

Search Engine **Journal**[®]

GOOGLE RANKING FACTORS

FACT OR FICTION



2 N D E D I T I O N

2ND EDITION

GOOGLE RANKING FACTORS

FACT OR FICTION

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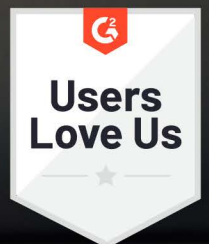
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RANKING FACTORS 2ND EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, even the most seasoned pros may stop and ask, “What even *is* – or isn’t – a Google ranking factor, anyway?”

The thing is: The answer to that question is fluid. It evolves with changes in the algorithms, which are constantly being updated to respond to user needs.

That’s why we’ve made it a habit to put together a comprehensive guide to ranking factors – to do the digging so you don’t have to.

The guide is back and updated for 2022.

But, back to the original question.

Before we call something a “ranking factor,” we look to Google for a statement from the search engine giant itself or an employee who can speak authoritatively on the algorithms that determine SERP rankings.

It’s part of what makes the question, “Is it a ranking factor?” anything but simple.

See, some things were previously ranking factors but aren’t anymore. The feature or concept in question must currently be in use.

There are plenty of studies and experiments regarding ranking factors floating around – but, as you’ll see in the book, they’re not always reliable.



Loren Baker

Founder,
Search Engine Journal

That's why we use the word "confirmed" when discussing ranking factors; if Google hasn't confirmed it directly, it's difficult to say with certainty that something is, in fact, a ranking factor.

And it doesn't *have* to be complicated. That's why we've collected a comprehensive list of everything that might make you ask, "Is it a ranking factor?"

Within each topic, you'll find an answer as to whether you can be 100% sure that it is a confirmed ranking factor that Google uses in its algorithms.

We lay out the evidence and let you know if there is any debate or uncertainty. If you want to understand the history of a ranking factor or why a myth came to be, you'll find that information here.

Plus, for those times when an SEO determinant might not be a ranking factor – but can still be vital for user experience, gathering data, or other reasons – we dig into that, too. To make sure you have the full context.

And even if you're just looking for a quick "yes or no" answer (hey, we've all been there), this ebook can help with that, too. Just use the skip tags in the table of contents to find your specific question.

If you have a ranking factor question that isn't addressed here, tweet the SEJ team [@sejournal](https://twitter.com/sejournal) or submit your specific question to [Ask An SEO](#), a weekly column where expert contributors respond directly to reader questions.

Let's get started!



301 REDIRECTS

By Kristi Hines

Are 301 Redirects A Google Ranking Factor?

Using 301 redirects is crucial when permanently moving an old webpage to a new URL. They will ensure a positive user experience by instantly connecting users to the content they are looking for, even if they were given an old URL.

But do 301 redirects affect your rankings in organic search?

This chapter will cover the relationship 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 permanently changed URL.

You would use a 301 redirect for the following scenarios:

- You are going from HTTP to HTTPS.
- You are moving 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://example.com/page.html* to *https://example.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, former 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, then redirected again and again. He noted that the Googlebot might 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](#), Gary Illyes shared this comment about redirects. Thanks to [Andy Beard](#) for surfacing this tweet.

“30x redirects don't lose PageRank anymore.”

In 2018, John Mueller was asked if Google would see 100 domains redirected to one as spam. His response:

“Redirect away. I doubt you'd get SEO value from that, but that's kinda up to you. For example, if you might use a domain name in an ad campaign to have a memorable URL to show, even if it ends up redirecting to your main site in the end.”

In [2019](#), Mueller 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 January [2020](#), Mueller discussed the 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.

In April [2020](#), Mueller answered a question submitted to #AskGoogleWebmasters about how long it takes Google to rank a new URL instead of the old one that has been 301 redirected. Mueller explains that 301 redirects signal canonicalization, but that Google also uses other factors for canonicalization.

He mentions a previous [video](#) discussing how Google chooses the right canonical URL. He then says that you can help Google determine the preferred destination URL beyond a 301 redirect by updating internal links, sitemaps, and other references to the original page to reference the new URL.

In June of [2021](#), Mueller discussed how Google could choose a new URL over an old one without a redirect.

Suppose you copy content from an older URL to a newer URL and don't place a redirect. In that case, Google may still be able to choose the new URL as canonical due to other signals (internal links, sitemap links, etc.).

In July of [2021](#), Gary Illyes advised that 301 redirects stay in place for at least a year, giving Google time to ensure ranking signals are properly passed to the new URL.

Google also regularly updates its guide to redirects and Google Search in its Advanced SEO [documentation](#) – noting that server side redirects are best.

“If you need to change the URL of a page as it is shown in search engine results, we recommend that you use a permanent server side redirect whenever possible. This is the best way to ensure that Google Search and people are directed to the correct page.”

They also add in the FAQ for [changing URLs](#) that 301 and 302 redirects do not result in a loss of PageRank.

OUR VERDICT

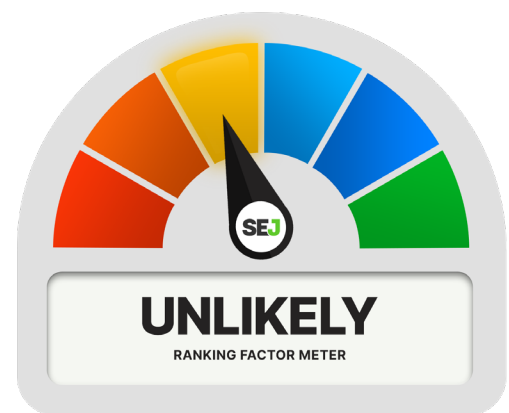
301 Redirects Are Not Likely A Ranking Factor

301 redirects may not boost the rankings of your webpages, but they can ensure that both Google and search users are directed to the content you want them to find.

They also ensure you don't lose the ranking signals built to old URLs when moving them to new ones.

But while they are essential for signaling the proper canonical and passing ranking signals, we have no official confirmation that 301 redirects are a ranking factor.

Remember that just because something isn't a Google Ranking Factor, doesn't mean it's not important. You should still [manage redirects carefully](#) and avoid technical issues such as redirect chains.





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

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):** ``
-  **Bad (keyword stuffing):** ``
-  **Better:** ``
-  **Best:** ``

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

When you think about it, AMP ticks several boxes that suggest it could be a ranking factor:

- Developed by Google ✓
- Makes websites more mobile-friendly ✓
- Improves page speed ✓

Despite actively encouraging people to use it, Google has debunked claims that AMP is 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 its connection to other ranking factors.

THE CLAIM

AMP As A Ranking Factor

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

Discussions about AMP as a ranking factor began when Google launched the technology in 2018.

Why?

People think AMP is a ranking factor because Google has a stake in its success as a technology.

Google is responsible for creating AMP and actively encourages using it as part of a more significant 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 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 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:

“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 loads pages instantly, it can help sites send stronger ranking signals regarding mobile page speed.

The increased speed 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](#) with the rollout of the Page Experience update in June 2021.

Leading up to the update's launch, Google's [communication to site owners](#) has always been that AMP can help achieve 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 than non-AMP domains.

Passing Google's Core Web Vitals thresholds can improve a site's search rankings.

Again, as with the page speed ranking boost, you can achieve this without AMP.

Decline Of AMP

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

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

Top Stories eligibility was a ranking advantage unique to AMP for a while.

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.

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.

AMP Decline Continues

Since the first version of this ebook was released, AMP has continued to decline steadily.

In response to complaints from publishers and readers alike, an [update to Google News](#) on mobile bypasses AMP URLs and sends traffic directly to publishers' websites.

Google has a long history of introducing new tools, hyping them up, and retiring them years later. Examples include failed social media site Google+ and Skype competitor Google Hangouts.

AMP isn't retired yet, but it would be on-brand for Google to say that this web technology it developed is no longer relevant.

It's not only Google saying it, but other web companies are dropping AMP from their platforms.

[Twitter no longer supports AMP links](#) and treats them like Google News by redirecting visitors to the publishers' domains.

As more companies continue to limit the prevalence of AMP, there's no reason why you should have to do anything different to your website.

If you're currently using AMP and are happy with how your webpages perform in search results, then continue doing what you're doing.

Should the day come when Google shuts the AMP project, it's not as though your website will stop working. AMP is HTML code crawled and indexed like anything else on the web.

OUR VERDICT

AMP Is Not 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 impact click-through rates, such as a distinctive icon and Top Stories exclusivity.

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



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&As 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 being 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

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 Miranda Miller

Is Author Authority A Google Ranking Factor?

Imagine you're having a minor medical problem. Maybe every time you eat, your jaw audibly clicks behind your molars. It's not painful, but it's unpleasant.

In the quest to find a solution to this annoying problem, you turn to that all-purpose bank of knowledge, the internet.

As you comb through the search engine results, which source do you think is more reliable: the page written by an ear, nose, and throat doctor with ten years of medical experience or the one written by a guy who runs a Minecraft blog?

It's an obvious choice, isn't it? That's not to say the Minecraft blogger's page doesn't have the correct information. Still, it's unlikely he knows more about what's ailing you than a healthcare professional with a medical degree, five years of residency training, and a decade of field experience.



It's just a fact: Credibility matters. And this has never been more true than today, when misinformation runs rampant on the internet.

And while most authors are genuinely trying to be helpful, there is a lot of information on the web that can be downright harmful. It doesn't matter whether this bad info is the result of maliciousness or just simple ignorance – inaccurate or flat-out wrong content can do a lot of damage.

That's why author authority, or author rank, is considered in the search engine optimization process. Let's take a look at how.

THE CLAIM

Author Authority Influences Page Rankings

When determining the overall quality of a webpage and how well it answers a search query, Google emphasizes [E-A-T](#). That is, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness.

But, does this include the E-A-T of the author? Does it really matter if the piece was written by a genuine expert rather than a recent journalism school graduate?

Author authority is a concept that has been around for years. And the role it plays in site rankings has long been a matter of debate between SEO experts and digital marketers.

Let's take a closer look.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence: For Author Authority And SERP Ranking

Google has never indicated that an article's author directly influences rankings. But this doesn't mean you can ignore it.

In fact, there is evidence that the search engine giant is interested in identifying authors.

Way back in 2005, which is an eon in SEO terms, [Google filed a patent](#) for Agent Rank. Designed to help weed out low-quality content, it allowed the search engine to use digital signatures to rank articles by reputation.

In 2011, Google confirmed support of authorship markup using `rel="author."` However, adoption of this tag was slow. A 2014 study found only 30% of authors were using this tag, and Google officially removed it the same year.

At a 2016 SMX conference, Google Webmaster Trends Analyst Gary Illyes said the company is not using authorship, but has systems in place to recognize who created a piece of content. This seems to be a reference to the role authors play in [Google's Knowledge Graph](#).

If you're not familiar with the Knowledge Graph, it's a massive database of facts and entities (i.e., things or concepts that are singular, unique, well-defined, and distinguishable). Authors are officially recognized entities by Google, though the search engine doesn't know every content creator.

Author reputation matters, but be careful not to conflate “reputation” with “expertise” and “authoritativeness.”

Google uses expertise and authoritativeness to evaluate reliability on a given subject. Reputation, on the other hand, is a more subjective evaluation based upon how readers view the author.

Reputation is determined according to [Search Quality Raters Guidelines](#): a set of guiding principles used to train human raters who evaluate the search engine’s quality and sometimes test proposed changes to search algorithms.

One of these guidelines states that a low content creator score is enough to give the piece itself a low quality score. However, Google has been clear that these human-generated ratings are never used to affect query results.

In March 2020, [Google filed a patent](#) for [Author Vectors](#), which helps it identify who created unlabeled content. It does this by evaluating writing styles and levels of expertise and interest in different topics.

While the search engine giant hasn’t been forthcoming about how or why they are using this program to determine search rankings, it has been clear in [recommending the addition of author URLs in article schema](#).

It does not specify what this URL should direct to, but it is most commonly used to send readers to a social media profile or bio page.

OUR VERDICT

Author Authority's Impact On Rankings Is Unclear



There has been a lot of back-and-forth about author authority's role in Google search results; unfortunately, there's no clear answer.

However, even if it doesn't directly impact your organic rankings, it's still smart to follow Google's Quality Rater Guidelines.

Users care about the reputation and relevance of a piece's author. And this alone is reason enough to seek out the best possible authors and clearly identify them in each article.



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 Bureau 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

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 Kayle Larkin

Bounce Rate: Is It A Google Ranking Factor?

Google search representatives have consistently and clearly stated that they do not use Google Analytics data to rank websites.

But, there are discrepancies between what Google says and what SEOs believe.

Despite Google's public statements, some search marketers continue to believe that bounce rate is in some way a ranking factor.

Why do they believe this? Is there any validity to the claims against Google's public statements?

Does Google use bounce rate to rank webpages?

THE CLAIM

Bounce Rate As A Ranking Factor

As recent as Q3 2021, recognized and respected resources have perpetuated the myth that bounce rate is a ranking factor.

Rand Fishkin, Founder of MOZ, tweeted in [May 2020](#) that “...Google uses (relative) bounce rate (or something that’s pretty darn close) to rank websites.”



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

Backlinko published an article ([June 2020](#)) about bounce rate saying that “bounce rate may be used as a Google Ranking factor.”

They cite an industry study they ran and claim it found a correlation between first-page Google rankings and bounce rate.

2. Bounce Rate may be used as a Google Ranking factor. In fact, one industry study found that Bounce Rate was closely correlated to first page Google rankings.

Screenshot from Backlinko.com, June 2022

Later the same year, Semrush reinforced this claim in [December 2020](#), saying, “Bounce rate is an important ranking factor.”

They did not provide evidence to back up the claim.

Bounce rate is an important ranking factor, and it's an important metric to be aware of your site's health. Semrush provides proven

Screenshot from Semrush.com, June 2022

HubSpot included bounce rate in a rundown of “all 200 ranking factors” in a cheat sheet to Google’s known ranking factors in [July 2021](#).

Bounce rate is included as a factor twice under “site-level factors” and under “user interaction” with no supporting evidence for their claim.

User Interaction

Google always emphasizes in their update announcements how important it is to provide an excellent user experience to website visitors. These factors measure user interaction to rank your page accordingly, including:

1. Organic click through rate for exact keyword
2. Organic click through rates for all ranking keywords
3. Dwell time
4. **Bounce rate**

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

So, let's take a look at the evidence, shall we?

THE EVIDENCE

Bounce Rate As A Ranking Factor

In "[How Search Works](#)," Google says, "...we use aggregated and anonymized interaction data to assess whether search results are relevant to queries."

Relevance of webpages

Next, algorithms analyze the content of webpages to assess whether the page contains information that might be relevant to what you are looking for.

The most basic signal that information is relevant is when a webpage contains the same keywords as your search query. If those keywords appear on the page, or if they appear in the headings or body of the text, the information is more likely to be relevant. Beyond simple keyword matching, we use aggregated and anonymized **interaction data** to assess whether search results are relevant to queries. We transform that data into signals that help our machine-learned systems better estimate relevance.

Screenshot from Google Search, June 2022

The vague wording here has led to many assumptions about what “interaction data” Google uses to inform its machine learning systems.

Some marketers believe the “interaction data” includes bounce rate.

They use a handful of studies to support this hypothesis.

The Backlinko study mentioned above ran a subset of domains from their own [data set](#) through Alexa to determine a site-wide time on site.

They discovered that the average time on site for a Google first-page result is 2.5 minutes.



Screenshot from Backlinko.com, June 2022

The study goes on to clarify:

“Please keep in mind that we aren’t suggesting that time on site has a direct relationship with higher rankings.

Of course, Google may use something like time on site or bounce rate as a ranking signal (although they have previously denied it). Or it may be the fact that high-quality content keeps people more engaged. Therefore a high time on site is a byproduct of high-quality content, which Google does measure.

As this is a correlation study, it’s impossible to determine from our data alone.”

Brian Dean confirmed in reply to a comment that the study did not actually look at bounce rate (or pageviews).



Alex

Do you have a pages per visit metric taken into account and some numbers for **bounce rate**?

REPLY



Brian Dean

Hi Alex, we didn't look at pageviews or **bounce rate** in this analysis.

REPLY

Screenshot from Backlinko.com, June 2022



The Backlinko study, which supposedly found a correlation between first-page Google rankings and bounce rate, did not look at bounce rate.

Rand Fishkin stated that Google uses relative bounce rate to rank websites, and discussed this topic with Andrey Lipattsev, Search Quality Senior Strategist at Google Ireland, in 2016.

Rand described tests he had been running where he would ask people to do a search, click on the seventh result, and then observe over the next 24 hours what happened to that page's ranking for that query.

Results were [inconclusive](#).

In seven to eight tests, rankings improved for a day or two. Rand said the rankings did not change in four to five tests.

Andrey responded that he believes it's more likely that the social mentions, links, and tweets (which are basically links) throw Google off temporarily until they can establish that the "noise" is irrelevant to the user intent.

Both the Backlinko study and Rand's experiments helped shape the bounce rate myth. But the study didn't look at bounce rate, and Rand's experiments did not prove a causal relationship between user behavior and ranking.

Does Bounce Rate Affect Search Rankings?

Google has stated that bounce rate is not a ranking factor for over a decade.

“Google Analytics is not used in search quality in any way for our rankings.” - [Matt Cutts](#), Google Search Central, February 2, 2010.

“...we don't use analytics/bounce rate in search ranking.” - Gary Illyes, Webmaster Trends Analyst at Google, Twitter [May 13, 2015](#).

“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.” - John Mueller, Webmaster Trends Analyst at Google, Webmaster Central office-hours, [Jun 12, 2022](#).

Why Google Doesn't Use Bounce Rate As A Ranking Factor

There are technical, logical, and financial reasons why it is improbable that Google would use bounce rate as a ranking factor.

This can be summarized by looking at three primary facts:

1. What bounce rate measures.
2. Not all websites use Google Analytics.
3. Bounce rate is easily manipulated.

What Does Bounce Rate Measure?

A lot of the confusion around bounce rate can be cleared up once people understand what bounce rate actually measures.

[Bounce rate](#) is a Google Analytics metric that measures the percentage of single-page sessions (no secondary hits) to your site divided by the total sessions.

Bounce Rate Formula

$$\text{Bounce Rate} = \frac{\text{Single-Page Sessions (no subsequent hits)}}{\text{Total Sessions}}$$

Image created by author, June 2022

Marketers often misinterpret this metric to mean that the webpage did not provide what the user was looking for.

But, all a bounce means is that a measurable event (secondary hit) did not occur.

Technically speaking, Google can't understand how long a user spends on a page unless a second hit occurs.

If a user spends 2.5 minutes reading the webpage (as the Backlinko study found correlates with page rank) and then exits, it will count as a bounce because they did not send any subsequent hits to GA.

So, keep in mind that bounce rate does not necessarily indicate a bad user experience.

Users may click on a result, read it, and leave because their query was satisfied. That's a successful search, and it doesn't make sense for Google to penalize you for it.

This is why Backlinko's study looking at the time on the page does not support the claim that bounce rate is a ranking factor.

Not All Websites Use Google Analytics

While [Google Analytics](#) is a widely-used analytics tool, not all websites use it.

If Google used bounce rate as a ranking factor, it would have to treat websites with the GA code differently than those without the GA code.

If websites without the GA code were not graded by bounce rate, they would theoretically have greater freedom to publish whatever content they wanted.

And if this were true, it would be illogical for any marketer to use the GA code.

You see, Google Analytics is a "freemium" service. While most businesses use their service for free, large companies pay a monthly fee for more advanced features.

The paid version is called GA 360, and pricing starts at [\\$150,000](#) annually.

There are [24,235](#) companies currently using GA 360.

That equates to \$3,635,250,000 per year (on the low end.)

Using bounce rate as a ranking factor is not in Google's financial interest.

Bounce Rate Can Be Easily Manipulated

Some of you may still not be convinced.

You may have even noticed a correlation between average position improving and bounce rate decreasing in your daily practice.

While bounce rate and average ranking may correlate, they certainly are not dependent on each other.

What happens when you increase your bounce rate? Do the rankings fall back to where they were?

Bounce rate is easy to manipulate, and you can try this experiment yourself.

You will need to increase and decrease your bounce rate for this test while comparing the average position for a search query over time.

Remember that bounce rate is sessions with zero secondary hits / all sessions.

So, all you need to do to reduce your bounce rate is send a secondary hit.

You can add a second pageview event using [Google Tag Manager](#).

Do not make any other changes on-page or off-page; chart your average rankings over three months.

Then remove this extra pageview tag.

Did your average rankings increase and decrease in unison with modifying the bounce rate?

Below is a graph of a quick version of this study on my own site; one that shows no correlation between bounce rate and average position.

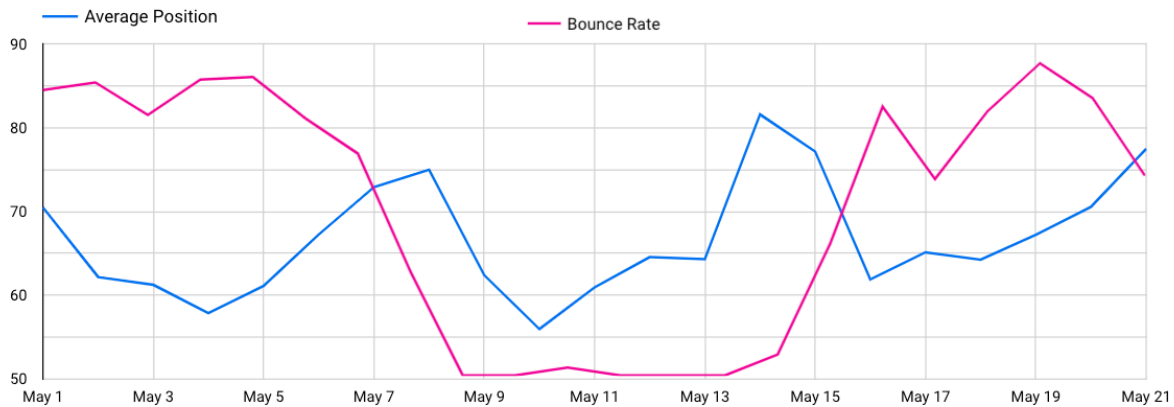


Image created by author, June 2022

OUR VERDICT

Bounce Rate Is Definitely Not A Ranking Factor



No, bounce rate is not a Google ranking factor. Bounce rate is not a reliable measurement of the relevance of webpages – and Google has repeatedly said it does not use it for rankings.

With big industry names like Rand and Backlinko putting their weight behind bounce rate as a ranking factor, confusion is understandable. Experts have tested this user signal with varying results.

Some experiments may have demonstrated a **correlation** between bounce rate and SERP rankings in certain situations.

Other experiments haven't done that, but people reference them as if they're proof.

"Confirmed ranking factor" requires a high degree of evidence. No one has proven a **causal** relationship.

You need to watch out for this in SEO, even when reading trusted sources.

SEO is complicated. Google representatives and industry pros love to joke that the answer to every SEO question is: "It depends."

We're all looking for ways to explain success in SERPs. But we need to avoid jumping to conclusions, which can cause people to invest resources in improving unconfirmed metrics.



BREADCRUMBS

By Kayle Larkin

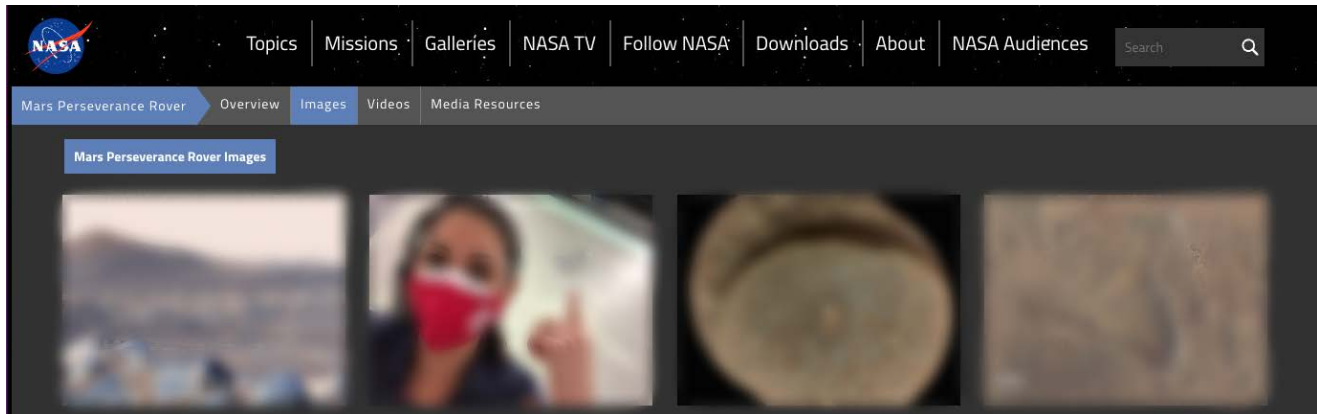
Are Breadcrumbs A Google Ranking Factor?

