

Ethics and Responsible Practice in SEO



- Ethical SEO is a durability and risk-management discipline, not a slogan



- Core tensions: visibility vs. manipulation, speed vs. accuracy, scale vs. editorial capacity



- Why now: continuous quality assessment plus enforcement across AI Overviews and AI Mode



- Four failure costs: algorithmic demotion, manual actions, legal exposure, trust loss



- Roadmap: vocabulary, risk areas, AI content, disclosure, guardrails, governance, remediation



Shared Vocabulary and the Compliance-vs-Ethics Distinction

- Working definitions: black-hat, gray-hat, white-hat; cloaking, link schemes, scaled content abuse
- Compliance is a floor, not a ceiling — permitted can still deceive
- Three-Party Integrity Test: compliance (engine), transparency (reader), merit (ecosystem)
- Gray-hat lives where intent decides: banned versus penalised-if-understood
- Responsibility map: SEO, content, legal, product, vendors
- Framing trade-offs when stakeholders push for faster tactics

MERELY COMPLIANT

Meets rules, but may mislead or manipulate.



ETHICAL

Earners of trust through transparent value.



THREE-PARTY
INTEGRITY
TEST



TRANSPARENCY (READER)

Can the reader understand what they are seeing and why?



COMPLIANCE (ENGINE)

Does it align with platform rules and guidelines?



MERIT (ECOSYSTEM)

Does it add genuine value to the broader ecosystem?

Risk Areas Across the Search Ecosystem



Content:

- Content: misinformation, plagiarism, undisclosed AI, low-value scaled publishing



Links:

- Links: paid placements posing as editorial, private blog networks, expired-domain abuse



Technical and UX:

- Technical and UX: cloaking, deceptive redirects, dark patterns, intrusive interstitials



Reviews:

- Reviews: fake or incentivized reviews, review suppression, doctored star ratings



Data:

- Data: scraping personal data, consent-less tracking, client data in unvetted AI tools



Verticals differ:

- Verticals differ: YMYL, e-commerce, local services, publishers, regulated sectors



What Search Engines Actually Target in 2026

“Scaled content abuse: many low-value pages made mainly to rank — AI, human, or scraped”



May 2026 update:
spam rules now cover
AI Overviews and
AI Mode responses



Enforcement
extended to AI
Overviews and
AI Mode



- Google judges quality, not how content was produced; AI assistance is fine, manipulation is not



- Scaled content abuse: many low-value pages made mainly to rank — AI, human, or scraped



- May 2026 update: spam rules now cover AI Overviews and AI Mode responses



- Raters can score low-effort AI main content as Lowest quality



- Helpful-content signals live inside core ranking, assessed continuously — not one named update



- No published page-count cap or safe AI percentage: value-to-volume ratio and intent decide



- Bing's "editorial oversight" framing shows the market converging on the same requirement

Ethics in AI-Assisted Content: Operating Rules



GUARDRAILS

No invented quotes, stats, or credentials;
no uncited medical, legal, or financial claims.



AI may research, outline, draft, translate, summarize —
never replace accountable human judgment



Five-layer workflow: briefing, drafting, verification,
expert review, post-publish monitoring



Guardrails: no invented quotes, stats, or credentials;
no uncited medical, legal, or financial claims



E-E-A-T still governs; AI cannot manufacture
Experience or genuine Expertise



Disclose AI use where readers would
reasonably ask how content was made



Never give AI an author byline;
one named human author per page is the cheapest control



**NAMED HUMAN
AUTHOR**

One named human
author per page
is the cheapest control.

Transparency, Disclosure, and User Trust

- Disclose sponsorships, affiliate links, paid placements, gifted products, insider reviews, and material AI involvement.
- FTC standard: clear and conspicuous, unavoidable, and placed with the endorsement.
- “Ad,” “Sponsored,” or “Paid partnership with [Brand]” work; “sp,” “collab,” and “thanks” do not.
- No incentives conditioned on sentiment; no suppressing negative reviews; no fake engagement.
- Layered rules: FTC Act, Consumer Reviews Rule, state privacy laws, EU AI Act Article 50.
- Transparency protects retention, brand equity, and AI citation eligibility.

