

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

How to write digital content that search engines will find, like and share

Released 12/3/2020

Even the most informative, ground-breaking, and creative content can fall flat if no one can find it. Taking a few simple steps to optimize your content helps search engines do two things: rank your content for relevance and put your content in front of qualified audiences to help them find the information they need to live their best lives.

This guide provides a few simple tips for optimizing website content, such as blog posts, media releases, events, and webpage text, so search engines can find it.

Create Relevant Content

Discoverability starts with relevant content. The goal isn't just to create content that Google and other search engines will find and share. You must also make sure it delivers value once a visitor gets to your page.

For more details on content creation and writing for your audience, visit additional resources on the CommIT website at extension.illinois.edu/commit

Identify Keywords

Primary keywords

Think in general terms about the central focus of your piece of content: apple pie, trees and shrubs, recipes, business.

Long-tail keywords

Consider the phrases your audience might use in searching for content on the internet, and add those short phrases (modifiers) to your primary keyword. More specific terms help search engines find a qualified audience for your content.

Primary	Long-tail
Apple pie	How to make apple pie filling
Trees and shrubs	Best trees and shrubs for shade
Recipes	Quick and healthy chicken recipes
Business	Small business plans for communities

Keyword research tools

If you need inspiration, there are several free tools online that can help you identify keywords and phrases related to your topic. They can also provide insight into ideas for development of future content.

- [Google Search auto-fill](#)
- [Google Trends](#)
- [Also Asked](#)
- [Answer the Public](#) (limited daily search)

For help researching keywords, identifying an audience, or finding the best way to include your keywords in headlines and throughout body text, please reach out to the Extension communications team by completing a support ticket at: go.illinois.edu/EXTMarketingRequest.

Incorporate Keywords

Review your original content and look for ways to integrate important keywords and phrases into the body of your piece.

- Start with the most relevant long-tail keywords toward the top or in the headline.
- Be selective; strive for a natural flow that includes several versions of top keywords and keyword phrases throughout.
- Avoid overuse of the same phrase; mix up structure and use different variations.

Optimize Headlines

Google displays roughly the first 50-60 characters of a headline in the search results page. For best effect, try to keep your headline short and simple.

- Aim for a headline length between 50 to 60 characters, but no more than 80 at a maximum.
- Include primary keyword or a long-tail keyword phrase.
- Write several versions of your headline and compare them. Free online tools can help you select a headline that will perform well. Try <https://coschedule.com/headline-analyzer>.

Good headlines are descriptive and give a clear preview of what the reader will find if they follow the link to your content. Make them as useful as you can while still striving to keep the overall length in the 50-60 character range, with a hard limit of no more than 80 characters.

- Make an apple pie: Tips for successful baking
- Selecting the best ornamental trees for shade
- Indoor plant care tips for tropical plants

Content Structure

Search engines seek out organized content as much as we do. Use easy formatting options to help Google understand the structure of your content.

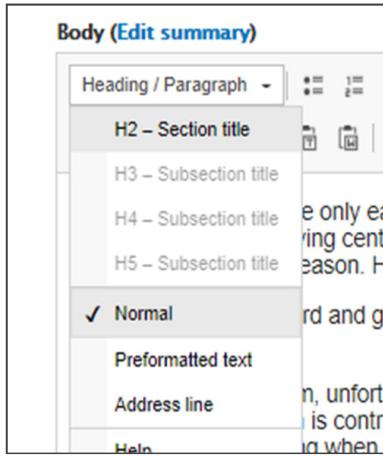
Heading tags

HTML is a markup language, or code, that tells a webpage how to display content. Using HTML heading tags for headlines and subsections helps Google understand page flow and content priority.

Extension's website automatically assigns a primary H1 heading tag to webpage headlines. Consider using subsection options H2 and H3 as you edit to prioritize additional body text in a blog or event listing; use of H4 or H5 will be rare.

Access heading tag options when adding or editing text on the website. Each subsection title format becomes available for use after the previous format has been applied.

The graphic below gives you a preview of how to label your content with title tags. It's as easy as selecting a style from the list of preformatted options in a dropdown menu.



Depending on content and structure, you may not need any tags; it is also possible that your content only calls for H2 tags. Add title tags only as appropriate. Unnecessary use can hurt more than help.

Text layouts

Arrange content in appropriate paragraphs and topics. Both people and search engines appreciate breaks from long blocks of text.

Taking steps to group related content into clearly defined sections and paragraphs also supports best practices in accessibility by assisting screen reader navigation.

Bullet points and lists

Formatting bulleted and numbered lists can be another important way to help search engines understand the organization of content on your page. These types of lists work well for blog and event content; however, news releases are better served with comma-separated lists as text, or paragraphs that use bold subsection headers to draw attention instead.

Adding Links

Hyperlinks within text increase a search engine's understanding of related content, website structure, and domain validity. Use a combination of links for maximum effect.

Internal links (within site)

Internal links point to content within the same domain as the host content. Most Extension content can accommodate these three links consistently.

- Educator/Source
- Writer (if different than source)
- University of Illinois Extension

Find highest ranking related topic pages within Extension by pasting this URL into a new Google search and consider linking to some of the resulting pages in your post.

- site:extension.illinois.edu

Add a plus sign and topic keyword(s) to find related pages:

- site:extension.illinois.edu + tomato plants

External links (outbound)

Links to external partners, affiliated programs, or social media channels lend credibility as well: A few examples:

- Illinois Department of Public Health
- Illinois Department of Agriculture
- Rural Partners
- North Central Regional Water Network

Backlinks (inbound)

Inbound links to Illinois Extension's website are very valuable for search relevancy, but we have much less control over these. Sharing blog posts, news releases, events, and award announcements with select networks and media can help build those connections over time. If you have a piece of content that you think would be valued by one of your partners, don't be shy about directly sharing it with them.

