Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) & Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)

York U Website Optimization Strategy

2026

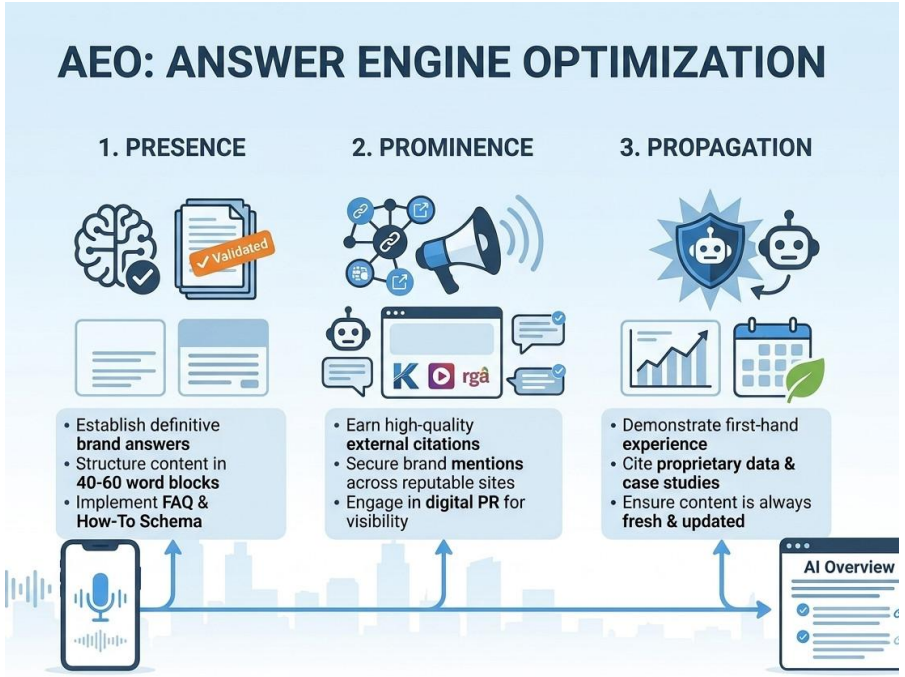
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AEO Overview

What is AEO?

- Optimizing digital content for AI search engines, voice assistants, LLMs and chatbots
- **Why:** Our target audiences are increasingly using AI such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Perplexity instead of traditional search engines to get quick answers, so institutionally York needs to optimize content to serve the target audiences new browsing habits
- **The Shift:** Traditional SEO focuses on ranking high in Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) using keywords and relevant content, however AEO focuses on becoming the answer cited by AI models in a more conversational format



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GEO Overview

What is GEO?

- Optimizing digital content to establish authoritativeness and trustworthiness so LLM (ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity) use it as a trusted, cited source when giving long and detailed response

- **Why:** York needs to have clear, expert articles, academic research, expert faculty commentary, and detailed press releases, the university feeds the training data of AI engines with trust signals

- **The different between GEO & AEO:** AEO is about quick, transactional factual answers (e.g., "When is the York application deadline?"). GEO is about the long, detailed answers (e.g., "Why should I choose York's Lassonde School of Engineering over other options?")



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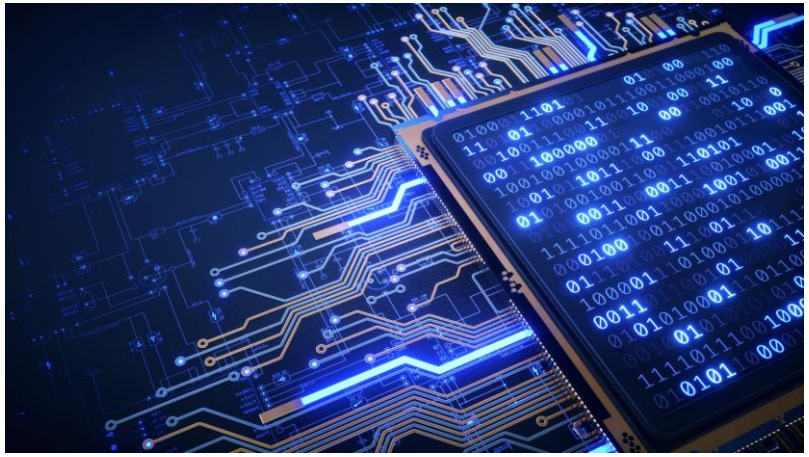
Explaining Query Fan-out & RAG

