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Purdue University - College of Agriculture

SEO - Header Tag Best Practices

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WHAT ARE HEADER TAGS?

When you plug content for a web page into your CMS, you have options for tagging chunks of text as H1 or H2. Essentially, these are different types of headers and they are important for SEO. There are other heading tags beyond these, such as H3, H4, H5, and H6, but they are not incredibly helpful for SEO. The H1 carries the most weight when it comes to ranking power, followed by the H2. Basically, they descend by importance. The H1 is the main header, while the H2 is the subheader. While each page should only have one H1, it can have multiple H2s, which are best used as section headers within the body of your text. Think of it this way: the headers provide both search engines and users with an outline of a page's content.

In recent years, there has been some skepticism regarding just how much of a factor header tags are in Google's ranking algorithm. Some believe that their importance has diminished with time. However, when we think about header tags from a user experience point of view, it becomes clear that using headers is still a best practice.

When searchers click on a result in the SERP, they expect to find exactly what they are looking for when they land on the web page. For this reason, it is important that you have a header and subheaders that speak directly to the keywords that the searcher used in their query to find you. If they get to the page and see nothing immediately relevant to their search, then they will click the back button. This will register as a bounce, which will negatively affect your search engine visibility.

HOW TO CODE HEADER TAGS

Most CMSs give you the ability to simply highlight a section of body text and tag it as an H1, H2, H3, etc. However, if your CMS does not have such a plugin, then you should instead insert the below tags in your HTML around the appropriate text:

<h1> Your Header 1 Here </h1>
<h2> Your Header 2 Here </h2>

IDENTIFYING HEADER TAGS IN HTML

It is important to note that you should only have one H1 tag on each page. You can check the source of a page to see if there is more than one H1 tag in the HTML. Sometimes, a web page has more than one H1 without the website manager knowing. This is because certain design elements can cause random text to be tagged as an H1. That's why it is important to check the HTML for all <h1> tags by doing a search in the "view source" option of your browser.

While having multiple H2s is okay, it's important that they are relevant to the page's content. For example, when you inspect a page's source, you may find that an <h2> tag is being pulled into the HTML from an unrelated page that is linked in the main menu. This is an issue that your web developer or designer should look into.

WRITING H1s

The H1 is the main header for a webpage. Take, for example, a program page on a higher ed website. The header might simply be "MBA." However, you would want to get more granular than this so that your H1 can include more keywords. For example, you might instead name the H1 "MBA Programs" or "MBA Degrees" as both "degrees" and "programs" are top keywords. There are no character limits for H1s, so you can make the headers as long as you'd like. You may opt to make the header a sentence, such as: "Our MBA Programs Open Up Endless Career Advancement Opportunities." Remember, you should only have one H1 on each page.

WRITING H2s

H2s serve as subheaders on a webpage. Remember, you can have more than one H2 on each page. They are good to use when you have long blocks of content that you want to break up for readability purposes. For example, you may want to break up sections of body text on your main Admissions page for undergraduate, graduate, and transfer. Like with H1s, it is always a good idea to include keywords in your H2s. Therefore, if your main keyword was "admissions," then you would want to label your H2s: Undergraduate Admissions, Graduate Admissions, and Transfer Admissions.

If you opt to use a longer, sentence-length H1, you may also consider doing the same for your first H2. For example:

H1: Our Executive MBA Programs Open Up Endless Career Advancement Opportunities
H2: With many executive MBA degrees to choose from, you can further your career in accounting, finance, healthcare, and more!
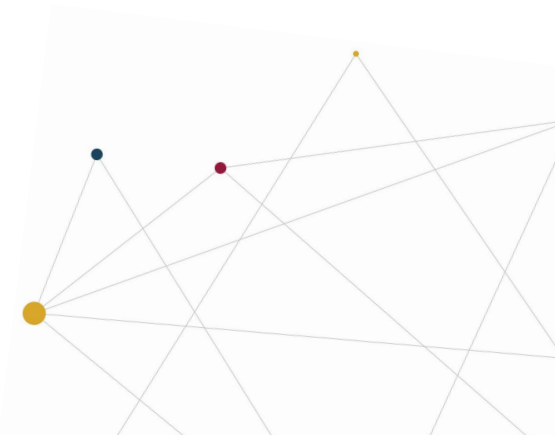
A NOTE ON KEYWORDS

The above H1 and H2 include the following keywords: executive MBA, executive MBA programs, executive MBA degrees. Note how they are woven into these headers seamlessly. While it is important that your keywords appear in your headers, it is also important that they read naturally. You don't want to keyword stuff and have them sound grammatically incorrect.

Also note that, while "accounting," "finance," and "health care," are not part of the list of keywords you're targeting, it is smart to list top program names, as students get more granular as their search process goes on.

FINAL NOTES

Keep in mind that content is the most important search visibility factor and headers are part of the content of a web page. That's why it is important not to neglect header tags for your web pages. For the best optimization, be sure that the content of your header tags lines up with the information in the body text, as well as the title tags and meta descriptions. This kind of alignment ensures the best search engine visibility.