

FREE GUIDE

How to Rank in the Top 3 on Google Maps

A step-by-step guide for local service businesses. No ads needed.

1. How Local SEO Actually Works

When someone searches "plumber near me" or "plumber Houston," Google shows a map with three business listings at the top. Those three listings are **Google Business Profiles** (GBP), not websites. Over 40% of people who search locally click the map results (Backlinko, 2024), and the top three spots get the most attention. If you're in position four or worse, you are basically invisible. Nobody scrolls to page two.

What this means: in regular SEO you're trying to rank a website's pages. In local SEO you're trying to rank a Google Business Profile. Every page you build on the website exists to support that one goal, not to get its own traffic.

Google decides who gets those top three spots using four factors:

Proximity

How close your business is to the person searching.

Relevance

How well your business and content match what they searched for.

Prominence

Also called Authority. How well known and trusted your business is: reviews, links, activity, mentions across the internet.

Traffic

Whether people are actually clicking your listing. Getting clicks is itself a ranking signal, separate from having good reviews or categories.

Think of each business as a glass. Proximity, relevance, and authority each fill part of the glass. When it overflows, you rank. You can't control proximity, someone searching from across town is always going to favor the business closer to them. But you can absolutely control relevance and authority, and most of your competitors are barely trying on either one. Most local businesses filled out their GBP once, years ago, picked one category when Google allows ten, and never touched it again. That's why it's often surprisingly easy to outrank businesses that have existed for decades. They're not playing the game. They don't know there's a game to play.

2. The Local Rank Map & The Top 3% Metric

Before doing any work, run a local rank map. This is a diagnostic report that shows your GBP's ranking position at around 169 different points spread across the city.

Reading the map: Green = top 3 (visible, getting calls). Yellow = positions 4 to 10 (invisible, but close). Red = not ranking at all (Google doesn't believe you serve that area).

The number that matters most is the **top 3%**: what percentage of the map is green. This single number tells you exactly what kind of content to build next.

1. Run rank maps for your top 3 to 4 competitors in the same search.

2. See what top 3% the leader is sitting at. In a highly competitive city that might only be 30 to 40%. In a smaller, less competitive area it could be 90%+.
3. Your realistic near-term goal is 25 to 50% of what the leader has. If they're at 80%, aim for 30 to 40%. If they're at 40%, aim for 15 to 20%. That's your **topical relevance threshold**.
4. Below your threshold? Google doesn't trust you as an expert yet. Build more topical content (see Part 5).
5. At or above your threshold? Google already trusts your expertise. Now expand outward geographically (see Part 5).

Re-run the rank map every month. This isn't a one-time check, it's how you decide what to build next, forever.

See where you stand today (no tool needed)

A rank map tool is the best way, but you can get a rough picture by hand in ten minutes. Write down where you are now, so you can compare every month.

1. On your phone, search your main service the way a customer would, like "roofer near me."
2. Do it from three places in your service area, for example your shop, a neighborhood across town and the edge of your area. Results change with location.
3. Write down which three businesses show up each time, and where you show up, if you do.
4. Open the profile of each of the top three and fill in the table below.

	Main category	Number of reviews	Newest review	Number of photos
You				
Competitor 1				
Competitor 2				
Competitor 3				

Checklist

- ☐ I searched my main service from three places and wrote down the results and today's date.
- ☐ I filled in the table for me and my top three competitors.
- ☐ I know whether I'm below or above my threshold.

3. Categories

Google allows up to 10 categories. Most businesses use one. Every category you add is another search term Google can show you for. A plumber with only "Plumber" as a category is invisible for "drainage service" or "gas installation service" searches, even though they do that work.

Aim for 2 to 4 categories minimum, more if genuinely relevant. Two ways to choose the right ones:

- Use a free Chrome extension (GMB Everywhere or GMB Crush) to see exactly which categories your top-ranking competitors have chosen, and how many other businesses use each category.
- Search your target term, open the top 3 competitors, and copy their category structure directly. Your primary category should match what's already ranking, not just what sounds most accurate to you.

4. Services

List at least 25 services, as many as genuinely apply to the business. In competitive markets, 30 to 40+. Every service listed is another signal telling Google exactly what you do. Services should be grouped under the category they're most relevant to (under "Plumber," list things like water heater replacement, pipe repair, leak detection). Google checks whether your services semantically match your categories. If they don't, it's confusing, not helpful.

5. Fill Every Single Box

An empty profile signals to Google that a business might not be real, might be spam, or the owner doesn't care. None of those are good. Fill out everything:

What's a keyword? A keyword is simply the actual words someone types into Google when they search. If someone searches "plumber Dallas," that whole phrase is the keyword. This guide mentions keywords constantly because the entire game is making sure your business shows up for the exact keywords your real customers are searching.

- **Business description:** 750 characters, the maximum Google allows. Use all of it. Work in your story, your location, and your keywords naturally, but don't stuff keywords obviously.
- **Photos:** at least 20. Exterior, interior, team, work-in-progress. Real photos taken on a phone get geotagged automatically, which Google expects to see. Never use stock photos.
- **Attributes:** check every box that applies (veteran-owned, women-owned, accepts credit cards, free estimates, ADA compliant, etc.) and explicitly mark "no" for ones that don't apply rather than leaving them blank.
- **Service areas:** list every town or area you actually serve. If an area isn't listed, you will not show up for "near me" searches from people in that area, full stop.