Google [defines](#) “breadcrumbs” as navigation that indicates the page’s position in the site hierarchy.

When you hear the term “breadcrumbs,” Hansel and Gretel might come to mind. In the old fairy tale, the main characters leave behind a trail of breadcrumbs to avoid getting lost in the forest.

Similarly, breadcrumbs are helpful for users as they drill down into your site hierarchy.

A website can display a “breadcrumb” trail of internal site navigation so that a user can easily find their way back through the website’s structure.



Screenshot from NASA.gov, June 2022

So, we know that breadcrumbs are helpful for users and that Google is always telling us to focus on the user experience. Does that mean breadcrumbs are a ranking factor?

THE CLAIM

Breadcrumbs As A Ranking Factor

In [2009](#), Google announced that search results would begin displaying site hierarchies.

This was an effort to show users the location (thus providing context) of a page on the website.

Below is an example of what Google search results looked like in 2009 before and after this monumental change.

[Spidersapien - ProductWiki unbiased product reviews](#)

Not satisfied with only the success of the Robosapien, WowWee is introducing a line of Robosapiens made in the likeness of popular characters starting with ...

www.productwiki.com/spidersapien/ - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#)

Screenshot from search, Google, June 2022

[Spidersapien - ProductWiki unbiased product reviews](#)

Not satisfied with only the success of the Robosapien, WowWee is introducing a line of Robosapiens made in the likeness of popular characters starting with ...

[www.productwiki.com › Toys & Games › Robots](http://www.productwiki.com/Toys%20%26%20Games/Robots/) - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#)

Screenshot from search, Google, June 2022

Given that Google is tight-lipped on what exactly are ranking factors (for a good reason), the search community relies on what is accessible to better understand how search works.

This includes a medley of what we can see in the search engine result pages, patents, official documentation, and what Google representatives say.

Google changed how search results were displayed and [wrote](#), “By analyzing site breadcrumbs, we’ve been able to improve the search snippet for a small percentage of search results, and we hope to expand in the future.”

Search marketers listened and asked the question: Are breadcrumbs a ranking factor?

THE EVIDENCE

Breadcrumbs As A Ranking Factor

Search engines try to make sense of your website by analyzing how the text is organized in main topics and subtopics.

Breadcrumbs reinforce the hierarchical arrangement of pages on a website and how those pages are related.

[Google developer docs](#) explain that using breadcrumb markup in a webpage's body helps categorize the information from the page in search results.

Because a webpage ranks for more than just one keyword, users often will arrive at a page from multiple different types of search queries.

Each of these unique search queries returns the same webpage. But, thanks to breadcrumb markup, the content can be categorized within the search query context.

Multiple breadcrumb trail

If there are multiple ways to navigate to a page on your site, you can specify multiple breadcrumb trails for a single page. Here's one breadcrumb trail that leads to a page for award winning books:

[Books](#) › [Science Fiction](#) › Award Winners

Here's the another breadcrumb trail that leads to the same page:

[Literature](#) › Award Winners

Screenshot from Google Search Central, June 2022

In January [2009](#), Google filed a U.S. Patent Application titled, *Visualizing Site Structure and Enabling Site Navigation for a Search Result or Linked Page*.

The patent may suggest that Google could include breadcrumbs in search results even if a website doesn't use them.

However, the patent also explains how this could make it easier for Google to understand a website's structure and include that information in search results.

The patent has since been listed as "abandoned." Could that be a clue that Google has abandoned using breadcrumbs in this fashion?

Breadcrumbs Pass Pagerank

In reply to a question on Twitter about breadcrumbs, [Gary Illyes](#), Google webmaster trend analyst, said, "We like them. We treat them as normal links in, e.g., PageRank computation."



 **Gary 鯨理 / 경리 Illyes** 
@methode

Replying to [@Andrew_Isidoro](#)

We likes them. We treat them as normal links in e.g. PageRank computation

3:54 AM · Jun 22, 2017 from Zurich, Switzerland · Twitter for iPhone

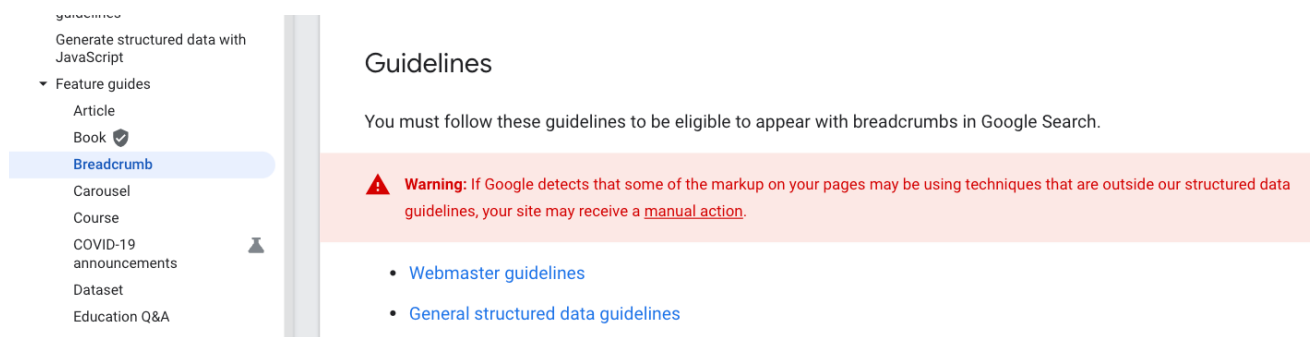
Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

[PageRank](#) (PR) is a link analysis algorithm used by Google to rank webpages in their search engine results.

While it doesn't have as much impact as it used to, [Google still uses PageRank](#), among many other factors, to rank results.

Google Search Console Warning

There is a [Warning in GSC featured guides](#) under breadcrumbs for manual actions against websites that misuse structured data guidelines.



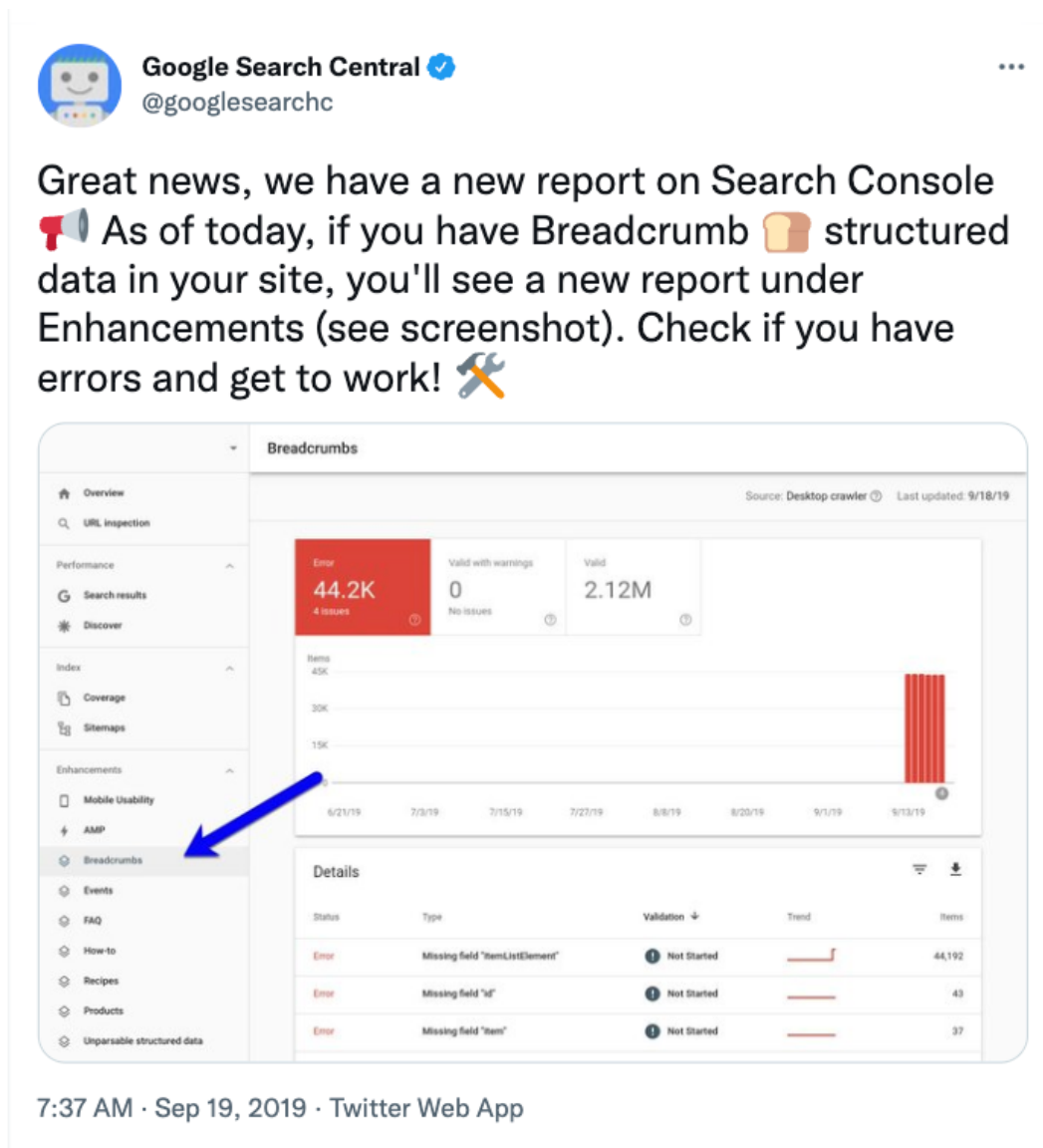
Screenshot from Google Search Central, June 2022

Most manual actions address attempts to manipulate Google's search index.

If breadcrumb markup were not part of Google's search index, it would not likely be at risk of manual actions for spammers abusing it.

Not only is Google serious about not wanting people to manipulate breadcrumbs, but they are also invested in website owners implementing breadcrumbs properly.

Check out Google Search Console's tweet below, from September 2019.



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

GSC updated its interface to show users where there were errors in search enhancements, including breadcrumbs.

That same weekend GSC started emailing accounts with breadcrumb structured data errors on their sites – and they're still doing this three years later.

Google Search Console

Breadcrumbs issues detected on

Search Console has identified that your site is affected by 1 Breadcrumbs issues:

Top Errors

Errors can prevent your page or feature from appearing in Search results. The following errors were found on your site:

Either "name" or "item.name" should be specified

We recommend that you fix these issues when possible to enable the best experience and coverage in Google Search.

Fix Breadcrumbs issues

Screenshot from Google Search Central, June 2022

If breadcrumbs were not important to Google, why would they spend time and resources to educate website owners on proper implementation and send notices when there were errors?

OUR VERDICT

Breadcrumbs Are Kind Of A Ranking Factor



Breadcrumbs are inadvertently a ranking factor.

A ranking factor is a set of criteria that search engines use to evaluate web pages and put them in the order you see in search results.

Does Google use breadcrumbs to evaluate web pages?

Yes, Google documentation supports the theory that breadcrumbs are used to evaluate web pages.

And a representative confirmed that breadcrumbs are considered normal links in Google's link analysis algorithm, PageRank.

The weight given to those links is unknown.

Does that mean that adding breadcrumb markup will propel your page to the top of search results or that you're doomed to never reach page one by not having them?

Of course not; the Google algorithm is far too complex for that.



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 relate 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

By Miranda Miller

Click-Through Rate (CTR): Is It A Google Ranking Factor?

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

The screenshot shows a Google search interface. The search bar contains the text "is ctr a ranking factor". Below the search bar, there are navigation options: "All", "News", "Images", "Videos", "Shopping", and "More". To the right of these options are "Settings" and "Tools". Below the navigation bar, the search results are displayed. The first result is from "https://cxl.com" and is titled "The SEO Impact of Click-Through Rate (What You Need to ...". The snippet of the result reads: "Optimizing **CTR** has an innate benefit here. But second, it seems that Google does indeed use organic **click-through-rate** as a **ranking factor**. SERP results that have a higher than expected **CTR** have been known to improve, and those with lower **CTR** to decline."

Screenshot from search for [is ctr a ranking factor], Google, June 2022



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

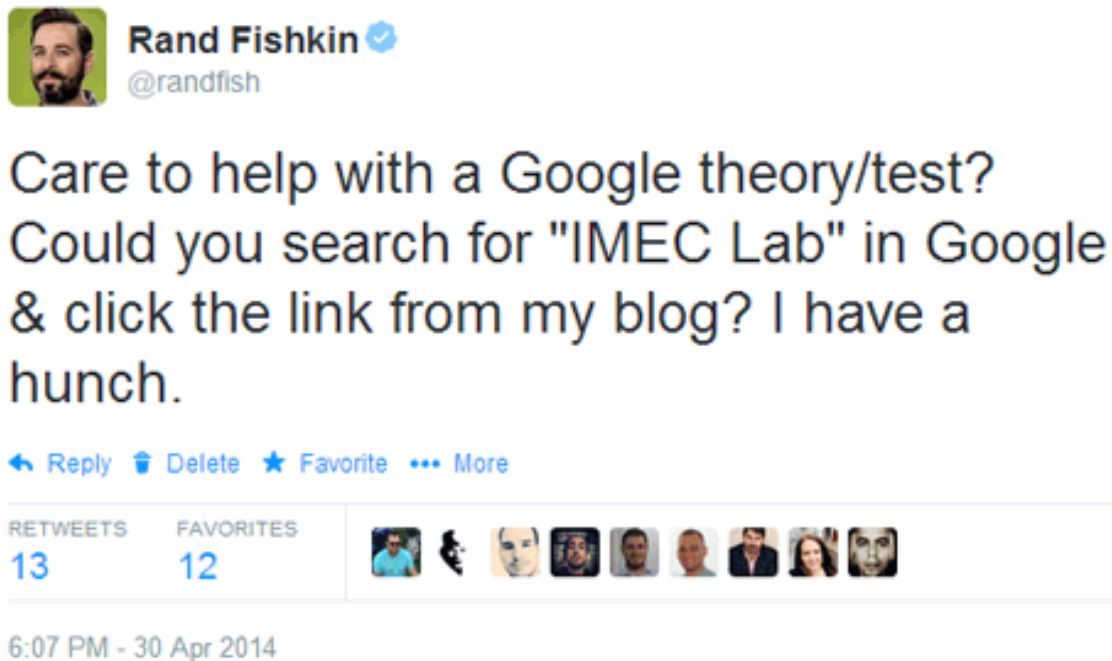
In 2016, Larry Kim [conducted an experiment](#) comparing the CTRs of 1,000 keyword terms in the same niche in both paid and organic search. “Something unusual is happening,” he said, adding that, “The difference (we think) is that [RankBrain](#) is boosting the search rankings of pages that have higher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



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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](#):

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread with three tweets. The first tweet is from Rand Fishkin (@randfish) dated April 18, 2014, asking for clarification on co-citation vs. co-occurrence. The second tweet is a reply from Bill Slawski (@bill_slawski) dated January 31, 2019, explaining that co-citation involves links to the same thing. The third tweet is another reply from Bill Slawski dated April 18, 2014, stating that co-occurrence happens when two things appear in the same document.

Rand Fishkin  @randfish · Apr 18, 2014

@bill_slawski re: co-citation vs. co-occurrence, when a brand is mentioned alongside a phrase is that just occurrence? citation? or both?

3 4 11

Replies

Bill Slawski  @bill_slawski · Jan 31, 2019

Replying to @randfish

The would be co-occurrence, Rand. Co-citation is when two things link to the same thing.

12

Bill Slawski  @bill_slawski · Apr 18, 2014

Replying to @randfish

@randfish They co-occur within the same document, so it's co-occurrence. :)

1 1

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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

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 Miranda Miller

Is Code To Text Ratio A Google Ranking Factor?

You probably already know that your website's coding can impact your search engine rankings.

You know that adding snippets for SEO, like a meta description, alt tags, and title tags, can significantly improve your visibility to search engines.

But, you may not have considered how the volume of code versus the amount of text on that page can affect your ranking.

It's a concept known as "code to text ratio," which can dramatically affect user experiences, page indexing, and page speed.

But what makes a good code to text ratio? And more importantly, how much does it factor into your search ranking?

The first question is easy to answer, but has complex execution. A page should have just as much code as it needs and, at the same time, just as much content as the users need.

Focusing on the exact ratio is, in most cases, not necessary.

The second factor requires a deeper dive.

THE CLAIM

Search Engines Value Code To Text Ratios When Ranking Sites

There's no question that your code to text ratio affects how visitors experience your website.

Sites that are too code-dense will have slower loading times, which can frustrate users and drive them away.

And websites with too little code may not provide enough information to a web crawler. And if search engines can't determine what your page is about, they won't be able to determine its content.

But do these issues also negatively impact your rankings?

THE EVIDENCE

Code To Text's Effect On Search Engine Results Pages

In a 2018 [Google Webmaster office-hours hangout](#), Google Webmaster Trends Analyst John Mueller was asked if the ratio of HTML code to website text had any role in determining rankings. He answered unequivocally, “no.”

So that's it; case closed, right? Not so fast.

While Google does not directly consider the code to text ratio itself, several factors of that ratio support SEO best practices, which means a bad ratio can indirectly impact your search results placement.

Your code to text ratio can tell you which pages on your website need beefing up to give crawlers more information. If your code is too sparse, Google may have difficulty determining its relevance, which could cause the page to drop in search results.

On the other hand, sites that are overloaded with code may have slow loading times. Bloated and redundant HTML is particularly troublesome when it comes to page speed on mobile devices.

Faster loading times mean better user experiences, which is a significant ranking factor. You can use Core Web Vitals in [Google Search Console](#) to see how your SEO and UX work together.

Likewise, cluttered or disorganized code can be difficult for web crawlers to navigate when indexing. Clean, compact code is much easier for bots to traverse, and while this won't have a massive effect on your rankings, it does factor in.

How To Fix Your Code To Text Ratio

At the end of the day, the main reason for improving your code to text ratio is to build a better user experience.

And that starts with validating your code. A tool like the [W3C validator](#) helps ensure your site is responsive and accessible while adhering to coding best practices.

It will help you identify invalid or redundant HTML code that needs to be removed, including all code that is not required to display the page and any code commented out.

Next, you'll want to evaluate your page loading time and look for areas of improvement. [Google's PageSpeed Insights Reports](#) are great tools to use for this task.

Once you've identified problem areas, it's time to fix them. If you can, avoid using tables on your pages, as they require an inordinate amount of HTML code. Use CSS for styling and formatting but place these elements in separate files wherever you can.

If you're using Javascript or Flash, consider eliminating these elements. Finally, remove any hidden text and huge white spaces. Resize and compress your images, and keep your page size under 300 KB if possible.

OUR VERDICT

Code To Text Isn't A Ranking Signal, But Is Still Important To SEO



Do search engines directly include your code to text HTML ratio when deciding where your page will fall on search results pages? No.

But the quality of your coding, page load speed, and code to text ratio play an indirect role in SEO. More importantly, it affects how users experience your page.

Keep your code to text within the 25-70% ratio to ensure bloated code isn't negatively impacting your website.



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](#) (page 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.

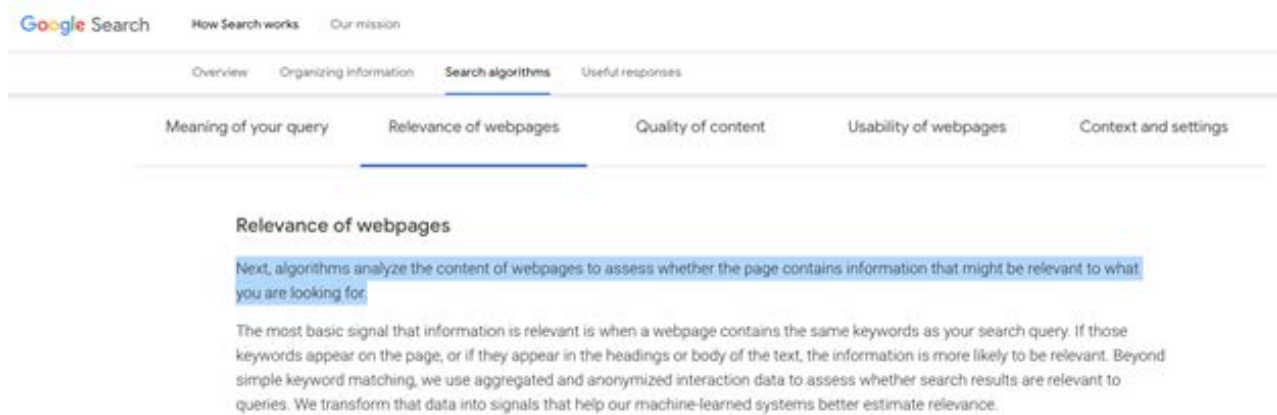
But is content a ranking factor in Google's search algorithms?



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:

INTERNET ARCHIVE
waybackmachine

121 captures
3 Aug 2014 – 24 Mar 2021

https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6001093?hl=en

Go

JUL AUG SEP
03
2013 2014 2015

As you begin creating content, make sure your website is:

- **Useful and informative:** If you're launching a site for a restaurant, you can include the location, hours of operation, contact information, menu and a blog to share upcoming events.
- **More valuable and useful than other sites:** If you write about how to train a dog, make sure your article provides more value or a different perspective than the numerous articles on the web on dog training.
- **Credible:** Show your site's credibility by using original research, citations, links, reviews and testimonials. An author biography or testimonials from real customers can help boost your site's trustworthiness and reputation.
- **High quality:** Your site's content should be unique, specific and high quality. It should not be mass-produced or outsourced on a large number of other sites. Keep in mind that your content should be created primarily to give visitors a good user experience, not to rank well in search engines.
- **Engaging:** Bring color and life to your site by adding images of your products, your team, or yourself. Make sure visitors are not distracted by spelling, stylistic, and factual errors. An excessive amount of ads can also be distracting for visitors. Engage visitors by interacting with them through regular updates, comment boxes, or social media widgets.

Be careful of things that can make visitors not trust your site or leave:

- Errors such as broken links or wrong information
- Grammar or spelling mistakes
- Excessive amount of ads
- Spam such as comment or forum spam

Screenshot from archive.org, June 2022



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:

Optimize your content

Make your site interesting and useful

Creating compelling and useful content will likely influence your website more than any of the other factors discussed here. Users know good content when they see it and will likely want to direct other users to it. This could be through blog posts, social media services, email, forums, or other means.

Organic or word-of-mouth buzz is what helps build your site's reputation with both users and Google, and it rarely comes without quality content.

Screenshot from Google Search Central, June 2022

[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

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 Kayle Larkin

Crawl Errors And Crawl Budget: Are They Ranking Factors?

Crawling is the first step on any page's journey to a results page.

Search engines have to discover your page before evaluating it and deciding where to place it in the results.

Crawling the web is a resource-intensive process. Search engines like Google draw from [hundreds of billions](#) of webpages, videos, images, products, documents, books, etc., to deliver query results.

So, they prioritize crawling efforts to conserve resources and the load on the websites they're visiting.

There's a limit on how much time crawlers can spend on you.



The amount of time that Google devotes to crawling a site is called the site's crawl budget.

Any technical hiccups that interrupt Google's ability to crawl your site are called crawl errors.

Smaller sites are not likely to be affected. When you hit over a few thousand URLs, it becomes essential to help Googlebot discover and prioritize the content to crawl, and when and how much of the server resources to allocate.

Given it's the starting point, you may wonder: Is how well Google can crawl my website a ranking factor?

THE CLAIM

Crawl Errors And Crawl Budget As Ranking Factors

Reducing crawl errors and improving crawl budget are both major focuses of technical SEO, and for a good reason!

