The Search Engine Land Guide to SEO

By the Editors of Search Engine Land
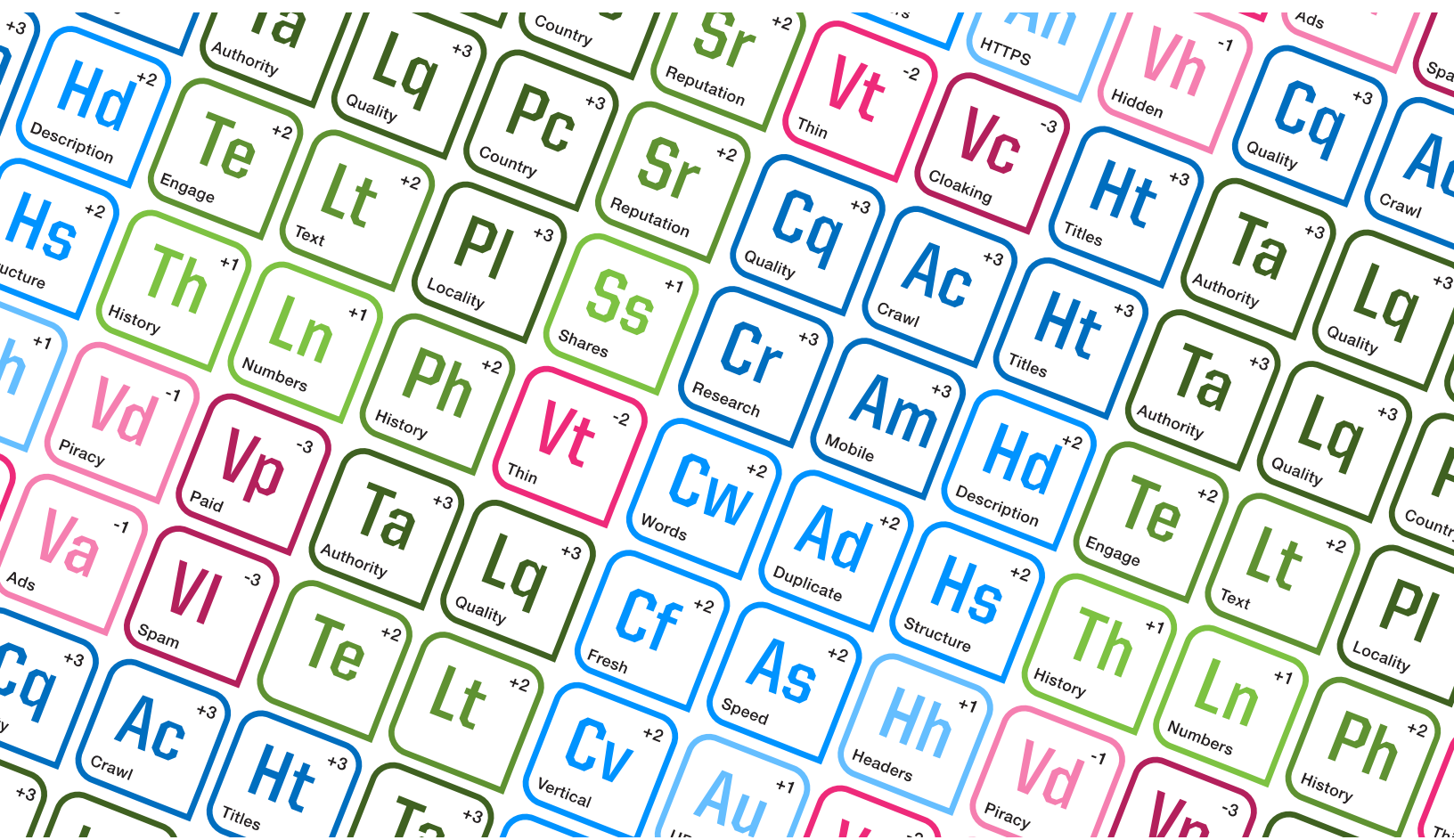
Search Engine Land

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Welcome to The Search Engine Land Guide to SEO.

Created as a companion to our Periodic Table of SEO Success, this guide will walk you through the various elements that go into search engine optimization. These include both on- and off-page factors: content; architecture; html; trust, links; personal and social factors.

Our Periodic Table was originally created in 2011, and was thoroughly updated by the editors of Search Engine Land in 2017. This guide, along with the Periodic Table, will provide you with the basics of SEO as well as expert advice on how to achieve search ranking success.

We wish you the best of success in SEO!

Michelle Robbins
Editor-in-Chief
Search Engine Land

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Types of Search Engine Success Factors

There are three major groups covered by Search Engine Land's Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors:
- On-the-page SEO
- Off-the-page SEO
- Violations

Within each group are subgroups, as each chapter of this SEO guide will explain. These subgroups contain one or more individual SEO factors with a specific weight or importance.

Violations, while a group unto themselves, are displayed under the group and subgroup to which they're associated.

Those two-letter acronyms you see on the chart above? That's our play on the periodic table of elements and the letter representations, or symbol, of each element. You may have had to remember that the symbol for gold was Au or that iron's was Fe.

