



Purdue University - College of Agriculture

SEO - Meta Description Best Practices

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WHAT ARE META DESCRIPTIONS?

Meta descriptions, in short, are used to describe web pages in search results. When you type a query into a search engine, you are given a number of results on page one alone, but how do you choose which is the most relevant? By reading the titles and descriptions of the page results, you start to deduce which result is best to click on. Essentially, a meta description is intended to attract human users to a webpage. Good meta descriptions give searchers some context as to what a page is about. Armed with useful information, users are more likely to click on results that have descriptions relevant to their search.

ag.purdue.edu > foodsci > Pages > grad overview ▾

Food Science Graduate Program Overview - Purdue Agriculture

The **Food Science Graduate** Program at **Purdue** University is an interdepartmental program, including all 20 of the faculty in the Department of **Food Science** and ...

Please note that the above image has been marked with colored highlights for the purposes of this document. The blue is the title tag, and the red is the meta description.

WHY ARE META DESCRIPTIONS GOOD FOR SEO?

Meta descriptions aren't inherently good for SEO as a standalone. They are, however, great for users. Good meta descriptions give the user an understanding as to what a page is about, which leads to a good click-through-rate (CTR).

Increased CTR has been proven to be a factor in ranking algorithms, so good meta descriptions are indirectly good for SEO.

In order to ensure a positive user experience, you want to make sure that each meta description is accurate and properly reflects the page's content. Also, make sure that content located on that landing page is above the fold and easily digestible to incoming traffic. When users cannot easily find what they are looking for, they often press the back button. This will then register as a bounce, lowering your overall potential to rank well. Therefore, it is important to keep relevant and pertinent information at the top of every webpage.

HOW DO YOU OPTIMIZE YOUR META DESCRIPTIONS?

There are a few factors that should be considered when writing meta descriptions:

+ USE THE OPTIMAL LENGTH

Meta descriptions should be no more than 150-160 characters, including whitespace. Please refer to the Google Snippet generator found at <https://www.portent.com/serp-preview-tool> in order to best gauge description length and to see the way a description will appear in a Search Engine Results Page. When a meta description runs over the 160-character count it may appear truncated on a SERP, and the remaining text will be replaced with an ellipsis.

+ PLACE IMPORTANT KEYWORDS CLOSE TO THE FRONT

It is smart to put two things at the beginning of your meta description: your school name and your main keyword for that page. When you put your school name at the beginning of the description, it ensures brand recognition. Alongside that, it's also a good idea to put an essential keyword or two at the beginning of a meta description so that searchers connect their query to your search result right away. You not only want them to find your site, but to find a specific webpage on your site that is going to be most helpful to them.

+ INCLUDE A CALL-TO-ACTION

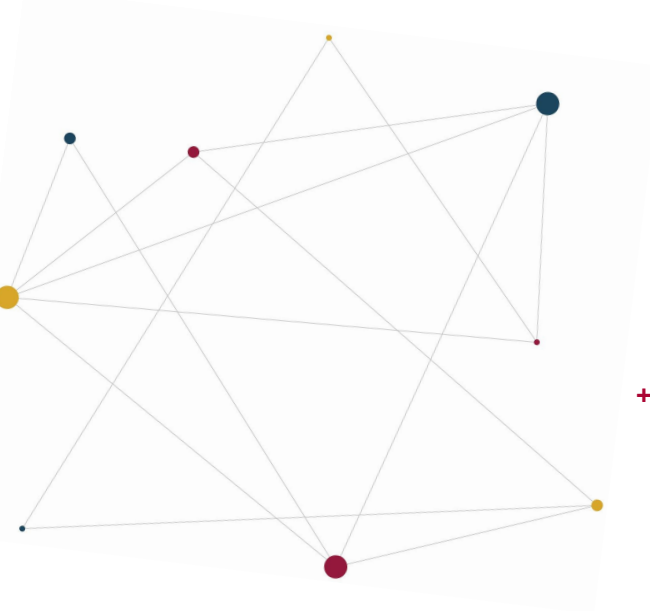
Having a call-to-action in your description is also a good idea. While having the school name and/or a keyword at the beginning of the content is important, it's smart to end the description with a sentence that entices the reader to click on your page! For example, ending a description with something such as, "Learn more now!" gives searchers direction on what to do next. Other good call-to-action verbs include: find, discover, join, etc.

WHAT NOT TO DO WHEN IT COMES TO META DESCRIPTIONS

+ AVOID META DESCRIPTION DUPLICATES

Let's say that someone has done a search for your brand. If a large portion of the web pages that appear in the SERP have identical titles and meta descriptions, how are they going to know which page to click on? In other words, how would they know which page holds the specific information they are looking for? They won't, so they will have to guess. Once they have clicked on a result, if they can't see or find the information they want, they will likely click back to the SERP. In such cases,

many searchers will abandon a search and move on. This is why meta descriptions are so important. They help searchers land on the page they are looking for, thus making them more likely to stay on your site and to have a positive user experience.



Since the purpose of a meta description is to describe the webpage that it is related to, there isn't a reason to have duplicate meta descriptions. Each web page should provide unique, useful, and easy-to-read information and this should be reflected in the meta description. If a page is so closely related to another page that you can't think of why the title or meta description would differ, then it may be best to merge the pages using a 301 redirect.

+ DO NOT KEYWORD STUFF

While naturally working one or two keywords into your description is helpful, you don't want to sacrifice readability for keyword stuffing. You want to compel searchers to click on your page, not be scared away by what appears to be spam. The keywords should look

like they belong in the content.

Say you were writing a description for an English Major page on your site and you wanted to target the following keywords: English major, creative writing major, and literature major. Now take the following two examples into account:

DO:

Carnegie Dartlet University offers two English major degree paths, one that gives you the option to specialize in literature and the other in creative writing. Learn more now!

The keywords are there, but this description still sounds natural.

DON'T:

Carnegie Dartlet University offers English major, creative writing major, and literature major options. Come be an English major in our department today and take courses in creative writing and literature!

The repetition of "major" sounds unnatural and grammatically incorrect, as does the repetition of the specialization names. This description is not as conversational as the first example, which makes it obvious that it is written for a search engine and not a person.

