

Subject vs. Keyword Searching

Generally, there are two kinds of searches one can employ while researching article databases or library catalogs. They are *keyword searching* (which we perform frequently in search engines) and *subject searching*.

Both types of searches are commonly used together-- a keyword search first to get many results followed by a subject search, to narrow those results:

- Start by doing a keyword search, using words or phrases describing your topic.
- Browse through your results list and choose two or three relevant results.
- Notice the **Subject** or **Descriptor** (also called subject headings or controlled vocabulary) field in those relevant records and note the terms used. Keep a list of them to help you remember. (They are also hyperlinked for easy access to all material with that **Subject**.)
- Redo your search using the subjects or descriptors you identify. Your results will be much more precise than those from your initial keyword search.

Subject Searching	Keyword Searching
Subjects are pre-set controlled vocabulary words used to describe the <i>content</i> or <i>conceptual ideas</i> of the source they are attached.	Keywords are just “natural language” words that exist in a given source’s detailed record page, and usually include subjects.
Subject searches are better when you know the subject terms or phrases you are looking for.	Keyword searches allow the user to search any word or phrase s/he can think of.
Narrowing the topic requires using the subheadings offered or adding a keyword to the search.	Narrowing the topic requires adding more keywords to the search using AND, OR, NOT.
Subject searches look only in the subject field of the article database or library catalog.	Keyword searches look in all fields of the record at the same time, including title, subject, author, and abstract.
Less flexible because you must know the exact subject term or phrase.	More flexible allowing one to combine terms in multiple ways.
Result list usually yields a limited number of “hits.” Result list usually correlates directly to the topic being searched. Results are <i>very relevant</i> to the topic.	Result list usually gives more “hits” than a subject search. Result list can often include many irrelevant sources because it hits when the word appears anywhere.

Sources:

MIT Libraries Information Navigator: <http://libraries.mit.edu/tutorials/general/subjectsearching.html>