THE SEO GUIDE BOOK

SEARCH MADE SIMPLE

Practical search optimisation
for business owners and marketers



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theseoguidebook.com

Welcome to The SEO Guide Book

A useful website helps people find accurate information, make a decision and take the next step. Search engine optimisation supports that work by making your information discoverable, understandable and usable. Its value should be judged alongside suitable enquiries, sales and the other outcomes your organisation needs.

I created The SEO Guide Book to make SEO understandable. Many owners, entrepreneurs and marketers can carry out routine improvements themselves. A complex technical problem may need specialist help, but you should still be able to understand the purpose of the work and how it will be checked.

This book takes you from the foundations to practical work on content, WordPress, reputation, local visibility and AI search. It then shows you how to measure outcomes, investigate problems and maintain the website without turning every new announcement into another project.

How to use the book

If you are starting from the beginning, read the foundations and work through the content and website chapters. If you already manage a site, use the contents or alphabetical index to find the task in front of you. The glossary explains terms used throughout the book.

Choose one business goal and a manageable set of pages. Keep a record of the problem, the change and the result. The final chapters and appendices provide a routine, a checklist and worksheets you can copy into a notebook or spreadsheet.

Examples described as fictional illustrate a method rather than a reported client outcome. The recent project accounts describe the work carried out and its purpose. Neither kind of example is a promise that another website will achieve the same result.

Use the online companion for changing details

Search products, reporting screens and supported features change. The book explains the purpose of each task; the online guides and primary documentation provide the place to recheck current instructions. Keep rollout dates and platform eligibility in that live context rather than treating them as permanent rules.

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1 Understanding SEO

SEO stands for search engine optimisation. It means improving your website so search engines can discover and understand its pages, and people can find useful information when they search.

For a business, the purpose is to reach suitable potential customers and help them take a useful next step, such as requesting a quote or buying a product. For a hobby site, it might be helping readers find and use your work.

SEO can improve your opportunities to be found. It cannot guarantee a top position, an AI recommendation or a sale. This introduction explains how it works and what the work involves. Use chapter 2 to plan the work and Appendix A for the practical checklist.

A simple example of SEO

Imagine a customer searching for “curtain alterations in York”. They need to know which businesses offer the service, where they operate and how to get a price.

A useful business page would explain the alterations available, any fabric limitations, the service area and the quote process. It might show genuine examples of previous work and provide an easy contact route.

SEO includes making that page accessible to search engines, describing it clearly and connecting it with relevant pages. The business also needs accurate information in appropriate listings and a website that works when the customer arrives.

The example is fictional. It shows why the job extends beyond adding a phrase to a page: the information must match the customer’s need and the service the business actually provides.

SEO and paid advertising are different

Organic results are unpaid search listings. SEO works on your opportunity to appear through those results. Paid search advertising buys advertising placement under the platform’s rules; it does not buy a better organic ranking.

Question	SEO	Paid search advertising
What are you investing in?	Website content, access, usability and relevant reputation.	An advertising campaign, its landing pages and paid placement.
Do you pay for each organic click?	No, although doing and maintaining the work has costs.	Advertising charges follow the campaign model, often per click.
Are results guaranteed?	No. Visibility and outcomes depend on many conditions.	Ad delivery also depends on eligibility, competition and settings; sales are not guaranteed.

Both can be useful. The choice depends on demand, budget, competition and how quickly you need to test an offer. SEO still needs maintenance, and advertising still needs a page that helps customers decide.

How Google Search works

Google describes three main stages. A discovered page does not automatically pass through all of them.

Crawling

Automated software called a crawler visits pages and fetches their content. Google can discover URLs through links and sitemaps, among other routes. A page behind a login or blocked by a security rule may not be accessible.

Indexing

Google analyses a page and may store information about it in its index. Not every discovered or crawled page is indexed. Publishing a page or submitting a sitemap does not guarantee inclusion.

Serving search results

When someone searches, Google selects relevant results using its systems. The question, language, location and other context can affect what appears. An indexed page is not guaranteed to appear for every related query.

Search engines do not need to scan the whole live internet from scratch for each question. Understanding discovery, indexing and selection helps you investigate where a page may be missing from the process.

What SEO work involves

SEO is commonly organised into several overlapping areas. These labels help explain the work; they are not a formula for assigning every website the same tasks.

Content and on-page SEO

This concerns the information and presentation on your own pages: the subject, title, headings, images and links. It starts with understanding what the reader needs, then explaining the answer accurately.

A product page, for example, needs reliable information about the item being sold. A service page needs to explain the offer and its limits. A tutorial needs instructions someone can follow. Each has a different job.

Technical SEO

Technical SEO investigates whether search engines can access and process the right pages, and whether the website functions properly. It can include indexing controls, redirects, sitemaps, mobile usability and performance.

You do not need perfect code or a perfect speed score before a page can be useful. Investigate faults that block important content or stop customers completing a task. Google says good Core Web Vitals scores do not guarantee top rankings.

Links and reputation beyond the website

A backlink is a clickable link from another website. Relevant links and coverage can help people discover your work. Genuine reviews, accurate listings and useful partnerships can also help customers assess the business.

These are different kinds of evidence. A social mention is not automatically a ranking boost, and an AI citation is not the same as a backlink or a customer visit. Earn relevant attention through useful work rather than buying links to manipulate rankings.

Local and specialist SEO

A local business may need an accurate Google Business Profile and clear service-area information. An online shop needs consistent product details, while a multilingual website must account for language and market needs. The relevant work depends on the site.

Where keywords fit

Keywords are the words and phrases people use to search. Search intent is the task behind those words: learning, comparing, finding a provider or buying something.

“How to shorten curtains” and “curtain alterations York” share a subject but can represent different needs. One person may want instructions; the other may want a local business to do the work.

Use the language your customers use, while making the page’s purpose clear. Repeating an exact phrase a fixed number of times is not a strategy. Nor does every close variation need its own article.

Why a good-looking website may still struggle

An attractive website can have unclear service information, inaccessible pages or a broken enquiry form. Equally, a plain-looking competitor may answer a particular customer question more effectively. Appearance alone cannot explain the search results.

Investigate the relevant page and query before deciding what is wrong. Check access, suitability, content and the wider search context. A ranking change by itself does not establish the cause.

Avoid treating a GA4 metric as a direct Google ranking score. Bounce rate, for example, measures the share of sessions that were not engaged under GA4’s definitions. It does not simply mean that someone left without clicking to a second page.

A visitor can read one page and complete their task. Review the page’s purpose and actual outcomes before deciding that a short visit or a particular engagement figure means the content failed.

Does SEO still matter when search uses AI

Search now includes several ways to present information. Google AI Overviews provide AI-generated responses for some searches, while AI Mode offers a conversational Search experience. Other assistants can also retrieve web information and show source links.

Google says established SEO practices remain relevant to its AI features. Its requirements include indexing and eligibility for a search snippet, but eligibility does not guarantee selection. There is no special schema or writing format that promises an AI citation.

GEO, or generative engine optimisation, is a term used for work intended to improve visibility in AI-generated answers. It overlaps with SEO, but each platform has its own systems and controls. Do not assume that a Google rule describes every assistant.

For a small business, an appropriate starting point is still accurate information, useful pages, accessible content and a clear next step. Allowing a training crawler is not a universal requirement for appearing in AI search; check provider controls separately.

What SEO can realistically achieve

SEO can help a business reach people who are looking for a relevant answer or offer. Choosing a specific service, audience or market may give a small business a useful focus. It does not remove larger competitors' advantages in reputation, resources or coverage.

Results also depend on matters beyond the search listing: whether the offer is suitable, prices and availability, the quality of the enquiry route and how the business follows up. More visits do not automatically become more sales.

SEO should therefore be evaluated against a goal. A repair business might want suitable quote requests, while a publication might want engaged readers or subscriptions. A ranking is one diagnostic measure, rather than the final business objective.

What to avoid

Avoid keyword stuffing, fabricated reviews, invented experience and paid links intended to manipulate rankings. Publishing large numbers of pages that add little value can also create problems, whether they were written manually or with AI.

Useful automation can support research and drafting, but someone must check the information, sources and claims. A newer date, a longer page or an extra plugin is not evidence that a page has improved.

Online companion: Understanding SEO

2 Managing SEO yourself

You can manage SEO without an agency by choosing a clear business goal, improving the pages that support it and reviewing what happens. Many routine tasks suit an owner who knows the business and can set aside time to learn.

The work still has a cost: your time, any tools you choose and occasional specialist support. The aim is to build a manageable routine that helps customers find accurate information and take the right next step.

This chapter gives you that routine. Use the choices below to assess how the work fits your skills and availability.

Decide what you will manage yourself

You do not have to choose between doing everything alone and buying an ongoing agency service. You can own the plan and handle routine work while commissioning a specific audit, technical fix or training session when needed.

Google says small local businesses can probably do much of the work themselves. It also recognises that professional help can be useful, particularly around redesigns or new websites. Choose according to the actual job and your ability to review the result.

Type of work	Practical approach
Business facts, service explanations and customer questions	Keep these close to the business. You know what you offer and can verify the details.
Routine page editing, links and basic reporting	Do these yourself when you understand the tools and can check the result.
Unclear technical problems or major changes	Use specialist help when diagnosis, testing or recovery exceeds your skills.
Ongoing strategy and delivery	Review whether you have enough time and expertise; an agency, consultant or internal team can help if the workload warrants it.

Keep business ownership of the domain, hosting and relevant accounts. Give helpers the access their work requires and keep a record of who can make changes.

Choose one business goal and a small set of pages

Start with a concrete outcome such as suitable enquiries for a service, completed product orders or relevant appointment bookings. “More traffic” is incomplete unless you can explain whose visits would be useful.

Choose the homepage, one important service or product page and the page where customers contact or buy from you. Add supporting pages only where they help that journey.

Write a short brief: who you want to help, what they need to decide, which pages support them and what a successful next step looks like. This keeps a list of SEO suggestions from becoming an unmanageable project.

Check access and the enquiry route first

Open the chosen pages on your phone and a desktop. Confirm that the main information is visible, navigation works and the contact or checkout route can be completed. Check that a test enquiry arrives or a booking is confirmed.

A button click is not the same as a completed action. If a form appears to submit but the message never reaches you, resolve that before investing in additional traffic.

Check important pages in Search Console

Use Google Search Console's URL Inspection tool to inspect the exact page URL. Its initial report describes Google's indexed version. A live test can help assess the current page, but it does not guarantee indexing or rankings.

Investigate unexpected problems on important public pages. Not every non-indexed URL needs fixing: account pages, duplicates and retired pages may be excluded for good reasons. Avoid changing robots.txt, canonical rules or indexing settings simply to make every report entry disappear.

Record a useful baseline

Before making substantial changes, save the current page and note the date, its purpose and the problem you intend to improve. Record relevant reporting periods and filters so you can compare like with like later.

Measure	What to record	Limit to remember
Search visibility	Relevant Search Console pages, queries, impressions and clicks.	An impression is not a unique person or an enquiry.
Website visits and actions	Recorded landing-page visits and tested enquiry or purchase events where available.	Tracking depends on implementation and consent; an event label alone does not prove an outcome.
Business outcomes	Suitable enquiries, confirmed bookings, orders or sales from business records.	Attribution can be incomplete, particularly when people return through another route.

Search Console shows your website's recorded search performance, not total market demand. Use page, query, country and device views where they help answer a question. Do not judge the whole business by one average position.

Improve one important page before adding more content

Read the page as a prospective customer. Can you tell what the offer includes, who it suits, what it costs or how quotes work, and what happens after contacting the business? Correct missing or misleading information first.

- Use an accurate page title and descriptive headings.
- Explain unfamiliar terms and important conditions.
- Add genuine examples, relevant evidence and clear business details.
- Link to useful supporting information and the right next step.
- Check images, mobile layout and the enquiry or purchase route.

Use customer language naturally. A plugin's focus keyword and colour score can help with editing, but they do not establish accuracy or guarantee visibility. Keep established URLs when they still serve the right purpose.

Research questions before proposing new pages

Collect recurring customer questions and compare them with what the website already answers. Use keyword research to clarify language and demand, then decide whether to improve an existing page or create a distinct supporting guide.

A blog is optional. Do not create a page for every wording variation or publish weekly merely to fill a calendar. Choose work you can research, check and maintain.

Handle local visibility and reputation where relevant

For an eligible local business, keep Google Business Profile information accurate. Check services, hours, contact details and website or booking destinations. Google says local results mainly depend on relevance, distance and prominence; a website edit does not remove the effect of distance.

Maintain important business listings and invite genuine feedback through a neutral process. Earn relevant mentions through useful contributions, local relationships or documented expertise. DIY SEO includes work beyond editing your own pages.

Avoid bulk directory submissions, purchased ranking promises and invented reviews. If you need location pages, create them for distinct customer needs rather than producing the same text for every town.

Use tools to answer questions

Start with the tools needed for the work in front of you. Search Console supports search and indexing checks. Correctly configured analytics and business records help you assess visits and outcomes. A spreadsheet or document can hold the priorities and change log.

PageSpeed Insights can help investigate loading problems. It reports lab diagnostics and real-user data where available. Treat its score as a clue to investigate, not a ranking target that justifies breaking a form, booking widget or consent interface.

For WordPress, understand which plugin or theme controls titles, sitemaps and structured data before changing settings. A plugin can manage useful output, but installing one does not complete SEO. Avoid adding overlapping tools without understanding their jobs.

Paid tools may save time, but buy against a defined task and check current limits before subscribing. A list of warnings is not a prioritised plan, and a third-party audit score is not Google's assessment of your business.

Use AI with a review process

AI can organise verified notes, suggest an outline or help explain a report. Give it the source material and the business facts you want it to use. Do not treat generated keyword volumes, invented examples or confident diagnoses as evidence.

Check factual claims, sources and metadata manually before publishing. Google's guidance calls for this review and warns about producing many pages without useful value. Keep responsibility for the final page with someone who understands the subject.

For Google's AI search features, established SEO practices remain relevant. No special AI writing format, file or schema guarantees a citation. If you track AI exposure, keep it separate from referral visits and completed enquiries rather than inventing a universal AI ranking score.

Build a routine you can sustain

Reserve time that fits your workload. One focused session a week is an option, not an SEO requirement. Use it to complete a useful action rather than constantly switching between scores and new tactics.

At each working session

- Check urgent access, security or enquiry problems first.
- Choose the highest-priority task you understand and can verify.
- Save the relevant original content or settings, make the change and check the result.
- Record what changed, why, when and what you will review next.

At your monthly review

Review complete reporting periods and the business's actual enquiries or sales. Allow for seasonality and changes in availability, marketing or tracking. Read the affected pages before deciding what a chart means.

Ask what was completed, whether the original problem is resolved and what remains uncertain. Choose the next priority. Avoid making a fresh set of changes every time a ranking moves.

A simple change record

Field	What to write
Page or setting	The exact URL or item changed.
Problem and evidence	What customers or reporting showed, with date and source.
Action	The substantive change and where the original is saved.
Verification	What you tested immediately, including the enquiry route where relevant.
Review	The owner, next review point and outcome to assess.

Example managing a small service website

This is a fictional example, not a measured case study. A window-cleaning business wants more suitable enquiries for regular work. Its website does not explain its actual coverage, and the enquiry form gives no indication of what happens next.

The owner confirms the offer, improves one service page, adds useful coverage information and explains the quotation process. They test the form through to receipt and record the changes. They retain accurate existing URLs and link relevant supporting information.

At the next review, they compare suitable enquiries and the page's relevant search activity. If tracking is unclear, they ask for a defined measurement check. They do not publish twenty town pages or claim that the edits caused more sales without evidence.

Bring in help with a defined brief

Seek specialist support for a hacked website, major migration, unexplained indexing failure, complex performance problem or broken measurement you cannot diagnose. Bring expertise in early when a redesign or URL change could affect important pages.

You can commission a bounded piece of work: a diagnosis and prioritised recommendations, tracking repair, migration plan, implementation review or training. Ask what will be delivered, what access is needed, who will implement it and how it will be checked.

A useful handoff includes the affected URLs, symptoms, when they began, recent changes and the evidence already collected. Ask for a clear explanation of proposed changes and how the previous state can be restored if necessary.

Google advises checking references, experience and the reasoning behind recommendations. It warns against first-place guarantees and supposed special relationships with Google. During an initial audit, read access may be sufficient; agree wider access only for the work that needs it.

Review your own capacity as well as the provider’s proposal. If the work repeatedly remains undone, ongoing help may be a sensible business decision. Managing SEO without an agency does not require refusing all outside support.

Online companion: Managing SEO yourself

3 Researching keywords and customer needs

Keyword research helps you find the words and questions people use when looking for your products, services or advice. The useful result is a shortlist of customer needs matched to pages you can improve or create.

You do not need a huge keyword database to begin. Start with one important service or product category, gather evidence from customers and search tools, then choose the most useful next action.

This chapter explains the research task. Chapters 5 to 9 explain how to plan, write and maintain the resulting content.

What keyword research can tell you

Research can reveal unfamiliar customer language, recurring questions and gaps in the information on your website. It can help you decide whether a page needs a clearer explanation, a comparison, local details or an easier route to contact you.

It cannot guarantee a ranking, predict exactly how many visitors you will receive or prove that a popular query will produce profitable enquiries. Treat tool data as evidence to interpret alongside what your business actually offers.

Step 1 Choose a business priority

Pick one area you want to improve. A local curtain maker might choose made-to-measure curtains, rather than researching every term connected with home furnishings.

Write a one-sentence brief: “Help people in our service area understand our made-to-measure curtain service and request a suitable consultation.” Then record the products, locations and practical limits that apply.

Exclude services you do not provide. If you do not repair blinds, a high-volume query about blind repairs is not a reason to build a misleading service page.

Create a small starting list

These starting words are sometimes called seed keywords. Use the language customers use, not only your internal product names. For the curtain maker, ideas might include “made to measure curtains”, “curtain fitting”, “blackout curtains” and “curtain measuring service”. These are illustrative ideas, not verified demand figures.

Add questions from enquiries, consultations and your team. What affects price? Is measuring included? Can customers supply their own fabric? Record the questions without including private customer information.

Step 2 Look at the searches already reaching your website

If you have access to Google Search Console, use it before buying another tool:

- Open the relevant property and its Search results Performance report.
- Choose a useful date range, such as the last three months. Use comparable periods when checking changes and allow for seasonal demand.
- Open Pages, select a relevant page and then open Queries to see searches associated with that page.
- Review clicks and impressions. Use country and device filters where they help explain your market.

- Export or record useful queries, the page and the date range. Inspect the actual page before deciding what to change.

Search Console measures your website's appearances and clicks. It is not a market-wide search-volume tool. An impression is not a unique person, and average position is an aggregate rather than a fixed ranking everyone sees.

Some queries are withheld for privacy, so the visible query list is incomplete. No data for a question does not prove that nobody asks it. A new website can begin with customer questions and the other research methods below.

Use search results to understand the task

Search for a few representative phrases. Note whether results mainly offer local services, product categories, individual products, comparisons or explanatory guides. This helps you assess what someone may expect after clicking.

Read enough to understand the task without copying competitors' structures or claims. A competitor's page is evidence of what they published, not proof that the topic brings them customers.

Autocomplete and related questions can suggest wording worth investigating. Autocomplete depends on factors including language, location, trends and search history. It is not a ranked list of the most popular keywords and provides no monthly volume figure.

Use Keyword Planner if you need demand estimates

Google Keyword Planner is an advertising research tool that can also provide context for SEO planning. Google currently requires completed account setup, including billing information, for basic keyword-idea access. Check the requirements before proceeding.

- In Google Ads, open Tools and Keyword Planner, then choose Discover new keywords.
- Enter a few relevant starting phrases or use a relevant website as an idea source.
- Check location, language, network and date settings against your intended market.
- Review the ideas, remove irrelevant ones and export the useful results with their settings and research date.

For an existing list, Get search volume and forecasts is the alternative starting option. The forecasts concern advertising performance, not future organic visits. You do not need to launch a campaign to follow the content-planning process in this chapter.

Check seasonality with Google Trends

Google Trends can help you compare interest over time. Keep the geography and period consistent when comparing terms, and note whether you selected a search term or a topic.

Its 0-100 index shows relative interest within the selected comparison, not monthly searches. A value of 100 marks peak relative interest in that view. Low-volume terms may show zero because there is insufficient data.

Keep other tools optional

Paid keyword tools can speed up research, but you can start with customer questions, Search Console and manual checks. Before subscribing, check the current limits, market coverage and what each metric means. A difficulty score from one provider is not directly interchangeable with another provider's score.

Step 4 Interpret the numbers correctly

Signal	Useful interpretation	What it does not establish
Keyword Planner average monthly searches	Rounded historical estimates for a keyword and close variants, using selected settings.	Exact demand today, unique people or future visits to your page.
Keyword Planner Competition	Competition between advertisers.	Organic ranking difficulty.
Third-party keyword difficulty	A provider's estimate of ranking difficulty under its own method.	A Google score or a guaranteed easy opportunity.
Search Console impressions and clicks	Your site's recorded search exposure and clicks for the selected report.	Total market demand or all customer journeys.
Google Trends index	Relative search interest within the selected view.	Absolute search counts or business value.

Search demand changes with seasonality and events. Do not add similar keyword estimates together and call the result a count of different potential customers: close variants can overlap, and people can search repeatedly.

Record an estimate as an estimate. Keep a range if the tool supplies a range. Use "not checked" or "unavailable" when appropriate rather than inventing an exact figure or silently replacing missing data with zero.

Step 5 Group queries by the customer task

Search intent means what someone is trying to do. "Curtain maker near me" suggests finding a provider. "Lined or blackout curtains" suggests comparing options. The same person might make both searches at different stages.

Group phrases that a single useful page can answer. "Made to measure curtains" and "custom curtains" may belong together if they describe the same offer for your audience. Check the language and results in your intended market before deciding.

Specific phrases can reveal requirements, but longer wording does not automatically mean lower competition or higher conversion. Do not make phrase length your main selection rule.

Choose an existing page before proposing a new one

Check your current pages for each group. If one already serves the task, improve it. Add a separate page when customers need a distinct service, substantial comparison or practical explanation.

Several pages mentioning curtains are not automatically competing harmfully. Review whether they serve different tasks and link usefully. Avoid creating near-identical pages for every keyword variation or every nearby town without distinct, relevant information.

Step 6 Turn the shortlist into a manageable plan

Prioritise ideas by relevance to your offer, importance to customers, evidence you can supply and effort needed. Demand estimates and the current search results add context; they should not override a poor business fit.

Example a curtain maker's research shortlist

This is a fictional planning example. No search volumes, rankings or customer outcomes have been measured. The business would need to verify its actual services and publish only accurate claims.

Query group	Customer task and evidence needed	Page decision
Made-to-measure curtains in the service area	Find a provider; confirm coverage, process, genuine examples and consultation route.	Improve the existing main service page first.
Curtain measuring and fitting	Check what is included; confirm who measures and fits, charges and exclusions.	Add detail to the service page unless a separate offer needs its own page.
Lined versus blackout curtains	Compare options; obtain the maker's actual product knowledge and suitable images.	Consider a distinct comparison guide linked from the service page.
Ready-made curtains for next-day delivery	Buy an offer this fictional business does not provide.	Exclude from the plan.

The first action is to improve the main service page, because it answers an important buying task and is already available. The comparison guide can follow when the business can provide a useful, checked explanation. That is an editorial decision, not a ranking forecast.

Use a simple research worksheet

Create one row per useful query group. Keep these fields in a spreadsheet or document:

- Query group and customer task.
- Evidence source, research date, market and tool settings.
- Demand estimate or range, clearly labelled; use "not checked" if none is available.
- Existing URL or proposed page, plus the reason for the decision.
- Priority, information needed, owner and next action.

Keep the first shortlist small enough to act on. You can save other ideas for later instead of turning every research result into a publishing commitment.

Step 7 Use the research when writing and reviewing

Make the page's subject clear in its title, opening explanation and relevant headings. Use the words readers recognise where they fit naturally. You do not need an exact phrase in every heading or a specified number of repetitions.

Keep established URLs unless there is a clear reason to change them. Adding a new target keyword to a working URL is not, by itself, a good reason for a migration. Write image alternatives for the image's purpose, rather than treating them as keyword fields.

A plugin's focus keyword helps you review a draft; it does not send Google an instruction to rank the page for that phrase. Judge the live page by accuracy, usefulness and the next step it offers.

Record what you changed and when. Review relevant page and query trends, visits and suitable enquiries or sales over time. Allow for seasonality, changing search layouts and tracking issues. A single position change is not proof that an edit succeeded or failed.

How keyword research fits AI search

People can ask longer questions and follow-ups in AI search. Google's query fan-out can generate related searches to explore a task. Use this as a reason to cover useful decisions clearly, rather than publishing a page for every imagined prompt.

An AI tool can suggest question groups, but generated ideas are not verified searches. Ask it to organise your checked inputs and flag assumptions. It cannot supply trustworthy monthly search volumes without an identifiable data source and settings.

There is no universal keyword or prompt list that guarantees AI citations. Google says its AI search features do not require tiny content chunks or a special writing style. Keep the main answer useful and connect it to distinct supporting information.

Online companion: Researching keywords and customer needs

4 Using search trends to plan useful work

Understand what your customers are searching for, identify emerging opportunities and adapt your SEO strategy as search behaviour changes.

People do not always search for the same things in the same way.

Customer interests change with the seasons, new technology creates new questions, and developments in the economy or individual industries can influence what people want to know.

Search itself is also changing. Alongside traditional Google searches, people increasingly use AI-powered tools to ask detailed questions, compare options and explore subjects through follow-up conversations.

For small businesses, understanding these changes can help answer an important question:

Are we creating content around what our customers actually need today?

This chapter explains how to identify meaningful search trends, which tools to use and how to turn what you discover into practical improvements.

What Are Search Trends?

Search trends are patterns in how interest in particular topics, questions and search terms changes over time.

They can reveal growing demand, seasonal behaviour, emerging customer concerns or declining interest in a subject.

For example:

- A garden furniture retailer may see increased interest in outdoor dining products before summer.
- An accountant may notice recurring searches about tax deadlines.
- A travel business may identify growing interest in a particular destination.
- A software consultancy may encounter new questions about AI automation and business systems.

These patterns can help businesses decide what information to publish, which existing pages to update and when to promote particular products or services.

However, an increase in searches does not automatically mean an increase in sales.

The most useful trends are those that connect with your customers' needs and your business objectives.

1. Seasonal Trends

Some searches increase at predictable times of the year. Examples include Christmas shopping, summer holidays, tax deadlines and back-to-school purchases.

Because these patterns often repeat, businesses can prepare relevant content before demand reaches its peak.

Practical tip: Review previous years' search patterns and update important seasonal pages well before customers begin searching.

2. Emerging Trends

Emerging trends develop as interest in a new subject gradually increases. New technologies, regulations, consumer preferences and business practices can all create new questions.

For example, businesses adopting AI tools may begin searching for guidance on automation, employee training or data protection.

Practical tip: Look for repeated evidence of growing interest rather than relying on a single spike.

3. Short-Term Trends

Some topics attract sudden attention because of breaking news, announcements or events. These can create opportunities for timely articles, but interest may disappear quickly.

A business should only respond when it has something relevant and useful to contribute.

Practical tip: Avoid creating content around every popular headline. A trend that has nothing to do with your customers is unlikely to deliver meaningful business value.

4. Declining Trends

Interest in some topics decreases as technology, terminology and customer preferences change.

However, declining search interest does not necessarily mean a product or service has become irrelevant. Customers may simply be using different words or finding information through other channels.

Practical tip: Investigate whether demand has genuinely declined before removing or replacing established content.

What This Means for Your Content

Your website should make it easy for visitors to find clear answers about:

- What your products or services do.
- Who they are suitable for.
- How different options compare.
- Pricing, availability and important limitations.
- Common problems and practical solutions.
- What customers should consider before making a decision.

These are useful improvements for human visitors as well as traditional and AI-powered search.

Important: Google Trends does not provide a complete picture of conversations taking place inside ChatGPT, Perplexity or other AI assistants.

Do not assume that a rising Google search trend represents equivalent demand across every AI platform.

Chapter 29 explains how to apply these ideas to important website pages.

Google Trends

Google Trends (https://trends.google.com/) helps you explore how relative search interest changes over time.

You can compare search terms, select countries or regions, review different periods and explore related topics.

One important limitation: Google Trends normally displays indexed interest on a relative scale from 0 to 100. A value of 100 represents the highest relative interest within the selected comparison, not 100 searches or a specific number of people.

Use it to identify patterns rather than calculate exact search volumes.

How to Identify Search Trends That Matter to Your Business

Finding a popular topic is relatively easy. Deciding whether it deserves your time and resources requires more thought.

1. Is It Relevant to Our Customers?

A trending topic may generate enormous interest without attracting anyone likely to need your services. Start with your customers' problems, not the size of the search volume.

2. Is the Interest Sustained or Temporary?

Compare several time periods. A sudden spike may represent a news event rather than lasting demand.

3. What Does the Searcher Want?

Someone looking for an explanation has different needs from someone comparing suppliers or preparing to purchase. This is known as search intent.

Your content should match the purpose behind the search.

4. Do We Already Have Suitable Content?

Before publishing another article, check whether an existing page could be improved. Updating a useful resource may be more effective than creating several overlapping posts.

5. Can We Offer Something Genuinely Useful?

A business with relevant experience, original examples or specialist knowledge may be well placed to explain an emerging subject.

Avoid publishing generic articles simply because a keyword is trending.

A Practical Example: A Small Accountancy Firm

Imagine an accountancy firm that works with freelancers and small businesses.

Using Google Trends and Search Console, it notices increasing interest in questions about electronic invoicing.

Instead of immediately publishing ten articles targeting slightly different keywords, the firm could:

- Check whether the interest relates to its country and target customers.
- Confirm the relevant regulations and implementation dates using official sources.
- Review its existing accounting and invoicing guidance.
- Update the main resource to explain what is changing.
- Publish a separate article only if an important question deserves more detailed coverage.
- Link the articles to relevant accounting services.
- Monitor search visibility and genuine enquiries.

This approach uses trend research to solve a customer problem rather than simply chase additional traffic.

How to Build Search Trends into Your Content Strategy

Search trend research works best as an ongoing activity rather than a one-off exercise.

Review Your Existing Content

Identify important pages that may need updated information, examples or terminology. Do not change a page simply because a keyword has become fashionable.

Plan Seasonal Content in Advance

Use historical patterns to decide when important seasonal information should be reviewed and published. Allow time for search engines to discover changes and for customers to find the information.

Create Content Around Emerging Questions

Look for genuine gaps in your website. If customers repeatedly ask questions that your existing pages do not answer, consider expanding your content.

Connect Related Information

Use relevant internal links to help visitors move between introductory explanations, detailed guides and service pages.

Monitor the Results

Measure whether your content is reaching relevant people and contributing to business objectives. Traffic alone is not enough.

A Simple Monthly Search Trends Checklist

You do not need to spend hours every day monitoring trends. For many small businesses, a monthly review provides a sensible starting point.

- Review Google Search Console for meaningful changes in queries and pages.
- Check Google Trends for important products, services and customer questions.
- Compare current results with equivalent periods where seasonal demand matters.
- Identify new questions customers are asking.
- Review whether existing content answers those questions.
- Investigate relevant competitor content and industry developments.
- Select a small number of worthwhile updates or new content opportunities.
- Record the changes made and review their impact later.

Businesses operating in rapidly changing industries may benefit from more frequent checks.

The objective is not to react to every fluctuation. It is to recognise meaningful changes early enough to make useful decisions.

Common Search Trends Mistakes to Avoid

Mistake 1: Treating Google Trends numbers as search volumes. The data generally represents relative interest, not exact search counts.

Mistake 2: Assuming every rising topic deserves an article. A trend is only useful if it is relevant to your audience.

Mistake 3: Chasing trends while neglecting evergreen content. Established guides, service pages and frequently asked questions still deserve attention.

Mistake 4: Assuming more impressions mean more customers. Visibility, visits and conversions are different measurements.

Mistake 5: Treating AI search behaviour as identical to Google Search. Different platforms provide different experiences, and reporting remains incomplete.

Mistake 6: Changing content without investigating why performance moved. Search demand, rankings, competition, search features and technical issues can all affect results.

Online companion: Using search trends to plan useful work

5 Planning connected content

Good content planning helps customers make decisions. For a small business, that means explaining how to choose a service, compare the options, arrange the work and use it successfully. Organise those answers into a clear main guide and supporting pages where more detail is useful.

This is the purpose of a content cluster: related pages connected through helpful internal links. AI search makes conversational questions more visible, but it does not create a need for a separate page for every wording variation. Start with real customer needs and the information your business can provide.

What a content cluster does

A content cluster brings together pages about one subject. The main guide, sometimes called a pillar page, explains the subject and helps readers find the detail they need. Supporting pages answer narrower questions with enough substance to stand on their own.

Internal links connect the pages at useful points. A reader can move from an overview to a comparison, then to the service or booking information that helps them act. Someone arriving directly on a supporting page should also be able to understand the answer and find the next step.

The main guide can be a service page rather than a long blog article. Supporting information can live in WordPress pages or posts. Choose the format that suits the purpose and navigation of your site.

A cluster is an organising approach, not a ranking guarantee. It does not make a business an authority simply because it has many articles. The information must be accurate, relevant and worth using.

Start with decisions rather than a list of titles

Choose one service or subject that matters to the business. Identify the people it serves and the decisions they need to make. Their questions will differ depending on their situation: a first-time buyer may need an explanation, while an existing customer may need practical instructions.

Aleyda Solis’s AI search checklist recommends beginning with meaningful business journeys and connecting findings to concrete improvements. For content planning, the useful application is to identify an unresolved customer need before deciding to publish another page.

Use four practical groups as a starting point: choosing, comparing, buying and using. They are planning prompts, not a mandatory funnel. People can move between them, return later or arrive with a particular question already in mind.

Choosing a service

What is the service, who is it suitable for and what does it include? Explain the business’s actual scope, coverage and limitations. Give someone enough information to decide whether to investigate further.

Comparing options

Which alternatives matter to the customer? Explain meaningful differences, including limitations and circumstances where another option could fit better. Use criteria you can substantiate rather than announcing that your business is always the best.

Buying or booking

What does the customer need to know before committing? Explain prices or quotation arrangements, what is included, availability where confirmed, and how the enquiry or booking process works. Make the next action clear.

Using the service

What happens after the customer agrees to the work? Provide useful preparation, delivery or aftercare information. Explain how to contact the business if something changes or a problem needs attention.

Collect questions from real customer conversations

Ask the people who handle sales, bookings and support what customers repeatedly need explained. Review suitable enquiry notes, website searches, customer feedback and Search Console queries. Remove personal details before putting examples into a planning document.

Record the question in the customer's language, the situation behind it and where you found it. An enquiry about urgent availability can indicate a different need from a question about ongoing service arrangements, even if both mention the same service.

Keyword research can help you check demand, related wording and the pages already appearing in search. Use it alongside business knowledge. A commonly repeated customer question can deserve an answer even when a keyword tool reports little demand.

An AI tool can suggest questions you may have missed. Treat those as ideas to verify with your team, not evidence of real demand. Do not use invented search volumes, fictional customer quotes or competitor claims that nobody has checked.

Group variations that need the same answer

"Do I need to be home?", "Can you visit while I am at work?" and "What happens if nobody is in?" may belong together if your service has one clear access policy. They do not automatically need three pages.

Separate questions when the task or answer meaningfully changes. A customer choosing between one-off and regular work has a different need from someone preparing for tomorrow's appointment. The distinction is the decision, not the presence of a different phrase.

Query fan out explained simply

Query fan-out is when an AI search system generates several related searches to help answer a question. Google describes this as retrieving additional information around the original request. It is work the system can do while preparing an answer.

A follow-up question is different: the customer asks another question after the first answer. Both make it useful to consider related needs, but neither means you should publish every possible query variation.

For example, someone might ask, "How do I choose a window cleaner for a small house if I am usually at work?" Related information could concern service coverage, what is included, access arrangements and quotation requirements. This is an illustrative example, not a record of Google's actual generated searches.

Your content plan should cover those relevant facts where they belong. One useful page can answer several related questions. A separate supporting page is worthwhile when it adds depth or handles a distinct task.

A small business example from choosing to using

The following plan is fictional. It illustrates a window-cleaning business that offers one-off and regular visits within a defined service area. The page titles are examples for that business, not pages on The SEO Guide Book or a required number of articles.

Its main guide is Window cleaning services in our area. That page explains the service, who it suits, the work included, actual coverage and the route to a quotation. It summarises the main decisions and links to detail where needed.

Customer decision	Example questions	Best place for the answer
Choosing	Do you cover my area? What is included?	Main service guide with a clear scope and coverage section.
Comparing	Is a one-off visit or a regular arrangement right for me?	A focused comparison page explaining both options and their limits.
Buying	What information do you need for a quote? How is a visit confirmed?	A page explaining quotations and bookings, linked to the enquiry route.
Using	Do I need to be home? What arrangements should I make before the visit?	A preparation page based on the business's actual access and appointment policies.

The main guide answers the broad decision

A customer should not have to open several articles just to establish whether the business can help. Keep the essential service facts on the main page, along with a clear explanation of the next step.

A useful structure for this example is: service overview, what is included, coverage, one-off and regular options, quotation process, a few practical questions and contact details. Adjust that structure to the business rather than using it as a compulsory template.

Use current photographs or examples from genuine work where appropriate and permitted. Do not present stock or AI-generated images as proof of a completed customer project.

The comparison page resolves a distinct choice

One-off or regular window cleaning explains the arrangements this fictional business offers. It covers how the options differ, the customer commitments involved and circumstances that may suit each option.

The main guide can give a short summary and link to the full comparison. The comparison page can link back to the service overview and onward to the quotation information. It should not reproduce the whole main guide.

The buying page explains the actual process

How our quotations and bookings work explains the information needed for an enquiry, how the team checks the request and when an appointment becomes confirmed. It also states the current terms that affect the decision.

This page should link to the relevant form or contact route. If the business has no live availability system, the copy should not imply that selecting a preferred date guarantees a booking.

The using page helps after the sale

Preparing for your window cleaning visit answers the business's genuine preparation questions. It explains the agreed access arrangements, what to do if plans change and how the customer can raise a concern.

An existing customer may reach it through a confirmation email rather than a search engine. Its value includes helping the appointment run smoothly, so low search traffic alone would not make it unnecessary.

A realistic path through the pages

A new customer starts on the service guide, opens the comparison because they are unsure about regular visits, and then reads the quotation page before enquiring. After the booking is confirmed, they use the preparation page.

Another customer may arrive directly on the comparison through search or a shared link. Each page therefore needs enough context to work on its own. The sequence is a useful possibility, not a prediction that every customer will follow it.

Decide whether to update a section or create a page

Before creating anything, inspect the pages you already have. Record which one currently answers the question and whether the answer is accurate and easy to find.

Keep a question within an existing page when it needs a short answer in that context. Improve or expand a current page when it already serves the right purpose. Create another page when a distinct decision needs substantial explanation, its own evidence or a different practical action.

For this example, "Do you clean window frames?" could belong in the service-inclusions section. Several useful details about arranging and confirming a booking could justify the process page. A different word order in either question does not justify another URL.

Ask whether a customer could explain why the two proposed pages are different. If their purpose is effectively the same, combine the work into a stronger answer rather than splitting it to meet a publishing target.

A simple content planning worksheet

Use a spreadsheet or document with the fields below. Add your actual URLs and evidence; the examples continue the fictional window-cleaning plan.

Need	Existing destination	Decision	Evidence to check
Understand the service	Current service page	Update the scope and coverage sections.	Services and areas confirmed by the owner.
Compare visit options	No focused comparison	Create only if the explanation needs its own page.	Current one-off and regular arrangements.
Arrange the work	Existing contact page	Improve it or add a process page if useful.	Enquiry fields, confirmation process and terms.
Prepare for a visit	Instructions currently in emails	Create a reusable preparation page if it helps.	Access and change-of-plan policies.

Add an owner, priority and review date to your working version. Give priority to gaps that prevent a suitable customer from choosing or contacting you, and to facts that are currently wrong.

Use internal links to explain the next step

Link from the main guide where a supporting answer becomes relevant. For example, place a link to the comparison beside the summary of visit options. On the comparison page, link to the quotation process when the reader is ready to arrange work.

Use descriptive link text such as how quotations and bookings work. Readers should understand the destination before clicking. Avoid forcing every keyword variation into the link or adding a list of unrelated links below every paragraph.

Google recommends crawlable links and descriptive text that helps people and its systems understand the destination. Every important page should have a link from another page on your site. There is no ideal link count to achieve.

A supporting page can link back to the main guide for the broader explanation. Link between supporting pages when that helps a real next question. You do not need to connect every page to every other page.

In WordPress, check that links point to the correct published destination and work on mobile. Keep important resources reachable through sensible navigation as well as contextual links. If you change a URL, plan the redirect and update links that used it.

Write for understanding without artificial size rules

Use headings that describe the questions or tasks, then answer them clearly. Include detail where it changes a decision. A useful comparison table, photograph or example can explain something better than another paragraph.

There is no compulsory chunk size for Google AI Search. Do not break a coherent explanation into fragments to satisfy a supposed extraction rule, or repeat an answer under multiple headings just to target more variations.

Google also says it has no preferred word count. Write enough to fulfil the page’s purpose, then remove repetition. A straightforward preparation page can be shorter than a detailed comparison without being less useful.

Keep necessary qualifications beside the claim they explain. If availability, pricing or service terms can change, make someone responsible for checking them. Never invent information simply to make a page look complete.

Use a question sample to check coverage

A prompt is the question or instruction someone gives an AI system. A prompt library is a selected set used for testing. It is not a list of pages to publish.

Aleyda Solis’s prompt-library guidance stresses that a sample should reflect the business’s services, audiences, markets, customer decisions and realistic constraints. It distinguishes representative coverage from trying to collect every possible wording. This is measurement advice, which can also help reveal gaps in a content plan.

For a modest editorial check, choose a few genuine questions from each relevant decision group. Include situations your business actually serves. Read your own pages against those questions and note the missing facts, misleading wording or unclear next step.

That exercise is not a representative AI visibility report. If you also test answers on AI platforms, record the question, date, platform and relevant location or account conditions. Keep observations separate and do not rebuild the site because of one response.

Review the cluster as a useful part of the website

Check page-level Search Console trends, recorded website visits and enquiries alongside customer feedback. Compare consistent periods and allow for seasonality or changes in the service itself. A visibility change does not establish that the content plan caused it.

Look for practical signs of improvement: customers finding the right service, fewer repeated clarification questions, suitable enquiries and a working booking route. A supporting page may help a decision without being the page where the enquiry is submitted.

Keep AI impressions, citations, referral visits and business outcomes separate when reporting them. A citation does not prove a visit, and a visit does not prove a booking.

Review pages when services, prices, coverage or policies change. Check links after edits and look for overlapping pages before adding new ones. When two pages have drifted into the same role, assess whether one stronger page would serve readers better.

A checklist for your first content cluster

- Choose one service and identify the customers it genuinely suits.
- Collect real questions and group them around choosing, comparing, buying and using.
- Audit existing answers before adding new pages.
- Strengthen the main guide and give each supporting page a distinct purpose.
- Add useful links and a clear next action where appropriate.
- Check facts, examples, metadata and mobile contact routes before publishing.
- Assign responsibility for maintenance and review business outcomes alongside visibility.

Online companion: Planning connected content

6 Writing useful blog content

Useful business blog posts help people understand a problem, compare their options or take a practical next step. The strongest starting point is a question your customers actually ask, backed by information your business can explain accurately.

You do not need to publish every week or reach a particular word count. Choose posts that deserve a place on your website, make them easy to use and keep them accurate afterwards.

These blog content tips take you from choosing a topic to reviewing the live page. Use the linked guides for detailed keyword research, AI writing and content planning.

Decide whether the answer belongs in a blog post

A blog is one way to help customers, alongside service pages, product information, booking instructions and support pages. Start by choosing the most useful destination for the answer.

Reader need	Useful starting point
Find out what a service includes and how to book.	Improve the service page and its contact or booking route.
Compare options before choosing.	Create a useful comparison article if the explanation needs a separate page.
Check an order, delivery rule or service restriction.	Improve the relevant product, policy or support information.
Understand a change affecting customers.	Publish a dated update explaining who it affects and what to do next.