You invest tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars a year creating high-quality content, then hit publish, and all you can do is wait for your hard work to appear in search results.

The trouble is, if Google doesn't crawl a page due to an error or limited crawl budget, the page can't rank for anything at all.

For a page to appear in Google search results, it must first be crawled by Googlebot.

That is why some marketers consider crawl budget a ranking factor.

Let's see if there is any evidence to support that claim.

THE EVIDENCE

Crawl Errors And Crawl Budget As Ranking Factors

Understanding how a page gets from a website to the search engine result page (SERP) is essential to determine if crawl budget could be a ranking factor.

The process involves three steps: crawling, indexing, and ranking.



Read about the intricacies of the process in SEJ's ebook, "[How Search Engines Work](#)."

Crawl budget and crawl errors fall under “crawling”; bots follow links to discover pages.

Indexing is analyzing a page and storing it in a catalog for easy retrieval.

After a page has been crawled and indexed, it is eligible to display in search results.

Ranking essentially lists the most relevant webpage at the top of search results, followed by the other pages, based on how well Google thinks the page answers the query.

The ranking stage includes most of the analysis performed by Google’s algorithms. To be considered a ranking factor, something needs to be given weight during the ranking stage.

While crawling is required for ranking once met, this prerequisite is not weighted during ranking.

Just in case that doesn’t fully settle the issue for you:

Google addresses whether or not crawling is a ranking factor directly in their “Top questions” section of the Google Search Central blog.

Is crawling 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.

Screenshot from Google Search Central, June 2022

Google’s documentation reassures readers that while crawling is necessary for being in search results, it is not a ranking factor.



“Crawl budget isn’t especially helpful to consider on a daily basis. Google is already actively trying to crawl as many pages as possible. So, if you have pages you can determine are not being crawled that you want to be, do what you can to help Google crawl, index, and display it in search.”

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor

OUR VERDICT

Crawl Errors And Crawl Budget Are Not Ranking Factors



Google determines rankings by many factors. However, crawl errors and crawl budget are not one of them.

Think of crawling as the entry point into Google’s search results.

Search engines need to be able to crawl your website to index your pages. Indexing is required for ranking. But, an increased crawl budget is not responsible for better positions in search results.



“If crawl errors flag problems, resolve them for the sake of the user, rather than purely thinking about ranking. As with most SEO, the priority should be an improved user experience. If you have a page that would support someone searching for your content, ensure that they can find it.”

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor



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 As 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 January 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-Googleers: 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.



Screenshot from Semrush, June 2022

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 wary 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 cruff.”

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:



Replying to [@rajeshkumarsem](#) [@nikhilgabda](#) and 3 others

No, domain age helps nothing.

3:56 AM · Jul 5, 2019 · Twitter Web Client

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

OUR VERDICT

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 Kristi Hines

Domain Authority: Is It A Google Ranking Factor?

Many companies and marketers believe that Domain Authority is a big deal.

There are guides everywhere about how you can boost your website's Domain Authority for better rankings in search results.

But does a higher Domain Authority actually result in better rankings?

In this chapter, we will explore what Domain Authority is, and the evidence as to whether it is a Google ranking factor.

What Is Domain Authority?

To understand whether Domain Authority is a part of the Google algorithm, first, we must understand what Domain Authority is.

First, there is domain authority – the concept – and Domain Authority (DA), the metric by Moz.

As [VentureSkies](#) describes it, the general definition of domain authority is as follows:

“The domain authority of a website describes how important the site is for a specific targeted subject area [and] relevance with respect to ... search words..”

Then, there’s [Moz’s](#) Domain Authority or DA scores, which defines the metric as “...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 by Moz is calculated using dozens of factors, including the number of linking root domains and the total number of links. The score itself is displayed on a 100-point scale.

It’s worth noting that Moz is not the only SEO platform that has developed a metric for measuring website authority. You will also find that:

- [Ahrefs](#) has an Ahrefs Rank and Domain Rating. AR ranks websites in the Ahrefs database by the size and quality of their backlinks, while Domain Rating shows the strength of a website’s backlink profile compared to others in the Ahrefs database on a 100-point scale.
- [Semrush](#) has an Authority Score that measures the overall quality and SEO performance of a domain or webpage.
- [Majestic](#) has Flow Metric Scores that measure the number of links a website has and the quality of the website’s content.

THE CLAIM

Domain Authority As A Ranking Factor

Many articles discussing Domain Authority refer to it as a search engine ranking score and suggest it is a good predictor of how well a website will perform in SERPs for targeted keyword phrases.

This can lead some to believe that Domain Authority is a ranking factor for search engines like Google.

There is even an interesting Twitter thread in [2020](#) from the co-founder of Moz, Rand Fishkin, showing [internal documents](#) from Google, suggesting Google does have a domain authority-like metric.

But continue reading – the evidence becomes clear.

THE EVIDENCE

Domain Authority As A Ranking Factor

Moz's [website](#) says its Domain Authority score does not impact Google search results.

“Domain Authority is not a Google ranking factor and has no effect on the SERPs.”

In [2015](#), Gary Illyes, Chief of Sunshine and Happiness at Google, was asked about authority passing from HTTP to HTTPS. His response:

“We don’t have “authority”, but signals should pass on, yes.”

In [2016](#), Illyes answered a question about whether adding or removing pages from a website affected its domain authority.

“so, my problem is that I don’t know of anything in ranking that would translate to “domain authority”, so can’t answer”

A few weeks [later](#), during a discussion about linking to image files or webpages for an impact on domain authority, Illyes replied:

“We don’t really have ‘overall domain authority’. A text link with anchor text is better though”

From there, you will find many confirmations from John Mueller, Search Advocate at Google, that Domain Authority exists, but that Google doesn’t use it.

In December [2016](#), Mueller responded to a comment about a desktop domain having higher authority.

“Google doesn’t use ‘domain authority”

In [2018](#), someone asked if Domain Authority existed on a Reddit AMA with Mueller.

Mueller’s response acknowledged that:

“Of course it exists, it’s a tool by Moz.”

Later that [year](#), when asked on Twitter if Domain Authority existed – again – Mueller responded:

“Domain Authority (DA) is a search engine ranking score developed by Moz’ so exists = yes. Search engines don’t use it.”

In [2019](#), when asked about a site-wide metric similar to Domain Authority on Twitter, Mueller answered:

“We don’t use domain authority. We generally try to have our metrics as granular as possible, sometimes that’s not so easy, in which case we look at things a bit broader (eg, we’ve talked about this in regards to some of the older quality updates).”

Later that [year](#), a Twitter user asked if a drop in search engine traffic was due to a loss in Domain Authority. Mueller replied:

“We don’t use domain authority, that’s a metric from an SEO company. I’d recommend starting a thread in the help forum with the details, including the URLs & queries you’re seeing changes in.”

In [2020](#), Mueller received another question about domain authority. This time, someone asked if backlinks from high domain authority websites matter in website rankings. His response:

“We don’t use domain authority at all in our algorithms.”

A few months [later](#), Mueller was asked how important Domain Authority was to crawling webpages faster on Twitter.

“Just to be clear, Google doesn’t use Domain Authority *at all* when it comes to Search crawling, indexing, or ranking. This is pretty clear on their site.

We do, however, index tweets that talk about it.”

Up until that point, Google representatives seem clear that there is no use of Domain Authority. However, in a late [2020](#) interview with SearchLove, Mueller was quizzed on whether Google had a domain authority-like metric.

Unlike the ones before, this answer hints at a possible DA-like metric in Google’s algorithm.

“I don’t know if I’d call it authority like that, but we do have some metrics that are more on a site level, some metrics that are more on a page level, and some of those site-wide level metrics might kind of map into similar things.”

In [2022](#), Mueller answered another question about Domain Authority on Reddit. The question was how to increase a website with a Domain Authority of 31. Mueller answered:

“I’m kinda torn. On the one hand, you do not need DA for Google Search. Google doesn’t use it *at all*. If you’d like to level your site up in search, you’d need to focus on something else, or at least use other metrics for it. This is mostly why DA as a metric is frowned upon by many SEOs. For context, I don’t think I’ve ever looked up the DA for a site in the 14 years I’ve been doing this.”

He offered additional advice on how one could improve a domain's authority by focusing on a topic with low competition and creating "...a reasonable collection of fantastic content" about that topic.

He emphasized that user signals, not any kind of authority score, would be what moves the needle.

OUR VERDICT

Domain Authority Is Definitely Not Ranking Factor



Domain Authority (DA) by Moz is similar to Domain Rank (DR) by Ahrefs, the Semrush Authority Score, and Flow Metric Scores by Majestic.

They are all authority metrics calculated by third-party tools that have no actual effect on search engine rankings.

While Mueller once suggested that Google has metrics that map into similar things as Domain Authority, he has repeatedly denied the use of Domain Authority by Moz on Twitter and Reddit.

He also has noted that they don't call anything they do internally "domain authority."

Therefore, we can conclude that Domain Authority is definitely not a ranking factor.



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](https://archive.org).

OUR VERDICT

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 Miranda Miller

Is Domain Name A Google Ranking Factor?

Remember the early days of the internet?

You could spend all day chatting with your friends on AOL messenger while you played solitaire on Yahoo games. And then your mom picked up the phone to make a call, and you were kicked off the web. Good times.

In those days, if you were doing some shopping, there was a good chance you were doing it on a site with an exact match domain (EMD). For example, if you needed a dog collar, you'd probably end up on a site with an address like www.buydogcollars.com.

In those primitive days of search engine optimization, it was common for companies to put their exact target keyword phrase right in their domain URL.



Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately, depending on how you feel about EMDs), scammers and bad actors took advantage of this, snatched up many of these domains, and linked them to low-quality sites.

So, what's true today? Does your domain name have an impact on search results?

Let's take a closer look at the debate.

THE CLAIM

Is Domain Name A Ranking Factor?

Having an exact match domain used to be a big deal.

In 2010, CarInsurance.com [sold for \\$49.7 million](#): still the most expensive domain name purchase of all time. So clearly, someone valued domains with that keyword.

It was (and sometimes still is) common for people in the SEO industry to advocate for EMDs. The claims around them usually being that they instantly generate credibility and generate a competitive edge.

But remember those bad actors we talked about in the last section? Eventually, Google got wise to their keyword-stuffing URLs and changed its algorithm to discount them. But that's not to say your website's domain name does not affect SEO.

THE EVIDENCE

The Impact Of Domain Names On SEO

There is a lot of mixed information about domain names and their impact on rankings.

There's no question that domain names played a role in rankings at one point.

In a [2011 Webmaster Hangout](#), Matt Cutts, a software engineer on Google's Search Quality group, acknowledged the role EMDs played in the tech giant's search algorithm.

However, he also stated:

“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.”

And just one year later, in 2012, [Cutts tweeted](#) that low-quality exact match domains would get reduced visibility in search results.

Finally, in 2020, Google Webmaster Trends Analyst [John Mueller](#) [revealed](#) keywords in domain names no longer play a role in determining search engine results rankings.

Answering a question if keywords in domain names impact rankings during an Ask Google Webmasters video, he said, “In short, no. You don’t get a special bonus like that from having a keyword in your top-level domain.”

But this doesn’t mean that domain names are unimportant. They’re just not direct ranking factors.



“ Your domain name should be crafted with as much care and considerations as any part of your highly exposed branding. It should make you appear as a compelling answer or result to queries on the SERP, be easily comprehensive and quickly understood, and hopefully help your brand become memorable to potential customers.”

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor

OUR VERDICT

Your Domain Name Is Not A Ranking Factor, But Is Still Important



Now that we've established that domain names are NOT a part of your overall search engine rankings, SEO professionals can just forget about them, right?

Absolutely not.

Your choice of domain name can be an important aspect of your UX and public image. Your domain name should usually be the most recognizable aspect of your business. Sometimes that's not your business name, but a particular brand or trademark.

You may want to consider subdomains or even separate domains for different properties. If you sell products that resellers carry, this can help your customers find you more easily.

Using keywords in your domain doesn't help in terms of search ranking; if not done correctly, it could even hurt your SEO.

But, if your branding is heavily focused on a particular service or product, including a keyword in the domain could help users understand what you're about at a glance. A carefully placed keyword could also help attract audiences likely to convert.

Don't be afraid to use a keyword if it's highly relevant or part of your branding.

So here's the TL;DR: Your domain name doesn't directly impact your Google ranking, but provides opportunities for savvy web marketers to reflect their brand's values and create more positive user experiences.

For more help choosing a domain name, check out [Roger Montti's advice](#).



"There's so little space for any result on the SERP that you should ensure each component resents your brand to customers in a digestible and comprehensible way. That should include your domain name."

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor



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

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

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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

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

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022



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

.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 one on your site links to page two on your site twice, Google only considers the anchor text of the first link in ranking page two. 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 one to page two.

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 Kayle Larkin

Is Fresh Content A Google Ranking Factor?

As with most updates in Google's history, search industry rumors spread quickly about how to "game" the system.

"Freshness" is a common theme among Google updates, spanning over a decade.

And "fresh content" as a ranking factor has been an ongoing point of interest for SEOs, especially among content marketers.

To better understand the debate, we will look at Google's "Freshness" updates; specifically, what they mean and how (if at all) they affect search rankings.

THE CLAIM

Fresh Content As A Ranking Factor

The speculation that fresh content may be a ranking factor began in response to a few major Google updates and has snowballed into quite the claim.

The idea behind “fresh content” started a few years before Google’s Caffeine update.

In 2007, a New York Times reporter was allowed to spend a day with Amit Singhal (Senior VP of Search at the time).

During this time, Singhal spoke on the record about the solution he had developed to solve the “freshness problem.”

It was a new algorithm that tried to determine when users wanted new information and when they didn’t.

And like all Google initiatives, it had a catchy moniker: QDF for “query deserves freshness.”

Caffeine (2009 Google Update)

If you think Google core updates are a big deal now, wait until you hear about the [Google Caffeine](#) update of 2009.

It was such a massive change that Google actually provided developers with a preview a few months before rolling it out.

Caffeine allowed Google to crawl faster, thus delivering fresher results from a much larger index.

The indexing update was completed in June 2010, kicking off the fresh content myth because Google [said](#), “Caffeine provides 50 percent fresher results.”

Freshness (2011 Google Update)

Google announced a “Freshness update” in November 2011, four years after the New York Times story broke.

In the announcement titled, “Giving you fresher, more recent search results,” Google explained that this was a significant improvement to the ranking algorithm and noticeably impacts six to 10% of searches.

Featured Snippets Freshness (2019 Google Update)

Freshness updates did not stop there. Relevancy continues to be top of mind for Google as they seek to satisfy user queries.

Pandu Nayak, Google’s current vice president of Search, [announced](#) in 2019 that the company updated its search algorithms to keep snippets current, fresh, and relevant.

Danny Sullivan [confirmed](#) that the Featured Snippets Freshness update went live in late February 2019.

Rumors on how to optimize for Google updates spread quickly, and this was undoubtedly true for fresh content.

Speculations circulated claiming that by updating content frequently, you could secure an SEO advantage or that updating the publication date of an article can make it look fresh.

Let's take a look at the evidence behind these claims and whether fresh content is in any way a ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

Fresh Content As A Ranking Factor

To decide if “fresh content” could be a ranking factor, we need to understand two things: what the “Freshness” algorithm updates mean, and how they affect search rankings.

QDF

Query deserves freshness (QDF) is very literal.

Google's solution revolved around determining whether a search query is “hot,” meaning whether or not the user wants the most up-to-date information on the topic.

The mathematical model looked at news sites, blog posts, and Google's own stream of billions of search queries to see how much global interest there is in a particular subject.

For example, Singhal shared what happens when cities suffer power outages.

“When there is a blackout in New York, the first articles appear in 15 minutes; we get queries in two seconds,” Singhal told the [New York Times](#).

Such a sudden spike in interest can signify that people are looking for new information.

Caffeine

Unfortunately, many people got the Caffeine update wrong.

Caffeine wasn't a ranking update. The intention behind it wasn't even to impact rankings. It was a complete rebuild of Google's indexing system.

Indexing and ranking are two very different things.

Indexing is when Google first looks at your content and adds it to its index. That means it has the potential to be ranked.

Ranking, however, is an entirely different story, with much more complex algorithms behind it.

And while Caffeine focused on indexing, it was the Freshness update that affected Google's ranking algorithm.

Freshness

The Freshness update was an effort to understand when a user is looking for more recent information.

But “freshness” doesn't apply across the board to all search queries.

Google shares information on precisely which queries deserve freshness on its [How Search Works](#) page.

Key factors in your results

To give you the most useful information, Search algorithms look at many factors and signals, including the words of your query, relevance and usability of pages, expertise of sources, and your location and settings. The weight applied to each factor varies

depending on the nature of your query. For example, the freshness of the content plays a bigger role in answering queries about current news topics than it does about dictionary definitions.

Screenshot from Google "How Search Works," June 2022

Google's Freshness algorithm seeks to provide the latest information for trending keywords that fall under categories such as:

- Recent events or hot topics: celebrity news or natural disasters.
- Regularly recurring events: the Olympics or Sports Scores.
- Content that frequently updates: best/reviews or technology industry.

[Freshness is a complex topic](#) in its own right, so it's a good idea to learn about it if you're targeting time-focused queries.

Google Representatives On Freshness: Give Users The Respect They Deserve

Do we have an official answer? Yep.

In 2018, John Mueller replied to a question asking, does Google favor fresh content?



The screenshot shows a Twitter thread. The top tweet is from **johnmu.xml (personal)** (@JohnMu) dated Aug 15, 2018. The text reads: "As a user, recognizing that old content is just being relabeled as new completely kills any authority that I thought the author / site had. Good content is not lazy content. SEO hacks don't make a site great. Give your content and users the respect they deserve." This tweet has 21 replies, 119 retweets, and 269 likes. A reply from **Anil Thakur** (@anilthakur2u) dated Aug 15, 2018 is shown in a rounded box: "@randfish @neilpatel @JohnMu @sejournal @Backlinko As we are heading towards 2019, all Title tags on 31 dec will be changed to How to Rank in 2019 or To 100000 ways to Rank in 2019.#SEO hack 😊". Below this is a tweet from **Dr. Analytics Ninja, PhD** (@AnalyticsNinja) dated Aug 18, 2018: "Does Google favor 'fresh' content?". This tweet has 1 reply, 2 retweets, and 1 like. The final tweet is a reply from **johnmu.xml (personal)** (@JohnMu) dated Aug 18, 2018, replying to @AnalyticsNinja and @aschottmuller. The text of the reply is "No". The timestamp for the reply is "12:56 PM · Aug 18, 2018 · Twitter Web App".

johnmu.xml (personal) @JohnMu · Aug 15, 2018

As a user, recognizing that old content is just being relabeled as new completely kills any authority that I thought the author / site had. Good content is not lazy content. SEO hacks don't make a site great. Give your content and users the respect they deserve.

Anil Thakur @anilthakur2u · Aug 15, 2018

@randfish @neilpatel @JohnMu @sejournal @Backlinko As we are heading towards 2019, all Title tags on 31 dec will be changed to How to Rank in 2019 or To 100000 ways to Rank in 2019.#SEO hack 😊

21 119 269

Dr. Analytics Ninja, PhD @AnalyticsNinja · Aug 18, 2018

Does Google favor "fresh" content?

1 2 1

johnmu.xml (personal) @JohnMu

Replying to @AnalyticsNinja and @aschottmuller

No

12:56 PM · Aug 18, 2018 · Twitter Web App

Screenshot from [Twitter thread](#), June 2022

Mueller's "no" reply has to be taken into context with the whole Twitter conversation.

User @anilthakur2u had made a joke about title tags updating on December 31 to become relevant for the upcoming year.

Mueller replied, "SEO hacks don't make a site great. Give your content and users the respect they deserve."

Here, here!

Just updating your publication date is a poor SEO strategy and won't help you rank better.

OUR VERDICT

Fresh Content Is A Confirmed Ranking Factor For Some Queries



When the query demands it, fresh content is a Google ranking factor.

Does that mean you should constantly change the publish date? No.

Does it mean an article could outrank other pages because of the date they were published? Potentially, if Google thinks freshness is critical to the user's query.

Please keep in mind there are a lot of ranking factors, not just "freshness."

You may be able to win a ranking boost by riding the wave of popular trends, upcoming events, or breaking news, but it is not an evergreen content strategy.



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:



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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 Kayle Larkin

Is Using Google Analytics A Search Ranking Factor?

Google Analytics (GA) is a powerful tool that lets website owners learn how users interact with their webpages.

The amount of information we can get from Google Analytics is so in-depth that a theory has been circulating, for over a decade, that GA data is a ranking factor.

Is Google Analytics really powerful enough to influence Google search results?

Let's take a closer look.

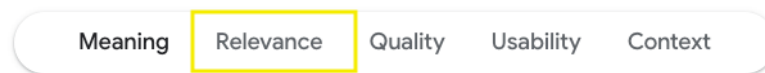


THE CLAIM

Google Analytics As A Ranking Factor

In Google's [How Search Works](#) documentation, we can see that a webpage's relevance is one of the many factors used to rank webpages.

Learn more below about the key factors that help determine which results are returned for your query:



Screenshot from Google's How Search Works, June 2022

The most basic relevancy signal is that the content contains the same words as the search query.

Additional information about how Google determines a page's relevance is provided.

Beyond simple keyword matching, Google says, "We also use aggregated and anonymized interaction data to assess whether search results are relevant to queries. We transform that data into signals that help our machine-learned systems better estimate relevance."

Beyond looking at keywords, our systems also analyze if content is relevant to a query in other ways. We also use aggregated and anonymized **interaction data** to assess whether search results are relevant to queries. We transform that data into signals that help our machine-learned systems better estimate relevance. Just think: when you search for “dogs”, you likely don’t want a page with the word “dogs” on it hundreds of times. With that in mind, algorithms assess if a page contains other relevant content beyond the keyword “dogs” — such as pictures of dogs, videos, or even a list of breeds.

Screenshot from Google's How Search Works, June 2022

What is “interaction data,” and where does Google get it?

Some marketers hypothesize that these factors include metrics such as time on page, organic click-through rate, bounce rate, total direct traffic, percentage of repeat visitors, etc.

That makes sense, because those are the metrics marketers are familiar with and understand to represent the interactive data Google may be looking for.

Marketers may also notice a correlation between the metrics improving as their position in the SERP improves.

Is it possible that we are somehow improving Google’s understanding of our website’s user experience by using Google Analytics?

Like some sort of SEO bat signal?

Can we directly influence rankings by giving Google more “interaction data” to work with?

THE EVIDENCE


The Evidence Against Google Analytics As A Ranking Factor

While we don't have direct access to Google's algorithm, evidence shows Google Analytics as a ranking factor is not a plausible theory.


First, Google representatives have been clear and consistent in saying that they don't use Google Analytics data as a ranking factor.

As recently as March 16, 2022, [John Mu](#) has responded to tweets about Google Analytics impacting rank.

← **Tweet**

 **Shekhar Suman** @Y2K_SUMAN · Mar 16 ...
If Google wants everyone to implement #GA4 then they just need to give indirect signal/statement via @JohnMu that is might impact rank... LOL

2 ↻ 1 ↗

 **johnmu.xml (personal)** 🐝 🟡 @JohnMu ...

Replying to @Y2K_SUMAN

That's not going to happen.

