hobo

Beginners Guide to SEO

2013

Contents

Introduction

By Shaun Anderson

Here are some free search engine optimisation tips for you to create a successful site.

I deliberately steered clear of things that might be a bit grey, as what is grey today is often black hat tomorrow, as far as Google is concerned.
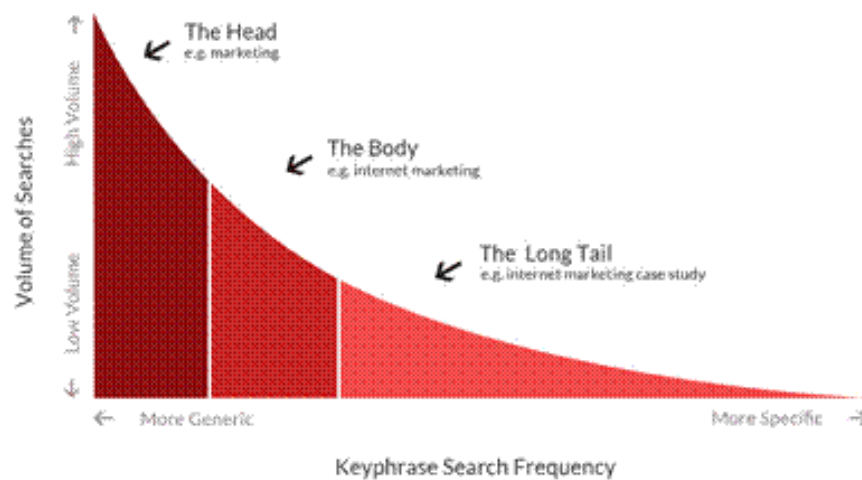
What is SEO?

There are a lot of definitions of SEO (Search engine optimisation) but let's face it, SEO in 2013 is about getting free traffic from Google, the most popular search engine in the world.

SEO is about **KEYWORDS** and **LINKS**. It's about RELEVANCE and REPUTATION.

Search engine optimisation is about a web page being relevant enough for a query, and being trusted enough to rank for it. It's about ranking for popular keywords for the long term, on merit. You can play by 'white hat' rules laid down by Google, or you can choose to ignore those and go 'black hat' – a 'spammer'. But MOST SEO TACTICS still work, for some time, on some level, for a period of time, depending on who's doing them, and how it's deployed.

Whichever route you take, know that if Google catches you trying to "modify your rank", then they will class you a spammer, and your site will be penalised (you won't rank for important keywords). Google does not want you to try and modify your rank. They would prefer you paid PPC to do that. The problem is – traffic from SEO is valuable. VERY valuable. And FREE, once you've pleased Google enough.

In 2013, you need to be aware that what works to improve your rank can also get you penalised (faster, and a lot more noticeably). In particular, Google is currently <u>waging war</u> on **unnatural links** and manipulative tactics if it <u>detects them</u>.

Welcome to the tightrope that is SEO. Let's touch on a few simple things to begin with:

SEO Basics

If you are just starting out in seo, don't think you can fool Google about everything all the time. Google has probably seen your tactics before. So, it's best to keep it simple. GET RELEVANT. GET REPUTABLE. If you are just starting out – you may as well learn how to do it within Google's Webmaster Guidelines first.
Don't expect stellar results without a lot of work, and don't expect them too fast. Expecting too much too fast might get you in trouble.

1. You don't pay anything to get into Google, Yahoo or Bing natural or free listings (SERPS). It's common for the major search engines to find your website pretty easily by themselves within a few days. This is made so much easier if your website actually 'pings' search engines when you update content (via XML sitemaps for instance).

2. To stay in Google and other search engines, you really should consider and largely abide by search engine rules and guidelines for inclusion. With experience, and a lot of observation, you can learn which rules can be bent, and which tactics are short term and perhaps, should be avoided.

3. Google ranks websites by the number and quality of incoming links to a site from other websites (amongst hundreds of other metrics). Generally speaking, a link from a page to another page is viewed in Google "eyes" as a vote for that page the link points to. The more votes a page gets, the more trusted a page can become, and the higher Google will rank it – in theory. Rankings are HUGELY affected by how much Google ultimately trusts the DOMAIN the page is on.

4. I've always thought if you are serious about ranking – do so with ORIGINAL COPY. It's clear – search engines reward good content it hasn't found before. It indexes it blisteringly fast, for a start. So – make sure each of your pages has content you have written specifically for that page – and you won't need to jump through hoops to get it ranking.

5. If you have original quality content on a site, you also have a chance of generating inbound quality links (IBL). If your content is found on other websites, you will find it hard to get links, and it probably will not rank very well as Google

favours diversity in its results. If you have <u>decent original content</u> on your site, you can let authority websites, those with <u>online business authority</u>, know about it, and they might link to you – this is called a **quality backlink**.

6. Search engines need to understand a link is a link. Links can be designed to be ignored by search engines (the <u>attribute nofollow effectively cancels out a link</u>, for instance)

7. Search engines can also find your site by other web sites linking to it. You can also <u>submit your site to search engines</u> direct, but I haven't submitted my site to a search engine in the last 10 years – you probably don't need to do that.

8. Google spiders a link to your home page, finds your site, and crawls and indexes the home page of your site, and will come back to spider the rest of your website if all your pages are linked together (in almost any way).

9. Many think Google will not allow new websites to rank well for competitive terms until the web address "ages" and acquires "trust" in Google – I think this depends on the quality of the incoming links. Sometimes your site will rank high for a while then disappear for months. This is called the "honeymoon period".

10. Google WILL classify your site when it crawls and indexes your site – and this classification can have a DRASTIC effect on your rankings – it's important for Google to work out WHAT YOUR ULTIMATE INTENT IS – do you want to classified as an affiliate site made 'just for Google', a domain holding page, or a small business website with a real purpose? Ensure you don't confuse Google by being explicit with all the signals you can – to show on your website you are a real business, and your INTENT is genuine. NOTE – <u>If a page exists only to make money from Google's free traffic</u> – Google calls this spam.

11. To rank for specific keyword searches, you generally need to have the words on your page (not necessarily altogether, but it helps) – ultimately it is all dependent on the competition for the term you are targeting) or in links pointing to your page/site.

12. As a result of other quality sites linking to your site, the site now has a certain amount of PageRank that is shared with all the internal pages that make up your website that will in future help determine where this page ranks.

13. Yes, you need to build links to your site to acquire more Google Juice. Google is a links based search engine – it does not quite understand 'good' content – but it does understand 'popular' content.

14. When you have Google Juice or Heat, try and spread it throughout your site by ensuring all your pages are linked together

15. I think your external links to other sites should probably be on your single pages, the pages receiving all your Google Juice once it's been "soaked up" by the higher pages in your site (the home page, your category pages).It's not JUST a numbers game, though. One link from a "trusted authority" site in Google could be all you need. Of course, the more "trusted" links you build, the more trust Google will have in your site. It's pretty clear that you need MULTIPLE trusted links from MULTIPLE trusted websites to get the most from Google.

16. Try and get links within page text pointing to your site with keywords in it – not, for instance, in blogrolls or sitewide links. Try to ensure the links are not obviously "machine generated" i.e. site-wide links on forums or directories. Get links from pages that in turn, have a lot of links to them.

17. Internally, consider linking to your other pages by linking to them within text – I usually only do this when it is relevant – and recently, I'll link to relevant pages when the keyword is in the title elements of both pages. I don't really go in for auto-generating links at all. Google has penalised sites for using particular auto link plugins, for instance.

18. Linking to a page with actual key-phrases in the link help a great deal in all search engines when you want to feature for specific key-terms. i.e. "seo scotland" as opposed to http://www.hobo-web.co.uk or "click here".

19. I think the anchor text links in internal navigation is still valuable – but keep it natural. Google needs links to find your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a clever internal link keyword-rich architecture and be sure to understand for instance how many words Google counts in a link, but don't overdo it.

20. Search engines like Google 'spider' or 'crawl' your entire site by following all the links on your site to new pages, much as a human would click on the links of your pages. Google will crawl and index your pages, and within a few days normally, begin to return your pages in search results (SERPS)

21. After a while, Google will know about your pages, and keep the ones it deems 'useful' – pages with original content, or pages with a lot of links to them. Ideally you will have unique pages, with unique page titles and unique page descriptions if you deem to use the latter – most search engines don't use the meta description when actually ranking your page for specific keyword searches if not relevant – I don't worry about meta keywords these days.

22. Google chews over your site, analysing text content and links

23. If you have a lot of duplicate crap found on other websites Google knows about, Google will ignore your page. If your site has spammy signals. Google will penalise it.

24. You don't need to keyword stuff your text and look dyslexic to beat the competition. Generally it's good to have keywords in links, page titles and text content. There is no ideal amount of text – no magic keyword density. Keyword stuffing is a tricky business.

25. I prefer to make sure I have as many UNIQUE relevant words on the page.

26. If you link out to irrelevant sites, Google may ignore the page, too – but again, it depends on the site in question. Who you link to, or HOW you link to, REALLY DOES MATTER – I expect Google to use your linking practices as a potential means by which to classify your site. Affiliate sites for example don't do well in Google these days without some good quality backlinks.

