

# Settling the (Quality) Score

Using Quality Score to Guide Optimizations

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*AdWords Best Practices Series*

# Introduction

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A good ad experience is good for everyone: users, advertisers and Google too. AdWords is built on this idea, and one of the key ways we make that good experience happen is by measuring the quality of your ads.

Our measurement of quality helps us show more useful ads in higher positions on Google.com search results pages, so that users see ads that are relevant to their query and advertisers get clicks from qualified users. Besides creating happier users, those high-quality ads have the potential to earn extra benefits for advertisers, like lower costs per click and eligibility to surface more information with ad extensions.

This makes ad quality critically important to AdWords advertisers. Yet there are plenty of misconceptions about the topic, specifically about the metric Quality Score that's reported in your account. In an attempt to clear up some of those misconceptions, we wanted to explain how advertisers should think about and react to their Quality Score metrics.

We'll cover the following topics:

- The 1-to-10 Quality Score metric in your account, how to interpret it, and why it's different from census data like impressions and clicks
- Why you should pay attention to Quality Score but not make it a primary obsession
- How to use your Quality Score as a guide to delighting your users

The last point is key: give your users what they need, and a great Quality Score should follow.

In this paper we'll use Quality Score (with capitals) to refer to the Quality Score numbers from 1 to 10 that you see in your account. A lower-case phrase, such as ads quality, will refer to a more nuanced version of quality, much closer to what's actually used in the auction that determines the position of your search ads. As we'll see, they're related but far from identical concepts.

Now let's talk quality.

# A Few Things Every AdWords Advertiser Should Know About Quality Score

In case you only have time to skim bullets today, here is a summary of the best practices we cover.

## 1. Quality Score Is a Helpful Diagnostic Tool, Not a Key Performance Indicator

**Why:** Your Quality Score is like a warning light in a car's engine that shows how healthy your ads and keywords are. It's not meant to be a detailed metric that should be the focus of account management.

## 2. Focus Your Efforts on High-Value Areas Where You Can Affect Change

**Why:** Being selective with your quality optimization efforts allows you to maximize impact - don't waste time on things you can't change or optimizations with limited upside.

## 3. Pay Attention to the "Big Three" Component Parts of Ads Quality

They are: ad relevance, expected CTR and landing page experience.

**Why:** The real-time evaluations of these three components are used in the ad auction, while your Quality Score itself is not. Speaking generally, when those three components aren't working well, you may want to take the below actions to improve them:

| Quality Score diagnosis               | Action to take  |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Below-average ad relevance            | Do a better job of matching ads to user queries             |
| Below-average expected CTR            | Make your ads more compelling                               |
| Below-average landing page experience | Drive traffic to more useful or more relevant landing pages |

## 4. Understand What Does and Doesn't Matter When It Comes to Ads Quality

**Why:** Doing so will keep you focused on meaningful optimizations that will improve ads quality. Here are some of the specific things that matter, and don't matter, when ads quality is calculated by the Google system:

| Does matter  | So you should...  |
|--|---|
| The user's device  | ...think about mobile targeting and your mobile landing page experience   |
| When launching new keywords, your performance on related keywords                              | ...invest in growing your coverage on relevant searches, especially in areas where your ads have the potential to be high quality |
| Relevance to a user's intentions   | ...make sure your ads and landing pages match what the user wants   |
| Doesn't matter   | So you should...  |
| How you structure your account (such as the campaign names or the number of ad groups you use) | ...restructure your campaigns if you think it'll make them easier to manage   |
| Other networks you target (like Google search partners or the Google Display Network)          | ...feel free to test new networks. We don't look at that traffic when calculating expected CTR for Google.com ads                 |
| Your ad's position on the page   | ...work to improve the user experience, but don't bid up to higher positions just to try to improve your quality                  |

## Settling the (Quality) Score

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# 1 A Quick Refresher on Quality Score

