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How to optimize your website for SEO.

A Beginner's Guide by AddThis®

You want people to find your website, right?

Well, that means making sure that when someone searches Google or another search engine for what you've got on your site, they'll find it. This will only happen if the text content on your website contains the words and phrases that your target audience is searching for.

Sounds pretty straightforward, but there is a lot you can do (and should do!) on your site to get search engines to prioritize your site above others that contain similar keywords.

This guide presents a comprehensive overview of the steps you need to take—and the "best practices" involved in each step—to optimize your site for best search engine results.

Having the right keywords on your site, and using them effectively, is one of the cornerstones of SEO – Search Engine Optimization. In fact, many online marketing experts will tell you that keyword research is one of the most critical, valuable and high-ROI activities in the online marketing field. In many cases, it's not an exaggeration to say that ranking well for the right keywords can make or break your business.

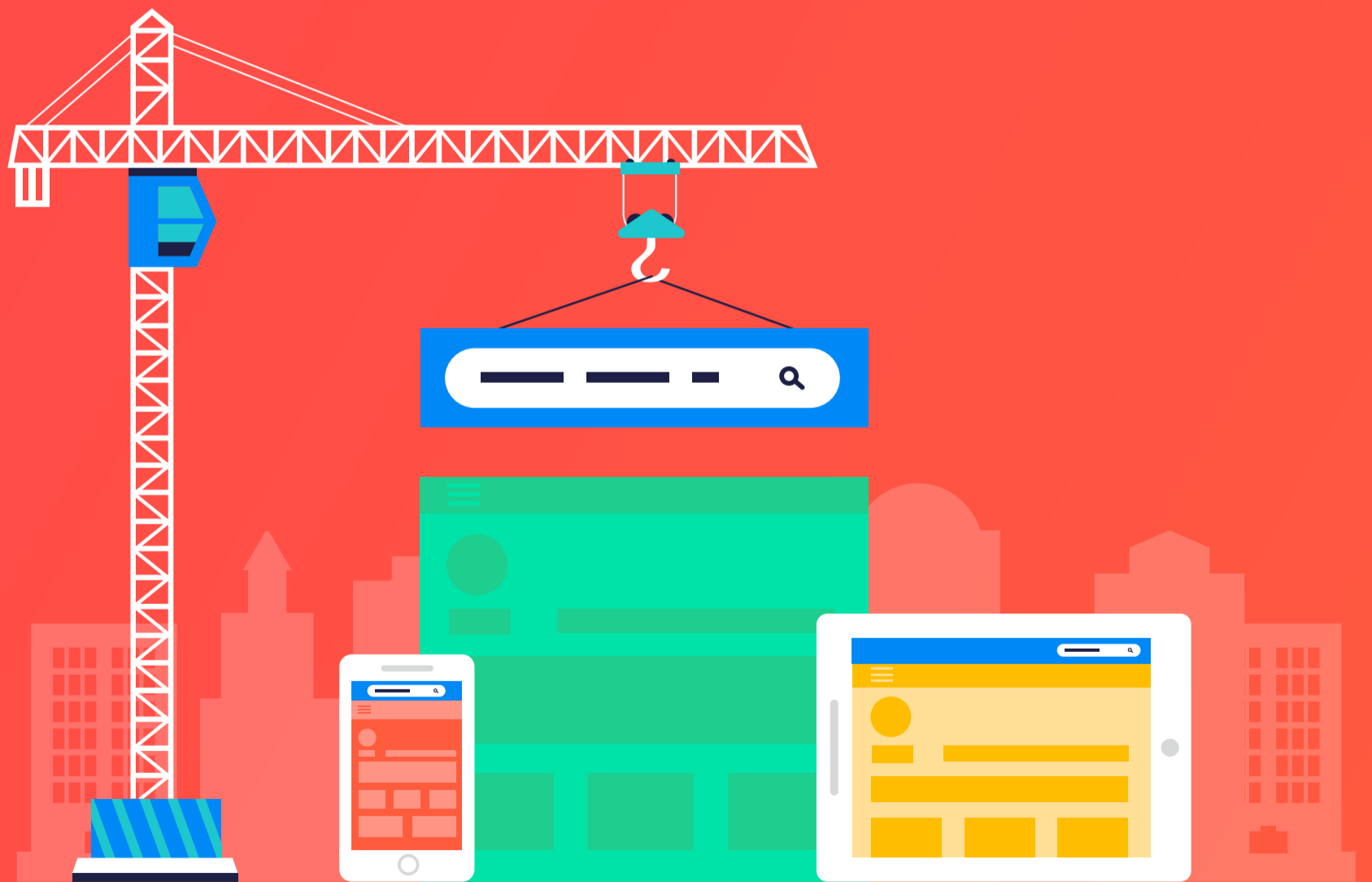# There are two main challenges to SEO

1 Identifying the words and phrases that people are using to find the products, services or information you're offering.

2 Properly implementing the keywords in your site's content and code so that your site will rank above your competitors in search engines.

Let's dive into each one!

