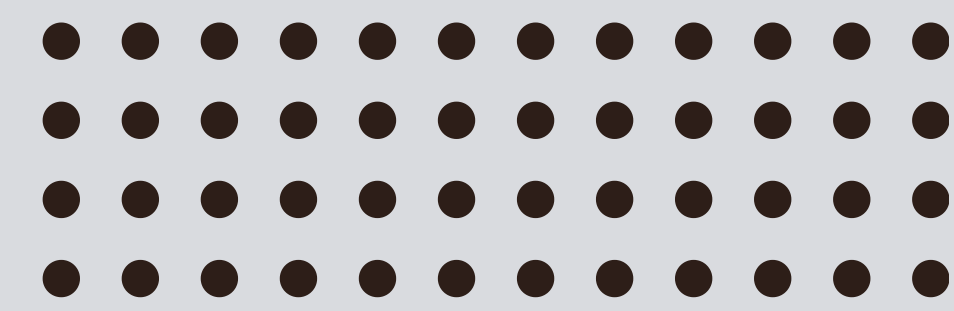


**THE ONLY  
SEO GUIDE  
YOU'LL  
EVER NEED**



**The Move**

# ***INTRO***

This SEO audit checklist is easy to understand, and encompasses all crucial aspects related to indexing, ranking, and visibility in Google search results.

You have the flexibility to download and tailor this audit spreadsheet to suit your specific needs. Whether you are an agency or consultant, you can seamlessly integrate it into your existing audit workflow. If you are a website owner, you can swiftly assess the vital SEO components of your own site.

To get started, [click here](#) to download the template.



# THE BASICS

While technically not part of the audit itself, these are simple checklist items to help deliver the best data, gain access to additional tools, and in most cases, make the auditing process a hundred times easier.

## **Analytics installed**

While having analytics installed isn't an actual ranking factor, having an analytics package can deliver a ton of visitor and technical information about your site. Most webmasters install Google Analytics.

**Tools:** Google Analytics

## **Search engine properties set up**

Setting up a website property in Google Search Console or Bing Webmaster Tools can provide a wealth of information about how these search engines crawl your site. Many of the additional steps in this checklist are vastly easier with access to these tools.

**Tools:** Google Search Console, Bing Webmaster Tools

Nearly everything on this checklist can be audited manually by hand, using various tools and an hour or two of your time. That said, if you want to audit multiple pages at once, or scale your process, it's typically helpful to run a site crawl across your entire site. Most major SEO toolsets offer site crawl/audit capabilities.



# CRAWLING & INDEXING

The good part of the audit to answer two very basic yet important questions: are search engines crawling your site and indexing your important content?

## URL is indexed

Perhaps the most important item of the entire checklist: does the URL actually appear on Google (or the search engine of your choice)? To answer this question, SEOs typically perform one of two very quick checks.

- Do a site: search A "site:" search is perhaps the quickest and easiest way to see if a URL is indexed. Simply type "site:" followed by the URL. For example: `site:https://moz.com/blog/performance-metrics-beta`
- Search Console "Inspect URL" The problem with using "site:" search is that it returns everything starting with the URL pattern you enter, so it can return multiple URLs that match the string. For this reason, it's often better to look up the exact URL using the URL Inspection tool in Google Search Console. In fact, this method is preferred because the URL Inspection Tool will help you complete other audit items on this checklist.

## Tools: URL Inspection Tool

## Important content indexed

While it's important that search engines can index your URL, you also want to make sure that they can index your actual content. Although not completely foolproof, one quick way is to simply examine Google's cache of the URL. You can perform that with the following code, replacing "example.com" with your URL. `https://google.com/search?q=cache:https://example.com/`

## Tools: Google Search Console



# CRAWLING & INDEXING

## CONTINUED

### URL not blocked by robots.txt file

While Google can still index a URL that's blocked by robots.txt, it can't actually crawl the content on the page. And blocking via robots.txt is often enough to keep the URL out of Google's index altogether. If the URL is simple, you might get away with a quick visual inspection of your robots.txt file. In most cases, you'll likely want to do a more thorough check of the URL using one of the tools listed below.

**Tools: [Google Robots.txt Tester](#), [Robots.txt Validator and Testing Tool](#)**

### URL listed in XML sitemap file

Technically, listing URLs in a XML sitemap file isn't required for ranking in Google, but it can make discovering your URLs by search engines a whole lot easier, and in some cases, can help with crawling and even ranking (it doesn't rank if it never gets crawled.) Best practice is to have all your indexable URLs listed in an XML sitemap or multiple sitemap files.

Learn more: [XML Sitemaps: The Most Misunderstood Tool in the SEO's Toolbox](#)

### Sitemap file location defined in robots.txt

Okay, so you've verified that your URL is listed in an XML sitemap. Next, you want to ensure that search engines can easily find your sitemap files. The easiest way to accomplish this is to simply list your sitemap location in your robots.txt file. Placing your sitemap here works for all major search engines, and doesn't require any extra work. The disadvantage of this method is that it potentially exposes your sitemap to third-party crawlers, so in some cases you may not want to use it, and employ direct search engine submission instead.



# CRAWLING & INDEXING

## CONTINUED

### Sitemap file submitted to search engines

Even if your sitemap is listed in your robots.txt file, you'll still want to make sure to submit your XML sitemaps directly to search engines. This ensures that:

1. The search engines actually know about your XML sitemap
2. The search engines will report if they found the sitemaps valid
3. Finally, you can get a coverage report from the search engines with statistics about how they crawled and indexed the URLs found in your sitemap

Both Bing and Google support direct sitemap submission. Google offers particular value in this area because after you submit a sitemap, you can check out [Google's Index Coverage Report](#) for each individual sitemap submitted.

