



# The Complete Guide to Google Penalties (Both Manual and Algorithmic)

## Panda – This penalty chews up weak content

It was one of the first updates that specifically penalized websites. The first Panda algorithm was run in 2011 and decimated the traffic of a lot of low-quality websites.

### The basics – What is Panda?

It's been run several times over the past four years or so, we still don't have an exact definition of what types of sites it affects (although we have a good idea).

The purpose of the Panda algorithm update was and is to keep low-quality ("shallow") content from showing up in search results.

The SEO community has come together to analyze websites that were hit by Panda and arrived to the [following conclusions](#) about pages that get penalized:

- The content is poorly written (perhaps "spun" using software)
- The content is very short ("shallow" content that is too brief to be valuable)
- The content is mostly duplicate content (copied from another page)

### How do Panda penalties work?

Google creates a site-wide modification factor based on the quality of all the pieces of content on the site. If it falls below a certain threshold, the factor is applied to the site (lowering rankings of all the pages on the site). In plain English, this means that if a site has a certain amount of low quality content on it, **the entire site will be penalized.**

### How do you know if you were hit by Panda?

If you ever suspect you've been hit by a penalty, but it happened in the past, there are online tools that can help you. One useful free tool is the [Panguin Tool](#). Once you connect it to your Google Analytics account, it will overlay a graph of your traffic over timelines of past algorithms. If you see that your traffic rapidly declined a few days before or after a major Panda update, you were likely penalized by it.

## Penguin – The bird that can't fly but can detect your bad backlinks

The first Penguin was released in 2012 and affected over 3% of all queries. Like Panda, it decimated the traffic of any site it penalized.

## What Penguin looks for:

We do know that there are three main backlink factors that can be used to identify unnatural link patterns:

1. **Link quality** - A site that has obtained all of its links naturally will have links of both low and high quality. Sites made by blackhat SEOs often have a ton of just low quality links or only high authority links (like from a [private blog network](#)).
2. **Link velocity** - Look at the backlink growth of any large site, and you will see that it gains links at an increased rate over time. Unnatural sites often get a lot of links in a short period, followed by a sudden decrease.
3. **Link diversity** - Legitimate sites get links from all sources (contextual, blog comments, forums, etc.). However, bad SEOs often create a large portion of a site's links from one source (like blog comments). In addition, links should have [varied anchor text](#). Too many links with the same anchor text could trigger a Penguin penalty.

## How Penguin penalizes sites:

Penguin is not a site-wide penalty—it affects specific pages. However, since it affects those pages that typically have the most backlinks pointing to them, you can still lose 80%+ of your traffic if those pages are responsible for most of your traffic.

A tool such as Panguin (shown in the previous section) can confirm that your traffic drop was caused by a Penguin algorithm update.

Recovering from a Penguin penalty is possible but difficult. Not only will you have to try to fix the issue (which could be a number of different things), but you'll also need to wait for the next algorithm refresh to see if it worked or not.

## Mobilegeddon – Can Google force website owners into the future?

In early 2015, [Google announced](#) that it would start trying to help mobile users find useful results on mobile-friendly websites. The update finally came a few months later on [April 20th](#). Although it was called “Mobilegeddon” and “Mobilepocalypse,” it turned out to be much less significant than originally predicted.

### What does Google consider mobile-friendly?

Right now, there's no sliding scale. Your web pages are either friendly or not friendly. You can see what Google thinks of your content by using the [Mobile-Friendly Test tool](#). Enter a URL, click Analyze, and it will give you a green passing message or a red fail message. It's a good idea to check a few different pages such as your home page, a blog post, and any other pages with custom layouts or designs.

Another place to check if you have any major mobile issues is in [Google Webmaster Tools](#) (Search Console). Navigate to “Search traffic > Mobile usability”, and you’ll see any errors that you should fix as soon as possible.

Here are a few more general [mobile-friendly principles](#) to keep in mind:

- Don’t use software that most mobile devices can’t render, e.g, Flash.
- Resize text to match the screen (i.e., responsive design)
- Use text that is easily readable on a small screen (typically 16px or more)
- Don’t put links right beside each other (hard to tap the right one)

### **Mobilegeddon in the future:**

Keep in mind that even if you get hit by a mobile “penalty,” your traffic likely won’t be decimated. This update primarily boosts the rankings of the most mobile-friendly sites, so they’ll just push down your unfriendly pages in the results.

Top Heavy – Balance is the key to any impression

The “Top Heavy” algorithm was first run [in January 2012](#).

