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2026 EDITION

SEO Audit Framework 2026

Every element I check in a 2026 SEO audit: content, technical, local, authority and AI search (AEO & GEO).



PREPARED BY
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COVERS
On-page · Technical · Local · AI search

FORMAT
Scorecard + action plan template

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Executive Summary *The Big Picture at a Glance*

What We Found — Top Priorities

Fix These First (Content & On-Page)

1. [e.g. 36 pages are missing meta descriptions entirely]
2. [e.g. 8 duplicate title tags across key service pages]
3. [e.g. FAQ schema missing — zero AI Overview eligibility]

Fix These Next (Technical)

4. [e.g. LCP averaging 4.2s on mobile — below Google's 2.5s threshold]
5. [e.g. 3 x 302 redirects that should be 301s]
6. [e.g. XML sitemap includes 12 redirected URLs]

Build This Out (AI & Authority)

7. [e.g. No author bios — E-E-A-T signals are weak across the board]
8. [e.g. Brand mention count significantly behind top 3 competitors]
9. [e.g. Google Business Profile incomplete — 6 key attributes missing]

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Master SEO Scorecard *Every Element. One Page.*

This is your at-a-glance health check. Red means fix it now. Amber means it's on the list. Green means it's working. We'll break down every single one of these in the sections that follow.

SEO Element	Score	Weight
CONTENT & ON-PAGE		
Keyword Focus & Topical Authority	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
URL Structure	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Title Tags	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Meta Description Tags	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Schema & Structured Data	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Heading Tags (H1–H6)	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Content Quality & E-E-A-T	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Internal Linking & Anchor Text	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Image Optimisation & Alt Tags	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
NoFollow / Sponsored Tags	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
Keyword Cannibalization	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
SERP Feature Opportunities	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	26%
TECHNICAL & INDEXING		
Mobile SEO & Mobile-First Indexing	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
Site Architecture & Crawl Depth	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
Page Exclusions (robots.txt / NoIndex)	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
XML Sitemap & Page Inclusions	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
URL Redirects (301 / 302)	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
Duplicate Content & Canonicals	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
Broken Links & Crawl Errors	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
Core Web Vitals (LCP / INP / CLS)	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%
Code Validation & Security	**[X]/10** – FILL IN	12%

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SEO Element	Score	Weight
Analytics Setup (GA4)	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	12%
AI SEARCH — GEO · AEO · LOCAL		
AI Overview Visibility (GEO)	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	Growing
Answer Engine Optimisation (AEO)	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	Growing
E-E-A-T & Author Signals	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	Growing
Google Business Profile (Local)	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	Growing
Competitor Content Gap	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	Growing
LINKING & AUTHORITY		
Inbound Followed Links	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	40%
Linking Root Domains	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	40%
Domain Authority & Trust	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	40%
Social Media Signals	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	40%
Competitive Link Gap	**[X]/10** — FILL IN	40%

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SECTION 01

Content & On-Page SEO

Keywords · Structure · Quality · Schema · Internal Links

1.1 Keyword Focus & Topical Authority

★ **2026 UPDATE** 2026 UPDATE: Keyword targeting alone is dead. Google now evaluates "topical authority" — whether your site comprehensively covers a subject area. A site with 20 deeply connected articles on one topic will beat a site with 200 shallow posts every time.

Analysis

Finding	Detail
Primary keyword targets	[List core keyword themes]
Topical cluster coverage	[Complete / Gaps identified / Thin]
Keyword cannibalization issues	[X pages competing for same query]
Search intent alignment	[Correct / Misaligned on X pages]
Question-based keyword coverage	[Strong / Weak]
AI Overview trigger queries	[Tracked via Semrush / Not set up]

Recommendations

- Build a topic cluster for each core service or product — one strong pillar page linked to 5–10 supporting pages covering related questions.
- Assign one clear search intent per page: informational, transactional, navigational, or commercial. A page trying to serve two intents serves neither well.
- Go after question-based queries aggressively — "How do I...", "What is...", "Why does..." — these trigger AI Overviews 57.9% of the time.
- Run a keyword cannibalization audit in Ahrefs or Semrush. If two of your pages are competing for the same query, merge them or differentiate them. Two pages fighting each other means neither ranks.
- Map People Also Ask boxes for your target keywords — these feed directly into AEO visibility and are genuinely easy wins.

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Guidelines

- One primary keyword cluster per page — not one keyword, a cluster. All the ways people search for the same thing.
- Primary keyword must appear in: URL, H1, first 100 words, at least one H2, meta description, and at least one image alt tag.
- Variations and related terms throughout — never keyword stuffing, always natural usage.

> 🔧 **TOOL** Semrush's Keyword Magic Tool + Topic Research are the fastest way to map your topical gaps versus competitors. Run this before building any new content.

1.2 URL Structure

Analysis

Issue	Count
URLs over 100 characters	[X] pages
URLs containing uppercase letters	[X] pages
URLs using underscores instead of hyphens	[X] pages
Duplicate URLs or parameter issues	[X] instances
Keyword missing from URL slug	[X] pages
URLs without HTTPS	[X] pages

Recommendations

- All URLs: lowercase, hyphens only, keyword included. That's the rule.
- Keep URLs short — 3 to 5 meaningful words is the sweet spot. Every unnecessary word dilutes the keyword signal.
- If a URL needs changing, a 301 redirect is mandatory. No exceptions. Broken URL changes kill link equity.
- For local businesses, include the location in the URL where it makes sense: /plumber-manchester/ not /services/plumbing/manchester-north-west-uk/.

