



30 STEPS *to* WORDPRESS SEO MASTERY

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Introduction

WordPress is the most versatile Content Management System available, and the fact that it's well-configured for SEO best practices straight out of the gate should come as no surprise. But **because most sites powered by a CMS use WordPress**, they're effectively starting out on equal footing as far as Google, Bing, Baidu, and Yandex are concerned. To help your site stand out, rank higher than the competition on organic searches, and avoid missing out on traffic and revenue — you'll want to tune every aspect of your site — and likely rethink your workflow — with a keen eye toward SEO.

Search engine algorithms consider hundreds of factors when determining where a site should fall on their search engine results page (SERP) for a particular keyword. The specifics may be proprietary to each search engine, but marketers have devoted a wealth of time, research, and money to the task of figuring them out. How much? SEO is projected **to be a \$65 billion industry in 2016**, up from \$60 billion in 2015.

To help your site reap the rewards of all that labor, we'll break down the top 10 SEO recommendations in each of three categories: Site content, structure, and workflow.



establish a benchmark



To set the most realistic goal, you'll want to know exactly where you're starting from. Any number of paid tools and subscription services can help you do that, but there are no shortage of free and public options to gauge your site's current performance. For our purposes, those tools will more than suffice. Record your results on these tests, and then check your site again after you've had a chance to put these guidelines into place to see how much your site has improved and identify areas that may benefit from a more thorough SEO analysis.

Look Through a Search Engine's Eyes

To start with, you'll want to use a tool such as **View as Googlebot** to display your site the way Google sees it while focusing on specific keywords. Google itself offers **Fetch as Googlebot**, which you can use to a similar end. To cover Bing (and, by extension, Yahoo), check your site with Bing's **SEO Analyzer tool**. Note that Yandex's **original Webmaster Tools** are available in English, but the **current version** and **Baidu Webmaster** are not. The guidelines presented here, however, are designed to apply equally to all four major search engines.

Compare with Competitors

Next, find out how your site ranks against the competition with a tool such as What's My SERP's **SERP checker**, which spotlights your results page placement against competitors by keyword and geographic region.

Perform an SEO Audit

Now that you know how your site stacks up, take it to the next level by running it through an SEO audit tool such as **the Found SEO Audit Tool** or **Varvy**.

Test your Page Speed

Finally, because page performance also is an important ranking metric, take a moment to test your site's PageSpeed and YSlow scores at a site such as **GTMetricx**.



TOP 10 → CONTENT

What you post, when you post, and how you format your posts all have a measurable impact on SEO. Keep these guidelines in mind to help maximize each page's ranking score as you create content for your site.

Keep Content Relevant and Focused

Know the specific keywords you're targeting with each post, and stay on topic. Straying too far will cost you keyword density, which can keep your page from getting maximum exposure. Using an SEO plugin, which we'll discuss a bit later, can help keep you on message when writing, but a **Keyword Density Analyzer** can be of tremendous value to identify potential issues in existing content.

'Own' Your Content

SERPs will always be weighted toward authoritative sources. That inherent bias penalizes smaller sites, but you can make it work for you by becoming an authoritative source on your subject matter, thus "owning" that content. Each visit to your page and inbound link from a reputable source boosts your reputation, and you can speed up the process of becoming an authority by offering unique, high-quality content and promoting it to a relevant audience. Put another way: Don't let your site be just another voice in the conversation about your topic of choice — strive to be the voice that everyone else listens to, quotes, and links to.

Publish Frequently and Regularly

There's no specific number of posts per day or per week that will improve your SEO. How often you post will be determined by your subject matter and the pace at which you can reliably produce high-quality content. But there is evidence that establishing and maintaining a regular schedule can work in

your favor. If you only can publish new content twice a week, doing so on the same days every week and around the same times can distinguish your site as a legitimate, reliable source of information and help increase the perception of your site as an authoritative source.

Apply Common Sense to Headlines

Each page on your site should have only one H1 header, and it should contain the keyword you're targeting on that page. This is one case where search engine practices haven't caught up to web standards, and the only time that deviating from standards-compliant code won't cost you points with the major players. Even though HTML 5 calls for an H1 in each section, search engines still appear to prefer the older convention, so be sure to follow it. Feel free to use as many H2 headers as necessary, but avoid repeating the keyword in them to make it clear that your page is written for people, not search engines.

Cultivate Inbound Links

Backlinks are the single most important metric search engines use to rank your site. Both the quantity and quality of inbound links are used to help determine how your site stacks up against the competition, and can go a long way toward ranking your site's authority on a given topic. Each inbound link from an authoritative source give your site a little boost, but backlinks from less-reputable sources will drag you down with them. Use a tool such as **Monitor Backlinks** to see which sites already are linking to you and keep an eye on those that do so in the future.

