Google Link Disavow Tool

The Complete Guide

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Google has finally released their link disavow tool enabling webmasters to report inorganic inbound links for their domains. This document contains a step-by-step guide with screenshots and a list of best practices including potential problems associated with the use of the tool.

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What is the link disavow tool?

The tool allows you to disavow unnatural inbound links for a domain verified in your Google Webmaster Tools. Specifically you can ask Google to ignore links you do not control if you believe they could be harming your website's rankings.

> *"If you believe your site's ranking is being harmed by low-quality links you do not control, you can ask Google not to take them into account when assessing your site."*

What are inorganic links?

Google uses links as one of their ranking signals and they want them to occur naturally. Paid links, link exchanges or other types of link manipulation are considered 'inorganic' or 'unnatural'.

How did I end up with inorganic links?

You may have created some yourself or perhaps your SEO company did. In some cases even third parties can create unnatural links for you. This can happen as part of random spam / content scraping, reputation management spam or deliberate attempt at much debated concept of 'negative SEO'.

Examples of Inorganic Links

Here are some examples where inorganic links may appear:

- Automated link exchanges
- Low quality article and directory submissions
- Artificial blog networks
- Paid links
- Fake Profiles
- Blog Comment Spam
- Widgetbait Tactics
- Footer Link Spam
- Artificial Blogrolls

The above examples typically exhibit characteristics of manipulative anchor text.

Why use this tool?

There are two reasons why you would use this tool:

1. Preventative

Inorganic links could potentially harm your website's rankings and by using the link disavow tool you can specify which links should be ignored by Google to prevent any algorithmic or manual action against your website.

2. Remedial

If your website has been affected by a search quality algorithm or manual action you can assist in the repair process by specifying which links Google should ignore.

There are several levels of action Google may take upon noticing search quality issues including:

- Algorithmic Filter (e.g. Panda, Penguin)
- Manual Action (various degrees of severity)
- Domain Ban

For example, Google recently sent out thousands of notifications to webmasters whose websites experienced partial intervention and only very granular action was taken against their content. This could, for example, affect the ability for a single page or phrase to rank in results after ignoring inorganic links pointing towards that page. Finding and disavowing unnatural links for troubled pages could be a good strategy to resolve the issue.

Use With Caution!

Google's link disavow tool is an advanced feature, recommended for experienced and well-informed webmasters. By removing good links you could impact your website's ability to rank in Google. If you are certain that the links you are about to disavow are indeed a part of a link scheme and you do not control the links then this tool may be an option for you.

Do I have to use this tool?

No. You have an option to go directly to the source of your bad links and ask for them to be removed. Some links are already ignored by Google and will not affect your website's rankings. One such example is any link which contains rel="nofollow". These will neither help nor harm your website. Another example is various domain information websites such as domain information websites (example: au.similarsites.com/site/dejanseo.com.au) or parked domains. Google already knows about these websites and deals with them appropriately on an algorithmic level.

Step-by-Step Guide

Google's link disavow tool works with appropriately formatted text files. The correct format is one URL per line. You can use a .txt file but a .csv will also work fine.

Disavow links from a specific URL

http://bad-link-domain.com/bad-link-page/ - disavows all inbound links coming from that page.

Disavow links from an entire domain

domain:bad-link-domain.com - disavows links from an entire domain.

Commenting

Line starting with a "#" is to be used for comments. Commenting can be useful if you have a large file which may need to be separated into different groups of links for easier overview and updates.

Here's an example:

> *#Blog Comment Spam (ignoring the offending pages)*
> *http://bad-link-domain.com/bad-link-page-1/*
> *http://bad-link-domain.com/bad-link-page-2/*
> *http://bad-link-domain.com/bad-link-page-3/*
> *http://bad-link-domain.com/bad-link-page-4/*
>
> *#Article Spam (Ignoring the entire domain)*
> *domain:another-bad-link-domain.com*

Once you're happy with your list navigate to the following URL:
https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/disavow-links-main

You will be given an option to select any of the websites verified in your Google Webmaster Tools:

Select the appropriate website and hit the "Disavow Links" button. The next screen will display the selected website in the drop down and show the following warning:

"This is an advanced feature and should only be used with caution. If used incorrectly, this feature can potentially harm your site's performance in Google's search results. We recommend that you only disavow backlinks if you believe you have a considerable number of spammy, artificial, or low-quality links pointing to your site, and if you are confident that the links are causing issues for you."

If you've selected the wrong domain, you can adjust it by selecting the correct one in the domain drop down. Click on "Disavow Links" button and a pop-up screen will open up. You will be asked to choose a file containing your disavow list.

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Disavow Links

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Upload a file containing **only** the links you want to disavow.

Choose File

Submit   Cancel

Select the file you've prepared earlier and hit the "Submit" button. If the file uploads successfully it will be visible on the same screen:

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The file below contains the list of disavowed links. To edit the list, click **Download**.

orm.csv   Download   Delete

Choose File

Submit   Cancel

There is nothing else you need to do at this point and it's safe to close the screen.

Updating and Deleting Your Disavow List

You cannot, upload more than one file, but you can update the existing file. To do so you're able to download the existing disavow file, edit it and re-upload using the same process. Google offers two download options: CSV and Google Docs / Google Drive.

Select Download Format

◉ CSV   ○ Google Docs

OK   Cancel

Note: At this stage Google Docs export option removes any # comment lines.

When you upload a new file, the old one will be overwritten so ensure you include all your links in there and not just the ones you're adding to the list. If you change your mind about links you wish to disavow or wish to start with a completely new file you always have an option to delete the file and start over.

