SEO 101: The 23-Point SEO Checklist

If you’re just getting the hang of all the things that go into an optimized website, there’s no doubt the list can be overwhelming. In Bruce Clay, Inc.’s [SEO Training course](http://www.bruceclay.com/seo/training.htm), we offer students an SEO checklist as one of the many take-home materials. Here, we’d like give you an excerpt of that list to help you on your way. While not exhaustive, many people find a list like this to be a great reminder of the many “to-do” items during their SEO projects.

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On-Page Optimization

**1. Head Section Order**  
BCI’s best practices is to ensure your Web pages’ Meta tags are in the right order: Title > Description > Keywords. Remember, the information you put in these tags is used to render the title and description in the search engine results pages, and is what searchers see.

**2. Title Tag**  
BCI methodology states Title tags should be approx. nine words, plus or minus three. You want to make sure the most important information, including top keywords, show up before the cutoff in the SERP in Google at approximately 70 characters including spaces.

**3. Description Tag**  
The description tag should also be mindful to include the most important info and  keywords before the SERP cutoff at approximately 160 characters in Google.

**Side note:** Don’t forget to make the title and description compelling – this assists in conversions. You don’t want to waste your prime real estate in the SERP with boring copy. For more on your Head section, check out this SEO Newsletter article that discusses the [ins and outs of Meta data](http://www.bruceclay.com/newsletter/volume79/metadata.html).

**4. Keywords Tag**  
Even though Google has stated the Keywords tag is not a consideration in ranking, we always include it as a best practice. We list keywords in order from longest in length to shortest in length, separated by commas.

**5. Heading Tags**  
In the body of your content, make sure your first Heading tag always begins as an <h1>. Subsequent heading tags should be <h2>, <h3>, <h4> etc., and be used as the page’s table of contents. For example, <h2> is a subhead of <h1>.

**6. Overall Word Count**  
The amount of words you have on a Web page will vary by topic, keyword and intent. But, in general, less than 250 words is rarely recommended – *especially* if you’re trying to optimize for keywords. Informational Web pages will almost always warrant at least 450 words. And quality content is key.

**7. Alt Attributes with Keywords**  
The American with Disabilities Act says you should always describe the image on the page for the vision impaired. Ensure your images have proper descriptions associated with them, and if appropriate, keywords for the page. Alt attributes are also required to validate your HTML code.

**8. Dashes vs. Underscores in URLs**  
Underscores are alpha characters and do not separate words. Dashes are word separators, but should not appear too many times or it could look spammy. For more on this topic, [check out this post](http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/dashes-vs-underscores/) by Google’s Matt Cutts.

**9. Fully Qualified Links**  
If you make your links fully qualified, there’s no question by search engine spiders, browsers, etc. as to where the file is located and what it’s about. If your link looks something like “../../pagename” (a relative link), then it may result in crawl issues for some search engines. Rather than complex URLs, use fully qualified links (http://www.URL). And the site map should always have fully qualified URLs.

**10. Make JavaScript/CSS External**You want to be sure the most important code is the first thing the search engine bots crawl. You can externalize the code that gets in the way of this to ensure there aren’t unnecessary lines above the body text.

Sitewide Optimization

**11. Site Map**  
Your site should have an HTML site map, and every page should link to that site map, probably in the footer. You should also have an XML Sitemap you submit to search engines.

**12. Text Navigation**  
Verify there is text navigation, not JavaScript or Flash navigation that spider’s can’t see. Make sure you at least have text navigation on the bottom of the page if there aren’t any spiderable navigation links in the top nav.

**13. Make Robots.txt File**  
It’s important this file exists, even if it’s empty. The Robots.txt file tells the search engine spiders what not to index. Also make sure the file doesn’t accidentally exclude important files, directories or the entire site (this has been known to happen!).

**14. Keyword Strategy**  
The keyword strategy is an ongoing process that essentially never ends. It starts with extensive research and iterates with extensive research. One could write novels about this topic; just know it’s part of any solid SEO checklist.

**15. Web Analytics**  
There’s much you could say about Web analytics in your SEO strategy. The important thing is to make sure you have it. Ensure your analytics are properly set up and monitor them regularly to find out of if the keywords that are generating traffic are in your keyword list, and that your site is optimized for them.

**16. Linking Strategy**  
This section warrants way more than just a few sentences, but it should be noted as part of the SEO checklist. Your internal linking structure typically stems from your [siloing strategy](http://www.bruceclay.com/seo/silo.htm" \o "siloing strategy" \t "_blank). Your inbound/outbound links should be part of an organic, natural strategy in compliance with search engine guidelines, and be monitored regularly.

**17. Server Configuration**Regularly check your server, looking for 404 errors, 301 redirects and other errors.

**18. Privacy Statement**  
Some reports say a “privacy statement” on your site is an important element in bing. It’s best practices to include one anyway; this is so you can let site visitors know what you’re doing with any data you collect about them.

**19. Static Pages**Complex, dynamic URLs could be a problem. If your URLs have more than two query string parameters and/or dynamic pages aren’t getting indexed and/or you have a lot of duplicate content, consider converting them to static pages. You can also use mod\_rewrite or ISAPI\_rewrite, as appropriate, to simplify URLs. Rewritten URLs will appear to be static pages. This tends to be a lot of work, but is a surefire way to address this issue; you can also use the Canonical tag.

**20. Static Index Pages**  
If you have a home page with content that constantly changes, it can result in diluting the theme of your site and cause poor rankings for key terms. Try to maintain chunks of constant text on the home page.

**21. Use Text over Images**  
Any time you can use text for something instead of image files, this helps the spiders understand what the page is about. This is because search engine spiders can’t “see” all the text on an image file.

**22. Ensure No SPAM Tactics**  
Make sure your SEO strategy is following [Google Webmaster Guidelines](http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=35769). If ever in doubt about any of your tactics, refer to what [Google accepts for SEO](http://static.googleusercontent.com/external_content/untrusted_dlcp/www.google.com/en/us/webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf).

**23. Check for Duplicate Content**Do a search to see if your content exists elsewhere on the Web. You may want to check out [CopyScape.com](http://www.copyscape.com/) and use it regularly.