Keyword research

This lesson covers keyword research. We'll start by exploring what keywords are, and why they are important. Then, we'll dive into keyword research. We'll explain what it entails and how to do it. Finally, we'll show in what way the Yoast SEO plugin provides feedback on how to improve your content for the focus keyword you've chosen.

Keywords

What is a keyword?

A keyword, or focus keyword, is the search term that describes the content on a page best. It's the search term that you most want your page to rank for, so when people search for that term, they should find you. A focus keyword can be a word, like "guitar", but also a phrase, like "electric guitar for kids".

Head, mid tail and long tail keywords

Some keywords are rather generic, others are specific. We broadly distinguish three types of keywords: head keywords, mid tail keywords and long tail keywords. Although really, you shouldn't think of it as a fixed set of types. Rather, there is a spectrum running all the way from short and broad keywords to long and specific keywords. Consider the graphic on the next page (Image 1).
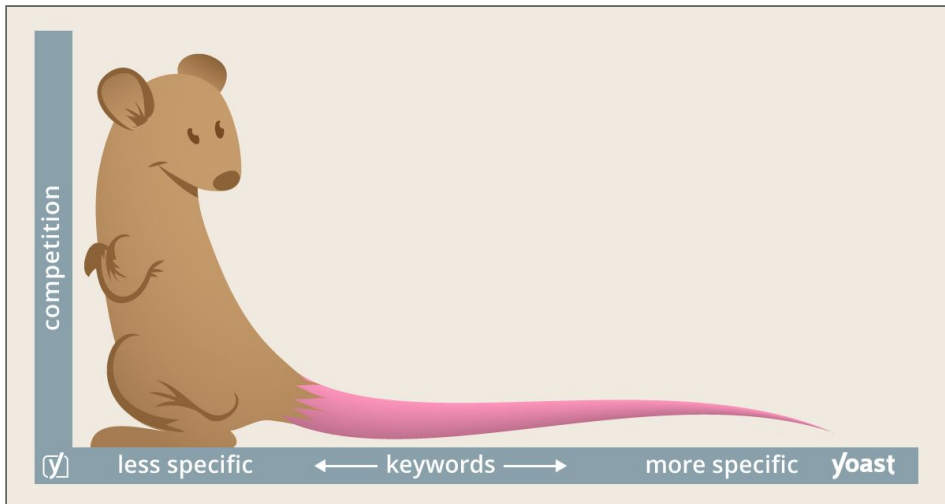
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Image 1: Focus keywords

The "tail" of the mouse stretches all the way from the beginning (short and broad) to the end (long and specific). Your keywords can be anywhere on the spectrum. Still, it can be useful to distinguish three types of keywords, to make things a bit more concrete. We'll discuss head, mid tail and long tail keywords. This also allows us to give clear examples. Let's dive into them!

Head keywords

Most blogs have just a few main topics – these are your **head keywords**. Mom blogs are usually about children and family life; food blogs are about eating, restaurants, and recipes. Our blog at yoast.com is all about SEO. So, all of our blog posts are about SEO, or about SEO-related topics. We most certainly want to rank for the term "SEO". In addition, terms like "SEO plugin", "SEO courses", and "SEO blog" are also head keywords for us. As an authority in our field, we have the luxury of being able to rank for these words.

The main topic or theme of your blog is the number one keyword (or key phrase) you want people to use to find you, in our case "SEO". Imagine having a food blog about homemade Italian food. You would then like to be found on a search term like "homemade Italian food". That would pretty much be the number one keyword you want to rank for.

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Mid tail keywords

You cannot, however, optimize all blog posts for "homemade Italian food", even if all your blog posts will be about homemade Italian food. Instead, you should write a whole number of blog posts about all kinds of longer variants of your number one search term. In the example of the food blog, you could write about all kinds of delicious things: homemade Italian pasta, homemade Italian salads, homemade Italian pie. These could be your main categories. For these situations, you use **mid tail keywords**. Mid tail keywords are more specific keywords, derived from the head keyword they tie into.

