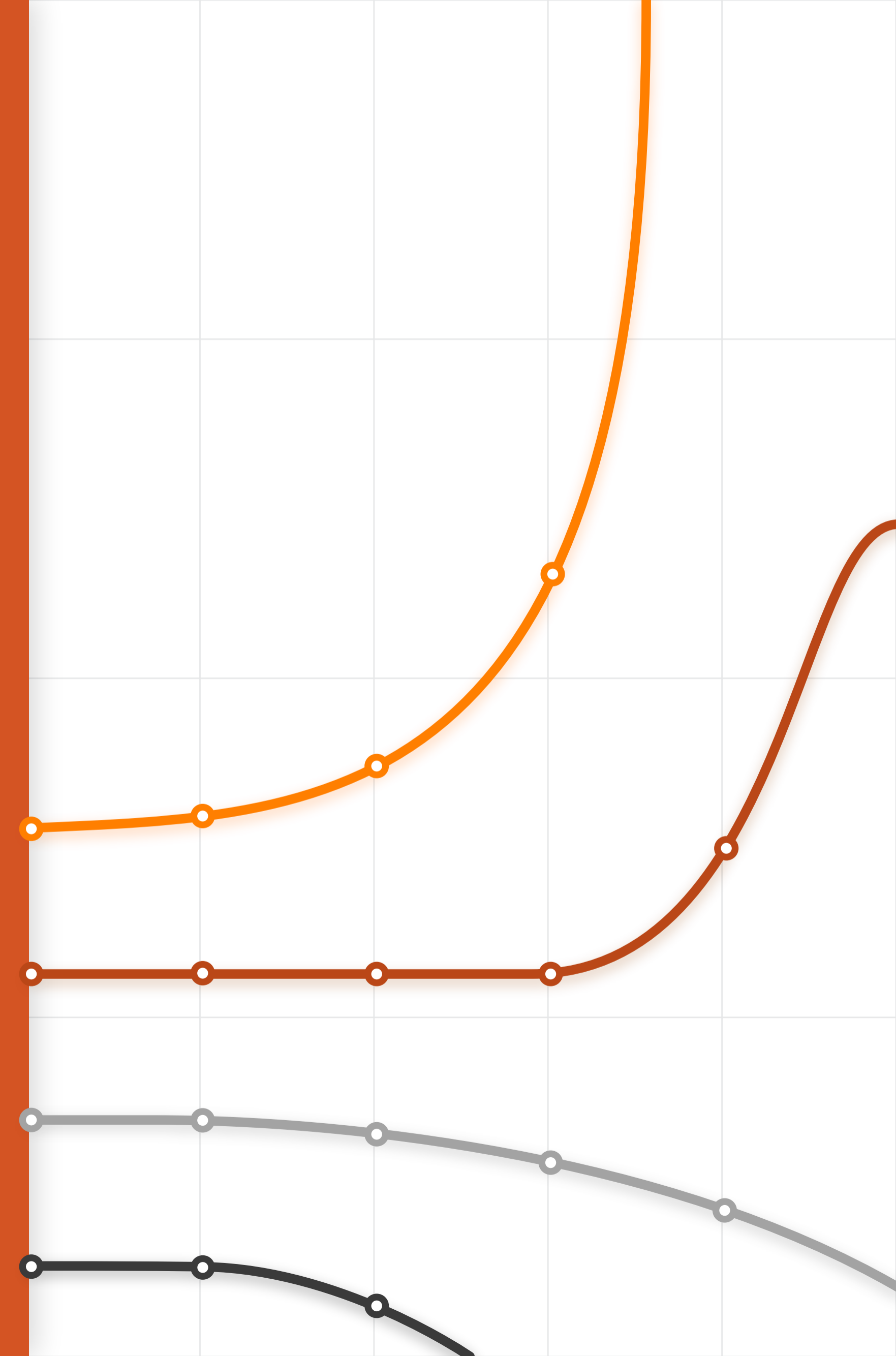




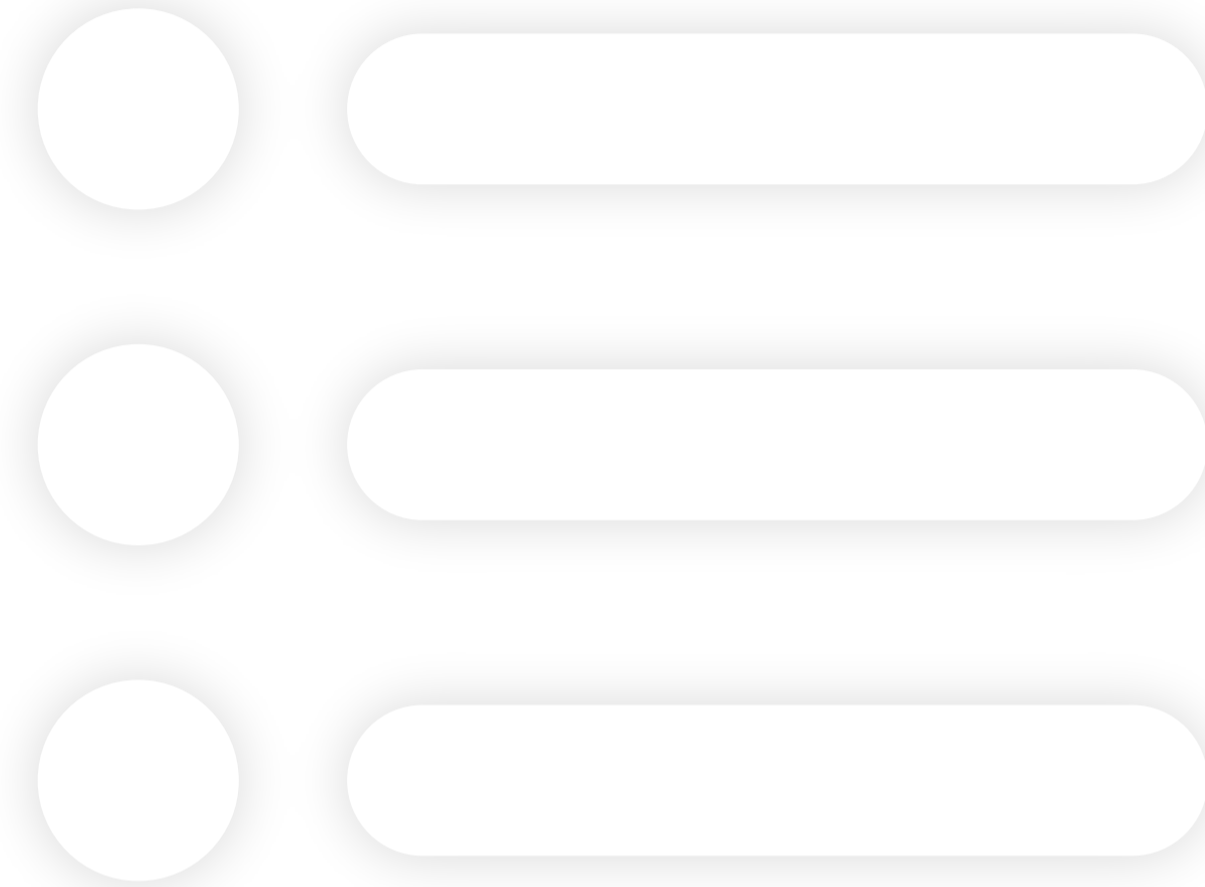
**SEM RUSH**  
COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE

# Ranking factors 2017

SEMrush research



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# About SEMrush

SEMrush is a SaaS product used by over 1,500,000 marketers worldwide.

For the past nine years, SEMrush has grown into an all-in-one marketing suite consisting of more than 30 tools and reports that help companies market better online. On top of being one of the best keyword research tools worldwide, SEMrush now helps users fix technical website issues, improve the health of their backlink profile, and track local rankings on both mobile and desktop. Marketers can easily spot opportunities they are missing compared to their top ten competitors in search and get ideas for their SEO, PPC and content marketing campaigns. Our vision is to create the only tool a digital marketing team would ever need to improve their online marketing results, ensure a smooth workflow between team members and save time on routine tasks.

Because the web is evolving so quickly, and with the constant updates from giants like Google and Facebook, marketers are easily lost without the right data, unable to make the right decisions and adjust to the new reality. Having software that changes with the latest trends and updates and makes data quick and easy to obtain is crucial. At SEMrush, the agile methodology is applied on all levels within the company (both in development and marketing), which means we react to market changes as quickly as possible to ensure every change is an opportunity for our clients.

## SEMrush in numbers

**1,500,000+**  
users

**30**  
tools

**140**  
databases globally

**2.5**  
billion keywords

**3**  
trillion backlinks



# Methodology of this research

## Why we did it

We at SEMrush are working hard to create the best SEO tool in the world. Our main goal is to help our customers organize their SEO priorities and learn how to do first things first.

Having a lot of data at our disposal, we decided to use it to help the marketing community answer one of the most important questions of today's digital world: what makes your website rank higher?

There are plenty of valuable resources on the Internet that explain which ranking factors are the most important. First of all, there is the official information from Google on how to promote your website, which is holistic. But we couldn't resist our natural curiosity and decided to investigate how things really are.

## Why we did things differently

Our colleagues tend to calculate the correlation between a factor value (for instance, the number of referring domains) and a page's position and then sort the factors by correlation size. However, correlation analysis is not the best match for this type of research because:

- It doesn't work when one variable depends on several other variables (such as ranking factors).
- Correlation analysis is sensitive to outliers, and the data for various keywords suggests a lot of them.

Initially we performed correlation analysis, and the results were similar to the ones that our colleagues received: the correlation between the alleged ranking factors and the page's positions was less than 0.3 with a high standard deviation value, which didn't allow us to come to a solid conclusion about which factor was the most important. Thus, we applied more complex methods in order to reveal the parameters that influence SERP results.

We cannot state explicitly that if you improve the factor X, you will rank higher for Y, but we have come up with a list of observations regarding the nature of these alleged ranking factors.



# What we did

We started with a set of big data consisting of **600,000 keywords** from the worldwide base (US, Spain, France, Italy, Germany and others), the pages' positions in search results and a list of alleged ranking factors. To track down any consistent patterns in the resulting data, we applied a machine learning algorithm called **Random forest**. As a result, we received a **list of 12 factors** that influence page position in order of importance: from the most influential to the least.

Then we limited the scope of the analysed data to the first **100 positions** for each keyword, as everything that lies outside of this range is usually of no interest to the user. And for preliminary research, we took all the served pages in the 20th position and checked if the trends that we received for the whole set of data coincides with the results for the 20th position.

