Beginner Wordpress SEO: How to Setup and Optimize Your Blog

Mike Johnson

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Are you tired of trying to figure out the best way to setup and optimize your blog for WordPress SEO? Do you keep getting mixed messages and can't figure out who you should trust to give you the help you need?

You can relax and take a deep breath. This tutorial is going to show you everything you need to do in order to setup and optimize your site right.

You have to understand that Search Engine Optimization in 2017 is focused on high quality content and user engagement. Those are the key terms you are likely to hear as you begin your SEO education. **Beginner WordPress SEO** is not necessarily just for beginners.

WordPress SEO is for **anyone** who wants to make sure their blog is setup and optimized for SEO. This ensures that every time you create a new post or page, your site will rank faster and higher **EVERY TIME ALL THE TIME!**

***Note:** If you are still asking yourself, "What is WordPress SEO?", then you might want to read this.

I have been doing WordPress SEO for over 15 years. In fact, with my Auto Blogging business from years ago, I had to be great at SEO to succeed. I couldn't just be good or OK. I had to know how to beat Google or my business would have never lasted.

I created hundreds of blogs over the years and I learned the best way to setup a WordPress blog for SEO. In fact, I learned a lot of lessons from both my successes and failures. If you are one of my students, you already know this,

Now you get to take advantage of everything I've learned and put it into use right now. Plus, you get to see why this is a crucial set of steps required by anyone who is setting up a new site or even running a current one.

How to Setup and Optimize Your Blog for WordPress SEO

I've always approached SEO for WordPress through the basic principles of SEO. I focus on the three major search engine factor areas and by doing this I can focus my optimization efforts.

The 3 Major Search Engine Optimization Factor Areas:

- On-site SEO
- On-Page SEO
- Off-Site SEO

We will be covering all 3 aspects here in this guide and by the end you will be able to publish content on your site knowing your WordPress blog has been setup correctly and is highly optimized. Your blog will then be able to maximize it's SEO Rankings every time you publish a new post or page.

It's all about establishing a foundation for SEO and that's what we are going to do.

We are going to go through this as if you haven't even installed your site yet and take it step by step. This will help you make sure you you do hit every SEO Milestone as you go. I don't want you to miss anything.

Let's get started.

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1. Selecting Your Domain Name

A few years ago the selection of your domain name was a critical part of SEO. The keywords in the domain and whether or not it was a .com were both hugely important factors.

This is not something you need to worry about now. Now any domain will do. That being said, I still think picking the right domain is important for brand recognition.

You always want to pick a name which is easy to recognize and is easy to remember. Anything which is too complicated or long will diminish the intrinsic value of the domain. So pick the right one in the beginning and while having your site's target keywords in the title might give it a slight boost, it really won't provide much if any help.

Branding will be more important to your business in the long run.

The most asked question I get about domain names is if you should use "www" in front of your domain like i do here on my site (www.getstarted.net). The answer is no. You do not have to use the "www" for SEO purposes. There are some technical benefits to using it, but we won't go over those here. I do recommend using it, but it is not going to make or break your SEO.

2. Selecting Your Web Host

Yes, website hosting is an important part of your WordPress SEO. I always get questions asking why hosting is such an important part of the process and the answer is simple.

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One of Google's ranking factors is Site Speed (page load times). They check this for both desktop and mobile versions of your site and each will affect you site's rankings accordingly.

Site speed and loading times are affected greatly by the web host you use for your site. The more optimized the server you are on, the faster your site will be and the faster it will load.

One of Google's newest and most important ranking factors is "**User Experience**". Site speed and loading times are a part of this and critical user experience elements which you cannot ignore.

I like to use two (2) seconds as my benchmark for page loading times. Google says you have an average of 2 seconds to capture the attention of your site's visitors. If your pages don't even load in 2-3 seconds, you might have a problem.

There are other ways of improving user experience, site speed, and page load times; but it all begins with your web host. ***We will go over more ways to improve this later in this Tutorial, so please keep reading.***

There are a lot of hosting options out there, but I have a few recommendations to help get you started.

- **SiteGround** - This is specialized WordPress Hosting starting at just $3.95/ Month with Free SSL, CDN, and Supercacher.
- **Liquid Web WordPress Hosting** - This is a highly optimized solution for WordPress sites which are looking to grow. *This is a fully managed solution with a Free SSL Certificate.

I go over this and a lot more in my **How to Start a Blog guide**. If you are just getting started, I definitely recommend reading it. Especially if you just installed your blog or are getting ready to. It will help you to start there first before going through your SEO setup and optimization process.

Once you have web hosting and have installed your WordPress blog, it is time to start digging into the individual settings and optimizations of your site.

SSL Certificate

Having an SSL Certificate on your site is great for security. It is also a Google ranking factor. With this being a relatively new factor, it is safe to say it will only grow in importance.

Security and safety of a website is part of the user experience equation, so I expect this to be something you will need on your site sooner than later.

I am going to be switching everything here to SSL soon. It will be a pain, but I know I have to do it.

This is one of those things which really need to be done by your host. If you cannot do it yourself, use your hosting support. More time than not, they are happy to help with this, especially if it helps you become a long term customer.

The hosting companies above all have free SSL options, making it easier to get started. You can also use the Free SSL service, **Let's Encrypt**. It is a solid open source option for taking care of your blog. If you are running an ecommerce shopping cart, I suggest upgrading to a higher level SSL. For SEO purposes on a blog, the free option is definitely enough.

3. Set Your Permalinks

This will make your old default Wordrpess URLs go from looking like this:

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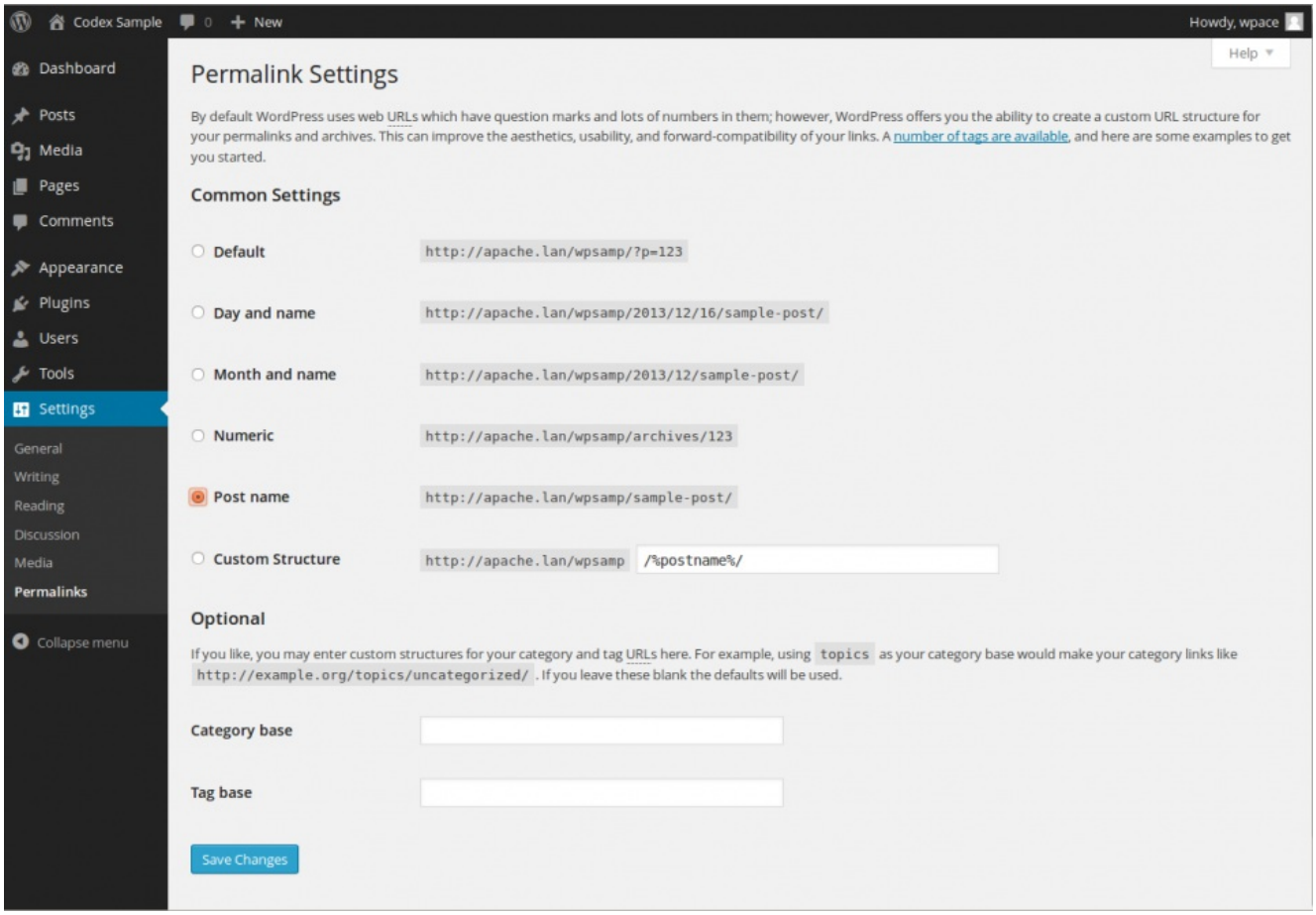
http://www.getstarted.net/?p=214

To looking great like this:

http://www.getstarted.net/beginner-wordpress-seo-how-to-setup-optimize-blog/

ALERT: If you are new to WordPress and this is already getting confusing, hop on over to my **STARTER Academy** and learn How to Use WordPress and a lot more for *free*. It only takes **30 seconds** to get started!