Link to Authoritative External Sources

Outbound links also play a key role in how your site is perceived. Ideally, each page should include one external link per 100-200 words. Whenever possible, you'll want to make sure that those links point to high-authority pages to get the SEO credit you deserve. If a site consistently pops up near the top of your own search results when researching an article or post, linking to them when you need to attribute a quote or statistic is your best course of action.

Link to Your Own Content

Don't assume that someone reading a specific page on your site is familiar with everything you've posted before. Relevant internal links not only make it easier for readers to find more great content you've created, but also can keep them on your site longer, further boosting engagement. If your content doesn't lend itself to inline links, consider a bulleted list calling attention to related content that may be of interest based on the current page topic. Jetpack's **Related Posts** feature (and any number of plugins) makes this easy for WordPress sites.

*focus on
your targeted
keywords*



If your goal is to draw traffic from organic search queries, you'll want to know which keywords to target before you even begin to write. Ask yourself, what would a potential visitor to your site need to search for to arrive at the page you want them to see?

Generally, a WordPress site should have no trouble targeting short-tail keywords, such as "web design agency" on the CMS's built-in strengths alone. In most cases, it also should help narrow down the specific geographic region you're targeting. But unless a potential visitor includes your company's name among their search terms, they may need to click through several pages of results to find your page.

Long-tail keywords are the key to optimal SERP, and targeting them specifically can dramatically increase your organic search traffic. Expanding the short-tail example above to "web design agency wordpress seo conversion", for example, returns Google Top 10 listings for companies that don't appear in the first five pages of results with the shorter search.

To help decide which long-tail keywords to target, use **Google Keyword Planner** or a free site such as **Keyword Tool**.

Once you've picked your keywords, make sure to focus your writing on them to ensure they're incorporated naturally into the text wherever appropriate. You'll find that SEO plugins do an excellent job of helping maintain your focus on keywords throughout the content creation process. Finally, be sure to include your targeted keywords in the page's title and main headline (H1).

Keep Your Readers Engaged

To improve a visitor's experience on your site and increase their engagement, always give them something to do after they've consumed your content. You can do that by including a Call to Action (CTA) on every page of your site. It may sound unnecessarily complicated, but a CTA can be as simple as a prompt to comment, share the page on social media, or subscribe to your RSS feed. Some sites make it a practice to end every article with a prompt along the lines of "What do you think? Tell us in the comments section below", and you may want to consider that where appropriate. There's also nothing wrong with an article's author leaving the first comment to start the conversation, so long as it poses a relevant question or shares additional insight into the topic.

Make Sure Your Images are 'Seen'

Search engines can only see text. If you're relying on images to help tell your story, you need to make sure that they're also being "seen". To make your site fully accessible, always take the time to include appropriate descriptive text in the alt tags for each image on your site. This is another example of WordPress going the extra mile, because it automatically will include a description for each image based on its file name. However, it's still up to you to name your images properly in the first place. It may take some time to rename dozens of "DSC_XXXXXX" images to accurately represent their content, but remember that the page you're posting now will be visible for years. A little extra time spent up front will pay for itself many times over.

Pay Attention to Page Structure

Breaking out key details makes it easier to highlight the main takeaways from your content — not just for your readers, but for search engines, too. Including a set of bulleted items or a numbered list on pages where it makes sense to do so is an easy way to add SEO value to your content while also improving the experience for your readers.



TOP 10 → STRUCTURE

Your site's underlying structure can make optimizing individual pages an invisible, almost effortless task — or turn it into a needlessly time-consuming chore. Some of these tips may require some heavy lifting to implement on an existing site, but your work will be well-rewarded with a measurable SEO boost.

It All Starts With Your Theme

You likely won't be surprised to know how many ranking factors your choice of theme influences: Page load time, number of external requests, heading structure, schema markup, and more. But you may not know that even **stock WordPress themes** can get even the most basic page structure wrong (as far as search engines are concerned). That's one reason many designers turn to optimized frameworks such as **Genesis** and paid "SEO-friendly" themes. You can solve a lot of issues with an SEO plugin, but a poorly-coded theme (again, in the eyes of search engines) is not one of them. If you've applied every other SEO best practice and your site still comes up short on the benchmarks we covered earlier, it's time to test a new theme.

Be Responsive and Mobile-Friendly

Google now employs a **mobile-friendly algorithm** which gives responsive sites a boost in search results from mobile devices. It doesn't yet apply to desktop search results, but considering that **more than half of all Google searches come from mobile devices** that shouldn't matter to you. Put your site through a **Mobile-Friendly Test** and make any adjustments required to ensure you're not missing out on the mobile boost.