11:21 AM · Mar 16, 2022 · Twitter Web App

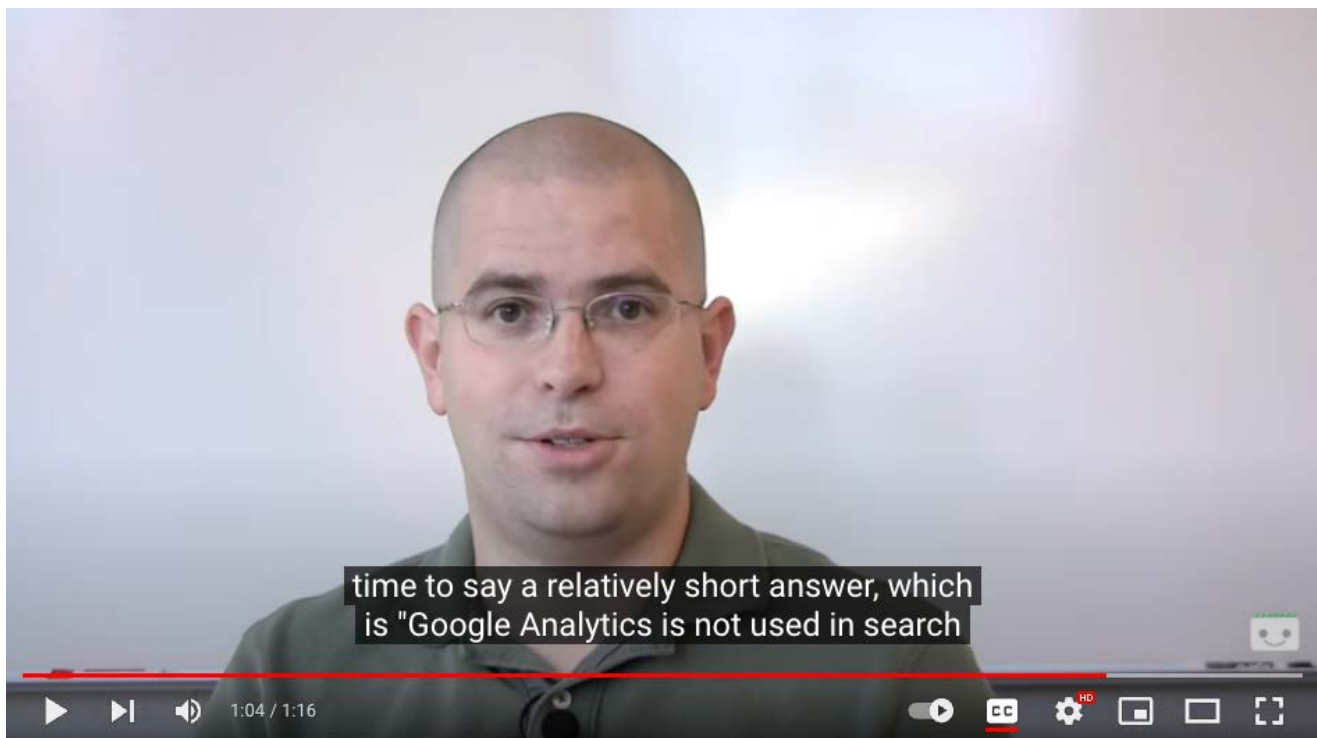
Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

In jest, a marketer suggested if Google wanted people to use GA4, they could just say it would improve ranking.

John Mu replied, “That’s not going to happen.”

Google seems to continuously be batting down the idea that its analytics services influence ranking in any way.

Back in 2010, when we were [tweeting](#) to snag the top spot in results for a few moments, [Matt Cutts](#) said, “Google Analytics is not used in search quality in any way for our rankings.”

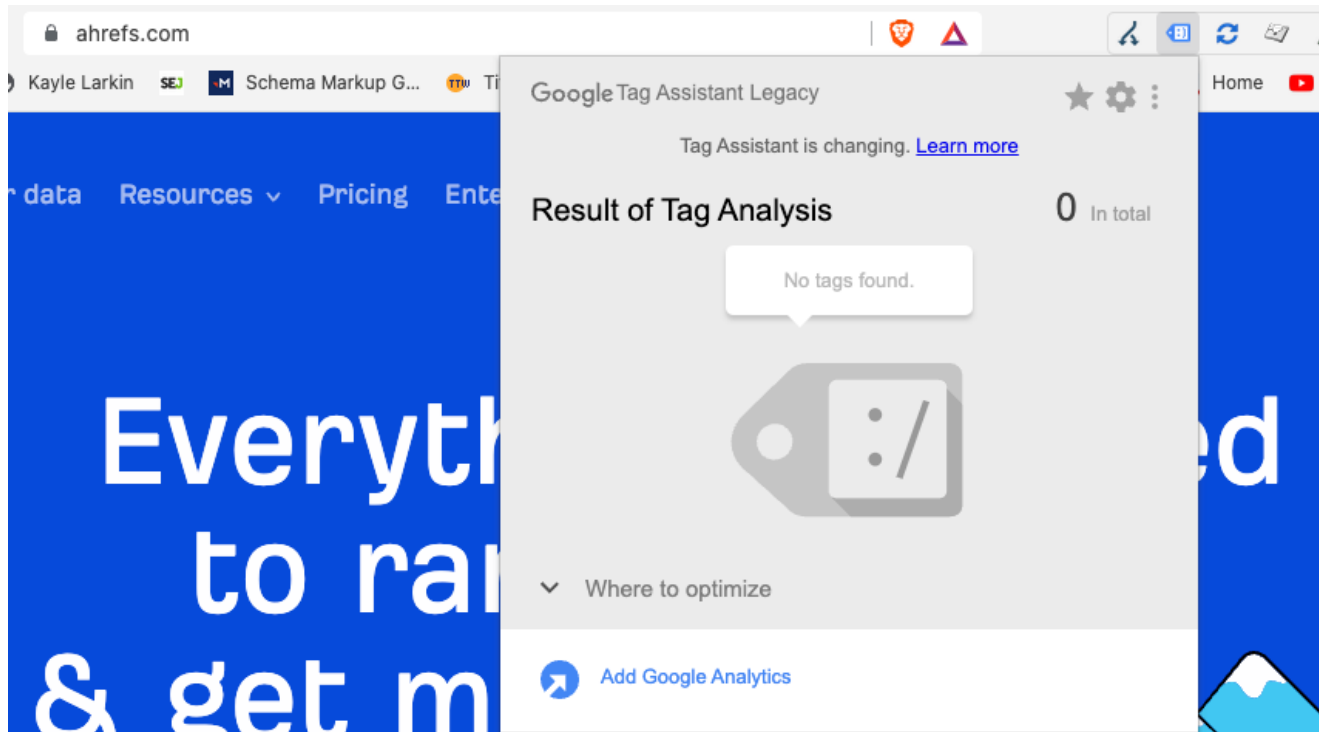


“Is Google Analytics data a factor in a page’s ranking?” Google Search Central, June 2022

And you don’t have to take Google’s word for it.

Here are three websites ranking in the top 10 for highly competitive keywords that do not have the Google Analytics tag on their site.

1. Ahrefs, an SEO tool, famously does not use Google Analytics.



Screenshot from ahrefs.com, June 2022

Tim Soulo, CMO at Ahrefs, tweeted in December 2019, "Every time I tell fellow marketers that we don't have Google Analytics at ahrefs.com, they react with 'NO WAY!'"

← **Tweet**

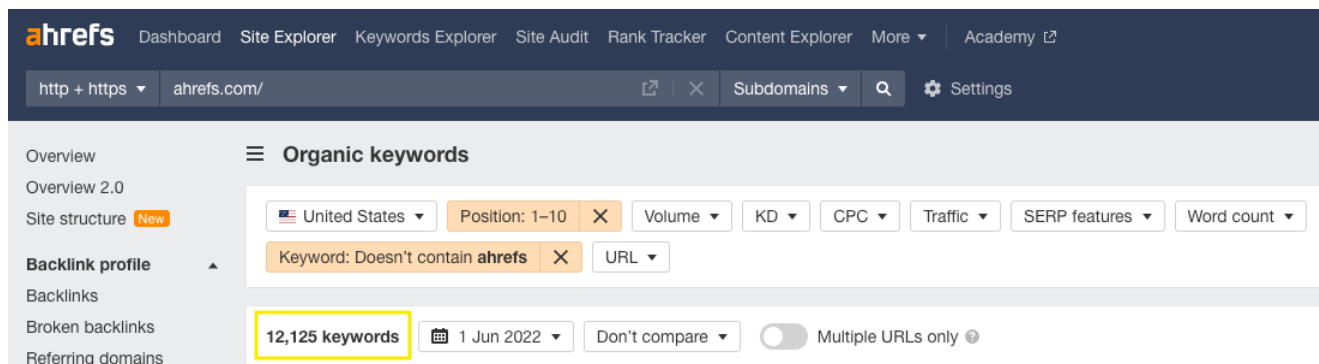


Tim Soulo  
@timsoulo

Every time I tell fellow marketers that we don't have Google Analytics at ahrefs .com they react with - "NO WAY! 😳"

Screenshot from [Twitter](#), June 2022

And the Ahrefs domain ranks in the top 10 positions for over 12,000 non-branded keywords.

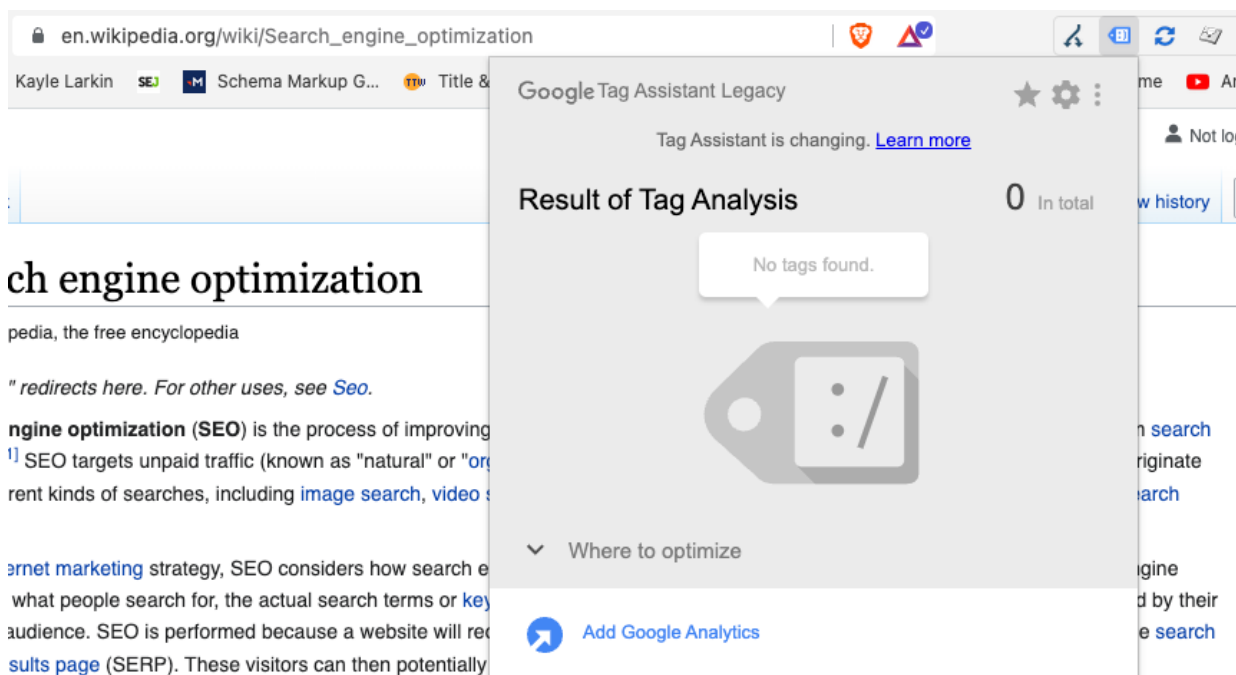


Screenshot from Ahrefs.com, June 2022

2. Another famous example is Wikipedia.

Wikipedia articles dominate Google search results, ranking very well for definition type searches such as computer, dog, and even the search query "Google."

And, it ranks for all this with no Google Analytics code on the site.

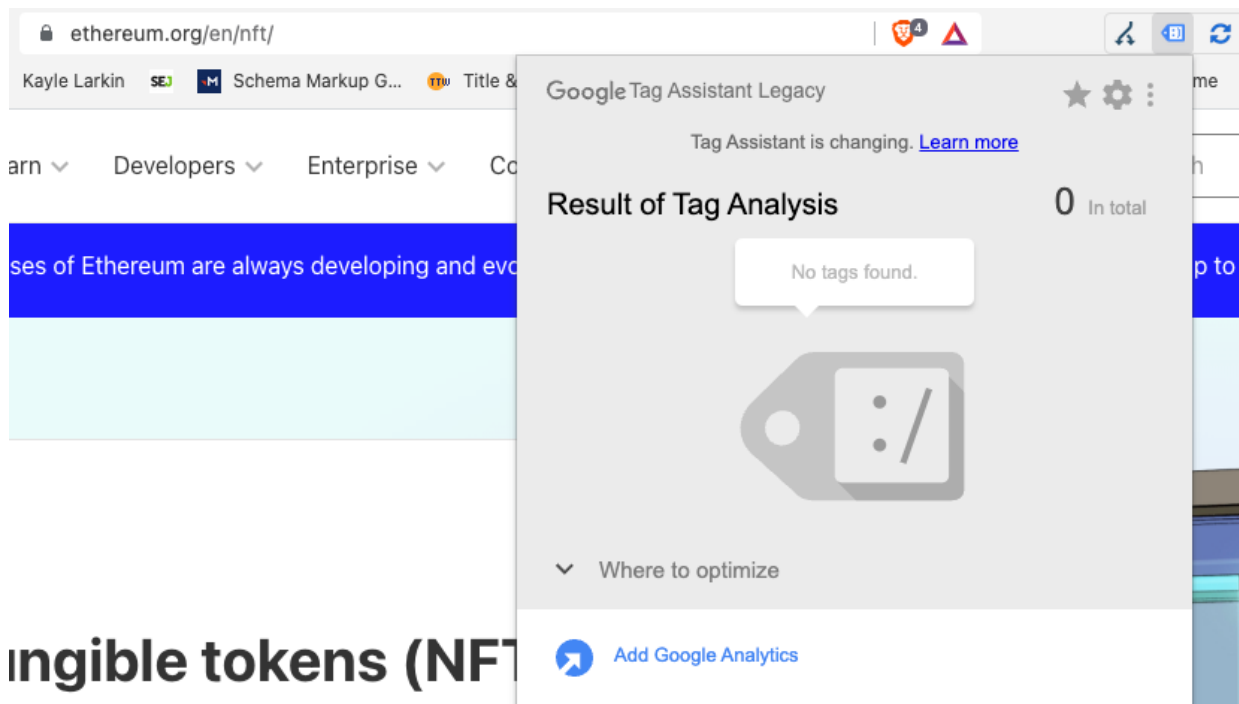


Screenshot by author, June 2022

3. One more example is Ethereum.

Ethereum is ranking in the top 10 for “nft.” NFT is an [enterprise-level keyword](#) with over one million monthly searches in the United States alone.

Ethereum’s website does not have Google Analytics installed.



Screenshot by author, June 2022

OUR VERDICT

Google Analytics Is Not A Ranking Factor



Google Analytics is a powerful tool to help us understand how people find our website and what they do once there.

And when we make adjustments to our website, by making it easier to navigate or improving the content, we can see GA metrics improve.

However, the GA code on your site does not send up an SEO bat signal.

The GA code is not a signal to Google, and it does not make it easier for Google to assess relevance (whether your webpage fulfills the user's search query.)

The "bat signal" is for you.

Google Analytics is not a ranking factor, but it can help you understand whether you're heading in the right or wrong direction.



GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

By Kayle Larkin

Google Search Console: Is It A Ranking Factor?

Search Console is a free Google tool that helps you monitor and fix problems with your site's performance in Google search results.

You can get a lot of helpful information from Google Search Console to guide your SEO efforts. But is it a ranking factor?

Let's dig in.



THE CLAIM

Google Search Console As A Ranking Factor

While the tool doesn't give us access to every detail about what is going on behind the scenes, it certainly shares a great deal of information on how to help Google crawl and index our pages better.

In addition, the performance reports show you what queries your website displays, your average search positions for those queries, and how many people clicked through to the website from Google Search.

Using Google Search Console certainly gives us marketers an upper hand. But is it the tool influencing ranking or the insights that sharpen your edge?

THE EVIDENCE

Is Google Search Console A Ranking Factor?

Google hasn't explicitly addressed whether or not Search Console is a ranking factor, so we will take a look at a few features that may seem, at first glance, to be a factor.

Adding A Website To Google Search Results

Respected SEO sites tell site owners to sign up for Google Search Console and submit a sitemap to Google.

TABLE OF CONTENTS[What is a Sitemap?](#)[What is Google Search Console?](#)[How to Submit a Sitemap to Google](#)[Using the Site Audit Tool for Sitemaps](#)[Sitemap FAQs](#)[Final Thoughts](#)

There are a few important tasks you'll need to complete if you want Google to crawl and rank your website.

One of those tasks is creating and submitting your sitemap to Google. Submitting a sitemap directly helps Google's crawl bots index your site, understand your website's relevance, and determine your site's ranking.

In this guide, we'll share how to submit your sitemap to Google and some sitemap best practices.

Screenshot from Semrush, June 2022

That can make Google Search Console itself seem like a required step to ranking on Google.

But you don't actually have to submit your sitemap to be included in Google search results.

Google automatically looks for sites; you don't need to do anything special. Just publish your website, and Google will (eventually) find it. Submitting your sitemap is a best practice, but it's not required.

Fix Indexing Problems And Request Reindexing

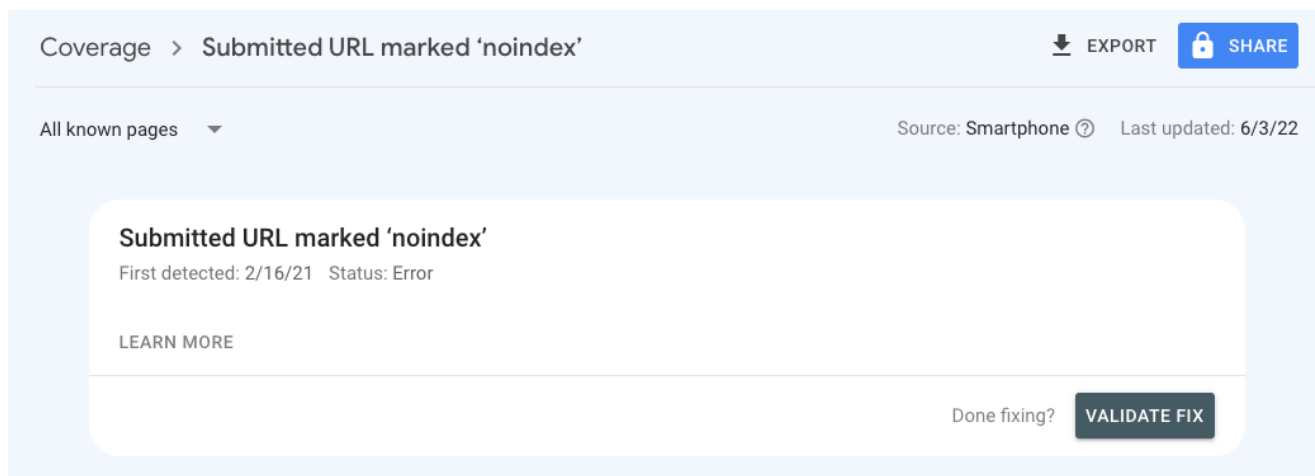
Occasionally, websites or web pages are missed by Googlebot, and this may occur because of an indexing problem.

Within Search Console, you can view coverage reports, which tell you if the search engine can find all the pages on your website.

Pages are grouped based on whether they can be found, and how they were indexed.

The report explains why some pages may not be found or indexed.

Once you've fixed an indexation or crawling issue on your website, you can let Google know that it's been fixed within Google Search Console.



Screenshot from Google Search Console, June 2022

While getting your web pages crawled and indexed is required to appear in search results, it's a separate step from ranking.

That said, getting your site or pages indexed is step one. If you're having trouble indexing your pages, [try this advice from Google's John Mueller](#).

Improve Performance Metrics

Once a site has been crawled and indexed, it can "compete" in search results.

Google Search Console doesn't give us the ranking factors' details but shows how many people saw and clicked on your site, what queries your site displayed for, and your average search position.

By exploring website clicks, impressions, and average positions, you can gather the data you need to improve your SEO efforts.

Dig into which pieces of content are performing well and discover quick wins to [boost your performance in Google search](#).

Performance metrics are not directly weighted in ranking; they're more like a measurement of the outcome of your performance in Google search.



"Besides keyword, click, and impression data, GSC also provides you with greater insight into other SEO-related metrics like Core Web Vitals, Page Experience, Mobile Usability, and webpage Live Test data."

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor

OUR VERDICT

Google Search Console Is Not A Ranking Factor



No, Google Search Console is not a ranking factor.

You don't have to sign up for Google Search Console to be included in Google search results.

However, using Google Search Console is wise because it helps you understand your site performance and identify issues.



"No question—all sites should have GSC set up. It's a valuable educational tool that should be leveraged regardless of whether it impacts rank. For newer or smaller businesses, especially those that may not have the budget for an SEO platform, GSC provides a valuable overview of your site's performance on the SERP and can be a critical resource for establishing your SEO strategy."

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor



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 \(a.k.a. PotPieGirl\) 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



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:



John 
@JohnMu



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

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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

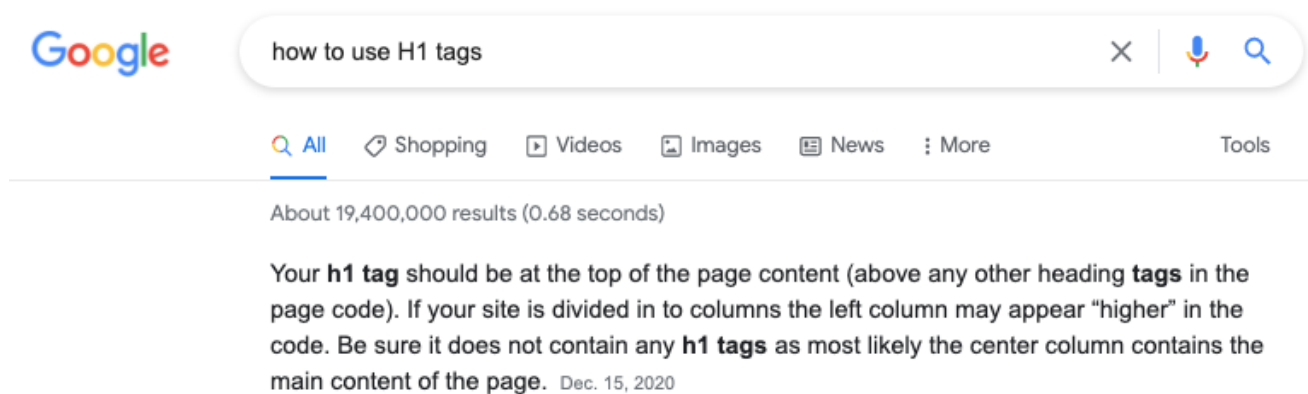
The Claim: H1 Tags As A Ranking Factor

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:



Screenshot from search for [how to use H1 tags], Google, June 2022

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.

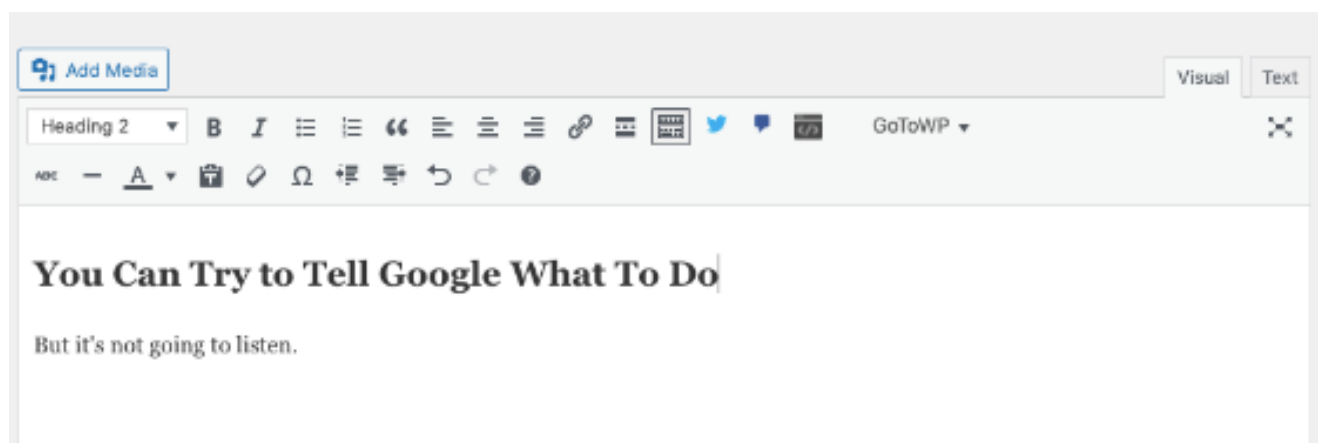
What Mueller said was that heading tags:

- 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.



