Featured snippets: The 9 rules of optimization

In SEO, some might consider featured snippets the holy grail of rankings. Featured snippets are a great low hanging fruit opportunity for many websites. By optimizing for the featured snippet, you can propel your site to the top of the search results by only making very small adjustments to your page's content. Throw away backlinks, performance, and site architecture (only kidding). Featured snippet optimizations allow you to bypass all of that for a chance at ranking in the first position without having to worry about all of those other factors.

The goal of this post is to provide you with a set of rules to reference when you find featured snippet opportunities. Think of this as a checklist to run through when you're brainstorming how to optimize for featured snippets in your keyword set.

What is a featured snippet?

A featured snippet is a two to three sentence summary of text that appears at the top of Google. Featured snippets provide an answer for a user's query directly in the search results. Receiving a featured snippet can result in more traffic for a given page.

The steps to receiving a featured snippet are as followed:

1. Add a "What Is" heading
2. Use an "is" sentence structure
3. Fully define the topic
4. Match the featured snippet format
5. Don't use your brand name
6. Don't use first person language

7. Scale featured snippets
8. Prioritize when you rank in the top five
9. Iterate your optimizations

The featured snippet appears to work on a more simplistic algorithm than Google's "primary" one. The featured snippet is much more influenced by simple on-page adjustments that very clearly define the topic to users.

Featured snippets and voice search

As well, keep in mind that one of the goals of the featured snippet is to fuel voice search. Google reads back featured snippets when users perform voice queries on mobile or Google Home devices. This means that featured snippets must always make sense in this context. When optimizing for featured snippets it makes sense to ask yourself "*How would my answer sound if read back on voice search*?"

The types of featured snippets

When optimizing for featured snippets, you might notice that there are several different types. It's important to be aware of these different types so you understand how to structure your content to optimize for them. The most common types are as followed:

Paragraph: Two or three sentences of text pulled from a <p> HTML element. These are the most common type:

List: A bulleted or numbered list *generally* pulled from either an <ol> or <ul> HTML element:

Table: A table of information pulled from a <table> HTML element. These are the least common type:

How to optimize for the featured snippet

Throughout the years, one of the things I've been able to hone in on is how to optimize for the featured snippet. I've developed a set of rules that I follow when optimizing client pages for this SERP feature.

You can learn more about each rule below:

Rule #1: Add a "What Is" heading

To start your featured snippet optimizations, you'll want to look for a place in your content to add a "What Is [Keyword]"

heading tag. This sends clear signals to Google that text that could be used for the featured snippet is upcoming. We've seen countless examples of pages that receive the featured snippet using this heading format. When replicating this strategy for our clients, we've seen very good success rates.

Ideally, you'll add this heading as close to the top of your content as possible. If writing a blog post, I'll generally add it right below the introductory paragraph. This is often a great place to add it that flows well with the content while allowing you to include it near the top of the page.

For instance, here's a great example on TechnologyAdvice. We can see that they include this section right below their "Table of contents" at the top of the page:

By adding this section, this gives Google a straightforward indication of what text they can pull into the featured snippet. The result is that they receive the answer box for the competitive keyword “project management software.” This actually helps them perform above Capterra which is very difficult to do in SaaS SEO.

Rule #2: Use the “is” sentence structure

When optimizing for the featured snippet, it’s really important to include an “is” statement. This means that the very first sentence should start with the structure: “[Keyword] is”. Below are some examples from results that are getting the featured snippet:

*“**Agile methodology is** a type of project management process,*

mainly used for software development…"

*"**Customer relationship management (CRM) software is** software that automates and manages the customer life cycle of an organization."*

*"**Return on Investment (ROI) is** a performance measure used to evaluate the efficiency of an investment or compare the efficiency of a number of different investments."*

When analyzing pages that are receiving featured snippets, we consistently see that "is" statements are utilized within the text. In our experience, structuring content this way appears to act as a "triggering phrase" that allows Google to easily find the text that's relevant for the featured snippet.

When optimizing your pages for the featured snippet, try to ensure that your first sentence follows this format. By using an "is" statement, you should see a higher percentage of your optimizations result in winning the featured snippet.

Rule #3: Fully define the topic in 2-3 sentences

To me, this is the most important rule to follow.

Feature snippets are meant to give users as much information about the topic as possible in a short amount of time. This means that the content your optimizing must try to describe the topic as completely as possible in two to three sentences. For this rule, being concise is extremely important.

Here are some general guidelines we try to follow when trying to concisely define featured snippets

1. The first sentence should define the topic
2. The second and third sentences should describe 2-3 must-know facts about the topic
3. Try to avoid using any extraneous phrasing in your definition

Here’s a great example from Investopedia:

1. Forensic accounting is a specific accounting technique to discover crimes
2. It’s used to provide evidence of financial misconduct to courts
3. Forensic accounting is heavily used in the insurance industry

This follows the above pattern of first describing the topic and then providing users with two must-know facts about it. Also notice how the text doesn’t use unnecessary words within the definition. It’s short and to the point.

