What Does It Mean to "Write for SEO" in 2018? – Whiteboard Friday

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes” – it’s a quote that’s actually quite applicable when it comes to writing for SEO. Much of the advice given to copywriters, journalists, editors, and other content creators for SEO writing is dangerously out of date, leaning on practices that were once tried and true but that could now get your site penalized.

In this edition of Whiteboard Friday, we hope you enjoy a brief history lesson on what should be avoided, what used to work and no longer does, and a brief 5-step process you should start using today for writing content that’ll get you to the front of the SERPs.



Click on the whiteboard image above to open a high-resolution version in a new tab!

Video Transcription

Howdy, Moz fans, and welcome to another edition of Whiteboard Friday. This week we’re chatting about writing for SEO and what that means in 2018.

So writing for SEO has had a long history, and it meant something many years ago that it does not mean today. Unfortunately, I see a lot of bad advice, terrible advice out there for journalists and editors and authors of all kinds about what you need to do in terms of writing for SEO, meaning writing to get you to the top of search engines.

“Writing for SEO” in 2001

Now, let’s be clear, some of this stuff is mired in pure mythology. But some of it is mired in historical fact that just hasn’t been updated. So let’s talk about what writing for SEO used to be back in 2001, how it evolved in sort of the middle era of 2008, let’s say, and then what it means today in 2018.

So, back in the day, writing for SEO did mean things like…

I. Keyword stuffing

If you wanted to rank highly in early search engines, especially the late ’90s into the early 2000s, keyword stuffing was a real tactic that really did have effectiveness. So SEOs would cram keywords into all sorts of tags and locations.

II. They would use and reuse a bunch of different variants, slight keyword variants

So if I’m targeting the word blue watches, I would have blue watch, blue watches, blue watch accessory, blue watch accessories, blue watches accessory, blue watches accessories, ridiculous little variants on plurals because the search engines were not great at figuring out that all these things sort of had the same intent and meant the same thing. So raw, rough keyword matching, exact keyword matching was part of SEO.

III. Keyword use in every tag possible

If there was a tag, you’d cram keywords into it.

IV. Domain name and subdomain keyword use

So this is why you saw that brands would be outranked by, to use our example, blue-watch-

accessories.bluewatchaccessories.info, that kind of silly stuff would be ranking. Some of it even maintained for a while.

V. SEO writing was writing for engines and then trying not to annoy or piss off users

So, a lot of the time, people would want to cloak. They'd want to show one set of content to the search engines and another set to searchers, to actual users, because they knew that if they showed this dense, keyword-stuffed content to users, they'd be turned off and they wouldn't find it credible and they'd go somewhere else.

"Writing for SEO" in 2008

2008, we evolve on a bunch of these fronts, but not all of them and certainly not perfectly.

I. Keywords are still important in important locations

II. Exact matching still matters in a lot of places. So people were crafting unique pages even for keywords that shared the same intent.

Blue watches and blue timepieces might have two different pages. Blue watch and blue watches could even have two separate pages and do effectively well in 2008. 2018, that's not the case anymore.

III. Domain names were definitely less powerful, subdomains more so, but still influential

They still had some play in the engines. You still saw a lot of debates back in '08 about whether to create a keyword-rich domain.

IV. Since links in 2008 were overwhelmingly powerful rather than on-page signals, writing in order to get links is

incredibly prized

In fact, it still is, but we'll talk about the evolution of that a little bit.

"Writing for SEO" in 2018

So now let's jump another decade forward. We're in 2018. This year, what does writing for SEO mean? Well, a bunch of things.

I. Solving the searcher's query matter most – writing that doesn't do this tends not to rank well (for long)

Because engines have gotten so much better, Google in particular, but Bing as well, have gotten so much better at essentially optimizing for solving the searcher's task, helping them accomplish the thing that they wanted to accomplish, the writing that does the best job of solving the searcher's task tends to be the most highly prized. Stuff that doesn't, writing that doesn't do that, doesn't tend to rank well, doesn't tend to rank for long. You can sometimes get to the top of the search results, but you will almost certainly invariably be taken out by someone who does a great job of solving the searcher's query.

II. Intent matching matters a lot more in 2018 than exact keyword matching.

Today, no credible SEO would tell you to create a page for blue watch and blue watches or blue watch accessories and blue watch accessory or even blue timepieces and blue watches, maybe if you're targeting clocks too. In this case, it's really about figuring out what is the searcher's intent. If many keywords share the same intent, you know what? We're going to go ahead and create a single page that serves that intent and all of the keywords or at least many of the keywords that that intent is represented by.