For every resulting page we analyzed the following factors:

- On-page factors
- Backlink profiles
- Traffic data

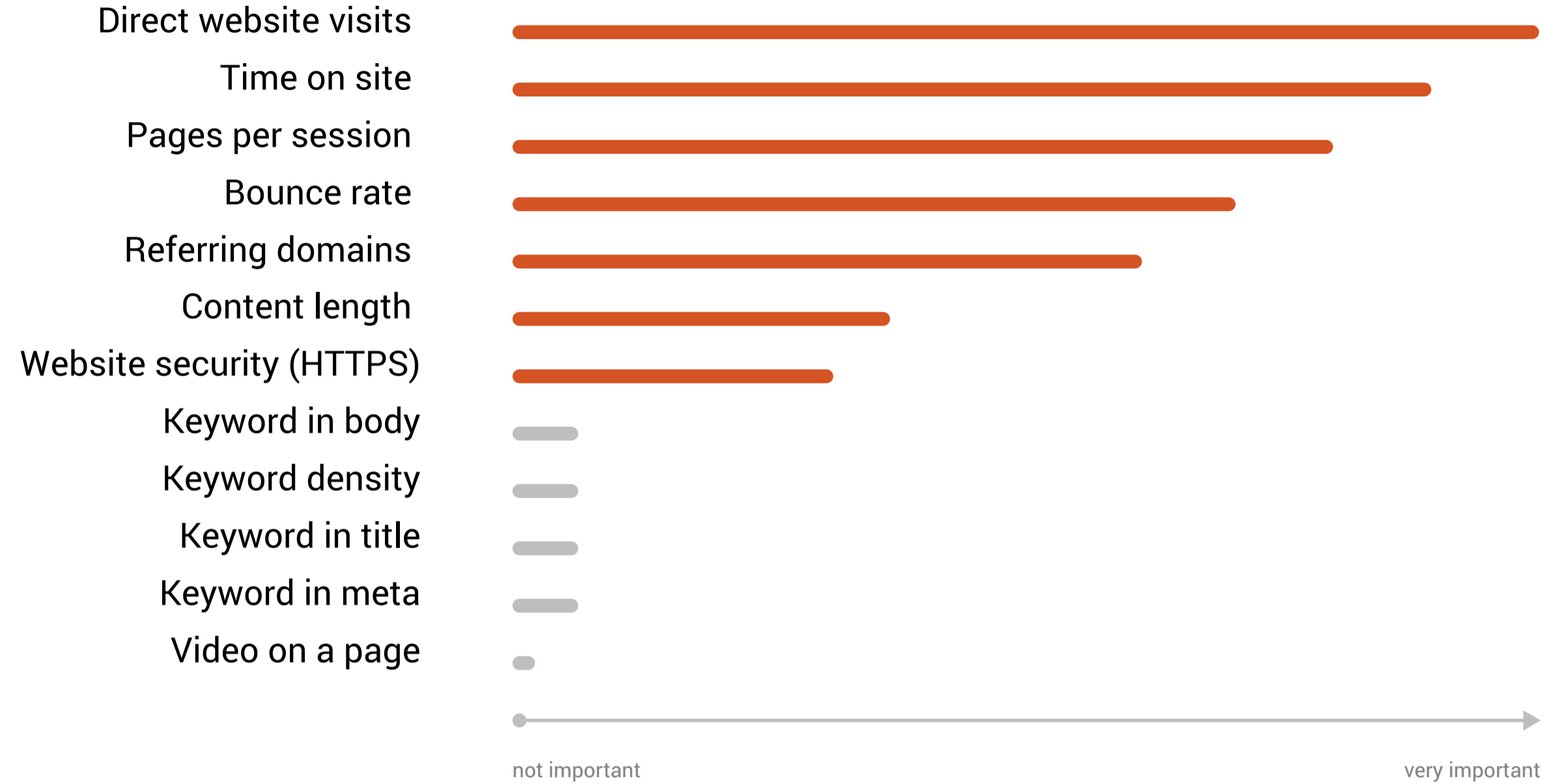
We believe that businesses operate differently in various competition niches, so we classified the results according to four keyword volume classes:

- Low volume (1 -100)
- Mid volume (101 -1,000)
- High volume (1,001 -10,000)
- Very high volume (above 10,000)

During our research, we tried classifying the results by keyword difficulty classes, but the results remained the same, so we took keyword volume classification as a standard for the report.

Also, we segmented the results within each volume class by keyword length. Whenever the difference between short-head and long-tail keyword results was substantial, we included this information in the report and presented it in a graph. By long-tail keywords, we mean phrases of four and more words.





## Key takeaways

- Out of 12 factors we have analyzed, the number of direct website visits seems to be the most important page-ranking factor. Websites with higher authority consequently gain more traffic, and as a result, have a better chance of getting into the top.
- User behaviour signals such as time on site, pages per session and bounce rate indicate the authority of a website and influence its rankings as well.
- A website's number of referring domains can also indicate its authority, which together with the previously mentioned factors influences a website's rankings.
- Google states that website security, which is indicated by HTTPS implementation, is important, but has little influence as a ranking factor. The results we received prove this statement. Though it is important for various reasons, having an HTTPS version of your website doesn't drastically change its ranking position.
- The influence of the on-page SEO factors proved to be insignificant, so their status as major ranking factors can be dismissed.

**45%**

is the difference in content length between TOP-3 and 20th position

**10,000**

is the difference in the number of referring domains between the 1st and 10th positions

**65%**

of domains ranking for high volume keywords are HTTPs

**49%**

is the bounce rate for the domains ranking within TOP-3

**3-3.5**

pages are visited per one session when user lands on the website from search

**18%**

of domains ranking for high volume keywords don't have the keyword in the body



# Website security

## Website security



In past years, Google promoted the idea of a more secure web. By applying new policies and imposing new rules, Google sent a clear message – make the Internet safer for users. By migrating to HTTPS, you are being proactive in protecting your users' security, which strengthens the authority of your website. However, it is a costly undertaking, but it can significantly impacts your business.

In our research, we tracked down the correlation between HTTPS migration and page rankings.

### What we did

We analyzed 600,000 search queries and calculated the percent of domains that have an HTTPS version for every top-100 SERP position.

We segmented the analyzed keywords according to four volume intervals to see if trends for different keyword groups vary.

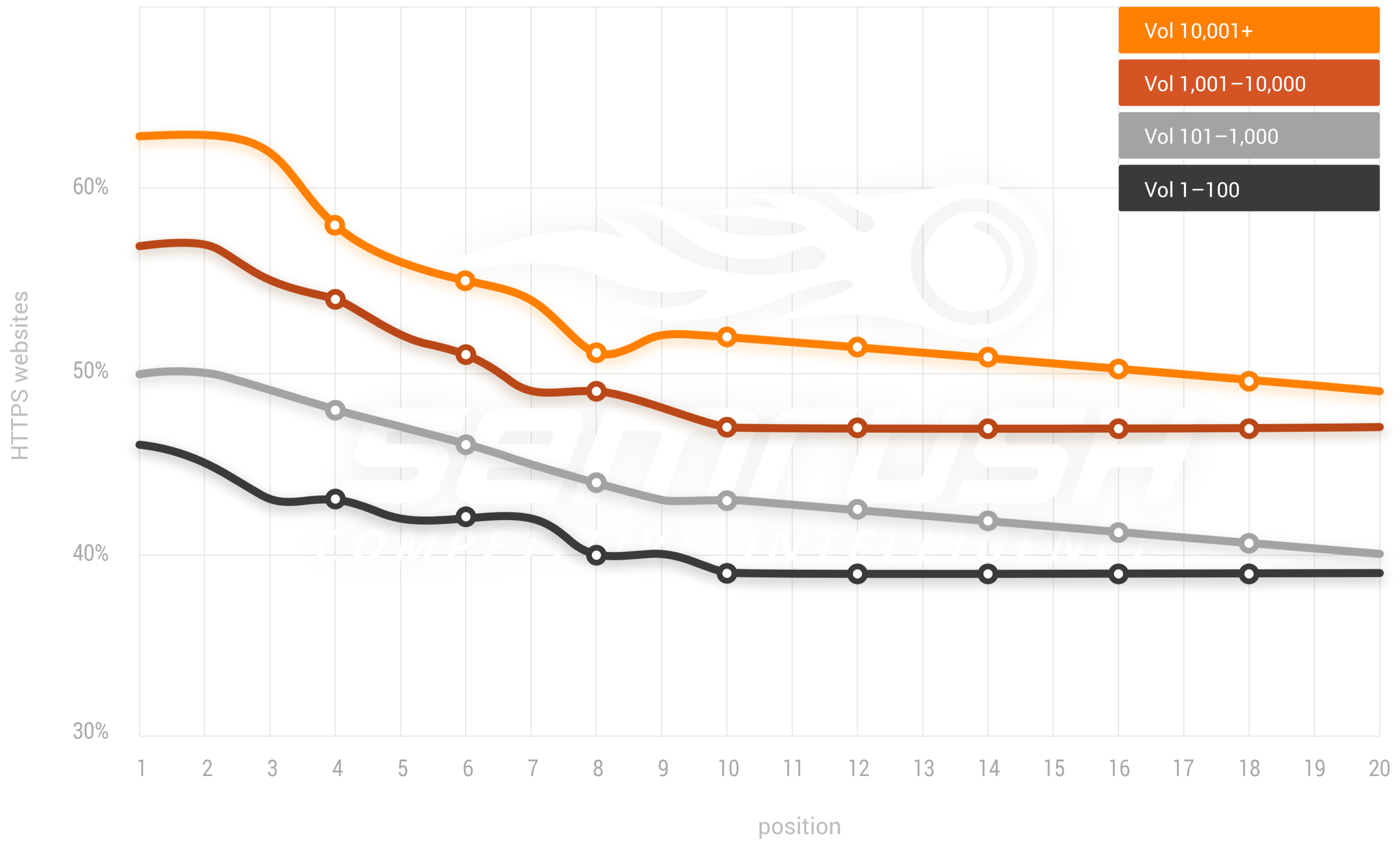
Also, we segmented the results in the high-volume keyword group by keyword length (one up to and including three words in a keyword = short-head keyword; three plus words in a keyword = long-tail keyword) to see the opportunities in both segments.





