

AN HONEST TAKE ON GOOGLE'S AI SEARCH GUIDANCE

AEO Is Not Dead

Why Google's recent guidance doesn't change what actually ranks in AI search.

BY THRASHER & VINE

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INTRODUCTION

An honest take, not a victory lap

These are my recommendations based on Google's recent guidance on how to rank for AI search. Before we go any further — this is not a post about "I was right" or "Google is wrong." It's just my honest take from being in the SEO space for a while.

Yes, this may have been the first time Google has formally announced guidance on how to rank for AI search. But this is certainly not the first time Google has given an update on ranking. They've been doing it for literally decades.

So before you read too deep into what they're discussing, you should understand one thing: Google is incentivized to **not** tell you exactly how to rank. They don't want their crawlers parsing through thousands of AI slop pages — but they also aren't going to give away the keys to the kingdom in a random article released on a Friday afternoon.

Google cares deeply about user experience. But they will never reveal the real reasons for how to rank highest in AI search. Following their guidance blindly is a mistake.

PART 01

A History Lesson

Google has never told you exactly how to rank

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Google has never told you exactly how to rank

If you think what Google just released is fact, I'd really recommend you go back and look at previous discussions and announcements Google has made.

Case study one for my reasoning: Google's consistent claims around backlinks. It wasn't long ago — maybe just a few years ago — when people would be buying backlinks to increase rankings. And Google constantly said it didn't help with rankings as much as everyone was claiming.

When in reality, it was one of the biggest reasons their website pages were all seeing a boost. So why would Google "lie" about this or not straight up tell you how to rank? Because SEOs abuse systems — as you have all seen with programmatic AI slop.

Google cares about the user experience because it makes them more money. That doesn't mean they'll hand you the ranking playbook in a Friday blog post.

So what does this all mean?

Here are the four big takeaways I'm bringing to the people I advise — the stuff that actually moves the needle in AI search, regardless of which announcement Google publishes next.

PART 02

Rich Media Wins

Videos and visuals always increase citations

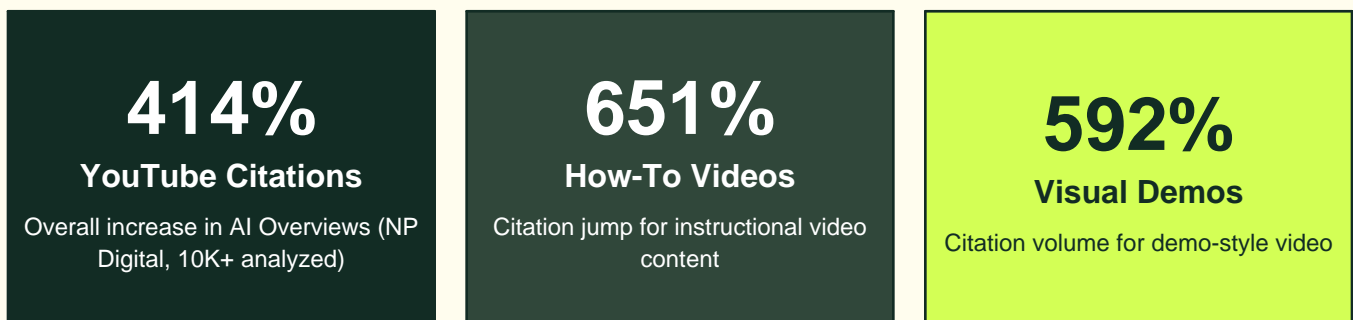
PART 02

Videos and visuals always increase citations

I promised I wouldn't toot my own horn here — but this is something I have been saying for literally years. Check my YouTube. I talked about this back in 2020.

YouTube videos and rich content on your website pages **always** increase rankings. And the new data backs this up in a way that's hard to ignore.

