



Grand Montréal

SEO guide for 211 – Technical information

Complementary guide for the Presentation:

How to increase your website traffic (AIRS 2018, Dallas TX)

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2-1-1



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Note: This guide serves as a complementary source of information for the PowerPoint Presentation: How to increase your website traffic. We invite you to consult the PowerPoint Presentation before reading this guide; some key concepts are only explained in the presentation. The guide provides detailed information for the section “Plan your SEO Strategy – Diagnose your website”.

1 - On-site SEO – Technical aspects to consider in your website

The first step to perform when looking at SEO, is to audit your website to see if it is correctly built for search engines. In this section, we will look at the main technical aspects of a website that could affect your rankings.

Search engines are considering hundreds of different factors in their algorithms and the followings points are not necessarily more important than your content. Some are really a must and some are nice to have. Just remember that they are generally good practices to adopt.

Most of these items can only be change or add by a web company or someone having access to your code. However, with the information below, you will be able to diagnose your website, understand the importance of it and include these aspects in future development or in a RFP if you are building a new website.

1.1 General website diagnosis

The following items apply to your entire website. You should thus consider and test them on many pages of your site, if applicable.

1.1.1 Website Speed & Mobile Accessibility

One of the most important consideration for SEO is the speed of your website. Most of the searches on the web are now done with mobile devices (phone & tablets) that do not necessarily have the same quality of Internet connection that a desktop computer has.

Google has recently switch to a mobile-first indexing, which means that the mobile version of your site is considered before the desktop version. Read this article to know more about this: <https://moz.com/blog/mobile-first-indexing-seo>

Main actions to do:

- **Responsive website:** your website must be in responsive web design (adaptable to each devices). If it is not, consider this development as a top priority.
- **Page Speed Insights:** Use Google's tool Page speed insight (free) to determine what you can do to improve the speed of your site:
<https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/>
- **Optimize your images:** Make sure every images you add on your website are optimized. You can diminish the size of an image yourself with this free tool:
<https://compressor.io/compress>

1.1.2 Web Accessibility

Web accessibility is important for SEO, but also and mainly to make sure that people with disabilities can use your website.

It might seem challenging to make your website accessible because there are many criteria, but some principles are easy to understand.

The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the W3C gives detailed information and guideline to make the web accessible. <https://www.w3.org/WAI/>

Most important things to look for:

- **Text alternatives for non-text content:** Include “Alt-Text” for images (description of the image), text transcripts or captions for multimedia content.
- **Keyboard navigation:** All functionalities of your site should be accessible with a keyboard (without a mouse). The navigation is normally done with the arrows, Tab key, and Enter key.
- **Text is readable and understandable:** Clarity and visibility of all the information: buttons, links, contrast between elements.

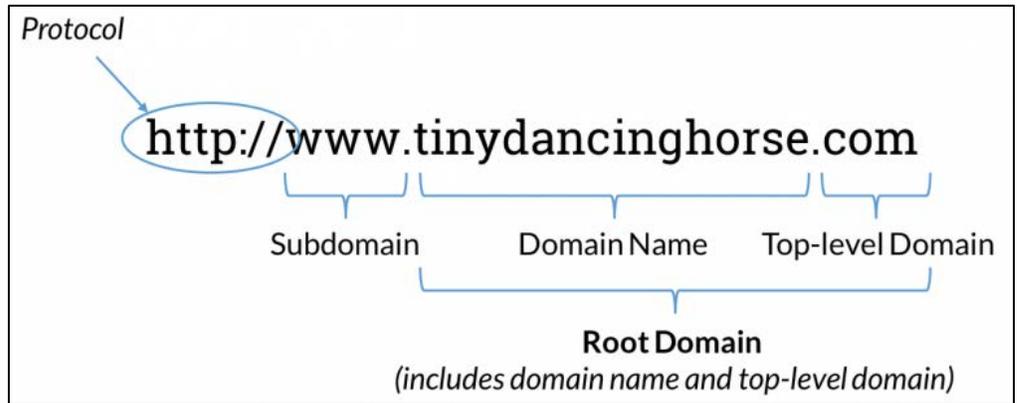
Look for things to correct on your website with this tool:

Wave Accessibility evaluation tool: <http://wave.webaim.org>

1.1.3 Domain, subdomain and domain authority

There are good practices to follow regarding the use of domain and subdomain. Google and search engines will keep different metrics for domains and subdomains.

