ARKCES

PLAYBOOK

AI Search Readiness Playbook

How to get your business found, quoted and recommended by Google AI Overviews, AI Mode, ChatGPT, Perplexity, Copilot and Claude. A step-by-step plan for a small team.

Free resource from Arkces, a South African digital agency.
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Contents

1. The short version
2. What changed in search
3. How AI search picks its sources
4. Step 1: Let the right crawlers in
5. Step 2: Fix the technical basics
6. Step 3: Write answer-first pages
7. Step 4: Make your business easy to identify
8. Step 5: Earn mentions elsewhere
9. Step 6: Measure AI visibility
10. What you can ignore
11. The 90-day plan
12. Readiness checklist

1. The short version

AI search tools build their answers from pages they can crawl, understand and trust. There is no separate trick for them. Google's own AI optimisation guide (May 2026) says no special files or markup are needed to appear in AI features. The work is the same work that good SEO always needed, done more carefully:

1. Let search crawlers reach your pages, including the AI search bots.
2. Answer real customer questions clearly, near the top of the page.
3. Make it obvious who you are, where you operate and why you can be trusted.
4. Get other credible sites to mention you.
5. Measure AI visibility, because it is now reported separately.

2. What changed in search

Search results now often start with a written answer, and fewer people scroll past it.

Date	Change
August 2023	Google limited FAQ rich results mostly to well-known government and health sites. FAQ markup no longer earns most businesses a visual boost.
2024	The research paper that named generative engine optimisation (GEO) was accepted at KDD 2024. It found that adding citations, quotations and statistics could raise a source's visibility in AI answers by up to 40%, while keyword stuffing did not help.
July 2025	Pew Research Center found that people who saw an AI summary clicked a traditional result in 8% of visits, compared with 15% when no summary appeared.
August 2025	Google AI Mode launched in South Africa.
February 2026	Bing Webmaster Tools added an AI Performance report (public preview) showing citations in Copilot and the grounding queries behind them.
March 2026	Google extended AI Overviews and AI Mode to 13 African languages, including Afrikaans, Sesotho, Setswana and isiZulu.
May 2026	Google published its AI optimisation guide. Main message: original, expert, non-commodity content; no special files needed.
June 2026	Google announced generative AI performance reports in Search Console (AI Overviews, AI Mode and Discover AI features). They reached all sites by 31 August 2026.

What this means for you: fewer clicks per search, but the clicks that arrive are often better informed. Being the source an answer is built from is now the goal, not only ranking first.

3. How AI search picks its sources

Most AI search tools work in two stages: retrieve a handful of pages, then write an answer from them.

1. **Retrieval.** The tool searches its index (Google's index, Bing's index, or its own, such as PerplexityBot's) for pages relevant to the question. If your page is not crawlable or not indexed, it cannot be picked.
2. **Selection.** From the retrieved pages it prefers passages that answer the question directly, contain specific checkable facts and come from sources that look credible.
3. **Generation.** It writes the answer and, in most tools, cites or links some of the sources it used.

Two practical consequences follow. First, classic SEO still decides whether you are in the pool at all. Second, the page has to contain a passage that works on its own when lifted out: a clear question, a direct answer and supporting detail.

Where each tool gets its pages

Tool	Main source of pages
Google AI Overviews and AI Mode	Google's search index (Googlebot)
ChatGPT search	OpenAI's search systems (OAI-SearchBot) plus partner search data
Microsoft Copilot	Bing's index (Bingbot)
Perplexity	Its own index (PerplexityBot)
Claude	Web search and its own crawler (Claude-SearchBot)

So Bing Webmaster Tools matters more than many businesses assume: it feeds Copilot and is a common data source for other assistants.

Step 1: Let the right crawlers in

Separate search bots from training bots. Blocking a search bot removes you from that tool's answers. Blocking a training bot does not.