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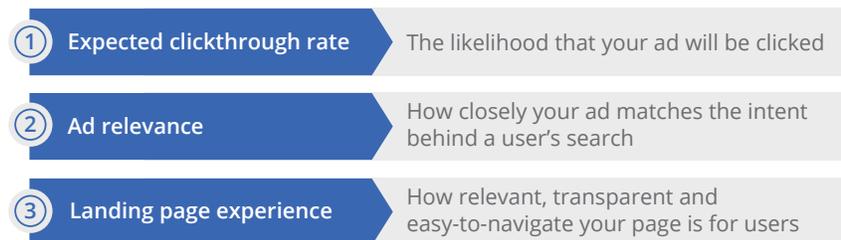
Because we believe that better ads are a good thing for everyone, the AdWords system is set up to identify and reward quality ads. High-quality ads can give you a higher Ad Rank and lead to other potential benefits, including:

- Lower costs-per-click
- Better ad positions
- Eligibility for ad extensions and other ad formats

The quality of your ads is calculated for each auction they enter. But this is the important point: the Quality Score you see in your account is not an exact representation of those real-time ad quality calculations—there are just too many factors that are taken into account for every auction to allow one figure to fully capture your quality. Instead, the Quality Score you see is a more general metric presented as a diagnosis of your overall performance in those auctions.

It's easy to think that the Quality Score number of 1 to 10 is connected directly to the auction. But during a real-time auction we also consider many additional factors, like the user's exact query, their device, their location and the time of day. Those aren't directly reflected in the Quality Score you see in your account.

To help you improve your ad performance, your Quality Score summarizes recent performance based on three components<sup>1</sup>:



Each has a status of above average, average, or below average.

When a user searches for something on Google, we recalculate all three of these components as part of our determination of Ad Rank.

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<sup>1</sup> Other factors are taken into account at auction time.

## 2 Diagnose Keyword Quality Using Quality Score and Other Metrics

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Another way to think of the Quality Score reported in your AdWords account is as warning lights in a car: something that alerts you to potential problems.

This number shouldn't be the main focus of your account optimizations. Yes, it should align with your performance if you're doing the right things. But trying to use tricks or short-term solutions to force the number up isn't the way to go.

Instead, you should focus on your long-term performance goals and look for ways to reach them by improving your user experience. Then check the Quality Score to see how you're doing. Google is dedicated to measuring these positive experiences, so when you focus on them as well, both our goals (and the goals of users) are aligned.

For real specifics, pay attention to all the other metrics shown in your account, like click-through rate, conversion rate and site engagement. They're more clearly connected with your performance and should help as you look for specific areas to improve.

As you review your performance, you can use Quality Score as a filter to tell you where to focus your efforts. Some key thoughts:

- Look through your high-value keywords and use Quality Score to identify the ones that are lagging behind.
- Use low Quality Scores to find components (or trends across components) that are doing worse than in other places in your account, and set priorities for improvement.
- Remember that even if your score is 8, 9 or 10, you may still be able to improve your results. A Quality Score of 10 won't go up if you improve an already above average clickthrough rate, but your performance and results can still get better.

Pay attention to the three components of Quality Score above the overall 1-10 score. They're a better indicator of your account's health. As mentioned earlier, your 1-10 score is not plugged into the Ad Rank formula at auction time. Instead, we use an auction-time calculation of the three components, with other factors included, to compute Ad Rank.

Some of those other factors that are a part of your ad's quality without being directly reflected in your Quality Score include:

- Geographic signals (like the country of the search)
- The differing qualities of multiple ads in an ad group (since one ad may get better results than others)
- Non-exact query matches. The 1-10 number estimates your Quality Score for a query that exactly matches your keyword. But it doesn't reflect match types or negative keywords you may use. Negative keywords are a very good thing for your account, but Quality Score doesn't include them as a factor.

We're continually improving the way that we calculate the quality of your ads, and that calculation will never be captured by a simple 1-10 number. That's why we call it a guide, not a precise metric.

