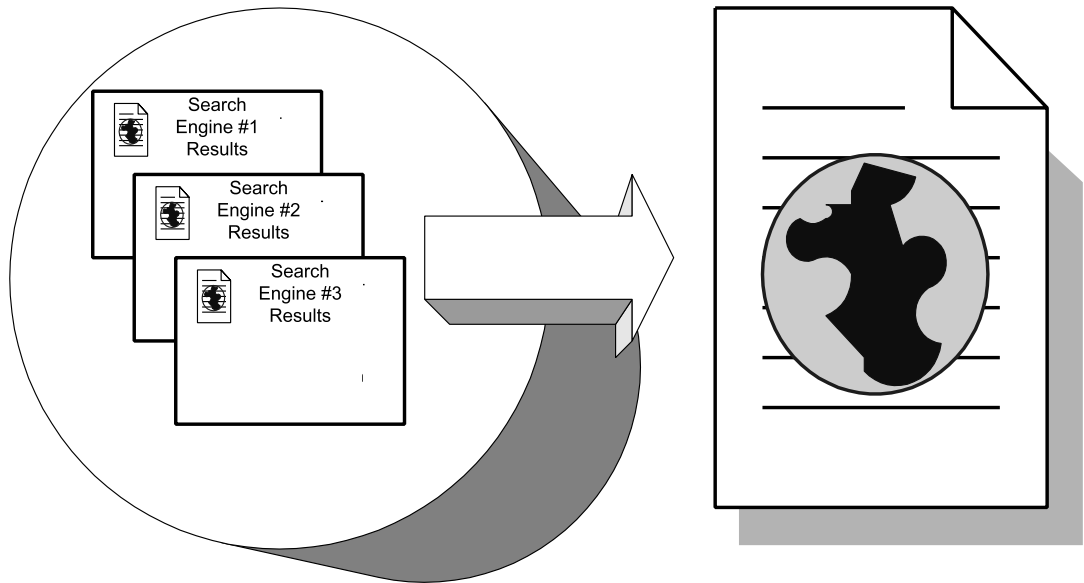


## Write So Your Pages Will Be Found



### BACKGROUND |

### **Do you want to be linked to?**

If you manage to get a spot in the top 10 or 20 results on a search engine, people will follow the link and discover your site for the first time. If you place lower than 30, you might as well not appear. To rank high, you have to respect the way the search spiders work, the way the companies filter out spam, and the way the algorithms look for relevance.

*Spiders* are trained to follow links and look for keywords and phrases—text chunks that stress your unique content, service, or point of view. The spiders look for these keywords in critical locations on each page, particularly your home page. Oddly, given the robotic nature of these little critters, their most important focus is on the content on the page—title, headings, running text, and link

*Having keyphrase-rich home page copy that converts traffic is incredibly important. However, ...if you rely on your home page to be the be all, end all for ALL your keyphrases, you're hobbling your Search Engine Optimization success and probably making your copy impossible to read.*

—Jill Whalen and Heather Lloyd-Martin, *Rank Write Roundtable*

text. You have to write this material so it appeals to the spiders—and, oh yes, the humans. Managing that double perspective takes finesse and planning.

Before writing anything on the page, come up with one or two key phrases for each page—mantras and slogans that persuasively answer questions that users might ask about the page or the site, such as:

- What info, service, or product do you offer?
- What's the benefit of using your information, service, or product?
- What's the unique subject of this page?
- How do you distinguish yourself from your competitors?
- What is the main reason I should buy, subscribe, register, explore your site?
- Who are you aiming at? (Am I in that niche?)

Developing phrases that respond to these questions involves a lot of discussion with your team, and arguments that go on for days, but don't forget to ask your customers.

Ask users what methods they would use to find a site such as yours. (IBM, 1999)

Most people use only one or two words in a query. You can use a service like WordTracker to see which of your new phrases are most commonly searched for, and you can sneak a look at the keywords used by your competitors (particularly if they already rank high on the search engines). But you should do some market research among your most valuable customers to see what they would enter to find a particular page (more revealing than asking them what keywords they would use for the site as a whole). Don't go vague, either, reaching for words so general that they would apply to General Mills, General Motors, and General Incompetence. Come up with your own focused and very precise keywords.

Keywords become our characterization of what each document is **about**. (Richard Belew, 2000)

Having defined the messages you want to communicate to the people who come to your pages, repeat yourself enough to appeal to the spiders, but not so much that you make them suspect you are trying to bamboozle them.

## **Make those keywords visible in ordinary text**

The spiders check your visible content to make sure it matches the words in your Title, Description, and Keyword tags. If not, suspicion sets in. If you use a bunch of words in the same color as the background (so the text is invisible to humans, but readable by software), the spiders suspect that you are trying to fool them, and they react by banning your site for life. Rule of thumb: write content so that it can be read by both humans and spiders.

Your headings should be text, not graphics, identified with conventional H1, H2, H3 tags. Each heading should pick up a keyword or phrase. After all, search engines figure that any text you put in a heading must be important on your site, indicating what topics are really relevant.

Running text, particularly on the home page, must weave together your keywords in a way that sounds convincing to a human. It's OK to repeat the phrases, but don't just say the same phrase over and over in a row, because humans hate it and spiders sense you are trying to con them. You want a dense thicket of keywords, but not such a jumble that a human reacts by puking on the screen. You don't have to jam all your keywords into the first paragraph; spiders read the whole page, and humans get indigestion if you try to force-feed them all those nuggets of compressed significance.