Guidelines

- Structure: domain.com/category/keyword-slug/ — flat hierarchy, 3 levels maximum.
- Consistent trailing slash policy — pick one version and 301 the other.

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- HTTPS is not optional in 2026. HTTP sites face active suppression. Check SSL certificate expiry

1.3 Title Tags

Analysis

Issue	Count
Too long — over 600px / ~60 characters	[X] pages
Too short — under 30 characters	[X] pages
Duplicate title tags	[X] pages
Missing title tags entirely	[X] pages
Title identical to H1	[X] pages
Primary keyword missing from title	[X] pages
No brand name in title	[X] pages

Recommendations

- Every page gets a unique title tag. Duplicate titles tell Google two pages cover the same thing — and it'll pick one to rank, ignoring the other.

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- Structure that works: [Primary Keyword] — [Benefit or Descriptor] | [Brand Name].
- Lead with the keyword. The closer it is to the start of the title, the stronger the signal.
- The title is your ad copy in search results. Write it like one. It needs to earn the click, not just describe the page.

Guidelines

- Aim for 50–60 characters. Google measures pixel width (600px limit) not characters — bold keywords take more space, so test with the Semrush snippet preview.
- Title and H1 should complement each other, not repeat each other. Different angles on the same topic.

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1.4 Meta Description Tags

Analysis

Issue	Count
Missing meta descriptions	[X] pages
Too long — over 155 characters	[X] pages
Too short — under 70 characters	[X] pages
Duplicate meta descriptions	[X] pages

Issue	Count
Pages with 2+ meta description tags	[X] pages
Keyword not used in description	[X] pages

Recommendations

- Every single page needs a unique meta description. Missing ones mean Google writes them for you — and it's not trying to earn you a click, it's just pulling random text from the page.
- Write each one like a two-sentence ad: what the page does, why the user should care, and a natural call to action.
- Include the primary keyword — Google bolds it in the search result when it matches the user's query. More visibility, more clicks.

Guidelines

- 120–155 characters is the sweet spot. Long enough to be informative, short enough not to get cut off.
- Meta descriptions don't directly affect rankings — but they directly affect CTR. And CTR affects rankings. So they matter.
- AI Overviews frequently pull meta description text as source content. A well-written description increases your chances of being cited.

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1.5 Schema Markup & Structured Data

★ **2026 UPDATE** 2026 UPDATE: Schema is no longer a technical nice-to-have. Google's official May 2026 guide confirms structured data directly influences what appears in AI Overviews and AI Mode. If your schema is missing or broken, you're handing AI visibility to competitors.

Analysis

Schema Type	Status
Organization / LocalBusiness	[Present / Missing / Errors]
WebPage / WebSite	[Present / Missing / Errors]
FAQPage	[Present / Missing / Errors]
HowTo	[Present / Missing / Errors]
Article / BlogPosting	[Present / Missing / Errors]
Product / Service	[Present / Missing / Errors]
Review / AggregateRating	[Present / Missing / Errors]
Speakable (voice & AI)	[Present / Missing / Errors]
Person / Author entity	[Present / Missing / Errors]

Recommendations

- FAQPage schema on every page with a FAQ section — this is the single fastest route to appearing in AI Overviews. Do this first.
- LocalBusiness schema with full detail: address, hours, geo-coordinates, service areas, phone, and payment methods.
- Article schema on all content pages with Author entity markup — this directly supports E-E-A-T signals.
- Validate everything with Google's Rich Results Test. Schema errors are silent killers — they don't throw 404s, they just stop working.

Guidelines

- Always use JSON-LD format — Google says so and it's the easiest to maintain.
- Schema describes what's on the page. Misleading schema triggers manual actions. Don't claim star ratings you don't have.

🔧 **TOOL** Check the Rich Results report in GSC (when access is available) or use the Rich Results Test monthly. Errors here are often the reason a site drops out of featured positions without any algorithm update.

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1.6 Heading Tags (H1 – H6)

Analysis

Issue	Count
Pages missing H1	[X] pages
Pages with multiple H1s	[X] pages
Duplicate H1s across the site	[X] pages
H1 identical to title tag	[X] pages
H1 over 70 characters	[X] pages
H2 tags missing on content pages	[X] pages
Heading hierarchy violated (e.g. H3 before H2)	[X] pages
Keyword missing from H1	[X] pages

Recommendations

- One H1 per page. That's it. It's the title of the page from Google's perspective — there can only be one.
- Primary keyword in the H1, as close to the start as possible.
- Use H2s as your main content dividers. Rewrite them as questions where it makes sense — "How does X work?" triggers People Also Ask and AEO placement.
- Never skip levels — H1 to H2 to H3. Not H1 straight to H4.

Guidelines

- Break content with a heading every 200–300 words. Big blocks of unbroken text get skimmed or abandoned. Headings keep people reading.

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- AI systems extract heading structure to understand what a page covers. Clear, keyword-relevant headings make it easier for AI to cite you accurately.