- **Short name / custom URL:** claim a clean g.page/your-business link. Useful because you can add /review to the end of it to make a dead-simple link for asking clients to leave a review.
- **Booking link / contact page:** make sure this is filled in and actually clickable, not left blank.
- **Payment methods:** check every method you actually accept.

This whole audit takes about half an hour and puts you ahead of most local competitors immediately.

6. Reviews

Reviews are one of the biggest ranking factors, but it's not just the count that matters, it's how they're written and how you respond.

Getting better reviews

- Ask happy clients to attach a photo. Reviews with photos show up first.
- If a happy client is a Google "Local Guide" (a reviewer status Google assigns to active reviewers), their review carries extra weight. Ask them first if you know who they are.
- A weak review just says "great job, loved working with them." A strong review naturally includes the business name, the location, the specific service done, sometimes even the name of the person who did the work, and a few keywords. Guide clients gently toward this when you ask (e.g. "mind mentioning what we did for you and where?").
- Ask in person right after the job, while the client is visibly happy, or send a direct review link by text/email right after (your GBP short name + /review makes this a one-tap link).

Replying to reviews

Never send a templated "Thank you for your review!" reply. It's an obvious waste of a ranking opportunity. Every reply should mention the specific service and naturally include your business name. A simple template to work from:

Hi [name],

Thank you for the 5 star review, me and the whole team over at [business name] really appreciate it.

We are glad we could help you with the [exact match keyword / long tail, e.g. "roofing installation," "roofing repair"].

Please spread the word :)

Thank you,

The team at [business name]

Negative reviews: acknowledge the specific complaint, take responsibility even if it wasn't entirely your fault, and offer a real next step (refund, follow-up call). Reviews usually can't be removed, but a well-handled bad review can build more trust than it loses.

Reviews from everywhere

Google pulls in reviews from Facebook, Yelp, Healthgrades, and other platforms too, not only GBP directly. Your goal isn't just GBP reviews, it's reviews spread across every platform your industry uses. If you have reviews on your own website, link back to the original source, and consider a dedicated reviews page pulling in roughly 10 reviews from different platforms.

7. GBP Posting & Photos/Video

Treat your GBP like it needs constant feeding, not a one-time setup. Google is watching for activity: businesses that post regularly, upload new photos, and respond to reviews rank higher than dormant ones.

- Post several times a week, fully optimized: link back to your site, mention your citations, interlink your posts with each other, work your keywords into the description, and put your business name directly in the post photo.
- Google reads image file names before upload. Don't leave a testimonial video named "VID_2041.mp4," rename it to something like "testimonial-plumbing-company-dallas.mp4."
- A video that autoplays on your GBP (no click required) is far more eye-catching than a static photo.
- Never use stock photos. Google, and customers, can usually tell.
- Prioritize faces and your branding over job photos. People buy from people they know, like, and trust. A photo of your team means more than another photo of a finished job.
- Upload short, engaging videos, 30 to 60 seconds, highlighting products, services, or testimonials. These autoplay in the gallery even if nobody clicks them.
- Geotag your photos with the location to strengthen relevance.

8. Your Business Title

Don't keyword-stuff your business name on GBP (e.g. "Tribeca Plumbing Inc, Local Trusted Plumber Dallas"). It's against Google's terms of service, and the safe, standard advice is simply: don't do it.

The nuanced reality: businesses with the keyword actually in their title usually do rank higher, the same idea as an exact-match domain (EMD). It can go wrong. Competitors can and do report these listings to Google, and a suspended listing can be very hard to reinstate. How risky it is depends heavily on the niche and market. More competitive niches mean more competitors reporting each other. Some businesses go as far as legally changing their business name to include the keyword, which is a real keyword match rather than stuffing, and it works. Keyword + location + an EMD-style setup heavily influences GBP rankings. Still, this is a real risk to your actual listing, so treat it as your call to make, not a default recommendation.

9. Q&A / FAQ Section

The Q&A section on your GBP is basically a mini FAQ, and it's one of the most valuable, most overlooked parts of a profile.

1. Source real questions from Google's "People Also Ask" results and from Quora/Reddit threads in your niche.
2. Write unique answers. Never copy-paste an answer you found somewhere else, Google penalizes that.
3. Post the question from one Google account and answer it from a different account. Self-question-and-answer from the same account looks less natural.
4. Start with 5 to 10 questions, then add 2 to 3 more every week going forward.
5. Mirror the same Q&As on your website's FAQ page too, so the content works double duty.

A good answer isn't just correct, it's an opportunity: "Give us a call at (number), [business name], in [location]" makes even a simple answer do more work. For example:

Q: "What's the best way to reduce my energy bills?"

A: "Using programmable thermostats, sealing air leaks, upgrading to energy-efficient systems, and installing ceiling fans to circulate air effectively during peak seasons."

That answer isn't bad, it has real keywords. But it's missing the opportunity: add "Give us a call at (number), [business name], serving [location]" to the end, and it starts working for you, not just for the reader.

