AEO
THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO
Answer Engine Optimisation

FW² FREELANCE WORDS²

How to get cited by the AI that's stealing your clicks

"The rules of engagement have changed.

For over a decade, the goal in search marketing was simple: Rank high, earn the click, and drive traffic to your site.

However, as we move through 2026, a new reality has set in. According to recent [industry data](#), **over 60% of searches are now "zero-click."** Between Google's AI Overviews and conversational assistants such as ChatGPT, the answers users want are already there, at the very top of search results.

So what does this mean? It means your traffic isn't just migrating, it's being **intercepted.** Users [no longer need](#) to click through to your website. To survive, businesses and brands must pivot from traditional SEO to **Answer Engine Optimisation (AEO)**. The goal is no longer just to get the click – it's to be the authoritative source that AI cites."

Chris Godfrey
Founder @ Freelance Words

WHAT IS AEO?

Answer Engine Optimisation is the practice of creating content so that AI-driven systems *(Google AI Overviews, ChatGPT, Perplexity, Copilot, Alexa, Siri, etc.)* can confidently use it as the direct answer or as a cited source. Unlike SEO, which optimises for lists of blue links, AEO optimises for summarised responses spoken or displayed back to the user.
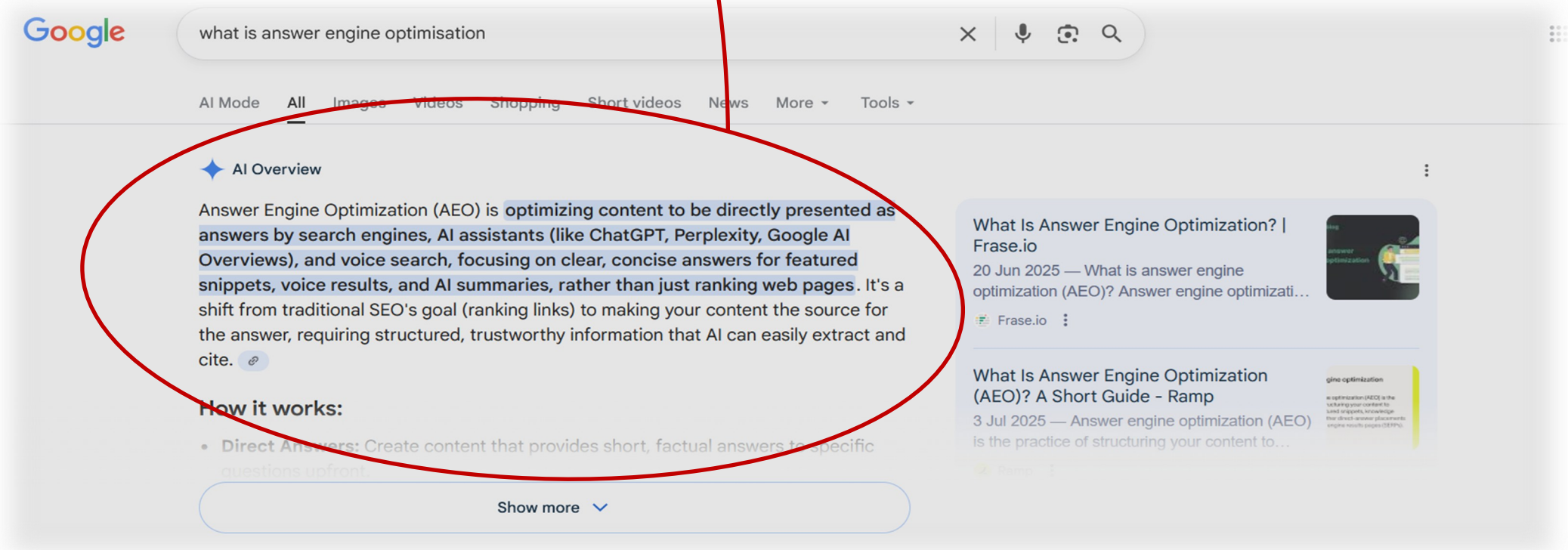
Key characteristics of AEO:

- Focuses on questions and user intent, **not just keywords**

- Prioritises clear, concise, self-contained answers in natural language

- Uses structured formats (FAQs, how-tos, definitions) and Schema Markup. (*See page 3 for more on Schema*)

- Aims to earn featured snippets, AI Overviews and citations in AI chat responses

An example would be **a page that directly answers a question** such as: *"How do I calculate PAYE for UK employees?"* in 2–3 tight paragraphs, followed by a step by step list and a simple worked example.

