



AI SEARCH GUIDE · 2026

One Search, A Hundred Answers

Winning Visibility in the Age of Query Fan-Out

How Fandango Digital helps ambitious brands stay found when AI quietly breaks every search into dozens of hidden questions.

fandangodigital.co.uk

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SETTING THE SCENE

The rules of visibility have changed



The ground has shifted under SEO

For years, the strategy was simple: find the right keywords, claim the top spots on the SERP, and watch the traffic roll in. Today's shift runs deeper than that - it's changing how search works and what success looks like.

With the rise of AI-powered search and assistants, a single query no longer leads to a single result. Systems like Google's AI Overviews break each query down into a network of sub-questions - a process known as query fan-out.

Query fan-out changes how visibility works. Rather than chasing one keyword ranking, we now need to think in terms of topical authority and comprehensive coverage.

This guide is here to help you navigate that shift. We'll cover:

- What query fan-out is, and why it matters for your SEO strategy
- The risks and opportunities it creates for businesses across every sector
- How to structure your site and content to succeed in an intent-driven world
- How Fandango Digital's AI SEO approach gives you the insight you need to adapt and grow

Our goal is simple: help you move from chasing rankings to building sustainable visibility in the age of AI-powered search.

CHAPTER ONE

How one search becomes many



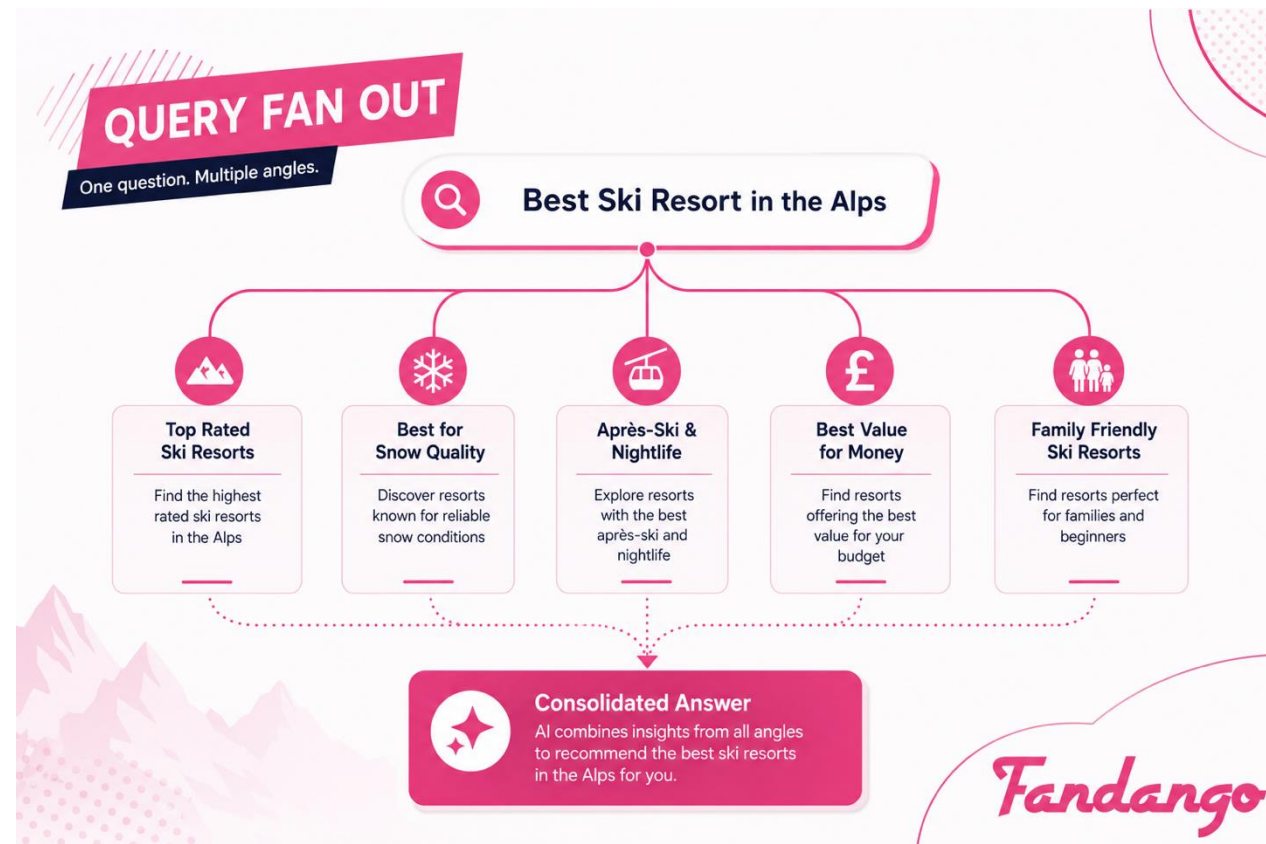
The hidden mechanics behind every AI Overview and chat-based answer.

