The Absolute Best Way To Write Meta Descriptions via @sejournal, @martinibuster

There are many opinions about best practices for writing meta descriptions, while many have given up on them entirely because Google rewrites so many of them. What may be useful is an update to best practices in a way that better aligns with the realities of search and the tools we have today.

The goal here isn't just to keep Google from rewriting meta descriptions. The goal is to maximize the opportunity for controlling Google's snippets in order to improve click-through rates by showing the best information.

There are two sources of ground truth to consider for understanding meta descriptions.

1. Google's guidelines for meta descriptions.
2. The official HTML standards by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

What Google Recommends

Google has multiple help pages about meta descriptions dating back to 2007 that are still relevant and offer granular details.

Here are some takeaways.

1. "We want snippets to accurately represent the web result."

Meta descriptions must accurately represent the web page so

that users know what it’s about. This is really simple, but many SEOs get it wrong all the time, all day long. The standard SEO procedure is to use keywords here, and that’s 100% the wrong approach.

The average SEO will stamp their feet and insist that keywords belong in meta descriptions because they’re bolded in the search results. But that argument falls apart like wet toilet paper because web pages in the real world rank for keyword variations, and that’s been the reality for about twenty years. That argument makes even less sense in the age of AI, where users are talking to Search in natural language.

People don’t search with keywordese anymore, so your meta description should transition to accurately saying what the web page is about. Full stop.

2. “Differentiate the descriptions for different pages.”

This means don’t use boilerplate. This means don’t waste the meta description with branding or a “click here to visit” call to action across all pages. Circling back to the purpose of meta descriptions, describe the page so that users know what to expect, period.

3. “Include structured data about the page.”

It’s easy to confuse the phrase “structured data” with Schema structured data. They are actually two different things depending on the context. In this context Google is referring to structured data that are facts about products. Google says that meta descriptions do not have to be in sentence form.

They use the example of a meta description for a Harry Potter book:

> *“Author: J. K. Rowling, Illustrator: Mary GrandPré, Category: Books, Price: $17.99, Length: 784 pages”*

The above meta description matches the example used in the current version of their meta description best practices:

> *"Written by A.N. Author, Illustrated by V. Gogh, Price: $17.99, Length: 784 pages"*

Google's latest guideline recommends virtually the exact same thing:

> *"The meta description doesn't just have to be in sentence format; it's also a great place to include information about the page.*
>
> *For example, news or blog postings can list the author, date of publication, or byline information. This can give potential visitors very relevant information that might not be displayed in the snippet otherwise.*
>
> *Similarly, product pages might have the key bits of information—price, age, manufacturer—scattered throughout a page. A good meta description can bring all this data together."*

Why Google Rewrites Meta Descriptions

The reason meta descriptions get rewritten is that SEOs are in the habit of using them to insert their keywords with calls to action, branding, and other words and phrases that do not do the job of telling users what to expect if they click through.

Many SEOs have given up and say there's no point to writing meta descriptions. They're right, there is no point to writing meta descriptions… if you write them the wrong way.

The Worst Practices For Meta Descriptions

Here are three so-called “best practices” that SEOs recommend that make meta descriptions likelier to backfire and get rewritten by Google.

- **Use Them For Keywords**
  SEOs say that the meta description is where you put your important keywords. This is why they’re rewritten. You can convince yourself that the keyword phrases are relevant, but that’s not the same thing as describing what users should expect to see after the click.
- **Encourage A Click**
  SEOs say that you can use the meta description to encourage a reader to click. This is also heavy-handed. There are ways to do this that still abide by Google’s guidelines.
- **Search Intent**
  SEOs say this is where you can signal search intent. Meta descriptions have nothing to do with search intent. It’s all about describing what users will find.

Using AI to write a meta description is fine. But you’re self-sabotaging your meta descriptions if your prompt begins with “You are an Expert SEO…” That’s the exact opposite of how to approach the meta description.

