How to Rank: 25 Step SEO Master Blueprint

May 14th, 2013 - Posted by [Cyrus Shepard](#) to [Intermediate & Advanced SEO](#)
215
1

If you're like most SEOs, you spend a lot of time reading. Over the past several years, I've spent 100s of hours studying blogs, guides, and Google patents. Not long ago, I realized that 90% of what I read each doesn't change *what I actually do* - that is, the basic work of **ranking a web page higher on Google**.

For newer SEOs, the process can be overwhelming.

To simplify this process, I created this SEO blueprint. It's meant as a **framework** for newer SEOs to build their own work on top of. This basic blueprint has helped, in one form or another, 100s of pages and dozens of sites to gain higher rankings.

Think of it as an intermediate SEO instruction manual, for beginners.

Level: Beginner to Intermediate

Timeframe: 2 to 10 Weeks

What you need to know: The blueprint assumes you have basic SEO knowledge: you're not scared of title tags, can implement a rel=canonical, and you've built a link or two. (If this is your first time to the rodeo, we suggest reading the [Beginners Guide to SEO](#) and browsing our [Learn SEO section](#).)

HOW TO RANK:
SEO BLUEPRINT

Before you begin...

1 There are 100's of ways to rank a web page, from tweeting a link to getting New York Times articles written about you. This is only one process.

2 *The blueprint is an SEO framework* - It's not meant to detail every step, but instead provides you with the basic outline of ranking a web page from beginning to end, so you can build your own campaign on top of it.

3 Many experienced SEOs undoubtedly have superior processes. Listen to them every chance you get.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Keyword Research

1. Working Smarter, Not Harder

Keyword research can be simple or hard, but it should always be fun. For the sake of the Blueprint, let's do keyword research the easy way.

The biggest mistakes people make with keyword research are:

1. Choosing keywords that are too broad
2. Keywords with too much competition
3. Keywords without enough traffic
4. Keywords that don't convert
5. Trying to rank for one keyword at a time

The biggest mistake people make is *trying to rank for a single keyword at a time*. This is the hard way. It's much easier, and much more profitable, to rank for 100s or even 1,000s of long tail keywords with the same piece of content.

Instead of ranking for a single keyword, let's aim our project around a **keyword theme**.

2. Dream Your Keyword Theme

Using keyword themes solves a whole lot of problems. Instead of ranking for one Holy Grail keyword, a better goal is to rank for lots of keywords focused around a single idea. Done right, the results are amazing.

I assume you know enough about your business to understand what type of visitor you're seeking and whether you're looking for traffic, conversions, or both. Regardless, one simple rule holds true: *the more specific you define your theme, the easier it is to rank*.

This is basic stuff, but it bears repeating. If your topic is the football, you'll find it hard to rank for "Super Bowl," but slightly easier to rank for "Super Bowl 2014" - and easier yet to rank for "Best Super Bowl Recipes of 2014."

Don't focus on specific words yet - all you need to know is your broad topic. The next step is to find the right **keyword qualifiers.**

3. Get Specific with Qualifiers

Qualifiers are words that add specificity to keywords and define intent. They take many different forms.

- **Time/Date**: 2001, December, Morning
- **Price/Quality**: Cheap, Best, Most Popular
- **Intent**: Buy, Shop, Find
- **Location**: Houston, Outdoors, Online

The idea is to find as many qualifiers as possible that fit your audience. Here's where keyword tools enter the picture. You can use any keyword tool you like, but favorites include Wordstream, Keyword Spy, SpyFu, and Bing Keyword Tool and Übersuggest.

For speed and real-world insight, Übersuggest is an all-time SEO favorite. Run a simple query and export over 100 suggested keyword based on Google's own Autocomplete feature – based on actual Google searches.

Did I mention it's free?

4. Finding Diamonds in the Google Rough

At this point you have a few dozen, or a few hundred keywords to pull into Google Adwords Keyword Tool.

Pro Tip #1: While it's possible to run over a hundred keyword phrases at once in Google's Keyword Tool, you get more variety if you limit your searches to 5-10 at a time.

Using "Exact" search types and "Local Monthly" search volume, we're looking for 10-15 closely related keyword phrases with decent search volume, but not too much competition.

Pro Tip #2: Be careful trusting the "Competition" column in Google Adwords Keyword Tool. This refers to bids on paid search terms, not organic search.

5. Get Strategic with the Competition

Now that we have a basic keyword set, you need to find out if you can actually rank for your phrases. You have two basic methods of ranking the competition:

