

What's the difference between a subject search and a key word search?

Subject Searching

Books, journals, videos, even individual articles may have subjects assigned to them to help researchers locate information. These subjects are placed in the "subject field" or "descriptor field" of the electronic record in the database or library catalog. Subject searching involves searching for the exact term(s) that the indexer or cataloger has used to describe the material you seek. These terms ensure that all items about the same topic have consistent subject headings. Often there is a specific list of terms that can be assigned. Academic libraries use the Library of Congress Subject Headings. They are often called "The Big Red Books" and are available in most libraries. Besides offering controlled subject terms, the Library of Congress Subject Headings are also useful for generating topic ideas, locating broad areas of subjects, and providing a glimpse into the organizational structure of how materials are arranged on library shelves.

Let's use the subject DEATH PENALTY. The Library of Congress Subject Headings books say:

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT (HV8694-HV8699)

UF:	Abolition of capital punishment Death penalty	UF means "used for"
BT:	Criminal law Punishment	BT means "broader term"
RT:	Executions and executioners	RT means "related term"
NT:	Crucifixion Death row Discrimination in capital punishment Electrocution Garrote Hanging Last meal before execution Stoning	NT means "narrower term"

Key Word Searching

Key words are significant and/or unique words that you use to search for information. Results are retrieved from the title, author, publisher, subject, or note fields of an electronic record. Key word searching is useful if you are not sure of exact titles, subjects, authors, etc. Key words are also valuable for finding information in the "notes field" of a record. A book about politics may have a chapter on Edgar Allan Poe's The Raven that is mentioned in a note. Searching with key words may be tricky. A search for "aids" may find the disease or audio-visual materials or hearing aids.

Tips: Use key words for very distinctive or new terms. Use key words in specific fields of records by using the "advanced search" feature offered in many databases, catalogs, and search engines. Use a thesaurus to help you think of a variety of words for your topic.