.blog

Getting started with SEO

Rank better in search engines:
an introduction for new blog owners

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SEO

Why should you be thinking about SEO?

Earning traffic through search engines has been a hot topic for over 20 years. And with over 2 million searches on Google every minute, that's no surprise. Organic traffic, as it is known, is the lifeblood of many sites.

So if you are keen to increase your blog's audience you need to be thinking about how to make SEO a key part of your digital marketing. If search engines can't see you, you're missing out on a fantastic marketing opportunity.

SEO can be a very complicated and constantly evolving discipline, but amongst the changes there are fundamentals you can always apply.

This guide has been written to show you some of these fundamentals, and some tips on how to get started.

SEO can seem intimidating, but with just a bit of learning and a few hours of work, you can start making a difference.

Data helps you make smart SEO decisions

One of the great advantages of digital marketing is the wealth of data available. In fact, it can almost be overwhelming – where do you start?

In SEO it is important to use the numbers available to guide your decisions - work with data, not guesses.

Data such as how many people have visited your blog, what they looked at, what topics are popular and technical issues to fix helps you shape an effective strategy.

All the other SEO principles rely on information – basing decisions on what your audience wants, what competitors are doing and how search engines interact with your site.
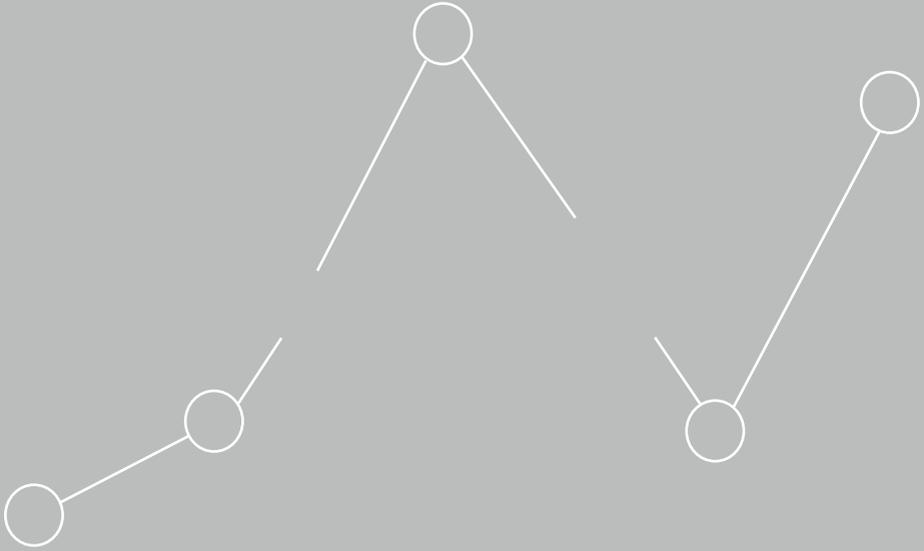
Steps to try

Know how much traffic you get with Google Analytics:

Free, flexible and powerful, Google Analytics lets you track how many people visit your blog, and what they do once there. It tracks sales, what content interests your audience the most, and how your audience found you. Getting started with Google Analytics does require a little technical know-how, but if you are using one of the most popular blogging platforms such as WordPress or Medium, there are plenty of tools and online guides to make it easy.

Learn how Google sees your site with Search Console:

What if there was a powerful collection of tools that shows how often Google crawls your site, what they think it's about, and even things they have trouble with? Well, there is, and it is free - Google Search Console helps you monitor and optimise your site's performance in search results. There's an equivalent for Bing called Webmaster Tools. This is free advice from those you're trying to impress.
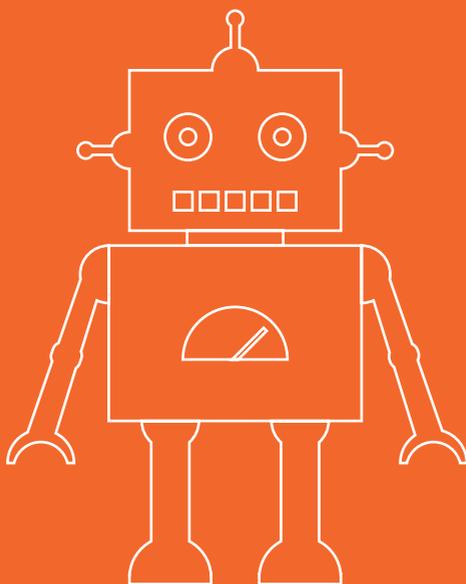
Technical SEO helps you with the bits your visitors can't see

Search engines work by crawling the internet to build an index of documents ('crawling' is the term used to describe how search engine bots move around websites).