1. Automated tools like the Keyword Difficulty Tool
2. Eyeballing the SERPs

If you have an SEOmoz PRO membership (or even a free trial) the [Keyword Difficulty Tool](#) calculates – on a 100 point scale – a difficulty score for each individual keyword phrase you enter.
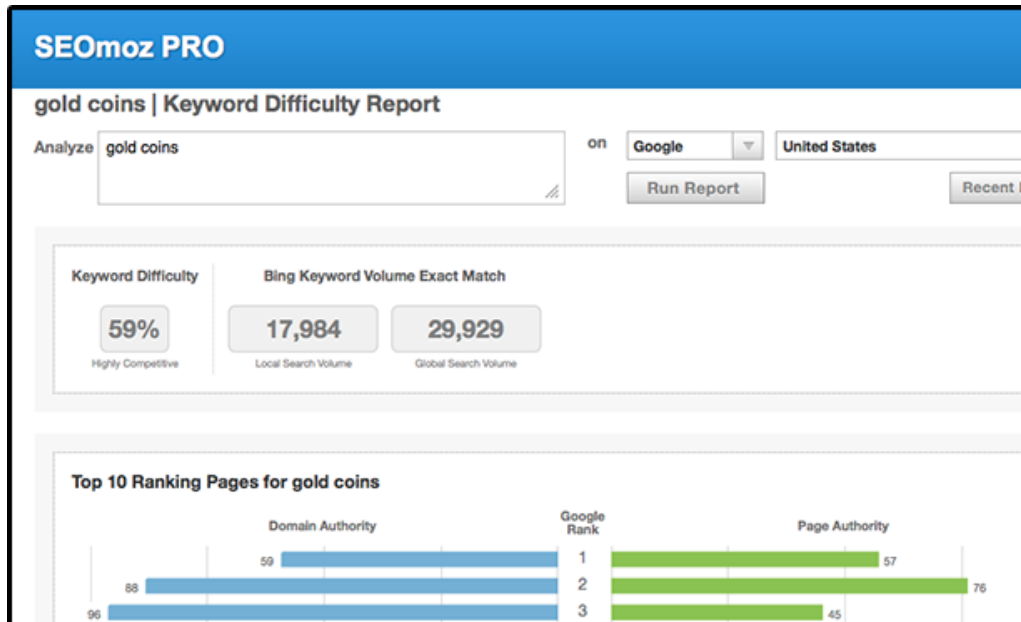
Keyword phrases in the 60-70+ range are typically competitive, while keywords in the 30-40 range might be considered low to moderately difficult.

To get a better idea of your own strengths, take the most competitive keyword you currently rank #1 or #2 for, and run it through the tool.

Even without automated tools, the best way to size up the competition is to **eyeball the SERPs**. Run a search query ([non-personalized](#)) for your keywords and ask yourself the following questions:

*   Are the first few results optimized for the keyword?
*   Is the keyword in the title tag? In the URL? On the page?
*   What's the Page and/or Domain Authority of the URL?
*   Are the first few results authorities on the keyword subject?
*   What's the inbound anchor text?
*   Can you deliver a higher quality resource for this keyword?

You don't actually have to rank #1 for any of your chosen words to earn traffic, but you should be comfortable cracking the top five.

With keyword themes, the magic often happens from keywords you never even thought about.

Case Study: Google Algo Update

When SEOmoz launched the Google Algorithm Change HIstory (run by Dr. Pete) we used a similar process for keyword research to explore the theme "**Google Algorithm**" and more specifically, "**Google Algorithm Change**."

According to Google's search tool, we could expect a no more than *a couple thousand visits a month* – best case – for these exact terms. Fortunately, because the project was well received and because we optimized around a broad keyword theme of "Google Algorithm," the Algo Update receives lots of traffic outside our pre-defined keywords.

This is where the long tail magic happens:
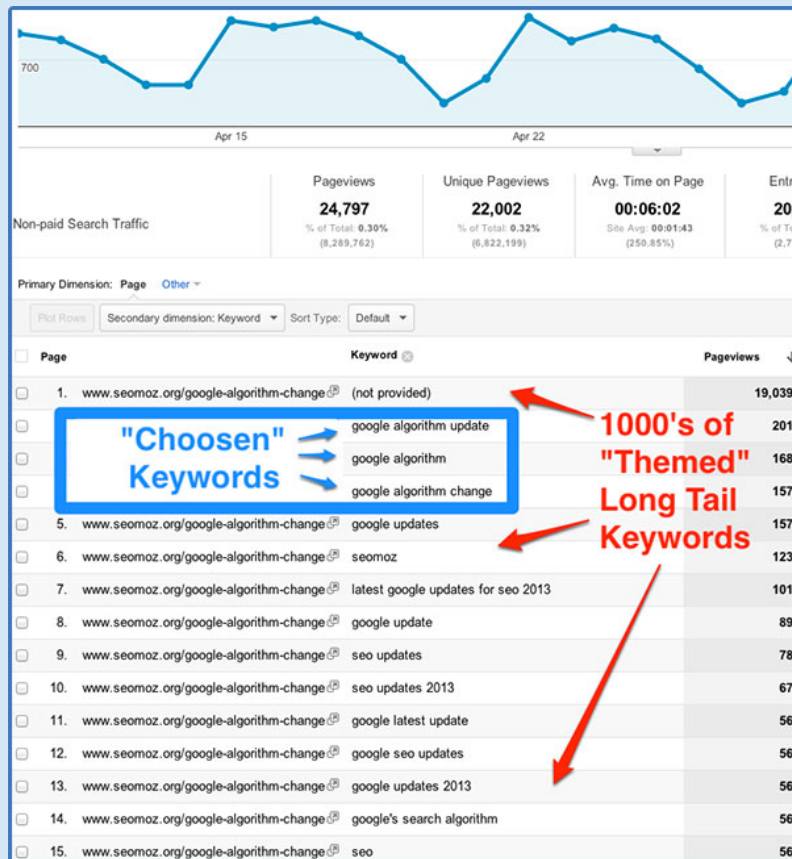
How can you improve your chances of ranking for more long tail keywords? Let's talk about content, architecture, on-page optimization and link building.

