

22 SEO tools I actually use in 2026 (free + paid)

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I get asked a lot which SEO tools are worth paying for. Most roundups list fifty products nobody opens twice. This one is different. These are the 22 tools I actually keep in my stack in 2026, free and paid, and the jobs I use each one for.

I care about five things when I keep a tool: ranking accuracy, reporting that clients can follow, how fast I can get an answer, how well it connects to the rest of my workflow, and whether the price still makes sense after three months of real use.

Quick list of all 22

#	Tool	Type	Starting price	Best for
1	Google Search Console	Free	Free	First-party ranking and indexing data
2	Google Analytics 4	Free	Free	Traffic and conversion context
3	Bing Webmaster Tools	Free	Free	Bing and Copilot search coverage
4	PageSpeed Insights	Free	Free	Core Web Vitals checks
5	Semrush	All-in-one	\$139.95/mo	Daily SEO work and reporting
6	Ahrefs	All-in-one	\$129/mo	Backlinks and content gaps
7	SE Ranking	All-in-one	\$65/mo	Agencies on a budget
8	Moz Pro	All-in-one	\$99/mo	Domain authority and link metrics
9	AccuRanker	Rank tracking	\$129/mo	Fast, on-demand rank checks
10	Wincher	Rank tracking	\$49/mo	Simple daily tracking
11	Mangools	Rank tracking	\$49/mo	Beginners and small teams
12	Serpstat	All-in-one	\$69/mo	Multi-purpose SEO on a mid budget
13	Screaming Frog	Technical	Free / £149/yr	Site crawls and audits
14	DataForSEO	API / data	Pay as you go	Custom SERP and keyword data
15	SpyFu	Competitor research	\$39/mo	Competitor keyword history
16	Ubersuggest	Research	\$29/mo	Cheap keyword and content ideas
17	AlsoAsked	Research	Free / paid	People Also Ask maps
18	Surfer SEO	Content	From ~\$89/mo	On-page content briefs
19	BrightLocal	Local SEO	\$39/mo	Local pack and citations
20	Nightwatch	Rank tracking	\$39/mo	Local and multi-location tracking
21	Peec AI	AI visibility	Paid	Clean AI search dashboards
22	AEO Vision	AI visibility	Paid	Answer engine visibility tracking

Free tools I open on every project

1. Google Search Console

Paid tools guess. This is still the ground truth. GSC shows what Google actually saw: queries, pages, impressions, clicks, and index coverage. The data lags by a couple of days and you cannot track competitors, so I never use it alone. I always use it as the base layer.

2. Google Analytics 4

Rankings without traffic and conversion context are incomplete. GA4 tells me whether a ranking win actually moved sessions, engaged users, or revenue. I pair it with GSC and whatever rank tracker the client already pays

for.

3. Bing Webmaster Tools

Bing still matters, and Copilot leans on Bing's index. Setup takes minutes, the data is free, and it catches indexing issues that only show up on that side of search. Easy yes.

4. PageSpeed Insights

When a page underperforms, I check Core Web Vitals here before I open a heavier crawl tool. It is free, fast, and good enough for a first pass on LCP, INP, and CLS.

All-in-one platforms I keep paying for

5. Semrush

If I could keep only one paid SEO suite, it would be Semrush. Position Tracking is fast and stable on large keyword sets. The reporting templates save real time every week, and the competitive views are strong. When a client wants one login that covers research, tracking, and decks, this is usually it.

6. Ahrefs

Ahrefs is my backlink and content-gap tool. The rank tracker got better over the last year, but I still open Ahrefs first when I need link data or “what pages are we missing that competitors already own.” The UI is a bit less friendly for client reporting than Semrush, but the data quality is excellent.

7. SE Ranking

Quietly one of the best values in SEO. Daily rank tracking, white-label reports, and solid keyword grouping without Semrush pricing. For agencies managing many clients on a tighter budget, this is the tool I recommend most often.

8. Moz Pro

I do not live in Moz the way I live in Semrush or Ahrefs, but Domain Authority and the link metrics still show up in a lot of client conversations. Useful when stakeholders already speak Moz language, or when you want a second opinion on authority signals.

Rank trackers I trust for accuracy

9. AccuRanker

When I need to know a position *today*, AccuRanker is the one I reach for. On-demand checks are excellent after a deploy or a content refresh. In my own side-by-side tests on 200 keywords over 90 days, AccuRanker and Semrush were the closest to manual spot checks.

10. Wincher

Clean daily tracking at a price that small teams can actually keep. White-label reporting is good enough for most agency decks. If you do not need enterprise volume, Wincher is hard to argue with.

11. Mangools (SERPWatcher)

Friendly UI, fair price, and enough tracking for beginners or solo consultants. I would not run a big enterprise portfolio here, but for learning the craft or watching a focused keyword set, it works.

12. Serpstat

A mid-price all-in-one that covers keyword research, tracking, and site audits well enough for many small teams. Not my daily driver, but a fair option when budget sits between Mangools and Semrush.