Screenshot from WordPress, June 2022

Anything you can explicitly “tell” Google can be used to manipulate the algorithm.

OUR VERDICT

H2-H6 Tags As A Ranking Factor



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 `` element with `` child elements creates an unordered list that is typically displayed as a bullet list. The `` element and `` 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 ()** and **ordered lists ()**, nested tables, divs, and line breaks (
) 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



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 Is Definitely Not 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 Kristi Hines

Is IP Address A Google Ranking Factor?

Does the IP address of your website's server affect your rankings in search results? According to some sources around the internet, your IP address is a ranking signal used by Google.

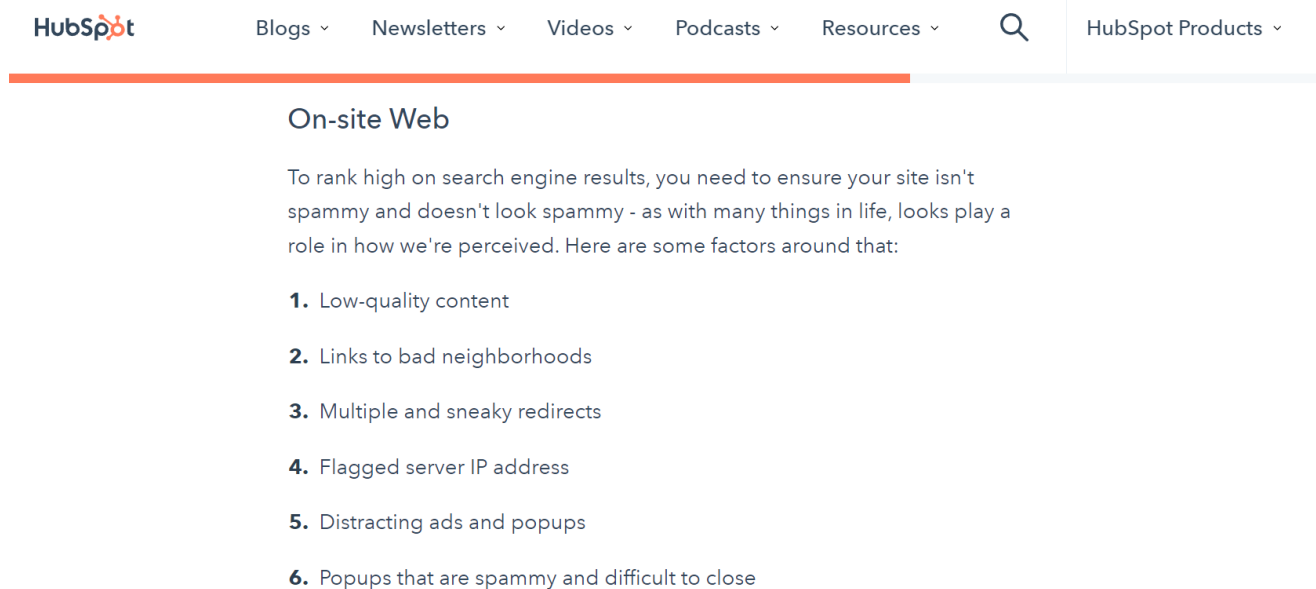
But, does your IP address have the potential to help or harm your rankings in search? Continue reading to learn whether IP addresses are a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

IP Address As A Ranking Factor

Articles on the internet from reputable marketing sites claim that Google has over 200 “known” ranking factors.

These lists often include statements about flagged IP addresses affecting rankings or higher-value links because they are from separate C-class IP addresses.



The screenshot shows the HubSpot website navigation bar with the logo and menu items: Blogs, Newsletters, Videos, Podcasts, Resources, a search icon, and HubSpot Products. Below the navigation bar is a section titled "On-site Web" with a paragraph of text and a numbered list of six factors.

HubSpot Blogs ▾ Newsletters ▾ Videos ▾ Podcasts ▾ Resources ▾ 🔍 HubSpot Products ▾

On-site Web

To rank high on search engine results, you need to ensure your site isn't spammy and doesn't look spammy - as with many things in life, looks play a role in how we're perceived. Here are some factors around that:

1. Low-quality content
2. Links to bad neighborhoods
3. Multiple and sneaky redirects
4. Flagged server IP address
5. Distracting ads and popups
6. Popups that are spammy and difficult to close

Screenshot from Hubspot.com, June 2022

Fortunately, these lists sparked numerous conversations with Google employees about the validity of IP addresses as ranking factors in Google's algorithm.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against IP Address As A Ranking Factor

In [2010](#), Matt Cutts, former head of Google's webspam team, was asked if the ranking of a client's website would be affected by spammy websites on the same server.

His response:

“On the list of things that I worry about, that would not be near the top. So I understand, and Google understands that shared web hosting happens. You can't really control who else is on that IP address or class c subnet.”

Ultimately, Google decided if they took action on an IP address or Class C subnet, the spammers would just move to another IP address. Therefore, it wouldn't be the most efficient way to tackle the issue. Cutts did note a specific exception, where an IP address had 26,000 spam sites and one non-spammy site that invited more scrutiny, but reiterated that this was an exceptional outlier.

In [2011](#), a tweet from Kaspar Szymanski, another former member of Google's webspam team, noted that Google has the right to take action when free hosts have been massively spammed.

In [2016](#), during a Google Webmaster Central Office Hours, John Mueller, Search Advocate at Google, was asked if having all of a group's websites on the same c block of IP addresses was a problem.

He answered:

“No, that’s perfectly fine. So that’s not something where you artificially need to buy IP address blocks to just shuffle things around.

And especially if you are on a CDN, then maybe you’ll end up on an IP address block that’s used by other companies. Or if you’re on shared hosting, then these things happen. That’s not something you need to artificially move around.”

In March [2018](#), Mueller was asked if an IP change with a different geo-location would affect SEO. He responded:

“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.”

A few months [later](#), Mueller replied to a tweet asking if Google still counted bad neighborhoods as a ranking signal and if a dedicated IP was necessary.

“Shared IP addresses are fine for search! Lots of hosting / CDN environments use them.”

In October [2018](#), Mueller was asked if the IP address location mattered for a site’s rankings. His response was simply, “Nope.”

A few tweets later, within the same Twitter thread, another user commented that IP addresses mattered regarding backlinks. Mueller again responded with a simple, “Nope.”

In June [2019](#), Mueller received a question about Google Search Console showing a website's IP address instead of a domain name. His answer:

“Usually, getting your IP addresses indexed is a bad idea. IP addresses are often temporary.”

He suggested that the user ensure the IP address redirects to their domain.

A few months [later](#), when asked if links from IP addresses were bad, Mueller tweeted that:

“Links from IP addresses are absolutely fine. Most of the time, it means the server wasn't set up well (we canonicalized to the IP address rather than the hostname, easy to fix with redirects & rel=canonical), but that's just a technical detail. It doesn't mean they're bad.”

In early [2020](#), when asked about getting links from different IP addresses, Mueller said that the bad part was the user was making the backlinks themselves – not the IP addresses.

Then, in [June](#), Mueller was asked what happens if a website on an IP address bought links. Would there be an IP-level action taken?

“Shared hosting & CDNs on a single IP is really common. Having some bad sites on an IP doesn't make everything on that IP bad.”

In [September](#), during a discussion about bad neighborhoods affecting search rankings, Mueller stated:

“I’m not aware of any ranking algorithm that would take IPs like that into account. Look at Blogger. There are great sites that do well (ignoring on-page limitations, etc.), and there are terrible sites hosted there. It’s all the same infrastructure, the same IP addresses.”

In [November](#), Gary Illyes, chief of Sunshine and Happiness at Google, shared a fun fact.

“Fun fact: changing a site’s underlying infrastructure like servers, IPs, you name it, can change how fast and often Googlebot crawls from said site. That’s because it actually detects that something changed, which prompts it to relearn how fast and often it can crawl.”

While it’s interesting information, it seems to impact crawling and not ranking. Crawling is, of course, required to rank, but [crawling is not a ranking factor](#).

In [2021](#), a Twitter user asked if IP canonicalization could positively affect SEO. Mueller replied:

“Unless folks are linking to your site’s IP address (which would be unexpected), this wouldn’t have any effect on SEO.”

Later in [December](#), when asked if an IP address instead of a hostname looks unusual when Google evaluates a link’s quality, Mueller stated, “Ip addresses are fine. The internet has tons of them.”

If you’re worried about your IP address or [hosting company](#), the consensus seems to be: Don’t worry.

OUR VERDICT

IP Address Is Not A Ranking Factor Anymore



Maybe in the past, Google experimented with IP-level actions against spammy websites.

But it must have found this ineffective because we are not seeing any confirmation from Google representatives that IP addresses, shared hosting, and bad neighborhoods are a part of the algorithm.

Therefore, we can conclude for now that IP addresses are not a ranking factor.



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 one 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

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

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

Is Language A Google Ranking Factor?

If your target audience speaks different languages, offering your website content in multiple languages would make sense to provide a better user experience.

But does offering different languages on your website affect organic search rankings?

Can the way you organize your localized pages affect organic search rankings?

THE CLAIM

Language As A Ranking Factor

Your content should be in English if you want to reach English-speaking people.

However, that same English content probably won't rank well in markets where other languages – including Chinese, Arabic, or Spanish, for instance – 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 role in how Google ranks webpages, right?

Search engines will always do their best to present users with the most relevant results, and they can detect the language in the content. But they also seem to want us to help by organizing localized versions of pages.

Google mentions language in [its 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 searcher sets English as their preferred language and Canada as their location, Google will consider those preferences when delivering results. It makes sense that websites targeting English-speaking people in Canada could be more likely to appear in that search.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence For Language As A Ranking Factor

Google's Advanced SEO documentation shares how you can [tell Google about localized versions of your page](#). The reason this is important?

“If you have multiple versions of a page for different languages or regions, tell Google about these different variations. Doing so will help Google Search point users to the most appropriate version of your page by language or region.

Note that even without taking action, Google might still find alternate language versions of your page, but it is usually best for you to explicitly indicate your language- or region-specific pages.”

Google recommends using [different URLs for different language versions](#) of a page. Then, mark each URL with the language you're using to help search engines understand what's going on. You can organize language-specific pages in a few different ways:

HTML Tags

The first option is to use the [hreflang attribute in the HTML tags](#) of a page, which tells search engines the target language and country for the page.

```
<link rel="alternate" href="https://www.site.com" hreflang="en-uk">
```

This code indicates that the page is intended for English speakers in the U.K.

HTTP Headers

You can also place [hreflang tags in an HTTP header](#). This use case helps indicate the language of non-HTML files.

Sitemaps

You can also use your [sitemap to specify a page's language and region](#) variants. This involves listing each language-specific URL under a <loc> tag. Follow the link above to see Google's guide and code snippet examples.

Different Domains For Different Countries

You can use top-level domain names for specific countries for an Italian website, such as <https://domain.it/>, which tells search engines the entire website targets people in Italy.

Language-Specific Subdirectories

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/>, targeting English-speaking people in the United States.

It's important to note that Google claims it doesn't use any of these methods to determine the language or target audience:

“Use hreflang to tell Google about the variations of your content so that we can understand that these pages are localized variations of the same content. Google doesn't use hreflang or the HTML lang attribute to detect the language of a page; instead, we use algorithms to determine the language.”

Canonical Tags

Google also recommends using [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.”

Google's documentation on consolidating duplicate URLs discusses 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 its do’s and don’ts for canonicalization, Google suggests 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.”

In [2018](#), Gary Illyes, chief of Sunshine and Happiness at Google, discussed a sampling of hreflang examples analyzed.

“We spent over half an hour with @suzukik looking at hreflang examples with MENA, EU, ASIA, etc. region codes in hreflang, and I’m happy to report they are not working. We don’t extract a language even from something like fr-eu, let alone use it in ranking.”

In [2021](#), John Mueller suggested having multiple language content on a page.

“I’d just avoid the situation where you have multiple language versions of the same text on a page (e.g., translation next to the original). Make it easy to recognize the primary language.”

OUR VERDICT

Language Is Probably A Ranking Factor

In explaining how its search engine works, Google discusses how language can affect search results. Multiple pages in Google's Advanced SEO documentation cover how to handle languages.

You need to have a common language with the user to answer their query successfully, and Google takes language preferences into account when serving search results.

On the other hand, Google states that they don't use your tags, domains, or subdirectories to determine the language or audience. In one case, Gary Illyes directly said that hreflang code is not a ranking factor.

So, although Google doesn't officially confirm it to be a ranking factor, language settings affect visibility in search for users who specify a particular language and location.

Therefore:

- Your method of organizing different language versions of your site probably doesn't affect organic ranking.
- Using people's preferred language probably does affect organic ranking.

Overall, 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

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 engineer 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.”

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

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 Kristi Hines

Are Internal Links A Ranking Factor?

You hear about internal links all the time. But how important are they, really?

Do internal links affect search rankings, and if so, how can you best optimize them for SEO?

That is what we will explore by diving into Google Search Central, patents, tweets, and office hour videos.

THE CLAIM

Internal Links As A Ranking Factor

What are internal links?

Internal links are simply hypertext links connecting two pages on the same domain. For example:

- A link from one Search Engine Journal article to another within the searchenginejournal.com domain would be an internal link.
- A link from a Search Engine Journal article to an article on Google Search Central would be an external link.

Peruse articles from the top SEO blogs and experienced marketers. You will likely find advice on properly optimizing internal links to increase visibility for your key pages in search results. For example:

- [Internal Linking Is Super Critical For SEO](#)
- [Internal Link Structure Best Practices To Boost Your SEO](#)

But what does Google say?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence For Internal Links As A Ranking Factor

Google's page on [How Search Works](#) explains how links help Google discover new content.

“Because the web and other content is constantly changing, our crawling processes are always running to keep up. They learn how often content they've seen before seems to change and revisit as needed. They also discover new content as new links to those pages or information appear.”

In [2017](#), Gary Illyes, chief of Sunshine and Happiness at Google, was asked if breadcrumb navigation links passed value. His response:

“We like them. We treat them as normal links in, e.g., PageRank computation.”

It sounds like he confirmed that internal links could influence a page's performance in search results.

Does Google look at the anchor text of internal links? John Mueller, Search Advocate at Google, tweeted a response to this question later in [2017](#):

“Most links do provide a bit of additional context through their anchor text. At least they should, right?”

During a Google Webmaster Central Office Hours Hangout in [2018](#), Mueller was asked if updating the anchor text of internal links to help users could affect rankings.

He responded that if you were making the anchor text more useful to users, it would also be more useful for search engine crawlers.

Later in [2018](#), when asked about ranking changes related to mobile-first indexing, Mueller stated, "...if your mobile site doesn't have all of the content you need for ranking (including internal links, images, etc.), then that could have an effect."

On Twitter, in response to a question about the results of a Lighthouse audit in [2020](#), Mueller said, "...internal links with useful anchor text help users, and they help search engines."

In a Google Webmaster Central Office Hours later in [2020](#), Mueller was asked how internal linking would work for two pages about cheese on the same website. He noted that there didn't need to be a change to the anchor text that separated a page to buy cheese from a guide to cheeses.

In [2021](#), during Google SEO Office Hours, Mueller discussed how Google might choose a website's homepage, category page, or other pages as the most relevant for a specific keyword search result.

He suggests you use internal linking to let Google know the most important pages on a website. For example, if you have one product that's more important to your business than others, link to that product specifically from your homepage and other essential pages throughout your website.

This would help Google recognize that one product is more important than the others on the site.

Mueller answered another question about internal links in [2021](#). Are internal links diluted if you use too many on a page?

Mueller's response ultimately boiled down to site structure. If Google can still understand the site structure and see the differentiation in the importance of some pages over others, then the number of internal links is acceptable. He gives a similar answer to this question again in [2022](#).

In [2022](#), Mueller was asked if placing a link in a header, footer, or content makes a difference. He responded that it didn't mean anything. He answered similar questions during [future office hours](#).

Later, in March [2022](#), Mueller was asked if internal links are still important to SEO if structured data for breadcrumbs are present. He states that "...internal linking is super critical to SEO." He calls it one of the biggest things you can do on a website to guide Google to your most important content.

The evidence is pretty clear. Internal links help people and search engines understand your site. Google gives internal links weight and uses them to help determine which pages are your most important.

So, what makes a good internal link?

Google's Advice For Effective Internal Links

Many of the Google employees' responses focused on improving users' experience and helping search engines understand your site. What are the most effective ways to indicate your important pages using internal links?

Google's documentation provides clear answers.

Google's explanation for [How Search Works For Site Owners](#) reiterates the role that links play in helping Google discover new content.

“The first stage is finding out what pages exist on the web. There isn’t a central registry of all webpages, so Google must constantly look for new and updated pages and add them to its list of known pages. This process is called ‘URL discovery.’

Some pages are known because Google has already visited them. Other pages are discovered when Google follows a link from a known page to a new page: for example, a hub page, such as a category page, links to a new blog post.”

They recommend that creators use Google Search Console to learn how to make their site more accessible to crawlers. GSC offers [reports](#) that help website owners identify their top linked pages and pages with the most internal links.

Google’s official [Search Engine Optimization \(SEO\) Starter Guide](#) discusses internal linking, beginning with the use of breadcrumbs.

“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 guide also references internal links as part of 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."

As for advice on how to help your website's SEO, Google recommends writing good link text.

"Links on your page may be internal – pointing to other pages on your site – or external – leading to content on other sites. In either of these cases, 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."

It continues:

"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."

Of course, Google also warns not to use "excessively keyword-filled or lengthy anchor text just for search engines" or links that don't help users with navigation throughout the website.

In a Google Search Central Blog article from [2008](#), Google discusses the importance of link architecture.

"Link architecture – the method of internal linking on your site – is a crucial step in site design if you want your site indexed by search engines. It plays a critical role in Googlebot's ability to find your site's pages and ensures that your visitors can navigate and enjoy your site."

The article goes on to answer questions about internal linking. The answers, in short:

- Google doesn't recommend using nofollow with internal links for PageRank sculpting or siloing.
- Google doesn't have a problem with cross-themed internal linking, such as a website discussing biking and camping.

Under Advanced SEO [documentation](#), Google discusses the importance of internal links for your website's sitelinks in search results.

"Ensure that your internal links' anchor text is concise and relevant to the page they're pointing to."

In another Google Search Central Blog article from [2010](#) offering website advice for non-profits, Google noted that:

"20% of our submissions could improve their sites by improving the anchor text used in some of their internal links. When writing anchor text, keep two things in mind:

- Be descriptive: Use words relevant to the destination page, avoiding generic phrases like "click here" or "article." Make sure the user can get a snapshot of the destination page's overall content and functionality by reading the anchor text.
- Keep it concise: Anchor text that contains a few words or a short phrase is more attractive and convenient for users to read than a sentence or paragraph-long link."

Does the number of internal links matter?

Matt Cutts, former head of Google's webspam team, answered this question in a Google Search Central video in [2013](#). He responded that internal links would not cause trouble. Website templates and architecture will naturally lead to many internal links with matching anchor text. So long as it is natural and for user experience, it is fine.

OUR VERDICT

Internal Links Are A Ranking Factor



Google's documentation about how search works and its starter guide on how site owners can help Google understand their content explain internal links' importance.

You can also find advice on Twitter and YouTube from Google representatives about optimizing internal links to help Google determine the most important pages on your website.

Internal links are a part of the ranking factors that help determine where your webpages will rank in search results.



LINKS (NOFOLLOW)

By Kayle Larkin

Are Nofollow Links A Google Ranking Factor?

At face value, the average website user cannot tell whether a link is Nofollow or Dofollow.

You can copy or click on a Nofollow link just the same as they do any other link on the web.

Behind the scenes, however, there is quite a big difference.

Google considers Dofollow links a vote of confidence and trust for the information shared on that webpage. These are ranking factors.

Nofollow links are a bit more nuanced. As to whether or not Nofollow links are a ranking factor, that's up for debate.

Some argue that Nofollow links have zero impact on ranking, and others claim that they still help, just not to the same degree Dofollow links do.

What's the truth?



THE CLAIM

Nofollow Links As A Google Ranking Factor

In [2005](#), Google partnered with MSN Search and Yahoo to create an initiative to help fight comment link spam.

This new initiative was the Nofollow attribute.

IE: Visit my `discount pharmaceuticals` site.

That comment would be transformed to

Visit my `discount pharmaceuticals` site.)

The blog post stated that links with the tag would receive no “credit” when ranking search results. Anything with the tag would not be “followed” by Googlebot and passed much less SEO value. It was a simple concept.

Nofollows allowed webmasters to discourage comment link spam by making all of those links effectively worthless in the eyes of the bad actors placing them. Using Nofollows also ensured that sponsored links were not violating [Google’s quality guidelines](#).

The business of buying and selling links took quite a hit.

Website owners started to blanket-cover all external links with a Nofollow attribute to safeguard against Google updates. SEOs were not interested in Nofollow links.

Many SEOs jumped to the conclusion that Nofollow links are entirely worthless. Anyone who runs a blog has probably argued with a contributor about Nofollow links.

And it remained that way until 2020, when Google updated how it handles the Nofollow tag.

THE EVIDENCE

Nofollow Links As A Google Ranking Factor

To determine whether Nofollow links are a Google ranking factor, we need to understand what `rel="Nofollow"` is and if Nofollow links pass PageRank or any other ranking factors to Google.

Rel Nofollow Defined

The `rel="Nofollow"` attribute is an [elemental microformat](#) or a solution to a single problem. The solution was created by Matt Cutts (Google) and Jason Shellen (Blogger, Google).

“By adding `rel="Nofollow"` to a hyperlink, a page indicates that the destination of that hyperlink should not be afforded any additional weight or ranking by user agents which perform link analysis upon web pages (e.g. search engines).”

The definition provides two primary use cases: user comments and links the author wishes to point to but avoid endorsing.

Much later, to assist with organization, Google added two additional attributes that perform the same function. They suggest that you:

- Use `rel="sponsored"` for ads and sponsored links.
- Use `rel="ugc"` for user-generated content that you don't necessarily have control over, such as comments and forum posts.
- Use `rel="Nofollow"` as a catch-all. Google advises developers to use `rel="Nofollow"` anytime they don't wish to endorse a site or don't have control over the link.

Do Nofollow Tags Pass PageRank?

In [2009](#) (before the 2020 update), Matt Cutts was very clear in a blog post saying Nofollow links do not pass PageRank or anchor text.

It was in response to questions about an antiquated SEO practice known as PageRank sculpting.

The final word is, "The essential thing you need to know is that Nofollow links don't help sites rank higher in Google search results." It seemed like the topic of Nofollow links as a ranking factor was fully resolved.

Google introduced changes to how it handles the Nofollow tag and reopened the debate in an algorithm update on [March 1, 2020](#).

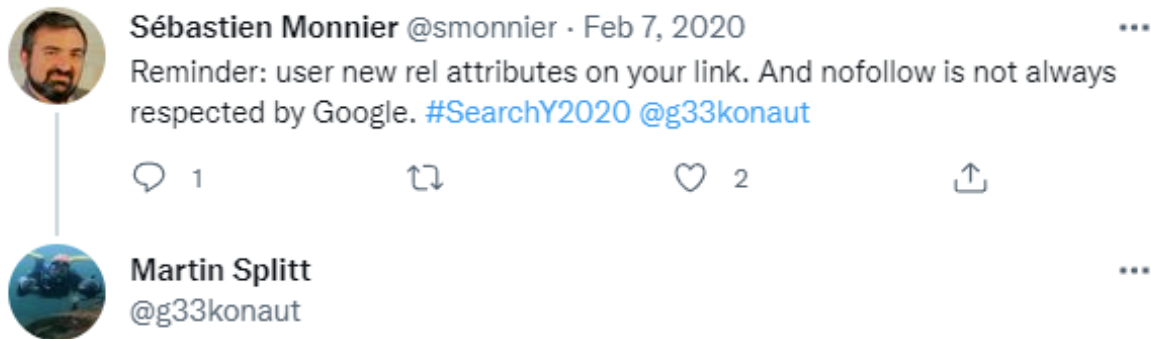
2020 Google Algorithm Update

Google's [official announcement](#) stated, "For crawling and indexing purposes, Nofollow will become a hint as of March 1, 2020."

Previously, Google treated Nofollow links as a command. Google did not crawl, or index links marked as Nofollow.