Content

6. Creating Value

Want to know the truth? I hate the word content. It implies words on a page, a commodity to be produced, separated from the value it creates.

Content without value is spam.

In the Google Algorithm Update example above, we could have simply written 100 articles about Google's Algorithm and hoped to rank. Instead, the conversation started by asking how we could create a valuable resource for webmasters.

For your keyword theme, *ask first how you can create value*.

Value is harder to produce than mere words, but value is rewarded 100x more. Value is future proof & algorithm proof. Value builds links by itself. Value creates loyal fans.

Value takes different forms. It's a mix of:

1. **Utility**
2. **Emotional response**
3. **Point of view** (positive or negative)
4. **Perceived value**, including fame of the author

Your content doesn't have to include all 4 of these characteristics, but *it should excel in one or more* to be successful.

A study of the New York Times found key characteristics of content to be influential in making the Most Emailed list.

Source: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1528077

7. Driving Your Content Vehicle

Here's a preview: the Blueprint requires you create at least one type of link bait, so now is a good time to think about the structure of your content.

What's the best way to deliver value given your theme? Perhaps it's an

- Infographic
- Video series
- A new tool
- An interview series
- Slide deck
- How-to guide
- Q&A
- Webinar or simple blog post

Perhaps, it's all of these combined.

The more ways you find to deliver your content and the more channels you take advantage of, the better off you'll be.

Not all of your content has to go viral, but you want to create at least one "tent-pole" piece that's better than anything else out there and you're proud to hang your hat on.

If you need inspiration, check out [Distilled's guide to Viral Linkbait](#) or [QuickSprout's Templates for Content Creation](#).

8. Title – Most Important Work Goes Here

Spend two hours, minimum, writing your title.

Sound ridiculous? If you're an experienced title writer like Rand Fishkin, you can break this rule. For the rest of us, it's difficult to underplay the value delivered by a finely crafted title.

Write 50 titles or more before choosing one.

Study the successful titles on Inbound.org, Mashable, Wired, or your favorite publication.

Whatever you do, read this fantastic post by Dan Shure and the headline resources at CopyBlogger.

9. Length vs. Depth - Why it Matters

How long should your content be? A better question is: How deep should it be? Word count by itself is a terrible metric to strive for, but **depth of content** helps you to rank in several ways.

1. Adds **uniqueness** threshold to avoid duplicate content
2. **Deeper topic exploration** makes your content "about" more
3. Quality, longer content is **correlated with more links** and higher rankings

I. Uniqueness

At a minimum, your content needs to meet a minimum uniqueness threshold in order for it to rank. Google reps have gone on record to say a couple sentences is sometimes sufficient, but in reality a couple hundred words is much safer.

II. Long Tail Opportunities

Here's where the real magic happens. The deeper your content and the more in-depth you can explore a particular topic, the more your content becomes "about."

The more your content is "about", the more search queries it can answer well.

The more search queries you can answer well, the more traffic you can earn.

Google's crawlers continuously read your content to determine how relevant it is to search queries. They evaluate paragraphs, subject headings, photographs and more to try to understand your page. Longer, in-depth content usually send more relevancy signals than a couple short sentences.

III. Depth, Length, and Links

Numerous correlation studies have shown a positive relationship between r*ankings and number of words in a document*.

> **"The length in HTML and the HTML within the <body> tag were the highest correlated factors, in fact with correlations of .12 they could be considered somewhat if not hugely significant.**
>
> **While these factors probably are not implemented within the algorithm, they are good signs of what Google is looking for; quality content, which in many cases means long or at least sufficiently lengthy pages."**
>
> - Mark Collier The Open Algorithm

This could be attributed longer, quality content earning more links. John Doherty examined the relationship between the length of blog posts on SEOmoz and the number of links each post earned, and found a strong relationship.
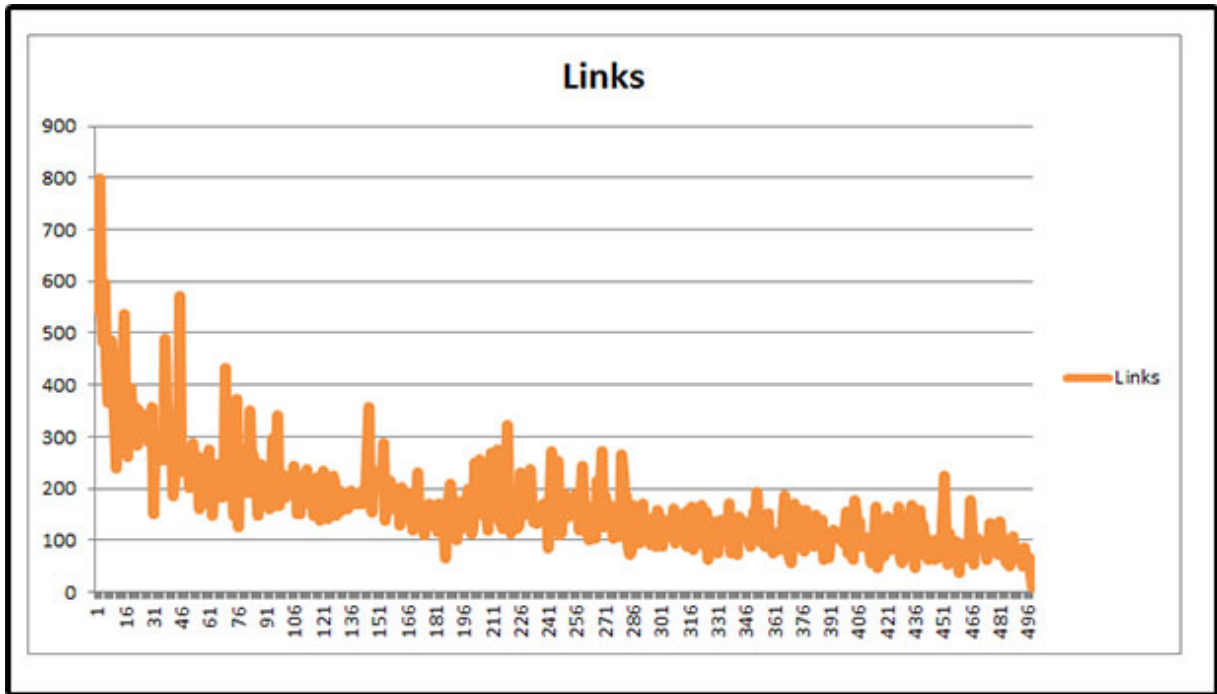
10. Content Qualities You Can Bank On