Always use **clearly labelled sections** that AI can easily lift into a response. *(See page 6 for more on content creation)*.

HOW AEO WORKS

AI answer engines draw on a mix of traditional search indexes, web crawlers and their own language models to generate responses, then optionally cite sources. AEO improves your odds at each stage by making your content easy to find, understand, and reuse.

Core mechanisms:

- **Discoverability**: Search indexes and AI crawlers must be able to access and crawl your content (robots.txt, paywalls, login walls and blocked regions all affect this)
- **Interpretability**: Clear headings, **Schema Markup**, and question/answer structures help systems map your content to user queries and intents. Directly feed the AI the questions and answers your customers are asking
- **Extractability**: Short, well-formed answers, bullet lists and tables in plain language are easier for models to summarise or quote accurately

- **Trust and authority**: Original data, citations, and mentions on authoritative domains increase the likelihood that models treat your content as reliable. AI prioritises **E-E-A-T** (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness). **across multiple reputable sites.**

- **Linking your content to a verifiable UK expert** with a digital footprint proves to the AI that your information is credible. (The 'trust factor')

Research into AI citations suggests that depth, readability and clear structure strongly influence whether content is selected and cited, with longer, well-organised pieces outperforming thin or unstructured material. **AI tools lean heavily on frequently referenced brands and sources, especially when they are mentioned.**

What is Schema Markup?

*"**Schema markup** is structured data code that you add to your website's HTML. It helps search engines understand your content better. Think of it as a translator that tells Google, Bing, and others exactly what your information means, no matter if it's a recipe, product, event, review, etc.*

When implemented properly, Schema can earn you rich snippets in search results (those enhanced listings with star ratings, prices, or images), which typically boost click-through rates and visibility without directly affecting your rankings." See more here.

AEO vs SEO

DIMENSION	AEO	SEO
Main objective	Become the direct answer or cited source in AI, voice and AI Overview results	Rank pages higher in search results to increase organic traffic
Primary surfaces	Featured snippets, "People also ask", Google AI Overviews, AI chat tools, voice replies	Traditional SERPs on Google and Bing, including organic listings and rich results
User behaviour	Conversational queries, follow-up questions, voice search, "just tell me the answer"	Typed or tapped queries, comparison of multiple links, browsing behaviour
Content style	Structured, concise, answer-first, conversational tone	In-depth, keyword-targeted, comprehensive topic coverage
Core signals	Question alignment, clarity, Schema, authority, citation-friendly structure	Keywords, backlinks, technical health, UX, engagement metrics
KPIs	Presence in AI Overviews, frequency of citations, share of answer surface	Rankings, organic sessions, click‑through rate, conversions from search
Devices	Voice assistants, AI chat interfaces, mobile AI modes in search	Desktop and mobile web browsers using classic search engines

Why AEO is now "more important"

"AEO can determine whether users ever see your brand at all.

Even if your SEO is strong, AI overviews and chat answers can intercept clicks and keep users within the AI experience, reducing organic traffic while still relying on your content in the background.

For brands, this shifts the priority from "get the click" to "be the answer" or "be the cited expert" wherever the user asks the question. *SEO is still necessary to feed the eco-system, but AEO increasingly determines visibility and perceived authority in AI-mediated journeys."*

5

HOW TO GET CITED IN AEO ANSWERS: STEP BY STEP

1 Define your answer territory

List the high-value questions your ideal customers ask at each stage (awareness, consideration, purchase, retention)

Prioritise specific, answerable questions rather than broad, unfocused topics (e.g. *"How do I comply with UK GDPR for email marketing?"* rather than *"What is GDPR?"*)

Map each priority question to a dedicated page or section that can serve as a complete, standalone answer

2 Create answer-first content

For each key question, open with a clear, 2–4 sentence answer in plain language that directly addresses the query

Follow with structured sections: short sub-headings *(What, Why, How, Examples, FAQs)*, bullet lists, numbered steps, and one or two simple examples or scenarios

Use natural, conversational phrasing that reflects how humans actually ask questions, including long-tail and voice-style queries

