The Discovery Stack for 2026

SEO · AEO · AIO · GEO

A framework for leaders and specialists navigating search engines and AI answer systems in 2026.

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Logan Sivanasen · March 11th, 2026

Executive Summary

Search has restructured. Rankings remain necessary but no longer sufficient. This paper maps the four disciplines that now govern how brands get found, understood, cited, and trusted across search engines and AI answer systems.

Findability / SEO	Answerability / AEO
keeps content eligible for retrieval	structures content for direct answers

Understandability / AIO	Cite-ability / GEO
builds entity trust and correct brand facts	optimizes for citations inside generated answers

The four disciplines form a compounding stack, each layer a prerequisite for the one above it.

🗨️ **Key insight:** Traffic projections built on pre-2024 click assumptions are now structurally optimistic. Visibility strategy must account for the answer layer itself, not just the link below it.

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Research drawn from: [Google Search Central](#) · [Pew Research Center](#) · [SparkToro](#) · [Semrush](#) · [seoClarity](#) · [GEO research paper](#)

Table of Contents

This white paper is structured to be read sequentially. Each section builds on the one before it. Readers familiar with SEO fundamentals may begin at Section 07.

Discovery shifted from click-first to answer-first.

Users ask. Systems summarize. Fewer clicks follow.

Visibility now includes answer placement and citation placement: not just the rank you hold on a results page. The journey from query to destination has been interrupted by an answer layer that resolves intent before a user ever reaches your site.

This is a structural change, not a trend. The platforms are investing in keeping users inside their surfaces. That means your brand's presence in the answer itself, not just the link below it, is the new unit of discovery value.

User Query

The intent signal enters the search system

Fan-out and Retrieval

System expands query into subqueries and retrieves sources

Answer Synthesis

AI synthesizes a response from retrieved content

Citation Selection

Sources are selected and surfaced as supporting links

Optional Click

User may or may not visit the cited source

🗒 **Takeaway:** Rankings remain a factor. Attribution now matters.

Sources: [Pew Research: AI summaries and clicks](#) · [Google AI features](#)

Zero-click is already normal in APAC

APAC users increasingly finish on the results page, not your site.

APAC Snapshots of Zero-Click Behavior

43%

Australia

Top 1,000 queries, Aug 2023–Jul 2024. Clickstream via Similarweb Pro, reported by ACCC.

48.8%

Japan

Survey of 1,504 people, Oct–Nov 2025. Share relying on AI answers without opening websites.

US and EU Benchmark (Google Searches)

58.5%

United States

Clickstream, Datos panel, SparkToro 2024.

59.7%

European Union

Clickstream, Datos panel, SparkToro 2024.

In APAC, zero-click already removes a large share of site visits from the funnel.

Zero-click includes sessions that end on the search results page, plus sessions where the user reformulates the query without clicking a result. Definitions vary by study, so label each metric clearly when comparing across regions.

Why This Matters

- Your ranking-to-click model understates discovery.
- You need visibility in summaries, snippets, and entity panels.
- Measure citations and answer inclusion, not only CTR.

🗇 **My take:** The APAC data gap is itself a signal. The research infrastructure that tracks zero-click behavior has not caught up with the markets where AI search adoption is moving fastest. If you are operating in APAC, do not wait for a Western research firm to publish your region's numbers. Run your own query set. The absence of data is not evidence of absence.

Sources: [ACCC Ninth Interim Report (Australia, 43%)](#) · [Nippon.com / Seed survey summary (Japan, 48.8%)](#) · [Seed AI Search Trends report (methodology)](#) · [SparkToro 2024 Zero-Click Study (US and EU)](#)

Data type note: Australia value is clickstream-based. Japan value is survey-based behavior reporting. US and EU values are clickstream-based.

AI summaries reduce link clicks.

Pew Research data shows a clear pattern: when an AI summary appears in results, users click traditional links at half the rate. Session end rates increase: users are satisfied by the summary and leave without further exploration.

8%

Click rate WITH AI summary

Traditional link click rate when an AI summary is present on the results page.

15%

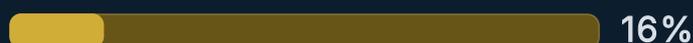## Click rate WITHOUT AI summary

Traditional link click rate when no AI summary is present.

26%
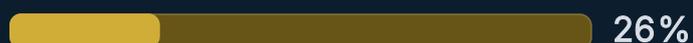
Session end rate WITH AI summary

Users satisfied by the summary and leave without further exploration.

16%

Session end rate WITHOUT AI summary

Session end rate when no AI summary is present.

🗨 **Takeaway:** Answer surfaces change the funnel.

Source: Pew Research: AI summaries and clicks

AI Overviews expanded fast in 2025.

Semrush analyzed 10M+ keywords across 2025. AI Overview presence went from a narrow feature to a material layer of the results page: it peaked at nearly 1 in 4 tracked queries mid-year before settling back toward the mid-teens by November.

6.49%

24.61%

15.69%

January 2025

AI Overview presence rate at the start of 2025. A narrow feature at this point.

July 2025 (Peak)

AI Overview presence peaked at nearly 1 in 4 tracked queries mid-year.