Best Practices For Meta Descriptions

Google’s meta description algorithms tend to be HTML standards-based, so anything that diverges from the standards is likely to be rewritten. So, let’s take a look at the standards.

The actual best practice for meta descriptions is simple and it can be found on the World Wide Web Consortium's page for meta data:

"The value must be a free-form string that describes the page. The value must be appropriate for use in a directory of pages, e.g. in a search engine. There must not be more than one meta element with its name attribute set to the value description per document."

Two key considerations for meta descriptions:

1.The value must be a free-form string that describes the page.
This means that the meta description accepts any text input without constraints like length or formatting requirements.

"Free-form" means that the author can choose to write the description in any way they want as long as it describes the page. There is only one constraint to the meta description: It must describe the web page.

2. "The value must be appropriate for use in a directory of pages, e.g. in a search engine."

What "appropriate" for use in a directory of pages means is that it must work as a description of a web page when it's displayed in an out-of-context medium like a search engine results page.

But, it may be useful to review the guidelines of an actual authoritative directory. The Open Directory Project (aka ODP and DMOZ) had guidelines for writing descriptions for directory listings that are useful for understanding how an actual directory interpreted the W3C standards. DMOZ used to be the most important link to get on the Internet. DMOZ was so important to SEO that the founders of SEOMoz borrowed the

“moz” part of their brand name from DMOZ.

And yes, I used to be a DMOZ editor back in the day.

Three DMOZ rules that are helpful for meta descriptions:

They write that descriptions:

> *“1. Are concise, informative, and objective, telling end-users what they will find when they visit a web site.*
>
> *2. Use logical sentence or phrase structure and proper punctuation and capitalization to make it easier for users to read directory listings.*
>
> *3. Do not read like advertisements, sales pitches, opinions, or editorial reviews. The ODP does not advertise or review web sites.*
>
> - Avoid superlatives commonly used in advertising, such as “best”, “most”, “greatest”, or “cheapest.”
> - Do not use emphatic punctuation (e.g., “!!!”), all caps to denote emphasis, ampersands (“&”) or ellipses (“…”).
> - Do not give your personal review of any aspect of the website.”

Obviously the DMOZ guidelines are not meant to be a guide for writing meta descriptions. But they do give an authoritative idea of how to write a directory description, which the W3C standards said

How To Use AI To Write Meta Descriptions

It’s almost inevitable that a site owner or an SEO will be

influenced by their own biases about the content and what it is about. Using AI to analyze the web page and construct an objective summary is one way to get an impartial opinion about the true meaning of a web page.

A consequence of using AI in the manner I will show you is that if the summary does not match what you think the page is about, then that may be a big signal that the web page is not what you think it's about. It may be useful to review the page.

The following is a five-step prompt for generating a meta description. Upload the text of the web page, run the prompt, and AI will generate text that can serve as the basis for a meta description. Sometimes a word or two may need adjustment, but in general, it works perfectly for generating meta description candidates.

How The AI Meta Description AI Prompt Works

Don't ask a chatbot to generate a meta description. What can happen is that the AI may use low-quality SEO tactics to generate a meta description. My approach to AI prompting is to specify the objectively correct requirements of a meta description that conform to the W3C's own standard.

So, the first step: Ask for a web page analysis to identify the one general question the web page answers. This is a great way to see what an LLM thinks is the most important query phrase for a given web page.

The second step asks it to create an answer to the question in a way that also summarizes what the web page is about.

The third step changes the answer so that it contains the full context so that it reads like a standalone statement, as opposed to a statement that relies on a question for context.

The fourth step tells the AI to reduce the summary to a character count that will fit within Google's search results display limits, which will increase the odds that your meta description will show up in the search results.

The fifth step of the prompt converts the summary of the web page into a strict W3C standards-compliant meta description. There is also a constraint to use one imperative verb (words like learn or discover) that enables the resulting meta description to be a little clicky without going over the top, but it's optional and something you can play around with.

The prompt also uses a constraint to use a declarative summary. A declarative summary tells you everything you need to know about a web page before clicking through. The imperative verb constraint is optional, it's there to make the resulting meta description warm and inviting but it's not necessary.

