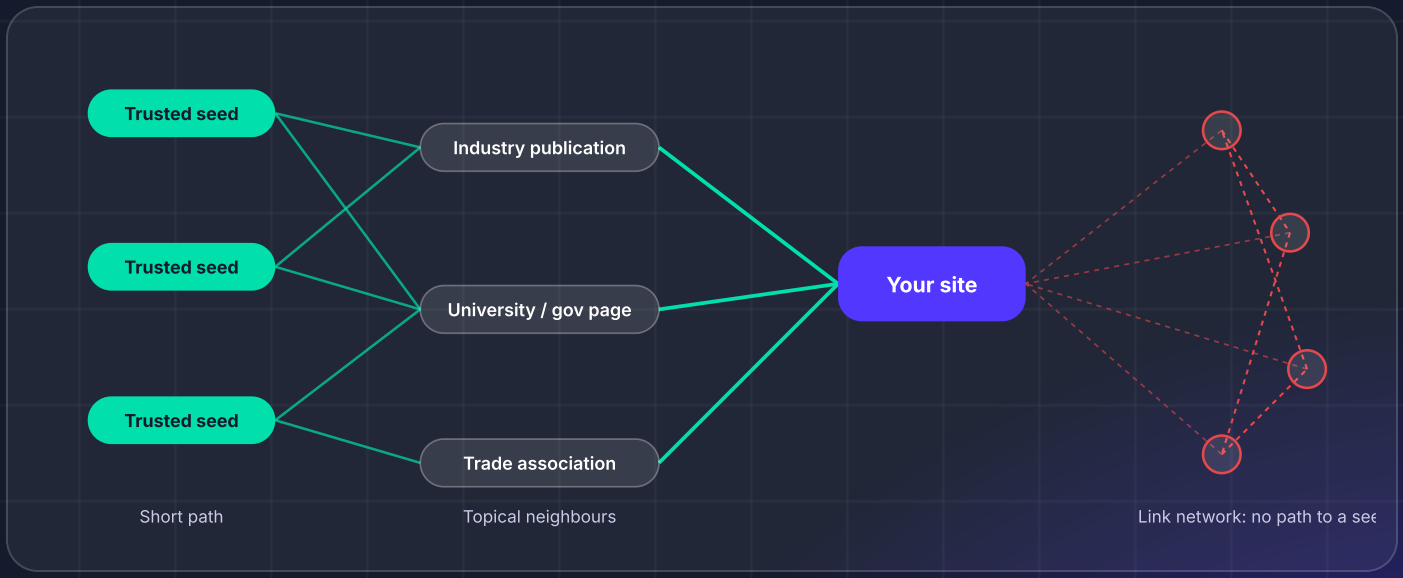
Backlinks
In the AI Search Era

What links still do for Google and AI answers, how link quality is judged, what counts as link spam, and how to earn links that build real authority.

Guide · Off-page SEO and generative engine optimization

LINKS ARE PATHS OF TRUST. SHORT PATHS FROM GOOD SOURCES COUNT MOST.



1	10+	3
signal among many, still core	link quality signals	link attributes to use

Ameneh Saeednia
Senior SEO and Generative Search Strategist

Why links still matter

Links are still a core signal. Just not the only one

The 2023 US v. Google trial and the 2024 API leak gave SEOs a rare look at how Google talks about links internally. **Links still matter. They are just one input into a bigger quality picture.**

What the trial and leak show

Google described **PageRank** as a single signal relating to **distance from a known good source**, used as an **input to the Quality score**. [1]
Popularity signals draw on **Chrome visit data** and **the number of anchors** pointing at a page. [1]
The leak shows **several PageRank variants**, a site-level **siteAuthority** score, host age and **SpamBrain** link demotions. [1]

What Kopp concludes

Most of Google's quality signal comes from **the page itself**. Links can't rescue weak content. [1]
Authority is **transferred from outside**: what other trusted sources say and link to shapes how expert you look. [3]
Link signals sit inside his **80+ E-E-A-T signals**, next to authorship, reviews, mentions and user signals. [2]

Old belief	Better model in 2026
More links = higher rankings	**Closer to trusted sources** = more trust. Count matters far less than path and context.
Links are a ranking trick	Links are **evidence**: other sites vouching for you, read alongside content and user signals
Anchor text = target keyword	Anchor text = **how the web describes you**, read in aggregate
Only Google cares about links	Links help pages get **found, crawled and cited**, including by AI search that runs on a web index

The short version

Earn links **from sources that are close to the trusted core of your topic**, with anchors that describe you honestly. Everything else in this guide is detail on that sentence.