Query Fan-out

- **The Student's AI Prompt:** *"What are the exact admission steps for an international student applying to computer science in Toronto?"*

- **What it means:** When a student types one simple sentence into an AI search box, the AI secretly breaks that question down into 3 or 4 hidden, deeper questions behind the scenes to get the complete picture

- Gone are the days of just building pages or content that just target obvious keywords. To be better discovered, website owners must create detailed content that answers the hidden questions the AI is generating in the background



Explaining Query Fan-out & RAG

Example of Query Fan-out in Action

- **The Student's AI Prompt:** *"Is York University a good option for a commuter student in Toronto?"*

- **The AI's Internal "Fan-out"** (The hidden questions it asks itself to build the answer):
  - *"What transit lines connect directly to York University Keele campus?"*
  - *"How much does a monthly transit pass cost for York students vs. TMU?"*
  - *"What do student forums say about evening campus safety at York?"*
  - *"Does York offer flexible evening or hybrid classes for commuters?"*

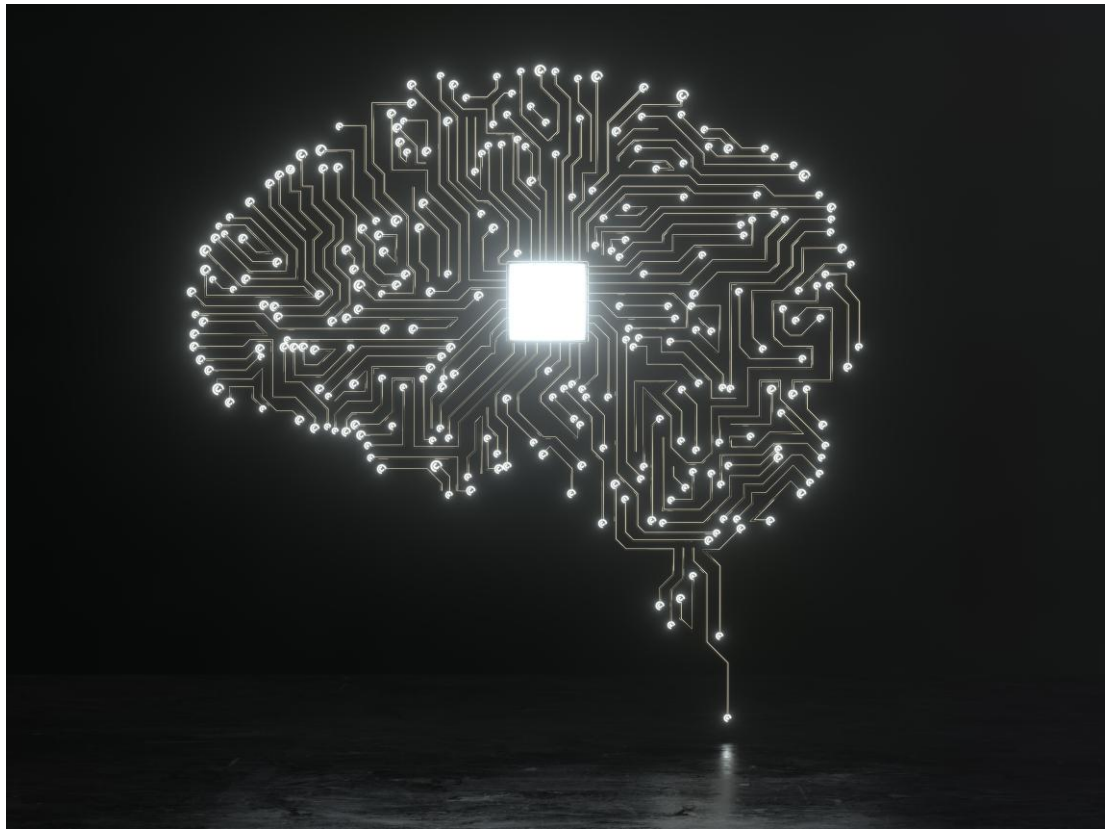
- Websites that have dedicated pages or articles answering those exact sub-questions (e.g., a detailed page on *“Keele Campus Night-Transit Safety and Go Transit Pathways”*), the AI will pull it as the source

