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Technical Blogging, Second Edition

Amplify Your Influence

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The
Pragmatic
Programmers

Second Edition

Technical Blogging

Amplify Your Influence

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edited by Michael Swaine

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*To my incredible wife, Jessica. And to all the
kind souls who helped us in the aftermath of
losing our home in an arson fire.*

Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.

► *Dwight D. Eisenhower*

CHAPTER 2

Rock-Solid Planning for Your Blog

In the previous chapter, we made some broad, preliminary decisions that impact the direction of your blog. In this chapter, we're going to finalize our plan by fleshing out further details.

In particular, we'll define goals for your blog, clarify its *raison d'être* and topic, and demystify audience expectations. We'll also discuss finding a good domain name that works well both from human and search-engine-optimization perspectives.

Define Your Blog's Main Topic

Whether you opted for a niche blog or a more general one, your site is going to have a main theme. In the case of a niche, the scope will be well defined and easy to identify. For general blogs, it can be much looser and less defined. Nevertheless, you need to have a clear, if preliminary, idea of what your blog will be about.

Identify Your Niche

You should identify the main topic for your niche based on your interests and motivations. For example, an iPhone freelancer may want to start a blog about Swift and iOS development. That's a relatively large niche, but it provides the blog with a well-defined scope. You'll know immediately what the boundaries for the blog are, as well as what does and doesn't belong on your site.

After picking the main topic, jot down a list of ten articles you could write for your blog. You don't need to write the actual articles yet, just the titles. When you're done with this task, ask yourself whether doing this exercise left you excited or frustrated. Was it hard to come up with ten titles, or could you have kept going for ages? The main point of this exercise is to understand if you do in fact have enough to say about the topic at hand.

In most cases, you won't have to worry about this, but if you pick a tiny niche that's highly specific, you may quickly run out of ideas for articles and face other obvious problems, such as only being able to attract a small audience. We'll discuss how to estimate the size of a niche in [Analyze the Size of Your Niche, on page 9](#).

Define the Main Theme for Your General Blog

If you intend to publish a blog on programming in general, web development, or a similarly broad topic in another industry, you don't have to worry about the possibility of running out of ideas or having too small of an audience to capture.

Your pre-setup exercise will be a bit different from the niche one. Start by coming up with a main theme for your blog (e.g., web development). Follow that by listing several relevant topics that you're passionate and knowledgeable about.

For example:

- Python
- Django
- JavaScript
- Deployment and scaling
- Relational and NoSQL databases
- Technical reviews

As you can see, these are very broad topics, each of which would roughly correspond to a different category within your blog. The argument could be made that a general blog is just a niche blog with a much larger niche. I can live with this interpretation, but the much wider latitude will definitely affect your blog in ways that warrant the niche/general distinction.

This task is not just meant to help you figure out what kind of topics you'll be covering in your blog. The real point of this exercise is to determine if you're willing to cover enough variety of topics to warrant creating a general blog on your main subject.

How did you feel as you jotted them down? Were you excited about the prospect of writing articles for them? Was coming up with this list easy or did you struggle to write more than two or three topics? If you find that your passion and expertise really lies with only one or two categories, you may be better off picking one and running a laser-focused niche blog that's dedicated solely to that subject instead.

Analyze the Size of Your Niche

Before committing to your blog, you may want to assess the size of your potential audience. For most niches, this is more of a curiosity than a requirement, but if you're trying to establish yourself in a very small niche and are uncertain about its size, this step can help you determine if it's worth pursuing or not.

We're after an estimate rather than exact numbers. More importantly, the process you'll go through in order to estimate the size of your niche will also turn out to be useful when researching keywords and topics for your articles later on.

Determine the Search Volume for Your Niche

As you probably know, Google makes the bulk of its profits from selling ads. And ads are annoying, right? Well, in this case it actually works in our favor. Google has released a series of tools for advertisers that are meant to help its Ads (formerly AdWords) users find new keywords to advertise with, as well as helping them estimate search volumes for those keywords.