Part 1

How a link is judged

Kopp's review of Google patents, leak documents and trial evidence lists the **link signals** that feed authority and trust. [2] No single row decides anything: a link that ticks **topic, proximity and natural anchor** beats ten that tick none.

Signal	What it means	What to do
Proximity to seed sites	How few hops separate you from sites Google already trusts	Target sources that are themselves cited by the leaders in your field
PageRank and link diversity	Link value plus how many **different** sites link to you	Many independent referring domains beat many links from one site
Neighbour quality	The quality of sites in your link neighbourhood rubs off on you [5]	Avoid networks; stay in good company
Anchor relevance and n-grams	The words others use when they link to you	Make your brand and topic easy to describe (Part 3)
Fresh links over time	A steady stream of new links **long after** publication	Build assets that keep earning links: data, tools, guides
Anchor matches business name	Anchors that use your real brand name	Keep your name consistent everywhere (see the Brand Consistency guide)
References to the entity	How often the brand is linked or referenced as a source	Be the original source of facts others cite
Co-occurrence	Your brand appearing next to your topic, even unlinked	PR and content that pair your name with your category
Outbound links to authorities	Who **you** link to also says something about you	Cite primary sources; don't hoard links
Consistency across signals	Links, mentions, reviews and content tell one story	Don't let link campaigns pull your topic in random directions

Part 2

Distance from trusted sources

PageRank today is best understood as **distance**. Google starts from sites it trusts and measures how far other pages are from them through links. [1] **A short path from a respected source beats a long chain of weak sites.**



What sits close to the seeds

Leading publications in your industry and region.
Universities, public bodies and standards organisations.
Trade associations, chambers and professional registers.
Sites that **those** sites link to and cite regularly.

What sits far away

Private blog networks and **link farms** that mostly link to each other.
Low-quality directories and bookmark sites. [6]
Sites that publish anything for a fee, with no topic focus.
Hacked or expired domains repurposed for links.

Practical test

Before chasing a link, ask: **who links to this site?** If the answer is respected names in your field, the path is short. If it is nobody, or a network of look-alike sites, the link carries little trust, or risk.

Part 3

Anchor text: how the web describes you

Anchor text is the visible text of a link. Google says it tells people and Google **something about the page you're linking to**. [7] Kopp highlights that Google can read anchors in aggregate, as **n-grams**, to learn how reputable sources describe a site. [2]

What a natural anchor profile tends to look like



Brand name **46%** · Naked URL **18%** · Descriptive / topical **22%** · Generic ("click here") **9%** · Exact-match keyword **5%**

Illustrative shape, not a target. Real profiles vary by industry and brand age. The warning sign is **exact-match anchors you didn't earn**.

Paid or forced: 50 guest posts all linking with **"best private tours Rome"**.

Earned: a travel editor writes *"according to **[Brand]**, the Vatican queue peaks at 10am"* and links your study.

Brand name + topic in a natural sentence

Empty or generic: an image link with no alt text, or **"click here"**.

Descriptive: *"[Brand]'s **guide to accessible tours in Lisbon**"*. For image links, Google uses the **alt text** as the anchor. [7]

Concise, descriptive, relevant to the page

You control

Internal anchors (Part 6).
The **name and one-liner** you give journalists and partners.
Alt text on logos and badges you supply.

You shouldn't control

Exact anchors on **other people's** sites.
Google lists **optimized anchor text** in guest posts, press releases and advertorials as link spam. [6]

Part 4

Links, mentions and AI answers

AI search runs on top of a web index and on what models learned from the web. **Links help your pages get found and trusted. Mentions help the model know who you are.** You need both.

Links in AI search

Grounded AI answers (AI Mode, AI Overviews, ChatGPT search) retrieve pages from an index. **Pages that aren't crawled and trusted don't get retrieved.**

Links are still how crawlers **discover** pages and how search systems judge **which sources to trust**. [1][7]

Kopp notes that **corroborating links** in AI Overviews attract clicks: being one of the supporting sources is visibility in itself. [1]

Mentions in AI search

LLMs build a **composite profile** of a brand from fragments across the web. [4]

Co-occurrence of your brand with your topic, even without a link, strengthens that association. [2][3]

Contradictory or thin mentions make the model fall back on **better-described competitors**. [4]

Goal	Link does	Unlinked mention does
Get a page crawled and indexed	**Yes**, a crawlable link is a discovery path [7]	No
Pass ranking signals (PageRank)	**Yes**, unless qualified with nofollow / sponsored / ugc [8]	No
Teach AI what your brand is	Partly, through anchor and surrounding text	**Yes**, through co-occurrence and context
Show topical authority	**Yes**, if the linking site is in your topic	**Yes**, if the source is in your topic

What this changes

Measure **referring domains in your topic** and **brand mentions in your topic** side by side. A PR win with no link is still a GEO win.

