

Canonical URLs

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Learning objectives

In this lesson, you will learn:

- what duplicate content is;
 - what are canonicals;
 - how and when you use canonicals.
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In the `<head>` of a page, you'll find the **canonical link element**. The canonical link element is a standard. This standard allows you to tell search engines that certain similar URLs are actually one and the same. Sometimes you have products or content that is accessible under multiple URLs, or even on multiple websites. In that case, you'll have **duplicate content** on your website. Duplicate content could seriously harm your rankings in the search engines. Using a canonical URL (an HTML link tag with attribute `rel=canonical`) makes sure these can exist without harming your rankings.

1. What is duplicate content (and why is it a problem)?

If you have the same content on multiple pages on your website, you'll have duplicate content. You'll likely have duplicate content if you have a webshop. Perhaps you sell shirts in a lot of different colors. If so, you probably won't come up with a totally different copy for each of these colors.

Duplicate content is a problem because Google does not know which of the pages it should show in the search engines. The result of this confusion is that both pages actually rank lower than if you would only have one of these pages. The canonical URL solves your problem by telling Google: this page is the same as the other one – this is the original one - please show this page in the search results.

2. What is the canonical link element?

The `rel=canonical` element, often called the canonical link, is an HTML element that helps webmasters **prevent duplicate content issues**. It does this by specifying the 'canonical URL', the 'preferred' version of a web page. Using it well improves a site's SEO. The idea is simple: if you have several similar versions of the same content, you pick one 'canonical' version and point the search engines at that. This article takes you through the use cases and the anti-use cases

Choosing a proper canonical URL for every set of similar URLs improves the SEO of your site. Because the search engine knows which version is canonical, it can count all the links towards all the different versions, as links to that single version. Setting a canonical is similar to doing a 301 redirect, but without actually redirecting.

The process of canonicalization

When you have several choices for a products URL, canonicalization is the process of picking one. In many cases, it'll be obvious: one URL will be better than others. In some cases, it might not be as obvious, but then it's still rather easy: pick one! Not canonicalizing your URLs is always worse than canonicalizing your URLs.

3. How to set canonical URLs

Let's assume you have two versions of the same page, each with exactly – 100% – the same content. The only difference is that they're in separate sections of your site and because of that the background color and the active menu item are different – that's it. Both versions have been linked to from other sites, so the content itself is clearly valuable. So which version should search engines show in results?

For example, these could be their URLs:

- <https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/>
- <https://example.com/wordpress/plugins/seo/>

This is what `rel=canonical` [was invented for](#) and, unfortunately, this happens fairly often, especially in a lot of e-commerce systems. A product can have several different URLs depending on how you got there. In this case, you would apply `rel=canonical` as follows:

1. **Pick one** of your two pages as the canonical version. This should be the version you think is the most important. If you don't care, pick the one with the most links or visitors, and if all else is equal, flip a coin. You just need to choose.
2. **Add a `rel=canonical` link** from the non-canonical page to the canonical one. So if we picked the shortest URL as our canonical URL, the other URL would link to the shortest URL in the `<head>` section of the page – like this:

```
<link rel="canonical"
href="https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/">
```