10. Full GBP Audit Checklist

A quick recap you can run through for any business, or your own profile:

Check	What you're looking for
Categories	2 to 10, matching top competitors
Reviews	Photos? Local Guides? Keyword/location-rich text?
Review replies	Personalized, not canned
Description	All 750 characters used, keywords included naturally
Booking/contact link	Present and working
NAP	Name, address, phone match exactly everywhere
Posting	Weekly, optimized text
Photos/video	20+, fresh, no stock images
Q&A	Filled, optimized, synced to website FAQ

Checklist

- ☐ I added every category that truly applies and listed 25+ services.
- ☐ I filled every box: description, 20+ photos, attributes, service areas, short name, booking link, payments.
- ☐ I have a one-tap /review link and I ask every happy client.
- ☐ Every review reply names the service and my business.
- ☐ I post several times a week and add new photos and short videos.

11. Why "The Core 30"

If you have 3 to 4 categories and 20 to 30 services on your GBP, your website should end up with roughly 30 pages: one homepage, 3 to 4 category pages, and 25 to 30 service pages. This structure is called the **Core 30**, and it's the foundation of topical relevance Google needs to see before it will rank you in a competitive market. The site structure mirrors the GBP exactly: homepage, then category pages, then service pages.

12. The Homepage

Title tag and H1, quickly: the **title tag** is the blue clickable headline Google shows for your page in search results. It's set in the page's code and people see it before they even click. The **H1** is the main heading actually written on the page itself, the first big piece of text a visitor sees once they land. They're usually similar but not always identical, and both matter for the same reason: they're the fastest way to tell Google (and a visitor) exactly what this page is about.

Most local sites just say "Home" in the title tag. Instead, use your primary GBP category plus your city name. For example, a plumber in Plano, Texas shouldn't have a title tag that just says "Home," it should say something like "Professional Plumber in Plano | 24/7 Emergency Service."

Then turn each secondary GBP category into its own H2 section on the homepage, with 50 to 100 words about it: what it is, why customers need it, what falls under it.

Then, critically, link from that paragraph to a dedicated category page. Not a nav link, not a footer link, but a link inside the actual sentence. This is called an **editorial link**.

Editorial links vs. navigation links: Google knows nav and footer links are just site structure, not endorsements. They pass very little authority. A link inside a paragraph, in context, tells Google "this page is specifically about this next page" and passes real authority. Always link out to category and service pages from within your actual content, not just the menu.

13. Category Pages

Target keyword: category name + city (e.g. "Drainage Service Houston"). That goes in the title tag and the H1. On the page, list the specific services under that category, each with its own H2 and 50 to 100 words, each linking (editorially) to its own dedicated service page.

14. Service Pages

Target keyword: service name + city (e.g. "Water Heater Replacement Houston"). Title tag, H1, and first paragraph should all include it. Write detailed, specific content: why customers need it, what it includes, how long it takes, what to expect. Not generic advice, specific information about this exact service in this exact city.

Example URL structure: **example.com/heating-contractor-houston**

A lot of people worry that suddenly adding 30 service pages will look suspicious to Google. It doesn't, if the structure is built correctly like this. Done right, Google trusts the site more, not less.

Going deeper: nested URLs for specific variants

For a service with several real variants, nest them under the main service page instead of creating separate, disconnected pages. City first, then service, then the specific variant:

```
/austin/drain-cleaning-services/emergency  
/austin/drain-cleaning-services/yard-drains  
/austin/drain-cleaning-services/hydro-jetting  
/austin/drain-cleaning-services/sewer-backup
```

Each one gets its own title tag built the same way, city + service + variant: "Emergency Drain Cleaning Services in Austin." This structure tells Google exactly how the pages relate to each other. All four are clearly part of the same "drain cleaning services in Austin" topic, just answering a more specific version of it.

15. Writing The Content With AI

Google does not care whether content is written by AI or a human. It cares whether the content is genuinely helpful. Most AI content fails not because it's AI, but because it's generic and vague. The fix is specificity: tell the AI the exact category, service, and city, ask it to mention real neighborhoods, and write from the perspective of a local expert.

```
You are an expert in SEO content and writing content that creates both user  
engagement and conversion, and is clear to Google's algorithm the website is  
a service business specializing in SEO for local companies.  
You have years of experience in writing content that is semantically relevant  
to target keywords. Your content should be accessible, engaging, and reflect  
your personal experiences or research. Include anecdotes or stories you've  
heard from related businesses. Your writing style should be casual and  
conversational, as if you're explaining things to a friend.  
You don't use cliches or exaggerated language. You are very familiar with how  
Google's algorithm interprets written content and how it knows what keyword  
to rank specific content for.  
Please write content for a homepage for an [SEO agency that specializes in
```

SEO for plumbers]. The target article length is 1,500 words.
The target keyword for this page is ["seo for plumbers"] and the GBP primary category is [Internet Marketing Service]. The GBP secondary categories are listed below. Make sure each secondary category has a paragraph dedicated to it.

- [2. Marketing Agency
- 3. Marketing Consultant
- 4. Website Designer
- 5. Web Hosting Company]

Incorporate a compelling hook that uses personal anecdotes or stories to enhance emotional connection and addresses the reader's questions.

