

YouTube The algorithm explained

Every day, creators like you are sharing stories with billions of people on YouTube¹

Viewers come to this platform for so many reasons – to unwind, be inspired, connect with communities, learn something new and explore the world. The role of **YouTube's algorithm** is to **help each viewer find videos that they want to watch**. In this resource, we'll break down the fundamentals of YouTube's recommendations and share how you as a creator can use this knowledge to build an audience.

Connecting viewers to content

With over 20 billion videos, YouTube's recommendation system faces the challenge of identifying the most relevant content for each user at any given moment.²

Personalised recommendations are designed to help viewers easily find content that they'll enjoy, from exploring new topics and creators to staying connected with their favourites. Making YouTube a rewarding and tailored experience for each viewer ultimately helps creators reach their communities, and grow them too.



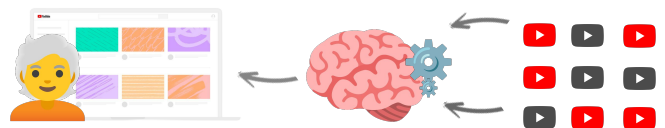
The goal of the algorithm is twofold

Help each viewer find videos that they want to watch, and maximise long-term viewer satisfaction.

and content to viewers

Many creators believe that YouTube 'pushes' videos to viewers after they're published, but it's the opposite: the platform 'pulls in' videos for viewers as they engage with the site.

YouTube's recommendation system is activated the moment a user visits, aiming to identify what they'll most likely want to watch and enjoy.



In real time, the system analyses each viewer's profile

It considers the device, time of day and past habits to surface and rank the most relevant content, leading to a highly personalised and unique viewing experience for everyone.

The algorithm follows the audience

Creators often focus on 'the algorithm', but what really matters is what viewers enjoy. Instead of asking '*Does the algorithm like my content?*', think '*Does my audience like this?*'

Ultimately, YouTube's recommendations are driven by what viewers watch and enjoy – and the algorithm is learning from audience signals.

These signals can be categorised into:

- **Personalisation and performance**
- **External factors** can also influence recommendations

Personalisation

Engagement history and interest affinity

Performance

Appeal, engagement and satisfaction



External factors

Topic interest, seasonality and competition

Let's explore these categories further

Personalisation

Signals that help us understand users' preferences

Think of YouTube's recommendation system like suggesting a book or film to a friend: it understands your unique tastes, past likes and dislikes, and even what similar users enjoy. This is essentially automated word of mouth on a massive scale, designed to truly satisfy a viewer's preferences. It achieves this by primarily examining two signal types: a viewer's watch history (content that they've enjoyed) and their interest affinity (explicit and inferred topics that they're interested in).



Engagement history

Our systems aim to determine content that viewers might enjoy by analysing their engagement history. This includes what videos they choose to watch, ignore or dismiss ('not interested' feedback), how long and how much of a video they watch, and other viewing routines. We also consider content that they've searched for or engaged with, such as via likes, shares, comments, 'not interested' feedback and survey responses. Additionally, we factor in the channels that a user subscribes to and the languages of the content that they consume.



Interest affinity

We determine interest affinity by recognising a viewer's favoured themes, topics and formats, as well as what's popular among similar audiences.

Additionally, our system learns from what videos similar viewers also enjoyed; for example, 'viewers of video A also watched video B'.

What does this mean for you?

Help viewers discover more

Cultivate deeper audience engagement by making it easy for viewers to find and watch more of your content. For example, you can develop content series to encourage continued viewing, and use clear calls to action (e.g. 'If you liked this, watch...'), playlists and end screens to surface more content. Remember that positive viewer interactions are a strong signal for the recommendation system.

Sustainability is key

A sustained presence helps your audience embrace your channel as a routine that they anticipate, keeping it top of mind.

Being there for your community means regularly delivering valuable content that they can rely on and crafting a recognisable experience. Plus, a consistent title and thumbnail style makes your videos instantly identifiable, helping viewers to quickly choose what to watch.

Get to know your audience

Unlocking greater discoverability starts with understanding your audience's interests.

