

TUTORIAL 20 CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF OPTIMISING A WEBSITE



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CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF OPTIMISING A WEBSITE

Reading time: 25 minutes

Prerequisite: Search engines 101

The previous tutorial reviewed the role of search engines. This document will take you through the steps to successfully optimise your website for search engines.

1) THE TWO SIDES OF OPTIMISATION

There are 2 sides to search engine optimisation. Both are equally as important:

- **On-site optimisation:** activities that need to be performed **on your site's** content and structure
- **Off-site optimisation:** refers to search engine techniques that are not performed on your own website.

This section will focus on on-site optimisation.

2) CONTENT THAT SEARCH ENGINES CAN ACCESS

You can have the nicest looking website but if search engines can't see it, the return on investment is going to be insignificant.

This highlights the importance of programming your website in a search engine friendly manner, respecting the "grammar" of the web.

- Sites that use a lot of Flash technology will not be as successful as well-coded HTML sites. Even though Google is making significant progress in reading Flash content, it is still far from being optimal.
- Sites that use HTML "Frame" technology are not search engine friendly.

Run your site through www.seo-browser.com and see if all your text content is visible to search engines. Can you see all your text in a structured manner and the Alt tags of your images? If not, contact a web professional who is proficient at search engine optimisation.

3) GOOD LINK STRUCTURE

The Internet is made of millions of pages that are linked to one another. These links are the essence of the web. They are referred to as **hyperlinks**.

Imagine many fishing nets joined together. The knots within each net are internal hyperlinks. The knots joining two nets together are external hyperlinks.

Search engines navigate knots in each net. If they can't find the knots linking your webpages together, they won't be able to move to the next page, and the next one, and so on. They won't be able to index each page.

Photo credit: <http://flickr.com/photos/solaara/194320189/>



a) Anatomy of a standard HTML hyperlink



The above image shows how a hyperlink is formed using HTML. On a webpage it will look like this:

[Tours for the 18 to 35 year olds](http://www.contiki.com)

If you have programmed your website yourself you will be familiar with the above HTML. If you edit your website with a content management system, you won't need to learn HTML.

b) Correct structure of hyperlinks on my website

- The navigation bar of a website is its main suite of hyperlinks. **Users and search engines should be able to access every single page of your website using your navigation and sub navigation menus.** Is this the case on your site? If not, search engines will not be able to crawl all your pages and index them.
- What is also important, especially on the homepage, is to **have hyperlinks within the content of your site.** This will inform your readers and search engines that such and such pages are more relevant than others.
- The text of the hyperlink should indicate what the page you are linking to is about. In the blue Contiki example above, you can see the text is "Tours for the 18 to 35 year olds". This summarises the subject matter of the page. Having the page's keywords within the hyperlink text is crucial. Avoid the "click here" as they would only inform search engines that the topic of the page is "click here"!

4) TITLES, HEADINGS, DESCRIPTION, KEYWORDS, HYPERLINKS, ALT

a) Title tag

The page title is a one-line description of each page of your website. It is displayed at the very top of the Internet browser window:

- For Windows users, it is displayed on the top left of the browser window.
- For Mac users, it is displayed at the very top of the browser window but justified in the middle.

In the Lonely Planet example below, one can see that the title of the Lonely Planet homepage (www.lonelyplanet.com) is **Lonely Planet | Travel guides, advice, tips and information.**



Screen capture copyright: Lonely Planet

In web jargon, this title is known as **title tag**. Search engines give immense importance to the title tag of each page as it identifies the content of a web document.

