Keyword Research for SEO

Video: Why Keyword Research Is Important

Keyword research is the guiding force of your SEO efforts.

It helps you better understand your target audience by giving you insight into what they're actually searching for. If nobody is searching for what you're writing about, then your site won't receive any traffic from Google. This is where keyword research comes into play.

What are keywords?

The words and phrases that people type into search engines

What is keyword research?

The process of finding and analyzing search terms that people enter into search engines with the goal of using that data for a specific purpose

Keyword research helps you answer questions like:

- What are people searching for?
- How many people are searching for it?
- What format do they want to receive information in?
- How difficult will it be to rank for that search query?

In the field of keyword research, there are different types of search terms.

These are often referred to by different names, but they all mean the same thing.

Let's call them head terms, body keywords, and long tail keywords.

What are head terms?

Head terms (or fat head) are usually single-word keywords with lots of search volume and competition (e.g. marketing, insurance).

Search volume refers to the number of times a particular keyword is entered into a search engine per month.

This phrase comes up a lot in the SEO space, especially when it comes to keyword research.

What are body keywords?

Body keywords (or chunky middle) are 2-3 word phrases with decent search volume, but slightly more specific than head terms and with slightly less competition (e.g. marketing automation, car insurance).

What are long tail keywords?

More specific phrases that don't get as much search volume but tend to be less competitive.

Long tail keywords make up the majority of searches online.

Long tail doesn't simply mean the keyword is very long.

This is a common misconception. "Long tail" actually refers to the long tail of the demand curve, not the number of words in the search query. Queries that have many specific variations, all looking for related information, are

known as having a long tail. Because they have less search volume, these phrases are generally easier to rank for than the highly competitive head terms.

Example of long tail keywords:

- "How to apply sunscreen"

- "How often should you apply sunscreen"

- "When to apply sunscreen"

- "Best sunscreen ingredients"

- "Best natural sunscreen for kids"

Your keyword strategy should contain a mix of long tail and body keywords, guided by head terms.

If a head term has a lot of search volume, the chances are that the long tail and body keywords under it will have enough volume to be worth creating content for. These keywords will be less competitive to rank for and, when you do rank for them, add up to the amount of traffic you would get if you ranked for the head term.

Focus on building topical relevancy.

Keywords tell you which topics people care about.

Your goal is to build up a library of helpful content on topics related to your business.

Matching keywords exactly isn't as important as it once was. What *is* important is establishing your expertise on relevant topics by creating lots of high-quality, helpful content.

Video: Why Are Topic Clusters Important?

Hi, I'm Justin with HubSpot Academy.

Content marketing has seen a lot of changes over the past several years. Many of these changes can be attributed to the rapidly evolving search landscape, as well as a shift in the way people search, discover, and consume content online.

All that said, many marketers still experience the same pain points that were common 5 to 10 years ago. "I struggle to measure the return on investment of the content I create." "We know the content we're creating provides value, but we still don't seem to rank high on Google for our target keywords." And, "I've done my keyword research. Now what?"

Let me start by telling you that creating more content in the hopes of having your website show up on Google is not the answer. In fact, adding more content to an outdated existing site architecture can make it harder for Google to find and rank your content. That's not a situation any marketer wants to find themselves in.

The answer to these problems spans way beyond the amount of content your business publishes per week or month; the real problem lies in the way that most content strategies are being developed and organized.

SEO is evolving, and marketers need to adapt.

Today, we live in a digitally informed world, one where there's millions of people searching for content every minute as well as millions of pieces of content being published online every minute. This makes the job of a search engine like Google increasingly difficult to serve you the most relevant, high authoritative content possible. To

remain a relevant and helpful search engine, Google released a series of algorithm changes over the past several years.

The first notable update, which really shook things up, was Google's "Hummingbird" algorithm update in 2013. This update focused on parsing out phrases rather than focusing on specific search queries. Many search engine optimizers and content marketers viewed this as an initial shift from a keyword to topic focus.

The next major update happened in 2015—Google's RankBrain algorithm update. RankBrain is Google's machine-learning artificial intelligence system that interprets people's searches to find pages that might not have the exact words they searched for. Google is able to do this by associating past search history with similar themes and pulling together keywords and phrases to provide a better context-driven search engine results page.

