

RANKING FACTORS 2023

SYSTEMS, SIGNALS & PAGE EXPERIENCE



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RANKING FACTORS 2023

SYSTEMS, SIGNALS & PAGE EXPERIENCE

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Sortable Sheet Of Ranking Factors

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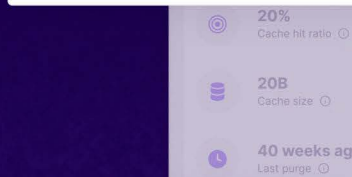


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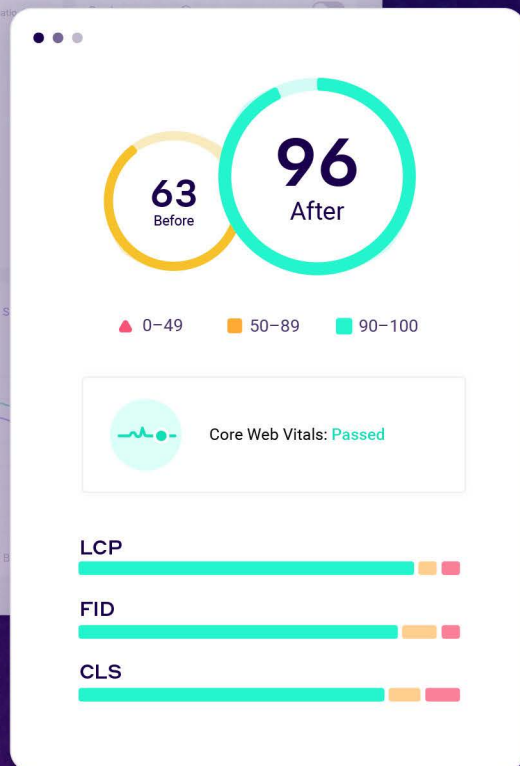


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INTRODUCTION




Welcome to SEJ's 2023 Ranking Factors ebook!

This book sorts out evidence and provides clear guidance on what is – and is not a – confirmed ranking factor in Google's algorithms.

Over the last year, there have been big changes in search. Google changed how it describes several previously documented “ranking systems,” rolling a series of technical signals into one “page experience” evaluation.

It also doubled down on content standards, adding “experience” to expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness ([E-E-A-T](#)).

Some of the changes we made:

-  We changed our opinion on five factors.
-  We removed another four – for either being so out of date that they're no longer relevant, even as myths, or being rolled into other factors.
-  We updated others with new information.





One thing we noticed this year is that ranking factors are getting more difficult to fully categorize.

Today, Google uses the terms “systems” and “signals” more than “ranking factors.”

Here's what Google says about how it [ranks results](#): “Google uses automated ranking systems that look at many factors and signals about hundreds of billions of web pages and other content in our Search index to present the most relevant, useful results, all in a fraction of a second.”

There are multiple [ranking systems](#), and they all make use of different combinations of signals.

Google is (and has been for some time) shifting away from a model where a collection of quantitative factors determines ranking. Instead, Google is building collections of qualitative signals that come together to approximate bigger – human – questions and decisions, such as:

-  [What does authority look like](#), and how does the concept apply to this query?
-  How does the [intent behind a query](#) impact the effectiveness of different answers?
-  How [directly helpful is this content](#), and how likely will a user be satisfied after reading it?
-  How [do users experience this page](#)? Is the experience good or bad?

Many SEO professionals are numbers people. Researchers. Data divers. Google releases a little bit of information about its algorithms, and we latch on like limpets. For many years, we've used clues from interpreting patents to try and decipher the algorithmic impact of everything from social media to co-citation.

But Google patents aren't necessarily the constitution. No ultimate document holds the secrets to the ranking algorithms – though I'd love to see a heist movie about stealing it from Google HQ.

Interpreting patents is an interesting skill and can provide some interesting insights. But you should weigh the business impact of obsessing over individual elements against leaning into understanding your audience.

As algorithms get more complex and AI becomes more advanced, it's only going to become more difficult to pinpoint the exact sources of data they use to make decisions.

Ranking factors aren't going away; they're evolving. The cornerstones of ranking will always be there, but the more complexity gets added to the systems, the less it benefits us to interrogate every potential signal.

EXPERT REFLECTIONS ON A VOLATILE YEAR IN SEARCH



“Although much of the semantics and jargon that Google uses has changed, what it’s looking for isn’t fundamentally different – for example, it still explicitly says, in multiple places, that page experience remains important. Remember that Google is also optimizing to satisfy user intent and stay ahead of competitors (Bing, ChatGPT, iOS search, etc). Provide pages and brands that help them achieve this, and you’ll be rewarded.”

– Tom Capper, Senior Search Scientist 



“It’s been a wild, volatile year for search, and Google is testing and changing more than ever - rapidly. Given the advent of AI and its viral adoption, the industry is at an inflection point, and things are going to change. The role of SEO will expand in many ways, and for those willing to expand their skill set and thinking, it’s going to be a fun, chaotic, and opportunity-filled ride.”

– Patrick Reinhart, VP of Services & Thought Leadership 



“The primary objective of every website is conversion. While strategic SEO will elevate you to the top of the SERP, your site’s flawless user experience will then drive conversions. Beyond achieving good Core Web Vitals and a 90+ PSI score, the real value of fast-loading pages is visitors consistently choosing your business over competitors. After all, a user’s loyalty is won in those first moments of interaction.”





– Ivailo Hristov, Chief Technical Officer and Co-Founder 

**WHAT THE HECK HAPPENED
WITH "PAGE EXPERIENCE"
AND WHAT'S A**

RANKING SYSTEM?



In April 2023, Google removed several entries from its “ranking systems” documentation:

-  Page experience.
-  Mobile-friendliness.
-  Page speed.
-  Security and HTTPs.

Several SEO pros lost their collective cool over this change.

Google’s Search Liaison account on X (formerly Twitter) shared [this statement](#):



“Our guidance on page experience is here, as we shared last week along with our blog post:

<https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/page-experience>

It does *not* say page experience is somehow ‘retired’ or that people should ignore things like Core Web Vitals or being mobile-friendly. The opposite. It says if you want to be successful with the core ranking systems of Google Search, consider these and other aspects of page experience.

We also made an update to our page on ranking systems last week. Ranking *systems* are different than ranking *signals* (systems typically make use of signals). We had some things listed on that page relating to page experience as “systems” that were actually signals. They shouldn’t have been on the page about systems. Taking them off didn’t mean we no longer consider aspects of page experience. It just meant these weren’t ranking *systems* but instead signals used by other systems.

...

The big takeaway? As our guidance on page experience says in the first sentence:

‘Google’s core ranking systems look to reward content that provides a good page experience.’ ... ”

This seems to mean that the changes were a matter of organization and not any functional algorithm adjustment.

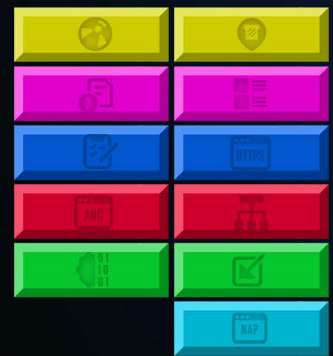
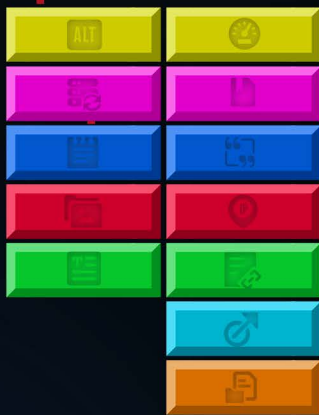
A ranking system is a broad application of signals that go toward a specific goal or evaluation.

Ranking systems can use ranking signals, but not necessarily all the time or for every query.

“Page experience” is not a ranking system. But it is a collection of ranking signals that multiple ranking systems can and do use to evaluate and reward pages with good user experience.

CLICK DATA

THE ANTITRUST LAWSUIT AND
CTR AS A RANKING FACTOR



As we were going to press with this book, a software engineer who left Google in November was called to give [testimony](#) during the antitrust suit against Google. I started seeing chatter all over social media about his smoking gun statement on click data in ranking.

His testimony called attention to the probability that Google uses clicks and other data about interactions on SERPs in ranking algorithms, and that Google is evasive about this fact to prevent SEO professionals from influencing the rankings.

This data may not be used for much longer, as Law360 reported: The former Googler's testimony said the 'situation is changing rapidly,' and that Google now has systems that can be trained just as well without user data.

"Great," I said to myself, "How many conclusions do I need to reassess?"

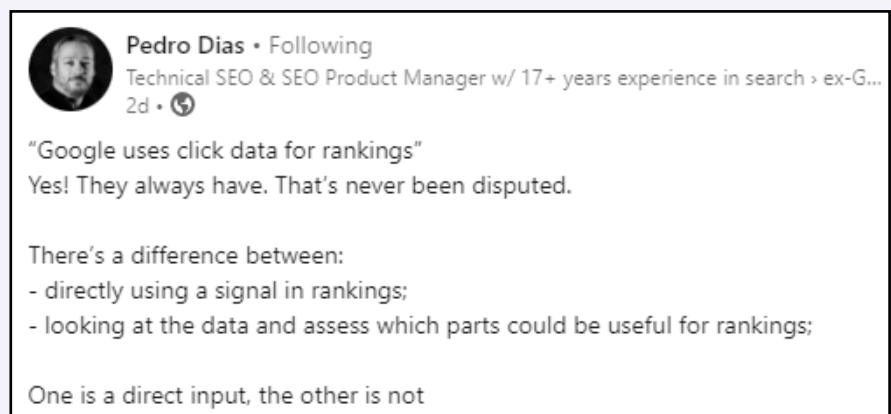
Thankfully, none so far. My first thought was CTR, but we're still dubious about CTR as a ranking factor, even with the new information.

There's a difference between live ranking signals and data used for analysis.

Ex-Google Search Quality team member Pedro Dias has a great take on this, saying in a [LinkedIn post](#):

"There's a difference between:

- 🍄 Directly using a signal in rankings;
- 🍄 Looking at the data and assess which parts could be useful for rankings."



Using data to analyze results and train algorithms is much, much different to using it live in result delivery. These signals are more likely used for training and evaluation purposes than live results ordering.

It doesn't matter if click metrics are direct ranking signals, because they're ways to measure what truly matters: the impact of your page on the user.

If you're focusing on what matters – content, authority, user experience – then whether CTR is a ranking factor shouldn't change your overall strategy. You don't have control over click data, you can only use it for measurement.

So, at this time, we aren't going to change our stance on CTR.

We don't consider CTR a direct ranking signal even though "click data" is used in search.

EXPERT RESOURCES

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ALGORITHM UPDATE EMERGENCY RESPONSE CHECKLIST

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Your go-to protocol to stay on top of changes and leverage data when algorithm updates are afoot.

- Gather Intel From [Trusted Industry Sources](#).**
 Identify what Google seems to be targeting with the update – content, page speed, backlinks, etc. – and ensure every optimization you make in response aligns.
- Assess Impact On Traffic, Organic-Sourced Revenue & Rankings.**
 Look at before and after comparisons to see which pages have fluctuated and warrant potential tweaks or improvements. Be sure to look at the positives and negatives.
- Investigate The SERPs.**
 Analyze the top 10 organic results for the domains that moved up or down, are new to the list, or vanished entirely. What kinds of results is Google favoring?
- Review Page-Level Ranking Factors.**
 Identify opportunities to improve on-page content, off-page authority, and technical performance with things like better E-E-A-T signals, anchor text ratios, and page speed respectively.
- Review Domain-Level Ranking Factors.**
 Assess your topical authority and overall domain [backlink profile](#), and ensure no glaring technical issues like 404s, redirect chains, or [Core Web Vitals](#) assessment failures.
- Roll Out A Communications & Execution Plan.**
 Brief leadership, content writers, and developers on what's changed and what it will take to "win" – then delegate tasks and monitor your results.