If you don't focus on word count, how do you add quality "depth" to your content?

SEOs have written volumes about how Google might define quality including metrics such as *reading level, grammar, spelling, and even Author Rank*. Most is speculation, but it's clear Google does use guidelines to separate good content from bad.

My favorite source for clues comes from the set of questions Google published shortly after the first Panda update. Here are a few of my favorites.

GOOGLE:

WHAT COUNTS AS A HIGH-QUALITY SITE?

- Would you trust the information presented in this article?

- Is this article written by an expert or enthusiast who knows the topic well, or is it more shallow in nature?

- Does this article have spelling, stylistic, or factual errors?

- Does the article provide original content or information, original reporting, original research, or original analysis?

- Does the article describe both sides of a story?

- Does this article contain insightful analysis or interesting information that is beyond obvious?

- Is this the sort of page you'd want to bookmark, share with a friend, or recommend?

- Would you expect to see this article in a printed magazine, encyclopedia or book?

- Are the pages produced with great care and attention to detail vs. less attention to detail?

11. LDA, nTopic, and Words on the Page

Google is a machine. It can't yet understand your page like a human can, but it's getting close.

Search engines use sophisticated algorithms to model your **sentences, paragraphs, blocks,** and **content sections**. Not only do they want to understand your keywords, but also your topic, intent, and expertise as well.

How do you know if your content fits Google's model of expectations?

For example, if your topic is "Super Bowl Recipes," Google might expect to see content about grilling, appetizers, and guacamole. Content that addresses these topics *will likely rank higher* than pages that talk about what color socks you're wearing today.

Words matter.

SEOs have discovered that using certain words around a topic associated with concepts like LDA and nTopic are **correlated with higher rankings**.

Virante offers an interesting stand alone keyword suggestion tool called nTopic. The tools analyzes your keywords and suggests related keywords to improve your relevancy scores.

12. Better than LDA - Poor Man's Topic Modeling

Since we don't have access to Google's computers for topic modeling, there's a far simpler way to structure your content that I find far superior to worrying about individual words:

Use the **keyword themes** *you created at the beginning of this blueprint*.

You've already done the research using Google's keyword tool to find closely related keyword groups. Incorporating these topics into your content may help increase your relevancy to your given topic.

Example: Using the Google Algorithm project cited above, we found during keyword research that certain keywords related to our theme show up repeatedly, time and time again. If we conducted this research today, we would find phrases like "*Penguin SEO*" and "*Panda Updates*" frequently in our results.

Google suggests these terms via the keyword tool because they consider them closely related. So any content that explored "Google Algorithm Change" might likely include a discussion of these ideas.

POOR MAN'S TOPIC MODELING:
MAIN KEYWORD: "GOOGLE ALGORITHM CHANGE"

RELATED KEYWORD PHRASES

- Algorithm Update
- Google Change History
- Penguin SEO
- Panda Updates
- Search Engine Optimization
- SEO Help

Note: This isn't real LDA, simply a way of adding relevant topics to your content that Google might associate with your subject matter.

13. Design Is 50% of the Battle

If you have any money in your budget, **spend it on design**. A small investment with a designer typically pays outsized dividends down the road. Good design can:

- Lower bounce rate
- Increase page views
- Increase time on site
- Earn more links
- Establish trust

… All of which can help earn higher rankings.