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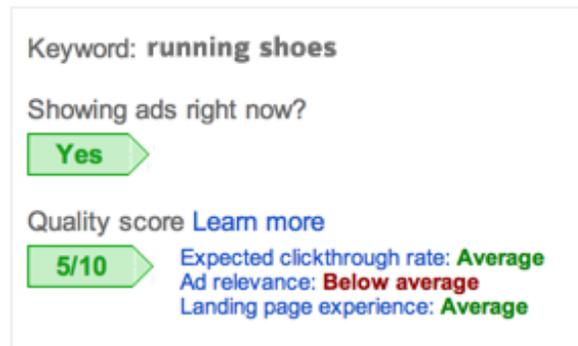
**EXAMPLE:** Suppose your ads for a keyword are above average in expected CTR (meaning that users find the text compelling), but below average in landing page experience (meaning that the users are having a hard time doing what they arrived at your site to do). In that case you might work to make sure you are directing users to the best landing page possible for your ad rather than testing new calls to action.

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### 3 Improve Your Account by Focusing on Your Quality Score Components

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Let's look more closely at the three components of Quality Score: ad relevance, expected CTR, and landing page. Here's how they appear in your account:



The screenshot shows the following information:

- Keyword:** running shoes
- Showing ads right now?** Yes (indicated by a green arrow pointing right)
- Quality score** [Learn more](#) (indicated by a green arrow pointing right with the value 5/10)
- Expected clickthrough rate:** Average
- Ad relevance:** Below average
- Landing page experience:** Average

For the keyword shown, **running shoes**, the Quality Score is 5 and all three components are ranked either average or below average. That shows us where we can start to improve: all three could be better, but at “below average,” ad relevance looks like the most urgent area for improvement.

We suggest you set your priorities based both on a component's rating and on the potential speed and impact of your changes. For instance, if your landing page experience is below average, but you don't actually have control of your website (or if changes take a long time), then you may want to focus first on CTR or ad relevance. Even if those components are average or above average, you can still improve their performance and your bottom line.

We also find that some people tend to focus only on CTR, because a user click is their ultimate goal. But ad relevance and landing pages are very important to the overall results of your campaigns. And each component calls for a different approach to improvement.

If your **ad relevance** needs to get better, you may want to:

- Match the language of your ad text more directly to user search queries
- Move keywords to smaller ad groups with more targeted creatives
- Look for ad groups with disparate keywords that can't possibly be addressed by the same ad, and give below-average keywords their own, new ad group with ads that better speak to the user's queries
- Speak more directly to the intent embedded in a user's query
- Add negative keywords to prevent your ads from showing on queries you don't want

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**EXAMPLE:** Suppose you sell luxury dress shoes: a phrase like “free bow tie with order” may attract many shoppers, but the people attracted by phrases like “fine craftsmanship” or “old-world Italian design” may engage more deeply on your site and buy more. That’s not to say that sales pitches are a bad idea, but driving clicks and driving relevant clicks are not always the same thing.

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If your **expected CTR** needs to get better, you may want to:

- Create more compelling ad text. Expected CTR is about ad creative that inspires action on the results page
- Highlight a unique benefit of your product or service
- Experiment with different calls to action
- Be more specific in your ad text

More detail usually makes for a more compelling ad. Creatives should be tailored to a user’s search, which means a strong relationship between a keyword and an ad. Convince the user that your landing page will be promising and related to her query, and she’ll be more likely to act. You can also highlight benefits that you offer (“free shipping”) or create urgency to act now (“buy today to save 30%”).

As we mentioned about ad relevance, there may be times when a more specific ad leads to lower CTRs but higher conversion rates. Don’t assume one is always better than the other: look for the balance that leads to the best possible performance for your account.

If your **landing page experience** needs to get better, you may want to:

- Send traffic to landing pages that are more closely related to a user’s query. If a search is for “striped shirts,” the landing page should feature striped shirts, not just shirts or clothing in general.
- Use your ads to set up your landing pages for success. An ad click is only one step in the experience, after all. Your ads should tell users what’s coming on their entire customer journey. They should also speak to the users who are most likely to become customers. A million clicks won’t do you any good if they don’t lead to meaningful engagement on your site.
- Make sure the landing page continues that conversation set up by your ad. Follow through on the ad’s offer or call to action. Even if you have no control over your site, you can still experiment to find the most useful existing pages.
- Try using conversion rate as a proxy for good landing page experience. We don’t use it in our calculation of landing page quality, but it can be a good proxy for you to measure and optimize against. It’s also something that should matter a whole lot to your bottom line, so you’re probably keeping a close watch on this already.
- Rethink mobile. Ease of navigation is something users value even more on mobile websites, and a good mobile site can go a long way toward increasing navigability. (Visit [Google.com/think/multiscreen](https://www.google.com/think/multiscreen) to learn more about what matters for mobile.)

