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*Free Cheat sheet*

# Google Ranking Systems Cheat Sheet (All 17, in Plain English)

Every system Google publicly names, what it does, and the 3 you can influence this month.

One page that explains every ranking system Google publishes, in words a small business owner can use. Stop panicking about 'the algorithm' and work on the few systems you can actually move.



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SEO since 2018 · I help founders get customers from Google + AI search  
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## How to use it

1. Read the table once so you know the names. You will hear them again in every SEO news story.
  2. Skip to 'The 3 systems you can influence this month' and pick one task.
  3. When a core update rolls out, use the checklist in section 3 before you change anything.
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## The 17 ranking systems Google publicly names

Google doesn't have one algorithm. Its guide to ranking systems (last updated 10 Dec 2025) lists these. The 'what it means for you' column is my plain-English take.

| System                             | What Google says it does                                                                            | What it means for you                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BERT                               | Helps understand how combinations of words express meaning and intent.                              | Write the way people talk. Small words like 'for' and 'without' change the answer.      |
| Crisis information systems         | Shows hotlines and official info during personal crises and disasters (SOS Alerts).                 | Not something you optimise for.                                                         |
| Deduplication systems              | Hides near-identical results and doesn't repeat a featured snippet as a normal listing on page one. | Ten near-copies of the same page won't get ten spots.                                   |
| Exact match domain system          | Limits credit for domains made to match a query, like best-plumber-austin.com.                      | A keyword domain is not a shortcut.                                                     |
| Freshness systems                  | Shows newer content where recency is expected (news, new releases).                                 | Only matters for searches where 'new' is the point. Updating a date alone does nothing. |
| Link analysis systems and PageRank | Uses how pages link to each other to understand what they're about and how helpful they may be.     | Real links and mentions still count. So do your own internal links.                     |
| Local news systems                 | Surfaces local news sources in Top stories and Local news.                                          | Relevant if you publish local news.                                                     |

| System                         | What Google says it does                                                                         | What it means for you                                                            |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MUM                            | An AI model used for specific applications, not general ranking.                                 | Ignore anyone who says 'optimise for MUM'.                                       |
| Neural matching                | Matches concepts in queries to concepts in pages.                                                | You don't need every keyword variation. Cover the topic clearly.                 |
| Original content systems       | Helps original content, including original reporting, rank above pages that only cite it.        | Be the source: your own data, photos, prices, process.                           |
| Removal-based demotion systems | Demotes sites with many legal or personal-information removals.                                  | Don't publish copyrighted or doxxing content.                                    |
| Passage ranking system         | Judges individual sections of a page for relevance.                                              | A clear answer in one section of a long page can rank on its own.                |
| RankBrain                      | Relates words to concepts so pages rank without the exact words.                                 | Same lesson as neural matching: answer the need, not the string.                 |
| Reliable information systems   | Surfaces authoritative pages, demotes low-quality ones, shows advisories when confidence is low. | Matters most for health, money and news topics.                                  |
| Reviews system                 | Rewards reviews with insightful analysis and original research by people who know the topic.     | If you review products, show you used them: photos, measurements, pros and cons. |
| Site diversity system          | Generally limits top results to two listings from the same site (subdomains count as the root).  | You usually get two shots per search, not five.                                  |
| Spam detection systems         | Systems including SpamBrain that handle content and behaviour against spam policies.             | Read the spam policies once (section 4). Breaking them can sink a site.          |

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## Retired systems you still hear about

| Name                   | What happened to it                                                                                            |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Helpful content system | Became part of the core ranking systems in March 2024. 'Helpful content update' is no longer a separate thing. |
| Panda                  | Folded into the core ranking systems in 2015.                                                                  |
| Penguin                | Link spam system, integrated into core ranking in 2016.                                                        |
| Hummingbird            | A big 2013 improvement. Ranking has kept evolving since.                                                       |

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## What a core update really is (and what to do)

Google says core updates are broad changes that 'don't target specific sites or individual web pages', and they happen several times a year. Use this checklist before you touch anything.

