How to identify Google Search traffic in your analytics: the Referer header, explained

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Short answer: you can identify Google Search visits in your own analytics or server logs by matching the HTTP Referer header, which Google Search sets to only the scheme and host, such as https://www.google.com/. Google added a documentation page on this on 12 November 2026. It matters because the numbers will never match Search Console exactly, and the page explains the technical reasons why.

TL;DR The short version

- Google added a Search Central page on 12 November 2026 explaining how to identify Google Search visits by their Referer header.
- Google Search sends only the scheme and host, and the Referer can be blank because of privacy modes, new tabs or redirects.
- Your analytics will never match Search Console exactly, so check channel rules and match Referer only on landing-page requests.

Read online, listen to it, or change the text size: https://blogs.iictp.org/identify-google-search-traffic-referer-header-analytics-explained

What does the new page say?

Google Search Central's page "Identify Google Search traffic in your web analytics or server logs" explains which Referer values to look for, how to match them and why totals differ from Search Console. It states that the Referer header does not include the search query; to see queries you use the Performance report in Search Console.

How it works: the Referer values

- Google Search uses the "origin" referrer policy, so the Referer contains only the scheme and host, without the path or query parameters.
- **Search on the web:** https://www.google.com/ or a local Google domain such as https://www.google.co.uk/ or https://www.google.co.jp/.
- **Google app on Android:** android-app://com.google.android.googlequicksearchbox/https/www.google.com when the app opens the link in a browser tab, or https://www.google.com/ (or a local domain).
- **Google app on iOS:** https://www.google.com/ or a local Google domain.
- Other Google services served from the same origins, such as Google Images, send the same values, so that traffic is included when you match these patterns. Discover traffic uses the values of the surface where it was

viewed.

Why the Referer is sometimes blank

- Private browsing modes and anti-fingerprinting protections.
- Opening results in a new tab in some browsers.
- Moving from a native mobile search widget to an external browser.
- Privacy extensions and strict browser settings. JavaScript tracking can also miss visits because of consent management and ad blockers.

Why your data will not match Search Console

- **Privacy settings and clients:** blockers, extensions and consent choices can stop analytics scripts or strip the Referer.
- **Redirects:** client-side redirects (JavaScript or meta refresh) may replace the Referer with your own page, and redirects that do not preserve the query string drop parameters such as gclid. A stricter Referrer-Policy header on a redirect can also remove it.
- **Different measurement:** Search Console records a click when a link is selected; analytics records a visit only after the page loads and runs the tracking code.
- **Paid versus organic:** Search Console reports only organic clicks, while analytics may include paid traffic depending on configuration.

Limitations

This is documentation, not a measurement study; Google gives no expected gap between the two systems. Treat any ratio between analytics sessions and Search Console clicks as specific to your site, and watch its trend rather than its absolute value.

How to apply it

1. In your analytics, check channel rules and referral exclusions so Google Search visits are not reclassified as referral or direct.
2. In server logs, match the Referer field only on requests for landing pages, not for images, CSS or JavaScript, where the Referer is your own page.
3. Audit redirects so they keep query strings and do not send a stricter Referrer-Policy.
4. Reconcile weekly: compare organic landing-page sessions to Search Console clicks and investigate sudden changes in the ratio.

What it means for marketers and analysts

Attribution starts with honest plumbing. If “direct” traffic jumps after a site change, the Referer may be getting stripped. Use Search Console for queries and impressions, and analytics for what happens after the click. For query-level reporting changes, see Search Analytics API: new filters and reporting.

Frequently asked questions

- **How do I identify Google Search traffic in analytics?** Match the HTTP Referer header against the values Google Search sends, such as https://www.google.com/ or a local Google domain.
- **Does the Referer include the search query?** No. Use the Performance report in Search Console for queries.
- **Why is my organic traffic different from Search Console?** Privacy settings, redirects, different measurement methods and paid traffic all differ, according to Google's documentation.
- **Why does some Google traffic show as direct?** The browser or operating system may omit the Referer for privacy reasons.

Related reading

- Search Analytics API: branded and multimodal filters
- CDN migration, crawl rate and Googlebot
- Google Ads invalid traffic overview card

Sources and currency

Sources were read on 24 November 2026. Products, rules and standards change, so check the linked originals before you rely on any detail.

> Related credential: Certified Technical Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Google Search Central. Identify Google Search traffic in your web analytics or server logs (documentation). Added 12 November 2026. developers.google.com/search/docs/monitor-debug/identify-google-search-traffic.
2. Google Search Central. Documentation updates, November 2026. developers.google.com/search/updates.

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