<blockquote>

"Design doesn't just matter, it's 50% of the battle."
-Rand Fishkin

</blockquote>
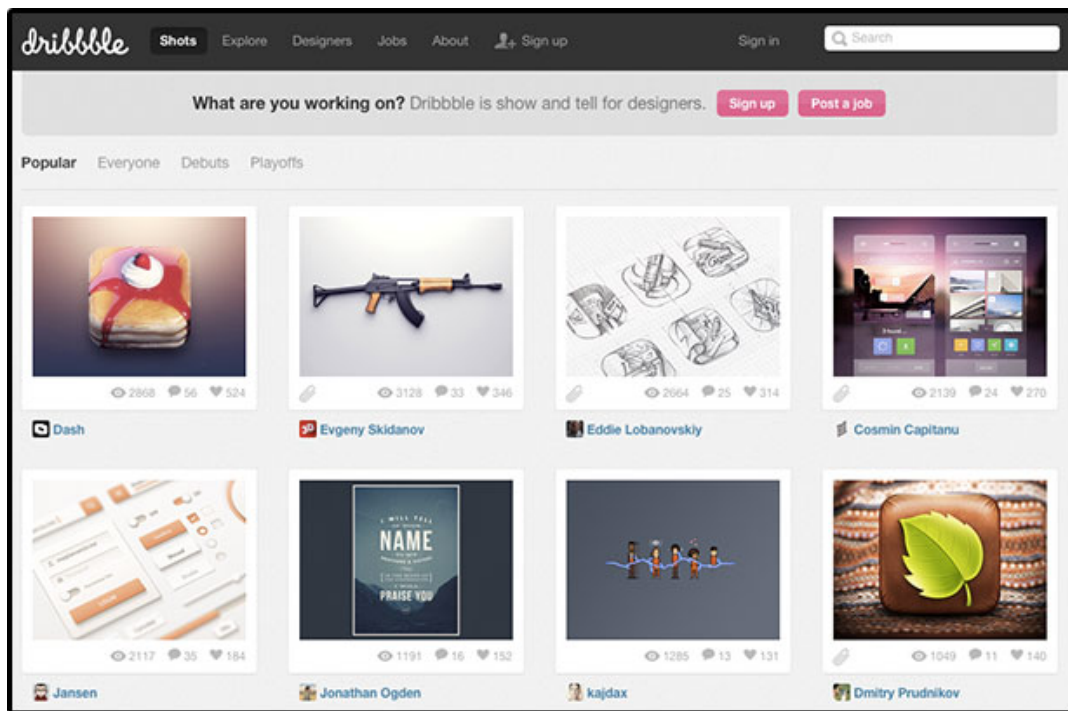
[Dribbble.com](#) is one of our favorite source of design inspiration.


Architecture

Here's the special secret of the SEO Blueprint: you're not making a single page to rank; you're making several.

14. Content Hubs

Very few successful websites consist of a single page. Google determines context and relevancy not only by what's on your page, but also by the pages around it and linking to it.

The truth is, it's far easier to rank when you create Content Hubs exploring several topics in depth focused around a central theme.

Using our "Super Bowl Recipes" example, we might create a complete section of pages, each exploring a different recipe in depth.
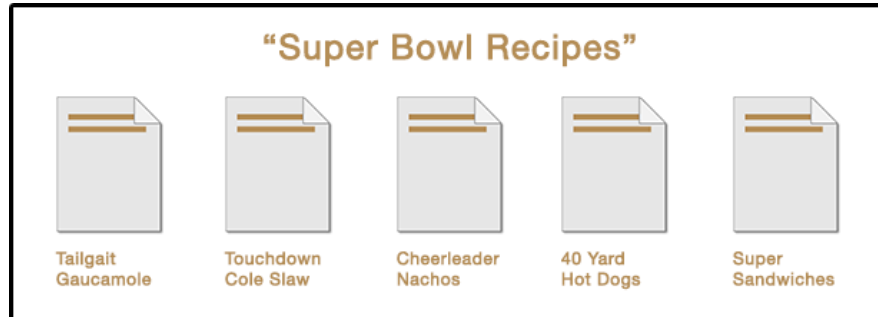
15. Linking the Hub Together

Because your pages now explore different aspects of the same broad topic, it makes sense to link them together.

- Your page about **guacamole** relates to your page about **nachos**.
- Your page about **link building** relates to your page about **infographics**.
- Your page about **Winston Churchill** relates to major figures of **World War II**.
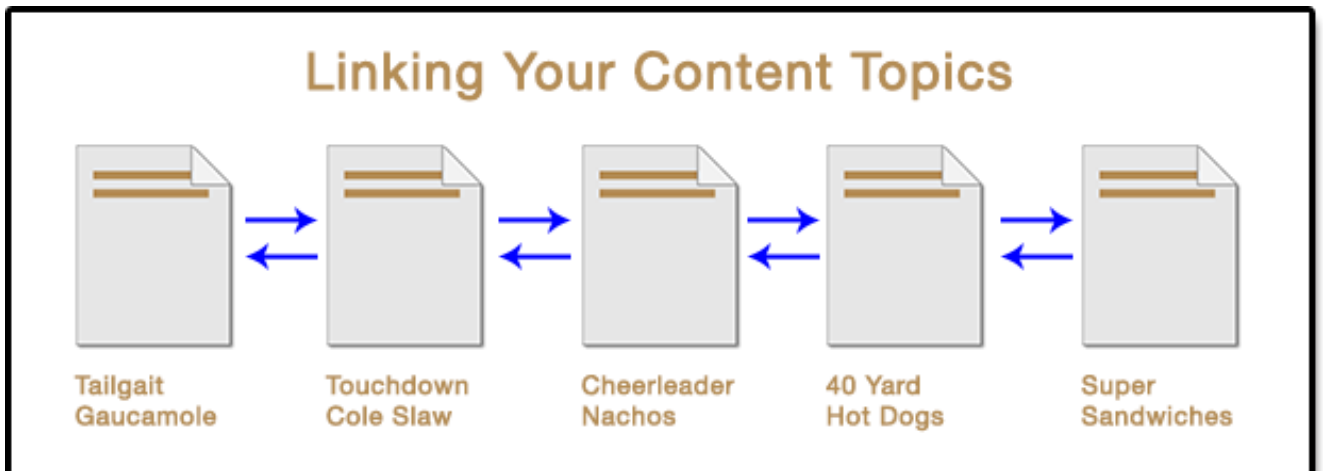
It also helps them to rank by distributing *PageRank*, *anchor text,* and other *relevancy signals*.