### Tools: [Google Sitemaps Report](#), [Bing Webmaster Sitemaps](#)

### URL is discoverable via internal links/navigation

Sitemaps are one way search engines use to discover pages on your site, but the primary way remains by crawling webpages and following links.

Typically, your high-priority pages should be discoverable within 4–5 clicks of the homepage. This is part of [your site architecture](#). You also want to avoid "orphaned pages" – which are pages not linked to by any internal URLs on your site.

The process for discovering orphaned pages isn't quite so simple. SEO crawlers like [Screaming Frog](#) and [Sitebulb](#) do a decent job finding orphaned pages but require connecting to other data sources – such as sitemaps – in order to discover them.



# CRAWLING & INDEXING

## CONTINUED

### Content is available at a single, canonicalized URL

There are a few basic guidelines you want to keep in mind when thinking about canonicalization and duplicate content.

1. All URLs should have a canonical tag
2. Different URLs with the exact same content should point to the same canonical URL. Additionally, URL parameters that don't change a page's content shouldn't change the canonical tag. For example: `https://example.com?parameter=same-content` Would likely have a canonical like this: `<link href="https://example.com/" rel="canonical">`
3. Different URL patterns should lead to the same content: e.g.
  - `http://example.com`
  - `https://example.com`
  - `http://www.example.com`
  - `https://www.example.com`
  -

Ideally, 3 out of the 4 would redirect to the "canonical" version – whichever URL pattern is correct – via 301 redirects. You can perform a simple canonicalization check using the MozBar. Simply navigate to a URL and first verify that the page contains a self-referencing canonical. Next, try adding random parameters to the URL (ones that don't change the page content) and verify that the canonical tag doesn't change. Note: While the most common place to signal canonicals is within the HTML, you can also place them in the HTTP header.

**Tools: [Google Search Console](#)**



# CRAWLING & INDEXING

## CONTINUED

### No canonical/indexation mixed signal errors

This one is pretty simple. You want to avoid sending mixed signals between your canonical tags and indexation tags. For example: if Page A canonicals to Page B, and Page B is indexable, you don't want to put a "noindex" tag on Page A, as this would send mixed signals. In short, if a URL is indexable, don't canonicalize "noindexed" pages to it. Friendly URL structure

A general rule of thumb is to keep your URLs as simple as possible. Typically this means:

- Using shorter, human-readable URLs whenever possible
- Avoiding unnecessary parameters, such as session IDs or sorting parameters
- Broken relative links that cause "infinite spaces" (never-ending URLs)

Keep in mind that Google may use your URL to create breadcrumbs for your snippet in search results, so using simple, keyword-rich URLs can help with your click-through rate as well.

To learn more, Google has good documentation surrounding URL structures.

### Content can be rendered with basic JavaScript

If you've made it this far, and you've already verified that Google is indeed already indexing your important content, you likely don't have any JavaScript rendering issues. That said, if you do experience a problem in these areas and your site relies on JavaScript, it may be the culprit.

The two simple tools to test if Google can render your site with basic JavaScript are Google's Mobile-Friendly Test and the "Test Live URL" function in Google's URL Inspection Tool in Search Console. Select "View Rendered Page" in Search Console to view the rendered DOM, JavaScript Console Messages, and resource loading errors. Debugging JavaScript errors is a big subject beyond the scope of this checklist, but at least now you know where to start.





# ***CRAWLING & INDEXING***

## CONTINUED

### **Important CSS, JS, and images not blocked by robots.txt**

If search engines can't render your page, it's possible it's because your robots.txt file blocks important resources.

Years ago, SEOs regularly blocked Google from crawling JavaScript files because at the time, Google didn't render much JavaScript and they felt it was a waste of crawling. Today, Google needs to access all of these files to render and "see" your page like a human.

The best practice is to visually inspect your robots.txt file and make sure you don't block any important image files, CSS, or JavaScript files that would prevent search engines from rendering your page. You can also use Google's URL Inspection Tool to discover any blocked resources, as shown here.

**Tools: [URL Inspection Tool](#)**



# ***META & STRUCTURED DATA***

Here we look at your meta and structured data – the "behind-the-scenes" information that doesn't display on the page, but may help search engines understand your content, influence how you show up in search results, and may even help you to rank higher.

## **Page contains a title element**

Finally, an easy one!

Your URL should contain a single title tag, with text describing your page. Fortunately, missing or empty title tags are really easy to discover:

- Web browsers typically display the title in the tab heading
- Most SEO tools alert you to missing and/or empty title tags

If your title is missing or empty, be sure to add it in!

Title contains important keywords visible in first 60 characters The answer, of course, is it depends. Google confirms that titles can be very long.

Traditionally, most SEOs recommend keeping your title to 55–60 characters, as that's the limit of what Google typically displays in search results (based on pixel length.)

Longer titles can also be problematic because they're often comprised of boiler-plate, parts of titles that repeat over and over again across different sections of your site, which Google recommends against.



# ***META & STRUCTURED DATA***

## CONTINUED

### **Title tag is unique**

Whew, another point about title tags again. They must be important! The final check of your title tag is to make sure that it's not duplicated across your site. While there's no known ranking penalty for duplicate titles,

Google both encourages the use of unique titles and discourages repetitive boilerplate. Unique titles can help search engines differentiate your content, and can help identify your unique value to users. Most SEO crawlers can easily identify duplicate title errors.