# Website Security (HTTPS)

segmented by search volume



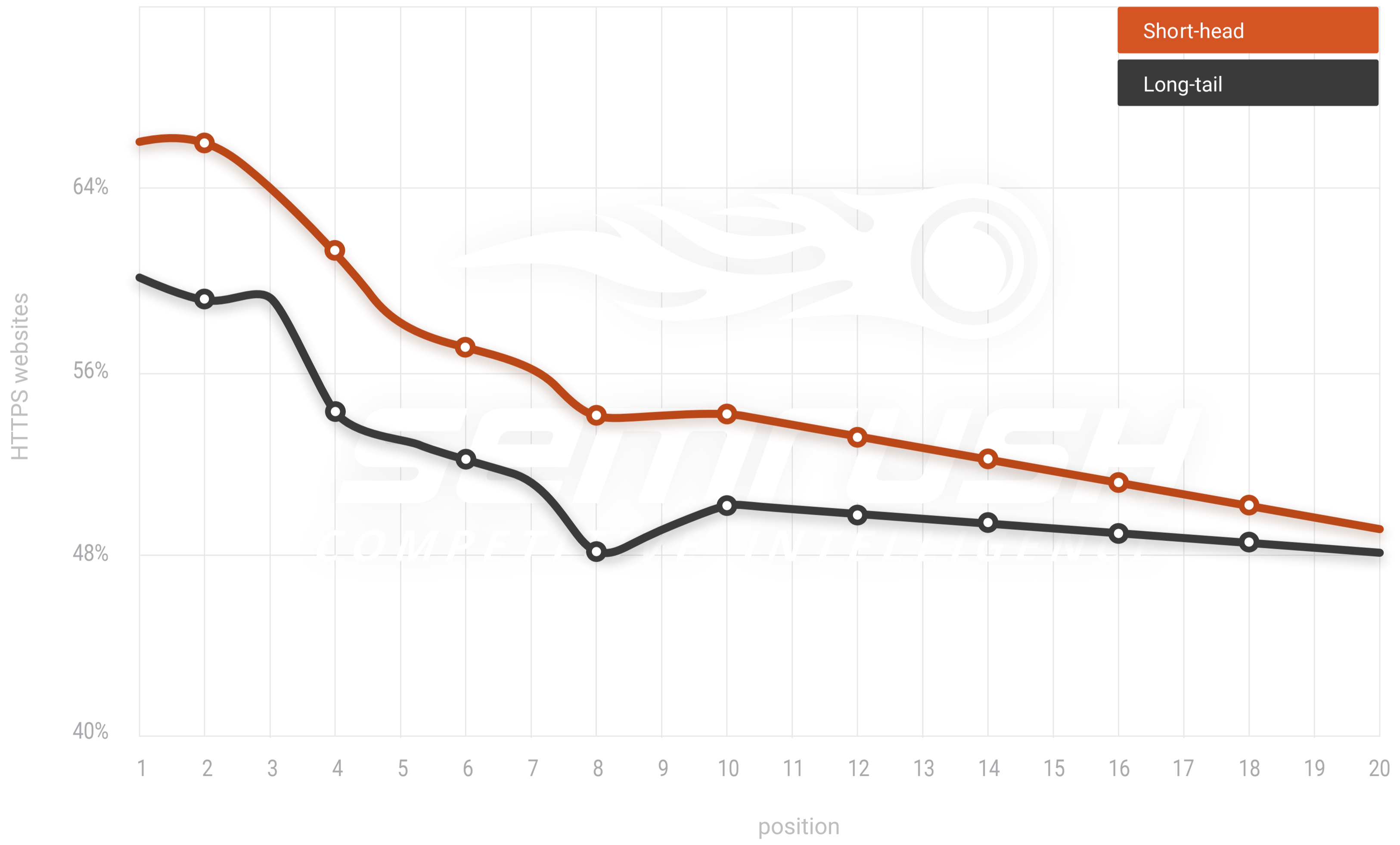
## Numbers Talk

- The higher the page position, the more domains with an HTTPS version reside on it.
- This trend is similar for all keyword volume intervals.
- The higher the keyword volume, the more HTTPS domains can be found on every SERP position.



# Website Security (HTTPS)

segmented by keyword length



## Numbers Talk

- In the high-volume segment, there are significantly less domains with an HTTPS version for the long-tail keyword search queries, than for the short-head keyword search queries. That means, if you plan to rank for a high-volume long-tail keyword, creating an HTTPS version of your site would be a good opportunity for promotion in the search results.
- Starting from the tenth position, the trend curves for both short-heads and long-tails have a more gentle angle than for the first ten positions.



# What it means to you as a marketer

The HTTPS adoption rate is very high in the high-volume keyword group. That is, the more popular the keywords are, the more possible it is that the top positions will be occupied by HTTPS domains. So if you want to compete for high-volume keywords, having an HTTPS version of your site is extremely important.

In the low-volume keyword segment, the HTTPS adoption rate is not so high, so having a secure version will significantly distinguish you among the competition.

---

*The HTTPS adoption rate in less competitive niches is 10 percent lower, which creates a great opportunity to outrun the competition.*

---

## How SEMrush helps

### Site Audit Tool

helps you during an HTTPS migration. It monitors your website and discovers any issues in the implementation and maintenance of your secured pages.

[Fix migration mistakes →](#)

### Sensor

allows you to see if your category is filled with domains with an HTTPS version.

[Check your niche →](#)



# Referring domains

## Referring domains

This metric represents the number of unique domains from your backlink profile. That is, if you have 20,000 backlinks from 500 websites, your referring domain number will be 500.

Previously, before Google became as smart as it is today, black hat SEO techniques were quite popular. A website could have a few thousand backlinks from a suspicious domain and this would count as a solid backlink profile. Now the search robots are smart, and Google penalizes particular pages for using toxic backlinks for promotion. Your site's backlink profile should be diverse and consist of trustful domains.

We decided to analyze how hard it would be to build a strong backlink profile competing for high- and low-volume keywords. To do that, we decided to track down the correlation between the number of referring domains and the page position in SERP.

### What we did

To discover the correlation between a website's number of referring domains and the page position in search results, we analyzed 600,000 search queries and calculated how many domains (we took the median value of that number for each position) are referring to each top-100 page's website in total.

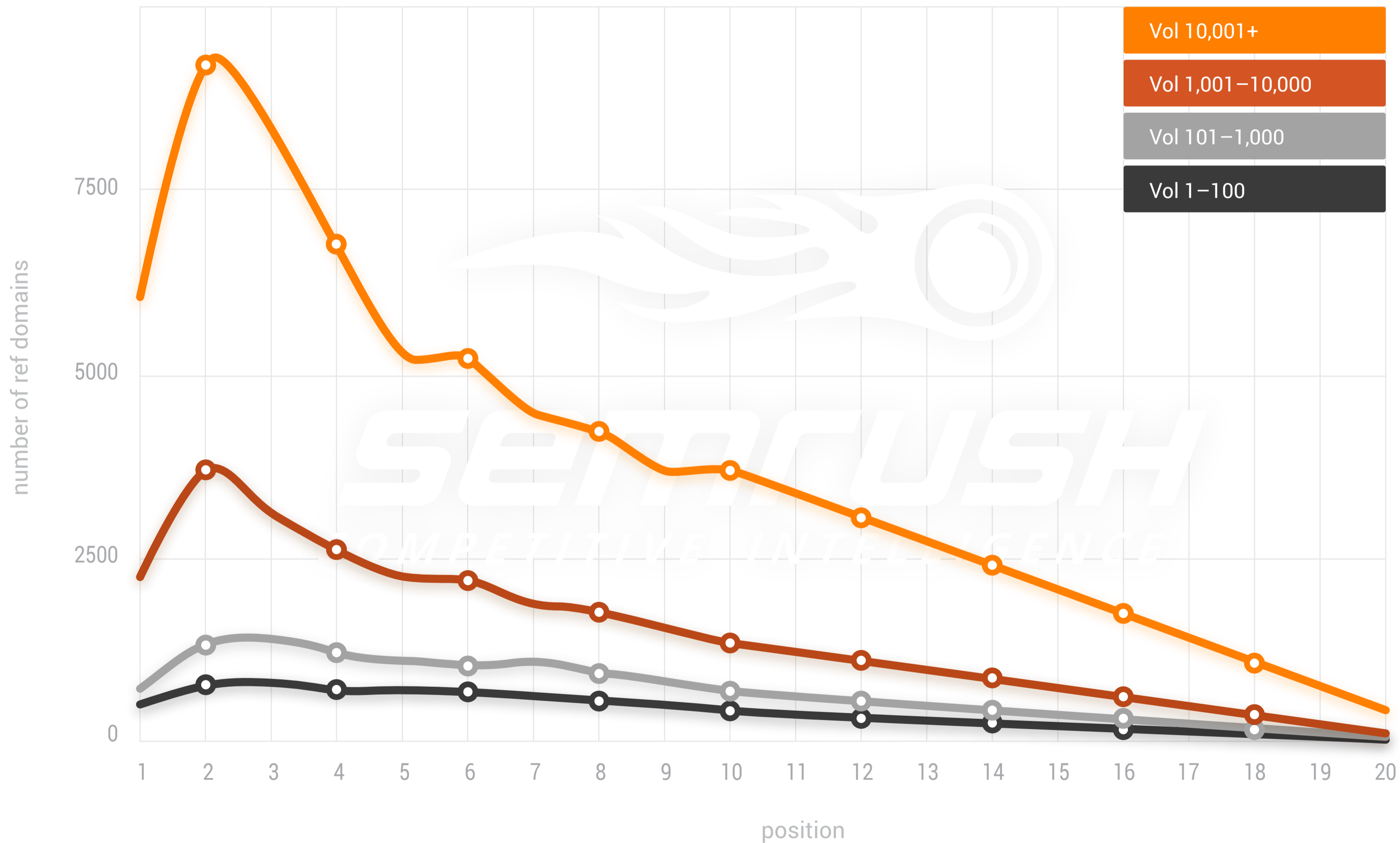
To see if there is a difference between the numbers for high-volume and low-volume keywords, we also divided the results into four volume groups.

Also, we included the first 20 positions in the graph since the trend line for all 20+ positions is not illustrative.



# Referring domains

segmented by search volume



## Numbers Talk

- The pages that rank higher have more backlinks from unique domains.
- The more popular the keyword for which the page is ranked is, the more backlinks from unique domains the website receives.
- The websites that appear on SERPs for high-volume keywords have significantly more backlinks than ones that appear for low-volume keywords – almost 10 times more.
- For high-volume keywords, there is a huge difference in the number of referring domains between, for instance, the second and the fifteenth position, and for low-volume keywords this difference is insignificant.
- Excluding huge domains like Wikipedia and Facebook from our research had almost no influence on the final results.



# What it means to you as a marketer

According to Google, a strong backlink profile is very important for SEO optimization, and our research proves this statement to be true. It indicates that the highly competitive niche where websites target popular keywords is occupied by monsters with giant backlink profiles.

The median value here is 10,000 unique referring domains! That is, the competition for high-volume keywords is vicious, and those websites are invincible. But for low-volume keywords the competition is not so tough, so some link building could bring tremendous results.

---

*If your ranking strategy targets keywords with a volume of less than 10,000 queries, proper high-quality link building will offer a huge advantage over your competitors.*

---

## How SEMrush helps

### Backlink Analytics

compares your backlink profile to your rivals' profiles and helps you build a competitive pool of referring domains.

[Find backlink ideas →](#)

### Backlink Audit Tool

shows you how to remove toxic backlinks from your backlink profile, easily disavow them, and monitor all your new and lost links from unique domains.

[Manage backlink profile →](#)

### SEO Ideas Tool

provides a list of your pages with the most ranking potential and offers suggestions on where to obtain backlinks from in order to compete with your rivals.

[Steal rivals' ideas →](#)



**Content length**



## Content length



Article's length, or the article's word count, is one of the first things that forms the user's opinion about the page. The exact numbers for how long your content should be are debatable, as the main advantages of a text are its quality and relevance. However, long-form content creates the impression of in-depth analysis and, therefore, looks more trustworthy.

Our main intention was to see if there is a correlation between content length and a page's position in the search results.

