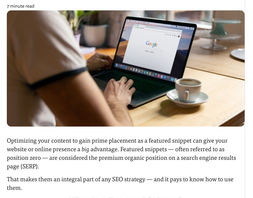
How and Why to Optimize Content for Featured Snippets

Jonna Jerome ■ September 18, 2021

7 minute read



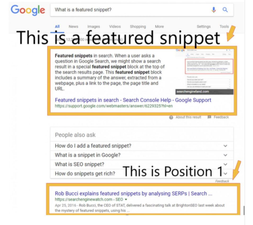
Optimizing your content to gain prime placement as a featured snippet can give your website or online presence a big advantage. Featured snippets — often referred to as position zero — are considered the premium organic position on a search engine results page (SERP).

That makes them an integral part of any SEO strategy — and it pays to know how to use them.

What Is a Featured Snippet?

Featured snippets are those nifty little information boxes containing detailed descriptions that appear just after the first batch of paid ads but before traditional, organic search results on Google or Bing.

Search engines, the search engine pulls pertinent information from a web page and highlights it in the search engine results.



What's the Purpose of a Featured Snippet?

The point of a snippet is to answer a user's question immediately.

Most often, these questions are of the "who, what, why, where, when, and how" variety.

While this fast information exchange improves the user experience, some worry that if users get answers to their questions in a snippet, they have no reason to click through to a website. While this may happen for simple searches, for more complex topics, Google shows only an excerpt of a web page's information in the snippet. To see more, users must click through to go to the full web page.

Featured snippets drive a lot of traffic. According to Search Engine Watch, featured snippets account for just over 35% of all clicks. Because they are considered the "best" answer to a search, snippets are also the first choice in voice searches.

As a result, companies want to earn featured snippets. For you, as an SEO content writer, this presents a big opportunity to help your clients improve their visibility and generate more traffic.

A featured snippet legitimizes your client's website and establishes their business as an expert source. Organic results can be worth more than ad sales, so acquiring this positioning can greatly help a brand be seen as an industry authority.

The best news? If you do it right, you can help any company, no matter the size or stature, earn a spot at the top of the SERP without spending advertising dollars.

Four Types of Featured Snippets

There are four main types of featured snippets: Definitions or answers, tables, lists, and video.

All are valuable for driving visitors to a website.

A snippet will include the page title, a link to the web page from where the answer originated, and a URL, along with the information excerpted from the page. Get familiar with each type to determine which will work best for whatever page you're working on. Any snippet can also include images, which may come from a third-party page.

To win the snippet, having some familiarity with website builders will help you when formatting your copy to its best advantage. If you are writing copy for a website developer, giving them proper instructions regarding positioning is also critical.

Let's start with a visual review of each type of snippet, and tips on how to attain them.

1. Paragraph snippets answer questions in the form of text.

This type of snippet commonly features up to 50 words. In your copy, format your keyword phrase/question as an H1 or H2 heading. (H1 is the preferred or question in the main headline of the page, and H2 if it's a subhead. Remember, there should not be more than one H1 on a page.) Then immediately follow it with a paragraph providing the most detailed, comprehensive summary of the answer.

This kind of feature snippet will look like this…

2. Table snippets provide organized data in response to a query.

To create content for a table snippet, give your table a title, and incorporate your keyword phrase(s) as header tags. Build a simple table to display your relevant content. Remember, Google will only display the first few rows of your table in the featured snippet.

3. List snippets offer answers/ how-to questions in the form of a process or series of steps.

To earn a list snippet, you can create an ordered list, or you can break your process out into subsections and begin each step with an H2 or H3 subheading.

The best practice is to create lists with nine or more lines to increase the click through rate.

4. Video snippets answer questions by featuring informational video links.

Use the question you want to answer in your snippet for the title of your video. All YouTube videos are already marked with structured data, but you can give yourself an edge by including a transcript of your video on the page. This gives search engines the exact content contained in the video — which is more than most people provide — and creates a competitive ranking advantage.

Do I Stand a Chance of Getting Featured?

The answer is absolutely yes. While the purpose of a search is to provide a quick answer, you have a higher chance of getting featured if you answer a lot of questions in your content about a particular topic.