Once you've done this you now have "**SEO Friendly URLs**".

This step will also automatically create the settings which actually make this work inside your .htaccess file in the root of your site directory. The .htaccess file controls redirects, special commands, and the URL Rewrite commands which make this new and SEO Friendly URL structure possible.

***NOTE:** If you do not have an .htaccess file, performing this action will automatically create it for you. I have actually deleted my file accidentally in the past and all I had to do to fix my site was to Save my Permalinks Settings and this action created a new file and fixed my site instantly.

4. Install the Yoast WordPress SEO Plugin

It might sound simple, but installing a plugin, no matter how many features it has, will **NOT** optimize your blog for SEO. There are still a lot of steps you need to follow after installation until your blog is truly optimized.

You can do a search for the plugin from inside your WordPress installation admin menu by going to **Plugin > Add New** and typing "**Yoast SEO**" in the search box. You can then **install it and activate the plugin** right from inside the WordPress Admin. If you want to do it manually, you can download the plugin from the **WordPress Repository here**.

The WordPress SEO plugin is a great free option for fulfilling the optimization tasks required for SEO on your site. There is a Premium Version, but it isn't something I would say that is required unless you are in a very competitive niche.

5. Yoast SEO General Settings

The first thing we need to do after installation is connect your site with the Google Search Console. We will do this in the **General** Settings portion of the Yoast SEO plugin in the **Webmaster Tools** Verification tab.

Connect Google Search Console

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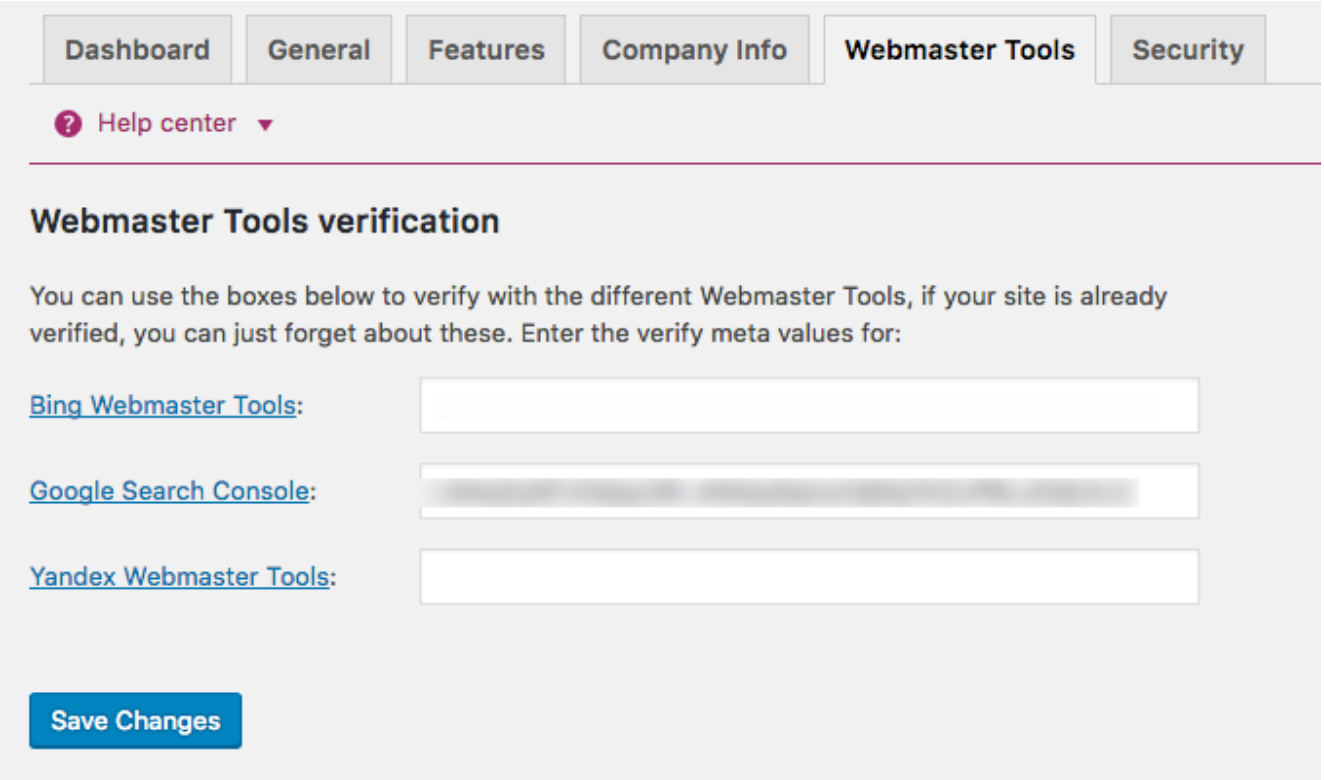
While Bing and Yandex are great search engines in their own right, I recommend connecting Google Search Console first What this does is allow you to use the tools inside Search Console to get Google to index and crawl your site when you are ready among other things.

Here's what you need to do.

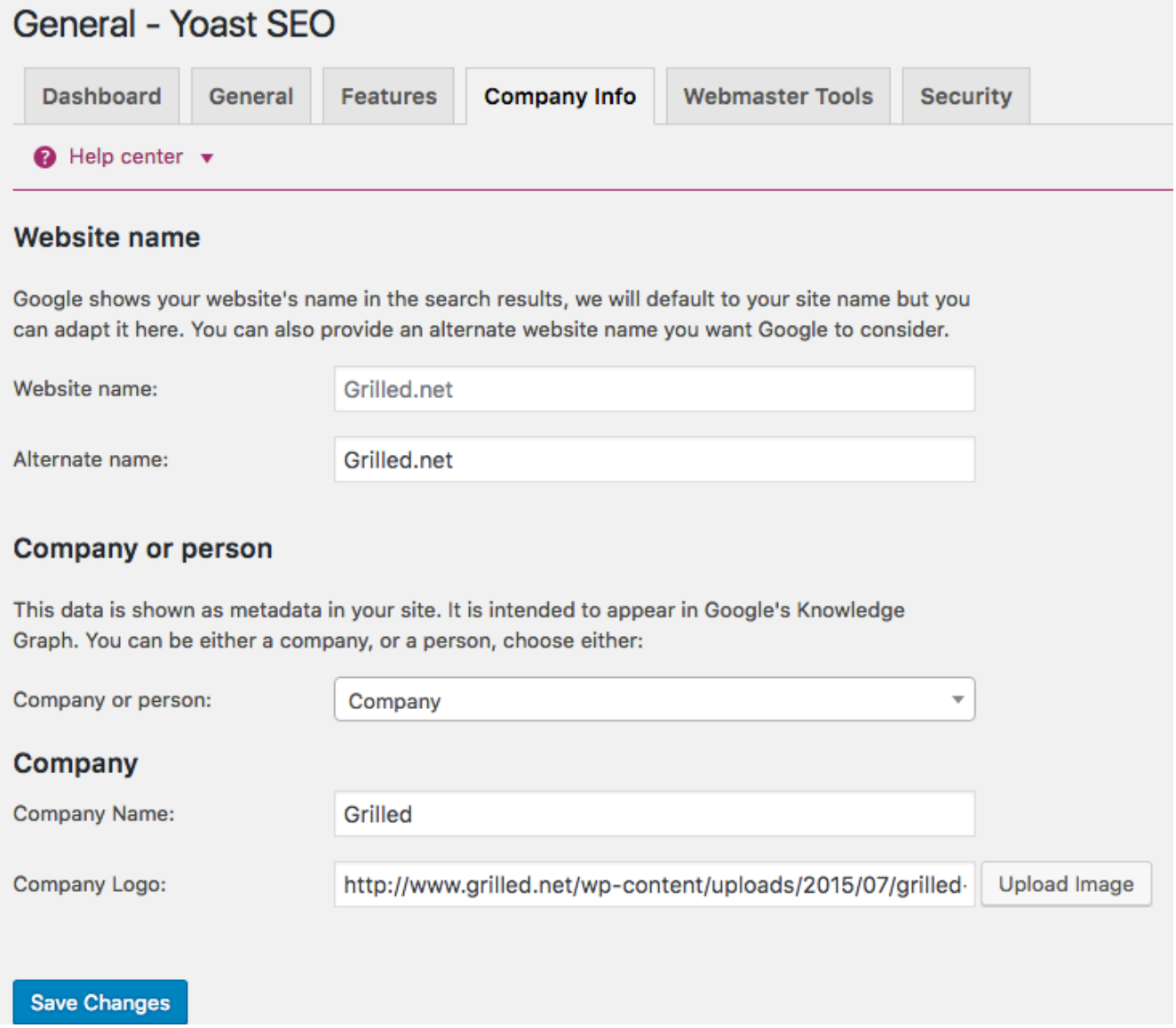
1. Create your account at Google Search Console.
2. Click on the **Red** "Add a Property" button.
3. Choose the Meta Tag Verification option.
4. Copy the Meta Tag html and Paste it into the Google Search Console section of the Webmaster Verification section of Yoast SEO and click the Save button.
5. Now go back to Google Search Console and click on the Verify button.
6. That's it! Your blog should now be connected to Google Search Console and Webmaster Tools.



