GOOGLE RANKING FACTORS
FACT OR FICTION

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" In 1999, I started this company with the mission statement, 'We will work toward bringing in the greatest amount of relevant traffic to our clients' websites, using the most ethical methods available.' That mission remains true today."

Jim Boykin, *CEO & Founder of Internet Marketing Ninjas*

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UP↑ 51%
After **3 Months**

UP↑ 62%
After **6 Months**

UP↑ 80%
After **12 Months**

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IS IT A RANKING FACTOR?

Is there any more widely contested topic in the entire industry of SEO?

Whether this issue or that element can actually influence your rankings in Google search is a constant source of conversation (and anxiety) for marketers of all stripes.

And while some of these potential ranking factors seem pretty straightforward, each one carries with it a lifetime of folklore, Twitter debate, and anecdotal evidence.

Given that some of these factors have been around as long as the practice of SEO itself — meta data, HTML tags, keyword density, and links, for example — it's no wonder there's so much conflicting information out there.

And there's no shortage of people who'd like you to believe the success of your SEO program hinges on this factor or that. They typically have a solution to sell you, too...

Our Editorial Team here at Search Engine Journal decided to put each of these claims through the paces by applying the same rigorous evaluation to each one.

For each debated ranking factor, we looked at:

- **The Claim:** Why people believe it may or may not be a ranking factor.

- **The Evidence For It:** Any confirmation from Google or solid evidence pointing to its status as a ranking factor.

- **The Evidence Against It:** Logic, expert opinion, or other evidence it is not a ranking factor.

- **Our Verdict:** The author's determination of whether Google uses that factor in its ranking algorithm — or not (or even not anymore).

Everything in the search sphere is a constant work in progress. This guide is no exception.

We fully expect some of these verdicts to change. And if you have evidence to contradict one of our decisions, get in touch with us at info@searchenginejournal.com! We love to be proven wrong when it means new, accurate information is becoming available to the SEO community.

Enjoy Google Ranking Factors: Fact or Fiction. And keep it handy. You never know when a colleague or client might challenge your position on dwell time, reading level, or any of the other 88 factors we evaluated for this book.

Yours in debunking SEO misinformation,

Danny Goodwin
Executive Editor, Search Engine Journal

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E-A-T (Expertise, Authority, Trust)

.edu Links

First Link Priority

Fresh Content

Google Ads

Google Analytics

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Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines

.gov Links

Powerful SEO Insights Right In Your Browser

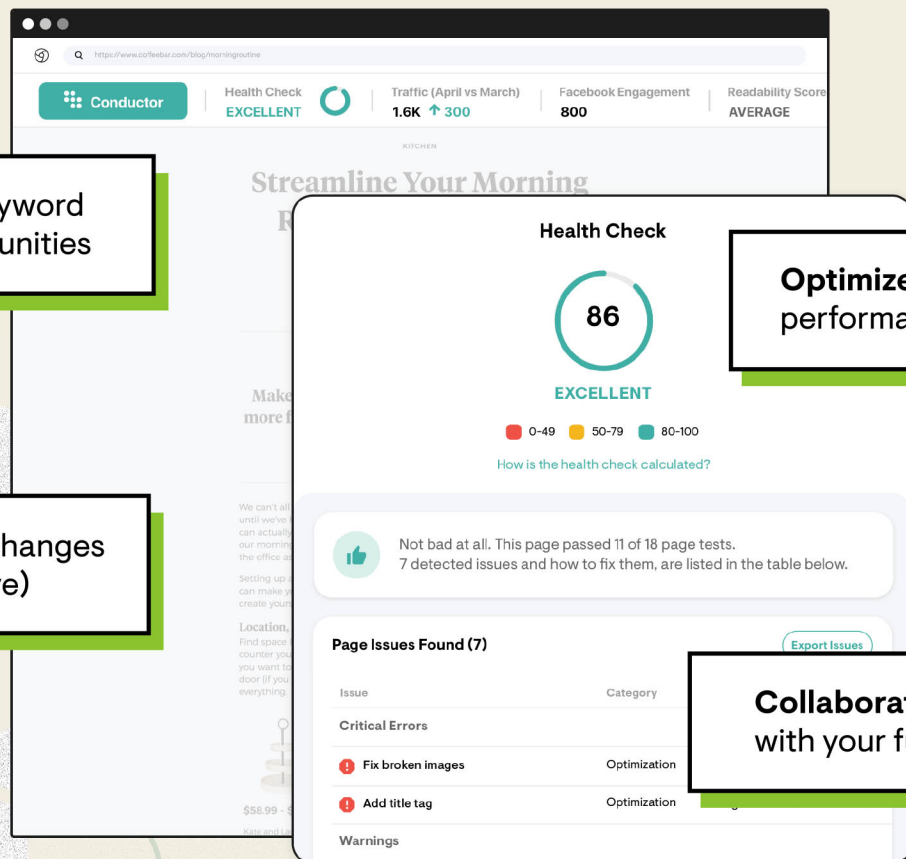Empower your entire Organic Marketing team with the best of Conductor in one click

Discover new keyword and topic opportunities

Optimize with immediate performance insights

Execute on-page changes in real-time (with live)

Collaborate on-the-go with your full team

conductor

Health Check
EXCELLENT

Traffic (April vs March)
1.6K ↑ 300

Facebook Engagement
800

Readability Score
AVERAGE

KITCHEN

Streamline Your Morning

Health Check

86

EXCELLENT

0-49 50-79 80-100

How is the health check calculated?

👍 Not bad at all. This page passed 11 of 18 page tests.
7 detected issues and how to fix them, are listed in the table below.

Page Issues Found (7)   Export Issues

Issue	Category
Critical Errors	
❗ Fix broken images	Optimization
❗ Add title tag	Optimization
Warnings	

Install free today!

H1

H2-H6

HTML Lists

HTTPS

Images (Number of)

IP Address

Keyword Density

Keyword Prominence

Keyword Stemming

Keyword Stuffing

Language

Link Stability

Link Velocity

Links (Contextual)

Links (Inbound)

Links (Internal)

Links (Nofollowed)

Links (Outbound)

Links (Paid)

Links (Sitewide)

Local Citations (NAP)

LSI (Latent Semantic Indexing)

Manual Action

Meta Descriptions

Meta Keywords

Mobile Friendliness

MUM

Page Speed

Physical Proximity to Searcher

RankBrain

Reading Level

Reconsideration Requests

Relevance, Distance, Prominence

Review Sentiment

Schema Markup

Social Signals & Shares

Spelling & Grammar

Subdomains & Subdirectories

Syndicated Content

Tabbed Content

Text Formatting

TF-IDF

Title Tag

URLs

User Search History

User-Generated Content

Website Quality Score

WHOIS

www vs. non-www

XML Sitemaps

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Easily Navigate to the Table of Contents

Click this menu button (found in the lower right
corner of each page) to quickly get back to the
TOC.

TOP 8 RANKING FACTORS: WHAT REALLY MATTERS FOR SEO
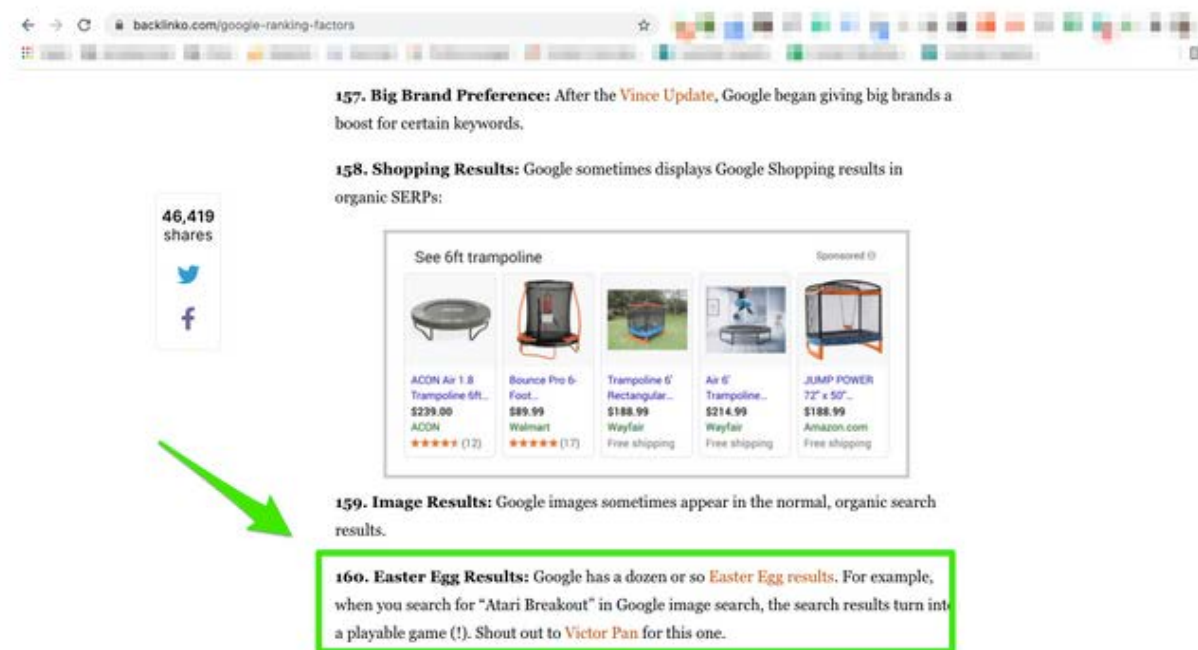
By **Anna Crowe**

Ah, ranking factors. The ancient art of ranking in search engines is a lesson in balance and patience.

Yet some people read an article like the example below that talks about the most important ranking factors and think, "Yep, I'll follow that advice."

After reading these types of articles, I'm begging for a shower and a bar of soap.

You'll read some bizarre stuff like Easter Eggs are ranking factors.

Now, you could spend all your time prepping for Easter Egg results and optimizing Google Doodles in the SERPs, or... you could just not do that.

So what ranking factors should you focus on to improve your SEO?

According to Google's John Mueller, you should focus on "awesomeness."

Saroj Kumar @sarojnishad · Sep 5, 2017 · · ·
@methode @JohnMu What's the main important factor for rank a
website in top search results on a particular phrase?

♡ 2 ⟲ 3 ♡ 6 ⬆

Replies

🍌 **John** 🍌 ✓ @JohnMu · Sep 6, 2017 · · ·
Replying to @sarojnishad and @methode
Awesomeness.

♡ 13 ⟲ 25 ♡ 55 ⬆

But with over 1.8 billion websites online today, how do you create awesomeness?

And with the oversaturated amount of articles claiming to be ranking factors, what is fact or fiction?

With Google evaluating sites based on hundreds of ranking factors, knowing where to aim your SEO strategy for the biggest bang might seem impossible.

What we do know is that Google will continue adjusting ranking signals to best meet the needs of searchers.

This means that even new SEO trends have roots in the current algorithm – and with a little creativity and SEO savvy, it's entirely possible for you to rank well.

While ranking signals are far from limited to just these eight, the factors highlighted in this post are ones the Search Engine Journal team has demystified out of 88+ ranking factors.

To help you avoid unneeded stress and worry from SEO ranking myths, the Search Engine Journal team shares our top ranking factors that *really* matter, and why.

1. Publish High-Quality Content

"I don't need quality content on my website to rank," said no one ever.

The quality of your website and blog content is still crucial. Content still reigns as king.

Your content needs to provide valuable information. Creating pages with no real value can come back to haunt you, thanks to Google's Panda and Fred algorithm updates.

Pages like this portal site.

Or, this.

Even big names like eBay and Apple aren't worthy of the content crown. Thin content has hurt both brands in the past.

High-quality content is about creating pages that increase time on page, lower bounce rate, and provide helpful content for the user.

Blog pages like this and guides like this are the type of high-quality content search engines, and users want.

High-quality content pages must do more for today's SEO than just be well-written and long-form. They must also take the following into account to enjoy an increased presence in SERPs:

RankBrain

[Knowing users' search intent](#) is essential to creating pages that drive organic traffic. That's where RankBrain is applied.

[RankBrain is a machine learning system](#) that helps Google understand the intent of a search query.

How much does this matter? Well, CoSchedule saw a [594%](#) increase in traffic by reshaping their SEO content strategy to be more aligned with searcher intent.

This alignment with searcher intent is especially important because, as [Mueller has pointed out](#), intent can change over time.

Google has even updated the search results with a new featured snippet that is designed for "multi-intent" queries.

To understand what your target searcher's intent is, you need to [dive into your Google Analytics](#) to see what users are looking for.

Luckily, you have a [number of techniques](#) at your disposal.

Reports like [Site Search](#) and User Flow can give you an idea of what your customers are searching for.
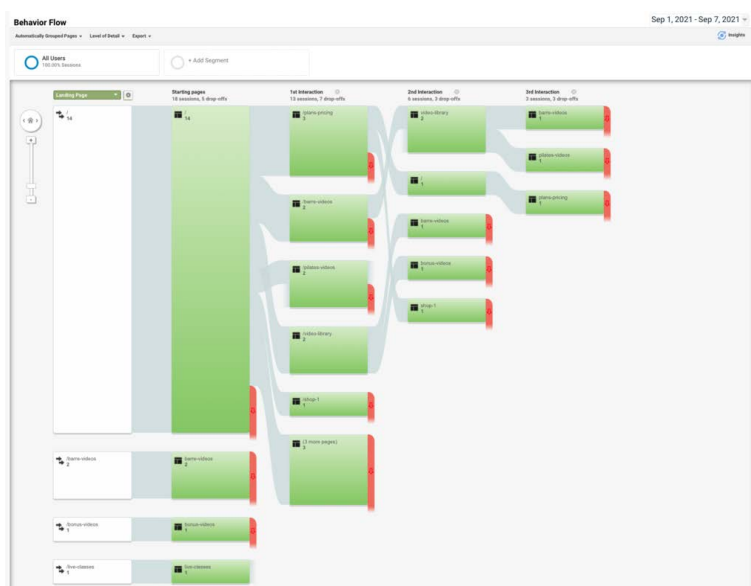
You can also view the [Performance report in Google Search Console](#). This will give you insights into what people are clicking on the SERPs to get to your site.

Keyword Usage

Despite the word on the street that [keyword research](#) is not needed to rank, it still supports quality content creation. But unlike traditional keyword research, today keywords serve as a content creation roadmap.

Through [competitor research](#) and data mining, you can uncover keyword gems that have average search volume but a high click-through rate for your audience.

Check out how Chris Hornack, founder of Blog Hands, saw an [80%](#) increase in traffic after performing keyword research.

So, as the industry continues to whisper about the negative impact of keyword research, you need to identify your primary keywords and bucket them into topics suited for your searcher.

For instance, [a Google study](#) found that mobile search queries such as [brands like] and [stores like] have increased by 60% over the past two years. This study explains the need to adapt your keyword strategy for the mobile consumer.

Andrea Lehr, Brand Relationship Strategist at Fractl, shares insights on how she buckets her keywords [here](#).

Gone are the days of doing keyword research on individual keywords.

Today, it's best to bucket keyword topics into themes. Think about synonyms, long-tail keywords, and keywords related to the topic or similar topics. This is how you target keyword usage.

Freshness

Content freshness is nothing new. When Google first made the announcement in 2011, it sparked confusion around what was deemed as "fresh content."

So what is it? And how does freshness work with evergreen content?

For evergreen content, don't simply update the date every year. You must dive into the meat of the content to see what needs to be refreshed.

For example, if you created a listicle of tools, you could update the screenshots, pricing, and information attached to each tool.

This is why it's ideal to perform quarterly content audits to understand what pieces deserve a refresh and others that could be redirected into similar pages. Before you make any changes to your content, look at your data to help you make smarter decisions.

2. Make Your Site Mobile-First

Mobile-first indexing was officially finalized in March 2021. It's been a long, slow process since it kicked off in 2017.

In short, mobile-first indexing is the way Google indexes your site. If you have a separate mobile website, the URL of your mobile site will be indexed and used for ranking instead of the desktop version.

To be clear, there is no separate mobile-first index. Google indexes and ranks your content that comes directly from the mobile version of your site.

Also, the mobile-first index should not be confused with mobile usability. Let's dive into the difference in mobile usability.

Mobile Usability

Remember when a mobile version of your website hosted at m.URL.
com was the recommended thing to do?

While it won't always harm you, more websites are moving away from
this mobile website method and toward building responsive websites
instead.

Even though Google has said they don't publicly favor any one set
way of doing mobile websites (whether it's responsive, dynamic, or
separate URLs) when it comes to rankings, a responsive website is
their recommended format.

Google has stated that responsive design helps their "algorithms
accurately assign indexing properties to the page rather than needing
to signal the existence of corresponding desktop/mobile pages."

In the age of the mobile-first index, your mobile website is the
lifeblood of your existence in the SERPs. To stay alive, follow Google's
guidelines and make sure your content matches identically on your
desktop and mobile.

While mobile responsive layouts are not required for mobile-first
indexing, you still want to optimize it for better page experience, and
in turn, rankings.

Whenever you can make it easier for a search engine to improve its
results, do it!

3. Enhance Page Experience

Improve Your User Experience

User experience (UX) has an impact on SEO, as we have seen with the recent updates to Page Experience.

If you don't think about UX, your website will end up in the metaphorical trash.

In fact, 38% of people will stop engaging with a website if the content and layout is unattractive.

Getting this right can bring big benefits. Main Street Host, a digital marketing agency, saw a 66% increase in page views to their attorney profile pages by updating the content and optimizing call-to-action buttons.

And, Ezoic saw 186% increase in earnings per 1,000 visitors after creating a better UX.

Rover is a good example of a solid user experience:

Designing a user experience that pairs nicely with your SEO is vital if you want to succeed in the SERPs. It's like choosing which Backstreet Boys song you want to sing karaoke to. Even if the performance is good, if the song is off, no one will sing along with you.

Site Architecture

Site architecture is a related component of user experience and has a significant impact on SEO.

John Doherty of Credo claims, "One of the biggest changes I can make is fixing their site architecture."

He goes on to discuss a website where he switched the URLs from a tag page to a subcategory page to link higher in the site architecture. He was able to increase organic sessions by 74% and pages per session by 41%.

Here is an example of proper site architecture:

Not only does site architecture help users find what they are looking for with better website navigation, but it can also help search engine crawlers find more pages on a website.

In a nutshell, your websites should be dead easy to use.

All pages and navigation should be laid out as simply as possible.

It should take a user only three to four clicks to find any page on a website. While this isn't always possible on large sites, there are ways to help users search and find pages internally to ensure they find what they need.

With the release of the Page Experience update, site architecture will have a bigger impact on your SEO.

Core Web Vitals

As Google's John Mueller noted, Core Web Vitals is more than a tie-breaker. This metric impacts many other factors related to SEO.

For instance, Core Web Vitals impacts your usability. If a searcher goes to page and converts, your UX, page speed, and content all affect the conversion rate.

Essentially, Core Web Vitals were created to help you deliver a better experience for the user.

Create a Secure Website (HTTPS)

Dr. Pete J. Meyers wrote that 30% of page 1 Google results were using HTTPS.

While not switching to HTTPS won't necessarily harm your website, there have been several changes since Google first announced HTTPS as a ranking signal back in 2014.

In 2017, Google announced that its Chrome browser (which 45% of us use) would begin to flag sites as "not secure" in the URL bar when they aren't HTTPS.

And, after their final warning announcement you could start to see a rise in bounce rakes if you don't make the transition.

Here is what Chrome will look like when you implement HTTPS:

All of this shows that Google thinks HTTPS is essential.

However, switching to HTTPS (and SSL, as they work together) can also bring a lot of canonicalizing issues to your site if not done correctly.

To learn more, check out HTTP to HTTPS Migration: The Ultimate Stress-Free Guide by Aleh Barysevich.

Even though it hasn't been shown to make a significant impact on SEO by itself, the Chrome update may mean that switching your site over (by experienced people) is worth it.

Ad Experience

Ad Experience was rolled out in 2017 and targeted Chrome users.

Chrome could remove all the advertisements from your website if you are in violation of Better Ads Standards. Chrome could now impact website owners for running aggressive ads.

Glenn Gabe gave a breakdown of examples of Chrome ad filtering in action.

Ad Experience is tied to page experience and Core Web Vitals because it is impacted by the user experience and how the user interacts with your website.

4. Optimize Your Page Speed

After being a desktop-only ranking factor, page speed became a Google mobile ranking factor in 2018.

The slower your site loads, the more visitors and revenue you'll lose out on.

For Amazon, just one second could cost it $1.6 billion in sales each year.

The Telegraph, a British publication, found that a four-second delay reduced page views by 11.02%.

Why take that risk?

There are tools available to test a website's average page speed.

Lighthouse is your friend.

Many fixes are relatively easy if they are done by someone who knows what they are doing (not everyone knows how to minify JavaScript, for example).

Faster loading pages lead to a better overall website experience, hence Google's move toward making it a mobile ranking factor.

5. Master Your On-Page Optimization

Closely related to Page Experience is on-page optimization, which deals with the "behind the scenes" components of your content and SEO.

These facets have been around for years and still make a significant impact on your website's visibility and SERP position for your target keyword topics.

Mockingbird saw a 62% increase in organic traffic by merely updating H1 tags, for example.

And, Brand New Copy increased organic traffic by 48% by cleaning up metadata and internal linking structure.

Worth it? I think so.

Optimizing your website can help your existing high-quality content get found faster by search engines and users.

These are just a few of the ways that on-page optimization will still make a major impact for years to come:

Metadata

This information includes your title tag and page descriptions – the information about your sites that users see in the SERPs.

Google sometimes pulls content from the page and dynamically inserts it as the description in SERPs when it better matches the user's query. Here is how that might look:
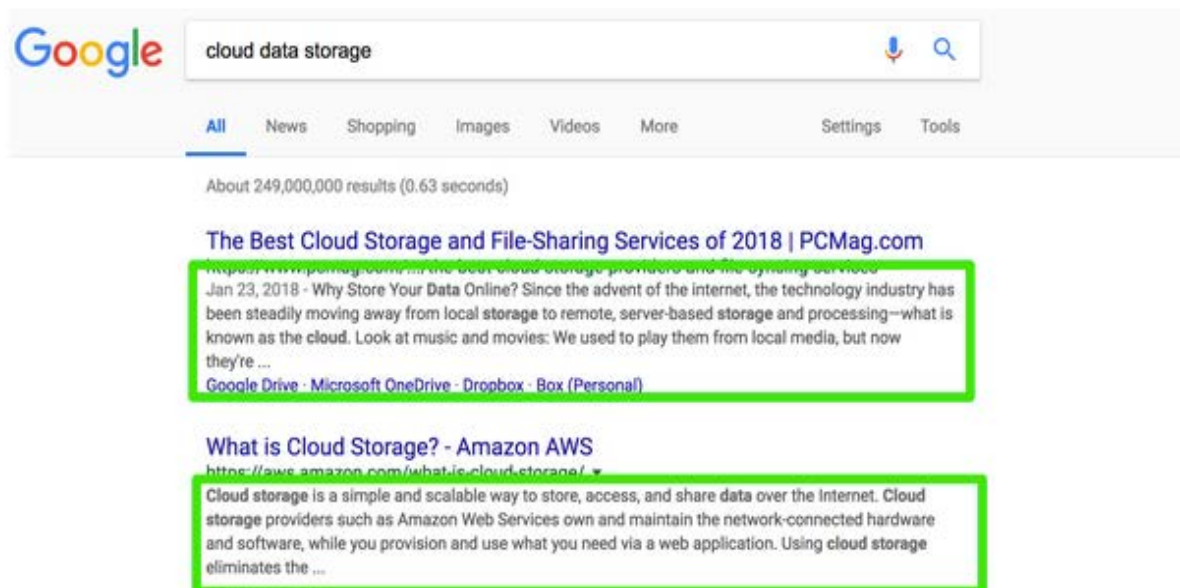
As it stands, write the best titles and descriptions for your pages that you can, but keep in mind that they won't always be used.

There are plenty more meta tags to know in SEO.

And think about this: The simple addition of one particular meta tag could result in a 300% increase in Clicks from Google Discover.

Schema

Schema markup is another "hidden" component of a website that tells search engines more about your content.

Created in 2011, there are now almost 600 different types of information you can include.

Schemas make it easier for search engines to identify the essential information on a website. For instance, there your schemas for a local business might look like this:

```
<!-- FOOTER -→
   <div class="footer left">
      <div class="footer-top left"></div><!--/footer-top-→
      <div class="wrapper">
         <div class="footer-widgets-content left">


            <div class="footer_box left">
               <div class="footer-widget-holder"><h2>Get to
Know Us!</h2> <div class="textwidget"><div itemscope
itemtype="http://schema.org/LocalBusiness">
<a itemprop="url" href="http://www.toybraryaustin.com"><div
itemprop="name"><strong>Toybrary
Austin, TX</strong></div>
</a>
<div itemprop="description">The Toybrary is a toy lending library
and kids' birthday party venue that
also offers drop-in
childcare in Austin, TX</div>
<div itemprop="address" itemscope itemtype="http://schema.org/
PostalAddress">
<span itemprop="streetAddress">2001 Justin Lane</span><br>
<span itemprop="addressLocality">Austin, </span>
<span itemprop="addressRegion">TX </span>
<span itemprop="postalCode">78757</span>
<span itemprop="addressCountry"> USA</span><br>
<span itemprop="telephone">5127654174</
span>
</div>
</div></div>
 </div>
         </div><!--/footer-widget-→
```

In a session, "How to Stand Out in Search with Structured Data" at Google I/O, Andrew Valente of Google shared a sample of the case studies that show how Schema markup and rich results help increase engagement and clicks online.

Rotten Tomatoes saw 25% higher click-through rate on pages with markup. And, the Food Network saw a 35% increase in visits for recipes with markup.

Schema markup is what helps Google display rich snippets in search results, making it an important part of SEO.

You can now add schema to a page's header using JSON-LD, too. Use a generator like this one from Hall Analysis for basic markup needs.
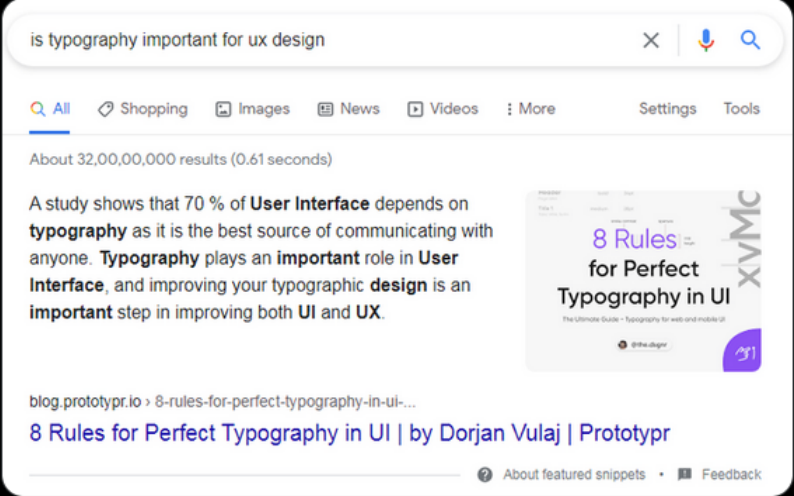
Featured Snippets

Featured snippets, sometimes referred to as the coveted Position 0, are a snippet of content extracted from the page's copy and served directly in the search results.

If you're looking to snag a featured snippet, you need to understand RankBrain and the search intent behind the query you want to rank for the featured snippet.

If your content provides more value to the intent behind the search query, search engines will serve your content in the featured snippet.

Himani Kankaria shares her advice and tactics on how to optimize for featured snippets.

Google Discover

Google Discover is one of the newer content-related SEO factors that's popped up.

Google Discover is like opening a Taco Bell combo box full of burritos, in that it has the potential for more organic traffic than the standard search results.

To see if you're currently ranking in Google Discover, check out the report in Google Search Console.
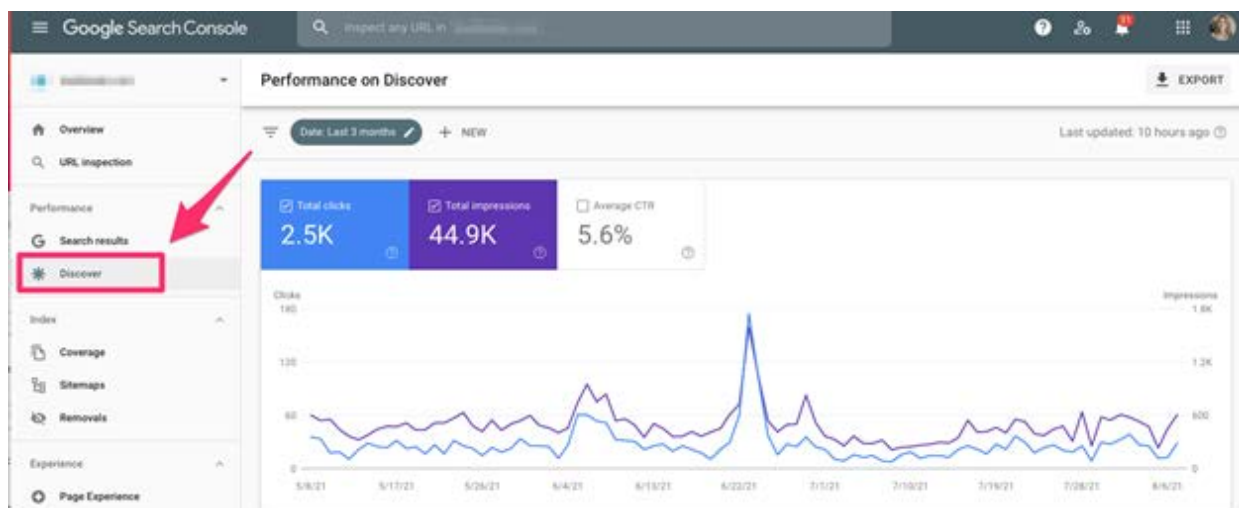
Read Lily Ray's article on the characteristics of top-performing content in Google Discover to learn how to optimize your content.

6. Internal Link Structure

Internal link structure helps users and search engines better find pages.

> **Corey Morris, Vice President of Marketing for Voltage, talks about [prioritizing your internal linking](#) structure in five different areas:**
>
> - Helping users.
> - Managing link flow (e.g., where the traffic goes once it gets to your site).
> - Building a roadmap around specific content topics.
> - Canonicals.
> - Prioritizing indexing of particular pages.

What this means is that your strategy for linking to different pages on your site should be user-centered first. Then you can focus on how to drive traffic to a fundamental set of pages.

Think about how internal link structure can help guide users toward completing a conversion from signing up for your newsletter to completing a request for a live demo.

7. Earn Relevant & Authoritative Links

Links will continue to be one of the [leading SEO components](#) if you want to rank well.

Ignore those who say you can achieve success without inbound links (a.k.a., backlinks).

While some sites absolutely can and have, it would be silly not to pursue any powerful link building strategies that work.

As each industry is unique, there are various link building opportunities for each one.

Looking for ideas? Check out [Search Engine Journal's Link Building Guide.](#)

While links may lose their value over the next few decades, they are still an active ranking signal.

8. Local

Google states [local is broken down into three ranking factors.](#)

Relevance

Relevance is connected to how close the business is to the searcher's query. You could see search queries like [best burritos] when speaking about local search relevance. Relevance is the lifeblood of Google's local algorithm.

Your business listings like Google My Business, Bing Places listings, etc. are tied to your NAP (Name, Address, Phone number) and other key attributes related to your business. It's key to fully complete all the detailed business information in these directories to help search engines better understand your business and relevance to the searcher.

Distance

Distance refers to the physical distance between your business and the searcher. The closer your business is to the searcher, the more likely that location will appear in the local map results. This is where search queries with "near me" come into focus.
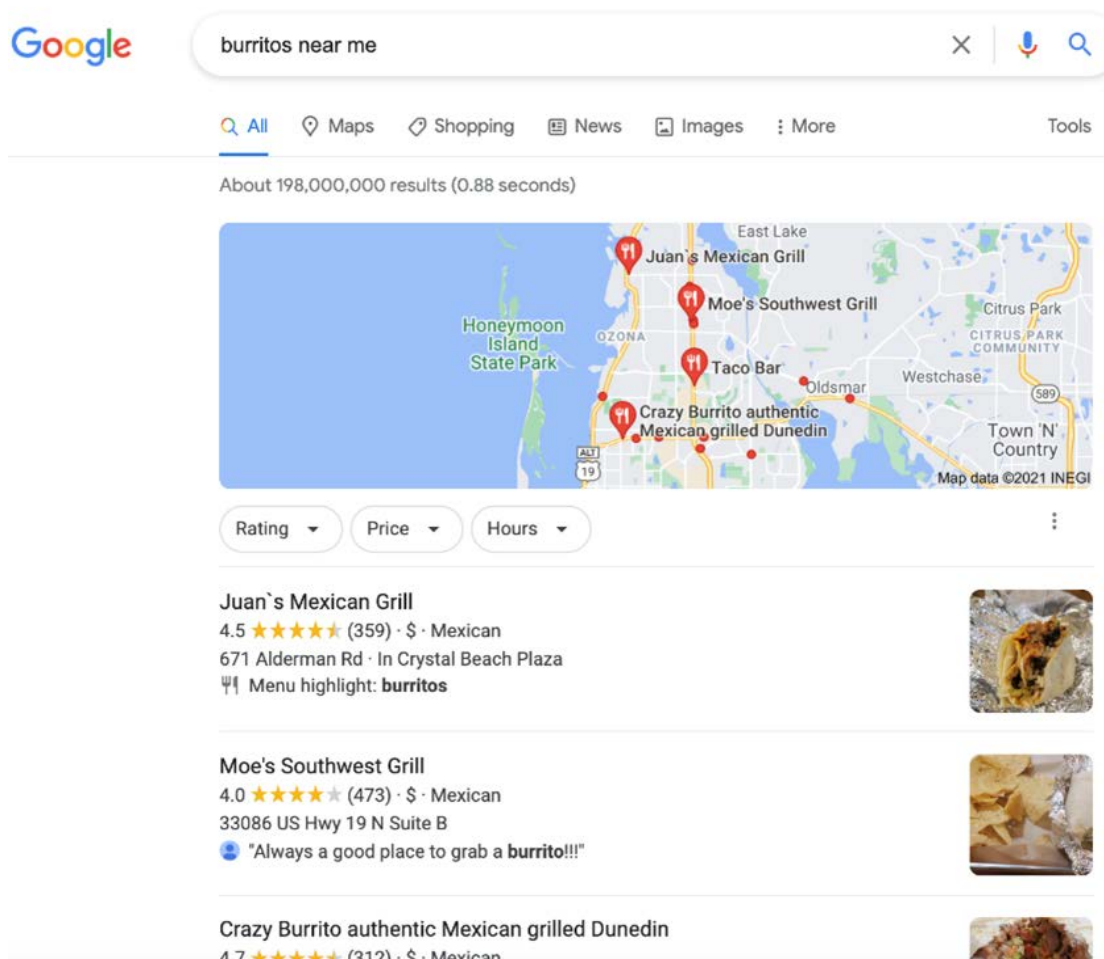
Prominence

Prominence is tied to the popularity of your business offline. Google tells us exactly what they're looking for in measuring prominence:

> Prominence is also based on information that Google has about a business, from across the web, like links, articles, and directories. Google review count and review score factor into local search ranking. More reviews and positive ratings can improve your business' local ranking. Your position in web results is also a factor, so search engine optimization (SEO) best practices apply."

Key Takeaway: E-A-T Impacts All Ranking Factors

E-A-T refers to Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness, and features prominently in Google's Search Rater Guidelines.

While E-A-T may not be a ranking factor, it indirectly affects your rankings. This helps us understand where Google is focused on improving the quality of search results.

E-A-T is used to evaluate the truth of your content, in turn, impacting your rankings. Use it wisely.

Use These Ranking Factors to Create SEO "Awesomeness"

Ranking signals all flow together to help SEO marketers create "awesomeness." Ranking factors don't boil down to these alone. Ranking in the SERPs is not about the latest and greatest tips and tricks.

Ranking factors should be used as a guide on the work you need to put into being awesome. Being awesome means a more comprehensive, sophisticated SEO strategy for better performance now and going forward.

301 REDIRECTS

By **Kristi Hines**

Are 301 Redirects a Google Ranking Factor?

Using 301 redirects to tell search engines when a webpage has permanently moved to a new location is definitely an SEO best practice.

But can 301 redirects affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between 301 redirects and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

301 Redirects are a Ranking Factor

What are 301 redirects?

A 301 redirect is a server-side redirection for a URL that has permanently changed.

You would use a 301 redirect for the following scenarios:

- You are going from HTTP to HTTPS.
- You are going from an old domain to a new one.
- You are optimizing URL slugs for existing posts and pages.
- You are moving to a new website platform and your pages will change from *https://domain.com/page.html* to *https://domain. com/page/*.

Most of the discussion surrounding 301 redirects focuses on whether PageRank would transfer from the old URL to the new URL.

Or, if inbound links existed for the old URL, would they automatically be applied to the new URL?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against 301 Redirects as a Ranking Factor

Not much is officially said about 301 redirects as a ranking factor.

In 2012, Matt Cutts, then the head of Google's Webspam Team, said that Google would follow an unlimited number of redirects, from one page to another.

Google will even make multiple hops if a page is redirected to another page, and then redirected again and again. He noted that the Google-bot may stop following redirects after four to five hops.

In 2013, Cutts confirmed that a small percentage of PageRank is lost in 301 redirects. While some SEO professionals quote a loss of 15%, Cutts doesn't say there is a specific percentage.

In 2016, John Mueller answered the question of whether 301 redirects pass PageRank in a post about moving from HTTP to HTTPS.

He reassured webmasters that:

"Fluctuations can happen with any bigger site change. We can't make any guarantees, but our systems are usually good with HTTP → HTTPS moves."

"...for 301 or 302 redirects from HTTP to HTTPS, no PageRank is lost."

In 2019, John further confirmed that HTTPS is a lightweight ranking factor when discussing how SSL affects a website's search rankings. The redirection of a website from HTTP to HTTPS is the closest way 301 redirects are linked to ranking factors.

In 2020, Mueller discussed possible SEO implications of stringing multiple 301 redirects together. Redirects can negatively impact speed. Also of note: Google will only crawl up to five "hops" in a redirect chain.

And in 2021, Google updated its guide to redirects and Google Search in its Advanced SEO documentation. It confirmed that of all redirect types, 301 redirects are most likely to be crawled correctly.

Specifically, Google noted:

"...a server side redirect has the highest chance of being interpreted correctly by Google."

Temporary HTTP and meta refreshes have the least chance of being processed correctly by Googlebots.

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

301 Redirects as a Ranking Factor

The only time you may experience a boost as a result of using 301 redirects is when you go from HTTP to HTTPS.

In the case above it was HTTPS, not the 301 redirects, that was confirmed as a lightweight ranking factor.

When used properly, 301 redirects should have no impact on your website's search rankings.

404 & SOFT 404 PAGES

By **Kristi Hines**

Are 404 & Soft 404 Errors Google Ranking Factors?

Can 404 and soft 404s errors affect your Google search rankings?

According to Google, the answer is no.

However, there is an exception you will want to know about, in order to avoid having a 404 error impact your rankings. Read on to learn more.

THE CLAIM

404 & Soft 404 Errors Are a Ranking Factor

What are 404 errors? 404 errors occur when a user or search crawler tries to access a page that does not appear to exist on a domain.

404 errors happen when:

- A page is deleted from your website without a 301 redirect.
- Someone makes a mistake typing the page URL into their browser's address bar.
- Another website links to an incorrect URL.

In addition to traditional 404 errors, some pages cause soft 404s.

A soft 404 occurs when a website returns a 200 success code from the server, but a "404 page not found" simultaneously for a user.

The page either doesn't exist or portions of the main content didn't load completely.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against 404 & Soft 404s as Ranking Factors

In 2011, Susan Moskwa, Webmaster Trends Analyst, published a series of questions and answers about 404s on the Google Search Central Blog. The short answer to that first question, do 404 errors affect my site's rankings, was no.

> **"The fact that some URLs on your site no longer exist / return 404s does not affect how your site's other URLs (the ones that return 200 (Successful)) perform in our search results."**

Google Search Console Help also shares information about 404 errors.

Most importantly, they assure you from the start:

> **"...404 errors won't impact your site's search performance, and you can safely ignore them if you're certain that the URLs should not exist on your site."**

Regarding soft 404 errors, you should avoid anything that makes it hard for Google to process your website's structure. Specifically:

> **"Don't create fake content, redirect to your homepage, or use robots.txt to block 404s."**

THE EXCEPTION

404 errors may not hurt the rankings of pages that load successfully. But they can when you have inbound links pointing to a page that no longer exists.

In a previous chapter, we concluded that inbound links are a ranking factor.

Let's say that you remove a page with inbound links from your website In 2017, Google Search Central posted a video on how to handle a URL that results in a 404 error.

If you see significant traffic going to the URL in Google Analytics or links to the URL, you should use a 301 redirect.

According to a tweet from John Mueller in 2019, with a 301 redirect:

> **"...links to the redirecting URL could be seen as links to the redirection target."**

Without a 301 redirect, however, the PageRank from those inbound links would be lost.

This is the only time a 404 error has the potential to affect your rankings.

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

404 & Soft 404s as a Ranking Factor
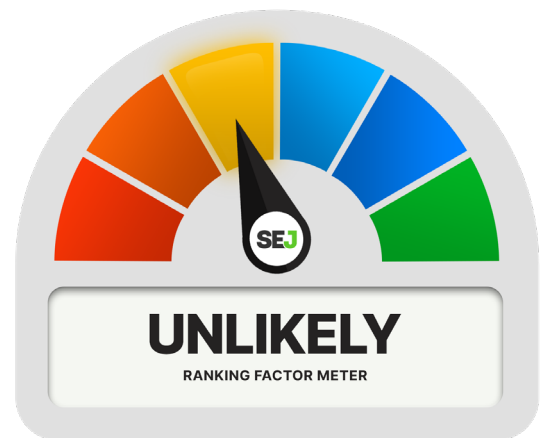
Google directly says 404s don't affect your site's rankings.

As a matter of fact, "404 page not found" and 301 redirects are preferred to soft 404 errors.

Advanced SEO documentation for Developers on Google Search Central suggests that you fix soft 404 errors to redirect or definitively return 404 or 410 errors.

If the content still exists, but the page is returning a soft 404 error, you can use the URL Inspect Tool to review how Google sees the page.

ADSENSE USAGE

By **Matt Southern**

Google AdSense: Is it a Google Search Ranking Factor?

AdSense is a Google ad product that allows publishers to monetize their content by displaying targeted advertisements on their website. Publishers earn money when people view or click on these ads.

So why do some people believe AdSense is a ranking factor? Ads have nothing to do with organic ranking, right?

Well, the belief is that sending traffic to pages with ads served by Google also serves Google's interests as a company.

When a website is monetized with AdSense, it becomes another platform for Google's advertisers to serve ads on.

Ethics aside, there's an incentive for Google to send traffic to pages displaying AdSense ads.

More traffic means more ad clicks and views, which means Google's advertisers are happy to pay for more ads.

But would Google let its interests as a company get in the way of delivering unbiased organic search results?

That's the theory shared amongst those who question whether AdSense is a ranking factor.

Conversely, there are concerns AdSense ads could impact rankings in a negative way, as Google has specific guidelines on proper ad placement.

Let's dive further into these claims, then look at what the evidence says about the impact of AdSense on search rankings.

THE CLAIM

AdSense as a Ranking Factor

There are various claims related to AdSense as a ranking factor.

AdSense is a Positive Signal

One theory suggests that putting AdSense ads on a page has a positive effect on rankings, because those ads generate profit for Google and its advertisers.

With Google having many of its services intertwined – such as organic search, Google Ads, and AdSense – there's bound to be speculation that they share signals between each other.

Just as theories circulate about Google Ads being a ranking factor, which we debunk in another chapter, the same line of thinking gets applied to AdSense.

Lack of trust in Google?

An element connecting all these theories appears to be a distrust for Google.

People believe these claims because there isn't enough trust in Google to keep search results fair and objective.

Google's reputation as a trustworthy company has been damaged by lawsuits and investigations into alleged anticompetitive business practices.

Government officials have accused Google of such things as favoring its own apps on Android, and favoring its own products in search results.

Antitrust charges have been filed against Google in Europe and the United States in the past. Google is often under the microscope of the U.S. Department of Justice for claims related to anti-competitive behavior.

Despite being ordered to pay fines, Google maintains it didn't do anything to stifle competition.

Continued investigations into Google's practices do significant damage to its image of being a company people can trust.

That's why AdSense continues to come up in discussions about ranking factors.

AdSense is a Negative Signal

Another claim suggests site owners have to tread lightly when participating in AdSense.

Using too many ads, or using them in the wrong places, is thought to negatively impact rankings.

This theory stems from the fact that Google is gradually putting more emphasis on pages that offer a good user experience.

Crowding a page with ads creates a poor user experience in a number of ways that Google considers important.

An abundance of ads can make the main content difficult to identify, cause the page to load slower, and cause the page to move around as it's loading.

Each of these could lower a site's page experience score. That's why AdSense may come up as a negative ranking factor.

According to claims, AdSense either boosts rankings or lowers them. Which one is it?

Here's the evidence.

THE EVIDENCE

AdSense as a Ranking Factor

This section is separated into two parts for each of the adjacent claims.

AdSense is a Positive Signal

The question of whether AdSense affects a site's search rankings comes up so often that, Google addresses it in the official [AdSense Help guide](#).

Google confirms that AdSense **does not** impact a site's position in the SERPs:

"Participating in Google AdSense does not affect your site's rank in Google search results and will not affect the search results we deliver.

Google believes strongly in freedom of expression and therefore offers broad access to content across the web.

Our search results are unbiased by our relationships with paying advertisers and publishers. We will continue to show search results according to our PageRank technology."

Site owners shouldn't use AdSense under the assumption it will have a positive impact on search rankings, as that's confirmed to be untrue.

It's worth keeping this in mind if you're doing a competitive SERP analysis. If a competitor is using AdSense and your site is not, you don't have to worry about it being a factor that will contribute to better rankings.

Will it lead to worse rankings? Here's the evidence on the other claim.

AdSense is a Negative Ranking Factor

As we learned in the above section, AdSense doesn't impact rankings either positively or negatively.

Advertisements in general can, however, degrade the user experience in Google's eyes and lead to lower rankings.

There's nothing inherently wrong with putting ads on a website. But the ways in which they're used can cause trouble for SEO.

When it comes to ad placement, Google asks site owners to follow the Better Ads Standards, which lists unacceptable placements of ads on mobile and desktop.

In addition, the AdSense Help Center has a section on best practices for ad placement, which site owners are asked to follow.

Lastly, Google's page experience update takes into consideration how a site uses ads.

In communication to site owners regarding the page experience update, Google says:

> **"A site must not use advertising techniques that are distracting, interrupting, or otherwise not conducive to a good user experience."**

There are various ways sites can use ads that negatively impact rankings, but that isn't exclusive to AdSense.

To that end, Google has gone on record saying AdSense is not exempt from the negative signals that ads could potentially generate.

Invasive AdSense ads are treated the same as any other type of invasive ad.

OUR VERDICT

Google AdSense as a Ranking Factor

Google confirms that AdSense is not a **ranking factor.**

The way AdSense ads are used on a page *could* lead to lower rankings, but that's true of all ads. Therefore it's not accurate to say AdSense is a potential negative ranking factor, either.

ALT TEXT

By **Kristi Hines**

Is Alt Text a Google Ranking Factor?

Alt text is used to help computers read images.

But can alt tags affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between alt text and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Alt Text is a Ranking Factor

What is Alt text?

Alt text is an HTML image attribute. It allows you to create an alternative text version of your image in the event the image is unable to load or there is an accessibility issue.

Because of its importance to Google Image Search, it is considered a ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

Alt Text as a Ranking Factor

Google emphasizes the importance of Alt text in multiple ways.

In Google Search Central's Search Engine Optimization Starter [Guide](), they state the following about the use of alt tags:

> **"…optimizing your image filenames and alt text makes it easier for image search projects like Google Images to better understand your images."**

In Google Search Central's Advanced SEO [documentation](), you will find a page on image best practices. In a section called about alt text, Google discusses the use of alt text.

> **"Google uses alt text along with computer vision algorithms and the contents of the page to understand the subject matter of the image. Also, alt text in images is useful as anchor text if you decide to use an image as a link."**

While they don't specify that alt text will improve your rankings, they do warn webmasters that improper use can harm your website.

> **"Avoid filling alt attributes with keywords (keyword stuffing) as it results in a negative user experience and may cause your site to be seen as spam."**

They also offer the following examples of good and bad alt text usage.

- 👎 **Bad (missing alt text):** `<img src="puppy.jpg"/>`
- 👎 **Bad (keyword stuffing):** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt="puppy dog baby dog pup pups puppies doggies pups litter puppies dog retriever labrador wolfhound setter pointer puppy jack russell terrier puppies dog food cheap dogfood puppy food"/>`
- 👍 **Better:** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt="puppy"/>`
- 👍 **Best:** `<img src="puppy.jpg" alt="Dalmatian puppy playing fetch"/>`

In [2020](#), John Mueller, Google Search Advocate, answered a question about the alt text of a quote image during a Google Webmaster Office Hours. In the answer, he talked about how Google uses it.

> **"For Search, what happens with the alt attribute is we use that to better understand the images themselves, in particular, for Image Search. So if you didn't care about Image Search, then from a Search point of view, you don't really need to worry about alt text.**
>
> **But if you do want these images to be shown in Image Search, which sometimes it makes sense to show fancy quotes in Image Search as well, then using the alt attribute is a good way to tell us this is on that image and we'll get extra information from around your page with regard to how we can rank that landing page."**

Moz [mentions](#) ranking factors in relation to alt text. Instead of saying that the alt text itself is a ranking factor, Moz advises:

> **"...alt text offers you another opportunity to include your target keyword. With on-page keyword usage still pulling weight as a search engine ranking factor, it's in your best interest to create alt text that both describes the image and, if possible, includes a keyword or keyword phrase you're targeting."**

In [2021](#), during a Twitter discussion about alt text having a benefit on SEO, Google Developer Martin Splitt said:

"Yep, alt text is important for SEO too!"

OUR VERDICT

Alt Text as a Ranking Factor

There is no specific mention of alt text as a ranking factor for Google search.

It's clear that if you want your images to appear in Google image results, then you do need to craft descriptive, non-spammy alt text.

So, based on the comments made by Google representatives, plus all the supporting information we've found, we're calling alt text a confirmed Google ranking factor.

AMP

By **Matt Southern**

AMP: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

AMP is an HTML framework that helps desktop-optimized sites deliver ultra-fast mobile versions of webpages.

AMP is created by Google, which has led to claims it gives pages a ranking advantage in mobile search over non-AMP pages.

Google has debunked those claims and said AMP is not a ranking factor.

Case closed, right?

It's easy to say AMP doesn't give a site an advantage in rankings and leave it at that.

But we can't write it off and ignore the impact it has on other elements that do matter for SEO.

Here's what the evidence says about AMP's impact on search results and how it's connected to other ranking factors.

THE CLAIM

AMP is a Ranking Factor

The claim here is straightforward – AMP gives pages a ranking boost in Google's search results.

AMP has come up in discussions about ranking factors ever since Google launched the technology in 2018.

Why?

One reason AMP is thought to be a ranking factor is because Google has a stake in its success as a technology.

Google is responsible for the creation of AMP, and actively encourages using it as part of a larger effort to speed up the web.

In theory, Google could increase the adoption rate of AMP by turning it into a ranking signal.

The ranking boost would be like a reward for using Google's new technology. Of course, that would be unfair to any site not using AMP.

If Google used AMP to rank search results, you could argue it would be forcing sites to use its technology in order to stay relevant.

Thankfully, that's not how search works.

But AMP isn't irrelevant to SEO by any stretch.

Let's look at the evidence on how AMP impacts SEO.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against AMP as a Ranking Factor

This one is pretty easy – Google has confirmed that AMP is not a ranking factor. Again. And again.

In Google's Advanced SEO guide, the company says it ranks all pages using the same signals regardless of how the page was developed:

> **"While AMP itself isn't a ranking factor, speed is a ranking factor for Google Search. Google Search applies the same standard to all pages, regardless of the technology used to build the page."**

This quote touches on something we mentioned earlier about AMP impacting other things, like page speed, which are confirmed ranking factors.

Sites that use AMP can potentially benefit from these other signals.

As of July 2018, page speed has been a ranking factor for mobile searches.

Because AMP is designed to load pages instantly, it can help sites send stronger ranking signals in terms of mobile page speed.

This has the potential to lead to better rankings. However, sites can generate the same signals without AMP.

Core Web Vitals

Google's Core Web Vitals became ranking factors when the page experience algorithm update was rolled out in June 2021.

Leading up to the launch of the update, Google's communication to site owners has always been that AMP can help with achieving ideal Core Web Vitals scores.

"There is a high likelihood that AMP pages will meet the thresholds. AMP is about delivering high quality, user-first experiences; its initial design goals are closely aligned with what Core Web Vitals measure today.

This means that sites built using AMP likely can easily meet Web Vitals thresholds."

Google presented data showing that AMP domains were five times more likely to pass Core Web Vitals compared to non-AMP domains.

Passing Google's Core Web Vitals thresholds has the potential to improve a site's search rankings.

Again, as with the page speed ranking boost, this can be achieved without AMP.

Other SEO Benefits of AMP

AMP used to carry with it various perks that could enhance how a page appears in search results.

For example, Google's Top Stories carousel, which appears at the top of search results when looking for news stories, used to only accept AMP pages.

Top Stories eligibility was a ranking advantage unique to AMP for a period of time.

That changed in June 2021 with the rollout of the Page Experience update, which now makes it possible for non-AMP pages to appear in the Top Stories carousel.

Lastly, another unique feature of AMP pages was that a lightning bolt icon appeared in search results to indicate which pages offered faster experiences.

Google has [done away with that icon](). Now, AMP pages are indistinguishable from regular pages in search results.

OUR VERDICT

AMP as a Ranking Factor

Google has confirmed multiple times that AMP is not a Google ranking factor.

Further, it no longer has unique advantages that could have an impact on click-through rate, such as a special icon and Top Stories exclusivity.

AMP can positively impact other ranking factors (e.g., speed), but it is not a factor on its own.

DEFINITELY NOT

RANKING FACTOR METER

ANCHOR TEXT

By **Matt Southern**

Anchor Text as a Google Ranking Factor: Everything You Need to Know

Keyword-rich anchor text has long been an SEO best practice.

Why?

Because it's a way to signal to search engines about what type of page your link is pointing to. That information is believed by many to play a role when it comes to ranking the page in search results.

Anchor text refers to words or phrases that a user clicks on to visit a URL that's linked within a piece of copy.

Anchor text is useful for providing context to users on the page they're about to visit, but does it have any impact when it comes to search rankings?

Here are the claims about anchor text as a ranking factor, followed by the evidence which either supports or debunks those claims.

THE CLAIM

Anchor Text as a Ranking Factor

Anchor text is believed to be a ranking factor in the sense that it helps search engines associate URLs with particular keywords or key phrases.

The importance of anchor text isn't limited to what search engines can do with it; it's also essential to providing a good user experience through enhancing website accessibility.

On-page optimization techniques that improve the user experience tend to correlate positively with search rankings, which is another reason you'll see anchor text listed as a top ranking factor.

A good rule of thumb when it comes to optimizing websites is that SEO follows user experience.

When a website is built to provide the best experience for human visitors, it often ends up being optimized for search engines as a result. That's not always true, but you'll come to learn it holds true for anchor text.

How does anchor text fit with SEO?

Google can get some idea of what the page being linked to (the target page) is about based on words used in anchor text. If a page links to a URL using the anchor text "top 10 pizza places in NYC," then Google knows what type of page users are being directed to visit.

With generic text (e.g., "click here"), it's less clear to Google what the target page is about. Just as a site would provide descriptive text to assist users, it should do the same for Google.
Anchor text enhances the user experience in a number of ways. When a user is quickly scanning through an article, descriptive anchor text can help them immediately identify the links they're looking for.

For example, if a user clicks on an article that makes a wild claim, they may want to scan through it to find the source of the information.

In a case like that, generic anchor text wouldn't help users quickly find the link they need. It also tells Google nothing about the target page. That's why descriptive anchor text is recommended over generic words or phrases.

Another, less obvious, way anchor text improves the user experience is through accessibility. Think about what the experience is like for a website visitor who is visually impaired.

Users who are blind or visually impaired rely on screen readers to browse the web. This involves using software to read off all the text on a page, including links, as the user navigates a website.

If the user hears "click here" or "read more" for all links they come across on a page, they won't find it very helpful. In fact, it would be downright frustrating and they may choose not to visit the website again.