- ☐ **Check the Search Status Dashboard ([status.search.google.com](https://status.search.google.com)) and note the update's start and end dates.**

You can't judge an update that is still rolling out.

- ☐ **Wait at least one full week after it finishes before you analyse Search Console.**

This is Google's own advice in its core updates guide.

- ☐ **Compare the week after with the week before the update started, page by page.**

Site-wide totals hide which pages actually moved.

- ☐ **Small drop (like position 2 to 4)? Do nothing drastic.**

Google says small shifts are normal fluctuation.

- ☐ **Big sustained drop (like position 4 to 29)? Compare your page with the pages that now rank above you, honestly.**

Ask which one a searcher would rather read.

- ☐ **Run Google's 'helpful, reliable, people-first content' self-assessment questions on your worst-hit pages.**

It's the closest thing to an official checklist.

- ☐ **Improve pages before deleting them. Delete only what can't be saved.**

Google calls deletion a last resort.

- ☐ **Expect it to take months, and maybe until the next core update.**

Google says it can take several months for its systems to confirm a site has improved, with no guarantee.

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## Spam policies in one line each

Spam systems enforce these 16 policies. If you do any of them, fix that before anything else.

| Policy                     | In plain English                                                                  |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cloaking                   | Showing Google different content than people see.                                 |
| Doorway abuse              | Lots of near-identical pages built to catch searches and funnel people elsewhere. |
| Expired domain abuse       | Buying an old domain to rank weak content on its past reputation.                 |
| Hacked content             | Content placed on your site by an attacker. Keep your CMS updated.                |
| Hidden text and link abuse | Text or links people can't see but Google can.                                    |
| Keyword stuffing           | Repeating words unnaturally.                                                      |
| Link spam                  | Buying, selling or trading links to manipulate rankings.                          |
| Machine-generated traffic  | Bots sending automated queries to Google.                                         |
| Malicious practices        | Malware, unwanted software, harmful behaviour.                                    |

| Policy                   | In plain English                                                               |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Misleading functionality | Fake tools or features that trick people.                                      |
| Scaled content abuse     | Mass-producing pages (by AI, people or both) with little value.                |
| Scraping                 | Republishing other sites' content without adding value.                        |
| Site reputation abuse    | Third-party pages riding a host site's reputation (the 'parasite SEO' policy). |
| Sneaky redirects         | Sending people somewhere other than what Google saw.                           |
| Thin affiliation         | Affiliate pages that copy product descriptions and add nothing.                |
| User-generated spam      | Spam in your comments, forums or profiles. Moderate them.                      |

## The 3 systems you can influence this month

### 1 Original content: publish one thing only you can say

Pick your most important service page. Add something nobody else has: your real prices or price ranges, photos of your own work, the steps you actually follow, the questions customers ask you. Original content systems are built to reward the source over the copy.

### 2 Links: fix internal links today, earn one real mention this month

Link to your money pages from your homepage and from related posts, with descriptive anchor text. Then ask one partner, supplier or local group to mention you with a link. Real links still feed link analysis systems.

### 3 Passage ranking: answer one question in one clear section

Under a heading phrased like the question, answer it in the first one or two sentences, then explain. A strong section can rank even inside a long page.

*Featured pick*

## theStacc

theStacc plans, writes and publishes SEO blog posts for local and small businesses, which helps if your bottleneck is publishing original, helpful pages consistently. It also includes an SEO auditor that checks crawler access.

Disclosure: I work at theStacc as a product growth marketer, so I am biased. Compare it against the free options on this page and pick what fits you.

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## Sources

- Google Search Central: A guide to Google Search ranking systems — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ranking-systems-guide>
- Google Search Central: Google Search's core updates and your website — <https://developers.google.com/search/updates/core-updates>
- Google Search Central: Spam policies for Google web search — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies>
- Google Search Central: Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/creating-helpful-content>
- Google Search Status Dashboard — <https://status.search.google.com/>
- Google Search Central: SEO Starter Guide — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/seo-starter-guide>

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<https://ritiknamdev.com/resources/ranking-systems/>