What Are Subject Headings?

Subject Headings are a “controlled vocabulary” that librarians use to describe the content of a resource.

How are “subject heading searches” different from “keyword searches”?

A keyword search looks for any use of a particular word in the item’s catalog record. A subject heading search only looks at the subject heading portion of that record.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of search?

Keyword searches allow you to use whatever term comes to your mind. You do not need to use a particular term. On the other hand, keyword searches frequently return irrelevant results because they search only for the word without considering the meaning of the word. Often keyword searches return too many or too few results.

Subject heading searches allow you to search precisely for the information you are seeking. Their biggest advantage is that they will likely return very relevant results. On the other hand, you must use the chosen vocabulary and phrasing.

Will Subject heading searches work for other libraries and databases.

Yes, the controlled vocabulary is established by the library of congress and can be used in multiple databases and library catalogs.

How do I know what vocabulary to use?

The Library of Congress publishes lists of subject headings online. Sometimes these are difficult to navigate, so it is a good idea to ask a librarian or consult a libguide for a particular course. Another good trick is to start out searching with keywords, then when you have found a book look at the MARC record to find out what subject headings were used for that book. Ask a librarian how to do this.

Should I try subject headings searches first or keyword searches first?

Use keyword searches first, then try subject headings.