Accessibility is key to providing a good user experience. Even if you think it's not important for your specific audience, it is important to search engines like Google.

With all of that said, it's time to answer the question – is anchor text a ranking factor?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Anchor Text as a Ranking Factor

Yes, anchor text is a ranking factor.

Using descriptive anchor text when inserting links on a page is a best practice listed in Google's SEO Starter Guide.

SEO can be a lot to take in for beginners, but it isn't a secret science. Google aims to provide the most relevant results to users, and it needs the cooperation of site owners in order to do that.

That's why Google makes it clear what it wants site owners to do when optimizing pages for its search engine.

When optimizing pages to rank in Google, it's wise to listen to Google. So what does Google say about anchor text?

From Google's SEO Starter Guide:

"...the better your anchor text is, the easier it is for users to navigate and for Google to understand what the page you're linking to is about.

With appropriate anchor text, users and search engines can easily understand what the linked pages contain."

The Starter Guide then goes on to recommend these best practices:

- Choose descriptive text, rather than generic or off-topic text.
- Write concise text, rather than a lengthy sentence or whole paragraph.
- Make links visible, as they should be easy to spot amongst regular text.
- Use descriptive text for internal links, but avoid excessive use of keywords.

More recently, Google's John Mueller confirmed anchor text is still a ranking factor during one of his regular Q&A's with the SEO community.

The topic of anchor text comes up often during Mueller's Q&As. Here's another example; this time Mueller addresses the user experience aspect of anchor text:

> **"If you're updating anchor text internally to make it more easily understandable by users then usually that also helps search engines to better understand the context of those pages. So I would definitely go for that."**

We can't talk about anchor text as a ranking factor without discussing how important it was in the early days of SEO. Google's guidance on avoiding overuse of keywords in anchor text is a callback to how this signal was abused in the past.

It used to be easy for sites to manipulate their rankings by building links using exact keywords as the anchor text. Anchor text was weighted so heavily that pages could rank for keywords that never even appeared in the on-page copy.

Longtime SEO professionals may remember that Adobe once ranked for the term "click here" because that was a common anchor text used by site owners when linking to PDFs.

Google eventually caught on to how its overvaluing of anchor text was be abused by spammers. It addressed this issue in 2012 with the release of the Penguin algorithm update, which, in part, targeted manipulative link building tactics.

Now, sites that attempt to game their search rankings with exact match anchor text are more likely to have their efforts ignored than rewarded.

OUR VERDICT

CONFIRMED
RANKING FACTOR METER

Anchor Text as a Ranking Factor

Google confirms that anchor text is used in search rankings as a way to gain a deeper understanding of pages, which may help with getting those pages surfaced for relevant queries.

The strength of anchor text as a ranking factor is nowhere near the level it was before Penguin, when sites could rank for the phrase of their choice by building enough keyword-rich links.

However, anchor text remains important to the search engine optimization process.

AUTHORSHIP

By **Anna Crowe**

Author Authority: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Is there anything than scarier reading an article providing medical advice from a journalism major fresh out of college with no medical background?

The truth is, not everything you read online is for your benefit. A lot of online content is just downright untrue. While authors may come from a harmless place, when certain copy is taken as the truth, it can become pretty harmful.

This is where the authority of the author (or author rank) begins to impact your content.

Here, we're debunking the myths around author authority.

Read on to find out whether or not author authority is a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Author Authority as a Ranking Factor

When it comes to Google, it would make sense for them to value author authority as a ranking factor because of the E-A-T (Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness) guidelines.

But do search engines *really* care who created the content? And, does who the author is impact ranking algorithms?

Spoiler alert: There is not enough evidence to support this claim. But interest in this topic is growing.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Author Authority as a Ranking Factor

Let's start with the first question, is author authority a ranking factor?

No, author authority is not a ranking factor. However, there are Google patents to help them identify authors for specific pages.

In August 2005, Google filed a patent for Agent Rank. If you want to learn more about that, Bill Slawski breaks down Agent Rank here.

The short version? Google's patent uses "digital signatures" to rank content based on reputation scores.

On June 20, 2011, Google confirmed it was [supporting authorship markup](#). Remember, rel="author"?

In 2014, Mark Traphagen ran a study on authorship adoption to show authorship adoption by authors was slow. He found that [70%](#) of authors did not connect their authorship with content.

Later in 2014, [authorship markup was officially removed](#).

In 2016, Google's Gary Illyes said at an SMX conference that Google is "not using authorship at all anymore" – but they know who the author is.

How does Google know this? Well, we learned in this [video](#) in 2021 that Google looks at a number of factors (e.g., links to profile pages, structured data, other visible information on a page) as part of a process called reconciliation.

Other relevant evidence we found is from August 21, 2018, when Google's John Mueller confirmed that Google does not use author reputation as a ranking factor.

English Google Webmaster Central office-hours hangout

Now, what about E-A-T. Reputation is different than "expertise" and "authoritativeness."

Reputation is how others view the author.

Expertise and authoritativeness are characteristics that Google uses to evaluate the author.

But, recent patents show how authorship is evolving. For instance, in March 2020, Google filed a patent called Author Vectors to identify authors through internet-based writing styles.

In Slawki's evaluation of the patent, he describes how the process works:

> **"Different authors can have different writing styles and different levels of expertise and interest in different topics.**
>
> **Google is telling us with this new patent on author vectors that they may be able to identitfy the authors of unlabeled content."**

The fact is, we know that Google is getting better at determining who the authors of content might be with the updates to their Quality Rater Guidelines.

But we don't know why or how they are using this to support their ranking factors.

One thing we know for sure is that Google recommends adding an author's URL to article schema.

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Author Authority as a Ranking Factor

Author authority has had its ups and downs over the years. And, with Google's Quality Rater Guidelines related to E-A-T, it's causing a bit of a gray area in SEO.

While author authority may not directly impact your organic search rankings, it's still smart to follow Google's Quality Rater Guidelines to improve your content performance.

BBB RATING

By **Matt Southern**

BBB Rating: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Google's algorithms rely on more than 200 signals for ranking, but is BBB rating one of them?

Google has denied it on at least three separate occasions. However, that doesn't necessarily mean they completely ignore it either.

Let's examine the evidence.

THE CLAIM

BBB Rating isn't a Ranking Factor

We'll start by taking a look at precisely what a BBB rating is and what it measures.

The Better Business Bureau (BBB) is a nonprofit, non-government organization that examines companies' trustworthiness. The idea is to uphold certain standards across the board and allow customers to feel confident in their dealings with different businesses.

Companies are ranked on a simple A+ (highest) to F (lowest) letter-grade scale representing BBB's degree of confidence in the business and how it interacts with its customers.

This rank is based on a score that measures factors such as:

- The type of business and whether it might be operating in violation of the law.
- How long the company has been in operation.
- Advertising issues (e.g., inaccurate claims).
- The transparency of the company's business practices.
- Any failures to honor commitments to BBB, including mediation settlements and arbitration awards.
- Complaint history, which covers the number and nature of any issues raised against the company as well as how long they take to resolve them.
- Licensing and government actions taken against the company.

Enterprises looking to get BBB accreditation must meet several initial eligibility requirements and pay an annual fee directly to the bureau.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against BBB Rating as a Ranking Factor

Search Quality Raters Guidelines (QRGs), given to Google contractors who run manual evaluations of search engine results pages (SERPs), ensure that the algorithms are doing what they need to be.

In July 2018, Google made substantial changes to their QRGs and placed a larger focus on user safety regarding sites they prioritized in ranking.

On August 1, 2018, Google rolled out a broad core algorithm update that impacted many sites.

Many previously popular health and medical sites took a drastic ranking dive. SEO experts at the time noted a correlation between these and poor BBB ratings.

Beyond that, BBB, alongside other third-party review sites, are frequently mentioned in the QRGs as an indicator of trustworthy sites.

> **"For businesses, there are many sources of reputation information and reviews. Here are some examples: Yelp, Better Business Bureau, Amazon, and Google Shopping."**

It adds, "Please consider very low ratings on the BBB site to be evidence for a negative reputation," which serves to highlight the importance of BBB rating for Google.

The Evidence Against BBB Rating as a Ranking Factor

In 2017, a Twitter user asked about the SEO benefits of adding Accreditation Badges (Trust Seals) to their site. When another user said that he doubted it, Google's Gary Illyes responded, "I can confirm your doubt."

Then, in 2018, Google's John Mueller was asked the following in a video hangout:

"In the past, you explained that Googlebot or Google is not researching author backgrounds expertise, etc. Can you say the same thing for site reputation and Better Business Bureaus scores?

For example, some believe that BBB ratings and reviews are used algorithmically with the latest core updates. That doesn't make sense since the BBB is only for the US, Mexico, and Canada.

I can't imagine that Google would use a single source like that algorithmically when its algorithms are mainly global in nature."

Mueller responded:

> **"I would venture to guess that you are correct that we wouldn't use something like the BBB score for something like this. As far as I know, that's certainly the case."**

He went on to add:

> **"There are various kinds of issues with regards to some of these sources of information about a business, about a website, and we need to make sure that we're really reflecting what we think is actually relevant for users. Rather than blindly relying on some third parties' ratings."**

See that discussion at 15:30 in the aforementioned video.

In 2020, Google's Danny Sullivan was crystal clear in his response to another Twitter claim that Google uses BBB ratings to determine whether a site should rank.

"No, we don't use BBB ratings as a ranking factor," [he tweeted](#).

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

BBB Rating as a Ranking Factor

While the importance of trustworthiness for Google rankings is well established, there is no evidence that their algorithms consider BBB ratings a ranking factor.

In fact, it wouldn't really make all that much sense for them to do so given that BBB is only for the U.S., Mexico, and Canada and also requires that businesses pay for accreditation.

That doesn't mean you should completely disregard BBB ratings.

Their prominence in the QRGs suggests that while BBB ratings may not be a direct ranking signal, Google respects them as a reliable measure of a company's trustworthiness, so much so that they have factored them into their algorithmic quality control.

BOUNCE RATE

By **Anna Crowe**

Bounce Rate: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Raise your hand if you start your SEO day with the goal of trying to improve your bounce rate…

Anyone? Anyone?

Too often, SEO advice gets passed down so often through so many different people that it can be hard to tell fact from fiction.

And, bounce rate is just another victim of false information in the SEO community.

You've likely read SEO advice like this from Brian Dean of Backlinko, who supports this with his own "industry study."
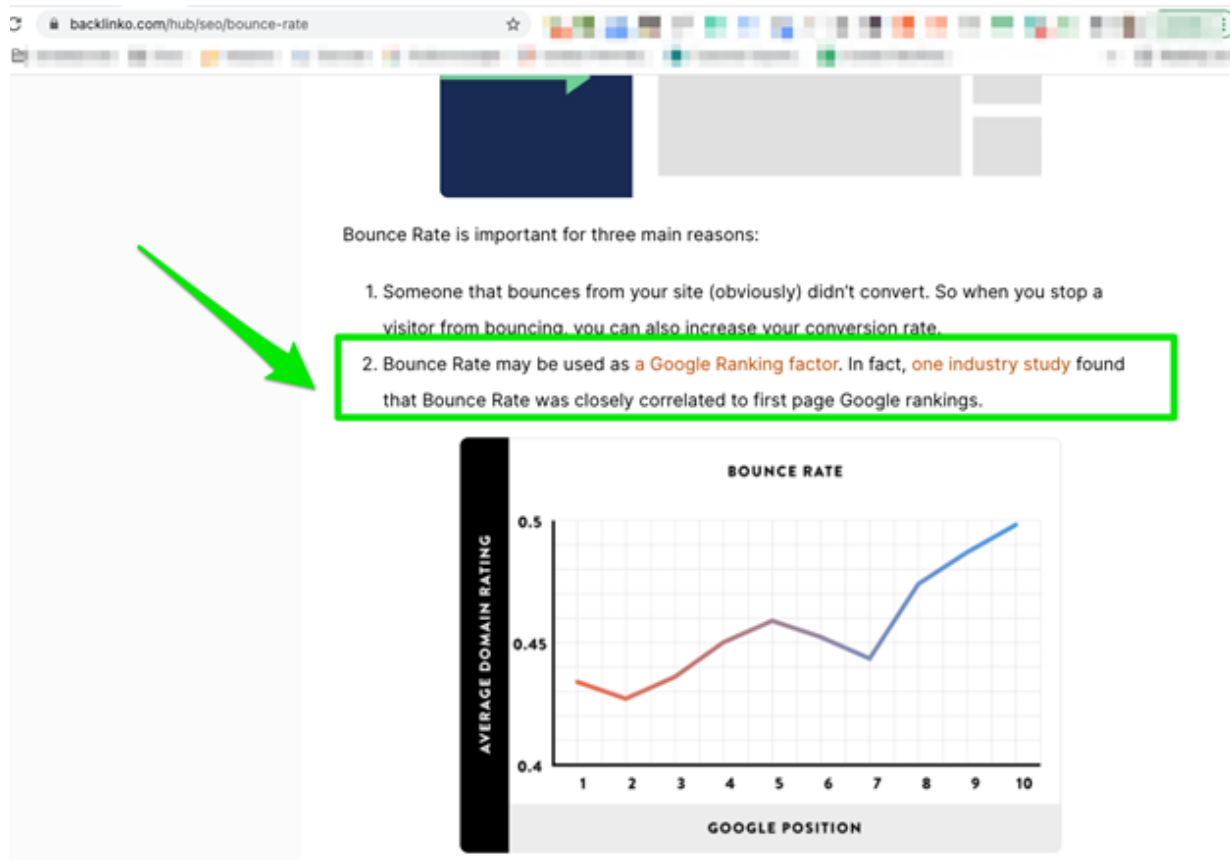
However, his "industry study" was quickly called out for being "an effective piece of link bait" by the SEO community.

It should have been a red flag when I saw bounce rate paired with pogo-sticking, where he continued to spread false information.
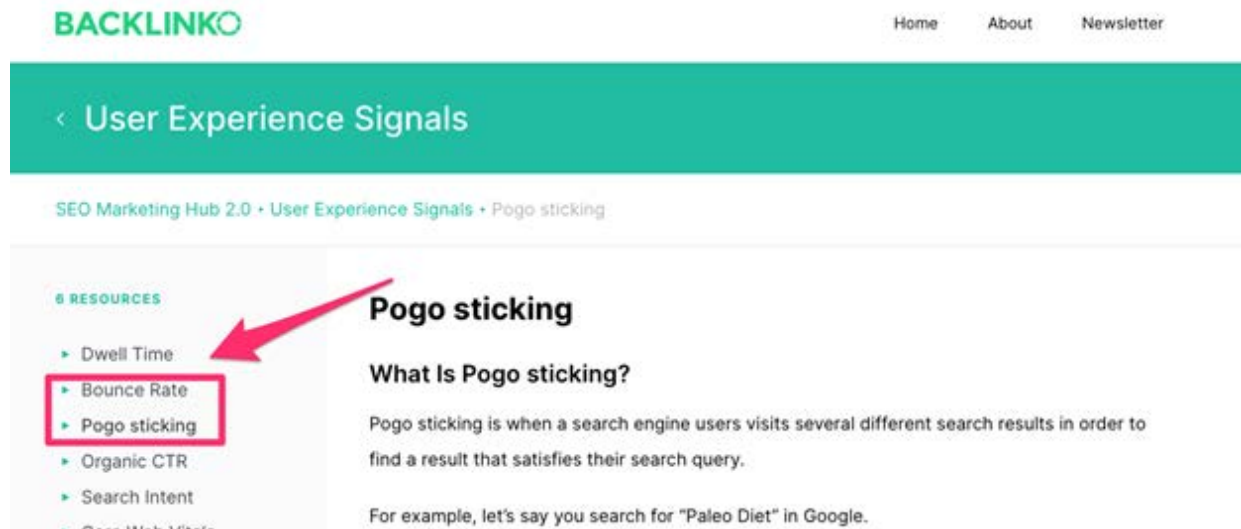
To confirm, [pogo-sticking is not a ranking factor](). But I digress.

So, what's the truth – is bounce rate a ranking factor? Does bounce rate impact your organic traffic?

Let's investigate.

THE CLAIM

Bounce Rate as a Ranking Factor

Bounce rate reminds me of those reality TV spring break shows; it's full of unrealistic expectations and ends up getting your hopes up. While the cast of "The Hills" appear to be shacked up at a swanky hotel in Tulum, they're actually in a Motel 6 in Miami.

That's how I see bounce rate when it comes to SEO.

So, What is Bounce Rate?

Bounce rate relates to the percentage of single-engagement visits to your site. Google Analytics tracks the number of people who visit your page and leave without viewing other pages on your site.

Bounce rate does not necessarily mean you need to improve the quality of your site. The user flow of your site should be designed for your customer journey, not bounce rate.

Here are some myths, facts, and truths you should know about how bounce rate impacts your rankings.

THE EVIDENCE

Bounce Rate as a Ranking Factor

On June 12, 2020, Google's John Mueller confirmed that Google does not use bounce rate as a ranking factor in a webmaster hangout.

> "I think there's a bit of misconception here that we're looking at things like the analytics bounce rate when it comes to ranking websites, and that's definitely not the case."

There is historical data to support this message.

On April 14, 2017, Google's Gary Illyes said on Twitter, "bounce rate is not a good signal."

Gary 鯨理 / 경리 Illyes ✔ @methode · Apr 4, 2017
(bounce rate is not a good signal)

💬 7   ⟳ 10   ♡ 8

And, way back in 2008, Google's Matt Cutts said in a Sphinn forum, "bounce rates would not only be spammable but noisy."

"A search industry person recently sent me some questions about how bounce rate is done at Google, and I was like, 'Dude, I have no idea about any things like bounce rate. Why don't you talk to this nice Google Analytics evangelist who knows about things like bounce rate?' I just don't even run into people talking about this in my day-to-day life."

It's safe to say that bounce rate as a ranking factor is a myth.

Does Bounce Rate Affect Search Rankings?

Bounce rate doesn't directly affect organic ranking.

However, it indirectly affects other ranking factors that Google cares about — slow page speed, low-quality design, poor mobile optimization, etc.

This is where time-on-page and bounce rate meet. Together, these metrics can tell you that you've created a good user experience.

If your webpage has a low bounce rate and high time-on-page, your webpage is in a good place.

A high time on page indicates your content is engaging – and creating an engaging website is a far better use of your time than trying to optimize for bounce rate.

OUR VERDICT

Bounce Rate as a Ranking Factor

No, bounce rate is not a Google ranking factor.

Bounce rate is just a metric – and one Google has repeatedly said does not directly influence Google rankings.

Should you track your bounce rate and try to improve it? Yes – because it is one metric you can use to understand whether your content is successful.

Improving your bounce rate won't help you rank better on Google. But lowering your bounce rate is usually a good indicator that your content is engaging, valuable, or useful.

Although most of the SEO community has thoroughly dismissed this idea as a myth, it somehow still persists.

So next time a client, colleague, peer, or your boss comes to you with 100% certainty that bounce rate is a Google ranking factor (thanks to some bad information they read), send them this article.

You're welcome!

BREADCRUMB NAVIGATION

By **Angel Niñofranco**

Breadcrumb Navigation: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Adding breadcrumbs to your website helps Google better understand your content from a hierarchical perspective.

It also aids users in understanding their current position on your website.

Breadcrumb navigation seems good for both Google and users.

But does that mean it has a direct impact on your organic search rankings?

Let's find out.

THE CLAIM

Breadcrumb Navigation as a Ranking Factor
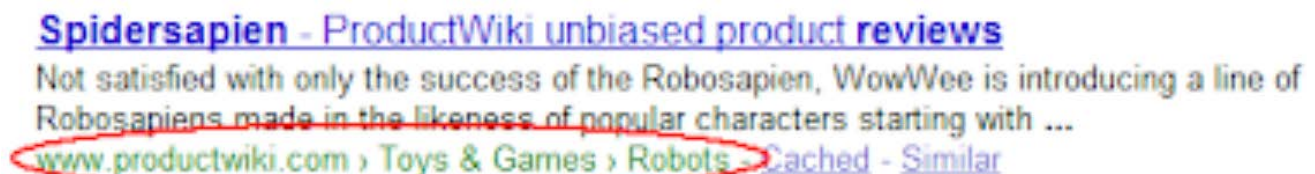
Breadcrumbs drew the attention of the SEO community when Google first added them to the search results in 2009. That was when the search engine rolled out enhancements on how site hierarchies are displayed in its search results.

Prior to the change, Google usually showed a green web address, or URL, at the bottom of each search result to let users know where they're headed:

The green URL was replaced with a hierarchy showing the precise location of the page on the website (a.k.a., breadcrumbs).

Sites that already offered hierarchical breadcrumbs in their navigation benefited from this change, as their SERP listing differed from the regular search result.

As Aaron Wall explained at the time:

> **"Each breadcrumb is a clickable link to the associated page (which could increase traffic to the target site in some cases)..."**

In the years that followed, some SEO professionals began speculating that breadcrumb navigation links could be a ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Breadcrumb Navigation as a Ranking Factor

To understand how the idea of breadcrumb navigation as a ranking factor came to be, it's important to understand how SEO pros approached it back then.

In the early 2010s, breadcrumbs were seen not only as a tool to ease website navigation but also as an internal link structure to optimize.

Josh McCoy offered this tip in his 2010 article, "What Google Thinks of Your Site:"

> **"To create an optimal process of breadcrumb linking, make sure you've applied your keyword strategy alongside the information architecture of your site content.**
>
> **Your URL structure should include keyword rich and content relevant category/folder naming conventions and ensure that site content falls into the appropriate categories."**

In 2011, Catfish Comstock cited breadcrumb navigation as one of three important link structures to optimize, along with the global navigation template and "alternative link structures."

Speculations of breadcrumbs being an SEO ranking factor surfaced in a 2012 blog post by Matt Green of Ethical SEO Consulting, titled "Breadcrumb Navigation Links as an On-Page Optimization Factor."

> **"The anchor text used in links continues to be a substantial ranking factor, despite recent algorithmic updates from Google which have reportedly diluted their importance. When breadcrumb navigation is enabled on a website, it creates anchor text links on every page of the website which link back to the home page of the site.**
>
> **This, ladies and gentleman, is how you can use breadcrumb links as a positive ranking factor for targeted keywords."**

Brian Dean of Backlinko then included it in his list of Google's 200 Ranking factors without offering much explanation or proof.

The Evidence Against Breadcrumb Navigation as a Ranking Factor

The way Google displays search results has evolved over the years, but Google still incorporates breadcrumbs in its SERPs.

Although Google recommends that website owners and developers implement breadcrumbs, no one from the search engine has ever gone on record to confirm that it is indeed a ranking factor.

The closest acknowledgment of Google's stance on breadcrumb navigation is from 2017, when Google's Gary Illyes was asked: "What's Google's stance on breadcrumb navigation? Do those links pass value? If so, should they?"

In 2021, Google's John Mueller tweeted that Google uses breadcrumbs for crawling (to find internal links) and for rich results (structured data). He also added that location of the breadcrumbs on a webpage "doesn't matter for SEO."

OUR VERDICT

POSSIBLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Breadcrumb Navigation as a Ranking Factor

Breadcrumbs help provide a positive user experience to website visitors and reinforce the site's structure for search engines.

In addition, breadcrumbs naturally build more internal links, thus pushing more PageRank to those pages. Potentially, breadcrumbs may impact CTR, though that is more of an indirect benefit.

But adding breadcrumb navigation to your website pages doesn't guarantee any significant boost to your rankings. Plenty of websites rank quite well without using breadcrumbs.

And while Google recommends the usage of breadcrumbs to developers and website owners, this is more from a UX and usability standpoint as opposed to SEO and ranking.

CANONICALIZATION

By **Matt Southern**

Canonicalization: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Canonicalization is loosely connected to search rankings, but would it be a stretch to call it a ranking factor?

You may have heard that the rel="canonical" tag is a tool that can be used to consolidate ranking signals from multiple URLs into a single canonical URL.

That's true, but it's a tool that has limited use cases.

Even when used correctly, there's [no guarantee](#) that Google will follow its directions.

Learn more about canonical URLs and how the rel="canonical" tag is connected to search rankings.

THE CLAIM

Canonicalization (rel="canonical") is a Ranking Factor

Rel="canonical" is an HTML tag that can be used to tell Google which version of a page to show in search results when multiple versions of the page exist.

It's most commonly used as a way to consolidate duplicate URLs on one's own site, but the tag can also be used when content is republished or syndicated across multiple domains.

Google doesn't like to show duplicate content in search results, so it will instead choose one URL and omit the other. This is referred to as the canonical URL.

In addition to telling Google which URL to show in search results, some believe that the rel="canonical" tag can forward ranking signals from one page to another.

This is what Google says about canonicals as they relates to search rankings.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Canonicalization (rel="canonical") as a Ranking Factor

Google's official guide to advanced SEO has a whole chapter about using canonicalization to consolidate duplicate URLs. Curiously, it doesn't mention anything about search rankings.

However, Google's John Mueller previously addressed the topic of canonicals and search rankings in one of his weekly SEO Q&A sessions.

In this particular example, Mueller recommends that a site owner use a rel="canonical" tag for duplicate content because it can combine all ranking signals into one. He said:

> "In general, I'd recommend using a rel="canonical" for duplicate content rather than a noindex.
>
> With a noindex, you're telling us this page should not be indexed at all.
>
> With a canonical, you're telling us this page is essentially the same as this other page I have, and that helps us because then we can take all of the signals that we have for both of these pages and combine them into one.

Whereas if you just have a noindex, or if you block it with robots.txt, then the signals that are associated with that page that's blocked or has a noindex on it are lost, they're dropped."

This is confirmation that Google is capable of combining ranking signals from duplicate content into one canonical URL with the rel="canonical" HTML tag.

OUR VERDICT

Canonicalization as a Ranking Factor

Canonicalization is confirmed to have a connection with search rankings, but that doesn't mean it's a ranking factor.

A rel="canonical" tag can be used to combine signals from multiple duplicate URLs into one, but even then it's not a reliable tool.

When the rel="canonical" tag is used correctly, Google may still choose to ignore it and pick its own canonical URL to show in search results instead.

The rel="canonical" tag is more of a suggestion than a directive – and definitely not a factor for rankings.

CHROME BOOKMARKS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are Chrome Bookmarks a Google Ranking Factor?

Does Google use data around how many times a site is bookmarked in Chrome as a ranking factor?

I have to admit, I hadn't heard about this one when asked to look into it. And when I went looking to see if Search Engine Journal has ever reported this in our site's history, I didn't find a thing.

Still, it seems this question has come up over the years and I still see (lower quality) sites perpetuating the myth today.

You probably know where I'm going with this, so let's work through it together.

THE CLAIM

Chrome Bookmarks Data as a Ranking Factor

One of the top Google results related to this claim is a site that states:

> **"Google keeps the record of the bookmarked pages in its own server and uses it as a boosting factor. Google collects the user browsing data from Google chrome (sic)."**

Of course, this won't be a difficult claim to rank for, since it's patently untrue. I actually hope this piece outranks that one so no one else wastes their time chasing this particular white rabbit.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Chrome Bookmarks Data as a Ranking Factor

It is true that Google applied for a patent called 'Search customisation based on user profiles and personalisation' in 2006. This comes up as 'Bookmarks and ranking' in Google Patents Search.

Although it was reassigned in 2017 when Google changed the capitalization of its name, it's current status is Abandoned.
Patent citations give us some insight into how others may have used the technologies laid out in Google's 'Search customisation based on user profiles and personalisation' patent.

In 2004, for example, IBM published a patent citing Google's aforementioned work for its own 'Method, system, and program for ordering search results using an importance weighting.' (Remember IBM's WebFountain?)

And Microsoft referred back to it in 2005 in its 'Mobile friendly internet searches.'

Some have questioned whether that particular Google patent proves that bookmarking data is a ranking factor.

I call this the "Ancient Aliens" effect, where simply asking a question – no matter how ridiculous – can lead others to think the topic is therefore a possibility.

Could it be that Google is using the number of times your site is bookmarked in Chrome as a factor in its Search algorithm?

And is this patent the result of technologies delivered to Earth millions of years ago by adorable, inquisitive... ALIENS?

The answer is a definitive no, on both counts.

Patenting a technology doesn't mean it will be used at all. And if it is, pieces of the technology may be applied for other purposes, or even by other people and companies.

Questioning whether bookmarks data is a ranking factor creates a search result that might suggest to others that it is, and on and on the misinformation perpetuates itself.

The Evidence Against Chrome Bookmarks Data as a Ranking Factor

The idea that Google would use Chrome bookmarks data as a ranking factor is problematic in a lot of ways:

Google has access to much better data.

What you're searching for (queries), where you're searching from (device and location), which sites you visited before, and what you did on the sites you visited (user behavior signals) all tell Google way more about any given searcher. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Bookmarking data from Chrome has nothing on these far more useful insights.

Bookmarks are devoid of context.

So many other forms of user feedback provide more helpful context than bookmarks possibly can. What useful information could Google possibly glean from your bookmarking Dogtime.com?

Are you thinking of getting a dog?

Doing a school project about dogs?

Bored or sad and looking for a furry pick-me-up with dog pics?

Simply intending to return to a site later doesn't give any useful clues about *why* you want to do that.

And without the context of intent, a bookmark is just a nonsensical factoid Google can't use in any way to personalize or improve the searcher experience.

Bookmarks are way too easy to game.

Can you imagine if bookmarks were a commodity in the same way as links?

We'd have bookmarks building agencies, bookmarks spam, and negative bookmarking (what does that even look like – maybe a bunch of porn and gambling sites bookmark your bakery website en masse?).

You would be able to hire VA services to bookmark you for a fee.

There's just no way this would be a useful signal.

OUR VERDICT

Chrome Bookmarks as a Ranking Factor

Bottom line: Google does not use Chrome bookmarks data as a search ranking signal.

The end.

CLICK DEPTH

By **Miranda Miller**

Click Depth: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Website size can vary from a single page to millions.

To the uninitiated, all the pages on a site are equally important and anyone searching online should be able to find them.

However, all pages are not created equally. Some are more important than others, and some believe that click depth is a signal Google uses to determine which ones those are.

But is click depth actually a ranking factor?

THE CLAIM

Click Depth as a Ranking Factor

Click depth is the number of clicks it takes to go from a homepage to another page on a website.

We can assign numerical values to the different pages on a site, based on their distance from the homepage. The homepage can be assigned 0. Any pages linked on the homepage have a depth value of 1. Any links on a 1 page will have a value of 2. Any links on a 2 page will be a 3, and so on.

The claim is that pages with lower click depth values tend to rank better in search results.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Click Depth as a Ranking Factor

In a 2018 Google Webmaster Central hangout, John Mueller addressed click depth explicitly.

He cautiously indicated that Google places a small amount of attention to how easy it is to find content on a given website. If the homepage is the strongest page on the site, he said, Google gives a little more weight in search results to pages that are one click away than pages that are multiple clicks away.

This makes sense with what we know about search engine crawlers.

Brendan Bennett of Selesti says Google's web crawlers are unlikely to browse pages over three clicks from the homepage (unless your site is considered to be extremely authoritative). This means that pages beyond three clicks will likely not be indexed by Google, attract organic traffic, or earn rank.

Botify recommends positioning your most strategic webpages at a depth of no greater than 5, though individual sites will vary for crawl and PageRank.

Google's PageRank algorithm determines the worth of webpages by determining the number and quality of pages that link to it. While PageRank can use the merit of other websites citing the page in question, internal PageRank is the rank of the pages within a given website.

On most websites, the homepage is the most linked and valuable page – and also the most authoritative.

Pages directly linked to from the homepage are typically viewed as more important and will get the most link equity. As links get further away from the homepage, the potential for a ranking boost diminishes.

OUR VERDICT

Click Depth as a Ranking Factor

Click depth likely is a ranking factor. But even if it is, it probably isn't a factor that is going to make or break your rankings.

What is more important here is your consideration of the user experience, and ensuring that all content is easily accessible for site visitors.

Our verdict is ultimately based on Mueller's careful remarks about the relative importance of click depth.

Click-Through Rate (CTR): Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Is click-through rate a Google ranking factor? Let's ask Google.

According to this featured snippet, "Google does indeed use organic click-through rate as a ranking factor."

Of course, fact-checking is not as simple as using whatever comes up first in Google search as verification – in fact, please don't ever do that.

To determine whether CTR is a ranking factor, we're going to have to do a bit of digging.

THE CLAIM

Click-Through Rate (CTR) as a Ranking Factor

This one has been a hotly contested topic almost as long as we've practiced SEO.

In his 2002 paper Optimizing Search Engines using Clickthrough Data, Thorsten Joachims of Cornell argued that "a good information retrieval system should present relevant documents high in the ranking." Click-through data from the search engine's query log combined with the log of links clicked by users should be used in ranking, he said.

In the last five years, Larry Kim has argued for CTR as a ranking factor, and Eric Enge against it. AJ Kohn explained why he believes it's a ranking signal; Dan Taylor took a deep dive into why he believes it is not.

So who's right?

Let's take a look at the evidence.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Click-Through Rate (CTR) as a Ranking Factor

In 2016, Larry Kim conducted an experiment comparing the CTRs of 1,000 keyword terms in the same niche in both paid and organic search. "Something unusual is happening," he said, adding that, "The difference (we think) is that RankBrain is boosting the search rankings of pages that have higher organic click-through rates."

Kim concluded at the time that click-through rate and ranking were codependent variables; that there is a relationship there, but its exact nature is unclear.

We must not confuse correlation with causation. And that's the thing – this debate over whether CTR is a ranking factor begs the question: Is it direct or indirect?

For our purposes here, we're strictly looking at whether each factor is used by Google in its ranking algorithms. There are potentially thousands of factors that indirectly support direct ranking factors, and we need to be careful not to confuse the two.

That was the issue with Rand Fishkin's 2014 CTR experiment in which he published a blog and asked people to search a specific term, then click on the link in the SERPs:
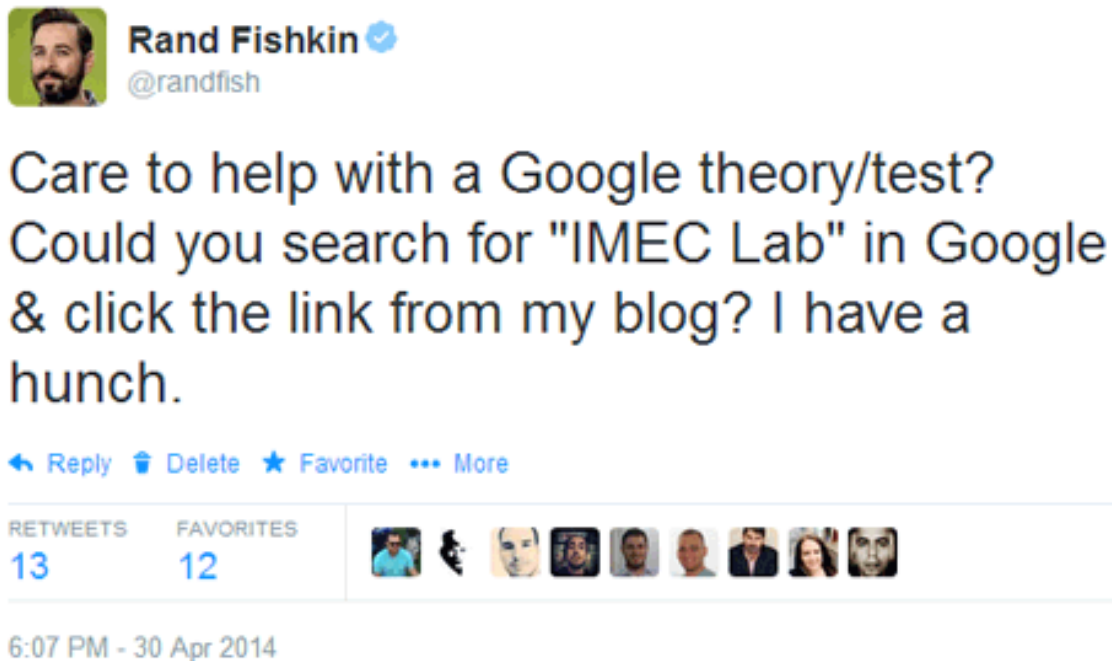
The blog post received 228 visits and shot to the #1 spot in Google that evening.

As Fishkin said, "Let's be clear – this is not enough evidence to say for certain that Google is definitively using query and click volume to rank webpages. There may be other factors at work."

Even so, he titled the piece 'Queries & Clicks May Influence Google's Results More Directly Than Previously Suspected.' And a legend was born.

As Enge explained, Fishkin's experiment seemed to indicate that Google was using CTR at the time within its freshness algorithm to surface trending topics – not that CTR was influencing Google's results any more than previously suspected.

The Evidence Against Click-Through Rate (CTR) as a Ranking Factor

As Roger Montti noted in his 2018 evaluation of CTR research papers, there were major issues with CTR as a prospective ranking factor even in Joachims' aforementioned 2002 paper. Even back then, experts recognized that using CTR as a ranking factor was vulnerable to manipulation.

You can buy everything from Facebook Likes and Instagram followers to links, comments, and spun articles.

Why wouldn't people buy clicks, too?

They absolutely would, if this were actually a ranking factor.

Now, Google has confirmed that CTR is used alongside other engagement metrics in controlled search quality tests (as documented by Enge, based on a Googler's 2016 SMX West deck that has since been made private).

But it's not a ranking factor.

Not convinced? Google's Gary Illyes confirmed CTR is not a Google ranking factor at Pubcon Las Vegas 2016.

"If you think about it, clicks in general are incredibly noisy," Illyes said. "People do weird things on the search result pages. They click around like crazy, and in general it's really, really hard to clean up that data."

CTR is also used for personalization, Illyes said, in that the types of results an individual typically chooses can "teach" Google's algorithm which types of results that person prefers.

But can CTR impact your website's performance at scale as a direct ranking factor?

No.

OUR VERDICT

Click-Through Rate (CTR) as a Ranking Factor

Bottom line: There is no compelling evidence to support the idea that Google uses CTR as a direct search ranking signal.

Which means there's no point trying to game this one – Google was onto it decades ago.

Should you track your organic CTR and try to improve it? Yes – because it is one metric you can use to understand whether your content is successful.

It won't help you rank better on Google. But getting more traffic to your website is always a good thing.

Click-through rate is too noisy, messy, and easy to game to be taken seriously as a ranking factor.

There are plenty of more productive places to focus your SEO efforts!

CO-CITATION

By **Miranda Miller**

Is Co-Citation a Google Ranking Factor?

What on earth is co-citation, and is it a Google search ranking factor?

You may have heard the term co-citation in your SEO wanderings, often in discussions on link building and typically in conjunction with another term: co-occurrence.

Co-citation has long been used by search engines to assist in determining how two seemingly unrelated documents may be related.

If my tiny home building website (a girl can dream) gets a link from a leading construction publisher this week and your solar power equipment website gets one from them next week, what does that tell Google?

While it's not indicative of a relationship between you and I, it does suggest to search engines that we have something in common.

But is co-citation actually used by Google as a factor in its search ranking algorithm? Let's see.

THE CLAIM

Co-Citation as a Ranking Factor

We've been talking about co-citation for an awfully long time. Jim Boykin shared a good overview of the SEO industry's understanding of the concept at the time back in 2006.

He cited a definition from SourceForge that states, in part:

> **"Bibliographic Co-Citation is a popular similarity measure used to establish a subject similarity between two items. If A and B are both cited by C, they may be said to be related to one another, even though they don't directly reference each other. If A and B are both cited by many other items, they have a stronger relationship. The more items they are cited by, the stronger their relationship is."**

You can see how such an understanding could be helpful to Google in its pursuit to find the most reputable, authoritative, trustworthy sources to answer searchers' queries.

But is co-citation actually a ranking factor?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Co-Citation as a Ranking Factor

Before we dig in, if you're wondering what the difference is between co-citation and co-occurrence, this brief conversation between Rand Fishkin and Bill Slawski sums it up in a few tweets:

For the purposes of this piece, we're talking about co-citation – how links vs. keywords drive Google's understanding of a piece of content.

Citation analysis comes from the field of bibliometrics, in which academics and researchers use citations between documents to determine which books, articles, or other content are most popular.

It's a practice that's been around at least since the early 19th century. However, citation analysis became a lot more useful with automation and citation indexing. This enabled researchers to not only document citations at scale but to visualize how they were connected and analyze the entire collection for patterns.

Sound familiar? It should, as these are the principles on which Google's Knowledge Graph was built.

And if there's even a hint of method to Google's indexing and information retrieval madness, SEO pros are going to try to figure out how it impacts rankings.

Digital marketers have long believed in the power of co-citation.

In 2010, Jennifer Van Iderstyne wrote,

> **"One of the things that can affect the value of a link, are the links surrounding it. Simply put, having your link surrounded by crap is gonna make you look bad. But having your site linked to alongside competitors, or trusted resources can have a positive effect on your rankings."**

In 2013, Tayyab Nasir wrote,

> **"Co-citations are more liked by search engines than anchor text because co-citations are earned, while anchor text is created by yourself."**

And in 2020, Adam Heitzman wrote,

> **"If you think about it, both co-citation and co-occurrence make complete sense when it comes to what Google has been trying to value all along – authority and real, genuine intermingling between great pieces of content."**

Links are still widely perceived as one of the most — if not *the* most — heavily weighted ranking factors in Google's algorithms.

But we all know there are massive issues with link integrity and their value as a ranking factor in a world where links can be bought and sold.

The introductions of Hummingbird, RankBrain, and BERT each demonstrate the great strides Google is making in developing a deeper, more meaningful understanding of each piece of content.

There has been talk over years of co-citation and co-occurrence replacing links and anchor text as ranking signals.

Citations are just a type of link, though. And co-citation helps give a link context.

It helps Google understand who's who, the "why" behind a link, and whether the link makes sense in the grander scheme of things.

In that way, co-citation could actually assist Google in identifying link spam, helping links stay relevant as a ranking signal for many more years to come.

The Evidence Against Co-Citation as a Ranking Factor

There are potential issues with the idea of co-citation as a Google ranking factor, not the least of which being the potential for manipulation.

Anywhere links are perceived to have value, some will attempt to game the system.

If you're thinking of buying links to build relevance in your industry in some kind of co-citation scheme, though, you really have to ask whether it's worth it.

John Mueller restated the various ways Google handles link manipulation, in a July 11, 2021, edition of Office Hours:

"Artificially building links, dropping links on other sites, buying links – all of that is against the Webmaster Guidelines.

We take action on that algorithmically, and we take action on that manually. And the actions that we take include demoting the site that is buying the links, demoting the site that is selling the links, and sometimes we just take more subtle action in that we just ignore all of those links.

For example, if we recognize that a site is regularly selling links,... we often go in and say, 'Okay, we will ignore all links.'"

None of this is new, but here we are still talking about it.

OUR VERDICT

POSSIBLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Co-Citation as a Ranking Factor

Sure, co-citations can be gamed.

Academics long ago identified a need to go beyond simply counting citations in order to understand their true value. Volume alone does not make a good metric.

Pointing a high volume of junk links at a site won't do you any good (not anymore and not for long, anyway).

Links/citations are such a foundational aspect of document analysis and so incredibly useful that I believe the benefit far outweighs the potential for manipulation – and I think Google thinks so, too.

The complexity of Google's index and ranking algorithms means that co-citation probably carries a lot less weight than it does in academic document scoring.

What two links pointing to one page tells Google about that page is just one small clue. It's one pinpoint on a very large graph.

Attempts to manipulate it as a ranking signal would be far less impactful in search than in academic collections.

Has Google confirmed that co-citation is a ranking factor? Not that I could find.

However, we believe logically that co-citation is possibly a search ranking signal.

CODE TO TEXT RATIO

By **Anna Crowe**

Code to Text Ratio: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

You've likely heard the claims that you want to have a healthy code to text ratio (a.k.a., text to HTML ratio) when it comes to displaying content — typically text — on a webpage.

To sum it up, it's a ratio that tells you what percentage of your webpage should contain text.

It's a notion that's been backed up by many SEO professionals and my own experiences when figuring out the right word count or designing a new user experience (UX).

Anyone who has built a website knows the pain points your code to text ratio can have on the UX, indexing of pages, and page speed.

But does the code to text ratio *really* matter to the search engines?

Let's break down the evidence to see whether search engines use code to text as a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Code to Text as a Ranking Factor

Some SEO pros claim that code to text is used not only to improve user experience but as a key ranking factor for search engines.

Code to text is said to be used by search engines to determine the relevancy of a webpage. If you have a lower code to text ratio (less copy on the webpage), you spark confusion with crawlers.

Why?

Because crawlers don't have enough information to determine the context of the webpage and what it's all about.

THE EVIDENCE

Let's Start With The First Question: Is Code To Text a Ranking Factor?

On March 27, 2018, Google's John Mueller confirmed in a Google Webmaster Office Hours Hangout that code to text is not a ranking factor.

Mueller explained that certain sites use more HTML, while others use less. He stated, "It is more a matter of design preference, and how you set things up on your site."

So, Should You Care About Code to Text Ratio?

Now that you know code to text is not a ranking signal, is it still relevant to focus on for SEO?

Short answer: Yes.

Code to text ratio can tell you if you have bloated HTML that can slow down your page speed, especially on mobile.

With Core Web Vitals in Google Search Console, you can see how SEO and user experience go hand-in-hand. 🤝
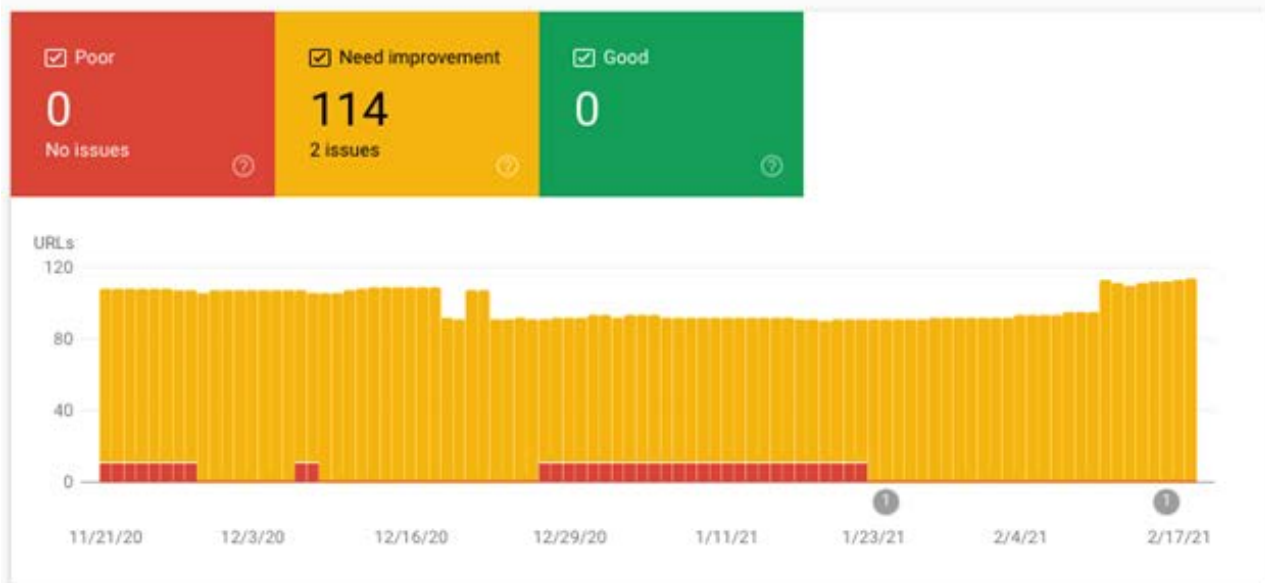
This report can help connect the dots between content and page speed. It shows you how long it takes to load your main content, how it loads, and layout shifts.

It can help you identify areas of your site that are causing pain points for users.

What is a Good Code to Text Ratio?

A good rule of thumb when it comes to code to text ratios is to aim for between 25-70% of visible text compared to non-visible elements (i.e., alt tags).

How to Improve Your Code to Text Ratio

The key to improving your code to text ratio is building a better user experience.

Start by making sure your HTML code is valid. You can check that with [a tool like this](). If you have an invalid HTML code, you'll want to remove it.

Next, evaluate your page speed and determine what you can improve.

Then, remove any unnecessary code like white spaces, tabs, comments, etc. If you can, avoid tables as they create a lot of HTML.

Finally, remove any hidden text that is not visible publicly, resize and compress your images, and aim to keep your page size under 300kb.

OUR VERDICT

Code to Text as a Ranking Signal

As the evidence above shows, code to text is not a ranking signal used by search engines.

Instead, you should use this as a guide to help determine the quality of your coding and page load speed.

CONTACT INFORMATION

By **Miranda Miller**

Contact Information: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Giving customers and prospects a way to reach you by phone or email is just good business.

It enables people to get in touch and ask questions, raise any concerns they may have, place an order, and more.

With that said, there may be legitimate reasons a person or organization chooses not to publish their contact information.

The question is does contact information – or a lack thereof – affect your Google search rankings?

THE CLAIM

Contact Information is a Google Ranking Factor

There are two different considerations here:

1. Contact information on your GMB listing (which replaced Google Places for Business and Google+ Pages, which is why you'll see reference to Place pages below).

2. The contact information on your website.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Contact Information as a Ranking Factor

Having your contact information – specifically your business name, address, and phone number – appear in various places online is known as a citation.

We know that citations are a local search ranking factor and have been for well over a decade (likely even prior to Google launching its own Places pages in 2009).

David Mhim's fifth Local Search Ranking Factors survey report, published in 2012, offers a snapshot of the conventional wisdom around contact information as a local ranking factor at that time.

SEO professional Nyagoslav Zhekov (now Director of Local Search at WhiteSpark) is cited as saying the following on the importance of having a local area code on your Place page:

> **"While it is a rather minor ranking factor, it can significantly affect your click-to-call rate, and general conversion, as when people search for local businesses, they'd prefer to find exactly this."**

James Svoboda, partner at WebRanking, said:

> **"Place page factors of Business Title, Categories, Phone number and Address are of high importance for establishing an accurate and trusted profile that will rank well in your local market for related keywords."**

You can learn more about citations as a ranking factor [here](#).

It gets a little trickier when we try to determine whether including contact information on your website is a ranking factor.

There's some evidence that it is.

The [Google Quality Raters Guidelines](#) (pg 15) state that:

> **"The types and amount of contact information needed depend on the type of website. Contact information and customer service information are extremely important for websites that handle money, such as stores, banks, credit card companies, etc. Users need a way to ask questions or get help when a problem occurs."**

Now, that doesn't mean it's part of the algorithm. These are the guidelines given to human quality raters who have no ability to influence search rankings.

But it does tell us that Google considers contact information an important part of the searcher experience, particularly when it comes to [Your Money Your Life (YMYL)](#) webpages.

Page 35 reiterates the importance of contact information in evaluating a webpage's trustworthiness when YMYL is in play:

"Important: For YMYL pages and other pages that require a high level of user trust, an unsatisfying amount of any of the following is a reason to give a page a Low quality rating: customer service information, contact information, information about who is responsible for the website or information about who created the content."

And again on Page 42:

"...we expect most websites to have some information about who (e.g., what individual, company, business, foundation, etc.) is responsible for the website and who created the MC, as well as some contact information, unless there is a good reason for anonymity."

The Evidence Against Contact Information as a Ranking Factor

In a 2016 Google Webmaster Central hangout, John Mueller was asked, "Can missing contact information on a news magazine cause worse rankings in Google News or Google news snippet in the organic search?

Mueller responded:

> **"I don't know about Google News, so I can't comment on that. With regards to normal web search, I don't think we look at things like contact information on a webpage. So that's probably not something that we'd focus on for web search rankings."**

He added that personally, he appreciates when a website displays contact information as it enables Google to get in touch directly if they notice a major site error such as noindex applied sitewide.

He also noted that particularly for news sites, not giving visitors a way to contact the business seems like a bad user experience.

OUR VERDICT

Contact Information as a Ranking Factor

Google definitely uses contact information in local listings (citations) as a local ranking factor.

And although Mueller expressed his doubt that contact information on a website was used in web (organic) search rankings, that was in 2016.

The themes of E-A-T and higher standards for YMYL were prominent in the 2015 release of the Quality Raters Guidelines.

I had read and written about a previously leaked edition of the guidelines in 2011, and the focus on YMYL in the 2015 version seems a refinement of the webpage rating scale Google used in that earlier version.

It asked raters to assign "exactly one" of the following ratings:

- Vital
- Useful
- Relevant
- Slightly Relevant
- Off-Topic or Useless
- Unratable

It seems that by 2015, Google's approach to website quality had matured to the extent that it recognized the need to evaluate different types of sites in different ways.

Google's Danny Sullivan suggested in 2018 that the key to doing better in broad core algorithm updates was making good use of the Quality Raters Guidelines.

For all of these reasons, the evidence points to contact information on your website as a ranking factor for queries that have the potential to impact a person's health or livelihood.

Google's search ranking systems are made up of many different algorithms. Sites that publish important, potentially impactful information are held to a higher standard and that includes enabling readers/customers to contact them.

CONTENT

By **Miranda Miller**

Content as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Content is King.

Content is SEO.

Content marketers will rule the world (I just made that one up, but I stand by it).

No doubt, content is an integral part of your digital marketing and SEO strategies. You cannot do SEO without something to put on the page.

You can't offer value or engage your audience with no text, imagery, audio, or video on the page.

But is content a ranking factor in Google's search algorithms?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Content as a Ranking Factor

Content is foundational to how search works – and it features heavily in Google's own "How Search works" resource:
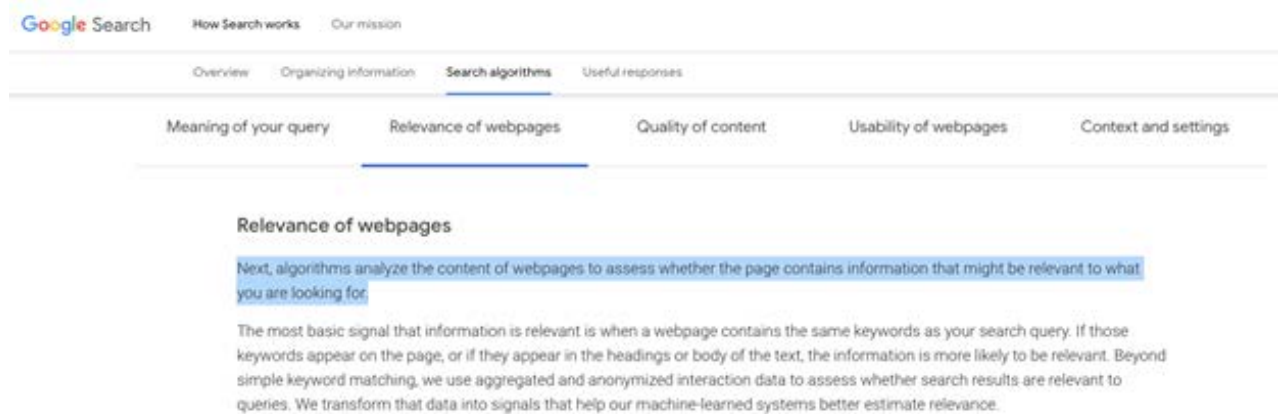
Once Google understands the meaning of the query – the searcher's intent – content is analyzed to determine each page's relevance.

Which content characteristics matter (and how much) vary for different types of queries. This is why Google has higher standards for Your Money, Your Life (YMYL) content, as it can potentially impact a person's wellness or livelihood.

Check out this Google Webmaster Tools online course on how to make a great site, as it appeared in 2014 (the page has since been redirected).

The module's lessons were:

- 1.1 Determine if you want a website
- 1.2 Set up a new website
- 1.3 Identify your audience
- 1.4 Create valuable content
- 1.5 Organize your site structure
- 1.6 Quiz

The "How to make a great site" module was incredibly simple — set up a site, know your audience, create valuable content, have a good site structure.

That sure suggests that content must have been a pretty important ranking factor.