### **Contains unique meta description**

Honestly, it sometimes can be a little hard to get enthusiastic about meta descriptions when the data shows that Google ignores our meta descriptions 63% of the time. That said, descriptions remain important because Google will use them if they believe your description is superior to what they can pull from the page, and a good description can also help with CTR. If Google detects duplicate descriptions, they indicate that they are much less likely to use them. Because detecting duplicate descriptions isn't easy to do manually, it's typically done with an SEO crawler.

### **Favicon defined**

A few years ago, you'd never find anything about favicons in an SEO audit. To be fair, most people still overlook them. Regardless, favicons are important because Google displays them next to your snippet in mobile search results.

Having a clear favicon that stands out may influence your organic CTR.

Typically, you can tell if your site has a favicon defined by simply looking at the browser tab. To be double-sure, you want to make sure the favicon is defined on the homepage of your site with the following code: `<link rel="shortcut icon" href="/path/to/favicon.ico">`



# META & STRUCTURED DATA

## CONTINUED

### OG and social metadata

To be clear: marking up your content with Open Graph and social metadata (such as Twitter cards) will not impact your Google rankings one bit. But social meta tags do influence how your content shows up on social networks such as Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and more, which can influence how your content is shared, linked to, and can ultimately influence your rankings downstream.

Most modern CMS systems allow you to easily define OG and other social metadata, and even define defaults for these values, so it's best not to leave them blank.

Here's some social debugging links:

1. [Twitter Card Validator](#)
2. [Facebook Sharing Debugger](#)
3. [LinkedIn Post Inspector](#)
4. [Pinterest Rich Pins Validator](#)

These tools are often handy when you need to update a social image (or other data) and need to clear the cache to update what gets displayed on the social site. Structured markup First, a few Q&As about Rich Snippet Markup:

1. Is structured data, by itself, a ranking factor? No.
2. Can structured data help me to rank? Yes, it can help Google to understand the content of your page.
3. Can structured data influence CTR? Yes, Google supports several types of rich snippets based on structured data.

While exactly how much Google uses structured data is open to debate, it's fair to say they definitely support the data types listed in their structured data [Search Gallery](#).

To validate your structured data, try the tool below.

**Tools: [Google Rich Results Test](#), [Google Structured Data Testing Tool](#)**



# ***META & STRUCTURED DATA***

## CONTINUED

### **Uses max-image-preview:large setting**

Here's one you won't find in most SEO audits, and it involves [Google Discover](#). Many SEOs have found Google Discover to be a great source of traffic, but earning the coveted spots can be elusive.

Google defines [no special requirements](#) for Google Discover inclusion, except for general advice about descriptive headlines and the use of large images. Google recommends using images at least 1200px wide, and enabled by the "max-image-preview:large" setting, which is shown in this code snippet:

```
<meta name="robots" content="max-image-preview:large">
```

Alternatively, the page can be served with AMP. To be fair, Google can likely figure out your images without this meta tag, but it's a good idea to include it nonetheless.



# CONTENT

Now let's examine the content of the page. Many of these items don't strictly fall under the area of "technical SEO" but they can cause significant ranking issues if not addressed.

## Content isn't substantially duplicate

While Google won't penalize you for duplicate content, duplicate pages typically get filtered out of search results as Google strives to "show pages with distinct information." Small amounts of duplicate content on a page are natural and often don't present a problem, but when the majority of your content is "substantially similar" to other content found on the internet, or on your own site, it can cause issues. While we've previously discussed solving duplicate content issues on your own site with canonicalization, noindex tags, and robots.txt control, it's also helpful to make sure you've discovered the duplicate content that exists both on your site, and possibly across the web as well.

Three different ways to find duplicate content:

1. Run a site crawl using the SEO tool of your choice.
2. For a single page, use Google's exact match search operator — by wrapping a portion of the "page text in quotes" — to find duplicate content.
3. Copyscape, a free plagiarism detector.
- 4.

While it's not uncommon to find your content duplicated across the web, it's typically not a problem, unless those sites outrank you. In these cases, you may want to file a DMCA Complaint. Even better, you can ask the offending sites to link to you as the source of the original content or add a cross-domain canonical.

Content organized with hierarchical HTML tags Should your page use a single h1 tag? How many h2s should you use? In reality, Google doesn't care how you organize your page, as long as you make your structure clear. Typically, this means ordering your content with headings in a hierarchical fashion. Most SEO studies show a strong relationship between the use of headings and Google rankings, so we recommend using headings to organize your content in a smart, logical way.

**Tools: Logical Content Flow**



# CONTENT

## CONTINUED

### Content is keyword-targeted

For years, keyword targeting has been the basis for many SEO site audits. While Google today is much more sophisticated about how it understands what pages are about, it's still a good idea to check that your page includes target keywords and related phrases in key places:

- URL
- Title tag
- Meta description
- Headline
- Subheads
- Main body text
- Image alt attributes

The score will change over time as you fix issues and incorporate suggestions.

Content doesn't violate Google's Quality Guidelines Experienced SEOs can often tell at a glance if content is spammy or if it deserves a shot at ranking. As part of the audit process, it's a good idea to make sure the page meets minimum quality of standards in that it doesn't violate Google's Quality Guidelines.

Most of Google's list is obvious stuff, but worth a double-check. Things like:

- No sneaky redirects
- No cloaking
- Limit user-generated spam
- No doorway pages

You can find the full list of [Google's Quality Guidelines here](#).



# CONTENT

## CONTINUED

### **Avoids intrusive interstitials**

Popups and banners that get in the way of content are a common feature of websites, especially on mobile.

Unfortunately, these "intrusive interstitials" can also cause a site to rank lower. Popups for legal reasons (e.g. cookie consent) and those that only take up a small amount of space typically aren't a cause for concern. That said, if your mobile URL greets you with a giant advertising banner that fills the screen, this is likely something you want to flag.