Check your existing pages before creating another one. A clearer section on a service page may help more than a new article repeating the same information.

Choose a question that matters to your audience

Collect questions from enquiries, sales conversations, support requests and the people doing the work. Look for points where customers hesitate, misunderstand the offer or need help comparing choices.

Then ask whether the topic connects to your actual products, services or expertise. A popular subject outside your business can attract attention that does little for your readers or your commercial goals.

Write a short brief before drafting

Before writing, answer these questions in a few lines:

- Who is the reader, and what should they understand or be able to do afterwards?
- Why does this need a separate post rather than an update to an existing page?
- What original information, experience, images or examples can the business supply?
- Which facts need reliable sources or a colleague’s review?
- Which related page or useful action should come next?

This brief should help you keep the article focused. If you cannot identify what the reader gains, revise the idea before producing the draft.

Use a title that describes the task

Choose a title that tells readers what the post explains. “What to Bring to a Picture-Framing Appointment” gives a clearer expectation than “Transform Your Art Today”. Avoid promises you cannot support, such as guaranteed results or an unverified “best” claim.

Use recognisable customer language naturally. You do not need an exact target phrase in every heading, and there is no keyword density you need to achieve.

Explain the useful answer early

Open with the main answer and the scope. Tell readers who the advice is for and what depends on their circumstances. Skip a long introduction about how important the industry has become.

For an appointment guide, an opening might explain which information customers should have ready and whether the business wants them to contact the studio before bringing an unusually large item. Confirm the actual process before publishing it.

Organise the detail so people can use it

Give each main section a descriptive heading. Use subsections when they help organise the answer, and use lists for steps or items people need to compare. Short paragraphs help scanning, but do not split every sentence into a separate block.

Use a table where it makes options clearer. Add FAQs only for useful questions that remain unanswered; an FAQ section is optional. Remove repeated summaries that simply restate the same advice.

Write enough to complete the task. Google says it has no preferred word count. A concise practical answer and a detailed comparison can both be useful when they match what readers need.

Add information that comes from your business

Original input does not have to mean commissioning a survey. It can be an explanation of how your service works, a genuine comparison of options you offer or a photograph that demonstrates a point.

Keep examples accurate and specific. Record the basis for price, time or performance claims. Do not invent customer quotations, case studies, qualifications or first-hand testing to make an article appear more authoritative.

Example a local picture-framing studio

This is a fictional planning example, not a measured case study. The studio would need to confirm its own process and services before using the suggested content.

Customers repeatedly ask what they should bring to a framing appointment. The owner decides that a short preparation guide would help customers arrive with the information needed for a useful conversation.

Post section	Business input to obtain
What happens at the appointment	The actual consultation process and whether booking is required.
Information to have ready	The studio’s requirements for artwork dimensions, display preferences and photographs.

Post section	Business input to obtain
When to contact the studio first	Verified limits or special arrangements for unusually sized or delicate items.
What happens afterwards	How quotes, customer decisions and collection arrangements actually work.

The owner supplies genuine notes and a suitable photograph of the consultation area. They link the post to the relevant framing service and appointment page. The article helps readers prepare; it does not promise that every type of artwork can be handled or that the guide will increase bookings.

This supporting post has a different job from the main service page. Keep that distinction clear rather than copying the full guide onto both pages.

Add useful images without slowing the post down

Use a photograph, diagram, screenshot or chart when it explains something the reader needs to understand. Do not add an image simply to fill space. Check permissions and remove private customer information from screenshots or examples.

Resize images for their intended use and compress them while retaining enough detail. Check them on a phone: a chart that cannot be read at the displayed size is not helping.

Write alternative text according to the image's purpose and context. Informative images need an appropriate text alternative; decorative images generally need empty alt text. Complex charts may also need an explanation or data table in the page.

Do not stuff keywords into image descriptions or present a generated illustration as a photograph of a real project. Keep captions and nearby text consistent with what the image actually shows.

Link the post to a sensible next step

Use internal links where readers need supporting information or are ready to explore a relevant offer. In the studio example, a preparation guide can link to the framing service and the appointment route.

Choose descriptive link text that explains the destination. "Explore our framing service" is more informative than "click here". Add links from relevant existing pages so the new post can be found through the website.

There is no ideal number of internal links per post. Choose them for relevance and context. Avoid forcing a repeated keyword into every link or adding unrelated destinations to meet a quota.

End with a next step suited to the question. A comparison might lead to a service page; a practical guide might lead to a checklist or contact route. Do not promise a download or booking option unless it exists and works.

Check the post in WordPress before publishing

- Verify facts, sources, dates, examples and author details.
- Check the title, meta description and excerpt against what the post actually delivers.
- Preview headings, paragraphs, tables and images on desktop and mobile.
- Open links and test forms, booking buttons or other next steps.
- Confirm the post is linked from relevant pages and placed in a useful category.
- Remove draft instructions, unresolved questions and internal review notes.

A meta description should describe the page accurately. Google may instead choose other page text for its snippet, so the wording shown in search is not fully under your control.

Promote the post where it is relevant

Share a useful introduction through the channels your audience already uses, such as your business social profile or an appropriate newsletter. Explain the question the post answers rather than posting only its title and link.

Follow community rules when contributing to forums or groups. Answer the question properly and link only where the article adds value. Avoid posting the same promotional message across unrelated discussions.

Online companion: Writing useful blog content

7 Balancing evergreen and timely content

Evergreen content answers questions that remain useful over time. Trending content responds to current interest, news or a recent development. Seasonal content addresses a need that returns at particular times of year.

The right choice depends on what your customers need, what your business can explain and how much you can maintain. You do not need a fixed ratio of evergreen and trending posts. Neither type guarantees traffic, links, enquiries or AI citations.

For a small website with limited time, start with important unanswered customer questions. Add timely coverage when you can verify the facts and offer a useful contribution.

Understand what makes content evergreen

Evergreen describes a lasting reader need. Examples include a guide to choosing a service, an explanation of a process or instructions for preparing for an appointment. These can be useful to customers long after publication.

The subject may remain useful while its details change. Prices, screenshots, policies, product choices and booking arrangements can become inaccurate. An evergreen guide therefore still needs an owner and a review plan.

Evergreen is not a promise of constant demand or low maintenance. A detailed software tutorial may need frequent checks even though people continue to need help with the same task.

Understand trending and timely content

Trending content responds to a topic receiving current attention. A related category is timely information that matters now, even if it never becomes widely popular: a service change, a local event or a new product announcement.

A useful update explains what happened, when it applies, who is affected and what to do next. It should distinguish confirmed information from an announcement, trial or speculation.

Interest may rise and then fall, but a traffic spike is not guaranteed. A small, accurate update can still be worthwhile if it prevents customer confusion. Conversely, a popular story may have little value for your particular audience.

Keep seasonal content in the picture

Seasonal demand repeats around a period or event, such as holiday bookings, annual maintenance planning or festive products. It is different from a one-off news cycle.

A seasonal guide can have a lasting purpose while needing current dates and availability. “Choosing a Christmas cooking class” could remain useful across years; a page listing this December’s classes needs verified course details.

Plan from your actual enquiry and booking patterns. Review important seasonal pages early enough for customers to make decisions. There is no universal lead time that suits every business or event.

Compare the work each type needs

Content type	Main reader need	Maintenance to plan
Evergreen guide	Understand a recurring question or decision.	Check facts, examples, links and whether the advice still fits the task.
Trending or timely update	Understand a development and its practical implications.	Verify the announcement, track changes and make expiry or historical status clear.
Seasonal page	Plan or buy around a recurring period.	Confirm current dates, availability, terms and what happens after the season.

These labels are planning aids rather than separate SEO requirements. One page can contain lasting advice and a clearly dated update. Choose the arrangement that makes the information easiest to find and maintain.

Choose your next topic with a short checklist

Before committing to an article, answer these questions:

- Does it help an existing or intended customer with a real task?
- Does it connect to something your business offers or understands well?
- Can you add reliable information, original experience or a practical explanation?
- Is an existing page the better place for the answer?
- Can you check the facts and publish while the information is still useful?
- Who will review the page, and what will happen when its details change?

If an essential service page is misleading, correcting it may deserve priority over a new trend post. If a change affects customers immediately, a verified update may deserve priority over a longer guide. Make the decision from the task and its urgency.

Google’s helpful-content guidance asks whether content serves the site’s audience and adds useful value. It also warns against writing about topics merely because they are trending.

Connect lasting guides and timely updates

Put recurring explanations where readers can find them again. Use a dated update when the change itself deserves a separate record, then link it to the main guide for background and current instructions.

Update the main guide when a confirmed development changes its advice. Do not leave it contradictory while relying on a separate news post to explain the correction.

Example an independent cookery school

This is a fictional planning example. It contains no measured search volumes, actual course announcements or performance results.

Reader question	Page choice	Information and next step
How do I choose a beginners’ cooking class?	A lasting guide linked to the course catalogue.	Explain the school’s real options, skill levels and booking process.

Reader question	Page choice	Information and next step
Which Christmas classes can I book?	A recurring seasonal page if the school offers these classes.	Confirm dates, prices, availability and booking terms for the current season.
What is included in the school's new course?	A dated launch update if a genuine new offer merits one.	Explain the confirmed change and link to the current course page.

The school first corrects missing information in its current course pages. It then improves the beginners' guide and checks its seasonal page against actual bookings and availability. A launch update is added only when there is a real announcement to explain.

The guide links to current course information. The update links to both the relevant course and background guidance where useful. This gives each page a distinct job and avoids copying the same full answer into several posts.

Make dates and changing information clear

A reader should be able to distinguish when a page was published or updated from when an event or offer takes place. Label those dates clearly. Keep the original announcement's historical context when it remains part of the article's purpose.

If you make a substantive update, describe the change where useful and use an accurate update date. Keep equivalent visible dates and structured data consistent. Google may use several signals to choose a byline date and does not guarantee that it will display one.

A newer date alone is not a content improvement. Google specifically cautions against changing dates to make unchanged pages appear fresh. Check the advice, examples and supporting information rather than simply replacing the year.

Keep recurring URLs useful

When the same reader task returns each year, retaining an established URL can make maintenance simpler. Update the current information and distinguish it from any historical material. Do not automatically publish another near-identical annual page.

Separate annual editions can make sense when readers need a genuine historical record or distinct event information. Decide from that purpose, rather than treating either URL approach as a universal ranking rule.

Decide what happens when a timely page expires

Include an expiry or review decision in the brief. After an event, offer or announcement, choose the action that fits what the page still provides:

- Keep it as history when it remains useful. Label it clearly, remove misleading active offers and link to current information.
- Update it when the same page still answers the current task. Check all dates, booking routes and qualifications.
- Combine overlapping material into a useful destination when it serves the same need. Preserve important context and update internal links.

- Retire it when it no longer provides a useful destination. Review links, references and any relevant replacement before removing it.

If you permanently move or combine a page, use a permanent redirect to the appropriate replacement. Do not redirect every expired offer or unrelated article to the homepage. Where there is no suitable replacement, a proper not-found response can be appropriate; ask your website manager to implement the decision correctly.

Measure each page against its purpose

A lasting guide may help customers choose over a long period. A seasonal page may matter most during a short booking window. A notice may succeed by reducing confusion. Judge each against the role you gave it.

For seasonal content, compare corresponding seasons or booking periods where data is available. For a news update, examine its useful life rather than assuming it should keep attracting the same attention indefinitely.

Review relevant queries, visibility and clicks alongside recorded visits and business outcomes. Keep AI citations, visits, enquiries and sales separate. A popular post does not necessarily bring suitable customers, and a quieter page may still answer an important question.

A fall after a seasonal peak does not by itself prove an SEO problem. Investigate tracking, demand, page changes and technical access where the evidence calls for it. Avoid rewriting a useful guide because of a small fluctuation.

Online companion: Balancing evergreen and timely content

8 Using AI with editorial judgement

SEO content writing with AI works best when you supply the business knowledge, check the evidence and take responsibility for the live page. AI can organise notes, suggest an outline and help draft clear explanations. The useful contribution comes from the information and judgement behind the words.

For a small business, the aim is to answer a real customer question and make the next step easier. Producing more articles, sounding conversational or getting a green plugin score does not establish that you have achieved that.

Use the workflow below for a new page or a substantial update. Keep the existing URL when improving a page that already serves the task.

What Google says about AI content

Google recognises that generative AI can help with research and structure. Its current guidance calls for manual fact-checking and review before publication, including metadata and supporting material. It also warns about producing many pages without useful added value.

The drafting method alone does not determine whether a page deserves visibility. Neither an AI label nor human authorship guarantees quality, rankings or citations. Check the finished work against the reader's needs and the evidence.

Step 1 Choose a useful task before asking for a draft

Start with a customer question, recurring support issue or decision your website should explain. Write down who needs the answer and what they should be able to do afterwards.

For example: "Help a WordPress owner understand why robots.txt may not appear in File Manager and identify what to check next." That gives the writer a practical task. "Write twenty posts about AI SEO" only describes a production target.

Check whether an existing page already answers the question. Improve it when appropriate, or create a supporting page for a genuinely distinct task. Use keyword research to understand customer language; do not treat an AI-generated keyword list as verified demand.

Step 2 Gather sources and business input

Build a short source pack before drafting. For a product feature, policy or technical instruction, start with the organisation responsible for it. Record the source URL, relevant date, date checked and the particular point it supports.

Add the information your business can contribute: an actual service process, a genuine customer question, photographs, documented observations or an explanation from the person who does the work. Separate confirmed facts from assumptions and proposed advice.

A newsletter or another article can help you discover a development. Follow it to the primary source, then decide what your readers need explained. A lightly rewritten summary does not become original business experience.

Keep confidential or identifying customer information out of prompts unless its use is authorised and appropriate. Anonymised notes are usually enough for an educational example.

Keep a claim record alongside the draft

Material	Evidence to keep	Editorial decision
A current product or platform feature	Responsible provider’s documentation and date checked.	Confirm market, eligibility and rollout limits.
A customer question or business example	Original notes and any necessary permission.	Represent what happened accurately and remove private details.
A claimed improvement	Comparable records, dates and measurement method.	Check calculations and distinguish association from proven cause.
An author or reviewer credential	Confirmed profile and relevant qualification.	Use a truthful credit only for work actually performed.

Mark claims as verified, revise or remove. A second AI answer repeating the first does not supply independent evidence.

Step 3 Give AI a clear brief and approve the outline

Specify the reader, task, source pack, original input, scope and tone. Ask for an outline first, so you can remove unnecessary sections before spending time reviewing a full draft.

A reusable briefing prompt

Help draft a page for [audience] answering [question]. The reader should finish able to [task]. Use the verified sources and business notes supplied below. Distinguish facts, editorial recommendations and examples. Do not invent statistics, quotations, customer stories, test results, credentials, author experience or URLs. Mark missing evidence as [CHECK] in the working draft. Use plain British English, H2 and H3 headings and natural wording. First propose an outline and identify evidence gaps. Wait for approval before drafting the full page.

Then supply the evidence with clear labels. If the tool can retrieve web pages, ask it to identify what it actually opened. You still need to inspect the relevant sources yourself.

Approve the outline when each section helps the reader complete the task. Remove sections added merely to reach an arbitrary word count or repeat a target phrase.

Step 4 Draft within the evidence and add practical judgement

Ask for a section or full draft using the approved outline. Working in sections can make review easier; it is a workflow choice, not a search-engine requirement.

Keep source references close to the claims they support. When the evidence leaves a decision open, explain your recommendation and its limits. Remove confident wording that hides an unanswered question.

Read the result as a customer would. Does the answer arrive early? Are instructions in a usable order? Are unfamiliar terms explained? Can someone tell whether the guidance applies to their situation?

An example from real WordPress support work

During work on The SEO Guide Book, a genuine question arose: the website owner could not find robots.txt in File Manager. That question is useful original input because it identifies a specific point of confusion.

The question is real. The paragraph below demonstrates a possible explanation; it is not a diagnosis of the website or a claim that a fix was completed.

WordPress's official do_robots documentation shows that WordPress can generate robots.txt content dynamically. That supports explaining why a response may exist without a physical file. It does not establish which part of a particular website controls its response.

Example draft: "If you cannot find robots.txt in File Manager, open your website's /robots.txt URL first. WordPress can generate the response, so a physical file may not exist. Save the text you receive and establish whether WordPress, a plugin or another delivery layer controls it before creating or replacing a file."

The useful business contribution is identifying the confusion and explaining the next check. The AI can help express it. A reviewer must verify the actual configuration before adding site-specific instructions or claiming that anything was repaired.

Step 5 Check every factual claim and source

Read the draft sentence by sentence. Check claims about dates, numbers, capabilities, eligibility, comparisons and your own business. Follow each claim back to its documentation or business record.

- Open every source link and read the relevant passage, including qualifications. A real link can still support the wrong claim.
- Check timing, location and availability. An announced trial is not necessarily a feature every reader can use.
- Recalculate figures. Retain units, sample sizes and reporting periods. Do not turn a change after an edit into proof that the edit caused it.
- Check quotations word for word, identify the speaker and confirm the context. Remove any invented endorsement.
- Check examples against records. Label fictional illustrations and keep them separate from genuine cases.
- Resolve every [CHECK] marker. Find evidence, qualify the statement where justified or delete it.

For content that could materially affect health, finances, legal decisions or safety, arrange review by someone with appropriate subject knowledge and qualifications. A polished explanation does not establish that the underlying advice is correct.

Finish with an editorial review of the whole page: whether it answers the question, offers useful substance and avoids unnecessary repetition. An automated readability or SEO score cannot perform that judgement for you.

Step 6 Confirm authorship and explain assistance honestly

Use the real author's name and an accurate profile where a byline is appropriate. Check roles, qualifications and reviewer credits. Do not invent an expert or imply first-hand testing that never happened.

Google's helpful-content guidance encourages clear information about who created content and how it was produced where that context helps readers. It also makes clear that there is no preferred article word count.

A suitable disclosure for substantial assistance could be: “AI helped organise the outline and draft. [Name and role] checked the sources, examples and final text before publication.” Use it only after the stated review has happened.

Decide what explanation your audience needs, and check any separate platform requirements that apply. Disclosure does not replace factual review or make an unsupported article trustworthy.

Step 7 Review metadata and supporting material

Review every part of the page’s presentation, including material generated separately from the body.

Element	What to check
Page title and SEO title	Accurate subject and scope; remove unproved “best”, “official” or guaranteed-result claims.
Meta description and excerpt	Summarise what is actually present. Do not promise a resource, service or result the page does not provide.
Images, captions and alt text	Represent the image and its purpose accurately. Do not present a generated illustration as a photograph of a real customer or completed project.
Structured data	Use genuine authors, appropriate dates and accurate page information. Validate relevant markup and check current feature requirements.
Links and calls to action	Open the destinations, check descriptive wording and test the next step on a phone.

Google may choose different wording for a title link or search snippet. Write concise, accurate metadata rather than trying to satisfy a universal character count that guarantees how it will appear.

Write image text alternatives according to the image’s purpose and context. Decorative images generally need empty alt text. Do not turn every image description into another target-keyword repetition.

For AI-generated product information or images submitted to Merchant Center, check its separate labelling and image-metadata requirements. A general article disclosure does not satisfy every product-specific rule.

Keep automation useful and publishing decisions human

Automate manageable tasks such as organising notes, formatting drafts and flagging missing fields. Keep decisions about the topic, evidence and publication with someone who understands the subject.

Google’s scaled content abuse policy concerns producing many pages primarily to manipulate rankings without useful value. It can apply regardless of whether people, automation or both produce the material.

A workflow that rewrites every newsletter item into a new post can reproduce the same information at scale. Adding a source link or changing the wording does not automatically supply a distinctive contribution.

Select developments that matter to your readers. Read the original source, explain the practical implication and contribute evidence or experience you actually have. Combine overlapping updates when one useful page would serve readers better.

There is no safe publishing quota or required percentage of manual rewriting. Assess whether each page deserves to exist and can be kept accurate.

Step 8 Preview publish and maintain the page

Preview the page in WordPress on desktop and mobile. Check the headings, tables, source links, images and contact route. Remove internal research notes and unresolved markers. Keep the claim record and final approval with the content brief.

After publication, review relevant queries, visits and suitable enquiries or sales. These are different measures; neither an impression nor an AI citation proves that someone became a customer. A rise after publication does not prove that AI writing caused it.

Refresh the page when facts change or readers need a clearer answer. Record substantive edits. A newer date alone is not a content improvement.

Your editorial checklist

- Choose one customer task and identify what useful information you can add.
- Collect current sources and genuine business input before drafting.
- Approve the outline, then draft within the evidence.
- Verify every claim, quotation, example and source link.
- Confirm truthful author and reviewer details.
- Check metadata, images, structured data and the published preview.
- Keep the approval record, then measure and maintain the page.

Online companion: Using AI with editorial judgement

9 Refreshing an established archive

A content refresh should make an existing page more useful, accurate or easier to follow. For a hobby website with a large archive, the manageable approach is to choose a small batch and decide what to keep, update, combine or archive.

Start with misleading advice and important reader tasks. Use impressions and visits to help find pages worth inspecting, then read the page before deciding what it needs. A newer date, a longer article or a fresh set of keywords is not evidence of an improvement.

Choose a small starting point

You do not need to rewrite the whole archive or finish a detailed audit before correcting an obvious error. Start with pages people still use, guides that matter to your site's purpose and any advice you already know is out of date.

Make a simple working list with the URL, reader task, suspected problem and proposed action. Add an owner and a review date. The list can grow as you work; it does not need to contain every post on day one.

For a hobby site, think about what a reader comes to do: follow a tutorial, choose an item, understand a technique or revisit an event. These purposes are different. A historical event report should not be judged by the same freshness expectations as current instructions.

Choose one manageable piece of work at a time. If a page needs new testing or substantial research, record that and schedule it separately. Do not let one broken link turn into an unplanned rewrite of the entire topic.

Prioritise the pages where a correction matters

- Misleading or incorrect advice, even if the page gets few visits.
- Important reader tasks that are difficult to complete because instructions, links or examples no longer work.
- Established guides where your own experience can replace vague or outdated information.
- Pages with a persistent performance change that needs investigation.
- Overlapping pages that make readers unsure which answer to use.

Age alone is a weak reason to change something. An older explanation may still be accurate, while a recent post may already contain a mistake. Give priority to the reader's problem rather than to the oldest publication date.

Use impressions and visits as diagnostic signals

Search Console impressions describe appearances in Google Search results; clicks describe interactions leading to your site. Use page and query views to see which topics changed. Website analytics records a different part of the journey: activity on the site through its available measurement.

Compare consistent periods and filters, and look at longer trends. For seasonal topics, include a suitable comparison with the same part of the previous year where data exists. Avoid making a large editorial decision from a few days or a handful of visits.

Google's traffic-drop guidance describes several possible causes, including technical issues, changes in demand, security problems, ranking changes and data anomalies. A decline does not by itself prove that the page is outdated. Small fluctuations may not call for radical changes.

If impressions and clicks decline, check which queries and pages are affected and whether people still need the topic. If exposure remains but clicks fall, inspect the title, description and search context. If recorded visits fall across the site, check measurement and technical changes too.

These are investigation prompts, not diagnoses. Read the affected page and test its main task. Low traffic alone does not justify deleting a useful resource, and strong traffic does not excuse misleading advice.

Inspect the page as a reader would

Open the public page on a phone as well as a desktop. Read it from the beginning and follow the main instructions or links. Ask whether someone arriving directly can understand the purpose and complete the task.

Check factual claims against current primary sources where appropriate. Confirm product references, screenshots, dates and instructions. Keep the useful examples that still work; replace an example when it is wrong, unclear or no longer representative.

Look for information that is missing rather than merely old. A tutorial might need one explanation of a confusing step. A comparison might need clearer criteria. A guide might already answer the question well and need only a corrected link.

Check the title, introductory promise and metadata against the final content. Review author details and any claims of experience. Do not leave a misleading summary in place after correcting the body.

Choose keep update combine or archive

Action	When it fits	What to do
Keep	The page is accurate, useful and still serves a distinct purpose.	Record the check and next review trigger. Leave the working answer intact.
Update	The purpose remains useful but facts, instructions, examples or links need improvement.	Correct the page under its existing URL and record the substantive changes.
Combine	Two or more pages substantially answer the same reader task.	Preserve useful material in the best-fitting destination and plan appropriate redirects and link updates.
Archive	The page is no longer current guidance, but it may have historical or reference value.	Decide whether to retain it clearly as historical material or retire it with an appropriate URL response.

Keep an answer that still works

Keeping is an active decision. Record that you checked the important facts and links. Set a sensible trigger for the next review, such as a product change, a broken instruction or a reader reporting a problem.

You do not need to add paragraphs or change the headline just to demonstrate activity. Google’s helpful-content guidance cautions against changing dates without substantive changes and against adding or removing content simply to make the site appear fresh.

Update the smallest amount that solves the problem

Write down the intended improvement before editing. For example: “Replace the discontinued download link and retest the steps” is a clearer task than “Refresh this old tutorial”.

Keep the accurate sections and useful reader comments where appropriate. Rewrite more extensively when the page’s main answer or structure no longer works, but retain the existing URL when it still represents the same subject.

Add original experience where it helps someone understand or act. A tested screenshot, a practical example or an explanation of a common mistake can be more valuable than another general introduction.

Combine pages that serve the same task

Compare the actual purpose and useful material, not just the keywords. Two pages mentioning the same subject can deserve separate places if one helps people choose and the other helps them use it.

When the purpose overlaps substantially, choose the destination that best fits the reader’s need. Consider the existing content, established links, search activity and URL meaning. Do not assume that the newest page must win.

- Save copies of the pages before making changes.
- Build the combined answer and preserve genuinely useful examples or context.
- Use a permanent redirect from an old URL only where the new page is a relevant replacement.
- Update internal links to the final destination and review sitemap entries.
- Test the old URL and the destination, including images and important downloads.

Avoid redirecting every old post to the homepage or an unrelated category. A redirect should take the reader to the replacement they reasonably expected. Record the old and new URLs so the decision can be reviewed later.

Archive historical material without disguising its age

A report about a past exhibition, a dated opinion or an old software walkthrough may remain useful as history. Keep it clearly labelled, retain the original context and link to current guidance when a suitable page exists.

Archiving can mean moving material out of current recommendation lists while retaining it in a historical section. It does not automatically mean deleting the page or excluding it from search. Decide based on its continuing usefulness.

If a page is withdrawn entirely and there is no relevant replacement, arrange an appropriate not-found or gone response, such as 404 or 410. Keep a backup if the material matters to your records. A public page should not pretend that removed content is still available.

Neither archiving nor deleting is a guaranteed SEO improvement. Do not remove pages merely because a report shows no recent clicks. Check reader value, external links, downloads and historical context before retiring them.

A manageable example for a hobby website

This example is fictional. A photography enthusiast has several hundred posts and chooses five pages for a first review. The aim is to improve useful resources without starting a large publishing project.

A guide to planning a personal photography project is still clear and accurate. The owner checks its links, records Keep and leaves the original article intact.

An older editing tutorial contains instructions for an interface that has changed. The owner retests the process, replaces the affected screenshots and corrects the steps under the existing URL. They record Update, including which steps changed.

Two short posts explain almost the same way to organise a photo collection. The owner compares their useful material, builds one complete answer at the most suitable URL and redirects the redundant page to it. They update links from related tutorials and record Combine.

A report about a 2022 photo walk remains interesting as an event record. The owner labels it as a past event, removes any suggestion that bookings remain open and keeps it in the historical archive. They record Archive rather than republishing it as a current event.

The next batch is chosen after those tasks are finished. Five pages is only an illustration, not a quota. One carefully corrected page is a reasonable maintenance session.

Record substantive changes and reconnect related articles

Keep a short change log so you can see what improved and why. Record the URL, problem, action, actual work completed, source or testing evidence, completion date and next check. Mark unfinished tasks separately.

An entry saying “Updated” is too vague. “Retested the import steps, replaced two obsolete screenshots and corrected the download link” explains the change. Keep the source URL or test notes with that entry.

The following sample continues the fictional photography site. Use actual URLs and dates in your own log.

Page or task	Decision	Work recorded	Next check
Project-planning guide	Keep	Facts and links checked; no substantive edit needed.	Review if reader questions reveal a gap.
Editing tutorial	Update	Changed steps retested and screenshots replaced.	Check after a relevant software update.
Photo-collection posts	Combine	Useful sections retained, old URL redirected and links updated.	Verify the final route after publication.
2022 event report	Archive	Past-event context made clear; booking references removed.	Check if archive links or event context change.

Add links where they help the reader continue. The refreshed tutorial might point to the preparation guide, while that guide can link back to the tested instructions. Use text that describes the destination and check that it is the correct version.

Inspect links pointing into combined or retired pages as well as links inside the edited page. Updating the article alone does not fix an old sidebar or resource list that still recommends obsolete material.

Use AI to support the review without multiplying the work

An AI tool can help organise an inventory, compare drafts or suggest questions to check. Give it a defined task, such as listing claims that need verification or identifying repeated sections. A suggested edit still needs editorial judgement.

Google's guidance on generative AI content emphasises manual review for accuracy and trustworthiness, including metadata, structured data and image alternative text. Generating many pages without useful added value may breach its scaled-content policies.

Check each proposed fact, example, source and author claim yourself. AI can repeat an old error in cleaner language or invent a replacement statistic. Do not automatically rewrite an entire archive, publish unverified recommendations or fabricate first-hand experience.

Keep a copy of the original and review the finished page before publication. Reject edits that add length without helping the reader. Automation is most useful when it reduces routine work while leaving the final decisions with you.

Make dates and publication checks honest

If the page has substantially changed, describe that update accurately. Retain the original publication context where it helps readers and use a clearly labelled updated date. If you only checked an unchanged article, a separate Reviewed note can describe the check without implying a rewrite.

Where the site outputs publication and modification dates in structured data, ensure the equivalent dates agree with the visible information and describe the actual page. Do not replace the publication date with the date of an event mentioned in the chapter.

A new date alone does not improve an answer. Avoid adding the current year to an evergreen headline unless that year is necessary to describe the content accurately.

Before publishing, check the public preview, sources, links, screenshots, metadata and mobile layout. Review existing markup against the features Google currently supports. Do not add schema simply because an old guide promised FAQ or HowTo enhancements.

Check the result without promising recovery

Test the page immediately after publication so you can catch broken links, layout problems or incorrect redirects. Then review search and site activity after a suitable observation period, using consistent definitions and noting what changed.

For a small site, low volumes may need a longer observation period. Consider seasonal demand and other changes before interpreting a rise or fall. A before-and-after comparison is useful context, not proof that the edit caused every difference.

Judge the reader-facing result too. Can someone now complete the instructions? Is the misleading advice corrected? Are fewer people asking the same clarification question? Those improvements matter even before you can see a clear search trend.

You can use Search Console's URL Inspection tools where appropriate, but requesting indexing does not guarantee a particular result or a fixed recovery timetable. Do not keep rewriting an accurate page just because its traffic did not rise immediately.

Online companion: Refreshing an established archive

10 Improving on page SEO

On-page SEO means improving a page's information, structure and presentation so readers can use it and search engines can understand it. The work includes titles, headings, links, images and the content itself.

Start with the task the page should help someone complete. A service page should explain the offer and how to enquire; a product page should help someone assess and buy the item; a tutorial should give usable instructions. Adding keywords cannot compensate for missing or misleading information.

This chapter takes you through one page at a time. Use it alongside the wider SEO audit checklist when you need to investigate indexing, site-wide technical faults or other issues beyond the page.

What on-page SEO covers

On-page work overlaps with content, technical SEO and usability. You can edit much of it yourself, but some changes depend on your theme, plugins or developer. You can influence what you publish; you cannot control exactly how a search engine displays or ranks it.

Area	What to inspect
Purpose and content	Does the page help the intended reader make a decision or complete a task?
Title and description	Do they accurately explain the page without exaggerated promises?
Headings and links	Can someone follow the information and find the next useful page?
Images and usability	Can people understand the visuals and use the page on their device?
Consistency	Do facts, relevant markup and the next step describe the same offer?

Choose a page with a clear reason to improve it

Pick an important service, product, category or advice page. Look for a specific problem: repeated customer confusion, outdated information, a missing price explanation or a form people struggle to use.

Search Console impressions, clicks and queries can help you choose what to inspect. They do not explain the cause by themselves. A drop may involve demand, indexing or tracking rather than the wording on the page.

Write a one-sentence brief: "This page helps [reader] decide or do [task], and the next step is [action]." Save the existing copy and record the current URL before making substantial changes.

1 Match the page to the reader's task

Search intent means what someone is trying to achieve. "How to clean a velvet sofa" may call for advice, while "velvet sofa cleaning in York" may call for a service. The same subject can involve a different decision.

Use real customer questions, support requests and relevant query data to identify what the page needs. Inspect current results for context, while avoiding the assumption that copying their length or structure will reproduce their performance.

Keep closely related questions together when they serve the same task. Create a supporting page when the need is genuinely distinct, then connect it with a useful link. Do not make a separate page for every close keyword or prompt variation.

2 Explain the offer or answer accurately

Check the details someone needs before acting. A service page might need its scope, exclusions, locations, price conditions and booking process. A product page needs accurate variants, stock, delivery and returns. A guide needs enough explanation to follow its advice.

Add information from real knowledge of the subject: how the business handles a particular problem, a documented comparison, original photographs or an example used with permission. Identify the relevant author or reviewer accurately when that helps readers assess the advice.

Check claims against the original source or approved business information. Remove invented testimonials, unsupported statistics and services the business does not offer. If AI helped draft the page, it still needs human review, including the metadata.

Google recommends content that offers useful original value. It does not prescribe a preferred word count. Write enough to complete the task, then remove repetition that makes the answer harder to find.

3 Write a descriptive SEO title

The SEO title is supplied in the page's HTML title element, usually through your CMS or SEO plugin. Use distinct, concise wording that accurately identifies the subject. Include a relevant location or distinguishing detail when it belongs to the offer.

For a fictional repair business, "Sash Window Repairs in York" is clearer than "Our Services" or a string of repeated repair phrases. Keep the title aligned with the visible page, rather than promising a service the body does not explain.

There is no universal 60-character Google title limit. Display depends on the available space, and Google may generate a different title link from other page information. A plugin preview is a useful approximation, not a guarantee.

4 Describe the page without promising a result

A meta description is a short summary that Google may use as the search snippet. Google can also select text from the page, and the snippet may vary with the search.

Summarise the useful offer or answer. For the fictional repair page: "Explore sash window repair options in York, see what an assessment covers and request a quote for your property." That wording would only be appropriate if the page actually provides those details.

Do not claim a meta description is a direct ranking factor or that a higher click-through rate proves a ranking improvement. Its practical purpose is to help the right reader understand whether the page is relevant.

5 Give headings a clear reading order

Use a prominent main heading for the page subject, followed by section headings and subsections where needed. In WordPress, check whether the theme already outputs the page title as an H1 before adding another in the editor.

Choose headings such as “What the repair includes” or “How the assessment works” when they reflect the section. Do not add a keyword to every heading simply to satisfy a plugin. Headings should organise information, not act as decorative font sizes.

Put essential information where readers can find it easily. A long guide may benefit from a contents list. A short service page may need only a few sections. Avoid compulsory paragraph lengths or repeated summary boxes that add no value.

6 Use keywords naturally

Use the words your audience recognises in the title and body where they clarify the subject. Include important terminology, product names or service descriptions accurately. Explain unfamiliar terms when readers need help.

There is no requirement to place an exact phrase in the first 100 words, include it in a set number of H2 headings or meet a keyword-density target. A focus keyword is an editorial aid, not a field that tells Google what to rank.

Read the page aloud. If the wording sounds unnatural because you have repeated a phrase, improve the sentence. Different wording can still describe the same topic.

7 Link to the next useful information

Add internal links where readers need related information: from a service to its price conditions, from a guide to a distinct supporting explanation, or from a product to its delivery policy.

Use link text that describes the destination, such as “see our collection areas”. Check that important pages have relevant links pointing to them. There is no ideal number of internal links for every page.

Use ordinary crawlable links, normally an HTML anchor with an href destination. A control that only triggers a script may need a developer’s inspection. Link to external sources when they support a claim or help the reader; there is no compulsory external-link quota.

8 Keep useful existing URLs

For a new page, choose a straightforward descriptive URL. For an established page, do not change its address merely to shorten it, add a keyword or remove a year. A cosmetic change can create more work without fixing the reader’s problem.

If a move is genuinely needed, plan the appropriate redirect, update internal links and check the destination. Ask for help if you are uncertain about redirect or canonical settings. They are not ordinary copy-editing fields.

9 Make images meaningful and accessible

Choose images that help explain the subject. For a repair service, a real detail photograph may show what a particular fault looks like. For a product, show the actual item and relevant variants. Keep nearby information accurate and consistent.

Alternative text depends on an image’s purpose. Explain meaningful information when it is not otherwise available in the text. Decorative images can use empty alt text. An image used as a link or button needs an accessible description of its function.

Do not add a keyword list to every image. A complex chart may need a fuller text explanation rather than a long alt attribute. Resize and compress files sensibly while retaining the detail readers need.

The image section of our audit checklist covers the wider checks for image context, product consistency and visual search.

10 Test the page and the next step

Open the page on a phone and a computer. Check readable text, usable menus, stable layouts, visible information and clearly labelled controls. Test keyboard navigation where possible, including the form and its error messages.

Follow the main action through to completion. A quote request must not look like a confirmed booking if the team still needs to approve it. Check successful submission, delivery and the confirmation message, rather than only clicking the button.

Use PageSpeed Insights to investigate performance. Core Web Vitals assess loading, responsiveness and layout stability; a generic “loads in under three seconds” rule does not describe every metric or establish SEO success. Google says good scores do not guarantee top rankings.

Have your host or developer investigate HTTPS errors, broken scripts or template faults. Change caching and optimisation settings carefully, then retest important functions. A faster score is not a success if the form stops working.

A worked page improvement

This example is fictional. A sash window repair business serves York and two nearby villages. Its page says “the best window specialists everywhere”, shows a generic photograph and has a “Book now” button that only sends an assessment request.

Element	Useful revision
Page title	Describe sash window repairs in York, matching the real service.
Content	Explain repairs offered, coverage, assessment requirements and exclusions.
Evidence	Add a genuine repair photograph with permission and relevant context.
Internal link	Link to the assessment process and service-area details.
Action	Use “Request an assessment” and explain when the team will confirm.

The owner retains the existing URL, previews the changes and tests the form on a phone. They record the update and monitor suitable assessment enquiries. A citation or ranking change alone would not show whether the clearer page helped the business.

Online companion: Improving on page SEO

11 Titles descriptions and site structure

Metadata describes a page or gives supporting systems instructions about it. Site structure is how your pages are organised and linked. Together, they help people understand what a page offers and find the information that belongs with it.

Start with clear page purposes, accurate titles and useful navigation. Treat indexing controls separately: a noindex setting or a canonical change can have a very different effect from editing a description.

This chapter explains the important distinctions and shows how to review them in WordPress. For a complete individual-page workflow, use the on-page SEO guide; for access and indexing faults, use technical SEO.

Know which element you are editing

SEO plugins often group these settings in one panel, but they do different jobs. A title element and a canonical link are not technically meta tags, even though they are often discussed alongside them.

Element	Main purpose	Important distinction
HTML title	Describe the page in the browser and provide a source for search title links.	The title you supply is not guaranteed to be the title Google displays.
Meta description	Summarise the page as a possible search snippet.	Google can select different text from the page.
Robots metadata	Give supporting crawlers indexing or presentation instructions.	Not a privacy control or a ranking boost.
Canonical link	Signal a representative URL for duplicate or similar content.	A preference signal, not a redirect or a command.
Open Graph metadata	Describe a page for supported sharing and other systems.	Display varies by platform; some properties can also inform Google.
Visible heading	Identify and organise content on the page.	An H1 is part of the page body, not hidden metadata.

Write titles that identify the actual page

Use a distinct, concise HTML title that describes the subject. Include a useful distinguishing detail such as a real location, product or service. Avoid repeated keyword strings or using “Home” and “Our Services” where a clearer description is available.

A fictional upholstery cleaner might use “Sofa Cleaning in York | Willow Cleaning”. That would only be appropriate if the business and page genuinely offer that service in York.

Google automatically generates title links using several possible sources, including the HTML title, main visual heading, other page text and references to the page. Its documentation also lists og:title. Keep these descriptions consistent rather than assuming one field overrides everything else.

There is no universal 60-character limit for an HTML title. Search display can be shortened to fit the available space. A plugin preview helps you judge clarity, but does not guarantee the exact result.

Use descriptions to set accurate expectations

A meta description is a short summary Google may use beneath a search result. Google can instead select text from the page, and the snippet may vary with the question.

Explain what the reader will find. For the fictional cleaner: “See what our York sofa-cleaning service includes, which fabrics need assessment and how to request a quote.” The page must actually provide those details.

Do not copy the same description across unrelated services or invent an offer to make it more persuasive. Keep the wording useful and concise, but do not treat 160 characters as a Google rule. Snippet length depends on the display.

A description is not a direct ranking boost, and more clicks do not automatically mean more suitable customers. Evaluate whether it attracts the right visitor, alongside the page and wider search context.

Handle robots settings as instructions

Robots metadata can be supplied in the HTML head or through an HTTP response header. It can affect indexing and how content is presented by search engines that support the instruction.

Index and follow are default behaviours for Google; adding those words is not a guarantee of indexing. A noindex instruction prevents inclusion when Google can crawl the resource and read the rule. Blocking access in robots.txt can stop it seeing that instruction.

Do not use noindex as a way to protect private information. Use proper access restrictions for private content. Nor should you apply noindex to every duplicate URL: canonicalisation may be the relevant solution, depending on what the pages are for.

Other robots instructions can restrict snippets or previews. Do not apply a restrictive site-wide template simply because it appears in an SEO checklist. Record what you intend to achieve and confirm its effects before changing it.

In WordPress, inspect the relevant page setting, site-wide template and actual output if something unexpected appears. A setting in one plugin may not explain a conflicting server header or a second plugin’s output.

Keep canonical preferences consistent

A canonical link signals your preferred version of duplicate or very similar content. Google can select a different canonical. The annotation does not send a visitor to another page as a redirect does.

Keep internal links, sitemap entries and canonical preferences aligned. Investigate conflicting output before adding another tag. Do not point unrelated service pages at the homepage to “tidy” the index.

If the problem involves product filters, language versions or a site move, follow the relevant technical guidance. Do not remove a useful page from search merely to clear a duplicate warning.

Understand sharing metadata and the fields you can ignore

Open Graph properties such as og:title, og:description, og:image and og:url describe a page for systems using the protocol. Platforms may use them to build a preview, but their presentation and caching behaviour differ.

Set a relevant image and description, then check the actual shared result where it matters to your audience. Keep the offer consistent with the page. Do not promise that a sharing image or title will appear identically everywhere.

Avoid the blanket claim that these properties are invisible to Google. Google documents og:title among its title-link sources. That does not mean every social tag controls rankings or that changing a preview guarantees more clicks.

You can leave the meta keywords field out of your Google SEO work: Google says it does not use that tag for indexing or ranking. A viewport setting concerns mobile presentation; it is not a place to put target phrases.

Organise pages around what customers need

A useful site structure gives visitors a clear route to the right information. Group related services, products or guides under meaningful labels, and use links to show the relationships between them.

Begin with a short inventory of important pages and the tasks they support. Look for unclear groups, near-identical pages and important resources that are hard to reach. The answer may be a better menu or contextual link, rather than a redesign.

A parent page should help people choose among its supporting pages. It should do more than repeat their titles. An advice guide can answer a different question and link to the relevant service where it helps the reader.

An example for a local service business

The following structure is fictional. The page names illustrate information roles, not a requirement to create all these pages.

Page or group	Reader task	Useful connection
Services overview	Choose the relevant cleaning service.	Links to the real services with brief explanations.
Sofa cleaning	Check suitability, scope and the quote process.	Links to fabric-care guidance and the enquiry route.
Carpet cleaning	Understand this distinct service.	Links to relevant preparation information.
Areas served	Check whether the business covers the location.	Links back to relevant services and contact details.
Care guides	Find practical advice for a particular problem.	Links to supporting guides or services when useful.