Now that you are connected to Search Console you will be able to accomplish some other tasks which we will go over a little later.

Add Company or Business Information

In the Yoast General settings section, you then need to add your company, blog, or business information. This lets Google identify your site in search by its name or alternate name. Its rather simple. Just follow the directions and input your own information in the format shown below.



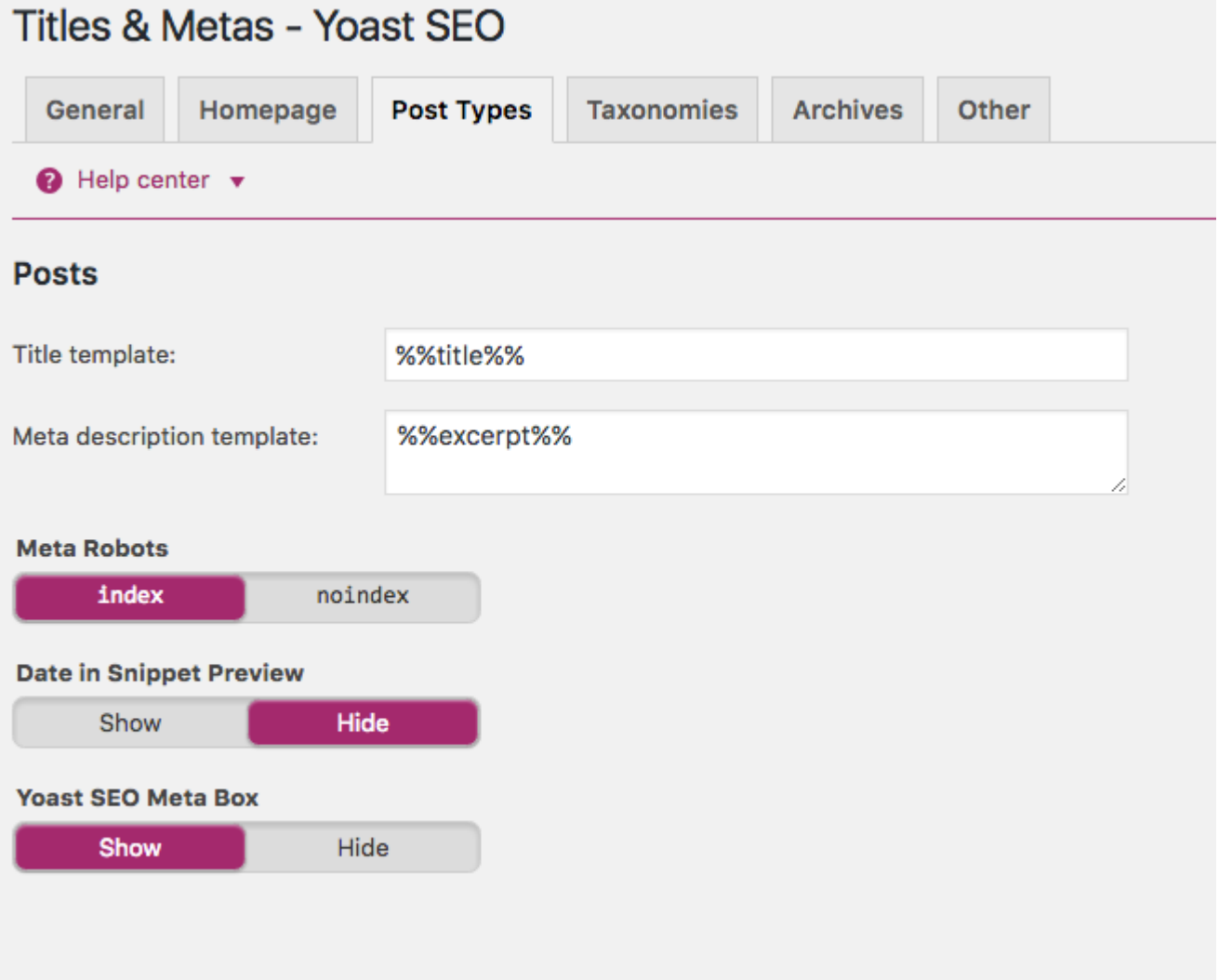
6. Setting Up Titles and Post Meta Data

The Yoast SEO plugin automatically creates post Meta Data and Titles so Google and other Search Engines can read them. This comes with preset **default** template tags which I recommend using. You can make minor tweaks, but the guys at Yoast are some of the top SEO Experts on the web. Take their recommendations seriously here.

There are 2 parts of the Yoast SEO plugin which control Post and PageMeta Titles and Meta Descriptions. The main plugin settings and page/post specific settings. I will show you how to setup each one to get the best optimization possible.

Optimizing the Titles and Descriptions Template

The main plugin settings portion in the WP Admin controls the overall template which helps ensure that all the titles and descriptions are written for every post and page on your site. Start by going to the **Titles and Metas** section in Yoast.



You can see the **Yoast template tags** I use above for blog posts (Use the Yoast default settings for Pages too). You can use these tags throughout the Yoast settings for titles and descriptions so every post and page will be SEO ready no matter what you do.

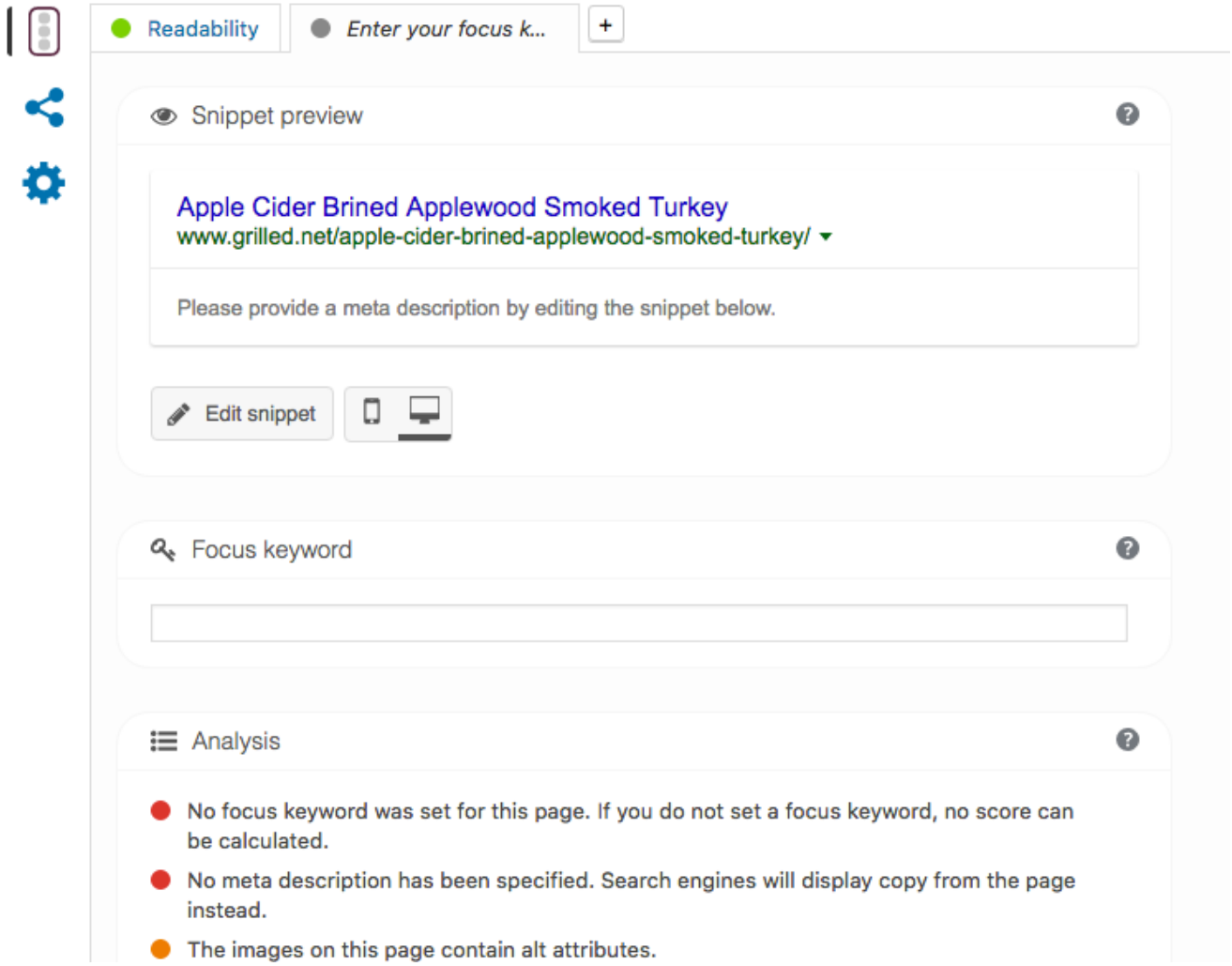
Here are a few other **template tags** you can use in this section:

- Categories, Tags and other taxonomies: `%%term_title%% %%sep%% Archives %%page%% %%sitename%%`
- Search pages: `You searched for %%searchphrase%%%%sep%% %%sitename%%`
- 404 pages: `Page not found - Error 404 %%sep%% %%sitename%%`
- Author archives: `%%name%% %%sep%% Author at %%sitename%%`

If you use **Custom Post Types**, I recommend using the same settings described for Posts and Pages above.

Optimizing for Individual Posts and Pages

The second place you can edit Titles and Descriptions is directly in the **Post and Page edit pages**. This allows you to do custom SEO specific edits to really optimize each and every post or page you create.