 PASSES (CLEAR & CONSPICUOUS)	  FAILS (NOT SUFFICIENT)
 Ad	 sp
 Sponsored	 collab
 Paid partnership with [Brand]	 thanks



Review Checklists and Pre-Publication Guardrails

✓		- Core check: real user question, verified claims, named author, original value
✓		- SEO checks: honest titles, accurate schema, correct canonicals, relevant internal links
✓		- Scaled publishing: page-specific evidence, distinctiveness checks, batch sampling, high-risk review
✓		- Stop-the-publish red flags: unsupported claims, hidden affiliation, exact duplication
✓		- Decision logging: who approved what, on what evidence, and when
✓		- Adapt the checklist: publishers, agencies, in-house, and product teams weight lines differently



STOP-THE-PUBLISH RED FLAGS

Unsupported claims
Hidden affiliation
Exact duplication



Governance, Roles, and Vendor Accountability

A RACI CLARITY MAP FOR HIGH-RISK DECISIONS

DECISION DOMAIN	 SEO	 CONTENT	 LEGAL	 COMPLIANCE	 PRODUCT	 EXTERNAL VENDORS
 Approve high-risk SEO tactics	R	C	C	A	C	I
 Content strategy and publication	A	R	C	C	C	I
 Contract review and obligations	C	C	R	A	C	I
 Policy, risk, and compliance oversight	C	C	C	R	C	C
 Product roadmap and priorities	C	C	C	C	R	C
 Vendor selection and management	C	C	C	A	C	R

R Responsible **A** Accountable **C** Consulted **I** Informed



- Written policy naming prohibited tactics — binds employees, agencies, freelancers, subcontractors



- RACI clarity across SEO, content, legal, compliance, and product for high-risk calls



- Contract essentials: defined deliverables, tactic and risk disclosure, no ranking guarantees



- Client owns content, data, and accounts — direct analytics and Search Console access



- Google's June 2026 grid: cite official docs, align AEO/GEO advice, consistent tools



- Named AI governance owner, approved-tools list, data-handling protocol, escalated training



NAMED AI GOVERNANCE OWNER

Ultimate accountability for AI governance, approved tools, data handling, training, and escalation.



EVIDENCE FILE / DOCUMENTATION TRAIL

Maintain a clear record from policy to approval.



Official Sources
& References
(URLs)



Policy & Guidance
(Versioned
Dates)



RACI Decisions
& Approvals



Contracts & Disclosures
(No Ranking
Guarantees)



Training & Escalation
Records



Ongoing Monitoring
& Documentation

Measurement, Monitoring, and Early Warning Signals

EARLY WARNING SIGNALS

Monitor leading risk indicators for early detection.



complaints



review
authenticity



manual
actions



content
churn



indexed-to-
outcome ratio



SUSTAINABLE KPI FOCUS

Reward the behaviors and outcomes that drive durable growth.



qualified
demand



engaged
sessions



brand
search



assisted
pipeline



- Leading risk indicators: complaints, review authenticity, manual actions, content churn, indexed-to-outcome ratio



- Watch policy updates, regulatory changes, platform disclosure rules, and new AI-feature guidance



- Run content, link, and structured-data audits as routine cycles, not one-time cleanups



- Reward sustainable KPIs: qualified demand, engaged sessions, brand search, assisted pipeline

