

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION (SEO) FOR RESEARCHERS

What is SEO?

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of using techniques to ensure your website ranks highly in the results of search engines such as Google so it can be found by your audiences and attract more visitors.

Just creating a website does not guarantee it will attract visitors; you have to ensure that this website can be found. Optimising your site for search engines guides your target audience to your content more reliably.

This guide will give you an overview of how you can begin to implement SEO on your research website.

How does SEO work?

Search engines find and understand all the content on the internet and deliver **relevant** and **authoritative** content that is useful to their users.

Relevance:

- When a user searches for something, search engines will analyse all the web pages they've ever visited and show the user the pages that are most relevant to their search term. It decides this based on:
 - How the content is **written**
 - How the content is **implemented**
 - How the site is **linked** to other pages on the internet

Authority:

- The authority of content is determined by what other websites have to say about it – for example through references, links or reviews. A link to your website on another page is seen by search engines as a vote of trust, and therefore your content is afforded more authority.
 - The **quality** of where these links come from also matter – for example, if your site is linked to from an official University of Reading page (such as research pages on your School or Department site) it will be seen as more trustworthy by the search engine.

Search engine results pages will show two kinds of listings: **organic listings** and **paid listings**.

- **Organic listings** are where your webpages will appear – this is content that has not been paid for and occurs on the search engine naturally.
- **Paid listings** are advertisements that pop up at the top of the search results. They are paid for by bidding on certain keywords.

As of 2024, many search engines such as Google now also provide AI-generated overviews in response to search queries, however the current impact on website traffic is not clear.

SEO techniques

Using and building links

Link **popularity** and link **quality** are important for search engine visibility. Links can be used to direct users to other related content within your site or direct them elsewhere to an external site (such as a related School or Department page or another research site).

The link text itself determines what is on the other side for the search engine. For this reason, you should avoid using phrases like 'click here' or 'find out more at this link' on the link – instead, try something more descriptive that includes keywords, like 'download the programme for our recent politics conference'.

Consider asking colleagues or networks in related or interdisciplinary research areas to share your site or link to it on their own platforms (websites, social media). Adding a link to your website in your email signature can also help with this.

Using keywords

Keywords are the terms that users are putting in their search engines to find content. **Choosing your keywords effectively will help search engines gain a better understanding of your website and help them identify if it is relevant to the user.**

Keywords can be put into the body of your webpages and posts, as well as in the Yoast SEO plugin installed on your WordPress site in order to help users find your content.

These keywords should be **relevant** to your content and as **specific** as possible.

They should be relevant to the user's **intent**, the motivation behind their search. When choosing keywords, think about what you might search for to find content related to your own interests.

Where should I place them?

Keywords should be distributed throughout your site, on every page, event listing, news articles and blog posts. Try to centre each keyword around the same theme to ensure the search engine understands what your site is about.

Keywords can also be placed in:

- The headers of your content (H1, H2, H3 etc.)
- The meta description – this is the short description which shows up underneath your listing on search results. It tells the user what your page is about. You can adapt it in the Yoast SEO plugin in your site, which is displayed underneath each page.
- The slug of each page or post – this is the part of the URL that identifies that particular page. For example in 'https://research.reading.ac.uk/research-blog', '/research-blog' is the slug.

If you have not yet set up your site, consider including keywords in the URL and title of your site.

Each page will need a unique target keyword – if you have a pre-existing site, much of your content may already have keywords. However, if you're adding a keyword to an already complete page, you may need to go back and rewrite some of the content to optimise it for that specific keyword.

More information on keywords and some tools to research the best ones for you can be found on:

- [Google Search Console](#)
- [AnswerThePublic](#)
- [Moz's Keyword Explorer](#)

For more information, please contact: research@reading.ac.uk

Optimising your Content for Search Engines

There are additional techniques that will help you optimise your content for search engines.

Content optimisation

Content optimisation is the process of continually improving the quality and relevancy of everything included on your webpages.

Your content should be clear and easy to understand – the user wants to know immediately what your website is about. Check for any spelling, punctuation or grammar errors and write in plain language, avoiding jargon wherever possible.

Optimising site structure

Effectively structuring your site makes it easy to navigate for both users and search engines. Make sure that your website navigation is clear – use a navigation menu with dropdown options that correlate to your content. Ensure that the titles of the menu tabs make it obvious what the content is about.

Submitting a sitemap to Google Search Console

To guarantee that Google is aware of your site's optimised structure, you'll need to generate a sitemap. A sitemap is an XML file containing details of the site's structure, which you can generate using the Yoast SEO plug-in installed in WordPress.

Submitting this information to Google Search Console will prompt Google to crawl your site again and rank it higher in relevant search queries.

Optimising images

Images should not include text or act as a substitute for the content of a page. Not only can a search engines not read this, but it also isn't accessible for users with a screen reader or related devices. You can find more information about creating accessible online content [here](#).

However, you can optimise certain elements of the image:

- The URL/filename of the image can be made relevant to your content/keywords.
- Images can often be accompanied by text components, such as captions in text boxes underneath.
- Alt text should always be used to describe the content of the image for those using screen readers.

Additional Considerations

SEO takes time to work. If your site is new, and you have not yet submitted a sitemap, it won't immediately show up in search results.

Additionally, the exact parameters of what search engines like Google use to algorithmically rank pages can change depending on broader industry-wide trends and updates. However, despite this external variable, making your content clear, optimised, accessible and well-structured will help your content reach the intended audience.

Further Information

- WordPress: [Search Engines and SEO \(Search Engine Optimization\)](#)
- WordPress free course: [Intro to Search Engine Optimization \(SEO\)](#)
- Google's [SEO Starter Guide](#)
- Google's [beginner guide to Sitemaps](#)
- Moz's [Beginners Guide to SEO](#)

Visit the University's [Knowledge Base](#) for more detailed information about how to set up, use and customise WordPress websites.

For more information, please contact: research@reading.ac.uk