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# A Basic Guide to URLs and Why They Matter for SEO



Knowledge  
Series

# A Basic Guide to URLs and Why They Matter for SEO

If you're a website admin working with a CMS, you've probably come across URLs and may have heard of things like canonical URLs. But what exactly are these, and how do they impact your site and its SEO? Let's break it all down.

## What Is a URL?

URL stands for Uniform Resource Locator, but in simpler terms, it's just the web address of a page or resource on the internet.

Every page on your website has a unique URL, which helps users and search engines find and access your content.

A typical URL looks something like this:

```
https://www.example.com/blog/what-is-a-url
```

This URL is made up of several parts:

- `https://` – The protocol, which defines how the data is transferred. You usually see `http` or `https` (the secure version).
- `www.example.com` – The domain name that identifies the website.
- `/blog/what-is-a-url` – The path that tells the server which page or resource to load.

## What Is a Canonical URL?

Sometimes, you might have multiple URLs leading to the same page or similar content. This can happen accidentally (or even intentionally if you have different versions of the same content). Search engines get confused when there are multiple URLs for the same page because they don't know which one to prioritise.

Enter the canonical URL. This is the "official" URL you want search engines to focus on. It's like saying, "Hey, Google, if you're going to rank this page, use this specific URL, not the others." It prevents search engines from penalising your site for duplicate content.

You can set the canonical URL by adding a special tag in the HTML of your page:

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```
<link rel="canonical" href="https://www.example.com/blog/what-is-a-url" />
```

This tells search engines that this URL is the preferred version of the content.

## What's the Difference Between a URL and a Canonical URL?

A URL is simply the address of a page on your website. A canonical URL, on the other hand, is used when there are multiple URLs for the same or very similar content. It tells search engines which version you want them to focus on for SEO purposes.

For example:

- URL 1: <https://example.com/page>
- URL 2: <https://www.example.com/page>

Both URLs may lead to the same page, but using a canonical tag on one ensures that search engines know which one to prioritise.

## How Do URLs Work?

URLs connect users to the content they want to access by directing their browsers to the correct server and location. When a user clicks a link or types a URL into their browser, the following happens:

1. The browser sends a request to the server that hosts the website.
2. The server looks at the URL to figure out which page the browser is asking for.
3. The server responds by sending the content associated with that URL back to the user's browser.

## URLs and SEO: Why Should You Care?

URLs aren't just addresses; they play an important role in SEO (Search Engine Optimisation). Here's why you need to pay attention to them:

1. **Keyword-Friendly URLs:** Having keywords in your URLs can give search engines a clue about the content of your page. For example:

- Good URL: <https://example.com/best-gardening-tips>
- Bad URL: <https://example.com/page?id=12345>

The first one is clear, readable, and includes keywords. The second one is just a jumble of numbers that doesn't help anyone.

2. **Canonical Tags Prevent Duplicate Content Issues:** When you have multiple URLs for the same content, search engines might penalise your site for having duplicate content. By setting canonical URLs, you help search engines know which version to rank, avoiding a potential SEO mess.

3. **Clean and Simple URLs Improve User Experience:** Clean, readable URLs are easier for users to remember and share. They also help search engines understand what your page is about, which can improve rankings.

4. **HTTPS for Security and SEO:** Google has confirmed that using HTTPS is a ranking factor. If your site isn't secure (i.e., still using HTTP), you're potentially losing ranking points. Plus, it's good for your users' trust.

5. **URL Structure Impacts Crawlability:** A well-structured URL hierarchy makes it easier for search engines to crawl your site. Use categories and subdirectories logically, like this:

- <https://example.com/blog/gardening>
- <https://example.com/shop/plants>

This helps both users and search engines understand how your site is organised.

## Best Practices for URLs in a CMS

When create pages in a CMS (Content Management System), the system might automatically generate URLs for you. But don't just leave them as they are take control! Here are some quick tips for creating SEO-friendly URLs:

- **Keep It Simple:** URLs should be short and to the point. Avoid long strings of unnecessary words or numbers.
- **Include Keywords:** If possible, use relevant keywords in your URLs to make it easier for search engines to understand the page's content.
- **Use Hyphens, Not Underscores:** Hyphens (like-this) are better for readability and SEO. Underscores (like\_this) aren't as easily understood by search engines.
- **Avoid Special Characters:** Stick to letters, numbers, and hyphens. Special characters can cause issues with browsers and search engines.
- **Make Them Human-Readable:** A user should be able to glance at the URL and have a good idea of what the page is about.

## In Summary

- A URL is the web address of a page or resource.
- A canonical URL is the preferred URL you want search engines to focus on when there are multiple versions of the same content.
- URLs play an important role in SEO by helping search engines understand what your pages are about.
- Use clean, keyword-rich URLs to improve both user experience and search engine rankings.

Managing URLs may seem like a small part of website admin tasks, but they're crucial for SEO and user experience. So next time you create a page in your CMS, take a second to check the URL because it can make a big difference!



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