### **Avoids heavy ads above the fold**

Heavy ads above the fold is another area that Google may penalize you for if they find the ads distract too much from your content.

Like intrusive interstitials, it's best to take a look at your page in a mobile browser to inspect how easy it is to get to your main content. If this task is made more difficult by a heavy ad presence, you likely want to mark it in your audit and experiment with reducing the top-of-page ad flow.

### **Content isn't loaded in an iFrame**

Loading content in an iFrame can be tricky from a technical SEO point of view, and Google generally recommends against it.

Typically what happens when you use an iFrame is that Google "flattens" the iFrame with your content and considers it a part of the content itself. While this generally works, it can become problematic if the iFrame doesn't load, or Google has trouble accessing the iFrame. In short, sometimes it's necessary or convenient to use iFrames, but you should avoid them whenever possible.





# ***CONTENT***

## CONTINUED

### **Lazy-loaded content is visible in the ViewPort**

Lazy-loading has become more popular, especially since native browser support. Many CMS frameworks, including WordPress, now incorporate lazy-loading of images by default. When lazy-loading works correctly, images (or other content) come into view when needed in the viewport (the visible part of your web browser.) When things go wrong, content isn't loaded correctly and isn't visible to search engines.

The easiest way to audit lazy-loaded content is simply to use Google's URL Inspection Tool. After inspecting a page, check the screenshot and the HTML to make sure all images loaded correctly. For the more technical-minded, Google offers a Puppeteer script using headless Chrome.

### **Supports paginated loading for infinite scroll**

Like lazy-loading, infinite scroll can be good for user experience, but not-so-great for search engines. When set up incorrectly, it can hide information from Google. The correct way to implement infinite scroll is with paginated loading, which means the URL changes as the visitor scrolls down the page. This allows users to share and bookmark specific pages of your content, as well as allows search engines to index individual sections of your content.

Google recommends signaling your paginated loading using the History API, which tells the browser when to update the displayed URL as the user scrolls.



# ***CONTENT***

## CONTINUED

### **Current publication and updated dates**

Adding a publication date to your content isn't likely to impact your rankings directly, but it can have a strong influence on both your CTR and user engagement signals. Google directly displays dates in search results, which can affect user clicks. If you choose to display dates, many SEOs choose to display the last modified or last updated date, to show readers that the content is fresh and relevant. For example, instead of saying "Published On" you could say "Last Updated" - as long as the information is true. Google knows when you actually updated your content, so you won't fool them if you try.

A few general guidelines about displaying accurate dates:

1. Display a visible date for the user, typically near the top of the page.
2. Include "datePublished" and "dateModified" properties in your Schema markup.
3. Keep dates consistent. For example, multiple dates on the page could confuse Google



# CONTENT

## CONTINUED

### Clear who the author and/or publisher is

Google's Search Quality Rater Guidelines supports this by encouraging raters to go to great lengths to determine the reputation of the author and/or publisher. Content by anonymous or low-reputation authors/publishers is often rated "Low" quality, while content from high-reputation author/publishers is often rated "High" or "Highest."

Typically, Google can figure out who the author and publisher of a given piece are, but it's best practices to help them connect the dots.

#### A few tips:

- For specific authors, make sure the author is clearly printed on the page
- Include author data in your Schema markup
- Link your author to an author profile page, which in turn links to social media profiles and other articles by the same author
- Include "publisher" markup in your Article Schema (or other types of schema)
- Make your publisher and contact information clear on your About Us and Contact pages

Most of the time, the system works great. Occasionally, Google may flag a site as having explicit content, when none exists. This can sometimes happen when Google gets confused by your content.

If you have any doubt at all that your site may trigger Google's SafeSearch, it's best to do a manual check:

- Turn on SafeSearch in your own browser
- Do a site: search of your website homepage and a few specific directories
- Turn off SafeSearch and repeat the searches
- If the number of results is substantially different, your site may be filtered by SafeSearch
- 

If your site does not host adult or sensitive content and you believe SafeSearch is filtering your content in error, you can [report the problem to Google](#).



# LINKS & NAVIGATION

## Links are crawlable

You might be surprised, but there are many, many ways to create web links. Some are good for SEO. Others, not so much. In order for a link to be crawlable, search engines typically need an `<a>` tag with an href attribute. And yes, lots of developers create links without these attributes. Page doesn't link to broken pages (404) Pages break. The web is literally littered with 404s. It's a natural part of the ecosystem.

If you happen to link to a 404, it typically doesn't represent a big SEO problem. That said, links leading to 404s can be bad in that:

- They can create a frustrating user experience
- Stop the flow of link equity, e.g. PageRank
- Linking to lots of 404s can be a sign that the page is outdated and unmaintained.

Fixing broken links works better when you do it at scale, and your efforts may be more greatly rewarded when you prioritize internal links. If you have a very large site, hunting down and fixing every 404 may be a low ROI effort, though the ROI rises with the importance of each page.

Most SEO crawlers can identify broken links and 404s. If you simply want to audit a single page, many Chrome extensions such as [Broken Link Checker](#) can easily handle the job.



# LINKS & NAVIGATION

## CONTINUED

### Links use descriptive anchor text

Links with relevant anchor text typically pass more value. Google uses anchor text as a ranking signal, and patent filings suggest it may even ignore links with irrelevant or generic anchor text. Finally, Google typically frowns on "over-optimization" which can include linking with too many exact-match anchors, so it's good to mix things up.