Now, Google says it will consider the Nofollow link attribute as a hint.

Martin Splitt, the developer advocate at Google, further clarified the update ramifications in response to a tweet.



Replying to @smonnier

Let's be careful here: We do respect nofollow - we don't associate the link with your site.

However, we may still use the link for discovery.

That's an important nuance here...

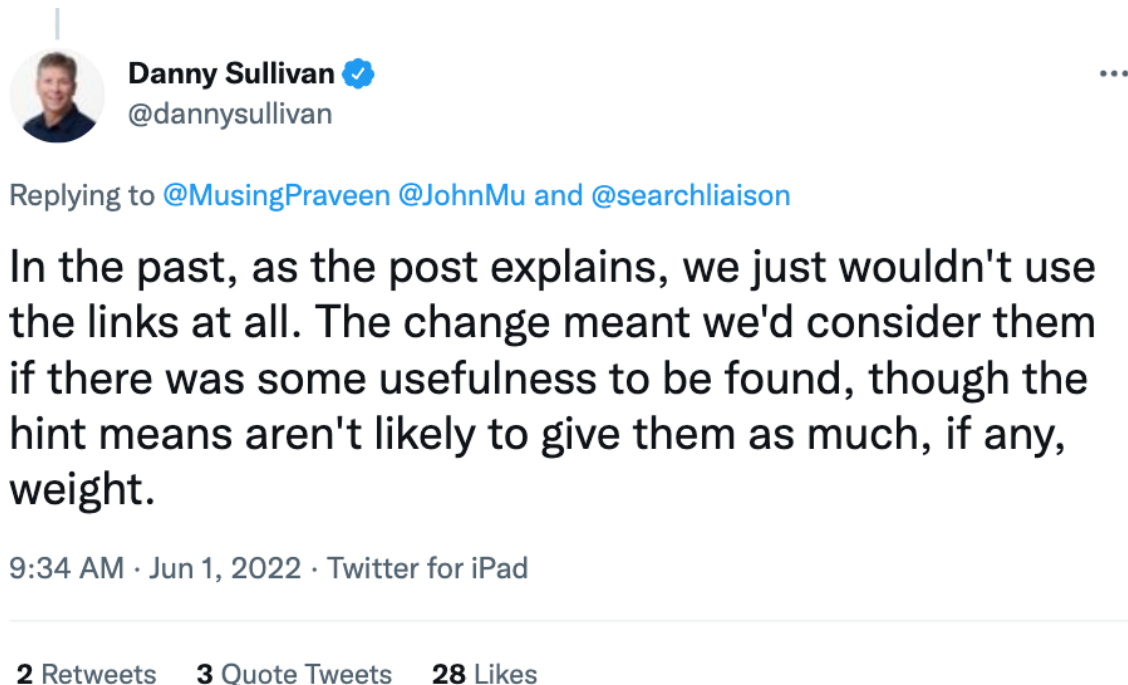
1:54 AM · Feb 7, 2020 · Twitter Web App

2 Retweets 2 Quote Tweets 10 Likes

Screenshot from [Twitter](#), June 2022

Undoubtedly an important nuance.

More recently, Danny Sullivan, Google's public search liaison, chimed in on Twitter to say the following.



Screenshot from [Twitter](#), June 2022

It sounds like the 2020 algorithm update allows for the crawling and indexing of Nofollow links. Still, the links are not associated with (endorsed by or given additional weight from) your site.

OUR VERDICT

Nofollow Links Are Not A Google Ranking Factor



Nofollow links are not a Google ranking factor. Their function is to tell search engines not to add additional weight or ranking.

Nofollow links are an improper way of blocking search engines from finding a webpage because Google may decide to crawl and index Nofollow links, but that's all.

Whether or not the anchor text of Nofollow links holds any weight can not be confirmed and is still open for debate. I have yet to read a convincing argument or case study proving anything but correlation one way or the other.

That's not to say you should avoid Nofollow links; they are a natural part of a robust digital marketing strategy.



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:

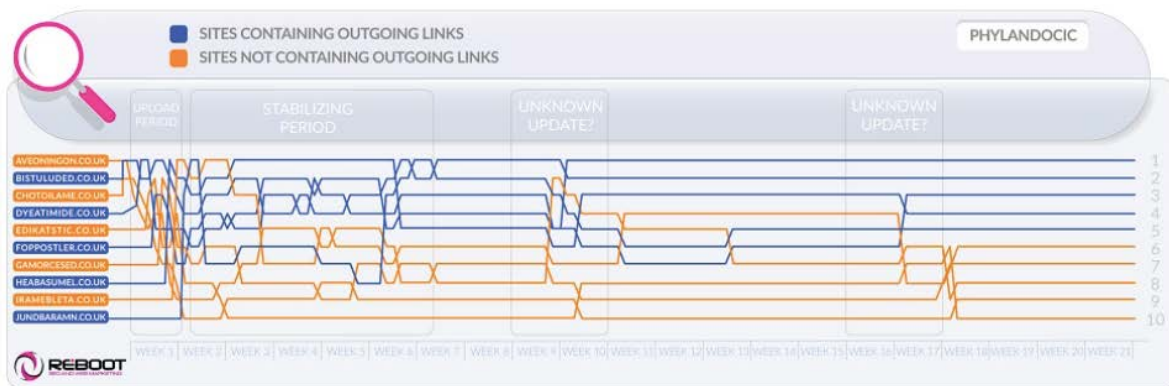
“The main thing to take away from this test is that although we don’t know and have not proved how powerful outgoing links are in the grand scheme of things, we have proved they do have a positive impact if used correctly.”

However, this evidence is not exactly convincing.

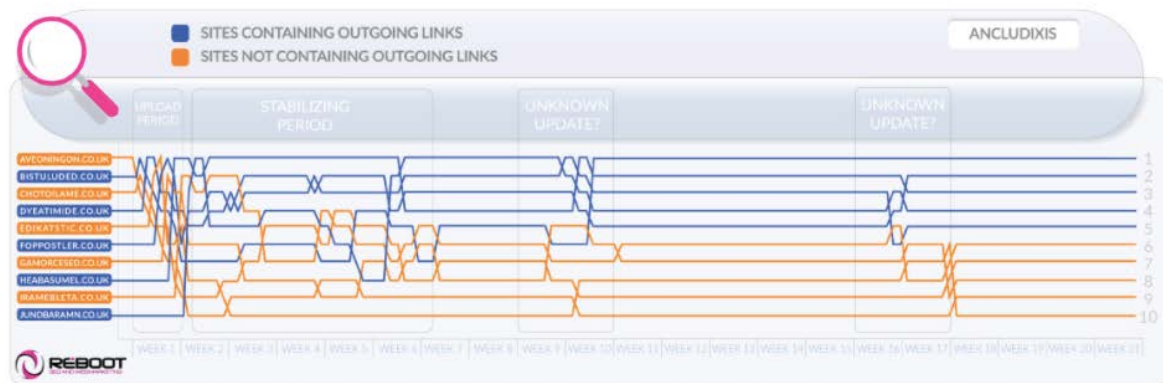
Here’s what we see in the results. The author notes that the graph shows the position of the sites in the ranking.

- Blue line = site **with** an outgoing link.
- Orange line = site **without** outgoing links.

Key Phrase: **[Phylandocic]**



Key Phrase: **[Ancludixis]**



Screenshot from Rebootonline.com, June 2022

As you can see, the sites with the outbound links ranked in the top five Google results, and those without in the next five.

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:



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

Here's where the aforementioned PageRank sculpting post comes in:



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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:

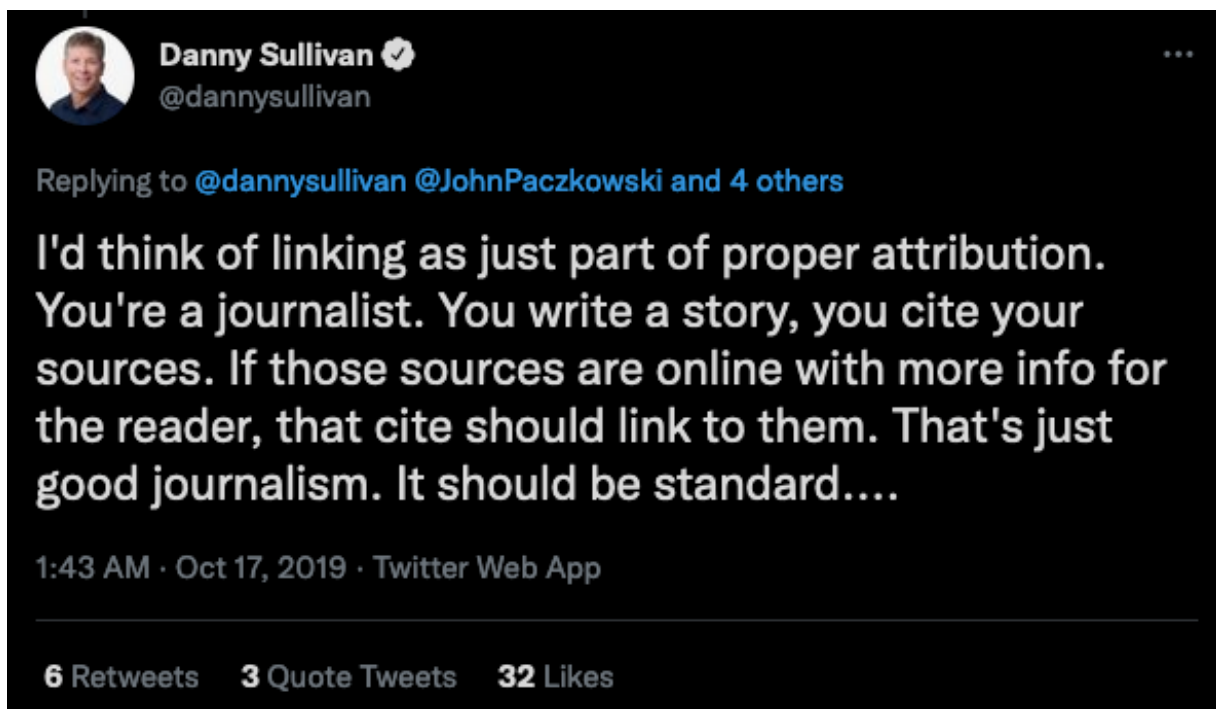
"External links from your pages to other sites – is that a ranking factor? What if they're nofollow?"

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:



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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



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.



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:



Gary "鯨理" Illyes ✓
@methode



Hey Jon! I don't know if this will reach you, but your email address bounces. Just wanted to say thank you very much for sending over that spreadsheet with over 700 link seller domains! We made sure their links are worthless!

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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

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

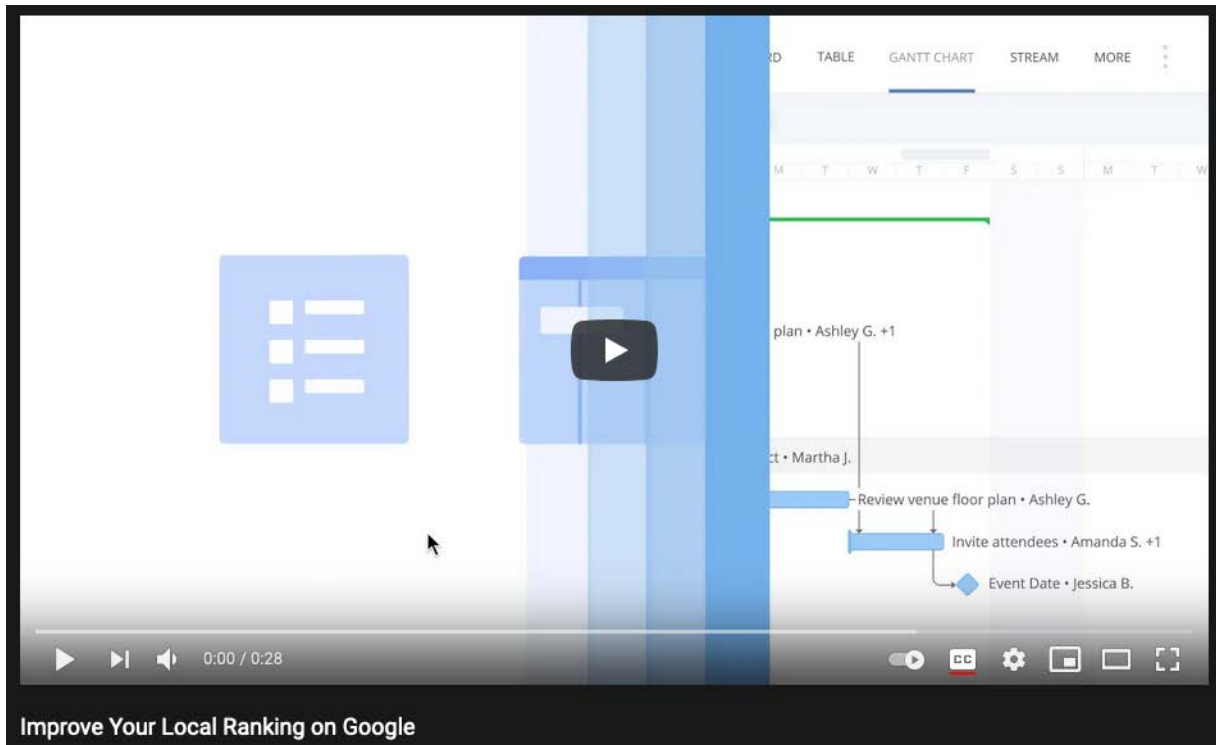
Citations have long been widely accepted by SEO professionals as a key local ranking factor.

“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," Google Business Profile, June 2022

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 GBP 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 GBP 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 in 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.

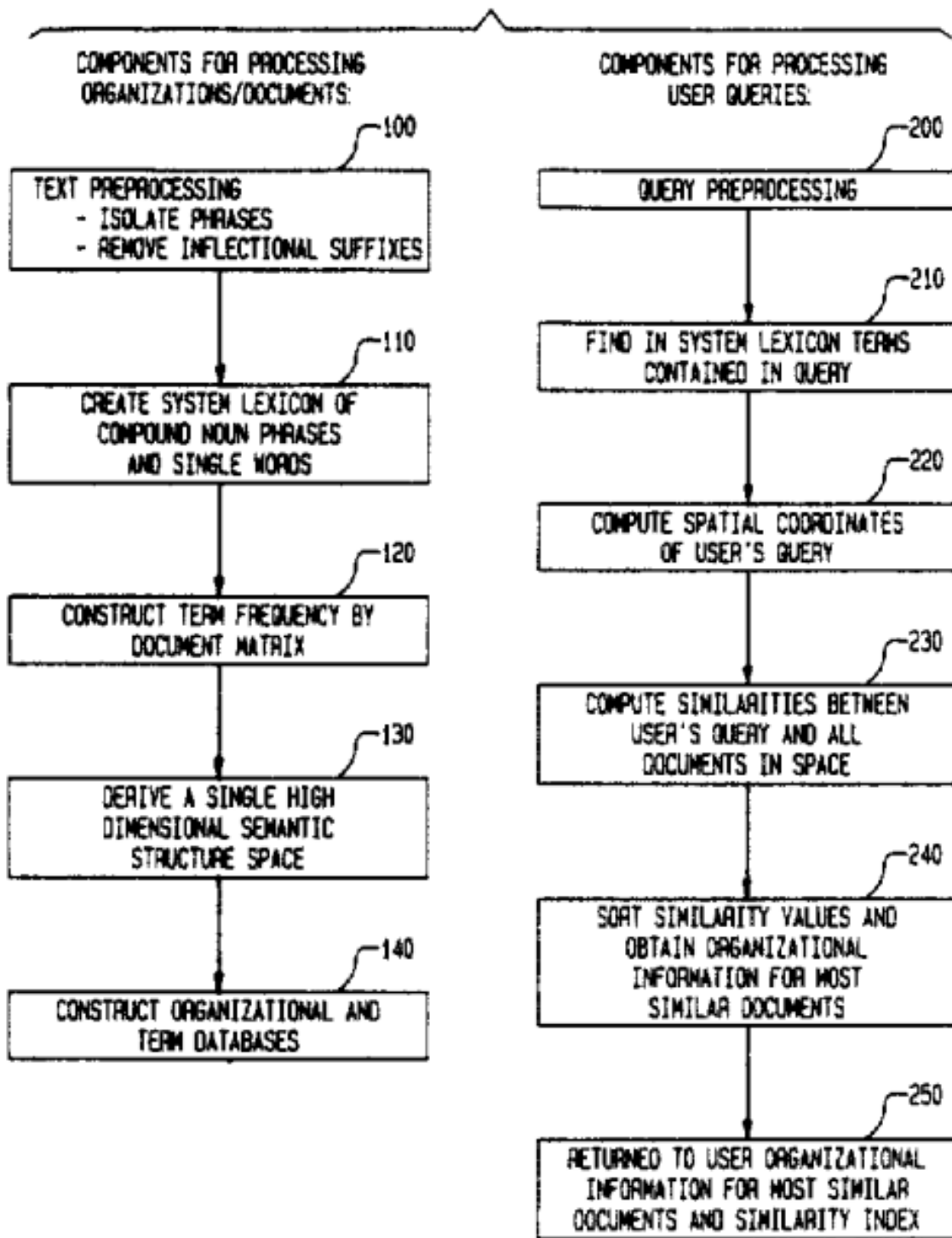
However, the methodologies and technology Google uses to solve for relevance long ago moved on from LSI.

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:



Screenshot by author, June 2022



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



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

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:

- [Keyphrase in meta description](#): Keyphrase or synonym appear in the meta description. Well done!
- [Meta description length](#): Well done!

Screenshot from Yoast, June 2022

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 [video](#) 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 [tweeted Splitt](#) 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](#):



 **John**  
@JohnMu

...

Replying to [@type_SEO](#)

Meta descriptions can be used for the search result snippet, so if you don't specify anything (on the mobile page, with mobile-first-indexing), we'll have to figure it out ourselves. They're not used for ranking though.

3:52 PM · Aug 6, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022



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

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

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

Is Mobile-Friendliness A Google Ranking Factor?

Is mobile that important in search? Does it matter whether your site is mobile-friendly?

Mobile devices account for [60%](#) of internet usage worldwide, which was once inconceivable in the desktop era.

At one time, it made no difference to Google whether a site was compatible with mobile devices. Mobile-friendliness was considered a nice-to-have feature but not a necessity.

Mobile search grew as smartphones and tablets became more ubiquitous, causing Google to reconsider its evaluation of mobile-friendliness as a ranking factor.

That led to an event known as "[mobilegeddon](#)," which signaled that mobile search was no longer an afterthought.



Is that as scary as it sounds? And is mobile-friendliness a ranking factor today?

This chapter will investigate the claims and clarify the impact mobile-friendliness has on search rankings.

THE CLAIM

Mobile-Friendliness As A Ranking Factor

Many SEO experts say that websites that fit mobile screens benefit from a ranking boost over sites only optimized for desktops.

This claim stems from a larger percentage of searches conducted on mobile devices and the understanding that Google aims to serve pages with the [best user experience](#).

With most users searching on mobile, the best user experience can be assured by serving results that work on both mobile and desktop (often referred to as responsive web design).

Before mobile was the dominant way to search Google, it was common for users to land on pages not optimized for their smartphone or tablet.

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

The Evidence For Mobile-Friendliness As A Ranking Factor

Understandably, users grew frustrated with visiting pages they couldn't easily navigate.

Google found itself with a search quality issue on its hands.

Webmasters might take years to make their sites compatible with all devices without any incentive. They might not bother to do it at all. 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 implemented a mobile-friendly design on their own.

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.”

Google designed the mobile-friendly update to impact mobile search results.

There was no boost for mobile-friendly sites when a user searched on a desktop.

To further emphasize the importance Google places on responsive mobile design, in 2020, the search engine adopted a new form of indexing that ditches the desktop crawler.

Mobile-first indexing is now the standard. That means algorithms use the mobile-rendered version of a page instead of the desktop version. Despite mobile-friendliness being a ranking factor strengthened over time, Google reminds us that user intent is a stronger signal.

A page 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.”

The ranking advantages gained by mobile-optimized sites spurred the adoption of responsive web design on a larger scale.

OUR VERDICT

Mobile-Friendliness Is A Confirmed Ranking Factor



Mobile-friendliness is a confirmed Google ranking factor.

If a webpage displays less information on mobile than on desktop, for example, then Google won't have as much context to use for rankings.

There's potential to adversely impact search rankings if your site provides a lesser experience on mobile than desktop.

Responsive mobile design is a core component of a good user experience. That's not an opinion, either. It's baked right into Google's page experience algorithm update, which they also rolled out in 2020.

As the name suggests, the page experience update rewards content visitors can easily interact with and navigate. It includes the following factors:

- Mobile usability.
- HTTPS.
- Core Web Vitals.
- No intrusive interstitials.

It's fair to conclude that websites are at a disadvantage with Google if they're not mobile-friendly.

Businesses with outdated website designs should strongly consider upgrading to remain competitive in Google. If you need some help getting started with implementing a mobile site, [SEJ's Mobile SEO ebook](#) can help.



MUM

By Miranda Miller

Is Google's MUM A Search Ranking Factor?

At Google I/O [2021](#), Google announced a new technology called MUM (Multitask Unified Model) that it will use internally to help its ranking systems better understand language.

Since the announcement, there has been much discussion about if or when MUM would become a ranking factor.

What Is MUM?

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.



MUM 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, they could apply MUM to document summarization, question answering, and classification tasks such as sentiment analysis.

MUM is a major priority inside the Googleplex, and so it should definitely be on your radar.

THE CLAIM

MUM As A Ranking Factor

When Google first revealed the news about MUM, many who read it 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. It was rolled out worldwide [in 2019](#) and hailed the most important update in five years by Google itself.

And sure enough, BERT impacted about [10%](#) of search queries.

[RankBrain](#), which rolled out in the spring of 2015, is another example of an algorithmic update that substantially impacted 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 peek at what may be under the hood.

For now, let's just consider whether MUM is a ranking factor.

THE EVIDENCE

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](#) that MUM technology isn't in yet play:

“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.”

Then, the timeline provided for when MUM-powered features and updates would go live became, “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](#).



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

The Evidence For MUM As A Ranking Factor

When RankBrain rolled out, it wasn't announced until six months afterward. And most updates aren't announced or confirmed at all.

However, Google has become 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. Google announced them [over a year](#) before the eventual rollout in [June 2021](#).

Google has already said MUM is coming and will be a big deal.

But could MUM be responsible for a rankings drop of many sites experienced in the spring and summer of 2021?

Implementing MUM To Improve Search Results

As promised, Google announced new and potential MUM applications publicly.

In [June 2021](#), Google described the first application of MUM and how it improved search results for vaccine information.

“With MUM, we were able to identify over 800 variations of vaccine names in more than 50 languages in a matter of seconds. After validating MUM’s findings, we applied them to Google Search so that people could find timely, high-quality information about COVID-19 vaccines worldwide.”

In [September 2021](#), Google shared ways that it might use MUM in the future, including new ways to search with visuals and text – as well as a redesigned search page to make it more natural and intuitive.

In [February 2022](#), Google offered insight into how RankBrain, neural matching, BERT, and MUM lead to information understanding. In this post, the following was noted:

“While we’re still in the early days of tapping into MUM’s potential, we’ve already used it to improve searches for COVID-19 vaccine information, and we’ll offer more intuitive ways to search using

a combination of both text and images in Google Lens in the coming months. These are very specialized applications — so MUM is not currently used to help rank and improve the quality of search results like RankBrain, neural matching and BERT systems do.”

In [March 2022](#), Google posted an update about how MUM applied to searches related to a personal crisis.

“Now, using our latest AI model, MUM, we can automatically and more accurately detect a wider range of personal crisis searches. MUM can better understand the intent behind people’s questions to detect when a person is in need, which helps us more reliably show trustworthy and actionable information at the right time. We’ll start using MUM to make these improvements in the coming weeks.”

Later in the post, Google continued describing how MUM could improve search results.

“MUM can transfer knowledge across the 75 languages it’s trained on, which can help us scale safety protections worldwide much more efficiently. When we train one MUM model to perform a task — like classifying the nature of a query — it learns to do it in all the languages it knows.

For example, we use AI to reduce unhelpful and sometimes dangerous spam pages in your search results. In the coming months, we’ll use MUM to improve the quality of our spam protections and expand to languages where we have very little training data. We’ll also be able to better detect personal crisis queries all over the world, working with trusted local partners to show actionable information in several more countries.”