Read the [full guide by Trent Howard over on the STAT blog](#).

CHECKLIST TO TRANSITION FROM FID TO INP

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In March 2024, Core Web Vitals (CWV) will receive a massive upgrade. Page experience is an important consideration in multiple ranking systems, so you should be prepared for the change.

First Input Delay (FID) will be replaced by a new interactivity metric – [Interaction to Next Paint \(INP\)](#).

INP's goal: To measure the slowest interaction in the entire web session and provide a more comprehensive view of how responsive your webpages are.

So, here's everything you need to do before March 2024:

Set Your INP Benchmark.

Identify your current INP score. Setting this as a benchmark will allow you to better evaluate your optimizations later on.

Tools: Run your website through [PageSpeed Insights](#).

Document How Your Users Currently Experience Your Website.

Gather field data from a Real User Monitoring (RUM) provider.

Tools: Use [web-vitals JavaScript library](#) to find some slow interactions.

Test & Identify All Slow Interactions.

Try to reproduce the issues your visitors are experiencing. This will help you identify site elements that need to be optimized.

Tools: Use [Lighthouse timespans](#) and the [Web Vitals extension](#) to uncover your slow interactions.

❑ Upgrade Slow Interactions To Lightning Interactions.

Once you identify the issues, optimize these elements to shorten the time between user's click or tap and the visual response.

Pro Tip: Usually, the main culprits often include [unoptimized JavaScript and CSS files](#).

❑ Enhance Response Time After Clicks.

Minimize the time your site takes to process clicks. Uncover and eliminate unnecessary tasks or break up long tasks.

Tools: [SetTimeout](#) and [scheduler.yield](#) can help.

❑ Give An Immediate Indication After Every Interaction.

After a user interaction, an immediate visual update should follow.

Pro Tip: [Reduce your website's DOM size](#), and avoid heavy animations to provide immediate visual feedback.

❑ Evaluate.

After applying each optimization, re-run some live tests to evaluate your efforts and see if your page responsiveness is closer to the [good 200ms INP threshold](#).

Remember: INP is not just about making your interactions fast.

Not all interactions can be cut down under 200ms, and this is okay.

INP is also about giving an immediate indication to your site visitors on what is happening.

TIMELINE OF 2023 GOOGLE UPDATES

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The most important Google Updates: January - August 2023.



December 2022 - January 2023: Helpful Content Update & Link Spam Update

Goal: Enhance Google's signals for content made for humans vs. search engines.

Result: Major impact on website performance and produced one of the largest cullings of spammy links from an update in years.



February 2023: Product Reviews Update

Goal: Weeded out thin content summary reviews.

Result: Prioritized reviews based on actual experience or research.



February 2023: Google Chrome Lighthouse 10 Scoring Changes

Goal: Time-To-Interactive (TTI) removed to provide users with more accurate page speed UX metrics in order to encourage publishers to reduce the amount of JavaScript added to their sites.

Result: Increased PageSpeed Insights Scores for 90% of pages.



March 2023: Core Update

Goal: Reward and prioritize content that displays E-E-A-T and provides a high-quality UX.

Result: Significant volatility in rankings compared to the core update from September 2022.



March 2023: AI Chatbot Bard Launch

Goal: Speak to Google's prioritization of AI-powered functionality.

Result: Renewed focus on integrating AI within search, website management, analytics, and more.

● April 2023: Reviews Update

Goal: Expand stricter review policies and guidelines to include articles, blog posts, or other first-party standalone content that has the purpose of providing a review, opinion, recommendation, etc.

Result: Prioritized reviews based on actual experience or research.

● July 1: First Official Day of GA4.

Goal: Stop Universal Analytics from collecting data July 1 in order to fully launch GA4.

Result: To be decided on how it will impact website performance analysis, reporting, and optimizations.



August 2023: Core Update

Goal: Continue the trajectory seen with the March Core Update by rewarding websites aligned with E-E-A-T that also provide a high-quality UX.

Result: It completed roll-out on September 7th. Time will tell the full impact of this update on rankings.

Upcoming Google Updates:



HowTo & FAQ Rich Results To Be Downgraded.



Potential Result: These types of search results will appear less frequently, leading to potential implications for websites reliant on these result types for visibility and traffic.



FID To Be Replaced With INP For Core Web Vitals.



Potential Result: Highlights Google's continued focus on ensuring pages provide a quality UX.

Honorable Mention:



New Search Generative Experience (SGE) Beta.

The most significant change to SEO in years – if not decades – is on the horizon, and we got our first look at it this year. Google is working on transforming search through AI by replacing the top organic spot on SERPs with an SGE result type.



HOW TO USE **THIS EBOOK**

The Ranking Factors ebook is a myth-busting book. You will see a combination of confirmed ranking factors and debunked myths.

This year, we changed the format. I felt that a 400+ page guide was much too clunky, so each ranking factor comes with a brief description, our conclusion, and a link to the full article on the website if you want more information.

Here's a handy guide to our range of possible conclusions:

CONFIRMED

There is direct confirmation from Google, or someone who represents Google, that this signal is used for ranking.

PROBABLY

There is a substantial amount of evidence (e.g., public comments, patents, third-party data) indicating Google uses this ranking signal – though neither Google nor a representative has officially confirmed it.

POSSIBLY

There is some evidence that Google is using this signal, but no official confirmation from Google or its representatives, and/or conflicting/unreliable data.

UNLIKELY

This signal hasn't been ruled out completely, but there is little or no evidence that Google is using, or has used it, to rank results.

NOT ANYMORE

This used to be a ranking signal, but is now outdated or no longer used by Google.

DEFINITELY NOT

There is zero evidence or even direct refutation by Google that this signal is used for ranking.










We also included a sortable spreadsheet with each of the ranking factors and information about which factors we changed our opinion of this year.

Use the ebook to find a factor, in alphabetical order, and read a summary or click through to the full article.



Use the template as a sortable reference when you just need an answer quickly.

RANKING FACTORS CHANGE LOG


“Page Experience” Updates

-  Page experience was moved out of Google’s “ranking systems” page, but has its own documentation.
-  Many ranking signals are considered to evaluate page experience, and it is still taken into account, but it is no longer classified as its own ranking system.
 -  Other factors, such as mobile-friendliness, page speed, and HTTPS were also removed from the “systems” documentation.
-  Google representatives have explicitly stated that the algorithms reward good page experience. It’s used by the ranking systems, even if it isn’t a system itself.
-  We updated several chapters for clarity to reflect these changes, but they all remain **CONFIRMED** ranking factors:
 -  HTTPS.
 -  Page Speed.
 -  Mobile Friendliness.
 -  Core Web Vitals.


Alt Text

-  We **clarified** that alt text is only a ranking factor for Google image search, not general search.
-  In general search, alt text counts the same as any other text on the page, and so is considered by algorithms, but has no special treatment.


Authorship

-  We **removed** this entry because it’s increasingly covered by E-E-A-T.



Contextual Links

-  We **removed** this entry because it’s increasingly covered by anchor text, natural language processing, and content.



Deep Link Ratio

-  SEJ's opinion changed from **UNLIKELY** to **DEFINITELY NOT**.



Domain History

-  SEJ's opinion changed from **PROBABLY** to **CONFIRMED**.
-  Ranking signals don't change when a domain changes owners, so if a domain has been algorithmically penalized for some reason, that will carry over.




E-E-A-T

-  Content significantly updated to reflect the addition of "experience."
-  No change in opinion.


Language

-  SEJ's opinion changed from **PROBABLY** to **DEFINITELY**.
-  However, we clarified that Google detects this automatically, and using language-specific domains, HTML tags, etc., does not impact ranking.


Link Stability

-  SEJ's opinion changed from **UNLIKELY** to **DEFINITELY NOT**.
-  This myth is based on a 2006 patent from Google mentioning "link churn" – but the patent no longer references this term today.
-  If you change a link, it might take time for it to be crawled again, but that's the only impact.



Physical Proximity To Searcher

-  We **removed** this entry because it's covered under Relevance, Distance, and Prominence.



Syndicated Content

-  SEJ's opinion changed from **UNLIKELY** to **POSSIBLY**.



If not handled properly, syndicated content can be a negative ranking factor:

-  If a site automatically scrapes and reposts content, this is considered spam.
-  If a site syndicates content without noindexing it, it can outrank the original content, despite Google's efforts to prioritize original reporting.

TF-IDF

-  We **removed** this entry because it's extremely outdated concerning Google's current algorithms/natural language processing.
-  If you're concerned about this in 2023, consider reviewing some SEO fundamentals.

URLs

-  Our opinion of this ranking factor overall hasn't changed, but we updated it for clarity.
-  Despite being a **CONFIRMED** ranking factor, it would only impact very specific cases where Google has never indexed content before – and as soon as the content is indexed, it becomes a negligible factor.

RANKING FACTORS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

#

.edu Links
 .gov Links
 301 Redirects
 404 & Soft 404 Errors

A

Alt Text
 Anchor Text
 AMP
 AdSense

B

Better Business Bureau (BBB) Ratings
 Bounce Rate
 Breadcrumbs

C

Canonicalization
 Chrome Bookmarks
 Click Depth
 Click-Through Rate (CTR)
 Co-Citation
 Code-To-Text Ratio
 Contact Information
 Content

C

Content Length
 Core Web Vitals
 Crawl Errors And Budget

D

Deep Link Ratio
 Direct Traffic
 Disavow Tool
 Domain Age
 Domain Authority
 Domain History
 Domain Name
 Dwell Time

E

E-E-A-T

F

First Link Priority
 Fresh Content

G

Google Ads
 Google Analytics
 Google Search Console

H

HTML Lists
 HTML H1 Heading Tags
 HTML H2-H6 Heading Tags
 HTTPS

I

Image Quantity
 Inbound Links
 Internal Links
 IP Address

K

Keyword Density
 Keyword Prominence
 Keyword Stemming
 Keyword Stuffing

L

Language
 Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI)
 Link Stability
 Local Citations (NAP)
 Link Velocity

M

Manual Actions
 Meta Descriptions
 Meta Keywords
 Mobile Friendliness
 Multitask Unified Model (MUM)

N

Nofollow Links

O

Outbound Links

P

Paid Links
 Page Speed

R

RankBrain
 Reading Level
 Reconsideration Requests
 Relevance, Distance,
 And Prominence
 Review Sentiment

S

Schema Markup
 Spelling & Grammar
 Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines
 Sitewide Links
 Social Signals & Shares

S

Subdomain Or Subdirectory
 Syndicated Content

T

Tabbed Content
 Text Formatting
 Title Tags

U

URLs
 User-Generated Content (UGC)
 User Search History

W

Website Quality Score
 Whols Information
 WWW Vs. Non-WWW

X

XML Sitemaps



.EDU LINKS

DEFINITELY NOT

#

A

B

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[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Some claim that links from websites like educational institutions are more highly authoritative and valuable than others.

This has to do with a word and meaning mixup.

Google talks about experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness. What better embodiment of those ideas than educational institutions?