Examples of good anchors:

- "lists the best ice cream stores in Seattle"
- "how to undo send in Gmail"
- "our careers page"

Examples of generic anchors:

- "click here"
- "read more"
- "example.com"

Google also introduced two new link attributes:

1. "ugc" to indicate user-generated content
2. "sponsored" to indicated sponsored links

These attributes, along with nofollow, can help protect you as a publisher. Since Google can penalize sites that link to spam or links that give a financial incentive, marking these links appropriately can help you avoid Google's wrath.



# LINKS & NAVIGATION

## CONTINUED

### Faceted navigation doesn't lead to duplicate content

Faceted navigation can work great for shoppers, allowing them to narrow down their selection with nearly infinite choices.

Those same nearly infinite choices can create nearly infinite pages for Google to crawl if you aren't careful. If every option in your faceted navigation is linked in a way that creates a new URL every time, in a way that doesn't substantively change the content, you could inadvertently create millions of duplicate or near-duplicate pages for Google to crawl.

A few best practices for faceted navigation:

1. Don't create clickable elements for options that don't exist or change the page content
2. Nofollow unimportant options and block crawling in robots.txt
3. Use either noindex or canonicalization for URLs you want to keep out of the index
4. Use Google Search Console's Parameter tool to define parameter settings.



# LINKS & NAVIGATION

## CONTINUED

### Paginated pages are clearly linked

If your site uses pagination, it's important that your paginated links are visible to search engines. Google recently [deprecated support](#) for rel=prev/next markup, though other search engines continue to use it.

This means that the primary way Google finds paginated content is through links on your page.

In general, paginated pages should be clearly linked and crawlable. Paginated pages themselves should be self-canonicalized or canonicalized to a "view all" page containing all entries.

There are lots of details and traps to fall into when dealing with pagination. In the old days, Google recommended no more than 100 links on a page. Those days are long gone, and today Google can process many multiples of that without challenge.

That said, even though Google can crawl several hundred links (or more) per page, there are still valid reasons to limit the number of options you present to search engines.

A high number of links dilutes the link equity every link passes and can make it harder for Google to determine which links are important.

While there's no magic number as to the number of links that's reasonable, if you find every page of your site has hundreds – or thousands – of links, you may consider trimming them down to better focus your link equity and how Google crawls your site.

Finally, Google is known to devalue sitewide and/or boilerplate links, so if you have footer navigation with the same 500 links on every page, it might be valuable to experiment with new linking practices.



# ***LINKS & NAVIGATION***

## CONTINUED

### **Page does not link to redirect chains**

Similar to our advice about not linking to broken 404 pages, it's often helpful to check your outgoing links for redirects and redirect chains.

Pages move frequently on the web, and over time these moves can lead to redirect chains that are truly quite impressive.

Google has stated they will follow up to 5 redirects per attempt – and they may make many attempts to eventually discover the final URL.





# IMAGES

Did you know that if Google's image search was its own search engine, it would account for over 20% of the total search engine market share?

Regardless, ranking in image search isn't the only reason to optimize your images, as images can play an important part in your overall SEO.

## Images contain descriptive alt attributes

Generally, images need alt attributes for 3 primary reasons:

1. Alt attributes help search engines to understand the image
2. For images that link to another URL, the alt attribute acts as the link's anchor text
3. Accessibility: screen readers and other applications rely on alt text to properly understand the page

To be fair, fixing a missing alt text or two (or three) likely isn't going to move the SEO needle very much, but at scale and when applied consistently, descriptive alt text can help Google add content to your page and imagery, as well as help you rank.

Keep your alt text concise but descriptive. The best alt texts are those that would make the most sense to one using a screen reader who couldn't actually see the picture. `` Image heights and widths are defined

While defining image heights and widths isn't a direct Google ranking factor, the lack of image dimensions can cause usability issues as a browser tries to load the page. This leads to Cumulative Layout Shift which can impact your Core Web Vitals score, which in turn can harm your rankings.

Because layout shift is really the important issue here, it's best to run a speed audit of your site using something like Google's Page Speed Insights, and see what your CLS score reflects. If it's low, there's a good chance you have images without defined dimensions.



# IMAGES

## CONTINUED

There are many ways to define image dimensions.

Use descriptive titles, captions, filenames, and text for images. In addition to alt text, Google uses many other signals to determine what an image is about, and how it relates to your content. These signals include:

- Image title
- Captions
- Filenames
- Text surrounding the image

Ideally, and for maximum visibility, each of these elements is defined, descriptive, and unique. Most of the time, the #1 element folks neglect is the filename.

A human-readable filename, one that ideally uses descriptive keywords, is the way to go.

Poor filename: /590k9985x-9974-Screen-Shot-2021-05-22-at-6.36.00-PM.jpg

Better filename: /my-new-puppy.jpg

### **Images don't contain important text**

While Google has gotten much better at understanding text embedded in images in recent years, you still shouldn't rely on them to index any image text on your page.

If your images do contain important text, make sure that the same information is communicated either in the alt text, captions, titles, or surrounding body text. Images are listed in image sitemaps

For better discoverability and indexing by search engines, it's helpful to list images in a sitemap file, or an image sitemap file specifically for images.



# VIDEO

Some days, it may seem like YouTube is the only game in town, but Google does index and rank videos from millions of different sites.

For maximum visibility, there are a few best practices you'll want to follow.

## **Video is available on a public, indexable page**

This is kind of a no-brainer, but it's not always obvious. Google doesn't rank videos by themselves but instead ranks your pages that actually host the video where they are embedded.

This means that the video needs to appear on a public, indexable URL. Additionally, the URL of the video itself must be accessible by Google on a stable URL, not blocked by robots.txt or any other means.

