AI SEARCH COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

# How to analyze competitors in AI Overviews and answer engines

A portable field guide for separating brand appearance, cited-source roles, passage contribution and real commercial competition before choosing an action.

**Core rule:** brand mention ≠ recommendation ≠ citation ≠ passage contribution ≠ commercial competitor.

**Use this guide when:** a brand, publisher, marketplace, official documentation page, analyst or other source appears in an AI-generated answer and you need to decide what that observation actually means.

**1 · SCOPE**
Freeze buyer/job, market, locale, surface and observation window.

**2 · CAPTURE**
Save prompt, answer, date, links and provenance before interpretation.

**3 · CLASSIFY**
Separate appearance type, source role, passage contribution and buyer overlap.

**4 · COMPARE**
Compare only like-for-like governed records.

**5 · DECIDE**
Route the first material gap to the smallest justified action.

**6 · REOPEN**
Repeat only when the evidence universe or decision materially changes.

**Stop rule:** stop sampling when the first material uncertainty and next action are stable enough for the decision. More observations are not automatically more useful.

Updated 17 August 2026. This guide does not produce an AI authority score and does not claim access to any platform's hidden ranking algorithm.

# 1. Separate the five evidence objects before calling anything a competitor

| Evidence object | Question | What it does not prove |
|---|---|---|
| **Brand mention** | Was the entity named? | That it was cited, recommended or commercially relevant. |
| **Recommendation / comparison** | Was the entity offered as a choice or alternative? | Which source caused the recommendation. |
| **Citation / supporting link** | Was a page visibly linked as support? | That the page is a commercial rival or that every claim came from it. |
| **Passage contribution** | What definition, fact, comparison or procedure did the source appear to support? | A hidden causal ranking rule. |
| **Commercial competitor** | Does the entity materially compete for the same buyer/job/budget? | That it should be treated like every other visible source. |

## Source-role taxonomy

| Role | Commercial rival automatically? | Typical decision use |
|---|---|---|
| Direct provider | Potentially yes | Compare recommendation criteria, product/entity evidence and supporting sources. |
| Substitute | Potentially | Map buyer trade-offs and substitution conditions. |
| Publisher / reference | No | Understand comparison, definition or evidence role. |
| Official authority / documentation | No | Trace technical or definitional authority. |
| Marketplace / directory / review | No | Understand discovery and comparison environment. |
| Community / witness | No | Understand experience, discussion or social proof. |
| Analyst / research | No | Trace evidence, statistics or methodology. |
| Unresolved | No classification yet | Collect more evidence before comparison. |

> **Common failure:** a publisher can be highly visible and heavily cited without competing for the buyer's budget. Visibility can create influence without creating commercial rivalry.

# 2. Scope the study and build prompts from buyer decisions

**Governed scope**
Analysis name · buyer/job · market · locale · surface · observation window · decision owner · reopening trigger.

**Like-for-like rule**
A record outside locale, surface or time window is not “close enough.” Correct it or explicitly reopen the scope.

## Qualitative query / keyword matrix

| Query family | Reader stage | Expected answer object | Likely source roles |
|---|---|---|---|
| AI search competitor analysis | Method / evaluation | Repeatable analysis workflow | Practitioners, vendors, research |
| AI Overview competitor analysis | Surface-specific diagnosis | Observation protocol + role classification | Google docs, vendors, analysts |
| answer engine competitor analysis | Cross-surface comparison | Comparable evidence model | Vendors, researchers |
| AI share of voice competitors | Measurement | Monitoring metric + boundary | Monitoring platforms |
| competitor citation gap analysis | Diagnostic | Citation/source gap separated from rivalry | Publishers, tools, research |
| competitors in ChatGPT / AI Overviews | Observation | Prompt + surface + date + entity/ source evidence | Providers, publishers, references |
| AI competitor workbook / template | Operational handoff | Ledger, comparison, action map, decision brief | Tool/template pages |

## Prompt-family checklist

- ☐ Category / definition
- ☐ Problem / diagnostic
- ☐ Comparison / alternatives
- ☐ Implementation / evidence
- ☐ Purchase / selection
- ☐ Risk / objection

**No fake keyword metrics:** if licensed volume or difficulty data was not collected, treat the matrix as qualitative intent research rather than inventing numbers.