And here's what Google wanted you to know about what it considered valuable content at that time:
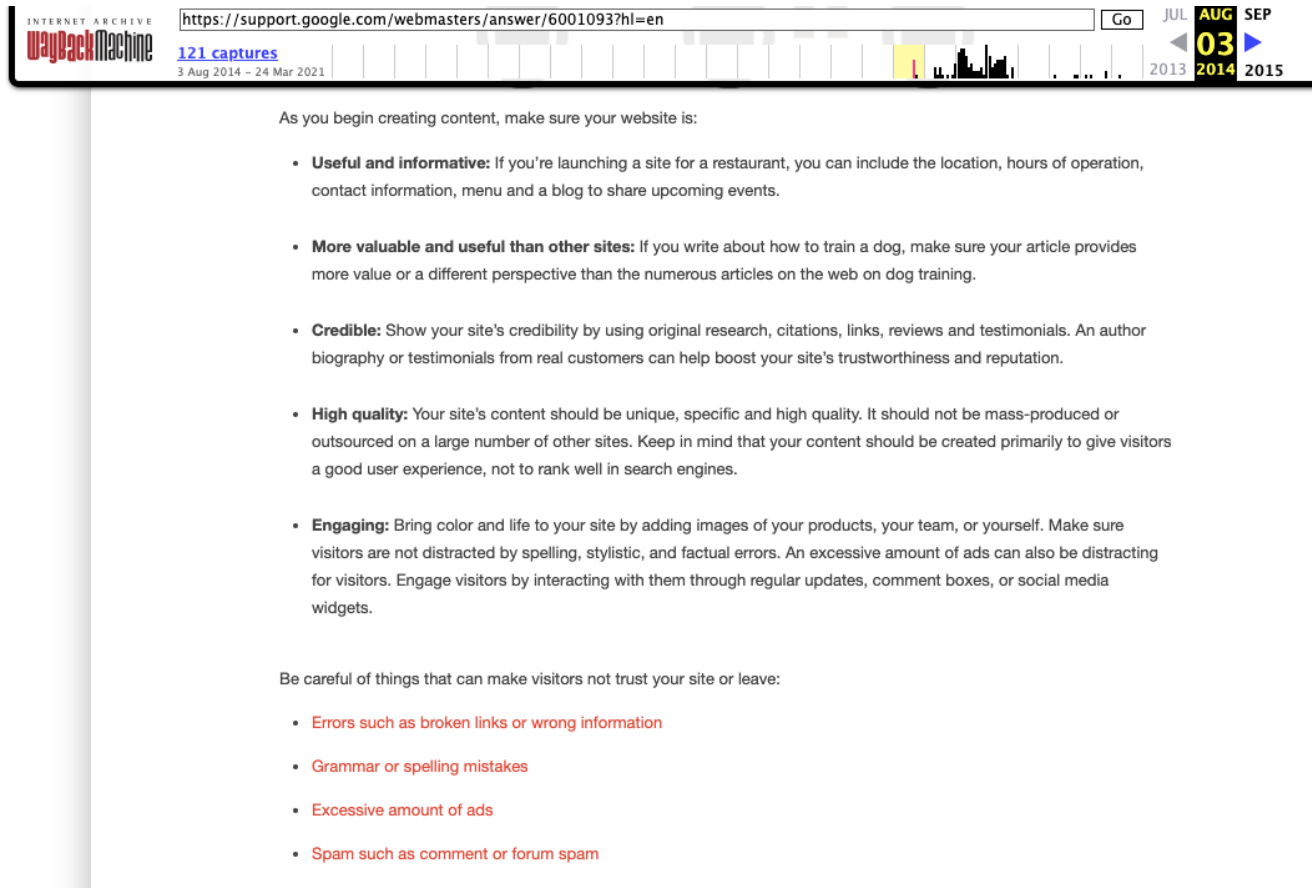
Not much has changed, really. Google is looking for value, credibility, specificity, good user experience, etc.

We see these themes again in the Beginner SEO resources at Google Search Central:

In this section, **Google also recommends that you:**

- Write easy-to-read text.
- Organize your topics clearly.
- Create fresh, unique content.
- Act in a way that cultivates user trust.
- Make expertise and authoritativeness clear.
- Provide an appropriate amount of content for your subject.
- Avoid distracting advertisements (prevent them from consuming the site's content).
- Use links wisely.

We see these themes throughout the Quality Raters Guidelines, as well. I evaluated whether those are a ranking factor in another chapter (they're not).

But the Raters Guidelines go into great detail about what Google is looking for as far as the Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness (E-A-T) of content, and how it is determined.

Now, you could read all of that and come to the conclusion that Google still hasn't implicitly said that content is a ranking factor.

But in a 2016 Google Q&A with Ammon Johns, Rand Fishkin, and Eric Enge, Google Search Quality Senior Strategist Andrey Lipattsev flat out told us what the top 3 ranking signals are.

Ammon John asked,

> **"We've heard that this (RankBrain) is the third-most important signal contributing to results now. Would it be beneficial to us to know what the first two are? Could webmasters build better sites?"**

Lipattsev responded,

> **"Yes. And I can tell you what they are. It's content and links pointing to your site."**

He then clarified that "there is no order," so it's not a numbered list of 1. Ranking Factor = Content, 2. = Links, 3. = RankBrain.

Instead, different aspects of the algorithms are involved at varying levels depending on the query.

So while it's safe to say that content, links, and RankBrain were the top three ranking factors that point in time, it doesn't mean content was the #1 factor, or that those are the top three today.

Getting more recent, then; in an August 2020 [Webmaster Central video](), John Mueller said in response to a question about H1 tags:

> **"Headings on the page are not the only ranking factor that we have — we look at the content on its own, as well."**

The Evidence Against Content as a Ranking Factor

There really isn't any.

You can't have search without content.

Content is foundational to how search works, it's examined in many different ways by Google's search algorithms, and content is a ranking factor.

OUR VERDICT

Content as a Ranking Factor

Google uses content as a search ranking signal.

Google uses many aspects of that content to gauge whether it is the best answer for a relevant query, so simply having average content is not enough.

Focus on the elements that make your content exceptional if you want it to perform in search.

CONTENT LENGTH

By **Matt Southern**

Content Length: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

One of the longest-running debates in SEO happens to involve the length of content and whether it has an impact on rankings.

Word count is said to be a factor for search results, with claims suggesting Google sees high word counts as a sign of high quality content.

Let's investigate those claims and settle the debate around word count as a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Content Length as a Ranking Factor

Content is king, so having more content than competitors is thought to be better for search rankings.

Based on the theory that word count is an indicator of content quality, SEO experts claim a larger word count can help with achieving greater ranking positions.

Some experts even go as far as to recommend a specific word count as a "sweet spot" for landing on the first page of Google.

These claims lead marketers and companies to believe they need to stretch their content to reach a certain number of words in order to be competitive in Google.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Content Length as a Ranking Factor

Google is frequently asked if word count is a ranking factor, meaning we have a lot of evidence to draw from for this section.

According to all the evidence available, it's clear that word count is not a ranking factor.

Google's John Mueller [says exactly that](#) in a Reddit thread where an SEO asks how to analyze word counts in a SERP.

He states:

> **"Word count is not a ranking factor. Save yourself the trouble."**

Here's another statement from Mueller [on Twitter](#) confirming that word count is not used to evaluate content quality:

> **"Word count is not indicative of quality. Some pages have a lot of words that say nothing. Some pages have very few words that are very important & relevant to queries. You know your content best (hopefully) and can decide whether it needs the details."**

In one more example, Mueller advises that adding more text to a page [will not make it better](#) from Google's perspective:

> **"From our point of view the number of words on a page is not a quality factor, not a ranking factor.**
>
> **So just blindly adding more and more text to a page doesn't make it better."**

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Content Length as a Ranking Factor

Word count is confirmed to not be a ranking factor.

What Google cares most about when ranking search results is satisfying user intent.

It may take 50 words, 100 words, or 1,000 words to communicate what a searcher needs to know. That number will vary from query to query.

If a user is searching for a question that warrants a quick answer, then a shorter piece of content is more than capable of ranking on the first page.

There's no benefit to extending the length of content to fit an arbitrary word count.

CORE WEB VITALS

By **Kristi Hines**

Core Web Vitals as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Core Web Vitals measure page experience signals to ensure an engaging user experience for search users.

But can Core Web Vitals affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between Core Web Vitals and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Core Web Vitals are a Ranking Factor

What are Core Web Vitals?

According to web.dev:

> "Core Web Vitals are the subset of Web Vitals that apply to all web pages, should be measured by all site owners, and will be surfaced across all Google tools.
>
> Each of the Core Web Vitals represents a distinct facet of the user experience, is measurable in the field, and reflects the real-world experience of a critical user-centric outcome."

The three Core Web Vital metrics are as follows.

- **Largest Contentful Paint (LCP):** Measures how long it takes to load the largest image or block of text in the viewport.

- **First Input Delay (FID):** Measures how long it takes for the browser to respond when a user engages with the page (button click, tap, etc.).

- **Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS):** Measures visual stability to determine whether there is a major shift in the content on-screen while elements are loading.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Core Web Vitals as a Ranking Factor

In 2020, Google Search Central made a pre-announcement of the upcoming page experience metrics (Core Web Vitals) ranking signals.

The corresponding blog post stated the following:

> **"Earlier this month, the Chrome team announced Core Web Vitals, a set of metrics related to speed, responsiveness and visual stability, to help site owners measure user experience on the web.**
>
> **Today, we're building on this work and providing an early look at an upcoming Search ranking change that incorporates these page experience metrics. We will introduce a new signal that combines Core Web Vitals with our existing signals for page experience to provide a holistic picture of the quality of a user's experience on a web page."**

In 2021, Google hosted a half-hour "ask me anything" session on web vitals. During the AMA, someone asked if page experience is a binary ranking factor.

Philip Walton, Google engineer working on web performance, answered that web vitals were mostly not a binary ranking factor.

John Mueller, Google Search Advocate, confirmed during the AMA that while web vitals affect rankings, relevance also plays a strong role. If website A is faster than website B, but B is more relevant to the search users query, website B would still outrank AB.

Mueller also noted that websites moving from "needs improvement" to "good" may see ranking improvements. But websites that are already good and improve their speed a millisecond or two may not see ranking changes.

In 2021, Google updated the original blog announcement for Core Web Vitals. They confirmed that the page experience rollout would be completed in August 2021.

OUR VERDICT

Core Web Vitals as a Ranking Factor

Google has confirmed that yes, Core Web Vitals are a ranking factor.

Google's web.dev offers great advice on how to improve your LCP, FID, and CLS to improve both your users' experience and your rankings.

For a real world perspective of web performance metrics throughout the internet, visit HTTP Archive for "...various performance metrics in the lifecycle of a loading page including those used by many modern progressive web apps."

CRAWL ERRORS & BUDGET

By **Anna Crowe**

Crawl Errors & Crawl Budget: Are They Google Ranking Factors?

Pop quiz: If you publish a webpage, do search engines rank your page?

Not always.

For a search engines to rank your page, it has to crawl it first.

This is where the crawl budget comes into play.

Search engines use their crawl budget to crawl your website.

If there is a crawl error on the webpage (i.e., 404, 403, 503, etc.), search engines will not crawl the page with the error.

In an attempt to set the record straight once and for all, we've tapped into Google's documents to fact-check this common SEO myth.

🥁 Drumroll, please: Find the truth about some of your crawl errors and crawl budget beliefs ahead.

THE CLAIM

Crawl Errors & Crawl Budget as Ranking Factors

Before exploring the evidence, here's a bit of a refresher on crawl errors and crawl budget.

What is a Crawl Error?

[Crawl errors are issues](#) search engines discover when trying to access a webpage. These errors stop search engines from reading and indexing your content.

If search engines can't read or index your content, then the chances of ranking for those pages are slim.

What is Crawl Budget?

Crawl budget refers to the amount of pages a search engine can crawl. Google breaks down its crawl budget by two factors:

- Crawl rate limit, the speed of pages, crawl errors, and crawl limit set in Google Search Console.
- Crawl demand, meaning the popularity of your pages as it relates to freshness.

Still with me? Now let's examine how crawl errors and crawl budget impact rankings.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Crawl Errors & Crawl Budget as Ranking Factors

Are Crawl Errors a Ranking Factor?

Let's just get this out there: No, crawl errors are not a ranking factor.

In fact, Google's John Mueller says it's normal if 30-40% of URLs in Google Search Console are returning 404 errors.

Is Crawl Budget a Ranking Factor?

All the way back in 2009, Google affirmed it could only detect a percentage of content on the internet.

"**The Internet is a big place; new content is being created all the time. Google has a finite number of resources, so when faced with the nearly-infinite quantity of content that's available online, Googlebot is only able to find and crawl a percentage of that content.**

Then, of the content we've crawled, we're only able to index a portion."

In 2017, Google Webmaster Trend Analyst, Gary Illyes, published "What Crawl Budget Means for Googlebot," which explains how Google calculates crawl budget.

At the beginning of this article, Google states:

"**First, we'd like to emphasize that crawl budget, as described below, is not something most publishers have to worry about. If new pages tend to be crawled the same day they're published, crawl budget is not something webmasters need to focus on.**

Likewise, if a site has fewer than a few thousand URLs, most of the time it will be crawled efficiently."

And, at the bottom, Google answers whether crawling is a ranking factor:

> **"An increased crawl rate will not necessarily lead to better positions in Search results. Google uses hundreds of signals to rank the results, and while crawling is necessary for being in the results, it's not a ranking signal."**

There you have it, straight from Google. Crawl budget is not a ranking factor.

Now, if you're interested in learning how to optimize your crawl budget, Search Engine Journal contributor Nicolas Vargas shares [everything you need to know about](#) it here.

OUR VERDICT

Crawl Errors & Crawl Budget as a Ranking Signal

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Just in case you went straight to the end of this chapter without reading anything else, let's say it again: Neither crawl errors nor crawl budget are Google ranking factors.

That said, if a page cannot be indexed or rendered, it will not rank or pass any link equity. Crawl errors can indicate whether this is happening on your site, so it is an important SEO check.

While there's no one-size-fits-all, universal model when it comes to handling your crawl errors and crawl budget when it comes to your SEO strategy, it helps to know that an overwhelming amount of crawl errors in Google Search Console does not directly affect your rankings.

DEEP LINK RATIO

By **Kristi Hines**

Deep Link Ratio: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Building a diverse portfolio of links, including deep links, is part of a successful link building strategy.

But can your deep link ratio affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between the deep link ratio and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Deep Link Ratio is a Ranking Factor

Deep links are any inbound links that point to pages on your website that aren't your homepage.

(To be clear: this article does not discuss the other type of deep link, which is when a link points to content within an app. Because that type of deep linking is specific to mobile apps, it has no impact on the organic search results and is definitely not a Google ranking factor.)

What then is a deep link ratio?

The deep link ratio is a measurement of the total number of inbound links to every page on your website vs. the total number of inbound links to only your homepage.

Calculating Deep Link Ratio

Let's say you have a total of 1,584 inbound links to your website. Of those links, 698 are to your homepage.

The remaining 886 are to specific pages on your website.

To calculate your deep link ratio, take your number of deep links divided by the total number of inbound links.

886 / 1,584 = 55.9% deep link ratio

The claim is that this percentage would suggest a more natural link profile as compared to a site with 90% of their links to their homepage.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Deep Link Ratio as a Ranking Factor

In the Advanced SEO documentation in Google Search Central, there is a page on link building tactics to avoid.

You won't find a mention of deep links here, however. Here's what Google suggests:

> **"The best way to get other sites to create high-quality, relevant links to yours is to create unique, relevant content that can naturally gain popularity in the Internet community.**
>
> **Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will find that content valuable to their readers and link to it."**

This approach could lead to deep links, but doesn't specifically mention deep links or a ratio.

Not much is officially said by Google or Googlers about deep link ratio as a ranking factor.

In 2004, you'll find one of the first mentions of a deep link ratio from a link building agency. It includes an example of how to calculate your deep link ratio, but no evidence for it being a ranking factor.

In 2006, SEOBook.com published a question about deep link ratio. Similar to the article in 2004, it offers a calculation method to determine your ratio of deep links but no further evidence that it affects your rankings.

In 2006, a study on the Link-Based Characterization and Detection of Web Spam correlated a high number of homepage links with "spammier" websites.

OUR VERDICT

Deep Link Ratio as a Ranking Factor

It's important to build a diverse link portfolio for your website, which includes a mix of homepage and deep links.

But there is no magic ratio of deep links to homepage links.

While links are a confirmed ranking factor, an exact deep link ratio is highly unlikely to be a direct Google ranking factor.

If anything, we could see Google using a deep link ratio as a webspam check – perhaps for the purposes of identifying spammy link building footprints.

However, unless Google or a spokesperson is on record saying deep links aren't a ranking factor, then we can't definitively rule it out.

One thing we know for sure, via Google's John Mueller, is that the total number of inbound links doesn't matter.

So if a raw number of links doesn't matter to Google, would a deep link ratio of those inbound links really help Google rank webpages in any meaningful way?

It's unlikely.

DIRECT TRAFFIC

By **Miranda Miller**

Direct Traffic: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Does Google factor direct website visits into your search rankings?

To be clear, direct traffic is where a person (or bot – we'll get to that later) navigates directly to your website's URL versus through another channel, such as a search engine or social media platform.

They already know you, and that tells Google great things about your authority and popularity — or so the theory goes.

Let's see what the experts have to say about this one.

THE CLAIM

Direct Traffic as a Ranking Factor

The idea here is that a direct website visit is an endorsement of your webpage, much in the same way as a link.

Direct traffic is any site visit without an http_referrer (for one reason or another).

For direct traffic to count as a ranking factor, Google would need to somehow measure those direct visits to your site using one of its tools.

Considering it has Chrome, Google Search Console, Google Analytics, its DNS service, Google Fiber, and more at its disposal, there's no shortage of possibilities as to where this click data could come from.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Direct Traffic as a Ranking Factor

A Backlinko article dated Jan 22, 2020, states, "It's confirmed that [Google uses data from Google Chrome](#) to determine how many people visit site (and how often)."

Following that link to the source takes you to an article based on a Brighton SEO 2013 fireside chat with three ex-Googlers: Fili Wiese, Jonas Weber, and Alfredo Pulvirenti. There, we find this in a conversation on whether Google uses social signals as ranking factors:

> **"...perhaps one of the biggest points of the session was that Google definitely uses Chrome user data and can track every click within it."**

If you went looking today, you would read on an authoritative site that Google confirmed it uses Chrome data to determine how many people visit a site and how often. You could see that verified by Googlers, and would logically probably believe this to be true.

In reality, what those ex-employees said was that Google uses Chrome data — not how, or whether it was in the live algorithm or testing.

All this proves is that as of April 2013, Google had at some point prior to that (because those were former, and not current employees) used Chrome data to track clicks.

If you skipped over the date, or believed that an article dated Jan 22, 2020, would be accurate at that time, you would be forgiven for thinking this was actually confirmed by Google (to be crystal clear: it was not).

This came up a lot more recently, though, and in a big way.

In 2017, Semrush published its first Ranking Factors study and named direct traffic the #1 Google Search ranking factor.

Ranking factors analyzed

- Direct website visits
- Time on site
- Pages per session
- Bounce rate
- Total referring domains
- Total backlinks
- Total referring IPs
- Total follow-backlinks
- Content length
- Website security (HTTPS)

Chaos ensued.

SEO professionals battled it out on Twitter.

People wrote blog posts for and against it.

There's been a lot of back and forth over this one over the years, and it won't change anything to rehash it all now.

So let's go straight to two of the most reasoned pieces, which offer some pretty compelling evidence as to why the idea of direct traffic as a ranking factor is seriously flawed.

The Evidence Against Direct Traffic as a Ranking Factor

The first of those aforementioned blog posts features a [video conversation](#) between Eric Enge and Mark Traphagen, on the fallacy of reading too much into ranking studies like the one conducted by Semrush.

As Eric explained:

> **"It's possible for two things to occur together but have little or nothing to do with each other. My favorite example is the fact that ice cream sales and drowning deaths are highly correlated. So someone might conclude that increased ice cream sales causes more drownings or even more silly, vice versa. But we know the real reason the two things correlate so well."**

(They correlate because it's summer and people are swimming and eating ice cream. But one does not cause the other to happen.)

A site with qualities that signal great things to Google might also say great things to users and get more direct traffic.

But that doesn't mean the traffic caused the increased ranking.

Another great resource on this topic is by Martin MacDonald, who takes issue with the quality of direct traffic as a prospective ranking signal. He explains:

> **"The technical definition of direct traffic simply being requests made without an http_referrer is far too vague a concept.**
>
> **We're not talking about direct type in traffic most of the time, rather:**
>
> - requests made from non web browsers
> - many URL shorteners
> - social media platforms and apps
> - links with mismatched security protocols
> - links shared across devices (desktop to mobile particularly)."

Finally, direct traffic is just too easy a signal to game.

As MacDonald says, "If all you need to do is strip out the referrer on all internal links to 'fool' Google into thinking its direct traffic, you could do this with a few lines of PHP code, or with server configuration…"

You could run bots or buy site visits. You could fake it yourself.

And at the end of the day, does direct traffic tell Google something that other signals don't?

OUR VERDICT

Direct Traffic as a Ranking Factor

Google does not use direct traffic as a search ranking signal.

It's noisy, easy to manipulate, and difficult to collect and verify.

Be weary of studies that characterize a correlation between direct traffic and search rankings as causation.

And always check the date when fact-checking! Follow each claim to its source. What was true 10 years ago may not be valid today — and it may have been misinterpreted even then.

DISAVOW TOOL

By **Miranda Miller**

The Disavow Tool: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

The disavow tool, now located in your Google Search Console, enables you to tell Google not to count spammy links as part of your link profile.

Following Google's Penguin update in 2012, toxic links became a huge issue. Sites with link profiles that appeared unnatural ended up hurting a lot of businesses and brands that had dabbled in spammy link building tactics in prior years.

SEO professionals balked at the idea of having to contact someone on the other end of every potentially damaging link to ask for its removal. There were also many reports of extortion ("Sure, we'll remove that sketchy link, just send us lots of $$$!").

And although Google initially resisted, the disavow tool was born.

We know unnatural links can negatively affect your search rankings.

So can you improve your search rankings by using Google's disavow tool?

Let's answer this question.

THE CLAIM

Disavow Tool as a Ranking Factor

Claims about this range from "use it to protect your rankings" to "we used the disavow tool and rankings skyrocketed."

The idea is that if you rid your link profile of spam, identifiably paid, and other low quality links, your organic search rankings will directly benefit.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for the Disavow Tool as a Ranking Factor

Reddit and SEO forums are rife with anecdotes about the power of disavowing links.

Here are just a few titles currently coming up on the topic:

- How to Use Google's Disavow Tool For Better Rankings
- How to Effectively Disavow Links & Protect Organic Ranking
- Disavow Unnatural Links and Improve Your Rankings

Really, that's about it.

There's no verifiable evidence that would prove that using the disavow tool tells the algorithm anything about your site.

The Evidence Against the Disavow Tool as a Ranking Factor

Google is careful in its positioning of the disavow tool as a preventative measure against manual action – not a component of the organic ranking algorithm – and says:

"If you have a manual action against your site for unnatural links to your site, or if you think you're about to get such a manual action (because of paid links or other link schemes that violate our quality guidelines), you should try to remove the links from the other site to your site. If you can't remove those links yourself, or get them removed, then you should disavow the URLs of the questionable pages or domains that link to your website."

But as Penguin taught the SEO world, manual actions aren't the only weapon in Google's link spam arsenal.

Links are a ranking factor, and the disavow tool can help you clean up that signal.

Still, it's not a ranking factor on its own and is only useful in cases where the link spam is so egregious Google can't possibly ignore it on its own.

OUR VERDICT

The Disavow Tool as a Ranking Factor

Is using the disavow tool a ranking factor?

No. You will not experience any lift in search rankings for using the tool.

Are links a ranking factor?

Absolutely.

Can you positively influence organic rankings by cleaning up the links pointing to your site?

Yes. It's a matter of reducing any potential negative impact of low quality/spam links; you are influencing an existing ranking factor.

But only in certain cases, and those tend to be few and far between.

If you've experienced a manual penalty, cleaning that up is going to stop the suppression of your site in Google search.

Even outside of a manual action, spammy and identifiably paid or otherwise manipulated links could be negatively impacting the algorithm's assessment of your link profile.

You can actually end up doing more harm than good by disavowing links.

As John Mueller says,

> "Random links collected over the years aren't necessarily harmful, we've seen them for a long time too and can ignore all of those weird pieces of web-graffiti from long ago. Disavow links that were really paid for (or otherwise actively unnaturally placed), don't fret the cruft."

If you do use it and don't see any results, it could be that you didn't need to use it in the first place – or, you need to follow up with a reconsideration request.

As [Chuck Price recommends](#):

> **"The most common misconception is the disavow tool doesn't work. It does. For a manual penalty, the disavow file works, when used as a last resort. That means that a full fledged and well documented link removal campaign must precede it. The disavow file, combined with a detailed reconsideration request, is a core component in successfully getting a manual penalty revoked."**

Bottom line: Google does not use your use of the disavow tool as a search ranking signal.

DOMAIN AGE

By **Miranda Miller**

Domain Age: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Does Google favor older, established domains in its search results?

Does buying a brand new domain name put you at an SEO disadvantage?

These are just a couple questions surrounding domain age as a ranking factor – a topic that has been hotly contested and debated during the past two decades.

We know that Google at least considered it as part of a document scoring algorithm at one point in time.

Read on to learn whether domain age is really a Google search ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Domain Age as a Ranking Factor

The claim here is twofold:

- The longer Google has had a domain in its index, the more it will benefit your search ranking.
- The longer the domain is registered, the more it will benefit your search ranking.

Basically, here's the argument:

Let's say you registered two domains, one in 2010 and the other in 2020. Until three months ago, you never published a piece of content on either site. That means Google will consider the 2010 domain "stronger" – simply because it was registered more than 10 years prior to the second site, and it should have an easier time ranking.

Does that seem logical?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Domain Age as a Ranking Factor

Back in 2007, some folks in SEO believed domain age to be one of the top 10 most important ranking factors.

More recently, some have pointed to this Matt Cutts video as "proof" domain age is a Google ranking factor.

Why?

Because in it, Cutts said: "The difference between a domain that's six months old versus one year old is really not that big at all."

To some, this makes it sound like Google uses domain age as a ranking signal – although perhaps not a very important one.

The Evidence Against Domain Age as a Ranking Factor

The thing is, that video is from 2010.

And here's what else Cutts actually said:

- Registrar data doesn't matter at all. It's too difficult to gather and Google doesn't have access to enough of it for it to be a reliable signal.
- What Google was able to measure was when the site was first crawled and when the site was first linked to by another site.

Even then, he stated,

"The fact is it's mostly the quality of your content and the sort of links that you get as a result of the quality of your content that determine how well you're going to rank in the search engines."

A 2005 patent application called "Information retrieval based on historical data" by Matt Cutts, Paul Haahr, and several others gives us a bit more insight into how Google perceived these domain signals at the time.

The patent outlined a method of identifying a document and assigning it a score composed of different types of data about its history.

This data included:

- Information about its inception date.
- Elapsed time measured from the inception date.
- The manner and frequency in which the content of the document changes over time.
- An average time between the changes, a number of changes in a time period, and a comparison of a rate of change in a current time period with a rate of change in a previous time period.
- At least one of the following: the number of new pages associated with the document within a time period, a ratio of a number of new pages associated with the document versus a total number of pages associated with the document, and a percentage of the content of the document that has changed during a time period.
- The behavior of links relate to at least one of appearance and disappearance of one or more links pointing to the document.

There's a lot more, but already you can see this patent was never only about domain age.

There are elements of links and content quality/freshness in here, too.

Domain age may have been a factor back then. But there's no clear evidence it was a direct ranking factor so much as a weak signal inside of a more comprehensive document history score (and *that* was/maybe still is the ranking factor... maybe).

In any case, John Mueller has been clear on this one:

Nikhil Gabda @nikhilgabda · Jul 4, 2019

Is domain age still matters in todays SEO? In comparison to Domain vs Subdomain? @BermanHale @JohnMu @rustybrick @glenngabe

💬 16   🔁 3   ♡ 17   ⬆️

Rajesh Kumar @rajeshkumarsem · Jul 5, 2019

Domain age only helps to gain the trust value, it is may one of the signals from more than 200 signals of ranking.

💬 3   🔁 1   ♡   ⬆️

🌿 **John** 🌿 ✔️
@JohnMu

Replying to @rajeshkumarsem @nikhilgabda and 3 others

No, domain age helps nothing.

3:56 AM · Jul 5, 2019 · Twitter Web Client

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Domain Age as a Ranking Factor

Google has said domain age is not a ranking factor – and we have no reason to doubt them on this one.

How long you register your domain for doesn't matter to Google's search algorithm.

Buying old domains won't help you rank faster or higher – in fact, you could inherit junk links or other negative associations that could hurt your SEO efforts. But, again, that's not purely because of the age – it's what happened to that domain during those years.

Bottom line: Google does not use domain age as a direct search ranking signal.

DOMAIN AUTHORITY

By **Anna Crowe**

Domain Authority: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Pop quiz: There's a popular ranking metric obsessed over by SEO pros – one that can grade the quality of a site, estimate how easy/difficult it is for that website to rank in search engines, or tell you how valuable a link from that site might be for your SEO.

Are we talking about Domain Authority or PageRank?

If you said PageRank, congrats! You've finally woken up from that coma you went into around 2015.

For the rest of us, and as you probably should have guessed from the title of this article, we're talking about Domain Authority (DA).

Why do some believe it's a ranking factor?

First things first: Domain Authority is a Moz metric. It is a score that ranges from 0-100.

And ever since Moz released Domain Authority, it's caused confusion in the SEO industry.

Domain Authority has been compared to, and confused with, Google's PageRank – specifically, the retired Toolbar PageRank. At times, Domain Authority has even been mistakenly referred to as a "Google metric."

Some SEO gurus represented domain as the golden ticket into Google's algorithm. It was a promise to boost your rankings by opening the doors to how search engines rank your site.

These so-called SEO experts are at the helm of these types of emails that flood your inbox.

Hi Sir/Mam,
We hope you are all well there. We are a Guest Post services provider,
We will provide High-Quality Do-Follow BACKLINKS

Please check our sites

Website Name	DR	Link Type
https://cupertinotimes.com/	45	Do-Follow
https://www.geeksscan.com/	41	Do-Follow
https://www.theitbase.com/	51	Do-Follow
https://www.infopool.org.uk/	35	Do-Follow
https://www.urbansplatter.com/	42	Do-Follow
https://timebusinessnews.com/	52	Do-Follow
https://5bestthings.com/	51	Do-Follow
https://www.smartbusinessdaily.com/	50	Do-Follow
https://www.allperfectstories.com/	54	Do-Follow
https://ridzeal.com/	32	Do-Follow
https://technonguide.com/	42	Do-Follow
https://www.elmens.com/	51	Do-Follow
https://mashhap.com/	42	Do-Follow
https://greenrecord.co.uk/	31	Do-Follow

Except for these sites you can post on other sites according to your choice. I have Many sites for all Niche.
We are waiting for your good reply
Thanks
Regards!

It's difficult to deny when well-known websites continue to put confusing information out there.
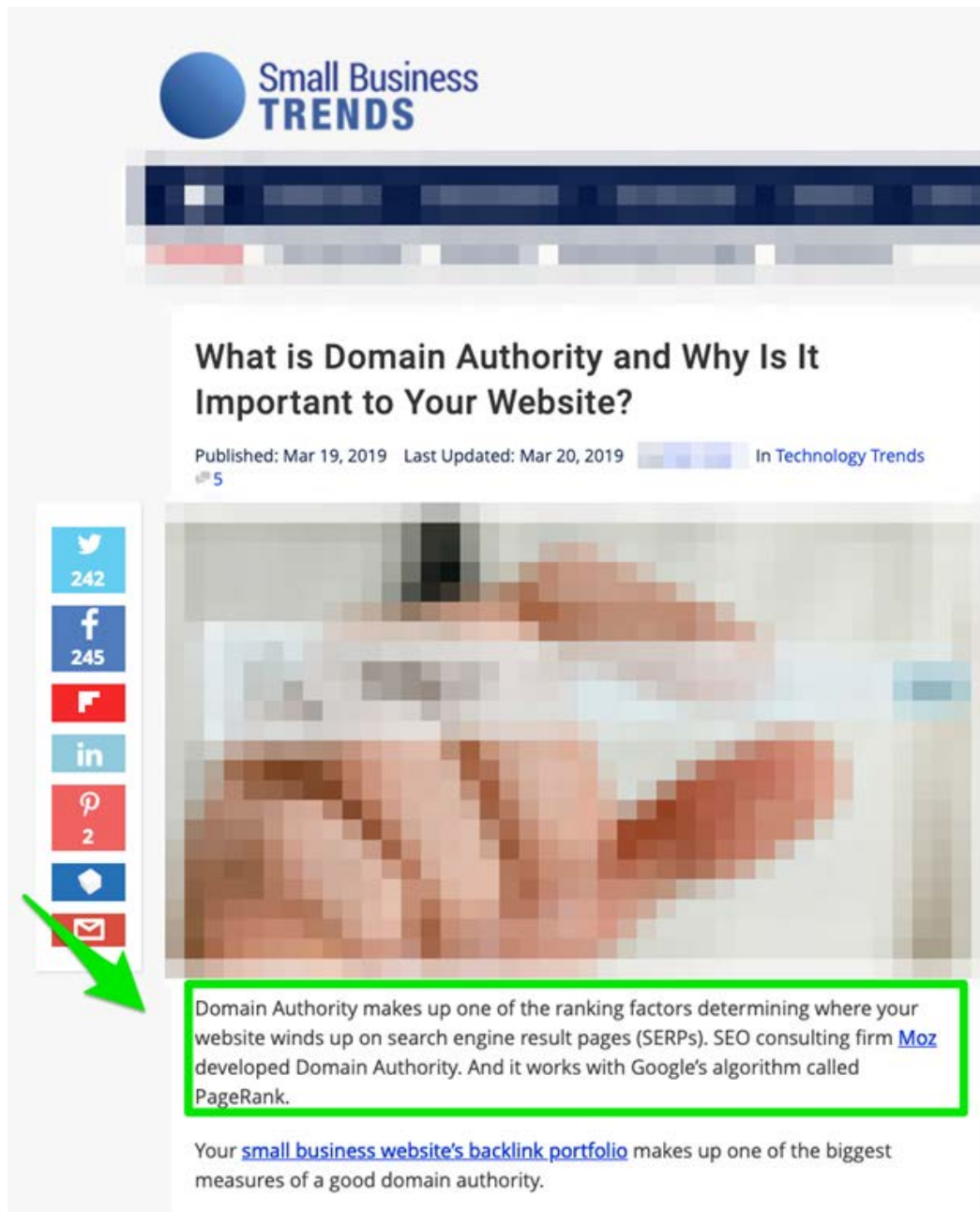
Hmmm, smells like BS to me.

To get to the [truth about domain authority](#), we went to the source itself - the team at Moz.

Domain Authority (DA) vs. Domain Authority (Concept)

Before continuing, we need to make an important distinction.

There are two types of "Domain Authority".

We've already talked about Domain Authority, or DA, the Moz metric.

But there's also the concept of domain authority.

Basically, the idea is that Google gives more authority to certain domains – and that you can build authority for a domain over time by doing things such as publishing great content and attracting high-quality links.

All of this gives certain sites an inherent ranking advantage in the SERPs.

In simplest terms, it would explain why it's easy for a website like The New York Times to rank in Position 1 whereas Joe's News Blog, which launched last month, would have a much harder time.

We investigate this idea more in our chapter on Website Quality Score.

THE CLAIM

Domain Authority as a Ranking Factor

Before we probe the Moz team on domain authority, it's important to understand the basics

What is Domain Authority?

Moz [states that](#):

> "Domain Authority (DA) is a search engine ranking score developed by Moz that predicts how likely a website is to rank in search engine result pages (SERPs). Domain Authority scores range from one to 100, with higher scores corresponding to greater likelihood of ranking.
>
> Domain Authority is based on data from our Link Explorer web index and uses dozens of factors in its calculations. The actual Domain Authority calculation itself uses a machine learning model to predictively find a 'best fit' algorithm that most closely correlates our link data with rankings across thousands of actual search results that we use as standards to scale against."

Domain Authority & Domain Rating the Same?

To be fair, Moz isn't the only SEO tool coming up with its own search engine algorithm metrics.

After Moz led the way, other SEO tools followed.

Semrush has an Authority Score.
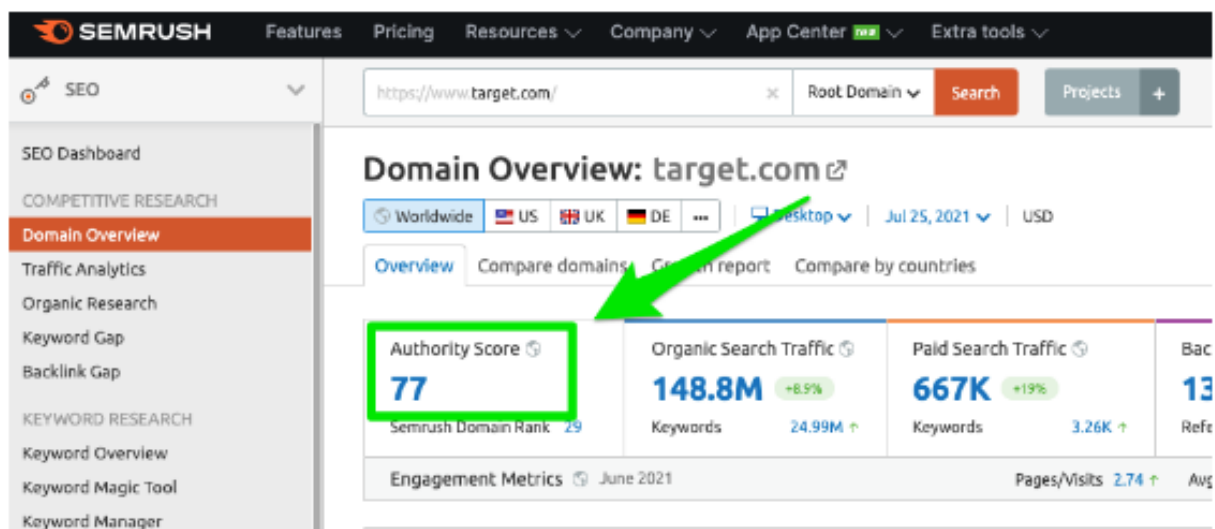
Ahrefs has Ahrefs Rank.
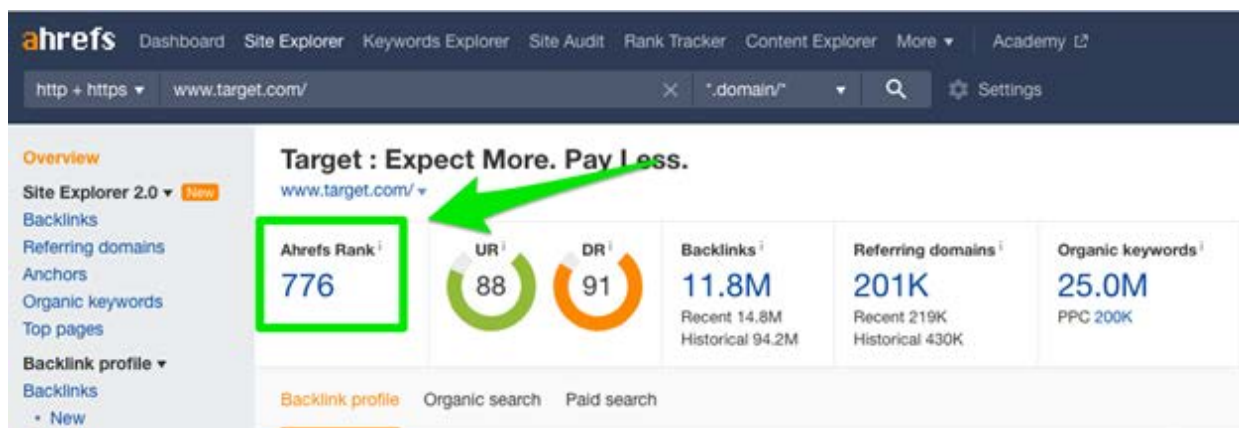
That's where domain rating stems from. Ahrefs used to call Ahrefs Rank, "domain rating." In 2018, Ahrefs improved the formula and [changed the name to Ahrefs Rank](#).

Ahrefs initially used the formula using backlinks only. In contrast, domain authority represented your entire onsite and offsite SEO efforts as one.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Domain Authority as a Ranking Factor

No, Domain Authority is not a ranking factor.

To be clear, Moz came forward to clear this up, confirming:

> "**[Domain Authority is not a Google ranking factor](#) and has no effect on the SERPs.**"

Then what is Domain Authority?

It's a way to gauge website performance. It should be used to provide an idea if your SEO strategy is following best practices.

OUR VERDICT

Domain Authority as a Ranking Factor

Domain Authority is just one metric you can use to compare your site to a competitor's site.

Don't obsess over it. In fact, you can safely ignore it if you want.

If your Domain Authority drops, it doesn't necessarily mean your Google ranking will drop.

But above all else, like BBB ratings, it just wouldn't make sense for Google to use a metric created by a third-party to help rank its search results.

DOMAIN HISTORY

By **Matt Southern**

Domain History: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Unless you're lucky enough to register a domain name no one has thought of before, chances are a domain registered today will have a history attached to it.

Is there any reason for the new owner of a domain to be concerned with what the previous owner(s) did with it?

Yes, a domain's history does matter, even after ownership changes hands and it gets repurposed into a new site.

The truth is, domain history matters more than site owners may think. Unfortunately some don't learn that until it's too late.

Read on to learn more about the claims regarding domain history as a ranking factor, then we'll look at the supporting evidence from Google.

THE CLAIM

Domain History is a Ranking Factor

Domains can potentially have many different and varying uses throughout their lifetime.

A domain name that's being used by a legitimate business today may have previously been used by a payday loan website, or a piracy site, or any other type of website that Google frowns upon.

Despite the website itself being new, domain history is said to be a factor for Google's search results in the present day.

That means a new website could be held back in Google search before it even has a chance to rank.

Is this a genuine concern? Or is it all theoretical?

Here's what the evidence says.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Domain History as a Ranking Factor

Google has addressed the topic of domain history and its impact on rankings on a number of occasions.

It's consistently stated that how a domain was used in the past can be a factor in how Google treats it today.

The impact can range from moderate to severe. The most severe issue a site owner could run into is acquiring a domain with a history of unresolved manual actions.

Google's manual actions don't go away on their own, even after the previous owner sells the domain or lets the registration lapse.

If the penalties aren't dealt with, the domain's next owner may find their website demoted or deindexed right out of the gate.

This issue is discussed in a [video with former Googler Matt Cutts](#), who recommended researching a domain before purchasing it.

A site owner can immediately find out if their domain has a manual action against it by checking the [manual action report](#) in Google Search Console.

That's the worst case scenario. But it's only a temporary setback as all manual actions can be resolved.

In other cases, a domain may not have a penalty associated with it, but still have a negative history with Google.

In those cases, the site may still be impacted in search results., though Google's John Mueller says that's an issue that will [resolve itself over time.](#)

A domain with a brief history of bad activity is not a cause for concern, according to Mueller. If the negative history dates back 10 years or more that may be more difficult to recover from.

The history of any domain can be looked up at Archive.org.

OUR VERDICT

PROBABLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Domain History as a Ranking Factor

Domain history is pretty much confirmed to be a ranking factor.

That's why Google advises you to do your due diligence and research how a domain was previously used before acquiring it.

The impact of poor domain history varies in severity, with the most harmful being an unresolved Google manual action, leading to deindexation.

In most cases, unless the poor history went on for a decade or more, a new website can rise above its domain's problematic past and rank on its own merits.

DOMAIN NAME

By **Anna Crowe**

Is Domain Name a Google Ranking Factor?

Let's just say it: Exact match domains should be buried in a garbage bag right next to people who talk on their speakerphone in public.

Remember when every domain used to look like www. caraccidentattorney.com or www.buydogcollars.com?

That's what we're referring to when we talk about an exact match domain (EMD).

EMDs are domain names that include the exact keyword phrases you want to rank for in the SERPs.

Luckily, on September 28, 2012, Google's Matt Cutts confirmed [exact match domains are not a ranking factor](#).

Matt Cutts ✓
@mattcutts

Minor weather report: small upcoming Google algo change will reduce low-quality "exact-match" domains in search results.

4:43 PM · Sep 28, 2012 · Twitter Web Client

Now that we've settled that dispute, let's analyze how the domain name impacts search results.

Take a deep breath and prepare to get the real story behind the SEO industry's false claims on exact match domain names. To avoid a future crisis of your own, keep reading.

THE CLAIM

Domain Name as a Ranking Factor

You've probably heard a client or someone in SEO say something like: "Exact match domains generate instant credibility."

"It's the best investment you could make."

"It gives you a competitive edge."

It was true — back in the day. The Hotels.com domain sold for [$11 million](#) in 2003, making it one of the most expensive domain name purchases of all time.

The same theory goes for keywords in your domain name. We all saw claims that having a keyword in your domain name gives you a rankings boost.

Come. *On.*

We hate to be a party pooper, but it's officially time to call B.S.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Domain Name as a Ranking Factor

There's a lot of chatter online about domain names and the impact on rankings.

Does Domain Name Affect Ranking?

In 2011, Bill Slawski [investigated Google's exact match domain patent](#) and uncovered insightful nuggets of information.

He theorized that it is possible that keywords in domains work better, according to the patent.

That same year, Google's Matt Cutts addressed concerns about domain names in a [Webmaster Hangout](#).

Cutts stated:

> **"Now if you're still on the fence, let me just give you a bit of color, that we have looked at the rankings and the weights that we give to keyword domains, and some people have complained that we're giving a little too much weight for keywords in domains.**
>
> **And so we have been thinking about adjusting that mix a little bit and sort of turning the knob down within the algorithm, so that given two different domains it wouldn't necessarily help you as much to have a domain with a bunch of keywords in it."**

So, it was obvious back in 2011 that domain names did affect rankings.

But, in 2012, [Cutts shared on Twitter](#) that this will negatively affect your rankings if done incorrectly.

In today's world, domain names do not impact Google rankings.

Google's John Mueller said as much in [2020](#):

> **"Just because a website has a keyword in its domain name doesn't mean that it's more relevant than others for that keyword. In short, you don't need to put keywords in the domain name."**

To be clear, you do not want to listen to this advice.
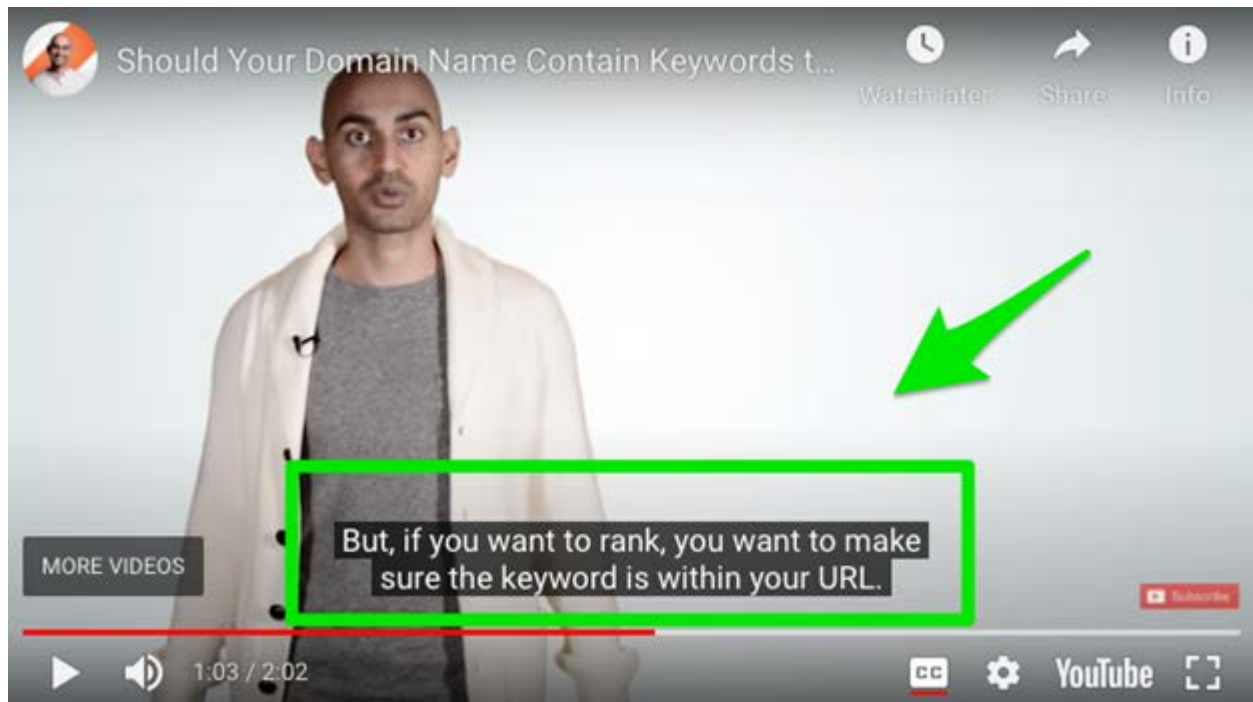
How Important is Exact Match Domain Name?

The fact is, exact match domain names were always gray hat feeding into the black hat world. Exact match domains are pure baloney from a ranking factors standpoint.

Brian Harnish tackles everything you need to know about Google's EMD update.

OUR VERDICT

NOT ANYMORE
RANKING FACTOR METER

Domain Name as a Ranking Signal

While there are exceptions to every rule, you want to properly evaluate your goals for the domain when it comes to your domain name.

Speaking of exceptions, there is one here with our verdict: and that is when it comes to pure navigational searches.

For example, if someone searches for a domain (e.g., Facebook), they are specifically looking to navigate to that domain (eg., www. facebook.com), via a Google search (vs. typing in the URL or opening the site via a bookmark). In that case, the fact that Facebook is Facebook will help Facebook rank for that query.

Want more information on domains and SEO? Check out Roger Montti's advice on [choosing a domain name](#).

DWELL TIME

By **Matt Southern**

Dwell Time: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Dwell time is one of many user interaction signals that finds its way into experts' lists of top Google search ranking factors.

The length of time between clicking the link to view the webpage, and clicking the back button to return to search results, is referred to as dwell time.

On paper, it sounds like an effective metric for measuring user satisfaction. This, may seem like a reason for Google to rank the page higher in SERPs.

But is dwell time a genuine Google ranking factor?

Let's look at what SEO experts claim, and then we'll compare that with official statements from Google to try to get to the truth.

THE CLAIM

Dwell Time is a Ranking Factor

The term "dwell time" was first used by Bing – not Google – in a 2011 blog post. Bing said it is "a signal we watch."

Experts claim dwell time is a Google ranking factor, with a longer dwell time having a positive impact on search position.

Dwell time is often examined in correlation studies to prove it's important to SEO. These studies have found that a long dwell time correlates positively with high search rankings.

However, the same can be said for other metrics that have been debunked as Google ranking factors.

The adage *correlation doesn't equal causation* should be kept top of mind when reading any studies about ranking factors that aren't recognized by Google.

With that said, what is Google's official position on dwell time and its impact on search rankings?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Dwell Time as a Ranking Factor

Google has repeatedly denied that dwell time, or any other user interaction metric, is a factor for search rankings.

Google's Gary Illyes once addressed these theories, and one of the individuals who perpetuates them, saying they're all made up:

> "Dwell time, CTR, whatever Fishkin's new theory is, those are generally made up crap. Search is much more simple than people think."

Google's Martin Splitt debunked this theory as well, saying user interaction metrics are not used for search.

Those are only a couple of recent examples.

Every time dwell time comes up in discussion as a potential ranking factor, Google has been quick to shoot the theory down.

With that being the case, we're not going to look at any evidence that attempts to prove dwell time has a direct impact on SEO, as that's all conjecture.

That's not to say dwell time isn't worth thinking about. It can be a useful way of gauging how satisfied users are with your website's content.

If you're optimizing for a longer dwell time by giving users more content to consume on your webpages, that could potentially lead to a positive, though indirect, impact on your rankings.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Dwell Time as a Ranking Factor

Based on all of the available evidence, we're confident that dwell time is not a direct Google ranking factor.

However, let's be clear: Google's search team is more than likely looking at dwell time (or whatever Google may call this metric internally), as well as other engagement metrics.

Let's remember that dwell time is a **metric.** It's more of a check – just one way Google can measure whether its algorithms are providing the best possible search results.

Think of dwell time like click-through rate, bounce rate, and other data points that you can track in Google Analytics, Search Console, and other tools. These metrics are all indicators of the health of your website, but the metrics themselves have no direct impact on your rankings.

You can't optimize your dwell time. But you can influence your dwell time by making your content better, more useful, valuable, unique, engaging, etc.

Ultimately, it's all a moot point anyway. The only way you will ever see dwell time data is if you work at a search engine.

As Duane Forrester put it in his Search Engine Journal article, "What Is Dwell Time & Why It Matters for SEO," "chasing dwell time is not a good use of your time."

Bottom line: How users interact with webpages after leaving search results does not factor into Google's search rankings. Be highly skeptical of any studies, articles, or presentations that say dwell time is a ranking factor.

E-A-T (EXPERTISE, AUTHORITY, TRUST)

By **Miranda Miller**

E-A-T: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness (E-A-T) are important to Google. This is inarguable.

In fact, E-A-T is such an essential element in how Google perceives web content that it's mentioned 135 times in Google's 167-page [Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#).

But is it an algorithmic ranking factor?

Let's put this one through the paces.

THE CLAIM

E-A-T as a Ranking Factor

I like to start each one of the evaluations with a Google search. Chances are, if you're Joe or Jane SEO looking for ammo to back an idea you're about to pitch the boss or explain something to a client, that's what you're going to do.

And if you search Google today for evidence that E-A-T is a ranking factor, you're going to find a lot of compelling results that would make the case for your boss or client:

- Guide to Google SEO E-A-T: The Top Ranking Factor in 2021
- Google E-A-T: How to Improve your E-A-T Ranking Score
- Marie Haynes: E-A-T confirmed by Google to be an important part of their algorithms

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for E-A-T as a Ranking Factor

I'm only linking the last article above, as the first is flat-out hyperbolic and the second implies E-A-T is a single factor with a measurable score. We know that not to be true.

Marie Haynes, on the other hand, is someone I have a lot of respect for in this industry.

And as she tends to do, Haynes does the work of dissecting and evaluating the information, careful not to jump to conclusions.

Haynes explains:

> **"There is no one single E-A-T score that Google assigns to a website. Rather, there are multiple algorithms at Google that use the idea of E-A-T."**

Rather than comprising a factor of their own, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness inform other ranking factors.

That makes them even more essential for SEO pros.

Haynes's conclusions are based largely on a 2019 whitepaper called "How Google Fights Disinformation," which states:

> **"Our ranking system does not identify the intent or factual accuracy of any given piece of content. However, it is specifically designed to identify sites with high indicia of expertise, authority and trustworthiness."**

She was also involved in a conversation on Twitter in which Googler Danny Sullivan said:

Danny Sullivan ✔
@dannysullivan

Is E-A-T a ranking factor? Not if you mean there's some technical thing like with speed that we can measure directly.

We do use a variety of signals as a proxy to tell if content seems to match E-A-T as humans would assess it.

In that regard, yeah, it's a ranking factor.

11:07 AM · Oct 11, 2019 · Twitter for iPad

E-A-T as a Ranking Factor

Assigning a single score to a piece of content that encompasses all of E-A-T is impossible, even for Google, who say as much in the aforementioned whitepaper:

> **"Google is not in a situation to assess objectively, and at scale, the veracity of a piece of content or the intent of its creators. Further, a considerable percentage of content contains information that cannot be objectively verified as fact. This is because it either lacks necessary context, because it is delivered through an ideological lens others may disagree with, or because it is constructed from contested datapoints."**

Further, they explain:

> **"The systems (Google News and Search algorithms) do not make subjective determinations about the truthfulness of webpages, but rather focus on measurable signals that correlate with how users and other websites value the expertise, trustworthiness, or authoritativeness of a webpage on the topics it covers."**

Google has been clear on how the Search Quality Raters Guidelines are used, noting that it conducted over 200,000 experiments with human raters in 2017 alone.

Those raters assess the utility and quality of each piece of content based on its based expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness.

"The resulting ratings do not affect the ranking of any individual website, but they do help us benchmark the quality of our results, which in turn allows us to build algorithms that globally recognize results that meet high-quality criteria," Google says.

In short, the three characteristics of E-A-T are important signals as to whether a piece of content can be trusted.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

E-A-T as a Ranking Factor

To be clear, our verdict is somewhat a matter of semantics, but not entirely.

There is no "E-A-T ranking factor" in the sense that no measurable E-A-T "score" or "rating" exists that will push your search rankings up or down.

Ultimately, E-A-T is a concept, not a ranking factor.

But the E-A-T framework **represents very real signals** that Google evaluates for the purposes of ranking.

E-A-T is an integral part of the search experience and Google is acutely aware of its importance in modern information retrieval and dissemination.

The search engine is committed to improving the quality of search results by using expertise, authoritativeness, and trust to inform PageRank and other ranking factors.

This is particularly true where disinformation could result in actual harm to a searcher, as is the case in politics and Your Money Your Life (YMYL) content.

Google uses E-A-T to determine the veracity of all content.

That means E-A-T must be incorporated into every single piece of content you produce – and it's an ongoing process.

You can neither manipulate E-A-T (not for long, anyway), nor ignore it.

