

Search engine optimisation (SEO) guide

To help you make a start optimising your web content for search, this guide includes the following areas:

1. **Basic SEO principles**
2. **Paragraph and heading styles**
3. **Image optimisation for SEO**
4. **Optimising page titles and meta descriptions**
5. **Keyword research tools**
6. **Link building**
7. **Checklist**

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Basic SEO principles

What is SEO?

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the process of making your site more attractive to search engines. The term 'engine' is a far from perfect metaphor for what are very sophisticated algorithms that sort, rank and return the results when we type in a search.

Those algorithms are (now) really good at finding relevant web pages. Their focus is on audiences and what they want from each search. So the best performing websites start from that simple principle – they focus on exceptional content and the ways that search engines can find it.

This document offers a simple overview of SEO with tips and guidance focused on Website Content for SEO.

For a more detailed view on SEO we'd recommend [reading the article we wrote in the Cog Journal](#).

There are three basic SEO principles that you should be aware of.

Three basic SEO principles

1. Technical setup
2. Website content
3. Backlinks



1. Technical setup

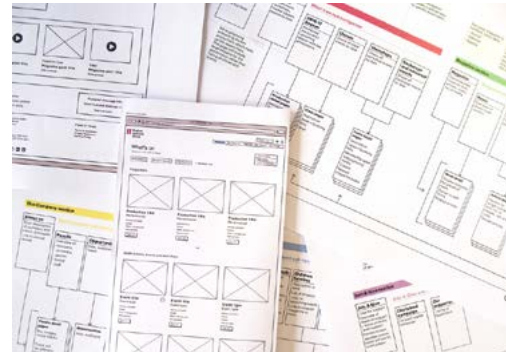
The technical setup refers to the code and structure of your website. It plays a big part in your SEO performance.

Search engines use bits of code called "spiders" to regularly crawl your website to catalogue what's there and determine which pages to include in their search results.

These spiders take lots of factors into account: they check how fast your pages load, they read and score the metadata (the hidden code that explains and gives extra context), they review file sizes and note excessively large files, they check that your pages are mobile-friendly, and they check and score lots of other technical factors.

Most websites built by reputable web agencies, using modern content managements systems (such as Wordpress) will have been built with technical SEO considerations in mind.

But they still need and benefit from extra work and ongoing review.



2. Website content

The next component which is important to SEO is the actual content on your website.

The search engines will be evaluating the usefulness of the content to website visitors – does it match and respond to what they have just searched for?

It's not enough to have just great content though, it needs to be organised and to fit within a logical structure on your website.

Imagine visiting a supermarket that didn't have signs indicating what you'll find in each aisle, or picking up a reference book that doesn't have a contents or index page. You'd probably struggle to find what you're looking for, it would certainly take you longer.

Search engines like to see similar types of content grouped together and a clear hierarchy of information. For example, you could have a top level page for "Events", secondary landing pages for "Theatre" and "Comedy" with sub-pages for individual event pages.



3. Backlinks

A backlink is when another website links back to yours.

Search engines look at the sites that link back to yours as a way to validate your authority and area of expertise.

Most arts, culture and heritage websites will naturally pick up backlinks from their funders and sponsors, from external artists, performers and associates, from press reviews and other web chatter.

The quality of the links are more important than the quantity. For example a link back from the BBC website holds more weight than a link back from a local theatre reviewer blog.

You might consider having specific pages that accumulate backlinks over time. For instance, you could encourage reviewers to link a "Theatre" landing page in addition to the specific event page. That means the backlink will still be valid after the event has passed and maybe removed from the site.

Paragraph and heading styles

Your website should have been designed to use specific text and paragraph styles for different headings and paragraph text.

Using the correct 'styles' (rather than just making the text bigger and bolder) is really important visually, for accessibility and to show the search engines the hierarchy of your content.

Using the correct 'styles' is really useful for breaking up pages with large amounts of information and keeping your visitors engaged.

How to use styles

Depending on the content management system of your site, you should be able to select the appropriate heading style when adding or updating content. In Wordpress, you select a line of your text (by highlighting it with your cursor), then choose a heading style from the dropdown list as shown.