In the Periodic Table of SEO, we've tried to make it slightly more intuitive. The first letter of each "SEO element" comes from the subgroup that it's in, and the second letter stands for the individual factor.

> With billions of web pages to sort through, looking only at "on-the-page" clues isn't enough. More signals are needed to return the best pages for any particular search.

SEO factors work in combination

No single SEO factor will guarantee search engine rankings. Having a great HTML title won't help if a page has low-quality content. Having many links won't help if they are all low in quality. Having several positive factors can increase the odds of success, while the presence of negative factors can worsen those odds.

On-the-page success factors

On-the-page search ranking factors are those that are almost entirely within the publisher's own control. What type of content do you publish? Are you providing important HTML clues that help search engines (and users) determine relevancy? How does your site architecture help or hinder search engines?

Off-the-page success factors

Off-the-page ranking factors are those that publishers do not directly control. Search engines use these because they learned early on that relying on publisher-controlled signals alone didn't always yield the best results. For instance, some publishers may try to make themselves seem more relevant than they are in reality.

With billions of web pages to sort through, looking only at "on-the-page" clues isn't enough. More signals are needed to return the best pages for any particular search.

SEO violations & ranking penalties

Make no mistake — search engines want people to perform SEO because it can help improve their search results. Search engines provide help in the form of guidelines, blog posts and videos to encourage specific SEO techniques.

However, there are some techniques that search engines deem "spam" or "black hat," which could result in your pages receiving a ranking penalty, or worse, being banned from the search engines entirely.

Violations are generally tactics meant to deceive or manipulate a search engine's understanding of a site's true relevancy and authority.

Weighting of search ranking factors

All the factors we show are weighted on a scale of 1 to 3, as shown in the top right corner of each factor, as well as reflected in the hue of that factor. A weighting of 3 is most important and is something you should pay special attention to because it has a bigger impact than other factors.

That doesn't mean that factors weighted 2 or 1 aren't important; they are. It's just that they are of less importance, relatively speaking, in terms of the other factors on the chart. Violations are also weighted, but in negative numbers, with -3 being the worst and potentially most harmful to your SEO success.

The weighting is based on a combination of what search engines have said, surveys of the SEO community and our own expertise and experience in watching the space over time. We don't expect them to be perfect. Not everyone will agree. Your mileage may vary. But we're confident it is a useful general guide.

"Missing" SEO factors & the Guide's philosophy

Experienced SEOs may be wondering why some factors aren't shown. How come ALT text and bolding words aren't included as HTML factors, for example?

The answer? We don't think those things are as important, relatively speaking. We're not trying to encompass every possible signal (Google has more

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than 200 of them) and sub-signals (Google has more than 10,000 of those).

Instead, the goal of the Periodic Table Of SEO Success Factors and this companion guide is to help those new to SEO focus on the big picture and perhaps allow experienced SEOs to hit the "reset" button if they've gotten lost staring at specific trees in the SEO forest.

That's why this SEO guide doesn't address having your most important keywords at the beginning or end of an HTML title tag. Nor are we trying to assess how much more weight an H1 header tag carries than an H2 tag.

We're purposely avoiding being ultra-specific because such things often distract and pull us down the rabbit hole. Instead, we hope you gain an understanding that pages should have descriptive titles, that indicating page structure with header tags may help, and topping things off with structured data is a good idea.

Do these things well, and you've probably addressed 90 percent of the most important HTML factors.

Similarly, it's not whether a good reputation on Twitter is worth more than on Facebook. Instead,

we're trying to help you understand that having social accounts that are reputable in general, which attract a good following and generate social shares, may ultimately help you achieve search success.

Want more specifics about success factors?

Want more specifics about success factors?

We know some of you may want to drill down into specifics. Check out our What Is SEO/Search Engine Optimization? page, which lists some useful guides to the fundamentals (including one from Google itself) along with many more SEO resources.
We do hope you'll keep any specific ranking factors in the context of the fundamentals covered by our table.

In addition, many of the success factors aren't true algorithmic factors at all. Content Research (element Cr) is a highly weighted "on-the-page" factor that describes the process of researching the words people use to find your content. Understanding your user is important to your SEO success, even if it's not a "ranking" factor.

Content & Search Engine Success Factors

Content is king. You'll hear that phrase over and over again when it comes to SEO success. Indeed, that's why the Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors begins with the content "elements," with the very first element being about content quality.

Get your content right, and you've created a solid foundation to support all of your other SEO efforts.

Cq +3
Quality

Cq: Content quality

More than anything else, are you producing quality content? If you're selling something, does your website go beyond being a simple brochure with the same information that can be found on hundreds of other sites?

Do you provide a reason for people to spend more than a few seconds reading your pages?

Do you offer real value, something of substance to visitors that is unique, different and useful that they won't find elsewhere?

These are just some of the questions to ask yourself in assessing whether you're providing quality content. This is not the place to skimp, since it is the cornerstone on which nearly all other factors depend.

You can find more information in Search Engine Land's SEO: Content and Writing category.

Cr +3
Research

Cr: Content research/ keyword research

Perhaps the most important SEO factor after creating good content is good keyword research. You want to create content using those keywords, the actual search terms people are using, so you can produce content that effectively "answers" that query.