Use an SSL Certificate to Encrypt Traffic

When search engines first **started favoring SSL-secured websites**, they indicated that it would become a more important ranking factor over time.

Be assured, the arrival and widespread use of free SSL certificates using the **Let's Encrypt** authority will only hasten that process. If your site still isn't using HTTPS, there's no longer any reason to delay.

Give Search Engines a Map

A good sitemap is absolutely necessary for search engines to be able to index every relevant page of your site. An XML sitemap can be especially helpful if your site makes use of Flash, AJAX, or other rich content that can't otherwise be seen by crawlers. Any WordPress sitemap plugin designed for Google, Bing, or Yandex will work for all three (and most others). Optimizing for Baidu, however, will require the use of its official WordPress plugin, available directly from **Baidu Zhanzhang**.

Use Canonical Tags Correctly

One of the most common SEO mistakes relates to the use of the `rel="canonical"` tag. It's helpful to remember that canonical tags exist to prevent duplicate content from being indexed. With a CMS such as WordPress, there may be many ways to access the same content (including the home page, archive pages, category pages, and author pages, to name a few). Specifying the preferred source to index via canonical tags ensure that crawlers don't penalize you for duplicating content.

Consider Your Permalink Structure

You already know not to use the default WordPress permalink structure, but there are a number of good reasons to simply use the post name. First and foremost, it results in an easy-to-type (and remember, and promote) link. Secondly, it allows you to regularly update existing content rather than replacing posts as the information becomes outdated — a key step in maintaining the page's SERP over time — without scaring off potential visitors who will judge the value of the page by its age should your permalink contain a date. It also can help prevent your pages from being scraped, which numerically-sequenced URLs make ridiculously easy to accomplish.

Make Effective Use of Plugins, Part One

No one-click-install can deliver an SEO slam dunk, but a tried-and-tested SEO plugin such as **Yoast SEO, All in One SEO Pack**, or a similar tool can quickly whip your site's structure into shape. An all-in-one plugin can generate sitemaps, optimize images and RSS feeds, reduce your page size and load times, enforce the correct use of canonical and meta tags, manage redirects, and handle nearly every other ranking aspect of your site's structure. You may need a paid version to tick all the boxes, but you'll likely find the cost trivial next to the amount of time it would take you to accomplish the same tasks. Regardless of which plugin you choose to use, make sure that you're removing any existing plugins that duplicate its functions. Every plugin carries both a physical cost in terms of server resource usage and a potential SEO cost through additional calls to external resources which could increase your page size and load time. SEO-related plugins do tend to carry a higher overhead simply because they do so much, which makes it that much more important to remove any plugins your site doesn't really need.

use a **CDN**
to boost your
SEO



A Content Delivery Network can dramatically improve your site's security, reliability, and performance, but it can have an equally impressive effect on your SEO.

Serving content from multiple locations allows each visitor to download resources from the server geographically closest to them, and reduces the **abandonment issues experienced by slow sites**.

Because site speed and engagement both are key factors in search engines' rankings, using a CDN is one of the most cost-effective and least labor-intensive methods of maximizing your site's visibility.

Additionally, a CDN automatically minifies scripts, compresses content, combines files where possible, and sets appropriate expiration dates for your site's resources. Because those are among the most common SEO recommendations (so common, in fact, that we're assuming you're already addressing them via plugins, .htaccess rules, or server configuration includes), you may be able to use fewer plugins, reduce load on your server, and serve more concurrent visitors by letting your CDN take over these responsibilities.



Invite Interaction

We've already mentioned that every page on your site should contain an easy way for readers to interact with your content. Your SEO-friendly theme already may include a social share module; if so, make sure it's set to include links to your site's social media pages in your header or footer as well as share links on each page of your site. Don't hesitate to use a plugin if your theme lacks either or both components.

Your Domain Name Matters

We've mentioned that SERPs are weighted toward authoritative domains. While link analysis is the most obvious method of determining authority, it's certainly not the only one they use. Your domain name itself is a key factor. Top-level domains (TLDs) such as ".com" are universal, but country-specific domains such as ".ru" and ".cn" are likely to appear higher in results for search terms most relevant to that country (and are indeed given priority by Yandex and Baidu). A site targeting multiple geographic regions should not only provide content in each appropriate language, but also should consider securing an appropriate TLD to which the translated content can be redirected. Depending on the geographic region and language targeted, it can be the best — if not only — way to overcome a competitor's home field advantage.

