AI SEO STRATEGY

AIO, GEO, AEO & LLMO

A deep-dive reference guide — how the search landscape is being described in 2026

AI & SEO: Why These Terms Exist At All

For two decades, SEO meant one thing: rank a page highly enough in a list of blue links that a person clicks through to your site. That model is breaking down. Search results increasingly answer the question directly on the results page itself, and a growing share of research and comparison behavior now happens inside chat-based AI tools instead of a search engine at all.

Two data points are worth knowing. First, industry analysis has found that Google's AI Overviews substantially reduce click-through rates for top-ranking organic content compared to a year earlier — the page can rank #1 and still get far fewer visits, because the AI-generated summary answers the query before the user scrolls down. Second, a large share of Google searches now end without any click to a third-party website at all, a trend AI-generated answers are accelerating.

The practical consequence for a role like this one: SEO strategy can no longer stop at "rank the page." It has to also ask whether your content is the thing an AI system quotes, cites, or recommends when it answers the question on your behalf. AIO, GEO, AEO, and LLMO are the industry's (still-competing) attempts to name that new layer of work.

The Four Terms, One at a Time

Read these in order — each builds on the one before it.

AEO Answer Engine Optimization

The oldest of the four terms, and the most concrete.

AEO started as the practice of winning Google's featured snippets and knowledge panels — structuring a page so the search engine could lift out a short, direct answer. It has since expanded to cover the same goal across AI answer surfaces: ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google AI Overviews, and voice assistants.

The emphasis in AEO is citation and extraction. When someone asks an answer engine a question, is your content the thing it quotes and links back to? That means clear, direct answers near the top of a page, descriptive headings, and content structured so a machine can lift a clean answer out of it without misreading the context.

Optimizes for: individual answers — winning the specific citation for a specific question.

GEO Generative Engine Optimization

The broadest and most heavily used of the four terms in trade publications.

GEO is about shaping the whole AI-generated response, not just one extracted answer. Where AEO asks "did they quote me," GEO asks a wider set of questions: does the AI mention my brand at all, how does it

describe my brand, does it recommend me, and is that description accurate and favorable across multiple platforms?

This is brand- and entity-level work rather than page-level work. It depends on consistent signals about who you are across many sources — your own site, review platforms, directories, and third-party mentions — so that an AI system has a coherent, trustworthy picture to draw from when it generates an answer.

A widely cited Princeton study on GEO found specific tactics measurably increase how often a source is included in AI-generated answers — for example, adding expert quotes, citing statistics, and adding citations each produced meaningful visibility gains in testing. That study is a useful, concrete reference point if asked to go deeper on GEO in an interview.

Optimizes for: brand-level presence — being mentioned, described accurately, and recommended across AI-generated answers.

https://derivatex.agency/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Princeton-GEO-paper.pdf

AIO AI Optimization (or, confusingly, "AI Overviews")

The one term you should expect ambiguity on — use it carefully.

AIO is used two different ways in current industry writing, and it's worth knowing both so you're not thrown by either usage in an interview. The first, broader usage treats AIO as an umbrella term for the ongoing work of making AI systems consistently understand, trust, and recommend a brand — essentially a synonym for GEO used by some agencies and consultancies.

The second, narrower usage — more common at Google-adjacent and technical publications — uses AIO specifically to mean Google's AI Overviews, the AI-generated summary box that now appears at the top of many Google results pages. In that usage, "optimizing for AIO" means optimizing specifically to be pulled into that one Google feature, which behaves somewhat differently from how Perplexity or ChatGPT select sources.

LLMO Large Language Model Optimization

The technical, plumbing-level layer underneath GEO.

LLMO is the practice of optimizing content specifically for how large language models retrieve and cite information — both content that may have been used in a model's training data, and content retrieved live through retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) pipelines, the same underlying mechanism a tool like Google Search Console or an AI chatbot uses to pull in current information at answer time.

In practice, LLMO is best understood as the technical subset of GEO: if your GEO work is solid (clean structure, clear entity signals, authoritative citations), you are already doing most of what LLMO asks for. The distinction matters mainly for precision in conversation — LLMO is the mechanism, GEO is the goal.

Optimizes for: machine retrieval and citation mechanics — the technical layer that makes GEO's goals achievable.

How the Four Terms Relate to Each Other

A useful mental model, borrowed from industry commentary: picture nested circles. Traditional SEO sits on the outside — the broadest layer, still concerned with rankings and organic traffic. Inside that sits the newer discipline of optimizing for AI-driven search generally (what the JD groups together as AIO/GEO/AEO/LLMO). AEO and GEO overlap heavily at the center — most of the work that wins a citation in one also strengthens the other — while LLMO describes the technical mechanics that make both possible.

Don't be surprised if practitioners use these terms interchangeably, or if a given agency has picked one term as its preferred brand (GEO is currently the most commonly used term in trade publications; some firms deliberately prefer AEO instead, arguing it is clearer to non-specialist executives). Knowing that the boundaries are genuinely contested — not something you failed to learn — is itself a credible thing to say if asked to define them precisely.

Platform Behavior Differs — Know a Few Specifics

- **Google AI Overviews: draws heavily from what already ranks in Google's traditional top 10 organic results — meaning strong conventional SEO remains a prerequisite, not a replacement. Google utilizes YouTube, Reddit, Quora, and its own internal index.**
- Perplexity: rewards content freshness and source authority more heavily than Google does. Utilizes Bing for search, along with niche & regional sites.
- ChatGPT relies on publishers and news outlets, and Bing search.
- Microsoft Copilot: leans heavily on LinkedIn as a source for business-to-business queries specifically. Also utilizes Bing for search.
- General principle across all platforms: no vendor or tactic can guarantee placement inside an AI-generated answer — any pitch claiming otherwise is a red flag worth being skeptical of, which is a credible, grounded thing to say if asked how to set client expectations.

Sources for Further Reading

Paraphrased and summarized above; consult these directly for full detail or to stay current, since this field is moving quickly.

- Generative engine optimization — Wikipedia — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generative_engine_optimization
- AEO vs GEO: Answer vs Generative Engine Optimization — 2Point Agency — https://www.2pointagency.com/blog/aeo-vs-geo/
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- AEO and GEO in 2026: Powerful AI Search Optimization Tips — Crawlvision — https://www.crawlvision.com/blog/aeo-and-geo-in-2026-the-complete-guide/
- AI Search Optimization In 2026: AEO, AIO & GEO — EisnerAmper — https://eagrowthsolutions.com/ai-search-optimization/

- What is Generative Engine Optimization? GEO vs AEO vs SEO Guide 2026 — Jasper — https://www.jasper.ai/blog/geo-aeo