III. Only a few tags are still absolutely crucial to doing SEO

correctly.

So SEO writing today, there are really only two that are not very fungible. Those are the **title element** and the **body content**. That's not to say that you can't rank without using the keyword in these two places, just that it would be inadvisable to do so. This is both because of search engines and also because of searchers. When you see the keyword that you search for in the title element of the page in the search results, you are more inclined to click on it than if you don't see it. So it's possible that some click-baity headline could outrank a keyword-rich headline. But the best SEO writers are mixing both of those. We have a Whiteboard Friday about headline writing on just that topic.

A few other ones, however, a few other tags are nice to have in 2018 still. Those include:

Headline tags (the H1, the H2),

URL field, so if you can make your URL include the words and phrases that people are searching for, that is mildly helpful. It's both helpful for searchers who see the URL and would think, "Oh, okay, that is referring to the thing that I want," as well as for people who copy and paste the URL and share it with each other, or people who link with the URL and, thus, the anchor text is carried across by that URL and those keywords in there.

The meta description, not used for rankings, but it is read by searchers. When they see a meta description that includes the words and phrases that they've queried, they are more likely to think this will be a relevant result and more likely to click it. More clicks, as long as the engagement is high, tends to mean better rankings.

The image alt attribute, which is helpful both for regular search results, but particularly helpful for Google Images, which, as you may know from watching Whiteboard Friday, Google

Images gets a tremendous amount of search traffic even on its own.

IV. Employing words, phrases, and concepts that Google's identified as sort of commonly associated with the query

This can provide a significant boost. We've seen some really interesting experimentation on this front, where folks will essentially take a piece of content, add in missing words and phrases that other pages that are highly ranking in Google have associated with those correct words and phrases.

In our example, I frequently use "New York neighborhoods," and a page that's missing words like Brooklyn, Harlem, Manhattan, Staten Island, that's weird, right? Google is going to be much more likely to rank the page that includes these borough names than one that doesn't for that particular query, because they've learned to associate that text with relevance for the query "New York neighborhoods."

What I do want to make clear here is this *does not* mean LSI or some other particular tactic. LSI is an old-school, I think late '80s, early '90s computer tactic, software tactic for identifying words that are semantically connected to each other. There's no reason you have to use this old-school junk methodology that became like pseudoscience in the SEO world and had a recent revival. But you should be using words and phrases that Google has related to a particular keyword. Related topics is a great thing to do. You can find some via the Moz Bar. We did a Whiteboard Friday on related topics, so you can check that out.

V. The user experience of the writing and content matters more than ever, and that is due to engagement metrics

Essentially, Google is able to see that people who click on a particular result are less likely to click the back button and choose a different result or more likely to stay on that page or site and engage further with that content and solve their

whole task. That is a good sign to Google, and they want to rank more of those.

A brief “SEO writing” process for 2018

So, pragmatically, what does this history and evolution mean? Well, I think we can craft a brief sort of SEO writing process for 2018 from this. This is what I recommend. If you can do nothing else, do these five steps when you are writing for SEO, and you will tend to have more success than most of your competition.

Step 1: Assemble all the keywords that a page is targeting



So there should be a list of them. They should all share the same intent. You get all those keywords listed out.

Step 2: You list what the searchers are actually trying to accomplish when they search those queries



So someone searched for blue watches. What do they want? Information about them, they want to see different models, they want to know who makes them, they want to buy them, they want to see what the costs are like, they want to see where they can get them online, probably all of those things. Those are the intents behind those queries.

Step 3: Create a visual layout



Here’s going to be our headline. Here’s our subheadline. We’re going to put this important key concept up at the top in a callout box. We’re going to have this crucial visual next up.

This is how we're going to address all of those searcher intents on the page visually with content, written or otherwise.

Step 4: Write first and then go add the keywords and the crucial, related terms, phrases, top concepts, topics that you want into the page



The ones that will hopefully help boost your SEO, rather than writing first with the keywords and topics in mind. You can have a little bit of that, but this would be what I suggest.

Step 5: Craft the hook, the hook that will make influential people and publications in this space likely to amplify, likely to link



Because, in 2018, links still do matter, still are an important part of SEO.

If you follow this and learn from this history, I think you'll do a much better job, generally speaking, of writing for SEO than a lot of the common wisdom out there. All right, everyone. Look forward to your thoughts in the comments. We'll see you again next week for another edition of Whiteboard Friday. Take care.

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