
FREE RESOURCE · NO. VII

The content *engine*

How a non-writer plans, produces and maintains pages that bring in customers.

A repeatable system built on **Google's own published guidance** — including a section on the advice that is now simply wrong, so you can date anything else you are handed.



Before you write anything

Most website content fails for a boring reason: nobody decided what question it answers. It gets written because "we should blog more," it answers nothing in particular, and it brings in nobody.

This guide is a system for the opposite. You will end up with a list of real questions your customers ask, a page assigned to each one, a brief that makes writing it straightforward, and a publishing rhythm that survives a busy month.

You do not need to be a writer. You need to be clear. Clarity is a much easier skill to acquire than style, and Google's published guidance rewards it more.

A note on the tools. Everything in Parts 3 and 4 uses free tools and your own knowledge of your customers. That is deliberate. Once you have built the question list by hand, you will know your market well enough to tell when a tool — or an AI — hands you something plausible and wrong.

Start by unlearning something

You will find a great deal of advice about Google's "helpful content system" and how to survive its updates.

That system no longer exists as a separate thing. Google's own ranking systems guide lists it under *retired* systems, alongside Panda and Penguin:

"In March 2024, it evolved and became part of our core ranking systems, as our systems use a variety of signals and systems to present helpful results to users."

This matters practically. There is no separate "helpful content" switch to flip and no distinct penalty to recover from. Content quality is simply part of how ranking works now. Any guide still treating it as a standalone system is at least two years out of date — which is a useful test to apply to anything else that guide tells you.

The questions Google publishes

Google maintains a self-assessment on its *Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content* page. Read them as a checklist for every page you plan.

On content and quality:

- Does the content provide original information, reporting, research, or analysis?
- Does it provide a substantial, complete, or comprehensive description of the topic?
- Does it provide insightful analysis or interesting information beyond the obvious?
- If it draws on other sources, does it avoid simply copying or rewriting them, and instead add substantial value and originality?
- Does the main heading or page title provide a descriptive, helpful summary — without exaggerating or being shocking?
- Is this the sort of page you would bookmark, share with a friend, or recommend?
- Would you expect to see this content in a printed magazine, encyclopedia or book?
- Does it provide substantial value compared to other pages in search results?
- Any spelling or stylistic issues? Does it appear sloppy or hastily produced?
- **Is the content mass-produced by or outsourced to a large number of creators, so that individual pages don't get as much attention or care?**

On expertise:

- Does the content present information in a way that makes you want to trust it — clear sourcing, evidence of the expertise involved, background about the author or site?
- If someone researched the site producing this, would they come away thinking it is well-trusted or widely recognised on its topic?
- Is this written or reviewed by an expert or enthusiast who demonstrably knows the topic well?
- Does the content have any easily-verified factual errors?

THE MOST USEFUL QUESTION ON THE LIST IS THE SECOND-TO-LAST ONE ON QUALITY

"Is the content mass-produced... so that individual pages don't get as much attention or care?" is Google describing, in advance, what happens when you generate fifty pages in an afternoon. Hold on to it — Part 8 comes back to it.

Who, how and why

Google frames three questions about any piece of content. The third one is the whole game:

- **Who** — *"Is it self-evident to your visitors who authored your content?"*
- **How** — *"Is the use of automation, including AI-generation, self-evident to visitors through disclosures or in other ways?"*
- **Why** — *"The 'why' should be that you're creating content primarily to help people, content that is useful to visitors if they come to your site directly."*

That last clause is the test worth internalising: **would this page be useful to someone who arrived at it directly, with no search engine involved?** If not, you are writing for a machine, and Google has spent a decade getting better at noticing.

You will be sold E-E-A-T services. Here is what it actually is.

E-E-A-T stands for Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness and Trustworthiness. It comes from Google's Search Quality Rater Guidelines — the manual given to human beings who evaluate search results to help Google assess its own systems.

It is not a ranking factor. Google says so directly:

"While E-E-A-T itself isn't a specific ranking factor, using a mix of factors that can identify content with good E-E-A-T is useful."