Pro Tips

Here are a few little known facts and tips which may assist in your link cleanup process and save you valuable time:

Nofollow Links

Nofollow links cannot help your rank nor can they harm your website.
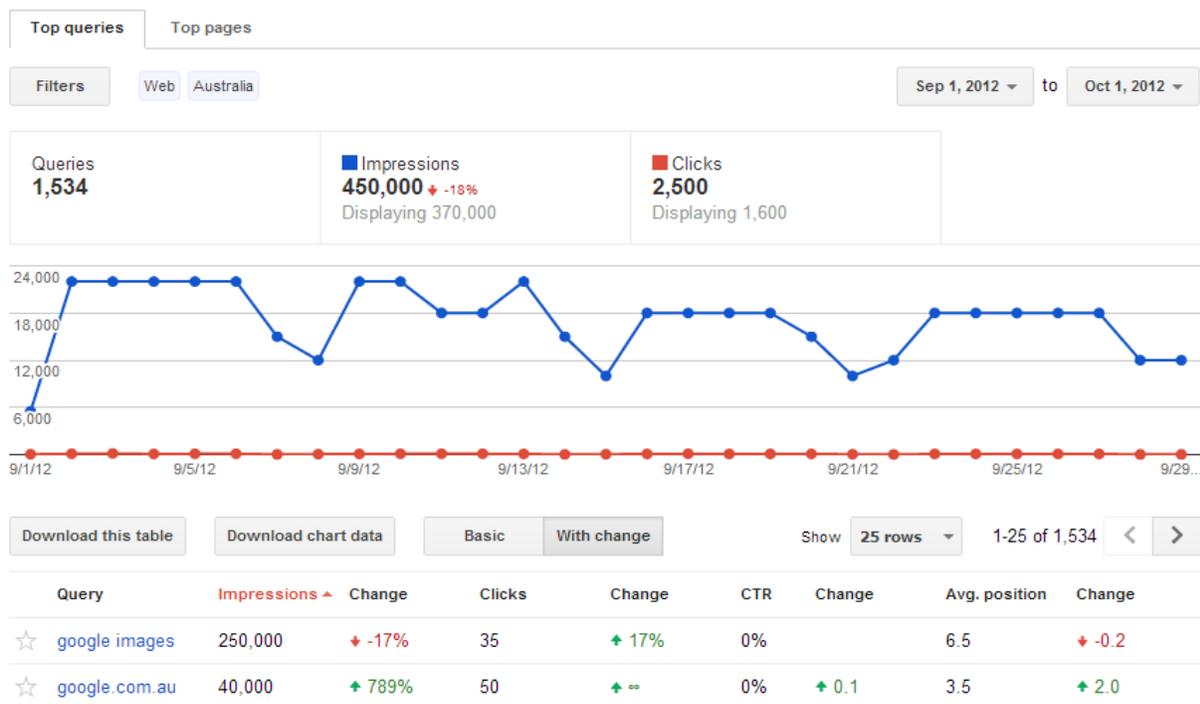
Smart Link Analysis

When looking for bad inbound links which may be harming your website it's good enough to use the link export from Google Webmaster Tools. You don't have to spend money on fancy link analysis tools. These will often produce links Google didn't include in their list and give you more noise to deal with. Be smart and work with Google's tools directly to save time and money.

Detecting Affected Pages

Sometimes Google will take action against certain pages or phrases rather than the entire website. To find out which of your pages could be in trouble use Google Webmaster Tools to discover any phrases or pages which have experienced traffic or ranking drop in recent time:

Search Queries

| Top queries | Top pages |

| Filters | Web Australia | | Sep 1, 2012 ▾ to Oct 1, 2012 ▾ |

Queries	■ Impressions	■ Clicks
1,534	450,000 ↓ -18%	2,500
	Displaying 370,000	Displaying 1,600

| Download this table | Download chart data | Basic | With change | | | Show | 25 rows ▾ | 1-25 of 1,534 | < > |

Query	Impressions ▲	Change	Clicks	Change	CTR	Change	Avg. position	Change
☆ google images	250,000	↓ -17%	35	↑ 17%	0%		6.5	↓ -0.2
☆ google.com.au	40,000	↑ 789%	50	↑ ∞	0%	↑ 0.1	3.5	↑ 2.0

Just ensure you have set your filters correctly to prevent any false alerts. For example if you're targeting audience in Australia then set your location to "Australia" to get more realistic ranking data. Similarly you can detect pages which may have lost traffic/position by navigating to the "Top Pages" tab on the same screen.

Unusual Link Quantities

Your website's content will have a usual link growth pattern and most of your pages will have a balanced number of inbound links. For various reasons, spammers may target some of your regular pages and create unnatural links for them by spamming other websites.

One such example is online reputation management spam with the intention to lift a page on your website in rankings on the basis that it mentions a brand which is trying to bury any bad references in search results.

Another example includes a scenario where spammers manage to insert a link into your content, either by hacking your site or through UGC (user generated content) such as comments and fake user profiles. This is especially problematic if you do not use rel="nofollow" on untrusted UGC.

There is an easy way to detect such pages in Google Webmaster Tools. Navigate to: Traffic > Links to Your Site and sort the results by "Source domains". Observe the link quantities and if you notice a page with an unusual number of linking domains investigate it, especially if the page seems pretty ordinary and normally wouldn't have that many more links than other average page on your website. Click on the page in the list and if you notice unusual domains

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linking in, click through further to reveal actual pages and investigate the links. If they seem like spam then they might be worth including in the disavow list.

Links:

Link Disavow Tool: https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/disavow-links-main