A selection of those documents are then chosen each time someone does a search.

To make sure your blog can rank, you have to ensure that search engines can crawl, and understand, your pages. Search engines are smart (and getting smarter all the time), but still need guidance.

That's why technical SEO is fundamental. Knowing your blog's structure, which pages are indexed and any problems crawling your blog are topics all site owners should be in control of.
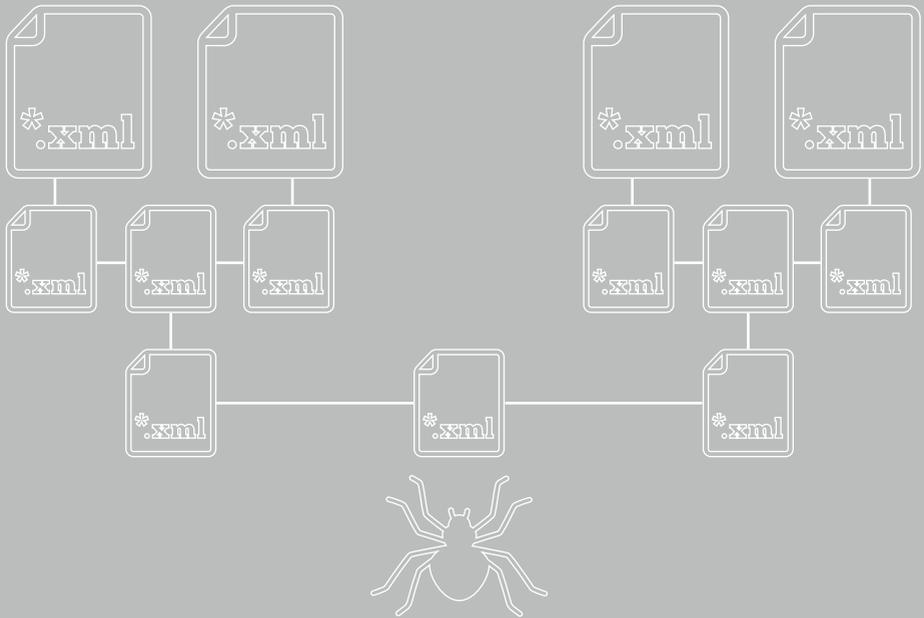
Steps to try

Upload an XML sitemap:

Wouldn't it be great to give Google & Bing a map of all the pages you want them to notice? XML sitemaps do just that. This is a file on your website (normally at yourdomain.blog/sitemap.xml) that lists your important URLs. Most blogging platforms can create one automatically and let you choose which pages are to be included. Once live, you can upload it to Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools and see how many URLs are indexed.

Crawl your blog to find errors:

During the life of any blog, pages come and go. But what can frustrate visitors is finding their journey blocked by a dead page. Worse, such pages can lose any importance a search engine has given to them. So, regularly check your blog for broken pages and links. You can do this in Google Search Console to see errors Google has found, or use a tool called a crawler (which finds all the pages on a website) to find them yourself.

Be mobile-friendly, and as fast as you can be

The way we use the internet, and search engines, has changed radically over recent years.

With the rise of smartphones, we now consume online content on mobile devices in huge numbers. In 2015, Google confirmed that they see more searches on mobile than on desktop.*

As a result, when looking at SEO, you have to consider your users' experience. Sites that are not mobile-friendly have a harder time ranking for searches done on a phone. And mobile versions of a site will become the most important for search engines.