Google's SEO Starter Guide independently lists E-E-A-T under *"Things we believe you shouldn't focus on."*

And the raters cannot affect your rankings. From the guidelines themselves:

"No single rating can directly impact how a particular webpage, website, or result appears in Google Search, nor can it cause specific webpages, websites, or results to move up or down."

What to take from it anyway

The concept is still a useful description of what good looks like, and one part carries more weight than the others:

"Of these aspects, trust is most important. The others contribute to trust, but content doesn't necessarily have to demonstrate all of them."

So the practical version, for a small business:

- **Experience** — you have actually done the thing. Say so, with specifics. A plumber writing about water heaters has something no content agency can manufacture.
- **Expertise** — show the working. Real numbers, real timelines, real named results.
- **Authoritativeness** — earned slowly through other people referencing you.
- **Trust** — be checkable. Real address, real names, real photos, sources for claims.

YMYL

Google gives extra weight to E-E-A-T signals on topics that *"could significantly impact the health, financial stability, or safety of people, or the welfare or well-being of society."* Google calls these **Your Money or Your Life** topics.

If you are in finance, health, legal, or safety-critical trades, the bar for demonstrable expertise is genuinely higher. Anonymous content in those fields is a poor investment.

Do this by hand at least once. It takes an afternoon and it is the most valuable afternoon in this guide.

Source 1 — your own phone (best source, zero tools)

For two weeks, write down **every question a customer asks**, before and after the sale. Whoever answers the phone should keep the list.

This is the highest-quality keyword research available to you and almost nobody does it. These are real questions, from real buyers, in their own words. No tool will give you that.

Source 2 — Google Search Console

If your site has any traffic, the Performance report shows what people searched before they saw you. Metrics: clicks, impressions, click-through rate, and average position. You can break it down by query, page, country and device.

Read it for two things:

1. Queries where you get impressions but almost no clicks — you appear, but your title or description is not compelling
2. Queries where you rank on page two — small improvements here often produce the fastest results

Note: Search Console holds a limited window of history — roughly the last 16 months — so export anything you want to keep long-term.

Source 3 — Google's own autocomplete

Start typing your service into Google and read the suggestions. Google is explicit that *"autocomplete predictions reflect real searches that have been done on Google."*

Two useful mechanics: type your service followed by each letter of the alphabet, and type question words — how, why, what, when, does, can, should — in front of it.

Worth knowing: Google says autocomplete *"doesn't simply display the most common queries on a given topic."* It is a directional signal, not a ranked list of volume.

Source 4 — "People also ask"

The expandable questions in search results. Not documented by Google as a research method, so treat it as observation rather than official guidance — but it is a fast way to see adjacent questions real people ask.

Source 5 — Google trends

Useful for seasonality and for comparing two terms. Google describes it as *"a largely unfiltered sample of actual search requests,"* scaled 0–100 relative to total searches — **not** absolute volume. Google cautions it is *"not a scientific poll"* and should be *"one data point among others."* For a local business, it is best used to answer "when does demand for this peak?"

Source 6 — Google keyword planner

Free, and it does not require ad spend — but Google's help does state you must complete account setup by entering billing information to access basic features like getting keyword ideas.

One caveat: it is widely reported that volumes appear as broad ranges rather than exact figures without active spend. We could not verify that in Google's own documentation, so treat it as user report rather than policy.

What you are building

A single list. For each item: **the question, in the customer's words**. Not "keywords" — questions. You should end up with somewhere between 30 and 100.

Now sort the list. This is where most content strategies quietly go wrong.

Sort every question into one of four buckets

BUCKET	THE PERSON IS...	PAGE TYPE	PRIORITY
Ready to buy	Looking for someone to do this now	Service page	Highest
Choosing	Comparing options, worried about cost	Cost, comparison, "how to choose" page	High
Diagnosing	Has a problem, does not yet know the solution	Problem / how-to page	Medium
Curious	Researching, may never buy	Educational article	Lowest

Most small business blogs live almost entirely in the bottom row and then wonder why traffic does not become customers. The top two rows are where the money is, and they are usually the emptiest.

