FOREGROUNDWEB

SEO Triage for Photographers

THE 10 FIXES THAT MATTER, IN THE ORDER I'D CHECK THEM, THE 10 THINGS TO STOP WORRYING ABOUT, AND THE FREE TOOLS THAT ARE ENOUGH. ANY PLATFORM; WHERE A SETTING LIVES ON WORDPRESS OR SQUARESPACE, I SAY SO.

Most photographers who ask me about SEO are worried about the wrong thing. The plugin shows an orange dot, a friend swears by keyword density, a free scanner hands out a score, and all of it feels like work. In the audits I do, the real problem is usually quieter: a page Google isn't showing at all, or a homepage title that's only the studio name.

So this is a triage rather than a checklist to complete. Work down the 10 fixes from the top and stop at the first box you can't tick: that's where you start, and everything under it can wait until it's done. There's no score to add up, on purpose, since 9 ticks don't help a site whose pages Google isn't showing.

If you're on Squarespace, Showit, Pixieset or Format, every box still applies, only the place where the setting lives changes.

The 10 fixes, top to bottom

- [ ] **1. Google is showing your pages.**
  In Google Search Console, open Indexing, then Pages, and read the "Not indexed" list, which says why each address was left out. The 2 rows I'd look for are "Excluded by 'noindex' tag" and "Blocked by robots.txt". If your homepage, a service page or a gallery sits in either, nothing below matters until it's fixed. A noindex often gets left on after a launch or a platform move, and the page looks no different afterwards.

- [ ] **2. Every page title says what you photograph and where, with your name at the end.**
  It's the clickable headline in Google's results, and often all people read before they pick one. The trap is the studio name first: "Jane Doe Photography | Home" tells a stranger nothing, where "Family & Newborn Photographer in Bristol | Jane Doe" does the job, and each service page gets its own version. Check the site-wide title pattern first, since a mistake there repeats on every page.

- [ ] **3. Each page has one main heading (H1) that says what you shoot and where, as real text.**
  On a lot of photography sites the big text at the top is a picture of the logo, or a tagline styled to look big, and the actual H1 is "Welcome" or nothing. Set the line as Heading 1 in your editor, put your specialty and your place in it, and keep the tagline as the line under it. Where it sits on the page is a design call, Google doesn't mind.

- [ ] **4. Each thing you want to be found for has its own page.**
  Weddings and family sessions can't share one portfolio page, since its title can only lead with one of them. If a service you sell has no page of its own, make one, give it a title and a heading per boxes 2 and 3, and put it in the menu. Same for a town you really work in, as long as you have something real to say about it (pages that only swap the city name count as doorway pages under Google's spam policies).

- [ ] **5. Every page you care about is linked from the menu or from another page.**
  Google follows links to find pages and to judge which ones matter, so a page nothing links to is as good as hidden. In my audits the pages that sell the work are often the hardest to reach (a headshots page linked from 7 pages while every menu page had 166). Link text counts too: "Family sessions" says what's behind it, "Learn more" says nothing.

- [ ] **6. There are words on the pages that matter.**
  Google and the AI assistants read words, so a gallery with 40 photos and no text, or a service page with 2 sentences and a button, gives them almost nothing. A short paragraph at the top of each gallery and a few plain sentences on each service page saying what you shoot, where and what a session includes is enough. Then plain alt text on the photos that show your work (who, doing what, where); decorative images can stay empty.

- [ ] **7. Old addresses redirect to their closest match.**
  After a redesign, a platform move or a renamed page, every old URL lands on a Page Not Found, and Google treats the new address as a brand new page with no history. Set a 301 (permanent) redirect from each old address to the page that answers the same question, not to the homepage (WordPress: the redirects feature in most SEO plugins; Squarespace: URL mappings). Then open an old address in a private window to check.

- [ ] **8. Your Google Business Profile is complete, if you shoot locally.**
  It's the panel next to the results when someone searches your name or your specialty plus your town, and in my tests Gemini built its shortlist of photographers largely from Maps. Pick the most accurate primary category, write out your services and the area you cover, add photos, and ask every happy client for a review. You don't need a studio address to have one.

- [ ] **9. Your photos are exported at the right size, and the site loads fast on a phone.**
  Full-size Lightroom exports are the number 1 slowness factor I see on photography sites, so export at the size your platform recommends, usually 2000 to 2500px on the long edge and under 500 KB. Then run PageSpeed Insights on the homepage and one gallery page and compare with last month, not with 100. If the site loads fast and holds still on your phone, that part of the job is done.

- [ ] **10. Only now: links and mentions from other sites.**
  With the 9 boxes above ticked, what moves rankings is mostly outside your site, and the quality counts (a venue you've shot at matters, a link from your neighbor doesn't). Pick one place a quarter: a venue's vendor page, a vendor you work with, a directory your peers are on, a client with a business site. Mentions without a link count too, since AI assistants shortlist photographers from what's written about them.

For the first box, without Search Console: type site:yourdomain.com into Google and look at what comes back. Pages you expected and can't see, and junk you forgot about (a /contact-2, a demo page the theme shipped with), both belong on your list. And the sitemap: the Sitemaps screen in Search Console should show yours submitted and read with no errors (your platform or SEO plugin makes the file).

Where the noindex switch lives: on WordPress it's in the SEO plugin's box on the page itself (Rank Math: the Advanced tab, under Robots Meta; Yoast: the Advanced section, "Allow search engines to show this page in search results"). On Squarespace it's a toggle to hide the page from search results, in the page's SEO settings. Worth checking the pages you care about once.