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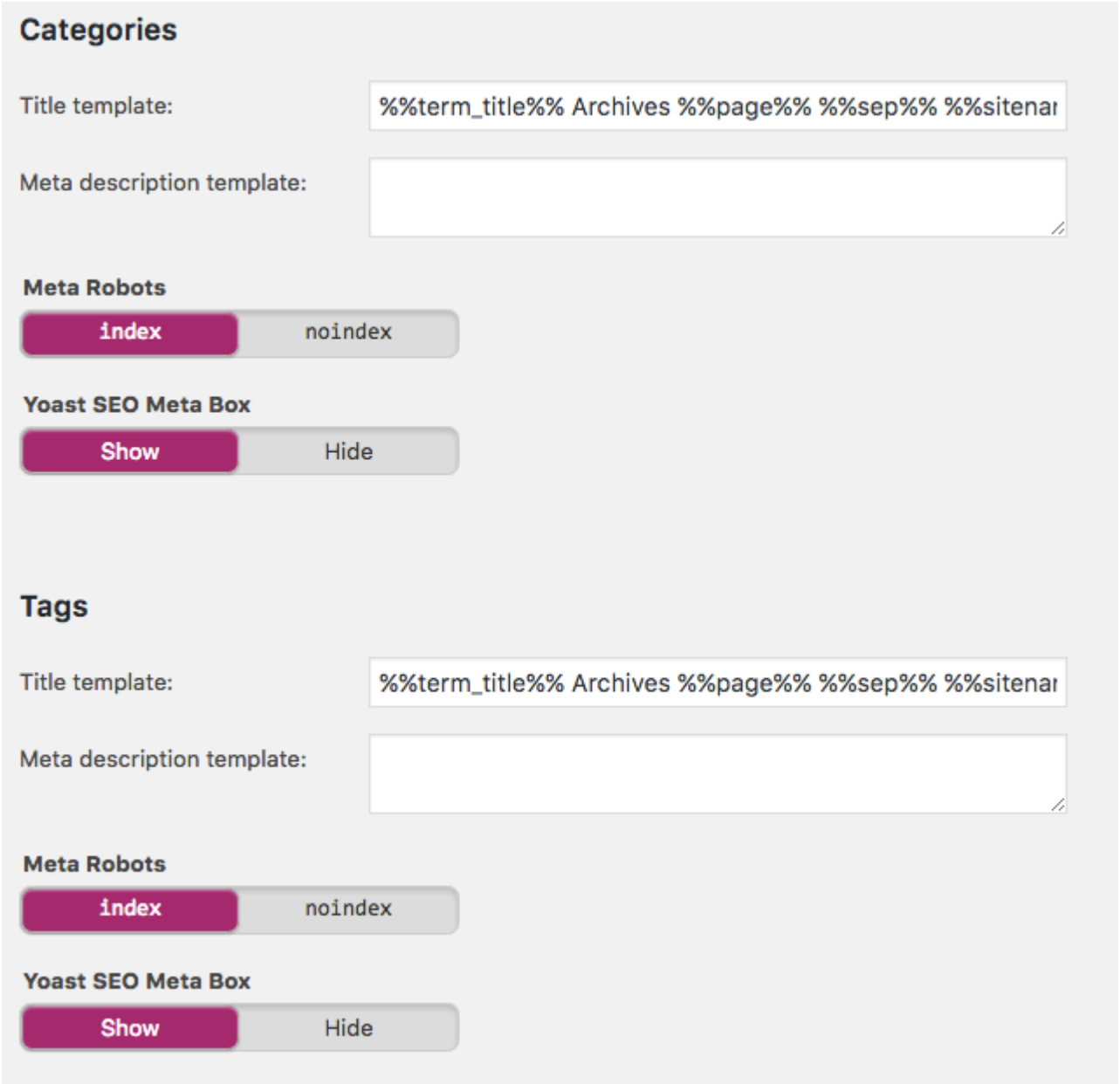
The plugin will analyze your titles, metas, and even your post content and let you know if your current optimization are good or bad. This is great for when you are starting out. It gives you a full analysis with insight into the parameters that will help you write better titles and descriptions for SEO and make your site rank faster and better.

Categories and Tags Settings

When it comes to Categories and Tags, the general rule is to allow Categories to be **indexed** and set your Tags for **noindex**. The main reason for this is because people tend to add a lot of Tags to their site. Google will still follow the Tags, but it won't index them, minimizing issues with duplicate content.

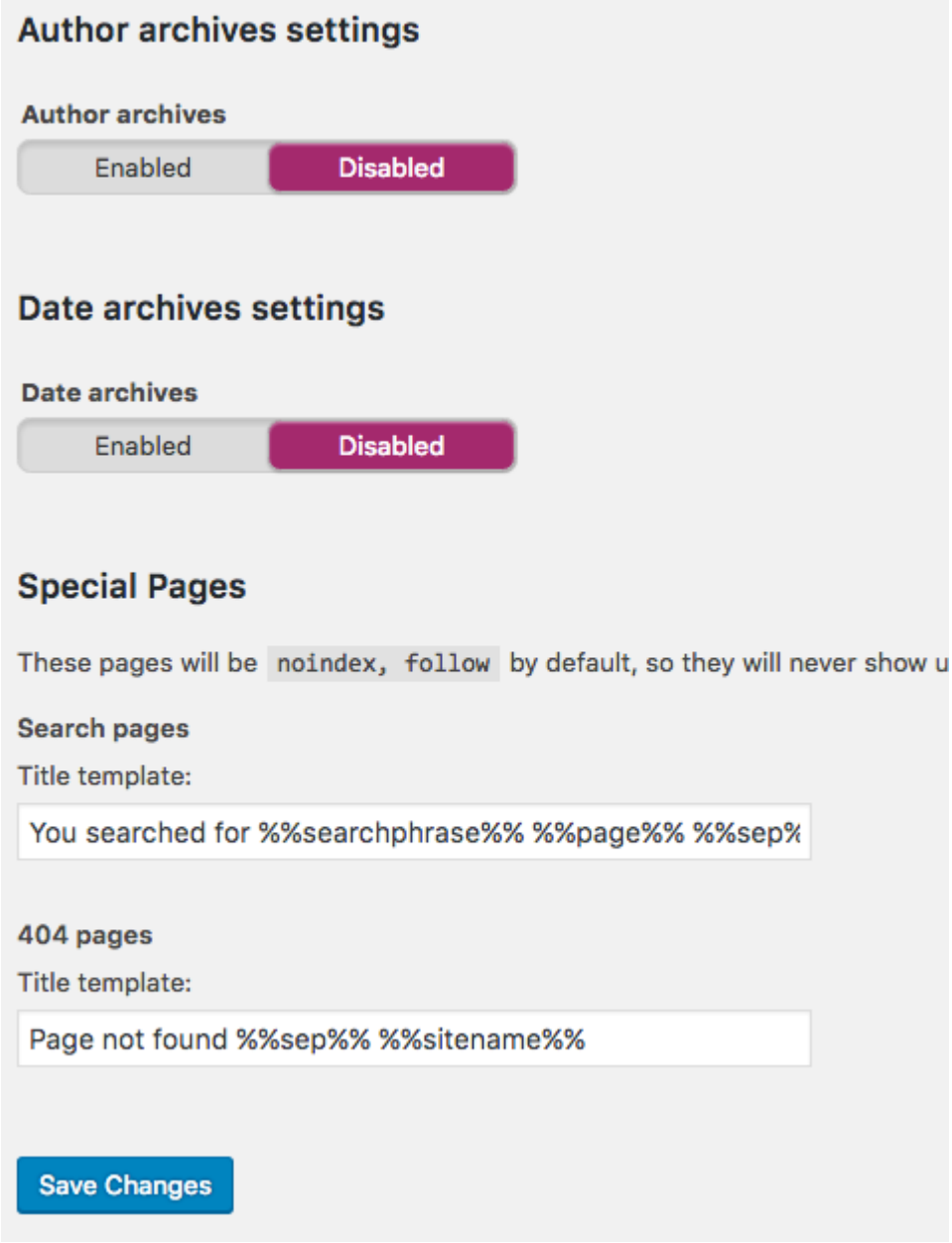
*If you do not plan on using a lot of Tags, then you can set them to **index**. In the end we are looking for the best SEO benefit and it is better to have one and not the other. Google will still follow the links either way and this is what we care about the most in this instance.

If you use **Custom Taxonomies**, I recommend setting these to **index** since in most cases they are specialized and would require additional attention by Google.



