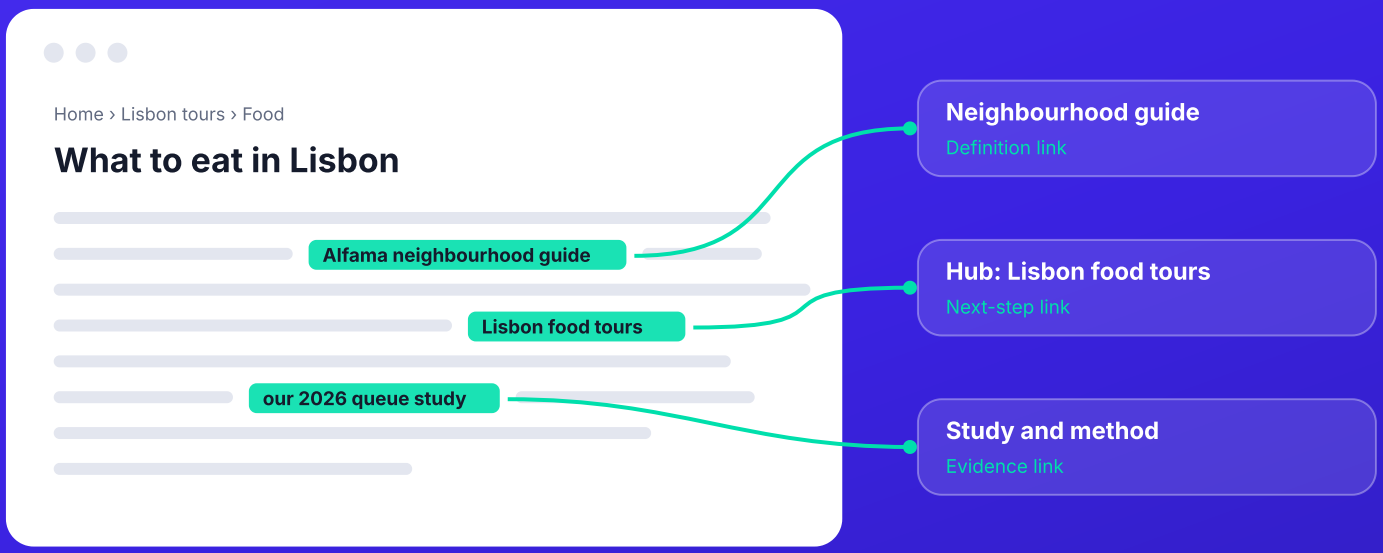
Internal Linking For Search and AI

How to use the links you fully control to get pages found, show Google what your site is about, and build the topic structure that search engines and AI systems retrieve from.

Guide · On-site SEO and generative engine optimization

ONE PARAGRAPH, THREE JOBS: DEFINE, GUIDE, PROVE



1+
internal link to every page you care about

3
clicks from home, as a rule of thumb

4
step audit

Ameneh Saeednia
Senior SEO and Generative Search Strategist

Why it matters

The links you fully control

Backlinks depend on other people. **Internal links are 100% yours.** They decide which pages Google finds, how your topics hang together, and where your authority flows.

What Google says

The **vast majority of new pages** Google finds every day are found **through links**. [6]
Every page you care about should have a link from at least one other page on your site. [5]
Internal anchor text helps **people and Google make sense of your site**. [5]
If pages are properly linked, Google can usually discover most of a site. A sitemap **helps but doesn't replace** links. [7]

What Kopp's research adds

The API leak shows **siteFocusScore** and **siteRadius**: Google compares each page's embedding to the **site's** embedding to judge whether a page is **core to the site's topic**. [1]
Site-wide topical focus and comprehensive coverage of a topic, across informational and navigational intents, appear among his E-E-A-T signals. [2]
Anchor text relevance is listed as an expertise signal. [2]

Internal links do this	For
Discovery: give crawlers a path to every important URL	Indexing, and retrieval by AI search that runs on an index
Context: anchors and surrounding text describe the target	Relevance for the right queries
Structure: group pages into topics and subtopics	Topical focus, hubs, AI topic clustering [3]
Priority: send more internal links to pages that matter	Signal flow from strong pages to money pages
Journeys: move readers to the next useful step	Engagement and conversions