The business can improve those relationships without changing every URL into a new folder structure. Navigation hierarchy and URL folders are related design choices, but they do not have to mirror each other exactly.

Use internal links rather than a rigid click rule

Important pages should have useful links from other relevant pages. Link text should help someone predict the destination, such as “check our collection areas”. Use ordinary crawlable links rather than relying only on script-triggered controls.

There is no universal requirement for every page to sit within three clicks of the homepage. A small service site and a large product catalogue need different structures. Keep important journeys short and understandable without flattening everything into one enormous menu.

An orphan page has no useful internal route from the rest of the site. It may still be discovered through a sitemap or external link, but readers browsing your site can miss it. Add a relevant connection, or reconsider whether the page belongs in the site.

For shops, connect categories, subcategories and products in a way people can browse. Google's ecommerce guidance explains that links help it understand the relative importance and relationships of pages; URL shape alone does not communicate the whole structure.

Use categories and breadcrumbs with a purpose

WordPress categories and tags can generate archive pages. Keep them when they provide a useful way to browse. Avoid creating a new tag for every wording of a keyword or generating many nearly empty archives.

Do not apply a blanket index or noindex setting to all archives without assessing them. A carefully maintained category can be an important destination; another archive may add little for readers. Confirm the intended role before changing its search eligibility.

Breadcrumb navigation shows a page's place in a hierarchy, rather than necessarily reproducing the visitor's browsing history. It can help people move to a broader section. Check that the labels and linked destinations reflect the structure you intended.

BreadcrumbList structured data can support Google's breadcrumb feature, subject to requirements. Google currently documents that feature for desktop Search. Useful on-site breadcrumbs can still serve readers on mobile; neither markup nor validation guarantees a particular search display.

Review metadata and structure together in WordPress

Choose a few important pages and use the following sequence. Check more than one template if the site includes services, products and posts.

- Record each page's URL, reader task and intended search eligibility.
- Check the visible title and headings, then the title and description supplied by the SEO plugin.
- Confirm that templates do not produce repeated titles or descriptions across unrelated pages.
- Inspect the output for conflicting robots or canonical instructions when there is a problem.
- Follow the menu, breadcrumbs and relevant internal links on a phone.
- Check the sharing preview for an important page where the platform supports it.
- Preview, publish, retest and record substantive changes.

Use one clear source of responsibility for each setting. Installing a second SEO plugin can create conflicting output rather than improve it. If a theme or server controls the element, ask the responsible developer to inspect that layer.

Use Search Console URL Inspection when investigating how Google processed a page. Remember that stored indexing information and a live test describe different states. A plugin screen alone does not prove what Google receives.

Avoid unnecessary URL changes during a tidy-up

Changing a menu label or adding a useful link may solve the problem without moving the page. Preserve established URLs unless there is a clear reason to change them.

If a move is needed, map the old URL to an appropriate replacement, implement the correct redirect and update internal links, sitemaps and relevant metadata. Retain the previous configuration and a rollback route. Test the starting and final URLs.

Do not use a canonical tag as a substitute for every move, or redirect unrelated retired pages to the homepage. Larger changes to taxonomy, permalinks or language versions deserve a migration plan.

A short maintenance checklist

- Does each important page have a clear task and an accurate title and description?
- Are robots and canonical settings intentional and consistent?
- Can visitors find important pages through relevant links?
- Do menus, categories and breadcrumbs help real browsing tasks?
- Are sharing details accurate without unsupported promises?
- Have URL changes been planned and tested rather than made cosmetically?

Online companion: Titles descriptions and site structure

12 Images accessibility and visual search

Images and visual search a practical SEO checklist

An image can explain a process, show a product or help someone recognise an option. Visual search also lets people start with a photograph or other image input. Audit your visuals according to the reader's need, not simply whether a plugin says every media field is filled.

Choose images that answer a real question

Check whether each important picture adds useful information. A product page may need a clear main photograph and views of details or scale. A tutorial may need a screenshot of the step people find confusing. An unrelated decorative banner does not replace either.

Place the visual near the explanation it supports. Add a caption when it clarifies what is shown or why it matters. Keep essential instructions and specifications available as text rather than only inside a picture.

Prefer images that represent the actual subject. Label illustrations or mock-ups when readers could mistake them for a real product, premises or completed job. Confirm that you have appropriate permission to use the asset and supply genuine credits where required.

Write alternative text for the image's purpose

Alternative text, or alt text, supplies a text alternative when an image cannot be seen. Its wording depends on what the image does in that page. Describe useful information rather than treating the field as a place to repeat SEO keywords.

W3C's decision tree distinguishes informative, decorative and functional images. A decorative image usually needs empty alt text, while an image used as a link or button needs an alternative that explains the action or destination. A complex diagram needs its essential information explained in accessible text.

For a fictional bicycle shop, a useful description could be "Blue step-through bicycle with rear rack and front basket". It should match the pictured product. A string such as "cheap bikes best bicycle shop buy bike" provides poor information.

Check the public page after editing in WordPress. A media-library description, attachment title and actual img alt attribute are different fields. A builder or template may use its own setting, so changing one field does not establish what visitors receive.

Use suitable product photographs

Check that the photograph matches the selected model, colour and variant. Show the item clearly and avoid crops that hide important features. Keep lifestyle photographs and detail views useful, but ensure that the main image makes the product identifiable.

For Merchant Center feeds, Google's image_link guidance has specific requirements, including an accurate product image and restrictions on promotional overlays or placeholders. Check the applicable guidance for your products and additional images instead of assuming that any website banner is a valid feed image.

A fictional mug shop may have a blue mug page while its feed still references a white mug photograph. Correct the mismatch across the selected product page, feed and existing product markup. Alt text alone cannot repair the wrong photograph.

Keep preferred-image metadata consistent

Google can use schema.org image information and og:image when choosing Search or Discover previews. Selection remains automated: supplying a preference does not guarantee that a particular image will appear.

Choose a relevant representative image for those fields. Google recommends avoiding a generic logo, an image with text or an extreme aspect ratio as the preferred page preview, and using high resolution where possible. This guidance concerns the preferred image, not a ban on useful screenshots within an article.

In WordPress, check the featured image, social-image setting and relevant structured-data image. They serve different purposes and can have different crops, but should not describe a different subject or point to an obsolete file. Preview the live page after replacing an image.

Review credits, creator and licence information where applicable. Google supports image metadata through structured data and IPTC metadata for relevant features. Preserve accurate rights information through your image-processing workflow; filling in a credit does not grant permission to use the picture.

Check image access loading and quality

Open the image file and test the page on a phone. Look for broken URLs, security challenges, distorted proportions and compression that removes useful detail. Ask the maintainer to check important image resources if they fail to load or may be blocked from crawling.

Use appropriately sized, sharp images and responsive delivery. Descriptive filenames are useful for new assets, but avoid renaming a working archive indiscriminately and breaking existing references. Reserve image dimensions so loading does not move surrounding content unexpectedly.

Lazy loading can help images further down a page. Avoid lazy-loading an important image already visible at the top of the page, especially the image responsible for Largest Contentful Paint. Retest the result rather than treating one image format or plugin switch as a universal fix.

Record the visual checks in your audit

Check	Evidence or action
Context	Image supports the task; useful explanation is nearby.
Accessibility	Text alternative fits the purpose; essential information is available in text.
Product accuracy	Selected variant, visible image, feed and product markup agree.
Preferred preview	Relevant metadata image loads and represents the page.
Rights and credits	Permission confirmed and applicable credit or licence information retained.
Delivery	No broken file, unusable crop or avoidable loading problem in the tested journey.

Use the multimodal Search filter with its limits

The web multimodal filter concerns image-based search inputs, such as searches initiated through Lens or an uploaded image. It does not simply mean that the result contained a picture. Check the current report definition and whether your property has eligible data.

In the Search results Performance report, choose your date range, then use Search type to select Web: multimodal. Inspect the available metrics and page, country or device views, keeping the scope consistent. Export the report if you want to record the observations alongside your audit.

Web: multimodal describes searches that start with an image input. The Image search type describes results from the Google Images tab. A page containing photographs is not automatically multimodal traffic, and the two filter options are not interchangeable.

Google's dimensions guidance says that text query data is not available for multimodal searches, so the Queries dimension is unavailable for this search type. You cannot use that view to recover the exact photograph or text a customer submitted.

Do not assume your property has useful observations. Google says these metrics appear when the site receives traffic from those queries. If a report is empty or unavailable, record that condition, check the selected property and filters, and revisit later. It is not evidence that your images are defective.

Keep the report's counts separate from visits and sales. Impressions are not unique people, and a displayed link does not establish a purchase. Do not add several report views together and call them a combined audience without checking their definitions and overlap.

Use the page results to choose an inspection, not to diagnose an image by number alone. Check whether the destination identifies the pictured item, supplies useful information and offers the appropriate next step. A before-and-after change in counts does not prove that an image edit caused it.

Online companion: Images accessibility and visual search

13 Understanding technical SEO

Technical SEO is the work that helps search engines access, process and understand your website's pages. It includes indexing controls, sitemaps, redirects, canonical URLs and the technical conditions affecting how people use the site.

Begin with important pages that should be publicly available. Check whether they load, whether Google can access their content and whether customers can complete the next step. Then investigate specific faults rather than trying to clear every warning in an audit tool.

You can carry out useful checks without being a developer. Changes to server settings, security rules, templates or site-wide indexing may need specialist help. This chapter explains what to inspect, what the controls mean and how to verify a correction.

Start with eligibility rather than a perfect score

Google's minimum technical requirements include an accessible page, a successful HTTP 200 response and indexable content. Meeting those requirements makes a page eligible for indexing; it does not guarantee indexing, a ranking or a customer visit.

A successful response alone is not enough. A blank template or an error message served with a 200 response may still fail to provide useful indexable content. Equally, an indexed page can remain unsuitable for a particular search.

Technical work supports content and business goals. A fast page with the wrong service information still needs editorial improvement. A clear service page behind an unintended access block needs a technical correction first.

Choose a small set of pages to test

Include the homepage, an important service or category, a product or detailed guide and the main enquiry or booking route. Add a recently changed page if a problem began after an update. Test more than one template where the site uses different layouts.

Record each URL, its intended role and the symptom. "The enquiry page shows a challenge on mobile" is more useful than "the site has bad SEO". Note when the fault began and any recent plugin, theme, hosting or security changes.

Priority	Examples	What to do first
Urgent	Site unavailable, security warning or checkout failure.	Contact the responsible host or specialist and establish the scope.
Important	An intended search page is accidentally noindex or redirects incorrectly.	Inspect the exact URL and confirm the setting causing it.
Investigate	An audit warning, performance score or excluded URL without a clear impact.	Check the page's purpose before deciding that it needs a fix.

1 Check access and the response

Open the page while signed out, on a phone and a computer. Check the final URL, visible content, certificate warnings and essential functions. A normal browser visit does not prove a crawler receives the same response.

In Google Search Console, inspect the exact URL. The indexed result describes Google's stored information; the live test checks current accessibility and processing. A successful live test does not mean that the page is indexed or will appear in results.

Use the available rendered output and resource information to investigate missing content. If a firewall, CDN or security plugin is involved, ask the person managing it to check relevant blocked requests and challenges. Confirm the responsible rule before changing it.

2 Separate crawling controls from indexing controls

Robots.txt gives supported crawlers instructions about which paths to crawl. It is not a password, and it is not a reliable way to remove a URL from Google Search. A blocked URL can still appear without its content being crawled.

A noindex rule tells supporting search engines not to index a resource. Google must be able to crawl the page to see that rule. Blocking the URL in robots.txt while relying on its noindex tag can therefore prevent Google from reading the instruction.

Control	Purpose	Important limit
robots.txt	Manage crawling for crawlers that follow its rules.	Does not protect private information or reliably remove a URL from search.
noindex	Prevent indexing by search engines that support the rule.	The crawler needs access to read the tag or response header.
Login or access control	Restrict who can retrieve private content.	Appropriate for private resources, rather than trying to hide them only with robots rules.

A WordPress check

If an important public page is unexpectedly excluded, inspect WordPress search visibility settings and the relevant SEO plugin's page-level settings. Also check for a server or CDN response header. Change only an unintended restriction; private pages and testing sites need appropriate protection.

WordPress can serve a virtual robots.txt file. The public /robots.txt address may work even when no physical file appears in your host's file manager. Establish whether WordPress, a plugin or the host controls the response before creating another version.

Do not use robots.txt to conceal hacked or malicious pages instead of removing the underlying problem. A security incident needs investigation and remediation.

3 Check internal discovery and the sitemap

Important pages should be reachable through useful navigation or relevant internal links. A page that exists only in a sitemap can still be difficult for customers to discover. Use descriptive links to the intended destination.

An XML sitemap lists URLs you want search engines to know about. Keep it aligned with your preferred, publicly indexable pages. Avoid intentionally filling it with redirects, removed pages or pages you exclude from search.

WordPress or an SEO plugin may already generate the sitemap. Check the actual output before installing another generator. Submit the relevant sitemap in Search Console and inspect reported errors. Google says a sitemap helps discovery but does not guarantee crawling or indexing.

4 Understand redirects and genuine missing pages

A redirect sends a visitor or crawler to another address. Use a suitable permanent redirect when a page genuinely moves to a lasting replacement. Temporary moves have different requirements; choose the behaviour that reflects the change.

Check the starting and final URLs. Resolve loops and unnecessary chains, and update internal links to the correct destination. Do not redirect every removed URL to the homepage simply to make an error count disappear.

Response	What it usually means	Useful action
200	The request succeeded.	Confirm the page actually contains the intended content.
301 or 308	A permanent redirect.	Check that the destination is the appropriate replacement.
404 or 410	Content is not found or has been removed.	Fix unintended broken links; retain a genuine removal when no suitable replacement exists.
5xx	A server-side failure.	Ask the host or developer to investigate, especially when repeated or widespread.

A 404 is not automatically a site-wide SEO fault. It can be the correct response for removed content. Prioritise errors affecting important pages and customer routes, then investigate the cause.

5 Treat canonical URLs as a preference signal

A canonical URL is the representative version of duplicate or very similar content. A rel="canonical" annotation signals your preference to Google; it does not force Google to choose that URL.

Keep the preference consistent with internal links, sitemap entries and redirects. Inspect Google’s selected canonical in Search Console when an important page is unexpectedly treated as a duplicate. Check the content relationship and conflicting signals before editing the tag.

Do not point unrelated service pages at one another as a shortcut. Do not canonicalise every translated page to the English homepage. Different language versions need an appropriate international implementation, including hreflang where relevant.

Duplicate URLs do not automatically mean a penalty. The task is to understand which versions should remain available and how their signals should be handled. Get help with complex product filters or multi-language configurations.

6 Check mobile content and rendering

Google uses the mobile version of a site's content for indexing and ranking. Make sure essential information, relevant images, links and metadata are available on mobile. A shorter layout should not remove the substance needed to understand the page.

Google can render JavaScript, but a script error or inaccessible resource can affect what it processes. Compare the visible page with the rendered output available in URL Inspection when something important is missing.

Test the mobile navigation, forms and checkout as a customer. Check readable text, clear labels and usable controls. Use a real device where possible; a desktop preview is useful but cannot reproduce every condition.

A simple WordPress investigation and retest

This example is fictional. A service page opens for an administrator, but a signed-out mobile visitor sees a security challenge. Search Console also reports a failed live test. The owner records the exact URL and test time.

The person managing security checks the request logs and identifies the relevant challenge rule. They retain the original configuration and make a targeted correction, rather than disabling protection across the whole site.

After any necessary cache clearing, they retest signed-out access and URL Inspection, inspect the content and submit the form. They check delivery and confirmation. If the correction causes another problem, they roll back and investigate again.

A successful retest shows that the immediate access problem has been addressed under those conditions. It does not prove the page is now indexed or that traffic will recover. The owner monitors subsequent indexing and performance separately.

Record the fix and its evidence

Before implementation, confirm a usable backup and who can restore it. For WordPress, recovery may require both files and the database. Retain configuration values separately when the change is outside WordPress.

Use a small log: affected URL or template, symptom, evidence, responsible person, change, rollback and retest result. Keep unresolved items visible rather than marking an entire audit complete because one test passed.

Retest representative pages after a relevant release or configuration change. Monitor Search Console messages and important customer functions. Set a review routine that fits the site's complexity; a quarterly audit is not a substitute for acting on a verified urgent fault.

When traffic drops, compare affected pages and check demand, tracking and security as well as indexing. An algorithm update near the same date does not establish the cause, and technical fixes do not make a site immune to future changes.

What to do yourself and what to hand over

An owner can usually inspect pages, test customer journeys, review reports and document symptoms. Get appropriate help for server faults, persistent indexing conflicts, security incidents, complex redirects or migrations.

Give the specialist the exact URLs, test dates, relevant reports and recent changes. Agree who implements, who checks the result and how to restore the previous state. Automated audit tools can find issues to inspect, but do not reproduce Google’s systems or prove the cause of a ranking change.

Online companion: Understanding technical SEO

14 Indexing and XML sitemaps

A sitemap helps search engines discover the pages you want customers to find. Indexing is a separate decision: Google assesses a page and decides whether to include it in its search index. Submitting a sitemap does not guarantee that every listed page will be crawled, indexed or ranked.

For a small business, the useful question is whether your important public pages can be found and understood. This chapter shows you how to check your WordPress sitemap, use Google Search Console and investigate a missing page without trying to index every URL your website creates.

Discovery, crawling and indexing are different

Stage	What happens	What it does not establish
Discovery	Google learns that a URL exists, for example through a link or sitemap.	That Google has fetched the page.
Crawling	Google requests the URL and processes the response and accessible content.	That the page will be included in the index.
Indexing	Google analyses content and decides whether and how to store it for Search.	A particular ranking, visit or enquiry.

A public page generally needs to allow Googlebot access, return a successful HTTP response and contain indexable content. Meeting these technical requirements makes a page eligible for consideration; it does not compel Google to index it. If a customer can open a page, that alone does not show what Google can access.

Decide which pages should be indexed

Start with a short list of pages that serve a real customer task: your main services, useful product and category pages, location information, contact details and substantial advice. Check those first rather than treating the largest possible indexed total as the goal.

A booking confirmation, private customer area, internal search result or duplicate filter URL may have no useful role in public search. The right treatment depends on its purpose. Keep genuinely private information behind appropriate authentication; an indexing instruction is not access control.

Write down the preferred public URL for each important page. This gives you something meaningful to compare with a sitemap and Search Console, especially when a website has old addresses or several versions of the same content.

What an XML sitemap does

An XML sitemap is a machine-readable list of preferred page URLs. A sitemap index lists other sitemap files, such as separate files for pages, posts or products. Seeing several files beneath one index is normal.

Sitemaps are especially useful for new sites, large collections and pages that are harder to discover. A small, well-linked site may already be discoverable without one. A sitemap remains a practical way to make your preferred URLs explicit and monitor whether Google can read the list.

It supports internal links rather than replacing them. Customers should still be able to reach important pages through sensible navigation and relevant links. A page listed only in an XML file can remain difficult for people to find.

Find your WordPress sitemap before adding a plugin

WordPress has included a core sitemap feature since version 5.5. Its standard index address is /wp-sitemap.xml. An SEO plugin may supply its own sitemap and disable the core version. Your actual address therefore depends on your setup.

- Check the sitemap settings or documentation for the SEO plugin you already use. Follow its sitemap link if provided.
- If you are using WordPress core sitemaps, try your website address followed by /wp-sitemap.xml. Use your own domain.
- Open the resulting index and one of its listed sitemap files. Confirm that you see URLs from the right website, not a staging domain or an error page.
- Keep a note of the working index URL and which system generates it. Avoid adding another sitemap plugin simply because a different example URL does not work.

A generated sitemap may not exist as a physical file in File Manager. WordPress or a plugin can produce the response when someone requests its address. Test the public URL before concluding that the sitemap is missing.

Check what the sitemap includes

Sample a main service page, a recent article and a product or location page if relevant. Prefer final, public URLs that you want indexed. Investigate staging addresses, redirects, deleted pages, duplicates or pages intentionally marked noindex rather than leaving contradictory signals in the list.

Use the canonical version: the address you prefer when similar content exists at several URLs. Keep that preference consistent with internal links and canonical tags. Google can choose a different canonical; listing a URL is a signal, not an instruction it must follow.

Let your website software maintain the sitemap. Where it supplies lastmod dates, they should reflect significant changes, not a daily refresh or a new copyright year. Google ignores sitemap priority and changefreq values, so adjusting them is not an indexing shortcut.

Submit and check the sitemap in Search Console

Use a verified Search Console property that covers the correct website address. Take care with https versus http and www versus non-www when working with URL-prefix properties.

- Open the Sitemaps report and enter the working sitemap index URL in the submission field. Submit the address your site actually uses.
- After processing, open its row and check the status and last-read date. Success means Google fetched and read the file; it does not mean every listed page is indexed.
- If it could not be fetched or contains errors, read the details. Check the exact address, login requirements, server response and any security rule affecting access.
- Recheck periodically. For ordinary publishing, allow your generator to update the same sitemap address; you do not need to resubmit it after every post. Resubmit after fixing a persistent fetch failure or when substantial changes warrant it.

An empty Sitemaps report does not by itself prove Google has never found a sitemap: the report lists submissions made through the report or API. Submitting your working URL gives you a place to monitor its processing.

Use URL Inspection to check an important page

Enter the complete page address in Search Console's URL Inspection bar. Use the exact URL, including the correct domain and path. Read the indexing status, last crawl information and any available canonical details.

The initial result describes Google's stored information, not a fresh test of your website. If you have changed the page since that crawl, select Test live URL. Compare the current result with the earlier information rather than assuming they describe the same moment.

A successful live test indicates that the tested page passes the checks it covers. It does not confirm that the page is already indexed, predict Google's canonical choice or check every condition for appearing in Search.

Do not use site: as your indexing count

A search such as site:example.com can be useful for a quick look at visible results. It is not a complete inventory. An indexed URL may be absent from those results, so a missing result does not prove that Google has not indexed it. Use URL Inspection for a specific page.

Read the Page indexing report without chasing every exclusion

Open the Page indexing report to look for patterns. Review changes and the reasons shown, then inspect representative important URLs. Use a sitemap filter where useful. The example list is a sample, not necessarily every affected address.

Not indexed is not automatically an error. Decide whether the particular URL should appear before changing anything.

Reported reason	What to investigate
Discovered - currently not indexed	Google knows the URL but has not crawled it. Check discovery links and reliable access; do not assume a penalty.
Crawled - currently not indexed	Google fetched it but did not index it. Review its purpose, usefulness and overlap. Repeated submission is not a remedy.
Excluded by noindex	Expected for some pages. For an important public page, check where the instruction comes from.
Alternate or duplicate	Inspect the selected canonical. An intended duplicate may need no action.
Not found (404)	Expected after a genuine removal with no replacement. Investigate if the page should still exist.
Server error or blocked access	Investigate hosting, login and security rules affecting the public page.

Keep robots.txt, noindex and canonicals separate

Robots.txt controls crawler access. Blocking a URL there is not a reliable way to remove it from Search: Google can sometimes learn about the address elsewhere without crawling its content. It can also prevent Google from seeing a noindex instruction on that page.

Noindex asks Google not to index a page and must be available for Google to read, usually in the page or response header. Remove an accidental noindex only from pages intended for public search; do not change every excluded page at once.

A canonical identifies a preferred version of duplicate or very similar content. It is not a privacy setting or a guaranteed command. If Google selects an unexpected URL, compare the content, redirects, canonical declarations, internal links and sitemap entries before choosing a fix.

Example of investigating a missing service page

This is a fictional example. Willow Cleaning in York publishes an end-of-tenancy cleaning page. The owner can open it, but cannot find it in a site: search. They record the exact URL and inspect it in Search Console rather than assuming the sitemap has failed.

The stored result reports noindex. A live test still detects that instruction, and the owner finds an accidental exclusion in the page's SEO settings. They first confirm that this is a public service page, rather than a private booking page.

They record the existing setting, remove the exclusion from that page and clear the relevant cache. They confirm the preferred URL is included in the generated sitemap and linked from the services page. A new live test no longer detects the block.

They request indexing once and record the change for later review. If other pages acquire unexpected behaviour, they can restore the recorded setting and ask their developer to investigate. The correction removes a barrier; it does not establish a deadline for indexing or a ranking improvement.

When should you request indexing?

For an important new page or a page with a substantive correction, you can use Request indexing after checking it. Requests have limits. Repeating the same request does not make Google process it faster, and submission does not guarantee inclusion.

For many URLs, maintain a useful sitemap and good internal links. Google says recrawling can take days to weeks. There is no universal deadline after which a missing page proves something is broken. Check the evidence and the scale of the problem instead of clicking the button every day.

Do small sites need crawl budget optimisation?

Usually, a small business gets more value from fixing inaccessible pages, confusing duplicates and weak links. Google's crawl budget guidance concerns large or rapidly changing sites. Do not buy a crawl budget service merely because a few pages have not been indexed.

A manageable monthly check

- Confirm that your sitemap still loads and review its Search Console status.
- Inspect a small selection of important pages, including anything newly published or substantially changed.

- Investigate unexpected changes affecting valuable pages before spending time on harmless duplicates or retired URLs.
- Record the URL, observed reason, crawl or test date, action, owner and next review date. Separate observed results from expected outcomes.
- After a fix, retest the current page. Use Validate fix where the report offers it and the relevant instances have been corrected. Allow reporting time to catch up.

Escalate a sudden loss affecting many important pages, persistent server failures or conflicting site-wide rules to your developer. Send exact URLs, dates, report details and recent changes so they can investigate the cause.

Online companion: Indexing and XML sitemaps

15 Managing WordPress SEO

WordPress SEO means making your website easy for search engines to access and understand, while helping visitors find useful information and take the next step. WordPress gives you tools to manage that work, but the software, theme or plugin you choose cannot guarantee rankings.

Start with your important public pages: what you sell, who you help, where you operate and how someone can contact or buy from you. Then check the settings and published output that support those pages. This chapter covers the WordPress decisions an owner can manage and the changes that deserve technical help.

Start with the website you already have

You do not need to replace a working theme or buy a new SEO plugin to begin. Make a short inventory of your hosting, theme, page builder, SEO plugin, caching system and analytics setup. Note who maintains each part and how to restore a backup.

Themes and plugins influence the final page. WordPress does not guarantee clean headings, fast loading or a usable mobile layout simply because those features appear in a sales description. Check what customers actually receive.

Before changing settings, choose a small baseline: your homepage, main service or product page, an advice article and the contact or checkout route. Save their current URLs and note any existing problems. These are useful pages to retest afterwards.

Check whether public pages can be indexed

In the WordPress dashboard, open Settings → Reading and find Search engine visibility. On a public website intended for search, “Discourage search engines from indexing this site” should normally be unchecked. Record the existing setting before correcting an accidental exclusion.

That setting asks search engines not to index the site; it does not make the website private. A staging copy or customer area containing private information needs appropriate access protection. Do not expose it merely to make an SEO check pass.

Also check the SEO settings for an individual page. A plugin, response header or other system can supply a noindex instruction independently of the site-wide setting. Security rules may block access even when the page opens for you.

Use Google Search Console’s URL Inspection for an important page. Its initial result shows stored information; Test live URL checks the current page. A successful live test does not establish that the page is indexed or guarantee its inclusion. A site: search is not a complete indexing audit.

Keep established URLs stable

For a new site, choose readable permalinks before publishing. Settings → Permalinks includes Post name, which is a straightforward option for many small-business blogs. Choose short, descriptive page slugs that will still make sense later.

For an established website, do not switch the permalink structure simply to follow a checklist. That can change many working addresses. A date in an existing URL is not, by itself, a reason to migrate it.

If a change is necessary, map each old URL to the relevant replacement, implement permanent redirects, update internal links and sitemap entries, then test both addresses. Ask for help with a site-wide change. Avoid sending unrelated retired pages to the homepage.

Give each SEO function a clear owner

An SEO plugin can help you manage titles, descriptions, sitemap inclusion, canonical preferences and structured data. It cannot establish that your business claims are correct, make an unhelpful page useful or choose your priorities for you.

Check the maintained plugin you already use before replacing it. Features, compatibility, support and ease of use matter more than a generic “best plugin” label. A paid licence is useful when you need its features, rather than as a ranking advantage.

Avoid having two plugins independently generate the same SEO controls. When changing tools, check migration settings and the published output rather than assuming every title, exclusion and redirect transferred correctly. Some features may be supplied by the theme or another plugin.

Treat content scores and traffic lights as prompts for review. Do not repeat a keyword, lengthen a complete answer or remove useful detail just to turn an indicator green.

Organise navigation and archives deliberately

Link important pages from relevant navigation or other useful pages. Use descriptive link text that tells the reader what comes next. Customers should not need to discover a service through a sitemap or an old blog post.

Use categories for meaningful subject groups. Add tags when they help readers browse related material; they are optional. A tag created for every keyword can produce many archive pages with little distinct purpose.

Review category, tag, author and date archives according to their usefulness. Some make good destinations; others may duplicate existing routes. Do not apply a blanket noindex rule or delete every archive because it contains excerpts also found elsewhere.

Use the sitemap your setup actually provides

WordPress core includes XML sitemap functionality, normally at /wp-sitemap.xml. Your SEO plugin may replace that with its own index. Use the working address supplied by your current setup rather than installing another plugin to create a second version.

Open the index and check a sample of its page URLs. They should reflect the public pages you want considered for indexing. Submit the correct index to Search Console and investigate fetch errors. Let the generator maintain the same address as you publish.

A sitemap helps discovery; it does not guarantee crawling, indexing or rankings. Google does not need a manually resubmitted sitemap after every routine edit. Follow chapter 14 if an important page is missing.

Make mobile pages and images usable

Open the website on a phone and check the pages people actually use. Read the text, open the menu, follow links and complete a form. Look for overlays hiding content, buttons too close together or layouts that move while you try to tap.

Upload images at dimensions appropriate to their purpose and compress them without making useful detail unreadable. Product photographs should help customers assess the real item. Keep important text available as text rather than embedding it only inside a banner image.

Write alternative text according to the image's purpose. Describe meaningful information, explain the action for a functional image and use an empty alt attribute for a purely decorative image. Do not add keywords that do not help someone understand the image.

In WordPress, inspect how an existing image is used on the page. Updating a Media Library field may not update every placement or builder widget; check the rendered result and any linked-image behaviour.

Keep HTTPS and maintenance working

Check that the public website uses HTTPS without certificate warnings and that important links use the preferred address. HTTPS protects the connection; it does not prove the business is trustworthy or that the website is free from malware. Browser icons also vary.

Maintain WordPress, the theme and supported plugins. Before substantial updates, confirm that backups include both files and the database and that you know how to restore them. Use a protected staging copy for changes involving PHP, the builder, templates or checkout.

Review unused software with whoever maintains the website. Remove components after checking dependencies rather than assuming that the smallest plugin count is always fastest. One badly behaved component can matter more than several modest ones.

A manageable WordPress SEO routine

When	What to check
Before publishing	Useful information, accurate facts, title, headings, links, images and the contact or purchase route.
After a significant change	Public page output, mobile layout, indexing controls and the functions affected by the change.
Monthly	Search Console trends, important landing pages, completed enquiries or orders and any emerging technical issue.
When advice becomes outdated	Correct the affected page and related information; record substantive changes. A newer date alone is not an improvement.

Keep a simple change log: date, URL, reason, action and result. Use Search Console to understand search visibility and clicks, then analytics and business records to assess visits, genuine enquiries and sales. A booking-link click is not a confirmed appointment.

Choose one or two useful improvements from the evidence. A new plugin, more indexed pages or a higher content score is not a business outcome.

Can I do WordPress SEO without coding

You can manage much of the content, linking and routine checking yourself. Ask for technical help with migrations, persistent indexing problems, conflicting output, server settings or changes affecting payments. A plugin interface does not make every setting low risk.

Does my page builder prevent good SEO

Judge the published result. Check whether important information and links are accessible, headings make sense, mobile pages work and performance problems are addressed. Switching builders is a substantial project, so establish the actual problem before rebuilding.

Should I add a keyword to every image and heading

No. Use headings to explain the content and alternative text to convey the image’s purpose. Repetition for a plugin score can make both less helpful.

Online companion: Managing WordPress SEO

16 Choosing a suitable theme

An SEO-friendly WordPress theme helps you publish pages that people can read and use, with accessible navigation, sensible structure and manageable performance. It provides part of the foundation; it does not guarantee rankings or make the rest of the website work automatically.

If your existing theme is supported and meets your needs, you may not need to replace it. Start by identifying the actual problem. If you are choosing a new theme, test it with your content and required functions before committing to a design or a subscription.

What a theme controls and what it does not

A theme supplies much of the website's presentation and its templates: the arrangements used for articles, pages, archives and other views. It can influence navigation, headings, typography, responsive layouts and the resources loaded on a page.

The finished result also depends on your content, hosting, plugins, builder and configuration. A slow page does not establish that the theme is the cause. Nor does a missing Google result prove that you need a new theme: indexing controls, access problems, duplication and other issues need separate investigation.

Google says its ranking systems use Core Web Vitals, but good measurements do not guarantee top rankings. Choose a theme that supports useful pages and customer tasks rather than buying a promise of an SEO boost.

Block themes and the Site Editor

A block theme lets you work with templates and site elements through WordPress's Site Editor. That can include headers and footers as well as page layouts. The ordinary block editor is used for content, and using it does not by itself mean your site has a block theme.

If you want to use this approach, try the actual tasks you will repeat: editing the header, changing an article layout and adding a service page. Check who can edit shared templates, because a change there can affect more than the page currently open.

Classic themes and page builders

Other themes use a different combination of templates, theme settings and customisation tools. A page builder such as Elementor or WPBakery is another part of the setup, rather than a theme category that automatically determines SEO quality.

Check the documented integration and test it. A starter design may depend on a particular builder, block collection, form plugin or paid extension. Include those dependencies in your decision and cost estimate.

Ask what happens if you later remove the builder or change the theme. Content may remain in the database while its layout, shortcodes or specialised elements need rebuilding. For an established website, inspect representative pages before estimating a migration.

What to test before calling a theme SEO friendly

Area	A useful check
Mobile layout	Read content, open menus and complete the main task on a phone.

Area	A useful check
Accessibility	Check keyboard access, visible focus, readable contrast and usable forms.
Page structure	Inspect headings, navigation links and the content produced by each template.
Performance	Test real page types with your images, plugins and necessary features.
Compatibility	Verify the editor, shop, language and SEO tools you actually use.
Maintenance	Check documentation, updates, support, licence terms and a workable handover.

Make mobile tasks work

A responsive screenshot is a starting point. Open a long page on a phone, read the text, expand the menu and follow the contact or purchase route. Look for clipped text, horizontal scrolling, overlapping controls and sticky elements that hide content.

Check that important information remains available on mobile. Google uses the mobile version of a site's content for indexing. Do not remove useful service details, product information or navigation from the mobile template merely to simplify the design.

Device previews help you investigate layouts, but also test on a real phone. Different text lengths, browser settings and translated labels can reveal problems the demo does not show.

Review accessibility beyond a badge

Try navigating with the keyboard. You should be able to see which control has focus, open the navigation and reach the main content without becoming trapped. Check text contrast, zoomed layouts and form labels rather than relying only on an automated score.

An accessibility-ready theme is a useful starting point, not a guarantee that your finished website is accessible. Your colours, content, plugins and customisations affect the result. Basic checks also do not replace a thorough accessibility review when one is needed.

Inspect templates and navigation

Check an article, service page, archive and product page where relevant. Look for duplicated titles, headings chosen only for their visual size and important text displayed only inside images. Use body headings to describe the sections and style their appearance separately.

Navigation links should lead to real destinations. Google generally discovers crawlable links through an anchor element with an href attribute. A clickable-looking element that only runs a script is not equivalent to an ordinary crawlable link.

Menus, breadcrumbs and related-content areas should help customers reach useful pages. Their presence does not guarantee better rankings or clicks. Review the generated output rather than treating "semantic HTML", "ARIA" or "schema included" as a score.

Test the page you intend to build

A vendor demo uses its own hosting, content, caching and configuration. Its score cannot establish how your website will perform. Compare themes on a controlled test setup with the same content and required features where practical.

Use representative pages and repeat comparable mobile and desktop tests. Inspect loading, responsiveness and layout movement. Keep lab results separate from real-user data, and record what you changed. Do not compare one stripped-down demo with another full shop and attribute the difference solely to the theme.

Large images, sliders, fonts and third-party embeds can change the result after a demo is imported. Test the customised page before accepting a design. A perfect score with a broken menu or enquiry form is not an improvement.

Check the full cost and the maintenance route

Compare the theme licence, renewals, site allowance, starter templates, required plugins and support. A low initial price can leave you paying for several dependencies. Confirm what remains available if you stop renewing and how future updates are delivered.

Read current compatibility information for WordPress, PHP and the plugins your business depends on. Theme minimum requirements are not a recommendation to keep an old server version. Your host or developer should check a supported combination and test updates before production changes.

Ask who will maintain customisations. Avoid direct edits to parent-theme files that an update can overwrite. A child theme may be appropriate for code or template overrides; ordinary settings and editor changes do not automatically require one. The right approach depends on how the theme stores and loads those changes.

Keep SEO controls portable and consistent

Check whether the theme, SEO plugin, shop software or custom code supplies titles, canonical preferences, indexing instructions and structured data. Give each output a clear owner so a new theme does not introduce conflicts or remove information you relied on.

You do not have to reject every theme with SEO settings. Understand what they do and whether those settings survive a theme change. In many setups, keeping core SEO administration in a maintained plugin makes future changes easier to manage.

Built-in schema should match visible information and work with existing markup. It does not guarantee a rich result, rankings or AI citations. Do not choose a theme on a promise of expandable FAQ results; keep useful FAQs for readers.

Plan a theme change before activating it

Treat an established site’s theme change as a release, especially if it affects templates, navigation, product pages or forms. A preview is useful, but it is not a complete test of the published website.

- Back up the files and database and confirm a restoration route. Create a protected staging copy for the work.
- Record important URLs, page types, navigation, SEO output and business functions. Note scripts or tracking code stored in theme settings or template files.
- Build the new templates with real content. Check long titles, images, translated pages and the relevant shop or booking features.

- Keep working URLs stable. A visual redesign is not, by itself, a reason to change permalinks or delete valuable pages.
- Compare metadata, canonicals, indexing instructions, structured data and internal links before and after. Check the real output, not only saved fields.
- Test mobile layouts, keyboard navigation, forms, consent controls and analytics. Complete an enquiry or an approved test purchase.
- Schedule launch when someone can verify the result. Clear the relevant caches and retest the public site while logged out.
- Keep a rollback plan and monitor access, indexing and performance after launch. Investigate unexpected changes before assuming they are normal redesign effects.

If the website takes orders or receives bookings during the work, agree how live data will be preserved. Restoring or replacing a whole database can overwrite new transactions. Ask your developer to plan the release around how the business operates.

Example of choosing a theme for a service business

The owner tests a simpler layout with the same content on a protected copy. They check mobile navigation, long service headings, keyboard access, performance and a completed form submission. They compare the cost and maintenance requirements of the necessary tools.

If the existing theme can deliver the same improvement through a template adjustment, the owner can keep it. If a replacement is justified, they launch only after the important pages and functions pass the agreed checks. The decision follows the observed problem rather than the demo’s SEO label.

Online companion: Choosing a suitable theme

17 Choosing and checking SEO plugins

The best SEO plugin for WordPress is the one that covers your website's needs, works with your setup and helps you make accurate changes. A longer feature list, higher content score or paid subscription does not automatically produce better rankings.

For most small-business owners, the sensible starting point is the maintained plugin already installed. Identify any genuine gap before replacing it. If you are choosing from scratch, compare the controls you need, the way you publish and the ongoing cost of using them.

Use this chapter to decide what an SEO plugin should handle and how to verify the output. Examples of established products include Yoast SEO, Rank Math, All in One SEO, SEOPress, SmartCrawl and Squirrly. Compare the current edition against your requirements rather than assuming one is best for every website.

What an SEO plugin can help you do

An SEO plugin provides controls for parts of your website's search presentation and technical output. Typical jobs include editing HTML titles and meta descriptions, generating a sitemap, setting indexing preferences and supplying structured data.

It does not replace useful information, accurate business facts, clear navigation or a working enquiry process. It also cannot guarantee indexing, a particular ranking, a rich result or an AI citation.

Function	What to look for
Titles and descriptions	Editable page fields and sensible defaults for the content types you actually publish.
Indexing and canonicals	Understandable controls, with the ability to inspect the final instructions and preferred URL.
Sitemaps	A working, maintained list of preferred public URLs, with appropriate inclusion controls.
Structured data	Relevant, accurate output that works with the theme or shop software already supplying markup.
Support and maintenance	Current compatibility information, useful documentation and support appropriate to your needs.

Social-sharing previews, redirects, content analysis and reporting integrations can be useful additions. Decide whether you need them in this plugin or whether another maintained system already handles the task.

Choose according to your situation

Your situation	A sensible next step
An existing plugin works	Keep it unless you can identify a material limitation, support problem or conflict.

Your situation	A sensible next step
A new brochure or service site	Compare the free versions of two suitable options. Test page controls, defaults and ease of use.
An online shop	Check product and category metadata, variants, schema and compatibility with existing shop output.
A multilingual website	Check documented compatibility and test titles, URLs, sitemaps and markup across your languages.
Several sites or a small team	Compare site licences, roles, handover, support and the recurring cost of the required features.

For a new site, shortlist tools on those criteria, then choose the one you can maintain confidently. For a live site, run comparisons on a protected staging copy rather than activating competing suites on the public website.

Do not choose purely by installation totals, star ratings or the number of feature ticks. Those can help you investigate a product, but they do not establish compatibility with your website or the quality of its current support.

When is a paid version worth it

A free version may be enough when you need ordinary page metadata, basic indexing controls and a sitemap. Paying can make sense for a specific missing function, reliable support, a team workflow or work that saves enough time to justify the cost.

Before buying, check the renewal price as well as any introductory offer, the number of sites covered, taxes, extension costs and AI usage allowances. Confirm what happens when the licence expires and which features depend on an external account.

Compare the total setup. A bundle can be good value if it replaces tools you need; a cheaper plugin can become expensive when the necessary extensions are added. Paying for unused automation offers little benefit.

Avoid overlapping functions rather than counting plugins

Usually, give one main SEO suite responsibility for core SEO output. It can coexist with separate tools for caching, backups, image compression or security. The issue is whether functions conflict, not whether more than one plugin has any connection with SEO.

Check who supplies each function before enabling it. Common overlaps include two sets of canonical tags, contradictory indexing instructions, competing product markup or several redirect systems acting on the same URL.

Analytics needs the same care. If a tag is already installed through a tag manager or another integration, connecting it again through an SEO plugin may duplicate collection. Check the implementation rather than treating every integration switch as an improvement.

Disable or adjust the overlapping feature, then retest. Do not remove software indiscriminately: another part of the site may depend on it. Avoid applying bulk noindex, redirect or automatic-linking rules without reviewing the affected URLs.

Do not mistake a plugin score for Google approval

A focus keyword helps the plugin analyse a page against its own rules. It does not tell Google which query the page must rank for. Google also says it ignores the meta keywords tag for indexing and ranking.

Use content analysis to notice possible omissions, then read the page yourself. A complete answer does not need padding to meet a word-count target. Headings and image alternative text should serve the reader rather than repeat a phrase to satisfy a score.

Preview panels are estimates of possible search presentation. Google may generate a different title link or snippet. A technically valid canonical is a preference signal, not proof that Google will select that address.

AI writing and AI visibility are different features

An AI feature that drafts descriptions may save editing time. It does not demonstrate that the page will appear in an AI answer. Check facts, claims, author details, examples and metadata before publishing generated material.

Google says its generative AI Search features do not require special schema, llms.txt files or content broken into tiny pieces. A plugin’s GEO score, llms.txt generator or schema aggregation feature is not evidence of improved Google visibility. Assess any use for other systems against their own documentation.

Crawler controls also need care. A restriction on a training crawler can have a different purpose from a restriction on a search crawler. Check which bots and rules the feature changes before enabling a broad block.