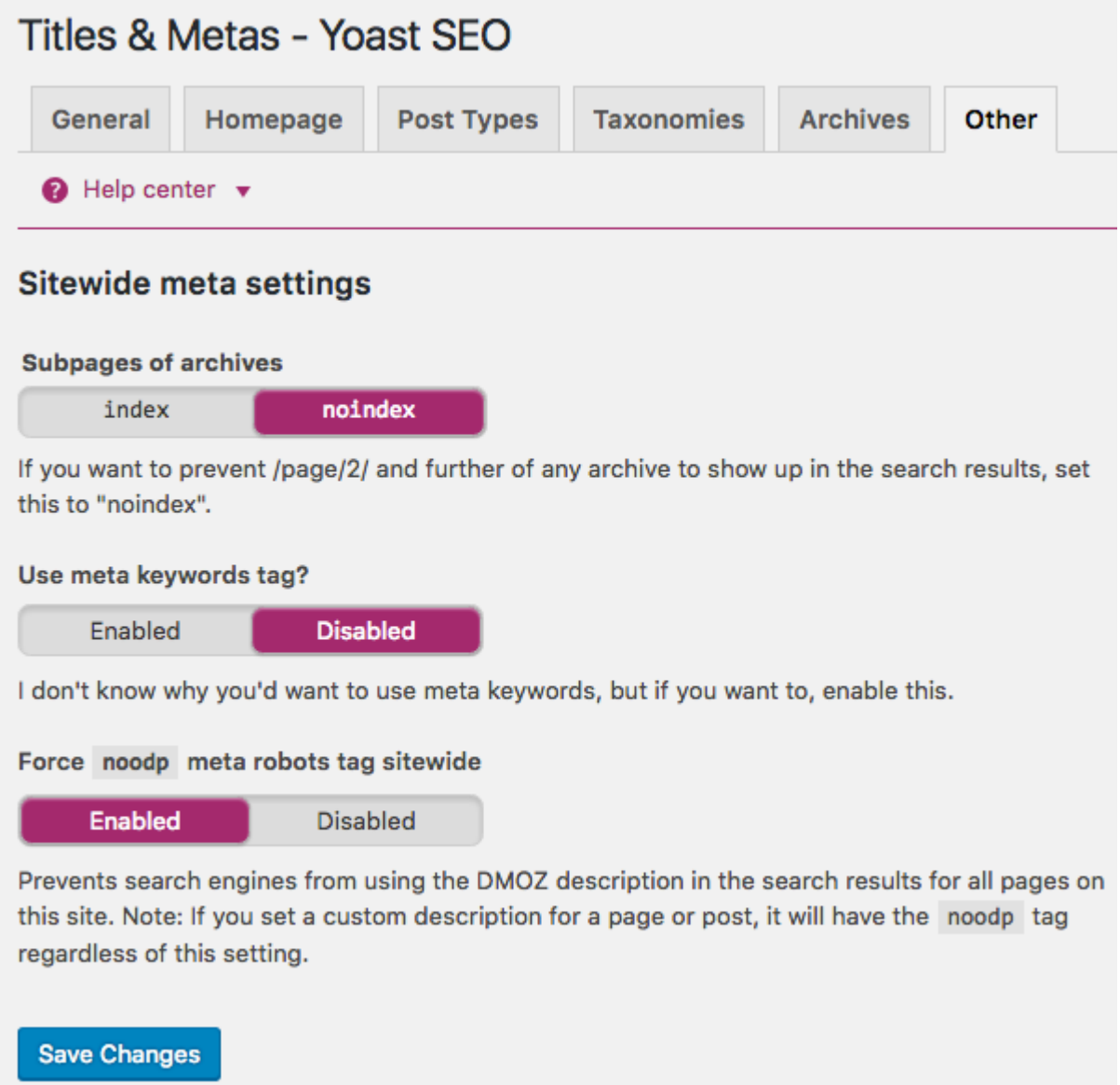
Author and Date-Based Archive Settings

For your Author Archive settings (in the **Archives Tab**), I recommend not enabling these unless you have a multi-author blog with a lot of contributors. You can see my recommended settings below. Do not allow the Date-based archives to be enabled as they simply create a lot of duplicate content on your site and this is definitely not good for your SEO.



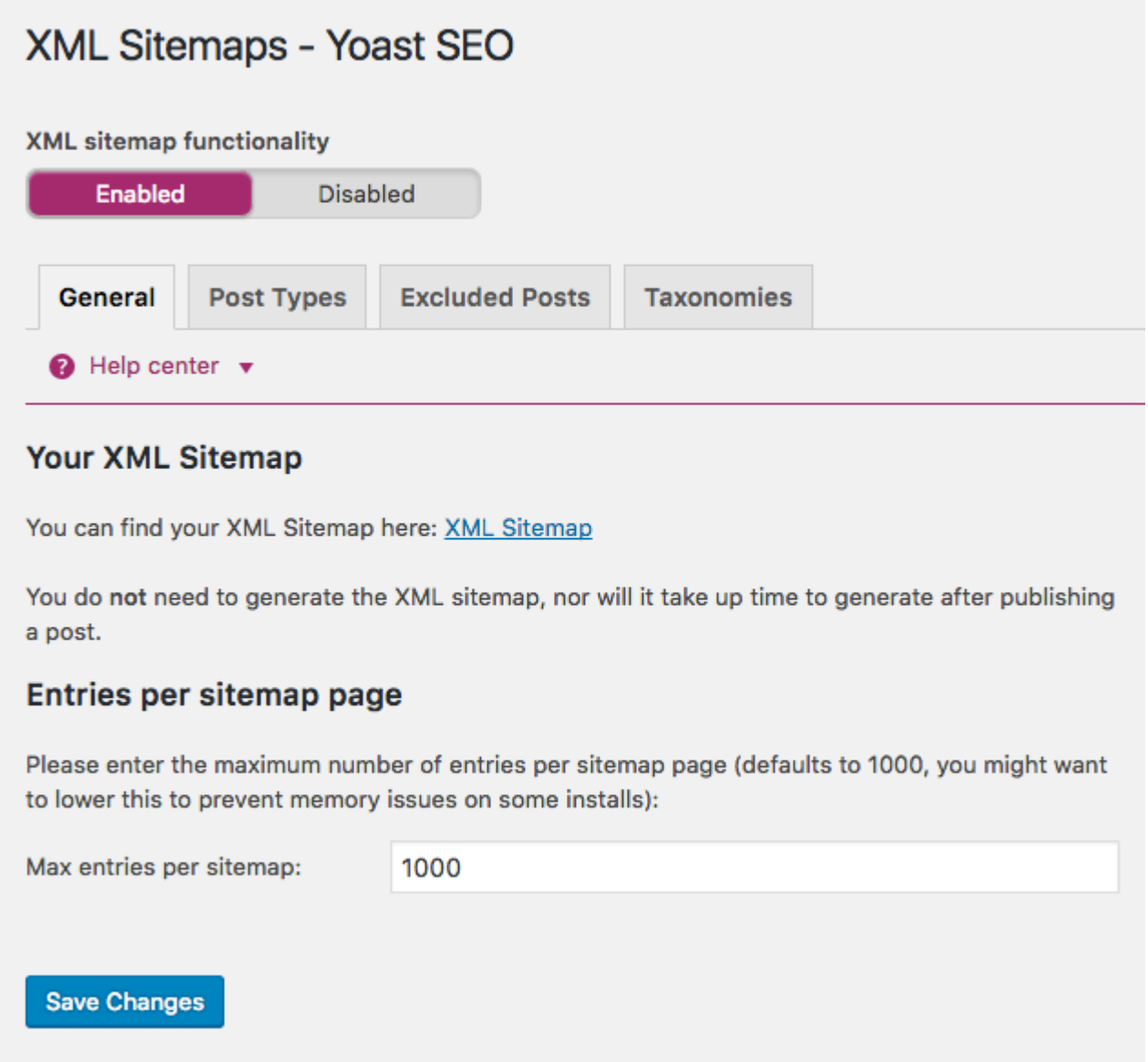
Other Sitewide Settings

In the Other section, use the Yoast default settings. As you can see in the image below, I recommend setting the Subpages of Archives to "noindex" and I definitely do not recommend using the Meta Keywords Tag in your blog. Google doesn't recognize the Meta Keywords Tag anymore and by using it you would simply be wasting your time.



7. XML Sitemap Settings

I recommend sticking to the default settings for the XML Sitemaps (SEO > XML Sitemaps) in Yoast SEO too. If you are an intermediate to advanced user you can go into each tab section and select individual parts of your site that you do or do not want included in your sitemap. It is better to leave this alone if you are not 100% sure of what you are doing since the other settings we have gone through above will tell Google how to treat your content.