1.7 Content Quality & E-E-A-T *Experience · Expertise · Authoritativeness · Trustworthiness*

★ **2026 UPDATE** 2026 UPDATE: Google's official guide draws a hard line between "commodity content" and "non-commodity content." Commodity content is anything AI can generate in seconds. Non-commodity content is content only your team can produce — first-hand experience, original data, genuine expertise. Only the latter gets cited by AI.

Analysis

Finding	Status
Average word count per page	[X] words
Pages under 300 words (thin content)	[X] pages
Named authors on content	[Yes / No / Partial]
Author bio pages with credentials	[Yes / No]
Original research or proprietary data	[Yes / No]
External expert sources cited	[Yes / No / Partial]
Content freshness — last updated	[Date / Frequency]
Thin or duplicate pages	[X] pages

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Recommendations

- Every page needs a named, credentialed author. This is non-negotiable for health, finance, legal, and any YMYL topic — and strongly recommended for everything else.
- Create individual author pages: photo, bio, credentials, published work, social links. Google needs to understand who is writing this and why they should be trusted.
- Thin pages — under 300 words with no unique value — should be expanded, merged with related content, or removed from the index.
- Build at least one piece of original research per quarter. Proprietary data earns links, earns AI citations, and earns trust. It's the highest-ROI content investment you can make.
- Date-stamp your updates. If you refresh a page, say so visibly. Google rewards freshness — and readers trust it.

Guidelines

- Commodity: "7 Tips for Choosing a Plumber." Non-commodity: "What 300 plumbing jobs in Manchester taught us about the most common boiler faults." Only the second one gets cited.
- 300 words is the floor, not the target. The right length is whatever it takes to genuinely answer the question — no more, no less.

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1.8 Internal Linking & Anchor Text

Analysis

Finding	Detail
Orphaned pages (zero internal links)	[X] pages
Pages with over 100 total links	[X] pages
Generic anchor text (click here, read more)	[X] instances

Finding	Detail
Keyword-rich anchor text	[X]% of internal links
Broken internal links	[X]
Site-wide external links without nofollow	[X] — leaking authority

Recommendations

- Every important page should be reachable within 3 clicks from the homepage. If it takes more than that, Google may not find it regularly.
- Link between topically related pages using descriptive anchor text — not "click here." The anchor text tells Google what the destination page is about.
- Aim for 2–3 keyword-rich internal links per piece of content. More than that starts to look unnatural.
- Use absolute URLs for all internal links. Relative URLs can cause indexing problems, especially on sites with complex URL structures.

Guidelines

- Internal links pass PageRank. Treat them like free link building — prioritise linking to the pages you most want to rank.
- AI systems use your internal linking structure to understand topic relationships. Strong internal links between related pages make you more likely to appear across multiple AI sub-queries.

> 🔧 **TOOL** Run Screaming Frog and filter for "No Inlinks" — those are your orphaned pages. Every page that earns traffic should be connected to the rest of the site.

1.9 Image Optimisation & Alt Tags

Analysis

Finding	Count
Images missing alt tags	[X] images
Images with generic or numeric file names	[X] images
Uncompressed images over 150kb	[X] images
Images not in WebP or AVIF format	[X] images

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Finding	Count
Lazy loading not implemented	[Yes / No]

Recommendations

- Every image needs a descriptive alt tag with the page keyword where it's genuinely relevant. Decorative images get alt="".
- Rename generic files (IMG_4021.jpg → london-office-reception.jpg). Google Image Search is real traffic — descriptive names help.
- Convert all images to WebP — typically 25–35% smaller than JPEG with no visible quality loss. Use AVIF for even better compression where browser support allows.
- Always specify width and height in image tags. Missing these causes Cumulative Layout Shift — a Core Web Vitals failure that affects both UX and rankings.

Guidelines

- Target under 100kb per image. For hero images that need to be larger, use progressive JPEG loading so something appears instantly.
- Serve images via CDN — the server closest to the user delivers the image fastest. This alone can shave seconds off load time for international visitors.

1.11 Keyword Cannibalization *One of the most common hidden ranking killers*

Analysis

Finding	Detail
Pages competing for the same primary keyword	[X] instances found
Most affected keyword / URL pairs	[List top offenders]
Google's preferred page (ranking inconsistency)	[Tracked via Ahrefs]
Impact on ranking consistency	[High / Medium / Low]

Recommendations

- Identify every cannibalization conflict using Ahrefs — filter for multiple pages ranking for the same keyword.
- Fix by one of three methods: merge the pages into one comprehensive piece and 301 redirect the weaker one; differentiate them by targeting different search intents; or add internal canonical signals to tell Google which page to prefer.

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- Don't let this fester. Two pages fighting for the same query is like two salespeople calling the same lead at the same time — everyone loses.

Guidelines

- The root cause of cannibalization is usually poor content planning. Building a topic cluster from the start prevents it.

> 🔧 **TOOL** Run this check in Ahrefs: Site Explorer → Organic Keywords → filter for multiple URLs ranking for the same keyword. Export and fix the top 20 first.