First, what is a domain?



So, when we refer to a domain, we normally refer to the root domain:

- 211.org – this is a domain
- 211.ca – this is a domain
 - ns.211.ca – this is a subdomain of 211.ca
 - ab.211.ca – this is another subdomain of 211.ca

Best practices:

- Keep your domain name short and memorable
- Favor subfolder over subdomain: if you have to create a blog prefer this version www.211.org/blog over that version blog.211.org

Domain authority

“Domain Authority (DA) is a search engine ranking score developed by Moz that predicts how well a website will rank on search engine result pages (SERPs). A Domain Authority score ranges from one to 100, with higher scores corresponding to a greater ability to rank.”²

The domain authority can help you to see your ranking ability. If two websites had the same content for a given location, the site with a higher domain authority should rank first. It has no direct effect on SEO but could help you to see your SEO progress.

You can use the [Chrome extension MOZbar](#) to see your domain or use this tool: <https://www.seoreviewtools.com/website-authority-checker/>

¹ MOZ: <https://moz.com/learn/seo/domain>, online, May 29th 2018

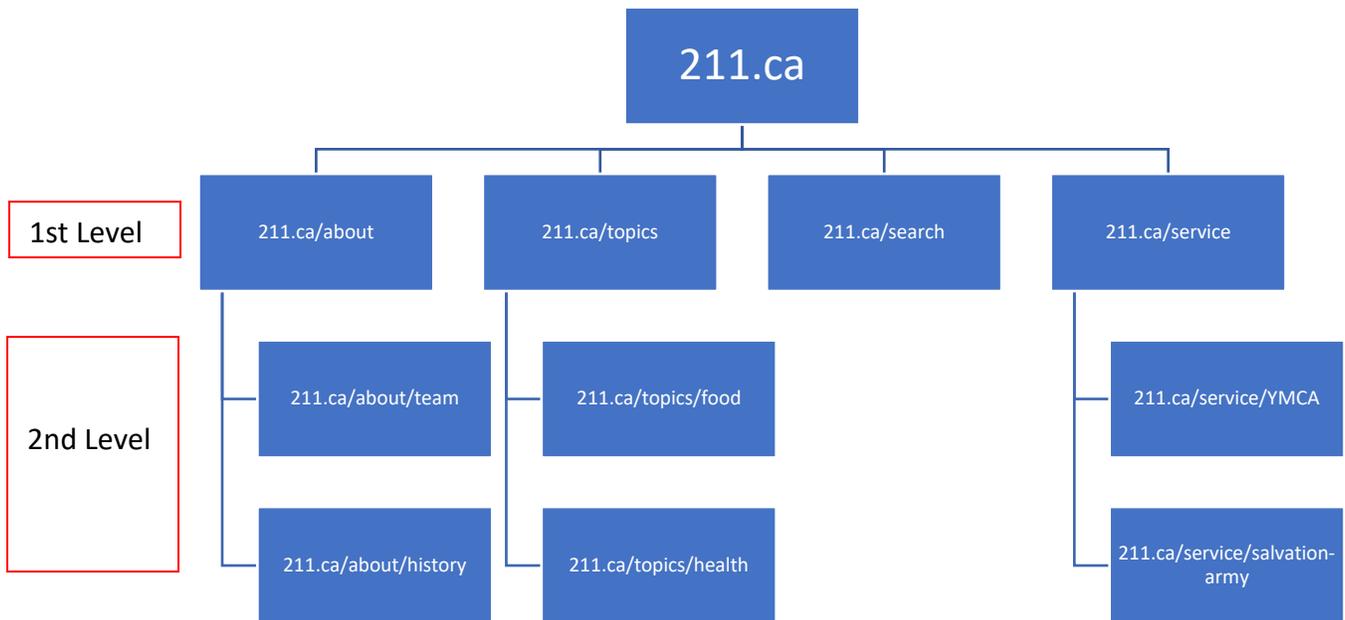
² MOZ: <https://moz.com/learn/seo/domain-authority>, online, May 29th 2018.

