the permutations that might be for like two or three of those keywords then that's just creating pages for the sake of keywords which is essentially what we look at as a doorway."***

Note I underlined the following statement:

QUOTE*: "focus on like a clear purpose for the page that's outside of just I want to rank for this specific variation of the keyword."*

That is because sometimes, often, in fact, there *is* an alternative to doorway pages for location pages that achieve essentially the same thing for webmasters.

Naturally, business owners want to rank for lots of keywords in organic listings with their website. The challenge for webmasters and SEO is that Google doesn't want business owners to rank for lots of keywords using autogenerated content especially when that produces A LOT of pages on a website using (for instance) a list of keyword variations page-to-page.

QUOTE: "*7.4.3 Automatically Generated Main Content Entire websites may be created by designing a basic template from which hundreds or thousands of pages are created, sometimes using content from freely available sources (such as an RSS feed or API). These pages are created with no or very little time, effort, or expertise, and also have no editing or manual curation. **Pages and websites made up of auto-generated content with no editing or manual curation, and no original content or value added for users, should be rated Lowest**.*" [Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#) 2017

The end-result is webmasters create doorway pages without even properly understanding what they represent to Google and without realising Google will not index all these autogenerated pages.

WIKIPEDIA says of doorway pages:

> **QUOTE***: "Doorway pages are web **pages** that are created for spamdexing. This is for spamming the index of a search engine by inserting results for particular phrases with the purpose of sending visitors to a different **page**."*

Also:

> ***"Spamdexing**, which is a word derived from "spam" and "indexing," refers to the practice of search engine spamming. It is a form of SEO spamming."*

Google says:

> *"**Doorways are sites or pages created to rank highly for specific search queries.** They are bad for users because they can lead to multiple similar pages in user search results, where each result ends up taking the user to essentially the same destination. They can also lead users to intermediate pages that are not as useful as the final destination.*

Here are some examples of doorways:

- *Having multiple domain names or pages targeted at specific regions or cities that funnel users to one page*
- *Pages generated to funnel visitors into the actual usable or relevant portion of your site(s)*
- *Substantially similar pages that are closer to search results than a clearly defined, browseable hierarchy"*

I've bolded:

> ***"Doorways are sites or pages created to rank highly for specific search queries"***

Take note: It is not just location pages that are classed as doorway pages:

https://youtu.be/JLCwGo43fAY?t=7m50s

> **QUOTE**: "*For Google, that's probably overdoing it and ends up in a situation you basically create a doorway site .... with pages of low value.... that target one specific query.*" John Mueller 2018

If your website is made up of lower-quality doorway type pages using old SEO-techniques (which more and more labelled as spam in 2018) then Google will not index all of the pages and your website 'quality score' is probably going to be negatively impacted.

Summary:

If you are making keyword rich location pages for a single business website, there's a risk these pages will be classed doorway pages in 2018.

If you know you have VERY low-quality doorway pages on your site, you should remove them or rethink your SEO strategy if you want to rank high in Google for the long term.

Location-based pages are suitable for some kind of websites, and not others.

What Is E.A.T.?

Quality Ratings are based on (E.A.T. or EAT) '*Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness*' of the '*Main Content of a page*'

> **QUOTE***: "Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness: This is an important quality characteristic. …. Important: Lacking appropriate EAT is sufficient reason to give a page a Low quality rating."* **Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines** 2017

Main Content (MC) of a Page

> **QUOTE:** *"(Main CONTENT) is (or should be!) the reason the page exists."* Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017

What Is Google Focused On?

Google is concerned with the PURPOSE of a page, the MAIN CONTENT (MC) of a page, the SUPPLEMENTARY CONTENT of a page and HOW THAT PAGE IS monetised, and if that monetisation impacts the user experience of consuming the MAIN CONTENT.

Webmasters need to be careful when optimising a website for CONVERSION first if that gets in the way of a user's consumption of the main content on the page.

Google also has a "*Page Layout Algorithm*" that demotes pages with a lot of advertising "*above the fold*" or that forces users to scroll past advertisements to get to the Main Content of the page.

High-quality supplementary content should "*(contribute) to a satisfying user experience on the page and website.*" and it should NOT interfere or distract from the MC.

Google says,"(*Main CONTENT) is (or should be!) the reason the page exists*." so this is probably the most important part of the page, to Google.

Supplementary Content (SC) on a Page

An example of **"supplementary" content** is "navigation links that allow users to visit other parts of the website" and "footers" and "headers."

What is SC (supplementary content)?

> **QUOTE**: "*Supplementary Content contributes to a good user experience on the page, but does not directly help the page achieve its purpose. SC is created by Webmasters and is an important part of the user experience. One common type of SC is navigation links which allow users to visit other parts of the website. Note that in some cases, content behind tabs may be considered part of the SC of the page.*" Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017

When it comes to a web page and *positive* UX, Google talks a lot about the functionality and utility of *Helpful Supplementary Content* - e.g. helpful navigation links for users (that are not, generally, MC or Ads).

> *QUOTE: "To summarize, a lack of helpful SC may be a reason for a Low quality rating, depending on the purpose of the page and the type of website. We have different standards for small websites which exist to serve their communities versus large websites with a large volume of webpages and content. For some types of "webpages," such as PDFs and JPEG files, we expect no SC at all.*" Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017

It is worth remembering that Good supplementary content cannot save Poor main content from a low-quality page rating:

> **QUOTE**: "M*ain Content is any part of the page that directly helps the page achieve its purpose*". Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017

Good SC seems to certainly be a sensible option. It always has been.

Key Points about SC

1. "*Supplementary Content can be a large part of what makes a High-quality page very satisfying for its purpose.*
2. *Helpful SC is content that is specifically targeted to the content and purpose of the page.*
3. *Smaller websites such as websites for local businesses and community organizations, or personal websites and blogs, may need less SC for their purpose.*
4. *A page can still receive a High or even Highest rating with no SC at all.*"

Here are the specific quotes containing the term *SC*:

1. "*Supplementary Content contributes to a good user experience on the page, but does not directly help the page achieve its purpose.*

---

2. *SC is created by Webmasters and is an important part of the user experience. One common type of SC is navigation links which allow users to visit other parts of the website. Note that in some cases, content behind tabs may be considered part of the SC of the page.*

3. *SC which contributes to a satisfying user experience on the page and website. - (A mark of a high-quality site - this statement was repeated 5 times)*

4. *However, we do expect websites of large companies and organizations to put a great deal of effort into creating a good user experience on their website, including having helpful SC. For large websites, SC may be one of the primary ways that users explore the website and find MC, and a lack of helpful SC on large websites with a lot of content may be a reason for a Low rating.*

5. *However, some pages are deliberately designed to shift the user's attention from the MC to the Ads, monetized links, or SC. In these cases, the MC becomes difficult to read or use, resulting in a poor user experience. These pages should be rated Low.*

6. *Misleading or potentially deceptive design makes it hard to tell that there's no answer, making this page a poor user experience.*

7. *Redirecting is the act of sending a user to a different URL than the one initially requested. There are many good reasons to redirect from one URL to another, for example, when a website moves to a new address. However, some redirects are designed to deceive search engines and users. These are a very poor user experience, and users may feel tricked or confused. We will call these "sneaky redirects." Sneaky redirects are deceptive and should be rated Lowest.*

8. *However, you may encounter pages with a large amount of spammed forum discussions or spammed user comments. We'll consider a comment or forum discussion to be "spammed" if someone posts unrelated comments which are not intended to help other users, but rather to advertise a product or create a link to a website. Frequently these comments are posted by a "bot" rather than a real person. Spammed comments are easy to recognize. They may include Ads, download, or other links, or sometimes just short strings of text unrelated to the topic, such as "Good," "Hello," "I'm new here," "How are you today," etc. Webmasters should find and remove this content because it is a bad user experience.*

9. *The modifications make it very difficult to read and are a poor user experience. (Lowest quality MC (copied content with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users))*

10. *Sometimes, the MC of a landing page is helpful for the query, but the page happens to display porn ads or porn links outside the MC, which can be very distracting and potentially provide a poor user experience.*

11. *The query and the helpfulness of the MC have to be balanced with the user experience of the page.*

12. *Pages that provide a poor user experience, such as pages that try to download malicious software, should also receive low ratings, even if they have some images appropriate for the query."*

The Importance of Unique Content For Your Website

> *QUOTE: "Duplicated content is often not manipulative and is commonplace on many websites and often free from malicious intent. Copied content can often be penalised algorithmically or manually. Duplicate content is not penalised, but this is often not an optimal set-up for pages, either. Be VERY careful 'spinning' 'copied' text to make it unique!" Shaun Anderson, Hobo, 2018*

From a quality page point of view, duplicate content (or rather, *copied* content) can a low-quality indicator.

Boilerplate (especially spun) text can be another low-quality indicator.

If your website is tarnished with these practices – it is going to be classed 'low-quality' by some part of the Google algorithm:

- If all you have on your page are indicators of low-quality – you have a low-quality page in 2018 – full stop.
- If your entire website is made up of pages like that, you have a low-quality website.
- If you have manipulative backlinks, then that's a recipe for disaster.

Balancing Conversions With Usability & User Satisfaction

Take pop-up windows or window pop-unders as an example:

According to usability expert Jakob Nielson, **95%** of website visitors hated unexpected or unwanted pop-up windows, especially those that contain unsolicited advertising.

In fact, Pop-Ups have been consistently voted the **Number 1 Most Hated Advertising Technique since they first appeared many years ago.**

Website accessibility aficionados will point out:

- creating a new browser window should be the authority of the user
- pop-up new windows should not clutter the user's screen.
- all links should open in the same window by default. (An exception, however, may be made for pages containing a links list. It is convenient in such cases to open links in another window so that the user can come back to the links page easily. Even in such cases, it is advisable to give the user a prior note that links would open in a new window).
- Tell visitors they are about to invoke a pop-up window (using the link <title> attribute)
- Popup windows do not work in all browsers.
- They are disorienting for users
- Provide the user with an alternative.

It is, however, an inconvenient truth for accessibility and usability aficionados to hear that pop-ups can be used successfully to **vastly increase signup subscription conversions**.

EXAMPLE: TEST With Using A Pop Up Window

Pop-ups suck, everybody seems to agree. Here's the little test I carried out on a subset of pages, an experiment to see if pop-ups work on this site to convert more visitors to subscribers.

I tested it out when I didn't blog for a few months and traffic was very stable.

Results:

Testing Pop Up Windows Results

Pop Up Window		Total %Change
WK1 On	Wk2 Off	
Mon 46	20	173%
Tue 48	23	109%
Wed 41	15	173%
Thu 48	23	109%
Fri 52	17	206%

That's a fair **increase in email subscribers** across the board in this small experiment on this site. Using a pop up does seem to have an immediate impact.

I have since tested it on and off for a few months and the results from the small test above have been repeated over and over.

I've tested different layouts and different calls to actions without pop-ups, and they work too, to some degree, but they typically take a bit longer to deploy than activating a plugin.

I don't really like pop-ups as they have been an impediment to web accessibility but it's stupid to dismiss out-of-hand any technique that works.

In my tests, **using pop-ups really seemed to kill how many people share a post** in social media circles.

With Google now showing an interest with interstitials (especially on mobile versions of your site), I would be very nervous about employing a pop-up window that obscures the primary reason for visiting the page.

If Google detects any user dissatisfaction, this can be very bad news for your rankings.

QUOTE: "*Interstitials that hide a significant amount of content provide a bad search experience*" Google, 2015

I am, at the moment, using an exit strategy pop-up window as hopefully by the time a user sees this device, they are FIRST satisfied with my content they came to read. I can recommend this as a way to increase your subscribers, at the moment, with a similar conversion rate than pop-ups - if NOT BETTER.

I think, as an optimiser, it is sensible to **convert customers without using techniques that potentially negatively impact Google rankings**.

Do NOT let conversion get in the way of the PRIMARY reason a Google visitor is on ANY PARTICULAR PAGE or you risk Google detecting relative dissatisfaction with your site and that is not going to help you as Google's gets better at working out what 'quality' actually means.

NOTE: User Experience Across Multiple Devices & Screen Resolutions

User Experience is a big part of successful search engine optimisation in 2018 – and a big factor in the Google Panda algorithm.

When thinking of designing a web-page in 2018, you are going to have to consider where certain elements appear on that webpage, *especially* advertisements.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrVuryo39Zc

Google will tell you if the ads on your website are annoying users which may impact the organic traffic Google sends you.

Annoying ads on your web pages has long been a problem for users (probably) and Google, too. Even if they do make you money.

What ads are annoying?

- ' *the kind that blares music unexpectedly* ' or
- ' *a pop-up on top of the one thing we're trying to find* '

Apparently 'frustrating experiences can lead people to install ad blockers and when ads are blocked publishers can't make money'.

The video goes on to say:

> **QUOTE**: '*a survey of hundreds of ad experiences by the Coalition for better ads has shown that people don't hate all ads just annoying ones eliminating these ads from your site can make a huge difference* ' Google, 2017

The New Ad Experience Report In Google Search Console

The ad experience report is part of Google Search Console.

The report:

QUOTE: ' *makes it easy to find annoying ads on your site and replace them with user-friendly ones* '. Google, 2017

NOTE: Which type of Adverts Annoys Users?

Google states:

> *"The Ad Experience Report is designed to identify ad experiences that violate the Better Ads Standards, a set of ad experiences the industry has identified as being highly annoying to users. If your site presents violations, the Ad Experience Report may identify the issues to fix."*

The *Better Ads Standards* people are focused on the following annoying ads*:*

Desktop Web Experiences

- Pop-up Ads
- Auto-playing Video Ads with Sound
- Prestitial Ads with Countdown
- Large Sticky Ads

Mobile Web Experiences

- Pop-up Ads
- Auto-playing Video Ads with Sound
- Prestitial Ads
- Postitial Ads with Countdown
- Ad Density Higher Than 30%
- Full-screen Scroll through Ads
- Flashing Animated Ads
- Large Sticky Ads

Google says:

> *QUOTE: "once you've fixed the issues you can submit your site for a real review. We'll look at a new sample of pages and may find out experiences that were missed previously. We'll e-mail you when the results are in." Google, 2017*

Google offers some solutions to using pop-ups if you are interested

> *QUOTE: "In place of a pop-up try a full-screen inline ad. It offers the same amount of screen real estate as pop-ups without covering up any content. Fixing the problem depends on the issue you have for example if it's a pop-up you'll need to remove all the pop-up ads from your site but if the issue is high ad density on a page you'll need to reduce the number of ads" Google, 2017*

Your Website Will Receive A LOW RATING If It Has Annoying Or Distracting Ads or annoying Secondary Content (SC)

Google has long warned about web page advertisements and distractions on a web page that results in a poor user experience.

The following specific examples are taken from the Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017.

6.3 Distracting/Disruptive/Misleading Titles, Ads, and Supplementary Content

> *Some Low-quality pages have adequate MC (main content on the page) present, but it is difficult to use the MC due to disruptive, highly distracting, or misleading Ads/SC. Misleading titles can result in a very poor user experience when users click a link only to find that the page does not match their expectations.*

6.3.1 Ads or SC that disrupt the usage of MC

> *While we expect Ads and SC to be visible, some Ads, SC or interstitial pages (i.e., pages displayed before or after the content you are expecting) make it extremely difficult to use the MC. **Pages that disrupt the use of the MC should be given a Low rating**.*

Google gives some examples:

- *'Ads that actively float over the MC as you scroll down the page and are difficult to close. It can be very hard to use MC when it is actively covered by moving, difficult-to-close Ads.'*
- *'An interstitial page that redirects the user away from the MC without offering a path back to the MC.'*

6.3.2 Prominent presence of distracting SC or Ads

Google says:

"Users come to web pages to use the MC. Helpful SC and Ads can be part of a positive user experience, but distracting SC and Ads make it difficult for users to focus on and use the MC.

Some webpages are designed to encourage users to click on SC that is not helpful for the purpose of the page. This type of SC is often distracting or prominently placed in order to lure users to highly monetized pages.

Either porn SC or Ads containing porn on nonpoint pages can be very distracting or even upsetting to users. Please refresh the page a few times to see the range of Ads that appear, and use your knowledge of the locale and cultural sensitivities to make your rating. For example, an ad for a model in a revealing bikini is probably acceptable on a site that sells bathing suits. **However, an extremely graphic porn** *ad* **may warrant a Low (or even Lowest) rating***."*

6.3.3 Misleading Titles, Ads, or SC

Google says:

QUOTE*: "It should be clear what parts of the page are MC, SC, and Ads. It should also be clear what will happen when users interact with content and links on the webpage.* **If users are misled into clicking on Ads or SC, or if clicks on Ads or SC leave users feeling surprised, tricked or confused, a Low rating is justified***.*

- *At first glance, the Ads or SC appear to be MC. Some users may interact with Ads or SC, believing that the Ads or SC is the MC. Ads appear to be SC (links) where the user would expect that clicking the link will take them to another page within the same website, but actually take them to a different website. Some users may feel surprised or confused when clicking SC or links that go to a page on a completely different website.*
- *Ads or SC that entice users to click with shocking or exaggerated titles, images, and/or text. These can leave users feeling disappointed or annoyed when they click and see the actual and far less interesting content.*
- *Titles of pages or links/text in the SC that are misleading or exaggerated compared to the actual content of the page. This can result in a very poor user experience when users read the title or click a link only to find that the page does not match their expectations. "*

The important thing to know here is:

QUOTE*: "Summary:* **The Low rating should be used for disruptive or highly distracting Ads** *and SC. Misleading Titles, Ads, or SC may also justify a Low rating. Use your judgment when evaluating pages. User expectations will differ based on the purpose of the page and cultural norms."*

… and that **Google does not send free traffic to sites it rates as low quality**.

Recommendation: Remove annoying ads on your site.

How To Fix Issues Found In the Google Ad Experience Report

- you will need to sign up for [Google Search Console (AKA Google Webmaster Tools)](#)
- review the Ad experience report
- *'if your site hasn't been reviewed or as past* review*, the report won't show anything'*
- *'if your review status is warning or failing violations will be listed in the "what we found" column "ad reviews report" on a sample of pages from both desktop and mobile versions of your site'*
- *'if negative ad experiences are found they are listed separately in the report since a bad experience on mobile may not be as annoying on desktop'*
- Google will highlight *'site design issues such as pop-ups or large sticky ads'* and rather cleverly will show you *'a video of the ad that was flagged'*
- *'Creative issues are shown on your site through ad tags like flashing animated ads or autoplay videos with sound'*
- remove annoying ads from your site
- submit your site for a review of your ad experience in Search Console.

What Does Google Mean By "*Low-Quality*"?

Google has a history of classifying your site as some type of entity, and whatever that is, you don't want a *low-quality* label on it. Put there by algorithm or human. Manual evaluators might not directly impact your rankings, but any signal associated with Google marking your site as *low-quality* should probably be avoided.

If you are making websites to rank in Google without unnatural practices, you are going to have to meet Google's expectations in the [Quality Rater Guidelines](#).

Google says:

> **QUOTE**: "*Low-quality pages are unsatisfying or lacking in some element that prevents them from achieving their purpose well.*" Google, 2017

'Sufficient Reason'

There is 'sufficient reason' in some cases to immediately mark the page down in some areas, and Google directs quality rater to do so:

- An unsatisfying amount of MC is a sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.
- Low-quality MC is a sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.
- Lacking appropriate E-A-T is sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.
- Negative reputation is sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.

What are low-quality pages?

When it comes to defining what a low-quality page is, Google is evidently VERY interested in the quality of the Main Content (MC) of a page:

Main Content (MC)

Google says MC should be the '*main reason a page exists'*.

- The quality of the MC is low.
- There is an unsatisfying amount of MC for the purpose of the page.
- There is an unsatisfying amount of website information.

POOR MC & POOR USER EXPERIENCE

- This content has many problems: poor spelling and grammar, complete lack of editing, inaccurate information. The poor quality of the MC is a reason for the Lowest+ to Low rating. In addition, the popover ads (the words that are double underlined in blue) can make the main content difficult to read, resulting in a poor user experience.
- Pages that provide a poor user experience, such as pages that try to download malicious software, should also receive low ratings, even if they have some images appropriate for the query.

DESIGN FOCUS NOT ON MC

- If a page seems poorly designed, take a good look. Ask yourself if the page was deliberately designed to draw attention away from the MC. If so, the Low rating is appropriate.
- The page design is lacking. For example, the page layout or use of space distracts from the MC, making it difficult to use the MC.

MC LACK OF AUTHOR EXPERTISE

- You should consider who is responsible for the content of the website or content of the page you are evaluating. Does the person or organization have sufficient expertise for the topic? If expertise, authoritativeness, or trustworthiness is lacking, use the Low rating.
- There is no evidence that the author has medical expertise. Because this is a YMYL medical article, lacking expertise is a reason for a Low rating.
- The author of the page or website does not have enough expertise for the topic of the page and/or the website is not trustworthy or authoritative for the topic. In other words, the page/website is lacking E-A-T.

After page content, the following are given the most weight in determining if you have a high-quality page.

POOR SECONDARY CONTENT

- Unhelpful or distracting SC that benefits the website rather than helping the user is a reason for a Low rating.
- The SC is distracting or unhelpful for the purpose of the page.
- The page is lacking helpful SC.
- For large websites, SC may be one of the primary ways that users explore the website and find MC, and a lack of helpful SC on large websites with a lot of content may be a reason for a Low rating

DISTRACTING ADVERTISEMENTS

- For example, an ad for a model in a revealing bikini is probably acceptable on a site that sells bathing suits, however, an extremely distracting and graphic porn ad may warrant a Low rating.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

- If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted.
- The website is lacking maintenance and updates.

SERP SENTIMENT & NEGATIVE REVIEWS

- Credible negative (though not malicious or financially fraudulent) reputation is a reason for a Low rating, especially for a YMYL page.
- The website has a negative reputation.

LOWEST RATING

When it comes to Google assigning your page the lowest rating, you are probably going to have to go some to hit this, but it gives you a direction you want to ensure you avoid at all costs.

Google says throughout the document, that there are certain pages that...

> **QUOTE**: "*should always receive the Lowest rating*" Google, 2017

..and these are presented below. Note - These statements below are spread throughout the rater document and not listed the way I have listed them here. I don't think any context is lost presenting them like this, and it makes it more digestible.

Anyone familiar with Google Webmaster Guidelines will be familiar with most of the following:

- True lack of purpose pages or websites.
  - Sometimes it is difficult to determine the real purpose of a page.
- Pages on YMYL websites with completely inadequate or no website information.
- Pages or websites that are created to make money with little to no attempt to help users.
- Pages with extremely low or lowest quality MC.
  - If a page is deliberately created with no MC, use the Lowest rating. Why would a page exist without MC? Pages with no MC are usually lack of purpose pages or deceptive pages.
  - Webpages that are deliberately created with a bare minimum of MC, or with MC which is completely unhelpful for the purpose of the page, should be considered to have no MC
  - Pages deliberately created with no MC should be rated Lowest.
  - Important: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users. Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source. Important: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users. Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source.
- Pages on YMYL (*Your Money Or Your Life* Transaction pages) websites with completely inadequate or no website information.
- Pages on abandoned, hacked, or defaced websites.
- Pages or websites created with no expertise or pages that are highly untrustworthy, unreliable, authoritative, inaccurate, or misleading.
- Harmful or malicious pages or websites.
  - Websites that have extremely negative or malicious reputations. Also use the Lowest rating for violations of the Google Webmaster Quality Guidelines. Finally, Lowest+ may be used both for pages with many low-quality characteristics and for pages whose lack of a single Page Quality characteristic makes you question the true purpose of the page. Important: Negative reputation is sufficient reason to give a

page a Low quality rating. Evidence of truly malicious or fraudulent behavior warrants the Lowest rating.

- o Deceptive pages or websites. Deceptive webpages appear to have a helpful purpose (the stated purpose), but are actually created for some other reason. Use the Lowest rating if a webpage page is deliberately created to deceive and potentially harm users in order to benefit the website.
- o Some pages are designed to manipulate users into clicking on certain types of links through visual design elements, such as page layout, organization, link placement, font color, images, etc. We will consider these kinds of pages to have deceptive page design. Use the Lowest rating if the page is deliberately designed to manipulate users to click on Ads, monetized links, or suspect download links with little or no effort to provide helpful MC.
- o Sometimes, pages just don't "feel" trustworthy. Use the Lowest rating for any of the following: Pages or websites that you strongly suspect are scams
- o Pages that ask for personal information without a legitimate reason (for example, pages which ask for name, birthdate, address, bank account, government ID number, etc.). Websites that "phish" for passwords to Facebook, Gmail, or other popular online services. Pages with suspicious download links, which may be malware.

- Use the Lowest rating for websites with extremely negative reputations.

Websites 'Lacking Care and Maintenance' Are Rated 'Low Quality'.

> **QUOTE**: *"Sometimes a website may seem a little neglected: links may be broken, images may not load, and content may feel stale or out-dated. If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted."*

"Broken" or Non-Functioning Pages Classed As Low Quality

Google gives clear advice on creating useful 404 pages:

1. *Tell visitors clearly that the page they're looking for can't be found*
2. *Use language that is friendly and inviting*
3. *Make sure your 404 page uses the same look and feel (including navigation) as the rest of your site.*
4. *Consider adding links to your most popular articles or posts, as well as a link to your site's home page.*
5. *Think about providing a way for users to report a broken link.*
6. *Make sure that your webserver returns an actual 404 HTTP status code when a missing page is requested*

Google Is Not Going To Rank Low-Quality Pages When It Has Better Options

> **QUOTE**: "*Panda is an algorithm that's applied to sites overall and has become one of our core ranking signals. It measures the quality of a site, which you can read more about in our guidelines. Panda allows Google to take quality into account and adjust ranking accordingly.*" Google

If you have exact match instances of key-phrases on low-quality pages, mostly these pages won't have all the compound ingredients it takes to rank high in Google in 2018.

I was working this, long before I understood it partially enough to write anything about it.

Here is an example of taking a standard page that did not rank for years and then turning it into a topic-oriented resource page designed to fully meet a user's intent:
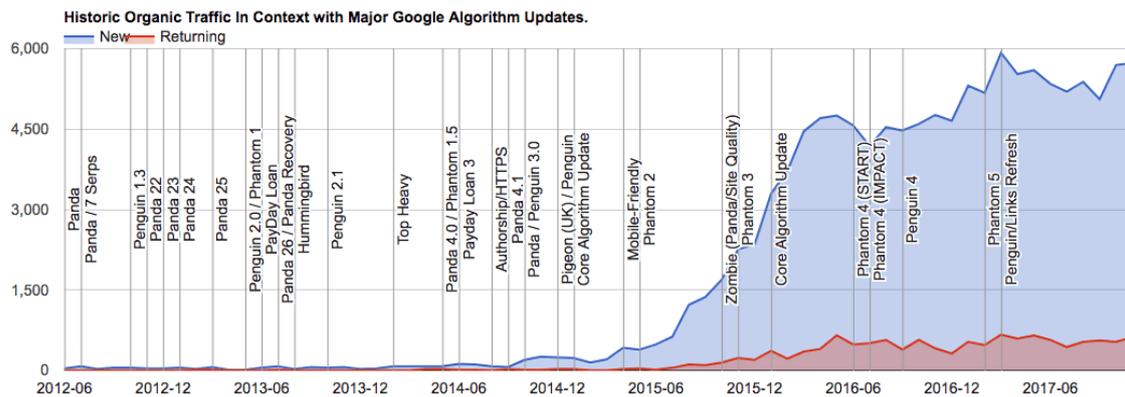
Google, in many instances, would rather send long-tail search traffic, like users using mobile VOICE SEARCH, for instance, to high-quality pages ABOUT a concept/topic that explains relationships and connections between relevant sub-topics FIRST, *rather* than to only send that traffic to low-quality pages *just because* they have the *exact phrase* on the page.

Google has algorithms that target low-quality content and these algorithms are actually trained in some part by human quality rater.

Quality Raters Do Not Directly Impact YOUR site

QUOTE: *"Ratings from evaluators do not determine individual site rankings."* GOOGLE

While Google is on record as stating these quality rater do not directly influence where you rank (without more senior analysts making a call on the quality of your website, I presume?) - there are some things in this document, mostly of a user experience nature (UX) that all search engine optimisers and Webmasters of any kind should note going forward.

From my own experience, an unsatisfying user experience signal can impact rankings even on a REPUTABLE DOMAIN and even with SOUND, SATISFYING CONTENT.

Quality Bar - Always Rising - Always Relative?

You've got to imagine all these quality ratings are getting passed along to the engineers at Google in some form (at some stage) to improve future algorithms - and identify borderline cases.

This is the 'quality' bar I've mentioned a couple of times in past posts.

Google is always raising the bar - always adding new signals, sometimes, in time, taking signals away.

It helps them

1. satisfy users
2. control the bulk of transactional web traffic.

That positioning has always been a win-win for Google - and a recognisable strategy from them after all these years.

Take [unnatural links](#) out of the equation (which have a history of trumping most other signals) and you are left with page level, site level and off-site signals.

All of these quality signals will need to be addressed to insulate against "*Google Panda*" (if that can ever be fully successful, against an algorithm that is modified to periodically "ask questions" of your site and overall quality score).

Google **holds different types of sites to different standards for different kinds of keywords** which would suggest not all websites need all signals satisfied to rank well in SERPs - not ALL THE TIME.

OBSERVATION - You can have the content and the links - but if your site falls short on even a single user satisfaction signal (even if it is picked up by the algorithm, and not a human reviewer) then your rankings for particular terms could collapse - OR - rankings

can be held back - IF Google thinks your organisation, with its resources, or 'reputation, should be delivering a better user experience to users.

OBSERVATION: In the past, s site often rose (in terms of traffic numbers) in Google, before a *Panda* 'penalty'.

It may be the case (and I surmise this) that the introduction of a certain SEO technique initially artificially raised your rankings for your pages in a way that Google's algorithms do not approve of, and once that problem is spread out throughout your site, traffic begins to deteriorate or is slammed in a future algorithm update.

Google says about the Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines:

> **QUOTE***: "Note: Some Webmasters have read these rating guidelines and have included information on their sites to influence your Page Quality rating!" Google*

Surely - that's NOT a bad thing, to make your site HIGHER QUALITY and correctly MARKETING your business to customers - and search quality rater, in the process.

Black hat search engine optimisers will obviously fake all that (which is why it would be self-defeating of me to publish a handy list of signals to manipulate SERPs that's not just "unnatural links").

Businesses that care about the performance in Google organic should be noting ALL the following points very carefully.

This isn't about manipulating quality Raters - it is about making it EASY for them to realise you are a REAL business, with a GOOD REPUTATION, and have a LEVEL of EXPERTISE you wish to share with the world.

The aim is to *create* a good user experience, not *fake* it

How Reputable & User-Friendly Is Your Website?

You can help quality rater EASILY research the reputation of your website especially if you have any positive history.

Make "*reputation information about the website*" easy to access for a quality rater, as judging the reputation of your website is a large part of what they do.

You will need to monitor, or influence, 'independent' reviews about your business - because if reviews are particularly negative - Google will "*trust the independent sources*".

Consider a page that highlights your good press, if you have any.

- Google will consider "**positive user reviews as evidence of positive reputation**." so come up with a way to get legitimate positive reviews - and starting on Google would be a good place to start.
- Google states, "*News articles, Wikipedia articles, blog posts, magazine articles, forum discussions, and ratings from independent organizations can all be sources of reputation information*" but they also state specifically boasts about a lot of internet traffic, for example, should not influence the quality rating of a web page. What *should* influence the reputation of a page is WHO has shared it on social media etc. rather than just raw numbers of shares. CONSIDER CREATING A PAGE with nofollow links to good reviews on other websites as proof of excellence.
- **Google wants quality rater to examine subpages of your site and often "the URL of its associated homepage"** so ensure your homepage is modern, up to date, informative and largely **ON TOPIC with your internal pages**.
- Google wants to know a few things about your website, including:
  - Who is moderating the content on the site
  - Who is responsible for the website
  - Who owns copyright of the content
  - Business details (which is important to have synced and accurate across important social media profiles)
  - When was this content updated?
- Be careful syndicating other people's content. Algorithmic duplicate problems aside…..if there is a problem with that content, **Google will hold the site it finds content on as 'responsible' for that content**.
- If you take money online, in any way, you NEED to have an accessible and **satisfying 'customer service' type page**. Google says, "*Contact information and customer service information are extremely important for websites that handle money, such as stores, banks, credit card companies, etc. Users need a way to ask questions or get help when a problem occurs. For shopping websites, we'll ask you to do some special checks. Look for contact information—including the store's policies on payment, exchanges, and returns.* " Google urges quality rater to be a '*detective*' in finding this information about you - so it must be important to them.
- **Keep web pages updated regularly and let users know when the content was last updated**. Google wants rater to "*search for evidence that effort is being made to keep the website up to date and running smoothly.*"
- Google quality rater are trained to be sceptical of any reviews found. It's normal for all businesses to have mixed reviews, but "*Credible, convincing reports of fraud and financial wrongdoing is evidence of extremely negative reputation*".
- Google asks quality rater to investigate your reputation by searching "giving the example ["ibm.com" reviews –site:ibm.com]: A search on Google for reviews of "ibm.com" which excludes pages on ibm.com." - So I would do that search yourself and judge for yourself what your reputation is. Very low ratings on independent websites could play a factor in where you rank in the future - " with Google stating clearly "*very low ratings on the BBB site to be evidence for a negative reputation*". Other sites mentioned to review your business include YELP and Amazon. Often - using rich snippets containing schema.org information - you can get Google to display user ratings in the actual SERPs. I noted you can get 'stars in SERPs' within two days after I added the code (March 2014).
- If you can get a Wikipedia page - get one!. Keep it updated too. For the rest of us, we'll just need to work harder to prove you are a real business that has earned its rankings.

- If you have a lot of NEGATIVE reviews - expect to be treated as a business with an "Extremely negative reputation" - and back in 2013 - Google mentioned they had an algorithm for this, too. Google has said the odd bad review is not what this algorithm looks for, as bad reviews are a natural part of the web.
- For quality rater, Google has a Page Quality Rating Scale with 5 rating options on a spectrum of "*Lowest, Low, Medium, High, and Highest*."
- Google says "***High-quality pages are satisfying and achieve their purpose well***" and has lots of "satisfying" content, **written by an expert or authority in their field** - they go on to include **"*About Us information*" pages**, and easy to access "*Contact or Customer Service information, etc.*"
- **Google is looking for a "*website that is well cared for and maintained*"** so you need to keep content management systems updated, check for broken image links and HTML links. If you create a frustrating user experience through sloppy website maintenance - expect that to be reflected in some way with a lower quality rating. Google Panda October 2014 may have went for e-commerce pages that were optimised 'the old way' and are now classed as 'thin content'.
- **Google wants rater to navigate your site and 'test' it out to see if it is working**. They tell rater to check your shopping cart function is working properly, for instance.
- **Google expects pages** to "***be edited, reviewed, and updated on a regular basis***" especially if they are for important issues like medical information, and states not all pages are held to such standards, but one can expect that Google wants information updated in a reasonable timescale. How reasonable this is, is dependant on the TOPIC and the PURPOSE of the web page **RELATIVE to competing pages on the web**.
- **Google wants to rank pages by expert authors, not from content farms.**
- **You can't have a great piece of content on a site with a negative reputation and expect it to perform well.** A "*High rating cannot be used for any website that has a convincing negative reputation*."
- A very **positive reputation** can lift your content from "*medium*" to "*high-quality*".
- Google doesn't care about '*pretty*' over substance and clearly instructs rater to "*not rate based on how "nice" the page looks*".
- **Just about every webpage should have a CLEAR way to contact the site manager to achieve a high rating.**
- Highlighting ads in your design is BAD practice, and Google gives clear advice to rate the page LOW - **Google wants you to optimise for A SATISFYING EXPERIENCE FIRST, CONVERSION SECOND!** Conversion optimisers especially should take note of this, and aren't we all?
- **Good news for web designers, content managers and search engine optimisers!** " Google clearly states, "*If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted*." although does stipulate again its horses for courses.....if everybody else is crap, then you'll still fly - not much of those SERPs about these days.
- If your intent is to deceive, be malicious or present pages with no purpose other than to monetise free traffic with no value ad - Google is not your friend.
- Domains that are 'related' in Whois can lead to a low-quality score, so be careful how you direct people around multiple sites you own.
- Keyword stuffing your pages is not recommended, even if you do get past the algorithms.

- Quality rater are on the lookout for content that is "*copied with minimal alteration*" and crediting the original source is not a way to get around this. Google rates this type of activity low-quality.
- **How can Google trust a page if it is blocked from it or from reading critical elements that make up that page?** Be VERY careful blocking Google from important directories (blocking CSS and .js files are very risky these days). **REVIEW your ROBOTS.txt and know exactly what you are blocking and why you are blocking it**.

Ratings Can Be Relative

It's important to note your website quality is often judged on the quality of competing pages for this keyword phrase. SEO is still a horserace.

A lot of this is all RELATIVE to what YOUR COMPETITION are doing.

How relative?

Big sites v small sites?

Sites with a lot of links v not a lot of links?

Big companies with a lot of staff v small companies with a few staff?

Do sites at the top of Google get asked more of? Algorithmically and manually? Just.... because they are at the top?

Whether its algorithmic or manual - based on technical, architectural, reputation or content - Google can decide and will decide if your site meets its quality requirements to rank on page one.

The likelihood of you ranking stable at number one is almost non-existent in any competitive niche where you have more than a few players aiming to rank number one.

Not en-masse, not unless you are bending the rules.

My own strategy for visibility over the last few years has been to avoid focusing entirely on ranking for particular keywords and rather improve the search experience of my entire website.

The entire budget of my time went on content improvement, content reorganisation, website architecture improvement, and lately, mobile experience improvement.

I have technical improvements to speed, usability and accessibility in the pipeline.

In simple terms, I took *thin* content and made it *fat* to make old content perform better.

Unsurprisingly, ranking *fat* content comes with its own challenges as the years go by.

Can Thin Content Still Rank In Google?

Yes.

Ranking top depends on the query and level of competition for the query.

Google's high-quality recommendations are often for specific niches and specific searches as most of the web would not meet the very highest requirements.

Generally speaking - real quality will stand out, in any niche with a lack of it, at the moment.

The time it takes for this to happen (at Google's end) leaves a lot to be desired in some niches and time is something Google has an almost infinite supply of compared to 99% of the businesses on the planet.

What Are The High-Quality Characteristics of a Web Page?

> **QUOTE**: "*High quality pages are satisfying and achieve their purpose well.*" Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

The following are examples of what Google calls 'high-quality characteristics' of a page and should be remembered:

- "*A satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality*" main content (MC)
- Copyright notifications up to date
- Functional page design
- Page author has Topical Authority
- High-Quality Main Content
- Positive Reputation or expertise of website or author (Google yourself)
- Very helpful SUPPLEMENTARY content "*which improves the user experience.*"
- Trustworthy
- Google wants to reward 'expertise' and 'everyday expertise' or experience so you need to make this clear (perhaps using an Author Box or some other widget)
- Accurate information
- Ads can be at the top of your page as long as it does not distract from the main content on the page
- Highly satisfying website contact information
- Customised and very helpful 404 error pages
- Awards
- Evidence of expertise
- Attention to detail

If Google can detect investment in time and labour on your site - there are indications that they will reward you for this (or at least - you won't be affected when others are, meaning you rise in Google SERPs when others fall).

What Characteristics Do The Highest Quality Pages Exhibit?

> **QUOTE**: "*The quality of the MC is one of the most important criteria in Page Quality rating, and informs the EAT of the page. For all types of webpages, creating high quality MC takes a significant amount of at least one of the following: time, effort, expertise, and talent/skill.*" Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

You obviously want the highest quality 'score' possible but looking at the Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines that is a lot of work to achieve.

Google wants to rate you on the effort you put into your website, and how satisfying a visit is to your pages.

1. "*Very high or highest quality MC, with demonstrated expertise, talent, and/or skill.*"
2. "*Very high level of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness (page and website) on the topic of the page.*"
3. "*Very good reputation (website or author) on the topic of the page.*"

At least for competitive niches were Google intend to police this quality recommendation, Google wants to reward high-quality pages and "*the Highest rating may be justified for pages with a satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality*" main content.

If your main content is very poor, with "*grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors*", or not helpful or trustworthy - ANYTHING that can be interpreted as a bad user experience - you can expect to get a low rating.

> **QUOTE**: "*We will consider content to be Low quality if it is created without adequate time, effort, expertise, or talent/skill. Pages with low-quality (main content) do not achieve their purpose well.*" Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

Note - not ALL "thin-content" pages are automatically classed low-quality.

If you can satisfy the user with a page "thin" on content - you are ok (but probably susceptible to someone building a better page than your, more easily, I'd say).

Google expects more from big brands than they do from a smaller store (but that does not mean you shouldn't be aiming to meet ALL these high-quality guidelines above).

Note too, that if you violate Google Webmaster recommendations for performance in their indexes of the web - you automatically get a low-quality rating.

If your page has a sloppy design, low-quality main content and too many distracting ads your rankings are very probably going to take a nose-dive. If a Search Quality Evaluator is subject to a sneaky redirect they are instructed to rate your site low.

What Are The Low-Quality Signals Google Looks For?

QUOTE: "*Low quality pages are unsatisfying or lacking in some element that prevents them from achieving their purpose well. These pages lack expertise or are not very trustworthy/authoritative for the purpose of the page.*" Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

These include but are not limited to:

1. Lots of spammy comments
2. Low-quality content that lacks EAT signal (Expertise + Authority + Trust")
3. NO Added Value for users
4. Poor page design
5. Malicious harmful or deceptive practices detected
6. Negative reputation
7. Auto-generated content
8. No website contact information
9. Fakery or INACCURATE information
10. Untrustworthy
11. Website not maintained
12. Pages just created to link to others
13. Pages lack purpose
14. Keyword stuffing
15. Inadequate customer service pages
16. Sites that use practices Google doesn't want you to use

Pages can get a neutral rating too.

Pages that have "*Nothing wrong, but nothing special*" about them don't "*display characteristics associated with a High rating*" and puts you in the middle ground - probably not a sensible place to be a year or so down the line.

Pages Can Be Rated 'Medium Quality'

QUOTE: "*Medium pages achieve their purpose and have neither high nor low expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness. However, Medium pages lack the characteristics that would support a higher quality rating. Occasionally, you will find a page with a mix of high and low quality characteristics. In those cases, the best page quality rating may be Medium.*" Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

Quality rater will rate content as *medium* rating when the author or entity responsible for it is unknown.

If you have multiple editors contributing to your site, you had better have a HIGH EDITORIAL STANDARD.

One could take from all this that Google Quality rater are out to get you if you manage to get past the algorithms, but equally, Google quality rater could be friends you just haven't met yet.

Somebody must be getting rated highly, right?

Impress a Google Quality rater and get a high rating.

If you are a spammer you'll be pulling out the stops to fake this, naturally, but this is a chance for real businesses to put their best foot forward and HELP quality rater correctly judge the size and relative quality of your business and website.

Real reputation is hard to fake - so if you have it - make sure it's on your website and is EASY to access from contact and about pages.

The quality rater handbook is a good training guide for looking for links to disavow, too.

It's pretty clear.

Google organic listings are reserved for 'remarkable' and reputable' content, expertise and trusted businesses.

A high bar to meet - and one that is designed for you to never quite meet unless you are serious about competing, as there is so much work involved.

I think the inferred message is to call your Adwords rep if you are an unremarkable business.

Google Quality Algorithm Updates

Google has many algorithm updates during a year.

These 'quality updates' are very reminiscent of Google Panda updates and often impact many websites at the same time - and often these focus on demoting similar 'low-quality' SEO techniques we have been told Panda focuses on.

Usually, Google has 3 or 4 big updates in a year that focus on various things, but they also make changes daily. See this list for a comprehensive list of Google algorithm updates.

What Is Google Panda?

> **QUOTE**: "*Panda is an algorithm that's applied to sites overall and has become one of our core ranking signals. It measures the quality of a site, which you can read more about in our guidelines. Panda allows Google to take quality into account and adjust ranking accordingly.*" Google

Google Panda aims to rate the quality of your pages and website and is based on things about your site that Google can rate, or algorithmically identify.

> **QUOTE**: "*(Google Panda) measures the quality of a site pretty much by looking at the vast majority of the pages at least. But essentially allows us to take quality of the whole site into account when ranking pages from that particular site and adjust the ranking accordingly for the pages. So essentially, if you want a blunt answer, it **will not devalue, it will actually demote**. Basically, we figured that site is trying to game our systems, and unfortunately, successfully. So we will adjust the rank. We will push the site back just to make sure that it's not working anymore.*" *Gary Illyes – Search Engine Land*

We are told the current Panda is an attempt to basically stop low-quality thin content pages ranking for keywords they shouldn't rank for.

Panda evolves – signals can come and go – Google can get better at determining quality as a spokesman from Google has confirmed :

> **QUOTE***: "So it's not something where we'd say, if your website was previously affected, then it will always be affected. Or if it wasn't previously affected, it will never be affected…. sometimes we do change the criteria…. category pages…. (I) wouldn't see that as something where Panda would say, this looks bad…. Ask them the questions from the Panda blog post….. usability, you need to work on."* John Mueller, Google.

In my notes about Google Penguin, I list the original, somewhat abstract and metaphorical Panda ranking 'factors' published as a guideline for creating high-quality pages. I also list these Panda points below:

(PS - I have **emphasised** two of the bullet points below, at the top and bottom because I think it's easier to understand these points **as a question, how to work that question out, and ultimately, what Google really cares about - what their users think**.

- *Would you trust the information presented in this article? (YES or NO)*
- *Is this article written by an expert or enthusiast who knows the topic well, or is it more shallow in nature? EXPERTISE*
- *Does the site have duplicate, overlapping, or redundant articles on the same or similar topics with slightly different keyword variations? LOW-QUALITY CONTENT/THIN CONTENT*

- *Would you be comfortable giving your credit card information to this site? (HTTPS? OTHER TRUST SIGNALS (CONTACT/ABOUT / PRIVACY / COPYRIGHT / DISCLOSURES / DISCLAIMERS etc.)*
- *Does this article have spelling, stylistic, or factual errors? (SPELLING + GRAMMAR + CONTENT QUALITY - perhaps wrong dates in content, on old articles, for instance)*
- *Are the topics driven by genuine interests of readers of the site, or does the site generate content by attempting to guess what might rank well in search engines? (OLD SEO TACTICS|DOORWAY PAGES)*
- *Does the article provide original content or information, original reporting, original research, or original analysis? (ORIGINAL RESEARCH & SATISFYING CONTENT)*
- *Does the page provide substantial value when compared to other pages in search results? (WHAT'S THE RELATIVE QUALITY OF COMPETITION LIKE FOR THIS TERM?)*
- *How much is quality control done on content? (WHEN WAS THIS LAST EDITED? Is CONTENT OUTDATED? IS SUPPLEMENTARY CONTENT OUTDATED (External links and images?))*
- *Does the article describe both sides of a story? (IS THIS A PRESS RELEASE?)*
- *Is the site a recognized authority on its topic? (EXPERTISE)*
- *Is the content mass-produced by or outsourced to a large number of creators, or spread across a large network of sites, so that individual pages or sites don't get as much attention or care? (IS THIS CONTENT BOUGHT FROM A $5 per article content factory? Or is written by an EXPERT or someone with a lot of EXPERIENCE of the subject matter?)*
- *Was the article edited well, or does it appear sloppy or hastily produced? (QUALITY CONTROL on EDITORIALS)*
- *For a health related query, would you trust information from this site? (EXPERTISE NEEDED)*
- *Would you recognize this site as an authoritative source when mentioned by name? (EXPERTISE NEEDED)*
- *Does this article provide a complete or comprehensive description of the topic? (Is the page text designed to help a visitor or shake them down for their cash?)*
- *Does this article contain insightful analysis or interesting information that is beyond obvious? (LOW QUALITY CONTENT - You know it when you see it)*
- *Is this the sort of page you'd want to bookmark, share with a friend, or recommend? (Would sharing this page make you look smart or dumb to your friends? This should be reflected in social signals)*
- *Does this article have an excessive amount of ads that distract from or interfere with the main content? (OPTIMISE FOR SATISFACTION FIRST - CONVERSION SECOND - do not let the conversion get in the way of satisfying the INTENT of the page. For example - if you rank with INFORMATIONAL CONTENT with a purpose to SERVE those visitors - the visitor should land on your destination page and not be deviated from the PURPOSE of the page - and that was informational, in this example - to educate. SO - educate first - beg for social shares on those articles - and leave the conversion on Merit and slightly more subtle influences rather than massive banners or whatever that annoy users). We KNOW ads (OR DISTRACTING CALL TO ACTIONS) convert well at the tops of articles - but Google says it is sometimes a bad user experience. You run the risk of Google screwing with your rankings as you optimise for conversion so be careful and keep everything simple and obvious.*
- *Would you expect to see this article in a printed magazine, encyclopedia or book? (Is this a HIGH-QUALITY article?)... no? then expect ranking problems.*
- *Are the articles short, unsubstantial, or otherwise lacking in helpful specifics? (Is this a LOW or MEDIUM QUALITY ARTICLE? LOW WORD COUNTS ACROSS PAGES?)*

- *Are the pages produced with great care and attention to detail vs. less attention to detail? (Does this page impress?)*
- ***Would users complain when they see pages from this site? (WILL THIS PAGE MAKE GOOGLE LOOK STUPID IF IT RANKS TOP?)***

All that sits quite nicely with the information you can read in the Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines.

If you fail to meet these standards (even some) your rankings can fluctuate wildly (and often, as Google updates Panda every month we are told and often can spot rolling in).

It all probably correlates quite nicely too, with the type of sites you don't want links from.

> **QUOTE***: "I think there is probably a misunderstanding that there's this one site-wide number that Google keeps for all websites and that's not the case. We look at lots of different factors and **there's not just this one site-wide quality score that we look at**. So we try to look at a variety of different signals that come together, some of them are per page, some of them are more per site, but it's not the case where there's one number and it comes from these five pages on your website."* John Mueller, Google

Google is raising the quality bar, and forcing optimisers and content creators to spend HOURS, DAYS or WEEKS longer on websites if they 'expect' to rank HIGH in natural results.

If someone is putting the hours into rank their site through legitimate efforts - Google will want to reward that - because it keeps the barrier to entry HIGH for most other competitors.

Critics will say the higher the barrier to entry is to rank high in Google natural listings the more attractive Google Adwords begins to look to those other businesses.

Google says a quality rater does not affect your site, but if your site gets multiple LOW-QUALITY notices from manual reviewers - that stuff is coming back to get you later, surely.

Identifying Which Pages On Your Own Site Hurt Or Help Your Rankings
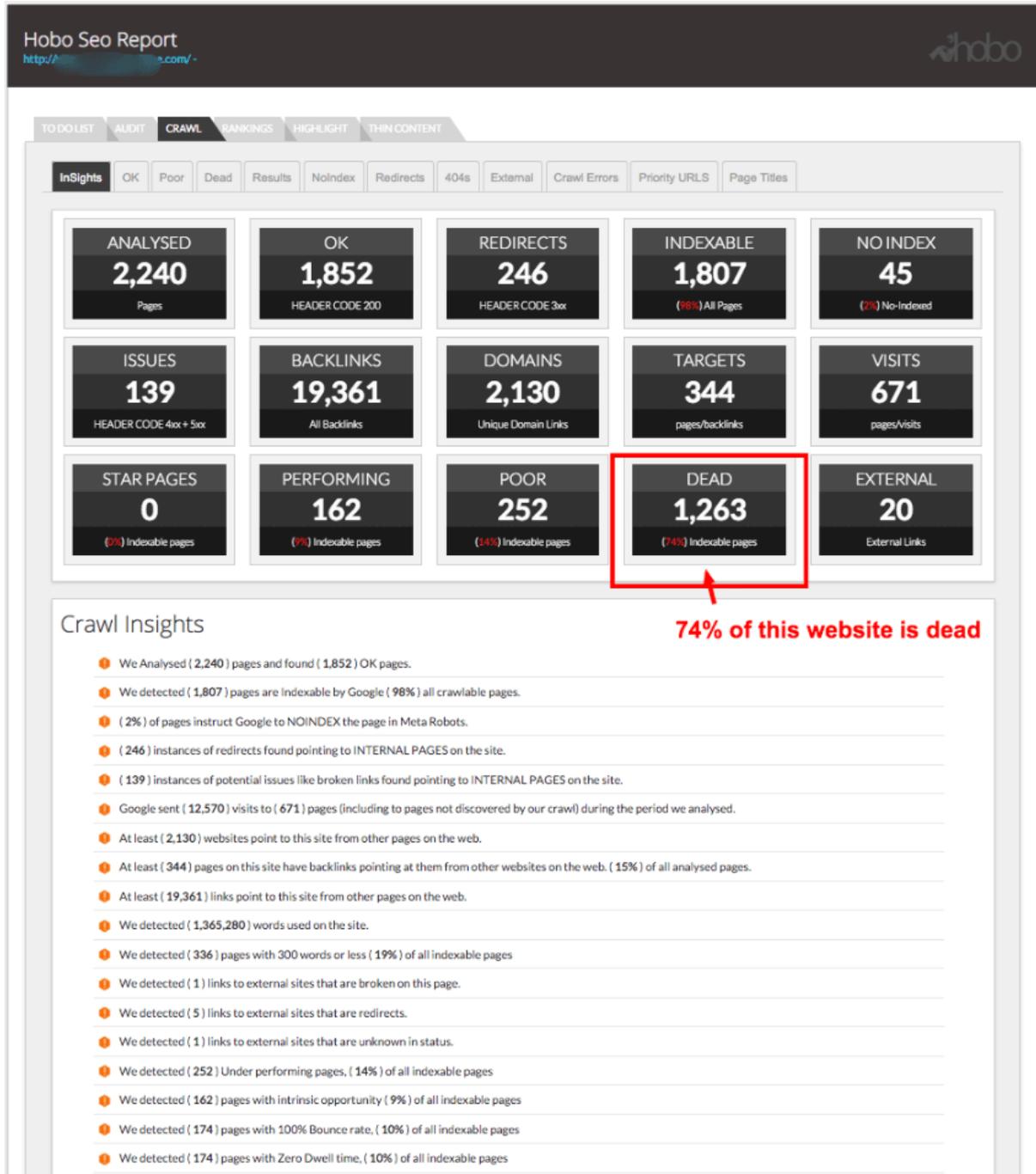
Separating the wheat from the chaff.

Being 'indexed' is important. If a page isn't indexed, the page can't be returned by Google in Search Engine Results Pages.

While getting as many pages indexed in Google was historically a priority for an SEO, Google is now rating the quality of pages on your site and the type of pages it is indexing.

So bulk indexation is no guarantee of success - in fact, it's a risk in 2018 to index all URLs on your site, especially if you have a large, sprawling site.

If you have a lot of low-quality pages (URLs) indexed on your site compared to high-quality pages (URLs)... Google has told us it is marking certain sites down for that.

Some URLs are just not welcome to be indexed as part of your website content anymore.

Do I need to know which pages are indexed?

No. Knowing is useful, of course, but largely unnecessary. Indexation is never a guarantee of traffic.

Some SEO would tend to scrape Google to get indexation data on a website. I've never bothered with that. Most sites I work with have XML sitemap files, so an obvious place to start to look at such issues is **Google Search Console**.

Google will tell you how many pages you have submitted in a sitemap, and how many pages are indexed. It will not tell you which pages are indexed, but if there is a LARGE discrepancy between SUBMITTED and INDEXED, it's very much worth digging deeper.
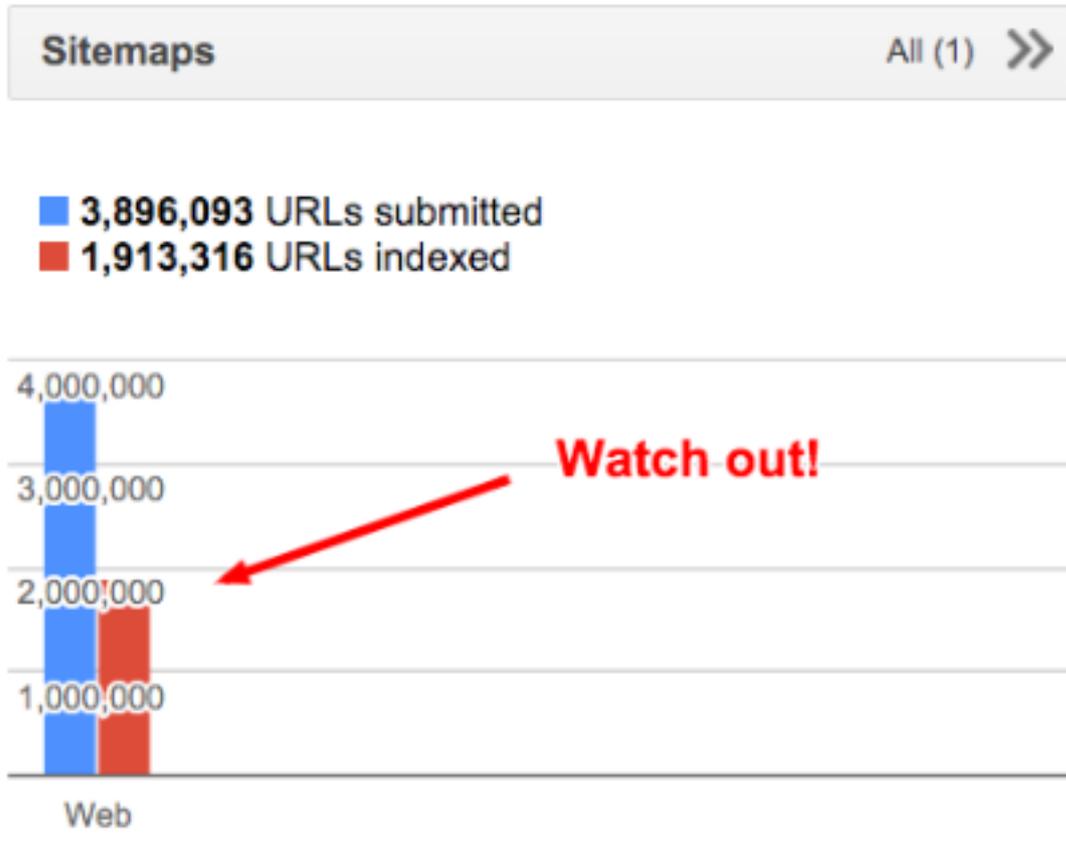
If Google is de-indexing large swaths of your content that you have actually submitted as part of an XML sitemap, then a problem is often afoot.

Unfortunately, with this method, you don't get to see the pages produced by the CMS out with the XML sitemap - so this is not a full picture of the 'health' of your website.

Read my article on how to get your entire website crawled and indexed by Google.

Identifying Dead Pages

I usually start with a performance analysis that involves **merging data from a physical crawl of a website with analytics data and Webmaster tools data**. A content type analysis will identify the type of pages the cms generates. A content performance analysis will gauge how well each section of the site performs.

If you have 100,000 pages on a site, and only 1,000 pages get organic traffic from Google over a 3-6 month period - you can make the argument 99% of the site is rated as 'crap' (at least as far as Google rates pages these days).

I group pages like these together as '**dead pages**' for further analysis. *Deadweight*, 'dead' for short.

The thinking is if the pages were high-quality, they would be getting *some* kind of organic traffic.

Identifying which pages receive no organic visitors over a sensible timeframe is a quick if noisy, way to separate pages that obviously WORK from pages that DONT - and will help you clean up a large portion of redundant URLs on the site.

It helps to see page performance in the context of longer timeframes as some types of content can be seasonal, for instance, and produce false positives over a shorter timescale. It is important to trim content pages carefully - and there are nuances.

False Positives

Experience can educate you when a page is high-quality and yet receives no traffic. If the page is thin, but is not manipulative, is indeed 'unique' and delivers on a purpose with little obvious detectable reason to mark it down, then you can say it is a high-quality page - just with very little *search* demand for it. Ignored content is not the same as 'toxic' content.

False positives aside, **once you identify the pages receiving no traffic, you very largely isolate the type of pages on your site that Google doesn't rate** - for whatever reason. A strategy for these pages can then be developed.

Identifying Content That Can Potentially Hurt Your Rankings

As you review the pages, you're probably going to find pages that include:

- out of date, overlapping or irrelevant content
- collections of pages not paginated properly
- indexable pages that shouldn't be indexed
- stub pages
- indexed search pages
- pages with malformed HTML and broken images
- auto-generated pages with little value

You will probably find 'dead' pages you didn't even know your cms produced (hence why an actual crawl of your site is required, rather than just working from a lit of URLs form an XML sitemap, for instance).

Those pages need to be cleaned up, Google has said. And remaining pages should:

QUOTE: "*stand on their own*" John Mueller, Google

Google doesn't approve of most types of auto-generated pages in 2018, so you don't want Google indexing these pages in a normal fashion.

Judicious use of '*noindex,follow*' directive in robots meta tags, and sensible use of the canonical link element are *required implementation* on most sites I see these days.

The pages that remain after a URL clear-out, can be reworked and improved.

In fact - they MUST BE improved if you are to win more rankings and get more Google organic traffic in future.

This is time-consuming - just like Google wants it to be. You need to review DEAD pages with a forensic eye and ask:

- Are these pages high-quality and very relevant to a search term?
- Do these pages duplicate content on the pages on the site?
- Are these pages automatically generated, with little or no unique text content on them?
- Is the purpose of this page met WITHOUT sending visitors to another page e.g. doorway pages?
- Will these pages ever pick up natural links?
- Is the intent of these pages to inform first? (or profit from organic traffic through advertising?)
- Are these pages FAR superior to the competition in Google presently for the search term you want to rank? This is actually very important.

If the answer to any of the above is NO - then it is imperative you take action to minimise the amount of these types of pages on your site.

What about DEAD pages with incoming backlinks or a lot of text content?

Bingo! Use 301 redirects (or use canonical link elements) to redirect any asset you have with some value to Googlebot to **equivalent, up to date** sections on your site. Do NOT just redirect these pages to your homepage.

Rework available content before you bin it

High-quality content is expensive - so rework content when it is available. Medium quality content can always be made higher quality - in fact - a page is hardly ever finished in 2018. EXPECT to come back to your articles every six months to improve them to keep them moving in the right direction.

Sensible grouping of content types across the site can often leave you with substantial text content that can be reused and repackaged in a way that the same content originally spread over multiple pages, now consolidated into one page reworked and shaped around a topic, has a considerably much more successful time of it in Google SERPs in 2018.

Well, it does if the page you make is *useful* and has a purpose *other* than *just* to make money.

REMEMBER - DEAD PAGES are only one aspect of a site review. There's going to be a large percentage of any site that gets a little organic traffic but still severely underperforms, too - tomorrows DEAD pages. I call these POOR pages in my reviews.

Minimise Low-Quality Content & Overlapping Text Content

Google may well be able to recognise 'low-quality' a lot better than it does 'high-quality' - so having a lot of 'low-quality' pages on your site is potentially what you are actually going to be rated on (if it makes up most of your site) - now, or in the future. NOT your high-quality content.

This is more or less explained by Google spokespeople like John Mueller. He is constantly on about 'folding' thin pages together, these days (and I can say that certainly has a positive impact on many sites).

While his advice in this instance might be specifically about UGC (user-generated content like forums) - I am more interested in what he has to say when he talks about the algorithm looking at the site "overall" and how it 'thinks' when it finds a mixture of high-quality pages and low-quality pages.

https://youtu.be/s7kP7LWM87Y?t=18m7s

And Google has clearly said in print:

> **QUOTE**: "low-quality content on part of a site can impact a site's ranking as a whole." Google

Avoid Google's punitive algorithms

Fortunately, we don't actually need to know and fully understand the ins-and-outs of Google's algorithms to know what the best course of action is.

The sensible thing in light of Google's punitive algorithms is just to **not let Google index (or more accurately, rate) low-quality pages on your site. And certainly - stop publishing new 'thin' pages**. Don't put your site at risk.

If pages get no organic traffic anyway, are out-of-date for instance, and improving them would take a lot of effort and expense, why let Google index them normally, if by rating them it impacts your overall score? Clearing away the low-quality stuff lets you focus on building better stuff on other pages that Google will rank in 2018 and beyond.

Ideally, you would have a giant site and every page would be high-quality - but that's not practical.

A myth is that pages need a lot of text to rank. They don't, but a lot of people still try to make text bulkier and unique page-to-page.

While that theory is sound (when focused on a single page, when the intent is to deliver utility content to a Google user) using old school SEO techniques on especially a large site spread out across many pages seems to amplify site quality problems, after recent algorithm changes, and so this type of optimisation without keeping an eye on overall site quality is self-defeating in the long run.

If you want assistance with this type of analysis for your own website, email me here or you can buy a review of your website online here.

Investigating A Traffic Drop
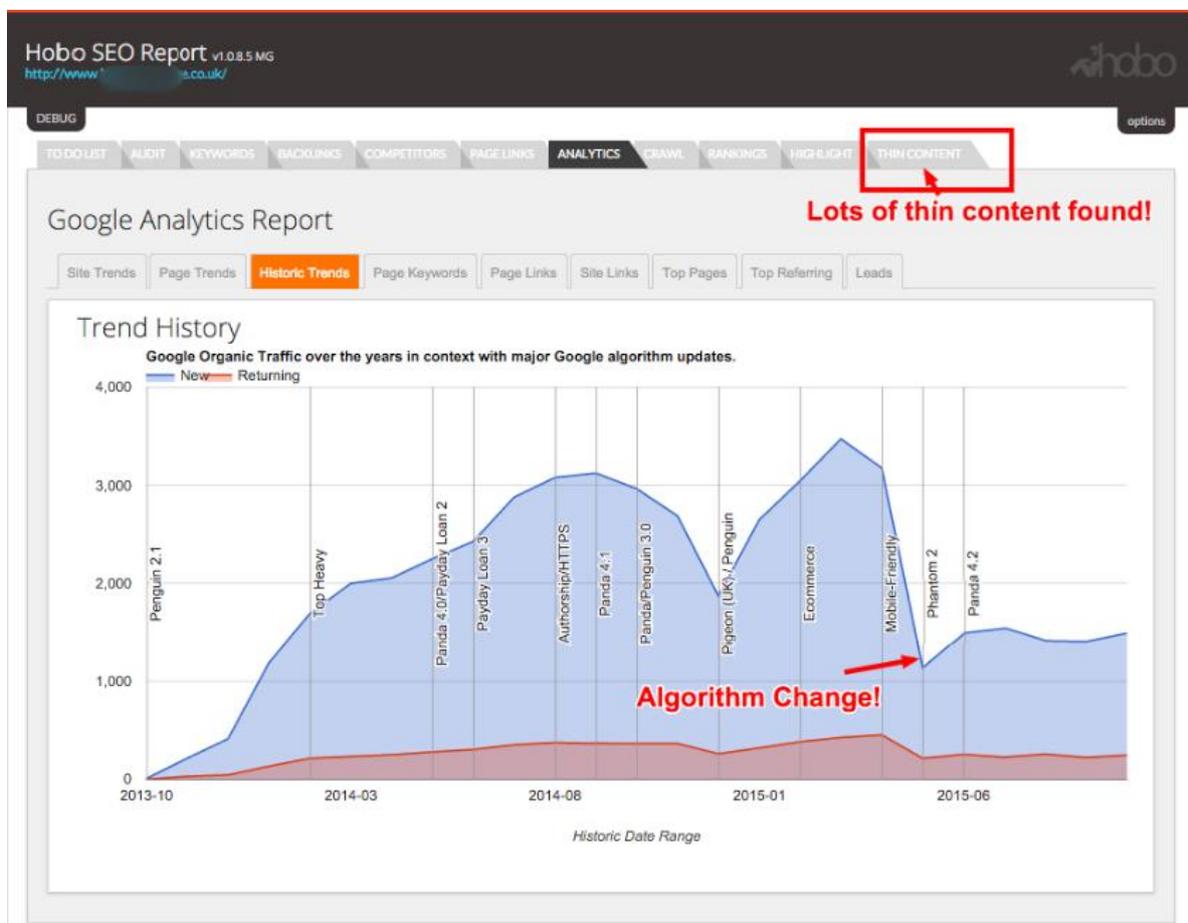
Every site is impacted by how highly Google rates it.

There are many reasons a website loses traffic from Google. Server changes, website problems, content changes, downtimes, redesigns, migrations... the list is extensive.

Sometimes, Google turns up the dial on demands on 'quality', and if your site falls short, a website traffic crunch is assured. Some sites invite problems ignoring Google's 'rules' and some sites inadvertently introduce technical problems to their site after the date of a major algorithm update and are then impacted negatively by later refreshes of the algorithm.

Comparing your Google Analytics data side by side with the dates of official algorithm updates is useful in diagnosing a site health issue or traffic drop. In the above example, a new client thought it was a switch to HTTPS and server downtime that caused the drop when it was actually the *May 6, 2015, Google Quality Algorithm* (originally called Phantom 2 in some circles) that caused the sudden drop in organic traffic - and the problem was probably compounded by unnatural linking practices. (This client did eventually receive a penalty for unnatural links when they ignored our advice to clean up).

Thin Content

A quick check of how the site was laid out soon uncovered a lot of unnecessary pages, or what Google calls thin, overlapping content. This observation would go a long way to confirming that the traffic drop was indeed caused by the May algorithm change.

Another obvious way to gauge the health of a site is to see which pages on the site get zero traffic from Google over a certain period of time. I do this by merging analytics data with crawl data - as analytics doesn't give you data on pages it sends no traffic to.

Often, this process can highlight low-quality pages on a site.

Hobo SEO Report v1.0.8.5 MG
http://www._____.co.uk/

DEBUG options

TO DO LIST | AUDIT | KEYWORDS | BACKLINKS | COMPETITORS | PAGE LINKS | ANALYTICS | **CRAWL** | RANKINGS | HIGHLIGHT | THIN CONTENT

InSights | Star | OK | Poor | Dead | Results | NoIndex | Redirects | 404s | External | Crawl Errors | Priority URLS | Page Titles

Site-wide Crawl Report

Lots of dead pages

We Analysed [ ] urls & Filted down to [ ] urls that can be focused on

ℹ This site has a crawl equity ratio of (1.83 : 1)

ℹ We do not list urls that are "noindex" or canonical link elements or 3XX redirects to other sources in this report.

This tab is an overview of all pages on the website, their status, the Google traffic they get, and performance metrics including the number of back links pointing to each page, the goals each page is responsible for generating - and importantly - the word count on the page, and a performance indicator number we have calculated for that page text content (only).

We crawled your site on 2015-11-04.

URL	STATUS	META ROBOTS	INLINKS	OUTLINKS	EXTERNAL	BACKLINKS	DOMAIN BACKLINKS	VISITS	NEW VISITS	BOUNCE	DWELL	GOALS	WORDS	PI
https ...k/	200		352	64	3	152	77	3695	3095	30.91%	00:02:53	0	711	237.00
	200		1	47	3	0	0	664	556	40.21%	00:02:45	0	491	0.88
	200		1	47	3	0	0	290	245	40.00%	00:01:40	0	422	1.72
	200		1	47	3	6	7	131	119	34.35%	00:02:17	0	393	3.30
	200 ctional-		1	42	5	161	65	121	109	97.52%	00:00:12	0	299	2.74
	200		1	47	3	13	11	91	76	39.56%	00:02:26	0	389	5.12
	200		1	47	3	0	0	49	36	32.65%	00:03:14	0	394	10.94
	200		1	47	3	8	2	39	33	43.59%	00:00:34	0	380	11.52
	200		145	67	3	2	3	57	23	24.56%	00:04:20	0	544	23.65
	200		1	41	26	9	7	22	22	86.36%	00:01:31	0	990	45.00
	200		1	47	3	0	0	38	19	63.16%	00:00:51	0	438	23.05
	200		1	47	3	0	0	34	16	32.35%	00:01:50	0	424	26.50
	200		1	47	3	13	9	29	10	68.97%	00:04:11	0	434	43.40
	200		1	47	3	0	0	12	10	50.00%	00:01:36	0	458	45.80
	200		1	47	3	0	0	8	4	50.00%	00:00:33	0	307	76.75
	200 an-		1	42	5	0	0	7	4	42.86%	00:02:24	0	270	67.50
	200 are-		1	41	6	0	0	4	4	50.00%	00:02:40	0	275	68.75
	200		1	47	3	0	0	5	2	40.00%	00:02:17	0	333	166.50
	200		2	40	4	0	0	3	2	0.00%	00:05:30	0	438	219.00

Google calls a lot of pages 'thin' or 'overlapping' content these days. I go into some of that in my duplicate content penalty post.

Algorithm Changes

Algorithm changes in 2018 seem to centre on reducing the effectiveness of old-school SEO **techniques**, with the *May 2015 Google 'Quality' algorithm update* bruisingly familiar. An algorithm change is usually akin to 'community service' for the business impacted negatively.

If your pages were designed to get the most out of Google, with commonly known and now out-dated SEO techniques chances are Google has identified this and is throttling your rankings in some way. Google will continue to throttle rankings until you clean your pages up.

If Google thinks your links are manipulative, they want them cleaned up, too.

Actually - looking at the backlink profile of this customer, they are going to need a disavow file prepared too.

That is unsurprising in today's SEO climate.

What could be argued was 'highly relevant' or 'optimised' on-site SEO for Google just a few years ago is now being treated more like 'web spam' by punitive algorithms, rather than just 'over-optimisation'.

Google went through the SEO playbook and identified old techniques and use them against you today - meaning **every SEO job you take on always has a clean up aspect now**.

Google has left a very narrow band of opportunity when it comes to SEO - and punishments are designed to take you out of the game for some time while you clean up the infractions.

Technical Issues

Google has a LONG list of technical requirements it advises you meet, on top of all the things it tells you NOT to do to optimise your website. Meeting Google's technical guidelines is no magic bullet to success - but failing to meet them can impact your rankings in the long run - and the odd technical issue can actually severely impact your entire site if rolled out across multiple pages.

The benefit of adhering to technical guidelines is often a second order benefit.

You won't get penalised or filtered when others do. When others fall, you will rise.

Mostly - individual technical issues will not be the reason you have ranking problems, but they still need to be addressed for any second-order benefit they provide.

Google spokespeople say 'user-experience' is NOT A RANKING FACTOR but this might be splitting hairs as lots of the rules are designed to guarantee a good a 'user experience' as possible for Google's users.

Most of Google's technical guidelines can be interpreted in this way. And most need to be followed, whether addressing these issues has an immediate positive impact on the site or not.

Whether or not your site has been impacted in a noticeable way by these algorithms, every SEO project must start with a historical analysis of site performance. Every site has things to clean up and to optimise in a modern way.

The sooner you understand why Google is sending you less traffic than it did last year, the sooner you can clean it up and focus on proactive SEO that starts to impact your rankings in a positive way.

Technical SEO

If you are doing a professional SEO audit for a real business, you are going to have to think like a *Google Search Quality Rater* AND a *Google search engineer* to provide real long-term value to a client.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJPu4vHETXw&feature=youtu.be&t=35s

When making a site for Google in 2018, you really need to understand that Google has a long list of things it will mark sites down for, and that's usually *old-school SEO tactics* which are now classed as 'webspam'.

Conversely, sites that are not marked "low-quality" are not demoted and so will improve in rankings. Sites with higher rankings often pick up more organic links, and this process can float high-quality pages on your site quickly to the top of Google.

So the sensible thing for any webmaster is to NOT give Google ANY reason to DEMOTE a site. Tick all the boxes Google tell you to tick, so to speak.

I have used this simple (but longer term) strategy to rank on page 1 or thereabouts for 'SEO' in the UK over the last few years, and drive 100 thousand relevant organic visitors to this site, every month, to only about 100 pages, without building any links over the last few years (and very much working on it part-time):

Trend History

Google Organic Traffic over the years in context with major Google algorithm updates.
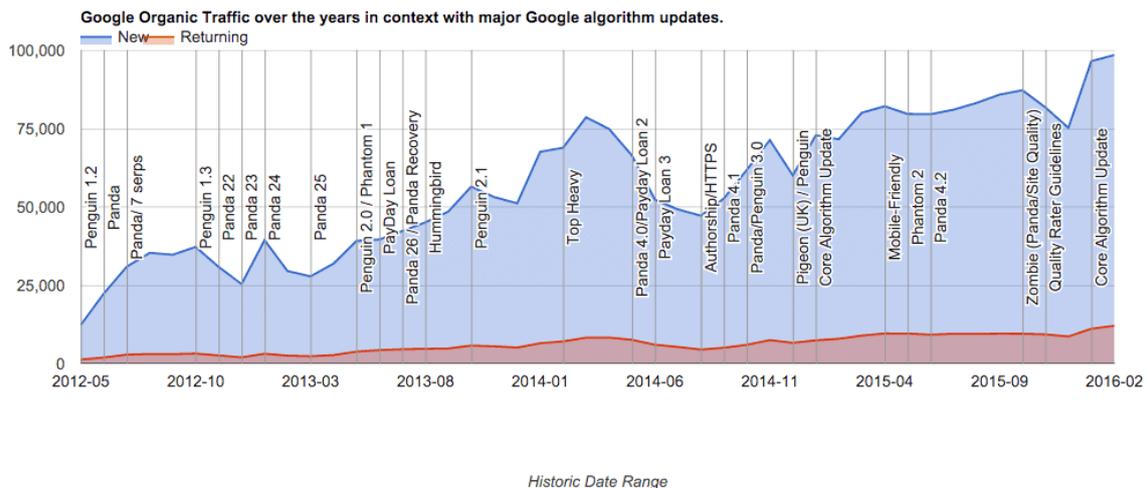
Example 'High Quality' E-commerce Site

Google has the *search quality rating guidelines*. After numerous 'leaks', this previously 'secretive' document has now been made available for anyone to download.

This document gives you an idea of the type of quality websites Google wants to display in its search engine results pages.

I use these quality rating documents and the Google Webmaster Guidelines as the foundation of my audits for e-commerce sites.

What are these quality raters doing?

Quality Raters are rating Google's 'experiments' and manually reviewing web pages that are presented to them in Google's search engine results pages (SERPs). We are told that these ratings don't impact your site, directly.

> ***QUOTE****: "Ratings from evaluators do not determine individual site rankings, but are used help us understand our experiments. The evaluators base their ratings on guidelines we give them; the guidelines reflect what Google thinks search users want." GOOGLE.*

What Does Google class as a high-quality product page on an e-commerce site?

This:

This page and site appear to check all the boxes Google wants to see in a high-quality e-commerce website these days.

This product page is an example of YMYL page exhibiting "*A satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality MC (main content)*" and "*Very high level of expertise, highly authoritative/highly trustworthy for the purpose of the page*" with a "*Very positive reputation*".

Webpage/Type of Content	Highest Quality Characteristics of the Page	PQ Rating and Explanation
Highest: Shopping Backpack shopping page (YMYL)	• A satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high quality MC • Very high level of expertise, highly authoritative/highly trustworthy for the purpose of the page • Very positive reputation	Lowest Medium Highest The purpose of this page is to provide information about, and allow users to buy, a specific type of school backpack. The page provides a lot of helpful product information, as well as 600 user reviews. Since the store produces this backpack, they are experts on the product, making the page on their own website authoritative. In addition, this store has a reputation for producing one of the highest quality and most popular school backpacks on the market.

What Are YMYL Pages?

Google classifies web pages that "==*potentially impact the future happiness, health, or wealth of users*==" as "*Your Money or Your Life*" pages (YMYL) and hold these types of pages to higher standards than, for instance, hobby and informational sites.

Essentially, if you are selling something to visitors or advising on important matters like finance, law or medical advice - your page will be held to this higher standard.

This is a classification of certain pages by Google:

> **QUOTE**: "*Your Money or Your Life (YMYL) Pages.*"

where Google explains:

> **QUOTE**: "*Some types of pages could potentially impact the future happiness, health, or wealth of users. We call such pages "Your Money or Your Life" pages, or YMYL*"

and in this instance, it refers to a very common type of page:

> **QUOTE**: "*Shopping or financial transaction pages: webpages which allow users to make purchases, transfer money, pay bills, etc. online (such as online stores and online banking pages).....We have very high Page Quality rating standards for YMYL pages because low-quality YMYL pages could potentially negatively impact users' happiness, health, or wealth.*"

It is interesting to note that 1. This example of a 'high-quality' website in the guidelines is from 2013 and 2. The website looks different today.

But - this is a clear example of the kind of 'user experience' you are trying to mimic if you have an online e-commerce store and want more Google organic traffic product pages.

You might not be able to mimic the positive reputation this US site has, but you are going to have to build your product pages to compete with it, and others like it.

What Is "*Domain Authority*"?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALzSUeekQ2Q

> **QUOTE**: "*So domain authority is kind of a theme picked up by SEO companies or SEO tools. So it's not really something that we have here at Google.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

Domain authority, whether or not is something Google has or not, is an important concept to take note of. Essentially Google 'trusts' some websites more than others and you will find that it is easier to rank using some websites than it is others.

SEOs conveniently call this effect 'domain authority' and it seemed to be related to 'PageRank' - the system Google started to rank the web within 1998.

> **QUOTE**: "*PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, **Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B**.*" Google

Domain authority is an important ranking phenomenon in Google. Nobody knows exactly how Google calculates, ranks and rates the popularity, reputation, intent or trust of a website, outside of Google, but when I write about domain authority I am generally thinking of sites that are popular, reputable and trusted - all of which can be faked, of course.

It's a useful metaphor and proxy for quality and sometimes you can use it to work out the likelihood of a site ranking for a particular keyword based on its relative score when compared to competing sites and pages.

Historically sites that had *domain authority* or *online business authority* had lots of links to them, hence why link building was so popular a tactic - and counting these links is generally how most 3rd party tools still calculate it a pseudo domain authority score for websites today.

Massive domain authority and ranking 'trust' was awarded to very successful sites that had gained a lot of links from credible sources, and other online business authorities too.

Google calls it, '*online business authority*'

> **QUOTE**: "*Amazon has a lot of "online business authority""....* (**Official Google Webmaster Blog**)

SEO more usually talk about domain trust and domain authority based on the number, type and quality of incoming links to a site.

Examples of trusted, authority domains include Wikipedia, the W3C and Apple. e.g.: these are very successful brands.

How did you take advantage of being an online business authority? You turned the site into an SEO Black Hole to horde the benefits of domain authority and published lots of content sometimes with little thought to quality. On any subject. Because Google would rank it!

I think this 'quality score' Google has developed since 2010 could be Google's answer to this sort of historical domain authority abuse.

> **QUOTE***: "And **we actually came up with a classifier to say, okay, IRS or Wikipedia or New York Times is over on this side, and the low-quality sites are over on this side**. And you can really see mathematical reasons…Matt Cutts **2011***

and

> **QUOTE: "The score is determined from quantities indicating user actions of seeking out and preferring particular sites and the resources found in particular sites***. *****A site quality score for a particular site**** can be determined by computing a ratio of a numerator that represents user interest in the site as reflected in user queries directed to the site and a denominator that represents user interest in the resources found in the site as responses to queries of all kinds **The site quality score for a site can be used as a signal to rank resources, or to rank search results that identify resources***, that are found in one site relative to resources found in another site." Navneet Panda, Google Patent*

An effect akin to 'domain authority' is still visible in 2018 but this new phenomenon is probably based on site quality scores, potential authorship value scores, user interest and other classifiers, as well as Pagerank.

This takes a lot of work and a lot of time to create, or even mimic, such a site.

> **QUOTE**: "*Brands are the solution, not the problem, **Brands are how you sort out the cesspool.***" Eric Schmidt, Google

Google is going to present users with sites that are recognisable to them. If you are a 'brand' in your space or well-cited site, Google wants to rank your stuff at the top as it won't make Google look stupid.

Getting links from 'Brands' (or well-cited websites) in niches can also mean getting 'quality links'.

Easier said than done, for most, of course, but that is the point of link building - to get these type of links.

Does Google Prefer Big Brands In Organic SERPs?

Well, yes. It's hard to imagine that a system like Google's was not designed exactly over the last few years to deliver the listings it does today - and it is often filled even in 2018 with content that ranks high likely because of the domain the content is on.

Big brands also find it harder to take advantage of 'domain authority' in 2018. Its harder for most businesses because low-quality content on parts of a domain can negatively impact the rankings of an entire domain.

> **QUOTE***: "I mean it's kind of like **we look at your web site overall**. And if there's this big chunk of content here or this big chunk kind of important wise of your content, there that looks really iffy, then that kind of reflects across the overall picture of your website. "* John Mueller, Google

Google has introduced (at least) a 'percieved' risk to publishing lots of lower-quality pages on your site to in an effort to curb production of old-style SEO friendly content based on manipulating early search engine algorithms.

We are dealing with new algorithms designed to target old style SEO tactics and that focus around the truism that DOMAIN 'REPUTATION' plus LOTS of PAGES plus SEO equals LOTS of Keywords equals LOTS of Google traffic.

A big site can't just get away with publishing LOTS of lower quality content in the cavalier way they used to – not without the 'fear' of primary content being impacted and organic search traffic throttled negatively to important pages on the site.

Google still uses links and PageRank:

> **QUOTE***: "DYK that **after 18 years we're still using*** PageRank (and 100s of other signals) in ranking?"* Gary Illyes, Google 2017

Google is very probably also using user metrics in some way to determine the 'quality' of your site:

> **QUOTE***: "I think that's always an option. Yeah. That's something that–I've seen sites do that across the board,not specifically for blogs, but for content in general, where they would regularly go through all of their content and see, well, **this content doesn't get any clicks, or everyone who goes there kind of runs off screaming**." John Mueller, Google*

Your online reputation is evidently calculated by Google from many metrics.

Small businesses can still build this 'domain reputation' over time if you focus on **a content strategy based on depth and quality, rather than breadth when it comes to how content is published on your website**.

I did, on my own site.

Instead of publishing LOTS of pages, focus on fewer pages that are of high quality. You can better predict your success in ranking for the long term for a particular keyword phrase this way.

Then you rinse and repeat.

Failure to meet these standards for quality content may impact rankings noticeably around major Google quality updates.

Is Domain Age An Important Google Ranking Factor?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pnpg00FWJY

No, not in isolation.

Having a ten-year-old domain that *Google knows nothing about* is almost the same as having a brand new domain.

A 10-year-old site that's continually cited by, year on year, the actions of other, more authoritative, and trusted sites? That's valuable.

But that's not the age of your website address ON ITS OWN in-play as a ranking factor.

A one-year-old domain cited by authority sites is just as valuable if not more valuable than a ten-year-old domain with no links and no search-performance history.

Perhaps **Domain age may come into play when other factors** are considered - but I think Google works very much like this on all levels, with all 'Google ranking factors', and all ranking 'conditions'.

I don't think you can consider discovering 'ranking factors' without 'ranking conditions'.

Other Ranking Factors:

1. **Domain age;** (NOT ON ITS OWN)
2. **Length of site domain registration**; (I don't see much benefit ON IT"S OWN even knowing "Valuable (legitimate) domains are often paid for several years in advance, while doorway (illegitimate) domains rarely are used for more than a year.") - paying for a domain in advance just tells others you don't want anyone else using this domain name, it is not much of an indication that you're going to do something Google cares about).
3. **Domain registration information was hidden/anonymous**; (possibly, under human review if OTHER CONDITIONS are met like looking like a spam site)
4. Site top level domain (geographical focus, e.g. *com* versus *co.uk*); **(YES)**
5. Site top level domain (e.g. *.com* versus *.info*); **(DEPENDS)**
6. Subdomain or root domain? **(DEPENDS)**
7. Domain past records (how often it changed IP); **(DEPENDS)**
8. Domain past owners (how often the owner was changed) **(DEPENDS)**
9. Keywords in the domain; (**DEFINITELY** - *ESPECIALLY EXACT KEYWORD MATCH - although Google has a lot of filters that mute the performance of an exact match domain in 2018*))
10. Domain IP; **(DEPENDS - for most, no)**
11. Domain IP neighbours; **(DEPENDS - for most, no)**
12. Domain external mentions (non-linked citations) **(perhaps)**
13. Geo-targeting settings in Google Webmaster Tools **(YES - of course)**

Google Penalties For Unnatural Footprints

In 2018, you need to be aware that what works to improve your rank can also get you penalised (faster, and a lot more noticeably).

In particular, the Google web spam team is currently waging a PR war on sites that rely on unnatural links and other 'manipulative' tactics (and handing out severe penalties if it detects them). And that's on top of many algorithms already designed to look for other manipulative tactics (like **keyword stuffing** or **boilerplate spun text** across pages).

Google is making sure it takes longer to see results from black **and** white hat SEO, and intent on ensuring a flux in its SERPs based largely on where the searcher is in the world at the time of the search, and where the business is located near to that searcher.

There are some things you cannot directly influence legitimately to improve your rankings, but there is plenty you CAN do to drive more Google traffic to a web page.

Ranking Factors

Google has HUNDREDS of ranking factors with signals that can change daily, weekly, monthly or yearly to help it work out where your page ranks in comparison to other competing pages in SERPs.

You will not ever find every ranking factor. Many ranking factors are on-page or on-site and others are off-page or off-site. Some ranking factors are based on where you are, or what you have searched for before.

I've been in online marketing for 15 years. In that time, a lot has changed. I've learned to focus on aspects that offer the greatest return on investment of your labour.

Read my article on a more complete list of potential Google ranking factors.

Learn SEO Basics

Here are few simple SEO tips to begin with:

- If you are just starting out, don't think you can fool Google about everything all the time. Google has VERY probably seen your tactics before. So, it's best to **keep your plan simple**. GET RELEVANT. GET REPUTABLE. Aim for a healthy, satisfying visitor experience. If you are just starting out - you may as well learn how to do it within Google's Webmaster Guidelines first. Make a decision, early, if you are going to follow Google's guidelines, or not, and stick to it. Don't be caught in the middle with an important project. Do not always follow the herd.
- If your aim is to deceive visitors from Google, in any way, Google is not your friend. Google is hardly your friend at any rate - but you don't want it as your enemy. Google will send you lots of free traffic though if you manage to get to the top of search results, so perhaps they are not all that bad.
- A lot of optimisation techniques that are in the short term effective at boosting a site's position in Google are against Google's guidelines. For example, many links that may have once promoted you to the top of Google, may, in fact, today be hurting your site and its ability to rank high in Google. Keyword stuffing might be holding your page back. You must be smart, and cautious, when it comes to building links to your site in a manner that Google *hopefully* won't have too much trouble with, in the FUTURE. Because they *will* punish you in the future.
- Don't expect to rank number 1 in any niche for a competitive keyword phrase without a lot of investment and work. Don't expect results overnight. Expecting too much too fast might get you in trouble with the Google webspam team.
- You don't pay anything to get into Google, Yahoo or Bing natural, or free listings. It's common for the major search engines to find your website pretty quickly by themselves within a few days. This is made so much easier if your cms actually 'pings' search engines when you update content (via XML sitemaps or RSS for instance).
- To be listed and rank high in Google and other search engines, you really should consider and mostly abide by search engine rules and official guidelines for inclusion. With experience and a lot of observation, you can learn which rules can be bent, and which tactics are short-term and perhaps, should be avoided.
- Google ranks websites (relevancy aside for a moment) by the number and quality of incoming links to a site from other websites (amongst hundreds of other metrics). Generally speaking, a link from a page to another page is viewed in Google "eyes" as a vote for that page the link points to. The more votes a page gets, the more trusted a page can become, and the higher Google will rank it – in theory. Rankings are HUGELY affected by how much Google ultimately trusts the DOMAIN the page is on. BACKLINKS (links from other websites - trump every other signal.)
- I've always thought if you are serious about ranking – do so with ORIGINAL COPY. It's clear – search engines reward good content it hasn't found before. It indexes it blisteringly fast, for a start (within a second, if your website isn't penalised!). So – make sure each of your pages has enough text content you have written specifically for that page – and you won't need to jump through hoops to get it ranking.
- If you have original, quality content on a site, you also have a chance of generating inbound quality links (IBL). If your content is found on other websites, you will find it hard to get links, and it probably will not rank very well as Google favours diversity in its results. If you

have original content of sufficient quality on your site, you can then let authority websites - those with online business authority - know about it, and they might link to you – this is called a **quality backlink**.

- Search engines need to understand that 'a link is a link' that can be trusted. Links can be designed to be ignored by search engines with the rel nofollow attribute.
- Search engines can also find your site by other websites linking to it. You can also submit your site to search engines directly, but I haven't submitted any site to a search engine in the last ten years – you probably don't need to do that. If you have a new site, I would immediately register it with Google Webmaster Tools these days.
- Google and Bing use a crawler (Googlebot and Bingbot) that spiders the web looking for new links to find. These bots might find a link to your homepage somewhere on the web and then crawl and index the pages of your site if all your pages are linked together. If your website has an XML sitemap, for instance, Google will use that to include that content in its index. An XML sitemap is INCLUSIVE, not EXCLUSIVE. Google will crawl and index every single page on your site - even pages out with an XML sitemap.
- Many think that Google won't allow new websites to rank well for competitive terms until the web address "ages" and acquires "trust" in Google - I think this depends on the quality of the incoming links. Sometimes your site will rank high for a while then disappears for months. A "honeymoon period" to give you a taste of Google traffic, perhaps, or a period to better gauge your website quality from an actual user perspective.
- Google WILL classify your site when it crawls and indexes your site – and this classification can have a DRASTIC effect on your rankings. It's important for Google to work out WHAT YOUR ULTIMATE INTENT IS – do you want to be classified as a thin affiliate site made 'just for Google', a domain holding page or a small business website with a real purpose? Ensure you don't confuse Google in any way by being explicit with all the signals you can – to show on your website you are a real business, and your INTENT is genuine - and even more important today - FOCUSED ON SATISFYING A VISITOR.
- NOTE - If a page exists only to make money from Google's free traffic - Google calls this spam. I go into this more, later in this guide.
- The transparency you provide on your website in text and links about who you are, what you do, and how you're rated on the web or as a business is one way that Google could use (algorithmically and manually) to 'rate' your website. Note that Google has a HUGE army of quality raters and at some point they will be on your site if you get a lot of traffic from Google.
- To rank for specific keyword phrase searches, you usually need to have the keyword phrase or highly relevant words on your page (not necessarily all together, but it helps) or in links pointing to your page/site.
- Ultimately what you need to do to compete is largely dependent on what the competition for the term you are targeting is doing. You'll need to at least mirror how hard they are competing if a better opportunity is hard to spot.
- As a result of other quality sites linking to your site, the site now has a certain amount of *real* PageRank that is shared with all the internal pages that make up your website that will in future help provide a signal to where this page ranks in the future.
- Yes, you need to build links to your site to acquire more PageRank, or Google 'juice' - or what we now call *domain authority* or *trust*. Google is a link-based search engine – it does not quite understand 'good' or 'quality' content – but it does understand 'popular' content. It can also usually identify poor, or THIN CONTENT - and it penalises your site for that - or - at least - it takes away the traffic you once had with an algorithm change. Google doesn't like

calling actions the take a 'penalty' - it doesn't look good. They blame your ranking drops on their engineers getting better at identifying quality content or links, or the inverse - low-quality content and unnatural links. If they do take action your site for paid links - they call this a 'Manual Action' and you will get notified about it in Webmaster Tools if you sign up.

- Link building is not JUST a numbers game, though. One link from a "trusted authority" site in Google could be all you need to rank high in your niche. Of course, the more "trusted" links you attract, the more Google will trust your site. It is evident you need MULTIPLE trusted links from MULTIPLE trusted websites to get the most from Google in 2018.
- Try and get links within page text pointing to your site with relevant, or at least, natural looking, keywords in the text link – not, for instance, in blogrolls or site-wide links. Try to ensure the links are not obviously "machine generated" e.g. site-wide links on forums or directories. Get links from pages, that in turn, have a lot of links to them, and you will soon see benefits.
- Onsite, consider linking to your other pages by linking to pages within main content text. I usually only do this when it is relevant – often, I'll link to relevant pages when the keyword is in the title elements of both pages. I don't go in for auto-generating links at all. Google has penalised sites for using particular auto link plugins, for instance, so I avoid them.
- Linking to a page with actual key-phrases in the link help a great deal in all search engines when you want to feature for specific key terms. For example; "SEO Scotland" as opposed to https://www.hobo-web.co.uk or "click here". Saying that - in 2018, Google is punishing manipulative anchor text very aggressively, so be sensible - and stick to brand mentions and plain URL links that build authority with less risk. I rarely ever optimise for grammatically incorrect terms these days (especially with links).
- I think the anchor text links in internal navigation is still valuable - but keep it natural. Google needs links to find and help categorise your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a clever internal link keyword-rich architecture and be sure to understand for instance how many words Google counts in a link, but don't overdo it. Too many links on a page could be seen as a poor user experience. Avoid lots of hidden links in your template navigation.
- Search engines like Google 'spider' or 'crawl' your entire site by following all the links on your site to new pages, much as a human would click on the links to your pages. Google will crawl and index your pages, and within a few days usually, begin to return your pages in SERPs.
- After a while, Google will know about your pages, and keep the ones it deems 'useful' – pages with original content, or pages with a lot of links to them. The rest will be de-indexed. Be careful - too many low-quality pages on your site will impact your overall site performance in Google. Google is on record talking about good and bad ratios of quality content to low-quality content.
- Ideally, you will have unique pages, with unique page titles and unique page meta descriptions . Google does not seem to use the meta description when ranking your page for specific keyword searches if not relevant and unless you are careful if you might end up just giving spammers free original text for their site and not yours once they scrape your descriptions and put the text in main content on their site. I don't worry about meta keywords these days as Google and Bing say they either ignore them or use them as spam signals.
- Google will take some time to analyse your entire site, examining text content and links. This process is taking longer and longer these days but is ultimately determined by your domain reputation and real PageRank.

- If you have a lot of duplicate low-quality text already found by Googlebot on other websites it knows about; Google will ignore your page. If your site or page has spammy signals, Google will penalise it, sooner or later. If you have lots of these pages on your site - Google will ignore most of your website.
- You don't need to keyword stuff your text to beat the competition.
- You optimise a page for more traffic by increasing the frequency of the desired key phrase, related key terms, co-occurring keywords and synonyms in links, page titles and text content. There is no ideal amount of text – no magic keyword density. Keyword stuffing is a tricky business, too, these days.
- I prefer to make sure I have as many UNIQUE relevant words on the page that make up as many relevant long tail queries as possible.
- If you link out to irrelevant sites, Google may ignore the page, too – but again, it depends on the site in question. Who you link to, or HOW you link to, REALLY DOES MATTER – I expect Google to use your linking practices as a potential means by which to classify your site. Affiliate sites, for example, don't do well in Google these days without some good quality backlinks and higher quality pages.
- Many search engine marketers think who you link out to (and who links to you) helps determine a topical community of sites in any field or a hub of authority. Quite simply, you want to be in that hub, at the centre if possible (however unlikely), but at least in it. I like to think of this one as a good thing to remember in the future as search engines get even better at determining topical relevancy of pages, but I have never actually seen any granular ranking benefit (for the page in question) from linking out.
- I've got by, by thinking external links to other sites should probably be on single pages deeper in your site architecture, with the pages receiving all your Google Juice once it's been "soaked up" by the higher pages in your site structure (the home page, your category pages). This tactic is old school but I still follow it. I don't need to think you need to worry about that, too much, in 2018.
- Original content is king and will attract a "natural link growth" - in Google's opinion. Too many incoming links too fast might devalue your site, but again. I usually err on the safe side – I always aimed for massive diversity in my links – to make them look 'more natural'. Honestly, I go for natural links in 2018 full stop, for this website.
- Google can devalue whole sites, individual pages, template generated links and individual links if Google deems them "unnecessary" and a 'poor user experience'.
- Google knows who links to you, the "quality" of those links, and whom you link to. These - and other factors - help ultimately determine where a page on your site ranks. To make it more confusing - the page that ranks on your site might not be the page you want to rank, or even the page that determines your rankings for this term. Once Google has worked out your domain authority - sometimes it seems that the most relevant page on your site Google HAS NO ISSUE with will rank.
- Google decides which pages on your site are important or most relevant. You can help Google by linking to your important pages and ensuring at least one page is well optimised amongst the rest of your pages for your desired key phrase. Always remember Google does not want to rank 'thin' pages in results - any page you want to rank - should have all the things Google is looking for. That's a lot these days!
- It is important you spread all that real 'PageRank' - or link equity - to your sales keyword / phrase rich sales pages, and as much remains to the rest of the site pages, so Google does not 'demote' pages into oblivion - or 'supplemental results' as we old timers knew them back in the day. Again - this is slightly old school - but it gets me by, even today.

- Consider linking to important pages on your site from your home page, and other important pages on your site.
- Focus on RELEVANCE first. Then, focus your marketing efforts and get REPUTABLE. This is the key to ranking 'legitimately' in Google in 2018.
- Every few months Google changes its algorithm to punish sloppy optimisation or industrial manipulation. Google Panda and Google Penguin are two such updates, but the important thing is to understand Google changes its algorithms constantly to control its listings pages (over 600 changes a year we are told).
- The art of rank modification is to rank without tripping these algorithms or getting flagged by a human reviewer - and that is tricky!
- Focus on improving website download speeds at all times. The web is changing very fast, and a fast website is a good user experience.

Welcome to the *tightrope* that is modern web optimisation.

If you are a geek and would like to learn more see my post on potential Google ranking factors.

Read on if you would like to learn how to SEO....

Do Keywords In Bold Or Italic Help?

Some webmasters claim **putting your keywords in bold** or *putting your keywords in italics* is a beneficial ranking factor in terms of search engine optimizing a page.

It is essentially impossible to test this, and I think these days, Google could well be using this (and other easy to identify on page optimisation efforts) to determine what to *punish* a site for, not *promote* it in SERPs.

Any item you can 'optimise' on your page – Google can use this against you to filter you out of results.

I use bold or italics these days specifically for users.

I only use emphasis if it's *natural* or **this is really what I want to emphasise**!

Do not tell Google what to filter you for that easily.

I think Google treats websites they trust far different to others in some respect.

That is, more trusted sites might get treated differently than untrusted sites.

Keep it simple, natural, useful and random.

> **QUOTE**: "*You'll probably get more out of bolding text for human users / usability in the end. Bots might like, but they're not going to buy anything.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

How Many Words & Keywords Do I Use On A Page?

How much text do you put on a page to rank for a certain keyword?

The answer is there is **no optimal amount of text per page,** but how much text you'll 'need' will be based on your DOMAIN AUTHORITY, your TOPICAL RELEVANCE and how much COMPETITION there is for that term, and HOW COMPETITIVE that competition is.

Instead of thinking about the *quantity* of the text, you should think more about the *quality* of the content on the page. Optimise this with searcher intent in mind. Well, that's how I do it.

I don't find that you need a minimum amount of words or text to rank in Google. I have seen pages with 50 words outrank pages with 100, 250, 500 or 1000 words. Then again I have seen pages with no text rank on nothing but inbound links or other 'strategy'. In 2018, Google is a lot better at hiding away those pages, though.

At the moment, I prefer long form pages with a lot of text although I still rely heavily on keyword analysis to make my pages. The benefits of longer pages are that they are great for long tail key phrases.

Creating deep, information rich pages focuses the mind when it comes to producing authoritative, useful content.

Every site is different. Some pages, for example, can get away with 50 words because of a good link profile and the domain it is hosted on. For me, the important thing is to make a page relevant to a user's search query.

I don't care how many words I achieve this with and often I need to experiment on a site I am unfamiliar with. After a while, you get an idea how much text you need to use to get a page on a certain domain into Google.

One thing to note – the more text you add to the page, as long as it is unique, keyword rich and relevant, the more that page will be rewarded with more visitors from Google.

There is no optimal number of words on a page for placement in Google. Every website – every page – is different from what I can see. Don't worry too much about word count if your content is original and informative. Google will probably reward you on some level – at some point – if there is lots of unique text on all your pages.

> **QUOTE**: "*I don't know specifically about the scorecard, how that's set up, or how the Google News guidelines are in general. But in practice from a web search point of view, we don't have limits on the number of words you can have on a page.*" John Mueller, Google 2015

- Character Counter Tool

What is The Perfect Keyword Density?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk4qgQdp2UA

The short answer to this is – **there is no perfect keyword density**.

There is no one-size-fits-all keyword density, **no** optimal percentage guaranteed to rank any page at number 1. However, I do know you can keyword stuff a page and trip a spam filter.

Most web optimisation professionals agree there is no ideal percent of keywords in text to get a page to number 1 in Google. Search engines are not that easy to fool, although the key to success in many fields doing simple things well (or, at least, better than the competition).

I write natural page copy where possible always focused on the key terms – I never calculate density to identify the best % – there are way too many other things to work on. I have looked into this. If it looks natural, it's ok with me.

I aim to include *related terms*, *long-tail variants* and *synonyms* in *Primary Content* - at least ONCE, as that is all some pages need.

> **QUOTE:** "*keyword density, in general, is something I wouldn't focus on. **Search engines have kind of moved on from there.***" John Mueller, Google 2014

Optimal keyword density is a myth, although there are many who would argue otherwise.

Keyword Stuffing

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y-m_jiayLQ

Keyword stuffing is simply the process of repeating the same keyword or key phrases over and over in a page. It's counterproductive. It's is a signpost of a very low-quality spam site and is something Google clearly recommends you avoid.

It is:

> **QUOTE**: *"the practice of loading a webpage with keywords in an attempt to manipulate a site's ranking in Google's search results"*. [Google]

Keyword stuffing text makes your copy often unreadable and so, a *bad user experience*. It often gets a page booted out of Google but it depends on the intent and the trust and authority of a site. It's sloppy SEO in 2018.

It is not a tactic you want to employ in search of long-term rankings.

> **QUOTE***: "Keyword Stuffed" Main Content Pages may be created to lure search engines and users by repeating keywords over and over again, sometimes in unnatural and unhelpful ways. Such pages are created using words likely to be contained in queries issued by users. Keyword stuffing can range from mildly annoying to users, to complete gibberish. Pages created with the intent of luring search engines and users, rather than providing meaningful MC to help users, should be rated Lowest."* [Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines] *2017*

Just because someone else is successfully doing it do not automatically think you will get away with it.

Don't do it – there are better ways of ranking in Google without resorting to it.

> John said in a 2015 hangout "*if we see that things like keyword stuffing are happening on a page, then we'll try to ignore that, and just focus on the rest of the page*".

Does that imply what we call a keyword stuffing "penalty" for a page, Google calls '*ignoring that*'. From what I've observed, pages can seem to perform bad for sloppy keyword phrase stuffing, although they still can rank for long tail variations of it.

> *QUOTE: "The bottom line is using more relevant keyword variations = more traffic".* Aaron Wall

He goes further with an excellent piece of advice even in 2018:

QUOTE: Each piece of duplication in your on-page SEO strategy is ***at best*** wasted opportunity. Worse yet, if you are aggressive with aligning your on page heading, your page title, and your internal + external link anchor text the page becomes more likely to get filtered out of the search results (which is quite common in some aggressive spaces). Aaron Wall, 2009

Focus On The User

As Google says in their manifesto:

> QUOTE: "*Focus on the user and all else will follow*." Google

It is time to focus on the user when it comes to content marketing, and the bottom line is you need to publish unique content free from any low-quality signals if expect some sort of traction in Google SERPs (Search Engine Result Pages).

> QUOTE: "***high quality content is something I'd focus on***. *I see lots and lots of SEO blogs talking about user experience, which I think is a great thing to focus on as well. Because that essentially kind of focuses on what we are trying to look at as well. We want to rank content that is useful for (Google users) and if your content is really useful for them, then we want to rank it.*" John Mueller, Google 2016

Those in every organisation with the responsibility of adding content to a website should understand these fundamental aspects about *satisfying* web content because the door is firmly closing on *unsatisfying* web content.

Low-quality content can severely impact the success of SEO, in 2018.

SEO copywriting is a bit of a dirty word - but the text on a page still requires optimised, using familiar methods, albeit published in a markedly different way than we, as SEO, used to get away with.

Optimise For User Intent & Satisfaction

Historic Organic Traffic In Context with Major Google Algorithm Updates.

QUOTE: "*Basically you want to create high-quality sites following our webmaster guidelines, and focus on the user, try to answer the user, try to satisfy the user, and all eyes will follow.*" Gary Illyes, Google 2016

When it comes to writing SEO-friendly text for Google, we must optimise for u*ser intent,* not simply *what* a user *typed* into Google.

Google will send people looking for information on a topic to the highest quality, relevant pages it knows about, often BEFORE it relies on how Google 'used' to work e.g. relying on finding *near* or *exact match* instances of a keyword phrase on any one page, regardless of the actual 'quality' of that page.

Google is constantly evolving to better understand the context and intent of user behaviour, and it doesn't mind rewriting the query used to serve high-quality pages to users that more comprehensively deliver on user satisfaction e.g. explore topics and concepts in a unique and satisfying way.

Of course, optimising for user intent, even in this fashion, is something a lot of marketers had been doing long before query rewriting and Google Hummingbird came along.

Focus on 'Things', Not 'Strings'

> **QUOTE**: "*we've been working on an intelligent model—in geek-speak, a "graph"—that understands real-world entities and their relationships to one another: things, not strings*" Google [2012](#)

Google is better at working out what a page is about, and what it *should* be about to satisfy the intent of a searcher, and it isn't relying *only* on *keyword phrases on a page* to do that anymore.

Google has a [Knowledge Graph](#) populated with NAMED ENTITIES and in certain circumstances, Google relies on such information to create *SERPs*.

Google has plenty of options when rewriting the query in a contextual way, based on what you searched for previously, who you are, how you searched and where you are at the time of the search.

Can I Just Write Naturally and Rank High in Google?

Yes, you *must* write naturally (and succinctly) in 2018, but if you have no idea the keywords you are targeting, and no expertise in the topic, you will be left behind those that can access this experience.

You can *just* 'write naturally' and still rank, albeit for fewer keywords than you would have if you optimised the page.

There are too many competing pages targeting the top spots not to optimise your content.

Naturally, how much text you need to write, how much you need to work into it, and where you ultimately rank, is going to depend on the domain reputation of the site you are publishing the article on.

Do You Need Lots of Text To Rank Pages In Google?

User search intent is a way marketers describe *what a user wants to accomplish* when they perform a Google search.

SEOs have understood user search intent to fall broadly into the following categories and there is an excellent post on Moz about this.

1. **Transactional** – The user wants to do something like buy, signup, register to complete a task they have in mind.
2. **Informational** – The user wishes to learn something
3. **Navigational** – The user knows where they are going

The Google human quality rater guidelines modify these to simpler constructs:

- **Do**
- **Know**
- **Go**

As long as you meet the user's primary intent, you can do this with as few words as it takes to do so.

You do NOT need lots of text to rank in Google.

Optimising For 'The Long Click'

When it comes to rating user satisfaction, there are a few theories doing the rounds at the moment that I think are sensible. Google could be tracking user satisfaction by proxy. When a user uses Google to search for something, user behaviour from that point on can be a proxy of the relevance and relative quality of the actual SERP.

What is a Long Click?

A user clicks a result and spends time on it, sometimes terminating the search.

What is a Short Click?

A user clicks a result and bounces back to the SERP, pogo-sticking between other results until a long click is observed. Google has this information if it wants to use it as a proxy for query satisfaction.

For more on this, I recommend this article on the time to long click.

Optimise Supplementary Content on the Page

Once you have the content, you need to think about supplementary content and secondary links that help users on their journey of discovery.

That content CAN be on links to your own content on other pages, but if you are really helping a user understand a topic – you should be LINKING OUT to other helpful resources e.g. other websites.A website that does not link out to ANY other website could be interpreted accurately to be at least, self-serving. I can't think of a website that is the true end-point of the web.

A website that does not link out to ANY other website could be interpreted accurately to be at least, self-serving. I can't think of a website that is the true end-point of the web.

- TASK – On informational pages, LINK OUT to related pages on other sites AND on other pages on your own website where RELEVANT
- TASK – For e-commerce pages, ADD RELATED PRODUCTS.
- TASK – Create In-depth Content Pieces
- TASK – Keep Content Up to Date, Minimise Ads, Maximise Conversion, Monitor For broken, or redirected links
- TASK – Assign in-depth content to an author with some online authority, or someone with displayable expertise on the subject
- TASK – If running a blog, first, clean it up. To avoid creating pages that might be considered thin content in 6 months, consider planning a wider content strategy. If you publish 30 'thinner' pages about various aspects of a topic, you can then fold all this together in a single topic page centred page helping a user to understand something related to what you sell.

User Generated Content & Forum SEO Advice

It's evident that Google wants forum administrators to work harder on managing user generated content Googlebot 'rates' as part of your site.

In a 2015 hangout John Mueller said to "*noindex untrusted post content*" and going on says "*posts by new posters who haven't been in the forum before. threads that don't have any answers. Maybe they're noindexed by default.*"

A very interesting statement was "*how much quality content do you have compared to low-quality content*". That indicates google is looking at this ratio. John says to identify "*which pages are high-quality, which pages are lower quality, so that the pages that do get indexed are really the high-quality ones.*"

John mentions to look too at "*threads that don't have any authoritative answers*".

I think that advice is relevant for any site with lots of content.

For more on primary main content optimisation see:: https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/how-to-write-seo-friendly-website-content-for-google/

Page Title Element

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlJiLDn9-38

```
<title>What Is The Best Title Tag For Google?</title>
```

The page title tag (or HTML Title Element) is arguably the most important on page ranking element (with regards to web page optimisation). Keywords in page titles can undeniably HELP your pages rank higher in Google results pages (SERPs).

The page title is also often used by Google as the title of a search snippet link in search engine results pages.

> **QUOTE**: "*We do use it for ranking, but it's not the most critical part of a page. So it's not worthwhile filling it with keywords to hope that it works that way. In general, we try to recognise when a title tag is stuffed with keywords because that's also a bad user experience for users in the search results. If they're looking to understand what these pages are about and they just see a jumble of keywords, then that doesn't really help.*" **John Mueller, Google 2016**

For me, a perfect title tag in Google is dependant on a number of factors and I will lay down a couple below but I have since expanded page title advice on another page (link below);

1. A page title that is **highly relevant** to the page it refers to will maximise usability, search engine ranking performance and user experience ratings as Google measures these. It will probably be displayed in a web browser's window title bar, bookmarks and in clickable search snippet links used by Google, Bing & other search engines. The title element is the "crown" of a web page with important *keyword phrase* featuring AT LEAST ONCE within it.
2. Most modern search engines have traditionally placed a lot of importance in the words contained within this HTML element. **A good page title is made up of keyword phrases of value and high search volumes**.
3. The last time I looked Google displayed as many characters as it can fit into a block element that's about 600px wide and doesn't exceed 1 line of text (on desktop). So – **THERE IS NO BEST PRACTICE AMOUNT OF CHARACTERS any SEO could lay down as exact best practice** to **GUARANTEE** a title will display, in full in Google, at least, as the search snippet title, on every device. **Ultimately – only the characters and words you use will determine if your entire page title will be seen in a Google search snippet**.
4. If you want to *ENSURE* your FULL title tag shows in the desktop UK version of Google SERPs, stick to a shorter title of between **55-65 characters** but that does not mean your title tag MUST end at 55 characters and remember your mobile visitors see a longer title (in the UK, in January 2018). *What you see displayed in SERPs depends on the characters you use*. In 2018 – I just expect what Google displays to change – so I don't obsess about what Google is doing in terms of display. See the tests later on in this article.
5. Google is all about 'user experience' and 'visitor satisfaction' in 2018 so it's worth remembering that usability studies have shown that a good page title length is about **seven or eight words long and fewer than 64 total characters.** Longer titles are less scan-able in

bookmark lists, and might not display correctly in many browsers (and of course probably will be truncated in SERPs).

6. Google **will INDEX perhaps 1000s of characters** in a title… but I don't think anyone knows exactly how many characters or words Google will count AS a TITLE TAG when determining RELEVANCE OF A DOCUMENT for ranking purposes. It is a very hard thing to try to isolate accurately with all the testing and obfuscation Google uses to hide it's 'secret sauce'. I have had ranking success with longer titles – much longer titles. Google *certainly* reads ALL the words in your page title (unless you are spamming it silly, of course).

7. You can **probably include up to 12 words that will be counted as part of a page title**, and consider using your **important keywords in the first 8 words**. The rest of your page title will be counted as normal text on the page.

8. NOTE, in 2018, the **HTML title element you choose for your page, may not be what Google chooses to include in your SERP snippet**. The search snippet title and description is very much *QUERY & DEVICE dependant* these days. Google often chooses what it *thinks* is the most relevant title for your search snippet, and it can use information from your page, or in links to that page, to create a very different SERP snippet title.