1.12 SERP Feature Opportunities *Featured Snippets · PAA · Image Pack · Video · Local Pack*

Analysis

SERP Feature	Available?	Currently Owned?	Opportunity
Featured Snippets	[Yes / No]	[X owned]	[High / Med / Low]
People Also Ask (PAA)	[Yes / No]	[X owned]	[High / Med / Low]
Local Pack / Map Pack	[Yes / No]	[X owned]	[High / Med / Low]
AI Overview citations	[Yes / No]	[X pages]	[High / Med / Low]

Recommendations

- Identify which SERP features trigger for your target keywords using Semrush SERP Analysis. Then systematically target the ones your competitors are winning.
- Featured snippets: find queries where a competitor holds the snippet, write a more direct and concise answer, add question H2 + 40–60 word direct answer block.
- People Also Ask: use each PAA question as an H2 subheading and answer it directly beneath. These cascade — winning one often wins the adjacent ones.
- Video carousel: if there are video SERP features for your keywords and you have no video presence, you're invisible on that surface entirely.

Guidelines

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- SERP features are free real estate. A featured snippet can double your organic CTR for that query even if you don't move up in the blue links.

> 🔧 **TOOL** Use Semrush to export all SERP features triggering for your top 50 keywords. Build a prioritised list of the ones your competitors hold that you don't. That list is your content roadmap.

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SECTION 02

Technical & Indexing Audit

Mobile · Architecture · Speed · Redirects · Crawlability

2.1 Mobile SEO & Mobile-First Indexing *Google indexes the mobile version of your site. Full stop.*

★ **2026 UPDATE** 2026 UPDATE: Google completed its mobile-first indexing rollout. The mobile version of your site is the version Google indexes and ranks — not the desktop version. If your mobile experience is broken, your rankings are broken.

Analysis

Finding	Status
Viewport meta tag configured correctly	[Yes / No]
Text readable without zooming	[Yes / No]
Content identical on mobile and desktop	[Yes / No — discrepancies found]
Mobile page speed (PageSpeed Insights)	[X] / 100
Mobile LCP	[X] seconds — target under 2.5s
Horizontal scrolling issues	[Yes / No]
Interstitials blocking mobile content	[Yes / No]
Reasonable Font size	[Yes / No]

Recommendations

- Test every key page with Google's PageSpeed Insights on mobile — the mobile score is the one that matters for rankings.
- Tap targets must be at least 48x48 pixels with 8px spacing. Buttons too close together on mobile are a usability failure that Google penalises.

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- Any content that's hidden on mobile but present on desktop is invisible to Google. Mobile and desktop content must be identical.
- Pop-ups and interstitials on mobile are a direct ranking risk. Google's intrusive interstitial penalty is real and active.

Guidelines

- Run the Mobile-Friendly Test for each key page. A site that passes on the homepage often fails on inner pages.
- Check Google Search Console mobile usability report for specific errors once access is granted.

2.2 Site Architecture & Crawl Depth

Analysis

Finding	Detail
Maximum crawl depth found	[X] clicks from homepage
Pages more than 4 clicks deep	[X] pages
Orphaned pages (no internal links)	[X] pages
Navigation structure clarity	[Clear / Confusing / Inconsistent]
Category / silo structure	[Present / Missing / Disorganised]

Recommendations

- No important page should be more than 3 clicks from the homepage. The deeper a page is buried, the less frequently Google crawls it — and the less authority it inherits.
- Organise content into clear silos — group related pages together under logical category structures. This reinforces topical authority.
- Add breadcrumb navigation and BreadcrumbList schema. It helps users, helps crawlers, and wins breadcrumb SERP features.
- Every orphaned page needs internal links from related content — or a decision to noindex it.

Guidelines

- Think of your site architecture like a pyramid: homepage at the top, category pages in the middle, individual content pages at the bottom. Each level should link down and up.

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> 🔧 **TOOL** Screaming Frog → Crawl Depth report shows exactly how many clicks each page is from the homepage. Sort by depth and start adding internal links from higher-authority pages to anything buried too deep.

2.3 Page Exclusions (Robots.txt & NoIndex)

Analysis

Finding	Status
robots.txt file present and valid	[Yes / No]
robots.txt blocking CSS or JavaScript	[Yes / No — never do this]
robots.txt blocking important pages	[Yes / No]
NoIndex on thin or duplicate pages	[Yes / No]
Low-value pages consuming crawl budget	[Yes / No]

Recommendations

- Never block CSS or JavaScript in robots.txt. Google renders pages before it indexes them. Block render resources and it can't see your content.
- NoIndex on: thank-you pages, checkout pages, account/login pages, pagination beyond page 2, tag and archive pages with no unique content.
- NoIndex, Follow on pages you want crawled (for link equity) but not indexed — thin pages, filtered category pages.

Guidelines

- robots.txt controls crawling. Meta robots controls indexing. Both are needed — and they work differently.

2.4 XML Sitemap & Page Inclusions

Analysis

Finding	Status
XML sitemap present	[Yes / No]
Submitted to GSC (confirm with client)	[Yes / No / Unknown]

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Finding	Status
Sitemap includes NoIndex pages	[Yes / No — should not]
Sitemap auto-updates on publish	[Yes / No]
Image sitemap present	[Yes / No]

Recommendations

- Sitemap must only contain live, canonical, indexable, 200-status URLs. No redirects. No noindex pages. No broken links.
- For image-heavy sites, build a separate image sitemap — it significantly improves Google Image Search coverage.
- Submit to both Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools.