### What we did

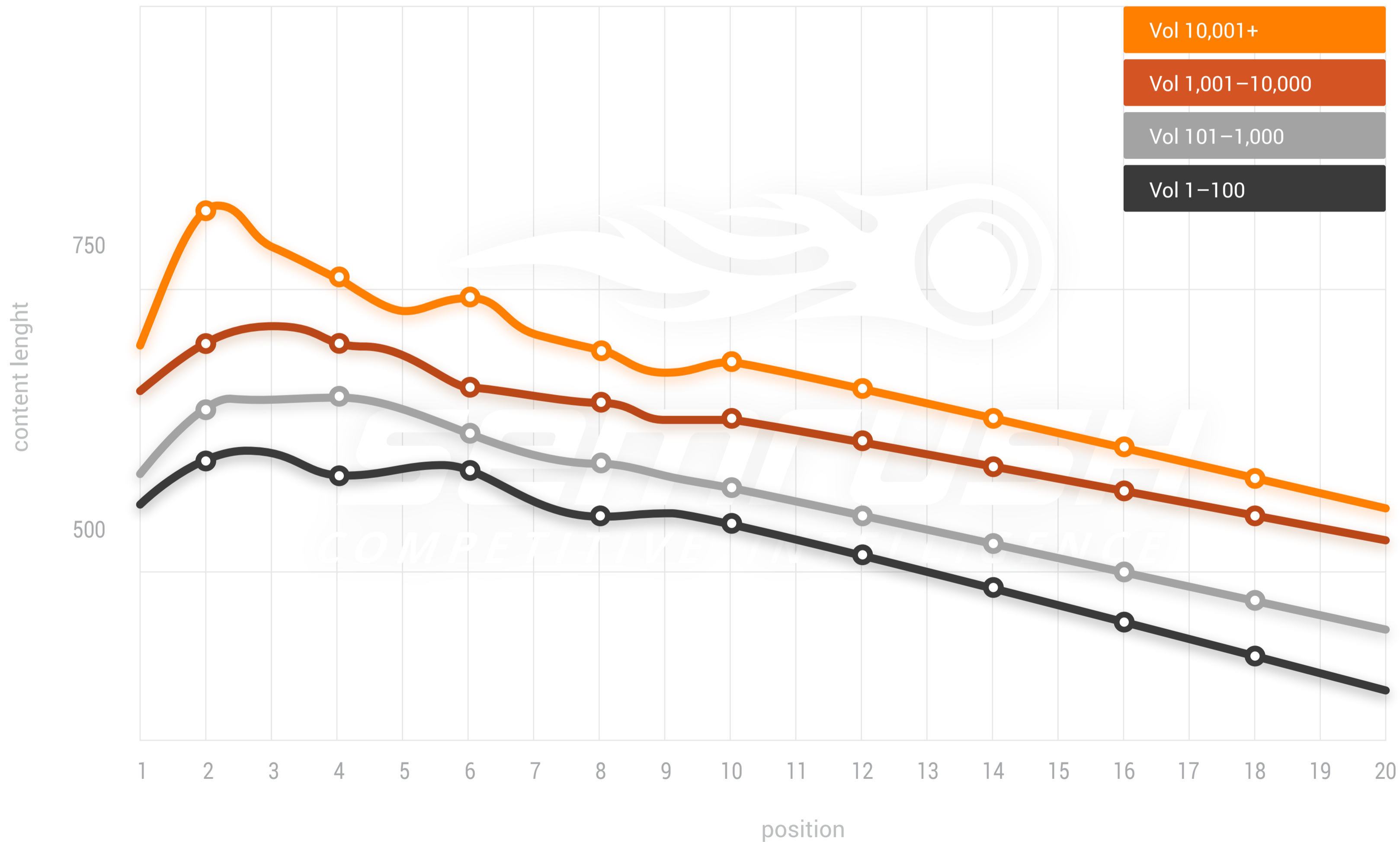
To track down the correlation between those numbers, we calculated the median-value content length for the top 10 pages for 600,000 keywords from our worldwide base. The results were broken down into four keyword volume intervals. We presented the data for the first 20 positions on a graph, as the trend remains the same for all the following positions with no extreme values.

We also took keywords from the middle-volume interval (10 – 1,000 keywords) and segmented them by keyword length to see if trends for the short-head and long-tail keywords are similar.



# Content length

segmented by search volume



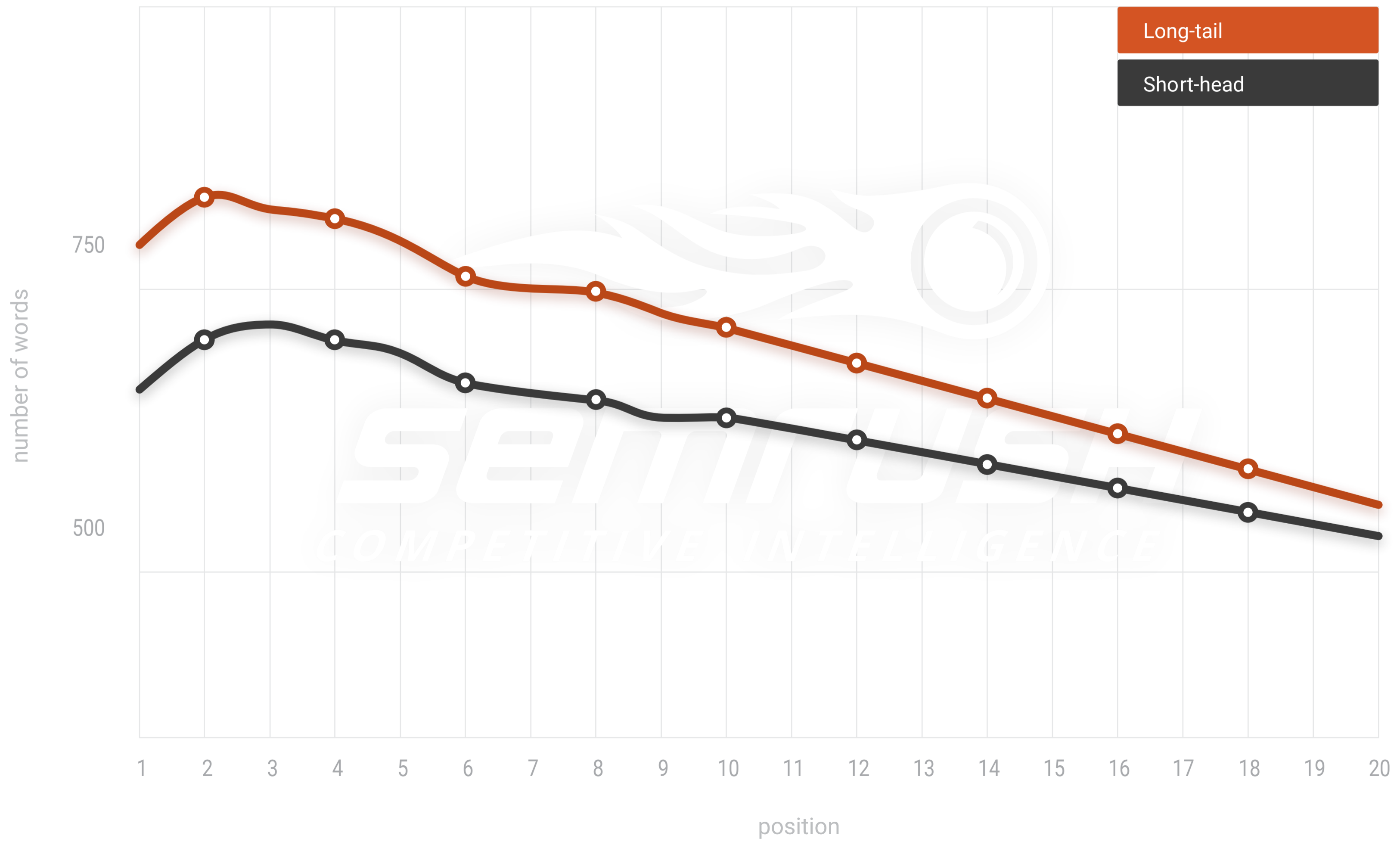
## Numbers Talk

- What we saw first was that there is generally more content on the pages that rank higher for all search volume intervals.
- The bigger the keyword volume is, the longer is the content.
- For high-volume keywords the median curve is more abrupt than for low-volume keywords.
- The content length median value for high-volume keywords is 1.5 times higher than for the low-volume keywords.



# Content length

segmented by keyword length



## Numbers Talk

- In the middle-volume interval (101–1,000 keywords), the trends are similar for short-head keywords and long-tail keywords.
- There is more content on the pages with long-tail keywords than on those with short-head keywords.



# What it means to you as a marketer

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the quality and relevance of your content play a crucial role in the page rankings. Creating content of a certain length is not a silver bullet for SEO optimization, and if the content is irrelevant to the user's query it doesn't matter how long it is – it will still be irrelevant. However, the results of our research indicate that pages that rank higher have longer content on average. So, content length is important for your page's success as long as it is valuable, well-written, and optimized, especially if you target high volume keywords.

We also found out that long-tail search queries have more content on average than short-tail ones – almost 20 percent more. For instance, an average top-100 article on 'graphic design' will be shorter than an average top-100 article on 'graphic design trends in 2017.' That is, if you are writing on a broader topic, your users do not expect a long read. If your article's topic is narrowed down to a precise statement, then it should provide a more in-depth view.

Also, the research shows that high-volume search queries return better SEO-optimized content, which we will show later on in this article.

---

*The larger the search volume, the longer the content.  
Write long-reads if you want to rank for popular keywords.*

---

## How SEMrush helps

### SEO Content Template

allows you to see the average content length of the top 10 pages that perform for your target keywords list. This saves a lot of time, as you do not need to google each keyword manually and perform a word-count for every one of your competitors pages.

Create killer content →

### SEO Ideas Tool

allows you to do bulk analysis for many different keywords at once and compare the results.

Boost content rankings →

### Keyword Magic Tool

helps you to find the best keywords for your new longread.

Find best keywords →



# On-page SEO elements

# On-page SEO elements



These days, content specialists know better than to stuff their texts with keywords. And though keyword stuffing is not *comme il faut* anymore, it is a commonly accepted rule to include keywords in your articles' main on-page elements such as their title, meta description and body. So, we checked if the presence of keywords in a page's main on-page elements influences its rankings.

A video is considered to be a valuable contribution to almost any piece of content these days. Sometimes it is essential to include a video in an article or post, and in other cases it is not absolutely necessary, though websites often do it anyway because it will, allegedly, make the post rank higher. We checked if the presence of a video on a page has any impact on its SERP position.