It's easy to forgive the misconception that .edu links are more powerful than other links due to educational institutions' perceived status and authority.

But Google treats .edu links like any other links.

While links are a confirmed Google ranking factor, .edu links do not carry any special ranking advantage just because of their domain extension. In fact, they were (and still are) abused so much that [Google may be more likely to ignore links from those domains](#).



.GOV LINKS

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Although government websites are seen as trustworthy sources, and their content is widely shared, Google doesn't treat certain domain types differently than others.

A link's worth is based on its inherent value and not on the domain extension like .gov or .edu.

Search Engine Journal

Therefore, .gov links do not hold any special ranking power and should not be the sole focus of link building strategies.

“Focus instead on producing content that authoritative, trustworthy, relevant sites want to endorse and reshare with their audience.”



[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

301 redirects are server-side redirections commonly used when going from HTTP to HTTPS, moving to a new domain, optimizing URL slugs, or changing website platforms.

They provide Google with a strong signal that the target page should be the canonical version and ensure that users land on the version of the page you intend.

“Most of the discussion surrounding 301 redirects and their impact on SEO focuses on whether [PageRank](#) would transfer from the old URL to the new URL.”

301 redirects do pass ranking signals, but in terms of PageRank, they don’t function any differently than an internal link. Nothing specifically about them gives them an edge.

We have no official confirmation that they are a ranking factor. But they’re still important tools.



[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

A 404 error code indicates that the webpage a user or search crawler is trying to reach can’t be found or doesn’t exist in a domain.

Search Engine **Journal**

Certain pages may also generate soft 404s. This time, it occurs when the page displays a “404 page not found” message for the user, but the server delivers a 200 success code to website crawlers.

According to Google, 404 errors are [perfectly normal](#), and some 404 pages don’t count against you in search results.

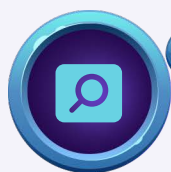
However, there is an exception.

404 errors may hurt your rankings when you have inbound links pointing to a page that no longer exists.

Google also states it prefers “404 page not found” and 301 redirects rather than soft 404 errors.

How you handle 404 and soft 404 pages may be crucial for improving your site’s user experience.



CONFIRMED
FOR IMAGE SEARCH



ALT TEXT

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Alt text is an attribute you can give images on webpages that describe them. Primarily an accessibility feature, screen readers can read alt text so that users with visual impairments can understand:

-  That an image is present.
-  What the image depicts.

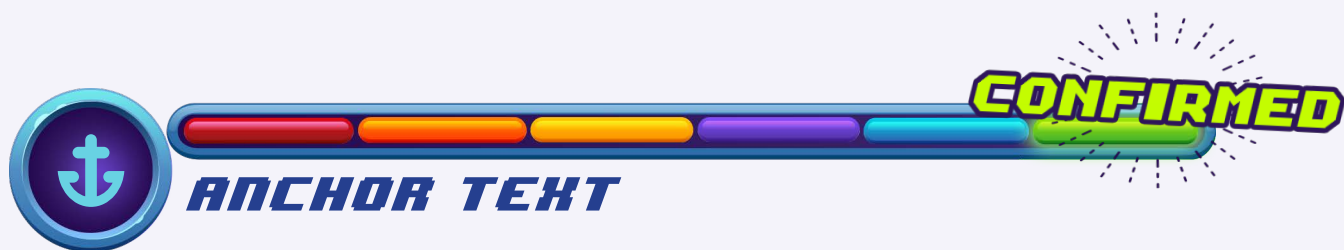
Per accessibility best practices, alt text should clearly describe exactly what the image shows.

Some people believe that adding keywords to alt tags for images impacts search rankings.

Specifically for image search, this is true. Google's algorithms use alt text to help understand and rank images in those results.

However, in regular Google Search, there's nothing special about alt text. The algorithms read and treat it the same as any other content on the page. So, just as anything else, you won't see results if you try to over-optimize it with keywords.

Alt text is definitely not a specific ranking factor in Google Search text results.



[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Anchor text refers to a hyperlink's visible, clickable text (usually blue and underlined). It's also the text that screen readers recite aloud to users.

Ideally, it should be descriptive of the destination page and understandable without the context of other text around it. This helps users, especially those with screen readers, understand what to expect when they click.

Anchor text has been a ranking factor for a long time; however its impact has been reduced over the years to address exact-match keyword spam intended to manipulate algorithms.

Google's algorithms do use anchor text to help them understand the relationships between pages and surface them for relevant queries, but relying on keyword-rich anchor text is no longer a quick way to boost rankings. It's better to focus on providing a good user experience and describing the true relationship between the pages.

**AMP****DEFINITELY NOT**

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Google's AMP used to be a big deal and is still technically functional, but the extent to which it is "not a thing anymore" has increased over time.

AMP is an HTML framework that can help desktop-optimized websites perform more efficiently on mobile devices.

You can find more details in the article, but AMP is no longer relevant today. Even when it was, Google repeatedly stated that it is not a ranking factor.

Page speed and mobile responsiveness are still important, of course. But if you focus on AMP to deliver technical improvements, you're relying on a framework that's losing support and relevance.

**ADSENSE****DEFINITELY NOT**

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

AdSense is a Google product allowing website owners to display Google Ads on their websites and earn revenue from them.

It's easy to assume that Google would prioritize websites using its products and services in algorithms, but as far as we know, this is not the case. Google has stated explicitly that AdSense isn't used to calculate rankings.

Overusing ads, however, can have a negative impact if they're particularly invasive. Google Ads is not exempt from the possibility of negative signals due to ads that provide a poor user experience.

Search Engine Journal



DEFINITELY NOT **BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU** **(BBB) RATINGS**

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

BBB ratings were never a ranking factor, but their usefulness took another hit in 2022.

People used to think BBB ratings had value for SEO because Google's [search quality rater guidelines](#) mentioned them several times.

This was true as of October 2021, when we were working on SEJ's previous version of Ranking Factors.

But in 2022, all mentions of the BBB disappeared from the document except for one, which had nothing to do with how raters actually evaluate pages.

In the past, quality raters may have used BBB ratings to understand websites' authority or trustworthiness. In the best of circumstances, this would have had zero functional impact on any individual websites, because the algorithms don't take search raters into account directly.

Now, BBB ratings aren't even relevant for search raters. But consumers might still check them, so they aren't unimportant.



DEFINITELY NOT **BOUNCE RATE**

[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

Even though some SEO professionals believe that bounce rate is a ranking factor, Google explicitly states that it does not use it for rankings.

Bounce rate was a metric in Google Analytics that measured single-page sessions without secondary hits. It did 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.”

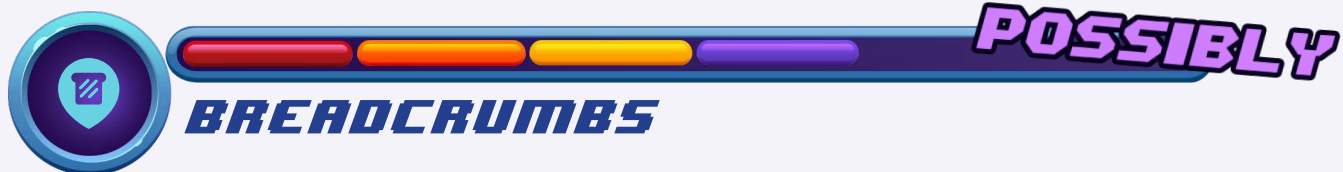
In Google Analytics 4, Google added “engagement rate” and changed bounce rate.

[Bounce rate](#) now means the inverse of engagement rate:

“Percentage of sessions that were not engaged sessions. For example, if a user visits your website, reviews content on your homepage for less than 10 seconds, and then leaves without triggering any events or visiting any other pages or screens, then the session will count as a bounce.”

This change doesn’t come with any indications that Google will start using it as a ranking factor.

Not all websites use Google Analytics, and bounce rate can be easily manipulated, further diminishing its reliability to be considered as a ranking factor.



[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

Breadcrumbs, which indicate a page’s position in the site hierarchy, help users understand a website as they navigate its structure.

Google analyzes these “breadcrumb” trails to improve rich snippets for some results.

In fact, Google Search Central states that it uses breadcrumb markup within webpages to “categorize the information from the page in search results.”

Google's Gary Illyes confirmed that breadcrumbs are treated as normal links in Google's PageRank computation. However, the weight given to them in ranking is unknown.

Google considers other various factors, and adding breadcrumb markup alone will not guarantee a significant impact on search rankings.



[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern

Canonicalization is an attribute tag (`rel="canonical"`) that you can add to pages to indicate your preferred version of a page. This is primarily used for duplicate pages and content. It signals to Google that it should combine the signals of two pages with duplicate content.

It's saying, "Hey, I know these two pages are the same – it's not an accident and here's the one I prefer."

Indicating your preferences can help Google algorithms make decisions.

But canonicalization is a very weak signal that Google might simply ignore. It's not an effective way of blocking crawling or indexing, so it can't be used to remove pages from the index.

Canonicalization can be an important part of a tidy website, but it's little more than a suggestion, and doesn't impact indexing or ranking.



DEFINITELY NOT **CHROME BOOKMARKS**

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Google does not consider Chrome bookmarks data as a factor in search rankings.

Chrome bookmarks do not offer relevant context about user intent, making them an unreliable signal for ranking.

Additionally, using Chrome bookmarks as a ranking factor would be too easy to manipulate.

Google's algorithms take more reliable browser data, such as search history and location, to determine intent for building SERPs.



PROBABLY **CLICK DEPTH**

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Click depth, which refers to the number of clicks from the homepage to another page on a website, may influence rankings to some extent.

According to [John Mueller](#), Google gives a page that is one click away from your homepage a little more weight in search results compared to pages that take multiple clicks to navigate.

Additionally, Google's web crawlers are unlikely to explore pages beyond three clicks from the homepage. As a result, these pages are less likely to be indexed, attract organic traffic, or earn rank in search results.

While click depth may affect rankings, it's not a decisive factor.

What's more important is providing a user-friendly experience and ensuring seamless accessibility to all content for site visitors.

DEFINITELY NOT **CLICK-THROUGH RATE (CTR)**

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

While click-through rate (CTR) is widely acknowledged as an important SEO metric, there is no clear evidence that Google uses CTR as a direct ranking signal.

Google's Gary Illyes confirmed that CTR is not a ranking factor, pointing out that "clicks in general are incredibly noisy."

He also said that CTR is used for personalization, meaning it can "teach" Google's algorithm about a user's preference based on the types of results they usually select.

Nevertheless, monitoring and improving your organic CTR is still a good idea, as it helps you understand your content's performance and drive more traffic to your website.

POSSIBLY **CO-CITATION**

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Co-citation has a bit of a tricky definition.

Imagine there are three sources: A, B, and C. When source C links to both Source A and Source B, the latter two are considered to be "co-cited," even though they may not have a direct relationship or reference one another at all.

So, if a website links to you, do Google's algorithms take clues from the other links on that page or site to inform how it understands you?

This is a difficult one to find a strong answer for.

We do know that Google's algorithms look at context and try to understand the relationships between linked pages. It's potentially a useful clue in identifying link spam. Or if co-citation occurs often, a clue about high authority and relevance.

On the other hand, there's no firm answer from Google on whether co-citation is a ranking factor.



[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

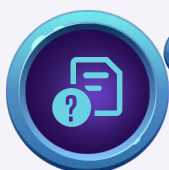
Code-to-text ratio is just a way of describing the amount of code on a page compared to the amount of visible text.

