Engineer

SEO

making a page findable without paying for it

What it is

SEO, short for search engine optimization, is the work a site owner does on how their pages appear in search. Google's SEO Starter Guide defines it as "helping search engines understand your content, and helping users find your site and make a decision about whether they should visit your site through a search engine". It is just as plain about its limits: "There are no secrets here that'll automatically rank your site first in Google".

Getting into the index usually needs none of it. "You usually don't need to do anything except publish your site on the web," the guide says, because most sites "are found and added automatically as we crawl the web." Nor does appearing cost anything, and Google Search Essentials says so "no matter what anyone tries to tell you". What SEO adds is care over a site's own pages, care the guide hopes will help "search engines (not just Google)" as well.

Search Essentials is the rulebook beneath it, in three parts. The technical requirements are "the bare minimum", and "most sites pass the technical requirements without even realizing it". The spam policies cover what can lead to "a page or an entire site being ranked lower or completely omitted". The key best practices are what most people mean by SEO. None of it is a contract: meeting every part "doesn't mean that Google will crawl, index, or serve its content."

Use the concept in a decision

Put "What is SEO?" to work in a real decision. We can help relate the concept to the system you are building or buying. A site or an app that the AI assistants your customers use can find, read and act on, checked on every release rather than promised once.

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Test the assumptions behind the term

Use the explanation and linked work to frame questions for your project. We can examine the assumptions with you before a tool is chosen. Built a multilingual Hugo site in 3 languages — 108 template files serving three languages and four formats

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Why it matters

The Starter Guide names the part it expects to weigh most: “Creating content that people find compelling and useful will likely influence your website’s presence in search results more than any of the other suggestions in this guide.” It means text that is easy to read, original (“Don’t just rehash what others already published”), up to date, and written for people.

Words matter, though less mechanically than keyword lists suggest. Search Essentials asks for “words that people would use to look for your content”, placed in the title and main heading, the alt text and the link text. The Starter Guide’s example is one reader who searches for “charcuterie” and another who searches for “cheese board”, and it adds that Google’s language matching “can understand how your page relates to many queries, even if you don’t explicitly use the exact terms in them.”

The line Google draws runs between pages made for people and pages made for search engines. Its guide to helpful content puts the question “What about SEO?” to itself and answers: “SEO can be a helpful activity when it is applied to people-first content, rather than search engine-first content.” Its warning signs read like a portrait of SEO done badly: content “primarily made to attract visits from search engines”, “extensive automation”, and pages “mainly summarizing what others have to say without adding much value”.

Spam is the far end of that line, “techniques used to deceive users or manipulate our Search systems into featuring content prominently” in the words of Google’s spam policies, which now count attempts to manipulate its generative AI responses as well. Sites caught by automated systems or human review “may rank lower in results or not appear in results at all”.

A good share of familiar SEO advice aims at signals Google says it ignores or weighs lightly, and the Starter Guide lists them under “Things we believe you shouldn’t focus on”. “Google Search doesn’t use the keywords meta tag.” Keywords in a domain name or URL path “alone have hardly any effect beyond appearing in breadcrumbs”. Headings in semantic order are “fantastic for screen

readers" and make no difference to Search. PageRank "is just one" of many signals. And E-E-A-T, Google's shorthand for experience, expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness, is not a ranking factor either: "No, it's not."

What it looks like in practice

The write-up of building client sites to be found from the start puts the stake in one line: "A beautiful site nobody can find is a failure that looks like a success." It treated design and build on one side, and SEO, content strategy and copywriting on the other, as one job, so that the site "was designed from the start to be found, not optimised as an afterthought", and it reports clients ending up "with stronger visibility and more engagement". That is the write-up's account of its own clients, not a rule any search engine states.

The credits page holds this site's own claims to an outside test. Its "Check it yourself" section links public tools that run against the live page, and "none of them takes our word for anything, and none of them is ours". PageSpeed Insights "runs Lighthouse from Google's machines rather than ours", with SEO among the four areas it covers. The W3C Feed Validator warns that most feed entries share a modification date, and the page lets the warning stand, since the dates come from git history: "We would rather show a warning than invent a date." Google's helpful-content guide asks the matching question: "Are you changing the date of pages to make them seem fresh when the content has not substantially changed?"

The write-up of measuring traffic from the access log alone shows what this site chooses not to know. Query strings are cut before anything reads the path, "so neither the words somebody typed into a search engine nor the words they typed into this site's own search box can reach any file", and search terms are among the questions that "are all unanswerable here and say so". For a site owner who wants that answer, the Starter Guide's next step is Search Console, to "monitor and optimize how your website performs on Google Search".

Where it goes wrong

A page repeats its keywords until it reads badly. The main phrase turns up in every heading and paragraph, a list of towns sits at the foot of the page, and a keywords meta tag carries the rest. Google's spam policies call this keyword stuffing, "filling a web page with keywords or numbers in an attempt to

manipulate rankings", and give blocks of text listing the cities a page is "trying to rank for" as one example. Put the words a reader would search for in the title, the main heading, the link text and the alt text, and stop there.

Pages are padded to a length or re-dated to look fresh. An article is stretched to a rumoured word count, or its date moves forward while the text stays the same. Google's helpful-content guide lists both among its warning signs, and on a preferred word count answers itself: "(No, we don't.)" The Starter Guide agrees that "there's no magical word count target". Write to the length the subject needs, and change a date when the content changes.

A change shows no effect after a few days. Rankings stay where they were, and the change is undone, or another stacked on top, before the first could register. The Starter Guide says that "Some changes might take effect in a few hours, others could take several months", suggests waiting "a few weeks", and warns that "not all changes you make to your website will result in noticeable impact in search results". Change one thing at a time and give it weeks. To see whether Google has a page at all, use the `site:` search operator or the URL Inspection Tool.

Someone offers guaranteed rankings or a bundle of links. A seller promises first place, or links bought from other sites, swapped in bulk or spread through footers. By Google's own account, appearing costs nothing and no secret ranks a site first. Its spam policies define link spam as "creating links to or from a site primarily for the purpose of manipulating search rankings", paid links and excessive link exchanges included. A link paid for as advertising is allowed when it carries `rel="sponsored"` or `rel="nofollow"` .

Further reading

- SEO Starter Guide — Google's own introduction: what helps, how long it takes, and what is not worth the effort.
- Google Search Essentials — the technical requirements, spam policies and key best practices for appearing in Google Search.
- Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content — the self-assessment questions that separate people-first from search-engine-first.
- Spam policies for Google web search — keyword stuffing, link spam, cloaking and the other practices that can cost a site its place.
- In-depth guide to how Google Search works — crawling, indexing and serving, the three stages SEO tries to help along.

Glossary

Choose for your actual constraints

Describe the workflow, the existing interfaces and the users who need the change. We can define a testable delivery and a handover that lets your team maintain it.

See what it costs Get in touch →

Make the terminology practical

Ask how “What is SEO?” applies to your organisation. A concrete example from your current system is enough to start the discussion.

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