## What we did

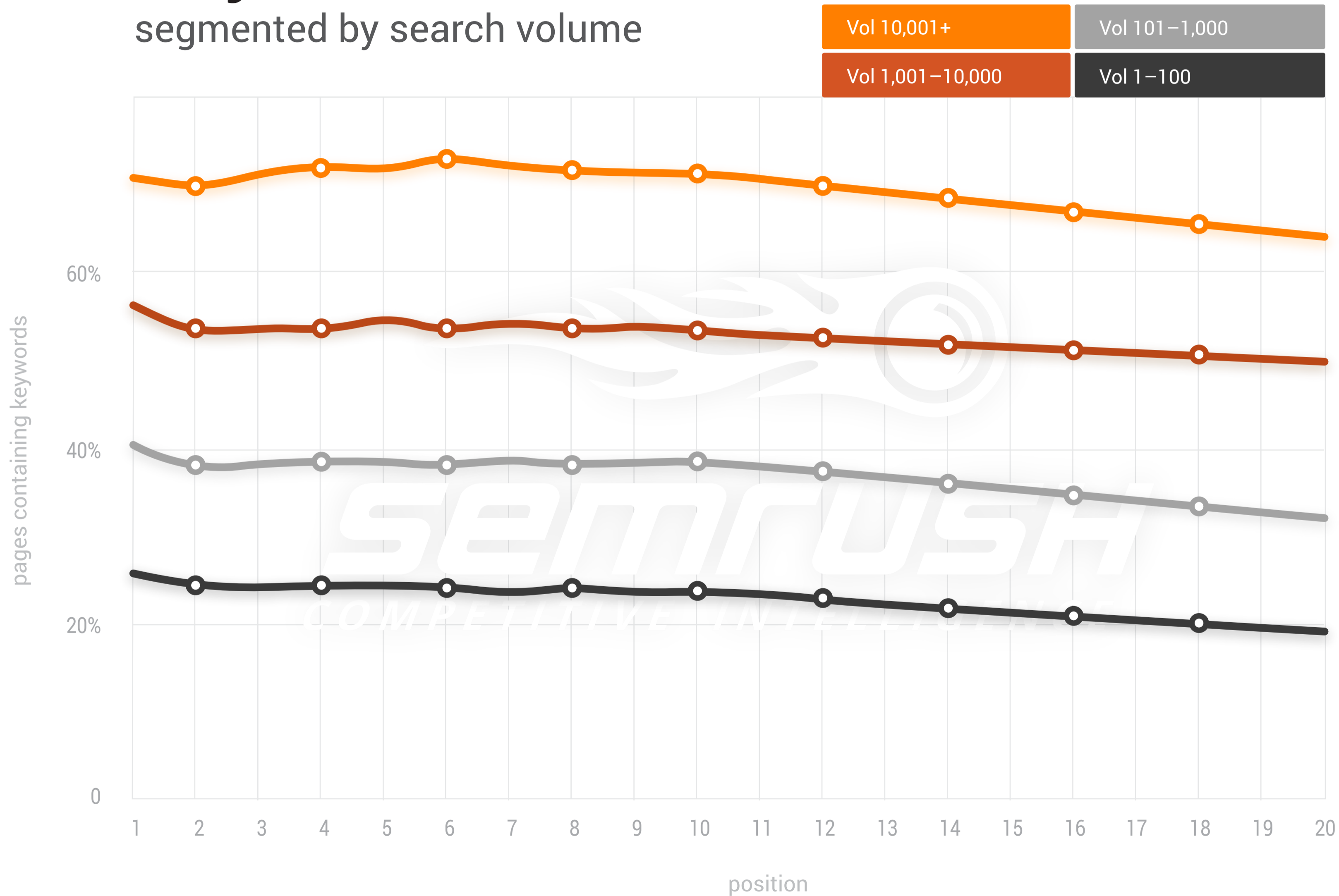
We analyzed 600,000 search queries and calculated the percent of pages that had a keyword in different page elements. Apart from the exact match keywords, we also applied keyword stemming to include all keyword variations. Also, we checked how many of those pages had a video.

We segmented the results into four keyword volume intervals to track the difference between group trends. Also, we decided to take the mid-volume interval and compare the trends for short-head and long-tail keywords.



# Keyword in title

segmented by search volume



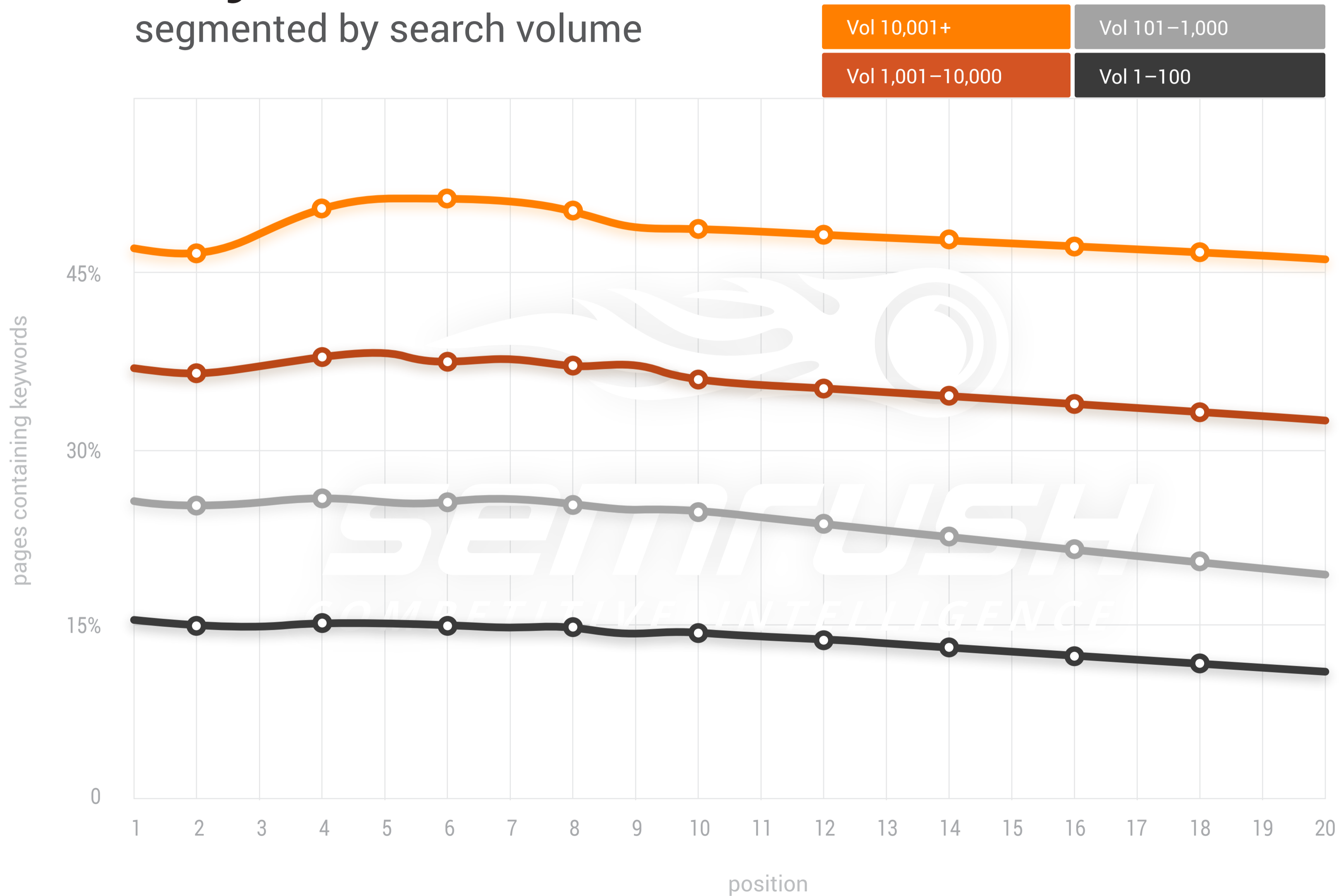
## Numbers Talk

- The trend curves for keyword occurrence in the title are flat for every keyword volume group, that is, the number of pages that have a keyword in title remains on the same level within a volume interval.
- The higher a keyword's volume, the higher the percentage of pages that include the keyword in their title.
- In the high volume keyword group, the majority of the pages add a keyword to their title.



# Keyword in meta

segmented by search volume



## Numbers Talk

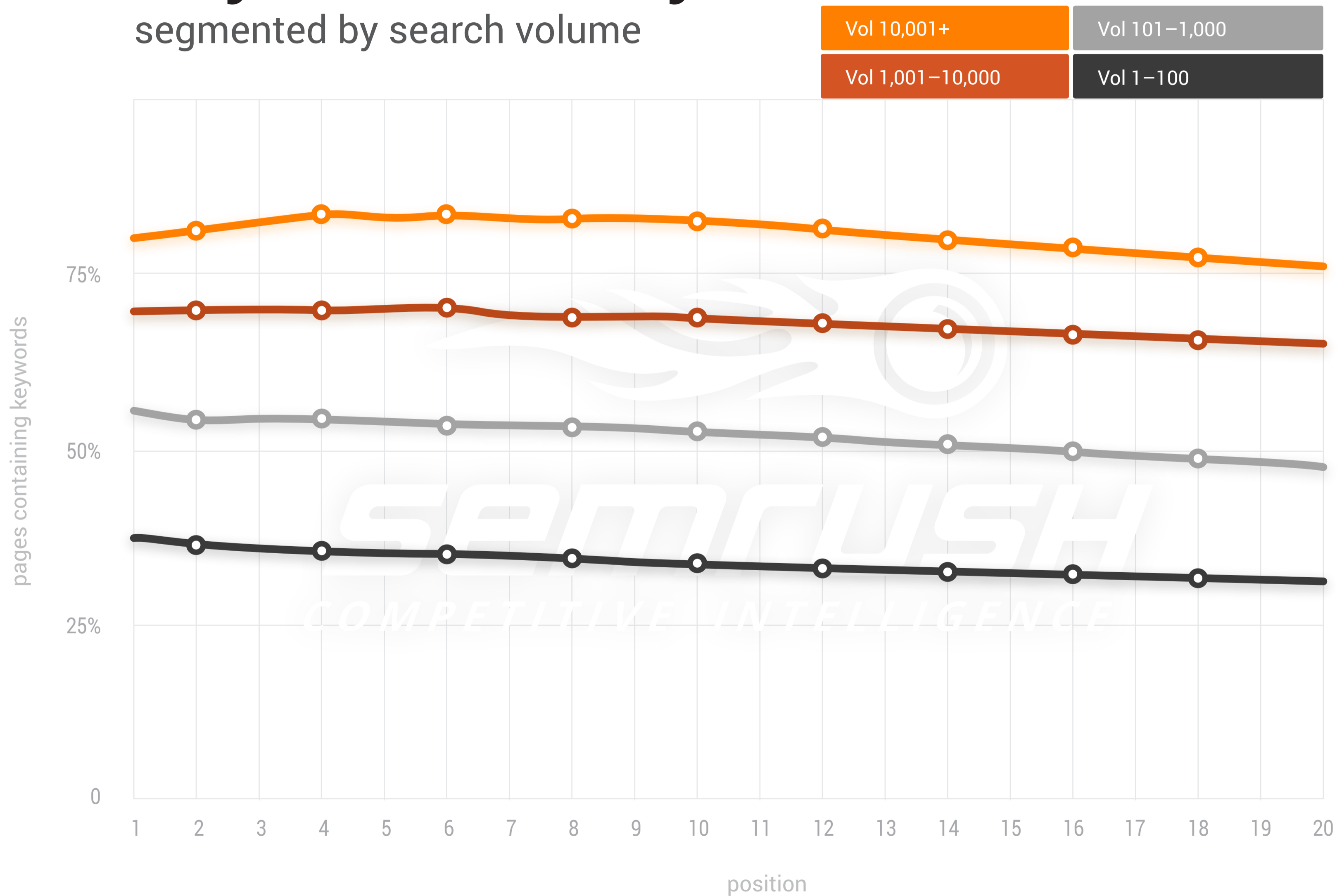
- The trend curves are flat throughout all volume groups which means that the occurrence of the keyword in the meta description does not influence the page rankings.
- The higher the keyword volume is, the more pages include keywords into their meta description.
- Less than 50 percent of the pages that rank for a high-volume keyword have a keyword in their meta description.
- Of the pages that rank for a low-volume keyword, only 15 percent have a keyword in their meta description.





