SEO **BEST** PRACTICES GUIDE

STEVENS
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
1870

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INTRODUCTION TO **SEO BASICS:**

Search engines are tools used to find information across the internet. At the end of December 2022, Google had an 86.08% share of the search market. Because of this, we focus our optimization efforts towards Google, their search algorithms & search standards

How search engines work:

Google's goal is to make any and all information accessible in as few clicks as possible to ensure the user finds the most helpful and relevant information quickly.

To achieve that, it uses algorithms to scan websites and webpages for signals and factors. These help determine the context of the content in relation to the authority of a webpage and the query (keyword/key phrase entered into the search bar) used in the search process.

Google then produces a list of results that are relevant to the users' search factors. Due to the complexity and interactivity of the algorithms, the top results listed are the most relevant to the searcher's query, and hold a high level of authority and trustworthiness.

How Google chooses the top URLs to display from search results:

1. The algorithms Google uses to rank content take a variety of factors into account, including the keywords used in the search query and the quality or the content relevant to the query. The most relevant results are listed in the search engine results page (SERP).

2. Google ranks data based on how helpful it is. One of the most impactful updates to Google's algorithm occurred in the late summer to early fall in 2022, titled the Helpful Content Update.

   Basically, helpful content provides expertise on a subject that comes from a trustworthy source.

Why SEO is the most important step of content management

1. The URLs closest to the first position of Google receive the most search traffic. Before Google removed its pagination, over 70% of searches occurred on the first page. Incorporating search engine optimization (SEO) is an important aspect of content strategy because it can ensure your content is visible and discoverable by your target audience. Websites that rely heavily on lead generation and organic traffic are dependent on users' ability to find and select their URL in the Google search results.

2. A robust SEO strategy can also help establish credibility with a particular URL, which is one of the factors that Google takes into account when ranking content. The more authoritative and trustworthy a domain is, the more likely it is to be selected and shown in the first positions on Google.

DANCING W/ ALGORITHMS:
DO'S & DON'TS

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Algorithm updates

Vigilance is key in anticipating Google's many surprise updates. While Google updates its algorithm constantly, it doesn't always announce these updates. Google also keeps algorithm information incredibly private—to the point where SEO experts still don't understand all aspects of the algorithm.

Do's: SEO elements to remember

1. Google's quality rater guidelines help the algorithm evaluate content on a webpage. EEAT evaluates whether or not Google's search ranking systems are providing relevant and helpful information when presented with queries. Pages that incorporate all of these elements are seen as having more authority. The higher authority a domain has, the more likely it is to perform well in search results.

Do incorporate elements of EEAT

- *Expertise*
- *Experience*
- *Authoritativeness*
- *Trustworthiness*

   One way content managers can incorporate elements of EEAT is by paying close attention to the language and tone they use. The Stevens Brand Guidelines document contains rules and examples of what a copywriter's voice and tone should be on stevens.edu. Here copywriters will see how they can "speak Stevens" within their website content but also keep in mind SEO elements and best practices from this guide.

2. **Do use natural English** - Copywriters should always have human readers in mind when writing content for a website. While incorporating keywords and optimizing for search is important, writing in a natural voice and tone, a copywriter can connect with their audience in an authentic and meaningful way.

3. **Do structure the page with headings** - People skim content to find what they need, especially when that content is very dense. You have to break it up! When pages are structured with clear headings true to the content, a user is more likely to have a positive experience.

4. **Do pay attention to keyword density** - Keywords should never be over-used to the point that they negatively impact the user experience. Pages that contain too many keywords often come across as artificial and quite frankly, strange.

   The keyword density of a webpage should not be above 5.5%. To calculate the keyword density, divide the number of times a keyword is used on the page by the total number of words on the page, then multiply that total by 100 to get the percentage.

Don'ts: SEO mistakes to avoid

1. **Don't add 'Stevens' to a keyword or keyphrase** - While it may be intended for branding and brand distinguishment, adding the institution's name to a keyword or phrase actually severely limits which keyword it will rank for.