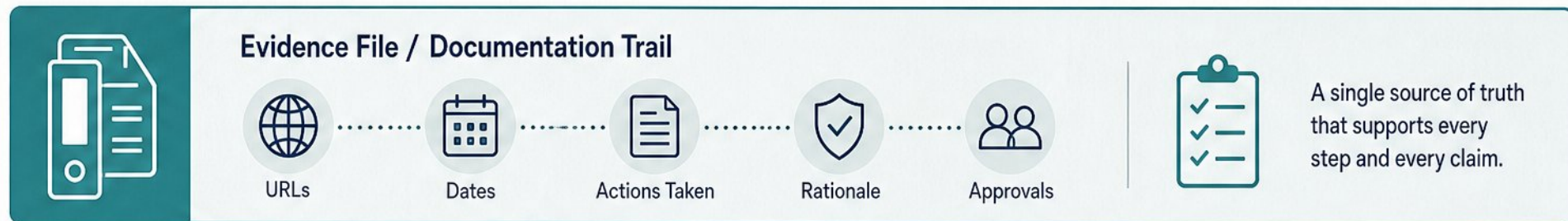
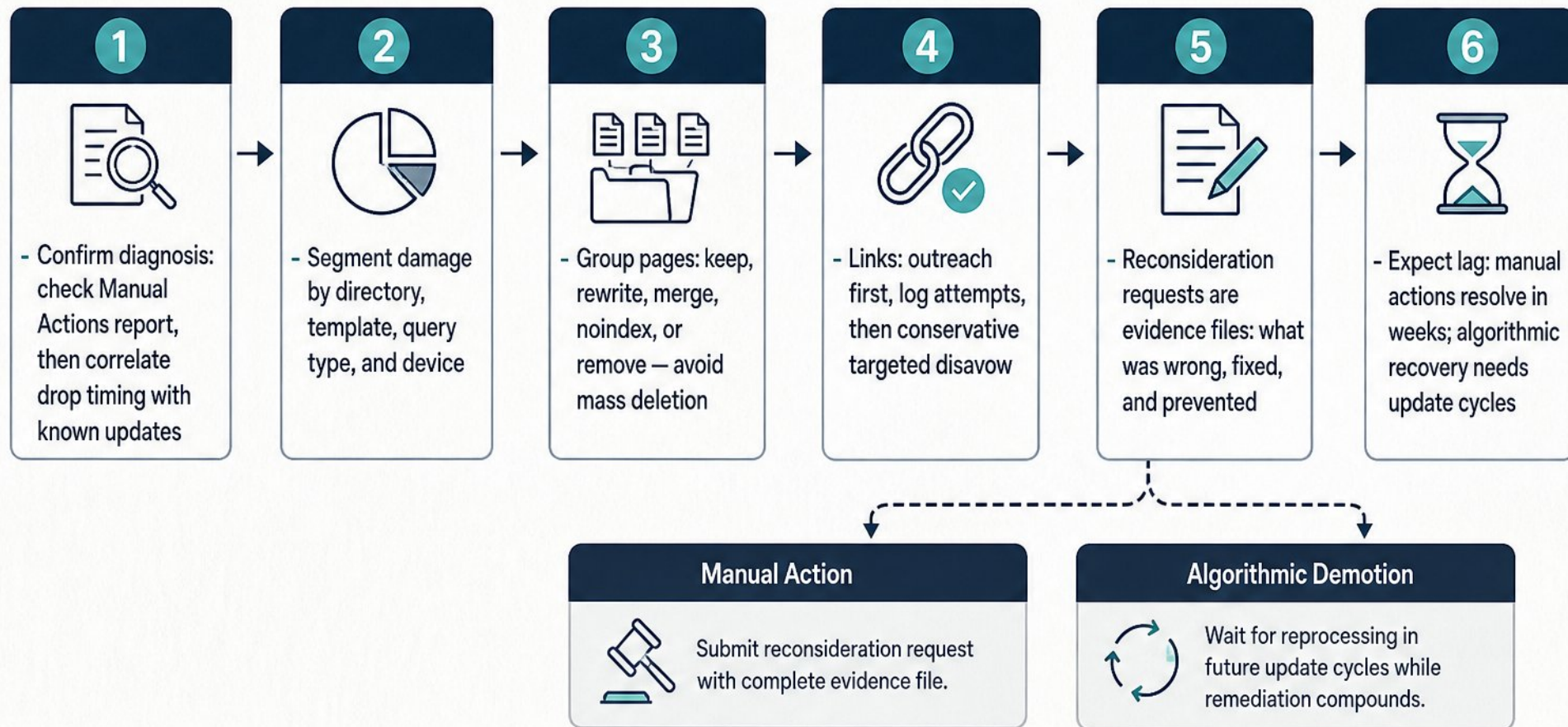