November 2025

Presence settled back toward mid-teens as Google calibrated which query types trigger AI answers.
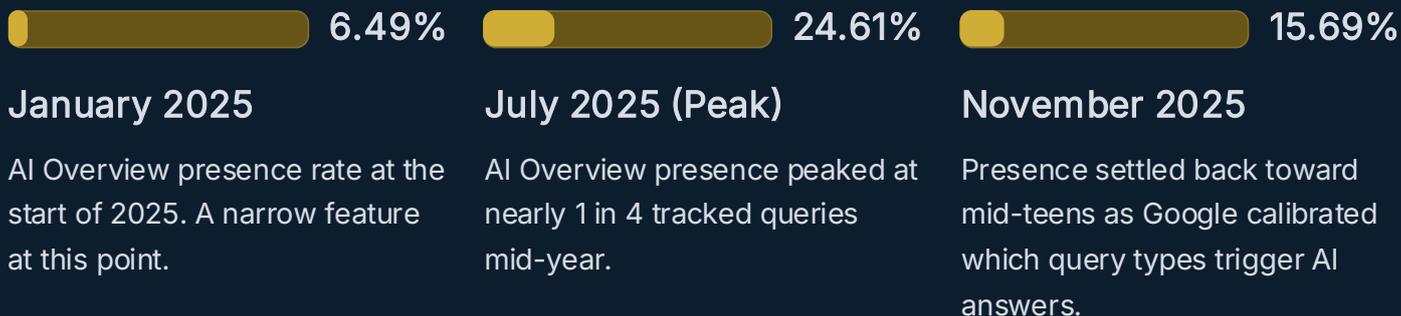
The volatility itself is a signal. Google is actively calibrating which query types trigger AI answers. The presence rate will continue to shift. The strategic implication is not to chase a fixed number; it is to ensure your content is structurally eligible for inclusion when and where AI Overviews appear.
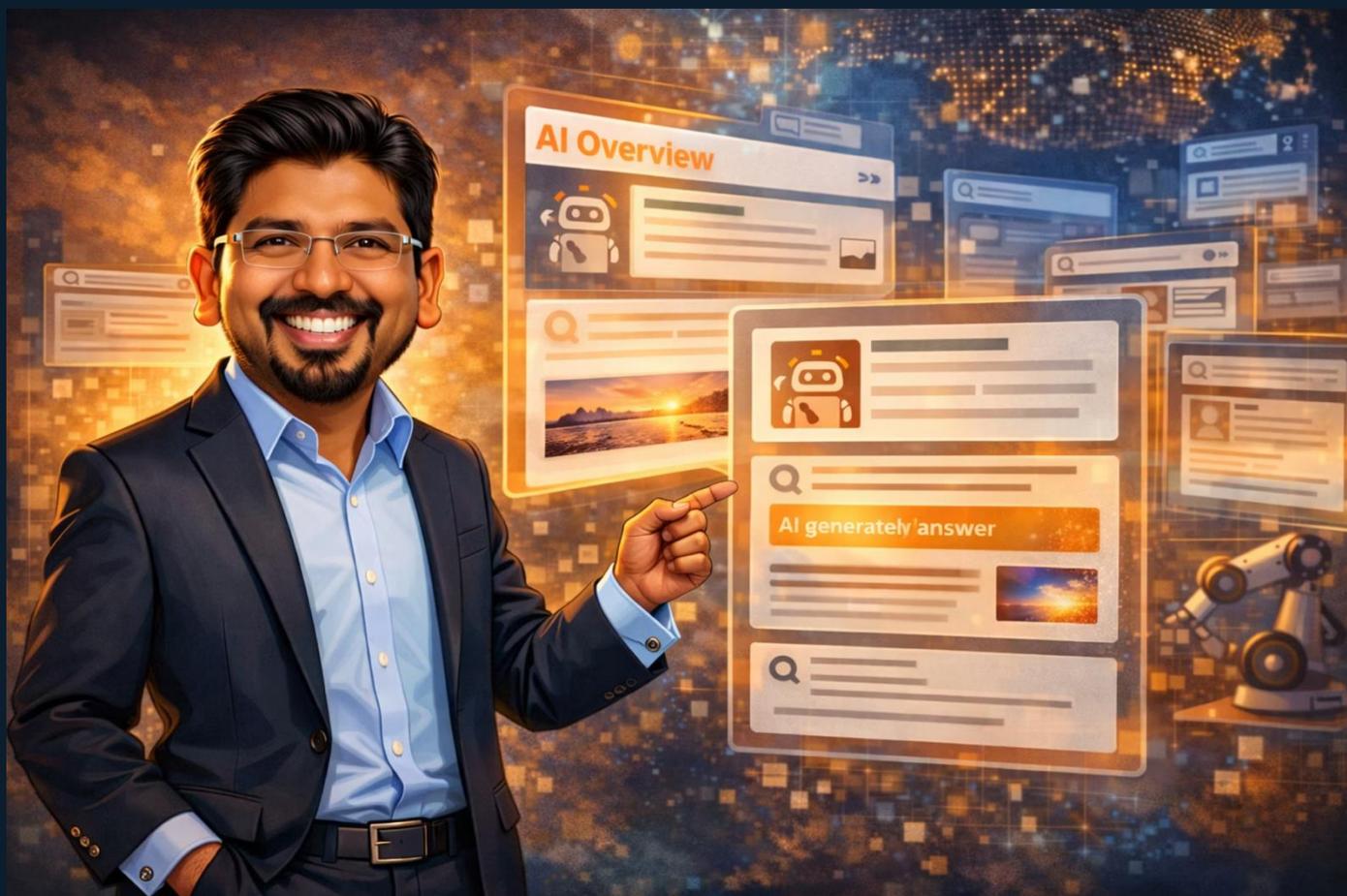
Takeaway: AI answer surfaces now represent a material layer of visibility.

Sources: Semrush AI Overviews study · Google AI features documentation

Google uses query fan-out.

Fan-out is Google's mechanism for expanding a single user query into a set of related subqueries. Each subquery retrieves sources independently. The system then synthesizes across all retrieved content into a single coherent response, with supporting links shown below.

User Query
Initial question from the user

Fan-out
Expand into related subqueries

Retrieve
Gather results from multiple sources

Synthesize
Combine content into a coherent answer

Show Links
Present supporting source links

Fan-out rewards breadth. A page covering only the head term is one retrieval node. A cluster covering the head term and its subtopics is a network, and networks get retrieved more often. Map your content against the full subquery cluster, not just the primary keyword.

What fan-out means for content strategy

- A page that answers only the head term is a single node in the retrieval graph
- A page cluster that covers the head term plus its subtopics is a network
- Networks get retrieved more often because fan-out hits multiple nodes simultaneously
- Internal linking between cluster pages amplifies the signal across all of them

Practical fan-out audit

- Take your top 10 target queries
- For each, identify 3 to 5 adjacent subtopics Google would fan out to
- Check whether you have indexed pages covering each subtopic
- Map the gaps — those are your next content priorities
- Ensure all cluster pages are interlinked with descriptive anchor text

Map Subtopic Cluster
Identify all related subqueries and adjacent topics

Create Deep Pages
Build pages covering subtopics, not just surface answers

Fan-Out Content Strategy

Interlink Cluster
Connect pages into a coherent, navigable cluster

Optimize for Citation
Prioritize depth and breadth to increase inclusion

My take: Fan-out is the mechanism that makes topical authority real. It is not enough to rank for the head term. If your content cluster does not cover the subqueries the system fans out to, a competitor with shallower rankings but broader cluster coverage will get cited instead. Depth beats position when the system is synthesizing, not just ranking.

