Using Subject Headings

...or...What is a Controlled Vocabulary and Why do I Need it?
Database Angst

Grrr! I’ve been searching this library database for over an hour. Why can’t I find anything?

It’s great when your keywords work and you find lots of articles, but if they aren’t working well or if you think you might be missing something, upgrade your search strategy by using the database’s subject headings. Here’s why...
What do you call that?

Some things go by different names depending on where you are. It helps to know the local lingo.

- Do you drink pop, soda, soda pop or coke?
- Is that sandwich a sub, a hoagie, a grinder or a hero?
- 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”, too! It’s called a controlled vocabulary.
A Controlled Vocabulary is

... a standardized set of terms (subject headings) used by a database to categorize articles based on the actual content of the article.

Searching with subject headings is a good way to improve search results and retrieve the most relevant articles.

Subjects: BEVERAGES; ICED tea; DRINKING cups; DRINKING vessels
Is it like tagging?

Subject Headings are like tagging, but much more precise. They aren’t made up on the spot, they come from an approved list – the Controlled Vocabulary.
How to find & use a controlled vocabulary.

In the **Academic Search Complete** database:

1. Select **Subject Terms** from the menu.

2. Enter a keyword in the **Browse** box.

   This example shows that the word “cola” refers to many different things. A keyword search for “cola” would include all these topics in the results!

3. “Cola Drinks” is the correct subject heading for articles about the beverage. Check the box and click either **Add** or **Search**.

4. Search results will only include articles that have “Cola drinks” as a subject heading.
What do you think?

I think I understand! I browse the controlled vocabulary to find subject headings for my topic and then I use those headings in my search and get better results. Right? Do you have more examples?
More examples: Keyword vs. Subject Headings
Using Subject Headings in a Search

1. Enter the subject heading in the search box.

2. Select the field: SU Subject Terms.

This search will only retrieve articles that have “Salishan Languages” in the Subject Term field.

TIP: All controlled vocabulary terms assigned to an article appear in the Subject Terms field. This is a good place to find additional terms to try in your next search.
Each database has its own controlled vocabulary. Controlled vocabulary terms are listed under headings like:

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

(MeSH = Medical Subject Headings)

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

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**
CINAHL’s “tree view”

CINAHL displays subject headings in a “tree view,” which shows the hierarchy of subject headings.

Influenza is nested under Virus Diseases and then under RNA Virus Infections and then under Orthomyxovirus Infections.

Influenza is also broken down into Animal or Human and the specific flus. This allows for very precise search strategies.
The education database ERIC

Scope Notes →
The database’s definition of a subject heading.

Broader and Related Terms. →
More ideas for your search!
When searching a library database:

– Try your own keywords first.

– Browse the Controlled Vocabulary (Subject Headings, Thesaurus, etc.) to find the preferred, related, narrower or broader search terms.

– Check the Subject Terms field in an article record to identify additional controlled vocabulary terms to try in your search.

– Always use controlled vocabulary terms when searching databases for the fields of medicine, psychology, science and engineering.
Give Subject Headings a try!

Let us know if you need help!