OUR VERDICT

MUM Could Be A Ranking Factor



While Google doesn't use MUM as a search ranking signal yet, it most likely could in the future.

In multiple posts about MUM on The Keyword blog, Nayak promises MUM will undergo the same rigorous testing processes as BERT before Google implements it into search.



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.

In 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 li 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?

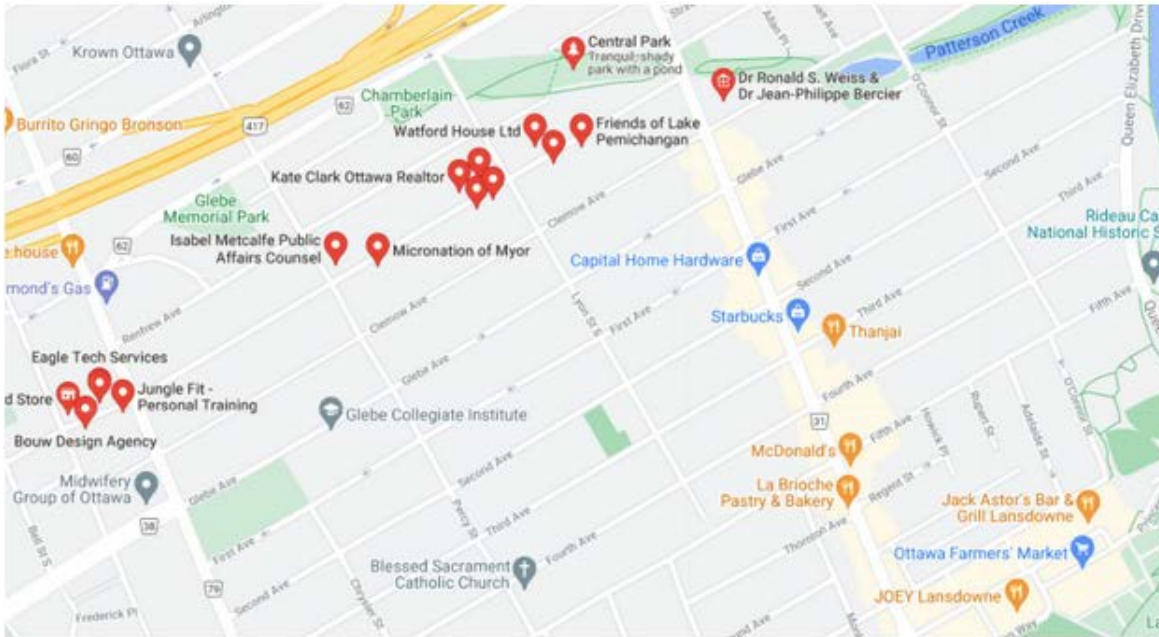
There are a few concrete ways:

- Ensure citations (local listings) are accurate and that your business appears where people are searching for local products, services, etc.
- 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.
- [Claim](#) and [verify](#) your Google My Business listing.

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.



Screenshot from Google Business Profile, June 2022

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 GBP profile and accurate citations.

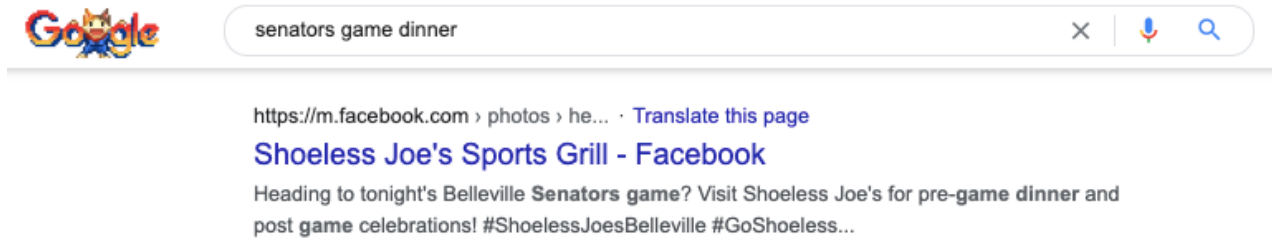
But – to borrow a few examples from sports – what about [dinner before the Jay's game]?

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?

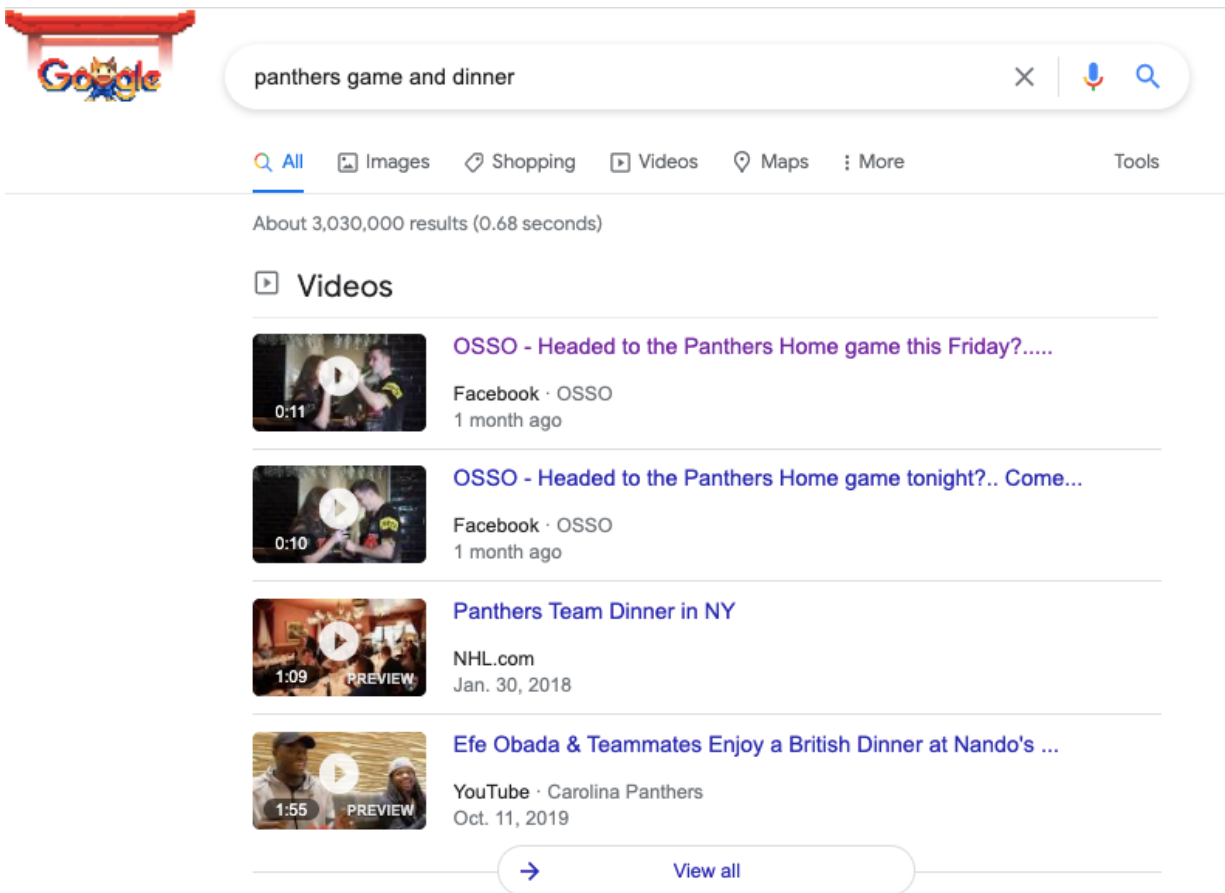
The first restaurant I find in the top 10 organic Google results for the Senators example isn't even a website or local listing; it's a Facebook post:



Screenshot from search for [senators game dinner], Google, June 2022

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:



Screenshot from search for [panthers game and dinner], Google, June 2022

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

Physical Proximity To Searcher As A Ranking Factor

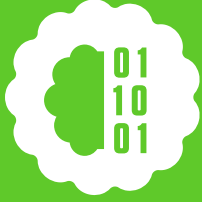


Yes, Google uses proximity/distance as a search ranking signal.

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

Is RankBrain A Ranking Factor In Google Search?

Google's understanding of human language is made possible by several breakthrough technologies in artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Launched in 2015, RankBrain was the first of said breakthroughs. It allowed Google to return results for queries with no previous record of searches.

RankBrain's functionality has evolved since its initial introduction. It now allows Google's algorithms to do something that humans do instinctively: relate words to real-world concepts.

In the days before RankBrain, Google interpreted words literally. It didn't understand synonyms or figurative meanings.

That limited both the quality and quantity of search results Google could provide.



The ability to interpret what humans mean when they write queries in natural language marked a significant milestone for Google Search.

RankBrain does more than just understand language; if you need a hint at its other function, it's in the name: Rank.

In this article, we'll investigate the claims around RankBrain as a ranking factor, providing clarity on what [RankBrain](#) is and how it impacts search results.

THE CLAIM

RankBrain As A Ranking Factor

RankBrain is a technology that seems to impact how Google returns search results.

Due to its association with search, many people consider RankBrain to be a ranking factor.

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.

The following section goes over what Google designed RankBrain to do and how it assists with answering queries.

THE EVIDENCE

Is RankBrain A Ranking Factor?

RankBrain is an artificial intelligence (AI) system introduced in 2015 to help Google return results for queries without previous search data.

That changed sometime between the spring of 2015 and 2016.

Google announced an update to RankBrain, which integrated the AI into all queries.

Wired revealed this information in an article that 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](#), the algorithm makes 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 webpage.

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.

RankBrain accomplishes this 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.

Practical Example From Google's Vice President Of Search

In addition to returning results for ambiguous and never-before-seen queries, RankBrain is capable of connecting words to concepts.

Pandu Nayak, Google's vice president of Search, [explains how this works](#) with an example of a query that contains the phrase "food chain."

"Food chain" can refer to organisms in an ecosystem (literal meaning), or it can refer to a hierarchy of people (figurative meaning).

As Nayak states, RankBrain helps Google determine the intended meaning of words based on how a searcher uses them in a query:

"For example, if you search for 'what's the title of the consumer at the highest level of a food chain,' our systems learn from seeing those words on various pages that the concept of a food chain may have to do with animals, and not human consumers.

By understanding and matching these words to their related concepts, RankBrain understands that you're looking for what's commonly referred to as an "apex predator."

Thanks to this understanding, Nayak confirms, RankBrain can decide the best order for top search results by ranking them according to relevance.

OUR VERDICT

RankBrain Is A Confirmed Ranking Factor



Google has confirmed that RankBrain is used to rank search results and is involved in all queries.

In 2016, Andrey Lipattsev, a Google Search Quality Senior Strategist, [said](#) RankBrain was one of the three most important ranking signals (along with [content](#) and [links](#)).

RankBrain continues to play an essential 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?

The only option is to provide Google with as much information about a page as possible, which site owners should do anyway if they create holistic content for users.

Illyes was asked this question once and [replied](#) with a 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 Miranda Miller

Is Reading Level A Google Ranking Factor?

Every SEO professional knows content is king. And not all content is created equal.

But does your content's readability affect how Google ranks you in search results?

There are a lot of misconceptions about this. But what exactly is readability?

If you've done any content creation, there's a good chance you've come across [readability tools](#) like the popular Yoast SEO WordPress plugin before. These valuable tools evaluate your copy and generate statistics such as passive voice, paragraph length, subheads, and transitions.

And included in this analysis is [Flesch Reading Ease \(FRE\)](#). FRE is a scale between one and 100, with 100 being the easiest to read and one being incomprehensibly dense.



For example, this piece scored 59 on the FRE scale, which puts it at a ninth-grade reading level. This score takes two variables into account: word length and sentence length. Generally, longer words and sentences will lower your FRE score.

While content that is easier to read will perform better with visitors, what about with search engines? How much do you need to focus on improving readability to secure a high ranking?

Let's take a look.

THE CLAIM

Reading Level As A Ranking Factor

In 2010, Google added a [short-lived “reading level” filter](#) to its advanced search function. But the idea that readability affects search engine rankings has been around a lot longer than that.

And the rise of Google's machine learning models [BERT](#) and [MUM](#), which aim to understand language and content quality, seem to hint that it's still important.

But what's the truth? Should you be obsessed with turning all those red and orange circles on your reading analysis green? Will eliminating passive sentences and adjusting your vocabulary to a sixth-grade level send your page rocketing to the top of search engine results?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence Against Readability As A Ranking Factor

Despite claims to the contrary, reading level does not factor into your search ranking. Google's Senior Webmaster Trends Analyst John Mueller confirmed this in a [2018 Google Webmaster Hangout](#):

“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 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.”

FRE is a basic score with just two variables, so this makes sense.

To verify this, Portent ran a [study analyzing](#) the reading level of more than 750,000 pieces of content for 30,000 desktop search queries. This study found no correlation between Google search ranking and a page's reading level.

So, SEO professionals can just disregard FRE, right?

No.

Readability has an impact on user experiences, and that plays an [ever-increasing role in SEO](#). If visitors to your website struggle to read and understand your content, they're more likely to leave.

Challenging-to-read pieces are also much less likely to have incoming links directed to them, which is an essential ranking factor.

To quote John Mueller's hangout again:

"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."

So, it would seem that while your content's reading level can have some effect on your ranking, it's not a ranking factor.

OUR VERDICT

Reading Level Is Not A Ranking Factor



While not a confirmed ranking factor, the reading level is critical to content strategy. Every audience has different preferences regarding the complexity and reading level of content.

Write For Your Audience

The key to successful web content is usefulness. To rank highly, you must demonstrate that your webpage answers a search query better than anyone else.

And the way to do this is by understanding your audience.

For example, suppose you're trying to promote a company that sells electron microscopes. In that case, you can probably get away with using a more sophisticated vocabulary than if you were selling mudflaps.

Just be careful to avoid talking down to your audience, which will alienate them as quickly as using \$10,000 words.

Writing good content is a skill that every SEO professional would do well to cultivate. Adapting your writing to a specific reading level isn't a ranking factor, but using words that don't resonate with your audience will always be a problem.



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.

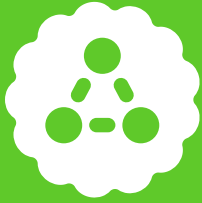
Google's John Mueller [stated as much](#) while advising site owners to adjust their expectations after recovering from a manual action penalty:

“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 Business Profile. Think about the keywords you have optimized your website for – these same keywords for products and services should appear in your GBP 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, And Prominence As Ranking Factors

In the Google Business Profile [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 Business Profile. 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 Business Profile, links, and reviews. This aligns with Google’s recommendations to update your Google 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 Business Profile Help Center.

In addition to entering your complete business details into Google Business Profile, 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).



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."

Screenshot from SearchEngineJournal.com, June 2022

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

Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022



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

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 Kristi Hines

Are Social Signals & Shares A Google Ranking Factor?

Do social signals affect search rankings?

In a world of ever-evolving [social networks and platforms](#), can engagement on one social network over another help you get better visibility in Google search engine results?

Let's explore social signals as a Google ranking factor to determine their effect on search rankings.

THE CLAIM

Social Signals Are A Ranking Factor

Social signals are [engagement](#) from social media users with content you have shared from your website.

Here are some examples of social signals.

- Someone shares a link to a page on your website in a public post on Facebook. The post receives likes, comments, and additional shares.
- Someone shares a link to a page on your website in a public tweet on Twitter. The tweet receives replies, likes, and retweets.

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence For Social Signals As A Ranking Factor

Google does seem to care about [social media](#). In the [Search Engine Optimization \(SEO\) Starter Guide](#), Google acknowledges that compelling content gets shared, and organic buzz will build your website's reputation.

“Creating compelling and useful content will likely influence your website more than any of the other factors discussed here. Users know good content when they see it and will likely want to direct other users to it. This could be through blog posts, social media services, email, forums, or other means.

Organic or word-of-mouth buzz is what helps build your site’s reputation with both users and Google, and it rarely comes without quality content.”

Later, when referring to website promotion, Google suggests knowing about social media sites because:

“Sites built around user interaction and sharing have made it easier to match interested groups of people up with relevant content.”

Inside Google Analytics, there is a section for Social reports. According to Google Analytics:

“Social analytics provides you with the tools to measure the impact of social. You can identify high value networks and content, track on-site and off-site user interaction with your content, and tie it all back to your bottom line revenue through goals and conversions.”

Google believes social profiles are important, especially to local businesses. Google Business Profiles gathers information from various sources – including [social profiles](#) – to give potential consumers a complete view of the local business.

Google also offers [advice](#) for anyone with a Knowledge Graph panel on updating their information, including social profiles.

While Google does seem to place importance on social profiles, it doesn't necessarily mean that social signals can lead to better rankings.

In [2010](#), Matt Cutts, former head of the Webspam team, received a question asking how Google rates links from sites like Twitter and Facebook to a new website. He responded that Google treats links the same, and it doesn't matter if they come from a .gov or .edu, or Twitter or Facebook.

The only catch would be links shared on profiles that aren't public. If Google can't fetch or crawl the profile page, it can't see the link.

Later, in December [2010](#), Cutts received a similar question, referring to an article that suggested Google used links from Twitter and Facebook in search.

Cutts answered that although they didn't use social signals for rankings in the past, Google had implemented social links as ranking signals at the time of the video. The link to the [article](#) was included with the video from Google Search Central for more details.

In 2013, Google filed a [patent](#) that references searching content of prominent users of social networks. In one section, the patent mentions how interactions by members of a user's social graph can be used as social signals.

“Interactions performed by members of the user's social graph can be used as social signals to adjust rankings of corresponding search results. For example, if a search query identifies results that include a resource that has been so identified by a member of the user's social graph, this result can be boosted relative to other general search results responsive to the user's query.

The boosting factor could be based on, for example, the number of friends who endorsed the identified resource or a top affinity to a friend who endorsed the identified resource.

Boosting can also be based on authorship (e.g., what is the relationship or affinity with the individual that endorsed the resource), or the type of endorsement did the member of the user's social graph provide (e.g., an explicit endorsement by starring a result or page or an implicit endorsement by visiting the resource or commenting on a posting)."

While the patent shows Google's interest in boosting resources in search results based on social signals, it doesn't mean they applied it to the algorithm.

Fast forward to [2014](#), when someone again asked Cutts if Facebook and Twitter signals are part of Google's algorithm. He responded that Google did not include signals such as the number of followers or likes in the algorithm. You can't assume that because a signal exists on Twitter or Facebook, Google picks it up.

The Evidence Against Social Signals As A Ranking Factor

A few months [later](#), Cutts answered this question:

"As Google continues to add social signals to the algorithm, how do you separate simple popularity from true authority?"

In his response, he says there is an "assumption" in the first part of his question, adding social signals to the algorithm, which he dismisses.

In [2015](#), John Mueller, a search advocate at Google, said that social signals do not directly help in organic rankings.

Links in most social posts are nofollowed. They won't help with organic rankings. However, the social posts that link to your website could show up in search results.

In [2016](#), Mueller received a tweet asking if social media tags do any good for on-page SEO. His response:

“No, I'd use links to social media as a way to add value to users, not in the hope that they improve rankings.”

In 2017, Gary Illyes, Chief of Sunshine and Happiness at Google, mentioned social media twice in a discussion about links. [First](#):

“And that's where social media comes handy. It's not because SEs will rank you better, that's BS, but because you market your content”

[Followed by:](#)

“Also, for the record, PageRank wise most social media links count as much as a single drop in an ocean.”

In [2019](#), Mueller joked in response to a guide on TikTok:

“Do people put links in Tiktok videos? #seo #numberoneranking #follow #growthhacking”

In [2021](#), Mueller joked in response to the number of likes a particular tweet was receiving:

“Sorry, we don't use likes as a ranking factor.”

Later in August [2021](#), Mueller was asked if clicks via emails could impact rankings. He replied:

“No effect on SEO. Like ads, like social media. It’s good to have multiple separate sources of traffic to your website, and not everything needs to have an SEO effect.”

A few months [later](#), Mueller was asked if social media directly or indirectly impacted SEO. He answered:

“If I give you advice on Twitter which helps improve your website’s visibility in search, would that be an indirect effect of social signals on SEO?”

The joking response is a clue to their sentiment about social signals. They don’t put much stock in them.

OUR VERDICT

Social Signals Is Definitely Not A Ranking Factor



It's a bit confusing whether social signals affect organic search rankings. Between 2010 and 2014, Google may have experimented with social signals in search results.

Plus, there are scenarios where [social media can help your SEO efforts](#). While social signals may not be a ranking factor, social profiles and links can affect your brand's appearance in search results.

Ultimately, it seems that Google may have used social signals in the past to create better results for users. But now, social signals seem to be a thing of Google's past.



SPELLING & GRAMMAR

By Kristi Hines

Spelling & Grammar: Are They Google Ranking Factors?

While most professionals strive to write the highest quality content possible, spelling and grammatical mistakes happen.

But what happens when you publish those mistakes? Will search engines be less likely to rank you higher in search results thanks to those mistakes?

THE CLAIM

Spelling & Grammar As Ranking Factors

Understandably, many marketing professionals see spelling and grammar as possible ranking factors. After all, one of the things often repeated by Google is to avoid publishing low-quality content.



For example, Google’s Advanced SEO guide for [bloggers](#) states, “A useful post once a week is better than low-quality content published daily.”

In an article on how to create high-quality websites, the Google Search Central [Blog](#) specifies:

“One other specific piece of guidance we’ve offered is that low-quality content on some parts of a website can impact the whole site’s rankings, and thus removing low quality pages, merging or improving the content of individual shallow pages into more useful pages, or moving low quality pages to a different domain could eventually help the rankings of your higher-quality content.”

Google’s SEO Starter [Guide](#) suggests that you avoid “writing sloppy text with many spelling and grammatical mistakes.”

The Search Quality Rating [Guidelines](#) describe low-quality content as follows.

“This content has many problems: inaccurate/meaningless information and complete lack of editing with poor spelling and grammar—both of these characteristics in combination justify the Lowest+ to Low rating.”

Google also released a [post](#) about spelling and search queries, noting that:

“Thanks to advancements in deep learning, we now have a better way to understand spelling. Late last year, we announced a new spelling algorithm that uses a deep neural net that better models and learns from less-common and unique spelling mistakes. This

advancement enables us to run a model with more than 680 million parameters in under two milliseconds — a very large model that works faster than the flap of a hummingbird’s wings — so people can search uninterrupted by their own spelling errors.”

In other words, Google’s algorithm knows how to handle misspellings.

THE EVIDENCE

Spelling & Grammar As Ranking Factors: The Evidence

In [2011](#), Matt Cutts, head of Google’s webspam team, was asked if spelling and grammar matter when evaluating content and site quality. He begins by saying that since the last time he checked, spelling and grammar were not direct ranking signals.

Cutts says that throughout various tests, Google has determined that websites with better spelling and grammar tend to be more reputable.

Cutts ultimately suggests that content should provide a good user experience regardless of the effect on search rankings.

A month [later](#), Cutts answered another question about spelling and grammar on whether blog owners should edit blog comments, or not approve poorly-written comments to protect the site’s quality.

He notes that there are nonsensical comments on sites like YouTube, but that doesn’t stop YouTube from ranking the videos properly. The key is to ensure that your content is high quality.

In [2017](#), John Mueller, Search Advocate for Google, was asked if grammar affects SEO. Mueller says it doesn't affect search engines, but it does make an impression on your users, which is more important.

In [2021](#), Mueller answered whether Google's search algorithms check for broken HTML, spelling, or grammatical mistakes.

Mueller said he considers spelling and grammar a gray area. It affects SEO because if crawlers can't determine what the page is about, it can't be indexed appropriately.

He notes that Google aims to serve high-quality content to search users, and content with spelling and grammatical errors tends to appear more low-quality.

He concludes that most websites should be more concerned with spelling and grammar mistakes than they should be concerned with broken HTML (unless the HTML is so broken that crawlers can't properly understand it).

Should You Care About Spelling & Grammar In SEO?

Cutts and Mueller agreed that spelling and grammar could affect user experience regardless of Google rankings.

Even if you provide good information and services, you will have difficulty converting searchers if your webpage contains errors.

Also, it's important to note that spelling and grammar matter to other search engines.