Explaining Query Fan-out & RAG

RAG

- **Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG):** AI engines (like Google AI Overviews or ChatGPT) do not just guess answers. They act like an open-book researcher. When a student asks a question, the AI scans highly trusted university websites, pulls out the exact facts, and summarizes them into a direct answer

- If there is vague marketing language, the AI crawler might not use it. It will potentially read a competitor's website that provides more specific language/facts instead



Explaining Query Fan-out & RAG

Example of RAG in Action

- **Student Prompt:** *"What are the exact admission steps for an international student applying to computer science in Toronto?"*

- **Scenario A (Vague Content):** York's page says: *"We welcome global applicants! Our admissions process is straightforward and globally recognized. Check our portal for details."*
  AI's Reaction: The AI cannot use this. It has no hard facts to extract.

- **Scenario B (Authoritative Content):** A competitor's page says: *"International applicants need an IELTS score of 7.0, must submit transcripts by February 1st via the OUAC portal, and require a minimum 85% GPA or equivalent."*
  AI's Reaction: The AI extracts these exact details and presents them to the student. York is completely left out of the answer.

- **Learn more:** https://youtu.be/T-D1OfcDW1M?si=Rec2F8iEqnCxU6G_

What is the different with AEO/GEO vs SEO

- **SEO** ranks a link on Google to get clicks (e.g., a student clicks on a York homepage link).
- **AEO** provides short, direct facts so AI can answer simple questions (e.g., tuition costs).
- **GEO** builds expert content so AI trusts and recommends York for complex questions (e.g., best programs).

Summary Cheat Sheet

	SEO	AEO	GEO
Target	Search engines (Google)	Voice assistants & AI snippets (zero-click searches)	Chatbots (ChatGPT, Gemini)
Output	List of blue links	Single, quick answer	Detailed recommendation
Focus	Keywords	FAQs and data facts	Expert reputation and trust
Goal	Get users to click a link	Give the AI a quick fact	Convince the AI to recommend us

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York U's Approach



Browsing Habits

- Among 18–24-year-olds, **66% report using ChatGPT to find information**, compared with **69% who still use Google**, showing near-parity between AI and traditional search in this age group – and the numbers continue to shift

- The trust is growing with **79% of consumers say they trust AI search engines**, and **77% trust AI chatbots**, approaching the trust levels traditionally enjoyed by Google and other major platforms

- Google is changing as well - approximately **58–60% of Google searches now result in no click** to an external website relying on the AI summary to answer the question

- For complex questions, traditional search usage **drops to 36%**, while AI chatbots and AI search tools together account for 48% of usage for these type of queries



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Goals & Strategy

With shifting browsing habits, our target audiences expect instant, conversational answers on their searches

- **Visibility:** By securing York's presence in AI-generated summaries it will protects our digital footprint and brand authority and increases our digital impressions and awareness

- **Our Core Goals:** Maximize brand citations in major Large Language Models (LLMs) and conversational search tools through both content and technical optimization
  - **Outcome 1:** York University websites continue to be optimized to allow AI to easily crawl and find the right content for the prompts
  - **Outcome 2:** Aid user journeys from an AI chat prompt to York's websites
  - **Outcome 3:** Optimize York University website for as many relevant LLM impressions as possible. Including increasing the visibility and impressions of Non Branded prompts and keywords - while maintaining branded results and impressions



Current Landscape

What York is doing well: York University currently has the technical optimization setup strong as part of our website optimization principles. This includes structured pages; AODA compliant modules; plugins to assist with automatic structured data (schema), and XML sitemap generation; sitemap indexing; and general server maintenance

Areas for Improvement: York University website content was developed before the proliferation of AI. Therefore, the majority of our website content is currently not structured to answer questions and currently has a lot of general language vs specific language. This also includes page heading structure and on-page accessibility.

There are also a lot of legacy webpages and expired or duplicate content that needs to be updated and/or removed



So how do we improve our content?



