Topical Optimization in the AI Era

Why covering a whole topic beats chasing single keywords, and why it matters even more now that AI search breaks one question into many sub-searches before it answers.

Teaching series · Lesson 13 · intermediate

ONE QUESTION BECOMES MANY SEARCHES



Illustrative fan-out: the sub-searches an AI system might run behind one traveller question

9	1	2022
step process	question, many searches	process, rebuilt

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Before you start

What this lesson covers

This lesson rebuilds two documents from my archive: a **Primer on Topical Optimization** and a **19-step Topical Optimization Process** from October 2022. The core idea still holds. Several tactics don't, and the AI era adds a new reason to do it well.

By the end of this lesson you can

- Explain the shift from **single keywords to topics**, and why it still matters.
- Describe **query fan-out** and what it means for which pages get cited.
- Build a **topic map**: pillar, cluster and supporting pages, linked as a tree.
- Run the updated **9-step process** on a real site.
- Find coverage gaps by **sub-question**, not by counting terms.

Related lessons

Lesson 6 (writing liftable sentences), **Lesson 10** (triples) and **Lesson 11** (NERD). Topical optimization is the **page and site level** of the same idea.

Honest framing

Google confirms query fan-out exists in AI Overviews and AI Mode. It doesn't publish how sub-searches are chosen. The fan-out examples here are **illustrative**.

Part 1

From keywords to topics

The 2022 primer put it simply: stop optimizing a page for **one keyword**. Find the **parent** topic and all its **children**, and optimize the page for the whole basket.

The parent and child idea

Parent: the broadest version of the topic, e.g. *dog beds*.
Children: the variants and facets: *puppy beds, orthopedic dog beds, washable dog beds, beds for large dogs*.
Use the parent in the **title and URL**, and the children in **headings and sections**.
Result: the page ranks for the parent **and** for long-tail queries nobody targeted.

Why it worked, and still does

Search engines match **concepts**, not strings. The 2022 doc's example: *movie about tiger on boat* returns **Life of Pi**.
Most of a page's traffic comes from queries **you never targeted**. Search Console proves it on almost any site.
Several thin pages on near-identical keywords **compete with each other**. One strong page wins.

The shift in one line

A keyword is a way of asking. A topic is the thing being asked about. Optimize for the thing, and the many ways of asking come with it.

Part 2

Query fan-out changes the stakes

In AI search, one question doesn't trigger one search. Google says AI Overviews and AI Mode **may use a "query fan-out" technique, issuing multiple related searches across subtopics and data sources** to develop a response. [1]



Illustrative fan-out: the sub-searches an AI system might run behind one traveller question

What this means

The answer is assembled from pages that cover the **sub-questions**, not only the main one.
A page that covers **many facets clearly** has more chances to be pulled in.
Pages that only target the head keyword can be **skipped** even if they rank for it.

What I saw in practice

In my November 2026 test of **64 travel prompts in Google AI Mode**, answers averaged about **455 words**, split into sections that matched facets of the question: routes, access, timing, cost, booking.
Many ended by offering to **narrow the question** further: a visible sign of the follow-up questions behind it.

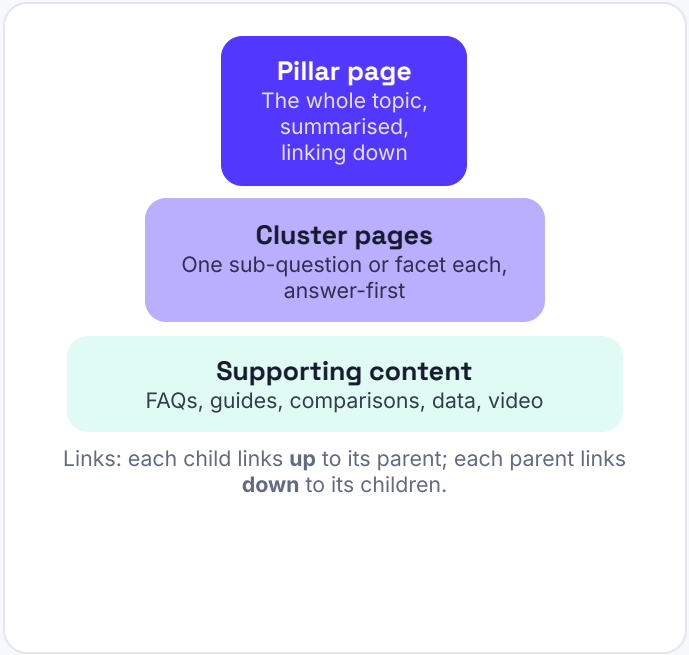
The takeaway

Topical optimization used to be a way to **rank for more keywords**. Now it's also how a page **qualifies as a source** for AI answers.

