REVIEWABLE STUDY GUIDE

Complete SEO & AI-SEO Course (2026)

Source: YouTube video transcript, broken into short, self-contained chunks for review.
Each chapter is split into numbered sections (a few minutes of reading each), and closes with a quick recall box you can use to self-test before moving on.

The Complete SEO & AI SEO Course for 2026 (Full Beginner's Guide)
Surfer Academy and Matt Kenyon
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Chapter 1 — What Is SEO?

Why SEO still matters, and how the modern search results page actually works.

1.1 Is SEO dead? (No — it's the foundation of AI search)

AI chatbots and Google AI Overviews are pulling attention away from classic "blue link" search, leading many to declare SEO dead. But Google still processes billions of searches a day (up ~20% last year) and sends roughly 190x more traffic to websites than ChatGPT does. Just as important: AI assistants are built on top of traditional search infrastructure. ChatGPT relies on Bing's index; Perplexity runs its own crawler but still leans heavily on Bing underneath, and even AI tools with their own indexes are crawling the same pages that already rank in traditional search. If a site doesn't show up in Google or Bing, it's likely invisible to AI assistants too.

REVIEW / RECALL

- SEO isn't competing with AI search — it's the foundation AI search is built on.
- Traffic reality check: Google still sends ~190x more traffic than ChatGPT.
- Almost every AI assistant depends on Bing's (or a similar) underlying web index.

1.2 What SEO actually is

SEO historically means "search engine optimization," but a better modern framing (credited to Ashley Liddell) is "search everywhere optimization": getting your website to show up wherever people search for things related to your business. Google search works in three steps:

- **Crawl —** Automated bots read pages across the web, following links from page to page.
- **Index —** Google stores what those bots find in a massive library (its index). If a page isn't indexed, it can't appear in results.
- **Rank —** When someone searches, Google selects and orders the results it judges most relevant, trustworthy, and useful — that order is what SEO tries to influence.

1.3 Anatomy of a modern search results page (SERP)

Today's SERP is far more than "10 blue links." A typical results page can include, from top to bottom: an AI Overview (Google's AI-generated summary), sponsored ads, organic results (the ones earned through SEO), "People Also Ask" boxes, video carousels, a local map pack (for location-based searches), and knowledge panels. SEO strategy needs to account for all of these surfaces, not just the classic organic listing.

1.4 SEO as a business goal, not a vanity goal

A business shouldn't chase an "SEO goal" in isolation — it should chase a business goal (more customers, revenue, leads), and SEO is one of the most reliable paths there because it reaches people at the exact moment they're already looking for a solution. That's the key difference from interruption-based ads (like a scrolling social ad): intent. The video illustrates this using three running example businesses: a SaaS company selling proposal software, an e-commerce specialty coffee brand, and a managed cybersecurity platform — showing that SEO principles stay the same, but tactical decisions differ by business type.

REVIEW / RECALL

- SEO = search everywhere optimization, not just Google optimization.
- Three steps of search: Crawl → Index → Rank.

- The always-ask question before any SEO work: "What are people actually searching for, and what do they want when they search it?"

Chapter 2 — Mastering Search Intent

The single most important concept in SEO — figuring out what a searcher actually wants.

2.1 The four types of search intent

- **Informational —** e.g. "how to train your puppy" — the searcher wants to learn something.
- **Commercial —** e.g. "best dog training classes" — the searcher is willing to spend money but is still comparing options.
- **Transactional —** e.g. "dog training class near me sign up" — the searcher knows what they want and is ready to buy.
- **Navigational / Branded —** e.g. "petsmart dog training" — the searcher is using Google to navigate directly to a known brand.

2.2 How to figure out intent: mirror the SERP

The fastest way to determine intent for any keyword is to simply Google it and look at what's already ranking — Google has effectively done the research already, and the top 10 results show exactly what type of content satisfies that searcher. The job is then to match that intent and execute it better than the current results. (Reminder: SERP = Search Engine Results Page.)

2.3 Keyword length vs. competition, and long-tail keywords

Rule of thumb: shorter keywords tend to be more competitive, higher volume, and less useful, because Google can't tell exactly what the searcher wants (example: "coffee" gets 650,000+ monthly searches in the US but returns a messy, unfocused SERP). Longer, more specific "long-tail" phrases (example: "best dark roast coffee beans for espresso") have lower individual volume but much clearer intent and far less competition — and in aggregate can drive solid traffic. Newer or lower-authority sites should start by building authority on long-tail keywords before working up to head terms.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Four intent types: informational, commercial, transactional, navigational/branded.
- To find intent: Google the keyword and study what's already ranking.
- Long-tail keywords = lower volume individually, clearer intent, much less competition.

