Subject & Keyword Searching
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Subject Searching

Most databases (like catalogs and indexes) have subject headings assigned for each book or article included in the database. Subject searching involves searching for the exact term that the indexer or cataloger has used to describe the item. These terms, which ensure that all items about the same topic have consistent subject headings, are in a database field called a subject or descriptor field. Using the correct subject headings, researchers can retrieve all the items on a topic, even when there may be several good ways to state a concept.

For example, you may want to research the topic death penalty:

Possible ways to state this topic:

- Death Penalty
- Electrocution
- Capital Punishment
- Hanging
- Cruel and Unusual Punishment
- Death Row
- Lethal Injection

The same term may not be used in all databases. If you are unsure whether a database has a thesaurus, ask a reference librarian.

Keyword Searching

A keyword (also called natural language) search retrieves words or phrases from several important fields of the records in a database. In most databases a keyword search finds words in fields that have descriptive content, such as title, author, subject/descriptor, content field and abstract. In some databases, additional fields may be included in the keyword search. A keyword search usually retrieves more items than a subject search, but they may not all be relevant. In a keyword search you can retrieve a number of irrelevant items because the computer is looking for the exact word you typed, not just for the idea you are researching.

For example, a search on AIDS will retrieve items on

- aids for the hearing impaired
- school aids
- AIDS (the disease)

Keyword search is the best method when:

- there is no subject heading for your topic
- the subject heading is too general or too specific
- you are searching for a new trend or concept
- the database does not have subject headings

What’s the Difference?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Searching</th>
<th>Keyword Searching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Searches subject or descriptor field only</td>
<td>Searches subject, title, author, content and abstract fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use only controlled terminology (may be from a Thesaurus)</td>
<td>May search for any significant terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many relevant items</td>
<td>May retrieve many irrelevant items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low retrieval</td>
<td>High number of retrieval</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Search Tips

Boolean Searching: named after mathematician, George Boole, Boolean searching or Boolean logic allows concepts (or search terms) to be connected by various “operators” such as “AND”, “OR”, and “NOT”. Using these operators, which are supported by most databases, will allow the user to narrow or expand the focus of their search.

AND search

The “AND” operator narrows a search by requiring that both terms and/or phrases be present in a document. Search results will be fewer when multiple terms are connected using the “AND” operator. In the Venn diagram above, the shaded overlap area represents the results containing both search term: Constructivism and Classroom.

OR search

The “OR” operator widens a search and produces results that contain either of the terms/phrases searched. This is helpful when searching for synonyms or like concepts.

NOT search

Combing concepts/terms with the “NOT” operator narrows a search by excluding documents that contain the term/phrase that has a “NOT” in front of it. In the example above, the search will produce results which contain the word Vikings. Any record that contains the word Football in it will be eliminated from the search. Be aware that you could eliminate documents that are relevant to your search using the “NOT” operator.

General Search Tips for Databases

1) Break your research question/or idea into concepts. Example: What are the benefits of reading groups in the K-6 classroom?

   Possible Keywords/Terms
   a. Reading groups/literature circles/reading/literature
   b. Classroom activities
   c. Benefits/impact
   d. Elementary education

2) Try to eliminate qualifiers, adjectives, and modifiers from your search terms/phrases

3) If you are not finding any records, try to use a broader term/phrase or try a synonym.