Sources: Google AI features and query fan-out · Google blog on AI Mode and fan-out · Google PDF overview

Four layers of visibility work together.

Each discipline addresses a distinct mechanism of how content gets found, selected, understood, or cited. They are not competing frameworks: they are layered operating requirements. Weakness in any layer reduces performance across all of them.

SEO

Eligibility gate. If this fails, nothing above it works.

AEO

Structure layer. Requires indexed, crawlable pages from SEO.

AIO

Trust layer. Requires structured, answer-formatted content from AEO.

GEO

Citation layer. Requires entity trust and source credibility from AIO.
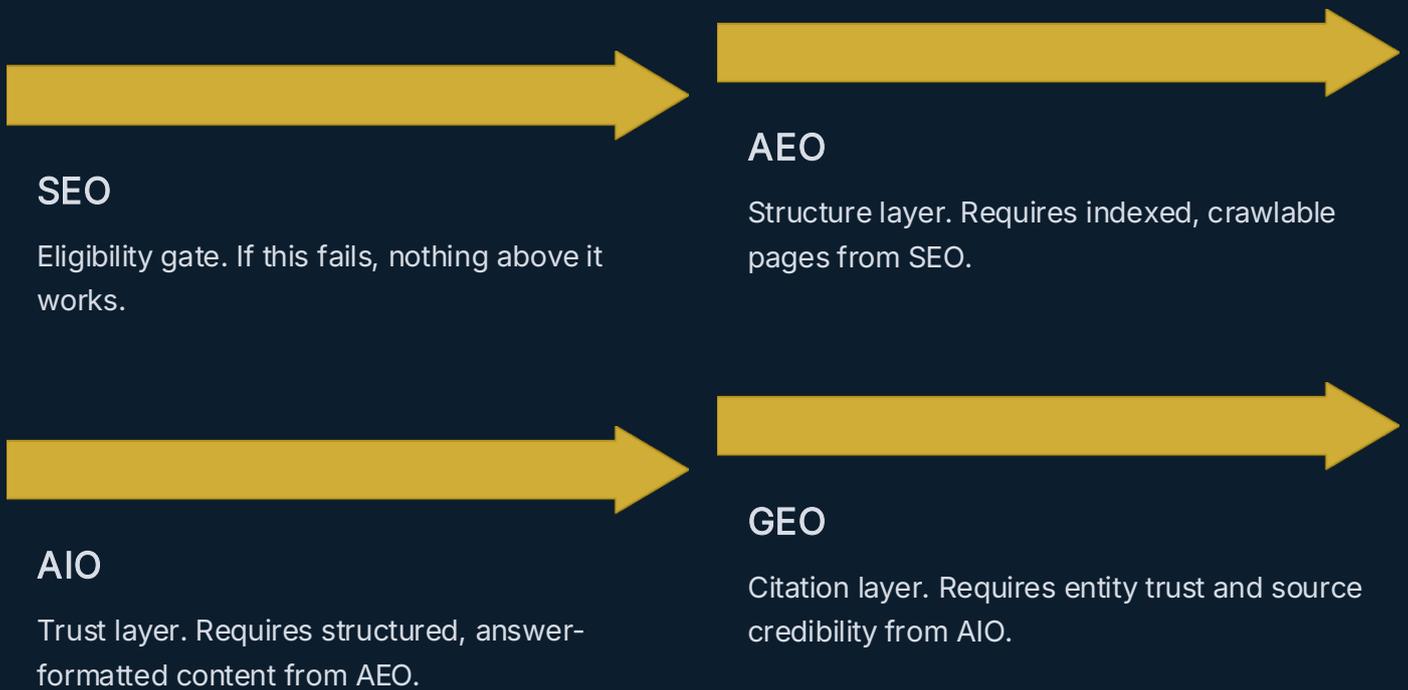
The failure mode is predictable, and it follows the same pattern every time: investment in the wrong layer. Brands that invest in GEO without fixing indexing issues produce citation magnets that never get processed, as the content exists and the structure is correct, but the crawler never reaches it. Brands that build entity signals without answer-first page structure get understood by AI systems but not selected, as the system knows who they are, but the answer is buried too deep to extract. Brands that invest in AEO formatting without E-E-A-T signals lack the trust threshold required for AI Overview inclusion, and brands that rank well organically but ignore GEO-specific claim-evidence-source formatting get cited less frequently than lower-ranked competitors who write in extractable structures.

Each layer is a prerequisite for the one above it. The audit sequence is not optional: start at the bottom, confirm the layer is solid, then move up. Skipping layers does not accelerate results, as it guarantees waste.

> 🗒 **Takeaway:** Audit from the bottom up. Fix the layer below before optimizing the one above.

Sources: Google AI features · GEO research paper

SEO keeps content eligible.

Standard SEO remains the foundation of the entire stack. Google has explicitly stated that standard SEO best practices remain relevant for AI features. A page that cannot be crawled, indexed, or matched to intent cannot be selected for any answer surface: regardless of how well-structured or well-cited its content is.

→ **Crawlable and indexable pages**

Robots directives, canonical tags, and site architecture must allow Google to access and process your content without friction.

→ **Clear site architecture**

Logical hierarchy, clean internal linking, and topical clustering help systems understand content relationships and depth.

→ **Helpful content that matches intent**

Content must satisfy the underlying user need, not just target a keyword. Google's helpful content guidance applies directly to AI Overview eligibility.

Eligibility is binary. Either the page is in contention or it is not. All upstream optimization (structured data, citation formatting, entity signals) is wasted if the base layer is broken. Fix eligibility first, then build upward.

✓ Visible: In Contention

⏱ Surface: Not Contending

▽ Underlying: Eligibility Rules

⚒ Deep: Broken Base Layer

⚡ Core: Fix Eligibility First

🗋 **Takeaway:** Fix eligibility first.

Source: Google AI features

AEO structures content for direct answers.

Answer Engine Optimization is the practice of structuring content so search systems can extract and surface it as a direct answer. Google's featured snippets documentation makes clear that the format and position of your answer within a page matters: not just the presence of relevant content somewhere on it.