2.4 Intent in the AI era: zero-click search

Google's AI Overviews now summarize results across informational, commercial, and even transactional queries — meaning Google can answer a searcher's question, and sometimes influence a purchase decision, before a single link is clicked. This is called zero-click marketing. Because of it, content needs to go deeper than whatever the AI summary already covers in order to still earn the click; surface-level content no longer cuts it.

Chapter 3 — Finding the Right Keywords

A repeatable framework for choosing which keywords are actually worth targeting.

3.1 The "keyword sweet spot" framework

A keyword is any phrase someone types into a search engine, of any length. Not all keywords are worth targeting — a good one scores well on four attributes:

- **Demand —** Are people actually searching for this? If nobody's Googling it, ranking #1 has little benefit.
- **Fit —** Where does it sit in your funnel, and how relevant is it to what you actually offer?
- **Intent —** What does the searcher actually want, and can you satisfy that (e.g. do you need a YouTube video, not just a blog post)?
- **Keyword Difficulty —** Can you realistically rank for it given your site's current authority? A brand-new site won't outrank Amazon for "running shoes," but might compete for "best running shoes for flat feet in winter."

Keywords rarely score high on all four at once; when one does, it's a "unicorn" worth prioritizing immediately.

3.2 Sweet spot in practice: two real examples

PandaDoc (proposal software) ranks highly for "contract template" (~300,000 monthly searches) even though almost nobody searching that is ready to buy proposal software today. It works because PandaDoc has a plan for the traffic: free template download → email capture → nurture sequence → product signup. It's a deliberately top-of-funnel keyword with a conversion path behind it.

Counterculture Coffee ranks for "pour over coffee" (~34,000/month) and related educational terms ("pour over coffee ratio," "cold brew ratio," "coffee brewing methods") not with a sales page, but with brew guides on their blog — building authority and trust that leads to product sales over time. Lesson: a keyword without a conversion path is a vanity metric; a keyword with a conversion path can become an automated pipeline.

3.3 The keyword research process: ideation → validation → clustering

Keyword Ideation — sources for raw keyword ideas include:

- Google Search Console (shows exactly what people already search to find your site).
- Google's autocomplete suggestions and "People Also Ask" boxes.
- The "People also search for" section at the bottom of a results page.
- Subreddits where customers describe their problems in their own words.
- Pasting a sitemap (yours or a competitor's) into an AI tool and asking it to identify content gaps.
- Asking an AI assistant for questions buyers would ask before purchasing in your category.
- Free browser extensions (e.g. Keyword Surfer) that surface volume/CPC/related terms directly in Google.

Keyword Validation — assessing each idea's search volume, difficulty, business fit, and intent to decide what to target first. Can be done via a DIY SEO-data API + AI coding tool, or through an all-in-one tool (e.g. Surfer) that returns volume, difficulty, and intent without any technical setup.

Keyword Clustering — grouping keywords that are topically related or that Google treats as equivalent, so content can be planned by topic rather than as one giant unsorted spreadsheet.

3.4 Prioritization: a three-step plan, bottom of funnel first

- **Step 1 — Money pages first:** Product, service, feature, and pricing pages — the pages that directly convert (transactional/commercial keywords). These fund the whole site; skipping them in favor of blog content leaves no compelling place for traffic to convert.
- **Step 2 — Build out one topical cluster:** Once money pages exist, pick one topical cluster connected to a money page and build the full funnel around it (money page → commercial comparison content → top-of-funnel educational content), all internally linked.
- **Step 3 — Repeat, cluster by cluster:** Finish one cluster before starting the next, rather than spreading effort thin across many unrelated topics at once.

3.5 Topical authority

Google doesn't evaluate a page in isolation. For a query like "how to prevent ransomware attacks," Google also checks whether the site covers related steps in that same journey (what is ransomware, signs of compromise, an incident response checklist). Comprehensive coverage of a full topic cluster builds "topical authority," which makes it progressively easier to rank for every keyword in that cluster — including the harder ones.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Keyword sweet spot = Demand + Fit + Intent + Keyword Difficulty.
- Research order: ideation → validation → clustering.
- Prioritize: money pages first, then one full topic cluster at a time.
- Topical authority = comprehensive cluster coverage makes every keyword in it easier to rank for.

Chapter 4 — Creating Content That Ranks

Turning validated keywords into content that actually earns rankings.

4.1 Four phases of content creation

- **1. Research —** What's already ranking, and what are competitors missing?
- **2. Structure —** Build an outline that matches search intent and covers the topic thoroughly.
- **3. Write —** Draft content that combines real expertise with optimization.
- **4. Optimize —** Refine based on data, not guesswork.