Content Guidelines

Direct Answers First

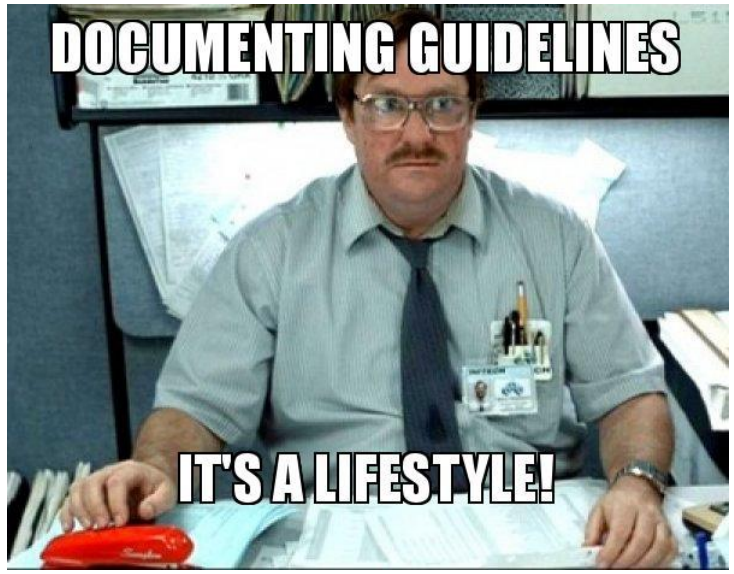
- **Guideline:** Place a clear page title and concise summary statement at the very top of web pages
- **Examples:**
  - Page Title: Undergraduate Degree Options at York University
  - Summary at top of page: York University offers over 200 undergraduate degrees across diverse fields, including arts, sciences, business, and engineering. Most programs offer flexible full-time or part-time schedules and can be completed in three to four years.
- **Why it helps AEO:** AI tools can quickly extract and cite the summary without needing to analyze the entire page



Content Guidelines

Conversational Formatting

- **Guideline:** Use clear Question and Answer formats in your website copy
- **Examples:**
  - **Does York University guarantee residence for first-year students?**
    Yes, York University guarantees an on-campus residence room to all first-year students, provided they accept their offer of admission and submit their housing application by the June deadline
  - **How do you get to York University by public transit?**
    York University's Keele campus is directly accessible via two TTC subway stations (York University and Pioneer Village), GO Transit buses, and the YRT/Viva transit networks.
- **Why it helps AEO:** AI search engines are designed around questions and answers, making this format easier to surface in conversational searches improves content relevancy and extracts more content 1 to 1