The [Audience tab in Analytics](#) provides powerful insights, showing you preferred formats and the 'channels and content that your audience is also watching'. **This helps you spot market shifts and adapt your strategy.** For new ideas, the [Trends](#) and [Inspiration](#) tabs help you explore concepts, content gaps and audience search interest, empowering you to create more of what viewers are looking for.

Publishing > perfect time

Don't overthink your publish time; it is not known to impact a video's long-term performance.

The algorithm **aims to deliver the right content to viewers whenever they visit YouTube, regardless of upload time.** While publishing when your audience is most active might lead to more immediate views, it doesn't typically affect long-term viewership. However, if you're scheduling a Premiere or going live, consider your audience's active times to maximise engagement.

Quality over quantity

Prioritise consistent quality content over a high frequency of uploads. This approach fosters sustained audience engagement, which is key for growth.

However, true consistency also involves making things sustainable for yourself. **Taking breaks is a healthy and encouraged part of a long-term creative journey** – the algorithm doesn't penalise creators for doing so. If you need some time off, letting your audience know can help you re-engage them smoothly upon your return.

Experiment to adapt

Your audience's interests will naturally evolve – just think about how much your own tastes have changed over time. Our system adapts to these shifts.

Experimenting with new content is a great way to stay connected with your audience.

The algorithm uses fresh performance data for each individual video, rather than relying on past results, so a single experiment that doesn't land won't necessarily hinder your channel's potential. Nevertheless, it's worth bearing in mind that frequently sharing content that doesn't resonate can, over time, affect your channel's overall performance.

Performance

Signals that help us predict if a user will watch and feel satisfied with a piece of content

Performance data reveals how viewers respond to content, indicating its overall appeal and engagement, and whether it delivered a satisfactory experience. **While the specific signals vary by format, our goal remains consistent: to determine if viewers would be interested in the video and feel satisfied after watching it.**



Appeal

We look at how the content performs when it's being recommended.

Did people choose to watch the content? Or did they ignore it or click 'not interested'?



Engagement

We're also interested to know how long the content captures viewer attention.

Once viewers start watching, do they stick around?



Satisfaction

Additionally, we aim to understand if the content provides a positive viewer experience.

Did viewers enjoy the video?

A COMMON QUESTION AMONG CREATORS

What's the most important metric to optimise for?

The reality is that there's no single metric to optimise for. All metrics are taken into consideration to help us understand viewer preferences across different intents, surfaces and devices. Similarly, there's no universal 'good' benchmark for performance metrics like CTR, as what's considered good varies wildly across content genres and formats. Instead, content is ranked against other videos that a user might want to watch. So, when you're looking to improve, optimise against your own historical metrics rather than aiming for an external benchmark.

What does this mean for you?

Unlock your content's reach

Ideation: Even within a niche, you can frame your content around a universal problem or topic to make it more accessible. For example, instead of *'In-depth analysis of economics in the coffee market'*, try *'Why is your coffee so expensive? Understanding everyday economics'*.

This approach can **make your content relatable to a wider audience**, providing an entry point for viewers who might not be experts in your core topic.

Packaging: How you present your content can significantly impact the scale of your reach. Your **title and thumbnail** are vital for communicating value, sparking intrigue and setting clear expectations for viewers.

TOP TIP: Put yourself in the shoes of the audience. Look at your videos as if you were a new viewer. Would you click to watch? (Be honest.)

Build viewer connection

Engaging hooks: The initial seconds of your content are when viewers decide to stay or move on, especially for Shorts and long-form videos. Ensure that your intro delivers on the promise made by your thumbnail and title, immediately reassuring your audience that they'll find the value they're looking for. Keep your intro concise and get straight to providing that value.

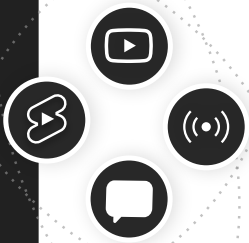
Once you've connected, maintain viewer interest through thoughtful storytelling. Build anticipation and curiosity to keep viewers watching. Experiment with diverse storytelling techniques, editing styles and content delivery. Use Analytics to measure **audience retention** at key moments and understand how your audience reacts.

