SOURCE ASSESSMENT FIELD GUIDE

Search Authority vs Answer Authority

Search authority asks whether a source can win discovery across a defined query context. Answer authority asks whether a source or passage can support a specific claim on a defined answer surface. Keep the evidence objects separate; compare them only after scope, evidence, source linkage, provenance and freshness are recorded.

> **The rule to remember:** Search authority is about winning discovery. Answer authority is about supporting a claim. A high ranking is not proof of claim-level source fitness, and a citation is not proof of endorsement, correctness or broad search authority.

Use this guide when

- rankings and answer citations disagree;
- a stakeholder treats a domain metric as universal authority;
- you need to decide whether the next action belongs to discovery, passage support, provenance, freshness, source role or technical eligibility.

Evidence boundary

Every conclusion is bound to the recorded question, query set, answer surface, locale and observation date. If required evidence is missing, unlinked, stale for the question or materially contradictory, the correct result is **UNRESOLVED**.

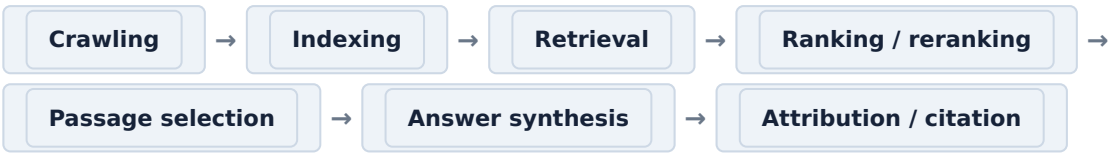
Reviewed and updated 16 August 2026. Decision-support aid; not a platform ranking or citation guarantee.

1. Two authority evidence objects

Evidence object	Question	Useful evidence	Does not prove
Search authority	Can this page, source or domain earn conventional search visibility for the governed query set?	Ranking distribution, ranking URL breadth, owned impressions/ clicks, query-class coverage, indexability and stability.	Best evidence for every claim; answer citation; endorsement.
Answer authority	Can this source or passage responsibly support this exact answer or claim?	Question fit, source inclusion/ citation, passage support, source role, provenance, freshness and repeated observations.	Broad ranking strength; commercial importance; durable answer-system visibility.

Do not substitute a proxy for the evidence object. A third-party domain score, citation count, mention share, structured-data presence or vendor visibility score can be useful observation data. None answers both authority questions by itself.

The stage distinction



These stages can share infrastructure and signals without being interchangeable outcomes. Google says its generative search features build on core Search systems and may use query fan-out; Microsoft separately reports citations and grounding queries for AI answers; OpenAI documents search crawling and source links without publishing a universal answer-authority score.

2. Four-state matrix - after the gates pass

HIGH SEARCH / HIGH ANSWER

Meaning: Discoverable and supportable in the governed scope.

Next action: Protect the evidence and monitor stability.

Do not conclude: Durable leadership, universal citation or commercial dominance.

HIGH SEARCH / LOW ANSWER

Meaning: Visible in search, weak for the exact claim.

Next action: Check passage support, source role, provenance and freshness.

Do not conclude: More links automatically solve the problem.

LOW SEARCH / HIGH ANSWER

Meaning: Useful claim source, weak broad discovery.

Next action: Protect evidence; improve discovery only where that job matters.

Do not conclude: Narrow answer fit equals broad authority.

LOW SEARCH / LOW ANSWER

Meaning: Neither evidence object is strong.

Next action: Repair relevance, eligibility and evidence before presentation optimization.

Do not conclude: A cosmetic content refresh is enough.

UNRESOLVED is a gate, not a fifth state. Withhold classification if the question, query set, locale, date, answer surface, valid search evidence, valid answer evidence, linked source/ provenance or freshness evidence needed for the decision is missing or materially contradictory.

3. Diagnose the authority failure before choosing the tactic

Failure mode	Typical symptom	Root cause to test	Smallest next check
Scope failure	Teams argue about authority while measuring different questions, query sets, locales or dates.	The decision boundary was never governed.	Write the exact answer question, governed query set, locale and observation window.
Discovery failure	Strong evidence exists but the source is difficult to find in conventional search.	Eligibility, query fit, discoverability or competitive search weakness.	Inspect indexability, relevant query coverage, ranking URLs and owned search evidence.
Answer-fit failure	A visible page is repeatedly weak for the exact claim.	The passage does not directly support the claim, or the source role is wrong.	Locate the supporting passage and classify support as direct, partial, none or unresolved.
Evidence-quality failure	A citation exists but the claim cannot be defended.	Weak provenance, stale evidence, unsupported inference or wrong source type.	Link the answer observation to a complete source record and check freshness.
Measurement failure	A team treats one prompt, one tool score or one date as durable authority.	Sample and observation boundaries are hidden.	Record engine/surface, prompt/query set, locale, date and repeat observations where persistence matters.