Safeguard Your Domain Registration

Another domain name-related factor believed to affect authority ranking is your domain registration itself. For maximum SEO benefit, you'll want register your domain name for as long as your registrar will allow. Far-future domain expirations are an indication that the site will be sticking around, and search engines may interpret this as a sign of authority. On the other side of that equation, there are indications that WHOIS privacy protection may serve as an indication that a domain lacks authority. Privacy protection can be a worthwhile measure for individuals who prefer to avoid unsolicited marketing offers, and it certainly can be essential for those operating sites with potentially controversial subject matter. But it's also an easy way to distinguish personal sites from those run by companies. In many cases the larger the organization behind the site, the more likely it is to be authoritative, and anything that makes you look smaller can work to your detriment.

TOP 10 → WORKFLOW

The way in which you produce content can have as great an SEO impact as the content itself. Keep these guidelines in mind to stay focused on your goal throughout your entire workflow.

Take Control of Your Workflow

Publishing regularly can build authority and persuade visitors to return more frequently, and automation tools can be essential to maintaining your schedule. If you're not already automating your WordPress workflow, a narrowly-focused plugin such as **Publish To Schedule** may be all you need. If your site has an irregular posting schedule and multiple authors, you may need to consider a full-scale editorial calendar such as **Oasis Workflow**. On the extreme opposite end of the spectrum, a heavily customizable solution such as **PostFlow** will let you define your own actions and triggers for posting, promoting, and more as you develop your own custom workflow.

Choose Your Title Wisely

Every post title should include the post's targeted keywords. In the very rare cases when it may not be possible to do so, you can always manually edit the title field in the permalink before publishing to generate an appropriate URL. Be careful when doing this, though: The title and permalink don't need to be identical, but they do need to be close enough to be obviously related. When manually editing permalinks, make certain that you use all lowercase letters and use dashes — not underscores — to separate words.

Update, Don't Replace

Even your site's best content eventually will become stale over time. When that happens, you have a choice to either update it or replace it. Fortunately, the choice is clear: An older page which has been updated will consistently rank higher than a new one created as a replacement.

Optimize Your Assets

Page load time matters for SEO, and every byte of content on your page adds to it. To reduce file sizes and improve your performance scores, make sure that you're minifying JavaScript and CSS. You'll also want to make sure that images are being uploaded at exactly the same size they'll be displayed on your pages. Your CDN and most SEO plugins can handle all of this automatically, so make sure those settings are enabled.

Know When to Redirect

Despite your best efforts to update existing content, there will be times when you have no choice but to pull an existing page or change its URL. Perhaps the name of a product or service has changed, or simply is no longer available. In these cases, a 301 (permanent) redirect will send traffic to the new page and preserve all (or very nearly all) of the previous page's SEO weight. Additionally, frequent site visitors and external sites won't need to update their bookmarks or links. Temporary redirects (302s) don't pass along the full SEO value of the previous page, and should almost never be used.

Don't Duplicate Content

As we mentioned earlier, search engines are not fond of duplicate content. A good way to avoid this in your workflow is to resist the urge to copy and paste content from an existing post into a new one, no matter how relevant it may be. If you must re-use material, never do so without rewriting (or at least paraphrasing) it for the new page. The only exception to this, and the only time it does not appear to incur a search engine penalty, is when re-using content for country-specific domains.

Promote Your Content

Once your post is live, don't wait for traffic to come to you. Tweet about it. Post links to it on Facebook, VK, Google+, Weibo, LinkedIn and any other social media outlet appropriate to the content. Aside from the obvious benefits of drawing more visitors organically, search engines take social media links into account for ranking purposes. But, no matter how difficult, resist the urge to include a direct link to your page in any comments you may leave for similar posts at other sites.

Periodically Evaluate Your Content

As part of your regular workflow, schedule some time to quickly check up on your content. If new content is being added several times a day, you may want to check once a month. For less-active sites, a few times a year may suffice. Specifically, you'll want to check for (and fix) any broken links or duplicate content to avoid potential search engine penalties. Use a browser plugin such as [Check My Links](#) and a WordPress plugin similar to [Fix Duplicates](#) to make identifying problem pages a painless process. You also can use your own spider to crawl your site. A tool such as [Screaming Frog](#) can automatically discover broken links, redirects, and duplicate pages across your entire site.



Check Your Code

Standards-compliant code carries weight with search engines. You'll never have to worry about the WordPress core in this respect, but that may not be true of your site as a whole. Anyone can develop and publish themes and plugins, and the official directories highlight the work of thousands of talented individuals as well as professional developers, with the full range covering the spectrum of skill levels. You don't have to regularly inspect your site's underlying code — or even know what to look for, necessarily — to keep substandard code from impacting your page rank. Use the developer menu in your browser, or a plugin such as **Firebug**, to check for page errors and make sure your code is up to par.

