10 Golden Rules for Writing Search-Engine-Friendly Copy

The Fuel Agency

1. Page Title

A descriptive and relevant page title is an essential part of a good page. This will usually be displayed as the H1 tag on the page and will be picked up by search engines. Use keywords or expected search terms where possible but make sure to remember your audience consists of human beings.

2. Short Title

You should consider a short title for pages that can be used in website navigation (menus, breadcrumbs, that sort of thing) that will have limited space for text. Try to aim for five or fewer words where possible.

3. Meta Title (HTML Title)

This is the title shown at the top of the web browser window and is sometimes used in search engine listings. The maximum size here should be about 60 characters. You will often see the page title combined with the site title in this format: "This is the title of my page – My website" and may happen automatically. If not then it is considered best practice to put the page title before the site title, as in the example above.

4. Body Copy

Write copy for **people**, using good quality, plain **English**. Do not try to write for search engines and do not employ sneaky tricks that may get recommended to you as they usually have a negative impact to either the search engines themselves or, more importantly, to your site visitors.

Remember that people use search engines with a need to do something such as find, learn, solve, buy, fix, treat, get help or understand; so write your copy with meeting one or more of those needs in mind.

Mention key phrases early on in the content and break up the copy with sub headings (H-tags) – Google likes to see a well structured hierarchy of information. Use important keywords and phrases in the headings. Do not go overboard with

focusing on keyword density in the document, as a whole, because this usually ends up being detrimental to search-engine ranking and creates a negative visitor experience.

5. Meta Description

The meta description is not visible to site visitors but is often used by search engines to calculate page relevance and is usually used as the description of the page in search engine listings. Remember that it will be human beings who will read this text so think about using it to encourage people to click through to your site. Try to keep the text to below 20 words and avoid being pushy or phrasing things like a sales person.

6. Headings and Subheadings

Use the heading tags (H1 - H6) to give a structured hierarchy to your text copy. Only use one H1 tag on the page – this will be recognised by search engines as the main page title. Other tags should break the page down logically.

For example:

[H1] – **All About Fruit**
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam ullamcorper velit vel risus ullamcorper a mattis velit faucibus. Pellentesque vitae elementum lectu.

[H2] – **Apples**
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam ullamcorper velit vel risus ullamcorper a mattis velit faucibus. Pellentesque vitae elementum lectu.

[H3] – **Golden Delicious**
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam ullamcorper velit vel risus ullamcorper a mattis velit faucibus. Pellentesque vitae elementum lectu.

[H2] – **Bananas**

7. Alt-Text (on images)

Applying alt-text to images is an essential element for assisting visually impaired users when visiting your site. However, search engines can also use them to better understand the meaning of the page. Remember search engines cannot "see" images – the only information they can pick up is the filename and the alt tag text (you can also add title tags). Try to get your keywords in where possible but, again, make it readable. If your image has important text on it, make sure the alt-text replicates the important aspects.

If an image serves no contextual purpose or does not provide any information, in other words it is simply "eye candy", then you may consider not applying alt-text to it as the wording will not be relevant to the page or important to a visually impaired user.

8. Documents and Filenames

Use keywords in your document and image filenames. Be specific with the filename where possible. "annual report.pdf" means very little in isolation so consider something like "my-company-annual-finance-report-2011.pdf". When naming files do not leave spaces between words. Do not use an underscore (_) to separate words either. If you need to break the words up then use hyphens (-) or full stops. Search engines can parse many words even if not separated out although separation is very wise in certain situations to avoid confusion. For example, "skillsexchange.pdf" might be be better named as "skills-exchange.pdf" for obvious reasons.

Search engines can also analyse document content so the recommendations for body copy (above) should also be applied when writing your documents. Endeavour to make your documents accessible. MS Word and Adobe Acrobat allow you to do this. If your documents contain private information, do not put them on your website unless you know they are in a secure area, away from the prying eyes of the search engine bots/spiders. An alternative is to apply a password restriction to a file (Adobe Acrobat can do this).

9. Link Text

When including links in your main text copy be sure to put the title, or keywords, of the page you are linking to in the link text. For example, this would be a good example when linking to a page called "The essential elements of good design":

> To find out more visit our page on the <link>essential elements of good design</link> or call us on 01234 567 890.

Compared to this poor link formatting which is see all too often:

> To find out more <link>click here</link> or call us on 01234 567 890.

[Note: <link> is not a valid HTML tag but used just as a marker for the examples.]

Where possible try not to use words from the current page title or keywords from the current page in the link text to other pages. This is a minor conwideration, and rather awkward to accomplish, but worth keeping in mind if possible.

10. Meta Keywords

These are not actually used any more by Google (and many other search engines). However, writing them before you type the main content can help you focus on structuring well written copy. Aim for between ten and fifteen keywords, separated by commas or spaces. Ensure they make sense when viewed in relation to the main page content.

If your site has a built-in search feature then it is possible that it has been set up to include the meta keywords as part of the search process.