

Advanced SEO Part 3 – Canonical URLs

A website can sometimes contain the same text on different variations of the page. This can be for a number of reasons, sometimes the same article is posted in a different directory on the same website so could have urls like '/articles/bikes/buying-guide' and '/articles/tips/buying-guide'. Other times it could be because the website has aliases, e.g. 'mykesbikes.co.uk/articles/buying-guide' and 'mykesbikes.com/articles/buying-guide'.

If your website publishes the same content in different urls, then Google may not automatically select the correct URL. If Google sees the same content in a different URL, then your site might be downgraded with a duplicate content penalty, or may be judged as less authoritative.

How do you make sure Google uses the correct URL?

There are a few methods you can use:

1. **Be consistent with the URL across your website.**

And if you can, use absolute links if your website has aliased urls (including sites where you have both www and non www versions of your address that show the same content, or http and https versions that are the same)

2. **Use redirects for non-primary urls.**

If you can put 301 redirects on duplicate content pages then this tells Google not to index the incorrect version. It will also help if you have backlinks to the wrong url

3. **Use a rel=canonical link element tag.**

In the <head> element of your web page, you can add a special html tag that looks a bit like this:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://mykebikes.com/articles/buying-guide" />
```

Search engines will then see this link and know that the preferred URL for the page should be the one indicated. Be warned though, if you mistype the URL in the canonical tag, then your page could be excluded from Google.

4. **Use Google webmaster tools to set preferred domain.**

this works with aliased domains but not with different folder structures

5. **Use a sitemap to indicate preference.**

XML Sitemaps include full urls of the page, so having the canonical URL in the sitemap may be beneficial. This is not as powerful a method as using rel=canonical tags though as sometimes the sitemap information might not be considered when deciding preferred urls.

6. **Specify the canonical link in the HTTP Headers.**

This is a more technical procedure and you will need to have access to your web server to configure the http headers. Each type of web server has a different method of adding http headers so I won't go into detail how to do it here, but if you know how to do it, the header should look something like this:

```
Link: <http://mykebikes.com/articles/buying-guide >; rel="canonical"
```