For example, a page about "Avoiding Melanoma" might use technical jargon to describe ways to prevent skin cancer. But a search engine might skip or not rank that page highly if people are instead searching for "skin cancer prevention tips." Your content needs to be written in the right language — the language your customer or user is using when searching.

For more advice, see our Search Marketing: Search Term Research category.

Cw +2
Words
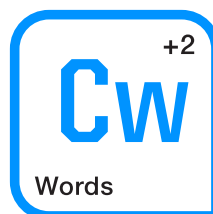
Cw: Content words/use of keywords

Having done your keyword research (you did that, right?), have you actually used those words in your content? Or if you've already created some quality content before doing research, perhaps it's time to revisit that material and do some editing.

Bottom line, if you want your pages to be found for particular words, it's a good idea to actually use those words in your copy.

How often? Repeat each word you want to be found for at least five times or seek out a keyword density of 2.45 percent, for best results.

No no no, that was a joke! There's no precise number of times. Even if "keyword density" sounds scientific, even if you hit some vaunted "ideal" percentage, that would guarantee absolutely nothing.

Just use common sense. Think about the words you want a page to be found for, the words you feel are relevant from your keyword research. Then use them naturally on the page. If you commonly shift to pronouns on second and further references, maybe use the actual noun again here and there, rather than a pronoun.

For more, see our SEO: Content and Writing category.

Cf: Content freshness

Search engines love new content. That's usually what we mean when we say "fresh."

You can't update your pages (or the publish date) every day thinking that will make them "fresh" and more likely to rank. Nor can you just add new pages constantly, just for the sake of having new pages, and think that gives you a freshness boost.

However, Google does have something it calls "Query Deserved Freshness (QDF)." If there's a search that is suddenly very popular versus its normal activity, Google will apply QDF to that term and look to see if there's any fresh content on that topic. If there is, that new or fresh content is given a boost in search results.

The best way to think about this is in regard to a term like "hurricane." If there's no active hurricane, then the search results will likely contain listings to government and reference sites. But if there's an active hurricane, results will change and may reflect stories, news and information about the active hurricane.

If you've got the right content, on the right topic when QDF hits, you may enjoy being in the top results for days or weeks. Just be aware that after that, your page might be shuffled back in search results. It's not that you've done anything wrong. It's just that the freshness boost has worn off.

Sites can take advantage of this freshness boost by producing relevant content that matches the real-time pulse of their industry.
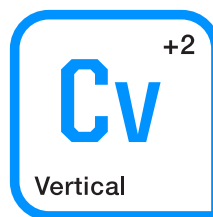
Cv: Vertical search

The other factors on this table cover success for web page content in search engines. But alongside these web page listings are also often "vertical" results. These come from "vertical" search engines devoted to things like images, news, local and video. If you have content in these areas, it might be more likely to show up within special sections of the search results page.

Not familiar with "vertical search" versus "horizontal search?" Let's take Google as an example. Its regular search engine gathers content from across the web, in hopes of matching many general queries across a broad range of subjects. This is horizontal search, because the focus is across wide range of topics.

> If you've got the right content, on the right topic when QDF hits, you may enjoy being in the top results for days or weeks.

Google also runs specialized search engines that focus on images or news or local content. These are called vertical search engines because rather than covering a broad range of interests, they're focused on one segment, a vertical slice of the overall interest spectrum.

When you search on Google, you'll get web listings. But you'll also often get special sections in the results that may show vertical results as deemed relevant.

Having content that performs well in vertical search can help you succeed when your web page content doesn't. It can also help you succeed in addition to having a web page make the top results. So, make sure you're producing content in key vertical areas relevant to you. For more information, see some of our related categories:

• Google: Maps & Local
• Google: Images
• Google: News
• Google: Shopping
• Google: YouTube & Video
• SEO: Image Search
• SEO: Local
• SEO: Video Search

Ca +2
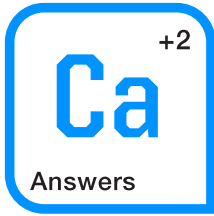
Answers

Ca: Direct answers

Search engines are increasingly trying to show direct answers (also called "featured snippets" or "answer boxes" or "position 0") within their search results. Questions like "why is the sky blue" or "how old is the president" might give you the answer without your needing to click to a web page.

Where do search engines get these answers? Sometimes they license them, such as with menus or music lyrics. Other times, they draw them directly off web pages, providing a link back in the form of a credit.

There's some debate over whether having your content being used as a direct answer is a success or not. After all, if someone gets the answer they need, they might not click, and what's the success in that?

We currently consider sites being used as direct answer sources to be a success for two main reasons. First, it's a sign of trust, which can help a site for other types of queries. Second, while there's concern, there's also some evidence that being a direct answer can indeed send traffic. Third, there is anecdotal evidence demonstrating direct answers/ query results in "position 0" are also surfaced for same/similar voice search results.