Long tail keywords

Your keywords can be even more long tail. You could write about: homemade Italian spaghetti bolognese, homemade Italian lasagna, homemade Italian penne carbonara, and so on. These keywords are called **long tail keywords**. Long tail keywords are even more specific and less common keywords, which often focus on a niche and are easier to rank top 3 for. The longer (and more specific) search terms are, the easier it will be to rank for them. For smaller sites, long tail keywords can comprise up to six or seven separate terms.

Classifying your keywords is essential. Some keywords are very common and competitive (head keywords), while others are long tail. Decide which are your most critical high-level keywords, the ones that generate sufficient traffic for your business and fit your business best. You should only have a few of these general keywords for your business. The rest of them are bound to be more down the tail.

Why are keywords important?

When you optimize your blog post for a specific keyword, it's important that people actually search for that keyword. If they're not, you'll be doing a lot of hard work for nothing. But how do you choose the right focus keyword?

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There are two things to consider when choosing your focus keyword:

1. Your *audience*: what are they searching for and which words are they using? You should get inside the heads of your audience and try to figure this out. You can use tools like Google Trends to help you with this.
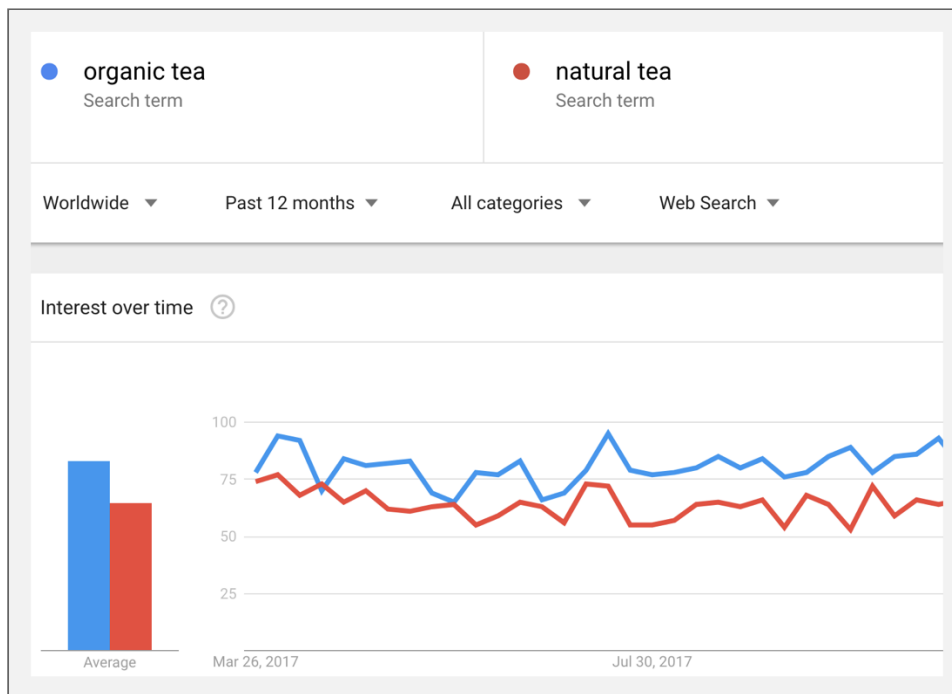