Company	Search or answers	Model training	User-initiated fetch
Google	Googlebot	Google-Extended (token)	n/a
OpenAI	OAI-SearchBot	GPTBot	ChatGPT-User
Anthropic	Claude-SearchBot	ClaudeBot	Claude-User
Perplexity	PerplexityBot	Not used for training (per Perplexity)	Perplexity-User
Microsoft	Bingbot	n/a	n/a
Apple	Applebot	Applebot-Extended (token)	n/a

Do this

1. Open yoursite.co.za/robots.txt and check no rule blocks Googlebot, Bingbot, OAI-SearchBot, Claude-SearchBot or PerplexityBot.
2. Check your CDN or firewall too (Cloudflare and others have "block AI bots" switches that can block search bots as well as training bots).
3. Decide on training bots as a business choice. Blocking GPTBot, ClaudeBot, Google-Extended or Applebot-Extended does not remove you from search.
4. Look in your server logs for the search bots and confirm they receive 200 responses.

Our free robots.txt for AI crawlers cheat sheet has copy-ready rules.

Step 2: Fix the technical basics

AI features are built on top of normal search indexing. A page that is not indexed cannot be cited.

- [ ] Every important page is indexable: no stray noindex, correct canonical, 200 status.
- [ ] XML sitemap submitted in Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools.
- [ ] Core content is in the HTML, not only loaded by JavaScript after the page renders.
- [ ] Pages load fast on mobile: Largest Contentful Paint 2.5 seconds or less.
- [ ] One clear H1, logical H2 and H3 headings that read like questions or topics.
- [ ] Internal links connect related pages so crawlers and readers can follow the topic.
- [ ] Structured data describes the business (Organization or LocalBusiness), articles and authors accurately.

Work through the full list with the free Technical SEO Audit Workbook or the printable checklist.

Step 3: Write answer-first pages

Put the answer in the first two sentences under each question. Then add the detail that makes it trustworthy.

The pattern

```
## How much does a website cost in South Africa?

[Direct answer in one or two sentences, with a range and what drives it.]

[Supporting detail: what is included, examples, exceptions.]
[A table or list if the reader will compare options.]
[A source or date for any figure.]
```

What makes a passage quotable

- **Specific:** numbers, ranges, names, dates and places instead of general claims.
- **Self-contained:** it still makes sense when read on its own, without "as mentioned above".
- **Sourced:** statistics link to where they came from. The GEO research found citations and statistics increased visibility.
- **Original:** your own pricing, process, test results or local knowledge. Google's guide calls this non-commodity content.
- **Dated:** "In February 2026 Bing launched..." ages better than "recently".

Use the free Answer-First Content Guide for examples and a brief template.

Step 4: Make your business easy to identify

AI tools try to work out which entity a page is about. Make that unambiguous.

1. **One name, everywhere.** Use the same business name, address and phone on your site, Google Business Profile, Bing Places, Apple Business Connect, LinkedIn and directories.
2. **An About page that answers the basics:** what you do, where, since when, who leads the business and how to contact you.
3. **Real author pages.** Articles name a real person with a profile page that lists their experience. Link the byline to it.
4. **Organization schema** with your logo, contact details and `sameAs` links to your official profiles.
5. **Service pages** that state plainly what you offer, for whom and in which areas.

> **Quick test:** ask ChatGPT, Perplexity and Gemini "What does [your business name] do and where is it based?" Wrong or vague answers show which facts need to be clearer on your site and profiles.

Step 5: Earn mentions elsewhere

AI answers lean on corroboration. If only your site says you are good at something, that is a weak signal.

- Complete and verify your Google Business Profile and Bing Places listing.
- Ask happy clients for reviews on Google and relevant platforms (Hellopeter is widely used in South Africa).
- Get listed in industry associations, chambers of commerce and credible directories.
- Contribute expert comment or data to local publications and trade sites.
- Publish something others want to cite: a price survey, a local study, a test you ran.
- Correct wrong information about you wherever you find it.