Keywords are the foundation of SEO

How to build a keyword list for your website

Your first and most important step is to compile a list of the most important keywords to target. Your goal is to find the most relevant words and phrases that will lead your desired audience to your site.

Here are some tips to get started:

Start with high-level categories and drill down

Make a list of the general topics that describe your business, industry or offering. Brainstorm on all the specific words and phrases that make sense within each one. Include synonyms and alternative terms that searchers might be using. Some ideas to get your creative juices flowing: consider including specific brand names, product categories/names, product functions/features, complementary industry terms (names of items connected to your offering even if you don't sell them yourself) and terms describing common users/purchasers of your products/services.

Think like your customers

Sometimes, business owners see their offering somewhat differently than their customers might. It's important to put yourself in the shoes of your customers and try to imagine what they might be typing into search engines to find what you've got. Ask some of your customers to tell you how they searched for you initially! Keep in mind that there will be extensive variety among the people searching for your offering – some are looking for initial information, some already know what they want, some are shopping around for alternatives and so forth. Make sure that you are covering all the types of customers, at all stages of the buying cycle.

Look at the data you already have

If you use website analytics software, you should be able to generate a report of which keywords customers used in search engines to reach your site (Google used to be more generous with this information in the past, but you might still get some of it, especially if you are using AdWords). Even better, if you track conversions (which you should absolutely be doing!), your conversion reports can include those search terms that most often delivered the customers who converted. Also, if your site has a search box, you'll find plenty of ideas for keywords in the terms your visitors have already searched for.

### Research your competitors' websites

Visit the sites of your online competitors to see what keywords they use in their content (pay special attention to keywords used in page and section headings) and in their site code (e.g., title and meta tags – more about this later).

Include local terms, if relevant for your business

If you are trying to attract customers who live in one or more particular geographic areas (e.g., state, city, neighborhood), make sure to include all relevant names describing those areas in your keyword list. When applicable, localized search terms are a fast and powerful way to get visibility alongside other competitors in search engine results.

Select specific keywords to target specific customers

In addition to the general topics and terms that describe your offering, dive down into very specific sub-categories that may be of interest to certain types of customers, or specific products/services that you offer.
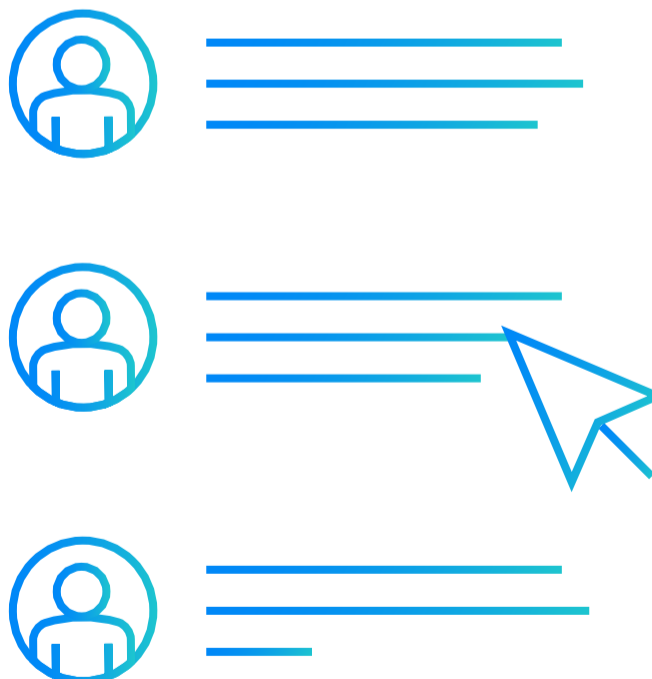
Use tools to find similar keywords you may not have thought of

There are many online tools that can be a big help in coming up with sets of similar yet different keywords (sometimes called "keyword clusters"), and even in sparking ideas for entirely new keyword categories. This is really not optional – you need to do it! Find one or two tools that you're comfortable with and take the time to learn how to get the most out of them.

Some widely-used keyword tools you might want to check out include:

- **Google Analytics Site Search** (free, requires a Google Analytics account)
- **Google Keyword Planner** (free, requires a Google AdWords account)
- **Google Keyword Suggestion tool** (free, requires a Google AdWords account)
- **Google Trends** (free)
- **Jaaxy** (free trial, then monthly subscription)
- **Keyword Eye** (free trial, then monthly subscription)
- **Keyword Revealer** (free trial, then monthly subscription)
- **KeywordTool.io** (limited free version or monthly subscription)
- **KWFinder.com** (limited free version or monthly subscription)
- **Microsoft Bing Ads Intelligence tool** (free, requires a Bing Ads account)
- **Moz Pro Keyword Explorer** (monthly subscription)
- **SE Ranking** (free trial, then monthly subscription)
- **SEMRush** (requires monthly subscription)
- **SimilarWeb PRO** (free trial available, then monthly subscription)
- **SpyFu** (requires monthly subscription)
- **Trellian Keyword Discovery** (limited free version or monthly subscription)
- **Übersuggest** (free)
- **Wordtracker** (monthly subscription)

Refine and prioritize your keyword list

Once you've got your initial set of keywords, you need to select the ones that will likely have the greatest impact, at least as a first step. The limit on how many words you can reasonably optimize your website for depends on the size of your site, but you'll always need to try to zero in on the best keywords to use.