Part 5

What earns links in 2026

The link sources that still work are the ones Google's spam policy can't object to: **people linking because your page is useful to their readers.** Kopp's advice for authority is the same: run PR and content **in thematic contexts**, where your topic lives. [3]

1

Original data

Run a study only you can run: your bookings, prices, survey, crawl. **Journalists link to sources of numbers.**

Evidence: Data studies earn links long after launch, the "fresh links" signal. [2]

2

Expert commentary

Offer named experts to journalists and podcasts on your topic. **Quotes come with brand mentions and often links.**

3

Reference assets

Glossaries, calculators, checklists, maps. Things other writers **need to cite** rather than rewrite.

4

Partners and associations

Suppliers, trade bodies, local tourism boards, event organisers. **Real relationships, real links.**

Evidence: Keep partner pages genuine, not link swaps. [6]

5

Local and community

Sponsorships, charities, meetups, local press. Fine to do: **qualify paid links with sponsored**. [6][8]

6

Reclaim what you've earned

Find **unlinked mentions** and broken links to your site, and ask for a link or redirect the URL.

Before you pitch

Is the outlet **about my topic** or region?
Do respected sites in my field **link to it**?
Would I want this link **if Google didn't exist**?

A note on guest posts

Writing for a respected publication to reach its readers is fine. Writing for any site that will take you, **to place keyword anchors**, is what Google calls link spam. [6]

Part 6

Internal links: the links you fully control

Google says **every page you care about should have a link from at least one other page** on your site, and that internal anchor text helps people and Google make sense of your site. [7]

Do

Link from **strong pages** (home, top guides, pages with backlinks) to pages that need help.
Use **descriptive anchors** that match the target's topic.
Build **hubs**: a pillar page linking to every page in the topic, and back.
Link **in context**, inside sentences, not only in menus.
Use crawlable `<a href>` links. Google generally **can't follow** links in other formats. [7]

Don't

Leave **orphan pages** with no internal links.
Use the same anchor for **different** pages.
Hide important links behind JavaScript that doesn't render.
Add `nofollow` to your own internal links to "sculpt" PageRank.
Stuff long keyword anchors into footers. Google says there's **no magical ideal number** of links. [7]

Situation	Internal link move
New page earning no traffic	Add 3 to 5 contextual links from related, established pages
Old article with strong backlinks	Add links from it to the money page or hub it supports
Many similar pages competing	Choose one target per topic; point anchors to it consistently
Large archive of thin pages	Keep archives crawlable as paths, but link to hubs, not to every page

Part 7

Link attributes: nofollow, sponsored, ugc

Since 2019 Google treats these attributes as **hints** about how to treat a link, rather than strict directives. [9] Use them to **qualify** links honestly.

Attribute	Use it for	Example
`rel="sponsored"`	Ads, sponsorships, affiliate links, any link that is **paid or compensated**	A sponsored post, an affiliate product link
`rel="ugc"`	Links in **user-generated content**	Comments, forum posts, reviews
`rel="nofollow"`	Links you don't want to vouch for, when the others don't fit	A link to a site you mention but don't endorse

Google's position on paid links

Buying and selling links is a **normal part of the web economy** for advertising and sponsorship. [6]
It isn't a violation **as long as the links are qualified** with `nofollow` or `sponsored`. [6]
You can combine values, for example `rel="ugc nofollow"`. [8]

On your own site

Mark **affiliate** and paid placements as sponsored.
Mark **comment and forum** links as ugc.
Link to good sources **normally**. Outbound links to authorities are a positive signal, not a leak. [2]

For PR and partnerships

If money, free product or a service changed hands, the link should be **sponsored**. Google lists "sending someone a product in exchange for them writing about it and including a link" as link spam when the link isn't qualified. [6]

Part 8

What Google calls link spam

Google defines link spam as **creating links to or from a site primarily to manipulate search rankings**. [6] SpamBrain, its AI spam system, is used to detect it. [1]

On Google's list [6]

Buying or selling links that pass ranking credit, for money, goods or services.
Excessive link exchanges and partner pages made only to cross-link.
Automated link building programs or services.
Requiring a link in **terms or contracts** without letting the site owner qualify it.
Advertorials and paid articles with links that pass credit.

Also on the list [6]

Optimized anchors in guest posts, articles or press releases distributed on other sites.
Low-quality **directory or bookmark** links.
Keyword-rich links in **widgets** distributed across sites.
Widely distributed links in **footers or templates**.
Forum comments with optimized links in the post or signature, and low-value content made to manipulate links.