Part 3

Map the topic before you write

The 2022 process started where every topic strategy should: **list your core topics (entities)**, then map every existing page to one of them.



Level	Example: wheelchair-friendly Vienna
Pillar	Accessible Vienna: a complete guide
Cluster	Step-free sightseeing routes
Cluster	Accessible trams, U-Bahn and taxis
Cluster	Museums and palaces with full access
Cluster	Choosing a guide with accessibility experience
Supporting	FAQ: toilets, rentals, cobblestones

1

Too big?

If the outline would take weeks, the topic is **too broad**. Split it into several pillars.

2

Too small?

If it's done in two headings, it's probably **a keyword inside a bigger topic**. Make it a cluster page.

3

Be strict

Each page belongs to **one main topic**. Categories should mean something, not include everything.

Part 4

The process, updated

The 2022 document had 19 steps. Here they are condensed into **nine**, with what changed for the AI era.

#	Step	What to do now
1	**List core topics**	Name the entities your brand should own. Add the **problems** your audience needs solved.
2	**Build a question universe**	Keywords **plus** follow-up questions, People Also Ask, customer questions and AI follow-ups (Part 5).
3	**Classify your inventory**	Map every page to one topic. CMS tags, a script with an NLP API, or a spreadsheet.
4	**Merge, refresh, remove**	Combine thin pages on the same question. Update old facts. Redirect what you remove.
5	**Outline pillar pages**	Sections only, no writing yet. Each section = one sub-question.
6	**Write answer-first**	Each section opens with a direct, self-contained answer (Lesson 6), then detail and evidence.
7	**Link as a tree**	Children link up, parents link down. **Descriptive, varied anchors** from your question universe.
8	**Earn topical mentions**	Links and mentions from sites **in your field** say more than generic coverage.
9	**Measure by topic**	Report clusters, not single pages, in Search Console, analytics and AI visibility tracking (Part 7).

Part 5

Finding the sub-questions

Keyword tools show only a fraction of what people ask. To cover a topic for fan-out, collect **questions**, not just keywords.

Source	What it gives you
Search Console	Real long-tail queries your pages already appear for. Filter by page or by regex for a cluster.
People Also Ask and related searches	The questions Google itself connects to the topic.
AI Mode and other assistants	The facets an answer is organised around, and the follow-up questions it offers.
Your customers	Sales calls, support tickets, reviews, guide or staff notes. The questions **no tool shows**.
Forums and communities	Reddit and specialist forums: real wording, real worries, edge cases.
Competitor pillar pages	Which facets they cover that you don't. Look for **missing sections**, not missing words.
Wikipedia and Wikidata	The related entities and properties a complete page should mention (Lesson 11).

Organise them

Group questions by **intent and journey step**: exploring, comparing, booking, preparing, during, after. Each group often becomes **one cluster page**.

Prompt libraries help

A structured prompt set, such as **situation + constraint + journey step**, shows which facets AI answers include and which sources they use. That is fan-out you can observe.

Part 6

Coverage gaps, not keyword gaps

The 2022 process measured gaps by **counting terms** competitors used and you didn't. In the AI era, measure gaps by **sub-questions answered**.

Sub-question	Your page	Top competitor	AI answer covers it?
Which routes are step-free?	Partly	Yes	Yes
Are trams and the U-Bahn accessible?	No	Yes	Yes
Which museums have full access?	Yes	Partly	Yes
How do I check a guide's experience?	No	No	Yes
Where are accessible toilets?	No	Yes	Sometimes

How to read it

Missing everywhere but in AI answers: the biggest opportunity. Nobody owns it yet.
Competitor has it, you don't: add a section, with better evidence.
You have it partly: strengthen it with facts, dates and first-hand detail.

Don't pad

Covering a sub-question means **answering it well**, not adding the words. A thin paragraph that names the facet but says nothing new is not coverage.

Example table is illustrative. Build yours from Part 5 sources and a check of current AI answers.

Part 7

Measure by topic

The 2022 process ended with a good habit: **report clusters, not pages**. The tools have changed.