Google is committed to ridding its index of harmful misinformation, meaning E-A-T will only continue to grow in importance. Ignore it at your peril.

.EDU LINKS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are .edu Links a Google Ranking Factor?

If ever there was one Google ranking factor that should be easy to prove or disprove, it's .edu links.

Right?

Well, not so much.

Misinformation and theories about what may or not be a Google search ranking factor persist far longer than perhaps they should.

Even today, there are an abundance of results for companies selling .edu links and touting their benefits — Much Quality! Such Authority! Build "TrustRank"! (Ahem.)

If you're wondering whether .edu links are a ranking factor, you aren't alone. Plenty of people want you to believe they are.

Let's determine whether .edu links are a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

.edu Links as a Ranking Factor

Let's be clear here before we dive specifically into .edu links:

Links are a ranking factor, no doubt.

And who those links are from matters.

Links are an endorsement of your content; a signal that someone trusts you and thinks you're pretty awesome.

Therefore, links from high authority websites with rigorous publishing controls must be *super* valuable. Right?

And who has more rigorous publishing practices and authority than leading educational institutions and other academia?

This is the premise of the claim – that .edu links are one of the most valuable types of links and therefore are an important ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for .edu Links as a Ranking Factor

You want to believe .edu links help your site rank better, because it makes good sense.

Governments and educational institutions typically put out a lot of essential information and get a ton of links as a result. They tend to have high quality content, too.

They tend to have great PageRank, and you want some. Just a little piece.

The Evidence Against .edu Links as a Ranking Factor

The thing is, if you're just catching on to this one you're about 15 years late to the party.

All the way back in 2010, Matt Cutts told us, "You don't just look at the number of links to a site; you look at how reputable those links are. Links don't really matter whether they come from a .gov or a .edu – and that applies to Twitter or Facebook, as well." He continued, "It's not like a link from an .edu automatically carries more weight."

The SEO industry had already spammed .edus to death by then.

The only way .edu links are a ranking factor today is in the sense that they're links.

If you're getting a link from a .edu site based on the merit of your content, the value of that link is determined by all of the same elements as if it were a link from a .com, .gov, or any other site.

And you're going to benefit from all of the positive PR, branding, and thought leadership that excellent content entails.

For example, if you're alumni and have an opportunity to share thought leadership on your alma mater's site, go for it.

If you teach at a college or university, are giving a presentation at one, run a scholarship fund, or otherwise have an authentic relationship with a .edu site's organization, you should by all means create relevant top quality content that serves your audience to maximize that opportunity.

But if you aren't *earning* .edu links (i.e., if you're buying or comment spamming them instead), any potential value that link might have held for you is wasted.

As Google's John Mueller has explained:

Replying to @vikaskbh

Because of the misconception that .edu links are more valuable, these sites get link-spammed quite a bit, and because of that, we ignore a ton of the links on those sites. Ideally, they should just nofollow all of those links instead of us having to ignore them.

4:55 AM · Sep 3, 2018 · Twitter Web Client

Considering all of the various expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness signals Google has at its disposal for evaluating content quality, it's probably pretty easy for the algorithm to sniff out poor quality content, even on an .edu site.

If you did manage to sneak it in there somehow, chances are the link will be ignored.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

.edu Links as a Ranking Factor

A link is a link. And links are a confirmed Google ranking factor.

However, the specific question here we are investigating is whether .edu links are more powerful, or somehow treated differently for the purposes of ranking, than other types of links.

The answer to that question: definitely not.

Sure, .edu links may be considered (or even completely ignored) for the purposes of ranking. **But it's because they're links.** It has nothing to do with the top-level domain (TLD).

In fact, the only TLD Google is going to consider any differently are those that are country-coded, and that has to do with localization.

So if you try to game this one, you'll void any value that content may have generated for you on a site where it actually belongs, as Google will just tune you out.

Bottom line: This one is confirmed. Google does not use a link's .edu extension as a search ranking signal.

FIRST LINK PRIORITY

By **Miranda Miller**

First Link Priority: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

If you have two internal links on a single page both linking to another page on your website, does Google value one more than the other?

And can you use the anchor text in your internal links to signal to Google which keywords you'd like to rank for?

What about an external page linking to your page twice – does the second link pass as much PageRank as the first?

These are all questions triggered in conversations about first link priority.

There's a bit to unpack here, so let's get right to it.

THE CLAIM

First Link Priority as a Ranking Factor

There are two separate issues here that have been associated with the term first link priority at various points over the years:

1. Internal First Link Priority

If Page 1 on your site links to Page 2 on your site twice, Google only considers the anchor text of the first link in ranking Page 2. Therefore, if you want a specific page on your site to rank for [red hot bananas], you'll make sure [red hot bananas] is used as anchor text in the first-appearing link from Page 1 to Page 2.

2. External First Link Priority

When YourWebpage.com links to MyWebpage.com multiple times, Google counts the first link and ignores every other link after that.

(This is the theory that appears in a Featured Snippet on the term today, so to anyone new to the industry, this will be their most likely understanding of the topic.)

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for First Link Priority as a Ranking Factor

Some of the articles and blog posts that advocate for first link priority as an internal strategy point to a post by Rand Fishkin, who said he tested this out, as proof:

> "...let's say that on your website's homepage, you have two links to your blog. The first link is in the top level navigation, and the anchor text is [blog]. The second link is in the body of the homepage and reads [celebrity news blog]. That second link's anchor text is NOT going to help the blog page rank for [celebrity news] because Google doesn't appear to count the anchor text from multiple links to a target from a single URL."

The thing is, that was 2008.

And even then, he said,

> "On stuff like this, it's never a good idea to just take my word for it (or anyone else's) - run the tests yourself and see the results you get. Since the engines are evolving all the time, the results might be different in six months or six days."

Or, you know, more than a decade later.

From an external backlink perspective, SEO pros wondered and debated whether there was any point getting more than one link from a single domain.

The general consensus circa 2010-2012, as far as memory serves me, was that getting multiple links from a single domain still had value so long as they were different pages linking. Some did say there were diminishing returns on each additional link, though.

There is some evidence that both of the above strategies worked back then, and I don't doubt the SEO pros who say it worked for them.

But what about now?

The Evidence Against First Link Priority as a Ranking Factor

John Mueller spoke about this in a 2018 Google Webmaster Central office hours, in response to a user-submitted question. He said:

> **"This isn't something we have defined, where we say 'It's always like this — it's always the first link, always the last link, always an average of the links, or something like that.**
>
> **Rather, that's something that our algorithms might choose to do one way or the other.**
>
> **So my recommendation there would be not to worry too much about this. If you have different links going to the same page, that's completely normal. That's something that we have to deal with; we have to understand the anchor text to better understand the context of that link and that's completely normal."**

SEO pros have, in the past, gone to great lengths to try to reverse engineer how Google perceives and treats multiple internal links to the same resource on a single page. Check out this experiment from 2011.

Here's what Mueller had to say about these sorts of attempts to crack the "first link priority" code:

"I know people do SEO experiments and try to figure this out, to try and work out, 'Oh, Google currently does it like this.'

But from our point of view, that can change and it's not something we have defined. So even if you manage to figure out how we currently do it today, then that's not necessarily how we'll do it tomorrow, or how it always is across all websites."

Some SEO pros choose not to believe Google when they speak out about these things.

But here's the thing.

What he said about context makes a lot more sense than having a hard and fast rule about it, based on what we know about how Google operates today.

Google has developed RankBrain, the Knowledge Graph, and other tools/technologies to help the algorithm better "understand" so much more about the content it's evaluating.

Also, having a hard and fast rule limiting PageRank passed on from one domain to another doesn't make much sense anymore, either. It was probably a necessary spam fighting tactic at one point.

But Google can algorithmically discern so much more about the relationship between entities and pages now. There are a lot of other ways to tell whether a link makes sense as an actual endorsement of a piece of content.

OUR VERDICT

First Link Priority as a Ranking Factor

You can't tell Google which search terms you'd like to rank for by virtue of which anchor text you use first in your internal links.

Google doesn't have some kind of governor that limits how much trust or authority can pass between entities (in various signals including but not limited to PageRank). This could potentially keep useful resources from being discovered, which is counter to everything Google is trying to do.

Your priority in internal linking should always be to facilitate a seamless, intuitive user experience first. Internal links are for helping people move around and navigate your site.

Any utility they may have had as secret keyword signals to Google died off a long time ago.

As for your backlink strategy, it's far smarter to focus on creating content people want to link to than to fret about potentially wasting PageRank by virtue of who's linking to you too often. This approach will work more consistently over time.

Bottom line: Google does not use first link priority as a search ranking signal.

FRESH CONTENT

By **Anna Crowe**

Fresh Content as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Fresh content helps you rank better in Google's organic search results.

That's the claim – you've probably heard it quite a few times in SEO.

But is it true, false, or "it depends"?

Read on as we dive into the idea of content freshness as a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Fresh Content as a Ranking Factor

New or fresh content on your website helps you rank better because ... science?

First, let's think about freshness.

One dictionary definition defines it as "the state of being recently made or obtained or not having decayed."

Well, then you have to think about how we're defining "recently" here, as this will vary depending on the topic. Or the industry. Or the niche. Or some other factor.

Think about it, how fresh is this article?

Are you reading it the day it was published? A week later? A year later?

Is it still "fresh"?

Other questions we could ponder and debate about freshness:

- Can only brand new content be considered fresh?
- Does freshness only impact trending topics (news/events)?
- Will updating existing (a.k.a, old) content make it "fresh?"
- Does user search behavior determine whether a query is "fresh" or "stale?"

Okay, okay, that's a lot. Where are we going with all this?

The point is that there are a lot of misconceptions about what fresh content is and whether it impacts your rankings.

Let's look at the evidence.

THE EVIDENCE

Fresh Content as a Ranking Factor

Let's start with the first and biggest question: Iis fresh content a ranking factor?

On November 3, 2011, Google announced an improvement to its ranking algorithm. It said, that the algorithm "better determines when to give you more up-to-date, relevant results for these varying degrees of freshness."

However, the definition of what is classified as "freshness" varies, when this topic is discussed in SEO.

Google uses Query Deserves Freshness (QDF) to decide when to serve users new information and when not to.

Google broke down fresh content into three categories in 2011:

- Recent events or hot topics.
- Regularly recurring events.
- Frequent updates.

In addition, Section 18 of Google's Search Quality Rating Guidelines (Oct. 14, 2020 edition) breaks down the types of queries that demand "fresh" information.

Those are:

- "Breaking news" queries.
- Recurring event queries (e.g., elections, sports events, TV shows, conferences, etc.)
- Current information queries.
- Product queries.

Some search queries need to be connected to fresh content, while others can be served with older content.

For instance, Google's patent related to freshness states:

> **"For some queries, older documents may be more favorable than newer ones. As a result, it may be beneficial to adjust the score of a document based on the difference (in age) from the average age of the result set."**

Can Updating Your Content Improve Rankings?

Yes!

Our team at Search Engine Journal, led by Executive Editor Danny Goodwin, kick-started this project to update old content in 2017 and saw 2x the pageviews over a year.

How Much of Your Old Content Do You Need to Update to Influence Rankings?

The amount of content you change on an old webpage does play a role in rankings.

For example, simply updating an article title from 2021 to 2022, without making any other change to the content, won't impact your rankings.

Google may completely ignore those changes.

Google states:

> **"Also, a document having a relatively large amount of its content updated over time might be scored differently than a document having a relatively small amount of its content updated over time."**

Botify conducted a study to compare content changes to crawl frequency. They found that larger content changes improved crawl frequency and the average keyword rankings of a piece of content.

Essentially, content with the most changes to the page had higher crawl frequency and more keyword rankings.

OUR VERDICT

Fresh Content as a Ranking Factor

Yes, freshness of content is a ranking factor.

While fresh content can help boost your rankings, it goes much deeper than updating old content or writing about news or events in a timely fashion.

Remember, there are multiple reasons your content may be considered fresh.

But even if freshness wasn't a Google ranking factor, it's always a best practice to keep your content up to date, relevant, and valuable for your audience/customers/clients.

Remember, too, that freshness alone won't make your content rank. It's just one element of your content that Google looks at.

Always focus on quality – because high-quality fresh content (in theory, anyway!) should always beat low-quality fresh content. This is true as long as Google is doing its job: providing the best, most up-to-date results possible.

GOOGLE ADS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are Google Ads an Organic Search Ranking Factor?

Does Google favor advertisers by giving those who use paid ads a ranking advantage in organic search results?

It's a topic that's been hotly debated over the years.

Let's take a look at why people have believed this to be true – and whether Google Ads can really help you rank higher in organic search.

THE CLAIM

Google Ads as a Ranking Factor

This one stems from an ongoing [distrust of Google the Mega Corporation](). It suggests that if you spend money in one division (in this case, Google Ads), you'll enjoy benefits in another (Search).

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Google Ads as a Ranking Factor

Every so often, an SEO professional pops up to share anecdotal evidence around rankings dropping in correlation with a Google Ads campaign (see an example in the next section).

But that's just what it is – there's no evidence of causation there, and the plural of anecdote is not data.

Early in 2021, a member of the search marketing community fired off a series of tweets accusing Google of not only using Ads campaign spend to influence organic search rankings but of attempting to extort business owners with the practice.

In one, she wrote:

> **"I'm not sure yet how to process the fact that Google just did a shakedown of one of our clients. In essence, they were told to spend more on paid ads in order to improve organic search *for their brand name.*"**

As expected, chaos ensued. Those who'd harbored a belief in the Google Ads/organic rankings cheered in vindication. SEO pros shook their proverbial fists at the Twitter sky. Google tricked us again!

Others argued that it wasn't possible; that the intent of the sales rep's message had been lost in translation.

Upon questioning, she insisted it was not a miscommunication and that the Google Ads sales rep had even sent written confirmation that increasing ad spend would improve branded organic rankings.

Was Google caught out with a smoking gun, accepting money in exchange for rankings?

The Evidence Against Google Ads as a Ranking Factor

Google's Danny Sullivan caught wind of the conversation above and was clear in denying any connection between the two:

This isn't surprising, as Google has long held that there's no connection between advertising and organic search.

Matt Cutts dispelled this myth in a 2014 video, characterizing the ongoing insistence that Google Ads (AdWords, at the time) were in any way related to organic search performance as the stuff of conspiracy theories:

> "...there are a lot of SEO myths. So one of the biggest that we always hear is, 'If you buy ads, you'll rank higher on Google.' And then there's an opposing conspiracy theory which is, 'If you don't buy ads, you'll rank better on Google.' And we sort of feel like we should get those two conspiracy camps together and let them fight it all out. And then whoever emerges from that one room, we can just debunk that one conspiracy theory.

Another conspiracy theory, he said, was that Google makes algorithm changes to try to make people buy ads.

> "We want to return really good search results to users so they're happy, so they'll keep coming back. That's basically it."

More recently, John Mueller addressed the topic in a Google Office Hours hangout.

A viewer said they noticed a rankings drop on a specific keyword when they started running Google Ads, and their rankings returned when they stopped advertising.

Mueller explained:

> "...these systems are completely separate on our side. The ranking within the ads, the ranking within search are completely separate systems and there's essentially no real connection there.
>
> ...So the ranking change that you saw there seems like something that would be totally unrelated to the ads."

OUR VERDICT

Google Ads as a Ranking Factor

Google is a massive organization more than capable of keeping these two divisions separate.

What's more, allowing ad spend to influence organic rankings would surely result in less useful results and a poorer user experience. You may not believe everything Google says.

But in this case, I believe we would have seen a good deal more concrete evidence over the last 20+ years if you could simply buy your way to the top of organic search rankings through ads.

This one is clear: Google does not use Google Ads as a search ranking signal.

What else is true about Google: the layout of Google's search engine result pages (SERPs) clearly emphasize ads (traditional text, Shopping, Hotels, etc.).

So while buying an ad isn't an organic search ranking factor, Google's ads absolutely can impact the visibility and placement of your site on the SERPs.

GOOGLE ANALYTICS

By **Anna Crowe**

Is Google Analytics a Google Ranking Factor?

Raise your hand if a client or your boss has ever asked you to put Google Analytics on their website to help improve rankings?

🙌

[Google Analytics isn't just for website data](#), oh no – this is to boost our keyword rankings, they say.

But is there any legit research to support these claims?

As it turns out, a lot of SEO experts have covered this topic.

So is Google Analytics use as a ranking factor fact or fiction?

Keep reading to find out.

THE CLAIM

Google Analytics as a Ranking Factor

You may hear the claims that removing Google Analytics from your website will hurt your search engine rankings, possibly even causing Google to penalize you.

Or, you may have heard that Google uses your Google Analytics data to rank your website.

There are a lot of assumptions, but I'm here to drop some knowledge.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Google Analytics as a Ranking Factor

Is Google Analytics a Ranking Factor?

Before we get going, let's address the obvious:

No, Google Analytics is not a ranking factor.

Google Analytics is a tool that allows you to measure ROI and better understand your customers. Google has been making this clear since way back in 2005 when it acquired Urchin Web Analytics, now known as Google Analytics.

Matt Cutts, former Head of Google's Webspam team, answered the question in a 2010 video:

Cutts states:

> **"Google Analytics is not used in search quality in any way for our rankings"**

Then, Google's Gary Illyes addressed it again in 2017:

Gary 鯨理 / 경리 Illyes ✔ @methode · Jun 26, 2017   •••
We don't use *anything* from Google analytics in the "algo".

💬 1   🔁 33   ♡ 19   ⬆

Not convinced? Let's hear it again from Google's John Mueller, this
time via Twitter in 2018.

John 🖐 ✔ @JohnMu · Jun 28, 2018   •••
Just to be clear: there's no penalty for using or not using GA with regards
to search.

💬 3   🔁 2   ♡ 7   ⬆

He continued to clear up any confusion that Google Analytics is not
required for search.

John 🖐 ✔ @JohnMu · Jun 28, 2018   •••
GA can give you lots of insights about your site & how users enjoy it, but
it's not required for search.

💬 1   🔁   ♡ 2   ⬆

He continued to clear up any confusion that Google Analytics is not
required for search.

Can I Get Penalized for Using Google Analytics on Google?

I know it can be difficult to understand what can and can't be penalized on Google — especially when you read articles like this from Google Analytics competitors.

Bill Hartzer, SEO Consultant and my long-time SEO idol, stepped in to ask Mueller for his take on this piece.

Bill Hartzer @bhartzer · May 3

This article claims that Google Penalizes sites for using @googleanalytics. What do you think @johnmu?
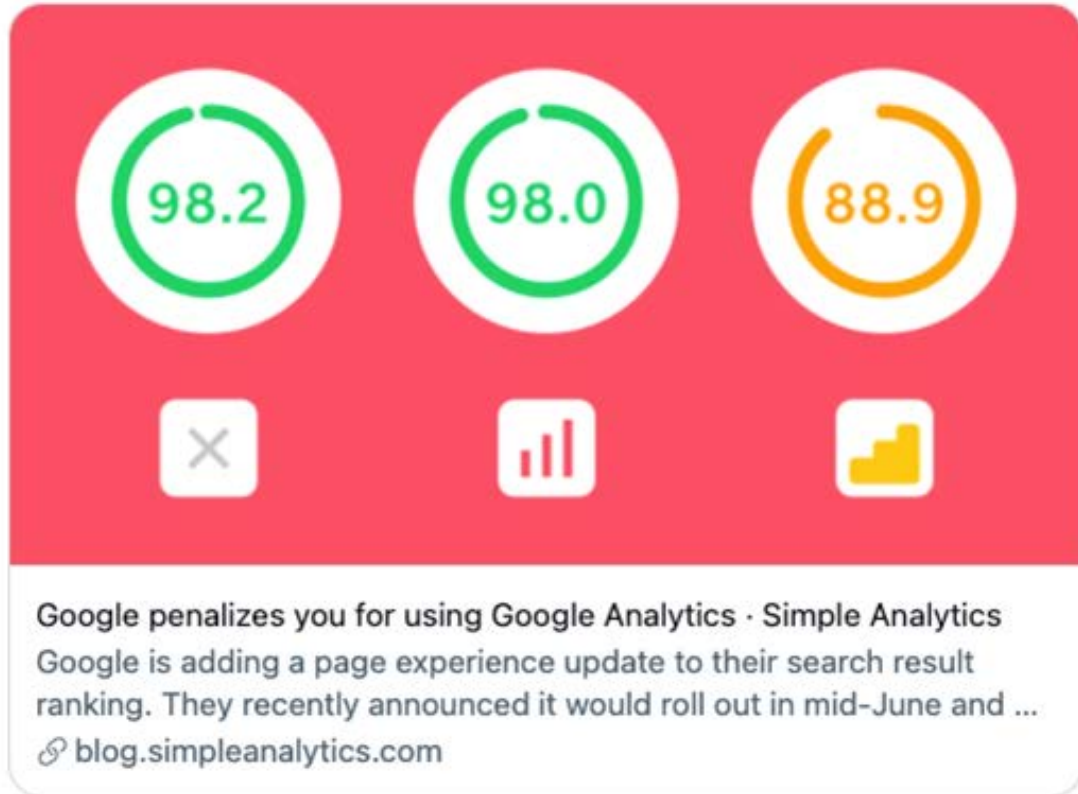
98.2   98.0   88.9

Google penalizes you for using Google Analytics · Simple Analytics
Google is adding a page experience update to their search result ranking. They recently announced it would roll out in mid-June and ...
🔗 blog.simpleanalytics.com

💬 13   🔁 7   ♡ 25   ⬆

[John Mueller's response](#):
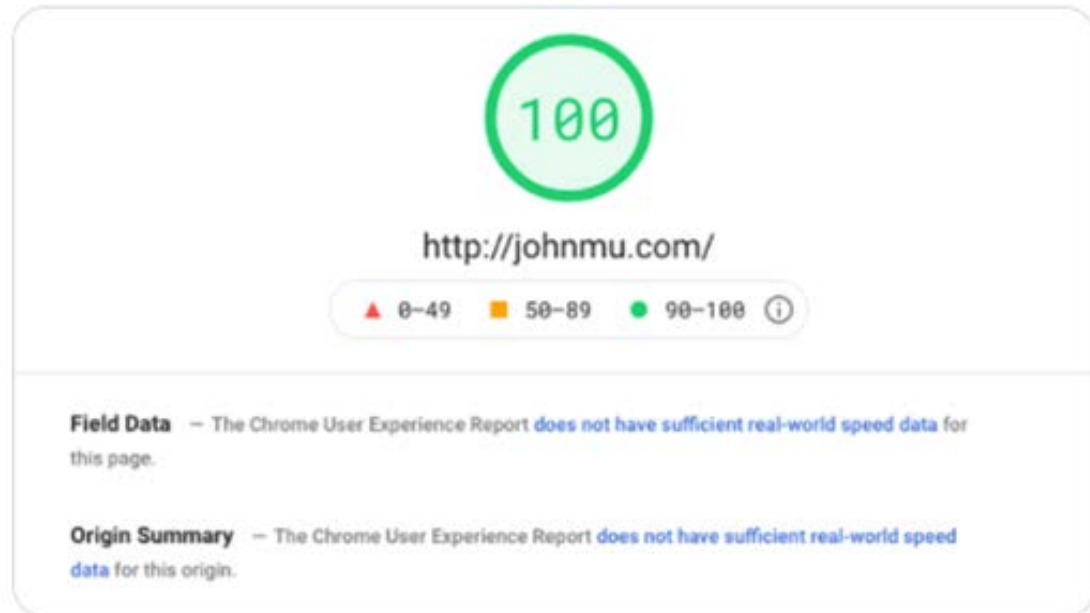
This was also confirmed back in [2010, again by Matt Cutts](#). He said:

> **"The answer is no. Webspam does not use Google Analytics, and a while ago I went and checked and search quality in general does not use Google Analytics in ranking. So, you can use Google Analytics, you can not use Google Analytics, it won't affect your ranking within Google search results."**

Does Google Use Google Analytics to Improve Indexing?

Another ranking factor myth busted: Google does not use Google Analytics for indexing.

I heard it from Google's John Mueller himself:

OUR VERDICT

Google Analytics as a Ranking Signal

There you have it! Google Analytics is not a ranking factor.

If your SEO agency tells you that your site needs it to rank, you should find another SEO agency.

The conspiracy theories you're hearing about Google wanting your SEO team to use Google Analytics to get more details about your strategies areis completely false.

There is more to Google's algorithm than pimping its own products out to the algorithm, at least for now.

GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

By **Anna Crowe**

Is Google Seach Console a Google Ranking Factor?

For years, SEO professionals have lived inside Google Search Console (previously known as Google Webmaster Tools) almost as if we're building our own Sims world for SEO.

If you've mastered the art of optimizing your website with the help of Google Search Console, you most likely have your site on lock.

But does Google Search Console play a role in Google's ranking factors? Can you benefit directly from connecting your site to Google Search Console?

Let's get those questions answered below.

THE CLAIM

Google Search Console as a Ranking Factor

At one point or another, I'm sure you've heard the myth that using Google Search Console can improve your rankings. It's the same with other Google products (e.g., Google Analytics, Google Ads, Google AdSense).

But is that all a rumor?

Let's put this myth to rest officially.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence of Google Search Console as a Ranking Factor

Is Google Search Console a Ranking Factor?

I hate to break it to you, but Google Search Console is not a ranking factor.

You can determine this based on past information Google has confirmed related to Google Analytics and Google Ads not being a ranking factor.

This is such an obvious **no** that no one even talks about it.

The closest I've seen Google address this is Google's John Mueller responding to a Reddit thread from 2018, which asked

> **"How important if at all is it to run different websites on different search console and analytic accounts?"**

John's reply:

> **"There's no ranking advantage from using separate accounts."**

"There's no ranking advantage from using separate accounts."

johnmu · 3y

There's no ranking advantage from using separate accounts.

⬆ 2 ⬇ Share Report Save

Google Search Console should be used as a data source to help savvy SEO pros make data-driven decisions about their SEO strategy.

Do I Have to Use Google Search Console to Be Seen in the SERPs?

No, you do not need to use Google Search Console to be shown in the search results.

[Google stakes its claim](#) in the sand in its support documentation:

> **You don't have to sign up for Search Console to be included in Google Search results, but Search Console helps you understand and improve how Google sees your site.**

About Search Console

Google Search Console is a free service offered by Google that helps you monitor, maintain, and troubleshoot your site's presence in Google Search results. You don't have to sign up for Search Console to be included in Google Search results, but Search Console helps you understand and improve how Google sees your site.

Can I Use Google Search Console to Rank Higher?

Yes and no.

Just implementing Google Search Console on your website won't automatically spring you to position #1. But you can use the data from Google Search Console to improve your SEO.

For instance, you can use Google Search Console to:

- [Find and fix security issues](#).
- [Ask Google to index your website](#).
- Gather [insights for your content](#).

I like to think of Google Search Console as a gift from Google to help uncover potential issues with my website.

OUR VERDICT

Google Search Console as a Ranking Signal

Google Search Console isn't usually associated with ranking factors. But now we can officially put this ranking factor myth to rest.

It turns out that Google Search Console is not the culprit of your ranking drops.

But even better?

It's an awesome tool that can help you understand how Google ranks your site. It paints a vivid picture of how Google views your site.

GOOGLE SEARCH QUALITY RATING GUIDELINES

By **Miranda Miller**

The Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines are a document used by third-party Quality Raters to inform what changes to Google's algorithm may improve user experience in search.

Sounds pretty important. So does a high rating by human Quality Raters help your organic search rankings?

If you've heard some buzz about Google's Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines but aren't quite sure what they're for, you might think so.

Let's take a look at why people may think these guidelines are a ranking factor, the evidence for and against it, and whether there's evidence this document is part of Google's algorithm.

THE CLAIM

Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines as a Ranking Factor

In 2011, [Jennifer Ledbetter (AKA PotPieGirl) discovered](#) the then-secret URL rater guidebook in a Google search.

I wrote about it shortly after, and at the time Google's training manual for human URL quality raters was 125-pages in length. URL rating seemed to be a step below Search Quality rating, as evidenced by this line from the introduction: "When you can do URL rating, you will be well on your way to becoming a successful Search Quality Rater!"

There was some speculation initially that since they were cruising the web evaluating pages and making recommendations, those Quality Raters might be able to impose manual penalties if they came across pages that violate Google's guidelines.

However, these are not members of the webspam team. They're not Google employees at all; the Quality Raters are now and have always been third-party contractors.

As far as I can tell, there are still at least five companies that supply Search Quality Raters to Google and other search engines, including Microsoft's [Universal Human Relevance System](#):

- [Appen](#)
- [Lionbridge](#)
- [Raterlabs](#)
- [Teemwork](#)
- [Clickworker](#)

And looking back on [this article from nearly 10 years ago](#), we see that as much as the algorithm has changed (as evidenced by [all of the updates we know about](#) — and many more than we don't), Google's goals have largely stayed the same.

What mattered then still makes for a great search experience today:

- How the query is interpreted.
- Understanding intent.
- The context of language and location.
- Timeliness.
- Specificity.
- Page utility; the usefulness of the content.

The things that would land you in hot water with Google back then will still cause you headaches today – keyword stuffing, sneaky redirects, and mass-produced/spun or duplicate content among them.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines as a Ranking Factor

Search Quality Raters are used to evaluate proposed changes to the algorithm so Google can gauge the impact of each one in small tests and adjust (or scrap the update) accordingly.

Their feedback is not (and has never been) a direct ranking factor.

However...

Do I believe that what the Raters are looking for is what Google wants to see on a webpage?

Absolutely.

Do I think you're crazy if you choose to ignore Google's expressed desires to see specific things on a webpage?

Also yes.

Ben Gomes, SVP of Education at Google, has been with the company since a few months after it launched. He was VP of Search Engineering in 2018 when he told CNBC:

"You can view the rater guidelines as where we want the search algorithm to go. They don't tell you how the algorithm is ranking results, but they fundamentally show what the algorithm should do."

It's a lot easier to create quality content and optimize it for search when you understand what Google itself considers quality.

The Evidence Against Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines as a Ranking Factor

[Google tells us](#) exactly how human Quality Raters help improve Search results:

- They provide feedback on search experiments to inform which potential changes are most useful.
- They help Google categorize information to improve its systems.
- And they use the raters guidelines to do so.

Remember, Google is one giant, complex information retrieval system. Quality Raters provide feedback that may influence how the algorithms operate. But they have no direct impact on the output of those algorithms (search results).

OUR VERDICT

Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines as a Ranking Factor

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

The Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines give us insight into what Google considers a good user experience and quality content, and that can be advantageous.

Implementing some of the teachings from these guidelines as best practice might help your SEO strategy, by virtue of the improved searcher experience you will provide.

But a ranking factor they are not.

Bottom line: Google does not use its Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines as a search ranking signal.

.GOV LINKS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are .gov Links a Google Ranking Factor?

Nearly as long as we've had search engines, links have been considered the currency of the web.

Who links to your website can say a great deal about your associations, relevance to specific topics and regions, trustworthiness, and more.

And when high authority, trustworthy sites link to your webpage, you benefit a bit from that implied endorsement by the transference of PageRank to your page.

What's more authoritative than the government?

There's still a persistent belief that .gov links are more valuable and desirable than other types of links, and plenty of people out there willing to take your money to build them.

So are .gov links actually a ranking factor? Let's see.

THE CLAIM

The Claim: .gov Links as a Ranking Factor

Government websites publish all kinds of important information that other sites link to – statistics and reports, important health and financial information, impactful announcements, and more.

You can bet there are rigorous checks and balances in place to ensure the veracity of that information before it's published to a government site, too.

A lot of funding goes into government communications and publishing to support the creation of top quality content that's accessible to all.

And once it's out there, government-supplied content is widely shared by mainstream media, social media users, all kinds of organizations, etc.

For those reasons, people – and search engines – tend to see government sites as fairly trustworthy.

So when a government agency links to you and says they trust you, too, that's got to be huge. It must be way more important than some link from a local nonprofit or some blogger.

Right?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for .gov Links as a Ranking Factor

Why do people believe .gov links are so valuable?

Well, just today I found these gems from services selling them:

- "You can achieve a higher trust rank by having trusted and highly regarded websites such as government and academic learning websites linking back to your own site."

- "Because of the very high authority of the .edu / .gov sites these backlinks will increase the authority of your site and your Google Ranks."

- "These links pass serious ranking juice. Links from high authority sites like these boost your domain authority."

- "Every single link will be DOFOLLOW, the rank juice passes."

Mmm, pass me some of that rank juice.

If you're looking for confirmation that .gov links will help your Google rankings, there's no shortage of it out there. But consider the sources.

The Evidence Against .gov Links as a Ranking Factor

This one was dispelled a long time ago and has been disproven over and over since then. But let's go back to 2008 and see what Matt Cutts had to say about .gov links:

> **"Typically, our policy is: a link is a link, is a link; wherever that link's worth is, that is the worth that we give it. Some people ask about links from DMOZ, links from .edu or links from .gov, and they say: "Isn't there some sort of boost? Isn't a link better if it comes from a .edu?" The short answer is: no, it is not. It is just .edu links tend to have higher PageRank, because more people link to .edu's or .gov's."**

The number one question you should be asking yourself (and your SEO team, whether in-house or outsourced) about any one link in particular isn't what the domain authority is, or any of that.

What matters most is, "Does it make sense that this entity would link to this particular piece of content?"

Does it make sense that the U.S. Department of Agriculture would link to our plumbing company's blog post exploring the merits of different types of faucets? Probably not.

Whether the link was achieved via comment spam, a link injection hack, or a jaded low-level government employee taking a few bucks for it on the side, Google is more likely to sniff it out than not.

And if you see your team chasing those kinds of nonsensical links, keep this in mind:

You'd be further ahead getting a link from your local hardware store. At least Google isn't going to discount that one the minute it's detected.

OUR VERDICT

.gov Links as a Ranking Factor

A link is a link. And links are a confirmed Google ranking factor.

However, the specific question here we are investigating is whether .gov links, in particular, are more powerful, or somehow different, than other types of links.

The answer to that question: definitely not.

The value in a .gov link is simply that it's a link, and if you're trying to game the system based on the TLD that link may end up having no value to you at all.

Google has so many other more impactful, meaningful signals to consider around links. This one is too easy to manipulate to have any value to the algorithm.

Focus instead on producing content that authoritative, trustworthy, relevant sites want to endorse and reshare with their audience.

H1 TAGS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are H1 Tags a Google Ranking Factor?

Can you boost your search rankings in Google by using the right keywords in your H1 tags?

And just how many H1 tags should you use on each webpage, anyway?

There's been much debate and misunderstanding over the years about how Google perceives H1 content.

So are H1 tags actually a Google ranking factor? Let's see.

THE CLAIM

The Claim: H1 Tags as a Ranking Factor

Plenty of "best practices" and recommendations about H1 tags have circulated over the years. Among them:

- You should use lots of keyword-loaded H1 tags to rank higher for specific keywords.

- You should only have one H1 tag per webpage or Google will punish you. (With an algorithmic downgrading? A manual penalty? Fifty lashes with a wet noodle in the town square?).

- You should use your primary keyword at the start of your H1 tag and your secondary keywords in the H2 tags and so on to tell Google what terms you want to rank on.

- You should only use one H1 tag and it should be the first text element on the page.

If you're confused about the conflicting information out there on this topic, I don't blame you.

After all, this is the featured snippet for [how to use H1 tags] at the time of writing, in June 2021:
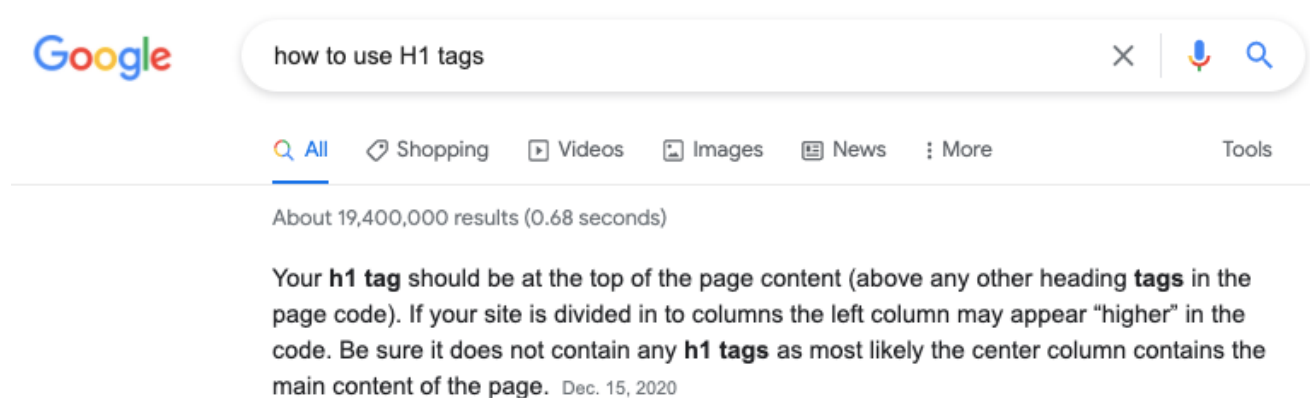
As you'll learn below, this contradicts everything Google has told us about H1 tags for many, many years.

Let's take a look at what's been happening on both sides of this debate.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for H1 Tags as a Ranking Factor

For this timeline, we'll lean heavily on Roger Montti's research into how Google's perception and weighting of H1 tags has evolved over the years. Among his key findings:

1998

Page title was a heavily weighted ranking factor, as evidenced by this passage from Sergey Brin and Larry Page's research paper, The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine:

> **"For most popular subjects, a simple text matching search that is restricted to webpage titles performs admirably when PageRank prioritizes the results."**

2003-2004

Font size, initially a measure of how important a word was, gave way to HTML structure as a ranking algorithm.

We got an early look at how Google used HTML markup to inform the algorithm's understanding of semantic structure in the patent, Google patent Document ranking based on semantic distance between terms in a document.

Bill Slawski analyzed this patent in 2010 and explained:

> **"One part of the process behind this approach involves a search engine analyzing the HTML structures on a page, looking for elements such as titles and headings on a page... In other words, the search engine is attempting to locate and understand visual structures on a page that might be semantically meaningful, such as a list of items associated with a heading."**

Read Montti's H1 Headings For SEO – Why They Matter to learn more about each of the above milestones.

2005-2011

H1 tags were widely considered a Google ranking factor – and optimizing them a key SEO tactic – through the glory days of article marketing. I know this because back in the day, I used to get a little chunk of revenue share and even some ghostwriting contracts for articles on Suite101, WikiHow, HubPages, and other sites like them.

Optimized H1 and H2 tags, keyword density, and formulaic content ruled the day. Because these articles were used to build links and drive traffic for revenue sharing, volume mattered to content creators a great deal more than the quality or utility of the content being produced.

And I can confirm that using these tactics had me ranking #1 for topics and keywords I really had no business ranking for (mesothelioma, anyone?).

Legitimate publishers took exception to this, and so along came Google Panda in 2011. Those tactics no longer worked and could, in fact, tank your entire site's rankings.

Just ask Demand Media.

For those sites obliterated by the Panda algorithm, Google revealed 23 questions that help the search engine determine the authority of a piece of content. User experience was prioritized in a great, big way – and my revenue share payments from content farms eventually petered out.

Let's fast-forward to...

2019

More recently, John Mueller explained in a 2019 Google Webmaster Hangout that Google uses HTML tags to better understand what the webpage and its content are all about. How many H1 tags you use doesn't matter, he said, stating that:

> **"Your site is going to rank perfectly fine with no H1 tags or with five H1 tags.**
>
> **...H1 elements are a great way to give more structure to a page so that users and search engines can understand which parts of a page are kind of under different headings.**

> **...especially with HTML5, having multiple H1 elements on a page is completely normal and kind of expected."**

Sidenote: If you want to dig into *how many* H1 tags to use on a webpage, check out this dismantling of the [myth that Google prefers just one H1 per page here](#).

2020

Mueller addressed a question about H1 tags in a Google Webmaster Central [video](#) in August, 2020. He clearly referred to headings as a ranking factor and said:

> **"Headings on a page help us to better understand the content on the page. Headings on the page are not the only ranking factor that we have — we look at the content on its own, as well.**
>
> **But sometimes having a clear heading on the page gives us a little bit more information on what that section is about."**

He explained that headings can be particularly useful in helping Google understand the content and context of an image.

2021

In August, there was a lot of discussion about Google rewriting title tags for a limited number of pages in search results. Often, the text from the H1 tag was being used as the new title on the search engine results page (SERP).

The Evidence Against H1 Tags as a Ranking Factor

Even by 2009, Google was well aware of spammy tactics around H1 tags. For example, Matt Cutts, then the head of Google's Webspam Team, warned in [this video](#) for Google Search Central:

> **"Don't do all H1 and then use CSS to make it look like regular text, because we see people who are competitors complain about that. If users ever turn off the CSS or the CSS doesn't load, it looks really bad."**

At the time, he said it was OK to use "a little H1 here and little H1 there," but that it should be used in the way it was intended: for headings.

He added:

> **"...if you try to throw H1 everywhere on a page, people have tried to abuse that and so our algorithms try to take that into account. So it doesn't really do you that much good."**

Like so many good things, SEO pros beat that horse lame by using it to game the system.

OUR VERDICT

H1 Tags as a Ranking Factor

In the earliest days of SEO, on-page text elements were heavily weighted factors in the Google search algorithm.

The specific words used, where they appeared on the page, and what size font they appeared in told Google how important those words were. That was how Google determined the relevancy of a webpage for any given query.

That was what Google used in the late '90s and early '00s because it didn't have much else to go on.

And like so many former ranking factors, H1 factors were quickly seized upon as an easy way to manipulate rankings. Over-optimizing H1s put them on the Spam Team's radar, resulting in their being devalued.

Today, H1 tags and other structural HTML elements still help Google understand how the content on any given webpage appears to users. They still help Google determine the relevance and semantic structure of a webpage.

They inform the algorithm's understanding of what the page is about, who it's for, and why it is/is not the best answer for any given query.

Mueller has confirmed that headings are a Google ranking factor.

With that said, it doesn't count for much on its own. Trying to use H1 to game your way to the top of the SERPs by using a whole bunch of them, stuffing them with keywords, or trying to hide an entire page of H1 using CSS just doesn't work.

Not anymore.

When it comes to on-page optimization, your primary goal should always be user experience.

That's what is most important to Google, and that goes for your H1 tags as well as your content quality, image optimization, and more.

H2-H6

By **Miranda Miller**

Are HTML Heading Tags (H2-H6) a Google Ranking Factor?

In a previous chapter, we explored the evidence around H1 tags as a Google ranking factor.

Now, let's take a look at the rest of the heading tags — H2 to H6.

Will using these tags help your content rank higher in Google?

And can using specific keywords in H2 to H6 tagged headings help you rank for those terms?

Let's check it out.

THE CLAIM

The Claim: H2-H6 Tags as a Ranking Factor

The belief here is that the keywords you use in H2-H6 subheadings are more heavily weighted in Google's algorithm than words in plain text and that tags are therefore a ranking factor of their own.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for HTML Heading Tags as a Ranking Factor

Once upon a time – circa 2005-2010 or so – subheadings sure seemed to count as ranking factors. Using your target keywords in higher-level subheadings (typically your primary keyword in your H1 and secondary keywords in H2s and H3s) helped you rank for those keywords.

That was back when text as a whole, and what you did with it, was more heavily weighted.

Using a certain keyword density and placing keywords in specific places was considered best practice for optimizing content for sites like Suite101, About.com, and WikiHow. These sites were a nightmare for Google because much of what it used to evaluate webpage quality worked to their advantage.

With a solid technical foundation and the perceived authority that publishing massive amounts of content (and getting links to that content) provided, on-page SEO tactics like optimizing your subheadings was a just-add-water recipe for high rankings.

Fast forward to August 2020, and Google's John Mueller flat out told us that headings are indeed a ranking factor:

> **"So headings on a page help us to better understand the content on the page.**
>
> **Headings on the page are not the only ranking factor that we have. We look at the content on its own as well.**
>
> **But sometimes having a clear heading on a page gives us a little bit more information on what that section is about."**

He went on to say:

> **"And when it comes to text on a page, a heading is a really strong signal telling us this part of the page is about this topic.**
>
> **...whether you put that into an H1 tag or an H2 tag or H5 or whatever, that doesn't matter so much."**

The Evidence Against H2-H6 Tags as a Ranking Factor

If all you took away from the above interview excerpts was that Mueller said heading tags are a strong signal, you probably think they're a lot more valuable than they're likely to be.

We know that pages can rank with no heading tags at all.

We know that adding a certain keyword to a heading tag won't shoot you to the top of the Google rankings.

What Mueller said was that heading tags:

- Help Google better understand the content.

- Give Google a little bit more information.

- Are a strong signal of what a specific part of the page is about.

Google has made great strides in developing a more nuanced understanding of each webpage by [adding more (and more complex) factors](#) to the algorithm. It's constantly testing and updating the algorithm to better "understand" relevance, relationships between entities, and searchers' perception of a positive, high-quality experience.

And as new, more accurate ways of understanding these complex issues were incorporated into the algorithm, those older signals were inevitably diluted.

Why? Because like so many former ranking signals – text formatting, keyword density, and .gov links among them – subheadings are just too easy to game.
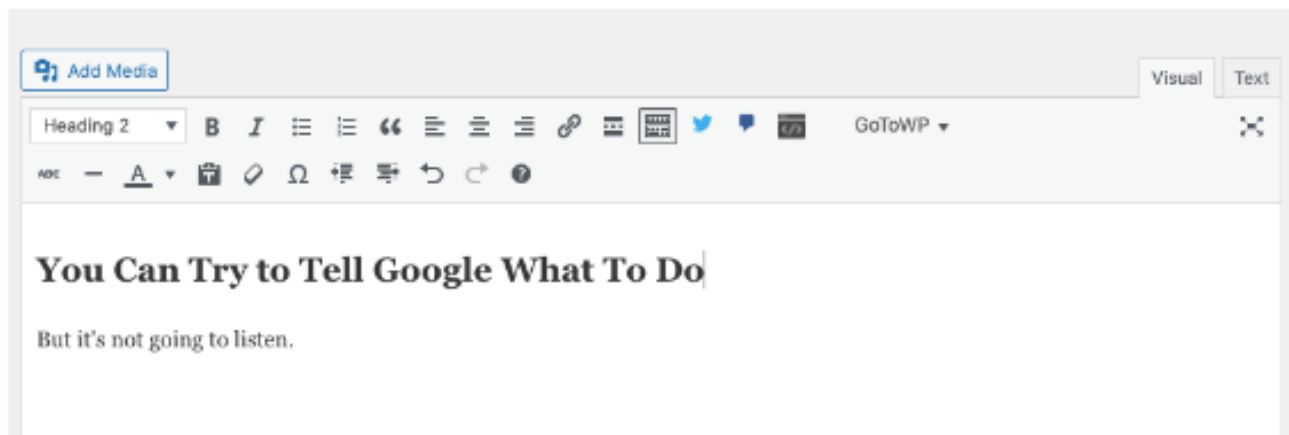
Anything you can explicitly "tell" Google can be used to manipulate the algorithm.

OUR VERDICT

H2-H6 Tags as a Ranking Factor

CONFIRMED
RANKING FACTOR METER

HTML heading tags are an important:

- **Structural element:** that helps readers and search engines navigate the content on each webpage.

- **Accessibility aid**: heading tags help browsers, plug-ins, and assistive technologies navigate the page.

- **Navigational tool:** They can help improve user experience and highlight important information.

They're a confirmed ranking factor, but including specific keywords in heading tags isn't your ticket to the top of the Google SERPs. You'll have to take a ride in your time machine back to the first decade of this century to see any major ranking impact.

Much like the H1, this one got misused and abused. Google got wise to all the keyword stuffing, overuse, and sites trying to disguise heading tag HTML with CSS.

Want to reap the greatest rewards from these page elements? Focus on the user experience benefits of heading tags and their utility in giving your content structure.

HTML LISTS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are Ordered or Unordered HTML Lists a Google Ranking Factor?

Ordered and unordered lists are commonly used in web content to present related items, step-by-step instructions, etc. in an organized way.

Using the <ul> element with <li> child elements creates an unordered list that is typically displayed as a bullet list. The <ol> element and <li> children display a numbered list.

Lists can help you organize the text and numerical information on your webpage.

But can they help you rank higher in Google Search results?

THE CLAIM

The Claim: Ordered or Unordered HTML Lists as a Ranking Factor

In order for HTML lists to be a direct ranking factor, adding them to your page and how you use them would have to be weighted within the Google search ranking algorithm.

We know that some HTML elements are, such as heading tags. So what about lists?

That would mean that adding this:

```
<ul>
  <li>Berries</li>
  <li>Whipped cream
    <ul>
      <li>Heavy cream</li>
      <li>Sugar</li>
    </ul>
  </li>
</ul>
```

To make this appear:

- Berries

- Whipped cream

  ○ Heavy cream

  ○ Sugar

...would help you rank higher for berries and whipped cream – and, to an arguably lesser extent, heavy cream and sugar – in Google results.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for HTML Lists as a Ranking Factor

A 2010 Google patent analyzed by Bill Slawski shortly after its release indicates that (at least, at that time) Google used HTML markup for both unordered and ordered lists in its evaluation of a webpage.

Specifically, the method described in the patent helped the algorithm determine the semantic relationship between words, in its pursuit of understanding the page's topical relevance. Slawski wrote:

> **"One part of the process behind this approach involves a
> search engine analyzing the HTML structures on a page,
> looking for elements such as titles and headings on a page,
> unordered lists (<ul>) and ordered lists (<ol>), nested
> tables, divs, and line breaks (<br>) that might be used to
> layout a list of items on a page."**

These elements could indicate to Google how words and topics are
related to one another, and how content in each section relates to the
content around it.

Considering Google's [increasing interest in natural language](#) and
what we now know about its [Knowledge Graph](#), it stands to reason
that page elements that improve its semantic understanding of that
content are used in the algorithm.

Lists can also help your content appear in [featured snippets](#) at the top
of the organic results.

In answer to, "How can I mark my page as a featured snippet?" [Google](#)
says,

"You can't. Google systems determine whether a page would make a good featured snippet for a user's search request, and if so, elevates it."

One of the things Google's systems looks for and will display in coveted Position Zero snippets is listicle-type content.

So while you can't specifically tell Google, "This is a featured snippet," you can write and format your content in such a way that you may qualify for a featured snippet.

The Evidence Against HTML Lists as a Ranking Factor

On their own, lists are too easily manipulated to count for much within the ranking algorithm. How awesome would it be if you could just list the things you wanted to rank for and shoot to the top of the SERPs?

(Not awesome at all. It would be spammy as hell.)

That's why I think the real and only benefit content creators and SEO professionals need to focus on is the order and structure HTML lists bring to your page.

Lists give your readers a quick point of reference or step-by-step action to take. They highlight key pieces of information. They help you easily convey what's most important. They help people who are skimming the page quickly locate takeaways.

As [Roger Montti explained](#) in a recent article:

> **"In my opinion and experience, the ordered or unordered list isn't ranking because they're ordered/unordered lists. They are ranking because the ideas contained in the content is coherent, organized, and well structured."**

On its own, a list – whether ordered or underordered – doesn't mean much to Google.

But when it becomes clear to Google that a subheading, original text backed by reputable and properly cited expert information, an ordered or unordered list and perhaps a video or high-quality image are all working together – that's where the magic happens.*

The list is just how the information is presented. It's the quality, context, trustworthiness, and accuracy of that information that matters most.

Just so we're clear, there's no actual magic – black, white, or otherwise.

OUR VERDICT

Ordered or Unordered HTML Lists as a Ranking Factor

UNLIKELY

RANKING FACTOR METER

Google may use HTML lists as a search ranking signal. If so, it's not nearly as strong a signal as it may have been when HTML, words on the page, and links were nearly all the algorithm had to go on.

I think it's used to help Google contextualize the information it's evaluating as a whole, but the presence of a list (or lack thereof) isn't going to move the needle for you in the organic SERPs.

What lists definitely can do is bring order to chaos and help simplify complex ideas.

They can help you earn a highly visible, expanded search result in a featured snippet.

And lists can improve the reader's experience, which is an SEO win all day long.

HTTPS

By **Matt Southern**

HTTPS as a Google Ranking Factor:
What You Need to Know

More than a nice-to-have addition to a website, HTTPS encryption plays an important role in search rankings.

HTTPS makes websites safer for users to visit, and that added layer of security is highly valued by Google.

If there's any question whether HTTPS is a ranking factor, this chapter will clear everything up.

Here's what you need to know about HTTPS and its relation to search.

THE CLAIM

HTTPS is a Ranking Factor

When a website is encrypted with HTTPS it's said to receive a boost in search rankings over HTTP sites.

One of the bases for this claim is Google rewards websites that provide a good user experience, and enhanced security is a way to make sites better for users.

This claim also stems from the fact that Google's Chrome browser displays a warning before users visit non-HTTPS websites. The warning is enough to make even the most non-SEO savvy individual recognize that Google treats HTTPS differently.

Further, there are claims regarding the strength of the HTTPS ranking signal that can vary from one extreme to another.

We'll address all these claims in the next section and get to the truth with evidence from Google.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for HTTPS as a Ranking Factor

Evidence of HTTPS as a ranking factor dates back to August 2014.

Google published [a blog post](#) announcing HTTPS had become a signal for its search ranking algorithms.

> "... over the past few months we've been running tests taking into account whether sites use secure, encrypted connections as a signal in our search ranking algorithms. We've seen positive results, **so we're starting to use HTTPS as a ranking signal.**"

When this update was first rolled out, Google said HTTPS would be a "lightweight" ranking signal.

That appears to be the case to this day; Google's Gary Illyes said idea of boosting the ranking signal has been discussed but the team [decided against it](#).

That doesn't mean site owners should treat HTTPS as anything less than a priority, though. [Illyes advised](#) that the signal "affects enough queries measurably that I wouldn't ignore it."

OUR VERDICT

HTTPS as a
Ranking Factor

HTTPS is a confirmed Google ranking factor.

The impact of the HTTPS ranking signal is said to be slight, often referenced as a "tiebreaker" signal.

That means HTTPS can make the difference in ranking positions between two relatively equal sites.

With that being said, site owners shouldn't underestimate Google's appreciation of a good user experience.

Google values HTTPS so strongly that it's a component of *another* ranking signal. The [page experience signal](#) takes into account a number of UX factors, with one of them being HTTPS.

Websites could, in theory, benefit from both the HTTPS *and* page experience ranking boost. That turns a lightweight signal into a stronger signal.

Although it's a confirmed ranking factor, keep in mind an HTTPS site can still be outranked by an HTTP site.

Relevance is key when it comes to search rankings. If the content most relevant to a query is on a non-HTTPS site, it will likely rank ahead of encrypted sites.

Even with all the benefits of HTTPS taken into consideration, it's not a silver bullet. If a site has poor rankings to begin with, HTTPS will not fast track it to the first page of Google.

In other words: HTTPS is not the be-all, end-all of search rankings, but it *is* a factor. Most importantly, Google recommends it.

IMAGES (NUMBER OF)

By **Matt Southern**

Number of Images on a Webpage: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Adding images to written content can help add context for readers and keep them engaged for longer periods.

In turn, that could lead to more time on site, which increases the potential for more pageviews per visit.

There are SEO benefits associated with images as well, such as the ability to earn traffic from more surfaces in Google.

But we all know it's possible to have too much of a good thing when it comes to SEO.

A few keywords are great, too many is keyword stuffing. Using some structured data is helpful, but going overboard can lead to violations of Google's guidelines.

Are there any SEO risks associated with using too many images?

That's the claim we'll address in this chapter as we answer whether the number of images in a piece of content is a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

The Number of Images on a Webpage Can Impact Rankings

The number of images in a piece of content is said to impact rankings in a couple of ways.

It's claimed that using too many images will impact rankings in a negative way. This is due to the fact images can impact page speed, and slower pages tend to not rank as well as faster ones.

There's another claim suggesting a lack of images in web content can work against a site's SEO, or that a webpage needs images in order to rank well.

Is there truth to either of those claims? Here's what the evidence says.

THE EVIDENCE

Does the Number of Images on a Webpage Impact Rankings?

In theory, the number of images on a webpage could negatively impact rankings as the claims suggest.

However, this is not a hard and fast rule, and there's no exact threshold for determining how many images are "too many."

The extent to which images impact search rankings depends on how long they take to load.

Embedding a lot of images with large file sizes can make pages slower, which may adversely impact rankings with page speed being a ranking factor. That's right, page speed is a confirmed ranking factor, albeit a "teeny tiny" one.

On the other hand, if a website employs techniques that allow images to load fast, it can publish galleries of images without issue.

Search Engine Journal's Complete Guide to On-Page SEO has a chapter on images with tips such as utilizing compression or lazy loading to achieve ideal page speeds.