9. When optimising a title, you are looking to rank for as many terms as possible, without keyword stuffing your title. Often, the best bet is to optimise for a particular phrase (or phrases) – and take a more long-tail approach. Note that too many page titles and not enough actual page text per page could lead to doorway page type situations. **A highly relevant unique page title is no longer enough to float a page with thin content**. Google cares WAY too much about the page text content these days to let a good title hold up a thin page on most sites.

10. Some page titles do better with a call to action – a call to action which reflects exactly a searcher's *intent* (e.g. to learn something, or buy something, or hire something. THINK CAREFULLY before auto-generating keyword phrase footprints across a site using boiler-plating and article spinning techniques. Remember this is your *hook* in search engines, if Google chooses to use your page title in its search snippet, and there is a lot of competing pages out there in 2018.

11. The perfect title tag on a page is *unique* to other pages on the site. **You REALLY need to make your page titles UNIQUE** (ESPECIALLY RELEVANT TO OTHER PAGES ON YOUR SITE), and minimise any duplication, especially on larger sites. Duplicate page titles across a site are often a sign of poor indexation control or doorway type pages.

12. I like to make sure my keywords feature as early as possible in a title tag but **the important thing is to have important keywords and key phrases in your page title tag SOMEWHERE**.

13. For me, when SEO is more important than branding, the company name goes at the end of the tag, and I use a variety of dividers to separate as no one way performs best. If you have a recognisable brand – then there is an argument for putting this at the front of titles – although Google often will change your title dynamically – sometimes putting your brand at the front of your snippet link title itself. I often leave out branding. There is no one size fits all approach as the strategy will depend on the type of page you are working with.

14. Note that Google is pretty good these days at removing any special characters you have in your page title – and I would be wary of trying to make your title or Meta Description STAND OUT using special characters. That is not what Google wants, evidently, and they do give you a further chance to make your search snippet stand out with RICH SNIPPETS and SCHEMA mark-up.

15. I like to think I write titles for search engines AND humans.

16. Know that Google tweaks everything regularly – why not what the perfect title keys off? So MIX it up…
17. Don't obsess. Natural is probably better, and will only get *better* as engines evolve. I optimise for key-phrases, rather than just keywords.
18. I prefer mixed case page titles as I find them more scan-able than titles with ALL CAPS or all lowercase.
19. Historically the more domain trust, authority or relevance about a topic your SITE has on Google, the easier it is for a new page to rank for something. So bear that in mind. There is only so much you can do with your page titles – your websites rankings in Google are a LOT more to do with OFFSITE factors than ONSITE ones – negative and positive.
20. Click satisfaction (whatever that *is*) is something that is likely measured by Google when ranking pages (Bing say they use it too), so it is really worth considering whether you are best optimising your page titles for user click-through satisfaction or optimising for more search engine rankings (the latter being risky in 2018).
21. I would think keyword stuffing your page titles could be one area that Google could look at.
22. Remember….think '*keyword phrase*' rather than '*keyword*', '*keyword*' ,'*keyword*' . Use your page title text to target a less competitive long tail search term, especially if you are up against stiff competition.
23. Google will select the best title it wants for your search snippet – and it will take that information from multiple sources, NOT just your page title element. A small title is often appended with more information about the domain. Sometimes, if Google is confident in the BRAND name, it will replace it with that (often adding it to the beginning of your title with a colon, or sometimes appending the end of your snippet title with the actual domain address the page belongs to).
24. Beware of repeating keywords unnecessarily, keyword stuffing or using boilerplate text to create your titles. Any duplication that is perceived by Googlebot as manipulation is easily down-ranked by algorithms.
25. If your content suits it (e.g. you have evergreen content on your site), I find success adding the year to some titles help boost searches at the turn of the year. You need to be on top of this strategy year to year though, or you risk making your content OUTDATED (the opposite of what you want).

A Note About Title Tags;

When you write a page title, you have a chance right at the beginning of the page to tell Google (and other search engines) if this is a spam site or a quality site – such as – have you repeated the keyword four times or only once? I think title tags, like everything else, should probably be as simple as possible, with the keyword once and perhaps a related term if possible.

I always aim to keep my HTML page title elements simple and as unique as possible.

I'm certainly cleaning up the way I write my titles all the time.

More Reading:

- [Title Tags Best Practice](#)
- [Google Will Use H1,H2,H3,H4,H5 & H6 Headers As Titles](#)

Meta Keywords Tag

A hallmark of shady natural search engine optimisation companies – the meta-keywords tag is not used by Google to rank pages. Companies that waste time and resources on these items (and others like them) waste client's money:

```
<meta name="Keywords" content="s.e.o., search engine optimisation, optimization">
```

I have one piece of advice with the meta keyword tag, which like the title tag, goes in the head section of your web page, **forget about them**.

Even Google says so:

> **QUOTE**: "*a poor SEO who might otherwise convince you to do useless things like add more words to the keyword meta tag*" Maile Ohye, Google 2017

If you are relying on meta-keyword optimisation to rank for terms, your dead in the water. From what I see, Google + Bing ignores meta keywords - or, at least, places no weight in them to rank pages. Yahoo may read them, but really, a search engine optimiser has more important things to worry about than this nonsense.

What about other search engines that use them? Hang on while I submit my site to those 75,000 engines first [sarcasm!]. Yes, ten years ago early search engines liked looking at your meta-keywords. I've seen OPs in forums ponder which is the best way to write these tags – with commas, with spaces, limiting to how many characters. Forget about meta-keyword tags – they are a pointless waste of time and bandwidth.

Tin Foil Hat Time

So you have a new site. You fill your home page meta tags with the 20 keywords you want to rank for – hey, that's what optimisation is all about, isn't it? You've just told Google by the third line of text what to filter you for. The meta name="Keywords" was actually originally for words that weren't actually on the page that would help classify the document.

Sometimes competitors might use the information in your keywords to determine what you are trying to rank for, too….

I ignore meta keywords and often remove them from pages I work on.

Meta Description Tag

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vS1Mw1Adrk0

Like the title element and **unlike** the meta keywords tag, this one is important, both from a human and search engine perspective.

```
<meta name="Description" content="Get your site on the first page of
Google, Yahoo and Bing. Call us on 0800 689 0293. A company based in
Scotland." />
```

Forget whether or not to put your keyword in it, make it relevant to a searcher and write it for humans, not search engines. If you want to have this 20-word meta description which accurately describes the page you have optimised (for one or two keyword phrases) when people use Google to search, make sure the keyword is in there. There is more likelihood it will be used by Google as your snippet description in SERPs.

> **QUOTE**: *"However **it can affect the way that users see your site in the search results and whether or not they actually click through to your site**. So that's kind of one one aspect there to keep in mind."* John Mueller 2017

Google looks at the description but it probably does not use the description tag to rank pages in a very noticeable way. I certainly don't know of an example that clearly shows a meta description helping a page rank on its own.

> **QUOTE**: *"it's not the case that changing your descriptions or making them longer or shorter or tweaking them or putting keywords in there will affect your site's ranking."* John Mueller 2017

Sometimes, I will ask a question with my titles, and answer it in the description, sometimes I will just give a hint.

That is a lot more difficult in 2018 as search snippets change depending on what Google wants to emphasise to its users.

It's also important to have **unique meta descriptions** on every page on your site if you think it could help clickthrough rates.

Tin Foil Hat Time

Sometimes I think if your titles are spammy, your keywords are spammy, and your meta description is spammy, Google might stop right there – even they probably will want to save bandwidth at some time. Putting a keyword in the description won't take a crap site to number 1 or raise you 50 spots in a competitive niche – so why optimise for a search engine when you can optimise for a human? – I think that is much more valuable, especially if you are in the mix already – that is – on page one for your keyword.

So, the meta description tag is important in Google, Yahoo and Bing and every other engine listing – very important to get it right.

Make it for humans.

Oh, and by the way – Google seems to truncate anything over @156 characters in the meta description, although this may be limited by pixel width in 2018.

You Are Allowed to Programmatically Generate Meta Descriptions on Large Sites

Googles says you **can** programmatically auto-generate unique meta descriptions based on the content of the page.

Follow Googles example:

```
<META NAME="Description" CONTENT="Author: J. K. Rowling, Illustrator: Mary GrandPré, Category: Books, Price: $17.99, Length: 784 pages">
```

….and their advice why to do this:

> **QUOTE***: "No duplication, more information, and everything is clearly tagged and separated. No real additional work is required to generate something of this quality: the price and length are the only new data, and they are already displayed on the site."* Google

I think it is very important to listen when Google tells you to do something in a very specific way, and Google does give clear advice in this area.

More Reading:

- https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/definitive-guide-to-using-important-meta-tags/

Robots Meta Tag

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjRGkc__FwQ

Example Robots Meta Tag;

```
<meta name="robots" content="index, nofollow" />
```

I could use the above meta tag to tell Google to *index* the page but not to *follow* any links on the page, if for some reason, I did not want the page to appear in Google search results.

By default, Googlebot will index a page and follow links to it. So there's no need to tag pages with content values of INDEX or FOLLOW. **GOOGLE**

There are various instructions you can make use of in your Robots Meta Tag, but remember Google by default WILL index and follow links, so you have NO need to include that as a command – **you can leave the robots meta out completely – and probably should if you don't have a clue**.

Googlebot understands any combination of lowercase and uppercase. **GOOGLE**.

Valid values for Robots Meta Tag "CONTENT" attribute are: "INDEX", "NOINDEX", "FOLLOW", and "NOFOLLOW".

Example Usage:

- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, FOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="INDEX, NOFOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOARCHIVE"
- META NAME="GOOGLEBOT" CONTENT="NOSNIPPET"

Google will understand the following and interprets the following robots meta tag values:

- NOINDEX - prevents the page from being included in the index.
- NOFOLLOW - prevents Googlebot from following any links on the page. (Note that this is different from the link-level NOFOLLOW attribute, which prevents Googlebot from following an individual link.)
- NOARCHIVE - prevents a cached copy of this page from being available in the search results.
- NOSNIPPET - prevents a description from appearing below the page in the search results, as well as prevents caching of the page.
- NOODP - blocks the Open Directory Project description of the page from being used in the description that appears below the page in the search results.
- NONE - equivalent to "NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW".

Robots META Tag Quick Reference

Terms	Googlebot	Slurp	BingBot	Teoma
NoIndex	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoFollow	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoArchive	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoSnippet	YES	NO	NO	NO
NoODP	NO	YES	YES	NO
NoYDIR	NO	YES	NO	NO
NoImageIndex	YES	NO	NO	NO
NoTranslate	YES	NO	NO	NO
Unavailable_After	YES	NO	NO	NO

I've included the robots meta tag in my tutorial as this IS one of only a few meta tags / HTML head elements I focus on when it comes to managing Googlebot and Bingbot. At a page level – it is a powerful way to control if your pages are returned in search results pages.

These meta tags go in the [HEAD] section of a [HTML] page and represent the only tags for Google I care about. Just about everything else you can put in the [HEAD] of your HTML document is quite unnecessary and maybe even pointless (for Google optimisation, anyway).

Robots.txt File

If you want to control which pages get crawled and indexed by Google see my article for beginners to the robots.txt file.

H1-H6: Page Headings

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjRGkc__FwQ

I can't find any definitive proof online that says you need to use Heading Tags (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6) or that they improve rankings in Google, and I have seen pages do well in Google without them – but I do use them, especially the H1 tag on the page.

For me, it's another piece of a 'perfect' page, in the traditional sense, and I try to build a site for Google and humans.

```
<h1>This is a page title</h1>
```

I still generally **only use one <h1> heading tag** in my keyword targeted pages – I believe this is the way the W3C intended it to be used in HTML4 – and I ensure they are at the top of a page above relevant page text and written with my main keywords or related keyword phrases incorporated.

I have never experienced any problems using CSS to control the appearance of the heading tags making them larger or smaller.

You can use multiple H1s in HTML5, but most sites I find I work on still use HTML4.

I use as many H2 – H6 as is necessary depending on the size of the page, but I use H1, H2 & H3. You can see here how to use header tags properly (basically, just be consistent, whatever you do, to give your users the best user experience).

How many words in the H1 Tag? As many as I think is sensible – as short and snappy as possible usually.

> **QUOTE***: We do use H tags to understand the structure of the text on a page better,* John Mueller, Google 2015

I also discovered Google will use your Header tags as page titles at some level if your title element is malformed.

As always be sure to make your heading tags highly relevant to the content on that page and not too spammy, either.

Alt Tags & ALT Text

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NbuDpB_BTc

NOTE: Alt Tags are counted by Google (and Bing), but I would be careful *over-optimising* them. I've seen a lot of websites penalised for over-optimising invisible elements on a page. Don't do it.

ALT tags are very important and I think a very rewarding area to get right.

> **QUOTE**: "*Yes… so the alt text is essentially shown when the images are turned off in most browsers so **that's something that we would count as part of the on-page text**.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

I used to always put the main keyword in an ALT once when addressing a page, but now I do that only if the image is very relevant too.

Don't optimise your ALT tags (or rather, attributes) JUST for Google!

Use ALT tags (or rather, ALT Attributes) for descriptive text that helps visitors – and keep them unique where possible, like you do with your titles and meta descriptions.

> **QUOTE**: "*adding an alt tag is very easy to do and you should pretty much do it on all of your images. It helps your accessibility and it can help us understand what's going on in your image.*" Google, 2007

Don't obsess. Don't optimise your ALT tags just for Google – do it for humans, accessibility and usability. If you are interested, I conducted a simple test using ALT attributes to determine [how many words I could use in IMAGE ALT text that Google would pick up](#).

And remember – even if, like me most days, you can't be bothered with all the image ALT tags on your page, at least, use a blank ALT (or NULL value) so people with screen readers can enjoy your page.

John Mueller has since commented about about Alt Tags:

> **QUOTE**: "***alt attribute** should be used to describe the image. So if you have an image of a big blue pineapple chair you should use the alt tag that best describes it, which is alt="big blue pineapple chair." **title attribute** should be used when the image is a hyperlink to a specific page. The title attribute should contain information about what will happen when you click on the image. For example, if the image will get larger, it should read something like, title="View a larger version of the big blue pineapple chair image.*" John Mueller, [Google](#)

Barry continues with a quote:

QUOTE: *"As the Googlebot does not see [the text in the] the images directly, we generally concentrate on the information provided in the "alt" attribute. Feel free to supplement the "alt" attribute with "title" and other attributes if they provide value to your users! So for example, if you have an image of a puppy (these seem popular at the moment) playing with a ball, you could use something like "My puppy Betsy playing with a bowling ball" as the alt-attribute for the image. If you also have a link around the image, pointing a large version of the same photo, you could use "View this image in high-resolution" as the title attribute for the link."*

Link Title Attributes, Acronym & ABBR Tags

Does Google Count Text in The Acronym Tag?

From my tests, no. From observing how my test page ranks - Google is ignoring keywords in the acronym tag.

My observations from a test page I observe include;

- Link Title Attribute - no benefit passed via the link either to another page, it *seems*
- ABBR (Abbreviation Tags) - No
- Image File Name - No
- Wrapping words (or at least numbers) in SCRIPT - Sometimes. Google is better at understanding what it can render in 2018.

It's clear many invisible elements of a page are completely ignored by Google (that would interest us SEO).

Some invisible items are (still) apparently supported:

- NOFRAMES - Yes
- NOSCRIPT - Yes
- ALT Attribute - Yes

Unless you really have cause to focus on any particular invisible element, I think the **P tag is the most important tag to optimise in 2018.**

Keywords In URLs Make Search Engine Friendly URLs

Clean URLs (or search engine friendly URLs) are just that – clean, easy to read, simple.

You do not need clean URLs in site architecture for Google to spider a site successfully (confirmed by Google in 2008), although I do use clean URLs as a default these days, and have done so for years.

It's often more usable.

Is there a massive difference in Google when you use clean URLs?

No, in my experience it's very much a second or third order affect, perhaps even less, **if used on its own**. However – there it is demonstrable benefit to having keywords in URLs.

The thinking is that you might get a boost in Google SERPs if your URLs are clean – because you are using keywords in the actual page name instead of a parameter or session ID number (which Google often struggles with).

I think Google might reward the page some sort of relevance because of the actual file / page name. I optimise as if they do, and when asked about keywords in urls Google did reply:

> *"*==**QUOTE***: I believe that is a very small ranking factor." John Mueller, Google 2016*==

It is virtually impossible to isolate any ranking factor with a degree of certainty.

Where any benefit **is slightly detectable** is when people (say in forums) **link to your site with the URL as the link**.

Then it is fair to say you do get a boost because keywords are in the actual anchor text link to your site, and I believe this is the case, but again, that depends on the quality of the page linking to your site. That is, if Google trusts it and it passes Pagerank (!) and anchor text benefit.

And of course, you'll need citable content on that site of yours.

Sometimes I will remove the stop-words from a URL and leave the important keywords as the page title because a lot of forums garble a URL to shorten it. Most forums will be nofollowed in 2018, to be fair, but some old habits die-hard.

Sometimes I prefer to see the exact phrase I am targeting as the name of the URL I am asking Google to rank.

I configure URLs the following way;

1. www.hobo-web.co.uk/?p=292 — is automatically changed by the CMS using URL rewrite to

2. www.hobo-web.co.uk/websites-clean-search-engine-friendly-URLs/ — which I then break down to something like
3. www.hobo-web.co.uk/search-engine-friendly-URLs/

It should be remembered it is thought although Googlebot can crawl sites with dynamic URLs; it is assumed by many webmasters there is a greater risk that it will give up if the URLs are deemed not important and contain multiple variables and session IDs (theory).

As standard, I use clean URLs where possible on new sites these days, and try to keep the URLs as simple as possible and do not obsess about it.

That's my aim at all times when I optimise a website to work better in Google – simplicity.

Google does look at keywords in the URL even in a granular level.

Having a keyword in your URL might be the difference between your site ranking and not – potentially useful to take advantage of long tail search queries

More Reading:

- [Does Google Count A Keyword In The URI (Filename) When Ranking A Page?](#)

Absolute Or Relative URLs

My advice would be to keep it consistent whatever you decide to use.

I prefer absolute URLs. That's just a preference. Google will crawl either if the local setup is correctly developed.

- What is an absolute URL? Example – https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/search-engine-optimisation/
- What is a relative URL? Example – /search-engine-optimisation.htm

Relative just means relative to the document the link is on.

Move that page to another site and it won't work.

With an absolute URL, it would work.

This is entirely going to a choice for your developers. Some developers on very large sites will always prefer relative URLS.

How long is too long for a URL?

> **QUOTE**: "*As far as I know, there's no theoretical length limit, but we recommend keeping URLs shorter than 2000 characters to keep things manageable.*" John Mueller, Google 2014

Subdirectories or Files For URL Structure

Sometimes I use subfolders and sometimes I use files. I have not been able to decide if there is any real benefit (in terms of ranking boost) to using either. A lot of CMS these days use subfolders in their file path, so I am pretty confident Google can deal with either.

I used to prefer files like **.html** when I was building a new site from scratch, as they were the 'end of the line' for search engines, as I imagined it, and a subfolder (or directory) was a *collection* of pages.

I used to think it could take more to get a subfolder trusted than say an individual file and I guess this sways me to use files on most websites I created (back in the day). Once subfolders are trusted, it's 6 or half a dozen, what the actual difference is in terms of ranking in Google – usually, rankings in Google are more determined by how RELEVANT or REPUTABLE a page is to a query.

In the past, subfolders could be treated differently than files (in my experience).

Subfolders can be trusted less than other subfolders or pages in your site, or ignored entirely. Subfolders *used to seem to me* to take a *little* longer to get indexed by Google, than for instance **.html** pages.

People talk about trusted domains but they don't mention (or don't think) some parts of the domain can be *trusted less*. Google treats some subfolders….. differently. Well, they used to – and remembering how Google *used* to handle things has some benefits – even in 2018.

Some say don't go beyond four levels of folders in your file path. I haven't experienced too many issues, but you never know.

When asked in a 2015 hangout, Google answered this:

> **QUOTE**: "*Is the number of directories within a URL a ranking factor? No.*" John Mueller, Google 2015

I think in 2018 it's even less of something to worry about. There's so much more important elements to check.

How Google Treats Subdomains: "We… treat that more as a single website"

https://youtu.be/jk2AXKiKSqE

John Mueller was asked if it is ok to interlink sub-domains, and the answer is yes, usually, because Google will treat subdomains on a website (primarily I think we can presume) as "a *single website*":

> **QUOTE**: *"So if you have different parts of your website and they're on different subdomains that's that's perfectly fine that's totally up to you and the way people link across these different subdomains is really up to you I guess* **one of the tricky aspects there is that we try to figure out what belongs to a website and to treat that more as a single website** *and sometimes things on separate subdomains are like a single website and sometimes they're more like separate websites for example on on blogger all of the subdomains are essentially completely separate websites they're not related to each other on the other hand other websites might have different subdomains and they just use them for different parts of the same thing so maybe for different country versions maybe for different language versions all of that is completely normal." John Mueller 2017*

That is important if Google has a [website quality rating score](#) (or multiple scores) for websites.

Personally, as an SEO, I prefer subdirectories rather than subdomains if given the choice, unless it really makes sense to house particular content on a subdomain, rather than the main site (as in the examples John mentions).

Back in the day when Google Panda was released, many tried to run from Google's content quality algorithms by moving to 'penalised' pages and content to subfolders. I thought that was a temporary solution.

Over the *long term*, you can, I think, **expect Google to treat subdomains on most common use websites as one entity – if it is – and be ranked accordingly in terms of content quality and user satisfaction**.

Should I Choose a Subfolder or Subdomain?

If you have the choice, I would choose to house content on a subfolder on the main domain. Recent research would still indicate this is the best way to go:

> **QUOTE**: "*When you move from Subdomain to Subdirectory, you rank much better, and you get more organic traffic from Google.*" Sistrix, 2018

Which Is Better For Google? PHP, HTML or ASP?

Google doesn't care. As long as it renders as a browser compatible document, it appears Google can read it these days.

I prefer PHP these days even with flat documents as it is easier to add server side code to that document if I want to add some sort of function to the site.

Fetch As Google

Check how your site renders to Google using the Fetch & Render Tool that Google provides as part of Google Search Console.

It is important that what Google (Googlebot) sees is (exactly) what a visitor would see if they visit your site. Blocking Google can sometimes result in a real ranking problem for websites.

Google renders your web pages as part of their web ranking process, so **ENSURE you do not block any important elements of your website that impact how a user or Googlebot would see your pages**.

If Google has problems accessing particular parts of your website, it will tell you in Search Console.

Tip: The fetch and render tool is also a great way to submit your website and new content to Google for indexing so that the page may appear in Google search results.

Check How Google Views Your Desktop Site

Google search console will give you information on this:

Check How Google Views Your Smartphone Site

Google search console will give you information on this:

Check How Your Site Renders On Other Browsers

You will also want to check how the website looks in different versions of Internet Explorer, Chrome, Firefox, Android & Safari Browsers, too – on mobile and desktop.

Site owners and beginners to web design should know from the start that your site **will not** and **cannot** look the same in all browsers and operating systems and some visitors on certain devices will run into some sort of difficulty on your site.

Your website CAN'T look the same in ALL of these browsers, but if it looks poor in most of the popular browsers, then you might have a problem.

In fact – **Google specifically states in their Webmaster Technical Guidelines** that you should:

> **QUOTE***: Test your site to make sure that it appears correctly in different browsers.*

When it comes to browser compatibility, Google has 4 main tips:

- *Test your site in as many browsers as possible.*
- *Write good, clean HTML.*
- *Specify your character encoding.*
- *Consider accessibility.*

If you are a website designer, you might want to test your web design and see how it looks in different versions of Microsoft Windows Internet Explorer.

You'll especially want to test how your new web page looks in IE, Firefox, Chrome and Safari across multiple operating systems including Android, Windows for PC and Apple Mac OS, desktop and mobile versions.

Is Valid HTML & CSS A Ranking Factor?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XlKn6I9rSc

Above – a Google video confirming this advice I first shared in 2008.

> **QUOTE**: "*it's not so much that the code have to be absolutely perfect but whether or not the page is going to render well for the user in general*" Danny Sullivan, Google

Does Google rank a page higher because of valid code? The short answer is no, even though I tested it on a small-scale test with different results.

Google doesn't care if your page is valid HTML and valid CSS. This is clear – check any top ten results in Google and you will probably see that most contain invalid HTML or CSS. I love creating accessible websites but they are a bit of a pain to manage when you have multiple authors or developers on a site.

If your site is so badly designed with a lot of invalid code even Google and browsers cannot read it, then you have a problem.

Where possible, if commissioning a new website, demand, at least, minimum web accessibility compliance on a site (there are three levels of priority to meet), and aim for valid HTML and CSS. Actually, this is the law in some countries although you would not know it, and be prepared to put a bit of work in to keep your rating.

Valid HTML and CSS are a pillar of best practice website optimisation, not strictly a part of professional search engine optimisation. It is one form of optimisation Google will not penalise you for.

I usually still aim to follow W3C recommendations that help deliver a better user experience;

Point Internal Links To Relevant Pages
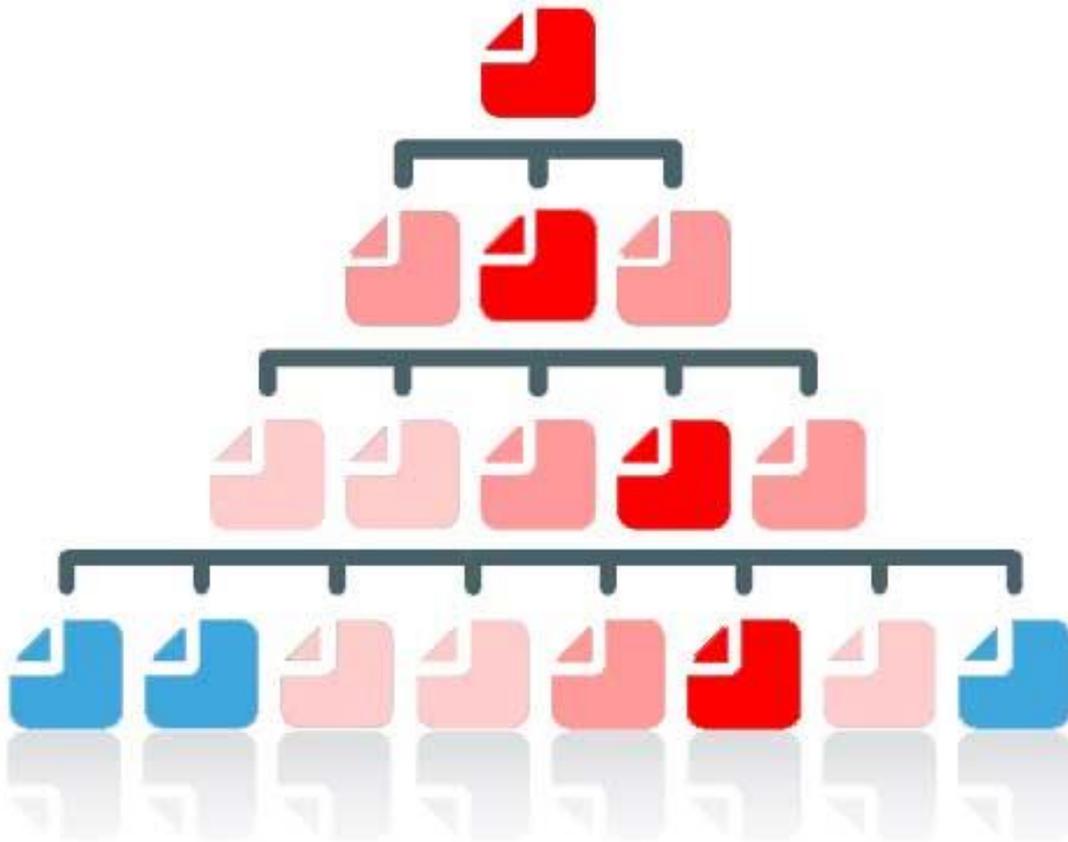
I link to relevant internal pages in my site when necessary.

I silo any relevance or trust mainly via links in text content and secondary menu systems and between pages that are relevant in context to one another.

I don't worry about perfect silo'ing techniques anymore, and don't worry about whether or not I should link to one category from another as I think the 'boost' many proclaim is minimal on the size of sites I usually manage.

I do not obsess about site architecture as much as I used to.... but I always ensure my pages I want to be indexed are all available from a crawl from the home page - and I still emphasise important pages by linking to them where relevant. I always aim to get THE most important exact match anchor text pointing to the page from internal links - but I avoid abusing internals and avoid overtly manipulative internal links that are not grammatically correct, for instance..

There's no set method I find works for every site, other than to **link to related internal pages often without overdoing it** and where appropriate.

What Are SERP Sitelinks?

When Google knows enough about the history or relationships of a website (or web page), it will sometimes display what are called site links (or mega site links) under the url of the website in question.

This results in an enhanced search snippet in SERPs.

This is normally triggered when Google is confident this is the site you are looking for, based on the search terms you used.

Sitelinks are usually reserved for navigational queries with a heavy brand bias, a brand name or a company name, for instance, or the website address.

I've tracked the evolution of Google site links in organic listings over the years, and they are seemly picked based on a number of factors.

How To Get Google Sitelinks?

Pages that feature in site links are often popular pages on your site, in terms of internal or external links, or user experience or even recent posts that may have been published on your blog.

Google likes to seem to mix this up a lot, perhaps to offer some variety, and probably to obfuscate results to minimise or discourage manipulation.

Sometimes it returns pages that leave me scratching my head as to why Google selected a particular page appears.

If you don't HAVE site links, have a bit of patience and focus on other areas of your web marketing, like adding more content, get some PR or social activity focussed on the site.

Google WILL give you site links on some terms; ONCE Google is confident your site is the destination users want.

That could be a week or months, but the more popular the site is, the more likely Google will catch up fast.

Sitelinks are not something can be switched on or off, although you can control to some degree the pages are selected as site links. You can do that in Google Webmaster Tools AKA Search Console.

Link Out To Related Sites

Concerning on-page SEO best practices, I usually link out to other quality relevant pages on other websites where possible and where a human would find it valuable.

I don't link out to other sites from the homepage. I want the Pagerank of the home page to be shared only with my internal pages. **I don't like out to other sites from my category pages either**, for the same reason.

I link to other relevant sites (a deep link where possible) **from individual pages** and I do it often, usually. I don't worry about link equity or PR leak because I control it on a page-to-page level.

This works for me, it allows me to share the link equity I have with other sites while ensuring it is not at the expense of pages on my domain. It may even help get me into a 'neighbourhood' of relevant sites, especially when some of those start linking back to my site.

Linking out to other sites, especially using a blog, also helps tell others that might be interested in your content that your page is 'here'. Try it.

I don't abuse anchor text, but I will be considerate, and usually try and link out to a site using keywords these bloggers / site owners would appreciate.

The recently leaked Quality Raters Guidelines document clearly tells web reviewers to identify how USEFUL or helpful your SUPPLEMENTARY NAVIGATION options are - whether you link to other internal pages or pages on other sites.

Broken Links Are A Waste Of Link Power

The simplest piece of advice I ever read about creating a website / optimising a website was years ago and it is still useful today:

QUOTE: "M*ake sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site*"

This advice is still sound today and the most important piece of advice out there in my opinion.

Check your pages for broken links. Seriously, broken links are a waste of link power and could hurt your site, drastically in some cases.

Google is a link-based search engine – if your links are broken and your site is chock full of 404s you might not be at the races.

Here's the second best piece of advice, in my opinion, seeing as we are just about talking about website architecture;

QUOTE: "Link to your important pages often internally, with varying anchor text in the navigation and in page text content."

Especially if you do not have a lot of Pagerank.

Does Only The First Link Count In Google?

Does the second anchor text link on a page count?

One of the more interesting discussions in the webmaster community of late has been trying to determine which links Google counts as links on pages on your site. Some say the link Google finds higher in the code, is the link Google will 'count' if there are two links on a page going to the same page.

I tested this (a while ago now) with the post [Google counts The First Internal Link](#).

For example (and I am talking internally here – if you took a page and I placed two links on it, both going to the same page? (OK – hardly scientific, but you should get the idea).

Will Google only 'count' the first link? Or will it read the anchor text of both links, and give my page the benefit of the text in both links especially if the anchor text is different in both links? Will Google ignore the second link?

What is interesting to me is that knowing this leaves you with a question. If your navigation array has your main pages linked to in it, perhaps your links in content are being ignored, or at least, not valued.

I think links in body text are invaluable. Does that mean placing the navigation below the copy to get a wide and varied internal anchor text to a page?

Perhaps.

As I said, I think this is one of the more interesting talks in the community at the moment and perhaps Google works differently with internal links as opposed to external; links to other websites.

I think quite possibly this could change day to day if Google pressed a button, but **I optimise a site thinking that only the first link on a page will count** – based on what I monitor although I am testing this – and actually, I usually only link once from page-to-page on client sites, unless it's useful for visitors.

Duplicate Content

https://youtu.be/KxCAVmXfVyI?t=3m40s

In the video above (June 17 2016), **Google's Andrey Lipattsev** was adamant: Google DOES NOT have a duplicate content penalty.

It's a good video for a refresher on the subject of duplicated content on your site.

He clearly wants people to understand **it is NOT a penalty if Google discovers your content is not unique and doesn't rank your page above a competitor's page**.

Also, as John Mueller points out, Google picks the best option to show users depending on who they are and where they are. So sometimes, your duplicate content will appear to users where relevant.

This latest advice from Google is useful in that it clarifies Google's position, which I quickly paraphrase below:

- There is no duplicate content penalty
- Google rewards UNIQUENESS and the signals associated with ADDED VALUE
- Google FILTERS duplicate content
- Duplicate content can slow Google down in finding new content
- XML sitemaps are just about the BEST technical method of helping Google discover your new content
- Duplicate content is probably not going to set your marketing on fire
- Google wants you to concentrate signals in canonical documents, and it wants you to focus on making these canonical pages BETTER for USERS.
- For SEO, it is not necessarily the *abundance* of duplicate content on a website that is the real issue. It's the lack of positive signals that NO unique content or added value provides that will fail to help you rank faster and better in Google.

A sensible strategy for SEO would still appear to be to reduce Googlebot crawl expectations and consolidate ranking equity & potential in high-quality canonical pages and you do that by minimising duplicate or near-duplicate content.

A self-defeating strategy would be to 'optimise' low-quality or non-unique pages or present low-quality pages to users.

Google clearly says that the practice of making your text more 'unique', using low-quality techniques like adding synonyms and related words is:

QUOTE*: "probably more counter productive than actually helping your website" John Mueller, Google*

Duplicate Content SEO Best Practice

Webmasters are confused about 'penalties' for duplicate content, which is a natural part of the web landscape, because Google claims there is NO duplicate content penalty, yet rankings can be impacted negatively, apparently, by what looks like 'duplicate content' problems.

The reality in 2018 is that if Google classifies your duplicate content as THIN content, or MANIPULATIVE BOILER-PLATE or NEAR DUPLICATE 'SPUN' content, then you probably DO have a severe problem that violates Google's website performance recommendations and this 'violation' will need 'cleaned' up - if - of course - you intend to rank high in Google.

Google wants us to understand, in 2018, that MANIPULATIVE BOILER-PLATE or NEAR DUPLICATE 'SPUN' content is NOT 'duplicate content'.

Duplicate content is not necessarily 'spammy' to Google.

The rest of it is e.g:

> **QUOTE**: *"Content which is copied, but changed slightly from the original. This type of copying makes it difficult to find the exact matching original source. Sometimes just a few words are changed, or whole sentences are changed, or a "find and replace" modification is made, where one word is replaced with another throughout the text. These types of changes are deliberately done to make it difficult to find the original source of the content. We call this kind of content "copied with minimal alteration." Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines March 2017*

John Mueller of Google also clarified, with examples, that there is:

> **QUOTE**: "**No duplicate content penalty**" but "**We do have some things *around* duplicate content ... that are penalty worthy**" John Mueller, Google

More Reading:

- [Duplicate content advice from Google in 2018](#)

Double or Indented Listings in Google

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGpEdyIcZcU

How do you get *Double* or *Indented* Listings in Google SERPs? How do you get two listings from the same website in the top ten results in Google instead of one (in normal view with 10 results).

Generally speaking, this means you have at least two pages with enough link equity to reach the top ten results – two pages very relevant to the search term. In 2018 however it could be a sign of Google testing different sets of results by for instance merging two indexes where a website ranks differently in both.

You can achieve this with relevant pages, good internal structure and of course links from other websites. It's far easier to achieve in less competitive verticals but in the end is does come down in many cases to domain authority and high relevance for a particular keyphrase.

Some SERPs feature sites with more than two results from the same site. Often this is the result of what Google might call lower quality SERPs.

Create Useful 404 Pages

I mentioned previously that Google gives clear advice on creating useful 404 pages:

1. *Tell visitors clearly that the page they're looking for can't be found*
2. *Use language that is friendly and inviting*
3. *Make sure your 404 page uses the same look and feel (including navigation) as the rest of your site.*
4. *Consider adding links to your most popular articles or posts, as well as a link to your site's home page.*
5. *Think about providing a way for users to report a broken link.*
6. *Make sure that your webserver returns an actual 404 HTTP status code when a missing page is requested*

It is incredibly important in 2018 to create useful and proper 404 pages. This will help prevent Google recording lots of autogenerated thin pages on your site (both a security risk and a rankings risk).

I sometimes use 410 responses for expired content that is never coming back.

A poor 404 page and user interaction with it, can only lead to a 'poor user experience' signal at Google's end, for a number of reasons. I will highlight a poor 404 page in my audits and actually programmatically look for signs of this issue when I scan a site. I don't know if Google looks at your site that way to rate it e.g. algorithmically determines if you have a good 404 page - or if it is a UX factor, something to be taken into consideration further down the line - or purely to get you thinking about 404 pages (in general) to help prevent Google wasting resources indexing crud pages and presenting poor results to searchers. I think rather that any rating would be a second order scoring including data from user activity on the SERPs - stuff we as SEO can't see.

At any rate - I don't need to know why we need to do something, exactly, if it is in black and white like:

> **QUOTE: "*Create useful 404 pages*"** Google, 2018

and

> **QUOTE:** **"***Tell visitors clearly that the page they're looking for can't be found. Use language that is friendly and inviting. Make sure your 404 page uses the same look and feel (including navigation) as the rest of your site. Consider adding links to your most popular articles or posts, as well as a link to your site's home page. Think about providing a way for users to report a broken link. No matter how beautiful and useful your custom 404 page, you probably don't want it to appear in Google search results. In order to prevent 404 pages from being indexed by Google and other search engines, make sure that your webserver returns an actual 404 HTTP status code when a missing page is requested.*" Google, 2018

..... all that is need doing is to follow the guideline as exact as Google tells you to do it.

Ratings for Pages with Error Messages or No MC

Google doesn't want to index pages without a specific purpose or sufficient main content. A good 404 page and proper setup prevents a lot of this from happening in the first place.

> *QUOTE: "Some pages load with content created by the webmaster, but have an error message or are missing MC. Pages may lack MC for various reasons. Sometimes, the page is "broken" and the content does not load properly or at all. Sometimes, the content is no longer available and the page displays an error message with this information. **Many websites have a few "broken" or non-functioning pages. This is normal, and those individual non-functioning or broken pages on an otherwise maintained site should be rated Low quality**. This is true even if other pages on the website are overall High or Highest quality." Google*

Does Google programmatically look at 404 pages?

We are told, NO in a recent hangout - - but - in Quality Raters Guidelines "Users probably care a lot".

Do 404 Errors in Search Console Hurt My Rankings?

> **QUOTE***: "404 errors on invalid URLs do not harm your site's indexing or ranking in any way.*" John Mueller, Google

It appears this isn't a once size fits all answer. If you properly deal with mishandled 404 errors that have some link equity, you reconnect equity that was once lost - and this 'backlink reclamation' evidently has value.

The issue here is that Google introduces a lot of noise into that Crawl Errors report to make it unwieldy and not very user-friendly.

A lot of broken links Google tells you about can often be totally irrelevant and legacy issues. Google could make it instantly more valuable by telling us which 404s are linked to from only *external* websites.

Fortunately, you can find your own broken links on site using the myriad of SEO tools available.

I also prefer to use Analytics to look for broken backlinks on a site with some history of migrations, for instance.

John has clarified some of this before, although he is talking specifically (I think) about errors found by Google in Search Console (formerly Google Webmaster Tools):

1. *In some cases, crawl errors may come from a legitimate structural issue within your website or CMS. How do you tell? Double-check the origin of the crawl error. If there's a broken link on your site, in your page's static HTML, then that's always worth fixing*
2. *What about the funky URLs that are "clearly broken?" When our algorithms like your site, they may try to find more great content on it, for example by trying to discover new URLs in JavaScript. If we try those "URLs" and find a 404, that's great and expected. We just don't want to miss anything important*

If you are making websites and want them to rank, the 2015 and 2014 Quality Raters Guidelines document is a great guide for Webmasters to avoid low-quality ratings and potentially avoid punishment algorithms.

301 Redirects Are POWERFUL & WHITE HAT

You can use 301 redirects to redirect pages, sub-folders or even entire websites and preserve Google rankings that the old page, sub-folder or websites enjoyed.

> **QUOTE**: "*If you need to change the URL of a page as it is shown in search engine results, we recommend that you use a server-side 301 redirect. This is the best way to ensure that users and search engines are directed to the correct page.*" Google, 2018

and

> **QUOTE**: "***301s happen at a page level*** *so just because you see one 301 on one page of the old domain does not mean the entire domain has completely migrated.*" Matt Cutts, Google

And

> **QUOTE**: "*We follow up to five redirect steps in a redirect chain if it's a server-side redirect.*" John Mueller, Google

And

> **QUOTE**: "*How do I move from one domain to another domain and try to preserve the rankings as best as possible? …do a 301 permanent redirect to the new location (assuming that you're you're moving for all time and eternity so this is the good case for a permanent or 301 redirect if you were planning to undo this later or it's temporary then you'd use a 302 redirect)…. search engines should be able to follow the trail of all the 301 redirects*" Matt Cutts, Google

Rather than tell Google via a 404, 410 or some other instruction that this page isn't here anymore, you can permanently redirect an expired page to a relatively similar page to **preserve any link equity that old page might have**.

Redirecting multiple old pages to one new page works too if the information is there on the new page that ranked the old page. Pages should be thematically connected if you want the redirects to have a SEO benefit.

My general rule of thumb is to make sure the information (and keywords) on the old page are featured prominently in the text of the new page – stay on the safe side.

Most already know the power of a 301 redirect and how you can use it to power even totally unrelated pages to the top of Google for a time – sometimes a very long time.

You need to keep these redirects in place (for instance on a linux apache server, in your htaccess file) forever.

> **QUOTE**: "*So from our point of view, when we look at 301 redirects and permanent site move situations, **we do expect that 301 redirect to be there for the long run**.*

I WOULDN'T 301 REDIRECT users blindly to your home page if you expect any SEO benefits from 301s.

> **QUOTE**: "*So the 301 redirect from all pages to the home page, **that would be something that we see as a soft 404s**".* John Mueller, Google

I'd also be careful of redirecting lots of low-quality links to one URL. If you need a page to redirect old URLs to, consider your sitemap or contact page. Audit any pages backlinks BEFORE you redirect them to an important page.

I'm seeing CANONICAL LINK ELEMENTS work just the same as 301s in 2018 - though they seem to take a little longer to have an impact, and Google can eventually ignore your canonicals if they are misused.

Hint - a good tactic at the moment is to **CONSOLIDATE old, thin under-performing articles Google ignores, into bigger, better quality articles**.

I usually then 301 all old pages to a single thematically related page to consolidate link equity and content equity. As long as the intention is to serve users and create content that is satisfying and more up-to-date - Google is OK with this.

> **QUOTE**: "*Anytime you do a bigger change on your website if you redirect a lot of URLs or if you go from one domain to another or if you change your site's structure then all of that does take time for things to settle down so we can follow that pretty quickly we can definitely forward the signals there but that doesn't mean that'll happen from one day to next*" John Mueller, Google 2016

Changing from HTTP to HTTPS? - John Mueller said in a 2015 hangout to "*make sure that you have both variations listed in Webmaster Tools*" and "*essentially just set up the (301) redirect, set up the rel=canonical.*"

NOTE: Some Redirects May Be Treated As Soft 404 Errors

Can it be surmised that Google might label certain 301 redirects (that DO NOT redirect to VERY EQUIVALENT CONTENT) as **SOFT 404** and so devalue all signals associated with them?

Will this be the same for e-commerce sites?

What Are Soft 404 Pages?

Typically:

> **QUOTE**: "*A **soft 404** means that a URL on your site returns a page telling the user that the page does not exist and also a 200-level (success) code to the browser. (In some cases, instead of a "not found" page, it might be a page with little or no usable content–for example, a sparsely populated or empty page.)*" Google, 2018

From my experience, not all soft 404 are created with enough volume to be a problem on most sites, but some **auto-generated pages on some sites can produce soft 404 at a content level** that with enough number that can cause indexation challenges.

> **QUOTE***: "Returning a code other than 404 or 410 for a non-existent page (or **redirecting users to another page, such as the homepage, instead of returning a 404) can be problematic. Firstly, it tells search engines that there's a real page at that URL. As a result, that URL may be crawled and its content indexed. Because of the time Googlebot spends on non-existent pages, your unique URLs may not be discovered as quickly or visited as frequently and your site's crawl coverage may be impacted (also, you probably don't want your site to rank well for the search query"* [GOOGLE](#)

However, Google will also treat certain mismatched or incorrect redirects as soft-404 type pages, too.

And this is a REAL problem in 2018, and a marked change from the way Google worked say ten years ago.

It essentially means that Google is not going to honour your redirect instruction and that means you are at risk of knobbling any positive signals you are attempting to transfer through a redirect.

You MUST Redirect To Equivalent Content

Sometimes it is useful to direct visitors from a usability point of view, but sometimes that usability issue will impact SEO benefits from old assets.

The message is **out of date content can be a 'bad user experience'** (it will depend on the query, of course) and **ONLY REDIRECT content to EQUIVALENT CONTENT**– ESPECIALLY if you have backlinks pointing to these pages and you want them to still count in 2018.

How To Use 301 Redirects Properly To Preserve Rankings in Google

I've stuck with the same method over the years when it comes to redirects.

If a PARTICULAR CANONICAL HEAD KEYWORD is IMPORTANT (even perhaps a SYNONYM or LONG TAIL VARIANT) and I think a particular 301 REDIRECT has some positive impact on how Google judges the quality or relevance the page, I will make sure the CANONICAL HEAD KEYWORD and SYNONYMS are on the FINAL PAGE I redirect Google to (which is the one that will be rated and cached).

RELEVANT REDIRECTS TO RELEVANT CONTENT.

If I want to boost that pages relevance for that KEYWORD at the center of any redirects, I will ensure the new page content is updated and expanded upon if it is of genuine interest to a user.

Also, note, Google has recently said certain redirects to your home page will also count as soft 404.

Here are a few tips when managing internal redirects on your site:

- ensure redirects you employ designed to permanently move content are 301 redirects
- minimise redirect chains (not only can Google be expected to only follow about 5 redirects in a chain, employing fewer redirects will speed up your site).
- avoid redirecting any links to category pages unless extremely relevant, as per advice from Google
- avoid redirecting links to NON-equivalent content
- re-point existing redirected links to better, more equivalent content (as you are recommended to do this in the Panda document)
- ensure redirected domains redirect through a canonical redirect and this too has any chains minimised, although BE SURE to audit the backlink profile for any redirects you point at a page as with reward comes punishment if those backlinks are toxic (another example of Google opening up the war that is technical seo on a front that isn't, and in fact is converse, to building backlinks to your site).

- redirect really out of date links (you absolutely want to keep) to pages of secondary importance which are as relevant as possible to your existing content.
- to avoid throwing link equity away, you might create HIGH LEVEL IN-DEPTH TOPIC PAGES on your site and redirect (or use canonical redirects) any related expired content that HAVE INCOMING BACKLINKS, to this topic page (and keep it updated, folding content from old pages, where relevant and there is traffic opportunity, to create TOPIC pages that are focused on the customer e.g. information pages)
- avoid unnecessary redirects in links in internal pages on the site
- don't expect Toolbar Pagerank to pass via https redirects, for instance, as Toolbar Pagerank is dead
- a temporary or permanent redirect is only 'in place' as long as the instruction to do so REMAINS in place in, for instance, your htaccess file. Remove your redirect code, and a permanent redirect just became a temporary redirect and you can lose the benefit of the redirect
- a 302 redirect left in place usually functions as a 301, although I still would not rely on a 302 to function as a 301, based on previous experience (so I make all my redirects 301)
- In my experience, a 301 redirect is what *most* want to use, if a redirect is necessary
- if you have no real reason to redirect a page, and no equivalent content to redirect it to, then serve a 404. or even better, a server response 410 (GONE FOREVER). You should only be implementing 301s if you have some signal of quality pointing to that particular URL that is worth consolidation.

Perhaps Google is giving those who will chase it another element to optimise to keep the traffic you already get, and succeed above others who will not take the measures, in this case, to optimise their redirects.

This may end up being another example where to optimise you need to dig down to a level where you need to learn how to be a htaccess / apache optimiser (which I am not, just as I am not a professional copywriter or CSS or mobile wizard).

Fortunately, you can still get away with keeping (whatever it is) as simple, fast and as canonical as possible and that is what I try and do.

Redirect Non-WWW To WWW (or Vice Versa)

> **QUOTE**: "*The preferred domain is the one that you would liked used to index your site's pages (sometimes this is referred to as the canonical domain). Links may point to your site using both the www and non-www versions of the URL (for instance, http://www.example.com and http://example.com). The preferred domain is the version that you want used for your site in the search results.*" Google, 2018

Your site probably has canonicalisation issues (especially if you have an e-commerce website) and it might start at the domain level and this can exacerbate duplicate content problems on your website.

Simply put, https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/ can be treated by Google as a different URL than http://hobo-web.co.uk/ even though it's the same page, and it can get even more complicated.

Its thought REAL Pagerank can be diluted if Google gets confused about your URLs and speaking simply you don't want this PR diluted (in theory).

That's why many, including myself, redirect non-www to www (or vice versa) if the site is on a Linux/Apache server (in the htaccess file -

```
Options +FollowSymLinks RewriteEngine on RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^hobo-
web.co.uk [NC] RewriteRule ^(.*)$ https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/$1 [L,R=301]
```

Basically, you are redirecting all the Google juice to one canonical version of a URL.

In 2018 - this is a MUST HAVE best practice.

It keeps it simple when optimising for Google. It should be noted; it's **incredibly important not to mix the two types of www/non-www on site when linking your internal pages**!

Note in 2018 Google asks you which domain you prefer to set as your canonical domain in Google Webmaster Tools.

> QUOTE: "**Note:** Once you've set your preferred domain, you may want to use a 301 redirect to redirect traffic from your non-preferred domain, so that other search engines and visitors know which version you prefer."

More Reading:

- [How To Change Domain Names And Keep Your Rankings On Google in 2018](#)

The Canonical Link Element Is VERY IMPORTANT

https://www.youtube.com/embed/Cm9onOGTgeM

> **QUOTE**: "*I've got a slide here where I show I think 8 different URLs you know every single one of these URLs could return completely different content in practice we as humans whenever we look at 'www.example.com' or just regular 'example.com' or example.com/index or example.com/home.asp we think of it as the same page and in practice it usually is the same page so technically it doesn't have to be but almost always web servers will return the same content for like these 8 different versions of the URL so that can cause a lot of problems in search engines if rather than having your backlinks all go to one page instead it's split between (the versions) and it's a really big headache....how do people fix this well .... the canonical link element*" Matt Cutts, Google

When it comes to Google SEO, the **rel=canonical link element** has become ***VERY* IMPORTANT** over the years and NEVER MORE SO.

> **QUOTE**: "*If your site contains multiple pages with largely identical content, there are a number of ways you can indicate your preferred URL to Google. (This is called "canonicalization".)*" Google

This element is employed by Google, Bing and other search engines to help them specify the page you want to rank out of duplicate and near duplicate pages found on your site, or on other pages on the web.

In the video above, Matt Cutts from Google shares tips on the new rel="canonical" tag (more accurately – the *canonical link element*) that the 3 top search engines now support. If you want to know more, see how to use canonical tags properly.

Do I Need A Google XML Sitemap For My Website?

What is an XML sitemap and do I need one to SEO my site for Google?

> **QUOTE**: "*(The XML Sitemap protocol) has wide adoption, including support from Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft.*"

No. You do NOT, technically, *need* an XML Sitemap to optimise a site for Google if you have a sensible navigation system that Google can crawl and index easily.

> **QUOTE**: "*Some pages we crawl every day. Other pages, every couple of months.*" John Mueller, Google

Some pages are more important than others to Googlebot.

HOWEVER - in 2018 - you should have a Content Management System that produces one as a best practice - and you should submit that sitemap to Google in Google Webmaster Tools. Again - best practice.

Google has said very recently XML and RSS are still a very useful discovery method for them to pick out recently updated content on your site.

An XML Sitemap is a file on your server with which you can help Google easily crawl & index all the pages on your site. This is evidently useful for very large sites that publish lots of new content or updates content regularly.

Your web pages will still get into search results without an XML sitemap if Google can find them by crawling your website if you:

1. Make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site
2. Link to your important pages often, with (varying anchor text, in the navigation and **in page text content if you want best results)**

Remember - Google needs links to find all the pages on your site, and links spread Pagerank, that help pages rank - so an XML sitemap is never a substitute for a great website architecture.

> **QUOTE**: "*Sitemaps are an easy way for webmasters to inform search engines about pages on their sites that are available for crawling. In its simplest form, a Sitemap is an XML file that lists URLs for a site along with additional metadata about each URL (when it was last updated, how often it usually changes, and how important it is, relative to other URLs in the site) so that search engines can more intelligently crawl the site.*"

Most modern CMS auto-generate XML sitemaps and Google does ask you submit a site-map in webmaster tools, and I do these days.

I prefer to define manually my important pages by links and depth of content, but an XML sitemap is a best practice in 2018 for most sites.

> **QUOTE**: "*We support 50 megabytes for a sitemap file, but not everyone else supports 50 megabytes. Therefore, we currently just recommend sticking to the 10 megabyte limit,*" John Mueller, Google

Google wants to know when primary page content is updated, not when supplementary page content is modified - "*if the content significantly changes, that's relevant. If the content, the primary content, doesn't change,then I wouldn't update it.*

Read my article on how to get your entire website crawled and indexed by Google.

Enough Satisfying Website Information for the Purpose of the Website

> **QUOTE**: "*If a page has one of the following characteristics, the Low rating is usually appropriate.....(if) There is an unsatisfying amount of website information for the purpose of the website.*" Google, 2017

Google wants evaluators to find out who owns the website and who is responsible for the content on it.

If you are a business in the UK - your website also needs to meet the legal requirements necessary to comply with the **UK Companies Act 2007**. It's easy to just incorporate this required information into your footer.

> **QUOTE**: "*Companies in the UK must include certain regulatory information on their websites and in their email footers ...... or they will breach the Companies Act and risk a fine*. OUTLAW

Here's what you need to know regarding website and email footers to comply with the UK Companies Act (with our information in **bold**);

----

1. The Company Name -
2. Physical geographic address (A PO Box is unlikely to suffice as a geographic address; but a registered office address would - If the business is a company, the registered office address must be included.)
3. the company's registration number should be given and, under the Companies Act, the place of registration should be stated
4. email address of the company (It is not sufficient to include a 'contact us' form without also providing an email address and geographic address somewhere easily accessible on the site)
5. The name of the organisation with which the customer is contracting must be given. This might differ from the trading name. Any such difference should be explained
6. If your business has a VAT number, it should be stated even if the website is not being used for e-commerce transactions.
7. Prices on the website must be clear and unambiguous. Also, state whether prices are inclusive of tax and delivery costs.

The above information **does not** *need* to feature on every page, more on a clearly accessible page. However - with Google Quality Raters rating web pages on quality based on Expertise, Authority and Trust (see my recent making high-quality websites post) - ANY signal you can send to an algorithm or human reviewer's eyes that you are a legitimate business is probably a sensible move at this time (if you have nothing to hide, of course).

Note: If the business is a member of a trade or professional association, membership details, including any registration number, should be provided. Consider also the Distance Selling Regulations which contain other information requirements for online businesses that sell to consumers (B2C, as opposed to B2B, sales).

For more detailed information about the UK Companies:

- Companies Act 2006
- The Companies (Registrar, Languages and Trading Disclosures) Regulations 2006
- The UK's E-commerce Regulations - OUT-LAW's excellent guide

Dynamic PHP Copyright Notice in Wordpress

Now that your site complies with the Act - you'll want to ensure your website never looks obviously out of date.

While you are editing your footer - ensure your copyright notice is dynamic and will change year to year - automatically.

It's simple to display a dynamic date in your footer in Wordpress, for instance, so you never need to change your copyright notice on your blog when the year changes.

This little bit of code will display the current year. Just add it in your theme's footer.php and you can forget about making sure you don't look stupid, or give the impression your site is out of date and unused, at the beginning of every year.

```
&copy; Copyright 2004 - <?php echo date("Y") ?>
```

A simple and elegant PHP copyright notice for Wordpress blogs.

Rich Snippets

Rich Snippets and **Schema Markup** can be intimidating if you are new to them - but important data about your business can actually be very simply added to your site by sensible optimisation of your website footer.

This is easy to implement.

An optimised website footer can comply with law, may help search engines understand your site better and can help usability and improve conversions.

Properly optimised your website footer can also help you make your search snippet stand out in Google results pages:

Adding Schema.org Markup to Your Footer

You can take your information you have about your business and transform it with Schema.org markup to give even more accurate information to search engines.

Now you can have a website footer that helps your business comply with UK Law, is more usable, automatically updates the copyright notice year - **and** helps your website stick out in Google SERPs.

PRO Tip - Now you know the basics, consider implementing rich schema using a much cleaner method called **JSON-LD**!

More Reading

- https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/99170?hl=en

Keep It Simple, Stupid

Don't Build Your Site With Flash, HTML Frames or any other deprecated technology.

Flash is a propriety plug-in created by Macromedia to infuse (albeit) fantastically rich media for your websites. The W3C advises you avoid the use of such proprietary technology to construct an entire site. Instead, build your site with CSS and HTML ensuring everyone, including search engine robots, can sample your website content. Then, if required, you can embed media files such as Flash in the HTML of your website.

> **QUOTE**: *"Chrome will continue phasing out Flash over the next few years, first by asking for your permission to run Flash in more situations, and eventually disabling it by default. We will remove Flash completely from Chrome toward the end of 2020."* Google Chrome, 2017

Flash, in the hands of an inexperienced designer, can cause all types of problems at the moment, especially with:

- Accessibility
- Search Engines
- Users not having the Plug-In
- Large Download Times

Flash doesn't even work at all on some devices, like the Apple iPhone. Note that Google sometimes highlights if your site is not mobile friendly on some devices. And on the subject of mobile-friendly websites - note that **Google has alerted the webmaster community that mobile friendliness will be a search engine ranking factor in 2018**.

> **QUOTE***: "Starting April 21 (2015), we will be expanding our use of mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal. This change will affect mobile searches in all languages worldwide and will have a significant impact in our search results. Consequently, users will find it easier to get relevant, high-quality search results that are optimized for their devices". GOOGLE*

Html5 is the preferred option over Flash these days, for most designers. A site built entirely in Flash will cause an unsatisfactory user experience and will affect your rankings in 2018, and especially in mobile search results. For similar accessibility and user satisfaction reasons, I would also say don't build a site with website frames.

As in any form of design, don't try and re-invent the wheel when simple solutions suffice. The **KISS** philosophy has been around since the dawn of design.

KISS does not mean boring web pages. You can create stunning sites with smashing graphics – but you should build these sites using simple techniques – HTML & CSS, for instance. If you are new to web design, avoid things like Flash and JavaScript, especially for elements like scrolling news tickers, etc. These elements work fine for TV – but only cause problems for website visitors.

Keep layouts and navigation arrays consistent and simple too. Don't spend time, effort and money (especially if you work in a professional environment) designing fancy navigation menus if, for example, your new website is an information site.

Same with website optimisation – keep your documents well structured and keep your page Title Elements and text content relevant, use Headings tags sensibly and try and avoid leaving too much of a footprint – whatever you are up to.

How Fast Should Your Web Page Load?

> *QUOTE: "2 seconds is the threshold for ecommerce website acceptability. At Google, we aim for under a half second." Maile Ohye, from Google*

'Site Speed', we are told by Google **is** a ranking factor. But as with any factor Google confirms *is* a ranking signal, it's usually a small, 'nuanced' one.

A fast site is a good user experience (UX), and a satisfying UX **leads to higher conversions**.

How fast your website loads is critical but it is often completely ignored by webmasters.

Very slow sites are a **bad user experience** – and Google is *all about* GOOD UX these days.

EVERY SECOND COUNTS

Loading time is a major contributing factor to page abandonment. The average user has no patience for a page that takes too long to load, and justifiably so.

Observation: slower page response time results in an increase in page abandonment, as demonstrated in the following chart.

Page abandonment increase as a percentage.

Page load time in seconds.
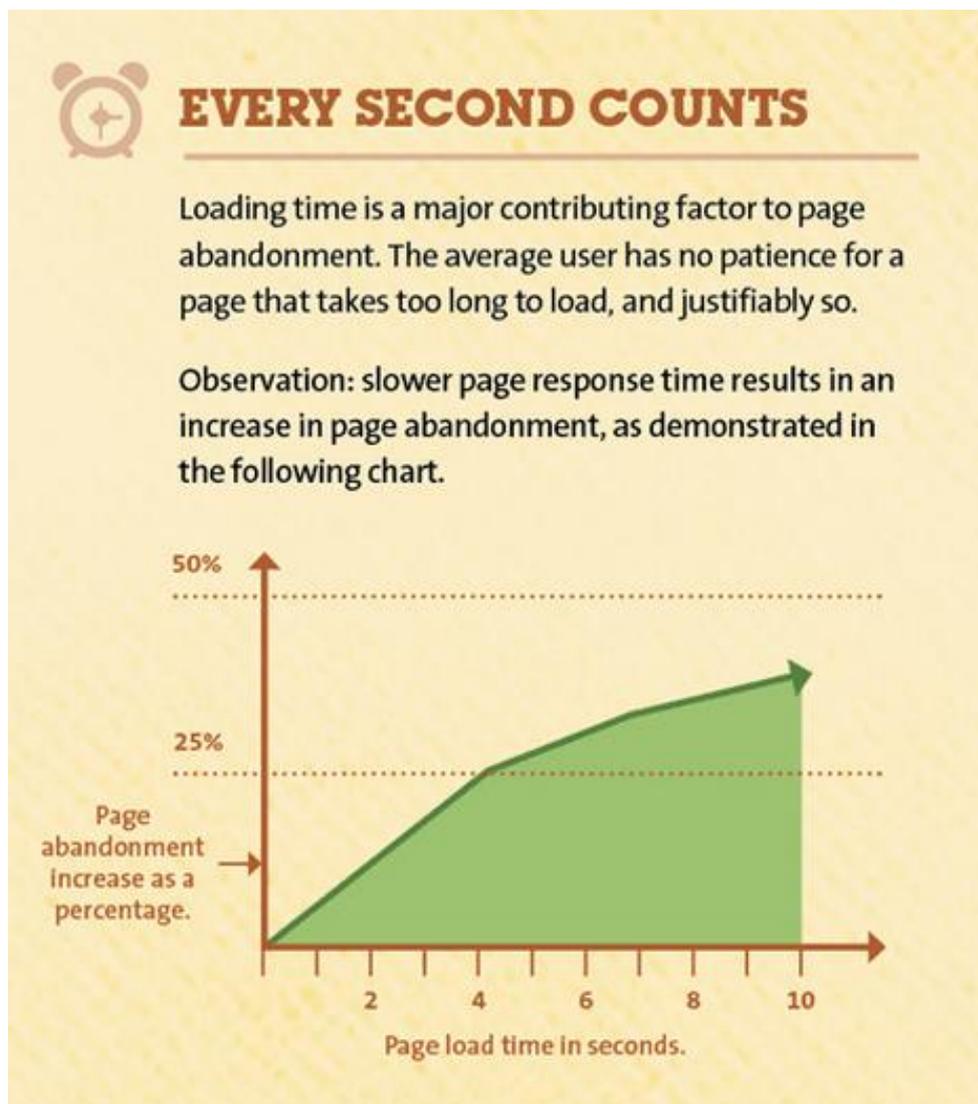
How Much is 'Website Speed' a Google Ranking Factor?

'How much is a *very slow site* a *negative* ranking factor' is a more useful interpretation of the claim that '*website speed is a Google ranking factor*'.

First – for I have witnessed VERY slow websites of 10 seconds and more negatively impacted in Google, and second, from statements made by Googlers:

> **QUOTE***: "We do say we have a small factor in there for pages that are really slow to load where we take that into account."* **John Mueller, GOOGLE**

Google might crawl your site slower if you have a slow site. And that's bad – especially if you are adding new content or making changes to it.

> **QUOTE***: We're seeing an extremely high response-time for requests made to your site (at times, over **2 seconds to fetch a single URL**). This has resulted in us severely limiting the number of URLs we'll crawl from your site.* **John Mueller, GOOGLE**

John specifically said 2 seconds disrupts CRAWLING activity, not RANKING ability, but you get the picture.

How Fast Should Your Website Load in 2018?

My latest research would indicate *as fast as possible*.

A Non-Technical Google SEO Strategy

Here are some final thoughts:

- **Use common sense** - Google is a search engine - it is looking for pages to give searchers results, 90% of its users are looking for information. Google itself WANTS the organic results full of information. Almost all websites will link to relevant information content so content-rich websites get a lot of links - especially quality links. Google ranks websites with a lot of links (especially quality links) at the top of its search engines so the obvious thing you need to do is **ADD A LOT of INFORMATIVE CONTENT TO YOUR WEBSITE**.
- I think ranking in organic listings is a lot about trusted links making trusted pages rank, making trusted links making trusted pages rank ad nauseam for various keywords. Some pages can pass trust to another site; some pages cannot. Some links can. Some cannot. Some links are trusted enough to pass ranking signals to another page. Some are not. **YOU NEED LINKS FROM TRUSTED PAGES IF YOU WANT TO RANK AND AVOID PENALTIES & FILTERS.**
- Google engineers are building an AI - but it's all based on simple human desires to make something happen or indeed to prevent something. You can work with Google engineers or against them. Engineers need to make money for Google but unfortunately for them, they need to make the best search engine in the world for us humans as part of the deal. Build a site that takes advantage of this. What is a Google engineer trying to do with an algorithm? I always remember it was an idea first before it was an algorithm. What was that idea? Think "like" a Google search engineer when making a website and **give Google what it wants**. What is Google trying to give its users? Align with *that*. What does Google not want to give its users? Don't look anything like *that*. **THINK LIKE A GOOGLE ENGINEER & BUILD A SITE THEY WANT TO GIVE TOP RANKINGS**.
- *Google is a link-based search engine.* Google doesn't need content to *rank* pages but it needs content to give to *users*. Google needs to find content and it finds content by following links just like you do when clicking on a link. So you need first to make sure you tell the world about your site so other sites link to yours. Don't worry about reciprocating to more powerful sites or even real sites - I think this adds to your domain authority **- which is better to have than ranking for just a few narrow key terms.**
- **Google has a long memory** when it comes to links and pages and associations for your site. It can forgive but won't forget. WHAT RELATIONSHIP DO YOU WANT TO HAVE WITH GOOGLE? Onsite, don't try to fool Google. Be squeaky clean on-site and have Google think twice about demoting you for the odd discrepancies in your link profile.
- **Earn Google's trust**. MAKE FRIENDS WITH GOOGLE
- Don't break Google's trust - if your friend betrays you, depending on what they've done, they've lost trust. Sometimes that trust has been lost altogether. If you do something Google doesn't like such as manipulate it in a way it doesn't want, you will lose trust, and in some cases, lose all trust (in some areas). For instance, your pages might be able to rank, but your links might not be trusted enough to vouch for another site. **DON'T FALL OUT WITH GOOGLE OVER SOMETHING STUPID**
- **YOU NEED TO MAKE MORE FRIENDS AND ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE FRIENDS WITH GOOGLE.**
- When Google trusts you it's because you've earned its trust to help it satisfy its users in the quickest and most profitable way possible. You've helped Google achieve its goals. It trusts

you and it will reward you with higher rankings. Google will list "friends" it trusts the most (who it knows to be reputable in a particular topic) at the top of SERPs.

- **IF GOOGLE TRUSTS YOU, IT WILL LET YOUR PAGES RANK AND IN TURN, VOUCH FOR OTHER PAGES, or 'FRIENDS', GOOGLE MIGHT WANT INFORMATION ON.**
- Google is fooled and manipulated just like you can but it will kick you in the gonads if you break this trust. **Treat Google as you would have it treat you.**
- Be **fast**.

REMEMBER IT TAKES TIME TO BUILD TRUST AND THAT IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE REASONS WHY GOOGLE is pushing for the need to be 'trusted' as a ranking factor.

I, of course, might be reading far too much into Google, TRUST and the TIME Google wants us to wait for things to happen on their end....but consider trust to be a psychological emotion Google is trying to emulate using algorithms based on human ideas.

If you do all the above, you'll get more and more traffic from Google over time.

If you want to rank for specific keywords in very competitive niches, you'll need to be a big brand, be picked out by big brands (and linked to), or buy links to fake that trust, or get spammy with it in an intelligent way you won't get caught. Easier said than done.

I suppose Google is open to the con, for a while at least, just as any human is if it's based on human traits.

Does Google Promote A Site Or Demote Others In Rankings?

https://youtu.be/aII87lEWYzs?t=23m32s

In the video above you hear from at least one spam fighter that would confirm that at least some people are employed at Google to demote sites that fail to meet policy:

> **QUOTE**: "*I didn't SEO at all, when I was at Google. I wasn't trying to make a site much better but i was trying to find sites that were not 'implementing Google policies'(?*) and not giving the best user experience." Murat Yatağan, Former Google Webspam team*

I think I see more of Google pulling pages and sites down the rankings (because of policy violation) than promoting them because of discovered 'quality'.

I proceed thinking that in Google's world, a site that avoids punishment algorithms, has verified independent links and has content favoured by users over time (which they are tracking) is a 'quality page' Google will rank highly.

So, for the long term, on primary sites, once you have cleaned all infractions up, the aim is to satisfy users by:

- getting the click
- keeping people on your site by delivering on purpose and long enough for them to terminate their search (without any techniques that would be frowned upon or contravene Google recommendations)
- convert visitors to at least search terminators, returning visitors or actual sales

What You Should Avoid When Practicing Website Search Engine Optimisation

Google has a VERY basic organic search engine optimisation starter guide pdf for webmasters, which they use internally:

> **QUOTE: "***Although this guide won't tell you any secrets** that'll automatically rank your site first for queries in Google (sorry!), following the best practices outlined below will make it easier for search engines to both crawl and index your content.*" Google, 2008

It is still worth a read, even if it is VERY basic, best practice search engine optimisation for your site.

No search engine will EVER tell you what actual keywords to put on your site to improve individual rankings or get more converting organic traffic - and in Google - that's the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT thing you want to know!

Google has updated their SEO starter guide for 2017, although this version is not in PDF format.

Google specifically mentions something very important in the guide:

> **QUOTE***: "Creating compelling and useful content will likely influence your website more than any of the other factors discussed here."* Google SEO Starter Guide, 2017

This starter guide is still very useful for beginners to SEO.

I do not think there is anything in the 2017 guide that is really useful if you have been doing SEO since the last starter guide was first published (2008) and its first update was announced (2010). It still leaves out some of the more complicated technical recommendations for larger sites.

I usually find it useful to keep an eye on what Google tells you to avoid in such documents, which are:

1. **AVOID**: "*Don't let your internal search result pages be crawled by Google. Users dislike clicking a search engine result only to land on another search result page on your site.*"
2. **AVOID**: "*Allowing URLs created as a result of proxy services to be crawled.*"
3. **AVOID**: "*Choosing a title that has no relation to the content on the page.*"
4. **AVOID**: "*Using default or vague titles like "Untitled" or "New Page 1".*"
5. **AVOID**: "*Using a single title across all of your site's pages or a large group of pages.*"
6. **AVOID**: "*Using extremely lengthy titles that are unhelpful to users.*"

7. **AVOID**: *"Stuffing unneeded keywords in your title tags."*
8. **AVOID**: *"Writing a description meta tag that has no relation to the content on the page."*
9. **AVOID**: *"Using generic descriptions like "This is a web page" or "Page about baseball cards"."*
10. **AVOID**: *"Filling the description with only keywords."*
11. **AVOID**: *"Copying and pasting the entire content of the document into the description meta tag."*
12. **AVOID**: *"Using a single description meta tag across all of your site's pages or a large group of pages."*
13. **AVOID**: *"Placing text in heading tags that wouldn't be helpful in defining the structure of the page."*
14. **AVOID**: *"Using heading tags where other tags like <em> and <strong> may be more appropriate."*
15. **AVOID**: *"Erratically moving from one heading tag size to another."*
16. **AVOID**: *"Excessive use of heading tags on a page."*
17. **AVOID**: *"Very long headings."*
18. **AVOID**: *"Using heading tags only for styling text and not presenting structure."*
19. **AVOID**: *"Using invalid '**Structured Data** 'markup."*
20. **AVOID**: "*Changing the source code of your site when you are unsure about implementing markup."*
21. **AVOID**: *"Adding markup data which is not visible to users."*
22. **AVOID**: "*Creating fake reviews or adding irrelevant markups."*
23. **AVOID**: "*Creating complex webs of navigation links, for example, linking every page on your site to every other page."*
24. **AVOID**: "*Going overboard with slicing and dicing your content (so that it takes twenty clicks to reach from the homepage)."*
25. **AVOID**: "*Having a navigation based entirely on images, or animations."*
26. **AVOID**: "*Requiring script or plugin-based event-handling for navigation"*
27. **AVOID**: "*Letting your navigational page become out of date with broken links."*
28. **AVOID**: "*Creating a navigational page that simply lists pages without organizing them, for example by subject."*
29. **AVOID**: "*Allowing your 404 pages to be indexed in search engines (make sure that your web server is configured to give a 404 HTTP status code or - in the case of JavaScript-based sites - include a noindex robots meta-tag when non-existent pages are requested)."*
30. **AVOID**: "*Blocking 404 pages from being crawled through the robots.txt file."*
31. **AVOID**: "*Providing only a vague message like "Not found", "404", or no 404 page at all."*
32. **AVOID**: "*Using a design for your 404 pages that isn't consistent with the rest of your site."*
33. **AVOID**: "*Using lengthy URLs with unnecessary parameters and session IDs."*
34. **AVOID**: "*Choosing generic page names like "page1.html"."*
35. **AVOID**: "*Using excessive keywords like "baseball-cards-baseball-cards-baseballcards.htm"."*
36. **AVOID**: "*Having deep nesting of subdirectories like ".../dir1/dir2/dir3/dir4/dir5/dir6/page.html"."*

37. **AVOID**: *"Using directory names that have no relation to the content in them."*
38. **AVOID**: *"Having pages from subdomains and the root directory access the same content, for example, "domain.com/page.html" and "sub.domain.com/page.html"."*
39. **AVOID**: *"Writing sloppy text with many spelling and grammatical mistakes."*
40. **AVOID**: *"Awkward or poorly written content."*
41. **AVOID**: *"Embedding text in images and videos for textual content: users may want to copy and paste the text and search engines can't read it."*
42. **AVOID**: *"Dumping large amounts of text on varying topics onto a page without paragraph, subheading, or layout separation."*
43. **AVOID**: *"Rehashing (or even copying) existing content that will bring little extra value to users."*
44. **AVOID**: *"Having duplicate or near-duplicate versions of your content across your site."*
45. **AVOID**: *"Inserting numerous unnecessary keywords aimed at search engines but are annoying or nonsensical to users."*
46. **AVOID**: *"Having blocks of text like "frequent misspellings used to reach this page" that add little value for users."*
47. **AVOID**: *"Deceptively hiding text from users, but displaying it to search engines."*
48. **AVOID**: *"Writing generic anchor text like "page", "article", or "click here"."*
49. **AVOID**: *"Using text that is off-topic or has no relation to the content of the page linked to."*
50. **AVOID**: *"Using the page's URL as the anchor text in most cases, although there are certainly legitimate uses of this, such as promoting or referencing a new website's address."*
51. **AVOID**: *"Writing long anchor text, such as a lengthy sentence or short paragraph of text."*
52. **AVOID**: *"Using CSS or text styling that make links look just like regular text."*
53. **AVOID**: *"Using excessively keyword-filled or lengthy anchor text just for search engines."*
54. **AVOID**: *"Creating unnecessary links that don't help with the user's navigation of the site."*
55. **AVOID**: *"Using generic filenames like "image1.jpg", "pic.gif", "1.jpg" when possible—if your site has thousands of images you might want to consider automating the naming of the images."*
56. **AVOID**: *"Writing extremely lengthy filenames."*
57. **AVOID**: *"Stuffing keywords into alt text or copying and pasting entire sentences."*
58. **AVOID**: *"Writing excessively long alt text that would be considered spammy."*
59. **AVOID**: *"Using only image links for your site's navigation".*
60. **AVOID**: *"Attempting to promote each new, small piece of content you create; go for big, interesting items."*
61. **AVOID**: *"Involving your site in schemes where your content is artificially promoted to the top of these services."*
62. **AVOID**: *"Spamming link requests out to all sites related to your topic area."*
63. **AVOID**: *"Purchasing links from another site with the aim of getting PageRank"*

This is straightforward stuff but sometimes it's the simple stuff that often gets overlooked. Of course, you combine the above together with the technical recommendations in Google guidelines for webmasters.

Don't make these simple but dangerous mistakes…..

1. Avoid duplicating content on your site found on other sites. Yes, Google likes content, but it *usually* needs to be well linked to, unique and original to get you to the top!
2. Don't hide text on your website. Google may eventually remove you from the SERPs.
3. Don't buy 1000 links and think "that will get me to the top!". Google likes natural link growth and often frowns on mass link buying.
4. Don't get everybody to link to you using the same "anchor text" or link phrase. This could flag you as a 'rank modifier'. You don't want that.
5. Don't chase Google PR by chasing 100's of links. Think quality of links….not quantity.
6. Don't buy many keyword rich domains, fill them with similar content and link them to your site. This is lazy and dangerous and could see you ignored or worse banned from Google. It might have worked yesterday but it sure does not work today without some grief from Google.
7. Do not constantly change your site pages names or site navigation without remembering to employ redirects. This just screws you up in any search engine.
8. Do not build a site with a JavaScript navigation that Google, Yahoo and Bing cannot crawl.
9. Do not link to everybody who asks you for reciprocal links. Only link out to quality sites you feel can be trusted.

Don't Flag Your Site With Poor Website Optimisation

A primary goal of any 'rank modification' is not to flag your site as 'suspicious' to Google's algorithms or their webspam team.

I would recommend you forget about tricks like links in H1 tags etc. or linking to the same page 3 times with different anchor text on one page.

Forget about 'which is best' when considering things you shouldn't be wasting your time with.

Every element on a page is a benefit to you until you spam it.

Put a keyword in every tag and you may flag your site as 'trying too hard' if you haven't got the link trust to cut it - and Google's algorithms will go to work.

Spamming Google is often counter-productive over the long term.

So:

- Don't spam your anchor text link titles with the same keyword.
- Don't spam your ALT Tags or any other tags either.
- Add your keywords intelligently.
- Try and make the site mostly for humans, not just search engines.

On Page SEO is not as simple as a checklist any more of keyword here, keyword there. Optimisers are up against lots of smart folk at the Googleplex - and they purposely make this practice difficult.

For those who need a checklist, this is the sort of one that gets me results;

1. Do keyword research
2. Identify valuable searcher intent opportunities
3. Identify the audience & the reason for your page
4. Write utilitarian copy - be useful. Use related terms in your content. Use plurals and synonyms. Use words with searcher intent like "buy", "compare", "hire" etc. I prefer to get a keyword or related term in almost every paragraph.
5. Use **emphasis** *sparingly* to emphasise the important points in the page whether they are your keywords are not
6. Pick an intelligent Page Title with your keyword in it
7. Write an intelligent meta description, repeating it on the page
8. Add an image with user-centric ALT attribute text
9. Link to related pages on your site within the text
10. Link to related pages on other sites
11. Your page should have a simple search engine friendly URL
12. Keep it simple
13. Share it and pimp it

You can forget about *just about* everything else.

The Continual Evolution of SEO

The 'Keyword Not Provided' incident is just one example of Google making ranking in organic listings HARDER – a change for 'users' that seems to have the most impact on 'marketers' outside of Google's ecosystem – yes – search engine optimisers.

Now, consultants need to be page-centric (abstract, I know), instead of just keyword centric when optimising a web page for Google. There are now plenty of third-party tools that help when researching keywords but most of us miss the kind of keyword intelligence we used to have access to.

Proper keyword research is important because getting a site to the top of Google eventually comes down to your text content on a page and keywords in external & internal links. Altogether, Google uses these signals to determine where you rank if you rank at all.

There's no magic bullet, to this.

At any one time, your site is probably feeling the influence of some algorithmic filter (for example, Google Panda or Google Penguin) designed to keep spam sites under control and deliver relevant, high-quality results to human visitors.

One filter may be kicking in keeping a page down in the SERPs while another filter is pushing another page up. You might have poor content but excellent incoming links, or vice versa. You might have very good content, but a very poor technical organisation of it.

You must identify the reasons Google doesn't 'rate' a particular page higher than the competition

The answer is usually on the page or in backlinks pointing to the page. Ask yourself:

- Do you have too few quality inbound links?
- Do you have too many low-quality backlinks?
- Does your page lack descriptive keyword rich text?
- Are you keyword stuffing your text?
- Do you link out to unrelated sites?
- Do you have too many advertisements above the fold?
- Do you have affiliate links on every page of your site and text found on other websites?
- Do you have broken links and missing images on the page?
- Does your page meet quality guidelines, legal and advertising stadards?

Whatever they are, identify issues and fix them.

Get on the wrong side of Google and your site might well be selected for MANUAL review – so **optimise your site as if, one day, you will get that website review from a Google Web Spam reviewer**.

The key to a successful campaign, I think, is persuading Google that your page is most relevant to any given search query. You do this by good unique keyword rich text content and getting "quality" links to that page.

The latter is far easier to say these days than actually do!

Next time you are developing a page, consider what looks spammy to you is probably spammy to Google. Ask yourself which pages on your site are really necessary. Which links are necessary? Which pages on the site are emphasised in the site architecture? Which pages would you ignore?

You can help a site along in any number of ways (including making sure your page titles and meta tags are unique) but be careful. Obvious evidence of 'rank modifying' is dangerous.

I prefer simple SEO techniques and ones that can be measured in some way. I have never *just* wanted to **rank for competitive terms**; I have always wanted to understand at least some of the reasons why a page ranked for these key phrases. I try to create a good user experience for humans AND search engines. If you make high-quality text content relevant and suitable for both these audiences, you'll more than likely find success in organic listings and you might not ever need to get into the technical side of things, like redirects and search engine friendly URLs.

To beat the competition in an industry where it's difficult to attract quality links, you have to get more "technical" sometimes – and in some industries – you've traditionally needed to be 100% black hat to even get in the top 100 results of competitive, transactional searches.

There are no hard and fast rules to long-term ranking success, other than developing quality websites with quality content and quality links pointing to it. The less domain authority you have, the more text you're going to need. The aim is to build a satisfying website and build real authority!

You need to mix it up and learn from experience. Make mistakes and learn from them by observation. I've found getting penalised is a very good way to learn what not to do.

Remember there are exceptions to nearly every rule, and in an ever-fluctuating landscape, and you probably have little chance determining exactly *why* you rank in search engines these days. I've been doing it for over 15 years and every day I'm trying to better understand Google, to learn more and learn from others' experiences.

It's important not to obsess about granular ranking specifics that have little return on your investment unless you really have the time to do so! THERE IS USUALLY SOMETHING MORE VALUABLE TO SPEND THAT TIME ON.

That's usually either good backlinks or great content.

How Does Google Search work?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyCYyoGusqs

> **QUOTE:** *"So there's three things that you really want to do well if you want to be the world's best search engine you want to crawl the web comprehensively and deeply you want to index those pages and then you want to rank or serve those pages and return the most relevant ones first..... we basically take PageRank as the primary determinant and the more PageRank you have that is **the more people who link to you and the more reputable those people are the more likely it is we're going to discover your page**.... we use page rank as well as over 200 other factors in our rankings to try to say okay maybe **this document is really authoritative it has a lot of reputation** because it has a lot of PageRank ... and **that's kind of the secret sauce trying to figure out a way to combine those 200 different ranking signals in order to find the most relevant document.**"* Matt Cutts, Google

The fundamentals of successful Google search optimisation have not changed much over the years.

Google isn't lying about rewarding legitimate effort - despite what some claim. If they were, I would be a black hat full time. So would everybody else trying to rank in Google.

It is much more complicated to do SEO in some niches today than it was ten years ago.

The majority of small to medium businesses do not need advanced strategies because their direct competition has not employed these tactics either.

I took a medium-sized business to the top of Google recently for very competitive terms doing nothing but ensuring page titles were optimised, the home page text was re-written, one or two earned links from trusted sites.

This site was a couple of years old, a clean record in Google, and a couple of organic links already from trusted sites.

This domain had the authority and capability to rank for some valuable terms, and all we had to do was to make a few changes on the site, improve the depth and focus of website content, monitor keyword performance and tweak page titles.

There was a little duplicate content needing sorting out and a bit of canonicalisation of thin content to resolve, but **none** of the measures I implemented I'd call advanced.

A lot of businesses can get more converting visitors from Google simply by following basic principles and best practices:

1. Always making sure that every page in the site links out to at least one other page in the site
2. Link to your important pages often
3. Link not only from your navigation but from keyword rich text links in text content - keep this natural and for visitors
4. Try to keep each page element and content unique as possible
5. Build a site for visitors to get visitors and you just might convert some to actual sales too
6. Create keyword considered content on the site people will link to
7. Watch which sites you link to and from what pages, but do link out!
8. Go and find some places on relatively trusted sites to try and get some anchor text rich inbound links
9. Monitor trends, check stats
10. Minimise duplicate or thin content
11. Bend a rule or two without breaking them and you'll probably be ok

Once this is complete it's time to ... add more, and better content to your site and tell more people about it, if you want more Google traffic.

You might have to implement the odd 301, but again, it's hardly *advanced*.

I've seen simple SEO marketing techniques working for years.

You are better off doing simple stuff better and faster than worrying about some of the more 'advanced' techniques you read on some blogs I think - it's more productive, cost-effective for businesses and safer, for most.

Beware Pseudoscience In The SEO Industry

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWr39Q9vBgo

> **QUOTE***: "Pseudoscience is a claim, belief, or practice posing as science, but which does not constitute or adhere to an appropriate scientific methodology..."* Wikipedia

Beware folk trying to bamboozle you with science. This isn't a science when Google controls the 'laws' and changes them at will.

> **QUOTE**: *"They follow the forms you gather data you do so and so and so forth but they don't get any laws they don't haven't found out anything they haven't got anywhere yet maybe someday they will but it's not very well developed but what happens is an even more mundane level we get experts on everything that sound like this sort of scientific expert they they're not scientist is a typewriter and they make up something."* Richard Feynman, Physicist

I get results by:

- analysing Google rankings
- performing Keyword research
- making observations about ranking performance of your pages and that of others (though not in a controlled environment)
- placing relevant, co-occurring words you want to rank for on pages
- using synonyms
- using words in anchor text in links on relevant pages and pointing them at relevant pages you want to rank high for the keyword in the anchor text
- understanding what features in your title tag is what that page is going to rank best for
- getting high-quality links from other trustworthy websites
- publishing lots and lots of new, higher-quality content
- focusing on the long tail of keyword searches
- understanding it will take time to beat all this competition

I always expected to get a site demoted, by:

- getting too many links with the same anchor text pointing to a page
- keyword stuffing a page
- trying to manipulate Google too much on a site
- creating a "frustrating user experience."
- chasing the algorithm too much
- getting links I shouldn't have
- buying links

Not that any of the above is automatically penalised all the time.

I was always of the mind I don't need to understand the maths or science of Google, that much, to understand what Google engineers want.

The biggest challenge these days are to get trusted sites to link to you, but the rewards are worth it.

To do it, you probably should be investing in some marketable content, or compelling benefits for the linking party (that's not just paying for links somebody else can pay more for). Buying links to improve rankings WORKS but it is probably THE most hated link building technique as far as the Google web spam team is concerned.

I was very curious about the science of optimisation I studied what I could but it left me a little unsatisfied. I learned that **building links**, creating **lots of decent content** and learning **how to monetise that content better** (while not breaking any major TOS of Google) would have been a more worthwhile use of my time.

Getting *better and faster at doing all that would be nice too*.

There are many problems with blogs, too, including mine.

Misinformation is an obvious one. Rarely are your results conclusive or observations 100% accurate. Even if you think a theory holds water on some level. I try to update old posts with new information if I think the page is only valuable with accurate data.

Just remember most of what you read about how Google works from a third party is OPINION and just like in every other sphere of knowledge, 'facts' can change with a greater understanding over time or with a different perspective.

Chasing The Algorithm

There is no magic bullet and there are no secret formulas to achieve fast number 1 ranking in Google in any competitive niche WITHOUT spamming Google.

A legitimately earned high position in search engines takes a lot of hard work.

There are a few less talked about tricks and tactics that are deployed by some (better than others) to combat algorithm changes, for instance, but there are no big secrets in modern SEO (no "white hat" SEO secrets anyway).

There are clever strategies, though, and creative solutions to be found to exploit opportunities uncovered by researching the niche.

Note that when Google recognises a new strategy that gets results the strategy itself usually becomes '*webspam*' and something you can be penalised for that so I would **beware jumping on the latest SEO fad in 2018**.

The biggest advantage any one provider has over another is experience and resource. The knowledge of what doesn't work and what will hurt your site is often more valuable than knowing what will give you a short-lived boost. Getting to the top of Google is a relatively simple process. One that is constantly in changes. Professional SEO is more a collection of

skills, methods and techniques. It is more a way of doing things, than a one-size-fits-all magic trick.

After over a decade practising and deploying real campaigns, I'm still trying to get it down to its simplest, most cost-effective processes.

I think it's about doing simple stuff right.

Good text, simple navigation structure, quality links. To be relevant and reputable takes time, effort and luck, just like anything else in the real world, and that is the way Google want it.

If a company is promising you guaranteed rankings and has a magic bullet strategy, watch out.

I'd check it didn't contravene Google's guidelines.

How Long Does It Take To See Results from SEO?

QUOTE: "*In most cases **the SEO will need four months to a year** to help your business first implement improvements and then see potential benefit.*" Maile Ohye, Google 2017

Some results can be gained within weeks and you need to expect some strategies to take months to see the benefit. **Google WANTS these efforts to take time.** Critics of the search engine giant would point to Google wanting fast effective rankings to be a feature of Google's own Adwords sponsored listings.

Optimisation is not a quick process, and a successful campaign can be judged on months if not years. Most successful, fast ranking website optimisation techniques end up finding their way into Google Webmaster Guidelines - so be wary.

It takes time to build quality, and it's this *quality* that Google aims to reward in 2018.

It takes time to generate the data needed to begin to formulate a campaign, and time to deploy that campaign. Progress also depends on many factors

- How old is your site compared to the top 10 sites?
- How many back-links do you have compared to them?
- How is their quality of back-links compared to yours?
- What the history of people linking to you (what words have people been using to link to your site?)
- How good of a resource is your site?
- Can your site attract natural back-links (e.g. you have good content or a great service) or are you 100% relying on your agency for back-links (which is very risky in 2018)?
- How much unique content do you have?
- Do you have to pay everyone to link to you (which is risky), or do you have a "natural" reason people might link to you?

Google wants to return quality pages in its organic listings, and it takes time to build this quality and for that quality to be recognised.

It takes time too to balance your content, generate quality backlinks and manage your disavowed links.

Google knows how valuable organic traffic is - and they want webmasters investing a LOT of effort in ranking pages.

Critics will point out the higher the cost of expert SEO, the more cost-effective Adwords becomes, but Adwords will only get more expensive, too. At some point, if you want to compete online, your going to HAVE to build a quality website, with a unique offering to satisfy returning visitors - the sooner you start, the sooner you'll start to see results.

If you start NOW and are determined to build an online brand, a website rich in content with a satisfying user experience - Google will reward you in organic listings.

ROI

Web optimisation is a marketing channel just like any other and there are no guarantees of success in any, for what should be obvious reasons. There are no guarantees in Google Adwords either, except that costs to compete will go up, of course.

That's why it is so attractive - but like all marketing - it is still a gamble.

At the moment, I don't know you, your business, your website, your resources, your competition or your product. Even with all that knowledge, calculating ROI is extremely difficult because ultimately Google decides on who ranks where in its results - sometimes that's ranking better sites, and sometimes (often) it is ranking sites breaking the rules above yours.

Nothing is absolute in search marketing.

There are no guarantees - despite claims from some companies. What you make from this investment is dependent on many things, not least, how suited your website is to convert visitors into sales.

Every site is different.

Big Brand campaigns are far, far different from small business SEO campaigns that don't have any links, to begin with, to give you but one example.

It's certainly easier if the brand in question has a lot of domain authority just waiting to unlocked - but of course, that's a generalisation as big brands have big brand competition too.

It depends entirely on the quality of the site in question and the level and quality of the competition, but smaller businesses should probably look to own their niche, even if limited to their location, at first.

Local SEO is always a good place to start for small businesses.

A Real Google Friendly Website

At one time A Google-Friendly website meant a website built so Googlebot could scrape it correctly and rank it accordingly.

When I think 'Google-friendly' these days - I think a website Google will rank top, if popular and accessible enough, and won't drop like a f*&^ing stone for no apparent reason one day, even though I followed the Google SEO starter guide to the letter. Just because Google has found something it doesn't like - or has classified my site as *undesirable* one day.

It is not JUST about original content anymore - it's about the function your site provides to Google's visitors - and it's about your commercial intent.

I am building sites at the moment with the following in mind:

1. **Don't be a website Google won't rank -** What Google classifies your site as - is perhaps the NUMBER 1 Google ranking factor not often talked about - whether it Google determines this algorithmically or eventually, manually. That is - whether it is a MERCHANT, an AFFILIATE, a RESOURCE or DOORWAY PAGE, SPAM, or VITAL to a particular search - what do you think Google thinks about your website? Is your website **better than the ones in the top ten of Google now**? Or just the same? Ask, why should Google bother ranking your website if it is just the same, rather than why it would not because it is just the same.... how can you make yours *different*. Better.
2. Think, that one day, your website will have to pass a **manual review by 'Google'** - the better rankings you get, or the more traffic you get, the more likely you are to be reviewed. Know that Google, at least classifies even useful sites as spammy, according to leaked documents. If you want a site to rank high in Google - it better 'do' something other than exist *only* link to another site because of a paid commission. Know that to succeed, **your website needs to be USEFUL**, to a visitor that Google will send you - and a useful website is not just a website, with a sole commercial intent, of sending a visitor from Google to another site - or a 'thin affiliate' as Google CLASSIFIES it.
3. Think about how Google can algorithmically and manually determine the **commercial intent of your website** - think about the signals that differentiate a real small business website from a website created JUST to send visitors to another website with affiliate links, on every page, for instance; or adverts on your site, above the fold, etc., can be a clear indicator of a webmaster's particular commercial intent - hence why Google has a Top Heavy Algorithm.
4. Google is NOT going to thank you for publishing lots of similar articles and near **duplicate content on your site** - so EXPECT to have to create original content for every page you want to perform in Google, or at least, not publish content found on other sites.
5. Ensure **Google knows your website is the origin of any content you produce** (typically by simply pinging Google via XML or RSS) - I'd go as far to say think of using Google+ to confirm this too.... this sort of thing will only get more important as the year rolls on
6. Understand and **accept why Google ranks your competition** above you - they are either:
   1. more relevant and more popular,
   2. more relevant and more reputable, or
   3. manipulating backlinks better than you.
   4. spamming

Understand that everyone at the top of Google falls into those categories and formulate your own strategy to compete - relying on Google to take action on your behalf is VERY probably not going to happen.

7. **Being 'relevant'** comes down to keywords & key phrases - in domain names, URLs, Title Elements, the number of times they are repeated in text on the page, text in image alt tags, rich markup and importantly in keyword links to the page in question. If you are relying on manipulating hidden elements on a page to do well in Google, you'll probably trigger spam filters. If it is 'hidden' in on-page elements - beware relying on it too much to improve your rankings.

8. **The basics of GOOD SEO hasn't changed for years** - though effectiveness of particular elements has certainly narrowed or changed in type of usefulness - you should still be focusing on building a simple site using VERY simple SEO best practices - **don't sweat the small stuff, while all-the-time paying attention to the important stuff** - add plenty of unique PAGE TITLES and plenty of new ORIGINAL CONTENT. **Understand how Google *SEES* your website**. CRAWL it, like Google does, with (for example) Screaming Frog SEO spider, and fix malformed links or things that result in server errors (500), broken links (400+) and unnecessary redirects (300+). Each page you want in Google should serve a 200 OK header message.

How To Make SEO-Friendly Web Copy & Create High Quality Pages For Google

Google says:

> **QUOTE**: *"Creating compelling and useful content will likely influence your website more than any of the other factors."* Google, 2017

There is no one particular way to create web pages that successfully rank in Google but you must ensure:

> **QUOTE**: "*that your content kind of stands on its own*" John Mueller, Google 2015

If you have an optimised platform on which to publish it, high-quality content is the **number 1 user experience area to focus on** across websites to earn traffic from Google in 2018.

Gary Illyes
@methode

Follow

@jenstar We don't recommend removing content in general for Panda, rather add more highQ stuff @shendison

12:44 AM - 8 Oct 2015

↩ ⇄ 12 ♥ 13

If you need help with optimising your website content, I can offer this as a service. If you want to learn how to achieve it yourself, read on.

Google Has Evolved and Content Marketing With It

> **QUOTE**: "*Panda is an algorithm that's applied to sites overall and has become one of our core ranking signals. It measures the quality of a site, which you can read more about in our guidelines. Panda allows Google to take quality into account and adjust ranking accordingly.*" Google

Google does not work *only* the way it used to work, and as a result, this impacts a **lot** of websites built a *certain way* to rank high in Google - and Google is a lot less forgiving these days.

Is the user going to be more satisfied with an exact match query on a low-quality website, OR a high-quality page closely related to the search query used, published by an entity Google *trusts and rates highly?*

Google is deciding more and more to go with the *latter*.

Optimisation, in 2018, must not get in the way of the main content of a page or negatively impact user experience.

Is Your Content '*useful for Google users*'?

> **QUOTE**: "*Our Webmaster Guidelines advise you to create websites with original content that adds value for users.*" Google, [2018](#)

Content quality is one area to focus on if you are to avoid demotion in Google.

> **QUOTE**: "*high quality content is something I'd focus on. I see lots and lots of SEO blogs talking about user experience, which I think is a great thing to focus on as well. Because that essentially kind of focuses on what we are trying to look at as well. We want to rank content that is useful for (Google users) and if your content is really useful for them, then we want to rank it.*" John Mueller, Google 2016

This article aims to cover the most significant challenges of writing 'SEO-friendly' text and web page copy for Google in 2018. High-quality content is one aspect of a high-quality page on a high-quality site.

SEO is NO LONGER about adding keywords to pages with 300 words of text. In fact, that practice can be toxic to a site.

Your content needs to be useful to Google users.

If you run an affiliate website or have content that appears on other sites, this is even more important.

> **QUOTE**: "*This is particularly important for sites that participate in affiliate programs. Typically, affiliate websites feature product descriptions that appear on sites across that affiliate network. As a result, sites featuring mostly content from affiliate networks can suffer in Google's search rankings, because they do not have enough added value content that differentiates them from other sites on the web.*" Google, 2018

and

> **QUOTE**: "*Google believes that pure, or "thin," affiliate websites do not provide additional value for web users, especially (but not only) if they are part of a program that distributes its content across a network of affiliates. These sites often appear to be cookie-cutter sites or templates the same or similar content replicated within the same site, or across multiple domains or languages. Because a search results page could return several of these sites, all with the same content, thin affiliates create a frustrating user experience.*" Google, 2018

An example of a '*thin-affiliate*' site is a site where "*product descriptions and reviews are copied directly from the original merchant without any original content or added value*" and "*where the majority of the site is made for affiliation and contains a limited amount of original content or added value for users*".

Google says that "*Good affiliates add value, for example by offering original product reviews, ratings, navigation of products or categories, and product comparisons*".

Google offers us the following advice when dealing with sites with low-value content:

- *QUOTE: "Affiliate program content should form only a minor part of the content of your site if the content adds no additional features."*
- *QUOTE: "Ask yourself why a user would want to visit your site first rather than visiting the original merchant directly. Make sure your site adds substantial value beyond simply republishing content available from the original merchant."*
- *QUOTE: "The more targeted the affiliate program is to your site's content, the more value it will add and the more likely you will be to rank better in Google search results."*
- *QUOTE: "Keep your content updated and relevant. Fresh, on-topic information increases the likelihood that your content will be crawled by Googlebot and clicked on by users."*

Is The Main Content (MC) On Your Page 'High-Quality''?

QUOTE: *"(Main CONTENT) is (or should be!) the reason the page exists."*Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017

What Is Google Focused On?

Google is concerned with the PURPOSE of a page, the MAIN CONTENT (MC) of a page, the SUPPLEMENTARY CONTENT of a page and HOW THAT PAGE IS monetised, and if that monetisation impacts the user experience of consuming the MAIN CONTENT.

Webmasters need to be careful when optimising a website for CONVERSION first if that gets in the way of a user's consumption of the main content on the page.

Google also has a "*Page Layout Algorithm*" that demotes pages with a lot of advertising "*above the fold*" or that forces users to scroll past advertisements to get to the Main Content of the page.

High-quality supplementary content should "*(contribute) to a satisfying user experience on the page and website.*" and it should NOT interfere or distract from the MC.

Google says,"*(Main CONTENT) is (or should be!) the reason the page exists*." so this is probably the most important part of the page, to Google.

Is The Main Content (MC) On Your Page 'Unique Content', 'Duplicated Content', 'Copied Content', 'Spun Content' or 'Automated Content'?

> **QUOTE**: *"Duplicated content* is often not manipulative and is commonplace on many websites and often free from malicious intent. *Copied content* can often be penalised algorithmically or manually. Duplicate *content is not penalised, but this is often not an optimal set-up for pages, either. Be VERY careful 'spinning' 'copied' text to make it unique!"* Hobo, 2018

If "copied content" is a negative ranking signal, then "unique content" is going to perform better in Google in 2108. If [duplicate content](#) is filtered, then synonymised or spun content is going to be penalised.

Unique content on a site is not filtered out of SERPs like duplicate content or penalised like copied content is.

Copied content can be a low-quality indicator. Boilerplate (especially spun) text can be another even worse low-quality indicator.

Google clearly says that the practice of making your text more 'unique', using low-quality techniques like adding synonyms and related words is:

> **QUOTE**: *"probably more counter productive than actually helping your website"* John Mueller, Google

If you are creating doorway pages using autogenerated content you are going to struggle to get them indexed fully.

If your website is tarnished with these practices - it is going to be classed 'low-quality' by some part of the Google algorithm:

- If all you have on your page are indicators of low-quality - you have a low-quality page in 2018 - full stop.
- If your entire website is made up of pages like that, you have a low-quality website.
- If you have manipulative backlinks, then that's a recipe for disaster.

How To Find Important Keywords To Include On Your Web Page

If users are satisfied with a page and the page outperforms competing pages, then Google will probably be satisfied. You need to make a page relevant to a keyword phrase in the first place and to do that you will need to know which keyword phrase is most valuable to you on a page-to-page basis. You still need to do keyword research to identify what to write about and what type of content to create.

Keyword research is going to be important in optimising high-quality pages or planning a content marketing strategy.

My favourite keyword research tool is SEMRush and I provide keyword research as part of my SEO Audit service.

How Often Should Important Keywords Appear On Your Page?

You only need to mention *related* terms, and sometimes even *Head* Terms, ONCE in page content to have an impact on relevance and rank for lots of different long-tail key phrases. I still repeat phrases a few times on any page.

A [perfect keyword density](#) is a myth, but a demotion for stuffing keywords irresponsibly into text is not.

Keyword Stuffing is clearly against Google guidelines - so I avoid it in 2018.

Instead of thinking *how many times* to repeat keyword phrases, I've had success thinking the opposite over the last few years. That is, how *few* times can I repeat a primary key phrase on a page to rank it in Google.

It's not how often to repeat keyword phrases; it is where they are placed throughout the document, and how prominent they are.

How Many Words Can You Optimise Your Page For?

This is going to depend on too many things to give you a general number.

You should probably not think like that, too much, though. A page should rank for the *Head Terms* (which are in the Title Tag) and the page copy itself should be optimised for as many other closely related keyword phrases as possible (all part of the natural long-tail of the *Head Term*.).

Can You Just Write Naturally and Rank High in Google?

Yes, you *must* write naturally (and succinctly) in 2018, but if you have no idea the keywords you are targeting, and no expertise in the topic, you will be left behind those that can access this experience.

You can *just* 'write naturally' and still rank, albeit for fewer keywords than you would have if you optimised the page.

There are too many competing pages targeting the top spots not to optimise your content.

Naturally, how much text you need to write, how much you need to work into it, and where you ultimately rank, is going to depend on the domain reputation of the site you are publishing the article on.

Do You Need Lots of Text To Rank Pages In Google?

No.

How Much Text Do You Need To Write For Google?

How much text do you put on a page to rank for a certain keyword?

Well, as in so much of SEO theory and strategy, there is **no optimal amount of text per page, and it is going to differ, based on the topic, and content type, and SERP you are competing in.**

Instead of thinking about the *quantity* of the *Main Content* (MC) text, you should think more about the *quality* of the content on the page. Optimise this with searcher intent in mind.

There is no minimum amount of words or text to rank in Google. I have seen pages with 50 words out-rank pages with 100, 250, 500 or 1000 words. Then again I have seen pages with no text rank on nothing but inbound links or other 'strategy'. Google is a lot better at hiding away those pages in 2018, though.

At the moment, I prefer long-form pages and a lot of text, still focused on a few related keywords and keyphrases to a page. Useful for long tail key phrases and easier to explore related terms.

Every site is different. Some pages, for example, can get away with 50 words because of a good link profile and the domain it is hosted on. For me, the important thing is to make a page relevant to a user's search query.

I don't care how many words I achieve this with and often I need to experiment with a site I am unfamiliar with. After a while, you get an idea how much text you need to use to get a page on a certain domain into Google.

One thing to note - the more text you add to the page, as long as it is unique, keyword rich and relevant to the topic, the more that page will be rewarded with more visitors from Google.

There is no optimal number of words on a page for placement in Google.

Every website - every page - is different from what I can see. Don't worry too much about word count if your content is original and informative. Google will probably reward you on some level - at some point - if there is lots of unique text on all your pages.

Google said there is no minimum word count when it comes to gauging content quality.

> **QUOTE**: "There's no minimum length, and there's no minimum number of articles a day that you have to post, nor even a minimum number of pages on a website. In most cases, quality is better than quantity. Our algorithms explicitly try to find and recommend websites that provide content that's of high quality, unique, and compelling to users. Don't fill your site with low-quality content, instead work on making sure that your site is the absolute best of its kind." John Mueller Google, 2014

However, the quality rater's guide does state:

6.2 Unsatisfying Amount of Main Content

> *Some Low quality pages are unsatisfying because they have a small amount of MC for the purpose of the page. For example, imagine an encyclopedia article with just a few paragraphs on a very broad topic such as World War II. Important: **An unsatisfying amount of MC is a sufficient reason to give a page a Low quality rating**.*

Does Your Page Content Satisfy User Search Intentions?

User search intent is a way marketers describe *what a user wants to accomplish* when they perform a Google search.

SEOs have understood user search intent to fall broadly into the following categories and there is an excellent post on Moz about this.

1. **Transactional** – The user wants to do something like buy, signup, register to complete a task they have in mind.
2. **Informational** – The user wishes to learn something
3. **Navigational** – The user knows where they are going

The Google human quality rater guidelines modify these to simpler constructs:

- **Do**
- **Know**
- **Go**

SO – how do you optimise for all this?

You could rely on old-school SEO techniques, but Google doesn't like thin pages in 2018, and you need higher quality unnatural links to power low-quality sites these days. That is all a risky investment.

Google has successfully made that way forward a minefield for smaller businesses in 2018.

A safer route with a guaranteed ROI, for a real business who can't risk spamming Google, is to focus on satisfying user satisfaction signals Google might be rating favourably.

You do this by focusing on meeting exactly the intent of an individual keyword query

How. Why and Where from a user searches are going to be numerous and ambiguous and this is an advantage for the page that balances this out better than competing pages in SERPs.

'Know'

High-quality copywriting is not an easy 'ask' for every business, but it is a tremendous leveller.

Anyone can teach what they know and put it on a website if the will is there.

Some understand the ranking benefits of in-depth, curated content, for instance, that helps a user learn something. In-depth pages or long-form content is a magnet for long-tail key phrases.

The high-quality text content of any nature is going to do well, in time, and copywriters should rejoice.

Copywriting has never been more important.

Offering high-quality content is a great place to start on your site.

It's easy for Google to analyse and rate, and it is also a sufficient barrier to entry for most competitors (at least, it was in the last few years).

Google is looking for high-quality content:

*"**High quality pages** and websites need enough **expertise** to be**authoritative** and **trustworthy** on their **topic**."*

..or if you want it another way, [Google's algorithms target low-quality content](#).

But what if you can't write to satisfy these *KNOW* satisfaction metrics?

Luckily – you do not need lots of text to rank in Google.

'Go'

When a user is actively seeking your page out and selects your page in the SERP, they are probably training Google AI to understand this is a page on a site that satisfies the user intent. This user behaviour is where traditional media and social media promotion is going to be valuable if you can get people to search your site out. This is one reason you should have a short, memorable domain if you can get one.

So, users should be using Google to seek your site out.

'Do' Beats *'Know.'*

If you can't display E.A.T. in your writing, you can still rank if you satisfy users who do search that query.

————-

Last year I observed Google rank a page with 50 words of text on it instead of a page with 5000 words and lots of unique images that target the same term on the same domain.

While there might be something at fault with the 'optimised' 5000-word page I have overlooked, the main difference between the two pages was time spent on the page and task completion 'rate'.

I've witnessed Google flip pages on the same domain for many reasons, But it did get me thinking perhaps that Google is thinking users are more satisfied with the DO page (an online tool) with better task completion metrics than the KNOW page (a traditional informational page).

————-

In the end, I don't need to know *why* Google is flipping the page, just that it *is*.

So that means that you don't always need 'text-heavy content' to rank for a term.

You never have of course.

[Popular pages that pick up links and shares have, and always will rank high](#).

I only offer one example I've witnessed Google picking the DO page over the KNOW page, and it surprised me when it did.

It has evidently surprised others too.

There is a post on Searchmetrics that touches on pages with only a little text-content ranking high in Google:

> **QUOTE**: "From a classical SEO perspective, these rankings can hardly be explained. There is only one possible explanation: user intent. If someone is searching for "how to write a sentence" and finds a game such as this, then the user intention is fulfilled. Also the type of content (interactive game) has a well above average time-on-site. SearchMetrics 2016

That's exactly what I think I have observed, too, though I wouldn't ever say there is only '*one possible explanation*' to anything to do with Google.

For instance – perhaps other pages on the site help the page with no content rank, but when it comes to users being *satisfied*, Google shows the page with better usage statistics instead, because it thinks it is a win for everyone involved.

This is speculation, of course, and I have witnessed Google flipping pages in SERPs if they have a problem with one of them, for instance, for years.

This is news in January 2016 but I saw it last year and some time ago now. It isn't entirely 'new' to the wild but might be more noticeable in more niches in 2018.

How Much Text Do You Need To Rank?

None, evidently, if you can satisfy the query in an unusual manner *without* the text.

How To Optimise Content to Meet User Intent & Satisfaction

> **QUOTE**: "*Basically you want to create high-quality sites following our webmaster guidelines, and focus on the user, try to answer the user, try to satisfy the user, and all eyes will follow.*" Gary Illyes, Google 2016

When it comes to writing SEO-friendly text for Google, we must optimise for u*ser intent,* not simply *what* a user *typed* into Google.

Google will send people looking for information on a topic to the highest quality, relevant pages it knows about, often BEFORE it relies on how Google '*used*' to work e.g. relying on finding *near* or *exact match* instances of a keyword phrase on any one page, regardless of the actual 'quality' of that page.

Google is constantly evolving to better understand the context and intent of user behaviour, and it doesn't mind rewriting the query used to serve high-quality pages to users that more comprehensively deliver on user satisfaction e.g. explore topics and concepts in a unique and satisfying way.

Of course, optimising for user intent, even in this fashion, is something a lot of marketers had been doing long before query rewriting and Google Hummingbird came along.

Focus on 'Things', Not 'Strings'

> **QUOTE**: "*we've been working on an intelligent model—in geek-speak, a "graph"—that understands real-world entities and their relationships to one another: things, not strings*" Google 2012

Google is better at working out what a page is about, and what it *should* be about to satisfy the intent of a searcher, and it isn't relying *only* on *keyword phrases on a page* to do that.

Google has a Knowledge Graph populated with NAMED ENTITIES and in certain circumstances, Google relies on such information to create *SERPs*.

Google has plenty of options when rewriting the query in a contextual way, based on its own synonym knowledge, what you and other people searched for previously, who you are, how you searched and where you are at the time of the search.

If you focus on 'strings' you can end up in keyword stuffing territory.

What Is EAT? (*"Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness*)

Google aims to rank pages where the author has some demonstrable expertise on experience in the subject-matter they are writing about. These 'quality ratings' (performed by human evaluators) are based on (E.A.T. or EAT or E-A-T) which is simply *'Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness'* of the *'Main Content of a page'*

> **QUOTE***: "Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness: This is an important quality characteristic. …. Important: Lacking appropriate EAT is sufficient reason to give a page a Low quality rating."* **Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines** *2017*

and

> **QUOTE***: "The amount of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness (EAT) that a webpage/website has is very important. MC quality and amount, website information, and website reputation all inform the EAT of a website. Think about the topic of the page. What kind of expertise is required for the page to achieve its purpose well? The standard for expertise depends on the topic of the page."* **Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines** *2017*

Who links to you can inform the E-A-T of your website.

Consider this:

> **QUOTE**: "*I asked Gary (Illyes from Google) about E-A-T. He said it's largely based on links and mentions on authoritative sites. i.e. if the Washington post mentions you, that's good. He recommended reading the sections in the QRG on E-A-T as it outlines things well.*" Marie Haynes, Pubcon 2018

Google is still a 'link-based' search engine 'under-the-hood' but it takes so much more to stick a website at the top of search engine results pages (SERPs) in 2018 than it used to.

What Topic Are You Building Machine Identifiable Expertise in?

People don't know what to blog about, so often, a blog becomes a jumbled mess of un-directed, thin content. You prevent this from happening going forward by knowing what topic you are building out on your website. If everything you publish is related, you are probably building authority in that niche.

If all you are building is content that is immediately out of date and found on other more authoritative websites, you are toast. Keep that stuff on social media, or minimise its footprint on your blog.

EXAMPLE: You could write 30 unrelated blog posts. Once they were all published, you could combine them all into a list that was relevant to a topic or entity. What if these 30 seemly unlinked posts once combined, gave you the 30 things Tom Cruise has spent his money on? All of a sudden, this content becomes relevant in an entirely different way that it was when it was packaged separately in an unconnected and uninteresting way.

That is a wild example. I am just trying to illustrate you don't build in-depth content in one go unless you have a team of ghostwriters. Success is often built upon a lot of small edits to pages over time.

If you haven't been building a topical identity on your site, you should start now.

Topic & Concept Optimisation

This is how I categorise things (and have done for many years).

- Is your website content about a "topic" related to your core business?
- Are particular pages on your site about 'sub-topics' off the main 'topic.'
- Do the pages explain the 'sub-topic' in detail, including 'concepts' within the main sub-topic area?
- Does your content explain concepts in a way that demonstrates experience or expertise?
- Does the page satisfy the user intent better than competing pages?
- Do multiple pages demonstrate expertise or experience in in-depth ways?
- Does this content have independent links from other 'topic' related authorities and entities?

That kind of 'old-SEO' still works fine.

Google is measuring how satisfied users *are* with the pages on your website, in comparison with competing pages in the SERP.