## **Video is wrapped within an appropriate HTML tag**

A small but simple point: when you embed your video, make sure Google can identify it as a video by wrapping it in an appropriate HTML tag. Acceptable tags are:

- <video>
- <embed>
- <iframe>
- <object>



# VIDEO

## CONTINUED

### Videos is included in video sitemap

While video sitemaps aren't strictly required if you also use video schema markup, they can be hugely beneficial in helping search engines both find your videos and understand related information about your videos included in the sitemap.

Video sitemaps are valuable because, in order to be indexed and ranked, it's helpful to explicitly define additional information about your videos, such as the video location, title, description, and thumbnail.

To be clear, these properties should be defined in either a video sitemap file or on-page schema markup. Ideally, you would define this information in both places, as each offers its own unique advantages.

Required properties that you must define in your video sitemap:

- `<url>` - Parent tag
- `<loc>` - URL where you host the video
- `<video:video>` - Parent tag for video information
- `<video:thumbnail_loc>` - URL of the video thumbnail
- `<video:title>` - Title of the video
- `<video:description>` - Description of the video
- `<video:content_loc>` - URL of the actual video file
- `<video:player_loc>` - Alternate to `<video:content_loc>` if you want to list a video player URL instead.

There are multiple other optional properties as well, including view counts, ratings, and more.



# VIDEO

## CONTINUED

### Video schema markup

Adding video schema is important because, like video sitemaps, your structured data provides information typically considered as necessary for Google to display your video in search results.

Required properties include:

- description
- name
- thumbnailUrl
- uploadDate

Beyond these required properties, video schema allows you to add several other data points to influence how your video appears in search.

Adding BroadcastEvent markup can make your video eligible for Google's "Live" badge when applicable.

Google also allows you to define Key Moments, which are increasing in popularity, by using Clip or SeekToAction Schema. If using YouTube, you can specify timestamps for Key Moments manually.



# MOBILE

In the age of [Google's mobile-first indexing](#), it seems very few sites remain that are not mobile-friendly. Regardless, there are a number of best practices that still trip up websites that can hurt visibility in search results.

## Passes Google Mobile-Friendly Test

Pure and simple, you want to know if your site passes [Google's Mobile-Friendly Test](#). Sites that do not meet Google's mobile-friendly criteria are likely not to rank as well in mobile search results.

You can find the same information in Search Console's [Mobile Usability Report](#). If a page fails the mobile-friendly test, each report flags which issues need to be fixed, such as setting the viewport width, or content wider than the screen. Preference responsive web design

When building a mobile experience for your website, you typically have three different options:

1. Responsive web design: Serves the same content from the same URL on both mobile and desktop, but the layout changes based on screen size.
2. Dynamic serving: Similar to responsive web design in that the URL stays the same, but the content itself may change based on which device the browser detects.
3. Separate URLs: With separate URLs, the mobile version is served from a completely different URL (often referred to as an m.site). Users are typically redirected to the right version based on their device.

While each of these methods is valid, one is strongly preferred above the others: responsive web design. The advantages of responsive web design are numerous, including a single URL, content that doesn't change by device, no need for redirection, less chance for content errors, easier to maintain, and it allows Google to crawl only a single page.

If your site uses one of the other methods, you can still rank, but you'll have to do more work to signal your mobile pages to Google. You should strongly preference responsive web design whenever possible.



# MOBILE

## CONTINUED

### Mobile content and links match desktop site

By far, the biggest technical mistake with mobile SEO is when mobile content doesn't match desktop content. If Google has turned on mobile-first indexing for your site this means any content that's "missing" on the mobile version of your site may not get indexed as it would on desktop.

Content checks that should be the same on both the mobile and desktop versions of your site include:

1. Meta robots tags (e.g. index, nofollow)
2. Title tags and metadata
3. Content
4. Heading tags
5. Images
6. Links
7. Structured data
8. robots.txt access

### Special considerations for separate URLs

In some situations, your site may separate URLs to serve mobile pages (again, not recommended). For instance, example.com might serve desktop users, but redirect to m.example.com for mobile users.

**Canonicalization:** Mobile pages on a separate URL should not canonicalize to themselves, but rather to the desktop version of the page. At the same time, the desktop version should canonical to itself as normal, but should also signal to Google the existence of a mobile page, using rel="alternate" `<link rel="alternate" media="only screen and (max-width: 640px)" href="http://m.moz.com/">` You can also signal rel="alternate" values in your sitemaps.

**Internationalization (hreflang):** Unlike other elements that should be the same between your mobile and desktop URLs, if you use hreflang attributes for internationalization, you should link between your mobile and desktop URLs separately.



# SPEED

Speed has played a role in search engine ranking factors for many years, and now with Google's [Core Web Vitals update](#), it's top of mind for many SEOs.

At this point, you might expect to find a 28-point web speed checklist, but that's simply not the case. Speed is not a one-size-fits-all technical SEO challenge. A single-page site with minimal JavaScript will have very different speed issues than a complex e-commerce site with lots of different technology.

Simply put, if your site is already fast, you likely don't need to worry about much – your investigation should uncover exactly what needs to be fixed. We'll cover the basics here.

## **Content fully loads within a reasonable time**

Our first recommendation seems paradoxically non-technical but provides a good starting point from a real user point of view. Does your site load fast, or do users experience painful slowness?

The challenge of any speed audit is that every tool provides you with a different score. For this reason, a decent baseline measurement is total load time. This simply measures the total time it takes your content to load in the browser. While this measurement is too basic for a full picture of your speed performance, it can give you a rough idea if your site is fast or slow, or somewhere in between.