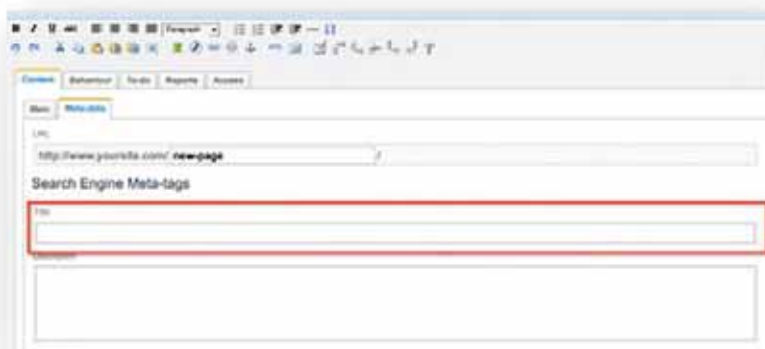
Title tags are not only important to search engines but also to humans as they attract their attention in search engine results. Note the title tag of the Lonely Planet homepage appearing in the Google search for "lonely planet".

Screen capture copyright: Google

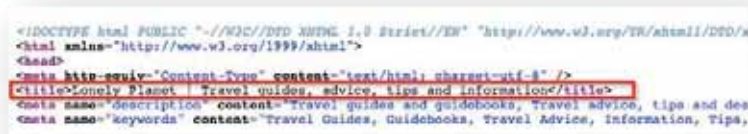


How to edit title tags

Title tags are located in the header section (top section) of each webpage. As a website owner, you will be able to edit the title tags using your content management system or in your HTML page itself if you do not have a content management system installed.



Example of the location of the title tag in a content management system



Example of the location of the title tag in the HTML code

If your website was built by a web professional who has poor knowledge of search engine optimisation, there is a large chance that they did not pay any attention to your title tags.

Example of non-optimised vs. optimised title tags:

Imagine you own a backpacking business called Coconut Shack in Broome:

Page address	Non-optimised Title Tag	Optimised Title Tag
www.coconutshack.com.au	Coconut Shack Home	Coconut Shack Backpackers accommodation in Broome
www.coconutshack.com.au/about-us	Coconut Shack About Us	Affordable overnight accommodation Hostel in Broome WA
www.coconutshack.com.au/prices	Coconut Shack Prices	Budget accommodation Broome

In the non-optimised version, there is no mention of what the Coconut Shack actually is (backpackers) and no mention of other keywords to describe the business offer.

In the optimised version, the search engine sees the keywords (and keyword combinations) "backpackers", "accommodation" "Broome" "affordable" "hostel" "budget".

Guidelines to search engine friendly title tags:

Unique:	Each page must have a unique title tag.
Keyword:	It is important the title tag of each page holds the main keywords for that page (as seen in the Coconut Shack example above). Experts also recommend placing important keywords at the beginning of the title.
Readability:	Aim for meaningful page titles and avoid making title tags that are simply a long list of keywords. <i>Favour Coconut Shack Backpackers accommodation in Broome over Backpackers, cheap, accommodation, Broome, hostel, budget</i>
Length:	Search engines will only display the first 65 characters of the title tag. If you require more characters because of your keywords you may go over 65 characters. However, be aware that only the initial 65 will display in search engine results.

An excellent source of information on title tags is the SEOMoz blog: www.seomoz.org/blog/best-practices-for-title-tags.

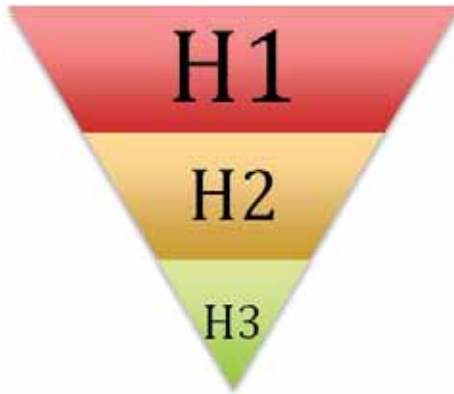
b) Headings

Just like chapters in a book, **headings are used to structure content in a reader-friendly and hierarchical manner**. They describe the section of information that they introduce. It comes as no surprise that search engines rely on headings to understand the weight and relevancy of each section of your page.

In HTML, headings are organised from 1 (H1 - the most important) to 6 (H6). Unless you are writing a webpage that is extremely rich in content - such as a book - there is no need to use H4 to H6.