The audience and format choices

We aim to understand viewers' diverse interests across all content formats – Shorts, long videos, live streams and posts. **For that reason, we use what a user discovers about topics or channels to inform recommendations across formats.** For instance, a viewer that often engages with your long-form videos might see your Shorts being recommended.

It is important to note that while these connections exist, it is ultimately up to the viewers to engage with the content across formats. While our algorithm makes this engagement possible, we notice that this is not common behaviour from viewers; individual preferences vary, not just by topic but also by format (e.g. enjoying dance Shorts but not long-form dance content).

TOP TIP: Get a sense of the formats that your audience is watching within **audience insights in Analytics**.



Where are viewers watching?

Our recommendation system aims to deliver the right content to the right viewer at the right time, optimised for each unique context. **It learns from signals like time of day and device type to understand diverse viewing preferences.**

We aim to identify and cater to the user's unique routines – for example, if they prefer watching news on a phone in the morning and comedy on a TV at night. This means that the content they see can differ depending on whether they're watching on a mobile phone versus a TV or in the morning versus at night.

In Analytics, you can check the percentage of watch time that comes from each device.

Let's learn about external factors

External factors

Beyond personalisation and performance, external factors influence YouTube recommendations

These include how much **interest** and **competition** surrounds a topic, alongside shifts in viewer behaviour and preferences **throughout the year**. **Bear these in mind when planning your content, researching your audience and analysing your performance.**



Topic interest

Topic interest reflects the global audience size for videos on a specific subject.

Naturally, some topics simply have broader appeal than others. For example, football videos often get more views than golf videos simply because football has broader global appeal, attracting a larger audience to its content on YouTube. It's not the algorithm favouring football, but rather a reflection of existing viewer interest.



Competition

YouTube's recommendations rank content against all other videos that a user might want to watch.

Creators often compare their video's performance only within their own channel, but the algorithm ranks your content against all videos that a viewer might watch. Most viewers spread their attention across hundreds of channels. So, even if your content has good individual metrics, it might get fewer impressions if other channels' videos perform better for that viewer.



Seasonality

Audience interest and platform traffic naturally ebb and flow throughout the year.

The number of viewers online changes and their search interests are often highly seasonal. For instance, a Valentine's Day recipe Short will likely perform much better in February than in August. Similarly, holidays or school breaks can significantly shift viewing habits. To better understand your traffic's fluctuations, consider your audience's locations and what's happening in their lives at different times of the year.

What does this mean for you?

Tap into interests and trends

Tap into waves of audience interest by truly knowing your viewers. **Understanding them allows you to tailor your content calendar to what's more relevant in their lives.** For instance, if your viewers set goals and go to the gym in January, plan related videos at that time to coincide with their peak interest.

Staying nimble also lets you adapt to surging trends. Publishing relevant content during periods of high demand and low supply can mean more views per video. Stay tuned to your audience's evolving interests.

Performance fluctuations are normal

It's natural for your channel's views to fluctuate. A temporary dip doesn't signal a permanent decline; we frequently see channels recover by re-engaging their audience and innovating in terms of content.

It's also unrealistic to expect consistently record-high views indefinitely. A period with lower views simply means that you're not at your all-time peak, which is normal. **Focus on evolving your content, listening to audience feedback and analysing your data.** This might involve exploring new formats or topics if your audience is ready for a fresh perspective.

Good to know

Performance and external factors

Creators often ask: 'My video has great CTR and average view duration; why aren't my content's impressions higher?'

The reality is that even with strong engagement, videos may not be getting as many impressions as you'd hope, and external factors play a big role. Beyond your channel's performance, high competition means that your video is ranked against countless others. If other videos perform even better, your content may not reach as many viewers. Topic interest and seasonality also play a role as some subjects have broader or shifting appeal.



Optimising for user needs

YouTube's diverse surfaces may be tuned to match different viewer objectives, influencing how content is ranked.