Image 2: Comparing the interest of keywords using Google Trends

2. Your *competition*: you have to focus on keywords that are not too competitive, otherwise you'll have a hard time ranking. To check this, you can search for your proposed focus keyword in Google and see whether or not the post you want to write would stand out from the other results. Does your site have enough authority?
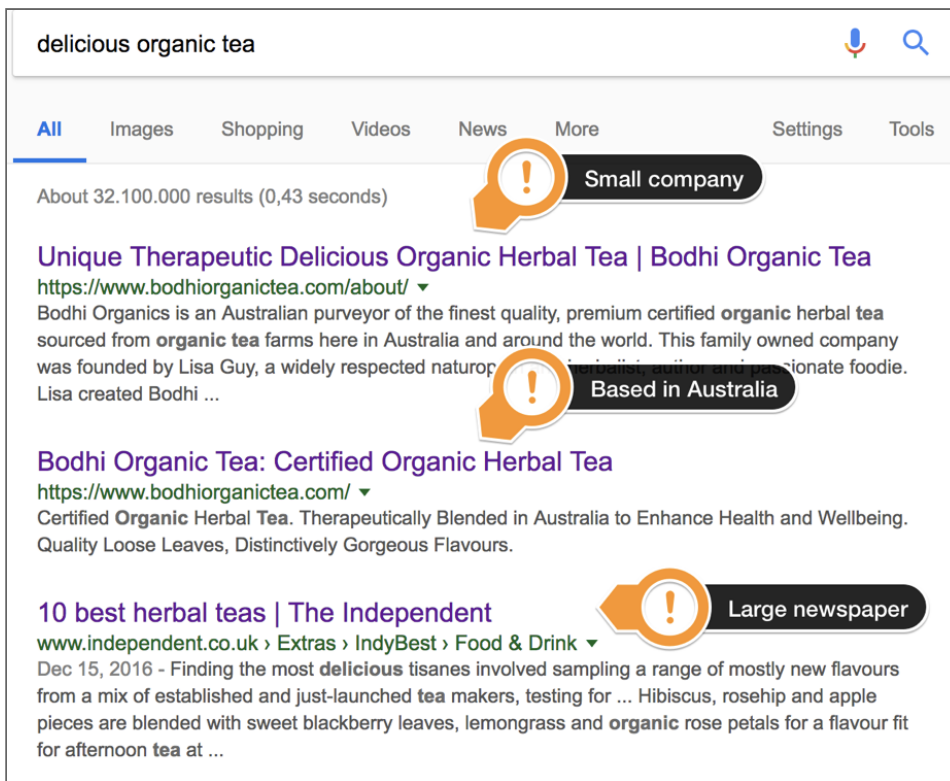
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Image 3: Google your focus keyword to analyze your competition

Use your focus keyword only once

You don't want to compete with your own content for a position in Google, so you should use your focus keyword only once. If you optimize two different articles for the same focus keyword, you would like to have both posts to turn up in Google. You'll be telling Google: these two are both suitable for people searching for my keyword. You may be able to get away with this if you're a large company dominating the search results. Generally, however, you should try to write the optimal post for a focus keyword and try to rank for that article. You can have multiple posts about one topic, but try to optimize them for different keywords by addressing different aspects of that topic.

How do you use keywords in your pages and posts?

There was a time where you could add a lot of keywords to your pages and posts, so-called keyword stuffing, and you'd rank in the search engines. However, this is not a great SEO strategy anymore. If you do this, you'll be hit by the Google Panda algorithm (or another update) in no time. Google prefers readable texts. Texts with a high keyword density

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do not read nicely. They are in fact, terrible to read. Instead of using your focus keyword over and over, you should use synonyms if possible. Google actually recognizes synonyms to keywords now.

Of course, you should use your focus keyword in your text, but you shouldn't overdo it. Usually, a keyword density of 1 to 2% is perfect. In addition, you should make sure your use of keywords is balanced throughout the text. Make sure you use your focus keyword in your page title, first paragraph, one or several subheadings, and in your meta description.

Keyword research

What is keyword research?

Keyword research should be the first step of every SEO strategy. Before you write your website content, you need to think about which search terms you want to be found for. This means getting inside people's heads, to find out which words they use when searching. You have to come up with an extensive list of keywords that you want your site to rank for. This is called doing keyword research.

The importance of good keyword research

Proper keyword research is important because it will make clear which search terms your audience uses. At Yoast, we frequently come across clients who use one set of words when describing their products, while their target audience uses a completely different set of words. These sites aren't found by their potential customers because of a mismatch in vocabulary.

Of course, it doesn't make any sense to optimize for words that people don't use. Good keyword research makes sure that you use the words your target audience searches for to find you. This makes the whole effort of optimizing your website far more worthwhile.

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How do you execute keyword research?

There are three steps to good keyword research: writing down your company's mission, making a list of all the keywords you want to be found for, and researching your competition. Let's take a look at these three steps in more detail.

Step 1: Define your mission

Before you do anything, you need to know what makes your company unique. You need to have a clear concept of the mission of your company, what you have to offer, and what makes your company stand out, because that's what's going to make you rank. Think about it like this: if you're not the best result, why should people want to find you? Why should Google rank you? Defining your mission should be the foundation for your keyword research.