As it relates to the claim that images are required in order to earn high rankings in Google – there's no truth to that at all.

For evidence of that look through the first page of any SERP. There's almost sure to be pages without images. Wikipedia is a prime example of a site that has no problem earning high rankings despite many of its pages not having a single image.

OUR VERDICT

Number of Images on a Webpage as a Ranking Factor

There's no evidence to suggest that the number of images on a webpage, whether too many or too few, is inherently a factor for search rankings.

So don't feel like you need to limit your use of images in order to rank well.

On the other side, don't feel obligated to add images on all your pages to appease Google's algorithms. Just like word count, there is no magic number of images that will help you rank better.

IP ADDRESS

By **Anna Crowe**

IP Address: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Age-old stories and advice like the below from Brian Dean would have us believe that your server's IP address will affect your rankings.

184. Fred: A nickname given to a series of Google updates starting in 2017. According to Search Engine Land, Fred "targets low-value content sites that put revenue above helping their users."

185. Affiliate Sites: It's no secret that Google isn't the biggest fan of affiliates. And many think that sites that monetize with affiliate programs are put under extra scrutiny.

186. Autogenerated Content: Google understandably hates autogenerated content. If they suspect that your site's pumping out computer-generated content, it could result in a penalty or de-indexing.

187. Excess PageRank Sculpting: Going too far with PageRank sculpting — by nofollowing all outbound links — may be a sign of gaming the system.

188. IP Address Flagged as Spam: If your server's IP address is flagged for spam, it may affect all sites on that server.

189. Meta Tag Spamming: Keyword stuffing can also happen in meta tags. If Google thinks you're adding keywords to your title and description tags in an effort to game the algo, they may hit your site with a penalty.

I mean, why not? If your server is all porn, gambling, or Viagra, it would make sense to blacklist the server, right?

But is it a myth?

One might imagine it wouldn't be much help if Google blacklisted the server because SEO black hats could move their server. But it would become a constant game of Hungry Hungry Hippos.

That, and with evidence, we'll share below, is why SEO professionals are getting mixed messages here. Below, we discuss the truth behind IP addresses as a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

IP Address as a Ranking Factor

When it comes to IP addresses as a ranking factor, things can get cloudy in the SEO community. And it's difficult to know who or what to believe.

The idea of IP addresses as a ranking factor began with the term "bad neighborhoods."

Bad neighborhoods are based on the idea that if you're on shared hosting, your IP address is shared with all those other sites on the same shared server.

Essentially, this could mean you're sharing a server with 5, 20, 100, 1,000, or even 20,000+ other websites.

If you share a server with 499 other websites talking about porn, does this impact your rankings?

Should you get a dedicated IP address? Or cloud hosting?

Let's explore the evidence.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence of IP Address as a Ranking Factor

Is IP Address a Ranking Factor?

[Google's Matt Cutts answered this IP address question](#) back in 2003.

My SEO client is using shared hosting for one of their websites. When I checked other sites hosted on their server, I found some spamy websites. Will that affect ranking of my client's website?

Remiz Rahnas, Kerala, India

His response:

> **"I really wouldn't worry about it that much."**

But later in May 2011, Kaspar Szymanski, Google's Search Quality Strategist, tweeted:

Kaspar Szymanski
@kas_tweets

if freehosts appear 2b massively spammed #Google reserves the right 2take action on the entire site #forum #response

10:29 AM · May 24, 2011 from Dublin City, Ireland · Twitter Web Client

8 Retweets   1 Like

As you can imagine, this raised some confusion in the SEO community. In June 2011, Google released a blog post about protecting users from malware hosted on bulk subdomain services.

Then in July 2011, Google banned an entire subdomain, .co.cc, because the host had an unusual amount of spammy sites.

Finally, in 2018, Google's John Mueller laid this to rest when asked a similar question about IP addresses on Twitter.

Mueller's response was simple and direct:

So, we can guess this was a potential ranking factor back in the early 2010s. But that's not the case anymore.

Does the Server Location Matter for SEO?

If you have your site hosted in the U.S., but you move it to a server in Brazil, will that impact your SEO?

Mueller answered this question [on Twitter](#), stating:

> **If you move to a server in a different location? Usually not. We get enough geotargeting information otherwise, e.g., from the TLD & geotargeting settings in Search Console.**

← **Tweet**

ws @eightxis · Mar 6, 2018
Replying to @JohnMu and @charlesroads
Does IP address change with different GEO Location will effect SEO as well?

💬 1   ⟲   ♡ 1   ↑

🍌 **John** 🍌 ✓ @JohnMu · Mar 7, 2018
If you move to a server in a different location? Usually not. We get enough geotargeting information otherwise, eg, from the TLD & geotargeting settings in Search Console

💬 1   ⟲ 1   ♡ 2   ↑

Do IP Addresses Affect Link Building?

Many SEO pros believe the server location and different C-Class IP addresses can improve ranking.
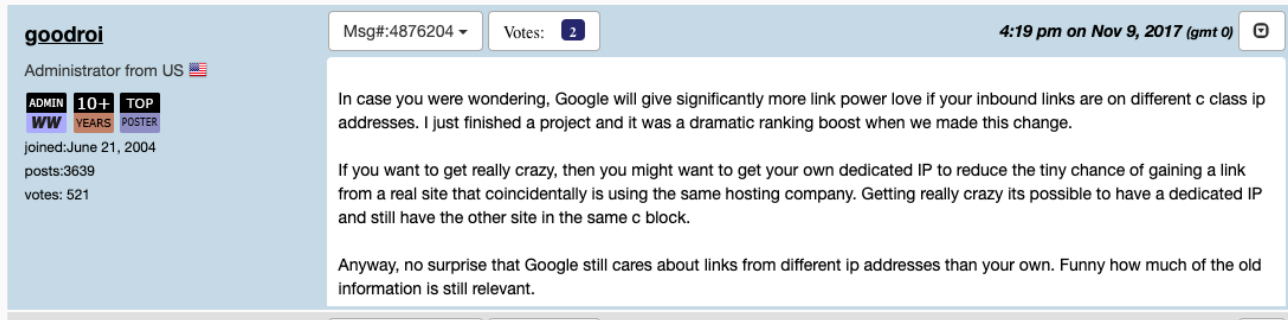
Honestly, if you're thinking about this in relation to your link building strategy, you aren't doing link building right.

Want proof?

Mueller answered this question in a Google Hangout with a simple "no."

He added:

> "That is not something where you need to artificially buy IP address blocks to just shuffle things around. And especially if you are on a CDN, then you will end up on an IP block with other companies as well. Or if you are on shared hosting then these things happen. That is not something that you need to artificially move around."

Is a Shared IP, Dedicated IP, or Cloud Hosting Better for SEO?

It does not matter if you have a shared IP, dedicated IP, or cloud hosting for SEO.

Mueller answered this question related to [dedicated IP and SEO](#) on Twitter.

← **Tweet**

Raktim Dutta @meetraktim · May 17, 2018   ···
Does bad neighborhood still a negative ranking signal on Google's SERP? Should I grab a dedicated IP address for my website? @JohnMu

💬 1   ⟲   ♡ 2   ⬆

Replies

🖐 **John** 🖐 ✓ @JohnMu · May 17, 2018   ···
Replying to @meetraktim
Shared IP addresses are fine for search! Lots of hosting / CDN environments use them.

💬   ⟲ 1   ♡ 4   ⬆
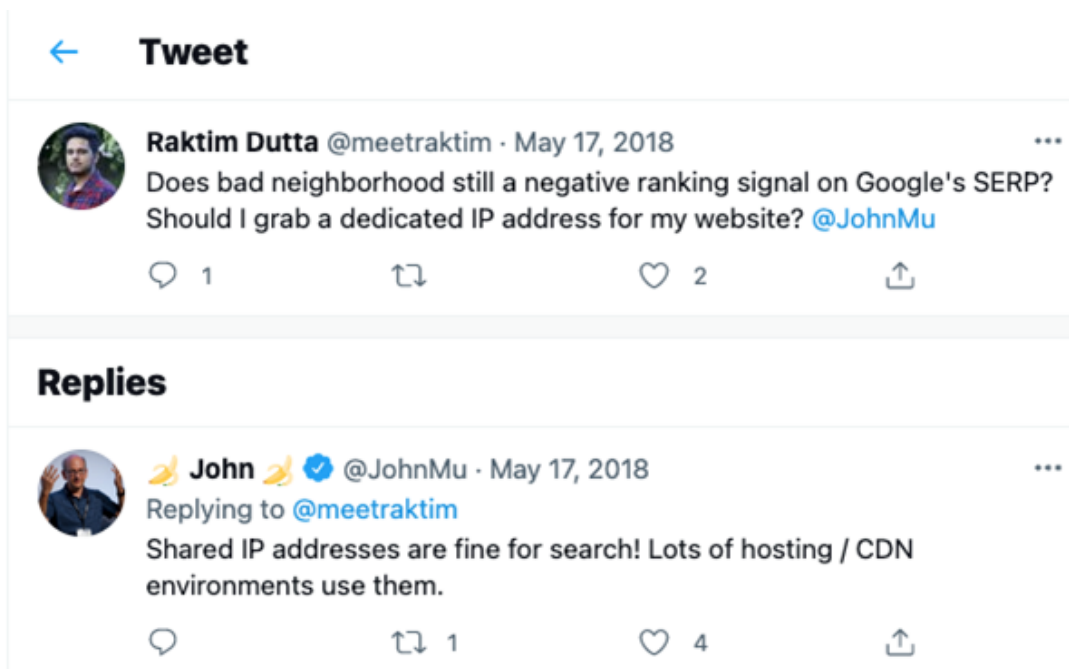
OUR VERDICT

IP Address as a Ranking Signal

Your IP address does not impact your rankings, at least not anymore.

The general consensus is that your time is better spent focusing on your website performance and content.

KEYWORD DENSITY

By **Matt Southern**

Keyword Density: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Keyword density has long been thought of as a ranking factor.

Some consider it an essential piece to the SEO puzzle for achieving a Page 1 position in Google.

Why is it so highly regarded?

We know keywords *are* important to Google. It's difficult to rank content for a specific term when the words don't appear in the on-page text.

Some SEO tool companies help add to this belief that there's an ideal ratio of keywords to copy that will maximize the chances of earning high rankings.

It's time to examine the evidence behind the claims that keyword density is a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Keyword Density is a Ranking Factor

First things first, what exactly is keyword density?

Keyword density refers to the number of times a term or phrase appears in relation to the amount of text on the page.

It's calculated by dividing the number of keywords by the total number of words on the page and multiplying by 100.

For example, if a keyword is used 26 times in a 1,000 word article, then it has a keyword density of 2.6%.

There are various claims around the "best" keyword density to aim for. You may hear 2%, or 5%, or even as high as 10%.

So why do people believe keyword density is a ranking factor?

Unlike other ranking factor myths, this one is based in fact – keyword density used to be a real thing. But we're talking way back in the earliest days of search.

Yet the idea persists today. Why? The thinking goes like this:

Keywords send signals to Google about which types of queries a page should show up for.

If too few keywords are used then Google may not understand what the page is about.

If too many keywords are used, then Google may see that as an attempt to manipulate search rankings, which it doesn't take kindly to.

So some people believe there's a specific keyword density that's "just right" – a happy medium between using too many and too few keywords.

However, there's no magic number that will achieve the best results for everyone. That's not how Google works today.

The truth is fairly simple: using keywords is important, but hitting a certain ratio won't help your SEO efforts.

In fact, a webpage can rank for a keyword even if that keyword never appears on that page. Which pretty much instantly blows up the whole idea of keyword density.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence of Keyword Density as a Ranking Factor

To answer the question of whether keyword density is a Google ranking factor we're going to look at an official Google video from 2011, which is as accurate today as it was then.

The video features Matt Cutts, who worked with Google from 2000 to 2015. He was the head of Google's webspam team and acted as a liaison between the company and the SEO community.

Cutts confirmed there is no ideal keyword density for Google. He said that overuse of a keyword can do more harm than good.

Mentioning a keyword a few times **can** help with rankings, but any more than that may lead to Google seeing it as keyword stuffing.

"Once you start to mention it a whole lot it really doesn't help that much more. There's diminishing returns. It's just an incremental benefit but it's really not that large. And then what you'll find is, if you continue to repeat stuff over and over again, then you're in danger of getting into keyword stuffing or gibberish and those kinds of things.

So the first one or two times you mention a word that might help with your rankings, absolutely. But just because you can say it seven or eight times, that doesn't mean that it will necessarily help your rankings."

If keyword density isn't a ranking factor, then what's the right way to use keywords?

Once you've identified the keywords you want to use, Cutts recommended writing content that's long enough to work those keywords into the copy in a natural way. Read the content out loud when you're done writing and listen for anything that doesn't sound right.

If the copy sounds artificial, stilted, or like it was written by a robot, that's a reasonable indicator the keyword was used too many times.

On the other hand, if it sounds natural, then you're on the right track.

Using synonyms when possible can help you avoid using the same keyword repeatedly. For example, in this piece of text, we could swap out "keyword density" with "keyword frequency."

Synonyms are also a great way to hold a reader's attention, and they may even help with ranking for other terms. Google understands synonyms, which means it's possible for a page to rank when it's not optimized for the exact term typed into the search bar.

Don't Obsess Over Keyword Density

Cutts advice was clear: stop obsessing over keyword density. Be cautious of anyone who says otherwise.

> **"I would love it if people could stop obsessing about keyword density. It's going to vary. It's going to vary by area, it's going to vary based on what other sites are ranking it. It's not a hard and fast rule, and anyone who tells you there is a hard and fast rule you might be careful because they might be selling you keyword density software or something along those lines."**

OUR VERDICT

NOT ANYMORE

RANKING FACTOR METER

Keyword Density as a Ranking Factor

Keyword density may have worked at one point. Ask any long-time SEO professional and you'll hear lots of anecdotal evidence that keyword density worked – and worked quite well.
Today, though?

Keyword density simply isn't worth stressing about. As long as you use the word or phrase a few times, as you likely would if you weren't aiming for a specific ratio, then you're good.

At the least, use the keyword in your page title, meta description, and first paragraph. Then limit the use to a few more times throughout the copy.

There's no perfect percentage of keywords to use, because **keyword density is not a ranking factor.**

KEYWORD PROMINENCE

By **Matt Southern**

Keyword Prominence as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Keyword prominence is an SEO best practice that involves using a page's target keyword early in order to send a strong signal to Google about what the page should rank for.

It's a concept comparable to the journalistic standard of never burying the lede. To "bury the lede" means to hide the main focus of a story underneath information that's less relevant to the reader.

That's considered a mistake in journalism because it sends a confusing message about what the most important details are in a given story.

Burying the lede in a piece of web content, with the "lede" being the target keyword, is considered a bad practice in SEO because it sends confusing signals regarding what the page is about.

That's the consensus within the SEO industry at least. But is it an unsupported theory or has Google confirmed keyword prominence is a ranking factor?

Here's more about the claim related to keyword prominence, followed by the evidence to back it up.

THE CLAIM

Keyword Prominence is a Ranking Factor

Where a keyword appears on a page is said to play a role in search rankings.

SEO professionals advise using a page's target keyword early in order to benefit from a ranking signal known as keyword prominence.

Keyword prominence correlates positively with higher rankings. The closer a keyword appears toward the beginning of titles and text, the more **prominent** it is.

Using a keyword less prominently is said to reduce the chances of ranking for that keyword.

When conducting a search in Google it's common to see results where the exact keyword you entered appears at the beginning of page titles.

Anecdotally speaking, a case can be made that keyword prominence is a ranking factor.

Is it confirmed by Google?

Let's take a look at the supporting evidence.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Keyword Prominence as a Ranking Factor

Early Evidence

Evidence supporting keyword prominence as a ranking factor dates back as far as 2011 where it's mentioned in [a video with former Googler Matt Cutts](#).

He discusses how Google picks up on the use of keywords when crawling the web, and that the first few uses of a keyword will send signals to Google about a page's main focus.

Cutts cautions site owners not to overdo their use of keywords, however, because more isn't necessarily better.

"The way that modern search engines, or at least Google, are built is that the first time you mention a word — [Google thinks] "Hey that's pretty interesting, it's about that word."

The next time you mention that word, [Google thinks] "Oh OK, it's still about that word." And once you start to mention it a whole lot, it really doesn't help that much more. There's diminishing returns. It's just an incremental benefit, but it's really not that large.

... So the first one or two times you mention a word than that might help with your ranking, absolutely. But just because you can say it seven or eight times that doesn't mean that it will necessarily help your ranking."

Recent Evidence

A lot has changed in SEO since 2011, but Google's guidance on keyword prominence remains the same.

Here's more recent evidence from Google's John Mueller addressing the topic in 2021 during one of his weekly Q&A sessions (at the 6:43 mark):

"I would recommend, if there's something that you want to tell us that your page is about, to make that as visible as possible. So don't just put that as a one word mention on the bottom.

But rather, use it in your titles, use it in your headings, use it in your subheadings, use it in your captions from images, all of these things to make it as clear as possible for users and for Google when they go to your page that this page is about this topic.

So that's kind of the direction I would take there. I would not worry about like, can Google get to the word number 20,000 or not. Because if you're talking about the word 20,000, and you're saying this is the most important keyword for my page, then you're already doing things wrong.

You really need to make sure that the information that tells us what this page is about is as obvious as possible so that when users go there they're like "Yes, I made it to the right page, I will read what this page has to tell me."

Mueller makes a great point about thinking of keyword prominence from a user experience perspective.

Circling back to our analogy of burying the lede, when you use the most important keyword as early as possible you end up optimizing for readers and Google at the same time.

Other Considerations for Keyword Prominence

We've touched on how keyword prominence impacts SEO, how it impacts the user experience, and now we're going to discuss how it can potentially impact click-through rate.

Mueller strongly advises making your most important keyword obvious in titles, headings, subheadings, and the main copy.

Page titles are not only a factor for SEO, they can also influence click-through rates from organic search results. That's another reason keyword location is particularly important, as rankings mean nothing without traffic.

In the English language we read left to right, so a page title with the keyword closest to the beginning is going to catch a searcher's attention since it matches what they typed into the search bar.

The goal with SEO isn't just to appear at the top of search results, it's to get searchers to click on your page over others. Strategically placed keywords can help accomplish that.

Now think about what your visitors are going to do when they land on the page. They're most likely going to skim through the content rather than read word for word.

With that in mind, you want to use the keyword as early on as you can in an article. You want to make sure the reader is going to see it as they're skimming.

Use the keyword toward the first paragraph, or even in the first sentence if you can. You want to immediately show the reader that they've found the right article to assist them with their search query. Otherwise they're going to leave.

As you continue writing the content make sure to use the keyword again in headings, and anywhere else the reader's eyes are likely to jump to as they're skimming a page.

OUR VERDICT

Keyword Prominence as a Ranking Factor

Keyword prominence is a confirmed ranking factor.

Google has reinforced time and again that using a keyword toward the beginning of a piece of copy is better, from an SEO standpoint, than if it first appeared further down a page.

If you want to maximize your chances of ranking for a particular keyword, then include it in your intro paragraph. Use the keyword early, but don't use it too often, or you may run into problems with keyword stuffing.

For more on how frequently a keyword should appear on a page, see our chapter on keyword density.

KEYWORD STEMMING

By **Matt Southern**

Keyword Stemming: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

When people talk about keyword stemming as a ranking factor, they're referring to Google's ability to recognize different variations of the same word.

Since Google can understand when a user enters a query with the word [monetize], it makes sense to include results with the words [monetization], [monetized], and [monetizing].

In the context of SEO, the act of keyword stemming involves modifying the use of key terms with different prefixes and suffixes.

Keyword stemming is said to be beneficial for search rankings.

Let's investigate those claims and provide clarity around keyword stemming and its relation to SEO.

THE CLAIM

Keyword Stemming is a Ranking Factor

The claims around keyword stemming suggest that using variations of key terms can help a page rank for more queries.

"Stemming" means appending different prefixes and suffixes to the same term. The root word doesn't change; it's only the beginning or end of the word that varies.

In the previous section, we went over an example of how to stem the word "monetize" with different suffixes.

As an example of modifying a term with different prefixes, let's take the word "hydrate." Say an article is being written about hydration; there's an opportunity to stem this term with "dehydrate" and "rehydrate."

In this example, instead of ranking primarily for queries with the word [hydrate], keyword stemming can help the page rank for a greater variety of queries.

That's the claim, at least.

But is keyword stemming a genuinely effective way to optimize pages for more queries?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Keyword Stemming as a Ranking Factor

Keyword stemming is one of the oldest confirmed updates to Google's algorithm, dating all the way back to 2003.

There are conflicting reports that stemming technology was baked into Google's Florida update, which rolled out in November 2003.

However, Google added word stemming to its algorithm in a separate update that came out around the same time.

Long before the days of Matt Cutts and John Mueller, the SEO community depended on posts from "GoogleGuy" on WebmasterWorld.com. This individual confirmed Google began utilizing word stemming in a post dated December 4, 2003:

"Within the last month or so we've made stemming be more visible, but it's been in a testing mode that's less visible for a while longer. If you like it--great! If you don't like it, you can put a plus sign in front of the word to turn it off, e.g. searching for cert advisory returns great results at #1 and #2 from CERT because we can also match against advisories.

If you really only want to match the word "advisory" though, you can search for cert +advisory and then we'll only match that exact word."

This was a novel idea in 2003, but now it's known that Google can return results containing variations of the keyword in the query. We see evidence of this every day in almost every SERP.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Keyword Stemming as a Ranking Factor

While Google is able to recognize keyword "stems," and use them to return more relevant results, it's inaccurate to call keyword stemming a ranking factor.

It's true that websites can potentially increase their chances of ranking for more queries with keyword modifications.

However, a webpage will not rank better or worse based on the fact that it uses different forms of a keyword throughout the copy.

That's something content writers will do naturally without thinking about it. Using variations of words along with synonyms makes for more interesting writing compared to repeating the same word over and over again.

Intentional keyword stemming could come across as unnatural; as though the writer was trying to cram keyword variations into the copy to rank for more queries.

Google can sniff out those attempts to manipulate search rankings, and will likely deal with them by demoting the content.

With that in mind, site owners should keep writing content naturally and not worry about this ancient addition to Google's algorithm.

KEYWORD STUFFING

By **Matt Southern**

Keyword Stuffing as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

If some keywords are good, then more must be better, right?

That's the simple logic behind keyword stuffing as a ranking factor.

In the early days of web search, way before SEO was a thing, Google ranked web content using a basic set of signals.

Keywords were one of those signals. The more keywords you used, the better a page would rank, especially in the earliest days of search engines.

Keyword stuffing was a widely used technique because it yielded results, at least for a period of time.

But how does Google treat it now?

Here's the history of the claims around keyword stuffing, followed by what the evidence says about it today.

THE CLAIM

Keyword Stuffing is A Ranking Factor

Exact match keywords were once a signal that carried a lot of weight. If a keyword appeared on a page exactly as the user typed it, the page would have a high chance of ranking.

When people discovered they could rank their websites for more queries by repeating different variations of keywords on a page, it led to the technique known as keyword stuffing.

You could get away with a lot of keyword stuffing. That ranged from overuse of keywords in on-page copy, to entire paragraphs that were just keywords separated by commas.

A more egregious form of keyword stuffing involved **hiding** paragraphs of keywords by making the text the same color as the page's background. Google could see hidden keywords when crawling the pages, but users wouldn't notice anything out of place.

Keyword stuffing wasn't limited to on-page copy. Page titles and meta descriptions were packed full of keywords in an effort to manipulate their search rankings.

When people talk about the early days of SEO being like the Wild West, this is what they're referring to. Not only were sites not penalized for keyword stuffing, they were more likely to benefit from it.

And Then the Google Updates Start Rolling Out…

The impact of keyword stuffing on search rankings changed in 2003 when Google rolled out the Florida update, which is regarded as Google's first major algorithm update.

Evidence suggests the Florida update primarily targeted link spam, but sites engaging in other spammy techniques were impacted as well.

Florida reduced the ranking impact of keyword stuffing to a certain extent, but it still didn't go completely unrewarded by Google's algorithms.

In 2011, Google launched the Panda update which targeted low quality sites and thin content with little or no added value.

That invariably led to keyword stuffed pages getting demoted in search results, as those pages tended to add less value to the web compared to pages that weren't written to game search engines.

After Panda, Google strictly advised against doing any keyword stuffing.

Lastly, we can't talk about the evolution of keywords in SEO without mentioning Google's introduction of the [Hummingbird update](#) in 2013.

Hummingbird brought conversational search to Google, which meant users could type queries using natural language and Google's algorithm would understand what they were looking for.

Approaches to content writing changed after this update, particularly as it relates to unnatural use of keywords. It might be fair to say Hummingbird sparked the shift away from writing content for search engines to writing content for people.

Keyword stuffing was done purely to manipulate rankings and didn't offer anything of value to searchers. It's an obsolete technique now that Google's search algorithm is more adept at recognizing for quality content.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Keyword Stuffing as a Ranking Factor

There's evidence all over Google's search results that keyword stuffing isn't a ranking factor.

Today's SERPs have page titles that read naturally, meta descriptions that contain paragraphs of actual copy, and articles that aren't filled with unnecessary uses of exact-match phrases.

But that's anecdotal evidence. Let's look at hard evidence straight from the source.

Google's Webmaster Guidelines, which sites have to follow in order to remain indexed in search, acknowledges keyword stuffing in a chapter called "irrelevant keywords."

It reads:

> "'Keyword stuffing' refers to the practice of loading a webpage with keywords or numbers in an attempt to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results. Often these keywords appear in a list or group, or out of context (not as natural prose). **Filling pages with keywords or numbers results in a negative user experience, and can harm your site's ranking.** Focus on creating useful, information-rich content that uses keywords appropriately and in context."

If there was any doubt whether Google demotes pages filled with an unnecessary amount of keywords, there's your official confirmation right in the Webmaster Guidelines.

OUR VERDICT

Keyword Stuffing as a Ranking Factor

Keyword stuffing is a confirmed **negative** ranking factor.

Attempting to manipulate search rankings with repeated uses of words or phrases will only cause a site to rank lower in Google's search results. Be wary of any advice that suggests otherwise.

LANGUAGE

By **Kristi Hines**

Language: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Websites in multiple languages allow you to target people based on their language preference.

But can the use of different languages affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between language and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Language is a Ranking Factor

If you want to reach people who speak English, your content should be written in English.

However, that same English content probably won't rank well in markets where Chinese, Arabic, or Spanish dominate.

Businesses that want to reach customers who speak different languages in specific countries can do so by creating content in multiple languages.

So it seems logical that language plays some sort of role in how Google ranks webpages, right?

You can tell search engines what language and country they are targeting using the following methods.

The first option is to use the hreflang attribute, which tells search engines the target language and country for the page.

<link rel="alternate" href="https://www.site.com" hreflang="en-uk">

The second option is to use the content language meta tag, which tells search engines the target language and country for the page.

<meta http-equiv="content-language" content="en-uk">

In both examples, the hreflang and meta tags tell search engines the page is targeted toward English speaking people in the United Kingdom.

You can use top-level domain names for specific countries, such as *https://domain.it/* for an Italian website. This tells search engines the entire website is targeted toward people in Italy.

In addition, you can use subdirectories to separate content by language and country. An example would be content found under *https://domain.com/en-us/*, which would target English speaking people in the United States.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Language as a Ranking Factor

Google offers in-depth advice on how to manage multi-regional and multilingual sites in Google Search Central's Advanced SEO section. It explains how to tell Google about different language versions using the HTML tags, meta tags, and URL structures discussed above.

In addition, Google mentions language in their explanation of how search algorithms work. It states:

> **"Search settings are also an important indicator of which results you're likely to find useful, such as if you set a preferred language or opted in to SafeSearch (a tool that helps filter out explicit results)."**

If a search user sets English as their preferred language, and Canada as their location, websites that target English speaking people in Canada using the following methods would have a better chance of outranking sites without any language or country specification:

- *https://domain.ca/en/*

- *https://domain.com/en-ca/*

- <link rel="alternate" href="https://www.site.com" hreflang="en-ca">

- <meta http-equiv="content-language" content="en-ca">

Google also advises the use of canonical tags in certain situations.

"If you provide similar or duplicate content on different URLs in the same language as part of a multi-regional site (for instance, if both example.de/ and example.com/de/ show similar German language content), you should pick a preferred version and use the rel="canonical" element and hreflang tags to make sure that the correct language or regional URL is served to searchers."

In Google's Advanced SEO documentation on consolidating duplicate URLs, they continue discussing how canonical tags and language work together.

"Different language versions of a single page are considered duplicates only if the main content is in the same language (that is, if only the header, footer, and other non-critical text is translated, but the body remains the same, then the pages are considered to be duplicates)."

Under their do's and don'ts for canonicalization, they suggest that you:

"Specify a canonical page when using hreflang tags. Specify a canonical page in same language, or the best possible substitute language if a canonical doesn't exist for the same language."

OUR VERDICT

PROBABLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Language as a Ranking Factor

Language is discussed on Google's page on how search algorithms work. You'll also find language under the Advanced SEO documentation on Google Search Central.

So although it isn't officially confirmed by Google to be a ranking factor, language and country settings do affect visibility in search for users who specify a particular language and location.

Therefore, we're confident that language is an all-but-confirmed Google ranking factor.

LINK STABILITY

By **Matt Southern**

Link Stability: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Link stability and its connection to search rankings has been in question since a patent describing "link churn" surfaced in 2006.

The stability of a website's links, or the length of time links remain live on a page without being edited, is to generate signals that are used by Google's algorithms.

This chapter will look at the claims around link stability as a ranking factor, where they originate from, and whether there's any evidence to back them up.

THE CLAIM

Link Stability is a Ranking Factor

A link is described as stable when it remains on a webpage for an extended period without any changes.

Changes that could disrupt a link's stability include swapping out the URL and making adjustments to the anchor text.

A website is said to have high "link churn" when it makes frequent changes to the outbound links on its webpages.

Google filed a patent in 2005 describing a possible update to its search algorithm where link churn would be used as a ranking factor.

Here are excerpts from the patent from the time it was discovered in 2006:

- The method of claim 54, further comprising: **determining an indication of link churn for a linking document** providing the linkage data; and **based on the link churn, adjusting the ranking of the linked document.**

- The method of claim 61, wherein the **indication of link churn is computed as a function of an extent to which one or more links provided by the linking document change over time.**

- The method of claim 62, wherein **adjusting the ranking includes penalizing the ranking if the link churn is above a threshold.**

These are the above three points simplified:

- The algorithm update will evaluate a website's link churn. That evaluation will be used to adjust the amount of weight given to outbound links.

- Link churn is calculated based on how often links and/or anchor text changes on a particular website.

- Google may penalize websites if their link churn is above a certain threshold.

Ever since this patent surfaced there have been claims that maintaining link stability is a factor for search rankings.

Based on these claims, should you be hesitant to adjust outbound links out of concern for this supposed negative signal?

Is there any reason to be concerned about link churn and link stability?

Here's what the evidence says.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Link Stability as a Ranking Factor

Google's patent referencing link churn was filed back in 2005. An archive remains viewable on the web, but it has since been revised numerous times.

The version of the patent that exists today makes no reference to link churn or anything similar. That's a strong indicator that if link stability ever was a ranking factor then it hasn't been relevant in years.

Besides — a patent is just a patent. Companies file patents all the time with ideas that never make it to market.

Google occasionally has to remind us that not everything it patents is used in search results.

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Link Stability as a Ranking Factor

There's no conclusive evidence that Google measures the rate at which websites modify their outbound links.

Further, there's no evidence that making edits to outbound links can create a negative signal known as link churn.

Based on the evidence available, we feel confident in saying link stability is an unlikely ranking factor.

LINK VELOCITY

By **Matt Southern**

Link Velocity: Is it a Ranking Factor?

Quickly gaining a lot of links from other sites sounds like it should be a positive thing for any website.

But could it actually hurt, rather than help, your rankings?

Or does link velocity not matter at all to Google? Is it, in fact, just some made up SEO term?

Read on as we investigate the origins of link velocity and whether it's something you need to be genuinely concerned about in SEO.

THE CLAIM

Link Velocity as a Ranking Factor

Link velocity refers to a theory that the speed at which a website gains links has the potential to impact rankings, either positively or negatively.

Link Velocity = Good

Years ago, having a high link velocity in a short period of time was viewed by some as a good thing in the SEO industry, one that could positively influence your Google rankings.

Link velocity was mentioned in articles and during conference sessions – because in those days link building was more about quantity than quality.

Want to get a webpage to rank quickly? Build a whole bunch of links to it fast.

But the idea of quantity over quality changed after Google launched the Penguin algorithm.

Link Velocity = Bad

The belief here is that gaining links too fast can cause a website to get penalized or demoted in search results.

It is based on the idea that Google will interpret a quick increase in inbound links as a sign that the website is trying to manipulate its search rankings.

Understandably, the idea of link velocity can be concerning for everyone who is averse to getting inadvertently penalized for acquiring links.

The growth of a website's link profile is largely out of its control. If a site publishes a great piece of content, for example, many other sites may reference it within a short time frame, resulting in a number of links gained all at once.

Were link velocity to work as SEO experts claim, the website in the above example could receive a penalty because it gained an influx of inbound links through no fault of its own.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Link Velocity as a Ranking Factor

The origins of link velocity in the SEO community can be dated back to the discovery of a Google patent that was filed in 2003.

The patent, Information Retrieval Based on Historical Data, includes ideas about how a search engine should treat a website based on the growth of its link profile.

In particular, the idea of link velocity can be traced back to this passage:

> "While a spiky rate of growth in the number of backlinks may be a factor used by search engine 125 to score documents, it may also signal an attempt to spam search engine 125. Accordingly, in this situation, search engine 125 may actually lower the score of a document(s) to reduce the effect of spamming."

Search Engine Journal's Roger Montti has [picked apart SEO experts' interpretation](#) of this patent, noting how they ignore parts of the patent which disprove their own theory.

For instance, the patent goes on to define what a "spiky rate of growth" is and how it can be the defining characteristic of unnatural link building.

The patent isn't about penalizing websites that see a rapid increase of inbound links. It's about demoting websites that exhibit a pattern of unusual spikes in inbound links over extended periods.

According to Montti:

> **"What that patent is really talking about is the smooth natural rate of growth versus a spiky and unnatural rate of growth.**
>
> **A spiky rate of growth can manifest over the course of months. That's a big difference from the link velocity idea that proposes that a large amount of links acquired in a short period will result in a penalty."**

The evidence doesn't add up to what experts claim about link velocity.

OUR VERDICT

Link Velocity as a Ranking Factor

There is no evidence to suggest that Google uses a signal known as link velocity that can negatively impact rankings.

Link velocity is not a term Google officially recognizes.

When asked about it, Google search representatives say a website's links are assessed on their own merits, not by how many are gained in which length of time.

Here's an example of such a response from Google's John Mueller:

> **"It's not so much a matter of how many links you get in which time period. It's really just… if these are links that are unnatural or from our point of view problematic then they would be problematic.**
>
> **It's like it doesn't really matter how many or in which time."**

Google's Gary Illyes put it more bluntly in a [Reddit AMA](), calling link velocity a made up term.

Whether links are gained fast or slow, what really matters is the quality of the individual links and the manner in which they were acquired (naturally or unnaturally).

LINKS (CONTEXTUAL)

By **Matt Southern**

Are Contextual Links a Google Ranking Factor?

Inbound links are a ranking signal that can vary greatly in terms of how they're weighted by Google.

One of the key attributes that experts say can separate a high value link from a low value link is the context in which it appears.

When a link is placed within relevant content, it's thought to have a greater impact on rankings than a link randomly inserted within unrelated text.

Is there any bearing to that claim?

Let's dive deeper into what has been said about contextual links as a ranking factor to see whether there's any evidence to support those claims.

THE CLAIM

Contextual Links Are a Ranking Factor

A "contextual link" refers to an inbound link pointing to a URL that's relevant to the content in which the link appears.

When an article links to a source to provide additional **context** for the reader, for example, that's a contextual link.

Contextual links add value rather than being a distraction.

They should flow naturally with the content, giving the reader some clues about the pages they're being directed to.

Not to be confused with anchor text, which refers to the clickable part of a link, a contextual link is defined by the **surrounding** text.

A link's anchor text could be related to the webpage it's pointing to, but if it's surrounded by content that's otherwise irrelevant then it doesn't qualify as a contextual link.

Contextual links are said to be a Google ranking factor, with claims that they're weighted higher by the search engine than other types of links.

One of the reasons why Google might care about context when it comes to links is because of the experience it creates for users.

When a user clicks a link and lands on a page related to what they were previously looking at, it's a better experience than getting directed to a webpage they aren't interested in.

Modern guides to link building all recommend getting links from relevant URLs, as opposed to going out and placing links anywhere that will take them.

There's now a greater emphasis on quality over quantity when it comes to link building, and a link is considered higher quality when its placement makes sense in context.

One high quality contextual link can, in theory, be worth more than multiple lower quality links. That's why experts advise site owners to gain at least a few contextual links, as that will get them further than building dozens of random links.

If Google weights the quality of links higher or lower based on context, it would mean Google's crawlers can understand webpages and assess how closely they relate to other URLs on the web.

Is there any evidence to support this?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Contextual Links as a Ranking Factor

Evidence in support of contextual links as a ranking factor can be traced back to 2012 with the launch of the Penguin algorithm update.

Google's original algorithm, PageRank, was built entirely on links. The more links pointing to a website, the more authority it was considered to have.

Websites could catapult their site up to the top of Google's search results by building as many links as possible. It didn't matter if the links were contextual or arbitrary.

Google's PageRank algorithm wasn't as selective about which links it valued (or devalued) over others until it was augmented with the Penguin update.

Penguin brought a number of changes to Google's algorithm that made it more difficult to manipulate search rankings through spammy link building practices.

In [Google's announcement of the launch of Penguin](#), former search engine Matt Cutts highlights a specific example of the link spam it's designed to target.

This example depicts the exact opposite of a contextual link, with Cutts saying:

"Here's an example of a site with unusual linking patterns that is also affected by this change. Notice that if you try to read the text aloud you'll discover that the outgoing links are completely unrelated to the actual content, and in fact the page text has been "spun" beyond recognition."

Get Fit Using These Simple And Easy Methods.

Posted on April 6, 2012 by mary

If you agree you are too active to get time and energy to exercise, you'll be amazed to find out available a fantastic exercise routine a lot sooner than you imagine. This post includes numerous ideas that could show you to improve your workout in a short amount of time, which enable it to pay day loan you stay healthy and keep the kitchen connoisseur.

To assist you to recover loan coming from a tricky exercise routine, try out offering the muscle groups exercise the next day. You want to do this softly, about 20 on the weight that one could elevate on one occasion. Try to do 25 repetitions in 2 packages. Choosing this, you'll have additional blood and nutrients sent to the muscle groups for quicker fix.

Climbing is a terrific way to stay fit while not having to expend every day fast cash loans a health club. Circumstances car park is a superb destination for a walk, since a lot of them have effectively groomed, predesignated hiking trails. You won't just obtain a cardiovascular exercise routine, there is however a high probability additionally, you will take in some stunning views.

A contextual link, on the other hand, looks like the one a few paragraphs above linking to Google's blog post.

Links with context share the following characteristics:

- Placement fits in naturally with the content.

- Linked URL is relevant to the article.

- Reader knows where they're going when they click on it.

All of the documentation Google has published about Penguin over the years is the strongest evidence available in support of contextual links as a ranking factor.

See: A Complete Guide to the Google Penguin Algorithm Update

Google will never outright say "contextual link building is a ranking factor," however, because the company discourages any deliberate link building at all.

As Cutts adds at the end of his Penguin announcement, Google would prefer to see webpages acquire links organically:

"We want people doing white hat search engine optimization (or even no search engine optimization at all) to be free to focus on creating amazing, compelling web sites."

OUR VERDICT

PROBABLY

RANKING FACTOR METER

Contextual Links as a Ranking Factor

Contextual links are probably a Google ranking factor. A link is weighted higher when it's used in context than if it's randomly placed within unrelated content.

But that doesn't necessarily mean links without context will negatively impact a site's rankings.

External links are largely outside a site owner's control. If a website links to you out of context it's not a cause for concern, because Google is capable of ignoring low value links.

On the other hand, if Google detects a pattern of unnatural links, then that could count against a site's rankings.

If you have actively engaged in non-contextual link building in the past, it may be wise to consider using the disavow tool.

LINKS (INBOUND)

By **Matt Southern**

Inbound Links as a Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Inbound links, or backlinks as they're commonly referred to, have mattered to SEO for as long as Google has been using an algorithm to rank search results.

Historically, having a greater number of inbound links have increased a website's chances of earning high rankings in search results.

Links continue to be important to Google, but there's more nuance to it compared to the days of PageRank.

Let's look at the claims surrounding inbound links as a ranking factor, followed by evidence which either supports or debunks those claims.

THE CLAIM

Inbound Links are a Ranking Factor

Inbound links refer to links pointing to your website from another domain to your website.

There are a number of claims surrounding inbound links as a ranking factor.

The first claim is simply that inbound links are ranking signals for Google's search algorithms.

In other words, Google assesses the links pointing to a webpage when determining how to rank it in search results.

Other claims about inbound links relate to the **strength** of the ranking signals generated by the links.

Quantity is said to be one of those factors, with more links creating stronger signals.

The **referring domain** is said to be another factor, with **high authority** and **relevant** sources creating stronger ranking signals.

The next section dissects these claims and goes over what matters to Google when it comes to inbound links.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Inbound Links as a Ranking Factor

Google's algorithm is founded on links.

PageRank, the algorithm on which Google's search engine is built, depended solely on links to rank content when it was first introduced.

Describing to the public how its algorithm works, Google once stated:

> **"PageRank works by counting the number and quality of links to a page to determine a rough estimate of how important the website is. The underlying assumption is that more important websites are likely to receive more links from other websites."**

Google's algorithm has since been updated to consider other factors, but inbound links remain an important signal.

The company says as much on its How Search Works microsite describing how Google's algorithms assess webpage quality:

"We look for sites that many users seem to value for similar queries. For example, if other prominent websites link to the page (what is known as PageRank), that has proven to be a good sign that the information is well trusted. Aggregated feedback from our Search quality evaluation process is used to further refine how our systems discern the quality of information."

There's no doubt that inbound links are a Google ranking factor. Now let's look at the next claims.

Does the quantity of inbound links matter to Google?

The claim that quantity of inbound links is a ranking factor has been refuted by Google.

[Google's John Mueller states](#) that the total number of inbound links pointing to a website is "completely irrelevant" to search rankings. Mueller explains why link quantity is not a factor, saying it's a signal that can be easily manipulated.

He advises site owners not to focus on how many backlinks they have. Google may even choose to ignore most of a site's inbound links and only look at the ones that are relevant.

"We try to understand what is relevant for a website, how much should we weigh these individual links, and the total number of links doesn't matter at all. Because you could go off and create millions of links across millions of websites if you wanted to, and we could just ignore them all.

Or there could be one really good link from one website out there that is, for us, a really important sign that we should treat this website as something that is relevant because it has that one link. I don't know, maybe from like a big news site's home page, for example. So the total number essentially is completely irrelevant."

In that statement, Mueller confirms that the authority and relevance of referring domains are taken into consideration as well.

OUR VERDICT

Inbound Links as a Ranking Factor

To recap, here are the verdicts on all claims based on the evidence we've presented:

- **Yes** - Inbound links are a ranking factor.

- **No** - Quantity of inbound links is not a ranking factor. To be clear, this means just increasing your raw number of backlinks won't help you, especially if the links are low-quality. However, there is one way that quantity can matter: having a large number of great links is always better than having a small number of great links.

- **Yes** - Relevance and quality of the referring domain is a ranking factor.

LINKS (INTERNAL)

By **Anna Crowe**

Internal Links as a Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Serious question: Are internal links a ranking factor?

Too often, the chatter around internal links as a ranking factor feels more like it's coming from a never-ending game of telephone rather than the true source, the search engines.

Certain mythical SEO tales about internal links have been passed down through generations of SEO professionals. It can be hard to tell fact from fiction.

In an effort to set the record straight, I've tapped our resources to fact-check whether internal links are a confirmed ranking factor. Drumroll, please: You'll find the truth about internal links, ahead.

THE CLAIM

Internal Links are a Ranking Factor

An internal link is a hyperlink to a page on a domain to another page on the same domain. Internal links help people navigate websites and create a site architecture for hierarchy.

Okay, but what about the more nitty-gritty questions, like:

- Does the total number of internal links pointing to a page matter?

- Does the quality of those internal links pointing to the page have a strong effect?

- What about the anchor text of those internal links – is that another relevancy signal? Does longer anchor text add more value?

- Is there such a thing as too many internal links on a page?

Since there are tons of internal link questions to answer still, and I want you to have all the facts straight, here they are.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Internal Links as a Ranking Factor

Are internal links a ranking factor?

Google confirms internal links are a ranking in their [Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Starter Guide](#). Google states:

> **Create a naturally flowing hierarchy**
>
> **Make it as easy as possible for users to go from general content to the more specific content they want on your site. Add navigation pages when it makes sense and effectively work these into your internal link structure. Make sure all of the pages on your site are reachable through links, and that they don't require an internal "search" functionality to be found. Link to related pages, where appropriate, to allow users to discover similar content.**

And, Google's "How Search Engines Work" establishes internal links as a ranking factor.

> **Some pages are known because Google has already crawled them before. Other pages are discovered when Google follows a link from a known page to a new page.**

This is also why Google Search Console features the "Top linked pages" report. It is used to "Confirm that the core site pages (home page, contact page) are properly linked within your site."

The SEO Starter Guide also recommends using internal links in your breadcrumb structured data markup, stating:

> **"A breadcrumb is a row of internal links at the top or bottom of the page that allows visitors to quickly navigate back to a previous section or the root page. Many breadcrumbs have the most general page (usually the root page) as the first, leftmost link and list the more specific sections out to the right. We recommend using breadcrumb structured data markup when showing breadcrumbs."**

The PageRank algorithm itself, and the internal flow of it, relies on internal links.

Does your webpage rank faster if you have internal links from high traffic pages?

Since Bill Slawski shared his analysis of Google's Reasonable Surfer patent, there have been arguments in the SEO community as to whether pages with or without traffic affect the ranking signals from internal links.

Slawski stated that:

> **"...based upon a probability that a person following links at random on the web might end up upon a particular page."**

The patent talks about the position of a link on a page.

Essentially, it's about giving more weight to links it believes people will actually click, including links placed in more higher up positions on the page.

Matt Cutt's confirmed this at Pubcon in 2010.

The patent does not reference traffic.

Slawski also dives into the Page Segmentation patent that explains more about the placement of internal links on a page. And, he shares further insights on how search engines use internal links to understand a webpage.

Is anchor text in an internal link a ranking factor?

The SEO Starter Guide clears up the confusion if the internal link anchor text is a ranking factor as it states:

> **"Think about anchor text for internal links, too.**
>
> **You may usually think about linking in terms of pointing to outside websites, but paying more attention to the anchor text used for internal links can help users and Google navigate your site better."**

Google's John Mueller also addressed this claim on Twitter, where he said:

> **"Most links do provide a bit of additional context through their anchor text. At least they should, right?"**

And, in 2019, John Mueller talked more how internal links help your rankings in a Google Webmaster Hangout.

However, the claim that long anchor text within your internal links is merely speculation at this time. Search engines have not verified this myth.

In fact, the SEO Starter Guide evidently recommends avoiding "using excessively keyword-filled or lengthy anchor text just for search engines."

Rand Fishkin also dives into [his anchor text experiments](#) to prove the value of quality anchor text.

And, Search Engine Journal's Roger Montti digs into John Mueller's response on [if anchor text helps improve rankings](#).

Are internal links used as a ranking signal in your site architecture?

Internal linking can have positive or negative effects:

- NinjaOutreach increased their site traffic by [50%](#) in three months with their internal link structure.

- The Daily Mail failed to outrank its competitors because of its [weak internal linking](#).

Google's patent on [Ranking documents based on user behavior and/or feature data](#) explores site architecture more in-depth.

So, what happens if your internal links are broken?

Broken internal links make it hard for search engines to index your pages and for users to navigate your site. Broken links are a sign of a low-quality site and could affect your rankings.

Google's Web Page Decay patent validates this claim as it states,

> **"If the web page has a relatively large number of dead links, it is assessed as being a stale web page."**

Now, how many internal links is too many?

Back in 2009, Matt Cutts stated there was a limit of 100 internal links per page.

In the past, Google would not download more than 100k of a single page (no longer the case), so the idea that the links would distribute your PageRank, it made sense.

In 2013, Matt Cutts retracted this statement saying to "keep it at a reasonable number." So, the rule of 100 internal links is no longer valid.

OUR VERDICT

Internal Links as a Ranking Factor

Yes, there is a bit of truth in the myth that internal links and your ranking in search engines have a connection.

Think about it this way, as Cutts said:

> "…if there's a page that's important or that has great profit margins or converts really well - escalate that. Put a link to that page from your root page that's the sort of thing where it can make a lot of sense."

LINKS (NOFOLLOWED)

By **Anna Crowe**

Are Nofollowed Links a Google Ranking Factor?

"Nofollow" isn't just a funny-sounding term SEO professionals use to sound more mysterious. Nofollow is an HTML attribute that's been around for 14 years.

At its most basic, nofollow is a hyperlink attribute that tells Google to not pass PageRank so Google doesn't even crawl nofollowed links.

You can control the nofollowing of any links on your site (whether those are to external sites or internal pages) with the simple addition of the nofollow attribute.

There are also nofollowed links that are out of your control – when another site links to you, but has marked it up as a nofollowed link.

But is there any connection between nofollowed links and rankings?

It turns out there is a lot of confusion on this topic. Let's get to the bottom of it all.

THE CLAIM

Nofollow Links are a Ranking Factor

Do nofollow links offer any value?

Nofollow links are not just a glorified attribute. It was a way to show search engines to ignore spammy or low-quality links.

Think of nofollow links as armor to protect your site from shady tactics.

It looks like this in your source code:

```
<a href="http://www.example.com/" rel="nofollow">Anchor Text</a>
```

But do nofollow links **really** impact rankings?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Nofollow Links as a Ranking Factor

Google introduced the nofollow link attribute in 2005 to help website owners fight off spam. Google required that sites add the nofollow link attribute if you were exchanging links.

If you didn't and you got caught, Google could penalize you for link schemes.

That's when nofollow links were introduced. Nofollow tag tells search engines to ignore the destination URL.

While Google can take manual action on you for not using nofollowing links, does it help your rankings?

In September 2019, Google's Gary Illyes confirmed these directives serve as "hints."

Gary 鯨理 / 경리 Illyes ✔
@methode

Replying to @TrondLyngbo

Focus on the other part: nofollow became a hint. Ugc and sponsored are icing on top of that cake, and it's one of those things where you don't have to do anything if you don't want to. If you want to help us understand the web better, implement them. If you don't want to, don't.

8:55 PM · Sep 10, 2019 from Sapporo City Higashi Ward, Hokkaidō · Twitter for iPhone

[Google's Danny Sullivan chimed in](#) to support Illyes's comments related to nofollow links.

Danny Sullivan ✔
@dannysullivan

Replying to @dannysullivan @dohertyjf and 4 others

People may simply adopt these because they are specific to what they want to communicate to use about these links. They don't have to make nofollow into a one-size-fits-all type of thing. They have a choice to be granular, if they want to....

9:09 PM · Sep 10, 2019 · Twitter Web App

These statements are supported in the [nofollow announcement post by Google](#), which stated:

> **"When nofollow was introduced, Google would not count any link marked this way as a signal to use within our search algorithms. This has now changed. All the link attributes — sponsored, UGC, and nofollow — are treated as hints about which links to consider or exclude within Search.**
>
> **We'll use these hints — along with other signals — as a way to better understand how to appropriately analyze and use links within our systems."**

More recently on September 10, 2019, Google introduced two new attributes to support the nofollow link: **sponsored links and UGC links.**

These attributes were created to help Google understand the intent behind the link.

Sponsored links (rel="sponsored") are used for promotional, advertising, or sponsored links.

UGC links (rel="ugc") are used for users who generate their own content that was not endorsed from an advertising perspective.

Can nofollow links hurt your site?

In a Google Search Central YouTube video on September 9, 2013, Matt Cutts shared that nofollow links do not hurt your site.

Cutts stated:

> **"No, typically nofollow links cannot hurt your site. So, upfront, very quick answer."**

Can I use nofollow tag to control indexing?

No.

Simply adding the nofollow tag attribute to a link does not mean Google will not index or crawl your site.

The best way to preserve your crawl budget is with other methods like using the noindex attribute or disallowing from the robots.txt files.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Nofollow Links as a Ranking Signal

While links with a nofollow tag are no longer ignored, they do not pass ranking signals.

While it's interesting to see that nofollow links do not directly impact your rankings, it's clear to see the little hints it serves to Google and search engines.

If you read between the lines, these "hints" we are serving to Google means you can tell Google to nofollow a link, but the ultimate decision lies with Google in "some" cases.

In the end, in most cases, your rankings will not be affected.

LINKS (OUTBOUND)

By **Miranda Miller**

Are Outbound Links a Google Ranking Factor?

You can't throw a stone in SEO without hitting a link builder.

Since Google's earliest days, links are – and have always been – an integral part of search optimization.

But what about outbound links?

These are the links in your content (the source) that point to a different website (the target).

But are outbound links actually a ranking factor?

THE CLAIM

Outbound Links as a Ranking Factor

Google sees links from one site to another as a sort of endorsement.

When one site cites another via a link, there's a fairly good possibility that they're doing so because they believe the content they're linking to is reputable, authoritative, and trustworthy.

Is that always the case? No.

As long as there have been search engines and links, marketers have been trying to find ways to [manipulate Google's perception](#) of what a link actually means.

We know that when a site links to you, it can help improve your search rankings.

But what about when you link to another website – can that help your site rank higher, too?

The SEO industry has never entirely come to a consensus on whether outbound links are a direct ranking factor in Google's algorithm.

Many believe outbound links aren't a ranking factor at all and have no SEO benefit to the linking party (the source).

However, some believe that who you link to is a signal that can help your own rankings, as well as the page that earned your link.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Outbound Links as a Ranking Factor

Google's John Mueller addressed that very question in the inaugural Ask Google Webmasters video in July, 2019. He said:

> **"Linking to other websites is a great way to provide value to your users. Oftentimes, links help users to find out more, to check out your sources, and to better understand how your content is relevant to the questions that they have."**

In the same video, Mueller cautions that the reasoning behind the link matters – and Google is pretty good at sniffing out bad links.

He calls out reciprocal links, paid links, and user-generated comments as types of links that Google may see as of dubious quality. For these links, you should be using rel="nofollow".

See Julie Joyce's guide, When to Use Nofollow on Links & When Not To, for more on that.

In short, Google wants to see outbound links that indicate you think the page you're linking to is a great match for users.

So, we know that user experience and the value provided to searchers/site visitors is Google's top priority.

As Mueller said, outbound links are a great way to provide value to users.

Plus, we have a bunch of other SEO pros and blogs saying things like:

- "...valuable outbound authority links are part of what Google likes to see as part of its recent Google Panda update."

- "By adhering to some of the following best practices when optimising outbound links – you could be seeing an effect on your visibility and ranking."

Some even quantify what you need to do for outbound links to "work" and recommend you include at least two or three per piece of content.

(I'm not linking to those sources as I don't want to lend them our credibility. See how that works? Suggesting in 2021 that a certain density of outbound links is SEO magic makes about as much sense as optimizing for a keyword density of 7%.)

Aside from the industry chatter, Shai Aharony at Reboot did a [small experiment](#) in 2016 in which his team created 10 brand new sites with articles "of comparable structures and text length" to test whether outbound links influenced ranking.

The study got a bit of attention following an endorsement from Rand Fishkin, who said,

> **"This study of outgoing links impacting rankings is as close to 'proof' as we get in the SEO world…"**

Half the sites contained three links – one each to Oxford University, Cambridge University, and the Genome Research Institute. Two used the name of the institution as anchor text; the anchor text for the third was the completely made-up test subject word "phylandocic."

Another made-up control word, "ancludixis," was placed in the content unlinked so they could determine whether the anchor text was a factor in ranking. All domains were purchased at the same time, and none were optimized for "phylandocic."

The study declares:

> **"The results are clear. Outgoing relevant links to authoritative sites are considered in the algorithms and do have a positive impact on rankings."**

The analysis goes on to say:

"The main thing to take away from this test is that although we don't know and have not proved how powerful outgoing links are in the grand scheme of things, we have proved they do have a positive impact if used correctly."

However, this evidence is not exactly convincing.

Here's what we see in the results. The author notes that the graph shows the position of the sites in the ranking.

- Blue line = site **with** an outgoing link.
- Orange line = site **without** outgoing links.