Answer-first page structure

- Question as heading (H2 or H3)
- Short direct answer immediately below the heading
- Supporting explanation in the following paragraph
- List or steps section for procedural content

Why this format works

Systems scanning for extractable answers look for proximity between the question signal and the answer text. Burying the answer three paragraphs into a section reduces selection probability.

Answer-first formatting increases reuse across answer surfaces: featured snippets, AI Overviews, and voice responses all draw from structurally accessible answer content.

AEO is not a new content strategy - it is a restructuring discipline applied to what you already have. Most high-traffic pages already contain the right answers. They just bury them. Systems scanning for extractable content do not read to the end; they select what is closest to the question signal. Audit your highest-traffic pages with one test: does each section open with its answer, or build toward it? If it builds toward it, it is formatted for a human reader and invisible to an answer engine. Reformat the lead. The content does not change. The selection probability does.

📝 **Takeaway:** Answer-first formatting increases reuse across answer surfaces.

Sources: [Google Featured snippets documentation](#) · [Google featured snippets help page](#)

Voice answers often mirror answer boxes.

The connection between featured snippets and voice responses is not coincidental: it is structural. Voice assistants draw from the same answer selection mechanisms as text-based answer boxes. Winning a featured snippet materially improves voice answer inclusion probability.

40.7%

Voice answers from featured snippets

Of voice answers came from featured snippets in the Backlinko voice search study.

~80%

Google Home answers matching Answer Box

When Google Home answered a query, roughly 80% matched the Answer Box result.

Featured Snippet

Direct answer box on the SERP. Primary selection surface for AEO.

Voice Answer

40.7% of voice answers pulled directly from featured snippets. Zero additional work required.

AI Overview Citation

Answer-first pages have higher AI Overview inclusion probability. Same structure, different surface.

This is the compounding return most teams miss. One well-structured answer page, formatted correctly, once, generates simultaneous presence across featured snippets, voice responses, and AI Overview citations. No additional content. No separate optimization track. The format does the work across all three surfaces. The problem is that click-based analytics will never show it. If your measurement framework only counts traffic, AEO's return is invisible by design. The value is in presence and selection, not in the click that follows.

> **Takeaway:** Winning answer boxes supports voice visibility.

Sources: Backlinko voice search study · Search Engine Land ROAST study summary

AIO builds entity trust and correct brand facts.

AI systems do not just retrieve pages: they construct a model of the entities those pages describe. Every mention of your brand, every author byline, every product claim, and every linked source contributes to that model. The system aggregates these signals across your own properties and across the broader web, then uses the resulting entity model to decide what to say about you, how confidently to say it, and whether to attribute it to you at all. AIO (AI Optimization) is the discipline of managing that model deliberately, ensuring that what AI systems understand about your brand, products, authors, and claims is accurate, consistent, and well-supported enough to survive the aggregation process without distortion.

Entity consistency across the web

Brand name, description, products, and key facts must appear consistently across your own properties and third-party mentions. Inconsistency creates conflicting signals that reduce attribution confidence.

Author transparency and expertise cues

Google's E-E-A-T guidance covers experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness. Author bylines, credentials, and external presence all contribute to the trust model.

Primary sources for claims

Claims that link to primary sources, such as research, data, or official documentation, carry stronger trust signals than unsupported assertions. Source discipline at the claim level reinforces entity credibility.

Structured data for entities

Schema markup for Organization, Person, Product, and Article helps systems parse entity attributes directly from the page, reducing the chance of misinterpretation or incorrect attribution.

🗒 **Takeaway:** Entity clarity supports accurate attribution.

Sources: Google on structured data · Google Search blog on E-E-A-T · Google Knowledge Panel help

Structured data helps systems understand pages.

Page Content

Structured Data

Machine Understanding

Richer Extraction
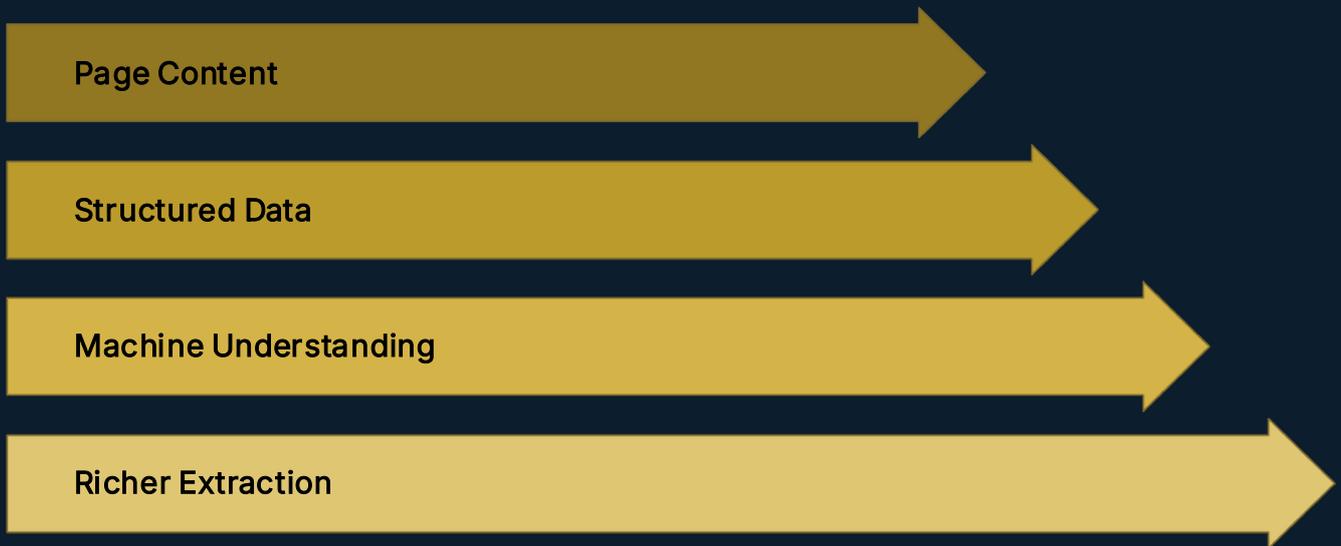
Structured data is the explicit translation layer between human-readable content and machine interpretation. Natural language is written for humans: it relies on context, implication, and shared understanding to convey meaning. Machines do not share that context. Without structured data, a system reading your page must infer whether 'Apple' refers to a technology company or a fruit, whether the person named in the byline is the author or a subject, and whether the number cited is a price, a rating, or a statistic. Every inference is a point of failure. Structured data eliminates the inference by stating the answer directly in a format the system can parse without ambiguity. The result is more accurate entity attribution, higher confidence in content interpretation, and a reduced risk that your brand facts get misrepresented in a generated response.