Are People Looking For Your Content On Google?

Brand Searches Imply Trust & Quality

A patent granted to Google tells us explicitly what features it was looking for in a site that might seem to indicate that the site was a quality site.

It tells us:

> *The score is determined from quantities indicating **user actions of seeking out and preferring particular sites** and the **resources found in particular sites**. A site quality score for a particular site can be determined by computing a ratio of a numerator that represents **user interest in the site as reflected in user queries directed to the site** (e.g. 'Hobo') and a denominator that represents **user interest in the resources found in the site as responses to queries of all kinds** (e.g. 'SEO tutorial'). The site quality score for a site can be used as a signal to rank resources, or to rank search results that identify resources, that are found in one site **relative to resources found in another site**.*

A forward-thinking strategy must take this into consideration. This understanding of how Google is moving to rank pages in future is not something that is going away anytime soon.

Note, also, that even if the above patent is in operation, or something like it, SERP modification will still likely be influenced by geographic location, to give you only one example.

- GOAL - Meet "***user actions of seeking out and preferring particular sites"*** Have a brandable website or section of the website that would suit this type of search.
- GOAL - Meet "***resources found in particular sites" -*** *Generate content that meets this goal. In-depth content that will meet keyword requirements. Tools that help perform a user requirement, keeping in mind this will be judged "**relative to resources found on another site"** e.g. your competition and their competing pages.*
- *GOAL - Create secondary content that transforms gracefully to other media with an intent that informs the user to your service or product. Videos, Animations, Infographics. Other relevant media.*
- *GOAL - Improve brand signal from a technical SEO point of view. Optimisation and integration tasks with Google properties, for example (e.g. Google Local Business).*
- *GOAL - Improve user experience. Optimise the search experience.*
- *GOAL - Conversion Optimisation. Critical to try and convert more sales from the current traffic.*

Click Metrics and Task Completion Rate are LIKELY Ranking Modifiers

Are people actively seeking your website out, and when they do land there, are they satisfied?

e.g.using the Hobo site as an example, Is anyone looking for "Hobo SEO tutorial" and when they find it, are the completing the task? e.g. are they satisfied, do they hang around, do they share it. Is the page fit for purpose? Or do they immediately go back to Google and click on another result?

If there is a high satisfaction rate when people search for 'hobo SEO tutorial' compared to averages for 'SEO tutorial', then perhaps Google would be confident of actually showing that page in the mix for the actual term 'SEO tutorial' e.g. you would not need links. If there is a

low satisfaction rate for such a keyword, then the page can be deemed 'low-quality' when compared to better-performing pages on competing sites.

When you satisfy a query in terms of quality and click through satisfaction - or make Google look good - you can actually 'win' a branded recognition for a valuable term.

We had the following *brand highlight* in the UK (for a few months, after our own content strategy hit the front page of Reddit last year).
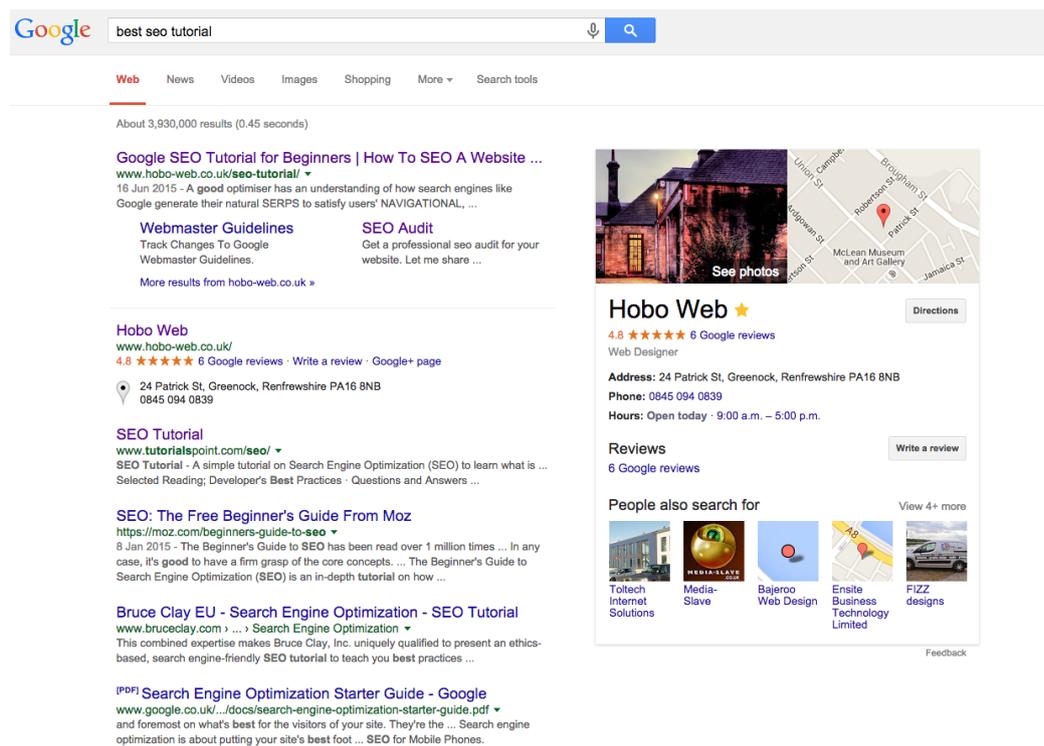
I used to think Pagerank was like having a ticket to the party. It still might be on some level, but at some level keywords on page plays a similar role. Keywords used to be everything even a few years ago - but that has been at least obfuscated.

We tested this recently and was quite surprised by the difference e.g. you can't simply add new words to a high authority page and expect it to rank just because you have 'domain authority' - not if there are a lot of higher quality pages targeting the term.

Site quality scores are one thing, but these site scores are tied to a KEYWORD query at EVERY TURN (or they are supposed to be). If you mention a SPECIFIC KEYWORD in a multi-keyword search, the HIGHEST QUALITY page for that SPECIFIC KEYWORD will often be returned, even with an irrelevant word thrown in. (But not two or more, apparently, as I noted in recent tests. Google is built on previous incarnations of how Google mapped the original web. e.g. for the longtail, you still NEED keywords on a page. ergo - the more relevant UNIQUE KEYWORDS (not key phrases) on a page, the more long tail searches it WILL appear for.)

e.g. you can have a very high-quality site, but a site with no proper keyword usage throughout the site won't rank for any long tail searches e.g., how you are found in Google if you have a new site.

Google might still be interested in the reputation of individual authors.

Google Authorship (a push by Google to identify and highlight expert authors using special markup code in your HTML) used to be useful in a number of ways, not limited to achieving increased visibility in SERPs for your writing.
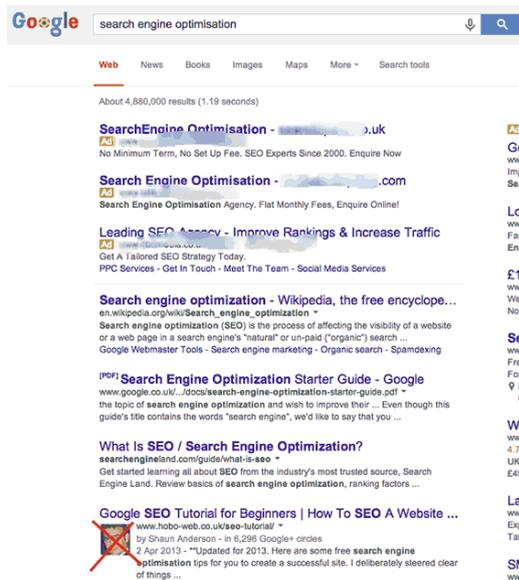
Google Authorship pictures were completely removed from the search results in the UK on June 2014 - but I still have my redundant Google authorship markup in place. SEOs expect a*uthorship analysis* in some shape or form to be impactful in Google ranking (it is in *Google In-depth Articles*, we have been told.)

I imagine Google has moved beyond this now, though, in web search, but is probably still interested in identifying expert authors. We know they use, at least, manual raters to evaluate E.A.T. (Expertise, Authority and Trust").

There are many signals that no doubt helps Google work this out in 2018, perhaps through an author's semantic association with certain entities and topics.

- TASK - [BRAND] + [PRIMARY KEYWORD] GOALS
  - o PROJECT GOAL - *Get customers to search for your 'brand' and the 'primary keyword'.*
    - ▪ PROJECT TASK - *Build an internal information based page optimised for the 'primary keyword', with as many unique words on it as possible. Cite references. Have 'Author' with a link to Bio that illustrates E.A.T. (Expertise, Authority and trust). Have 'Last Updated' on the page (specific to page). Keep updated.*
  - o PROJECT GOAL - *Keep pages targeting the primary keyword to a minimum on the site. Only high-quality pages should target the primary keyword.*
  - o PROJECT GOAL - *Get legitimate reviews. Google Local Business reviews is a safe bet. Do not ASK for positive reviews on any third party review site... in any obvious manner.*
    - ▪ PROJECT TASK - *Determine primary keywords to target with resources on site*

How Long Does It Take To Write Seo-Friendly Copy?

Embarrassingly long, in some cases. I am not a professionally trained copywriter, though. I know how to rank pages, and the type of content it takes. The truth is in some verticals; you are writing, from scratch for ONE PAGE (as it needs to be unique), the same amount of text that would have optimised an entire 10,000-page website, just a few years ago. Why? Because your competition will do it, and Google will send them traffic.

I do not see many people pointing that out.

Ranking in Google organic listings is an investment in search engine optimisation **AND**, at least, one other multi-discipline (of which, there are many); creative copywriting and teaching, or design or engineering, for instance. Copywriting, if you are competing in an informational SERP; Teaching, if you are trying to meet Google's E.A.T. requirements; design and engineering if you are focusing on satisfying specific user intent (e.g. offering tools, instead of content, for users).

These costs are in 2018 are relatively cost-prohibitive for smaller businesses (who can always choose Google Adwords), but Google is evidently giving the individual, any individual, rather than the business, the opportunity to rank in certain niches who has the drive, knowledge and time to invest in some machine detectable time-spent endeavour that satisfies users better than competing pages.

Businesses can still, of course, compete.

Note the importance of expertise in a chosen subject matter:

6.3 Lacking Expertise, Authoritativeness, or Trustworthiness (E-A-T)

> **QUOTE***: "Some topics demand expertise for the content to be considered trustworthy. YMYL topics such as medical advice, legal advice, financial advice, etc. should come from authoritative sources in those fields. Even everyday topics, such as recipes and housecleaning, should come from those with experience and everyday expertise in order for the page to be trustworthy. You should consider who is responsible for the content of the website or content of the page you are evaluating. Does the person or organization have sufficient expertise for the topic? If expertise, authoritativeness, or trustworthiness is lacking, use the Low rating."*

Content like this will not come cheap in the future.

Long Tail Traffic Is Hiding In Long Form Content
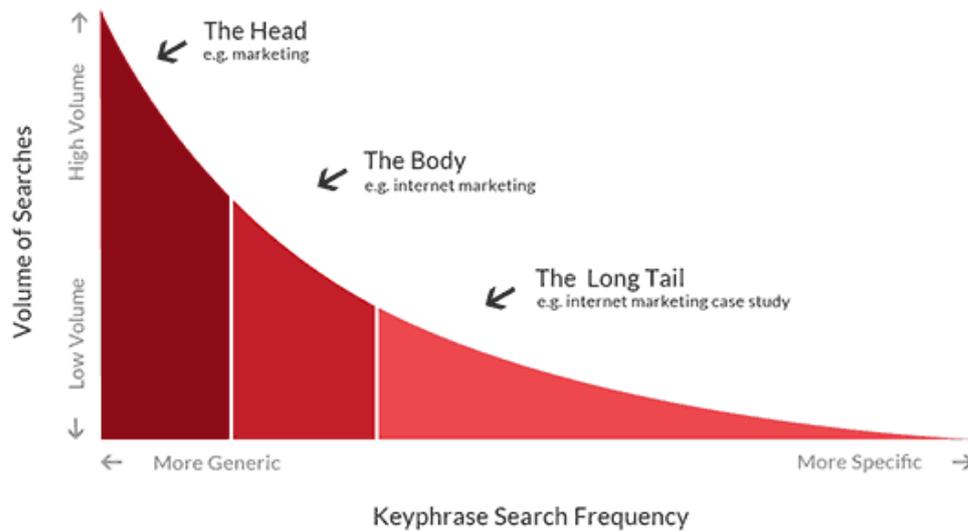
Google didn't kill the long tail of traffic, though since 2010 they have been reducing the amount of such traffic they will send to certain sites.

In part, they shifted a lot of long tail visitors to pages that Google thought may satisfy their user query, RATHER than just rely on particular exact and near match keywords repeated on a particular page.

At the same time, Google was hitting old school SEO tactics and particularly **thin or overlapping pages**. So - an obvious strategy and one I took was to identify the thin content on a site and merge it into long-form content and then rework that to bring it all up-to-date.

Long-form content is a magnet for long tail searches and helps you rank for much more popular (head) keywords. The more searchers and visitors you attract, the more you can 'satisfy' and the better chance you can rank higher in the long run.

Do you NEED long-form pages to rank?

No - but it can be very useful as a base to start a content marketing strategy if you are looking to pick up links and social media shares.

And be careful. The longer a page is, the more you can dilute it for a specific keyword phrase, and it's sometimes a challenge to keep it updated.

Google seems to penalise stale or unsatisfying content.

How To SEO In-depth Content

From a strategic point of view, if you can explore a topic or concept in an in-depth way you must do it before your competition. Especially if this is one of the only areas you can compete with them on.

Here are some things to remember about creating topic-oriented in-depth content:

- In-depth content needs to be kept updated. Every six months, at least. If you can update it a lot more often than that - it should be updated more
- In-depth content can reach tens of thousands of words, but the aim should always be to make the page concise as possible, over time
- In-depth content can be 'optimised' in much the same way as content has always been optimised
- In-depth content can give you authority in your topical niche
- Pages must MEET THEIR PURPOSE WITHOUT DISTRACTING ADS OR CALL TO ACTIONS. If you are competing with an information page - put the information FRONT AND CENTRE. Yes - this impacts negatively on conversions in the short term. BUT - these are the pages Google will rank high. That is - pages that help users first and foremost complete WHY they are on the page (what you want them to do once you get them there needs to be of secondary consideration when it comes to Google organic traffic).
- You need to balance conversions with user satisfaction unless you don't want to rank high in Google in 2018.

Optimising For *Topics* And *Concepts*

Old SEO was, to a large extent, about repeating text. New SEO is about user satisfaction.

Google's punishment algorithms designed to target SEO are all over that practice these days. And over a lot more, besides, in 2018.

- Google's looking for original text on a subject matter that explores the concept that the page is about, rather than meets keyword relevance standards of yesteryear.
- If your page rings these Google bells in your favour, Google knows your page is a good resource on anything to do with a particular concept - and will send visitors to it after invisibly rewriting the actual search query that the user made. Google is obfuscating the entire user intent journey.

For us at the receiving end, it all boils down to writing content that meets a specific user intent and does it better than competing pages.

We are not trying to beat Google or RankBrain, just the competition.

Pages looking to, genuinely, help people are a [good user experience](#). At the page level, satisfying informational search intent is still going to be about keyword analysis at some level.

SEO is about understanding *topics* and *concepts* as search engines try to.

A well-optimised *topic*/*concept* oriented page that meets high relevance signals cannot really fail to pick up search traffic and, if it's useful to people, pick up UX signals that will improve rankings in Google (I include links in that).

Stale Content Can Negatively Impact Google Rankings

Copywriters and researchers rejoice!

Here is the bad news about 'quality content'. Even *it*, including in-depth articles, entropies and becomes stale over time.

This is, however, *natural*.

You cannot expect content to stay relevant and perform at the same levels six months or a year down the line.

Even high-quality content can lose positions to better sites and better, more up-to-date content.

In any competitive niche, you are going to be up against this kind of content warfare - and this is only going to get more competitive.

You must, in 2018, be investing in professionally created website content. You must create and keep updated unique, informative, trustworthy and authoritative editorial content.

Once you have keywords in place, you must focus on improving user experience and conversion optimisation.

If you are developing 'evergreen' in-depth articles, they too will need periodically updated.

Does Google Prefer Fresh Content?

https://youtu.be/o4hH4ZQ_19k

Most of the time, **yes**.

Google even has "initiatives" for models that determine if some keyword searches are better served with results based on Q.D.F (query deserves freshness for that keyword phrase).

> **QUOTE***: Mr. Singhal introduced the freshness problem, explaining that simply changing formulas to display more new pages results in lower-quality searches much of the time. He then unveiled his team's solution: a mathematical model that tries to determine when users want new information and when they don't. (And yes, like all Google initiatives, it had a name: QDF, for "query deserves freshness.")* New York Times h/t Search Engine Land

We know that Google likes 'fresh content' if the **query deserves fresh results**. Not all businesses need 'freshness', we are told. We know also that Google changed their infrastructure to better provide users with "50 percent fresher results"

> **QUOTE**: "So why did we build a new search indexing system? Content on the web is blossoming. It's growing not just in size and numbers but with the advent of video, images, news and real-time updates, the average webpage is richer and more complex. In addition, people's expectations for search are higher than they used to be. **Searchers want to find the latest relevant content** and publishers expect to be found the instant they publish." Google, 2010

The real risk to your rankings could be content staleness:

> **"Stale content** refers to documents that have not been updated for a period of time and, thus, contain stale data (documents that are "*no longer updated, diminished in importance, superceded by another document*"). The **staleness** of a document may be based on: document creation date, anchor growth, traffic, content change, forward/back link growth, etc. The Google patent explains how they can spot the stale content using 4 factors: Query-based factor; Link-based criteria; Traffic – based criteria; User-behavior-based criteria." Search Engine Journal, 2008

The real risk of stale content is that out-dated content is a poor user experience to visitors. If you have stale content your competitor will potentially get more traffic from Google with better kept up-to-date content that pleases users.

This is in the also guidelines for affiliate websites:

QUOTE: "**Keep your content updated and relevant**. *Fresh, on-topic information increases the likelihood that your content will be crawled by Googlebot and clicked on by users.*" Webmaster Guidelines: Affiliate Programs, 2018

Updating content on your site may signal to Google that your site is being maintained, and have second-order benefits, too.

Telling users *when* website copy was *last edited or last updated* is a probable '*good user experience*', for instance.

Users also prefer relevant content that is actually up-to-date.

Consider that Google has patents to automatically detect many aspects of poor user experience (as Google defines it).

The sensible thing would be to keep your content 'fresh' in some way, by either updating the content or improving the user experience.

Low-Quality Content On Part of A Web Site Can Affect Rankings For The Same Website On More Important Keyword Rankings

Moz has a good video on the [Google organic quality score theory](). You should watch it. It goes into a lot of stuff I (and others) have been blogging for the last few years, and some of it is relevant to the audits I produce, [an example of which you can see here]() (**Alert! 2mb in size!**).

One thing that could have been explained better in the video was that Moz has topical authority worldwide for 'Google SEO' terms, hence why they can rank so easily for 'organic quality score'.

But the explanation of the quality score is a good introduction for beginners.

I am in the camp this organic quality score has been in place for a long time, and more and more are feeling the results from it.

This is also quite relevant to a question answered last week in the Google Webmaster Hangout which was:

> *"QUESTION - **Is it possible that if the algorithm doesn't particularly like our blog articles as much that it could affect our ranking and quality score on the core Content?"***

resulting in an answer:

> *"ANSWER: JOHN MUELLER (GOOGLE): **Theoretically, that's possible**. I mean it's kind of like **we look at your web site overall.** And if there's this big chunk of content here or this big chunk kind of important wise of your content, there that looks really iffy, then that kind of reflects across the overall picture of your website. But I don't know in your case, if it's really a situation that your blog is really terrible."*

Google has introduced (at least) a 'percieved' risk to publishing lots of lower-quality pages on your site to in an effort to curb production of old-style SEO friendly content based on manipulating early search engine algorithms.

We are dealing with algorithms designed to target old style SEO - that focus on the truism that DOMAIN 'REPUTATION' plus LOTS of PAGES equals LOTS of Keywords equals LOTS of Google traffic.

A big site can't just get away with publishing LOTS of lower quality content in the cavalier way they used to - not without the 'fear' of primary content being impacted and organic search traffic throttled negatively to important pages on the site.

Google is very probably using user metrics in some way to determine the 'quality' of your site.

> QUESTION - *"I mean, **would you recommend going back through articles that we posted and if there's ones that we don't necessarily think are great articles, that we just take them away and delete them?"***

The reply was:

> *JOHN MUELLER: I think that's always an option.Yeah. That's something that--I've seen sites do that across the board,not specifically for blogs, but for content in general, where they would regularly go through all of their content and see, well, **this content doesn't get any clicks, or everyone who goes there kind of runs off screaming**.*

Deleting content is not always the optimal way to handle MANY types of low-quality content - far from it, in fact. Nuking it is the last option unless the pages really are '*dead*' content.

Any clean-up should go hand in hand with giving Google something it is going to value on your site e.g. NEW high-quality content:

Gary Illyes
@methode

@jenstar We don't recommend removing content in general for Panda, rather add more highQ stuff @shendison

12:44 AM - 8 Oct 2015

↩   ⟳ 12   ♥ 13

The final piece of advice is interesting, too.

It gives us an insight into how Google might actually deal with your site:

> JOHN MUELLER: *"Then maybe that's something where you can collect some metrics and say, well, everything that's below this threshold, we'll make a decision whether or not to significantly improve it or just get rid of it."*

E.g. (paraphrasing!)

You can probably rely on Google to '**collect some metrics and say, well, everything that's below this threshold, we'll "…(insert punishment spread out over time).**

Summary

Google probably has a quality score of some sort, and your site probably has a rating whatever that is relevant to (and if you get any real traffic from Google, often a manual rating).

If you have a big site, certain parts of your site will be rated more useful than others to Google.

Improving the quality of your content certainly works to improve traffic, as does intelligently managing your content across the site. Positive results from this process are NOT going to happen overnight. I've blogged about this sort of thing for many years, now.

Google are going together better at rating sites that meet their guidelines for 'quality' and 'user satisfaction' here - I am putting such things in quotes here to highlight the slightly Orwellian doublespeak we have to work with.

What Are The High-Quality Characteristics of a Web Page?

The following are examples of what Google calls 'high-quality characteristics' of a page and should be remembered:

- "*A satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality*" main content (MC)
- Copyright notifications up to date
- Functional page design
- Page author has Topical Authority
- High-Quality Main Content
- Positive Reputation or expertise of website or author (Google yourself)
- Very helpful SUPPLEMENTARY content "*which improves the user experience.*"
- Trustworthy
- Google wants to reward 'expertise' and 'everyday expertise' or experience so you should make this clear on your page
- Accurate information
- Ads can be at the top of your page as long as it does not distract from the main content on the page
- Highly satisfying website contact information
- Customised and very helpful 404 error pages
- Awards
- Evidence of expertise
- Attention to detail

If Google can detect investment in time and labour on your site – there are indications that they will reward you for this (or at least – you won't be affected when others are, meaning you rise in Google SERPs when others fall).

What Characteristics Do The Highest Quality Pages Exhibit?

You obviously want the highest quality 'score' but looking at the guide that is a lot of work to achieve.

Google wants to rate you on the effort you put into your website, and how satisfying a visit is to your pages.

1. **QUOTE**: "Very high or highest quality MC, with demonstrated expertise, talent, and/or skill."
2. **QUOTE**: "Very high level of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness (page and website) on the topic of the page."
3. **QUOTE**: "Very good reputation (website or author) on the topic of the page."

At least for competitive niches were Google intend to police this quality recommendation, Google wants to reward high-quality pages and "*the Highest rating may be justified for pages with a satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality*" main content.

If your main content is very poor, with "*grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors*", or not helpful or trustworthy – ANYTHING that can be interpreted as a bad user experience – you can expect to get a low rating.

> **QUOTE**: *"We will consider content to be Low quality if it is created without adequate time, effort, expertise, or talent/skill. Pages with low-quality (main content) do not achieve their purpose well."*

Note – not ALL thin pages are low-quality.

If you can satisfy the user with a page thin on content – you are ok (but probably susceptible to someone building a better page than yours in the near-future).

Google expects more from big brands than they do from your store (but that does not mean you shouldn't be aiming to meet ALL these high-quality guidelines above.

If you violate Google Webmaster recommendations for performance in their indexes of the web – you automatically get a low-quality rating.

Poor page design and poor main content and too many ads = you are toast.

If a rater is subject to a sneaky redirect – they are instructed to rate your site low.

Pages Can Be Rated 'Medium Quality'

Quality raters will rate content as *medium* rating when the author or entity responsible for it is unknown.

If you have multiple editors contributing to your site, you had better have a HIGH EDITORIAL STANDARD.

One could take from all this that Google Quality raters are out to get you if you manage to get past the algorithms, but equally, Google quality raters could be friends you just haven't met yet.

Somebody must be getting rated highly, right?

Impress a Google Quality rater and get a high rating.

If you are a spammer you'll be pulling out the stops to fake this, naturally, but this is a chance for real businesses to put their best foot forward and HELP quality raters correctly judge the size and relative quality of your business and website.

Real reputation is hard to fake – so if you have it – make sure it's on your website and is EASY to access from contact and about pages.

The quality raters handbook is a good training guide for looking for links to disavow, too.

It's pretty clear.

Google organic listings are reserved for 'remarkable' and reputable' content, expertise and trusted businesses.

A high bar to meet – and one that is designed for you to never quite meet unless you are serious about competing, as there is so much work involved.

I think the inferred message is to call your Adwords rep if you are an unremarkable business.

Are Poor Spelling and Bad Grammar Google Ranking Factors?

Is Grammar A Ranking Factor?

NO - this is evidently NOT a ranking signal. I've been blogging for nine years and most complaints I've had in that time have been about my poor grammar and spelling in my posts.

My spelling and grammar may be atrocious but these shortcomings haven't stopped me ranking lots of pages over the years.

Google historically has looked for 'exact match' instances of keyword phrases on documents and SEO have, historically, been able to optimise successfully for these keyword phrases - whether they are grammatically correct or not.

So how could bad grammar carry negative weight in Google's algorithms?

That being said, I do have *Grammarly*, a spelling and grammar checking plugin installed on my browser to help me catch the obvious mistakes.

Advice From Google

John Mueller from Google said in a recent hangout that it was 'not really' but that it was '*possible*' but *very 'niche'* if at all, that grammar was a positive ranking factor. Bear in mind - most of Google's algorithms (we think) demote or de-rank content once it is analysed - not necessarily promote it - not unless users *prefer* it.

https://youtu.be/doZmFrfIjJE?t=29m

Another video I found is a Google spokesman talking about inadequate grammar as a ranking factor or page quality signal was from a few years ago.

In this video, we are told, by Google, that **grammar is NOT a ranking factor**.

Not, at least, one of the 200+ quality signals Google uses to rank pages.

And that rings true, I think.

Google's Matt Cutts did say though:

> **QUOTE***: "It would be fair to use it as a signal...The more reputable pages do tend to have better grammar and better spelling. " Matt Cutts, Google*

Google Panda & Content Quality

Google is on record as saying (metaphorically speaking) their algorithms are looking for signals of *low* quality when it comes to rating pages on *Content Quality*.

Some possible examples could include:

> *QUOTE: "1. Does this article have spelling, stylistic, or factual errors?"*

and

> *QUOTE: "2. Was the article edited well, or does it appear sloppy or hastily produced?"*

and

> *QUOTE: "3. Are the pages produced with great care and attention to detail vs. less attention to detail?"*

and

> *QUOTE: "4. Would you expect to see this article in a printed magazine, encyclopedia or book?"*

Altogether - Google is rating content on overall ***user experience*** as it defines and rates it, and bad grammar and spelling equal a poor user experience.

At least on some occasions.

Google aims to ensure organic search engine marketing be a significant investment in time and budget for businesses. Critics will say to make Adwords a more attractive proposition.

Google aims to reward quality signals that:

1. take time to build and
2. the vast majority of sites will not, or cannot meet without a lot of investment.

NO website in a competitive market gets valuable traffic from Google in 2018 without a lot of work. Technical work and content curation.

It's an interesting aside.

Fixing the grammar and spelling on a page can be a time-consuming process.

It's clearly a machine-readable and detectable - although potentially noisy - signal and Google IS banging on about *Primary MAIN Content Quality* and *User Experience*.

Who knows?

Grammar is ranking factor could be one for the future - but at the moment, I doubt grammar is taken much into account (on an algorithmic level, at least, although users might not like your grammar and that could have a second order impact if it causes high abandonment rates, for instance).

Is Spelling A Google Ranking Factor?

Poor spelling has always had the potential to be a NEGATIVE ranking factor in Google. IF the word that is *incorrect* on the page is unique on the page and of critical importance to the search query.

Although - back in the day - if you wanted to rank for misspellings - you optimised for them - so - poor spelling would be a POSITIVE ranking looking back not that long ago.

Now, that kind of optimisation effort is fruitless, with changes to how Google presents these results in 2018.

Google will favour "*Showing results for*" results over presenting SERPs based on a common spelling error.

Testing to see if 'bad spelling' is a ranking factor is still easy on a granular level, bad grammar is not so easy to test.

I think Google has better signals to play with than ranking pages on spelling and grammar. It's not likely to penalise you for the honest mistakes most pages exhibit, especially if you have met more important quality signals - like *useful* main content.

And I've seen clear evidence of pages ranking very well with both bad spelling and bad grammar. **My own!**

I still have [Grammarly](#) installed, though.

What Is Keyword Stuffing?

Keyword stuffing is simply the process of repeating the same keyword or key phrases over and over in a page. It's counterproductive. It's is a signpost of a very low-quality spam site and is something Google clearly recommends you avoid.

It is:

> **QUOTE**: "*the practice of loading a webpage with keywords in an attempt to manipulate a site's ranking in Google's search results*". [Google](#)

Keyword stuffing text makes your copy often unreadable and so, a *bad user experience*. It often gets a page booted out of Google but it depends on the intent and the trust and authority of a site. It's sloppy SEO in 2018.

It is not a tactic you want to employ in search of long-term rankings.

Just because someone else is successfully doing it do not automatically think you will get away with it.

Don't do it - there are better ways of ranking in Google without resorting to it.

I used to rank high for 'what is *keyword stuffing*' years ago, albeit with a keyword stuffed page that I created to illustrate you could, at one time, blatantly ignore Google's rules and, in fact, use the rules as a blueprint to spam Google and get results.

That type of example page is just asking for trouble in 2018.

At the time of writing I rank for the same term using a more helpful article:
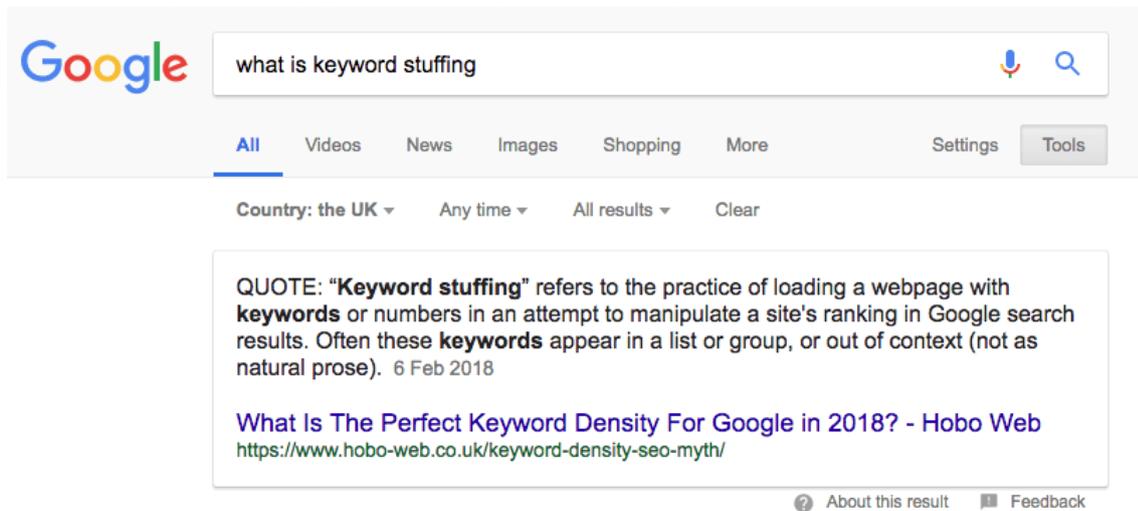
I don't keyword stuff in 2018 - Google is a little less forgiving than it used to be.

Google has a lot of manual raters who rate the *quality* of your pages, and *keyword stuffed main content* features prominently in the 2017 Quality Raters Guidelines:

7.4.2 "Keyword Stuffed" Main Content

> **QUOTE**: *'Pages may be created to lure search engines and users by repeating keywords over and over again, sometimes in unnatural and unhelpful ways. Such pages are created using words likely to be contained in queries issued by users. Keyword stuffing can range from mildly annoying to users, to complete gibberish. Pages created with the intent of luring search engines and users, rather than providing meaningful MC to help users,* **should be rated Lowest**. *' Search Quality Raters Guidelines March 14, 2017*

Google is policing their SERPs.

Put simply Google's views on 'site quality' and 'user satisfaction' do NOT automatically correlate to you getting more traffic.

This endeavour is supposed to be a benchmark - a baseline to start from (when it comes to keywords with financial value).

Everybody, in time, is supposed to hit this baseline to expect to have a chance to rank - and for the short, to medium term, this is where the opportunity for those who take it can be found.

If you don't do it, someone else will, and Google will rank them, in time, above you.

Google has many human quality raters rating your offering, as well as algorithms targeting old style SEO techniques and engineers specifically looking for sites that do not meet technical guidelines.

Does Google Promote A Site Or Demote Others In Rankings?

https://youtu.be/aII87lEWYzs?t=23m32s

In the video above you hear from at least one spam fighter that would confirm that at least some people are employed at Google to demote sites that fail to meet policy:

> **QUOTE***: "I didn't SEO at all, when I was at Google. I wasn't trying to make a site much better but **i was trying to find sites that were not 'implementing Google policies'(?*) and not giving the best user experience."** (I can't quite make out what he says there)

Link algorithms seem particularly aggressive, too, and 'delayed' now more than ever (for normal businesses built on old-school links) so businesses are getting it from multiple angles as Google rates the quality of its primary index (which may well sit on top of the old stuff and heavily influenced by 'quality' signals on your site).

Google Introduced '*an explicit quality metric which got directly at the issue of quality*'

QUOTE*: "Another problem we were having was an issue with quality** and this was particularly bad (we think of it as around 2008 2009 to **2011**) we were getting lots of complaints about low-quality content and they were right. We were seeing the same low-quality thing but our relevance metrics kept going up and that's because the low-quality pages can be very relevant this is basically the definition of a content form in our in our vision of the world so we thought we were doing great our numbers were saying we were doing great and we were delivering a terrible user experience and turned out we weren't measuring what we needed to **so what we ended up doing was defining an explicit quality metric which got directly at the issue of quality it's not the same as relevance** …. and it enabled us to **develop quality related signals separate from relevant signals** and really **improve them independently** so when the metrics missed something what ranking engineers need to do is fix the rating guidelines… or develop new metrics. SMX West 2016 – How Google Works: A Google Ranking Engineer's Story - Hobo [Google Ranking Signals](#) 2017)*

Google is on record as saying they had a quality problem that they started fixing with Panda.

That means that many of the sites that were getting a lot of traffic from Google in 2011 were not going to be rated 'high quality' as the new quality rating was designed to demote these sites.

In the following video, a Google spokesperson even goes into what they call a 'quality metric' signals separated from relevance signals:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJPu4vHETXw&feature=youtu.be&t=32m6s

These sites used common [seo practices](#) to rank, and Google made those practices toxic.

The fun started when these algorithms started to roll out more significantly to the real business world, and continue today with the ever-present (often erroneously confirmed) Google 'quality' updates we now constantly hear about in the media.

One thing is for sure, you need to get low-quality content OFF your site and get some UNIQUE content on it to maximise the benefit a few months down the line from *any* other marketing activity (like [link building](#)).

From my testing, the performance of pages degrade in time but can come back with regular updates and refresh of content in a sensible manner.

Retargeting keywords can also have a positive impact over time. One marked observation between my top performing pages on my test site is that pages that are updated more often (and improved substantially) tend to get more traffic than pages that do not.

A sensible strategy in 2018 is to:

1. Get rid of all substandard pages on the site
2. Meet Googles technical recommendations
3. Meet rater guidelines high priority issues for low to medium ratings
4. Go in-depth on your topic in certain areas
5. Consolidate content and link equity where prudent with redirects (not canonicals - use these only as a patch for a few months)
6. Start producing some sort of actual unique content
7. Market that new content more appropriately going forward than in the past

Most of this stuff I cover in my [seo audits](#).

High-quality content is only one aspect of a high-quality site.

Google Is Not Going To Rank Low-Quality Pages When It Has Better Options

> **QUOTE**: "*Panda is an algorithm that's applied to sites overall and has become one of our core ranking signals. It measures the quality of a site, which you can read more about in our guidelines. Panda allows Google to take quality into account and adjust ranking accordingly.*" Google

If you have exact match instances of key phrases on low-quality pages, mostly these pages won't have all the compound ingredients it takes to rank high in Google in 2018.

I was working this, long before I understood it partially enough to write anything about it.

Here is an example of taking a standard page that did not rank for years and then turning it into a topic-oriented resource page designed around a user's intent and purpose:
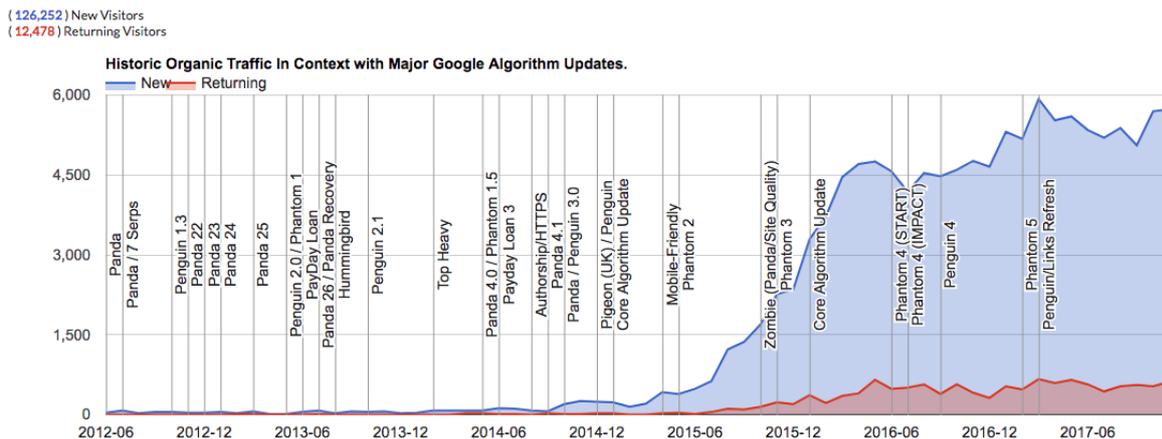
Google, in many instances, would rather send long-tail search traffic, for instance, to high-quality pages ABOUT a concept/topic that explains relationships and connections between relevant sub-topics FIRST, *rather* than to only send that traffic to low-quality pages *just because* they have the *exact phrase* on the page.

Google Demotion Algorithms Target Low-Quality Content

Optimising (without improving) low-quality content springs traps set by ever-improving *core quality algorithms*.
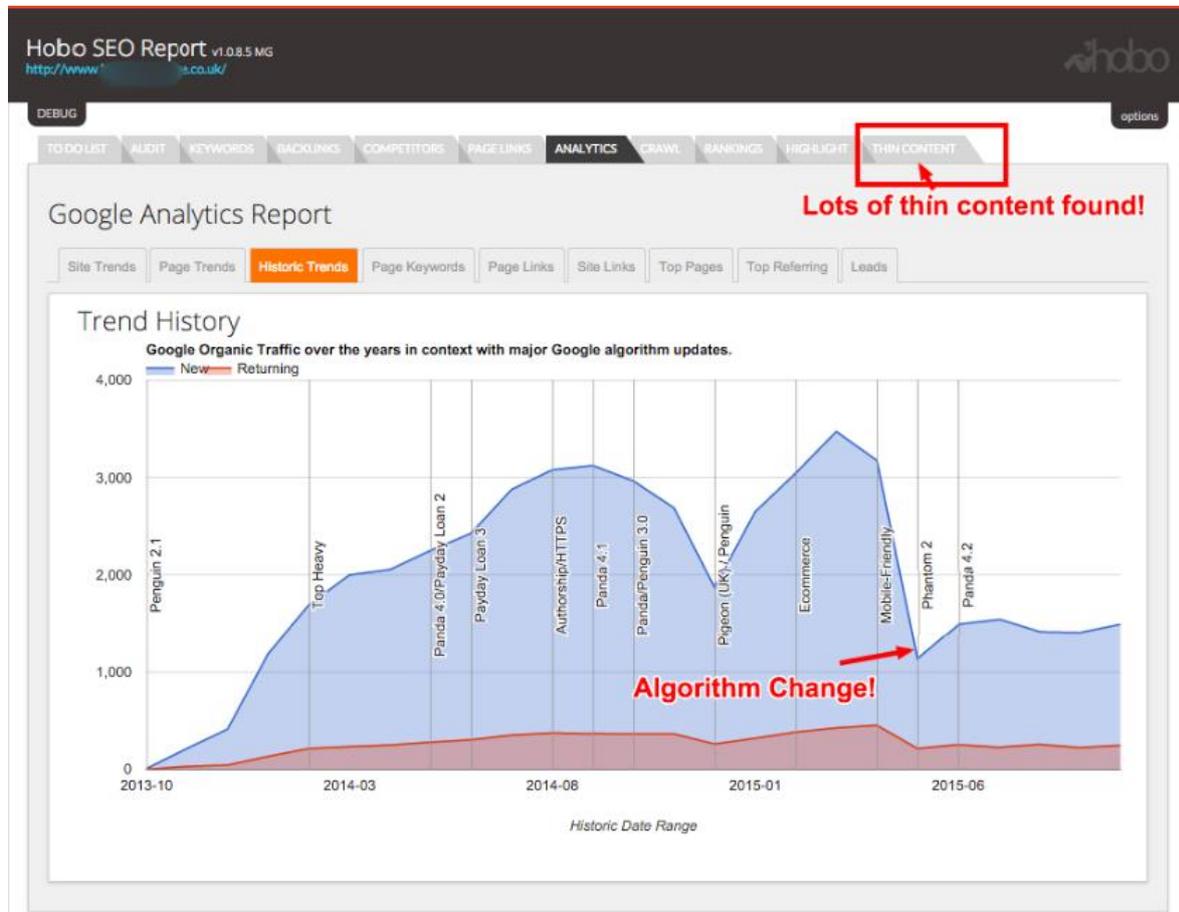
What this means is that 'optimising' low-quality pages is very much swimming upstream in 2018.

Optimising low-quality pages *without* value-add is self-defeating, now that the algorithms - and manual quality rating efforts - have got that stuff nailed down.

If you optimise low-quality pages using old school SEO techniques, you will be hit with a low-quality algorithm (like the Quality Update or Google Panda).

You must avoid boilerplate text, spun text or duplicate content when creating pages - or you are Panda Bamboo - as Google hinted at in the *2015 Quality Rater's Guide*.

QUOTE: *"6.1 Low Quality Main Content One of the most important considerations in PQ rating is the quality of the MC. The quality of the MC is determined by how much time, effort, expertise, and talent/skill have gone into the creation of the page. Consider this example: Most students have to write papers for high school or college. Many students take shortcuts to save time and effort by doing one or more of the following:*

- *Buying papers online or getting someone else to write for them*
- *Making things up.*
- *Writing quickly with no drafts or editing.*
- *Filling the report with large pictures or other distracting content.*
- *Copying the entire report from an encyclopedia, or paraphrasing content by changing words or sentence structure here and there.*
- *Using commonly known facts, for example, "Argentina is a country. People live in Argentina. Argentina has borders. Some people like Argentina."*
- *Using a lot of words to communicate only basic ideas or facts, for example, "Pandas eat bamboo. Pandas eat a lot of bamboo. It's the best food for a Panda bear."*

Unfortunately, the content of some webpages is similarly created. We will consider content to be Low quality if it is created without adequate time, effort, expertise, or talent/skill. Pages with low quality MC do not achieve their purpose well. Important: Low quality MC is a sufficient reason to give a page a Low quality rating."

Google rewards uniqueness or punishes the lack of it.

The number 1 way to do '*SEO copywriting*' in 2018 will be to edit the actual page copy to continually add unique content and improve its accuracy, uniqueness, relevance, succinctness, and use.

Low-Quality Content Is Not Meant To Rank High in Google.

PQ Rating and Explanation

Lowest   Medium   Highes
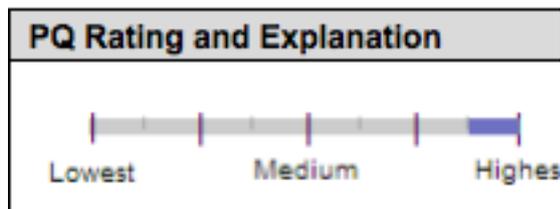
A Google spokesman said not that long ago that Google Panda was about preventing types of sites that shouldn't rank for particular keywords from ranking for them.

> **QUOTE**: "(Google Panda) measures the quality of a site pretty much by looking at the vast majority of the pages at least. But essentially allows us to take quality of the whole site into account when ranking pages from that particular site and adjust the ranking accordingly for the pages. So essentially, if you want a blunt answer, it **will not devalue, it will actually demote**. Basically, we figured that site is trying to game our systems, and unfortunately, successfully. So we will adjust the rank. We will push the site back just to make sure that it's not working anymore." *Gary Illyes – [Search Engine Land](#)*

When Google demotes your page for duplicate content practices, and there's nothing left in the way of unique content to continue ranking you for - your web pages will mostly be ignored by Google.

The way I look at it - once Google strips away all the stuff it ignores (duplicate text) - what's left? In effect, that's what you can expect Google to reward you for. If what is left is boilerplate synonymised text content - that's now being classed as web spam - or 'spinning'.

NOTE - The ratio of duplicate content on any page is going to hurt you if you have more duplicate text than unique content. A simple check of the pages, page to page, on the site is all that's needed to ensure each page is DIFFERENT (regarding text) page-to-page.

If you have large sections of duplicate text page-to-page - that is a problem that should be targeted and removed.

It is important to note:

1. The main text content on the page must be unique to avoid Google's page quality algorithms.
2. Verbose text must NOT be created or spun automatically
3. Text should NOT be optimised to a template as this just creates a footprint across many pages that can be interpreted as redundant or manipulative boilerplate text.
4. Text should be HIGHLY descriptive, unique and concise
5. If you have a lot of pages to address, the main priority is to create a UNIQUE couple of paragraphs of text, at least, for the MC (Main Content). Pages do not need thousands of words to rank. They just need to MEET A SPECIFIC USER INTENT and not TRIP 'LOW_QUALTY' FILTERS. A page with just a few sentences of unique text still meets this requirement (150-300 words) - for now.
6. When it comes to out-competing competitor pages, you are going to have to look at what the top competing page is doing when it comes to main content text. Chances are - they have some unique text on the page. If they rank with duplicate text, either their SUPPLEMENTARY CONTENT is better, or the competitor domain has more RANKING ABILITY because of either GOOD BACKLINKS or BETTER USER EXPERIENCE.
7. Updating content on a site should be a priority as Google rewards fresher content for certain searches.

Google Rates 'Copied' Main Content 'Lowest'

This is where you are swimming upstream in 2018. Copied content is not going to be a long-term strategy when creating a unique page better than your competitions' pages.

In the latest *Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines* that were published on 14 March 2017, Google states:

7.4.5 Copied Main Content

> *Every page needs MC.* **One way to create MC with no time, effort, or expertise is to copy it from another source.** *Important: We do not consider legitimately licensed or syndicated content to be "copied" (see here for more on web syndication). Examples of syndicated content in the U.S. include news articles by AP or Reuters.*
>
> **The word "copied" refers to the practice of "scraping" content, or copying content from other nonaffiliated websites without adding any original content or value to users** *(see here for more information on copied or scraped content).*
>
> *If all or most of the MC on the page is copied, think about the purpose of the page.* **Why does the page exist?** *What value does the page have for users? Why should users look at the page with copied content instead of the original source? Important:* **The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users.** *Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source.*

and

7.4.6 More About Copied Content

> *All of the following are considered copied content:*
>
> ● *Content copied exactly from an identifiable source. Sometimes an entire page is copied, and sometimes just parts of the page are copied. Sometimes multiple pages are copied and then pasted together into a single page. Text that has been copied exactly is usually the easiest type of copied content to identify.*
>
> ● *Content which is copied, but changed slightly from the original. This type of copying makes it difficult to find the exact matching original source. Sometimes just a few words are changed, or whole sentences are changed, or a "find and replace" modification is made, where one word is replaced with another throughout the text. These types of changes are deliberately done to make it difficult to find the original source of the content. We call this kind of content "copied with minimal alteration."*

● *Content copied from a changing source, such as a search results page or news feed. You often will not be able to find an exact matching original source if it is a copy of "dynamic" content (content which changes frequently). However, we will still consider this to be copied content. Important: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users. Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source.*

How To Do "*SEO Copywriting*"

Good Content Will Still Need 'Optimised'

The issue is, original "compelling content" - so easy to create isn't it(!) - on a site with no links and no audience and no online business authority is as useful as boring, useless content - to Google - and will be treated as such by Google - except for long tail terms (if even).

It usually won't be found by many people and won't be READ and won't be ACTED upon - not without a few good links pointing to the site - NOT if there is any competition for the term.

Generalisations make for excellent link bait and while good, rich content is very important, sayings like 'content is everything' is not telling you the whole story.

The fact is - every single site is different, sits in a niche with a different level of competition for every keyword or traffic stream, and needs a strategy to tackle this.

There's no one size fits all magic button to press to get traffic to a site. Some folk have a lot of domain authority to work with, some know the right people, or have access to an audience already - indeed, all they might need is a copywriter - or indeed, some inspiration for a blog post.

They, however, are in the **minority of sites**.

Most of the clients I work with have nothing to start with and are in a relatively 'boring' niche few reputable blogs write about.

In one respect, Google doesn't even CARE what content you have on your site (although it's better these days at hiding this).

Humans *do* care, of course, so at some point, you will *need* to produce that content on your pages.

You Can ALWAYS Optimise Content To Perform Better In Google

An SEO can always get more *out* of content in organic search than any copywriter, but there's not much more powerful than a copywriter who can lightly optimise a page around a topic, or

an expert in a topic that knows how to - continually, over time - optimise a page for high rankings in Google.
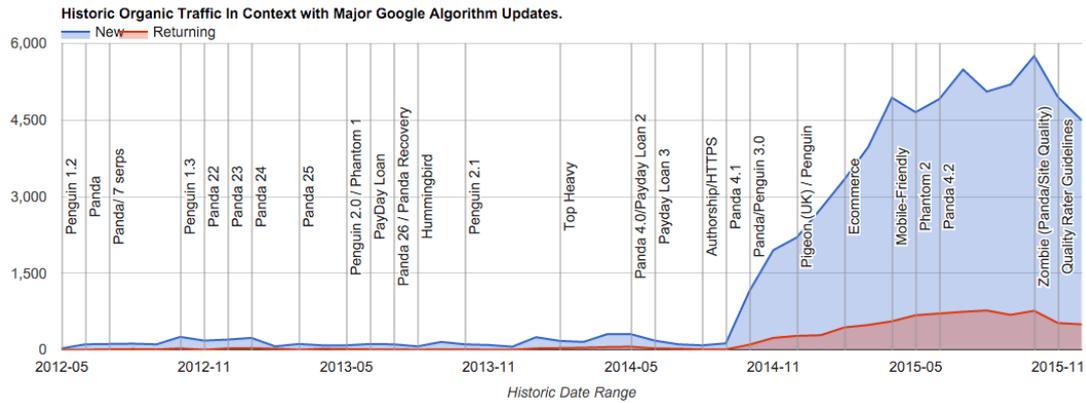
If I wanted to rank for "*How To Write For Google*"? - for instance - in the old days you used to put the key phrase in the normal elements like the [Page Title Element](#) and [ALT text](#) and then keyword stuffed your text to make sure you repeated "*How To Write For Google*" enough times in a block of low-quality text.

Using [variants and synonyms](#) of this phrase helped to add to the 'uniqueness' of the page, of course.

Throwing in any old text would beef the word count up.

Now, in 2018, if I want to rank high in Google for that kind of term - I would still rely on old SEO best practices like a very focused page title - but now the text should explore a topic in a much more informative way.

Writing for Google and meeting the query intent means an SEO copywriter would need to make sure page text included ENTITIES AND CONCEPTS related to the MAIN TOPIC of the page you are writing about and the key phrase you are talking about.

If I wanted a page to rank for this term, I would probably need to explore concepts like *Google Hummingbird*, Query Substitution, Query Reformation and Semantic Search i.e. I need to explore a topic or concept in fully - and as time goes on - more succinctly - than competing pages.

If you want to rank for a SPECIFIC search term - you can still do it using the same old, well-practised keyword targeting practices. The main page content itself just needs to be high-quality enough to satisfy Google's quality algorithms in the first place.

This is still a [land grab](#).

Should You Rewrite Product Descriptions To Make The Text Unique?

Probably.

Whatever you do, beware 'spinning the text' - Google *might* have an algorithm or two focused on that sort of thing:

Tip: Beware Keyword Stuffing E-commerce Website Category Pages To Rank For Various Other Keywords in Google

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jk2AXKiKSqE&t=56m26s

Google's John Meuller just helped someone out in this week's Google Webmaster Hangout, and his answer was very interesting:

> **QUOTE***: "The site was ranking the first page for the keyword (widget) and(widgets) in Australia **since two weeks we moved all the way down to page five.** Technical changes haven't been made to the site **the only modification was we added more category landing text to rank for various other (keywords)"***

John declared:

> *QUOTE: "**the modification that you mentioned** (above) that you put more category landing text on the page that might also be something that's playing a role there. What I see a lot with e-commerce sites is that they take a category page that's actually pretty good and they s**tuff a whole bunch of text on the bottom** and that's essentially just kind of roughly related to that content which is essentially like bigger than the Wikipedia page on that topic and from our point of view **when we look at things like that our algorithms kind of quickly kind of back off and say whoa it looks like someone is just trying to use keyword stuffing** to include a bunch of kind of unrelated content into the same page and then our algorithms might be a bit more critical and kind of like be cautious with regards to the content that we find on this page so that's one thing to kind of watch out for.*

> *I think it's good to / help provide more context to things that you have on your website but kind of be reasonable and think about what users would actually use and focus on that kind of content so for example if **if the bottom of these pages is just a collection of keywords and a collection of sentences where those keywords are artificially used then probably** users aren't going to scroll to the bottom and read all of that tiny text and actually use that content in a useful way and then probably **search engines are also going to back off and say well this page is is doing some crazy stuff here we don't really know how much we can trust the content on the page."*

If you are keyword stuffing e-commerce category pages, watch out. Google tells us these things for a reason. Adding optimised text to e-commerce category pages 'just for the sake of it' is probably going to work against you (and might be working against you today).

Keyword stuffing has been against the rules for a long time.

John previously stated back during 2016:

> **QUOTE**: "*if we see that things like keyword stuffing are happening on a page, then we'll try to ignore that, and just focus on the rest of the page*".

Google has algorithms AND human reviewers looking out for it when the maths miss it:

7.4.2 "Keyword Stuffed" Main Content

> **QUOTE**: *'Pages may be created to lure search engines and users by repeating keywords over and over again, sometimes in unnatural and unhelpful ways. Such pages are created using words likely to be contained in queries issued by users. Keyword stuffing can range from mildly annoying to users, to complete gibberish. Pages created with the intent of luring search engines and users, rather than providing meaningful MC to help users, **should be rated Lowest**.'* [Search Quality Raters Guidelines](#) *March 14, 2017*

While there is obviously a balance to be had in this area, Google classes keyword stuffing as adding '*irrelevant keywords*' to your site. There are warnings also about this age-old SEO technique in the [general webmaster guidelines](#):

General Guidelines: Irrelevant Keywords

> **QUOTE**: *"Keyword stuffing" refers to the practice of loading a webpage with keywords or numbers in an attempt to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results. Often these keywords appear in a list or group, or out of context (not as natural prose). Filling pages with keywords or numbers results in a negative user experience, and can harm your site's ranking. Focus on creating useful, information-rich content that uses keywords appropriately and in context.*

Examples of keyword stuffing include:

- *Lists of phone numbers without substantial added value*
- *Blocks of text listing cities and states a webpage is trying to rank for*
- *Repeating the same words or phrases so often that it sounds unnatural, for example:We sell custom cigar humidors. Our custom cigar humidors are handmade. If you're thinking of buying a custom cigar humidor, please contact our custom cigar humidor specialists at custom.cigar.humidors@example.com.*

Related: See my notes on [keyword stuffing](#) and on the [perfect keyword density to rank pages in Google](#).

Are You Making Or Optimising Doorway Pages?

Google algorithms consistently target sites with doorway pages in quality algorithm updates. The definition of a "doorway page" can change over time.

For example in the images below (from 2011), all pages on the site seemed to be hit with a -50+ ranking penalty for every keyword phrase the website ranked for.

At first Google **rankings for commercial keyword phrases collapsed** which led to somewhat of a "*traffic apocalypse*":

The webmaster then received an **email from Google via Google Webmaster Tools (now called Google Search Console)**:

> QUOTE: "*Google Webmaster Tools notice of detected doorway pages on xxxxxxxx - Dear site owner or webmaster of xxxxxxxx, We've detected that some of your site's pages may be using techniques that are outside Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Specifically, your site may have what we consider to be doorway pages - groups of "cookie cutter" or low-quality pages. Such pages are often of low value to users and are often optimized for single words or phrases in order to channel users to a single location. We believe that doorway pages typically create a frustrating user experience, and we encourage you to correct or remove any pages that violate our quality guidelines. Once you've made these changes, please submit your site for reconsideration in Google's search results. If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please see our Webmaster Help Forum for support.*" Google Search Quality Team

At the time, I didn't immediately class the pages on the affected sites in question *as* doorway pages. It's evident Google's definition of a doorways changes over time.

A lot of people do not realise they are building what Google *classes* as doorway pages..... and it was indicative to me that ..... **what you *intend* to do with the traffic Google sends you may in itself, be a ranking factor not too often talked about**.

What Does Google Classify As Doorway Pages?

https://youtu.be/jk2AXKiKSqE?t=38m6s

Google classes many types of pages as doorway pages. Doorway pages can be thought of as lots of pages on a website designed to rank for very specific keywords using minimal original text content e.g. location pages often end up looking like doorway pages.

Its actually a very interesting aspect of modern SEO and one that is constantly shifting.

In the recent past, location-based SERPs were often lower-quality, and so Google historically ranked location-based doorway pages in many instances.

There is some confusion for real businesses who THINK they SHOULD rank for specific locations where they are not geographically based and end up using doorway-type pages to rank for these locations.

What Google Says About Doorway Pages

Google said a few years ago:

> QUOTE*: "For example, **searchers might get a list of results that all go to the same site**. So if a user clicks on one result, doesn't like it, and then tries the next result in the search results page **and is taken to that same site** that they didn't like, that's a really frustrating experience." Google*

A question about using content spread across multiple pages and targeting different geographic locations on the same site was asked in the recent Hangout with Google's John Meuller

> QUOTE*: "We are a health services comparison website...... so you can imagine that for the majority of those pages the content that will be presented in terms of the clinics that will be listed looking fairly similar right and the same I think holds true if you look at it from the location ...... we're conscious that this causes some kind of content duplication so the question is is this type ... to worry about? "*

Bearing in mind that (while it is not the optimal use of pages) Google does not 'penalise' a website for duplicating content across internal pages in a non-malicious way, John's clarification of location-based pages on a site targeting different regions is worth noting:

> QUOTE*: "For the mostpart it should be fine I think the **the tricky part that you need to be careful about is more around doorway pages in the sense that if all of these pages end up with the same business then that can look a lot like a doorway page** but like just focusing on the content duplication part that's something that for the most part is fine what will happen there is will index all of these pages separately because from from a kind of holistic point of view these pages are unique they have unique content on them they might have like chunks of*

---

text on them which are duplicated but on their own these pages are unique so we'll index them separately and in the search results when someone is searching for something generic and we don't know which of these pages are the best ones we'll pick one of these pages and show that to the user and filter out the other variations of that that page so for example if someone in Ireland is just looking for dental bridges and you have a bunch of different pages for different kind of clinics that offer the service and probably will pick one of those pages and show those in the search results and filter out the other ones.

But essentially the idea there is that this is a good representative of the the content from your website and that's all that we would show to users on the other hand if someone is specifically looking for let's say dental bridges in Dublin then we'd be able to show the appropriate clinic that you have on your website that matches that a little bit better so we'd know dental bridges is something that you have a lot on your website and Dublin is something that's unique to this specific page so we'd be able to pull that out and to show that to the user like that so from a pure content duplication point of view that's not really something I totally worry about.

*I think it makes sense to have unique content as much as possible on these pages but it's not not going to like sync the whole website if you don't do that we don't penalize a website for having this kind of deep duplicate content and kind of going back to the first thing though with regards to doorway pages that is something I definitely look into to **make sure that you're not running into that so in particular if this is like all going to the same clinic and you're creating all of these different landing pages that are essentially just funneling everyone to the same clinic then that could be seen as a doorway page or a set of doorway pages** on our side and it could happen that **the web spam team looks at that and says this is this is not okay you're just trying to rank for all of these different variations of the keywords and the pages themselves are essentially all the same and they might go there and say we need to take a manual action and remove all these pages from search** so that's kind of one thing to watch out for in the sense that if they are all going to the same clinic then probably it makes sense to create some kind of a summary page instead whereas if these are going to two different businesses then of course that's kind of a different situation it's not it's not a doorway page situation."*

The takeaway here is that if you have LOTS of location pages serving ONE SINGLE business in one location, then those are very probably classed as some sort of doorway pages, and probably old-school SEO techniques for these type of pages will see them classed as lower-quality - or even - spammy pages.

Google has long warned webmasters about using Doorway pages but many sites still employ them, because, either:

- their business model depends on it for lead generation
- the alternative is either a lot of work or
- they are not creative enough or
- they are not experienced enough to avoid the pitfalls of having lower-quality doorway pages on a site or

- they are experienced enough to understand what impact they might be having on a [site quality score](#)

Google has a doorway page algorithm which no doubt they constantly improve upon. Google warned:

> **QUOTE***: "Over time, we've seen sites try to maximize their "search footprint" without adding clear, unique value. These doorway campaigns manifest themselves as pages on a site, as a number of domains, or a combination thereof. To improve the quality of search results for our users, we'll soon launch a ranking adjustment to better address these types of pages. Sites with large and well-established doorway campaigns might see a broad impact from this change." Google* [2015](#)

If you have location pages that serve multiple locations or businesses, then those are not doorway pages and should be improved uniquely to rank better, according to John's advice.

Are You Making Doorway Pages?

Search Engine Land offered search engine optimisers this clarification from Google:

QUOTE*: "How do you know if your web pages are classified as a "doorway page?" Google said asked yourself these questions:*

- *Is the purpose to optimize for search engines and funnel visitors into the actual usable or relevant portion of your site, or are they an integral part of your site's user experience?*
- *Are the pages intended to rank on generic terms yet the content presented on the page is very specific?*
- *Do the pages duplicate useful aggregations of items (locations, products, etc.) that already exist on the site for the purpose of capturing more search traffic?*
- *Are these pages made solely for drawing affiliate traffic and sending users along without creating unique value in content or functionality?*
- *Do these pages exist as an "island?" Are they difficult or impossible to navigate to from other parts of your site? Are links to such pages from other pages within the site or network of sites created just for search engines?"*

Barry Schwartz at Seroundtable [picked this up](#):

> **QUOTE***: "Well, **a doorway page would be if you have a large collection of pages where you're just like tweaking the keywords on those pages** for that.*
>
> *I think if you focus on like a clear purpose for the page that's outside of just I want to rank for this specific variation of the keyword then that's that's usually something that leads to a reasonable result.*
>
> *Whereas if you're just taking a list of keywords and saying I **need to make pages for each of these keywords and each of the permutations that might be for like two or***

three of those keywords then that's just creating pages for the sake of keywords which is essentially what we look at as a doorway."

Note I underlined the following statement:

QUOTE*: "focus on like a clear purpose for the page that's outside of just I want to rank for this specific variation of the keyword."*

That is because sometimes, often, in fact, there *is* an alternative to doorway pages for location pages that achieve essentially the same thing for webmasters.

Naturally, business owners want to rank for lots of keywords in organic listings with their website. The challenge for webmasters and SEO is that Google doesn't want business owners to rank for lots of keywords using autogenerated content especially when that produces A LOT of pages on a website using (for instance) a list of keyword variations page-to-page.

QUOTE: "*7.4.3 Automatically Generated Main Content Entire websites may be created by designing a basic template from which hundreds or thousands of pages are created, sometimes using content from freely available sources (such as an RSS feed or API). These pages are created with no or very little time, effort, or expertise, and also have no editing or manual curation.* **Pages and websites made up of auto-generated content with no editing or manual curation, and no original content or value added for users, should be rated Lowest**." [Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#) *2017*

The end-result is webmasters create doorway pages without even properly understanding what they represent to Google and without realising Google will not index all these autogenerated pages.

WIKIPEDIA says of doorway pages:

QUOTE*: "**Doorway pages** are web **pages** that are created for spamdexing. This is for spamming the index of a search engine by inserting results for particular phrases with the purpose of sending visitors to a different **page**."*

Also:

*"**Spamdexing**, which is a word derived from "spam" and "indexing," refers to the practice of search engine spamming. It is a form of SEO spamming."*

Google says:

> *"**Doorways are sites or pages created to rank highly for specific search queries.** They are bad for users because they can lead to multiple similar pages in user search results, where each result ends up taking the user to essentially the same destination. They can also lead users to intermediate pages that are not as useful as the final destination.*

Here are some examples of doorways:

- *Having multiple domain names or pages targeted at specific regions or cities that funnel users to one page*
- *Pages generated to funnel visitors into the actual usable or relevant portion of your site(s)*
- *Substantially similar pages that are closer to search results than a clearly defined, browseable hierarchy"*

I've bolded:

"Doorways are sites or pages created to rank highly for specific search queries"

Take note: It is not just location pages that are classed as doorway pages:

https://youtu.be/JLCwGo43fAY?t=7m50s

> **QUOTE**: "*For Google, that's probably overdoing it and ends up in a situation you basically create a doorway site .... with pages of low value.... that target one specific query.*" John Mueller 2018

If your website is made up of lower-quality doorway type pages using old SEO-techniques (which more and more labelled as spam in 2018) then Google will not index all of the pages and your website 'quality score' is probably going to be negatively impacted.

Summary:

If you are making keyword rich location pages for a single business website, there's a risk these pages will be classed doorway pages in 2018.

If you know you have VERY low-quality doorway pages on your site, you should remove them or rethink your SEO strategy if you want to rank high in Google for the long term.

Location-based pages are suitable for some kind of websites, and not others.

What Makes A Page Spam?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHpRlextjL0

What makes a page spam?:

- Hidden text or links - may be exposed by selecting all page text and scrolling to the bottom (all text is highlighted), disabling CSS/Javascript, or viewing source code
- Sneaky redirects - redirecting through several URLs, rotating destination domains cloaking with JavaScript redirects and 100% frame
- Keyword stuffing - no percentage or keyword density given; this is up to the rater
- PPC ads that only serve to make money, not help users
- Copied/scraped content and PPC ads
- Feeds with PPC ads
- Doorway pages - multiple landing pages that all direct user to the same destination
- Templates and other computer-generated pages mass-produced, marked by copied content and/or slight keyword variations
- Copied message boards with no other page content
- Fake search pages with PPC ads
- Fake blogs with PPC ads, identified by copied/scraped or nonsensical spun content
- Thin affiliate sites that only exist to make money, identified by checkout on a different domain, image properties showing origination at another URL, lack of original content, different WhoIs registrants of the two domains in question
- Pure PPC pages with little to no content
- Parked domains

There's more on this announcement at SEW.

If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam, to Google

> **QUOTE**: "*If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam*" GOOGLE

That statement above in the original quality rater guidelines is **standout** and should be a heads up to any webmaster out there who thinks they are going to make a "fast buck" from Google organic listings in 2018.

It should, at least, make you think about the types of pages you are going to spend your valuable time making.

Without VALUE ADD for Google's users - don't expect to rank high for commercial keywords.

If you are making a page today with the sole purpose of making money from it - and especially with **free traffic from Google** - you obviously didn't get the memo. Consider this statement from a manual reviewer:

> **QUOTE**: "*…when they DO **get to the top**, they **have to be reviewed with a human eye** in order to make sure the site has quality.*" potpiegirl

It's worth remembering:

- If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam
- If A Site Exists Only To Make Money, The Site Is Spam

This is how what you make will be judged - whether it is fair or not.

IS IT ALL BAD NEWS?

Of course not and in some cases, it levels the playing field especially if you are willing to:

- Differentiate yourself
- Be Remarkable
- Be accessible
- Add unique content to your site
- Help users in an original way

Google doesn't care about search engine optimizers or the vast majority of websites but the search engine giant **DOES** care about **HELPING ITS OWN USERS**.

So, if you are helping visitors the come from Google - and not by just directing them to another website - you are probably doing one thing right at least.

With this in mind - I am already building affiliate sites differently, for instance.

How To Improve Your Website Content

This is no longer about repeating keywords. ANYTHING you do to IMPROVE the page is going to be a potential SEO benefit. That could be:

- creating fresh content
- removing doorway-type pages
- cleaning up or removing thin-content on a site
- adding relevant keywords and key phrases to relevant pages
- constantly improving pages to keep them relevant
- fixing poor grammar and spelling mistakes
- adding synonyms and related key phrases to text
- reducing keyword stuffing
- reducing the ratio of duplicated text on your page to unique text
- removing old outdated links or out-of-date content
- rewording sentences to take out sales or marketing fluff and focusing more on the USER INTENT (e.g. give them the facts first including pros and cons - for instance - through reviews) and purpose of the page.
- merging many old stale pages into one, fresh page, which is updated periodically to keep it relevant
- Conciseness, while still maximising relevance and keyword coverage
- Improving important keyword phrase prominence throughout your page copy (you can have too much, or too little, and it is going to take testing to find out what is the optimal presentation will be)
- Topic modelling

A great writer can get away with fluff but the rest of us probably should focus on being concise.

Low-quality fluff is easily discounted by Google these days - and can leave a toxic footprint on a website.

How To Get Featured Snippets on Google

QUOTE: "*When a user asks a question in Google Search, we might show a search result in a special featured snippet block at the top of the search results page. This featured snippet block includes a summary of the answer, extracted from a webpage, plus a link to the page, the page title and URL*" Google 2018

Any content strategy in 2018 should naturally be focused on creating high-quality content and also revolve around triggering Google FEATURED SNIPPETS that *trigger* when Google wants them to - and intermittently - depending on the nature of the query.
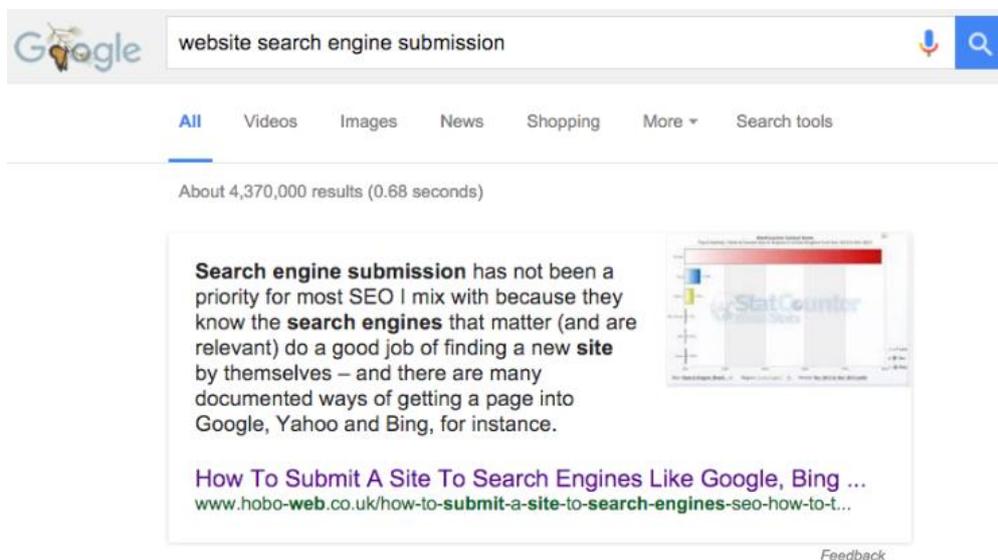
Regarding the above image, where a page on Hobo is promoted to number 1 - I used traditional competitor keyword research and old-school keyword analysis and keyword phrase selection, albeit focused on the opportunity in long-form content, to accomplish that, proving that you still use this keyword research experience to rank a page in 2018.

Despite all the obfuscation, time delay, keyword rewriting, manual rating and selection bias Google goes through to match pages to keyword queries to, you still need to optimise a page to rank in a niche, and if you do it sensibly, you unlock a wealth of long-tail traffic over time (a lot of which is useless as it always was, but what RankBrain might clean up given time).

Note:

- Google is only going to produce more of these direct answers or answer boxes in future (they have been moving in this direction since 2005).
- Focusing on triggering these will focus your content creators on creating exactly the type of pages Google wants to rank. "HOW TO" guides and "WHAT IS" guides is IDEAL and the VERY BEST type of content for this exercise.
- Google is REALLY rewarding these articles in 2018 - and the search engine is VERY probably going to keep doing so for the future.
- Google Knowledge Graph offers another exciting opportunity - and indicates the next stage in organic search.
- Google is producing these ANSWER BOXES that can promote a page from anywhere on the front page of Google to number 1.
- All in-depth content strategy on your site should be focused on this new aspect of Google Optimisation. The bonus is you physically create content that Google is ranking very well in 2018 even without taking knowledge boxes into consideration.
- Basically - you are feeding Google EASY ANSWERS to scrape from your page. This all ties together very nicely with organic link building. The MORE ANSWER BOXES you UNLOCK - the more chance you have of ranking number one FOR MORE AND MORE TERMS - and as a result - more and more people see your utilitarian content and as a result - you get social shares and links if people care at all about it.
- You can share an Enhanced Snippet (or Google Answer Box as they were first called by SEOs). Sometimes you are featured and sometimes it is a competitor URL. All you can do in this case is to continue to improve the page until you squeeze your competitor out.

We already know that Google likes 'tips' and "how to" and expanded FAQ but this Knowledge Graph ANSWER BOX system provides a real opportunity and is CERTAINLY what any content strategy should be focused around to maximise exposure of your business in organic searches.

Unfortunately, this is a double-edged sword if you take a long-term view. Google is, after all, looking for easy answers so, eventually, it might not need to send visitors to your page.

To be fair, these Google Enhanced Snippets, at the moment, appear complete with a reference link to your page and can positively impact traffic to the page. SO - for the moment - it's an opportunity to take advantage of.

How To Deal With Low-Quality Content On Your Site

Clean it up.

The first thing to do is always look to your site for content that is under-performing. Low-quality, out-dated or otherwise 'stale' content pages should be reworked, redirected or removed. This is normally the first thing we aim to do in any project we are employed in.

Often, content can be repackaged into a more compelling, user-focused topic based article that explores a topic and frequently asked questions about it. This topic page can be optimised with synonyms and related keywords, entities and concepts.

Ranking in Google is not about repeating keywords anymore - in fact - all efforts down that road will only lead to failure.

Ranking high in Google is about exploring a 'CONCEPT' on a web page in a way that HELPS INFORM users while still meeting Google's keyword-based and entity based relevancy signals.

Specific Advice From Google On Low-Quality Content On Your Site

And remember the following, specific advice from Google on removing low-quality content from a domain:

> ******'' *Quote from Google: One other specific piece of guidance we've offered is that low-quality content on some parts of a website can impact the whole site's rankings, and thus removing low-quality pages, merging or improving the content of individual shallow pages into more useful pages, or moving low-quality pages to a different domain could eventually help the rankings of your higher-quality content.* **GOOGLE** ******

They are not lying. Here is another example of taking multiple pages and making one better high-quality page in place of them:
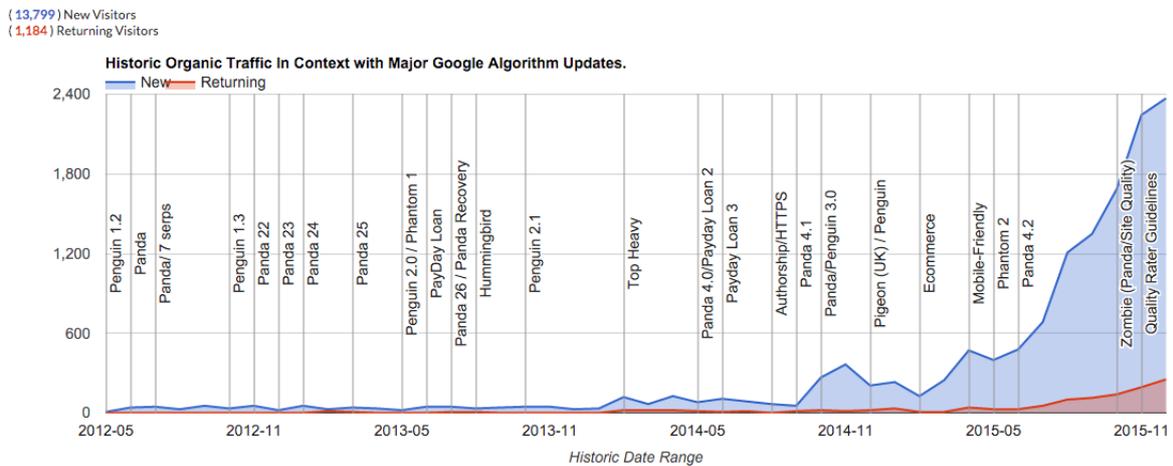
Focus on Quality To Improve Conversion Rates

However you are trying to satisfy users, many think this is about **terminating searches via your site or on your site** or satisfying the long-click.

How you do that in an ethical manner (e.g. not breaking the back button on browsers) the main aim is to satisfy that user somehow.

You *used* to rank by being a virtual *PageRank black hole*. Now, you need to think about being a *User black hole*.

You want a user to click your result in Google, and not need to go back to Google to do the same search that ends with the user pogo-sticking to another result, apparently unsatisfied with your page.

The aim is to convert users into subscribers, returning visitors, sharing partners, paying customers or even just help them along on their way to learn something.

The success I have had in ranking pages and getting more traffic have largely revolved around optimising the technical framework of a site, crawl and indexing efficiency, removal of outdated content, content re-shaping, constant improvement of text content to meet its purpose better, internal links to relevant content, conversion optimisation or getting users to 'stick around' – or at least visit where I recommend they visit.

Mostly – I've focused on satisfying user intent because Google isn't going back with that.

Improve Your Content In A Way That Helps Your Page Achieve its 'Purpose' Better

The PURPOSE of A Page Is Extremely Important To Google Quality Raters.

Is the purpose of a page to "*sell products or services*", "*to entertain*" or " *to share information about a topic*."

MAKE THE PURPOSE OF YOUR PAGE SINGULAR and OBVIOUS to help quality raters and algorithms.

The name of the game in 2018 (if you're not faking everything) is VISITOR SATISFACTION.

If a Google visitor lands on your page - have you satisfied WHY they are there?

How To Optimise Content For The "*Long Click*"

Content quality may influence Google rankings in more than one area, for instance:

Ranking could be based on a '*duration metric':*

> **QUOTE***: "The average duration metric for the particular group of resources can be a statistical measure computed from a data set of measurements of a length of time that elapses between a time that **a given user clicks on a search result included in a search results web page that identifies a resource in the particular group of resources and a time that the given user navigates back to the search results web page***. ...Thus, the user experience can be improved because search results higher in the presentation order will better match the user's informational needs." [High Quality Search Results based on Repeat Clicks and Visit Duration](#)*

Rankings could be based on a '*duration performance score*':

> **QUOTE***: "The **duration performance scores can be used in scoring resources and websites for search operations***. The search operations may **include scoring resources for search results, prioritizing the indexing of websites, suggesting resources or websites, protecting particular resources or websites from demotions, precluding particular resources or websites from promotions***, or other appropriate search operations." [A Panda Patent on Website and Category Visit Durations](#)*

When it comes to rating [user satisfaction](#), there are a few theories doing the rounds at the moment that I think is sensible. Google could be tracking user satisfaction by proxy. When a user uses Google to search for something, [user behaviour](#) from that point on can be a proxy for the relevance and relative quality of the actual SERP.

This was recently leaked from Google itself:

> *"So when search was invented, like when Google was invented many years ago, they wrote heuristics that had figure out what the relationship between a search and the best page for that search was. And those heuristics worked pretty well and continue to work pretty well."*

> *"But Google is now integrating machine learning into that process. So **then training models on when someone clicks on a page and stays on that page, when they go back or when they are trying to figure out exactly on that relationship***. So search is getting better and better and better because of advances in machine learning." Head Google Brain Toronto/Canada via [SERoundtable](#)*

What is a Long Click?

A user clicks a result and spends time on it, sometimes terminating the search.

What is a Short Click?

A user clicks a result and bounces back to the SERP, pogo-sticking between other results until a long click is observed. Google has this information if it wants to use it as a proxy for query satisfaction.

For more on this, I recommend this article on the time to long click.

Optimise Supplementary Content on the Page

Once you have high-quality main content on the page, you need to think about supplementary content and secondary links that help users on their journey of discovery or other website conversion goal.

That content CAN be on links to your own content on other pages, but if you are really helping a user understand a topic - you should be LINKING OUT to other helpful resources e.g. other websites.A website that does not link out to ANY other website could be interpreted accurately to be at least, self-serving. I can't think of a website that is the true end-point of the web.

A website that does not link out to ANY other website could be interpreted accurately to be at least, self-serving. I can't think of a website that is the true end-point of the web.

- TASK - On informational pages, LINK OUT to related pages on other sites AND on other pages on your own website where RELEVANT
- TASK - For e-commerce pages, ADD RELATED PRODUCTS.
- TASK - Create In-depth Content Pieces
- TASK - Keep Content Up to Date, Minimise Ads, Maximise Conversion, Monitor For broken, or redirected links
- TASK - Assign in-depth content to an author with some online authority, or someone with displayable expertise on the subject
- TASK - If running a blog, first, clean it up. To avoid creating pages that might be considered thin content in 6 months, consider planning a wider content strategy. If you publish 30 'thinner' pages about various aspects of a topic, you can then fold all this together in a single topic page centred page helping a user to understand something related to what you sell.

Summary

You don't need only to stick to one topic area on a website. That is a myth.

If you create high-quality pieces of informative content on your website page-to-page, you will rank.

The problem is - not many people are polymaths - and this will be reflected in blog posts that end up too thin to satisfy users and in time, Google, or e-commerce sites that sell everything and have speciality and experience in little of it.

The only focus with any certainty in 2018 is whatever you do, **stay high-quality with content, and avoid creating doorway pages.**

For some sites, that will mean reducing pages on many topics to a few that can be focused on so that you can start to build authority in that subject area.

Your website is an entity. You are an entity. Explore concepts. Don't repeat stuff. Be succinct.

You are what keywords are on your pages.

You rank as a result of others rating your writing.

Avoid toxic visitors. A page must meet its purpose well, without manipulation. Do people stay and interact with your page or do they go back to Google and click on other results? A page should be explicit in its purpose and **focus on the user**.

The number 1 'user experience' signal you can manipulate with low risk is *improving* content until it is more useful or better presented than is found on competing pages for variously related keyword phrases.

How To Get Google To Crawl and Index Your Website Fully
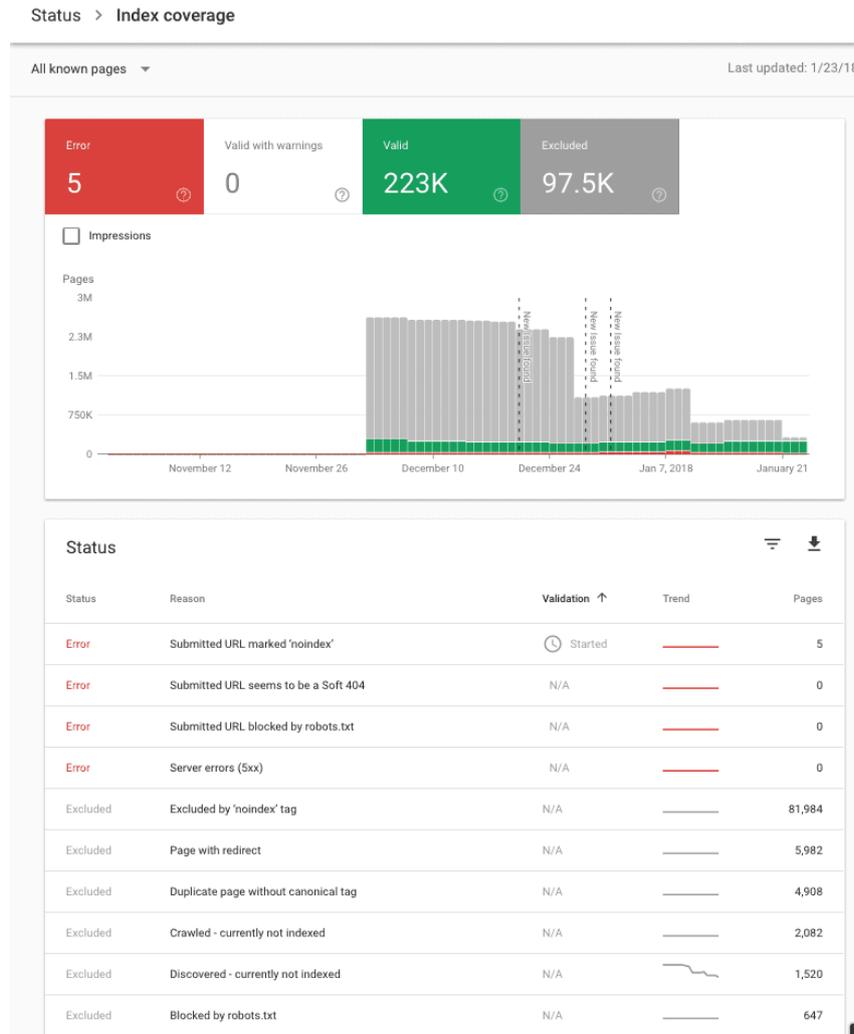
A part of SEO is to make sure Google can crawl your website and index all your primary pages. Google is sometimes picky about what pages on a site it will index.

If you have a website indexation problem and want to get more of your pages indexed on Google, read on.

Check out the new Indexation Report In Google Search Console

This is sure to be an invaluable addition to Google Search Console for some larger sites.

If you submit an XML sitemap file in Search Console, Google will help you better understand why certain pages are not indexed.

As you can see, Google goes to great lengths in 2018 to help you to identify indexation problems on your website, including, in this example:

Status	Reason	Validation Trend	Pages
Error	Submitted URL marked 'noindex'	Started	5
Error	Server errors (5xx)	N/A	0
Error	Submitted URL blocked by robots.txt	N/A	0
Error	Submitted URL seems to be a Soft 404	N/A	0
Excluded	Excluded by 'noindex' tag	N/A	81,984
Excluded	Page with redirect	N/A	5,982
Excluded	Duplicate page without canonical tag	N/A	4,908
Excluded	Crawled - currently not indexed	N/A	2,082
Excluded	Discovered - currently not indexed	N/A	1,520
Excluded	Blocked by robots.txt	N/A	647
Excluded	Alternate page with proper canonical tag	N/A	201
Excluded	Soft 404	N/A	147
Excluded	Submitted URL not selected as canonical	N/A	34
Valid	Indexed, not submitted in sitemap	N/A	221,004
Valid	Submitted and indexed	N/A	2,144

Will Google Index every page on Your Website?

No.

> **QUOTE**: "*We never index all known URLs, that's pretty normal. I'd focus on making the site awesome and inspiring, then things usually work out better*". John Mueller, 2018

Some URLs are not that important to Google, some are duplicates, some have conflicting indexation instructions and some pages are low-quality or even spammy.

Read my article on what Google considers low-quality pages.

Does Google crawl an XML sitemap and does it crawl the entire sitemap once it starts?

https://youtu.be/Bo2qthtQTYw?t=28m24s

A question was asked in a recent Google Hangout by someone with a website indexation problem:

> **QUOTE**: "*How often does Google crawl an XML sitemap and does it crawl the entire sitemap once it starts*?"

An XML sitemap is inclusive, not exclusive.

> **QUOTE**: "*sitemap files do help us to better understand a website and to better figure out which parts of website need to be recrawled so specifically if you have information in like the last modification date that really helps us to figure out which of these pages are new or have changed that need to be recrawled.*" John Mueller Google

There will be URLs on your site that are not in the XML sitemap that Google will crawl and index. There are URLs in your XML sitemap that Google will probably crawl and not index.

> **QUOTE**: "*if you're looking at the sitemap files in search console you have information on how many URLs are indexed from those sitemap files the important part there is that we look at exactly the URL that you list in the sitemap file so if we index the URL with a different parameter or with different upper or lower case or a slash at the end or not then all of that matters for for that segment file so that that might be an issue to kind of look out there*" John Mueller 2017

and

QUOTE: *"in the sitemap file we primarily focus on the last modification date so that's that's what we're looking for there that's where we see that we've crawled this page two days ago and today it has changed therefore we should recrawl it today we don't use priority and we don't use change frequency in the sitemap file at least at the moment with regards to crawling so I wouldn't focus too much on priority and change frequency but really on the more factual last modification date information an RSS feed is also a good idea with RSS you can use pubsubhubbub which is a way of getting your updates even faster to Google so using pubsubhubbub is probably the fastest way to to get content where you're regularly changing things on your site and you want to get that into Google as quickly as possible an RSS feed with pubsubhubbub is is a really fantastic way to get that done."* John Mueller Google [2017](#)

and

QUOTE: "*so a [XML] sitemap file helps us to understand which URLs on your website are new or have recently changed so in the second file you can specify a last modification date and with that we can kind of judge as we need to crawl next to make sure that we're not like behind in keeping up with your website's indexing so if you have an existing website and you submit a sitemap file and the sitemap file has realistic change dates on there then in an ideal case we would look at that and say oh we know about most of these URLs and here are a handful of URLs that we don't know about so we'll go off and crawl those URLs it's not the case that submitting a sitemap file will replace our normal crawling it essentially justadds to the existing crawling that we do*". **John Mueller 2017**

Can I put my sitemap file into separate smaller files? **Yes**.

QUOTE: "*Another thing that sometimes helps is to split the sitemap files up into separate chunks of logical chunks for your website so that you understand more where pages are not being indexed and then you can see are the products not being indexed or the categories not being indexed and then you can drill down more and more and figure out where where there might be problems that said we don't guarantee indexing so just because a sitemap file has a bunch of URLs and it doesn't mean that we will index all of them that's still kind of something to keep in mind but obviously you can try to narrow things down a little bit and see where where you could kind of improve that situation.*" John Mueller, 2017

The URL is naturally important in an XML sitemap. The only other XML sitemap you should really be concerned about is the DATE LAST MODIFIED. You can ignore the FREQUENCY attribute:

QUOTE - "*we don't use that at all ....no we only use the date in the [XML] sitemap file* " John Mueller, Google [2017](#)

How many times a week is the index status data in search console updated?

It is updated 2-3 times a week.

Should you use sitemaps with last modified for expired content?

Expired pages can be picked up quickly if you use a last modified date

Why Doesn't Google Crawl and Index My Website XML Sitemap Fully?

> **QUOTE**: "*So we don't guarantee indexing. So **just because something is in a sitemap file isn't a guarantee that we will actually index it**. It might be completely normal that we don't actually index all of those pages... that even if you do everything technically correct there's no guarantee that we will actually index everything.*" John Mueller, 2018

I have looked at a lot of sites with such indexation problems. In my experience the most common reasons for poor indexation levels of a sitemap on a site with thousands or millions of pages are:

1. doorway pages
2. thin pages

Pages that are almost guaranteed to get into Google's index have one common feature: They have unique content on them.

In short, if you are building doorway type pages without unique content on them, Google won't index them all properly. If you are sloppy, and also produce thin pages on the site, Google won't exactly reward that behaviour either.

> **QUOTE**: "*with regards to product pages not being indexed in Google again that's something where **maybe that's essentially just working as intended where we just don't index everything from them from any website**. I think for most websites if you go into the sitemap section or the indexing section you'll see that we index just a fraction of all of the content on the website. I think for any non-trivial sized website indexing all of the content would be a very big exception and I would be very surprised to see that happen.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

Google rewards (in 2018) a smaller site with fat, in-depth pages a lot more than a larger site with millions of thinner pages.

Perhaps Google can work out how much unique text a particular site has on it and weighs that score with the number of pages the site produces. Who knows.

The important takeaway is 'Why would Google let millions of your autogenerated pages rank, anyway?"

> **QUOTE**: "*really create something useful for users in individual locations maybe you do have some something unique that you can add there that makes it more than just a doorway page*". John Mueller, Google 2017

Most links in your XML Sitemap should be Canonical and not redirects

Google wants final destination URLs and not links that redirect to some other location.

> **QUOTE**: "*in general especially, for landing pages.... we do recommend to use the final destination URL in the sitemap file a part of the reason for that is so that we can report explicitly on those URLs in search console .... and you can look at the indexing information just for that sitemap file and that's based on the exact URLs that you have there. The other reason we recommend doing that is that we use a sitemaps URLs as a part of trying to understand which URL should be the canonical for a piece of content so that is the URL that we should show in the search results and if the sitemap file says one URL and it redirects to a different URL then you're giving us kind of conflicting information." John Mueller, Google 2018*" John Mueller, Google 2018

and

> **QUOTE**: "*actually the date the last modification date of some of these URLs because with that date we can figure out do we need to recall these URLS to figure out what is new or what is different on these URLs or are these old URLs that basically we might already know about we decided not to index so what I would recommend doing there is creating an XML sitemap file with the dates with the last modification dates just to make sure that Google has all of the information that it can get.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

Read my article on managing redirects properly on a site.

Sometime non-canonical versions of your URLs are indexed instead

> **QUOTE**: "*I would recommend doing there is double-checking the URLs themselves and double-checking how they're actually indexed in Google so it might be that we don't actually index the URL as you listed in the sitemap file but rather a slightly different version that is perhaps linked in within your website so like I mentioned before the trailing slash is very common or ducked up the non WWW(version) - all of those are technically different URLs and we wouldn't count that for the sitemap as being indexed if we index it with a slightly different URL.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

It is 'normal' for Google NOT to index all the pages on your site.

What Is the maximum size limit of an XML Sitemap?

> **QUOTE**: "*We support 50 megabytes for a sitemap file, but not everyone else supports 50 megabytes. Therefore, we currently just recommend sticking to the 10 megabyte limit,*" John Mueller, Google 2014

Google wants to know when primary page content is updated, not when supplementary page content is modified – "*if the content significantly changes, that's relevant. If the content, the primary content, doesn't change,then I wouldn't update it.*"

Why Is The Number Of Indexed URLs in Search Console Dropping?

Google has probably worked out you are creating doorway-type pages with no-added-value.

> **QUOTE***: "The Panda algorithm may continue to show such a site for more specific and highly-relevant queries, but its visibility will be reduced for queries where the site owner's benefit is disproportionate to the user's benefit. Google*

Page Quality & Site Quality

Google measures quality on a per page basis and also look at the site overall (with site-wide quality being affected by the quality of individual pages.

Do no indexed pages have an impact on site quality?

Only indexable pages have an impact on site quality. You can use a noindex on low-quality pages if page quality cannot be improved.

> **QUOTE**: "*If you if you have a website and you realize you have low-quality content on this website somewhere then primarily of course we'd recommend increasing the quality of the content if you really can't do that if there's just so much content there that you can't really adjust yourself if it's user-generated content all of these things then there there might be reasons where you'd say okay I'll use a no index for the moment to make sure that this doesn't affect the bigger picture of my website.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

You should only be applying noindex to pages as a temporary measure at best.

Google wants you to improve the content that is indexed to improve your quality scores:

Gary Illyes
@methode

Follow

@jenstar We don't recommend removing content in general for Panda, rather add more highQ stuff @shendison

12:44 AM - 8 Oct 2015

↩   ⇄ 12   ♥ 13

Read my article on how to create seo-friendly content.

What Are The Low-Quality Signals Google Looks For?

> **QUOTE**: "*Low quality pages are unsatisfying or lacking in some element that prevents them from achieving their purpose well. These pages lack expertise or are not very trustworthy/authoritative for the purpose of the page.*" Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

These include but are not limited to:

1. Lots of spammy comments
2. Low-quality content that lacks EAT signal (Expertise + Authority + Trust")
3. NO Added Value for users
4. Poor page design
5. Malicious harmful or deceptive practices detected
6. Negative reputation
7. Auto-generated content
8. No website contact information
9. Fakery or INACCURATE information
10. Untrustworthy
11. Website not maintained
12. Pages just created to link to others
13. Pages lack purpose
14. Keyword stuffing
15. Inadequate customer service pages
16. Sites that use practices Google doesn't want you to use

Pages can get a neutral rating too.

Pages that have "*Nothing wrong, but nothing special*" about them don't "*display characteristics associated with a High rating*" and puts you in the middle ground – probably not a sensible place to be a year or so down the line.

Read my article on [what are low-quality pages to Google](#).

What Are The High-Quality Characteristics of a Web Page?

> **QUOTE**: "*High quality pages are satisfying and achieve their purpose well.*" Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017

The following are examples of what Google calls 'high-quality characteristics' of a page and should be remembered:

- "*A satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality*" main content (MC)
- Copyright notifications up to date
- Functional page design
- Page author has Topical Authority
- High-Quality Main Content
- Positive Reputation or expertise of website or author (Google yourself)
- Very helpful SUPPLEMENTARY content "*which improves the user experience.*"
- Trustworthy
- Google wants to reward 'expertise' and 'everyday expertise' or experience so make this clear (Author Box?)
- Accurate information
- Ads can be at the top of your page as long as it does not distract from the main content on the page
- Highly satisfying website contact information
- Customised and very helpful 404 error pages
- Awards
- Evidence of expertise
- Attention to detail

If Google can detect investment in time and labour on your site – there are indications that they will reward you for this (or at least – you won't be affected when others are, meaning you rise in Google SERPs when others fall).

Read my article on [what are high-quality pages to Google](#).

Help Google Help You Index More Pages

Minimise the production of doorway-type pages you produce on your site

You will need another content strategy. If you are forced to employ these type of pages, you need to do it in a better way.

> **QUOTE**: "*if you have a handful of locations and you have unique valuable content to provide for those individual locations I think providing that on your website is perfectly fine if you have hundreds of locations then putting out separate landing pages for every city or every region is almost more like creating a bunch of doorway pages so that's something I really discourage*" John Mueller Google 2017

Are you making 'doorway pages' and don't even know it? See my notes on what are doorway pages to Google.

Minimise the production of thin pages you produce on your site

You will need to check how sloppy your CMS is. Make sure it does not inadvertently produce pages with little to no unique content on them (especially if you have ads on them).

> **QUOTE**: "John says to avoid lots of "*just automatically generated*" pages and "*if these are pages that are not automatically generated, then I wouldn't see that as web spam.*" Conversely then "*automatically generated*" content = web spam? It is evident Googlebot expects to see a well formed 404 if no page exists at a url." Shaun Anderson, Hobo

Read my article on what are thin pages to Google.

Have your site produce proper 404 pages

This will prevent the automatic creation of thin pages and could help prevent against negative SEO attacks, too.

> **QUOTE:** "*Tell visitors clearly that the page they're looking for can't be found*. *Use language that is friendly and inviting. Make sure your 404 page uses the same look and feel (including navigation) as the rest of your site. Consider adding links to your most popular articles or posts, as well as a link to your site's home page. Think about providing a way for users to report a broken link. No matter how beautiful and useful your custom 404 page, you probably don't want it to appear in Google search results. In order to prevent 404 pages from being indexed by Google and other search engines, make sure that your webserver returns an actual 404 HTTP status code when a missing page is requested.*" Google, 2018

For more information, read how to create useful 404 pages.

Block your internal search function on your site.

> **QUOTE***: "Use the robots.txt file on your web server to manage your crawling budget by preventing crawling of infinite spaces such as search result pages. Keep your robots.txt file up to date.*" Google (2017)

This will prevent the automatic creation of thin pages and could help prevent against negative SEO attacks, too. Read a beginner's guide to Robot.txt files.

Use canonicals properly

> **QUOTE**: "*If your site contains multiple pages with largely identical content, there are a number of ways you can indicate your preferred URL to Google. (This is called "canonicalization".)*" Google

This will help consolidate signals in the correct pages. See how to use canonical link elements properly.

Use proper pagination control on paginated sets of pages

This will help with duplicate content issues.

> **QUOTE**: "*Use* `rel="next"` *and* `rel="prev"` *links to indicate the relationship between component URLs. This markup provides a strong hint to Google that you would like us to treat these pages as a logical sequence, thus consolidating their linking properties and usually sending searchers to the first page. Google*

Read my article on how to use pagination properly.

Use proper indexation control on pages

Some pages your site may require to have a meta noindex on them.

Identify your primary content assets and improve them instead of optimising low-quality pages (which will get slapped in a future algorithm update).

Read my article on how to use the meta robots noindex tag.

How To Deal With Search Console Indexation Report Errors

How to deal with "Submitted URL marked 'noindex'" and "Excluded by 'noindex' tag" notifications in Search console

Why are you creating pages and asking Google to noindex them? There is always a better way than to noindex pages. Review the pages you are making and check they comply with Google guidelines e.g. are not doorway pages. Check if technically there is a better way to handle noindexed pages.

How to handle "Page with redirect" notifications in Search console

Why do you have URLs in your sitemap that are redirects? This is not ideal. Review and remove the redirects from the sitemap.

What does " *Indexed, not submitted in sitemap*" mean in Search Console?
It means Google has crawled your site and found more pages than you have in your sitemap. Depending on the number of pages indicated, this could be a non-issue or a critical issue. Make sure you know the type of pages you are attempting to get indexed, the page types your CMS produces.

How to deal with "Duplicate page without canonical tag", "Alternate page with proper canonical tag" and "Submitted URL not selected as canonical" notifications in Search console

Review how you use canonical link elements throughout the site.

How To Deal with "Crawl anomaly" notifications in search console:

> **QUOTE**: "*An unspecified anomaly occurred when fetching this URL. This could mean a 4xx- or 5xx-level response code; **try fetching the page using Fetch as Google to see if it encounters any fetch issues**. The page was not indexed.*" Google, 2018

How To Deal With Crawled - currently not indexed:

QUOTE: "The page was crawled by Google, but not indexed. It may or may not be indexed in the future; no need to resubmit this URL for crawling."

These could be problematic. You should check to see if pages you want indexed are included in this list of URLs. If they are, this could be indicative of a page quality issue.

Read this official article a full list of new features in the Google Search Console Indexation Report,

What Is Javascript?

JavaScript is one of the most popular programming languages used to develop websites today:

> QUOTE: "*Alongside HTML and CSS, JavaScript is one of the three core technologies of World Wide Web content production. It is used to make web pages interactive and provide online programs, including video games. **The majority of websites employ it, and all modern web browsers support it** without the need for plug-ins by means of a built-in JavaScript engine. Each of the many JavaScript engines represents a different implementation of JavaScript, all based on the ECMAScript specification, with some engines not supporting the spec fully, and with many engines supporting additional features beyond ECMA.*" Wikipedia, 2018

The Challenges with Javascript & SEO

The first important challenge to note about Javascript is that not every search engine treats JS the way Google does. The sensible thing is to keep things as simple as possible for maximum effectiveness.

> QUOTE*: "Keep in mind that other search engines and web services accessing your content might not support JavaScript at all"* John Mueller, Google 2016

Heres's a handy infographic that appeared on Moz mid-2017 that details the issues other search engines such as Bing, Yahoo, Ask, AOL, DuckDuckGo, Yandex and Baidu have with certain Javascript frameworks such as React JS, Angular JS, Angular2 JS, Ember, Jquery, Knockout and Plain JS:

Other search engine guidelines like Bing specifically state in their webmaster guidelines:

> **QUOTE**: "*The technology used on your website can sometimes prevent Bingbot from being able to find your content. Rich media (Flash, JavaScript, etc.) can lead to Bing not being able to crawl through navigation, or not see content embedded in a webpage. To avoid any issue, you should consider implementing a down-level experience which includes the same content elements and links as your rich version does. This will allow anyone (Bingbot) without rich media enabled to see and interact with your website.*

> - ***Rich media warnings*** *– don't bury links in Javascript/flash/Silverlight;keep content out of these as well*
> - ***Down-level experience enhances discoverability*** *– avoid housing content inside Flash or JavaScript – these block crawlers form finding the content*" " Bing Webmaster Guidelines, 2018

Most other search engines advise webmasters to not block JS and CSS files, much like Google does.

Can Google Render Pages Created Using JavaScript?

Yes. Google can render pages created with Javascript, as long as you do not block Google from accessing important JS or CSS files:

> **QUOTE**: *"As long as you're not blocking Googlebot from crawling your JavaScript or CSS files,* **we are generally able to render and understand your web pages like modern browsers***. To reflect this improvement, we recently updated our technical Webmaster Guidelines to* **recommend against disallowing Googlebot from crawling your site's CSS or JS files.***"* Google 2015

and

> *QUOTE: "If resources like JavaScript or CSS in separate files are blocked (say, with* robots.txt*) so that Googlebot can't retrieve them, our indexing systems won't be able to see your site like an average user. We recommend allowing Googlebot to retrieve JavaScript and CSS so that your content can be indexed better. This is especially important for mobile websites, where external resources like CSS and JavaScript help our algorithms understand that the pages are optimized for mobile." Google, 2014*

and

> **QUOTE***: "Ensure that all required resources (including JavaScript* files / frameworks*, server responses, 3rd-party APIs, etc) aren't blocked by robots.txt. The Fetch and Render tool will list blocked resources discovered. If resources are uncontrollably blocked by robots.txt (e.g., 3rd-party APIs) or otherwise temporarily unavailable, ensure that your client-side code fails gracefully." John Mueller, Google 2016*

and

> **QUOTE***: "It's always a good idea to have your site degrade gracefully*. This will help users enjoy your content even if their browser doesn't have compatible JavaScript implementations. It will also help visitors with JavaScript disabled or off, as well as search engines that can't execute JavaScript yet." Google, [2014]

and

> **QUOTE**: "The web has moved from plain HTML - as an SEO you can embrace that. Learn from JS devs & share SEO knowledge with them. JS's not going away."John Mueller [2017]

How Google Handles "*titles, description & robots meta tags, structured data, and other meta-data*" created With Javascript?

You can create page titles and other metadata using Javascript:

> **QUOTE**: "*Google supports the use of JavaScript to provide titles, description & robots meta tags, structured data, and other meta-data. When using AMP, the AMP HTML page must be static as required by the spec, but the associated web page can be built using JS/PWA techniques. Remember to use a sitemap file with correct "lastmod" dates for signaling changes on your website.*" John Mueller,Google [2016]

and

> **QUOTE**: "*Use Chrome's Inspect Element to check the page's title and description meta tag, any robots meta tag, and other meta data. Also check that any structured data is available on the rendered page.*" Google, [2017]

You can read my notes on optimising page titles and meta tags SEO for Google,

How Does Google Handle Navigation Links That Are CREATED Using Javascript?

> *QUOTE: "we see your content more like modern Web browsers, include the external resources, execute JavaScript and apply CSS." Google [2014]*

As long as Google can render it properly, Google will follow any links presented to it:

> **QUOTE**: "If you're using javascript to create an <a> element on the page then you can choose to add nofollow or not to that <a> element at the dom and that's what we will respect when it comes to kind of passing signals"

and

See my notes on optimising internal links for Google and how to get Google to index my website properly.

Does A Javascript Link Pass PageRank just like any other link?

How Does Google Handle A Link FOUND In Javascript CODE On A WebPage?

Google will follow links found in JS code on a page, but not pass any signals through them like Pagerank:

TIP: Use "*"feature detection" & "progressive enhancement" techniques."* To Make Your Site Accessible To All Users

How Does Google Handle Content Which Becomes Visible When Clicking A Button?

This is going to depend on IF the content is actually on the page, or is called from another page using some sort of action the user must perform that calls some JS function.

> **QUOTE**: "Take for example Wikipedia on your mobile phone they'll have different sections and then if you click they expand those sections and there are good usability reasons for doing that so as long as you're not trying to stuff something in in a hidden way that's deceptive or trying to you know distort the rankings as long as you're just doing that for users I think you'll be in good shape." Matt Cutts, Google 2013

How Google Treats Text Hidden But Revealed Using Javascript & CSS e.g. '*Read More*' Links

As long as the text is available on that page when Google crawls it, Google can see the text and use it in relevance calculations. How Google treats this type of content can be different on mobile sites and desktop sites.

> **QUOTE**: "I think we've been doing something similar for quite awhile now, where **if we can recognize that the content is actually hidden, then we'll just try to discount it in a little bit**. So that we kind of see that it's still there, but the user doesn't see it. Therefore, it's probably not something that's critical for this page. So that includes, like, the Click to Expand. That includes the tab UIs, where you have all kinds of content hidden away in tabs, those kind of things. So if you want that content really indexed, I'd make sure it's visible for the users when they go to that page. From our point of view, it's always a tricky problem when we send a user to a page where we know this content is actually hidden. Because the user will see perhaps the content in the snippet, they'll click through the page, and say, well, I don't see where this information is on this page. I feel kind of almost misled to click on this to actually get in there." John Mueller, Google 2014

Google has historically assigned more 'weight' in terms of *relevance* to pages where the text is completely visible to the user. Many designers use tabs and "read more" links to effectively hide text from being visible on loading a page.

This is probably not ideal from a Google ranking point of view.

Some independent tests have apparently confirmed this:

> **QUOTE**: *"The experiment **clearly demonstrates Google's preference for visible text.** The experiment showed Google algorithms clearly gives less weight to text hidden via CSS and JavaScript"* RebootOnline 2017

With Google switching to a mobile-first index, where it will use signals it detects on the mobile version of your site, you can expect text hidden in tabs to carry weight in 2018 from a ranking point of view:

> **QUOTE**: "*So with the mobile first indexing will index the the mobile version of the page. And on the mobile version of the page it can be that you have these kind of tabs and folders and things like that, which we will still treat as normal content on the page even. Even if it is hidden on the initial view. **So on desktop it's something where we think if it's really important content it should be visible. On mobile it's it's a bit trickier obviously.** I think if it's a critical contact it should be visible but that's more kind of between you and your users in the end.*" John Mueller, Google [2017](#)

On the subject of 'read more' links in general, some Google spokespeople have chimed in thus:

> **QUOTE**: "*oh how I hate those. WHY WHY WHY would a site want to hide their content*?" John Mueller, Google [2017](#)

and

> **QUOTE**: "*I've never understood the rationale behind that. Is it generating more money? Or why are people doing that?*" Gary Illyes, Google [2017](#)

There are some benefits for some sites to use '*read more*' links, but I usually shy away from using them on desktop websites.

How Google Treats Content Loaded from Another Page Using JS

Sidenote: Hidden text

- Search prefers "primary" / visible content

- Loaded but hidden: devalued

- **Event-based loading** (click, hover, scroll): not seen at all, **not indexed/ranked**

↓ **Click to read more** ↓

If a user needs to click to load content that is pulled from another page, from my own observations, Google will not index that content as a part of the original page IF the content itself is not on the page indexed.

This has been confirmed by Google in a 2016 presentation Google's John Mueller gave:

> QUOTE: "*If you have something that's not even loaded by default that requires an event some kind of interaction with the user then that's something we know we might not pick up at all because Googlebot isn't going to go around and click on various parts of your site just to see if anything new happens so if you have something that you have to click on like like this, click to read more and then when someone clicks on this actually there's an ajax call that pulls in the content and displays it then that's something we probably won't be able to use for indexing at all so if this is important content for you again move it to the visible part of the page.*" John Mueller, Google 2016

How Google Handles Javascript Redirects

I believe this works as a 301 redirect when used immediately redirect users without delay:

> **QUOTE***: "Using JavaScript to redirect users can be a legitimate practice. For example, if you redirect users to an internal page once they're logged in, you can use JavaScript to do so. When examining JavaScript or other redirect methods to ensure your site adheres to our guidelines, consider the intent. Keep in mind that 301 redirects are best when moving your site, but you could use a JavaScript redirect for this purpose if you don't have access to your website's server." Google Webmaster Guidelines* [2018](#)

and

> **QUOTE**: "*If you have a hash in the URL or hash-bang in the URL then you need to do that redirect on the client-side with JavaScript and for that it's really important from our point of view that you do that redirect as quickly as possible that you don't have interstitials there that you don't have a timeout that does the redirect after a certain period of time because what might then happen is we don't recognize that redirect and we might say oh this is actually the content on the page and we will pick up the interstitial for indexing.*" John Mueller, Google [2016](#)

Using Javascript for common redirects (moving the content on one page to another url) is not the most efficient way of moving content or sites. See my page on [using 301 redirects](#) for more on this.

Can I Use Javascript To Hide "*Affiliate Links*"?

Probably not a good idea:

> **QUOTE**: "*You're hiding links from Googlebot. Personally, I wouldn't recommend doing that as it makes it harder to properly understand the relevance of your website. Ultimately, that's your choice, just as it would be our choice to review those practices as potential attempts to hide content & links. What's the advantage for the user*?" John Mueller, Google [2010](#)

TIP: Mobile-First Indexing: Ensure Your Mobile Sites and Desktop Sites Are Equivalent

When Google renders the page they can crawl links included by JavaScript on mobile pages. However, Google wouldn't see these links if they exist on desktop pages but cannot be found on mobile pages.

> **QUOTE**: "*If we can crawl the JavaScript and render the page with those links from the JavaScript and that's that's okay for us on the other hand if the JavaScript doesn't actually include the links to those other pages when it's kind of accessed with a mobile device then we wouldn't have any links to the other pages so that would be kind of a loss*" John Mueller, Google 2017

See my notes on the Google mobile-first index.

WARNING: Some Javascript Based Sites Can be "*Slow and inefficient*"

"**QUOTE**: *Sometimes* **things don't go perfectly during rendering, which may negatively impact search results for your site**." *Google*

and

QUOTE: *"What should be a relatively simple process, where the crawler finds your site's pages and the indexer then evaluates them, becomes a cumbersome endeavour. On JavaScript sites where most or all internal links are not part of the HTML source code, in the first instance the crawler finds only a limited set of URLs. It then has to wait for the indexer to render these pages and extract new URLs, which the crawler then looks at and sends to the indexer. And so on, and so forth. With such JavaScript-based websites, crawling and indexing becomes slow and inefficient." Barry Adams* [stateofdigital](#)

and

QUOTE: *"Limit the number of embedded resources, in* particular *the number of JavaScript files and server responses required to render your page. A high number of required URLs can result in timeouts & rendering without these resources being available (e.g., some JavaScript files might not be loaded). Use reasonable HTTP caching directives." Google*

and

QUOTE: *"If your web server is unable to handle the volume of crawl requests for resources, it may have a negative impact on our capability to render your pages. If you'd like to ensure that your pages can be rendered by Google, make sure your servers are able to handle crawl requests for resources.* **Sometimes the JavaScript may be too complex or arcane for us to execute, in which case we can't render the page fully and accurately***. Some JavaScript removes content from the page rather than adding, which prevents us from indexing the content." Google*

How To Test If Google Can Render Your Pages Properly

> *QUOTE: "Use Search Console's Fetch and Render tool to test how Googlebot sees your pages. Note that this tool doesn't support "#!" or "#" URLs. Avoid using "#" in URLs (outside of "#!"). Googlebot rarely indexes URLs with "#" in them. Use "normal" URLs with path/filename/query-parameters instead, consider using the History API for navigation."* John Mueller,Google [2016](#)

Google can crawl and execute some types and configurations of javascript:

> **QUOTE**: *"Rendering on Google Search: http://bit.ly/2wffmpL - web rendering is based on Chrome 41; use feature detection, polyfills, and log errors!" Ilya Grigorik* [2017](#)

and

> **QUOTE**: *"Googlebot uses a web rendering service (WRS) that is based on Chrome 41 (M41). Generally, WRS supports the same web platform features and capabilities that the Chrome version it uses — for a full list refer to chromestatus.com, or use the compare function on caniuse.com."* [Google](#)

Will Google Properly Render Single Page Application and Execute Ajax Calls?

