

Keyword research

This lesson covers keyphrases and keyword research. We'll explore what keyphrases are, and why they are important. We'll also discuss what keyword research is all about and we'll explain how to execute your own keyword research step by step. Finally, we'll explain how you can optimize your text for your focus keyphrase with the Yoast SEO plugin.

Focus keyphrases

What is a focus keyphrase?

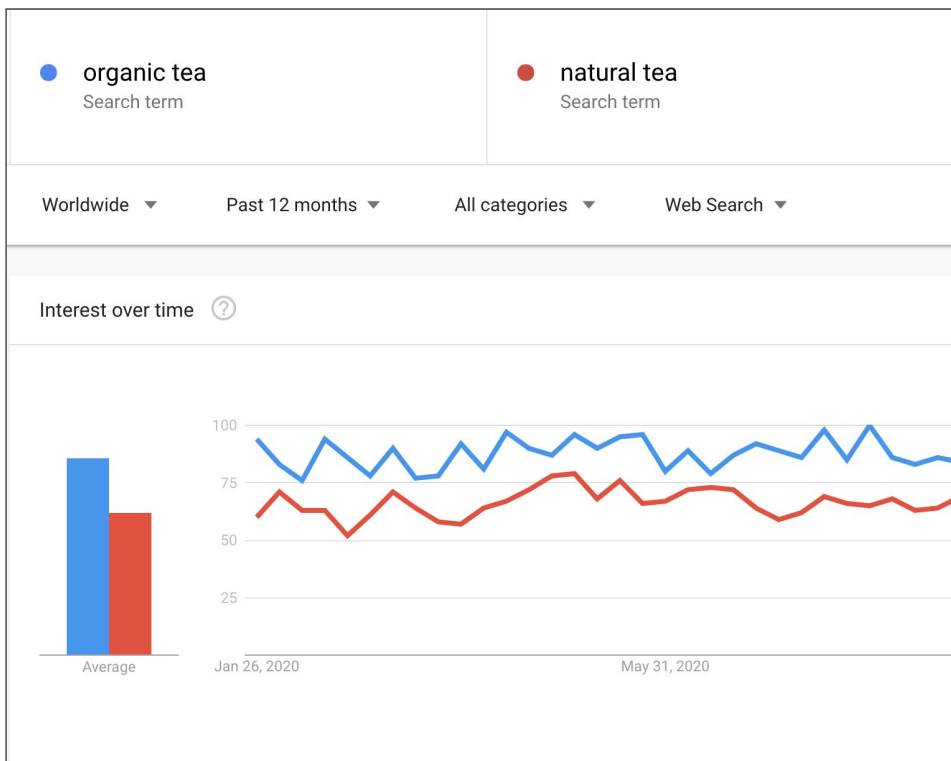
The focus keyphrase is the search term that you most want your page to rank for, so when people search for that keyword or phrase, they should find you. A focus keyphrase can be a word, like [shoes], but also a phrase, like [ballet shoes for kids].

Why is a focus keyphrase important?

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

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

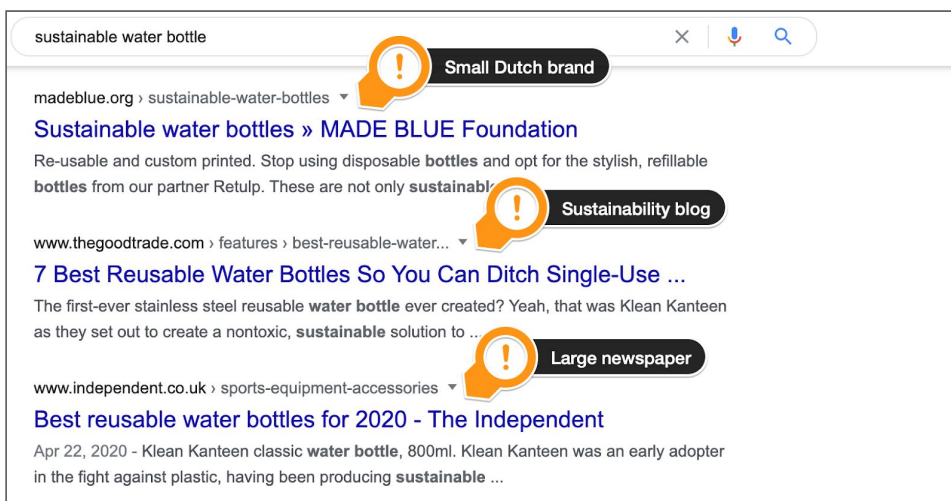
1. Your **audience**: what are they searching for and which words are they using? You should get inside the heads of your audience and try to figure this out. You can use tools like [Google Trends](#) to help you with this (see Image 1).