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2.5 URL Redirects

Analysis

Finding	Count
301 Permanent redirects	[X]
302 Temporary redirects (likely need	[X]

Finding	Count
converting)	
HTTP → HTTPS redirect in place	[Yes / No]
www → non-www redirect consistent	[Yes / No]

Recommendations

- Every 302 redirect that isn't genuinely temporary — as in, the page will come back in a few days — needs to be a 301. 302s don't pass link equity.
- Collapse all redirect chains to a single hop. A → B → C should be A → C. Each extra hop loses link equity and slows crawl time.
- HTTP must always 301 to HTTPS. Non-www must always 301 to www (or vice versa — pick one and stick with it).

Guidelines

- Every time a URL changes or a page is deleted, a 301 redirect is mandatory. There are no exceptions. Broken redirects strand link equity and confuse crawlers.

2.6 Duplicate & Near-Duplicate Content

Analysis

Finding	Status
Exact duplicate pages found	[X] pages
Near-duplicate or thin pages	[X] pages

Recommendations

- Fix every duplicate content issue by one of four methods: 301 redirect to the canonical version; rel=canonical tag; merge and rewrite; or delete and redirect.
- Add a self-referential rel=canonical to every page — even pages with no duplicate issues. It's best practice that prevents future problems.
- Address parameter-based duplicates via canonical tags or URL parameter settings.

Guidelines

- Google doesn't penalise duplicate content in the traditional sense — it just picks one version to index and ignores the others. The problem is it might pick the wrong one.

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2.7 Broken Links & Crawl Errors

Analysis

Finding	Count
Internal 404 errors	[X]
External broken outbound links	[X]
Server errors (5xx responses)	[X]
Orphaned pages with no internal links	[X]

Recommendations

- Every internal 404 gets a 301 redirect to the most relevant live page. Not to the homepage — to something genuinely related.
- Fix or remove broken outbound links. They're a poor user experience signal and suggest the site isn't maintained.
- Set up a monthly Screaming Frog crawl to catch new broken links before they become a problem.

Guidelines

- When Google's crawler hits a 404 on a site it's crawling, it leaves. Hit too many and Google starts to think the site is poorly maintained — and crawls it less frequently.

2.8 Core Web Vitals & Page Speed *LCP · INP · CLS — the metrics that actually affect rankings*

> ★ **2026 UPDATE** 2026 UPDATE: INP (Interaction to Next Paint) replaced FID as a Core Web Vitals metric in March 2024 and is now fully integrated into the algorithm. Many sites are still failing on INP without realising it.

Analysis

Metric	Your Score	Good	Needs Work	Status
LCP — Largest Contentful Paint	[X] sec	< 2.5s	2.5–4s	[Pass/ Fail]
INP — Interaction to	[X] ms	< 200ms	200–500ms	[Pass/

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Metric	Your Score	Good	Needs Work	Status
Next Paint				Fail]
CLS — Cumulative Layout Shift	[X]	< 0.1	0.1–0.25	[Pass/ Fail]
TTFB — Time to First Byte	[X] ms	< 800ms	800ms–1.8s	[Pass/ Fail]
Total Page Size	[X] kb	< 500kb	500kb–1mb	[Pass/ Fail]
Total HTTP Requests	[X]	< 40	40–80	[Pass/ Fail]
Mobile PageSpeed Score	[X] / 100	90–100	50–89	[Pass/ Fail]

Recommendations

- LCP is the most impactful metric — optimise the largest above-the-fold element first. Usually a hero image or H1 block. Preload it, compress it, serve it via CDN.
- INP fails are usually caused by heavy JavaScript blocking the main thread. Defer non-critical JS and optimise event handlers.
- CLS failures are almost always caused by images without defined dimensions or ads loading and pushing content down. Always specify width and height on images.
- Enable server-side compression (Brotli is better than Gzip — use it where available). Reduces transfer size by 60–80%.
- Combine and minify CSS and JavaScript files. Every unnecessary request adds latency.

Guidelines

- Use PageSpeed Insights for lab data and GTmetrix for the detailed waterfall. They tell different stories — both are useful.

> ⚠️ **HEADS UP** Field data (real user experience) is what actually affects rankings. Lab data is a proxy. When GSC access is available, check the Core Web Vitals report for field data — the scores are often different from what lab tools show.

2.9 Code Validation & Security

Analysis

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Finding	Status
W3C HTML validation errors	[X] errors, [X] warnings
SSL certificate valid	[Yes / No / Expiry: DATE]
Google Safe Browsing — clean	[Yes / No]
Mixed content warnings (HTTP on HTTPS)	[Yes / No]

Recommendations

- Fix W3C errors that affect page rendering — warnings can be deprioritised unless they're significant.
- Test every key page with JavaScript disabled. If your content disappears, Google may not be indexing it.
- Check SSL certificate expiry dates. A lapsed certificate causes browser security warnings that instantly destroy trust and conversions.
- Run the domain through Google's Safe Browsing Checker (safebrowsing.google.com). A security flag causes a manual warning in search results — catastrophic for traffic.

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2.10 Analytics Setup (GA4) *You can't improve what you're not measuring*

Analysis

Finding	Status
GA4 installed and firing	[Yes / No / UA only — needs migration]
Conversions configured	[Yes / No / Which events]

Recommendations

- If Universal Analytics is still in use, migrate to GA4 immediately. UA stopped collecting data in July 2023.
- Configure key conversion events: contact form submissions, phone clicks, quote requests, purchases — whatever constitutes a lead or sale for this business.
- Filter internal traffic by IP address. Internal visits skew your data and make it impossible to measure real user behaviour accurately.
- Link GA4 to Google Search Console (when access is available) — this unlocks organic keyword and landing page data inside GA4.