The rules of the map

One question, one page. If you cannot state a page's job in a single sentence without using "and" twice, it is two pages.

No duplicate jobs. Two pages competing for the same question means neither wins.

Cost questions are not optional. "How much does X cost" is one of the most-searched and least-answered questions in every trade. Answering it honestly — even as a range with the factors that move it — filters out the wrong customers and builds enormous trust with the right ones. Your competitors are all avoiding it.

A warning about location pages

If you serve multiple towns, you will be tempted to generate one page per town. Google's spam policies name this pattern directly. It is now called **doorway abuse**:

"Doorway abuse is when sites or pages are created to rank for specific, similar search queries. They lead users to intermediate pages that are not as useful as the final destination."

The listed example is unambiguous: *"Having multiple domain names or pages targeted at specific regions or cities that funnel users to one page."*

Being honest about the boundary: Google does not publish anything that explicitly blesses genuine per-location pages. What it prohibits is templated near-duplicates funnelling to a single destination. So the safe interpretation is a test you can apply yourself: *if I removed the city name, would this page still be substantially different from the others?* If not, do not publish it.

Three real location pages beat thirty thin ones and carry none of the risk.

Before writing anything, fill this in. It takes ten minutes and removes almost all of the difficulty of writing.

PAGE BRIEF

The question this page answers:
(in the customer's own words)

Who is asking:
(their situation, not a demographic)

What they need to believe before they act:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What they will worry about:

- 1.
- 2.

Proof I can show:
(numbers, photos, named results, timelines)

The one action I want them to take:

Pages this should link to:

Page title (what appears in the browser tab and search results):

Main heading (what a visitor sees first):

If you cannot fill in "proof I can show," that is a signal — either find the proof or move the page down the list. Pages without proof are the ones that read like everyone else's.

The structure that works for almost every page

1. **Answer the question in the first two sentences.** Do not build up to it. Someone who arrived from a search wants confirmation they are in the right place.
2. **Then expand** — the detail, the nuance, the exceptions.
3. **Then prove it** — a real example, a photo, a number, a named result.
4. **Then handle the objection** you know they have.
5. **Then say what to do next**, specifically.

Rules that actually help

- **One idea per paragraph.** Two or three sentences.
- **Headings that make sense alone.** Someone skimming only your headings should still get the answer.
- **Write like you talk to a customer.** Read it aloud. Where you stumble, rewrite.
- **Specifics over adjectives.** "We replaced 340 water heaters last year" beats "quality service you can trust."
- **Cut the introduction.** Almost every page's first paragraph can be deleted entirely.

What Google says about the mechanics

Page titles. Google generates the title link in search results automatically, drawing on your <title> element, the main visible heading, <h1> tags, Open Graph titles, and even how other sites link to you:

"Google's generation of title links... is completely automated and takes into account both the content of a page and references to it."

If Google detects a problem, it may replace your title with something it constructs. The fix is not a trick — it is writing a descriptive, concise, unique title and putting matching text in the first visible heading.

Things you can stop worrying about. All from Google's own documentation:

- *"Number and order of headings: Having your headings in semantic order is fantastic for screen readers, but from Google Search perspective, it doesn't matter if you're using them out of order."*
- *"Meta keywords: Google Search doesn't use the keywords meta tag."*
- *"Minimum or maximum content length: The length of the content alone doesn't matter for ranking purposes."*

That last one deserves emphasis. There is no word count that ranks. A 400-word page that fully answers a question beats a 2,000-word page padded to hit a target — and the padding actively triggers the "sloppy or hastily produced" concern from Part 1.

How long until it works

Google's own answer:

"Some changes might take effect in a few hours, others could take several months. In general, you likely want to wait a few weeks to assess whether your work had beneficial effects."

Anyone promising results in a fortnight is either lucky or lying.