An indexing notification is not guaranteed inclusion

Some plugins use “instant indexing” for URL notification features. IndexNow tells participating search engines about changed URLs. A notification does not guarantee that a URL will be crawled, indexed or ranked.

For an ordinary website, maintain a useful sitemap and use Search Console’s supported inspection and indexing-request workflow where appropriate. A successful submission message is not confirmation that your page is in Search.

Switch SEO plugins with a plan

A migration changes controls that may affect many pages. An import tool can help, but do not assume that it transfers every setting, redirect, schema configuration or custom field.

- Record why you are switching and identify the feature or problem that justifies it.
- Back up the website files and database. Confirm a restoration route and use a protected staging copy for testing.
- Export supported settings and keep a record of important titles, descriptions, indexing rules, canonicals, sitemap addresses and redirects.
- Follow the destination plugin’s current migration instructions. Check exactly which source versions and fields it supports.
- Arrange the switchover so one system owns each output. Some migrations require both plugins to be installed temporarily; follow the documented sequence rather than running competing output indefinitely.

- Compare representative pages before and after: homepage, service page, article, archive, product and translated page where relevant.
- Check the public output and important redirects. Clear the relevant caches and retest while logged out. Review sitemap access and Search Console after launch.
- Keep a change log and rollback plan. Restore the known working setup if a material regression appears, then investigate before trying again.

Keep page URLs stable during a plugin migration unless a separate, planned change requires otherwise. If a site-wide canonical, indexing or redirect issue is unclear, involve your developer before applying a bulk fix.

How to check whether the plugin is working

Start with the change you intended to make. If you edited a title, inspect the published HTML title. If you changed a canonical or noindex setting, inspect the actual tag or response header. A saved dashboard field alone does not prove the output is correct.

Open the active sitemap and sample its URLs. Check structured data for accuracy and conflicts. Use Google's Rich Results Test for supported Google features and Schema.org's validator for broader vocabulary checks; neither guarantees a particular search display or citation.

Then distinguish output from outcomes. Search Console helps show what Google reports about pages and search performance; analytics and business records help assess visits, completed enquiries and sales. A green score is not an outcome, and a ranking change after installation does not establish that the plugin caused it.

Online companion: Choosing and checking SEO plugins

18 Speed performance and reliable functions

Website Speed and Performance for Small Businesses

Website speed and performance affect how easily people can read, browse and buy from you. A page should show useful information promptly, respond when someone interacts and keep its layout stable. A high test score is useful only when the website still works for customers.

For a small-business WordPress website, start by measuring important pages, identify the cause of a problem and make one controlled change at a time. This chapter explains what to measure, which improvements to consider and how to check that a faster page still delivers enquiries or sales.

What performance means for SEO

Google says its ranking systems use Core Web Vitals, but good results do not guarantee top rankings. There is no single page experience signal that replaces relevance and useful content. Improving performance supports the experience of a page; it does not compensate for information that fails to answer the customer's question.

Avoid assuming that your analytics bounce rate directly tells Google to demote a page. Equally, a conversion increase after a speed change does not establish that speed caused it. Check the customer journey and keep other changes in view.

Understand the three Core Web Vitals

Measure	What it describes	Good threshold
Largest Contentful PaintLCP	When the largest visible image or text block is painted.	2.5 seconds or less
Interaction to Next PaintINP	How promptly the page responds visually to user interactions.	200 milliseconds or less
Cumulative Layout ShiftCLS	Unexpected movement of visible page content.	0.1 or less

These targets are assessed at the 75th percentile of measured page loads, with mobile and desktop considered separately. In ordinary language, the target is for at least three quarters of measured experiences to be within the good threshold for each metric.

INP replaced First Input Delay, or FID, as a Core Web Vital in 2024. If an old report still centres on FID, use current guidance when planning improvements. LCP is not the time at which every resource has finished downloading, and CLS is a score rather than a time.

Real user data shows recorded experience

PageSpeed Insights uses Chrome User Experience Report data from eligible real users over the previous 28 days. Check whether the report refers to the exact URL or falls back to the origin, meaning the wider website. Origin data is not a measurement of that page alone.

If there are insufficient samples, the report may have no real-user data. That is an information gap, not a pass or failure. Small or recently live pages can still be tested in the lab.

Lab tests help you investigate

PageSpeed Insights also runs a Lighthouse test under simulated conditions. Use it to investigate loading and technical issues, and record the device setting and date. The score can vary between runs; compare repeated tests under similar conditions rather than treating one number as permanent.

A lab improvement can appear immediately after a fix, while the 28-day field view still includes earlier visits. Do not expect the historical view to reset when you clear a cache.

A standard navigation-only Lighthouse run does not measure INP because it does not reproduce real interactions. Total Blocking Time, or TBT, is a useful lab diagnostic for potential responsiveness problems, but it is not interchangeable with INP. A page can also shift or slow down after the initial load.

Build a baseline before changing settings

Choose a few important URLs rather than testing only the homepage. Include a main service page, an article, a product or category page where relevant and the enquiry or checkout journey. Different templates can have different problems.

- Run PageSpeed Insights for mobile and desktop. Record the URL, date, field-data scope, metrics and the main diagnostic finding.
- Repeat the lab test a few times under comparable conditions. Keep the range or a typical result; do not select only the best run.
- Open the public page while logged out and on a phone. Read, scroll, open the menu and try the main action.
- Use Search Console’s Core Web Vitals report to look for patterns across groups of similar URLs. Inspect examples rather than assuming every URL has identical behaviour.
- If customers are in several markets, use a testing tool that lets you choose locations. Keep the device and network settings consistent when comparing locations or changes.

Record relevant conditions, including whether you are testing a first visit, a repeat visit or a page after its cache has warmed. A cached public page can behave differently from a logged-in, personalised or checkout page.

A simple performance work log

URL or page type	Observed issue	Next action	Retest
Main service page	Large hero image appears late in lab tests.	Check image size and how it is loaded.	Repeat comparable tests and submit the enquiry form.
Product page	Layout moves as images appear.	Reserve the correct image space.	Check mobile layout, variants and add-to-cart.

These are illustrative entries, not findings about this website. Add the test date, owner and actual before-and-after measurements to your own log. Keep lab results separate from field results.

If the main content appears late

Use the report to identify the LCP element. It could be a hero image or a large text block. A late LCP can involve server delay, late resource discovery, download time or delays before the browser displays the content. Compressing every image will not address every cause.

For an image problem, supply suitable dimensions and compression, then check the image the browser actually receives. WebP or AVIF can reduce transfer size where suitable. Preserve detail customers need, especially in product photographs.

Do not lazy-load an important image already visible at the top of the page, particularly the LCP image. Lazy loading is more suitable for images below the initial view. Check the real output: WordPress, a builder and an image plugin may each influence loading behaviour.

Alternative text helps convey an image's purpose; it is not a file-size optimisation. Keep meaningful text available as text rather than embedding it only inside a banner.

If clicks or taps feel delayed

Test the interactions customers use: opening the menu, choosing a product option, searching or submitting a form. Heavy JavaScript and long tasks can delay responses. Third-party widgets or builder features may contribute, but investigate the actual interaction rather than blaming all scripts.

Remove features you do not need and ask your developer to investigate long tasks or expensive event handlers. Deferring or delaying a script can help some pages and break others. A menu or consent control that starts working only after an extra click is a regression to investigate.

If content jumps while people use it

Watch the page beyond its first screen. A button moving just as someone taps it is a practical problem, even when a short lab run misses the movement. Retest mobile pages and different content lengths after template changes.

Find out where the delay starts

Time to First Byte, or TTFB, measures how long the browser waits for the first byte of a response. It is a diagnostic metric rather than one of the three Core Web Vitals. It can reflect connection setup, redirects, server work and other delays, so a high value is not proof that your hosting company alone is responsible.

Ask your host or developer to check slow responses, resource constraints, expensive requests and the difference between cached and uncached pages. Compare relevant regions if you serve international customers. An expensive plan, a VPS or a "managed" label does not by itself establish a faster result.

Understand which cache you already have

Page caching can serve a stored response instead of rebuilding a public page for every request. Browser caching can reduce repeat downloads. Object caching stores reusable data to reduce repeated processing. These solve different parts of the workload.

Check what the host, CDN and existing plugins already do. Assign responsibility for each function before adding another optimisation plugin. Overlapping minification, lazy loading or script-delay systems can make the source of a problem harder to identify.

Keep personalised areas out of inappropriate shared page caching. Test carts, checkout, account pages and forms using the exclusions recommended for your software. Verify that changing cache rules does not show stale stock, incorrect prices or another visitor's information.

Know what the CDN actually caches

A content delivery network can serve cached resources from locations closer to visitors. Whether it caches HTML as well as images, scripts and styles depends on the provider and configuration. For example, Cloudflare's default cache behaviour does not cache HTML or JSON.

A CDN does not automatically fix slow page generation, excessive JavaScript or an oversized image. Check cache behaviour and representative locations before judging the result. Confirm that security rules still allow legitimate visitors and necessary crawlers.

Treat optimisation settings as changes to website behaviour

Minification reduces unnecessary characters in code; combining, deferring and delaying resources are separate techniques. Their benefits depend on the page and delivery setup. Do not enable every available setting because a plugin labels it an optimisation.

The same applies to themes and plugins. One costly component can matter more than several modest ones. Review unused features and dependencies before removing software. Changing the builder or theme is a project, rather than a routine first fix for a low score.

Do not routinely delete database records or media files merely because a tool calls them unused. Builders, templates, translations or background processes may still rely on them. Establish what is safe to remove and keep a restoration route.

Make one change and check the whole journey

Before a substantial change, back up files and the database and confirm how to restore them. Use a protected staging copy for changes to PHP, the theme, builder, caching rules or checkout. Record the current configuration so an individual setting can be reversed.

- Write down the observed problem and the change intended to address it.
- Change one setting or resource at a time. Note the time and the affected URLs.
- Clear only the relevant caches, then repeat comparable tests. Check that the public page receives the intended version.
- Test the mobile menu, images, sliders, consent controls and any other affected components while logged out.
- Complete a test enquiry and verify delivery and confirmation. For a shop, test variants, cart and checkout through the approved test process.
- If something breaks, restore the previous setting, clear the relevant cache and retest the original function before attempting another fix.

Do not remove consent controls or essential measurement merely to raise a score. Confirm that your existing consent choices and analytics behaviour still work after script or caching changes.

Example of a faster page with a broken form

This is a fictional example. Willow Heating delays JavaScript on a service page and sees a higher lab score. The page looks correct, but the enquiry form no longer displays its confirmation or sends the expected message.

The owner restores the previous script setting, clears the relevant cache and confirms that the form works again. They record which change caused the problem. Their developer then investigates a narrower exclusion rather than disabling all optimisation.

The improvement is accepted only after comparable tests show a benefit and the enquiry route works. The owner checks later field data as it becomes available. A test score alone would have missed the business problem.

Keep performance maintenance manageable

Review important pages monthly and after significant releases or new embeds. Keep a short change log and investigate repeated problems across page types. Fix a shared template problem once where possible rather than applying unrelated adjustments to every page.

Check business results alongside technical measurements. Completed enquiries, usable bookings and successful orders matter. Distinguish a button click from a completed action, and do not assume a performance change caused a movement in sales or rankings.

Ask for specialist help with persistent regional delays, long JavaScript tasks, cache leaks, repeated breakage or changes requiring server access. Provide URLs, test conditions, dates, findings and the last working configuration.

Online companion: Speed performance and reliable functions

19 Structured data and supported search features

How to Add and Check Structured Data in WordPress

Structured data describes information on your pages in a format machines can interpret. In WordPress, some of it may already come from your SEO plugin, theme or shop software. The first job is to find out what is present, then check that it is relevant and accurate.

You do not need a separate schema plugin simply because a page has no stars or other enhanced search display. This chapter shows how to inspect existing markup, choose an appropriate implementation, test it and maintain it without adding conflicting information.

Separate vocabulary from Google features

Schema.org supplies a vocabulary for describing things such as articles, organisations, products and people. Google supports particular search features with their own requirements. A type existing in Schema.org does not establish that it triggers a Google rich result.

Structured data can help Google understand page content and make a page eligible for supported search presentations. Eligibility is not a guarantee of display, higher rankings, more clicks or AI citations. A test result also does not establish that your business claims are true.

Choose a feature from Google's current documentation when Google rich-result eligibility is your goal. Do not rely only on a plugin's list of available schema types.

Keep useful FAQs without promising expandable results

Google retired the FAQ rich-result feature from 7 May 2026. FAQPage still exists in Schema.org, but a valid FAQPage item does not restore that Google feature. HowTo markup is also not a route to a current Google HowTo rich result.

Keep visible questions and answers when they help readers. Review any plugin block or old template promising FAQ expansion, rather than removing useful content simply because Google changed its display features.

Start by inspecting a representative page

Choose an important public page that is already published. Use its exact URL rather than a preview link. Start with one article, service page or product page; the output may differ across templates.

- Open Google's Rich Results Test and test the URL. Note the supported items it detects and any errors or warnings.
- Test the same URL with Schema.org's Markup Validator to inspect broader Schema.org types and properties.
- Compare detected facts with the visible page: name, author, dates, business details, images, price or availability where relevant.
- Record the likely source of each item. Check the SEO plugin, theme, shop software, builder blocks and any custom snippets.
- Repeat on another relevant page type before assuming the whole website uses the same configuration.

View Source can help you locate JSON-LD script blocks, often identified by application/ld+json. Markup can also appear as HTML attributes or be added by JavaScript. An initial source search alone is therefore not a complete inventory. If the source is unclear, ask your developer to trace it.

Record what supplies the markup

Page or item	Possible source	Check before changing
Article and author	SEO plugin or template	Real author, relevant headline, images and genuine dates.
Business identity	SEO plugin, theme or custom code	Consistent name, URL and the appropriate organisation or business type.
Product and offer	Shop software or an extension	The actual product, currency, price and availability.
Breadcrumbs	Theme or SEO plugin	A sensible route through the website with working destinations.
FAQ block or custom item	Editor block or snippet	Relevant visible content and a clear reason to maintain the markup.

These are possible sources, not instructions to install another tool. A WordPress plugin can generate several related items, while a shop extension may add specialist data. Confirm the source on your setup before disabling anything.

Articles and author details

For an editorial article, check relevant Article or BlogPosting information such as the headline, author, images and publication or modification dates. Use the real author and a useful author profile. Do not invent qualifications or change the publication date merely to make an old page look new.

Check the article template rather than adding identical manual code to every post. If the template supplies incorrect dates or an inappropriate author, correct the underlying mapping.

Business identity and local details

Use business information that reflects the real organisation. LocalBusiness markup has requirements that depend on the intended feature and business details; adding it is not a substitute for maintaining a Google Business Profile.

Check names, hours, URLs, contact information and applicable locations against your pages. Do not invent a public address to satisfy a required field. If you operate as a service-area business without a public premises address, get advice on an appropriate implementation rather than publishing false or private information.

Products and commercial information

For an actual product page, check the product and offer information supplied by your shop. Different Google product experiences have different requirements. A product identifier, price, stock status or variant must describe what the visitor can actually buy.

Use dynamic information from the maintained shop data where practical. A manually pasted price can become wrong as soon as the product changes. Check consistency across the visible page, generated markup and any product feed.

Breadcrumbs and navigation

BreadcrumbList describes a route through the website. Check that its labels and URLs make sense alongside the site's navigation. Google currently documents breadcrumb rich results as a desktop feature; useful on-page breadcrumbs can still help visitors on mobile.

An ordinary service page does not need to be labelled as a product, recipe or event to secure a more attractive display. Describe what the page contains and use supported features only where their requirements fit.

Reviews and ratings

Do not fabricate feedback or a rating, or attach a site-wide business rating to unrelated items. Google has specific rules about eligible review types and the relationship between the reviewed item and the reviewer.

Reviews about a LocalBusiness or Organization are ineligible for the star review feature when the reviewed business controls those reviews on its own site, including through an embedded third-party widget. Genuine testimonials can still help visitors, but do not promise Google stars from adding a ratings plugin.

Configure WordPress before adding custom code

Open the documentation for the SEO or shop tool you already use. Find its site identity, content-type and structured data controls; names and locations vary by product and version. Check any existing setup before running a wizard again.

Confirm whether the site represents a person or an organisation. Enter accurate details, choose relevant defaults for actual content types and review page-level exceptions. If a post has been assigned the wrong type, correct that assignment rather than adding a second description over it.

Assign responsibility for each output. For example, your SEO plugin may describe articles and business identity while the shop supplies product offers. Test the combined result. Separate tools can coexist when their output is accurate and coordinated.

JSON LD is convenient but other formats are supported

Google supports JSON-LD, microdata and RDFa, subject to the relevant feature documentation. It generally recommends JSON-LD because it is easier to implement and maintain. JSON-LD can appear in the page's head or body; it is not restricted to a manual header insertion.

The presence of both microdata and JSON-LD is not automatically an error. Investigate contradictory facts or duplicated descriptions of the same thing. Several different, relevant items on one page can also be legitimate.

Use custom code only for a defined gap

If existing tools cannot describe a necessary item, ask a developer to implement and maintain it through an appropriate template or scoped plugin mechanism. Establish which pages receive it, where its values come from and who updates it.

AI and generators can help draft code, but do not publish the output without checking syntax, current feature requirements and every business fact. Replace example URLs and placeholders, avoid unsupported properties and confirm that the snippet is not being inserted across irrelevant pages.

Test syntax and eligibility separately

Tool	What it helps check	What it does not prove
Schema.org Markup Validator	Schema.org types, properties and parsing across the detected markup.	Google rich-result eligibility or the truth of the information.
Google Rich Results Test	Detected items and requirements for supported Google rich-result features.	That all Schema.org vocabulary is assessed or a result will display.
Search Console	What Google reports about supported enhancements and inspected URLs.	Every schema item on the website, an AI citation or a commercial result.

A “no items detected” result in the Rich Results Test does not necessarily mean there is no structured data. The page may contain vocabulary outside that tool’s supported feature set. Check the broader validator and the actual implementation.

For a detected feature, fix required-property errors before expecting eligibility. Review recommended-property warnings for useful information you can accurately provide; do not invent a value just to clear a warning. A syntactically valid item can still fail a policy requirement.

Recheck the published URL after the change. Testing code before publication is useful, but it cannot confirm what the final WordPress page outputs after templates, plugins and caches have acted on it.

Example of an article with conflicting author details

This is a fictional example. Willow Heating publishes an advice article. The SEO plugin supplies BlogPosting data with the real author, but an old custom snippet supplies another Article item naming a different author and an outdated business URL.

The owner records both items and asks the maintainer to identify their sources. They confirm that the old snippet is unnecessary, keep a backup of its configuration and remove it from the affected template. They do not disable every structured data feature on the website.

After clearing the relevant cache, they retest the article URL and a second article using the same template. They check the visible byline, dates, business information and remaining markup. The aim is a consistent description, not the largest possible count of detected items.

Publish in a controlled way and monitor

For a template or site-wide change, back up files and the database and keep a rollback route. Test a representative sample on a protected copy first. Record the affected pages, previous settings, changes and validation results.

After publication, ensure that intended public pages are accessible for crawling and indexing. Structured data does not override robots.txt, a noindex instruction or a login requirement. Use URL Inspection when access or indexing is unclear.

Where Search Console provides a relevant enhancement report, review its errors and examples. After correcting the affected instances, use the validation process offered by that report. Changes are not necessarily reflected immediately, and not every type has a dedicated report.

Monitor relevant pages and available search-appearance reporting alongside completed enquiries or sales. Keep a record of content and template changes. A change in click-through rate after publication does not, by itself, prove that the markup caused it.

A short maintenance checklist

- Inspect output after changing the theme, SEO plugin, shop extension or a shared template.
- Update source information when authors, business details, products or availability change.
- Retest representative public URLs and compare facts with visible content.
- Record which system owns each item and preserve the setup for future maintainers.

Online companion: Structured data and supported search features

20 Troubleshooting common website problems

How to Find and Fix Common WordPress SEO Issues

Start a WordPress SEO fix by confirming the problem, finding where it occurs and checking what changed. An error report is a clue; it is not a reason to change every setting or install another plugin.

This chapter helps you investigate common problems with access, indexing, redirects, page output, performance and enquiries. Make one controlled change, retest the affected page and keep a way to restore the previous setup. Some faults are straightforward; others need your host or developer.

Triage the problem before editing

What you notice	Check first	Priority
Public site unavailable or showing certificate warnings	Open important URLs while logged out and contact the host with the error and time.	Restore safe public access.
Forms or checkout fail	Complete the journey and confirm receipt or the approved test transaction.	Restore the customer function.
Important pages unexpectedly excluded	Inspect exact URLs and the current access or indexing instructions.	Correct unintended barriers.
Traffic or enquiries decline	Compare search, analytics and business records for the same period.	Establish where the decline occurs.
A tool flags a warning	Read the reason and inspect representative pages.	Assess its actual effect.

Record the exact URL, date and time, device, observed result and expected result. Note whether one page, one template or the whole site is affected. Check recent content edits, updates, redirects, caching changes and security rules.

For a meaningful change, confirm that you have backups of files and the database and know how to restore them. Use a protected staging copy for plugin conflicts, theme changes or server-related work. Do not publish private staging content to make a test pass.

Check its status rather than guessing from a search

Enter the full URL in Google Search Console’s URL Inspection. The initial information is stored data, so check its crawl date. Use Test live URL to investigate the current page after a change. A successful live test does not mean the page is already indexed or guarantee that it will appear.

A missing result in a site: search is not proof of non-indexing. Inspect the particular page and decide whether it should be public and eligible for search. Duplicate URLs, private areas and genuinely removed pages may be intentionally absent.

Trace an accidental exclusion to its source

For a public WordPress site, review Settings → Reading and the “Discourage search engines from indexing this site” option. Also check the page’s SEO settings, template rules and any noindex response header. Removing one setting may not remove another instruction generated elsewhere.

Noindex and robots.txt do different jobs. Google must be able to fetch a page to read its noindex instruction. A robots.txt block controls crawling and is not a reliable way to keep a URL out of results or protect private information.

Correct the unintended restriction on the relevant public page, clear the appropriate cache and retest. Keep necessary privacy and security controls. A sitemap or indexing request does not override an access block or noindex instruction.

Google or an AI search crawler cannot access a page

If you can open a page but a crawler cannot, check whether you are logged in or exempt from a security rule. Look for login screens, challenge pages, denied requests or server failures affecting the public URL.

Ask the host or security administrator to inspect the relevant requests and verify the crawler’s identity. A user-agent label alone is not enough to establish that a request came from Google. Do not disable the firewall globally as a routine fix.

Search crawling and model-training controls serve different purposes. Review the actual bot and rule before changing an “AI” setting. Allowing one search crawler does not establish that every assistant can access or cite your website.

Decide what the URL should do

Open the exact address and check its response and destination. A visible page is not enough: an error template may look normal, and a redirect can take the visitor somewhere unintended. Use the inspection information or ask your developer to check the HTTP response.

What should happen	Appropriate action
The page still exists at this URL	Investigate an incorrect redirect, removal rule, routing problem or publication setting.
The page moved permanently	Redirect the old address to its relevant replacement and update internal links.
The page was removed with no suitable replacement	A genuine 404 or 410 can be appropriate. Remove obsolete internal links.
The destination redirects again or loops	Trace the rules across WordPress, the host and CDN; remove conflicting or unnecessary hops.

Do not redirect every missing page to the homepage or return a successful response with no useful content. Check whether the visitor’s original task has a genuine replacement.

Check rules as well as the post

If an existing post unexpectedly redirects or returns Gone, inspect the redirect systems that can affect it. Removing a mistaken redirect or 410 rule is different from deleting the post. Record the rule and confirm the intended URL before changing it.

If many posts return 404 after a migration or server change, ask your maintainer to check permalink routing and server rewrite configuration. Do not change all slugs or switch the site-wide permalink structure as an unplanned repair.

Google selects a different canonical URL

A canonical declares your preferred version of duplicate or very similar content; it is not a command Google must follow. In URL Inspection, compare the user-declared and Google-selected canonical where available. Then open both pages and examine the actual content.

Check redirects, internal links, sitemap entries and any canonical output from the theme, plugin or server. Correct contradictory signals at their source. If the pages serve genuinely different purposes, assess the content rather than forcing a canonical between unrelated pages.

A canonical field saved in a dashboard does not prove the tag is present on the public page. Inspect the output after clearing relevant caches. Avoid adding a second canonical snippet over an existing one.

Review archives individually. A useful category page is not automatically an error because it contains article excerpts. Blanket noindex or removal rules can eliminate useful routes without solving the underlying issue.

Separate website output from Google presentation

If a title or description is wrong, compare the SEO field, the public page output and what Google displays. A cache, template or competing plugin may affect output. Google can also generate a different title link or snippet even when your intended information is present.

Correct inaccurate output first, then allow for recrawling and processing. Repeatedly rewriting a correct title to match one search result can create extra work without identifying the cause.

Check the purpose of a schema warning

Use Google’s Rich Results Test for supported Google features and Schema.org’s validator for broader vocabulary checks. A missing rich result is not proof that a plugin failed. Fix relevant errors and factual conflicts rather than adding another generator.

Keep useful visible FAQs, but do not add FAQ markup expecting to restore Google’s retired FAQ rich result. Valid markup also does not guarantee rankings, clicks or an AI citation.

Pages load slowly or break on mobile

Reproduce the problem on important page types and on a phone. Note whether the issue is late main content, delayed interactions, layout movement or an element that does not work. A desktop preview or a single lab score is not a complete test.

Use current Core Web Vitals and PageSpeed Insights diagnostics to investigate. Keep lab measurements separate from available real-user data. Check the host and existing optimisation setup before adding a cache plugin, replacing the theme or removing software.

For a broken mobile menu, slider or form, review recent script-delay, minification and caching changes. Restore the last setting if a regression began with it, clear relevant caches and retest. Optimisation should not require a visitor to click twice before an essential control starts working.

Check readable text, keyboard access, overlays and working buttons. Use browser tools and real devices; the retired Google Mobile-Friendly Test is not a current troubleshooting route.

An update causes errors or missing page elements

Record what changed and which functions are affected. A theme, plugin, builder, PHP version or combination of components may be involved. Capture the error and its time so your host or developer can examine the relevant logs.

Reproduce the issue on a protected copy and isolate likely components there. Do not deactivate every live plugin as a routine experiment: payments, consent controls, security or other business functions may depend on them.

If the public site is down or the dashboard is inaccessible, contact the host or maintainer for recovery. Use a known restoration plan rather than making unfamiliar database or server-file edits. Error logs should help the investigation without being exposed publicly.

People click the enquiry button but no enquiries arrive

Test the whole journey. A click, an opened form, a confirmation message, an email and a completed booking are different observations. Establish the point at which the process fails rather than treating every click as a lead.

Submit a clearly labelled test through the public page and confirm where it is stored or delivered. Check the intended recipient, spam folder, mail service and form logs where available. A successful WordPress mail-function return does not establish that the recipient received the message.

For an external booking service, follow the link, review the available appointments and complete an authorised test through its agreed process. Confirm the booking record and any confirmation rather than relying only on a website click report.

Then check the analytics event. It should represent the action named, such as a successfully submitted enquiry, and avoid duplicate recording. DebugView can help verify events when debug mode is enabled. Test your existing consent behaviour as part of that process.

Traffic falls but the website appears to work

Separate a fall in Google Search clicks from a fall in analytics sessions or recorded enquiries. Compare the same periods, properties and filters. Check tracking changes, collection gaps and business records before attributing the decline to SEO.

In Search Console, compare affected pages, queries, devices and countries. Consider seasonality, demand and search presentation alongside technical changes. An update occurring near a decline is not proof that the update caused it.

A good average position also does not guarantee many visits. Examine the actual queries and impressions, the pages shown and their relevance to customers. Improve a misleading title or an unsuitable page where the evidence supports it, rather than adding schema as a universal click remedy.

Retest and record the result

- Record the URL, original symptom, evidence and setting or component changed.
- Check the public page while logged out and test any affected mobile or customer function.
- Compare the current result with the original problem, not only with a plugin score.
- Recheck relevant inspection or reporting data after processing. A live fix and an older crawl record can describe different moments.
- If a new problem appears, restore the previous setting and retest before attempting another change.

A useful handover includes exact URLs, timestamps and time zone, reproduction steps, recent changes and the last known working setup. Share necessary logs through an appropriate private support route, without publishing credentials or customer information.

A simple troubleshooting record

Fictional example: a cleaning service page returns 410 although the post remains published. The owner records the response and finds a matching removal rule in the redirect manager. They confirm the service should remain public, preserve the rule details and remove only that mistaken rule. After clearing the relevant cache, they verify the expected page response, mobile layout and enquiry form. They inspect the URL again later to review Google’s updated information. The fix restores the intended page behaviour; it does not promise an indexing date or a ranking gain.

Online companion: Troubleshooting common website problems

21 Links mentions and reputation

Off-page SEO is work beyond your own website that helps people discover and assess your business, and can contribute to its visibility in search. It includes earning relevant links and coverage, maintaining useful listings and managing genuine customer feedback.

These activities have different roles. A backlink, an unlinked mention, a review and an AI citation are not interchangeable ranking signals. Choose work for its relevance to your customers and business, rather than trying to collect a fixed number of endorsements.

This chapter explains the foundations and gives you a manageable way to review your external presence. Chapter 22 develops this into a practical outreach plan.

How off-page work fits with the website itself

On-page SEO improves the information and presentation on your own pages. Technical SEO addresses access, indexing and how the site works. Off-page activity concerns relevant information and references elsewhere.

They support different parts of the same journey. Coverage may introduce someone to your service, but the destination page must still explain the offer and provide a working enquiry route. External attention cannot repair an inaccessible page or an inaccurate price.

Understand the different kinds of reference

Reference	What it means	What it does not establish
Backlink	A clickable link from another website to yours.	That Google gives it a particular weight or that it produces a sale.
Brand mention	A reference to your business, with or without a link.	That every mention directly improves rankings.
Business citation	A listing or reference containing business information.	That it is an AI source citation or that more listings always help.
Review	Feedback about a real customer experience.	That reviews on every platform affect Google rankings in the same way.
AI citation	A source reference displayed in an AI answer.	That someone visited your site or that the recommendation is accurate.

A single article can contain several of these: a business mention, a link and a customer story. Record what actually appeared rather than calling them all “links”.

Why relevant backlinks can matter

Google uses links to discover pages and as a signal of relevance. A link can also bring people directly to your website. Its usefulness depends on the source, surrounding context and destination, among other considerations.

Think about a specialist association linking to a genuinely useful resource, or a local publication referencing a business involved in a relevant project. Those are easier to justify to a reader than an unrelated site selling links to any customer.

There is no universal number of links that guarantees a ranking, and no fixed exchange rate between “good” and “bad” links. Do not label backlinks the number one factor for every query. The page, question and competitive context still matter.

Use third-party scores as context

Commercial tools may offer Domain Authority, Domain Rating or similar scores. These are estimates from their own systems, not a Google-issued score or a target Google asks you to achieve. Different tools can disagree because their data and methods differ.

Inspect the actual publication and page. Does it serve a relevant audience? Is the article useful and accurate? Is the link placed for a reader? A high score does not turn an irrelevant paid link into a good opportunity.

Find useful opportunities through the work you do

Start with expertise or information worth referencing. You might explain a recurring customer problem, publish a carefully documented comparison, contribute to a genuine local project or share an approved case study.

Make the source page useful before promoting it. Explain who produced the material, the conditions behind any figures and its limitations. Do not invent research or customer experience to make a story appear more impressive.

Then choose a few relevant publications, associations or partners. Explain why the material would help their audience. The editor decides whether to use it, how to describe it and whether to include a link.

A genuine guest article can be useful when it contributes expertise for that publication’s readers. Mass-produced guest posts, forced keyword links and large-scale exchanges intended to manipulate rankings are a different proposition.

Choose listings customers actually use

Review the listings that matter in your market: an eligible Google Business Profile, a trade directory, a professional register or a relevant local business organisation. Confirm that each listing describes the real business.

Correct meaningful errors in the name, contact details, services, locations and hours. A listing for a service you stopped offering can create unsuitable enquiries even if it sends visits.

Do not submit to hundreds of unrelated directories just to increase a count. A membership or listing fee may pay for a legitimate service; it should not be sold as a way to buy ranking credit. Assess the audience and purpose.

For local results, Google describes relevance, distance and prominence. Links and reviews can contribute to prominence, but a directory submission cannot eliminate the distance between your business and the searcher.

Ask for genuine reviews without steering the answer

Follow each platform's rules. Google Maps allows requests for feedback based on genuine experiences, but prohibits incentives, fabricated experiences and selectively soliciting positive reviews.

Use a consistent, neutral invitation to eligible customers rather than sending only happy customers to the public review page. Do not supply praise for them to post, ask for specific keywords or offer a discount in exchange for a review.

Respond helpfully and protect private information. If a review describes a service problem, investigate the underlying experience. Flag policy violations through the platform's process; a negative opinion alone is not a reason to expect removal.

Reviews can help customers assess the business, and Google says review counts and positive ratings can help local ranking. That does not establish that every review platform has an identical effect on ordinary web rankings or AI recommendations.

Use social media where the audience makes sense

Social activity can help distribute useful information, maintain relationships and send visits. Choose a channel you can support and where relevant customers or peers actually spend time.

Do not promise a direct Google ranking increase from likes, follower counts or shares. Equally, an unlinked mention may help someone discover or remember a business without proving a direct algorithmic effect.

Answer relevant questions as a participant, disclose your connection where appropriate and follow the community's rules. Avoid automated comments or dropping the same promotional link into unrelated discussions. There is no compulsory presence on every forum or platform.

Keep paid promotion separate from earned coverage

Advertising, sponsorship and creator partnerships can be legitimate marketing activities. Describe the commercial relationship honestly and assess the opportunity for its audience and business value.

Google says paid links should be qualified with rel="sponsored"; rel="nofollow" is also acceptable. The publisher normally controls that markup. Do not pay for a placement on condition that it disguises the relationship or passes ranking credit.

For user-generated links, rel="ugc" identifies their context. Nofollow is used where the other values do not fit and the publisher does not want Google to associate with or crawl the linked page through that link. Ordinary editorial links need no special "dofollow" attribute.

Google treats these qualification values as hints. Avoid the blanket claim that a qualified link has no value: it may still be useful to readers and bring referral visits. Nor can an ordinary unqualified link promise a particular ranking effect.

What changes when people use AI search

AI answers may cite external articles, listings or your own pages. A citation can introduce someone to a business, but it is a source reference rather than proof of an endorsement, visit or purchase.

Relevant external information is worth checking for accuracy. If a useful listing says you serve a city you do not cover, request a correction through its owner or normal editorial process. Keep your own service details clear as well.

Google says established SEO practices apply to its AI features and does not offer a special format or markup that guarantees citations. Other platforms have their own systems. Do not assume a mention on one famous site produces recommendations everywhere.

Choose external opportunities because the audience, subject and potential business value fit. Avoid trying to manipulate AI answers with fake reviews, invented rankings or promotional text disguised as independent opinion.

Start with a small external presence review

Choose a few places customers are likely to encounter your business. Check the information directly, then decide whether to correct it, maintain it or pursue a useful contribution. You do not need to monitor the entire internet.

Check	Record	Possible action
Important listings	URL, owner, contact details, offer and hours.	Correct material errors or outdated information.
Relevant coverage	Publication, audience, mention, link and destination.	Check accuracy and whether the destination remains useful.
Customer feedback	Recurring issues and legitimate response needs.	Respond appropriately and improve the underlying service.
New opportunities	Audience fit, contribution, effort and commercial terms.	Choose a small number you can support well.

For each action, keep an owner and a follow-up date. A requested correction is not a completed correction until the published information has been checked.

A realistic small-business example

This is fictional. An independent bicycle repair shop offers collection from two districts. A local directory incorrectly lists city-wide collection, while the owner has useful experience of common winter maintenance problems.

The owner requests a directory correction and checks the website for the same ambiguity. They publish a clear maintenance resource based on actual workshop knowledge, then offer a practical contribution to a relevant community publication.

The publication mentions the workshop and links to the resource. The owner records the coverage and checks the link, rather than demanding a particular anchor phrase. They also use a neutral invitation for genuine customer reviews.

Later, they assess relevant referral visits and suitable enquiries. They do not claim that the mention caused every ranking change or that one AI citation proves a permanent recommendation.

Measure coverage and outcomes separately

Keep a short record of new coverage, accurate listings, useful links and relevant corrections. These show work completed, not business results by themselves.

Search Console's Links report can help identify linking sites and pages. It is a sample, not a complete inventory. It may show links found in the past that have since disappeared, and it does not identify their nofollow status. Inspect important source pages directly.

Use analytics to review recorded referral visits and completed actions, then reconcile suitable enquiries or sales with business records where possible. Missing referrers and measurement gaps can limit what you see.

For AI visibility, keep citations distinct from referral sessions and conversions. Google AI impressions are included in overall Search totals. Do not add them again or combine incompatible figures into a universal audience or authority score.

Compare complete periods and note campaigns, seasonal demand and website changes. A link followed by growth does not prove the link caused it. A simple report should end with the next useful decision.

Do not routinely disavow unfamiliar links

An unfamiliar domain in a backlink tool is not enough reason to act. Google says most sites do not need its disavow tool. It is an advanced option for substantial artificial or low-quality linking that has caused, or is likely to cause, a manual action.

Do not upload a disavow file solely because a tool labels links "toxic" or shows a low score. Inspect the situation and get informed help if there is evidence of a manipulative link scheme or a manual action. Misuse can harm performance.

A manageable order for the work

- Confirm the website's offer and destination pages are accurate and usable.
- Correct important listings and material errors in relevant external information.
- Make one useful contribution based on real knowledge or work.
- Approach a small set of appropriate publications or partners.
- Invite genuine feedback within platform rules and respond helpfully.
- Record what appeared and assess suitable visits and business outcomes.

Off-page work takes time and editorial decisions are outside your control. There is no link quota or timetable that guarantees success, and reputation does not make a site immune to search updates. Choose useful work you can sustain, then review its value.

Online companion: Links mentions and reputation

22 Earning relevant coverage through digital PR

Digital PR for small businesses means earning attention by giving journalists, publishers and local organisations something useful to share. That could be an informed explanation, a worthwhile partnership, a carefully checked finding or a customer story with evidence behind it.

Search now includes AI answers, but the purpose of PR remains practical. Help the right people understand your business and give them a reason to trust or investigate it. Coverage may bring links, mentions and enquiries. It cannot guarantee rankings or an AI recommendation.

What digital PR involves

PR stands for public relations. Digital PR develops relationships and stories for online publications, newsletters, podcasts, community websites and other relevant media. For a small business, a useful feature in a local or specialist publication may matter more than an unrelated appearance on a very large website.

Earned coverage happens when a publisher decides that a contribution is useful to its audience. You can offer information, respond to questions and suggest a story. The editor chooses whether to publish, what angle to take and whether to include a link.

Your own article, a copied press release and a paid advertorial can have communication value, but they have different origins. Keep those distinctions clear when reporting your results or presenting coverage to customers.

Understand backlinks mentions and AI citations

These terms describe different things. One story might produce all three, just one, or none of them.

Term	What it means	What it does not establish
Backlink	A clickable link from another website to a page on yours.	A visit, sale or guaranteed ranking improvement.
Brand mention	A reference to your business or expert, with or without a link.	That the writer endorses your business.
AI citation	A source reference shown in an AI-generated answer. It may point to a publisher discussing your business.	That your own site was cited, a customer clicked, or the business was recommended.

If an AI answer links to a newspaper article that quotes your owner, the visible source is the newspaper. Record that accurately rather than claiming a citation to your website. Read the passage too: a critical or incidental mention is different from a favourable recommendation.

How digital PR can support SEO and AI discovery

A relevant article can introduce your business to potential customers and give them somewhere to learn more. An editorial link can also help search engines discover the linked page. Those benefits are useful even when the coverage does not produce an immediate measurable enquiry.

Aleyda Solis's August 2026 framework recommends evaluating third-party opportunities by their relevance, evidence and business value, as well as the effort involved. It highlights useful formats such as specialist reporting, expert contributions and documented customer outcomes. Its priorities are directional, not a universal formula for gaining AI visibility.

The practical lesson for a small business is to choose work that would still help its audience if an AI platform changed its sources. This chapter applies that idea through a modest outreach process; it does not promise that any particular publication will influence an answer.

Google's AI Search guidance says its generative features depend on quality and spam systems. It also cautions against seeking inauthentic mentions. Manufacturing praise or repeating promotional posts across forums is not a dependable substitute for useful evidence.

Start with a business goal and a useful audience

Choose one goal before developing a story. You might want more enquiries for a particular service, greater awareness among local residents or introductions to businesses that need your expertise. Write down who needs the information and what they should be able to do after reading it.

Then identify publications or organisations already serving that audience. Read their recent work. Look for the subjects they cover, the questions readers ask and the type of evidence they use.

For example, a local appliance repair business might contribute to a community article about arranging a repair. Its useful contribution is an explanation of the information a customer should provide, based on the team's real enquiry process. A generic claim to be the best repair company adds little for that reader.

Offer expertise that answers a real question

Start with the questions your team repeatedly receives. Choose something you can explain from direct experience, within your actual qualifications and service scope.

Prepare a short answer with a named spokesperson, an accurate role and a concrete example you can substantiate. Separate your own observations from external facts. If a claim depends on a source, include the source and its date.

A venue manager could explain the information an organiser needs before asking for a room quotation. A furniture maker could describe the choices customers need to consider when commissioning a table. Each should explain their own process without claiming to speak for an entire industry.

When a journalist requests comment, answer the actual question and respect the deadline. If you cannot verify a point in time, say so. An editor may use one sentence from your explanation or decide not to use it at all.

Build local partnerships with a clear purpose

Look for a shared activity that helps people: a demonstration with a community organisation, a useful contribution to a trade association's resources, or a joint customer project with a complementary business.

Agree who is involved, what each organisation contributes and how the activity will be described. Keep evidence of the work, such as the event programme, approved photographs or a short factual account.

For example, an independent bookshop and a community reading group might run an event and publish the reading list and practical details. The story is the activity and its value to participants. Neither organisation needs to invent an endorsement or require reciprocal SEO links.

If you fund or sponsor an activity, describe that relationship openly. A partner's account can support accurate understanding of the work, but partnership involvement is different from an independent review.

Share useful research with its limitations

Research does not have to mean an expensive national survey. You might examine a relevant public dataset or a suitable, anonymised set of your own records. Begin with a clear question and decide how you will count the answers before selecting a headline.

Explain the dates, source, sample size and method. Record exclusions, missing information and any assumptions. Use the data only where you have the right to do so, and avoid publishing details that identify customers.

A count of your enquiries describes those enquiries. It does not automatically describe everyone in your town, the whole market or what customers elsewhere believe. Small or self-selected samples need especially careful wording.

Fictional example: a business examines 40 recorded enquiries received during one month and finds that 12 needed clarification about delivery coverage. That is 30% of the enquiries reviewed. It would be misleading to claim that 30% of local residents misunderstand delivery services.

Publish the method and a clear summary alongside any chart. Where practical, share the underlying non-identifying figures so a journalist can check the calculation. If the finding is not useful or reliable, choose another story rather than stretching the headline.

Tell a customer story that can be checked

Ask a willing customer whether they want to participate. Agree which details, comments and images can be used. Start with their situation, explain what the business actually did and show the outcome you can verify.

A small design studio might document how it reorganised a customer's booking page. It could show the approved before-and-after layout and the reason for each change. It should claim improved enquiries only if suitable records support that result and the reporting period is clear.

Include constraints and relevant context. Do not turn one successful project into a promise that every customer will get the same outcome. If the customer or a partner publishes the story, accurately describe their relationship with your business.

AI can help organise an interview transcript or draft an outline. A person must check every quote, date, number and claim. Do not create fictional customers, invent testimonials or present an AI-generated image as evidence of completed work.

Prepare evidence before sending a pitch

A short page on your website can provide the detail an editor needs. Make it readable without requiring a form submission. Include the article, method or case study, its date and the person responsible.

Prepare a small supporting pack with approved images, captions, source information and contact details. Make clear which facts are available for publication and which material is background only. Avoid large unsolicited attachments.