# Keyword in body

segmented by search volume



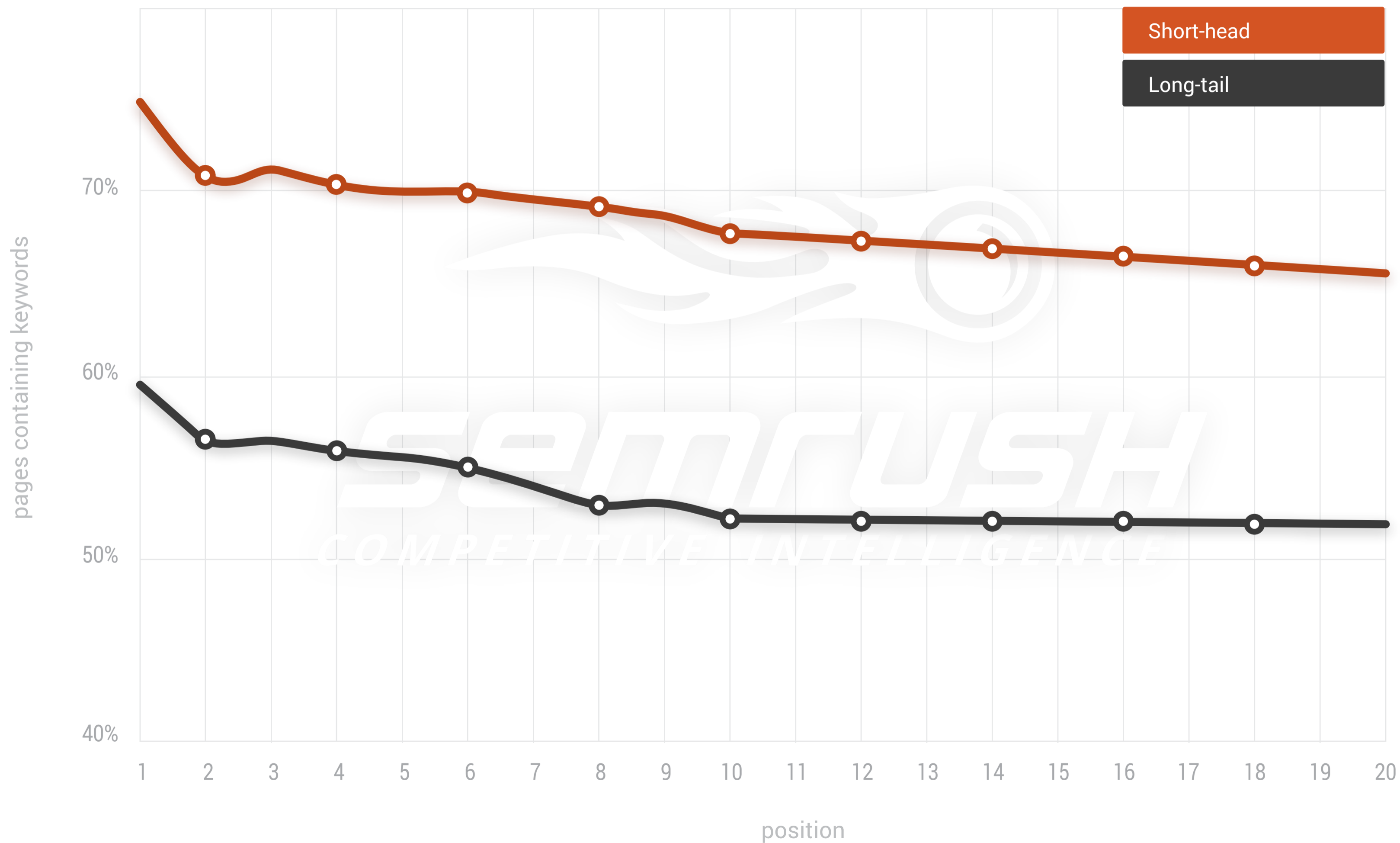
## Numbers Talk

- The trend curves for every keyword volume group are almost flat, showing no drastic difference between position values.
- Over 75 percent of the pages that rank for a high-volume keyword have a keyword in the body of their text.
- The higher a keyword's volume is, the more pages that include the keyword in their body copy.



# Keyword on page

segmented by keyword length



## Numbers Talk

- The trend curves for the page rankings are flat for both short-head and long-tail groups, that is, there is no drastic difference between the positions.
- Pages that rank for long-tail keywords repeat those keywords less often than pages that rank for short-heads.
- The pages on the first positions (for both long-tails and short-heads) have noticeably more keywords than all other pages.



# What it means to you as a marketer

Over 75 percent of the top-20 pages have keywords in their body and over 60 percent have them in their title. It seems to be a common practice, and pages optimized for high-volume keywords tend to have the keyword in body. However, the data proves that it doesn't have any impact on rankings.

This is even less important if you are trying to rank for a low-volume keyword – a little over 25 percent of the pages we analyzed have a keyword in their body, around 15 percent have one in their meta description and around 20 percent have one in their title.

One time-proven approach in SEO is using longer keywords for promotion, as they usually bring more relevant traffic to a website. If this is your case and you plan to rank by long tails, having an exact-match keyword in your on-page SEO elements is not crucial. In fact, it is more important to diversify the semantic core of your text and make it relevant to the target keyword rather than copying it.

The presence of a video didn't show a significant influence on page rankings, so we came to the conclusion that video itself is not a silver bullet. However, in certain niches clients expect video content, so it makes sense to provide it. Consider your audience's demands, and if they include visual support, use video.

## How SEMrush helps

### SEO Ideas Tool

verifies if you have included target keywords in your on-page SEO elements and checks your content for signs of keyword stuffing, performing standard density and TF-IDF analysis.

[Check your content →](#)



**Website visits**

## Website visits

One of the main indicators of a website's popularity is its number of visits. There are a lot of ways for visitors to find your website: direct traffic, organic search, paid ads, social networks, referring domains, emails, etc.

In our research, we checked how the traffic influences the page rankings and whether the organic search traffic has the major influence on that.

### What we did

We analyzed 600,000 search queries and calculated three values for all top-100 position: the number of unique visits per month, the total number of visits per month and the total number of visits excluding organic search traffic.

To see if organic search visits distort the final results, as there are more visits to the domain in the high-volume keyword group, we compared the total number of non-unique visits and the total number of non-unique visits excluding the ones that came from organic search.

We also segmented the results by four keyword volume groups.

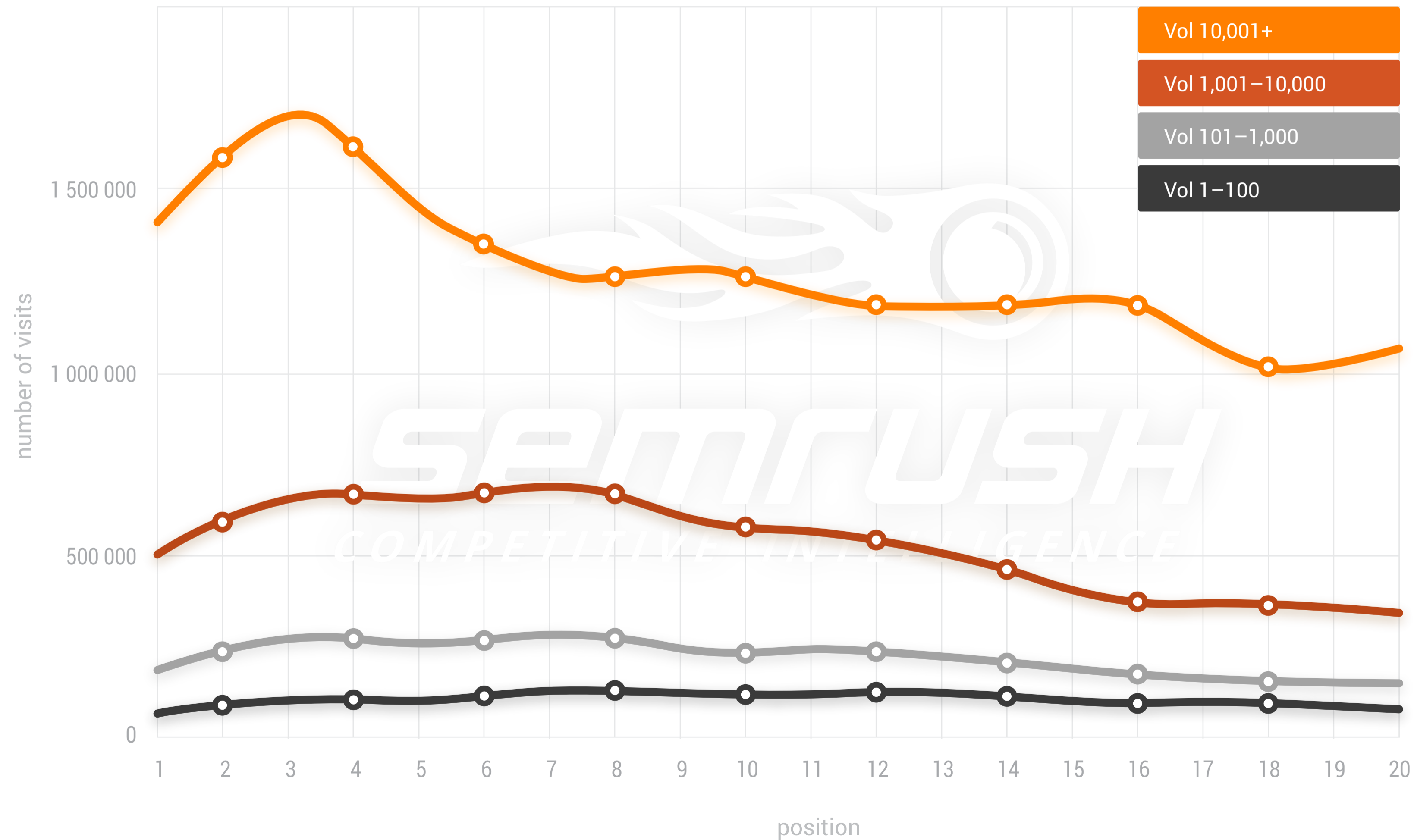


# Unique visits

segmented by search volume

## Numbers Talk

- The closer to the top a page is, the more unique visits it gets monthly.
- The domains that rank in the low-volume keyword group have less visits in total compared to the high-volume group.
- The difference between the top of a SERP and the rest of its positions is not as drastic for the low-volume group as for the high-volume group.

