Basic Search Engine Optimisation

Metatags – what they are and how to use them

A web page is basically a text file. This text file contains little bits of code that tell search engines how to display your content. These bits of code are called 'tags' and are characterised by a left angle bracket '<' at the start and a right angle bracket '>' at the end. A simple example of a tag is:

this text is bold

The tag tells the search engine that whatever comes between the opening and closing tags should be shown in bold (not all tags require closing tags as we'll see later). Other tags include <u> for underline or <i> for italic. Easy really isn't it?

Tags can have nested tags inside them like this:

This is Bold <i> and this is bold italic</i>

There are other html tags that define the structure of the web page. All web pages start with a <html> tag and end with a closing </html>tag. This root html tag is only allowed to have 2 different tags directly inside it. This is the <head></head> and the <body></body> tags. Inside the <body> tag is all the stuff that you see on the webpage. Inside the <head> tag is all the stuff that is not displayed in your browser but is a container for information about the web page and how the page is displayed - and also a few other things like stylesheets and JavaScript (which we will cover later in Advanced SEO).

For basic SEO, the most important tags are the meta tags. If you go to a website and right click on it, and select 'view source' you'll see something like this:

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html lang="en-us">
<head>
<meta charset="utf-8">
<title>W3Schools Online Web Tutorials</title>
<link rel="icon" href="favicon.ico" type="image/x-icon">
<meta name="Keywords" content="HTML, CSS, DOM, JavaScript, jQuery, XML, AJAX, ASP.NET, W3C,
tutorials, programming, learning, guide, primer, lessons, school, howto, reference, examples, source
code, demos, color tables, Cascading Style Sheets, Active Server Pages, Programming,
Development.Webbuilder, Sitebuilder, Webmaster">
<meta name="Description" content="HTML CSS JavaScript jQuery AJAX XML ASP.NET SQL Tutorials
References Examples">
<meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width">
… ….
```

(This code was taken from w3schools.com.)

The Metatags are all those tags that start with "<meta" The ones used in the example page above are:

- **Charset** – tells the browser what character encoding to use- utf-8 is Unicode character sets. Different languages use different character sets.
- **Keywords** – the meta keywords tells search engines which keywords to use when finding the site
- **Description** – a brief summary of the page
- **Viewport** – tells mobile devices how to present the web page, in this case, stretch to full screen width
- **Title tag** – the title of the web page

The only metatags that are essential to have for SEO is the meta description, and the page title.

Meta Keywords
Google stopped using the meta keywords tag a long time ago because it was abused by spammers who used to stuff it with hundreds of keywords to try to spam Google. That's not to say they ignore it altogether now. If you add lots of content to the meta keywords tag, you might find yourself getting downgraded or possibly even blacklisted for it.

Meta Description
You know that bit of text that appears beneath the links in the Google SERPs, well most of the time (but not always) that text is directly copied from the meta description tag. A good meta description will include keyword related words and should be less than 160 characters in length (Google's search pages cut off text after around 160 characters). I say around 160, but the actual limit is more related to the physical width of the characters, so a meta description with lots of l's in it takes up less space than one with lots of w's in it, and therefore has a greater number of characters before it gets cut. One recent trend that we are beginning to see now is that for mobile search, the meta description is cut off around 115 characters, and this is also starting to filter into desktop search. Therefore, you should write a shorter and more concise meta description, and aim for around 110 characters to be safe. If you *have* to go over this limit, make sure you don't go further than 160.

The content of the meta description should be natural English readable text. If you put in 'buy bikes, great bikes, road bikes, bikes for tykes, bike buying, bike advice, bike help' not only will this signal to Google that the page is spammy, but it will also impact on the number of people who click on your link in the search results. After all, getting people to click through to your site is the ultimate aim of SEO.

A better description would be something like 'Buying your first road bike – from frame size to tyre type, our buying guide will help you choose the perfect ride'. This meta description includes the

keywords of 'advice' 'bike' 'guide' and related words 'frame' 'tyre', 'ride' which are all grouped around the keyword theme of bikes and advice.

Page Title

The page title is one of the 10 most important aspects of your webpage. Therefore, it is imperative that you get it right. Your title should be unique to every page on your site. You can use Google Webmaster Tools (GWT) to check if this is the case.

To get the perfect page title, you need to try to view your website from your audience's perspective. A title should be short, but describe the primary focus of the page. Let's say for example you have an online shop selling bikes. Your home page title should probably be the title of your business – "my bikes – online bike shop" and other pages in your site should be equally succinct. For example the shipping and returns policy page title should simply be 'Shipping and returns'. Note you should not try to stuff the keywords in your page title unless it is appropriate they be there. If it is appropriate, try to put the keywords near the start of the title tag.

The length of your page title should be less than 55 characters. This length would be visible in 512 pixel width displays, and be quite easy to embed in limited character tweets. Only the first 20-25 character are visible in browser tabs so it's worth considering that when creating page titles.

Note, the title that appears in Google's search results are not necessarily guaranteed to be the ones that you selected for your page. Sometimes, Google works in mysterious ways.