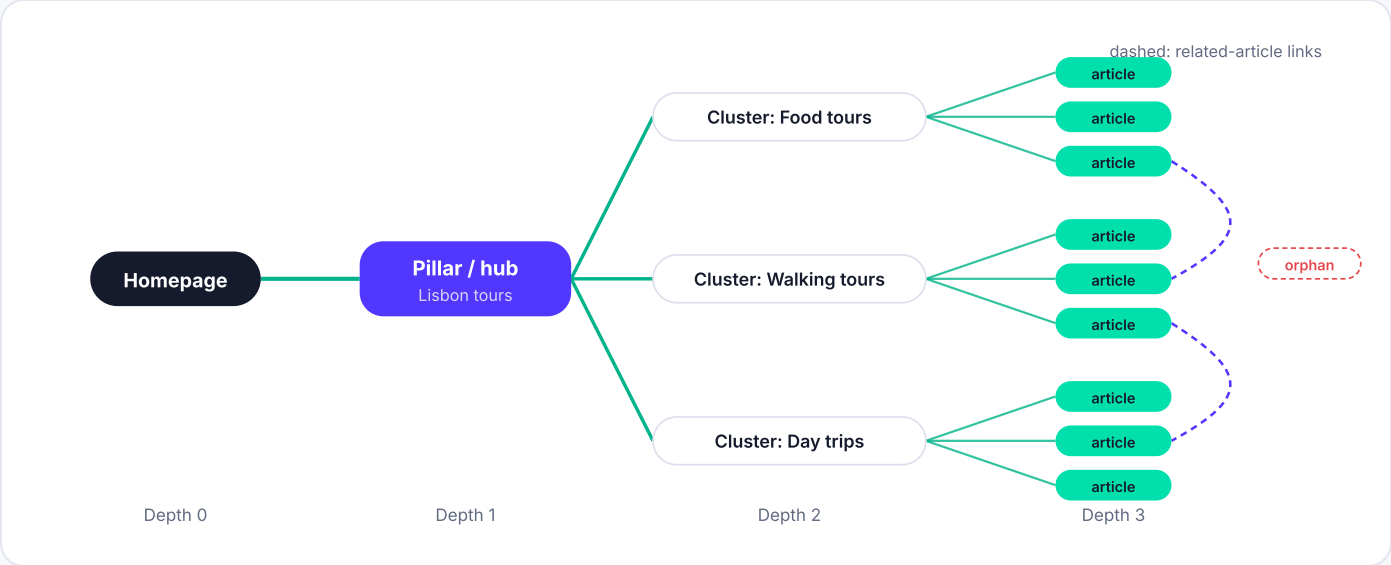
The short version

Build a site where **every page is easy to reach**, **pages on the same topic link to each other**, and **anchors say what the target is about**.

Part 1

Architecture: hubs, clusters and depth

A good structure looks like a **tree with cross-branches**: the homepage links to topic hubs, hubs link to their articles, and related articles link to each other. Kopp notes that AI systems can organise documents into **topic hierarchies** and judge how closely each cluster fits a topic. [3] **Your structure should make that easy.**



Build it like this

One **pillar page** per core topic, linking to every page in it.
Each article links **up** to its pillar and **across** to two or three close siblings.
Group URLs in **folders by topic**. Google says directories can help it learn how often sections change. [6]
Add **breadcrumbs** that mirror the hierarchy, with BreadcrumbList markup. [8]

Click depth

Keep priority pages **within about three clicks** of the homepage. This is a rule of thumb, not a Google rule.
Deep pages get crawled less often and receive less internal signal.
Flatten with **hubs**, not with a giant menu of every URL.
Orphan pages (no internal links) rely on sitemaps alone. Fix them first.

Part 2

Topical focus: what to link, and what not to

If Google judges whether a page is **core to your site** by comparing it to the site as a whole [1], your linking should **reinforce your main topics**, not blur them.