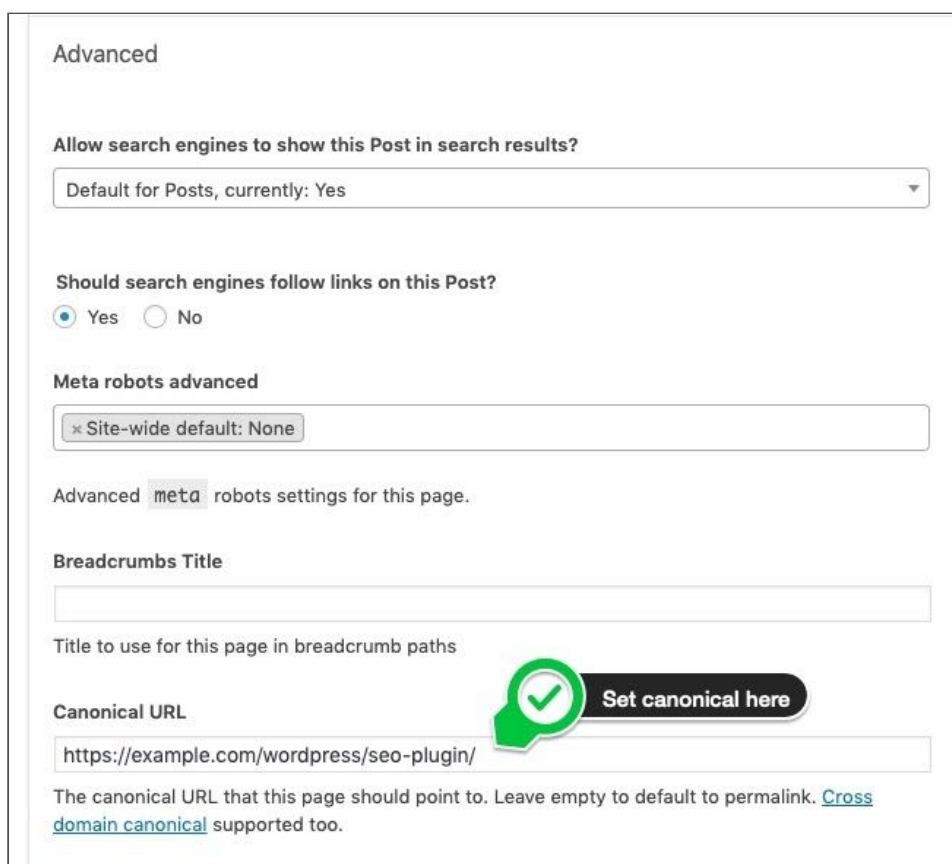
That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

What this does is “merge” the two pages into one from a search engine's perspective. It's a “soft redirect”, without redirecting the user. Links to both URLs now count as the single, canonical version of the URL.

4. Setting the canonical URL in Yoast SEO

Our [Yoast SEO WordPress plugin](#) lets you change the canonical URL of several page types in the plugin settings. You only need to do this if you want to change the canonical to something different from the current page's URL. Yoast SEO already renders the **correct canonical URL** for almost any page type in a WordPress install.

For posts, pages, and custom post types, you can edit the canonical URL in the advanced tab of the Yoast SEO metabox:



The image shows a screenshot of the Yoast SEO metabox in the 'Advanced' tab. The 'Canonical URL' field is highlighted with a green checkmark icon and a 'Set canonical here' button. The field contains the URL 'https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/'. Below the field, there is a note: 'The canonical URL that this page should point to. Leave empty to default to permalink. [Cross domain canonical](#) supported too.'

Advanced

Allow search engines to show this Post in search results?
Default for Posts, currently: Yes


Should search engines follow links on this Post?
 Yes No

Meta robots advanced
× Site-wide default: None

Advanced meta robots settings for this page.

Breadcrumbs Title

Title to use for this page in breadcrumb paths

Canonical URL  Set canonical here
https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/

The canonical URL that this page should point to. Leave empty to default to permalink. [Cross domain canonical](#) supported too.

Image 1. Setting a canonical URL in Yoast SEO

For categories, tags and other taxonomy terms, you can change the canonical URL in the same place in the Yoast SEO metabox too. If you have other advanced use cases, you can also use the `wpseo_canonical` filter to change the Yoast SEO output.

5. When should you use canonical URLs?

301 redirect or canonical?

If you are unsure whether to do a 301 redirect or set a canonical, what should you do? The answer is simple: you should **always do a redirect** unless there are technical reasons not to. If you can't redirect because that would harm the user experience or be otherwise problematic, then set a canonical URL.

Should a page have a self-referencing canonical URL?