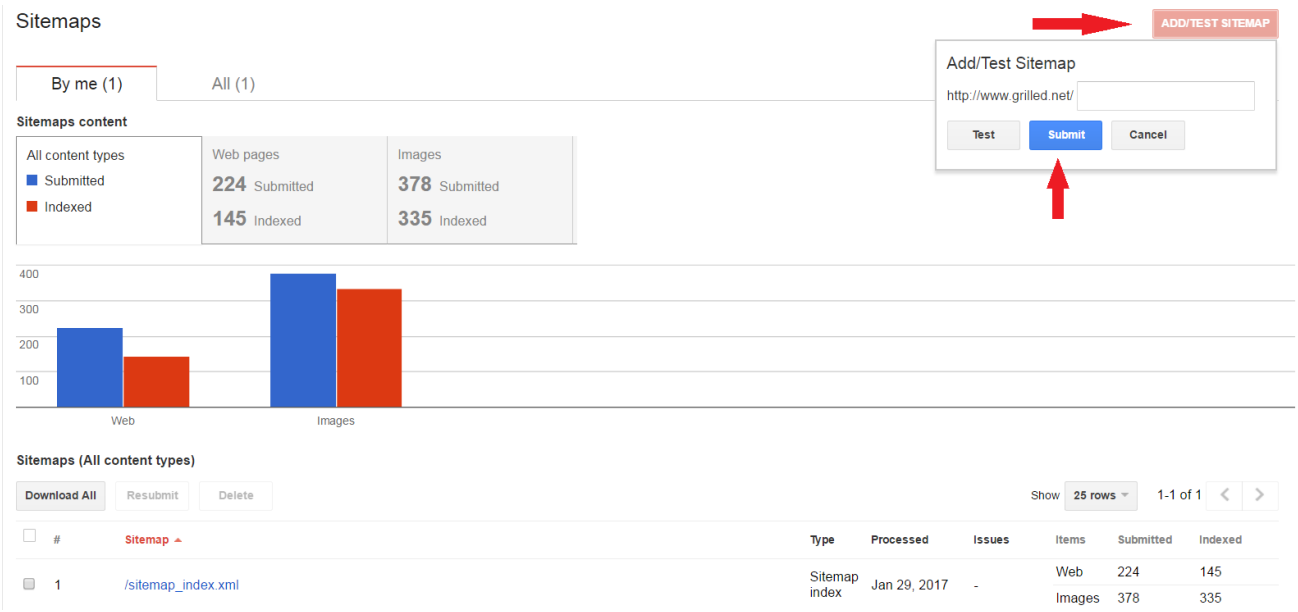


Submit Your XML SItemap to Google Search Console

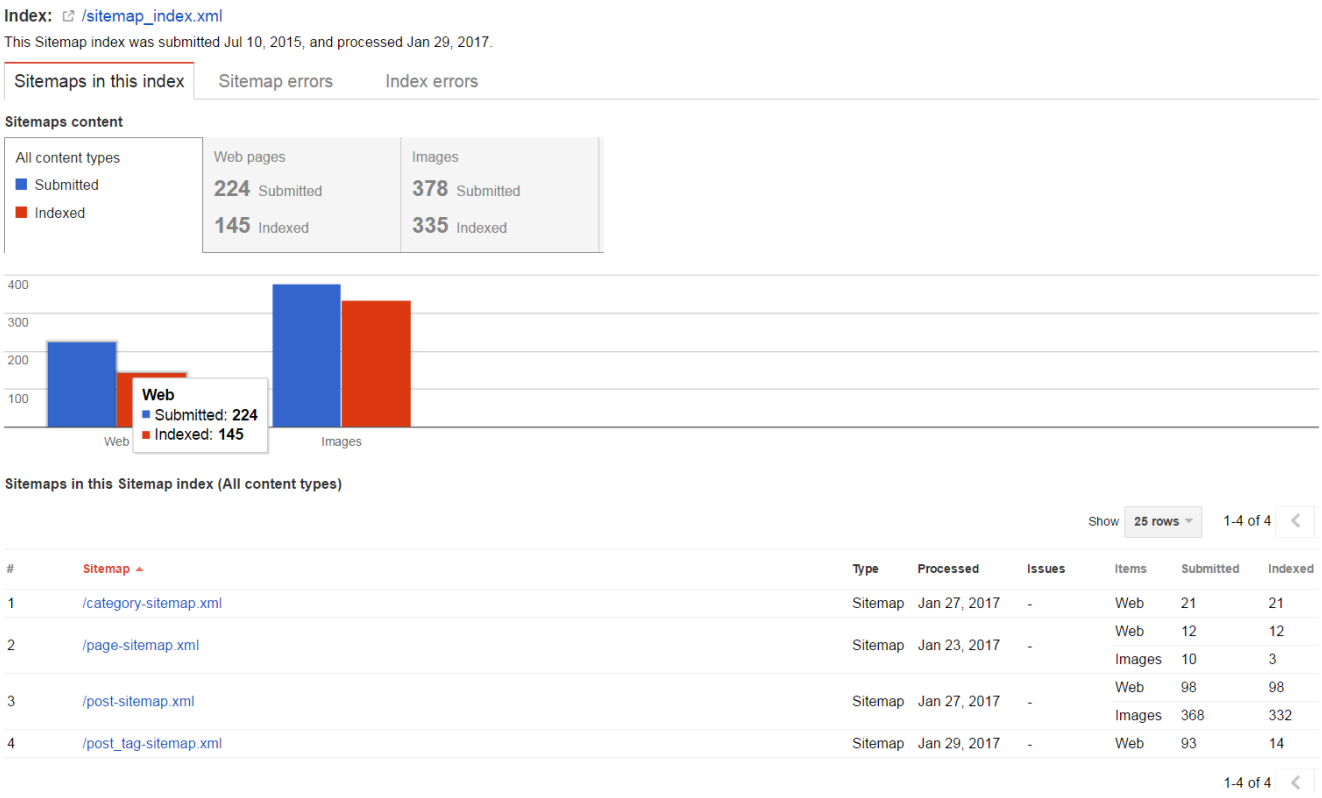
Once your XML Sitemap has been created, your first instinct may be to submit it to Google right away. I recommend setting up at least a base set of Categories, your main pages (About Us, Contact, Privacy Policy, etc.), and create at least 2 posts before submitting. This way you are adding something to Google worth indexing. If you are not ready for Google to visit your site, then hold off until you are.

Once you are ready to submit, all you have to do is go back to the **Google Search Console** account you created previously. Using the sidebar menu inside your site property management dashboard, go to **Crawl > Sitemaps**.

Next, click on the Add Test/ Sitemap button and add your sitemap URL. All you should need to add is "**sitemap_index.xml**" to the form. and then click the **Submit** Button.



Once your sitemap has been submitted (you may have to wait a few minutes), you can refresh the page. You should then see the "sitemap_index.xml" file shown. Over time, you can come back to this page and see how many pages and images Google has indexed from your site.



Index: /sitemap_index.xml

This Sitemap index was submitted Jul 10, 2015, and processed Jan 29, 2017.

Sitemaps in this index | Sitemap errors | Index errors

Sitemaps content

All content types	Web pages	Images
Submitted	224 Submitted	378 Submitted
Indexed	145 Indexed	335 Indexed

Sitemaps in this Sitemap index (All content types)

Show 25 rows 1-4 of 4

#	Sitemap	Type	Processed	Issues	Items	Submitted	Indexed
1	/category-sitemap.xml	Sitemap	Jan 27, 2017	-	Web	21	21
2	/page-sitemap.xml	Sitemap	Jan 23, 2017	-	Web	12	12
					Images	10	3
3	/post-sitemap.xml	Sitemap	Jan 27, 2017	-	Web	98	98
					Images	368	332
4	/post_tag-sitemap.xml	Sitemap	Jan 29, 2017	-	Web	93	14

1-4 of 4

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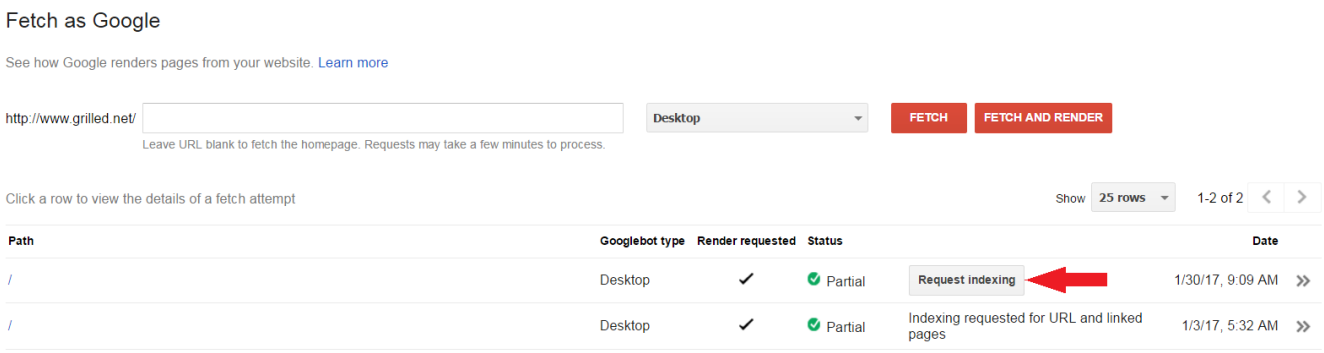
The sitemap should be checked by Google and auto updated. I still always come back and resubmit mine about every 90 days, just to make sure Google is getting the updates to my site.

8. Submitting Your Site to Google for Indexing

Once your Sitemap has been submitted, stay in Search Console and go to the **Crawl > Fetch** as Google section. Here you can submit your entire site or just specific pages for indexing. I recommend submitting your base domain URL.

Click the Fetch and Render Button and then wait for Google to process your submission. Once they are done, you will see a "Request Indexing" button. Click this button as shown below.