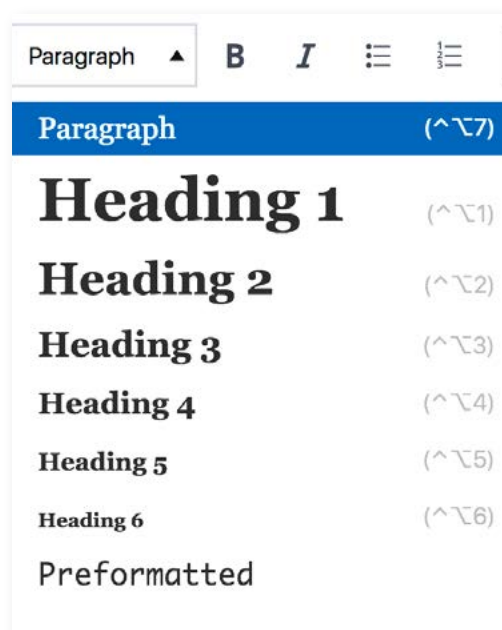
Using heading hierarchies

It can be tempting to just shove a big heading in the middle of a page (to add emphasis) but this will have a detrimental effect on lots of other aspects related to your website, including SEO and accessibility.

Think about structure first and the visual styling should follow.

The heading styles dictate the hierarchy of some visual aspects of your site (such as what appears in menus) and have an influence on how search engines scan your content and pull paragraphs of text to use in previews.

People who use screen reading technology also need your content to be structured in a useful order for them to navigate your content.



Website developers talk about heading styles in alphanumeric terms (Heading 1 = H1, Heading 2 = H2 etc) to denote their importance.

In the language of the internet, these are referred to as 'tags'.

The **H1** tag (Heading 1) is used only for page titles so you should not use this within the content of your pages.

The **H2** tag is used for headings within the page.

H3 for sub headings.

And **H4** onwards for sub-sub headings.

And, of course, **Paragraph** is used for the main text on the page.

As a real-world example, imagine the 'Travel' page of your website. It might be structured something like this example:

H1 Getting to us

H2 Public Transport

Para We are three minutes walk from City railway station, or 20 minutes from the Urban Overground station.

H3 Buses

H4 #12, #P15, #37, #66, #207B

Para The #37 bus runs every half hour from the city centre to our door.

Other buses stop just around the corner in Omnibus Street.

H2 Cars and motorbikes

H3 Where to park

Para There is no parking outside the venue but there are plenty of parking options nearby.

H4 City centre parking restrictions

Para Weekdays

Parking bays are for Resident card holders from 9am until 7pm on weekdays. Orange bays allow 4hrs free parking for all.

Para Weekends

All designated parking areas are free for all, at the weekend.

Image optimisation for SEO

The images on your site and how they're added can make a huge difference to your SEO performance. Here's how to optimise your images when creating new web content.

Image sizes and types

Large images (and hefty video files) are one of the most common issues causing slow page loading and this can be viewed as a negative by the search engines, as well as your website visitors who will expect pages to load quickly.



Optimising images before uploading them

Optimising images is all about finding the best balance between image quality and the large file sizes necessary for image files.

You'll want to ensure that your images look great on the best quality screens, but the bigger the file sizes the slower your site will be for your users.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution but there are some guidance that we can help you with.

Choose the right file type

Choosing the correct file type can produce much sharper results and much smaller file sizes. If you need help with any of this we're at the end of the phone or email to provide advice or practical assistance.

JPEG – perfect for photos and some logos

PNG – line drawings, screenshots, images that contain text, and most logos

GIF – animated images

SVG – logos, icons, simple illustrations

There are newer, better image compression file types, including AVIF and WebP. At Cog we'll convert your images to these new formats, automatically, to make your site super-speedy.

Compressing images

Image files contain all sorts of digital information that aren't necessary to display the image (such as the name of the camera used, the setting used, the date and time etc).

Stripping out that superfluous data (and resaving the useful data in the most efficient way) creates much smaller file sizes.