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

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Use your focus keyphrase only once

You do not want to compete with your own content for a position in Google, so you should use your focus keyphrase only once. If you optimize two different articles for the same focus keyphrase, 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 keyphrase. 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 keyphrase and try to rank for that article. You can have multiple posts about one topic, but try to optimize them for different keyphrases by addressing different aspects of that topic.

How do you use keyphrases in your pages and posts?

There was a time where you could add a lot of keyphrases 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 [Google Panda](#) (or another update) in no time. Google prefers nice, readable texts. Texts with a high keyphrase density do not read nicely. They are in fact, terrible to read. Instead of using your focus keyphrase over and over, you should use synonyms if possible. Google actually recognizes synonyms to keyphrases now. With this ability, optimizing for a single focus keyphrase becomes more and more silly.

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

Head, mid-tail, and long-tail keyphrases

There are several kinds of keyphrases. Some of them are rather generic, others are more specific. We distinguish three kinds of keyphrases: head keyphrases, mid-tail keyphrases and long-tail keyphrases. Let's take a closer look.

Head keyphrases

Most blogs have just a few main topics – these are called the **head keyphrases**. 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], [SEO blog], etc. are also head keyphrases for us. As an authority in our field, we have the luxury of being able to rank for these phrases.

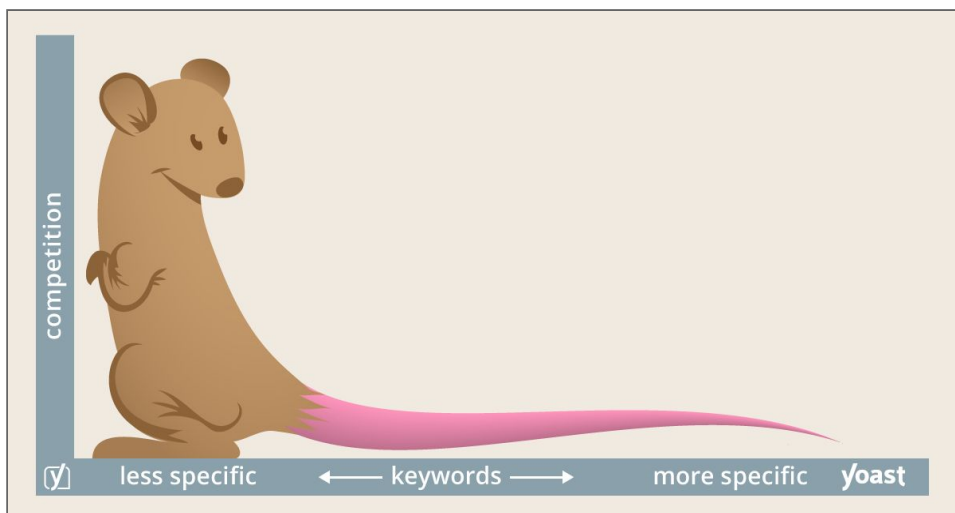
The main topic or theme of your blog is the number one keyword or keyphrase you want people to use to find you, in our case [SEO]. Imagine yourself having a food blog about homemade Italian food. You would then like to be found on a search term like [homemade Italian food]. That would pretty much be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

Mid-tail keyphrases

You cannot, however, optimize all blog posts for the same term [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 long tail 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. We call them mid-tail keyphrases. **Mid-tail keyphrases** are more specific keyphrases, derived from the head keyphrase they tie into.

Long-tail keyphrases

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



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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. You need to determine what your site should be ranking 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 and keyphrases 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.

How to execute your own keyword research

There are five steps to good and comprehensive keyword research:

1. defining your company's mission;
2. making a list of all the keyphrases you want to be found for;
3. looking at search intent;
4. researching your competition;
5. constructing landing pages.

Let's take a look at these steps in more detail.



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Step 1: Define your company's 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. As we mentioned before: 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 keyphrases

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:

- **Yoast SEO and Semrush**

Together with [Semrush](#), we've built an integration that helps you find related keyphrases for your focus keyphrase in Yoast SEO. We will tell you more about this tool [here](#).

- **Google Ads Keyword Planner**

You can use the [Google Ads Keyword Planner](#) to find new and related keyphrases. However, you should ignore the search volume data because this is really only useful for keyphrases that you're actually spending money to advertise on.

- **Yoast Suggest**

[Yoast Suggest](#) uses the Google Suggest functionality you know from searching in Google. It finds the keyphrase expansions Google gives and then requests more of them. This is a great way to quickly find more long tail-keyphrases you can focus on.