Most site speed tools such as [GTmetrix](#) or [Pingdom](#) will show you the total load time. Even better, you can use the [Site Speed report in Google Analytics](#) to measure load time by page. While there's no set benchmark for average load time, 4–5 seconds is typically a reasonable goal to hit. If your pages take longer than this, speed is an area that's likely costing you traffic and visitor satisfaction.





# ***SPEED***

## CONTINUED

### URL passes Google's Core Web Vitals assessment

As Google has evolved its use of speed as a ranking factor, today the most direct route of auditing your site for speed is to measure against Core Web Vitals.

There are many, many ways to measure your CWV scores. A few of the most common:

- Run a Lighthouse Audit in Chrome
- The Core Web Vitals report in Search Console
- The Page Speed Insights tool

After running the audit, these tools give you a list of suggestions to address your speed score.

1. Largest Contentful Paint (LCP): 2.5 seconds or better
2. First Input Delay (FID): 100 milliseconds or faster
3. Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS): 0.1 seconds or less

Keep in mind that you don't need a "good" score in every metric to see a rankings boost. Even small improvements may help you. Also keep in mind that Google weights speed as a "minor" ranking factor, often describing it as a "tie-breaker."

That said, speed is hugely important to users, and typically influences engagement metrics such as bounce rate.

Finally, remember that you'll typically see two sets of Core Web Vital scores for every URL: one for desktop, another for mobile. This is important because presently, Google's ranking boost to pages with good CWV scores is planned only for mobile rankings (though it's still a good idea to optimize your desktop experience as well).



# ***SPEED***

## CONTINUED

### **Address common speed traps**

Auditing Core Web Vitals can prove a little confusing, as sitewide issues and best practices can be obscured when auditing at the page level. Regardless of your CWV scores, there are a few best practices that broadly apply to many websites, and addressing these issues may help you to avoid common "speed traps." While this list is not exhaustive, if your site needs improvement, finding which areas to address may definitely help.

#### 1. Image optimization

By far, one of the largest contributors to slow websites is images. Making sure your image files aren't too large often makes all the difference. Additionally, [Google's documentation](#) recommends several other image optimization techniques, including:

- Using image CDNs
- Compressing images
- Replacing animated GIFs with video
- Lazy-loading images
- Serving responsive images
- Serving images with correct dimensions
- Using WebP images

#### 2. Enable text compression

We recommend using [Gzip](#), a software application for [file compression](#), to reduce the size of your CSS, HTML, and JavaScript files for faster serving.



# **SPEED**

## CONTINUED

### 3. Optimize CSS and JavaScript

By far, both CSS and JavaScript are two of the things with the most potential to slow down your site, especially if the server needs to download and execute the files. Specifically,

Google recommends the following optimizations:

- Minify CSS
- Remove unused CSS
- Minify JavaScript
- Reduce JavaScript execution time
- Eliminate render-blocking resources

### 4. Improve server response time

For years now, we've observed a strong correlation between server response time and Google rankings.

Fixing your response time may be easier said than done. First, it's important to identify the bottlenecks that may be slowing you down. Common culprits could be your server, database, CMS, themes, plugins, and more.

For WordPress users, Cloudflare offers an interesting solution for reducing Time to First Byte you might consider. Otherwise, Google offers a few best practices as well.

### 5. Leverage browser caching

Browsers cache a lot of information (stylesheets, images, JavaScript files, and more) so that when a visitor comes back to your site, the browser doesn't have to reload the entire page. You can set your Cache-Control for how long you want that information to be cached.



# ***SPEED***

## CONTINUED

### 6. Use a Content Distribution Network

While it's not directly addressed in Core Web Vital audits, using a Content Distribution Network (CDN) can help address many real-world speed issues for actual users.

CDNs speed up your site by storing your files at locations around the world and speeding up the delivery of those assets when users request them.

There are literally hundreds of CDNs you can use.



# SECURITY

Security issues aren't typically the first thing one thinks about when doing a technical SEO audit, but security issues can definitely tank your rankings if not addressed.

Fortunately, there are a few checks you can make to ensure your site is up to par.

## Site Uses Proper HTTPS

Yes, the use of HTTPS is an official Google ranking signal. Technically, it's a small signal and classified as a "tie-breaker." That said, recent browser updates and user expectations mean that HTTPS is table stakes on today's web.

Auditing SSL/HTTPS is easy, as most browsers will simply warn you when you try to visit a site that isn't encrypted. Make sure to access the site at HTTP (without the "S") if no redirects are in place.

## Site supports HSTS

HSTS stands for HTTP Strict Transport Security. While there's no indication that HSTS is a ranking signal, Google recommends using it nonetheless because it can increase the security of your website.

Basically, HSTS instructs the user's browser to always load pages over HTTPS automatically, no matter the protocol entered.

To enable HSTS, you must serve a Strict-Transport-Security response header with a max-age directive in seconds, like so:

```
Strict-Transport-Security => max-age=2592000
```

To ensure HSTS doesn't cause problems for visitors, it's typically best to start with a low max-age, and work your way up to a year, or 31,536,000 seconds.



# SECURITY

## CONTINUED

If your site meets other requirements, you can submit your site for inclusion in Chrome's [HSTS preload list](#), which tells most browsers ahead of time to load your site via HTTPS only.

This can lead to benefits in both performance and security.

For the average webmaster, this can be a lot to take in, so don't worry if it's too overwhelming! And if you want to check your HTTP headers, you can use a tool such as [httpstatus.io](#).