What structured data covers

- Organization identity and attributes
- Article authorship and publication date
- Product specifications and reviews
- FAQ and How-to content types
- Events, people, and datasets

Why it matters for AIO

When a system needs to answer "What does [brand] do?" or "Who wrote this?", structured data provides a direct, unambiguous answer. It reduces the gap between what you intend to communicate and what the system actually attributes to you.

📝 **Takeaway:** Markup supports consistent interpretation of entities and content types.

Sources: Google structured data documentation · Google E-E-A-T guidelines · Google Knowledge Panel help

GEO optimizes for citations inside generated answers.

Most content gets summarized. Some gets paraphrased. A small fraction gets cited, quoted directly, attributed by name, and linked back to the source. Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) is the discipline of getting into that third category. The peer-reviewed GEO research paper, published by researchers at Princeton, Georgia Tech, and The Allen Institute for AI, tested which content attributes most reliably increased citation frequency in generative responses. The answer was not domain authority or traffic volume. It was structure, evidence quality, and source transparency: the same variables that make content trustworthy to a human reader, applied at the level of individual claims.

Up to 40%

Visibility boost from GEO techniques

Measured across GEO-bench: 10,000 queries across nine domains. Princeton, IIT Delhi, and independent researchers, 2023.

2.3x

More citations with structured data

Pages with Schema markup were cited 2.3x more frequently than those without, across 100,000 AI responses. Hashmeta, 2025.

4.7x

More citations for long-form content

Articles of 1,500 or more words were cited 4.7x more often than content under 500 words. Hashmeta, 2025.

01

1. **Make a specific claim**

Precise, bounded statements are more citeable than general assertions. Vague claims get paraphrased away; precise claims get quoted.

02

1. **Provide direct evidence**

Support the claim with data, research, or documented observation immediately following the claim, not three sections later.

03

1. **Link to the primary source**

A claim supported by a live, credible URL carries stronger citation weight than an unsupported assertion, even if the claim itself is accurate.

04

1. **Use extractable structure**

Short summary sentences, definition-first paragraphs, and labeled sections make it easier for systems to extract and reuse content accurately.

📝 1. **Takeaway:** Write in a format generative systems cite and reuse.

Source: GEO research paper PDF · Hashmeta AI Citation Study (100,000 responses)

Rankings influence citations. No guarantee.

The data shows a strong correlation between organic ranking position and AI Overview citation probability: but correlation is not causation, and the gap between the two creates the strategic challenge.

Position 12 or higher
Three-quarters of AI Overview links appear in position 12 or higher in organic results. Dataset: 120,000+ queries.

46% desktop / 34% mobile
The top-ranked organic result appears in 46% of desktop AI Overviews and 34% of mobile AI Overviews.

94% overlap
Across 362,000 keywords, 94% showed at least one overlap between AI Overview citations and the top 20 organic results.

The practical reading: if you are not in the top 20 organic results for a query, your citation probability for that query is near zero. But being in the top 20, even position 1, does not guarantee citation. The content itself must also meet the structural and authority criteria that generative systems use to select sources.

Ranking is a necessary condition. Citation requires additional layers of work on top of it. The two are related inputs, not the same output.

Formatting
Applying citation styles

Ranking
Ordering items by relevance

Research Credibility

Verification
Checking accuracy and provenance

Citation Collection
Gathering source references
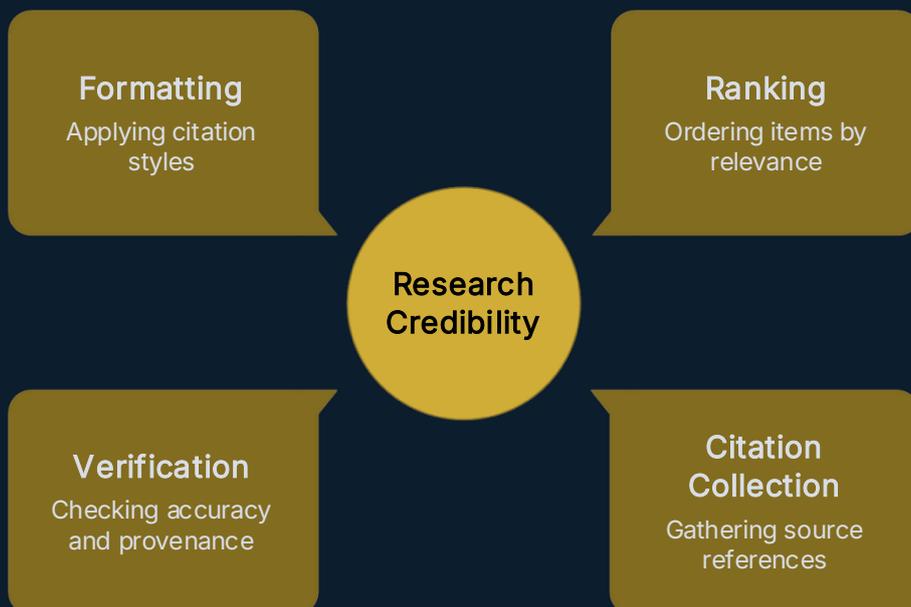
🗒 My take: The 94% overlap figure is frequently misread as reassurance. It is not. It means that if you are not in the top 20, you are effectively invisible to AI citation systems — a far harsher cutoff than traditional SEO, where position 21 still earns some traffic. And being in the top 20 still does not guarantee citation. The bar has moved up, not down.

Sources: Search Engine Land: Botify and DemandSphere analysis · Semrush AI visibility · seoClarity overlap study

The Discovery Stack for 2026.

The four disciplines are not independent options. They form a compounding stack. Each layer depends on the one below it, and authority (built through consistent entity signals, credible sourcing, and structured content) runs through all four simultaneously.