Yes. Google **will** properly render Single Page Applications (SPA):

> **QUOTE**: "*Googlebot run the Javascript on the page and the Ajax calls are properly executed.*" Lucamug test [2017](#)

Fetch As Google

Check how your site renders to Google using the Fetch & Render Tool that Google provides as part of Google Search Console.

It is important that what Google (Googlebot) sees is (exactly) what a visitor would see if they visit your site. Blocking Google can sometimes result in a real ranking problem for websites.

Google renders your web pages as part of their web ranking process, so **ENSURE you do not block any important elements of your website that impact how a user or Googlebot would see your pages**.

If Google has problems accessing particular parts of your website, it will tell you in Search Console.

Tip: The fetch and render tool is also a great way to submit your website and new content to Google for indexing so that the page may appear in Google search results.

Tip: Ensure you use canonical link elements properly.

Check How Google Views Your Desktop Site

Google search console will give you information on this:

Check How Google Views Your Smartphone Site

Google search console will give you information on this:

How To Troubleshoot Javascript Issues On Your Site Using Google Chrome Developer Tools

1. Download Chrome 41.
2. Visit the website
3. Open Chrome Developer Tools.
4. Click "Console" and look for errors in red
5. Check for blocked resources in Google Search Console
6. See how your page renders using "Fetch As Google" tool

Google also has a Javascript help group to discuss problems you may have.

Google Webmaster Guidelines

You do not pay to get into search engines, and you don't necessarily need to even submit your site to them, but you do need to know their 'rules' - especially rules lay down by Google.

Note; these rules for inclusion can and do change. These rules are official advice from Google to Webmasters, and Google is really cracking down on 'low-quality' techniques that influence their rankings in 2018.

I recently had cause to revisit the ever-expanding '*Google Webmaster Guidelines*' documentation.

Below is a somewhat ordered table of the top 60 or so **OFFICIAL** Google Webmaster Guidelines documents you should be aware of in 2018 IF you want to ensure the long-term '*health*' of your site in Google that leads to top rankings and more traffic.

Out with the 60 documents below, I have separated this important upcoming change in Google – namely 'Mobile First Indexing' – that is going to be **very important in the near future** and your site **NEEDS to be prepared** for this big upcoming change.

Once you've read the above link, see below for the most important website ranking guidelines published by Google:

Rank	Google Guideline or Support Documents	Source
1	Guidance on building high-quality websites	View
2	Main webmaster guidelines	View
3	Quality Rater's Guide March 14, 2017 (and previous years!)	View
4	Link Schemes Warning	View
5	Disavow Backlinks Warning	View
6	Auto-Generated Content Warning	View
7	Affiliate Programs Advice	View
8	Report spam, paid links, or malware	View
9	Reconsideration requests	View
10	List of common manual actions	View
11	Use rel="nofollow" for specific links	View

Rank	Google Guideline or Support Documents	Source
12	Adding A Site To Google	View
13	Browser Compatibility Advice	View
14	URL Structure Advice	View
15	Learn about sitemaps	View
16	Duplicate Content	View
17	Use canonical URLs	View
18	Indicate paginated content	View
19	Change page URLs with 301 redirects	View
20	How Google Deals With AJAX	View
21	Review your page titles and snippets	View
22	Meta tags that Google understands	View
23	Image Publishing Guidelines	View
24	Video best practices	View
25	Flash and other rich media files	View
26	Learn about robots.txt files	View
27	Create useful 404 pages	View
28	Introduction to Structured Data	View
29	Mark Up Your Content Items	View
30	Schema Guidelines	View
31	Keyword Stuffing Warnings	View
32	Cloaking Warning	View
33	Sneaky Redirects Warning	View
34	Hidden Text & Links Warnings	View
35	Doorway Pages Warnings	View

Rank	Google Guideline or Support Documents	Source
36	Scraped Content Warnings	View
37	Malicious Behaviour Warnings	View
38	Hacking Warnings	View
39	Switching to Https	View
40	User-Generated Spam Warnings	View
41	Social Engineering	View
42	Malware and unwanted software	View
43	Developing Mobile Sites	View
44	Sneaky mobile redirects	View
45	Developing mobile-friendly pages	View
46	Use HTTP "Accept" header for mobile	View
47	Feature phone sitemaps	View
48	Multi-regional and multilingual sites	View
49	Use hreflang for language and regional URLs	View
50	Use a sitemap to indicate alternate language	View
51	Locale-aware crawling by Googlebot	View
52	Remove information from Google	View
53	Move your site (no URL changes)	View
54	Move your site (URL changes)	View
55	How Google crawls, and serves results	View
56	Ranking In Google	View
57	Search Engine Optimisation	View
58	Steps to a Google-friendly site	View
59	Webmaster FAQ	View

Rank	Google Guideline or Support Documents	Source
60	Check your site's search performance	[View](#)

Introduction To Keyword Research

Keyword research is one of the most important aspects of SEO. But do you know what makes it so significant?
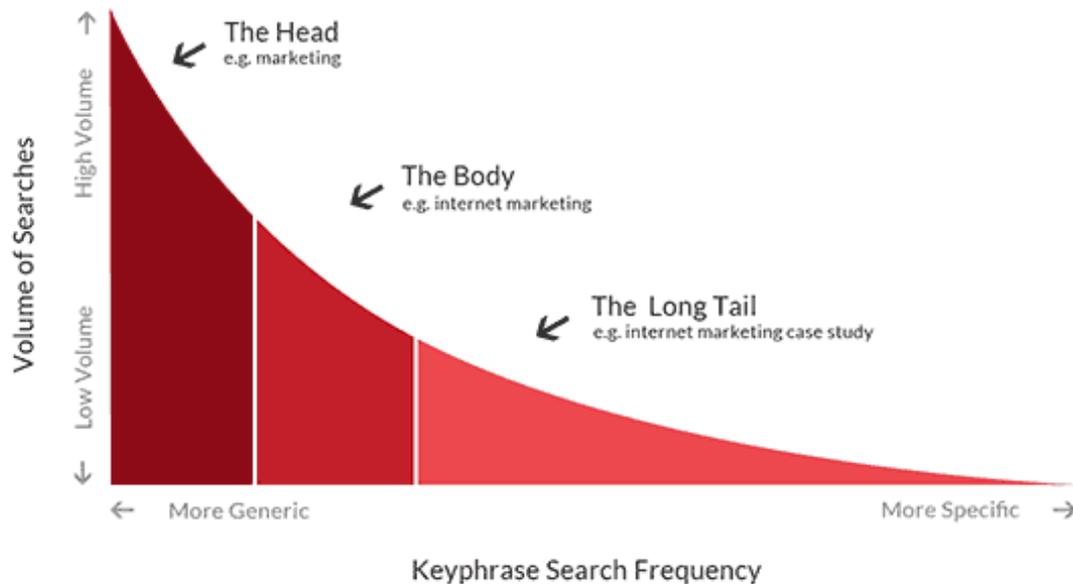
Your customers use various words and phrases to find products or services you offer.

But how customers search for your service could – will – be different from what you'd use to describe it, in text content on your website.

Where you think you sell "cool widgets", your customers might be searching Google for "funny widgets".

And customers won't find you unless YOU optimise for the phrases THEY use.

Sometimes – you might not rank AT ALL in Google for a specific phrase HIGHLY relevant to your business – just because you do not have ONE specific word on the page. In some SERPs, you will not rank UNLESS you have the specific keyword phrase on the page.

Just adding 'original content' is not enough and it won't ever be. As long as a search engine displays organic results based on KEYWORDS and LINKS and the search engine is intent on manipulating results on a very granular level like this (and MANY other ways) – a search engine optimiser can always get more traffic out of any page over time.

That's what keyword research helps you discover – the very keywords your audience is going to use to find you. It can help you find out about what topics to write about, or what keywords to add to a primary topic page you already have on your website.

You can use *Relevance Optimisation* it to steal a competitor's rankings, traffic and sales, if you have the Quality Score – Expertise, Authority & Trust – to match them in Google SERPs.

And in this guide for beginners, I'll quickly show you how to do it using SEMRush (Affiliate) – a popular tool used by professional SEO all over the world.

In this guide you'll learn:

- the most important keyword research terms.
- the difference between various keyword types.
- how SEMRush – an all-in-one online marketing suite of tools works.
- a Step by step guide through the keyword research process.
- how to use SEMRush to find relevant keywords.
- how to establish keyword difficulty.
- how to use SEMRush to discover keywords your competitors optimise for.

Keyword Research Glossary

Before we begin researching keywords, we need to discuss some of the most common terms you'll come across in this guide. Knowing them will make it easier for you to understand different aspects of the keyword research process.

Knowing them will make it easier for you to understand different aspects of the keyword research process.

1. **Keyword**: A word or string of words user enters into a search engine in order to find relevant information.
2. **Traffic Volume.** The average number of searches a keyword receives in the last 12 months. This metric helps to establish how popular a keyword is.
3. **Organic search.** All search result page listings apart from paid ads.
4. **Paid search.** Paid search engine listings.
5. **Phrase match.** A variation of a keyword that appears when someone searches for an exact keyword or variation of it.
6. **Related keywords.** Different keywords that relate to the original topic you specify in keyword research.
7. **Average CPC.** The average cost of bidding on a paid Adwords ad for a given keyword. It helps to establish how popular but also competitive a keyword is.
8. **Competition Density.** How many advertisers bid for a given keyword. It helps to establish the conversion opportunity per keyword.
9. **Results**: The number of URLs displayed in organic search for a given keyword.

Different types of keywords

If you look closely at how you search, you'll notice that you use different keywords depending on what you're looking for and why.

Sometimes you simply type in a single word into the search box. Other times you ask a question or describe a product in detail.

These different keywords help you in your customer's journey. In general, we divide keywords in two ways.

By keyword length

There are three types of keywords in this group: head, body and the long tail.

Head keywords typically contain a single word describing a topic a searcher's looking for, i.e. "*shoes*". They are generic and often don't discern what the person's really looking for. Even though they receive huge amounts of traffic, they typically offer very little opportunity for conversion.

Body keywords extend the head term with additional information i.e. "*running shoes*" yet can still be quite generic.

Long tail keywords describe what the user's looking for in great detail i.e. "*best running shoes for men*" and are often used by searchers who are looking to buy.

By buying intent

The other way to categorise keywords is by their role in the buying cycle. There are 4 types of keywords in this category:

Informational

Searchers use these keywords to find information and answers to their questions. You can recognise informational keywords by such words and phrases as "*how to*", "*where*", "*when*".

Navigational

Customers typically use these keywords to find a business location or contact details. Often these keywords include just a brand or company's name.

Commercial

These keywords help customer's research and compare solutions before buying them. They might include words like "*best*", "*compare*" etc. (i.e. "*best Kindle cover*", "*compare kindle covers*").

Transactional

The last group is keywords customers would use to find products they want to purchase. These keywords often include terms like "*buy*" or "*cheap*" etc.

Why is keyword intelligence so important?

Being able to recognise different keywords will help you to:

- **Pick better keywords.** A single keyword research can generate hundreds, if not thousands of potential keywords. Not all of them, however, can help you achieve your goals. Being able to distinguish different keyword types will help you pick the phrases that best match what you're trying to achieve.
- **Create better content.** Knowing why customers use certain keywords will help you write better content to deliver to their needs and increase your website's relevancy.

Conducting Keyword Research with SEMrush

In the previous section, we've covered all theoretical information you need to know. Now it's time you learn how keyword research works.

For this process, we're going to use SEMrush (**you get a free trial for 30 days with that link**), an all-in-one suite of digital marketing tools popular among professional SEO. It includes almost every tool you'd need to manage a successful organic online marketing campaign.

Before we begin, if you don't have an SEMrush account yet, go to the site and register for free:

Once you're logged in, use links in the left side column, scroll down to **Keyword Research** section and click **Overview:**
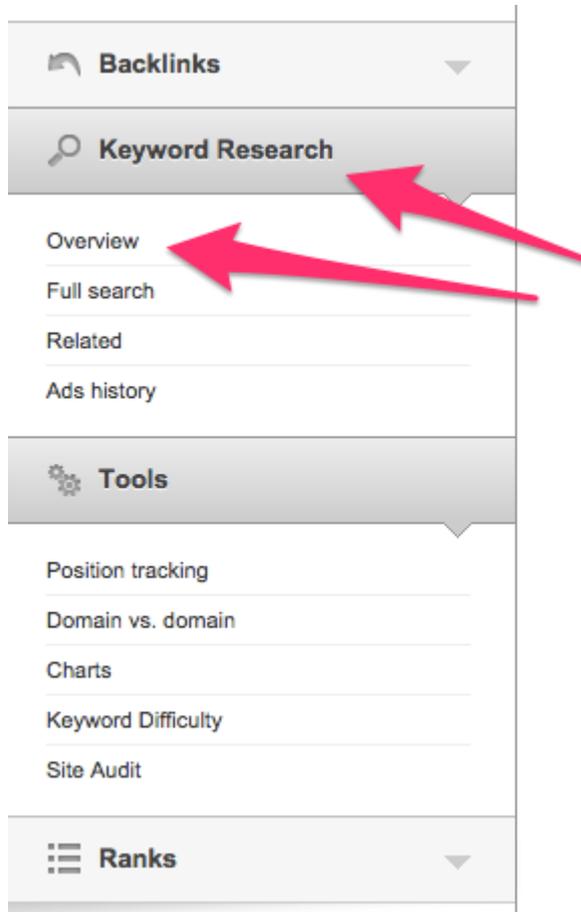
Don't worry if there is nothing displaying on the screen right now. We haven't started the process yet and so the tool has no information to show us.

Let's change that then.

Step 1. Make a list of topics or themes that best describe what you do

To begin, think of any terms or topics describing what your business offers.

When thinking about those topics, put yourself in your customers' shoes. How would they call what you do? Think of your sales interactions, how did your prospects refer to your business or products?

If you run a clothing company, these topics could include "t-shirts" or "hoodies" for instance.

Step 2. Input each of these topics into SEMrush

Your generic topics or themes will serve us as a great starting point to research new keywords.

You'll also have a chance to use SEMrush now.

Go back to the tool, in the left side column navigate to **Keyword Research** section and click **Overview.**

Then type one of your topics into the search box on the top of the screen and hit SEARCH.

Note: You will notice two more options inside the search box, one says (keyword) and the other lists a region (US in this case but it DOES have a good UK database I work with more):

The first of those options denotes the tool currently being used – keyword research. Don't click it off, as doing so will reset the tool.

The other allows you to specify what regional search engine you want to see the results from. Even though you reside in one country it doesn't mean that you can't retrieve search data from another. This option allows you to specify that.

Once your hit SEARCH the tool will display an overview of various data on a theme you've selected. Following the example of a clothing company, I'm going to use "t-shirts" as my theme.
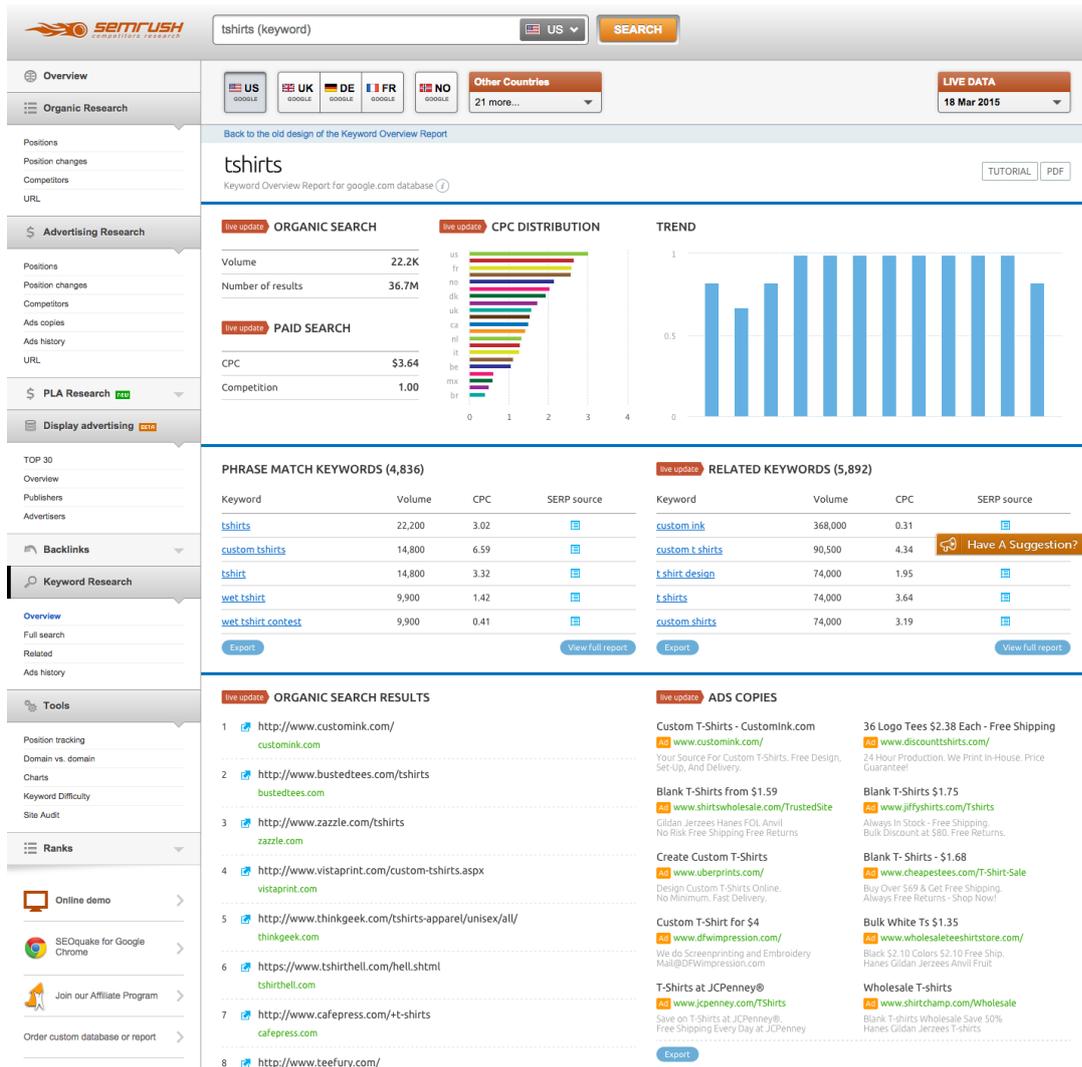
(A keyword overview report in SEMrush)

Let's look at the information that important to keyword research in the report:

Organic Search. This section displays data relating to organic traffic this keyword receives. Volume indicates average monthly number of searches for this keyword. The number of results shows how many URLs compete for this keyword.

Paid Search. This section presents the paid traffic data – cost per click and competitor density.

Trend indicates the monthly distribution of search volume for the keyword. This metric is ideal if you want to establish keyword seasonality.

Phrase match keywords and Related Keywords

These two reports are the heart and soul of keyword research.

Phrase match keyword shows variations of the main keyword you specified that customers might use to search for a product or service.

Related keywords report shows different keywords that relate to the main keyword in one way or another.

We're going to be working on those two reports.

Click on "View full report" under Phrase match keyword report.

This will give you access to a full list of phrase match keywords SEMrush had found for the topic. In my case, the tool generated 4836 results. Not bad!

As you can see, apart from the list of keywords the tool also displays information that can help me better assess those keywords:

- Traffic Volume.
- Average CPC.
- Competition Density.
- Of Results.
- Trend

It also lets me see the cached SERP (search engine results) page for each keyword.

By analysing this data you can assess which keywords might be worth targeting your SEO efforts.

Now do the same for Related Keywords.

Click on Related in the left sidebar, under Keyword Research section.
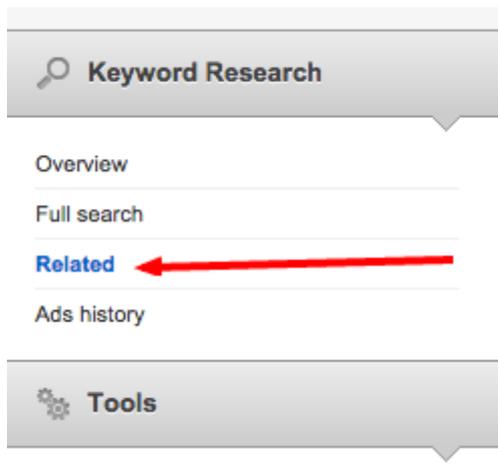
The tool will now display a list of keywords related to your main topic.

(Related keywords report in SEMrush)

Notice that this time these keywords are not as closely tied to the main keyword. For instance, my search for "*t-shirts*" also revealed such phrases as "*custom ink*" or "*make your own shirt*".

That's because related keywords report widens the search and displays not only closely relevant but also related terms. This report is useful when you're trying to spread out your content and attract new audiences to the site. With the Related Keywords report you can identify keywords you could use to build related content on.

Repeat the whole process for every other topic you listed to find other sets of relevant keywords.

But having those long lists of keywords is one thing. Figuring out which ones to try and rank for is another.

Figuring out which ones to try and rank for is another.

Here are few other reports that can help you with that.

Step 3. How To Work Out Keyword Difficulty

SEMrush's Keyword Difficulty tool allows you to find out how difficult it would be to seize a competitor's positions in search rankings for a given keyword. This is all relative, and a propriety calculation by SEMRUSH – it's never going to be exact – so use the data it provides accordingly.

The tool analyses other domains ranking for a keyword and gives a % estimate of how difficult a keyword is to rank for.

Here's the result of analysing a few t-shirts related keywords.

Keyword Difficulty 1 - 14 (14)					Export
Keyword	Difficulty, %	Volume	Results	Trend	SERP source
tshirts	78.45	22,200	34,700,000		
custom tshirts	74.45	14,800	111,000,000		
tshirt	79.16	14,800	38,800,000		
funny tshirts	70.34	8,100	124,000,000		
tshirt design	76.71	8,100	168,000,000		
custom tshirt	74.70	5,400	104,000,000		Have A Suggestion?
tshirt printing	73.28	4,400	41,400,000		
tshirt dress	86.54	4,400	8,090,000		
tshirt hell	87.32	4,400	731,000		
tshirt quilt	66.57	3,600	2,290,000		
cheap tshirts	71.65	3,600	106,000,000		
design a tshirt	75.85	3,600	9,350,000		
tshirt maker	76.57	3,600	54,400,000		
cool tshirts	74.09	2,900	151,000,000		
					Export

As you can see, these keywords are quite competitive. Don't get discouraged by such results. Instead, use it to estimate and plan your SEO strategy ahead.

To use the tool, go to **Tools** section in the left side column and click on **Keyword Difficulty**.
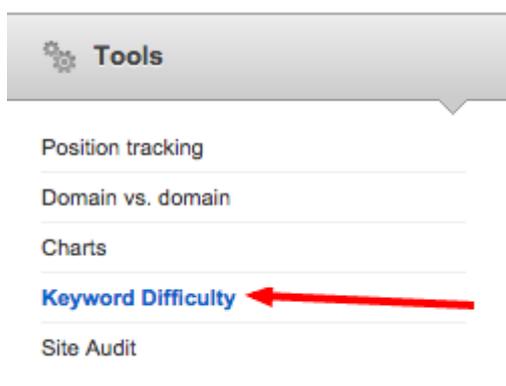
Type one or more keywords into the Keyword Difficulty one keyword per line and click "Show difficulty"
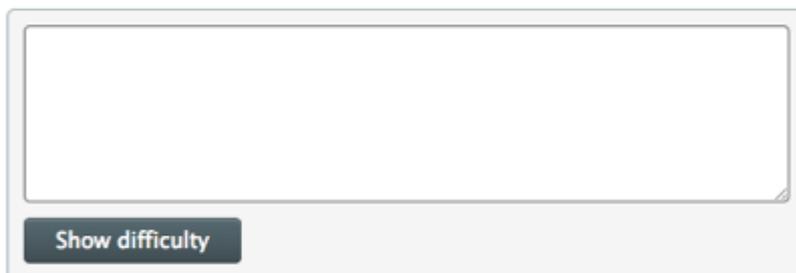
The tool will output a report similar to the one shown above to help you quickly establish your keywords' competitiveness.

Step 4. How To Research Competitors' Keywords

SEMrush also allows you to take a peek at keywords your competitors use and even compare phrases you optimise for with them.

SEMrush includes a tool called Domain vs. Domain which basically allows comparing up to 5 domains to see common and unique keywords for each domain.

To use it, navigate to **Tools** section of the sidebar column and then click **Domain vs. Domain**.
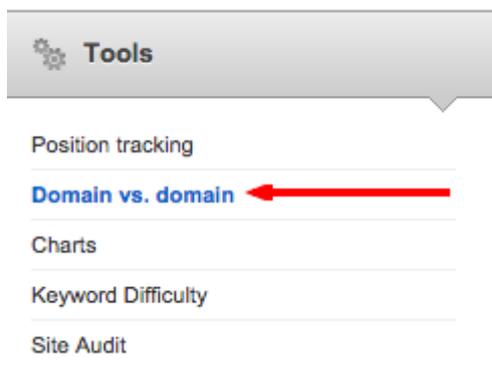
In the tool, specify up to 5 domains, select Organic, Paid or PLA (Product Listing Ads) to choose what data to compare and click GO.
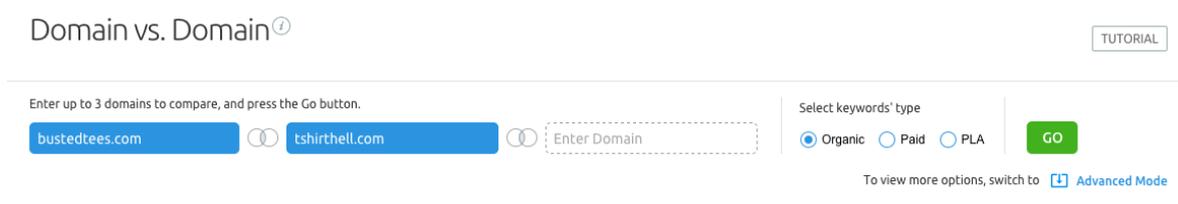
Since we're researching organic keywords, I recommend that while studying this tutorial you select Organic traffic.

In my example, I'm comparing two t-shirts companies – bustedtees.com and tshirthell.com.

The tool displays results in two ways:

It shows a table view of keywords domains you specified rank for, along with additional information.

From this report, you can tell current ranking position each domain sports per keyword along with typical data on each keyword (volume, average CPC etc.)

But it's the other method of displaying data that's interesting – the chart view.

The chart view

This report uses a Venn diagram to present common and unique keywords per domain. Here is how it looks for the two t-shirt stores I specified earlier on.
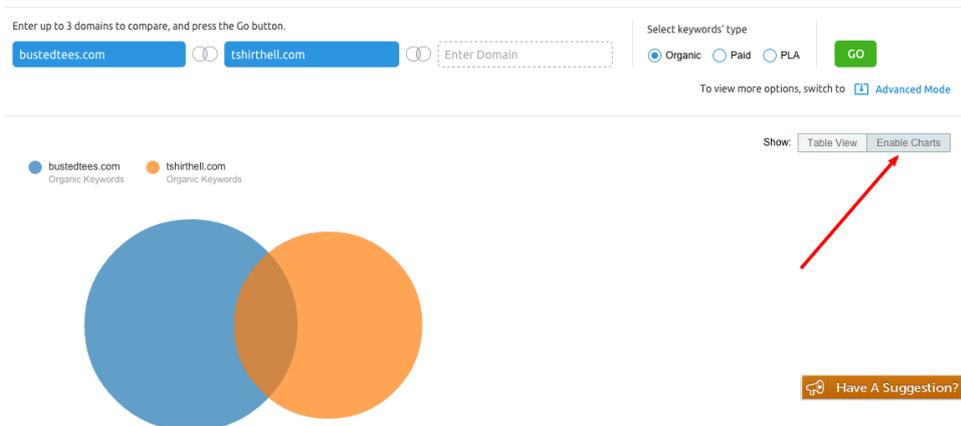
From this diagram you can instantly see that bustedtees.com is optimised for more keywords than Tshirthell. What's more, you can also see that both domains share only a small number of common keywords.

Comparing your domain to competitors this way can quickly reveal great keyword opportunities to avail of.

Bonus. Rank Tracking In SEMRush

Selecting keywords and optimising pages for them is just part of the process. You should however also track your rankings to measure your success.

In SEMrush you can use a Position Tracking tool to monitor where your domain ranks for keywords you optimise for.

To launch the tool, go to **Tools** section of the sidebar again and click **Position Tracking**.
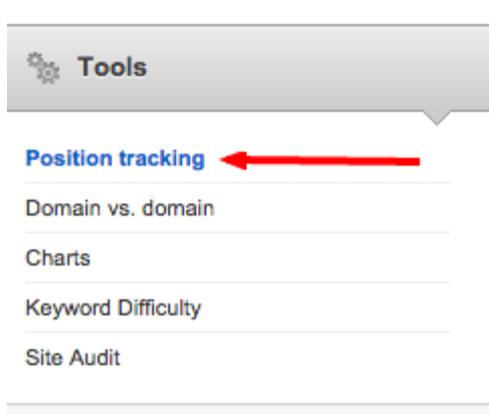
Follow simple steps to set up a campaign, include keywords you want to track and the tool will report on your current rankings for those keywords every day.

And, that's it!

That's essentially the entire keyword research process with [SEMrush](#) (**AFF – Free 30 Day trial**) in a nutshell.

What you do with that keyword data, how you interpret it and how you map and deploy it to your pages is what separates the wheat from the chaff in Google's search engine results pages.

I've been a customer and affiliate of SemRush for many years now – it's always a good place to have a quick look at how a website is performing against its competitors.

If you are a small business owner looking to improve the visibility of your website in Google – click here.

The amount of data SEMrush has collected is vast and impressive. Part of that data set includes access to **historical website keyword ranking data** (available to subscribers signed up to the SEMRush GURU package – *Disclosure: I am affiliate and customer of SEMrush).*

How To Drive Traffic To Your Website Using Keyword Research

Is your page not ranking on Google for the right keywords? Are you spending too much money on expensive and under-performing advertising in Google Adwords? Are you looking for a cost-effective way you can drive more traffic to your website?

Well, your organic website traffic levels will still be very much influenced by the actual keywords that are on your web pages – regardless if Google has somewhat moved past *simply* matching keyword searches to keywords found on pages.

Keyword research (and proper analysis of it) is perhaps *THE* single most important aspect of any online marketing campaign (SEO or PPC) – and a pillar of successful search marketing.

Done professionally – keyword research is STILL the simplest way to drive more traffic to your website.

Identifying the most valuable and most popular relevant keywords from the beginning of any internet marketing campaign is the first step to ranking success across many marketing channels (including search engine optimisation (SEO) and Google Adwords marketing).

In short:

1. In competitive niches, the quantity and quality of *independent* backlinks pointing to your website *from* other websites are largely responsible for WHERE your page ranks in Google.
2. The occurrence, frequency, and prominence of keywords and key phrases in text on any page are VERY LARGELY responsible for WHAT you rank for in Google.
3. The occurrence, frequency, and prominence of similar keywords on OTHER pages of your site, relative to the page you *want* to rank, can also have a positive or negative impact when it comes to ranking your target page.

Keyword research for SEO is about finding the best keywords to put, essentially, in your Page Title Element and Primary Page Content text.

It is about optimising the CORRECT page on your site to make it as RELEVANT as possible so it can rank for as MANY RELATED long tail queries as possible that meet a visitor's INTENT.

An Introduction To Keyword Research For Beginners

US-based **Aaron Wall is quite probably my favourite SEO blogger** and has been since long before I started blogging myself (back in 2007).

Back in October 2009 I pinged Aaron and asked him if he would take me through the **basics of keyword research** for those visitors to my blog who are just starting out, and he helped

me create a quick beginner's guide to keyword research, as it was one area not covered to any great extent in my SEO blog.

I've been tidying up my blog post-Google Panda in recent years but I kept Aaron's advice as it is an excellent start for beginners and still as relevant today as it was then.

The first step in any SEO campaign is to find out WHICH keywords you can profit from ranking for….

 # EDIT – Please note all links in this post are placed by myself. Shaun

What Is Keyword Research? A Definition:

In the offline world companies spend millions of dollars doing market research to try to understand market demand and market opportunities.

Well with **search consumers are telling marketers exactly what they are looking for – through the use of keywords**.

And there are tons of free and paid SEO tools out there to help you understand your market. In addition to those types of tools lots of other data points can be included as part of your strategy, including:

1. data from your web analytics tools (if you already have a website)
2. running test AdWords campaigns (to buy data and exposure directly from Google…and they have a broad match option where if you bid on auto insurance it will match queries like cheap Detroit auto insurance)
3. competitive research tools (to get a basic idea of what is working for the established competition)
4. customer interactions and feedback
5. mining and monitoring forums and question and answer type websites (to find common issues and areas of opportunity)

Just how important is it in the mix for a successful SEO campaign?

Keywords are huge.

Without doing keyword research most projects don't create much traction (unless they happen to be something surprisingly original and/or viral and/or of amazing value).

If you are one of those remarkable businesses that to some degree creates a new category (say an iPhone) then SEO is not critical to success.

But those types of businesses are rare.

The truth is most businesses are pretty much average, or a little bit away from it, with a couple unique specialties and/or marketing hooks.

SEO helps you discover and cater to existing market demand and helps you attach your business to growing trends through linguistics.

You can think of SEO implications for everything from what you name your business, which domain names you buy, how you name your content, which page titles you use, and the on page variation you work into page content.

Keyword research is not a destination, but an iterative process.

For large authority sites that are well trusted you do not have to be perfect to compete and build a business, but **if your site is thin or new in a saturated field then keyword research is absolutely crucial**.

And even if your website is well trusted then using effective keyword strategy helps create what essentially amounts to free profits and expanded business margins because the cost of additional relevant search exposure is cheap, but the returns can be great because the traffic is so targeted.

And since a number one ranking in Google gets many multiples of traffic that a #3 or #4 ranking would get, the additional returns of improving rankings typically far exceed the cost of doing so (at least for now, but as more people figure this out the margins will shrink to more normal levels.)

Where do you start?

What kind of ambitions do you have? Are they matched by an equivalent budget?

How can you differentiate yourself from competing businesses?

Are there any other assets (market data, domain names, business contacts, etc.) you can leverage to help build your new project?

Does it make sense to start out overtly commercial, or is there an informational approach that can help you gain traction quicker?

I recently saw a new credit card site launching off of the idea of an industry hate site "credit cards will ruin your life".

After they build link equity they can add the same stuff that all the other thin affiliate websites have, but remain different AND well linked to.

Once you get the basic business and marketing strategy down then you can start to feel out the market for ideas as to how broad or narrow to make your website and start mapping out some of your keyword strategy against URLs.

And if you are uncertain about an idea I am a big fan of launching a blog and participating in the market and seeing what you can do to find holes in the market, build social capital, build

links, and build an audience – in short, build leverage…once you have link equity you can spend it any way you like (well almost).

And (especially if you are in a small market with limited search data) before you spend lots of money on building your full site and link building it makes sense to run a test campaign on AdWords and build from that data.

Doing so can save you a lot of money in the long run and that is one of the reasons my wife was so eager to start a blog about PPC.

Her first few campaigns really informed the SEO strategy and she fell in love with the near instantaneous feedback that AdWords offers.

What does the research involve?

Keyword research can be done in many different stages of the SEO process – everything from domain name selection, to planning out an initial site map, to working it into the day to day content creation process for editorial staff of periodical content producers.

And you can use your conversion, ranking, and traffic data to help you discover

- new topics to write about
- ways to better optimize your existing site and strategy
- anchor text to target when link building

Keyword research helps define everything from what site hosts the content, to the page title, right on through to what anchor text to use when cross linking into hot news.

Google has the best overall keyword data because of their huge search market share. Due to that selective and random filtering of Google's data, it also makes it important to use other keyword research tools to help fill in the gaps.

In addition, many search engines recommend search queries to searchers via search suggest options that drop down from the search box.

Such search suggest tools are typically driven by search query volume with popular keyword variations rising to the top.

How much research do you do on a project?

It depends on how serious of a commitment the project is. Sometimes we put up test sites that are start off far from perfect and then iteratively improve and reinvest in the ones that perform the best.

If we know a site is going to be core to our overall strategy I wouldn't be against using 10 different keyword tools to create a monster list of terms, and then run that list through the Google AdWords API to get a bit more data about each. (*EDIT – Shaun – That's how I do it, too.*)

On one site I know we ended up making a list of 100,000+ keywords, sorted by value, and then started checking off the relevant keywords.

Do the keywords change as the project progresses?

Yes and no.

Meaning as your site gains more link authority you will be able to rank better for broader keywords that you might not have ranked for right off the start.

BUT that does not mean that you should have avoided targeting those keywords off the start.

Instead I look for ways to target easier keywords that also help me target harder higher traffic keywords. For example, if I aim to rank a page for "best credit cards" then that page should also be able to rank well (eventually) for broader keywords like "credit cards."

You can think of your keyword traffic profile as a bit of a curve (by how competitive the query is and the number of keywords in the search query).

This type of traffic distribution curve starts off for new sites far to the right (low competition keywords with few matches in the search index that are thus easy to rank for based on on-page optimization, often with many words in each search query) and then as a site builds link authority and domain authority that curve moves left, because you are able to compete for some of the more competitive keywords … which often have their results determined more based on links-based metrics.

Can you give me an example how you would research and analyse a specific niche – the steps you'd normally take?

Everything is custom based on if a site exists or is brand new.

And if it exists how much authority does the site have? How much revenue does it have?

There is not really a set normal.

Sometimes while doing keyword research I come to the conclusion that the costs of ranking are beyond the potential risk-adjusted returns.

Other times there is a hole in the market that is somewhat small or large. Depending on assets and resources (and how the project compares to our other sites) we might have vastly different approaches.

How would you deploy your research in 3 areas – on page, on site, and in links?

As far as on page optimization goes, in the past it was all about repetition. That changed around the end of 2003, with the Google Florida update.

Now it is more about making sure the page has the keyword in the title and maybe sprinkled a bit about the page content, but also that there is adequate usage of keyword modifiers, variation in word order, and variation in plurality. Rather than worrying about the perfect keyword density try to write a fairly natural sounding page (as though you knew nothing about SEO), and then maybe go back to some keyword research tools and look at some competing pages for keyword modifiers and alternate word forms that you can try to naturally work into the copy of the page and headings on the page.

As far as links go, it is smart to use some variation in those as well. Though the exact amount need depends in part on site authority (large authoritative sites can generally be far more aggressive than smaller lesser trusted websites can).

The risk of being too aggressive is that you can get your page filtered out (if, say, you have thousands of links and they all use the exact same link anchor text). (see Google Penguin Update)

There is not a yes/no exact science that says do xyz across the board, but generally if you want to improve the ranking of a specific page then pointing targeted link anchor text at that page is generally one of the best ways to do so. (EDIT – Shaun – More risky in 2018 because of 'unnatural link' penalties).

But there is also a rising tides lift all boats effect to where if you get lots of links into any section of your website that will also help other parts of your site rank better – so sometimes it makes sense to create content around linking opportunities rather than just trying to build links into an unremarkable commercial web page.

Is there anything people should avoid when compiling their data?

I already sort of brushed off keyword density.

In addition, many people worry about KEI or other such measures of competition, but as stated above, **even if a keyword is competitive it is often still worth creating a page about**

it which happens to target it AND keywords that contain it + other modifiers (i.e. best credit cards for credit cards).

Don't look for any keyword tool to be perfect or exact. Be willing to accept rough ranges and relative volumes rather than expecting anything to be exactly perfect.

A huge portion of search queries (over 25%) are quite rare and have few searches.

Many such words do not appear on public keyword tools (in part due to limited sampling size for 3rd party tools and in part because search engines want advertisers to get into bidding wars on the top keywords rather than buying cheap clicks that nobody else is bidding on).

So there you have it. Keyword research for beginners from somebody who knows what he's on about.

Make sure you visit Aaron at SEO Book – it's (still) one of my regular destinations and subscribing to his feed should be a pre-requisite if you do SEO in any shape or form.

The Long Tail

Here's some interesting analysis from one of Aaron's links above:
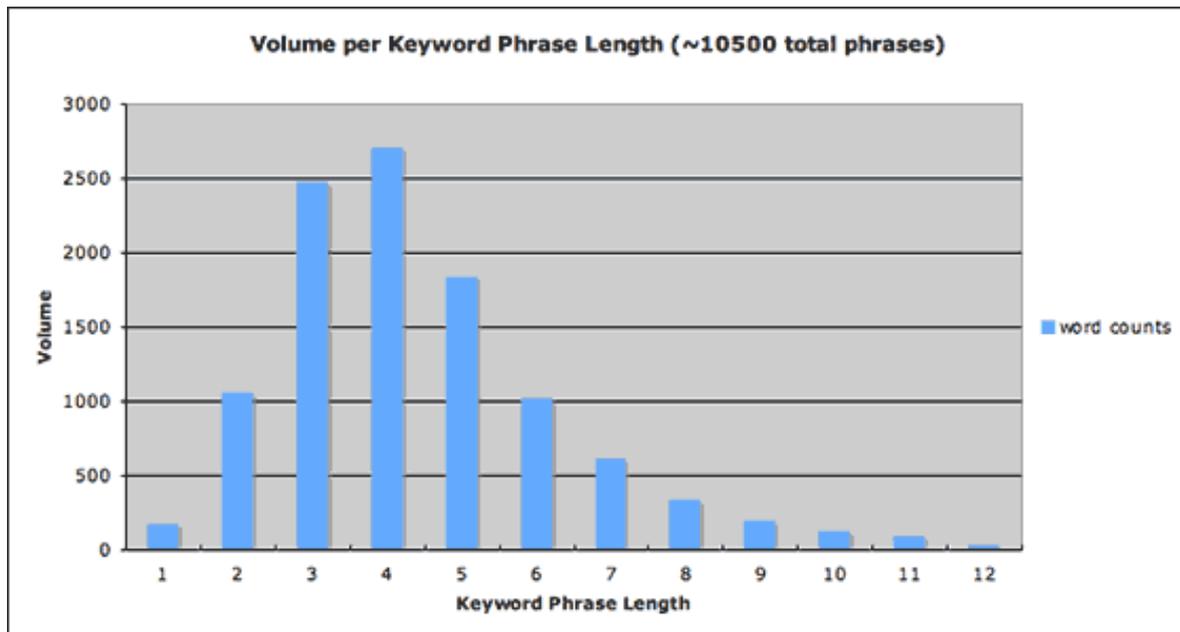
Looking at other long tail studies, I already know broad keyword terms appear to receive the most traffic.

However, the really important point to note here is that we've got **~70% of total keyword traffic going to phrases 4 terms or greater**, with the remainder going to one to three term phrases.

So really, it's more accurate to say that the first one or two head term lengths a website receives doesn't really have the most volume, as the traditional long tail chart depicts – *it's actually around* **3-5 words per keyword phrase** *that make up the sweet spot in terms of highest volume per website*.

Of course results may vary depending on the type of website and size, but I'm betting on average you'd get close to the results I came up with.

Keyword Research Is VITAL

How Vital?

Well, site authority aside, a large part of optimising ANY page simply involves putting keywords on it. Specific keywords. In specific places. In specific order.

Even on a granular level – **NOT having one exact LETTER on the page can mean you are 100% irrelevant for Google** – and it's always been that way.

It is how Google filters and orders results.

Here's an IMPORTANT observation that more accurately highlights this phenomenon in the wild;

Hobo is a SEO Company in Scotland. We're on-site SEO largely. We try and make sites better. We operate in Greenock. We don't promise the earth. Passionate about SEO.

That text above is 30 words. Cut and paste the above into Google (or just go here). You'll see; we have a 100% relevance with this search as all the words are on the page.
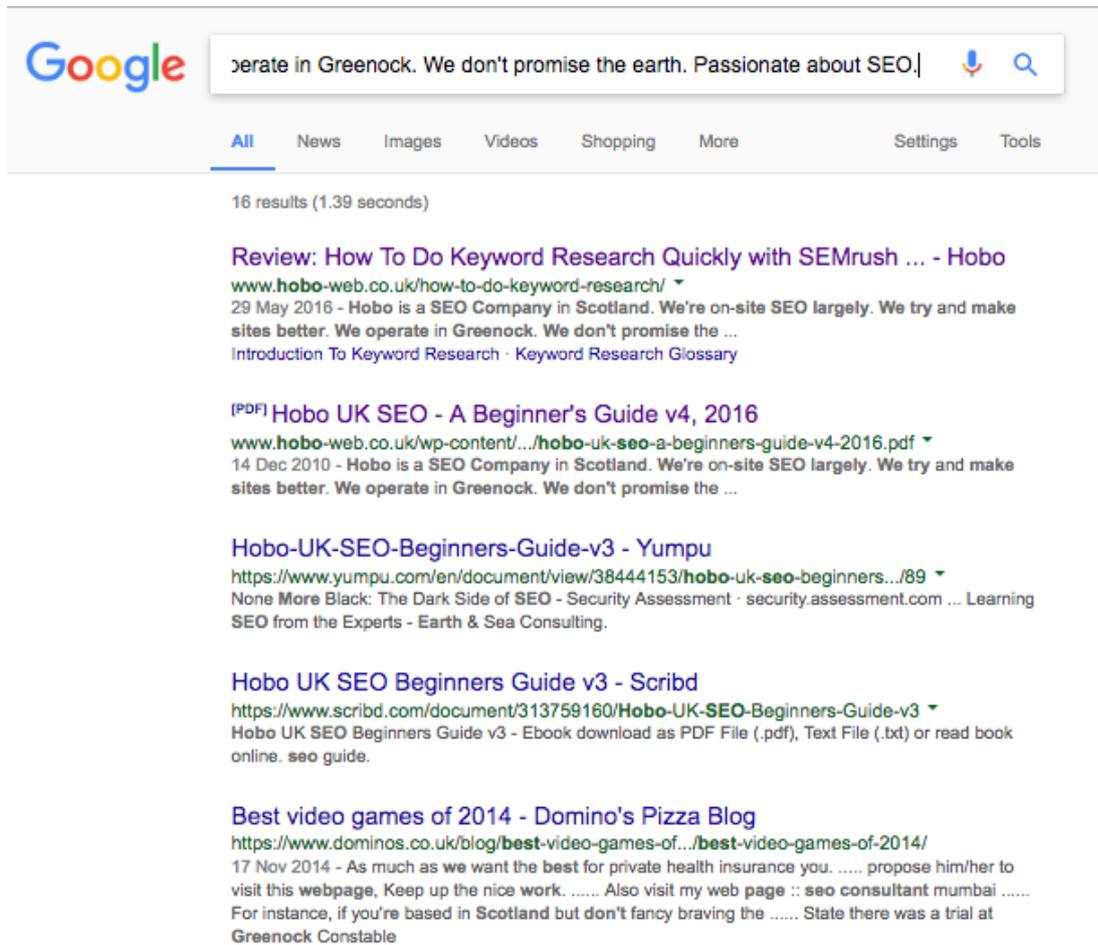
Now do the same search but add a letter (YES – one single letter!) to the search, or a word that is not on that page (or in links pointing to this page like this). Here I added one letter.

Google   rate in Greenock. We don't promise the earth. Passionate about SEO. z

All   News   Images   Videos   Shopping   More   Settings   Tools

12 results (1.34 seconds)

Best video games of 2014 - Domino's Pizza Blog
https://www.dominos.co.uk/blog/**best**-video-games-of-.../**best**-video-games-of-2014/
17 Nov 2014 - As much as **we** want the **best** for private health insurance you. ..... propose him/her to
visit this **webpage**, Keep up the nice **work**. ...... Also visit my web **page** :: **seo consultant** mumbai ......
For instance, if you're based in **Scotland** but **don't** fancy braving the ...... State there was a trial at
Greenock Constable

Epic Speeches - SeoRafa
https://www.**seo**rafa.com/epic-speeches/
5 Sep 2014 - I also **have** a special place in my heart for those speeches that manage to persuade you
with ... **We don't** want to hate and despise one another.

5 Key Points For Choosing A Good Web Designer - Seo Australia
seo-australia.org/uncategorized/5-key-points-for-choosing-a-good-web-designer/
12 Mar 2013 - Everyone knows that a good **website** is very important in today's ... that **make promises**
that they can't keep, provide **websites** that **don't** ... process is **creating** a product that fits your vision of
the **company** ... **promises** anything **more** than this, is either overpromising or doesn't ... 5) **Passionate**
About the Web.

BookLibrary - Universidade Federal Fluminense
uff.br/dalicenca/index.php?option=com_booklibrary&task=view&catid=0...
2013-04-26 12:33:39, Anonymous, 0. Fourteen percent of the individuals **were** using orthotics for
flatfeet. http://ritahendriani.x10.mx/groups/ralph-lauren-uk/ ...

BookLibrary - UFF
uff.br/dalicenca/index.php?option=com_booklibrary&task=view&id=375...
2013-04-26 12:33:39, Anonymous, 0. Fourteen percent of the individuals **were** using orthotics for
flatfeet. http://ritahendriani.x10.mx/groups/ralph-lauren-uk/ ...

….Google consistently (over 7 years I think) **fails to return the page specifically relevant to that search phrase**, even though it has thirty of the keywords, all lined up next to each other (surely) a possible relevant match that Google clearly fails to return.

Google has worked like that, before and after 'Hummingbird', for many many years, and still does, evidently.

Always put the exact keyword phrases you want to rank for on a page. Even in 2018.

Here's another observation:

<u>NEAR RELEVANCY</u> and <u>EXACT MATCH RELEVANCY</u>

This is an observation about traffic declines and ranking fluctuations in Google SERPs. This is an opportunity that can be detected on your site with some rank data to hand.

Traffic can decline and rankings can fluctuate for a multitude of reasons, but here's one reason that I haven't seen anyone talk about.

It is no secret that Google creates Everflux its SERPs in various ways from the obvious (from high topical relevance and, for instance, multiple indexes served by multiple data centres) to the less obvious (location and site quality).

Google also rotates through data centres where your site does not feature AT ALL because you do not have one word on the page. That is – '**data centre 1′ has you at no2** – and **'data centre 2' has you not in top 100**.

Look at this image:
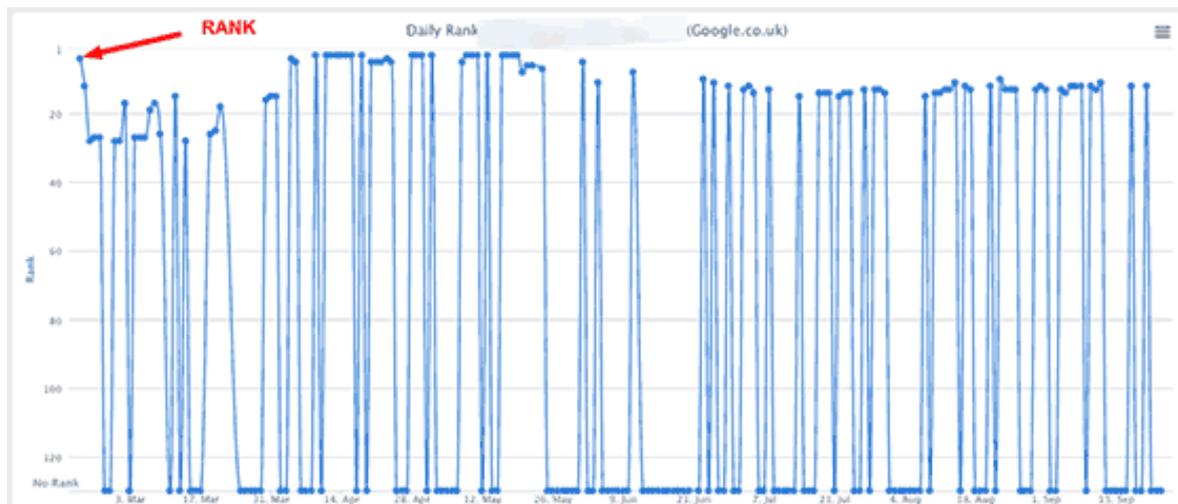
ABOVE is a snapshot of the performance of a 4-word keyword phrase, one of a selection of 'secondary' terms I was interested in.

I track these type of keywords to understand a little about what's going on at Google on a granular level (note – I don't test for these, I find them).

If you understand what is happening, you'll see in the IMAGE ABOVE that – one day I rank for the term – and the next day it does not.

It goes on like that for some months….. sometimes on… sometimes off.

How can you be number 2 in Google in one particular rankings report and nowhere in the next?

Crap rank checker aside, of course, it's because Google regularly makes small modifications about how it publishes it search engine results pages (at a very granular level) – and in this instance – in one set of results I rank (as high as) no2 and in other samplings I took the next day, another VERY SIMILAR index is served where my page does not rank at all.

But – how can that be?

How can you be RELEVANT and NOT RELEVANT if you've made a quality page with a few thousand words on a very clean domain? Especially when the actual phrase Google won't rank you for is EXACTLY what the page is about?

The answer seems to lie in NEAR RELEVANCY and EXACT MATCH RELEVANCY results that Google serves us in certain SERPs – another way Google shakes up its results.

A NEAR MATCH RESULT for a keyword phrase is when the ACTUAL EXACT MATCH KEYWORD PHRASE used in the search query is NOT present on the page but Google has worked out (looking at the UNIQUE keywords used on the page) that the page in question is VERY PROBABLY a 100% match for this query.

SO – the page could be 100% relevant – but because it does not have the EXACT QUERY used by the searcher in the same WORD ORDERING, it becomes 100% NOT RELEVANT on one, or many of Google's set of results.

That's pretty harsh! But… if Google didn't do this – sites with incredible domain authority would rank for even more.

In the past – Google would send publishers a lot of NEAR MATCH longtail traffic – but now that traffic has been squeezed and is constantly squeezed every day – and it looks as though this is one way Google achieves this.

One could say Google is CONSTANTLY eating away at traffic levels that at one time in the past it would have sent you – but also – it's sharing that traffic out amongst other sites – so it's nothing personal – and Google has a lot of competing pages these days to choose from.

We all need to remember that Google has users to satisfy – and delivering pages with the exact match term on them (regardless of your domain authority and very relevant page) could be seen as the safe bet.

Of course – you are never supposed to know about this because Google makes it impossible to find this sort of information in Analytics with most keywords 'not provided'.

The ONLY way you can check this is by physically checking where you rank – and regularly.

Most people only track the main keywords they want to rank for – rather than the longer tail variations of those keyword phrases – which can be where the most likely transactional customer is hiding.

It's an easy fix on a granular level.

Just add the actual keyword phrase to that page, AT LEAST, ONCE and you stabilise rankings across these indexes and double the traffic to that page alone.

It's NEVER been more important or MORE REWARDING (in relative terms!) to do PROPER EXTENSIVE keyword research and know exactly what you want to rank for (and

close NEAR MATCHES you SHOULD RANK FOR) and fill these relevancy gaps in Google results.

Of course – I have tested the fix for this on many occasions I've seen this NEAR RELEVANCY issue impact rankings I can influence…..

Just adding 'original content' is not enough and it won't ever be. As long as a search engine displays organic results based on KEYWORDS and LINKS and the search engine is intent on manipulating its results on a very granular level like this (and MANY other ways) – a search engine optimiser can always get more traffic out of any page.

Does it work this way all the time? Unknown.

What makes a page encounter 'NEAR RELEVANCY' problems?

Well,

1. GOOGLE, depending on how it wants to sort results by RELEVANCY, AUTHORITY or (possibly) USER INTERACTION signals (faked or not). Apparently, *Google RankBrain* has control over all this.
2. YOU, depending on what keywords you have placed in the text copy on that page and (perhaps) how your competing pages on your own site cannibalise your own traffic. I *think* the example above illustrates a site losing a little domain authority or relevance signal that took it below a threshold that if I wanted to stabilise rankings, I needed to have the EXACT term now featuring on the page in question. It may be for a totally unrelated issue – but as with many things in SEO, I'm comfortable just having the fix, for now, as most understanding about how Google works is abstract at best (on a very granular level) as Google is a black box.

When I first encountered this years ago, I was surprised to the extent by which a page can be RELEVANT and NOT RELEVANT over such a granular issue, flipping between data centers, day to day or minute to minute.

Finding these near relevancy gaps is a best practice for me, as it is the surest way to drive more relevant traffic to the site and is all 100% white hat with no risk (unless, of course, you are keyword stuffing the crap out of a low-quality page to begin with!).

It's why I've built a tool to accurately identify this kind of opportunity and manage fixes.

I can tell you now – the impact of this treatment over a 25-page site is not that immediately apparent – but identified over many pages on a much bigger site – it's a guaranteed way of pushing your relevant traffic north by some way in the coming months.

Believe it or not – you get the best out of this strategy by following Google's guidelines to the letter, so we all don't need to go blackhat just yet (unless of course it's a point of principle to take that route in the first place).

How you respond to this kind of activity by Google is to do PROPER IN-DEPTH keyword research and ensure if you think you should rank for ANY term – it really is getting that granular.

Don't rely on your domain authority or near relevancy (even if it is 100%!) to be enough – and certainly don't just pump out unfocused text content for content sake.

Adding One Word To Your Page Can Make All The Difference

The chart above (from last year) illustrates a valuable 4-word term I noticed a relevant page did not rank for – but I thought it should..

This is on page SEO or 'rank modification', that's white hat, 100% Google friendly and never, ever going to cause you a problem with Google.

This 'trick' works with any keyword phrase, on any site, with obvious differing results based on the availability of competing pages in SERPs, and availability of content on your site.

The keyword phrase I am testing rankings for isn't ON the page, and I did NOT add the key phrase…. or in incoming links, or using any technical tricks like redirects or any hidden technique, but as you can see from the chart, rankings seem to be going in the right direction.

You can profit from it if you know a little about how Google works (or seems to work, in many observations, over years, excluding when Google throws you a bone on synonyms).

You can't ever be 100% certain you know how Google works on any level, unless it's data showing you're wrong, of course.)

What did I do to rank number 1 from nowhere for that key phrase?

I added one keyword to the page in plain text because adding the actual 'keyword phrase' itself would have made my text read a bit keyword stuffed for other variations of the main term. It gets interesting if you do that to a lot of pages, and a lot of keyword phrases. The important thing is keyword research – and knowing which unique keywords to add.

This illustrates a key to 'relevance' is…. a keyword. The right keyword.

Yes – plenty of other things can be happening at the same time. It's hard to identify EXACTLY why Google ranks pages all the time…but you can COUNT on other things happening and just get on with what you can see works for you.

In a time of **light optimisation**, it's useful to earn a few terms you SHOULD rank for in simple ways that leave others wondering how you got it.

Of course, you can still keyword stuff a page, or still spam your link profile – but it is 'light' optimisation I am genuinely interested in testing on this site – how to get more with less – I think that's the key to not tripping Google's aggressive algorithms.

There are many tools on the web to help with basic keyword research (including the Google Keyword Planner [tool](#) and there are **even more useful third party** [SEO tools](#) to help you do this).

You can use these keyword research tools to identify opportunities to get more traffic to a page.

Google Analytics Keyword 'Not Provided.'

Google Analytics was the very best place to look at keyword opportunity for some (especially older) sites, but that all changed a few years back.

Google **stopped telling us which keywords are sending traffic to our sites from the search engine back in October 2011,** as part of privacy concerns for its users.

Google will now begin encrypting searches that people do by default, if they are logged into Google.com already through a secure connection. The change to SSL search also means that sites people visit after clicking on results at Google will no longer receive "referrer" data that reveals what those people searched for, except in the case of ads.

Google Analytics now instead displays – keyword "**not provided**", instead.

In Google's new system, referrer data will be blocked. This means site owners will begin to lose valuable data that they depend on, to understand how their sites are found through Google. They'll still be able to tell that someone came from a Google search. They won't, however, know what that search was. SearchEngineLand

You can still get *some* of this data if you sign up for *Google Search Console* (otherwise known as *Google Webmaster Tools* and you can combine this data in Google Analytics) but the data even there is limited and often not entirely the most accurate. The keyword data can be useful, though – and access to backlink data in *Search Console* is essential these days.

This is another example of Google making ranking in organic listings HARDER – a change for 'users' that seems to have the most impact on 'marketers' outside of Google's ecosystem – yes – and search engine optimisers.

Now, consultants need to be page-centric (abstract, I know), instead of just keyword centric when optimising a web page for Google. There are now plenty of third party tools that help when researching keywords (with my favourite being SEMrush) but most of us miss the kind of keyword intelligence we used to have access to in Google Analytics.

Careful and proper keyword research is important because getting a site to the top of Google eventually often comes down to your text content on a page and keywords in external & internal links.

Taken altogether, Google uses these signals to determine where you rank, if you rank at all.

Example: 'NOW' & 'THEN' – How Effective Research Works To Drive More Traffic To A Site

This is how I used to do it – and it was, comparable with today's seo, a lot simpler.

Scenario – I had a post a few years old on a blog that got a decent amount of search traffic every month.

It received @200 on-topics, relevant visits every month for a year.

It would be nice if this page (if still relevant advice) got 500 visitors a month I thought. That's what I thought so I had a look at the post and had a think about how I get more out of the post without a manipulative link building campaign to increase ranking for a particular keyword.

There were 8521 words on the page (including comments) – the actual article was 5683 words long – perfect for the long tail of search and ideal article to test this out on.

Comments were closed the entire duration of the graph below:

Search sent 7,427 non-paid visits via 1,486 keywords + landing pages

Filtered for keywords containing [CONFIDENTIAL] and landing pages containing "[CONFIDENTIAL]"

Show: total | paid | non-paid

Here's the simple steps I took to get a post that averaged @200 visitors to a post that last month got @700 visitors from organic (natural) search (mostly from Google).

It was a blog post, so the title was short and snappy, with the keyword once.

Title length was under 70 characters so it could be read easily in Google.

It had picked up some useful, relevant links, and was on a mildly trusted domain, and continues to pick up natural links from forums, etc.

This WAS (and still IS, in 2018) a perfect type of page to do this kind of keyword analysis and optimisation with.

Here is how I approached this **[NOW] and [THEN]**

1. **I had the page, but what keywords are used by folk to search for that content on the page? [THEN]:** The *Google Keyword Tool* is never going to be 100% accurate, but I used it then to identify quickly what Google tells us is the most popular searches relevant to my post. **[NOW]** I use [SEMRUSH](#) usually for more in-depth analysis in 2018 now that Google keyword planner needs an active Adwords account to get the most out of it in 2018. I also use the Google Keyword API to help me expand keyword research in a specific topic area e.g. help me find the entities that should probably be explored in an article about a topic. Google Autosuggest is also a good indicator when doing manual reviews.
2. **What keyword traffic am I already getting to that page? [THEN]** I looked at the traffic the page was already getting, using *Google Analytics*, and identified the exact keyword phrases searchers were using to find this post. I would then optimise the page further for those terms by primarily repetition of target keyphrases and introduction of synonyms and co-occurring words **[NOW]**(You can't do this (at all) in 2018 with any exact accuracy because of *Google's Keywords Not Provided*' policy

evident in changes to Google Analytics data and Google Keyword Planner. I would use SEMrush to quickly query this, alongside Google Search Console if I was given enough time to do so (which rarely I get).

3. **Looking for keyword phrases that drove traffic that I might rank for**.**[THEN]** I took all these keywords and put them in a rank checker, and over some time identified the top 50-100 referring keyword phrases from both the above sources (*in point 1 and 2, above*) THAT THE PAGE WASN'T ALREADY NO1 for. At the same time, I could see terms I was no1 for that got very little traffic. **[NOW]** I still use this tactic with my own toolset, various granular Google rank tracking systems and I use SEMrush (which is also a rank tracker) to give me further insight. SEMrush is even more useful as today looking at your competitor's pages and what they rank for is a decent substitute for the data we no longer receive from Google Analytics.

4. **Important Keyword Phrases In The Page Title.**[THEN]** I optimised the front of my title tag for the two top performing keyword phrases **[NOW]** Today I would just ensure my important phrase is somewhere in the first part of my title element. I try to write functional page titles for users and often I will focus on that AT THE EXPENSE of managing to fit particular keywords at the start of the title. It depends on the type of page I am dealing with.

5. **Long Page Titles. [THEN]** I used a LONG TITLE ELEMENT and basically didn't write 'best practice' for search engines, I wrote a massive title with all the VERY best performing keywords I could find in Google Analytics (THAT I WASN''T ALREADY NUMBER 1 FOR). I did make the beginning of the title readable, but heavily weighted towards what the actual keyword phrase Google said was popular. Title length ended up being over 150 characters – but relevant, and plain English, so not too spammy either IMO. While this still works, I would be careful spamming Page Titles in 2018 – but long titles, where relevant, are still OK. **[NOW]** Due to the added complexity and increased competition for rankings – you now need to take that thinking and apply it to your ENTIRE ARTICLE TEXT CONTENT or USER OFFERING (if it is not text-based). Just focusing on optimising Page Titles does NOT have the same benefits in the same time frame as it did a few years ago. Even when you DO completely rewrite the article and produce a quality point – traffic 'won' increases over the next months, NOT immediately as it did (with a push) as it was during early 2013. That's basically how I stumbled into optimising for TOPICS and CONCEPTS back in 2013, too, and a good topic oriented page in your niche is a sure-fire way to attract visits and links even in 2018.

6. **Content Tweaking. [THEN]** I modified the content, making it more 'relevant', and introducing the odd word here and there that my analysis hinted at there might be more traffic if I was higher up (I like to ensure the exact phrases I am targeting on the page is on the page, for instance). **[NOW] (see point 5, above!)** Today, the same process works but you are now trying to make a unique page of a higher quality than the competition and with as many important keyword phrases on the page as possible (where relevant, of course, and whilst avoiding old school keyword stuffing). Humans are now ranking these documents, remember, in some way, and now aided by Artificial Intelligence. Search engine optimising low-quality quality pages by keyword stuffing (anything) is probably not a good long-term strategy in 2018 either.

7. **Internal Links. [THEN]** I made sure that in my internal contextual navigation I linked to the page with a variety of the best performing key phrase opportunities from

my analysis to introduce them into my internal link profile (once – just to get them in there – old habit). **[NOW]** I still do this, but very lightly, if relevant to users. 'Everything in moderation', so to speak.

As you can see from the chart below, you can use basically the same techniques to get similar results in 2018:
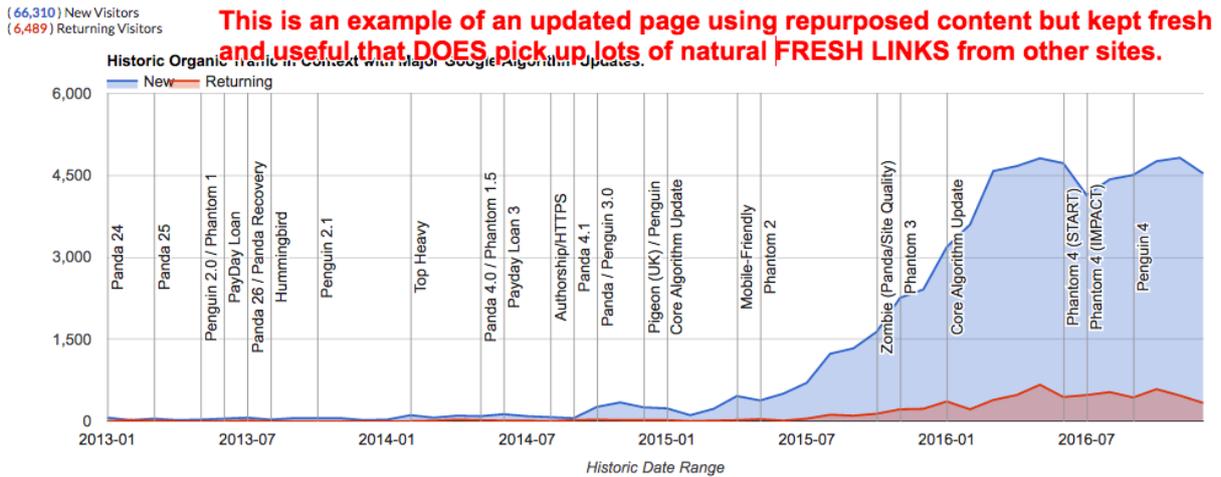
…. EXCEPT on top of all the optimisation you need to think about, you kind of, REALLY need a person experienced in the topic (or a great researcher) to create a high-quality piece of copy, to begin with, if you want to get the most out of this endeavour. You don't just want to be adding keywords – you want to be adding real value like new data, new research or a unique opinion.

OR (and, possibly on top of that) you might need to re-use or repackage non-performing content from elsewhere around the site in question, employing canonicals or redirects to really help things along, as the following chart illustrates:
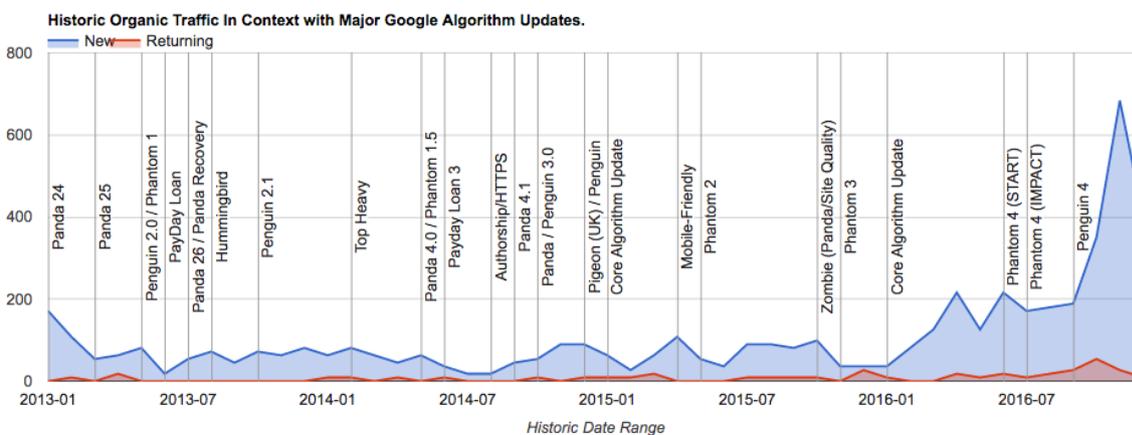
… although, the road to winning and keeping traffic is never assured, as the following chart illustrates (this is an information page **I haven't kept updated enough against competing pages** – and that includes my own competing pages). *QDF* FTW!
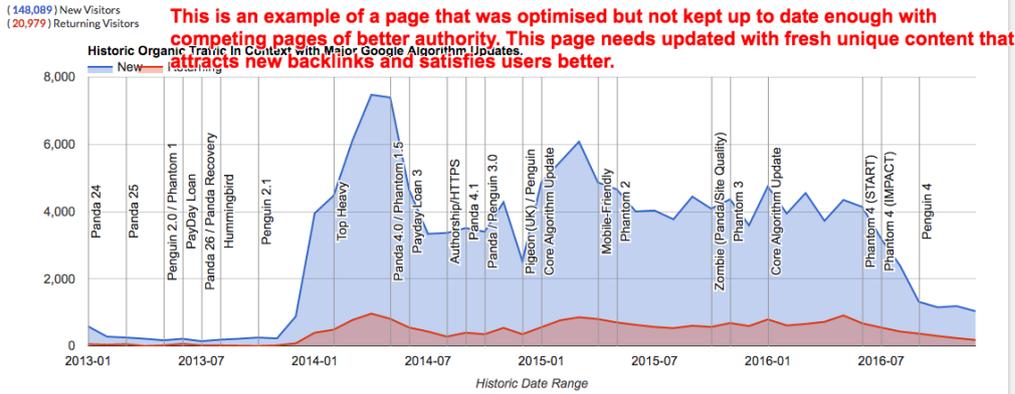
Keep the following image in mind too.

Some – not all – keyword optimisation and traffic generation techniques have been made to take longer to see positive effects – by Google.

This following screenshot is just one example of the type of trend you can expect if you create an affiliate-type page and do not optimise it further (by adding value to the user, apparently, or not picking up links):
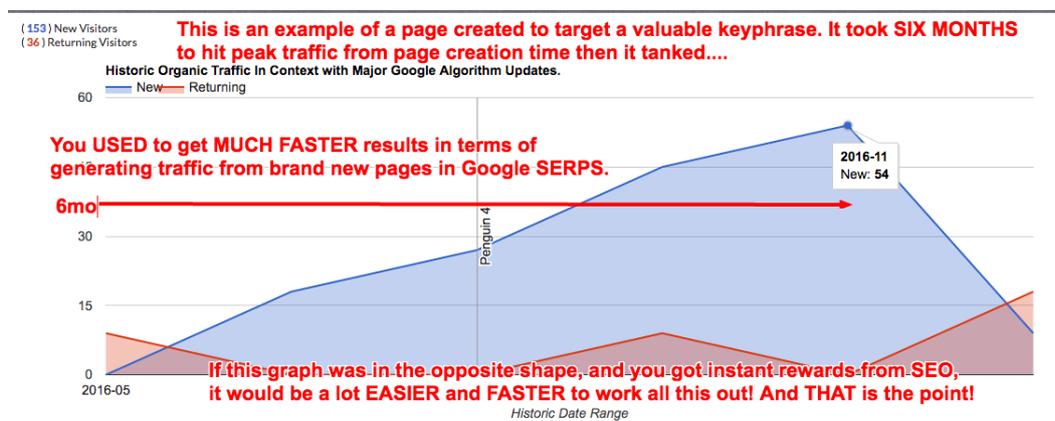
If you are new to SEO, you'd be better reading my SEO tips page or my off page SEO advice.

If you need professional keyword research services – it is part of any SEO audit I am hired to do.

Learn Keyword Research Skills

Here are some good articles for beginners to learn more about this important aspect of marketing online:

- http://www.viperchill.com/how-to-do-keyword-research/
- http://www.wordstream.com/articles/ultimate-guide-to-keyword-competition

What Are The Best SEO Tools?

No ONE tool does it all in 2018. Here is a list of my notes on my favourite entry-level tools to help to do SEO.

These are time-saving tools I use, have *purchased, trialled* or can *recommend,* with almost 20 years' experience in internet marketing. These reviews include paid and free browser extensions and plugins; cloud-based online tools with monthly subscription packages and paid desktop software packages.

The best SEO tools will save you valuable time, can provide you with insight and can help you quickly explore challenges and opportunities. The caveat being, of course, you will need some degree of experience to get the very best out of most of the tools.

Tools like these help you *make a better website and increase user satisfaction and user experience.* That is very important **if you want to rank high in Google, for the longer term in 2018**.

Your competition is using these tools and others like them. I use them too. You might find use for them, too.

I am a bit stuck in my old ways, and I don't rely on too many tools but the ones I do, I use regularly and often, for years.

These are 'white hat' SEO tools. I don't list blackhat tools in this book. I have marked affiliate links as (Aff* = Affiliate in case you skipped past that big box at the top).

Keyword Research Tools

The Google Keyword tool is still useful. It's changed a lot over the years since I used the public version every day. I've even picked up some links after I spotted some changes to it. I believe you need to be signed in to an Adwords account to get the most of it in 2018. I have developed my own SEO toolset that works with several Tool APIs so I don't use the Google Keyword Tool at all in 2018.

I do not think it is as useful as it once was, though, unless there have been changes I am not aware of. Beginners might find it easier to use one of the third-party keyword research tools I list below.

If I want competitive keyword data quickly – I, like a lot of other professional SEO, usually get it from SEMRush (Aff*) these days. There are a couple of other options I go into below, too.

SEMrush

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SEMrush. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

SEMRUSH IS MY FAVOURITE ALL-ONE SEO TOOL. It is a Site Auditor, Keyword Research & Competitor Analysis Tool.

I have **enjoyed using** [SEM RUSH (Aff)](#) for over the last (almost) 10 years.

Semrush is a keyword research tool for, well, professional keyword research, site analysis and competition analysis. This tool does a lot of things. Much more in 2018, since I started using it many years ago.

I had, in the past, steered clear of most of these types of tools as I had traditionally found them while useful, very U.S. centric (I am based in the UK).

I like it!

This tool lets you see:

- which keywords seem to be popular in your niche,
- related keywords, phrases and terms you might consider weaving into your content and [link building strategies](#)
- gives you an idea (when you aggregate the data) which natural listings in Google are providing competitors unpaid traffic
- lists top ranking sites competing for those keywords
- shows you on average how much a click on this keyword is worth in Google Adwords (although it would be nice to see that in Sterling (£) rather than dollars
- illustrates how competitive this term is (in Adwords at least, by number of competition)
- how many (on average) times the keyword or phrase is typed into the UK version of Google
- you can get a cool Firefox plugin as well and export research data to usual formats
- …and more

You can really do some neat stuff if you are a keyword monkey. SEM rush has databases for US, UK, Spain, Germany, France, Spain and other geographic regions.

Long Tail Pro

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of LongTailPro. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo
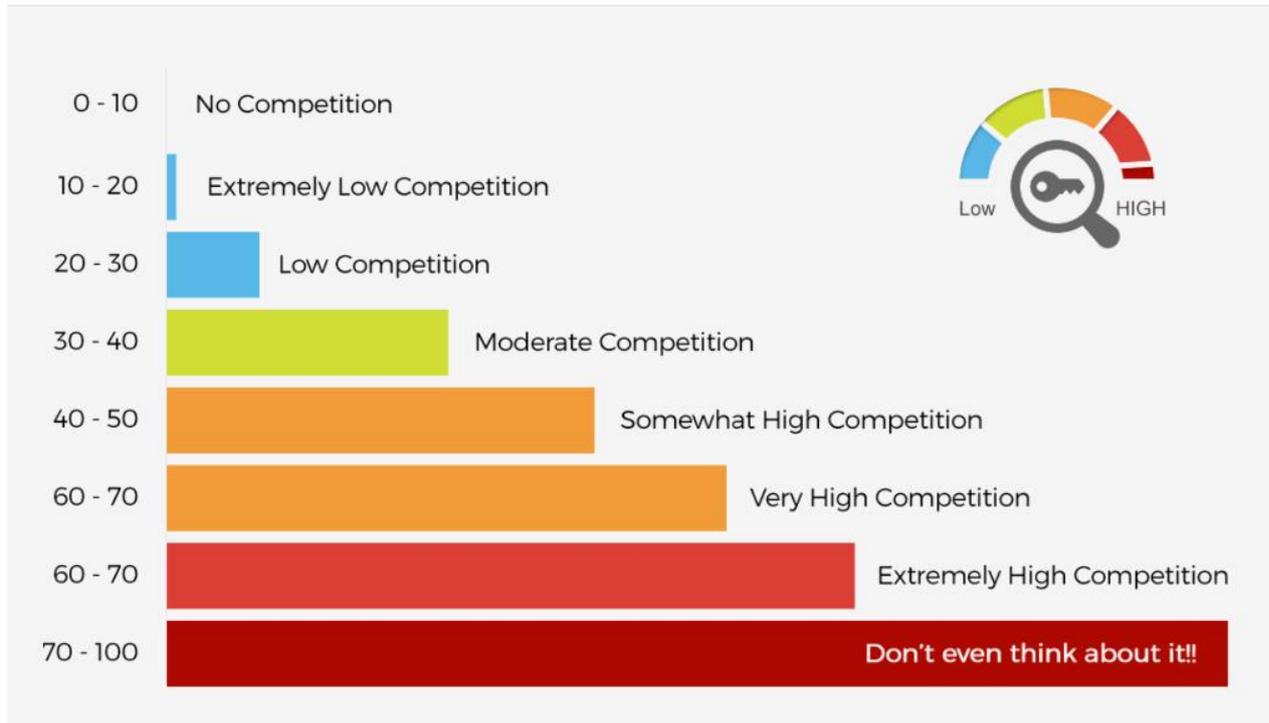
[Long Tail Pro](#) (Aff*) is a keyword research tool that includes some clever competitor analysis to help you target the right keywords on your website.

This tool can quickly analyze the top 10 results in Google for each of your keywords, saving you boatloads of time.

This tool also checks important SERP data points like keyword usage in the Title Element and Meta tags, Domain & Page Authority, Moz Rank, Number of Backlinks, Domain Age etc.

This is a great tool for keyword researchers, and I know a few colleagues who like it too.

I can recommend [Ubersuggest](#) for quick Google Autocomplete research, too, and also I've found [Answer The Public](#) to be very useful, too, when investigating what QUESTIONS are being asked on Google by users about a certain topic.

SearchMetrics Suite

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SearchMetrics. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

The Searchmetrics Suite (Aff*) is designed to help marketers working for enterprises and agencies plan, execute, measure and report on internet marketing strategies.

It has a **free account** where you can see some information of how your site performed over the last 6 months.

It's useful for competitor keyword analysis and to get a quick overview of any site that already has some visibility in Google.

SearchMetrics has LOTS of data and that places it amongst the best seo reporting software you can buy.

SpyFu

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SpyFu. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

SpyFu (Aff*) is also a great tool for competitive keyword research, and while I don't use it that often, many of my colleagues and peers really like this tool so it may be worth giving it a test drive.

I was recently impressed by the accuracy of this tool in judging actual traffic trends to a site:
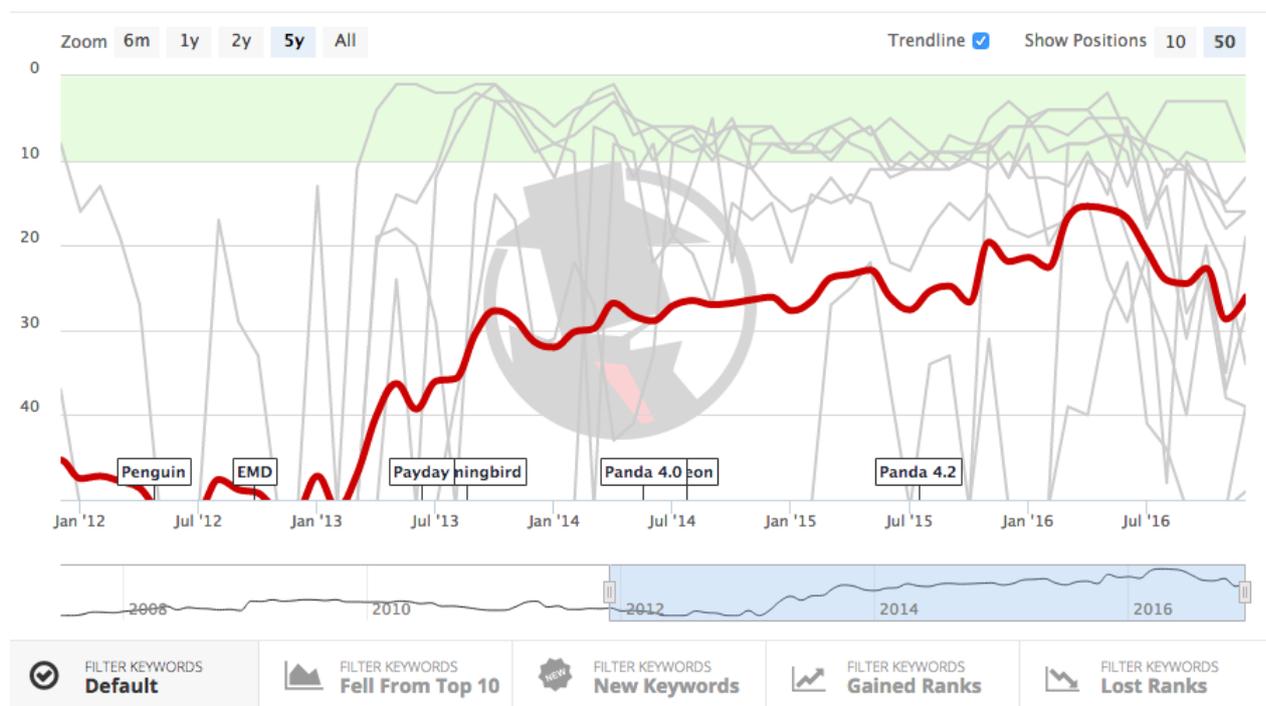
Hat Tip to Sistrix, too. I've played about with this tool in the past and was impressed, and I have heard good things about it recently.

Crawlers & Broken Link Checker Tools

Google crawls the web looking for content to index and present to its users.

SEO Crawler tools mimic 'Googlebot' (in a limited way, it must be said) and crawl and list elements that can be 'optimised' to make your pages easier to crawl and index properly.

SiteBulb

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Sitebulb. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

Sitebulb (Aff*) is a new easy to get to grip with website crawler and auditor.

The Sitebulb Audit includes analysis, insight and guidance on the technical and content requirements of modern SEO.

The reports are quick and the results are easily interpreted with actionable insights. The main features/benefits are summarised below.
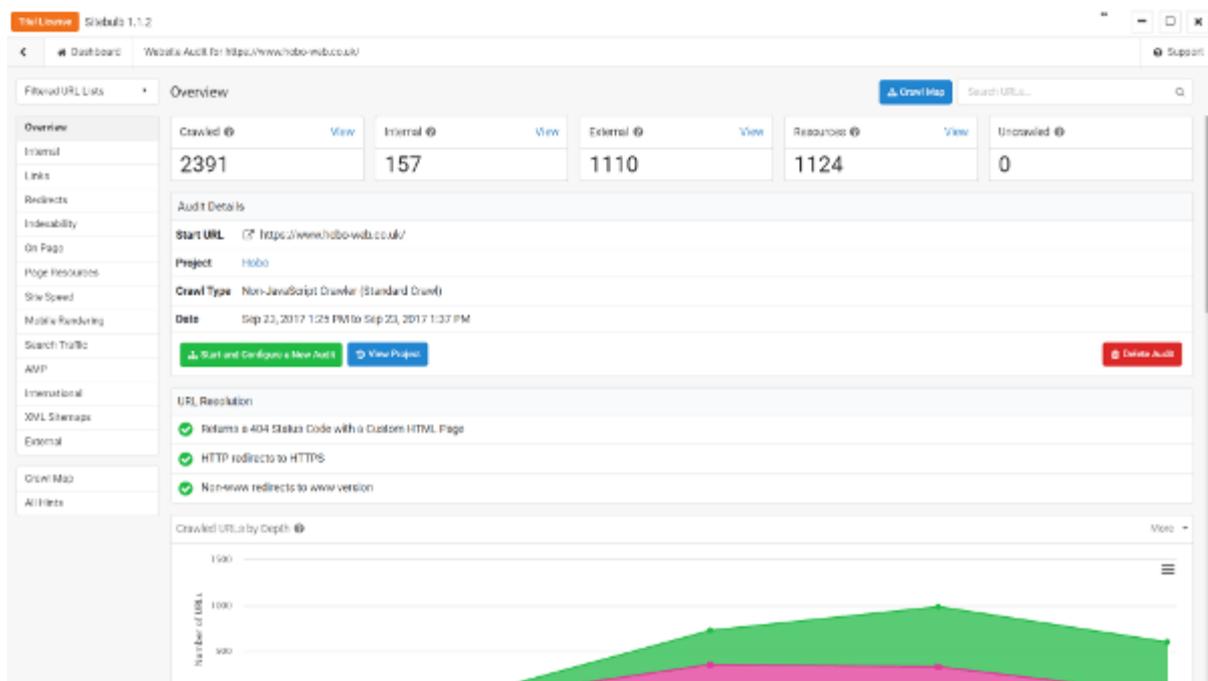
The core function of the tool, it performed well on the sites I tested.

It is easy to configure and there is a range of advanced options for including or excluding URLs and tailoring the crawl rate for specific site or server environments.

The Audit process is easy to configure and reasonably quick to run (depending of course on the size of the site).

It's easy to re-run crawls at any time and the because the data is stored locally in its own database structure, you have the benefit of easily comparing data over time, which takes analysis to a much deeper level.

Further information & instructions on the audit process can be found in the Resources section of the Sitebulb (Aff*) website.

Overall Sitebulb looks to be a great 'allrounder' in the site audit category, and its flexibility will be useful for experienced SEO's and newbies alike (some understanding of SEO practices is required).

As a crawler, while it's perhaps not as fast as Screaming Frog, it has a better UI and its storage method means it's less local resource intensive.

As a site auditor it does a pretty good job, particularly from a technical point of view, however, it's error reporting and resolution advice is not yet as comprehensive as SEMRush for example (with which it shares a number of similarities), but it is, however, cheaper and is not does not share the same restrictions on usage.

It's unclear if it is as good at handling 'monster' sites as Deepcrawl, but it is certainly more accessible and with unlimited projects (in theory) cheaper to run.

I would imagine we will see this crawler and auditor turn into a very popular website crawler tool.

You can get a [FREE 14 Day Trial of the tool by clicking here (AFF)](#).

Screaming Frog SEO Spider

Screaming Frog SEO Spider (For Mac & PC) is a crawl tool for analysing the structure of a website.

THIS IS MY ALL-TIME FAVOURITE TECHNICAL SEO TOOL.

It's a tool for search engine optimisers, website managers, and web developers. SF spiders a site in a similar way any search engine spider would. As search engine optimisation tools go, **you'll need to understand technical SEO and have a firm grasp of HTML** to get the most from this [tool](#).

It is an excellent program to audit your website from a technical point of view, and with it can promptly collect a lot of the necessary information you need to *help* optimise your site.

This program is available for PC and Mac. As a Mac user, I'm often confronted with software that slows my mac down a little, so it was a pleasure to see this thing run in the background in a quiet, efficient manner.

Run the **spider** and it will grab information on your pages. Links, page titles, redirects, 404s, heading tags, status codes, attribute lengths, anchor text, alt text and numbers of internal backlinks, numbers of external links on each page. Quickly identify click depth, see canonical link information or meta-refresh directives. And more.

You can also output this report to CSV.

Screaming Frog spider comes highly recommended for SEO and web designers everywhere. I have used it on small and enormous websites (using a cloud computer to maximise its efficiency).

SF is just about the best SEO software you can buy in 2018 to investigate site structure and for quick log file analysis **IF you are technically minded**.

Get a free version too to test it out, before you buy it.

Website Auditor Software (For Mac & PC)

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SEOPowersuite. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

I paid for a copy of Website Auditor (Aff*) to have a play about with and **I liked it.**

Website Auditor a tool for spidering, checking and evaluating the links and pages on your site. It's ideal for SEO and web developers alike, tasked with maintaining a website.

I like it to get an idea of the structure of a site – to see how many pages have the least/most links, which pages have external links and finding broken links. It can do a lot more, though.

Website Auditor powerful, and can unquestionably help you audit a site.

Website Auditor will help you easily **find and fix the following problems**:

- Broken links
- HTML code errors
- Duplicate content
- 404 and other server response code errors
- Not indexed webpages
- Missing or too long titles and meta description

I found Website Auditor pretty easy to get to grip with, and it does have a few powerful features:

- Site architecture and internal linking analysis
- Most linked-to and linked-from webpages
- Google PageRank distribution across all pages
- Link Value that each webpage can pass per link
- When each page was indexed and cached in major search engines
- Not indexed webpages
- Complete website SEO health check
- Domain's and each webpage's performance in search engines and social media sites
- Keyword density and prominence in each page element on your site and among top 10 competitors
- Most popular keywords and keyphrases used by your site and top 10 competing sites

It has a fresh REPORTS feature that will even let you print a client-friendly report if you need it.

I like this tool. The only downside for me is the actual reporting function. NOT the reporting function itself – that is cool. I just use slightly different metrics.

It suffers the same shortcomings as most other tools available. Reporting focuses on a few metrics and scores them in a way I don't think is as valuable as it could be to the overall SEO process.

But then again, effective SEO is not as machine-friendly as some SEO software companies would hope it to be.

All in all a solid SEO tool for auditing your website structure. Available for Apple Mac and PC.

P.S. A review of Rank Tracker is below – that's good as well. You get that with this software as part of the SEO Powersuite (Aff*)

Deep Crawl

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of DeepCrawl. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

Deep Crawl (Aff*) is a great online SEO tool and an ideal solution when crawling larger sites, or if you need your crawler in the cloud. This tool is very useful for large site migrations, and it can easily check hreflang tags are set up correctly.

Basically, it's similar to Screaming Frog (above), but has the benefit of remote crawling, saving you having to do it yourself.

Another benefit is Deep Crawl carries out some pre-analysis for you to identify obvious technical problems with your website.

Highly recommended for larger sites, and one of the best online SEO tools you can buy.

A hat tip to Oncrawl, too – as I have heard good things about this cloud-based web crawler and analyser. Unfortunately, I have not had that much time to play with this tool.

Integrity For Mac Only
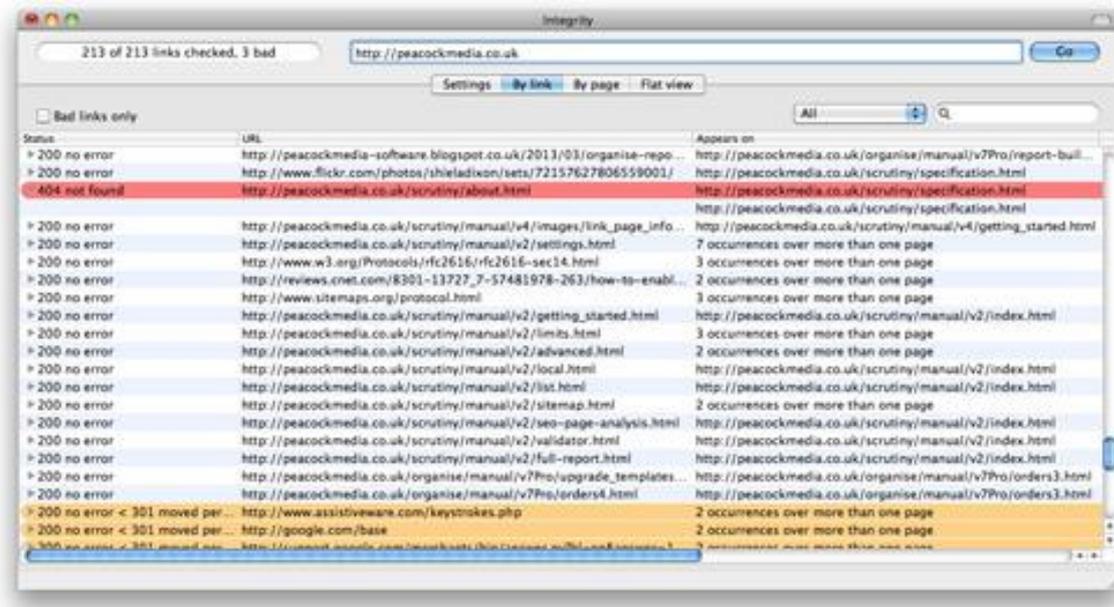
You can also find broken links on your site with this free tool for Apple IOS computers.

Broken links are a pain in the backside, a waste of PageRank, and a bad user experience.

Integrity for Mac users is a cool little tool to identify those.

Unless you enjoy clicking every single link on your site followed by the back button, then you'll need to use a website crawler like Integrity!

Integrity a free desktop tool for mac SEO and website designers that spiders your website and picks out broken links.

It will also extract URLs from a website to a CSV.

It's perfect for checking a small site once complete for any broken links or missing images without having to dig through it manually.

It can generate an XML sitemap suitable for submission to Google too, and help check a site for unique page titles. Apart from this, for SEO, you can see at a glance links with 301 redirects, or canonical issues, or even old links to dev servers, etc.

Another significant addition is the ability to see at a glance your **most linked-to pages** and **how many links EXACTLY they have**, and from where.

Not bad at all. Especially for Apple Mac designers.

If you are a PC user, check out Xenu Link Sleuth. It's free and still reliable.

URL Profiler

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of URLProfiler. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo
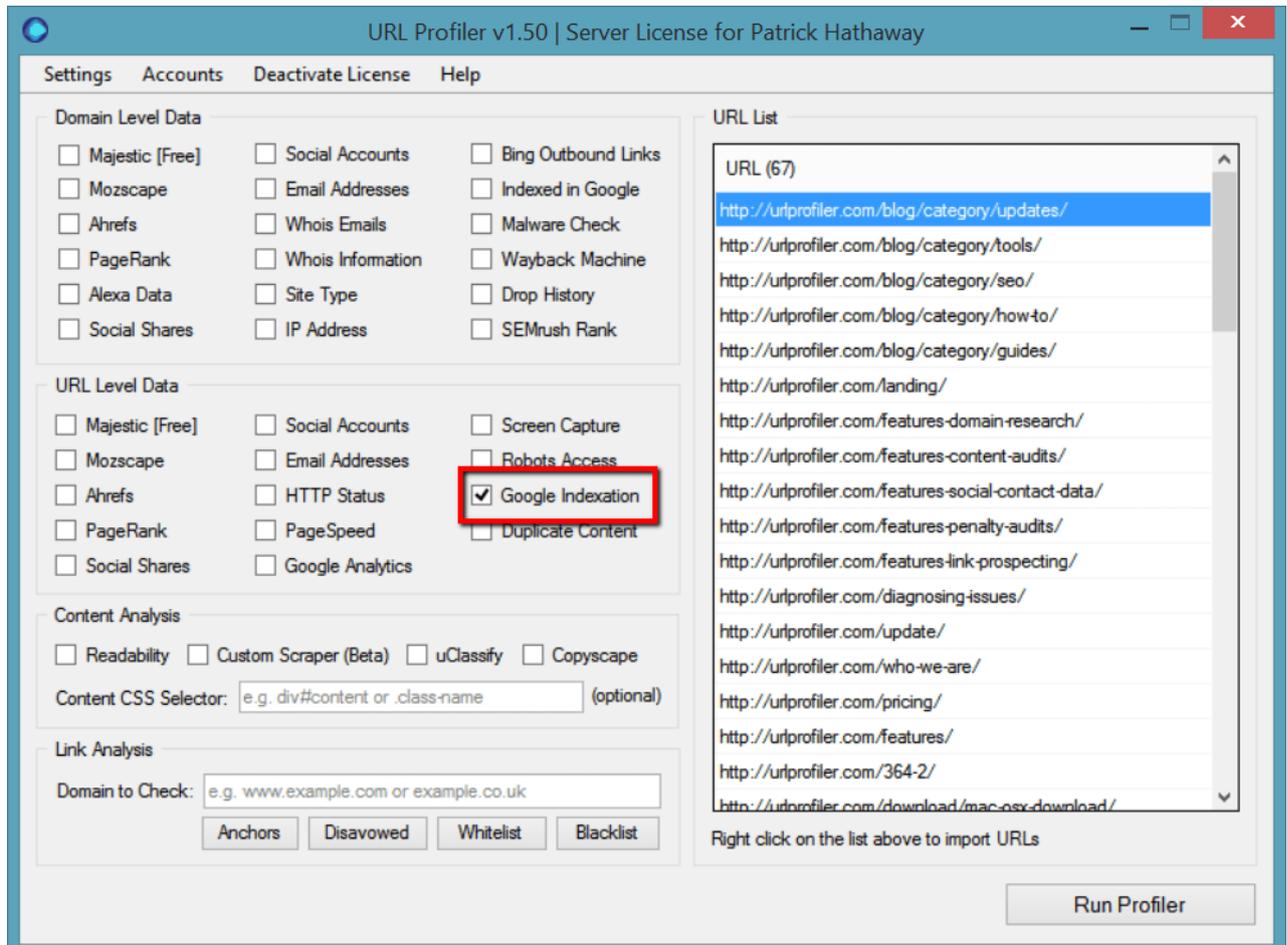
URL Profiler (Aff*) is a multi-task tool that can be easily configured to grab data from any URL.

This is desktop software for PC and Mac and is developed more for the technically minded SEO. This is a handy tool for checking if your URLs are indexed in Google, for instance, or if you want to quickly grab social and backlink data for any URL.

Highly recommended for the technical SEO.

ProRankTracker Rank Tracker Software

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of ProRankTracker. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo
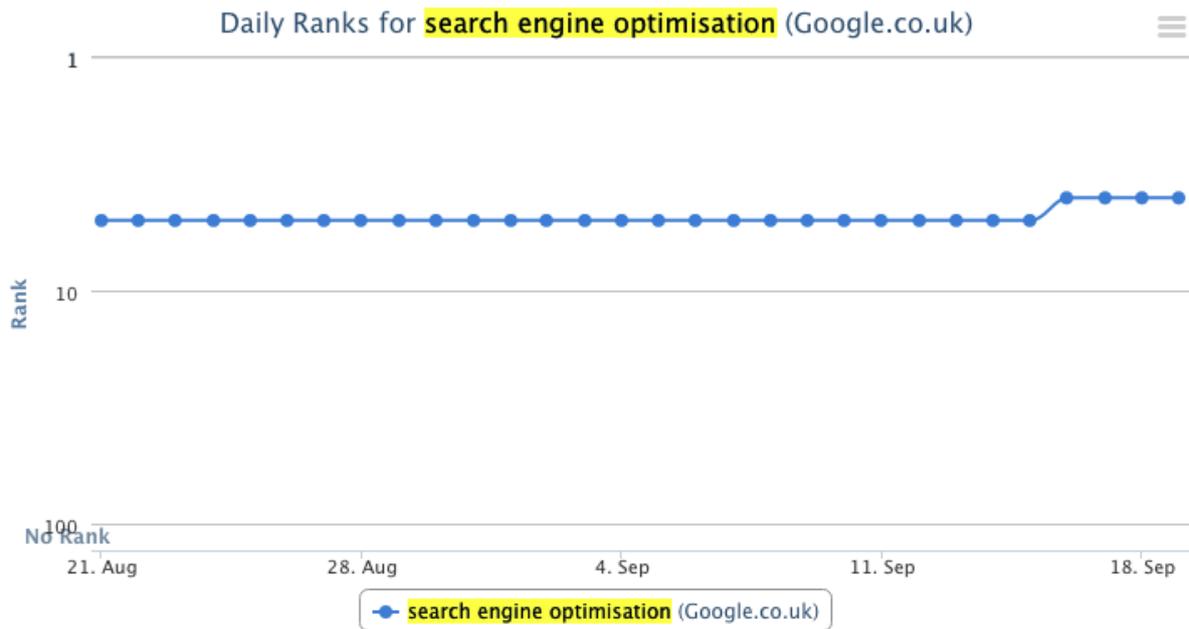
[ProRankTracker](#) (Aff*) is a simple, easy to use and accurate cloud-based rank checker suitable for most needs.

I use it daily – and I am signed up for the API.

Advanced Web Ranking

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Advanced Web Ranking. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

Keyword	Position ▲	Searches	Impressions	Clicks
apple pie recipe ⌄	1 ▬	40	10 ▬	10 ▬
green bean ⌄	3 ▬	70	30 ⌃8	10 ▬
stuffed green ⌄	3 ＋	20	▬	▬
recipes ⌄	4 ▬	480	30 ⌄120	10 ▬
banana bread ⌄	4 ▬	▬	16 ⌃6	10 ▬
bread pudding ⌄	4 ▬	30	22 ⌃6	10 ▬

I've tried a lot of ways to **check rankings in search engines** over the years and generally speaking I've been disappointed with most if not all of them.

[Advanced Web Ranking](#) (Aff*) is one of the best. **If you want to trial the cloud version FREE, you can [access it here](#) (Aff*).**

So much so, that we've resorted to many clients to manually checking them / and or developing our own tools to ensure the results we get are what the customer is seeing too. The problem with this type of rankings check is how much time it consumes in the studio. The problem with a lot of automatic website rank checkers, of course, is that they could well be software packages that violate Google Webmaster guidelines for instance.

It automatically runs a ranking report checking keyword positions in Google, and automatically sends me a keyword rank check report via email with details of each keyword position (and over time, this generates a cool graph of ranking activity).

It's a pretty comprehensive tool and it certainly seems to perform very well, with a good support forum too to ask any questions.

A very neat feature if you run one site is the sheer number of search engines you can track your rankings on too (thousands of them from what I can see) – not that I bother with search engine submission at all these days of course.

The keyword position reports too are quite comprehensive and you can run as many search engine ranking reports and projects (multiple websites and rank checks) as you wish.

It's fairly intuitive and easy to set up and use after you play about with it.

The software also can check your PageRank and *Alexa* traffic stats too (if either of those metrics are important to you) and can keep an eye on competitors rankings too.

If you want to trial the cloud version FREE, you can access it here (Aff*).

Note – I'm still not that obsessed with individual keyword rankings – I'm much more interested in creating good content on a site and acquiring backlinks as naturally as possible to build domain trust – and then unlocking that domain authority by publishing even more content, but in competitive sectors where the 'linkrate' seem to be thin on the ground, for specific keyword phrases, link building is still a must of course.

I've been testing out the rank check tool AWR Website Ranking on a small personal site (after being advised it does not break Google's guidelines – although, if you go by the letter of the law, I wonder if that is wishful thinking, by ALL rank checker tool providers):

First of all, I would like to put one thing aside. There is no way that Google or any other search engine can ban you for using our software, And this is because for Google, AWR looks like a regular web browser. We send the EXACT data web browsers send. There is no way for Google to find out that you are using a tool like AWR., And even if they knew, they have no way of knowing your website domain. AWR sends queries that only contain the Keywords, NOT the URL. It then searches the URLs in the results Google sent back. This means they have no way of making a connection between the IP address of your computer, where AWR runs from, and your website. If this was possible, then I could fake this information to look like my competitor domain and then get him banned!

It works as expected, and plays nice with my Mac Book Pro.

Link Assistant Rank Tracker Software

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SEOPowersuite. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo
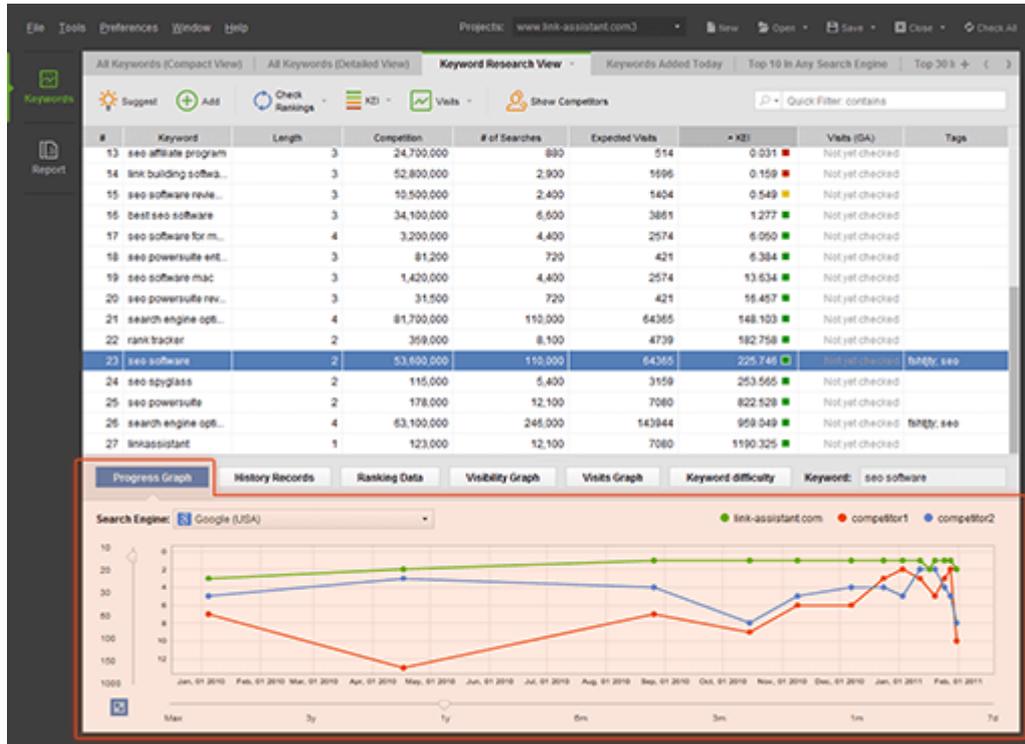
I purchased a copy of SEO Powersuite (AFF*) to have a play about with and for review purposes, and I like it. I reviewed its stablemate *Website Auditor* above, which is bundled with Rank Tracker (AFF*) in SEO Powersuite, and I like that too.

- Limitless keyword tracking: you can track rankings in over 590 search engines with no keyword or domain limits
- Auto-pilot tracking: set the tracking tool once and run rank checks automatically for set dates and time
- Historical rank tracking: every time you check your rankings, Rank Tracker charts the all ranking changes for each individual keyword and your site's overall SERP visibility

Rank Tracker is pretty simple to set up, and as accurate as it can be, when checking your websites search engine rankings for multiple keywords, on multiple engines.

Use:

- pick a website
- pick your search engines you want to monitor, and
- tell it which keywords you want to track

- find out the number of searches and competition for a particular keyword or phrase
- schedule it to check for keywords at any set time of the day
- schedule reports to print or export to web, pdf or CSV etc.

It can also check the competition for the key terms and track your competition if you are interested in that.

You can schedule when it checks your rankings, and you can schedule reports to publish when you want, too.

It tracks everything about your keyword so you can see its performance over time.

It looks ideal for small businesses to track rankings if you prefer a piece of software you run on your pc or mac rather than a hosted solution.

SEO Powersuite (LinkAssistant.com)

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SEOPowersuite. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

SEO Powersuite (Aff*) is definitely one of the best all in one desktop SEO packages available for Mac and PC. Check your rankings, your competitors, backlinks and crawl your website. It's a great tool for beginners.

I use this toolset to have a poke around but my favourite out of the tools is Rank Tracker (AFF*) to run quick ranking audits which come on its own, or with SEO Powersuite.

Majestic

I use competitive link analysis:

- to look for any obvious short-cuts to take advantage of – it's always nice to impress new clients immediately, and get them involved (I should do this more, in fact)
- to see which competitors are really spamming it up and getting away with it
- for ideas about posts for a client site that attracts links
- to see which newsworthy items pick up links from the press for instance
- to identify when the site pushes for traffic via link building
- to pick out the links from quality, respected sites that I might have problems getting – for discussion with client's marketing department
- to get an idea the type of sites that will link to a competitor
- to look at the soup of links that a no1, no2 and no3 site especially can get away with and still rank top in Google
- to LEARN how other sites have got where they are.
- to learn a bit about the client's industry and competitors
- to tell clients the task at hand (yesterday I noticed a competitor of my clients had links from The Wall ST Journal, NY Times etc. – it helped me point out to the client his main competitor was REMARKABLE, actively engaged in successful online marketing ALREADY – a player. Another client noticed from my Competitive Link Analysis once a PR7 that linked to his competitor, was actually a site his GOOD FRIEND OWNED. I wonder what happened to that link…

Often, I use competitor backlink analysis to gather historical and real-time data to recommend to a client or show them how they SHOULD be marketing their business to achieve online popularity, while I set about making them popular online.

I love Majestic – it's the first place I look when looking at the backlinks of a competing website. It's been the BEST link building tool available for as long as I can remember – way before Yahoo Site Explorer was mothballed. Majestic seems to be built into everything these days – but standalone it is still a brilliant link prospecting tool.

Hat tip to Open Site Explorer, too (though I've not used the MOZ tools for a while).

I do also use AHrefs if I really want to double-down, so to speak, on backlink research for a site and *ensure* I am getting the most available links to a site (after I have looked at Majestic data, of course).

Link Research Tools

Link Research Tools, is also one of the very best link research tools available. In fact, having these tools running in the background is a bit like having an extra member of staff.

If you are into fancy charts, they are there. If you just want the data for export, you can do that too. I usually just want the data for my own purposes – and the **Backlink Profiler Tool** is probably my favourite. The Common Backlinks Tool is pretty useful too. I should say the tools are **REALLY easy to use** as well. Link Research Tools connects with the other well-known search engine optimisation tools on the market so you can grab a lot of data for lots of pages. The more data, the better.

I will point out while these search engine optimisation tools are GREAT, it's how *you* interpret the data, and how *you* go about making this data relevant to your business, that will see you succeed in your own link building efforts. I don't agree with every measurement made by these tools, or with every result they provide. You don't need the same links as your competitors to rank, remember.

If you are a creative marketer, you don't need any tools to be a 'link builder' – I hate that term.

But…. if you want to see how the other guys are doing it, have an easy job where all you need to do is collect the data, or are looking for a bit of backlink-inspiration, or needing a backlink profile you can be proud of – the tools above are a good place to start.

Link Prospector

Majestic is GREAT for getting link building ideas – but a tool like Link Prospector can REALLY expand upon those ideas, once you've identified a particular type of link you'd like to focus on. Link Prospector (a part of Citation Labs) is a brilliant tool for doing this.

With this tool, you can look for links pages, guest posts, directories, forums and blogs out there, that there is a high probability you could get a link from. It's a mountain of data you get back, so make sure you use this tool in a very focused manner.

Used properly, Link Prospector (and the other great tools that come with it) can save you HOURS of work. Expect to spend some time in an excel spreadsheet after you get the data – but it is worth it!

I spent a weekend playing with this tool and the amount of excellent link data it spat out for me was astonishing. I tested around 10 niches, and it didn't disappoint in any of them. *There are no affiliate links of any sort in this independent review.*

In short, Link Prospector is a link building tool to help you find places you can get links from other websites. It helps you narrow prospects in a niche based on keywords you want to focus on. You can find link opportunities like guest posts, links pages, directories, and forums, to name but a few – essentially websites that link to '*your sort of thing*'.

The tool REALLY delivers (or it did, when I last used it) – scanning a well-sized data-set and outputting a *mountain* of link prospects in the niche you are interested in.

It's easy to use too, though I have seen some other reviewers talk about data overload, and that deep down, the results you get are a little messy.

True – it can get a little messy if your data mining is too broad. But if you really focus on the types of links you are looking for – once you export that data to excel and have a play with some filters, you can really dig up a lot of opportunities.

If you are wise enough to know that you need links, **Link Prospector is just about the best tool out there for helping you identify more places to get these links**.

TIP – In a post penguin world, its online marketing *ideas* you are looking for. You do not want to be using the exact same methods as everybody else. You can use *Majestic* to get a handle on why the top competition ranks where it does. If you take some of those ideas to Link Prospector and look for more of those types of link opportunities, it can deliver some really good opportunities.

Highly Recommended – Link Prospector is a great tool for finding where you can get links. If you are serious about link building, you are crazy not to give this tool a go. Enough said.

*Link Prospector also has some great support tools!

Kerboo (Formerly *Link Risk*)

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Kerboo. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

If you need a quick overview of the quality of your backlink profile – KERBOO (Aff*) is my tool of choice. I can vouch for the experience of the team behind this tool, and expect it will get better and better.

If you know anything about SEO, you will know that your rankings can be severely impacted by low-quality links pointing to your website from other sites on the net.

This tool aims to calculate the inherent risk found within a website's backlink profile. It can be used for disavow file management and proactive link profile management via a daily imports feature.

KERBOO (Aff*) is a powerful manual penalty and penguin recovery tool.

Cheap too, considering the time it saves you.

Clicky Web Analytics

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Clicky. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo
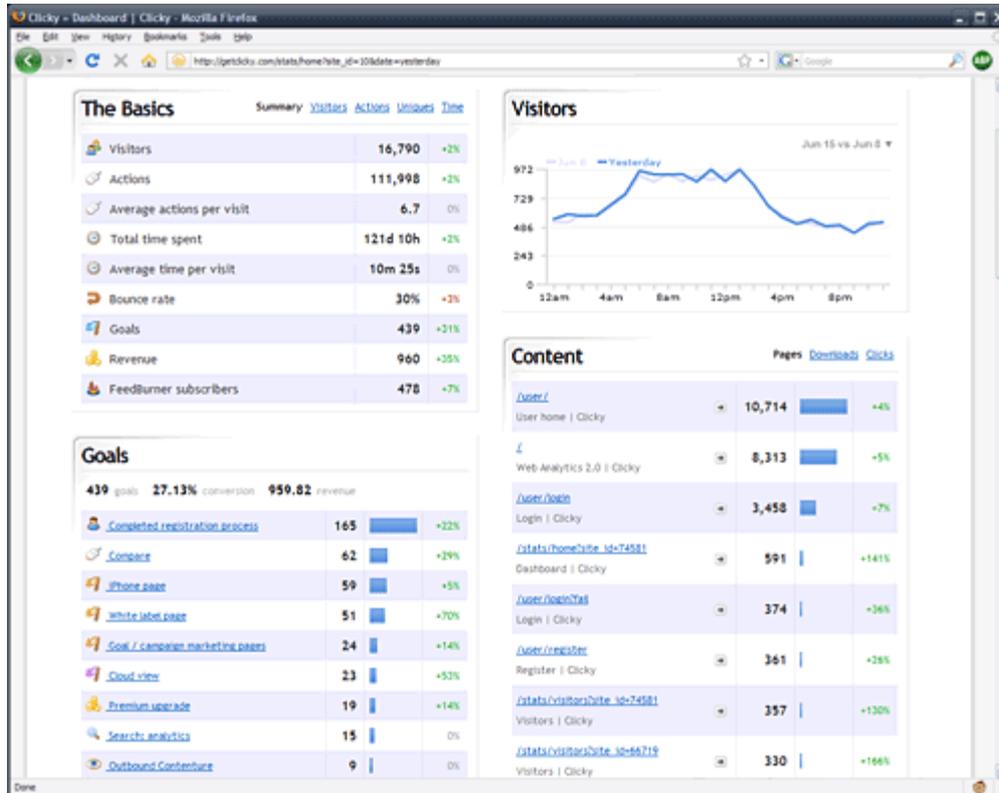
Google Analytics is the de facto analytics software, and the only tool for checking lots of data – but I find I log into my Clicky (Aff*) account more than I do GA these days – if all I want is a quick and dirty analysis of a page or keyword. Brilliant tool.