Check the destination on a phone. A journalist should be able to see the information and contact a real person. A customer arriving later should find a sensible route to the relevant service or enquiry page.

Keep the business facts consistent

Maintain an approved fact sheet with your trading name, location or service area, current services, spokesperson details, website and public contact routes. Include only qualifications, memberships and awards you can verify. Record when someone last checked it.

Use that information in your About page, relevant profiles and outreach pack. If coverage contains an error, send a courteous factual correction with evidence. An accurate fact sheet also gives you a reference when checking what an AI answer says about your business.

A low budget outreach plan for one month

This illustrative plan uses an existing website, phone, email and a simple spreadsheet. It allows four hours of staff time across a month and no additional cash spend. Those are planning assumptions, not a price or a promise of coverage. A new survey or event would need its own time and budget.

Choose one topic already supported by your team's experience. In this fictional example, an appliance repair business prepares a page explaining what information residents should gather before requesting a quotation. It includes its actual coverage and enquiry process, without giving technical repair instructions.

Week	Time	Task and finished output
1	60 minutes	Select the customer question and confirm the facts with the team. Prepare the short source page and spokesperson details.
2	90 minutes	Check and publish the page. Research five relevant local or specialist outlets and record their public editorial contact routes.
3	45 minutes	Send up to five individually written pitches. Record what was offered, where it was sent and the date.
4	45 minutes	Respond to questions, consider one suitable follow-up and review outcomes. Record the next improvement.

This schedule assumes that the information and any necessary permissions are already available. If checking takes longer, reduce the outreach list or postpone the pitch. Do not trade accuracy for the weekly timetable.

Choose five suitable contacts

Find a recent article or recurring section where the contribution would fit. A local newspaper, a community newsletter and a specialist publication may need different angles. Record the relevant article, the reason your contribution is useful and the publication's instructions for contacting its editorial team.

Use publicly provided submission or professional contact routes. If an outlet does not accept unsolicited pitches, respect that. You do not need a paid media database to make a small, carefully selected list.

Write a short pitch with a clear offer

Explain the idea early. Say why it fits that publication, what you can provide and who is available to answer questions. Link to the supporting page and give accurate contact details.

The following is fictional draft wording. Adapt it only after the promised material is ready.

Subject: Local repair business offers practical advice for your household guide

“Hello [name],

Your recent article on [specific topic] covered questions we also receive from local customers. We have prepared a short explanation of the information people can gather before requesting an appliance-repair quotation, including how to check whether an address is within our service area.

[Spokesperson name and accurate role] can explain our enquiry process and answer questions for a follow-up article. The checked notes are here: [source-page link].

If this would be useful for your readers, please let me know your deadline and preferred format.

[Name, business and public contact details]”

The placeholders need real details before use. Personalisation means having a relevant reason to contact the recipient, not inserting a first name into the same mass email.

Follow up proportionately

If the outlet’s instructions allow it, consider one brief follow-up after a reasonable interval, such as a week. A specific deadline may require a different approach. Answer genuine requests promptly and stop when someone declines.

Silence is not a request for repeated messages. Record what you learned and improve the relevance or evidence of the next pitch. Five thoughtful contacts may produce no coverage; that still gives you a manageable test to assess.

Keep paid activity separate from earned coverage

Paying a publication or creator for placement makes it paid activity. Describe sponsorships, advertorials, affiliate relationships and product provision honestly. Do not present a purchased feature or an approved promotional script as an independent earned endorsement.

A label that readers can understand and a link attribute serve different purposes. The label explains the commercial relationship to people. The link attribute tells Google how the publisher qualifies the link.

Google prefers rel="sponsored" for advertisements and paid placements; rel="nofollow" remains acceptable for that purpose. The publisher controls those attributes. Do not ask it to remove the qualification to make a paid link appear editorial.

Google’s link-spam policy includes buying links for ranking purposes, excessive exchanges and manipulative links in widely distributed content. Genuine advertising or sponsorship can use appropriately qualified links. Avoid packages that promise ranking credit through purchased placements.

Let the editor choose useful wording and the appropriate destination. If a story refers to your research, a link to the method can help readers check it. You can suggest that source politely without demanding a particular keyword-rich anchor or making coverage conditional on a link.

Measure coverage and business outcomes separately

Keep a simple record of each item: date, publication, URL, subject, spokesperson, earned or paid status, whether there is a link, and the linked destination. Check that the published business facts are correct.

Count original coverage separately from copies of the same announcement. Do not describe ten republished versions of your press release as ten independent editorial endorsements.

Where measurement is available, check referral visits, suitable enquiries and confirmed work. Note what the customer says about how they found you. A newsletter or podcast may influence someone who later visits directly, so referral data will not capture every effect.

Keep AI observations in their own record. Note the platform, exact question, date, relevant location or account conditions, answer and cited URL. Distinguish a mention of your business from a source citation and from an actual recommendation. Treat occasional tests as samples rather than a universal visibility score.

Official AI visibility reports can help where their definitions and platform coverage fit your question. Do not combine backlinks, AI citations and website visits into one total or assume that a rise in one caused a sale.

After the first month, assess the relevance of the replies and published work, the time spent and any suitable enquiries. Continue the activities that help your audience. Where the story did not connect, improve the evidence or choose a better outlet before increasing volume.

Common mistakes to avoid

- Pitching an unsupported statistic because it makes an attractive headline.
- Presenting a paid placement or partner-authored account as an independent endorsement.
- Using invented customers, expert quotes or AI-generated evidence.
- Treating copied announcements or a publication’s size as proof of useful coverage.
- Requiring SEO links or prescribed anchors instead of providing a source readers can check.
- Claiming guaranteed rankings, recommendations or AI citations from a PR package.

Online companion: Earning relevant coverage through digital PR

23 Managing your Google Business Profile

Your Google Business Profile helps customers understand what your business does, where it operates and how to contact you. Local SEO connects that profile with a useful website, accurate information elsewhere and genuine customer feedback.

AI search gives people another way to ask local questions. The practical work remains familiar: explain your real services, keep customer information current and make the next step easy. There is no setting that guarantees an AI recommendation.

What a Google Business Profile does

A Business Profile is the listing you manage for your business on Google Search and Maps. It can show information such as your location, hours, website, photographs and customer reviews. It is separate from your WordPress website, although the two should tell the same story.

A profile is useful when someone needs a nearby business or a service that visits their area. A website can then explain the detail: what is included, who the service suits, what it costs where appropriate, and how to book.

Google describes local ranking in terms of relevance, distance and prominence. Relevance concerns the match with the search; distance concerns the customer's location; prominence concerns how well known the business is. Accurate information helps Google understand your business. Google does not sell improved organic local placement or accept requests for a better local ranking.

Check eligibility before creating a profile

In general, a business must make in-person contact with customers during its stated hours to qualify. Online-only businesses are not eligible simply because they want local visibility. Google has exceptions and business-specific rules, so check the eligibility guidance if your situation is unusual.

Before adding a listing, search for your business name and location on Google and Maps. If an existing profile represents the business, use the claim or ownership process rather than creating a duplicate. Keep the business owner in control of the account and give authorised helpers their own access.

Use the correct location arrangement

A shopfront business receives customers at its premises. A service-area business visits or delivers to customers without receiving them at its business address. A hybrid business does both.

If you work from home and visit customers, hide the address on your profile and define the areas you actually serve. Do not invent offices in neighbouring towns. A business that receives customers and also travels to them can show an eligible shopfront and a service area.

Claim and verify the business

Sign in with the Google Account responsible for the business, find the profile and follow the available claim and verification instructions. If someone else manages it, follow Google's ownership process.

Use your real business name

Use the name customers recognise from your real-world branding. Do not append extra town names, service keywords or promotional claims to improve visibility. Google does not permit unnecessary information in the name.

Choose categories that describe the business itself. Use the description to explain what you offer in ordinary language; keep links and promotions out of that field. Put location, hours and contact details in their proper fields.

Check regular and holiday hours

Review the normal customer-facing schedule. Where main hours are appropriate, Google's current route is Edit profile, then Hours. An always-available web form does not make the business open 24 hours.

For a bank holiday or another short-term change, use Special hours rather than changing the normal weekly schedule. Confirm holiday hours even when they stay the same. Check the separate guidance for longer closures.

Appointment-only businesses and some other business types have different hours guidance. Explain appointment arrangements clearly on your website and use Google's guidance for your business type rather than inventing opening times.

Describe services customers can actually buy

Where the Services editor is available, add the work you currently offer. Some business categories can include descriptions and prices. Do not advertise a service because a competitor offers it or because an AI tool suggested it.

Use the website for the detail a customer needs before enquiring. For example, a garden maintenance page could explain whether the service includes hedge cutting, waste removal and regular visits. Say which jobs need a quotation and what information the customer should provide.

Show the real business

Use current photographs that help someone recognise the premises, team or work. Check that you have permission to use them. Replace images that show a former location or a service you no longer provide. An attractive stock photograph should not be presented as your own premises or completed job.

Connect the profile to a useful WordPress website

Start with the contact page, key service pages and any genuine location pages. A customer should be able to confirm the service, area, hours or appointment arrangements without searching through promotional text.

Information	Where to check	Practical test
Name and contact details	Profile, contact page and main listings	Does the number reach your business?
Hours and appointments	Profile and customer-facing pages	Can someone tell when to visit or book?
Location or coverage	Profile and location/service-area pages	Is the address visitable or the area genuinely served?

Information	Where to check	Practical test
Services	Profile where supported and service pages	Is the advertised work currently available?
Booking or enquiry route	Profile links and website buttons	Does a test request reach the correct team?

In WordPress, inspect shared information in the footer, contact block and page templates as well as individual pages. An old number in a reusable block can survive after you update the contact page. Check the mobile version too.

Give local pages a real purpose

Create a page for a genuine branch when customers need its address, team, hours and access information. A service-area page can explain coverage and local arrangements without implying that you have premises there.

Use details from your business: areas you cover, travel limitations, examples of relevant completed work with permission, and questions your team actually receives. Label customer examples accurately. Avoid publishing dozens of near-identical pages with only the town name changed.

A simple coverage page may be enough for a small business. Create another page when there is useful information to add, rather than to fill a list of place-name keywords.

Make contact and booking straightforward

Use a clear action such as Request a quote, Book an appointment or Call us. Say what happens next and give a realistic response time. Distinguish a booking request from a confirmed appointment.

Google supports different business links depending on the profile and transaction type. Where a booking or order option is available, link to the relevant working page. Check third-party links too, especially if you change provider.

Test the complete journey on a phone. Submit a permitted test enquiry, confirm receipt and check that the success message is clear. If a booking system shows availability, make sure it reflects the current schedule.

A realistic customer journey

This fictional example illustrates a possible journey, not an observed AI recommendation. Riverbank Garden Care visits customers in part of Leeds and offers scheduled garden maintenance. It does not receive customers at its home base.

A customer might ask an AI search experience, “Who maintains small gardens in north Leeds and takes the waste away?” They might then ask whether regular visits are available. The business’s website explains its coverage, the work included, waste-removal arrangements and how to request a quotation.

If the customer encounters the business through search, a map result, an AI answer or another source, they can check the details and send a suitable enquiry. Clear information supports that decision. It does not establish that an AI system will select or recommend the business.

Use AI as an assistant to your own checking

An AI tool can help organise an owner-approved service description or draft a response to a common question. Check every factual detail against your actual operations before publishing. Do not let the tool invent opening times, qualifications, customer comments or completed projects.

Search features and availability change. Check the current documentation before adding instructions for a new feature; do not assume an announcement applies to every country, account or business type.

Online companion: Managing your Google Business Profile

24 Citations reviews and customer trust

Local citations and reviews help customers check who you are, where you operate and what other people experienced. Managing them well means keeping practical information accurate and making space for honest feedback.

The useful question is not how many listings or five-star comments you can collect. It is whether a prospective customer can find reliable information, assess your service and contact the right business.

What is a local citation?

A local citation is an online mention of a business's identifying details. It commonly includes the name, address and phone number, often shortened to NAP. A directory entry may also include a website, hours and services.

A structured citation uses listing fields, such as a directory profile. An unstructured citation is a mention in ordinary content, such as a local article. Neither term means that the mention automatically improves your ranking.

For your business, the practical value is accurate discovery. An old address on a popular listing can cause a wasted journey; a dead phone number can lose an enquiry. A minor formatting difference is not the same problem as conflicting business details.

Check the listings that matter to your customers

Start with Google Business Profile, then the map services, directories and specialist platforms your customers actually use. Include relevant trade or membership listings you already hold. You do not need to buy a bulk directory package to carry out this audit.

Choose priorities using your own evidence: customer enquiries, recorded referrals and places people mention when they contact you. A directory that brings suitable customers is worth checking even if it has little apparent SEO value.

Create one approved business record

Record the current public-facing name, phone number, website, visitable address or service coverage, regular hours and appointment arrangements. Add the person responsible and the date checked. Use that record when updating listings.

A service-area business should not publish a home address merely to make every NAP field look identical. Follow each platform's rules and use the appropriate public location or coverage information. Keep genuine address changes distinct from harmless abbreviations.

Audit before adding more listings

- Search for your business name together with its town, old address and previous phone number.
- List important results and check whether you control the account.
- Compare each listing with the approved business record.
- Correct the website and listings you control; use the platform's correction or support route for the others.
- Check duplicate or outdated entries carefully before requesting a merge or removal.
- Return to the public listing after the change and record what customers can now see.

Keep a simple log so a colleague can continue the work. The example below is fictional; replace it with your own findings.

Listing	Problem found	Next action
Main map profile	Old holiday hours	Confirm and update special hours.
Trade directory	Previous phone number	Update the controlled listing and test the number.
Local association page	Link to an old service page	Ask the page owner to correct the destination.
Historic duplicate entry	Former address still visible	Use the platform’s duplicate/correction process.

Check for genuine errors after a move, rebrand or change of contact details. Do not replace an established profile casually or remove a valid branch because its details differ from head office.

What reviews can and cannot do

Reviews help customers judge whether a business is suitable. Google says review numbers and positive ratings can help local ranking as part of prominence. That does not establish a fixed formula involving review freshness, keywords or a target number of reviews.

Treat reviews as feedback about real service. A pattern of complaints about missed appointments should prompt an operational review, not a campaign to bury the comments. Improve the problem customers are describing.

Ask for honest feedback without influencing it

Google prohibits paid or fabricated reviews, review incentives, selective requests for positive feedback and attempts to discourage negative reviews. It also prohibits influencing the content of a review. Do not ask customers to include a service keyword, town name or staff member.

Use a consistent invitation process for genuine customers. Do not send only happy customers to Google while directing dissatisfied customers to a private form. Customers should decide whether to review and what to say.

Google provides a review link or QR code you can share. Make it easy to find, but keep participation optional. Other platforms may have different rules about requesting reviews, so check the platform before extending the same process.

A neutral review-request example

“Thank you for choosing [business name]. If you would like to share your experience, you can leave an honest review here: [review link]. Feedback helps other customers understand our service.”

Adapt this wording to your normal follow-up process. Keep the invitation optional and avoid repeated reminders that pressure a customer to respond.

Keep automation under human control

Automation can help send an approved invitation at an appropriate point in the customer journey. Check the trigger, link and exclusions so it does not send duplicate requests or contact people who have not used the business.

Never generate customer reviews with AI, invent testimonials or post through accounts that pretend to be customers. Google's policy requires genuine experience and excludes conflicts of interest, including employment and personal affiliations. Asking staff or relatives to pose as independent customers is not a substitute for feedback.

Reply in a way that helps the next customer

Make replies specific, calm and proportionate. Thank a customer for useful feedback and answer a practical question where appropriate. Avoid copying the same promotional paragraph under every review.

For criticism, acknowledge the issue without arguing about the customer's character. Offer a suitable route to discuss the matter privately. Check the details internally before stating that something has been resolved.

Do not publish private information from a booking or customer record. A public reply is not the place to reproduce a customer's contact details or explain sensitive circumstances.

An AI tool can help draft a reply from facts you approve, but a person should check the tone and details before posting. Do not upload confidential customer records into the drafting process.

A response to a service complaint

Fictional example: "Thank you for telling us about the delay. We are sorry the appointment did not start as expected. Please contact our office through the details on our profile so we can look into what happened."

Use wording that fits the real situation. If the complaint is valid, fix the scheduling problem too. Do not offer a discount in exchange for removing or changing the review.

Report policy violations with evidence

A negative opinion is not automatically a policy violation. Where there is evidence of fabricated, abusive or otherwise prohibited content, use the platform's reporting process and explain the relevant issue. Do not assume a report guarantees removal.

Use testimonials accurately on your website

If you use genuine customer feedback on your own website, obtain the appropriate permission, preserve its meaning and make the source clear. Do not turn a short comment into a fictional case study or imply an independent endorsement that does not exist.

Google does not make reviews controlled by the reviewed LocalBusiness or Organisation eligible for its review-star feature, including reviews displayed through third-party widgets. A testimonial can be useful to customers without qualifying for stars in Search.

How citations and reviews relate to AI search

A customer might ask an AI experience which local provider offers a particular service. Accurate listings and genuine feedback give people useful information to check if they encounter your business. They do not guarantee inclusion, a source link or a recommendation.

Use AI as a way to identify questions your website should answer, then verify those questions with your own team and customers. Publish the services, coverage and booking arrangements you can substantiate. Do not manufacture reviews or supposed independent mentions to influence an answer.

A practical monthly routine

- Check your priority listings and correct operational changes promptly.
- Review new feedback and investigate repeated service issues.
- Check that review invitations remain neutral, optional and linked correctly.
- Confirm website testimonials still represent real, permitted customer feedback.
- Record suitable enquiries and bookings separately from review or listing counts.

Online companion: Citations reviews and customer trust

25 Creating useful local pages

Local Pages for SEOA Practical Small Business Guide

A useful local page explains how your business serves customers in a particular place. It helps someone confirm the right service, understand the arrangements and take the next step.

You do not need a separate page for every town you serve. Create one when there is a distinct customer need and enough accurate information to make that page worthwhile. Otherwise, a strong service page with a clear coverage section may be the better destination.

This chapter explains how to decide, what to include and how to review local pages you already have.

Separate branch pages from service area pages

A branch page describes a real business location, such as a shop, showroom or office customers can visit under the stated arrangements. It can answer questions about that location's services, opening hours, access and appointments.

A service-area page describes work delivered to customers in an area where you may have no premises. It should explain coverage and service arrangements without implying that a branch exists there.

Situation	Useful starting point
A real branch with its own practical details	A branch page explaining the location, relevant services, visits and contact route.
The same service across nearby towns with the same arrangements	One strong service page with a clear coverage section may be sufficient.
An area with a distinct offer or substantial practical information	Consider a service-area page if the information helps customers choose or book.
A new town name with no different information to supply	Improve the existing coverage explanation before proposing another page.

These are editorial decisions, not fixed Google page-count rules. A shared booking team or contact form does not automatically make a useful branch or service-area page unnecessary.

Decide whether a separate page earns its place

Before drafting, answer these questions:

- Do you actually provide the advertised service in this area?
- What does a customer here need to know that the current pages do not explain well?
- Can you supply verified details, relevant work examples or a distinct service arrangement?
- Will this page answer the question directly and provide a useful next step?
- Can customers find it through normal website navigation or relevant internal links?
- Who will check its facts when coverage, staff, prices or booking arrangements change?

If the only proposed difference is the place name, reconsider. Changing sentence order, using synonyms or adding a paragraph about local landmarks does not create a useful new destination by itself.

There is no minimum word count or percentage of unique text that proves a location page deserves to exist. Focus on whether its information changes or improves the customer's decision.

Understand doorway abuse and duplication

Google's doorway-abuse policy covers pages created for similar searches that send people through intermediate destinations less useful than the page they ultimately need. Examples include substantially similar city-targeted pages and pages outside a clear browsing structure.

The practical concern is the page's purpose and value. A location page should be a useful destination, even when it links to a central booking form. Do not create large sets of town-and-service combinations mainly to capture more searches.

Repeated information is a different issue. Google explains that duplicate content is not inherently a spam violation. Shared business details or a consistent layout are normal. Google may choose a representative URL when pages are very similar.

Do not describe every repeated paragraph as a "duplicate-content penalty". Equally, rewriting the same thin page does not protect a doorway strategy from the spam policies.

Explain the offer and the actual coverage

Start with what the business provides in the area and whether customers visit a branch or the business travels to them. Be clear about exclusions, appointment requirements or coverage checks.

Use a descriptive title such as "Curtain Fitting in Leamington Spa" only if it accurately describes the service. Explain the arrangements early. Avoid repeating the town name in every heading or claiming to be the local "best" without evidence.

Provide practical details that affect the decision

For a branch, useful details might include its services, hours, appointment process, accessibility information, parking and directions. Verify each detail; do not infer it from a map or another branch's page.

For a service area, explain how customers check coverage, what information you need for a quote and any confirmed travel or scheduling conditions. Avoid promising a response time or availability the business cannot reliably provide.

Use genuine evidence

Relevant photographs, documented work and customer experiences can help people assess the business. State what the example actually demonstrates, and obtain appropriate permission before using customer material.

Do not invent a local job, testimonial, staff member or address. A generic image of a landmark is not proof that you have worked there. Reusing a genuine example can be sensible when relevant; do not relabel it as work in a different town.

Make the next step easy

Give readers the correct phone, enquiry or booking route and explain what happens next. A service-area enquiry form might ask for a postcode and a short description of the work so the business can confirm suitability.

Use a map when it helps customers reach a real location. A map centred on a town does not establish a branch, expand Google Business Profile eligibility or guarantee rankings.

Example choosing pages for a curtain fitting business

This is a fictional planning example, not a real business case or a report of measured results. The business would need to verify its own offer and arrangements before publishing.

A curtain-fitting business based in Warwick serves nearby customers, including Leamington Spa, but has no Leamington branch. Its main service and booking process are the same across those areas.

Proposed page or change	Decision and reason
A Warwick branch page	Only describe a visitable branch if one actually exists. Otherwise explain the business's real operating arrangements.
Another page for Leamington Spa with the same text	Start by improving the main service page's coverage explanation and postcode-checking route.
A separate Leamington Spa service-area page	Consider it only if the business can provide substantial useful information for that audience. Say clearly that it travels to customers.
A later genuine showroom opening elsewhere	A distinct branch page may help if customers need its verified services, hours and visit information.

A useful coverage paragraph could say: "We provide curtain fitting in Warwick and Leamington Spa. Visits are arranged at customers' properties; we do not have a Leamington Spa showroom. Send your postcode and details of the work so we can confirm coverage and the next step."

This wording is illustrative and must match the actual business. The decision to begin with one page is based on the available information, not a claim that a service-area page can never be justified.

Keep Google Business Profile separate from website page planning

A location page does not automatically qualify for its own Business Profile. Profiles must represent eligible real businesses and follow Google's rules for locations, service areas and business types.

A genuine multi-location business may have profiles for eligible branches. A business travelling from one base should not create a profile for every town it covers. A mailbox or unstaffed virtual address is not a substitute for a qualifying location.

If customers do not visit your address, use the appropriate service-area setup and follow Google's address-hiding rules. Do not publish a private address simply to fill a local-page template.

Google says local results mainly depend on relevance, distance and prominence. Adding a town page does not move the business closer to everyone searching there. Website results and Maps visibility are related parts of local search, with different requirements.

Use structured data to describe the real business

Structured data should accurately describe the page and the business. It does not turn a service-area page into a physical branch or create eligibility for a separate profile.

Google's LocalBusiness feature documentation includes a physical address among its requirements. Do not invent an address to make a test pass. If that feature does not fit the business's public information, use appropriate markup without claiming Google feature eligibility.

Displaying genuine customer feedback can help readers, but marking up your own business's reviews does not make that page eligible for Google's self-serving LocalBusiness or Organization review stars. Embedding a third-party review widget does not remove that restriction.

Check relevant markup with the correct tools. The Rich Results Test checks Google-supported feature eligibility; Schema Markup Validator checks schema vocabulary and structure. Neither guarantees a ranking or search appearance.

Make useful pages easy to find

Link branch pages from a clear locations section and relevant service pages. Link service-area information where customers check whether the business can help them. Use descriptive link text and avoid hiding pages only in an XML sitemap.

There is no need to link every town page to every other town page. Choose links that help a reader continue, such as checking another branch or understanding the main service. A consistent template can make genuine differences easier to compare.

Review the local pages you already have

Make a short inventory of URLs, their purpose, the areas actually served and the evidence each page provides. Check important links and useful enquiries before deciding to remove anything.

- Keep pages that remain accurate and serve a distinct customer task.
- Update pages with a useful purpose but misleading or incomplete information.
- Combine pages when one stronger destination can answer the same need more clearly.
- Retire obsolete pages when there is no useful role left, after checking references and replacement options.

When moving or combining pages permanently, use an appropriate permanent redirect to the relevant replacement and update internal links. Do not send every old location URL to an unrelated homepage.

Canonical tags help express a preferred version among duplicate or similar URLs. They are not a way to make many thin location pages useful. If you want each distinct local page eligible to appear separately, avoid automatically pointing all of them to one central canonical URL. Review the purpose and configuration first.

Measure usefulness as well as search visibility

In Search Console, filter for a local page and review relevant queries, impressions and clicks over comparable periods. Check indexing if a page is not appearing as expected. Report settings and changes should be recorded with the figures.

A query mentioning a town does not prove that the searcher lives there. A page view is not a suitable enquiry, and a call-button click is not a completed call. Confirm outcomes against the business's actual enquiries and bookings.

Do not delete a useful page solely because it has little recent traffic. Inspect its purpose, information, technical access and business contribution. Equally, a high impression count does not justify maintaining misleading information.

Your local page checklist

- Confirm the real branch or service-area relationship.
- Explain why a separate page helps the customer.
- Verify services, coverage, hours, conditions and the next step.
- Use genuine examples and describe locations truthfully.
- Check links, mobile layout, forms and accurate markup.
- Record what changed and assign a review owner.

Online companion: Creating useful local pages

26 Ecommerce product information and buying

Ecommerce SEO helps customers find your products, understand their options and complete a purchase. Start with useful category and product pages, then keep the commercial details accurate wherever you share them.

AI shopping creates more places where people may discover or compare products. It also makes reliable prices, stock, variant details, delivery and returns important beyond the website. A good product feed or schema implementation supports eligible experiences; neither guarantees visibility or means that your store must offer checkout inside an AI service.

Start with a store customers can navigate

Organise products into categories that make sense to your audience. A visitor should be able to move from a category to the relevant product, understand the difference between options and reach the basket without unnecessary steps.

Use category names that describe what is sold. Add a useful introduction where it helps customers choose, and link to relevant products or narrower categories. Avoid filling the page with text that pushes the products out of view, especially on mobile.

A category such as insulated bottles can help people compare sizes and uses. A product page should then explain the specific bottle they can buy. Those are different jobs, and both deserve attention.

Buying guides can answer questions about materials, fit, compatibility or care. Connect them to the relevant categories and products through useful links. Do not create a separate article for every wording variation of the same buying question.

Make each product page useful before adding markup

State the product name, brand where applicable and important specifications clearly. Explain what the customer receives, who the item suits and any limitations they need to know before buying.

Manufacturer specifications can provide essential facts. Keep them accurate and add information from your own business where it helps, such as measured dimensions, an original demonstration or answers to genuine customer questions. Rewriting factual specifications solely to make the wording different is not the main objective.

Give the page a descriptive title and sensible SEO metadata. Use the terms customers understand without repeating keywords unnaturally. Check that the description does not advertise a price or delivery promise that is no longer correct.

Show the selected option and make it easy to change. If colour, size or capacity changes the price or stock, the page needs to reflect the option the customer actually intends to buy.

A product data checklist for small stores

Use this checklist for priority products, new items and promotions. Check the selected variant and destination market, rather than assuming that the parent product’s information covers every offer.

Information	What to check	Example of a problem
Price and currency	Current price, applicable sale period and any conditions; the amount shown through checkout.	An expired promotion remains in the feed.
Stock	Availability of the selected option and accurate preorder or backorder information where relevant.	The page says sold out while the feed says in stock.
Variants	Correct colour, size, material or capacity, with the matching identifier, image, price and availability.	A blue item links to a page showing the red option.
Images	Clear pictures of the actual item, relevant detail and the selected variant.	A lifestyle photograph implies an accessory is included when it is not.
Delivery	Supported destinations, cost, dispatch arrangements and realistic delivery estimates.	A banner promises free delivery to an excluded destination.
Returns	Accessible, current policy covering the process, costs and relevant conditions or exclusions.	The policy page and merchant settings give different information.
Product identity	Stable internal identifiers and genuine brand or manufacturer identifiers where applicable.	A made-up barcode is submitted to fill an empty field.
Purchase route	Correct product and variant in the basket, working payment route and clear order confirmation.	The basket contains a different size from the one selected.

This is an editorial and operational checklist, not a complete specification for every sales channel. Each feed and marketplace has its own required fields and policies. Check the requirements for the markets and destinations you use.

Show the product accurately

Use images that help someone judge the item: overall view, important details and suitable scale or dimensions. Make it clear what is included in the purchase. Do not use AI-generated details or edited colours that misrepresent the item.

Compress images appropriately and check that customers can still inspect the product. Use descriptive alternative text where it helps communicate the image. Test galleries and option selectors on a phone as well as a desktop.

Explain delivery and returns before the sale

Make the relevant delivery and returns information easy to find from the product page. Distinguish dispatch time from time in transit, and explain conditions attached to offers such as free delivery.

Use the policy that actually applies to the product and customer’s market. Have the responsible person check its accuracy and applicable requirements. Do not invent a standard return period or copy another shop’s exclusions.

Keep pages feeds and structured data aligned

The product page is what the customer reads. A feed is a structured product-data submission to a service such as Merchant Center. Structured data is machine-readable information embedded in the page. They are different representations of the same commercial facts.

Your catalogue or stock system should provide the approved information. Check how each destination receives it and how often it updates. A successful change in the store admin does not establish that a cached page, feed or external listing has refreshed.

Google's product guidance describes using on-page Product structured data, Merchant Center feeds or both. Providing both can broaden eligibility and help Google understand and verify the information, but the supported features have their own requirements.

For Merchant Center, availability should agree with the landing page, checkout and structured data. Treat mismatches as customer problems as well as listing problems. Inspect product-level issues in the channel rather than relying only on a successful feed-upload message.

A simple example of a mismatch

This example is fictional. A shop sells a blue 500 ml insulated bottle for £18. Its product page shows that option as sold out, but an old feed still lists it at £16 and in stock. The page's markup also contains the previous availability.

First confirm the approved price and stock for that exact item. Correct the catalogue and any conflicting overrides, refresh the page and check the outgoing feed and markup. Then inspect the channel's latest processed item and test the customer journey again.

Correcting only the visible stock message leaves the other representations wrong. Do not claim the mismatch is resolved until you have checked the relevant outputs. This example illustrates the checking process, not a real store's price or performance.

Use the structured data supported for your page

For a product customers can buy from you, start with Google's merchant-listing guidance. Product snippets cover other situations too, including certain pages about products that do not sell them directly. Retail product pages can also be eligible for some snippet features when they meet the relevant requirements.

Have your platform or developer check the applicable product and offer properties, including the genuine name, images, price, currency and availability. Add supported delivery and returns information where it accurately describes the offer or business policy.

Reviews and ratings must represent genuine eligible content. Do not create ratings, copy unrelated reviews into markup or describe schema as a way to guarantee stars, rankings or AI recommendations.

Check variants rather than treating them all as duplicates

Google supports product-variant markup using ProductGroup and related Product information. Its guidance covers both variants selected on one page and variants distributed across separate pages. The appropriate URL and canonical arrangement depends on that design.

The customer must reach the relevant option, see its correct image, price and availability, and be able to add that option to the basket. Do not blindly point every variant to one master page without reviewing the store's design and Google's variant guidance.

Test the output that is actually published

Before installing another schema app or plugin, inspect what the theme, ecommerce platform and existing integrations already produce. Conflicting product descriptions from multiple components need investigation. Adding a second generator is not automatically a fix.

Run representative product URLs through Google's Rich Results Test. Include a simple product, a variant and an item with a promotion or stock change. Review errors and warnings against the relevant feature requirements.

A successful test checks supported markup; it does not verify every business fact or guarantee display. Check the visible page and feed separately. Use Search Console's relevant product reports and URL Inspection to investigate what Google has processed.

Keep useful pages discoverable without opening every filter URL

Make priority categories and products reachable through ordinary site navigation and contextual links. A product hidden behind a search box or an unexplained interaction can be difficult for customers to find.

Filters such as colour, price and size help shoppers, but combinations can generate very large numbers of URLs. Decide which combinations genuinely deserve a search landing page and which are simply useful browsing controls.

Google's faceted-navigation guidance distinguishes URLs you want potentially indexed from those you do not need in Search. A small store should review its platform's behaviour before changing rules across the entire catalogue.

Robots.txt manages crawling; it is not a reliable instruction to remove a page from the index. If you use noindex, Google needs access to read that rule. Blocking the same URL in robots.txt can prevent that.

Canonical tags, noindex rules and crawl restrictions serve different purposes. Ask your developer to assess the chosen approach for filters, duplicates and variants. Avoid blanket rules that hide valuable categories or product offers.

Do not delete an out-of-stock page automatically. Consider whether the product will return, whether its information remains useful and what alternatives the customer needs. Keep its availability accurate. A permanently discontinued item needs a considered plan rather than an unrelated redirect.

AI shopping discovery is different from AI checkout

Product discovery means that a service helps someone find, compare or investigate an item. The customer may then visit your store to buy. Direct checkout means that the purchase can be completed in the platform's own shopping experience through a supported integration.

Neither should be confused with an assistant operating a normal website on the customer's behalf. Check which route the provider actually offers before choosing an integration or measuring the resulting sales.

Decide whether an AI checkout integration is worth pursuing

UCP stands for Universal Commerce Protocol, an open standard supporting agentic commerce interactions. It is not a prerequisite for ordinary ecommerce SEO, Product markup or a useful store.

If your platform supplies an eligible route, check its settings and limitations before commissioning custom development. Google's direct onboarding documentation says to consult a third-party provider about its integration plans where one is involved.

Before spending on an integration, confirm the customer market, product eligibility, delivery methods, payment requirements and operational support. Check that the route handles the features your business relies on, such as subscriptions, custom options or additional checkout information.

For example, Shopify's Google direct-checkout guidance lists limitations for certain products and delivery methods. Eligibility of the store alone does not mean that every product or checkout feature is supported.

Assign responsibility for order handling, refunds and customer support, and plan how to measure completed orders. If there is no suitable route for your market or catalogue, prioritise accurate product data and the store checkout that customers can already use.

A practical monthly store check

- Review priority categories and products on mobile, including option selection and the basket.
- Confirm price, promotions and stock for the variants customers can buy.
- Compare visible information with the latest processed feed and published markup.
- Check delivery destinations, costs and returns information with the responsible team.
- Review channel errors and retest representative product markup after relevant changes.
- Confirm current eligibility before enabling an AI shopping or checkout route.
- Reconcile recorded purchases with store orders and decide which customer problem to fix next.

Online companion: Ecommerce product information and buying

27 International SEO beyond translation

International SEO helps people find and use the right version of your website for their language and market. Translation is part of that work, but a fluent page can still fail a customer if it shows the wrong price, suggests an unavailable service or links to information from another country.

Start with the people you can actually serve. Localise the facts, terminology, examples and route to purchase, then check the technical connections between your pages. Apply the same care when reviewing AI answers: language, location and platform can change what you observe, and no implementation guarantees a citation or recommendation.

Separate language from market

A language version and a country version are different decisions. An English-speaking customer in Warsaw may need the same Polish availability, złoty prices and booking conditions as a Polish-speaking neighbour. An English page does not automatically mean that you serve the UK or the United States.

Likewise, someone reading Polish may live outside Poland. Decide what each page covers and make the offer clear. Where one business serves several countries, delivery areas, currencies, support and terms may genuinely differ. Where it serves one city in two languages, most business facts should stay consistent.

Write a simple brief for each version: intended reader, language, country or service area, main task, available offer and responsible reviewer. Avoid launching additional markets solely because translation software makes it easy.

Situation	What to plan
One market with two languages	Translate the customer journey and preserve the same local offer and limitations.
Several markets in one language	Adapt availability, prices, terms and relevant examples for each market.
Several markets and languages	Maintain both the language version and the market-specific business facts.

Localise the information people use to decide

Read each important page as a customer would. Could someone tell whether the offer is available to them, what it costs or how to get a quote, and how to take the next step? Check the answers with the business owner or the person responsible for that market.

Check	What needs a local review
Prices	Actual selling currency, applicable price conditions, what is included and when the information was checked.
Availability	Products, services, stock, delivery destinations, appointment areas and exclusions.
Terminology	The words customers use for the task, including local names and common questions.

Check	What needs a local review
Examples	Situations, measurements, seasons and practical constraints that fit the audience.
Evidence	Appropriate official guidance, qualified expertise and relevant market sources.
Customer journey	Contact details, booking or checkout, support language, forms, emails and confirmation messages.

Publish actual prices and availability

A currency conversion is not necessarily a local selling price. Use the price the business actually offers, with its relevant conditions. If you quote individually, explain the quote process rather than inventing a standard fee for the translated page.

Keep a common source for shared business facts so translations do not drift apart. When a product is withdrawn or a service area changes, identify every affected version. Do not leave an old offer active because nobody remembers which translated page contains it.

Where an online shop serves different markets, check the visible product page, relevant feed and existing structured data against the correct market offer. Verify delivery and returns information separately. If commercial or legal terms differ, have the responsible specialist review them.

Research terminology before translating keywords

Begin with enquiries, customer conversations and the language used by your market-facing team. Compare likely wording with relevant search results and your own query data. Ask a fluent reviewer whether the phrase sounds natural and describes the service correctly.

A literal translation may describe a different task or sound unfamiliar. Polish inflections and everyday wording deserve attention in headlines, navigation and forms as well as in the body. Use terms that clarify the offer; avoid repeating every grammatical variation as a separate keyword or page.

Treat translated keyword lists as research leads. Do not assume that the phrase with the closest dictionary meaning has the same customer intent or demand. Equally, a keyword suggestion does not establish that your business can provide the service.

Use sources that fit the market and the claim

When explaining a local requirement, use the relevant authority or primary documentation for that jurisdiction. When helping someone choose a product or service, consider useful specialist publications, trade organisations and genuine customer experience in that market. Check who produced the evidence and what it actually supports.

A locally registered domain is not a trust certificate. A global manufacturer may be the best source for a product specification, while a local delivery page answers an availability question. Choose sources by their relevance and reliability, not just their domain ending.

Solis’s third-party prioritisation framework considers business value, durability and effort alongside citation opportunities. Apply that judgement to local partnerships and coverage: worthwhile work should still help your audience if a platform’s citation patterns change.

Do not manufacture local reviews, invent an office or buy a placement and describe it as an earned endorsement. Keep directory and partner information accurate, and contribute useful expertise where it belongs.

An English and Polish example for a Warsaw business

This example is fictional. A bicycle workshop in Warsaw serves customers locally and takes bookings in Polish and English. It is adding an English version for residents who prefer that language, not launching a UK operation.

Its approved offer is the same in both versions: a basic service costs 180 zł, replacement parts are charged separately, and collection is available only in two stated Warsaw districts. These are illustrative business facts, not market prices or recommendations.

Page element	English version	Polish version
Title	Bicycle servicing in Warsaw	Serwis rowerowy w Warszawie
Price	Basic service: 180 zł. Replacement parts cost extra.	Przegląd podstawowy: 180 zł. Części zamienne są płatne dodatkowo.
Availability	Collection in Mokotów and Ursynów by prior arrangement.	Odbiór roweru na Mokotowie i Ursynowie po wcześniejszym uzgodnieniu.
Customer action	Request a service appointment	Umów wizytę w serwisie
Support	Booking and confirmation available in English.	Rezerwacja i potwierdzenie dostępne po polsku.

A fluent bilingual reviewer would check that “basic service” and “przegląd podstawowy” describe the same actual work. Both pages should list what is included and make the parts charge clear. The forms and confirmation messages need the same review as the headline.

Changing the English page to pounds, claiming nationwide UK collection or linking to UK-specific conditions would misrepresent the offer. Changing the language has not changed the business’s location or capabilities.

The pages could use separate example URLs such as https://example.com/en/bicycle-service/ and https://example.com/pl/serwis-rowerowy/. Their language switcher should lead to the equivalent service page. A Polish-only service with no English equivalent should not pretend to have a translated counterpart.

Keep the technical structure understandable

Google recommends separate URLs for different language versions. Use clear links between equivalent pages and let people choose a language. Avoid forced redirection based on a guessed language or location, which can obstruct access to other versions. Keep the main content and navigation appropriate to the selected language.

For a small WordPress site, folders within the existing domain can be a manageable editorial choice. A country domain or subdomain may fit a different business setup. Choose a structure you can maintain; do not migrate a working site just because another structure is presented as an automatic ranking advantage.

Check each public version directly. It should load correctly, offer useful content and allow the intended customer task. Test on a phone, including longer translated labels, Polish characters, forms and confirmation messages. Review accidental noindex settings, broken links and security challenges with the person maintaining the site.

Declare the document language correctly for browsers and assistive technology, for example lang="pl" for a Polish page. This has a different purpose from mapping alternate pages with hreflang. It should agree with the language of the actual page.

Use hreflang for the search task it supports

Hreflang identifies alternate versions for Google Search. It helps Google choose an appropriate language or regional page; it is not a promise of higher rankings, a translation-quality check or a documented rule that every chatbot follows.

For the workshop's language-based pair, each page can list both alternatives, including itself, in its HTML head. These illustrative tags belong in the page template, not as visible article text:

<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en" href="https://example.com/en/bicycle-service/" />

<link rel="alternate" hreflang="pl" href="https://example.com/pl/serwis-rowerowy/" />

Use a regional code only when it matches the intended version, such as en-GB for UK English or pl-PL for Polish in Poland. Do not assign a UK code simply because a Warsaw page is written in English. An optional x-default identifies a fallback for unmatched languages.

Use full URLs, valid codes and return annotations between equivalent pages. Google supports HTML, HTTP headers or sitemap annotations; choose a method you can maintain. Check the output after changes.

Keep canonical decisions separate

A canonical identifies the preferred URL among duplicate or very similar pages. Do not point every Polish page to the English original merely because it was published first. For distinct translated pages intended to be indexed, a self-referencing canonical is the usual starting point; investigate other duplicate routes separately.

Check that canonical URLs, internal links and sitemap entries agree with your intended live pages. More complex same-language regional duplicates may need individual decisions. Hreflang is not a cure for an incorrect canonical, and translated pages do not need protection from an automatic translation-related duplicate-content penalty.

Check what your WordPress setup actually produces

A multilingual plugin can help manage versions, but the public output matters more than the feature label. Confirm that your current configuration gives each version a usable URL, maps equivalents correctly and lets you edit translated metadata and customer-facing messages.

Review a small set of templates: homepage, service or product page, article, contact form and checkout where applicable. Look for competing plugins producing conflicting annotations. Retest affected pages after changing a translation, URL or template. Do not assume that installing a plugin completes localisation.

A manageable localisation checklist

- Define the reader, language, market and available offer for each version.
- Confirm local prices, availability, exclusions and contact routes with the business.

- Research natural customer terminology and check examples and sources.
- Have a fluent reviewer inspect the copy, metadata, forms and confirmations.
- Test separate URLs, equivalent-page links, language declarations, hreflang and canonicals.
- Check important AI questions repeatedly under recorded conditions.
- Record factual errors and correct useful pages and relevant listings.
- Review enquiries or sales alongside visibility, and update all affected versions when facts change.

Start with an important customer journey you can maintain well. A complete, accurate service page and working enquiry route are more useful than a large collection of translated pages with conflicting information.

Online companion: International SEO beyond translation

28 Understanding AI Overviews and AI Mode

AI search is a way of receiving a generated answer informed by retrieved information. It can help people compare options and refine a question, while giving them links to investigate further. The exact experience depends on the product, language, location and account settings.

For a business owner, three questions matter: can the customer find accurate information about the business, can they verify the answer, and can they take a useful next step? A mention in an answer is one observation, not proof of a visit or sale.

AI Overviews

An AI Overview is a generated response that can appear within Google Search results. It may summarise information related to the query and provide supporting links. It does not appear for every search, and a displayed source can vary between searches.

