

Top 10 SEO considerations for web content developers



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Having worked as a technical content developer for many years, I know that creating compelling content from scratch is not easy. Unfortunately, having great content does not guarantee success on the web, where the competing web page numbers are sometimes in the millions. The key factor for improving the discoverability of your content is search engine optimization (SEO). SEO helps elevate the search rank of your content by feeding the search engine crawlers the information that they must have to better understand your webpage, associate it with words used in search queries (keywords), and thus give it the highest possible rank it deserves.

The following are my top 10 SEO considerations for web content developers.

No. 1: Develop a list of targeted keywords for each webpage. To get a list of websites related to the topic you want to see in Google, Yahoo, Bing, or any other search engine, you typically type a few words into the search engine's search box and press ENTER. These words are the query's **keywords**. Anticipating those keywords and using them in your content will be most effective in developing keyword relevance.

Not all keywords are equal in value. The most-used keywords are popular, and you'll likely find strong competition in your efforts to rank well for them. These are called head terms. After the top five or ten **head terms**, there is usually a long list of other keywords used far less often for the same content. This is the long tail of search. The keywords in the long tail of search usually have less competition per word, but also offer less potential traffic per word.

To create a keyword list for your content, identify your intended audience and what they want to know. Then brainstorm to develop a list of relevant keywords and keyword phrases that your target audience will likely use to search for your content. Next, run some sample search queries for your initial set of keywords in both Google and Bing to identify which keywords your online competition uses in their webpages and note how well they rank for those queries. This step will likely uncover additional keyword candidates for your list. Once you have a good list, examine the value of the keywords in your list (head vs. tail terms) by reviewing them in a keyword tool. The most commonly used free keyword tool is Google AdWords. This tool is designed to help search marketers develop and refine keyword lists for Pay Per Click search advertising. However, the keyword data that it provides is equally applicable to SEO efforts.

Finally, develop a list of three to seven valuable, relevant keywords for each webpage of content. Learn more about developing keyword lists for your website in the Bing Webmaster Center blog. (I managed the webmaster blog there for nearly two years, so if I appear biased, I am only so toward my own writing!)

No. 2: Write unique, keyword-rich <title> tag text. Knowing where and how to apply keywords for maximum effect is critically important to SEO. HTML source code consists of both metadata (non-visible information) and visible, on-page content. The <title> tag is the most potent metadata tag for SEO; its text describes, in one line, the contents of the entire webpage. As a result, the words you put in the <title> tag should be your strongest, most valuable keywords.

As with real estate, the three most important things in writing <title> tag text are location, location, location. Word position matters! The first word is most valuable, the second word second most, and so on. Don't interpret this, however, as an invitation to make the <title> tag text a keyword dump, also known as keyword stuffing. Always write your metadata text in natural language, but use your writing skills to put your strongest keywords as early as possible. The search engines use the string you write for the <title> tag for the anchor text (also known as **the blue link**) to your webpage in their **search engine results pages (SERPs)**. Make it descriptive and compelling, minimizing fluff words that convey no value.

The text in the <title> tag should not exceed approximately 65 characters, including spaces. Anything longer is liable to be cut off in the SERP and not seen by end users (and potentially be ignored by search engines).

Lastly, unless your website's branding is one of your top keywords (and there aren't too many companies like Amazon or Ford out there), put your website branding at the end of your <title> text string.

No. 3: Write compelling <meta> description text. The <meta> description tag text describes the content of the webpage and typically appears beneath the SERP's blue link. The words used in the <meta> description have largely been discounted by search engines due to keyword stuffing. However, this fact does not negate the value of this important tag.

The <meta> description tag text is what end users typically see when they review search query results. Use the text in this tag to persuade the reader to click through to your webpage. Make the description text interesting, compelling, and, above all, relevant to your webpage. Include a few keywords for good measure, if only because query terms are highlighted in the SERPs and any matching words in your snippet will help draw attention to your link.

To avoid having your <meta> description cut off in the SERP, limit the length of the string to no more than 160 characters, including spaces.

