How to audit your site’s backlink profile

There are differing opinions in the SEO industry about whether disavowing links is still a necessary part of SEO.

Some say that Google simply doesn’t count toxic links. Others say that Google still uses the disavow as a means of “policing” spam links. Yet others claim that disavowing toxic links is essential for your site’s health and growth.

I prefer to err on the side of caution and disavow toxic links.

Perhaps, right now, Google simply ignores toxic backlinks. However, what if Google decides to pay attention to these in the future? Google is constantly changing, so what guarantee do we have that toxic links won’t result in manual actions or algorithmic downgrades?

In this article, we’ll explore a step-by-step process to comprehensively audit your backlink profile and keep an updated disavow on file with Google Search Console.

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Build your list of backlinks

It’s important to use as many sources as possible to build your initial disavow list. Generally, I download my backlinks from Google Search Console, Ahrefs, and LinkResearchTools. I then upload all of these links to Semrush’s Backlink Audit tool.

Once your audit runs, you'll get an Overall Toxicity Score and other important data:

Categorize your links

If you click on the *Audit* tab, you'll see a list of all of your backlinks. For each, Semrush will list the Anchor Text, Authority Score and Toxicity Score.

Ideally, you should go through each and every one of your links and categorize them as:

- **Whitelist:** Safe, healthy links that should be kept as part of your link profile
- **Remove:** Links that should be removed. You have to do this by contacting the site owners and requesting for them to remove your links.
- **Disavow:** These links should be disavowed from your backlink profile.

Semrush will save this audit and, as new links are found, will prompt you to categorize them, making it easy and systematic to maintain your backlink profile free of toxic links.

Identify link patterns

In the audit report, click on *Toxic Markers*. You'll see a list of patterns that can be used to filter your backlinks:

By using these markers, you can look at your backlink profile

in the context of patterns, instead of having to look at your backlinks one by one.

A link might look healthy when analyzed by itself, but when you use the *Toxic Markers*, you may notice it's part of a link network, that you have many links from the same C class or that many of them have the same Google Analytics or Google Adsense code.

Start by clicking on each of the sections for toxic markers.

Next, go through the links that show up and label them as whitelist, remove or disavow.

Once you have gone through every pattern, go through the remaining links and use the toxic score and other link details to determine if you should whitelist, remove or disavow the links.

When analyzing your backlinks, you need to look at the entire context of your backlink profile to make decisions. Also, you may want to audit your competitors' backlinks as well, especially those that are ranking well, to get an idea of the backlink ratios that are working in your particular industry.

Here are some of the percentages that you can review and keep in mind when deciding how to label links:

Top referring domain categories

Based on your business, the category of internal links is important. Are most of your links coming from:

- Related, topical websites?

- Directories or unrelated websites?

Look at the percentages. Compare those to your competitors and use those percentages to help you decide what links to keep or disavow.

Referring domains by authority score

Many people believe that they should disavow all low-quality links or links with low authority scores. However, think of the natural growth of the web.

Is it natural for sites to only gain links from topical, authoritative websites? Think of how many people have small sites that only their close circle follows.

Looking at link patterns, it’s clear that sites will have a mixture of high, medium and low-quality links. Your goal should be to have links from each of these levels, almost like a link pyramid.

In the “natural state” of the web, you’ll have a number of low-quality links that simply don’t have a lot of authority or that may be toxic. You should keep some of those, especially those that don’t belong to other patterns.

Backlinks by anchor type and anchor text

How many of your backlinks are branded? How many of your links use keywords in the anchor text? Monitor this closely as it will reveal patterns.

If your percentage of money anchors is high, this could lead

to a suppression of your rankings due to algorithmic Penguin filters. When reviewing your backlinks, disavow some of the links with money anchors to bring those percentages down.

Look at the exact anchor text to identify some that are being overused or look unnatural.

Semrush will allow you to click on the links for each of the charts above, knowing the context of the filter, so you can go straight through and disavow links that belong to a particularly obvious pattern.

When looking at Link Attributes, you can determine if there's a high volume of follow vs. nofollow links or links from User Generated Content (UGC). A high number of nofollow links is expected. However, if too many of the links are Follow, Sponsored or UGC, you may want to disavow some to even out the percentages.

Review your disavow list

Once you have completed your audit, you can click on the *disavow* tab to review all of the URLs you added to this list:

Before uploading your disavow to Google, use a metrics tool to get additional data on each of these URLs.

Sometimes, you'll find that some of the links that have a toxic marker have good metrics and would be acceptable to keep. Scrubbing all of your links one last time will help you make sure you're not disavowing links that could help your site to rank better.

To decide what links to keep, review the Authority Score, number of keywords ranking, and organic traffic to ascertain if the link should stay in the disavow file or be removed.

Once completed, export your disavow file.

Google disavow file

Once you have your disavow file in a .txt format, you can go to the Google Disavow Tool to upload your disavow file.

Monitor your link profile

You should run a new backlink audit at least quarterly to make sure your backlink profile is healthy. If you use the same Semrush project, it will save all of the data and will only add new links that haven't been labeled or categorized.

Keeping an eye on your backlink profile can signify the difference between thriving traffic or ranking suppression.

Even though Google claims it isn't possible to suffer from a negative SEO attack, there have been enough reports to prove that it is, in fact, possible for your site to be negatively impacted.

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