1.1.4 Crawable link structure

The organization of your website pages has an influence on how search engine will crawl and index your site. Search engines will understand more easily your content if it is clearly organized in folders and subfolders.

Best practices:

- Try to keep all your website pages within three levels of links or folders. Most I&R can keep everything within two. Here is an example of a two levels hierarchy:



- Avoid using too many “floating pages”, pages that are not part of your hierarchy. For example, these 5 pages are not included in the structure above:
 - 211.ca/promotional-material
 - 211.ca/article-on-mental-health
 - 211.ca/annual-report
 - 211.ca/agency-for-non-profit
 - 211.ca/help

1.1.5 Sitemap

A sitemap is a document on your site that helps search engines to crawl and index your website. Having a sitemap does not mean it will be indexed, but it is a good practice to have one and send it to Google.

A sitemap is not a list of links at the bottom of your site, it is an XML document this lists all your website pages, here is an example: <https://www.211qc.ca/sitemap.xml>.

Best practices:

- **Dynamic Sitemap:** It is important that your web development team generates a dynamic sitemap. I&R and 211 website have constant changes in their database by adding and removing records. A dynamic sitemap will automatically add new pages and remove the ones you have deleted.
- **Submit your sitemap to Google:** If you have just built a new site or if it is the first time you create your sitemap, it is a good idea to submit your sitemap to Google through the Google Search Console. To do this:
 - Add your property to Google Search console - <https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/>
 - Go to *Exploration – Sitemaps*.
 - Click on the button “Add/test a sitemap” to submit your XML sitemap link.

1.1.6 Robots.txt

“Robots.txt is a text file webmasters create to instruct web robots (typically search engine robots) how to crawl pages on their website.”³

The Robots.txt file needs to be placed at the root of your domain to be found. Example: <https://www.211qc.ca/robots.txt>

The Robots.txt file can be used to allow or disallow crawling and indexing pages of your site. The most basic version of that file would be to allow everything, like this:

```
User-agent: *  
Allow: /
```

If you want some sections of your site not to be crawled and indexed, you can use the disallow function for all bots or some of them.

```
User-agent: *  
Disallow: /private/  
Disallow: /internal/
```

For a complex use of a Robots.txt file, you can take a look at the BuzzFeed Robots.txt file: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/robots.txt>

³ MOZ, Robots.txt, <https://moz.com/learn/seo/robotstxt>, online May 29th 2018

1.1.7 Secure website (Https)

Having a secure website is now included in Google's algorithm for indexing website pages, so it has a small effect on your rankings.

Moreover, most browser like Chrome or Firefox will show a green padlock at the left of the URL to inform you that the website is secure. This has an influence on users' confidence towards your site. Example of a secure website in Chrome:



If it is not secure, they will show an "i" for information. Example of a non-secure website in Chrome:



With HTTPS you are encrypted the communication protocol over a computer network. To secure your website, you need to buy an SSL certificate (normally around 150\$ to 300\$ a year). You can take a look at this article to find one: <https://www.whichssl.com/top-10-ssl-certificate-providers.php>

Be aware that installing an SSL certificate and switching to an https website can be tricky and needs to be done by a web developer. Google also provides a list of recommendation when installing an SSL certificate: <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6073543?hl=en>

1.1.8 Content management System (CMS)

The choice of your content management system (CMS) does not have any direct effect on your SEO. However, before choosing a CMS, make sure it provides all the features you need for SEO (chapter 1 of this document).

Right now, WordPress is by far the most used CMS with almost 60% of the market share. Other popular CMS are Joomla, Drupal and Magento.

SEO should always be considered amongst other reason to choose a CMS. Other reasons could be usability, efficiency of content edition, experience of your team with the CMS, etc.

Most web companies work with only one CMS. So, when you choose the company, you choose the CMS. Some web companies also have developed custom-built CMS. Again, there is no problem in using a custom-built CMS, as long as it meets your SEO expectations.

For WordPress

If you use WordPress CMS, Yoast (<https://yoast.com/>) is a popular plugin that will help you in maintaining and analyzing various SEO features of your website. There is a free basic version and a premium one.

