

# SEO BASICS FOR RESEARCHERS

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SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION



# WHAT IS SEO?

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Search engine optimization is exactly what it sounds like: Optimizing digital content so that search engines (like Google) rank content/web pages higher on search engine results pages (SERPs).

In other words, there's a reason why certain websites pop up first when you Google "Sylvia Plath vampirism."



# SEO STARTER FACTS

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- In the US, “search engines” and Google are used interchangeably. Google is the leading search engine in the US, and most other search engines follow the best practices established by Google. That being said ...
- Google doesn't reveal all of their SEO best practices publicly. What we do know is that SEO is always changing and evolving.
- There are “black hat” strategies that can temporarily boost web content/pages higher on SERPs. However, Google is very good at catching black hat hackers and punishments can include permanent deletion of a website from Google results pages.

# WHAT IS CONTENT?

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- “Content” in the SEO world is traditionally written content. However, it can now include images and videos. Video-based SEO is the fastest-growing type of content, particularly for younger users.
- Written content can include meta tags, video descriptions (i.e. YouTube), and back end content (i.e. written text that isn’t seen by users, but may be included in hidden code on a site).
- All content, written or otherwise, needs to be organic, high quality, and original. Google’s goal is to connect users with the highest-quality content that matches their search queries. As a researcher, you and Google have the same goals.

# HOW ARE PEOPLE SEARCHING?

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- Most users search for content just like you do. They're not going to type into Google "What is the history of the wise Indian in western film history?" They will Google something like "Wise Indian western films." Conjunctions are rarely used. This presents a puzzle for SEO writers to solve: If content needs to be high-quality AND match what people are actually typing into Google, how do we make that happen?
- Studies show that most people don't look beyond the first five or so search results.
- Almost nobody goes beyond the first page of search results. If you don't exist on the first page of "your" search key phrases, you may as well not exist at all.
- For every nanosecond that a page takes to load, you increase the odds of a person back-clicking. It's the goldfish and instant gratification mentality.



# COMMON BLACK HAT STRATEGIES

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- Sometimes it's lack of knowledge that makes someone create illegal black hat-driven content. Common strategies that are easily caught and punished include:
  - Creating duplicate pages/content
  - Keyword stuffing
  - Link stuffing
  - Plagiarism from top competing sites

# CURRENT BEST WHITE HAT STRATEGIES

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Also known as best SEO strategies, current white hat approaches that are helpful can include:

- Creating all-original content with a keyword/key phrase density around 4 percent
- Utilize professional writing services and editing services
- Ensure every image and video is accompanied by SEO-rich written descriptors
- Include authority links and check them regularly (ideally once per month). Authority links are often .gov sites
- Encourage link sharing with complementary, but not competitive, sites
- Aim for short sentences, paragraphs with no more than five sentences, and plenty of images and white space
- Images should be high-resolution and copyright-free

# WHAT ARE “MY” KEYWORDS AND PHRASES?

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- Every researcher has “their” keywords and key phrases. These are dictated by what type of researcher you are and what people will query when looking for your research.
- Keywords used to be at the heart of SEO. However, these are so broad they are impossible to compete for, which is why key phrases are now the core. For example, competing for the key word “US history” is going to be impossible. Competing for the key phrase “US history of indigenous boarding schools” is a much more feasible key phrase to prioritize.

# HOW DO I CHOOSE MY KEY PHRASES?

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- Key phrases are chosen partially organically (you probably already know a few key phrases that suit you). You'll also want to look at top competitors. Peruse their sites. What key phrases do you notice that also apply to you? There's a thin line between utilizing key phrases and plagiarizing.
- There are many free keyword planners online where you can find “variants” of your key phrases. One is [kwfinder.com](http://kwfinder.com)

# MAKING SURE YOU DON'T PLAGIARIZE

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There are numerous free plagiarism checkers online. One of the biggest black hat tricks is “duplicate content,” which can include unintentional plagiarism. It’s a good idea to always check your content for plagiarism, even if you’re certain it’s all authentic. Sometimes technical terms can trigger plagiarism tags simply because they’re so long.

Recommended checker: Copyscape. It’s not free, but it’s very low cost and the industry standard. [www.copyscape.com](http://www.copyscape.com)

# SEO AND SM

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- Social media (SM) platforms are a great opportunity to utilize SEO. Think SEO-rich when you're posting as a researcher on any platform. Technically, hashtags and when you @ key influencers means you're also practicing SEO.
- We often think of websites when we think of "What sites come up when I Google this?" However, sometimes a researcher's public social media sites come up before their website. This is because SM platforms are often more regularly updated with more content.
- One exception: Snapchat. This app doesn't have a desktop presence, and with disappearing content, there's no use in prioritizing SEO.

# HOW DO I KNOW SEO IS WORKING?

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There are hundreds of ways to run “analytics” on your SEO strategies. However, once you get to this level, you’re probably investing more in the business side of your researcher than you’d like. If you’re really interested, it’s better to higher a contract SEO expert.

A few rules:

- *Nobody* can promise you’ll be at the top of Google search results.
- SEO changes can be slow moving. You won’t notice huge results right away.
- SEO is always evolving. It takes practice. However, many researchers don’t prioritize SEO at all. Simply being aware of it and following a few tips (such as quality key phrase-rich content) will put you ahead of the competition. (There’s a reason SEO experts have coined another meaning for the acronym).



# FINAL TIPS: WHAT CAN I DO TODAY TO BETTER MY SEO?

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- Use more high-quality, copyright-free images and videos on all web presence (websites and SM). Make sure these images and videos are accompanied by SEO-rich content.
- Ensure all of your written content has “your” key phrases, as directed by Google Keyword Planner.
- Include authority links and link sharing with complementary sites.
- If possible, hire or barter for a professional writer and editor.
- Check your website for plagiarism.
- Use more white space, short sentences, aim for 2-4 % key phrases in your content.