There are two primary considerations while doing this:

1 **Monthly search volume**
You want to start by focusing on terms that have the potential to bring the most visitors.

2 **Competition**
You want to take into consideration which terms involve intense competition, because it might be difficult for you to rank well at first (or ever!) for those terms. On the flip side, look for keywords which may be able to grab higher rankings quickly because fewer websites are using them.

Of course, there is usually more competition for terms with greater search volume (because that's where the money is!), so there's not always a lot you can do about it. However, keeping this in mind may help you find niches that your competitors aren't focusing on as much.

The best way to determine the search volume and competitive environment for specific search terms is to use online keyword tools, such as those listed above, that report these important details. Something you want to be on the lookout for in these tools is any super-competitive terms – consider placing these lower in your priority list, no matter how much you'd love to rank for them, simply because your odds of winning with them early in the game are probably slim.

Treat keyword research as an ongoing process

Don't go through the keyword brainstorming and research process only once, this should be an ongoing process that you tackle at least twice a year. As time goes by, you will have more experience and more data to continuously improve your focus list of keywords. Also, things change – such as market trends and your competitive environment – so you need to be agile and change your keywords accordingly.

Over time, you will find that some of your primary keywords just aren't pulling their weight – either because they were off-base to begin with, or because the level of competition is simply too high. Once you've determined that certain keywords are simply not working for you, drop them and use your website real estate to focus on more productive keywords.

Also, once you've implemented all the recommended SEO advice for your set of keywords, it's time to expand the list and target even more terms. Even if you have a healthy set of valuable keywords in play, there are always more "long-tail" opportunities. The term "long tail" refers to a large number of niche terms. While each long-tail term alone may not bring a long of traffic, they can, in aggregate, serve as a significant source of search traffic, and are usually less competitive terms than the primary ones.
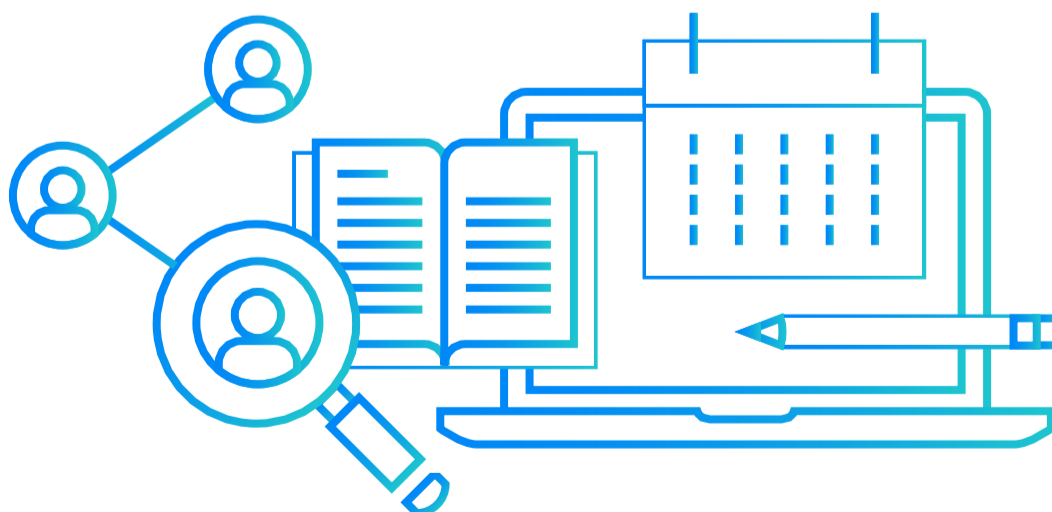
Optimizing your website for your keywords
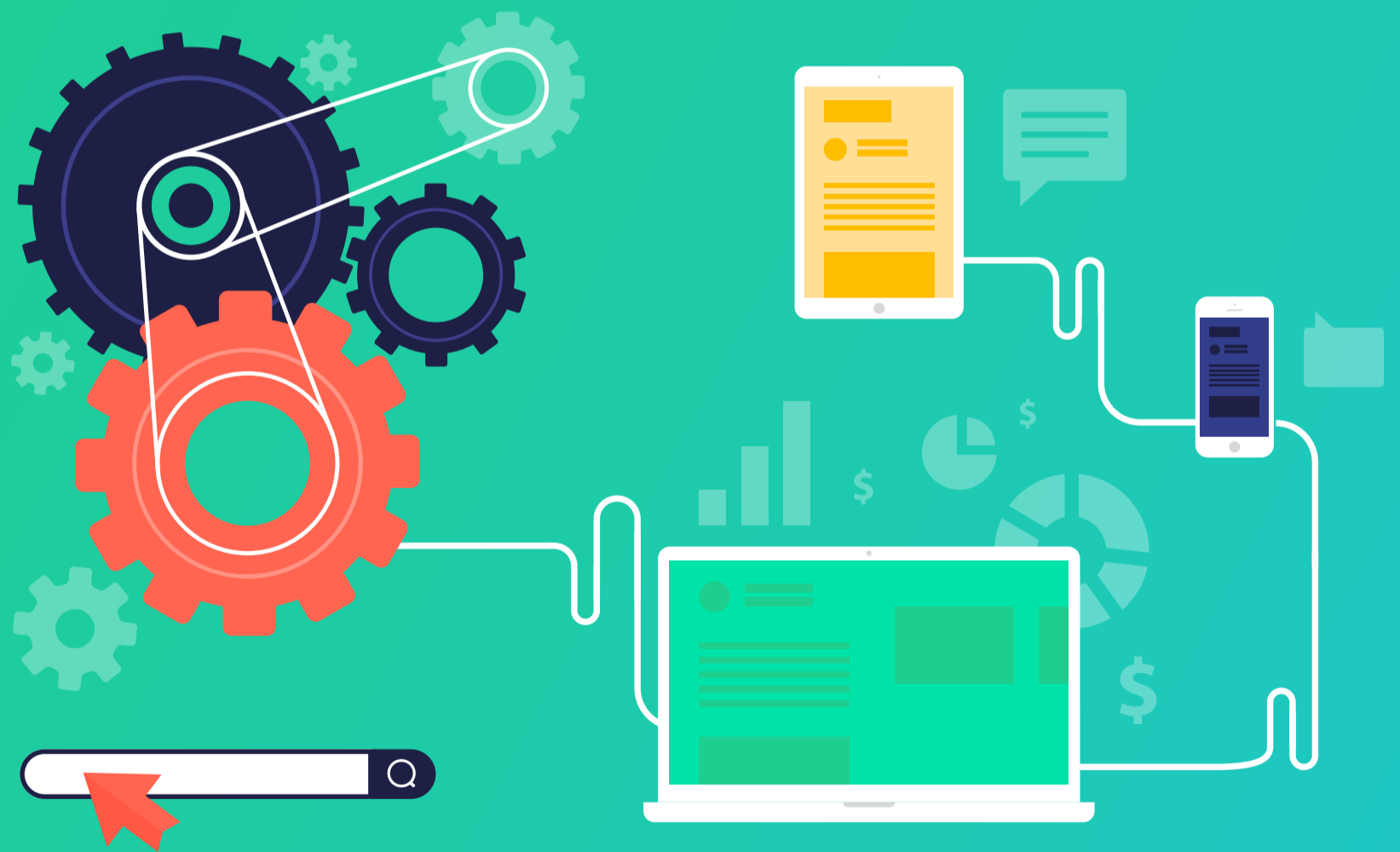
How to optimize your website around keywords