Then (2022)	Now
Universal Analytics content grouping	**GA4 content groups**, or a cluster column in your reporting sheet
Keyword rank tracking per page	**Search Console** with regex filters by URL pattern or query theme
Featured snippet tracking	**AI visibility tracking**: is the brand mentioned or cited for the cluster's questions?
Traffic per post	Clicks, impressions and **queries per cluster**, plus conversions

1

Watch the long tail

A healthy cluster gains **new queries** every month, even before the head term moves.

2

Watch citations

Track whether pages in the cluster are **cited in AI answers** for the cluster's questions.

3

Review monthly

Which clusters grow, which stall? Feed what works into the **next cluster**.

Part 8

What the 2022 documents got wrong

The strategy holds up. Some tactics were already weak in 2022, and some have aged badly.

2022 idea	What's accurate now
Add LSI keywords	LSI is an old indexing method. There's no evidence modern Google uses "LSI keywords". Cover **entities and sub-questions** instead.
Match competitors' TF-IDF and density	Term counts are a weak proxy. **Answer the questions** competitors miss.
Longer articles perform best	Length follows coverage. A short page that fully answers a narrow question can win.
Use inflections to raise frequency	Write naturally. Search understands variants; repetition adds nothing.
Optimize for featured snippets and voice	Answer-first sections still help, now mainly for **AI answers** (Lesson 6).
Write a long guide and a listicle on the same keyword	Only if each serves a **different intent**. Otherwise they compete.
Avoid generalist sites' links	Links from **topically relevant** sites matter most, but brand mentions on big sites still build recognition.
Universal Analytics content grouping	Universal Analytics was retired. Use **GA4** content groups.

What still holds

Topics over keywords, a clear topic map, merging thin pages, tree-like internal links, topical links and measuring by cluster. **That was the core of the 2022 process, and it's exactly what fan-out rewards.**

Exercise

Map one topic cluster

Time: 45 minutes. Pick one topic your site should own.

Step	What to do	Output
1	Name the **pillar topic** and the entity behind it.	Pillar name
2	Collect **20 to 30 questions** from at least four Part 5 sources.	Question list
3	Group them into **4 to 8 facets**. Each facet is a cluster page or a pillar section.	Facet groups
4	Map your **existing pages** to the facets. Mark duplicates to merge.	Inventory map
5	Run 5 key questions in **AI Mode**. Note the facets it covers and the sources it cites.	AI coverage notes
6	Fill a **coverage gap table** like Part 6.	Gap table
7	Draw the **link tree**: pillar down to clusters, clusters up to pillar.	Link plan

What good looks like

Every facet has **one** home page. Every question has an answer somewhere in the cluster. The pillar links to all of them, and each links back.

Discussion

Which facet did AI answers cover that **no ranking page** covered well? That is your first page to write.

Check your understanding

Quick quiz

1. What does "query fan-out" mean in Google's AI features?

a) Showing more ads
b) Running multiple related searches across subtopics
c) Translating queries

2. In the parent and child model, where does the parent keyword mainly go?

a) In every heading
b) Title and URL
c) Only in alt text

3. A pillar page should:

a) Repeat every cluster page in full
b) Summarise the topic and link down to cluster pages
c) Have no internal links

4. The best way to find coverage gaps now is to compare:

a) Term counts
b) Sub-questions answered
c) Word counts

5. Which 2022 tactic is outdated?

a) Merging thin pages
b) Adding "LSI keywords"
c) Tree-like internal links

6. How should results be measured?

a) By single page only
b) By topic cluster, including AI citations
c) By keyword density

Answer key and sources

Answer key

1 b. Google's own description. **2 b.** Title and URL; children go in headings and sections. **3 b.** Summary plus links down. **4 b.** Sub-questions, not term counts. **5 b.** No evidence Google uses LSI keywords. **6 b.** Clusters, plus whether AI cites them.

01 **AI features and your website. Google Search Central**
AI Overviews and AI Mode may use query fan-out across subtopics and data sources; same SEO best practices apply.
https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features

02 **Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content. Google Search Central**
Content made for people, with original information and complete descriptions of a topic.
https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/creating-helpful-content

03 **Primer on Topical Optimization; Topical Optimization Detailed Process, Oct 2022. Author's archive**
Parent and child keywords; the 19-step process this lesson condenses.

04 **Who AI Recommends for Private Tours: Google AI Mode study, 64 prompts, November 2026. Author's study**
Answer length and structure observations.

Lesson by Ameneh Saeednia, rebuilt from 2022 process documents in my archive, checked against current Google documentation, and prepared with AI assistance. Examples are illustrative.