FIG 2.1 — YOUTUBE CITATION GROWTH IN AI OVERVIEWS



SUPPORTING SIGNALS

ALSO TRACK: ChatGPT cites high-view YouTube videos 1.5x more than Gemini · YouTube citations in Google AI Overviews grew 34% in six months

NP Digital analyzed 10,000+ AI-generated search overviews. Profound's data covers 10,250 YouTube citations from Dec 2025 – Jan 2026.

The takeaway

My advice remains unchanged: if you want the best performance, always include a video narrative along with imagery that helps the reader. As LLMs learn to process audio, video, and structured metadata, the gap between text-only and multimedia content is only going to widen.

If your content doesn't include a video and supporting visuals, you are already behind the pages competing for the same AI citations.

PART 03

Speed Is Non-Negotiable

How AI crawlers judge your site

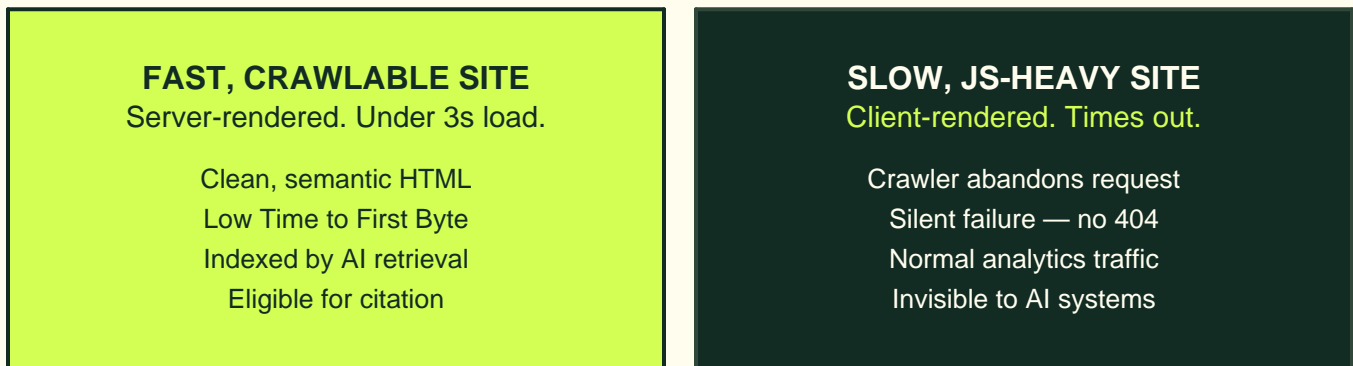
PART 03

How AI crawlers judge your site

This shouldn't be a surprise, but it's so important now that AI agents are accessing your page. If your site loads slowly, the AI agent will just skip you.

AI crawlers operate on strict compute budgets and parse only the raw HTML content on initial page load. Meaning if your Time to First Byte exceeds their timeout threshold, they abandon the request entirely — and your page never enters their training or retrieval set.

FIG 3.1 — WHAT AI CRAWLERS SEE



Most AI crawlers don't execute JavaScript. If your content depends on client-side rendering, it may be entirely invisible.

The fix

Server-side rendering for core pages. Clean, semantically structured HTML. Optimized site speed. If your site isn't loading under three seconds, you need serious tech fixes before you have any opportunity to rank in AI search.

Slow pages create a silent failure mode: no errors, normal traffic, but AI systems never actually read your content.

PART 04

EEAT and the Author

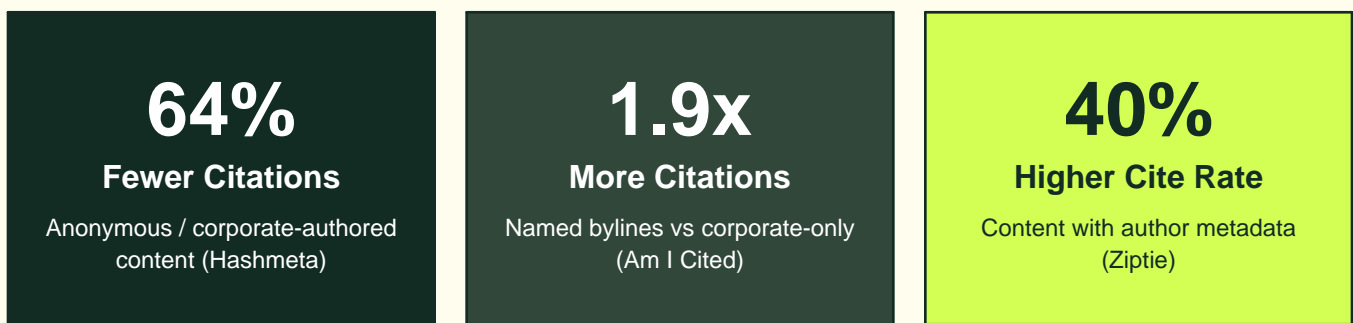
Why named bylines beat anonymous content