For more information on the evolution of SEO, check out the resources section below.

All this change brings opportunity to be found by your ideal audience. That's a key facet to creating successful content in today's online environment. Most forget it's not just about creating content for the search engine. Search engines aren't the ones filling out the forms on your website. Search engines aren't the ones sharing your content on social media. Search engines aren't your customers—humans are.

If you want to create effective content that converts visitors into leads and eventually customers, you need to create a helpful, positive user experience that solves for both the searcher and the search engine, not just one or the other.

Here's how you can solve for both: Create targeted clusters of relevant content that each cover a specific topic in depth. These targeted clusters then need to lead to a centralized hub, known as a pillar page.

A pillar page (also known as a content pillar or power page) is a website page that covers a specific topic in depth and is linked to a cluster of related content.

The topic cluster model, at its very essence, is a way of organizing a site's content pages using a cleaner and more deliberate site architecture. Topic clusters rearrange the architecture to clusters of related content that link to a central pillar page. Each pillar page should provide a comprehensive overview of the topic you're writing about. By linking all internal content within that topic to a pillar page, search engines such as Google can easily scan all the content and understand that there is a semantic relationship between the pages' content. The cluster setup also signals to search engines that there is real breadth and depth in the content, which gives the pillar page more authority on the topic. Algorithms like Google's RankBrain reward this orderly linking with higher search placement.

So whether you're new to creating content or just getting started, consider mapping out the topics your business wants to be known for and build authority around. Then map and organize your site architecture to support it.

Video: How to Do Keyword Research

There is no single correct way to do keyword research.

These steps represent just one method of performing keyword research, based partially on what we do here at HubSpot. Different companies may want to perform these steps in a different order, or prioritize or de-prioritize certain metrics based on what's important to them.

Step 1: Understand your customers and their goals.

This is key to having success with your content strategy.

Not all of your content needs to have a certain amount of search volume.

Just because a keyword has low montly search volume doesn't mean you shouldn't focus on it. If there are topics (or subtopics within those topics) that you feel are critical for your customers to know, you should still create content on them. Search volume is a reflection of industry demand. If you do it well, as your business grows, you can create your own demand and search volume.

Over 92% of keywords get ten monthly searches or fewer.

So don't just focus on keywords above a certain monthly search volume threshold.

Of course, you want to create content for keywords with *some* search volume, but it can be less than you think. The important part is that the topic you're writing about is important to your customers and something they would be searching for.

Create your buyer personas with SEO in mind.

What are your target customers searching for online? What words and phrases do they use?

What is a buyer persona?

A semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on real data and some educated speculation about demographics, behaviors, motivations, and goals.

If you already have your buyer personas built out, revisit them in the context of SEO.

If you need some help getting started creating your buyer personas or revising them, check out the resources section to learn more.

Step 2: Decide which topics you want to be known for.

What topics do people search for that are related to your business?

Start by making a list of all the important, relevant topics based on what you know about your business.

 For example, a topic that's related to HubSpot is "inbound marketing." A topic that's related to a wedding planner could be "budget weddings."

There may be several topics related to your business, and that's perfectly fine. Just don't get overwhelmed trying to create content that covers all of them at once. You need to prioritize which topics to focus on and, in order to do this, you need to find out what people are searching for.

Step 3: Find out what terms people are searching for online.

Start at the topic level, then zoom in.

How to find out what terms people are searching for:

Once you have your topics identified, you can "zoom in" and identify some keywords that fall into those buckets. Your topics can act as root words; then, you can use your keyword research tool of choice to find queries that include or relate to that root word.

For example, if we take the topic "marketing automation," some keywords related to that topic could include "marketing automation tools," "what is marketing automation," "email marketing automation," and so on. This isn't meant to be your final list of keywords, just a brain dump of phrases you think your potential customers might

search for within a given topic area.

Keyword research tools

"Searches related to" and auto suggestions in Google are a simple way to get started. Other recommended tools are Google Keyword Planner, Moz Keyword Explorer, and Answer the Public.