4.2 Researching the SERP before writing

Read the current top five results for the target keyword in full, looking for four things: (1) what topics they all cover — the table stakes you must also cover; (2) what they're missing — your opportunity; (3) their average length, as a rough comprehensiveness benchmark; and (4) any unique angles taken, which show room to differentiate. Doing this manually for the first few pieces of content builds the judgment needed to later automate it (tools like Surfer's content editor can analyze top-ranking pages and surface required topics/terms/comprehensiveness in about 60 seconds).

4.3 Outlining, and where AI fits into writing

Never skip building an outline before writing. Research notes can be fed into an AI tool (Claude, ChatGPT) to draft a starting structure, or a search-optimized outline can be generated directly from a tool like Surfer. The recommended way to use AI in the writing process itself: let it handle structure, scaffolding, basic definitions, research summarization, and sentence flow — the parts that are commodity work.

4.4 What AI can't add — the human differentiation layer

In a landscape full of AI-generated "slop," the differentiator is what only a human (or a real business) can add:

- **Real experience & opinion —** What actually happened when you tried something; what's overrated, underrated, or wrong.
- **Original data —** Your own results, case studies, or conversations with customers.
- **Expert insights —** Interviews or quotes — these can be sourced from podcasts, books, or scholarly journals, not only from you directly.
- **Specific examples —** Real businesses, real numbers, real outcomes.

The bar isn't just "good" — for a given search, content needs to be roughly five times better than what already exists to stand out. Every business has unique knowledge to unearth (or knowledge to find via expert interviews and primary sources) that AI-spun content mills can't replicate — that becomes the content "moat."

4.5 Scoring content, and a sobering stat

A real-time content score (0–100 in tools like Surfer) tracks whether a draft has covered the right topics, used the right terms, and hit the right depth — for both traditional and AI search — turning "is this comprehensive enough?" into something measurable. Context for why this matters: an Ahrefs study of 14 billion web pages found that over 96% get zero traffic from Google — most content fails not because it's terrible, but because it's indistinguishable from everything else already published.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Content process: Research → Structure → Write → Optimize.

- Let AI handle scaffolding/structure; humans add experience, original data, expert insight, and specific examples.
- Target: content ~5x better than the current top result, not just "good."
- 96% of pages (per an Ahrefs study of 14B pages) get zero Google traffic — sameness is the real competitor.

Chapter 5 — On-Page SEO

The technical, checklist-style work done on each individual page — illustrated with Huntress's educational guide vs. product page.

5.1 Title tags

Include the target keyword, stay under 60 characters, and make it compelling enough to click. Huntress's Ransomware Recovery Guide front-loads the keyword: "Ransomware Recovery Guide for Businesses." Their product page ("Endpoint Detection and Response Built for Every Business") stays keyword-rich but is written to sell, not just teach.

5.2 Header tags (H1/H2/H3)

Use exactly one H1 per page, and generally mirror the title tag. H2s mark main sections, H3s mark subsections nested underneath, with keywords used naturally throughout. This hierarchy helps both search engines/LLMs understand structure and depth, and helps human readers skim and stay engaged.

5.3 URL structure

Keep URLs short, descriptive, and keyword-inclusive (e.g. Huntress uses "cybersecurity-101/ransomware-recovery-guide" for content and "platform/managed-edr" for a product page). Avoid CMS-generated strings of random letters/numbers, which tell Google and searchers nothing.

5.4 Meta description

The snippet shown under the title in search results, ideally 150–160 characters. It isn't a direct ranking factor but affects click-through — write it like ad copy: action-oriented, keyword-inclusive, and clear about what the searcher will get.

5.5 Internal linking

Add contextual links inside body copy to other relevant pages — this is how topic clusters get connected, and how Google discovers and understands the relationships between pages. Huntress's ransomware guide links out to a related handbook, a blog post, their compliance page, their product page, and a training page. Internal linking has one of the best effort-to-value ratios of any SEO tactic and is easy to skip by accident — don't skip it. Some tools (e.g. Surfer's content editor) can auto-insert relevant internal links.

5.6 Image optimization

Use descriptive file names, alt text that genuinely describes the image (written as if describing it to someone who can't see it — screen reader users depend on this), and compressed file sizes (WebP is a good format choice). Even well-optimized sites leave this on the table — e.g. Huntress reuses generic alt text like "glitch effect" across many images on one page, a missed opportunity.

