

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 an 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