

Scrappy SEO: The Cheapest Way to Rank First

Whether you're a small business owner, a freelancer, or an agency on a budget, this is the definitive guide to affordable SEO strategies. Your goal is to get organic traffic to your site and monetize that traffic. Our goal is to show you how without costing you. We'll break the process into two parts:

1. **Offensive SEO** - We don't mean using vulgar language to rank higher. Offensive SEO is the process of actively seeking out traffic: ranking higher on search results by creating and optimizing content.
2. **Defensive SEO** - Vulgar language, as you might've guessed, is not involved here either. Defensive SEO is the process of maintaining engagement: ranking higher on search results by optimizing user experience.

Our budget? Ten bucks. Our plan? Ten steps. Here's the plan:

Offense:

1. **Keyword Research:** Figure out what people are searching for

You don't need professional tools to do keyword research. You've got a niche, you've got expertise (everybody is an expert on something! See step 5 😊), and you've got an internet connection. There are lots of free tools—each will show you how much traffic a given search term gets—but each has strengths and weaknesses: that's why you'll need to master **keyword averaging**.

Keyword averaging is the process of finding **medium traffic, low competition** keywords by using several keyword research tools and comparing their results. Don't try to rank for "New York Times," don't try to rank for "best news site that won't offend my aunt but also won't offend my grandmother, both of whom have careers in the circus." We're going to help you find the middle ground.

Our scrappy method is based on three crucial insights:

- Keyword research tools don't have Google's scope. Each one is only familiar with certain search terms—and will give you inaccurate estimates for others.
- Keyword research tools can't overestimate. They may say a popular keyword has no or little traffic, but they rarely overpredict traffic.¹
- There is no such thing as a high traffic, low competition keyword. Luckily, high traffic keywords show much lower conversion rates: they fall in the 3% range vs. 10-20% for lower traffic ones.
- Focusing on mid-to-low traffic terms is the best way to rank for high traffic ones. Specific content is high quality content, and high quality content ranks higher.

By looking at multiple research tools, you can trust the highest number you see for traffic—and usually assume that number is too low. We recommend using four tools:

- The Keyword Surfer Chrome Extension
- The SEOquake Chrome extension
- The Ahrefs Keyword Generator Tool
- The Ahrefs Keyword Difficulty Checker

Start with a broad search term. If you're selling ping pong paddles, try putting "best ping pong paddles" into Google. See how much traffic that term gets on Keyword Surfer and SEO quake, and keyword average with the Ahrefs Difficulty Checker if the number seems low. Keep in mind 30% of it usually goes to the first result, and use SEOquake to confirm [visual]. If that's already not enough traffic, jump back to an even broader keyword. Keep using SEOquake to determine how competitive the search term is. Check the number of backlinks for that specific URL [visual]. Then, ask recursive questions.

- **Why are people searching for that?** What do they want to find/learn/understand?
- **Do these results give them the answer they're looking for?** What could current results do better? Think about content quality, relevance to the search term, and user experience (are there too many ads on the site? does it look... old?). If you've found ways to do better, you've found a keyword! If the results seem perfect, ask the next question.
- **What else might someone like this search for?** Make those searches and ask these questions again.

That last question is where Keyword Surfer's true value shines. They'll show you related keywords right there on the page. Between that and [efficiently using the "people also asked" section](#), you'll be on track to finding more niche keywords. Eventually, you'll hit the sweet spot: brilliant keywords that you can create content² for. And you've already found a topic to

write about! If this hasn't proved successful—some niches are already extremely competitive—step 2 will!

2. Content Strategizing: Brainstorm ideas with an impact

Content strategizing is interchangeable with step 1. Some folks prefer to find ideas first, then figure out which search terms they can direct towards their own writing. Others want to write great content, then figure out how it meshes with Google searches. We take a deep dive into the latter method in our [reverse keywording article](#), but here's the big idea:

- **Figure out your unique value:** What do you know that nobody else does? What's intuitive and obvious to you, but would be interesting to many? What stories can you tell? What do you have in common with your audience? What do you enjoy writing about?
- **Go narrow-wide:** If you need more ideas, browse Reddit communities in your niche and figure out what people are asking. The questions people ask on Reddit are questions they can't yet find the answer to on search results—high value questions. Find a good answer. Or, go wide. Find a big question (not necessarily on reddit) that nobody quite knows the answer to. Document your process of striving for that answer.
- **Develop a web of ideas:** Now you should have either a kernel of an idea or a bowl of popcorn full of them. Thoroughly outline that one (big or small) article. Something magical will happen: you'll realize you can't just write that one article.
- **Use modifiers:** Have you written about the best SEO strategies on a budget? Now write about the best SEO strategies for ecommerce, or startups, or small businesses, and now write about the worst SEO strategies, and now write case studies applying those strategies... Do you see where we're going? Once you have one idea, you have infinite articles. Keep changing things around slightly.

Now you've got articles, but they might not rank so high—yet. Step 8 is going to be the place for you! Big picture, though, use Google analytics and Keyword Spy to see what you're ranking for and then optimize for those keywords. But hey, you've still got to write all these great ideas down! Let's get into how.