27. Many SEOs think who you actually link out to (and who links to you) helps determine a topical community of sites in any field, or a hub of authority. Quite simply, you want to be in that hub, at the centre if possible (however unlikely), but at least in it. I like to think of this one as a good thing to remember in the future as search engines get even better at determining topical relevancy of pages, but I have never really seen any granular ranking benefit (for the page in question) from linking out.

28. Original content is king and will attract a "natural link growth" – in Google's opinion. Too many incoming links too fast might devalue your site, but again. I usually err on the safe side – I go for massive diversity in my links – to make them look more natural. Actually, I go for natural links in 2013 full stop. Google can devalue whole sites, individual pages, template generated links and individual links if Google deems them "unnecessary".

29. Google knows who links to you, the "quality" of those links, and who you link to.

30. Google decides which pages on your site are important or most relevant. You can help Google by linking to your important pages.

31. It is of paramount importance you spread all that Google juice to your sales keyword / phrase rich sales pages, and as much remains to the rest of the site pages, so Google does not "demote" starved pages into its reserves, or "supplementals".

32. Consider linking to important pages on your site from your home page, and via the template navigation on the site.

33. Focus on RELEVANCE first. Then get REPUTABLE. The key to ranking in Google is actually pretty simple.

34. Every few months Google changes it's algorithm to punish sloppy optimisation or industrial manipulation. Google Panda and Google Penguin are two such updates, but the important thing is to understand Google changes it's algorithms to control its listings pages. The art of SEO is to rank high without tripping these algorithms – and that is tricky!

Keyword Research

The first step in any seo campaign is to do some keyword research. There are many tools on the web to help with basic keyword research (including the free Google Keyword Research Tool and SEMRUSH). You can use these tools to quickly identify opportunities to get more traffic:

Example Keyword	Search Volume
seo tutorial for beginners	1900
seo tutorials	1600
seo tutorial pdf	1000
how to seo a website	880
seo tutorial step by step	720
how to seo your website	720
google seo tutorial	320
best seo tutorial for novices	260
free seo tutorial	210
free seo tutorials	210
on page seo tutorial	170
seo tutorials for beginners	170
all in one seo tutorial	170
seo tutorial video	140
how to seo website	140
seo tutorial in urdu	110
how to seo my website	110
seo tutorial download	91
joomla seo tutorial	91
online seo tutorial	91
seo tutorial in bangla	91
seo tutorial free	73
optimizare seo tutorial	73
best seo tutorial	58
basic seo tutorial	58
bing seo tutorial	58
step by step seo tutorial	46
beginners seo tutorial course	46
seo tutorial google	46

Getting a site to the top of Google eventually comes down to your text content on a page and external & internal link profile. Altogether, Google uses this analysis to determine whether your no1 in Google or number 32, or de-indexed. There's no magic bullet.

At any one time, your site is under some sort of filters designed to keep spam sites out and deliver relevant results to human visitors. One filter may be kicking in keeping a page down in the serps, while another filter is pushing another page up. You might have poor content but excellent incoming links, or vice versa.

Try and identify the reasons Google doesn't link a particular page.

- Too few quality incoming links?
- Too many incoming links?
- No keyword rich text?
- Linking out to irrelevant sites?
- Too many ads?
- Affiliate links on every page of your site, found on a thousand other websites?

Whatever, identify issues and fix them. Get on the wrong side of Google and your site might well be MANUALLY reviewed – so seo your site as if, one day, you will be getting that review.

The key to successful seo, I think, is persuading Google that your page is most relevant to any given search query. You do this by good unique keyword rich text content and getting "quality" links to that page. Next time your developing a page, consider what looks spammy to you is probably spammy to Google. Ask yourself which pages on your site are really necessary. Which links are necessary? Which pages are getting the "juice" or "heat". Which pages would you ignore?

You can help a site along in any number of ways (including making sure your page titles and meta tags are unique) but be careful. Obvious evidence of 'rank modifying' is dangerous.

I prefer simple seo techniques, and ones that can be measured in some way. I don't want to **just rank for competitive terms**, I want to understand the reason why I rank for these terms; At Hobo we try to build sites for humans AND search engines. Make a site relevant to both for success in organic listings and you might not ever need to get into the techy side of SEO like redirects and URL rewriting. Of course, to beat the competition in an industry where it's difficult to attract quality links, you have to get more "technical" sometimes.

There are no hard and fast rules to long term seo success, other than developing quality websites with quality content and quality links pointing to it. You need to mix it up and learn from experience. Remember there are exceptions to nearly every rule, and you probably have little chance determining exactly why you rank in search engines. I've been doing it for over 10 years and everyday I'm trying to better understand Google, to learn more and learn from others' experiences. It's important not to obsess about the minute seo specifics unless you really have the time to do so!

THERE IS USUALLY SOMETHING MORE VALUABLE TO SPEND THAT TIME ON.

There are some things that are apparent though.
- Don't build a site in Flash
- Don't build a site with Website Frames
- Don't go mad generating thousands of back links
- Don't hide lots of text from visitors but show to Google
- KISS – Keep it simple, stupid.

Page Title Tag Best Practice

<title>What Is The Best Title Tag For Google?</title>

The page title tag (or HTML Title Element) is arguably the most important <u>on page seo</u> factor. Keywords in page titles can HELP your pages rank higher in Google results pages (SERPS). The page title is also often used by Google as the <u>title of a search snippet</u> link in search engine results pages.

For me, a perfect title tag in Google is dependent on a number of factors;

1. The page title is highly **relevant** to the page it refers to; it will probably be displayed in a web browsers window title bar, and the clickable search snippet link in Google, Bing & other search engines. The title is the "crown" of a keyword targeted article with most important keyword phrase featuring AT LEAST ONCE, as all search engines place a lot of weight in what words are contained within this html element.

2. Google displays as many characters as it can fit into "a block element that's <u>512px</u> wide and doesn't exceed 1 line of text". So – **THERE IS NO AMOUNT OF CHARACTERS any seo can lay down as exact best practice** to **GUARANTEE** your title will display, in full in Google, at least. **Ultimately – only the characters and words you use will determine if your entire page title will be seen in a Google search snippet**. Google used to count <u>70 characters in a title</u> – but not in 2012. If you want to ENSURE your full title tag shows in Google SERPS, stick to about 65 characters. I have seen 'up-to' 69 characters in 2012 – but as I said – it depends on the characters you use.

3. <u>Google will INDEX perhaps 1000s of characters in a title</u>… but no-one knows exactly how many characters or words Google will actually count AS a TITLE when determining relevance for ranking purposes. It is a very hard thing to try to isolate accurately. **I have had ranking success with longer titles** – <u>much longer titles</u> – Google certainly reads ALL the words in your page title (unless you are spamming it silly, of course).

4. You can probably **fit up to 12 words** that will be counted as part of a page title, and consider using your **important keywords in the first 8 words**.

5. Some page titles do better with a call to action – one which reflects exactly a searcher's *intent* (e.g. to learn something, or buy something, or hire something. Remember this is your *hook* in search engines, if Google chooses to use your page title in its search snippet, and there is now a lot of competing pages out there!

6. When optimising a title, you are looking to rank for as many terms as possible, without keyword stuffing your title. Often, the best bet is to optimise for a particular phrase (or phrases) – and take a more long-tail approach. Yes – that does mean more pages on your site – that's the reality in 2012. Content. Content. Content.

7. The perfect title tag on a page is *unique* to other pages on the site. In light of Google Panda, an algorithm that looks for a 'quality' in sites, you REALLY need to make your page titles UNIQUE, and minimise any duplication, especially on larger sites.

8. I like to make sure my keywords feature as early as possible in a title tag but the important thing is to have important keywords and key phrases in your page title tag SOMEWHERE.

9. For me, when SEO is more important than branding, the company name goes at the end of the tag, and I use a variety of dividers to separate as no one way performs best. If you have a recognisable brand – then there is an argument for putting this at the front of titles.

10. I like to think I write titles for search engines AND humans.

11. Know that Google tweaks everything regularly – why not what the perfect title keys off? So MIX it up…

12. Don't obsess! Natural is probably better, and will only get *better* as engines evolve. As I said – these days – I optimise for key-phrases, rather than just keywords.

13. Generally speaking, the more domain trust/authority your SITE has in Google, the easier it is for a new page to rank for something. So bear that in mind. There is

only so much you can do with your page titles – your websites rankings in Google are a LOT more to do with OFFSITE factors than ONSITE ones.

14. Also bear in mind, in 2012, the html title element you choose for your page, may not be what Google chooses to include in your SERP snippet. The search snippet title and description is very much *QUERY dependant* these days. Google often chooses what it *thinks* is the most relevant title for your search snippet, and it can **use information from your page, or in links to that page,** to create a very different SERP snippet title.

15. Click through rate is something that is likely measured by Google when ranking pages (Bing say they use it too, and they now power Yahoo), so it is really worth considering whether you are best optimising your page titles for click-through rate or optimising for more search engine rankings.

16. Google has been recorded recently discussing an 'over-optimisation' penalty. I would imagine keyword stuffing your page titles could be one area they look at.

17. Remember….think '*keyword phrase*' rather than '*keyword*', '*keyword*' ,'*keyword*'… but think UNIQUE keywords when dealing with single pages. That is – how many single unique keywords can you include on the page relevant to your main keyword phrase you are optimising for.

A Note About Title Tags;

When you write a page title, you have a chance right at the beginning of the page to tell Google (and other search engines) if this is a spam site or a quality site – such as – have you repeated the keyword 4 times or only once? I think title tags, like everything else, should probably be as simple as possible, with the keyword once and perhaps a related term if possible.