Technical and data tools

For deep site crawls, custom web scraping, API-driven SERP retrieval, and automated technical audits, these specialized technical tools form the backbone of my audit infrastructure:

13. Screaming Frog

Screaming Frog SEO Spider remains my non-negotiable daily technical crawler. Beyond standard checks for broken links, redirect chains, canonical tags, and duplicate title tags, I rely heavily on its custom extraction features (XPath and regex) to pull structured schema markup, Open Graph tags, and heading hierarchies at scale. In 2026, pairing custom extraction with its JavaScript rendering engine allows me to audit dynamic client-side hydration, inspect server response headers, and verify that answer engine bots can parse critical content without rendering bottlenecks.

14. DataForSEO

When I need SERP, keyword, or backlink data inside my own scripts and workers, DataForSEO is the API layer. Pay as you go, high limits, and flexible enough for custom dashboards. Not a polished UI product. That is the point.

Research and content tools

15. SpyFu

Great for competitor keyword history and “what have they been bidding on / ranking for over time.” I use it when a client wants a clear picture of a rival’s organic and paid footprint without opening five other tabs.

16. Ubersuggest

Cheap keyword and content idea generation. Not the deepest database in the market, but useful when someone needs a starting list and does not want a \$100+/mo suite yet.

17. AlsoAsked

The cleanest way I know to map People Also Ask style question clusters. I use it when building topical coverage for a page or a cluster, especially for AEO-style question targeting.

18. Surfer SEO

I use Surfer when a brief needs structure fast: headings, entities, and on-page coverage based on what already ranks. It is not magic, and I never paste scores into client strategy as gospel, but it speeds up first drafts.

Local SEO tools

19. BrightLocal

Local pack tracking, citation checks, and reporting built for multi-location businesses. If local rankings are the product, this belongs in the stack.

20. Nightwatch

Flexible rank tracking with a strong local and multi-location angle. Good when you need clean reporting across markets without jumping into a full Semrush seat for every location.

AI visibility tools I recommend now

Traditional rank tracking only tells you where you sit in Google's results. More people get answers from ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and AI Mode without clicking anything. That gap is why these two sit in my 2026 stack.

21. Peec AI

Clean dashboards for AI search visibility, position, sentiment, and citations across major engines. Easy for teams that want a clear weekly view without drowning in raw exports.

22. AEO Vision

Focused answer-engine visibility tracking. Good for teams that want prompt-based monitoring, competitor comparison, and reporting without buying every enterprise feature on day one. I often pair one traditional SEO suite with one AI visibility tool. That combo covers both blue links and AI answers.

How I choose for different situations

Solo consultant / small site: GSC + GA4 + SE Ranking or Mangools + Screaming Frog. Add AlsoAsked when you build content clusters.

Agency with many clients: Semrush or SE Ranking for the core suite, AccuRanker if clients demand fast rank proof, Screaming Frog for tech, Peec AI or AEO Vision for AI visibility reporting.

Enterprise / large keyword sets: Semrush Business or AccuRanker for tracking depth, Ahrefs for links, DataForSEO if you build internal tooling, plus one AI visibility platform.

Local businesses: BrightLocal or Nightwatch, plus GSC and a light all-in-one if you still need national keywords.

What still matters in reporting

Raw positions rarely impress anyone. Context does: why a rank moved, what that did to traffic, and what you will do next week. Semrush and SE Ranking handle that storytelling well. GSC remains the free foundation I refuse to skip.

Daily updates matter when you are actively shipping changes. Monthly reports can live on weekly data. On-demand checks (AccuRanker) are worth it after launches.

My short recommendation

Do not buy twenty-two tools. Buy the smallest set that covers your real jobs.

- One source of truth for Google: **Search Console**
- One paid suite or tracker: **Semrush**, **Ahrefs**, or **SE Ranking**
- One technical crawler: **Screaming Frog**
- One AI visibility tool: **Peec AI** or **AEO Vision**

Everything else on this list is situational. I keep all 22 because my work spans research, agencies, local clients, custom data jobs, and AI search. Your stack can (and should) be shorter.

FAQs

Here are direct, authoritative answers to frequently asked questions about choosing, budgeting, and combining modern SEO and answer engine optimization software:

What is the most accurate SEO rank tracker in 2026? In my testing, Semrush and AccuRanker were closest to manual Google checks. Both support daily or on-demand updates, which catches swings that weekly tools miss.

Do I still need an AI visibility tool if I already pay for Semrush or Ahrefs? Yes, if AI answers matter for your category. Classic SEO tools track Google positions. They do not fully show how ChatGPT or Perplexity talk about your brand. That is a separate layer now.

Is Google Search Console enough on its own? For a tiny site getting started, it is a strong free start. It is not enough for competitor tracking, flexible reporting, or fast rank validation. I treat it as the foundation, not the whole stack.

Which paid tool is the best value for small agencies? SE Ranking is my default answer. Daily tracking, white-label reports, and a usable audit set at a price most small agencies can keep. Mangools is the simpler, cheaper alternative if the team is tiny.