# 3. Capture and classify with fail-closed controls

## Observation checklist

- ☐ Record ID is unique.
- ☐ Exact prompt and prompt family are saved.
- ☐ Surface and locale match the governed scope.
- ☐ Observed date is inside the governed window.
- ☐ Appearing entity/source and appearance type are recorded.
- ☐ Source/entity role and buyer/job overlap are classified.
- ☐ Cited URL is recorded when applicable.
- ☐ Passage contribution is inspected when a citation matters.
- ☐ Repeat group is recorded when claiming matched repetition.
- ☐ Evidence locator/capture note and provenance URL exist.

## Hard contradictions

| State | Result | Why |
|---|---|---|
| CITED SOURCE + “NOT APPLICABLE / NO CITATION” | **INVALID** | The record says both that a citation exists and that there is no citation. |
| Out-of-scope locale/surface/date | **INVALID** | Unlike records cannot enter a governed comparison. |
| Unknown source role or buyer overlap | **UNRESOLVED** | Commercial classification is not yet defensible. |
| Cited source + passage not checked | **EVIDENCE INSUFFICIENT** | Citation count alone cannot explain contribution. |
| Ready observation + empty executive brief | **NOT READY** | Observation readiness is not the same as handoff readiness. |

> **Fail-closed rule:** INVALID, UNRESOLVED or EVIDENCE INSUFFICIENT evidence never becomes READY TO SHARE.

# 4. What current AI-visibility platforms measure - and the decision that remains

| Method | Useful observation layer | Decision A51 keeps separate |
|---|---|---|
| Ahrefs | Mentions, citations, cross-platform visibility, cited pages and competitor comparisons. | Is the visible/cited entity actually a direct rival, substitute or non-rival source? |
| Semrush | Share of voice, mentions, citations, cited pages, sentiment and gaps. | Which underlying evidence object changed, and what action does that justify? |
| Peec AI | Prompt/model monitoring, position, sentiment, citations and competitor benchmarks. | Is a citation gap the same thing as a commercial competitor gap? Often no. |
| Scrunch AI | Prompts, citations, competitor presence, personas/ regions, page audits and AI referral/agent traffic. | Does the monitored scope match the buyer, market, locale and surface for the decision? |
| OtterlyAI | Prompt libraries, mentions, citations, competitor monitoring and change detection. | Are winners/losers direct competitors or different evidence roles? |
| AthenaHQ | Visibility, citations, prompt/demand intelligence, competitive movement and business impact. | Can downstream impact be interpreted without first validating source role and buyer overlap? |

> **Market-level information gain:** monitoring platforms are becoming richer at observation. The durable analyst advantage is a governed decision layer that survives vendor or metric changes.

Vendor material is used to compare market methods, not as independent proof that any metric causes AI visibility.

# 5. Turn evidence into strategy without sending every problem to content

| Observed pain | Strategic risk | Evidence needed | Smallest next action |
|---|---|---|---|
| “Competitors are everywhere.” | Broad content spend before the competitor set is valid. | Source role + same-buyer/ job overlap. | Clean the competitor set first. |
| “Our AI share of voice is lower.” | Aggregate hides low-value mentions vs purchase-stage recommendations. | Prompt, appearance type, source role, buyer stage. | Find the first material layer that changed. |
| “This publisher beats us.” | Reference authority treated as a product competitor. | Supported answer segment + commercial overlap. | Strengthen source/ evidence ecosystem where justified. |
| “We rank, so we should be cited.” | Search authority assumed to transfer automatically. | Matched search evidence + answer/citation/passage evidence. | Route to retrieval, authority or passage-fit diagnosis. |
| “One change created a citation.” | Temporal sequence promoted into causal proof. | Matched repeated observations in stable scope. | Record, repeat only if decision requires, avoid causal language. |

## Owner routing

**Strategy / product**
Direct competitors, substitutes, buyer trade-offs.

**SEO / technical**
Eligibility, retrieval, surface mismatch.

**Content / research**
Passage contribution, evidence gaps, claim fidelity.

**PR / authority**
Publisher/reference/analyst ecosystem gaps.

> **Strategic rule:** fix the first material evidence failure before choosing a channel tactic. Move only one layer deeper than the evidence justifies.