We have no intention of buying ads from Google through its Ads program now, but we can still use the information Google makes available to do some research into the size of our niche.

In the first edition of this book, I advocated using the Google Keyword Tool, which has since been rebranded to the Keyword Planner tool.¹ It's still a viable option, but these days I find it to be more focused toward (and therefore more useful to) actual advertisers rather than bloggers. Nevertheless, at this stage, we're not doing advanced SEO research. We're looking for broad ranges, and the Keyword Planner does provide us with those.

For example, let's say that your blog niche is TypeScript. The Keyword Planner currently suggests a U.S. monthly volume of searches for that exact keyword to be in the 10K–100K range, as shown in [Figure 3, Google Keyword Planner, on page 11](#). This gives us an idea of the size of the audience, and it's good enough for now.

Alternatively, you could use one of the many free keyword tools available by searching for “free keyword tool” in...well, likely Google. Some of these services don't require registration and provide specific numbers instead of broad ranges like Google does. The catch is that the estimates will be different, depending on the site you use, but the general order of magnitude should be consistent across the board.

1. ads.google.com/home/tools/keyword-planner

Whichever tool you decide to use, plug in some keywords related to your specific blog topic and see what kind of search volume shows up. Use generic keywords with one or two words at most, and not something specific like “python programming for data science.” Instead, search for “python,” “data science,” and perhaps “numpy” to better gauge the interest level in the topic.

One of the tools I use shows a volume of 42,000 U.S. monthly searches for “TypeScript,” and much more globally (200K+). That’s certainly a sizable-enough audience to build a blog around.

Although worldwide data is provided by the Keyword Planner, if you’re primarily targeting countries like China, Russia, or South Korea, you might be better off using the keyword research tools offered by the most popular search engines in those respective countries—namely Baidu, Yandex, and Naver. The same is true for any market where Google isn’t the de facto search engine.

Going Pro with Premium SEO Tools

SEO experts tend to use premium tools that offer amazing features and insight. It’s a crowded market, but the three tools that stand out are Ahrefs,² SEM-Rush,³ and Moz.⁴ Personally, I’m partial to Ahrefs, but they’re all roughly equivalent and invaluable to bloggers who are serious about ranking in Google.

There are two downsides:

1. They are as complex as they are powerful, so there’s a bit of a learning curve.
2. Their price tends to be rather premium.

Pricing can vary over time, but think “\$100/month and up” kind of premium. The good news is that they are total overkill for someone who’s just starting out. I included them because in a few months or years from now, you might decide to take your SEO efforts to the next level. If you do, one of the three tools shown in [Figure 3, Google Keyword Planner, on page 11](#) will serve you well.

Use Google Trends

Just as important as the current search volume is the search trend. Is your keyword becoming increasingly popular over time, or are you setting yourself up to create a blog about a technology whose adoption is regressing?