Consistency beats volume. A business publishing two genuinely useful pages a month will pass one that published forty in a burst and then stopped.

A sustainable month

WEEK	TASK	TIME
1	Pick the next two questions from the map. Write both briefs.	30 min
2	Draft page one.	1–2 hours
3	Draft page two.	1–2 hours
4	Publish both. Add internal links from related pages. Check Search Console for anything unexpected.	45 min

That is roughly four hours a month, and it produces 24 pages a year. Most small business competitors will publish nothing in that time.

Refreshing old content

Google publishes no "refresh every N months" rule. That is an SEO convention, not a Google position.

What Google does say is that freshness is *query-dependent*: there are "*various 'query deserves freshness' systems designed to show fresher content for queries where it would be expected.*" Someone searching "current building code" needs fresh. Someone searching "how a water heater works" does not.

Google also explicitly names two things as warning signs of writing for search engines rather than people:

"Are you changing the date of pages to make them seem fresh when the content hasn't substantially changed?"
"Are you adding/removing content primarily to make your site seem fresh?"

So: update pages when the information has actually changed, when Search Console shows a page slipping, or when customers start asking something the page does not cover. Not on a schedule, and never by changing the date alone.

On dates generally, Google's guidance is to show a user-visible date prominently, keep it consistent with any structured data, and never post future dates.

This is the part of the guide that will age fastest, so here is Google's actual position rather than anyone's interpretation.

Google's stated policy

From Google's guidance on AI-generated content:

"Appropriate use of AI or automation is not against our guidelines."

"Using automation—including AI—to generate content with the primary purpose of manipulating ranking in search results is a violation of our spam policies."

The relevant spam policy is **scaled content abuse**:

"Scaled content abuse is when many pages are generated for the primary purpose of manipulating search rankings and not helping users."

With this example listed directly: *"Using generative AI tools or other similar tools to generate many pages without adding value for users."*

Note the crucial detail: Google's March 2024 announcement made explicit that this policy applies whether the content was produced by automation *or by humans*. Google's objection is not the tool. It is **scale without value**.

What this means for you

The order matters, and it is the reason this guide put AI in Part 8 rather than Part 1.

Do it manually first. Build the question list from your own phone calls. Write the first five pages yourself, badly if necessary. You will learn what your customers actually worry about, what proof you have, and what your voice sounds like.

Then use AI for the repetitive parts, where you can check the output because you know the subject:

GENUINELY USEFUL	DO NOT DELEGATE
Turning your notes into a first draft	Deciding which questions matter
Writing 50 unique meta descriptions	Anything requiring proof you have
Alt text for images	Claims about your own work
Reformatting and tightening	Anything in a YMYL field without review
Turning a transcript into an outline	Judging whether a page is good

Disclose where it matters. Google's *How* question asks whether the use of automation is self-evident to visitors, and its guidance notes disclosures are useful *"for content where someone might think 'How was this created?'"*

The test that keeps you safe: if you could not have written this page yourself with enough time, you cannot check whether it is true. Publishing things you cannot verify is how a site quietly acquires "easily-verified factual errors" — one of the things Google's own quality questions asks about directly.

Content guides age badly. Here is what changed, so you can spot outdated advice — including in things written last year.

FAQ rich results are gone. Restricted in 2023 to well-known government and health sites, then removed entirely: they stopped appearing on **7 May 2026**, with documentation removed the following month. Adding FAQ markup for rich results no longer does anything.

HowTo rich results are gone. Deprecated in 2023 and now fully removed; the documentation page returns a 404. Google's advice on dead markup still applies: you can drop it, but there is no need to rush to remove it.

"Add schema and you'll show up in AI answers" is not supported. A 2026 Ahrefs analysis found no meaningful causal link between adding structured data and being cited by AI search features. Google's own May 2026 guide on optimising for generative AI features is blunter still:

"Structured data isn't required for generative AI search, and there's no special schema.org markup you need to add."