AI Prompt To Generate An Accurate Meta Description

1. Analyze the document and extract the one question that the entire page answers.

2. Use that question to create a short, relevant summary of what the document is about, formatted as if it is an answer to a question.

3. Format that relevant summary so that it can function as a declarative summary of the document when it is out of context to the question.

4. Constrain the "relevant summary" to 120 characters (including spaces).

5. Lightly edit the document description so that it can serve as a meta description on a web page. Use one imperative verb. Must strictly abide by W3C standards for the meta description.

Example Of Meta Descriptions:

I used the above AI prompt on one of my recent articles, WordPress Developers Say New AI Feature Does Not Belong In Core.

Here's the meta description the AI suggested:

"See why WordPress developers oppose merging the new Knowledge Post Type into core."

If you want to make the output more variable you can change the last prompt to something like this:

"Lightly edit the document description so that it can serve as a meta description on a web page. Use one imperative verb that is like the word "read" but it cannot be that one word. Must strictly abide by W3C standards for the meta description."

That prompt results in this:

"Discover why developers are pushing back against WordPress's proposed Knowledge Custom Post Type for core."

Here's what the meta description looks like if I completely remove the imperative verb constraint:

"WordPress developers are pushing back on a proposed Knowledge Custom Post Type for WordPress core."

I like it without the imperative verb constraint.

Meta Descriptions Are Useful

- It's true that Google says that meta descriptions are not a requirement.
- It's true they are not used for ranking purposes.
- It's also true that focusing on the content itself takes priority over writing meta descriptions.

But it is not true that meta descriptions are pointless. They have value to site owners because they offer the opportunity to describe a web page in their own words and emphasize what they feel is best about that page. There is value in that because it’s one of the few ways available to influence the snippets in Google search results.

Takeaways And One Last Meta Description Tip

- **Meta descriptions still matter, despite Google rewrites**
  Google rewriting snippets does not make meta descriptions useless. Their value is in increasing the odds of influencing what users see in search results.
- **An SEO-first approach to meta descriptions is self-defeating**
  Common practices like adding a focus keyword phrase, pushy calls to action, and signaling search intent can make meta descriptions less useful and more likely to be rewritten.
- **Google prioritizes descriptive accuracy over marketing language**
  Meta descriptions work best when they clearly tell users what the page contains so that user expectations match the web page.
- **W3C standards provide clear guidance**
  The formal standard is simple: a meta description must be a free-form string that accurately describes the page within the context of search engine results.
- **Meta descriptions do not need to be sentences**
  Structured factual information such as author, price, publication date, or product details can work better than sentences for product pages.
- **Directory-writing rules are helpful**
  Old directory standards such as those from DMOZ reinforce useful principles: be concise, objective,

readable, and avoid advertising language.

- **A possible problem is author bias**
  Site owners and SEOs often describe pages based on what they want their web pages to be about which can be different from what the page actually focuses on.
- **AI is useful for summarization**
  AI works best when used to objectively analyze page content and generate a factual summary instead of being prompted with traditional SEO assumptions.
- **A question-first AI workflow improves results**
  Extracting the single question a page answers helps AI identify the true web page topic and generate clearer, more accurate descriptions.
- **The real goal is snippet control, not preventing rewrites**
  Success is not whether Google uses the exact meta description, but whether the snippet communicates the strongest click-worthy information that is relevant to the user's needs.

Meta descriptions remain useful because they give site owners one of the few ways to influence how their pages appear in Google search results.

A Tactic To Regain Control Of Meta Descriptions

That said, a web page can still be relevant for multiple subtopics, not just the one big topic, so it's not a bad thing that Google generates a snippet for those situations. Yet you can still control the snippet that Google displays by analyzing each subtopic to understand the question it answers, then starting that section with an answer to that question. You can still control the snippet from the on-page content itself.

Although some SEOs say that meta descriptions are pointless

and useless, they clearly are not.

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