Code can impact search rankings, and text can impact search rankings. Is there a magic ratio or an ideal amount of each?

In short, no.

Neither too much nor too little of either code or text can impact your rankings. That's because you should have exactly as much as you need for both to provide an ideal user experience.

Looking at code-to-text ratio can potentially identify outlier pages with bloated code or too little text. So it might be a useful statistic to check if you have many pages to work through to identify those outliers. But you should focus on how code and text relate to the user experience, not one another.



CONTACT INFORMATION

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[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Having contact information accessible to users is a confirmed ranking factor in local search.

Its status as a ranking factor in general Search is up in the air. We don't have an official confirmation, and Google's John Mueller has previously expressed doubt about its significance in ranking outside of local.

However, Google's search quality evaluator guidelines do note that contact information is particularly important for any website that handles money. So, while contact information may or may not be an algorithmic ranking factor, suspicious or absent contact information could impact how search quality raters view a website.

Google doesn't use search quality rater responses to boost or penalize specific sites, but it uses the results to improve outcomes. Therefore, contact information could be an important signal for specific websites: those that process transactions and deal with Your Money or Your Life (YMYL) topics.

If your business or content requires user trust, contact information is a good idea. It likely interacts with other systems (YMYL, E-E-A-T) to become a ranking factor.



CONTENT

CONFIRMED

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Content is core to the functionality of SEO and search algorithms. The content you write and place on your website is the primary way to communicate what your site is about and what value you offer to users and search engines.

Search Engine Journal

Google employees have gone on record stating that content is one of the top ranking factors. In addition, many other ranking factors can appear within a site's content, such as headers, links, and keywords.

Search algorithms aim to identify and rank the best responses for a specific query. To do that effectively, they need to understand the content on websites.

Today, they're advanced enough to understand not only the topics and context of content, but also its value and helpfulness. They can determine the quality of content both in general and with regard to the specific intent of the current search.

Content should be exceptional if you want it to perform in search.



CONTENT LENGTH

DEFINITELY NOT

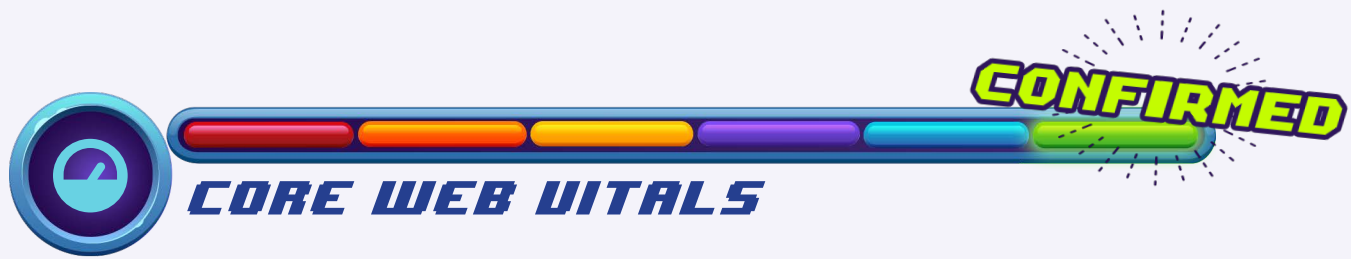
[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Some claims suggest that Google sees longer content as a sign of higher quality, leading to better rankings.

However, all available evidence conclusively establishes that word count is not a ranking factor.




Google's [John Mueller](#) emphasized that word count does not determine content quality, and that "blindly" adding more text to a page does not make it better.

Google places greater emphasis on the content's ability to meet user intent, meaning that even shorter pieces can achieve high rankings if they successfully address a user's query.



[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

The Core Web Vitals (CWV) are a set of technical measurements that go into assessing a page's user experience and technical usability. According to [Google's documentation](#), they are:

-  **Largest Contentful Paint (LCP):** Measures loading performance. To provide a good user experience, strive to have LCP occur within the first 2.5 seconds of the page starting to load.
-  **First Input Delay (FID):** Measures interactivity. To provide a good user experience, strive for an FID of less than 100 milliseconds. Starting March 2024, Interaction to Next Paint (INP) will replace FID as a Core Web Vital.
-  **Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS):** Measures visual stability. To provide a good user experience, strive for a CLS score of less than 0.1.

Recently, Google pulled “page experience,” which CWV is part of, out of its “ranking system” documentation. This doesn't mean that CWV metrics are unimportant, but Google felt the need to clarify how they're used.

CWV values go into the broader calculations of page experience and helpful content. They're important for ranking but algorithms may prioritize more helpful content over pages with better performance.

But optimizing your pages is still important because what's good for users is good for all of your business efforts, and CVW is still a confirmed ranking factor.



DEFINITELY NOT **CRAWL ERRORS AND BUDGET**

[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

While reducing crawl errors and improving crawl budget are major focuses of technical SEO, they are not ranking factors.

A crawl error happens when Google bots cannot access a website's content, preventing them from indexing the page correctly.

Crawl budget refers to the time and resources that search engines allocate to crawl and index a website's pages.

Both fall under the crawling process, which is the first step in getting a page from a website to the search engine results page.

Ranking algorithms come into play during the ranking stage. If something is to be considered a ranking factor, it needs to be given weight during this stage.

While crawling is necessary for a page to appear in search results, it does not carry much weight during the ranking process.

Google [explicitly states](#), "An increased crawl rate will not necessarily lead to better positions in Search results."



DEEP LINK RATIO

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Deep link ratio is such an outdated and unimportant term that Google's definition differs from the definition we're addressing.

To Google, deep links are links that send mobile users directly to a page in an app from an ad that they see.

The definition we're addressing here is backlinks that go to pages on a website other than the homepage.

There's a persistent rumor that there is some sort of ideal "ratio" between homepage links and non-homepage links (deep links).

There isn't.

If you've been paying attention to the trajectory of Google updates over the last 10 years, you should know that fixating on ideal ratios, quotas, and numbers is the wrong way to think about SEO.

Save obsessing over numbers for analysis and reporting.

There is a correlation in some cases between a high number of "deep links" and high rankings. But it's not always true, and you shouldn't jump on highly correlative factors as proof of ranking factors.

A high number of homepage links can, in some cases, indicate spam. But it's one of many checks algorithms would use to identify spam tactics, and is relatively meaningless on its own.



DIRECT TRAFFIC

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Direct traffic refers to website visits where users enter the URL directly into the web browser instead of accessing it through a search engine.

There used to be a quite heated debate surrounding the significance of direct traffic in search rankings.

Part of it was from an article based on Brighton SEO 2013, claiming that “Google definitely uses Chrome user data and can track every click within it.”

In reality, it was never confirmed whether Google uses it in its live algorithm or testing.

In 2017, Semrush released a study naming direct traffic as the top Google search ranking factor, intensifying the discussion.

Despite all these claims and studies, Google hasn’t officially confirmed whether direct traffic is a major factor in ranking websites.

It’s also worth noting that correlation does not imply causation. Just because there may be a connection between direct traffic and search rankings, it doesn’t necessarily mean that one directly causes the other.

Moreover, the quality of direct traffic is questionable since it can be easily manipulated and difficult to verify.

Considering the above, we can conclude that Google does not use direct traffic as a ranking signal.



DISAVOW TOOL

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

The disavow tool is a resource from Google that allows you to indicate you don't wish to be associated with a link to your site.

When Google ramped up its pushback against link spam with Penguin in 2012, there was a lot of fallout and panic.

Many legitimate website owners were looking for ways to protect themselves from malicious links, and concepts like "negative SEO" saw a lot of discussion.

Since then, Google has significantly refined how it handles unnatural and spammy links.

Links are absolutely a ranking factor, and if you've been hit by a manual penalty for unnatural link building, you will need to use the disavow tool as part of the recovery process.

But the tool isn't a ranking factor. For the most part, Google algorithms will simply ignore an unnatural link. Google's documentation on the matter states that, generally, the algorithms don't need assistance assessing links, and you won't need to use the tool.

That isn't to say there aren't benefits to cleaning up your link profile. There certainly can be.

It can help clean up large link profiles, since many irrelevant links could confuse algorithms. But using the tool isn't specifically a ranking factor.



DOMAIN AGE

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[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Domain age is relatively self-explanatory: the actual length of time a domain has been registered and crawlable.

It makes some logical sense that Google might look at domain age as one indicator of the trustworthiness or reliability of a website.

While this idea had some traction in 2010, it's pretty much obsolete today.

Domains can be bought and sold, and a 10-year-old domain with a bunch of spam is still just a domain with a bunch of spam on it.

There were some indications of age being a factor in a 2005 Google patent that may or may not still be in use. But raw age was one element among many. So, at the most generous, domain age could be seen as one data point going into a much broader document evaluation, not a ranking factor in and of itself.

In 2019, John Mueller confirmed that Google doesn't consider domain age for ranking.



DOMAIN AUTHORITY

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

There are two definitions for domain authority.

First, there's Domain Authority (DA), the metric by Moz. It is not, and has never been, a ranking factor.

Then, there's the general idea of domain authority, a metric that could be used to measure the overall authority of a domain.

People have asked Google employees many times over the years whether the algorithms have an overall authority metric.

Usually, it has said no. Google's John Mueller said in 2019 that the company tries to be as granular as possible with the metrics it looks at.

In 2020, he hinted that it might have some metrics on a "site level" and that "some of those site-wide level metrics might kind of map into similar things" as domain authority – hardly a confirmation.

Based on repeated statements that Google doesn't use an "authority" metric internally, we're confident calling this one busted.



[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

A domain's history matters, especially for Google. The way a domain was previously used can and does influence how Google treats websites today.

Before you purchase a domain, [Matt Cutts advises](#) that you thoroughly research its history.

The last thing you want is to end up with a domain with a history of spam, or worse, unresolved [manual actions](#).

There might be instances when a domain still has a negative history with Google. [John Mueller assures](#) that the issue will resolve itself over time.

You can check the history of any domain at [Archive.org](#).



DOMAIN NAME

NOT ANYMORE

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Using keywords in your domain name used to be a ranking factor, generating a lot of spam.

Exact match keyword domains were once considered big money.

Google started devaluing domain name keywords in 2011. Today, the algorithms pretty much ignore the exact words in your domain name when it comes to ranking.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't use keywords in your domain at all.

If a particular word is critical to how users understand your brand, services, or voice, you might want to include it. Just don't expect a boost in search, and don't create domain names for SEO.



DWELL TIME

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Dwell time, which refers to the duration between clicking a webpage link and returning to search results, is not a factor for rankings.

“Every time dwell time comes up in discussion as a potential ranking factor, Google has been quick to shoot the theory down.”

Gary Illyes once dismissed the theories, saying they are all made up.

When asked whether Google uses user interaction metrics like dwell time as a ranking factor, Martin Splitt said that they are not used for search.

Revelations from the antitrust suit, covered earlier in this book, lead some people to believe that dwell time, which is a factor in defining “pogo-sticking” is a ranking factor after all. While Google is definitely looking at click data when it evaluates the performance and accuracy of the algorithms, we aren’t convinced that it’s using these specific metrics — dwell time, bounce rate, etc. — as live ranking signals.

Given that, it’s clear that dwell time, like other engagement metrics, does not directly impact rankings.

But that doesn’t mean you should ignore optimizing for dwell time altogether.

Dwell time can help you understand how satisfied users are with your content and gauge how healthy your website is.