> *Example:* '*biomedical engineering masters program' brings in an average monthly search volume of 400. When the institution's name is added, changing the keyword to 'Stevens biomedical engineering masters program,' the average monthly keyword search volume is 10. This is a significantly lower number of searches, which limits the amount of users that will travel to the page. By using a keyword with higher volume, the content manager is opening up the potential search pool, which increases the chances of users traveling to the site.*

Since webpages can use other branding elements such as title tags, logos and other branding imagery, it is unnecessary to also have the brand name with the focus keyword too often in the text. There are other ways for a user to know they are on a Stevens webpage.

2. **Don't stuff keywords** - When it comes to keywords, less is more. Keyword stuffing occurs when content contains a large number of keywords and key phrases, negatively impacting the user experience. This is a blackhat SEO tactic that will result in penalization by Google, where Google severely limits a URL from appearing in search results.

3. **Don't use content written primarily by AI** - Google is pretty smart and can easily identify content written by artificial intelligence. As the algorithm scans content, it identifies non-human attributes in the writing styles. The more non-human attributes identified, the lower Google will rank the content.

4. **Don't let your content get stale** - Update your content often. The fresher and more relevant your content is, the more likely it is to rank competitively in the Google search results.

CONTENT **DEVELOPMENT** CHECKLIST

Understanding the audience & identifying user intent

The Stevens website caters to a multitude of audiences. Since the audience and user intent per audience can be drastically different, it is important to not only identify each user audience but their intent as well. Below is a list of primary audiences on stevens.edu:

- Current students: Undergraduate
- Current students: Graduate
- Current student: Ph.D. Students
- Current student: International
- Prospective students: Undergraduate
- Prospective graduate students: Graduate
- Prospective students: Ph.D. Students
- Prospective students: International

- Faculty & Staff
- Prospective Faculty & Staff
- Alumni
- Community
- Parents/Family
- Donors
- Partners
- Media/Press

Incorporating keywords & keyword modifiers

1. Keywords are words and phrases that searchers use to find a website. Basically, they define what a webpage's content is. Incorporating keywords into a keyword strategy is one of the most important elements of SEO because they help define what a user is searching for. Once marketers can identify what that is, they can tailor content around these keywords so that they best match user intent. The webpages that best match user intent and have the highest EEAT scores will be most likely to rank higher in search engine results.

   - **Types of keywords that indicate user intent:**

     Informational - gain general knowledge on a topic
     Navigational - has an end destination in mind
     Commercial - information on future purchases
     Transactional - shows intent to buy a product or service

   - **Informational & commercial keywords will most likely be used on academic pages, and major and minor pages**

   - **Navigational & transactional keywords will most likely be used on admissions pages and enrollment pages.**

2. Keyword modifiers are words added to core keywords or key phrases to make them more targeted and specific. Check out this list of keyword modifiers with their respective keyword type.

Informational	Navigational	Commercial	Transactional
How	Stevens	Best	Apply to Stevens
What	The Stevens MBA	Top	How to get into Stevens
Where	Stevens soccer/ducks	Top ranking	Stevens enrollment deadline
Why	Where is Stevens located	Pricing [affordable, cheapest]	Stevens enrollment checklist
Learn [degree/major]	Stevens graduate/masters programs	Size [biggest/largest, smallest]	Stevens bookstore
Online [degree/major]	Stevens acceptance rate	vs	Stevens registration
[Degree/major] jobs	Stevens tuition	Schools in [location]	Stevens accepted students
[Degree/major] curriculum	Stevens ranking	[Type of school]	Stevens application deadline
[Degree/major] research	Stevens majors/degrees	Class sizes [small, large]	Stevens admissions
Honors [degree/major]	Visit/tour Stevens	Best financial aid	How to apply to Stevens?
[Degree/major] opportunities	Stevens request information	Schools with [X]	
[Degree/major] academic requirements	[Stevens accreditation]	[Location] [programs/degrees/majors]	
[Degree/major] salary	Stevens Graduation Rate		
Informational	Stevens Retention Rate		
	Stevens [program/honors/ degree] requirements		

Writing for SEO

1. **EEAT:**

   - *Expertise* - To harness elements of experience in copywriting, the content should come across as knowledgeable and provide an understanding of the topic. Copywriters should reference the Stevens Brand Guidelines as a guide on how to express Stevens' core messaging. If a copywriter does not have this knowledge or understanding, it is best to consult an expert in the subject matter. When referencing a Stevens faculty or staff member, include their credentials and link to the directory if possible.