Behind the curtain: how fan-out actually works

We've watched search move from keyword matching to semantic understanding, from documents to passages, and from simple retrieval to intent-driven answers. This shift is driven by a process called query fan-out.

On the surface, query fan-out looks new. In reality it builds on existing SEO fundamentals; named entities, query expansion, search intent modelling - but with far more sophistication, powered by large language models (LLMs).

At its core, query fan-out is the practice of expanding a single query into multiple sub-queries that reflect different facets of user intent.



Straight from the patent filing

This isn't theoretical. In late 2024, Google filed the Thematic Search patent, describing exactly how query fan-out works through five steps:

- 1 **Initial query processing** - detecting entities and intent.
- 2 **Expansion into sub-queries** - breaking broad queries into smaller, intent-driven questions.
- 3 **Parallel retrieval** - running those sub-queries across different indexes.
- 4 **Clustering** - grouping results thematically (cost, features, comparisons).
- 5 **Summarisation** - using AI to generate a concise answer from multiple sources.

The LLM angle

Search engines and AI language models take a similar approach to complex queries: they break them into smaller components to deliver a fuller answer.

LLMs apply fan-out implicitly, using learned reasoning patterns, sometimes called decomposition or chain-of-thought, to tackle different aspects of a query at once.

Both systems lean on entities as organising anchors. Google expands queries by identifying related entities and topics; LLMs structure their answers around key entities and concepts.

Watching AI search in the wild

We're constantly watching AI search mechanics for emerging patterns. Some are quirks - ChatGPT Search adding the current year to queries to force freshness, creating search strings no human would ever type.

Independent log-file analysis published in Search Engine Land found that when ChatGPT changed its default model, the average number of unique domains cited per response fell from 19 to 15 - with a matching drop in ChatGPT-User crawl volume.

The newer “thinking” models can fire more than ten fan-out queries per response, while the faster default models run just two or three.

The takeaway: how aggressively a query fans out depends on the model doing the work - and that changes faster than most SEO playbooks.

So, what does this mean for you?

For SEOs, query fan-out opens a new frontier: making sure your content is valuable to humans and to the AI systems that now shape visibility.

Every opportunity comes with trade-offs. Greater reach through AI-driven summaries can mean fewer direct clicks, less predictable traffic, and less control over how your content is presented.

The real question is whether the opportunities outweigh the risks and how you position your site to benefit.

CHAPTER TWO

The trade-off: what you stand to gain (and lose)

THE TRADE-OFF

Weighing it up

Traffic loss is one of the top concerns when AI Overviews satisfy a query directly. But query fan-out also opens new visibility in places you couldn't reach before, especially for e-commerce and media sites.

Where you could lose ground

Traffic cannibalisation by AI Overviews

When Google answers a query directly, users may never click through - even if you're cited.

Head-term rankings no longer guarantee visibility

Ranking #1 doesn't mean you'll appear in the AI summary. Pages buried deeper may be pulled in if they answer sub-queries well.

Unpredictable visibility

Because visibility depends on sub-query coverage, it's harder to forecast which pages will attract clicks.

Where you could gain ground

Expanded ranking surface

Your pages can surface through sub-queries you never explicitly targeted.

Niche expertise amplified

Smaller, specialised sites can compete with the big players by covering specific intent angles in depth.

Comprehensive content gains more value

Content that addresses multiple intent layers and entities is more likely to get extracted.

38%

A study looking at the correlation between SERP rankings and AI Overviews found that just 38% of AI Overview citations now come from pages ranking in the top 10 organic results - down from 76% a year earlier.

Two industries, two playbooks

E-commerce:

Traditional e-commerce SEO focused on optimising product pages for transactional keywords. Query fan-out changes that dynamic entirely.

Picture someone searching for ski gear. AI Overviews pull from product reviews, buying guides, comparison charts, and even weather considerations - not just product listings.

A small outdoor retailer specialising in ultralight ski jackets can suddenly appear alongside the big names by publishing detailed content on weight comparisons and packing techniques.

Media:

Media companies face a similar challenge, often more intensely, given audience expectations for full coverage. A query like “climate change impact on ski-ing” decomposes into thematic sub-queries: economic cost, sea-level rise, agricultural impacts, tourism and policy developments.

AI Overviews might blend statistics, NGO data, specialist blog insight, and mainstream news. Generalist outlets need detailed sub-articles on each facet, not just broad overviews.

Niche publishers can lean on deeper expertise to boost their chances of citation, even with lower domain authority.

CHAPTER THREE

Building a site AI can actually understand

Your site's structure needs to speak the same language as the algorithms reading it.

The building blocks: entities

Named entities; people, places, products, concepts - are the anchors Google uses to expand and cluster intent. Without clearly identified brands, software, or hardware, Google can't diversify sub-queries to reflect real user needs.