You'll need specialist software to do this. For one-off images you might try online tools. Pixlr has a good, free, online software solution: <https://pixlr.com/editor/>

For more regular use, you might invest in a copy of Adobe Photoshop.

It's worth reading our in depth article on image compression: [Compressing Images for your website.](#)

Use alt tags (correctly)

Alternative text (contained in what is known as an 'alt tag') is a way to attach a description that can be read independently of the image.

This is important for SEO, as text in alt tags can also be read by the search engines so you may decide to be diligent about the words you use from that perspective too. However, do not be tempted to stuff alt text with keywords. It's not useful to your audiences and the search engines definitely frown on that. Remember that alt text also plays a vital part of making your site accessible to people who are using assistive technology (or have images turned off).

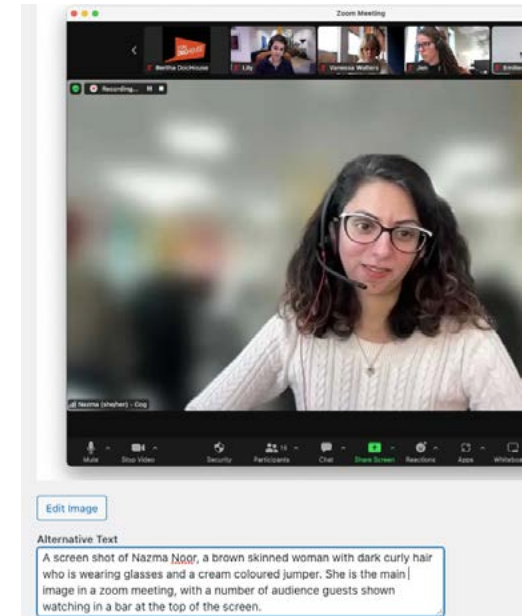
Your content management system should be set up to easily allow you to add alt text.

Here are some key bullet points for best practice:

1. Write short, descriptive sentences in everyday English.
2. Describe the context (think about why the image is being used) as much as the detail.
3. Don't add alt text to images that are just there for decoration.

Name and label your image files

As well as alt text, Google can see your image file names so use that to your advantage. Give your images meaningful names (not just a string of numbers) so the spiders can find them. It'll also make it much simpler to find your image when you search for your images in your computer files and online media library.



Caption your images

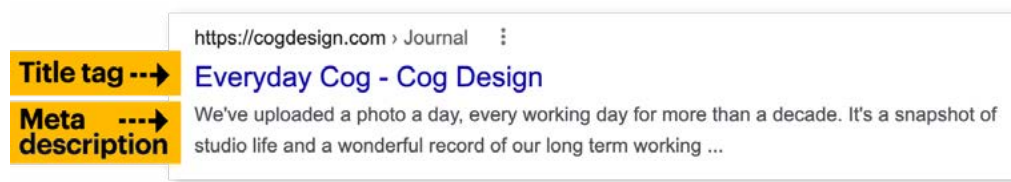
Finally, think about the captions you use. If your website is set up to display captions on or near the images then use that space to enhance your communication. Give context and further explain what people can see, name the people in the photo, include the photographer's credit. It's all useful to your visitors which in turn will enhance your SEO.

Optimising page titles and meta descriptions

Page titles (also referred to as title tags) and meta descriptions are bits of code that convey the title and description of the page. That code is picked up in different scenarios for different purposes.

They are used by search engines and are displayed in search results pages. They can be pulled through when someone adds a link in a social media post (including platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook).

On Cog websites we install a plugin called Yoast SEO.



This is a powerful SEO tool and whilst you won't need to use most of the options and tools, it does give you an easy way to update the page titles and meta descriptions. Meaning you can optimise your content on a page-by-page basis.