You do not need an llms.txt file. From the same Google guide: *"You don't need to create new machine readable files, AI text files, markup, or Markdown to appear in generative AI search."* This is being actively sold right now. It is not required.

You do not need to chunk your content for AI. Also from Google: *"There's no requirement to break your content into tiny pieces for AI to better understand it,"* and *"You don't need to write in a specific way just for generative AI search."*

Buying "mentions" does not work. Google: *"Seeking inauthentic 'mentions' across the web isn't as helpful as it might seem."*

The overall message from that guide, which should reassure you:

"The best practices for SEO continue to be relevant because our generative AI features on Google Search are rooted in our core Search ranking and quality systems."

There is no separate AI content strategy to buy. There is writing genuinely useful pages, which is what the previous eight parts described.

The short version

1. Spend two weeks writing down every question customers ask
2. Add what Search Console, autocomplete and Trends tell you
3. Sort every question into ready-to-buy, choosing, diagnosing, curious
4. Start at the top of that list, not the bottom
5. One question, one page
6. Fill in a brief before you write
7. Answer the question in the first two sentences
8. Show proof — numbers, photos, named results
9. Publish two pages a month, forever
10. Update when the facts change, not on a schedule
11. Learn all of the above manually before automating any of it

— IF THE SYSTEM IS RIGHT AND THE WRITING IS NOT

We can run the engine *for* you.

The question list in Part 3 is yours to build and nobody can build it better — it comes from your own phone calls.

Turning it into published pages, month after month, is where most businesses stall. **Hyde & Co. is an agency for business owners** — we keep it running so it does not depend on a quiet week.

i. We build the question map with you, from your real customer calls.

ii. We turn it into a publishing plan you could hand to anyone.

iii. You write it, or we do, and it goes out on a rhythm either way.

No obligation. If you have the time to write, keep it — your own voice will beat ours.

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Sources

USED IN	SOURCE
Part 1 — retired system	Google Search Central, <i>Ranking systems guide</i> (helpful content system listed as retired, folded into core March 2024); Google Search blog, 5 March 2024
Part 1 — quality questions	Google, <i>Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content</i> (page updated 10 December 2025)
Part 2 — E-E-A-T	Same page ("E-E-A-T itself isn't a specific ranking factor"; "trust is most important"); Google <i>SEO Starter Guide</i> , "Things we believe you shouldn't focus on"
Part 2 — raters, YMYL	Google <i>Search Quality Rater Guidelines</i> , edition dated 11 September 2025 — §0.1 on ratings not affecting rankings, §3.4 on trust, §2.3 on YMYL categories
Part 3 — Search Console	Google Search Console Help, <i>Performance report</i>
Part 3 — autocomplete	Google Search Help, <i>How Google autocomplete predictions work</i>
Part 3 — Trends	Google Trends Help, <i>FAQ about Google Trends data</i>
Part 3 — Keyword Planner	Google Ads Help — billing information required for basic features
Part 4 — doorway abuse	Google Search Central, <i>Spam policies for Google web search</i>
Part 6 — titles	Google Search Central, <i>Control your title links in search results</i>
Part 6 — what not to focus on	Google <i>SEO Starter Guide</i> — heading order, meta keywords, content length, expected timelines
Part 7 — freshness and dates	Google <i>Ranking systems guide</i> (query deserves freshness); <i>Creating helpful content</i> (warnings on faked freshness); <i>Publication dates</i> guidance
Part 8 — AI policy	Google Search blog, <i>Google Search and AI-generated content</i> (8 February 2023); Google Search Central, <i>Using generative AI content</i> (updated 10 December 2025); <i>Spam policies</i> — scaled content abuse (updated 15 May 2026)
Part 9 — deprecations	Google Search Central changelog — FAQ rich results ceased 7 May 2026, documentation removed 15 June 2026; HowTo deprecated 2023 and removed
Part 9 — AI features	Google Search Central, <i>Optimizing your website for generative AI features on Google Search</i> (published 15 May 2026); Ahrefs analysis of schema and AI citations (2026)

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