Try Using Subject Headings

Part 1: What is a Subject Heading?

Do you ride a toboggan or wear one on your head? Do you drink pop, soda, soda pop, or coke? The fact of the matter is that there are often a lot of ambiguities in how we use language--and it can make it hard to search. For example, if I want articles about reading level, I might use any of the following terms:

- Reading level
- Reading achievement
- Literacy
- Reading tests

Since databases are basically giant word-matching machines, a search for reading level won't necessarily get articles about literacy, because the words simply aren't the same. Synonyms, different word usage, ambiguity, and levels of technical language can all make searching difficult.

Subject terms are basically a way to get around these problems, by providing a standardized vocabulary for describing concepts. Each database has its own controlled vocabulary, because each discipline has different needs in terms of specificity and relevant concepts. For example, the term for cancer in Academic Search Complete (a general database) is cancer. In CINAHL (a nursing database that uses technical language) it's neoplasms.

Check out the other two tabs to see examples of ways you can use subject headings in your searches.

Part 2: Viewing and Article’s Subject Headings

One of the easiest ways to start using subject headings is to check out the subjects of good articles you've already found! If you find a great article in one of our databases, click on the title (usually listed in blue) to open the article information.
Once you have the article information open, you should see a lot of useful information—including an abstract (if one is available), supplemental information (like author affiliation) and a complete list of subject headings. See the picture below:

These subject terms can be very useful if I want to add them to my search—for example, in this search, if I had been searching using the term reading level, I may want to consider including READING standards and/or READING — Ability testing.

All of these subject terms are linked, so if I wanted to see every single article in the databases about reading standards, I could simply click on the link. Keep in mind, though, that that would start an entirely new search, so I would have to re-add any limiters (ex. date/peer-reviewed) or other search terms I'd been using.

Now you try! Find an article you like and check out the subject terms. Then click on one to see all the available material for that topic.

Part 3: Searching the Subject Headings

You can also put together a search from scratch using the subject headings. Keep in mind that this is a different type of search—in a keyword search (the kind you type your search terms into the search boxes), you are matching your terms to articles that contain those terms. In a subject heading search, you are matching your terms to
standardized vocabulary that you then use to match with articles. Let me show you what I mean. To get to the subject headings search box, click on **Subject Terms** at the top of the search screen in Academic Search Complete:

Once you click on Subject Terms, you’ll be taken to a search screen that looks like this (the highlighted area is the search box you'll use to try to find your terms):

You'll type a concept you're searching for into the highlighted search box (don't put anything into the upper search box yet--just use the **Browsing** box). Then click **Browse**. Here's an example search for **reading level**:
If you look at these search results, you'll notice that there is not an exact match for the term I typed in. However, the database redirect me to the standardized term for what I typed in (Use READING achievement). Since this is a standardized vocabulary, I need to make sure I find the correct terms for my search.

If I wanted to use READING achievement in my search, I would click on that term (everything in blue is linked in the database) and see that term in context. Here is what it would look like (with the options to select and add it highlighted):
If I want to add **READING achievement** to my search, I'd click on the check-box to the left of the term, then click the **Add** button. This will cause the term to appear in the top search box:

The **DE** is a code that just means you are searching in the subject headings. If you want to add another subject term to your search (which you might not), type something else into the browse box (the lower search box--you don't type directly into the top box during a subject heading search), then hit **Browse**. For example, the image below shows the results of a search for **public schools**, with the options to select and add the term highlighted.
Unlike last time, here I see that there’s an exact match for my term (PUBLIC schools). Now I can check the box to the left, and add it to my search with the Add button.

**NOTE:** The default operator for subject heading searches is OR, and you will probably want to use AND–remember, OR will give you results that include *any* of your terms and AND will give you results that feature *all* of your terms–check out the AND/OR/NOT section of the Databases page if you need a refresher on the difference.

Once you hit Add, you should see your term appear in the upper search box:

If it looks good, hit Search to see your results! Give it a try to see if subject headings searches are useful to you.

The subject headings may be called something else in different databases (ex. Thesaurus in PsycINFO, CINAHL Headings in CINAHL), but the search option is typically in the same location and has the same function.