   - *Experience* - Writers can demonstrate first-hand experience to harness elements of experience in copywriting. If a copywriter does not have this knowledge or understanding, it is best to consult with someone who does, incorporating details of their experience into writing styles such as tone and voice.

   - *Authority* - To harness elements of authority, copywriters should write in a clear and concise manner. Avoid over- or under-explaining, and trim unnecessary text that does not bring value. The Stevens Brand Guidelines display several examples of this such as "...equipped for leadership" and "We're a leader in student success post-graduation"

   - *Trustworthiness* - One way to harness elements of trustworthiness is to write content for the user's intent. Another way is to eliminate passive sentences.

2. **Write clearly, and write concisely** - For Google's algorithm to see a page as an expert source of information, the language on the page needs to be written with clarity. The lower a page's readability score is, the less helpful it is and the lower the URL will rank on Google.

   Users often skim text to find the information they are looking for. Text needs to be easily digestible so that finding information isn't difficult and overwhelming. It is important for content managers and copywriters to write in a clear and concise manner, getting helpful information and content across without overloading the use.

3. **Language complexity** - In order for content to have elements of EEAT, there needs to be a degree of language complexity. If a page contains too much simple language, Google's algorithm will not assess it as being of value to users. If it does not see a page's content as valuable or helpful, it simply will not rank the URL high in the search results, thus limiting the page's visibility.

4. **How to establish an appropriate tone** - When incorporating elements of EEAT, copywriters and content managers can use the tone of their writing to harness expertise and experience, while coming across as trustworthy and having authority. In reference to the Stevens Brand Guidelines, the tone should be informative, supportive, passionate, sensible, inspiring, enthusiastic and reassuring.

5. **Write like a human will read it** - When writing for SEO, human readers always come first. Google prefers content that is written by people for people.

6. **Using Related Keywords** - Since it is not best practice to have a high keyword density, it is crucial for content managers and copywriters to use keywords related to the focus keyword. This can help the page establish more authority on a topic and rank for additional keywords.

SEO formatting & optimization best practices

1. **Image alt attributes** - 'Alt text' is the text used within an HTML code to describe the image and its functionality within a specific page. Using alt text ensures that web users who utilize screen readers can access the context of the image.

   When adding alt text to images on the stevens.edu site, it is important to reference the campus when applicable, building names when applicable, and that students pictured are Stevens students.

   How to Optimize: Alt-text is typically between 80 – 125 characters. When writing alt text, content managers and copywriters should ask themselves "Why am I using this photo?" to best portray its context, while leaving nothing to the imagination. The key with alt text is accurately depicting what is happening in an image, while correlating it with the stevens.edu domain. Image alt attributes should always include the focus keyword since it is the focus of the page and reference Stevens.

   ## Bad alt text example:

   "3 college students with stuffed animals"

   This alt text is not descriptive enough, and leaves too much up to the imagination. Where are these students? What college or university are they attending? Why are they holding stuffed animals? What and why is the image being used?

   ## Good alt text example:

   "3 undergraduate Stevens Institute of Technology students smiling for a photo on campus celebrating Stevens Day of Giving with stuffed duck mascot stuffed animals"

Image example

   This alt text leaves nothing to the imagination. A user utilizing a screen reader will know that these are Stevens students, they are on campus at the Day of Giving Event, and that they are holding the Stevens mascot.

2. **Slugs** - This is the tail-end part of a URL after the backslash. Slugs should explain what the page is about and what the user intent is.

   How to optimize: How to Optimize: Keep the slug as simple and as easy to read as possible, but keep it relevant to the content. Slugs should include the focus keyword and never include duplicates of any words. Slugs should never contain unnecessary function words such as "and", "the" and "a".

3. **Title tags** - These can also be called SEO titles, and they are HTML tags that are used to title a web page. This title is found in the browser title bar and the search engine results page.

   How to optimize: Title tags should contain the focus keyword early on in the title. They should also be unique and not duplicated. Google has not released a recommended character length for title tags, but search engine optimization experts recommend keeping titles under 60 characters because Google only displays the first 50-60 characters on their desktop and mobile browser displays.

4. **Heading tags** - These are used to separate headings and subheadings on a page. Heading tags are ranked in order of importance, starting with H1 to H6. H1s are traditionally titles, and there should only be one H1 per page. Headings help improve readability by separating information into sections, making it easier for the user to digest. Headings are crucial for SEO, since they help tell Google's algorithm what the page is about.