No hacked content, malware, or other security issues In most cases, if your site suffers from hacked content or security issues, it's typically easy to spot for a couple of reasons:

- If you have Google Search Console set up, Google will typically notify you in-app in addition to emailing you.
- Major browsers, including Chrome, will likely show a warning to visitors if they try to access your site.

If you see a sudden drop-off in traffic you can't account for, it's worth a quick check for these security issues.

While Search Console [catches a lot of hacked content](#), it doesn't catch everything. If you suspect your site has been injected with spam or another type of attack, you may want to use a [third-party security tool](#) to run a quick check for major issues.

Finally, if you don't have access to Search Console, you can simply try navigating to your site using Chrome (incognito is best) to look for any security warnings. Alternatively, you can check your site status using [Google's Safe Browsing tool](#).



# INTERNATIONAL SITES

Millions of sites target different languages and geographical areas all over the globe. If your site targets multiple regions and/or languages with variations of your content, you'll want to do a thorough check for language and geotargeting accuracy.

## Signal location targeting

If your content targets specific locations, or multiple locations, there are three primary ways to signal this to Google:

1. Local-specific URLs. For example, Google would interpret the following URLs to primarily target users in Australia:

- au.example.com (subdomain)
- example.au (top-level domain)
- example.com/au (directory)

Not recommended are parameters to specify geotargeting, such as example.com?loc=au.

2. hreflang attributes. There are three different places you can specify hreflang targeting:

- In the HTML
- In the HTTP Header
- In sitemap files

3. International Targeting Report. Using Google Search Console, you can use the International Targeting Report to target your entire site to a specific country.

This option is not recommended if your site targets multiple areas.



# ***INTERNATIONAL SITES***

## CONTINUED

### **Valid hreflang annotation**

Most sites that target multiple geographical or language variations use hreflang attributes, either in the HTML, the HTTP headers, or via a sitemap file.

The rules for valid hreflang are complex, and they are very easy for even the most experienced SEO to mess up badly. This is probably one of the reasons Google only considers hreflang a "hint" for ranking and targeting purposes.

As we stated, Google considers hreflang a "hint" when targeting content towards a specific audience, combining it with many other hints, including the language of the page.

For this reason, your page language should be obvious. Mixed languages on a page can send mixed signals.

If you load a page in Chrome and Google offers to translate from a language that isn't obvious, you may be sending mixed language signals. Often, eliminating boilerplate text or navigational elements may solve the problem, or simply adding more content in the appropriate language.





# ***INTERNATIONAL SITES***

## CONTINUED

### **Avoid automatic redirection**

By far one of the biggest mistakes websites make with language and geolocation targeting is automatic redirection. It's common for websites to detect a user's location via their IP or other information, and then attempt to automatically redirect them to the "correct" page for simplicity's sake.

Unfortunately, this is bad practice.

Automatic redirection can hide content from both users and Google. If Google itself is automatically redirected, it may never crawl all of your content. Instead, first prioritize getting Google to serve the correct page to users by using the signals above.

Second, as a fallback, use hyperlinks to allow users to select the correct language/location for themselves. The additional benefit of using hyperlinks is that when combined with proper hreflang markup, they could actually increase Google's crawl coverage of your URLs.



# BACK LINKS

If we're being honest, backlinks aren't typically included in most technical SEO audits. The truth is, most SEO audits are performed to ensure a page has the maximum potential to rank, but one of the primary reasons a page may not rank is because of a lack of backlinks.

## URL has relevant backlinks

Search engines value links in a variety of ways. While Google says it's technically possible to rank without significant backlinks, our own research shows that it's very, very difficult to do so. If a page with good, relevant content isn't ranking, there's a good chance it lacks relevant backlinks.

Most of the major SEO tool offer great backlink reports

While there are many techniques to find and audit backlinks, at a minimum you want to ensure your page has a mix of links from trusted external sources and internal pages with a variety of anchor text phrases that accurately describe your content.

In the old days, SEOs had to worry about backlinks... a lot. Google's Penguin algorithm was designed, in part, to demote (or at least not reward) sites with a spammy backlink profile. Today, Google is likely to simply ignore bad links.

That said, if Google determines you've violated their policies on manipulative link building, they may still issue a manual penalty, or possibly demote you algorithmically in search results. Regardless, when performing an SEO audit, you should perform a couple of quick checks:

1. Does the website have any manual actions listed in Google Search Console?
2. Has the site participated in actions that knowingly violate Google's guidelines against manipulative link building?

If so, you may want to disavow links using Google's Disavow Tool. For a deeper understanding, check out Tom Capper's advice on when to disavow backlinks. Disavow file doesn't block important links

**To be clear:** the vast majority of sites do not need to disavow links.



# BACK LINKS

## CONTINUED

**Regardless, you should still check the site's disavow file.**

Many sites contain old disavow files without even being aware of them. Other SEOs, agencies, or website owners may have inserted blanket disavow rules, intentionally or unintentionally.

Without manually checking the file, you have no idea if you may be blocking important links. To perform this check, simply head to [Google's Disavow Tool](#) and see if any disavow files exist.

You may need to check each property separately, as domain properties aren't supported.

If a file does exist, download it and make sure you aren't blocking any important links to your site. If so, you can re-upload a new list, or optionally, cancel the disavow file entirely.

While the benefits of removing links from the disavow tool are debated in the SEO community, there is [anecdotal evidence](#) from several sources that it can help in certain circumstances.

At the very minimum, you should know what's in your disavow file.



# ***AND THAT'S IT***

We know, we know. This was a long read. But we promise the information is super valuable and current to SEO moving into 2024.

If you get stuck, we're here for you.

Head over to see us at [The Move](#). We're happy to answer any questions you have.

