Using Subject Headings
or...What is a Controlled Vocabulary
and Why do I Need it?
It's a common experience.

I’ve tried searching the library databases for articles and I can’t find anything!

Hey! That happened to me, too!

Guess I’m not the only one!

Same here!
So, what’s going on?

You know how some things have different names depending on where you are? It helps to know the local lingo.

Here are a few examples from everyday life:

- Is your noon meal lunch or dinner?
- Do you drink pop, soda, soda pop or coke?
- Do you wear sneakers or tennis shoes?
- Do you ride a toboggan or wear one on your head?

Each library database has a “local lingo“ of its own. It's called a controlled vocabulary.
A Controlled Vocabulary is

...a standardized set of terms used by a database to categorize articles based on the content.

...a good way to improve your search results and retrieve the most relevant articles.
The yellow pages in a phone book have a controlled vocabulary. Cafes and whatchamacallit bistros are listed under “Restaurants”, car stuff is listed under “Automobile”.

Yeah, I know, I know. You could just look it up on your cell phone, but I’m trying to make a point here! Cheers!
How to find & use a controlled vocabulary.

The controlled vocabulary for the Academic Search Complete database can be found under the Subject Terms tab.

To check your own keyword against the database’s controlled vocabulary, enter it in the box and click the Browse button.

In this database, articles about heart attacks can be retrieved by searching for: MYOCARDIAL Infarction.

Articles on heart bypass surgery, have the Subject Heading: CORONARY artery bypass.

You will find articles searching with the term “heart attack”, but for the best results in this database, use “myocardial infarction”.

So, I can browse the controlled vocabulary in a database to find preferred terms and related terms to use in my search. Perfect! Do you have more examples?
Here are some Keyword vs. Subject Heading examples from **Academic Search Complete**

- **ALLERGIES** Use **ALLERGY**
- **OFFSHORE** drilling (Petroleum) Use **OFFSHORE oil well drilling**
- **NOT-in-my-back-yard** syndrome Use **NIMBY syndrome**
- **STRING** theory Use **STRING models**
- **BABYLONIAN** exile, Jewish Use **JEWS -- History -- Babylonian captivity, 598-515 B.C.**

**Keywords shown in Black**  **Subject Headings are in Blue**
Use Subject Headings in a Search

Once you find a relevant Subject Heading, use it in your search.
Select the Subject Terms field to limit your results to articles with that subject heading. This search will find just those articles that have “OJIBWA language” as a subject Term.

The controlled vocabulary terms assigned to an article appear in the Subject Terms field. These words can help you improve your next search.
Other Databases

Each database has its own controlled vocabulary. You will find the vocabulary terms listed under a heading like:

- Descriptors
- Subject Headings
- Subject Terms
- Thesaurus
- Index

The following slides show examples from a few other databases.
The nursing database **CINAHL**

Controlled Vocabulary = **CINAHL Headings**

It’s *really* important to use controlled vocabulary terms whenever you search a medical, technical or science database.

- **Allergies** *Use:* Hypersensitivity
- **Cancer** *Use:* Neoplasms
- **Itching** *Use:* Pruritus
- **Sore Throat** *Use:* Pharyngitis

**Partial Knee Replacement** *Use:* Arthroplasty, Knee, Unicompartmental
The **CINAHL** database uses a “tree view” to display their hierarchy of headings and subheadings.

For more about tree views, look for the View Tutorials link on the CINAHL Headings screen.

This tree shows that:

- Influenza is listed under **Virus Diseases**.
- And then under **RNA Virus Infections** and **Orthomyxovirus Infections**.
- **Influenza A H5N1** is one type of influenza.
From the education database **ERIC**

**Controlled Vocabulary = Thesaurus**

- Emotions **Use** Psychological Patterns
- Parent Opinions **Use** Parent Attitudes
- Foreign Languages **Use** Second Languages
- Pictorial Tests **Use** Visual Measures
- Vice Principals **Use** Assistant Principals

A Scope Note explains what a subject heading means in this database.

Notice the list of Broader Terms and Related Terms.
From the psychology database PsycINFO
Controlled Vocabulary = Thesaurus

Search with the subject heading exactly as it appears in the controlled vocabulary. Even one letter can make a huge difference in your search results.
Got it?

When searching a database:

• Start with your own keywords.

• Browse the Subject Headings or Thesaurus to find preferred, related, narrower or broader search terms.

• *Always* use controlled vocabulary terms when searching databases for the fields of medicine, psychology, science and engineering.
Try it! If you need help, let us know.

509-313-5931
800-498-5941
Text: 509-730-5979
refdesk@gonzaga.edu

Or use the chat service on the library website.

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On campus? Come in and talk to one of us!

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