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Content Guidelines

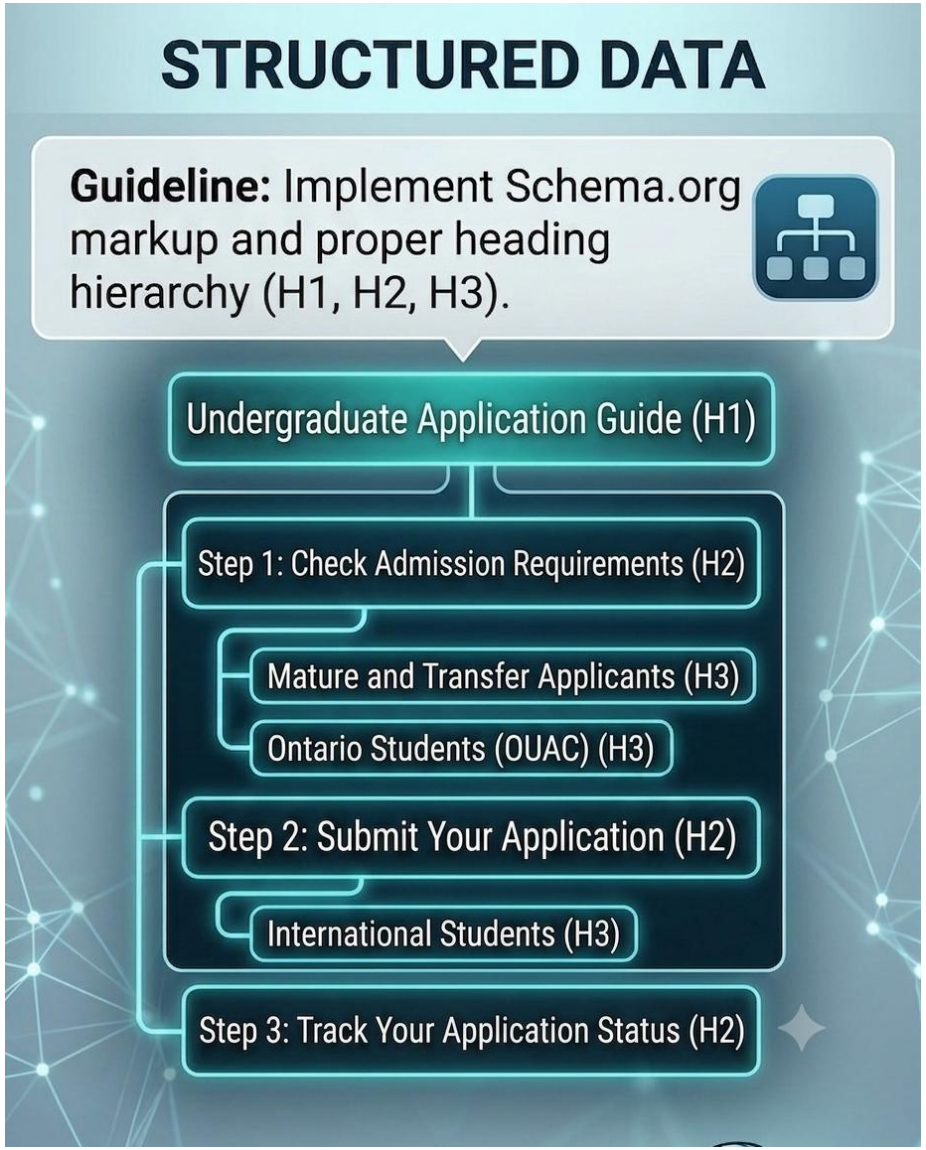
Structured Data

- **Guideline:** Implement Schema.org markup and proper heading hierarchy (H1, H2, H3)

- **Example:**

- **Undergraduate Application Guide (H1)**
  - Step 1: Check Admission Requirements (H2)
    - High School Applicants (H3)
    - Mature and Transfer Applicants (H3)
  - Step 2: Submit Your Application (H2)
    - Ontario Students (OUAC) (H3)
    - International Students (H3)
  - Step 3: Track Your Application Status (H2)

Why it helps AEO: Structured content helps AI crawlers understand page context, relationships, and key information.