Red flag in a link offer	Why
"DA 50+ guaranteed, dofollow, your anchor"	Paid link passing credit with chosen anchor
Same site offers links on hundreds of topics	No topical focus; likely a network
"Write for us" with a price list	Advertorial without qualification
Packages of 100s of links per month	Automated or bulk building

What usually happens

Google's systems often **ignore** spammy links rather than punish the target. Ignored links are still wasted money, and deliberate schemes can lead to a **manual action**.

Part 9

Auditing your link profile

A link audit is not about deleting links. It is about **knowing where your authority comes from** and spotting real risk.

1

Collect

Export links from **Search Console** (Links report) plus one third-party tool. No single source sees everything.

2

Group by domain

Work at **referring-domain** level. Tag each: topical, local, press, partner, directory, spam, unknown.

3

Check the path

For key domains: who links to **them**? Is the site close to trusted sources in your topic? (Part 2)

4

Review anchors

Compare to the natural shape in Part 3. **Unearned exact-match anchors** are the main warning sign.

5

Compare competitors

Which topical sources link to competitors but not to you? That is your **outreach list**.

6

Decide

Keep, fix (ask for a qualifier or redirect), or, rarely, disavow.

When to disavow	When not to
You have a considerable number of spammy, artificial or low-quality links and they caused, or are likely to cause, a manual action [10]	Random spammy links you didn't build. Google's systems generally ignore them
You know links were bought or built by a past agency	A tool's "toxic score" alone. Scores are estimates, not Google's view

Watch out

Google warns that the disavow tool, **used incorrectly, can harm** your site's performance. Use it as a scalpel, not a cleanup routine. [10]

Part 10

Measuring what matters

Count what reflects **trust and topic**, not raw volume.

Metric	Why it matters	Where
Referring domains in your topic	Diversity plus relevance [2]	Search Console, link tools, tagged sheet
Links from trusted sources	Short paths to seeds [1]	Your tagged list of top-tier domains
New links per month to evergreen assets	The "fresh links" signal [2]	Link tools, by target URL
Brand anchor share	How the web names you	Anchor report
Unlinked brand mentions	Co-occurrence for AI [2][4]	Mention monitoring, Google Alerts
Citations in AI answers	Whether you're a corroborating source [1]	Prompt tracking (see the Prompt Library guides)
Rankings and traffic of linked pages	The outcome links should support	Search Console

Report quarterly

Topical referring domains gained and lost.
Top 10 new links and **where they sit** relative to trusted sources.
PR mentions with and without links.
Changes in AI citations for your priority prompts.

Expect lag

Links are crawled and processed over **weeks**. AI answers that rely on model memory change over **months**. Grounded AI answers move sooner.

Checklist and sources

Backlinks checklist

Before you build

[ ] Content worth linking to **before** outreach
[ ] List of **trusted sources** in your topic and region
[ ] At least one **original data** asset per year
[ ] Experts available for **journalist requests**
[ ] Consistent **brand name** for natural anchors

Keep it clean

[ ] Paid and affiliate links marked **sponsored**, comments **ugc**
[ ] Internal links: **no orphans**, hubs in place
[ ] Quarterly **audit** by referring domain
[ ] Disavow only for **manual-action risk**
[ ] Track **mentions and AI citations** with links

Sources

01 **What we can learn from DOJ trial and API Leak for SEO? Olaf Kopp**
kopp-online-marketing.com/what-we-can-learn-from-doj-trial-and-api-leak-for-seo

02 **How Google evaluates E-E-A-T? 80+ signals. Olaf Kopp**
kopp-online-marketing.com/how-google-evaluates-e-e-a-t-80-signals-for-e-e-a-t

03 **E-E-A-T and topical brand positioning. Olaf Kopp**
kopp-online-marketing.com/e-a-t-topical-brand-positioning

04 **Guide to Brand Context Optimization for GEO. Olaf Kopp**
kopp-online-marketing.com/guide-to-brand-context-optimization-for-generative-engine-optimization-geo

05 **Evaluating quality based on neighbor features. Kopp patent summary**
kopp-online-marketing.com/patents-papers/evaluating-quality-based-on-neighbor-features

06 **Spam policies: link spam. Google Search Central**
developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies

07 **Link best practices for Google. Google Search Central**
developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/links-crawlable

08 **Qualify your outbound links. Google Search Central**
developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/qualify-outbound-links

09 **Evolving "nofollow". Google Search Central Blog, 2019**
developers.google.com/search/blog/2019/09/evolving-nofollow-new-ways-to-identify

10 **Disavow links to your site. Search Console Help**
support.google.com/webmasters/answer/2648487

Guide by **Ameneh Saeednia**, seogirl.ca, drawing on published work by **Olaf Kopp** (Aufgesang) and Google documentation, prepared with AI assistance. Uses Kopp's public material. Anchor shares are illustrative.