In [2014](#), Bing's Sr. Product Manager Duane Forrester published a blog post on quality. After discussing common errors on the web, he ends the post with the following:

“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.”

That explanation aligns with Bing's Webmaster [Guidelines](#), which include the following section about quality and credibility.

“Determining the quality and credibility (QC) of a website includes evaluating the clarity of purpose of the site, its usability, and presentation. QC also consists of an evaluation of the page's authoritativeness, which includes such factors as the author's or site's reputation, the level of discourse (for example, an article with citations and references to data sources is considered higher quality than one that does not explain or cite its data sources; pages that call for violence, name-calling, offensive statements, or use derogatory language to make a point are generally considered low quality), the completeness of the content, and transparency of authorship.”

While it doesn't specifically address spelling and grammar, it does suggest that Bing uses a system similar to Google's Search Quality Rating Program to ensure it delivers quality results to its search engine users.

Bing News also has specific [criteria](#) when choosing content for PubHub. It includes the following:

“Content containing correct grammar and spelling and that keeps site design easy for people to navigate. Advertising should never interfere with the site experience.”

OUR VERDICT

**Spelling And Grammar
May Not Be Direct Google
Ranking Factors, But They're
Still Very Important**



Spelling and grammar are not direct Google ranking factors. However:

- They are important signals to users of your website about its quality, and you should care about that more than whether the algorithm counts them.
- Google is not the only search engine, and they might be ranking factors for other search engines.

A perfect editing job may not impact your rankings in Google search, but it can help with other search engines and improve your conversions from search traffic. There's also a correlation between good spelling and grammar and good performance in search.

Therefore, it would be wise to work with an editor or use [readability tools](#) like Grammarly to check your website content for spelling, grammar, and readability issues.

While a perfect performance score on Grammarly won't ensure you the number one ranking for your target keyword, it can help provide a better user experience. And that makes it worth the investment, regardless of the SEO benefits.



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://corporate.example.com/)
- [https://**store**.example.com/](https://store.example.com/)
- [https://**blog**.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/store/)
- [https://example.com/**blog**/](https://example.com/blog/)
- [https://blog.example.com/**category**/](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



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

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.



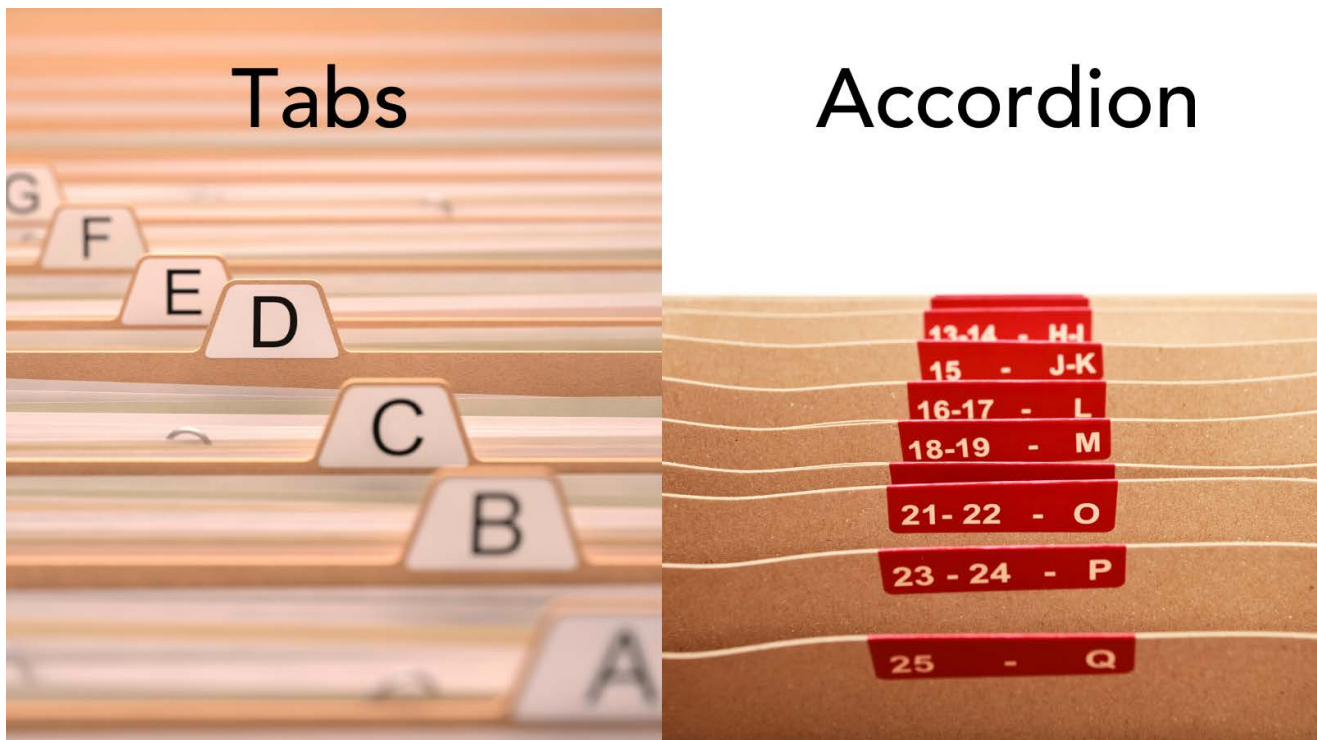
THE CLAIM

“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.



Composite image created by author, June 2022; images sourced from Shutterstock

On webpages, 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?”

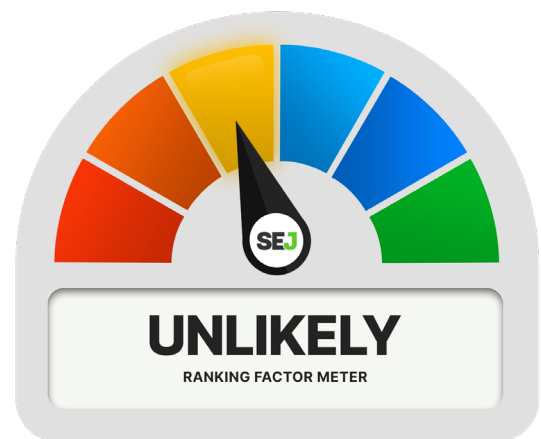
Mueller responded:

“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

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.

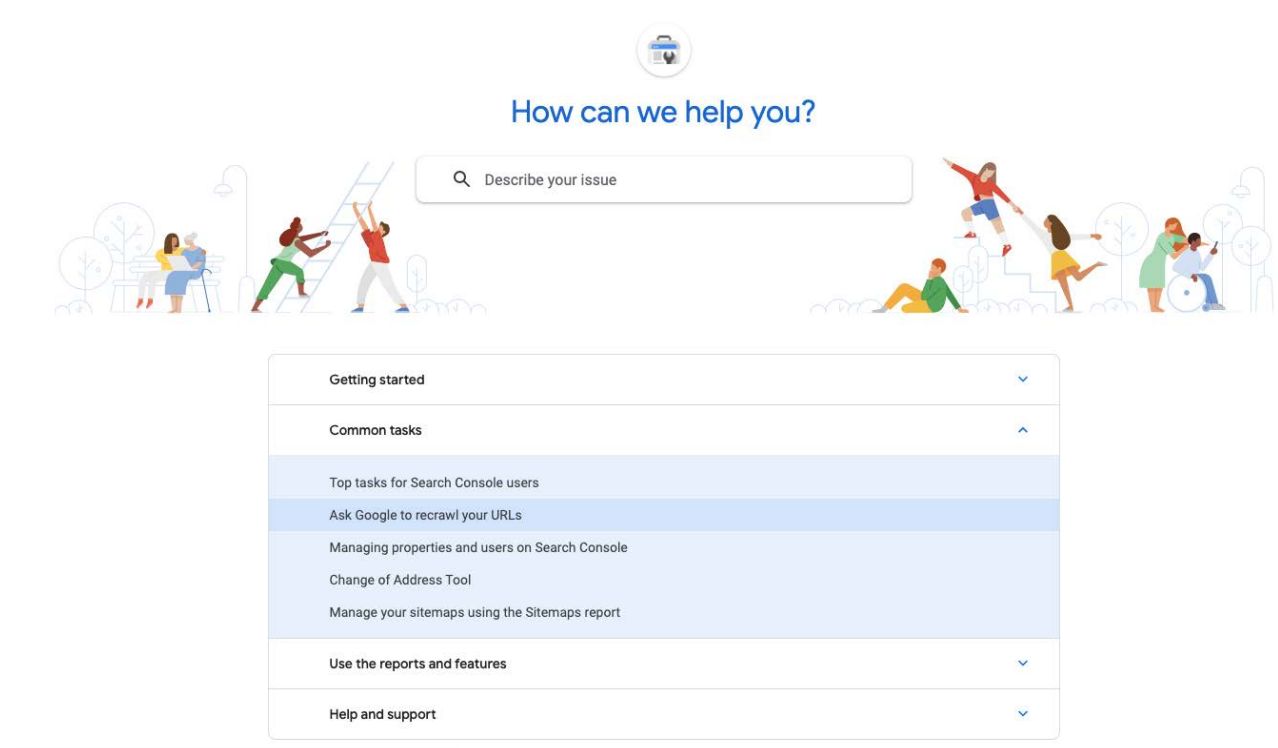
Content is the key part, not the fact that it’s tabbed.

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 a 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:



Screenshot from Google Search Console Help, June 2022

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?

Several HTML elements format text to help website visitors and search engine crawlers easily identify important portions of your content.

But can these elements have an impact on your rankings in search?

Continue reading to learn if text formatting is a Google ranking factor.

THE CLAIM

Text Formatting As A Ranking Factor

You can use HTML elements to format text in various ways; for example:



- Bold text using ``.
- Indicate strong importance, seriousness, or urgency using ``.
- Italicize text using `<i>`.
- Indicate emphasis and meaning using ``.
- Underline text using `<u>`.

`` and `` differ from `` and `<i>`, as the former indicate semantic importance while the latter are styles that simply indicate how the words appear on the screen.

That is an important distinction we'll dig into later.

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 a ranking factor.

Or did he?

A viewer had asked, "In terms of SEO, what is the difference between `` tag and `` tag for emphasis on certain words of text?"

Cutts noted that he had answered this question before, [in 2006](#), and didn't think the answer had changed.

“Back then, whenever we checked, and 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 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 ranking algorithms give bolded/italicized text extra weight:

“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 get used in algorithms.

The Evidence Against Text Formatting As A Ranking Factor

In the earlier-referenced video, Cutts is saying Google treats the two types of HTML elements the same from a ranking perspective.

He doesn't say whether they impact ranking at all. It could be that they equally have no impact.

Google has never confirmed or denied HTML formatting as a ranking factor.

In the Google developer documentation style guide, Google offers advice on [HTML and semantic tagging](#). Specifically, you shouldn't use HTML elements for visual formatting.

“The `` element indicates emphasis, not italics as such. Don't use it to italicize something that isn't meant to be emphasized; instead, use `<i>` for non-emphasis italics.

The `` element indicates strong importance, not bold as such. To bold a word that doesn't merit strong importance, use the `` element.”

This suggests that tags like `` and `` are important for understanding pages.

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:

“You’ll probably get more out of bolding text for human users / usability in the end. Bots might like, but they’re not going to buy anything.”

Many on-page factors have diminished in importance since 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 elevate it in the rankings.

Mueller, in [2021](#), confirmed that text formatting could help both users and bots see what you want to stand out on a page.

“It’s essentially semantic HTML - make it easy to recognize (for bots & users) what you think should stand out on a page. Titles help, headings help, highlighting within text helps (like bold, or strong, etc), tables for tabular data, lists as lists, etc.”

But in the next tweet, he also confirmed it would not help with rankings.

“These things don’t make your site rocket up in rankings, but especially with regards to understanding pages better, small things can help. Think of it more as giving relative guidance within the page; if you have 5 ‘SEO-points’, what should they be used for on this page?”

In a Google SEO office hours from the [same date](#), Mueller discussed an argument on whether bolding parts of your paragraph could boost your SEO.

After referencing the Matt Cutts video from 2012, he explains that semantic HTML allows you to give more meaning to a part of the page with proper markup.

“So usually, we do try to understand what the content is about on a webpage, and we look at different things to try to figure out what is actually being emphasized here. And that includes things like headings on a page, but it also includes things like what is actually bolded or emphasized within the text on a page.

So, to some extent, that does have a little bit of extra value there in that it’s a clear sign that actually, you think this page or this paragraph is about this topic here.

And usually, that aligns with what we think the page is about anyway. So it doesn’t change that much. The other thing is that this is, to a large extent, relevant within the webpage.

So, if you go off and say, well, I will just make my whole page bold and then Google will think my page is the most important one, then by making everything bold, essentially, nothing is bold because it’s all the same.

Whereas, if you take a handful of sentences or words within your full page where you say, this is really important for me, and you bold those, then it’s a lot easier for us to say, well, here’s a lot of text, and this is potentially one of the most important points of this page. And we can give that a little bit more value

And essentially, what that kind of goes into is everything around semantic HTML where you’re giving a little bit more meaning to a

page by using the proper markup for the page. And from our point of view, that's good. It helps us to understand the page a little bit better.

So, if you want to simplify it to a one-word answer, does bolding important points on a paragraph help the SEO? Yes, it does. It does help us to better understand that paragraph or that page.”

OUR VERDICT

Text Formatting Is Possibly A Ranking Factor



As you can see, text formatting can affect how search engines determine the most important content on a page.

But, it's unlikely that bolded content on a page will be the element that moves you above competitors in search results.

Even so, proper markup will help users and search engines find the most important points of your content.

You can learn more about text-level semantics and how to appropriately use these elements in the [WHATWG Community HTML Living Standard resource](#) that Apple, Google, Mozilla, and Microsoft provide.



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

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?

An association between page titles and Google search rankings exists as strongly today as in the early days of SEO.

People of all levels of SEO expertise agree that optimizing page titles is vital to success in search.

And how could you argue?

Page titles are the most visible component of Google's search results pages (SERPs); it's easy to conclude they carry weight as a ranking factor.

But, more optimization is not necessarily better. Optimization can cross the line into manipulation. That's when you're writing for search engines before actual people.



Historically, Google devalues ranking factors when the level of manipulation reaches a point where it's dragging down the quality of search results.

A prime example of this is domain names, which Google once valued so highly that it was difficult to rank **without** keywords in your URL.

That's a thing of the past, and now it's equally possible to rank with an obscure brand name in your URL as it is with a keyword-based domain.

As Google search matures, it's logical to wonder if page titles may go in a similar direction. Will Google eventually get fed up with the spam and reduce the weight of the page title ranking factor?

Who knows what's in store for the future, but we haven't reached that point yet. There's no question about Google's algorithms considering page titles.

Instead, the questions around page titles are:

- The extent to which title tags are valued.
- 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.

Page titles are the largest and most visible element of a page snippet when conducting a Google search.

A page's title also appears in the browser tab after clicking through a search result.

Page titles' prominence 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 website pages.

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 significantly affect 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

Title Tags Are A Ranking Factor

Page titles are a confirmed Google ranking factor, with evidence suggesting the strength ranges from mild to moderate.



A title tag is a tool for communicating what a page is about to Google.

It helps search algorithms 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 ranking.

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.

Did The Page Title Update Impact Search Rankings?

Since we published the first version of this ebook, Google [released](#) an update on how it generates page titles in search results.

Google replaces page titles in SERPs when the provided title isn't relevant to a user's query.

Specifically, this happens when the main content is relevant, but the title doesn't directly speak to what a user typed in the search bar.

Google will replace the page title with a piece of text more likely to catch the searcher's attention.

Indeed, this impacts the appearance of search results but **doesn't** impact rankings.

Google [confirms](#) it uses original page titles for search rankings even when they're replaced in SERPs. There's no need to worry about your optimization efforts going to waste.



"The title tag should provide a succinct overview of your content and subject matter. Adjust titles as often as necessary with changes in search habits, trends, and language. Google may display a different title in certain results to provide a better user experience. If it does, don't worry. Keep refining your titles to suit a range of relevant searches. Research terms and phrases most compatible with your content or products."

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor



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 URLs 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

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 announcement](#):

“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

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?

As marketers, we love numbers and metrics. They help us track progress. They tell us where we are and how far we have to go.

SEO continues to be a nebulous task and a moving target. Most focus is on how an individual page ranks for a specific query.

But, do websites have an overall reputation with Google?

Wouldn't it be nice if Google rewarded consistently high-quality websites based on a score that you can improve?



If you search for [website quality score], you will find plenty of debate about whether it exists and, if it does, how you can optimize your website for it.

But does Google have an organic quality score for websites? And does it impact your rankings?

THE CLAIM

Website Quality Score Is A Ranking Factor

This topic can cause confusion as a couple of things are in play here.

What We Know:

Google Ads uses [Quality Score](#). Quality Score is a number between one to 10 Google assigns to PPC ads, based on three factors:

1. Expected click-through rate (CTR): The likelihood that your ad will be clicked when shown.
2. Ad relevance: How closely your ad matches the intent behind a user's search.
3. Landing page experience: How relevant and useful your landing page is to people who click your ad.

Since they're described with the same words, it's easy to confuse Google Ads Quality Score and organic quality score. Remember that ads and organic search run on separate systems.

Google does not use its Google Ads Quality Score in organic ranking. We're talking about a different idea with much less information supporting it.

So The Question Is:

Does Google use a quality score that rates an entire website with a number?

We know Google considers [E-A-T](#) (Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness) an important guiding concept for every website that publishes content.

E-A-T is not a ranking factor but a way of describing what high-quality content looks like.

If Google considers the quality of each piece of content, does it consider the overall quality of a domain?

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]?

That's the hotly-debated idea of domain authority (not to be confused with [Domain Authority](#), the Moz metric, addressed in another chapter) – that some domains have an inherent SEO advantage over others.

A website-level organic quality score would mean that an individual page might rank higher or lower based on how the algorithms view the entire domain, not just that page. A thin or low-quality page might get a boost from an otherwise high-quality website.

Does Search Engine Journal, The New York Times, or Wikipedia have an automatic ranking advantage compared to smaller competitors?

Could it be due to some sitewide organic quality score Google has assigned them? Or does Google have other methods for determining what domains users would prefer to receive their results from based on their popularity with other users?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence For Website Quality Score As A Ranking Factor

In [2010](#), Google filed a patent for evaluating website properties by partitioning user feedback. Within the description is a section specifically referencing a website quality score.

“In some implementations, the website quality score is derived based on a combination of multiple distributions of aggregated user feedback data, where each distribution of aggregated user feedback data is obtained according to a different partition parameter.

For example, in addition to the IR score of the top result document of the query, another partition parameter relevant to website quality is query length (e.g., the number of terms in a search query). Queries that are neither too short nor too long tend to produce results that are good matches to the query (i.e., neither too general nor too specific).

Therefore, if the clicks for documents on a website concentrate in the partitions that are associated with the high IR ranges, and in the partitions that are associated with queries having only two or three words, then it is highly likely that the website is of high quality.”

Essentially, Google could determine a score from user interactions with a particular website. The measurement of the user interactions could, ultimately, help with rankings.

The Impact Of Low-Quality Content

In [2011](#), Michael Wyszomierski, a technical writer at Google, gave feedback about Google’s then-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.”

Many in SEO, including Jeff Ferguson, have argued that [Google ranks webpages, not websites](#).

There is evidence to support this theory. But, if it’s true, how could low-quality content on part of a website impact the entire site’s ability to rank?

Google Patent For A Site Quality Score

In [2012](#), 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.”

Just because Google has a patent on something does not provide clear evidence that it uses the patent in search algorithms. But it shows they are interested in developing a score based on users who query specific sites in search.

Quantifying Quality

During a Google SEO office hours in [2021](#), John Mueller answered a question about whether site quality could be quantifiable or expressed as a metric.

“I don’t think it’s quantifiable in the sense that we have kind of like a quality score like you might have for ads when it comes to web search.

We have lots of different algorithms that try to understand the quality of a website, so it’s not just one number, anything like that.”

He went on to say, however, that there is the possibility of a quality metric appearing in Search Console in the future.

“From time to time, I talk with the search quality team to see if there’s some quality metric that we could show, for example, in Search Console.

But it’s super tricky because we could create a separate quality metric to show in Search Console, but then that’s not the quality metric that we actually use for search, so it’s ... almost like misleading.

And if we were to show exactly the quality metric that we use, then on the one hand, that opens things up a little bit for abuse, and on the other hand, it makes it a lot harder for the teams internally to work on improving this metric.

So that’s kind of the tricky balance there.

I don’t know ... at some point, maybe we’ll still have some measure of quality in Search Console, though.”

OUR VERDICT

Website Quality Is Possibly A Ranking Factor



While Google has hinted at the possibility of a metric to measure site quality in the future of Search Console, there has not been any confirmation of an organic website quality score to date.

The Site Quality Score patent, filed in 2012, could be supporting evidence that Google might implement a quality score as a future ranking factor.

Wyszomierski's comment is an intriguing hint that something of this nature could be in play in Google's algorithms.

If websites can be hurt by low-quality content, it seems fair to assume they would be helped by high-quality content.

However, Mueller has rejected the idea of a quantifiable score, at least for now.

We have ruled out that Google uses the Google Ads Quality Score for ranking. But the principles behind it – intent, relevance, and usefulness – can easily be applied to optimizing for organic search.

Without direct confirmation, we can't call the website quality score a definite Google ranking factor.

But, it could be possible in the future.



“While score or rating can be valuable for tracking your site quality’s performance and any shifts to it over time, scoring well on all the components that contribute to a site quality score ultimately do more to improve your ranking on the SERPs. Having a well-organized site, desirable content, quickly-loading webpages and images, etc., all eventually lead to a better user experience, which is what Google is looking for in the first place.”

Lauren Carel, SEO Manager, Conductor



WHOIS

By Miranda Miller

Whols 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 [Whols](#) for all the world to see.

There are plenty of legitimate reasons people want to protect their privacy online.

But does Whols information – or using domain privacy – have any SEO implications?



THE CLAIM

Whols 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 Whols a Google trust factor?

THE EVIDENCE

The Evidence For Whols 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.

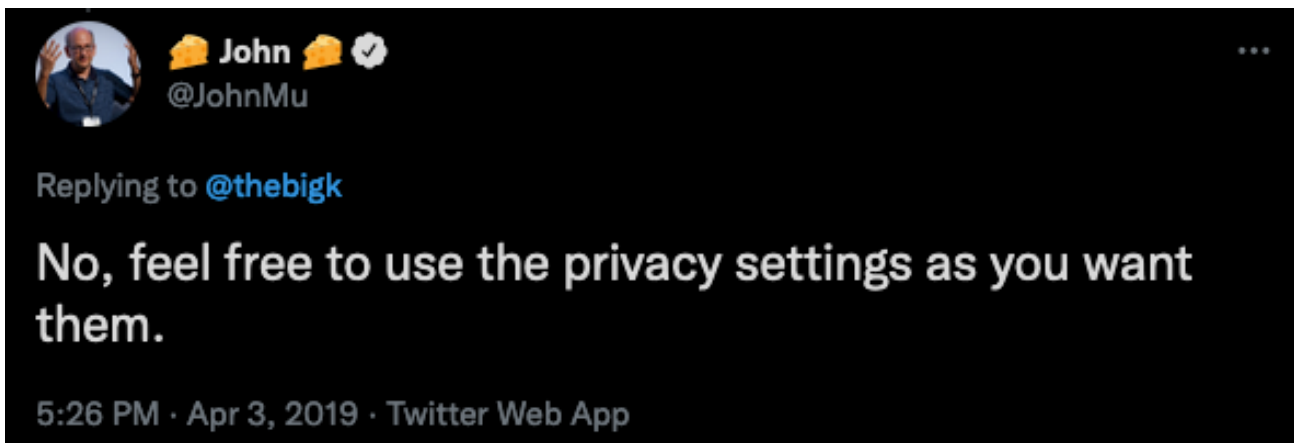
The algorithms had become far more sophisticated than when we were having these conversations in 2005.

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 Whols/domain privacy a trust factor in its ranking algorithms in 2016.

The Evidence Against Whols 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:



Screenshot from Twitter, June 2022

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

Whols 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 Or 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

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 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 (2nd Edition)**? Reach out to our Editorial team at info@searchenginejournal.com and share your thoughts.

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