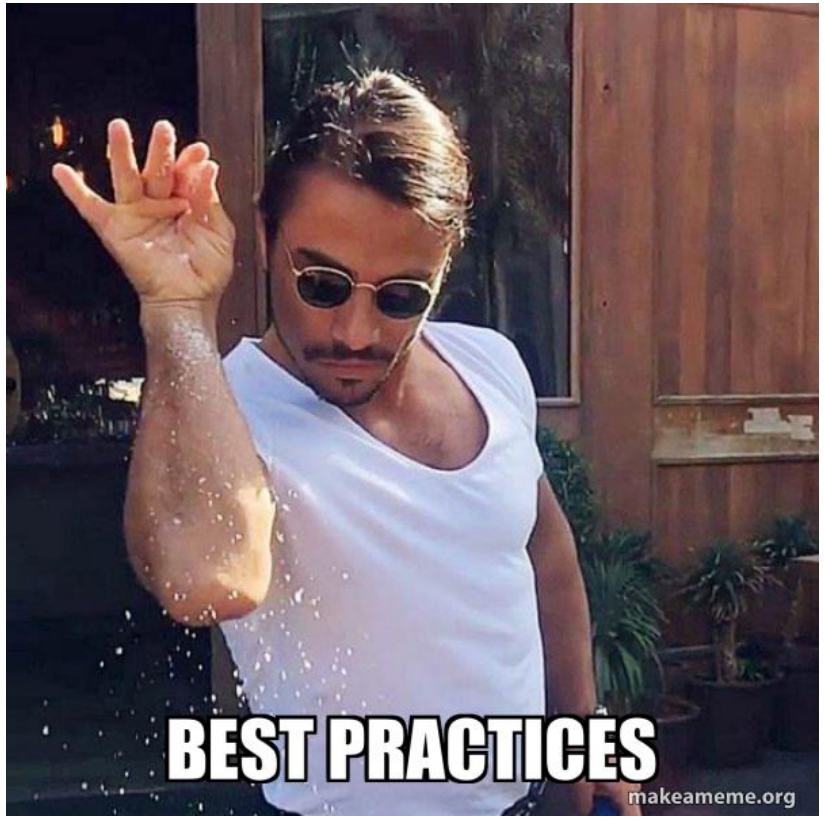


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Content Guidelines

The "No-AI" Content Rule

- **Guideline:** Do not use generic AI-generated text to write your website content
- **Example:**
  - Instead of: "Our research program is innovative and impactful.“
  - Use: "Researchers in York University's Lassonde School of Engineering are developing AI-driven technologies to improve urban transportation systems. According to Professor Jane Smith, the project aims to reduce traffic congestion while improving sustainability outcomes.”
- **Why it helps AEO:** Human Content’s Important - AI search engines are more likely to cite content that demonstrates expertise, authority, and real-world experience. AI content can reduce content authority and hurt domain trust



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What you can do?



What you can do at York

Optimize existing content on website

- **Review Website Content:**
  1. **Heading Structure:** Look at the structure of your websites and ensure that they are following the proper heading format (shown on page 16)
  2. **Copy Review:** Update intro copy and other copy to be more conversational and answer specific prompts vs general knowledge (shown on pages 14 & 15)
  3. **Organize Content to be Scanned:** Like humans, AI crawls websites and properly structured content vs bulky paragraphs help both find the right information fast and efficiently
  4. **Reduce Duplicate Content:** This will improve content authority, have the right pages referenced, and get the right information sourced. Instead link to content you do not own vs copy/paste
  5. **Remove legacy pages:** Make pages draft or delete ones that are no longer relevant as AI may not be able to identify if they are still accurate
  6. **Avoid Hacks:** Prioritize effective content development and SEO basics over "AEO/GEO hacks"



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What you can do at York

Content development considerations:

1. Does this page directly answer a specific question?
2. Could an LLM quote this section verbatim?
3. Is the structure easy to extract and summarize?
4. Does this signal expertise and credibility?
5. Would someone else cite this page as a source?
6. Is there another source for the same content?



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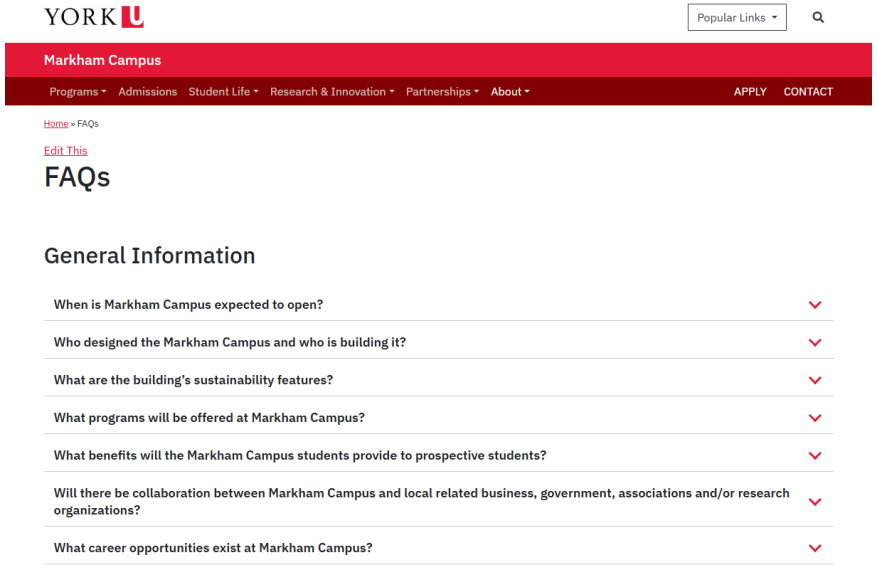
What you can do at York

If not possible on the current pages, dedicate unique pages (or sections) for AEO or specific prompts

- **Develop FAQ Pages:** Enhance your digital footprint by creating web pages focused on the main prompts and questions that your target audience would be searching for or you want to rank for in LLMs

- **Leverage a New Module:** “FAQ” and "Quick Facts" Module optimized for AEO. Recommended modules include:
  - Module 10 - Accordion
  - Module 11 – Content Table
  - Module 39 – Content Tabs
  - Or standard Guttenberg paragraph blocks, columns, bulleted lists
  - *New modules in development*