Step 2: Make a list of keywords

Once you've determined what you have to offer and what makes your company stand out, it's time to consider your audience. With your mission in mind, try to get into the heads of your potential buyers. What will these people be looking for? What kind of search terms could they be using while looking for your service or product? Ask yourself these questions and write down as many answers as possible. If your mission is clear, you'll have a pretty clear image of your niche and your unique selling points (the things that set your business apart from others). These are the terms you want to be found for. Luckily, there are some tools that can help you with this step:

- **Google Adwords Keyword Planner**
  You can use the Google Adwords Keyword Planner to find new and related keywords. However, you should ignore the search volume data because this is really only useful for keywords that you're actually spending money to advertise on.

- **Yoast Suggest**
  We've developed our own keyword research tool to come up with keywords as well. Yoast Suggest uses the Google Suggest

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functionality you know from searching in Google. It finds the keyword expansions Google gives and then requests more of them. This is a great way to quickly find more long tail keywords you can focus on.

- **Google Trends**
  Google Trends allows you to compare the traffic for sets of keywords. You can even see the difference for numerous geographical regions. It's very important to check Google Trends if you expect that some of your keywords are seasonal, for instance due to regulations or holiday seasons.

- **Your internal search engine**
  What are people searching for on your site? These terms are keywords in the vocabulary of your actual audience and should definitely be added to your keyword list. You can look into your site's internal search results via Google Analytics.

Step 3: Research your competition

You can't devise a proper keyword research strategy without taking your competition into account. Because of that, the third step of keyword research should be to research your competition. You make a thorough analysis of all the competitors in your field, and that can certainly be worthwhile. However, let's stick to the basics for now. It's quite easy to get a general idea of your SEO competition. Just google some search terms you would like to rank for, and see what companies show up and where you rank. How big are the companies you are competing with for top three rankings? Would your company fit between these results? This is all quite easy to determine using just the Google search results.

Nevertheless, you shouldn't trust the search results blindly, because Google tailors them to your search history. Because of this, your site is going to come up higher for you than for others. To circumvent this, you can use an incognito screen. However, even in an incognito screen, there's still a local search component. If that's a problem for you, you should consider using VPNs (Virtual Private Networks; these create a safe and encrypted connection over a less secure network, such as the

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internet) to mask your location or set a specific location you want to search from.