Use storytelling techniques and adhere to Google's quality guidelines to keep the content engaging. Employ metaphors and vivid descriptions where appropriate to enrich the narrative, and ensure the tone aligns with our previous analysis of our customers' preferred writing style.

Remember:

Focus on providing genuinely helpful information to plumbers

Include relevant context and references to specific neighborhoods or areas

Use headings and subheadings to break up the text

Mention any relevant events or news related to [seo for plumbers]

Link to reputable local sources for additional information

Share any personal anecdotes or stories you've heard about [seo for plumbers]

Aim for a conversational tone that engages the reader while providing

valuable insights about [seo for plumbers]

Include a lot of grammatical errors and typos

Give opinions

Don't use formal language.

Avoid fluff.

Write at the 4th grade level

Keep in mind natural language processing as you write and make sure the structure of the sentences is as simple as possible

Here is a list of NLP words to use in the content: [paste your list here]

Avoid these words: embark, look no further, navigating, picture this, top-notch, unleash, unlock, [add your own]

Always do a human editing pass after: add real business personality and voice, real client photos where possible, callouts, tables, proper formatting, short paragraphs, and internal links connecting the pages together. A page that looks like a wall of AI text with no formatting reads as "AI slop" to a human visitor and, by extension, performs badly. Keep it looking like a real, well-designed page.

16. On-Page SEO Checklist

What this is: "on-page SEO" just means everything about how one single page is built and written that affects how well it ranks, as opposed to things like backlinks, which happen on other people's websites. This is a checklist of the on-page basics to get right on every page of the site.

- **URL slug:** the part of the web address after your domain name. In "example.com/plumber-austin," the slug is "plumber-austin." Keep it short and include your keyword, don't stuff in extra words.
- **Headings:** the heading levels on a page, H1 (the biggest, main title), then H2 and H3 for subheadings. Use exactly one H1 per page with your main keyword in it. H2s and H3s should use variations of the keyword, not just repeat the H1 word for word.
- **Title tag:** the blue clickable headline that shows up for your page in Google's search results. It's set in the page's code and isn't always the same text as what's visibly written on the page. Balance being catchy enough to win the click with matching your keyword closely enough for Google to understand the page. Check what's already ranking for the same term for ideas.
- **Meta description:** the short block of text that shows under your title tag in search results. Put your keyword near the start, Google bolds matching words in search results and people read left to right, but it still has to read like a normal sentence, not a keyword dump.
- **Images:** (1) add alt text (a short written description of the image, originally meant for people who can't see images) with your real keyword in it, (2) rename the image file before you upload it, never leave it as "Screenshot2026.png," (3) compress the file size and prefer JPEG over PNG so the page loads faster.
- **Interlinking:** linking between the different pages on your own website. Every page you want to rank should both receive links from other pages on your site and link out to other relevant pages. It needs to flow both ways.
- **Outbound links:** links from your page out to a completely different website. Link out to genuinely trustworthy sources (Wikipedia, major news, industry associations). Most local sites never do this, and it's a real, easy signal most competitors are missing.
- **Content length:** check what's actually ranking for your target keyword right now and aim to cover the topic more thoroughly than that current top result, not just hit some arbitrary word count.
- **Sitemap:** a file on your website (usually invisible to regular visitors) that lists every page on the site, so Google can find and understand your site structure more easily. A basic technical item, usually a one-click setup through your website platform.

17. Prove Your Website And GBP Are The Same Business

Google needs to verify your website and your GBP belong to the same business. Without this, everything else is wasted effort. There are seven consistency signals your homepage (or "GBP landing page") should have:

1. Title tag includes your primary category and city name.
2. H1 includes your primary category and city name.
3. A Google Maps embed of your exact GBP location on the page.
4. Secondary categories and core services mentioned, ideally in a subheading.
5. A review widget displaying real Google reviews.
6. Your address matches your GBP address character for character.

7. Your phone number matches character for character.

Bonus eighth signal: local business schema markup on that same page (next section).

18. Schema Markup, Map Embeds & NAP

a) Schema Markup

What this is: schema markup is invisible code added to a page that describes your business in a structured way search engines can read directly, instead of guessing from regular text. Think of it as handing Google a business card with exact details, rather than making it read your whole page to figure out who you are.

Add local business schema to the homepage, matching your GBP information character for character.

Claude Prompt 1: What information do you need to create local business schema?

Claude Prompt 2: [Give requested information]
With this data, please write local business schema.

Beyond basic local business schema, there's also how-to schema, FAQ schema, event schema, and recipe schema (if relevant). Each makes your search result visually stand out (expandable questions, step lists, images), which increases how often people click you over a competitor.

Workflow: generate the code with a free tool (search "schema markup generator"), validate it with Google's free Rich Results Test, then paste it into the page.

b) Direct Map Embed

Embed your Google Business Profile map directly on the contact page.