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- Title tag: keyword + under 60 characters + clickable.
- One H1 per page; H2s = sections, H3s = subsections.
- URLs: short, descriptive, keyword-rich — never random strings.
- Meta description: 150–160 characters, written like ad copy.
- Internal linking connects topic clusters and is high effort-to-value.
- Alt text should describe the image to someone who can't see it.

Chapter 6 — Backlinks & Link Building

The hardest, least controllable part of SEO — and how to approach it without shortcuts.

6.1 What backlinks are, and why they matter

Backlinks are links from other websites to yours — effectively votes of confidence. When a reputable site links to your content, Google treats that as a signal of trustworthiness and value. Not all links carry equal weight: a link from a major industry publication matters far more than one from a random directory. Link building is described as the hardest part of SEO — time-consuming, often feeling like outreach into the void, with no durable shortcuts that avoid eventual penalties. The most reliable long-term approach: create genuinely great content (original data, unique insight, practical tools), and links tend to follow more naturally than expected.

6.2 Tactic 1 — Be the source

Create original data, analysis, or resources that journalists and bloggers want to cite. Example: Counterculture's pour-over brew guide is linked to by WikiHow, Gear Patrol, and Breville because it's simply the most thorough resource on the topic; Huntress's ransomware research is cited by Google Cloud's Threat Intelligence team and referenced on Wikipedia. Every business holds knowledge worth unearthing and publishing — most just never do it.

6.3 Tactic 2 — Journalist query platforms

Sign up for a free journalist-query platform (e.g. Source of Sources, created by HARO's original founder). Journalists post requests for expert sources; responding with a genuine quote or insight can earn a citation and link when the piece publishes. This is described as the most accessible link-building tactic for beginners — roughly 15 minutes a day to monitor — though it's a numbers game (submitting ~100 pitches might land only one hit, and that's still a win worth continuing for).

6.4 Tactic 3 — Create linkable assets

Free tools, calculators, templates, and comprehensive guides become reference material that other sites want to link to because it makes their own content better. AI coding tools (e.g. Claude Code, Codex) now make it realistic for non-technical marketers to build simple browser-based tools quickly — the video cites building a working inventory calculator in about 10 minutes with near-zero coding experience as an example. A calculator addressing a lower-competition, decent-volume keyword (example: a "coffee to water ratio calculator" at ~500 searches/month, difficulty 8) can become a strong backlink magnet for sites that already reference less interactive guides on the same topic.

6.5 Where to start if you're new to link building

Don't chase link building first. Focus initially on creating 10–15 genuinely strong pieces of content. Then start with Tactic 2 (journalist queries) since it's free and low time-investment. Links compound over time — the immediate job is to build something worth linking to.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Backlinks = trust signals; not all links are equal (publication > directory).
- Three tactics: be the original source, answer journalist queries, build linkable free tools/assets.
- If new to SEO: build 10–15 strong pieces of content first, then start with journalist queries.

Chapter 7 — Technical SEO

Why most small/medium sites don't need to fear this chapter.

7.1 Auditing with Screaming Frog

For most small-to-medium business sites on Webflow, WordPress, Shopify, or a typical custom CMS, technical SEO is largely already handled by the platform. Rather than manually checking every technical factor, download Screaming Frog SEO Spider (free for up to 500 URLs), point it at the site, and let it crawl every page. It returns a prioritized list of issues — broken links, missing title tags, duplicate content, redirect chains, images missing alt text — along with what to fix.

7.2 Local SEO, briefly

Businesses with a physical location (store, office, restaurant) should treat local SEO as its own dimension. At minimum: claim and fully complete the Google Business Profile, and actively collect and respond to reviews. This alone can help a business appear in local map-pack results for "[category] near me" searches.

7.3 Reality check on priorities

For most beginners, technical SEO is not what's actually holding results back — the real blocker is simply not having published enough content yet. Technical fundamentals matter, but they shouldn't become a rabbit hole that delays publishing.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Screaming Frog SEO Spider = free technical audit tool (up to 500 URLs).
- Local SEO minimum: complete Google Business Profile + collect/respond to reviews.
- For beginners, the real bottleneck is usually a lack of published content, not technical issues.

Chapter 8 — AI Search — The New Frontier

What changes (and what doesn't) when the "search engine" is a conversational AI assistant.

8.1 A second search landscape

Google alone processes over 5 trillion searches a year, but people now also query ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Copilot, Claude, Grok, and Google AI Mode directly for recommendations ("what's the best CRM for small businesses," "recommend a project management tool"). If a business isn't showing up in those AI-generated answers, it's invisible in a fast-growing discovery channel. A simple test: open an AI assistant in an incognito browser (to avoid personalization skewing results) and ask a buying-journey question your audience would ask — whatever brand comes up is your AI-search competition.