3. SEO-Friendly Writing

TL;DR: The highest ranking content is **the content users want**. Write your best, make basic SEO improvements, and you'll be in great shape. If you want to outsource your writing for cheap, use a free trial of copy.ai—but we strongly recommend writing the content yourself.

Now, onto my most frequently asked question: “How often should I use keywords?” We're not looking for keywords, we're looking for **intent**. If you can answer all the questions a searcher has, you've written a good article. That doesn't mean longer content is better. It [isn't](#). Write only as much as you need!

Don't stuff keywords into your article. Instead, think in terms of **topic clusters**. What other articles would searchers be interested in? Write them! Don't feel like everything has to be squished together in one article. Optimize your web of ideas with **internal links**.

SEO is useless if all your traffic leaves right after they click. **Bounce rate** and **average engagement time** are two of Google's biggest ranking factors for a reason. Making your articles interconnected webs keeps users on your site and helps them connect with your product. Advanced SEO's will tell you to build your keyword strategy around a funnel: write general interest articles, pain point specific articles, and then articles about your product. We don't love this structure because it implies users work linearly.³

[visual for the idea of your product's trajectory vs reality: landing page to social media to blog to a week thinking about it to seeing an ad back to features page]

Build a web, build clusters, and build credibility.

Easy SEO Essentials. Your content will not rank without these features!

- One H1 Header: Your title should be formatted with an H1. Copy-paste ours if you're not sure how to create one.
- Meta tags: These are the titles and descriptions that show up on search results. The (free) Perrfy [meta tag generator](#) will help you make them and make sure they look professional!
- OG properties: Ever texted someone a link or shared one on social media? OG properties control the text and images that pop up when you do that. There's a

different way to add them for every platform. Yoast is the best free tool for WordPress sites.

- Schema markup is the next step for advanced scrappy SEO's. It helps Google understand your page even better. Head over to schema.org if you're feeling determined.

Now, onto [AI writing](#). We don't love current computer-written content because it doesn't have the capacity to be unique: it is all based on a massive corpus of existing writing. If you use it to *outline* blog posts that are *based on your unique ideas*, you can be successful. A tool like copy.ai is perfect for creating outlines—or even for brainstorming landing page and product page copy. Use the free trial!⁴ That way, you're saving time without breaking the bank.

4. Quantity first. Time second, third, and fourth. Quality fifth.

Write regularly. Google loves websites that change. It must frequently recrawl them, so it gets more and more familiar with your content. Your readers will love it, too, even when you're starting small. Create a schedule and stick to it. Practice makes perfect. Over time, you'll learn what content sticks.

Get feedback on your writing from friends, family, and most importantly Google Analytics. Always evaluate how your articles are performing, specifically their bounce rate and average engagement time—remember those internal links! [visual] Compare your stats to your competitors' with SEOquake.

Basic Tips for Better Writing

- Answer “Why should I read this?” in the first paragraph.
- One idea per paragraph—keep them short!
- Use as many visuals as possible.

If the traffic isn't coming, wait. It takes months for new articles to rank high, especially on new websites. In the meantime, make sure Google gives your page an A+ on expertise and user experience.

5. Prove expertise: Backlinks and credentials

Google ranks articles based on search intent, user experience, and content quality. Search intent is all about keyword research and user experience is all about defensive SEO (stay tuned!), but we need to make sure our content is high quality—and not just by writing well! We do this by proving [expertise](#): one of Google’s biggest ranking factors.

Big SEO misconception: expertise ≠ a P.h.D or 25 years’ experience (though that doesn’t hurt). Expertise is carefully written, well researched, articles FOR YOUR TOPIC. If you’re writing an article for a beginner, you don’t have to be an expert. Focus on careful writing and good research.

Follow one rule: Unless you’re qualified, do not write about financial or health-related topics. Google takes these subjects very seriously, and rightly so.

Besides writing well, take these steps to prove your aut

- **Create a thorough “about us” page:** Mix in a narrative about your experience with concrete “why you” statements. Prove your experience and knowledge. [Pitch yourself](#).
- **Put your name on the line:** Articles without an author will not boost credibility. Make your name synonymous with good content! Add your name to every article you write and link a bio page. The article also *can* be written “by” your business or company. The key is consistency: choose an author identity and stick to it.
- **Be your own primary source:** If you create content about your own product and ideas—or create unique PDF-able resources—your content will be authoritative because it is yours. You are writing about things that only you know about. Don’t stuff you
- **Avoid or Moderate User Content:** if you have a comment section, consider deleting it. What people post there will impact your expertise score. At the very least, invest in a way to regulate that content.

Bigger SEO misconception: getting backlinks = ranking higher. High-ranking content has a lot of backlinks because it is well-written and got backlinks long after publication, not because the author has sent 1,000 cold emails asking for them. We believe in a sustainable strategy to get [organic backlinks](#). You don’t need them to rank high, especially for low-competition searches.

Let's play some defense.

Defense:

6. Competitor Research: Make their weaknesses your strengths

Your friends at SEOquake are back, with a new friend from [Keyword Spy](#), another great free tool. Keyword spy lets you put in any URL and see what your competitors are ranking for. If you see terms that they're ranking for and you're not, see if you can sneak into those search results.