Similarly, we all know the frustration of a slow-loading website, and there is evidence showing they perform less well – and both Google and Bing take site speed into consideration when ranking sites in search results.
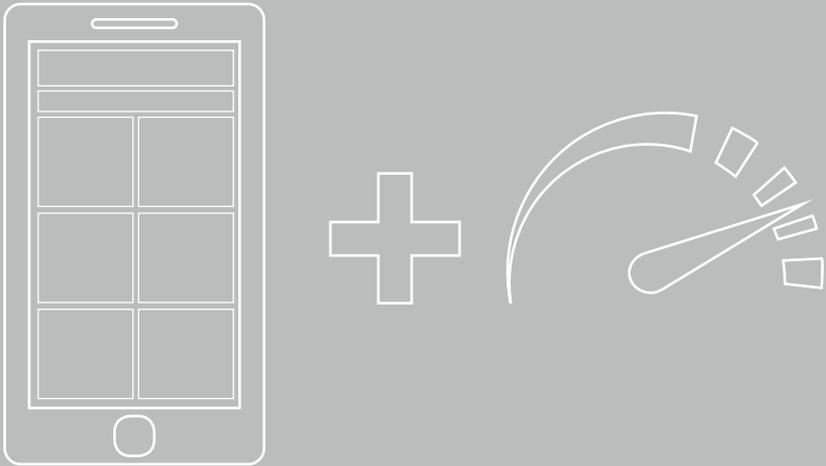
Steps to try

Test to see if your blog is mobile-friendly:

Google is looking to reward sites that work well on a phone, rather than having to tap and zoom constantly – they even have different search results for mobile searches. How can you tell if you are "mobile-friendly"? Use Google's handy Mobile-Friendly Test (google.com/webmasters/tools/mobile-friendly) to check – it is free and only needs you to put in a page from your blog.

See if you can make your blog faster:

Just as there is a mobile-friendly tool, you can test your site to see how fast it is, and get a list of ways it could be faster. Audit your site with Google's PageSpeed Insights (developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights) or Pingdom's speed test (tools.pingdom.com/). Taking simple steps, such as reducing the file size of your images, can be a good place to start.
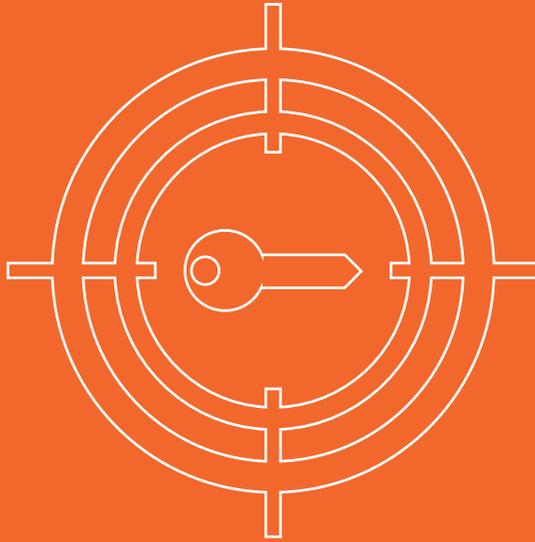
Use your audience's language

Every time we use a search engine, we're using a keyword (the name can be confusing, most keywords have more than one word in them!)

Keyword research is one of the most valuable exercises you can undertake in SEO. It offers a fascinating mix of audience insight and market demand, helping you learn what parts of your industry are most popular and what your audience wants.

Through keyword research, you start building a blog that serves your audience and targets the right kind of traffic. Just as in the offline world, being able to speak your audience's language and help them with their problems is key.
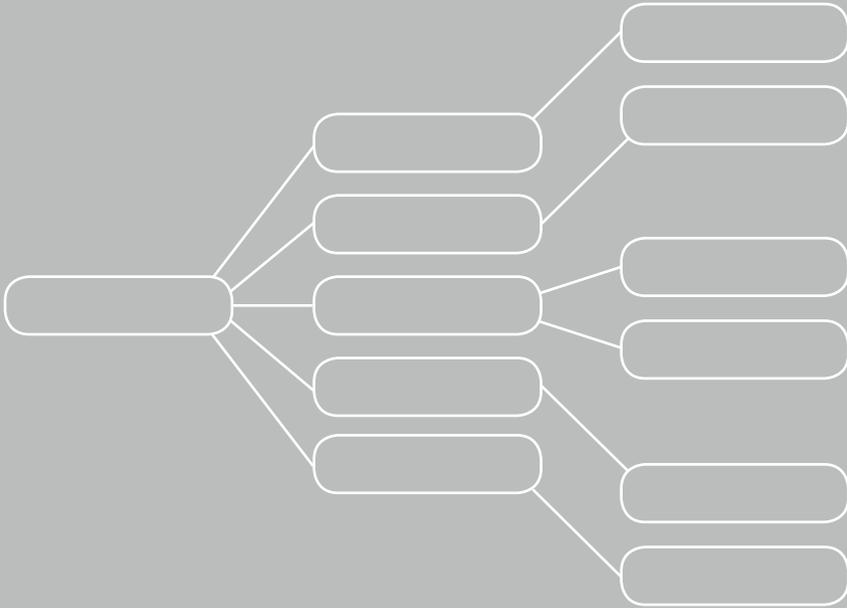
Steps to try