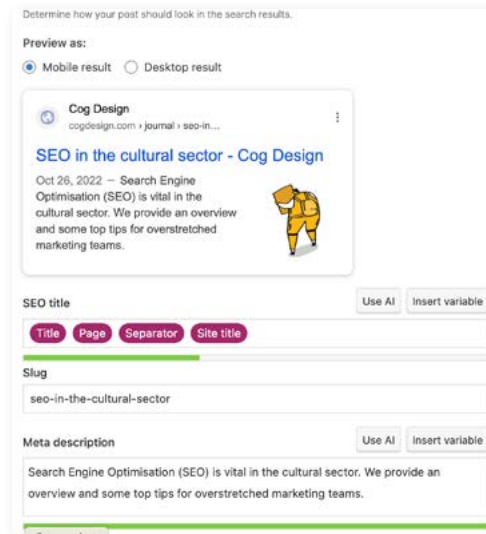
- Login to your content management system, click on the page you want to edit and look for the Yoast SEO section.
- Page Title / Title Tag is the field called SEO Title.
- The Meta description field is, as you can probably tell, where you add the meta description.
- If you leave these fields blank, the search engines will use some of the existing text on the page to display.

Writing SEO-friendly page titles and meta descriptions

Here are some general tips for updating your page titles and meta descriptions

Keep your title tag short

Remember that people scan the results so you have a fraction of a second to grab their attention. Display sizes vary but 50 – 60 characters (including spaces) is about the maximum that will be displayed.



The Yoast SEO plugin has a colour-coded system to help you keep it the right length. Look out for a green bar to indicate an appropriate length.

Make every word count

In theory, meta descriptions can be any length. But search engines will only show as much as will fit in their display area. 155-160 characters is probably the useful limit. Again, look to the red or green indicator bar on Yoast SEO which will indicate an appropriate length.

Write meta descriptions in short sentences

Search engines are looking for natural writing and regular syntax. Don't be tempted to just write a list of the keywords; that's not what people want to read.

Include key words (maybe)

If you are focusing on specific keywords then do include them in both the title tag and meta description. But be sensible and don't force it.

There are some tips and tools for keyword research included later on in this guide.

Entice searchers to click

The Yoast SEO plugin can show you a preview of what your updated title tag and meta description will look like in the search results.

Consider that your page will hopefully appear in a list of other similar search results and that you're competing for the users' attention.

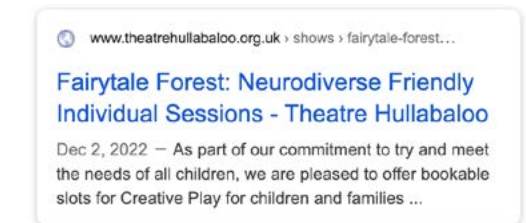
The meta description is an opportunity to entice users to click through.

You know your target audience best and the things which are important to them so you if you have the space you could include:

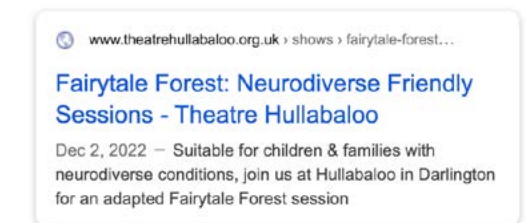
- "Tickets from" prices
- Age guidance
- Names of notable artists appearing in the show

As with the guidance on keywords, be sensible and don't force it.

Example before optimisation:



Example after optimisation:



- Shorter title
- "Suitable for" sentence
- Location added for anyone searching for "Darlington" keywords

Keyword research tools

“Keywords” is a term used in SEO to mean the specific words that appear in searches. It can be useful to work out some of those key terms and make sure your site features them in the most search-friendly places.

Of course, search engine algorithms take into account more than just the keywords on your page, but they’re still an important part of optimising your content.

When it comes to choosing which keywords to use, start with your audiences and think about the sorts of searches they will be making.

One suggestion is to use a spreadsheet to build up different variations and word combinations.

Once you have an initial idea of keywords, here are some tools you can use to expand on these ideas and get an idea of how many users are actually searching for these terms.