E-E-A-T

DEFINITELY NOT
A RANKING FACTOR
(BUT A CRITICAL CONCEPT
FOR RANKING)

[Read the article](#) by Roger Montti.

E-E-A-T stands for experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness. It’s become a major focus of conversation in SEO, and Google recently expanded it to include the “experience” criteria.

Put simply, this is a set of criteria by which Google assesses content to help decide whether it is good or bad, and whether it deserves a place on SERPs. It's fundamental to understanding what Google defines as great content and how to create content that ranks.

So, how can it not be a ranking factor, but be critical to ranking at the same time?

E-E-A-T refers to the values that many ranking signals and systems use to understand content.

To be more specific, E-E-A-T is the human criteria that Google uses to measure the effectiveness of the algorithms.

Generally, we should aim to create websites and content that meet these criteria; in other words, that users love and algorithms understand. If you can demonstrate these values in your content, you're on your way to ranking before you've thought about a single ranking factor.

Google is leaning into these aspirational descriptions. Is your content authoritative? Is your content helpful? Is your website user-friendly? These are all things that humans can evaluate using a combination of solid metrics, intuition, and experience.

However, algorithms need to use a series of many signals to approximate the conclusions a human might come to. That's why Google has been de-prioritizing previously clear ranking factors that are actually individual signals taken as parts of bigger systems.

It's trying to tell us to step back and look at the forest, not each of the trees.

So, focusing on whether your content meets E-E-A-T criteria is likely better than fixating on specific ranking factors. Still, E-E-A-T is a set of evaluation standards, not an algorithmic system itself.



FIRST LINK PRIORITY

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

First link priority is a bit of a confusing concept. It's the idea that Google's algorithms give more weight to links that appear first on a page if they link to the same location.

The theory goes: If page A contains two links to page B, the first link will get priority when Google considers anchor text – so that's where you should ensure you include the most relevant keywords.

This isn't true.

Google's algorithms are much too advanced these days for this to make sense. They don't rely on hard rules like the order of links on a page.

Instead, ensure that each instance of a link makes sense, and that the anchor text is user-friendly and descriptive.

Trying to optimize for "first links" is approaching SEO with the wrong mindset. It's not a ranking factor because it would be easy to manipulate and defeats the purpose of all the work Google has put into natural language processing and other machine learning systems.

CONFIRMED



FRESH CONTENT

[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

Fresh content plays a crucial role in Google's ranking system for certain kinds of searches.

Search Engine Journal

When a search query requires it, having up-to-date and relevant content can positively impact your search rankings.

Google's "Query Deserves Freshness" (QDF) algorithm determines when a search query is considered "hot." It helps identify whether the user is looking for current and timely content.

With the introduction of the Caffeine update, Google significantly improved its ability to crawl and index pages, providing fresher search results and faster access to relevant content. It's important to note, however, that it is an upgrade to Google's indexing system and not a ranking update.

Google's Freshness algorithm is designed to understand when a user is seeking recent information. It applies to specific search queries, such as recent events, regularly recurring events, or content that undergoes frequent updates.

It's important to note that this doesn't mean you should start trying to gain rankings by updating all your content with dates in the title. Freshness only comes into play when relevant to search intent.



GOOGLE ADS

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Google does not use paid ads as a ranking signal in organic search.

You may have come across anecdotal evidence suggesting that running a Google Ads campaign can cause a drop in rankings.

However, it's important to take these anecdotes with a grain of salt, as they don't necessarily prove any direct cause-and-effect relationship.

For instance, in 2021, a member of the search marketing community took to X (formerly Twitter) and accused Google of using Ads campaign spend to influence organic search rankings and even going as far as attempting to extort business owners with this approach.

In response, Google's Danny Sullivan denied any link between advertising and organic search performance. Matt Cutts dismissed the idea as well.

John Mueller also made it clear that the two systems, ranking within ads and ranking within search, are entirely separate.

So, while it's true that Google Ads can affect your website's visibility and placement on the SERPs, it's clear that they are not used as a ranking factor in organic search.



[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

Google Analytics (now GA4) is Google's service that helps you analyze your website's performance and traffic data.

It's easy to forgive someone for assuming that using GA4 would have some impact on rankings.

But tying ranking to using its services, as discussed with ads, isn't something we have evidence of Google doing.

Google Analytics provides very helpful insights that can assist you with improving your website's SEO, as well as tracking visitor behavior.

Integrating with Google services makes sense, but not everyone does it, and it wouldn't be fair for them to be penalized for it.

DEFINITELY NOT

GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

While Google Search Console (GSC) is a helpful tool for submitting your sitemap, analyzing performance, and fixing issues, it's not a ranking factor.

You'll find that this is a theme with all Google properties.

They can provide you with tools to examine aspects of your website that might contribute to or be influenced by ranking factors. But using them isn't required for ranking.

Uploading a sitemap, for example, is considered a best practice, but Google will still discover your website if you don't.

Using GSC is a good idea if you need to fix indexing issues or you want to request re-indexing manually, rather than wait. But there's nothing about the tool that will algorithmically improve ranking.

UNLIKELY

HTML LISTS

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

You can use HTML to create bullet and numbered lists in your content. Some elements of HTML markup, like title and header tags, absolutely do impact ranking.

But there isn't much evidence that, on their own, the existence of HTML lists can move the needle.

Using lists is a helpful way to organize information; when your content is helpful, you have a better chance of ranking. Under those circumstances, markup-like lists can increase the likelihood that Google will feature your content in a rich snippet.

When you're using lists to organize high-quality content for the benefit of your audience, you might very well be rewarded. But you're being rewarded for good organization and good information, not for using lists.

That's why we rate this as unlikely a ranking factor.

Under certain circumstances, HTML lists could be considered by the algorithms, but not to the extent of other elements like title tags. They're not things you need to include and optimize on every page. But in support of good content, they can help.



[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

H1 tags used to be an extremely strong ranking factor. In the article marketing days of SEO, the right combination of exact match keywords in your H tags and your content could quickly propel content to the top of SERPs.

Ever since Google's 2011 Panda update, this hasn't been the case.

H1 tags are still ranking factors, but how algorithms understand content has changed. They can evaluate context, clues about quality and user experience, and how words and entities relate to one another.

When it comes to in-content ranking factors, Google algorithms prioritize how they support, contextualize, and organize the content on the page. The words you use in H1 tags are important, but only if they provide a good user experience in support of high-quality content.




CONFIRMED

HTML H2-H6 HEADING TAGS

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

HTML heading tags are the number-ranked heading you can use to help organize content visually on a page. They also send clues to Google about your content and how it's organized.

There are three key reasons to use them:

-  To help users and search engines understand the structure of the page and what content appears where.
-  To help assistive technology interpret pages for accessibility.
-  To help users navigate to the information they need.

Google doesn't seem to place much importance on the actual numbering and ordering of the tags. You're unlikely to see noticeable differences between H2s and H5s, for example. But following a logical order is a good usability best practice.

Much like other in-content factors, their effectiveness depends on how you use them. In support of high-quality content, they're extremely useful. But be aware. Their direct impact is somewhat diminished to prevent low-quality keyword spam.

Adding a bunch of exact-match keywords into heading tags isn't a quick trick to ranking.

CONFIRMED

HTTPS

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

HTTPS is a secure, encrypted data transfer protocol between a web server and browsers.

Search Engine **Journal**

In 2023, Google updated its documentation. HTTPS is not explicitly mentioned, but “security” is rolled into “page experience.” “Page experience” itself was moved out of the ranking system documentation, but retains importance and its own documentation.

This doesn’t mean you should ignore HTTPS, and it’s still a signal used in ranking. But Google wants SEO professionals to think about it – and many other technical elements of a website – differently.

As a standalone ranking factor, it’s unlikely to move the needle all that much simply because it’s the norm.

But when it’s important, it’s important. Not using HTTPS when your site handles private data or transactions create trust and security issues.

Like many other updated ranking factors this year, it seems that Google is trying to push SEO professionals and website owners to think about the end goal: what makes for the best, most helpful user experience.

HTTPS is a ranking factor in the sense that not using it could cause serious issues. But if you’re looking for an “edge” in rankings, HTTPS is standard operation, not a difference maker.

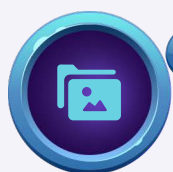


IMAGE QUANTITY

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

When it comes to adding images on a webpage, there’s no solid evidence suggesting that using too many or too few images affects rankings.

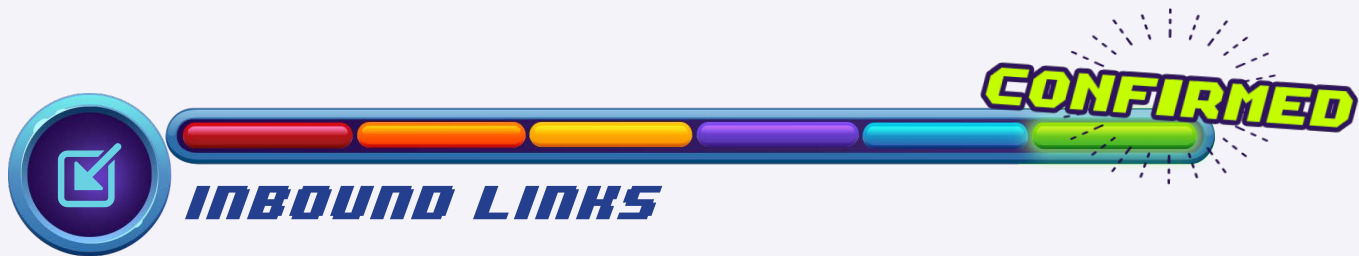
Including images in your content is a great way to keep your readers engaged. But it is not a requirement for earning high rankings in Google.

Going overboard with images can slow down [page speed](#), which is an important user experience metric and potentially a ranking factor. This could have an impact

if the algorithms decide your page experience is very poor. But this would likely require a number of different performance issues.

The tricky part is that there's no specific number of images that is considered "too many." At the end of the day, it's all about providing a great user experience.

Just like [word count](#), there is no magic number of images that will help you rank better. What matters is high-quality, relevant content that satisfies user intent.



[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

While Google has made some changes to its algorithm over time, inbound links, also known as backlinks, remain one of the most important ranking factors.

It's interesting to note, however, that the total quantity of inbound links is "completely irrelevant to search rankings," as it can be easily manipulated, [explains John Mueller](#). The number of links may have been an important factor during the early days of PageRank, but Google prioritizes more helpful metrics to evaluate links today.

Google focuses on relevant, quality links instead. The algorithms evaluate the context of the links and the relevance of the two pages to one another. They evaluate the anchor text and the text around a link.

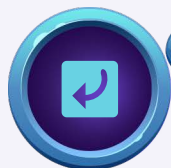
These days, the algorithms are very good at deciding what links are relevant and helpful, and which aren't.

So, acquiring a large number of low-quality or low-relevance links may not be a ranking factor. It's likely that these types of links are simply ignored. They may not be doing damage, but they're not helping either.

Contextually relevant links from reputable websites with excellent content, however, can significantly improve rankings. It's been a long time since Google first modeled its algorithms on academic referencing models that count links as "votes," and the true calculations are much more complex than that these days. But through all the iterations, a high-quality link still counts as a strong vote.

Link building will likely always be a high-impact SEO activity.