Start with a long tail keyword strategy

As we've discussed, long tail keywords are keywords or key phrases that are more specific – and usually longer – than more commonly searched for keywords. Long tail keywords get less search traffic, but will usually have a higher conversion rate, as they are more specific.
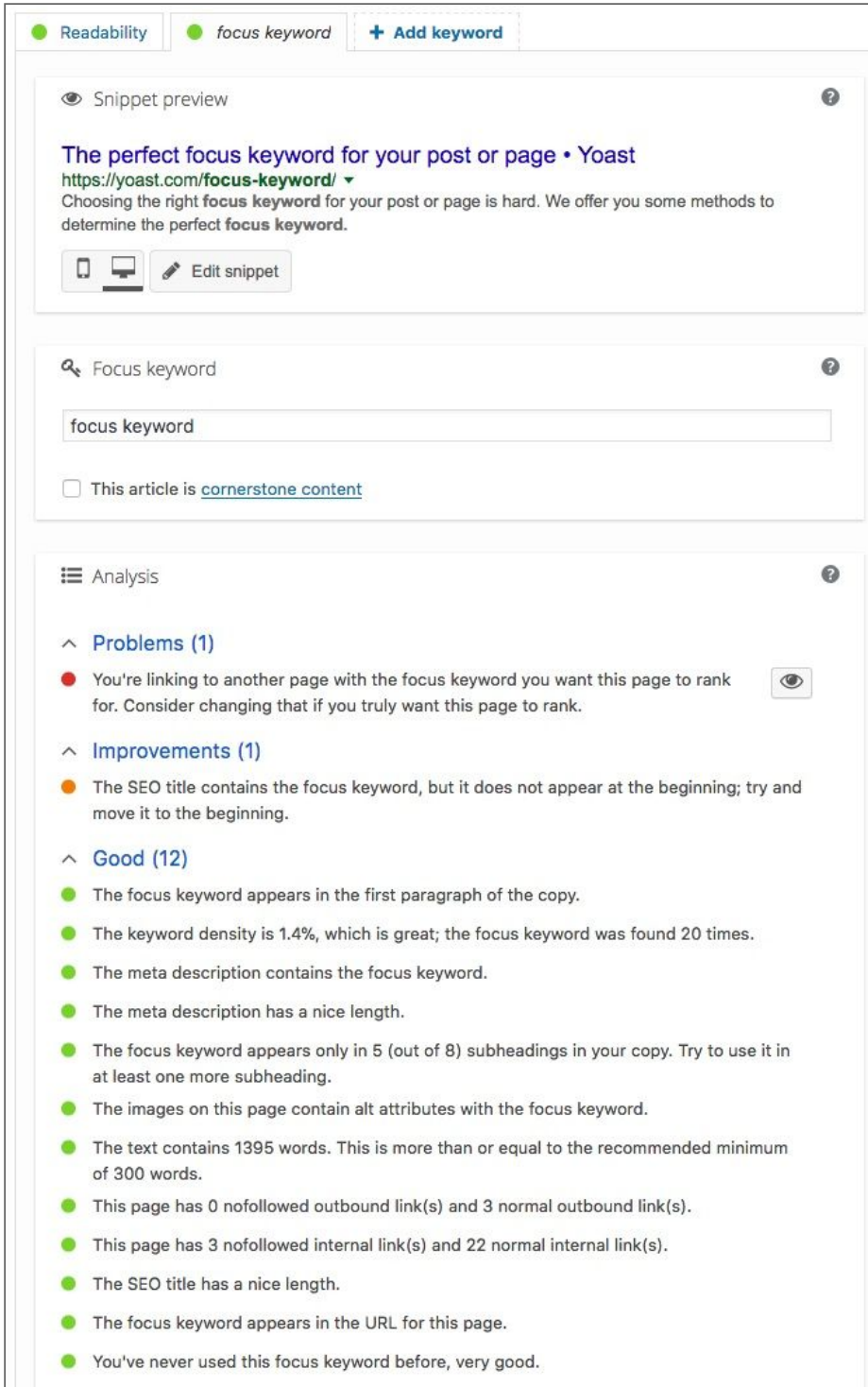
Big sites can rank for the most general terms. Smaller sites within a very specific niche can do the same. Of course, it's also easier if you're writing in a language that is not spoken all over the world. For most smaller sites writing in English, however, the general rule of thumb is this: start with a big set of long tail keywords which have little traffic but you can rank for more easily. Then, work yourself up the rankings step by step. Once you've gained some SEO authority, start optimizing for more general keywords. And in the end, maybe you'll even be able to rank for your head keywords!

Focus keywords and the Yoast SEO plugin

Yoast SEO it has its own input field for focus keywords. The plugin evaluates the page's content and provides feedback on how to improve the content for that focus keyword. As shown in Image 4 on the next page, the plugin offers feedback on several aspects, including whether you use the focus keyword often enough (but not too often) throughout your text, and whether you use it in enough of your subheadings. In addition, it tells you whether you've used this keyword before.

The feedback is provided in a structured way. It's divided into problems (red bullets), improvements (orange bullets), good things (green bullets), and considerations (grey bullets). Please note that you don't need a green bullet for everything to get an overall green bullet. The main goal will be to get a green bullet for most things, at least until the green bullet on the tab (next to "focus keyword" in Image 4) turns green. To get a green bullet for everything will be nearly impossible, and you have to keep in mind that green bullets don't equal a great text. Moreover, if

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you base your text too much on the bullets feedback, your text may actually even be worse than it may have been otherwise.

Image 4: Focus keywords in Yoast SEO

Conclusion

In this lesson, we've discussed focus keywords and keyword research. We've seen that it's very important to choose the right focus keyword. Otherwise, you'll be doing a lot of hard work for nothing. To make sure you use the same terms as your target audience searches for, you need to do keyword research. Finally, we've discussed how the Yoast SEO plugin provides feedback on how to improve your content for the focus keyword you've chosen.

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