

**Dear reader:**

This "writing samples" page comes from an electronic column I write for Integrated Enrollment Services, a student retention consulting services company in Texas. Their monthly newsletter features articles or columns by professionals they partner with to provide various services to colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. This column covers electronic communications, including editorial and strategic services.

You can find Integrated Enrollment Services online at [www.enroll2grad.org](http://www.enroll2grad.org).

If you would like me to write a column or other article for your business or organization, please e-mail me at: [EMessenger-Consul@aol.com](mailto:EMessenger-Consul@aol.com).

**Using search engines to put you ahead of the competition**

What do you know about search engines? Of what you **do** know, what do you **actually know** as opposed to what you **think** you know? You might be surprised.

The other day I got into a discussion with a reasonably well informed web developer about search engine optimization – optimizing your web site so it shows up higher in the search engine results pages. He studied my business card and said, "Search engine optimization? That's, like, putting down as many keywords as you can, right?"

It floored me that a web developer didn't know more about search engines than that.

"No," I said, "it's much more than that. Search engine optimization is about making sure that your page title, meta description, and page content all relate. It's about picking a few **key** keywords, including them in the title and description, and then using them as often as possible in the page content, within reason."

He gave me a confused look. The bad news was that he was basically ignorant about search engines and how they work. The good news was that he was open to learning.

Here is what he should have known:

There is as much art in search engine optimization as science, yet a few key measures can help you position your web site ahead of your competition.

First, use the page title to tell the user what the page is about. You shouldn't "sell" the user and you don't have to be clever – be clear and concise. Include three or four key words (thus "keywords") someone might use to try to find your site.

Second, use the meta description to define what the title means. Explain what you provide on that page. Again, don't be clever and don't sell the user. This isn't advertising, it's data mining. Be clear and concise. Include words from the title in the description.

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Third, focus the page content – the text – on doing what the title says and the description describes. Include the keywords contained in the title and description. Use them multiple but sensible times. Exchange words like “it” and “they” with the keywords – you’ll be surprised at how clear your content will become, too.

Fourth, use the many other elements on that page to supplement those first three. For instance, besides the title, description, and text, include the keywords in alt tags for the graphics and images. Include them in links to other pages or other sites. Also use them in subheads, titles, and captions. Make them stand out in bold – search engines **love emphasis**.

Finally, frequently update your site. Optimizing your site isn’t a casual pursuit. It takes time and planning and tweaking the pages and the elements on them.

That isn’t all there is to search engine optimization. It’s really more complex than that. However, if you know at least this much, you can be sure you are well ahead of your competition. And good use of search engines is really about staying ahead of the competition.

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Alan Eggleston, a Web writer, editor, and site strategist, has specialized in Internet communications since 1995. He has helped launch and maintain dozens of Web sites for businesses, universities, and organizations.

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