CONFIRMED







INTERNAL LINKS

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

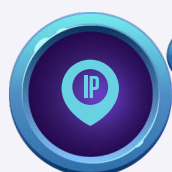
Google gives weight to internal links and uses them to help determine which pages are most important on your website.

When asked if internal links are still crucial to SEO when structured data for breadcrumbs are present, [John Mueller responds](#) with an "absolutely." He even calls internal linking "one of the biggest things you can do on a website to guide Google and visitors to the pages that you think are important."

Google also emphasizes that effective internal linking improves user experience and helps search crawlers understand a website better. Here are some of the internal linking best practices:

-  Make the site more accessible to crawlers with Google Search Console.
-  Use breadcrumb navigation.
-  Make internal links a part of a naturally flowing hierarchy.
-  Ensure that anchor texts are concise and relevant to the destination page.

Internal links are a critical ranking factor and provide significant value to your site organization. They're also important for how users move through your goals and funnels, so a well-organized website with internal links can have a direct business impact as well.



IP ADDRESS

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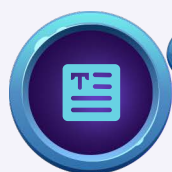
[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

In the past, Google may have experimented with IP-address-level actions.

But back then, and even if it still applied one today, it would be an exceptional circumstance.

You wouldn't see exceptional circumstances analyzed and reacted to algorithmically.

The primary reason for this is that individual site owners have no control over who else is hosted on the same IP address. So, unless a particular IP is clearly only being used for spam, it doesn't make sense to punish an entire IP for the actions of spammers – especially since spammers can easily move addresses.



KEYWORD DENSITY

NOT ANYMORE

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Keyword density refers to how often keywords are used relative to the total length of the content.

Keyword density may have been more relevant in the past, but it is no longer a factor in today's SEO.

Using keywords strategically will help your SEO efforts; hitting a certain ratio won't. Excessive keyword use may be considered [keyword stuffing](#).

With Google’s natural language processing and broad match keywords, a webpage can rank for a keyword even if it isn’t mentioned anywhere on that page – this practically blows up the whole idea of keyword density.

Matt Cutts confirmed in [a 2011 video](#) that there is no ideal keyword density for Google. The takeaway is clear: Stop obsessing over keyword density.



[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

The words you use in the titles, headings, and first sentences of content are important indications of a page’s topic and intention. This is true for both users and search engines.

This one is pretty intuitive. The caveat, of course, is that this works as long as the keyword is actually relevant to the content.

As long as you’re not using spam tactics, you should be rewarded for clarity that helps users understand what they’re about to read. If you’re creating high-quality content and describing it well, this ranking factor can help you in SERPs.

Google’s John Mueller recommended in a 2021 Q&A that you should include any information you want Google to know about your page prominently in your content. If you’re following content best practices, the information you want Google and users to know should be the same.

If your intent research is effective, keyword prominence can also impact click-through rates when the keywords appear in SERPs through titles, meta descriptions, and snippets.



DEFINITELY NOT KEYWORD STEMMING

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Keyword stemming was once a popular SEO technique, but is now deemed outdated due to advances in search algorithms.

It involves altering keywords with different prefixes and suffixes for broader searches.

For example, when a user searches for [hydration], it makes sense to show results with the words [hydrate], [dehydrate], and [rehydrate].

Search engines had limited NLP capabilities back in the early 2000s, and stemming was a way to target keyword variations. But it easily got out of hand and spammy.

Google's algorithms have evolved to be more sophisticated and become much smarter at understanding the meaning and intent behind our queries. They no longer rely on keyword stems to deliver relevant results.

Today, keyword stemming is indicative of poor quality or spammy content. This practice leads to unnatural language intended to cater more to search engines than users.

As search technology advances, it's best to leave outdated tactics like keyword stemming behind. Focus instead on delivering relevant content and quality user experience.



KEYWORD STUFFING

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

If you're trying to rank for a keyword, the more you use it, the better, right?

Nope. Google stresses helpful content, and this means writing in a way that's natural and most helpful for the user.

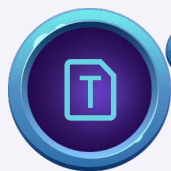
Rather than using the same keywords over and over again to get Google's attention, use synonyms and other turns of phrase when describing concepts so your text flows naturally.

Google's algorithms are sufficiently advanced to recognize variations, synonyms, context, and how phrases relate to each other.

They're also pretty good at recognizing attempts to game the system. In this day and age, if you find yourself using unnatural language in order to force a number of keywords into your content, you are keyword stuffing.

The most extreme examples of keyword stuffing will remind you of the good old days: long lists of keywords hidden on pages or shoved in below the content, nonsensical writing to chase that sweet exact match keyword juice.

Today, keyword stuffing is indeed a ranking factor – a negative one. Google sees you, and when it catches on, it's likely to simply ignore your work. If you make a habit of it, you might catch a manual action.



LANGUAGE

CONFIRMED

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Although Google doesn't officially confirm it to be a ranking factor, language plays a role in the visibility of search results for users who have specific language and location preferences.

As a user, if you set English as your preferred language and Canada as your location, Google will consider those preferences when delivering results.

Search engines can detect the language used in the content to make sure it is presenting users with the most relevant results.

In the [Google Search Help files](#), Google explains how it uses various factors to cater to multilingual people.

These factors include language used in the query, the helpfulness of content in different languages, user display language settings, browser and device preferences, location and region settings, and information provided by content creators.

Having a shared language with the user is key to answering their query successfully, and Google understands the significance of language preferences in delivering search results.

It's important to remember that Google bases any ranking preference it gives to language on its algorithms, not on the information you give it, such as using regional or language-based subdomains or HTML tags.



LATENT SEMANTIC INDEXING (LSI)

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[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Latent Semantic Indexing is an information retrieval method for identifying patterns in the relationships between terms and concepts in a collection of text.

With LSI, it is possible to predict which meaning the word represents by analyzing how words are used together within a query.

Some SEO professionals believe that Google relies on LSI keywords to better understand web content. Thus, optimizing for these “LSI keywords” will lead to higher rankings.

Google’s [John Mueller debunks the concept](#), stating that “there is no such thing as LSI keywords.” Moreover, LSI is seen as outdated and impractical for Google’s massive search index.

This makes it clear that LSI is not part of Google’s ranking algorithm.



LINK STABILITY

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

In 2005, Google filed a patent that described “link churn” – a measure of how often a website modified or removed outbound links – and its connection to rankings.

This has led many to believe that keeping your outbound links “stable” and unmodified for a certain period of time lends your site more trust and higher rankings.

There's simply no evidence that this is true. As mentioned in the introduction, there's no guarantee that the signals described in Google patents are currently, or ever have been, used in live algorithms.

The patent has changed since the original filings and no longer references link churn or stability.



[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

In local SEO, local citations are anywhere your key business contact information – name, address, and phone number (NAP) – appears on the web.

They can appear in directories, review sites, apps, and many other places.

Considering this information is how users will find and contact you, it makes sense that these citations are important for local search.

Acquiring and maintaining these citations external to your website could give you boosts in rankings.

On the other hand, ensuring that all of your citations are accurate and up to date can be quite difficult, since many aren't generated by you.

While Google hasn't directly confirmed that citations are a ranking factor, there's evidence to support the idea that it's one of many signals the company uses to populate the Map Pack and localized search results.



LINK VELOCITY

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[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

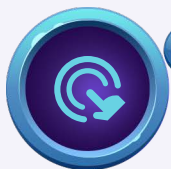
Link velocity refers to the speed at which your website gains new links. Does Google notice and consider spiky increases in your rate of link acquisition?

Some SEO professionals interpret a 2003 Google patent as being about discovering and penalizing sudden link velocity increases.

But the patent isn't referring to individual instances of "spiky" velocity. It refers to patterns of growth that play out over the course of long periods of time that can signify unnatural link building.

It's important to remember that Google is careful about directly negatively impacting sites, whether manually or algorithmically. There have been big upsets in the past, and algorithm updates can still interrupt performance – but if you're acting in good faith, this isn't the sort of thing you need to worry about.

If Google uses velocity signals to examine backlink profiles, it's over a long period of time to evaluate growth patterns. Velocity itself isn't a factor.



MANUAL ACTIONS

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

A manual action is a penalty imposed by Google on a website for non-compliance with webmaster quality guidelines. It results in the demotion or removal of content from search results.

Manual actions are aimed at deterring and addressing manipulative SEO tactics. Websites may end up facing a manual action if they engage in third-party spam, unnatural inbound and external links, cloaking and sneaky redirects, hidden text, or keyword stuffing, among others.

Despite its impact on your website's online presence and rankings, a manual action is not a ranking factor. This is because it isn't applied by the algorithms.

Still, it can take some time to recover from once your site is entered back into the index.



[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

It's true that meta descriptions play a role in helping potential site visitors and search engines understand what a page is about.

While optimizing your meta description is considered an SEO best practice, Google doesn't use it as a ranking signal.

In the early days of SEO, people abused meta tags of every type to stuff keywords in an attempt to rank. For this reason, Google shifted away from giving any ranking value to meta tags.

Furthermore, a [2018 experiment](#) found that Google often generates its own description to use in the search snippet, disregarding assigned meta descriptions.

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META KEYWORDS

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[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Meta keywords, tags that help search engines know what topics are covered on the page, do not impact organic search rankings.

It was [confirmed in 2009](#) that Google no longer uses the keywords meta tag for rankings, mainly because it was often abused.

Yahoo and Bing have also followed suit, disregarding the use of meta keywords for ranking purposes.

[John Mueller recently reconfirmed](#) what we all knew: Meta keywords hold no significance for SEO in 2023 and beyond.

CONFIRMED

MOBILE FRIENDLINESS

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Google caused quite a stir recently when it changed how it categorized several technical ranking factors. “Page experience” was moved out of the “[ranking systems](#)” documentation, and many aspects of technical SEO that go into it are categorized as “signals.”

Among the factors Google appeared to reorganize were mobile friendliness, [HTTPS](#), [page speed](#), [Core Web Vitals](#), and others.

It's critical to understand that nothing about these "page experience" signals fundamentally changed. Rather, Google decided it didn't like how it had been categorizing them.

This could be because it didn't like how much focus SEO professionals were putting on the minutiae of technical SEO. It could simply have been a mistake that took a long time to correct. Or it could be that Google employees feel the updates better reflect the current state of the algorithms.

A key thing to note is that, back when mobile browsing was first introduced, you had to intentionally create pages that worked for different screen sizes.

These days, all major CMS platforms have mobile friendliness built-in. Developing custom websites to be responsive is now a standard practice, too.

So, in a way, mobile friendliness has fallen out of the cluster of responsibilities that SEO professionals are usually responsible for. And because it's become standard practice, it doesn't make sense to put a whole lot of focus on it anymore.

Much like what happened with HTTPS, when something becomes standard practice, it has less of a positive impact when you do it, and more of a negative one when you don't.

Mobile friendliness is still a ranking factor, but it's one signal that goes into broader page experience calculations.



MULTITASK UNIFIED MODEL (MUM)

POSSIBLY

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

In 2021, Google introduced its "new AI milestone for understanding information" called Multitask Unified Model, or MUM.

Helping the search engine handle complex queries better and provide more relevant results, MUM is said to be [a thousand times](#) more powerful than [BERT](#). It is also multimodal, meaning it understands information from different formats like texts, images, and more in the future.

MUM has already shown significant improvements in certain search tasks, such as providing accurate information about vaccines and detecting personal crisis queries.