Track listings with the free Local SEO Citation Tracker.

Step 6: Measure AI visibility

Source	What it tells you
Google Search Console: generative AI reports	Impressions in AI Overviews, AI Mode and Discover AI features, by page, country and device.
Bing Webmaster Tools: AI Performance	How often Copilot cited your pages and the grounding queries behind the citations.
GA4 custom channel	Visits from chatgpt.com, perplexity.ai, gemini.google.com, copilot.microsoft.com, claude.ai and others, grouped as one channel.
Prompt tracking	A fixed set of buyer questions asked in each assistant every month, recording whether you are mentioned and cited.
Server logs	Which AI crawlers visit, which pages they request and whether they get 200 responses.
Leads	Ask "How did you hear about us?" and include AI assistants as an option.

Two free workbooks do this: the AI Visibility Tracker (prompt tracking and share of voice) and the Monthly SEO Report Template (includes the GA4 regular expression).

10. What you can ignore

Claim	Reality
"You need an llms.txt file to appear in AI search."	Google has said it does not use llms.txt. It is cheap to add and some developer and browser tools read it, but it is not a ranking or citation factor for Google.
"AI search needs special schema."	Google says no special markup is needed for AI features. Normal, accurate structured data is enough.
"Block all AI bots to protect your content."	Blocking search bots removes you from those tools' answers. Block training bots only if that is what you want.
"Write for robots: short, keyword-heavy answers."	The GEO research found keyword stuffing did not help. Clear, specific, sourced writing did.
"SEO is dead."	AI search retrieves from search indexes. Indexing, relevance and authority still decide whether you are considered.

11. The 90-day plan

When	Tasks	Owner
Week 1	Check robots.txt and CDN bot settings. Verify Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools. Submit sitemaps.	
Week 2	Set up the GA4 AI channel. Write 20 to 30 buyer prompts and record a baseline in the AI Visibility Tracker.	
Weeks 3 to 4	Run the technical audit. Fix indexing, speed and heading problems on the 10 most important pages.	
Weeks 5 to 6	Rewrite the top service pages answer-first. Add a short FAQ section where real questions exist.	
Weeks 7 to 8	Fix the About page, author pages and Organization schema. Align NAP across profiles.	
Weeks 9 to 10	Publish two original pieces (data, pricing guide or local study). Ask five clients for reviews.	
Weeks 11 to 12	Re-run the prompts. Compare AI impressions, citations, AI sessions and leads with the baseline. Plan the next quarter.	

12. Readiness checklist

Access

- [ ] Search bots allowed in robots.txt
- [ ] Search bots allowed at CDN or firewall
- [ ] Training bot policy decided
- [ ] Bots receive 200 responses in logs

Technical

- [ ] Key pages indexed
- [ ] Sitemaps in Google and Bing
- [ ] Content in HTML
- [ ] Mobile LCP 2.5s or less

Content

- [ ] Answers in the first two sentences
- [ ] Specific facts with sources and dates
- [ ] Original information on key pages
- [ ] Related pages linked together

Identity

- [ ] Consistent name, address, phone
- [ ] Clear About page
- [ ] Author pages linked from articles
- [ ] Organization schema with sameAs

Reputation

- [ ] Google Business Profile complete
- [ ] Bing Places listing claimed
- [ ] Reviews requested monthly
- [ ] Relevant directories and associations

Measurement

- [ ] Search Console AI reports checked monthly
- [ ] Bing AI Performance checked monthly
- [ ] GA4 AI channel live
- [ ] Prompt tracking monthly

Keep going

This guide is free to use and share inside your business. Updates are published at arkces.co.za/resources/ai-search-readiness-playbook/.

- AEO, GEO and LLM SEO services
- SEO services
- All free resources

Want a hand? Arkces builds, manages and optimises websites for South African businesses. Talk to us.