For more about direct answers, see our related categories:

Google: Knowledge Graph
Google: Featured Snippets & Direct Answers
Google: Voice Search
Search Features: Direct Answers

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Site Architecture & Search Engine Success Factors

The next major On-The-Page group in the Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors is site architecture. The right site structure can help your SEO efforts flourish while the wrong one can cripple them.
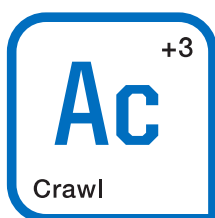
Ac: Site crawlability

Search engines "crawl" websites, going from one page to another incredibly quickly, acting like hyperactive speed-readers. They make copies of your pages that get stored in what's called an "index," which is like a massive book of the web.

When someone searches, the search engine flips through this big book, finds all the relevant pages and then picks out what it thinks are the very best ones to show first. To be found, you have to be in the book. To be in the book, you have to be crawled.

Most sites generally don't have crawling issues, but there are things that can cause problems. For example, JavaScript, Flash or CSS can potentially hide links, making the pages those links lead to hidden from search engines. And both can potentially cause the actual words on pages to be hidden.

> To be found, you have to be in the book. To be in the book, you have to be crawled.

Each site is given a crawl budget, an approximate amount of time or pages a search engine will crawl each day, based on the relative trust and authority of a site. Larger sites may seek to improve their crawl efficiency to ensure that the "right" pages are being crawled more often. The use of robots.txt, internal link structures and specifically telling search engines not to crawl pages with certain URL parameters can all improve crawl efficiency.

However, for most, crawl problems can be easily avoided. In addition, it's good practice to use sitemaps, both HTML and XML, to make it easy for search engines to crawl your site. You'll find more about sitemaps and dealing with potential crawling issues in the Search Engine Land categories below:

- SEO: Submitting Sitemaps
- SEO: Crawling and Robots
- SEO: Redirects & Moving Sites

Remember, "search engine-friendly design" is also "human-friendly design"!

Am: Mobile-friendly
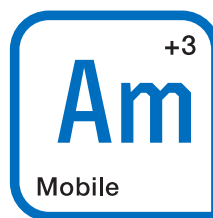
More Google searches happen on mobile devices than on desktop. Given this, it's no wonder that Google is rewarding sites that are mobile-friendly with a chance of better rankings on mobile searches while those that aren't might have a harder time appearing. Bing is doing the same.

Google has also announced it will move to mobile-first indexing over the next year (and has already begun with a small group of sites). What this means is that that the mobile version of your site's content will be used for indexing and ranking.

So get your site mobile-friendly. You'll increase your chance of success with search rankings as well as making your mobile visitors happy. In addition, if you have an app, consider making use of app indexing and linking, which both search engines offer.

To learn more about being mobile-friendly and app indexing, see our categories below:

- Google: Accelerated Mobile Pages / AMP
- Google: Mobile
- Google: App Indexing
- Bing: Mobile
- Bing: App Linking
- Mobile Marketing: App Indexing & Search
- SEO: Mobile Search

Ad: Duplication/ canonicalization

Ad +2
Duplicate

Sometimes that big book, the search index, gets messy. Flipping through it, a search engine might find page after page after page of what looks like virtually the same content, making it more difficult for it to figure out which of those many pages it should return for a given search. This is not good.

It gets even worse if people are actively linking to different versions of the same page. Those links, an indicator of trust and authority, are suddenly split between those versions. The result is a distorted (and lower) perception of the true value users have assigned that page. That's why canonicalization is so important.

You only want one version of a page to be available to search engines.

There are many ways duplicate versions of a page can creep into existence. A site may have www and non-www versions instead of redirecting one to the other. An e-commerce site may allow search engines to index their paginated pages. But no one is going to search for "page 9 red dresses." Or filtering parameters might be appended to a URL, making it look (to a search engine) like a different page.

For as many ways as there are to create URL bloat inadvertently, there are ways to address it. Proper implementation of 301 redirects, the use of rel=canonical tags, managing URL parameters and effective pagination strategies can all help ensure you're running a tight ship.

For more, see our category that discusses duplication and canonicalization issues, SEO: Duplicate Content.
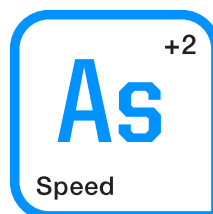
As: Site speed

As +2
Speed

Google wants to make the web a faster place and has declared that speedy sites get a small ranking advantage over slower sites.

However, making your site blisteringly fast isn't a guaranteed express ride to the top of search results. Speed is a minor factor that impacts just one in 100 queries, according to Google.

But speed can reinforce other factors and may actually improve others. We're an impatient bunch of folks these days, especially when we're on our mobile devices! So engagement (and conversion) on a site may improve based on a speedy load time.

Speed up your site! Search engines and humans will both appreciate it. Below is some of our past coverage of the importance of site speed:

- SEO: Site Speed
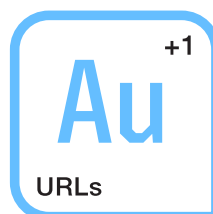
Au: Are your URLs descriptive?

Au +1
URLs

Yes. Having the words you want to be found for within your domain name or page URLs can help your ranking prospects. It's not a major factor, but if it makes sense to have descriptive words in your URLs, do so. The articles in the category below explore the power of the URL in more depth:

- SEO: Domain Names and URLs
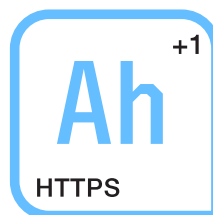
Ah: HTTPS/secure site

Ah +1
HTTPS

Google would like to see the entire web running HTTPS servers, in order to provide better security to web surfers. To help make this happen, it rewards sites that use HTTPS with a small ranking boost.