To answer a common question: the word-for-word phrase from a query doesn’t need to be on your landing page. A query for “South Chicago Chihuahua-friendly budget hotels” doesn’t need to lead to a landing page with the headline “South Chicago Chihuahua-friendly budget hotels.”

In fact, we advise that you not try to “keyword stuff” your landing pages in an attempt to increase landing page relevance (we don't think keyword stuffing is a good practice for [any of your pages](#)). Instead, we urge all advertisers to focus on creating great experiences that deliver what a user is looking for. Our scoring is merely an attempt to measure that—to measure, you might say, user delight.

Just as good ads are good for everyone, good measurement systems should be good for everyone. As you work on giving users the best experience, we'll continue to work hard to measure that in the most accurate possible way and reward you for quality.

## 4 Six Things that Matter (and Don't) When It Comes to Quality

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To speak to some common misconceptions, here's a short list of things that do and do not matter when it comes to Quality Score. Understanding these will ensure you're focused on meaningful optimizations around ads quality.

### The User's Device: **Does** Matter

The user's device (laptop, tablet, smartphone or whatever) is taken into account when ad quality is calculated. Make sure your site experience is optimized for mobile, and if you haven't already, try targeting users on mobile devices with specific mobile-friendly ads and pages. Google doesn't require that you have a separate mobile site, but you should make sure that information is easy to find and the navigation is intuitive for users on a mobile device.

### Relevance to a User's Intentions: **Does** Matter

Relevance to users' searches and intentions is the heart of ads quality. That means ads and sites that help users gather relevant info, complete a sale or other task, and navigate with ease are more likely to result in high ads quality. This is why we suggest you focus on delivering relevant ads to answer queries rather than trying to optimize to manipulate your score.

### For Newly-Launched Keywords, Performance on Related Keywords: **Does** Matter

Instead of measuring new keywords from scratch, we start with info about related ads and landing pages you already have. If your related keywords, ads and landing pages are in good shape, we'll probably continue to have a high opinion of them. Always invest in growing your coverage on relevant searches, especially in areas where your ads have the potential to be high quality.

## How You Structure Your Account: **Doesn't** Matter

If it doesn't affect user experience, it shouldn't affect quality or Quality Score. Set up your account in whatever way lets you manage it best, and feel free to restructure things like campaign names or the number of ad groups as needed. There is no such thing as ad group-level, campaign-level or account-level Quality Score.

Note also that breaking keywords into new ad groups or campaigns (without changing the ad text or destination URL) has no effect on their Quality Score. But moving a keyword to a new ad group that has new ad text could change your Quality Score, because that can affect user experience.

## Running Your Ads in Other Networks: **Doesn't** Matter

Targeting the Google Display Network or Google's search partners in your AdWords account won't affect your ads' quality on Google.com. As with keywords, use your existing performance metrics—conversions, cost-per-acquisition, etc.—to test out search partners and the Display Network if you want to drive more volume.

## Your Ad's Placement on the Page: **Doesn't** Matter

While it's great to have a high position on the page, doing so doesn't increase the expected CTR rating of your ads. The expected CTR is normalized for your actual position on the page. The top position is expected to receive more clicks than the third position on the top, and so on. We also normalize for other factors that affect visibility, like ad extensions and other ad formats.

You don't need to bid for higher positions to increase Quality Score, so you're free to bid to performance: the clicks, conversions and costs that work best for your business.

# Conclusion

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The old advice to college graduates is, "Do what you love and all else will follow." In the world of AdWords, the advice is "Do what's best for your users and your bottom line, and all else will (or at least should) follow." Those business fundamentals are more important than Quality Score.

Remember, too, that there are differences between auction-time quality and the 1-10 Quality Score number that appears in your account. Your Quality Score will give you insight into how you're performing, but "chasing the number" shouldn't be the focus of your optimizations. Be relevant, be compelling and drive traffic to landing pages that deliver on what you promise in your ad, and you can feel confident your score should reflect that quality.