Strengthen focus

Link most heavily **within** a topic cluster.
Make hub pages the **most-linked** pages in each topic.
Link from **informational** pages to the **navigational and commercial** pages they lead to, and back.
Kopp lists coverage of both intents as a signal. [2]
Cover the **entities** in your topic and link to the page that explains each one.

Avoid blurring it

Random "popular posts" widgets that link **off-topic** content everywhere.
Dozens of thin tag pages competing with real hubs.
Pushing internal links to **off-topic** pages you don't want to be known for.
Linking the **same anchor** to different pages, which splits the signal.

Page type	Should link to	Should receive links from
Homepage	Hubs and top commercial pages	Every page (logo, breadcrumb)
Pillar / hub	Every page in its topic	Homepage, nav, every article in the topic
Article / guide	Its hub, 2 to 3 siblings, the commercial page it supports	Its hub, related articles, newer posts
Commercial page	Its hub and supporting guides	Hub, guides, nav for top pages
Author page	The author's articles	Every byline. Important for E-E-A-T

A quick focus test

List your top 20 most internally linked pages from a crawl. **Do they match the topics you want to be known for?** If not, your links are telling Google a different story.

Part 3

Internal anchor text

Google says good anchor text is **descriptive, reasonably concise and relevant** to the page it's on and the page it links to, and that the **text around the link** matters too. [5] Internally, you control every word.

Generic: *"For more information, **click here**."*

Descriptive: *"See our **guide to Lisbon food tours** for what to book."*

Tells readers and Google what the target is

Keyword-stuffed: *"**best cheap private Lisbon food tour deals 2026**"* repeated in every footer.

Natural and varied: *"**Lisbon food tours**"*, *"**what to eat on a food tour in Alfama**"*, depending on the sentence.

Concise, varied, and not stuffed [5]

Image link with empty alt: a tour photo linking to a page with `alt=""`.

Alt as anchor: Google uses the image's **alt text** as the anchor for image links. [5]

Write alt text that describes the link target

Rules of thumb

One **primary anchor** per target page, with natural variations.
Never use the **same anchor** for two different pages.
Put the link where it **helps the sentence**, not in a block at the end.
Keep the most important link **early** in the body where it makes sense.

Why it matters more internally

You can't control how other sites describe you.
You **can** control how your own site does.
Consistent internal anchors give Google a clear picture of **which page answers which topic**.
This is the internal version of the **anchor n-grams** Kopp describes for backlinks. [2]

Part 4

Where to place links

Not every link carries the same context. A link **inside a relevant sentence** tells Google far more than the same link repeated in a footer.

How much topical context each placement gives

Contextual link in body copy	■■■■■	Strongest topical signal; read with surrounding words
Breadcrumb	■■■■□	Shows hierarchy; consistent, short anchors
Related articles block	■■■□□	Good for cross-links; keep it topical, not random
Main navigation	■■■□□	Crawl path for priority pages; site-wide, so less specific
Footer / template links	■□□□□	Site-wide repetition; little topical context

Editorial rating for planning, not a measured Google weight.

Navigation

Keep the main menu for **hubs and top pages**, not every URL.
Use crawlable `<a href>` links. Google generally **can't follow** links in other formats, such as buttons that rely on JavaScript events. [5]
Mega menus with hundreds of links dilute focus and slow pages.

Body and modules

Contextual links in the copy carry the most topical meaning.
Related content blocks should be chosen by topic, not by date or popularity.
Breadcrumbs give every page a consistent link up the hierarchy. [8]
There's **no magical ideal number** of links per page. [5] Link when it helps.

Part 5

Internal links in the AI search era

AI search engines retrieve **pages and passages** from a web index, then build answers. Internal links shape what gets **crawled**, how topics are **grouped**, and how clearly each page's **role** is defined.

What changes

Pages that aren't linked are found late or not at all, so they **can't be retrieved** for AI answers.
Systems that cluster documents by topic reward sites where each topic has **clear, connected coverage**. [3]
AI answers quote **passages**. A link inside a passage adds context about what that passage refers to.