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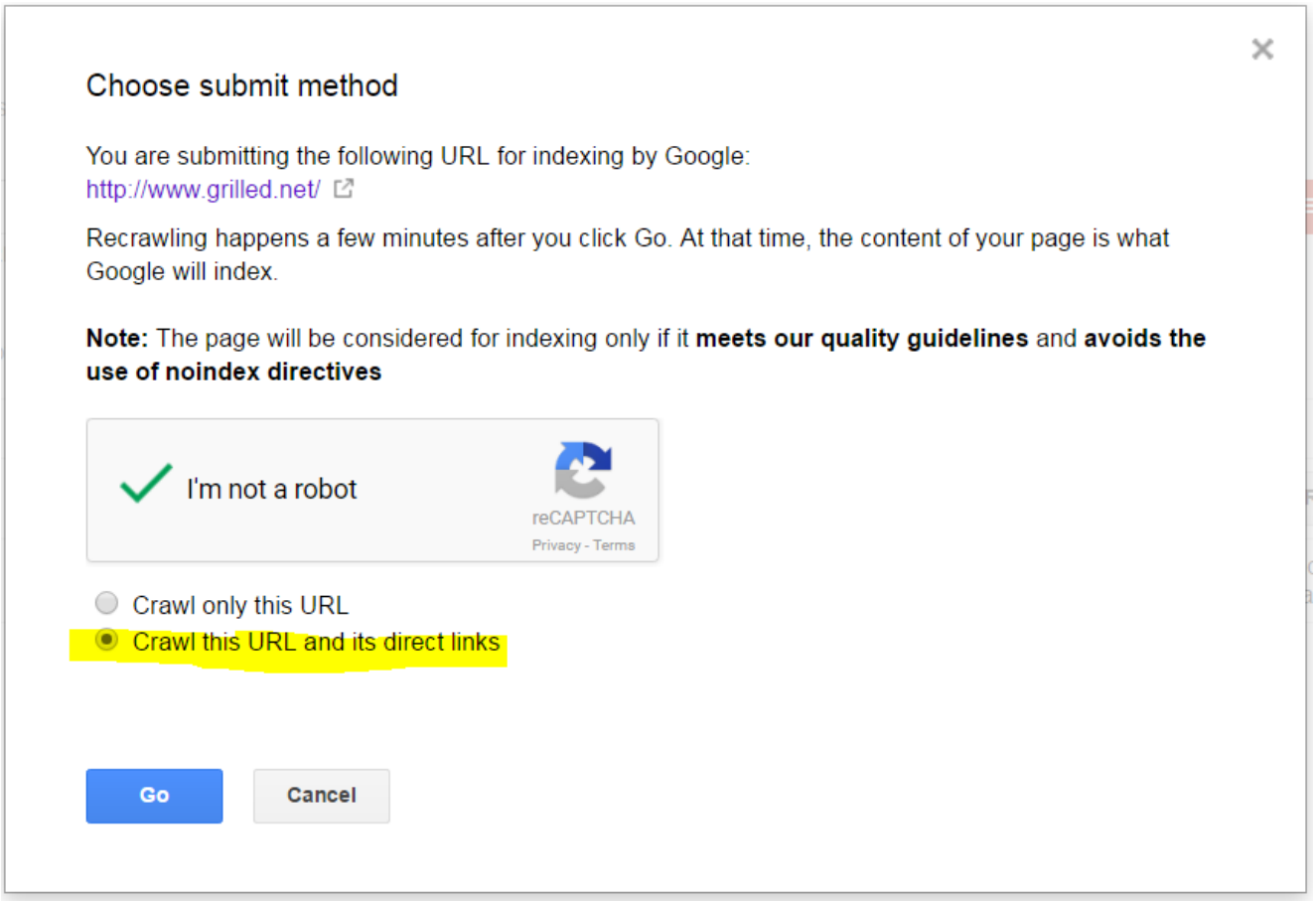
The form below will then pop-up. Select the option to "**Crawl this URL and its direct links**" and then click **Go**.



This will automatically ensure your site gets crawled by Google and the Indexing process will begin. You can come back to this page and submit the request, but don't abuse it. I recommend only doing this when you have added a new, significant item to your site.

***Do not resubmit your site** just because you created a new blog post. Google and Bing both will be Pinged by the Yoast SEO plugin every time you create a new post and your sitemap will update too. Most of the time this will be all you need.

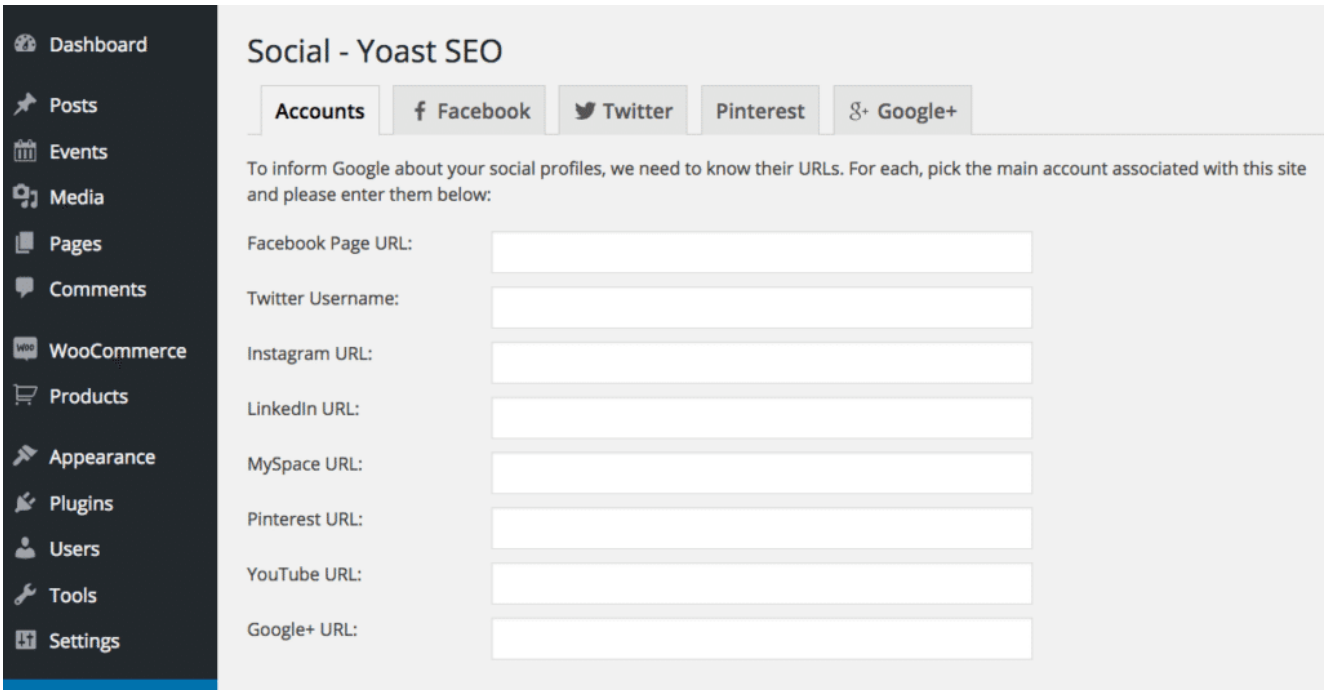
One additional thing to do when you are submitting your site, if you remember, we asked Google to "**Fetch and Render**" your site. If you click on the Status, which may say Full or Partial rendering of your site, then you will see a graphic rendering of how Google sees your site and how visitors will see your site.

This can show you if you have any potential errors or if you need to make corrections to your site. If it is a Partial rendering, you may not see your entire Home Page, so don't get worried if you don't.

9. Yoast Social SEO Settings

Next, go to the **SEO > Social** section of the Yoast SEO Plugin and fill in the entire section, going from Tab to Tab. If you do not have one of the accounts listed, that is OK, but I recommend that you go set each social media account up that is listed in the Tabbed sections at a minimum. Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and Pinterest will help you with **Social SEO** quite a bit.

I will be doing a complete Post on Social SEO and How to set it up in a highly detailed future post. So stay tuned.



10. Optimizing Your Robots.txt file

This optimization is easy. The Yoast SEO plugin takes care of your Robots.txt file for you. You shouldn't have to do anything to the file at all. In years past Google couldn't see CSS and Javascript when it visited your site. That's all changed now. Remember, Google can **"Render"** and see everything and when you block them from seeing something, they don't like it. Yes, this includes the WordPress /wp-includes file.

Don't get me wrong, there are Advanced cases where you do want to block Google, bots, or even other search engines. Things like Special Memberships, private content, images, etc. But for most sites, you want Google to see and crawl everything. You don't want to block any links which are providing you SEO value inadvertently.

The Robots.txt file you should be using now should have 2 lines in it:

```
# This space intentionally left blank
User-Agent: *
```

This will take care of everything and the Yoast plugin does it for you. If you are saying, great, I didn't know what the Robots.txt file was anyway. Then relax, you don't have to worry about it.

If you do want to edit this file, all you have to do is go to the SEO > Tools section of the Yoast SEO Plugin and click on the File Editor link. There you will be able to make any required changes to the Robots.txt file.

This is where we are pretty much done with the Yoast SEO Plugin. From here we continue on with other WordPress SEO Optimizations.