Given MUM's promising potential to interpret information, there's speculation about whether it will become a ranking factor like BERT or RankBrain.

Google has made it clear that it doesn't use [MUM](#) as a general search ranking signal yet, but it is in use for some specific applications in search results. In the future, we may see MUM integrated into more query types and influencing rankings on a wider scale.



NOFOLLOW LINKS

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Kayle Larkin.

There's a lot of nuance to how nofollow links work, and it can cause some confusion.

Previously, Google completely ignored links tagged with rel= attributes (nofollow, UGC, sponsored).

In 2020, Google updated its documentation to say that nofollow links may be used to crawl and index. This reignited debate about nofollows.

Some SEO professionals took the fact that Google now views them as a "hint" to mean that nofollow links do pass some ranking signals.

It's important to remember the differences between crawling, indexing, and ranking.

Crawling is the process of bots identifying and following links.

Indexing is entering those pages into databases to allow Google's algorithms to assess them and, potentially, serve them as results.

Ranking is the process of returning pages in a specific order as a response to a query.

We are talking about ranking factors – not crawling factors, and not indexing factors.



The updates that Google made to nofollow mean that it views those links as “hints” when it comes to crawling and indexing. The bots may still “follow” the link as part of those processes. It means that rel= attributes are not effective ways of blocking bots.

They still don't pass ranking signals.



[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Outbound links are links that you place on your website to other websites. There have been many disagreements and experiments over the years that this article touches on, but the general conclusion is:

-  No, outbound links are not a ranking factor.
-  Yes, they're still important.

We didn't answer “definitely not,” because it's possible that Google algorithms take some cues from the links in your content about both the target page and your page.

But it's a pretty weak case for a ranking factor, and if you try to “optimize” it, you're in for a bad time.

If you're using outbound links to cite your sources, provide context, and improve user experience, you're helping users (and maybe algorithms) understand your content. If you build trust with your readers, Google looks for ways to evaluate and reward that.

But outbound links, on their own, are definitely not ranking factors, and you shouldn't think of them in terms of SEO optimization.

The web is an ecosystem, and it's good practice to participate in it by citing other pages when they're relevant. But it's too easy to manipulate outbound links for Google to directly reward you for that participation.





PAID LINKS

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller

A link is a link. Unless it's voluntarily flagged using a rel= attribute [or another method](#), it's a ranking factor.

But you shouldn't attempt to use paid links as ranking factors, because if Google gets wise (and it most likely will), you're at risk of two outcomes:

-  In the less serious case, the links will be ignored, and you'll have wasted the money.
-  In the more serious case, you could take a manual penalty, especially if you make a habit of selling links on your website that aren't properly tagged.

But that doesn't mean paid links can't be useful for marketing and PR. A well-placed and properly tagged paid link could raise brand awareness or drive traffic.



PAGE SPEED

CONFIRMED

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Page speed is one signal that may or may not have weight in the “page experience” calculations. Google’s recent changes moved “page experience” and page speed out of its “ranking systems” documentation.

This doesn’t mean that Google changed the weighting of page speed. This reclassification more accurately describes how page experience factors are used by ranking systems. Page experience isn’t a ranking system, but ranking systems do reward good page experience.

It’s still a ranking factor, but it may have variable weight, depending on how the systems interpret your page experience metrics.



RANKBRAIN

CONFIRMED

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

RankBrain, which was launched in 2015, was the first of many machine learning systems applied to Google’s algorithm.

When it was introduced, it had a very specific function – but it’s grown since then, and also provided the basis for other ML/AI updates.

RankBrain addressed a problem Google had: Its algorithms didn’t have a history of search data for 15% of queries. Those queries were difficult to handle. RankBrain uses ML to interpret queries the algorithms haven’t seen before and match them to existing information.

Search Engine Journal

It was also the beginning of Google's advanced capabilities to connect words and concepts, and return better search results based on [entity information](#). This is how Google's algorithms provide context-aware responses to queries with multiple possible meanings.

While it initially only impacted 15% of searches, RankBrain served as a foundation for future updates like Hummingbird.

Unlike most other ranking factors, you can't directly control RankBrain. But you can [learn about entities and Google's knowledge graph](#), and use that information to improve your content and how you organize your website.



DEFINITELY NOT **READING LEVEL**

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

While your content's reading level can affect your ranking, Google does not use it as a ranking factor, as confirmed by John Mueller.

[Portent's study](#) also found no correlation between search ranking and a page's reading level.

Should SEO professionals disregard readability? No.

Readability plays a crucial role in content strategy. If your content is difficult to read, it can lead to visitors leaving your site because they struggle to understand it.

Not only that, but it's also less likely to attract incoming links, which is an essential ranking factor.

So, here's the key to successful web content and ranking highly: Focus on making it useful and relevant. The ultimate goal is to provide a better answer to a search query than anyone else.

Search Engine Journal



RECONSIDERATION REQUESTS

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[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Reconsideration requests are a crucial step in recovering from a [Google manual action](#). While they are loosely connected to rankings, it would be inaccurate to consider them a ranking factor.

It's also worth noting that after bouncing back from a penalty, there's no guarantee that a site will regain the same rankings it had before.

Additionally, a reconsideration request does not apply when a site experiences a drop in Google's search rankings for reasons unrelated to manual action, like a broad core algorithm update. This process is specifically meant for addressing manual actions or security issues.

Reconsideration requests serve to lift the penalty imposed on a website, not boost rankings.

CONFIRMED



RELEVANCE, DISTANCE, AND PROMINENCE

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

According to Google's [Business Profile Help Center](#), relevance, distance, and prominence are key factors that help Google determine local rankings.

Relevance refers to how closely local business information matches the search user's query. To ensure relevance, it is important to provide as much complete and detailed information as possible on your Google Business Profile.

Distance considers the search user's proximity to local businesses based on the user's browser information. The closer the search user is to your business, the more likely it will appear in the local Maps results.

Prominence gauges a local business's popularity offline. Famous museums or well-known establishments, for example, tend to have higher prominence in local search results.

Google also factors positive reviews and ratings into local rankings.

If you're a local business owner, it is best to ensure that your Business Profile is "accurate, complete, and engaging" for better visibility in local search.



DEFINITELY NOT **REVIEW SENTIMENT**

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

When customers leave reviews about a business's products or services, their thoughts and experiences shape the overall sentiment of those reviews.

There's been debate about whether positive sentiment can actually boost rankings and negative sentiment can lower them.

However, Google has stated that review sentiment does not influence search rankings.

In the past, people took advantage of Google's inability to recognize sentiment.

But since then, Google has been working on improving its algorithms to ensure that websites engaging in unethical practices or attempting to deceive customers are not rewarded.

The exception to this is that Google's algorithms consider [Google review counts and scores when surfacing local search results](#).



SCHEMA MARKUP

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

This one can be a little sticky, so it's vital to understand the difference between factors that Google uses to better understand a page and factors that it uses to rank it.

The two things go hand-in-hand, but they're not synonymous.

Schema helps Google's algorithms understand the content and make connections between entities. Entities are a critical concept in modern search, and so you can get SEO benefits from correctly using markup.

In addition to becoming eligible for SERP features, schema can give you better opportunities to appear in results because the algorithms better understand your page. But these opportunities have more to do with targeting than raw ranking.

Targeting means that Google might surface your page for searches that are a more ideal match in keyword or intent. But schema isn't one of the factors contributing to you earning the rank in the first place.

Schema is the icing on the cake that helps Google present your page in the best way. But you need to bake the cake first.



SPELLING AND GRAMMAR

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[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

This one is a little complicated, with apparently conflicting information coming from Google.

Several accounts from Google documentation and employees emphasize spelling and grammar and their relationship to content quality. It's also mentioned in the quality rater guidelines. These things definitely have an impact, but Google employees tend to stop short of calling them ranking factors.

Spelling and grammar likely contribute to signals like E-E-A-T, along with improving the usability of a page. But on their own, they're not helpful indicators of whether a page fulfills the intent behind a search. You can quite easily create irrelevant or spammy content that also uses good spelling and grammar.

While they may not be confirmed ranking factors on their own, the readability of your content absolutely impacts other ranking factors, so you should always aim for high standards. Presenting good information with spelling errors could negatively impact your page.



SEARCH QUALITY EVALUATOR GUIDELINES

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Google refines search algorithms with the help of real people, search quality raters, who use the [search quality rater guidelines](#) to evaluate and give feedback on results pages.

The guidelines make up a massive document and give many clues to what Google considers important. They tell you about what Google considers to be high and low quality, and how it decides whether the algorithms are serving effective results.

Things that Google lists in these guidelines are often mistaken for ranking factors, but let's be clear: Ranking factors and quality rater guidelines are different things.

Just because Google uses something to evaluate the success of a SERP, doesn't mean it makes for an effective algorithmic metric. In fact, some rater guidelines wouldn't work at all if they were also ranking factors.

Let's use reviews as an example.

The guidelines mention that reviews are a helpful way to assess a website's reputation. But we know that [review sentiment](#) is not a ranking factor, partially because it can be manipulated. If reviews were a ranking factor, they would be easy to game for SEO purposes, making them effectively useless as a true measure of quality when evaluating SEO results.

The guidelines provide fantastic insights on how you should improve your site to align with the best practices Google wants to see. Some happen also to be ranking factors. But they are not, in and of themselves, ranking factors.



[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

A sitewide link is a static outbound link on a webpage that you usually find in the header, footer, or navigation menu. It is a possible ranking factor because, in the end, a link is a link.

The theory that sitewide links are negative for SEO gained traction after Google rolled out its Penguin 4.0 algorithm update. However, [Google has clarified](#) that sitewide links are not a negative ranking signal as long as they occur naturally.

Sitewide links, by themselves, do not harm search rankings. They are not automatically seen as an unnatural linking pattern or an attempt to spam, according to [John Mueller](#). The real concern, though, lies in having overly optimized anchor text used for sitewide links.

Google recommends using the nofollow attribute to ensure a sitewide link is not interpreted as unnatural or spammy.



SOCIAL SIGNALS AND SHARES

DEFINITELY NOT

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Back in the early 2010s, Google may have experimented with social signals as ranking signals.

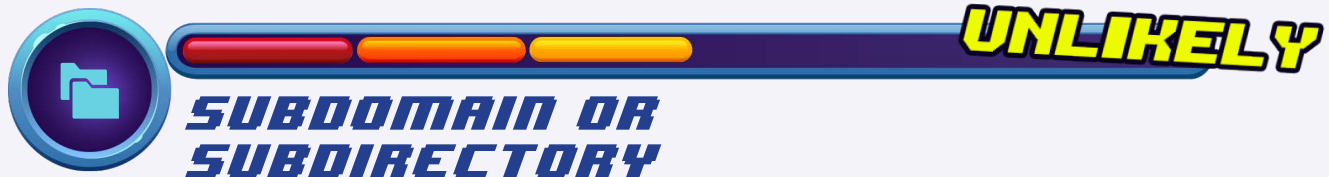
But ever since 2014, Google employees have been pretty clear that they don't use likes, shares, and other social statistics in ranking.

Links from social media do get crawled, and public social posts can appear in search results. So, if a post with a link to a website gets shared a lot, bots will at least see that.

But as a rule, links on social media networks don't have much impact. Even if they were to have an effect, it would be the multitude of links, not the shares themselves, doing the work.

This doesn't mean that social media can't help SEO. Up-to-date social profiles could help strengthen local results, and anything that's good for your audience is good for your website, so a lot of buzz on social media can have knock-on effects.