1 — GEO

Cite-ability

Claim-evidence-source structure. Generative systems select and quote.

2 — AIO

Understandability

Entity consistency, E-E-A-T signals, structured data for correct attribution.

3 — AEO

Answerability

Answer-first formatting, featured snippets, voice answer eligibility.

4 — SEO

Findability

Crawlability, indexing, ranking signals. The eligibility gate for all layers above.

> 🗔 **Authority graph:** Authority compounds across every layer of the stack.

The authority graph is not a fifth discipline: it is the connective tissue that runs through all four. Brands that build consistent, well-sourced, entity-clear content do not optimize four separate systems. They build one coherent signal that feeds all of them simultaneously.

Sources: Google AI features · GEO research paper PDF

Authority forms a graph, not a page.

A single well-optimized page does not build authority. A connected network of consistent, interlinked evidence does.

Weekly

Run citation checks across tracked query set. Log AI Overview and ChatGPT Search presence and accuracy.

Monthly

Audit third-party mentions for brand fact accuracy. Flag and correct inconsistencies in name, positioning, and product descriptions.

Quarterly

Update structured data to reflect any changes in brand facts, team, or products. Refresh author profiles and external credentials.

Annually

Full entity audit: Wikipedia, knowledge panel, press coverage, and owned properties. Rebuild any conflicting nodes.

The authority graph degrades without maintenance. Facts change, coverage drifts, and inconsistencies accumulate. Treat entity accuracy as an ongoing operational discipline, not a one-time setup task.

Monitor Authority Drift

Detect Inconsistencies

Continuous Validation

Remediate Facts
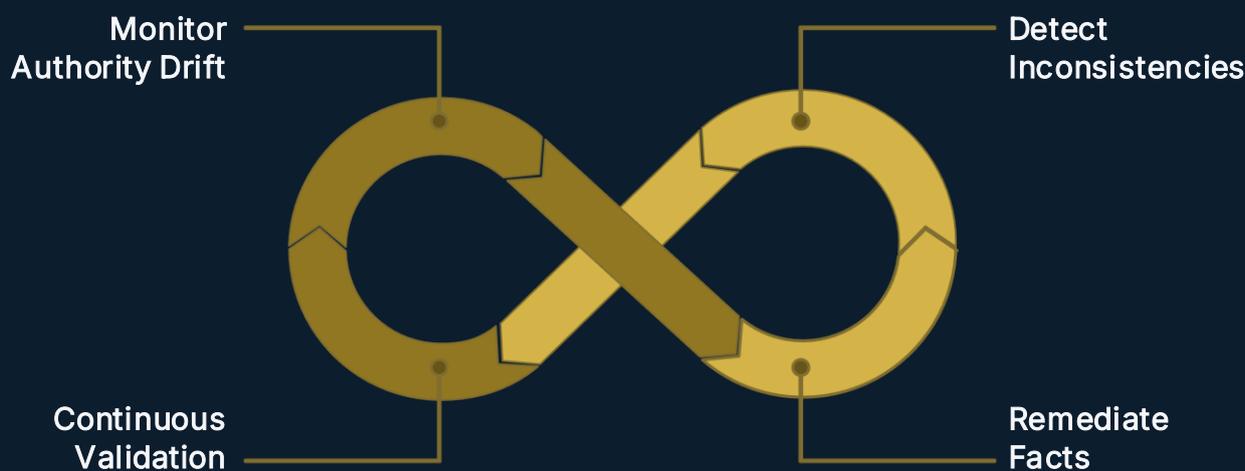
Takeaway: Build connected evidence, not isolated pages.

Sources: Google Knowledge Panel help · Google Search blog on E-E-A-T · Google structured data documentation

Two surfaces. Similar inputs. Different outputs.

Google AI Overviews and ChatGPT Search are the two dominant AI answer surfaces as of 2026. They share key architectural similarities: both use web retrieval, both surface supporting links, and both require content to be crawlable and citable. But they differ in how they weight sources, how they present answers, and how visible the citation mechanism is to users.

Google AI Overviews

Answer plus supporting links shown inline below or beside the generated response. Operating within the traditional search results page. Source links are visible but secondary to the answer text.
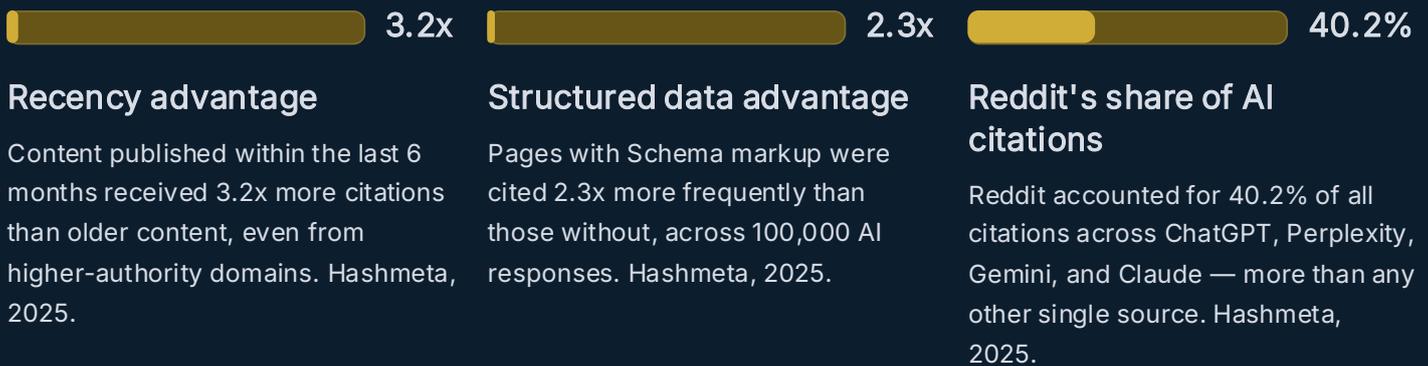
- Triggered by query type and content eligibility
- Strong overlap with organic top-20 results
- Standard SEO eligibility applies

ChatGPT Search

Answers with links to sources, surfaced within a conversational interface. Users interact in multi-turn dialogue. Source attribution is visible and clickable within the response.