Now that you've got the list of keywords you want to target, it's time to optimize your website around those keywords. The goal is to get as much visitor traffic as you can from potential customers who enter your keywords into search engines.

The first thing to keep in mind is that search engine technology has evolved a lot over the past few years, and it is much better at identifying well-written sites that provide visitors with high-quality, well-organized information. So, your goal should be to focus on providing your visitors with good content and a pleasant overall experience. With this in mind, it's time to start re-writing (or writing) your webpages to incorporate your keywords in the best ways you can.
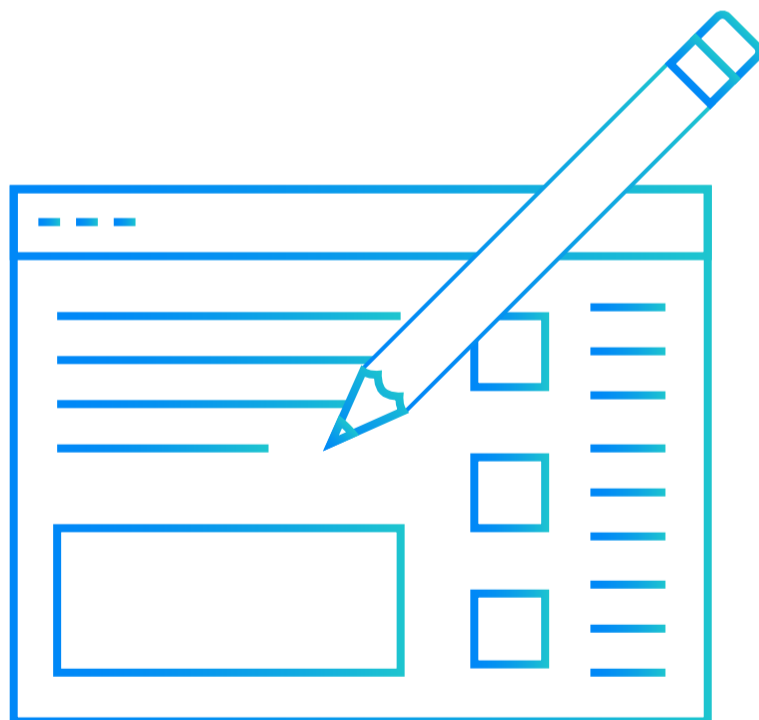
Group your keywords to optimize individual webpages

It is important to realize that all on-page SEO is performed on a page-by-page basis, and that it is not critical to optimize every single page (at least not right away). While a site containing many high-ranking pages will provide "clout" to all the pages in the site, search results for given keywords still point to individual pages, and so you need to focus on selecting individual pages and optimizing them one at a time.