No. 4: Write webpage-contextual alt text. Images can make an otherwise text-heavy webpage come alive visually. Unfortunately, search crawlers can't "see" the contents of images. To help them better understand the information an image file contains, add the alt attribute to the tag and insert text describing the image, such as:

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Note that an alt text description is optimized when it is written in context to the theme of the webpage rather than a mere literal description of the image. For example, imagine a photo of a wine bottle. What would be the best alt text description of that image for webpages dedicated to the following themes:

- Visiting a fine Pinot Noir winery in Oregon
- Collecting wine bottle labels
- Recycling green glass

In any of these cases, would the text "wine bottle" be an optimized, relevant description? I think not. Let the theme of the webpage dictate how you describe your images. If you can't think of a viable, webpage-relevant description, reconsider including that image on the webpage.

The value of keywords in alt text, as with <title> tag text, is weighted more heavily toward the front. Use natural language in your descriptions, but be a crafty writer and put your most valuable keywords near the beginning. Place all copyright attributions at the end. Lastly, keep the string between 25 and 150 characters, including spaces.

No. 5: Write descriptive, keyword-rich <h1> tag text. Similar to the <title> tag, the <h1> tag is a one-line description of the content on your webpage. While the <title> tag is metadata and is not displayed in the browser window, the <h1> is prominently displayed. Think of it as your webpage's visible, on-page headline. Always use just one <h1> tag on a webpage.

Don't duplicate the <title> tag text in the <h1> tag text. Both are important tags for associating keywords to the webpage; a mere duplication of another tag's text is a wasted keyword development opportunity. Keep your <h1> tag text between 10 and 200 characters, including spaces.

No. 6: Create lower level heading tags if necessary. If your webpage's content is long, consider adding lower level heading tags to break up the content flow into logical segments. The <h2> tag only describes the content from the start of that tag down to either the next <h2> tag or the bottom of the webpage. As the <h2> describes a smaller quantity of content, it has less SEO value than either <h1> or <title>, but it still has some SEO value. Use <h2> and even <h3> tags as needed. If you need to continue subdividing your content past the <h3> level heading, consider breaking your content into multiple webpages. Having a webpage with a clear, distinct focus is better for SEO, enabling the search engine to associate a few, targeted keywords with higher levels of relevance, which increases opportunities for earning higher rank.

Keep your <h2> and <h3> tag text between 10 and 200 characters, including spaces.

No. 7: Write an adequate amount of crawlable body text. Header tags and metadata aside, you still need **crawlable text** on the webpage. Defining how much text you need is a tricky question, and no one is really satisfied with the answer, "Enough to describe the webpage." If your webpage contains an article, the article itself is the content, and webpage content descriptions are best made in the metadata and <h1> tag text. However, if the webpage contains a collection of non-text-based content, such as images or videos, be sure to include some expository, on-page body text describing the content. This description is very helpful to search engine crawlers and end users alike, especially those with disabilities who depend upon screen readers to browse the web.

Can you write a good webpage description in 300 words? Sure. Do you need 300 words to do so? Not necessarily. This rule-of-thumb number is often advised for body text length. My take is this: if you have three paragraphs of text on a webpage preceding a collection of new product images or support videos, will the end user actually read it? Might they in fact be turned off by the long passage of text before they even see the content they came to see? If the reader simply abandons that webpage instead of digging further into the website, it's considered a **bounce** (where the visitor starts and ends a website visit by only viewing one webpage). Generally speaking, bounces are not good. There are exceptions, of course (such as the home pages of blogs), but a high bounce rate is often a symptom of a poorly designed webpage. Don't let an overly long passage of text ruin your webpage design.

Knowing the preferences of your target customers should enable you to write enough crawlable body text that adequately describes the webpage contents. Another idea is to put your description text at the end of the webpage (as done on the home page of the top-ranked travel website, Expedia.com). Simply put, if you write for the benefit of a human reader, the search crawlers will follow (they are designed to assign the highest value to webpages best designed for human consumption).