Consider a fictional customer asking how to prepare a garden for a maintenance visit. An Overview might summarise preparation tasks and link to relevant sources. A garden business can publish its actual preparation requirements and make them easy to check. The business cannot guarantee that Google will choose it as a source.

Availability and presentation change. Check the current Google help pages for the country and language you serve rather than assuming that a screenshot from another market describes your customers' experience.

AI Mode

AI Mode is a conversational Google Search experience. It is not simply an Android assistant and is not restricted to a telephone. Customers may use supported desktop and mobile experiences, ask follow-up questions and explore source links.

A person might ask for a bicycle repair service, then add that they need collection, have an electric bicycle and are available only on Saturday. Each follow-up refines the task. The information needed to make a decision is richer than a single phrase such as bike repair.

Google may use related searches to gather information for a complex question. This is often called query fan-out. It does not mean you need a separate page for every possible variation of the question. Publish distinct information where it helps the customer.

Gemini and other assistants

Gemini is also the name of Google's assistant and model family. Its app and other product experiences are distinct from AI Mode within Search. Do not assume that a setting, report or website control applies equally to every Google product.

Other assistants, including ChatGPT and Perplexity, have their own retrieval methods, interfaces and controls. Some answers use web search and some may rely on other information. Record which product and mode you tested before interpreting the result.

Follow the customer journey

In a fictional journey, a customer asks which local workshop can collect an electric bicycle. The answer presents possible options. The customer follows a source link to check collection areas, supported bicycle types, charges and appointment arrangements.

On the workshop website, the customer finds a clear service explanation and submits a collection request. The website acknowledges receipt and explains that the booking requires confirmation. That complete journey is more useful than a page which attracts attention but leaves the practical questions unanswered.

A source link is an opportunity to investigate. It does not show that the assistant endorsed the business, that the customer clicked, or that the enquiry was suitable. Keep each stage separate when evaluating performance.

Location and personalisation

Local answers can depend on the location the system uses. A typed town name, device location, search settings or other available context may affect the response. Someone asking near me in one district may see a different set of options from someone elsewhere.

Personalisation can also affect the experience where the product supports it and the user enables it. You cannot recreate every customer’s context. Record the conditions of your own checks and avoid describing one answer as the universal result.

What to improve on the website

Keep actual services, locations, eligibility, availability and contact details current. Explain meaningful limitations, such as products you cannot repair or areas you do not cover. Make the next step understandable on a phone and a computer.

Supported structured data can help describe content and establish eligibility for particular search features. It does not guarantee an AI citation. FAQ and HowTo markup should not be presented as a route to assured inclusion.

Measure the right evidence

Use Search Console’s available generative AI visibility report alongside overall Search performance, and use analytics for recorded visits. Review confirmed enquiries and sales through the business’s records. The dedicated visibility view is already included in broader Search reporting, so it must not be added as a separate audience.

If clicks fall, investigate pages, queries, demand, positions, technical access and changes in search presentation. An AI answer on a sample search may be relevant context, but is not by itself an explanation for the whole decline.

Use the next chapters to improve important pages, check business facts and test crawler access. Chapter 36 supplies the recurring reporting workflow.

Online companion: Understanding AI Overviews and AI Mode

29 Making your website useful for AI search

To optimise for AI search, start with the pages your customers need: make them accessible, accurate and useful, then check whether people can take the next step. Use reporting to assess visibility, visits and business results separately.

AI search optimisation cannot guarantee a recommendation, citation or sale. This chapter gives you a manageable way to improve an existing website, without adding another publishing schedule or buying a tool before you know the problem.

What you are optimising for

People can discover a business through Google AI Overviews, the conversational AI Mode experience, or an assistant using web search. Those experiences have different interfaces, sources and controls. An answer in one is not evidence of how every other system treats your site.

Start by choosing a useful outcome: more suitable quote requests, completed bookings or product sales. Then select a service, category or product page that should help deliver it. A citation that sends unsuitable enquiries is less useful than a clear page that helps the right customer decide.

Chapter 28 explains the search experiences and terminology. This chapter applies those ideas to the website itself.

1. Choose a small set of important pages

Do not begin by rewriting the whole archive. Choose one important customer journey and list the pages involved. A local service business might start with its main service page, price information, service area and quote form. A shop could choose one category and its bestselling products.

Record the current URL, its purpose, the person responsible for it and the most important problem to fix. Check the page before deciding that falling visits mean the writing is poor. Tracking faults, changing demand and access problems can also affect performance.

Customer task	Page to inspect	Useful question
Choose a service	Main service page	Does this explain who the service suits and what is included?
Check suitability	Prices and service area	Can someone judge cost, location and important limits?
Take action	Quote, booking or checkout	Can someone complete the task on a phone?

2. Check access before changing the copy

Open each chosen page while signed out. Check that it loads, shows the important information and has working links. A browser check is useful, but does not establish that a crawler can access the page.

For Google, use Search Console URL Inspection to investigate indexing and test the live URL. Check accidental noindex settings, robots.txt restrictions, broken responses and security challenges. If Cloudflare or a security plugin is involved, ask your host or developer to inspect blocked requests before changing a rule.

Google documents that a page must be indexed and eligible for a search snippet to qualify as a supporting link in its AI search features. Eligibility does not guarantee selection. Google's guidance also covers whether the site is included in generative AI features in Search Console.

Keep search access and training choices separate

OpenAI uses OAI-SearchBot for ChatGPT search and GPTBot for content that may be used in model training. Its documentation describes those settings as independent: an owner can allow the search crawler while disallowing the training crawler. ChatGPT-User handles certain user-triggered visits and is not the search indexing control.

Check the relevant provider's documentation rather than assuming every bot works the same way. Do not disable security across the whole site. Save the original setting, change only the rule causing the verified problem, then retest access and normal customer use. Restore the setting if the change causes trouble.

WordPress can serve a virtual robots.txt file, so an accessible /robots.txt address does not necessarily correspond to a physical file in your host's file manager. Check the served file and the plugin or hosting controls that generate it before creating another version.

3. Make the business facts easy to verify

Create a short approved record of the facts customers need: business name, contact details, services, locations, hours, pricing conditions and booking arrangements. Use it to check the website and the relevant listings you control.

Correct important contradictions. If your contact page says Saturday opening but your booking page says weekdays only, establish the real position and update both. If you no longer offer a service, remove the promise from navigation, old articles and enquiry forms where it appears.

For local businesses, review the Google Business Profile alongside the site. For a shop, check product pages against the feed: price, stock, variants, delivery and returns should describe the same offer. These checks help customers make decisions even when an AI answer is incomplete.

4. Answer the questions behind a buying decision

Use real enquiries, sales conversations and support requests to identify what is missing. Ask the person who delivers the service which misunderstandings cause wasted calls or disappointed customers. Those details are often more useful than a list of generated prompts.

For each important page, check whether a reader can establish what is offered, who it suits, what it costs or how to get a price, what is excluded and what happens next. Put related answers together where they help that decision.

Some questions deserve a supporting page: a detailed comparison, a complex process or a genuinely different service. Others need a paragraph on the existing page. Avoid creating a separate article for every wording of the same question.

For example, "Do you collect bikes?" and "Can someone pick up my bicycle?" usually belong in the same explanation. A guide comparing a repair with replacement may serve a different task and justify a separate page.

Add evidence from the business

Use information you can stand behind: a real process, a photograph of the work, a documented test, an accurately described case study or a specialist's explanation. State the relevant conditions and get permission before using identifiable customer stories.

Do not invent experience, statistics, qualifications or testimonials. Explain who wrote or reviewed advice when that helps readers assess it, and describe their actual role. Adding a name or an author box is not a substitute for checking the work.

If AI helps produce a draft, review every factual claim, source, example and description of the business. Review titles and meta descriptions too. Google warns that generating many pages without adding value can breach its scaled content abuse policy; using an AI tool does not remove editorial responsibility.

5. Make the page easy to read and use

Use a descriptive title, headings that match the subject, ordinary paragraphs and lists or tables where they clarify a comparison. Link to related pages using wording that tells the reader what they will find. Keep important information visible on the page.

There is no compulsory paragraph length, chunk size or AI word count. A simple service question may need a short answer; a technical comparison may need more explanation. Let the task determine the depth.

Use clear original images when they help someone understand a product or service. Provide appropriate alternative text and nearby explanation. A photo of the actual item, its dimensions and its available variants can be more useful than another generic illustration.

Test the next step on a phone: check button labels, form fields, validation, confirmation messages and contact links. An enquiry form should make clear whether someone is requesting a quote or making a confirmed booking. Usable controls also provide a sensible starting point for emerging agent interactions.

Use structured data for its supported purpose

Structured data describes information in a machine-readable form. Relevant markup can make a page eligible for supported Google search features, subject to the feature's requirements. Markup must accurately represent the visible content, and eligibility does not guarantee a rich result.

Check what your WordPress theme or SEO plugin already generates before adding another plugin. Use Google's Rich Results Test for Google-supported features and Schema Markup Validator for the broader vocabulary. They answer different questions.

Keep FAQs that answer genuine customer questions. Do not promise expandable Google FAQ results or guaranteed AI citations from FAQ or HowTo markup. A schema type can remain part of the vocabulary even when Google does not offer that search feature.

6. Correct useful external information

Look first at external pages customers actually use: a relevant directory, trade association, partner page or review platform. Correct outdated details through the appropriate listing or editorial process. Ask for genuine reviews without supplying fabricated praise.

Earn coverage by contributing something useful: an informed explanation, a local partnership, original research with a clear method or an approved customer story. Choose an opportunity for its relevance and business value. Being mentioned on a famous platform is not, by itself, a reason to spend time there.

A backlink is a clickable link, a mention is a reference to the business, and an AI citation is a source reference within an answer. One does not guarantee the others. Paid coverage should not be described as an independent earned endorsement.

A worked example for a small service business

This is a fictional example, not a client result. A bicycle repair workshop wants more suitable collection enquiries. Its website says “repairs across the city”, but it only collects from two districts. The booking form asks customers to select a slot without saying that the workshop must confirm it.

The owner chooses the repairs page, collection information and booking form as the first project. They confirm the real service area, explain what a standard service includes and list repairs that need an individual assessment. They add a genuine workshop photograph and a clear route to request collection.

The form now says “Request a collection” and explains the confirmation process. The owner checks the Business Profile and relevant directory, tests the form on a phone and verifies that a successful enquiry is recorded once.

Over the following complete reporting periods, they review the chosen pages’ visibility and visits alongside suitable collection enquiries. If unsuitable locations still dominate, they inspect the wording and sources again. They do not declare success merely because one assistant mentioned the workshop.

A manageable order for the work

Use the following as a suggested sequence, not a promise that every site can be fixed in a month. Access faults or complex feeds may need specialist help first.

Priority	Task	What to retain
First	Inspect key pages and confirm access.	Baseline, URLs and a record of any access fix.
Next	Correct facts and fill the most important information gaps.	Approved facts and substantive change notes.
Then	Test forms, links, images, listings and relevant markup.	Test results and named owners for unresolved issues.
Review	Compare complete periods and inspect sampled AI answers.	Separate exposure, visit and outcome measures; choose the next action.

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30 Checking how AI describes your business

An AI answer can mention your business and still send a customer in the wrong direction. It might describe a service you do not offer, confuse your location with another company or recommend you for a job you cannot take on.

A business facts audit checks whether those answers are correct and helpful. Start with an approved record of what your business actually does, ask a small set of customer questions, save the answers and correct the information you can control. You can do this manually without buying a monitoring platform.

The result is a list of issues and practical corrections. It is a sample of answers under recorded conditions, not a precise measure of how every customer sees your business.

Decide what you are checking

Citation tracking asks whether an AI system references a page. This audit asks what a customer would understand about your business after reading the answer. A citation to your website does not establish that the answer is accurate, and an answer without a visible citation still needs checking.

Observation	Question to ask
Business mentioned	Does the answer identify the right business?
Website cited or linked	Which page is referenced, and does it support the claim?
Business recommended	Is it suitable for the customer’s stated needs?
Business described	Are services, locations, terms and limitations correct?
Business absent	Was a recommendation expected? Absence alone is not a factual error.

Choose the customer decisions that matter most. For a local business, that may be whether you cover their area, offer the required service and accept bookings. For a shop, it may be whether a product is suitable, available and returnable under the stated conditions.

Do not begin by searching for praise. A confident recommendation for an unsuitable job can create more confusion than no recommendation at all.

Create an approved business fact sheet

Before judging an answer, establish what is true. Keep a short internal document that the owner or relevant team member has checked. Include a version date, an approver and a source for important facts. This is your working reference, not a special file that AI platforms are required to read.

Use public business facts. Keep customer records, confidential prices and private staff information out of prompts and shared screenshots. If a fact is uncertain, resolve it with the person responsible rather than letting an AI answer settle it.

Field	What to record
Identity	Trading name, website, public contact details and enough context to distinguish similarly named businesses.
Services or products	Current offerings, important exclusions and who they are suitable for.
Locations	Customer-facing locations, service area and any limits. Separate an office address from an area you serve.
Availability	Normal hours, seasonal exceptions and how customers confirm current availability.
Prices and terms	Public prices or quote process, relevant conditions and where the current terms are published.
Customer route	Correct contact, booking or purchase page and what happens next.
Evidence and ownership	Source URL or internal confirmation, responsible person, approval date and next review trigger.

Avoid turning opinions into approved facts. “We provide domestic window cleaning in these areas” can be checked. “We are the best window cleaner in the city” is a promotional judgement. Likewise, a certificate or membership should only appear if it is current and verifiable.

Make the website reflect the approved facts where they help customers. The internal sheet is useful for checking consistency; it does not replace clear service pages, current opening hours and accessible contact information.

Choose a small set of genuine customer questions

Use enquiries, sales conversations and questions your team regularly answers. Select a handful that could reveal a consequential misunderstanding. Five questions is a workable first exercise for a simple business, not a completeness target or a statistical benchmark.

Include questions that name the business, plus one or two that describe a customer need without naming it. Branded questions test the description directly. Discovery questions let you inspect suitability if the business appears.

Aleyda Solis’s prompt-library framework emphasises relevant business scenarios and repeated testing rather than an exhaustive list. Answers can vary by platform, time, location and session, so one response should not be treated as a fixed ranking.

The following fictional example uses a window-cleaning company called Willow Window Care. Replace its name, locations and requirements with your own public facts. Avoid entering a real customer’s personal details.

Customer question	What it checks
What services does Willow Window Care offer in York?	Correct services and business identity.
Does Willow Window Care clean gutters?	A service the business might not offer.

Customer question	What it checks
Can Willow Window Care visit a house in Leeds?	The boundary of its service area.
How do I book Willow Window Care and get a price?	Accurate contact route and quote process.
Who offers regular domestic window cleaning in York?	Suitability if the business is mentioned or recommended.

Use ordinary wording and real constraints. Do not ask “Why is our business the best?” and then treat the prompted praise as independent evidence. Do not feed the approved fact sheet into the same conversation before testing: that checks whether the tool can repeat your input, rather than what it would otherwise say.

Keep the original wording in your log. A follow-up such as “What about a second-floor flat?” can be useful, but save it as a separate step with the preceding conversation. It is not directly comparable with the same question asked in a fresh chat.

Record the conditions before you run the questions

Pick one or two experiences relevant to your customers. Record the precise experience, such as Google AI Mode or a named assistant using its search function. Do not combine ordinary search results, AI Overviews and an assistant conversation into one undifferentiated result.

For this small audit, a practical starting routine is to run each question on three separate occasions within a week, using the same chosen conditions. This is an editorial suggestion for finding recurring problems, not enough to estimate population-wide error rates. If time is limited, test fewer questions carefully.

Record for each run	Why it matters
Date and time including timezone	Identifies when the observation happened.
Platform and experience	Keeps different products separate; add the model or version if displayed.
Search or browsing state	Distinguishes a web-supported answer from an answer produced without that function.
Account and session	Note signed-in state, new chat or follow-up, and relevant history or memory settings.
Language and location	Record the language, stated customer location and any displayed location setting.
Question and answer	Save exact wording, the answer and visible source links. Record when no AI answer appears.

Use a fresh conversation where possible. If the product requires an account, record that condition and avoid a thread that already contains information about your business. Private browsing alone does not prove that every influence, including location, has been removed.

You cannot control every part of a platform. Record what you can see, mark unavailable information as unknown and avoid claiming that the test recreates every customer's experience. Keep any separately tested personalised session in a separate group.

Read the answer against the approved facts

Check the main answer and any recommendation details, not just whether your name appears. Compare each important claim with the fact sheet and current evidence. Where the tool offers sources, open the relevant pages and see what they actually say.

Use simple issue labels: incorrect, outdated, unsupported, unclear or no issue found. Reserve "incorrect" for a claim you can contradict with reliable evidence. A missing price may be an appropriate uncertainty if you only provide individual quotes.

A recommendation needs context. A business offering domestic cleaning may be suitable for a house but unsuitable for a high-rise commercial building. The problem is the mismatch with the stated task, not that the answer used a different adjective from your marketing copy.

Record "business not mentioned" separately. Do not mark that as an accuracy failure. Also separate a refusal or absent AI response from a completed answer; neither should quietly become a positive result.

Keep an issue log that leads to action

Give each observation an ID. Save the original answer or a screenshot privately, with its visible sources and test conditions. Where a source contains the same error, record that connection. A cited page is a lead to investigate, not proof that it caused the whole answer.

For each issue, record the question, observed claim, approved fact, evidence, customer impact, proposed action, owner and status. Link repeated observations to one issue so you do not create a new task for every repeat.

This compact sample continues the fictional Willow Window Care exercise. No real business has been tested for this chapter.

Observed issue	Approved fact	Action and status
Gutter cleaning offered in two sampled answers.	Domestic window cleaning only; no gutter cleaning.	Check service page and cited directory. Correction assigned to owner.
Leeds bookings suggested in one answer.	Service area is York and named nearby villages.	Clarify area page; review old directory entry. Open.
An old phone number appears once.	Current public number confirmed by owner.	Update the stale listing and check website footer. Awaiting listing review.

Deal first with errors that could send someone to the wrong place, waste their time or misrepresent eligibility for a service. Then address repeated commercial misunderstandings. A harmless wording difference can wait, and an unresolved opinion should not be logged as a factual correction.

Start with the information you control

Compare your homepage, service pages, contact page, booking route, footer and relevant FAQs. Look for conflicting statements or obsolete pages that still describe discontinued services. Check the public view rather than relying only on the editing screen.

Make the correction where a customer would expect to find it. State the actual service area on the relevant page and explain a meaningful exclusion where necessary. Avoid adding a long list of services you do not offer simply to chase every mistaken response.

Check metadata and existing structured data for the same error. Update them to match the visible information. Publish a useful correction under the appropriate existing URL rather than creating a separate page for every prompt variation.

Google's AI Search guidance continues to emphasise useful content and sound SEO. It warns against creating pages for every query variation to manipulate responses. Clear information can help readers and discovery, but it does not guarantee an AI citation or recommendation.

Review external information selectively

Inspect your claimed business profiles, relevant directories, marketplace listings and partner pages. Start with those customers use and those connected to an observed error. Update a listing you control; request a factual correction from the publisher where you do not.

Keep the request specific: identify the page, the incorrect detail, the correct fact and a public source that supports it. Keep a record of the request and its status. A historical news report may remain accurate in its original context; ask for a contextual update where appropriate rather than demanding that history be rewritten.

Aleyda Solis's third-party framework weighs relevance, business value, durability and effort. For this audit, the practical application is to prioritise sources that help real customers rather than pursuing every possible mention. Independent publishers retain their editorial judgement.

Do not manufacture reviews, impersonate customers or present paid coverage as an independent endorsement. If an answer summarises genuine criticism, distinguish a factual error from an opinion. You can correct the underlying facts or improve the service without trying to erase legitimate feedback.

Retest and keep the outcome honest

After publishing, verify that your corrected pages work and the public listing shows any accepted change. Record these as separate milestones. A submitted directory edit is not the same as an approved public correction.

Repeat the original questions under comparable recorded conditions. Choose a sensible later check rather than assuming every AI platform will use the change immediately. There is no guaranteed correction timetable. If the experience or settings changed, note that limitation beside the comparison.

Use statuses such as source corrected, awaiting external update, not observed in later samples and still observed. Avoid declaring an issue permanently resolved because one later answer looks right. Retain the original evidence and dates so you can recognise a recurrence.

If the error persists despite accurate sources, keep the issue open and consider the platform's available feedback route. Describe the observed error and link to evidence where appropriate. Feedback does not guarantee removal or a correction.

Report findings without inventing an AI ranking score

A useful summary states the scope, what went wrong and what you did. Keep platforms separate and distinguish sampled descriptions from visits, enquiries and sales.

For example: “We asked five fixed questions on three occasions in one named search-enabled assistant. Of 15 completed answers, three contained a service or location error. The gutter-cleaning claim appeared twice and an out-of-area recommendation once. We corrected the service page and requested a directory update. These results describe our recorded samples; they do not estimate all customer experiences.”

That report is fictional. Three errors in 15 answers is a count from a small, deliberately selected sample, not a universal 20% error rate. Repeated answers may share sources and are not necessarily independent observations. Avoid false precision from averaging different questions or products into one score.

You can report that an issue appeared in two of three runs of a specific question. State the question, platform and dates beside the count. Do not call it an AI ranking, market share or the percentage of customers receiving the wrong answer.

Make the next check manageable

Keep a small core set of important questions and review it when services, locations, hours or terms change. Add a question if customers report a new misunderstanding. Retire questions that no longer describe a real decision and keep a note of the change.

You might schedule a short periodic check if the business information changes regularly. Otherwise, use concrete triggers such as a move, a discontinued service, a new booking system or a reported error. The useful outcome is maintained information and fewer misleading answers, not a growing spreadsheet nobody has time to review.

- Approve current public business facts with the responsible person.
- Choose a small set of real customer questions.
- Record platform, session, location, language and timing.
- Repeat the questions and preserve the answers and source links.
- Log factual errors separately from absence and opinion.
- Correct useful owned information and relevant external listings.
- Verify publication, retest and report the sample limits.

Online companion: Checking how AI describes your business

31 Checking crawler access and training controls

A useful page cannot compete in search if the crawler cannot reach its content. On a WordPress website, access problems can come from robots.txt, indexing settings, security plugins, hosting rules or Cloudflare. A page opening normally for you does not prove that Google or an AI search crawler receives the same response.

This chapter shows you how to investigate those layers, identify the rule responsible and retest a small, reversible correction. It also explains how to restrict AI training while preserving the search access you want. Allowing access creates an opportunity to be discovered; it does not guarantee indexing, rankings or AI citations.

Start by deciding which access you want

Search crawling, model training and user-directed page visits serve different purposes. Decide your policy before changing settings. For a typical local service business, that might mean allowing public service pages to be found in Google and ChatGPT search while declining training use where supported.

Control or agent	Main purpose	What to check
Googlebot	Crawling for Google Search and its features	Can it fetch the public pages you want found?
Google-Extended	A use-control token for Gemini training and specified grounding uses	Treat this separately from Googlebot access.
OAI-SearchBot	Discovery for ChatGPT search	Allow intended public content if you want search inclusion.
GPTBot	Crawling content that may be used for OpenAI model training	Choose a training policy independently of search.
ChatGPT-User	Visits initiated by a user	This is separate from automatic search crawling.

OpenAI documents OAI-SearchBot and GPTBot as independent controls. Opting out of OAI-SearchBot excludes sites from ChatGPT search answers, although navigational links can still appear. ChatGPT-User does not determine search inclusion, and robots.txt rules may not apply to its user-initiated visits.

Google-Extended is not a separate HTTP crawler identity. It controls specified uses of content collected by existing Google crawlers, including Gemini training and grounding. Google states that it does not affect inclusion or ranking in Google Search. Blocking Googlebot itself is a different decision, affecting Search crawling.

Prepare a small test and a rollback record

Choose the homepage, one important service or product page, one useful guide, and the contact page. Add the site’s robots.txt URL and sitemap. Use the real public HTTPS hostname, including www if that is your main address.

- Record the URLs, the symptom, when it started and any recent security or plugin change. A sudden traffic decline alone does not establish a crawler block.
- Copy the current served robots.txt text. Save the relevant WordPress setting and Cloudflare rule details, including the rule identifier, expression, action and enabled state.
- Confirm who can restore each setting. Make one change at a time and record its exact time so later requests can be compared with the earlier result.

Our example is a fictional garden maintenance business using WordPress behind Cloudflare. The owner wants Googlebot and OAI-SearchBot to reach its public service pages, while keeping its training restrictions. No private customer pages need to become public.

Step 1 Read the robots.txt visitors actually receive

Open https://example.com/robots.txt, replacing example.com with your own hostname. You should be able to read the response without logging into WordPress. Save that text before editing anything.

robots.txt gives crawling instructions to cooperating crawlers. It does not enforce access, protect confidential content or reliably remove a URL from Google's index. Google can sometimes list a blocked URL without crawling its content. Private content needs proper access controls.

If you cannot find a file in File Manager

WordPress can generate a virtual robots.txt response, so there may be no physical file to find. Plugins can modify that output. Cloudflare can also add managed directives to the response served to visitors. The browser URL is therefore your starting point, rather than the hosting folder alone.

Ask your website manager whether the response comes from a physical file, WordPress or a plugin, and whether Cloudflare modifies it. Edit the responsible layer. Creating a second physical file can replace the virtual response and lose existing rules or sitemap references.

Look for rules affecting important pages

This group asks cooperating crawlers covered by the wildcard group not to crawl the site:

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: /
```

Also check groups addressed to Googlebot and OAI-SearchBot, and restrictions covering your service or guide paths. A crawler-specific group can change the rules that apply to that crawler. Do not assume that one visible Allow line cancels every other restriction.

An isolated training restriction has a different purpose. For example, this group expresses a GPTBot opt-out:

```
User-agent: GPTBot
Disallow: /
```

It does not itself create an OAI-SearchBot block. Review the whole file before adding it, especially existing GPTBot groups and Cloudflare-managed sections. Keep rules for private or unimportant areas where intended. These fragments are examples to interpret, not complete replacement files.

Check the robots.txt response for each relevant hostname. A www host, a non-www host and a subdomain can have different configurations. If the response is an error or a security challenge, investigate that before assuming the written rules are being delivered correctly.

Step 2 Check WordPress indexing and page settings

In WordPress, open Settings, then Reading. For a public website intended for search, check that “Discourage search engines from indexing this site” is unticked and save any intended correction. Keep development or private sites restricted.

In modern WordPress, this setting adds a noindex robots meta tag to normal page output rather than necessarily adding a site-wide robots.txt block. A permissive robots.txt therefore does not prove that indexing is allowed.

For each test page, check that it is published and publicly visible. In your SEO plugin, review its indexing setting and intended canonical URL. Check maintenance-mode and security plugins for public-page restrictions. Ask your site manager to inspect both page HTML and response headers if the source of a noindex instruction is unclear.

Treat crawling and indexing separately: a crawler can successfully download a page that is marked noindex. If robots.txt prevents the download, Google may be unable to see the page’s noindex instruction.

Step 3 Test a key page through Search Console

Open the correct Search Console property. Paste the complete page URL into the inspection bar. The initial result describes Google’s stored version, so note the last crawl and then select Test live URL to check the current page.

Review crawl permission, page fetch and indexing permission. If available, open View tested page to inspect the returned HTML, screenshot and resource information. Confirm that Google’s test sees your service content rather than a verification screen, empty layout or error.

Record the result for each test URL. A live test can establish that the inspection tool fetched a page; it does not guarantee indexing or search appearance. Google-InspectionTool is also distinct from ordinary Googlebot activity, so inspect actual crawler requests as well.

For Google’s AI search features, access is only part of eligibility. Google says the page must be indexed and eligible for a snippet, and the site must be included in generative AI features through Search Console. Check those requirements if access succeeds but AI visibility remains absent.

Step 4 Find blocked or challenged requests in Cloudflare

Select the correct domain in Cloudflare. In the current security dashboard, open Analytics and use Events for security actions; older navigation may call this Security Events. Traffic shows the broader request view, including requests without a security event.

- Choose a short time window around a failed test or recent crawl.
- Filter by the affected hostname and path. Inspect Block and challenge actions, then relevant user agents or source IP addresses.
- Expand a matching event. Record the time, path, action, rule and service responsible. Retain the Ray ID when available to help your host or developer investigate.
- Compare the event with your page test. A security rule matching the same failed request is stronger evidence than a general count of blocked bots.

Security events are not unique requests: one request can trigger several events. Results may be sampled, especially on the Free plan. Narrow the time window if needed, and use hosting logs when the dashboard cannot establish what happened.

Recognise a challenge response

A “verify you are human” page can substitute for your content. Your own browser may pass the challenge and keep a clearance cookie, while an automated request receives the interstitial screen. Recheck in a fresh private window, but use crawler evidence to establish crawler access.

For a developer inspecting responses, Cloudflare documents the cf-mitigated header with the value challenge as an indicator of a Challenge Page. That is useful evidence alongside the returned HTML and matching security event.

Do not accept a successful-looking HTTP code alone as proof that the right content was returned. Check the body and required resources. A broken server response or WordPress error can also prevent access without a Cloudflare block.

Step 5 Review AI crawler controls and training policy

In AI Crawl Control, inspect the crawler list and current actions. Review OAI-SearchBot separately from GPTBot. On the Free plan, Cloudflare’s documented identification relies on self-identifying user-agent strings, so treat the displayed label as evidence to investigate rather than independent proof of identity.

Use the analytics date, hostname, path and crawler filters to inspect your test pages. Compare successful requests with redirects, client errors and server errors. Unsuccessful requests can come from other rules or errors, not just the crawler’s selected action.

An Allow setting in AI Crawl Control does not override every other security rule. If OAI-SearchBot is allowed there but remains blocked, trace the matching WAF rule or hosting restriction instead.

Understand Disallow AI Training before changing it

Cloudflare distinguishes disallowing training from blocking crawler requests. Its Disallow AI Training option is designed to communicate applicable training preferences while preserving access for supported mixed-use search crawlers. Its effectiveness depends on the provider, the exact setting and other rules in place.

Training Block and Block on pages with ads now include mixed-use crawlers such as Googlebot and Bingbot, so these settings can affect search access. This is why a blanket statement that every training restriction blocks Google is wrong: the selected action matters.

For mixed-use crawlers, check both the edge rule and the preference communicated to the provider. Do not assume a dashboard label establishes the effect on every provider. Microsoft and Google document their own controls and may change how preferences are supported.

Check the current dashboard settings

For a policy of allowing search while restricting training, open the domain’s Security Settings, filter by Bot traffic and select Configure AI bot policies. Check Search is Allow. For Training, select Disallow, turn on Enable Bot Preference Sync and select Save. Choose Agent separately according to your policy.

The interface’s Training Disallow corresponds to the announcement’s Disallow AI Training. Cloudflare’s current documentation says this adds managed robots.txt directives and blocks training crawlers at the edge, with mixed-use crawlers excluded from that edge block. Other WAF rules can still interfere.

Reload the public robots.txt URL after saving. Check the served managed section and your own rules together. Do not edit a generated section in WordPress and expect that to change the setting Cloudflare produces.

Step 6 Correct the rule responsible and retest

In our fictional example, robots.txt allows the public service page and OAI-SearchBot is set to Allow. A matching security event shows that a broad challenge rule catches its request. Changing the training preference would not fix that cause.

Ask the person managing Cloudflare to narrow the identified rule or its exception so the intended legitimate crawler can reach the affected public content. Keep the existing training policy unless the evidence identifies that policy as the cause.

Use verified identity or current provider IP ranges where appropriate. A user-agent name can be copied, so an exception based only on text containing Googlebot or OAI-SearchBot is weak. Cloudflare provides examples using its verified-bot field, but that category includes other bots too; choose the scope your policy needs.

Do not disable the whole firewall or apply a site-wide “skip all security” rule as the routine fix. Keep the correction tied to the rule, crawler and public pages you intend to allow. If the host or a WordPress plugin created the restriction, correct it there instead.

Retest the same URLs and settings

- Reload the public robots.txt and key pages. Confirm the intended text or page content is served, including necessary resources. Clear only the relevant cached response if it still contains the old output.
- Repeat the Search Console live test. Compare it with the earlier result. Request indexing for a corrected important page where appropriate, without treating the request as a guarantee.
- Review requests made after the change in Cloudflare and hosting logs. Confirm that genuine intended crawler requests reach the correct page, while the training restrictions and private-page protections still match your policy.
- Record the before-and-after evidence and review again after subsequent crawler activity. A successful browser visit or changed dashboard toggle alone is not a completed crawler retest.

OpenAI says robots.txt changes can take about 24 hours to affect its search systems. This does not promise a crawl or citation within a day.

Roll back if the correction causes a problem

Restore the saved rule expression, action and enabled state, or the previous WordPress or robots.txt setting. Restore any related Bot Preference Sync choice too if you changed it. Avoid reversing unrelated settings.

Clear the relevant cached response if necessary, then reload the same pages and rerun the tests. Confirm that the previous state is actually served. Record the rollback time and the remaining issue, and pass the saved request evidence to the person who manages the site.

Keep a short access-check record

Use one line per tested URL. Do not mark a crawler “passed” unless you have evidence for that crawler or test; write “Not observed” where genuine activity is missing.

URL or path	Before	Change and time	Retest evidence
robots.txt	Served rules or error	Responsible layer and exact edit	New public response

URL or path	Before	Change and time	Retest evidence
Main service page	Fetch or challenge result	Rule identifier or page setting	Live test plus actual request
Guide or product page	Fetch and indexing checks	Exact correction	Returned content and resources
Contact page	Public access and form status	Any related adjustment	Page and successful form test

A crawler request is not an AI citation, and a citation is not a visit or conversion. After access works, use the reporting guide to assess visibility and business results separately.

A durable crawler access checklist

- Decide separately which search, training and user-directed access you want.
- Check WordPress visibility, page indexing settings and actual returned content.
- Use live tests and real request evidence to identify the restriction and the layer responsible.
- Make one scoped correction, preserving a copy of the earlier state.
- Retest access and retained restrictions; roll back and retest again if the change causes a problem.

Fix access problems before drawing conclusions about content performance. Once useful public pages are reachable, search engines and assistants can consider them under their own eligibility and selection systems.

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32 Deciding whether to use llms.txt

llms.txt is an optional, proposed information index for AI tools. It does not block AI training or guarantee credit when your content is used.

For a small business owner, the practical question is whether a particular tool or workflow would benefit from the file. Adding one simply because you have heard that it is essential for AI SEO is not a sound reason to spend time on it.

What is llms.txt

LLM stands for large language model. Jeremy Howard's proposal describes a Markdown file containing background information and selected links. Markdown uses simple text formatting.

The filename is llms.txt, with an s. It can sit at /llms.txt or within a section such as /docs/llms.txt.

When might it be useful

Software documentation is a prominent use case. The proposal also supports other sites with information an agent needs to navigate. It remains a proposal, rather than a requirement followed by every AI service.

Consider a fictional business with a large library of equipment instructions. Its support team uses an assistant that can read a curated index. The team could test whether that index helps the assistant find the correct installation guide for a particular model.

The useful outcome would be fewer wrong documents selected and less time spent searching. Merely publishing a file would not establish either result. The business would need to compare the assistant's behaviour with and without the index.

What it does not control

llms.txt is not an access-control or training-permissions standard. It cannot guarantee that an AI service will read the file, follow its guidance or cite your business.

Adding wording such as "no training" or "always link to this website" does not turn an information file into an enforceable instruction. A business can publish its preferred terms, but should not treat those words as a technical block.

For this reason, we recommend keeping information publishing and crawler settings as separate tasks. First decide what public material helps users. Then decide which documented controls match your preferences for crawling, search and training.

Does llms.txt help Google rankings or AI Overviews

Google states that Google Search does not use llms.txt files. Creating one does not help or harm your rankings or visibility in Google Search, including its generative AI features. A file being discovered or indexed does not mean Google gives it special treatment.

Google's guidance instead emphasises useful original content, crawlable pages and the existing technical requirements for Search. There is no special llms.txt requirement for appearing in AI Overviews or AI Mode.

Our recommendation for a typical small business is to prioritise clear service information, accurate business details and a website customers can use easily. If your booking page is confusing or your product information is outdated, address those problems before experimenting with an optional file.

How llms.txt differs from other website files

File or control	Main role
llms.txt	A curated information index for tools that use the proposal.
XML sitemap	Lists website URLs to help search engines discover pages.
robots.txt	Communicates crawling rules to automated clients that respect them.
Provider controls	Manage specific uses through the mechanisms documented by that service.

These tools solve different problems. A working sitemap does not demonstrate that a crawler can access every page, and a crawler being allowed to visit does not guarantee that the page will be selected for an answer.

A short decision checklist for WordPress owners

Work through these questions before adding a plugin or creating a file:

- What am I trying to achieve? If the answer is blocking training, work on documented provider controls. If it is helping a specific assistant find information, an llms.txt experiment may be relevant.
- Does the intended tool actually use the file? Ask the tool supplier or check its documentation. Do not assume support because another website publishes one.
- Are the important public pages accurate and accessible? Check the pages themselves before building an index of them.
- Can I keep the file current? Choose a person to review it when services, policies or key URLs change.
- What would show that it helped? Define a small test, such as whether an assistant consistently retrieves the correct support guide.

If you have no supported use case and no useful test, leaving llms.txt out is a reasonable decision. Spend the time on the website improvements your customers need.

If you decide to add the file

Treat this as a small experiment. You do not need to commission a large “AI optimisation” project to establish whether an information index is useful in your workflow.

- Follow the proposal’s format: a site heading, with an optional summary and grouped links. Select public resources relevant to your test.
- Check what your existing WordPress tools provide. If a plugin generates a file, read the output rather than assuming it is accurate. Avoid adding a second generator for the same URL.
- Publish using a suitable plugin or your hosting file tools. Agree which method owns the file so a generated version does not unexpectedly replace a manually maintained one.
- Open the file URL while signed out. Confirm it returns the intended text rather than an error, login screen or security challenge. Test every included link.

- Keep private content out of the file. Review linked exports or Markdown versions too, if your implementation produces them.
- Run the test you defined, record the result and review the file when its linked information changes.

For an equipment supplier, a focused trial might cover one product range and five common support questions. Record whether the assistant chooses the correct instructions, whether its answers are accurate and how much maintenance the index requires. Expand only if the results justify the work.

Online companion: Deciding whether to use llms.txt

33 Preparing for AI agents

An AI agent is software that can work towards a user's goal by choosing and carrying out steps. Depending on its tools and permissions, it might compare products, check appointment availability or help complete a form. Some agents only gather information; others can interact with websites or connected services.

For a small website owner, the first useful task is to make an important customer journey understandable and reliable. Clear information, labelled fields, real buttons and a stable layout help people use the site and can help agents interpret it. You do not need to begin with a new protocol project.

This chapter explains what to check, how to test a simple booking journey and when a specialist integration may be worth investigating. It does not promise that every agent can use every website.

What makes an agent different from an AI answer

An answer might tell someone which service to consider. An agent can also take steps towards the goal, such as opening a booking page, selecting a service or entering information the user supplied. Its capabilities depend on the product, available tools and the permissions it has.

A website chatbot is not automatically an agent. It might answer questions without being able to change a booking or access current stock. Likewise, being mentioned in an AI search answer does not establish that an agent can complete a task on your site.

Activity	What it establishes
Describes your business	Information has appeared in an answer; check its accuracy.
Links to a page	A route to the site is shown; the customer task may still fail.
Compares current options	The agent can gather useful details under the observed conditions.
Submits a booking request	A request has been sent; this is not necessarily a confirmed appointment.
Completes a transaction	The relevant system confirms the action, subject to its terms and authorisation.

Some search and assistant products can help with bookings or purchases, but capability, market coverage and the final completion route vary. Check the specific product and booking supplier rather than assuming that every customer can complete a transaction through an agent.

A realistic booking journey

This example is fictional. A customer wants a bicycle service next week, within a stated budget, at a workshop they can reach. They ask an assistant to compare suitable options and help prepare a booking.

The agent first needs the service area, what the service includes, the price or quote process and how to check availability. A workshop page showing only "Quality repairs at great prices" does not provide enough detail to establish a match.

The customer chooses one workshop. Its booking page has a service selector, a date field, contact details and a summary of the request. The final control says “Send appointment request”, and the page explains that the workshop will confirm availability by email.

A successful interaction preserves that distinction. Sending the form should produce a request receipt, not a message implying that a slot has been reserved. The agent should not invent missing details or claim a confirmed appointment before the booking system confirms one.

A suitable review step lets the customer check the service, date, price conditions and supplied details before submission. For an actual payment or binding reservation, the action and applicable terms should be clear at the point of authorisation.

The site owner can improve this journey without installing agent tools: clarify the offer, label the fields, make the request button work and provide an accurate outcome message.

How agents may interpret your website

Google’s web.dev guidance describes agents using screenshots, page structure and the browser’s accessibility tree. The accessibility tree summarises controls through information such as their role, name and state. Different agents can combine these approaches.

The guidance recommends semantic HTML, associated labels and stable layouts. A native button or link communicates purpose more clearly than a styled element whose behaviour must be guessed. A moving layout or overlay can interfere with interaction.

You do not have to inspect browser internals to begin. Walk through the task as a new customer. If you cannot tell what a control does, what information is required or whether an action succeeded, record that as a problem worth fixing.

Check the information before the interface

Pick one important service or product page. Confirm that it explains the offer, limitations, location or delivery area, price conditions and next step. Ask the person responsible for the business facts to check them.

For product comparison, include the details that distinguish the options: dimensions, compatibility, variants, stock, delivery and returns where relevant. Check the selected variant rather than assuming the headline price and availability apply to every choice.

Keep essential information readable on the page. A photograph of a price list may be useful as an image, but it should not be the only way to understand the offer. Check that website details and the booking or checkout system agree.

Better information does not guarantee selection. It gives a customer or agent a clearer basis for deciding whether the business fits the task. An honest exclusion can prevent an unsuitable enquiry.

Use labels that stay meaningful

Every form field should have a clear purpose, including service selectors, dates and checkboxes. “Email address for your booking confirmation” is more useful than an unexplained empty box. Identify optional information and explain any required format.

A visible label should be properly associated with its field in the underlying page. W3C’s forms guidance explains that relationship; developers can implement it with a label whose for value matches the input’s id, or an appropriate alternative. Placeholder text alone is a poor replacement for a lasting label.

Use real buttons for actions and links for destinations

A button should clearly describe its action, such as “Check available dates” or “Send appointment request”. A link should make its destination understandable, such as “Read delivery information”. Ask your developer to use the appropriate native elements and ensure keyboard operation works.

Do not try to repair a broken control simply by adding an ARIA role. Custom controls need the expected behaviour as well as a name. If your page builder creates an attractive but inaccessible calendar, ask the booking supplier or developer to review the component.

Explain states errors and outcomes

A customer needs to know which service is selected, whether a date is unavailable and whether the form is still sending. Explain an error beside the affected field and keep valid entries where possible so the person can recover.

Test what happens when a required field is empty or an unavailable option is chosen. A blank page, silent failure or generic “Something went wrong” message leaves the next step unclear. A helpful message might say that no appointments are available for the selected date and invite another choice.

Confirm the actual result. A form receipt, reserved appointment and paid order are different outcomes. Check the email or booking record too: a success message in the browser does not prove that the business received the request.

Keep the layout stable during the task

Watch the page while it loads and while you use it. Does a banner push the booking button away? Does a popup cover the selected date? Does an animation hide the service options? Record the exact step where the journey becomes difficult.

Give controls enough room to read and operate comfortably on a phone. Keep the order of the task predictable, and make important options available without depending solely on hover. Avoid unnecessary movement around a final submit or payment control.

A simple design is useful when it makes the job easier; it need not remove the site’s personality. Concentrate on the service selection, form and confirmation route rather than rebuilding the entire website around a speculative agent audience.

Run a small readiness check

Choose one task and write down what counts as success. For example: a customer can select a service, request an appropriate date, review the details and receive an accurate receipt. Note the page URL, device, browser and test date.

- Complete the journey manually on a phone and desktop. Try the keyboard as well as the pointer.
- Use your own test details and a supplier’s sandbox or staging environment where available. Avoid creating unintended live bookings or charges.
- Check missing information, unavailable choices and failure messages, not just the ideal route.
- If you have access to an appropriate agent, repeat the same defined task and record the product, settings, steps and result. Stop before an unintended real commitment.
- Log each obstacle with its location, observed behaviour, owner and proposed fix. Retest after changes.

An agent test is optional. A manual and accessibility review can reveal valuable problems before you choose one. One successful agent run is evidence about that task and configuration, not certification that all agents can use the site.

Use this short checklist as a starting point. It is not an accessibility conformance audit or a guaranteed compatibility score.

Readiness check	Evidence to keep
Offer and limits are clear	Reviewed service or product page with current facts.
Fields and controls have meaningful labels	Test notes showing the selection and form can be understood.
Actions work and layout stays usable	Phone, desktop and keyboard walkthrough observations.
Errors allow recovery	Results from missing-field and unavailable-option tests.
Outcome matches the real system	Request receipt, sandbox booking or test order reconciled with its record.
Customer can review a commitment	Clear summary, terms and authorisation step where appropriate.

Understand WebMCP and UCP before considering a project

WebMCP and UCP are evolving approaches to different tasks. Neither is a general requirement for appearing in an AI answer.

WebMCP exposes website tasks to compatible agents

WebMCP is a proposed web standard for publishing structured tools on a webpage. Through JavaScript or HTML form annotations, a site can describe tasks and the inputs they need. A booking system might expose a tool to find suitable dates rather than requiring the agent to infer every click.

Browser support, trial requirements and compatible clients can change. Check the current WebMCP documentation before planning an implementation. A site exposing tools does not establish that every assistant can discover or use them.

Consider it when a defined customer task repeatedly fails through the ordinary interface, the target agent supports it and a developer can maintain the integration. Keep the normal customer journey working alongside any enhancement.

UCP addresses commerce integration

Universal Commerce Protocol, or UCP, is an open standard for commerce interactions. Google’s implementation describes direct buying through its AI surfaces, with native checkout and an optional embedded path for approved merchants. Its getting-started page includes a merchant waitlist.

A retailer should check its commerce platform’s supported route, current merchant and market eligibility, payment arrangements and operational requirements before committing. An available protocol does not mean that a particular shop has been accepted or that every assistant can place an order.

UCP is not a general fix for a contact form or a local service website. Keep product information and checkout reliable first. Consider a commerce integration when there is a relevant supported channel and a practical business case.

Option	Primary purpose	When to investigate
Ordinary website improvements	Make information and customer actions clearer.	Start here for most small sites.
WebMCP	Expose structured webpage tools to compatible agents.	A specific task and supported client justify a maintained experiment.
UCP	Connect commerce capabilities with participating systems.	A relevant retail platform, eligible channel and viable operating model exist.

When to involve a specialist

Ask for help when the problem sits beyond page copy or a simple builder setting. A booking widget you cannot modify, a custom date picker, account permissions or a third-party payment flow may need the supplier and a developer working together.

- Customers or tested agents repeatedly fail at the same important step despite clear information.
- The task creates a payment, binding reservation, account change or cancellation that needs reliable authorisation and records.
- Availability, prices or customer details must be exchanged between several systems.
- You are considering WebMCP or UCP and need support, eligibility and maintenance verified.
- Changes affect authentication, security challenges or the handling of private information.

Give the specialist a defined task, the failure evidence, involved plugins or services, test conditions and desired outcome. Ask for a limited proposal with supported clients, validation, ownership and a way to revert the change.

Chrome’s WebMCP workflow guidance recommends defining the user goal, starting conditions and task boundaries, then testing recovery when something goes wrong. For an owner, the practical handoff is a clear journey and acceptance criteria, rather than a request to “make the site agent-ready”.

Do not remove login, payment checks or abuse protection simply to make an agent test pass. The implementation must respect the same business rules as the normal customer route. If access is being blocked unexpectedly, investigate the specific request and rule with the responsible specialist.

Judge success by a useful completed task

Track whether the task finished correctly and where people needed help. For bookings, distinguish requests from confirmed appointments and check duplicates. For retail, distinguish comparison, cart activity and completed orders. Keep agent test observations separate from actual customer results.

A fix may be worth making even if no agent traffic can be identified: clearer labels and reliable forms help your existing customers. Start with the journey your business depends on, resolve observable problems and revisit protocols when a supported opportunity is relevant.

Online companion: Preparing for AI agents

34 Choosing tools that answer a question

The most useful SEO tools for small businesses help answer a question you can act on. Start with the job: checking whether an important page is indexed, understanding search visits, researching customer language or investigating a slow page. Then choose a tool that provides relevant evidence.

You do not need a large subscription bundle to begin. You need reliable information, enough time to understand it and a way to check whether the resulting work helps customers.

Start with the decision you need to make

Write down the problem before opening a trial or comparing plans. “I need better SEO” is too broad. “I need to find which internal links lead to retired pages” gives you a specific task to test.

Your question	Tool category	What to check afterwards
Can Google find this page	Search Console and indexing diagnostics.	The exact URL and the reason for its reported status.
Which visits become enquiries	Analytics and business records.	Whether tracking works and enquiries are genuine.
What language do customers use	Keyword research and customer research.	Relevance, market settings and the source of estimates.
Where are the broken internal links	Website crawler.	The source link, destination and intended replacement.
Why is this page slow	Performance diagnostics.	Test conditions and the customer experience after a change.
Is this markup suitable	Structured data testing tools.	Visible accuracy and the relevant feature requirements.

A tool can identify something worth investigating without establishing the cause or the correct fix. An audit warning is the beginning of a decision, not an instruction to change your website automatically.

Understand the different kinds of data

Reports often look similar while measuring different things. Keep the source, period and definition beside any figure you use.

- Recorded website data describes activity collected for your own property, subject to the report’s coverage and implementation.
- Third-party estimates model demand, traffic or visibility using the provider’s available data. They are not a competitor’s actual analytics.
- Diagnostic results describe what a test or crawl found under particular conditions. They may not represent every visitor or page.

- Vendor scores summarise the provider's rules. They are not an official Google assessment of your business.

Use estimates to compare possibilities, diagnostics to investigate and business records to assess real enquiries or sales. Do not combine different units into one apparently precise success score.

Google Search Console for Google Search performance and indexing

Search Console is a free Google service for monitoring and troubleshooting your site's presence in Google Search. It provides search performance and indexing information, alongside alerts about certain problems. You do not need an account for Google to include your website in Search.

Use it to investigate important pages and relevant search activity. It does not provide a complete picture of every potential customer or another website's performance. Do not try to make every excluded URL indexed: some account pages, duplicates and retired pages should remain outside search results.

Analytics for recorded visits and actions

Google Analytics 4 can help you investigate where recorded visits come from and what happens on the website. Its Traffic acquisition report uses session-based source information; it answers a different question from the User acquisition report about first-time acquisition.

Setup matters. Test enquiry and purchase measurement, use consistent report definitions and account for consent and collection limits. A phone-link click is not a completed call, and a form event is not automatically a suitable sales enquiry. Reconcile important outcomes with business records.

Bing Webmaster Tools for Bing and supported AI reporting

Bing Webmaster Tools adds another provider's view. Its AI Performance reporting can help assess citations within supported experiences. Microsoft's Topics Portfolio beta groups grounding queries into themes when sufficient data is available; its approximate figures and classifications need interpretation.

A citation is not a website visit or sale. Do not buy another reporting service simply because a small site has too little data to show a particular view. Start with the free reporting tutorial and decide whether an additional question remains unanswered.

Keyword research tools for ideas and estimated demand

Google Keyword Planner offers keyword ideas and search estimates for advertising research. Its current help documentation says account setup, including billing information, is needed to access basic features. Avoid assuming that every reader can open it immediately with an ordinary Google account.

For any keyword tool, record the country, language, period and data definition. Check whether a competition label refers to advertisers or a separate organic difficulty model. Neither a low score nor a high estimated volume proves that a phrase suits your business.

Combine tool suggestions with real customer questions and the search results for the intended market. Choose a page that answers the need, rather than creating a new page for every phrase.

Website crawlers for finding issues across pages

A crawler follows accessible URLs and records what it finds. It can help investigate broken links, redirects and page information across a site. Its view depends on the starting URL, settings, access, rendering and limits; it does not reproduce everything Google knows about a website.

Screaming Frog SEO Spider is one example. Its published free version allows crawling up to 500 URLs, with advanced features requiring a licence. That is a URL limit, not a promise that a 500-page website will be fully covered: other discovered URLs can use the allowance.

Before paying, confirm that the tool handles the work you need, including saved projects, JavaScript rendering or exports where relevant. A developer may be better placed to investigate an unfamiliar crawl configuration than an owner trying to clear every warning.

Performance tools for investigating slow pages

PageSpeed Insights combines a lab test with real-user data where enough data is available. The real-user section covers a rolling 28-day period and can show page or origin data. A small site may have no real-user data to display.

A new lab result and a rolling user-experience report can differ without either being broken. Record the URL, device mode and data scope before comparing. Use the findings to improve the experience, then test important forms and buying routes as well as the load time.

Structured data tools for different validation jobs

Google’s Rich Results Test checks structured data for Google-supported rich-result features. The Schema Markup Validator checks markup against the wider Schema.org vocabulary. They are different tools, so use the one that matches the question.

A validation pass does not guarantee a particular search appearance, rankings or an AI citation. Check that the markup accurately represents visible information and meets the requirements for the feature you intend to support.

Keep WordPress plugins and SEO research tools distinct

An SEO plugin helps manage output from your WordPress website, such as metadata or sitemaps, depending on its features and settings. A research platform gathers or estimates information to help you make decisions. Installing a plugin does not complete keyword research, repair all technical faults or produce a strategy.

Check what your existing plugin already controls before adding another. Overlapping output can create conflicting titles, canonicals, sitemaps or structured data. Compare the free and paid features needed for a particular job, rather than choosing by the longest feature list.

Decide whether paid tracking or an all-in-one platform adds value

A paid platform may be worthwhile when you repeatedly need functions your present tools do not cover. Examples include scheduled crawls, selected-location rank tracking, historical competitor research or several websites in one workflow. Availability and limits depend on the product and plan.

Test the requirement that matters to you. For local rankings, confirm the location and device settings. For international research, inspect the relevant language and market. For backlink research, ask what the link database covers and how current the observations are.

Treat a third-party authority or difficulty score as a comparison within that tool's model. It is not a Google score or a target that justifies buying links. A large database is only useful if the relevant information helps you decide what to do.

Be specific about AI visibility monitoring

Ask which platforms, markets and questions are sampled, how often they are repeated and whether the report counts mentions, citations or visits. Check how changes in model, location or personalisation affect comparisons.

Google warns that third-party tools do not have access to its internal ranking or AI systems. A vendor's "AI readiness" grade cannot establish that your site will be cited. Use sample observations alongside first-party reports and business evidence, rather than treating them as a universal AI ranking.

Run a small test before committing to a subscription

Define success before the trial starts. For a crawler, this might mean finding a known broken link and exporting a usable list of source pages. For reporting software, it might mean producing the same clearly defined monthly comparison without manual rework.

Check	What to record
Job and coverage	The question, website, market and features you need.
Evidence	The source and date of the figures, plus a finding you can verify independently.
Practical use	Whether you understand the result and can export or share it usefully.
Total cost	Billing period, currency, tax, limits, extra seats, credits and possible overages.
Exit arrangements	Renewal and cancellation terms, export options and retained access.
Decision	Keep, defer or cancel, with the reason and next review point.

A trial may require payment details or renew automatically. Read the actual terms before starting, and set your own reminder if there is a deadline. Do not assume that a demo, free tier and time-limited trial provide the same access.

Keep business ownership of connected accounts. Grant only the access required and review what data a new service receives. Do not upload customer details or confidential reports merely to try a feature.

Read reviews for evidence and fit

A useful review explains the job tested, the plan or version used, the testing date and the reviewer's evidence. Look for practical limitations as well as benefits. Disclosed sponsorship or affiliate links help you understand the commercial relationship; disclosure alone does not establish the recommendation's quality.

Google's review guidance encourages evidence of experience, comparisons and discussion of benefits and drawbacks. A vendor's feature page is useful for checking current capabilities, but it is not an independent test.

Choose reviews that resemble your situation. A platform that suits an agency managing many large sites may be unnecessary for a shop owner updating a few service pages. Check current product terms even when the review itself is good.

A practical example for a small service business

This example is fictional. A curtain-fitting business wants more suitable enquiries and has a short WordPress website. The owner starts with Search Console, tested enquiry tracking and a record of actual leads. They review customer questions before buying a keyword subscription.

When the business retires an old service, the owner needs to find remaining internal links to it. They test a crawler against that defined task and verify the source links. They do not assume the crawler's health score measures sales potential.

They would consider a paid plan only if repeated work, required features or coverage justify the cost. The decision follows a recurring task, rather than a belief that more software automatically improves rankings.

Online companion: Choosing tools that answer a question

35 Measuring visibility visits and business outcomes

Measure SEO success by connecting visibility with visits and business results. An impression shows that a link appeared; a citation shows that a platform referenced a page; neither tells you that someone visited, enquired or bought.

Google, Bing and Google Analytics provide first-party reporting on aspects of AI visibility. These reports answer different questions. A useful monthly report keeps their figures separate, explains their limits and helps you decide what to improve next.

Start with the result your business needs

A key performance indicator, or KPI, is a measure tied to a goal. For a service business, the goal might be qualified enquiries and profitable bookings. For a retailer, it might be completed orders and the profit they generate.

Choose a small set of measures that explain progress towards that goal. If your team cannot say how a number will affect a decision, it probably does not belong in the main summary.

Stage	Useful measures	What they help you assess
Exposure	Search impressions and AI citations	Whether your pages are being displayed or referenced.
Visits	Sessions by channel and landing page	Whether people reach your website and which pages they use.
Business results	Qualified enquiries, completed sales and revenue	Whether the attention becomes useful commercial activity.

These stages are a reporting framework, not a fully traceable customer funnel. One person can see several links, visit repeatedly and buy later through another route.

What Google Search Console measures

The Search results Performance report shows impressions, clicks, click-through rate and average position. Use relevant page, query and market views to investigate performance, rather than judging the whole business by one average.

Google’s Generative AI performance report provides a dedicated view of impressions in features including AI Overviews and AI Mode. Use its page, country, device and date views where available to understand the pattern.

This AI visibility data is already included in overall Search reporting. Do not add it to the overall total as an extra audience. The documented AI report does not provide an Overview-only breakdown or separate AI clicks, click-through rate and revenue.

Search impressions are not unique people. The report measures displayed links, rather than every unlinked mention of your brand. Its help documentation also notes that a report may be absent when impressions are insufficient or the site is excluded from generative AI features. Search Labs experiments are not included.

What Bing AI Performance measures

Bing Webmaster Tools provides AI Performance reporting for citations across Microsoft Copilot, AI-generated Bing summaries and selected partner experiences. It does not cover every AI system.

Total Citations counts displayed source citations. Average Cited Pages measures the average number of distinct cited pages per day. Page-level counts identify referenced URLs, while grounding queries provide a sample of the phrases used to retrieve supporting content.

These figures are not visits, rankings or sales. A grounding query is not necessarily the customer's exact original prompt. Keep the platform coverage and preview status visible in your report.

Use the newer insights for context

Where available, Intents classify retrieval context, Topics group related grounding queries and Compare supports period comparisons. Use the definitions shown in the report.

Citation Share is your site's percentage of citations for a particular grounding query across the cited sites. It is not a share of traffic or sales, and does not reveal competitor domains or assign a quality score. Intent and topic labels can be broad during the preview.

Use these views to identify questions worth investigating. An informational topic might justify improving an explanation; it does not prove that the audience wants to book your service.

What GA4 AI Assistant visits measure

GA4's AI Assistant channel identifies recorded visits from recognised assistant referrers. The documented classification uses an ai-assistant medium and an (ai-assistant) campaign value. It is not a complete record of AI influence.

Crucially, GA4's default channel definitions exclude Google AI Overviews and AI Mode from AI Assistant. Visits from those Google Search features belong in Organic Search. Gemini assistant referrals and Google AI search visits are therefore not the same category.

For monthly visits, use sessions with Session default channel group in Traffic acquisition. First user default channel group answers a different question about initial acquisition. Keep the scope consistent when comparing months.

A session is a visit, not a unique customer. GA4 can record behaviour only through the measurement available to it. Missing referrer information, consent choices or implementation problems can leave some journeys unobserved or classified differently. The AI Assistant row is not a complete count of everyone influenced by AI.

Measure enquiries and sales separately

Measure completed enquiries or purchases. A telephone-link click, opened form or started checkout shows intent, but does not establish that a conversation or sale happened.

GA4 calls important measured actions key events. Test that enquiries are recorded after successful submission without duplicates. If you sell online, test purchase tracking, currency and value.

Use your customer relationship management system, booking records or sales ledger to identify genuine enquiries, suitable leads and paid work. Exclude spam and duplicates consistently.

State your attribution rule. Sales associated with an enquiry's recorded Organic Search source are not necessarily sales caused entirely by SEO. Ordinary attribution reporting cannot establish that causal claim.

A worked monthly report

The following figures are fictional. They show how a small garden maintenance business could compare two consecutive months without combining incompatible measures.

The business uses the same website properties, filters and event definitions in both months. GSC figures use its Web search reporting scope. GA4 rows use session channel groups. Currency is GBP. August has 31 days and September has 30, so the owner also checks daily trends before interpreting the changes.

Exposure and visits

Measure and source	August	September	Change
GSC overall Search impressions	100,000	120,000	+20%
GSC generative AI impressionsAlready within overall Search	12,000	18,000	+50%
GSC overall Search clicks	2,800	3,000	+7.1%
Bing AI Performance citations	320	480	+50%
GA4 Organic Search sessions	2,450	2,600	+6.1%
GA4 AI Assistant sessions	80	120	+50%

September's overall GSC impressions remain 120,000. Adding 18,000 to report 138,000 would count overlapping reporting twice. Adding Bing citations would introduce another different unit, not produce a combined audience total.

Google clicks and GA4 sessions need not match: they have different definitions and collection methods. Keep both rows labelled. Do not divide the 120 assistant sessions by the 480 Bing citations to invent a click-through rate; their platform coverage differs.

Enquiries and commercial outcomes

In this example, recorded completed-enquiry events have been reconciled with unique enquiries. Qualified enquiries are confirmed by the team. Sales and revenue refer to work completed in each month, including work from earlier enquiries. Sales use the last recorded channel of the originating enquiry in the CRM, not a separate GA4 revenue attribution model.

Measure	August	September
Completed enquiriesOrganic Search / AI Assistant	49 / 4	52 / 6
Qualified enquiriesOrganic Search / AI Assistant	32 / 3	36 / 4
Completed salesOrganic Search / AI Assistant	10 / 1	12 / 2

Measure	August	September
Sales revenueOrganic Search / AI Assistant	£3,000 / £300	£3,600 / £600

Six enquiries from 120 assistant sessions gives an illustrative enquiry-per-session ratio of 5%, compared with 52 from 2,600 organic sessions, or 2%. The counts are small, so the owner checks quality and longer-term trends before changing the budget. These ratios are not a measure of AI visibility converting directly into sales.

Do not calculate a same-month lead-to-sale rate from these sales rows: some completed jobs came from earlier enquiries. To measure that rate, group leads by the month they arrived, allow a consistent follow-up period and count the wins from that same group.

What the owner can reasonably conclude

Visibility increased in the recorded Google and Bing measures. Organic Search visits and qualified enquiries also grew. Recognised assistant visits produced four qualified enquiries in September, which makes them worth monitoring, even though the volume remains modest.

The report does not establish which Google AI feature produced a particular visit or whether a Bing citation led to a booking. It also does not prove that a content update caused the growth. The owner checks which landing pages received enquiries and compares those findings with the visibility reports.

A short summary for the monthly report

“Overall Google Search impressions rose 20% and clicks rose 7.1%. The included generative AI impressions rose 50%, while Bing recorded 480 citations across its supported AI experiences. GA4 recorded 2,600 Organic Search sessions and 120 AI Assistant sessions. These channels produced 36 and four qualified enquiries respectively. Completed sales associated with their recorded enquiry sources generated £4,200, including jobs originating in earlier months. Next month we will review the service pages receiving enquiries and improve any unclear quote information.”

Choose the next action from the evidence

- If relevant visibility grows but visits remain flat, examine the pages, markets and search presentation. Do not assume all exposure will generate a click.
- If visits grow but completed enquiries do not, test the page and form. Check suitability, pricing information and the next step before commissioning more content.
- If enquiries grow but quality falls, review which services and locations those pages attract. The team’s qualification notes matter more than the raw form count.
- If qualified leads grow but completed sales lag, review follow-up time, availability and the sales cycle. Compare lead cohorts rather than mixing this month’s leads with older sales.

Keep traditional SEO diagnostics in the report

Rankings, click-through rate, engagement and indexing still help explain a problem. Use them as diagnostics alongside business results. There is no universal 2% click-through-rate threshold for deciding that a page needs rewriting.

A customer may get the answer on one page and immediately enquire, so more pages per session is not automatically better. Likewise, an average position across unrelated queries can hide the performance of an important service page. Segment by commercially relevant pages and markets.

When assessing return on investment, compare the profit associated with attributed sales against SEO costs, using a stated method. Revenue alone is not profit, and attributed revenue is not proof of additional sales that would never have happened otherwise.

Make the monthly report repeatable

- Use complete calendar months and retain the report property, filters, channel scope, currency and export date.
- Record tool time zones and allow for data processing. Month boundaries can differ between Search Console and your analytics property.
- Keep missing or unavailable values separate from genuine zeros. Check collection before interpreting an empty report as no activity.
- Keep a record of website changes, campaigns and tracking changes. Compare the same months a year apart when seasonality matters.
- End with the main business finding, a material limit and one or two actions with an owner. A dashboard full of numbers is not an action plan.

Online companion: Measuring visibility visits and business outcomes

36 Running a monthly AI visibility review

You can track AI search visibility without buying a specialist monitoring subscription. Google Search Console shows how often links to your website appear in Google's AI search features. Bing Webmaster Tools reports citations in supported AI experiences. Google Analytics 4, or GA4, shows recognised visits from AI assistants and the measured actions those visitors take.

This tutorial turns those reports into a monthly task. You will finish with a small worksheet, a record of the limits and one practical action for your website. The tools are free to use; initial account verification and website tracking may require help from the person who manages your site.

For the broader approach to choosing useful business measures, read chapter 35.

Keep three kinds of evidence separate

Evidence	What it tells you	What it does not establish
Impressions and citations	Your pages appeared as links or were referenced in the covered experience.	That someone visited, enquired or bought.
Referral visits	Analytics recorded a visit attributed to a recognised source.	Every visit influenced by AI, or the answer that prompted it.
Conversions and sales	A measured action happened; business records can confirm its quality and value.	That AI alone caused the result.

Do not add these figures together to create an "AI audience". Their units, coverage and collection methods differ. There is no useful combined total of impressions, citations and sessions.

Before you start

- Check that you can open the correct verified website in Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools, and the correct GA4 property. If access is missing, ask your site administrator to grant it.
- Check that GA4 actually collects visits and completed enquiries or purchases. Installing a plugin or creating an account does not automatically provide working conversion measurement.
- Choose a complete calendar month. For example, report on 1-30 September 2026 and compare with 1-31 August. Different month lengths and seasonal demand affect the comparison.
- Create one worksheet per month. Keep the property names, date ranges, filters, time zones and date of collection beside the figures. Save the reports you use.

Start with site-wide figures without country or page filters. If you later need a local market or service-page view, create a separately labelled section rather than silently changing the main report's scope.

Step 1 Record Google AI search impressions

Search Console's Generative AI report covers supported AI search features, including AI Overviews and AI Mode. Its visibility is already included in overall Search reporting. It is a subset, not an additional audience. Do not infer a separate conversion total from impression reporting.

Open the report and collect your figures

Sign in to Search Console and select your website property. Open the Generative AI performance report for Search. Confirm that the selected property is yours; the online companion links to the current report guidance.

Select the complete month. Record the chart's impressions total and search-type filter, such as Web: text-based. Keep the filter unchanged next month. Search Console dates use Pacific Time; note your GA4 property's time zone separately.

Inspect Pages, Countries and Devices. Note one relevant page, keeping this inspection separate from the site-wide total. Use Export to retain the chart and table.

Repeat for the previous month. Record overall Search impressions separately from Search results Performance, matching the dates and text-based or multimodal scope.

Check the limits before copying

Impressions count displayed links, not unique people or every brand mention. Search Labs experiments are excluded. A report can be missing when impressions are insufficient or the site is excluded from generative AI features.

Use the chart total rather than summing the Pages table: their aggregation can differ. Google also warns that unavailable values displayed as a dash or tilde export as zero. Check the screen before treating an exported zero as measured activity.

If the report is unavailable, write "Unavailable" in the worksheet and note the reason if known. Do not infer AI traffic from a drop in ordinary search clicks.

Step 2 Record Bing AI citations

Open Bing Webmaster Tools, choose the verified website and open AI Performance. This public-preview report covers Microsoft Copilot, AI-generated Bing summaries and selected partner experiences. It is not a report of all AI platforms.

Set the reporting dates to the same month as your worksheet. Copy Total Citations into its own row. This counts displayed source citations, not visits or rankings. If useful, keep Average Cited Pages in a separate note: it is a daily average of distinct cited pages, not the total number of pages cited during the month.

Review the cited-page list. Note one URL that receives relevant citations. Grounding Queries show a sample of retrieval phrases used to find supporting material; they are not necessarily customers' exact prompts.

Compare like with like

Where available, use Compare to examine the previous period, checking its dates. Microsoft's June preview update also added Intents and Topics to organise grounding queries. Treat these categories as context for a page review; preview classifications can be broad.

Citation Share is a percentage for a particular grounding query: your site's citations relative to citations across the sites referenced for that query. It is not traffic share or a ranking score. It does not reveal competitor domains. Do not sum these percentages across queries.

Retain the selected dates and the page or query you reviewed in your notes. If the interface offers a download, save it; otherwise record the totals and keep a dated screenshot for your own reporting file.

Step 3 Find recognised AI assistant visits in GA4

GA4's AI Assistant channel identifies recorded visits from recognised assistant referrers. The documented classification uses an ai-assistant medium and an (ai-assistant) campaign value. It is not a complete record of AI influence.

Use the session report

- Open the correct GA4 property. Go to Reports, then Acquisition, then Traffic acquisition. If your organisation has customised the navigation, ask an administrator to locate or restore this report.
- Set the date selector to the complete reporting month. Use Session default channel group as the table's main dimension. A dimension is simply the label used to group the rows.
- Find the AI Assistant row. Record Sessions. For visits, use this session-based report rather than User acquisition, which answers a question about how users were first acquired.
- Use the plus button beside the primary dimension to add Session source/medium when you want to inspect individual sources. Keep your monthly headline at the AI Assistant channel level.
- Repeat for the previous month. Record Organic Search sessions separately if you want the wider search comparison.

Sessions are visits, not unique customers. Missing referrer information and tracking gaps can leave some activity elsewhere or unobserved. Do not relabel all Direct traffic as AI traffic.

Google AI Overviews and AI Mode are excluded from GA4's AI Assistant channel. Their unpaid Google Search visits belong in Organic Search. Recognised referrals from the standalone Gemini assistant are a different category.

If the row is absent, first check the dates, property, default channel dimension and underlying sources. Record what you can establish. An absent row is not proof that no customer used AI before visiting.

Step 4 Check completed enquiries and purchases

Choose a measured action that matters, such as a successfully submitted enquiry or a completed purchase. A click on a telephone number or the start of a form is useful diagnostic information, but does not prove that an enquiry or sale happened.

In GA4, important measured actions are called key events. To mark an existing event, go to Admin, then Data display, then Events. In Recent events, find the correct event and use its star to mark it as a key event. Ask your administrator for help if the setting is unavailable.

The event must already measure the intended action correctly. Merely naming an event does not make your form track it. Marking it as a key event applies going forward; it does not rewrite earlier months. Standard reports can take up to 24 hours to reflect the change.

Submit a test enquiry and confirm successful delivery and one recorded completion. For a shop, check purchase value and currency as well. Ask your website manager to fix missing or duplicate measurement before drawing conclusions from the report.

Return to Traffic acquisition. In the Key events column, use the event selector to choose your completed-enquiry event rather than reporting all key events together. Record its count for the AI Assistant row. Keep a note of the event name and its counting setting.

An event count is not automatically a count of unique enquiries. Reconcile it with your inbox, booking system or customer relationship management system. Use those records to confirm genuine enquiries, qualified leads and paid sales, with a stated source-attribution rule.

For this simple worksheet, use the source recorded for the originating enquiry where it is available. If your records cannot connect a sale with that source, leave the AI-associated sales cell unavailable and report total business sales separately. Do not guess.

Step 5 Fill in the monthly worksheet

Copy this layout into a spreadsheet or keep it as a table in your reporting document. Replace each “Enter” with your value, a measured zero or “Unavailable”. Keep units and sources intact.

Report month: _____ Comparison month: _____ Collected on: _____

GSC property and search type: _____ Bing website: _____ GA4 property: _____

Filters and time zones: _____ Enquiry event and counting setting: _____

Business-record attribution rule: _____ Changes to tracking this month: _____

Measure and source	This month	Previous month
GSC overall Search impressionsIncludes the AI subset	Enter	Enter
GSC generative AI impressionsDo not add to overall Search	Enter	Enter
Bing AI Performance Total Citations	Enter	Enter
GA4 Organic Search sessions	Enter	Enter
GA4 AI Assistant sessions	Enter	Enter
GA4 selected enquiry key-event countAI Assistant row	Enter	Enter
Unique qualified enquiries associated with AI AssistantConfirmed in business records	Enter	Enter
Completed sales associated with AI AssistantBusiness records; state timing and source rule	Enter	Enter
Revenue from those salesBusiness records; state currency	Enter	Enter

Page or topic to investigate: _____ Main limitation this month: _____

Next action: _____ Person responsible: _____ Review date: _____

Read the figures without inventing a funnel

Suppose your fictional September report shows 20,000 overall Google impressions, including 3,000 generative AI impressions, 120 Bing citations and 40 GA4 AI Assistant sessions. It also records two genuine assistant-associated enquiries, one qualified enquiry and no completed sales yet.

The Google total is still 20,000. The 3,000 AI impressions are already within it. You cannot divide 40 assistant sessions by 120 Bing citations to calculate a click-through rate: the reports cover different experiences and do not connect those individual journeys.

A useful conclusion is: “We recorded AI visibility and a small number of recognised assistant visits. One enquiry was suitable. We will clarify the quotation process on the relevant service page and review next month.” A claim that AI visibility generated 40 visits would go beyond this evidence.

Completed sales this month may come from older enquiries. To calculate a lead-to-sale rate, follow the same group of leads over a stated period instead of dividing this month’s sales by this month’s new leads.

Use Clarity for an optional behaviour check

Microsoft Clarity offers a separate view of visitor behaviour. Its documented AI Platform channel groups recognised organic referrals from standalone assistants; Paid AI Platform is separate. These labels do not have the same coverage as GA4’s AI Assistant channel.

In your Clarity project, open the Dashboard and find the traffic/referrer card. Select the Channel tab, labelled Channels in some instructions, then AIPlatform. Apply that selection as a filter and inspect associated recordings or heatmaps. Set the same reporting month first.

For example, a garden maintenance owner might review whether those visitors find the service area information and successfully reach the quotation form. A recording can suggest a usability problem; it does not establish that an AI citation caused the enquiry.

Clarity’s guidance excludes embedded assistants within Search or Office from this grouping. Hidden referrers can appear as Direct, and older data is not retrospectively recategorised. Use this as optional behavioural context, not another citation count to add to your worksheet.

A checklist you can reuse every month

- Use complete months and the same website properties, filters and reporting scopes.
- Record Google AI impressions as a subset of overall Search, and Bing citations as a separate unit.
- Use GA4 session channels for visits. Keep AI Assistant and Organic Search separate.
- Check successful enquiry or purchase tracking; distinguish event counts from unique qualified enquiries and paid sales.
- Keep unavailable values, tracking changes and attribution limits visible. Retain your source reports.
- Review one relevant page or customer task. Set one action, a responsible person and a date to check the result.

This routine is useful even when the numbers are small. The aim is to learn whether useful visibility is accompanied by visits and worthwhile business activity, then improve what customers need next.

Online companion: Running a monthly AI visibility review

37 Turning an audit into an action plan

An SEO audit investigates how your website helps customers find and use its information. A useful report explains what changed, what the evidence shows and what needs attention next. Together, they help you choose work that matters and check whether it was completed properly.

Neither should leave you with a long list of unexplained warnings. Start with the business goal, inspect important pages and turn confirmed findings into specific actions. Use search data alongside genuine enquiries, bookings or sales, and be clear about what the figures cannot prove.

Understand the difference between an audit and a report

Work	Main question	Useful output
SEO audit	What needs attention, and why	Verified findings with affected pages, recommended actions and priorities.
Progress report	What happened during this period	A clear summary of work, results, limitations and the next decision.
Verification	Did the intended change work	A repeatable check of the original problem and important customer functions.

An audit can focus on one problem, such as a missing service page, or examine a wider part of the website. Agree the scope before calling it a full audit. A crawler export or automated health score is one source of evidence, rather than a complete assessment.

A report should connect the work with the evidence without claiming more than it shows. “The broken form now sends enquiries successfully” can be verified directly. “The repair caused this month’s sales growth” needs stronger evidence than two monthly totals.

Start with a goal and a manageable scope

Define the customer outcome you want to support: suitable service enquiries, appointment bookings, product purchases or access to important information. Then choose the pages and systems involved.

For a small service business, an initial review might cover the homepage, main service pages and contact route. A shop may need category pages, product variants and checkout checks. A multilingual site needs attention to the relevant language and country versions.

Record the scope before collecting data

- The website, business goal and pages or page types being reviewed.
- The period, property, country, device and search type relevant to the investigation.
- The tools and access available, including anything the review cannot inspect.
- The known concern, recent changes and person responsible for approving work.

If only a sample of pages is checked, say so and explain the selection. Include important journeys and representative templates, then broaden the review if a confirmed issue appears elsewhere. Do not imply that every page was tested when it was not.

Check access and customer journeys first

Open important pages on a phone and a desktop. Can a customer understand the offer, navigate to supporting information and complete the next step? Test a form through to receipt, a booking through to confirmation or a purchase using the appropriate test process.

Check the exact URLs that should be public and discoverable. In Search Console, URL Inspection initially describes Google's indexed version. A live test helps assess the current page, but it cannot guarantee indexing or predict Google's chosen canonical.

Investigate unexpected blocks, errors or exclusions on important public pages. Some non-indexed URLs are intentional, including private account pages or duplicates. Check the intended behaviour before changing robots.txt, noindex settings, redirects or canonical tags.

A sitemap helps discovery; submitting it does not establish that every listed page should be indexed. Likewise, a working page in your own browser does not prove that every relevant crawler can access it through your security rules.

Content and on-page information

Read a page as a prospective customer. Check the actual service or product, who it suits, important limits, price or quotation process and next step. Review descriptive titles, logical headings, relevant internal links and useful images.

Prioritise misleading claims, missing decision information and broken routes over cosmetic editing. A fixed word count, repeated keyword or plugin colour score does not establish that the page meets the customer's need.