Effective Use of Plugins, Part Two

This isn't the first time we've pitched SEO plugins such as **Yoast SEO** and **All in One SEO Pack**, but while their primary value is in providing and maintaining an SEO-friendly structure for your site, they also can be a tremendous asset in your regular workflow. Any of them can help with issues of duplicate content, generating redirects, and selecting an appropriate title and URL. Yoast, particularly, is incredibly effective at keeping your writing laser-focused on your targeted keywords throughout the entire content creation process.

*does optimizing
for Google mean
optimizing for
Chrome?*



For years, SEO firms have questioned Google executives about whether — and how — Chrome data is used in SERP listings. The company maintains that data gathered by Chrome does not directly affect search results, and its message has been consistent.

However, because Chrome **accounts for nearly 70 percent of the browser market**, and its parent company is the largest search engine in the world, the company line has not quite been accepted as the final word on the subject. While there is no evidence of a direct correlation, the consensus is that there likely may be an indirect one nonetheless.

That's because every time a Chrome user loads a page, a number of non-html metrics are collected and eventually reported back. Some of those metrics, individually, are SERP ranking factors: Server speed, page load time, site protocol, responsiveness, number of requests and external resource usage.

As such, the larger question remains unanswered. Backed by anecdotal evidence, many SEO experts hold fast to the idea that a site's performance in Chrome is vital to its SERP position. So, should you test thoroughly and optimize every aspect of your site for Chrome? Absolutely — but do so because it's the browser most visitors are using to view your site, not because of how it may affect your ranking.



Conclusion

WordPress provides an excellent framework on which to build SEO-friendly sites, and the wealth of available plugins makes it far easier than one might anticipate to apply SEO best practices to your workflow.

These guidelines can help you take advantage of every resource to maximize the SEO value of your site and your content. Once you've had a chance to put them into practice, be sure to repeat your initial benchmark tests — you'll likely see a measurable increase in your performance.

There is, of course, another factor which merits consideration: Your web hosting. The most well-optimized site will be unable to reach its full potential on a server lacking the resources to properly support it. By the same token, the most well-equipped server will itself need a modern Data Center with a multiple Tier 1 network providers to maximize speed, minimize latency, and provide the lowest possible Time to First Byte (TTFB). If you don't already know how your current web host stacks up on those counts, it might be time to consider your options.



Fully Managed WordPress Hosting

We built Managed WordPress on a custom server stack, with each component carefully selected, thoroughly tested, and expertly optimized with an ambitious goal: To be the fastest, most efficient, most reliable, and most secure way to run WordPress. All of our Fully Managed WordPress plans are backed by our Heroic Support[®] and include unlimited 24/7/365 access to expert assistance whenever it's needed.

Runs on VPS and Dedicated Servers

The Managed WordPress platform is built on our VPS and Dedicated Servers and suitable for hosting hundreds of sites. Plans, which start at \$89/mo, include free, unlimited incoming bandwidth, 5 TB of outgoing bandwidth, and an unlimited number of site visitors.

Fully Managed 24/7/365

We manage your server and the full stack that your WordPress site is built on, monitoring it in realtime to ensure it's always operating at peak efficiency. And because our Data Centers are built on a fully-redundant infrastructure, we can offer a 100% Network Uptime Guarantee.

Full of Features

Managed WordPress is built on a custom server stack for maximum performance; includes automatic updates (core and plugins), daily automated site backups, and free standard SSL certificates for security; and comes with WordPress Multisite support, full CDN support, and WP-CLI for convenience.

Our Heroic Support[®] is Included

Every Managed WordPress plan comes standard with Liquid Web's Heroic Support[®] and is backed by our industry-leading SLAs, including a 100% Network Uptime Guarantee.

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Liquid Web is a privately held managed web hosting company founded in 1997. We own and operate three Data Centers in Lansing, Mich., a software development office and Data Center in metropolitan Phoenix, Ariz., a development space in Ann Arbor, Mich., and a Data Center in Amsterdam, NL. Our client base spans more than 150 countries and includes more than 30,000 customers, and our rapid expansion has earned us a spot on INC. Magazine's 5000 Fastest Growing Companies list for nine consecutive years, beginning in 2007.

Liquid Web is committed to providing the most comprehensive hosting solutions and customer service available. Members of our Heroic® Support are professionally educated, certified by Cisco and Red Hat, and specialize in areas such as Technical Support, Server Setup, Database Administration, Advanced Networking, Security, Migrations, System Restoration, and more.