- Create new posts or pages for key prompts you want answered that are not part of our existing website content and the H1 or H2 should be specific to the content not just “FAQ”



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What you can do at York

Make your website content accessible

- **Media Accessibility and Readability:** Optimize Multimedia Fields – AI responses frequently inject high-quality images and video assets directly into generative cards
  - Inserting proper media size
  - Naming media properly (aka not img12432.jpg)
- **Alt Text:** Continue to use descriptive, keyword-rich Alt Text for every campus photo, virtual tour snippet, and video
- **Page Tagging:** Leverage the Tagging and Taxonomy Structure to better create relationships between content
- **SiteMap Structure:** Continue following the sitemap strategy both with new environments and existing, do not put all webpages at the top level of your website



What C&PA is doing

Institutional Authority Building

- Secure high-quality digital citations, cross links, and press mentions to boost overall domain trust
- Develop strong website ecosystem that prioritizes technical health including:
  - Page speed for all devices
  - Security and domain authority
  - Tools and plugins to assist users and properly create schema markup for all pages (Yoast)
  - Overall Web Optimization Standards
- Structures to properly assign content lead vs amplifiers (Single Source Content Strategy)
- Currently we index York 2020 website sitemaps automatically via GSC – but if you have a new website, please share so we can index
- **IN PROGRESS** – Building a new YouTube strategy to optimize video content, titles, descriptions, tags for AI, more to come



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Next Steps



Next Steps

- Review your website content – identify priority pages and begin updating content to align with content guidelines and recommendations including highlighting what main prompts you want to show for on the page
  - This includes reverse searching those prompts in AI and seeing what sources are currently displaying (aka reddit? York? Other?)
  - Following the what you can do list on slides)

- Ensure your websites are accessible and structured correctly and all new content and media is following best practices (Digital Experience Hub for more information)

- **Ongoing review:** The rules for GEO/AEO are still being updated – and this will shift how things change in the future, but we will continue to monitor the trends and adjust our strategy, goals and guidelines are more is developed



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Questions?



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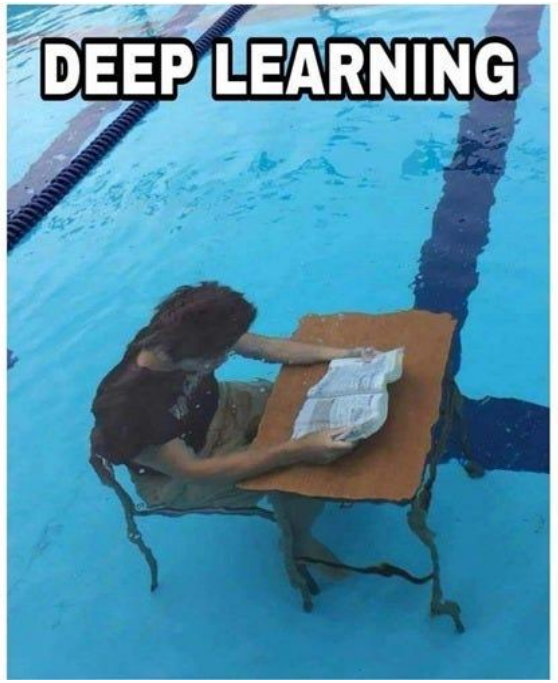
Additional learning:

- Watch this video for more information on AEO/GEO for beginners: https://youtu.be/Krse87iYvpE?si=hpCteflVwFDiu7Up

- Sharing content vs answer content: https://youtu.be/Oe_60eQ3ejM?si=rEHEPy_bTXrRXWHb

- General AEO Tutorial: https://youtu.be/uza9GX0E2mw?si=E_lmMC6CEZb1bla3

- Watch the general overview of the difference via LI Learning: https://www.linkedin.com/learning-login/share?account=2174970&forceAccount=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.linkedin.com%2Flearning%2Fdigital-marketing-foundations-26945172%2Fhow-to-get-started-with-seo-geo%3Ftrk%3Dshare_video_url%26shareId%3D7d6aKbRTS5Kf4Dw8j9UVsQ%253D%253D



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