I always aim to keep my html page title elements things as simple and looking as human-generated and unique, as possible.
I'm certainly cleaning up the way I write my titles all the time. How do you do it?

More Reading:

- Home Page Title Is Wrong In Google Search Results
- How Many Characters In A Page Title For Google SEO?
- How Many Words In A Page Title Tag?
- Dynamic Titles In Google SERP Snippet
- How Google, Yahoo & MSN Handle Title Snippets If They Choke
- No Page Title In Google Results
- Google Will Use H1,H2,H3,H4,H5 & H6 Headers As Titles
- How Many Title Tag Characters Will Google Display in a Search Snippet

External Links

- http://www.w3.org/QA/Tips/good-titles.html
- http://www.seomoz.org/learn-seo/title-tag
- http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_title.asp
- http://searchengineland.com/writing-html-title-tags-humans-google-bing-59384
- http://searchenginewatch.com/article/2054494/Title-Tag-Copywriting-Tips-for-Newbie-SEOs

Meta Keywords Best Practice

A Bastian of crap and unethical search engine optimisation companies – the meta-keywords tag. How many crap seo companies mention cleaning and optimising this tag in their presentations? Companies that waste time on these waste clients' money.

<meta name="Keywords" content="seo, search engine optimisation, optimization">

I have one piece of advice with the meta keyword tag, which like the title tag, goes in the head section of your web page, **forget about them**.

If you are relying on meta-keyword optimisation to rank for terms, you're dead in the water. From what I see, Google + Bing ignores meta keywords - or at least places no weight in them to rank pages. Yahoo may read them, but really, a seo has more important things to worry about than this nonsense.

What about other search engines that use them? Hang on while I submit my site to those 75,000 engines first [sarcasm!]. Yes, 10 years ago search engines liked looking at your meta-keywords. I've seen OPs in forums ponder which is the best way to write these tags – with commas, with spaces, limiting to how many characters. Forget about meta-keyword tags – they are a pointless waste of time and bandwidth. Could probably save a rain-forest with the bandwidth costs we save if everybody removed their keyword tags?

Tin Foil Hat Time

So you have a new site….. you fill your home page meta tags with the 20 keywords you want to rank for – hey, that's what optimisation is all about, isn't it? You've just told Google by the third line of text what to sandbox you *for* and wasn't meta name="Keywords" originally for words that weren't actually on the page that would help classify the document? Sometimes competitors might

use the information in your keywords to determine what you are trying to rank for, too….

If everybody removed them and stopped abusing meta keywords Google would probably start looking at them but that's the way of things in search engines. I Ignore them. <u>Not even a 'second order' effect, in my opinion</u>.

Meta Description

Like the title element and **unlike** the meta keywords tag, this one is important, both from a human and search engine perspective.

> *<meta name="Description" content="Get your site on the first page of Google, Yahoo and Bing too, using simple seo. Call us on 0845 094 0839. A company based in Scotland." />*

Forget whether or not to put your keyword in it, make it relevant to a searcher and write it for humans, not search engines. If you want to have this 20 word snippet which accurately describes the page you have optimised for one or two keyword phrases when people use Google to search, make sure the keyword is in there.

I must say, I normally do include the keyword in the description as this usually gets it in your serp snippet, but I think it would be a fair guess to think more trusted sites would benefit more from any boost a keyword in the meta description tag might have, than an untrusted site would.

Google looks at the description but there is debate whether it actually uses the description tag to rank sites. I think they might at some level, but again, a very weak signal. I certainly don't know of an example that clearly shows a meta description helping a page rank.

Sometimes, I will ask a question with my titles, and answer it in the description, sometimes I will just give a hint;

It's also very important in my opinion to have *unique title tags* and **unique meta descriptions** on every page on your site. It's a preference of mine, but I don't generally autogenerate descriptions with my cms of choice either – normally I'll elect to remove the tag entirely before I do this, and my pages still do well (and Google generally pulls a decent snippet out on its own which you can then go back and optimise for serps. There are times when I do autogenerate descriptions and that's when I can still make them unique to the page using some sort of server-side php.

Tin Foil Hat Time
Sometimes I think if your titles are spammy, your keywords are spammy, and your meta description is spammy, Google might stop right there – even they probably will want to save bandwidth at some time. Putting a keyword in the description won't take a crap site to number 1 or raise you 50 spots in a competitive niche – so why optimise for a search engine when you can optimise for a human? – I think that is much more valuable, especially if you are in the mix already – that is – on page one for your keyword.

So, the meta description tag is important in Google, Yahoo and Bing and every other engine listing – very important to get it right. Make it for humans. Oh and by the way – Google seems to truncate anything over @156 characters in the meta description, although this may actually be limited by pixel width in 2013.

More Reading:

- http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/the-perfect-meta-description/
- http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/meta-description-seo-tests-will-google-yahoo-or-bing-use-it-for-ranking-pages/
- http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/google-reads-meta-description/
- http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=35624

Google SEO: Robots Meta Tag

OK – So I've theorised about the <u>Title Element</u>, the <u>Meta Description Tag</u> and the pointless <u>Meta Keywords Tag</u>. Next:

The Robots Meta Tag;

<meta name="robots" content="index, nofollow" />

I could use the above meta tag to tell Google to *index* the page but not to *follow* any links on the page, if for some reason; I did not want the page to appear in Google search results.

By default, Googlebot will index a page and follow links to it. So there's no need to tag pages with content values of INDEX or FOLLOW. **GOOGLE**

There are various instructions you can make use of in your Robots Meta Tag, but remember Google by default WILL index and follow links, so you have NO need to include that as a command – **you can leave the robots meta out completely – and probably should if you don't have a clue.** *Googlebot understands any combination of lowercase and uppercase.* **GOOGLE**.

Valid values for Robots Meta Tag "CONTENT" attribute are: "INDEX", "NOINDEX", "FOLLOW", "NOFOLLOW". Pretty self-explanatory.

Examples:

- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, FOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="INDEX, NOFOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOARCHIVE"
- META NAME="GOOGLEBOT" CONTENT="NOSNIPPET"
- Google will understand the following and interprets the following robots meta tag values:
- *NOINDEX - prevents the page from being included in the index.*
- *NOFOLLOW - prevents Googlebot from following any links on the page. (Note that this is different from the link-level NOFOLLOW attribute, which prevents Googlebot from following an individual link.)*
- *NOARCHIVE - prevents a cached copy of this page from being available in the search results.*
- *NOSNIPPET - prevents a description from appearing below the page in the search results, as well as prevents caching of the page.*
- *NOODP - blocks the Open Directory Project description of the page from being used in the description that appears below the page in the search results.*
- *NONE - equivalent to "NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW".*

Robots META Tag Quick Reference

Terms	Googlebot	Slurp	MSNBot	Teoma
NoIndex	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoFollow	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoArchive	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoSnippet	YES	NO	NO	NO
NoODP	YES	YES	YES	NO
NoYDIR	NO	YES	NO	NO
NoImageIndex	YES	NO	NO	NO
NoTranslate	YES	NO	NO	NO
Unavailable_After	YES	NO	NO	NO

I've included the robots meta tag in my tutorial as this is one of only a few meta tags / html head elements I focus on when it comes to Google (and Bing) seo. At a page level – it is quite powerful.

1. Title Element – *Important – Unique*
2. Meta Description (*optional but advisable in most cases*) – *Unique*
3. Robots Meta Tag (optional) – *Be Careful*
4. Canonical Meta Tag (optional – recommended) – *Be Vigilant*

If you are interested in using methods like on-page robots instructions and the robots.txt file to control which pages get indexed by Google and how Google treats them, Sebastian knows a lot more than me

External Links

- http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2007/03/using-robots-meta-tag.html
- http://www.robotstxt.org/meta.html
- http://googleblog.blogspot.co.uk/2007/02/robots-exclusion-protocol.html

H1-H6: Headers

I can't find any definitive proof online that says you need to use Heading Tags (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6) or that they improve rankings in Google, and I have seen pages do well in Google without them – but I do use them, especially the H1 tag on the page. For me it's another piece of a perfect page, in the traditional sense, and I try to build a site for Google and humans.

<h1>The Hobo SEO Company, Scotland</h1>

I still generally **only use one <h1> heading tag** in my keyword targeted pages – I believe this is the way the W3C intended it be used – and ensure they appear at the top of a page and written with my main keywords or keyword phrases incorporated. I have never experienced any problems using CSS to control the appearance of the heading tags making them larger or smaller.

I use as many H2 – H6 as is necessary depending on the size of the page, but generally I use H1, H2 & H3. You can see here how to use header tags properly.

How many words in the H1 Tag? As many as I think is sensible – as short and snappy as possible usually. Aaron Wall at SEOBook recommends not making your h1 tags the exact same as your page titles, although I personally have never seen a problem with this on a quality site. I also discovered Google will use your Header tags as page titles at some level if your title element is malformed.

As always be sure to make your heading tags highly relevant to the content on that page and not too spammy, either.

Google SEO: How Many Words & Keywords?

I get asked this all the time –

How much text do you put on a page to rank for a certain keyword?

Well, as in so much of SEO theory and strategy, there is **no optimal amount of text per page**.

Instead of thinking about the *quantity* of the text, you should think more about the *quality* of the content on the page. Optimise this with searcher intent in mind. Well, that's how I do it.