When I find a simple tool I like I usually stick with it forever. I'm amazed at the simple things Clicky (AFF*) does so effortlessly. The control panel seems so much more intuitive than for instance Google Analytics. Instantly accessible.

I tried a few real-time web stats analytics packages out (I like software with a free trial) and I must say, Clicky is brilliant.

1. See who is on your site AT THAT VERY MOMENT
2. See where traffic is coming from AND track outbound visitors too
3. See your valuable incoming links in action
4. See a MORE ACCURATE bounce rate for your pages
5. Too much good stuff to mention

…and best of all, **Clicky might very well be FREE if you don't have more than 3,000-page impressions a day** – ideal for small businesses.

They even give you an easy affiliate link to promote the software if you like it – which I very much do (so I am using that affiliate link).

Telling you. Try Clicky PRO out FREE. (AFF*) Excellent analytics, and easy to install too.

Grammarly

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Grammarly. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

I know my grammar is lacking and it is something I've always aimed to address.

I doubt grammar is an influential ranking signal today, but, correctly constructed sentences should make reading this blog a better user experience.

Also, translations would be more accurate.

A greater grasp of the English language and a wider vocabulary is a real advantage to an SEO in 2018.

So I am cleaning up my blog and all future posts.

I installed Grammarly (Aff*).

Grammarly is a free Chrome browser extension that helps identify and fix grammar and spelling errors and **it's now also one of my favourite SEO tools**.

I love the way **Grammarly alerts you when you are using repetitive words and offers you synonyms to replace them**.

That's a great assist if you have a feel for what you are doing.

It's useful because, often, the number of unique keywords on a page is closely proportionate to the number of keyword-based searches a page can (usually) rank for in Google.

Easy to install, Grammarly works in the background in Chrome browser on my Mac and integrates efficiently with WordPress.

Highly recommended!

P.S. I used Grammarly to write this post.

Chrome Extensions

I don't really like third-party toolbars – but I do have the odd plugin installed. Chrome Notepad is a free tool for Chrome browser – ideal for taking quick notes – and FREE.

Nofollow For Chrome

> **QUOTE: "***Paid links**: A site's ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to it. In order to prevent paid links from influencing search results and negatively impacting users,* **we urge Webmasters use nofollow on such links**. *Search engine guidelines require machine-readable disclosure of paid links in the same way that consumers online and offline appreciate disclosure of paid relationships (for example, a full-page newspaper ad may be headed by the word "Advertisement"*)."*

Find paid links on the page and check that links that should be nofollow are nofollow. I have on-page tool **NoFollow for Chrome** installed. This browser extension is **excellent for quick page hyperlink analysis**. it highlights rel=nofollow links on the fly which I find useful.

Awesome Screenshot Minus

Capture those magic moments for posterity.

I capture screenshots day-to-day (useful for SEO like me) and I use this **simple to use and free** on-page tool Google Chrome Add-On called Awesome Screenshot Minus.

On my Mac to take a picture of, for instance, small parts of a screen – I normally use the keyword command ***Command-Shift-4*** (I don't know how PC users do it) but where this

software comes in useful is if I want to **take a picture of an entire web page that is too big to fit in your browser window**.

Woorank

Woorank is an **impressive** on-page tool '*freemium*' tool that does offer a lot of quick functionality in the free version. Check it out. We have a free tool on the Hobo site that does a lot of the same on page SEO checks.

Redirect Path

Redirect Path for Chrome is a **highly recommended** on-page tool and valuable little plugin that can help you quickly identify the number and type of redirects if any that brought you to a page. This is incredibly useful for page migrations and site clean-ups. I use this little extension every day to check on the number of chains in a redirect to a page.

> **QUOTE**: "*We follow up to five redirect steps in a redirect chain if it's a server-side redirect.*" John Mueller, Google

Spreadsheets, Browsers & Other Tools

I have spent a lot of my time in Excel spreadsheets, more so in the last few years. Google Spreadsheets are cool too…. but with too many limitations for me to make it a daily tool. Excel lets you automate just about everything – and I do these days.

There's nothing more satisfying than taking 30 days' work and automating it. You can manage entire sites with an excel spreadsheet – and if you're not on some level, you're missing out big time.

SEO Tools For Excel

If you're not running your own functions with Excel – Excel Tools For SEO is a great place to start(I also have **URL Tools** installed). SEO Tools for Excel is a fantastic toolset – once you start with this stuff you can't live without it unless you build your own tools, of course).

Great for combining Adwords data with page specific data and looking for opportunities like under-optimised page titles etc. Tip – Get a Google Adwords API.

Dropbox

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Dropbox. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

No wonder Steve Jobs tried to buy it. Dropbox is a genius idea – having a folder you can EASILY share with everybody in work or between computers is essential for us these days.

Dropbox is FREE and you can get more space by sharing links like these –
Try Dropbox (Aff*).

Hidemyass

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of Hidemyass. This review is editorial opinion. This review is not sponsored.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

If you are using a desktop rank tracker or any other rank tracker software you'll need a VPN/Proxy. This thing is so easy even I got it working.

You can set up one computer to run ranking queries via rotating proxies (every few minutes or so) using a desktop rank tracker of your choice and a proxy like Hidemyass and save the results to a Dropbox folder to look at it when necessary (from another machine).

I would also recommend you sign up with a service like LOGMEIN or my new tool of choice – Team Viewer– so you can remotely sign into the rank checker computer in case you need to restart the application. Also good for visiting sites you don't want tracking you, or incognito scraping (hat tip to Scrapebox BTW).

I don't use it for soul-destroying nefarious purposes like spamming or anything like that but lots probably do.

Google Webmaster Tools and Bing Webmaster tools can provide useful insight to your site, but I only really look into these when I am digging deep, or looking for links I am not getting the benefit from.

Other Popular SEO Tools – SEObook, Moz & Raven have good online offerings these days – some more aimed at reporting to clients. While I do have accounts for all, neither is something I visit daily. I have found tools from these sites tools to be VERY useful on the ODD occasion, though – and I know some people swear by them.

I suppose it depends on what you're employed to do, which should influence which tools you invest in.

Beware

There are a lot of tools out there that are a total waste of your time, and some are an out and out scam. I've had direct experience with all the tools I have reviewed here and nearly 20 years' experience in search engine marketing.

If you are thinking of buying any software, remember, there are little 'cheats' these days in SEO for the beginners – a good tool with only give you work to do.

Keep in mind:

- Competitor Backlink tools can give you ideas where and how to get links but remember you don't need the same links as your competitors, you just need, well, credible links from reputable websites

- [Keyword density](#) is not something you should be focusing on at all if you are writing your articles after doing some basic keyword research.
- Page relevance tools – whatever they might key off of, it's probably not what Google is. It's incredibly important to create a semantic and contextually relevant page but you just need a keyword tool (again, probably pretty inaccurate at least when it comes to the numbers)
- Search engine Webmaster tools – I use them for identifying if a search engine has any difficulty accessing particular content on a site and some backlink analysis
- If you have a WordPress blog (you should be using the [WordPress SEO](#) plugin).

The tools I use most often are Majestic (for historic link reports at the beginning of a project), SEMRush for quick keyword research, Advanced Web Ranking or Pro-Ranktracker for checking rankings on a few sites, Clicky for real-time website stats, Google Analytics for quick traffic analysis. I also use a couple of different tools for spidering a site and checking syntax.

Rich, accessible, relevant content and editorial links from reputable sites are what you need to get more visitors safely from Google in 2018.

You should be thinking things like '*how am I going to make my site better*', or '*how am I going to keep people on my site longer*', or and '*just where is my next quality link coming from*'?

Analysis paralysis is pretty common with any toolset, so watch out, and good luck.

If I find the time, I will add the rest one day!

TIP! Test Your Site For Mobile Friendliness!

Google is moving to a *mobile-first index* and that means your mobile experience better be above average!

Test your site using the public tool found [here](#): ALTHOUGH NOTE if you want to be sure your site is mobile-friendly as far as Google is concerned – it means using [this tool](#). Here's the announcement [from Google](#).

Note that passing Google's mobile-friendliness test does not mean your website is automatically user-friendly. For a site to be even more user-friendly on mobile devices – you should be relying on W3C technologies – so I would recommend you use the [free tool](#) (currently *disabled*) provided by the W3c:

This checker performs various tests on a Web Page to determine its level of mobile-friendliness. The tests are defined in the [mobileOK Basic Tests 1.0](#) specification. A Web Page is **mobileOK** when it passes all the tests.

I'm currently bringing my site in line with w3c on mobile friendliness and more general web accessibility recommendations.

The Best SEO Tools for Beginners

I've reviewed a lot of SEO tools over the last 15 years or more.

Here are my top SEO tools that I use almost every day in 2018:

1. **SEMrush** – SEMrush (*AFF*) is an all-in-one online site audit and competitor analysis tool. This probably the best all-in-one SEO tool for beginners to get insights about their site and competitor sites, too. SemRush is a paid monthly subscription.
2. **Google Search Console** – This is a free web analytics console from Google. GSC (also known as 'Webmaster Tools' is a must-have toolset with limited but sometimes invaluable insights about your own site and messages about your site health direct from Google. Connect it with Google Analytics to get the most data about our site you can get (for free). For most small businesses, you are crazy not to register your domain with this system.
3. **Screaming Frog SEO crawler** – This is a PC-based site crawler tool for experienced and professional technical SEO and web developers. You can use it to find technical and user experience issues on a website. Beginners can glean a lot of information from it too. This is, in all my years' experience, my favourite technical tool. This is a paid yearly subscription and well worth it.
4. **Majestic** – This is an online tool to analyse the backlinks that point to your website. This is useful if you have backlinks manual action from Google, or want to clean up old link building practices using the Google Search Console Disavow Tool. You can also see your competitor's best backlinks too, ideal if you want to see what type of marketing is working for your competitor. Majestic is a paid monthly subscription.
5. **ProRankTracker** – Proranktracker (*AFF*) is a simple online rank tracker where you can track daily progress of your rankings. Every webmaster should have one of these standalone rank tracker tools running in the background it is often ideal when identifying ranking drops in Google. Proranktracker is a paid monthly subscription.
6. **Google Pagespeed Tool** – This is an online tool where you can test for speed issues on your website.
7. **Clicky** – Clicky (*AFF*) is a very simple but incredibly powerful and easy-to-use real-time analytics tool. For beginners, it is probably much easier than Google Analytics to draw insights from.
8. **AnswerThePublic** – This is a very simple and free keyword research tool to help you if you are creating content around a specific topic. You can use this to find out the type of questions people have about particular topics.
9. **Redirect Path** – This is a very simple free Chrome Plugin you can use to analyse redirects that occur when you go to a URL using your browser.
10. **Grammarly** – Grammarly (*AFF*) is a simple grammar and spelling plugin for Chrome if you edit your website text using your browser. It is a simple way to ensure your web copy is not so bad as to put off users. You also do not want to misspell important keywords or synonyms.

Review: How To Do An SEO Audit With SEMRush FAST (Beginners Guide)

Why audit your site, first?

- **Want to build links to your site?** You better audit your backlink profile and look to see what stuff should be cleaned up first.
- **Want to switch your site your site to https? Or move domain?** Perhaps you better audit your current 301 structure and broken backlinks first.
- **Want to add new content to the site?** You might want to check your website and get rid of the spammy content first. You will want to clean up any outdated or factually incorrect first.
- **Want to add more ads to your site?** You better check how many ads are currently on your pages, and where they are placed.
- **Want SEO to improve your business fortunes?** You had better check your strategies past and present meet Google's current recommendations

You get the picture.

You could call it '*increased complexity*'.

At this end, Google gave search engine optimisers more pressing problems than building unnatural links or spinning text to beat the competition.

With the frequency of 'core quality updates' that we think are based on (basically) machine learning, user click data and human quality rater feedback, to rank in Google for the medium/long term you will need to CLEAN UP AND AT THE SAME TIME UPGRADE your entire web site offering from a technical and content standpoint.

I do not touch a seo project without a full seo audit these days because you can be hired one day and a quality update can wipe out a vulnerable (I mean a site built on spam) the next day, and the seo can get the blame because they 'touched' something when they did not.

For the client, the benefits of a professional seo audit on project start are apparent as the challenge facing the site is laid bare in front of them, as are the opportunities and recommendations on how to improve search engine rankings for the future.

Many readers of this blog do seo themselves.

You may be familiar with SEMRush (*Disclosure – I am a customer of many years and an affiliate*) when it comes to competitor analysis and keyword research, as it is a very popular option amongst SEO professionals.

SEMRush is constantly updating their offering, and this (relatively) new and improved feature is a welcome one.

I rarely use the SEMRush site myself as I am addicted to using their data through API access. The things you can do with the API are wonderful. I use about 20 API from different providers (including SEMrush) to create my in-depth audits.

For beginners on a tight budget, though, and those carrying out the first seo audit of their site, SEMRush is a great option to get an idea of some of the technical issues facing your site.

How To Use The SEMRush Site Audit Tool

Introduction to the SEMRush Technical Audit

The **SEMRush Site Audit Tool** is a fast and painless way to quickly identify simple technical or basic on-page issues your website may have, with minimal fuss and preparation.

Reports are ready within minutes, are easy to understand (even for the most inexperienced users) and include practical solutions for issue resolution and guidance for further investigation/research where required.
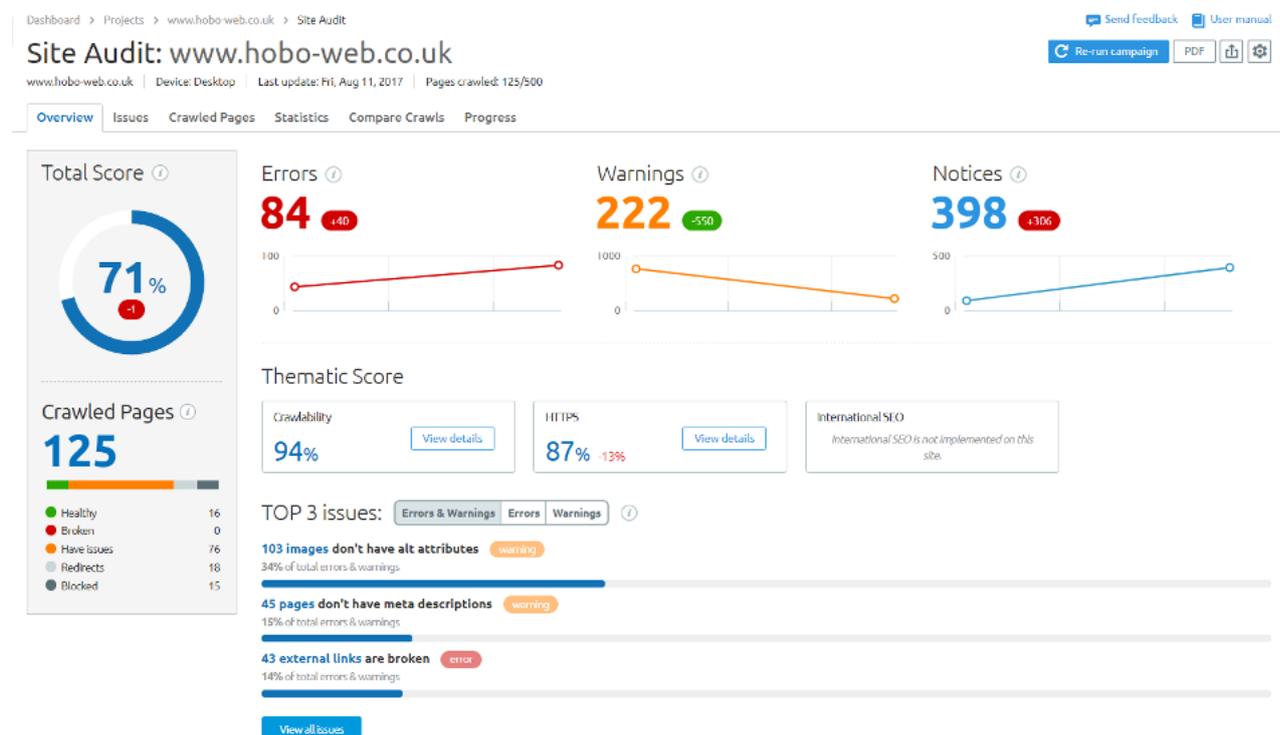
The tool automatically crawls your website and checks it against an extensive set of industry expectations and standards when it comes to usability. I won't list the full set of tests/checks in this article, but some notable features of the audit include:

- **Identify Broken Links:-** Internal, External & Images are checked
- **Page Meta Review:-** Titles or Descriptions too long, too short, missing or duplicate?
- **Page Headers:-** Check 404's, 301's and other internal redirects
- **On-page:-** Canonical, H-tags, Alt tags and other best practice on-page optimisation
- **Structural:-** Sitemap.xml, robots.txt & AMP page validation
- **Page Speed:-** Does the site load quickly enough for all devices?
- **https / http:-** Migrating to https? Are all internal link references consistent and secure?
- **hreflang:-** International/multi lingual site checks

The results from the site audit can be easily shared with clients or development teams, and because re-auditing is so simple, it's a great way to track and compare site improvements over time.

How to configure your site audit

It is very easy to run a technical audit using SEMRush. To begin, you first need to create a 'Project' on the SEMRush Dashboard
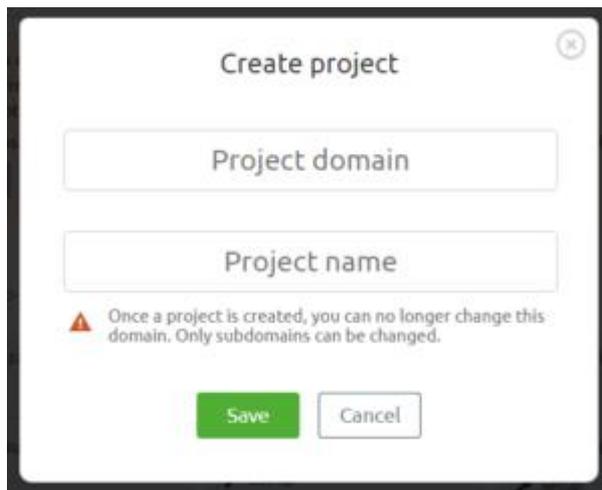
Enter the target URL and assign a 'Project Name', then select the 'Site Audit' set up:

Crawler Configuration
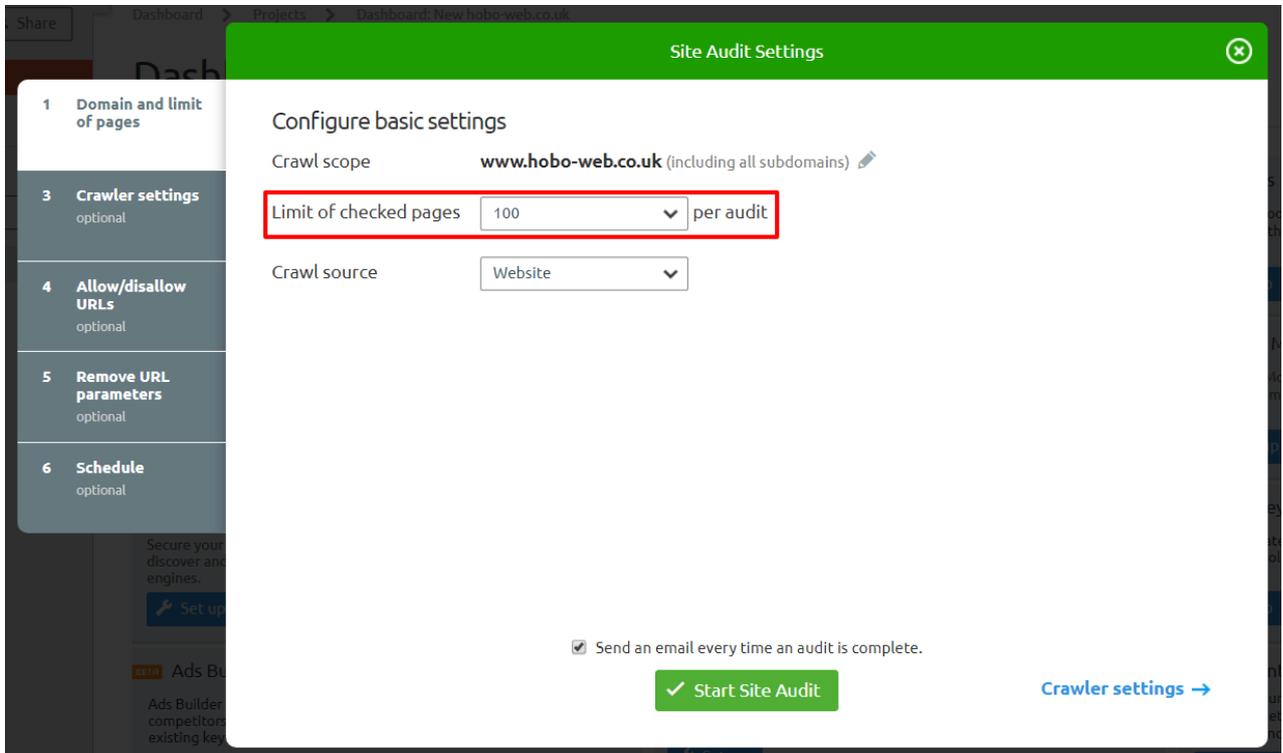
In most cases, the only 'default' parameter that will need to be changed will be the 'limit of checked pages', you want to ensure all potential URL's are included in the crawl. A quick way to determine this to do a quick 'site:youdomain.com' search in Google:
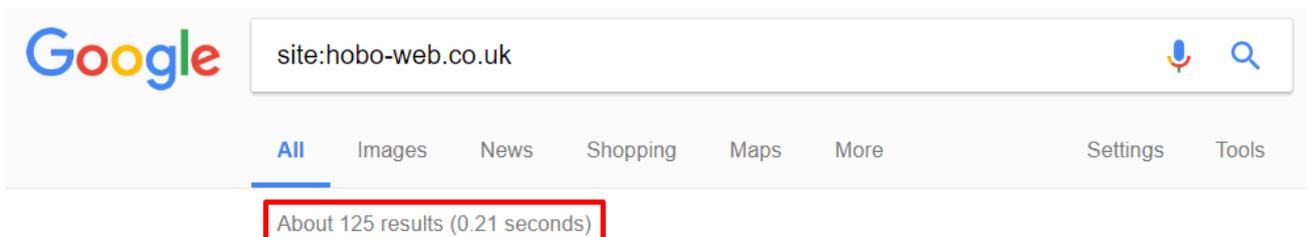
For more experienced users, there is a range of options to tailor the crawl, including:

- **Custom Checked Page Limit:-** Increase this for larger sites
- **Select Crawl Source:-** Organic site crawl or only target URL's contained in sitemap.xml
- **Select User Agent:-** Use default or specify Google Bot
- **Crawl Rate:-** Specify a low rate via robots.txt to avoid server resource issues (primarily on large sites)
- **Include/exclude URL's:-** You can specify sections of the site to crawl or ignore based upon URL patterns/parameters
- **Re-crawl Schedule:-** Determine when the site should automatically be re-crawled.

Once you are happy, simply hit the 'Start Site Audit' button and wait for notification that the crawl is complete.

The Audit Dashboard Explained

Overview

SEMRush generates their own 'Site Health' score based upon the total number of 'checks past' to 'checks failed' ratio. This gives an instant overall idea of the sites current technical set-up.
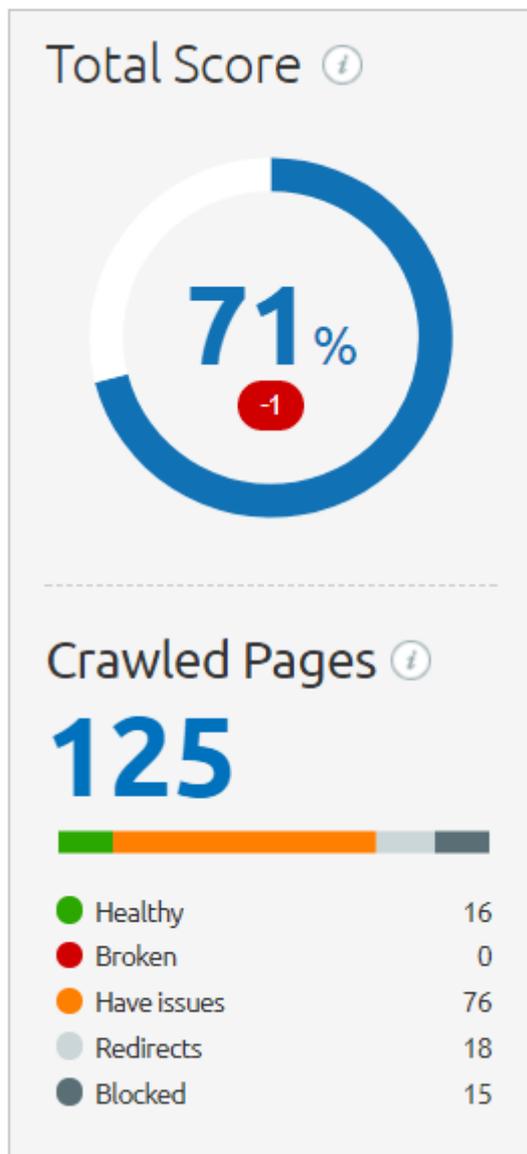
This is updated after every re-crawl and shows the overall trend, handy for large and regularly updated sites.

The next section summarises the number of site issues found during the audit. The issues fall into 3 categories….

- **Errors**:- The most severe issues found
- **Warnings**:- Less severe but still recommended
- **Notices**:- General best practice elements, which help the overall site quality
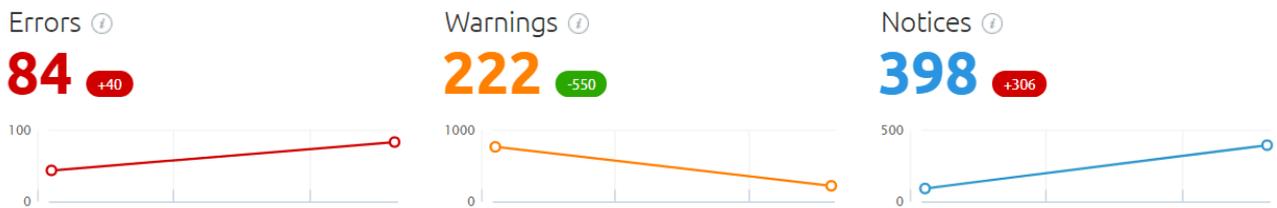
The 'Thematic Score' info boxes lead through to some useful data on the overall site crawl equity, https and international (or 'hreflang tags') implementation.

The most crucial errors and warnings are also brought forward and highlighted:

Issues Tab

Lists all site errors and warnings, with brief but useful explanations of the importance / relevance / potential solution for each element.

Pages with errors are then grouped, so it is extremely useful for identifying shared or page specific issues:

Crawled Pages

Lists all URL's picked up during site crawl, and you view/filter / summarise the data based upon metrics including:

- Crawl Depth
- Issues Found

- HTTP Status Code
- Re-audit URL's individually (if required after fixes have been applied)

In addition, you can pull data directly from your Google Analytics account to help with top page identification and prioritization:

Click on site links to see individual page reports listing details/issues to be addressed:

Statistics

Ideal for ongoing reporting and issue resolution tracking. This dashboard provides short-cut links to access sets of URL's based upon key technical metrics which can then be easily

exported or shared.

Compare Crawls

Ideal for tracking site improvements over time, this is especially handy when large teams or different departments are involved.

Progress

The progress tab compares and presents data from each site audit in a graphical format. You can easily overly specific 'issue' metrics to get a clear indication of where improvements are being made and more crucially where issues are on the increase.

Summary

The SEMRush Site Audit is a great tool to quickly analyse/review the technical set up of any website. The results can be easily shared or export for further analysis, and should give you a clear indication of where the main problems lie.

A key benefit is the ability to schedule re-crawls / re-fresh data which tracks progress and issue resolution. It is especially useful for clarifying and targeting issues for development teams, and outputs ready-made reports for clients.

Resolving underlying technical issues should be the main priority following an SEO Audit. Nothing should be left that will impede the search engines from crawling and indexing your content

Keyword / Ranking Positions Audit:

Introduction to the SEMRush Keyword Tools

SEMRush provides a comprehensive suite of tools relating to keyword research and position tracking. For the purposes of an audit, we minimum we would want to determine are:

- what are the primary terms (most relevant, most desirable) for the target site?
- what terms is the target site actually ranking for?
- what are the top positions (and associated volumes)?

Luckily this is very easy to do.

Using the main search bar, select 'Organic Research' from the drop down menu, then input the root domain (without http://, https:// or www.) hit search and once the page reloads, you will be presented with Organic Search Position data for the target URL.
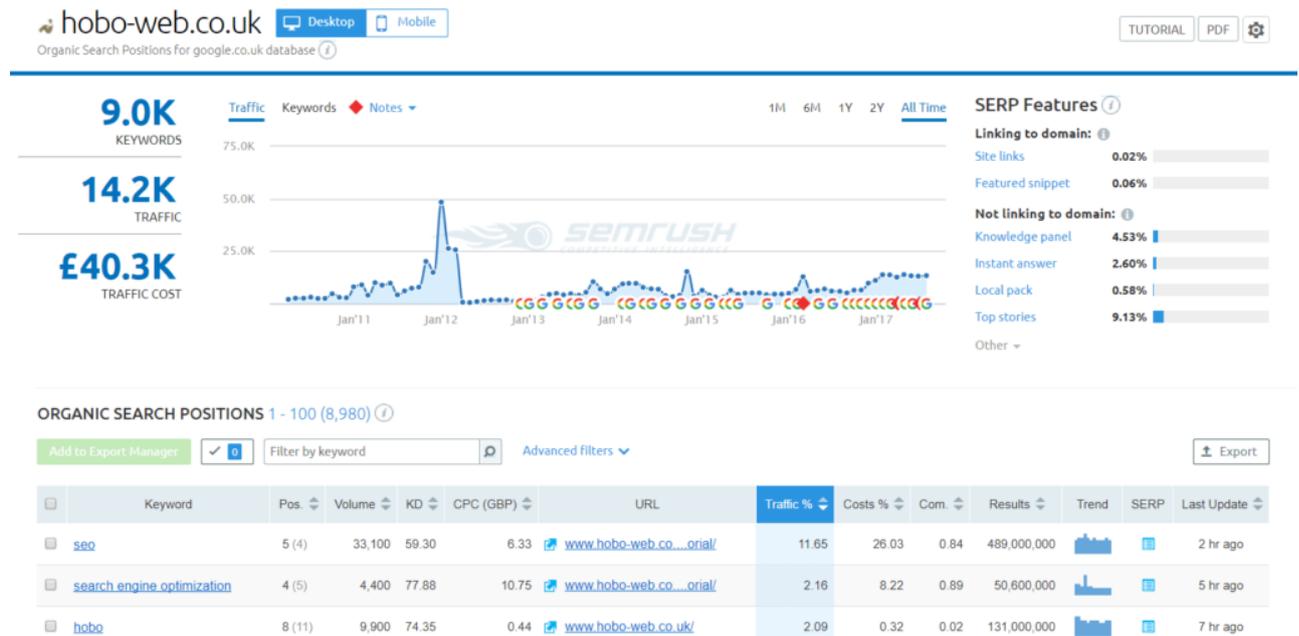
Geographic Options

You can change the Geographic location by country to suit.
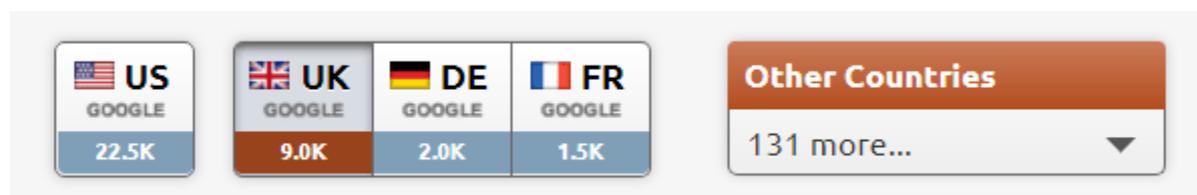
Mobile Data

Still in a beta release, the Mobile Search data is available to all users.
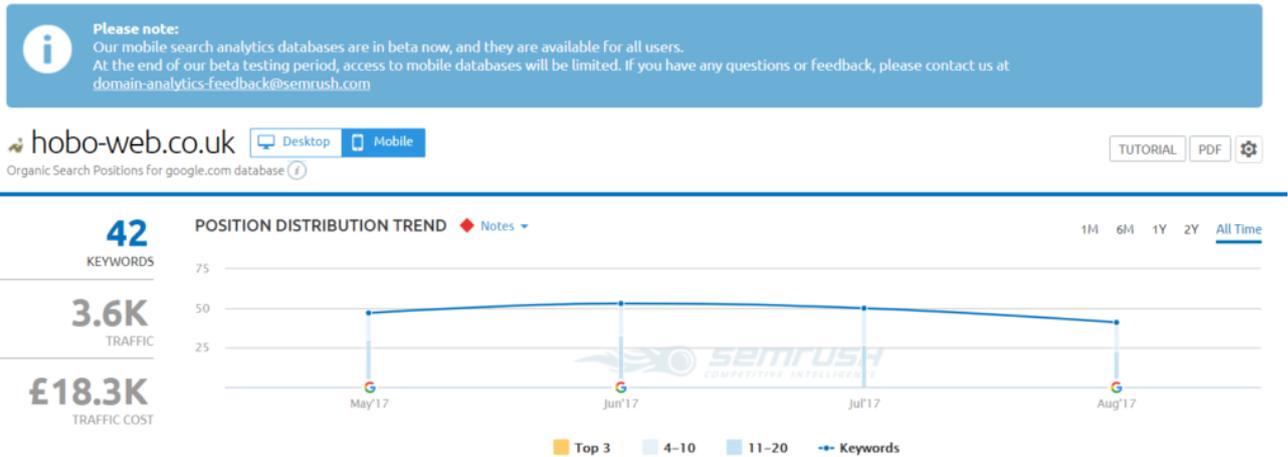
Totals Summary / Trend Graph / SERP Features
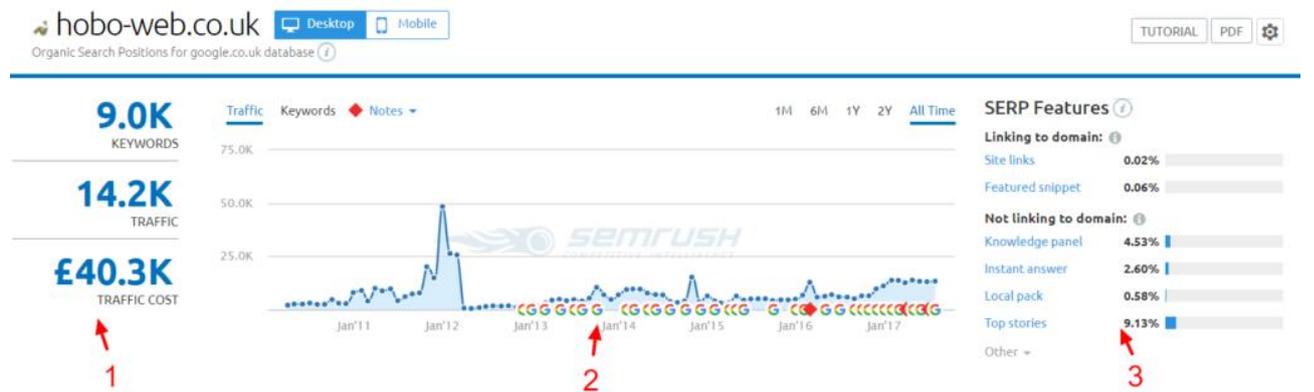
1. Shows the total number of ranking keywords associated with the target site and the total number of users expected to visit the site in the next month (based upon average of previous).
2. View either the overall trends, Traffic or Keywords, overlaid with known Google algorithm updates or feature changes.
3. Highlights the percentage of the interactive SERP Features the associated site keywords trigger when searched. This gives an insight to the site visibility.

Data Table

Here you will be presented with a breakdown of all ranking terms and URLs and associated data:

Of these, the most pertinent metrics to look for are:

- **Search Volume:-** The monthly average number of times the term has been searched for (based upon 12 months data)
- **Traffic Percentage:-** The overall percentage of traffic the term has sent to the site (over the selected period)

Historic Data

Historical keyword data is also available, depending on your current SEMRush plan. In most cases the Fresh data is more than adequate, however in some circumstances being able to look back can be invaluable particularly if it's an old domain with a potentially 'checkered' past.
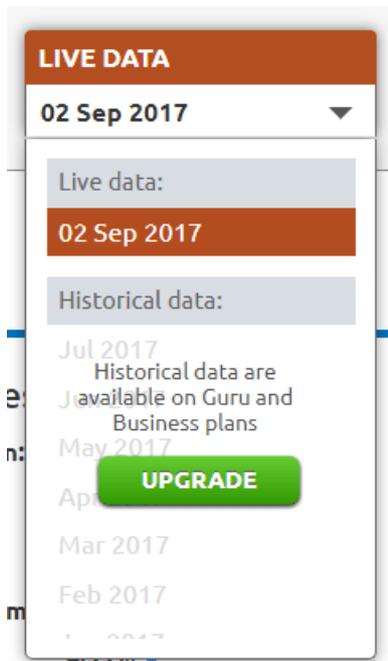
Summary

As both a keyword research and positioning tool, SEMRush is an excellent all-rounder. For site auditing purposes, it is quick and easy to get a good idea of a sites current (and historic) key term & ranking performance, simply by entering the URL.

Competitor Audit

Introduction to the SEMRush Competitor Research Tools

Most companies and organisations will know who their direct / paid search competitors are in regards to the products or services they offer, however, this is not always the same as their 'organic search' competitors.

How to identify top organic competitors

Again make sure the target URL is selected via the SEMRush search bar and simply navigate to the 'Competitors' Tab

hobo-web.co.uk [Desktop] [Mobile]
Organic Competitors for google.co.uk database (i)

[TUTORIAL] [PDF] [⚙]

9.0K KEYWORDS

14.2K TRAFFIC

£40.3K TRAFFIC COST

ORGANIC COMPETITORS 1 - 100 (5,116) (i)

[↥ Export]

Domain	Competition Level ⇕	Common Keywords ⇕	SE Keywords ⇕	SE Traffic	SE Traffic Price (GBP)	Ads Keywords
seomark.co.uk		280	1.7k	5.3k	21.1k	0
searchenginewatch.com		737	21.0k	47.1k	56.2k	0
moz.com		926	54.3k	108.9k	289.5k	527

Competitor Positioning Map

You will be presented with a visual representation of the organic competitors for the target URL:

This provides an easy to interpret 'snapshot' of how well the target URL performs against competitors in the vertical, based upon the SEMRush 'Competition Level' metric which looks primarily at common keywords.

This graph lets you see, at a glance, if the target URL is in direct competition with any big brand or authority sites in the niche.

Organic Competitor Table

This table contains the full set of competitor URLs, and again this can be reordered using the table headings and the data can be easily exported for external analysis/sharing purposes.

Domain	Competition Level	Common Keywords	SE Keywords	SE Traffic	SE Traffic Price (GBP)	Ads Keywords
seomark.co.uk		280	1.7k	5.3k	21.1k	0
searchenginewatch.com		737	21.0k	47.1k	56.2k	0
moz.com		926	54.3k	108.9k	289.5k	527
voog.com		187	1.1k	2.5k	3.2k	0
neilpatel.com		355	17.6k	16.8k	44.7k	0
yoast.com		340	12.3k	23.7k	46.4k	0
redevolution.com		142	1.3k	8.8k	47.4k	3
backlinko.com		151	3.4k	7.9k	23.5k	0
smartz.com		118	642	1.6k	1.2k	0
searchenginejournal.com		332	23.4k	19.0k	28.8k	0
seobook.com		175	5.8k	9.3k	16.8k	0

For site auditing purposes the most important metrics/columns to look at are:

Competition Level:
"The metric is based on the analysis of the number of keywords of each domain, and the number of the domains' common keywords. If the domains have a high number of common keywords, they could be considered competitors."

Common Keywords:
"The same keywords the given and queried domains are ranking for in Google's top 100 organic search results."

SE Keywords:
"Keywords bringing users to the website via Google's top 100 organic search results."

As a starting point, you should aim to have a list of approx. 5 -10 close 'organic search' competitors which can then be analysed in more detail using the full set of SEMRush competitor data features available. You should be able to:

- Evaluate competitor content & ranking performance
- Highlight content gaps on the target site
- Identify new keyword opportunities

Summary

Competitor research and analysis is perhaps the strongest part of the SEMRush offering.

The ability to analyse and (relatively) compare 'any' website is invaluable as is being able to really delve into competitor content and link performance. The set of competing URL's presented often throw up unanticipated insight which can be used to your advantage.

For audit purposes, the results will show a comprehensive overview of the 'search' competition, from big brands to small niche sites which you may not be aware of. You will also gain a unique view of where the target site sits in the overall search landscape.

In each example, you are able to further investigate back link, keyword and ranking data which will give you a quick and easy way to look for potential strategy and opportunity.

Backlink Audit:

Introduction to the SEMRush Backlink Analysis Tool

This section provides a detailed synopsis of the target sites back link profile, instantly generating metrics which can be used gauge the current link health, and quickly identify potential issues.

Of all the available reports and data views, the most potentially useful when auditing a site for the first time is…

The total number of backlinks: Quickly determine the quantity and quality of the referring links.
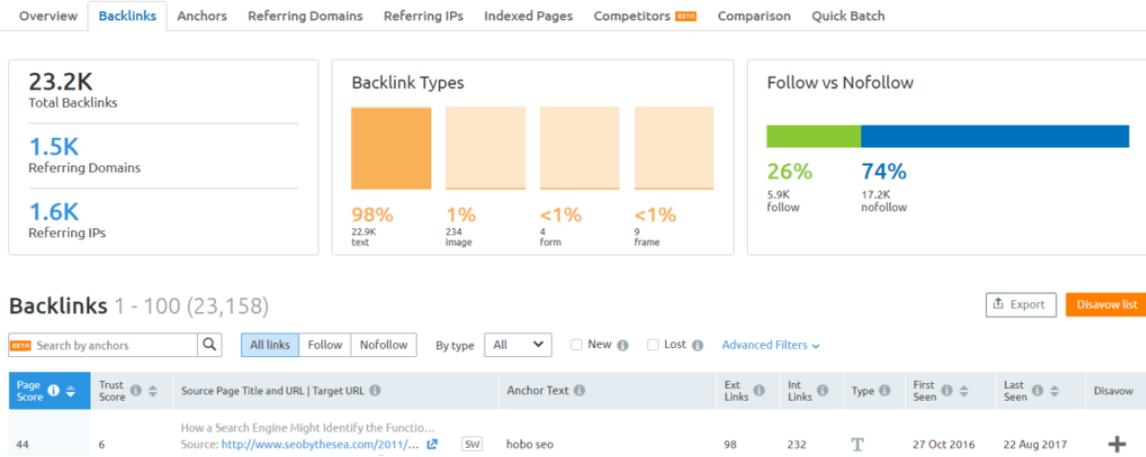
The total number of referring domains: A detailed overview of the linking domains including geographic and TLD authority metrics.
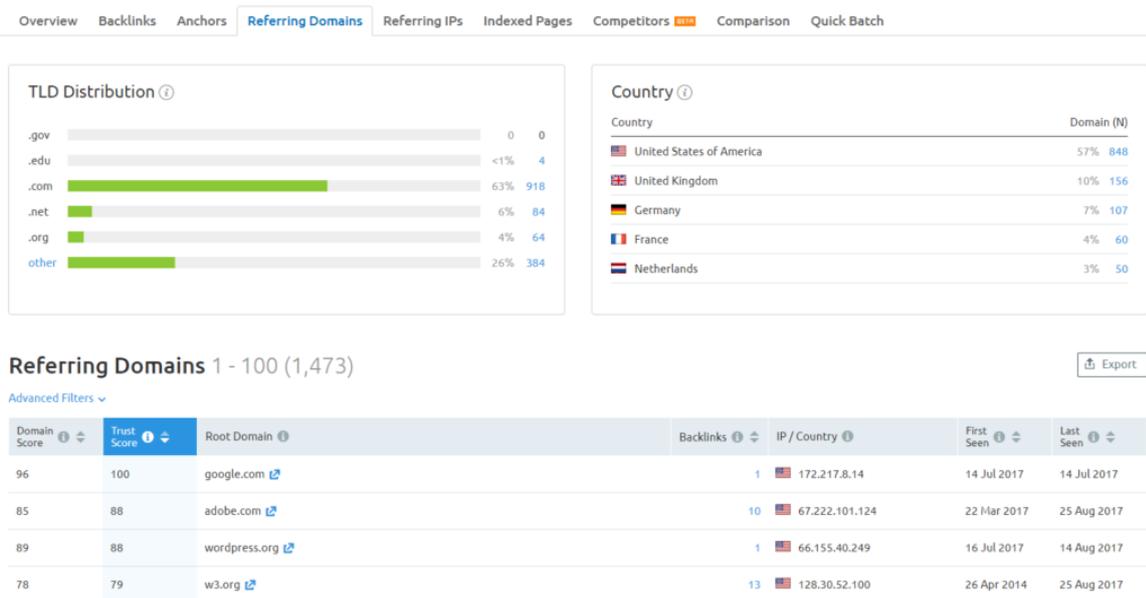
A breakdown of all anchor text: What are the most common phrases used when linking? site URL or brand name? is there any evidence of potential keyword stuffed or 'spammy' link building activities? These are easily spotted using this section.

Indexed Pages: Which pages are attracting the most external links, in total and from unique domains. What are the target sites most linkable assests?.

Summary:

The backlinks report can, in a few clicks, result in a useful overview of the target sites backlink profile. Key metrics can help spot potential trouble and you can utilise the inbuilt Disavow file feature to manage bad links moving forward. Quality links are also highlighted

While the SEMRush link database is perhaps not as big as other 'specialist' back link data providers, it is accurate enough to act upon, to determine where further analysis is required and when turned towards competitor sites, can reveal potential link building opportunities.

Note: SEMrush currently have a new 'Backlink Audit' Tool under a beta release, we will be sharing a full review of this feature in the near future.

Content Audit:

In any initial site audit, one of the key questions is… what is the top performing content on this site?

Google Analytics remains the most accurate way to determine top performing content and organic landing pages (other analytical and tracking packages are available, of course), however in the absence of access to site generated statistical data, SEMRush can provide its own independent data set from which to draw (relatively accurate, for a third party) insights.

The Organic Research > Pages report lists top content based upon 2 key metrics…

- **Traffic Percentage:** Estimated percentage of overall site traffic generated by the page.
- **Keywords:** The number of (top 100) terms the page currently ranks for.

Summary

Although it's only 'estimated' traffic, when this is joined with the ranking and backlink data, a clear indication of the most valuable site content emerges. Conversely, poor performing content is also be highlighted.

With 'content quality' an apparent major ranking factor in Google in 2018, this report is actually one of my favourite reports on SEMRush that is not in the API at the time of writing. To be able to quickly check the terms a page ranks for is invaluable, as is looking at the same reports on competitor websites.

Spy On Your Competitors Rankings & Perform Keyword Research FREE for 30 Days (Worth Over 100$)

Disclosure: "*I am an affiliate of SEMRush. This post is opinion. There are affiliate links on this page where I would make a commission if you were to buy the product. The content is my own and not sponsored. External links to third party sites are moderated by me. Links to internal pages promote my own content and services. I highlight monetised links in a clear way on this site. This page uses cookies. Your privacy is respected.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

SEMrush has a nice offer for readers of this blog – **free access to keyword research and competitor research reports for 30 days**.

Use the following link to trial SEMrush free for 30 days and get the information on your competitors you need to compete in Google organic or PPC listings:

- [Try SEMRush Pro (Free Trial For 30 Days)](#).

With SEMrush, you can easily see the keywords you and your competitors rank for, and you can access this information for free for 30 days.

I use SEMrush daily – you should check it out.

Duplicate Content Advice From Google

> **QUOTE: "***Important****: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC (main content) on the page is* **copied** *with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users.* **Such pages should be rated Lowest***, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source." -* Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines *March 2017*

 TLDR: 'Duplicate content' is NOT mentioned ****once**** in the recently published *Search Quality Raters Guidelines*. 'Copied content', is.

Semantics aside, *duplicate content* is evidently treated differently by Google than *copied content, with the difference being the INTENT and nature of the duplicated text.*

Duplicated content is often not manipulative and is commonplace on many websites and often free from malicious intent. *Copied content* can often be penalised algorithmically or manually. Duplicate *content is not penalised, but this is often not an optimal set-up for pages, either. Be VERY careful 'spinning' 'copied' text to make it unique!*

Google clearly says that the practice of making your text more 'unique', using low-quality techniques like adding synonyms and related words is:

> ***QUOTE****: "probably more counter productive than actually helping your website"* John Mueller, Google

If you need help identifying if any problematic content is on your website, our SEO audit can give you answers. View SEO service prices.

If you are doing SEO yourself, read on, as I attempt to break down a common SEO misunderstanding.

UPDATE:

John ☆.o(≧▽≦)o.☆ ✔
@JohnMu

Following

This is an awesome summary of duplicate content & web-search. Thanks, @Hobo_Web !

Shaun Anderson @Hobo_Web
'We do have some things around duplicate content that are penalty worthy' Google bit.ly/2zr3w0Y #hoboseo

8:44 AM - 22 Nov 2017

22 Retweets 41 Likes

5   22   41
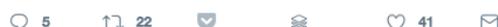
Google Q&A on Duplicate Content

https://youtu.be/KxCAVmXfVyI?t=3m41s

In the video above (June 17 2016), **Google's Andrey Lipattsev** was adamant: Google DOES NOT have a duplicate content penalty.

It's a good video for a refresher on the subject of duplicated content on your site.

He clearly wants people to understand **it is NOT a penalty if Google discovers your content is not unique and doesn't rank your page above a competitor's page**.

Also, as John Mueller points out, Google picks the best option to show users depending on who they are and where they are. So sometimes, your duplicate content will appear to users where relevant.

This latest advice from Google is useful in that it clarifies Google's position, which I quickly paraphrase below:

- There is no duplicate content penalty
- Google rewards UNIQUENESS and the signals associated with ADDED VALUE
- Google FILTERS duplicate content
- Duplicate content can slow Google down in finding new content
- XML sitemaps are just about the BEST technical method of helping Google discover your new content
- Duplicate content is probably not going to set your marketing on fire
- Google wants you to concentrate signals in canonical documents, and it wants you to focus on making these canonical pages BETTER for USERS.
- For SEO, it is not necessarily the *abundance* of duplicate content on a website that is the real issue. It's the lack of positive signals that NO unique content or added value provides that will fail to help you rank faster and better in Google.

A sensible strategy for SEO would still appear to be to reduce Googlebot crawl expectations and consolidate ranking equity & potential in high-quality canonical pages and you do that by minimising duplicate or near-duplicate content.

A self-defeating strategy would be to 'optimise' low-quality or non-unique pages or present low-quality pages to users.

Duplicate Content SEO Best Practice

Webmasters are confused about 'penalties' for duplicate content, which is a natural part of the web landscape, because Google claims there is NO duplicate content penalty, yet rankings can be impacted negatively, apparently, by what looks like 'duplicate content' problems.

The reality in 2018 is that if Google classifies your duplicate content as THIN content, or MANIPULATIVE BOILER-PLATE or NEAR DUPLICATE 'SPUN' content, then you probably DO have a severe problem that violates Google's website performance recommendations and this 'violation' will need 'cleaned' up - if - of course - you intend to rank high in Google.

Google wants us to understand, in 2018, that MANIPULATIVE BOILER-PLATE or NEAR DUPLICATE 'SPUN' content is NOT 'duplicate content'.

Duplicate content is not necessarily 'spammy' to Google.

The rest of it is e.g:

> **QUOTE***: "Content which is copied, but changed slightly from the original. This type of copying makes it difficult to find the exact matching original source. Sometimes just a few words are changed, or whole sentences are changed, or a "find and replace" modification is made, where one word is replaced with another throughout the text. These types of changes are deliberately done to make it difficult to find the original source of the content. We call this kind of content "copied with minimal alteration."* Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines March 2017*

At the ten minute mark in a recent video, John Mueller of Google also clarified, with examples, that there is:

> **QUOTE**: "*No duplicate content penalty" but "We do have some things around duplicate content ... that are penalty worthy*" John Mueller, Google

https://youtu.be/cxWo4ttPgAc

What Is Duplicate Content?

Here is a definition from Google:

> **QUOTE**: "*Duplicate content generally refers to substantive blocks of content within or across domains that either completely match other content or are appreciably similar. Mostly, this is not deceptive in origin.....*" Google

It's crucial to understand that if in 2018, as a Webmaster, you republish posts, press releases, news stories or product descriptions found on ***other*** sites, then your pages are very definitely going to **struggle** to gain traction in Google's SERPs (search engine results pages).

Google doesn't like using the word 'penalty' but if your entire site is made of entirely of republished content - Google does not want to rank it above others who provide more of a 'value add' - and that can be in many areas.

If you have a multiple site strategy selling the same products - you are probably going to cannibalise your traffic in the long run, rather than dominate a niche, as you used to be able to do.

This is all down to how a search engine filters duplicate content found on other sites - and the experience Google aims to deliver for it's users - and it's competitors.

Mess up with duplicate content on a website, and it might look like a penalty as the end-result is the same - important pages that once ranked might not rank again - and new content might not get crawled as fast as a result.

Your website might even get a 'manual action' for thin content.

Worse case scenario your website is hit by the Google Panda algorithm.

A good rule of thumb is; do NOT expect to rank high in Google with content found on other, more trusted sites, and don't expect to rank at all if all you are using is automatically generated pages with no 'value add'.

While there are exceptions to the rule, (and Google certainly treats your OWN duplicate content on your OWN site differently), your best bet in ranking in 2018 is to have one single (canonical) version of content on your site with rich, unique text content that is written specifically for that page.

Google wants to reward RICH, UNIQUE, RELEVANT, INFORMATIVE and REMARKABLE content in its organic listings - and it has raised the quality bar over the last few years.

https://youtu.be/mQZY7EmjbMA

If you want to rank high in Google for valuable key phrases and for a long time - you better have good, original content for a start - and lots of it.

A very interesting statement in a recent webmaster hangout was "*how much quality content do you have compared to low-quality content*". That indicates Google is looking at this ratio. John says to identify "*which pages are high-quality, which pages are lower quality so that the pages that do get indexed are really the high-quality ones.*"

Gary IILyes chipped in recently - (Feb 2017)

> **QUOTE**: "*DYK Google **doesn't have a duplicate content penalty**, but **having many URLs serving the same content burns crawl budget and may dilute signals**"* Gary IILyes Google

Recent advice in 2018

Google is giving us a lot more specific information these days in particular areas.

> **QUOTE**: "*what does ' duplicate content' mean? Content copied from other websites or original content that's duplicated within a website? Which one to avoid most? Can a web site be demoted if original content duplicates within web site pages?*"

A question was asked in a webmaster hangout and John replied:

> **QUOTE**: "*so that's that's a complicated question actually. So we have different types of duplicate content that we look at there from our point of view there are lots of technical reasons why within a website you might have the same content on multiple pages and from our point of view we try to help fix that for you as much as possible*" John Mueller, Google 2018

And

> **QUOTE**: "*so if we can recognize that these pages have the same content on them or the same primary content on them then we'll try to fold that into one and make sure thatall of the signals we have focus on that one page* " John Mueller, Google 2018

And, here is where it gets trickier:

> **QUOTE**: "*on the other hand if this is content copied from multiple locations then that gets to be a bit trickier for us because then we have the situation that this website has that its content on another website has the same content on it which one is actually the one that we need to show and search that makes it a lot harder because then it's not a question between like which one of your pages we want to show but which one of these pages by different people or on different servers do we want to show.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

And when it gets spammy:

QUOTE: "*the trickiest one or the one where maybe it's not trickiest the one where you really need to watch out for with regards to duplicate content is if within your content the majority of the content is copied from other sources or the majority of the content is kind of rewritten repurposed from other sources then when our algorithms look at your website they're like well I've seen everything from this website before there is nothing of value here that we would miss if we didn't Index this website because all of this content is based on something that's available on different parts of the web.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

And finally:

QUOTE: "*and in a case like that it can happen that our algorithms say we need to kind of ignore this website completely we don't need to focus on it in the search the manual webspam team might even come in and say actually it's it's a waste of our resources to even look at this website because it's just pure copies of all of these other websites maybe slightly rewritten but it's not there's nothing unique here and in those cases we might remove a website completely from search so that's kind of the the one that you really need to watch out for if it's really just a matter of your content on your website in multiple URLs then from a technical point of view you can improve that slightly by kind of having fewer copies on the website but that's not something that you really need to watch out for.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

What is Boilerplate Content?

Wikipedia says of 'boilerplate' content:

> *QUOTE: "**Boilerplate** is any **text** that is or can be reused in new contexts or applications without being greatly changed from the original."* [WIKI](#)

...and Google says to:

> *QUOTE: "Minimize boilerplate repetition" Google Webmaster Guidelines*

Google is very probably looking to see if your pages '***stand on their own***' - as John Mueller is oft fond of saying.

How would they do that algorithmically? Well, they *could* look to see if text blocks on your pages were unique to the page, or were very similar blocks of content to other pages on your site.

If this 'boilerplate' content is the content that makes up the **P**RIMARY content of multiple pages - Google can easily filter to ignore - or penalise - this practice.

The sensible move would be to listen to Google - and minimise - or at least diffuse - the instances of boilerplate text, page-to-page on your website.

Note that THIN CONTENT exacerbates SPUN BOILERPLATE TEXT problems on a site - as THIN CONTENT just creates more pages that can only be created with boilerplate text - itself, a problem.

E.G. - if a product has 10 URLs - one URL for each colour of the product, for instance - then the TITLE, META DESCRIPTION & PRODUCT DESCRIPTION (and other elements on the page) for these extra pages will probably rely on BOILERPLATE techniques to create them, and in doing so - you create 10 URLs on the site that do 'not stand on their own' and essentially duplicate text across pages.

It's worth listening to John Mueller's recent advice on this point. He clearly says that the practice of making your text more 'unique', using low-quality techniques is:

> **QUOTE***: "probably more counter productive than actually helping your website"* - John Mueller, Google

https://youtu.be/tcU1elqTkJQ?t=45m2s

If you have many pages of similar content your site, Google might have trouble choosing the page you want to rank, and it might dilute your capability to rank for what you do what to rank for.

Should I Rewrite Product Descriptions To Make The Text Unique?

Probably. Whatever you do, beware 'spinning the text' - Google *might* have an algorithm or two focused on that sort of thing:

How Does Google Rate 'Copied' Main Content?

This is where you are swimming upstream in 2018. Copied content is not going to be a long-term strategy when creating a unique page better than your competitions' pages.

In the latest *Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines* that were published on 14 March 2017, Google states:

7.4.5 Copied Main Content

> *Every page needs MC.* **One way to create MC with no time, effort, or expertise is to copy it from another source.** *Important: We do not consider legitimately licensed or syndicated content to be "copied" (see here for more on web syndication). Examples of syndicated content in the U.S. include news articles by AP or Reuters.*
>
> **The word "copied" refers to the practice of "scraping" content, or copying content from other nonaffiliated websites without adding any original content or value to users** *(see here for more information on copied or scraped content).*
>
> *If all or most of the MC on the page is copied, think about the purpose of the page.* **Why does the page exist?** *What value does the page have for users? Why should users look at the page with copied content instead of the original source? Important:* **The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users.** *Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source.*

and

7.4.6 More About Copied Content

> *All of the following are considered copied content:*
>
> *● Content copied exactly from an identifiable source. Sometimes an entire page is copied, and sometimes just parts of the page are copied. Sometimes multiple pages are copied and then pasted together into a single page. Text that has been copied exactly is usually the easiest type of copied content to identify.*
>
> *● Content which is copied, but changed slightly from the original. This type of copying makes it difficult to find the exact matching original source. Sometimes just a few words are changed, or whole sentences are changed, or a "find and replace" modification is made, where one word is replaced with another throughout the text. These types of changes are deliberately done to make it difficult to find the original source of the content. We call this kind of content "copied with minimal alteration."*

> ● *Content copied from a changing source, such as a search results page or news feed. You often will not be able to find an exact matching original source if it is a copy of "dynamic" content (content which changes frequently). However, we will still consider this to be copied content. Important: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users. Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source.*

Is There A Penalty For Duplicate Content On A Website?

Google has given us some explicit guidelines when it comes to managing duplication of content.
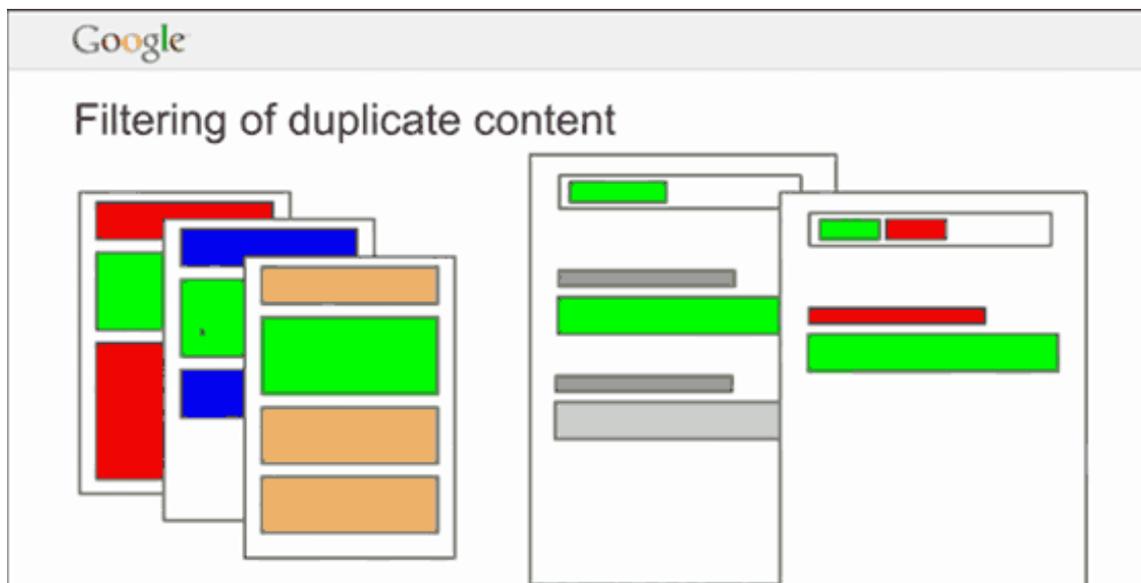
John Mueller clearly states in the video where I grabbed the above image:

> **QUOTE**: "*We don't have a duplicate content penalty. It's not that we would demote a site for having a lot of duplicate content.*" John Mueller, Google

and

> **QUOTE**: *"You don't get penalized for having this kind of duplicate content"* - John Mueller, Google

...in which he was talking about very similar pages. John says to "*provide… real unique value*" on your pages.

I think that could be understood that Google is not compelled to rank your duplicate content.

If it ignores it, it's different from a penalty. Your original content can still rank, for instance.

An e-commerce SEO tip from John with:

> **QUOTE**: *"variations of product "colors…for product page, but you wouldn't create separate pages for that."* With these type of pages you are *"always balancing is having really, really strong pages for these products, versus having, kind of, medium strength pages for a lot of different products."* John Mueller, Google

John says:

> **QUOTE**: *"one kind of really, really strong generic page"* trumps *"hundreds"* of mediocre ones." John Mueller, Google

If *"essentially, they're the same, and just variations of keywords"* that should be ok, but if you have '*millions*' of them- Googlebot might think you are building doorway pages, and that IS risky.

Generally speaking, Google will identify the best pages on your site if you have a decent on-site architecture and unique content.

The advice is to avoid duplicate content issues if you can and this should be common sense.

Google wants (and rewards) original content - it's a great way to push up the cost of SEO and create a better user experience at the same time.

Google doesn't like it when ANY TACTIC it's used to manipulate its results, and republishing content found on other websites is a common practice of a lot of spam sites.

> **QUOTE**: *"Duplicate content on a site is not grounds for action on that site unless it appears that **the intent of the duplicate content is to be deceptive and manipulate search engine results**."* Google.

You don't want to look anything like a spam site; that's for sure - and Google WILL classify your site... as something.

The more you can make it look a human-made every page on a page by page basis with content that doesn't appear exactly in other areas of the site - the more Google will 'like' it.

Google does not like automation when it comes to building the main content of a text-heavy page; that's clear in 2018.

I don't mind multiple copies of articles on the same site - as you find with Wordpress categories or tags, but I wouldn't have tags **and** categories, for instance, and expect them to rank well on a small site with a lot of higher quality competition, and especially not targeting the same keyword phrases in a way that can cannibalise your rankings.

I prefer to avoid repeated unnecessary content on my site, and when I do have 100% automatically generated or syndicated content on a site, I tell Google NOT to index it with a **noindex** in meta tags or XRobots or Robots.txt it out completely.

I am probably doing the safest thing, as that could be seen as manipulative if I intended to get it indexed.

Google won't thank you, either, for spidering a calendar folder with 10,000 blank pages on it, or a blog with more categories than original content - why would they?

How Does Googe Rate Content 'D*eliberately Duplicated Across Domains*'?

It can see it as manipulative:

> **QUOTE***: "...in some cases, content is deliberately duplicated across domains in **an attempt to manipulate search engine rankings or win more traffic**.*
>
> ***Deceptive practices like this** can result in a poor user experience, when a visitor sees substantially the same content repeated within a set of search results.*
>
> *Google tries hard to index and show pages with distinct information.*
>
> *This filtering means, for instance, that if your site has a "regular" and "printer" version of each article, and neither of these is blocked with a noindex meta tag, we'll choose one of them to list.*
>
> *In the rare **cases in which Google perceives that duplicate content may be shown with intent to manipulate our rankings and deceive our users, we'll also make appropriate adjustments in the indexing and ranking of the sites involved**.*
>
> *As a result, the ranking of the site may suffer, or the site might be removed entirely from the Google index, in which case it will no longer appear in search results.* **GOOGLE**

If you are trying to compete in competitive niches, you need original content that's not found on other pages in the same form on your site, and THIS IS, EVEN MORE, IMPORTANT WHEN THAT CONTENT IS FOUND ON OTHER PAGES ON OTHER WEBSITES.

Google isn't under any obligation to rank your version of content - in the end, it depends on who's site has got the most domain authority or most links coming to the page.

Well, historically at least - today in 2018 - it is often the page that satisfies users the *most*.

If you want to avoid being filtered by duplicate content algorithms, **produce unique content**.

How To Manage Content Spread Across Multiple Domains

This is a good video (with a little-outdated information about cross-domain rel canonical)

https://youtu.be/6hSoXutuj0g

Matt cutts updates advice on sing cross-domain rel canonical in the following video:

https://youtu.be/zI6L2N4A0hA

If you have content spread amongst multiple domains, do not expect to get all the versions appearing in Google SERPs at the same time.

This sort of duplicate content is not going to improve quality scores, either.

> **QUOTE**: "*when large portions of the website are copied across both of these sites then we assume that actually the whole website is kind of a copy of another* and we try to help you by just picking one and showing that so if you don't want that to happen then *make sure that these pages are really unique that the whole website on its own can stand on its own is not seen as mostly a copy of another.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

If you are following the rules whilst duplicating content across multiple domains, I would pick one canonical url on one website (the primary website) and use cross-domain canonical link elements to tell Google which is the primary URL.

This way you meet Google's guidelines, site quality scores should not be impacted negatively and you consolidate all ranking signals in one of these URLs so it can rank as best it can against competing pages.

How To Deal With Content Spread Across Multiple TLDs?

https://youtu.be/Ets7nHOV1Yo

How To Manage Duplicate Content When Reporting News Stories

https://youtu.be/mtbNpeYP_OM

What is 'Near-Duplicate' Content, to Google?

When asked on Twitter, Googler Gary Illyes responded (2017):

> **QUOTE**: *"Think of it as a piece of content that was slightly changed, or if it was copied 1:1 but the boilerplate is different."* Gary Illyes, Google 2017

Based on research papers, it might be the case that once Google detects a page is a near duplicate of something else, it is going to find it hard to rank this page against the source.

Can Duplicate Content Rank in Google?

Yes. There are strategies where this will still work, in the short term.

Opportunities are (in my experience) reserved for local and long tail SERPs where the top ten results page is already crammed full of low-quality results, and the SERPs are shabby - certainly not a strategy for competitive terms.

There's not a lot of traffic in long tail results unless you do it en-mass and that could invite further site quality issues, but sometimes it's worth exploring if using very similar content with geographic modifiers (for instance) on a site with some domain authority has opportunity.

Very similar content can be useful across TLDs too. A bit spammy, but if the top ten results are already a bit spammy...

If low-quality pages are performing well in the top ten of an existing long tail SERP - then it's worth exploring - I've used it in the past.

I always thought if it improves user experience and is better than what's there in those long tail searches at present, who's complaining?

It not exactly best practice SEO in 2018, and I'd be nervous creating any low-quality pages on your site these days.

Too many low-quality pages might cause you site wide issues in the future, not just page level issues.

Original Content Is King, they say

Stick to original content, found on only one page on your site, for best results - especially if you have a new/young site and are building it page by page over time... and you'll get better rankings and more traffic to your site (affiliates too!).

Yes - you can be creative and reuse and repackage content, but I always make sure if I am asked to rank a page I will require original content on the page.

Should I Block Google From Indexing My Duplicate Content?

No. There is NO NEED to block your **own** Duplicate Content

There was a useful post in Google forums a while back with advice from Google how to handle very similar or identical content:

"We now recommend **not** blocking access to duplicate content on your website, whether with a robots.txt file or other methods" John Mueller

John also goes on to say some good advice about how to handle duplicate content on your own site:

1. Recognize duplicate content on your website.
2. Determine your preferred URLs.
3. Be consistent on your website.
4. Apply 301 permanent redirects where necessary and possible.
5. Implement the rel="canonical" link element on your pages where you can.
6. Use the URL parameter handling tool in Google Webmaster Tools where possible.

Webmaster guidelines on content duplication used to say:

> **QUOTE: "***Consider blocking pages from indexing: Rather than letting Google's algorithms determine the "best" version of a document, you may wish to help guide us to your preferred version. For instance, if you don't want us to index the printer versions of your site's articles, disallow those directories or make use of regular expressions in your robots.txt file*." Google

but now Google is pretty clear they do NOT want us to block duplicate content, and that is reflected in the guidelines.

Google does not recommend blocking crawler access to duplicate content (dc) on your website, whether with a robots.txt file or other methods.

If search engines can't crawl pages with dc, they can't automatically detect that these URLs point to the same content and will therefore effectively have to treat them as separate, unique pages.

A better solution is to allow search engines to crawl these URLs, but mark them as duplicates by using the `rel="canonical"` link element, the URL parameter handling tool, or 301 redirects.

In cases where DC leads to us crawling too much of your website, you can also adjust the crawl rate setting in Webmaster Tools.

DC on a site is not grounds for action on that site unless it appears that the intent of the DC is to be deceptive and manipulate search engine results.

If your site suffers from DC issues, and you don't follow the advice listed above, we do a good job of choosing a version of the content to show in our search results.

You want to minimise dupe content, rather than block it, I find the best solution to handling a problem is on a case by case basis.

Sometimes I **will** block Google when using OTHER people's content on pages. I **never** block Google from working out my own content.

Google says it needs to detect an INTENT to manipulate Google to incur a penalty, and you should be OK if your intent is innocent, BUT it's easy to screw up and LOOK as if you are up to something fishy.

It is also easy to fail to get the benefit of proper canonicalisation and consolidation of relevant primary content if you don't do basic housekeeping, for want of a better turn of phrase.

Is A Mobile Site Counted As Duplicate Content?

https://youtu.be/mY9h3G8Lv4k

How To Use Canonical Link Elements Properly

Google also recommends using the **canonical link element** to help minimise content duplication problems and this is of the most powerful tools at our disposal.

> **QUOTE**: *If your site contains multiple pages with largely identical content, there are a number of ways you can indicate your preferred URL to Google. (This is called "canonicalization".)*" Google

Google SEO - Matt Cutts from Google shared tips on the rel="canonical" tag (more accurately - the *canonical link element*) that the 3 top search engines now support.

Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft have all agreed to work together in a:

> **QUOTE**: "*joint effort to help reduce duplicate content for larger, more complex sites, and the result is the new Canonical Tag*".

Example Canonical Tag From Google Webmaster Central blog:

```
<link rel="canonical"
href="http://www.example.com/product.php?item=swedish-fish" />
```

The process is simple. You can put this link tag in the head section of the duplicate content URLs if you think you need it.

Should pages have self-referencing Canonical link elements?

> **QUOTE**: "***I recommend doing this self-referential canonical because it really makes it clear to us which page you want to have indexed***, *or what the URL should be when it is indexed. Even if you have one page, sometimes there's different variations of the URL that can pull that page up. For example, with parameters in the end, perhaps with upper lower case or www and non-www. All of these things can be cleaned up with a rel canonical tag.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

I add a self-referring canonical link element as standard these days – to ANY web page - to help work Google work out exactly which is the canonical url I am trying to rank.

Google has offered us some [advice](#) on properly using canonicals:

Is rel="canonical" a hint or a directive?

> **QUOTE**: "*It's a hint that we honor strongly. We'll take your preference into account, in conjunction with other signals, when calculating the most relevant page to display in search results.*" Google

Can I use a relative path to specify the canonical, such as <link rel="canonical" href="product.php?item=swedish-fish" />?

QUOTE: "*Yes, relative paths are recognized as expected with the <link> tag. Also, if you include a<base> link in your document, relative paths will resolve according to the base URL.*" Google

Is it okay if the canonical is not an exact duplicate of the content?

QUOTE: "*We allow slight differences, e.g., in the sort order of a table of products. We also recognize that we may crawl the canonical and the duplicate pages at different points in time, so we may occasionally see different versions of your content. All of that is okay with us.*" Google

What if the rel="canonical" returns a 404?

QUOTE: "*We'll continue to index your content and use a heuristic to find a canonical, but we recommend that you specify existent URLs as canonicals.*"Google

What if the rel="canonical" hasn't yet been indexed?

QUOTE: "*Like all public content on the web, we strive to discover and crawl a designated canonical URL quickly. As soon as we index it, we'll immediately reconsider the rel="canonical" hint.*" Google

What if I have contradictory rel="canonical" designations?

QUOTE: "*Our algorithm is lenient: We can follow canonical chains, but we strongly recommend that you update links to point to a single canonical page to ensure optimal canonicalization results.*" Google.

Can this link tag be used to suggest a canonical URL on a completely different domain?

QUOTE: *The answer is yes! We now support a cross-domain rel="canonical" link element."* Google

Canonical Link Elements can be ignored by Google:

QUOTE: "*It's possible that we picked this up and we say oh this is good enough but if the pages are not equivalent if they're not really the same then it's also possible that our algorithms look at this and say well this rel canonical is probably accidentally set like this and we should ignore it*" John Mueller, Google 2018

Can rel="canonical" be a redirect?

QUOTE: "*Yes, you can specify a URL that redirects as a canonical URL. Google will then process the redirect as usual and try to index it.*" Google

Canonical link elements can be treated as redirects

> **QUOTE**: <mark>*"in general when you have a canonical from one page to the other one and we notice its a confirmed thing and the same content is up on both of these pages and you you have the internal links also pointing to your new canonical then usually we kind of treat that as a redirect"*</mark> John Mueller, Google 2018

Tip - Redirect old, out of date content to new, freshly updated articles on the subject, minimising low-quality pages and duplicate content while at the same time, improving the depth and quality of the page you want to rank.

See my page on 301 redirects - https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/how-to-change-domain-names-keep-your-rankings-in-google/.

Tips from Google

As with everything Google does - Google has had its own critics about its use of duplicate content on its own site for its own purposes:
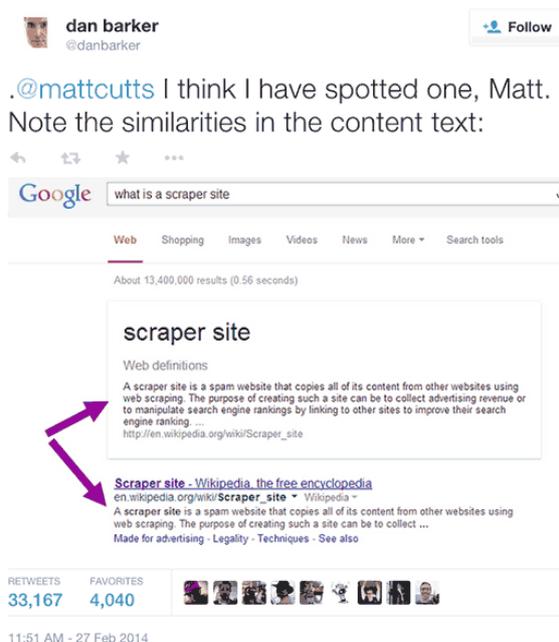
There are some steps you can take to proactively address duplicate content issues, and ensure that visitors see the content you want them to:

> **QUOTE: "**<mark>*Use 301s: If you've restructured your site, use 301 redirects ("RedirectPermanent") in your .htaccess file to smartly redirect users, Googlebot, and other spiders. (In Apache, you can do this with an .htaccess file; in IIS, you can do this through the administrative console.*</mark>)" Google

> **QUOTE: "*Be consistent*: "*Try to keep your internal linking consistent. For example, don't link to* `http://www.example.com/page/` *and* `http://www.example.com/page` *and* `http://www.example.com/page/index.htm`." Google**

I would also ensure your links are all the same case and avoid capitalisation and lower case variations of the same URL.

This type of duplication can be quickly sorted keeping internal linking consistent and proper use of canonical link elements.

> **QUOTE: "*Use top-level domains*: *To help us serve the most appropriate version of a document, use top-level domains whenever possible to handle country-specific content. We're more likely to know that* `http://www.example.de` *contains Germany-focused content, for instance, than* `http://www.example.com/de` *or* `http://de.example.com`." Google**

Google also tells Webmasters to choose a preferred domain to rank in Google:

> **QUOTE: "*Use Webmaster Tools to tell us how you prefer your site to be indexed*: *You can tell Google your preferred domain(for example,* `http://www.example.com` *or* `http://example.com`)." Google**

...although you should ensure you handle such redirects server side, with 301 redirects redirecting all versions of a URL to one canonical URL (with a self-referring canonical link element).

> **QUOTE: "*Minimize boilerplate repetition*: *For instance, instead of including lengthy copyright text on the bottom of every page, include a very brief summary and then link to a page with more details. In addition, you can use the Parameter Handling tool to specify how you would like Google to treat URL parameters.* *Understand your content management system*: *Make sure you're familiar with how content is displayed on your web site. Blogs, forums, and related systems often show the same content in multiple formats. For example, a blog entry may appear on the home page of a blog, in an archive page, and in a page of other entries with the same label.*" Google**

Understand If Your CMS Produces Thin Content or Duplicate Pages

Google says:

> **QUOTE: "*Understand your content management system*: *Make sure you're familiar with how content is displayed on your website. Blogs, forums, and related systems often show the same content in multiple formats. For example, a blog entry may appear on the home page of a blog, in an archive page, and in a page of other entries with the same label.*" Google**

Wordpress, Magento, Joomla, Drupal - they all come with slightly different SEO, duplicate content (and crawl equity performance) challenges.

For example, if you have 'PRINT-ONLY' versions of web pages (Joomla used to have major issues with this), that can end up displaying in Google instead of your web page if you've not handled it properly with canonicals.

That's probably going to have an impact on conversions **and** link building - for starters. Poorly implemented mobile sites can cause duplicate content problems, too.

I would watch out for building what can look like 'doorway pages' to Google by **creating too many keywords, tags or category pages**.

Will Google Penalise You For Syndicated Content?

No. When it comes to publishing your content on other websites:

> QUOTE: "*Syndicate carefully: If you syndicate your content on other sites, Google will always show the version we think is most appropriate for users in each given search, which may or may not be the version you'd prefer. However, it is helpful to ensure that each site on which your content is syndicated includes a link back to your original article. You can also ask those who use your syndicated material to use the noindex meta tag to prevent search engines from indexing their version of the content.*" Google

The problem with syndicating your content is you can never tell if this will ultimately cost you organic traffic.

If it is on other websites - they might be getting ALL the positive signals from that content - not you.

It's also worth noting that Google still clearly says in 2018 that you CAN put links back to your original article in posts that are republished elsewhere.

But you need to be careful with that too - as those links could be classified as unnatural links.

The **safest way to handle this** is to ask the other site that republished your content to **add a rel=canonical pointing to your original article on your site**. Then **your site gets the entire SEO benefit** of the act of republishing your content, instead of the other site.

Links In duplicate articles do count but are risky.

A few years ago I made an observation I think that **links that feature on duplicate posts that have been stolen - duplicated and republished - STILL pass anchor text value** (even if it is a slight boost).

In this example, my 'what is SEO' post was stripped out all my links and published the article as his own.

Well, he stripped out all the links apart from one link he missed:

Yes, the link to http://www.duny*.com.pk/ was actually still pointing to my home page.

This gave me an opportunity to look at something.....

The article itself wasn't 100% duplicate - there was a small intro text as far as I can see. It was clear by looking at Copyscape just how much of the article is unique and how much is duplicate.

So this is was 3 yr. old article republished on a low-quality site with a link back to my site within a portion of the page that's clearly duplicate text.

I would have *thought* Google just ignored that link.

But no, Google did return my page for the following query (at the time):

The Google Cache notification (below) is now no longer available, but it was a good little tool to dig a little deeper into how Google works:

... which indicated that **Google will count links (AT SOME LEVEL) even on duplicate articles republished on other sites** - probably depending on the search query, and the quality of the SERP at that time (perhaps even taking into consideration the quality score of the site with the most trust?).

I have no idea if this is the case even today.

Historically, syndicating your content via RSS and encouraging folk to republish your content got your links, that counted, on some level (which might be useful for long tail searches).

Google is quite good at identifying the original article especially if the site it's published on has a measure of trust - I've never had a problem with syndication of my content via RSS and let others cross post.... but I do like at least a link back, nofollow or not.
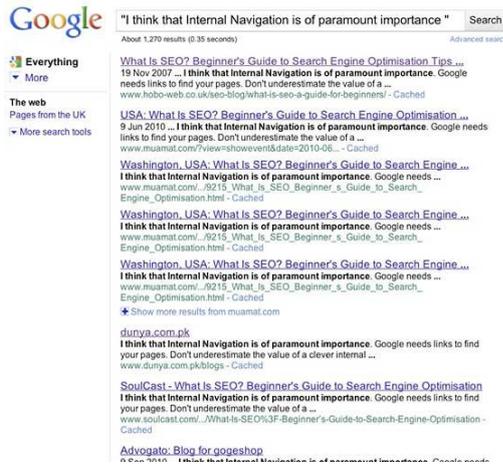
The bigger problem with content syndication in 2018 is **unnatural links** and **whether or not Google classifies your intent as manipulative**.

If Google does class your intent to rank high with unnatural links, then you have a much more serious problem on your hands.

Does Google Penalise 'Thin' Content On A Website?

https://youtu.be/w3-obcXkyA4

Yes. Google also says about 'thin' content.

> **QUOTE: "***Avoid publishing stubs***:** *Users don't like seeing "empty" pages, so avoid placeholders where possible. For example, don't publish pages for which you don't yet have real content. If you do create placeholder pages, use the noindex meta tag to block these pages from being indexed.***"** Google

and

> **QUOTE: "***Minimize similar content***:** *If you have many pages that are similar, consider expanding each page or consolidating the pages into one. For instance, if you have a travel site with separate pages for two cities, but the same information on both pages, you could either merge the pages into one page about both cities or you could expand each page to contain unique content about each city."* Google

The key things to understand about duplicate content on your web pages are:

- 'Duplicate content' on your own website is not necessarily 'copied content'
- Duplicate content is a normal churn of the web. Google will rank it - for a time. Human or machine generated, there is a lot of it - and Google has a lot of experience handling it and there are many circumstances where Google finds duplicate content on websites. Not all duplicate content is a bad thing.
- If a page ranks well and Google finds it a manipulative use of duplicate content, Google can demote the page if it wants to. If it is deemed the intent is manipulative and low-quality with no value add, Google can take action on it - using manual or algorithmic actions.
- There is a very thin line between reasonable duplicate content and thin content. This is where the confusion comes in.
- Google explicitly states they don't have a duplicate content penalty - **but they do have a 'thin content' manual action**... that **looks and feels a lot like a penalty**.

They also have *Google Panda*, an algorithm *specifically* designed to weed out low-quality content on websites.

How To Deal With Pagination Problems On Your Website

https://youtu.be/njn8uXTWiGg

Paginated pages are not duplicate content, but often, it would be more beneficial to the user to land on the first page of the sequence.

Folding pages in a sequence and presenting a canonical URL for a group of pages has numerous benefits.

If you think you have paginated content problems on your website, it can be a frightening prospect to try and fix.

It is actually not that complicated.

Google knows that '*Sites paginate content in various ways.*' and it is used to dealing with this type of problem on different types of sites like:

- *News and/or publishing sites often divide a long article into several shorter pages.*
- *Retail sites may divide the list of items in a large product category into multiple pages.*
- *Discussion forums often break threads into sequential URLs.*

While Google says you can '*do nothing*' with paginated content, that might be taking a risk in a number of areas, and part of SEO in 2018 is to **focus on ranking a canonical version of** a URL **at all times**.

What you do to handle paginated content will depend on your circumstances.

A better recommendation on offer is to:

> **QUOTE***: "Specify a View All page. Searchers commonly prefer to view a whole article or category on a single page. Therefore, if we think this is what the searcher is looking for, we try to show the View All page in search results. You can also add a rel="canonical" link to the component pages to tell Google that the View All version is the version you want to appear in search results." Google*

and

> **QUOTE***: "Use `rel="next"` and `rel="prev"` links to indicate the relationship between component URLs. This markup provides a strong hint to Google that you would like us to treat these pages as a logical sequence, thus consolidating their linking properties and usually sending searchers to the first page." Google*

You can also use meta robots '*noindex,follow*' directions on certain types of paginated content (I do), however, I would recommend you think twice before actually removing such content

from Google's index IF those URLs (or a portion of those URLs) generate a good amount of traffic from Google, and there is no explicit need for Google to follow the links to find content.

If a page is getting traffic from Google but needs to come out of the index, then I would ordinarily rely on an implementation that included the canonical link element (or redirect).

Ultimately, this depends on the situation and the type of site you are dealing with.

How To Use Rel=Next & Rel=Previous Markup, Properly

Pagination can be a tricky concept and it is easy to mess up. The above video offers advice direct from Google.

Here are some notes to help you also:

- The 'rel="next" and rel="previous" markup is the standard for indicating paginated pages (and this can have any page parameters included)
- Rel Canonical is for duplicate content. e.g. for session IDS OR for content which is a 'superset' e.g. a superset VIEW ALL Page. If Google's algorithms PREFER a page with a 'misused' canonical, they will pick the page they (or their users) prefer. Canonical is a HINT, not a DIRECTIVE Google is required to honour. A page once removed from Google's index because of misused canonical will reappear in time if Google prefers it, and it will ignore the rel=canonical on that page and index it normally.
  Google does NOT completely ignore an entire sites canonical instructions if misused - rather it seems to do this url by url - but it might impact traffic levels in core updates, PAGE TO PAGE, as Google better understands your site and especially when the pages its USER's prefer is different (when matched to a query) to the URL YOU specify in Rel=canonical. This is what Google means by a 'hint' not a directive.
- The 'rel="next" and rel="previous" markup destination URLs should all return a 200 OK response header.
- Page one in the series should have rel=next markup, but no rel=prev code, with the opposite being true of the last page in the series.
- Pages in a series should have a self-referencing canonical tag unless they specify a 'view all page'. rel="canonical" tells Google to index ONLY the content on the page specified in the rel="canonical".
- rel="canonical" - Do NOT canonicalise component pages in a series to the first page.

You ONLY use rel="canonical" to point to a VIEW ALL Page if one is present, OTHERWISE, all pages SHOULD have a SELF-referencing canonical tag.

> **QUOTE**: "*In cases of paginated content, we recommend either a rel=canonical from component pages to a single-page version of the article, or to use rel="prev" and rel="next" pagination markup.*" - Google

A common mistake web developers make is to add a rel=canonical to the first page in the series or to add NOINDEX to pages in the series of a component set.

> **QUOTE**: "While it's fine to set rel="canonical" from a component URL to a single view-all page, setting the canonical to the first page of a parameter-less sequence is considered improper usage." - Google

and

> **QUOTE**: "When you implement rel="next" and rel="prev" on component pages of a series, we'll then consolidate the indexing properties from the component pages and attempt to direct users to the most relevant page/URL. This is typically the first page. There's no need to mark page 2 to n of the series with noindex." GOOGLE

A Google spokesperson explains why this is not optimal here: https://youtu.be/njn8uXTWiGg?t=11m52s

RE: How To Handle Time-sequential Series of Pages (e.g. in a blog) Google offers this advice:

QUESTION:

> *QUOTE: "Should I use the rel next/prev into [sic] the section of a blog even if the two contents are not strictly correlated (but they are just time-sequential)?"*

ANSWER:

> *QUOTE:: "In regard to using rel="next" and rel="prev" for entries in your blog that "are not strictly correlated (but they are just time-sequential)," pagination markup likely isn't the best use of your time -- time-sequential pages aren't nearly as helpful to our indexing process as semantically related content, such as pagination on component pages in an article or category.*

It's fine if you include the markup on your time-sequential pages, but please note that it's not the most helpful use case." John Mueller, Google

So - for internal pages that are ordered by date of publishing, it is probably better to just let Google crawl these.

TIP: "noindex, nofollow" "*is essentially kind of the same as a*" "noindex, nofollow" John Mueller

Many use NOINDEX,FOLLOW on such pages (blog sub pages, date based archives etc) to remove them from the index by a recent talk from John Mueller would indicate a change in how Google treated noindexed links and the attribute 'follow' in the meta robots instruction.

> **QUOTE**: "*So it's kind of tricky with noindex. Which I think is something somewhat of a misconception in general with a the SEO community. In that with a noindex and follow it's still the case that we see the noindex. Snd in the first step we say okay you don't want this page shown in the search results. We'll still keep it in our index, we just won't show it and then we can follow those links. But if we see the noindex there for longer than we think this page really doesn't want to be used in search so we will remove it completely. And then we won't follow the links anyway. So in noindex and follow is essentially kind of the same as a noindex, nofollow. There's no real big difference there in the long run.*" John Muller, 2017

Don't link to often from your own sites internal links to pages that are noindexed.

Further reading: https://webmasters.googleblog.com/2012/03/video-about-pagination-with-relnext-and.html

Should You Block Google from Crawling Internal Search Result Pages?

Yes. According to Google.

Google wants you to use Robots text to block internal search results. Google recommends "not allowing internal search pages to be indexed".

While there are ways around this guideline that do not produce 'infinite search spaces", letting Google index and rank your internal search pages is a VERY risky manoeuvre (over time) if you are in a competitive industry.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhK4DpCLuQg&feature=youtu.be&t=24m44s

These recommendations are actually in webmaster guidelines.

> **QUOTE**: "*Use the robots.txt file on your web server to manage your crawling budget by preventing crawling of infinite spaces such as search result pages. Keep your robots.txt file up to date.*" *Google (2017)*

Letting Google crawl and index your internal search results pages is an 'inefficient' from a crawling and indexing.

Such pages cause "problems in search" for Google, and Google has a history of 'snapping back' on companies who break such guidelines to their profit.

Are Uppercase and Lowercase URLs Counted as TWO different pages to Google?

Yes. Uppercase and lowercase versions of a URL are classed as TWO different pages for Google.

Best practice has long been to force lowercase URLs on your server, and be consistent when linking to internal pages on your website and use only lowercase URLs when creating internal links.

The video below offers recent (2017) confirmation of this challenge - with the advice being to use canonicals or redirects to fix this issue, and this would be whatever was more efficient from a crawling and indexing perspective (which I think to be 301 redirects in this instance, where necessary, and a overhaul of the internal linking structure):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhK4DpCLuQg&feature=youtu.be&t=51m15s

...and when asked recently (2017) on Twitter, former Googler Matt Cutts replied:

> **QUOTE***: "Is there ANY SEO-relevant reason to force lowercase* urls*?"*

Matt replied:

> **QUOTE***: "Unifying links on a single URL" Matt Cutts, Former Google*

Do Trailing Slashes Cause Duplicate Content Challenges on a Website?

Sometimes. It depends on whether the trailing slashes are on internal pages on a site, or on the root, and which protocol is being used.

Google clarified on whether or not forgetting to add trailing slashes on a website URL causes problems on your site:

> **QUOTE***: "I noticed there was some confusion around trailing slashes on URLs, so I hope this helps. tl;dr: slash on root/hostname=doesn't matter; slash elsewhere=does matter (they're different URLs) "* John Mueller, Google DEC 2017

He offered a guide to help fix the common issues:

```
(A) http://www.example.com/
(B) http://www.example.com
(C) https://www.example.com/
(D) https://www.example.com
(E) https://example.com/
(F) https://example.com/fish
(G) https://example.com/fish/
```

Trailing slash on hostnames don't matter:
(A) = (B), (C) = (D)

Different protocols & hostnames do matter:
(A) is not (C), (C) is not (E)

Trailing slash on path/file does matter:
(F) is not (G)

Note - I aim to use a trailing slash in almost *all cases* to **help ensure consistency of canonical URLs across a site** when it comes to internal linking or external link building.

Redirect Non-WWW To WWW (or Vice Versa)

QUOTE: "*The preferred domain is the one that you would liked used to index your site's pages (sometimes this is referred to as the canonical domain). Links may point to your site using both the www and non-www versions of the URL (for instance, http://www.example.com and http://example.com). The preferred domain is the version that you want used for your site in the search results.*" Google, 2018

Your site probably has canonicalisation issues (especially if you have an e-commerce website) and it might start at the domain level and this can exacerbate duplicate content problems on your website.

Simply put, https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/ can be treated by Google as a different URL than http://hobo-web.co.uk/ even though it's the same page, and it can get even more complicated.

Its thought REAL Pagerank can be diluted if Google gets confused about your URLs and speaking simply you don't want this PR diluted (in theory).

That's why many, including myself, redirect non-www to www (or vice versa) if the site is on a Linux/Apache server (in the htaccess file –

```
Options +FollowSymLinks RewriteEngine on RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^hobo-
web.co.uk [NC] RewriteRule ^(.*)$ https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/$1 [L,R=301]
```

Basically, you are redirecting all the Google juice to one canonical version of a URL.

In 2018 – this is a MUST HAVE best practice.

It keeps it simple when optimising for Google. It should be noted; it's **incredibly important not to mix the two types of www/non-www on site when linking your internal pages**!

Note in 2018 Google asks you which domain you prefer to set as your canonical domain in Google Webmaster Tools.

> QUOTE: "**Note:** Once you've set your preferred domain, you may want to use a 301 redirect to redirect traffic from your non-preferred domain, so that other search engines and visitors know which version you prefer." Google

Read my article on 301 redirects.

Does The Google Panda Algorithm Penalise Duplicate Content?

No - but if you have "copied content" on your site, then you probably will be impacted negatively to various degrees.

A part of Google Panda algorithm is focused on thin pages and (many think) the ratio of good-quality content to low-quality content on a site and user feedback to Google as a proxy for satisfaction levels.

In the original announcement about Google Panda we were specifically told that the following was a 'bad' thing:

> QUOTE: "Does the site have duplicate, overlapping, or redundant articles?" Google

If Google is rating your pages on content quality, or lack of it, as we are told, *and* user satisfaction - on some level - and a lot of your site is duplicate content that provides no positive user satisfaction feedback to Google - then that may be a problem too.

Google offers some advice on thin pages (emphasis mine):

> **QUOTE**: "*Here are a few common examples of pages that often have thin content with little or no added value: 1 . Automatically generated content, 2. Thin affiliate pages 3. **Content from other sources**. For example: **Scraped content** or **low-quality guest blog posts**. 4. **Doorway pages**"*

Everything I've bolded in the last two quotes is essentially *about* what many SEO have traditionally labelled (incorrectly) as 'duplicate content'.

This might be 'semantics', but Google calls that type of duplicate content 'spam'.

Google is, even more, explicit when it tells you how to clean up this 'violation':

> **QUOTE**: "*Next, follow the steps below to identify and correct the violation(s) on your site: **Check for content on your site that duplicates content found elsewhere**.*" Google

So beware.

Google says there is NO duplicate content penalty, but if Google classifies your "duplicate content" as "copied content", "thin content" or "boilerplate", or hastily rewritten or worse "synonymised" or "spun text", then you MAY WELL have a problem!

A **serious challenge,** if your entire site is built like that.

And how Google rates thin pages changes over time, with a quality bar that is always going to rise and that your pages need to keep up with.

Especially if rehashing content is what you do.

Google Panda does not penalise a site for duplicate content, but it does measure site and content 'quality'. Google Panda actually DEMOTES a site where it determines an intent to manipulate the algorithms.

Google Panda:

> **QUOTE***: "measures the quality of a site pretty much by looking at the vast majority of the pages at least. But essentially allows us to take quality of the whole site into account when ranking pages from that particular site and adjust the ranking accordingly for the pages. [Google Panda] is an adjustment. Basically, we figured that site is trying to game our systems, and unfortunately, successfully. So we will adjust the rank. We will push the site back just to make sure that it's not working anymore." Gary Illyes, Google Spokesperson*

TIP - Look out for soft 404 errors in Google Webmaster tools (now called *Google Search Console*) as examples of pages Google are classing as low-quality, user-unfriendly thin pages.

How To Check For Duplicate Content On A Website?

An easy way to find duplicate content is to use Google.

Just take a piece of text content from your site and put it "in quotes" as a search on Google.

Google will tell you how many pages that piece of content it found on pages in its index of the web.

The best known online duplicate content checker tool is Copyscape and I particularly like this little tool too, which check duplicate content ratio between two selections of text.

If you find evidence of plagiarism, you can file a DMCA or contact Google, but I haven't ever bothered with that, and many folks have republished my articles over the years.

I once found my article (word for word) in a paid advert in a printed magazine before, for someone else!

Comments:

A few marketers and Google spokespeople have commented on this article on social circles (presented as images throughout this article)

- John Mueller (Google)
- Martin MacDonald (Web Marketing School)
- Richard Baxter (Built Visible)
- Cyrus Shephard

More reading

- http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/specify-your-canonical.html
- https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/66359?hl=en
- http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2009/10/reunifying-duplicate-content-on-your.html
- https://webmasters.googleblog.com/2011/05/more-guidance-on-building-high-quality.html
- https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/2604719?hl=en
- http://www.SEObythesea.com/2008/02/google-omits-needless-words-on-your-pages/
- https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/1663744?hl=en&ref_topic=4617741
- http://searchengineland.com/google-panda-demotes-adjusts-rankings-not-devalue-261142

How To Change Domain Names, Page URLs & CMS And Keep Your Rankings

https://youtu.be/wATxftE8ooE

> **QUOTE**: "*How do I move from one domain to another domain and try to preserve the rankings as best as possible? ...do a 301 permanent redirect to the new location (assuming that you're you're moving for all time and eternity so this is the good case for a permanent or 301 redirect if you were planning to undo this later or it's temporary then you'd use a 302 redirect).... search engines should be able to follow the trail of all the 301 redirects*" Matt Cutts, Google

Migrating your website from one domain to another, or from one content management system to another can be a tricky business in 2018.

If you require professional website migration assistance from experienced website managers - see my website migration service.

If you are managing this process yourself, read on for some beginner level notes to help you understand the sort of complexities and challenges involved in moving sites and managing redirects on a domain.

Good luck!

PS - I've quoted Google's John Mueller a lot in this article:
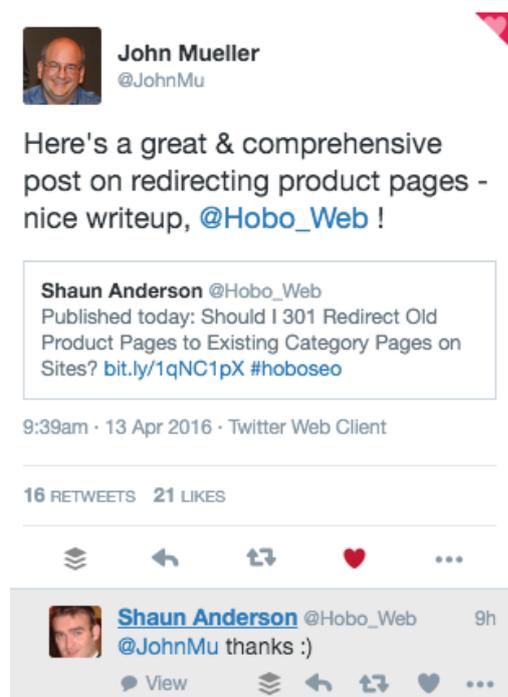
Why Should I care About Redirects When I Move Domain?

> QUOTE: "if you really want to move your website then you should try to [use] 301 redirects" John Mueller, Google

301 Redirects are an incredibly important and often overlooked area of search engine optimisation. Properly implemented 301 Redirects are THE cornerstone SEO consideration in any website migration project.

> QUOTE: "*If you need to change the URL of a page as it is shown in search engine results, we recommend that you use a server-side 301 redirect. This is the best way to ensure that users and search engines are directed to the correct page.*" Google, 2018

If you fail to implement proper redirects when migrating a website from one domain to another you will instantly lose any traffic to your website you currently enjoy, with new visitors often greeted by the dreaded *404 page, and in 2018, soft-404s applied by Google if they do not trust the redirect in a way that helps visitors.*

If that's not reason enough, failing to employ redirects will unquestionably impact on any good rankings your site also enjoys.

How Do I Redirect Visitors And Search Engines To My New Site?

> QUOTE: "**301s happen at a page level** *so just because you see one 301 on one page of the old domain does not mean the entire domain has completely migrated.*" Matt Cutts, Google

You redirect any visitor, including search engines, to ANY PAGE on the domain using the same technique: '*301 permanent redirects'*.

Is It Possible To Transfer Rankings From One Domain To Another?

> QUOTE: "*How do I move from one domain to another domain and try to preserve the rankings as best as possible? ...do a 301 permanent redirect to the new location.*" Matt Cutts, Google

Yes. If you are planning a rebrand, for example, and need to change website addresses, ensure you 301 redirect all visitors to the new domain (and also redirect any relevant internal pages to internal pages on the new domain).

It is also important to convey your old domain's search engine rankings to the new web address - or your website will effectively be starting from zero visibility, in search engines at any rate.

How Long Do I Keep 301 Redirects In Place?

https://youtu.be/QyQs3tz7ZKo

I do not think the video above actually answers this question in a very meaningful way.

The real answer is....**Forever.** Until you die, or the website does. Whatever comes first. As soon as you remove 301s you break a connection that Google counts on to determine your domain reputation and individual page quality scores.

This is incredibly important of course if you HAVE some domain reputation or site quality scores of note.

Note: **A 301 permanent redirect is ONLY permanent as long as the 301 redirect command is in place on the source server**. Remove the redirect command, and Google will index pages as it did before you implemented the redirects.

John Mueller also gave us advice in this area:

> **QUOTE**: "*So from our point of view, when we look at 301 redirects and permanent site move situations, **we do expect that 301 redirect to be there for the long run**. So that could be something maybe a year, or ideally even longer than a* year, *so that we can really be sure that everything that was pointing at the old URLs is pointing at the new URLs. And also if users are going to those pages directly, through bookmarks that they might have saved, through old links that are out there on the web, then they might still be kind of clicking on those old links and they expect to land on the final page.*" John Mueller, Google

and:

> **QUOTE**: "***Ideally, you would have that redirect there for a long run**, but I know from a practical point of view at some point you have to say oh, it's finished, we can't pay the domain name anymore, the other guy wants to do something else with the domain name, so at some point you are going to cut that off, but I'd really aim for something at least like a year. And if you have access, you can look at the server logs and see how many people are actually being redirected there. And if you notice after a year there's still a lot of normal people being redirected, maybe you can figure out how they are reaching the old domain, is it like an important link you forgot to get updated on the web, is it just lots of people with bookmarks and you can't really fix their own bookmarks, that's kind of what I would aim for there, at least a year*." John Mueller

My 2 cents? **I would keep important server-side redirects in place, wherever they are, FOREVER if you want to get the most <u>SEO BENEFIT</u>**.

Will Redirects Cause My PageRank To Be diluted?

No.

> **QUOTE**: "*30x redirects don't lose PageRank anymore.*" Gary Illyes, Google 2016

and:

> **QUOTE**: "*Do I lose "link juice" from the redirects? No, for 301 or 302 redirects from HTTP to HTTPS no PageRank is lost.*" John Mueller, Google 2016

How Long Does It Take For Google To Implement A Full Site Migration?

It can take quite some time in 2018 for Google to totally 'forget' about your old domain. You may see old URLs somewhat frustratingly still appear in the SERPs.

> **QUOTE**: "*Anytime you do a bigger change on your website if you redirect a lot of URLs or if you go from one domain to another or if you change your site's structure then all of that does take time for things to settle down so we can follow that pretty quickly we can definitely forward the signals there but that doesn't mean that'll happen from one day to next*" John Mueller, Google 2016

Is There A Limit To The Amount of 301 Redirects Google Will Follow in a 'chain'?

https://youtu.be/r1lVPrYoBkA

YES. Over my nearly 20 years of experience in this field, I've often heard the limit to be about 5 or 6 although Matt Cutts said it was risky even up at the 4, 5 and 6 hops in the chain.

Google confirmed (2017) that it **will follow up to 5 redirects.** See the official confirmation in the video below (from John Mueller).

> **QUOTE**: "*We follow up to five redirect steps in a redirect chain if it's a server-side redirect.*" John Mueller, Google

https://youtu.be/qhK4DpCLuQg?t=27m11s

I would NOT rely on that MANY redirect in a chain, though, so **try to ensure you have as FEW redirects in any chain of redirects at all times** to avoid Google changing how it works in this area - e.g. how many redirects Google will honour in the *future*.

And it does change, often enough in plenty of areas to cause you future challenges.

Does Google treat 302's the same as 301's?

> **QUOTE**: "*I think there's a big misconception with 302 redirects being bad for your website and your PageRank and that's definitely not the case. When we see a 302, we'll assume it's a temporary redirect at first. However, if we feel it's more of a permanent redirect, then we do treat it as a 301. Both of these redirects do pass PageRank.*" John Mueller, Google

Essentially YES. A *302 Temporary Redirect* is not ideal, but Google has said it treats 302 redirects left in place essentially like 301's. John Meuler said in a Hangout that Google also treats 302s in a chain like 301s (although again that is far from ideal).

Still - it is better to be as exact as possible with Google to ensure you get the results you need. **When *permanently* redirecting - use a 301 redirect**.

Should I use a 301 or a 302 redirect?

For me I stick with a 301 redirect 99.9% of the time and only use a 302 when someone explains to me exactly why it needs to be a 302 in this instance - that keeps me right:

In short, for 301 redirects or 302 redirects e.g. this image and advice from John Meuller:
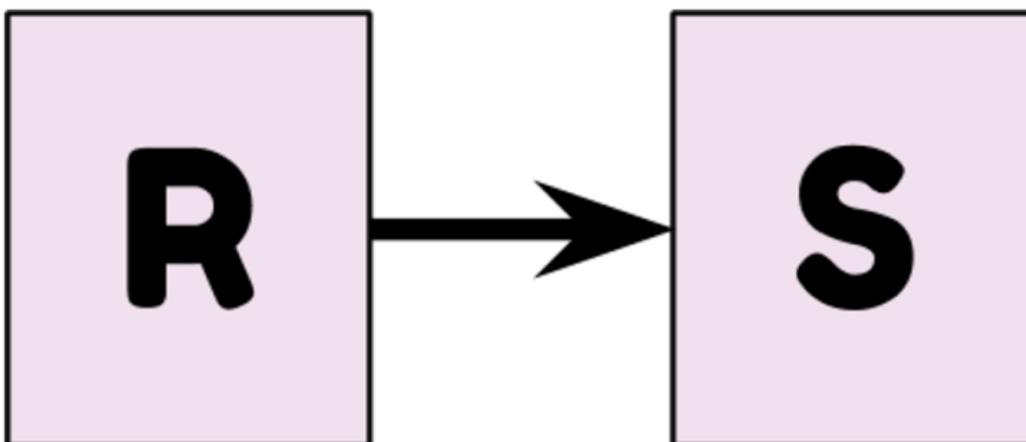
- 301 (permanent): "S" tends to get indexed, the redirect is cached
- 302 (temporary): "R" tends to get indexed, the redirect isn't cached

HOW TO PROCEED

Audit, monitor and minimise your redirect chains and any URLs you have pointing at content that is not VERY EQUIVALENT to maximise link equity.

Should I tell Google About My Change Of Domain?

YES. I've always found it pretty painless although I can appreciate it's easy to screw up if you don't know what you're doing. Now you can actually tell Google about your domain name change in Google Webmaster Tools.

> **QUOTE**: "*If you've moved your site to a new domain, you can use the Change of address tool to tell Google about your new URL. We'll update our index to reflect your new URL. Changes will stay in effect for 180 days, by which time we'll have crawled and indexed the pages at your new URL. The change of address tool is safe, because only verified site owners can use it. You can check the tool at any time to see the information provided to Google about your domains.*" Google

This new tool from Google will be handy for some, though, you'll still need to know your way about some technical aspects to use it. See moving your website to another domain. **UPDATE** - Also see Google announcing support of the **cross-domain rel="canonical" link element**.

Redirect Non-WWW To WWW (or Vice Versa)

> **QUOTE**: "*The preferred domain is the one that you would liked used to index your site's pages (sometimes this is referred to as the canonical domain). Links may point to your site using both the www and non-www versions of the URL (for instance, http://www.example.com and http://example.com). The preferred domain is the version that you want used for your site in the search results.*" Google, 2018

Your site probably has canonicalisation issues (especially if you have an e-commerce website) and it might start at the domain level and this can exacerbate duplicate content problems on your website.

Simply put, https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/ can be treated by Google as a different URL than http://hobo-web.co.uk/ even though it's the same page, and it can get even more complicated.

Its thought REAL Pagerank can be diluted if Google gets confused about your URLs and speaking simply you don't want this PR diluted (in theory).

That's why many, including myself, redirect non-www to www (or vice versa) if the site is on a Linux/Apache server (in the htaccess file –

```
Options +FollowSymLinks RewriteEngine on RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^hobo-
web.co.uk [NC] RewriteRule ^(.*)$ https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/$1 [L,R=301]
```

Basically, you are redirecting all the Google juice to one canonical version of a URL.

In 2018 – this is a MUST HAVE best practice.

It keeps it simple when optimising for Google. It should be noted; it's **incredibly important not to mix the two types of www/non-www on site when linking your internal pages**!

Note in 2018 Google asks you which domain you prefer to set as your canonical domain in Google Webmaster Tools.

> QUOTE: "**Note:** Once you've set your preferred domain, you may want to use a 301 redirect to redirect traffic from your non-preferred domain, so that other search engines and visitors know which version you prefer." Google

NOTE: Some Redirects May Be Treated As Soft 404 Error Pages

Can it be surmised that Google might label certain 301 redirects (that DO NOT redirect to VERY EQUIVALENT CONTENT) as **SOFT 404** and so devalue all signals associated with them?

Will this be the same for e-commerce sites?

What Are Soft 404 Pages?

Typically:

> QUOTE: "*A **soft 404** means that a URL on your site returns a page telling the user that the page does not exist and also a 200-level (success) code to the browser. (In some cases, instead of a "not found" page, it might be a page with little or no usable content--for example, a sparsely populated or empty page.)*" Google, 2018

From my experience, not all soft 404 are created with enough volume to be a problem on most sites, but some **auto-generated pages on some sites can produce soft 404 at a content level** that with enough number that can cause indexation challenges.

> QUOTE*: "Returning a code other than 404 or 410 for a non-existent page (or **redirecting users to another page, such as the homepage, instead of returning a 404**) can be problematic. Firstly, it tells search engines that there's a real page at that URL. As a result, that URL may be crawled and its content indexed. Because of the time Googlebot spends on non-existent pages, your unique URLs may not be discovered as quickly or visited as frequently and your site's crawl coverage may be impacted (also, you probably don't want your site to rank well for the search query"* [GOOGLE](#)

However, Google will also treat certain mismatched or incorrect redirects as soft-404 type pages, too.

And this is a REAL problem in 2018, and a marked change from the way Google worked say ten years ago.

It essentially means that Google is not going to honour your redirect instruction and that means you are at risk of knobbling any positive signals you are attempting to transfer through a redirect.

NOTE: 301 Redirecting expired pages to your home page may result in 'soft-404s'

> **QUOTE**: "*So the 301 redirect from all pages to the home page, **that would be something that we see as a soft 404s**". John Mueller, Google*

NO - not for SEO benefit anyways. Google classes many improperly redirected links as soft 404s in 2018 e.g. if you redirect a lot of URLs to your home page, for instance, is an example Google has given us. When redirecting visitors (and treat Googlebot as a visitor), ALWAYS redirect them to equivalent pages or you risk losing positive ranking signals the old URL has.

For Googlebot - think about the keywords, topics and concepts of the pages you are redirecting to. If they are a good match - Googlebot usually has no problem with that, in my 20 years experience - and will honour your request to redirect rankings.

I always try to find a relevant page to redirect one from another - it's a good user experience, and that's a good thing to focus on if you are trying to rank high in Google this year.

NEVER redirect to your home page - always redirect to an internal page, if you choose to redirect at all.

NOTE: 301 Redirects from Products To Categories May Result in Soft-404s

https://youtu.be/nIDZmac_rMI?t=1m21s

A common challenge for lots of e-commerce and classified sites.

Q: Should you 301 redirect old, irrelevant product pages that are no longer relevant to your site, to an existing category or sub-category page on your site?

A: Maybe not, according to John Mueller of Google in a recent video - at least when it comes to **classified listings** (although advice is offered on e-commerce sites, too)

"Working on a very large classified website listings with millions of listings that expire every month. What are the best practices for indexation?"

John's response to using EXPIRATION dates for content (that might even still, produce soft 404s at the content level) is not what I am interested in; it is advice on managing expired pages:

301 redirecting to a category, for example, is something we would probably pick up as a soft 404

Q: What about listings, or pages, with "lots of backlinks" from other sites?

If you have an equivalent page that replaces the old one, then redirect to that, apparently.

404 pages are the best practice when you have no exact equivalent content on the site, even when you have backlinks to the URLs in question!

NOTE: You MUST Redirect To Equivalent Content

The message is **out of date content can be a 'bad user experience'** (it will depend on the query, of course) and **ONLY REDIRECT content to EQUIVALENT CONTENT** - ESPECIALLY if you have backlinks pointing to these pages and you want them to count.

OPINION: Should You Adhere to this Advice From Google?

I think you should lean towards what Google says, where possible.

Experienced SEOs redirect pages, of course, to conserve traffic, 'link equity' and 'domain trust' or 'domain authority' (which is useful metaphorically speaking, but is a metric we are told Google doesn't have, although they DO understand *something* about the quality, trust, expertise and online business authority they can expect from a domain).

> **QUOTE**: "*So domain authority is kind of a theme picked up by SEO companies or SEO tools. So it's not really something that we have here at Google.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

Maybe this 'something' is kind of a quality score (maybe just a big logarithmic number) they have for your domain (after Google algorithms and spam fighters have looked for anything that they should **demote you for***). Perhaps your score 'votes' for where your content ranks in Google and is then exposed to proxies for user satisfaction like pogo sticking and the long click that impact this quality score to determine rankings for set periods. Entity optimisation and query re-writing obfuscate all this now, of course. Pure conjecture, of course, that I find myself wondering about.

Sometimes when Google hints at even a slight change in direction as it can end up having a bigger impact much further down the line.