	A	B	C	D
1	Christmas	theatre	Christmas theatre	
2		shows	Christmas shows	
3		things to do	Things to do at Christmas	
4		days out	Christmas days out	
5		puppet shows	Christmas puppet shows	
6	December	theatre	Theatre in December	
7		shows	Shows in December	
8		things to do	Things to do in December	
9		days out	Days out in December	
10		puppet shows	Puppet shows in December	
11	Schools	theatre	Theatre for schools	
12		shows	Shows for schools	
13		things to do	Things to do for schools	
14	Children	theatre	Theatre for children	
15		shows	Shows for children	
16		things to do	Things to do for children	
17		puppet shows	Puppet shows for children	
18		days out	Days out for children	
19	Family	theatre	Theatre for family	
20		shows	Shows for family	
21		things to do	Things to do as a family	

Google search console

Google Search Console is a free resource offered by Google which gives you a view on your organic search performance.

<https://search.google.com/search-console/about>

- Check your top keywords
- See which keywords specific pages are ranking for
- See which keywords you’re ranking for but not getting clickthroughs

Speak to your web developers if you need help getting access to Search Console.

Top queries	Clicks	Impressions
shoreditch cinema	204	1,232
cinema near me	189	433
cinema shoreditch	176	1,338
dugsi dayz	89	346
cinema bethnal green	71	295
jawdance	68	176
cinemas near me	62	134
bethnal green cinema	59	315
dugsi days	37	74
focus africa festival	36	213

Google Ads keyword planner

If you have access to an active Google Ads or Google Ad Grants account, the Keyword Planner tool allows you to enter your keywords and get an idea of how many searches per month each term is getting.

Keyword	Avg. monthly searches	Competition
darlington theatres	2,900	Low
theatre shows near me	2,400	Low
childrens theatre	1,900	Low
childrens birthday party venue	480	Low
theatre hullabaloo	210	Low
theatre for children	-	-

Note – if a keyword is showing 0 searches, but you know from experience that it fits, don’t discard it completely, but try to prioritise the keywords with higher search volumes. For example you may want to reword a sentence to include Children’s Theatre (1,900 average monthly searches) rather than Theatre for Children (not tracked).

You can also use Keyword Planner to generate new keyword ideas, although you may find the suggestions are very generic and not useful.

Auto-suggest and related searches

As you start typing something into the main search engines they will auto-complete your search with its most popular searches. Use this for ideas and you might also look at the Related searches at the bottom of the results page for clues about what else those users are interested in.

Be a little bit cautious because the search engines remember your previous searches. You should use an “incognito” window and clear your search history before doing this.

Try following each of those searches to see how well you currently rank, how well your competitors rank and the types of pages that Google consider the most relevant. Then learn from those things.



Link building

Backlinks

The best way to build links is to have brilliant content that people want to link to. Create informative, interesting, engaging content and tell people about it.

You probably already have backlinks, for example from funders and sponsors, from external artists, performers and associates, from press reviews and other web chatter.

If you want to enhance those then it could be worth actively seeking out new backlinks.

The quality and relevance of each linking site is also taken into account. Context is key. There is no definitive 'ideal' number of backlinks.

The best way to go about building new backlinks will depend on the page itself.

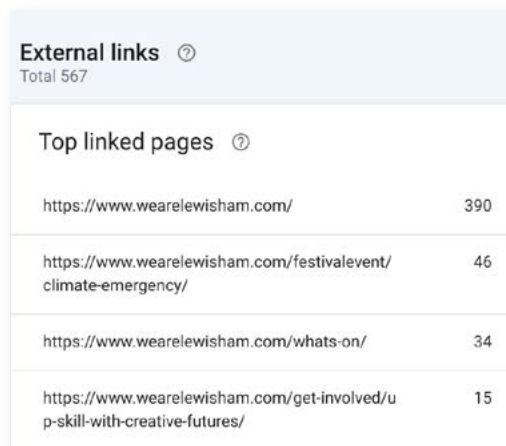
How to check your backlinks

Google Search Console has a free tool that allows you to view how many external backlinks your site has and also records the number of internal links between your pages.

Here are some other free and paid SEO tools you can use to review your backlinks:

- [Moz Link Explorer](#)
- [Semrush Backlink Analytics](#)
- [Ahrefs Backlink Checker](#)

The tools all offer slightly different comparisons and counting methods so don't be too surprised if they all give different numbers.