I don't subscribe that you need a minimum amount of words or text to rank in Google. I have seen pages with 50 words out rank pages with 100, 250, 500 or 1000 words. Then again I have seen pages with no text rank on nothing but inbound links or other 'strategy'. In 2012, Google is a lot better at hiding away those pages, though.
At the moment, I prefer long pages and a lot of text, still focused on a few related keywords and keyphrases to a page. Useful for long tail keyphrases and easier to explore related terms.

Every site is different. Some pages, for example, can get away with 50 words because of a good link profile and the domain it is hosted on. For me, the important thing is to make a page relevant to a user's search query.

I don't care how many words I achieve this with and often I need to experiment on a site I am unfamiliar with. After a while, you get an idea how much text you need to use to get a page on a certain domain into Google. One thing to note – the more text you add to the page, as long as it is unique, keyword rich and relevant, the more that page will be rewarded with more visitors from Google.

There is no optimal number of words on a page for placement in Google. Every website – every page – is different from what I can see. Don't worry too much about word count if your content is original and informative. Google will probably reward you on some level – at some point – if there is lots of unique text on all your pages.

- Character Counter Tool

Keyword Density?

The short answer to this is – **no**. There is no one-size-fits-all keyword density, no optimal percentage. I do not subscribe to the idea that there are a certain percentage of keywords per 1000 words of text to get a page to number 1 in Google. Search engines are not that easy although the key to success in many fields is simple seo.

I write natural page copy where possible always focused on the keyterms – I never calculate density in order to identify the best % – there are way too many other things to work on. Hey, I have looked, a long time ago. If it looks natural, it's ok with me. Normally I will try and get related terms in the page, and if I have 5 paragraphs, I might have the keyword in 4 or 5 of those as long as it doesn't look like I stuffed them in there.

I think optimal keyword density is a bit of a myth these days, although there are many who disagree.

Internal Links To Relevant Pages

I silo any relevance or trust mainly though links in text content and secondary menu systems and between pages that are relevant in context to one another. I don't worry about perfect silo'ing techniques any more, and don't worry about whether or not I should link to one category from another, as I think the 'boost' many proclaim is minimal on the size of sites I manage.

Sometimes I will ensure 10 pages link to 1 page in a theme, and not reciprocate this link. Other times, I will. It depends on the PR google juice I have to play with and again, if it feels right in the circumstance to do so, or the size of the site and how deep I am in the structure.

There's no set method I find works for every site, other than to **link to related internal pages often** and where appropriate – it's where I find some creativity.

Be careful overdoing internal linking.

Link Out To Related Sites

I am old school. I regularly link out to other quality relevant pages on other websites where possible and where a human would find it valuable.

I don't link out to other sites from homepage. I want all the PR residing in the home page to be shared only with my internal pages. **I don't link out to other sites from my category pages either**, for the same reason.

I link to other relevant sites (a deep link where possible) **from individual pages** and I do it often, usually. I don't worry about link equity or PR leak because I control it on a page to page level.

This works for me, it allows me to share the link equity I have with other sites while ensuring it is not at the expense of pages on my own domain. It may even help get me into a 'neighbourhood' of relevant sites, especially when some of those start linking back to my site.

Linking out to other sites, especially using a blog also helps tell others that might be interested in your content that your page is 'here'. Try it. Generally I won't link out to sites using the exact keyword /phrase I am targeting, but I will be considerate, and usually try and link out to a site using keywords these bloggers / site owners would appreciate.

Redirect Non WWW To WWW

Simply put, http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/ can be treated by Google as a different url than http://hobo-web.co.uk/ even though it's the same page, and it can get even more complicated.

It's thought PageRank and Google Juice can be diluted if Google gets confused about your URLS and speaking simply you don't want this PR diluted (in seo theory).

That's why many, including myself, redirect non-www to www (or vice versa) if the site is on a linux / apache server (in the htaccess file –

Options +FollowSymLinks

RewriteEngine on

RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^hobo-web.co.uk [NC]

RewriteRule ^(.)$ http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/$1 [L,R=301]*

Basically you are redirecting all the Google juice to one url.
Do you need to do this? **Of course not**. As standard these days, *I do* however. It keeps it simple, when optimising for Google.

It should be noted, it's **incredibly important not to mix the two types of www/non-www on site when linking your own internal pages**!

Google can handle most sites no problem even without this measure being taken, and it's certainly no magic bullet implementing this canonicalization fix. Note Google asks you which canonical version one to pick in Google Webmaster Tools.

Alt Tags

NOTE: Alt Tags are counted by Google (and Bing), but I would be careful *over-optimizing* them. I've seen a lot of websites penalized for over-optimising invisible elements on a page.

ALT tags are very important and I think a very rewarding area to get right. I always put the main keyword in an ALT once when addressing a page. Don't optimise your ALT tags (or rather, attributes) JUST for Google!

Use ALT tags (or rather, ALT Attributes) for descriptive text that helps visitors – and keep them unique where possible, like you do with your titles and meta descriptions.

Don't obsess. Don't optimise your ALT tags just for Google – do it for humans, for accessibility and usability. If you are interested, I ran a simple test using ALT attributes to determine how many words I could use in IMAGE ALT text that Google would pick up.

And remember – even if, like me most days, you can't be bothered with all the image ALT tags on your page, at least use a blank ALT (or NULL value) so people with screen readers can enjoy your page.

Update 17/11/08 – Picked This Up At SERoundtable about Alt Tags:

JohnMu from Google: **alt attribute** *should be used to describe the image. So if you have an image of a big blue pineapple chair you should use the alt tag that best describes it, which is alt="big blue pineapple chair."* **title attribute** *should be used when the image is a hyperlink to a specific page. The title attribute should contain information about what will happen when you click on the image. For example, if the image will get larger, it should read*

something like, title="View a larger version of the big blue pineapple chair image."

Barry continues with a quote:

As the Googlebot does not see the images directly, we generally concentrate on the information provided in the "alt" attribute. Feel free to supplement the "alt" attribute with "title" and other attributes if they provide value to your users! So for example, if you have an image of a puppy (these seem popular at the moment) playing with a ball, you could use something like "My puppy Betsy playing with a bowling ball" as the alt-attribute for the image. If you also have a link around the image, pointing a large version of the same photo, you could use "View this image in high-resolution" as the title attribute for the link.

Search Engine Friendly URLs (SEF)

Clean URLS (or search engine friendly urls) are just that – easy to read, simple. **You do not need clean urls in a site architecture for Google to spider a site successfully (**Update 23/9/08 – apparently confirmed by Google**)**, although I do use clean urls as a default these days, and have done so for years.

The thinking is that you might get a boost in Google SERPS if your URLS are clean – because you are using keywords in the actual page name instead of a parameter or ID number. Google might reward the page some sort of relevance because of the actual file / page name.

Google does reward pages with keywords in the url, and they can also form part of a link to your site if shared in a forum, for instance.

Sometimes I will remove the stop-words from a url and leave the important keywords as the page title because a lot of forums garble a url to shorten it. I configure urls the following way;

1.   www.hobo-web.co.uk/?p=292 — is automatically changed by the CMS using url rewrite to

2.   www.hobo-web.co.uk/websites-clean-search-engine-friendly-urls/ — which I then break down to something like

3.   www.hobo-web.co.uk/search-engine-friendly-urls/

It should be remembered it is thought although Googlebot can crawl sites with dynamic URLs, it is assumed by many webmasters there is a greater risk that it will give up if the urls are deemed not important and contain multiple variables and session IDs (theory).

As standard, I use clean URLS where possible on new sites these days, and try to keep the URLS as simple as possible and do not obsess about it. That's my aim at all times when I seo – simplicity.

Be aware though – Google does look at keywords in the URL even in a granular level. Having a keyword in your URL might be the difference between your site rankings and not – check out:

- Does Google Count A Keyword In The URI (Filename) When Ranking A Page?

Keywords In Bold Or Italic

As I mentioned in the <u>ALT Tag seo tip</u>, some seo proclaim **putting your keywords in bold** or *putting your keywords in italics* is a benefit in terms of search engine optimizing a page – as if they are working their way through a check list.

It's impossible to test this, and I think these days, Google might be using this to identify what to derank a site for, not promote it in SERPS.
I use bold or italics these days specifically for users. Only if it's *natural* or **this is really what I want to emphasise**!

Don't tell Google what to sandbox you for that easily!

Which Is Best? Absolute Or Relative URLS

This is another one of those areas in SEO or website development that you shouldn't be concerned about. My advice would be to keep it consistent.

Which Is Better? – Absolute Or Relative URLS?

I prefer absolute urls. That's just a preference. Google doesn't care so neither do I, really. I have just gotten into the habit of using absolute urls.

- What is an absolute URL? Example – http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/search-engine-optimisation/
- What is a relative URL? Example – /search-engine-optimisation.htm

Relative just means relative to the document the link is on. Move that page to another site and it won't work. With an absolute URL, it would work.

Which Is Best For Google – Subfolders or Files?

Another one to forget about. Sometimes I use subfolders and sometimes I use files. I have not been able to decide if there is any real benefit (in terms of seo) to using either. A lot of CMS these days (2012) seem to use subfolders in their file path, so I am pretty confident Google can deal with either.