- Web retrieval enabled for real-time queries
- Source credibility and structure heavily weighted
- GEO-formatted content performs better

What ChatGPT Search cites: the data

3.2x

Recency advantage

Content published within the last 6 months received 3.2x more citations than older content, even from higher-authority domains. Hashmeta, 2025.

2.3x

Structured data advantage

Pages with Schema markup were cited 2.3x more frequently than those without, across 100,000 AI responses. Hashmeta, 2025.

40.2%

Reddit's share of AI citations

Reddit accounted for 40.2% of all citations across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Claude — more than any other single source. Hashmeta, 2025.

Both surfaces reward the same underlying disciplines: well-structured, well-sourced, entity-clear content. The stack does not change by surface; the output format changes. Build for the stack, and get the benefit across both interfaces.

⬜ **Takeaway:** Visibility now spans multiple answer interfaces.

Sources: [Google AI features](#) · [OpenAI: Introducing ChatGPT search](#) · [OpenAI Help Center: ChatGPT search](#) · [Hashmeta AI Citation Study](#)

Old goal vs new goal.

The definition of "winning" in search has shifted structurally. The old model was a two-step sequence: rank for the query, earn the click. The new model has three parallel success conditions: two of them do not require a click at all.

<table>
<tr>
<td>

Before: Click-first model

- Rank for the query
- Earn the click
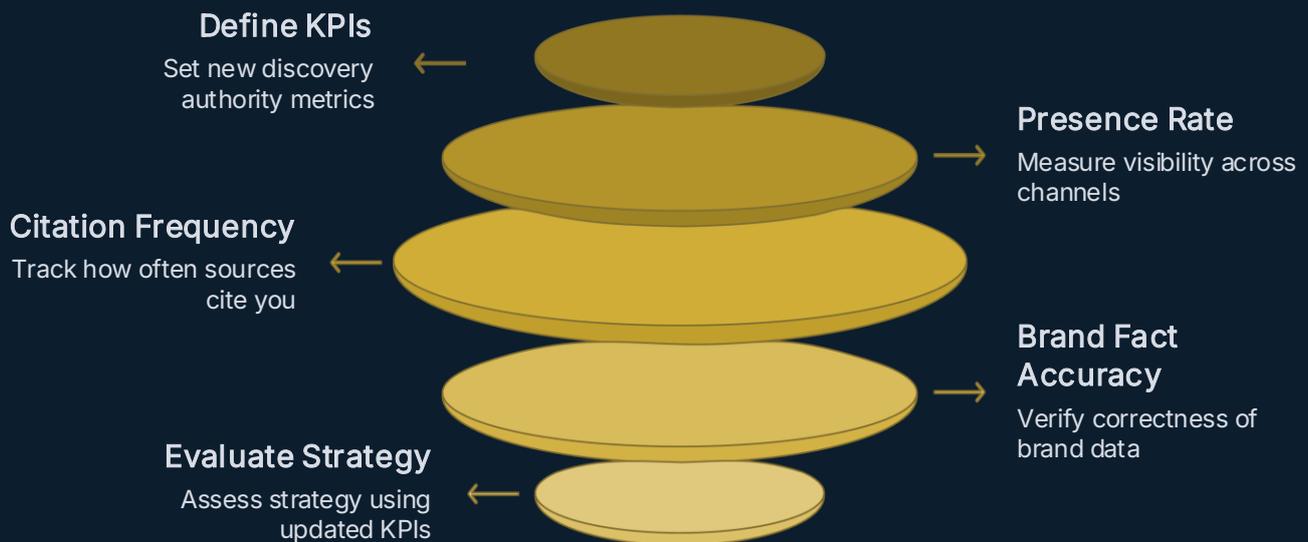
Success = traffic. Attribution assumed.

</td>
<td>

Now: Attribution-first model

- Appear as the answer
- Appear as the citation
- Maintain correct brand facts

Success = presence, attribution, and accuracy.

</td>
</tr>
</table>

The implications for measurement are significant. If you are only measuring traffic, you are measuring one of three success conditions and ignoring the other two. A brand can be the most-cited source on a high-volume topic, appear in thousands of AI answers per day, and show zero increment in click-based traffic analytics. By the old model, that brand is invisible. By the new model, it is winning.

Redefine the KPIs before you evaluate the strategy. Answer presence rate, citation frequency, and brand fact accuracy are the new metrics of discovery authority.

Define KPIs
Set new discovery authority metrics

Presence Rate
Measure visibility across channels

Citation Frequency
Track how often sources cite you

Brand Fact Accuracy
Verify correctness of brand data

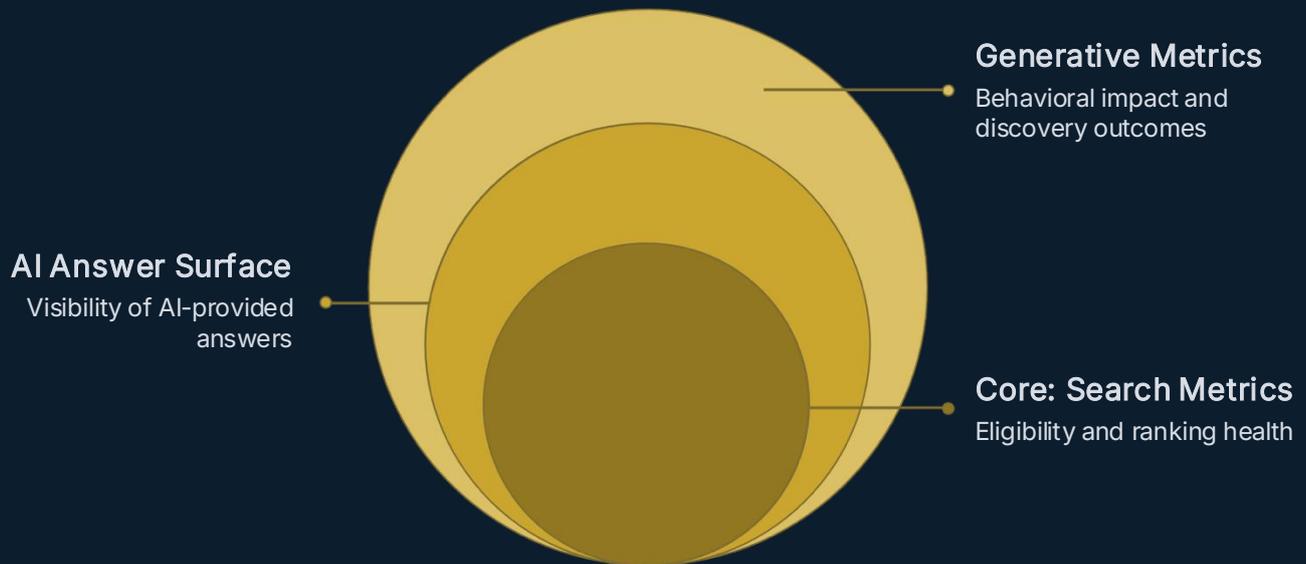**Evaluate Strategy**
Assess strategy using updated KPIs

📋 **Takeaway:** Authority and attribution define modern discovery.