Key Phrase: **[Phylandocic]**
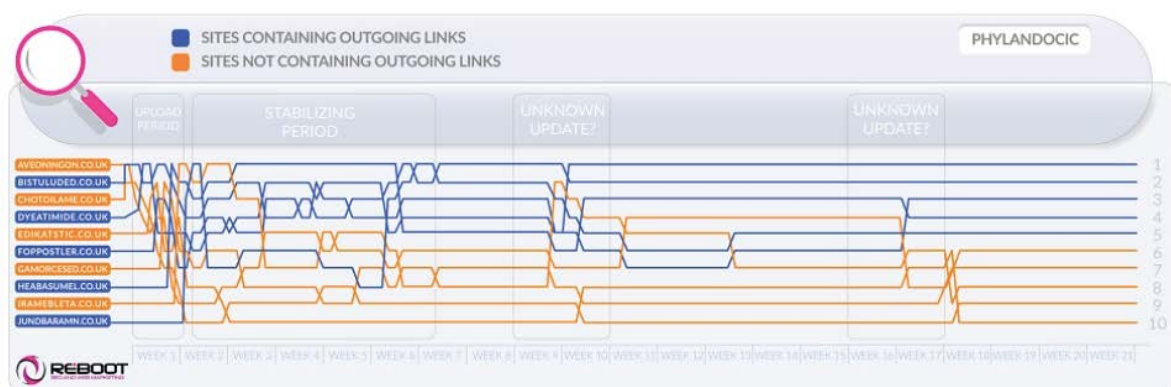
Key Phrase: [Ancludixis]

As you can see, the sites with the outbound links ranked in the top 5 Google results, and those without in the next 5.

Without seeing the content itself, it's impossible to know whether there are other factors at work.

But we do know that the made-up target keyword, "phylandocic" was used as anchor text once in at least each article. Did it increase rankings because it was anchor text, or simply because the word appeared on the page?

This test is simply too small. The fact that there's no other content in Google's index about this made-up word pretty much ensures you're going to get the top 10 results with 10 articles.

All other things being equal – and it does seem they took steps to make all other things as equal as possible – this could just be a matter of the additional keyword mention making those articles more relevant to the query.

So does this actually prove anything about the value of outbound links as a direct ranking signal? No.

The Evidence Against Outbound Links as a Ranking Factor

Outbound links can tell Google a lot of positive things about the site the link is pointing to – that it's considered authoritative and trustworthy, for example. Or that the person who created the content is an expert in the field.

That's exactly what Google wants to see in the content it recommends as answers to searchers, and they tell us that throughout Google's Search Quality Raters guidelines. Get your free SEJ Guide to Google E-A-T & SEO to learn more about that.

But Google also has to consider that there are a lot of ways links can be manipulated. They're a commodity that can be bought and sold.

People can exchange links for other links, or for anything of value to the parties involved – for a free product or discount on services, for example.

Links can even be placed on a website without the owner/webmaster's knowledge via code or URL injection.

There are a lot of different ways links can be gamed. Outbound links, in particular, are troublesome as a search signal.

Couldn't I just link to a bunch of highly authoritative, popular sites in my niche and that tells Google I'm one of the cool kids, too?

At one point, you could. This PageRank sculpting blog post by Matt Cutts resurfaced in a 2019 Twitter conversation about the benefit of linking to authoritative content.

A user asked Mueller whether the conclusion made in a graphic that cited "multiple SEO experiments and studies" was true.

Despite the fine print making it clear that the studies found correlation and not causation, the piece made a bold statement. And Mueller was clear in his response:

Here's where the aforementioned PageRank sculpting post comes in:
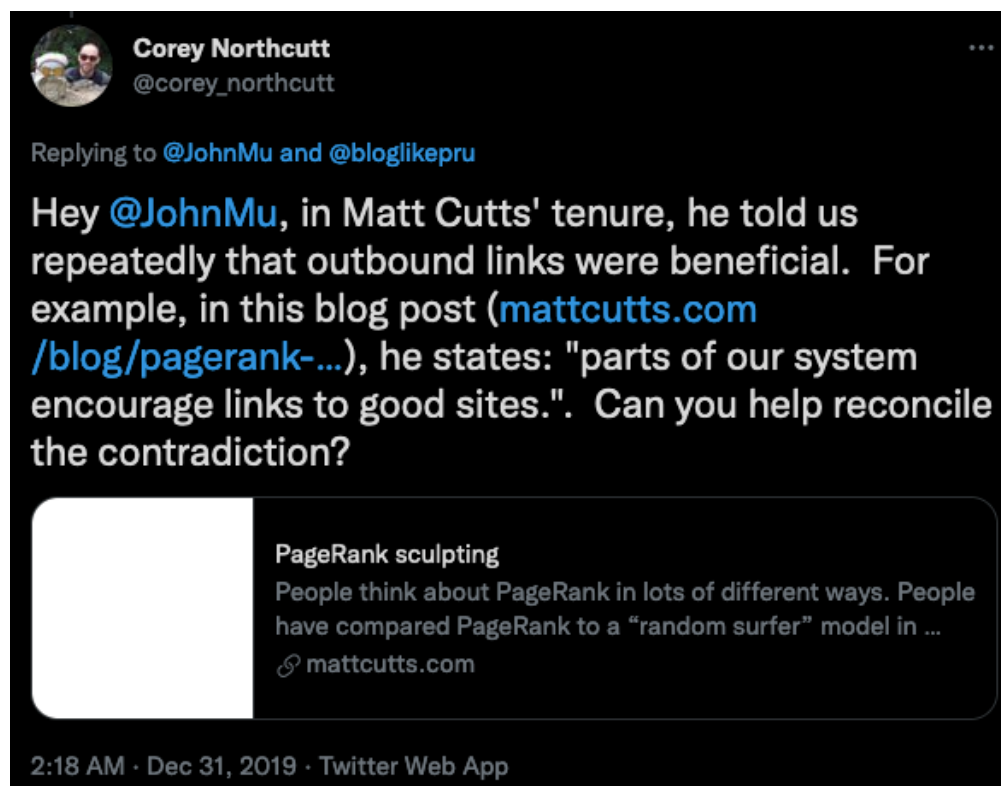
But here's the thing – that Cutts post is from 2009.

Search is constantly evolving. It's not a "contradiction" that the advice from that time would be different a decade later.

The issue came up in 2015, when Mueller responded to a Webmaster Central viewer question about any potential benefits of linking to one's trade association websites:

> **"We would say there's not any SEO advantage of linking to anyone else's site."**

And again in a 2016 video where Mueller was asked:

> **"External links from your pages to other sites – is that a ranking factor? What if they're nofollow?"**

He responded:

> **"From our point of view, external links to other sites – so links from your site to other people's sites – isn't specifically a ranking factor.**
>
> **But it can bring value to your content and that, in turn, can be relevant for us in search. Whether or not they're nofollow doesn't really matter to us."**

Google Search Liaison Danny Sullivan echoed this advice, that the value of outbound links is for users. This was in a series of 2019 tweets, one of which advised that SEO professionals should think of them in terms of journalistic integrity:

Danny Sullivan ✓
@dannysullivan

Replying to @dannysullivan @JohnPaczkowski and 4 others

I'd think of linking as just part of proper attribution. You're a journalist. You write a story, you cite your sources. If those sources are online with more info for the reader, that cite should link to them. That's just good journalism. It should be standard....

1:43 AM · Oct 17, 2019 · Twitter Web App

6 Retweets   3 Quote Tweets   32 Likes

And this is where outbound links really shine.

Used appropriately, outbound links can tell Google things like:

- You're aware of which people and websites in your industry are considered authoritative and trustworthy because you're an active member of the community.

- You've done your homework and invested time in truly understanding the topic.

- You value multiple perspectives and are doing your best to present fair, balanced information to readers.

- You care about accuracy and it's important to you that the information you reshare has been fact-checked.

- You value readers' trust and want to ensure they can verify your statements, if they choose.

These are all quality indicators that can help Google understand how accurate, relevant, and authoritative that piece of content is.

But are the links themselves a ranking signal?

OUR VERDICT

Outbound Links as a Ranking Factor

UNLIKELY

RANKING FACTOR METER

Here's what we know:

- The presence of outbound links, or lack thereof, on its own is not a ranking factor.

- The words in outbound link anchor text are used to help Google understand the source page's content – just like every other word on the page. They are no more or less valuable.

- Linking to high authority sites is not an indicator of the source page's authority because it's just too easy to game.

Your best strategy is to use outbound links in the way Google intends them to be used – to cite sources, to improve user experience, and as endorsements of high-quality content.

Trying to use them to whisper at Google about your authority or relevance could backfire.

Overusing outbound links looks spammy in the same way overusing any other optimization looks spammy, and it could lead Google to ignore the page entirely.

Outbound links may have been a ranking signal in the early 2000s. However, Google has so many more reliable, less noisy signals to consider today.

Image credits: Second in-line image, *Reboot*

LINKS (PAID)
By **Miranda Miller**

Are Paid Links a Google Ranking Factor?

Google [flat out tells us](#) that links help them evaluate a site's reputation, and that search rankings are "partly based on analysis of those sites that link to it."

We know that links are a ranking factor.

And we know that organic links can be difficult to come by.

Can you just buy links and enjoy the same ranking benefits as those earned through the quality of your content, building your reputation and authority, and sharing valuable expertise people can't get elsewhere?

Sure, you can buy them. There's no shortage of people willing to sell you links.

In this piece, we'll explore whether those paid links will actually help you rank higher.

THE CLAIM

Paid Links as a Ranking Factor

Google's [Webmaster Guidelines](#) are clear on paid links. They don't want them influencing search rankings. Google says:

> **"Make a reasonable effort to ensure that advertisement links on your pages do not affect search engine rankings. For example, use [robots.txt](#), rel="nofollow", or rel="sponsored" to prevent advertisement links from being followed by a crawler."**

That doesn't mean paying for links is inherently bad. You just have to be honest and open about it.

But what if you could sneak one (or several) paid links by Google?

Surely they can't algorithmically detect all paid links, especially if you're super careful. Right?

In that case, if you didn't disclose that it was a paid link and were careful there was no footprint to speak of, that link would provide the same benefit as any organic link.

That's true.

And it's also a dangerous game to play.

Here's why.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Paid Links as a Ranking Factor

We know that links pass PageRank and impact search rankings. That's not even a question.

However, Google asks that you disclose when there's some relationship outside of, "Hey, this is a super valuable/reputable/ authoritative page I genuinely want to share with my audience!" behind the link.

The way you explain that relationship to Google is through rel attribute values in the link's <a> tag:

- **rel="sponsored"** says, "This is an advertisement and paid placement." It won't pass PageRank and Google will basically disregard it.

- **rel="ugc"** says, "This is user generated content and we aren't making any endorsements as to its quality or accuracy."

- **rel="nofollow"** says, "This isn't a site we want to be associated with, so please don't follow this and crawl that page."

(Nofollow was the precursor to rel="sponsored" and is still an acceptable markup for paid links. However, Google would prefer that you use the sponsored tag for all paid links.)

If you choose not to disclose a paid relationship or transaction, you may very well enjoy some ranking benefits.

Until you're caught.

And when that happens, you're lucky if Google simply ignores the link.

Paid Links Can Make It Impossible to Rank, Too

If Google finds that you're using paid links to manipulate the algorithm, you might find that your site is removed from the index.

People have been trying to manipulate links and profit from selling them – and Google has been clapping back – since the engine's earliest days.

One particularly comical lawsuit from 2002 makes Google's position on the practice of selling links clear.

It was the case of Search King Inc. v. Google Technology Inc.

Search King sued Google for "maliciously" eliminating the PageRank of its link selling scheme, PRAN.

Search King was selling links on high-ranking sites. He tried to argue that because PageRank was described as "honest, objective, and mechanical" in Larry Page's thesis paper and in Google material, taking manual action against his link scheme was anti-competitive.

In her opinion, District Judge Vicki Miles-Lagrange explained:

> **"Search King asserts the devaluation occurred after and because Google learned that PRAN was competing with Google and that it was profiting by selling advertising space on web sites ranked highly by Google's PageRank system."**

Search King's case was dismissed and the lesson to the industry was clear: If you're caught participating in paid link schemes, you'll get slapped.

And if you try to sue Google for deindexing or otherwise penalizing you for it, you will lose.

In a 2005 blog post, Matt Cutts explained that while the algorithm took care of most paid link issues, Google was not averse to manually intervening:

> **"Yes, Google has a variety of algorithmic methods of detecting such links, and they work pretty well. But these links make it harder for Google (and other search engines) to determine how much to trust each link. A lot of effort is expended that could be otherwise be spent on improving core quality (relevance, coverage, freshness, etc.).**
>
> **"At the point where people are recommending ways to make paid links less detectable (e.g. by removing any labels or indication that the links are sold), I wouldn't be surprised if search engines begin to take stronger action against link buying in the near future."**

Even so, SEO pros have largely believed since about 2010 or so that if Google determines a link has been paid for, it'll just ignore it.

But recent manual interventions show that Google isn't messing around with paid link schemes at scale.

In 2019, Google Gary Illyes tweeted his gratitude to someone who had submitted a spreadsheet with over 700 domains selling links that passed PageRank:

Google also appears to have taken manual action against a law firm for its scholarship link building scheme in December, 2020.

In that case, the links weren't directly bought or sold. But as Search Engine Journal's Roger Montti explained at the time, "...the links aren't contextually relevant nor do they qualify as a true citation or 'link-vote' that vouches for the law office."

Today, the search engine's Paid Links resource says,

> **"Google works hard to ensure that it fully discounts links intended to manipulate search engine results, such as excessive link exchanges and purchased links that pass PageRank."**

But it's clear that even outside of algorithmic detection, Google is on the hunt for unnatural links. And that includes links that are exchanged for some kind of value – monetary or otherwise.

Google has long asked the SEO industry to police itself by reporting paid links and other link schemes.

This means what Google's algorithm might pick up on isn't your only concern.

If competitors (or their agencies) sniff out your paid links, you might find yourself on the wrong end of one of those reports. And the action that results.

Paid Links: Err on the Side of Caution

SEO pros have long argued over what constitutes a paid link and whether Google has any right to ask marketers to disclose the relationships behind links. See this 2006 article from Loren Baker, for example.

Today, Google defines the following as link schemes that can negatively impact a site's search ranking:

- Buying or selling links that pass PageRank. This includes:
  - Exchanging money for links, or posts that contain links.
  - Exchanging goods or services for links.
  - Sending someone a "free" product in exchange for them writing it and including a link.

- Text advertisements that pass PageRank.

- Advertorials or native advertising where payment is received for articles that include links that pass PageRank.

Google says paid links don't work.

That's not entirely true, though.

Paid links work in the same way as any other link unless they are:

- Tagged as sponsored or nofollow using rel attribute values.

- Algorithmically determined to have been manipulated in some way.

- Manually reported or detected as undisclosed paid links.

Two of those options – disclosing their paid status yourself and algorithmic detection – will result in Google simply ignoring the link. You still gain any associated branding, advertising, or other value from it.

The third could result in your ticking off the webspam team and incurring a manual action. And in that case, you risk not only losing the value of the link but all of your other SEO efforts, too.

OUR VERDICT

Paid Links as a Ranking Factor

Google uses links as a ranking signal. However, they explicitly do not want paid links to count.

Yes, you can try to hide it from them. But you do so at your own risk — and the fallout can be devastating.

Using undisclosed paid links to improve search rankings is the SEO equivalent of strapping a bomb on your site. If you're lucky, it's wired wrong and nothing will happen.

But one day, you just might find that someone has tossed Gary Illyes the detonator. And he'll gleefully flip the switch, make no mistake.

LINKS (SITEWIDE)

By **Matt Southern**

Are Sitewide Links a Google Ranking Factor?

Inbound links, ordinarily considered a positive thing for SEO, may cause problems if too many come from the same domain.

But are sitewide links to other domains – are they a negative ranking factor?

That's what some people believe in SEO.

Is there a cause for concern if you are on the receiving end of sitewide links?

We'll answer those questions as we investigate the theories about these potentially problematic links and their impact on SEO.

THE CLAIM

Sitewide Links are a Ranking Factor

A sitewide link refers to a static outbound link that appears on every page of a website. They're usually placed either in the header, footer, or navigation menu.

Depending on how many pages a website has, one sitewide link could create hundreds or thousands of outbound links to another site.

Having a disproportionate number of inbound links from the same domain is said to be interpreted by Google as a sign of unnatural link building.

In addition, the fact that sitewide links appear without context has led to claims that they carry little to no value.

For these reasons, SEO experts claim sitewide links send negative ranking signals to the domains they're pointing toward.

The theory behind sitewide links as a negative ranking signal started around the time of the seventh update to the Google Penguin algorithm, known as Penguin 4.0.

This update made Penguin a permanent component of Google's search algorithm, running in real-time.

Previous to Penguin 4.0, link spam was demoted and/or penalized on a per-update basis. That meant sites could get away with spammy/risky link building tactics until the next manual update was rolled out.

After hearing these claims, you might be worried about discovering sitewide links pointing to your domain from other websites.

However, another claim suggests that sitewide links may be considered a positive thing. The theory behind that is, simply, that more links pass more link equity.

You could also argue that a sitewide link from a reputable website creates a stronger signal than one or two links on their own; it's as though that website is extending its highest level of recommendation to the other domain.

But is there any truth to this?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Sitewide Links as a Negative Ranking Factor

Google confirms sitewide links, when they occur organically, are **not** a negative ranking signal.

John Mueller of Google states that sitewide links are not automatically interpreted as an unnatural linking pattern or an attempt to spam. There's no reason to think they count against a site, he says:

> **"In general, if these are normal links – organic links – that are happening that are pointing at your content, then I would just let them be. That's the way the internet works. People link to your content.**
>
> **If your students have blogs and they think, Oh, this is actually a teacher that knows what he's talking about,' then that's a good link. That's not something you need to disavow just because maybe it's a sitewide link or in the blogroll."**

When site owners are placing a sitewide link, Google recommends using the nofollow attribute in order to 100% avoid unnatural linking signals.

Mueller states:

> "... if you want to put your footer link there, make sure it has a nofollow link there, so that this is something that people could click on if they're interested, but it's seen as something that is not an editorial link by the webmaster.
>
> It's not something that you'd have to worry about later on and say, 'Ooh, my god. I put all these links on this website. Now Google will think I'm building an unnatural link pyramid or something crazy.'"

OUR VERDICT

POSSIBLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Sitewide Links as a Ranking Factor

Sitewide links are clearly a possible ranking factor because, in the end, a link is a link. We know Google uses links as a ranking signal.

Sitewide links do not have a negative impact on search rankings in and of themselves. There's no reason to disavow sitewide links or ask for them to be removed, except under one condition.

If you're working on a website that has a sitewide link pointing to it, and it's search rankings are struggling, it may not be the link itself causing the problem.

It could be the anchor text.

Overly optimized anchor text is much more likely to cause a problem for SEO than a sitewide link.

For example, if the anchor text is something like "best SEO services in Toronto," then the links might get flagged as spam.

When linking to another company, the recommended best practice is to use the company's name as the anchor text. Then it looks like a legitimate recommendation, as opposed to an attempt to manipulate search rankings.

Google understands there are instances where sitewide links occur organically. Sitewide links aren't automatically indicative of an attempt to manipulate search results.

When it comes to placing sitewide links, Google requests the use of the nofollow attribute so that they aren't seen as editorial links.

LOCAL CITATIONS (NAP)

By **Miranda Miller**

Are Local Citations (NAP) a Google Ranking Factor?

In local SEO, a citation is a mention of key business information – your name, address, and phone number (NAP) – anywhere else on the web.

Local citations might appear in directories, on social networking or review sites, in apps, and on all kinds of other websites.

Clearly, these are an important part of a searcher's experience; NAP info is how a local consumer will find their way to your store or give you a call.

But do citations help you rank higher in Google Search results?

THE CLAIM

Local Citations as a Ranking Factor

Some citations allow only for the location's name, address, and phone number.

However, you may be able to add a website link, business description, photos, and more, depending on the directory or platform.

The idea here is that each of these optimizations will help you rank higher in local search results:

- Having your NAP info appear on more external sites.

- Ensuring the accuracy of your citations.

- Optimizing each one by adding as much supporting detail as the fields on that site allow.

WhiteSpark's [industry survey](#) on local ranking factors provides a good framework that illustrates the variety of considerations in play when we talk about local citation signals.

Citations are evaluated based on:

- Consistency.

- Quality/authority.

- Quantity.

- Enhancement/completeness.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Citations as a Ranking Factor

Citations have long been widely accepted by SEO professionals as a key local ranking factor.

"Consistency of citations" came in at #5 in Moz's 2020 industry survey of what SEO pros believe are local ranking factors. (They were ranked fifth in the 2018 survey, as well, for both Local Pack/Finder and Localized Organic search results.)

However, what it is about citations that matters most has been the subject of debate over the years.

When BrightLocal surveyed the industry in 2016, [90%](#) of respondents said citation accuracy was "very important" to "critical" for local search rankings. What's more, 86% said the quality of those citations was more important than quantity.

In this video, Google confirms that local results are based primarily on relevance, distance, and prominence.

Improve Your Local Ranking on Google
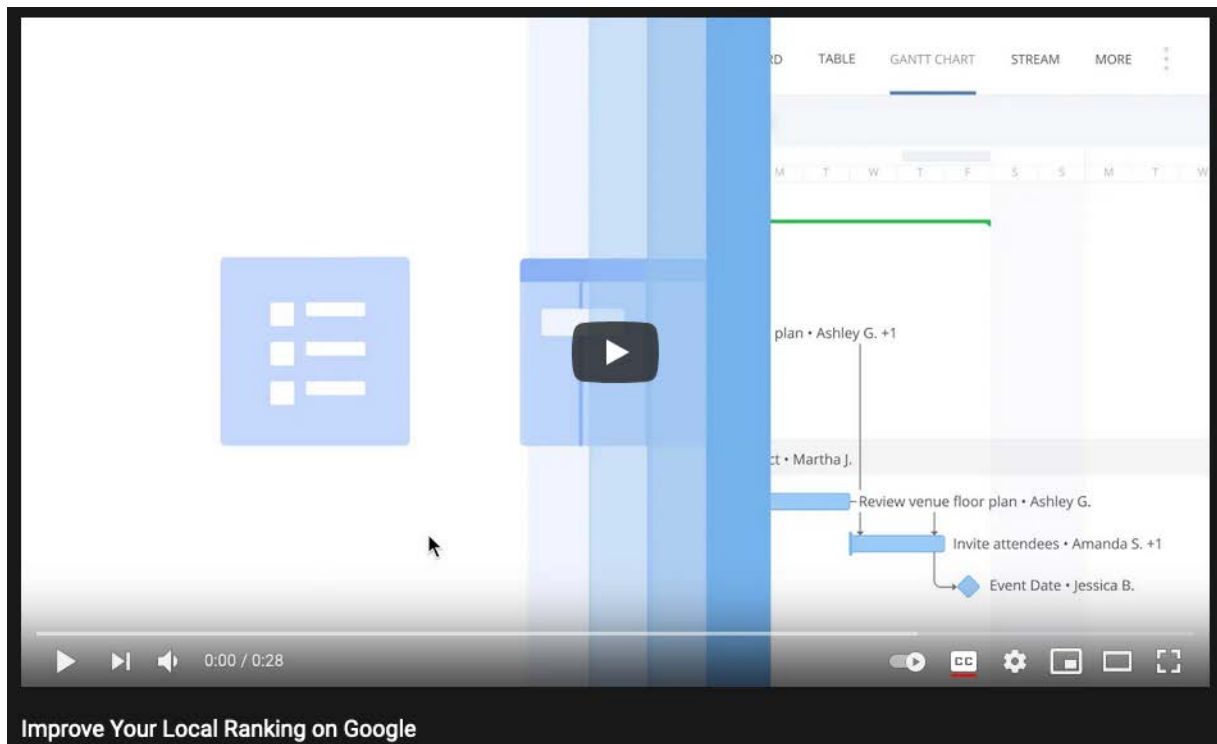
And while you cannot control all of these factors, they say:

> **"First, make sure all of your business information is complete. It's important to have accurate information including your phone number, address, and business category."**

Google also recommends that in order to ensure the accuracy of your GMB listing and "help you stand out", you should:

- Double-check that hours of operation are accurate.

- Use special hours for holidays.

- Add photos of your location, services, or merchandise.

- Verify your location to tell Google you are the correct owner of the business.

In their "Improve your local ranking on Google" help resource, the advice is clear:

"Local results favor the most relevant results for each search. Businesses with complete and accurate information are easier to match with the right searches."

The Evidence Against Local Citations as a Ranking Factor

You could argue that citations are too difficult to maintain and therefore not a reliable signal.

And you would be right.

It's incredibly difficult to ensure that all citations across the local search ecosystem are kept up to date.

With so many aggregators, user suggestions, manual errors, and other elements wreaking havoc with citation information, how can Google trust that the information they're finding about any one business location is accurate?

This is precisely why local listings management is so important, and providing Google a single source of truth through your GMB profile is key.

Monitoring for citation errors is essential so you can correct them before the wrong information is picked up by aggregators and more widely distributed.

Citation inconsistencies can happen for countless reasons:

- Businesses move to new locations.

- Brands open and close stores.

- Staff and owners create listings without documenting them, and they grow outdated as the business evolves.

- Consumers create duplicate listings by making spelling mistakes when trying to leave a review.

- Google searchers suggest listing edits with the best of intentions but the wrong information.

- And more. A lot more.

Google recognizes that all of these issues can impact citation accuracy, which is why it relies on such a wide array of sources to determine whether the information is trustworthy.

OUR VERDICT

Local Citations as a Ranking Factor

Bottom line: It is all but confirmed officially by Google that Google uses local citations as a ranking signal in Local Pack/Finder and localized organic search results.

Google's aim is to provide the best, most trustworthy answers to every searcher. Citations are an important signal as to whether key business information is correct and that location is the best answer for a local searcher's relevant query.

If you're just getting started, check out John McAlpin's Citations & Local SEO: The Ultimate Beginner's Guide.

Ready to get more advanced? Make sure your citations are accurate and complete on as many relevant sources as possible. WhiteSpark's free Top Local Citation Sources by Country finder enables you to pull a list of the top directories, networks, websites, etc. in 15 countries.

And if you really want to step up your local strategy, you'll want to download Local SEO: The Definitive Guide to Improve Your Local Search Rankings.

LSI (LATENT SEMANTIC INDEXING)

By **Miranda Miller**

Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI): Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Latent semantic indexing (LSI) is an indexing and information retrieval method used to identify patterns in the relationships between terms and concepts.

With LSI, a mathematical technique is used to find **semantically** related terms within a collection of text (an **index**) where those relationships might otherwise be hidden (or **latent**).

And in that context, this sounds like it could be super important for SEO.

Right?

After all, Google is a massive index of information, and we're hearing all kinds of things about semantic search and the importance of relevance in the search ranking algorithm.

If you've heard rumblings about latent semantic indexing in SEO or been advised to use LSI keywords, you aren't alone.

But will LSI actually help improve your search rankings? Let's take a look.

THE CLAIM

Latent Semantic Indexing as a Ranking Factor

The claim is simple: Optimizing web content using LSI keywords helps Google better understand it and you'll be rewarded with higher rankings.

Backlinko defines LSI keywords in this way:

> **"LSI (Latent Semantic Indexing) Keywords are conceptually related terms that search engines use to deeply understand content on a webpage."**

By using contextually related terms, you can deepen Google's understanding of your content. Or so the story goes.

That resource goes on to make some pretty compelling arguments for LSI keywords:

- "Google relies on LSI keywords to understand content at such a deep level."

- "LSI Keywords are NOT synonyms. Instead, they're terms that are closely tied to your target keyword."

- "Google doesn't ONLY bold terms that exactly match what you just searched for (in search results). They also bold words and phrases that are similar. Needless to say, these are LSI keywords that you want to sprinkle into your content."

Does this practice of "sprinkling" terms closely related to your target keyword help improve your rankings via LSI?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for LSI as a Ranking Factor

Relevance is identified as one of five key factors that help Google determine which result is the best answer for any given query.

As Google explains is its How Search Works resource:

> **"To return relevant results for your query, we first need to establish what information you're looking for the intent behind your query."**

Once intent has been established:

> **"...algorithms analyze the content of webpages to assess whether the page contains information that might be relevant to what you are looking for."**

Google goes on to explain that the "most basic signal" of relevance is that the keywords used in the search query appear on the page. That makes sense – if you aren't using the keywords the searcher is looking for, how could Google tell you're the best answer?

Now, this is where some believe LSI comes into play.

If using keywords is a signal of relevance, using **just the right keywords** must be a stronger signal.

There are purpose-build tools dedicated to helping you find these LSI keywords, and believers in this tactic recommend using all kinds of other keyword research tactics to identify them, as well.

The Evidence Against LSI as a Ranking Factor

Google's John Mueller has been crystal clear on this one:

> **"...we have no concept of LSI keywords. So that's something you can completely ignore."**

There's a healthy skepticism in SEO that Google may say things to lead us astray in order to protect the integrity of the algorithm. So let's dig in here.

First, it's important to understand what LSI is and where it came from.

Latent semantic structure emerged as a methodology for retrieving textual objects from files stored in a computer system in the late 1980s. As such, it's an example of one of the earlier information retrieval (IR) concepts available to programmers.

As computer storage capacity improved and electronically available sets of data grew in size, it became more difficult to locate exactly what one was looking for in that collection.

Researchers described the problem they were trying to solve in a patent application filed September 15, 1988:

> **"Most systems still require a user or provider of information to specify explicit relationships and links between data objects or text objects, thereby making the systems tedious to use or to apply to large, heterogeneous computer information files whose content may be unfamiliar to the user."**

Keyword matching was being used in IR at the time, but its limitations were evident long before Google came along.

Too often, the words a person used to search for the information they sought were not exact matches for the words used in the indexed information.

There are two reasons for this:

- **Synonymy:** the diverse range of words used to describe a single object or idea results in relevant results being missed.

- **Polysemy:** the different meanings of a single word results in irrelevant results being retrieved.

These are still issues today, and you can imagine what a massive headache it is for Google.

However, the methodologies and technology Google uses to solve for relevance long ago moved on from LSI.

What LSI did was automatically create a "semantic space" for information retrieval. As the patent explains, LSI treated this unreliability of association data as a statistical problem.

Without getting too into the weeds, these researchers essentially believed that there was a hidden underlying latent semantic structure they could tease out of word usage data.

Doing so would reveal the latent meaning and enable the system to bring back more relevant results – and **only** the most relevant results – even if there's no exact keyword match.

Here's what that LSI process actually looks like:

COMPONENTS FOR PROCESSING
ORGANIZATIONS/DOCUMENTS:

—100
TEXT PREPROCESSING
- ISOLATE PHRASES
- REMOVE INFLECTIONAL SUFFIXES

—110
CREATE SYSTEM LEXICON OF
COMPOUND NOUN PHRASES
AND SINGLE WORDS

—120
CONSTRUCT TERM FREQUENCY BY
DOCUMENT MATRIX

—130
DERIVE A SINGLE HIGH
DIMENSIONAL SEMANTIC
STRUCTURE SPACE

—140
CONSTRUCT ORGANIZATIONAL AND
TERM DATABASES

COMPONENTS FOR PROCESSING
USER QUERIES:

—200
QUERY PREPROCESSING

—210
FIND IN SYSTEM LEXICON TERMS
CONTAINED IN QUERY

—220
COMPUTE SPATIAL COORDINATES
OF USER'S QUERY

—230
COMPUTE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN
USER'S QUERY AND ALL
DOCUMENTS IN SPACE

—240
SORT SIMILARITY VALUES AND
OBTAIN ORGANIZATIONAL
INFORMATION FOR MOST
SIMILAR DOCUMENTS

—250
RETURNED TO USER ORGANIZATIONAL
INFORMATION FOR MOST SIMILAR
DOCUMENTS AND SIMILARITY INDEX

And here's the most important thing you should note about the above illustration of this methodology from the patent application: there are two separate processes happening.

First, the collection or index undergoes Latent Semantic Analysis.

Second, the query is analyzed and the already-processed index is then searched for similarities.

And that's where the fundamental problem with LSI as a Google search ranking signal lies.

Google's index is **massive** at hundreds of billions of pages, and it's growing constantly.

Each time a user inputs a query, Google is sorting through its index in a fraction of a second to find the best answer.

Using the above methodology in the algorithm would require that Google:

1. Recreate that semantic space using LSA across its entire index.

2. Analyze the semantic meaning of the query.

3. Find all similarities between the semantic meaning of the query and documents in the semantic space created from analyzing the entire index.

4. Sort and rank those results.

That's a gross oversimplification, but the point is that this isn't a scalable process.

This would be super useful for small collections of information. It was helpful for surfacing relevant reports inside a company's computerized archive of technical documentation, for example.

The patent application illustrates how LSI works using a collection of nine documents. That's what it was designed to do. LSI is primitive in terms of computerized information retrieval.

OUR VERDICT

Latent Semantic Indexing as a Ranking Factor

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

While the underlying principles of eliminating noise by determining semantic relevance have surely informed developments in search ranking since LSA/LSI was patented, LSI itself has no useful application in SEO today.

It hasn't been ruled out completely, but there is no evidence that Google has ever used LSI to rank results. And Google definitely isn't using LSI or LSI keywords today to rank search results.

Those who recommend using LSI keywords are latching on to a concept they don't quite understand in an effort to explain why the ways in which words are related (or not) is important in SEO.

Relevance and intent are foundational considerations in Google's search ranking algorithm. Those are two of the big questions they're trying to solve for in surfacing the best answer for any query.

Synonymy and polysemy are still major challenges. Semantics – that is, our understanding of the various meanings of words and how they're related – is essential in producing more relevant search results.

But LSI has nothing to do with that.

MANUAL ACTION

By **Matt Southern**

Is a Manual Action a Google Ranking Factor?

A manual action can have a profound impact on a website's appearance in Google. It's capable of demoting a website's content in search results, and removing content from the search index altogether.

Does that make manual actions a ranking factor?

No, not exactly.

A ranking factor is a signal Google uses to assess where and how a webpage should rank in search results. These signals are picked up on through Google's regular crawling of the web.

A manual action doesn't fit that definition, because it's something Google implements on its own.

It may be fair to say a manual action overrides all other ranking factors, as it can drop a website off the face of Google in an instant.

Google's algorithms automatically filter out content that could cause problems in search results. Every now and then, Google encounters an issue where it has to manually step in and take urgent action.

Here's more about manual actions and how they impact search rankings.

THE CLAIM

Manual Actions are a Ranking Factor

Manual actions get lumped into the ranking factors category because the action refers to adjusting a website's visibility in search results.

To be more specific, the action involves demoting or removing a site or specific pages from Google Search.

Calling a manual action a "ranking factor" is misleading as it creates the impression that it's part of or at least considered by the algorithm, which it absolutely isn't.

In fact, it's the most serious penalty Google is able to issue to websites.

The next section has more details on the types of offences that would cause Google to manually take action, which can help you avoid getting one of your own.

THE EVIDENCE

Manual Actions are a Penalty, Not a Ranking Factor

Google has [clear documentation](#) on what manual actions are, how to know if your site has been impacted by one, and how to recover after one has been issued.

From the document:

> **"Google issues a manual action against a site when a human reviewer at Google has determined that pages on the site are not compliant with Google's webmaster quality guidelines. Most manual actions address attempts to manipulate our search index."**

In addition to taking action against sites for manipulative SEO tactics, Google reserves the right to remove content if required to by law.

This is all explained in detail in a [video with former Googler Matt Cutts](#) which is as relevant today as it was when first published in 2012.

Types of Manual Actions

Here's a list of violations that will result in Google applying a manual action.

- **Third-party spam:** Site contains a significant amount of spam generated by third parties.

- **User-generated spam:** Site contains spam submitted by visitors.

- **Structured data:** Site is using structured data in a manipulative way.

- **Unnatural inbound links:** There's a pattern of artificially placed links pointing to a site.

  Unnatural external links: There's a pattern of artificially placed links pointing outward from a site.

- **Thin content:** Site contains low-quality pages with little or no added value.

- **Cloaking & sneaky redirects:** Site is showing different pages to users than are shown to Google, or redirecting users to a different page than Google saw.

- **Pure spam:** Site is using aggressive spam techniques and/or other repeated or egregious violations of Google's quality guidelines.

- **Cloaked images:** Some of a site's images may display differently in Google's search results than when viewed on the site.

- **Hidden text & keyword stuffing:** Some of a site's pages may contain hidden text or keyword stuffing, which are techniques not allowed by Google's Webmaster Guidelines.

- **AMP content mismatch:** There is a difference in content between the AMP version and its canonical web page.

- **Sneaky mobile redirect:** Some pages on a site redirect mobile device users to content not available to search engine crawlers.

- **News and Discover policies:** Site has violated content policies for Google News and/or Discover.

How to Know if Your Site is Impacted by a Manual Action

Unlike adjustments to search rankings that happen algorithmically, Google provides clear communication to websites when they've been hit with a manual action.

You may be notified in advance of the manual action getting implemented, as Google will sometimes offer an opportunity to correct the problem before issuing a penalty.

All this communication happens through Google Search Console, making it an essential SEO tool.

If and when a site is impacted by a manual action, Google will send a direct message via Search Console. The message will have information about why the action was taken, which pages are impacted and to what extent, and how to get back into Google's good graces.

You can find more information about any manual actions against your site in the [Search Console Manual Action report](#).

How to Recover From a Manual Action

It's possible to recover from all manual actions, as long as the necessary steps are taken.

Google [will never permanently deindex a site](#) from its search results. Some penalties may be harder to recover from than others, but it can always be done.

Recovering from a manual action requires fixing all problems identified by Google on all offending pages. When problems are fixed, site owners have to submit a reconsideration request.

A reconsideration request is exactly what it sounds like – a request for Google to reconsider the penalty it issued against a site.
Google will review the request and reverse the manual action if it finds the issues have been resolved.

Note that a site's rankings may not immediately go back to what they were, but nothing is holding the site back from moving up the SERPs again.

For more information about this process, see the chapter on reconsideration requests.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Manual Action as a Ranking Factor

Although a manual action results in pages or sites being ranked lower or omitted from search results, it is not technically a ranking factor.

A manual action is a Google penalty, it's the most severe of penalties, and should be avoided at all costs.

META DESCRIPTIONS

By **Miranda Miller**

Are Meta Descriptions a Google Ranking Factor?

Meta descriptions can help appear in search results and social media, enticing people to click through and visit a site.

They can help search engines like Google understand what a web page is all about, too.

If you run a site audit using one of many SEO tools, you may find a flag or warning about missing or duplicate meta descriptions. This could suggest that you need to make sure each page has a unique meta description, as part of your SEO strategy.

But are meta descriptions actually a factor in Google's search ranking algorithm?

THE CLAIM

Meta Descriptions as a Ranking Factor

The idea here is that if you write an optimized meta description, it will help you rank higher in Google search results.

Since we're talking about a field with fairly limited space, the conventional wisdom is that you should use your target keyword phrase in the meta description as SEO best practice.

Yoast is considered one of the definitive experts as far as meta descriptions go. At the time of publication, the Yoast WordPress SEO plugin was in use on over 7.9 million sites.

And here's what Yoast recommends as far as meta descriptions go:

- Keep it up to 155 characters.

- Use your focus keyword.

- Make sure it matches the content of the page.

If and how often you use the focus keyword in your meta description is part of the SEO evaluation Yoast provides:

- ● <u>Keyphrase in meta description</u>: Keyphrase or synonym appear in the meta description. Well done!

- ● <u>Meta description length</u>: Well done!

All of this seems to suggest that optimizing your meta description is essential for SEO.

But does Google actually use it to determine your ranking?

THE EVIDENCE

Meta Descriptions as a Ranking Factor

In a <u>video</u> published on the Google Search Central channel in August 2020, Google's Search Advocate Martin Splitt said of meta descriptions:

> **"Please don't forget to add them to your mobile pages.
> They matter a lot for Googlebot, as well."**

Almost immediately, an SEO professional <u>tweeted Splitt</u> asking for any additional details.

[Splitt responded](#) that the meta description and page title not only provide searchers a first impression but also:

> **"...helps Google Search to get a short summary of what you consider important about the page."**

Now, this caught a bit of attention. The widely-held belief among SEO pros is that meta descriptions lost any ranking value they may have had a long time ago.

As Ann Donnelly [wrote even back in 2011](#),

> **"Most of us know that while the search engines no longer consider the meta description in their ranking factors, this element of your page is still important in getting traffic to your site."**

Could it be that after all this time, Google actually does use meta descriptions as a ranking factor?

No.

Here's why.

The Evidence Against Meta Descriptions as a Ranking Factor

John Mueller was quick to clarify:

Now, there's a healthy skepticism amongst SEO pros that Google perhaps isn't entirely honest and open about ranking factors. Maybe you choose not to take Mueller at his word.

Even so, meta descriptions as a ranking signal just doesn't hold water. First, it's ridiculously easy to manipulate. Just put the keywords you want to rank for in there and voilà! Instant signal to Google that you should rank for that keyword phrase.

That was indeed the belief system in 2005-2008 or so when I was writing for sites like About.com, Demand Media, and Suite101.com.

Back then, on-page optimization was quite formulaic and you could literally change up keywords in your title, meta description, subheadings, etc. and see rankings change dramatically.

And that's exactly why the meta description lost any value as a ranking signal.

Matt Cutts' 2009 explanation of why meta keywords were removed from the algorithm sheds some light on their thinking around meta descriptions at the time, as well:

> **"About a decade ago, search engines judged pages only on the content of web pages, not any so-called 'off-page' factors such as the links pointing to a web page.**
>
> **...Because the keywords meta tag was so often abused, many years ago Google began disregarding the keywords meta tag.**
>
> **Even though we sometimes use the description meta tag for the snippets we show, we still don't use the description meta tag in our ranking."**

Even today, the meta description you assigned to that page might not appear in search results.

In fact, a [2018 experiment](#) by the team at Yoast found that Google "often" came up with its own description to use in the search snippet. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason as to why Google found some of the meta descriptions provided inadequate, either.

Michiel Heijmans noted:

> **"It didn't matter if we'd created long or short meta descriptions and whether the description was written with a high or low keyword density."**

They also found that in two-thirds of cases, Google used content from the first paragraph on the page to populate the search snippet.

OUR VERDICT

NOT ANYMORE
RANKING FACTOR METER

Meta Descriptions as a Ranking Factor

Google does not use the meta description as a search ranking signal and hasn't since sometime between 1999 and 2003-04.

That doesn't mean they aren't an important element of your SEO strategy.

The direct benefits of meta descriptions can include:

- Improving click-through rates from search results.

- Helping to differentiate your content from competitors in the SERPs.

- Intriguing and engaging searchers, compelling them to check you out.

- Brand exposure.

Indirectly, the additional user behavior signals resulting from more – and more engaged – site visitors can support your SEO.

But on their own, meta descriptions aren't a ranking factor and haven't been for a long time.

See Brian Harnish's SEO Best Practices: How to Create Awesome Meta Descriptions for helpful tips.

META KEYWORDS

By **Kristi Hines**

Are Meta Keywords a Google Ranking Factor?

Meta keywords allow you to tell search engines what topics are covered on the page.

But can meta keywords affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between meta keywords and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Meta Keywords are a Ranking Factor

What are meta keywords? This is a meta tag that appears in the HEAD section of the page's HTML. If this chapter had meta keywords, they would look like this.

<meta name="keywords" content="meta keywords, html tags, meta tags, Google ranking factors">

Because meta keywords give you the ability to add a seemingly unlimited number of keywords to your page, their impact on search rankings has always been questioned.

THE EVIDENCE

Meta Keywords as a Ranking Factor

In 2009, Google Search Central published a post about the meta keywords tag. The first question asked is, "Does Google ever use the keywords meta tag in its web search ranking?"

The answer? No.

> **"Our web search (the well-known search at Google.com that hundreds of millions of people use each day) disregards keyword metatags completely. They simply don't have any effect in our search ranking at present."**

Why did Google begin to disregard the meta keywords tag?

> **"Because the keywords meta tag was so often abused, many years ago Google began disregarding the keywords meta tag."**

At the time, Google did not see this decision changing.

> **"It's possible that Google could use this information in the future, but it's unlikely. Google has ignored the keywords meta tag for years and currently we see no need to change that policy."**

In Google Search Central's Advanced SEO documentation, Google goes on to list the meta tags that they recognize for search. They include the meta description and meta robots.

Meta keywords, however, were not mentioned in the documentation about meta tags.

Yahoo and Bing also disregard the meta keywords tag. In 2009, Yahoo made the revelation at SMX East that the meta keywords tag has been unsupported for months.

In 2014, Bing wrote a blog post, "Blame The Meta Keyword Tag." In it, they wrote the following.

> **"Today, it's pretty clear the meta keyword tag is dead in terms of SEO value. Sure, it might have value for contextual ad systems or serve as a signal to 'bots plying the web looking for topics to target, but as far as search goes, that tag flat lined years ago as a booster."**

In 2021, Google updated a page on irrelevant keywords. In it, they reinforce the fact that you shouldn't use keywords to "...appear in a list or group, or out of context (not as natural prose)"

Further, they say that the use of keyword stuffing anywhere on your page could constitute web spam:

> **"Filling pages with keywords or numbers results in a negative user experience, and can harm your site's ranking."**

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Meta Keywords as a Ranking Factor

We know, based on what Google told us in 2009, that meta keywords are definitely not a Google ranking factor – and even at that time, they hadn't been used for "many years" before that.

Bottom line: Meta keywords are a relic of a bygone SEO era.

When do keywords matter in meta tags? They matter in the meta description. Because Google sometimes uses meta descriptions in search results, it's important to include the main keyword in a well-written meta description.

MOBILE FRIENDLINESS

By **Matt Southern**

Mobile-Friendliness as a Google Ranking Factor

Mobile devices now account for over half of all searches on the web, though desktop reigned supreme throughout much of the internet's short history.

As smartphones became more ubiquitous, mobile search grew and Google had to reevaluate its approach to ranking mobile-friendly sites.

This led to an event that's become known in the SEO community as "**mobilegeddon**."

Is that as scary as it sounds? And is mobile-friendliness a ranking factor today?

This chapter will investigate the claims and provide clarity around the impact of a mobile-friendliness on search rankings.

THE CLAIM

Mobile-Friendliness is a Ranking Factor

Websites designed to fit on mobile screens are said to benefit from a ranking boost over sites that are only optimized for desktop.

This claim stems from the fact that a greater percentage of searches are conducted on mobile devices, and the understanding that Google aims to serve pages with the best user experience.

With a majority of users searching on mobile, the best user experience can be assured by serving results that work on both mobile and desktop.

Before mobile was the dominant way people used to search Google, it was common for users to land on pages that weren't optimized for their smartphone or tablet.

Understandably, users grew frustrated with visiting pages they couldn't easily navigate.

Google found itself with a search quality issue on its hands. Without any incentive, waiting for webmasters to make their sites compatible with all devices could have taken years.

Google couldn't force sites to become mobile-friendly, and it wouldn't be fair to threaten websites with punitive action for having an outdated design.

Instead, Google went the other route by rewarding domains that opted for a mobile-friendly design on their own.

The ranking advantage gained by mobile-optimized sites spurred the adoption of responsive web design on a larger scale. Now, it's uncommon to conduct a mobile search and land on a page that isn't optimized for a smartphone.

Is that because mobile-friendliness is a ranking factor? Or are there just more mobile-friendly sites on the web?

It's likely a combination of both. Here's what the evidence says.

THE EVIDENCE

Mobile-Friendliness as a Ranking Factor

Mobilegeddon isn't a myth (though, to be clear, the name Mobilegeddon didn't originate from Google). It occurred on April 21, 2015, after being announced two months prior.

When Google launched what's officially referred to as the "mobile-friendly update," it stated:

"As we noted earlier this year, today's the day we begin globally rolling out our mobile-friendly update. We're boosting the ranking of mobile-friendly pages on mobile search results. Now searchers can more easily find high-quality and relevant results where text is readable without tapping or zooming, tap targets are spaced appropriately, and the page avoids unplayable content or horizontal scrolling."

A year later, in 2016, Google [announced](#) it would be strengthening the mobile-friendly ranking signal:

"Today we're announcing that beginning in May, we'll start rolling out an update to mobile search results that increases the effect of the ranking signal to help our users find even more pages that are relevant and mobile-friendly."

The mobile-friendly update was only designed to impact mobile search results. There was no boost for mobile-friendly sites when a user searched on desktop.

Despite mobile-friendliness being a ranking factor that has been strengthened over time, Google reminds us that user intent is a stronger signal.

A page that's not optimized for mobile can still rank in mobile search results if it's the best match for what the user is looking for.

> **"And remember, the intent of the search query is still a very strong signal — so even if a page with high quality content is not mobile-friendly, it could still rank well if it has great, relevant content."**

However, Google advises in its [Mobile-first indexing best practices](#) documentation:

> **"While it's not required to have a mobile version of your pages to have your content included in Google's Search results, it is very strongly recommended."**

OUR VERDICT

Mobile-Friendliness as a Ranking Factor

Mobile-friendliness is a confirmed Google ranking factor.

It's fair to say websites that aren't easy to navigate on mobile are at a disadvantage when it comes to search.

Businesses with outdated website designs should strongly consider upgrading in order to remain competitive in Google.

MUM

By **Miranda Miller**

Is Google's MUM a Search Ranking Factor?

At Google I/O earlier this year, Google announced that it's exploring a new technology called MUM (Multitask Unified Model) internally to help its ranking systems better understand language.

Dubbed "a new AI milestone for understanding information," MUM is designed to make it easier for Google to answer complex needs in search.

Google promises MUM will be 1,000 times more powerful than its NLP transfer learning predecessor, BERT.

It uses a model called T5, the Text-To-Text Transfer Transformer, to reframe NLP tasks into a unified text-to-text-format and develop a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge and information.

According to Google, MUM can be applied to document summarization, question answering, and classification tasks such as sentiment analysis.

Clearly, MUM is a major priority inside the Googleplex – and something that important to the search team had better on the SEO industry's radar, as well.

But is it a ranking factor in Google's search algorithms?

THE CLAIM

MUM as a Ranking Factor

Many who read the news about MUM when it was first revealed naturally wondered how it might impact search rankings (especially their own).

Google makes thousands of updates to its ranking algorithms each year and while the vast majority go unnoticed, some are impactful.

BERT is one such example. Rolled out worldwide in 2019, it was hailed the most important update in five years by Google itself.

And sure enough, BERT impacted about 10% of search queries.

RankBrain, rolled out in the spring of 2015, is another example of an algorithmic update that had a substantial impact on the SERPs.

Now that Google is talking about MUM, it's clear that SEO professionals and the clients they serve should take note.

Roger Montti recently [wrote about a patent](#) he believes could provide more insight into MUM's inner workings. That makes for an interesting read if you want to take a peek at what may be under the hood.

For now, let's just consider whether MUM is a ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

MUM as a Ranking Factor

When RankBrain rolled out, it wasn't announced until some six months afterward. And most updates aren't announced or confirmed at all.

However, Google has gotten better at sharing impactful updates before they happen.

For example, BERT was [first announced](#) in November 2018, rolled out for English-language queries in [October 2019](#), and rolled out worldwide later that year, in [December](#).

We had even more time to prepare for the Page Experience signal and Core Web Vitals, which were announced [over a year ahead](#) of the eventual rollout in [June 2021](#).

Google has already said MUM is coming and it's going to be a big deal. But could MUM be responsible for a rankings drop many sites experienced in the spring and summer of 2021?

The Evidence Against MUM as a Ranking Factor

In his May 2021 introduction to MUM, Pandu Nayak, Google Fellow and Vice President of Search, made it clear the technology isn't in play. Not yet, anyway:

> **"Today's search engines aren't quite sophisticated enough to answer the way an expert would. But with a new technology called Multitask Unified Model, or MUM, we're getting closer to helping you with these types of complex needs. So in the future, you'll need fewer searches to get things done."**

The timeline given then as to when MUM-powered features and updates would go live was "in the coming months and years."

When asked whether the industry would get a heads up when MUM goes live in search, Google Search Liaison Danny Sullivan said yes.

Danny Sullivan ✔
@dannysullivan

Replying to @rustybrick

Yes, as with BERT, I'm sure we'll let every know. We won't be mum on MUM.

10:45 PM · May 20, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

2 Retweets   **18** Likes

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

MUM as a Ranking Factor

Bottom line: Google doesn't use MUM as a search ranking signal. But it most likely will in the not-so-distant future.

Before it rolls out, Nayak promised MUM will undergo the same rigorous testing processes as BERT.

How will you optimize for MUM? That remains to be seen.

What is for sure: Google search's intelligence is growing by leaps and bounds.

As Google's search algorithms become more sophisticated and better able to determine the intent and nuance of language, attempts at trickery and manipulation will be less and less effective (and likely easier to detect).

With an NLP technology 1000x more powerful than RankBrain on the horizon, optimizing for human experience is more important than ever.

If you want to get ahead of MUM, focus on what the content you're creating means for the people whose needs it is intended to meet. The machines are inching ever closer to fully and completely experiencing that content as your intended reader/viewer does.

PAGE SPEED

By **Matt Southern**

Page Speed as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

We all go through painstaking efforts to improve page speed, in the hopes of benefitting from a ranking boost.

Google is said to prioritize speed when it comes to ranking search results, giving fast sites an advantage over sites that take longer to load.

Can a page's loading time impact its SEO? If it can, how strong of a signal is it?

We'll answer those questions in this chapter as we investigate the claims around page speed as a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Page Speed is a Ranking Factor

Pages that meet a certain threshold for speed are said to benefit from a ranking boost in Google's search results.

Speed is measured by the time it takes for a page to load after a user clicks on the link on a search engine results page (SERP) – especially now with Core Web Vitals evaluating loading, interactivity, and visual stability.

Google offers a tool called PageSpeed Insights for measuring loading time, which further fuels the claims that speed is a ranking factor.

These claims also stem from the knowledge that Google aims to serve pages that provide a superior user experience. That makes it easy to believe faster pages have an advantage in search.

It's more pleasing to have a page load instantly after clicking on it – that was the whole idea behind AMP. A SERP full of lightning-fast links sounds like a satisfying solution, but it has the potential to exclude more relevant pages that take longer to load.

That's where the argument that page speed is a ranking factor starts to fall apart. Google says time and again that relevance is the number one ranking factor.

If fast pages were automatically boosted, they could be served ahead of content that provides a better answer to the user's query.

This would be a disservice to searchers, as it sacrifices quality at the expense of speed.

In short, there are claims for and against page speed as a ranking factor. The weight of this supposed signal is hotly debated within the SEO industry.

Let's look at the evidence in the next section and clear up a few misunderstandings.

THE EVIDENCE

Page Speed as a Ranking Factor

Speed has been a Google ranking factor from as far back as 2010.

An April 2010 announcement confirms Google's search algorithm would start taking speed into account when ranking search results:

> **"Like us, our users place a lot of value in speed — that's why we've decided to take site speed into account in our search rankings."**

This update applied to desktop search results, and what's considered fast on desktop may load comparatively slow on a mobile device.

To be sure, mobile searchers were still getting served frustratingly slow pages — that is, until nearly a decade later.

Iin July 2018, Google made page speed a ranking factor for mobile search results.

A company announcement states:

> **"Users want to find answers to their questions quickly and data shows that people really care about how quickly their pages load. The Search team announced speed would be a ranking signal for desktop searches in 2010 and as of this month (July 2018), page speed will be a ranking factor for mobile searches too."**

Google continues to take page speed into account when serving search results, though the company confirms the original signal was replaced by the page experience signal.

Google's John Mueller states on Twitter:

> **"We try to avoid unnecessary duplication in our code, so Ii would assume [the page experience update] replaces the previous speed ranking factors."**

For more on how Google's page experience update evaluates speed, see our chapter on Core Web Vitals.

OUR VERDICT

Page Speed as a Ranking Factor

Page speed is a confirmed ranking factor for Google's search results.

The speed that needs to be met to benefit from this ranking signal is constantly changing. Currently, it can be met by achieving Google's minimum thresholds for Core Web Vitals.

It bears repeating that speed doesn't carry as much weight as the relevance of a page. So keep that in mind when deciding where to devote SEO resources.

PHYSICAL PROXIMITY TO SEARCHER

By **Miranda Miller**

Physical Proximity to Searcher: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Close to [a third](#) of all Google searches have local intent – that is, the searcher is looking for something nearby or located in a specific area.

Often (but now always) when Google determines there is local intent, it will display top local results in a Map Pack at the top of the search results.

Businesses can appear in organic search results for queries with local intent, too.

Does how physically close the searcher is to the business impact rankings? Let's see.

THE CLAIM

Physical Proximity to Searcher is a Ranking Factor

The idea here is that the distance between a physical location of the business and a searcher is a key ranking factor in local search.