As with the site speed boost, this is just one of many factors Google uses when deciding if a web page should rank well. It alone doesn't guarantee getting into the top results. But if you're thinking about running a secure site anyway, then this might help contribute to your overall search success. To learn more, see our category below:

- Google: HTTPS & Secure Search

HTML Code & Search Engine Success Factors

HTML is the underlying code used to create web pages. Search engines can pick up ranking signals from specific HTML elements. Below are some of the most important HTML elements to achieve SEO success.

Ht +3
Titles
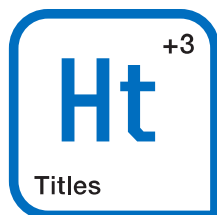
Ht: HTML title tag

Imagine that you wrote 100 different books but gave them all the same exact title. How would anyone understand that they are all about different topics?

Imagine that you wrote 100 different books, and while they did have different titles, the titles weren't very descriptive — maybe just a single word or two. Again, how would anyone know, at a glance, what the books were about?

HTML titles have always been and remain the most important HTML signal that search engines use to understand what a page is about. Bad titles on your pages are like having bad book titles in the examples above. In fact, if your HTML titles are deemed bad or not descriptive, Google changes them.
So, think about what you hope each page will be found for, relying on the keyword research you've already performed. Then, craft unique, descriptive titles for each of your pages.

For more help about this, see our posts in the category below:

• SEO: Titles and Descriptions

Hd +2
Description

Hd: The meta description tag

The meta description tag, one of the oldest supported HTML elements, allows you to suggest how you'd like your pages to be described in search listings.

If the HTML title is the equivalent of a book title, the meta description is like the blurb on the back describing the book.

SEO purists will argue that the meta description tag isn't a "ranking factor" and that it doesn't actually help your pages rank higher. Rather, it's a "display factor," something that helps how you look if you appear in the top results due to other factors.

Technically, that's correct. And it's one of the reasons we decided to call these "success" factors instead of ranking factors.

A meta description that contains the keywords searched for (in bold) may catch the user's eye. A well-crafted meta description may help "sell" that result to the user. Both can result in additional clicks to your site. As such, it makes sense for the meta description tag to be counted as a success factor. Be forewarned, having a meta description tag doesn't guarantee that your description will actually get used. Search engines may create different descriptions based on what they believe is most relevant for a particular query. But having a meta description tag increases the odds that what you prefer will appear. And it's easy to do. So do it.

The following category takes a closer look at the meta description tag:

• SEO: Titles and Descriptions
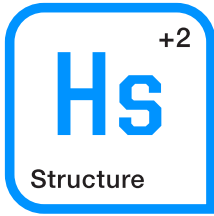
Hs: Structured data

Hs +2

Structure

What if you could tell search engines what your content was about in their own "language"? Behind the scenes, sites can use specific schema markup (code) that makes it easy for search engines to understand the details of the page content and structure.

The result of structured data often translates into what Google calls a "rich snippet," a search listing that has extra bells and whistles that make it more attractive and useful to users. The most common rich snippet you're likely to encounter is reviews/ratings, which usually includes eye-catching stars.

While the use of structured data may not be a direct ranking factor, it is clearly a success factor. All things being equal, a listing with a rich snippet is likely to get more clicks than one without.

Read more about using structured data - and the specific schemas supported by the search engines - in the categories below:

• SEO: Structured Data & Schema.org
• Google: Google Knowledge Graph
• Google: Google Rich Snippets

Hh: Header tags

Hh +1
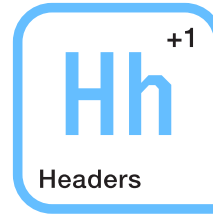
Headers

Take a look at any headline at the top of a web page. Behind the scenes, HTML code is used to make that a header tag. In this case, an H1 tag.

Are there sub-headlines on the page? Those also use header tags. Each of them is the next "level" down, using H2 tags.

Header tags are a formal way to identify key sections of a web page. Search engines have long used them as clues to what a page is about. If the words you want to be found for are in header tags, you have a slightly increased chance of appearing in searches for those words.

Naturally, this knowledge has caused some people to go overboard. They'll put entire paragraphs in header tags. That doesn't help. Header tags are as much for making content easy to read for users as it is for search engines.

Header tags are useful when they reflect the logical structure (or outline) of a page. If you have a main headline, use an H1 tag. Relevant subheads should use an H2 tag. Use headers as they make sense, and they may reinforce other ranking factors.

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Trust, Authority & Search Rankings

If search engines can decide to trust links or social accounts, can they learn to trust websites? Absolutely. Many SEOs believe that site trust plays a big role in whether a site will succeed or fail from a search perspective.

Ta: Authority

Is your site an authority? Is it a widely recognized leader in its field, area, business or in some other way? That's the goal.

No one knows exactly how search engines calculate authority and, in fact, there are probably multiple "authority" signals. Social references (from respected accounts), engagement metrics, topically relevant and quality pages linking to yours may all play a role in determining site authority. Conversely, negative sentiment and reviews may hurt site authority.