1.1.9 Database Export

Like Content Management System, the choice of your database export does not have a direct impact on SEO, however some choice exports have a terrible impact on website visits.

There are mainly three ways to export or transferred your database from the software you use to your website:

- Public Resources Directory (PRD)
- Excel/CSV export
- Application Programming Interface (API)

Public Resources Directory (PRD)

Some I&R software are providing a module to show your database on your website. It has the advantages of being: cheap, always up-to-date, easy to setup and requires almost no maintenance.

However, most Public Resources Directory available right now are not thought for SEO and will give you poor traffic from the web. Why? Because, many PRD are actually <iframe>, which means they are a website within a website. The content of those <iframe> are not indexable nor crawlable by Search Engines. If you do want to use a PRD make sure it provides at least:

- A static page for all your database entries, ex: www.211.org/service/YMCA-downtown
- An URL containing the name of the record, ex: www.211.org/service/YMCA-downtown and not www.211.org/records-18373417471, see 1.2.2
- A Title tag of the record, see 1.2.3

In all cases, almost all PRD will limit your SEO possibilities.

Excel/CSV export

Probably the most basic way to update the records of your website is to export the database from your software in an Excel or CSV format.

This is the most flexible type of export, you can model or clean your data as you want before publishing on your website and it will not limit in any way your SEO possibilities.

The main disadvantage of this export is the time and manipulations required to export from your software to the website. Moreover, your website will not be up to date in real-time.

Application Programming Interface (API)

Nowadays, many software communicates between each other via API. An API could be described as a tunnel between your database and your website. Your website requests information to the API, the API gets the information from your database and sends it back to the website.

Unlike Excel/CSV export, you get real-time data with an API and there is no time taken in exportation and importation. The other advantage of API is that you have almost full flexibility for the development of your website.

However, it should be noted that some API have limitation on the information they send to your website: some fields can be excluded, or the total number of records can be limited in each call request. For example, if your API limits the number of records sent to 100 per request, you won't be able to create a complete map of 140 resources on a specific topic, you will have to add a pager to it.

API requests also rely on the capacity of the servers sending back the information, which means that if the server infrastructure is slow, it will slow down your website.

If you want to go with an API export, make sure it gives you all SEO features of this document.

1.2 HTML <Head> elements and URL

“The `<head>` element is a container for **metadata** (data about data)”⁴.

This container is present on every page of a website and will give information to search engines on different aspects of a page. Metadata is not displayed.

Some metadata are crucial for your website and SEO, and some are nice to have.

Where to find your metadata and your head elements?

- On any site, you can take a look at the HTML code by clicking “CTRL+U” (Chrome and Firefox) or “CTRL+F3” (Internet Explorer) or by clicking right-button of your mouse and then “display the page source code”.
- Alternately, you can add “view-source:” before any page to see the HTML code.
- Example: <view-source:https://www.mec.ca/en/>; you will see at the top of the page many elements beginning by “meta” under the <head> element.

⁴ W3 School, Online : https://www.w3schools.com/html/html_head.asp

1.2.1 Indexable content

The most important metadata element is the Index element, this element will tell search engines to crawl and index the page. Normally, your page is always index, but if some of your content is tag with “noindex”, Google or Bing will not show your page for any given research.

In your source code, the “index” will be displayed like this:

```
<meta name="robots" content="index">
```

The only reason for using the “noindex” would be for internal content that you don’t want to be public or for new content that should not yet be public.

1.2.2 URL

The URL is the web address of your page that you can see at the top of your page like: <https://www.google.com/maps/>. Do not confound with page title, see 1.1.3.

The URL is an important aspect of SEO and is considered by search engines.