8.2 How AI assistants choose what to cite

Unlike Google's list-of-links format, AI assistants synthesize information from across the web into a single conversational answer, then cite sources — chosen based on authority, relevance, and how clearly the content answers the question. The reassuring part: the same qualities that earn strong Google rankings (authoritative content, clear structure, schema markup, being cited by other sites) also drive AI visibility. Good SEO is the shared foundation for both.

8.3 The tracking blind spot

Google Search Console cannot see traffic that originates from ChatGPT, Perplexity, or similar tools — those visits simply don't register, and currently no outside party has access to what people actually type into AI assistants (that data stays inside OpenAI, Perplexity, etc.). What can be tracked instead is whether a brand shows up when relevant questions are asked — tools like Surfer's AI tracker run queries across major AI assistants and monitor which brands get recommended and how that shifts over time, without reporting actual visit volume.

8.4 Four ways to show up in AI search

- **1. Structure for parsing —** Comprehensive, authoritative content with clear subheadings and direct answers to specific questions — the same content-creation approach from Chapter 4.
- **2. Build topical authority —** Cover a topic from every angle (definition, how-to, comparison, deep dive) so AI models recognize the brand as an authority — the cluster strategy from Chapter 3.
- **3. Earn citations —** AI models weight sources that other trusted sites reference; every backlink from a reputable site signals citation-worthiness. AI assistants especially favor "best of" roundup articles, so earning placement in (or writing) those roundups helps.
- **4. Monitor AI visibility —** Check regularly (manually or with a tool) whether a brand is showing up in AI answers, since AI recommendations shift over time and competitors who track this will adapt faster.

Bottom line: AI search optimization isn't a separate discipline from SEO — it's what happens when the SEO fundamentals are done well and applied to where these new channels are heading.

REVIEW / RECALL

- AI assistants largely run on the same underlying web indexes as traditional search.
- Google Search Console can't see ChatGPT/Perplexity traffic — that data is a current blind spot.
- AI visibility strategy = structure for parsing + topical authority + earned citations + ongoing monitoring.

Chapter 9 — The 30-Day Action Plan

A rapid-fire, week-by-week starting point that turns the whole course into action.

9.1 Week 1 — Foundation

- • Set up Google Search Console (free, essential).
- • Set up Surfer (or your chosen keyword tool) and run keyword research.
- • Find 10–15 target keywords using the Keyword Sweet Spot framework.
- • Analyze search intent for your top 5 keywords (the "30-second intent test": Google it and see what ranks).
- • Identify your money pages — which pages on the site directly convert visitors, and do they already exist?

9.2 Week 2 — Your most important money page

- • Write and publish your single most important money page, or optimize an existing one.
- • Follow the content creation blueprint from Chapter 4: research, structure, write, optimize.
- • Apply the on-page checklist from Chapter 5: title, meta, headers, internal links, images.

Additional money pages are an ongoing priority, not a one-week sprint.

9.3 Week 3 — Your first funnel

- • Pick one topical cluster connected to your money page.
- • Publish a mid-funnel or top-of-funnel piece that supports it, and internally link it to the money page and other related pages.
- • If content already exists, consider updating a page already ranking on page 2–3 rather than starting from scratch.

9.4 Week 4 — Promote and monitor

- • Start responding to journalist queries (Source of Sources or Featured.com), ~15 minutes a day.
- • Check AI visibility, manually or with a tool like Surfer's AI Tracker.
- • Review Google Search Console for early signals: rising impressions (even before clicks rise), new keywords appearing, and positions trending from page 5 toward page 3.
- • Plan the next topical cluster to build — not just the next random topic.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Week 1: GSC + tool setup + 10–15 target keywords + intent check + identify money pages.
- Week 2: publish/optimize the single most important money page, fully on-page optimized.
- Week 3: build the first supporting funnel around that money page.
- Week 4: start journalist outreach, monitor AI visibility and GSC early signals, plan the next cluster.

Chapter 10 — Closing Takeaways

The three-sentence version of the entire course.

Find what people search for. Create the best content for that search. Earn trust. These fundamentals haven't changed in 20 years — what's changed is that the same work now makes a business visible not just in Google, but in AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and Perplexity as well. Realistically, most sites won't see major results within 30 days — but after 30 days of following this plan, the foundation exists: the right keywords, optimized content, and a repeatable system for creating more, which already puts a business ahead of most competitors relying on unfocused, low-effort content.

REVIEW / RECALL

- Core loop: find demand → create the best content for it → earn trust (links/citations).
- SEO fundamentals now double as AI-search fundamentals.
- Expect the 30-day plan to build a foundation and system, not overnight rankings.