Standard vs. custom map: the default GBP map link is fine for a simple embed. A custom map (built in Google My Maps) lets you add driving directions, citations, and social links on top. A driving-directions map from a specific neighborhood to your business is actually a small ranking tool in itself. It tells Google how far you're willing to travel to serve customers, supporting rankings further from your office, not just next to it.

c) Consistent NAP

NAP = Name, Address, Phone number. These three details must match exactly, down to abbreviations, everywhere your business appears: your website footer, your GBP, and every directory listing (a "citation," covered next). "New Jersey" in one place and "NJ" in another is enough to confuse Google.

19. SSL & Basic Site Trust

A site without HTTPS shows visitors a hard browser warning, and it's a confirmed (if small) ranking factor. The free path: Cloudflare's free plan plus the "Really Simple SSL" WordPress plugin, after updating the domain's nameservers at the registrar. It's free and takes under an hour.

20. Basic Site Speed

Not local-SEO-specific, but still worth doing: check your site in GTmetrix (a free website that scans your site and tells you exactly what's slowing it down), resize/compress oversized images, remove unused plugins and themes, and turn on browser caching. A slow site hurts every other effort on this list.

Checklist

- ☐ My homepage title tag and H1 use my primary category and city.
- ☐ Each secondary category has an H2 section with an editorial link to its own page.
- ☐ Each service has its own page with the service and city in the title tag, H1 and first paragraph.
- ☐ The seven consistency signals are on my homepage, plus schema.
- ☐ My site runs on HTTPS and loads fast.

21. Citations

What this is: a citation is any business directory listing that includes your NAP (name, address, phone). Think Yelp, Bing Places, Apple Maps, industry-specific directories.

- NAP must be exact across every citation, including abbreviations.
- **Data aggregators** are separate services that scrape and redistribute your business data pulled from citations across the web. Keeping citations consistent feeds these correctly too.
- No-follow citation links (Yelp, Facebook, etc.) still matter. They build trust and brand signals even without passing direct link authority.
- Check how many citations your competitors have using a paid research tool like Ahrefs or SEMrush, and aim to beat their count.
- Interlink citations to each other, to social media, to the GBP listing, and to the website. A citation sitting alone, disconnected from everything else, is close to wasted.
- Yelp specifically gives you a home page, a gallery page, and individual photo pages, each capable of carrying its own link back to your site. Most businesses never touch their Yelp gallery/photo pages this way, which is exactly why it's an underused opportunity.

22. Why You Need Backlinks

Even perfect content and a perfect structure won't rank without outside verification. Anyone can write good website copy. Backlinks are Google's way of checking whether other sites vouch for yours. Since AI content flooded the internet, links matter more than ever. They're how Google tells real, trustworthy content apart from generic AI output.

Every page in your Core 30 needs at least one quality external link pointing to it. These are sometimes called "not AI slop" links: medium-quality but real, relevant links that don't need to be local or from huge domains, just reasonable, real sites.

23. Types Of Links

- **Comment links:** a link left in a blog comment reply. Low effort, low power.
- **Web 2.0 links:** a mini blog/site built on a free platform (WordPress.com, Weebly, Tumblr, Wix) that links back to your main site.
- **Guest posts:** you write (or pay for) an article published on someone else's site with a link back. Find opportunities by checking which sites your competitors already have guest posts on.
- **.edu / .gov links:** the hardest to get, and the most powerful.

- **Video / audio / PDF / image / slide links:** links that come naturally from uploading content to YouTube/Vimeo, SoundCloud/Spotify, PDF-sharing sites, Imgur, SlideShare.
- **Press releases:** submitted through a syndication service that distributes the article across many sites, each placement counts as a link. Embed your map, include images, and put your keyword and service area in the title.

Advanced/risky, skip for now: PBNs (private blog networks) and expired-domain links involve buying old domains with strong metrics and pointing them at your site. Powerful but easy to get wrong and not something to attempt without real experience.

24. Do-Follow vs. No-Follow

Every link on the internet is either "do-follow" or "no-follow." This matters every time you get a backlink, including the local sponsorships in section 27, so it's worth understanding properly before you go asking for one.

What this means: a **do-follow** link tells Google "I trust this site, pass some of my credibility to them." It's what actually helps you rank, think of it as a real vote of confidence. A **no-follow** link still sends people to your site and still builds some trust and visibility, but it doesn't pass that ranking "vote." Both exist because website owners can choose which type to give out, and most big platforms (Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram) automatically make every link no-follow by default.

A real example: say you sponsor a local youth sports league for \$200 and they list you on their "Our Sponsors" page with a link to your site. If that's a do-follow link, it genuinely helps your Google ranking, you got real SEO value for your money. If it's no-follow, it still sends real people to your site and still looks good for your business, but it won't move your rankings the same way. This is exactly why, before you pay for or chase any sponsorship or backlink, it's worth checking which kind you're actually getting.

How to check: once the link is live, right-click it on the page, choose "Inspect," and look at the HTML code that pops up for that link. If you see `rel="nofollow"` written in there, it's a no-follow link. If you don't see that at all, it's do-follow.

You don't need every single link to be do-follow. A mix of both is actually what a real, normal business naturally ends up with. A profile that's 100% do-follow links can look manipulated to Google, like you paid for all of them instead of earning them naturally.