   How to optimize: A page should always have one H1 per page that contains the focus keyword. All remaining headings should be relevant to the focus keyword/topic, and indicate user intent. Content managers and copywriters should always use H2, H3s and H4s for keyword optimization and for breaking up content in a logical, easy-to-read way.

5. **Meta descriptions** - These are short blurbs below the SEO title on SERPs that give searchers an idea of what a page is about. They will be scanning this text to see which page will give them the best result they are looking for.

   How to optimize: Copywriters should keep their meta descriptions between 130-155 characters, and meta descriptions should always contain the focus keyword. Meta descriptions should be engaging, unique, and include a call to action.
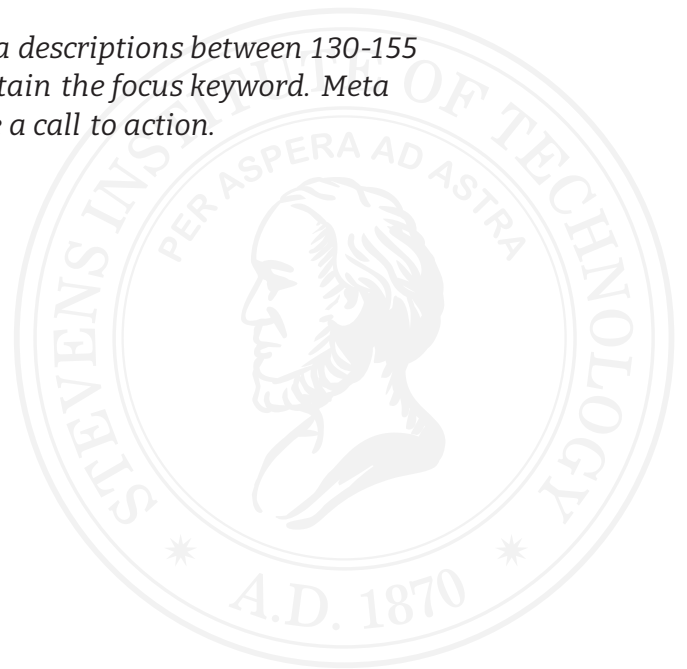
Use audience-specific keywords

By conducting effective keyword research and understanding user intent, content managers and copywriters will be able to find keywords specific to the intended audience.

Optimize metadata

Never publish a page without optimizing its metadata first. Metadata is information that search engines use to understand content within a webpage. In a sense, they are little clues and markers that help tell a search engine what the content is about and what information it is offering to a user.

Below is an example of an academic program page's optimized meta data. When optimizing metadata within Contentful, a content manager will see this screen in the page settings:

A. This is the name of the page for internal purposes

B. This is the Page Title and it is found within browser tabs and search engine result pages. Remember, page titles should contain the focus keyword early on in the title and titles should be unique.

C. This is the slug, the tail-end part of a URL. Remember, slugs should be written as simple and as easy to read as possible while relevant to the content

D. This is the SEO Metadata editor within Contentful. Clicking on this will take the content manager to an area where they can edit the remaining metadata. When they click on this, they will see this screen:

Internal Name (required)
A. ➡ Industrial & Systems Engineering B.E. - SSE - Undergrad
56 characters   Maximum 256 characters
Needed to represent the entry internally

Page Title (required)
B. ➡ Industrial and Systems Engineering B.E.
39 characters   Maximum 256 characters
Will be shown as page title

Slug (required)
C. ➡ 🔗 industrial-systems-engineering-be
Unique string to become a part of URL

SEO Metadata
D. ➡ 🌐 - SEO   PUBLISHED ⋯
Industrial & Systems Engineering Bachelor's Degree Meta
Populates metatags for the page

Additional example of the academic program page's optimized meta data.

A. Here is the internal name, it is also listed within this section. This is the name of the page for internal purposes

B. Here is the SEO title, it is also listed within this section. This is the Page Title and it is found within browser tabs and search engine result pages.

C. This is the meta description, these are short blurbs below the SEO title on SERPs that give searchers an idea of what a page is about.

D. This is where the content manager will list the focus keywords of the webpage. Since this is an academic program page, the focus keywords are variations of the program name.