TOP TIP: *AI models are designed to be concise. If your content is buried under 500 words of "fluff" or "introductory storytelling," an AI crawler will likely opt for a competitor who gets straight to the point.*

*To counter this, adopt the **"Quick Answer" block**. Every piece of content should lead with a 40–60 words summary that provides an immediate solution to the user's query."*

3   Add structured data and Q&A formats

Implement an FAQ Page, How To and other relevant Schema Markup for key Q&A sections so they are **machine-readable**

Use explicit question headings ("What is...?", "How do I...?") and pair them with one tight paragraph answer directly underneath

Ensure each page has a clean hierarchy of headings and avoids mixing multiple unrelated topics that could confuse parsers

This kind of structure helps search engines and AI systems understand which part of your content matches which user question, improving your chances of being selected for snippets, AI Overviews and chat citations.

4   Strengthen authority and uniqueness

Incorporate original research, proprietary data, benchmarks, or surveys where possible; AI systems are more likely to cite unique information sources

Reference independent, authoritative bodies and provide outbound citations so your content sits within a credible network of sources

Publish on a consistent cadence so your site remains current and is more frequently crawled; freshness can be a signal in fast-moving topics

Analysis of AI citations show that content depth and readability, combined with originality, significantly increase the likelihood of being used and named as a source.

5   Improve off-site visibility

Secure mentions on respected industry sites, news outlets, and reference-style resources, as authority domains weigh heavily in model training and retrieval

Participate in communities such as Reddit and specialist forums, where AI systems often scrape real world opinions and discussions

Create high-quality YouTube content answering key questions, as this can feed into Google's AI Overviews and related answer surfaces

Experience-based commentary from practitioners suggests that repeated brand mentions across multiple reputable domains create a cumulative effect, making brands more likely to surface in AI answers.

6   Make your content easy for AI to re-use

Write clearly and concisely, avoiding unnecessary jargon; large language models prefer direct, unambiguous phrasing

Use shorter sentences and logically grouped paragraphs, which improves extractability and reduces the risk of misinterpretation in summarisation

Add explicit source attributions and citation-friendly phrases (for example; *"According to the Forbes 2025 tax report…"*), which can encourage models to preserve your name when they quote data

Studies on LLM training indicate that content with clear citations and source attributions is more likely to be referenced directly in AI answers.

7 Ensure technical and policy accessibility

Check robots.txt, meta tags and paywalls so key informational pages can actually be crawled by search bots and (where desired) AI agents

Avoid over-restrictive cookie or script setup that unintentionally blocks important crawlers while still meeting UK and EU privacy obligations

Review your terms of use to decide whether and how you permit AI systems to use your content, balancing control with the visibility you want

If AI engines cannot legally or technically access your content, they cannot select you as an answer, even if your material is excellent.

8 Monitor how and where you are cited

Periodically ask AI tools questions in your niche and note which sources they cite; track whether your brand appears and in what context

Build a simple log of URLs and content types that frequently show up in citations for your space (e.g. government statistics, certain trade press sites, specific blogs)

Where appropriate, reach out to these sites with expert contributions, data or guest content to secure inclusion on pages already favoured by AI systems

Manual audits of AI citations reveal that "piggybacking" on the sources AI already trusts is one of the fastest ways to increase brand mentions.

9   Align measurement with AEO outcomes

Track visibility in featured snippets, "People also ask" panels and AI Overviews for your priority questions, not just classic ranking positions

Record when AI tools explicitly name your brand in answers and how often this occurs over time

Attribute downstream traffic, leads and mentions to AI influenced journeys where possible (for instance, branded search uplift following AI exposure)

Because AI experiences often keep users on-platform, some benefits will show up more as brand lift and assisted conversions than in direct click-through data, so measurement frameworks need to reflect that reality.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

For UK businesses, the strategic move is to treat AEO as a core extension of SEO, <u>not</u> a replacement.

Maintain technical and on-page SEO health, but deliberately design key pages as "answer assets" for AI and voice. That means choosing the questions you want to own, restructuring content around clear, citation-friendly answers, and building authority signals on and off your site. Ensure AI systems recognise your brand as a safe, high-quality source.

FREELANCE WORDS : For content that AI loves to cite

Copy, comms, campaigns, video and more. Since 2013, **Freelance Words** has delivered award-winning content to businesses both large and small.

