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PLAYBOOK

Google AI Overviews: A Practical Optimization Playbook

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 8 min read

Google AI Overviews changed the top of the search results page. Instead of a list of links, many queries now return an AI-generated answer, synthesized from multiple sources and topped with citations. For anyone who depends on search traffic, the question is no longer just "how do I rank number one." It's "how do I become one of the sources Google's AI cites."

This playbook is about exactly that. I'll explain how Overviews assemble their answers, what earns a citation, and give you a concrete checklist you can run against your own pages.

What are Google AI Overviews and how do they work?

Google AI Overviews are AI-generated summaries that appear at the top of many search results, answering the query directly and citing the web pages the answer draws from. They are powered by Google's Gemini models working alongside the traditional search index.

Mechanically, the process looks like this. Google interprets the query, often breaking it into several sub-questions (a technique related to what Google calls query fan-out). It retrieves candidate passages from across the indexed web, evaluates which passages best and most reliably answer each sub-question, then synthesizes a single answer and attributes the key claims to their sources.

Two things follow from this that most people miss. First, **Overviews operate at the passage level, not the page level.** Google isn't citing your whole article; it's citing a specific paragraph that cleanly answers a specific sub-question. Second, being cited is not the same as ranking first. Pages that rank on page one but weren't the crispest answer to a sub-question get skipped, and pages ranking lower sometimes get cited because one passage answered perfectly.

What does it take to get cited in an AI Overview?

You need to be the clearest, most trustworthy passage-level answer to a question Google is trying to resolve. That breaks down into relevance, structure, authority, and freshness. Here is how each one

works and what to do about it.

How does passage-level relevance work?

Because Overviews retrieve and cite passages, your unit of optimization is the passage, not just the page. A strong citable passage has a recognizable shape:

- It **states the answer directly in the first sentence**, then elaborates.
- It maps to **one clear question**, rather than blending several topics.
- It is **self-contained**, meaning it makes sense lifted out of the page with no surrounding context.
- It uses **plain, unambiguous language** a model can quote without hedging.

The practical move is to write in answer-first blocks. Put a question-shaped heading, then immediately answer it in one or two sentences, then support it. This mirrors how the model wants to consume your content, and it's simply good writing for humans too.

What content structure does Google's AI favor?

Structure is how you make your answers extractable. Overviews disproportionately pull from content that is organized for machine reading.

Element	Why it helps	What to do
Question-shaped headings	Match the sub-questions Google generates	Use natural-language H2s and H3s phrased as questions
Answer-first paragraphs	Give the model a clean passage to lift	State the answer, then support it
Lists and tables	Easy to parse for comparisons and steps	Use them for processes, criteria, specs
FAQ sections	Directly map question to answer	Add real, specific Q&A where relevant
Structured data	Clarifies meaning and entities	Implement FAQPage, HowTo, Article, and relevant schema

None of these are tricks. They're formats that reduce the model's uncertainty about what your content means, which is what earns a citation.

How much do authority and trust signals matter?

They matter enormously, because Google's AI is designed to be conservative about what it repeats. It leans toward sources it has reason to trust, which is where **E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise,**

Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness) does its work.

For AI Overviews specifically, the authority signals that count include: a site's overall topical reputation, clear authorship by identifiable experts with real credentials, first-hand experience visible in the content, and citations or mentions from other reputable sources. **Google is more willing to cite a passage when the source behind it has demonstrated it knows the topic.** This is especially strict for YMYL (Your Money or Your Life) topics like health, finance, and legal, where thin or anonymous content rarely gets surfaced.

The implication is that you can't structure your way to citations on credibility-sensitive topics without also being genuinely credible. Bylines, credentials, sourcing, and reputation are optimization work, not decoration.

How important is freshness?

It depends on the query, and knowing the difference saves you effort. For time-sensitive or fast-moving topics, freshness is a major factor, and Overviews visibly prefer recently updated sources. For stable, evergreen topics, a well-established page with deep authority can be cited for a long time.

The practical rule: **match your update cadence to how fast the underlying truth changes.** A page on current best practices, pricing, or anything with a year or a "latest" implied should be genuinely reviewed and updated on a schedule. An evergreen definitional page needs accuracy and authority more than constant edits.

The AI Overviews optimization checklist

Here is the concrete checklist I run. Work through it page by page for your priority queries.