Guidelines

- Broken analytics is like driving with your eyes closed. Every SEO decision should be informed by real data. If the tracking is wrong, the decisions are wrong.

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SECTION 03

AI Search Optimisation

GEO · AEO · E-E-A-T · Brand Mentions · Local AI Signals

★ **2026 UPDATE** GOOGLE'S OFFICIAL POSITION (May 15, 2026): "From Google Search's perspective, optimising for generative AI search is optimising for the search experience — and thus still SEO." AEO and GEO are not separate disciplines. Strong foundational SEO is the prerequisite for all AI visibility. There is no shortcut.

3.1 AI Overview Visibility (GEO)

Analysis

Finding	Status
AI Overview visibility tracked (Semrush)	[Yes / No — set up Semrush AI tracking]
Pages appearing in AI Overviews	[X] pages tracked
AI citation in ChatGPT	[Tracked / Not tracked]
AI citation in Perplexity	[Tracked / Not tracked]
AI citation in Claude	[Tracked / Not tracked]

Recommendations

- Set up Semrush AI Overview tracking immediately. It tracks which of your pages appear in AI-generated results across major platforms. Only 14% of marketers currently do this — it's a significant competitive gap.
- Ensure your domain ranks in the top 10 for target queries first. 92% of AI Overview citations come from top-10 ranking domains. You can't win AI visibility without organic ranking health.
- Focus content creation on informational, question-based queries — AI Overviews appear on 99.9% of informational keywords.

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- Being cited inside an AI Overview earns 35% more organic CTR than ranking position 3 without a citation. This isn't a future consideration — it's happening right now.

Guidelines

- AI Mode (Google) has passed 1 billion monthly users as of May 2026. In AI Mode there are no blue links — you're either cited, or you're invisible.
- 48% of all Google queries now trigger an AI Overview — up from 34.5% six months ago. This is accelerating.

🔧 **TOOL** Semrush's AI Overview tracking tool shows which queries trigger AI Overviews in your industry and whether your domain appears in them. Start here.

3.2 Answer Engine Optimisation (AEO) *Getting your content into zero-click answers*

Analysis

Finding	Status
Featured snippets currently owned	[X] — check Semrush
People Also Ask coverage	[X] PAA queries covered
FAQ sections on key pages	[Present / Missing]
FAQPage schema implemented	[Yes / No / Errors]
Question-format Headings used	[Yes / No]
Direct answer in first 100 words per section	[Yes / No]
HowTo schema on instructional content	[Present / Missing / N/A]
Speakable schema	[Present / Missing]

Recommendations

- Add a FAQ section to every key service, product, and informational page. Implement FAQPage schema on each one. This is the single fastest route to AI Overview citations.
- Rewrite H2 headings on informational pages as questions. Structure: Question (H2) → Direct answer in 40–60 words → Expanded detail below. That's the format Google extracts for featured snippets.
- Identify queries where competitors hold featured snippets and write a more direct, concise answer. Snippets are not permanent — they can be taken.

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Guidelines

- 57.9% of AI Overviews are triggered by question queries. 46% are long-tail (7+ words). Build your content calendar around both.
- AEO and SEO serve the same master — the best possible answer to the user's question. Do that well and both take care of themselves.

3.3 E-E-A-T Signals *The trust framework Google uses to evaluate everything*

Analysis

Signal	Status
Business identity clearly established	[Yes / No / Partial]
Real business address/service area clearly stated	[Yes / No]
Named owner / team members where relevant	[Present / Missing]
Relevant experience / credentials displayed	[X] mentions
Industry awards or accreditations	[Yes / No]
About Us page with team credentials	[Yes / No]
Verifiable contact information visible	[Yes / No]
Privacy Policy, T&C, Disclaimer pages	[Present / Missing]
Reviews with schema	[X] reviews, [X.X] average

Recommendations

- Named, credentialed authors on every piece of content. For YMYL topics (health, finance, legal) this is non-negotiable. For everything else, it's a significant differentiator.
- Create individual author pages. Not just a name at the top of an article — a full page with photo, bio, credentials, linked published work, and social profiles.
- Build a comprehensive About page that tells the actual story of the business and the people behind it. Vague corporate copy is an E-E-A-T fail.
- Display trust signals prominently: accreditations, awards, client logos, review counts, media mentions. These aren't vanity — they're ranking signals.

Guidelines

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- E-E-A-T is a reputation, not a tactic. It's built over time through consistently credible, expert-led content and a verifiable online presence. Start now.

✖ **CRITICAL** For health, finance, legal, and any topic where bad advice could harm someone, E-E-A-T is the most important ranking factor on the page. Google's quality raters are specifically trained to look for it.

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3.5 Local SEO & Google Business Profile *AI feeds from your GBP. Keep it accurate.*

✓ **BEST PRACTICE** Only 7.9% of local searches trigger an AI Overview (Ahrefs). The Local Pack is still the highest-ROI search surface for local businesses. But GBP is now the primary data source Google's AI uses for local answers — so an incomplete profile doesn't just hurt your Map Pack ranking, it makes you invisible in AI responses too.