For instance, YouTube Search strives to surface relevant results according to keyword queries, also looking at which videos have driven the most engagement for a query. The Shorts Feed, with its snackable and trendy nature, may be tuned to focus on the recency of content, making it great for the discovery of new content. Meanwhile, on the Subscriptions tab, viewers see the videos from the channels that they are subscribed to, listed by most recent, reflecting their expectations of fresh content from their favourite creators. Learn more about [traffic sources here](#).

Growing responsibly

We want YouTube to be a place where people can share diverse views and opinions, connect with one another and build businesses while having a safe and positive experience.

For topics where accuracy and quality are key – like news, personal finance and medical information – we elevate authoritative voices.



Myth-busting

MYTH

If a video is performing well on one device (like a TV), the algorithm reduces reach on others (like mobiles).

REALITY

That's not correct. The content could be recommended on both devices. The algorithm aims to understand viewers' watch preferences across all of their devices. If a video historically performs better for a given user on one device, it's more likely to be ranked well there. However, that doesn't mean it won't appear on their other devices.

MYTH

Trying a new content format will confuse the algorithm and hurt my whole channel

REALITY

Not really! The system evaluates each piece of content individually, so a single Short/VOD/live stream won't directly reduce the overall discoverability of your channel. We aim to understand each user's preferred formats and topics. If someone isn't interested in a certain type of content, we'll avoid recommending it to them, but we'll keep showing it to others who do enjoy it. When you try new formats, your audience's tastes might change. Any effect that you see is usually about how your viewers react to the new content, not a direct *penalty* from the algorithm itself.

MYTH

Changing a video's title or thumbnail will 'reset' the video in the algorithm.

REALITY

When you change your title and thumbnail, you might see a shift in your performance – your video may start to get more or fewer views. When your video looks different to viewers, it can change how people interact with it. **Our systems respond to how viewers are interacting with your video rather than the act of changing a video's title or thumbnail.**

Changing your metadata can be a way to get more views, but don't change what's working. In general, we recommend making changes to titles or thumbnails when a video has a lower CTR and it's receiving fewer impressions than usual. If that doesn't work, it may be that the topic of the video is just appealing to a smaller audience.

MYTH

The algorithm prioritises videos that are monetised.

REALITY

That's not correct. Our algorithm does not know which videos are monetised and which are not. **We take a long-term view and focus on recommending the videos that viewers will find satisfying, regardless of whether they are monetised.** You can see this in action by disabling monetisation on a particular video and noticing that there is no impact on search or recommendations traffic.

MYTH

If one of my videos underperforms, my channel will be penalised overall.

REALITY

No. What matters is how viewers respond to each video when it's recommended to them. Recommendations are designed to match each viewer with the videos that they are most likely to watch and enjoy.

We use video and audience-level signals to determine which are the best recommendations for viewers. What can impact your long-term channel performance is when a particular viewer stops watching videos from your channel when we recommend them, or if viewers start watching more of other channels on YouTube.

MYTH

If you have X subscribers, you should get at least X views.

REALITY

Your subscriber count reflects the number of times that people have hit 'subscribe', not necessarily the size of your channel's current active audience. Especially in the case of channels that have been on YouTube for many years, it's likely that some subscribers have since moved on. In fact, the [subscriber feed traffic source](#) offers a direct view into how your subscribers engage with your content. This traffic source can reveal that viewers often skip most of the videos in their Subscriptions feeds. To get a better understanding of a channel's audience, visit the Audience tab in Analytics and look at how many [unique viewers](#) are watching the channel. This metric can help you better understand the size of a channel's actual active audience.

In summary

The algorithm constantly evolves with a dual purpose: to connect viewers with content that they enjoy and to maximise their long-term satisfaction. When considering if the 'algorithm' likes your content, mentally substitute it for 'audience'. Instead of asking *'Does the algorithm like this?'*, ask yourself *'Does my audience like this?'* Remember to continuously experiment and evolve your content, listening to audience feedback and analysing your data. Ultimately, success on YouTube boils down to one thing: creating amazing content that your audience genuinely wants to watch.

Learn more

- [Learn more about YouTube Search and discovery](#)
- [Watch and learn about the YouTube algorithm](#)
- [Impressions and click-through rate FAQ](#)
- Take a look at [YouTube Insider's shorts](#) to learn more