Google itself has downplayed the idea that sites have much authority, though it does say pages do. See How Google measures the authority of web pages for more about this.

Te: Engagement

A quality site should produce meaningful interactions with users. Search engines may try to measure this interaction — engagement — in a variety of ways.

For example, how long do users stay on your page? Did they search, click through to your listing, but then immediately "bounce" back to the results to try something else? That "pogosticking" behavior can be measured by search engines and could be a sign that your content isn't engaging.

Conversely, are people spending a relatively long time reviewing your content, in relation to similar content on other sites? That "time on site" metric or "long click" is another type of engagement that search engines can measure and use to assess the relative value of content.

Social gestures such as comments, shares and "likes" represent another way that engagement might be measured. We'll cover these in greater detail in the Social section of this guide.

> **Since search engines are constantly visiting your website, they can get a sense of what's "normal" or how you've behaved over time.**

Search engines are typically cagey about the use of engagement metrics, much less the specifics of those metrics. However, we do believe engagement is measured and used to inform search results. More information about engagement is available in the following category:

- SEO: Engagement

Th: History

Since search engines are constantly visiting your website, they can get a sense of what's "normal" or how you've behaved over time.

Are you suddenly linking out to what the search engines euphemistically call "bad neighborhoods"? Are you publishing content about a topic you haven't

typically covered? Such things might raise alarm bells.

Then again, sites do change, just as people do, and often for the better. Changes aren't taken in isolation. Other factors are also assessed to determine if something worrisome has happened.

Similarly, a site with a history of violating guidelines and receiving multiple penalties may find it more difficult to work their way back to search prominence.

In the end, a good overall track record may help you. An older, more established site may find it can keep cruising along with search success, while a new site may have to "pay its dues," so to speak, for weeks, months, or even longer to gain respect.

You can also read up on articles that look specifically at domain registration issues:

• SEO: Domains and URLs

Link building & Ranking In Search Engines

Links were the first major "Off-the-page" ranking factor used by search engines. Google wasn't the first search engine to count links as "votes," but it was the first search engine to rely heavily on link analysis as a way to improve relevancy.

Despite the chatter around other signals, links, along with content, remain the most important external signal for Google's search rankings. But as you'll find, some links are more valuable than others.

Lq: Link quality

If you were sick, which would you trust more, the advice from five doctors or from 50 random people who offered their advice as you walked down the street?

Unless you've had a really bad experience with doctors, you'd probably trust the advice from the doctors. Even though you're getting fewer opinions, you're getting those opinions from experts. The quality of their opinions is better, so they carry more weight.

It works the same way with search engines. They'll count all the links pointing at websites, but they don't count them all equally. While links using the nofollow attribute are counted, they don't pass any quality factors. Search engines give more weight to the links that are considered to be of better quality, which is determined by the content and authority of the page the link is on.

What's a quality link? It's one of those "you'll know it when you see it" types of things in many cases. But a link from any large, respectable site is going to be higher on the quality scale than a link you might get from commenting on a blog. And, links from sites that are topically relevant to your site, may also count more.
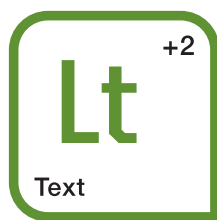
Lt: Link text/anchor text

Amazon has millions of links pointing at it. Yet, it doesn't rank for "boats." It does rank for "books." Why? Many of those links pointing at Amazon say the word "books" within the links, while relatively few say "boats," since Amazon doesn't sell boats.

"Anchor text", or the clickable part of the link you see, helps humans and search engines determine what may be coming next and are seen by search engines as the way one web page is describing another. It's as if someone's pointing at you in real life and saying "books" and indicating you an expert on that topic.

You often can't control the words people use to link to you, so capitalize on your opportunities to influence anchor text, within reason.

Ln: Number of links

Plenty of sites have found that getting a whole lot of links can add up to SEO success. Even more so if you're getting a lot of links from many different sites. All things being equal, 1,000 links from one site will mean far less than 1,000 links from 1,000 sites.

Long ago, the sheer number of links used to be far more important, but the number has decreased steadily in importance as search engines have learned how to better evaluate the quality of links.

Tactics such as targeted content and link baiting campaigns, writing products reviews and broken link building are a handful of ways to attract links to your web pages. Avoid automated software and spamming blogs, both are against the search engines' terms of service.

For more information, see our categories, Link Building and How to: Links

Personalization & Search Engine Rankings

Years ago, everyone saw exactly the same search results. Today, no one sees exactly the same search results, not on Google, not on Bing. Everyone gets a personalized experience to some degree, even in private browsing windows.

Of course, there's still a lot of commonality. It's not that everyone sees completely different results. Instead, everyone sees many of the same "generic" listings. But there will also be some listings appearing because of where someone is, who they know or how they surf the web.

Pc: Country

One of the easiest personalization ranking factors to understand is that people are shown results relevant to the country they're in.

Someone in the US searching for "football" will get results about American football; someone in the UK will get results about the type of football that Americans would call soccer.

If your site isn't deemed relevant to a particular country, then you've got less chance of showing up when country personalization happens. If you feel you should be relevant, then you'll probably have to work on your international SEO.

