Controlled vocabularies, thesauri and taxonomies

Introduction

During your library induction you may have heard your librarian talk about the importance of keywords. When searching for information, it is vital to use the right keywords or the information you retrieve won't be useful to you. There are a number of ways to generate keywords for a search (see the Study Hub guides on creating a search term grid and identifying keywords), but many of these methods rely on your own knowledge of the subject and ability to come up with a useful list of terms and combine them appropriately.

Sometimes, you may prefer to find keywords and search in a more formal way. This is where using a database's thesaurus, subject headings or taxonomy can be helpful. All of these terms refer to a **controlled vocabulary** of keywords that are used in particular research databases. Controlled vocabulary means that items in a database are assigned keywords from a list that has been approved. Having a controlled vocabulary means that items in the database are categorised in a consistent way, and can therefore make things easier to find. A controlled vocabulary can also give you keywords to help you to narrow down your search or broaden it, and uses cross-referencing to help you find alternative terms. It is important to realise that only specialist databases use controlled vocabularies, so you will not find them in general search engines such as Discover, or Google Scholar. You can find a list of specialist databases for your course in your Subject Guide.

You may have seen these controlled vocabulary keywords when you are looking at a list of search results. In many databases they are referred to as **subject headings**.

1. Farmer and rancher perceptions of **climate change** and their relationships with mental health.

Howard, Meredith; Ahmed, Selena; Lachapelle, Paul; Schure, Mark B.; Journal of Rural Mental Health, Vol 44(2), Apr, 2020 pp. 87-95. Publisher: Educational Publishing Foundation; [Journal Article], Database: APA PsycArticles

Subjects: Agricultural Workers; Distress; Mental Health; Rural Environments; **Climate Change**; Adulthood (18 yrs & older); Male; Female

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How to access thesauri and subject headings

In most databases, you can access the thesaurus from the main search home page. There is usually a link at the top of the page. Databases will use different terms such as subject headings or thesaurus. Medical databases such as Medline and PubMed use a specialist medical thesaurus called MeSH (medical subject headings).

You can usually search thesauri by browsing or by typing in a keyword.

You may also see cross-references to other terms in the thesaurus. Depending on which database you are using, you may notice that some thesauri use American English in their controlled vocabulary, for example, 'driving under the influence' rather than 'drunk driving'. You may retrieve more results by using the American English term when you search instead of, or as well as, the British English term.

If you click on the main subject term the subject **hierarchy** will appear. This hierarchy will list the broader and narrower terms related to your topic. Broader terms will be more general, and narrower terms will be more specific. Think of the hierarchy as a tree, with the trunk and thicker branches being the broader, more general topics and the thinner branches and twigs as the narrower, more specific topics.

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	Drugs	
	Year Term Introduced	1967
	Scope Note	Conceptually broad term referring to any substance other than food administered for experimental or treatment purposes. Use specific drug classes or names if possible.
	History Note	In 1982, this term replaced the discontinued term DRUG EFFECTS, and in 1997 it replaced CARDIOTONIC DRUGS and NARCOANALYTIC DRUGS. In 2000, these terms were removed from all records containing them, and replaced with DRUGS.
	Narrower Terms	Adrenergic Blocking Drugs +
		Adrenergic Drugs +
		Alcohols +
		Alkaloids +
		Amines +
		Analgesic Drugs +
		Anesthetic Drugs +
		Anti Inflammatory Drugs +
		Antiandrogens
		Antibiotics +
		Anticoagulant Drugs +
		Anticonvulsive Drugs +
		Antidepressant Drugs +
		Antiemetic Drugs +
		Antiestrogens
		Antihistaminic Drugs +

Many thesauri will also include a **scope note** for each term. A scope note is a short explanation of the term and a guide for the indexers who add material to the database to ensure they are using the right term from the thesaurus. Reading the scope note can also help you to see if you are on the right path or whether you may need to be more specific or look elsewhere in the thesaurus.

Building a search using subject headings

In most databases you can carry out a search directly from the thesaurus. In order to do this you will need to know how to use the Boolean search operators AND, OR, NOT (see our other Study Hubs guides for instructions on how to carry out an advanced search).

Select the term you want from the hierarchy. You may see further options to **Explode** or **Focus** the term or choose the term as a **Major Concept**. When you select explode, the search will retrieve results indexed with this term as well as results that are indexed with any of the narrower terms in the hierarchy. By choosing to Explode a term, you will retrieve more results as you are including all of the sub-topics related to that term. This can be useful if you want to see what is available on the topic.

Focusing a search or choosing the term as a Major Concept will retrieve less results but they should be more relevant as this will retrieve results where the term has been marked as a major point or focus of the article.

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Once you select the term you want, you can go back to the thesaurus to choose additional terms. You can add them to your first term using the Boolean operators.

Once you have added all the terms you want from the thesaurus, you can click on search to see the results.

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At this stage, you could also add in 'free text' keywords (i.e. terms not from the thesaurus) into the search using Boolean operators. Mixing subject headings from a controlled vocabulary and your own keywords will usually generate a highly relevant set of results. Controlled vocabularies are by default limited and so may not contain all the terms you need. To refer back to the example from earlier, you can combine the thesaurus term "driving under the influence" with the more commonly used British English term "drink driving", using the OR Boolean operator, thereby retrieving results which use either or both of those terms.

(DE "driving under the influence") OR "drink driving"

Using a controlled vocabulary to search a database is an advanced information retrieval technique and can be confusing if you have never tried it before. Contact your [Academic Liaison Librarian](#) for an appointment or further advice if you need more help.

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit:

lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub

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