Don't put key text into graphics (which spiders can't read), animation (ditto), or intricately nested tables (which confuse the eight-legged ones).

## **Focus your title**

Your title is all people see in the results on some search engines, so make it sell. As you write the content for the Title tag, double-check to make sure you are picking up a key phrase or two out of your visible copy. Bump the company name out of the title altogether or shove it to the very end where nobody will notice it, and concentrate

*The search engines are changing their rules constantly, and if you're relatively new to e-business it can be really CONFUSING. Heck! I find it confusing sometimes...*

—Corey Rudl,  
*Marketing Tips Newsletter*

on one or two key benefits of using your services, products, or spirit. Remember that the search engines compare the title to the page content to determine whether or not you are really sincere—not just stacking the deck with a bunch of interesting keywords.

## Add a description

Include an **abstract** in the meta-tag for the description in the page header. Like this:

```
<META NAME="description" CONTENT="Taken from the
journals of Delacroix, these words of advice still inspire
and guide artists today.">
```

Make sure the first sentences describe the page in 150 words or so, because that's the maximum that most search engines will display. Your abstract can go twice that long, though, because the spiders sent out by the search engines rely heavily on the description for information about the page, and read all of the description, robotically. Move your key phrases to the beginning. Spiders who read Meta descriptions give them a lot of weight—more than the Meta keywords.

## Use the Meta keyword tag

Just don't count on this. People have abused this tag, cramming all kinds of irrelevant words in here, like adding *sex*, *free*, *new*, and *xxx* to a site devoted to pump engines just to catch a few suckers. So put all your key phrases here, but don't make this your main effort at appealing to the search engines. Do not repeat the same word over and over (spread out similar phrases so the spiders do not feel you are faking the density). Within your list of key phrases, resist using the same word more than half a dozen times, including all variations, to avoid irritating the spiders. And remember: If a phrase is not relevant to the rest of your content, drop it.

*As far as the search engines are concerned, content IS king.*

—Heather Lloyd-Martin,  
*Rank Write Roundtable*

## Got images? Write alternate text

Spiders can read, but they can't see, so any text you place into graphics passes right over their heads. Solution: Add alternate text to the tag because the spiders can read that. Great place to use keywords!

## Make link text key

Spiders consider links a critical way of figuring out whether your site really deals with the subjects you announce in your Description and Keywords tags. Look at the actual text of your links. Could you possibly squeeze another keyword in?

The search engines figure that hyperlinked keyphrases are important, and they'll give that phrase more weight. In fact, now that I'm on my soapbox, I think that every hyperlink on your home page should include a keyphrase. (Heather Lloyd-Martin, 2001)

## Get out the thesaurus

Along with the keywords you actually use in the text, put **synonyms** in the Meta tags. Don't repeat the same word over and over in a row because the spiders consider that spamming and may ban your site. Don't try tricks like putting the same word a hundred times in white text on the page because the spiders recognize the trick and blackball your site forever.

Include generic terms used by customers or competing companies to describe the contents of the page. And remember that people can't spell very well so include typos for your keywords, too.

## Don't stray too far from the topic

If you invent a set of keywords for your whole site and drop them onto every page, the spiders coming from the search engines may get suspicious, seeing that the keywords don't show up in the text on some pages. You may get downgraded or dropped as a cheater, when you were really just lazy.

Make the keywords **match the text on their pages**. Whenever you shift topics, you ought to edit your keywords.

*If your target audience can't find you in the search engines...how will they know you exist? You may want to create a certain image for your site, but if your site is a beautiful billboard on a deserted highway, what good will it do for you?*

—Jill Whalen,  
**Rank Write Roundtable**

## Invite the spiders to come back

Make yourself easy to tour. Add meta tags addressed directly to the robot, saying that all your content is available for scanning. Invite the little critter to revisit the site in a few weeks, too. (See examples).

## EXAMPLES

### Before

```
<html>

<head>

<title>Department of Earth Sciences: Geology
101: Volcanoes</title>

</head>
```

### After

```
<html>

<head>

<meta name="keywords" content="Haleakala,
Halemaumau, Vesuvius, Aetna, volcano, volcanoes,
lava, aa, crater">
<meta name="description" content="Free infor-
mation about volcanoes, for students and teachers.
Tour key volcanoes of Hawaii and Italy, with close-
up images of lava flows, before and after shots, and
timelines.">
<meta name="robot" content="all">
<meta name="revisit" content="15 days">
<title>Volcanoes: Geology 101: Department of
Earth Sciences </title>

</head>
```

**See:** Belew (2000), IBM (1999), Kilian (1999), Lloyd-Martin and Whalen (2001), Nielsen (1999f), Sun (2000).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.  
(New Riders).

Copyright 2002 by Jonathan and Lisa Price

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the authors.

[theprices@theprices.com](mailto:theprices@theprices.com)

The Prices  
918 La Senda Lane, NW  
Albuquerque, NM 87107

No patent liability is assumed with respect to the use of the information contained herein.

Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and authors assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Nor is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

ISBN 0-7357-1151-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card: 2001089176