In the example above, we link the non-canonical page to the canonical version. But should a page set a `rel=canonical` for itself? This question is a much-debated topic amongst SEOs. At Yoast, we strongly recommend having a canonical link element on every page. That's because most CMS's will allow URL parameters without changing the content. So all of these URLs would show the same content:

- <https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/>
- <https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/?isnt=it-awesome>
- <https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/?cmpgn=twitter>
- <https://example.com/wordpress/seo-plugin/?cmpgn=facebook>

The issue is that if you don't have a self-referencing canonical on the page that points to the cleanest version of the URL, you risk being hit by this. If you don't do it yourself, someone else could do it to you and cause a duplicate content issue, so adding a self-referencing canonical to URLs across your site is a good "defensive" SEO move. Luckily, our [Yoast SEO plugin](#) does this for you.

Cross-domain canonical URLs

Perhaps you have the same piece of content on several domains. There are sites or blogs that republish articles from other websites on their own, as they feel the content is relevant for their users. In the past, we had websites republishing articles from Yoast.com as well (with express permission), but if you had looked at the HTML of every one of those articles you'd found a `rel=canonical` link pointing right back to our original article. This means all

the links pointing to their version of the article count towards the ranking of our canonical version. They get to use our content to please their audience, and we get a clear benefit from it too. Everybody wins.

6. Faulty canonical URLs: common issues

There are many examples out there of how a wrong `rel=canonical` implementation can lead to huge issues. For example, there are sites where the canonical on their homepage was pointed at an article, only to have their home page disappear from search results. There are other things you should never do with `rel=canonical`. Here are the most important:

- Don't canonicalize a paginated archive to page 1. The `rel=canonical` on page 2 should point to page 2. If you point it to page 1, search engines will actually not index the links on those deeper archive pages.
- Make them 100% specific. For various reasons, many sites use protocol-relative links, meaning they leave the `http / https` bit from their URLs. Don't do this for your canonicals. You have a preference, so show it.
- Base your canonical on the request URL. If you use variables like the domain or request URL used to access the current page while generating your canonical, you're doing it wrong. Your content should be aware of its own URLs. Otherwise, you could still have the same piece of content on – for instance – `example.com` and `www.example.com` and have each of them canonicalize to themselves.
- Multiple `rel=canonical` links on a page causing havoc. When we encounter this in WordPress plugins, we try to reach out to the developer doing it and teach them not to, but it still happens. And when it does, the results are wholly unpredictable.

7. `rel=canonical` and social networks

Facebook and Twitter honor `rel=canonical` too, and this might lead to weird situations. If you share a URL on Facebook that has a canonical pointing elsewhere, Facebook will share the details from the canonical URL. In fact, if

you add a 'like' button on a page that has a canonical pointing elsewhere, it will show the like count for the canonical URL, not for the current URL. Twitter works in the same way.

Advanced: Canonical link HTTP header

Google also [supports](#) a canonical link HTTP header. The header looks like this:

```
Link: <https://www.example.com/white-paper.pdf>;  
rel="canonical"
```

Canonical link HTTP headers can be very useful when canonicalizing files like PDFs, so it's good to know that the option exists.

Using rel=canonical on not so similar pages

While it is not recommended, you can definitely use rel=canonical very aggressively. Google honors it to an almost ridiculous extent, where you can canonicalize a very different piece of content to another piece of content. However, if Google catches you doing this, it will stop trusting your site's canonicals and thus cause you more harm.

Using rel=canonical in combination with hreflang

We also talk about canonical in our [ultimate guide to hreflang](#). That's because it's *very* important that when you use hreflang, each language's canonical points to itself. Make sure that you understand how to use canonical well when you're implementing hreflang, as otherwise, you might kill your entire hreflang implementation.

Rel=canonical is a powerful tool in an SEO's toolbox, but like any power tool, you should use it wisely as it's easy to cut yourself. For larger sites, the process of canonicalization can be very important and lead to major SEO improvements.

Key takeaways

- The canonical link element is a **standard** that allows you to tell search engines that certain similar URLs are the same.
- The canonical element helps you **prevent duplicate content**.
- To set a canonical page you need to:
 - **Pick one** of your two pages as the canonical version.
 - **Add a rel=canonical link** from the non-canonical page to the canonical one.
- You can easily set canonical URLs with **Yoast SEO**.