It is important that the important keywords of your page be contained in your URL. There are two main examples of this in a 211 website:

1. For your **database records**, you want to have the name of the agency or program in the url.
 - a. For example: <https://www.211qc.ca/organisme/centre-de-la-communaute-sourde-du-montreal-metropolitain-18761863> - The name of the Agency Centre de la communauté sourde du Montréal métropolitain is included in the URL.
 - b. To avoid: www.211example.com/organization/record-82723633 ; you don't want to have only a record number in the URL.
2. For your **articles**, make sure to have your important keywords in the url:
 - a. For example, an article on Income Tax Clinics should have these keywords in the URL, like: <https://www.211qc.ca/en/employment-and-income/income-tax-clinics-for-low-income-people>

TIPS for the URL

- Keep it short if possible
- Keep all your URL within 3 levels of folder (see 1.1.4 – Crawlable link structure)

1.2.3 Title tag

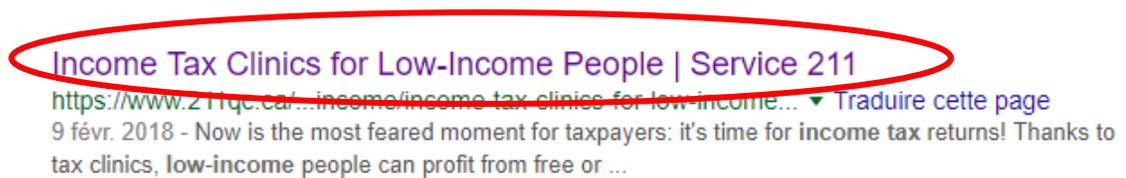
The title tag is the name of a web page.

You can see the title tag mainly at three places:

1. In the tab at the top of your **web browser**:



2. On Google's **search results**, it is the name of the page that comes first:



3. **Social Networks**: when you share a page of your site, the title tag will be displayed first.

Like the URL, it is important that your important keywords be found in the Title tag.

The title tag can be composed of two parts :

- 1) The name of the page: in the example above "Income Tax Clinics for Low-Income People" is the page title.
- 2) The brand: "Service 211" in the example above. It is good practice to include your brand (211 name) automatically on every page title of your site. You can separate the title and the brand by a line "|" or a hyphen "-". This is normally something you need your web development team to set for you.

TIPS for the title tag

- Ideally between 50 to 60 characters (600 pixels); Google will not display more than that in the search results.
- Try to make it attractive to users, a good title will make people click on your page in the search results.

Code Sample in the <head> element:

- `<title>Income Tax Clinics for Low-Income People | Service 211</title>`

1.2.4 Meta description

The Meta description is an HTML element giving a summary of a webpage. It is the text we found in the search results below the url:

Food aid, Agencies and Services in the Greater Montreal | Service 211

<https://www.211qc.ca/en/food> ▼ Traduire cette page

211 provides information on food aid services, community kitchens, meals-on-wheels and community gardens.

The Meta description is not a ranking factor for search engines like Google. However, this text has an important influence on people clicking on your links. In the search results, the words of your search will be in bold in the meta description.

Every page of your website should have a meta description. For your articles page, you should be able to add and modify the meta description within your CMS (Content management system).

The bigger challenge for 211 is to be able to generate a meta description for all your database records. There are a few options to do this. The first one would be to create a special field in your database and write a meta description for all your agencies and programs. Although this would be the best from an SEO perspective, it is extremely time consuming. Another option is simply to use a field already in your database, like the “service description” and use it to populate the meta description automatically. This is something you will probably have to ask your web development team to do.

TIPS for the meta description tag

- Ideally around 300 characters; this is the new limit from December 2017, depending of the device and the search, it could be truncated before 300 characters so make sure to have the most important content at the beginning.
- Match your meta description with search terms so people can see the terms in bold.

Code Sample in the <head> element:

- `<meta name="description" content="Find volunteer help for your taxes in Greater Montreal. Low-income people can access a free tax clinic at a partner organization of Revenue Quebec and the Canada Revenue Agency."></meta>`

1.2.5 Canonicalization

“A canonical tag (aka "rel canonical") is a way of telling search engines that a specific URL represents the master copy of a page. Using the canonical tag prevents problems caused by identical or "duplicate" content appearing on multiple URLs. Practically speaking, the canonical tag tells search engines which version of a URL you want to appear in search results.”⁵

For 211 and I&R websites, the canonical tag is important to avoid creating duplicate of pages (URL) from our database. How those duplicates are created? Many websites will setup different parameters that will change the URL in order to improve the user experience.