I used to prefer files like **.html** when I was building a new site from scratch, as they were the 'end of the line' for search engines, as I imagined it, and a subfolder (or directory) was a *collection* of pages. I used to think it could take more to get a subfolder trusted than say an individual file and I guess this sways me to use files on most websites I created (back in the day). Once subfolders are trusted, it's 6 or half a dozen, what the actual difference is in terms of ranking in Google – usually; rankings in Google are more determined by how RELEVANT or REPUTABLE a page is to a query.

In the past, subfolders could be treated differently than files (in my experience). Subfolders can be trusted less than other subfolders or pages in your site, or ignored entirely. Subfolders *used to seem to me* to take a *little* longer to get indexed by Google, than for instance **.html** pages.

People talk about <u>trusted domains</u> but they don't mention (or don't think) some parts of the domain can be *trusted less*. Google treats some subfolders….. differently. Well, they used to – and remembering how Google *used* to handle things has some benefits – even in 2012.

Some say don't go beyond 4 levels of folders in your file path. I haven't experienced too many issues, but you never know.

UPDATED – I think in 2012 it's even less of something to worry about. There are so much more important elements to check.

Which Is Better For Google? PHP, HTML or ASP?

Google doesn't care. As long as it renders as a browser compatible document, it appears Google can read it these days.

I prefer php these days even with flat documents as it is easier to add server side code to that document if I want to add some sort of function to the site.

Does W3C Valid HTML / CSS Help SEO?

Does Google rank a page higher because of valid code? The short answer is no, even though I tested it on a small scale test with different results.

Google doesn't care if your page is valid html and valid css. This is clear – check any top ten results in Google and you will probably see that most contain invalid HTML or CSS. I love creating accessible websites but they are a bit of a pain to manage when you have multiple authors or developers on a site.

If your site is so badly designed with a lot of invalid code even Google and browsers cannot read it, then you have a problem.

Where possible, if commissioning a new website, demand at least minimum accessibility compliance on a site (there are three levels of priority to meet), and aim for valid html and css. Actually this is the law in some countries although you would not know it, and be prepared to put a bit of work in to keep your rating.

Valid HTML and CSS are a pillar of best practice website optimisation, not strictly search engine optimisation (SEO). It is one form of optimisation Google will not penalise you for.

301 Old Pages

I have no problem permanently redirecting a page to a relatively similar page to pool any link power that page might have.

My general rule of thumb is to make sure the information (and keywords) is contained in the new page – stay on the safe side.

Most already know the power of a 301 and how you can use it to power even totally unrelated pages to the top of Google for a time – sometimes a very long time.

Google seems to think server side redirects are OK – so I use them.
You can change the focus of a redirect but that's a bit black hat for me and can be abused – I don't really talk about that sort of thing on this blog. But it's worth knowing – you need to keep these redirects in place in your htaccess file.

Redirecting multiple old pages to one new page – works for me, if the information is there on the new page that ranked the old page.

NOTE – This tactic is being heavily spammed in 2013. Be careful with redirects.

BE CAREFUL - I think I have seen penalties transferred via 301s. I also WOULDN'T REDIRECT 301s blindly to your home page. I'd also be careful of redirecting lots of low quality links to one url. If you need a page to redirect old urls to, consider your sitemap or contact page.

Penalty For Duplicate Content On-Site?

I am always on the look for duplicate content issues. Generally speaking, Google will identify the best pages on your site if you have a decent on-site architecture. It's usually pretty decent at this but it totally depends on where you are linkbuilding to within the site and how your site navigation is put together.

Don't invite duplicate content issues. I don't consider it a penalty you receive in general for duplicate content – you're just not getting the most benefit. You're website content isn't being what it could be – a contender.

But this should be common sense. Google wants and rewards original content. Google doesn't like duplicate content, and it's a footprint of most spam sites. You don't want to look anything like a spam site.

The more you can make it look a human built every page on a page by page basis with content that doesn't appear exactly in other areas of the site – the more Google will like it. Google does not like automation when it comes to building a website, that's for clear. (Unique titles, meta descriptions, keyword tags, content.)

I don't mind Category duplicate content – as with WordPress – it can even help sometimes to spread PR and theme a site. But I generally wouldn't have tags **and** categories, for instance.

I'm not that bothered with 'theming' at this point to recommend silo'ing your content or no-indexing your categories. If I am not theming enough with proper content and mini-silo'ing to related pages from this page and to this page I should go home. Most sites in my opinion don't need to silo their content – the scope of the content is just not that broad.

Keep in mind Google won't thank you for spidering a calendar folder with 10,000 blank pages on it – why would they. They may even algorithmically tick you off.

PS – Duplicate content found on other sites? Now that's a totally different problem.

UPDATED: See Google Advice on Duplicate Content.

Broken Links Are A Waste Of Link Power

make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site

This advice is still sound today and the most important piece of advice out there in my opinion. Yes it's so simple it's stupid.

Check your pages for broken links. Seriously, broken links are a waste of link power and could hurt your site, drastically in some cases. Google is a link based search engine – if your links are broken and your site is chock full of 404s you might not be at the races.

Here's the second best piece of advice in my opinion seeing as we are just about talking about website architecture;

Link to your important pages often internally, with varying anchor text in the navigation and in page text content

…. especially if you do not have a lot of PageRank to begin with!

Do I Need A Google XML Sitemap For My Website?

(The XML Sitemap protocol) has wide adoption, including support from Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft

No. You do not need a XML Sitemap to optimise a site for Google, again, if you have a sensible navigation system. But it's wise to have one.

A XML Sitemap is a method by which you can help a search engine, including Google, find & index all the pages on your site. Sometimes useful for very large sites, perhaps if the content changes often, but still not *necessary* if you have a good navigation system.

1. Make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site

2. Link to your important pages often, with varying anchor text, in the navigation and **in page text content**

Remember Google needs links to find all the pages on your site. *Sitemaps are an easy way for webmasters to inform search engines about pages on their sites that are available for crawling. In its simplest form, a Sitemap is an XML file that lists URLs for a site along with additional metadata about each URL (when it was last updated, how often it usually changes, and how important it is, **relative to other URLs in the site**) so that search engines can more intelligently crawl the site.*

I don't use xml sitemaps that much at all, as I am confident I can get all my pages indexed via links on the website and via RSS feed if I am blogging. **I would however suggest you use a 'website' sitemap** – a list of the important pages on your site.

Some CMS can auto-generate xml sitemaps, and <u>Google does ask you submit a site map in webmaster tools</u>, but I still don't. If you want to find out more go to<u>http://www.sitemaps.org/</u>

I prefer to manually define my important pages by links, and 'old – style' getting my pages indexed via links from other websites. I also recognise not all websites are the same.

You can make an xml site online at <u>http://www.xml-sitemaps.com/</u> if you decide they are for you.

Does Only The First Link Count In Google?

Does the second anchor text link on a page count?

One of the more interesting discussions in the seo community of late has been trying to determine which links Google counts as links on pages on your site. Some say the link Google finds higher in the code, is the link Google will 'count', if there are two links on a page going to the same page.

Update – I tested this recently with the post Google Counts The First Internal Link.

For example (and I am talking internal here – if you took a page and I placed two links on it, both going to the same page? (OK – hardly scientific, but you should get the idea). Will Google only 'count' the first link? Or will it read the anchor txt of both links, and give my page the benefit of the text in both links especially if the anchor text is different in both links? Will Google ignore the second link?

What is interesting to me is that knowing this leaves you with a question. If your navigation array has your main pages linked to in it, perhaps your links in content are being ignored, or at least, not valued.

I think links in body text are invaluable. Does that mean placing the navigation below the copy to get a wide and varied internal anchor text to a page? Perhaps.

Canonical Tag – Canonical Link Element Best Practice

Google SEO – Matt Cutts from Google shares tips on the new rel="canonical" tag (more accurately – the *canonical link element*) that the 3 top search engines now support. Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft have all agreed to work together in a *"joint effort to help reduce duplicate content for larger, more complex sites and the result is the new Canonical Tag"*.

Example Canonical Tag From Google Webmaster Central blog:

```
<link rel="canonical"
href="http://www.example.com/product.php?item=swedish-fish" />
```

You can put this link tag in the head section of the duplicate content urls, if you think you need it.

I add a self-referring canonical link element as standard these days – to ANY web page.
Is rel="canonical" a hint or a directive?
It's a hint that we honour strongly. We'll take your preference into account, in conjunction with other signals, when calculating the most relevant page to display in search results.

Can I use a relative path to specify the canonical, such as <link rel="canonical" href="product.php?item=swedish-fish" />?
*Yes, relative paths are recognized as expected with the **<link>** tag. Also, if you include a **<base>** link in your document, relative paths will resolve according to the base URL.*

Is it okay if the canonical is not an exact duplicate of the content?
We allow slight differences, e.g., in the sort order of a table of products. We

also recognize that we may crawl the canonical and the duplicate pages at different points in time, so we may occasionally see different versions of your content. All of that is okay with us.

What if the rel="canonical" returns a 404?

We'll continue to index your content and use a heuristic to find a canonical, but we recommend that you specify existent URLs as canonicals.

What if the rel="canonical" hasn't yet been indexed?

Like all public content on the web, we strive to discover and crawl a designated canonical URL quickly. As soon as we index it, we'll immediately reconsider the rel="canonical" hint.

Can rel="canonical" be a redirect?

Yes, you can specify a URL that redirects as a canonical URL. Google will then process the redirect as usual and try to index it.