Analysis

Finding	Status
GBP verified and claimed	[Yes / No]
Primary category — accuracy	[Correct / Needs review]
Secondary categories set	[X] categories
Business description complete (750 chars)	[Complete / Incomplete]
All attributes completed	[X]% complete
Hours accurate and current	[Yes / No]
Special hours set (holidays etc.)	[Yes / No]
Photos uploaded	[X] photos — target 100+
Google Posts active	[Yes / No / Frequency]
Q&A section populated	[Yes / No]
Review count and average rating	[X] reviews, [X.X] stars
Review response rate	[X]%
LocalBusiness schema on website	[Present / Missing / Errors]
NAP consistency across the web	[Consistent / Inconsistent]
Local citations built	[X] citations tracked

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Recommendations

- Treat GBP like a live product feed — not a listing you set up once and forget. Google's AI pulls from it in real time to answer local queries.
- Complete every single field. Every attribute left empty is a data gap that reduces confidence in your listing.
- Upload new photos weekly — interior, exterior, team, product, and behind the scenes. Businesses with 100+ photos get significantly more direction requests and website clicks.
- Respond to every review within 24 hours. Google reads your responses as part of understanding your business. It's also what customers read before they call.
- Post to Google Posts at least weekly — offers, news, events, and product highlights all keep the profile fresh and signal active management.
- Build citations on high-authority directories: Yelp, Apple Maps, Bing Places, TripAdvisor (if relevant), and industry-specific directories. NAP must be identical across all of them.

Guidelines

- Google's local algorithm: Relevance + Distance + Prominence. In 2026, Prominence includes GBP completeness, review sentiment, photo recency, and AI-readable structured data.
- For multi-location businesses: one dedicated local landing page per location, unique content, full LocalBusiness schema, and embedded map. Do not use one generic page with all addresses listed.

3.6 Competitor Content Gap Analysis *What are they ranking for that you're not?*

Analysis

Finding	Your Site	Competitor 1	Competitor 2
Total ranking keywords	[X]	[X]	[X]
Top-10 ranking keywords	[X]	[X]	[X]
Content gap keywords (they rank, you don't)	—	[X]	[X]

Recommendations

- Run the Content Gap tool in Ahrefs or Semrush: enter your domain and your top 3 competitors. Export every keyword they rank for in the top 10 that you don't appear for at all.
- Filter that list to informational, question-based queries first — these are your fastest wins for both content creation and AI Overview visibility.
- Build one piece of content targeting each significant gap. Don't spread thin — go deep on each topic.

Guidelines

- Your competitors are ranking for keywords you haven't even considered yet. Content gap analysis turns their success into your roadmap.

> 🔧 **TOOL** Use Semrush: Keyword Gap tool → enter your domain + 2 competitors → filter for "Missing" keywords. Export the top 50 by search volume. That list is your next 3 months of content.

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SECTION 04

Linking & Authority Audit

Backlinks · Domain Authority · Digital PR · Social · Competitive Gap

4.1 Inbound Followed Links

Analysis

Metric	Finding
Total inbound followed links	[X]
Total linking root domains	[X]
Domain Rating — Ahrefs	[X] / 100
Toxic or spammy links identified	[X] — disavow if confirmed
Links lost in last 90 days	[X]
Links gained in last 90 days	[X]

Recommendations

- Build links from topically relevant, high-authority domains. Relevance now matters as much as authority — a link from an industry publication beats a generic DR 70 site.
- Keep exact-match keyword anchors under 20% of the total profile. Over-optimised anchor profiles trigger algorithmic scrutiny.
- 40–60% branded anchor text is the sweet spot for a natural, trustworthy link profile.
- If toxic links are found, export the list, verify manually, and disavow via Google's Disavow Tool — only as a last resort.

Guidelines

- Google evaluates links by: Quantity, Quality, Trust, Authority, Topical Relevance, Anchor Text, and Velocity. All six matter. Volume without quality is worthless in 2026.
- One link from a high-authority, topically relevant source (DR 70+) can outweigh 100 links from average sites.

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4.2 Linking Root Domains & Domain Diversity

Analysis

Metric	Finding
Total unique linking root domains	[X]
Competitor 1 root domains	[Competitor] — [X]
Competitor 2 root domains	[Competitor] — [X]
Competitor 3 root domains	[Competitor] — [X]

Recommendations

- Domain diversity trumps volume. 10 links from 10 unique domains beats 100 links from the same domain — every time.
- Use Ahrefs Link Intersect to find domains linking to your competitors but not to you. That's your outreach list.
- Target a minimum domain diversity ratio of 10%: if you have 100 links, they should come from at least 10 unique domains.

4.3 Domain Authority & Trust

Analysis

Metric	Score
Ahrefs Domain Rating (DR)	[X] / 100
Moz Domain Authority (DA)	[X] / 100
Semrush Authority Score	[X] / 100
Competitor average DR	[X]

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Metric	Score
Gap to close	[X] DR points

Recommendations

- Focus link acquisition on DR 70+ sources — news sites, industry associations, government bodies, universities. These move authority metrics fastest.
- A Trust Flow / Citation Flow ratio above 0.5 indicates a healthy, trust-weighted profile. Below that suggests too many low-quality links.
- Set a 12-month DR target based on where your top 3 competitors sit. Close the gap methodically.