25. Anchor Text

What this is: on a webpage, a link is usually shown as blue, underlined text you can click to go somewhere else. Anchor text is just the name for those specific clickable words. For example, in the sentence "Call this Dallas plumber today," if the words "this Dallas plumber" are the blue clickable part, then "this Dallas plumber" is the anchor text.

When other websites link to you, the anchor text they use matters. Rotate between four types so it looks natural:

- **Naked URL:** the link is literally your web address, like yourbiz.com.
- **Branded:** the link is your business name.
- **Exact match:** the link is your exact keyword, like "plumber Dallas."
- **Partial match:** the link is a natural phrase containing your keyword, like "find a quality plumber in Dallas."

If almost every link to your site uses the exact same keyword as its anchor text, that looks manipulative to Google, like you're controlling it yourself rather than earning links naturally.

26. Link Building: Manual vs. Outsourced vs. Automated

Three approaches, ranked by risk. **Manual** is safest and slowest, you choose every source yourself. **Outsourced** is faster, but only safe if you vet the seller carefully. Paying under about 10 cents a link is a red flag for garbage links. **Automated** tools exist but are risky and not recommended until you have real experience.

27. Local Authority Links

The single best local authority link is your local **Chamber of Commerce**. Membership usually runs \$200 to \$300 a year, and gets you a link from a site Google specifically recognizes as a local authority. You can join multiple chambers if there are several within reasonable driving distance. Each one is its own vote of local trust.

Beyond chambers: youth sports leagues, local charities, and community events that need sponsors. Search for these directly on Google by typing this into the search bar, swapping in your own city:

```
inurl:sponsors Chicago
```

This searches for web pages that have the word "sponsors" in their URL, which almost always means it's a page listing that organization's sponsors, exactly the kind of page you want to get listed on. Swap "Chicago" for your city and see what comes up.

Or use ChatGPT's Agent Mode to go find them automatically:

I am looking for local sponsorship opportunities in my area (your area). Please prioritize results by relevance to my business. Specifically, look for and include:

- Local nonprofits
- Community events
- Organizations and community groups
- Schools and education programs
- Faith-based organizations
- Sports leagues
- Neighborhood associations and homeowners associations (HOAs)
- Local libraries
- City-run programs and initiatives
- Local media community calendars
- Local professional associations
- Charities

Make sure any paid backlink is do-follow, since you're paying specifically for the SEO value. You can also partner directly with other local businesses, but check their reviews first. If someone you recommend gives a client a bad experience, that reflects on you too.

28. Keyword Research

What's a "long-tail" keyword? It just means a longer, more specific search phrase, like "emergency water heater repair downtown Dallas" instead of the short, broad "plumber." Fewer people search the long version each month, but far fewer businesses are competing for it too, which makes it much easier to actually rank for.

Don't chase a single high-volume, high-competition keyword (meaning a short, broad search phrase that gets searched a lot, but that every competitor is also fighting over). A tool like Ubersuggest lets you type in one broad keyword and get back a full list of related long-tail variations. A pile of low-competition, long-tail keywords can add up to more combined traffic than one big keyword, with far less competition to beat. Also check Google's own "searches related to" suggestions at the bottom of a results page for more ideas the tool might miss.

29. Free Google Property Interlinking

Build a free page at sites.google.com for the business (name, keywords, an embedded map, embedded reviews and photos). Then interlink it with other free Google properties (Docs, Sheets, Slides, Forms, Drawings), each containing business info and linking back to the Google Site and the main website. It's a free trust signal because everything lives on Google's own domain.

Similarly, Google auto-generates a simple one-page site for every GBP. It won't rank on its own, but it's a free do-follow link back to your real site, and every field in it should still be keyword-optimized.

30. Advanced: Linking Straight To Your GBP Posts

Right-clicking a published GBP post's image gives you a direct image URL. Links built pointing at that specific image (through guest posts, press releases, etc.) pass extra authority directly to the GBP listing, not just the website. A smaller trick: route a post's "Learn More" button through a Bitly short link first. Bitly's own domain carries real authority, so the redirect passes a bit of extra strength through. Neither of these is essential, they're small extra levers once the basics are solid.

Flagged as risky, not recommended: some businesses illegally keyword-stuff their GBP business name (e.g. "Tribeca Plumbing Inc, Local Trusted Plumber Dallas"). It's against Google's terms of service. It can boost rank and click-through, but competitors regularly report these listings and Google does suspend them. Not worth it for a real, ongoing business.

Checklist

- ☐ My NAP is identical on my site, my GBP and every citation.
- ☐ I checked my competitors' citations and I'm working to beat their count.
- ☐ Every Core 30 page has at least one quality link pointing to it, or a plan for one.
- ☐ I searched "inurl:sponsors" with my city and listed the places I can reach out to.
- ☐ I checked every paid link is do-follow, and I'm joining my local Chamber of Commerce.

31. Topical Relevance: Supporting Content

If your rank map shows you below your top 3% threshold (Part 1, Section 2), Google doesn't trust your expertise yet. Adding more service pages won't fix this, you need supporting content that answers real questions.

