



Subject and Keyword Searching

Subject and keyword searches are two of the most basic types of searches that you will use in your research. Understanding the difference between them, and how and when to use them will improve your results.

Subject Searching	Keyword Searching
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relies on a pre-determined, fixed list of words, or subject headings, called a controlled vocabulary. For most medical searching this controlled vocabulary is the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) developed by the National Library of Medicine. • You have to use the appropriate subject heading(s) for your topic(s) to search successfully. • Searches only the subject field(s) of a bibliographic record. • Provides consistency in the description of the content of materials. • Must be entered in a specific format. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary is not taken from a pre-determined list. You can use words that you would normally use to perform a search. • Depending on the database can also be called free-text, or text-word searching. • Searches other text fields of a bibliographic record, such as the title, notes, and abstract or full-text when available. In many instances, the subject field will also be searched. • Allows for inconsistency in the use of language to describe a concept. • Can be truncated to search for word variations, and structured using Boolean or other search operators.
<p>Uses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assures that you have retrieved all records indexed using a particular subject heading. You can consult records for other subject areas that cover your topic. • Especially good for basic categories of information such as diagnosis and therapy. • Allows for very precise searching. Increases the relevance of items retrieved. • Can be used to focus or narrow down a search. • Most controlled vocabularies are arranged in some sort of hierarchy that reveals relationships between terms. This can be used easily to move to more general and/or more specific subject headings. 	<p>Uses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good way to start searching if appropriate subject headings are not known. You can then consult results for appropriate subject headings. • Allows you to retrieve relevant records that are indexed differently. • Good for searching topics that are so new that they have not yet been included in a controlled vocabulary. • Can be used to expand a search when you are not finding enough information, but can result in the retrieval of a larger number of items, and of less relevant items. • Can be used when subject headings are too general or too specific.

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