Build a keyword map:

Keyword research is a huge topic, so start with something simple. List all the important topics covered on your blog. For example, as you are blogging, you'll have a bucket for each of the major themes you cover, such as cake recipes or restaurants in Birmingham. Put yourself in your audience's shoes – what words would they search with? Next, map these topics to pages on your blog and make sure they have a suitable home. Once you've done some full keyword research, you can repeat this exercise, but with more data to guide you.

Remember, you can't rank for everything, and can't game the search engines. Make sure your keyword choices are relevant to your content, and a visitor would find the answer they seek on your blog.

Building the best content you can helps you stand out

When you look into SEO one cliché you will hear is 'content is king!'

While the idea of creating great content is often mentioned, that doesn't make it less true - building helpful and attractive content is key to SEO success. To be outstanding is hard, but is worth the effort.

What 'great' content actually is depends on the sector, target audience and goal of the page. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Fantastic content for a blog article on kid's meals will be very different to a guide on choosing a dishwasher.

And that's why SEO has to account for the intent– what is your searcher looking to learn, buy, understand or achieve?
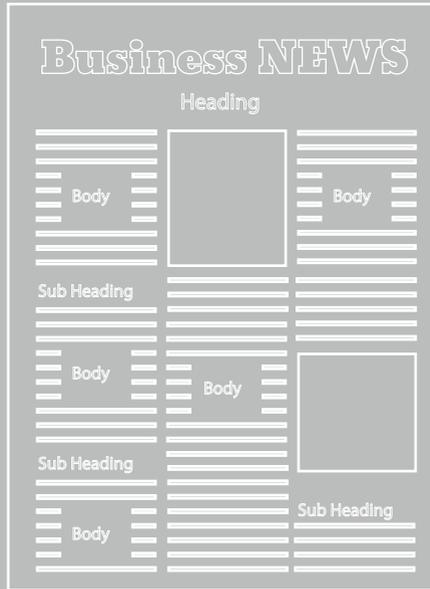
Steps to try

Have great headings:

A helpful start is to look at your headings. The main heading on your pages (the <h1> tag, if you know a little HTML) tells visitors, including search engines, what the page is about. Other heading tags let you define sub-headings. Many blogging platforms do this automatically. Imagine you are writing a newspaper story – what are the key parts of the content? Review the headings across your blog, using a crawler to find them all.

Do they all describe the page accurately? Do they use the target keyword? And do they show that this page answers the audience's intent?
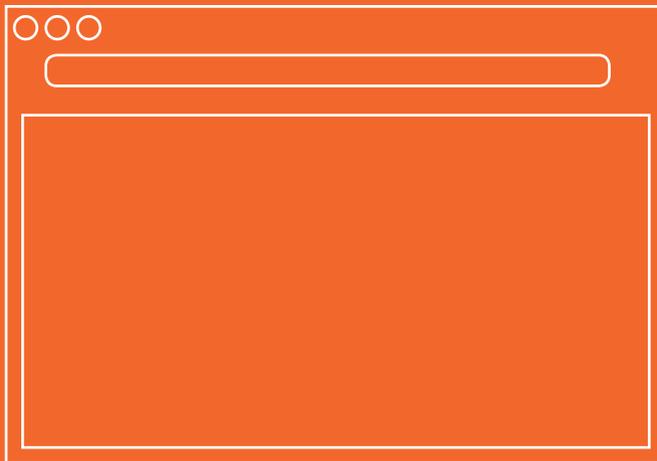
On-page optimisations help mark content as relevant

When learning SEO, one of the best places to start is on-page optimisation.