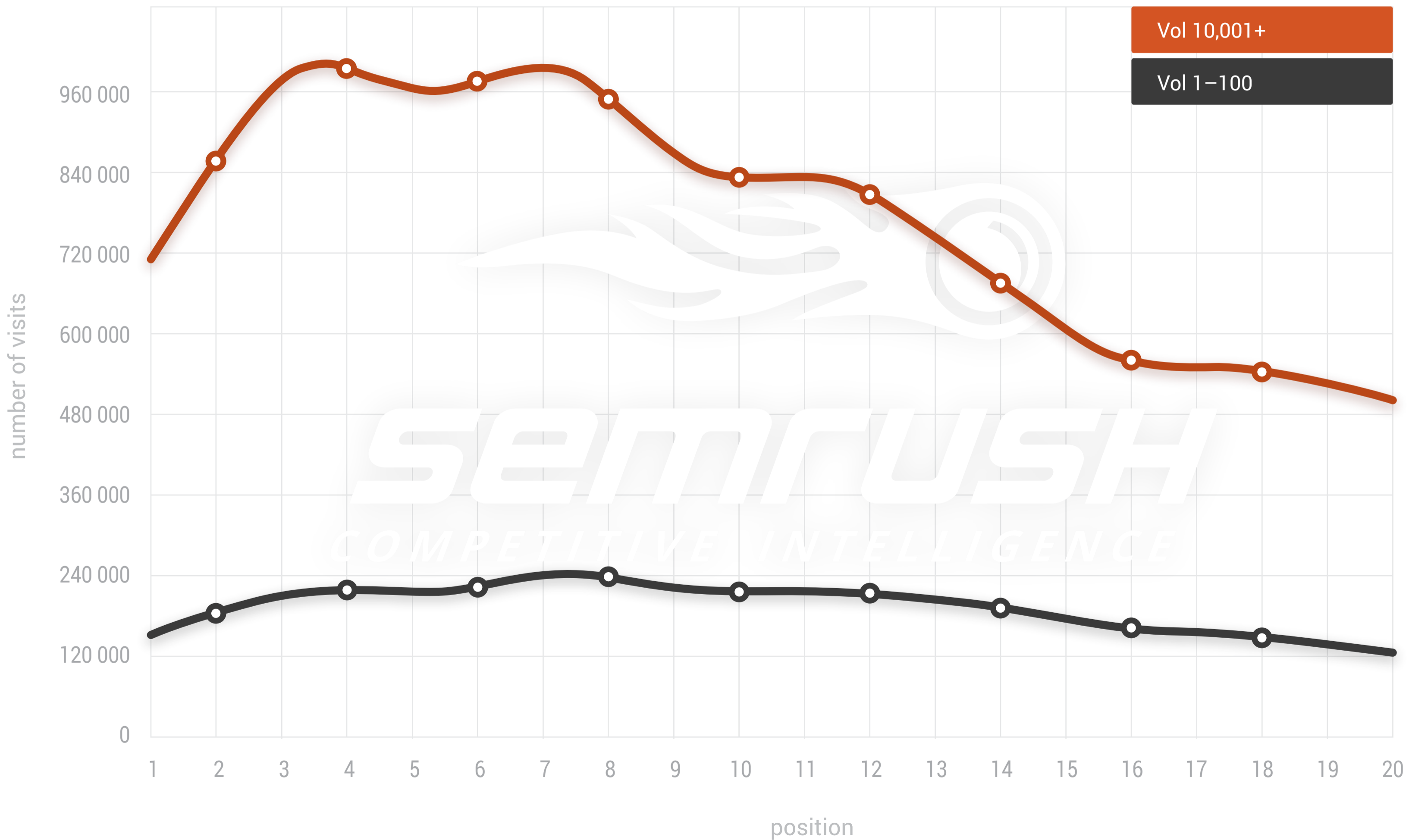


# All visits

segmented by search volume

## Numbers Talk

- For the low-volume keyword group, the trend is flat, indicating that a page's position does not strongly correlate with its number of total monthly visits.
- For high-volume popular keywords, the number of page visits gets noticeably smaller for sites that rank below the 12th position.

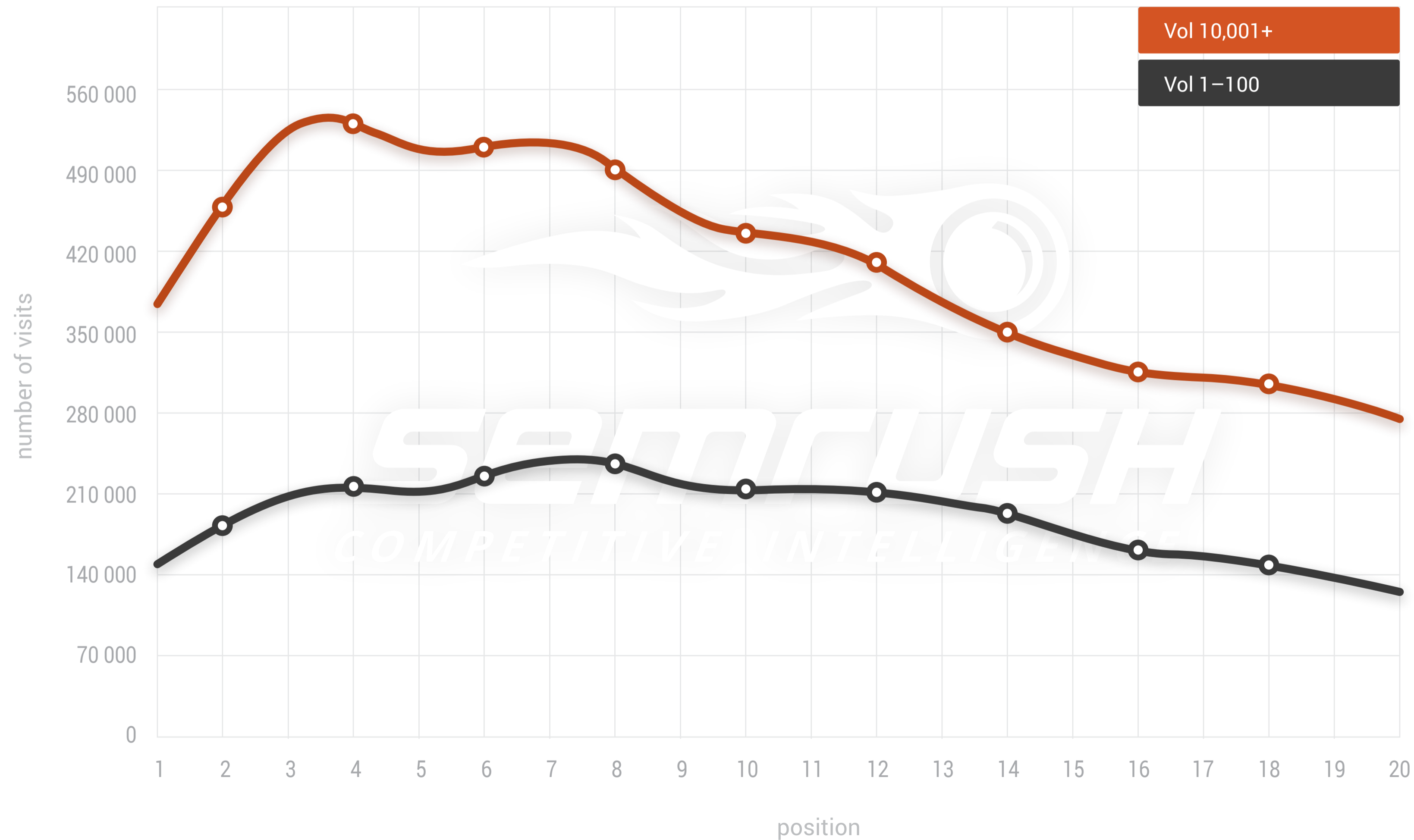


# All visits excluding search traffic

segmented by search volume

## Numbers Talk

- The trend curve for the high-volume keyword group is still significantly more abrupt than the one for the low-volume keyword group, even after excluding organic search traffic.
- Organic search visits do not interfere with the final page rankings.





# What it means to you as a marketer

Even after excluding organic search traffic data, the difference between the first ten positions and the following ones in the high-volume group is significantly more noticeable than in the low-volume keyword group. This could indicate that Google prioritizes domains with more authority when ranking the high-volume keyword group.

This also means that organic search is not the only thing you should be concentrating on. Direct and social visits are fueled by your brand awareness, so building a strong brand image should be an essential part of your promotion strategy.

---

*Building brand awareness is as important as putting effort into SEO.*

---

## How SEMrush helps

### Traffic Analytics

allows you to see the channels that fuel your competitors' website traffic. You can see organic, paid, social, direct and referral traffic altogether or broken by category.

Our estimates are based on clickstream data that comes from multiple proprietary and third-party data sources.

[Check competitors' traffic →](#)



**User behaviour signals**



**Bounce rate**  
**Time on site**  
**Pages per session**

While conducting our research, we analyzed several user behavior signals such as bounce rate, the time that the user spends on the website in general and how many pages per session the user opens. These signals help identify user behavior patterns and can provide information on whether your content is engaging, whether the navigation on your website is convenient and how users generally react to your website.

This is the number of website visitors who leave the site after viewing only one page. It does not necessarily mean that the page wasn't useful, but it could be a red flag for your content specialist.

This figure is the total amount of time that the user spends on your website navigating from page to page. This figure characterizes your website, so it makes sense to check if it also influences the page rankings.

This metric shows how many of the website's pages the user navigates through during one session. Along with other user behavior signals, this could indicate how engaging your content is, how clear the navigation is and how obvious the user path is.

## What we did

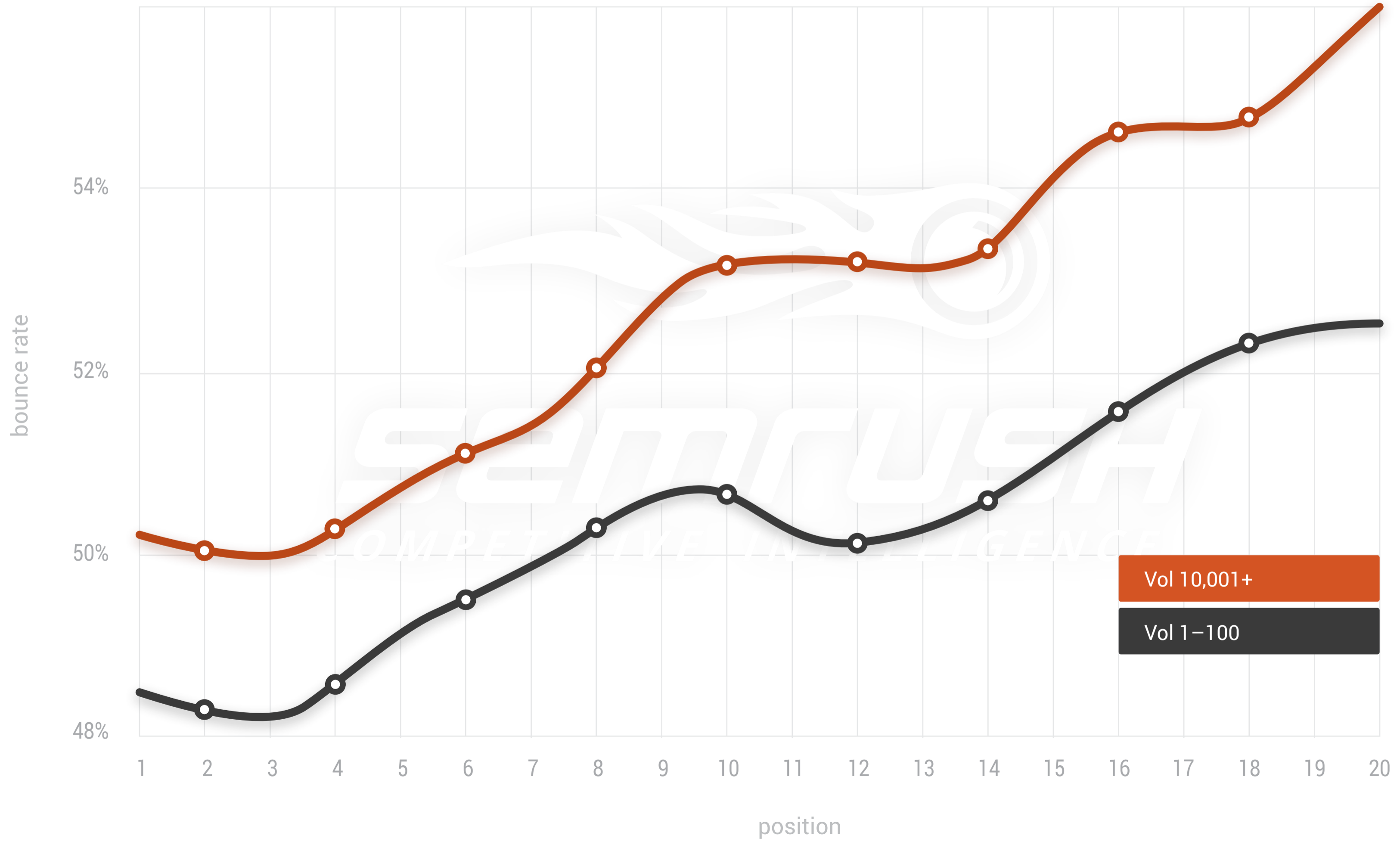
We analyzed 600,000 search queries and for every top-100 SERP position we calculated the median-value bounce rate, the amount of time that the user spends on the domain in general, and the number of pages that the user visits during a single session.