# 6. Worked example and executive handoff

**Fictional/composite example:** the prompt asks for the best enterprise SEO platform for international teams.

| Visible entity/ source | Observed role | Commercial relation | Correct decision use |
|---|---|---|---|
| Provider A | Recommended direct provider + cited product page | Same buyer/job | Direct competitor evidence; compare recommendation criteria and support. |
| Publisher B | Comparison source | None | Influential non-rival; inspect the comparison evidence it supplies. |
| Official documentation C | Implementation authority | None | Technical evidence, not competitor evidence. |
| Analyst D | Market/research evidence | None | Trace methodology and evidence role. |

**Wrong conclusion:** “Four competitors appeared.” **Better conclusion:** one direct provider appeared alongside three non-rival evidence sources performing different answer roles.

## Decision Brief - required fields

- ☐ Analysis scope
- ☐ Buyer / job
- ☐ Market / locale
- ☐ Primary surface
- ☐ Observation window
- ☐ Decision / finding
- ☐ Direct competitor set - enter NONE IDENTIFIED if genuinely empty
- ☐ Influential non-rival sources - enter NONE IDENTIFIED if genuinely empty
- ☐ Evidence strength / limitations
- ☐ Prohibited inference
- ☐ Next action
- ☐ Owner
- ☐ Reopening trigger

**Handoff rule:** one READY observation does not make the Decision Brief READY. The brief itself must be complete enough for another reviewer to reproduce the evidence path.

# 7. Platform and research boundaries

**Google Search:** current Search documentation treats AI Overviews/AI Mode as part of Search, describes query fan-out/supporting-link behavior, and does not require special AI-only schema. Dedicated generative-AI Search Console reporting provides visibility evidence, not commercial-competitor classification.

**Bing:** AI Performance exposes cited pages and grounding-query phrases; these are observation signals and should not be promoted into hidden ranking or authority claims.

**ChatGPT search:** OAI-SearchBot access and ChatGPT referral parameters provide access/referral evidence; neither is a guarantee of future citation or recommendation.

**Research:** 2026 work separating citation selection from citation absorption supports treating visible citation and answer contribution as different outcomes. Cross-interface studies also support treating surface/interface as a scope variable. These studies do not reveal a universal commercial-platform ranking formula.

## Primary documentation and research

- Google Search Central - AI features and your website: https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features
- Google Search Central - Generative AI optimization guidance: https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/ai-optimization-guide
- Google Search Central - Generative AI performance reports (2026-06-03): https://developers.google.com/search/blog/2026/06/gen-ai-performance-reports
- Bing Webmaster Blog - AI Performance public preview: https://blogs.bing.com/webmaster/February-2026/Introducing-AI-Performance-in-Bing-Webmaster-Tools-Public-Preview
- OpenAI Help Center - Publishers and Developers FAQ: https://help.openai.com/en/articles/12627856-publishers-and-developers-faq
- Zhang, He & Yao (2026) - Citation Selection to Citation Absorption: https://arxiv.org/abs/2604.25707
- Martinez (2026) - Critical Survey of GEO: https://arxiv.org/abs/2607.14035
- Zhen et al. (2026) - Chinese-language generative search cross-interface study: https://arxiv.org/abs/2607.15771

## Use with the workbook

The workbook adds controlled scope, repeated observations, strategy routing and a fail-closed Decision Brief. The browser diagnostic is the fast single-observation surface; this PDF is the portable reference; the workbook is the system of record.

> **Final rule:** classify before you compare. Compare before you intervene. Reopen only when the evidence universe materially changes.