As a direct ranking factor, though, if Google ever did experiment with it, it's pretty clear it dropped it.



[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Subdomains are sections of your website (e.g., <https://blog.example.com/>), while subdirectories are folders within your main domain (e.g., <https://example.com/blog/>).

While both help you organize specific types of content on your website, there's no official confirmation from Google whether using a subdomain and/or subdirectory would impact rankings.

Google's official stance is that there's no better choice between the two from an indexing and ranking perspective.

In the past, Google would show two results per host, but unfortunately, this led to abuse and manipulation. Since then, Google's algorithm has evolved to limit multiple results from the same domain in search results.

Furthermore, [John Mueller confirmed](#) that Google Search is "fine with using either."

He also pointed out that subdirectories are often easier to manage and can be crawled in a similar way due to being on the same server. Subdomains, on the other hand, need separate verification in Search Console and initial separate crawling, but that's mainly for formality.

At the end of the day, the choice between using subdomains and subdirectories should be based on your organizational and management preferences, rather than any potential ranking benefits.



SYNDICATED CONTENT

POSSIBLY

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

Syndicating your content won't help it rank. In fact, in some cases, it can have a negative impact.

Syndicating content is the process of having your content republished verbatim on other websites. Ideally, that content should link back to you, and the syndicators should “noindex” it to stop it from ranking above your original content. But that doesn't always happen.

Syndicated content can rank above original content, even though Google has devoted systems to prioritizing original content. It's likely the systems will get better at doing this automatically, but for now, syndicated content can act as a negative ranking factor by displaying above your own in SERPs.

Scraping and republishing content without permission is likely to get flagged as spam, having a negative impact on the website doing it.



TABBED CONTENT

UNLIKELY

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

In-page tabs and accordions are a type of user interface (UI) control that helps organize content into logical sections. Picture a drop-down menu or an FAQ section within a webpage.

Page visitors can easily switch between different views to access information by clicking on each tab or expanding an accordion. It's an intuitive way to navigate through information that might otherwise be overwhelming or too much for a single page.

While there's no official confirmation that Google uses tabbed content or accordions in its algorithm, some experts have shared their insights.

Matt Cutts said in [a 2013 Google Search Central video](#) that using accordion or tabbed structure for usability reasons, without deceptive intent, is acceptable.

John Mueller mentioned in 2014 that Google might not give as much weight to content that isn't immediately visible to users unless they click to expand it. He emphasized the importance of ensuring content is visible for indexing.

The thing is, Google's perspective on what makes a great user experience has evolved over time, particularly when it comes to mobile.

In 2020, Mueller confirmed that tabbed and accordion content is not devalued for mobile-first indexing. This means that Google treats tabbed content with the same significance as the rest of the text on the page.

So, here's the takeaway: [Content is a ranking factor](#). Tabbed sections and accordions, if used properly, can improve user experience – and UX is a highly valued asset, especially on mobile.

Enhance your visitor's journey with your content. Then, combine it with user experience design best practices to make a real impact.



TEXT FORMATTING

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[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

Some believe that using certain HTML elements like ``, ``, `<i>`, and `` to highlight keywords for Google can directly impact how your webpage ranks in Search.

[A Google patent from 2014](#) seems to support this idea, suggesting that bolded or italicized texts might have extra weight. However, this doesn't mean text formatting is used in algorithms.

Google has never officially stated whether HTML formatting plays a role in determining rankings.

John Mueller, [in 2021](#), mentioned that text formatting could be beneficial for both website visitors and search engine crawlers. It helps them see what you want to stand out on a page, but these elements “don't make your site rocket up in rankings.”

CONFIRMED



TITLE TAGS

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Page titles continue to play an important role in SEO.

Google relies on the HTML title tag to understand what your pages are all about and rank them in search results. That's why it is recommended to have [unique, accurate, brief, and descriptive titles](#) for all website pages.

But when it comes to their ranking power, title tags don't hold much weight as compared to other factors; they're only a mild signal.

It is your website's main content that plays a bigger role in ranking.

In 2021, [Google released an update](#) on how it generates page titles in search results.

In cases where your page's HTML title tag doesn't adequately describe its content or isn't relevant to a user's query, Google may display other text instead. This update affects how results appear in search, but it doesn't impact rankings.

Is it still worth your time to create unique titles for your pages? 100% yes.

CONFIRMED



URLS

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Yes, Google's John Mueller confirmed that the words in a URL are a ranking factor. But it's important to understand the context of the question he was answering.

The person asked whether using a German-language URL for English-speaking audiences would be a ranking problem. Mueller's response that, while the algorithms **might** use the words in a URL for ranking **if they've never seen the content before**, once they have seen the content on the pages, URLs become negligible.

And so, no, using a foreign-language word in a URL would not have a negative impact.

He did say that this could cause problems from a marketing and brand perspective, of course. But not for SEO.

URLs are a ranking factor, but their impact is so minor that using words in your URL that searchers don't even share a language with, let alone understand, will have no noticeable ranking impact.

So, let's not start over-optimizing our URLs.

CONFIRMED



[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

For the most part, Google doesn't differentiate between user-generated content and your own content. This isn't necessarily because the algorithms are incapable of doing it.

Search engines assume that content published on your site is endorsed by the site owner.

That's because your published content needs to meet certain standards to align with policies and algorithm best practices, regardless of who created it. If site publishers got a free pass for comment spam, well, there would be a whole lot more comment spam.

So, you need to take care to moderate the UGC on your websites, because if you allow users to abuse it, you could see adverse impacts on ranking.

CONFIRMED

USER SEARCH HISTORY

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

Although the impact seems light, search history is a confirmed ranking factor.

Google uses all the signals it can to analyze the intent behind a query and serve results that best fit. Search history and other web activity can provide clues to the intent behind an individual query, and we do know for sure that Google uses this to some extent in search ranking.

We aren't sure yet how this will play out when third-party cookies get phased out. Within Chrome, Google will still have access to all sorts of data. But it's possible that personalization will take a hit in effectiveness and/or priority in 2024.



WEBSITE QUALITY SCORE

POSSIBLY

[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

In Google Ads, “quality score” is a metric to measure the quality of an ad. Websites don't have overall quality scores – at least not something that you can see. As far as we know, Google doesn't have an internal standard for the “quality score” of a domain.

On the other hand, Google employees have made statements suggesting that poor-quality pages can have an impact on an entire domain. So, the algorithms seem to be able to identify signals of quality across a website.

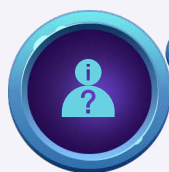
Google employees are normally careful when they talk about this, however.

A great example comes from the chapter on [Domain Authority](#). To summarize, the algorithms try to be as specific and granular as possible, but they are capable of widening their impact to a domain level when necessary.

We know that there is no singular metric or score for domains. Google employees claim that they don't use one internally, either. So, we can't say that there is a "score" that is a ranking factor.

On the other hand, we know that Google's algorithms do make some determinations about websites based on the individual signals they see on their pages.

Maybe this is only applied negatively; this is all that Google employees have mentioned. But it's not impossible it could have a positive impact as well.



DEFINITELY NOT **WHOIS INFORMATION**

[Read the article](#) by Miranda Miller.

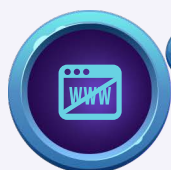
Let's be clear about this one: Your use of privacy settings, on its own, is not a ranking factor.

When you register a domain, you also need to register contact information. You can choose to keep that information private. Doing so doesn't impact rankings.

Matt Cutts talked about hiding Whois information appearing fishy in one case of manual review, in combination with other suspicious factors, in 2006.

Hiding your Whois information is not automatically suspicious – and even so, a flag during a manual review does not equal an algorithmic ranking factor.

In [2019](#) and [2021](#), John Mueller was asked directly whether hiding Whois information impacts ranking, and answered "no" both times.

UNLIKELY**WWW VS. NON-WWW**

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[Read the article](#) by Kristi Hines.

There is no concrete evidence or official statement from Google as to whether “www” or “non-www” affects rankings.

In 2017, [someone asked](#) John Mueller on X (formerly Twitter) about Google’s preference for www or non-www in terms of SEO. Mueller confirmed that using www is more of a brand preference with minimal SEO implications.

In [a 2019 Google Search Central post](#), Mueller explained that Google uses canonical URLs to determine the best version of a URL to display in search results.

Mozilla also updated its [guide for webmasters](#), stating that it doesn’t matter which version of your site you choose. What’s important is that you make a consistent choice and stick with that version as your canonical URL.

DEFINITELY NOT**XML SITEMAPS**

[Read the article](#) by Matt Southern.

An XML sitemap serves as a list of a website’s pages, making it easier for Google to find new URLs and recognize any changes to existing ones.

Despite its essence, an XML sitemap has nothing to do with rankings.

The lack of an XML sitemap won’t cause any problem or ranking disadvantage. Gary Illyes confirmed this in a [post on X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) back in 2019.

But having an XML sitemap won’t do any harm, either. In fact, it can be quite beneficial. It helps Google find the pages on your website and speed up the indexing process for new and updated pages.

FINAL WORDS ON GOOGLE UPDATES IN 2023

We asked each of this ebook's sponsors to provide a few final words on where they see updates and trends from Google going for the rest of the year and beyond.

They had this to say:



“Google will continue to incorporate advanced AI and even LLM systems, but not in the overt way embodied by SGEs and the new Bing.

Instead, we expect Google to get better and better at understanding nuance and relevance in queries and content.

In practice, this means that SEO professionals should double down on the most famous and ambiguous ranking factor of recent years – on-page E-E-A-T – and be aware that there will be less and less opportunity to rank questionable or irrelevant content with otherwise good SEO.”

– Tom Capper, Senior Search Scientist, STAT.



“Moving into the future, I believe the combination of specificity and authoritative authorship will be the key to winning future search results, regardless of how they look.

If you take a look at what Google has been focused on over the last few years, surfacing specific parts of content and serving it directly to users (SERP snippets, passage-based ranking, etc.) and/or connecting the dots between the written content and the folks that wrote it, plus confirming they have first-hand experience and expertise, we can see where the road is headed.

We are going to see Google continue to move in this direction as it aims to become the destination for user answers vs. a doorway to the answer.

How To Proceed: The more specific you can be and the more you can tie your content back to experts, the better chance you'll have to show up at the top of SERPs as a helpful, knowledgeable brand."

– Patrick Reinhart, VP of Services & Thought Leadership, Conductor.



"Beyond October 2023, it's apparent that Google will continue to refine its approach to web performance. The upcoming reorganization in ranking systems signifies a strategic shift towards recognizing web performance as an integral part of the overall user experience.

It's not just about individual metrics like Core Web Vitals but empowering user satisfaction across your website once visitors land on it. Beyond climbing search rankings, site owners will need to meet the ever-growing expectations of users and ensure websites are not only discoverable but also delightful to engage with."

– Ivailo Hristov, Chief Technical Officer and Co-Founder, NitroPack.

Thank you for reading SEJ's Ranking Factors 2023: Signals, Systems and Page Experience.

Look out for another release next year. This will be the last Ranking Factors book taking this format, and we'll have exciting updates to come.

A week after you download this ebook, you'll get a survey in your email. Please let us know how you liked the book and provide any feedback you have. We read every response.

To close out the year, the next ebooks on deck are PPC Trends in and SEO Trends, coming soon. If you're hungry for trends and insights now, check out August's [State Of SEO](#) report.

Farewell for now!