External links ⓘ	
Total 567	
Top linked pages ⓘ	
https://www.wearelewisham.com/	390
https://www.wearelewisham.com/festivalevent/climate-emergency/	46
https://www.wearelewisham.com/whats-on/	34
https://www.wearelewisham.com/get-involved/up-skill-with-creative-futures/	15

What gives a backlink value?

Relevance – is the source related to the subject matter (or just randomly linked)?

Authority – if people use the source as a reliable reference point to link to other places then that probably gives it authority.

Uniqueness – 10 links from 10 different sites are with more than 20 links from one site.

Best position on the page – Google uses the 'Reasonable Surfer Model' to work out how likely someone is to click a link.

Well anchored text – the wording of the link's text, and even the surrounding text, can be a factor.

A note about speed

Search engines are looking at how often you're getting new backlinks. In theory a website that is relevant, useful and has authority will regularly pick up new backlinks.

But if you suddenly get lots of new backlinks, then Google might think you are being tricky or spammy and penalise you.

Quick wins

- There will be mentions of your organisation on the web that don't link back to you. Contact the people behind those sites and ask if they'll add a link (and consider reciprocating).
- Ask every reviewer to link to you; there is no harm in nudging them if they haven't. Request that they link to your home page or a page that isn't going to be archived (not just the event page).
- Request links from all of your stakeholders. Most funders, sponsors, trustees, resident artists and staff will be proud to add a line and a link.
- Reach out to a few key sector people and ask them to include you in their blogs or website content.

Other areas worth pursuing

- All of the suppliers who provide event services (catering, flowers, security and especially photographers and the event producers themselves) are likely to show off about your lovely venue. Request links to the relevant 'hires' page as part of your hires contract (or just as a nice thing).

Internal links count too

Backlinks are important. But so are internal links, within your site.

Think about ease of navigation and also about how to provide relevant links from one page or story to another.

And if you have certain pages that already have lots of backlinks, then internally linking that page will add credibility to the pages you are linking to.

Internal links help users. If people can easily find the content they want, and link to other relevant content, then they are more inclined to spend longer on your site, which improves SEO in itself.

Internal links also help 'spiders' to crawl your site which makes it easier for search engines to properly index your site.

Links from social media posts

Links from social media channels don't hold as much weight as links from other websites, particularly if the social channels are your own.

But a social media link from a key influencer or a celebrity is certainly worth pursuing.

And linking to content from your social channels can be a good way to give new pages an initial boost and help them get noticed by the search engines.

Checklist

1. **Use the pre-defined heading and paragraph styles** in your content management system to indicate hierarchy.
2. **When creating new pages** also consider where they fit within the overall structure of your website, **what section or category does the information sit under?**
3. **Ensure you're compressing and optimising all images** before you upload them for optimal page load speeds.
4. **Use alt tags to describe your images** to improve accessibility and increase the chances of them appearing in search engine Image Searches.
5. **Update your page titles and meta descriptions** to fit within the character limit and highlight click-worthy information to people viewing these in search results.
6. Use tools to **conduct keyword research and competitor analysis** to help you write your content.
7. Keep your audiences in mind during the optimisation process. **Write your content for humans, not just for the search engine crawlers.**
8. **Keep an eye out for mentions** of your organisation on other sites and where relevant **contact the site editors to see if they will link back to you.**
9. **Share new content on your social channels** to give it a boost and help the search engines take notice.
10. Populate "related content" blocks on your site and **add relevant internal text links to connect up your pages** for users and for the search engines.

How long does it take to see results?

Depending on the number of pages on your website and how frequently you add new content, it can take weeks for the search engines to crawl and take notice of your changes. They then have to process this and determine where it should sit within the search results.

With this in mind, we wouldn't recommend changing and re-changing your content too frequently for SEO purposes. This is totally fine if you're making updates to pages based on necessary factual changes, for example if a new customer service policy needs adding.

After optimising your pages, wait at least 2-3 months and monitor organic search performance during this time before you make further changes.

For brand new content, as a general rule, it can take 3-6 months to start ranking and bringing in significant volumes of new traffic.

Help us improve this document

We're keen to ensure we've covered anything you think might be important or relevant to our work with you, so if we've missed anything, please do let us know.

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