



An Introduction to Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

This guide is designed to provide a brief introduction to the principles of search engine optimisation, aimed at helping you to increase the presence and value of your website to users on the web.

An Introduction to Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)	1
What is SEO?	1
Why is SEO important?	1
Top Ten checklist for SEO.....	1
... and a few extra tips.....	3
Tips from Google	3
Web ratings and analytics	3
Further information	3

WHAT IS SEO?

Search engine optimisation is all about making your website visible in the right context. When web users search on Google or Yahoo and other search engines for key terms that are included on your website, you want them to find your website easily.

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the term given to the methods you can use to make this happen, and to optimise the ranking your website gets in search engine results.

WHY IS SEO IMPORTANT?

A considerable proportion of website traffic (up to 80 per cent) is directed from search engines. The more established your site is, the more likely it is that users will come directly to your website, as returning visitors.

Search engines are an important tool in building traffic to your site from occasional or lapsed users – as well as new ones. These visitors may not know your website URL, or may not even know about your organisation – so will most likely find your website through a search engine.

Therefore, increasing the presence of your website on search engines is key to driving traffic and visitors to your site.

TOP TEN CHECKLIST FOR SEO

In SEO terms, the basics of optimisation come down to sound (X)HTML coding practice and good use of language; when followed they go a long way. There are a number boxes to tick when it comes to considering how best to go about designing web content and website, predominantly around metadata elements, content quality assurance, natural language, and semantic coding.

These tips will improve the likelihood of your pages being picked up by search engines.

1. URL

Very often, the web address you use is actually your primary keyword, or at least a variation on it. So for example, the URL www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk incorporates 3 keywords that are essential to what ESRC is trying to do, in promoting social science in *today's society*.

Also, try to make your URL/domain name memorable if possible.

2. Title tag

Similarly, every page of content should have a title, which is between 10 and 50 characters in length. This title should also include one or more keywords. At the same time, it ought to be descriptive of the page contents. The title content will appear in the title-bar of your web browser.



Again, using ESRC Society Today as an example, each page contains a title that reflects its position within the site, and what it's about, eg, "ESRC Society Today – News Articles 2006"

3. **Description meta tag**

The description meta tag should effectively present an abstract of the material in the body content, providing a quick summary of the rest of the page. Again, the emphasis should be on including one or two of the more important keywords – for the content in that page.

It's important to note that, if you use the same tag contents across multiple pages, search engines can pick up on this and potentially ignore the contents either of that tag, or even possibly of the entire page.

4. **Keyword meta tag**

Keywords are those words deemed to be descriptively important in the page. Some schools of thought would teach that the keyword meta tag is a thing of the past. However, at the time of writing, it is still included in the W3C – World Wide Web consortium - metadata specifications, and so its inclusion would indicate best practice.

When using the keyword meta tag, it makes sense to include all keywords that appear in the remainder of the document. However, words that are not included in the body text should not be included within the meta tag.

5. **Keyword density**

The body content itself should consist of all of the keywords pulled out into the meta tags above, as well as the supporting text that puts them into context. SEO gurus are at odds about precisely what proportion of keywords should be present in relation to the rest of the content, but a generally touted target range of 15-20 per cent of total page content is the optimal.

Anything under five per cent density is likely to make little, if any, difference. However, the density for individual keywords varies, dependant on their individual importance; a general rule of thumb, wherever possible, is to aim for a density of five per cent on the primary keyword and three per cent with subsequent keywords, cumulatively reaching the overall 15-20 per cent target.

6. **Header tags** (eg H1 and H2 tags)

Semantic use of heading tags is good practice, and search engines love sites that follow good practice. There should only be one <H1></H1> tag, for the primary content title, under which can appear any number of <H2></H2> or <H3></H3> tags.

Style and format of these can be further defined through use of CSS, but it is important to maintain a top-down hierarchy of H1, H2, H3 etc.

7. **Text formatting fonts** (eg strong, bold and underline):

Use made of these is unlikely to make any difference when it comes to crunching by algorithms, but it has been suggested that bolding the first instance of keywords and the last instance of the primary keyword, may result in increased ranking.

8. **Beginning and end of text**

The closer keywords are to the beginning and end of the page content the better. Including the primary keyword within the first and last paragraphs can contribute to hitcount.

9. **Key phrases as whole phrases**

If your keywords appears as multiple words in a specific phrase, say for example "Economic and Social Research" as a key phrase, then wherever possible, try to ensure these words do not appear separately or in a different order

10. **Alt text**

Include keywords within the Alt tag of images on your pages, and ensure that the descriptive text is both relevant to the image and to the overall context of the page



... AND A FEW EXTRA TIPS

11. Keep your content fresh and up to date

Google uses a spider which crawls the web each day for new and updated content. Where there is fresh content, these pages will appear in the top of the index for a few days. If the page was just an updated version of what is already in the results it will revert back to the old version and drop back to its previous position.

If the page is new then it will drop completely from the index, until the next full update when it should take a permanent place in the results.

Therefore, keeping your content as frequently updated as possible will help keep your website near the top of the rankings.

12. Reciprocal links

Link to relevant and well-regarded websites, and ensure that your website also appears on theirs. If you link to similar and high-ranking sites, this will improve your own ranking.

13. Keyword vs concept searching

If your keywords appear near other similar words and phrases, or associated terms, this will also increase the chances of your pages being picked up. Search engines such as Google use keywords, but others such as Excite (a directory) will look for clusters of words which form a concept, based on 'knowledge' of a subject. (ESRC Society Today's search engine is also based on conceptual searching.)

14. Register with major search engines

The top ten search engines (including Google, MSN, AOL, Yahoo and Ask Jeeves) cover 95 per cent of the web, so it's worth ensuring that these search engines know about your website.

TIPS FROM GOOGLE

Google, the search engine of choice for many, has a few tips for search engine optimisation too.

Google – SEO tips for webmasters

<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35291>

Google – Webmaster Help

<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/?hl=en>

WEB RATINGS AND ANALYTICS

There are some companies that will analyse the traffic and usage of your site and provide you with statistics. Some include:

Nielsen - <http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/>

Google Analytics - <http://www.google.com/analytics/>

WebTrends - <http://www.webtrends.com/>

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have any questions on the topics covered above, please contact the Society Today team at societytoday@esrc.ac.uk

There are also other useful websites with tips and information on SEO including:



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Creative Confusion – SEO tips

http://www.creativeconfusion.net/search_engines/index.html

Creative Confusion – SEO glossary

<http://www.creativeconfusion.net/seo-glossary/index.html>

Yahoo! - How do I improve the ranking of my web site in the search results?

<http://help.yahoo.com//us/yahoo/search/ranking/ranking-02.html>

Yahoo - How do I get listed in Yahoo! Search "Web Results," and how to increase the ranking of my site?

<http://help.yahoo.com//us/yahoo/search/basics/basics-14.html>

UKOLN – Metadata in a nutshell

<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/metadata/publications/nutshell/>

<http://inventory.overture.com/>

find out what search terms are being used that relating to keywords on your website