The first step is grouping and organizing your keywords into logical collections of 5-10 keywords that can be the focus of individual pages. You will chose one of these to be the "lead" term (for example, to be included in the page title and main heading, among other places), with the others to appear in various places throughout the page. This step helps make the whole process more manageable while also helping you create targeted, specific pages.

Prioritize your keyword groups from most important to least important and proceed to select pages on your site (or create new ones) that will be targeted by each set of 5-10 related keywords.

Remember both layers of on-page optimization

Before continuing, it's helpful to introduce the two layers in which you will be implementing keywords on your webpages:

1 **Content**
The text that actually appears on your website, for visitors to read. This includes headings, body text and image captions.

2 **Metadata**
The text that appears in the HTML code of a website and is not necessarily seen by visitors. Examples include the title tag, the meta-description tag, image attributes and even page and image URLs.

Search engines scan both layers, and analyze what they find to determine how to index your webpages. For this reason, it is very important to do everything possible to ensure that your keywords are properly implemented in ways that encourage the search engines to rank your pages ahead of your competitors. The more you optimize your website content and metadata using your keywords, the better the search engines will "understand" what your site has to say, which helps them send you search visitors who are actively seeking the information you have available on your website.

It goes without saying that the higher your pages rank for your keywords in search result pages, the more (and more relevant) search traffic you will receive to your website.

Checklist:
Optimizing your page content

☐ Use keywords in headings
This is most important for top-level headings (<h1> in HTML), but is certainly valuable in <h2> headings as well (when your page contains multiple sections of text). Most SEO experts don't consider <h3> headings and below more valuable than regular page text. Besides the SEO benefits, when visitors see headings that mention what they're looking for, they're more likely to stick around and read the page. Make sure that the heading closely relates to the body text following it. Additional tips: Use one primary keyword per heading, and keep headings shorter than about 75 characters.

☐ Use keywords in page text
Use your keywords naturally, in ways that provide a smooth and expected reading experience. Repeat your target keywords, and variations of them, throughout the page only as much as is reasonable for the content itself. "Keyword stuffing"—repeating keywords many times—worked in the early days of search engines, but can now penalize the page.

☐ Use keywords in internal links
It is important to have at least a couple of relevant text links from others pages in your site to the page you are optimizing. The text of each link (known as the "anchor text") should contain a keyword for which the target page is optimized.

For example: `<a href="targetpageURL">Use keywords here, in the displayed link text</a>`

☐ Use keywords in questions
Because many searchers enter search terms such as "What is/are ___" and "How do I ___", search engines tend to give priority to pages that ask—and answer—these kinds of questions. Consider asking these questions using your keywords in headings, followed by a paragraph that answers the question, starting with a keyword. For example, "What is Business Intelligence?" in a heading, followed by a paragraph starting, "Business Intelligence is ___".

☐ Use keywords in image captions
Captions below or alongside images are an excellent opportunity to repeat important keywords without them overloading the main page content.

Checklist:
Optimizing your page metadata

Use keywords in the title tag

Every webpage can have a title that appears in the browser tab where the page is displayed (in HTML, this appears as `<title>`Page Title Goes Here`<title>` which is placed within the <head> section of the page code). Search engines use this title in two ways: as a strong signal for what the page contains and as the page title shown in search results. Therefore, the title needs to include the most important keyword you're targeting for that page in a way that is natural and that encourages relevant searchers to click on it. Ideally, the page's lead keyword should appear at or near the start of the title. It's also a good idea to include a second keyword here as well.

Additional tips: As a rule of thumb, the title should be shorter than about 65 characters so that it's not cut off when being displayed by Google, and no two pages on your site should contain the same title.

Use keywords in the meta-description tag

Webpages also have a "description" field that should briefly describe what the page is about. (In HTML, this content is coded in a meta tag, which is also placed within the page's <head> section, like this: `<meta name="description" content="Page description goes here">`.) Because search engines often (though not always) display this text under the page title in search results, the most important use of this text is to encourage searchers to click on the page in the search results (which, in turn, helps improve the page's ranking over time). Therefore, make sure to include one or two of your keywords in this description field. You should include at least one keyword at, or near, the beginning of the text.

Additional tips: Limit the description text to around 150 characters, don't use the same meta-description on more than one page, and avoid the use of any "special" characters. For more meta-description tips, **click here**. Note that most search engines don't analyze this text anymore for the purposes of ranking pages.

Use keywords in page and image URLs

Search engines pay attention to words found in the file names of pages, as well as the URLs of the individual elements (e.g., images) that appear within a page. This is a valuable additional way to tell search engines what your pages are about. So, for example, instead of naming a page with a generic name like domain.com/product2413, you should name it along the lines of domain.com/natural-air-fresheners. The same goes for images and other elements referenced in page code.