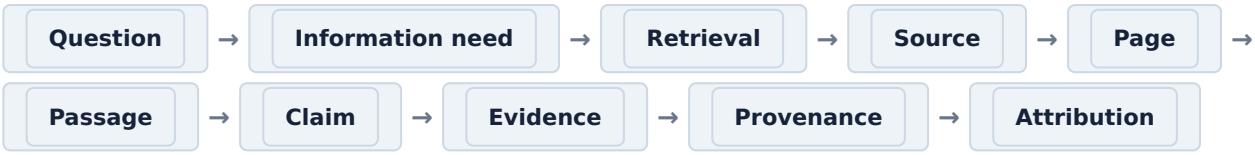
> **Route the smallest correction.** Links cannot repair unsupported evidence. Provenance cannot repair crawl/index eligibility. More prompts cannot repair an undefined question. Schema cannot substitute for a missing claim-support passage.

Five units that can diverge



A strong domain can contain a weak page. A strong page can contain an irrelevant passage. A relevant passage can be stale for a time-sensitive claim. One observed citation can still be unstable across surfaces, dates or prompts.

4. Source ecosystem, provenance and source roles



Source type	Best use	Important limit
Official documentation	Supported behavior and current implementation requirements maintained by the owner.	Can be incomplete, version-specific or outdated.
Primary source	Original statement, filing, standard, release, interview or first-party record.	Primary does not automatically mean complete or unbiased.
Original data	What a measured dataset directly observed.	Generalization depends on method, sample, query set and date.
Peer-reviewed research	Findings within a stated study design.	May not remain current for fast-changing product behavior.
Standard	Normative definitions, requirements or protocols.	May not describe a product's implementation.
Secondary analysis	Interpretation, comparison and synthesis.	Must not upgrade inference into fact.
Commercial/ vendor page	Product capabilities, methodology claims and market positioning.	Useful for what the vendor says/does, not neutral proof of universal behavior.
Community	Edge cases, experience and user language.	Anecdote is weak evidence for universal claims.

Linkage gate: a shareable HIGH/LOW result needs evidence records that resolve to the same valid source/provenance record. Three unrelated non-empty placeholders are not evidence integrity.

5. The 10-step comparison method

1. **Define the answer question.** Write the exact question or claim that needs support.
2. **Define the search context.** Fix the governed query set, locale and observation window.
3. **Collect search evidence.** Record ranking breadth, URLs, owned performance where available and technical eligibility.
4. **Define the answer claim.** Separate the claim from the broader topic.
5. **Collect source and passage evidence.** Record source ID/URL, source role, passage locator, support and observed source inclusion.
6. **Check provenance and freshness.** Confirm where evidence came from and whether its date fits the question.
7. **Classify both evidence objects.** Use HIGH or LOW only when decision-ready; otherwise UNRESOLVED.
8. **Diagnose the mismatch.** Locate the limiting problem: scope, discovery, answer fit, evidence quality or measurement.
9. **Route the smallest next action.** Repair the limiting evidence object instead of defaulting to more links or more content.
10. **Record limits and reopening triggers.** Preserve the governed scope and what should cause re-review.

One observation is not durable authority. Repeat observations when the decision depends on persistence. Keep engine/surface, locale and date explicit. Preserve changes in the source set instead of averaging instability away.

6. Worked example - different sources can be strongest for different jobs

Fictional scenario: a team asks whether Northstar Analytics supports SAML single sign-on on its Pro plan.

Record	Evidence	Reading
Marketplace page	Strong commercial rankings and broad category visibility; wording says only "enterprise security."	**HIGH search authority** for broad discovery; **LOW answer authority** for the exact SAML entitlement claim.
Official documentation	Weak broad-query ranking; dated entitlement table maintained by the product team and directly supporting the claim.	**LOW search authority** in the broad governed query set; **HIGH answer authority** for the claim if the evidence is current.
Decision	Use official documentation for the entitlement claim; use marketplace content for discovery/comparison context.	The strongest discovery source and strongest claim-support source can differ.

What not to conclude: This does not prove official documentation always wins answer selection, marketplaces are weak sources generally, low ranking increases citation likelihood, or ranking/citation disagreement reveals a specific platform algorithm.

Stakeholder explanation

> Search authority tells us whether a source can win discovery across a governed query set. Answer authority tells us whether that source can support this specific claim on a defined answer surface. If those signals disagree, diagnose the missing evidence instead of averaging them into one score.