- Search your target keyword (without the city) on Google and open the "People also ask" box. Click through several questions to surface 20 to 30 relevant ones.
- Don't copy these questions word for word. Google has gotten wise to this being overused. Reword each one, same meaning, different phrasing.
- Use an AI prompt with Reddit search to find real, specific questions people in your city are actually asking about your service. These tend to be more specific and valuable than generic "People also ask" results.
- Add each question to the most relevant existing page (a water heater question goes on the water heater page, a general plumbing question goes on the homepage), answer briefly (a couple dozen words) with a natural, in-context link to a new, dedicated page that answers it in full depth.

Keep building supporting content, and keep re-running the rank map monthly, until you hit your threshold. Every supporting page also needs its own external link, same as a Core 30 page.

32. Geographic Relevance: Location Pages

Once you're at or above your threshold, Google already believes you're an expert. Now the goal shifts to expanding how far from your address you can rank.

1. Look at your rank map for positions 4, 5, and 6, areas where you're close but not quite in the top three. It's much easier to move from 4th to 3rd than from 19th to 3rd, so these near-misses are the highest-leverage targets.
2. Use Google Maps to find real landmarks in that spot: neighborhood names, parks, major intersections, shopping centers, schools. Use only landmarks Google itself recognizes, not places you've made up.
3. Target keyword becomes: service + landmark + city. That goes in the title tag and H1.
4. Write real content about the area, not "we serve [neighborhood]" repeated 50 times. Mention common local issues (older homes with specific plumbing types, newer construction, etc.), nearby businesses, and genuinely local detail.
5. Every geographic page also needs its own external link, and should link back to a central "locations" page and to the specific service page it supports.

Keep expanding outward: re-run the rank map every couple of weeks, find the new positions 4 to 6, target those next. Over time the green area on the map grows outward from your address across the whole service area.

33. How To Build A Full Location-Page Rollout

1. **Research:** search your county/region on Google Maps, list every surrounding town within roughly a 10-mile radius (or ask ChatGPT to list the most populated areas in your region), and organize the list in a spreadsheet.
2. **Build:** one dedicated page per area, location name in both the title and the URL (e.g. yourwebsite.com/plumber-rumford). Content must be unique per page. Don't copy-paste and swap the city name, Google sees through it. Add a short (roughly one minute) explainer video to keep visitors on the page longer.
3. **Link:** your homepage should link to every location page (this passes authority and tells Google your service area), and location pages should link to each other too.
4. **Check:** run every page's content through an SEO checker tool before publishing and fix whatever it flags.

34. The Ongoing Loop

The work doesn't stop once you're ranking. This is the recurring monthly loop:

- Run the rank map. Check the top 3% number.
- Below threshold: build more topical (supporting) content.
- At threshold: build more geographic (location) content.
- Dominating everywhere: shift to maintain and defend. Keep GBP posts and photos active, respond to every review, add new services as the business grows, consider a second GBP location if the business expands.

Businesses that stop here are the ones that quietly lose their top 3 spot a few months later to a competitor who kept going.

Track it every month

Once a month, repeat your three searches from section 2 and write down where you show up. Then open your profile's performance numbers and note the calls, direction requests and website clicks.

Month	Search 1	Search 2	Search 3	Calls	Directions	New reviews

Checklist

- ☐ I know my top 3% and my threshold, and I know which side I'm on.

- ☐ Below threshold: I'm adding supporting content from "People also ask" and Reddit questions.
- ☐ At threshold: I'm building location pages for the spots where I rank 4 to 6.
- ☐ I re-run my rank map every month and write down the result.

Your first 30 days

A simple order of work, built from the steps above.

Week 1: your profile

- ☐ Do the "See where you stand today" steps in section 2 and write down where you are.
- ☐ Set your categories and services (sections 3 and 4) and fill every box (section 5).

Week 2: reviews and listings

- ☐ Set up your short name and /review link, and start asking every happy client.
- ☐ Reply to all reviews using the template in section 6.
- ☐ Fix your citations so name, address and phone match everywhere (section 21).

Week 3: your website

- ☐ Build the homepage, category pages and your first service pages (sections 12 to 14).
- ☐ Add the seven consistency signals, schema and the map embed (sections 17 and 18).

Week 4: links and routine

- ☐ Search "inurl:sponsors" with your city and reach out to the first organization (section 27).
- ☐ Publish your first GBP posts and add your first Q&A questions.
- ☐ Repeat your three searches and save the results as your month-one record.

35. Glossary

Every SEO term used in this guide, explained in plain language, in one place. If you hit a word anywhere above that you don't fully understand, it's here.

Local SEO

The practice of getting a business to show up when people nearby search for what it does, like "plumber near me." It's different from regular SEO, which is about ranking website pages for anyone, anywhere.

Google Business Profile (GBP)

The free business listing Google shows on Google Maps and in the "map pack" at the top of search results. It's not your website, it's a separate profile you fill out directly with Google, and it's the single most important thing to optimize for local SEO.

Map pack

The box of 3 business listings with a map that Google shows at the top of search results for local searches. These 3 spots get the most attention. Being ranked under them (organically, on page 1) still isn't nearly as valuable as being inside this box.

Proximity

How close a business is to the person searching. One of the three (really four) things Google uses to decide map pack rankings. You can't change where your business is, so this one isn't fully in your control.

