

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE · WW-026

Review search terms and manage negative keywords weekly

Review the searches that triggered your ads each week, block irrelevant ones with the right negative match type, and promote searches that bring leads into keywords.

GOOGLE ADS

VERSION 1.0	EFFECTIVE 5 October 2026
NEXT REVIEW 5 April 2027	TIME 30 to 60 minutes per account per week
DIFFICULTY Beginner	RELATED WW-014 · WW-025
AUDIENCE Paid media specialists managing Google Ads Search campaigns	
TOOLS Google Ads · A negative keyword log	

Purpose

Keywords decide which searches can trigger an ad, but Google matches them to many related searches, some of which never turn into customers. The search terms report shows the actual searches. This procedure reviews them every week, blocks wasted spend with negative keywords and adds strong performers as keywords. It is finished when every search term with meaningful spend in the review period has been marked as kept, added or excluded, and the changes are logged.

Scope

In scope

- Reviewing the search terms report for Search campaigns
- Adding negative keywords at the right level and match type
- Adding high-performing search terms as keywords

Out of scope

- Performance Max search term insights
- Bid, budget and ad copy changes
- Building new campaigns (see WW-025)

Roles and responsibilities

Role	Responsibility
Paid media specialist	Runs the weekly review and makes the changes.
Business owner	Confirms which services and job types are wanted or unwanted.
Reviewer	Spot-checks the negative log monthly for over-blocking.

Prerequisites

- Standard or Admin access to the Google Ads account.
- Conversion tracking working, so you can see which searches lead to conversions (WW-013).
- A list from the business of services it does and does not offer, and areas it does not cover.
- A negative keyword log (a spreadsheet with date, term, match type, level and reason).

Procedure

Open the report

Look at a full week of data.

1. In Google Ads, select the campaign, then open **Insights and reports**, then **Search terms**.

2. Set the date range to the last 7 days, or the last 30 days for low-volume accounts.
3. Make sure the **Cost**, **Clicks**, **Conversions** and **Cost / conv.** columns are visible, and sort by **Cost**, highest first.

Classify each search term

Decide what to do with every term that spent money.

1. For each term, mark it as one of:
 - **Keep**: relevant, and either converting or too new to judge.
 - **Add as keyword**: relevant, converting well and not already a keyword.
 - **Exclude**: irrelevant, a service the business does not offer, an area it does not cover, or research and job-seeking intent.
2. Ask the business owner about any term where you are unsure whether the job is wanted.

[!TIP] Look for repeated words across many poor terms, such as `jobs`, `salary`, `free` or `diy`. One single-word negative can block them all.

Add negative keywords

Block irrelevant searches with the narrowest effective match type.

1. Select the terms to exclude and choose **Add as negative keyword**.
2. Choose the match type:
 - **Exact** `[term]` blocks only that exact search.
 - **Phrase** `"term"` blocks searches containing those words in that order.
 - **Broad** `term` blocks searches containing all of those words in any order.
3. Choose the level: the shared negative list for terms that are never wanted, the campaign for terms wrong for that campaign, or the ad group for terms that belong in another ad group.
4. Record each negative in the log with the reason.

[!WARNING] Negative keywords do not match close variants, plurals or misspellings. Add common variants separately, and check that a negative does not block searches you want, such as `free` in "free quote".

Promote strong search terms

Turn proven searches into keywords.

1. For terms marked **Add as keyword**, choose **Add as keyword** and select the ad group whose service matches.
2. Use **exact** or **phrase** match so the term gets its own bid and performance data.

Check the impact

Make sure the changes worked.

1. The following week, confirm the excluded terms no longer appear in the report.
2. Once a month, review the negative log and remove any negative that is blocking wanted searches.

Quality checks

- ☐ Every search term with spend in the period is classified.
- ☐ Negatives use the narrowest effective match type and correct level.
- ☐ Negatives do not block wanted searches.
- ☐ Converting search terms are added as keywords in the right ad group.
- ☐ Every change is recorded in the negative keyword log.

Troubleshooting

Symptom	Likely cause	Fix
Excluded term still appears	Variant or misspelling not blocked	Add the variant as a separate negative.
Impressions dropped sharply	A negative blocks wanted searches	Check recent negatives and remove the one that over-blocks.
Many rows show as "Other search terms"	Google hides low-volume terms for privacy	Focus on visible terms and use broader negatives for patterns.
Same irrelevant theme in every campaign	Negative added at campaign level only	Move it to the shared negative list.

Records

- Keep the negative keyword log for the life of the account, with the date and reason for every change.
- Note the weekly review in the account change log.

References

- [About the search terms report \(Google Ads Help\)](#)
- [About negative keywords \(Google Ads Help\)](#)
- [About negative keyword lists \(Google Ads Help\)](#)
- [About keyword matching options \(Google Ads Help\)](#)

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