What if I have contradictory rel="canonical" designations?

Our algorithm is lenient: We can follow canonical chains, but we strongly recommend that you update links to point to a single canonical page to ensure optimal canonicalization results.

Can this link tag be used to suggest a canonical URL on a completely different domain?

Update on 12/17/2009: The answer is yes! We now support a _cross-domain rel="canonical"_ link element.

More reading

- http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/specify-your-canonical.html

How To Implement Google Authorship Markup – What is Rel Author & Rel Me?

Google is piloting the display of author information in search results to help users discover great content. Google.

We've implemented Google Authorship Markup on the Hobo blog so my profile pic appears in Google search snippets.

This helps draw attention to your search listing in Google, and may increase click-through rate for your listing. Many expect Authorship reputation to play a role in rankings in the near future. Google has released videos to help you get your face in Google serps. If you have a Google profile (or Google Plus) you can implement these so that you can get a more eye-catching serp snippet in Google results.

http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/how-to-implement-google-authorship-markup/

Rich Snippets

Rich Snippets in Google enhance your search listing in Google search engine results pages. You can include reviews of your products or services, for instance. Rich Snippets help draw attention to your listing in serps. You've no doubt seen yellow stars in Google natural results listings, for instance.

What Not To Do In SEO

Google has now released a search engine optimisation starter guide for webmasters, which they use internally:

Although this guide won't tell you any secrets that'll automatically rank your site first for queries in Google (sorry!), following the best practices outlined below will make it easier for search engines to both crawl and index your content. Google

Still worth a read even if it is fairly basic, generally accepted (in the industry) best practice search engine optimisation for your site.
Here's a list of **what Google tells you to avoid** in the document;

1. choosing a title that has no relation to the content on the page

2. using default or vague titles like "Untitled" or "New Page 1″

3. using a single title tag across all of your site's pages or a large group of pages

4. using extremely lengthy titles that are unhelpful to users

5. stuffing unneeded keywords in your title tags

6. writing a description meta tag that has no relation to the content on the page

7. using generic descriptions like "This is a webpage" or "Page about baseball cards"

8. filling the description with only keywords

9. copy and pasting the entire content of the document into the description meta tag

10. using a single description meta tag across all of your site's pages or a large group of pages

11. using lengthy URLs with unnecessary parameters and session IDs

12. choosing generic page names like "page1.html"

13. using excessive keywords like "baseball-cards-baseball-cards-baseball-cards.htm"

14. having deep nesting of subdirectories like ".../dir1/dir2/dir3/dir4/dir5/dir6/page.html"

15. using directory names that have no relation to the content in them

16. having pages from subdomains and the root directory (e.g. "domain.com/page.htm" and "sub.domain.com/page.htm") access the same content

17. mixing www. and non-www. versions of URLs in your internal linking structure

18. using odd capitalization of URLs (many users expect lower-case URLs and remember them better)

19. creating complex webs of navigation links, e.g. linking every page on your site to every other page

20. going overboard with slicing and dicing your content (it takes twenty clicks to get to deep content)

21. having a navigation based entirely on drop-down menus, images, or animations (many, but not all, search engines can discover such links on a site, but if a user can reach all pages on a site via normal text links, this will improve the accessibility of your site)

22. letting your HTML sitemap page become out of date with broken links

23. creating an HTML sitemap that simply lists pages without organizing them, for example by subject (Edit Shaun – Safe to say especially for larger sites)

24. allowing your 404 pages to be indexed in search engines (make sure that your webserver is configured to give a404 HTTP status code when non-existent pages are requested)

25. providing only a vague message like "Not found", "404″, or no 404 page at all

26. using a design for your 404 pages that isn't consistent with the rest of your site

27. writing sloppy text with many spelling and grammatical mistakes

28. embedding text in images for textual content (users may want to copy and paste the text and search engines can't read it)

29. dumping large amounts of text on varying topics onto a page without paragraph, subheading, or layout separation

30. rehashing (or even copying) existing content that will bring little extra value to users

Pretty simple stuff but sometimes it's the simple seo often get overlooked. Of course, you put the above together with Google Guidelines for webmasters. *Search engine optimization is often about making small modifications to parts of your website. When viewed individually, these changes might seem like incremental improvements, but when combined with other optimizations, they could have a noticeable impact on your site's user experience and performance in organic search results.*

Don't make simple mistakes…..

1. Avoid duplicating content on your site found on other sites. Yes, Google likes content, but it *usually* needs to be well linked to, unique and original to get you to the top!

2. Don't hide text on your website. Google may eventually remove you from the SERPS (search engine results pages).

3. Don't buy 1000 links and think "that will get me to the top!" Google likes natural link growth and often frowns on mass link buying.

4. Don't get everybody to link to you using the same "anchor text" or link phrase. This could flag you as an seo.

5. Don't chase Google PR by chasing 100′s of links. Think quality of links….not quantity.

6. Don't buy many keyword rich domains, fill them with similar content and link them to your site, no matter what your seo company says. This is lazy seo and could see you ignored or worse banned from Google. It might have worked yesterday but it sure does not work today!

7. Do not constantly change your site pages names or site navigation. This just screws you up in any search engine.

8. Do not build a site with a JavaScript navigation that Google, Yahoo and MSN cannot crawl.

9. Do not link to everybody who asks you for reciprocal links. Only link out to quality sites you feel can be trusted.

10. Do not submit your website to Google via submission tools. Get a link on a trusted site and you will get into Google in a week or less.

Remember to keep up to date with Google Webmaster Guidelines. :)

What are unnatural links?

Well, if you've been actively promoting your website, sit back for a moment and think about all the links you managed to generate to your site because you DID NOT come from a position of actually building a rich informative site – yes – all those links. If you paid someone else like a seo to get you links, yes, those links (probably). If you are using cheap submission services that actually are not a scam, yes those links. Those tactics to get easy-to-get links you got that were linking to your competitors' websites? Yes, those links.

In short – if you are using unnatural links to get top positions and don't deserve them Google will nuke your site if it detects them. Google knows exactly which keywords to hit you for to destroy your ability to rank. Sometimes keyword phrase by keyword phrase, sometimes page by page – sometimes site by site!

I've seen sites penalised for their main keyword and the main keyword in anchor text back links from other sites is not the problem.

Content Keywords

Keyword	Significance
1. google (5 variants)	████████████
2. seo (3 variants)	██████████░░
3. hobo (3 variants)	██████░░░░░░
4. blog (7 variants)	████░░░░░░░░
5. says (2 variants)	█████░░░░░░░

It's NOT ALL manipulative links Google is penalising, either. Many manipulative links still work – but Google is good at detecting a lot of them.

Sensible opportunistic links still pass a manual review, it appears. Paid links and lots of '*spam*' still dominate lots of competitive niches – that is – white hat seo has little, if any chance, of ranking in these serps.

The important thing to realise is there is a certain amount of risk now associated with backlinks that point to any site and any page.

How Do I know if I have unnatural links?

If you honestly do not have a clue….

Google is telling a lot of people by email if you are subscribed in Google Webmaster Tools. If you have unnatural links you need to worry about – the best place I think to detect any issues is rather obviously Google Analytics.

There is a case to be said Google is kind-of forcing people into using Google Webmaster Tools.

What happens to my site if Google detects unnatural links?

Sometimes you'll get an email from Google:

Dear site owner or webmaster of http://www.example.com/, We've detected that some of your site's pages may be using techniques that are outside Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Specifically, look for possibly artificial or unnatural links

pointing to your site that could be intended to manipulate PageRank. Examples of unnatural linking could include buying links to pass PageRank or participating in link schemes. We encourage you to make changes to your site so that it meets our quality guidelines. Once you've made these changes, please submit your site for reconsideration in Google's search results. If you find unnatural links to your site that you are unable to control or remove, please provide the details in your reconsideration request. If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please see our Webmaster Help Forum for support.

Sincerely,

Google Search Quality Team

Google is moving in various directions:

In less severe cases, we sometimes target specific spammy or artificial links created as part of a link scheme and distrust only those links, rather than taking action on a site's overall ranking. The new messages make it clear that we are taking "targeted action on the unnatural links instead of your site as a whole."

Other times the indicators might be more subtle. You might not rank at all in Google for something you used to rank for very well for. Your traffic might reduce month by month. You might disappear overnight for valuable keywords associated with your content. You might disappear for one keyword phrase. You might be reviewed manually. If you are actually penalised, you're going to have clean your links up if you want to restore your 'reputation' in Google. Penalties can last from 30 days to, well, forever (if the penalty is a manual action).

Google appears to crawls a site slower under a penalty. Google caches changes to your pages a lot less frequently, too, it appears and new content seems to struggle a bit more to actually get into Google. In some case – you might not rank for your brand name (like happened to Interflora a few weeks ago). In the very worst cases – your site can disappear from Google.

When you get a penalty revoked, things start to get back to normal within a month or two.

What can I do about unnatural links?

If you are a small business – you probably don't want to start again with a new domain. Do you want to use 301 redirects to postpone a Google slap? That option works, for at least, a while. The best option is to clean them up.

First, you'll need to download your backlinks from Google.

Download links to your site

On the Webmaster Tools home page, click the site you want.