- Separate manual actions (notified, appealable) from algorithmic drops (silent, no appeal)



- Report honestly: consistent definitions, annotated seasonality, no overpromising

Remediation Playbook: Pause, Correct, Disclose, Document



Scenario Practice: Agency and Client Dilemmas



Scenario 1:

client wants paid links disguised as editorial — integrity test, tagging, refusal path



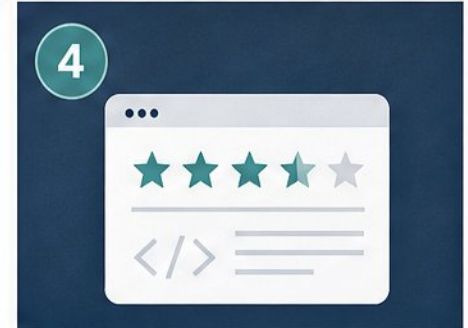
Scenario 2:

tool generates hundreds of near-identical location pages — scaled content abuse



Scenario 3:

rewards for positive reviews without disclosure — Consumer Reviews Rule implications



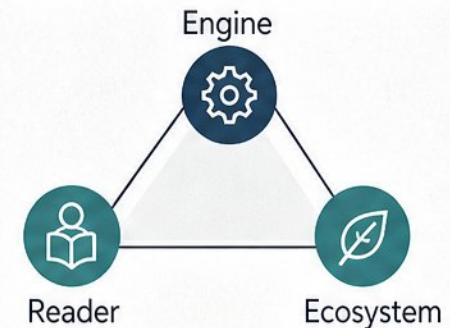
Scenario 4:

ratings schema overstating real reviews — structured-data honesty and trust risk

- **Format:** name stakeholders, assess harm, check policy, choose transparent path, document



Three-Party Integrity Triangle



- **Counter the rationalizations:** “everyone does it,” “only gray hat,” “client insists”

Scenario Practice: AI Content, Disclosure, and Product Teams



Scenario 5:

500 AI-assisted articles — match editorial capacity, batch sample, name an author



Scenario 6:

personalized discount code without visible disclosure — disclose material connections



Scenario 7:

white-label provider uses unapproved link tactics — liability lands with the agency



Scenario 8:

client data into unvetted AI tool — check GDPR/CCPA and data agreements first



GUARDRAILS



Documentation exercise: write the approval or rejection memo you need in 12 months

Action Plan and Takeaways

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS



- Start now: adopt a review checklist, audit one high-risk area, name an accountability owner



- Days 1–30: governance and written policy; days 31–60: training and vendor-contract review



- Days 61–90: monitoring, audits, and disclosure briefings



- Quality over origin; every page needs a real reason to exist; disclosure is trust, not confession



- Name one practice to stop, one to start, one to measure — then reconvene

DAYS 1–30



GOVERNANCE AND POLICY

Establish clear governance structure and document written policy that defines roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

DAYS 31–60



TRAINING AND VENDOR-CONTRACT REVIEW

Build knowledge and capability through training and review vendor arrangements to align with policy and standards.

DAYS 61–90



MONITORING, AUDITS, AND DISCLOSURE BRIEFINGS

Strengthen oversight with monitoring and audits, and provide timely disclosure briefings to build trust and transparency.

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