We also segmented the results according to two keyword volume groups – high and low.



# Bounce Rate

segmented by search volume



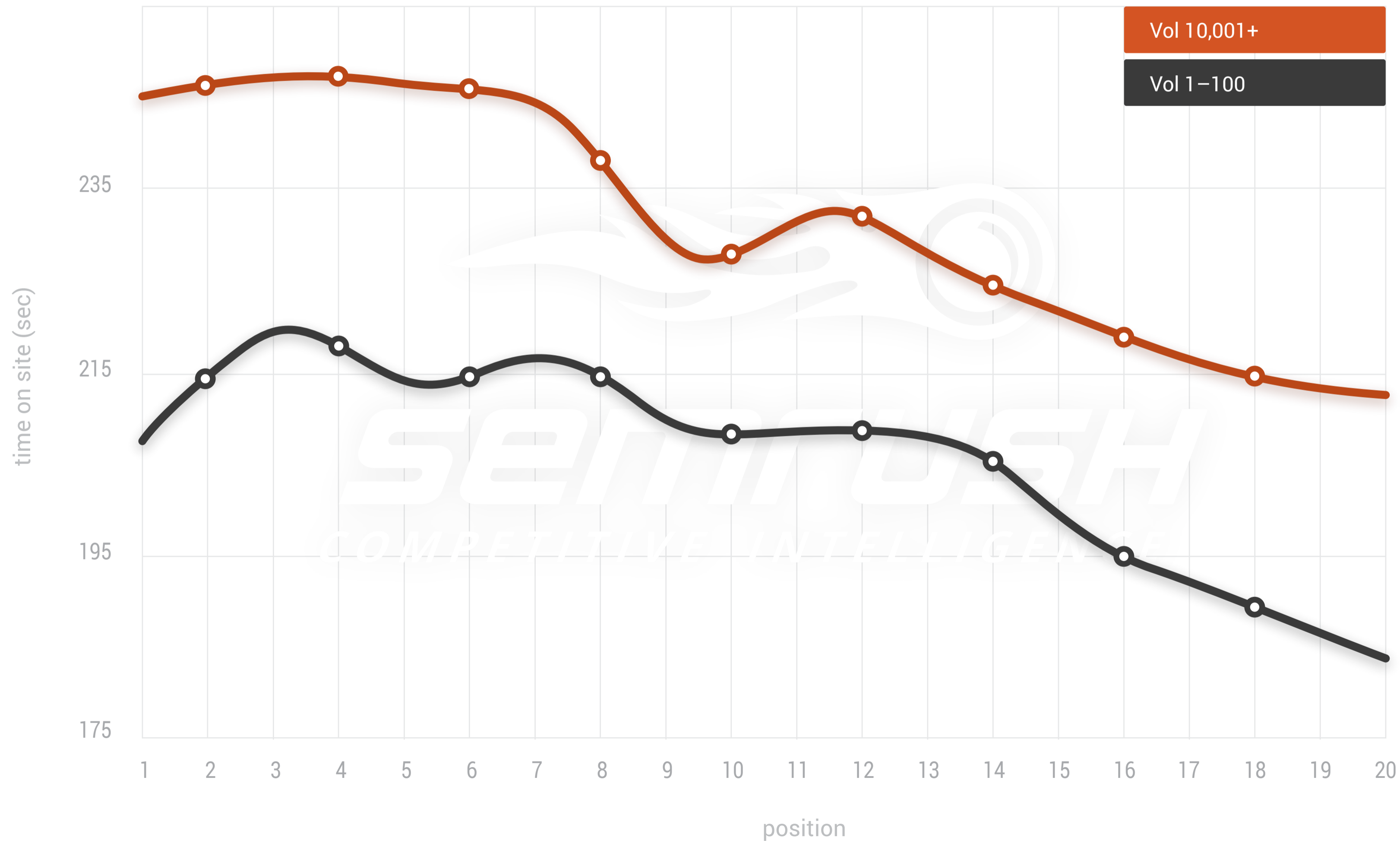
## Numbers Talk

- The higher a page's position is, the lower its bounce rate.
- The bounce rate of the top position for the high-volume keywords is approximately 49 percent; for the low-volume keywords — around 51 percent.



# Time on site

segmented by search volume



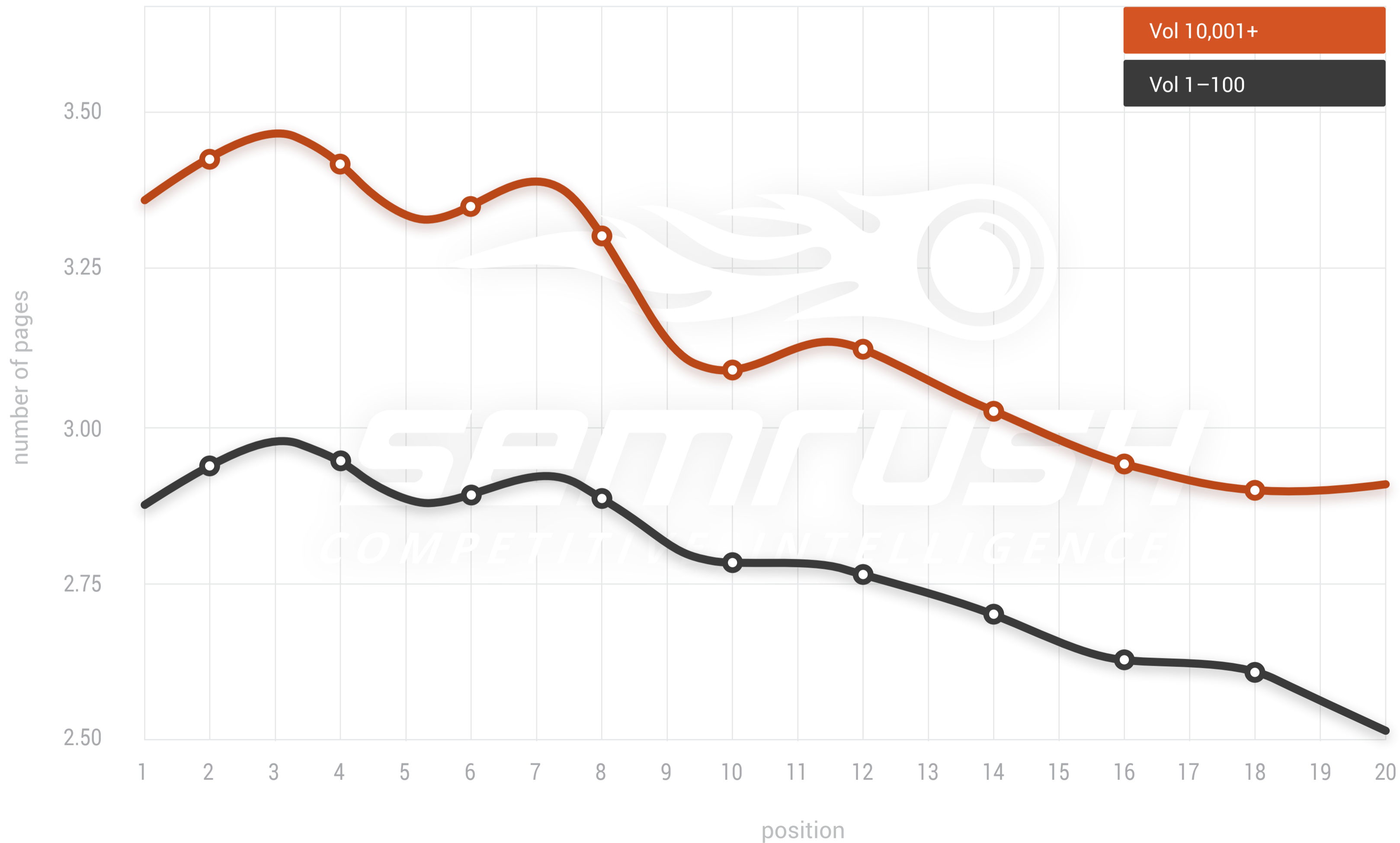
## Numbers Talk

- The higher a page rank is, the more time users spend on site in general.
- The time-on-site metric is similar for the first four positions in the high-volume keyword interval.
- The average amount of time spent on the site is 40 seconds less for the low-volume keywords than for the high-volume keywords.



# Pages per session

segmented by search volume



## Numbers Talk

- The user navigates through three to three-and-a-half pages per website, per visit.
- As move towards the top of the SERP, there are more pages per session for every domain.
- The number of pages per session is similar, on average, for the first four SERP positions.



# What it means to you as a marketer

It is clear that high-ranking pages have lower bounce rates. This could be the result of the level of trust that users have for top-ranking pages, or it could mean that the lower-ranking pages are less relevant. And though Google reps declare that all user behaviour signals are too noisy to be considered during the page qualification, a high bounce rate could indicate that the page content is irrelevant, which is bad for both users and search engine bots.

These results indicate that users tend to spend more time on websites that rank higher in SERPs. This could be explained by the same fact: users trust top-ranking pages more than lower-ranking ones.

Just like the bounce rate and time on site trends, these results confirm that users tend to visit more pages on websites that are in the top of organic search results.

---

*User signals might be too noisy for Google, but a high bounce rate, little time spent on site and a small number of visited pages indicate that users are not engaging with your site as they should be!*

---

## How SEMrush helps

### Traffic Analytics

allows you to determine the approximate bounce rate, time on site and number of pages per session for every domain.

Analyse your rivals →

### Organic Traffic Insights Tool

allows you to connect Google Analytics and see precise numbers for every user behavior characteristic for an entire domain or for particular landing pages, in addition to the Not provided keywords from the SEMrush database and Google Search Console.

Find low-performing pages →

### SEO Ideas Tool

helps you identify pages with high potential of getting into the top 10 search positions if their bounce rate is above average and the time on site and pages per session are below average.

Improve your pages →





**SEMRUSH**  
COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE

**Want to get a custom study conducted  
specifically for your niche?**

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