Keyword research extensions

Install Chrome extensions like Keyword Surfer and KeywordsEverywhere to get keyword ideas while you're browsing Google.

Step 4: Note search volume and competition.

Use your keyword research tool of choice to take note of the monthly search volume and competition for each keyword you're interested in targeting.

There is no hard-and-fast rule about how much search volume a keyword should have.

It varies greatly between industries. But there's not much point putting a ton of effort into keywords that have zero search volume. Similarly, if you're a small business going after search terms that huge, authoritative companies are dominating the search results for, there's not much point in that either. Focus on keywords that will give you the best ROI based on your particular situation and how authoritative your website already is.

See what kind of content is currently ranking for those keywords.

Emulate these, but offer unique value.

Make sure you're matching the type of content already ranking.

For example, if the top five ranking results for your keyword are lists, your content should also be in the form of a list, because that's what people want to read. Keep within the same general format of what's currently ranking on the first page for that search term, but offer your own unique spin. Add additional information that other websites aren't giving, include a video, make your list longer and more comprehensive, or otherwise provide some additional value. This will help you stand out from your competitors.

Check for trending keywords.

Use Google Trends to see whether the search volume for your chosen keyword is going up or down.

As your SEO strategy begins to scale, another way to scale your keyword research is to run competitive analyses.

This involves finding out which keywords your competitors are ranking for that you're not. Many keyword research tools, like Moz, Ahrefs, and SEMrush, have pre-packaged features that help you do this for multiple domains at once. But you can also run simple Google searches for those keywords in an incognito browser window and see who's ranking for what terms.

This is a great way to ensure the keywords you find are aligned with your audience: the more competitors that are ranking for these keywords, the more likely you should be too.

To learn how to perform a content gap analysis for your site, check out the resources section.

Step 5: Organize your keywords into topic clusters.

Topic clusters are a method of structuring your content for both users and search engines.

You can use the Topics tool in HubSpot to map this out.

You can also use a free mind-mapping software, or just a simple pen and paper.

With the list of keywords you've generated so far, organize them into related "clusters" around a given topic. Keep in mind their search volume, what type of keyword they are, and whether they're trending up or down. Also remember that you can only target one keyword or key phrase per page.

For more information on how to implement a topic cluster content strategy, check out the resources section.

Step 6: Prioritize which topic cluster you're going to focus on first.

This is going to depend on your goals and the search intent of your chosen keywords.

Not every keyword will have the same search intent.

Some keywords will come from searchers who are very early into their buying journey, while others will be farther along that journey.

What is the buyer's journey?

The active research process someone goes through leading up to a purchase.

The buyer's journey has three stages

The buyer's journey plays a big part in what keywords people are using to search.

For example, keywords that start with "what is" might imply that the average searcher is just starting to learn what the topic is all about. This content maps nicely to the Awareness stage of the buyer's journey, and it can make for a great pillar page to support the rest of the content within that topic. For example, if you're running a fitness club, a good Awareness stage keyword to create a pillar page on might be, "What Is Pilates?"

By contrast, keywords that include the phrase "how to" might imply the average searcher now has a problem they'd like to solve – one that maybe you can solve for them. They may be in the Consideration or Decision stage of the buyer's journey. Going back to our fitness club example, you could create a page on "How To Get Started With Pilates." Since someone searching for this type of content is more likely farther along in their buyer's journey, you could include a call-to-action on that page to sign up for a free day pass to your fitness club, or schedule a free one-on-one consultation with your Pilates instructor.

It's important to know in which stage of the buyer's journey your keywords fall.

This can dictate which keywords you should target first, and what traffic or conversions you can expect to generate from those keywords. If your product is in a relatively new industry, or your business is just starting out, you might want to create more Awareness stage content first, so you're setting a clear foundation of expertise that the rest of your content can build on.

Now that you have your keywords organized into topic clusters and prioritized, it's time to get started creating or repurposing content. This is where keyword research starts to blend into content marketing. To dive deeper into how to develop a content strategy for your business, check out the Content Marketing Certification. You can find the link in the resources section below.