Source: Pew Research: AI summaries and clicks

Track visibility with new metrics.

A modern visibility dashboard requires three measurement layers running in parallel. Classic search metrics remain necessary: they tell you about eligibility and ranking health. But they are no longer sufficient. Add AI answer surface metrics and generative metrics alongside them, or you have an incomplete picture of actual discovery performance.

Generative Metrics
Behavioral impact and discovery outcomes

AI Answer Surface
Visibility of AI-provided answers

Core: Search Metrics
Eligibility and ranking health

Classic search metrics

- Index coverage by priority segment
- Rankings by intent cluster
- Brand vs non-brand coverage

AI answer surface metrics

- AI Overview presence rate for tracked queries
- AI Overview citation rate for tracked queries

Generative metrics

- Share of answers for tracked prompts
- Share of citations for tracked prompts
- Entity accuracy spot checks

How to build the query set

Start with 50–100 queries that represent your highest-value topics. Include head terms, subtopic variants, and comparison queries. Run weekly checks across both Google AI Overviews and ChatGPT Search. Log presence, citation frequency, and any brand fact inaccuracies separately.

Entity accuracy spot checks are manual, but high-value. Ask AI systems about your brand, your key products, and your executives. Document what they say. Inaccuracies are correction opportunities, not just errors to flag.

🗌 **Takeaway:** Track citations and answer inclusion alongside rankings.

Sources: <u>Google AI features</u> · <u>Pew Research: AI summaries and clicks</u>

A 90-day operating plan.

The Discovery Stack requires sequential execution. Eligibility must come before structure, and structure before authority asset creation. Attempting to build citation magnets on a poorly indexed site is wasted effort. The 30-60-90 plan sequences the work in the right order.

Days 1–30: Eligibility
1

- Full crawl and indexing audit
- Entity facts inventory: brand, products, authors
- Baseline query set (50–100 queries) for weekly citation checks

Success benchmark: Zero critical crawl errors. All priority pages indexed. Baseline citation rate logged for tracked query set.

2
Days 31–60: Structure

- Answer-first rewrites for top-traffic pages
- Author bios, credentials, and external profile alignment
- Structured data deployment for Organization, Article, and FAQ types

Success benchmark: Top 20 pages reformatted to answer-first structure. Structured data deployed and validated in Google's Rich Results Test. Author profiles live and consistent across owned and third-party properties.

Days 61–90: Authority assets
3

- Publish citation magnets (benchmark reports, glossaries, frameworks)
- Expand subtopic cluster coverage to address fan-out subqueries
- Begin weekly entity accuracy monitoring cadence

Success benchmark: At least 3 citation magnets published and indexed. AI Overview presence rate tracked weekly. First entity accuracy audit completed with corrections filed.

Each phase builds on the previous one, and the dependency is not flexible. A site that launches citation magnets before fixing its indexing issues will see those magnets go unprocessed — the content exists, the structure is correct, but the system never reaches it. A brand that deploys structured data before reformatting its pages to answer-first structure has built the label before writing the content it describes. The sequence is not a preference. It is the architecture of how the stack actually works.

Sequence discipline is what separates a plan that compounds from one that stalls. Teams that skip the eligibility phase because it feels unglamorous will spend months wondering why their GEO investment is not generating citations. The answer is always the same: the foundation was not ready. Do the unglamorous work first. The compounding starts at the top, but it depends entirely on what is solid at the bottom.

> 🗒 **Takeaway:** Start with eligibility, then structure, then authority assets.

Sources: [Google AI features and fan-out](#) · [Google structured data intro](#)

Summary

Search has structurally changed. The click is no longer the primary unit of discovery value. Brands that measure only traffic are measuring one of three success conditions and ignoring the other two. The Discovery Stack is the framework for operating across all of them.

SEO / Findability

Keep content crawlable, indexed, and eligible. The gate that everything else depends on.

AEO / Answerability

Structure content for direct extraction. Answer-first formatting increases selection across snippets, voice, and AI Overviews.

AIO / Understandability

Build entity trust through consistency, E-E-A-T signals, and structured data. Accurate attribution requires a coherent entity model.

GEO / Cite-ability

Format claims with evidence and source links. Generative systems cite content that is precise, supported, and structurally extractable.

The four layers are a compounding stack, not separate workstreams. A page that is crawlable, answer-formatted, entity-clear, and claim-structured performs across all surfaces simultaneously. Authority is the connective tissue: it accumulates when all four are executed consistently, producing a brand that AI systems understand well enough to represent accurately, cite repeatedly, and trust by default.

What comes next

The Discovery Stack as defined here reflects the state of search in 2026. But the trajectory is clear. AI Mode, conversational search interfaces, and agentic browsing systems are already changing how queries are formed and how answers are delivered. The brands that will lead in 2027 and beyond are not those that react to each new surface; they are those that have built the underlying signal quality that every new surface will draw from. Entity clarity, source credibility, and structured content are not 2026 tactics. They are durable infrastructure.

> **Logan's take:** Most marketing teams are still debating whether AI search is real. That debate is over. The question now is whether your content infrastructure is built for a world where the answer is the destination, not the link below it. The teams that move first on entity clarity and citation structure will hold a compounding advantage that late movers cannot easily close.

> **Final takeaway:** Rank for the query. Structure for the answer. Build trust for the citation. Measure all three.

Sources: Google Search Central · Pew Research Center · SparkToro 2024 Zero-Click Study · Semrush AI Overviews Study · GEO Research Paper · seoClarity Overlap Study