

## **SEO 101 – Basic Optimization Techniques**

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It is hard to believe the all too short northern summer is almost over. In less than two weeks, kids will be going back to school and commercial webmasters will be gearing up for the autumn and winter sales seasons. This is as good a time as any, perhaps better than most, to cover SEO 101, the basic techniques that form the foundation to an advanced SEO or SEM campaign.

For the purposes of brevity this piece starts with a few assumptions. The first assumption is a single, small business site is being worked on. The second assumption is that the site in question is written using a fairly standard mark-up language such as HTML or PHP. The last assumption is that some form of keyword research and determination has already taken place and the webmaster is confident in the selection of keyword targets.

Believe it or not, basic SEO is all about common sense and simplicity. The purpose of search engine optimization is to make a website as search engine friendly as possible. It's really not that difficult. Basic SEO doesn't require specialized knowledge of algorithms, programming and taxonomy but it does require a basic understanding of how search engines work. There are two aspects of search engines to consider before jumping in. The first is how spiders work. The second is how search engines figure out what documents relate to which keywords and phrases.

In the simplest terms, search engines collect data about a unique website by sending an electronic spider to visit the site and copy its content which is stored in the search engine's database. Generally known as 'bots', these spiders are designed to follow links from one document to the next. As they copy and assimilate content from one document, they record links and send other bots to make copies of content on those linked documents. This process continues ad infinitum. By sending out spiders and collecting information 24/7, the major search engines have established databases that measure their size in the tens of billions. Every day, both Yahoo and Google claim to spider as much data as is contained in the US Library of Congress (approx. 150million items).

Knowing the spiders and how they read information on a site is the technical end of basic SEO. Spiders are designed to read site content like you and I read a newspaper. Starting in the top left hand corner, a spider will read site content line by line from left to right. If columns are used (as they are in most sites), spiders will follow the left hand column to its conclusion before moving to central and right hand columns. If a spider encounters a link it can follow, it will record that link and send another bot to copy and record data found on the document the link leads to. The spider will proceed through the site until it records everything it can possible find there.

As spiders follow links and record everything in their paths, one can safely assume that if a link to a site exists, a spider will find that site. Webmasters and SEOs no longer need to manually or electronically submit their sites to the major search engines. The search spiders are perfectly capable of finding them on their own, provided a link to that site exists somewhere on the web. Google and Yahoo both have an uncanny ability to judge the topic or theme of documents they are examining, and use that ability to

judge the topical relationship of documents that are linked together. The most valuable incoming links (and the only ones worth perusing), come from sites that share topical themes.

Once a search spider finds your site, helping it get around is the first priority. One of the most important basic SEO tips is to provide clear paths for spiders to follow from “point A” to “point Z” in your website. This is best accomplished by providing easy to follow text links directed to the most important pages in the site at the bottom of each document. One of these text links should lead to a text-based sitemap, which lists and provides a text link every document in the site. The sitemap can be the most basic page in the site as its purpose is more to direct spiders than help lost site visitors though designers should keep site visitors in mind when creating the sitemap. Here is an example of the [basic sitemap](#) used on the StepForth site. Google also accepts more advanced, XML based sitemaps, providing a wealth of information on their [Sitemap FAQ page](#).

Allowing spiders free access to the entire website is not always desirable. Good SEOs should also know how to tell spiders that some site content is off limits and should not be added to their database using [robots.txt](#) files. Last week, Mike Banks Valentine of [Website101](#) wrote a good overview on how to write and use robots.txt files in his article, “[Search Engine Spiders Lost Without Guidance - Post This Sign!](#)”.

Offering spiders access to the areas of the site one wants them to access is half the battle. The other half is found in the site content. Search engines are supposed to provide their users with lists of documents that relate to user entered keyword phrases or queries. Search engines need to determine which of billions of documents is relevant to a small number of specific words. In order to do this, the search engine needs to know your site relates to those words.

There are four basic areas, or elements, a search engine looks at when examining a document. After the URL of a site, the first information a search spider records is the title of the site. Next, it examines the Description Meta tag. Both of these elements are found in the <head> section of the source code.

Titles should be written using the strongest keyword targets as the foundation. StepForth’s primary keyword target is Search Engine Placement. A glance at our index page shows that phrase is used as the first three words in our site title. Some titles are written using two or three basic two-keyword phrases. A key to writing a good title is to remember that human readers will see the title as the reference link on the search engine results page. Don’t overload your title with keyword phrases. Concentrate on the strongest keywords that best describe the topic of the document content.

The Description Meta tag is also fairly important. Search engines tend to use it to gather information on the topic or theme of the document. A well written Description is phrased in two or three complete sentences with the strongest keyword phrases woven early into each sentence. As with the title tag, some search engines will display the Description on the search results pages, generally using it in whole or in part to provide the text that appears under the reference link. Some search engines place minor weight in the Keywords Meta tag however, it is not advisable to spend a lot of time worrying about the keywords tag.

After reading information found in the <head> section of the source code, spiders continue on to examine site content. It is wise to remember that spiders read the same way we do, left to right and following columns.

Good content is the most important aspect of search engine optimization. The easiest and most basic rule of the trade is that search engine spiders can be relied upon to read basic body text 100% of the time. By providing a search engine spider with basic text content, SEOs offer the engines information in the easiest format for them to read. While some search engines can strip text and link content from Flash files, nothing beats basic body text when it comes to providing information to the spiders. Very good SEOs can almost always find a way to work basic body text into a site without compromising the designer's intended look, feel and functionality.

The content itself should be thematically focused. In other words, keep it simple. Some documents cover multiple topics on each page, which is confusing for spiders and SEOs alike. The basic SEO rule here is if you need to express more than one topic on a page, you need more pages. Fortunately, creating new pages with unique topic-focused content is one of the most basic SEO techniques, making a site simpler for both live-users and electronic spiders. An important caveat is to avoid duplicate content and the temptation to construct doorway pages specifically designed for search placements.

When writing document content, try to use the strongest keyword targets early in the copy. For example, a site selling the ubiquitous Blue Widget might use the following as a lead-sentence; "Blue Widgets by Widget and Co. are the strongest construction widgets available and are the trusted widget of leading builders and contractors."

The primary target is obviously construction applications for the blue widget. By placing the keyword phrases "blue widgets", "construction widgets" and "trusted widget" along side other keywords such as the singular words, "strongest", "trusted" and "builders" and "contractors", the sentence is crafted to help the search engine see a relationship between these words. Subsequent sentences would also have keywords and phrases weaved into them. One thing to keep in mind when writing basic SEO copy is that unnecessary repetition of keywords is often considered spam by search engines. Another thing to remember is that ultimately, the written copy is meant to be read by human eyes as well as search spiders. Each page or document in the site should have its own unique content.

The last on-site element a spider examines when reading the site (and later relating the content to user queries), is the anchor text used in internal links. Using relevant keyword phrases in the anchor text is a basic SEO technique aimed at solidifying the search engine's perception of the relationship between documents and the words used to phrase the link. A good example is found on towards the bottom of pages in the [StepForth](#) site. Note the use of the words "placement services", "seo results", "SEO Faq" and the topic of the internal pages these links point to.

In a nutshell, that's pretty much it to the basics of clean, search engine friendly SEO. The foundation of nearly every successful SEO campaign is simplicity. The goal is to make a site easy to find, easy to follow, and easy to read for search spiders and live-visitors, with well written topical content and a fair number of relevant incoming links. While basic SEO can be time consuming in the early stages, the results are almost always worth it and set the stage for more advanced future work.