Additional tips: Separate individual words with hyphens, and avoid the use of "special" characters.

Checklist:
...continued

Use keywords in anchor tag titles

We've already mentioned using keywords in the displayed "anchor text" of links. The <a> tag provides an additional opportunity to associate your target keywords with a page. For links pointing back to a page, use the target page's keywords in the title value as well, like this: `<a href="targetpageURL" title="Keywords here">`). Note that while including keywords in the link anchor text is very valuable, this title attribute is considered less important for SEO purposes.

Use keywords in image tags

The HTML tag used to show images in a webpage (<img>) allows optional attributes such as alt and title (which have multiple uses, including improved site accessibility for users with poor vision). Because search engines use these texts both to index images during image searches and also as signals regarding the overall page content, this is another place you want your keywords to appear.

For example: `<img src="beagle-puppy.png" alt="beagle puppy" title="4-week-old beagle puppy">`.

Additional tips: Avoid using "special" characters, and limit the length of these texts to about 80 characters each.
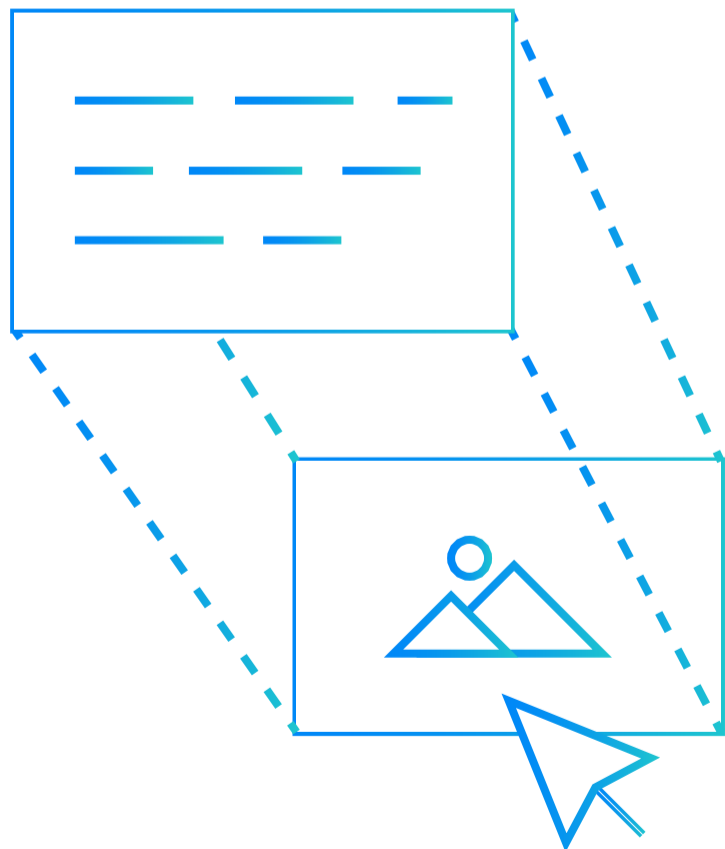
Tactics to avoid when refining your SEO
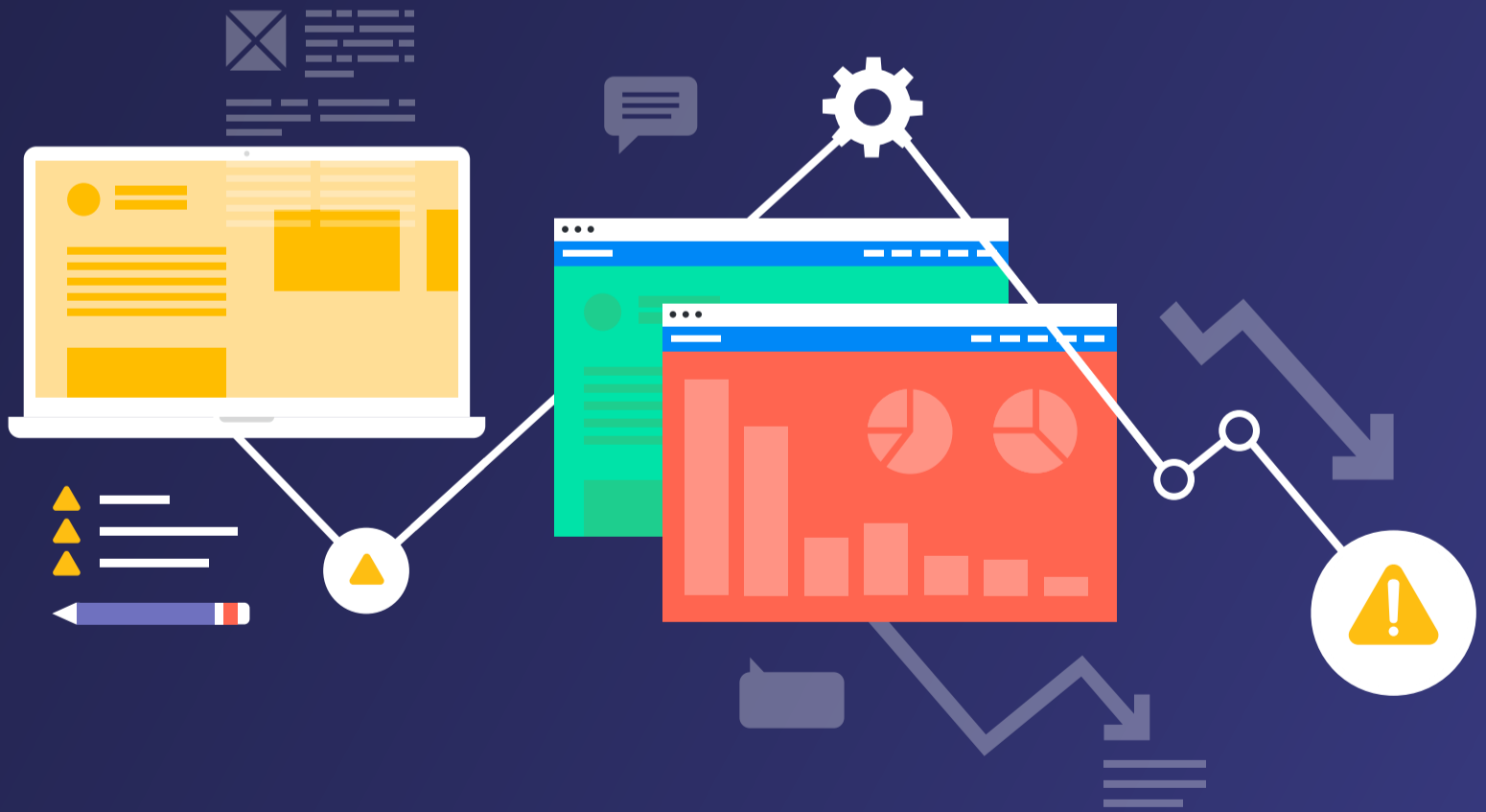
What not to do when working to improve your SEO