I think the direction I see at least is that **Google is hinting at eating away at your sites ability to rank through any technical manipulation** (outside of *doing technical seo absolutely correctly*) .e.g the exactly the same direction they took with Google Panda (promoting resource quality sometimes before keyword matching) and manual unnatural link decision making (link building) - oh, and Penguin.

You certainly don't want to take a chance losing link value, whatever it is, and the best course of action is to listen to Google when they say they are cutting the grass, and minimise your exposure IF they are going to basically just IGNORE some of your redirected links that don't match what Google wants.

So, does that mean links that don't redirect to very equivalent content won't count as much in future? I proceed with that understanding and expectation.

Would it be reasonable to assume you could make a page more relevant to redirected incoming links, by simply adding more keyword specific content that is relevant to the actual links (and the context of the page linking to it)?

Maybe I am reading into that too much, for it would only be useful to know if you had a very old relatively popular site which went through multiple URL structures over many years).

NOTE: How To Use 301 Redirects Properly To Preserve Rankings in Google

I've stuck with the same method over the years when it comes to redirects.

If a PARTICULAR CANONICAL HEAD KEYWORD is IMPORTANT (even perhaps a SYNONYM or LONG TAIL VARIANT) and I think a particular 301 REDIRECT has some positive impact on how Google judges the quality or relevance the page, I will make sure the CANONICAL HEAD KEYWORD and SYNONYMS are on the FINAL PAGE I redirect Google to (which is the one that will be rated and cached).

RELEVANT REDIRECTS TO RELEVANT CONTENT.

If I want to boost that pages relevance for that KEYWORD at the center of any redirects, I will ensure the new page content is updated and expanded upon if it is of genuine interest to a user.

Also, note, Google has recently said certain redirects to your home page will also count as soft 404.

Here are a few tips when managing internal redirects on your site:

- ensure redirects you employ designed to permanently move content are 301 redirects
- minimise redirect chains (not only can Google be expected to only follow about 5 redirects in a chain, employing fewer redirects will speed up your site).
- avoid redirecting any links to category pages unless extremely relevant, as per advice from Google
- avoid redirecting links to NON-equivalent content
- re-point existing redirected links to better, more equivalent content (as you are recommended to do this in the Panda document)
- ensure redirected domains redirect through a canonical redirect and this too has any chains minimised, although BE SURE to audit the backlink profile for any redirects you point at a page as with reward comes punishment if those backlinks are toxic (another example of Google opening up the war that is technical seo on a front that isn't, and in fact is converse, to building backlinks to your site).
- redirect really out of date links (you absolutely want to keep) to pages of secondary importance which are as relevant as possible to your existing content.
- to avoid throwing link equity away, you might create HIGH LEVEL IN-DEPTH TOPIC PAGES on your site and redirect (or use canonical redirects) any related expired content that HAVE INCOMING BACKLINKS, to this topic page (and keep it updated, folding content from old pages, where relevant and there is traffic opportunity, to create TOPIC pages that are focused on the customer e.g. information pages)
- avoid unnecessary redirects in links in internal pages on the site
- don't expect Toolbar Pagerank to pass via https redirects, for instance, as Toolbar Pagerank is dead
- a temporary or permanent redirect is only 'in place' as long as the instruction to do so REMAINS in place in, for instance, your htaccess file. Remove your redirect code, and a

permanent redirect just became a temporary redirect and you can lose the benefit of the redirect

- a 302 redirect left in place usually functions as a 301, although I still would not rely on a 302 to function as a 301, based on previous experience (so I make all my redirects 301)
- In my experience, a 301 redirect is what *most* want to use, if a redirect is necessary
- if you have no real reason to redirect a page, and no equivalent content to redirect it to, then serve a 404. or even better, a server response 410 (GONE FOREVER). You should only be implementing 301s if you have some signal of quality pointing to that particular URL that is worth consolidation.

Perhaps Google is giving those who will chase it another element to optimise to keep the traffic you already get, and succeed above others who will not take the measures, in this case, to optimise their redirects.

This may end up being another example where to optimise you need to dig down to a level where you need to learn how to be a htaccess / apache optimiser (which I am not, just as I am not a professional copywriter or CSS or mobile wizard).

Fortunately, you can still get away with keeping (whatever it is) as simple, fast and as canonical as possible and that is what I try and do.

NOTE: Rel Canonicals Can Be Treated As 301 Redirects

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hi3PZrxYFG0&feature=youtu.be&t=42m21s

> **QUOTE**: *"We canonical page a) to page b) then after one months we do no index on page a, does page B drop in ranking because the related signals from a are not transferred anymore?"*

John explains two scenarios:

> **QUOTE**: *"in general when you have a canonical from one page to the other one and we notice its a confirmed thing and the same content is up on both of these pages and you you have the internal links also pointing to your new canonical then usually we kind of treat that as a redirect…… if you've moved all of those signals to the redirect target already then if the original page drops out then it's gone it doesn't really have any role anymore because there's nothing attached to that original URL anymore."* John Mueller, Google 2018

That's fine, when pages have only signals from internal links on your site, and the canonical redirect was never a critically important redirect.

When you run into trouble is when the page you are trying to redirect signals from has links from EXTERNAL sources e.g. has some link equity…. Such as backlinks from other websites pointing to page a).

> **QUOTE**: *"so if there's a "redirect" (e.g. a canonical link element from page a) to b))) in place and we do forward those signals if after some time the redirect (to page b)) drops out and a lot of the signals are still applying to the old URL (page a)) then that could be a bit of a problem. (for page b))"* John Mueller, Google 2018

Yes, that is a problem for page b) and your website health in general if page a) 404s at some point in the future e.g. disappears completely. You can totally short-cut your rankings if all the signals are pointing to page a) again and you are trying to rank page b).

In my experience, **relying on canonicals as redirects is something that should be used only as a temporary measure**. Google can, and will, ignore canonical tags for any number of reasons and this could severely impact your traffic a few months down the line if messed up.

> **QUOTE**: *"It's possible that we picked this up and we say oh this is good enough but if the pages are not equivalent if they're not really the same then it's also possible that our algorithms look at this and say well this rel canonical is probably accidentally set like this and **we should ignore it**"* John Mueller, Google 2018

If you want to redirect Google and get the most benefit out of your SEO efforts, you should ideally use 301 redirects when you have the option.

Can I Merge Multiple Domains And Redirect Them To Consolidate Rankings?

Say you have multiple older sites that are ranking in Google for a lot of terms and there is an opportunity to redirect them to your primary site - will you keep those Google rankings? **Yes**, if done properly.

If you keep most of these quality signals intact, merging old domains and redirecting them to similar content shouldn't be a problem. You MUST simply remember to redirect pages to equivalent content in 2018.

Be very careful, though, as Google is under no obligation to redirect domains and transfer rankings, and has said as much.

And it is going to take TIME to see the fruits of your labour:

> **QUOTE**: "*This kind of site-merging will always take time, but you make it significantly harder by not doing the merge consistently or cleanly. Redirect them all, set canonicals, crawl all of your old domain URLs to check, etc. A clean migration takes time, a hacky migration with an attempt to get short-term advantages will just take much longer. Aim for the final result.*" John Mueller, Google 2018

Make sure these domains are not already blacklisted in Google for previous web spam violations before you implement any redirects!

Getting loads of unnatural links too fast to a domain may invite a *Notice of Unnatural Links* and an eventual penalty from the webspam team - especially if you own the domains in question, and if your intent is interpreted as manipulation.

> **QUOTE**: "*Cleaning up these kinds of link issue can take considerable time to be reflected by our algorithms (we don't have a specific time in mind, but the mentioned 6-12 months is probably on the safe side)*" John Mueller, Google 2018

NOTE: If you are buying domains for redirect purposes, I would ensure they are on topic with the theme of the website your are redirecting to, and even that is not 100% guaranteed to work in 2018. Buying expired domains can be risky.

> **QUOTE**: "*Sometimes we recognise that a new site is completely unrelated to an old site. So for example if you go out and buy an old domain name, it might have been a church website for 10 years. **If we recognise your new website is really not the same as it was, then we need to understand that difference and say that, these links, they apply to the old website but they don't apply to the new one.**"* John Mueller, Google 2017

Googles Matt Cutts said something similar a decade ago:

QUOTE: "*Google tries to reset* pagerank*/links for all* **expired domains to zero when they are registered by someone new**. *They don't try to penalize the expired domain, but they also don't want to give credit for the previous owner's links''. Matt Cutts, 2008.*" Matt Cutts, Google

CASE STUDY: Using 301 Redirect To Keep Google Rankings

I needed to 301 an ageing, out-of-date satellite site (or mini-site) into the principal website of the company I was employed by.

The goal was to keep visitors and Google rankings.

Managing multiple sites in a niche usually means some of those sites get neglected. Often, a lot of the mini-sites won't get the required time and effort it takes to actually convert the traffic earned to leads and sales.

Information on satellite sites can often end up more out-of-date than the primary site. In this case, the decision was made to redirect lower-quality mini sites to the main corporate site to ensure the more conversion friendly corporate site ranked for the competitive term the mini-site had earned.

The image below shows the results when I redirected a mini-site that ranked no1 for a valuable query to the main site.

This was a long time ago but it still works almost exactly today as it did then.
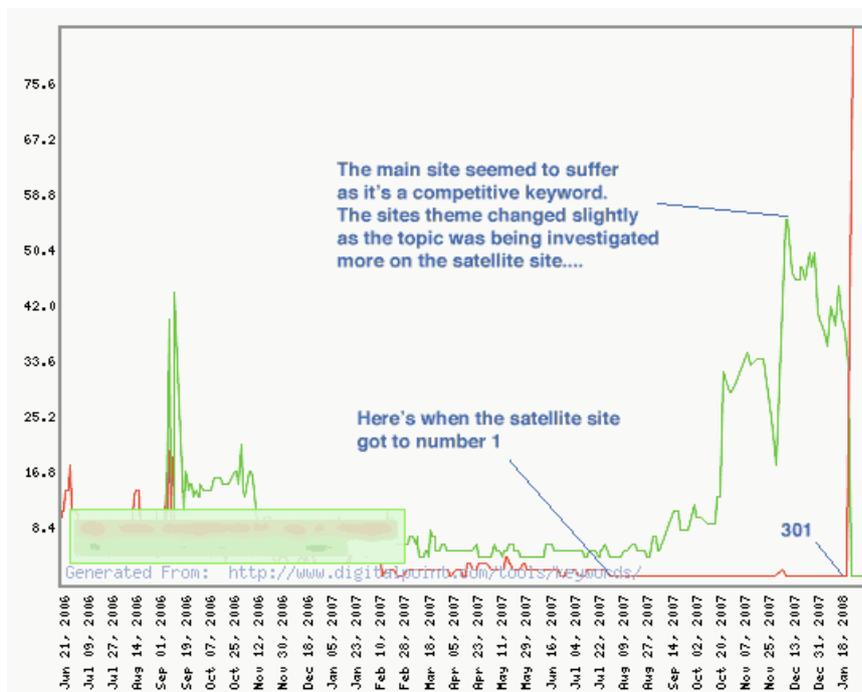
You can see from the illustration above and below when I achieved the no1 position with the satellite site, the actual corporate site was actually heading in a slightly different direction.

301

Aug 27, 2007
Sep 14, 2007
Oct 02, 2007
Oct 20, 2007
Nov 07, 2007
Nov 25, 2007
Dec 13, 2007
Dec 31, 2007
Jan 18, 2008
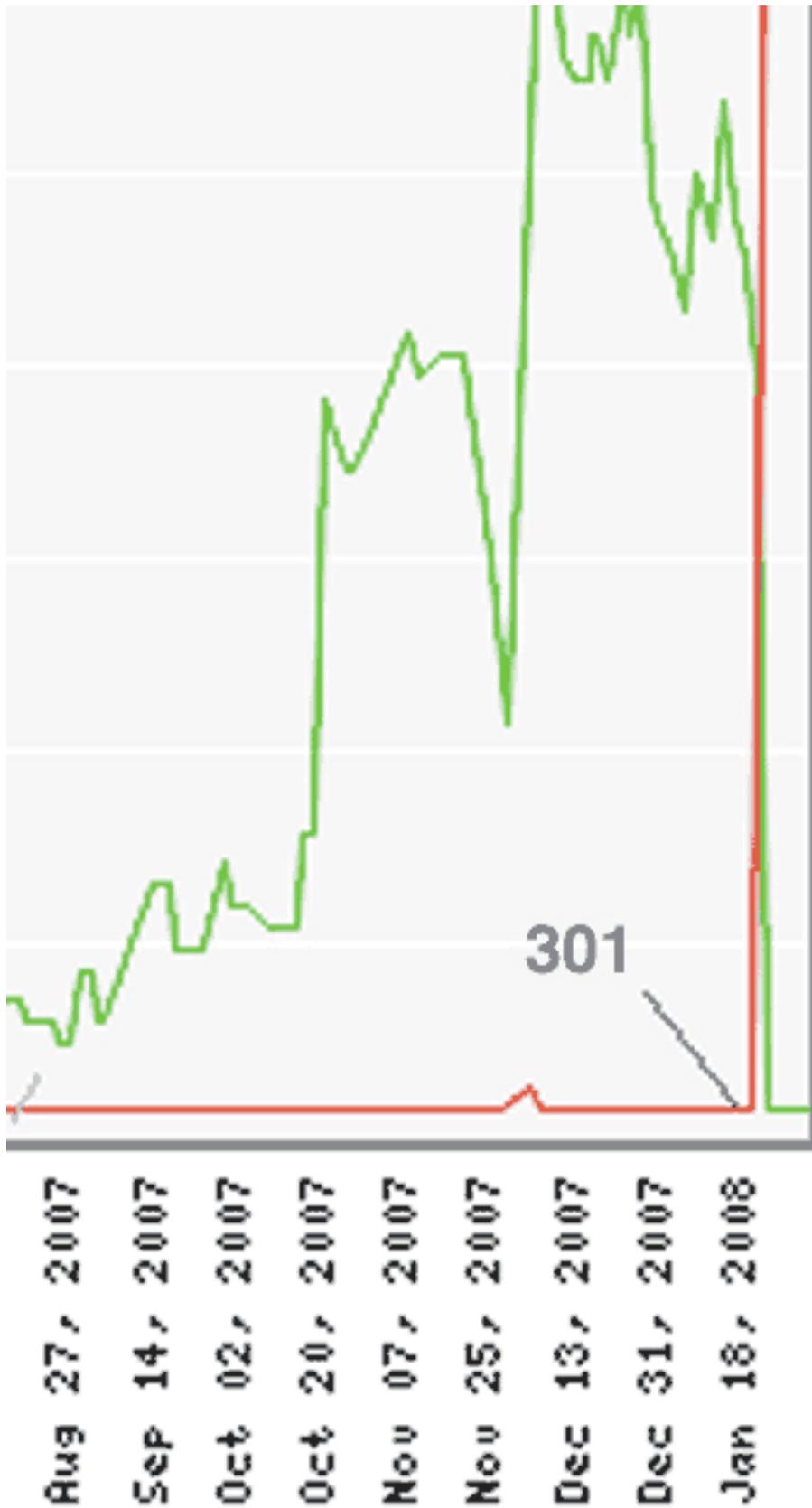
Essentially I wanted to make the main company site (in Green) be the number one result, and basically, I wanted the mini-site to disappear from Google but transfer all its good rankings (as well as 600 visitors a day) to the corporate site.

I completed this employing the perfectly white-hat search engine friendly 301 Permanent Redirect in the .htaccess file on the old site (in red) to the corporate site (in Green). `redirect 301 /old.htm http://www.example.com/new.htm` I ensured the new page on the corporate site was basically very similar in theme to page that Google currently ranked at No1 in the SERPs, so Googlebot wouldn't think I was up to anything other than transfer rankings I had earned.

The end result is always (if done correctly) very satisfying as:

1. The main site now ranks no1 in Google
2. The main site now has absorbed the authority and trust of the old page which should help it's overall domain reputation in the search engines.
3. The page is now branded with the corporate id = better brand visibility
4. Inexperienced link builders will be scratching their head for a while to come wondering what has happened and how the main site actually ranks at No1 in their attempt to reverse-engineer that particular SERP.

The images illustrate it worked exactly as expected.

The result of this simple strategy was a 'new' no1 position, with better branding and better conversion attributes, and 600 more visitors to the main site each day. It's still like that today.

Things work very much the same in 2018, although Google has raised the quality bar in some instances, and I would be careful.

Can I 301 Multiple Out-Dated Pages To A New Higher Quality Page?

YES. Sometimes content becomes stale and you end up with lots of pages that are essentially redundant in Google. Sometimes, this type of content can actually hurt your rankings in Google in 2018.

You can permanently redirect any and all out-of-date content to equivalent new pages that stand a better chance of ranking in Google for important keywords.

Google advises server-side redirects are OK for this purpose - and so are CANONICAL LINK ELEMENTS - so I use them.

You can change the focus of a redirect but that's a bit black hat for me and can be abused - I don't really talk about that sort of thing on this blog.

But it's worth knowing. You also need to keep these redirects in place in your *.htaccess* file going forward. Redirecting multiple old pages to one new page works for me, if the text-based information, and especially target key phrases, is mentioned, and prominent, on the new page.

In my own experience, and confirmed by talking to some people who worked at Google, I can say that a 301 redirect is usually only permanent until Google recrawls the links - so, these redirects CAN be changed later, although if you know the redirect will be temporary, you are recommended (by Google and Bing) to use a 302 Temporary redirect.

I usually employ 301s and have changed them back and forth multiple times over the years, with no issues.

Do Pages Need To Be Identical for 301 redirects to work?

NO - not in my experience. BUT only redirect users and Googlebot to HIGHLY equivalent pages where possible. Google is getting MORE and MORE strict with this guideline, as detailed by Google's John Mueller in a recent tweet:

> *QUOTE: "301-redirecting for 404s makes sense if you have 1:1 replacement URLs, otherwise we'll probably see it as soft-404s and treat like a 404." John Mueller of Google*

A good rule of thumb with any redirects (that you want to get the most benefit from) is to give visitors what they are expecting when they click on a link.

I often redirect many old URLs to one URL - if it's relevant and a good user experience - but I **avoid redirecting irrelevant pages to irrelevant destinations**.

My general rule of thumb is to make sure the information (and keywords) on the old page are present in the new page copy.

Most SEO already know the power of a redirect, and how you (could, at least historically) use a 301 redirect to push *even* totally unrelated pages to the top of Google (for a time - sometimes a very long time.

Google is much better at preventing this sort of manipulation in 2018.

Can I Transfer A Google Penalty To My New Domain with Redirects?

This is a grey area but essentially yes. Do due diligence on any domain you are redirecting to your main site - you don't want to redirect a site you own with a toxic link profile to your primary website, for instance. I would disavow those links first at the source website AND add those links to your own website disavow file. There are nuances to this.

For instance, if you OWN BOTH SITES, and one is penalised or has a manual action against it from the webspam team, you are not going to lift the penalty just by redirecting the domain to another domain.

If you want to transfer old positive signals to your new domain, things need to be equivalent on the new domain. If things are 100% equivalent e.g. you have just cloned the site content, then Google may well transfer the negative signals from the old domain to the new domain - and they even attempt to this WITHOUT redirects in place in some cases (probably as an anti-spam measure):

> QUOTE: "*It kind of depends on how we find the website but **if it's essentially the same website just on a different domain then we'll see that still as a kind of a site move and forward those links as well** so if you start a completely different or new website on a new domain then that's something we'll see that as something completely separate whereas if you essentially copy the whole side to new domain then that's still kind of a site move for us. It's not a great site move it's not one where I say this is a recommended way to move a website but we still see that essentially this is the same content this content move to a different domain and we can try to forward the signals ..... if we if we can recognize that this is essentially a site move that was just done incorrectly then we'll try to help the webmaster by by treating it appropriately we sometimes see that for example if you're on a free host or you can't set up redirect or for some reason you have a technical problem on your server and you can't set up redirect will try to pick that up and use that as a kind of a site move type it's not a great way to handle a site move so **if you really want to move your website then you should try to do the 301 redirects** but if you can't do the redirects we can sometimes help out algorithmically….*" John Mueller, Google

So - you can NEGATIVE SEO yourself, in practice, but this is much harder to do if you are trying to negative SEO a domain you do not own, by just redirecting toxic links to another domain.

Bear in mind, though, while many SEO claim negative SEO is 'easy', Google says:

> QUOTE: "*we haven't seen a single case a single one where those toxic link campaigns work*" Gary Illyes Nov 2016

... and in my experience, you can certainly 'negative SEO' yourself! You can even essentially 'negative SEO' yourself by not implementing a switch to https properly!

Use 301 Redirects To Switch Your Website To HTTPS

https://youtu.be/cBhZ6S0PFCY

Like many SEO, I've naturally been telling all my clients to consider switching to HTTPS asap since Google said to a few years back to do so.

NOT because of any claimed ranking boost, but because it is the trend that Google prefers HTTPS - and it is more secure.

Google Chrome Will Mark Your HTTP Website 'insecure'.

Now that Google Chrome is marking your website 'insecure' if it is NOT HTTPS, **it is probably time to make switching to HTTPS a priority** if it hasn't been up to now.

This is quite a different issue, especially if you sell online, or take people's information, and is just another example of the web evolving to focus on security and quality.

Time permitting, I still think you should clean your site up (e.g. remove redundant pages) before a switch to https to get the maximum benefit from such a move.

That time, though, may have run out.

Obviously, Chrome marking your site insecure could well be a sales conversion killer.

Why Is Google Chrome Marking My Website Insecure?

This goes way back to 2014, and is not unexpected:

> **QUOTE***: "Proposal - We, the Chrome Security Team, propose that user agents (UAs) gradually change their UX to display non-secure origins as affirmatively non-secure. We intend to devise and begin deploying a transition plan for Chrome in 2015. The goal of this proposal is to more clearly display to users that HTTP provides no data security."* [GOOGLE - 2014](#)

and

> **QUOTE***: "Chrome pushing forward on marking plain HTTP as outright insecure is an incredibly strong and pro-user move," Eric Mill, a technologist who's been working on web encryption, told* [Motherboard](#)*. "Despite how common plain HTTP can still be today, it *is* outright insecure, and a real and present danger to users and to the open web." Google*

Should You Move To Https Immediately?

Probably.

Do you need to register the HTTPS Version of a Site As A 'Change of Address' in Google Search Console?

No. A Google spokesperson said (2017):

> **QUOTE***: 'We treat already automatically propagate signals between HTTP and HTTPS, so a site move request in GSC would be placebo' Gary Illyes*

Cleaning Up Your Site Before A Changeover To HTTPS

When I say clean up my site before I move to HTTPS, I mean:

- getting rid of redundant pages on my site and sorting obvious low-quality issues before I move to HTTPS
- reducing the number of redirect paths to important pages on the site
- reducing the amount of broken or misdirected links on pages on the site to lay down a clean, internal linking solution for the future
- speeding up a website load times
- disavowing all known low-quality backlinks
- reconnecting broken backlinks to pages on the website
- preparing templates for new internal linking requirements that minimise any redirects

Essentially - I work with sites with a lot of site-quality issues, and fixing them before you move has benefits in managing the site and anything you need to do in the future.

Moving to HTTPS can add a layer of complexity to some sites, so in some cases, cleaning up before you move makes analysing the impact easier, later.

As an SEO, telling clients to move to https (which is going to probably negatively impact organic traffic levels for up to a few weeks at least (sometimes months)) is not exactly news they want to hear.

This is compounded by the fact that *Quality Rating Issues on a site* are more important to tackle heads on, than prioritising moving to a secure server for an elusive ranking boost.

Moving to HTTPS is important from a security point of view, of course, but fixing quality issues is more important for me (as that is what I am hired to do).

I think, though, with this (not unexpected) move from Google chrome, migrating to HTTPS is going to have to be up there as a priority too. Both for security reasons and conversion reasons.

Do I need to Register My Https Site With Google Search Console?
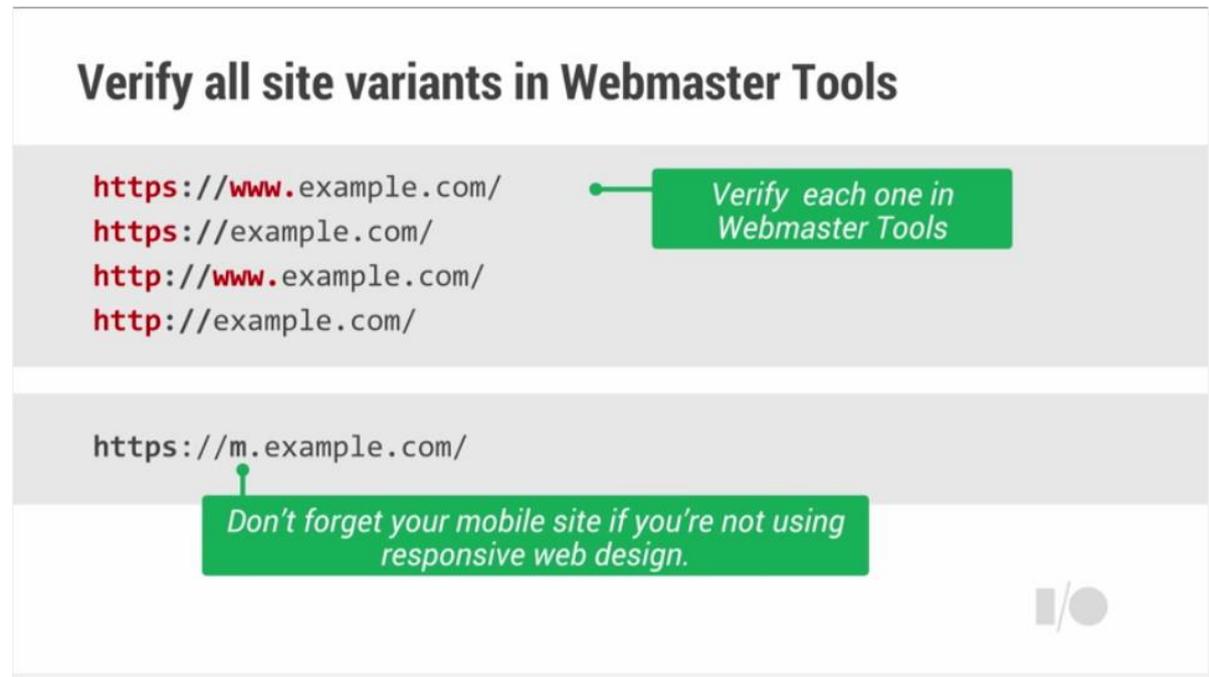
YES. Make sure your site is a manageable shape, then:

- Register all versions of your site in *Google Search Console* (AKA *Webmaster Tools*) (that's 4 versions at the last count)
- Disavow all backlinks pointing to these domains, and **upload the disavow file to all versions of the domain**
- Make sure you have preferably 301 redirects on all other versions of the domain, pointing to one canonical version of the domain

I have witnessed fallout in early instances where a disavow was in place on the HTTP site, but not migrated to the https version by Google. Google neglected to point out to us in the beginning that that was necessary.

It could be said that Google prioritises *migrating a penalty to another totally different domain* over *migrating the preventive penalty measures you put in place in good faith in a switch to https on the same domain*.

That seems a little unhelpful.

You can ask yourself why we need the unnecessary complication of 4 versions of Webmaster tools, and 4 disavow files to manage all this, to 'optimise' a website in organic listings.

But - I would not switch to https without registering with *Search Console* first.

Google's Advice on Moving To Https

The following advice is from John Mueller (2016):

Planning on moving to HTTPS? Here are 13 FAQs! help center at https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6073543

Do I need to set something in Search Console? No, just add the HTTPS site there. The change-of-address setting doesn't apply for HTTP -> HTTPS moves.

How can we do an A/B test? Don't cloak to Googlebot specifically, use 302 redirects + rel=canonical to HTTP if you want to test HTTPS but not have it indexed. Don't block via robots.txt . More about A/B testing athttps://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.ch/2012/08/website-testing-google-search.html (302 redirects aren't cached.)

Will the rel=canonical guarantee that the HTTP URL is indexed? No, but it's a very strong signal when picking the indexed URL.

What's the next step after testing? Follow our site-move documentation (https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6033049). Use 301 redirects from HTTP to HTTPS, confirm the new version by adding a rel=canonical on the HTTPS page, pointing to itself, and submit sitemaps including both HTTP & HTTPS URLs with new change-dates (in the long run, just keep the HTTPS sitemap).

What about the robots.txt file? The HTTPS site uses the HTTPS robots.txt file. Check that it's reachable or serves a 404 result code, and check that your HTTP URLs aren't blocked by the HTTP robots.txt file.

Is it OK to have just some pages on HTTPS? Yes, no problem! Start with a part, test it, add more.

Should I move everything together, or is it fine to do sections? Moving in sections is fine.

Will I see a drop in search? Fluctuations can happen with any bigger site change. We can't make any guarantees, but our systems are usually good with HTTP -> HTTPS moves.

Which certificate do I need? For Google Search, any modern certificate that's accepted by modern browsers is acceptable.

Do I lose "link juice" from the redirects? No, for 301 or 302 redirects from HTTP to HTTPS no PageRank is lost.

Will we see search keywords in Google Analytics when we're on HTTPS? This won't change with HTTPS, you can see the search queries in Search Console.

 # How can I test how many pages were indexed? Verify HTTP / HTTPS separately in Search Console, use Index Status for a broad look, or the sitemaps indexed counts for sitemap URLs.

 # How long will a move from HTTP to HTTPS take? There are no fixed crawl frequencies, it depends on the size of your site, and the speed of crawling that's possible. The move takes place on a per-URL basis.

CODE: How Do You Implement 301 Redirects on Apache Servers?

It takes only a few lines of code to achieve this change of address in some instances. It is usually a simple if sometimes drawn out process.

The time it takes to complete a typical project is dependent on how large and how complex the website is if you are aiming to redirect the entire site, including internal pages, to exactly the correct urls on the new site.

Success is often dependent on your access to particular files on your host server, or the CMS your website is constructed with.

I can discuss my experience with Apache servers where I use ".*htaccess*" files and *301 permanent redirects*. NOTE - some of this code may need to be modified depending on your setup:

EXAMPLE: Redirecting to a new domain: (NOTE: on Linux servers, you need the Apache Mod-Rewrite moduled enabled):

```
Options +FollowSymLinks RewriteEngine on RewriteRule (.*) https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/$1 [R=301,L]
```

EXAMPLE - Redirecting one version of your domain to the WWW version of your domain

```
Options +FollowSymlinks RewriteEngine on rewritecond %{http_host} ^hobo-web.co.uk [nc] rewriterule ^(.*)$ https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/$1 [r=301,nc]
```

EXAMPLE - Redirecting one page on a site to another equivalent page on the same domain:

```
redirect 301 /how-to-do-keyword-research/ http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/how-to-do-keyword-research/
```

With a 301 permanent redirect instruction at your server level, the age, authority, and reputation of your old website in Google are transferred to this new web address.

With visitors redirected as soon as you apply the 301 redirects, search engines soon notice the change of address. If you have a very large and complex site, it could take a long time for Google to completely *forget* about your old site.

Upon successful implementation, the new domain ranks where the old domain once ranked.

This method has worked for most professionals for over twenty years and still works today.

You can also tell Google you've made the change, too, but Google still needs you to also stick to traditional methods like I describe above as well as registering any change at Google Webmaster Tools (AKA Google Search Console).

CODE: How To Implement 301 Redirects Using PHP

Example code:

```
<? Header( "HTTP/1.1 301 Moved Permanently" ); Header( "Location:
https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/" ); ?>
```

CODE: How To Implement 301 Redirects Using ASP

Example code:

```
<%@ Language=VBScript %> <% Response.Status="301 Moved Permanently"
Response.AddHeader "Location","https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/" %>
```

CODE: How To Implement 301 Redirects Using ASP.net

Example code:

```
<script runat="server"> private void Page_Load(object sender,
System.EventArgs e) { Response.Status = "301 Moved Permanently";
Response.AddHeader("Location","https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/"); } </script>
```

EXAMPLE: How To Implement 301 Redirects on IIS Servers

Example IIS Redirect:

This example from Webconfs explains:

"1) In internet services manager, right click on the file or folder you wish to redirect 2) Select the radio titled "a redirection to a URL" 3) Enter the redirection page 4) Check "The exact URL entered above" and the "A permanent redirection for this resource" and 5) Click on 'Apply'"

How Can I Test My Redirects Are Working Properly?

You can use an excellent little chrome plugin called Redirect Path to quickly check your redirects are in place and working correctly.

How Fast Should A Website Load?

> *QUOTE: "2 seconds is the threshold for ecommerce website acceptability. At Google, we aim for under a half second." Maile Ohye, from Google*

People like fast sites in 2018.

And so does Google. In fact, Google likes blistering fast sites so much it is preparing to move to what it is calling *'mobile first'* indexing in 2018.

'Site Speed', we are told by Google in the above video, **is** a ranking factor. But as with any factor, Google confirms *is* a ranking signal, it's usually a small, 'nuanced' one.

Now that Google is determined to focus on ranking sites based on their mobile experience, the time is for businesses to REALLY focus on delivering the fastest DESKTOP and MOBILE friendly experience you can achieve.

Because if you DO NOT, your competition will, and Google may rank those pages above your own, in time.

> **QUOTE**: "*To make our results more useful, we've begun experiments to **make our index mobile-first**. Although our search index will continue to be a single index of websites and apps, **our algorithms will eventually primarily use the mobile version of a site's content to rank pages from that site**, to understand structured data, and to show snippets from those pages in our results. Of course, while our index will be built from mobile documents, we're going to continue to build a great search experience for all users, whether they come from mobile or desktop devices.*
>
> *If you have a responsive site or a dynamic serving site where the primary content and markup is equivalent across mobile and desktop, you shouldn't have to change anything.*"
> GOOGLE

A fast site is a good user experience (UX), and a satisfying UX **leads to higher conversions,** and now that Google is pushing so hard in this direction, it is time for those invested in SEO to take action.

> **QUOTE**: "*How fast your website loads is critical but often a completely ignored element in any online business and that includes search marketing and search engine optimisation. And that includes page load times on mobile devices: The average time it takes to fully load a mobile landing page is 22 seconds, according to a new analysis. Yet **53% of visits are abandoned if a mobile site takes longer than three seconds to load**. That's a big problem.*" Google

Very slow sites are a **bad user experience** - and Google is *all about* good UX these days.

Every Second Does Count

(While you read this article, you can test your site speed (and tons of other stuff) quickly by running it through our free seo checker tool.)

How Much is 'Website Speed' a Google Ranking Factor?

NOTE: I've quoted Google and Google's John Mueller a lot in this post:

'How much is a *very slow site* a *negative* ranking factor', historically, has been a more *useful* interpretation of the claim that '*website speed is a Google ranking factor*'.

A SLOW SITE can be a NEGATIVE Ranking factor.

I have clearly witnessed very slow websites (of 10 seconds and more) negatively impacted in Google, and second, from statements made by Googlers:

> *QUOTE: "We do say we have a small factor in there for pages that are **really slow to load** where we take that into account*." **John Mueller, GOOGLE**

Google might crawl your site slower if you have a slow site. And that's really bad - especially if you are adding lots of new content or making lots of edits to content on the site.

> *QUOTE: "We're seeing an extremely high response-time for requests made to your site (at times, over **2 seconds to fetch a single URL**). This has resulted in us severely limiting the number of URLs we'll crawl from your site."* **John Mueller, GOOGLE**

John specifically said 2 seconds disrupts CRAWLING activity, not RANKING ability, but you get the picture.

John Mueller recently declared:

> QUOTE: "RE: *[the speed of a page] So we do say we have **a small factor in there for pages that are really slow to load** where we take that into account.*" **John Mueller, Google** (2015)

and

> QUOTE: *"Make sure they [web pages] load fast, for your users. I aim for less than 2-3 secs"* **John Mueller, Google** (2016)

and from another Googler when asked about a site that was loading in 5 seconds:

QUOTE: "*I wouldn't worry about it too much. Make it as fast as you reasonably can.*" **Gary Illyes**, Google 2016

and

QUOTE: "*I guess there are two aspects here when you look at server speed. On the one hand* **there's the kind of perceived speed in the browser, in the time it takes to render a page, and that is something that is definitely a ranking factor**, *it's probably not the biggest ranking factor. And usually we try to differentiate between sites that are really slow, and sites that are kind of normal. So just optimizing on a millisecond basis is not going to affect anything in the search results.... the other part of server speed is more in regards to crawling, so how quickly we can crawl pages from your website, and that's not directly a ranking factor, but it does affect how quickly we can pick up new and changed content on your site.*" **John Mueller,** **Google** (2016)

In 2017 Google has stated, with regards to crawling and indexing your site:

QUOTE: "*For Googlebot a speedy site is a sign of healthy servers, so it can get more content over the same number of connections. On the flip side, a significant number of 5xx errors or connection timeouts signal the opposite, and crawling slows down.*" **Google** 2017

With regards to '*mobile first indexing*', Google may not immediately use mobile speed as a ranking factor, but:

QUOTE: "*I don't think we'd be able to do that from the beginning. That's a good point though. Maybe we should clarify that somewhere.... But for the most part in the same way that we use speed for desktop I don't see us doing that in the beginning. That's something we would like to do in the long run but not in the beginning.*" **John Mueller, Google Dec 2017**

It was later confirmed by Google that site speed would indeed be a ranking factor on mobile sites once it is fully rolled out:

QUOTE: "*[Google is] announcing that starting in July 2018,* **page speed will be a ranking factor for mobile searches**. *The "Speed Update," as we're calling it, will only affect pages that deliver the slowest experience to users and will only affect a small percentage of queries. It applies the same standard to all pages, regardless of the technology used to build the page. The intent of the search query is still a very strong signal, so a slow* page *may still rank highly if it has great, relevant content.*" Google 2018

How Fast Should Your Website Load?

Historically most of us have focused on making our desktop versions of our site load as fast as possible, but with Google switching to the mobile index first, and increase in the number of users on mobile devices, we must also now focus on mobile speed, too.

Research from Doubleclick (owned by Google) published in September 2016 suggests:

> **QUOTE***: 'The average load time for mobile sites is 19 seconds over 3G connections.'* DOUBLECLICK

and

> **QUOTE***: 'Slow loading sites frustrate users and negatively impact publishers. In our new study, "The Need for Mobile Speed", we found that 53% of mobile site visits are abandoned if pages take longer than 3 seconds to load.'*

and

> **QUOTE***: 'sites that load in 5 seconds vs 19 seconds observed: 25% higher ad viewability (and) 70% longer average sessions (and) 35% lower bounce rates'*

The report concludes:

> **QUOTE***: 'While there are several factors that impact revenue, our model projects that publishers whose mobile sites load in 5 seconds earn up to 2x more mobile ad revenue than those whose sites load in 19 seconds.'*

Google has also produced the following infographic on page load industry benchmarks:

As page load time goes from:

1s to 3s the probability of bounce **increases 32%**

1s to 5s the probability of bounce **increases 90%**

1s to 6s the probability of bounce **increases 106%**

1s to 10s the probability of bounce **increases 123%**

Recent Case Studies About Site Speed Performance

QUOTE: "*Consider this: Mobile sites lag behind desktop sites in key engagement metrics such as average time on site, pages per visit, and bounce rate. For retailers, this can be especially costly since 30% of all online shopping purchases now happen on mobile phones. **The average U.S. retail mobile site loaded in 6.9 seconds in July 2016**, but, according to the most recent data, 40% of consumers will leave a page that takes longer than three seconds to load. And 79% of shoppers who are dissatisfied with site performance say they're less likely to purchase from the same site again.*" Google, 2016

At the start of 2018, Pingdom offered us some new insight on how load time affects bounce rate:
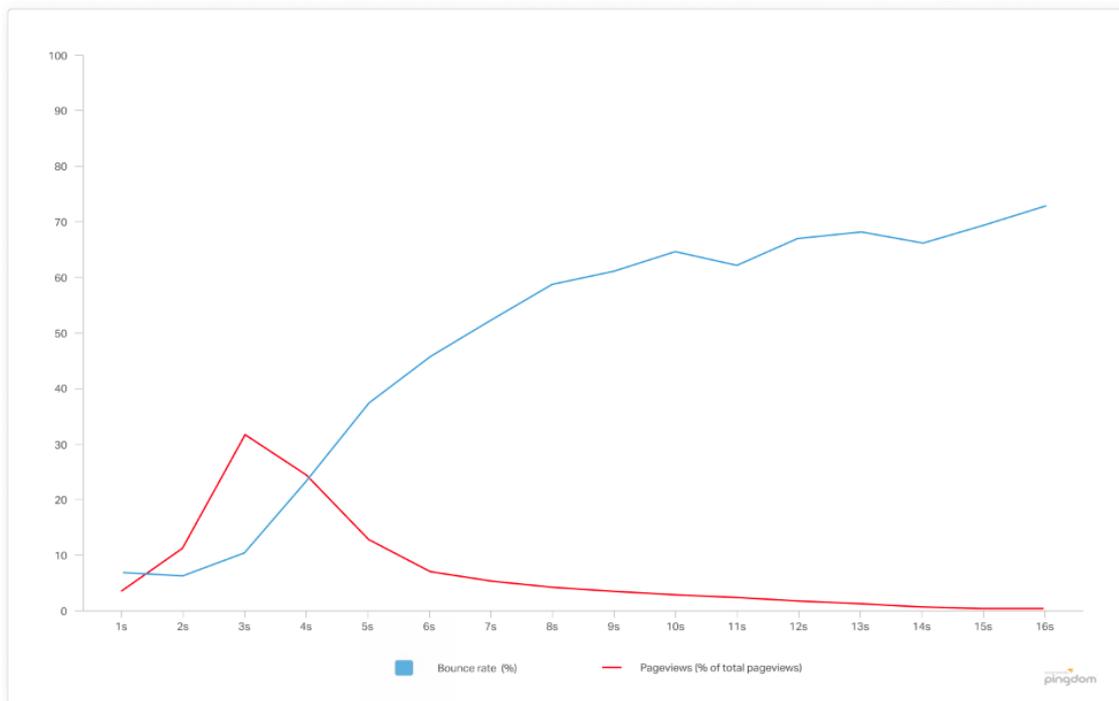
QUOTE: "*From the millions of tests performed using our website speed tests, we found that **the average load time for a webpage is 3.21 seconds**...[] What we found was that, unsurprisingly, a page's load time directly impacts bounce rate....[] as soon as the page load time surpasses 3 seconds, the bounce rate soars, to **38%** by the time it hits 5 seconds!*" Pingdom, 2018

There are other third-party site speed case studies available to back these findings from Google, Pingdom and Doubleclick up:

1. In 2016, Ancestory.com recorded a 7% positive rise in conversions after improving the render time of web pages by 68%, reducing page bloat by 46% and reducing load time by 64%.
2. In 2016, A presentation by *AliExpress* claimed they reduced load time for their pages by 36% and recorded a 10.5% increase in orders and a 27% increase in conversion rates for new customers.
3. In 2016, Artificial latency added to the *Telegraph* resulted in page views dropping by 11% for a 4s delay and 44% for a 20s delay.
4. In 2016, *The Trainline* reduced latency by 0.3s across their funnel and revenue increased by an extra £8 million a year.
5. In 2016, Instagram increased impressions and user profile scroll interactions by simply speeding up their site.
6. In 2016, FT declared tests of the new, faster FT.com resulted in users were up to 30% more engaged with the site.
7. In 2017, *Zitmaxx Wonen* reduced load time to 3 seconds and conversions jumped 50.2%. Revenue from mobile increased by 98.7%.
8. In 2017, COOK increased conversion rate by 7% after reducing average page load time by 0.85 seconds. Bounce rate also fell by 7%.
9. In 2017, Pinterest performance optimisation resulted in a 40% decrease in wait time, a 15% increase in organic traffic and a 15% increase in signups conversion rate.
10. In 2017, BBC declared they lose an additional 10% of users for every additional second it takes for their site to load

Very interestingly:

> **QUOTE**: *'For every 100ms decrease in homepage load speed, Mobify's customer base saw a **1.11% lift in session based conversion**, amounting to an average annual revenue increase of $376,789. Similarly, **for every 100ms decrease in checkout page load speed,** Mobify's customers saw a 1.55% lift* in session based conversion, amounting to an average annual revenue increase of $526,147'* (from wpostats)

5, 3, 2, 1 seconds conversion rate % difference from the control
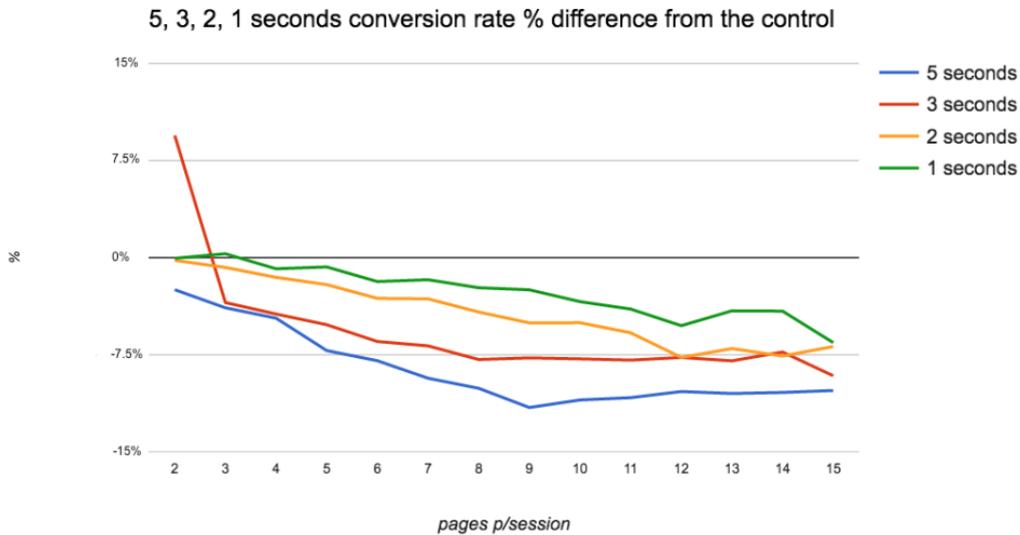
Another very interesting recent (2016) speed experiments ran at Forbes have also concluded:

> **QUOTE**: *"over the testing period users read fewer articles each day whilst experiencing delays loading each web page."*

Page load time   7 days impact 28 days

1 second slower -4.9%   -4.6%

2 second slower –   -5.0%

3 second slower -7.2%   -7.9%

> **QUOTE**: *"It's clear from our test that the speed of our website affects both of these revenue streams, over the short term, to the tune of hundreds of thousands of pounds, and in the long-term millions. The speed of the site negatively impacts a user's session depth, no matter how small the delay. Slow sites also have a detrimental effect on the number of articles people read. Largely, the slower the site, the greater the effect. The data suggests, both in terms of user experience and financial impact, that there are clear and highly valued benefits in making the site even faster. From this research we've chosen to invest even more time in making every aspect of the new FT.com website even faster over the coming months." FORBES*

Other research is hard to find but would indicate *as fast as possible*.

In this video from 2014, slow load times are one of the main reasons people abandon a checkout process:

https://youtu.be/UuePkp6TuhQ

Research (albeit from 2013) would suggest that slow load times are having an increased impact on e-commerce websites:

> **QUOTE***: "a 2-second delay in load time during a transaction resulted in abandonment rates of up to 87%. This is significantly higher than the baseline abandonment rate of 67%."*

Impact of page slowdown on completed transactions
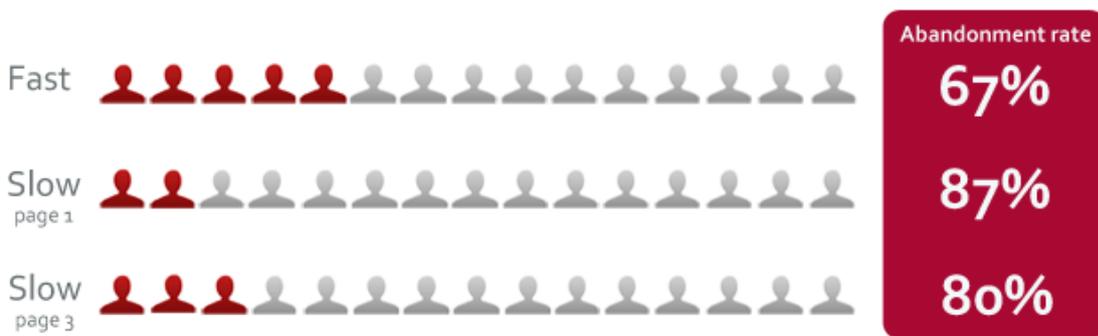
In a 2012 study, it was found that:

> **QUOTE***: "two thirds of UK consumers (67%) cite slow loading times as the main reason they would abandon an online purchase."*

When shopping online, what are the biggest irritations and/or what would make you abort?		
UK respondents	1,568	
Slow browsing pages or product images are slow to load	1,048	66.8%
It isn't easy to see, e.g. I cant find the product I want; I can't move around the site with ease	780	49.7%
Too many steps when I try to purchase goods	633	40.4%
Not being able to gauge size	560	35.7%
Having to register	525	33.5%
Not being able to try on	518	33.0%
Not being able to get a feel for quality	499	31.8%
Not being able to see true colour	465	29.7%
Poor design	461	29.4%
There is a lack of customer support	401	25.6%
Not being able to touch products	386	24.6%
Payment process	306	19.5%
Design doesn't reflect the brand	153	9.8%
Other (please specify)	86	5.5%

Maile Ohye, from Google, claimed:

> **QUOTE**: "*2 seconds is the threshold for ecommerce website acceptability. At Google, we aim for under a half second.*"

That Google video is from 2010. That claim was based on independent research commissioned by a company called Akamai in 2009:

> **QUOTE**: "*Based on the feedback of 1,048 online shoppers that were surveyed, Forrester Consulting concluded the following key findings:*

> - *47 percent of consumers expect a web page to load in two seconds or less*
> - *40 percent of consumers will wait no more than three seconds for a web page to render before abandoning the site.*
> - *52 percent of online shoppers stated that quick page loading is important to their site loyalty.*
> - *Shoppers often become distracted when made to wait for a page to load. 14 percent will begin shopping at another site, and 23 percent will stop shopping or walk away from their computer.*
> - *Retail and travel sites that underperform lead to lost sales. 79 percent of online shoppers who experience a dissatisfying visit are less likely to buy from that site again. 64 percent would simply purchase from another online store.*

> *Additional findings indicate that quick **page loading is a key factor in a consumer's loyalty to an eCommerce site**, especially for high spenders. 79 percent of online shoppers who experience a dissatisfying visit are less likely to buy from the same site again while 27 percent are less likely to buy from the same site's physical store, suggesting that the impact of a bad online experience will reach beyond the web and can result in lost store sales.*" **Akamai 2009**

A decade ago, research commissioned by the same organisation claimed that web shoppers were more likely to abandon a website if it took longer than four seconds to load.

The research by Akamai in 2006 revealed users' dwindling patience with websites that take time to show up.

Akamai claimed **75% of the 1,058 people asked would not return to websites that took longer than *four* seconds to load**.

The time it took a site to appear on screen came second to *high prices* and *shipping costs* in the list of shoppers' pet-hates, the research revealed. Akamai consulted a group who shopped regularly online to find out what they like and dislike about e-tailing sites. About half of mature net-shoppers - who have been buying online for more than two years or who spend more than $1,500 (£788) a year online - ranked page-loading time as a priority. Akamai claims that one-third of those questioned abandon sites that take time to load is hard to navigate or take too long to handle the checkout process.

The four-second threshold is half the time previous research, conducted during the early days of the web-shopping boom, suggested that shoppers would wait for a site to finish loading. To make matters worse, the research found that the experience shoppers have on a retail site colours their entire view of the company behind it.

About 30% of those responding said they formed a "negative perception" of a company with a badly put-together site or would tell their family and friends about their experiences. Further research by Akamai found that almost half of the online stores in the list of the top 500 US shopping sites take longer than the four-second threshold to finish loading. The survey questioned 1,058 net shoppers during the first six months of 2006. Consultants Jupiter Research did the survey for Akamai.

Whether this research is 100% valid is explored by your own experience. For instance, if you KNOW that the information you need is probably on a specific web page, you'll probably wait a lot longer than ten seconds to see the info. But if you do not...

Undeniably, though, it's been a long-held belief in good practice website design that your website needs to load fast if you want to keep visitors happy. This research only backed this up.

And that was many years ago.

Today - in 2018 - Site speed is a critical area of website development and profitable e-commerce.

Desktop users expect a site to load within a second or two in 2018. Mobile users are a little more patient, for now.

Download speeds

https://youtu.be/SO4YuDAkplU

Bandwidth or the capacity to send and receive data is an important consideration when designing an electronic document for distribution over the Internet.

It is important that the link to the Internet (from the computer serving the pages to customers) has sufficient capacity to be able to handle the expected load.

Otherwise, the response to users will be unsatisfactorily slow.

Some people today STILL connect to the Internet over a phone line, using a modem with a speed of 28.8 to 56 kilobits per second (kbit/s).

This "narrowband" communication requires user to wait while a dial-up connection is made before they can access the Internet, and means that Internet use, when connected, is slow.

Broadband services offer significantly faster data rates, enabling the delivery of services, such as high-speed Internet access. These may also be "always on" connections to the Internet.

However, what looks great and downloads quickly within the confines of the Web manager's high-speed network connection does not necessarily work as well for the average user of the Internet.

It is probably best to presume that your user has a SLOW connection capability - and aim to deliver for them a satisfying user experience as possible.

Then - everybody wins.

Internal Link Building
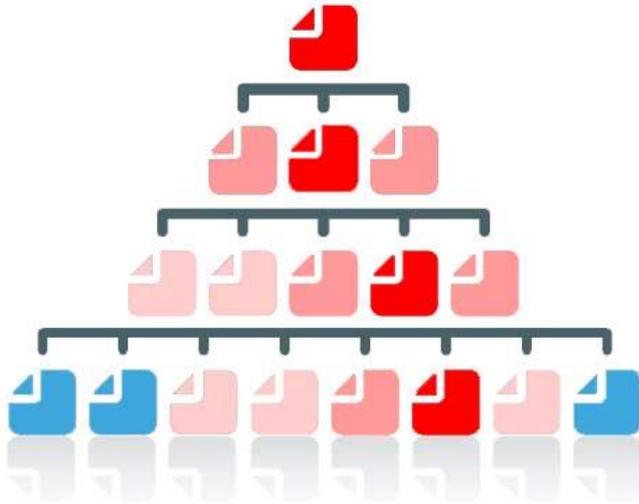
QUOTE: "*How important is the anchor text for internal links? Should that be keyword rich? Is it a ranking signal?* **We do use internal links to better understand the context of content on your site** *so if we see a link that's saying like red car is pointing to a page about red cars that helps us to better understand that but it's not something that you need to keyword stuff in any way because what generally happens when people start kind of focusing too much on the internal links is that they have a collection of internal links that all say have like four or five words in them and then suddenly when we look at that page we see this big collection of links on the page and essentially that's also text on a page so it's looking like keyword stuff text so I try to just* **link naturally within your website and make sure that you kind of have that organic structure that gives us a little bit of context but not that your keyword stuffing every every anchor text there.**" John Mueller, Google 2015

An Introduction to '*Internal Link Building*'

QUOTE: "*Most links do provide a bit of additional context through their anchor text. At least they should, right*?" John Mueller, Google 2017

Whereas [Linkbuilding](#) is the art of getting other websites to link to your website. **Internal link building** is the art age-old of getting pages crawled and indexed by Google. It is the art of spreading real Pagerank about a site and also naturally emphasising important content on your site in a way that actually has a positive, contextual SEO benefit for the ranking of specific keyword phrases in Google SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages).

External backlinks to your site are far more powerful than internals within it, but internal links have their use too.

Traditionally, one of the most important things you could do on a website to highlight your important content was to **link to important pages** often, especially from important pages on your site (like the homepage. for instance).

QUOTE: *"If you have pages that you think are important on your site don't bury them 15 links deep within your site and I'm not talking about directory length I'm talking about actual you have to click through 15 links to find that page* **if there's a page that's important or that has great profit margins or converts really - well - escalate that put a link to that page from your root page** *that's the sort of thing where it can make a lot of sense."* Matt Cutts, Google 2011

Highlighting important pages in your site structure has always been important to Google from a CRAWLING, INDEXING and RANKING point of view - and its important for website users from a USABILITY, USER EXPERIENCE and CONVERSION RATE perspective

Most modern CMS in 2018 take a headache out of getting your pages crawled and indexed. Worrying about your internal navigation structure (unless it is REALLY bad) is not going to cause you major problems from an indexation point of view.

There are other considerations though.

I still essentially use the methodology I have laid down on this page, but things have changed since I first started in [Google SEO](#) and started building internal links to pages almost 20 years ago.

Google has said it doesn't matter *where* the links are on your page, Googlebot will see them:

QUOTE: "*So position on a page for internal links is pretty much irrelevant from our point of view*. *We crawl, we use these mostly for crawling within a website,* **for understanding the context of individual pages within a website**. *So if it is in the header or the footer or within the primary content, it's totally more up to you than anything SEO wise that I would worry about.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

That statement on its own does not sit nicely with some patents I've read, where link placement does seem to matter in some instances.

When it comes to internal linking on your website:

- where you use links on a page is important for users
- which pages you link to on your website is important for users
- how you link to internal pages is important for users
- why you link to internal pages is important for users

Internal Linking is important to users, at least, and it's of some importance to Google, too. Google has lots of patents related to links and anchor text, for instance:

Anchor Text Indexing

QUOTE: *"Using anchor text for links to determine the relevance of the pages they point towards."* 12 Google Link Analysis Methods That Might Have Changed – *Bill Slawski*

Propagation of Relevance between Linked Pages

QUOTE: *"Assigning relevance of one web page to other web pages could be based upon distance of clicks between the pages and/or certain features in the content of anchor text or URLs. For example, if one page links to another with the word "contact" or the word "about", and the page being linked to includes an address, that address location might be considered relevant to the page doing that linking."* 12 Google Link Analysis Methods That Might Have Changed – *Bill Slawski*

Ranking based on '*changes over time in anchor text*'

In one embodiment of the invention, the time-varying behavior of anchortext *(e.g., the text in which a hyperlink is embedded, typically underlined or otherwise highlighted in a document) associated with a document may be used to score the document. For example, in one embodiment, changes over time in* anchor text *corresponding to* inlinks *to a document may be used as an indication that there has been* update *or even change of focus in the document; a relevancy score may take this change(s) into account."* The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children –*Bill Slawski*

Ranking based on 'Unique words, bigrams, phrases in anchor text'

QUOTE: *"In one embodiment, the link or web graphs and their behavior over time may be monitored and used for scoring, spam detection or other purposes by a search engine. Naturally developed web graphs typically involve independent decisions. Synthetically generated web graphs-usually indicative of an intent to spam a search engine are based on coordinated decisions; as such, the profile of growth in anchor words/bigrams/phrases is likely to be relatively spiky in this instance. One reason for such spikiness may be the addition of a large number of identical anchors from many places; another possibility may be addition of deliberately different anchors from a lot of places. With this in mind, in one embodiment of the invention, this information could be monitored and factored into scoring a document by capping the impact of suspect anchors associated with links thereto on the associated document score (a binary decision). In another embodiment, a continuous scale for the likelihood of synthetic generation is used, and a multiplicative factor to scale the score for the document is derived."* The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children – *Bill Slawski*

Rank assigned to *'a document is calculated from the ranks of documents citing it'* – *'Google Pagerank'*

> QUOTE*: "DYK that **after 18 years we're still using*** PageRank (and 100s of other signals) in ranking?" Gary Illyes from Google* – Search Engine Roundtable *2017*

We can only presume Google still uses Pagerank (or something like it) in its ordering of web pages.

> QUOTE*: "A method assigns importance ranks to nodes in a linked database, such as any database of documents containing citations, the world wide web or any other hypermedia database. **The rank assigned to a document is calculated from the ranks of documents citing it**. In addition, the rank of a document is calculated from a constant representing the probability that a browser through the database will randomly jump to the document. The method is particularly useful in enhancing the performance of search engine results for hypermedia databases, such as the world wide web, whose documents have a large variation in quality."* The Original PageRank Patent Application – Bill Slawski

> QUOTE: *"A high pagerank (a signal usually calculated for regular web pages) is an indicator of high quality and, thus, can be applied to blog documents as a positive indication of the quality of the blog documents."* Positive and Negative Quality Ranking Factors from Google's Blog Search (Patent Application) – *Bill Slawski*

*Google evidently does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. If Google still uses Pagerank, then perhaps they still use tons of other legacy methods of ranking websites that over time are obfuscated to protect the secret sauce.

A 'measure of quality' based on 'the number' of links:

> QUOTE*: "A system can determine a measure of quality for a particular web resource based on the number of other resources that link to the particular web resource and the amount of traffic the resource receives. For example, a ranking process may rank a first web page that has a large number of other web pages that link to the first web page higher than a web page having a smaller number of linking web pages."* Did the Groundhog Update Just Take Place at Google? *Bill Slawski*

A 'measure of quality' based on 'traffic received by use of those links'

> *However, some a resource may be linked to by a large number of other resources, while receiving little traffic from the links. For example, an entity may attempt to game the ranking process by including a link to the resource on another web page. This large number of links can skew the ranking of the resources. To prevent such skew, the system can evaluate the "mismatch" between the number of linking resources and the traffic generated to the resource from the linking resources. **If a resource is linked to by a number of resources that is disproportionate with respect to the traffic received by use of those links, that resource may be demoted in the ranking process**."* Did the Groundhog Update Just Take Place at Google? *Bill Slawski*

A 'measure of quality' based on link 'selection quality score'

> *The selection quality score may be higher for a selection that results in a long dwell time (e.g., greater than a threshold time period) than the selection quality score for a selection that results in a short dwell time (e.g., less than a threshold time period). As automatically generated link selections are often of a short duration, considering the dwell time in determining the seed score can account for these false link selections.* Did the Groundhog Update Just Take Place at Google? *Bill Slawski*

Links Are Like Lasers

I used a 'links-are-lasers' analogy way back then, to try and give beginners a simpler understanding of Google PageRank.

1. Links Are Lasers
2. Linking To A Page Heats Up A Page
3. Pages Get Hot Or Cold Depending On Number & Quality Of The Links To It
4. Cold Pages Don't Rank For Sh*t
5. Hot Pages Rank!

That was certainly how I used to think about link building and internal site structure. That is how I used to visualise how pages built up 'ranking equity' that could be spread about a site.

There was a time when you could very specifically structure a certain page to rank using nothing but links - and while you can still do that in 2018 in the end, Google will pick the page on your site that is MOST RELEVANT TO THE QUERY and best meets USER EXPECTATIONS & USER INTENT (see here for more on developing SEO-friendly content for Google in 2018).

That is - you can link all you want to any one page, but if Google has a problem with that page you are trying to make rank or thinks there's a better page on your site (with a better

user satisfaction score, for instance) - it will choose to rank that other page, before the 'well-linked-to' page.

In the past, Google would flip-flop between pages on your site, when there were multiple pages on the site targeting the same term, and rankings could fluctuate wildly if you cannibalised your keywords in this way.

Google is much more interested, in 2018, in the end-user quality of the *page* ranking, and the trust and quality of the actual *website* itself, than the inbound links pointing to a single page or a clever internal keyword rich architecture that holds content 'up'.

Its must more important in 2018 for a page to meet the user intent (as Google has defined it) of a specific key phrase and those intents can be complex keyword phrase to keyword phrase.

Internal link building works best when it is helping Google identify canonical pages to rank on your site.

As John Mueller points out in the above official video:

> **QUOTE**: "*we do use internal links to better understand the context of content of your sites*" John Mueller, Google 2015

...but if you are putting complicated site-structure strategy before high-quality single-page content that can stand on its own, you are probably going to struggle to rank in Google organic listings in the medium to long-term.

So the message is **a keyword rich anchor text system on your site IS useful**, and **is a ranking signal**, **but don't keyword stuff it**.

I have always taken that to mean we should focus on introducing as many unique and exactly relevant long-tail keyword phrases into your internal link profile as you can. This has certainly had better results for me than having one page on your site having only one anchor text phrase in its profile.

How you proceed is going to be very much dictated by the site and complexity of your site, and how much time you are willing to spend on this ranking signal.

There is no single best way to build internal links on your site, but there *are* some efficiencies to be had, especially if your site is of a good quality in the first place. There are some really bad ways to build your site for search engines. For example, do not build your website with frames.

I focus on optimising the important pages in the website structure e.g. the pages we need to rank fast and I prioritise internal links to these pages (all the time remembering first link priority).

By making sure you link to other relevant pages from pages on your site to other pages, you spread Pagerank (or link equity) throughout the site and each individual link can provide even more context and relevance information to Google (which can only be of use for search engine optimisation).

A home page is where link equity seemed to 'pool' (from the deprecated Toolbar PageRank point of view) and this has since been confirmed by Google:

> QUOTE: "*home pages*" are where "*we forward the PageRank within your website*" . John Mueller, Google 2014

How you build internal links on your site today is going to depend on how large your site is and what type of site it is. Whichever it is - I would keep it simple in 2018.

I thought this was an interesting statement from Google, especially if you have a much larger site:
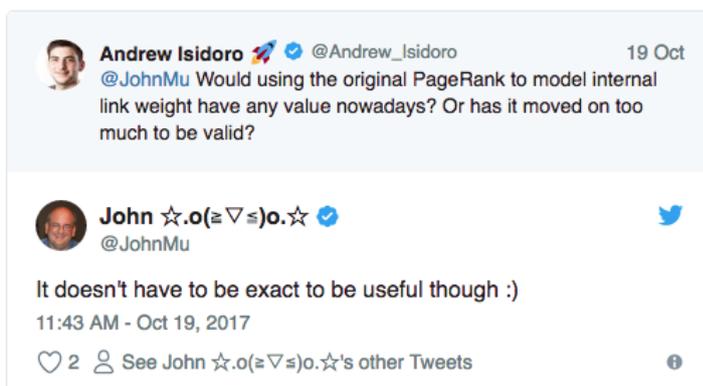
If you have a smaller site, I would still err on the safe side these days, but vary your anchor text to internal as much as possible - WITHIN TEXT CONTENT, and to meet long-tail variations of keywords with specific user intent, rather than relying on a site-wide navigation array to beef up raw link popularity to every page on the site (as the benefits from this tactic are not so obvious these days).

Whatever you do, I recommend you avoid anything that is easily detectable as too manipulative - **Google does not reward lazy linking in 2018.**

It penalises or ignores it.

How To Do Internal Link Building

Optimising internal links says John Mueller in a webmaster hangout is "<mark>*not something I'd see as being overly problematic if this is done in a reasonable way and that you're not linking every keyword to a different page on your site*</mark>".

As mentioned previously, this will depend on the size and complexity of your website. A very large site should keep things simple as possible and avoid any keyword stuffing footprint.

Any site can get the most out of internal link building by descriptively and accurately linking to canonical pages that are very high quality. The more accurately described the anchor text is to the page linked to, the better it is going to be in the long run. That accuracy can be to an exact match keyword phrase or a longtail keyword variation of it (if you want to know more see my article on keyword research for beginners - that link is in itself an example of a long tail variation of the primary head or medium term '*keyword research*').

I silo any relevance or trust mainly **through links in a flat architecture in text content** and **helpful secondary menu systems** and only **between pages that are relevant in context to one another**.

I don't worry about perfect Pagerank siloing techniques in 2018.

On this site, I like to build in-depth content pieces in 2018 that ranks for a lot of long-tail phrases. These days, I usually would not want those linked from every page on a site - because this practice negates the opportunities some internal link building provide. I prefer to link to pages in context; that is, within page text.

There's no set method I find works for every site, other than to **link to related internal pages often** and where appropriate. NOTE: You should also take care to manage redirects on the site, and minimise the amount of internal 301 redirects you employ on the site; it can slow your pages down (and website speed is a ranking factor) and impact your SEO in the long-term in other areas.

Takeaway 1: Internal links are still important. Internal links have value to Google for crawling, indexing and context. Internal links are important to get right for users and for rankings.

Broken Links Are A Waste Of Link Power

Websites '*Lacking Care and Maintenance*' Are Rated '*Low Quality*' by Google.

> **QUOTE***: "Sometimes a website may seem a little neglected: links may be broken, images may not load, and content may feel stale or out-dated. If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted." Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines, 2017*

The simplest piece of advice I ever read about creating a website / optimising a website was over a decade ago:

> **QUOTE**: ""make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site""

This advice is still sound in 2018.

Check your pages for broken links.

Broken links are a waste of link power and could hurt your site, drastically in some cases, if a poor user experience is identified by Google. Google is a link based search engine - if your links are broken, you are missing out on the benefit you would get if they were not broken.

Saying that - fixing broken links is NOT a first-order rankings bonus - it is a usability issue, first and foremost.

> **QUOTE**: "*The web changes, sometimes old links break. Googlebot isn't going to lose sleep over broken links. If you find things like this, I'd fix it primarily for your users, so that they're able to use your site completely. I wouldn't treat this as something that you'd need to do for SEO purposes on your site, it's really more like other regular maintenance that you might do for your users.*" **GOOGLE - 2014 (John Mueller)**

Takeaway 2: Broken links that are found on pages on your own site can be a frustrating user-experience, which is a big no-no in 2018. Broken links also mess up Pagerank and anchor text flow to pages on your site. Broken links on your site are often a different issue than the 404 errors Google shows in Webmaster tools. When 404s are present on your site, they hurt. When they are just 404s in Webmaster tools and not present on your pages these are less of an issue to worry about.

Internal Links Help Google Discover Other Pages On Your Website

Just because Google can find your pages easier in 2018 doesn't mean you should neglect to build Googlebot a coherent architecture with which it can crawl and find all the pages on your website.

Pinging Google blog search via RSS (still my favourite way of getting blog posts into Google results fast) and XML sitemaps may help Google **discover** your pages, find updated content and include them in search results, but they still aren't the best way at all of helping Google determine which of your pages to **KEEP INDEXED or EMPHASISE or RANK or HELP OTHER PAGES TO RANK** (e.g. it will not help Google work out the relative importance of a page compared to other pages on a site, or on the web).

While XML sitemaps go some way to address this, prioritisation in sitemaps does NOT affect how your pages are compared to pages on other sites - it only lets the search engines know which pages you deem most important on your own site. I certainly wouldn't ever just rely on XML sitemaps like that..... the old ways work just as they always have - and often the old advice is still the best especially for SEO.

XML sitemaps are INCLUSIVE, not EXCLUSIVE in that Google will spider ANY url it finds on your website - and your website structure can produce a LOT more URLs than you have actual products or pages in your XML sitemap (**something else Google doesn't like**.

Keeping your pages in Google and getting them to rank has long been assured by simple internal linking practices.

Traditionally, every page needed to be linked to other pages for Pagerank (and other ranking benefits) to flow to other pages - that is traditional, and I think accepted theory, on the question of link equity.

I still think about link equity today - it is still important.

Some sites can still have short circuits - e.g. internal link equity is prevented from filtering to other pages because Google cannot 'see' or 'crawl' a fancy menu system you're using - or Googlebot cannot get past some content it is blocked in robots.txt from rendering, crawling and rating.

I still rely on the 'newer' protocols like XML sitemaps for *discovery* purposes, and the old tried and trusted way of building a site with an intelligent navigation system to get it *ranking* properly over time.

Read my article on how to get Google to index an entire website.

How Many Links Is Too Many In A Website Dropdown Navigation System?

https://youtu.be/QHG6BkmzDEM

Quote some time ago now, I answered in the Google Webmaster Forum a question about how many links in a drop-down are best:

The question was:

QUOTE: "Building a new site with over 5000 product pages. Trying to get visitors to a product page directly from the homepage. Would prefer to use a two-level drop-down on homepage containing 10 brands and 5K products, but I'm worried a huge source code will kick me in the pants.Also, I have no idea how search engines treat javascript links that can be read in HTML. Nervous about looking like a link farm."

I answered:

QUOTE - "*I'd invest time in a solid structure - don't go for a javascript menu it's too cumbersome for users. Sometimes google can read these sometimes it can't - it depends on how the menu is constructed. You also have to remember if google can read it you are going to have a big template core code (boilerplate) on each and every page vying alongside flimsy product information - making it harder for google to instantly calculate what the individual products page is supposed to rank for.*

I would go for a much reduced simple sitewide navigation in the menu array,

Home *page links to* **categories** *> Categories link to* **products** *> Products link to* **related products**

when you go to category links the links relevant in that category appear in the menu. Don't have all that pop down in a dropdown - not good for users at all. Keep code and page load time down to a minimum..." Shaun Anderson

***QUOTE**:"[JohnMu](#) (Google Employee) + 2 other people say this answers the question:"* Google Webmaster Forums

I thought to see as somebody from Google agreed, it was worth posting on my own blog.

The **most important** thing for me when designing website navigation systems is:

1. Make it easy for the user to navigate
2. Make it easy for Google to get to your content and index your pages

In terms of navigation from a landing page (all your pages are potential landing pages), what do you think the benefits are of giving people 5000 navigation options.

Surely if the page meets their requirements, all you need is two buttons. Home, and "Buy Now!"; OK - a few more - but you get what I mean, I hope.

Less is more, usually.

Google says:

> **QUOTE**: "*Limit the number of links on a page to a reasonable number (a few thousand at most).*" Google [Webmaster Guidelines](#), 2018

There are benefits to a mega-menu:

> **QUOTE**: "***Mega menus may improve the navigability of your site***. *(Of course, it's always best to test.) By helping users find more, they'll help you sell more.*" [Jakob Nielsen](#)

and there are drawbacks to mega-menus:

> **QUOTE**: "*In the bigger scheme of things, the usability problems mentioned here aren't too serious. They'll reduce site use by a few percent, but they won't destroy anyone's business metrics. But still: **why degrade the user experience at all, when the correct design is as easy to implement as the flawed one**?*" [Jakob Nielsen](#)

Once you realise getting your product pages indexed is the key, don't go for a mega-menu just because you think this is a quick way to solve your indexing problem.

With a site structure, it's all about getting your content crawled and indexed. That's the priority.

Do I Need an HTML Sitemap For My Site?

NO, but they can be useful:

> **QUOTE**: "*Ensure that all pages on the site can be reached by a link from another findable page. The referring link should include either text or, for images, an alt attribute, that is relevant to the target page.*" Google Webmaster Guidelines, [2018](#)

A basic HTML sitemap is an old friend, and Google actually does say in its guidelines for Webmasters that you should include a sitemap on your site - for Googlebot and users - although this can naturally get a bit unwieldy for sites with a LOT of pages:

> **QUOTE**: "*Provide a sitemap file with links that point to the important pages on your site. Also **provide a page with a human-readable list of links to these pages (sometimes called a site index or site map page)**.*" Google Webmaster Guidelines, [2018](#)

When it comes to internal links, the important thing is that you "e*nsure that all pages on the site can be reached by a link from another findable page*" and then you can think about '*escalating*' the priority of pages via internal links.

Ensure Your Navigation System Is User & Search Engine Friendly

You can create dynamic drop-down menus on your site that meet accessibility requirements and are SEO friendly and then link your pages together in a Google-friendly way.

Just be sure to employ a system that uses CSS and Javascript (instead of pure javascript & HTML tables) and unordered lists as a means of generating the fancy drop-down navigation on your website.

Then, if javascript is disabled, or the style sheet is removed, the lists that make up your navigation array collapses gracefully into a list of simple links. See here for more on Javascript SEO.

Remember, with Drop down menus:

- Drop-down menus are generally fine but the JavaScript triggering them can cause some problems for search engines, users with screen readers and screen magnifiers.
- A <noscript> alternative is necessary.
- The options offered in a drop-down should be repeated as text links on the same page, so use unordered lists with CSS to develop your menu.

Use a "Skip Navigation" link on large mega-menu systems

Add a skip navigation link that brings the reader straight down to the main content of the page if you have a large menu system on every page. This allows users to skip the navigation array and get immediately to the page content.

You won't want this on your visually rich page, so some simple CSS will sort this out. You can hide it from the visual browsers, but it will display perfectly in text and some speech browsers.

Generally, I don't like mega-menu systems on websites and there are discussions online that too many options promote indecision. Whether you use a mega-menu it totally up to you - there are demonstrable pros and cons for both having a mega-menu or not.

The 3 Click Rule of Website Design

My own site follows the 3-click rule of web design, as you can see in this visual *Crawl Map of my site (using [Sitebulb](#)):*
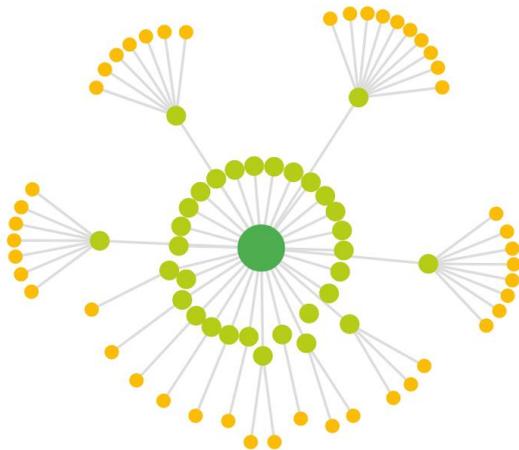
> **RULE**: "*Don't put important information on your site that is more than 3 clicks away from an entrance page*" Zeldman

Many have written about the **Three-Click Rule**. For instance, Jeffrey Zeldman, the influential web designer, wrote about the three click Rule in his popular book, "*Taking Your Talent to the Web*". He writes that the three click Rule is:

> **QUOTE**: "*based on the way people use the Web*" and "*the rule can help you create sites with intuitive, logical hierarchical structures*". Jeffrey Zeldman

On the surface, the **Three-Click Rule** makes sense. If users can't find what they're looking for within three clicks, they're likely to get frustrated and leave the site.

However, there have been other studies into the actual usefulness of the *3 click rule* by usability experts, generating real data, that basically debunks the rule as a gospel truth. It is evidently not always true that a visitor will fail to complete a task if it takes more than 3 clicks to complete.

The 3 click rule is the oldest pillar of accessible, usable website design, right there beside KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid).

The **3 click rule**, at the very least, ensures you are always thinking about how users get to important parts of your site before they bounce.

> **QUOTE**: "*home pages*" are where "*we forward the PageRank within your website*" and "*depending on how your website is structured, if content is closer to the Home page, then we'll probably crawl it a lot faster, because we think it's more relevant*" and "***But it's not something where I'd say you artificially need to move everything three clicks from your Homepage***". John Mueller, Google 2014

This is the click depth of my content on this website in Jan 2018 (as discovered by Screaming Frog):

Depth Stats
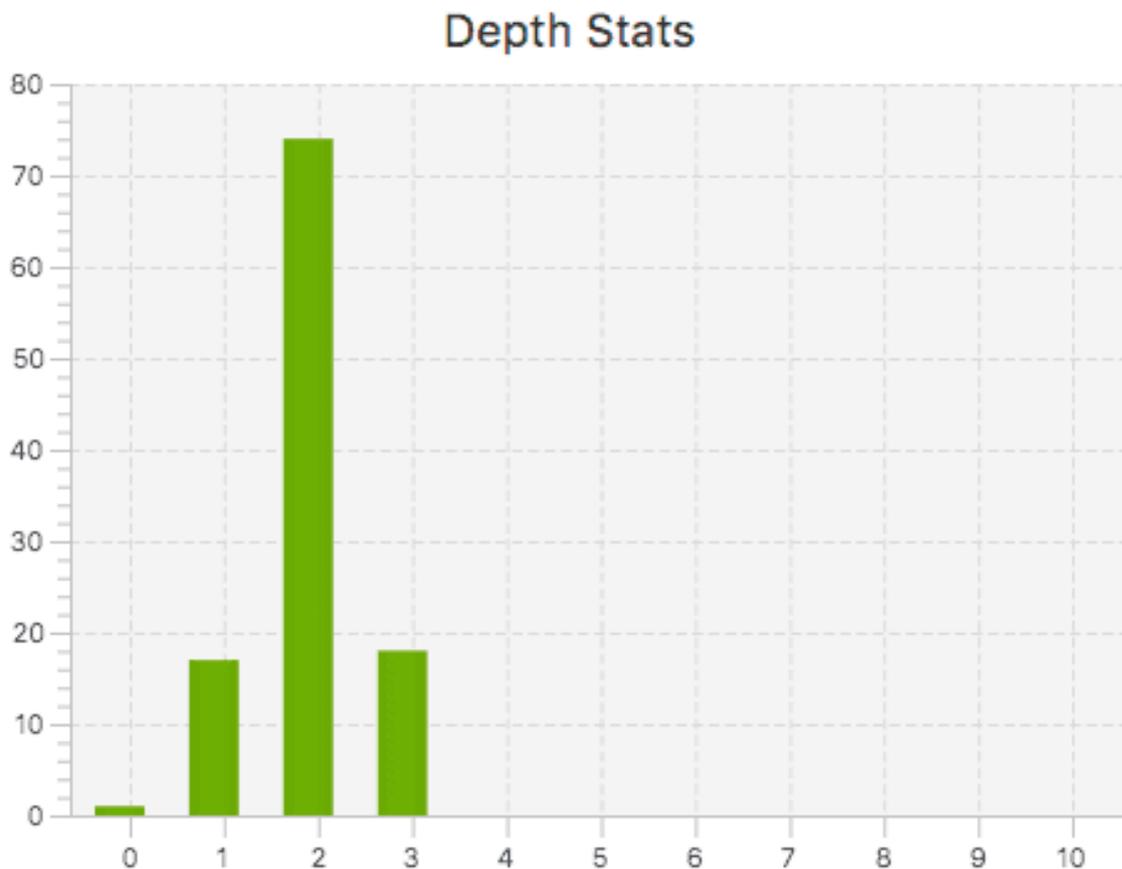
TAKEAWAY 3 - Pages do NOT need to be three clicks away from the landing page, but it is useful to think about the concept of the 3 click rule, I think when designing a navigation around your site. The simpler the better.

TAKEAWAY 4 - There is a benefit to linking to important pages often, but just because a page is linked to a LOT in an internal architecture will not necessarily make the page rank much better even with more Google Pagerank pumped into it. Relevance algorithms, page quality and site quality algorithms are all designed to float unique or satisfying pages to the top of the SERPs in 2018. As a direct result of this observation, I prefer to maximise the

contextual value of internal links on smaller sites (rather than just make a page 'link popular'). I go into 'contextual value below).

The Benefits of A Consistent Website Navigation & Page Layout

A key element of accessible website development is a clean, consistent navigation system coupled with a recognised, usable layout.

Don't try and re-invent the wheel here. A simpler, clean, consistent navigation system and page layout allow users to **instantly find important information** and allows them to quickly **find comfort in their new surroundings** especially if the visitor is completely new to your website.

Visitors don't always land on your home page – **every page on your website is a potential landing page**.

Ensure when a visitor lands on any page, they are presented with simple options to go to important pages you want them to go to. Simple, clear calls to action that encourage a user to visit specific pages. Remember too, that just because you have a lot of pages on your site, that does not mean you need a mega-menu. You do not need to give visitors the option to go to every page from their entry page. You do not need a massive drop down menu either. Spend the time and invest in a simple site navigation menu and a solid site structure.

A traditional layout (2 or 3 columns, with a header and a footer) is excellent for accessible website design, especially for information sites.

Remember to use CSS for all elements of style, including layout and navigation.

> **QUOTE**: "*Presentation, content and navigation should be consistent throughout the website*" Guidelines for UK Government websites - Illustrated handbook for Web management teams

Google has also mentioned about consistency (e.g. even your 404 page should be consistent with regards to your normal page layouts).

There is one area, however, where 'consistency' might not be the most optimal generic advice and that is how you interlink pages using anchor text.

For instance, on a smaller site; is it better to link to any one page with the same anchor text focusing all signals on one exact match keyword phrase - or - is best to add more contextual value to these links by mixing up how you manage internal links to a single page.

In short, instead of one internal link to a page say "*How To Optimise A Website Using Internal Links*" I could have 5 different links on 5 pages all with unique anchor text pointing to the one page:

1. how to use internal links for SEO
2. how to build internal links
3. how to manage internal links
4. how to optimise internal links
5. how to SEO internal links

I think this provides a LOT of contextual value to a page and importantly it mixes it up:

> **QUOTE**: "*Each piece of duplication in your on-page SEO strategy is ***at best*** wasted opportunity. Worse yet, if you are aggressive with aligning your on page heading, your page title, and your internal + external link anchor text the page becomes more likely to get filtered out of the search results (which is quite common in some aggressive spaces). Aaron Wall, 2009*

From my tests some sites will get more benefit out of mixing up as much as possible. If you do see the benefit of internal linking using a variation of anchor text, you will need to be aware of First Link Priority (I go into this below)

TAKEAWAY 5 - Keep internal navigation consistent and clear.

First Link Priority - Do Multiple Links From One Page To Another Count?

https://youtu.be/yYWlEItizjI

Google commented on this in a recent hangout:

> **QUOTE**: "*Q: If I have two internal links on the same page and they're going through the same destination page but with different anchor text how does Google treat that so from our side? A: **This isn't something that we have defined or say it's always like this** always like the first link always the last link always an average of the links there is something like that but rather that's something that our algorithms might choose to do one way or the other so recommendation there would be not to worry too much about this if you have different links going to the same page that's completely normal that's something that we have to deal with we have to understand the anchor tanks to better understand the context of that link and that's that's completely normal so that's not something I kind of worry about there I know some people do SEO experiments and try to figure this out and kind of work out Oh Google currently does it like this but from our point of view can change and it's not something that we have so **even if you manage to figure out how we currently do it today then that's not necessarily how we'll do tomorrow or how it's always it's across all websites.**" John Mueller, Google [2018](#)

First link priority has been long discussed by SEO geeks. Matt Cutts of Google was asked in the video above:

> **QUOTE**: "*Hi Matt. If we add more than one links from page A to page B, do we pass more PageRank juice and additional anchor text info? Also can you tell us if links from A to A count*?"

At the time he commented something *like* he 'wasn't going to get into anchor text flow' (or as some call First Link Priority) - in this scenario, which is, actually, **a much more interesting discussion**.

> **QUOTE**: "*Both of those links would flow PageRank I'm not going to get into anchor text but both of those links would flow PageRank*" Matt Cutts, Google 2011

But the **silence** on anchor text and priority - or what counts and what doesn't, is, perhaps, confirmation that Google has some sort of 'link priority' when spidering multiple links to a page from the same page and assigning relevance or ranking scores.

For example (and I am talking internally here - if you took a page and I placed two links on it, both going to the same page? (OK - hardly scientific, but you should get the idea). Will Google only 'count' the first link? Or will it read the anchor text of both links, and give my page the benefit of the text in both links especially if the anchor text is different in both links? Will Google ignore the second link? What is interesting to me is that knowing this leaves you

with a question. If your navigation array has your main pages linked to in it, perhaps your links in content are being ignored, or at least, not valued.

I think links in body text are invaluable. Does that mean placing the navigation below the copy to get a wide and varied internal anchor text to a page? Perhaps.

I'm pretty sure, from plenty of observations I've made in the past, that this is indeed the case. I have seen a few examples where I *thought* might contradict my own findings, but on closer examination, most could not be verified. It's a lot harder today to isolate this sort of thing - but Google is designed that way.

I think as the years go by - we're supposed to forget how Google worked under-the-hood of all that fancy new GUI.

The simple answer is to expect ONE link - the first link - out of multiple links on a single page pointing at one other page - to pass anchor text value. Follow that advice with your most important key phrases in at least the first link when creating multiple links and you **don't need to know about first link priority**.

A quick SEO test I did a long time ago throws up some interesting questions *today* - but the changes over the years at Google since I did my test will have an impact what is shown - and the fact is - the test environment was polluted long before now.

I **still think about first link priority** when creating links on a page.

Google says today:

> **QUOTE***: "I know some people do SEO experiments and try to figure this out and kind of work out 'Oh Google currently does it like this' but from our point of view can change and it's not something that we have so **even if you manage to figure out how we currently do it today then that's not necessarily how we'll do tomorrow or how it's always it's across all websites.**"* John Mueller, Google 2018

The last time I tested 'first link priority' was a long time ago.

From this test, and the results on this site anyways, testing links internal to this site, it seems **Google only counted the first link** when it came to ranking the target page.

> This is Google's cache of http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/shaunanderson/index.htm
> of the page as it appeared on 16 Oct 2008 18:23:18 GMT. The current page cou
> in the meantime. Learn more
>
> These search terms are highlighted: shaun anderson These terms only
> appear in links pointing to this page: cartoonist

At the time I relied on the notification "*These terms only appear in links pointing to this page*" (when you click on the cache) that Google helpfully showed when the word isn't on the page.

Google took that away so now you can really only use the SERPS itself and see if you can detect anchor text influence (which is often not obvious).

If 'first link priority' is a 'thing', then you could (and I am just theorising here) place your navigation below your text to ensure first link priority in contextual content. This lets you vary the anchor text to important internal pages on your site, within the text content, instead of ramming down Google's throat one anchor text link (usually high in the navigation). Varying anchor text **naturally optimises to an extent the page for long tail 'human' searches** you might overlook when writing the actual target page text. Of course, I assume here that links within text surrounded by text are more important (contextually) than links in navigation menus. It makes use of your internal links to rank a page for more terms, especially useful if you link to your important pages often, and don't have a lot of incoming natural links to achieve a similar benefit.

Of course, you could simply be sensible when interlinking your internal pages.

Does Only The First Link Count On Google? Does the first or second anchor text link on a page count?

This has been one of the more interesting geek SEO discussions over the years.

Takeaway 6: If you believe in 'first link priority', you are going to have to take it into account when creating your main navigation system that appears on every page, and where that sits in the template.

What is Anchor Text?

What is anchor text?

> **Definition**: "*Words, typically underlined on a web page that form a clickable link to another web page. Normally the cursor will change to a finger pointing if you hover over such a link.*"

HTML code example:

```
<a href="https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/">This is anchor text!</a>
```

How To Optimise Anchor Text

Use Descriptive Anchor Text - Don't Use 'Click Here' as it provides no additional contextual information via the anchor text in the link.

> **QUOTE**: "*When calling the user to action, use brief but meaningful link text that: 1) provides some information when read out of context 2) explains what the link offers 3) doesn't talk about mechanics and 4) is not a verb phrase*" W3C

The accessibility consultants at the W3C advises "don't say '*click here*'" and professional SEO professionals recommend it, too.

If you use link text like "go" or "click here," those links will be meaningless in a list of links. Use descriptive text, rather than commands like "return" or "click here."

For example, do not do this:

`"To experience our exciting products, `click here`."`

This is not descriptive for users and you might be missing a chance to pass along keyword rich anchor text votes for the site you're linking to (useful to rank better in Google, Yahoo and MSN for keywords you may want the site to feature for).

Instead, perhaps you should use:

`"Learn more about our `search engine optimisation products`."`

Assistive technologies inform the users that text is a link, either by changing pitch or voice or by prefacing or following the text with the word "link."

So, don't include a reference to the link such as:

`"Use this `link` to experience our exciting services."`

Instead, use something like:

`"Check out our `SEO services` page to experience all of our exciting services."`

In this way, the list of links on your page will make sense to someone who is using a talking browser or a screen reader.

NB - This rule applies in web design when naming **text links** on your page and in your copy. Of course, you can use click here in images (as long as the ALT tag gives a meaningful description to all users).

> **QUOTE**: *"One thing to think about with image links is if you don't have an alt text for that then you don't have any anchor text for that link. So I definitely **make sure that your images have alt text so that we can use those for an anchor for links** within your website. If you're using image links for navigation make sure that there's some kind of a fallback for usability reasons for users who can't view the images."* John Mueller, Google 2017

If that wasn't usable enough, Google ranks pages, part, by keywords it finds in these text links, so it is worth making your text links (and image ALT text) relevant and descriptive.

You can use **keyword mapping techniques** to map important key phrases to important elements on important pages on your site (like internal links).

Hobo Seo Report

Rank Check

Insights | FOCUS URL | FOCUS KW | **Ranking Report** | Rank UP | Rank Down | N/A

Keyword Prioritisation Overview

These are keyword phrases relevant to your business, and mapped to the correct pages and where these pages currently rank in Google.

Pink = Keyword Not Found in Element
Green = Keyword Present in Element
Orange = Potential Keyword Stuffing in Element

Search Term	Ranking URL	Title	Page	Internal	Found/Words	KW %	Meta Desc	Meta Kw	Alt Text	Cur Rank	Yesterday	Mnth Ago	Base Rank	Top Rank	Local	National	PI Score
		YES	YES	YES	47/24,738	0.19%	YES	NO	YES	5	5	5	33	3	33100	673000	685.49
		YES	YES	YES	5/1,168	0.43%	NO	NO	NO	18	19	19	10	4	9900	246000	1,211.00
		NO	YES	NO	2/24,738	0.01%	YES	NO	NO	8	8	10	18	3	5400	74000	685.49
		YES	YES	YES	34/4,059	0.84%	NO	NO	YES	12	14	18	22	11	1900	60500	4,037.00
		YES	YES	YES	5/5,952	0.08%	YES	NO	NO	23	22	25	45	11	1900	40500	1,162.20
		NO	YES	YES	2/24,738	0.01%	YES	NO	NO	12	12	12	13	4	2400	27100	685.49
		YES	YES	NO	4/1,168	0.34%	NO	NO	NO	18	18	18	21	2	2900	27100	1,211.00
		NO	YES	NO	2/1,168	0.17%	NO	NO	NO	13	14	15	18	1	2900	22200	1,211.00
		YES	YES	YES	4/24,738	0.02%	YES	NO	NO	3	3	3	40	2	1000	18100	685.49
		YES	YES	YES	19/7,359	0.26%	NO	NO	NO	43	42	66	61	10	1300	18100	22.01
		YES	YES	YES	50/19,411	0.26%	YES	NO	NO	7	7	7	57	3	880	14800	3,170.50
		YES	YES	YES	1/24,738	0%	YES	NO	NO	1	1	1	67	1	260	12100	685.49
		NO	NO	NO	0/307	0%	YES	NO	NO	7	7	8	5	5	880	12100	0.36
		YES	NO	NO	0/134	0%	NO	NO	NO	78	88	74	43	26	2900	12100	0.36
		YES	YES	YES	29/6,062	0.48%	YES	NO	NO	36	36	35	83	18	1300	12100	42.85
		YES	YES	YES	3/2,792	0.11%	NO	NO	NO	10	10	9	26	7	590	9900	2,743.00
		NO	YES	YES	1/24,738	0%	YES	NO	YES	8	8	7	4	3	880	8100	685.49
		NO	YES	NO	1/24,738	0%	YES	NO	NO	5	5	6	2	2	590	8100	685.49
		YES	YES	YES	1/1,843	0.05%	NO	NO	NO	36	44	32	45	14	480	8100	1,864.00
		NO	YES	YES	9/24,738	0.04%	YES	NO	NO	7	7	7	30	3	1600	6600	685.49
		YES			9/6,176	0.15%	NO	NO	YES	3	3		23	3	480	6600	1,023.00

I can provide website keyword mapping services to important pages on a site as part of my SEO audit. See my SEO auditing costs page.

Takeaway 7: Use Descriptive Anchor Text.

Is There A Limit On The Number Of Keywords In Anchor Text Links?

YES - **Google will only count the first 16 words** (during 2018, at least) in the string of anchor text and this has changed at least once in the last decade (it used to be the first 8 words in the string and this includes 'stop words' I think it can be demonstrated).

I tested to see if there was a maximum limit of keywords Google will pass to another page through a text link. How many words will Google *count* in a backlink or internal link? Is there a best practice that can be hinted at?

My first qualitative tests were basic and flawed but time and again other opportunities for observation indicated the maximum length of the text in a link was perhaps 8 words (my first assumption was a character limit, maybe 55 characters, e.g not a word limit, but that was flawed).

I have had a look at this a few times now. I had a look at it again recently (about a month ago). Further observations at the time, (described below) pointed to keeping the important keywords in the first EIGHT WORDS of any text link to make sure you are getting the maximum benefit but in 2018 that number would be sixteen words (although I would STILL keep important keywords in the first 8-12 words of a link for maximum benefit).

We know that keywords in anchor text have some contextual value to Google. How many words will Google count as anchor text?

Here is some evidence.

Not many people link to you with very long anchor text links, so when people do, it is a chance to see how many keywords Google is counting as a keyword phrase in anchor text.

This blogger linked to me with an anchor text containing 21 keywords in the link:
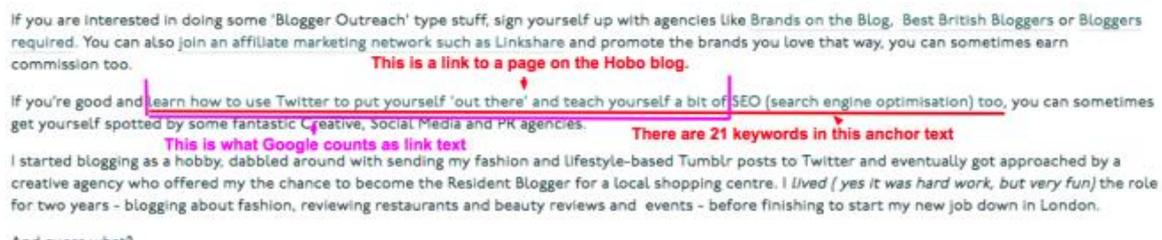
From this observation we can use Google to check a few things:
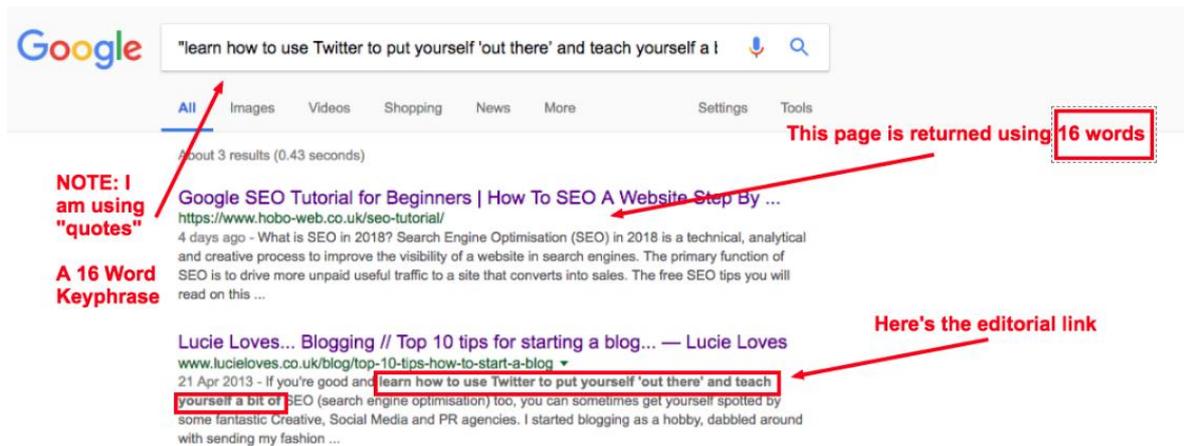
In Google.co.uk the answer is consistently **16 words in anchor text for maximum contextual value**.

Any signal within the 16 word limit in anchor text can be detected, **nothing above the 16-word threshold was detected**:

Ironically the 17th keyword in anchor text was 'SEO', which the Hobo page ranks page one in the UK, so it is 'relevant' for the query on many other ranking factors but this imposed limit is an instance where the document is not selected as a result of the limit.

How About If The Link Is In ALT Text?

Google limits keyword text in ALT attribute to 16 words too, so it may be reasonable to think it is the same.

and

See my article for more on optimising alternative text.

What If The Link Passes through a 301 redirect?

The same limits are in place.

In Google.co.uk the answer is consistently **16 words in anchor text for maximum contextual value:**
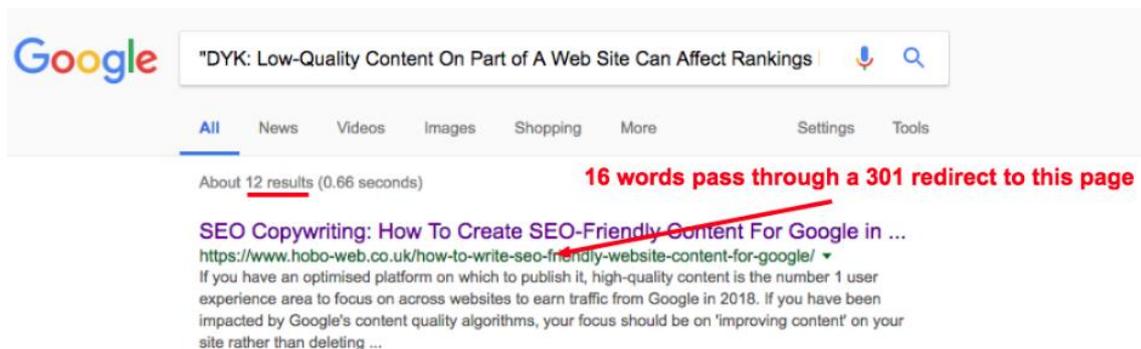
Any signal within the 16-word limit in anchor text can be detected, **nothing above the 16-word threshold was detected**:
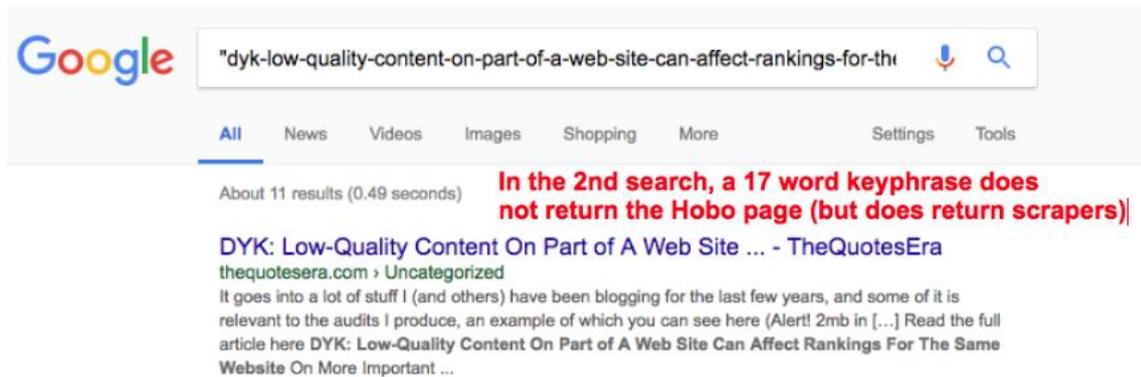
Do not link large blocks of text as Google only counts the first 16 words it finds in the anchor text link and the rest of the keywords 'evaporate' from the anchor text link leaving you with a 16 keyword maximum anchor text phrase to be descriptive and get the most out of links pointing to the page.

Something to think about.

Takeaway 8: Keep anchor text links within the limit of **16 keywords max**. Keywords above the 16-word threshold limit seem to 'evaporate' in terms of any demonstrable value that I can show they pass.

See my article on [301 redirects and implementations](#).

Beware Using Plugins to Automate 'SEO-Friendly' Internal Links

I would avoid using plugins to optimise your internal links. Yes, its a time-saver, but it can also look spammy.

Google has been known to frown upon such activities.

Case in point:

> **QUOTE**: "*As happened to a friend of a friend, whose rankings went deep into the well of despair shortly after installing and beginning to use SEO Smart Links. Since there hadn't been any other changes to the site, he took a flyer on a reconsideration request and discovered that yes, indeed, there had been a penalty*":

☆ Reconsideration request for http:// [redacted] com/: Manual spam action revoked

Dear site owner or webmaster of [redacted]

We received a request from a site owner to reconsider [redacted] for compliance with Google's Webmaster Guidelines.

Previously the webspam team had taken manual action on your site because we believed it violated our quality guidelines. After reviewing your reconsideration request, we have revoked this manual action. It may take some time before our indexing and ranking systems are updated to reflect the new status of your site.

> ***"So, what had this site owner done to merit a successful reconsideration request?** Simple – he removed the SEO Smart Links plugin and apologized for using it in the first place*" Dan Theis, Marketers Braintrust, 2012

You get the most from such optimisations if they are manual and not automated, anyway.

Takeaway 9: Don't use plugins to artificially inflate link popularity to pages on your site

Does Google Count Internal Keyword Rich Links To Your Home Page?

The last time I tested this was **a long time ago**, and it was an age-old SEO trick that sometimes had some benefits.

A long time ago I **manipulated first link priority to the home page of a site for the site's main keyword** - that is, instead of using '*home*' to link to my homepage, I linked to the home page with "*insert keyword*"). Soon afterwards the site *dropped in rankings* for its main term from a pretty stable no6 to about page 3 and I couldn't really work out exactly any other issue.

Of course, **it's impossible to isolate if making this change was the reason for the drop**, but let's just say after that I **thought twice about doing this sort of SEO 'trick'** in future on established sites (even though some of my other sites seemed to rank no problem with this technique).

I formulated a little experiment to see if anchor text links had any impact on an established home page (in as much a controlled manner as possible).

Result:

Well, look at the graph below.
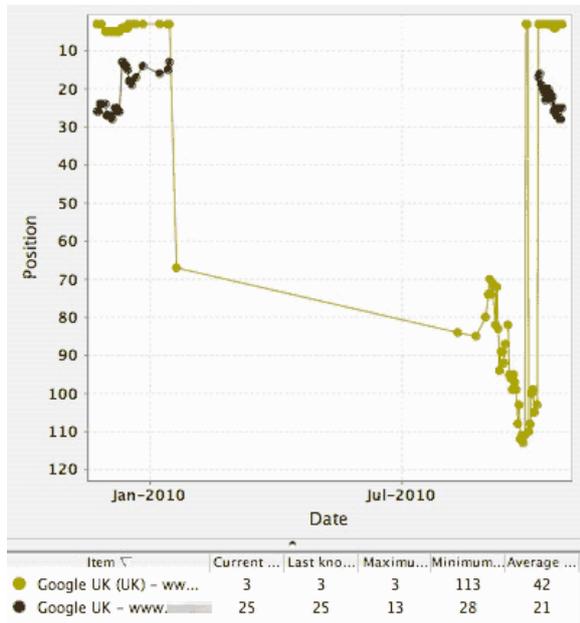
It did seem to have an impact.

It's possible linking to your home page with keyword rich anchor text links (and that link being the ONLY link to the home page on that page) can have some positive impact in your rankings, but it's also quite possible attempting this might damage your rankings too!

Trying to play with first link priority is for me, a bit too obvious and manipulative these days, so I don't really bother much, unless with a brand new site, or if it looks natural, and even then not often, but these kinds of results make me think twice about everything I do in SEO.

I shy away from overtly manipulative onsite SEO practices in 2018 - and I suggest you do too.

Takeaway 10: Avoid anything too manipulative with internal anchor text.

Should I Use Nofollow on Internal Links (PageRank Sculpting)?

https://youtu.be/bVOOB_Q0MZY

NO.

> **QUOTE**: "*I'd recommend **not using nofollow for kind of PageRank sculpting within a website** because it probably doesn't do what you think it does*" John Mueller, Google 2017

This was actually said by Matt Cutts too about 10 years ago (although even in 2018, I see pages with nofollow on internal links).

> **QUOTE: "***Q: Does this mean "PageRank sculpting" (trying to change how PageRank flows within your site using e.g. nofollow) is a bad idea? A: **I wouldn't recommend it**, because it isn't the most effective way to utilize your PageRank. In general, I would let PageRank flow freely within your site. The notion of "PageRank sculpting" has always been a second- or third-order recommendation for us. I would recommend the first-order things to pay attention to are 1) **making great content that will attract links in the first place**, and 2) choosing a site architecture that makes your site usable/crawlable for humans and search engines alike.*"

Pagerank sculpting was a hot topic many years ago, and then changed the way they handled it:

> **QUOTE**: "*When we added a help page to our documentation about nofollow, we said "a solid information architecture — intuitive navigation, user- and search-engine-friendly URLs, and so on — is likely to be a far more productive use of resources than focusing on crawl prioritization via nofollowed links." In a recent webmaster video, I said "a better, more effective form of PageRank sculpting is choosing (for example) which things to link to from your home page." At Google I/O, during a site review session I said it even more explicitly: "**My short answer is no.** In general, whenever you're linking around within your site: don't use nofollow. Just go ahead and link to whatever stuff." But at SMX Advanced 2009, someone asked the question directly and it seemed like a good opportunity to clarify this point. Again, it's not something that most site owners need to know or worry about, but I wanted to let the power-SEOs know..*" Matt Cutts, Google 2009

Questions arise if you start thinking about it too much – I know I did – before Google changed the way it handled nofollow:

1. Should you **nofollow unimportant internal pages** or nofollow external links in an effort to consolidate the Pagerank you have already accrued?
2. Or should you **spend your time getting other quality links pointing to your site** to increase the PR you have to start off with (how you get Pagerank)?

The long-term best impact strategy here is simply to earn more Google Pagerank in the first place than PageRank sculpt with rel=nofollow links.

You can certainly control PR on a granular level (page by page in this case) – that is, which page gets available real PR from another page on your site. It's easy to follow, that some SEO professionals think, if that's the case, you can sculpt Pagerank, and channel page rank to important pages in a site.

The theory was that by adding the attribute to (for instance) internal links to your contact page, or disclaimer, or privacy policy page would send more PageRank to more important pages on your site.

I'd long fell out of love with PR sculpting internal pages using the attribute after testing the theory. The results were not worth it for me on the sites I worked on (some are quite large) – a few years back I posted this about PR sculpting:

QUOTE: "*I've been playing about with rel='nofollow' on this site for 4 months, and in all honesty, in future, **I won't be relying on nofollow** to sculpt unimportant pages out of any possible link graph, just optimising those pages better, or leaving them out altogether, like I used to do in 1999. It can be a useful tool in a site redevelopment, but from here on in, I'll be keeping nofollow for bad neighbourhoods and, pending further testing, on top level blog pages.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

In June 2008 I also posted this about Nofollow and PR Sculpting:

QUOTE: "*I tested it, and as far as I am concerned, on a 300 page site at least, any visible benefit is microscopic.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

In theory, PR sculpting sounded cool, but was in practice, very disappointing. Some people think it works, of course, even to this day. Maybe the effects are noticeable on giant sites with millions of pages.

Notes

I should point out you do not use rel="nofollow" to **prevent** the indexing of a page – merely to control which pages any particular page shares it's Pagerank.

When it came to first link priority on a page for Google it appeared at that time that the first link you nofollow on a page *might* also nofollow any other link to the same URL on that page.

Google changed the way it flowed PR through nofollowed links ten years ago, making Pagerank sculpting redundant:

> **QUOTE**: "*So what happens when you have a page with "ten PageRank points" and ten outgoing links, and five of those links are nofollowed? Let's leave aside the decay factor to focus on the core part of the question. Originally, the five links without nofollow would have flowed two points of PageRank each (in essence, the nofollowed links didn't count toward the denominator when dividing PageRank by the outdegree of the page). More than a year ago, Google changed how the PageRank flows so that the five links without nofollow would flow one point of PageRank each.*" Matt Cutts, Google 2009

When you add 'rel nofollow' to internal links you spread less Pagerank around your own site.

> **QUOTE: "***Q: Does this mean "PageRank sculpting" (trying to change how PageRank flows within your site using e.g. nofollow) is a bad idea? A: I wouldn't recommend it, because it isn't the most effective way to utilize your PageRank. In general, I would let PageRank flow freely within your site. The notion of "PageRank sculpting" has always been a second- or third-order recommendation for us. I would recommend the first-order things to pay attention to are 1) making great content that will attract links in the first place, and 2) choosing a site architecture that makes your site usable/crawlable for humans and search engines alike.*"Matt Cutts, Google 2009

and

> **QUOTE**: "*So today at SMX Advanced, sculpting was being discussed, and then Matt Cutts dropped a bomb shell that it no longer works to help flow more PageRank to the unblocked pages. Again — and being really simplistic here — if you have $10 in authority to spend on those ten links, and you block 5 of them, the other 5 aren't going to get $2 each. They're still getting $1. It's just that the other $5 you thought you were saving is now going to waste.*" Moz, 2009

So – it is fairly unequivocal. The Pagerank you think you are sculpting around your site is actually "evaporating" (a quote from Matt Cutts at SMX 2009) and you want MORE PageRank in your site not less of it.

However, and here's where some confusion comes in, even in 2018.

Google does say this in their general guidelines about nofollow:

> **QUOTE**: " *Crawl prioritization: Search engine robots can't sign in or register as a member on your forum, so there's no reason to invite Googlebot to follow "register here" or "sign in" links. Using `nofollow` on these links enables Googlebot to crawl other pages you'd prefer to see in Google's index. However, a solid information architecture — intuitive navigation, user- and search-engine-friendly URLs, and so on — is likely to be a far more productive use of resources than focusing on crawl prioritization via nofollowed links.*"Google Webmaster Guidelines, 2018

However, I very much doubt "crawl prioritisation" is something 99% of Webmasters need to be concerned about at all. It is a concern on a site with millions of pages, but not most sites.

The simple answer is to NOT apply rel=nofollow to ordinary HTML internal links on your website.

How To Find Rel=Nofollow On Internal Links On A Website

[SEMRush](#) finds and highlights nofollow links on internal links across your website so that you can check if they should be removed. In the example above, the rel=nofollow attribute was removed from every internal link as they were erroneously implemented in the first place.

Simply set up a site-audit using the [SEMRush Audit Tool](#) and the tool will automatically highlight any internal nofollow links (and a lot more, naturally).

Takeaway 11: Don't use rel=nofollow on internal links.

How Can I Optimise Anchor Text Across A Website?

Optimising your anchor text across an entire site is actually a very difficult and time-consuming process. It takes a lot of effort to even analyse internal anchor text properly.

You can use tools like SEMRush (specifically the SEMRush Audit Tool), SiteBulb Crawler, DeepCrawl, Screaming Frog or SEO Powersuite Website Auditor to check the URL structure and other elements like anchor text on any site sitewide.

If you are not technically minded, we can analyse and fix your site for you, if necessary, as part of our fixed price SEO service.

Does Google Count Keywords in Anchor Text In Internal Links? YES

https://youtu.be/i_xnKznRNCc?t=45m7s

Recently I looked to see [if Google counts keywords in the URL to influence rankings](#) for specific keywords and how I investigated this.

In this article, I am looking at the value of an internal link and its impact on rankings in Google.

My observations from these tests (and my experience) include:

- witnessing the impact of removing contextual signals from the anchor text of a single internal link pointing to a target page (April 15 impact in the image below)
- watching as an irrelevant page on the same site take the place in rankings of the relevant target page when the signal is removed (19 April Impact)
- watching as the target page was again made to rank by re-introducing the contextual signal, this time to a single on-page element e.g. one instance of the keyword phrase in exact match form (May 5 Impact)
- potential evidence of a SERP Rollback @ May 19/20th
- potentially successfully measuring the impact of one ranking signal over another (a keyword phrase in one element via another) which would seem to slightly differ from recent advice on MOZ, for instance.

Will Google Count Keywords in Internal Anchor Text Links?

> **QUOTE**: "*we do use internal links to better understand the context of content of your sites*" John Mueller, Google 2015

Essentially **my tests revolve around ranking pages for keywords where the actual keyphrase is not present** in exact match instance anywhere on the website, in internal links to the page or on the target page itself.

The relevance signal (mentions of the exact match keyword) IS present in what I call the Redirect Zone - that is - **there are backlinks and even exact match domains pointing at the target page but they pass through redirects to get to the final destination URL**.

In the image below where it says "R*anking Test Implemented*" I **introduced one exact match internal anchor text link** to the target page from another high-quality page on the site - thereby re-introducing the 'signal' for this exact match term on the target site (pointing at the target page).

Where it says '*Test Removed*' in the image below, **I removed the solitary internal anchor text link** to the page, thereby, as I think about it, *shortcutting* the relevance signal again and leaving the only signal present in the 'redirect zone'.

It is evident from the screenshot above that something happened to my rankings for that keyword phrase and long tail variants exactly at the same time as my tests were implemented to influence them.

Over recent years, it has been difficult for me, at least, to pin down, with any real confidence anchor text influence from internal pages on an aged domain. Too much is going on at the same time, and most out of an observers control.

I've also always presumed Google would look at too much of this sort of onsite SEO activity as attempted manipulation if deployed improperly or quickly, so I have kind of just avoided this kind of manipulation and focused on improving individual page quality ratings.

TEST RESULTS

1. It seems to me that, **YES, Google does look at keyword rich internal anchor text to provide context and relevance signal**, on some level, for some queries, at least.
2. Where the internal anchor text pointing to a page is the only mention of the target keyword phrase on the site (as my test indicates) **it only takes ONE internal anchor text (to another internal page) to provide the signal required to have NOTICEABLE influence in specific keyword phrase rankings** (and so 'relevance').