Defining your entities clearly helps Google and AI assistants understand what your site actually covers. It's also useful for disambiguation - "amazon" could mean the Amazon Prime or the Amazon Rainforest.

Worth noting: schema markup adds clarity, but it doesn't guarantee citation on its own.

Give every entity a purpose

Naming entities isn't enough — you need to tie them to specific intents. Take "standing desk":

- Informational — What is a standing desk?
- Comparative — Standing desk vs traditional desk
- Transactional — Where to buy a standing desk online?
- Navigational — Best standing desk brands

These entity-intent relationships are the foundation for your content architecture.

Grouping content around topics, not keywords

Structure your site as a hub-and-spoke model, mirroring Google's thematic organisation:

- Hub pages: broad topic coverage, topical authority.
- Cluster pages: deep dives on specific entity-intent combinations.

Linking it all together

Internal links tie clusters together. Descriptive anchors like “our guide to best après ski locations” tell search engines what each page is for.

Cross-linking related cluster pages strengthens topical signals and your broader authority.

Writing for the passage, not just the page

Google often surfaces the single passage that best answers part of a query – not the whole page.

Make each section stand alone: question-style H2/H3 headings followed by a concise answer.



CHAPTER FOUR

Your partner for the fan-out era

Think of us as the analyst, strategist, and delivery partner your team needs to compete in a fan-out world.

YOUR PARTNER FOR THE FAN-OUT ERA

Your AI SEO partner, not just another supplier

The AI search revolution means manual SEO analysis alone isn't enough any-more. Traditional crawl reports and content audits don't cut it on their own, you need a team that thinks like the fan-out systems themselves.

That's where we come in. As your SEO and AI SEO partner, we turn raw technical and content data into business-focused insight, so you're not spending hours buried in reports - you're acting on clear, prioritised recommendations.

TECHNICAL SEO

Structural audits that matter

Fan-out systems depend on solid technical foundations to distribute your content across sub-queries. We identify and prioritise the fixes that unlock your content's visibility potential - crawlability, indexation, site architecture.

AI SEO

See your true AI search visibility

Query fan-out is what gets your content pulled into AI answers - but you need to know whether it's happening.

Built to keep you visible, end to end

CONTENT MARKETING

Built for intent coverage

Query fan-out systems favour comprehensive, structured, semantically rich content. We build content around entity-intent mapping and passage-level structure from the outset.

DIGITAL INSIGHTS

Stay on top of what's working

Visibility is fragile - a small technical issue on a key page can quietly knock it out of AI Overviews. Our reporting keeps your most business-critical pages monitored.

CRO & PERFORMANCE

Faster pages, stronger presence

Comprehensive content only gets you so far if the page itself is slow or clunky. Our work targets load times and Core Web Vitals to strengthen your authority.

None of this replaces good strategy — think of it as your team getting the insight they need to focus on what actually moves the needle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Looking ahead: beyond the search box

Intent is the only constant

The rise of AI assistants signals that search won't remain the sole interface to information. People increasingly turn to conversational agents to shop, research, and make decisions. In this multi-agent landscape, query fan-out is the connective tissue.

Our view: search intent should be your obsession. The businesses that thrive will be the ones who understand their audience's complete search intent universe and structure their digital presence accordingly.

Query fan-out began as a mechanism inside Google's AI search results, but it's rapidly become a universal principle of information retrieval across every AI system. A query is never just a query, it's a complex bundle of intents and entities waiting to be explored.

The SEO of the future needs your content to be discoverable, authoritative, and well structured. The only difference is that it now gets unpacked across multiple platforms, not just one.

ABOUT US

About Fandango Digital

Fandango Digital is a marketing agency based in Chichester, West Sussex, founded in 2016. We help ambitious businesses grow online through strategic, data-driven digital marketing - delivered with a personal touch.

Our team brings over 25 years of experience across SEO, PPC, AI SEO, content, CRO, and digital strategy. We're a Google Partner, and we work as an extension of our clients' teams - not just another supplier.

We work with businesses of every size, from sole traders and local companies to national brands and international sports teams, across sectors including charities, education, lifestyle, finance, trade, healthcare, and hospitality.

2016

Founded in Chichester, West Sussex

25+

Years of team experience

Digital with a personal touch.

Services: SEO, PPC, AI SEO, Digital Strategy, CRO, Content Marketing, Social Media, Creative, Digital Insights, Digital Consultancy, and Indieboost for small businesses.



Curious how Fandango Digital can help you stay visible as search fans out across AI Overviews, ChatGPT, Claude, and beyond?

Let's talk. Book a free SEO consultation with our team.

Book a free consultation

www.fandangodigital.co.uk

hello@fandangodigital.co.uk

01243 200444

Digital with a personal touch.