

6045 S. Kenwood Ave.
3rd Floor
Chicago, Illinois 60637

T 773.834.8154
F 773.702.2025

January 2014

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO) CHECKLIST

PREPARED BY **Heather Mirabelli**, Web Services

INTRODUCTION

Web Services uses this document as a guide for website development and SEO audits. UChicago web developers may find it useful as a tool for assessing their own sites.

SITE-WIDE SEO

These guidelines apply to the entire website.

ACCESS

- **Page Access**
If a search engine can't reach a page, it's impossible to have it indexed. Make sure that the robots.txt file or robots meta tag isn't accidentally blocking important pages.
- **Block inappropriate pages**
On the other hand: some pages should not be indexed, for example incomplete pages or confidential pages. Block them via the robots.txt file or robots meta tag.
- **Pagination**
Help search engines handle pagination by implementing the rel="next" and rel="prev" tag.
- **Redirects**
Use 301-redirects instead of 302.
- **404 errors**
Try to reduce the amount of 404 errors to a minimum.
- **Site speed**
Site speed has become a ranking factor. Faster is better. Use Google Page Speed to check the loading time of your pages.
- **Mobile accessibility**
Is your site accessible for mobile devices? Google recommends a responsive design.
- **Duplicate content**
Check for duplicate content in Google Webmaster tools, via the site: search command, or via site crawling software. Duplicate content issues can be solved with a 301-redirect, the rel="canonical" tag, meta robots tag, URL rewriting, etc.

URL STRUCTURES

- **www or non-www**

Choose one and make sure the internal and inbound links use the same format. Use Google Webmaster Tools to set the preferred version. Automatic URL rewriting is also possible.

- **Domain extension**

For global centers, the appropriate country domain extension can help findability. For example, the Center in Delhi's URL is <http://www.uchicago.in/>.

- **Subdomains**

Subdomains (x.uchicago.edu) are understood by Google to be distinct websites. It's our general practice to use subdomains at the University to distinguish websites from one another.

- **Descriptive URLs**

Use a descriptive page name instead of a random number of words and letters. The same goes for subfolders.

- **Hyphens**

Use hyphens to split words in a URL.

- **URL parameters**

You can help Google handle URL parameters via Google Webmaster tools.

SITEMAPS

- **XML sitemap**

This sitemap is only visible for search engines. XML sitemaps allow you to add metadata which can be used to provide additional information about the content of each page. An XML sitemap can contain a maximum of 50,000 links.

- **Image sitemap**

An image sitemap can help your images show up in Google Image Search results and get you some extra visitors. These are not visible to users, just to search engines.

- **Video sitemap**

A video sitemap can help with the creation of rich snippets for your page. These are not visible to users, just to search engines.

PAGE-SPECIFIC SEO

These optimizations apply to single pages on a site.

KEYWORDS

- **Single keyword per page**

Make sure every page targets a single keyword.

- **Keyword research**

Ranking for the correct keywords is very important. Do some research and see which keyword has the highest traffic potential and the least amount of competition. Balance these two factors with user research.

- **Keyword in URL**

Use the keyword in the URL (page name).

- **Keyword in title**

Use the keyword in the title of the page, preferably in the beginning. This is an important indicator

for search engines to categorize a page.

- **Keyword in headings**

Use the keyword in appropriate headings (h1, h2, h3...). The H1 tag should only be used once on a page and should be used for the title.

- **Keyword in content**

It's impossible to write about a topic without using the keyword. Use the keyword, including variations and synonyms throughout the text. Try to use it in the first paragraph too.

CONTENT

- **Page Titles**

- University of Chicago affiliation added at the end of page titles
- Page titles are 70 characters or less
- Unique keywords are at the beginning of page title
- Unique page titles (no duplicates)
- Pipes separate content (|)
- Wording is short and simple
- Commas and phrases are eliminated (these make the title read like a sentence)

- **Content type**

Choosing a different content type—e.g. infographic, comic, quiz—can help you attract links.

- **Crawlability**

Search engines have difficulties crawling certain content types, for example images or flash content. A combination of HTML, CSS and webfonts can be used to solve certain crawlability problems. Always use alt-tags for images.

- **Language targeting**

Inform search engines about a translated page by using the rel="alternate" hreflang="x" annotation.

- **Freshness**

Search engines like new content. Regularly posting or updating pages is recommended when user needs warrant.

- **Content length**

Content length is correlated with rankings. Readers prefer concise content online, but search engines like at least 300 words per page. User needs should trump search engine needs when it comes to content length, but you may be able to combine pages and use headings, lists, etc. to create easy-to-skim content.

IMAGES

- **File name**

Choose a descriptive file name instead of random words and numbers.

- **Alt-tag**

Add an alt-tag with a short description of the image that . . .

- Is less than 50 characters if possible
- Includes appropriate keywords, including department, unit, and/or UChicago
- Is unique when possible

- **Optimization**

Follow best practices for image optimization to keep page size and load times down.

DISPLAY IN SEARCH ENGINE RESULTS PAGE (SERP)

- **Meta descriptions**

Meta descriptions give the web user a brief idea of your mission or goal on each page – or as much specific information to entice him/her to click on the page. They are displayed in the snippet that appears on search engine results pages.

- Unique meta descriptions for each page
- Less than 120 characters (including spaces)

- **Structured data**

Add structured data to your page that can be used to generate rich snippets. Rich snippets can vastly improve the CTR (click-through rate) of your pages. Structured data can be added via microdata, RFDa or microformats.

- **Authorship information**

Add authorship information to your pages. AuthorRank is a relatively new ranking factor.

OFF-SITE SEO

Search engines—especially Google—also pay attention to how other websites refer to your site. Some factors include:

- **Inbound links**

Check the number of inbound links.

- **Authority**

Links from sites with a high domain authority are more valuable.

- **Anchor text**

Anchor text is the text that is used to link to your site from elsewhere. Keywords in anchor text are very useful, but don't overdo this. Make sure your link profile looks natural.

- **Diversity**

Try to gain links from multiple, relevant domains instead of only a handful of sites.

- **Bad links**

Links from spammy sites can hurt your rankings. Contact the webmaster to remove them or use the Disavow Tool.