Ask yourself, Do I have content in the same topic cluster these keywords reflect? Can I *broaden* my content *without decreasing its quality*? If the answer is yes, broaden!

Your next question: what could my competitor do better?

- Does their site load slowly?
- Is it poorly designed or covered with ads?
- Does it miss an important perspective?
- Is it missing great visuals?

Capitalize.

And don't stop with individual pages: audit their entire site. Don't worry about any fancy technology to scan it. Use it yourself, spend five minutes on it. Think critically. Learn from their strengths and win on their weaknesses. If you want to go the extra mile use SEOquake. It will give you detailed stats on any competitor's site.

[visual]

We do recommend taking a finer-tooth comb to your own site: precision matters, and it's still free.

7. Who's got the most affordable site audit in town?

Yep, you guessed it: us! Why? We'll scan your site and find hundreds of growth opportunities,

and our free trial plan will help you handle **all the low hanging fruit**.

What's an SEO's favorite fruit? Low hanging—ah! I should put the joke before I mention the term. If only there was a way to go back and edit your writing... oh well.

Low hanging fruit to an SEO means easy fixes. Remember meta tags and OG properties? You need those on every page of your site, even the ones you're not trying to rank for. Google wants to make sure your entire site is optimized for a great, relevant user experience (UX). If Petco and Starbucks each have an identical page about pet food, which one do you think will rank higher?

Trick question: probably Starbucks. All other things equal, yes, Petco wins without a doubt. Starbucks is a much better website overall, though. It's faster and more intuitive, plus it has more traffic and (marginally) more backlinks. Neither site is perfect—we like to think a Perrfy page about pet food would rank highest—but Starbucks has better UX.

Search intent matters, but so does user experience. Long story short, Google wants to make its users as happy as possible, which means getting them “good” search results. Google knows what it is doing: sleek sites show higher engagement numbers and convert better. Our audit focuses on UX over SEO: you should, too. Here's how to make yours perfect:

- **Low hanging fruit:** H1's, meta tags, OG's, yes. Here's the all-purpose site audit essential we left out: unhide “hidden” content! Google loves rich results, those text snippets you see at the top of a search result page. A lot of sites make their FAQ's collapsible. Ah! Google won't find them! Those are the easiest opportunities to rank high! Use Google's [rich results test](#) to make sure your content is working for you.
- **Performance:** Speed is synonymous with UX. Perrfy's free [performance optimizer](#) will help you look professional online. Your two biggest easy wins, though?
 - Optimize images
 - Make images responsiveThe optimizer will help you do both!
- **Internal links:** Make your website a web.
- **Content:** Make sure your writing is easy to read, meaningful, and effective. How do you do that? Keep reading.

8. Content tuning and pruning

Make sure your writing is always getting better—and staying up to date, too. **Prune** (delete) poor performing content and **tune** the rest. We'll give you the essential breakdown here, but if you have a very large, hard-to-manage website or want a more in depth look, check out our [content audit guide](#).

Boot up Google Search Console and check which keywords you're ranking for [visual]. Doesn't matter if they're on page one or page fifteen, that's a great place to be! Google has found your search result fits for you!

- Prune when the content isn't ranking for any keywords and has low session time (another data point you can see on Google Analytics).
- Tune when you see potential: either high session time or a hint of keyword ranking. If you see both, you've found an SEO gem.⁵

Search for those keywords. Work through step 6 on your front page competitors. Make their weaknesses your strengths. Double check that you're acing step 7. Now, wait. SEO takes time and you've set yourself up for success. You'll be golden.

Now, quiz yourself, was that a justified use of an internal link?

Conclusion

About 3,500 words ago we said you'd need ten bucks. What's the ten bucks for? Well... we also said there'd be ten steps. We lied on both counts. Why? Because Perrfy saves you time and money. That's what we're all about!

We hope you read that in your best salesman-y voice.

Keep in mind that this is the bare minimum. You can dominate search results with this strategy, but the more you invest, the better you'll perform. Stay tuned for our guide on the next price range: \$10-100 SEO—this guide takes time, and it's always a trade-off with spending money.

Stay frosty, fellow internet denizen.

- Ben

¹ Keyword research tools can overestimate in some cases, especially for search terms with seasonal popularity (eg “summer olympics”), but they underestimate much more frequently. I unfortunately don’t have a study to back this assumption up, it’s only based on personal and peer experiences.

² We define content broadly, but this article is tailored for, well, other articles. If you want to create landing pages or product pages for a specific search term, don’t worry: use the same approach! Focus more, though, on matching intent to your product. Your first question shouldn’t be asking what people searching are for. Instead ask, What kind of searcher would be interested in my product and how are they trying to find me? Everything else in this article should be a perfect fit, though!

³ Don’t make your website confusing. If everything can be on one page, make it one page. Convenience should always be your priority. When you can internally link, do it, but it’s not make-or-break.

⁴ There are loads of tools like copy.ai. Each one offers a free trial. They’re all more or less the same quality. Shop around, you’ll never have to buy a tool.

⁵ If you’re working with a landing page, A/B test!