- **Google Trends**

[Google Trends](#) allows you to compare the traffic for sets of keyphrases. 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 keyphrases 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 keyphrases in the vocabulary of your actual audience and should definitely be added to your keyphrase list. You can look into your site's internal search results in [Google Analytics](#) at Behavior > Site Search > Search Terms..

Step 3: Look at search intent

The third step of your keyword research should be to look at search intent. Whenever someone enters a search query into a search engine, they are on a quest for something. There are four types of intent:

1. Informational intent

This type of intent applies when people are trying to find information on a specific topic. For example, for yoast.com, we create blog posts for people looking for information on SEO.

2. Navigational intent

People have a navigational intent when they want to access a specific website by entering the term in a search engine. So, if people search for 'Yoast', they're probably trying to reach our website yoast.com.

3. Commercial intent

When people have a commercial intent, they want to buy something sometime soon and they are doing research before making a purchase. At yoast.com, we've created sales pages for our plugins and courses.

4. Transactional intent

People have a transactional intent when they are looking to buy something after doing their commercial intent searches. For example, the sales pages at yoast.com have multiple buttons through which people can buy our products immediately.

You should find out which intents apply to you and try to answer these search intents by giving people what they want. Consider the overview of the various types of intent in Table 1.

Type of intent	People want to...
informational intent	find information on a specific topic
navigational intent	access a specific website by entering the term in a search engine
commercial intent	do research before making a purchase

transactional intent	buy something, after doing their commercial intent searches
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Step 4: Research your competition

You can't devise a proper keyword research strategy without taking your competition into account. Because of that, the fourth step of keyword research should be to research your competition. 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 search results.

Once you have a general idea of your competition, it's time to take things a step further. Start with the keyphrases you think you have a reasonable chance of ranking for. Visit the pages that are currently ranking. What exactly are they doing? What information are they offering? Are their texts well-written? What can you offer that they don't? By setting up a thorough comparative analysis, you can try to match the things those sites do well and outperform them in areas you're better at. And if you do that well, you'll be able to be the best result!

Step 5: Create landing pages

The final step of your keyword research is creating awesome landing pages. Landing pages are the pages you want your audience to reach when they are searching for a keyphrase. For each keyphrase, you want to identify one page you want to rank with. So, if we at Yoast want to rank for [keyword research], our [Ultimate guide to keyword research](#) would be a great candidate for a landing page. It's important that you don't write many different articles to rank for the same keyphrase, because you'll be competing with yourself. If you write different articles on the same topic, you should come up with separate keyphrases for all of them.

For now, let's focus on the basics. We advise you to create a document which clearly shows your ranking strategy. We would advise you to build a logical site structure – using spreadsheet software like Excel or Google

Sheets is a great way to do this. Then you'll need to build a landing page for your search terms, but you don't have to create all these pages immediately – it can be a long term thing.

Adding a focus keyphrase in Yoast SEO

Yoast SEO has its own input field for focus keyphrases. The plugin evaluates the page's content and provides feedback on how to improve the content for that focus keyphrase. As shown in Image 5, the plugin gives you feedback on a lot of different aspects, including whether you use the focus keyphrase 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 or not you have used this keyphrase before.

The feedback is provided in a structured way. It is divided into problems (red bullets), improvements (orange bullets) and good things (green bullets). Please note that you don't need a green bullet for everything to get an overall green bullet. 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 you base your text too much on the bullets feedback, your text may actually even be worse than it may have been otherwise.

SEO
Readability
Schema
Social

Focus keyphrase ?

Get related keyphrases

Google preview ▼

😊 **SEO analysis**
blog engagement ^

Keyphrase synonyms ?

Analysis results

^ Problems (2)

- **Internal links:** No internal links appear in this page, [make sure to add some!](#)
- **Image alt attributes:** No images appear on this page. [Add some!](#)

^ Improvements (2)

- **Keyphrase distribution:** Uneven. Some parts of your text do not contain the keyphrase or its synonyms. [Distribute them more evenly.](#) 👁️
- **Keyphrase in title:** Does not contain the exact match. [Try to write the exact match of your keyphrase in the SEO title and put it at the beginning of the title.](#)

^ Good results (11)