11. Optimizing Images for SEO

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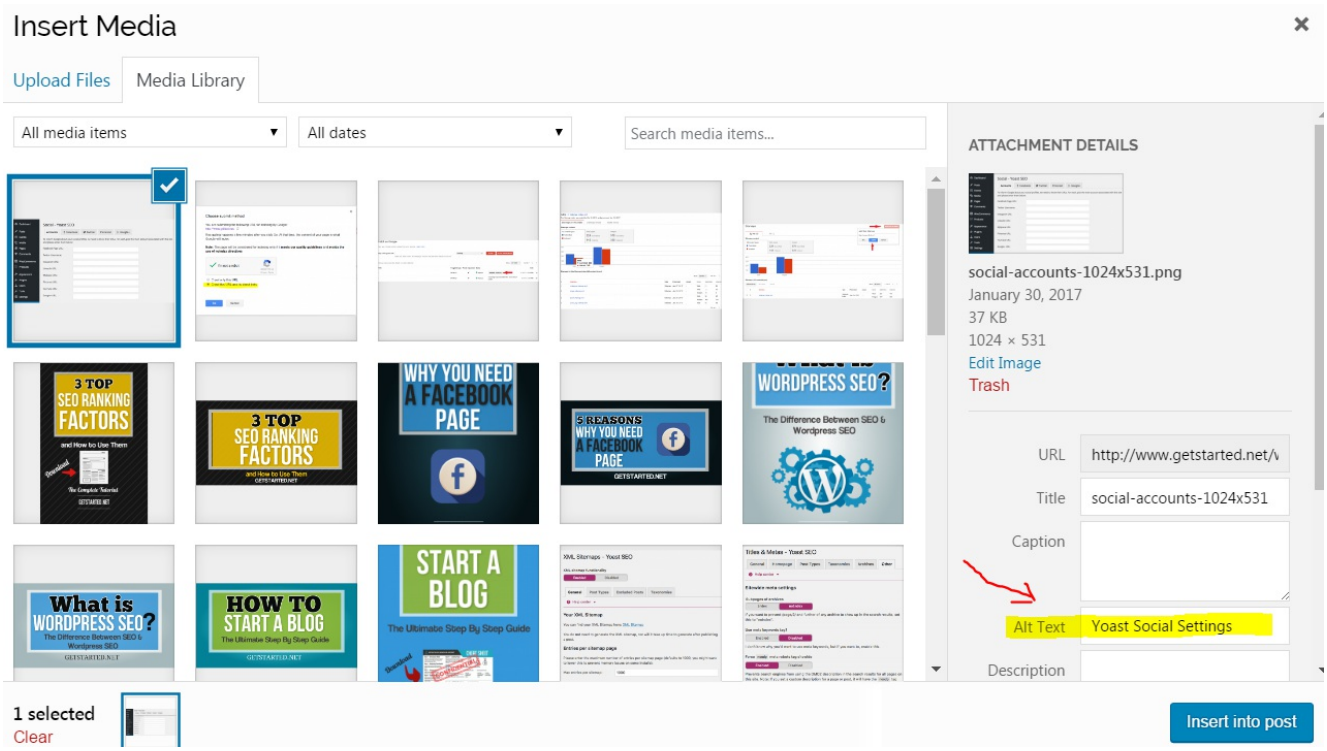
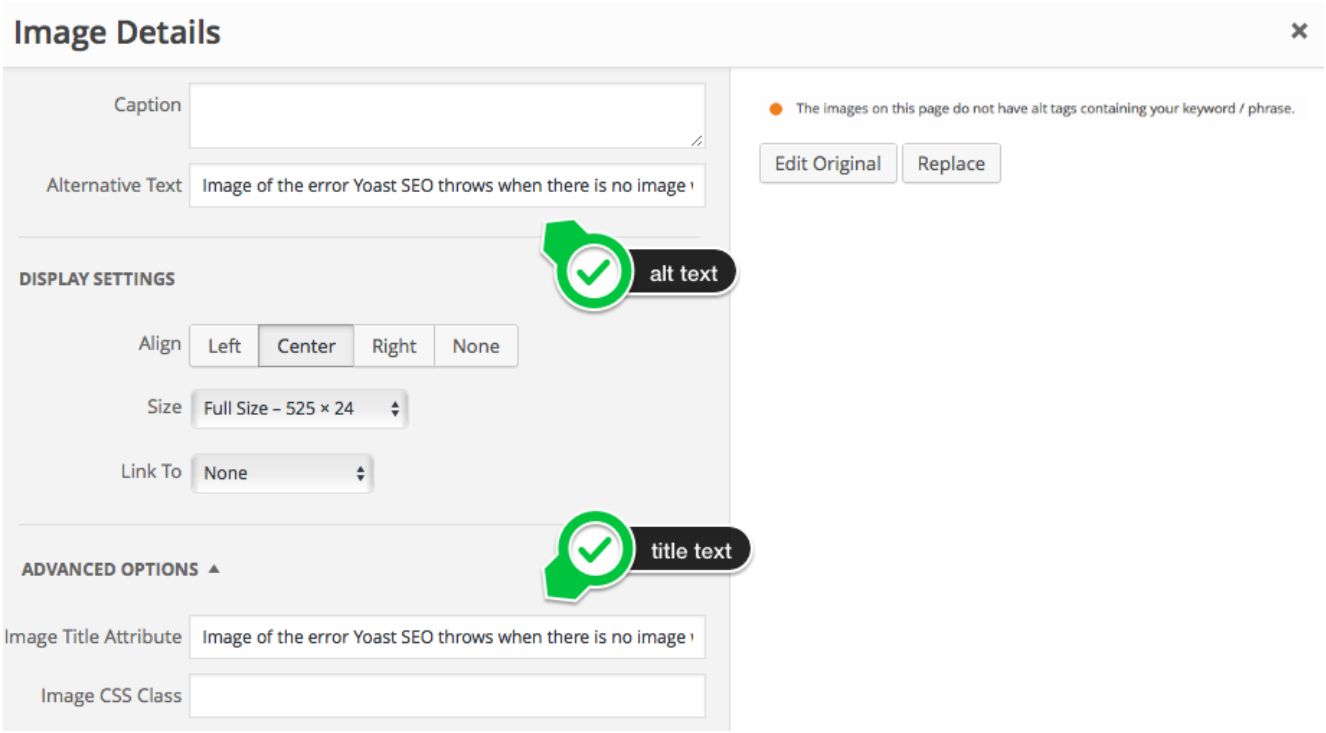
When it comes to optimizing your images in WordPress it couldn't get much easier. You see, Google only looks at the "Alternative Text" or "Alt Text" for images when it come to Image SEO. In WordPress, all you have to do is fillin the Alt Text form field when you upload a new image as shown below.



You can do this in the Image Editing section of your existing images too. See below.



###p **"Editing Image Alt Tags in WordPress."**

Remember, visitors can see the Alt Text when they hover over images on your site and when people browse without images in different RSS Readers, the only see your Alt Text, so make sure it is descriptive and not spammy.

If you use a lot of images or do a lot of bulk uploading of images, you may want to use a plugin to optimize the Alt Text. I recommend using the **###a href="https://wordpress.org/plugins/seo-optimized-images/" target="_blank" class="">SEO Optimized Images**plugin. It does everything you need.

12. Site Speed Optimizations for WordPress

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When it comes to optimizing your WordPress blog for speed, there are a lot of optimizations you can do. The best optimizations often happen at the Server level and this is why Web Hosting was one of the first things I talked about in this Tutorial. Your Host will dictate what optimization you can do in a lot of cases with different types of server level caching tools, etc.

For WordPress itself, I always recommending using a caching plugin and a CDN. at a minimum. Some WordPress Hosting services provide both and make it easy to setup.

Caching Plugin

The reason for using a caching plugin is so when you have the same content on your site and it doesn't change, you can have those pages "cached" and ready to load when someone visits your site. This becomes even faster when a visitor visits more than once. They get served the cached version of the page and it makes the pages load super fast. This is what both plugins listed above do. In fact, they also do a lot more. Database caching, browser caching, CSS, HTML, and Javascript minification, and much more.

Content Delivery Network (CDN)

When I am recommending the services like MaxCDN and Cloudflare, it is because these services can help take the load off your server by hosting your images and even your static Theme files, CSS, and Javascript for you and the cost is either Free (Cloudflare which is the slower option) or for pennies per Gigabyte (MaxCDN which is much faster).

I use WP Fastest Cache and MaxCDN on this site right now. One of the drawbacks to a caching plugin sometimes is the conflicts which arise when you use a lot of fancy plugins like I do. This is why I am using this simple option here, but most of my other sites all use W3 Total Cache with MaxCDN and/ or MaxCDN and Cloudlfare combined.

For Beginners - The Easy Way to Optimize:

1. Get **###a href="https://www.siteground.com/go/wordpresss-hosting-offer" target="_blank" class="">SiteGround Hosting**.
2. Install the **WP Fastest Cache Plugin.**
3. Get **MaxCDN** Content Delivery Network **or Cloudflare**.
4. Follow the detailed **Tutorial** Here from Tom at Online Media Masters to configure everything perfectly.

For Intermediate to Advanced Users - The Best Way to Optimize:

1. Get **SiteGround** or **Liquid Web Hosting.**
2. Install the **W3 Total Cache Plugin**.
3. Get **MaxCDN** and/ or **Cloudflare** (can be used together).
4. Follow the detailed **Tutorial Here** from Tom at Online Media Masters to configure everything perfectly.

I highly recommend using this option with the W3 Total Cache Plugin and **MaxCDN** (content delivery network) with Cloudflare. This will provide your site with the best caching and site speed boost for WordPress. The Tutorial I recommend above is from site speed specialists who do this for a living. I can't do it better. Both those tutorials are flat out awesome.

The bottom line is you want to have the best user experience possible and Google will reward you for it. Don't let a slow site kill your SEO. So no matter what option you use, take action now.

Conclusion

There are a lot of other things you can do for SEO on your WordPress blog, but when it comes to Setting up and Optimizing for Beginner WordPress SEO as a base for your site, we have covered everything you need to do in order to get started. This will help your site get the jump start it needs and make every post and page you create rank faster and better than every before. **You are ready!**

Next Steps

From here you will want to concentrate on your On-Page and Off-Site optimization factors like Page and Post Titles, the content of your post and how its formatted, internal links, external links, etc.

If you want to see how you can get a jump start on these **Top SEO Ranking Factors**, read our blog post linked here. It will show you how to use them.

I hope you like the Tutorial. If you have any questions or see something I missed, let me know in the comments below. If you like the Tutorial, please share it with your friends.

Good Luck!

Mike Johnson

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