How Do You Optimize Content for Featured Snippets?

The basic answer is to provide more thorough information than your competitors. Google needs convincing that your page is the best answer for a relevant need. No magic formula guarantees your page will be chosen for a snippet, but you can increase your chances by providing concise, helpful answers to questions you believe your target audience is interested in. And by making smart use of subheads (H2s and H3s as described in the list above).

Three Ways to Use the SERP to Aid Your Research

Know who your audience is (the basic foundation of strategic content marketing), before you begin.

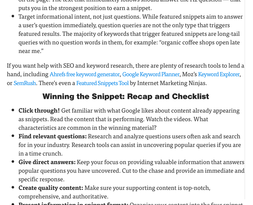
1. Start by entering questions you believe your audience would ask into Google, incorporating the language of your client's industry. Use a *conversational* tone that real humans use when searching.
2. Study the snippets that pop up. These are a clear reflection of what has already worked for others. Click through to the page that earned the snippet, and study how they structured the information.
3. Take your research and logically structure the information you gather. Add the question(s) you believe your audience is seeking in your titles and subheads. Immediately answer them in the body content following the subhead.

Let's use the topic of coffee as an example of how asking related questions born out of your research can help you structure content to satisfy more queries.

#1 — I searched for "How much caffeine is in decaf coffee?" I got a featured snipper in the form of a paragraph to answer my question. For research purposes, I got a whole lot more!

#2 — Here I find a row displaying more related terms (circled words).

#3 — The "People also ask" section proffers even more possibilities that my audience might be interested in, giving additional content ideas to explore.



Applying SEO Keyword Research to Win Featured Snippets

The majority of featured snippets are triggered by long-tail keywords. The more words that are typed into a search box, the higher the probability there will be a featured snippet.

- **Short-tail keywords (sometimes called "head keywords")** are one or two words long. They are broad and rather generic. For example, "dogs."
- **Mid-tail keywords (sometimes called "body keywords")** are slightly longer and more specific, such as "friendly dog breeds."
- **Long-tail keywords** are typically phrases, sometimes including questions or product names. Due to their specificity they can be the most targeted in your strategy. Long-tail keywords may have a lower search volume, but their detail makes it more likely conversions will happen. Someone searching for "friendly dogs" may be in the market for a new pet. Yet, if someone types in "where to buy a friendly golden retriever," it demonstrates a high intent to buy. This user knows exactly what they want.
- Remember, most searches contain the aforementioned: "who, what, why, where, when, and how." These are the easiest to identify and the first to investigate.

Make use of the targeted keywords and phrases on the website you want Google to reference for your snippet. Adjust them if necessary. Use your identified keywords and phrases for the questions in your header tags — ideally in an H2 tag position higher up on the page. The text that immediately follows should answer the H2 question — that puts you in the strongest position to earn a snippet.

- Target informational intent, not just questions. While featured snippets aim to answer a user's question immediately, questions are not the only type that triggers featured results. The majority of keywords that trigger featured snippets are long-tail queries with no question words in them, for example: "organic coffee shops open late near me."

Prepped with all this information, go climb your Mount Everest — which in this case is the top of the SERP!

Winning the Snippet: Recap and Checklist

- **Click through!** Get familiar with what Google likes about content already appearing as snippets. Read the content that is performing. Watch the videos. What characteristics are common in the winning materials?
- **Find relevant questions:** Research and analyze questions users often ask and search for in your industry. Research tools can assist in uncovering popular queries if you are in a time crunch.
- **Give direct answers:** Keep your focus on providing valuable information that answers popular questions you have uncovered. Cut to the chase and provide an immediate and specific response.
- **Create quality content:** Make sure your supporting content is top-notch, comprehensive, and authoritative.
- **Present information in snippet format:** Organize your content into the four snippet types search engines understand and feature: Paragraphs, tables, lists, or video formats.
- **Optimize headings:** Incorporate the target query into your headings and subheadings.
- **Remember voice search:** Voice assistants rely heavily on featured snippets for answers. So optimize for voice search by using conversational language and long-tail keywords likely to match voice queries.
- **Monitor and refine:** Keep an eye on how your content is performing and regularly check search results to see if you're ranking. Adjust your content and optimization strategies accordingly.

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