

Keyword and Subject Searching

Available electronically at http://www.cune.edu/resources/docs/Library/Keyword_and_Subject.pdf

Keyword Searching

Keyword searching is the broadest and most flexible method. Keywords can be combined with *AND*, *OR*, and *NOT* to change the scope of a search.

- **Too many items? Strategies to consider:**
Try a narrower term
Add concepts to your search using **AND**, e.g. adolescents **and** smoking
- **Not enough items? Strategies to consider:**
Try a broader term
Combine similar terms using **OR**, e.g. (adolescents **or** teenagers **or** youth) **and** smoking
Use a truncation symbol (! or *) to find alternate forms: instruct* will find instruct, instructs, instruction, instructing, instructor, etc.
- **Irrelevant items? Strategies to consider:**
You may need to use different terms to describe your topic -- the terms you've tried could too obscure, too vague, or have several meanings.
It might be appropriate to use **NOT** to exclude unwanted words: martin luther **not** king
Subject searching may yield more relevant results than keyword searching.

A keyword search can be the first step to finding subject terms. When you do a keyword search, identify one or two relevant records from your results. Look at the subject terms assigned to those records. Using those subject terms in another search can yield more relevant results.

Subject Searching

When you search by subject term (a.k.a. subject heading, descriptor), you're searching in the subject field of the database records where the content of the record is described. Each database determines its set of subject terms. This "controlled vocabulary" allows for consistency of terms across the database.

Many databases include a subject index or thesaurus listing the subject terms. Subjects are often described with a scope note and include broader, narrower, and related subjects. Using the database's subject index helps identify effective search terms.

To find subject terms, type one of your search terms in the database's subject index. Or, as mentioned above, identify relevant records from a keyword search and check the assigned subject terms. Most library catalogs use Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). A subject search must use the LCSH term – for example, united states history civil war 1861-1865 – which can be quite different from keywords you would use.

Review

Keywords	Subject Headings
Any significant words or phrases that you use to describe your topic	Controlled vocabulary used within a database – terms taken from the database's subject index or thesaurus
Results may include irrelevant items; less focused than subject headings	Results include very relevant items; more focused than keywords
Words that appear anywhere in the record (title, subject, abstract, notes, etc.).	Terms that appear in the subject/descriptor field of a record
Can be combined many different ways; any form of a word can be entered.	Wording entered must match term in the subject list or thesaurus for the database
Appropriate for use across databases; not database-specific	May differ from database to database