7. Use visibility tools for observation; use evidence review for authority decisions

Measurement layer	Useful for	Does not prove	Best next validation
Conventional search reporting	Queries, impressions/clicks, ranking pages, technical eligibility and search visibility.	That a page is the best evidence source for a specific answer claim.	Inspect the exact passage/source evidence required by the answer question.
Generative-search visibility reporting	Observed presence, cited pages, prompts/grounding queries, intents, topics and visibility trends where a platform exposes them.	A universal authority score or stable source-selection rule.	Preserve platform, date, query/prompt scope and source details.
Citation / source-share metrics	How often a brand/domain/page is cited or mentioned within a monitored sample.	Claim correctness, endorsement, passage support or causation.	Open the cited source and verify support/ provenance.
Manual source/ passsage review	Question fit, passage support, source role, provenance, freshness and caveats.	Broad discoverability or durable platform visibility.	Pair it with governed search/visibility evidence when that decision matters.

Vendor platforms such as Semrush, Ahrefs Brand Radar, Profound and Otterly are useful for prompt, mention, citation, competitor or visibility observation. Their metrics are measurement systems with their own sampling and methodologies; they do not replace claim-level source review.

Current platform evidence: Google says standard SEO foundations remain relevant to its generative features and now reports generative-search performance; Bing Webmaster Tools reports citations, cited pages and grounding-query context; OpenAI documents OAI-SearchBot and source links/referrals. These support measurement and eligibility decisions, not a single universal answer-authority formula.

8. Review checklist, boundaries and reopening triggers

- Exact question or claim recorded.
- Governed query set recorded.
- Locale and observation date recorded.
- Valid search evidence record present.
- Valid answer/source evidence record present.
- Answer source resolves to the same valid source register record.
- Source role and provenance recorded.
- Freshness is appropriate for the question.
- Passage support checked instead of inferred from citation count.
- Search and answer states classified separately.
- UNRESOLVED used when a gate is missing.
- Single-run evidence is not presented as durable authority.
- Third-party metrics are labeled as vendor metrics.
- Structured data is not treated as citation guarantee.
- Citation is not treated as endorsement.
- Next evidence and reopening condition are recorded.

Reopen when

Recheck consequential conclusions when crawler controls, reporting definitions, AI-search surfaces, source-selection documentation, source freshness, query sets, locale or material source evidence changes.

Refusal rules

Do not infer citation from ranking, endorsement from citation, answer authority from a domain metric, causation from correlation, or durable visibility from a single prompt/run.

9. Sources and evidence roles

Official **Google Search Central - Optimizing for generative AI features**

developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/ai-optimization-guide

Role: eligibility, SEO foundations, query fan-out context, measurement guidance and myth-busting.

Official **Google Search Central - AI features and your website**

developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features

Role: site-owner inclusion and technical context for AI features.

Official **Bing Webmaster - AI Performance**

blogs.bing.com/webmaster/February-2026/Introducing-AI-Performance-in-Bing-Webmaster-Tools-Public-Preview

Role: citation, cited-page and grounding-query reporting.

Official **Bing Search - expanded AI visibility insights**

blogs.bing.com/search/June-2026/New-AI-Visibility-Insights-in-Bing-Webmaster-Tools-Intents-Topics-Citation-Share-Compare

Role: intents, topics, citation share and comparison reporting.

Official **OpenAI - OAI-SearchBot crawler documentation**

developers.openai.com/api/docs/bots

Role: search crawler eligibility for ChatGPT search features.

Official **OpenAI Help - Publishers and Developers FAQ**

help.openai.com/en/articles/12627856-publishers-and-developers-faq

Role: publisher access and ChatGPT referral measurement.

Vendor methodology **Ahrefs - Brand Radar**

help.ahrefs.com/en/articles/11064852-what-is-brand-radar-and-how-to-use-it

Role: prompt/citation/AI-visibility measurement methodology and competitor observation.

Vendor documentation **Semrush - AI Visibility Toolkit**

semrush.com/kb/1493-ai-visibility-toolkit

Role: prompts, citations, competitor gaps, visibility and reports.

Vendor documentation **OtterlyAI - AI Search Monitoring**

otterly.ai

Role: multi-engine mention/citation/prompt monitoring; vendor claims remain vendor evidence.

Source roles are explicit because platform documentation, vendor methodology and dated observational studies answer different questions.

Measurement **Ahrefs - AI Overview citation/ranking overlap study, updated March 2026**

ahrefs.com/blog/ai-overview-citations-top-10/

Role: dated correlation/overlap evidence; not proof of source-selection causation.