The articles in the categories below offer some international and multilingual tips:

• Search Marketing: Multinational
• Legal: Right To Be Forgotten

Pl: Locality

Search engines don't stop personalizing at the country level. They'll tailor results to match the city or metropolitan area based on the user's location.

As with country personalization, if you want to appear when someone gets city-specific results, you need to ensure your site is relevant to that city.

Check out the following links and categories for more locality information:

• Channel: Local
• SEO: Local
• Google: Maps and Local
• Column: Local Search

• How to: Local Search Marketing
• Bing: Maps and Local
• Search Engines: Maps and Local Search Engines

Ph: Personal history

What has someone been searching for and clicking on from their search results? What sites do they regularly visit?

This type of personal history is used to varying degrees and ways by both Google and Bing to influence search results. Unlike country or city personalization, there's no easy way to try and make yourself more relevant.

Instead, it places more importance on first impressions and brand loyalty. When a user clicks on a "regular" search result, you want to ensure you're presenting a great experience so they'll come again. Over time, that user may seek out your brand in search results, clicking on it even if it's below other listings.

This behavior reinforces your site as one that should be shown more frequently to that user. Even more so if they initiate a social gesture, such as a like, +1 or tweet that indicates a greater affinity for your site or brand.

• Search History Personalization
• Google Personalized Search

Social Media & Ranking In Search Results

Using links as an off-the-page ranking factor was a great leap forward for search engines. But over time, for a variety of reasons, links have lost some of their value. Some sites are stingy about linking out. Others block links to help fight spam. And links get bought and sold, making them less trustworthy.

Enter: social media. If links were a way for people to "vote" in favor of sites, social media sharing represents a way for that voting behavior to continue.

For the record, Google has repeatedly said that it's not using the major social networks of Facebook and Twitter as a means to rank pages. However, conventional wisdom among many SEOs — and our own view — is that social is important as an indirect factor.

Content that gets socially shared can, in turn, pick up links or gain engagement, which are direct ranking factors. As a result, paying attention to social media is important to SEO success.
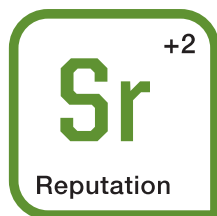
Sr: Social reputation

Sr +2
Reputation

Just as search engines don't count all links equally, they don't view all social accounts as being the same. This makes sense, since anyone can create a new account on a social network. What's to prevent someone from making 100 different accounts to manufacture fake buzz?

Nothing, really, other than the fact that fake accounts like these can often be easy to spot. They may only have a handful of "quality" friends in their network, and few might pass along material they share.

Ideally, you want to gain references from social accounts with good reputations. Having your own social presence that is well-regarded is important. So participate on relevant social platforms in a real, authentic way, just as you would with your website, or with customers in an offline setting.

Ss: Social shares

Ss +1
Shares

Similar to links, getting quality social shares is ideal, but being shared widely on social networks is still helpful. Good things happen when more people see your site or brand.

> Ideally, you want to gain references from social accounts with good reputations. Having your own social presence that is well regarded is important.

Again, participation in social sharing sites is crucial. If you don't have a Twitter account, a Facebook fan page or a Google+ Page you're missing out. You're not building up a network that can help spread (aka share) your content, site and brand.

For more information on social media and search results, see the categories below:

- Bing: Social Search
- Google: Social Search
- Search Engines: Social Search Engines
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google+
- Pinterest

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Violations & Search Engine Spam Penalties

So far, we've discussed the positive signals that make up the Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors. But there are also some negative factors to avoid.

A word of reassurance: Very few people who believe they've spammed a search engine have actually done so. It's hard to accidentally spam and search engines look at a variety of signals before deciding if someone deserves a harsh penalty.

That said, let's talk about things not to do!

## Vt: "Thin" or "shallow" content

Vt -2
Thin

Responding to a drumbeat of complaints about poor search results, Google rolled out its "Panda" update in February 2011. Panda targets what is described as "thin" or "shallow" content or content that is lacking in substance.

This domain-level penalty targets sites with a predominant amount of so-so content and essentially treats it similarly to the way it treats overt spam techniques.

Today, it's no longer a question of whether the content is simply relevant, but whether it is valuable to the user.

To learn more about this, see some of our articles in the category below:

• Google: Panda Update
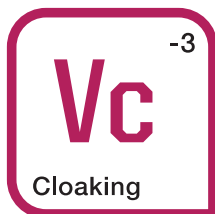
Vc: Cloaking

Vc -3
Cloaking

Let's talk sophisticated hiding. How about rigging your site so that search engines are shown a completely different version from the one humans see?

That's called cloaking. Search engines really don't like it. It's one of the worst things you could do. Heck, Google's even banned itself for cloaking. Seriously.

While most people are unlikely to accidentally spam a search engine, the opposite is true when it comes to cloaking. That's why there's such a heavy penalty if you're caught doing it. It's a bait-and-switch, and it's seen as a deliberate attempt to manipulate search results.

• SEO: Cloaking and Doorway Pages

Vs: Keyword stuffing

Vs -2
Stuffing

It's one of the oldest spam tactics on the books, yet it's still being used, and the search engines still don't like it. Search engines say to use words you want to be found for on your pages. OK, I'll give them those words over and over again! How about 100 times. In a row? That work for you, Google?