This is making changes to your pages that users and search engines will see. Improving your pages to earn more traffic through being more relevant to search queries.

As you might have already started thinking, on-page SEO works in hand with your content and makes use of your audience's language (keyword research).

With many modern blogging platforms, on-page optimisation tweaks are simple to implement. No matter the size or shape of your blog, on-page SEO helps signpost what a page is about through tweaking some of the layout and markup elements.

Steps to try

Use better title tags:

The title tag displays as the blue link in the search results, and as the main heading when a page is shared on social media. It also directly signals the page's subject. Create unique title tags for all your pages – you want to be descriptive, but brief, as Google will only show a portion if it is too long (roughly 65 characters). You should include your main keyword subject target(s) in as this signals the page is relevent to this topic. Finally, craft attention-grabbing titles that stand out in the search results.

Create more interesting meta descriptions:

Similar to your title tags, meta descriptions are a simple way to improve your SEO. Meta descriptions are used to generate the small paragraph of text that appears below a blog's title in the search results. Although not a ranking factor themselves, they combine with the title tag, to create the first advert for your blogs, helping earn you more clicks from the search results. They are designed to be a concise description of what you'll find on the page. Just like a title tag, they should be unique, descriptive and enticing.
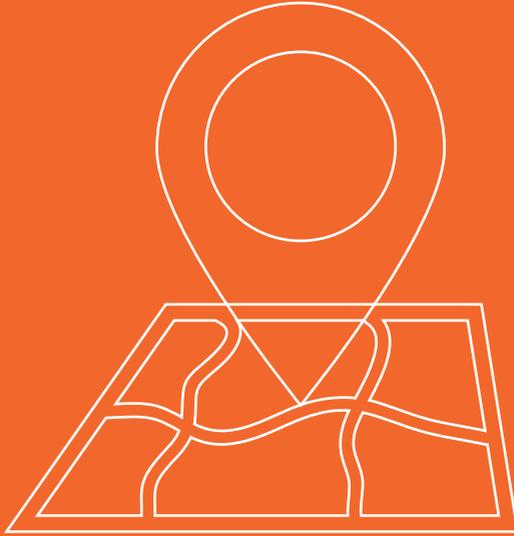
Local SEO has its own rules and tactics

For many new blogs, although they have a potential global audience, it is the local community they want to reach.

Local SEO is all about promoting your site at the exact moment your audience is looking for your content.

This means appearing in the search results or map listings when your audience uses a local search term, such as 'restaurant reviews manchester', or 'best pizza restaurant' when nearby. Optimising for a location and associated search phrases is the heart of local SEO.

Fortunately, many good SEO practices help. However, local SEO does have its own specific tactics you should learn if you want to rank well.

Steps to try

Optimising your pages to target a location:

If your pages target specific locations, you can ensure your content is relevant by including the name of the city in the title tags, meta descriptions, header tags, alt attributes and even the page URLs. For example, a restaurant critic in Oxford may have a page dedicated to Oxford's best restaurants. By naturally including 'Oxford' in the page content, the search engines will see that this page is very relevant and will be more likely to return your page in related city specific searches.

If your blog is not associated with a business with a physical location based in the target city, it will not appear in the local pack results (the map and 3 local results shown at the top of Google's search results from a query that has local intent).
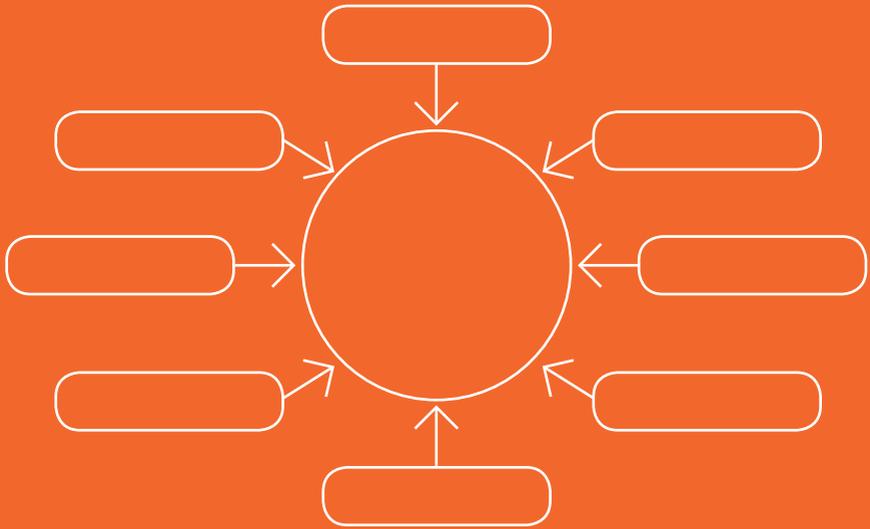
Backlinks should be built in a natural way