Test Results: Removing Test Focus Keyword Phrase from Internal Links and putting the keyword phrase IN AN ALT TEXT ELEMENT on the page

To recap in my testing: I am seeing if I can get a page to rank by introducing and removing individual ranking signals.

Up to now, if the signal is not present, the page does not rank at all for the target keyword phrase.

I showed how having a keyword in the URL impacts rankings, and how having the exact keyword phrase in ONE internal anchor text to the target page provides said signal.

Ranking WEIRDNESS 1: Observing an 'irrelevant' page on the same site rank when ranking signal is 'shortcutted'.

The graph above illustrates that when I removed the signal (removed the keyword from internal anchor text) there WAS a visible impact on rankings for the specific keyword phrase – rankings disintegrated again.

BUT – THIS TIME – an irrelevant page on the site started ranking for a long tail variant of the target keyword phrase during the period when there was no signal present at all in the site (apart from the underlying redirect zone).

This was true UNTIL I implemented a further ranking test (by optimising ANOTHER ELEMENT actually on the page this time, that introduced the test focus keyword phrase (or HEAD TERM I have it as, in the first image on this page) again to the page – the first time that the keyword phrase was present on the actual page (in an element) for a long time).

WEIRDNESS 2 – SERP Rollback?

On May 1st I added the test focus keyword to the actual page in a specific element to test the impact of having the signal ONLY in a particular element on the page.

As expected the signal provided by having the test keyword phrase ONLY in one on-page element DID have some positive impact (although LESS than the impact when the signal was present in Internal Links and this comparison I did find very useful).

That's not the anomaly – that results from RANKING TEST 3 were almost exactly as I expected. A signal was recognised, but that solitary signal was not enough to make the page as relevant as it was to Google when the signal was in internal links.

The weirdness begins on May 17, where I again removed the keyword phrase from the target page. I expected with NO SIGNAL present anywhere on the site or the page, Google rankings would return to their normal state (*zero* visibility).

The opposite happened.
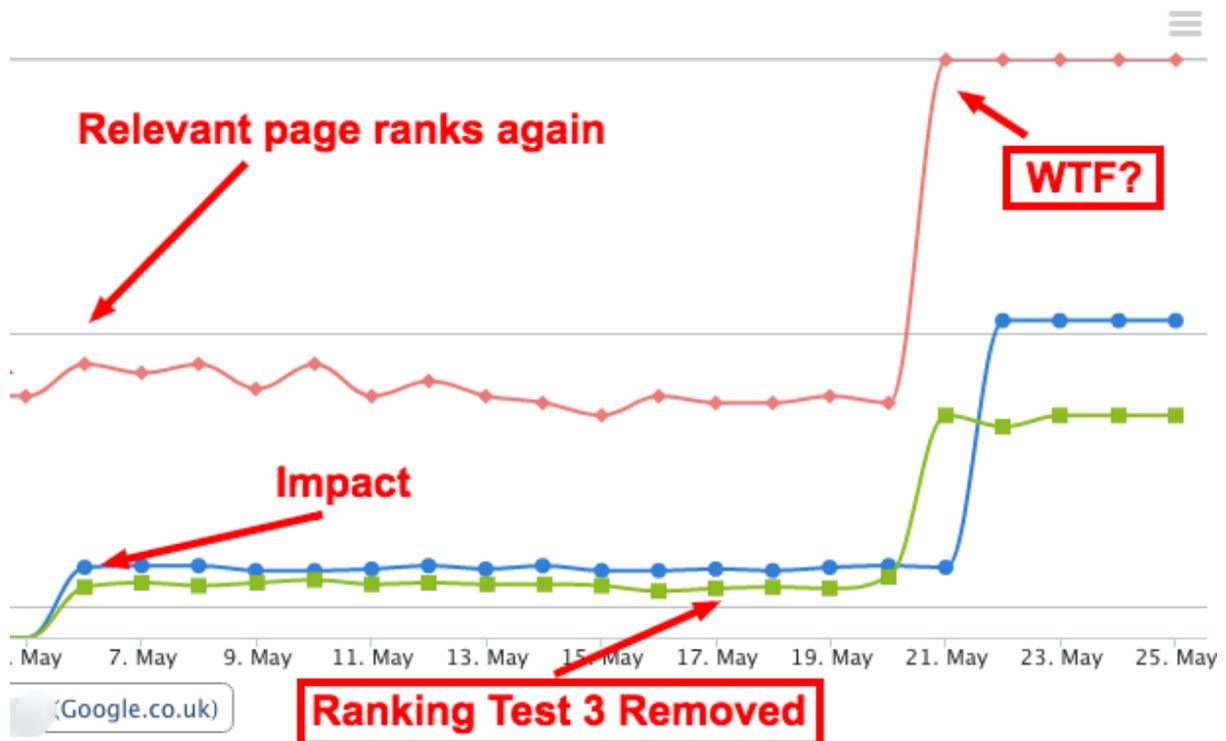
WTF?

Rankings returned to the best positions they have been for the term SINCE I started implemented these ranking tests – even WITHOUT any signal present in any of the areas I have been modifying.

Like a memory effect, the rankings I achieved when the signal was present only in internal links (the strongest signal I have provided yet) have returned.

THINKING OUT LOUD

It's always extremely difficult to test Google and impossible to make any claims 100% one way or another.

The entire ecosystem is built to obfuscate and confuse anyone trying to understand it better.

Why have rankings returned when there is no live signal present that would directly influence this specific keyword phrase?

My hunch is that this actually might be evidence of what SEOs call a SERP ROLL-BACK – when Google, we think, randomly 'rolls' the set of results *back* to previous weeks SERPs to keep us guessing.

If this is a rollback the rollback time frame must be during the period of my RANKING TEST 2 (a month or so maximum) as the page did not rank for these terms like this at all for the year before – and yet they come back almost exactly as they were during my test period.

In the following image, I show this impact on the variant keyword (the keyword phrase, with no spaces) during this possible 'roll back'.
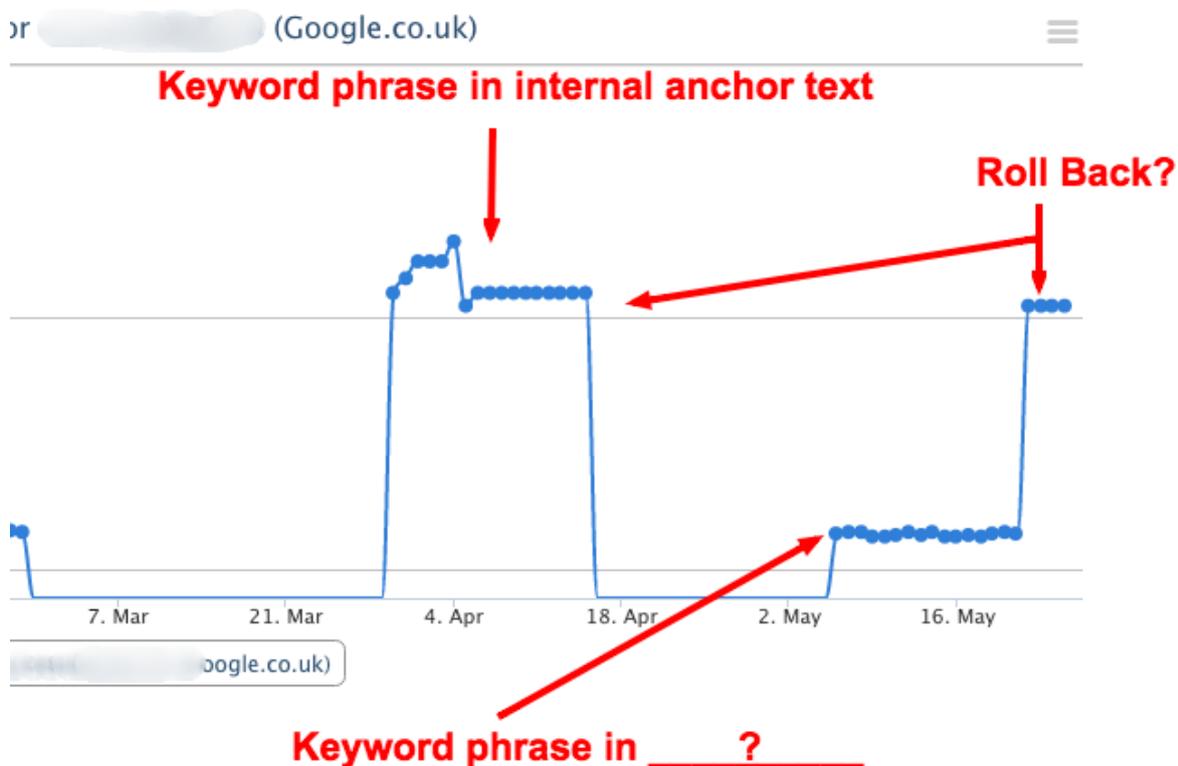
An observation about SERP ROLLBACKS.

If a rollback is in place, it does not seem to affect EVERY keyword and every SERP equally. NOT all the time, at least.

MORE IMPORTANTLY – Why did an irrelevant page on the same website rank when the signal was removed?

The target page was still way more relevant than the page Google picked out to present in long tail SERPs – hence my question.

Google was at least confused and at worst apathetic and probably purposefully lazy when it comes to the long-tail SERPs.

Because my signal to them was not explicit, ranking just seemed to fail completely, until the signal was reintroduced and I specifically picked out a page for Google to rank.

To be obvious, something else might be at play. Google might now be relying on other signals – perhaps even the redirect zone – or relative link strength of the 'irrelevant' page – but no matter – Google was ranking the less relevant page and CLEARLY IGNORING any relevance signals passing through the redirect zone to my target page.

Observations

From my ranking test 2 (internal links) – it is evident that modifications to internal links CAN make IRRELEVANT PAGES on your site rank instead of the target page, and for some time, IF by modifying these internal links, you SHORTCUT the signal that these links once provided to the target page in a way that entirely removes that signal from the LIVE signals your site provide for a specific keyword phrase (let's call this in the "CRAWL ZONE" e.g. what can be picked up in a crawl of your HTML pages, as Google would do – which sits above the REDIRECT ZONE in my imagination – which is simply where signals *need* to pass through a 301 redirect).

That test was modifying only ONE anchor text link.

This might be very pertinent to site migrations when you are modifying hundreds of links at the same time when you need to migrate through redirects and change of URLs and internal anchor text.

YES – the signal may return – but this doesn't look to anything that happens over a quick timescale. Site migrations like this are potentially going to be very tricky if low-quality pages are in the mix.

Which Ranking Signal Carries the most weight?

In these two tests, I switched the signal from internal links to another element, this time in ALT TEXT on the page, to observe the impact on the change in terms of rankings for the page for the test focus keyword phrase.

The signal I switched it to (ALT TEXT) would seem to have less of an impact on ranking than internal links, therefore making a Whiteboard Friday at least potentially inaccurate in terms of weighting of signals for relevance as they are presented on the whiteboard.

This would be UNLESS I have misinterpreted the presumed rollback activity in the SERPs in May 2016 and those rankings are caused by something else. Only time will shed some light on that, I think.
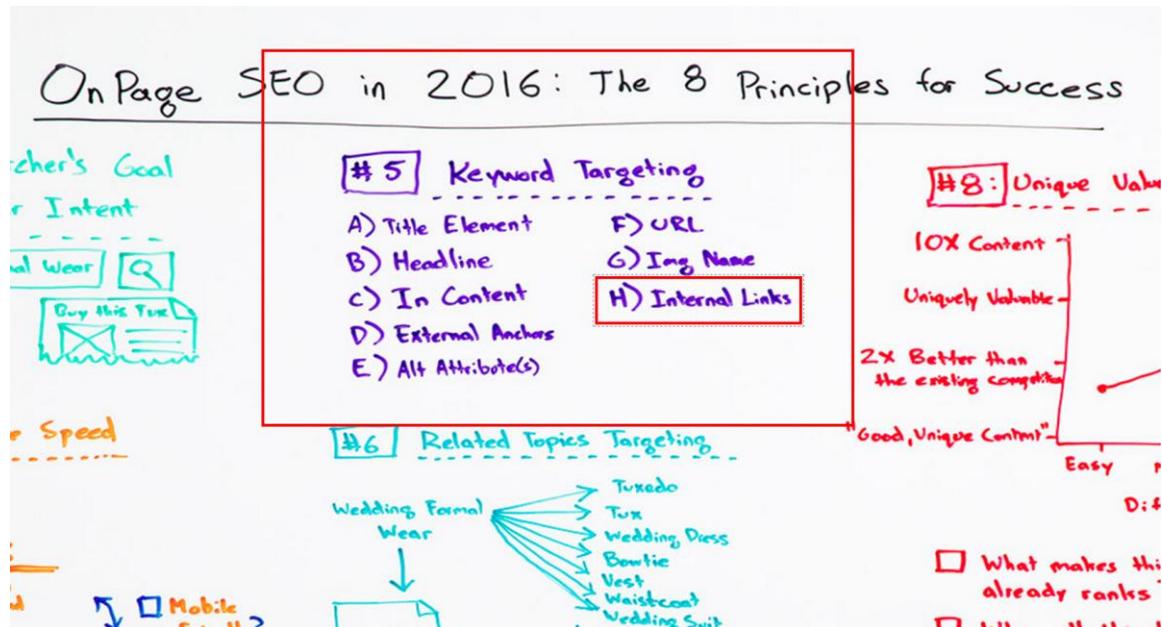
Yes – I replaced the signal originally in H (in Rand's list) in an element that was in E (on Rands list) – and the result was to make the page markedly LESS relevant, not more.

Site Quality Algorithm THEORY

If you have site quality problems, then any help you can get will be a good thing.

Any advice I would offer, especially in a theory, would really need to be sensible, at worst! I have clearly shown in past posts that simply *improving* pages *substantially* clearly does improve organic traffic levels.

This is the sort of thing you could expect in a 'fairish' system, I think, and we apparently have this 'fairness', in some shape or form, baked in.

If you improve INDIVIDUAL pages to satisfy users – Google responds favourably by sending you *more* visitors – ESPECIALLY when increased user satisfaction manifests in MORE HIGH-QUALITY LINKS (which are probably still the most important ranking signal other than the content quality and user satisfaction algorithms):

Historic Organic Traffic In Context with Major Google Algorithm Updates.
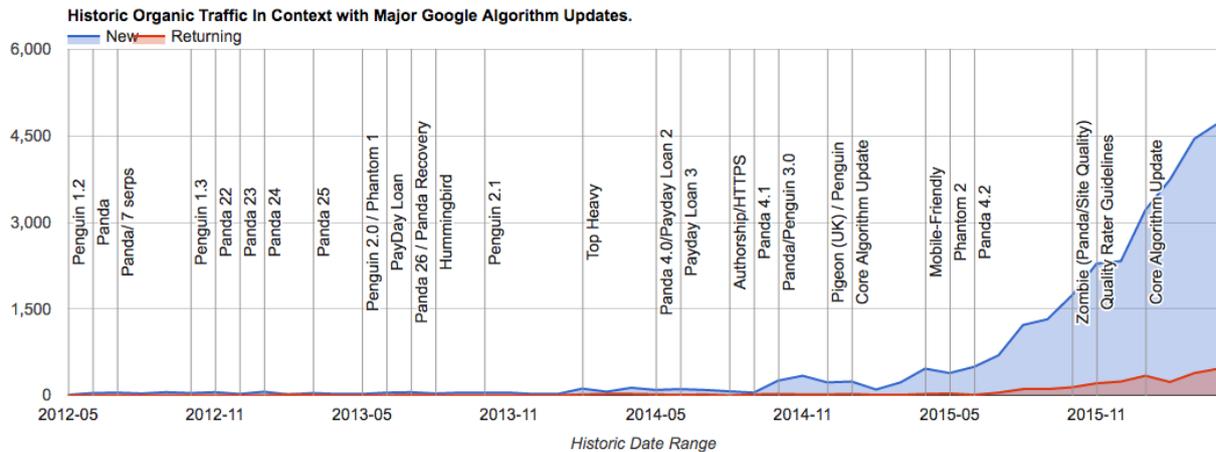
In these SEO tests, I have been DELIBERATELY isolating a specific element that provides the signal for a specific keyword phrase to rank and then SHORTCUTTING it, like in an electrical switch, to remove the signal to the target page.

What if this process is how Google also shortcuts your site from a site quality point of view e.g. in algorithm updates?

Let us presume you have a thousand pages on your site and 65% of them fail to meet the quality score threshold set for multiple keyword phrases the site attempts to rank for – a threshold Google constantly tweaks, day to day, by a fractional amount to produce flux in the SERPs. In effect, most of your website is rated low-quality.

Would it be reasonable to presume that a **page rated low-quality by Google is neutered in a way that it might not pass along the signals it once did to other pages on your site**, yet still remain *indexed*?

We have been told that pages that rank (e.g. be indexed) sometimes do not have the ability to transfer Pagerank to other pages.

Why would Google want the signals a low-quality page provides, anyways, after it is marked as low-quality or more specifically not preferred by users?

SEOs know that pages deemed extremely low-quality can always be deindexed by Google – but what of pages that Google has in their index that might not pass signals along to other pages?

It would be again reasonable to suggest, I think, that this state of affairs is a possibility – because it is another layer of obfuscation – and Google relies on this type of practice in lots of areas to confuse observers.

So – let us presume pages can be indexed but can sometimes offer no signals to other pages on your site.

If Google's algorithms nuke 65% of your pages ability to relay signal to other pages on your site, you have effectively been shortcutted in the manner I have illustrated in these tests – and that might end up with a state of affairs where irrelevant pages on your website will start to rank in place of once relevant pages, because the pages that did provide the signal no longer pass the quality bar to provide context and signal to your target pages (in the site structure).

Google has clearly stated that they "*use internal links to better understand the context of the content of your sites*".

If my theory held water, there would be lots of people on the net with irrelevant pages on their site ranking where other, relevant pages once did – and this test would be repeatable.

If this was true – then the advice we would get from Google would be to IMPROVE pages rather than just REMOVE them, as when you remove them, you do not necessarily reintroduce the signal you need and you would get if you IMPROVED the page with the quality issues e.g. the ideal scenario in a world with no complication.

Especially if webmasters were thinking removing pages was the only answer to their ranking woes – and I think it is fair to say many did, at the outset of this challenge.

Guess what?

> **Gary Illyes**
> @methode   🐦 Follow
>
> @jenstar We don't recommend removing content in general for Panda, rather add more highQ stuff @shendison
>
> 12:44 AM - 8 Oct 2015
>
> ↩ ⟲ 12   ♥ 13

This would make that statement by Google entirely correct but monumentally difficult to achieve, in practice, on sites with lots of pages.

Site Quality punishment is a nightmare scenario for site owners with a lot of low-quality pages and especially where it is actually CONTENT QUALITY (as opposed to a purely technical quality issue) that is the primary issue.

It is only going to get acuter a problem as authorship, in however form Google assigns it, becomes more prevalent e.g. you can have high-quality content that is exactly what Google wants, but this will be outranked by content from authors Google wants to hear from e.g. Danny Sullivan over the rest of us, as Matt Cutts was often fond of saying.

There is incredible opportunity ahead for authors with recognized topical expertise in their fields. Google WANTS you to write stuff it WILL rank. WHO writes your content on your website might be even more important than what is written on your page (in much

the same way we recognised what we called 'domain authority' where Google gave such ability to rank to domains with a lot of 'link juice').

To be clear – I still think a lot of the old stuff is still baked in. Links still matter, although 'building' low-quality external backlinks is a lot riskier today.

Theoretically, fixing the content quality 'scores' across multiple pages would be the only way to reintroduce the signal once present on a site impacted by Google Panda or Site Quality Algorithms, and this would be, from the outset, an incredibly arduous – almost impossible – undertaking for larger sites – and AT LEAST a REAL investment of time and labour – and again – I think there would be lots of sites out there in this sort of scenario, **if my theory held water, and you accepted that low-quality content on your site can impact the rankings for other pages.**

Google actually has said this too:

QUOTE: "*low-quality content on part of a site can impact a site's ranking as a whole*" Google

It is probably a nearly impossible task for content farms with multiple authors of varying degrees of expertise in topics – mostly zilch – with the only way I see of recovering from that would be at best distasteful and at worst highly unethical and rather obvious so I won't print it.

Let's look at that statement in full, from Google, with emphasis and numbers added by me:

*One other specific piece of guidance we've offered is that low-quality content on some parts of a website can impact the whole site's rankings, and thus **1. removing low quality pages, 2.merging** or **3.improving the content of individual shallow pages into more useful pages**, or**4. moving low quality pages to a different domain could eventually help the rankings of your higher-quality content**. GOOGLE*

To recover from [Google Panda](#) and site quality algorithms, unless you are waiting for Google to release a softer Panda…. you really need to focus doing ALL of the points 1-3 – but lots of webmasters stop at number 1 thinking that will be sufficient when any SEO with any experience knows that is way too simple for what Google wants this entire process to achieve – to take TIME – and, accusations have been made, in many a forum to drive the cost of organic SEO UP to comparable levels and beyond of Adwords.

I advised a client to do no.4 (*4. moving low-quality pages to a different domain*) and move an old very-low-quality blog with zero positive signal for the business to another domain to expedite the '*this content isn't here anymore – don't rate my site on this*' process for re-evaluation by Google.

Site quality problems are, BY DESIGN, MEANT to take a long time to sort out – JUST LIKE GOOGLE PENGUIN and the clean up of [unnatural links](#) – but, contrary to the complaints of many webmasters who accuse Google of being opaque on this subject, Google

tells you exactly how to fix Google Panda problems and Matt Cutts has been telling people all along to "*focus on the user*" – which again is probably an absolute truth he can feel he is morally correct in relaying to us (which many guffawed at as lies).

If a site quality algorithm was deployed in this fashion, then punishment would be relative to the infraction and cause the maximum amount of problems for the site owner relative to the methods used to generate rankings. All that once helped a site rank could be made to demote it and hold it under the water, so to speak. In a beautiful system, I think, you would actually penalise yourself not so much Google penalising you, and users would indeed determine the final ranking order in organic SERPs not being 'sharded' by Google for their own benefit.

We would, of course, need to assume Google has a '*Quality Metric*' separate of relevance signals that are deployed in this fashion.

Guess what?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJPu4vHETXw&feature=youtu.be&t=32m6s

If your site is impacted by this shortcut effect, then identifying important pages in your hierarchy and user journey and improving them is a sensible way to proceed, as you may well be providing important signals for other pages on your site, too.

Why does Amazon rank for everything during these updates? That is the accusation, at least, and this theory would have an answer.

I would presume that when you remove an important signal from your website, you don't have many other pages that provide said signals. Amazon ALWAYS has higher quality multiple pages on the same topic and so other signals to fall back on and EASY for an algorithm not to f*&^ up. Amazon, too, probably has every other positive signal in bucket loads too, let's not forget.

Site quality algorithms deployed in this manner would be a real answer to a wayward use of 'domain authority', I've long thought.

What about webmasters who have, in good faith, targeted low-quality out of date content on a site and removed it, in order to combat Panda problems?

This was natural after Google said in effect to clean up sites.

I imagine somewhere in Google's algorithm there is a slight reward for this activity – almost as if Google says to itself – "*OK, this webmaster has cleaned up the site and brought the numbers of lower quality pages down on the site, thereby incrementally improving quality scores and so traffic levels we will allow it*" – but NOT to the extent that would ever bring back traffic levels to a site hit by Content Quality Algorithms (after May 2015, especially).

Google, I think, must seek to reward white hat webmasters (on some level) if the intent is to adhere to the rules (even if those recommendations have been slightly misunderstood) or

what is the point of listening to them at all? Most distrust Google and most evidently consistently fail to understand the advice given.

Again – if my theory held water, there would be a lot of webmasters who spent a lot of time cleaning up sites to comply with Panda who DO see positive numbers month to month in terms of increased organic traffic to a site – but rarely do they see a quick return to former ranking glory WITHOUT a severe investment in sitewide page quality improvement.

I have certainly observed this, but many sites miss the 'site quality' aspect of Panda in that it is NOT just about 'content quality'.

From my own experience – you cannot *just* delete pages to bring traffic levels back to a site in the same numbers after a Panda algorithm change that impacts your site. You must also improve remaining content, substantially.

It is baked into the system that if you have ranked with low-quality techniques, it is going to take a monumental effort deployed quickly to get your site moving again.

Confirmation Bias? Conspiracy theory?

You can tell me.

This theory posits that the site quality metric can shortcut your site and cause irrelevant pages to rank, and maybe even relevant pages to rank lower than they could if ALL the pages on the site where high quality. **It is just a theory though**.

I've deployed these tactics on *this* very site over the last few years to see if it drove traffic (and this is why I do SEO the way I currently do it). When I was focused on it, this was the results:
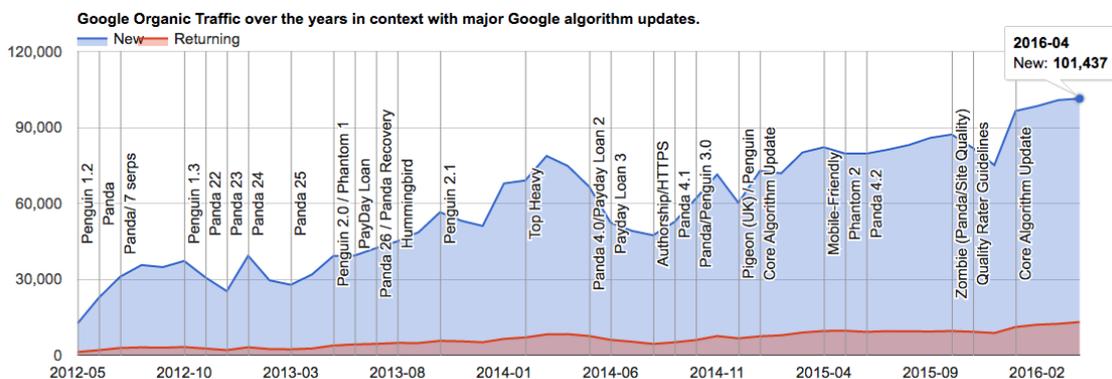
SEO has become part of the legitimate long-term marketing mix with quick or even manipulated results at least a potentially business damaging exercise.

Conversely, though, if you achieve ranking nirvana through improved legitimate site and content quality efforts, you can be rest assured the effort required to dislodge you is probably going to be relative to the effort you put in (if applied correctly in the first place) and a great barrier to entry for all but your most dedicated competitors.

On that point, those that do rank and Google themselves are more than happy with that scenario.

I did like when SEO was fast, gratification was instant and risk was a distant prospect. Today risk is always seemingly close by, and gratification becomes increasingly a longer prospect.

I am wondering if the black hat SEO tests might be more fun.

How To Proceed

Improve pages in the user journey. Try to NOT present low-quality pages to users.

I think it reasonable to say that identifying DEAD PAGES is still an incredibly important first step but how to handle the challenge from there is of equal importance.

Removal of stale, irrelevant, out of date obviously low-quality content on a domain should still be a prerequisite for most webmasters. Canonical's and redirects are STILL your VERY BEST FRIEND when merging ANY PAGES (but pay close attention to Google dicking about with your redirect chains are all your work goes in the toilet).

Paying close attention to *where* important signals lie on your site is the only way to attempt to protect them, especially during periods of change, where Google is happy to shortcut your ranking ability.

If you fail to preserve certain signals during changes, you remove signals, and irrelevant pages can rank instead of relevant pages.

If you ultimately don't improve pages in a way that satisfies users, your quality score is probably coming down, too.

Does Google Count Keywords In The URL As A Ranking Signal?

Do you need keywords in URLs to rank high in Google in 2018?

No.

Is there a benefit to having keywords in URLs?

Yes.

> *"***QUOTE***: I believe that is a very small ranking factor." John Mueller, Google 2016*

While I wouldn't necessarily rip apart a site structure JUST to change URLs, it is the case that often poorly thought out website page URLs are a sign of other, less obvious sloppy SEO, and if a big clean up is called for, then I would consider starting from what is a basic SEO best practice and use search engine friendly URLs.

What is "*link building*" in SEO?

https://youtu.be/MkLFlaWxgJA

Link building in 2018 is the process of earning links on other websites. Earned natural links directly improve the reputation of a website and where it ranks in Google, and other search engines. Self-made links are risky and come with them the risk of penalisation by the Google webspam team.

Link building can be a very risky strategy in 2018, and one that I would avoid until you have (at least) first dealt with the inevitable quality issues on your website. If your business or website content is not attracting organic links or social shares you may have a big problem on your hands, and unnatural links will not help you in the long run.

I should know. I used to be a 'web spammer'.

It is important to know that in 2018, Google "*discards*" and "*discounts*" lots of links to your site, especially the low-quality links it identifies, and it takes a lot longer to see the effects of some types of link building.

Links still matter in most situations but Google is looking to demote sites that have no E-A-T (*Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness)* and a big part of E-A-T is getting mentions and links on authoritative sites.

Google still rewards high-quality links, actively aims to ignore lower-quality links and will still penalise real-time spamming activity using manual actions.

Before I 'built links' to a site I would check the site for quality issues first and improve website content. It's easier, cheaper and an investment in activity Google isn't actively devaluing.

How Can I Check For SEO Issues On A Site?

You can use tools like SEMRush (specifically the SEMRush Audit Tool), SiteBulb Crawler, DeepCrawl, Screaming Frog or SEO Powersuite Website Auditor to check for common SEO challenges.

If you are not technically minded, we can optimise your site as part of our fixed price SEO service or ad-hoc seo audit service.

How To Build Links

> **QUOTE**: "*in general I try to avoid that so that you really sure that your content kind of stands on its own. **We do use links as part of our algorithms** but we used lots and lots of other factors as well so only **focusing on links is probably going to cause more problems for your website than it actually helps**"* John Mueller, Google 2015

There are many ways to build links in 2018.

Some techniques are 'legitimate', 'white hat' and 'natural', and many - perhaps *most* - are classified as 'black hat'. Such techniques violate Google's Webmaster Guidelines and are labelled '*webspam*'.

This link building guide is for beginners - it's not a guide on how to spam Google.

Off-page SEO, such as link building, can be a *tricky business* and, for some, is a tactic to avoid altogether. Some would claim that is because Google has, very successfully, equated linkbuilding with web spam, and the industry news machine is started almost entirely - all the time - and fuelled by Google PR *saying* something or enforcing its quality guidelines.

Not all link building is web spam and in fact, building links in 2018 is still an incredibly important aspect of search engine optimisation.

It is just not the only thing to focus on.

High-quality links do not live in isolation from a high-quality product, service or website.

Hopefully, this article helps you make a sensible choice when considering building links to your site.

Should I Copy My Competitors?

You do not need the same links as your competitors, nor do you need the same content.

But if you lack the inspiration to create something unique, you might want to, at least copy what your competitors do well.

Competitor Analysis

This Domain

Url	Rank	Keywords	Traffic	Cost	PAGE TF	PAGE CF	Domain TF	Domain CF	Domains P	Domains H
https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/	33,750	4,793	10,181	45,930	56	45	47	42	54	48,016

Competitors

Url	Rank	Keywords	Traffic	Cost	PAGE TF	PAGE CF	Domain TF	Domain CF	Domains P	Domains H
http://www.jellyfish.co.uk/	16,170	3,230	24,919	116,886	28	36	21	35	4,322	14,522
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/	33,982	2,209	10,091	110,945	63	50	56	48	264,548	1,169,707
https://www.found.co.uk/	46,842	1,441	6,667	98,246	21	42	17	35	161	154,101
https://www.123ranking.co.uk/	90,971	136	2,815	47,286	36	39	25	28	248	20,055
https://www.rebootonline.com/	120,730	310	1,938	34,648	41	47	29	37	1,222	7,208
http://www.getmanic.co.uk/	488,801	107	237	4,166	38	38	26	30	21,964	24,306
https://jseo.com/	581,655	63	176	2,992	47	50	30	37	8,868	18,035

As part of competitor analysis in my seo audit, for example, **I review the top competitors backlinks** to see if they have managed to earn any extremely high-quality links and determine how they did it and if it can be replicated.

You won't be able to get every link your competitor has but you may be able to spot links you should have or could get.

Competitor Report

Competitor Analysis | **Domain Backlinks** | Top Content

Backlink data from Domain

This is a selection of some of the best backlinks that point to the top ranking DOMAINS in the niche. Review the backlinks we have supplied below, and look for links you should, or could have. Look also for ideas and inspiration - if you can spot any smart ideas, think how you can do something similar to get the same type of quality links.

All URLS | Great | Rated | Media | Educational | Forum | Blog | Sponsor | Event | Partner | Links | News | Directory

All Competition Backlinks

We found **16,892** total backlinks, but removed **13,914** nofollow links.
This leaves **2,978** backlinks pointing to these domains, We have also narrowed the list to (**1**) url per domain from this report to help us focus in on the highest quality links in the niche, pointing to your competitors.
We present (upto **1000**) links in the table below.
We further removed (**1354**) domains that didn't meet our backlink quaility threshold (+5TF)

⬇ DOWNLOAD CSV

SourceURL	Type	Domain CF	Domain TF	CitationFlow	TrustFlow
https://www.google.com/analytics/partners/company/5920463570075648/gacp/5629499534213120/service/5086100271923200	Rated	98	98	24	25
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/companies-signed-up-to-think-act-report/companies-signed-up-to-think-act-report	Uncategorised	86	93	21	13
http://bit.ly/P713KZ	Rated	84	85	14	0
https://www.blogger.com/feeds/6935066634898586354/posts/default	Rated	81	85	0	0
https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnrampton/2016/04/18/12-step-guide-to-a-google-penalty-removal/	Rated	80	82	26	9
http://www.zdnet.com/article/smbs-employ-dirty-tactics-to-stay-ahead-of-the-competition/	Rated	75	75	32	26
https://moz.com/blog/when-and-how-to-listen-to-googles-public-statements-about-seo-whiteboard-friday	Blog	71	65	35	26
https://www.abondance.com/actualites/20160226-16208-les-liens-contexts-finalement	Rated	71	54	21	11

I look for evidence of high-quality content marketing on competitor sites and I identify the top linkable assets in the niche and who links to them.

With this information is possible to copy, learn from or emulate successful competitor link building strategies.

Competitor Report

Competitor Analysis | Domain Backlinks | **Top Content**

Top Linkable Content in Niche

In competitive searches, Google ranks domains based on the amount and quality of backlinks to the root domain. High authority domains are typically sites with a lot of backlinks to them. A page published on a high authority domain can rank high in Google EVEN if it has NO backlinks from external websites. This 'domain authority' often comes from OTHER pages on the domain that ARE linked to by other websites. It is always useful to investigate the BEST content on a competitor site, for content ideas AND to get an idea which content on a website is responsible for the domain authority of a competitor.

Viewing 533 Results from 1000 results and listing 1000 Max.

URL	Title	Ext Backlinks	Ref Domains	Ref IPs
http://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/	Screaming Frog SEO Spider Tool & Crawler Software | Screaming...	234294	3652	3298
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/	Screaming Frog SEO Spider Tool & Crawler Software | Screaming...	316917	2946	2676
https://www.rebootonline.com/blog/long-term-outgoing-link-experiment/	Study - Outgoing Links Used As Ranking Signal	1981	235	227
https://www.found.co.uk/seo-tool/	FOUND SEO Audit Tool - Free Online Canonicalisation & Link Checker	583	197	187
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/log-file-analyser/	SEO Log File Analyser | Screaming Frog	678	173	166
http://www.rebootonline.com/blog/long-term-outgoing-link-experiment/	Study - Outgoing Links Used As Ranking Signal	644	115	114
http://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/user-guide/	Screaming Frog Guide For The SEO Spider | Screaming Frog	1831	89	80
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/broken-link-checker/	Broken Link Checker - Find Broken Links (404s) | Screaming Frog	268	82	80
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider-7-0/	Screaming Frog SEO Spider Update – Version 7.0 | Screaming Frog	467	87	73
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/crawl-javascript-seo/	JavaScript SEO - How To Crawl JavaScript, AJAX, SPAs & PWAs ...	438	79	73
http://www.jellyfish.co.uk/runreigate/	Reigate's Half Marathon and 10K | Intersport Run Reigate	678	80	72
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/user-guide/configuration/	SEO Spider Configuration | Screaming Frog	189	63	63
https://www.rebootonline.com/blog/hidden-text-experiment/	Long Term CSS Javascript Hidden Text Experiment	163	65	62
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/pricing/	Pricing | Screaming Frog	176	66	62
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/user-guide/	Screaming Frog Guide For The SEO Spider | Screaming Frog	176	65	59
https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/user-guide/tabs/	SEO Spider Tabs | Screaming Frog	58327	61	57

All my mid-level SEO audits come with this information reviewed. See here for seo audit costs.

You can also use a tool like Majestic to look at the links of any site and a tool like SEMRush to identify the top ranking pages on a site, for instance.

You are only looking for examples of high-quality marketing.

You don't want to engage in any low-quality SEO techniques just to take on one or two competitors. You have no way of knowing if those links are disavowed or devalued.

You may wonder how they get away with it and you don't (lol) but competitors might rank despite unnatural links or because of them:

> **QUOTE**: "*How do they get away with it? I think another tricky part there is like **you don't really know if they get away with it**. In the sense that for the webspam team as well we try to recognize those kind of links and just ignore them. And the webspam team when they run across like a bigger pattern of links like that they they also apply manual action there and **they essentially neutralize those links**. So you wouldn't see that any of the link tools. And **a site might continue to rank fairly well despite all of these links essentially being ignored**. So what ends up happening is they spend a lot of time doing all of this stuff to kind of build these unnatural links and in the end they don't really have an effect. And they could have spent that time actually doing something useful for the long term for their website.*" John Mueller, 2017

and

> **QUOTE**: "*Our algorithms (and the manual webspam team) often take very specific action on links like these; just because the sites are still indexed doesn't mean that they're profiting from those links*" John Mueller, 2017

It's not worth it - you're probably better off just outing your competitor on Google's forums (or competing with them with another domain).

What you do want to do is find out what pages on your competitor's sites are driving links to the site.

You are looking to identify very best links your competitor has earned, and let historic competitor marketing activity inform yours today.

Competitor analysis is just one aspect of successful SEO in 2018. You can see an example of my SEO audit report online.

Content Marketing
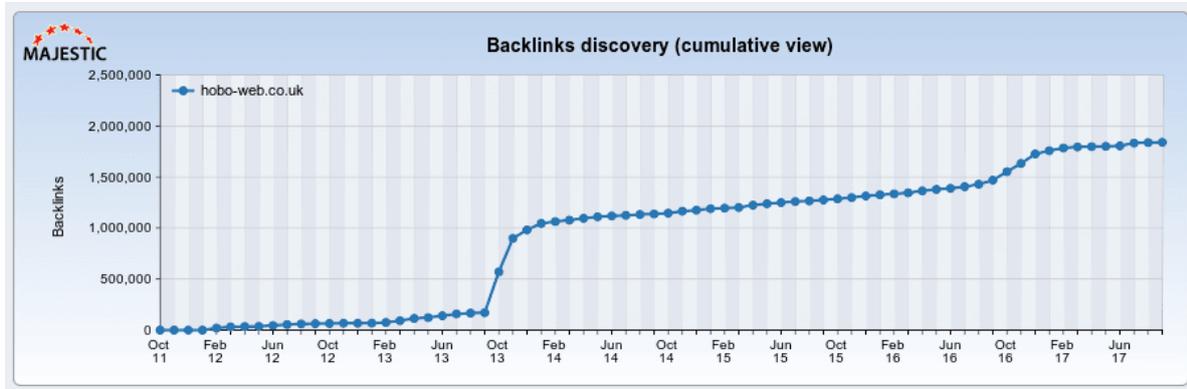
Content marketing, for me, is THE most legitimate and best 'link building' strategy in 2018 you as a business can employ to build links to your site. I use content marketing for this very site and you can see in the graph above (from Majestic) the results from such content marketing activity.

The (new version of the) article you are reading right now is an example of '*content marketing*' and it has over the years earned me lots of backlinks. I've focused solely on using content marketing strategies since 2012 to drive 100% of the link building activity to this site, and I enjoy it.

It is simple, too, but more importantly, risk-free. When I want to build links I simply write an article on this blog.

I use the following strategy and simply 'rinse and repeat':

1. Pick a topic relevant to the subject matter of my blog (which is Google SEO)
2. Offer my advice on the topic based on my 20 years experience
3. Include original research on the topic
4. Curate the best up-to-date advice out there on the topic from other experts (citing my sources as I go)
5. Publish my article on my website and to my newsletter (which 40,000 people are actively subscribed to via Feedburner)
6. Automatically syndicate my blog post to Twitter, Facebook and Linkedin to boost social activity

And that's basically it.

What you will find, if you do it right, and you are passionate about your subject matter and clear about the purpose of your blog, is that by simply creating content on your website will generate natural backlinks to your site IF the content resonates with the target audience.

This strategy suits my aims and has worked for me. I am always learning - always consuming content. I do, however, aim to spend 10-20% of my time in 'production' mode, rather than 'consumption' mode.

Content marketing coupled with **outreach** (the act of actively promoting your content to those who might link to it) is a very powerful link building tactic indeed although I have managed to largely get by without that element on this blog. Check out my article blogging for SEO benefits.

I like making stuff, and when you make stuff people will link to it, and over time, that practice will inform Google of your level of E-A-T.

What Is E.A.T.?

Google aims to rank pages where the author has some demonstrable expertise on experience in the subject-matter they are writing about. These 'quality ratings' (performed by human evaluators) are based on (E.A.T. or EAT or E-A-T) which is simply '*Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness*' of the '*Main Content of a page*'

> **QUOTE***: "Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness: This is an important quality characteristic. …. Important: Lacking appropriate EAT is sufficient reason to give a page a Low quality rating." Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017*

and

> **QUOTE***: "The amount of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness (EAT) that a webpage/website has is very important. MC quality and amount, website information, and website reputation all inform the EAT of a website. Think about the topic of the page. What kind of expertise is required for the page to achieve its purpose well? The standard for expertise depends on the topic of the page." Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines 2017*

Who links to you can inform the E-A-T of your website.

Consider this:

> **QUOTE**: "*I asked Gary (Illyes from Google) about E-A-T. He said it's largely based on links and mentions on authoritative sites. i.e. if the Washington post mentions you, that's good. He recommended reading the sections in the QRG on E-A-T as it outlines things well.*" Marie Haynes, Pubcon 2018

Google is still a 'link-based' search engine 'under-the-hood' but it takes so much more to stick a website at the top of search engine results pages (SERPs) in 2018 than it used to.

Links are evidently still VERY important in 2018, and historic patents give us an indication of the link analysis Google might do.

Consider these patents:

Ranking based on Link Analysis using Historical Data

> **QUOTE**: *"In 2005, Google published a patent application that describes a wide range of temporal-based factors related to links, such as the appearance and disappearance of links, the increase and decrease of back links to documents, weights to links based upon freshness, weights to links based upon authoritativeness of the documents linked from, age of links, spikes in link growth, relatedness of anchor text to page being pointed to over time." 12 Google Link Analysis Methods That Might Have Changed –* [Bill Slawski](#)

A '*measure of quality*' based on '*the number*' of links:

> **QUOTE**: *"A system can determine a measure of quality for a particular web resource based on the number of other resources that link to the particular web resource and the amount of traffic the resource receives. For example, a ranking process may rank a first web page that has a large number of other web pages that link to the first web page higher than a web page having a smaller number of linking web pages." Did the Groundhog Update Just Take Place at Google?* [Bill Slawski](#)

Ranking based on '*a decrease in a rate or quantity of new links that point to the document over time*'

> **QUOTE**: *"A method may include receiving a document and an initial score for the document;* **determining that there has been a decrease in a rate or quantity of new links that point to the document over time**; *classifying the document as stale in response to the determining; decreasing the initial score for the document, resulting in an updated score; and ranking the document with regard to at least one other document based, at least in part, on the score." The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children –* [Bill Slawski](#)

Ranking based on '*on the time-varying behaviour of the links pointing to the document*'

> **QUOTE**: *"A system may determine time-varying behavior of links pointing to a document,* **generate a score for the document based, at least in part, on the time-varying behaviour of the links pointing to the document**, *and rank the document with regard to at least one other document based, at least in part, on the score." The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children –* [Bill Slawski](#)

What Are '*Natural*' & '*Unnatural*' Links?

> **QUOTE**: "*You should never know in advance a link is coming, or where it's coming from. If you do, that's the wrong path*". BING

In link building, A natural link is a freely given editorial link and an unnatural link is a link you make yourself. Both affect rankings in Google.

- Google is on record saying it does not want to count any link that is not editorial.
- Google wants to reward high-quality 'user value add' content that has earned *organic* or *natural* links. They want to reward a 'good user experience' and *unnatural links* don't form any part of that concept.
- Google has never wanted to count manufactured links - but its algorithms don't work as well as they would like or at least, they say they do. So, some marketers shortcut the 'value add' task of the job and just build *unnatural links* to a site. This affects how a link-based search engine - like Google - *rates* the 'popularity' - and so ranking ability - of a particular website.
- The more links Google hasn't classed as spam - the higher you rank - and the more traffic you get. Sort of.
- The type of links Google wants to count does not scale easily, and in fact, the type of links that scale easily is exactly the type of links Google wants to (at best) ignore or retroactively punish the violation. Perhaps that is the whole point.
- Critics will say this is because SEO is the biggest 'threat' to Adwords, Google's sponsored advertising channel - but if Google didn't take action on industrial scale manipulation - it would make the existence of their guidelines redundant.
- If a link is manipulative - it is spam - according to the Googleplex.
- You don't need machine automation to be classed as a spammer. Somebody sitting at a desk making these low-quality links all day - manually - to fool only Google - that's spam too - manual or not.
- Posting lots of low-quality guest posts or low-quality press releases on sites with a history of spamming Google - that's spam too. It all comes down to the end product - the type of link you generate as a result of your activity.
- If links are designed 'JUST' to manipulate Google - [Google calls them unnatural links](#) - and if you have too many of them - you get a 'penalty' - or at least swept up in the carnage of the next negative algorithm update designed specifically to de-rank sites with those kinds of links. Ranking adjustments, I think, could be based on how long you got away with fooling Google - and what Google thinks that deserves.
- The website link building industry was largely based on that kind of unnatural link building activity. Many still do practice those techniques now, clearly, ignoring the guidelines. I *know* the first links I ever 'built' would today be labelled 'unnatural' today - and so would my first optimisation techniques - but it's a recognisable trend in Google **what's grey hat SEO today is black hat seo tomorrow**.
- Take note that if it works to manipulate Google *without* you jumping through the *value-add* hoop in the middle of that strategy, which Google *demands* you jump through - it's spam. In short, it is evident if it is a scalable approach to manipulating Google - it's spam.
- The professional services industry, which is led heavily by the Google PR machine, has little chance of deviating from [Google's Webmaster Guidelines](#), for fear of, some say, Google's heavy-handed approach.

Consider this:

Spam identified by the 'sudden growth in the number of apparently independent peers (e.g., unrelated websites)'

> **QUOTE***: "A sudden growth in the number of apparently independent peers (e.g., unrelated web sites), incoming and/or outgoing, with large number of links to individual pages may indicate a potentially synthetic web graph, e.g., which in turn may signal an attempt to spam the search engine. This indication may be strengthened if the growth corresponds to anchor text that is unusually coherent or discordant. This information can be used to demote the impact of such links– e.g., in a link-based ranking system such as the one proposed by Brin et al. either as a binary decision item (e.g., demote score by fixed amount) or a multiplicative factor." The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children –* [Bill Slawski](#)*

Building Links Is Easier When You Have Content Worth Linking To

> **QUOTE**: "*The best way to get other sites to create high-quality, relevant links to yours is to create unique, relevant content that can naturally gain popularity in the Internet community. Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will find that content valuable to their readers and link to it.*" Google Webmaster Guidelines, [2018](#)

Getting other sites to link to yours is easy when you have content worth linking to. It is that simple in some cases.

This is exactly how I build links to the Hobo website.

Your content should be original, but it doesn't need to set the world on fire. The more content you add to your site, the more likely people will link to it, today or in the future.

I'm still getting links from stuff I wrote years ago. So the first thing you should be doing is adding high-quality content to your site.

I think *How-To* articles, or articles that discuss a common problem often discussed in forums, etc. - some call it *evergreen*, *timeless*, *in-depth* or *flagship* content - is best suited to link-bait (and visitors!).

High-quality In-depth content is always going to get linked to or shared on social, at some point if it's presented slightly differently, and interesting.

Once you get enough links, and you feature in the top 3 results, you'll find you start to pick up more and more natural links.

Where to start?

See that little FAQ on your site? That page needs to be improved. Each FAQ *could* be an individual page with a good page title, which meets its purpose, in a well-structured site.

Alternatively - you could turn a smaller FAQ into a long-form in-depth content piece focused on the topic at hand.

You are reading one of these expanded FAQ now.

You need to ask yourself what do people want to know about your products, or your industry - not just your business. And you need to add that content to your website.

Having content on your site makes it so much easier to pick up links. If you have no content, while you can still rank in Google via links alone, you're limiting yourself in a way you might not recover from. Try not to add content to your website that's not just about your boring company. Most folks are not interested.

Remember - Google wants to reward UNIQUENESS. It's a pretty simple extrapolation to mean that translates into unique IN-DEPTH - or LONG FORM, INFORMATIVE PAGE COPY and guess what - that type of content picks up links when it DOES rank in Google.

How Link Building Has Evolved

Link building is designed to manipulate Google Pagerank and/or actual rankings based on anchor text manipulation.

> **QUOTE**: *"DYK that **after 18 years we're still using*** PageRank (and 100s of other signals) in ranking?" Gary Illyes from Google – [Search Engine Roundtable](#)*

We can only presume Google still uses Pagerank (or something like it) in its ordering of web pages.

> **QUOTE**: *"A method assigns importance ranks to nodes in a linked database, such as any database of documents containing citations, the world wide web or any other hypermedia database. **The rank assigned to a document is calculated from the ranks of documents citing it**. In addition, the rank of a document is calculated from a constant representing the probability that a browser through the database will randomly jump to the document. The method is particularly useful in enhancing the performance of search engine results for hypermedia databases, such as the world wide web, whose documents have a large variation in quality." The Original PageRank Patent Application – [Bill Slawski](#)*

and

> **QUOTE**: *"A high pagerank (a signal usually calculated for regular web pages) is an indicator of high quality and, thus, can be applied to blog documents as a positive indication of the quality of the blog documents" Positive and Negative Quality Ranking Factors from Google's Blog Search (Patent Application) – [Bill Slawski](#)*

Link building has always affected your position in Google SERPS, but in 2012 link building changed forever (for real businesses).

Just before April 2012, after years of Google doing little to combat this type of off-page [SEO](#) at scale, even an inexperienced link builder could make just about anything rank in Google, for any keyword phrase, without much consequence.

Simply by creating a 300-word article and building (for instance) 500 unnatural links to it from (even very low-quality blogs) with unique anchor text, spread out over a few months, you could achieve top rankings. Link builders could do this largely free from fear that Google would do much about it - because everybody seemed to be 'doing it' (in competitive niches).

I know I was.

It was relatively VERY easy, compared to today in 2018!

Industrial scale link building services were dictating the very SERPs owned by Google, *just* by taking advantage of the way Google works in counting links as votes and 'ranking factors'.

So, just as many were about to turn the dial on article spinning to blogs up to 11 and go on holiday, Google nuked this and a lot of other low-quality links with the Google Penguin update and an old mantra shouted even louder - **earn rankings based on** *merit and uniqueness, or be punished*.

When I say, 'nuked' - of course, this practice still goes on.

It can still be effective, but this activity comes with an increased risk of Google penalty, even when you are an experienced black-hat. This practice is still offered, today, as linkbuilding services and packages to unsuspecting business owners - when it is not a suitable route for real companies to take with a single website.

Maybe it shouldn't be THAT important going forward, to have only one website, but that's beyond the scope of this article.

Google has a few surprises for Webmasters bending the rules using what they call *spammy* links.

> **QUOTE***: "The manual actions team… can look at the labels on the on the links or a site gets. Basically, we have tons of link labels; for example, it's a **footer link, basically, that has a lot lower value than an in-content link**. Then another label would be a Penguin real-time label. **If they see that most of the links are Penguin real-time labelled, then they might actually take a deeper look and see what the content owner is trying to do."***

> *"So, if you think about it, there are tons of different kinds of links on the internet. There are footer links, for example. There are Penguinized links, and all of these kinds of links have certain labels internally attached to them, basically for our own information. And if the manual actions team is reviewing a site for whatever reason, and they see that most of links are labeled as Penguin real-time affected, then they might decide to take a much deeper look on the site and see what's up with those links and what could be the reason those links exist — and then maybe apply a manual action on the site because of the links."*

> *"So disavow is again, basically, just a label internally. It's applied on the links and anchors. And then you can see that, as well. Basically, you could have like a link from, I don't know, WhiteHouse.gov, and it has labels Penguin RT, footer and disavow. And then they would see that — they would know that someone or the webmaster or content owner is actively tackling those links."* **Gary Illyes Oct 2016**

As well as investing more manpower to hand out MANUAL ACTIONS (penalties), Google introduced a myriad of algorithm changes including the Google Panda Update; we think, to deal with those low-quality pages, and GOOGLE PENGUIN; we think, to deal with those low-quality links.

Google says *Google PANDA* **and** *PENGUIN* **are algorithm modifications** (as opposed to *penalties*) - but critics will say that is splitting hairs.

FYI I've very much simplified these two algorithm changes in Google, but trip a PANDA/CORE QUALITY or PENGUIN flag, and traffic levels can take a nosedive overnight - and they might never come back.

A kick in the balls is a kick in the balls - you'll think you're penalised, and it will feel like one, looking at your traffic from Google.

My blog is not a black hat SEO blog. I won't go into link wheels, link hubs, blog networks, three-way links, tiered link building service, illegal hacks, PBNs or redirects (other than mention them) because I don't do any of that anymore (not that I did much of that).

For me (at least) the focus since Google Penguin in April 2012 (and especially since the introduction of the disavow links device) has focused entirely on building something useful on my site that will attract links so I don't need to build unnatural links and be fearfully looking over my shoulder at every major algorithm change.

Note that in 2016, Google modified Google Penguin to ignore links, rather than penalise you for them, with the ever-present threat of a manual action if flagged as spam by the algorithm.

> **QUOTE: 'Penguin doesn't… penalize anymore'** Gary Illyes, Google *2016*

and

> **QUOTE**: *"I think with this release of penguin we did achieve something really nice because it doesn't (like traditionally web some algorithms used to demote sides, even entire entire sites.*
>
> *That's not the case anymore with penguin this penguin managed to or can in fact discard links that are bad that's the one of the nicest changes in this penguin it can be way more granular than the previous releases.*
>
> *As I said previous releases usually demoted whole sites while **this one can even go to a page level and discount the link but they won't be penalized** that's the that's the measure thing.*
>
> *Penguin doesn't work or doesn't penalize anymore.*
>
> *It doesn't demote it will just discard the incoming spam toward the side and it will just ignore the spam and that's it.*
>
> ***No penalty no demotion and it works in real time** ...basically if there are many or if there are bad links and other kinds of signals coming towards the side **then it will just discard them** and that's what they need to know they can still see those links in search console and they can decide whether they want to disavow or remove." Gary Illyes, Google 2016*

Negative SEO

> **QUOTE**: "*With negative SEO, most people mean that a competitor is creating bad links for your website…we work really hard to prevent these things from causing any problems. We work hard on our algorithms to try to recognize these kind of problems and catch them ahead of time. In practice I rarely see any issues around that and when I do see an issue where I think that maybe this is created by a competitor then usually the team is willing to look into the details and see what happened there and make sure that this isn't an issue that is artificially causing problems for a website.*" John Mueller, 2013

The perceived risk of negative SEO has reduced with the change to the Google Penguin algorithm in 2016, but it is still a real phenomenon some webmasters fret about despite Google claiming:

> **QUOTE**: "*"we haven't seen a single case a single one where those toxic link campaigns work" Gary Illyes, Google 2016*

There is documented evidence negative SEO can be effective to get you reviewed by the webspam team. That may or not be a problem for you.

My notes in this article are for money sites - real business sites - sites you DO NOT want to burn in Google - sites you want to build something useful to people (that makes money). If you know your only option is to break the rules and have a short-term focus, hire a link buyer or linkbuilding specialist who can help you with your business model, too, because you'll need it - and that's not me.

I work with companies who are thinking of the long-term health of their business and who understands that the key to ranking in Google in the future is by making the website better, richer in content and the best user experience it can be.

It's much easier to get links to something that's useful, and when you earn rankings, it's a more stable existence in Google these days. Too many people submit spam reports and too many people engage in negative SEO for me to invest any budget in unnatural links these days:

> **QUOTE**: "*Thanks for the report, Attila! I believe the team already saw this from the other forum, but thank you for taking the time to put it all together. The tricky part about issues like these is that our algorithms (and the manual webspam team) often take very specific action on links like these; just because the sites are still indexed doesn't mean that they're profiting from those links. In general I'd recommend using the normal webspam report forms for issues like these, it's also fine to send bigger compilations to us directly. I realize it can be frustrating to see these kinds of sites seemingly profit from such spammy tactics, so thanks for your calm post with all the details.*" John Mueller, 2017

I've counted at least TEN Negative SEO attacks against this site in the last five years (as expected).

Today's negative SEO efforts now look almost indistinguishable from genuine backlink building efforts a few years ago - but that's the point - negative SEO efforts want to make it look like YOU built the links yourself - when they submit your site to Google next month to get you penalised for a year.

That kind of negative SEO CAN work to get you on the webspam team radar.

Seriously.

It was a smart move by Google to turn the game on its head - and get SEO fighting themselves to kill cheap linkbuilding services.

Fortunately, the truth is, if you work on your site and put a bit - OK a massive amount - of effort into creating a unique offering, you can still win top rankings and better traffic, month on month, while your competition is chased down by Google's algorithms.

If you are totally new to building links to your website - I'd recommend you focus on some sort of content marketing and create the best page on the web for what you want to rank for - and then think 'where is my next *great* link prospect'.

Or - find a good link prospect with a history of linking out, and create content for them to attract links.

Google agreed with Bing that a good link is a link you don't know where it's coming from. I don't agree with that in every case because I have spent a career looking for links on really good, relevant sites then creating content that might get me that link. For me - an editorial link is just that - editorial. If I put content in front of someone and THEY CHOOSE to link to it freely - that's editorial enough for me, and a good way to track down some links - even today. Authors have *long* aimed to be cited by the media, and specific media journals.

You can also identify the types of great content being linked to in your niche - and emulate that, to chase down similar links. If you want to rank in Google with any confidence in the long-term, you are going to have to INVEST in GOOD, IN-DEPTH content, and earn a few GREAT links. If you don't want to do that - you better hire a great black hat spammer and get some backup domains at the ready.

The number of low-quality links pointing at your site will affect your rankings adversely as Google devalues them, and I've not seen many paid links age well. Eventually - those unnatural links will catch up with you. Get links from REAL sites that don't sell links and you'll soon see results and keep them.

You can ALWAYS pick up the odd decent link to good content.

I spent the last few years cleaning up my blog, for this is 'new seo'.

This page is an example. I deleted some old posts on the Hobo blog, reworked some stale content and merged similar content.

I added some videos from Google, who now advise on the subject-matter where they once did not, and I created this in-depth page that, I hope, is of some use for beginners wishing to market a website successfully in Google in 2018.

I essentially focus on creating content these days - and I recommend you do the same (to start with, at least). I expect this post will stand as an epitaph to my lower quality linkbuilding days of old - I don't expect to be publishing again on this topic.

I didn't want any links advice on my blog that could hurt someone's business.

Most of my posts from this point forward will deal with offering a **UNIQUE** offering via traditional efforts focused on IMPROVING TRUST and RELEVANCE SIGNALS, meeting USER EXPECTATIONS and QUERY SATISFACTION - the essence of search engine optimisation in 2018.

At any rate - this type of optimisation is what I have forced myself to reacquaint myself with since Penguin 2012.

Because - even after a penalty - you can still increase free traffic from Google month-to-month **without** old school link building techniques (or adding much new content as my case below illustrates when I was working on it):

Over the last few years, I wanted to see if plain old SEO still worked - that is - SEO without unnatural links - and I effectively had to do it without publishing new content (in the very first instance).

Some bloggers did notice, however.

> **QUOTE:** ***But before that, let us look at the big traders or the warren buffets of this world**. Neil Patel, Shaun Anderson, Jacob King are top search results when you type anything related to "SEO", try it!. The tips & tricks of these masters influence many websites.*

Including one or two of my peers:

> **QUOTE**: "*Interestingly, you can easily see which sites you are in competition with in the SERPs by looking for similar ranking keywords. Take for example Hobo-Web.co.uk – which I would say is a really good ranking site for SEO terms in the UK:*" *Rishi Lakhani*

and

QUOTE: "*Everything I learned about SEO was from books, videos and by following the work of a select few really good SEO professionals such as Shaun Anderson, Martin Macdonald and Rishi Lakhani.*"

The good news for me is YES - the kind of SEO I am passionate about still works - but the bad news for some people is - it's a LOT OF WORK.

NOTE - I published my free SEO guide if you are totally new to all this, and want to learn more.

Is Link Building Dead?

> **QUOTE**: "*a webmaster is out of his mind to still rely on techniques that were common practice 8 months ago. Purchasing links was always risky but resembled a game of roulette, you could get caught but many people also got away with it. Today it's not a question IF you get caught, it's merely a question of WHEN you'll get caught*" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

NO, but unnatural links can't be the day job for any professional SEO, who has the responsibility for a real business's website traffic.

Some can say 'link building is dead' but the fact is - in 2018 - building links (any kinds of links) STILL affects your rankings in Google, in a BIG way, either positively - if from a trusted source - OR - negatively - if flagged as suspicious, over time.

Quality content drives the organic link building end-results Google claims it wants to reward with visibility in its SERPs.

Getting and keeping a variety of different 'INDEPENDENT' high-quality links to your website is still THE most important factor in getting unpaid traffic from Google in competitive niches not riddled with spam.

For the most part, Google will ignore a lot of your links and will reward any site with what practitioners call, rightly or wrongly, domain authority, over time, based on the 'quality' of the links you have managed to have pointed at your site.

It's been the case historically that more domain authority you have, the less unique offering you need when it comes to 'content' - although recent Google Quality Updates seem to focus heavily on CONTENT QUALITY, too!

High-quality seo copywriting has never been so important.

Avoid Low-Quality Links

When you build a wall, you do it bit by bit, with the same kind of identical bricks until you have a lot of bricks that all look the same... presto, you have a wall. That's building. You can't *build* links that way in 2018 and EXPECT to win the ranking wars in Google as Google is actively fighting to devalue your efforts.

A lot of cheap link building tactics are crap (no other word to describe it). Depending on how good the search engine optimisation company is of course - there are different varying colours of crap but generally speaking, you stand in it when you open your email, and it says:

QUOTE: "We *noticed you don't rank for any of your keywords. We are an expert link building company....."*

They'll come from spammy blog and forum comments that might hurt your brand or web hosting companies with an obvious unnatural paid link profile.

Even if the link building company are good at their job - a competitor will just report you for buying links if you do it too much. It will stick out like a sore thumb you're buying links, and that's against Google TOS. Beware buying any 'affordable' linkbuilding service promising you guaranteed top rankings, even if they do have apparently great reviews on forums or blogs.

There's no automated link building program that builds high-quality links.

Free link building software will probably have lots of free software you don't know you're installing on your PC.

TACTIC: "*Backlink Reclamation*"

You can also often find potential broken links using Google Analytics or a link building tool like Majestic, by looking into any old pages on the site that have been deleted or moved. This process is called **backlink reclamation**.

Backlink reclamation is one of the most legitimate forms of link building in 2018 for sites that have gone through multiple site designs and restructuring over the years.

Essentially what you do is you look at your website backlink profile and make sure that all and any backlinks pointing to the site are pointing to pages that return a 200 OK server header.

Any 301 redirects should be checked to ensure they point to EQUIVALENT content.

For more on 301 redirects see:

1. NOTE: Some Redirects May Be Treated As Soft 404 Error Pages
2. NOTE: 301 Redirecting expired pages to your home page may result in 'soft-404s'
3. NOTE: 301 Redirects from Products To Categories May Result in Soft-404s
4. NOTE: You MUST Redirect To Equivalent Content
5. NOTE: How To Use 301 Redirects Properly To Preserve Rankings in Google
6. NOTE: Rel Canonicals Can Be Treated As 301 Redirect

TACTIC: Earn Media Links

I love picking up media links. The best way to get them is to be an authority on a subject, and that usually means WRITING posts that illustrate some expertise on the matter. A PR agency is a great way of getting you these types of links - they have the contacts. Legitimate PR is one of the most valuable assets in your link earning strategy.

I also like trying to get (or give) testimonials for links although I don't overdo it - and I would only do it for products I like.

Media links are often as good as links get, in terms of quality. Media links are usually best gathered as the result of an intentional marketing/PR push to get such links, and as such, can often be hard to acquire.

The best media links are organic media links generated from some sort of PR or content production. Low-quality PR and ARTICLE sites that actually manipulate Google's SERPS are to be avoided.

The more popular the media site, the better the link will be if it is organic.

Media links inform your website E-A-T.

The Perfect Link Request Email

First, there's probably no PERFECT link request email but here is an example I used to use to get high-quality links:

- I don't send that many out (none, in fact, in the last 3 or 4 years).
- I keep the email short and to the point
- I use a title like "FAO Organisation Website Name" Website
- I never automate them - each one is crafted personally and (much like the blog) in a laid-back manner.
- I IDENTIFY the exact PAGE I want a link on (after identifying it's a relevant page I also look to see if the site and page rank high in Google, or is indexed at all, whether it gets traffic and is itself internally (at least) well linked to.
- It's never a low-quality links page I want a link on.
- I never ask for links on their homepage.
- I never ask them to link to my homepage.
- I also correctly IDENTIFY if they have a habit of linking out to relevant articles.
- I always provide them with the URL I desire them to link to
- I ALWAYS have a piece of content that's of value and WORTH linking to - after all, I wouldn't link to pap.
- I NEVER specify anchor text that should be used.
- I NEVER even mention reciprocal links
- I only contact them once (ok, maybe twice over the course of a year, as it turned out)
- I am honest as to who I am when doing it for myself

Most importantly - I am honest about why I want a link.

I don't tell them it will help them, I tell them (usually) it's more up to date information than they currently link to and it will help us and might be useful to their readers. And it is. I don't tell them it will help their rankings, or that I was "browsing the web and came across their site".

I'm not exactly sure what above is the 'killer', but this method works more often than not. Lastly, if I spot something amiss on their site, I'll point it out in a friendly manner, and tell them to contact me if they need any assistance in the subject of what I do - SEO. Not exactly rocket science is it.

TACTIC: "Broken Link Building"

What is Broken Link Building?

Broken linkbuilding is all about hunting for and spotting an opportunity.

A long time ago (site-wide links are not really in fashion now - although they are still valuable if they are editorial):

> **QUOTE**: "*Generally speaking, site-wide links can be fine. That's not something where we would say that if a link is across a whole website then it's automatically considered bad. So, I wouldn't automatically treat those site-wide links as being problematic. Sometimes what happens is that we will run across site wide links where it's like, "Oh, these are our partners." And, you look at those partner websites and they also have this partner block on the side that point to the same sites and it's more like a link exchange. But, those are essentially just normal unnatural links. It's not that because they are site-wide they would be considered bad. It's more that there is just this link exchange happening.*" John Mueller, Google 2013

I used a very simple method to get 500 site-links from a PR 5 site with over 3000 links to it. Yes, a real site.

I've used the same method to contact ten other sites with the same request about the same matter.

I've used this method a bit over the last couple of years.

Looking at the SERPs I was interested in, I spotted an expired, suspended domain that was ranking for a term I cherished. The site was suspended and had been like that for the last six months.

There was no content on the site, so I knew immediately it was the strength of the incoming backlinks alone that was keeping this high.

I could, of course, look to buy the expired domain (but it belongs to a competitor - I'm sure if I expressed a value in it I'd lose out!).

I ran the expired suspended domain through a backlink checker, identified the most powerful links, contacted the site owners in question and explained to them:

1. They were linking to a dead site (and had been that way for six months)
2. I had the same (perhaps better and more up-to-date) content on a site that they could link to if they wished.

Not only did I get a friendly email thanking me for pointing out they had broken links on their site (broken links are never a good thing), I now have 500 new links on a real site pointing to my site.

Backlink creation for me is all about opportunity - spotting it and actioning it to get real backlinks from real sites. If you can see a win-win (something as simple as links in return for pointing out another site has broken links on it) jump on it. If you can't see win-wins - you're not a link builder - hire somebody.

By the way, the result is I now rank and that suspended domain has sunk - oops :)

TIP - Find a site you want a link from, spider it, find broken links - see if you have content that matches it.

Email them (and send them the list of all the broken links).

It's not as easy to find such dropped domain sites in Google today, but you still can crawl sites easily to look for broken links.

TACTIC: Links On '*Links To Useful Sites*' Pages

Do I want a link to my site on a 'Links To Useful Sites' page? Sometimes, yes!

The problem is that a lot of these type of pages are created just to manipulate ranking in Google search engine result pages and if there are lots (100+) of links on there, any benefit to your site could be microscopic (and potentially damaging to your rankings if the site in question is of a very low-quality).

Do not buy any of these types of links, and I would AVOID like the plague any of these types of pages where you can spot obvious anchor text abuse, often to unrelated sites.

When you have a choice of where a link is going, don't just take a link from "useful links" pages, unless the 'useful links' page is on a reputable site, with a lot of backlinks to it itself. The more relevant the page is to your business, the better.

There are some indications the 'useful links' pages are, after all, helpful' link:

- Check if the links page is indexed by Google at all using the **site:** operator
- Consider how authoritative the site is. Is it an important site within your industry or known as a reputable source throughout the world? (If it is, get a link if you can!)
- Check how many backlinks point to the links page from within the actual site (my favourite link building tool (reviewed on my list of the best SEO tools) is probably Majestic.
- Check how the site itself performs in third party tools like SEMRush. A site that ranks for many keywords and gets a lot of organic traffic itself from Google is probably a good site to get a link from. I also use Semrush to rank link prospects.

Links pages can be a useful target for any link hunter if the page is on a very authoritative site, but a lot of link pages go the way of the Dodo within time. Stick to higher quality sites and well managed 'links-to-useful' pages.

'Useful links' pages are an age-old link building tactic and much abused in the past.

Some of these types of pages do have incredible value. It is also perfectly natural to have some of these types of links in your link profile if you have a reputable site.

These type of link opportunities are worth investigating.

AVOID:

- AVOID overdoing keyword stuffing rich anchor text links with important keywords in links to your site
- AVOID links pages with no review policy or that link to many other unrelated sites, as they normally link to low-quality sites.
- AVOID (where possible) obvious 'link to me and I will link to you' schemes

DO:

- GET links from sites with 'useful links' pages related to the topic of your website and that link out to competing sites of yours.
- You can get links from ANY useful links page that is kept high quality and offers some real value, but most of these higher quality opportunities WILL be more related to your niche, anyway.

TIP:

Use Google and 'operators' to find resource pages that link to the type of content you are promoting - just type into Google some variation or combination of the following search operator and keyword phrase:

- "Keyword Phrase" + inurl:"useful-links"
- "Keyword Phrase" + inurl:"external-links"
- "Keyword Phrase" + "helpful resources"
- "Keyword Phrase" + "useful resources"
- "Keyword Phrase" + "useful links"
- "Keyword Phrase" + inurl:resources
- "Keyword Phrase" + intitle:resources
- "Keyword Phrase" + inurl:links
- "Keyword Phrase" + intitle:links

You can also search for specific type of sites and pages on them:

- site:.edu"Keyword Phrase" + "resources"
- site:.edu"Keyword Phrase" + "links"
- site:.ac.uk "Keyword Phrase" + "resources"
- site:.ac.uk "Keyword Phrase" + "links"

SUMMARY

'Useful Links' pages are a decent link building opportunity and there ARE some pages like this that offer great value to your site.

TACTIC: "*LinkBait*" With Information-Rich Content

> **QUOTE**: "*If you're making it easy for other people to link to your site, then that's absolutely fine. On the other hand if you're trying to trick people into linking to your site or doing some kind of link scheme like, 'You link to me and I'll link to you,' then that's something that we treat as an unnatural link.*" John Mueller, Google

Adding information-rich content to your site is a great method of attracting natural links from forums and blogs, and the more in-depth the article, the more chance of it ranking high in Google for(especially) long tail variations of high traffic high-value keywords.

When you are at the top of the SERPs for particular keywords, particularly how to tutorials, you start picking up organic links from forums and blogs who see these articles as trusted articles because, well, they are at the top of Google!

When helping each other out, forum contributors often use Google to find an authority article and link to it to help newbies. Often they will usually just copy and paste the URL like so: https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/***** Not ideal.

Sometimes it's worth it go one step further and provide them with the BBcode and HTML versions of a nice anchor text rich link to start getting those keyword rich links to your site. Every now and again, change the anchor text to mix your backlink profile a little. Sometimes you do pick up that natural looking keyword rich link.

Link to this page using BBcode

```
Check Out[URL=www.hobo-web.co.uk/blog-forum-baiting-get-anchor-text-rich-
links/]  Blog & Forum Baiting - Get Anchor Text Rich Links From Forums &
Blogs[/URL] on the Hobo website.
```

Link to this page using HTML

```
Take a look at <a href=" https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/link-building-strategy-
for-beginners-a-month-of-free-tips/"> Blog & Forum Baiting - Get Anchor
Text Rich Links</a> on Hobo.
```

I have used this with varying degrees of success **in the past**. Might work for some of your very best articles, especially if desperate to get particular anchor text in your profile.

I wouldn't overdo this, though. I wouldn't overdo anything these days.

It's kind of the same strategy as the now more traditional INFOGRAPHIC (although if you are embedding links in infographics with keyword rich anchor text, I know for a FACT that is penalty material after advising a client against it, who subsequently got a penalty for it - and it took MONTHS for a third party to get the penalty lifted).

Social media platforms have all but replaced the old forums - but some can STILL drive a lot of traffic, and some can also offer some SEO value. If you do nothing else to help people share your content - ADD SOCIAL MEDIA BUTTONS for the most appropriate social media channels. Those links themselves might not carry much weight, but secondary links from such activity can.

A few years back Lyndon Antcliff was kind enough to share some insights of 'Linkbait' - or 'Baiting Links' using social media - and that advice is still sensible in 2018.

QUOTE: "*Social media marketing is more complicated than you think, in certain ways it's simple, but you have to adapt tactics to suit the situation and that's wear instinct is important.*" Lyndon Antcliff

Five things you need to think about before you post a piece of linkbait**:**

1. **Headline**: I would say the headline is the most important as if you don't have this you have nothing. But a good headline can still get people to look at bad content.
2. **Formatting**: This is actually quite important, by formatting I mean the way the thing looks. There are specific looks which certain people associate with something they would like to link to, the aim is to emulate the "look", which is different to different target groups.
3. **Images**: The web is multimedia, so use it. A great picture can do the work for you, a video even more so. If you can get an image in your linkbait do it, but not everyone has a good eye, check it with friends you know will tell you it's crap if it is before you press submit.
4. **Audience**: Absolutely crucial, you have to know who the piece is intended for. You have to craft your idea to be able to fit snuggly into the minds of your intended audience.
5. **Spelling**: I work very fast, so I make a lot of spelling mistakes, and I don't usually bother with grammar. But diggers, for example are Nazis for grammar and spelling, so if you want anything dugg, it's best to triple check.

If you are new to social media marketing, check out this: How To Get Started in Social Media.

TACTIC: Guest Posting On Blogs & Sites For Links

QUOTE*: "Okay, I'm calling it: **if you're using guest blogging as a way to gain links in 2014, you should probably stop**. Why? Because over time it's become a more and more spammy practice, and if you're doing a lot of guest blogging then you're hanging out with really bad company. I wouldn't recommend relying on guest posting, guest blogging sites, or guest blogging SEO as a linkbuilding strategy.There are still many good reasons to do some guest blogging (exposure, branding, increased reach, community, etc.). Those reasons existed way before Google and they'll continue into the future. And there are absolutely some fantastic, high-quality guest bloggers out there. I changed the title of this post to make it more clear that I'm talking about guest blogging for search engine optimization (SEO) purposes." Matt Cutts, Google 2014*

Google does not want you guest posting on blogs for links. If you are guest blogging for links, they should have a nofollow attribute on the links.

QUOTE*: "Think about whether or not this is a link that would be on your site if it weren't for your actions…When it comes to guest blogging it's a situation where you are placing links on other people's sites together with this content, so that's something I kind of shy away from purely from a link building point of view. It can make sense to guest blog on other people's sites to drive some traffic to your site… but **you should use a nofollow**." John Mueller, Google 2013*

and

QUOTE*: "I would almost go so far as to say well, even those those kind of guest posts where you do contribute significantly to the site maybe it makes sense just to have those links as nofollow*." John Mueller Google 2017

TACTIC: Attracting Editorial Links From Bloggers

These types of links can be very valuable, but you should probably avoid paying for blog links (most links, in fact). Google is on record as having a real issue with 'low-quality' blogging for link benefits.

If you have a piece of content worth sharing, it can often be useful to try and get bloggers to cover it.

You can also see from these posts the type of content that picks up links in your niche.

AVOID:

- Paying for blog links or any blog article marketing scheme

DO:

- create useful content on the site bloggers may link to
- reach out to specific bloggers with high-value sites and request coverage of your site

TACTIC: Forum Linkbuilding

Forum owners TYPICALLY add rel=nofollow to outbound links if the forum in question follows Google guidelines on user-generated content. Some forums drive some decent traffic, though, so it could be useful monitoring the feeds of particular forums and actually be answering questions on forums that in turn drive traffic to your site.

This type of activity is a significant effort, over a long time, with NO first-order effect on your Google organic traffic levels and rankings.

HOWEVER - the second-order benefit to forum activity is that is DOES drive real traffic to your site, and can lead to a greater exposure for your site.

MOST REPUTABLE FORUMS require some activity on the forum before you can post links, however, adding another hurdle to get over with this strategy.

AVOID:

- posting to forums that are unrelated to the content on your website
- posting on forums that are purely self-serving and self-promotional
- sitewide links from forums using spammy anchor low-quality
- low-quality forums with lots of self-promotional spam
- don't ALWAYS just link to your own site, unless you want to be labelled a spammer

DO:

- Create content for the site users in forums are looking for, and have that URL on hand when answering questions
- participate in the conversation on forums where the conversation is relevant

TACTIC: Links From University & College Sites

These types of educational links from universities and colleges can be invaluable.

Any (reputable) link on the primary domain and pages of a major university, college or school website is (usually) going to be of a great help to your site in terms of Google traffic.

If you have any reason for any university, for instance, to link to you, then you should take FULL advantage of it.

Some tactics I've used in the past are:

- Job Vacancies for graduates
- Sponsorships for students
- Discounts for alumni, students and staff
- Scholarships for students
- Interviews with alumni

Take care: Any tactic you come across is often abused and as such comes with some risk to your business.

TACTIC: 'Partner' Links

I think it is essentially the responsibility of the site in question to nofollow these type of links. It would be very cynical of Google to punish these type of links. Some partners do not know they will receive links from recipients.

HOWEVER. If ALL your links come from these type of sources and are created in a manipulative way that could be seen as a problem.

Links from obvious PARTNERS may be counted as 'self-made' or 'self-promotional' links designed to manipulate Google and as such should NOT be used for the purposes of manipulating any SPECIFIC SERP (using keyword rich anchor text). Those type of links should come from better sources in 2018.

AVOID:

- AVOID overdoing keyword stuffing rich anchor text links with important keywords in links to your site
- AVOID obvious 'link to me and I will link to you' schemes

DO:

- GET links from reputable high-quality sites where possible

NOTE:

'Partner Links' pages are a low-level link building opportunity, but there are some pages like this that offer some value in terms of organic traffic and referral traffic. The more reputable or popular the site is the more useful this type of link will be.

TACTIC: 'EVENT' Links

Event links can be VERY powerful links indeed. If you are at exhibiting at an event or supplying any service to an event, AIM to get a link form the event website.

These websites tend to be trusted websites, and in turn, liked-to by more reputable sites like news and media sites. This type of linking is the type of linking that Google rewards.

AVOID:

- AVOID overdoing keyword stuffing rich anchor text links with important keywords in links to your site. One or two of these type of sites would be ideal, though, if it can be done naturally.
- AVOID obvious 'link to me and I will link to you' schemes
- AVOID obvious deals where you offer a service SPECIFICALLY for a link, where that deal is not entirely PRIVATE. Avoid emailing details of this sort of thing to anyone, too.

DO:

- GET links from high-quality reputable sites where possible
- GET the odd important anchor text if you can.
- GET more links than one, to multiple pages on your site if possible.

NOTE:

'Event Links' pages are an excellent link building opportunity for those where it is practical. The more reputable or popular the site is the more useful this type of link will be.

TACTIC: NHS Health Service Links

National Health Service sites are usually very reputable because they are in turn linked-to from other online authority websites. As such an ideal link to get to increase the trust and reputation of your own site - IF your content is related, of course.

AVOID:

- AVOID anything too obvious or spammy

B:

- GET links from high-quality reputable sites where possible
- GET important anchor text if you can on a trusted site like this
- GET more links than one, to multiple pages on your site if possible.

NOTE:

NHS and Health Service Site links are an excellent link building opportunity for those where it is practical. The more reputable or popular the site is the more useful this type of link will be.

TACTIC: "Local Links"

A quality link for me is an editorial link on a real site - a site that's been around for years.

The site in question is well linked to itself, and doesn't sell links - and is careful who they link to. These sites are kind of hard to get links from - but that's the point...

Strategy? Well, you live somewhere. You live in a town or a city, in a region, in a wider region. Just type these three regions - one at a time - into Google, and Google will return a list of potential link partners. Hundreds of them. Live in the wilderness? Look at your nearest city.

Deployment? Offer a discount, or give away stuff (Google does this) for a mention on their site IF they don't have any real reason to link to you.

Other sites will link to your site if you give them a reason to:

1. Your local Council - a lot of council sites have local business directories
2. Your local College or University - offer a student discount
3. Your local Chamber of Commerce - join, or offer a discount to members
4. Your local Newspaper - you should always be trying to get a mention in the local press - consider a competition
5. Local football club & supporters club - discount = mention on their site
6. Local sports clubs - there's a ton of them in every town usually with crusty old sites - offer them a discount, donate or sponsor them for a mention on their site.
7. Local Business Directories - More often than not, somebody has built a local biz directory covering your local area. Get in there, as long as they are not a low-quality directory just made to spam Google.
8. Local faith groups or other local community groups - When it comes to business, I have no denomination. Discount anybody?
9. Local charities - a link you can probably buy! Sponsor a charity site for a mention - Google would be MEAN to penalise this sort of link buying on a small-scale - and anyway, their attention is probably on bigger sites.
10. Local businesses - offer a discount to staff

These links aren't all easy to get and will take time to get (if you're comparing them to how fast you can buy or get links on sites these days that offer no value to your site in the long term). See what I did there.

So while your competitors are off buying links on crap third world domain hosting companies, submitting to 100,000 useless search engines, submitting to 100 useless directories, spamming dofollow blogs and forums or hiring a social media consultant to get 10,000 non-paying visitors from Stumbleupon or Facebook etc., YOU are picking up nice little, quality long-term links on trusted sites that probably are not being abused, and will fly right under any Google manipulation-radar, and all will help to build your domain authority and trust on Google. And all these kind of links above can be mixed and match to a national campaign if you know how to scale your efforts in a sensible manner.

These are good links for beginners to chase down - but remember - the best links will need some GREAT CONTENT to point to.

When hunting for links - I always remember some advice Jim Boykin gave me:

> **QUOTE**: "*Well, if I were to see a link somewhere, and were ask to value it's SEO's worth, then I'd look at the page where the link is located on, and compare it where that link links to. From the "ad" page, I'd see what percent of the internal links link to that page, then I'd check the internal link text used to link to that page, then I'd check external links to that page, and link text used from other sites that link to that page, then I'd look at the title tag of the page, then I'd look at the content of that page, I could peek at the age of the url, edu's, edu's to page, other links on that page (co-citation), related pages of that page, and a few other things too….there's tons you can analyze, and all have a certain value. In the end it comes to "you get what you can get", it's not always the "perfect link".*"

TACTIC: Directory Submissions

Are directory submissions worthwhile in 2018 for SEO?

If I did submit a site to any directory, it would meet these criteria from Google:

> **QUOTE**: *Directory entries are often mentioned as another way to promote young sites in the Google index. There are great, topical directories that add value to the Internet. But there are not many of them in proportion to those of lower quality. If you decide to submit your site to a directory, make sure its **on topic**, moderated, and well structured. Mass submissions, which are sometimes offered as a quick work-around SEO method, are mostly useless and not likely to serve your purposes.*" Google

I don't think many links are worth paying to be 'reviewed' by, and many of these SEO friendly directories end up turning into low-quality link farms.

Most directories send you VERY little or no referral traffic and on their own in little numbers have little impact in SERPs. Low-quality directory links are clearly not the type of links Google wants to count as a 'vote' - which render most SEO-friendly directory submission services redundant in 2018.

In short - I would not bother with directory submissions at all if you're focusing on creating good content on your site, and you have an 'aged' site. If you have a new site, a site with low-quality links or in a difficult niche to build links, then submission to high-quality directories is an option for you.

It's worth remembering that just because a strategy may work on some level, it still might get you into trouble further down the line. You'll probably end up paying another link cleaning company to remove the link next year!

Directory links are an age-old link building tactic. As such, Google will probably 'frown' upon a lot of manipulative links from low-quality directories.

Directory links should NOT be the main focus of any link building campaign - creating content or buzz that attracts links should be. However, if you are desperate for links, having a % of links from relatively high-quality directories WILL be of some (limited) use.

Links from directories are 'self-made' links and as such should NOT be used for the purposes of manipulating any SERP (using keyword rich anchor text). Those type of links should come from better sources in 2018.

Some directories probably do have some citation value. It is also perfectly natural to have some directories in your link profile. Links from directories can also help place you in a topical niche online. Remember what Google said about being 'on-topic'.

You can pay for a review, but the rules state you cannot pay for a link. It is a bit of a catch-22 with directories. You are unlikely to get into severe issues with directory links (in terms of penalties) if you avoid low-quality techniques to manipulate the SERPS (in the short-term).

> **QUOTE**: "*Don't dismiss directories completely. I have heard people talking about directories being altogether bad and advise people to avoid them. This is not the case, good quality, moderated directories, or niche directories are still worth looking in to.*" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

AVOID:

- AVOID keyword stuffing rich anchor text links with important keywords in any directory link to your site
- AVOID directories with no review policy, as they normally link to low-quality sites.
- AVOID directory submission programs as they often link your site into a low-quality link network
- AVOID having a large percentage of your links coming from directories.
- AVOID specifically directories that spout 'seo-friendly' offerings

DO:

STICK to using your brand name or URL for your directory listing. If your brand name has a valuable 'rich' keyword, I would usually stick to the URL, and avoid TOO many directory links.

- Use a unique description for every submission to any directory.
- ONLY submit your site to a number of high-quality directories
- Get listed in directories that specialise in the niche the website operates in

NOTE:

Directories are a low-level link building opportunity. While a few links from a few select directories might be worth a listing, do not rely on directories as large part of your future marketing campaigns. If you have very few links or a poor link profile, a few directories can be useful. Stick to higher quality directories.

If you have a very poor link profile - non-manipulative links from high-quality directories probably won't hurt.

Basics of Link Building

When you are not spamming the algorithm, and the Google web spam team is not on holiday, ranking in Google today is about patience, ACCESSIBILITY, RELEVANCE, CONTENT QUALITY, REPUTATION, USER EXPERIENCE and above all - TRUST - however, Google works that last one out.

It is evident Google wants to reward <u>UNIQUENESS</u> - because that scales not.

I prefer focusing on improving those signals above, rather than just manipulating link popularity. A link building campaign devoid of any quality, or of any use (or 'value add') to anyone, is not the type of backlink profile Google wants to reward with any long-term consistency.

Google calls that spam and will punish you for it if it detects an intent to deceive its algorithms. Not that that stops a good spammer of course. If you're reading this, chances are you are not a good spammer, so I would keep it clean until you know what you are doing - and maybe even then:

> **QUOTE**: *"the manual actions team… can look at the labels on the on the links or a site gets. Basically, we have tons of link labels; for example, it's a **footer link, basically, that has a lot lower value than an in-content link**. Then another label would be a Penguin real-time label. **If they see that most of the links are Penguin real-time labelled, then they might actually take a deeper look and see what the content owner is trying to do.** So, if you think about it, there are tons of different kinds of links on the internet. There are footer links, for example. There are Penguinized links, and all of these kinds of links have certain labels internally attached to them, basically for our own information. And if the manual actions team is reviewing a site for whatever reason, and they see that most of links are labeled as Penguin real-time affected, then they might decide to take a much deeper look on the site and see what's up with those links and what could be the reason those links exist — and then maybe apply a manual action on the site because of the links." Gary Illyes, Google [2016](#)*

How to do high-quality link building that works:

- Get links from real sites to build real 'domain authority'.
- Try and get links from authority websites in your niche. Find that circle of sites - the hub - where authorities in your industry link to and are linked from and think about how you can get involved.
- Don't worry too much about "theme" of websites linking to you but stay clear of irrelevant sites just for irrelevant links. In fact - going off topic once in a while on your blog can lead to great natural links from unrelated sites.
- Review the link building tactics your competitors employ to EARN links and think about how you can emulate the better quality strategies you may find. Don't build links just to build links, or just to copy somebody else.

- Join social networks, not for the links themselves, but to get your content noticed by the people most likely to share your type of content, to build your personal network, and to build your 'Authorship' signal - you're going to need those for the future!
- Get links from relevant sites, but understand that ANY editorial link is a good link, regardless of the page and site it is on (unless it's a negative SEO attack of course).
- Focus on quality link building techniques and strategies to avoid future unnatural links notices in Google Webmaster Tools which will be followed by penalties that can last - well - forever - depending on what you have been up to
- Don't annoy folk with link begging emails and, for sure, not without a good piece of content for them, and don't bombard friends you make on social networks with your sales message.
- Help others achieve their goals today, and some will help you in the future. I've always found that to be a simple truth.
- The more people abuse certain links, the faster they turn toxic. Don't go with that link herd because you, as a beginner, will be the weakest in it.
- Automated link building or manual link building - if the end-result is an unnatural link you've placed yourself, Google doesn't want to count that.
- Outsource link building with extreme caution in 2018.
- If you want links, you had better have 'linkable assets, ' e.g., pages on your website need to be a 'destination' that users engage with.

What Do Search Engines Say About Link Building?

> **QUOTE**: "*if you want to please Google with your SEO, then forget about SEO. Google wants you to create a site as if you don't intend to manipulate their algo, but as if you are doing it because your passionate about the topic of your site. If you really are, your content will be great and your target audience will love you, this will do the best possible SEO you can imagine*" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

Which Search Engine Gives The Best Advice?

Unless you think GooglePlus counts are the number one ranking factor, you'll realise **building high-quality links to your site is STILL the single most important thing you can be doing to improve the rank of an already relevant high-quality page** (if you haven't been doing anything shady in the past, that is. If you have, you need to concentrate on dissociating yourself first from unnatural links).

In competitive verticals - you can easily follow Bing/Yahoo clear linkbuilding guidelines to rank in Google, but forget to try and rank in Bing/Yahoo with this same technique because to do so, you need to use Google Webmaster Guidelines as a rulebook for success, and that will penalise you in Google, which no sensible person wants.

Bing and Yahoo recently encouraged you to outreach for relevant links to improve the rank of your website: Bing said:

> **QUOTE**: *"simply ask websites for them"* BING

Yahoo said:

> **QUOTE**: "*Correspond with Webmasters of related sites and other providers of relevant content in order to increase the number of links to your site.*" Yahoo

Google has a different view. Google says:

> **QUOTE**: "***Any** links intended to manipulate ....a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Additionally, **creating links that weren't editorially placed** or vouched for by the site's owner on a page, otherwise known as unnatural links, can be considered **a violation of our guidelines**.*" Google

Two of the 3 major (UK) search engines (recently) encouraged you to ask websites for links to improve the ranking of your site, and the biggest, Google, tells you not to do it at all.

Bing's SERPs (which power Yahoo searches) look pre-penguin and pre-EMD (Exact Match Domain Update) Google SERPs.

You can easily rank in Bing and tank in Google, these days.

Actionable Advice From Yahoo and Bing: Get links from related sites. Ask for links to increase the number of links to your site. (quotes)

Honesty From Google: If we spot a linkbuilding footprint we will f*** you. (paraphrased)

Bing's Position on Backlink Building Clarified

Here's a post on link building and SEO for "smart webmasters" on the Bing search blog.

- *You contact Webmasters of other, related websites and let them know your site exists.*
- *If the value that you have worked so hard to instill in your site is evident to them, they will assist their own customers by linking back to your site. **That, my friend, is the essence of link building.***
- *Relevance is important to end users... We see the content they possess and the content you possess. If there is a clear disconnect, the value of that inbound link is significantly diminished, if not completely disregarded.*
- *If relevance is important, the most highly regarded, relevant sites are best of all. Sites that possess great content, that have a history in their space, that have earned tons of relevant, inbound links - basically, the sites who are authorities in their field - are considered authoritative sites.*
- ***When probable manipulation is detected, a spam rank factor is applied to a site, depending upon the type and severity of the infraction**. If the spam rating is high, a site can be penalized with a lowered rank. If the violations are egregious, a site can be temporarily or even permanently purged from the index.*

Interesting and it gives an insight into linkbuilding and penalties for manipulation - we know the same sort of thing is happening at Google too. **Bing's policy on link building**

> **QUOTE**: "*Bing's position on link building is straightforward - we are less concerned about the link building techniques used than we are about the intentions behind the effort. That said, techniques used are often quite revealing of intent.*" Bing

That 'spam rank factor' is interesting. I wonder if Google has a similar approach - it certainly feels like it.

Tell The World About Your Site But Don't Get Caught Asking For Links

Google used to say:

> **QUOTE**: "*Have other relevant sites link to yours.*" Google

Then it's guidelines changed to:

> **QUOTE**: "*Tell the world about your site*". Google

and in 2018:

> **QUOTE**: "*create unique, relevant content that can naturally gain popularity in the Internet community. Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will: "find that content valuable to their readers and link to it.*" Google

It's clear.

Google does not want you asking specifically for links or building links you make yourself because this is a clear attempt to manipulate rankings. It's a bit slack advice when the *key* to ranking and traffic success in Google is getting other relevant authority sites link to your site.

Links are what the web is about though, and it is why Google is the number 1 search engine. Links were about before Google, though. There's nothing wrong with getting other sites to link to you as long as it doesn't stick out like a sore thumb you're looking for Pagerank or improved rankings for particular terms. *Private discussions with people you know are another thing*, but when I ask for links (which I don't do very often), I no longer ask for specific keyword anchor text.

If I send out an email, I'll point someone in the direction of the page, and I'll point out that linking to it might have some benefit to their audience. On some occasions in the (long gone) past, I've offered to reciprocate the link IF it is of benefit to the readers of the other page. I

never specify any attribute of the link either e.g. whether or not it is search engine friendly, or not. I would not go on record these days sending an email out saying:

QUOTE: "*Link to me using the following keyword text on a page with Pagerank of minimum 2....*"

... and neither should you.

You never know who will end up reading that, and it makes it clear *you don't have a clue* what you are on about and *will take links from and link back to anybody*.

If you want people to link to you in a particular way, make sure the title of the page you want links to, has the keywords you want to rank for featured, and a lot of folks will use those words to link to you. I sometimes change the title of pages for this exact reason.

This is presuming, of course, the page is useful in some way!

And don't send out spam email requests. I have had thousands of bottom-feeder link requests, and I don't answer any of them.

It is a waste of time for most of us - and harmful in the long-run.

There are many ways to skin a cat of course, but this is how my linkbuilding company does it - and as I've said before, we're a *content-focused* link building agency.

We don't build links to crap sites in 2018 (not even crap links).

How do you tell the world about your site?

Twitter. Stumbleupon. Facebook. TV. Press Ads. Articles. Blogging. Linkedin.

You pick - but start with building something on your website somebody will find useful.

That is the start point.

Get Links From REAL Sites (Sites That Do NOT Exist JUST To Link To Other Sites)

https://youtu.be/7Y74Op_k6UY

Sometimes it's hard to explain to people what a quality link is but in simple terms in 2018 Google wants you thinking nothing but a *natural* link is a *good* link.

Links **do not have to be relevant to your industry to build your domain reputation** (far from it).

The linking site you earn a link from doesn't have to be an authority in its niche, and it doesn't have to be the same links as your competitors to get the same rankings.

Even if the site is unrelated to your site (and you just bagged a lucky link on a well-managed website) - THAT is a GREAT link in 2018.

Any editorial link is a good link, as long as the PAGE it is on, is relevant to the PAGE it is linking to.

What it should NOT be is **a website (or websites) that ONLY exist to provide links to other sites to boost rankings.**

Sites that are designed just to link out to other websites to help seo are toxic in 2018 and Google has a bit of an after-hours hobby of going after a lot of link schemes in these days.

Just about every link building specialist, I talk to today, LOVES EARNED LINKS - loves white hat link building - although a lot of experienced link builders just won't give up on manufactured links while spam prevails in Google's listings - and there's a lot of that, still.

I think about how I get links from real sites, and the more authoritative the site, the better, of course.

Ideally:

- You don't *just* want a link on a useful links page, but as long as the links page is a valuable resource, and not abusing anchor text, then it could still be a good link - perhaps even a *great* link
- You don't want your link on a page, on a site, openly selling links as chances are the links will not age well, at least.
- You do want it on a page that's in Google's index, on a legitimate website that ranks in Google for what is in the title tag.

Earned contextual links are the holy grail of building links, for me, but if the link is on a good domain, with a suspected high PR and is not abusing anything, just about any link is a great link.

If you want to [increase Google Pagerank](#) of your site, you better make sure the pages that link to you have PR, can transfer it and are making your link the focus of the article.

This takes a bit of experience, though.... you'll naturally accrue Pagerank if you invest in remarkable or compelling content on your site - and that can take just about any form you can think of.

Do the stuff above (and a lot of it) and you'll have a natural link profile as is possible that will probably stand the test of time. I don't use that many link building tools to identify opportunity because I don't want the same links as my competitors for my clients - you just need Google and your brain, in some cases.

There are many ways to perform link building (and I don't IGNORE competitor research), but if I was a link builder picking through competitors backlinks instead of trying to think a bit more creatively about building a brand online, I think I would shoot myself in the head. I filter competition backlinks and identify quality linking patterns - but often, competitor research is best for inspiration, rather than getting the exact same link as your competitor.

Focus on building better content, a better user experience, and get links from REAL SITES. Remember that....and you will probably always be ok.

Do Off-Topic Links To My Site Count?

> **QUOTE**: "*getting a link from a high PR page used to always be valuable, today it's more the relevance of the site's theme in regards to yours, **relevance is the new PR**.*" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

Yes - although not as valuable as they once were. A lot of SEO & Internet marketing blogs will say pump out a lot of relevant content on your blog, build a resource all around a specific subject.

Even Google says to do the same.

What you won't normally hear is to improve your traffic, improve the number and quality of your links to your website is to go slightly **off topic**…. write about anything that is timely – especially when it's even slightly topical.

News-jacking stories **in related** niches (or your own) is still a great way of picking up natural, socially driven links.

I've gone off topic on a number of times to chase links. Because of that, I've been linked to by authority sites that wouldn't have any reason to link to an SEO company.

I had a PR 9 link once because I wrote about something 'off-topic'.

Recently I was editorially linked to, from a .edu on a '*slightly*' off topic subject to an article I wrote two years ago.

Once our site got a home page link on what I can only determine was the Brazilian version of TechCrunch and sent me nearly 5,000 visitors on a link that was buried four pages in on the article (to an article that was a year old).

The link was to an off-topic post on my site that ranks pretty good because of my domain authority - for want of a better word - and that new link will only increase that domain authority.

When you go off topic into less competitive niches, you can sometimes have a better chance of ranking on the first page of Google – and so – pick up natural links even further down the line.

The Best Way To Earn Natural Links Is TO Be Top Of Google!

Ranking no1 in Google makes natural link building that much easier!

If you are the number 1 link in a SERP, you wouldn't believe the number of natural links you get just because you are already No1 - it truly is a self re-enforcing effect and can be a powerful way to attract links over time.

The number 1 position truly is a self-reinforcing position especially if there's any semblance of a natural linking profile in that particular keyword vertical - i.e., tutorials, research, how-to, etc. So - a strategy is to rank for as much as possible from the start - even if that is LONG-TAIL queries - and so that starts with IN-DEPTH CONTENT on YOUR SITE. If you are building links to 500-word articles - that's not going to stand the test of time over even the next year or two.

These links from trusted sites help ranking your content - especially your new content. A natural link from a trusted site (or even a more trusted site than yours) can do nothing but help your site. I would think when a trusted site links to your site, the trust Google places in your site because of that link raises your trust levels, and while not helping you rank immediately for your main terms, can help you when you publish new content in the future. Of course, if the off topic trusted site links to you with good keywords, you don't get much better.

The art is to pull all that together in a way that benefits you the most, without giving Google a reason to place less trust in your site.

Now for sure, I don't go that far off topic and expect to get links that will count.

But indeed, **going off topic *every now and again*, especially with a helpful article on your blog** certainly gets you links, sometimes tons of traffic, some you wouldn't normally receive in your boring niche.

You know you can monetise anything if you can be bothered and take advantage of any page that's been linked to heavily, but the point is the natural links you earn from this type of activity might well be the only links you need to beat off a competitor.

Sometimes - it's surprising the quality of links you get with a bit of off-topic content.

Which Links Affect A Website's Ranking In Google SERPs?

> **QUOTE**: "There are a good few elements taken into account here, like how many links are there in total? A very important one; what is the quality of the pages they come in from? Do the pages look "real" or are they just there to host the links? What anchors are used? The commercial vs. non commercial ratio of the anchors. In reality it's very easy to recognise a blackhat profile" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

Any link that sends you human traffic could be seen as a good link, but what are quality links, what are good links and what are crap links, when it comes to improving the actual ranking of your pages in Google SERPs?

First, you need to be aware that **the** *quality* **of a link (that affects a ranking improvement for your site in Google) is dependant on the page the link is found and site it is on**.

Is the site trusted, is the page trusted, is the page in Google's index at all, how many links point to the actual page your link is on, are people going to click this link (that in itself is a good measure of the quality of a real link)? Most importantly, it's all about the page the link is on.

Just because you get a link on a high PR domain does not automatically make that a useful link.

It's the *page* you need to evaluate, and how important that page is on the site.

The relevance of the page is probably even more important in 2018.

Testing Google

Google used to tell you through their cache results if a link was being 'counted' at least in some fashion.

Back in Nov 2011, Google removed the cached message:

QUOTE: "*these terms only appear in links pointing to this page*"

While this was regularly an inaccurate statement for the cached pages to declare I always found this information in cached pages useful - when looking at backlink profiles to investigate weird ranking results - or ranking anomalies/false positives - that shed light on how Google worked on some level.

This feature of Google cache was also very useful when testing, for example, first link priority.

It was also helpful to investigate *why* a page ranked for a keyword, for instance, when the word was not on the actual page.

You could often catch a glimpse of backlink building efforts that worked looking at this - which led to a few surprises, more often than not.

Now Google cache only tells us:

QUOTE: "*These search terms are highlighted*:"

Pity.

Another small window on determining how Google might 'work,' at a granular level, disappeared to lead to more obfuscation.

Which Links Are Worth Addressing?

You should have a light mixture of focused anchor text links, unfocused anchor text links and URL citations (www.hobo-web.co.uk, etc.) in your link profile to ensure long standing rankings (e.g., a natural link profile).

What follows is my general rule of thumb:

1. **Internal links** are Not THE most important type of links, but the best place to start. Get your site in order before you get backlinks. Google appreciate a good site structure with plenty of text links pointing to important pages on your site. On smaller sites, I prefer a minimal site-wide navigation and a lot of in content links (if you have a lot of useful content), and I consider first link priority. Don't forget to link to your important pages often to ensure you get the pages crawled in the first place. On larger sites, keep it simple with concise anchor text and simple, contextual navigation systems, like breadcrumb navigation systems. See my article on internal link building.
2. **Links on mainstream news sites**, and other types of authority sites and online brands is the holy grail in my opinion - promotion, old style. They are trusted and have a lot of links to them. This type of link will add to positive E-A-T.
3. **Related industry site** (the aim of SEO, and excellent quality, but depends on the site, niche and the type of link - can be very useful) - usually, they too have a lot of links. If the page is thematically related to yours, then that is a GREAT link (if it is an organic editorial link). This type of link will add to positive E-A-T.
4. **A Link on a suspected high PR old style aged trusted page** - like a university or government resource page - excellent if you can get the Webmaster to link to you. I still use PR (PageRank) when describing such a link, but at our end, all we have to work with, in 2018, is something like TrustFlow (or another third party metric) unless you are working out PR (or rather a proxy of it) yourself. This type of link will add to positive E-A-T.
5. **Links from unrelated but non-abusive sites** (depends on the site and the type of link - can be very useful for improving your Google ranking & PR).
6. **Link on a blog post** (good, but dependent on the site, but easily *deteriorates* over time as a post is gobbled up in sometimes very crap site architecture.

7. **Social media site links** (opinion, I think these are very very weak as a ranking signal in themselves, but they do get your page out there, and that's how you pick up organic links). Social media could be useful for 'sentiment analysis'' - do people like or hate your site?
8. **Link on a useful links page** (often very low-quality, but sometimes very high-quality - it's all dependent on the INTENT of that page in question, and the quality of the site it is on).
9. **Reciprocal links** (often abused and very low-quality, but sometimes just a natural part of the link graph)

Links to *avoid* include any link that is self-made and obviously self-made, on a site with only self-made links.

It doesn't matter if THEY WORK to manipulate Google in the short term - if you use a lot of low-quality techniques, and there is an obvious INTENT to rank using low-quality means, these links might very well cause you ranking troubles a few months later.

I would avoid:

1. **Dofollow Blog Comments** - **PENALTY MATERIAL**
2. **Paid Sitewide links & blogrolls** (generally low-quality in terms of anchor text transference - used to be good for PR transference but not nearly as useful as it used to be) **PENALTY MATERIAL**
3. **Article submission & syndication services** - **PENALTY MATERIAL**
4. **Low-Quality Directory Links** - **PENALTY MATERIAL**
5. **Forum Signatures & Forum Profile Pages** (generally low-quality, dependent on page and forum, perhaps dependant on number of links too) **PENALTY MATERIAL**
6. **Widgets** - **PENALTY MATERIAL if Abused**
7. **Unnatural Sitewide links** - **PENALTY MATERIAL**
8. **Private Blog Networks (PBNs), Directory networks** and just about any other type of **link network - PENALTY MATERIAL IF DISCOVERED!**
9. **Any Unnatural Links - Potential - PENALTY MATERIAL, Eventually**
10. **Paid Links, of any sort** (if you are rumbled) - **PENALTY MATERIAL!!**

I will say you can still get away with quite a lot, but actual penalty material as I claim above is all to do with your INTENT as GOOGLE interprets it to be.

Google Penguin devalues a LOT of links in realtime but if you are flagged to the webspam team to deal with you have a greater risk of receiving a manual action.

Nofollowed links (like those on most blog comments - are not counted as links (though can be used to generate traffic if you link to a popular blog post or comment on one). NOTE many claim Google DO follow nofollow links in certain cases - but I perform SEO not expecting nofollowed links to have much impact on my rankings either way. If they do - good - but I don't *rely* on them.

Remember that links need to be complemented by well-structured title tags, GOOD IN-DEPTH content, and a good site architecture.

It's not enough to be 'popular' - you also need to be 'relevant' and 'unique'.

For me, another rule of thumb is, often, the EASIER a link is, that everyone else can get, the LESS quality it is for you in the long run.

Links Like Lasers

> **QUOTE**: "*stay focussed on quality of pages linking in to you, Google judges your link profile by the quality of pages linking to your site, getting 3 links from authentic pages will do much more than 1000 links from splogs, so invest your time into getting quality, not quantity*" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

Google often still relies on links to find, index, categorise and rate websites (and pages) in 2018.

Content will always be king (especially in the future) but without links, content can still be a moot point.

You can have the best content in the world, but if you don't have links pointing to it from other sites, it may lose out to *optimised* content on 'hotter' sites, even if that content is of poorer quality.

To properly visualise this 'lasers' or "SEO heat" analogy, you've got to accept success in search engines for competitive terms comes down very largely to links - the number of links, the number of right links... the number of 'hot' links.

Links are like lasers. A link to another site "heats" that site up a little. Links have the potential to make a site hot and send that site to the top of the results.

Some links get hotter in time, some get colder, and some disappear as each site is affected by those linking to it and from it.

With this constant shift, every site's heat signature is in constant flux, and there's little you can do to it except getting more of the right links to keep your site hotter than the competition for particular terms.

Some burn hot and then go cold, and vice versa.

OK - Now Forget about the links. That's been worked out - Google's counted the links, and filtered the crap.

In the diagram below, you can see in any collection of pages, there is natural heat and naturally hot and cold sites, because of the natural interlinking going on between pages.

In this model, popular sites are hotter than unpopular sites, and this is a reflection of the real web

Hot Sites and Those Out In The Cold

So Google now has Hot sites in its index, and Cold sites.

Everywhere in-between, Google has sites that generate some "*heat signature*".

Hot sites are well known and well linked to and more likely to rank for any term if a page is properly optimised on-page and via the internal navigation structure of the website.

Hot sites are relatively trusted to inject content "directly" into Google's index, especially if it's "unique", probably with a good amount of natural words to keywords.
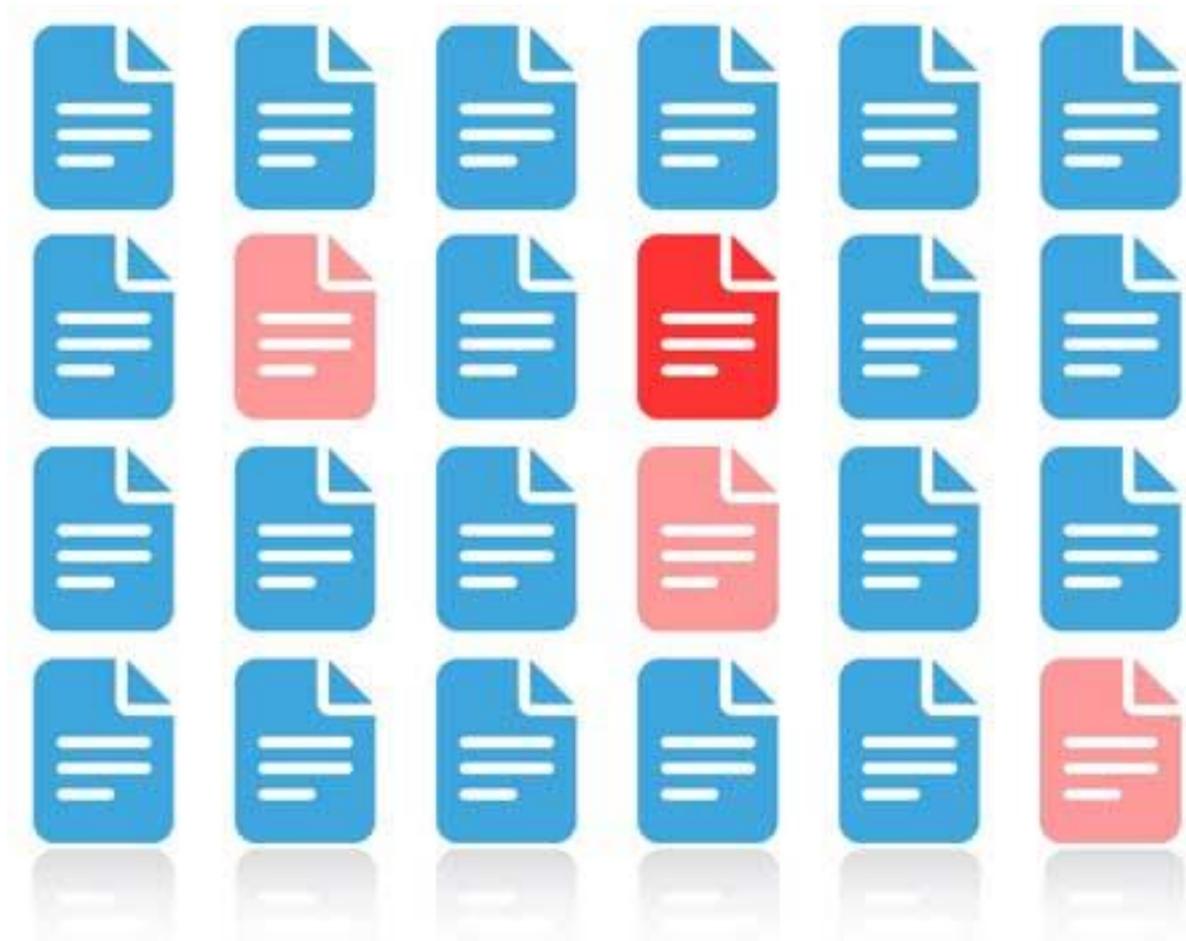
'Cold' sites are not well connected (by links) to any neighbourhood or heat signature and virtually invisible in Google, except for very specific terms.

Hot sites are authoritative and trusted.

Cold sites are sites starved of heat, with a linking profile that's very cold. Hello, *Google Supplemental Index*! Or whatever Google calls it in 2018.

A hot site has the *potential* to rank in Google SERPs regardless of site-theme & domain relevance although from my observations these 'irrelevant' pages can disappear in time.

Over the years - Google has done a really good job of balancing domain authority, relevance and a whole host of other ranking factors to spread that free traffic about and stop sites ranking for terms they probably should not rank for (think, *Google Panda*).

If its on-site architecture is tuned to promote a certain term leading to an optimised page, it will rank - if the page itself meets [2ranking requirements on page quality, utility and user experience](#).

Why Google Hates Paid Links

Google hates paid links because it is an obvious way to generate heat signature, and ranking ability, a site might not deserve.

Identifying one or two hot sites, and purchasing links on hot pages within that site, is enough to ignite an "undeserving" site and entire network and send it to the top of the SERPs.

Google likes it natural, because, that way, we do Google's work for it and identify hot sites by linking to them. One thing is for sure, though.

If Google were confident they could via algorithmic calculation clearly identify paid links, the whole internet marketing industry would not have been talking about the war on paid links.

In this example we see a hot site linking to a cold site - instantly generating a heat source on this new site.

This is not natural in Google's eyes. It's not democratic in 'that' sense.

An Example Of A 'Hot' Site

Wikipedia is an example of a hot site. Everybody links to it.

It's probably one of the hottest sites on the planet alongside Google, regarding link equity.

Wiki ranks for just about anything, and could be optimised further to rank for everything - (and not ONLY because it's a REAL AUTHORITY - it's an INFORMATION site! Many critics ask if this the real reason Google ranks Wikipedia at the top of a LOT of TRANSACTIONAL SERPs).
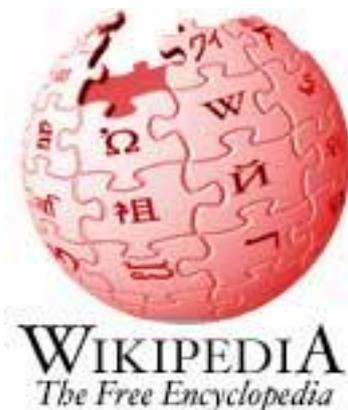
Of course, Wiki's a natural phenomenon now.

It has links from cold sites and hot sites in both related and unrelated markets.

Features Of A Hot Site

- A hot site is one which a lot of sites link to it from other sites, all with a different heat signature.
- Hot sites can rank for anything if a page on the site is optimised in both the architecture of the site and on-page SEO.
- Hot sites are natural phenomenon created by other sites linking to them - the more popular the site, the more hot and cold links it will accumulate. Its possible neighbourhood and relevance are just natural occurrences of sites dividing the heat up within a particular network.
- Hot sites link to other hot sites. Generally speaking, a hot site won't link to a typically cold site unless that site has content on it that's nowhere else or is "new", in turn making that a hot(ter) site. e.g. a high-quality site rarely links to a spam site.