For a clear example, all those pages are the same, but have different URLs:

- <https://www.211qc.ca/en/organization/pme-mtl-est-de-lile-18762022>
- <https://www.211qc.ca/en/organization/pme-mtl-est-de-lile-18762022?cat-id=6&sub-cat=employment-support-and-training&lat=45.5016889&lng=-73.56725599999999&sort=proximity>
- <https://www.211qc.ca/en/organization/pme-mtl-est-de-lile-18762022?cat-id=6&sub-cat=employment-support-and-training&lat=45.5016889&lng=-73.56725599999999&place=Montreal&field11=Montr%25E9al&field12=Montr%25E9al&sort=name&list=true&list=true>

Everything in the URL that comes after the name “pme-mtl-est-de-lile-18762022” is there to remember the category searched for the buttons “back to search results”, “next” and “previous”, or to remember the location and the filters selected.

For all these duplicates of the same page, we can add a canonical tag in the <head> to indicate which page is the master:

- `<link rel="canonical" href="https://www.211qc.ca/en/organization/pme-mtl-est-de-lile-18762022" />`

By doing this, Search Engines understand that this is not 3 different pages, but only one. This means that they will only index the main one.

If you don't use the canonical tag and have search parameters that modify the URL, you will get the same page indexed multiple times resulting in a diminution of the value of each one. Like if the “link power” was divided into many results.

⁵ MOZ, *What is Canonicalization?*, <https://moz.com/learn/seo/canonicalization>, online May 30th 2018.

Search page

All 211 and I&R websites have a search page. In many cases, this is the main page that could create thousands of pages when your search parameters are included in the URL. This is not exactly a duplicate, because the results are different from a page to another. However, search page will not get any organic traffic and have no SEO value. It is thus recommended to add a canonical on all your search page possibilities to bring it back to a master like this : `<link rel="canonical" href="https://www.211qc.ca/en/search" />`. By doing that, Search engines will not index every possible search results page.

1.2.6 Hreflang

If your website is bilingual or multilingual the Hreflang attribute tells Search Engines which language you are using on that page and what are the other versions of the same page in other languages. It has a double function: giving the appropriate language and avoiding duplicate of the same page in different languages.

Example:

The page <https://www.211qc.ca/> is in French and the exact same page in English is <https://www.211qc.ca/en/>

In the <head> section of both pages, we will include the following information to tell search engines which page to use for each language:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="fr" href="https://www.211qc.ca/" />
```

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en" href="https://www.211qc.ca/en/" />
```

Here “fr” stands for French and “en” for English.

1.2.7 Structured data (Schema.org)

“Schema.org (often called Schema) is a semantic vocabulary of tags (or microdata) that you can add to your HTML to improve the way search engines read and represent your page in SERPs. [...] Schema.org is the result of collaboration between Google, Bing, Yandex, and Yahoo! to help you provide the information their search engines need to understand your content and provide the best search results possible at this time.”⁶

Although it is unclear that Schema.org has a clear effect on rankings, this structured data helps search engines to present your data.

Schema has various tags to show Organizations and since I&R and 211 have complete databases of organizations, it is a good practice to implement those tags in the code of your website.

To see the different tags for Organizations in Schema, you can visit their website:

<http://schema.org/Organization>

Google also have two main tools to help you implement Schema.org:

1. To generate the HTML code: <https://www.google.com/webmasters/markup-helper/>
2. To validate your structured data once implemented on your website: <https://search.google.com/structured-data/testing-tool>

You can also consult those articles to get more information on Schema implementation:

<https://moz.com/blog/schema-hidden-gems>

<http://www.quicksprout.com/the-advanced-guide-to-seo-chapter-3/>

⁶ MOZ, Schema.org Markup, <https://moz.com/learn/seo/schema-structured-data>, online May 30th, 2018

1.2.8 Social Meta tags (Twitter Card data and Open Graph data for Facebook)

Sadly, Twitter, Facebook and other Social Media do not rely on the Schema.org structured data. They use their own form of data format:

- Twitter = Twitter Card data
- Facebook = Open Graph data

Twitter and Facebook Meta tags are included in the <head> section of your HTML pages.

Using these social meta tags will ensure you that when you share content on Facebook or Twitter, the title, description, images and other information appear correctly in your posts. Considering the importance of Facebook and Twitter it is a good practice to add Twitter Card data and Open Graph data to your site and especially on your articles.