Be sure to include your targeted keywords in your body text. This reinforces the other uses of these keywords elsewhere in the metadata and heading tags. Occasionally repeat your keywords in the body of the text using a natural language flow. However, intentionally overdoing keyword repetitions in a webpage can be a red flag to search engines, indicating the presence of keyword stuffing web spam. That said, if your webpage is about tax preparation services, your description of income taxes, sales taxes, state taxes, personal property taxes, tax deductions, tax forms, and other relevant phrases (you see the pattern here!) will naturally repeat the word "tax" numerous times. As long as it is natural and relevant, don't worry about this. The search engines will understand.

Lastly, if your webpage contains a great deal of non-text content, and in particular, rich Internet application (RIA) technologies, such as Adobe Flash, Microsoft Silverlight, JavaScript, or AJAX, work with your webpage developers to provide a graceful degradation strategy for the webpages. (This strategy enables a secondary, text-based version of the content to be presented to users who can't access the primary RIA content, such as browsers without plug-ins installed or with JavaScript disabled.) Search crawlers generally have problems effectively crawling these types of content as well. If they can't read the content on the webpage, the webpage is effectively blank, and thus it won't be indexed or ranked in search.

No. 8: Create inline links to other relevant webpages. A powerful way to build relevance between webpages on a website is to create inline links from one webpage to other webpages of your website. Every link is viewed as an endorsement of the linked webpage by search crawlers, and that counts for internal links as well as external links. This is an often overlooked opportunity by content developers.

However, don't fall prey to temptation and overdo this practice. The difference between link spam and legitimate linking can sometimes be a fine line. Be reasonable and don't attempt to trick the search engines. Most likely, it'll backfire, resulting in index penalties, which can do real damage to a website's search rank and reputation. The bottom line is this: if intra-site linking is relevant and will be of value to your human readers, search crawlers will usually agree and view such linking in a positive light.

No. 9: Write descriptive, keyword-rich anchor text for links. The key to getting the most value out of intra-site links is to use your best keywords for the target webpage in the link's anchor text. The anchor text is a description of the target webpage. Using "click here" or "more" as link text is a missed opportunity for creating or reinforcing keyword relevance.

No. 10: Ignore the <meta> keyword tag (unless you have nothing else to do). The <meta> keyword tag is by far the most abused HTML tag in terms of foolish attempts at black hat (maliciously manipulative) SEO. Search engines long ago gave up on finding any value in this tag's contents. If you have other tasks you can do to optimize your webpages, don't invest any time in developing text for this tag.

That said, search engines are constantly looking for better ways to rank webpages. Search engines use several hundreds of ranking factors, with the priority and value of each factor constantly tweaked and juggled to provide the highest quality and relevant results to search users. One day, it's quite possible that the <meta> keyword tag will begin to rise from the SEO trash heap and once again convey value for a webpage. If and when that day comes, the recommendations on developing content for this tag include adding secondary value keywords not used on the webpage, separating keywords and keyword phrases with commas, and limiting the string to no more than about 850 characters.

However, that day won't likely happen for a while, so this should be considered the lowest of the low priorities for you as a content developer to help optimize your content. Frankly, your time would be better spent today creating new content. Search engines love original content, and if you optimize your content using the strategies outlined above, your webpages, in time and with the help of relevant backlinks from other websites, will earn the best possible rank they deserve.

It's a wrap

By following the advice presented here, your great technical content will earn the full consideration of the search engines, and will no doubt rise in rank value against competing, non-optimized webpages. No one in SEO can legitimately guarantee a No. 1 rank for a given webpage—there are far too many variables in play to make that claim. However, if your content's value to end users is truly compelling, is given time to earn backlinks from other websites (links from other webpages are regarded as votes of endorsement to search engines), generates social media buzz, and, of course, you remove search crawling obstacles with the SEO advice provided in this article, your content can accomplish great things in search. Best of all, that effort ultimately benefits your customers.

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