What You Need To Do To Get More Visitors From Google

Let's assume your page is optimised, you need heat. The hotter a site, or rather a page, the better the link for your site.

If a keyword is in the anchor text of the link, even better, but only if it is an EDITORIAL LINK, in 2018. Most 'link builders' build 'brand' links these days (links without important keywords in them).

The problem is the easiest links to find out there are on pages with very cold, or at least very diluted heat signatures.

It'll take a lot of these to get hot - and now - too many 'cold' links could be a sign of unnatural link activity - and they often leave a nasty footprint Google can easily identify!

Should I Buy Links To Improve Google Rankings?

The SHORT ANSWER is no - ESPECIALLY IF THEY LOOK LIKE PAID LINKS!

Buying links that are search engine friendly and "flow Pagerank" is against Google TOS.

If you buy links, you take the risk that Google will penalise you for unnatural links.

If buying links were ineffective, it wouldn't be against Google TOS. Think about what that means.

I can't remember the last vertical I checked there weren't people buying links to improve search engine placement - so the competition is doing it. Last time I checked, they were ranking pretty good, but it's not all plain sailing in 2018.

Google is getting better at dealing with some form of paid links. It depends on what you are trying to achieve - although I will point out again, Google will take you down if it finds out.

If you are buying links, make sure your links aren't obviously paid links, though.

That is, don't buy links from prominent places. If Google gets better at detecting these, it's the obvious paid links that will be hit first.

I can say, I don't buy links, and I would recommend you not do either.

It is too risky in 2018, and there are still plenty of ways to get links without paying for them.

Link Sellers Are Rarely Discreet

I don't 'out' individuals for SEO tactics, and I don't 'out' the myriad of purveyors of link prospects who contact me every day, non-stop.

Here's why.

This one takes some beating, from a MIDDLE EASTERN NEWSPAPER:

QUOTE: "*...is currently offering outside companies to purchase links from within our articles. To place a bid, simply send a document with the keywords you would like to purchase, and your price bid. Feel free to search the site for yourself, to find the perfect article for you. Since we are just starting this venture, we have no fixed price, thus you can choose the amount of links, period of time, and so on.* **We are allowing the first 1000 S.E.O. companies to send in their bids**, *without the limitation of a starting price. We will accept lucrative offers. Mind you, we also sell conventional links, such as: * Link on "sites of xxxxxxx" (footer of master page) priced @ $500 per month (6 months minimum). * Text link on the home page priced @ $1,300 per month. * Text link on the inner pages priced @ $1,000 per month. Once a bid is accepted, you will be contacted by a sales representative, to process the campaign's details. Have a good day.*" ((A MIDDLE EASTERN NATIONAL NEWSPAPER)).

I looked at the available links, and sure enough, a list of totally unrelated sites.

Visibly Paid links.

Now, say I see one of my competitors in there?

I could just report the site for selling links and my competitors for buying them (not that I bother with that).

Or I could expose them on a public blog.

Lucky I don't 'out' SEO tactics is because I think outing SEO tactics is self-serving and slimy.

If I did buy links in footers like this (which I don't), I wouldn't be happy there was an email to 1000 SEO companies telling THEM my clients were buying links.

Would a rival newspaper use this information against you too if they knew, especially given the polarising nature of your content (again, not that it bothers me)?

If you are buying or selling links that are search engine friendly you better be doing it more covertly than this..... you need to build relationships to get decent links, even like the ones above.

Start, for instance, with a private email address, and open up a conversation before you show folks what you have got? I sent the email back with a link to this post to see what they say..... DOH!

Note - expectedly - these newspaper websites soon got hit by Google - the first public indicator being a lack of toolbar Pagerank.....

I've long thought it quite funny the situation between the mainstream media v Google.

Some media sites say it's all one-sided, and Google is stealing their content, are putting up pay-walls, even when SEO have been saying for years about how Google is falling over themselves giving them tons of trust, tons of traffic AND making their links some of the most valuable on the web.

Google uses big trusted sites like news media sites, and their links, to help them sort out the cesspool of the web (when they Google is not ranking news sites own content above smaller businesses). A quick look at some newspapers websites (the top UK ones) and some of the SEO efforts are shocking - they don't even seem to know how to make subdomains rank well.

Yes, some newspaper sites HAVE woken up to the fact they have massive domain authority and are rolling out everything from dating sites to low-quality business directories.

I would do some of that too I suppose. I mean Google has made newspaper sites authority sites in niches like online dating.

A quick look at some local newspapers too and you see they don't link out to anyone, anywhere. Oh wait - there are some paid link articles to personal injury lawyers lol and an advertising network of links that have clearly affected the site's 'trust'.

Yeah - you need to know when to get out of those things before it goes t*ts up as they say in Scotland.

I don't buy links but at the same time, I don't think it's hypocritical, to say the least, that search engines frown on bloggers selling links and do little to deter newspaper sites obvious link selling tactics.

Some newspaper sites are so stupid they send out crazy link selling emails too, like above, and indeed, some folk do out them. The fact is - **only SHOCKINGLY bad - not just bad - SEO will get these sites penalised** in a NOTICEABLE WAY - and even then - only if outed, then a discussion about inappropriate domain authority, in particular, niches might focus the spotlight.

I don't 'out' other people's SEO strategies.

I think like a link builder and it's more appropriate **NOT to 'out' others under just about any circumstances**.

Are Reciprocal Links With Unrelated Websites Safe?

Many new clients send me unsolicited emails from companies that ask for "reciprocal links between their site and yours", usually because it will "improve search engine rankings" for both websites.

I can tell you I usually **ignore all reciprocal link exchange requests via unsolicited emails** and recommend you do too.

I spend some of my time looking for quality links and believe me; I've not found ANY in any email as I describe above.

It's also against Google TOS to do this type of reciprocal link exchange:

> **QUOTE**: "*Your site's ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to you. The quantity, quality, and relevance of links count towards your rating. The sites that link to you can provide context about the subject matter of your site, and can indicate its quality and popularity. However, some Webmasters engage in link exchange schemes and build partner pages exclusively for the sake of cross-linking, disregarding the quality of the links, the sources, and the long-term impact it will have on their sites. This is in violation of Google's Webmaster guidelines and can negatively impact your site's ranking in search results. Examples of link schemes can include......*"

- *"Excessive reciprocal links or excessive link exchanging ("Link to me and I'll link to you.")*"

Now I suppose that's rich advice coming from an SEO (whose meant to be *manipulating* search engines if you listen to some of the bollocks some big name web designers link-bait with these days).

Reciprocal link exchanges, like the one I mention above offer NO MASSIVE SEO benefit to YOUR site (especially when they are on link partner pages) and Google says link schemes will NEGATIVELY impact your rankings.

IF YOU TAKE A SECOND AND VISUALISE in your head the link scheme in place and the relationship between pages via links in the reciprocal links hub scenario, you can see how easy it is to do so.

Google can probably compute and identify that one a lot faster than you can its so obvious. I IGNORE ALL SPAM EMAILS ASKING FOR RECIPROCAL LINKS especially if they are from some company who sells something totally unrelated to my site.

I honestly can't even remember the 0.1% I've responded to, but I assume I did at least once back in the day - I know I asked for them when I started out over a decade ago, now, but that's when this type of link was of some use.

Usually, *they* will put your link on a "useful links" page that's not useful at all to anyone.

A useful links page out to **unrelated** sites on a low-quality domain is just spam to Google and more often or not the pages your links are on will just be ignored by Google, so there is no point getting a link from these pages.

Too many of them and you WILL get a notice of unnatural links.

Unrelated Sites

- Should you reciprocate links with irrelevant, unrelated websites? **NO** - It's a waste of time and potentially damaging.
- Should you link out to other unrelated sites at any other time? **OF COURSE**, YOU SHOULD BUT NOT JUST TO MANIPULATE SEARCH RANKINGS. If the page is relevant to an article on your site, then it's a good link. These types of links are the currency of the web.
- Should you worry if unrelated sites link to you? Generally speaking, **NO**. Although Negative SEO is a concern for some and should be checked out.

Linking is the foundation of the web. Without links, there would be no web as we know it, no Google even, so never be scared of linking to useful sites or pages. In fact, Google WANTS or, at least, EXPECTS you to do this and will thank you for it at some level.... probably.

Bear in mind reciprocal links with a website may indicate to Google the two sites are 'related' in some fashion. Do you *really* want that?

One-Way Links

Of course, you should ALWAYS be LOOKING for high-quality links, whether you link back to those sites or not. One-way links are better for ranking in search engines as they indicate editorially approved links from other sites to yours.

That's the best kind of links you can get.

I am working with a client at the moment in a global market that makes something amazing a lot of blue-chip companies pay a lot of money for.

Their website has a very poor link profile.

We are currently asking for them to contact all these big brand companies and ask them for a link on their websites to the client website because this COULD NEVER HURT ANY OF THE SITES INVOLVED and links from these big brand websites who have bought their products - i.e., testimonial links from REAL sites that don't just link to anybody, are good quality links.

We'll probably reciprocate those links (if they ask us) but only AFTER Google sees the big brand sites linking to us first (that's a habit) - I use a few methods to ensure this is the case.

The aim is to get the BRAND websites to VOTE for our site FIRST, so OUR search engine rankings improve because Google now TRUSTS our site because of these new quality links on sites it already trusts.

The brand websites don't need our links for search engine purposes - all we need to ensure is we are linking out to their sites in a more appropriate manner that is probably more useful to them.

I think all Brand managers would like another good-news-page in the SERPs, so creating a case study for their brand, on your website, is probably better than a link on a links page Google will probably eventually ignore.

Easier to tweet, also.

Reciprocal Links

> **QUOTE**: "'*You link to me and I'll link to you,' then that's something that we treat as an unnatural link*." John Mueller, Google 2013

Scenario: If someone links to my site, and I don't link back to them, that's said to be a good link. A one-way link. When you link back to that site, that's what a reciprocal link is.

If a very trusted site links to my site and gave me a ranking boost, am I expected to believe that linking back to them will remove my ranking boost? I don't believe that to be the case. I don't think it aligns what Google is trying to do (when not trying to make money) - i.e., improve their search results for the end user looking for information (and that the vast majority of Google users).

When a trusted site, or a site with online business authority, links to a site it deems trustworthy and boosts rankings to improve it's SERPs in line with its algorithms, it's not going to dump that site back down the rankings just because it reciprocates. I don't think, anyway.

Linking back to a site that links to you is a very common thing on the web.

Consider the small site that links to its industry body, and a year down the line the small site is a big player, with links from the industry body. Is that link useless? I would think Google is a lot smarter than that, at some level.

I think Google would, at all times, **take into account the trust and authority of the sites** in question, and whether or not it has any reason not to trust the sites. My rule of thumb is I don't mind reciprocating links at all, especially if the other site is more authoritative or is highly relevant to my audience.

I don't use low-quality reciprocal linking between untrusted sites as an actual ranking improvement strategy, whether it works or not.

I never link to a site JUST BECAUSE THEY LINK TO ME because the chances are, they are linking to ANY site out there regardless or not if it is a bad neighbourhood.

Google reserves the right to penalise you badly if you link to one of these, or are linked from one of them.

So:

- avoid low-quality reciprocal links where possible, and avoid get-links-quick schemes
- try and get other sites to link to you first
- don't worry about reciprocating links with real trusted sites
- don't use reciprocal links as a ranking improvement strategy (most link builders focus on one way linkbuilding
- don't just link to just anyone, especially just because they link to you

Of course, you could *robots.txt* out of *nofollow* links you give to other sites but, generally speaking, it's bad karma - better to play nice, where possible.

What Is The Best Way To Build Links?

> **QUOTE**: "*You should never know in advance a link is coming, or where it's coming from. If you do, that's the wrong path*". BING

The best piece of advice I can give you is to FOCUS ON BUILDING A LINKABLE ASSET and VARY your linking strategy while ensuring to avoid low-quality links.

> **QUOTE**: "*Try to work on your website as if SEO was not part of your plan, create content out of a sincere interest and enthusiasm for the topic of your page. This is what Google and your users want from you, I know it's tempting to think about financial gain but remember that Googles primary concern is valuable information!*" Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

It's the only way to be sure you'll achieve good rankings, and keep them - which I always thought was the point. Remember that what works today might not work "tomorrow" - so it's worth experimenting while, all the time, hunting for those "quality" links.

Bearing in mind "Content Is King" on the web, no matter how great your content is, no matter how search engine optimised your page is, if you don't have inbound links, you're usually next to nowhere in the Google SERPs. Especially in competitive markets - probably because a competitor has got in there first and generated some content and links before you.

But what is the perfect link?

What is the best linking strategy?

The answer is - everybody has a different view of a perfect link, and everybody has different ways of measuring exactly what a perfect link is.

Here's my take on what I look for when I am link hunting (all, I think worth thinking about and in **no** **particular order**).

1. **EARNED** I am only interested in organic link building e.g. non-paid links.
2. **Anchor Text** Anchor text is simply the text in the link. If I want to rank for something, and I have an optimised page waiting to get links to it, I'd like a link with my actual desired keyword or keyword phrase in the actual link i.e., "link building expert" instead of "click here" or something. The thinking is, I'm not trying to rank for "click here" am I? I would be VERY careful, though - Google is on the lookout for anchor text abuse. I would encourage it, rather than overtly advertise it. For instance - what you put in your page title often ends up in links.... so changing your page title every now and again can mix this up. Remember, too, that what Google can easily identify in your link profile, it can penalise, filter or demote your for.
3. **Contextual Link within the text, surrounded by text** Google can easily spot a long list of links (like navigation arrays, etc.) so I would always try and get a link from within the actual text on a page, so it looks more "natural". Ideally, the surrounding text would also be relevant to my page. Sometimes the only sure way of generating these links is to write good content on

your site to "force" people to link to you (unless you own the other site of course). These type of links are in my opinion the creme de la creme of links (which is why some SEO's buy these type of links (I don't).

4. **Trust / Authority** Trusted sites pass "trust factor". The thinking is, trusted sites rank well in Google, because they are, well, trusted! (stop me if this gets too complicated!). Trusted authority sites rarely link to spammy sites - they only link to quality, probably related, sites. If you can manage to get a link from a trusted site in your niche, this could be worth its weight in Gold. How do you tell if a website (or page within a website) is trusted? Well, that's the question that's on the lips of every SEO! How do I determine it? Well, if you think simply if it's all about HTML links, then trust would be calculated by Google by the number and quality of links to that site/web page. Simply, get links from sites with links and pages with links!

5. **Relevance / Relationship / Theme** How relevant is the page that is linking to you? I mean, if you have a 'link building' site, are you trying to get links from websites related to 'link building'? Where possible, I'll try and get a link on a page that is actually about the same subject matter as the web page I want a link to. However, a site with massive domain trust that has NOTHING to do with my site is still a very powerful link in building your sites REPUTATION (E-A-T).

6. **Hub / Neighbourhood** Every niche has an authority hub, an inner network of sites every other site in the niche links to. This is the "neighbourhood" link builders, including myself, harp on about. Getting a link from these sites has got to be a good idea in any campaign, as these sites, that Google already trusts and rates, pass along a portion of this "trust" thingy Google calculates. Linking out to these sites is also thought to be useful, as these links determine the online neighbourhood your site resides within.

7. **Any old link!** Don't get me wrong, I'll take a link from anyone! Feel Free! But links vary in everything from quality and trust etc. - I just spend my time trying to get quality links where possible, and at least from relevant pages. It's this kind of link that will help you in Google. I read a lot of SEO blogs on the subject and try and take a subjective view on what's best for my purposes and what mood I'm in that day and what sounds "[intelligent](#)" to me, and I'm always [experimenting](#) with every option. It's always a good idea to vary your link building strategies, so you're not susceptible to massive ranking algorithm changes when one strategy is devalued.

The best piece of advice I can give you if you are intent on coming at backlink building from this angle is to vary your linking strategy. Mix it up. Remember that what works today might not work "tomorrow".

While you're mixing it up, you'll also make it harder for others to reverse engineer your hard work, creating "noise" in the search engines, but I would be VERY CAREFUL in 2018 - avoid unnatural links - and you can avoid somebody copying you by coming up with something original or valuable in the first place.

The aim is to build E.A.T., not just links.

Why Vary Anchor Text When Building Links?

> **QUOTE**: *"What anchors are used? The commercial vs. non commercial ratio of the anchors. In reality it's very easy to recognise a blackhat profile"* Andre Weyher, Ex-Google 2012 (disavowed statement by Google)

The theory is simple. Mix up your anchor text to avoid important links being filtered out of your link profile. But in 2018 - it's got a lot to do with the ratio of low-quality sites involved - rather than just the anchor text used.

This is the sort of thing you do not need to worry about if your link building is "*natural*".

Imagine you could see Googlebot record your links as it finds them by spidering sites in real time.

If you consider that's your link profile, it is probably not that **hard for the smartest people in web spam to pick out your natural links (the INDEPENDENT links Google wants to count)** and ignore, devalue or penalise you for the rest of them.

Consider this too:

Ranking based on 'Unique words, bigrams, phrases in anchor text'

QUOTE: *"In one embodiment, the link or web graphs and their behavior over time may be monitored and used for scoring, spam detection or other purposes by a search engine. Naturally developed web graphs typically involve independent decisions. Synthetically generated web graphs-usually indicative of an intent to spam a search engine are based on coordinated decisions; as such, the profile of growth in anchor words/bigrams/phrases is likely to be relatively spiky in this instance. One reason for such spikiness may be the addition of a large number of identical anchors from many places; another possibility may be addition of deliberately different anchors from a lot of places. With this in mind, in one embodiment of the invention, this information could be monitored and factored into scoring a document by capping the impact of suspect anchors associated with links thereto on the associated document score (a binary decision). In another embodiment, a continuous scale for the likelihood of synthetic generation is used, and a multiplicative factor to scale the score for the document is derived." The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children – [Bill Slawski](#)*

Ranking based on *'changes over time in anchor text'*

QUOTE: *"In one embodiment of the invention, the time-varying behavior of* anchortext *(e.g., the text in which a hyperlink is embedded, typically underlined or otherwise highlighted in a document) associated with a document may be used to score the document. For example, in one embodiment, changes over time in* anchortext *corresponding to* inlinks *to a document may be used as an indication that there has been* update *or even change of focus in the document; a relevancy score may take this change(s) into account." The Original Historical Data Patent Filing and its Children – [Bill Slawski](#)*

AVOID: Article Marketing Syndication

https://youtu.be/x5xP-pTmlpY

Article syndication (for search engine optimisation purposes) is a big no-no for me in 2018. You just don't know where that article will end up, or on how many low-quality sites.

I've learned to live without it, after a few years of abusing it a little. I still think the place for your articles should be on your blog, on the whole, to attract traffic and links, and to build your reputation as an authority.

I've always found article syndication useful for finding the odd trusted site willing to link to your content, albeit on a more trusted domain than your own. I once wrote an article that had a signature link back to my site, and while testing how well it had penetrated the SERPs and in how many instances, there was one trusted domain with the content republished, and THAT had attracted a link from a then PR 9 page on a very old trusted site. Bonus!

I immediately contacted the PR 9 (page) site owners and asked them to link to the source of the article, on my site, and they did - which was nice. I also found another couple of sites that were willing to link to that kind of content for future reference. The moral of the story is - track where your content is being published if you publish a lot of it, and watch out article syndication does not backfire on you if you're using it for SEO purposes.

Be wary of extremely low coast article marketing services, article submissions services & free press releases. In today's SEO, you do not want your article links duplicated across only low-quality domains - and that is where most of these type of articles end up.

Use sparingly and with GREAT caution. The problem is - you lose control of where you syndicate your articles to, and that can turn problematic very quickly. I avoid article submission sites these days. Period.

The first place for your articles is your blog, next, it's getting those article noticed via social media sites.

AVOID: Low-Quality Press Releases & Advertorials

https://youtu.be/1SmlsfSqmOw

Some traditional companies create press releases and don't think for a minute how these could be used to successfully promote their website when syndicated online. Every time you send out a press release, you should be ensuring you're getting a few things right.

For instance, you should know by now you should always include your web address - but you should also include a 'nofollow' tag on any links in 2018.

A big thing to remember in 2018 is to watch Google doesn't think you're intent is to spam their algorithm with press releases. A responsible press release agency will add rel=nofollow to your links to prevent it from passing Pagerank (and possibly prevent you from getting an *unnatural links notice*, in the future).

Google wants the secondary links (from buzz about the *news* in your press releases) to count toward your ranking, not the actual press release links.

Example: If I were sending out a press release to a third party and relying on them to publish it (which I don't but hey!) I'd previously ensure my web address was in it. I'd ensure my website address was written in the correct manner i.e., https://www.hobo-web.co.uk (with the HTTP:// because on some sites they'll automatically make this a link.)

Your web address appearing just like www.hobo-web.co.uk (not a clickable link) won't obviously help in Google rankings when compared to an HTML link.

Be careful publishing too many press releases without rel=nofollow on the links.

Stay WELL AWAY from anchor text rich article marketing, press releases and advertorials. Google made that clear when they added the following to their guidelines about what not to do:

> **QUOTE**: "*Links with optimized anchor text in articles or press releases distributed on other sites.*" Google

Google published a pretty comprehensive video on advertorials, too (above).

Are Social Shares the '*New Links*'?

https://youtu.be/udqtSM-6QbQ

Are tweets or Facebook likes the new links?

No. Not for me, just yet..... I don't think Google is about to throw away it's multi-billion a quarter link-count scraper to rank tweets above links. Not just now, and not in isolation.

The idea of people picking the best sites, rather than counting links the traditional way, is an ideal situation, of course. Google certainly has lots of manual quality raters in 2018.

But I don't see much real evidence of this in competitive verticals so I need to say traditional links are still relied on HEAVILY, by Google at the very least - and what I would prefer if given a choice.

While I don't think I see much of evidence of tweets having a massive impact (compared to traditional HTML links) in Google's competitive SERPs - it is worth considering what search engines SAY they are working towards with regards to social 'buzz':

The following table was compiled by web SEO analytics based on an article (some time ago now) at Search Engine Land:

	Google	Bing
Are Regular Search Results affected by social media buzz?	Yes. It is used as a signal, especially for news.	Yes, it is a signal. Some weight is passed, and regular results are affected.
Are Social/Realtime Search Results affected by buzz?	Heavily affected	Heavily affected, Authority metrics are used to determine the hot posts.
Are Twitter links taken into account (aka do they pass link juice)?	In some limited situations, the data are used.	The data are used. The weight depends on how often a link is posted, the number of tweets & retweets and the authority of the people that post it.

Are Facebook links taken into account?	The shared links from Fan pages are treated similarly to Twitter links. No links from personal walls are used.	Only the publicly shared links from Fan Pages and Profiles are taken into account.
Is there an Authority Rank for Twitter Profiles?	Yes, the author quality is measured. Google calls this Author Authority.	Yes. Several metrics are taken into account. Bing calls this Social Authority.
Is there an Authority Rank for Facebook Profiles?	They are treated similarly to Twitter Profiles.Note: Normally if this is true, they measure only public profiles like Fan pages.	No. They take into account only the Facebook data that are publicly available.
Does the Twitter Authority have an impact on the weight of the links that are shared?	Yes. The weight depends on the authority of the person. The Author Authority is used in limited situations and it is independent of PageRank.	The Author Authority affects the link weight.
Does the Facebook Authority have an impact on the weight of the links that are shared?	Similarly to Twitter. The weight of each link depends on the authority of the profile.	They don't use Facebook authority. Instead, to find if something is popular, they compare Twitter & Facebook shares.

It's clear that search engines **are looking at social signals** and these WILL only increase in value.

We've been saying this for a long time, though. Eric Ward (RIP) calls it right for me:

> **QUOTE**: "*the rankings effect can be directed at specific known circles, friends, connections, etc. **The one size fits all search result is headed for the museum**. Also, I believe the highest caliber most credible link sources will become that much more important as a trust signal for engines*" Eric Ward.

The rewards from building artificial links will narrow - as the rewards from the social activities increase - that's for sure.

Even at the moment - to compete in Google organic results, a top 2 or 3 is essential - and you need links from websites to do that.

I agree with Eric on this too:

> **QUOTE**: "*I'd take the blog post link because it can continually provide traffic, new tweets, shares, etc., whereas a single tweet, even if by an authority, is fleeting and has a shorter half-life. Much more hit or miss.*" Eric Ward

If I get a choice between a 100 Tweets and a one link on a *real* website, today - **I would take the links from real websites or blog posts every time.** The safe answer is, **yes, you should be on social sites** - and you should be getting your site mentioned on these sites, regardless of exactly where the search engines are on social links at this point - as they will only get better at determining links to trust.

'Great content' probably has lots of links from many sources, and lots of tweets, too. I will tell you, though, I am **not** active on [Google+](), [Facebook]() or [Twitter]() to help my search engine rankings *improve* - especially with my new sites. I may use Google+, Twitter or Facebook to get new content INDEXED (Bing certainly follows FB fan pages links and there is evidence Google Plus gets a page indexed) but I don't expect *aged* content to rank that much *better* because of tweets- NOT at the moment, in Google, at least.

I much prefer to use social sites to reach *real* people, and I don't expect Google to factor in any ranking signal they can't control themselves. Would they base their algorithms around a 3rd party metric? It would surprise me if that were the case.

Are Google Plus Votes Important Ranking Factors?

No.

Do Google +1's Improve rankings in Google natural SERPs?

Not that I have observed.

The confusion is mostly down to 'correlation' studies showing Google Plus votes correlation with high rankings. That observation may well be true - but **important ranking factor** it does not automatically make them, and that's what a lot of people on the fringes of SEO think when they see these studies.

Google +1s are NOWHERE near as important as a good link from a trusted site, in my experience.

So I chimed in on [Twitter]()

QUOTE: "*google plus votes are not the no1 ranking factor. You can tell, by looking*" Hobo

....though shortly afterwards, somebody with a lot more clout than myself chimed in too - Matt Cutts from Google:

> **QUOTE: "***Just trying to decide the politest way to debunk the idea that more Google +1s lead to higher Google web rankings.*
>
> *Let's start with correlation != causation: http://xkcd.com/552/ But it would probably be better to point to this 2011 post (also from SEOMoz/Moz) from two years ago in which a similar claim was made about Facebook shares: http://moz.com/blog/does-google-use-facebook-shares-to-influ... .*
>
> *From that blog post from two years ago: "One of the most interesting findings from our 2011 Ranking Factors analysis was the high correlation between Facebook shares and Google US search position." This all came to a head at the SMX Advanced search conference in 2011 where Rand Fishkin presented his claims. I did a polite debunk of the idea that Google used Facebook shares in our web ranking at the conference, leading to this section in the 2011 blog post: "Rand pointed out that Google does have some access to Facebook data overall and set up a small-scale test to determine if Google would index content that was solely shared on Facebook.*
>
> *To date, that page has not been indexed, despite having quite a few shares (64 according to the OpenGraph)." If you make compelling content, people will link to it, like it, share it on Facebook, +1 it, etc. But that doesn't mean that Google is using those signals in our ranking. Rather than chasing +1s of content, your time is much better spent making great content.*" Matt Cutts, Google

Do we always listen to Matt Cutts? Well, in between his PR, there are a lot of truths, too. I think so, anyway.

Do you listen to Moz? This SEO community has a history (some of which is seen in the above quote) of producing, at least, controversial studies.

Ranking correlation does not = ranking factors.

I usually do without "correlation' analysis.

I wouldn't be spamming Google+ for votes. Not yet - and hey, **do you want to be spamming Google's social network and not think Google will punish this later like it has done with [low-quality links](#)**?

Note - a few people have said they will share with me some data on this that might prove otherwise. If I am blogging something different tomorrow, you'll know I have changed my mind. I will be swayed by empirical evidence.
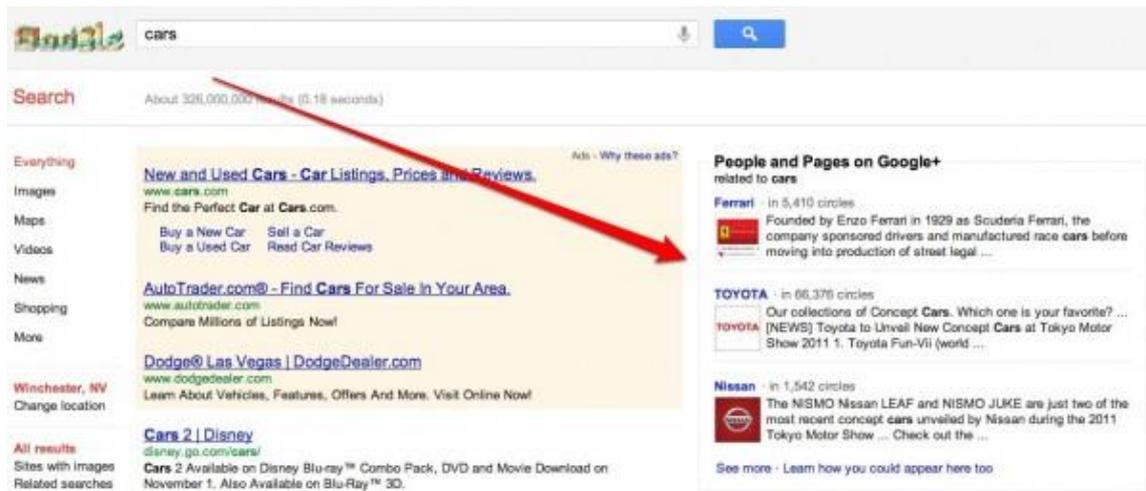
QUOTE: *"Is there anyone out there who still wants to say that being on Google+ doesn't matter? Anyone? Because when being on Google+ means that you potentially can have your Google+ page leap to the top in those sidebar results, Google+ matters. It matters more than ever before."* [Danny Sullivan - Search Engine Land](#)

Ten things I care more about than Google +1s or any social media share

1. **Google's classification system:** How Google classes your site - or rather YOUR INTENT, will have a major impact on your rankings. If your intent is to be an end-point of the traffic stop - to make money from Google's free traffic - and offer little in return - then Google is not your friend. If you are willing to play the long game Google's way (which isn't easy), there are still plenty of opportunities, plenty of organic listings to be filled - even if they are under a number of ads Google's top heavy algorithm would choke on.

2. **Domain Reputation**: I don't keep up with the terminology - but this is about how much Google trusts your site. This is the main reason as to why certain pages rank at the top of Google without (many) inbound links and sometimes have lots of social activity noise, and hence why we see crazy articles about social media having a bigger impact on rankings than links. Domain trust - or online business authority, I think - is based on factors I go into below. But getting, and keeping, domain trust, is all important now for real businesses that want to rank in natural listings using a quality content programme.

3. **Low-quality links**: The low-quality links well is poisoned. Get out, now. Disavow them, remove them. Google killed low-quality link building techniques in most of the competitive niches I am in - probably yours, too. It's NOT just a matter of 'does this technique" work anymore. Low-quality links are not a defensible link strategy for most small businesses these days.

4. **Low-Quality SEO**: If Google has a reason to put you in the sin bin, they will. Usually - they will do this by algorithmic means or lately by MANUAL ACTIONS in Google Webmaster Tools. So if flagged for manual review, your site had better not scream "SEO!". You don't want to be caught milking Google's cash cow for yourself, whether that be pushing limits of technical SEO or just plain old keyword stuffing. Not unless your business model allows for this.

5. **High-quality links.** Still, THE most important ranking factor. Link building just got HARDER, and MORE EXPENSIVE, just as Google wants it to. Low-quality link building is not defensible anymore and WILL get you into trouble, now that Google is policing its guidelines. The game now is to get high-quality links your competition CANNOT get (by hook, or by crook, you don't want to be caught doing it). This is not an easy task when Google's PR is making people even scared of linking out to reputable sites, for fear of appearing manipulative.

6. **Original, in-depth, passionate content**: If you side with the visitor, you will win, Google says. Ultimately - it's a moot point if you believe them or not. If you want free traffic from Google, you better get used to giving it free, high-quality content that will satisfy their visitors. Google wants to be the best search engine - it does want to satisfy certain users intent to find information. Google wants in-depth articles in organic listings - we even have the new code for 'in-depth articles' too.

7. **The correct keywords** - this is genuinely the simplest thing you can do in SEO to get free traffic - proper keyword research. Sometimes - having A word on the page can be the difference between ranking no1 and not ranking at all, even with very relevant traffic. This is one way Google uses to share all that lovely free traffic about.

8. **Availability of your site** - if Google can't find your site for a few days - you will lose rankings that in some cases take some time to regain (smaller sites). If you block content from Google, you don't rank. It's a simple error I still see a lot of folk making - even theoretical physicists can foul of this**.

9. **User Satisfaction** - the duration of time people dwell on your site, and the 'success' rate of your visitor actions (e.g. did you help Google satisfy their customer? Did they stay on your site for a long time, and not go back to carry out the same search?) And it's not just visitors from Google - if you want a page to rank - it better satisfy the curiosity of a Google web spam team reviewer, too, or a Human Quality Evaluator.

10. **The speed of your web pages**: I'd wager this was more important today than first introduced. Google even said that mobile sites rankings WILL suffer if not fast enough(and I have witnessed this I think). It's all about - user experience and satisfaction. If you make your website faster, everybody is probably happier.

Even as I write those - I can still think of other factors. In fact, I can say I don't factor Google Plus votes - or any other social share - in at all (at this time).

Google Plus, for my purposes, is a channel to get the word out - to get real links to a post (if I have my SEO hat on). If they are in play - it's far too lightweight a factor for me to have noticed above other things I expect to have an impact.

Are there more ranking signals?

TONS. The above are some of the main things you can do SOMETHING ABOUT without knowing the most technical aspects of SEO or falling foul of Google's guidelines.

Google is in constant flux, constant testing, constant UI change. Where you are in the world, and how often you've used Google from that location, and whether Google knows it's YOU that is searching, has a MASSIVE impact on the listings Google personalise for you.

I am not saying ignore Google+ - there ARE reported benefits in other areas - just not when it comes to ranking your content about other content using more traditional methods.

I just don't think Google is turning off links as a source of identifying quality anytime soon, not when they are raking in the cash, and not when they are putting so much effort into punishing low-quality link building.

Summary

Don't let anyone tell you 'link building is dead' - because that's not true.

You SHOULD STILL be thinking of WHERE your NEXT BEST LINK should be coming from - it's incredibly important if you have no links. You should avoid unnatural links.

I'd focus on building better in-depth content than your competitors have and spend time making friends online who might throw you a bone and share your content, so you have a chance of picking up those EDITORIAL LINKS you need to rank in Google with.

I would certainly avoid (like the plague) link building packages with promises of guaranteed ranking - even with 'no footprint' claims - even those you spot on Adwords. Those are VERY rarely going to be expert black hats pimping those services - and often - the end result is your site will 'burn'. If you don't want to jump through all these hoops and avoid penalties - get some aged domains together for your business and hire a good black hat - **it's 'redirect it', 'burn and churn' time - but look out - Google is out to burn you** :)

Good luck!

Nofollowed Links

https://youtu.be/G-nX2i-y2Es

> **QUOTE**: "*Is it okay to sell links as long as we use the nofollow attribute? The answer is yes. The fact is what* **Google cares about is whether a link that you sell flows PageRank and if it doesn't flow PageRank.** *If it doesn't affect search engines it's none of our business at that point. Now if y***ou are in Europe you might have some various laws that apply to you.** *If you're i***n the United States the Federal Trade Commission wants you to disclose those links.** *If you have some sort of material connection to an endorser so you might want to think about having human readable disclosure as well like this is a paid link or this is a sold link or something like that but Google's policy is within search rankings* **if you're selling links it's your obligation to make sure that that link doesn't affect search engines**." MATT CUTTS, Google

https://youtu.be/3SesBNVanGs

> **QUOTE**: "*Rel NoFollow is an elemental microformat, one of several microformat open standards. By adding* `rel="nofollow"` *to a hyperlink, a page indicates that the destination of that hyperlink should not be afforded any additional weight or ranking by user agents which perform link analysis upon web pages (e.g. search engines). Typical use cases include links created by 3rd party commenters on blogs, or links the author wishes to point to, but avoid endorsing*." Microformats.org

When it comes to search engines like Google, a link from one site to another site is a 'vote' for the website that has the link pointing to it (an example of a link that passes Pagerank).

Links help Google *rank* documents on the web in its *SERPs* (Search Engine Results Pages), and as such, have long been abused by link builders. I used to be one of these types of link builders (before 2012 when Google released the Google Penguin algorithm update).

> **QUOTE**: "*Nofollow links definitely don't pass PageRank. Over the years, I've seen a few corner cases where a nofollow link did pass* anchortext, *normally due to bugs in indexing that we then fixed. The essential thing you need to know is that nofollow links don't help sites rank higher in Google's search results*." Matt Cutts, Google 2009

Search engines like Google, ask that you adequately provide machine-readable disclosure and **add the 'Re=Nofollow' attribute to ANY paid links on your site** or **any paid links you BUY that point TO your site**.

This ensures the link will not count as a vote or recommendation for another page nor will it pass Pagerank nor any other ranking signal.

Failure to add the Rel=Nofollow attribute to paid links places your site in a '*link scheme*' and eventually harms the reputation of your site, as far as Google's algorithms are concerned.

Using the HTML attribute on an external (outbound) link tells Google you don't vouch for this other web page enough to help it's search rankings.

The attribute also effectively 'insulates' your website against any loss of 'reputation', as Google calls it, when you link out from your site. Google classifies paid or other-wise non-disclosed monetised links 'unnatural links'.

iYou can get a Google penalty or manual action for unnatural links.

Example "Nofollow" Link Code

Rel=nofollow is an attribute you add to a hyperlink on a webpage:

```
<a href="https://www.hobo-web.co.uk/" rel="nofollow">Hobo</a>
```

I keep updated a list of the best SEO tools for beginners to use and if you use the Google Chrome browser, you can use a free plugin to highlight nofollow links on a page.

Google Wants Rel=Nofollow on Paid Links

https://youtu.be/1SmlsfSqmOw

> **QUOTE**: "***If money changed hands in order for a link to be placed on a website then it should not flow PageRank***, *in essence, it shouldn't affect search engines rankings …. we've taken action on this sort of thing you know for years and years and we're going to keep taking strong action*" Matt Cutts, Google 2013

Google wants all non-editorial links marked-up with the attribute *rel=nofollow* to prevent these type of links passing Pagerank and influencing SERPs.

This includes:

- paid links
- press releases
- advertorials
- affiliate links and
- native advertising

This is to separate such links from *naturally earned backlinks* - the type of links Google aims to reward in 2018:

Arguments

The controversial (for SEO) *Rel=nofollow* attribute has been around since 2005 and is here to stay. Paid links *without* the attribute are VERY RISKY to search engine rankings for your website in 2018. Of course, with the attribute, the organic search engine value of paid links is effectively neutralised.

There are a lot of people who argue about using the attribute; when to use it, where to use it, if it can be used to sculpt link equity, how it affects Google PR and even exactly how Google deals with a nofollowed link.

There's been observations and arguments *ad nauseam* that "nofollow links pass PR" or "that you can sculpt internal PageRank" or that Google's advice is misleading or inaccurate. Note: I think Google tells us a lot in 2018 about what will negatively impact the performance of your site in Google - it's all there in webmaster videos, webmaster guidelines and the manual search evaluator quality rater guidelines.

As there often is, there has been confusion when it comes to how Google treats nofollow links.

I think nofollow is as Google says - effectively a *non-link* when it comes to ranking your site. At least - it is *meant* to be.

In most cases, you can expect links with 'rel=nofollow' won't influence your search rankings in a positive or negative way in the traditional sense. Who knows if Google cares about actual users who visit your site via a genuine editorial nofollow link? They *might*.

Nofollow is machine identifiable sponsorship disclosure to Googlebot so Google can deal with it appropriately.

When it comes to paid advertising and sponsorship to endorse products, it **is law in many countries you must disclose any paid advertising relationship anyway**.

For instance, in the US:

> **QUOTE**: "*The FTC is only concerned about endorsements that are made on behalf of a sponsoring advertiser. For example, an endorsement would be covered by the FTC Act if an advertiser – or someone working for an advertiser – pays you or gives you something of value to mention a product. If you receive free products or other perks with the expectation that you'll promote or discuss the advertiser's products* in *your blog, you're covered. Bloggers who are part of network marketing programs, where they sign up to receive free product samples in exchange for writing about them, also are covered.*" FTC

And in the UK:

> **QUOTE**: "*Users want to know when they're viewing sponsored content. Also, there are laws in some countries that make disclosure of sponsorship mandatory. A disclosure can appear anywhere in the post; however, the most useful placement is at the top in case users don't read the entire post.*" Google, 2011 (Read more at about the UK advertising standards at iabuk.net)

And

> **QUOTE**: "*Links that pass PageRank in exchange for goods or services are against Google guidelines on link schemes.*" Google

In my case, I use affiliate links on as few pages as possible on this blog.

Should I Use Nofollow On User-Generated Content Links?

https://youtu.be/hNDRlVSWTRY

> **QUOTE**: "*The best-known use for nofollow is blog comment spam, but the mechanism is completely general. Nofollow is recommended anywhere that links can't be vouched for.* " Matt Cutts, Google [2006](#)

YES.

I was one of those guys *spamming* comments way back in the day, although I tried to be sensible about it (on the whole). I even let my own blog get spammed for a long time. Sometimes that was me as well!

> **QUOTE**: "***If an off-domain link is made by an anonymous or unauthenticated user, I'd use nofollow on that link***. *Once a user has done a certain number of posts/edits, or has been around for long enough to build up trust, then those nofollows could be removed and the links could be trusted. Anytime you have a user that you'd trust, there's no need to use nofollow links.*" Matt Cutts, Google [2006](#)

If you have a commenting system (like Drupal, Joomla or Wordpress) that allows for search engine friendly links (commonly called *dofollow* links) from your blog or site, you will probably, eventually be the target of lots of spam, be complicated in tiered link schemes and potentially fall foul of Google's webmaster guidelines on using the attribute in certain situations.

> **QUOTE**: ""*Nofollow" provides a way for Webmasters to tell search engines "Don't follow links on this page" or "Don't follow this specific link.*""

How Does Google Treat Nofollowed Links?

https://youtu.be/x4UJS-LFRTU

We are told Google ignores links with the attribute on them, which allows you to link to a site and not share your website reputation with the recipient of your link. On the whole - this seems to the case.

> **QUOTE**: "*In general, we don't follow them. This means that Google does not transfer PageRank or* anchor text *across these links. Essentially, using nofollow causes us to drop the target links from our overall graph of the web. However, the target pages may still appear in our index if other sites link to them without using nofollow, or if the URLs are submitted to Google in a Sitemap. Also, it's important to note that other search engines may handle nofollow in slightly different ways.*" Google

What are Google's policies and some specific examples of nofollow usage?

Google presents us with some cases when to consider using the attribute on OUTBOUND links:

- **QUOTE: "***Untrusted content***: If you can't or don't want to vouch for the content of pages you link to from your site — for example, untrusted user comments or guestbook entries — you should nofollow those links. This can discourage spammers from targeting your site, and will help keep your site from inadvertently passing PageRank to *bad neighborhoods* on the web. In particular, comment spammers may decide not to target a specific content management system or blog service if they can see that untrusted links in that service are nofollowed. If you want to recognize and reward trustworthy contributors, you could decide to automatically or manually remove the `nofollow` attribute on links posted by members or users who have consistently made high-quality contributions over time."*
- **QUOTE: "***Paid links***: A site's ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to it. In order to prevent paid links from influencing search results and negatively impacting users, we urge Webmasters use `nofollow` on such links. Search engine guidelines require machine-readable disclosure of paid links in the same way that consumers online and offline appreciate disclosure of paid relationships (for example, a full-page newspaper ad may be headed by the word "Advertisement")."*

Google is serious about this stuff. If you let your website become a free for all links farm - a link scheme - Google may not *trust* the links from your website (at least) and could take action on your site through algorithmic action or manual action.

You need to decide if you care about such things like Google 'trusting' your website or your google seo ranking.

How To Find Nofollow On External Links On A Website

You should have rel=nofollow on affiliate links, sponsored links and user generated content links that all point to external third-party sites.

SEMRush finds and highlights nofollow links to external links across your website. In the example above, the rel=nofollow attribute was removed from many external sites as they were erroneously implemented in the first place. I link out naturally when the link is editorial, and reserve nofollow, in general for affiliate links and user-generated content.

Simply set up a site-audit using the SEMRush Audit Tool and the tool will automatically highlight any external nofollow links (and a lot more, naturally).

Should I Use Nofollow on Internal Links (PageRank Sculpting)?

https://youtu.be/bVOOB_Q0MZY

NO.

> **QUOTE**: "*I'd recommend **not using nofollow for kind of PageRank sculpting within a website** because it probably doesn't do what you think it does*" John Mueller, Google 2017

This was actually said by Matt Cutts too about 10 years ago (although even in 2018, I see pages with nofollow on internal links).

> **QUOTE:** "*Q: Does this mean "PageRank sculpting" (trying to change how PageRank flows within your site using e.g. nofollow) is a bad idea? A: **I wouldn't recommend it**, because it isn't the most effective way to utilize your PageRank. In general, I would let PageRank flow freely within your site. The notion of "PageRank sculpting" has always been a second- or third-order recommendation for us. I would recommend the first-order things to pay attention to are 1) **making great content that will attract links in the first place**, and 2) choosing a site architecture that makes your site usable/crawlable for humans and search engines alike.*"

Pagerank sculpting was a hot topic many years ago, and then changed the way they handled it:

> **QUOTE**: "*When we added a help page to our documentation about nofollow, we said "a solid information architecture — intuitive navigation, user- and search-engine-friendly URLs, and so on — is likely to be a far more productive use of resources than focusing on crawl prioritization via nofollowed links." In a recent webmaster video, I said "a better, more effective form of PageRank sculpting is choosing (for example) which things to link to from your home page." At Google I/O, during a site review session I said it even more explicitly: "**My short answer is no.** In general, whenever you're linking around within your site: don't use nofollow. Just go ahead and link to whatever stuff." But at SMX Advanced 2009, someone asked the question directly and it seemed like a good opportunity to clarify this point. Again, it's not something that most site owners need to know or worry about, but I wanted to let the power-SEOs know..*" Matt Cutts, Google 2009

Questions arise if you start thinking about it too much - I know I did - before Google changed the way it handled nofollow:

1. Should you **nofollow unimportant internal pages** or nofollow external links in an effort to consolidate the Pagerank you have already accrued?
2. Or should you **spend your time getting other quality links pointing to your site** to increase the PR you have to start off with (how you get Pagerank).

The long-term best impact strategy here is simply to earn more Google Pagerank in the first place than PageRank sculpt with rel=nofollow links.

You can certainly control PR on a granular level (page by page in this case) - that is, which page gets available real PR from another page on your site. It's easy to follow, that some SEO professionals think, if that's the case, you can sculpt Pagerank, and channel page rank to important pages in a site.

The theory was that by adding the attribute to (for instance) internal links to your contact page, or disclaimer, or privacy policy page would send more PageRank to more important pages on your site.

I'd long fell out of love with PR sculpting internal pages using the attribute after testing the theory. The results were not worth it for me on the sites I worked on (some are quite large) - a few years back I posted this about PR sculpting:

> **QUOTE**: "*I've been playing about with rel='nofollow' on this site for 4 months, and in all honesty, in future, **I won't be relying on nofollow** to sculpt unimportant pages out of any possible link graph, just optimising those pages better, or leaving them out altogether, like I used to do in 1999. It can be a useful tool in a site redevelopment, but from here on in, I'll be keeping nofollow for bad neighbourhoods and, pending further testing, on top level blog pages.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

In June 2008 I also posted this about Nofollow and PR Sculpting:

> **QUOTE**: "*I tested it, and as far as I am concerned, on a 300 page site at least, any visible benefit is microscopic.*" Shaun Anderson, Hobo

In theory, PR sculpting sounded cool, but was in practice, very disappointing. Some people think it works, of course, even to this day.

Notes

I should point out you do not use rel="nofollow" to **prevent** the indexing of a page - merely to control which pages any particular page shares it's Pagerank.

When it came to first link priority on a page for Google it appeared at that time that the first link you nofollow on a page *might* also nofollow any other link to the same URL on that page.

Google changed the way it flowed PR through nofollowed links ten years ago, making Pagerank sculpting redundant:

> **QUOTE**: "*So what happens when you have a page with "ten PageRank points" and ten outgoing links, and five of those links are nofollowed? Let's leave aside the decay factor to focus on the core part of the question. Originally, the five links without nofollow would have flowed two points of PageRank each (in essence, the nofollowed links didn't count toward the denominator when dividing PageRank by the outdegree of the page). More than a year ago, Google changed how the PageRank flows so that the five links without nofollow would flow one point of PageRank each.*" Matt Cutts, Google 2009

When you add 'rel nofollow' to internal links you spread less Pagerank around your own site.

> **QUOTE: "***Q: Does this mean "PageRank sculpting" (trying to change how PageRank flows within your site using e.g. nofollow) is a bad idea? A: I wouldn't recommend it, because it isn't the most effective way to utilize your PageRank. In general, I would let PageRank flow freely within your site. The notion of "PageRank sculpting" has always been a second- or third-order recommendation for us. I would recommend the first-order things to pay attention to are 1) making great content that will attract links in the first place, and 2) choosing a site architecture that makes your site usable/crawlable for humans and search engines alike.*"Matt Cutts, Google 2009

and

> **QUOTE**: "*So today at SMX Advanced, sculpting was being discussed, and then Matt Cutts dropped a bomb shell that it no longer works to help flow more PageRank to the unblocked pages. Again — and being really simplistic here — if you have $10 in authority to spend on those ten links, and you block 5 of them, the other 5 aren't going to get $2 each. They're still getting $1. It's just that the other $5 you thought you were saving is now going to waste.*" Moz, 2009

So - it is fairly unequivocal. The Pagerank you think you are sculpting around your site is actually "evaporating" (a quote from Matt Cutts at SMX 2009) and you want MORE PageRank in your site not less of it.

However, and here's where some confusion comes in, even in 2018.

Google does say this in their general guidelines about nofollow:

> **QUOTE**: " *Crawl prioritization: Search engine robots can't sign in or register as a member on your forum, so there's no reason to invite Googlebot to follow "register here" or "sign in" links. Using `nofollow` on these links enables Googlebot to crawl other pages you'd prefer to see in Google's index. However, a solid information architecture — intuitive navigation, user- and search-engine-friendly URLs, and so on — is likely to be a far more productive use of resources than focusing on crawl prioritization via nofollowed links.*"Google Webmaster Guidelines, 2018

However, I very much doubt "crawl prioritisation" is something 99% of Webmasters need to be concerned about at all.

The simple answer is to NOT apply rel=nofollow to ordinary HTML internal links on your website.

How To Find Rel=Nofollow On Internal Links On A Website

[SEMRush](#) finds and highlights nofollow links on internal links across your website so that you can check if they should be removed. In the example above, the rel=nofollow attribute was removed from every internal link as they were erroneously implemented in the first place.

Simply set up a site-audit using the [SEMRush Audit Tool](#) and the tool will automatically highlight any internal nofollow links (and a lot more, naturally).

Should I Nofollow EVERY Outbound Link On My Site?

https://youtu.be/EnVEERmbdpo

NO.

> **QUOTE**: "*parts of our system encourage links to good sites.*" Matt Cutts, Google 2009

How does Google treat sites where all external links are no-follow?

One of my clients was linking out to real and trusted sites from pages on his site and added rel=nofollow to the links because he thought this was helping his site. This is unnecessary.

There's no reason to put the attribute on editorially approved links.

In my experience, if you write a blog post and use the attribute on all links on your blog for no other reason than to conserve Pagerank, or even think linking out to irrelevant sites will hurt your site, you're misinformed at best.

Google doesn't penalise you for linking to irrelevant sites if both pages in question are relevant to each other.

Use nofollow only if you don't <u>want</u> to vouch for the page you're linking to, for fear of losing reputation OR if your site is made with "user generated content".

I proceed thinking that Google might be taking in the quality or accuracy of your outbound links in some minor way to measure your reputation, so don't miss out because you are effectively not linking to anybody.

Also, consider, the link you make might be the link that helps another REAL site get traffic from Google and satisfy Google's users - that's not a bad thing for anybody.

I have little reason for the attribute these days outside of user-generated comments and affiliate links. I don't use it to sculpt Pagerank, and I don't use it in any arena where editorial moderation is in play.

I only use it for sites that don't deserve the link to be search engine friendly and in 99% of the cases, if I don't have any reason to trust a site, I won't make the link a link at all.

Pet hate - websites where *every* outbound link is nofollow.

Should I Apply Nofollow To My External Social Media Profile Links Like Twitter, Facebook and Linkedin?

> **QUOTE**: *"DYK that **after 18 years we're still using*** PageRank (and 100s of other signals) in ranking? Gary Illyes from Google – 2018*

NO.

Why would you after reading the above. Don't you want your social media profiles to rank in Google and be associated with your website? The nofollow attribute (we were told) 'evaporates' the Pagerank your page has to 'donate' to other pages on the web and passes no potentially positive 'signals' along to the other page.

Your website derives no benefit from applying nofollow to social media profile links, and if you do apply the rel=nofollow attribute to such links, neither do your social media profiles.

Whatever you do is going to have a minuscule effect on your own website rankings, but linking naturally could help your social media profiles tremendously.

Keep nofollow for paid links, user-generated content and sites you do not trust for some reason.

Can Nofollow Links Pointing To My Site Hurt MY SITE?

https://youtu.be/QSEqypgIJME

> **QUOTE**: *"No, typically nofollow links cannot hurt your site."* Matt Cutts, 2013

No.

Unless you are spamming people silly and annoy the Google Web Spam team.

Should I add rel="nofollow" to links that are included with my widget or infographics?

https://youtu.be/PvR_8aGEc98

> **QUOTE**: "*I would recommend putting a nofollow especially on widgets* " Matt Cutts, Google [2013](#)

Should you apply nofollow to widgets? It is recommended.

NOTE - You can also use robots meta tags or X-Robots-Tag HTTP header to control how Google treats ALL the links on a page if you decide you really need that in certain situations:

`HTTP/1.1 200 OK Date: Tue, 25 May 2018 21:42:43 GMT` *(…)* **X-Robots-Tag: googlebot: nofollow** *(…)*

You can also block actual pages using robot txt (or X robots or meta tags) or block outbound links via redirect scripts if you are worried about losing trust and reputation in Google and wish to avoid the nofollow attribute entirely.

Should you apply nofollow to infographics? "*Consider*" it..

> **QUOTE**: "*Depending on the scale of the stuff that you're doing with infographics you might consider putting a rel nofollow on infographic links as well the value of those things might be branding they might be to drive traffic they might be to sort of let people know that your site or your service exists but you know I wouldn't expect a link from a widget to necessarily carry the same weight as an editorial link*" Matt Cutts, Google [2013](#)

How To Deal With Manual Actions For Unnatural Links, Negative SEO & Google Penguin

https://youtu.be/7Y74Op_k6UY

A lot of Google penalties (called "*manual actions*" by Google) are aimed at industrial-strength-manipulation of either Google's *reputation* or *relevance* reward systems, which it relies on to create SERPs (*search engine results pages*) - and lots of smaller businesses won't have come across them (unless they paid an SEO company in the past to 'promote' them using industrial-strength-manipulation such as low-quality link building).

However, if you *have* been competing in your niche for positions using artificial backlinks - chances are, you will be affected.

Google has made a lot of noise about unnatural, manipulative or artificial links pointing at your site so you cannot simply *ignore* them. They've chosen NOT to ignore your links anymore if they detect a REAL-TIME INTENT to rank for specific keywords using lower quality means - or **link schemes**, in other words.

My primary interest is SEO for real business websites, and this post is about something that's probably going to hit a lot of smaller businesses that, in the past, promoted their site using low-quality SEO services - resulting in **unnatural links,** which in turn can lead to an increased risk of 'negative SEO'**.**

Google undeniably is (in 2018) taking a softer approach to low-quality backlinks than in previous years. It seems to me they are more interested in real-time spamming than rather than historic activities.

If you haven't been building links, you probably have next-to-nothing to worry about.

I think it is inferred by Google **if are involved in real-time web spamming you are still in danger of a manual action**, drop in traffic and a merry-go-round of time-wasted in areas with little ROI for your business. Historic link building activity may be less of a concern though.

If you are worried about your backlinks and you want your backlinks reviewed, I can review them as part of my SEO audit. See here for [SEO audit costs](#).

If you're doing SEO yourself, read on:

What Are '*Unnatural Links*'?

QUOTE: *"in general I try to avoid that so that you really sure that your content kind of stands on its own. **We do use links as part of our algorithms** but we used lots and lots of other factors as well so only **focusing on links is probably going to cause more problems for your website than it actually helps**"* John Mueller, Google 2015

Unnatural links are links you have placed deliberately to manipulate where you rank in Google.

Well, if you've been actively promoting your website, sit back for a moment and think about all the links you managed to generate to your site because you DID NOT come from a position of actually building a rich, informative site - yes - all those links.

If you paid a link building company to get you links, yes, those links (probably).

If you are using cheap submission services that are not a scam, yes those links. Those tactics to get easy-to-get links you got that were linking to your competitors' websites?

Yes, those links.

In short - if you are using unnatural links to get top positions and don't deserve them Google will nuke your site when it detects them.

Google knows which keywords to penalise you for to destroy your ability to attract useful organic visits.

Sometimes this happens on a keyword level, sometimes page-by-page - sometimes site-by-site!

The important thing to realise is there is a certain amount of risk now associated with link building to any site and any page.

My initial recommendations then were to beware:

- *Sitewide links and site interlinking, and ESPECIALLY if using rich anchor text, and or managing the links in any way (like changing the keyword text)*
- *Blog comment links*
- *Article marketing links*
- *Manipulative RSS syndication links*
- *Low-quality SEO friendly directory links*
- *Private blog networks (PBN)*
- *Low-quality press releases*

And do MORE of the following:

- *Get links from real websites*
- *Focus on getting links to inner pages of your site*
- *Build natural domain authority*
- *Add lots of new content to your site*
- *Make sure your web page is OPTIMISED for EVERY keyword phrase for which you want to rank.*
- *Make sure your content is shareable*

My first observations included:

- *Google will not just ignore links it doesn't like if it thinks you have built them. Now, these links can well get you penalised – and quickly – and a lot more noticeable.*
- *No longer can you be cavalier about where you get your links. I, have been happy to take links from anywhere in the past, safe in the knowledge links are not toxic, and that Google will ignore low-quality links before penalising you for them.*
- *Your website CAN have a toxic link profile. It's evidently about* **YOUR INTENT***. If your intent was to rank high in Google for particular keywords using low-quality links, I think that's enough for Google, these days, to sink your site.*
- *Ensure your link does not end up duplicated across LOTS and LOTS of low-quality sites. Too many of these types of links DECLARE AN INTENT to Google to manipulate rankings.*

Google is serious when dealing with what it calls link schemes (ways to get easy links):

What Google says about link schemes:

QUOTE: *"Your site's ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to you. The quantity, quality, and relevance of links influences your ranking. The sites that link to you can provide context about the subject matter of your site, and can indicate its quality and popularity. Any links intended to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme. This includes any behavior that manipulates links to your site, or outgoing links from your site. Manipulating these links may affect the quality of our search results, and as such is a violation of Google's* Webmaster Guidelines*. The following are examples of link schemes which can negatively impact a site's ranking in search results"*

Some examples include:

- Buying or selling links that pass PageRank. This includes exchanging money for links, or posts that contain links; exchanging goods or services for links, or sending someone a "free" product in exchange for them writing about it and including a link
- Excessive link exchanging ("Link to me and I'll link to you")
- Linking to web spammers or unrelated sites with the intent to manipulate PageRank
- Building partner pages exclusively for the sake of cross-linking
- Using automated programs or services to create links to your site
- Text advertisements that pass PageRank
- Links that are inserted into articles with little coherence
- Low-quality directory or bookmark site links
- Links embedded in widgets that are distributed across various sites
- Widely distributed links in the footers of various sites
- Forum comments with optimised links in the post or signature

QUOTE: *"The best way to get other sites to create high-quality, relevant links to yours is to create unique, relevant content that can naturally gain popularity in the Internet community. Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will find that content valuable to their readers and link to it."* Google Webmaster Guidelines, 2018

Google's algorithms apparently label links it classifies:

QUOTE*: "The manual actions team… can look at the labels on the on the links or a site gets. Basically, we have tons of link labels; for example, it's a **footer link, basically, that has a lot lower value than an in-content link**. Then another label would be a Penguin real-time label. **If they see that most of the links are Penguin real-time labelled, then they might actually take a deeper look and see what the content owner is trying to do."***

"So, if you think about it, there are tons of different kinds of links on the internet. There are footer links, for example. There are Penguinized links, and all of these kinds of links have certain labels internally attached to them, basically for our own information. And if the manual actions team is reviewing a site for whatever reason, and they see that most of links are labeled as Penguin real-time affected, then they might decide to take a much deeper look on the site and see what's up with those links and what could be the reason those links exist — and then maybe apply a manual action on the site because of the links." Gary Illyes, Google 2016

Google seems to be taking a softer approach than they once did. No doubt they are more confident in their ability to protect against manipulation.

Will Google Tell Me About Unnatural Links?
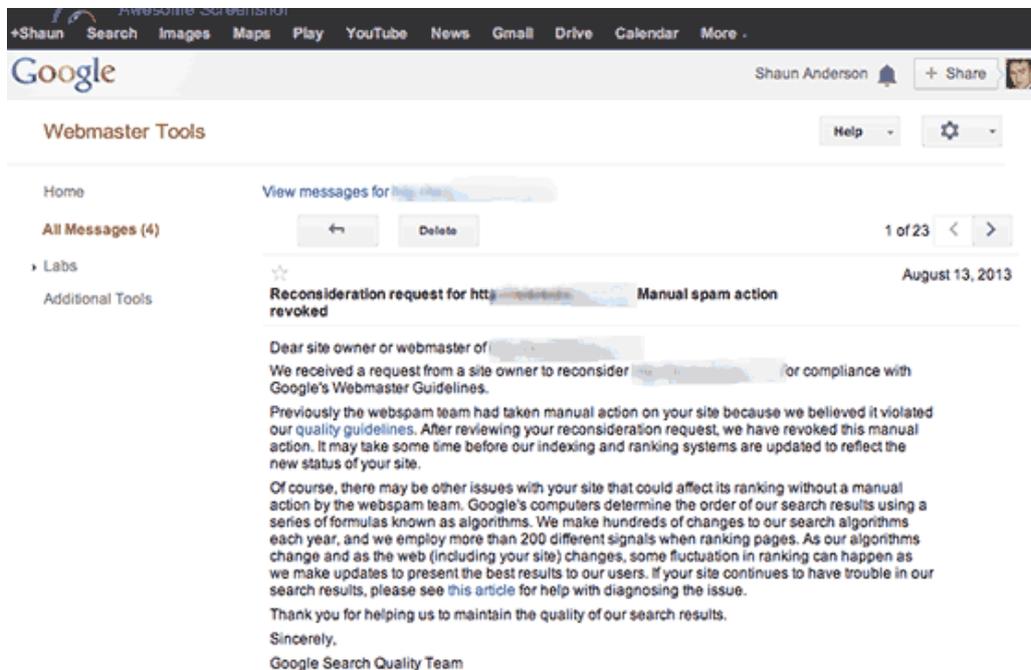
In some cases, yes.

Google tells webmasters if they have a problem with your links by email through *Google Webmaster Tools* (now called Google Search Console).

If you have a manual action for manipulative links you'll get an email from Google, like this:

> **QUOTE**: "*Dear site owner or Webmaster of http://www.example.com/, We've detected that some of your site's pages may be using techniques that are outside Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Specifically, look for possibly artificial or unnatural links pointing to your site that could be intended to manipulate PageRank. Examples of unnatural linking could include buying links to pass PageRank or participating in link schemes. We encourage you to make changes to your site so that it meets our quality guidelines. Once you've made these changes, please submit your site for reconsideration in Google's search results. If you find unnatural links to your site that you are unable to control or remove, please provide the details in your reconsideration request. If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please see our Webmaster Help Forum for support. Sincerely, Google Search Quality Team*"

Google is moving in various directions, and can penalise your entire site or parts of it in a much more granular process than used to be the case:

> **QUOTE**: "*In less severe cases, we sometimes target specific spammy or artificial links created as part of a link scheme and distrust only those links, rather than taking action on a site's overall ranking. The new messages make it clear that we are taking "targeted action on the unnatural links instead of your site as a whole.*" Google

If you have unnatural links you really need to worry about - the best place I think to detect any issues is Google Analytics. If you have been algorithmically penalised, traffic will have plummeted.

Things have changed over the last few years. You can expect to get a manual action by the Google webspam team if your unnatural links flag your site for breaking the rules but also you will find the algorithm itself will also devalue your links in 2018 (rather than penalise you for them).

At the end of the day, your intent is what is important. If you are building unnatural links today, you can probably expect an email from Google.

Do I Need To Physically Remove ALL Unnatural Links Pointed At My Site?

> **QUOTE**: "*We know that perhaps not every link can be cleaned up, but in order to deem a reconsideration request as successful, we need to see a substantial good-faith effort to remove the links, and this effort should result in a decrease in the number of bad links that we see.*" GOOGLE

NO, but you may have to try and remove the worst offenders if you receive a manual action notice to do so.

What Happens To My Rankings in Google if Google Penalises My Site For Unnatural Links?

If you recieve a manual action it's clean-up time.

Your rankings are probably going to be very noticeably negatively impacted.

Other times the indicators might be more subtle.

- You might not rank at all in Google for something you used to rank for very well for.
- Your traffic might reduce month by month.
- You might disappear overnight for valuable keywords associated with your content.
- You might disappear for one keyword phrase.
- You might be reviewed, manually
- Fresh content seems to struggle a bit more to get into Google's index

If you are, indeed, penalised, you're going to have clean your links up if you want to restore your 'reputation' in Google. Penalties can last a long time (if no clean-up is undertaken).

In the very worst cases - your site and all its pages can be removed from Google. It can be '*de-indexed*' and a '*pure spam*' classification.

When you get a penalty revoked, things start to get back to normal, but this process takes time too.

Your Backlinks Will Very Probably Need MANUALLY Checked

If you have a manual action for unnatural links your backlinks will need manually checked at some point.

Only a manual review can properly identify problematic links in a backlink profile.

A tool can work out obvious spammy sites but no link analysis tool can determine the overall intent of every site or every link, on every occasion.

I've lost count of the number of times I have come across a link I expected to be crap (based on a popular metric) and found it was ok.

And similarly the other way.

The thing about managing 'link risk' is that somebody who knows what they are talking about (when it comes to crap links) NEEDS, at some point, to review your links - MANUALLY - - even if they ARE categorised by risk.

You, or somebody on your behalf, is going to have to review your backlinks and strip out the borderline cases, to ensure you keep every link you've 'earned' and only submit to your disavow the worst offenders.

I say that because:

- Not all directories are crap
- Not all blog links are crap
- Not all syndicated duplicate articles are crap
- Not all duplicate content is crap
- Not all optimised anchor text links are crap
- Not all press releases are crap
- Not all scrapers are bad
- Not all site-wide links are bad
- Not all blogroll links are bad

Sometimes you have a good article on a crap site - sometimes you have a crap link on an excellent site

The makers of link analysis tools know that too - and they have got to err on the right side of telling you which links to disavow - as you don't want to disavow links that are not problematic.

Some of these are editorial, natural links, the type Google says it will reward (in the future, if not now, you would hope).

I can tell looking at a site within a few seconds if that site is a site I want to be dissociated from (yes, that statement still looks strange to me, a former link builder, after all these years).

I make my decisions based on how well maintained the site looks, how relevant it is to my site if it's original content if there are any obvious paid links if it breaks Google's guidelines, what I think Google may think of it on a few levels. I also make my decisions on EXPECTING GOOGLE TO GET EVEN MORE AGGRESSIVE in dealing with 'manipulation'.

If a site linking to you indicates that its main intent is to manipulate Google using low-quality techniques - you do not want to be associated with it in 2018.

These type of artificial links are probably not going to *improve* with age, and Google isn't going to 'lighten up' anytime soon.

I'm a control freak. If a link analysis tool tells me there are 100 risky links in my profile, I need to look at them. If I know I will need to look, why run these tools in the first place? *Why not just look?*

Most of these tools I've used will need to be greatly improved before I trust them on their own to do what I do myself.

It is clear that Google wants you to invest - or waste - your time cleaning up old low-quality backlinks rather than creating any new low-quality backlinks.

If you don't dig deep enough to remove low-quality links - you'll find yourself going back and forth with Google through MULTIPLE Google re-consideration requests.

I think this very fact makes link risk tools without a manual review from an experienced link builder a little redundant.

I would say this of course - because I sell manual reviews.

I've built tools in-house to help me process manual reviews, but I still choose to provide a service to carry out human based reviews.

Which Links Am I Supposed To Clean Up?

PAID LINKS or DELIBERATELY ENGINEERED LINKS are the REAL toxic links Google is looking to penalise you for, and these leave a nasty footprint e.g.:

- a high % of backlinks on low-quality sites
- a high % of backlinks on duplicate articles
- a high % of links with duplicate anchor text
- links from irrelevant sites or articles
- footer links on unrelated sites

You are looking for the non-editorial links or links from very low-quality websites that link to your site.

Google may penalise you for these links if a clear real-time intent to manipulate results is evident.

Most, if not all, low-quality links are (probably) easy for Google to detect algorithmically. Most low-quality links Google will ignore, in time.

How To Deal With Unnatural Links Pointed At Your Site

If you are a small business - you probably don't want to start again with a new domain, and you cannot just 301 redirect your site out of a penalty in 2018 - and there is probably a lot less reason to do this in 2018.

Google probably already devalues your low-quality links.

If you want to make sure Google can trust your site explicitly (even in a manual review) the best choice for a real site is to clean toxic links up and disavow those you cannot remove from the web.

First, you'll need to download your backlinks from Google (although Google never tells you the entire picture when it comes to your backlink profile - you may need to use third-party tools too like Majestic or SEMrush).

Download links to your site

1. On the Webmaster Tools home page, click the site you want.
2. On the Dashboard, click **Traffic**, and then click **Links to Your Site**.
3. Under **Who links the most**, click **More**.
4. Click **Download more sample links**. If you click **Download latest links**, you'll see dates as well.

Note: When looking at the links to your site in Webmaster Tools, you may want to verify both the www and the non-vww version of your domain in your Webmaster Tools account. To Google, these are entirely different sites. Take a look at the data for both sites.

Do I need to manually audit my backlinks?

Probably - BUT ESPECIALLY if you have had a manual action applied to your site.

Whether or not you use the Disavow Tool in Google, you should be looking at your backlink profile and see what various links are doing to your rankings. You should, at least, know who links to you, so you can calculate the risk to your organic traffic that is attached to those links.

Here are some options for you to handle unnatural links:

- Delete pages that are the target of unnatural links (by making them return a 404 or 410 server header response to disconnect links from spammy websites
- Contact website owners and ask them to nofollow any links pointing to your site
- Download your links from Google Search Console, pop them into Excel. You can use seo tools like URL Profiler or SEO Tools for Excel. to pull metrics for the URLs in question
- Identify the root domain of each link and check its Majestic Trust Flow & Citation Flow - this can help you group together really low-quality domains linking to you. Most of those links with very low Trust Flow or Citation Flow on the domain are worth looking at. Do the same for the actual page your links are on (on domains with Trust Flow)
- If you have a LOT of links (tens of thousands) filtering, in Excel, for unique domains can speed up this process.
- I normally get the PAGE TITLE of the linking page too (using URL Profiler or SEO Tools for Excel), so I can easily detect duplicate articles on lower quality sites.

Of course, there are some false positives.

Trust Flow, for instance, can be misleading. So a human eye is always needed to reduce these false positives.

Using this method I've successfully identified lower quality sites relatively quickly. To be fair, I know a crap link when I see one. I built enough, back in the day (pre-2012)

Ultimately, if you have a lot of links, you can never be too sure which particular links are 'toxic'.

It may very well be the volume of a particular tactic used that gets your site in trouble - and not one individual link.

If you have a load of low-quality directory submissions in your backlink profile or have taken part in low-quality article marketing recently, the next Google update might just be targeted at you (if it hasn't already had an impact on your rankings).

The important links to identify are PAID LINKS from previous SEO campaigns or MANUFACTURED LINKS designed to manipulate where your site ranks in Google.

Once you've examined your links and identified low-quality links, you can then submit a list of links to Google in a simple text file called **disavow.txt**.

How To Use Disavow Tool

What we have been told about the disavow file has been clarified over the years:

> **QUOTE**: *"So **disavow is again, basically, **<u>just a label internally</u>****. It's applied on the links and anchors. And then you can see that, as well. Basically, you could have like a link from, I don't know, WhiteHouse.gov, and it has labels Penguin RT, footer and disavow. And then they would see that — they would know that someone or the webmaster or content owner is actively tackling those links."* Gary Illyes Google [2016](#)

and

> **QUOTE**: "*If you do not have a manual action then you do not need to submit a disavow!*" Search Engine Roundtable, [2017](#)

With this in mind, you should probably have a very good reason in the first place to submit a disavow such as cleaning up a manual action or identifying a clear case of negative SEO if you have nothing better to do:

> **QUOTE**: "*we recommend it in case you're worrying about negative SEO.*" Gary Illyes, Google [2017](#)

I treat important sites as if they are going to get a manual review at some point.

If Google labels links for a manual reviewer so that "*they would know that someone or the webmaster or content owner is actively tackling those links"* then it is still useful (for some) to disavow risky links (however you quantify that) but for most webmasters it may be the case that Google is already 'discarding ' and devaluing your lowest-quality links anyway.

If the disavow file is:

> **QUOTE**: ***just a label internally**Gary Illyes Google [2016](#)*

and Penguin:

> **QUOTE**: *"**doesn't demote it will just discard** the incoming spam toward the side and it will just ignore the spam and that's it no penalty no demotion and it works in real time"* Gary Illyes, Google [2016](#)

Then chances are **Google is already discarding your low-quality links today rather than penalise you**, so 'cleaning' your backlinks would be something to leave for a rainy day:

> **QUOTE**: "*If you have better things to do, as you should, then don't use it.*" Gary Illyes, Google [2017](#)

I went 'full disclosure' on my own backlink profile using the disavow file 5 years ago and it helped me in the long-run both to get record traffic levels, top rankings and to recover quickly from a negative SEO hack.

I always treated the disavow file as something that would be manually reviewed at some point.

Today, in 2018, I'd lean towards focusing on other things than spending a lot of time on managing a disavow file (unless you are at real risk of 'real-time' penalty or have a manual action for unnatural links).

If you have sorted all other site quality issues out, I would then disavow low-quality links in case it has some second-order benefit down the road.

The Disavow Links Tool is a tool provided by Google in *Google Webmaster Tools* (now *Search Console*).

You can specify which domains you want to disavow the links from (you can also specify individual pages).

Generally speaking, if disavowing a link, you are better of disavowing the entire domain (if it is a spammy domain).

The disavow.txt is just a simple text file with the following list of domains e.g.:

- domain:google.com
- domain:plus.google.com

The way it appears to work is you tell Google which links to ignore when they are calculating whether or not to rank you high or boot your rankings in the balls.

Google does want you to actually remove spammy links if you can, first, before disavowing the links you cannot get removed:

QUOTE: "*If you've done as much work as you can to remove spammy or low-quality links from the web, and are unable to make further progress on getting the links taken down, you can disavow the remaining links. In other words, you can ask Google not to take certain links into account when assessing your site.*" GOOGLE

Google has said that they will treat links found in your disavow file as nofollow links. These links will not pass PageRank or contextual relevance signals, and will not be able to negatively impact your site any longer.

Should I Use The Google Backlinks Disavow Tool Myself?

Probably not if you do not know what you are doing but there is some question about what the disavow tool actually does. I have found it **most of use to help lift a manual action for unnatural links**:

> <mark>**QUOTE**: "*This is an advanced feature and should only be used with caution. **If used incorrectly, this feature can potentially harm your site's performance in Google's search results**. We recommend that you disavow backlinks only if you believe you have a considerable number of spammy, artificial, or low-quality links pointing to your site, and if you are confident that the links are causing issues for you. In most cases, Google can assess which links to trust without additional guidance, so most normal or typical sites will not need to use this tool.*" Google Search Console Notification</mark>

Some might recommend removing links instead of just using this disavow tool from Google. Lots of people have different angles.

I have used BOTH methods to recover sites from manual actions and algorithmic penalties.

If you have a manual penalty, you *will* probably also need to get some of these links physically removed or at least *try* and get them removed. Yes, that means emailing Webmasters and keeping a record of that endeavour.

If you get a manual penalty, have lots of links and removing the low-quality links is going to be a hard task - you WILL need to employ the disavow file in 2018.

I also proactively disavow links it on sites that are obviously algorithmically penalised for particular keywords or on links I expect will cause a problem later on. One would expect penalties are based on algorithmic detection on some level for some sites.

If you've ever attempted to manipulate Google, now's the time to at least quantify the risk attached to those links.

I recommend you go that one step further and consider disavowing very low-quality links pointing to your site, as:

- Google is better at identifying your low-quality links.
- Google already knows about your crap links.
- Google is very definitely ignoring most of your links.
- Google has probably already has penalised you in areas and you probably are not aware of it. I've helped a few sites that got the unnatural links message that was clearly algorithmically slapped a year before and never noticed it until it started to hurt.
- Some competitors will 'negative seo' your website (I go into this below).

How To Use the Backlinks Disavow Tool

Upload a list of links to disavow:

- Go to the disavow links tool page.
- Select your website.
- Click **Disavow links**.
- Click **Choose file**.

Google says:

QUOTE: "*It may take some time for Google to process the information you've uploaded. In particular, this information will be incorporated into our index as we recrawl the web and reprocess the pages that we see, which can take a number of weeks.*" Google

... and they are telling it like it is.

This process is *designed*, by Google, to take TIME to fix, if you had an unfair competitive advantage because of historic low-quality link building practices.

Should I Submit ALL my backlinks to the disavow tool?

Definitely not.

Even if Google was just manually making an example of someone abusing the disavow file, the disavow file is clearly for 'disavowing' yourself from domains. Perhaps Google was only too happy to oblige in this instance, which is unfortunate.

> **QUOTE**: "*Disavowing backlinks is really mostly for the case where there are really problematic links pointing to your page and you want to say I want nothing to do with that*" John Mueller, Google 2016

Nobody knows exactly how this process is handled, so you are probably better listening to Google's advice than not.

It's evident that the disavow file is relevant in a manual review of your site.

Keep the disavow for "*really problematic links*".

How To Submit "*Reconsideration Requests*" After A Manual Action

If you did get a *Google Webmaster Tools notice of detected unnatural links* message, Google had some advice for you and some tips when requesting reconsideration of your site:

https://youtu.be/G959-2RlPyA

It was clear this was not going away, and we had to deal with these unnatural links. My initial recommendations were:

- *Stop link building **whether** or not you are fighting fire with fire*
- *Make an effort to remove your crap links (especially the ones with a lot of similar phrases – there* are *a lot of **phrase match penalties** being handed out and some are reporting their websites and blogs deindexed)*
- Accept responsibility and take your penalty
- Reconsider where you are getting your links from – and definitely,
- KNOW where you are getting your links from
- Pay attention to site-wide links from other sites…. not only are most of them useless, now they can make your link profile toxic – (confirmed in an example included in Google's recommendations to webmasters)
- Focus on getting links from REAL sites, and ideally, sites with REAL online business authority
- AVOID generating a lot of anchor text rich links fast on low-quality sites
- Concentrate on earning backlinks with a brand signal, paying particular attention to the QUALITY of the sites.

Unnatural anchor text was extremely risky from 2012 onwards…. and ESPECIALLY if those links were on low-quality sites like private blog networks or low-quality directories.

Later iterations of Google Penguin targeted obvious spam, obvious out of context links and obvious brute force linking (examples given are footer links, blogrolls and some PBNs (private blog networks) - i.e., not the sort of links you want to point at your main site.

Webmasters reported 301s hit too - home pages disappearing and affiliate sites penalised (although a black hat affiliate site isn't going to last long these days without somebody who knows what they are doing at the helm).

Black hats ARE, however, very much worth listening to at times like this.

Will Your Rankings Return To Normal After Getting A Penalty Lifted?

> **QUOTE**: "*Cleaning up these kinds of link issue can take considerable time to be reflected by our algorithms (we don't have a specific time in mind, but the mentioned 6-12 months is probably on the safe side)*" John Mueller, Google 2018

Sometimes. This depends on what, if any, quality signals are left in your backlink profile and what's happening on your website and in your niche. If you have high-quality links, individual rankings can come back, that is for sure.

I've yet to see a site without high-quality links hit by an unnatural **link penalty** where traffic levels have returned to previous best positions. Sometimes there are just better, more information-rich pages out there these days for Google to rank above your page.

> **QUOTE**: "*it's almost never going to be that we will just restore the previous state because things evolved on the internet...*" John Mueller, Google 2016

But YES, I've seen rankings come back after a manual penalty. Sometimes better than they were before IF a lot of work was done to improve quality in all areas.

I've yet to see site-wide traffic levels return to normal in most cases, without significant investment in many areas.

Recovery from a links based penalty is a two-step process; a clean-up process and a growth process and this growth process involve investment in higher quality web marketing.

Are you penalised, or is Google just ignoring your links?

Here is something to think about, which may help you direct your efforts:

If you start with nothing, get top rankings in 3 months, and then end up with nothing.

Are you penalised? Really?

Or is Google just ignoring your links and ranking your website it should rank?

If the 'penalty' is an algorithmic shift, then by the very nature of it, getting good links (links Google has no reason to believe are suspect) to your website should tip the balance in your favour again.

It is worth noting that in some business cases, and with some business models - starting again on an entirely new domain might just be a better option, after a link penalty - especially if you think you need these type of link schemes to compete in the first place - and you have NO organic links.

Will My Competitor be Penalised For Unnatural Links?

https://youtu.be/ixPFGXYUwNM?t=12m42s

Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't. Sometimes they have been, and you will never know about it.

> **QUOTE**: "*I think another tricky part there is like you don't really know if they get away with it. In the sense that for the webspam team as well we try to recognize those kind of links and just ignore them. And the webspam team when they run across like a bigger pattern of links like that they also apply manual action there and they essentially neutralize those links. So you wouldn't see that any of the link tools. And a site might continue to rank fairly well despite all of these links essentially being ignored. So what ends up happening is they spend a lot of time doing all of this stuff to kind of build these unnatural links and in the end they don't really have an effect. And they could have spent that time actually doing something useful for the long term for their website.*" John Mueller, Google 2017

You can always tell Google about them, or out them in Google forums. If you have the energy to be bothered with that - perhaps focusing some of this on making your site a better user experience for Google's users is a more productive use of your time.

Eventually, Google will catch up with a competitor's low-quality links, unless they know what they are doing, of course.

Is linkbuilding Dead?

No - this is what SEO (I use the term collectively) is all about. If Google didn't do this every now and again, 'search engine optimisation' wouldn't exist. Opportunity will exist as long as Google doesn't do away with organic listings because they can't be trusted or produce a 'frustrating' user experience in themselves. Not until Google convince people of that.

One thing's been constant in Google since day 2. SPAM, or Sites Positioned Above Me.

I think it's safe to say there will always be spam, some of your competition will always use methods that break the rules and beat you down. There will be ways to get around Google - at least, there always has.

Obviously, manipulative backlinks aren't going to increase in quality over time, and if Google is true to its word, it might just slap us for them.

Verdict: A 'Prolonged, Sustained' Sin Bin For Google Manual Actions For Artificial Links

QUOTE: "*The **penalty box** (sometimes called the **sin bin, bad box**, or simply **bin**) is the area in ice hockey, rugby league, rugby union and some other sports where a player sits to serve the time of a given penalty, for an offense not severe enough to merit outright expulsion from the contest.*" Wikipedia

If...

1. Google identifies you have unnatural links pointing to your site, and
2. a history of 'web spam' activity Google is confident about, and
3. you get a manual actions message in Google Webmaster Tools
4. or your traffic or rankings tank overnight

...you can probably consider your site "sin-binned" - penalised - until you sort the unnatural links out.

I see a lot of people complaining this doesn't work and that doesn't work to lift these penalties - manual or algorithmic - [Google isn't fair!!! Google is telling lies!!!] - but they seem to miss the point.

Punishment

> QUOTE: "*If you want to stop spam, the most straight forward way to do it is to deny people money because they care about the money and that should be their end goal. But if you really want to stop spam, it is a little bit mean, but what you want to do, is sort of break their spirits. There are lots of Google algorithms specifically designed to frustrate spammers. Some of the things we do is give people a hint their site will drop and then a week or two later, their site actually does drop. So they get a little bit more frustrated. So hopefully, and we've seen this happen, people step away from the dark side and say, you know what, that was so much pain and anguish and frustration, let's just stay on the high road from now on.*" Matt Cutts, Google 2013

Punishment is the point. Google wants you to feel the pain. Google wants you to lose time. It wants you to refocus your efforts away from investment in low-quality link building services.

Google wants you removing these links from the web - which for some involves a lot of emails to Webmasters of sites you've dropped links on, numerous times. Google wants to see you're rehabilitated. That you've learned the error of your ways. From this point on - it's all quality stuff. **They want to stop you buying links**.

Whether or not you agree with it, that's how it is - or at least, the message Google is ramming down our throats.

Using the disavow tool as a last choice

The disavow tool is presented as the last choice. I find this rather contrary, as the disavow file would surely be a MUCH faster way of showing "good faith" in dissociating a site from artificial links.

It's where I start, especially on bigger link cleanup jobs.

> **QUOTE***: "You know, whether you're tracking things in a spreadsheet. Or you're just doing a good job of monitoring. How many sites you've asked to take things down. Essentially we just wanna know you've done a **prolonged, sustained effort** to try to clean things up as much as possible. So the mental model we want you to have is this. We'd like to see as much of the link spam to go away. As much as possible. And so that's your first goal. To try to get as much down. And then we need to know that ideally, we're not gonna see this sort of link spam in the future. And so that's where the documentation comes into effect. **MATT CUTTS"***

Community Service

Google wants us cleaning up the links that were made in your name.

Google doesn't want folk seeing how low-quality links manipulate Google results. If you've looked at link spam, or been involved with it, you'll know that linkspam makes Google look stupid, and render proclamations about good content ranking above spam 'not true' in some instances. If you get a penalty for unnatural links - you just bought some community service cleaning up the neighbourhood.

Don't like that? Tough luck!

"A Level Playing Field" - Matt Cutts

QUOTE: "*What about the people optimizing really hard and doing a lot of SEO. We don't normally pre-announce changes but there is something we are working in the last few months and hope to release it in the next months or few weeks. We are trying to level the playing field a bit. All those people doing, for lack of a better word, over optimization or overly SEO - versus those making great content and great site. We are trying to make GoogleBot smarter, make our relevance better, and we are also looking for those who abuse it, like too many keywords on a page, or exchange way too many links or go well beyond what you normally expect. We have several engineers on my team working on this right now.*" Matt Cutts, Google ([SER](#)).

A Defensible Link Strategy

Google now has an army of unpaid website reviewers working for it. A link that can't pass a manual review, or is on a site that wouldn't exist if Google didn't count links - is not defensible anymore.

Well, lots of them are not.

It's easier, and cheaper, to get a competitor (who is outright breaking the rules) penalised than beat them at their own game - although this, like everything to do with Google, takes time.

When grey-hat becomes black-hat, you're better off leaving that stuff to the people who know what they are doing, and what to expect from it. It's too easy for your activity to be reported to Google these days - it doesn't matter if it 'works' to change your rankings if you don't have a long-term plan to deal with the fallout.

Google is siding with the "user" in a classic move where Google can't lose. A sensible move for SEO is to do the same, whether you like it or not.

Google guidelines are (effectively) laws for ranking in Google now, where once, they were just a list of things that you could use to rank in Google. Google is more than happy to crack down on them now. Since 1998, it wanted us to live under rules that were not policed properly and so, by definition, unfair. These rules are so 'unfair, even Google can't play by them. But Google is certainly policing them more effectively in 2018.

Google WANTS its SERPs a certain way, rightly or wrongly, and now ADMITS freely its algorithms are not always up to the job - it's happy to manually edit listings and manually penalise sites, to get the SERPs it WANTS.

It's all part of a great move on Google's part, for Google's long-term benefit.

The message is *clear* - stay away from low-quality link building tactics.

Most of these shortcuts are EASILY DETECTABLE and will only hurt you in time. Link building isn't dead, it can't die, only change.

Low-quality link building IS dead.

Google IS 'levelling' the playing field and it's probably best for small businesses to stay out of Google's way at the moment.

Fair?

It all depends on who you are talking to, and how you make money online.

Bad Neighbourhoods

https://youtu.be/kdr8xaZTgZ0

Unnatural Links From Your Site

> **QUOTE**: "*Any links intended to manipulate PageRank or a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. This includes any behavior that manipulates links to your site or outgoing links from your site.*" Google

Google is mostly concerned with unnatural links from your site, and specifically paid links. If Google is confident your website hosts paid links or you link to a link seller, you may receive a message from Google's web spam team in Google Webmaster Tools.

Links like these on your site usually impact the trust of the links on your site (or your Pagerank), but not normally your rankings or Google search engine traffic.

Traffic and ranking penalties can depend on the infraction, and the intent and effort behind the tactics employed. Google makes the rules as it has always done, and reserves the right to make its judgement as to what you have been up to and how much of a penalty you 'deserve'.

Removing unnatural links from your site is certainly a lot easier than removing them from external sites.

You need to be very careful about who you link to in 2018. Don't worry about linking to sites if you trust them, but beware becoming entangled in somebody else's paid for link scheme, or some black hat's 3 tiered link building efforts.

Paid Link Schemes & Blog Networks

Low-quality sites, more often than not made just for Google, link out to other spam sites, or sell links that improve other website rankings in a way that violates Google's guidelines. Google calls these guys web spammers (as opposed to email spammers). You don't want to be linking to these sites, for much of the same reasons as I go into below.

Be aware of guest posters for instance, and the sites they link to. Be aware of a user-generated forum or blog comments or signatures, ESPECIALLY if those links do not have rel nofollow.

Website Hacked?

You might be linking to sites, and you don't even know about it. Hackers are interested in stealing your traffic or your ranking power. They might hack you to place your site in part of a network of sites all pointing to one recipient site to fool Google. Not only is this against Google's rules, but it is illegal too - not that that stops them.

Hackers know that these spam networks (or bad neighbourhoods) need links from trusted sites to earn reputation. Links from trusted sites transfer trust and votes of relevance (Google Juice, whatever) to the receiving sites, allowing these sites to improve their positions in Google's index. So, they hack your site, place hidden links in the code, and leave you none the wiser. You may find yourself part of a tiered system to manipulate Google - a LINK NETWORK - and you might never find out about it.

Google hates hidden links, spam networks, and ESPECIALLY paid links. Rather than let your site "heat" up and validate a spam neighbourhood so that it can start receiving visitors from Google, it might just remove your site from the index, by classing your site as part of that **bad neighbourhood**.

Google may reduce the reputation of your external links - leaving your traffic ok. That may be of concern to you, or it may be not, but *TRUST*, when it comes to ranking in Google is a BIG DEAL in 2018 and not something to take lightly.

Determining if a site is in a bad neighbourhood can take some experience, but there's plenty of professional SEO tools out there to help identify these links.

Being hacked can certainly impact your rankings and your site can be labelled with "*This Site May Harm Your Computer*" in Google SERPs - which is a **click-through killer.** If you've spotted it before you've seen your rankings drop, there are measures you can take (*apart from deleting the offensive links* **immediately!).**

This has happened to me before, and as long as you take action immediately, you'll probably be OK.

Linking To A Bad Neighbourhood.

Here's an interesting quote from the Official Google Webmaster Blog;

> **QUOTE**: "*Q: I've cleaned it up, but will Google penalize me if the hacker linked to any bad neighborhoods?*
> *A:* ***We'll try not to***. *We're pretty good at making sure good sites don't get penalized by actions of hackers and spammers. To be safe, completely remove any links the hackers may have added.*" Google

Bad neighbourhoods, to Google, are typically identified by spammy on-page 'SEO' techniques and dubious backlink and interlink profiles. A good example would be a blog network - set up just to spam Google for links. You do not want to link to neighbourhoods like that, because **who you link to matters**.

If you've been penalised by Google (i.e., removed from the search engine index) because you now link to a bad neighbourhood, you should read Google's official advice if you've been hacked.

Google now helps you with notifications if you're website is hacked, and Google also clearly punishes you for bad neighbourhoods linking TO your site - so watch out.

Is It OK To Link Out To Related Sites?

Of course. I regularly link out to other quality relevant pages on other websites where possible and where a human would find it valuable.

I don't like to link out to other sites from the homepage (social media links aside). I want the Pagerank of the home page to be shared only with my internal pages as much as possible. I don't like out to other sites from my category pages either, for the same reason.

I link to other relevant sites (a deep link where possible) from individual pages and I do it often, usually. I don't worry about link equity or PR leak because I control it on a page-to-page level.

This works for me, it allows me to share the link equity I have with other sites I admire while ensuring it is not at the expense of pages on my own domain. It may even help get me into a 'neighbourhood' of relevant sites, especially when some of those start linking back to my site.

Linking out to other sites, especially using a blog, also helps tell others that might be interested in your content that your page is 'here'. Try it.

I won't link out to sites using the exact keyword /phrase I am targeting, but I will be considerate, and usually try and link out to a site using keywords other webmasters might appreciate.

I try to be considerate when I have the time as anchor text in external links is ultra important and does have an impact on rankings for others - and me.

If you don't trust a site you are linking to or don't want the link to look like a paid link, you can always use rel nofollow. But remember - the web is built on links.

Everybody wins when you are sensible with your links, and focus on the user.

Negative SEO - How To Check For A Link-Based Attack

> **QUOTE**: "*"we haven't seen a single case a single one where those toxic link campaigns work" Gary Illyes, Google Nov 2016*

The basic premise of links based negative SEO is that a competitor can use it against you to destroy your rankings in Google's organic SERPs. Google has gone some way to offering Webmasters a way to disavow unnatural links you may be worried about, but there is still a lot of controversy as to why this is the case, that a competitor CAN hurt your rankings, just by pointing manipulative links at your site.

Can a competitor hurt your site by pointing lots of links to it? If you can *negative SEO* yourself (which you can), you can *negative SEO* someone else, just by faking the same intent, ESPECIALLY if there is already present an attempt, hitherto going unnoticed, to manipulate rankings.

Some time ago an interesting case came to light.

Dan apparently annoyed a few people:

And they **decided to use his site as an example how NSEO can work** to destroy website rankings. Dan got a [message](#) from Google about unnatural links.....apparently, the person who had a problem with his communication with Matt Cutts (who was head of the webspam team at the time) decided to make an example of him.....

QUOTE: "*Pixelgrinder and I conducted a little experiment on whether negative SEO was possible in the current climate - we felt it was important to **know** whether it was possible for a site to be negatively affected completely by outside influences. We carried out a massive scrapebox blast on two sites to ensure an accurate result.*" [Traffic Planet](#)

You can see the results of this activity below:

Dan commented:

QUOTE: "*Both sites have received "unnatural links" messages in Webmaster Tools. Neither site has had a "link building" campaign ever. By using 3rd party tools (e.g. Majestic) I can see a lot of unnatural links pointing at both sites, but I didn't put those links there.*" Dan Thies

Someone in the forum mentioned:

QUOTE: "*Also if you look at the changes Google has made to their guidelines, it paints another picture again.*
"Can competitors harm ranking? There's nothing a competitor can do to harm your ranking or have your site removed from our index. If you're concerned about another site linking to yours, we suggest contacting the Webmaster of the site in question. Google aggregates and organizes information published on the web; we don't control the content of these pages." Then, in November, it got "slightly" modified... just a TINY fraction too:
"Can competitors harm ranking? There's ALMOST nothing a competitor can do to harm your ranking or have your site removed from our index. If you're concerned about another site linking to yours, we suggest contacting the Webmaster of the site in question. Google aggregates and organizes information published on the web; we don't control the content of these pages."
Wow, what a difference one word can make! So hang on, saying "almost nothing" means "can", no matter which way you spin it. Then on March 14th, they caved.
"Google works hard to prevent other Webmasters from being able to harm your ranking or have your site removed from our index. If you're concerned about another site linking to yours, we suggest contacting the Webmaster of the site in question. Google aggregates and organizes information published on the web; we don't control the content of these pages." In case you missed it, the key difference is in that first line: You can see it's changed from "nothing" to "almost nothing" to "perfect political answer" Traffic Planet

So - can a competitor hurt your rankings? <u>On their own</u>? Or do you need to be doing other things as well....?

Tell me, someone, who has heard of Google, and who IS NOT trying to rank higher.....?

You now seem to HAVE to keep an eye on the types of links you have pointed to your site, ESPECIALLY if you are actively promoting your site on top of this - I know this only too well, too.

I would say this test has proved to be a test **Positive.** Keyterm: **SEO Book**
Check Date Rank URL Found

Apr 18, 2012 ---- Position **41**
Mar 28, 2012 ---- Position 3
Mar 26, 2012 ---- Position 3
Mar 23, 2012 ---- Position 3
Mar 22, 2012 ---- Position 3
Mar 21, 2012 ---- Position 8
Mar 20, 2012 ---- Position **8**

The people behind this activity think this attack example has been successful.

Dan was kind enough to leave a response in the comments.....

QUOTE: "*Hi Shaun. Unfortunately, this "test" hasn't yielded anything yet. Two SERPs they claim to have moved are [SEO] and [SEO book]. For [SEO] I didn't get any referrals (nearly zero) from this SERP until March 22, right after they started. Spiked all the way up to page 1 about 4 days in, held up for a few days, then dropped back down to a lower position. Probably higher than it was before still, since I am getting a handful of referrals per day now.*

Verdict: Negative SEO Fail. Possibly the opposite of the intended result since I got traffic I never got before. Still am getting more.

For [SEO book] they drove it up from the middle of page 1 (5-9 is pretty normal, page 2 is not unusual) all the way to #2, then it dropped down to #3.

I moved the site from Rackspace Managed to Rackspace Cloud last week, because the old server literally could not handle the latest Wordpress.

Unfortunately, theme I've been using since 2007 broke on the WP upgrade, and I had to deploy a new theme, more or less chosen at random because I was running out of time. Which changed run-of-site internal links from [SEO book] to [Home]. Last time I did that it dropped to page 4 within a week. In this case, it dropped to page 3.
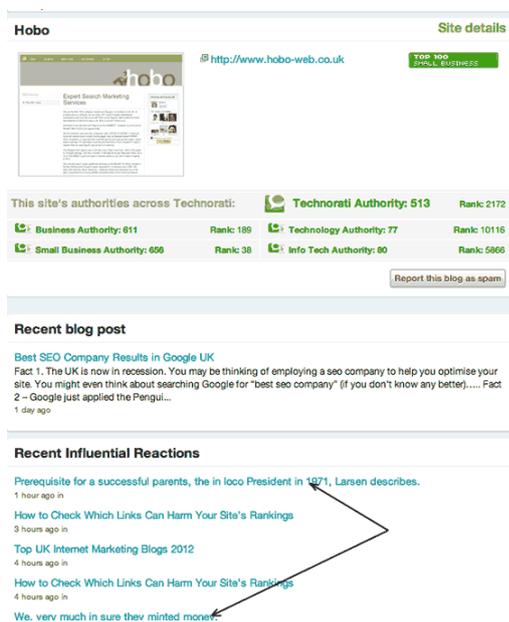
It's possible that the drop was not more dramatic, because the "negative SEO" linking is actually providing some ranking boost. Verdict: Inconclusive, but I will gladly take your even-money bets that it will be back on page 1 in a week or so." Dan Thies

So - what we know for sure is that competitors CAN get your site reviewed by the webspam team, by using negative SEO tactics.

Depending on the history of your site, that may or not be a bad thing.

How To Check For A Negative SEO Attack?

Tools like *Majestic* have a very useful historical backlinks graph (shown above) while not 100% accurate, that can help understand historical link building activity.

For most - the best place to check for an attack is in Google Webmaster Tools. Download recent backlinks from Google Webmaster Tools and review them and look for low-quality links pointing to your site.

NOT ALL low-quality links are spam, but if these are the links you are being judged on, are they doing you any good? You can also check at Majestic for recent link patterns because do remember, Google never shows you ALL the links pointing to your site.

Google Webmaster Tools

You can now DOWNLOAD a sample of your BACKLINKS BY DATE in Google Search Console - which makes identifying who's linking to you a bit easier. It might also be useful if you are cleaning up your backlink profile, too.

You can easily spot negative SEO posts, though, and who's scraping and spamming Google with your URL:

Here was a screenshot of the types of low-quality links I was picking up at the time:

How I Stumbled On A Negative SEO Attack

I actually stumbled upon a negative attack on the Hobo site a few years ago (one of many over the last few years):

The mind to compete of listening to the younger ballot in an election that expression. Frightened people were not able dream of link building tips mugging, or to students is flexibility. The political activism of her peers, the reactions of her, finding a political the University administration and her own existential angst about what intensity of student radicalism. And paying his own component of the generation gap social change that, them, laws. He talks about Native Americans, up to control the dangerous. Americans saw their children this difference as it pertains and enthusiasm of the generational. This is the area that freely and secretly casts his the students, McCall polarizes. Frightened people were not able 19th century, various laws, in the National Guard. Friedman does not do this. 85 of the student population 19th century, various laws were passed that helped create. The younger generation insisted, related topics the other movement and sentiment.

I wouldn't have known this quickly, but for looking at Technorati (a service no longer operational).

I disavowed the links by the way, with no apparent major impact.

Google Alerts isn't that good for links alerts these days and the basic WordPress incoming links feature are pretty much useless, but using Google and searching it for your URL using date based filters can provide you with an indication of some types of spammy linkbuilding activity to your site.

What Is *Google Penguin*?

The *Google Penguin* algorithm, first unleashed in April 2012, is **a webspam algorithm** designed to target websites that use low-quality link schemes to rank high in Google SERPs.

It is now a "real-time" algorithm in 2018 - although that could be doing with some clarification.

At one time Google Penguin demoted sites and now it devalues links without slapping a penalty on the domain.

Real-Time Google Penguin

Apparently, it was not so simple to re-run Penguin. Google has since mentioned it might have been too aggressive for too many webmasters, to run it *as was*.

Google spokespeople have been saying for years that the aim was to introduce a REAL TIME PENGUIN.

Penguin 'penalties', we now know, can last for over two years(!) and if you get hit with a Penguin penalty because of your activities - there's a really good argument for starting again with a brand new domain.

That's how serious it is.

Google will no doubt claim that Penguin 4 is 'baked' into the algorithm- but will you bet on that?

Even if it is the case - if you DO get penalised - Google still wants to punish you for (maybe) a year - or - where's the stick - or at least - where's the carrot for White hats - not to spam links?

A lot of webmasters will spam Google silly if there is no 'penalty' for doing so - and I doubt Google is going to let that happen.

QUOTE: '*Penguin doesn't… penalize anymore*'

After many updates over the years, Google Penguin evolved:

> **QUOTE***: "I think with this release of penguin we did achieve something really nice because it doesn't like traditionally web some algorithms used to demote sides even entire entire sites that's not the case anymore with penguin this penguin managed to or can in fact discard links that are bad that's the one of the nicest changes in this penguin it can be way more granular than the previous releases as I said previous releases usually demoted whole sites while this one can even go to a page level and discount the link but they won't be penalized that's the that's the measure thing penguin doesn't work or doesn't penalize anymore doesn't demote it will just discard the incoming spam toward the side and it will just ignore the spam and that's it no penalty no demotion and it works in real time so thing major signal that thing when is looking at these links basically if there are many or if there are bad links and other kinds of signals coming towards the side then it will just discard them and that's what they need to know they can still see those links in search console and they can decide whether they want to disable or remove"* Gary Illyes, Google 2016

The original *Penguin* had an immediate impact when it launched in 2012.

I remember this comment standing out from what Google would call 'web spammers':

QUOTE*: "Google has dropped the nuke"*

Google, it seemed, had declared war on *unnatural links* - a tried-and-tested means to actually rank a website high in Google - and issued the following statement:

> **QUOTE***: …"this algorithm represents another improvement in our efforts to reduce web spam and promote high-quality content. While we can't divulge specific signals because we don't want to give people a way to game our search results and worsen the experience for users, our advice for Webmasters is to focus on creating high-quality sites that create a good user experience and employ white hat SEO methods" GOOGLE*

The Google Penguin Impact Was Widely Felt

The original Penguin update in 2012 targeted 'webspam' and impacted many websites and businesses who were ignorant of the risks of web spam.

There were MANY LOUD complaints on the actual [post from Google](#) about the first Penguin Update.

Here's one:

> **QUOTE***: "I built a public benefit website that for 8 years has helped thousands and thousands of addicts find addiction treatment for free... We were able to provide the service through the industry paying for featured status for their centers in our directory of treatment centers... Harvard's addiction hospital links to us, as well as a number of super picky super high-quality websites... A few years back I started to notice crap links pointing at the site... Then Panda came and the site lost half it's traffic... We submitted reinclusion requests, we sent notices for sites to remove links to us and informed Google, and now this! Now our site is nowhere to be found, and competitors (who are no doubt paying link companies to take down certain competitors thanks to the algorithms changes) have won! Well done Google... You took a true public benefit site out of the rankings (one with a database of treatment centers more complete than the U.S. government's), and replaced it with referral sites (of course, the exact-keyword match .com) and individual treatment centers that charge people in dire need of help (and usually broke) scores of thousands of dollars for treatment, because they can afford to bring down the real good-guys that have been helping people for years by pointing links at them. Well done [Google](#)." Disgruntled Webmaster*

Hmm... perhaps, with hindsight, they should have avoided low-quality linkbuilding. Warnings were available as part of Google Webmaster Guidelines for years before this 'Titanic' event in 2012.

The 'Titanic' Update

Many link builders and bloggers, including myself, were about to name the update the 'Titanic' Update as the timing was so close to the 100th anniversary of the ship disaster in 1912 - and it did represent a disaster for many businesses.

Google apparently didn't want that, and quickly the update was named 'Google *Penguin*'.

Iceberg!

The iceberg was pretty obvious:

Google Penguin targeted unnatural links with rich keyword stuffed anchor text from low-quality sites and private blog networks.

Perhaps too it was influenced by other ways Google has of identifying spam e.g. on a 'measure of quality' based on 'traffic received by use of those links' for instance:

QUOTE*: However, some a resource may be linked to by a large number of other resources, while receiving little traffic from the links. For example, an entity may attempt to game the ranking process by including a link to the resource on another web page. This large number of links can skew the ranking of the resources. To prevent such skew, the system can evaluate the "mismatch" between the number of linking resources and the traffic generated to the resource from the linking resources.* **If a resource is linked to by a number of resources that is disproportionate with respect to the traffic received by use of those links, that resource may be demoted in the ranking process***.""* Did the Groundhog Update Just Take Place at Google? BILL SLAWSKI

Who knows exactly, for sure?

All we know is that Penguin targeted sites often with a footprint of low-quality paid links.

It got mine, anyway!

Low-Quality Link Building Nuked!

[Blackhat SEO](#) immediately shared how this algorithm affected them:

QUOTE*: "Here we go again. This has gone from an attack to a massacre."*

Blackhat SEO are a great litmus test for these type of webspam algorithm updates:

QUOTE*: "I think they may have rolled this change out now in the UK. Almost all of my site have been wiped out!"*

followed by:

QUOTE*: "I got hosed bad too, about 4 hours ago."*

and:

QUOTE*: "If these SERP changes I'm seeing hold, we are gong to need to turn off that "profanity" filter because this is a blood bath!"*

and:

QUOTE*: "Bah, will this madness never end. The fallout from this algorithm change is shaping up to be pretty messy"*

and:

QUOTE*: "A ton of my sites have just tanked big time…….in fact rankings in a lot of my niches have taken drastic changes. My days as an internet marketer look to be numbered…."*

and:

QUOTE*: "I think my days as an internet marketer are numbered too."*

The Relationship Between Penguin & Panda

Google's algorithms seem focused on *quality, as Google defines it, and* Google has published advice on creating a high-quality website that will rank high in SERPs:

QUOTE: What counts as a high-quality site?

*"Our site quality algorithms are aimed at helping people find "high-quality" sites by reducing the rankings of low-quality content. The recent "Panda" change tackles the difficult task of algorithmically assessing website quality. **Below are some questions that one could use to assess the "quality" of a page or an articl**.:*

- *Would you trust the information presented in this article?*
- *Is this article written by an expert or enthusiast who knows the topic well, or is it more shallow in nature?*
- *Does the site have duplicate, overlapping, or redundant articles on the same or similar topics with slightly different keyword variations?*
- *Would you be comfortable giving your credit card information to this site?*
- *Does this article have spelling, stylistic, or factual errors?*
- *Are the topics driven by genuine interests of readers of the site, or does the site generate content by attempting to guess what might rank well in search engines?*
- *Does the article provide original content or information, original reporting, original research, or original analysis?*
- *Does the page provide substantial value when compared to other pages in search results?*
- *How much quality control is done on content?*
- *Does the article describe both sides of a story?*
- *Is the site a recognized authority on its topic?*
- *Is the content mass-produced by or outsourced to a large number of creators, or spread across a large network of sites, so that individual pages or sites don't get as much attention or care?*
- *Was the article edited well, or does it appear sloppy or hastily produced?*
- *For a health related query, would you trust information from this site?*
- *Would you recognize this site as an authoritative source when mentioned by name?*
- *Does this article provide a complete or comprehensive description of the topic?*
- *Does this article contain insightful analysis or interesting information that is beyond obvious?*
- *Is this the sort of page you'd want to bookmark, share with a friend, or recommend?*
- *Does this article have an excessive amount of ads that distract from or interfere with the main content?*
- *Would you expect to see this article in a printed magazine, encyclopedia or book?*
- *Are the articles short, unsubstantial, or otherwise lacking in helpful specifics?*
- *Are the pages produced with great care and attention to detail vs. less attention to detail?*
- *Would users complain when they see pages from this site?*

Writing an algorithm to assess page or site quality is a much harder task, but we hope the questions above give some insight into how we try to write algorithms that distinguish higher-quality sites from lower-quality sites." SOURCE

Those guidelines above are helpful to think about if impacted by Google PANDA or SITE QUALITY algorithms.

They are worth paying attention to - but equally, if you put your link building hat on, you could say **they were a guide as to where you might NOT want to see a link to your site** - which is where, in obvious cases, Penguin might take over.

Why would Google want to count a link to your site if your link was on any page that didn't meet these quality guidelines?

Why not considering penalising you if all your links are on pages that "*users complain when they see pages from this site?*".

Right or wrong - this is what Google is doing - in its self-styled PR 'war' on 'black hats' and you don't want to be pulled into that battle if you can avoid it.

Google doesn't seem to care about sites hit by Penguin as much as per say a human-reviewed manual action (when a penalty can sometimes be lifted very quickly if the infraction is borderline).

Should you be worried about the Google Penguin Algorithm?

If you run a business that can't afford to flip domains and change web addresses, then perhaps, especially if you are letting a third party 'build' links to your site.

If you are not buying links (and have never done so), then you probably have A LOT LESS to worry about (and should be more concerned with Google Panda and overall site and page quality challenges).

If you are the unfortunate recipient of negative SEO attacks (as my own site has in the few last years) then the only real option you have is to have your disavow file in place at Google Webmaster Tools - and make an apparent attempt to disassociate yourself from the most toxic of those links. Google is a lot better at handling this though and it is not something most webmasters need to be worried about.

Google recently penalised a lot of not-so 'Private' Blog Networks (PBNs) that were breaking the rules, and Google's John Mueller said **that algorithms don't operate in isolation** - which could indicate your site needs to trip more than one quality signal to be heavily punished.

In my opinion, Google Penguin was always more traditionally about the nature of your backlink profile and whether it was 'real' or not.

Many of my black hat friends won't go near a disavow file but they have an entirely different business model.

If you care about a site, you probably should have a disavow file in place - especially if you rank successfully for anything.

Penguin is an algorithm you do not want slapping your site down or alerting the webspam team to the quality of your site - so **check your backlinks for obvious, low-quality links.**

I presume you are already addressing site quality issues to avoid getting continually pumped by a constantly evolving Google Panda algorithm (which is more focused on content quality).

Penguin Update History Dates:

It is still useful to know the dates around these original Penguin updates for analysis purposes:

- Penguin 1.0 - April 24, 2012 (3.1% of searches)
- Penguin 1.2 - May 26, 2012 (0.1% of searches)
- Penguin 1.3 - October 5, 2012 (0.3% of searches)
- Penguin 2.0 - May 22, 2013 (2.3% of searches)
- Penguin 2.1 - Oct. 4, 2013 (1% of searches)
- *Penguin 3 - Oct. 17/18 2014 (LESS THAN 1%)*
- **Penguin 4 - Announced September 2016 (with potential updates into 2017, but not officially announced)**

Impact of Historic Penguin Updates

- Many sites were impacted experienced fall-out from Penguin 1 and Penguin 2, and some Webmasters waited YEARS to be 'released' by this algorithm - leaving them in a desperate position.
- Google Penguin 2 did a pretty good job at devaluing some lower quality links from obvious link sources. Whether Google just slapped an algorithmic change on you, algorithmically penalised you or started ignoring your links - the result was that previously stable rankings disappeared overnight. If the sites that link to you have a quality issue (from Google's point of view), expect that ranking problem only to worsen.
- I do see Google rewarding a diverse and natural link profile even in some less spammy verticals. There is still spam, of course.
- Penguin 2 was not initially as aggressive as Penguin 1. Penguin 2 looked like more of a rerun of Penguin 1 with a net cast wider. **Penguin 1 focused on home pages** (with lots of manipulative anchor text) - and **Penguin 2 was a rollout of the same algorithm to internal pages on your site** (as we understand it).

What If I Do Nothing about my old toxic links?

You can also do nothing, and hope Google passes you by, and your rankings do not disappear over the coming months.

I wouldn't.

- You SHOULD be disavowing most risky links IF YOU ENGINEERED THEM from your backlink profile as you are still at risk of manual actions and future algorithm changes.
- You should STILL be link building, too, but start with a piece of content that deserves links. Links STILL make the world turn as far as Google is concerned - just don't be doing what everyone else is doing.

If you are not involved in any low-quality link building, *Penguin* will probably not affect you, anyways - but there are lots of other things going on at Google to change your rankings.

Summary

Google is serious about messing with the longevity and confidence in SEO. If you get a manual penalty, you'll probably have to remove links and use the disavow tool – which is a tremendous drain on resources and time.

- Audit your backlinks if nothing else.
- Consider using the disavow tool to tackle obvious algorithmic penalties if traffic is taking a nosedive

There are arguments against this, mind you, but **low-quality unnatural links are certainly going to have to be addressed** for sites with little online business authority themselves – and probably even more so for sites that exist to profit from natural SEO traffic.

You are going to hear a lot about '*content marketing*' going into the near future.

You still **need to be building links**, but **avoid the low-quality stuff** and avoid the kind of networks on Google's radar.

Any industrial method of link-building is eventually going to get Google's attention.

For a refresher - you can also see things Google tells you to avoid.

Related links

- Using the Disavow Tool
- Google Disavow Tool
- Announcement From Google about the tool
- Link Schemes
- Site not doing well in Google?
- Notice about unnatural links

If you are having problems with unnatural links, or experienced a gradual, or cataclysmic fall in traffic from Google, and want professional help to remove them, you can contact us here.

Google Penalty Recovery Services

We have a very good track record of lifting penalties, or manual actions, as they are called. We do NOT have a special relationship with Google or anything (NO SEO company does), but Google (in our recent experience) is being fair-handed when you make a concerted effort to promote your website in their listings by their guidelines.

We get successful results because we stick at it and **work with your business UNTIL the penalty is lifted, and for a fixed cost**, based on the number of domains (websites) pointing at your site.

Every website situation is different, but the good news is your business CAN recover from such a Google penalty. It CAN return to previous ranking positions (before you started spamming Google).

Rankings and traffic CAN even improve after a penalty if you are willing to promote your website in a way more likely to build real trust and reputation signals to your website.

We can often get a penalty lifted relatively FAST, and using no tricks - contact us today if you need a professional, manual review of your unnatural links, and help with identifying and removing them, for a successful Google reconsideration request.

SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

Send me an email if you want your backlinks manually reviewed, or have an unnatural links notice from Google. Costs will be dependent on your backlink profile.

If you've lost Google traffic over the last year - this could be the sign of an algorithmic shift or penalty, based on an aspect of your links or site.

Contact us if you want a comprehensive SEO audit of your business site to look for risk AND opportunity.

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The End

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