

The Manual SERP Read Cheat Sheet

Score any Google results page by hand in 4 minutes — the four relevance spots, the verdict thresholds, and the eleven signals that override them. By Benjamin Hübner · imdominator.com

SERP Gap AI does this in one click, on every result, in about two seconds. This sheet is for the times you cannot: a local SERP the extension does not cover, someone else's screen, a client call, a phone, or a quick sanity check before you trust any tool — including this one. Learn the read once and you will never look at a search results page the same way again.

The read: four spots, one point each

Open the SERP. Take the top 10 results one at a time. For each result, award **one point per spot where the exact keyword or a tight variant appears**. Maximum four points per competitor.

#	Spot	Where to look	Counts as a hit when
1	Title	The blue clickable headline in the results.	The keyword or a close variant appears in it. Word order can differ. Plurals and "for"/"to" swaps count.
2	URL slug	The grey address under the title.	The keyword sits in the slug itself. A category folder does not count — the page slug does.
3	H1	Open the page. The big headline at the top.	Keyword or variant present. If the visible headline is not the H1, right-click → Inspect and check.
4	First sentence	The opening line of the body, not the meta description.	Keyword appears in roughly the first 15-20 words and the sentence addresses the query.

NOTE

Variants count, exact-match paranoia does not. "best crm for freelancers" and "best crm for freelance" are the same intent. "crm software" is not. Judge it the way a searcher would, not the way a 2012 keyword-density tool would.

The verdict thresholds

Add up how many of the ten results scored **3 or 4**. That count is your verdict.

Results scoring 3-4	Verdict	What to do
0-2	WINNABLE	Build it. A page that hits all four spots is more relevant than almost everything on this page. Authority matters less than people think at this end of the tail.
3-5	SOFT	Build it if you can add real depth. Check <i>which</i> spots the leaders miss — slug and first sentence are the easiest to beat.
6-10	HARD	Skip, or go after a variant. Everyone here is deliberately targeting this query and you would be competing on authority, which you will probably lose.

Six signals that override the score — build it anyway

These beat the arithmetic. If you see two or more of them, treat the keyword as WINNABLE regardless of what the count says.

- ✓ **Forums, Reddit or Quora in the top 5.** Google is showing user-generated content because no good article exists. This is the strongest opportunity signal on any SERP.
- ✓ **YouTube results padding the page.** Same story — the text results were not good enough to fill ten slots.
- ✓ **Results that answer a *different* question.** Tangential pages ranking on authority alone. They are holding a spot they did not earn.
- ✓ **Dates older than two years** on a topic where recency matters (tools, pricing, anything with a year in it).
- ✓ **Thin pages.** Click through — under 600 words, no structure, no examples, nothing a reader could act on.
- ✓ **Nobody has the keyword in the slug.** Ten results, zero slugs. This is free money and it is more common than you would believe.

Five signals that mean walk away, even on a low score

- ✓ **Google's own properties dominate** — Maps pack, Shopping, Flights, Knowledge Panel eating the fold. Even position 1 gets scrolled past.
- ✓ **The intent is a brand you are not.** Someone searching a brand name wants that brand's site.
- ✓ **Your Money Your Life** — medical, legal, financial advice. Google applies a much higher trust bar and a new site will not clear it.
- ✓ **Every result is a marketplace or major platform** (Amazon, G2, Wikipedia, government sites). The SERP has decided what type of page belongs there, and yours is not it.
- ✓ **No commercial value.** It might be winnable, but if nobody who searches it will ever buy anything, winning it costs you a week and earns you nothing.

ACTION STEP (DO THIS NOW)

Pick a keyword you talked yourself out of in the last month. Run this read on it manually. If it scores 0-2, or shows two of the six override signals, you were talked out of free traffic by a difficulty number.

The score grid — print this

One row per result. Tick the spots, total the row, count the 3s and 4s at the bottom.

#	Domain	Title	Slug	H1	1st sentence	Total /4
1		■	■	■	■	
2		■	■	■	■	
3		■	■	■	■	
4		■	■	■	■	
5		■	■	■	■	
6		■	■	■	■	
7		■	■	■	■	
8		■	■	■	■	
9		■	■	■	■	
10		■	■	■	■	
Results scoring 3-4:					Verdict:	

Two things to remember

One page, one keyword. The read tells you about one query. Run it again for each variant rather than hoping one page covers all of them.

Then check your own page. Once you publish, run the same four-spot read on your live URL. Most pages that "should be ranking" are missing one of the four — usually the slug, because the CMS overwrote it, or the first sentence, because a writer added a warm-up paragraph on top.

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