16. Find Your Center

Content Hubs work best with a "hub" or center. Think of the center as the master document that acts as an overview or gateway to all of your individual content pages.

The hub is the authority page. Often, the hub is a link bait page or a category level page. It's typically the page with the most inbound links and often as a landing page for other sections of your site.
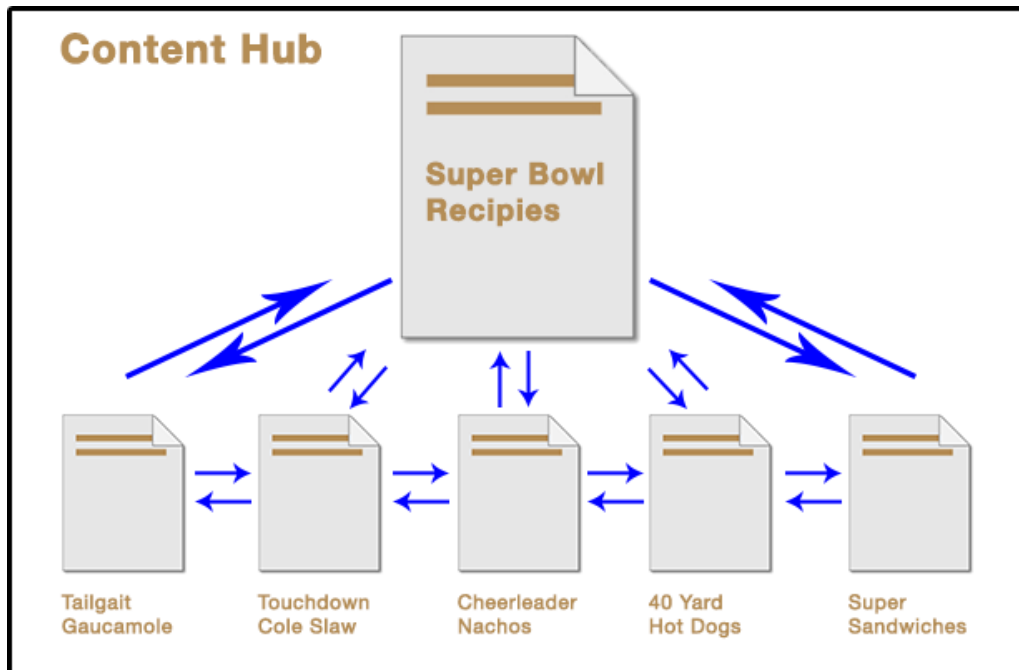
For great example of Hub Pages, check out:

- CopyBloggers [Magnetic Headlines](#)
- [SEOmoz's Learn SEO](#)
- Amazon's [author pages](#) (this one about Stephen King)

On-Page Optimization

17. Master the Basics

You could write an entire book about on-page optimization. If you're new to SEO, one of the best ways to learn is by using [SEOmoz's On-page Report Card](#) (free, registration required) The tool grades 36 separate on-page SEO elements, gives you a report and suggestions on how to fix each element. Working your way through these issues is an excellent way to learn (and often used by agencies and companies as a way to teach SEO principals)
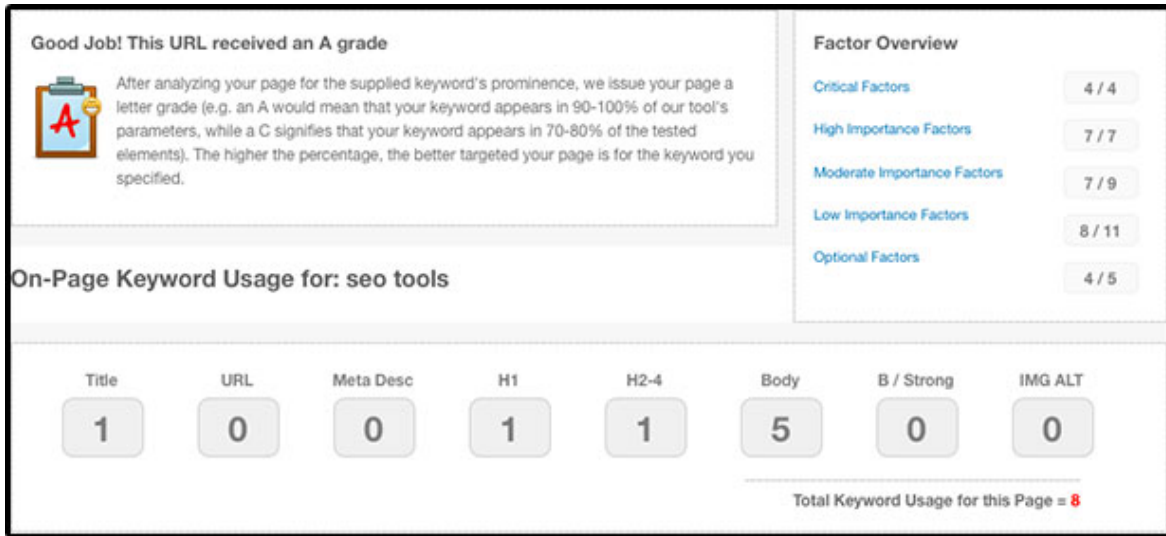
Beyond the basics, let's address a few slightly more advanced tactics to take advantage of your unique keyword themes and hub pages, in addition to areas where beginners often make mistakes.