What to do

Give every **entity** you mention a home page (a guide, a glossary entry, a location page) and link to it consistently.
Make the hub the page that **defines** the topic in plain language. It's the best candidate to be cited.
Link **supporting evidence**: data, methodology, author pages. Google notes links can connect users to a resource that **corroborates** what you're writing. [6]

AI-era link pattern	Example
Definition link	First mention of *Alfama* links to the Alfama neighbourhood guide
Evidence link	"Queues peak at 10am" links to the page with the study data
Next-step link	Food tour guide links to bookable food tours in the same city
Author link	Every byline links to an author page with credentials

Connection

The same structure helps **readers, Google and AI systems**. There is no separate "AI internal linking". There is just **clear, topical, crawlable** linking.

Part 6

Sending signals where they’re needed

Some of your pages have far more **backlinks and traffic** than others. Internal links let you **pass that strength on** to pages that need it.

1

Find your strong pages

Pages with the most **referring domains** and organic traffic. Usually the homepage, a few guides and data studies.

2

Find pages that need help

Commercial or new pages ranking on **page 2**, or with impressions but few clicks.

3

Connect them by topic

Add **contextual links** from strong pages to related weaker ones. Only where the topic matches.

4

Refresh old winners

Old articles with backlinks often link to **nothing new**. Add links to newer, related pages.

5

Point to one target

When several pages compete, choose **one** for the topic and aim internal anchors at it.

6

Measure after 4 to 8 weeks

Check rankings, impressions and crawl of the targets in **Search Console**.

Keep it honest

Only add a link where a reader would **want** it. A link from a strong page that makes no sense in context helps nobody, and blurs your topics.

Part 7

Common mistakes

Mistake	Why it hurts	Fix
Orphan pages	No internal path; discovery depends on the sitemap	Link from the hub and 2 to 3 related pages
nofollow on internal links	Stops your own pages passing signals to each other	Remove it. Use noindex or robots.txt for pages you want out
Links that need JavaScript	Google generally can't follow non-`<a href>` links [5]	Use real anchor elements with href
Links to redirects and 404s	Wasted crawl and lost signal	Update links to the final URL
Parameter and filter URLs	Thousands of near-duplicate paths	Link to clean canonical URLs
Archives as the only path	Deep paginated lists are weak paths and are often not indexed	Link articles from hubs, not only from archives
Same anchor, different pages	Splits relevance	One primary anchor per target
Site-wide keyword footers	Repetition with no context	Keep footers for utility links

Part 8

The internal link audit

Run it once a quarter, and after any migration or redesign.

1

Crawl

Crawl the site with a crawler (Screaming Frog, Sitebulb or similar). Export **inlinks, depth, anchors and status codes**.

2

Compare

Compare crawled URLs with your **sitemap** and Search Console. URLs in the sitemap but not in the crawl are **orphans**.

3

Prioritise

Rank pages by **business value**. Check each priority page's depth, inlink count and anchors.

4

Fix and track

Add contextual links, clean broken links, update anchors. **Re-crawl** and watch the targets in Search Console.

Metric	Healthy sign
Orphan pages	Zero among pages you want indexed
Click depth of priority pages	About 3 or less
Unique inlinks to each hub	Hubs among the most linked pages in their topic
Anchor consistency	One primary anchor per target, no shared anchors across targets
Links to redirects / 4xx	Close to zero
Search Console Links report: top internally linked pages	Matches the topics you want to be known for

Tip

Search Console's **Links** report shows your most internally linked pages. It's a fast way to see what **your site** is telling Google matters most.

Checklist and sources

Internal linking checklist

Structure

[ ] One **pillar page** per core topic
[ ] Articles link **up** to the pillar and **across** to siblings
[ ] Priority pages within about **3 clicks**
[ ] **Breadcrumbs** with markup
[ ] **No orphans** among indexable pages
[ ] Topic **folders** in URLs where practical

Links and anchors

[ ] Crawlable `<a href>` links only
[ ] **Descriptive** anchors, one primary per target
[ ] Contextual links in **body copy**
[ ] Strong pages link to pages that **need help**
[ ] No **nofollow** on internal links
[ ] Quarterly **crawl and audit**

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