The 10 things to stop worrying about

1. The green light in your SEO plugin. The Yoast and Rank Math scores lean heavily on how often you repeat a phrase, which isn't the same as Google understanding your page. A page can score 100 and say nothing.
2. Perfect alt text on every single image. Write a plain description on the photos on your main pages (box 6) and leave decorative images empty. Pasting "Austin wedding photographer" onto 300 images does nothing for you.
3. Image file names: Google calls them "very light clues", so name new uploads sensibly (family-photos-austin-park.jpg beats IMG_4471.jpg) and don't spend a weekend renaming the old ones.
4. Keyword density. Google hasn't counted words that way in years. Put the phrase in the title and the main heading, once near the top of the text, then write the way you'd talk.
5. The meta keywords box: Google says it has no effect on indexing or ranking at all, so leave it empty.
6. A word-count target: the page needs enough words to say what it's for, and 60 that say what you shoot and where beat 300 of filler. Nobody at Google is counting to 300.
7. Submitting your site to search engines, or resubmitting the sitemap after every edit. Google finds new pages through your sitemap and your links anyway. Submit the sitemap once, use "Request indexing" in Search Console for a brand new page if you're impatient, and leave it, since resubmitting doesn't re-rank anything.
8. Checking rankings every day. Rankings move daily for reasons that have nothing to do with you (you were signed in, on a phone, one suburb away). Once a quarter, in Search Console's Performance report, is plenty, and the pages with impressions but almost no clicks are the ones worth a new title.
9. Every last PageSpeed point. The score comes from a lab test on a throttled, simulated phone, not from your visitors. Do the sensible things (image sizes, lazy loading, caching), then stop, because a green score is easy on sites where the images don't matter.
10. Authority and "site health" scores from SEO tools. Domain authority is a Moz invention, every audit tool has its own version, and Google doesn't see any of them. The numbers Google does show you are in Search Console.

How long it takes, and what to do when traffic dips

SEO is slow, and I'd rather you know that now. Google's own starter guide says some changes take effect in hours and others take several months. After a real change (a new service page, new titles across the site), give it 4 to 8 weeks before you judge it, and think month 6 rather than month 3 for the overall picture. A new homepage title on its own rarely moves traffic, by the way, though it's still worth having.

When traffic dips after a Google core update, change nothing for 2 to 4 weeks. Rankings keep moving for weeks after a rollout ends, and pages that dropped often climb back partway on their own, so a service page rewritten on day 5 is edited against a snapshot that hasn't settled.

Open Search Console instead, find the pages and searches that lost ground, check them against the first 6 boxes, take notes, then act on what's still broken. The exception is a real pre-existing problem (a noindex, a page blocked in robots.txt): fix that the same day.

AI search, in short

Being recommended by ChatGPT, Perplexity or Google's AI answers is mostly the work above. Google's own guide to its AI features says there are no extra requirements and no special files or markup needed, since the same ranking systems feed AI Overviews and AI Mode.

And when I collected 185 AI answers to the questions clients ask (October 2026), most of them drew on photographers' own websites, and what the assistants repeated from those sites was text: the specialty, the place, what a session includes, the prices.

Then Bing, the one index most photographers never set up. ChatGPT's search sends its queries to Bing to get web results (OpenAI says so in its own help pages), so a site that's thin in Bing's index is thin in that slice of AI answers. Set up Bing Webmaster Tools, import your site from Search Console (a couple of clicks) and submit the same sitemap. About 15 minutes, then close the tab.

The web search on/off test. Ask an AI assistant the question a client would ask ("who should I hire for newborn photos in Leeds"), with web search on, then the same question in a new chat with web search off, and ask each one a few times, since the lists reshuffle from one ask to the next.

If you appear only with web search on, you're findable live but not yet known, so you need more mentions on other sites (the last box). If you appear with it off but described wrong, that's stale information: fix your own pages first, then the directories still saying the old thing. If you appear neither way, start with the Business Profile and the lists. And if you appear correctly both ways, go shoot something.

llms.txt is low impact. It's a small text file listing your pages for AI tools, and your plugin may be nagging you about it. Google's guide says you don't need to create AI text files for its features, and Google's John Mueller has said no AI system uses it. If the toggle is free, flip it and forget it; if it isn't, skip it. Don't lose sleep over it.

The 12 questions photographers ask me most about AI search, answered one by one:
foregroundweb.com/photographers-ai-seo-questions/

Free tools that are enough

- Google Search Console: the one tool. The Pages report under Indexing for the first box, the Performance report for which searches you show up for and which titles earn no clicks. search.google.com/search-console/about
- Bing Webmaster Tools: the same for Bing, imported from Search Console in a couple of clicks. bing.com/webmasters
- PageSpeed Insights: the homepage and one gallery, compared with last month. pagespeed.web.dev/
- Broken Link Check: a free online crawl (up to 3,000 pages) that lists every link on your site that lands on a 404, with the page it sits on. brokenlinkcheck.com/
- Screaming Frog SEO Spider, free version: crawls up to 500 URLs and exports every title, H1, noindex and redirect into a spreadsheet, so you can check the first 3 boxes for the whole site in one go (more technical, worth an hour once). screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/
- Ahrefs Webmaster Tools (now called Ahrefs Free): free for sites you verify, with a technical audit and the list of sites linking to you, for the last box. ahrefs.com/webmaster-tools
- Google Business Profile: box 8, free to set up. google.com/business/

You don't need a paid tool for any of this. The paid suites are built for agencies tracking hundreds of keywords, and nothing on the triage list needs one.

Next step: send me your link

If the triage turns up something you can't place (a page that won't index, or a redirect you can't find), send me your link and I'll take a free first look at the site, a personal reply within a day with what I'd fix first. If there's more to it than a checklist can hold, the $295 website audit is the next step.

foregroundweb.com/web-design/website-audit/#first-look