18. Linking Internally for the Reasonable Surfer

Not all links are created equal (One of the greatest SEO blog posts ever written!) So, when you interlink your internal pages within your content hub together, keep in mind a few important points.

1. Links from **inside unique content** pass more value than navigation links.
2. Links **higher up the page** pass more value than links further down.
3. Links i**n HTML text** pass more weight than image links.

When interlinking your content, it's best to keep links prominent and "editorial" – naturally link to your most important content pages higher up in the HTML text.

19. Diversify Your Anchor Text - Naturally

If Google's Penguin update taught us anything, it's that over-thinking anchor text is bound to get us in trouble.

When you link naturally and editorially to other places on the web, you naturally diversify your anchor text. The same should hold true when you link internally.

Don't choose your anchor text to fit your keywords; **choose your anchor text to fit the content around it**.

Practically speaking, this means *linking internally with a mix of partial match keyword and related phrases*. Don't be scared to link occasionally without good keywords in the anchor – the link can still pass relevancy signals. When it comes to linking, it's safer to under-do it than over-do it.

20. Title Tags - Two Quick Tips

We assume you know how to write a compelling title tag. Even today, keyword usage in the title tag is one of the most highly correlated on-page ranking factors that we know.

That said, Google is getting strict about over-optimizing title tags, and appears to be further cracking down on titles "written for SEO." Keep this in mind when crafting your title tags

I. Avoid Boilerplates

It used to be common to tack on your business phrase or main keywords to the end of every title tag, like so:

- Plumbing Supplies – Chicago Plumbing and Fixtures
- Pipes & Fittings – Chicago Plumbing and Fixtures
- Toilet Seat Covers – Chicago Plumbing and Fixtures

While we don't have much solid data, many SEOs are now asserting that "boilerplate" titles tacked on to the end of every tag are no longer a good idea. Brand names and unique descriptive information is okay, but making every title as unique as possible is the rule of the day.

II. Avoid Unnecessary Repetition

Google also appears (at least to many SEOs) to be cracking down on what's considered the lower threshold of "keyword stuffing."

In years past it was a common rule of thumb never to repeat your keyword more than twice in the title. Today, to be on the safe side, you might be best to consider not repeating your keywords more than once.

## 21. Over-Optimization: Titles, URLs, and Links

Writing for humans not only gets you more clicks (which can lead to higher rankings), but hardly ever gets you in trouble with search engines.

As SEOs we're often tempted to get a "perfect score" which means exactly matching our **title tags, URLs, inbound anchor text,** and more. unfortunately, this isn't natural in the real world, and Google recognizes this.

Diversify. Don't over-optimize.

22. Structured Data

Short and simple: Make structured data part of every webpage. While structured data hasn't yet proven to be a large ranking factor, it's future-facing value can be seen today in rich snippet SERPs and social media sharing. In some verticals, it's an absolute necessity.
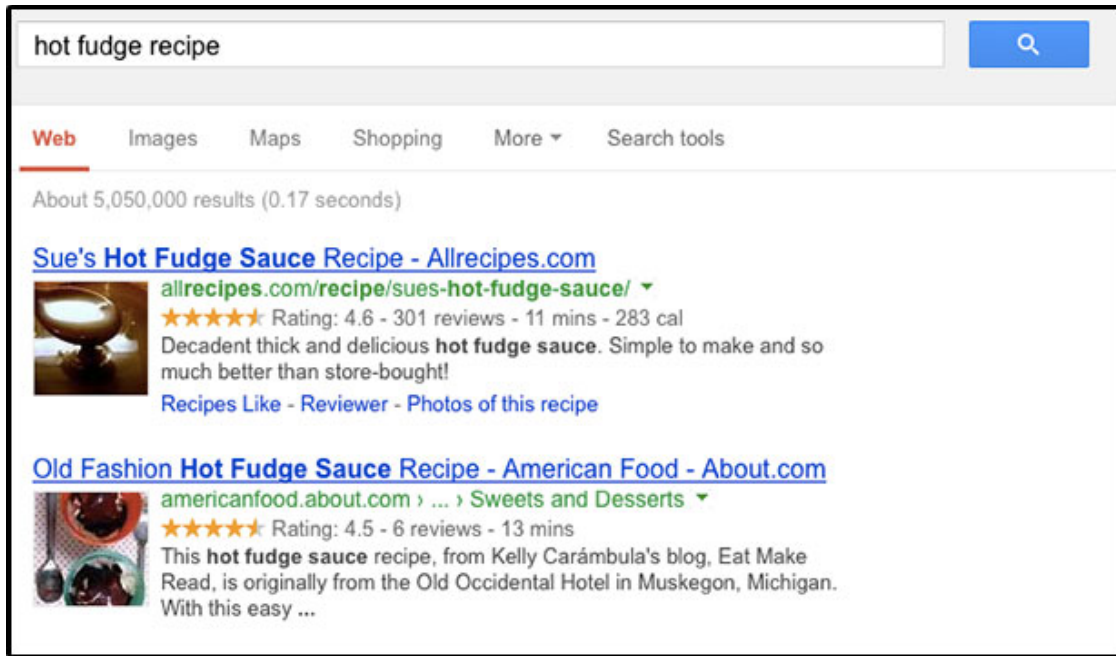
There's no rule of thumb about what structured data to include, but the essentials are:

- Facebook Open Graph tags
- Twitter Cards
- Authorship
- Publisher
- Business information
- Reviews
- Events

To be honest, if you're not creating pages with structured data, you're probably behind the times.

For an excellent guide about Micro Data and Schema.org, check out this fantastic resource from SEOGadget.

Building Links

## 23. The 90/10 Rule of Link Building

This blueprint contains 25 steps to rank your content, but only the last three address link building. Why so few? Because **90% of your effort should go into creating great content**, and **10% into link building**.

If you have a hard time building links, it may be because you have these numbers reversed.

Creating great content first solves a ton of problems down the line:

1. Good content makes link building easier
2. Attracts higher quality links in less time
3. Builds links on its own even when sleeping or on vacation

If you're new to marketing or relatively unknown, you may need to spend more than 10% of your time building relationships, but don't let that distract you from crafting the type of content that folks find so valuable they link to you without you even asking.
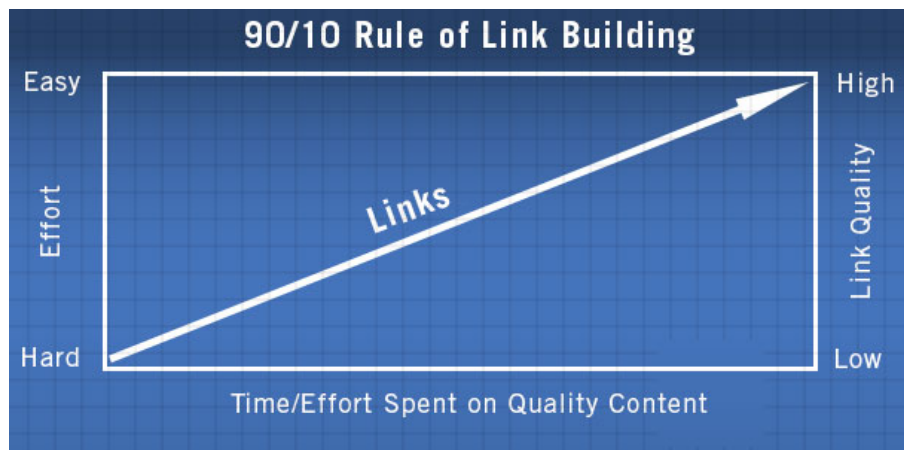
24. All Link Building is Relationships - Good & Bad

This blueprint doesn't go into link building specifics, as there are 100's of ways to build quality links to every good project. That said, a few of my must have link building resources:

1. Jon Cooper's [Complete List of Link Building Strategies](#)
2. [StumbleUpon Paid Discovery](#)
3. [Citation Labs](#)
4. [Promoted Tweets](#)
5. [Ontolo](#)
6. [eReleases](#) - Press releases not for links, but for exposer
7. [BuzzStream](#)
8. Paddy Moogan's excellent [Link Building Book](#)

These resources give you the basic tools and tactics for a successful link building campaign, but keep in mind that all good link building is relationship building.

Successful link builders understand this and foster each relationship and connection. Even a simple outreach letter can be elevated to an advanced form of relationship building with a little effort, as this [Whiteboard Friday](#) by Rand so graciously illustrates.

25. Tier Your Link Building... Forever

The truth is, for professionals, **link building never ends**. Each content and link building campaign layers on top of previous content and the web as a whole like layers of fine Greek baklava.

For example, this post could be considered linkbait for SEOmoz, but it also links generously to several other content pieces within the Moz family and externally as well; spreading both the link love and the relationship building as far as possible at the same time.

SEOmoz links generously to other sites: the link building experience is not just about search engines, but the people experience, as well. We link to great resources and build links for the best user experience possible. When done right, the search engines reward exactly this type of experience with higher rankings.

For an excellent explanation as to why you should link out to external sites when warranted, read AJ Kohns excellent work, [Time to Long Click](#).

One of my favorite posts on SEOmoz was [10 Ugly SEO Tools that Actually Rock](#). Not only was the first link on the page directed to [our own SEO tools](#), but we linked and praised our competitors as well.

Linkbait at its finest.

About Cyrus Shepard — [Cyrus Shepard](#) works for SEOmoz. Follow him on [Twitter](#) and [Google+](#)