

Keyword vs. Subject Searching

Keyword and **subject** searching methods are two widely used ways to effectively find items on your topic. They are usually offered to the researcher among other search options by any index, database, or online library catalog. There are important advantages to both methods; knowing how to use them and how they differ from each other will help you retrieve better, more accurate results.

What is keyword searching?

Keyword searching uses **any words** you can think of that best describe your topic. Keyword searches will be **broad**: title, source and contents of each item will be searched for your keyword(s). This is the reason your searches may retrieve too many, too few, or completely irrelevant items. That is why using this method is a good way to **start** your research process. A keyword search can be the first step on the way to finding subject headings appropriate to your topic and using them to get more relevant results.

What is subject searching?

Subject searching uses **subject headings** that come from a predetermined list of possible terms and reflect the content of the item. Most academic libraries use Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) for Subject Search of their online catalogs. A subject search is more **specific** than a keyword search: it looks in only one field of each record – **the subject field**. Many databases use subject headings that are unique to that particular database. This **controlled vocabulary** allows for consistency of terms across the database. For example, **Medline** database uses **MeSH** – medical subject headings and **CINAHL** database also has its own unique headings. These subject headings can be found in the database's **thesaurus**. In the thesaurus subjects are often listed with broader, narrower, or related subjects. Using the database's thesaurus will help you identify most effective search terms.

Research Tip

Use both **keyword searching** AND **subject searching** to get better results:

1. Start your search with keyword searching; use your own words that describe your topic best.
2. After getting results, focus on the most relevant record(s), and among subject headings, presented in them; choose the most suitable ones for your topic. In some databases subject headings can also be called “terms” or “descriptors”.
3. Now is the time to turn to subject headings for your further search.

Please turn over for comparative Keyword vs Subject Searching tables

Keyword Searching	Subject Headings Searching
uses words or phrases of researcher's choice	uses specific, predefined terms
more flexible – searches in several fields	less flexible – searches in only one field
results may include irrelevant items, less focused search	results include very relevant items, more focused search
may yield too many or too few results	in case of too many results uses sub-headings to focus on one aspect of the broader subject
keywords are appropriate for use across databases; not database-specific	subject headings may differ from database to database

How to Find Keywords	How to Find Subject Headings
think of any words that describe your topic; use alternate words and synonyms to describe the same idea	catalogs and databases usually provide lists of the subject headings preferred for searching, sometimes called “thesaurus”
start with just a few terms; the more terms you add, the more you narrow your possible results	consult printed multi-volume set of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), ask Reference Librarian for help

When to Use Keywords	When to Use Subject Headings
you don't know the full title or author's name of a particular work, you just know what the work is about	you want to find all documents provided by a database or a catalog on your specific topic
you are not sure where to start, or what subject heading(s) to use	you need to find out all the sources of information in your area of study