THE EVIDENCE

Physical Proximity as a Ranking Factor

The searcher's proximity to the place of business fell from #1 to #3 in Moz's industry [survey-based list](#) of local search ranking factors in 2020.

This isn't just a commonly held belief among SEO professionals, though.

Google [flat out tells us](#) that proximity is one of the three big factors in determining local search ranking:

"Local results are based primarily on relevance, distance, and prominence. A combination of these factors helps us find the best match for your search.

"Distance considers how far each potential search result is from the location term used in a search. If a user doesn't specify a location in their search, we'll calculate distance based on what we do know about their location."

Why would Google show someone a list of pizza shops in Toronto, Canada, if they were wandering the streets of Medellin, Colombia, looking for a slice?

The big question for local SEO pros and business owners is, how do you make your location is clear to Google to ensure you appear in relevant search results?

There are a few concrete ways:

• Ensure citations (local listings) are accurate and that your business appears where people are searching for local products, services, etc.

• [Claim]() and [verify]() your Google My Business listing.

- Get your Google Maps API Key and optimize for Places and Routes to provide searchers a more immersive, richer experience.

- For Service Area Businesses, ensure that your profile has been set up correctly so you aren't violating Google's guidelines for representing the business correctly.

Demonstrating Proximity Without Physical Closeness

Beyond that, you can help Google understand the context of your location for relevant local queries and also improve your prospective customers' experience with content optimizations.

For example, Google may be aware of your location's map pin and understand that your location is at the crossroads of First Ave and Lyon St S in Ottawa.
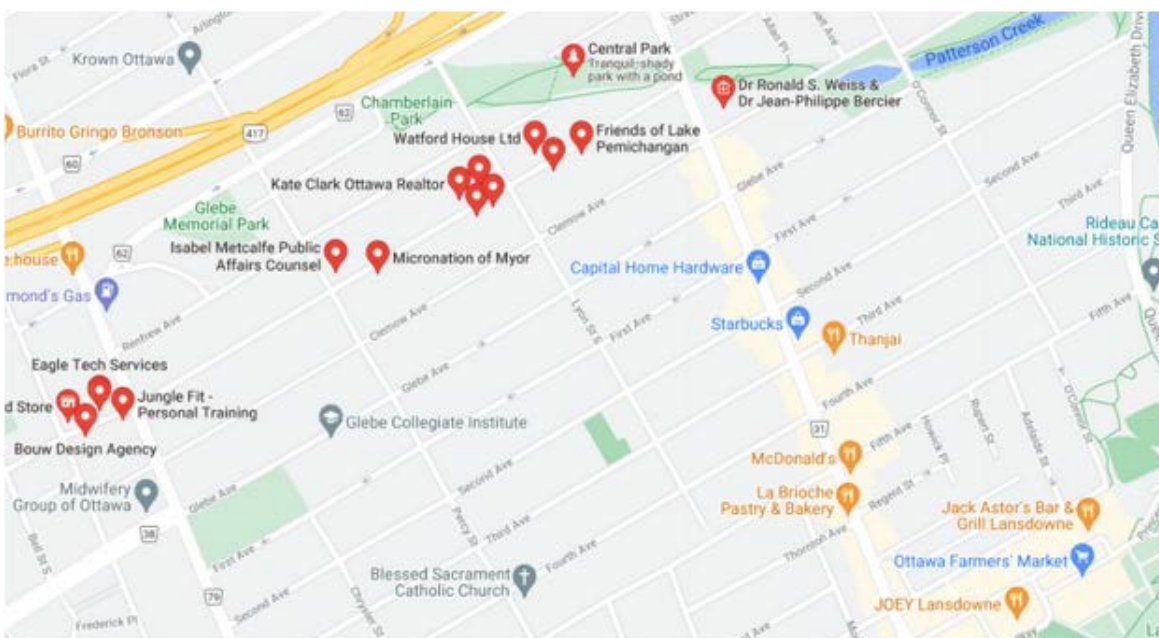
Google knows this neighborhood is called The Glebe, so you're already optimizing for searches like [restaurants in the glebe] and [dinner nearby] if the searcher is close to your physical location by virtue of having a verified GMB profile and accurate citations.

But – to borrow a few examples from sports – what about [dinner before the Jay's game]?

Or how about [senators game dinner]?

I'm nowhere near the cities where these two teams play, and the query doesn't have enough local intent to draw a MapPack.

But maybe I'm heading there tomorrow. So who's going to help me find dinner?

The first restaurant I find in the top 10 organic Google results for the Senators example isn't even a website or local listing; it's a Facebook post:
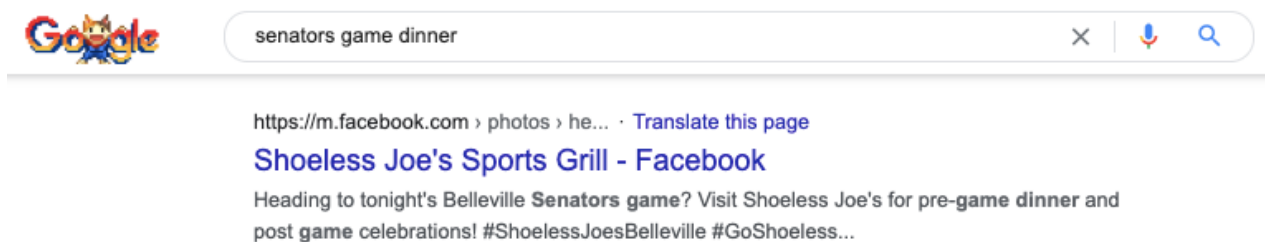
It's a smart play to talk about what's going on locally in your blog posts, GMB posts, social media, etc.

Here's another example of demonstrating proximity to the searcher's need when you may not be physically closest to the searcher at the time of the query, yet you're physically close to the need:
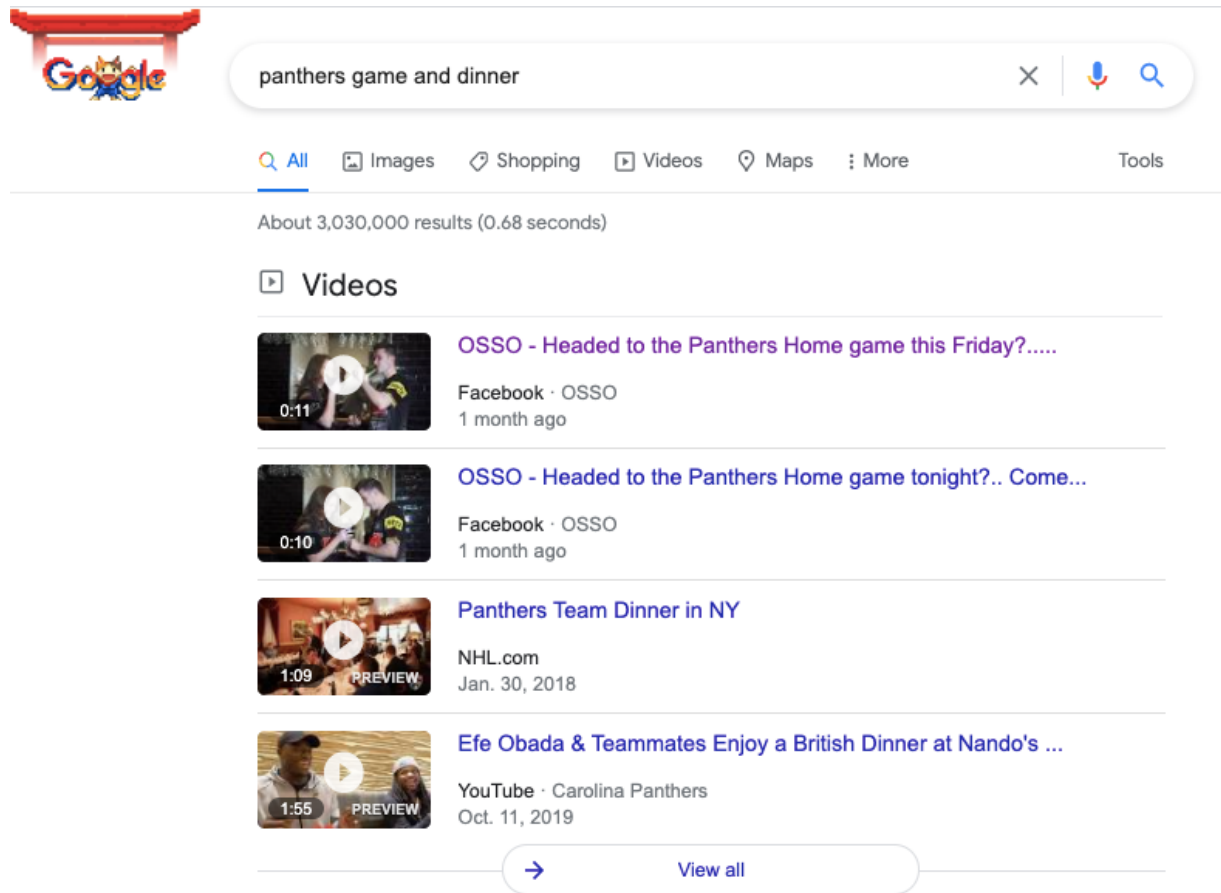
The restaurant, OSSO, is using video to appear in position zero search results for this locally relevant query even though I'm currently 1,550 miles away.

If you want to get in front of searchers who are making plans but not yet in the immediate vicinity, create locally relevant content.

OUR VERDICT

CONFIRMED
RANKING FACTOR METER

Physical Proximity to Searcher as a Ranking Factor

Yes, Google uses proximity/distance as a search ranking signal.

And it's important that you don't simply leave it to Google to surface your business only where the searcher expressly uses a location term or Google can tell where they are.

Mention local organizations, sports teams, neighborhoods, or activities in your content so Google has more ways to tell when you're physically close to the searcher's need.

Think of your [customer personas](#) and the problems you may be able to solve for different types of people. Make sure you're incorporating local information into your content where it makes sense so Google can tell you meet any local intent.

RANKBRAIN

By **Matt Southern**

RankBrain as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Without knowing what "RankBrain" means, people new to SEO may assume it refers to a technology Google uses to rank search results.

That assumption isn't far off, but not every component of Google's search algorithm is a ranking factor in and of itself.

In this chapter we'll investigate the claims around RankBrain as a ranking factor and provide clarity on what RankBrain is and how it's used in search results.

THE CLAIM

RankBrain is a Ranking Factor

RankBrain is a technology that's said to impact how Google returns search results. Due to its association with search, RankBrain is commonly referred to as a ranking factor.

If you're new to SEO, you may hear that and start to think RankBrain is one more signal you have to optimize for. But that's exactly not how it works.

The next section goes over what RankBrain is designed to do, and when it's called upon by Google to assist with answering queries.

THE EVIDENCE

Is RankBrain a Ranking Factor?

RankBrain is an artificial intelligence (AI) system introduced in 2015 to help Google with returning results for queries that have never been searched before.

That changed somewhere between the spring of 2015 and 2016 when an unannounced update was made to RankBrain which integrated the AI into all queries.

This information was revealed in a Wired article, which notes Google isn't clear on how RankBrain improves all queries but it **does** affect rankings.

From [Wired](#):

> **"Google is characteristically fuzzy on exactly how it improves search (something to do with the long tail? Better interpretation of ambiguous requests?) but [Google engineer Jeff Dean] says that RankBrain is "involved in every query," and affects the actual rankings "probably not in every query but in a lot of queries."**

What differentiates RankBrain from other Google algorithms is its ability to learn how to answer more ambiguous queries.

As [Google's Gary Illyes explains](#), this is accomplished through making educated guesses at what a user would likely click on for a never-before-seen query.

> **"RankBrain is a PR-sexy machine learning ranking component that uses historical search data to predict what would a user most likely click on for a previously unseen query."**

RankBrain allows Google to solve problems it used to run into with traditional algorithms.

Contrary to popular theories about how RankBrain works, it does not use data gathered from users' interactions with a web page. RankBrain relies more on data gathered from users' interactions with search results.

Illyes provides further clarity:

> **"It is a really cool piece of engineering that saved our butts countless times whenever traditional algos were like, e.g. "oh look a "not" in the query string! let's ignore the hell out of it!", but it's generally just relying on (sometimes) months old data about what happened on the results page itself, not on the landing page."**

In short – RankBrain is a machine learning system that allows Google's search algorithm to deliver more relevant results. This is thought to be accomplished through an improved understanding of ambiguous queries and long-tail keywords.

RankBrain uses data gathered from users' interactions with search results to predict which pages will likely get clicked on for a brand new search query.

OUR VERDICT

RankBrain as a Ranking Factor

Google has confirmed that RankBrain is used to rank search results and it is involved in all queries.

In 2016, Andrey Lipattsev, a Google Search Quality Senior Strategist at Google, said RankBrain was one of the three most important ranking signals (along with content and links). RankBrain continues to play an important role in search results today.

RankBrain differs from traditional ranking factors in that there's not an obvious way to actively optimize for it.

How do you optimize for ambiguous keywords or queries that no one's ever entered into Google before?

The only option is to provide Google with as much information about a page as possible, which is something site owners should be doing anyway if they're creating holistic content for users.

Illyes was asked this question once and replied witha similar sentiment: "you optimize your content for users and thus for RankBrain. That hasn't changed."

Search Engine Journal VIP Contributor Dave Davies provides more advanced tips for communicating information to Google regarding different entities on a page in A Complete Guide to the Google RankBrain Algorithm.

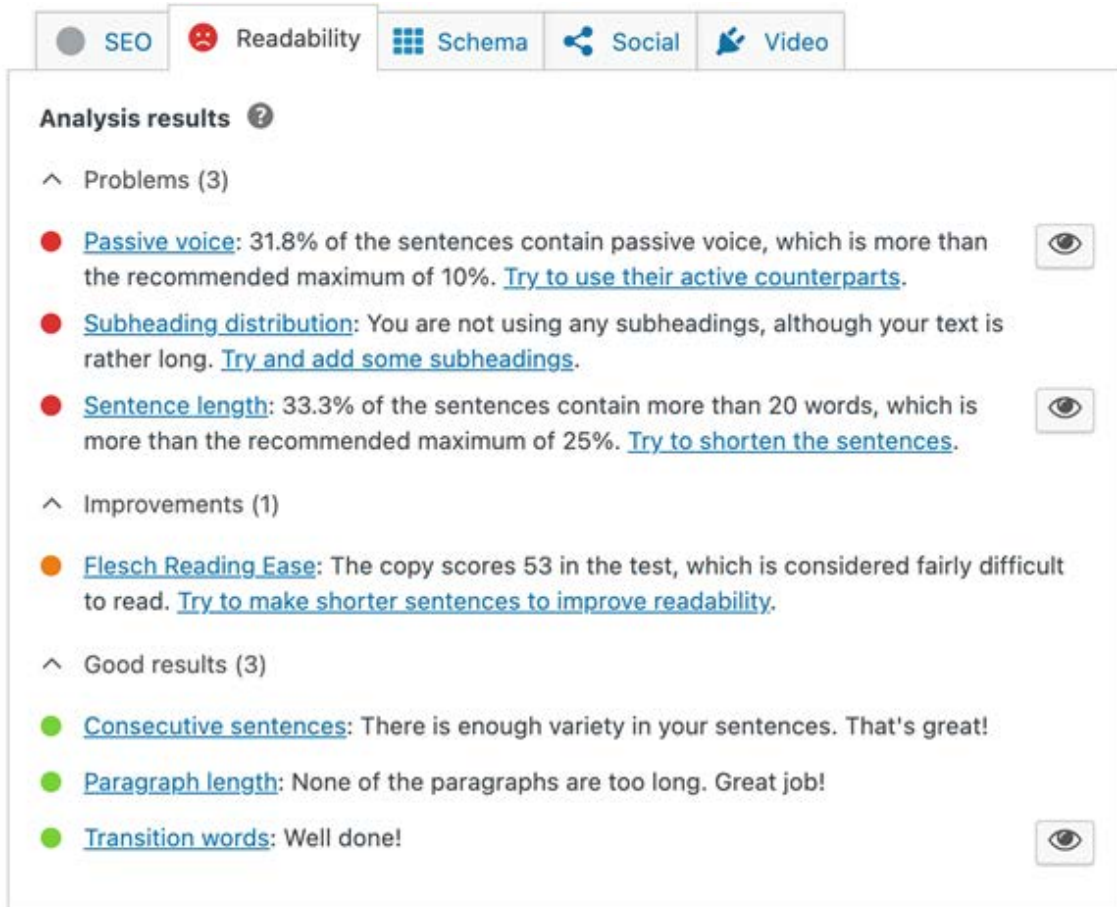# READING LEVEL

By **Anna Crowe**

Reading Level: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Out of all the ranking factors, reading level is one plagued with misconceptions from those within the SEO community (and those outside of it, too).

Many tools integrate readability into their grading system, such as the Yoast's SEO WordPress plugin:

It's becoming increasingly important to address these myths. How important is it that you edit and write to perfection to get into the green?

So, when it comes to reading levels, how much of this is essential to pay attention to? Can a better readability score actually help boost your rankings?

In this article, we'll answer whether readability is a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Reading Level is a Ranking Factor

Those new to SEO and writing can quickly become borderline-obsessed with getting their readability score into the green with Yoast.

And, they're often when they don't notice a change in rankings overnight.

But, the truth is, reading level is not about rankings, and eliminating passive voice won't propel you to the top organic position on Page 1. Neither will writing your content at a Grade 6 level vs. Grade 11.

Really, what's important when writing and optimizing your content is that you need to understand the intent behind the words you use and make sure it's right for your target audience.

THE EVIDENCE

Reading Level is not a Ranking Factor

Let's start with the first question: Is reading level a ranking factor?

No. Reading level is not a ranking factor.

On January 23, 2018, in a Google Webmaster Office Hours, Google's Senior Webmaster Trends Analyst, John Mueller, confirmed that reading level is not a ranking factor. He was asked about the readability and how Google looks at this.

Mueller responded stating:

> **"From an SEO point of view, it's probably not something that you need to focus on. In the sense that, as far as I know, we don't have the kind of these basic algorithms that just count words and try to figure out what the reading level is based on these existing algorithms.**
>
> **But it is something that you should figure out for your audience."**

You can watch Mueller's response below in the Google Webmaster Hangout.

Portent ran a [study analyzing the reading grade level]of 756,297 pieces of content for 30,000 desktop search queries. The study determined there is no correlation between ranking on Google and the reading level of a page.

So, should you care about reading level when it comes to SEO?

Yes! In the same Google Webmaster Hangout, Mueller connected the dots between reading level and search intent:

"So that's something where I see a lot of issues come up in that a website will be kind of talking past their audience.

So... a common example is a medical site. You want to provide medical information for the general public because you know they're worried about this. And all of your articles use these medical words that are 20 characters long. Technically, it's all correct.

You could calculate the reading level score of that content. You come up with a number.

But it's not a matter of Google using that reading level score and saying, this is good or bad., But rather, does it match what the people are searching for? And, if nobody's searching for those long words, then nobody's going to find your content. Or, if they do find your content, they're going to be like..., I don't know what this means."

Google has also released a few hints to point toward the idea that reading level is incorporated into the search algorithms.

In December 2010, Google released the "Reading Level" advanced search filter but later removed the reading level filter in May 2015.

More recently, Google has been developing machine learning models like BERT and MUM that aim to understand language and content quality.

But, again, there is no evidence to confirm that reading level is a ranking factor. Reading level is about understanding your audience and writing for them. It's not about the "perfect score."

Keep an easy-to-read flow using short sentences. For example, I aim to keep my reading level between grades 6-8 as a guide using the Hemingway App.

OUR VERDICT

Reading Level as a Ranking Signal

Writing content for your audience requires time, a little TLC, and patience. But, forcing your writing to adapt to a specific reading level isn't necessary to rank better.

There are many theories floating around about whether reading level is a ranking factor. But, you heard it directly from Mueller himself – reading level is not part of the algorithms.

RECONSIDERATION REQUESTS

By **Matt Southern**

Are Reconsideration Requests a Google Ranking Factor?

Reconsideration requests are indirectly related to search rankings, as they're an essential step in the process of recovering from a Google manual penalty.

They make the difference between a site getting reinstated in search results or remaining deindexed.

Reconsideration requests play an important role in SEO when rankings are manually held down by Google, but it's not accurate to call them a "ranking factor."

Here's more about the relationship between reconsideration requests and search rankings, and how they can get your site out of a critical situation.

THE CLAIM

Reconsideration Requests are a Ranking Factor

All site owners should be familiar with reconsideration requests. At the same time, you hope you never have to deal with one firsthand.

If you're dealing with a reconsideration request, it means a site you're working with has been hit by a manual action (aka a Google penalty). The site is now either demoted in search results or entirely removed from Google's index.

You may have heard submitting a reconsideration request can help remove a manual penalty and get your site ranking in Google again.

Yes, that's what they're designed to do. Site owners must submit a reconsideration request in order to recover from a manual action.

There's more work involved in submitting a request than it sounds, however, and if the necessary steps aren't completed the request will be denied.

The next section goes over what's involved in the reconsideration request process and how to submit one that meets Google's approval.

THE EVIDENCE

Reconsideration Requests as a Ranking Factor

According to a Google Search Console help documents:

> **"A reconsideration request is a request to have Google review your site after you fix problems identified in a manual action or security issues notification."**

A reconsideration request does not apply in situations where a site is demoted in Google's search rankings for reasons unrelated to a manual action, such as a broad core algorithm update. It's reserved only for manual actions or security issues.

As Google's document states, site owners will be notified if and when they're required to submit a reconsideration request. The notification will state what specifically led to the penalty and what needs to be done to recover from it.

When all of the issues listed in Google's message are fixed, it's time to move on to the next step.

Open the "Manual Actions" report in Google Search Console and click the "Request Review" button.

Requests are submitted in the form of .txt files containing a written explanation of what was done to recover from the penalty.

[According to Google](#), a good request does three things:

- Explains the exact quality issue on your site.

- Describes the steps you've taken to fix the issue.

- Documents the outcome of your efforts.

Be as thorough as possible when writing a request, because the onus is on you to prove you've done what was required to recover from the penalty.

After a request is submitted, do not resubmit a new request until you've heard back from Google regarding the first one. Google reviews and responds to all requests whether they're approved or denied.

If Google approves the request then the penalty will be lifted. If the request is denied, another one can be submitted after further effort to address the lingering issues.

It's possible there are no persistent issues and the request was denied because it didn't include enough detail. That's another reason it's important to document your work.

If you fixed an issue, but didn't tell Google about it in the reconsideration request, it won't count toward your penalty recovery.

OUR VERDICT

Reconsideration Requests as a Ranking Factor

Reconsideration requests are loosely connected to rankings but it's inaccurate to call them a ranking factor.

In fact, there's no guarantee that a site will regain the same rankings it once had after recovering from a penalty.

A site can, and likely will, rank much lower after a penalty because previous rankings were achieved by violating Google's guidelines.

Google's John Mueller stated as much while advising site owners to adjust their expectations after recovering from a manual action penalty:

"The other thing to keep in mind with manual actions in general is that, if you clean up a manual action, that essentially means in the past your website was ranking in an artificial situation.

The manual action kind of took care of that. And if you clean it up so that the manual action is no longer necessary, then your website is ranking in a different situation.

It can happen that it's very similar to before, but it can also happen that your previous positions in search were artificially, strongly, inflated due to the things that the manual action was looking at."

A reconsideration request has no inherent benefit to a site's rankings, other than getting it out of the Google penalty box.
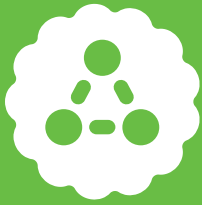
RELEVANCE, DISTANCE & PROMINENCE

By **Kristi Hines**

Relevance, Distance & Prominence as Google Ranking Factors: What You Need to Know

Local businesses that want more traffic from search must improve their local rankings.

But can prominence, distance, and relevance affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between prominence, distance, and relevance and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Relevance, Distance, and Prominence are Ranking Factors

What are relevance, distance, and prominence in relation to local businesses?

Relevance determines how closely the search user's query matches information about a local business.

While Google can pull information from around the web, the best way to ensure relevance is with a completed Google My Business listing. Think about the keywords you have optimized your website for – these same keywords for products and services should appear in your GMB listing.

Distance determines how close the search user is to local businesses based on the user's browser information.

The closer the search user is from a local business, the more likely that business is to appear in the local maps results. The exception is if another local business better matches the relevance of the search query. It may have more visibility in search results than closer, less relevant businesses.

Prominence determines how popular a local business is offline. "For example, famous museums, landmark hotels, or well-known store brands are also likely to be prominent in local search results."

THE EVIDENCE

Relevance, Distance & Prominence as Ranking Factors

In the Google My Business Help Center, Google specifically says:

> **"Local results are based primarily on relevance, distance, and prominence. A combination of these factors helps us find the best match for your search. For example, our algorithms might decide that a business that's farther away from your location is more likely to have what you're looking for than a business that's closer, and therefore rank it higher in local results."**

To improve each of these factors for your business, Google suggests you complete your business details in Google My Business. These details help Google determine your business's relevance to a user's search query and distance from the user.

For prominence, "More reviews and positive ratings can improve your business' local ranking."

In 2018, Moz released their study of the top ranking factors. The top three signals were from Google My Business, links, and reviews. This aligns with Google's recommendations to update your Google My Business profile and to acquiring more reviews.

OUR VERDICT

Relevance, Distance, and Prominence as Ranking Factors

Prominence, distance, and relevance were confirmed by Google via the Google My Business Help Center.

In addition to entering your complete business details into Google My Business, Google also suggests the following to increase your visibility in local search results.

- Verify each of your business locations to increase the likelihood that your business is close to applicable search users.

- Keep your business hours up to date and accurate.

- Manage and respond to all reviews, both positive and negative.

- Add photos that showcase your business, products, and services.

For better prominence, focus on increasing mentions of your business within your local community and beyond. The more times Google sees your positive mentions, ratings, and reviews for your business, the more likely your visibility on Google will increase.

Also make sure to read our chapter on Local Citations & NAP (Name, Address, Phone Number).

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT, EVEN WHEN THEY'RE WRONG – HOW REVIEWS CAN MAKE OR BREAK A LOCAL BUSINESS

By **Chris Shirlow, Director of Content Marketing, 1SEO**

There's no doubt how important Google Reviews are to the overall marketing strategy and success for local businesses in today's digital landscape.

With search engines more saturated than ever, a company needs to leverage consumer ratings to separate themselves from the pack and control the conversation when it comes to something as valuable as their reputation.

If you're anything like me or the 87% of consumers who used online reviews for local businesses in 2020, you probably already know what Google reviews are, and you can likely surmise the dramatic impact they can have on a local business.

However, for the uninitiated – or just as a refresher – let's start with basics.

What Is a Google Review?

Let's say you're visiting Philadelphia. You want to get a cheesesteak, but there are so many options from which you can choose.

Do you visit one of the famous tourist destinations like Pat's or Geno's? Should you go with a hometown favorite like Jim's or Tony Luke's?

How do you know which shop has the best cheesesteak?

Enter Google Reviews.

Google Reviews appear on a business' Google My Business (GMB) listing and can either be posted as summaries or in their entirety.

So when you Google "cheesesteaks near me," the local search results or map will typically show a few nearby options and the ratings that each cheesesteak shop has. This allows you to read about real customers' interactions with the business, its employees, and most importantly – the cheesesteaks!

From there, you can make your decision, tap "find directions," and indulge yourself in a memorable culinary experience.

As you chew, you realize your initial quest for the best shop in town has taken on a new inquiry about what led you to this tasty delight: How exactly do Google Reviews work?

How Do Google Reviews Work?

When it comes to Google reviews, it's all about the algorithm. Your search results for "cheesesteak near me" are generally based on a combination of the number of reviews, average rating, and proximity of each shop to the user.

So it stands to reason that in many cases, local businesses who have the most – and best – reviews will be at the top of those searches.

Clearly, it behooves any local business to garner, manage, and respond to their Google Reviews, encouraging further online engagement and interactions with their customers along the way.

In fact, leaving a Google Review is quick and easy for customers. They can simply go to the "reviews" section in the GMB search results, write about their experience, rate it on a scale from one to five stars, and click or tap "post."

Boom – done!

This effortless but impactful act can have significant consequences – either advantageous or unfavorable – for local businesses.

But why?

It comes down to trust.

In Google We Trust: Why Credibility and Trust Are Everything

While a local business's products or services should be incredible, the business itself – and its reputation – should be credible.

But what does that mean?

For starters, let's examine some stats.

According to research, 70% of people trust reviews over ads. That means more than two-thirds of users trust the opinion of a complete stranger more than they do a company or brand.

Not only that, but an overwhelming 91% of 18-34-year-olds trust online reviews just as much as they do their friends and family.

Trust is hard to earn but easy to lose. So when a user sees outstanding reviews for a business, it lends them automatic credibility and can even boost their sales.

In fact, customers are usually willing to spend 31% more on a business with superior reviews. Conversely, just a few negative reviews can cause a local business's credibility – and profitability – to plummet; 92% of consumers say that they would be less likely to use a business because of negative reviews.

Gaining a consumer's trust is incredibly essential to turning them from potential customer to satisfied patron, but there are plenty of other reasons why Google Reviews are so important.

Why Are Google Reviews So Important?

The answer is simple – because consumers want to know they're getting a quality product or service from a trusted company.

And as I already mentioned, they typically trust reviews over advertisements. Only 48% of consumers consider buying from a business that has below four-star ratings, so those cheesesteaks better be darn good.

Helps to Improve Local SEO Efforts

Google is in the business of serving up the most relevant results for users' local searches, and they rely heavily on the experiences, opinions, and impressions of real-life customers who had direct interaction with businesses in the area.

In fact, for all the complexity of Google's algorithm and its over 200 ranking components, we know that user-generated reviews and a website's reputation play a critical factor in determining its local SEO performance.

A company with a significant number of positive reviews can get ranked higher than its competitor in a local search query.

Offers an Opportunity to Enhance Product/Service Offerings

A negative review can give a business owner genuine, firsthand feedback on everything from their products or services to their employees and more.

Think about it – it's free research and development!

It's precisely through these insights that a business can improve its offerings and enhance its overall brand, upgrading the customer experience in the process.

Establishes Trust and Builds Social Proof

Trust, credibility, and social proof all go hand in hand. If a business respects its customers and stays open and transparent with them, it provides social proof that its brand is honest, forthright, and deserving of a new customer's business.

Boosts Traffic and Click-Through Rates

This one's pretty straightforward – an extensive collection of favorable, high-quality reviews can entice customers to click on a link that helps drive traffic and increase conversions.

Positive reviews aren't just one of the primary things that users see when they search for local products or services; they're also the 2nd-most influential GMB conversion factor.

Consequently, Google Reviews help to establish a good first impression with searchers, helping to increase traffic and convert it into bona fide sales.

How to Get Google Reviews

OK, so by now, you know what Google Reviews are and understand that harnessing their power is a critical element of the customer acquisition process.

However, the question remains – How do you get Google Reviews? The good news is that it's not too complicated.

Each of these facets of getting Google Reviews are crucial in their own right, but they work best in conjunction.

Let's dive in:

Optimize Your Google My Business (GMB) Listing

The first step for a local business to start getting Google Reviews is to claim ownership of the company on GMB. Once this is complete, the GMB listing can be optimized by ensuring all the information (company name, physical address, hours of operation, etc.) is accurate and up to date.

Additionally, it's always a good idea to include some high-resolution images to help stand out from the competition.

According to Google, GMB listings with photos typically get more clicks than listings without imagery, so make sure you add pictures of your logo, business exterior, interior, product(s), staff, etc., to make a good first impression.

Ask for Them

This might sound like common sense, but it's important to remember that reviews likely won't just come tumbling in.

Just as if you wanted extra onions on your cheesesteak, when it comes to getting Google Reviews – you need to ask!

And while 72% of customers are willing to leave a review if asked, you need to have an outreach strategy in place to ensure you're acquiring them regularly.

One thing to remember is to consider the timing of when you ask for the review.

There are a few opportunistic occasions when it's best to request a review, including:

- Once a job is complete.
- After a favorable phone conversation.
- Following a sale.
- When the bill is sent.
- During a face-to-face interaction.

Understanding your customers' preferred methods of communication – including in-person, email, and everything in between – can further mobilize your review outreach initiatives.

Make It Easy

Remember when I said that 72% of customers are willing to leave a review if asked?

Well, the crucial phrase here is "if asked." According to research, only 1 in 10 customers always post reviews, leaving businesses with a 90%-sized gap in their review potential.

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In many cases, it may simply be because they weren't asked (see above); in other instances, it's because the process is confusing, has too many steps, or is just flat out a pain in the butt.

By streamlining the reviews process, you make it simple, straightforward, and quick for your customers to leave a review.

A few easy methods include:

- **Creating a short link:** A custom-made short link to your business's review page can make it fast and convenient for them to write a review – all they need to do is simply click on the link.

- **Requesting a review by text:** Perfect for those in HVAC and other home service industries, a text message campaign with your custom short link can be sent to customers.

- **An email marketing campaign:** Send your short link out via an email blast to all your contacts.

Remember: All reviews, good and bad, present an opportunity to improve what's working well and ameliorate what's falling short of the mark, so treat them accordingly.

Reviews Best Practices

Remember, it's not enough just to merely "get reviews" – Google wants to see that you're engaged and interacting with them. Always follow best practices when managing your reviews.

Respond to Every Review

Positive reviews can be replied to with a simple "thank you" and perhaps even a short message, while negative reviews typically require a more detailed response (more on that later).

Either way, it's imperative to reply to all reviews in a timely manner to let your customers know their experience matters.

Don't Incentivize Reviews

Google wants to see reviews that are honest and unbiased. Avoid incentivizing the review process with gift cards or other free giveaways and never, ever buy reviews.

Not only are both in violation of Google's review policy, but it's just bad business.

If reviews aren't coming in as abundantly as you'd like, take some time to review your outreach campaign and see where you can make improvements.

Don't Review-Gate

Discouraging or prohibiting negative reviews will only result in a lack of authenticity. Let your customers know it's OK to leave a negative review.

Similarly, don't cherry pick favorable reviews. Be open and honest – customers will appreciate the transparency.

Share Positive Reviews

If you're getting positive reviews, use them to your advantage. Post them as a testimonial on the website, add them to your Facebook page, feature them in your email marketing campaigns, and share them with the world!

What to Do About Negative Reviews

Of course, not every review will be enthusiastic. Some may be downright vitriolic; others will be way off-base. However, that doesn't mean they're not as crucial to your business's growth as a positive review.

In fact, one might say negative reviews can be more valuable and beneficial than positive ones, considering the fact that they offer candid feedback and opportunities to make improvements to your services, product, and overall customer experience.

Here's a snapshot of things to keep in mind:

- Respond quickly and professionally.
- Don't ever share personal data or attack their person.
- Investigate why the person left a negative review.
- Be honest and control the conversation.
- Make things right if they're wrong – potential customers want to see how you handle these types of things before giving you their business.
- Apologize when appropriate.
- In the event the review violates Google's posting guidelines, you can flag it and request to have it removed if deemed inappropriate.

A Google Reviews...Review?

Not only are Google Reviews vital in establishing and building brand reputation and trust, driving local traffic (literally and figuratively), and increasing sales; they're absolutely free.

And if you're not using them, your competitors probably are.

The bottom line is, if you aren't using Google Reviews for local business, you should be. To paraphrase a famous saying: the best time to be using Google Reviews was five years ago; the second-best time is right now.

So what are you waiting for? Your cheesesteak is getting cold!

REVIEW SENTIMENT

By **Matt Southern**

Review Sentiment: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Review sentiment reflects the prevailing opinion shared by customers in reviews of a business's products or services.

Whether the sentiment is positive or negative is thought by some to have an impact on a business's search rankings.

There's legitimate concern over those claims, as it would leave businesses vulnerable to negative SEO attacks if rankings could be lowered with bad reviews.

Conversely, there's concern about competitors artificially inflating their rankings with fake positive reviews.

There's no question review sentiment can influence consumer behavior and impact metrics like conversion rate. But does it have any influence on Google's search rankings?

Let's look at the claims and evidence surrounding review sentiment as a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Review Sentiment is a Ranking Factor

Review sentiment gets brought up in discussions about Google ranking factors, with some claiming that a positive sentiment can boost rankings and a negative sentiment can lower rankings.

There are a number of reasons for these claims. One of the most frequently cited pieces of "evidence" is the correlation between high ranking websites and businesses that have positive reviews.

Sentiment analysis happens to be a feature included in SEO software, which may lead to the conclusion that review sentiment has an impact on search rankings.

Search Engine Journal's Roger Montti published an article with more detail on where the claims around sentiment originate from and why they persist.

In addition to what's mentioned in Montti's article, Google's Search Quality Rater guidelines play a role in keeping review sentiment a recurring topic amongst SEOs.

Google's Search Quality Rater Guidelines

Google lends credence to the claim that review sentiment is a ranking factor in its Search Quality Rater guidelines.

Section 2.6 of the guidelines tells Google's Quality Raters what to look for when assessing the reputation of a website or content creator.

There are a number of notes about checking review sites to understand more about a business's reputation.

Here's an example:

> **"Customer reviews can be helpful for assessing the reputation of a store or business. However, you should interpret these reviews with care, particularly if there are only a few. Be skeptical of both positive and negative user reviews. Anyone can write them, including the creator of the website or someone the store or business hires for this purpose."**

Some have drawn conclusions regarding review sentiment as a ranking factor based on the above.

However, Search Quality Raters have no direct impact on search rankings, and the guidelines they follow aren't based on what Google's algorithm uses as ranking factors.

Quality Raters gather feedback on Google's search results to help ensure webpages displayed in the SERPs meet a certain quality threshold.

One of the ways webpage quality is measured is by examining the reputation of the website where it's published.

Headlines related to this chapter of the Quality Rater guidelines circulated in 2017 after Google's Gary Illyes spoke at a conference on the topic of reputation analysis.

Some in attendance misconstrued his statements and incorrectly reported Illyes said reputation can impact a website's position in search results.

However, Illyes was only discussing how the Quality Rater guidelines work.

While customer reviews are a component of reputation research, the guidelines do suggest approaching them with a degree of skepticism.

Thankfully, Google has provided clarity on this subject and stated definitively whether review sentiment is a ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

Review Sentiment as a Ranking Factor

Studies may try to prove review sentiment is a ranking factor by showing a correlation between customer reviews and a website's position in search results.

We're only going to look at the confirmed evidence, and Google has stated repeatedly that review sentiment is **not** a ranking factor.

Google's Gary Illyes swiftly denied the claims that began circulating online after his conference talk, which we referenced in the previous section.

Not only does Google not use sentiment as a ranking factor, its algorithms don't even recognize sentiment. Google's Danny Sullivan confirmed this in 2018.

Google can't use sentiment for rankings if it has no concept of what the sentiment is.

That should be enough to end the speculation around review sentiment as a ranking factor, but theories continue to linger.

In 2021, Sullivan was asked whether anything had changed since he last said Google recognize sentiment.

He confirms nothing has changed.

Sentiment is still not recognized by Google's algorithm.

OUR VERDICT

Review Sentiment as a Ranking Factor

Review sentiment is confirmed to not be a ranking factor for organic search rankings, though we do acknowledge it is a factor for local search rankings.

This has always been the case, ever since Google's inability to recognize sentiment was [infamously exploited](#).

Back around 2010 a company was angering customers to the point that they would write bad reviews.
This was done deliberately, because the links received from the reviews pushed the company's website higher in search results.

Google didn't recognize people linking to the company were saying negative things, Google only recognized the links.

Since then Google has got better at not rewarding websites that rip off customers, but Google's indifference toward sentiment remains. Review sentiment can directly impact other areas of online marketing, but search rankings are not one of them.

SCHEMA MARKUP

By **Miranda Miller**

Schema Markup: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Schema markup is a type of microdata that creates an enhanced description Google might use in search results as a rich snippet.

In essence, it's a shared vocabulary that enables search engines including Google, Bing, and Yandex to better understand the content on any given webpage.

The ability for search engines to understand the content on your page is integral to its ability to match it to a relevant query.

So is schema a ranking factor? Let's review the evidence.

THE CLAIM

Schema is a Ranking Factor

Early in 2018, Roger Montti wrote about an update to Google's "Introduction to Structured Data" resource:

Google's Structured Data developers page changed from this:

> "search engines can more easily organize and display it in creative ways."

To this new version:

> "Google Search works hard to understand the content of a page. However, you can provide explicit clues about the meaning of a page to Google by including structured data on the page."

In case you're curious, that help resource of Google's on how structured data works has changed again just slightly — here's what it says today:

> **"Google Search works hard to understand the content of a page. You can help us by providing explicit clues about the meaning of a page to Google by including structured data on the page."**

Now, Google says "you can help us" by using structured data.

The consensus among SEO professionals had long been that while schema was useful, it was not a ranking factor.

However the above edit had SEO professionals wondering in 2017 what had changed to warrant updating the text.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Schema as a Ranking Factor

Schema.org explains why schema is important to search engines:

> **"Your web pages have an underlying meaning that people understand when they read the web pages. But search engines have a limited understanding of what is being discussed on those pages.**
>
> **By adding additional tags to the HTML of your web pages— tags that say, 'Hey search engine, this information describes this specific movie, or place, or person, or video'—you can help search engines and other applications better understand your content and display it in a useful, relevant way."**

A case study published by Google itself shares the schema success story of Rakuten, who increased traffic from search engines by 2.7 times after "collaborating with Google Search in 2017 to make their structured data even more useful."

Google also notes that time on page increased 1.5 times.

More recently a 2020 experiment by Dixon Jones found that over the course of a month, twice as many sites with schema applied gained rankings than lost rankings. He also found that pages with rich content benefitted far more than others.

The Evidence Against Schema as a Ranking Factor

In Montti's article, he also noted a few things Gary Illyes said at Pubcon 2017:

> **"...add structure data to your pages because during indexing, we will be able to better understand what your site is about."**

And:

> **"It will help us understand your pages better, and indirectly, it leads to better ranks in some sense, because we can rank easier."**

Illyes is clear here that the ranking benefit of using schema is indirect. It makes ranking easier when Google has a better understanding of which entities appear on the page and what they're about.

Google's John Mueller reaffirmed that schema is not a ranking factor in a tweeted response to a question in 2018, in which SD = structured data:

John 🍌 ✔
@JohnMu

Replying to @glenngabe

There's no generic ranking boost for SD usage. That's the same as far as I remember. However, SD can make it easier to understand what the page is about, which can make it easier to show where it's relevant (improves targeting, maybe ranking for the right terms). (not new, imo)

4:19 PM · Apr 2, 2018 · Twitter Web Client

So simply using schema markup doesn't give you a ranking boost.

The next question is, does using schema make your site more technically sound and help with rankings that way?

In a 2019 Google Webmaster Central office hours video, [Mueller said](#):

> **"On the one hand, we do use structured data to better understand the entities on the page and to find out where that page is more relevant. But that doesn't mean that just because people are doing things in a technically correct way on the website that the page is a better page than it would be otherwise.**
>
> **We will try to use it (schema) to show it (your page) in more relevant search results that would perhaps bring more users to your pages that actually match the topics of your pages.**
>
> **But it doesn't mean that we would show it to more users or that it would rank better."**

So much for that idea.

Mueller likened the concept of schema as a ranking factor to the idea of validated HTML as a ranking factor. Neither of these factors tell Google the page has more value to the user.

Need more evidence?

In 2020, Danny Sullivan, Google's Search Liaison, said structured data was optional, adding that it has ["no impact on ranking in web search."](#)

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT

RANKING FACTOR METER

Schema as a Ranking Factor

Schema does exactly what Google said it would in its 2011 Schema. org launch announcement: It improves how sites appear in major search engines.

Using schema can:

- Improve the appearance of your search result via rich snippets.

- Enable you to appear for relevant queries where you may not have, had Google not understood the relevance of your page.

- Increase time on page as you are exposed to more relevant queries and users discover more engaging content.

There is no evidence it's used by Google to determine search rankings, but those are all good things.

Anything you can do to help Google better understand why your page is the best answer to a relevant query is certainly going to help support your SEO goals.

SOCIAL SIGNALS & SHARES

By **Danny Goodwin**

Are Social Signals & Shares a Google Ranking Factor?

Do social signals affect organic search rankings? Google says no. Some correlation studies claim to show otherwise.

Let's clear up the confusion.

THE CLAIM

Social Signals are a Ranking Factor

First, let's determine what we're talking about here.

> **Social signals, for the purposes of this discussion, generally refer to things like:**
>
> - Facebook engagements (likes, comments, shares).
>
> - Twitter engagements (tweets, retweets, likes).

In the past, social signals also referred to activity like Google +1 (back when Google Plus was kind of / sort of relevant, circa 2012-2013).

Raw follower counts have also been mentioned as part of the "social signals" discussion.

Now, as for the idea that social signals are a ranking factor, it basically comes to this:

Content ranks well and gets lots of traffic. Content has lots of social media shares. Share count must have helped it rank well.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Social Signals as a Ranking Factor

Where did the whole idea of social signals originate? To find out, let's go back to 2010, when Danny Sullivan wrote What Social Signals Do Google & Bing Really Count?

> "...who you are as a person on Twitter can impact how well a page does in regular web search. Authoritative people on Twitter lend their authority to pages they tweet. When it comes to Facebook, Google says it does [try to calculate someone's authority], in some limited cases."

That was followed a few days later by a video from Google's Matt Cutts, in which he confirmed they use Facebook and Twitter links in ranking ("as we always have"). Cutts also stated that Google was looking into using the reputation of authors or creators as a ranking signal.

Many ranking correlation studies over the years have noted a strong relationship between social signals and organic search ranking.

For example, Moz released its final ranking factor correlation study (and survey) in 2015. It found that the number of social shares a page accumulated had a positive correlation with rankings.

In the survey, Moz asked 150 marketing professionals whether the number of social media shares a page was influential on organic ranking, specifically: "Quantity/quality of tweeted links, Facebook shares, Google +1s, etc. to the page."

Of all the ranking factors, page-level social metrics were rated as having the lowest impact.

Two important notes here:

- A survey is not a fact.

- Correlation is not causation.

In 2016, CognitiveSEO did a study on whether social signals influence SEO. Their findings were that a strong social media presence and shares from Facebook, Google Plus, LinkedIn, and Pinterest correlated with higher rankings.

In 2018, HootSuite did a study to determine whether social media impacts SEO. They found a strong correlation between social activity on Twitter and rankings.

The Evidence Against Social Signals as a Ranking Factor

In 2011, Sullivan asked Cutts about a correlation Moz found between Facebook shares and Google rankings. Cutts said, "Google doesn't get Facebook shares. We're blocked by that data. We can see fan pages, but we can't see Facebook shares."

In 2014, Cutts was asked the following question: "Are Facebook and Twitter signals part of the ranking algorithm? How much do they matter?"

His answer:

> "Facebook and Twitter pages are treated like any other pages in our web index so if something occurs on Twitter or occurs on Facebook and we're able to crawl it, then we can return that in our search results. But as far as doing special specific work to sort of say 'you have this many followers on Twitter or this many likes on Facebook', to the best of my knowledge we don't currently have any signals like that in our web search ranking algorithms."

Also:

> "We have to crawl the web in order to find pages on those two web properties and we've had at least one experience where we were blocked from crawling for about a month and a half. And so the idea of doing a lot of special engineering work to try to extract some data from webpages when we might get blocked from being able to crawl those web pages in the future, is something where the engineers would to be a little bit leery about doing that."

In 2015, Google's John Mueller was asked: "Do social signals have an impact on organic rankings in Google?"

His response: "Not directly, no."

What does that mean?

He went on to elaborate that social posts show up in the search results (e.g., Twitter content) and can rank for certain keywords (your product name, brand, etc.).

Here's his full answer, with the full context:

English Google Webmaster Central office-hours hangout

In 2016, Google's Gary Illyes responded to a tweet about whether Google takes social into account for SEO. His response: "No, we don't."
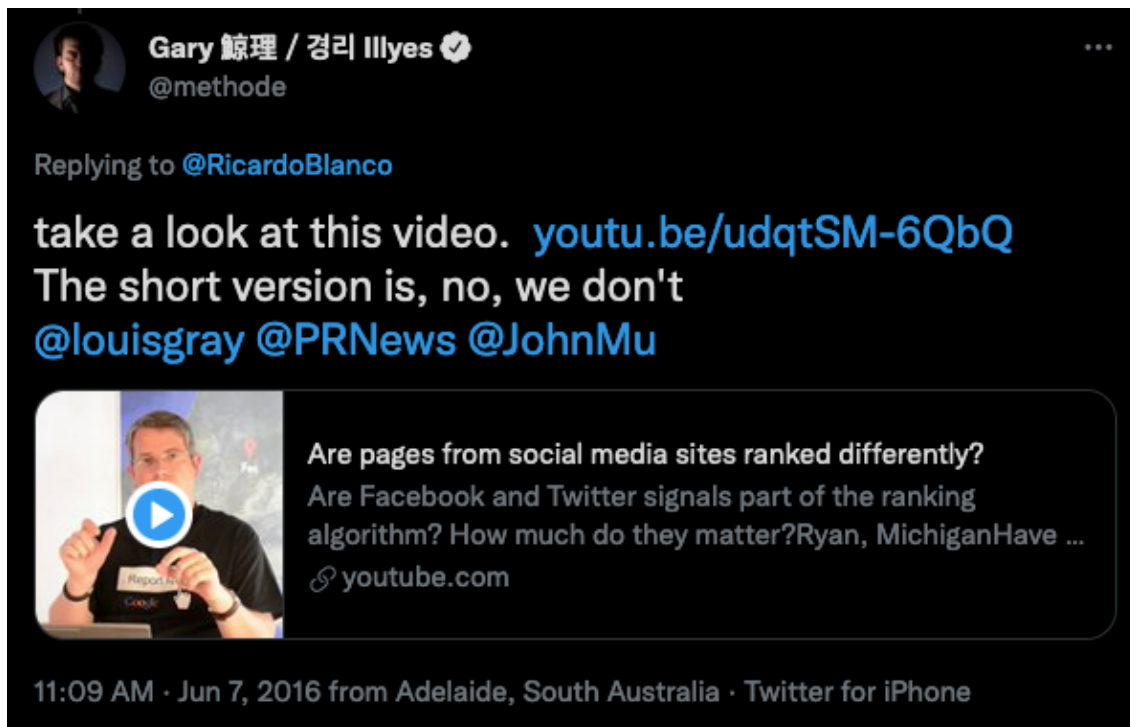
Illyes even shared a link to the Cutts video from 2014.

A few other things to consider:

- Most social networks nofollow links. Thus, any links to a webpage wouldn't pass any authority.

- Facebook can't crawl all of Facebook, for example. So how would they calculate influence on that social network? And even if they could, that's a heck of a lot of data to crawl, index, and make sense of.

- Also, social signals are fairly easy to manipulate. You can buy followers and likes and pretty much anything you want.

- But it's more likely a bot than a human. Will buying your "social signals" result in any actual engagement? Not likely - especially considering that a 2016 study found that 59% of URLs shared on Twitter never get clicked.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

Social Signals as a Ranking Factor

Social signals simply won't help your content rank any better.

Great content tends to rise to the top (granted, not always).

It's more likely that the correlation you're seeing between social signals and SEO is actually just people sharing great content – because it's great.

People tend to not share terrible content, **because it's terrible** (and it doesn't rank in organic search or drive much/any traffic).

Social media content absolutely can help your brand/company/product/whatever appear in organic results.

And social media has plenty of indirect benefits (e.g., engagement, traffic, brand awareness, personal branding). All of these can help your SEO efforts, but indirectly.

Bottom line: It's unlikely that if you get X number of likes, shares, or followers, or whatever vanity metric, that Google uses social signals as a ranking factor.

SPELLING & GRAMMAR

By **Anna Crowe**

Spelling & Grammar: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

For many of us, proper spelling and grammar have become the norm in our work lives. But no matter how good your score is on Grammarly, do search engines *really* care?

The truth is, there are tons of articles out there with advice on how grammar and spelling impact your SEO efforts.

Today, we'll look at the evidence.

THE CLAIM

Spelling & Grammar as a Ranking Factor

It isn't surprising that this claim has made headlines on many SEO publications and blogs.

In fact, around the time Google released the first Panda Update, several sites with poor spelling and grammar saw significant ranking demotions.

Coincidence? Or conspiracy theory?

Well, it isn't just SEO professionals who think spelling and grammar matter.

Harvard Business Review's 2016 study revealed that 81% of business people agree that poorly written material is a giant waste of time.

And anything that's bad for users is typically bad as well for search engines. Right?

So it's easy to see how this could connect the dots to improve your readability for SEO.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Spelling & Grammar as a Ranking Factor

Is spelling and grammar a ranking factor?

To answer this question, we need to go back to August 18, 2011. Matt Cutts (then Head of Google's Webspam Team) answered this question directly in a Google Webmaster Help video.

Short answer: No and yes, depending on the search engine.

Google's stance is that spelling and grammar are not a signal Google uses to rank your website.

Do spelling and grammar matter when evaluating content and site quality?
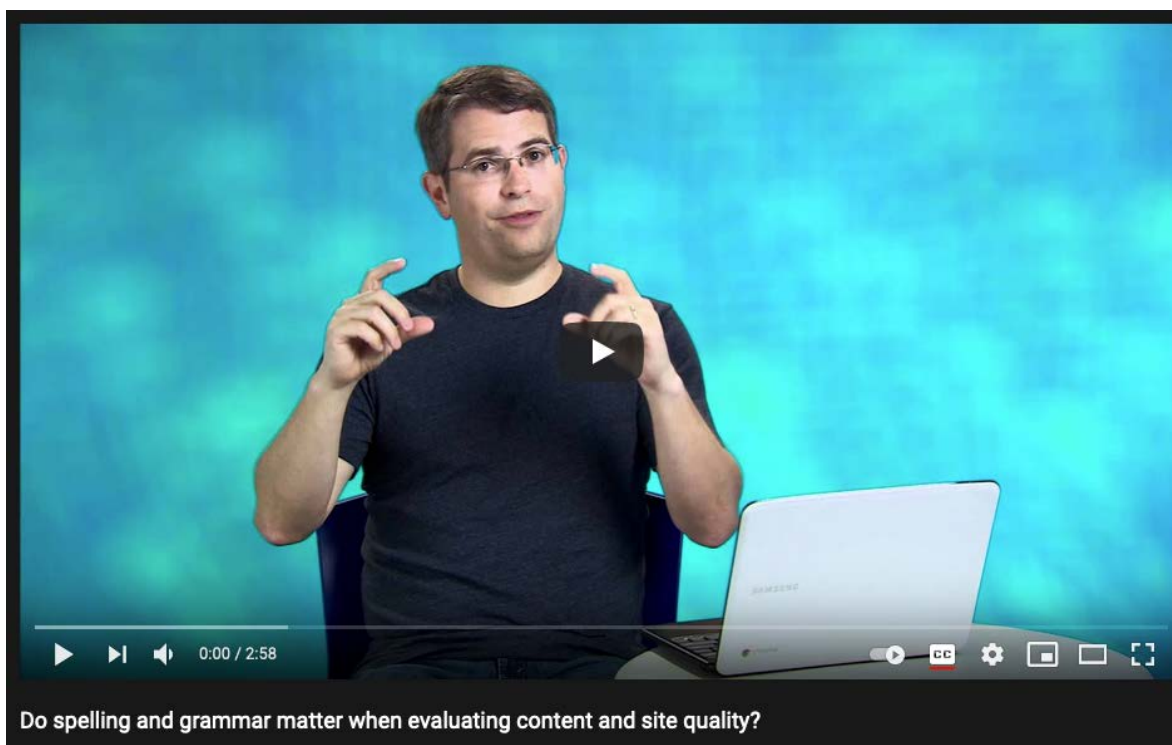
And, in 2017, John Mueller of Google confirmed that claim again.

More recently, in 2021, John Mueller confirmed that poor spelling and grammar does impact quality. He states:

> "With regard to spelling errors, grammatical errors, I think that's something that's a bit more of almost like a gray zone in that on the one hand we have to be able to recognize what a page is about.
>
> And if we can't recognize that because there's so many errors on the page in the text, then that makes it harder.
>
> The other aspect is also that we try to find really high quality content on the web and sometimes it can appear that a page is lower quality content because it has a lot of ...kind of... grammatical and technical mistakes in the text."

However, Duane Forrester, then Senior Product Manager at Bing, wrote in a 2014 Bing Webmaster Blog post that poor spelling and grammar would negatively affect your rankings on Bing.

Forrester stated:

> **"This might all seem a bit 'down in the weeds', but just as you're judging others' writing, so the engines judge yours. If you struggle to get past typos, why would an engine show a page of content with errors higher in the rankings when other pages of error free content exist to serve the searcher? Like it or not, we're judged by the quality of the results we show. So we are constantly watching the quality of the content we see."**

In reality, spelling and grammar affect the overall user experience. Your best bet is to play it safe and run a spellcheck on your content before publishing.