So far, we've covered the essential steps in optimizing your website to rank well in the search engines: building a keyword list for your website, refining and prioritizing your keyword list, grouping your keywords for optimizing individual webpages, optimizing your page content and optimizing your page metadata.

In addition to all of the "do's" we've discussed, there are a number of important "don'ts". Some of these are tempting to do, especially as you are working long and hard on optimizing lots of webpages, but search engines penalize pages for these sins, so you definitely want to avoid them!

Once upon a time, SEO practitioners did some of these things deliberately, because they could successfully "trick" search engines into giving their pages higher rankings. However, as search engine technology has advanced and improved, algorithms to detect these practices and demote pages that use them have made them obsolete.

Keyword stuffing

As mentioned earlier, this refers to repeating keywords many times throughout a page's content and/or metadata. Search engines calculate "keyword density" for pages, which describes the percentage of times that a keyword appears in a page, as a proportion of all the words on a page. As a rule of thumb, you want to make sure that none of your keywords have a keyword density of over about 3% (meaning, that they don't appear more than three times for every hundred words). Another good rule of thumb, as we've already mentioned, is to always write for your human audience: if repeating a keyword so many times make the page read poorly, you know you've gone over the limit.

Hiding keywords

One way of doing keyword stuffing without affecting the end-user experience is repeating keywords many times in a page, but making this text invisible (for example, by displaying it in the same color as the page background, placing it behind an image or setting it to be invisible using CSS). Search engines have gotten very good at detecting text that users don't actually see – and demoting pages that contain it, because it's a big "red flag" that "black-hat SEO" is at work. There are exceptions to this rule, but in general it's a good idea to avoid the use of invisible text.

Duplicate content

This refers to optimizing many pages to target the same keywords, using the same (or very similar content). The idea behind doing this is to try get as many pages in the top search results listings as possible, to increase the chances of a searcher clicking on one of those pages (and not one of a competitor). If a search engine detects repeated content on different pages (sometimes, even on pages found on different sites—which might indicate plagiarism), it will demote those pages in search result rankings. (Sometimes having duplicate content is necessary—see below about how to use "canonical tags" to handle those situations.)

Thin content

This is the creation of small, brief webpages containing very little actual content beyond the targeted keywords. Again, and sorry for repeating this so many times, your content needs to provide a good experience for your site visitors! Creating short pages that contain a bunch of keywords, but that don't provide value to visitors, will not help you in getting good rankings for those pages in search results. (If you're curious how search engines know which pages provide real value to users and which don't, it works like this: when most users click a particular link and quickly click Back in their browser, returning to the search engine results page, the search engine knows that users didn't find what they were looking for on that page. Thus, the search engine will demote that page in its search results in favor of other search results from which users don't return quickly – or at all!)

Meta keywords

Years ago, search engines would consider the contents of the meta-keywords tag, in which the website owner could specify the keywords that describe each page. Since search engines ignore this tag these days, don't bother with it. It won't hurt you, but it won't help you either.