### **How the Top Heavy penalty works?**

This is a site-based penalty. That means that either all of your content is penalized or none of it is. The final thing you need to know about this algorithmic penalty is that it is run very infrequently. It was first run in January of 2012, then October of 2012, and most recently in February of 2014. If you get hit with this penalty, you’ll have to be patient to get it removed.

### **Avoiding a Top Heavy penalty:**

Unless you have multiple ads, all above the fold, you’re probably safe. If your content is pushed below the fold, chances are your site visitors won’t bother trying to find it. To avoid this penalty, just [create a good user experience](#).

### **Payday – If you prey on hopeful readers, your Payday may be over**

This algorithm—“Payday”—was appropriately named for some of the most lucrative, and therefore competitive, search engine results for [Payday loans](#).

### **Combatting spammy results with the Payday algorithm:**

If you operate a site in any “spammy” niche, you need to be extra clean if you want to avoid being penalized. Otherwise, if you’re getting results with blackhat SEO, expect to be penalized eventually. If that happens, you’ll just have to move on to a new site.

## Pirate – Outlaws be warned! The Google police are coming for you

The “Pirate” algorithm was Google’s answer to the growing number of torrent sites (mainly used for pirating media and software) showing up in search results.

### How the Pirate algorithm works

The main purpose of this algorithm wasn’t to eradicate torrent sites from the search results altogether, just for certain queries. If a site has a lot of copyright violations, this algorithm will penalize it by lowering its rankings. To get an idea of the scale on which copyright violations occur, consider this: Google receives requests to remove over 10 million URLs from search [each week](#). If you want to avoid the Pirate penalty, it’s simple: don’t steal content (or I suppose don’t steal too much of it).

### Unnatural links (manual) – Diversity is healthy

As the name implies, manual penalties are given by Google employees and contractors who review your site against their [quality guidelines](#) and deem that you are violating one or more of them (most common ones are below)

Unnatural links to your site—impacts links	Unnatural links to your site	Unnatural links from your site
Hacked site	Thin content with little or no added value	Pure spam
User-generated spam	Cloaking and/or sneaky redirects	Hidden text and/or keyword stuffing
Spammy freehosts	Spammy structured markup	

Manually reviewing backlink profiles of “unnatural links” is one of the ways Google combats this. If the reviewer sees that a large portion of your links are paid links or part of a [link scheme](#), you will be hit with this penalty.

### Different forms of unnatural link penalties:

If you log into Webmaster Tools (Search Console), you can see whether you have any manual actions applied to your site:

The three most common actions are:

1. **“Unnatural links to your site—impacts links.”** If you have unnatural links, but it doesn’t look like you had any part in creating them, you’ll get this manual action, which isn’t actually a penalty. The links will no longer factor into your rankings (so traffic might drop a bit), but there’s nothing you need to do to “recover.”
2. **“Unnatural links to your site.”** If you just see this message, then you’ve been penalized. It means that the reviewer has concluded that you’re responsible for the shady links. Depending on the specific message, either specific pages will be penalized or your entire site could be.
3. **“Unnatural links from your site.”** If you’re always linking to specific sites with exact anchor text (for a high volume keyword) or you have way too many links pointing out from your site, you could get hit with this. This penalty can affect either a portion or all of your site.

## Fixing a manual penalty:

Manual penalties are better than algorithmic. Once you fix the issue, you can apply for reconsideration. If you truly fixed the problem, the manual action will be lifted. Once again, you may need to refer to my [step-by-step guide to fixing any Google penalty](#).

## Spam (manual) – If you’re going to play around, at least do it carefully

There are many different spam-related messages that can show up as a result of a manual action. These are the most common:

1. **“Pure spam.”** The majority of the site is clearly spam, or the backlinks to the site are all spammed. It’s next to impossible to recover from this manual action.
2. **“User-generated spam.”** If you have a site that allows users to submit content, you could be penalized for it if they abuse it to create spam content or links. Most commonly, this penalty refers to spam in comments or forum posts/profiles. It can be fixed.
3. **“Spammy freehosts.”** If you’re unlucky enough to have your site hosted by the same web host that provides service to a ton of spammers, your site might be lumped together with them. This is a good reason to stay away from very cheap or free hosting services.

## Thin content with no added value (manual) – No one likes hearing the same story over and over again

If a manual reviewer spots that most of your content is derived from other content, you can get hit with this penalty, and your traffic will take a tumble.

Here are the most common scenarios that represent “little or no added value”:

- Automatically generated content
- Thin affiliate pages
- Content from other sources, e.g., scraped content or low-quality guest blog posts
- Doorway pages

When you go to the Manual Actions section in Webmasters Tools (Search Console), you can see whether you’ve been hit by this penalty. Pay close attention to whether it says that it’s a site-wide match or a partial match.