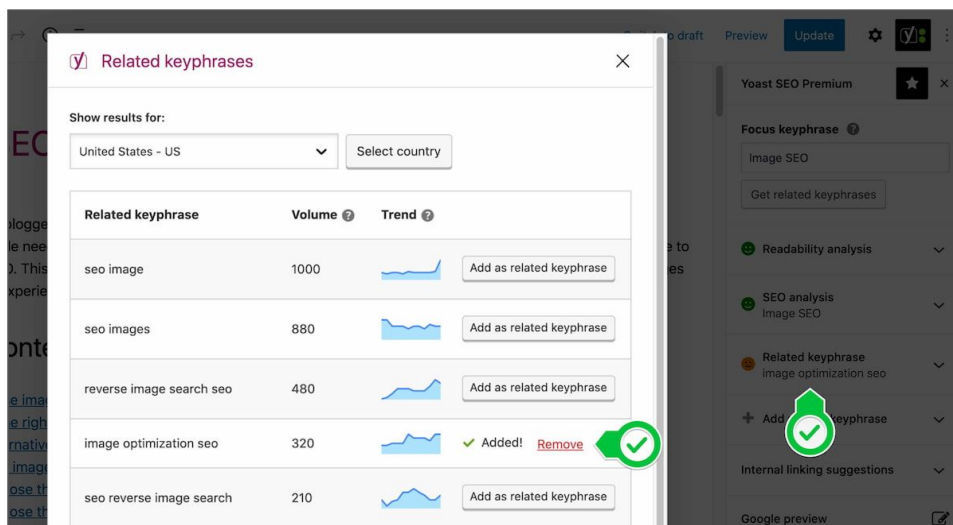
- **Outbound links:** Good job!
- **Keyphrase in introduction:** Well done!
- **Keyphrase length:** Good job!
- **Keyphrase density:** The focus keyphrase was found 10 times. This is great! 👁️
- **Keyphrase in meta description:** Keyphrase or synonym appear in the meta description. Well done!
- **Meta description length:** Well done!
- **Previously used keyphrase:** You've not used this keyphrase before, very good.
- **Keyphrase in subheading:** 4 of your H2 and H3 subheadings reflect the topic of

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Related keyphrases with Semrush

Below the Focus keyphrase input field, you will find the Get related keyphrase button. The first time you click on it, you will see a screen asking you to connect your Semrush account or make a new one. Then, you will need to authorize Yoast SEO to connect the accounts. After completing those steps, you can find related keyphrases right within the post editor. You even get insights on search volume and trends! Plus, you can select the country and the language you want to see results for.

This feature is available for free, but Premium users get the added benefit of using it in the related keyphrase feature and optimize the content for multiple keyphrases and synonyms (Image 6). You can add the relevant keyphrases you find with a simple click of the button. After that, you can simply optimize your text for these keyphrases in the post editor sidebar.



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Synonyms (Premium only)

Search engines are becoming smarter. They increasingly use the context surrounding terms to build a complete picture of what that term means. That's why we help you optimize your text with synonyms as well – if you have Yoast SEO Premium. Synonyms of a word are words or phrases that have the same meaning. A synonym for 'dog', for example, is 'canine', 'hound' or 'man's best friend'. Using synonyms in your copy can help people understand it better, and it improves the readability of your text. If you repeat the same word very often in your copy, it looks like you've written it for search engines, not humans.

In Yoast SEO Premium, you can indicate which synonyms you have used in addition to your main keyphrase. If you click the SEO analysis tab, you will see an input field where you can add them (Image 5). Then, the plugin will take these synonyms into account in the keyphrase checks.

Word forms and word order (Premium only)

Search engines also recognize word forms such as plurals, singulars, comparatives, or past-tense variants of the same words. That's why we also added this functionality to the Yoast SEO Premium plugin. The plugin will recognize all word forms of your focus keyphrase.

Does this sound a little too abstract? Let's take a look at an example. Say, you have a dog training school with an online site. And let's say one of your focus keyphrases is [teach dog to sit]. With this new functionality, the plugin will not only recognize the exact keyphrase but also alternative matches with different word forms, like [teaching dog to sit] or [teaching dogs to sit].

In addition, word order doesn't influence keyphrase recognition anymore, both for search engines and in Yoast SEO. So, it doesn't matter if you write [a trained dog] or [a dog that is trained]. In both sentences, the Yoast SEO analysis will find the keyphrase you're optimizing your post for. This will enable you to write in a more natural and free way and still get green bullets from Yoast.

Related keyphrases (Premium only)

We've talked about related keyphrases before. You can use the Semrush integration to find them. Search engines will recognize related terms in your copy, just like they recognize synonyms and different word forms of your focus keyphrase. This means that in a text about puppy training, search engines will also recognize words like 'rewards', 'commands' or 'behavior'. In Yoast SEO Premium, you can add related keyphrases to your SEO analysis. You can use the Semrush integration to do this, but you can also add them manually (Image 7). Your focus keyphrase is the most important, of course. That's why we're less strict in our analysis of your related keyphrases.