Broken links

While not a keyword-related issue, you want to avoid having broken links on your site, whether to other pages (or images, videos, files, etc.) on your site or to other sites. Search engines can penalize a page (or an entire site) for containing too many broken links. There are many tools for scanning a website and reporting any broken links found (two free online ones are **W3C Link Checker** and **Dr. Link Check**); it's a good idea to use one every now and then and make sure that all the links on your site are in good shape.
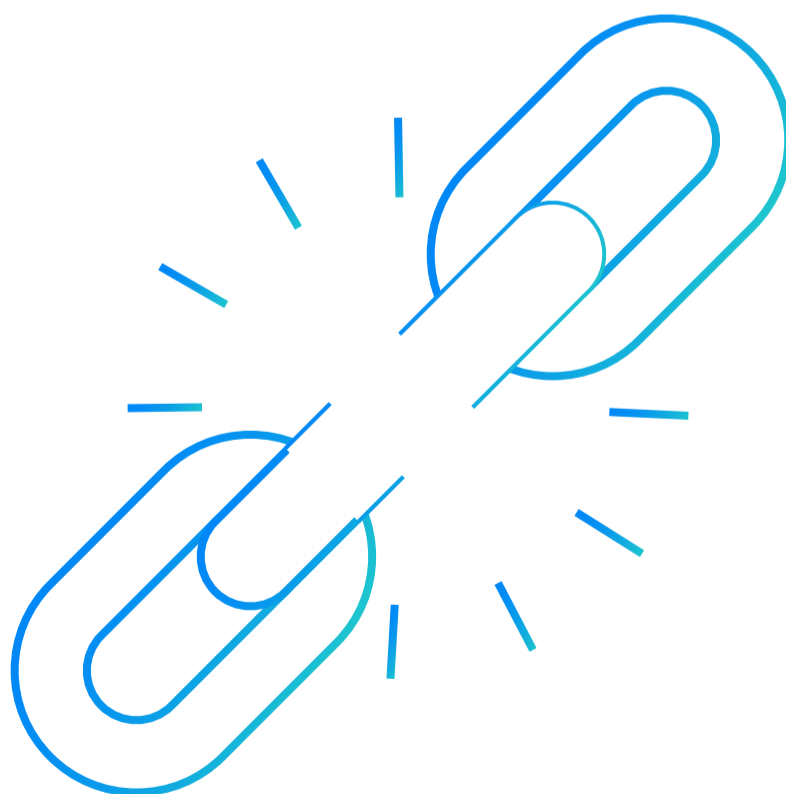
Some final advice for best SEO results

Give your optimized pages the biggest boost they can get:

Before we conclude, here are a few more tips worth knowing:

Regularly update your content

Search engines like fresh content, so it's important to update your pages on a regular basis. When webpages are close competitors in the search results pages, the freshness and frequency of updates are additional factors that search engines consider. The more dynamic, up-to-date pages will be given priority.

Maintain an up-to-date sitemap file

A sitemap is an XML file containing all the URLs in your site, and how they are structured. Search engines use sitemap files to help them crawl websites more effectively. Google provides a list of links to sitemap generators of various types here. When you initially create your sitemap, and then every time you update it thereafter, you should submit it to each search engine (Google, Bing, etc.). Refer to each search engine's directions for doing so (or you can wait for the sitemap file to be rescanned automatically, though it will take longer to get scanned).

Use canonical tags for duplicate content

Although we mentioned earlier that you should avoid having multiple pages with overlapping content, sometimes you need to do this. In such situations, it is important to prevent Google from penalizing pages with duplicate content by specifying which page is the primary, or authoritative one. This is done using a tag that looks like this, placed within the page's `<head>` section: `<link rel="canonical" href="https://www.domain.com/authoritative-page-URL"/>` (make sure to specify the absolute, not relative, path). This tells Google to show the primary page in search results, without penalizing either page.

Inbound links

This is a major topic in and of itself, and is beyond the scope of this guide. However, we would be remiss if we didn't mention the great importance of having links coming ("inbound") to your website from other websites. Pages to which other sites link, especially if the link text used contains keywords for which the target page is optimized, are a powerful indicator to search engines that the page is valuable to other people. (An interesting piece of search engine trivia: tracking and analyzing inbound links – and not just the page content itself – was the key innovation that allowed Google to leapfrog – and ultimately eliminate – most of the other existing search engines of that time and to cement its dominance in the search engine space.) But, just like on-page optimization, this "off-page" optimization has to be done correctly so that it helps your pages rank higher, instead of possibly hurting them.

Run an occasional SEO audit of your website

There are tools that scan your website to highlight any issues that might be hurting its search results rankings. It's a good idea to run such an audit after you've done your initial optimization project (and occasionally thereafter). Addressing the issues raised might further bump your pages up in search results. You can find a list of recommended SEO audit tools **here**.

Good Luck!

We hope you've learned a lot about SEO in this guide, and that the wisdom we've shared with you here will lead to dramatic increases in the number and relevance of visitors coming to your website from the search engines.

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