*On the Dashboard, click **Traffic**, and then click **Links to Your Site**.*

*Under **Who links the most**, click **More**.*

*Click **Download more sample links**. If you click **Download latest links**, you'll see dates as well.*

Note: When looking at the links to your site in Webmaster Tools, you may want to verify both the www and the non-vww version of your domain in your Webmaster Tools account. To Google, these are entirely different sites. Take a look at the data for both sites. More information

Which unnatural links am I supposed to worry about?

I think these can be summed up if you are ranking for money terms with a low quality site and have:

a high % of backlinks on low quality sites

a high % of backlinks on duplicate articles

a high % of links with duplicate anchor text

Basically the stuff that used to work so well for everyone and is mainly detectable by Googlebot. Google doesn't just ignore these links anymore if intent to manipulate Google is easy to work out. Most low quality links are (probably) easy to detect algorithmically.

Do I need to remove bad links?

We know that perhaps not every link can be cleaned up, but in order to deem a reconsideration request as successful, we need to see a substantial good-faith effort to remove the links, and this effort should result in a decrease in the number of bad links that we see. GOOGLE

It kind of looks as though we're going to have to, especially if you receive a manual action notice.

How To Remove Unnatural Links

There are services popping up everywhere offering to remove unnatural links – I'll blog about those later as I have little experience with any of them. An seo needs to be able to deal with this new problem in seo with the very basic of tools.

I've had success using simple methods.

Removing pages that are the target of unnatural links

Google Webmaster Tools

Excel

PageRank

Do I need to audit my backlinks?

Most definitely. Google is fully expected to make a lot of noise about unnatural links this year, and that always involves website rankings being nuked with traffic decimated, and lots of 'collateral' damage.

Whether or not you eventually use the Disavow Tool in Google, you should be looking at your backlink profile and see what various links are doing to your rankings for instance. You should at least know who links to you, and the risk to high rankings now attached to those links.

Download your links from Google Webmaster Tools, pop them into Excel. I assume you have **SEO Tools for Excel** (I also have **URL Tools** installed)?

Get the root domain of each link (I've used URL Tools for this for a while), and check its toolbar PageRank with SEO Tools for excel. Most of those links with zero -1 PageRank on the domain are worth looking at. Do the same for the actual page your links are on (on domains with PR). Similarly, if you have lots of links and all your links are on page with -1. That's probably not good indicator of reputation.

If you have a LOT of links (tens of thousands) filtering, in Excel, for only unique domains can speed up this process.

I normally get the PAGE TITLE of the linking page too (using SEO Tools for Excel), so I can easily detect duplicate articles on lower quality sites, and sites not yet affected by a PageRank drop.

Of course, there are some false positives. PageRank can be glitchy, or flat out misleading. So a human eye is often needed to reduce these. If you are using this method, you can run it again in the future and see if sites you identified as low quality by PageRank have changed, and perhaps modify your disavow list.

Using this method I've successfully identified lower quality sites fairly easily. To be fair, I know a crap link. Ultimately, if you have a lot of links, you can never be too sure which particular links are 'toxic'. It may very well be the volume of a specific tactic used that gets your site in trouble – and not one solitary link.

If you have a load of low quality directory submissions in your backlink profile, or have taken part in low quality article marketing recently, the next Google update might just be targeted at you (if it hasn't already had an impact on your rankings).

Once you've examined your links and identified low quality links, you can then submit a list of links to Google in a simple text file called **disavow.txt**.

What is the disavow Tool?

A tool provided by Google in Google Webmaster Tools. You can specify which domains you want to disavow the links from (you can also specify individual pages). Generally speaking if disavowing a link, you are better of disavowing the entire domain (if it is a spammy domain).

The disavow.txt is just a simple text file with the following list of domains:

- domain:google.com

- domain:plus.google.com

The way it appears to work is you tell Google which links to ignore when they are calculating whether or not to rank you high or boot your rankings in the balls.

If you've done as much work as you can to remove spammy or low-quality links from the web, and are unable to make further progress on getting the links taken down, you can disavow the remaining links. In other words, you can ask Google not to take certain links into account when assessing your site. GOOGLE

Should I use the Disavow Tool?

This is an advanced feature and should only be used with caution. If used incorrectly, this feature can potentially harm your site's performance in Google's search results. We recommend that you disavow backlinks only if you believe you have a considerable number of spammy, artificial, or low-quality links pointing to your site, and if you are confident that the links are causing issues for you. In most cases, Google can assess which links to trust without additional guidance, so most normal or typical sites will not need to use this tool. Google

Some might recommend pulling links down instead of using this tool from Google. Lots of people have different angles. If you have a manual penalty, you'll probably also need to actually get some of these links physically removed, too. Yes that means emailing them.

If you get a manual penalty, have lots of links and actually removing the low quality links is going to be a hard task - definitely. I'm also proactively using it on sites that are obviously algorithmically penalised for particular keywords or on links I expect will cause a problem later on. One would expect penalties are based on algorithmic detection on some level for some sites.

If you've ever attempted to manipulate Google, now's the time to at least quantify the risk attached with those links.

Its clear Google is better at identifying your low quality links. Google already knows about your crap links. Google is very definitely ignoring some of your links. Google has probably already has penalised you in areas and you probably are not aware of it. For instance, I've helped a few sites that got the unnatural links message that were clearly algorithmically slapped a year before and never noticed it until it started to hurt.

Using the disavow tool

1. Upload a list of links to disavow:

2. Go to the <u>disavow links tool page</u>.

3. Select your website.

4. Click **Disavow links**.

5. Click **Choose file**.

Google says:

It may take some time for Google to process the information you've uploaded. In particular, this information will be incorporated into our index as we recrawl the web and reprocess the pages that we see, which can take a number of weeks.

… and they are telling it like it is.

<u>You really do need to wait for a few weeks (after you submit your disavow list) before you submit a reinclusion request (if you have a manual penalty)</u>.

Will your rankings come back?

This depends on what, if any, quality signals are left in your backlink profile and what's happening in your niche. If you have decent links, individual rankings can come back, that is for sure. I've yet to see a site where total traffic levels have come back to previous best positions. Sometimes there's just better, more information rich pages out there these days. Often, there are always a couple of low quality or spammy sites between your site and number 1 in Google. Hey, there's always Adwords.

But YES, I've seen rankings come back after a manual penalty. Sometimes better than they were before. I've yet to see site-wide traffic levels return to normal in most cases.

Are you really penalised, or is Google just ignoring your links?

If you start with nothing, get top rankings in 3 months, and then end up with nothing. Are you really penalised? Or is Google just ignoring your links? If the 'penalty' is an algorithmic shift, then by the very nature of it, getting good links (links Google has no reason to believe are suspect) to your website should tip the balance in your favour again.

Google can't tell the difference between good seo and good spam. The payday loans market is taking a pounding at the minute as some folk brute force Google's algorithms using basic protocols Google basically has to respect (for now at least).

If you see obviously spammy links to your site, and your rankings are in the toilet, perhaps disavowing the links is an option. I've seen improvement, and heard of other successes using the tool. For me, the jury is still out on whether you can actually use the disavow tool as a new seo tool.

Link Schemes

Google is getting serious with what it calls link schemes (ways to get easy links):

What Google says about link schemes:

Your site's ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to you. The quantity, quality, and relevance of links influence your ranking. The sites that link to you can provide context about the subject matter of your site, and can indicate its quality and popularity. Any links intended to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme. This includes any behaviour that manipulates links to your site, or outgoing links from your site. Manipulating these links may affect the quality of our search results, and as such is a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. The following are examples of link schemes which can negatively impact a site's ranking in search results:

Some examples include:

- Buying or selling links that pass PageRank. This includes exchanging money for links, or posts that contain links; exchanging goods or services for links; or sending someone a "free" product in exchange for them writing about it and including a link

- Excessive link exchanging ("Link to me and I'll link to you")

- Linking to web spammers or unrelated sites with the intent to manipulate PageRank

- Building partner pages exclusively for the sake of cross-linking

- Using automated programs or services to create links to your site

- Text advertisements that pass PageRank

- Links that are inserted into articles with little coherence, for example:

- Low-quality directory or bookmark site links

- Links embedded in widgets that are distributed across various sites:

- Widely distributed links in the footers of various sites

- Forum comments with optimized links in the post or signature, for example

What Google says about building natural links:

The best way to get other sites to create relevant links to yours is to create unique, relevant content that can quickly gain popularity in the Internet community. The more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will find that content valuable to their readers and link to it. Before making any single decision, you should ask yourself: Is this going to be beneficial for my page's visitors? It is not only the number of links you have pointing to your site that matters, but also the quality and relevance of those links. Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the buzzing blogger community can be an excellent place to generate interest.

Ironically Google has ignored their own rules on many occasions with apparently - little long term consequence. Big brands too have been recently hit, including (in the UK) the BBC and INTERFLORA. Big brands certainly DO seem to be able to get away with a LOT more than your average webmaster, and so these problems often are often short-lived, especially if they make the news.

So how do we get natural links?

The simple answer is we're all going to have to think harder and work harder to get links from real sites. I think it's fair to say you need to avoid links from websites designed to give you a link. It's hard not to think Google will at some point takedown guest blogs and press release sites, much like the recent action they took on advertorials.

I'd certainly:

- stay away from just about all ARTICLE SITES

- avoid most DIRECTORIES and

- avoid most BLOG NETWORKS

- IGNORE LOW QUALITY SPAM EMAILS offering you links (or cheap seo services).