Rule #4: Match the featured snippet format

As we explained earlier, there are several different types of featured snippets. These are:

1. Paragraph (most common)
2. Bulleted & Numbered List
3. Table (least common)

This rule is extremely simple. Whatever featured snippet type you see on the SERP, match that type in your content.

For example, if you see that a paragraph featured snippet is appearing for the term you want to optimize for, then you need to find a place to add/adjust two or three sentences of text. However, if you're seeing a bulleted list appear, then you need to add a similar bulleted list to your page's content.

Rule #5: Never use your brand name in featured snippet text

This is a mistake that we see all the time when optimizing for the featured snippet. A company will get rules 1-4 right but will use some language that makes the result ineligible for the featured snippet.

Brand names are one example of such language.

Remember that featured snippets are used to fuel voice search. Devices such as Google Home will read what's in the featured snippet directly back to users. This means that what's in the featured snippet needs to make complete sense in this context.

As an example, think about if Wegmans was trying to optimize for the featured snippet "health benefits of avocado". Let's say we used the following sentence to try to optimize for the featured snippet:

"*Avocados from Wegmans have many health benefits as they are a great source of riboflavin, vitamins C and potassium.*"

This might be confusing if read from voice search. This user

was looking for general benefits that apply to **all avocados**, not just the ones sold from Wegmans.

By replacing the brand name with general language, this will give the content a higher chance of receiving a featured snippet. Instead, the optimization could look something like this:

"*Avocados have many health benefits as they are a great source of riboflavin, vitamins C and potassium.*"

Rule #6: Don't use first person language

Similarly to rule 5, using first person language can be a mistake due to the ramifications of voice search. Using the above example, let's say that the on-page text that was optimized for the featured snippet read:

"*Our avocados have many health benefits. We have avocados that are a great source of riboflavin, vitamins C and potassium.*"

Once again, imagine if this sentence was read from voice search. The user might be left confused and wondering:

1. Who is the "we" that is being referenced?
2. Does this information only apply to their product?

Once again, this sounds like the information might be specific to a certain type of avocado but might not apply to the food in general. Limiting this type of phrasing may also help you improve your chances of receiving a featured snippet.

Rule #7: Scale featured snippets when possible

Throughout the years, we've seen interesting behavior with bulleted list featured snippets. For example, you can see that a search for the term "food franchises" yields the following featured snippet below:

However, when looking at the page, there is no specific bulleted list to be found.

Instead, this page is set up as a standard eCommerce category page. What Google appears to be pulling the featured snippets from is actually the individual product listings within the category page:

These all appear to be formatted as H3 tags. This shows us that in some results, featured snippets can result from Google scraping in heading tag information.

This allows for an interesting opportunity as featured snippets can be scaled with adjustments to the HTML. For some of our clients, we've recommended adjusting the HTML on category pages from standard paragraph tags to H2 or H3 tags. This might send stronger signals that could scale featured snippet optimization at a global level.

Take the time to review where Google is pulling your competitor featured snippets from. If you're seeing common HTML elements, consider adjusting your global templates to give your content the best chance of triggering the featured snippet.

Rule #8: Prioritize opportunities where you rank in the top 5

Previous studies have shown that ranking position matters in terms of claiming a featured snippet. Simply put, the higher you rank, the better chance you have at claiming one. A previous study from AHREFs, showed that results ranking in the first position had a 30.9% chance of receiving a featured snippet. Positions 2 & 3 had a 23.5% and 15.9% chance respectively.

While this data might be different now since deduplication, it still has clear takeaways for SEOs. The higher your site ranks in the “standard” results, the better chance it has of generating a featured snippet. When prioritizing, look for keywords where you already rank within the top 5 results.

Rule #9: Iterate your optimizations

You've followed the steps above. You've written fantastic on-page content that clearly describes the topic under a dedicated "What Is" heading at the top of the page. You've also been sure to stay clear of any brand or first person terminology. You push your optimizations to production and wait for Google to re-index your content.

When Google finally indexes your new changes, you find that your page still isn't generating the featured snippet.

This is not the time to stop optimizing. Instead, iterate your approach and try again. For many of the featured snippets we get, it can take multiple iterations.

In this phase, I've found that using the above process generally gets you 80% of the way there. If your result still isn't receiving a featured snippet, I've found that very minor adjustments tend to work well. I'll generally look for opportunities to better define the topic, use even more concise phrasing or test highlighting different facts (see rule 3). Start with minor adjustments and work your way to more major ones if you're still not seeing the results you want.

Oftentimes, you'll find that the featured snippet can be obtained after a few rounds of interaction to really perfect the language.

Conclusion

I hope these rules help provide you with a set of guidelines to follow when optimizing for the featured snippet. Remember, it's extremely important to use an "is" statement and to fully define the topic in two to three sentences. By following the rules above, you should be able to significantly improve how many featured snippets you're able to receive for your site.

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