Keywords vs Subject Headings

What, when, the good and the bad
What is a keyword

- Describes the main idea(s) of your topic
- Important words from a title or part of a text
- May be one or more words
- Natural language; not necessarily jargon
- Keywords are how you search web search engines (Google)
What is a subject term

• Describes the content of a database
• Standardized set of terms (thesaurus)
• Often specific to a database
• But universal lists exist (LCSH, MESH)
When to use keywords

- Just starting on the research process
- You don’t know what the subject headings are
- For both books and articles
- To search for a phrase
- To combine terms (Boolean- ‘and’ ‘or’)
When to use subjects terms

• Looking for information on a broad topic
• Topic is poorly defined (start with keywords, then look at interesting subject headings)
• Topic may have multiple meanings: ‘management,’ or ‘psychology’
Advantages to keywords

• Looks for the word(s) anywhere in the document (or record)
• You will usually get a larger number of results
• Do not need to know any specialized or technical jargon- uses natural language
• Flexible
Advantages to subject terms

• May find fewer results, but usually more relevant and useful for your search
• Useful for personal/geographic searches
• Your search is checked against an organized list, not a random search through and entire record or article
Disadvantages to keywords

• You will usually get a larger number of results
• You will probably get many irrelevant results
Disadvantages to subject terms

• Database only looks for your term in the subject field
• Spelling counts
• Guessing won’t work–must know the exact phrase
• Not always intuitive
• Less flexible