Relevance and structure

- Identify the real question and its likely sub-questions.
- Add a question-shaped heading for each sub-question.
- Answer each in the first one to two sentences below the heading.
- Make every key passage self-contained and quotable.
- Use lists and tables for steps, comparisons, and criteria.
- Add a focused FAQ section with specific, real questions.

Authority and trust

- Attribute the content to a named author with visible credentials.

- Show first-hand experience: examples, data, original insight.
- Cite reputable sources and link out where it strengthens trust.
- Earn mentions and links from other authoritative sites over time.
- Be especially rigorous on YMYL topics.

Technical and freshness

- Implement relevant structured data (FAQPage, HowTo, Article).
- Ensure the page is crawlable, fast, and mobile-friendly.
- Confirm the content is actually in Google's index.
- Set an update cadence matched to how fast the topic changes.
- Keep facts, figures, and dates current and accurate.

Measurement

- Track which of your queries trigger AI Overviews.
- Note whether you're cited and which passage was used.
- Watch that answer-first blocks don't cannibalize clicks without value.
- Iterate on passages that should be cited but aren't.

The bigger point

Optimizing for AI Overviews is not a separate discipline bolted onto SEO. It's the natural conclusion of what good SEO always claimed to be: clear, trustworthy, well-structured answers from credible sources. The difference now is that the machine reading your content is far more discerning, and the reward for being the best passage-level answer is being spoken aloud to the user as **the** answer, with your name attached.

Do the work at the passage level, back it with genuine authority, and keep it fresh where freshness matters. That combination is what puts you inside the answer instead of below it.

Key takeaways

- ② Google AI Overviews cite at the passage level, not the page level, so your unit of optimization is a single self-contained paragraph that cleanly answers a sub-question.
- ② Being cited is not the same as ranking first; lower-ranked pages get cited when one passage answers a sub-question better than higher-ranked ones.

- ② Write answer-first blocks: a question-shaped heading followed immediately by a direct one-to-two-sentence answer, then support.
- ② Authority signals (E-E-A-T) determine whether Google trusts your passage enough to repeat it, and the bar is highest for YMYL topics like health, finance, and legal.
- ② Freshness matters most for time-sensitive queries; match your update cadence to how fast the underlying truth actually changes.
- ② Structure like question headings, lists, tables, FAQs, and schema reduces the model's uncertainty about your meaning, which is what earns citations.

Frequently asked questions

What are Google AI Overviews?

Google AI Overviews are AI-generated summaries that appear at the top of many search results, answering the query directly and citing the web pages the answer draws from. They are produced by Google's Gemini models working with the traditional search index to synthesize an answer from multiple sources.

How do I get my content cited in an AI Overview?

Become the clearest, most trustworthy passage-level answer to a question Google is trying to resolve. That means writing answer-first blocks under question-shaped headings, backing them with genuine authority and credentials, structuring content for machine reading, and keeping it fresh where the topic changes.

Does ranking first in Google guarantee a citation in the AI Overview?

No. Overviews operate at the passage level, so a page can rank first yet be skipped because another source answered a sub-question more crisply. Conversely, a lower-ranked page can be cited when one of its passages is the cleanest, most trustworthy answer to a specific sub-question.

What is passage-level relevance?

Passage-level relevance means Google evaluates and cites individual paragraphs rather than whole pages. A strong citable passage states its answer in the first sentence, maps to one clear question, is self-contained enough to make sense when lifted out, and uses plain language a model can quote confidently.

How much does E-E-A-T matter for AI Overviews?

It matters enormously because Google's AI is conservative about which sources it repeats. Clear authorship by credentialed experts, visible first-hand experience, and mentions from other reputable sites all raise the odds of citation, and the requirement is strictest for YMYL topics like health, finance, and law.

How often should I update content to stay in AI Overviews?

Match your update cadence to how fast the underlying truth changes. Time-sensitive topics like pricing or current best practices need regular genuine review, while evergreen definitional pages depend more on accuracy and

authority than on frequent edits.

What structured data helps with AI Overviews?

Schema types like FAQPage, HowTo, and Article help by clarifying your content's meaning and entities for the model. Structured data is not a trick; it reduces the model's uncertainty about what your content says, which improves your chances of being pulled into an answer.

Is optimizing for AI Overviews different from SEO?

It is the natural conclusion of good SEO rather than a separate discipline. The same principles apply, clear, trustworthy, well-structured answers from credible sources, but the machine reading your content is far more discerning and rewards passage-level clarity and genuine authority.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.