Guidelines

- DR above 40 is considered solid. DR above 70 is high quality. Neither matters if the links aren't topically relevant to your niche.

4.5 Social Media Signals & Visibility

Analysis

Platform	Followers	Avg Engagement	Posting Frequency
LinkedIn	[X]	[X]%	[X/week]
Facebook	[X]	[X]%	[X/week]
Instagram	[X]	[X]%	[X/week]
X (Twitter)	[X]	[X]%	[X/week]
YouTube	[X]	[X]%	[X/month]
TikTok	[X]	[X]%	[X/week]

Recommendations

- YouTube is the priority social platform for SEO. YouTube brand mentions show the strongest correlation with AI Overview visibility of all social signals.
- Make content easy to share — social sharing buttons on every article, blog post, and key page.

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- Social activity builds branded search volume, which correlates at 0.334 with AI visibility. The more people search for your brand name, the more AI systems recognise you as an authority.

4.6 Competitive Link Gap Analysis

Analysis

Metric	Your Site	Competitor 1	Competitor 2	Gap
Domain Rating (DR)	[X]	[X]	[X]	[X]
Linking Root Domains	[X]	[X]	[X]	[X]
Total Backlinks	[X]	[X]	[X]	[X]
Estimated Organic Traffic	[X]	[X]	[X]	[X]
Brand Mentions (est.)	[X]	[X]	[X]	[X]
AI Overview presence	[X pages]	[X pages]	[X pages]	[X]

Recommendations

- Run Ahrefs Link Intersect: domains linking to competitors but not to you are your highest-priority outreach targets.
- For each significant authority gap, identify the specific content asset that earned the competitor their links. Build something better. Then promote it.

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SECTION 06

90-Day Implementation Roadmap

The plan. In order. Starting Monday.

6.1 Priority Action Plan

Days 1 – 30 Fix the Foundation

✖ **CRITICAL** These are your quick wins — high impact, low complexity. Get these done in the first month without exception.

10. Set up Semrush AI Overview tracking — the most important monitoring gap to close right now.
11. Fix all title tag issues: over-long, duplicate, and missing. Start with the highest-traffic pages.
12. Write meta descriptions for every page missing one — prioritise top-traffic pages first.
13. Submit XML sitemap to GSC (confirm with client) and Bing Webmaster Tools.
14. Convert all 302 redirects to 301. Collapse all redirect chains to single hops.
15. Implement FAQPage schema on the top 10 highest-traffic pages.
16. Add LocalBusiness schema with full detail (local sites).
17. Fix all broken internal links identified in the crawl.
18. Run PageSpeed Insights on top 5 pages — implement immediate wins: compress images, enable caching, convert to WebP.
19. Claim and fully complete Google Business Profile (local sites).

Days 31 – 60 Build Authority

⚠ **HEADS UP** This is where the real leverage is. These actions compound over time — start them as early as possible.

20. Add named author bios and Author schema to all content pages.
21. Create a FAQ section on every key service and informational page.
22. Launch digital PR campaign — pitch original data study to 10 target publications.
23. Sign up to HARO / Qwoted — respond to minimum 5 journalist queries per week.
24. Build topic cluster map: identify all existing content clusters, find the gaps, plan the new content.
25. Rewrite H2 headings as questions on all key informational pages.
26. Complete image optimisation across the site: WebP conversion, compression, alt tags, dimensions.
27. Set up brand mention monitoring using Ahrefs Alerts or Brand24.
28. Begin systematic review request process for local clients.

Days 61 – 90 Scale & Measure

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✓ **BEST PRACTICE** Now you measure what's working, double down on it, and build the long-game assets.

29. Publish first original research piece.
30. Produce first quarter of new cluster content targeting identified keyword gaps.
31. Complete Core Web Vitals remediation — target LCP under 2.5s on mobile.
32. Conduct full competitive link gap analysis — begin outreach to gap domains.
33. Review AI Overview presence in Semrush — compare against baseline set in month 1.
34. Implement HowTo schema on all instructional content.
35. Conduct competitor content gap analysis — export top 50 missing keywords and brief content for each.
36. Produce 90-day performance report against KPI dashboard targets.

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Conclusion

The businesses winning in search right now aren't doing anything magical. They're doing the fundamentals exceptionally well — clean technical foundations, genuinely useful content written by real experts, and a consistent effort to build authority through earned media and brand presence.

What's different in 2026 is where the results surface. Google answers half of all searches before anyone clicks a link. AI Mode is now how a billion people search every month. The game has shifted from "rank high" to "get cited" — and the way you get cited is by being the most credible, comprehensive, and authoritative source on your topic.

The good news: Google's own official guidance confirms that strong foundational SEO is the prerequisite for AI visibility. You don't need a separate AI strategy. You need the best possible SEO strategy, executed with consistency and intent.

Work through this report in priority order. Measure against the KPI framework. Revisit the audit every quarter — the landscape moves fast, and what was cutting edge in January can be standard practice by June.

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> ℹ️ **NOTE** This audit was prepared exclusively for your business and reflects the state of the website as of 2026. SEO is not a one-time exercise — rankings, algorithms, and competitive landscapes change. We recommend revisiting this audit every 90 days and updating the scorecard accordingly.

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