Should You Care About Spelling & Grammar in SEO?

In the Cutts video from Google Webmaster Help above, he adds that higher quality pages tend to be more reputable and use better spelling and grammar.

While spelling and grammar are not a direct ranking signal, they do play a part in your SEO.

It's a trust factor. If you're a business and law firm with terrible grammar and spelling, users will lose trust. Once they lose trust, they will bounce.

If a user visits your site but immediately bounces or spends a shorter than average amount of time on your content, that sends a signal to search engines and could result in lower rankings and less traffic.

Typos on landing pages increased bounce rate by 85% and reduced time on site by 8% compared to the clean version, according to a Website Planet study.

Should You Care About Spelling & Grammar in SEO?

When it comes to reviews, UGC, and comments, Cutts said that it does not hurt your rankings.

Should I correct the grammar of comments on my blog?
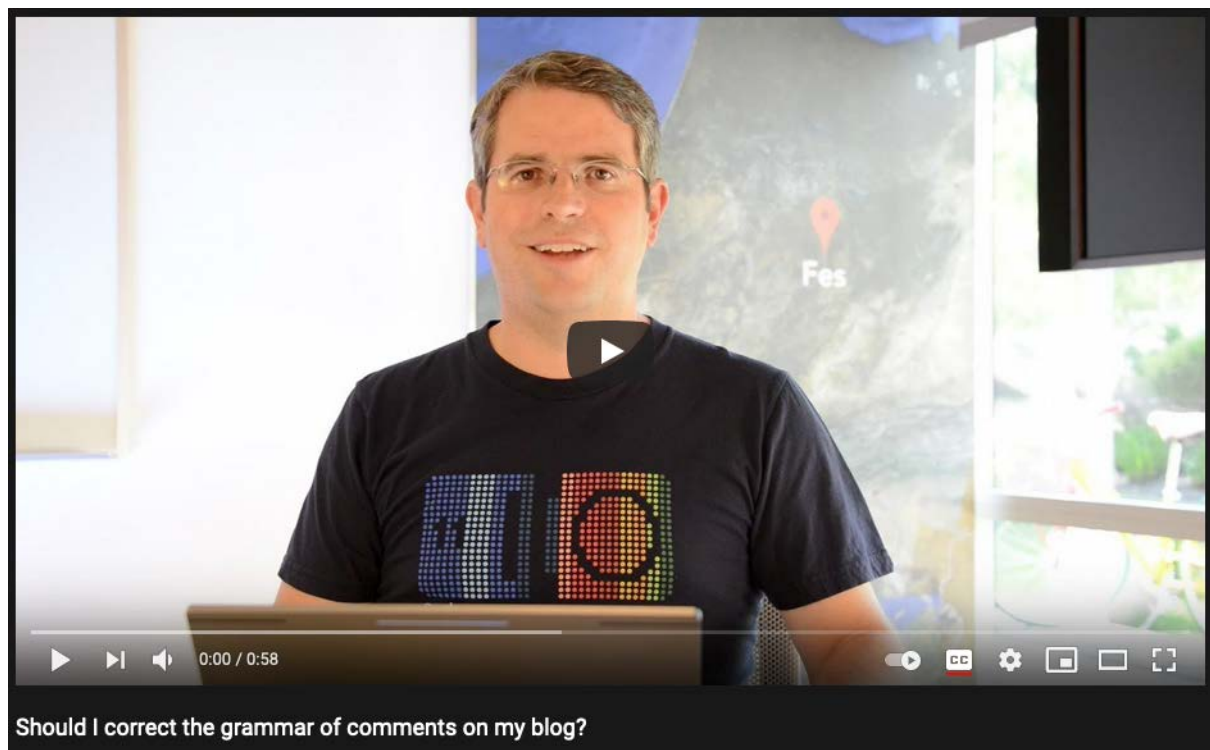
However, if these are spammy style comments, those can negatively impact your rankings.

If you're getting spam comments, you'll want to set up a better security setting with a CAPTCHA plugin or remove comments altogether.

OUR VERDICT

POSSIBLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Spelling & Grammar as a Ranking Signal

Based on all the evidence, it seems like spelling and grammar can impact your rankings – possibly directly, but definitely indirectly.

We know from Google that spelling and grammar directly impacts site quality, which impacts how your site ranks.

That means you shouldn't simply ignore the importance of spelling and grammar.

Before you publish your next piece of content, read your copy. Then reread it out loud.

Use tools like Grammarly to clean up grammar issues (aim for a score of 90+). And, tools like the Hemingway app to ensure your content is easy to read (aim for a grade of 6-8, unless your target audience dictates otherwise).

Remember, even though spelling and grammar are not a direct ranking signal, it does impact the user's experience.

SUBDOMAINS & SUBDIRECTORIES

By **Kristi Hines**

Subdomain (or Subdirectory) Usage: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Subdomains and subdirectories allow you to organize specific types of content on your website.

But can the use of subdomains or subdirectories affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between subdomains, subdirectories, and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

Subdomains & Subdirectories are Ranking Factors

What are subdomains and subdirectories? Subdomains are sections of your website.

Examples of subdomains include the bolded portions of the following URLs:

- https://**corporate**.example.com/
- https://**store**.example.com/
- https://**blog**.example.com/

Subdirectories, on the other hand, are folders in your domains. You can have subdirectories on the main domain as well as on your subdirectories.

Examples of subdirectories include the bolded portions of the following URLs:

- https://example.com/**store**/
- https://example.com/**blog**/
- https://blog.example.com/**category**/

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Subdomains & Subdirectories as Ranking Factors

In 2007, Matt Cutts, formerly the head of Google's Webspam Team, wrote a blog post on subdomains and subdirectories. In it, he stated,

> **"A subdomain can be useful to separate out content that is completely different."**

In 2011, in response to Google's Panda update, HubPages moved their user-generated content to subdomains. As reported by WSJ and Search Engine Watch, HubPages:

> **"...have returned to pre-Panda [traffic] levels in the first three weeks since he activated subdomains for himself and several other authors. The other authors saw significant, if not full, recoveries of web traffic."**

The Evidence Against Subdomains & Subdirectories as Ranking Factors

Google has confirmed how they handle subdomains and subdirectories on a few occasions. In the Google Search Central Support documentation, you'll find the following:

> **"Is it better to use subfolders or subdomains?**
>
> **You should choose whatever is easiest for you to organize and manage. From an indexing and ranking perspective, Google doesn't have a preference."**

In 2013, Cutts, answered the same question on how Google views subdomains and subdirectories:

> **"They are roughly the equivalent. I would basically go with whichever is easier for you in terms of configuration, your CMSs [content management systems]... all of that sort of stuff."**

Cutts gave an example of this, using a business that wants to use a different CMS (such as WordPress VIP or Tumblr) to power its blog.

He went on to say that historically, Google would show two results per host. This allowed webmasters to abuse subdomains, making enough to take over search results.

Google updated their algorithm to only show one or two results per domain, making it harder for subdomains to take more spots in search results.

In 2018, John Mueller, Google Search Advocate, was clear in his response as to what was best for SEO - subdomains or subdirectories:

"Google Web Search is fine with using either subdomains or subdirectories."

He went on to discuss the difference in processing between subdomains and subdirectories:

> **"Some servers make it easier to set up different parts of a website as subdirectories. This helps us with crawling since we understand everything is on the same server and can crawl it in a similar way."**

With regards to subdirectories, Mueller said:

> **"You'll need to verify subdomains separately in Search Console, make any changes to settings, and track overall performance per subdomain. We do have to learn how to crawl them separately, but for the most part that's just a formality for the first few days."**

OUR VERDICT

Subdomains & Subdirectories as Ranking Factors

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Since you have to verify subdomains separately in Search Console, but not subdirectories, it is safe to assume Google treats subdomains as separate websites.

This doesn't mean using either subdomains or subdirectories is a Google ranking factor.

SYNDICATED CONTENT

By **Kristi Hines**

Syndicated Content: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Does syndicated content affect organic search rankings?

In some cases, syndicated content is viewed as spam.

In others, it can outrank the original content.

And yet syndication is a widely accepted practice in journalism and content marketing alike. But is it a ranking factor in search ranking algorithms?

In this chapter, we'll determine if syndicated content is a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Syndicated Content is a Ranking Factor

Content syndication happens in a number of ways.

Individual content authors may choose to syndicate their content in an attempt to reach larger audiences.

For example, a CEO may publish a blog on their company website. They may then syndicate the same blog post to LinkedIn, Medium, or elsewhere. This enables them to tap into the audiences of each network and possibly link back to the main company website.

Publications and blogs can also choose to syndicate content.

This happens when a publisher (content creator) agrees to share their content with a partner (the syndicator) – or even multiple partners, with the goal of further expanding the reach of that piece of content and the brand behind its creation.

The syndicated content piece, when it appears on the third-party site, could end up being:

- **Identical** (all content is the same except for the URL where it lives).

- **Condensed** (e.g., perhaps only the first paragraph or some portion of the article appears).

- **Edited significantly** (e.g., it has a different headline, or has had portions edited, removed, or rearranged).

When syndication happens without the creator's consent, this piracy can result in duplicate content rather than syndicated content.

Let's call this what it really is: content theft.

Some websites use software to "scrape" content from other websites. These websites may only scrape content about a particular topic to syndicate. Others may scrape anything that is popular in an attempt to attract search traffic.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against Syndicated Content as a Ranking Factor

Google Search Central has specific quality guidelines for webmasters. In the Advanced SEO section, they specify two scenarios related to syndicated content that constitute webspam:

- Publishing auto-generated content created by scraping RSS feeds or search results.

- Publishing scraped content using automated techniques that add no additional value to or modify the original content.

In either scenario, your content is unlikely to rank in search results. The authors of the original content may also be able to file for copyright infringement.

In 2012, Google Search Central released a video on webspam content violations. This video reiterates the use of automation and scraping to create syndicated content as spam.

In 2018, John Mueller, Google Search Advocate, talked about how syndicated content had the potential to outrank original content. This happens when the syndicate site has additional valuable content surrounding the pirated content.

In 2021, in an article published on Google Search Central for developers, Google discussed how to handle duplicate content. In regards to syndicated content, they suggest the following:

> **"If you syndicate your content on other sites, Google will always show the version we think is most appropriate for users in each given search, which may or may not be the version you'd prefer.**
>
> **However, it is helpful to ensure that each site on which your content is syndicated includes a link back to your original article. You can also ask those who use your syndicated material to use the noindex tag to prevent search engines from indexing their version of the content."**

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY

RANKING FACTOR METER

Syndicated Content as a Ranking Factor

If you are using content syndication to reach new audiences on popular networks with high-quality content, you can boost your visibility in search by ranking on other networks.

But simply syndicating content will not help the rankings of the original content in search results. Therefore, we've classified it as unlikely to be a ranking factor.

TABBED CONTENT

By **Miranda Miller**

Tabbed Content: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

In-page tabs and accordions are a type of user interface (UI) control that can improve the user's experience by splitting content into logical sections.

Page visitors are then able to switch between different views by navigating through each tab or clicking to reveal a new section of text from the accordion.

But how does this impact the SEO value of the content that's hidden until the user actively navigates to and reveals it?

Many have questioned over the years whether Google still uses this type of hidden content in its ranking algorithm. So let's see.

THE CLAIM

"Hidden" Content is a Ranking Factor

The question here is whether Google devalues or even ignores content that is initially hidden from the user using UX/design elements.

It's important to note that we're not talking about hiding text in an effort to manipulate the algorithm by using CSS to position it off-screen or hiding it against the background, for example.

Tabs and accordions are used to organize page content in the same way as their namesakes from the old school world of paper filing.
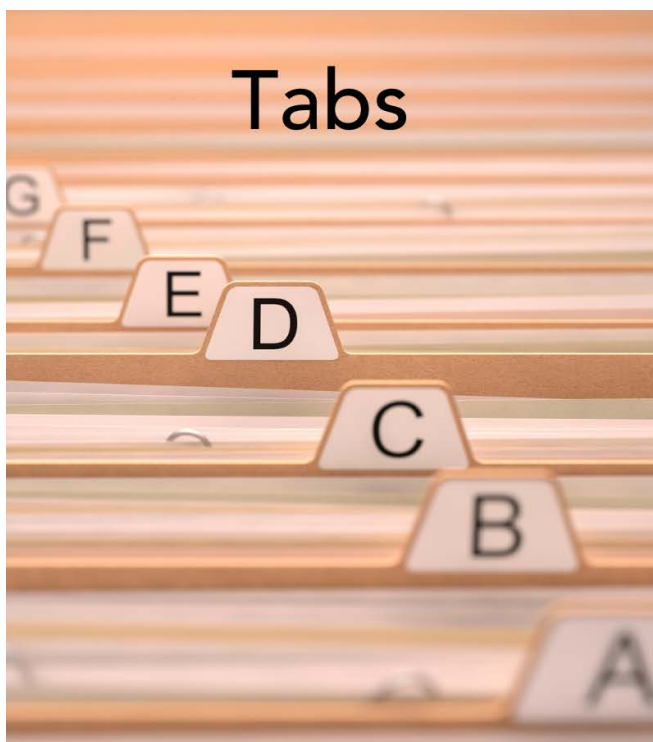
On web pages, tabs are typically arranged horizontally. The user can flip from tab to tab to reveal new content without having to load a new page each time.

And with accordions, users can click to open each one, typically closing the others as the new section opens (but not always, which can result in a very long page of text).

Tabs and accordions can be useful for:

- FAQs content.

- Video transcripts or descriptive content for accessibility.

- User reviews, which can be truncated but give users the option to "Read More."

- Navigating through complex topics.

- To categorize types of information on a single page.

- And lots more.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Tabbed Content as a Ranking Factor

This is what Google's Webmaster Guidelines has to say about content hidden in tabs:

> **"Make your site's important content visible by default. Google is able to crawl HTML content hidden inside navigational elements such as tabs or expanding sections.**
>
> **However, we consider this content less accessible to users, and believe that you should make your most important information visible in the default page view."**

Matt Cutts addressed the issue from a webspam perspective in a 2013 response to a viewer's question, "How does Google treat hidden content which becomes visible when clicking a button?"

There are good usability reasons for using an accordion or tabbed structure that lets users hide and reveal content, he said. As long as you're not trying to be deceptive with hidden, over-optimized text, you aren't going to trigger any spam actions.

That tells us that Google doesn't see properly structured and formatted tabs or accordions as hidden text.

But is the content in those tabs weighted the same as page content that is always visible?

In 2014, Google's John Mueller was asked about reports of Google, when rendering pages, ignoring content that isn't visible to a user unless they clicked on a "click to expand" button.

Mueller said,

> **"…I think we've been doing something similar for quite a while now, where if we can recognize that the content is actually hidden then we'll just try to discount it a little bit. We kind of see that it's still there, but the user doesn't see it. Therefore, it's probably not something that's critical for this page."**

He noted that he was speaking of both accordions and tabs, and advised that if you want content indexed, make sure it's visible to users.

The Evidence Against Tabbed Content as a Ranking Factor

The thing is, aside from the Webmaster Guidelines excerpt above, that advice on tabbed content is pretty old.

Google's perception of what makes a great user experience has evolved, particularly when it comes to mobile.

In 2016, Google's Gary Illyes responded to a tweeted question asking whether content in in-page elements such as accordions was devalued on mobile, and his response was clear:

> **"No, in the mobile-first world content hidden for UX should have full weight."**

Mueller more recently confirmed in a March 2020 Google Webmaster Central office hours episode that tabbed and accordion content is **not** devalued. When asked:

> **"In the mobile-first indexing world, will the hidden content behind tags and accordions still be devalued — for example, because there is a lower chance it'll be seen by a user?"**

Mueller responded:

> **"No. Specifically, when it comes to content on mobile pages, we do take into account anything that's in the HTML.**
>
> **So if there is something there that might be visible to users at some point, we will include that in the indexing. That's completely normal."**

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Tabbed Content as a Ranking Factor

Content is a ranking factor – and you do not devalue that content by enabling users to control what content they see and when.

Tabbing the content would basically be the same as not tabbing it. So does it ultimately matter whether that content is tabbed?

We know that, with mobile-first indexing, Google gives tabbed content the same weight as the rest of the text on the page.

Content is the key part, not the fact that it's tabbed.

There are many ways to "hide" tabbed content – some of which make it impossible for Google to crawl it. And if Google can't crawl content, that content won't be seen or help you rank.

Tabbed and accordion content, when used correctly, can also improve user experience — especially on mobile.

If you're trying to use hidden text deceptively, that's where you run the risk of a partial or site-wide penalty. To be clear again, here: the key part is the deception, not the fact that the content happens to be tabbed deceptively.

As best practice, use these elements from a strictly UX perspective. Take a look at how Google itself uses an accordion structure on its Search Console help resource page:
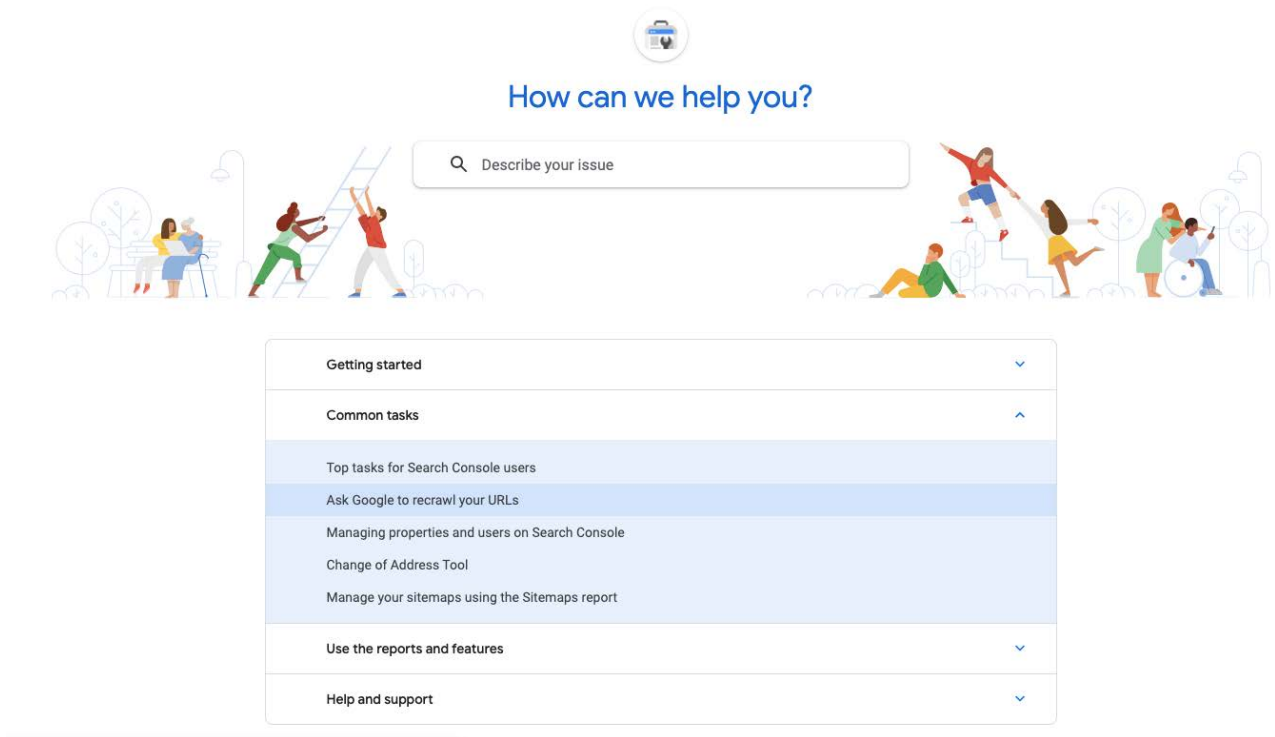
The accordion is used as a navigational tool to reveal FAQs. Clicking on a question opens a separate page where the longer form answer lives.

This serves both UX and SEO objectives. It's simple for the user to see all broad topics at a glance and drill down into more specific questions.

They can then navigate to a more focused page and dig into the response they choose, versus having 15 or 20 somewhat disconnected answers in core body content opening up and closing back down on the main page.

Each individual answer is stronger from an SEO perspective as an authoritative response to a specific question on its own page.

Think first of how you can improve your visitor's journey and experience with your content. More often than not, that's exactly what you need to do to improve your SEO, as well.

TEXT FORMATTING

By **Miranda Miller**

Text Formatting: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

We know that content – the actual words on webpages – is a ranking factor.

But can you use text formatting (e.g., bolding, italicizing, underlining words) to rank higher for specific words?

This is a question that's come up repeatedly over the years in SEO.

Let's take a look at why.

THE CLAIM

Text Formatting as a Ranking Factor

You can use HTML elements to format text in various ways; for example:

- Bold text using <b>.

- Indicate strong importance, seriousness, or urgency using <strong>.

- Italicize text using <i>.

- Stress emphasis and indicate meaning using <em>.

- Underline text using</u>.

<em> and <strong> differ from <b> and <i>, as the former indicate a semantic importance while the latter are styles that simply indicate how the words should be displayed on the screen.

This is an important distinction we'll dig into a bit further in.

Some believe that using HTML elements to highlight specific words for Google can directly impact how the webpage ranks for those keywords.

But are they right?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Text Formatting as a Ranking Factor

Google's Matt Cutts seemed to indicate in a 2013 Google Search Central video that HTML text formatting is indeed a ranking factor... or did he?

A viewer had asked, "In terms of SEO, what is the difference between <strong> tag and <b> tag for emphasis on certain words of text?"

Cutts noted that he had answered this question before, in 2006, and that he didn't think the answer had changed.

"Back then, whenever we checked, <strong> and <b> were treated the exact same in terms of ranking and scoring and how they're indexed and all that sort of stuff.

Likewise, there's also the <em> and the <i> that stands for italics, and those were treated exactly the same.

You could use either one, and it wouldn't make a difference in terms of Google ranking."

A Google patent awarded in 2014 also suggests that bolded/italicized text be given extra weight by ranking algorithms:

"One existing document quality measurement technique calculates an Information Retrieval (IR) score that is a measure of how relevant a document is to a search query.

The IR score can be weighted in various ways. For example, matches in a document's title might be weighted more than matches in a footer.

Similarly, matches in text that is of larger font or bolded or italicized may be weighted more than matches in normal text."

Of course, not everything that Google patents is used in practice.

The Evidence Against Text Formatting as a Ranking Factor

In the above-referenced video, Cutts is saying Google treats the two types of HTML elements the same from a ranking perspective.

He doesn't say whether the way they are treated actually impacts ranking. It could be that they equally have no impact.

Google has never come out and confirmed or denied HTML formatting as a ranking factor.

John Mueller responded to a tweeted question about bold text in particular in 2017 but again, the response is somewhat ambiguous and open to interpretation:

We do know for certain that a lot of on-page factors have diminished in importance since they were more heavily weighted in the early 2000s.

But here's what logic tells us: if you want to rank for a term, simply using that word in your content and then making it bold (or italics, or bold and italics) every single time you use it, won't be enough alone to shoot you up in the rankings.

OUR VERDICT

POSSIBLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Text Formatting as a Ranking Factor

 There is some evidence that Google is using HTML text formatting as a signal, but we've had no official confirmation.

Further, it's likely that text formatting was a ranking factor circa prior to 2010 and its weighting has gradually been reduced as new, more reliable factors have been introduced.

We know that semantic search is the way of the future and that improving how algorithms understand language is a major area of focus for Google.

The <em> and <strong> tags are one way you can help search engines understand the semantic meaning of terms in your content. And anything you can do to help Google understand your page's relevance to a query isn't going to hurt.

However, as with all content optimizations, overusing text formatting can make your content look spammy. Proceed with caution.

Focus on improving the quality of your content for readers. Anywhere emphasizing or stressing the importance of a word could help a human reader better understand the context, it could do the same for Google.

Does this directly impact your rankings? Perhaps. We just don't know.

Is using the right HTML formatting best practice for future-proofing your content? Absolutely.

Learn more about text-level semantics and how to use these elements appropriately in the [WHATWG Community HTML Living Standard resource](#) provided by Apple, Google, Mozilla, and Microsoft.

TF-IDF

By **Miranda Miller**

TF-IDF: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

What the eff is TF-IDF, and can it really help your SEO strategy?

You'd be forgiven for thinking, "Those crazy SEO people... what will they think of next?"

But this one isn't a case of this thought leader or trying to coin a new phrase.

In this chapter, you'll learn what TF-IDF is, how it works, why it's part of the SEO lexicon, and most importantly — whether Google uses it as a ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

TF-IDF is a Ranking Factor

If you go looking to learn more about this topic, you're going to see some wild headlines designed to make you feel like you missed out by not allocating budget to TF-IDF this year:

- TF-IDF for SEO: What Works & What Doesn't Work

- TF-IDF: The best content optimization tool SEOs aren't using

- TF IDF SEO: How to Crush Your Competitors With TF-IDF

Is TF-IDF the SEO tactic you've been missing?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for TF-IDF as a Ranking Factor

Let's start with this: what is TF-IDF?

Term frequency–inverse document frequency is a term from the field of information retrieval. It's a figure that expresses the statistical importance of any given word to the document collection as a whole.

In plain language, the more often a word appears in a document collection, the more important it is, and the heavier that term is weighted.

What's that have to do with search?

Well, Google is one giant informational retrieval system.

Say you have a collection of 500 documents and you want to rank them in order of relevance to the term [rocking and rolling].

The first part of the equation, term frequency (TF), is going to:

- Ignore documents that don't contain all three words.

- Count the number of times each term appears in each remaining document.

- Factor in the length of the document.

What the system ends up with is a TF figure for each document.

But that figure alone can be problematic. Depending on the term, you could still end up with a pile of documents and no real clues as to which is most relevant to your query.

The next step, inverse document frequency (IDF), gives your TF a little more context.

Document frequency = counting terms across the document collection.

Inverse = Inverting the importance of most frequently appearing terms.

Here, the system removes the term [and] from the equation because we can see that it occurs so frequently across all 500 documents as to be irrelevant to this specific query.

We don't want documents with the most instances of [and] being ranked highest. Documents highest weighted for [rocking] and [rolling] while normalizing for text length are more likely to be relevant to people looking for information on [rocking and rolling].

The Evidence Against TF-IDF as a Ranking Factor

As the document collection grows in size and variety, the utility of this metric shrinks.

Google's John Mueller has spoken about this and [explained that](#) "this is a fairly old metric and things have evolved quite a bit over the years. There are lots of other metrics, as well."

I don't think this says it's not a factor; I think he's pretty plainly saying it's just not that important anymore.

And as much as people like to believe Mueller is trying to pull one over on them, there's no way he's fibbing on this one.

Identifying which documents contain the words a searcher is querying is a necessary first step in returning a response.

But with that said, it's an old metric that just isn't useful on its own. In an index the size of Google's, the best that TF-IDF could do is bring back millions or billions of results.

Can you optimize for it?

No. Trying to optimize for TF-IDF means trying to achieve a certain keyword density, and that's called keyword stuffing. Don't do that.

Still, that doesn't mean this concept doesn't matter to SEO pros.

OUR VERDICT

DEFINITELY NOT
RANKING FACTOR METER

TF-IDF as a Ranking Factor

Does Google use TF-IDF in its search ranking algorithm – even potentially as a foundational part of its algorithm?

We're saying definitely not.

Why? Because it's an ancient (in technological years) information retrieval concept.

Today, Google has far superior ways to evaluate webpages (e.g., word vectors, cosine similarity, and other natural language processing methods).

Knowing whether the word a user is searching for appears in a document and how often is only a first step.

TF-IDF just doesn't account for much without myriad other layers of analysis to determine things, like expertise, authoritativeness, and trust, for starters.

That means TF-IDF isn't a tool or tactic you can use to optimize your site.

You can't do any useful sort of analysis with TF-IDF, or use it to improve your SEO, because it requires the entire corpus of search results to run the calculation against.

Additionally, we've graduated beyond simply wanting to know **what** keywords are used to **how** they're used and what related topics come up, to ensure the context and intent matches our own.

SEO pros who use the terms TF-IDF and semantic search interchangeably are misunderstanding TF-IDF. It's just a measure of how often a word appears in a collection of documents.

Bottom line: It's important to understand how content is being evaluated, but that knowledge doesn't always have to result in another item on your SEO checklist. Unless you're building an information retrieval system of your own, TF-IDF is one you can chalk up as an interesting factoid of days gone by and move on.

TITLE TAGS

By **Matt Southern**

Are Title Tags a Google Ranking Factor?

As the most visible component of Google's search results pages (SERPs), page titles are thought to carry significant weight as a ranking factor.

Is it possible to overvalue the impact of your title tags when it comes to improving search rankings?

There's little doubt Google's algorithm takes page titles into consideration.

The questions around page titles are:

- The extent to which title tags are valued.

- And how much they matter to the bigger picture of a website's search optimization.

In this piece, we aim to answer those questions by investigating various claims and looking at on-the-record statements from Google.

THE CLAIM

Title Tags are a Ranking Factor

A page title is the text that appears in the <title> tag within the <head> element of an HTML document.

When conducting a Google search, page titles are the largest and most visible element of a search snippet.

A page's title also appears in the browser tab after clicking through on a search result.

The prominence of page titles in Google SERPs has led to persistent claims that they're a strongly weighted ranking factor.

Is it possible these claims are overblown?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Title Tags as a Ranking Factor

Google unquestionably uses the HTML title tag to understand what pages are about so it can rank them in search results.

The company's official SEO starter guide recommends unique, accurate, and brief but descriptive titles on all pages of a website.

But when it comes to the strength of page titles as a ranking factor, evidence suggests they're only a mild signal.

Google's John Mueller has stated that page titles are not critical for rankings, at least compared to the main content:

> **"We do use [the title tag] for ranking, but it's not the most critical part of a page. So it's not worthwhile filling it with keywords to kind of hope that it works that way."**

Mueller goes on to clarify that page titles are important for SEO and they are a ranking factor.

However, they're not so critical that overhauling a site's page titles will lead to a significant difference in ranking positions. He said:

"**Titles are important! They are important for SEO. They are used as a ranking factor. Of course, they are definitely used as a ranking factor, but it is not something where I'd say the time you spend on tweaking the title is really the best use of your time.**"

Mueller [addressed this again](#) on another occasion, reiterating that page titles help Google understand what a page is about but are not critical to determining rankings.

"**... if you're talking about ranking changes so strong that you're seeing them overall, then I think just tweaking titles and meta tags are not going to give you what you're looking for. Tweaking titles and meta tags makes it easier for us to recognize what is actually on a page, but it's not going to change the overall visibility of the website significantly.**"

With all this taken into consideration, it's clear that page titles remain important for SEO.

But in the hierarchy of today's ranking factors, title tags are nowhere near the top.

OUR VERDICT

CONFIRMED
RANKING FACTOR METER

Title Tags as a Ranking Factor

Page titles are a confirmed Google ranking factor, with evidence suggesting the strength ranges from mild to moderate.

The title tag is a tool for communicating to Google what a page is about. It helps crawlers understand what category the page fits into and which queries it may be able to answer.

From there, Google uses more critical factors such as the main content to determine a page's rankings.

To be sure, it's worth taking the time to write out titles for every page.

Websites can struggle to gain any ground in search results without unique page titles as a bare minimum optimization.

URLS

By **Matt Southern**

URLs as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

Google search ranking factors can gain and lose prominence over time.

A factor that carried a lot of weight with Google years ago may not carry much at all in the present day.

A website's URL is an example of such a ranking factor.

Given that the impact of a website's URL on search rankings has changed over time, you may hear conflicting information regarding how important it is today.

Let's look at the claims regarding URL as a ranking factor, and then we'll go over what the evidence says.

THE CLAIM

URLs are a Ranking Factor

A website's URL is said to be a factor for Google's search rankings that can be optimized similar to how one would optimize a title tag.

More specifically, the claims suggest strategic use of keywords in a URL can help a website rank for queries containing those words.

For example, in order to rank for a query like "air fryer recipes", is it helpful to have a URL that contains air-fryer-recipes somewhere in the URL (e.g., example.com/air-fryer-recipes)

A website with keywords in its URL is said to have a ranking advantage over sites with more generic URLs.

Is there any truth to this claim? Here's what Google says.

THE EVIDENCE

URLs as a Ranking Factor

Evidence directly from Google indicates URLs do not play as great a role in search rankings as claims suggest.

Looking back at the times Google has acknowledged URLs as a ranking factor, it seems the impact has waned over time.

In 2016, Google's John Mueller confirmed keywords in a URL are a ranking factor. However, he described the signal as being "very small."

> **"I believe that's a very small ranking factor, so it's not something I'd really try to force. And it's not something where I'd say it's even worth your effort to kind of restructure your site just so you can include keywords in the URL."**

Mueller addressed the topic again in 2017, saying "Keywords in URLs are overrated for Google SEO."

Instead, Mueller recommends choosing URLs for users not search engines.

He repeats similar advice in 2018, saying site owners shouldn't worry about using keywords in a URL.

To be clear: that doesn't mean URLs are not at all a factor in rankings. It means there are many more important factors to consider above optimizing the URL.

That's made clear in other statements from Mueller, such as this one from 2021 where he says words in a URL are a "very, very lightweight ranking factor."

> **"We use the words in a URL as a very very lightweight factor. And from what I recall this is primarily something that we would take into account when we haven't had access to the content yet.**
>
> **So if this is the absolute first time we see this URL we don't know how to classify its content, then we might use the words in the in the URL as something to help rank us better.**
>
> **But as soon as we've crawled and indexed the content there then we have a lot more information. And then that's something where essentially if the url is in German or in Japanese or in English it's pretty much the same thing."**

As Mueller says, once the content is indexed then the URL becomes less important.

OUR VERDICT

CONFIRMED
RANKING FACTOR METER

URLs as a Ranking Factor

Google has confirmed that URLs are a minimal search ranking factor.

When Google crawls a new site for the first time, it will use the keywords in a URL to get an idea of what the site is about. That may play a small role in the site's initial rankings.

Some SEO professionals also think it may be used to help group pages (i.e., with pages under folders being grouped together as they would with breadcrumbs).

Once the site's content is thoroughly crawled and indexed, the SEO effect of the URL becomes minimal.

USER SEARCH HISTORY

By **Matt Southern**

User Search History as a Google Ranking Factor: What You Need to Know

The search results a person sees today may be influenced by things they looked up in Google weeks, months, or even years ago.

A user's past is said to follow them around on Google, with the data being used by search algorithms to serve personalized results.

If that's true, it means users are likely not seeing identical SERPs for the same query, as ranking positions for URLs could vary from one person's search to another's.

This chapter will investigate the claims around user search history as a ranking factor, and provide clarity around the extent to which it impacts results.

THE CLAIM

User Search History is a Ranking Factor

When a user is logged into their Google account, search results are said to be personalized based on their search history.

Google collects the web and app activity of all logged-in users. You can opt out of data collection, but it's turned on by default.

The data is collected to better understand a person's interests so Google can offer more tailored experiences (e.g., search results, advertising).

There are varying claims regarding the degree of search result personalization. For the most part, user search history is thought to have a mild impact on results.

Google's critics, however, suggest otherwise.

[DuckDuckGo claims](#) the personalization is so strong that it creates a "filter bubble" limiting users' exposure to new sources, ideas, and viewpoints.

DuckDuckGo has accused Google of employing extreme levels of personalization, saying two users could search for the same thing at the same time and get vastly different results.

Is user search history as great a ranking factor as Google's critics claim? Here's what the evidence says.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for User Search History as a Ranking Factor

User search history has been a Google ranking factor from as far back as 2007. The company confirmed the update in an accouncement:

> **"We're constantly trying to improve the quality of your search results. One of the ways we're tackling this is by personalizing your search experience.**
>
> **After all, you're the only one who actually knows what you're really looking for."**

Google continues to personalize search results to this day, though the company vehemently denies DuckDuckGo's claims that the effect is so strong it creates a filter bubble.

In fact, search results aren't always personalized. And when they are, the impact is said to be light and not drastically different from person to person, according to Danny Sullivan, Google's Search Liaison.

"Personalization doesn't happen often & generally doesn't dramatically change search results from one person to another. It is usually so lightly applied that the results are very similar to what someone would see without personalization."

OUR VERDICT

CONFIRMED
RANKING FACTOR METER

User Search History as a Ranking Factor

Based on Google's statements, we conclude user search history is a ranking factor with light impact.

It's easy to test how lightly personalization is applied.

Simply conduct a search in a fresh Incognito window and there will be no account-based activity used to serve the results. Then compare those results to a SERP from a logged-in search.

Anyone who wants to opt-out of personalization using account-based activity can do so from the Web & App Activity settings in their Google account.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

By **Kristi Hines**

Is User-Generated Content a Google Ranking Factor?

User-generated content (UGC) can help boost the content value on a page by adding new perspectives and engaging information for other readers — and at no cost to the content creator.

Common types of UGC used to increase word count include tagged content from social media, blog comments, ratings and reviews, and forum posts.

But can UGC affect your organic search rankings?

Read on to learn whether there is any connection between user-generated content and improved Google rankings.

THE CLAIM

User-Generated Content is a Ranking Factor

What is user-generated content?

UGC can be text, images, video, or some other form of content (e.g., blog comments, forum posts, product reviews) that has been created for a brand, business, or publication by someone not associated with that company.

You can use UGC to create engagement or excitement around your brand/website, enhance your content, and even help your SEO efforts.

Just think of Amazon and how much reviews have helped contribute to its rise and continued dominance.

But is it actually a Google ranking factor?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for User-Generated Content as a Ranking Factor

Google addresses user-generated spam in the Google Search Central Advanced [documentation](#):

> **"Sometimes, spam can be generated on a good site by malicious users. This spam is usually generated on sites that allow users to create new pages or otherwise add content to the site."**

Not all sites will be negatively impacted.

> **"However, if your site has too much user-generated spam on it, that can affect our assessment of the site, which may eventually result in us taking manual action on the whole site."**

Google [goes on](#) to give specific advice on how to prevent comment spam. In regards to rankings and comment spam, we see: "Low-quality content on some parts of a website can impact the whole site's rankings."

> **"Google might remove or demote pages overrun with user-generated spam to protect the quality of our search results."**

In 2020, John Mueller, Google Search Advocate, answered a question about how Google ranks user-generated content pages by relevancy and quality:

> **"User-generated content can take lots of forms, from comments on the bottom of your pages to discussion between users to complete pages written by users.**
>
> **Overall, Google doesn't differentiate between content you wrote and content your users wrote. If you publish it on your site, we'll see it as the content that you want to have published, and that's what we'll use for rankings."**

He added that, "...if you have a large amount of user-generated content, make sure it meets your standards for publishing content on your website."

With regards to links in user-generated content:

> **"...by default, you probably can't vouch for the links that were added. For these, we have a way of telling us that these links are user-generated content with the rel="ugc" link attribute."**

In 2021, Google released a presentation on user generated content for AdSense publishers. They describe comments as "...a great way for site owners to build community and readership and because of that, comment sections are often used by spammers who run automated programs that post spam to abuse them [the comments]."

Again, they say that Google can't differentiate between your content and UGC. If you don't ensure that user-generated content meets your publishing standards, "...spam comments on a page can impact your site's rankings."

OUR VERDICT

User-Generated Content as a Ranking Factor

We know, from Mueller, that Google doesn't differentiate between content you wrote and content your users wrote. And we already knew that content is a ranking factor.

Therefore, user-generated content is a confirmed ranking factor.

Unfortunately, it can also have a negative impact on your rankings well, in regards to UGC spam.

Therefore, create publishing guidelines that encourage users to submit quality content – and always stay on top of your site's user-generated content moderation.

WEBSITE QUALITY SCORE

By **Kristi Hines**

Website Quality Score: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

Does Google use a quality score similar to the one in Google Ads as part of its organic search ranking algorithm?

This has been hotly debated over the years, to the extent there are even articles out there telling you how to optimize for it.

But is there actually an organic quality score? And does it impact your rankings?

Let's explore some of the resources and discussion on this whole Google organic quality score concept and see if we can get to the truth.

THE CLAIM

Website Quality Score is a Ranking Factor

This topic can cause a bit of confusion as there are a couple of things in play here.

What we know:

Google Ads uses [Quality Score](#). This is a number between 1-10 Google assigns to PPC ads, based on three factors:

- Expected clickthrough rate (CTR): The likelihood that your ad will be clicked when shown.

- Ad relevance: How closely your ad matches the intent behind a user's search.

- Landing page experience: How relevant and useful your landing page is to people who click your ad.

So when you hear the idea that Google uses a quality score to assess websites, you might think it's the Quality Score that Google Ads uses.

No.

Google does not use its Google Ads Quality Score in organic ranking.

So the question is:

Does Google use a quality score that rates an entire website with a number (it could be between 1-10, 0 to 100, or something else)?

We know Google considers E-A-T (Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness) an important guiding concept for every website that publishes content.

So if Google thinks it's important to look at the E-A-T of individual content creators, isn't the website where that content is published equally important?

And, if so, could you quantify that with a PageRank-style score?

Think of it like this: I'm going to publish a post. Is it more likely to rank on a website like Search Engine Journal vs. [Insert Random Blog Name Here Nobody Has Ever Heard Of]?

Yes, this is basically the hotly debated idea of domain authority (not to be confused with Domain Authority, the Moz metric, which we debunk in another chapter of this guide) – that some domains have an inherent SEO advantage over others.

An organic quality score like this would mean that even if the page lacked in other quality signals, it could still enjoy the ranking benefit of the site quality score.

Does Search Engine Journal, The New York Times, or Wikipedia (or whatever other dominant site you can think of) have an automatic ranking advantage compared to all/most of their competitors?

Could it be due to some sitewide organic quality score Google has assigned them?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for Website Quality Score as a Ranking Factor

In 2011, Google's Michael Wyszomierski gave feedback about Google's latest algorithm change. That update was Google Panda, which largely impacted sites with low-quality content. He said, in part:

> **"...it's important for webmasters to know that low quality content on part of a site can impact a site's ranking as a whole. For this reason, if you believe you've been impacted by this change you should evaluate all the content on your site and do your best to improve the overall quality of the pages on your domain. Removing low quality pages or moving them to a different domain could help your rankings for the higher quality content. "**

Does this suggest that Google could be using a quality score made up of some collection of signals to detect low-quality websites?

Many in SEO, including Jeff Ferguson, have argued that Google ranks webpages, not websites.

While that is true in theory, Wyszomierski's statement raises big questions around how low-quality content on part of a website could possibly impact the ability for an entire site's content to rank.

Did we get that answer in 2012, when Google filed a patent for a Site Quality Score?

The patent includes the following:

> **"This specification describes how a system can determine a score for a site, e.g., a web site or other collection of data resources, as seen by a search engine, that represents a measure of quality for the site.**
>
> **The score is determined from quantities indicating user actions of seeking out and preferring particular sites and the resources found in particular sites.**
>
> **A site quality score for a particular site can be determined by computing a ratio of a numerator that represents user interest in the site as reflected in user queries directed to the site and a denominator that represents user interest in the resources found in the site as responses to queries of all kinds.**

> **The site quality score for a site can be used as a signal to rank resources, or to rank search results that identify resources, that are found in one site relative to resources found in another site.”**

As always, just because Google has a patent on something does not provide clear evidence it is being used in search algorithms.

Beyond that, we have speculation from 2017, when Moz released a Whiteboard Friday on an organic quality score. They prefaced the presentation by saying,

> **"While there's no hard proof it exists, the organic quality score is a concept that's been pondered by many SEOs over the years.”**

In 2020, Seer Interactive published a guide on how to optimize your website for organic search using the components of the Google Quality Score.

The guide does not presume that the Quality Score is a ranking factor. Rather, they want to give PPC practitioners a new perspective on optimizing content for organic search.

OUR VERDICT

POSSIBLY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Website Quality Score as a Ranking Factor

To date, Google has neither confirmed nor denied that an organic site quality score is a ranking factor.

The Site Quality Score patent filed in 2012 is, at best, circumstantial evidence that Google could use a quality score as a ranking factor (or at least considered doing so, around that time).

And it makes sense. A site should have a base level of authority (or even a topical relevancy score) it can pass to new pages based on its link profile (both internal and inbound).

So the question remains: could there be a domain/website quality score that acts as a baseline for new pages?

Wyszomierski's comment is an intriguing hint that something of this nature could be in play in Google's algorithms.

If sites can be hurt by low-quality content, is it also reasonable to assume that sites can be helped organically by consistently publishing high-quality content?

And while we have ruled out the idea that the Google Ads Quality Score is used by Google for the purposes of ranking, the principles behind it – especially around intent, relevance, and usefulness – can easily be applied to organic search.

Just like understanding E-A-T and the Search Quality Rating Guidelines can help you directionally with your SEO.

Without direct confirmation as of this writing, we can't call organic quality score a definite Google ranking factor.

But it's possible.

WHOIS

By **Miranda Miller**

WhoIs Information: Is it a Google Ranking Factor?

When you register a domain, the registrar has your identifying information.

However, you can choose domain privacy protection if you don't want the names, addresses, phone numbers, etc. of website contacts listed in WhoIs for all the world to see.

There are plenty of legitimate reasons people want to protect their privacy online.

But does WhoIs information – or using domain privacy – have any SEO implications?

THE CLAIM

WhoIs Information is a Ranking Factor

This topic can cause a bit of confusion as there are a couple of things in play here.

Some of the questions that have come up around the potential impact of domain privacy on SEO include:

- Does hiding your WHOIS information hurt your website's ranking?

- If we have a large number of sites in our network but are using domain privacy, will Google count the links passing back and forth as legitimate?

- Is WhoIs a Google trust factor?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for WhoIs Information as a Ranking Factor

When Google became a domain registrar in January 2005, SEO professionals were immediately suspicious about how registration information might be used in the ranking algorithm.

Barry Schwartz noted the following month that a Google spokesperson had fanned the flames with this comment to the New York Times:

> **"While we have no plans to register domains at this time, we believe this information can help us increase the quality of our search results."**

There was no real industry consensus on this for a few years, as SEO pros and webmasters shared conflicting experiences and advice in forums.

In 2007, an industry blogger cited Matt Cutts as the basis for this recommendation:

"Don't hide behind domain privacy services if you don't have a legitimate need to.

There is evidence that search engines can see right through this 'wall' anyway and it makes your site less trustworthy to normal (albeit tech savvy) visitors/ customers.

Make sure the whois data matches the contact details on your site and in your privacy policy, too."

As Loren Baker said at the time:

"By not wanting to be spammed in your inbox, mailbox, phone box or possibly even via your XBox, are you telling search engines that your site cannot be trusted? I'm not sure this is the case."

The above blogger made that recommendation based on what Matt Cutts wrote of the site reviews he'd done at Pubcon in 2006:

"Rather than any real content, most of the pages were pay-per-click (PPC) parked pages, and when I checked the whois on them, they all had "whois privacy protection service" on them.

That's relatively unusual.

Having lots of sites isn't automatically bad, and having PPC sites isn't automatically bad, and having whois privacy turned on isn't automatically bad, but once you get several of these factors all together, you're often talking about a very different type of webmaster than the fellow who just has a single site or so."

Even then, there was no evidence that "hiding" behind domain privacy protection and opting to keep your home address out of the WhoIs database had any impact on ranking.

As Cutts said, it could be perceived by the webspam team as a red flag. But he was talking about it popping up in conjunction with other factors.

That was all a long time ago, so let's get more current.

In 2016, an SEO pro published a case study on a fairly reputable site claiming that WhoIs was a trust factor, and he could prove it.

Specifically, he said, the address you use in your WhoIs contact info must be in the same general region that your site serves.

Turning on domain privacy protection or using a mailing/physical address outside of the area your site intends to serve would kill your rankings. Or so the story goes.

We have to look at the wider context of the state of Google at this point.

Google was into (or had gone through) many iterations of identity detection and verification methods by then — Google+, Authorship, IPv6, etc.

This Whiteboard Friday episode with Cyrus Shepard from May 2014 gives us a look back at the various signals and clues Google was using even then to determine who controlled which sites.

The algorithms had become far more sophisticated than when we were having these conversations in 2005.

Given that the SEO pro simply presented a story with no backing evidence, it's difficult to buy into that anecdotal experience that Google considered WhoIs/domain privacy a trust factor in its ranking algorithms in 2016.

The Evidence Against WhoIs Information as a Ranking Factor

So let's get more current.

In 2019, John Mueller responded to a tweeted question as to whether domain privacy settings affect SEO. He was clear:
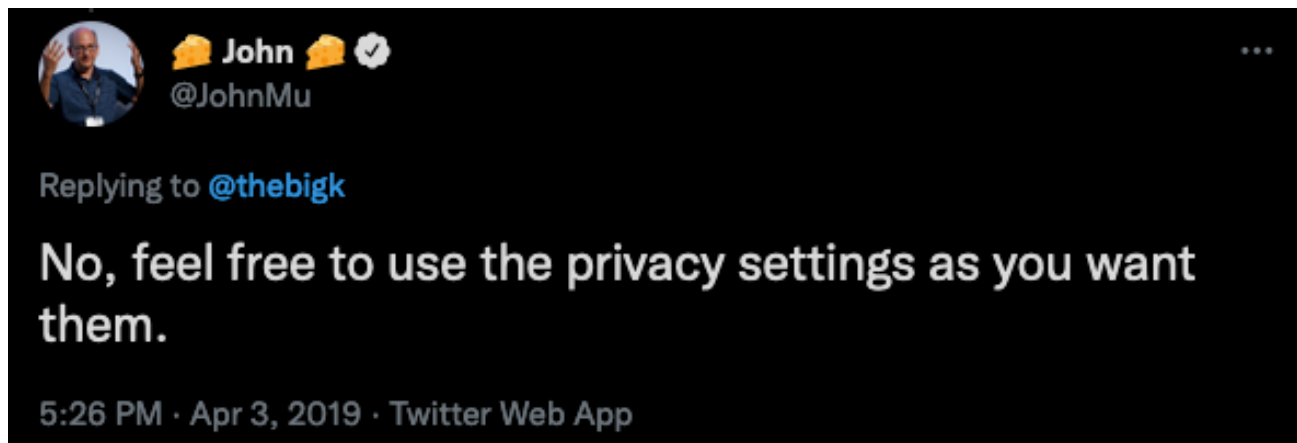
And today, Google has only a 2% market share in domain registration. They don't have access to enough data for this to have any reliability as a search signal.

In 2021, Mueller was again asked (this time on Reddit) about whether domain privacy settings impact SEO or rankings. His response: "No."

OUR VERDICT

WhoIs Information
as a Ranking Factor

There's no evidence that Google ever used domain privacy protection as a ranking factor. Perhaps they planned to back in 2005, when they first became a domain registrar.

Maybe they even did, for a short while.

But not for long, if so – and they definitely aren't using it today.

With that said, if you're attempting to mask the identity of site owners in order to create link networks or otherwise manipulate search rankings, you're solidly into webspam territory.

That puts you at risk of a manual penalty, if detected.

Google recognizes that online privacy is important and there are perfectly valid reasons people choose to keep their personal information out of WhoIs.

WhoIs is not a ranking factor.

WWW VS. NON-WWW

By **Kristi Hines**

www vs. Non-www: Is It a Google Ranking Factor?

Does the inclusion or exclusion of the www in a URL affect organic search rankings?

Some SEO pros have claimed that domains using a www rank higher than domains not using a www, or vice versa.

In this chapter, we'll determine if using www in your domain or excluding it is a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

www/non-www in a URL is a Ranking Factor

Would *https://www.example.com* rank higher than *https://example.com* (or vice versa) based solely on the use (or lack thereof) of the www?

To determine this, we must first define what the www portion of a URL represents.

Let's look at the following URLs.

- https://example.com/page.html - This URL shows an HTML page on the root domain.

- https://example.com/folder/page.html - This URL shows an HTML page in a subfolder/subdirectory.

- https://www.example.com/page.html - This URL shows an HTML page under the www subdomain.

- https://store.example.com/page.html - This URL shows an HTML page under the store subdomain.

Now that we know the www is viewed as a subdomain, let's see what Google has to say about the use of subdomains and subdirectories.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against www or non-www as a Ranking Factor

In 2005, Google published an article on the Google Search Central Blog about www vs non-www for developers. The author doesn't indicate Google has a preference, only that webmasters should choose one or the other.

Since then, Google has confirmed that the www subdomain does not affect rankings.

In 2017, a Twitter user asked if Google prefers www or non-www for SEO. John Mueller, Google Search Advocate, confirmed that www is a brand preference with minimal SEO implications.

In 2018, during a Google Webmaster Central Office Hours, someone asked if there is a difference between subdomains and subdirectories for Google. According to Mueller, "In general, we see these the same."

In 2019, Mueller explained canonical URLs on the Google Search Central Blog:

"Sometimes a web page can be reached by using more than one URL. In such cases, Google tries to determine the best URL to display in search and to use in other ways. We call this the 'canonical URL.' There are ways site owners can help us better determine what should be the canonical URLs for their content."

He goes on to explain how you can use Google Search Console to determine which URL Google has chosen.

If you prefer the non-www version of your website, and Google has chosen a page on the www version, you can follow the directions on consolidating duplicate URLs, updated in 2021.

In 2020, Mozilla updated a guide for webmasters on choosing the www or the non-www version of their domain. They also conclude that it doesn't matter which version of your site you choose, so long as you stick with that version as the canonical URL. They go on to explain how you can set your canonical URLs.

OUR VERDICT

UNLIKELY
RANKING FACTOR METER

Use of www vs. non-www as a Ranking Factor

Without word from Google or research proving that a domain with or without the www ranks better, we have to conclude that this is unlikely a ranking factor.

The key to success with www or non-www is to choose one and stay consistent.

XML SITEMAPS

By **Matt Southern**

Are XML Sitemaps a Google Ranking Factor?

Not to be confused with HTML sitemaps, which are designed to be viewed by humans, XML sitemaps are solely for search engines.

Given that XML sitemaps are intended to assist Google, site owners may assume they play a role in search rankings.

SEO experts even suggest XML sitemaps are so crucial to search that the absence of one can negatively impact rankings.

Alternate claims suggest Google has progressed past the need for XML sitemaps, and site owners can forego them altogether.

Despite only being used by search crawlers, is it possible XML sitemaps have nothing to do with rankings?

This chapter will answer that question as we investigate the various claims about XML sitemaps being a Google search ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

XML Sitemaps are a Ranking Factor

An XML sitemap is a list of a website's pages that assists Google with discovering new URLs and recognizing when existing ones have changed.

XML sitemaps are often recommended as an SEO best practice, with claims suggesting they're required in order for a website to rank to its full potential.

SEO experts may point out the absence of an XML sitemap as a red flag that's holding a website back in search results.

Contrary to those claims, an emerging school of thought says XML sitemaps are inconsequential to search rankings.

Unless their CMS generates an XML sitemap automatically, more site owners are choosing not to add one. Are they doing their website a disservice?

At least one of the above claims has to be correct. Let's look at what Google says in the next section.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence for XML Sitemaps as a Ranking Factor

Evidence indicates that XML sitemaps are not a factor for search rankings.

When asked if there's any problem, or ranking disadvantage, associated with not having an XML sitemap, Google's Gary Illyes has confirmed there isn't.

Does that mean there's no reason to have an XML sitemap?

Not at all. It just means it won't be used in ranking.

A sitemap file can help ensure Google knows where to find all pages of a website. They can also expedite the indexing of new and updated pages.

However, Google is able to crawl and index pages on its own, which is why there's no inherent ranking advantage to having an XML sitemap.

A far better solution to an is building a website with a structure that's easy for Google to navigate. This will get all internal links discovered naturally.

And, with sufficient external links pointing to a website, Google's crawlers will come back often without needing to be pinged by an XML sitemap.

OUR VERDICT

XML Sitemaps as a Ranking Factor

We feel confident saying XML sitemaps are not a Google ranking factor.

XML sitemaps are known to have an effect on indexing, but not ranking.

Even with that being the case, XML sitemaps are not necessary for indexing, nor do they guarantee indexing.

There's no harm in having an XML sitemap, however. Though Google typically recommends them for large sites with frequently changing URLs.

UNTIL NEXT TIME...

And there you have it! Thanks for sticking with us all the way through this deep dive into 88 of the most hotly debated potential search ranking factors.

Save it. Share it. Refer to it the next time a prospect or client gets upset that you haven't added meta keywords to their site or wants LSI keywords to be part of your SEO strategy.

Of course, our work here is never done. Search is a dynamic space in which you can't afford to sit still, lest the competition pass you by. And there are new claims about this or that being a ranking factor made every day.

We'll refresh this guide as Google continues to update its algorithms in the months and years to come so you can stay at the top of your game.

In the meantime, do you have feedback on **Google Ranking Factors: Fact or Fiction?** Reach out to our Editorial team at info@searchenginejournal.com and share your thoughts.

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