Relevance

How well a business matches what someone searched for. Built through your GBP categories, services, and your website's content.

Prominence (also called Authority)

How well-known, trusted, and established a business looks to Google. Built through reviews, backlinks, citations, and general activity.

Traffic

Whether people are actually clicking on your listing once they see it. A ranking factor on its own, separate from reviews or categories.

Local rank map

A report/tool that shows exactly where your GBP ranks across many different points on a map of your city, so you can see where you're winning and where you're invisible.

Top 3%

The percentage of a local rank map that's showing your business in the top 3 spots. The single number used to decide what kind of content to build next.

NAP

Short for Name, Address, Phone number. These three details about your business need to match exactly, word for word, everywhere they appear online.

Citation

Any online business directory listing that includes your NAP, think Yelp, Bing Places, Apple Maps. Each one is a small trust signal, and they all need to match each other exactly.

Data aggregator

A service that scrapes business information from citations across the internet and redistributes it elsewhere. Keeping your citations clean and consistent keeps these correct too, automatically.

The Core 30

The website structure this guide recommends: one homepage, a few category pages, and roughly 25 to 30 individual service pages, all mirroring your GBP's categories and services exactly.

Editorial link

A link placed inside a sentence of real content (as opposed to a menu or footer link). Google treats these as much stronger votes of relevance than navigation links.

On-page SEO

Everything about how an individual page is built and written that affects how well it ranks: its title, headings, URL, images, and the words on the page itself. Different from off-page SEO, which is about backlinks and citations from other sites.

URL slug

The part of a web address that comes after the domain name. In "example.com/plumber-austin," the slug is "plumber-austin."

Title tag

The clickable blue headline text that shows up for a page in Google's search results. Set in the page's code, not always the same as what's visibly written on the page itself.

Meta description

The short block of descriptive text that appears under the title tag in Google's search results. Doesn't directly affect ranking much, but affects whether people actually click.

H1, H2, H3 (headings)

The heading levels on a web page, from biggest/most important (H1, usually the page's main title) down to smaller subheadings (H2, H3). Google uses these to understand a page's structure and topic.

Interlinking

Linking between pages on your own website. Helps Google understand how your pages relate to each other and spreads ranking authority around the site.

Outbound link

A link from your page out to a different website entirely. Linking out to genuinely trustworthy sources (like Wikipedia or a news site) is actually a positive signal, most sites never bother doing it.

Schema markup

Invisible code added to a webpage that describes the business in a format search engines can read directly and exactly, instead of guessing from the regular visible text.

Rich results

The enhanced, more visual search results you sometimes see (with star ratings, expandable questions, step lists, extra images). Produced by having the right schema markup on a page.

Backlink

A link from someone else's website pointing to yours. One of the main ways Google decides whether to trust a website.

Do-follow link

A backlink that passes ranking value to your site, a genuine vote of confidence in Google's eyes.

No-follow link

A backlink that doesn't pass ranking value, but can still send real visitors and build visibility. Many large platforms (Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram) make all outbound links no-follow automatically.

Anchor text

The clickable words of a link. In "call this Dallas plumber today," if "this Dallas plumber" is the clickable blue part, that's the anchor text.

EMD (Exact Match Domain)

A domain name or business name that contains the exact keyword someone would search for, like "DallasPlumberPros.com." Can help rankings but carries real risk if it looks manipulative.

Guest post

An article you write (or pay to have written) that gets published on someone else's website, usually with a link back to yours included.

Web 2.0 site

A small, free mini-website or blog built on a free platform (like WordPress.com or Wix) used mainly to create an extra backlink pointing to your main site.

PBN (private blog network)

A group of websites, often built from expired domains, owned secretly by one person specifically to link to their main site. Against Google's guidelines and risky, mentioned in this guide only as something to know about, not something to do.

Keyword

The actual words and phrases people type into Google when searching. "Plumber Dallas" is a keyword.

Long-tail keyword

A longer, more specific search phrase with lower search volume but also much less competition, like "emergency water heater repair downtown Dallas" instead of just "plumber."

Topical relevance

How much Google trusts that you're a genuine expert on a subject, built by covering a topic thoroughly across multiple pages.

Geographic relevance

How far from your business address Google trusts you enough to rank you. Built with location-specific pages targeting real neighborhoods and landmarks.

Location page

A page built specifically to target one city, suburb, or neighborhood, with content written specifically for that area, not a generic page with the city name swapped in.

SSL / HTTPS

The padlock-and-encryption setup that makes a website secure. Shows as "https://" instead of "http://" in the address bar. A site without it shows visitors a warning and is a (small) ranking factor.

This guide is general education, not a promise of results. Google changes its rules, so check its help center for the latest. Map pack click share: Backlinko 2024, as cited by BrightLocal.

WANT HELP?

Would you rather we do it for you?

That is what we do. We handle your Google Business Profile and your website as one connected system, from the first audit to weekly updates, so you can keep running your business.

Our guarantee: if your rankings don't show measurable improvement within 60 days, we give you your money back, and we keep working for free until they do. No extra investment from you. We don't stop until you see real movement.

Book a call and we will talk about your business and your goals. No pressure, just a real conversation.

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