Performance and accessibility

Check whether important content loads, the layout remains usable and buttons and forms can be operated. Review labels, readable text and keyboard use where relevant. An automated accessibility scan is a starting point, not a complete accessibility assessment.

PageSpeed Insights provides a lab test and real-user data where sufficient samples exist. Record whether you are looking at a single page or origin data, and remember that the real-user view covers a rolling 28-day period. A new lab test will not immediately replace that history.

Judge a performance change alongside the working customer journey. A higher score is not a useful outcome if the booking widget, consent controls or enquiry form has stopped working.

Structured data and search features

Check relevant structured data against the information visible on the page and the requirements of supported search features. Missing markup is not a general barrier to ranking. Google says a structured data manual action affects rich-result eligibility rather than ordinary web-search ranking.

Use Google's Rich Results Test for supported Google features and the Schema Markup Validator for the wider vocabulary. Passing validation does not guarantee a rich result, ranking improvement or AI citation.

Links and business information

Review whether internal links help customers reach useful pages. For relevant local businesses, check public hours, services, locations and contact routes against the real business.

Treat a third-party backlink “toxicity” score as a vendor assessment. It is not a Google penalty notice. Google says most sites do not need the disavow tool, which is intended for specific unnatural-link situations and can cause harm if misused. Do not turn an automated label into a routine disavow list.

Turn each finding into an action someone can check

Keep observations, possible explanations and confirmed causes separate. For example, a crawler may report a redirect. That is not an error if the old URL intentionally leads to its appropriate replacement. A missing enquiry confirmation needs reproduction before you decide whether the form or the email delivery is responsible.

Use a consistent finding record

Field	What to include
Finding	The specific observation and affected URL or page type.
Evidence	The source, check date and relevant settings or screenshot.
Effect	What the issue prevents or makes difficult for a customer or crawler.
Action	The proposed change, with assumptions and dependencies.
Owner and priority	Who will do the work and why it comes before other tasks.
Verification	The exact retest, review point and result.

Keep the original content or settings and agree how to restore them if needed. For a technical change, use suitable backups and staging. Record what was changed so a future reviewer can distinguish a new problem from an old observation.

Set priorities using the actual effect

A useful order is to resolve urgent access, security or transaction failures first, then verified problems affecting important customer pages, then relevant improvements. Optional presentation changes can wait when higher-impact work remains.

Consider confidence, affected journeys, reach, effort and dependencies. One broken contact form can matter more than hundreds of minor metadata suggestions. A repeated template fault may justify a site-wide fix, provided you check representative pages before and after rollout.

Keep uncertain findings in an investigation list. Assign the next diagnostic check rather than describing an unverified cause as a confirmed fault.

Build a report around the decisions it supports

A useful report can be short. Lead with the outcome or issue the owner needs to understand, then provide the supporting evidence. Keep technical detail available for the person doing the work without forcing every reader through a raw export.

Include these five parts

- Summary: the most important verified result, concern or decision.
- Work completed: what changed, where and why, including the checks performed.
- Results: relevant visibility, visits and business outcomes under consistent definitions.
- Limits and open questions: missing data, changed tracking, small samples or incomplete work.
- Agreed next action: who will do it and what will establish completion.

Use charts when they make a trend easier to understand, but label the dates, source, units and scope. A screenshot of a rising line without those details is not enough. Tables often explain a small set of comparable figures more clearly.

Keep visibility and commercial outcomes separate

Search impressions describe exposure. Visits describe recorded arrivals. Qualified enquiries and sales describe business outcomes. These measures support different questions and should not be added into a combined audience total.

For AI search, keep platform citation counts, recorded referral visits and business outcomes distinct. Google's generative AI impressions sit within overall Search figures, so do not add them again. Use the measurement guide for each platform's definitions and the practical tutorial for collecting the figures.

A simple example of a monthly report

The figures and business below are fictional. A furniture repair business compares September and October using the same website properties, filters and enquiry definitions. September has 30 days and October has 31, so the owner also reviews daily patterns and seasonal context.

Measure	September	October
Google Search clicks	400	440
GA4 Organic Search sessions	350	370
Unique qualified enquiries with recorded Organic Search source	12	11

The team clarified its collection policy and repaired an enquiry email-delivery fault during October. The repair was tested through to receipt. However, the earlier delivery fault means the enquiry comparison may be incomplete; the figures do not establish whether demand rose or fell.

A sensible report summary would say: "Recorded Google clicks and organic sessions increased, while recorded qualified enquiries were slightly lower. We verified that the email-delivery fault is resolved. Earlier missing enquiries and the small counts limit comparison. Next, we will reconcile form records with received enquiries and inspect the pages attracting relevant visits."

This explains an improvement that was actually checked without claiming the content edit caused more business. It also makes the limitation visible rather than using higher traffic to conceal a concern about enquiries.

Investigate unexpected changes before recommending a fix

If performance drops, examine affected pages, queries, devices and countries. Check tracking changes, availability, seasonality, security, indexing and known reporting anomalies. A ranking update occurring near the change does not prove the cause.

Google's traffic-drop guidance recommends checking multiple possible explanations and avoiding radical changes for small ranking fluctuations. Keep the audit focused on evidence and the affected customer task.

Choose a review rhythm that fits the website

A regular review of results and open actions can help a small business keep work moving. Monthly is one practical option, not a requirement to run a full audit every month. A larger review is useful when the website changes substantially or a problem warrants it.

Check immediately after a migration, redesign, important plugin change or a fix affecting bookings and purchases. For a stable site, choose a proportionate schedule based on the risk, scale of changes and information available. Avoid paying for repeated issue lists that lead to no decisions.

When specialist help is useful

Use specialist support for compromised websites, migrations, complex access problems, unexplained tracking faults or issues beyond your ability to diagnose. Give the reviewer affected URLs, dates, symptoms and recent changes.

Ask what the audit includes, whether implementation is separate, how priorities will be explained and how fixes will be verified. Google advises granting only read access to Search Console during an initial audit and warns against first-place guarantees.

Online companion: Turning an audit into an action plan

38 Investigating a traffic drop

A Google traffic drop needs a diagnosis before a recovery plan. An update happening near the same date is a clue, not proof that it caused the decline. Tracking changes, seasonal demand, technical faults, security problems and reporting errors can produce similar-looking graphs.

Step 1 Confirm which traffic has fallen

Write down the metric, report, property and dates behind the concern. “Traffic is down” might mean fewer GA4 sessions, fewer Google Search clicks, fewer Discover clicks or fewer enquiries. Those are different problems.

In GA4, use Reports, Acquisition, Traffic acquisition and Session default channel group to compare visits. Separate Organic Search from Direct, Referral and other channels. Add Session source/medium when you need to isolate google / organic from other search engines.

Then check Search Console for Google clicks and impressions over comparable dates. Its clicks and GA4 sessions need not match exactly because the tools measure different things. Look for the pattern rather than expecting identical totals.

A total traffic decline is not automatically an SEO decline

Consider this fictional example, using equal reporting periods:

GA4 sessions	Before	After
Organic Search	400	400
Direct	500	100
Other channels	100	100
Total	1,000	600

Total sessions fell 40%, but the recorded Organic Search sessions stayed level. The immediate investigation belongs with Direct traffic and measurement. This example does not establish why Direct fell; it shows why the total alone cannot support a claim that Google reduced search traffic.

Check completed enquiries, bookings or sales separately. If recorded search visits are stable but enquiries fall, test the enquiry process and assess lead quality before assuming a ranking change.

Step 2 Check the measurement before changing the site

Confirm you are viewing the intended website property with the same report filters. Compare complete periods, avoiding an incomplete latest day or a different number of weekdays. Search Console’s newest data can be preliminary; unavailable values can also export as zero.

- Ask whoever manages analytics to check recent tag, consent-banner, plugin and channel-group changes. Confirm that page visits and completed enquiry or purchase events still record as intended.
- Check whether the concern comes from the original report or a spreadsheet, dashboard or export. A broken connector, missing export days or changed calculation can create a drop in the summary.

- Open Google's Search Console data anomalies page. Match the affected dates, report and metric; a Discover logging error does not explain every decline in Web Search.
- Save the original comparison and note when you collected it. If Google later restores missing data, refresh the analysis rather than continuing to use an earlier export.

Step 3 Identify the update type and its scope

Use Google's ranking history to confirm the update's name, start and completion dates. The publication date of a news report is not the rollout date. Add your own site changes and first observed decline to the same record.

Core updates

Core updates are broad changes to Google's ranking systems, rather than actions directed at a particular website. A fall near a core update is not, by itself, evidence of a penalty or a specific fault.

Google recommends waiting at least a full week after a core rollout completes before analysing its effect in Search Console, then comparing with a period before it began. Use this for ranking assessment; fix a confirmed outage or broken tracking immediately.

Spam updates and manual actions

Spam updates improve Google's automated spam detection. Where a sustained change overlaps one, review the spam policies and practices actually present on your site. Do not infer a violation solely from the date.

A manual action is a separate finding by a human reviewer at Google. Check Search Console's Manual Actions report. If an action exists, follow its specific remediation and review process. An empty report does not rule out automated spam detection.

Discover updates

Discover is an interest-based feed rather than a list of results for a typed query. Its traffic is less predictable than keyword-driven search. Assess its Performance report separately, including affected pages and countries. The report may be absent when its impression threshold is not met.

A Discover decline can reflect changing interests or distribution rather than a loss of ordinary Web Search rankings. The February 2026 rollout initially targeted English-language users in the US; do not assume a worldwide effect from the announcement alone.

Step 4 Build a useful before and after comparison

Use the Date filter's comparison options to choose matching periods. For a recent decline, equal 28-day windows can help balance weekdays. Review a longer view as well, including the same season last year when data is available.

For a core update comparison, place the baseline before the rollout and the assessment period after the completed rollout and recommended waiting period. Record the exact dates. A default "previous period" can accidentally include rollout days.

Compare the segments that can reveal a pattern

- Pages: identify the URLs with the largest absolute click losses. Group them by service, topic or shared template. Keep some stable pages as a comparison.
- Queries: check which searches declined for the affected pages. Separate your brand queries from service or informational queries, and look for a change in the questions attracting visits.
- Devices: compare mobile, desktop and tablet. A concentrated mobile decline merits a check of mobile content, navigation and any device-specific fault.
- Countries: compare the markets you serve. A decline in one country calls for investigation of local demand, language targeting and access, rather than an assumption of a site-wide problem.
- Search appearance: examine relevant feature views where available. A retired feature or changed reporting category can affect its row without establishing a general ranking loss.

Click a page row to filter the report to that URL, then inspect its Queries, Devices and Countries tabs. Record each filter and clear it before assessing the next site-wide view. Query and URL filters can change totals because some data is omitted or truncated.

Prioritise both business importance and absolute losses. A page falling from ten clicks to zero loses fewer visits than a service page falling from 500 to 400, even though its percentage decline is larger. With a zero baseline, a percentage change is undefined; label it rather than inventing one.

Step 5 Interpret the pattern and test alternatives

If impressions and clicks both fall, investigate demand, visibility and eligibility. If clicks fall while impressions are broadly steady, inspect query-level position and search presentation. The site-wide average can conceal a change in which queries your pages appear for.

Review actual search results for representative queries in the relevant market and device context. Note changes in competing pages, titles, snippets and result layouts. A current result is a snapshot, not proof of what every customer saw earlier.

Do not infer that AI answers caused the loss merely because clicks fell. Establish what the reports and observed search presentation can support. Keep a clear distinction between evidence and the explanation you are testing.

Check seasonal demand

Use Google Trends for important lost queries or topics, selecting the relevant country and a period that shows recurring patterns. Compare with last year’s Search Console data and your own business cycle, including holidays, campaigns and changes in availability.

Trends reports relative interest, normalised to a 0-100 scale, rather than exact monthly searches. Low-volume terms can show zero. Treat a matching demand decline as supporting context, not conclusive proof of the cause.

Step 6 Check access security and indexation

Review Search Console’s Page indexing and Crawl stats reports for changes around the decline. Inspect important affected URLs and a stable comparison page. A shared template or directory can help narrow the investigation.

Use URL Inspection to compare Google's stored result with a live test. Check crawl permission, page fetch, indexing permission and the expected canonical. Inspect the returned content where available; the live test cannot guarantee indexing or predict Google's chosen canonical.

- Open the affected public pages and check for errors, unintended redirects, missing content or password protection. Check whether important URLs changed during a migration.
- Review robots.txt, noindex instructions and WordPress Search Engine Visibility settings. Confirm that the intended pages and required resources remain available.
- Check hosting and Cloudflare logs for relevant blocks, challenges or server failures. A page working in your own browser does not prove that a crawler receives the same content.
- Open Search Console's Security Issues and Manual Actions reports. Investigate malware, injected pages or warnings promptly; keep this work separate from an ordinary content-quality review.

Save the settings before a correction, record its time and retest the same URLs afterwards. If it causes a new problem, restore the earlier configuration and verify that the rollback actually takes effect.

A clean technical test narrows the possibilities. It does not prove that an update caused the decline or that the content is already the best answer available.

Step 7 Improve the pages where evidence supports it

When a sustained visibility decline remains after the other checks, assess affected pages and the wider site. Compare the reader's task with what the page delivers. Look for missing answers, outdated claims, weak original input or instructions that are difficult to follow.

Ask someone who understands the subject to review the evidence and usefulness. Accurate author information and sources help readers assess trust; adding a biography, FAQs or schema is not a guaranteed recovery technique.

Make changes that solve a documented weakness. Preserve useful pages and successful elements. Treat deletion as a last resort for content that cannot be made worthwhile; do not remove whole sections merely because they lost traffic.

Keep an action log with the page, finding, change, owner and date. Avoid simultaneous site-wide rewrites, new redirects and security changes that leave you unable to tell what changed the result.

How long can improvement take

Google says some changes may show an effect within days, while broader reassessment can take months. Improvements can be recognised between major core updates; waiting for the next announced rollout is not always necessary. No change guarantees a return to the earlier position.

For spam-related effects, compliance may need to be recognised over months. If a specific manual action is present, use its review process rather than treating it as routine algorithm volatility.

Keep the diagnosis reviewable

Write a short conclusion containing what you know, what remains uncertain and what you will test next. For example, using fictional findings:

"Google Web Search clicks declined 30% across matched 28-day periods. Most lost clicks came from three service guides, concentrated in mobile searches in our main market. The dates overlap an announced update,

but the cause remains unconfirmed. We will verify mobile crawler access, inspect the affected queries and compare seasonal demand before deciding on content changes."

Retain the exports and filters supporting that statement. Monitor the affected pages, stable comparison pages and business results using the same scope. Revisit the working explanation when new evidence contradicts it.

A repeatable traffic drop checklist

- Confirm the report, metric, affected channel and first decline date.
- Validate tracking, filters, exports and reporting anomalies.
- Record the update type, scope and official rollout dates.
- Compare matched periods by page, query, device, country and search type.
- Check demand, security, access and indexation before changing content.
- Make evidence-based improvements, retain a rollback record and retest.
- Monitor consistent measures and state the limits of the diagnosis.

The useful outcome is a better-supported explanation and a focused action plan. A nearby update date or a promise of rapid recovery does not provide either.

Online companion: Investigating a traffic drop

39 Understanding Google updates

Google changes its ranking systems over time. Use the official update history to establish the type and timing of a confirmed rollout, then investigate your own evidence. The online companion keeps dated update records; the approach below remains useful after an individual rollout ends.

Google algorithm changes can affect where your pages appear in search results. Understanding the type of change helps you decide what to investigate and whether your website needs work. A ranking drop near an update is a reason to examine the evidence, not proof that the update caused it.

What is a Google algorithm update

Google uses several automated systems to understand searches and rank relevant results. An update changes how some of those systems work. Google announces significant changes, but smaller improvements also happen without a named announcement.

An update can change the order of results even when you have not edited your website. Other pages, information and customer expectations are changing too. Moving down does not automatically mean your page broke a rule.

Core updates

A core update broadly changes how Google evaluates results. It is not a notice that a particular website has been penalised. If important pages show a substantial, sustained decline, assess how well they serve readers compared with the alternatives.

Spam updates

A spam update improves automated detection of practices that breach Google’s spam policies. Examples of policy problems include manipulative links, deceptive pages and producing large amounts of content primarily to manipulate rankings. Review the actual policy and your practices before deciding what needs correcting.

A manual action is separate: a human reviewer has identified a policy violation and Google reports it in Search Console. A clear Manual Actions report does not rule out an automated ranking change.

Discover updates

Discover is a personalised feed that can show articles without someone typing a search. An update to Discover should be assessed against Discover performance, rather than assumed to explain a decline in ordinary web search.

A Discover update can have a different scope from a web search update. Check the original announcement and current rollout record before assuming that a change applies to every language or market.

Other changes to search and reporting

Search layouts, feature eligibility, technical incidents and reporting changes can also affect what you see. An announcement about AI search or a reporting tool is not automatically a core ranking update. Keep these developments separate when investigating a change.

Older update names in context

Panda and Penguin are useful parts of SEO history, but they are not separate recovery checklists for today. Panda became part of Google's core systems in 2015; Penguin followed in 2016. The helpful content system introduced in 2022 evolved into the core ranking systems in March 2024.

Use current documentation to assess current problems. An old industry nickname does not tell you why a particular page has moved.

For the current confirmed timeline, use theseoguidebook.com/google-algorithm-changes/ and Google's Search Status Dashboard. Recheck the official completion notice before choosing a post-rollout comparison period.

Online companion: Understanding Google updates

40 Learning from recent website projects

SEO works best when it supports what a business needs its website to achieve. That may mean helping prospective clients understand a specialist service, removing technical barriers or making a complex international website easier to use and maintain.

These recent project accounts illustrate financial services and an anonymous international B2B website. They describe the work and its purpose, with ongoing maintenance distinguished from completed changes.

A case study is most useful when you understand the starting point, the work involved and the evidence behind any reported change. Use these examples to ask better questions and plan relevant improvements, rather than expect another business's results on the same timetable.

Ross Naylor Financial planning for British expatriates

Ross Naylor's website helps British expatriates understand financial planning and pension questions. The work combines content development, clearer routes to professional advice and technical maintenance. The commercial aim is to attract suitable enquiries from people who may benefit from advice.

Developing content around real financial decisions

I developed and refreshed content around the questions expatriates face when living abroad or returning to the UK. This included country-focused material for destinations such as Dubai, Greece and Poland, alongside topics including frozen State Pensions, UK pensions abroad, returning to the UK and pension tax codes.

These topics connect practical questions with the wider financial decisions behind them. Country guides give readers context, while supporting articles address more specific concerns. Relevant internal links help readers explore the next question without having to start again elsewhere.

Financial information needs careful checking. My role includes researching and structuring content for Ross's professional review, keeping the distinction between general information and advice suited to an individual's circumstances clear.

Making the route to a Discovery Call clearer

A substantial conversion improvement project revised page layouts, service explanations and calls to action. The purpose was to help readers understand Ross's broader financial advice service and find the Discovery Call booking route when relevant to their needs.

The balance matters. An article should answer the question that brought someone to the page, then explain how professional advice may help. The ongoing content review includes checking that the principal answer remains prominent and that commercial messaging supports the reader's task.

Improving structure and interpreting the data

I have also been reviewing and correcting heading structures across the archive. This work puts each article's main topic and supporting sections into a logical order, while retaining its intended appearance. It makes long articles easier to navigate and gives assistive technologies a clearer structure. The archive review is ongoing.

Another workstream addressed unwanted automated traffic, particularly traffic associated with China and Singapore, through server-level blocking and monitoring. This makes comparisons between reporting periods

more complicated: a reduction in recorded visits after filtering can reflect cleaner measurement. Country alone does not prove that a visit is automated, and some unwanted activity may still get through.

Reporting distinguishes visits, booking-link clicks and confirmed calls. A click to Calendly shows interest in the booking route; it does not establish that an appointment was completed or that a new client was acquired. Enquiry quality and confirmed business outcomes remain the more useful commercial checks.

What this project demonstrates

Specialist SEO involves editorial judgement, conversion design and technical investigation working together. A useful article needs a clear answer, a relevant next step and measurement that helps the business understand what happened. The work continues as the content, audience and search environment change.

An international B2B services website Technical SEO and maintenance

This ongoing project involves a large international services business with a multilingual WordPress website. The client is not named here. The work spans technical SEO, performance investigation, content maintenance and a substantial website rebrand, in collaboration with the client’s team and hosting provider.

Maintaining a complex multilingual website

The website combines multiple language versions, an established page builder and a large archive of pages and news. Improvements have included rewriting titles and descriptions, maintaining excerpts and reviewing headings, internal navigation and important indexing issues.

The purpose is to make each page’s role clearer and help visitors reach the right service or information in their market. On a website of this size, consistency also matters operationally: an isolated correction can be undone by a shared template or competing page-level override.

Investigating performance and display problems

A major workstream examined slow or inconsistent page behaviour across different regions. I investigated browser errors, script loading, caching settings and the interaction between performance tools and the website’s components. Testing included checking ordinary and private browsing sessions and requesting checks from people in affected locations.

This identified a JavaScript conflict affecting the display of a slider. Adjusting the conflicting script settings restored its display during testing. I also removed an older code snippet that interfered with slider scripts on mobile, reducing another source of conflicting behaviour.

Following a wider decision to simplify the presentation, sliders were replaced with single images across the site. This removed unnecessary slide navigation and reduced dependence on moving components for the main message. I treated that change as part of the wider performance and usability work, checking the resulting pages rather than assuming that one change solved every speed issue.

Front-end performance and the WordPress administration area are separate parts of the investigation. Slow editing screens affect how efficiently content and corrections can be delivered. Backend responsiveness remains an explicit workstream with the hosting provider, alongside investigation of server processing and slow requests.

Fixing information at its source

Some office contact details were controlled by shared language-specific templates, while individual pages contained separate overrides. That could briefly show an incorrect address before replacing it with another version.

I corrected the shared templates so the appropriate details appeared immediately and consistently. Redundant page-level overrides were then removed, with the clean-up progressing across language versions. This reduces conflicting information for visitors and gives the team a clearer place to maintain future changes.

Delivering the rebrand through staging

A second substantial workstream covered the website's rebrand, including the logo, colours, navigation, overall presentation and a redesigned homepage. The work was prepared through a staging site so changes could be reviewed before reaching the public website.

This required attention to the existing content and components as well as the new appearance. Navigation, service sections and news presentation all needed to remain useful as the design changed. Technical maintenance continued alongside the rebrand rather than being treated as a separate task to revisit at the end.

What this project demonstrates

On a complex business website, SEO delivery often depends on resolving the causes of recurring problems. Template fixes, controlled testing, clearer navigation and efficient administration help protect the website's ability to support the business. This creates a more dependable platform for service information, enquiries and future improvements, with changes checked against the problem they were intended to solve.

Online companion: Learning from recent website projects

41 Avoiding costly SEO mistakes

The most costly SEO mistakes are often practical ones: attracting the wrong audience, losing enquiries through a broken form or spending time on low-value tasks while important pages remain unclear.

Other mistakes come from outdated advice, misunderstood reports or shortcuts that promise rankings and AI visibility. This chapter explains 12 common problems, why they matter and what to do instead.

Start with the issue affecting your customers or commercial priorities. You do not need to change every page or fix every tool warning at once.

1 Treating more traffic as the main goal

A rising visitor count can hide weak commercial performance. People may be arriving from markets you do not serve, reading unrelated articles or looking for services you do not provide.

Instead, define a useful business outcome: suitable enquiries, qualified sales opportunities, bookings or orders. Identify the pages that support it, then use search and analytics data to investigate how those pages perform.

For a business with a long sales cycle, qualified opportunities and eventual sales may tell you more than immediate online purchases. Record attribution limits rather than assume every sale came from SEO.

2 Targeting searches that do not match your offer

A popular search term is not automatically a good target. A page can attract plenty of attention while failing to answer the question a prospective customer actually needs resolved.

Instead, establish who the page is for and the decision it should help them make. Use customer conversations, enquiries and available search data to understand the language and needs involved. Consider the intended market and whether the search is about learning, comparing or buying.

Group related questions sensibly. A distinct customer task may need a separate page; a slightly different phrase usually does not.

3 Attracting visitors before testing the enquiry route

A clear-looking contact button is not proof that the enquiry process works. Forms can fail to deliver, booking links can break and important purchase conditions can be difficult to find.

Instead, complete the customer journey on a phone and desktop. Check the information needed to decide, follow the next step and confirm that a test enquiry, booking or appropriate test order reaches its destination.

Fix the failure before investing in additional promotion. Make clear who you help, what you offer and what happens after someone contacts you.

4 Overlooking access and indexing problems

Useful pages can become difficult to discover after a redesign, plugin change or security-rule update. Changing content will not resolve an accidental block affecting those pages.

Instead, inspect important URLs in Search Console and investigate unexpected exclusions. Its indexed report and live test answer different questions; a live test pass does not guarantee indexing. Review relevant indexing settings, internal links and security controls with someone who understands them.

Do not try to get every URL indexed. Private pages and duplicate versions may be excluded deliberately. A sitemap supports discovery without guaranteeing that a page appears in results.

5 Ignoring mobile problems or chasing perfect speed scores

A website may look acceptable on your office computer while its mobile menu, forms or overlays make it difficult to use. Equally, spending hours improving a laboratory score may leave a broken booking route untouched.

Instead, test real tasks on a phone and use PageSpeed Insights to investigate performance. Distinguish laboratory results from field data, which may be unavailable or reflect a wider set of pages. Check whether changes improve usability as well as the report.

Prioritise serious delays, unstable layouts and controls that fail. A perfect score does not guarantee rankings, and a low score alone does not explain a traffic drop.

6 Publishing more content without adding useful information

A busy publishing schedule can create a large archive of repetitive pages. AI makes producing those pages easier, but it does not supply genuine business experience or verify the facts for you.

Instead, improve the pages customers need most. Add accurate service detail, useful examples, evidence and answers that help a decision. Verify AI-assisted claims, sources and authorship before publishing.

Short content can be useful, and long content can be unhelpful. There is no universal word count. Producing large amounts of low-value content to manipulate search is a policy risk, whether it is made manually or with automation.

7 Following rigid keyword and metadata rules

Repeating a phrase to reach a keyword-density target makes writing awkward. Treating every title or description as a fixed-length formula can also obscure what makes the page useful.

Instead, use natural customer language, accurate titles and meaningful headings. Summarise the page honestly in its meta description. Search engines may display different title or snippet wording; character targets are editing guides, not guaranteed display limits.

Keyword stuffing violates Google’s spam policies, but ordinary repetition is not proof of a penalty. A missing meta description is also not, by itself, an indexing block.

8 Deleting pages or changing URLs without a plan

Removing every short, old or duplicate page can destroy useful information and break existing links. Changing established URLs simply to add keywords can create unnecessary migration work.

Instead, assess each page’s purpose, accuracy and value. Keep useful pages, update misleading ones and combine overlapping material where that helps readers. Duplicate content is not automatically a spam violation.

When a page moves permanently, use an appropriate redirect to a relevant replacement. If there is no suitable replacement, a genuine 404 or 410 may be correct. Redirecting every retired URL to the homepage is not a reliable clean-up strategy.

9 Buying ranking links or reacting to every toxic-link warning

Buying links intended to pass ranking credit can breach Google's link-spam rules. At the other extreme, treating every unfamiliar backlink as a threat can lead to unnecessary and harmful clean-up work.

Instead, pursue relevant coverage, partnerships and useful resources. Identify paid placements honestly and apply appropriate link attributes. A third-party toxicity score is not a Google penalty notice.

Google says most sites do not need its disavow tool. It is an advanced option for specific unnatural-link situations involving a manual action or a likely one. Do not disavow a list simply because a tool flags it.

10 Leaving business facts and advice out of date

Incorrect opening hours, unavailable services, old prices and outdated advice can mislead customers. Publishing new articles will not correct those problems elsewhere on the site.

Instead, prioritise commercially important information and claims that could cause confusion. Check key pages, product feeds and relevant external listings. For multiple markets, verify local availability, terminology and contact details.

Record substantive changes and review related pages. Altering a publication date without improving the content does not make the advice more reliable.

11 Expecting an AI file plugin or schema type to guarantee visibility

No plugin score, special text file or markup type can promise that an AI system will cite or recommend your business. A single answer sample is also not a universal AI ranking.

Instead, follow the documented requirements for the platform involved and maintain useful, accurate, accessible information. Google says established SEO practices remain relevant to its AI search features; it does not require special AI files or special schema for inclusion.

An llms.txt file is optional curated information, not training permission. Use structured data appropriately, while recognising that valid markup does not guarantee a rich result or an AI citation.

12 Making major changes before investigating the evidence

A traffic drop near a Google update does not establish the cause. Tracking changes, seasonality, security controls and lost access to important pages can produce different symptoms that need different responses.

Instead, confirm what declined and where. Compare affected pages, queries, devices and countries; inspect measurement and website changes. Keep search impressions, citations, sessions and business outcomes separate.

Write down the problem, the evidence, the proposed change and how you will test it. Keep a rollback route for significant changes. Ask for specialist help when you cannot confidently diagnose or reverse the work.

Decide what to fix first

Priority	Examples	Next step
Immediate customer or access problem	Failed enquiries, incorrect checkout information, important pages unexpectedly blocked.	Confirm the failure, assign an owner and retest the fix.

Priority	Examples	Next step
Important information or relevance gap	Unclear service pages, misleading advice, wrong-market content.	Improve the affected pages and check the customer journey.
Supporting improvements	Metadata refinements, minor tool warnings, broader content opportunities.	Assess their value and add useful tasks to the work plan.

For example, a fictional consultancy may discover that a service page attracts relevant searches but its enquiry form fails. Fixing and retesting the form comes before commissioning more articles. That is a prioritisation example, not a reported client result.

Online companion: Avoiding costly SEO mistakes

42 Building a manageable maintenance routine

SEO becomes manageable when it is part of looking after the business rather than a separate list of endless tasks. Keep one action record, choose a useful priority and complete the test that shows whether the change worked.

Start with the customer task

Write down what the website should help someone do: choose a service, buy a product, request a quotation or find reliable information. Select the pages needed for that task. A service page and contact route often deserve attention before another blog post.

Test the journey yourself on a phone and a computer. If the number is wrong, the offer is unclear or the form does not reach the team, record the issue and correct it. You can improve these problems without first explaining every movement in search visibility.

Keep one working record

For each task, record the affected URL, the observed problem, the evidence, the person responsible, the planned change and the retest. Keep a copy of the earlier state where the change could be difficult to reverse.

Use a clear status such as To investigate, Ready to change, Changed awaiting retest, or Complete. Complete should mean that the relevant check passed, not merely that someone edited a setting.

At each working session

Choose a task that fits the available time and your skills. Check that its original evidence still applies. Make the agreed change, inspect the public result and test the affected next step. Record what happened before moving to another task.

When the cause is unclear, use the session to collect useful evidence. An exact URL, a screenshot of the error, a time and a description of what changed can save a specialist a great deal of repeated investigation.

At the monthly review

Compare complete reporting periods, keeping visibility, visits and business outcomes separate. Review the important pages, markets and devices rather than relying only on a whole-site total. Note changes in tracking, filtering or definitions.

Ask the people handling enquiries whether the website is bringing appropriate requests and whether any recurring question remains unanswered. A short conversation can reveal a problem that a chart cannot explain.

Choose the next improvement from this combined evidence. Avoid filling a new month with activities simply because they are easy to count. The priority is the business consequence and the quality of the evidence.

After a business change

A move, new service, revised price or changed booking system can affect several places at once. Check the website, shared templates, Business Profile, relevant listings and any feeds. Use the approved fact sheet so colleagues update the same information.

Test redirects when a destination changes. Check that old links still lead to a relevant page where a replacement exists. A new design does not remove the need to preserve useful URLs and working customer routes.

After a technical change

Use staging for a change that needs controlled testing. Check the pages and functions affected by a theme, plugin, cache, security or server adjustment. Include mobile use, forms and any consent or booking components.

Restore the recorded previous state if the change creates a problem, then retest. Keep the failed experiment in the change record so another person does not unknowingly repeat it.

Review content selectively

Give misleading guidance and important customer decisions priority. Keep accurate pages, update a specific gap, combine overlapping answers where useful and retain historical context where it serves readers. A newer date alone does not improve a page.

Use the archive review and content planning chapters together. Questions already answered well do not need another page. Questions with a distinct purpose may need a stronger section or a separate supporting guide.

Decide when to ask for help

Bring in a specialist when diagnosis, access, testing or rollback exceeds your ability. Give them the evidence and a defined outcome. Ask how the proposed work will be checked and what limitations remain.

Keep business ownership of the domain, hosting and essential accounts. An owner or internal team can keep control of priorities while using specialist assistance for a particular problem.

Your next useful action

Choose one important page and one problem you can explain. Record its current state, make a proportionate improvement and test the result. The checklists and worksheets that follow help you repeat that process without rebuilding your plan every time.

Online companion: Building a manageable maintenance routine

Appendix A The working SEO checklist

Use this checklist on the pages that support your business. Some checks apply only to particular websites. Write Not applicable where appropriate and keep evidence beside any issue you find.

1 Check the route to enquiries and sales

Priority: fix anything that stops an interested customer taking the next step.

01 Choose a useful business outcome. Name the result you want, such as suitable enquiries, confirmed bookings or completed orders. Identify the pages that support it.

02 Make your offer clear. Check that visitors can understand what you provide, who it suits and the markets or areas you serve.

03 Explain the buying decision. Include important conditions, availability and prices or quotation arrangements. Remove claims that the business cannot substantiate.

04 Make the next step obvious. Use clear links or buttons for the relevant action. Check that people can find contact, booking or purchase information on a phone.

05 Complete a test journey. Submit an enquiry or test the booking or purchase process appropriately. Confirm the message, booking or order reaches the right destination.

If a test enquiry fails, fix that before spending time attracting additional visitors.

2 Check whether important pages can appear in search

Priority: investigate unexpected access or indexing problems on pages customers need.

06 Verify access to Search Console. Use the correct Google Search Console property for your website. Keep business ownership of the account and give helpers appropriate access.

07 Inspect important URLs. Enter the exact page address in URL Inspection. Review the indexed report and investigate unexpected exclusions. A live test assesses the current page; it does not guarantee indexing.

08 Check for accidental restrictions. Investigate unexpected noindex settings, crawler blocks or security challenges. Do not remove rules without understanding which pages or requests they protect.

09 Check your XML sitemap. If your website provides a sitemap, confirm it opens and lists the preferred public URLs you want indexed. Submission helps discovery; it does not guarantee inclusion.

10 Make pages reachable through links. Link to important pages from relevant navigation or related content. A page should not depend entirely on being listed in a sitemap.

11 Review serious alerts. Check Search Console for manual actions and security issues. Treat a confirmed problem separately from an ordinary ranking fluctuation.

Not every excluded URL needs fixing. Private pages, duplicates and retired URLs may be excluded deliberately. Avoid changing settings simply to make every report entry disappear.

3 Check that each page answers a real customer need

Priority: improve the pages supporting important decisions before adding more content.

12 Give the page a clear purpose. Identify the question or task it should address. Cover closely related questions together; avoid a separate page for every keyword variation.

13 Use customer language. Check enquiries, conversations and available search data for the words customers use. Explain specialist terms where the reader needs help.

14 Add information from the business. Include genuine service details, examples, expertise or product information. Replace generic statements with facts that help someone choose.

15 Verify facts and evidence. Check claims, dates, sources, authorship and examples, including AI-assisted drafts. Get the appropriate expert to review specialist advice.

16 Review older pages. Correct misleading guidance and outdated offers. Update, combine or retire pages according to their usefulness. Changing the date alone is not an improvement.

4 Check titles headings links and images

Priority: help people understand the page and move through the website.

17 Write an accurate page title. Make the title clear, concise and distinct from other pages. Include relevant business or location detail where helpful. Google may display different wording.

18 Review the meta description. Summarise the page honestly. There is no fixed character count that guarantees the displayed snippet, and Google may use text from the page instead.

19 Organise headings logically. Use a clear page title and descriptive section headings. Make the reading order understandable, including for people using assistive technology.

20 Use meaningful link text. Describe the destination rather than relying on repeated “click here” links. Check important navigation and contact links actually work.

21 Make images useful and accessible. Use relevant, clear images near supporting text. Give informative images appropriate alt text; decorative images should normally use empty alt text.

22 Avoid oversized image files. Serve suitably sized images and use supported compression or modern formats where appropriate. Check visual quality and layout after changing them.

5 Check technical issues that affect usability

Priority: fix real problems on important pages, rather than chase a perfect tool score.

23 Check HTTPS and browser warnings. Confirm important pages and form routes load securely without certificate or mixed-content problems. Investigate unexpected redirects or warnings.

24 Test the mobile experience. Check menus, text, buttons, forms and overlays on a phone. Make sure essential information and controls remain usable.

25 Investigate slow or unstable pages. Use PageSpeed Insights alongside real use. Distinguish laboratory suggestions from field data, which may be unavailable. Check whether changes improve the customer experience.

26 Review broken and retired URLs. Repair broken links. Redirect a permanently moved page to a relevant replacement. If none exists, a genuine 404 or 410 response can be appropriate.

27 Investigate unexpected duplicates. Check the preferred URL and canonical information where duplicates cause confusion. Duplicate URLs are not automatically a spam violation; avoid deleting useful pages indiscriminately.

28 Check WordPress changes carefully. Review plugin overlap and unexpected changes to indexing or metadata. Back up first and test updates; use specialist help for settings you cannot confidently restore.

6 Use the checks that fit your business

For local businesses

29 Verify business details. Check your eligible Google Business Profile and important listings for accurate hours, services, contact details and genuine locations.

30 Review customer feedback practices. Invite genuine reviews without incentives or selective positive-review requests. Respond appropriately and correct inaccurate information you control.

For ecommerce websites

31 Check product information. Keep prices, stock, variants, images, delivery and returns accurate. Check consistency between visible pages, product feeds and structured data.

32 Test purchase information and checkout. Confirm customers can understand total costs and important conditions before committing. Test the process after changes to products, payments or templates.

For multilingual or international websites

33 Review local relevance. Check local terminology, currency, availability and contact information. Translation alone does not make an offer appropriate for another market.

34 Check language versions. Make sure language links reach the intended pages. Ask a specialist to review hreflang and canonical implementation if versions are being confused in search.

7 Review structured data and AI search sensibly

Priority: accurate information and appropriate implementation, without promises of special visibility.

35 Use relevant structured data. Check that markup describes the visible content accurately and follows the rules for any Google feature you are targeting. Eligibility is not a display guarantee.

36 Use the appropriate validator. Use Google’s Rich Results Test for supported Google features and Schema Markup Validator for broader schema checks. Passing a test does not guarantee rankings or citations.

37 Check how your business is represented. Sample relevant customer questions in AI search and note incorrect services, locations or facts. Correct owned information and relevant listings; answers vary between platforms and checks.

38 Separate access from training choices. If AI crawler access is relevant, review the provider’s controls and security rules. An llms.txt file is optional curated information, not a permissions mechanism.

Keep useful questions and answers for readers. Adding FAQ or HowTo markup is not a shortcut to guaranteed Google features or AI recommendations.

8 Measure outcomes and choose the next task

39 Check measurement works. Verify the events you rely on. A button click is not a completed enquiry, and an analytics event does not automatically confirm a sale.

40 Review relevant search performance. Look at important pages, queries and markets in Search Console. Impressions and clicks help diagnose visibility; they are not unique customers or revenue.

41 Review business outcomes. Use reliable records for suitable enquiries, qualified opportunities, bookings or sales. Record attribution limits rather than assume every improvement came from SEO.

42 Keep different measures separate. Do not combine search impressions, AI citations, website sessions and sales into one total or score. They measure different activities.

43 Record changes and retest. Log what changed, why, who owns the task and how it was checked. Return after major website changes and use a manageable monthly review.

44 Choose the next commercial priority. Address lost enquiries, misleading information and important access problems before minor cosmetic warnings. Agree specialist help when the task exceeds your skills.

Keep a short action list

Copy this layout into your working notes if helpful. You can use the checklist directly above without downloading anything.

Page or issue	Next action	Owner	Status and check date
Example only: service enquiry form	Test delivery and fix the failure before promoting the page.	Website manager	Needs work; record the retest result.
Your page or issue	Describe one clear action.	Name the owner.	Done, Needs work or Not applicable; add date.

A completed checklist is not a guarantee of rankings, sales or AI citations. Its value is in identifying useful work, checking the result and keeping your website accurate and usable.

Appendix B Reusable worksheets

Copy the following fields into a notebook, spreadsheet or team system. The records do not update themselves. Keep the source, date and person responsible visible so another person can continue the work.

A business goal and page brief

- Business outcome: what should the website help achieve?
- Reader: who is the page for and what decision are they making?
- Page or group of pages: include the existing URLs.
- Essential answer: what should the reader understand after using the page?
- Evidence: approved facts, genuine examples and primary sources.
- Next step: what appropriate action can the reader take?
- Measures: how will you assess the page without confusing visibility with outcomes?
- Owner and review date: who can confirm that the information remains accurate?

An SEO action and change record

Field	What to record
Observed problem	Exact URL, symptom and customer or business consequence.
Evidence	Test, report, period, filters and relevant screenshot or log reference.
Diagnosis	What is known, what remains a hypothesis and what needs checking.
Proposed change	A defined edit or correction, with an owner.
Earlier state	Backup, export or exact setting needed for rollback.
Completion and retest	Time, public result and evidence that the affected function works.
Review	What happened later, limitations and any further action.

A customer question and content plan

Record the question in the customer's language, where it came from, the decision it concerns and the existing page that might answer it. Choose Keep, Update, Combine or Create only after checking the current information. Add the business input needed, useful internal links, reviewer and maintenance trigger.

Fictional example: a bicycle repair workshop receives repeated questions about collection areas. The existing service page is suitable but vague. The action is to update the coverage section and test the enquiry form, rather than publish several near-identical district pages.

An approved business fact sheet

- Business identity: approved public name and responsible contact.
- Services and products: what is currently offered, with important exclusions.
- Locations and coverage: visitable premises, actual service areas and access arrangements.

- Customer arrangements: hours, appointments, booking process and contact route.
- Commercial facts: current price basis, availability, delivery and returns where relevant.
- Proof: genuine qualifications, membership, documented experience and permission to use customer examples.
- Sources and maintenance: official page for each fact, owner and date checked.

A monthly measurement record

Measure	Source and scope	Period A	Period B
Overall Search visibility and clicks	Search Console; property, search type and filters.	Record	Record
Included Google AI visibility	Generative AI report; do not add to overall Search.	Record	Record
Supported AI citations	Bing AI Performance; defined surfaces and dates.	Record	Record
Website visits	Analytics sessions by channel and landing page.	Record	Record
Completed enquiries	Tested events, deduplicated against business records.	Record	Record
Qualified opportunities and sales	CRM, bookings or ledger; stated attribution rule.	Record	Record

Add a short interpretation: what changed, which evidence supports the explanation, what remains uncertain and what decision follows. Record changes in tracking, filters or definitions. Do not calculate a conversion rate across unmatched platforms or reporting populations.

A sampled AI answer check

Record the platform, mode or model where shown, date, language, location settings, sign-in status and exact question. Save the observed answer and any source links. Compare it with the approved facts, describe the customer consequence and assign one correction task. Retest under recorded conditions and report the sample limits.

Glossary

These definitions explain the terms used in the book. Use the index to find the practical discussion of a topic.

Accessibility Making information and functions usable by people with different abilities, including people using assistive technology.

AI agent A system that can attempt actions on someone's behalf, such as comparing products or submitting a booking request.

AI Assistant channel A GA4 classification for recorded visits from recognised AI assistant referrers. It is not a count of all AI influence.

AI citation A reference to a source in a generated answer. It is distinct from a website visit or an endorsement.

AI Mode Google's conversational Search experience, supporting follow-up questions and source exploration in supported interfaces.

AI Overview A generated response that may appear within Google Search results, with supporting links.

Algorithm A procedure or set of processes used by a system. Search ranking uses multiple systems and signals.

Alt text An image's text alternative, chosen for its purpose in context. Decorative images usually use an empty alternative.

Anchor text The visible words in a link, helping a reader understand its destination.

Attribution The rule or model used to assign credit for an outcome to recorded interactions. It does not by itself prove causation.

Backlink A link from another website to yours.

Bot Software making automated requests. Some bots are useful, while others may be unwanted or deceptive.

Breadcrumbs Navigation showing a page's place within a website's hierarchy.

Cache A stored response or item reused to reduce repeated work. Page, browser and object caches have different roles.

Canonical URL A preferred URL for a set of duplicate or very similar pages. A canonical declaration is a signal, not an absolute command.

CDN A content delivery network that can distribute content and provide related services. Its actual cache behaviour depends on configuration.

Citation Share A Bing AI Performance metric with a defined retrieval-query scope. It is not market share, traffic share or a universal AI ranking.

Click-through rate The proportion of impressions that produce recorded clicks within the same report scope, often abbreviated to CTR.

CLS Cumulative Layout Shift, a measure of unexpected visual movement. It is a score, not a duration.

CMS A content management system, such as WordPress, used to create and manage a website.

Content cluster Related pages organised around connected customer tasks, with a main guide and distinct supporting information.

Conversion A meaningful completed action, such as a successful enquiry or purchase. Define the action before measuring it.

Core update A broad change to Google's ranking systems. It is different from a manual action against a website.

Core Web Vitals A set of user-experience metrics covering loading, responsiveness and visual stability.

Crawl budget A broad description of the resources a crawler allocates to a site. It is rarely the first priority for a small website.

Crawling Fetching website resources so a search engine or other client can inspect them.

CRM A customer relationship management system or record used to manage enquiries, customers and outcomes.

Direct traffic An analytics classification used when a visit lacks usable source information under that tool's rules. It does not prove someone typed the address.

Disavow An advanced Google tool for specified link-related circumstances. Most websites do not need to use it.

Discover Google's personalised content feed, distinct from results following a typed search.

Discovery Finding that a URL exists, for example through a link or sitemap. It is not the same as crawling or indexing.

Domain A website's registered name, such as theseoguidebook.com.

Duplicate content Content available at more than one URL or substantially similar across URLs. Duplication is not automatically a spam violation.

E-E-A-T Experience, expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness, concepts used to assess quality. There is no single plugin-controlled E-E-A-T score.

Earned coverage Editorial attention obtained because a publication finds the story worthwhile, rather than a purchased placement presented as independent praise.

Engagement Interaction defined by a particular reporting tool. Check the metric's definition before interpreting it as satisfaction.

Evergreen content Content answering an enduring reader need. Its facts may still require maintenance.

Featured snippet An elevated extract selected by Google from a page. Website owners cannot guarantee its selection.

Field data Measurements collected from actual users under a tool's defined conditions, rather than a single controlled lab test.

GA4 Google Analytics 4, a system for recording and reporting website or app activity under its implementation and privacy settings.

GEO Generative engine optimisation, an industry term for work concerning visibility in generated search answers.

Google Business Profile A managed business listing on Google Search and Maps, subject to eligibility and representation rules.

Google Search Console Google's website-owner tool for recorded Search performance, indexing information and related diagnostics.

Google-Extended A Google product token controlling certain specified uses of content. Its scope is separate from ordinary Google Search inclusion and ranking.

Googlebot Google's main crawler for Search, subject to its documented behaviour and verification methods.

GPTBot OpenAI's crawler for content that may be used in foundation-model training. It is distinct from OAI-SearchBot.

Grounding Using retrieved information to inform a generated response. A grounding query may differ from the user's original wording.

Hreflang Annotations identifying language or regional alternatives for supported search-engine processing.

HTTP status code A server response code such as 200, 301, 404 or 500, describing aspects of the response.

HTTPS HTTP protected using transport encryption. It does not establish that every claim or business on a website is trustworthy.

Impression A recorded display under a report's rules. It is not a unique person, visit or sale.

Index The search engine's organised store of information eligible for retrieval. A book's subject index has a different purpose.

Indexing Processing content for possible inclusion in a search engine's index. A request or sitemap does not guarantee inclusion.

INP Interaction to Next Paint, a responsiveness metric based on user interactions.

Intent The task or purpose behind a search, such as comparing options, finding information or buying.

Internal link A link between pages on the same website.

JSON-LD A structured data format commonly used to describe a page or entity in machine-readable form.

Key event GA4's term for an important measured action. Its accuracy depends on the event implementation and definition.

Keyword A word or phrase used in searching or research. One useful page can address several related queries.

KPI A key performance indicator tied to a business objective.

Lab test A controlled test under simulated conditions, useful for diagnosing problems but not a complete picture of customer experience.

Landing page The first page in a recorded website visit.

LCP Largest Contentful Paint, measuring when the main visible content element is rendered.

Lead An enquiry or potential customer. A qualified lead meets the business's stated suitability criteria.

llms.txt An optional proposed information index for tools supporting that proposal. It is not a training-permission mechanism.

Local citation An online mention of a business's identifying details, such as a directory listing.

Long-tail query A more specific query, often part of a diverse set of lower-frequency searches. Length alone does not determine its value.

Manual action A Google action following human review of a policy violation, reported in Search Console.

Merchant feed Structured product information supplied to a supported merchant system. It should agree with the visible offer.

Meta description A page summary that a search engine may use for a result snippet, but may replace.

Multimodal search Search using more than text alone, for example an image-based input. Check the reporting tool's precise definition.

NAP Name, address and phone number, common fields in local business listings.

Noindex An instruction asking supporting search engines not to index a resource. A crawler must be able to retrieve it to see the instruction.

OAI-SearchBot OpenAI's crawler for ChatGPT search. Its purpose is distinct from GPTBot training crawling.

Off-page SEO Work involving reputation, links and relevant information beyond the website itself.

On-page SEO Improving a page's information, structure and related elements for readers and search discovery.

Open Graph Metadata commonly used when a page is shared, including a preferred sharing image.

Organic search Unpaid search listings and the recorded visits associated with them under a tool's rules.

Page builder A website editing tool that controls layout and components. Its output and maintenance matter more than its label.

Query fan-out An AI search system generating related searches to gather information for an answer.

Redirect A response sending a browser or crawler to another URL. Use a relevant destination and the appropriate status.

Referrer Information identifying a preceding page or source of a visit when it is supplied and available.

Rendering Processing a page's code and resources into its displayed content and behaviour.

Responsive design A layout that adapts to different screen sizes. Check actual tasks rather than relying on the label.

Rich result A search presentation supported by particular structured data and eligibility rules. Valid markup does not guarantee display.

Robots.txt A publicly served file providing crawl instructions to clients that respect them. It is not a security barrier.

Schema.org A vocabulary used to describe information through structured data, broader than Google-supported search features.

Search intent The purpose behind a query, considered alongside the actual results and the business's offer.

SERP Search engine results page.

Session A visit as defined by the analytics system. A person can generate several sessions.

Sitemap A file listing URLs to help discovery. An XML sitemap is not a guarantee of crawling, indexing or ranking.

Staging A separate environment used to prepare and test website changes before publishing them.

Structured data Machine-readable descriptions of information. They must represent the actual content and follow the relevant feature rules.

Technical SEO Work on access, processing, structure and usability that supports a website's ability to appear in search.

Title element The page title in HTML that helps describe the page. Google may generate a different title link in results.

TTFB Time to First Byte, a response-timing measure. It is distinct from the time needed to display the main page content.

UCP Universal Commerce Protocol, an evolving approach to commerce interactions. Check supported platforms and eligibility.

URL The address of a resource on the web.

URL Inspection A Search Console tool showing information about Google's indexed version and offering a separate live test.

Variant A product option such as size or colour. Its URL and data treatment depends on the store's implementation.

WAF A web application firewall that can block or challenge requests, including legitimate crawlers if a rule is too broad.

WebMCP An evolving approach to exposing website tasks as structured tools to compatible clients.

WordPress A content management system whose actual SEO output depends on the theme, plugins, settings and content.

XML A structured text format used for sitemaps and many other data files.

Sources and online companions

The online chapters provide further explanations and links to primary documentation. Use the current official guidance for interface labels, provider controls, supported features and eligibility. A product announcement is evidence of its stated scope, not proof that every account or market has the feature.

Primary documentation

Google Search Essentials
Google SEO Starter Guide
Google helpful and reliable content guidance
Google guidance on using generative AI content
Google generative AI search guidance
Google crawling and indexing documentation
Google introduction to robots.txt
Google sitemap guidance
Search Console URL Inspection guidance
Google core update guidance
Google traffic-drop diagnosis
Google Search Status Dashboard
Google Search Console data anomalies
Google structured data gallery
Google product structured data
Google Rich Results Test
Schema Markup Validator
Google generative AI reporting announcement
GA4 traffic acquisition guidance
GA4 default channel definitions
Bing AI Performance documentation and announcement
Google local ranking guidance
Google Business Profile representation guidelines
Google Maps prohibited and restricted content
WordPress documentation
Core Web Vitals documentation
Google image SEO guidance
Google multilingual and multiregional guidance
OpenAI crawler documentation
Cloudflare AI Crawl Control documentation
The llms.txt proposal
Agent-friendly website guidance
Aleyda Solis AI search optimisation checklist
Aleyda Solis representative prompt libraries
Aleyda Solis third party citation priorities

Chapter companions

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