For more information on how to implement Social meta tags, consult this article:

<https://moz.com/blog/meta-data-templates-123>

1.3 Page element

There are a few things that are important to consider for SEO in the core of your text. These elements need to be optimized for the keyword or group of keywords you want to rank for.

1.3.1 Headers

In each page of your site you should use HTML Headers to highlight your most important content. HTML headers can have many levels: header 1 = <h1>, header 2 = <h2>, header 3 = <h3>, header 4 = <h4>, etc. You should not need more than 3 or 4 levels.

When you write an article, it is important in SEO to divide your text with headers and include your main keyword at least once in the <h1> and your secondary in other headers <h2> and <h3>.

1.3.2 Images

Images cannot be understood by search engine by themselves (even though machine learning progress is changing that quickly). When you add an image to a page, you can add the attribute "alternative text" (alt="Sunset in Goose Bay"). By doing this, you are telling the search engine what the image is, and it will be recognized accordingly.

If you are writing an article and want to rank for a keyword, it will be a plus if you include a relevant image and add your keyword in the alternative text of that image.

2 - Available tools

There are many tools that can help you with your SEO, some are free (mostly from Google), but most of them are not. Here is non-exhaustive list of tools that can help you.

2.1 Google Search Console

Free - <https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/>

Google Search Console is an important tool for SEO, it has many features including:

- Analyze and show the keywords searched on Google that led to your site as well as the clicks, impressions, click through rate and average position.
- See the number of indexed page of your site on Google
- Look for error on your site (e404)
- Send your sitemap
- Verify your robots.txt file

2.2 Google keyword planner

Free – Part of Google Adword - <https://adwords.google.com> (Go to Tools – Keyword planner)

If you are not willing to pay for a software that can give estimation of traffic, Google Keyword Planner is a good place to start to get estimations of traffic for as many keywords as you want, in any location and with any language.

2.3 Multi-purposes SEO tools

Most paid tools out there for SEO have many features. The most important feature you get with these tools is the ability to enter many keywords and see how you rank on Google for these keywords in any given location. Many software will also have features like: backlink analysis, competitor analysis, keyword suggestions, website crawl looking for errors or suggestion of improvement, search volume estimations, etc.

Here is a list of the main paid SEO tools:

- Advanced web ranking: <https://www.advancedwebranking.com/>
- Ahrefs - <https://ahrefs.com>
- MOZ pro - <https://moz.com/> (75% discount for nonprofit)
- Majestic - <https://majestic.com/>
- SEMrush - <https://www.semrush.com/>
- SpyFu - <https://www.spyfu.com/>
- Mobile Moxie (mobile SEO) - <https://mobilemoxie.com/>

2.4 Image optimization tool

To be able to resize different formats of images for free you can use the open source software Gimp: <https://www.gimp.org>

To optimize your images for the web you can use this free tool: <https://compressor.io/compress>

2.5 SEO plugins for WordPress

There are many plugins for WordPress that can help you with SEO, the main one is Yoast (<https://yoast.com/>), there is a free version and a premium one.

2.6 Learn SEO

SEO is still a relatively new domain of marketing and most colleges and universities do not offer class including SEO techniques. When they do, they are sometimes already way behind the industry.

Luckily enough, there are plenty of quality information on the web about SEO. Why? Remember, SEO is all about quality content, so companies that are selling SEO software are competing against each other by putting lots of content on the web about SEO, for free!

If you want to learn more about SEO, here are a few guides, blogs and learning centers:

- **MOZ** - main resource to learn SEO, everything is free
 - Begin with the Beginner's guide: <https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo>
 - Look at the learning centre: <https://moz.com/learn/seo>
 - Learn more on the blog: <https://moz.com/blog>
- **Search Engine book:** <https://searchenginebook.com/>
- **Google SEO Starter Guide:** <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/7451184?hl=en>
- **Quicksprout:** <https://www.quicksprout.com/university/>
- **Ahref:** <https://ahrefs.com/blog/learn-seo/> (this post will give you information on how to learn SEO with links to different guides and topics by subjects)