2. ahrefs.com

3. semrush.com

4. moz.com

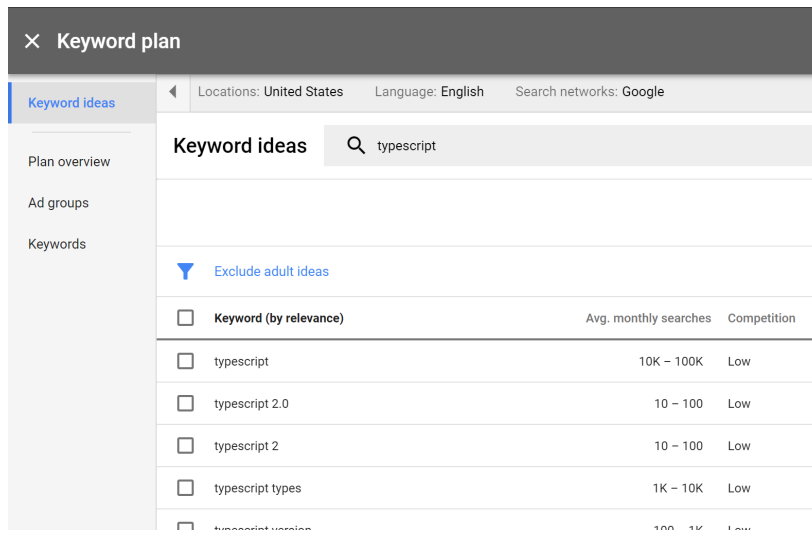


Figure 3—Google Keyword Planner

Thankfully we don't have to rely on intuition. We can verify our gut feeling about the trend of a given technology by using another Google tool called Google Trends.⁵ By searching in Google Trends for our language, technology, or main keyword, we can easily assess its search volume over time. The specific example of TypeScript ([Figure 4, Google Trends, on page 12](#)) shows decent growth over the past few years. Past performance is never a guarantee of future results, but a chart like this can be somewhat reassuring.

Google Trends offers details about the regions and cities in which a given keyword is popular. TypeScript seems to be searched for primarily in Redmond/Seattle (its birthplace), San Francisco, Minsk, Bengaluru, and other hotbeds of startup activity.

This kind of information is particularly useful to you if you live in one of the cities in which your niche is going strong. Along with starting a blog on the subject, you could decide to become active in your local tech community (and perhaps even launch a relevant Meetup group). A local environment favorable to your technology of choice would also be beneficial if you're looking for a job, intending to offer your freelance services to local companies, or hiring talent for your own business.

5. [google.com/trends](https://www.google.com/trends)

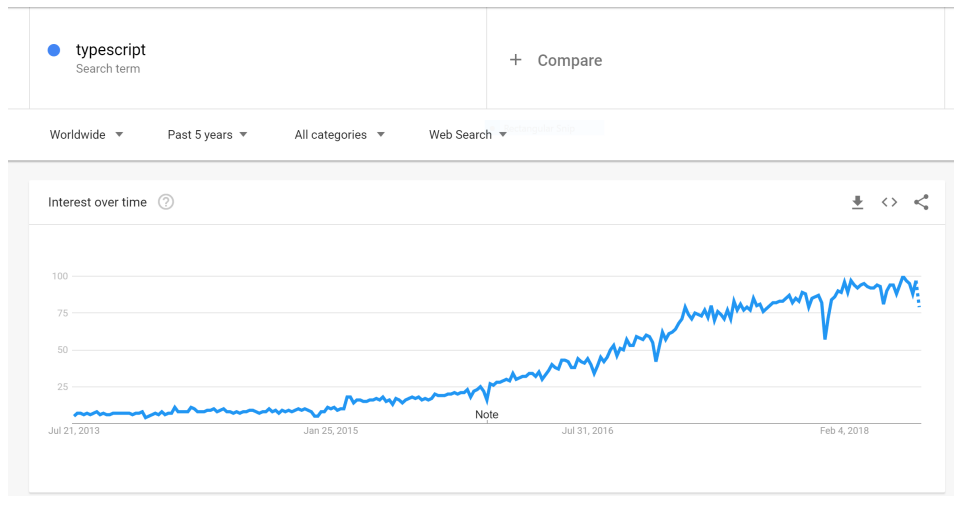


Figure 4—Google Trends

Make an Executive Decision

Perform similar searches for your own niche. It's hard to recommend a minimum threshold because it depends on many factors, including the type of niche, your reasons for blogging, and how specific you were while picking a keyword to search for. "It depends" answers are truthful but deeply unsatisfying. So if I truly had to provide you with a number, I would suggest opting for niches whose main keyword has at least 10,000 monthly searches. If you are creating a more generic blog, you don't have to worry about this.

If only 1,000 people search for your main keyword in a given month, your topic might be too niche to attract a sizable audience. It's up to you to decide whether it's still worth pursuing, but you can probably broaden the scope of your blog, at least slightly, to attract more people.

The exception to this is a brand-new technology that has just been announced (particularly by a well-established company like Apple or Microsoft). While such technologies may show zero search results initially, they're virtually guaranteed to become popular—at least to a certain extent—in the future. Also, keep in mind that, as a rule of thumb, the larger the niche, the bigger the competition.