E. The image field can be used to upload a featured image for the page that appears on search engine result pages and social media posts. By default search engines will automatically pull an image from page if there is one, this field allows content manager to manually set a featured image.

A. ➡️

Internal Name (required)

| Industrial & Systems Engineering Bachelor's Degree Meta |

55 characters   Maximum 256 characters
Needed to represent the entry internally

B. ➡️

SEO Title

| Industrial & Systems Engineering Bachelor's Degree - Stevens Institute of Technology |

84 characters   Maximum 256 characters
Overrides default page title metatags

C. ➡️

Description

| The industrial and systems engineering undergraduate degree program prepares students for employmer |

232 characters   Maximum 256 characters
Overrides default description metatags

D. ➡️

Keywords

| Type the value and hit enter |

⠿ industrial and systems engineering bachelors degree ✕

⠿ industrial systems engineering degree ✕   ⠿ industrial and systems engineering ✕

⠿ industrial systems engineering ✕

List keywords here, hit enter for consecutive values

E. ➡️

Image

| + Add media ⌄ |

Image for SEO purposes (to override the default SE behavior)

F. ➡️

Hide page from search engines (noindex)

○ Yes ◉ No   Clear
Disallow indexing by search engines

G. ➡️

Exclude links from search rankings? (nofollow)

○ Yes ◉ No   Clear

F. This indicates if the page should be hidden from search engine results. This will most often be checked 'No' since you normally want pages to be found by search engines. The only reason why a content manager would click 'Yes' is if they did not want it do be searchable on Google.

G. Checking 'Yes' will prevent Google from following the links on the page. Since internal and external linking is a common SEO strategy, content managers will most often select 'No' for this option.

The Stevens brand style guide

This document is for content migrators and copywriters to reference when creating content for stevens.edu. This document serves as a guide for Stevens' visual and verbal brand identity.

Using Google search as a resource

1. Google Search is an effective SEO research tool in itself. Using the search features, content managers can look up what questions users searched for, giving a crystal clear picture of user intent. Incorporating related content on pages is an excellent tactic to optimize them.

2. Content managers can also use Google Search to identify common search phrases and language behavior. Understanding this is key to writing content that will rank for common search queries.

AnswerThePublic

1. This is a free online tool that helps marketers identify key phrases and keyword modifiers related to a search query. This can help them explore more topic ideas, and identify trending topics, similar keywords, and other useful search information. AnswerThePublic uses autocomplete data from Google's search engines to build their huge database. Learn More...

limited to 2 searches per-day per IP address

Ahrefs Free Keyword Generator

1. Marketers can use this free online tool to find keywords that will help a page rank. They can enter a keyword and get a list of relevant keywords they can use within their content. This tool also shows an estimated monthly search volume for a keyword, which is essential for strategizing which keywords to use.

2. This tool also provides questions related to the query entered, which gives marketers content ideas and a sense of user search intent. Learn More...

GLOSSARY

1. **Keywords & keyphrases** - A word or phrase that is entered into a search engine to find information. The keyword and keyphrases are analyzed by Google to match the most relevant search results with the query.

2. **Keyword modifiers** - Words added to core keywords or keyphrases to make it more targeted and specific.

3. **SERP** - Search Engine Results Page, or the page you see when you perform a search on Google.

4. **User intent** - The core reason why the user is searching a search engine.

5. **BlackHat SEO** - These are frowned-upon tactics used by marketers in an attempt to manipulate Google's algorithm. These tactics are highly discouraged and using them can result in penalization.

6. **Domain** - This is the address used to access a website. Stevens' website domain is https://www.stevens.edu/.

7. **Subdomain** - This is the part of the domain created to organize and navigate a website. An example of a subdomain on stevens.edu is https://www.stevens.edu/school-engineering-science or https://www.stevens.edu/academics

8. **Domain authority** - This is a ranking score that predicts how likely a website is to rank in SERPs. The higher the website authority, the higher it will rank within the SERPs because Google sees it as a resource for trustworthy information.

9. **Schema markup**- The language Google uses to read and understand content on a webpage.

10. **Internal linking** - Internal linking occurs when a link linking to another page within the same domain is added to content within a page. Marketers will use internal linking when they want to provide the user with additional information on a topic.

11. **External linking** - External linking occurs when a link linking to another website domain is added within a page. Marketers use external linking to build authority.