One of the most influential factors in a blog's SEO is the links pointing to it. Think of each link as a citation – the more you have, the more it shows you are an influential resource.

Search engines see these links as a sign of authority. And just like academic citations, not all are created equal – a citation from a famous and trusted site (such as bbc. co.uk) is worth more.

This is why building links is so important in SEO. Unfortunately, it is also why the manipulation of links has been so prevalent. As Google has cracked down on link spam, the risks with trying to game the system, such as through buying links, has increased.

A good blog will attract links from a variety of sources, but to get ahead you need to earn them as much as you can. Today, much link-building is good old-fashioned marketing - promotion and PR.

Steps to try

Delve into your competitors' links:

To understand the challenge you face to rank well in your niche, see what has worked well (or not!), turn to your competitors. By taking a deep look at the links they've earned, and how they got them, you'll uncover tactics you can replicate, plus get inspiration for your own fresh ideas. You can also build a reasonable idea of how many links you need in order to compete. You can use tools such as Open Link Profiler to input a domain or blog post and see what links are pointing at it.

Promote your blog the right way:

While you hope to earn links gradually as people discover your content, you should create a strategy to effectively promote your blog. As with any strategy, you need to set goals, and make sure it aligns with your overall marketing focus. You should also spend some time finding where your audience hangs out online so you can create content to appeal to them in a format they enjoy.

Forget shortcuts

Not long ago, there were many tricks and loopholes you could use to manipulate search engines into showing your pages higher in the results.

As long as there is money to be made, black-hat SEOs will search for ways to rank artificially. However, as Google continues to make improvements, it is as often as much work to try to cheat as it is to achieve results naturally.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't do everything you can to improve your SEO – staying still while everyone else makes the most of the opportunity isn't an option.

The truth is that SEO doesn't bring instant results. Not unless you fix a major issue with your site such as a technical error or a penalty you've been hit with.

SEO today is about guiding Google, helping them understand your blog, building better content than your competitors and thinking of inventive ways of getting your name out there.

Outro

As you have learnt, there are many aspects to SEO.

It is the mix of technical and creative elements that makes it such a wide topic. But you've also seen how most blog owners can learn the basics, and that there's plenty to try for yourself.

This guide doesn't cover everything you could know about SEO, but by learning these principles and taking your first steps you put yourself ahead of much of the competition.

Below are some of the finest resources out there to explore and start to master SEO.

1. The beginner's guide to SEO: moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo
2. The steps to a Google friendly website: support.   google.com/webmasters/answer/40349?hl=en
3. Google's SEO starter guide: http://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.co.uk/en/uk/intl/en_uk/webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide-en-gb.pdf
4. On-page optimisations: moz.com/learn/seo/on-page-factors
5. Link building – the definitive guide: backlinko.com/link-building
6. Keyword research – a real world guide: my.copy

.blog

.blog run by Knock Knock, WHOIS There is a subsidiary of Automattic, the parent company of WordPress.com and Jetpack. It was created in 2015 to manage the launch and development of the .blog gTLD.

Automattic has been working towards offering .blog domain names almost since its inception, in 2005. Our goal is to offer bloggers across the world a great new name space at a great price — whether they are WordPress users or not.

.blog

Why .blog?

Blogs have grown from simple online diaries into the content that fuels the Internet. But no matter what you create - or why you create it - own what you create by putting it on your domain. It's time to be heard. It's time to stop compromising. It's time to own your online presence.

Get your .blog

Join the blogging evolution.

Created in
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DOMAIN
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