Some Internet marketers make a very comfortable living through a series of microniche blogs (usually affiliate sites) that have a much smaller target audience than that. However, their business model and approach to blogging

are quite different from the ones recommended in this book. Here we favor quality over quantity.

Give Readers a Compelling Reason to Stick Around

At this point, you should have determined the style and topic of your blog, as well as validated the existence of a sizable potential audience. Now you can start thinking about how to answer a question that many of your visitors will ask themselves: *Why should I subscribe to this blog?*

I phrased that question to intentionally imply a subscription to your upcoming posts via email or feed, the latter being less common these days but still used to a degree among a technical readership. Another way of phrasing the question would be to inquire why people should come back to your blog.

Whatever the exact question you ask, you need a convincing answer. What's the reason why your blog exists? Why did you start it in the first place? What's your compelling story? Answer these questions and you'll have a much clearer picture of what your blog is really about and why visitors will want to return.

The Elevator Pitch

The business world has a concept called the *elevator pitch*. Its name derives from the hypothetical scenario of finding yourself in an elevator with a potential investor. In such a context, you only get between thirty and ninety seconds to summarize what your product or company is all about before the doors of the fictional elevator spring open. While you don't need to raise money for your blog, considering your pitch is still a worthwhile exercise.

Tip 5

Focus your elevator pitch on the why, not the how.

Your elevator pitch should quickly summarize the essence of your product or company. Why does it exist? What problem does it solve? What is its value proposition?

We are dealing with a blog here, but the same principle applies. Characterize your blog in one or two sentences at most and give people a reason why they should come back and visit again.

Case Study: Popular Tech Blogs

To help you with this task, let's look briefly at a few blogs (listed by URL) and analyze the compelling reasons for their existence.

- daringfireball.net: News and opinions about Apple by an unrepentant advocate of Apple products. Reason to read it: It provides fresh insight, interesting controversy, and news about Apple and its competitors delivered by an established community pundit.
- thedailywtf.com: Daily examples of bad programming. Reason to read it: To learn more about antipatterns in programming and for amusement.
- troymhunt.com: The personal blog of security expert Troy Hunt. Reason to read it: To learn more about security and the latest threats.
- seths.blog: The personal blog of marketing expert Seth Godin. Reason to read it: To improve your marketing skills with the aid of a leader in the marketing world via thought-provoking ideas and bite-sized insight.
- techcrunch.com: News about startups and technology. Reason to read it: To stay up-to-date with the world of technology and startups.
- engadget.com: News about gadgets. Reason to read it: To stay abreast of the latest gadgets.
- flowingdata.com: A visualization and statistics blog. Reason to read it: To learn, in the blog's words, "how designers, programmers, and statisticians are putting data to good use." It's a must for those interested in data visualization and statistics.

In each example above, the reason why you should follow these blogs is pretty obvious and can be stated in a single sentence.

Come Up with Your Blog's Reason for Being

Your goal is to make it just as obvious, to yourself first and then to your readers, why your blog is worth following. Remember the elevator pitch we discussed earlier. You only have from a few seconds (most commonly) to a few minutes (rarely and at the very most) to effectively win your readers over. You want to state your blog's intent through your title, tagline/motto, "about" blurb in the sidebar, and on the About page. Be as direct as possible: don't be subtle about stating what your blog is about and who it's for.

In the example of the TypeScript niche, we could set our sights on becoming a one-stop resource for folks who are interested in TypeScript news. Alternatively, we could make the blog about tutorials on how to accomplish various tasks or, again, create a blog that's dedicated solely to converting from JavaScript to TypeScript programming. What about one that is devoted to documenting your journey as you try to become proficient in TypeScript and related frameworks (e.g., Angular)?

Pick the idea that suits you best for your own subject; pretty much any will do as long as you give it an angle and clearly communicate the point of your blog to your visitors.

Over time you'll find that many other elements corroborate with your effort to make your blog compelling for your readers. These include the quality and usefulness of your articles, the type of visitors and comments that your blog attracts, the design of your site, and even how catchy your headlines are. We'll examine each of these points in further detail in the coming chapters.