Actually, no, it doesn't. That's "keyword stuffing," and it could get you penalized.

How often is too often? There's no correct answer here, but you'd really have to go to extremes to cause this penalty to kick in. It's most likely to happen to non-SEOs who just don't know better and might decide to paste a word many times in a row, typically at the bottom of a web page.

Vh: Hidden text

Vh −1
Hidden

Once you decide to keyword stuff, your next thought will probably be, "Why don't I hide all this text that no human wants to see?" You might make the text white, so it blends with a page's background. In doing so, you will have spammed a search engine.

Search engines don't like anything hidden. They want to see everything that a user sees. Don't hide text, whether by using styles, fonts, display:none or any other means that so a typical user can't see it.

Vd: Piracy/DMCA takedowns

Vd −1
Piracy

The "Pirate" update targeted sites infringing on copyright law. Under pressure from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), Hollywood powerhouses and governments, Google began to penalize sites that received a large number of Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) "takedown" requests.

It's unlikely that most sites will have to deal with these issues, but you should handle any DMCA takedown notifications that show up in your Google Search Console account.

Learn more about the Pirate update and piracy in the following categories:

• Google: Pirate Update
• Legal: Copyright

Va: Ads/Top Heavy layout

Va −1
Ads

Have you ever been on a site and found it hard to find the actual content amid a slew of ads? Where's the beef?!

That's what the Page Layout algorithm was meant to address. Often referred to as Top Heavy, this penalty is reserved for sites that frustrate the user experience by placing an overabundance of ads before content. Don't make your users search for the content.

Learn more about the Page Layout algorithm from the following category:

• Google: Top Heavy Update

If you choose to ignore Google's rules, be prepared for little mercy if caught.

Intrusive interstitials are also an issue that Google has warned against and taken action over:

• Google's App Interstitial Giant Ad Penalty Is Now Live

• Google confirms rolling out the mobile intrusive interstitials penalty

Vp: Paid links

Vp −3
Paid
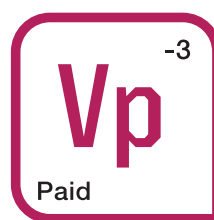
Speaking of Google banning itself, it also banned Google Japan when that division was found to be buying links. Banned for 11 months.

That's longer than J.C. Penney was penalized (three months) in 2011. But J.C. Penney suffered another penalty after having its paid link purchase splashed across a giant New York Times article. So did several large online florists. And Overstock got hammered via a Wall Street Journal article.

The debate over whether or not Google should act so aggressively against those who buy and sell links has gone on for years. The bottom line is that to rank on Google, you have to follow Google's rules — and the rules say no buying or selling links in a way that passes on search engine ranking credit. All paid links need to use the nofollow attribute and be flagged as "sponsored" or "paid".

If you choose to ignore Google's rules, be prepared for little mercy if caught.

As for Bing, officially, it doesn't penalize for paid links, but it frowns on the practice.

The following category has posts with more information about paid links:

• Link Building: Paid Links
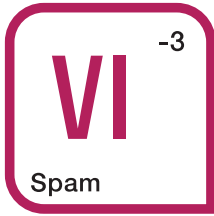
VI: Link spam

Tempted to run around and drop links on forums and blogs, all with highly optimized anchor text (like "louis vuitton handbags 2013"), with the help of automated software?

You're not doing SEO, though sadly, all the people who hate the spam you leave behind get the impression that's what SEO is about. So, SEOs hate you, too – with a passion.

If you do go ahead with it, most of the links won't give you the credit you were thinking they would. On top of that, you can find yourself on the sharp end of a penalty.

This penalty has been given more weight in this version of the table based on the efforts Google has made in neutralizing and penalizing link spam and, in particular, the launch of the "Penguin" update.

If you've been caught dabbling on the dark side, or if a fly-by-night "SEO" company got your site in hot water, you can disavow those links on both Google and Bing in hopes of redemption and a clean start.

More info & redemption

To learn more about spam, you might check out this category: If you're seeking redemption, here's guidance from Google on how penalties are applied or removed and how to request reinclusion:

• Search Engine Land's Guide to Google Penalties
• SEO: Spamming
• Google: Penalties
• Google: Link Disavow
• Google: Penguin Update

Get a reference copy of the periodic table

Congratulations! If you've been reading through this guide from the beginning, you're done!

Did you get your PDF version of the Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors? It's suitable for printing, framing or just future reference. You'll also find images that you can embed on your site.

Go ahead and download the Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors here.

About Search Engine Land

Search Engine Land is a leading daily publication that covers all aspects of the search marketing industry. The site is led by SVP Content & Editor-In-Chief Michelle Robbins, who oversees the editorial team behind Search Engine Land and its sister publications, MarTech Today and Marketing Land. Daily news coverage includes breaking stories, industry trends, feature announcements and product changes to popular platforms used by search marketers to reach consumers online.

In addition to the editorial news staff coverage, Search Engine Land features contributed articles by subject matter experts across all digital marketing disciplines, filled with practical tips, tactics and strategies for running successful marketing programs.

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