It is recommended to use headings H1 to H3 in this order, and not to skip levels. Experts also advise to limit the number of H1 to two maximum.

Below is an example of the heading structure for the homepage of the Coconut Shack using one H1, two H2 and one H3.



Quality backpacker accommodation for travellers

Welcoming visitors of all ages
Located in the centre of Broome

Booking and cancellation policy

Just like title tags, headings can be changed using your content management system. In the HTML document itself, they are represented by <H1></H1> to <H6></H6>.

c) Meta Description



Screen capture copyright: Google

The description is the snippet of text displayed below a listing in the search engine results page. Search engines do not use it to rank your page but it is a chance for you to stand out from your competitors on the search engine results page.

Use it as a teaser for your webpage content. It will encourage the visitor to click on your listing. Ensure it also holds your page's keywords as the keywords used by the user in the search field (travel advice lonely planet) will be bolded in the description, thus drawing the user's eye.

The description tag, just like the title tag, is also part of the page header. It is referred to as the Meta description tag. It is generally located in the same area as the title tag within your website's content management system. In the HTML files, look for <meta name="description" content="This is where you have to add your description" />

Guidelines to search engine friendly description tags:

Unique:	Each page must have a unique description tag
Keyword:	It is important the description holds the main keywords for each page (they get bolded when they match the query of the user)
Readability:	Make the description enticing (so they click!)
Length:	Descriptions can be any length but search engines generally will only display the first 160 characters.

d) Meta Keywords

The Meta keyword tag was a location where your web developer used to place your webpage's keywords to tell search engines what a page was about. This tag was crucial when search engines could not read the content (or body) of a webpage. **Now that their robots can feed on almost every piece of content, the Meta keyword tag has become obsolete and useless. It is no longer used by Google to rank pages.**

However, there are still many uninformed developers who use the old Meta keyword method. Pay attention to this when you hire a web developer.

e) Image Alt tag

Alt tags are for images. Since search engines cannot see images as such they rely on the Alt tag to understand what the image is about.

f) Structure of the page address (the URL)

Each web document or page has a unique address that can be typed in a browser to access it directly. This address is called a URL (Uniform Resource Locator).

Example of a URL: www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/australia

URLs appear in many locations:

- In the web browser's address bar
- Below the description in the search engine results
- In the content of other webpages as a hyperlink (as illustrated on the right)



Screen capture copyright: Tourism Australia

Since search engines do not reveal their secret method to rank websites, one will never know the extent of the relationship between the URL structure and the search engine rankings. However, following the below guidelines will help you improve your visibility:

Guidelines to friendly description tags:

Readability:	Which of the below URL is nicer for your customer to see, and could in turn affect the number of clicks the website gets? www.tours.com.au/ld=227#4302&countryId=445#984 or www.tours.com.au/china/great-wall Keywords get bolded in search engine results: if someone searched for "tours great wall of china" the above URL would become: www.tours.com.au/china/great-wall and attract the eye of the web searcher.
Used as links:	URLs are often used as links by other users. Keeping the structure simple and keyword-rich will encourage clicks on the URL.
Length:	Shorter is best.

Separate words:	Use a hyphen to separate words (not underscore or space) www.tours.com.au/china/great-wall instead of www.tours.com.au/great wall and instead of www.tours.com.au/great wall (with a space between great and wall).
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5) SUBMITTING TO SEARCH ENGINES

Once your website is search engine optimised, and only then, your site is ready to be crawled by search engines. To request search engines to crawl your website you need to “submit your site”. Doing it if your website is not optimised will not make any difference to your search engine rankings.

- Google: www.google.com/addurl
- Yahoo!: <https://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/submit>
- MSN: <http://search.msn.com.sg/docs/submit.aspx>

6) RELATED MATERIAL

a) Related tutorials

- Website 101: usability and technology
- Images 101
- Keywords
- Search engines 101

b) Related websites

- www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=70897
- www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35291