We're a freelance creative collective – a hub of like-minded souls – who pool our skills and resources to give clients big agency quality without the big-ticket price.
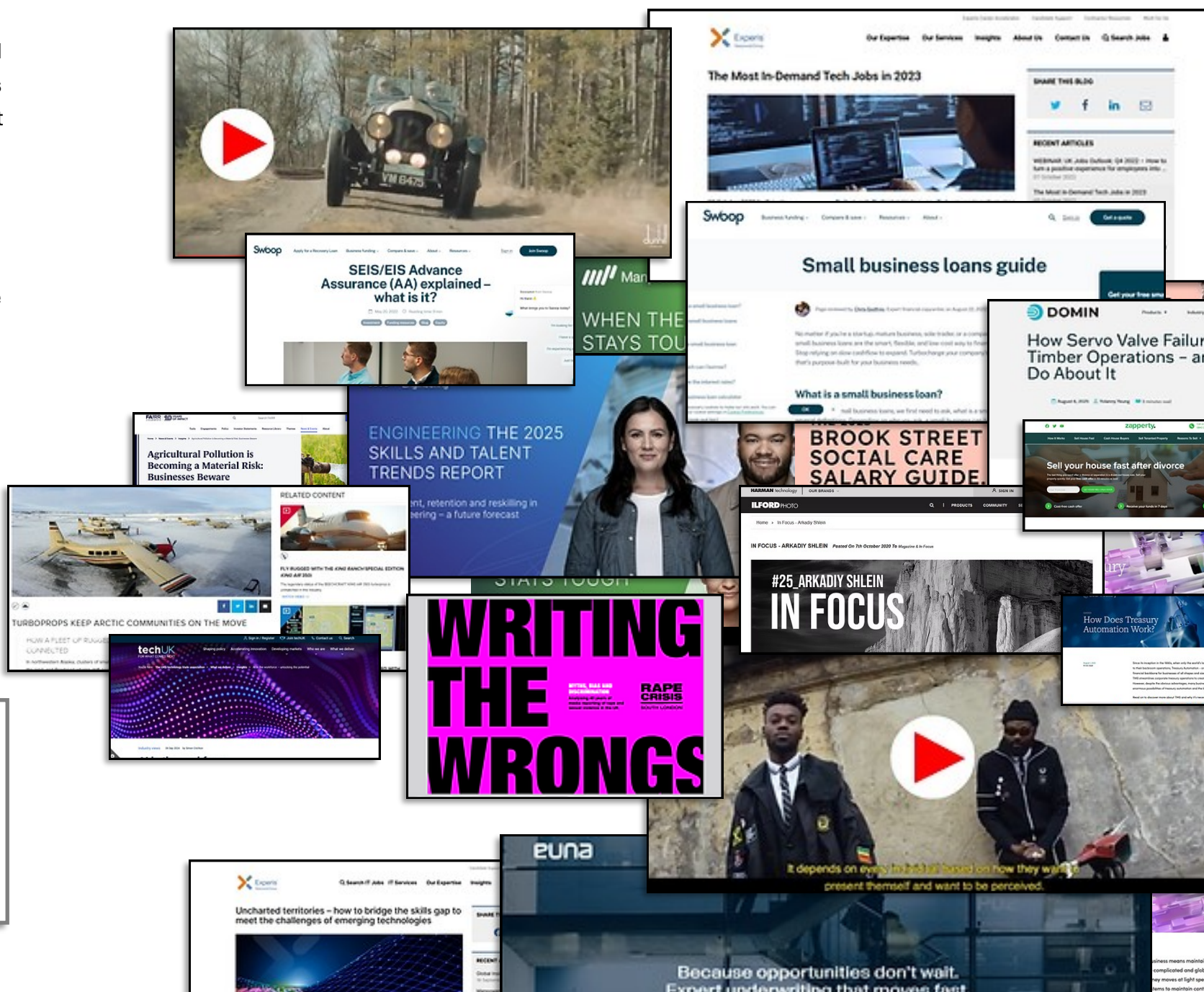
Use us for:

Ad campaigns

AEO and SEO

Brand support and launch

Content creation/storytelling

Promotional support

Video production and editing

FREELANCE WORDS²

Because life's too short for a boring story