PART 04

Why named bylines beat anonymous content

The big thing here is that having a clear author associated with your article or content helps a ton. The AI agents want to know who is saying this — and they want to be able to cite the **person**, not just the brand.

FIG 4.1 — THE CITATION GAP FOR ANONYMOUS CONTENT



WHAT THE AI MODELS LOOK FOR

WHAT 'AUTHOR METADATA' MEANS: Named author · Verifiable credentials · Publication history · Consistent cross-web identity

Hashmeta compared 10,000 frequently-cited pages against 10,000 rarely-cited pages in 100,000 ChatGPT responses.

The takeaway

If your blogs don't have authors with brief descriptions that lean into experience, authority, and trust, then you have a clear optimization to make. AI models are trained to prioritize the E-E-A-T framework — and corporate content lacks the personal accountability they're looking for.

Add the byline. Add the bio. Add the credentials. The AI cites people, not logos.

PART 05

Query Length Has Changed

Stop chasing 3-word keywords

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Stop chasing 3-word keywords

This is a hot take, but you've got to think about how people are searching now. I don't know many people that just type two words into Google anymore. Instead, people type a question — or even ask a question out loud. And the data shows that query length has increased dramatically since LLMs arrived.

FIG 5.1 — WHERE QUERY LENGTH IS HEADING

THE OLD KEYWORD STRATEGY

- Target 2–3 word "high volume" terms
- Optimize for Google's classic SERP
- Compete on broad head terms
- Get displaced by AI Overviews
- Convert poorly when ranked

THE AI-ERA QUESTION STRATEGY

- Write for 7+ word questions
- Mirror how people actually ask
- Capture FAQ-style intent
- Cited inside AI answers
- Higher conversion on intent

Search Engine Land analyzed 41M queries: 7–8 word searches nearly doubled since ChatGPT launched. AI Mode queries now average 7.22 words. ChatGPT queries average 20+.

Where to find the questions

So why are people still trying to rank for the "high volume" terms — when they just lead to AI overviews that return the information without sending a click?

It's better to always write content for specific questions being asked. Pull from your "frequently asked questions" area. Pull from things you hear constantly come up in sales calls, product calls, or leadership calls. That's where the real intent lives now.

Two-word keywords get displaced. Seven-word questions get cited. Write for the question, not the head term.

PART 06

The Wrap-Up

Good content still wins. AI slop still loses.

CONCLUSION

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So to wrap up — do Google's recommendations fundamentally change anything I'm telling clients? No, not really. It's all standard SEO advice.

Do I think AEO and GEO are still different from classic SEO? Yes, I do. And I think that narrative will stick around for a while, given the different ranking criteria that keeps surfacing in the large databases released to the public.

Hope you found this helpful and don't view it as a doom-scroll narrative — because it's far from that. The underlying message here is the same one it's always been: make good, helpful content.

AI shouldn't be writing your content without a lot of inputs and strict guardrails. Otherwise, you really will just be making AI slop.

AEO is not dead. It's just maturing — and the playbook still rewards the people who actually care about their reader.

Have a question?

Thrasher & Vine helps technical and B2B teams build content engines that actually rank in AI search — without resorting to slop. If you want a second set of eyes on your strategy, send a LinkedIn message or stop by the site.

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