- be wary of ADVERTORIALS

- avoid LOW QUALITY GUEST POSTS and

- avoid LOW QUALITY, OFF TOPIC SITEWIDE LINKS.

Have a think for a minute and work out if the article you are going to have a link on will end up duplicated across many low quality sites, for a start.

NOTE – In my experience you do not need to remove every instance of a site-wide link. NOT if they are on topic, and editorially given.

Will my competitor be penalised for unnatural links?

Your guess is as good as mine. Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't. You can always tell Google about them or out them in Google forums. If you have the energy to be bothered with that – perhaps focusing some of this on making your site a better landing prospect for Google's customers is a more productive use of your time.

Why doesn't Google just ignore bad links?

Where would the fun in that be? Google wants our focus on low quality backlinks now, and so, it is. It's in Google's interest to keep us guessing at every stage of seo.

Is linkbuilding Dead?

No – this is what seo (I use the term collectively) is all about. If Google didn't do this every now and again, 'search engine optimisation' wouldn't exist. Opportunity will exist as long as Google doesn't do away with organic listings because they can't be trusted or produce a 'frustrating' user experience in themselves. Not until Google convince people of that.

One thing has been constant in Google since day 2. SPAM, or Sites Positioned Above Me. I think it's safe to say there will always be spam; some of your competition will always use methods that break the rules and beat you down. There will be ways to get around Google – at least, there always has.

I can tell you I am auditing the backlink profiles of clients we work with – and new projects I'm invited to advise on. Those obviously manipulative backlinks aren't going to increase in quality over time, and if Google is true to its word, it might just slap us for them.

Matt said that there will be a large Penguin ("webspam algorithm update") update in 2013 that he thinks will be one of the more talked about Google algorithm updates this year. Google's search quality team is working on a major update to the Penguin algorithm, which Cutts called very significant. The last Penguin update we have on record was Penguin 3 in October 2012. Before that, we had Penguin 2 in May 2012 and the _initial release_ *in April. SEARCH ENGINE LAND*

Summary

Google is very serious about messing with the longevity and confidence in SEO. We are told to expect a new update from Google 2013 that will hit a lot of sites. The jury is out if the disavow tool SHOULD be used on fringe cases without manual penalties. If you get a manual penalty, you'll probably have to remove links and use the disavow tool.

Audit your back links if nothing else. Consider using the disavow tool to tackle obvious algorithmic penalties if traffic is taking a nosedive, or a site you know will take a hit in the next Google Penguin update. There are arguments against this, mind you, but **low quality unnatural links are certainly going to have to be addressed** for sites with little online business authority themselves – and probably even more so for sites that exist to profit from natural seo traffic.

You are going to hear a lot about 'content marketing' in 2013.

You still **need to be building links**, but **avoid the low quality stuff** and avoid the kind of networks on Google's radar. Any industrial method of link-building is eventually going to get Google's attention.

For a refresher – you can also see things Google tells you to avoid.

Related links

- Using the disavow Tool

- Google Disavow Tool

- Announcement From Google about the tool

- Link Schemes

- Site not doing well in Google?

- Notice about unnatural links

If you are having problems with unnatural links, or experienced a gradual or cataclysmic fall in traffic from Google, and want professional help to remove them, you can contact us here.

A Sample Optimized Page

(for example keyword phrase "internet marketing")

Page Title: Internet Marketing | Hobo

Meta Description: Professional, dependable internet marketing services
and software by Hobo, in Glasgow, Scotland

H1 Headline:
Internet Marketing

Alt Text:
internet marketing

Body Text: .... internet marketing ....

.... marketing ....

....

.... advertising ....

.... internet marketing ....

.... agency ....

....

.... tools ....

....

.... sales and marketing ....

SEO TOOLS

In 2013, there are lots of tools to help with seo:

Screaming Frog SEO Spider - I saw some awards thingy recently where Majestic SEO won best SEO tool. Screaming Frog was robbed. I don't even think the two should have been in the same group. SEO Screaming Frog Spider saves you time and with the info it provides you can make a website rank higher – without doing any dirty linkbuilding work. No brainer – best *seo* tool out there (godsend for Mac users!).

SEO Powersuite has a similar tool bundled with it. If you're not running tools like these (or even Xenu Link Sleuth) then you're probably not optimising a site properly. Hat tip to SEOMoz, Integrity For Mac and Website Auditor which comes in SEO Powersuite.

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Excel – I **spend most of my time in Excel spread sheets** these days. Google Spread sheets are cool too…. but with too many limitations for me to make it a daily tool. Excel lets you automate just about everything – and I do these days.

There's nothing more satisfying than taking 30 days' work and automating it. You can manage entire sites with an excel spread sheet – and if you're not on some level, you're missing out big time (Hat Tip to CSVpig).

Download SeoTools for Excel!

Excel Tools For SEO

If you're not running your own functions with Excel - Excel Tools For SEO is a great place to start. This is a fantastic tool set – once you start with this stuff you can't live without it.

Great for combining Adwords data with page specific data and looking for opportunities like under-optimised page titles etc. Tip – Get a Google Adwords API.

SEMRUsh (and Google Keyword Tool)

The Google Keyword tool is still invaluable – even if it is inaccurate, steers you down transactional roads, and is not as useful as it once was.

With API in hand – it's the first place to look when doing SEO. But if I want a LOT of data quickly - I usually get it from SEMRush. Also – try out Ubersuggest for some quick Google autocomplete research.

Dropbox

No wonder Steve Jobs tried to buy it. Dropbox is genius – having a folder you can EASILY share with everybody in work or between computers is essential for us these days. Dropbox is FREE and you can get more space by sharing links like these – Try Dropbox.

SEO Powersuite (LinkAssistant.com)

SEO Powersuite is definitely one of the best all in one desktop seo packages available for Mac and PC. Check your rankings, your competitors, back links and crawl your website. It's a great tool for beginners. I use this tool set to have a poke around but my favourite out of the tools is Tracker to run quick ranking audits which comes on its own, or with SEO Powersuite.

MAJESTIC SEO & LINK RESEARCH TOOLS

If you're thinking I don't like Majestic SEO, that's the wrong impression I gave. I **love Majestic SEO** – it's the first place I look when looking at the back links of a competing website.

It's been the BEST linkbuilding tool available for as long as I can remember – way before Yahoo Site Explorer was mothballed. Majestic SEO seems to be built into everything these days – but standalone it is still a brilliant link prospecting tool. **I do LOVE Link Research Tools from Cemper** though – much better for reporting back to clients for instance. Hat tip to Open Site Explorer especially for beginners to seo.

Majestic SEO is GREAT for getting link building ideas – but as tool like Prospector can REALLY expand upon those ideas, once you've identified a particular type of link you'd like to focus on. Link Prospector is a brilliant tool for doing this. With it you can look for links pages, guest posts, directories, forums and blogs out there, that there is a high probability you could get a link from. It's a mountain of data you get back, so make sure you use this tool in a very focused manner.

Used properly, Link Prospector (reviewed here) (and the other great tools that come with it) can save you HOURS of work. Expect to spend some time in an excel spread sheet after you get the data – but it is worth it!

Hidemyass- If you are using **Rank Tracker** or any other rank tracker software (I also recommend <u>Advanced Web Ranking</u>) you'll need a VPN/Proxy. This thing is so easy even I got it working.

You can **set up one computer to run ranking queries** via **rotating proxies** (every few minutes or so) via <u>hidemyass</u> and save the results to a Dropbox folder to look at it when necessary (from another machine). I would also recommend you sign up with <u>LOGMEIN</u> – so you can remotely sign in to the rank checker computer in case you need to restart the application. Also good for visiting sites you don't want tracking you, or incognito scraping (hat tip to <u>Scrapebox</u> BTW).

I don't use it for soul destroying nefarious purposes like spamming or anything like that but lots probably do.

Clicky - Google Analytics is my usual analytics tool and the only tool for checking lots of data – but I find I log into my <u>Clicky</u> account more than I do GA these days – if all I want is a quick and dirty analysis of a page or keyword. Brilliant tool. See my <u>review of Clicky</u>.

If you have a WordPress blog (you should be using the <u>WordPress SEO</u> plugin) we built a simple plugin that will track Googlebot and track keywords people find your site with – <u>WP Bot Tracker</u> - ideal if you have simple requirements.

Chrome Extensions - I don't really like third-party tool bars – but I do have the odd plugin installed. <u>Chrome Notepad</u> is a free tool for Chrome browser – ideal for taking quick notes – and FREE. I also have <u>SEO For Chrome</u> installed – good for a quick glance at things and it highlights nofollow links on the fly which I find useful.

<u>SEObook,</u> <u>SEOmoz</u> & <u>Raven</u> have good online offerings these days – some more aimed at reporting to clients. While I do have accounts for all, neither is something I visit daily. I have found tools from these sites tools to be VERY useful on the ODD occasion though – and I know some people swear by them. I suppose it depends on what you're employed to do, which should influence which tools you invest in.

<u>Google Webmaster Tools</u> and <u>Bing Webmaster tools</u> can provide useful insight to your site, but I only really look into these when I am digging deep, or looking for links I am not getting the benefit from. GWT does supply a bit of interesting data in 2013.

…That's all for now. I hope you found this book of use.

Shaun

http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/

This free ebook was originally published in April 2009, before there was a LOT of credible info on the web about SEO. Updated April 2013. Feel free to hook up with me on any of the networks below if you have any comments: