



## Keyword or Subject Search?

### Subject Search

Controlled vocabulary is used in both paper and computer indexes. An indexer looks at the record and assigns it relevant subject headings or index terms (controlled vocabulary). Information that has been indexed is limited to a specified list of terms. These specified lists of terms are called controlled vocabulary, subject terms, descriptors, subject headings, or index terms.

For example, when you are searching for information on ritalin, you **MUST** use the subject term for ritalin, or you will miss finding an incredible amount of information.

The best way to do a subject search is to do a keyword search first. Search PsycINFO\_1887 in FirstSearch (go to <http://www.lvc.edu/library/index.aspx>, click on FirstSearch, choose PsycINFO) for ritalin; note you'll hit about 279 citations. Look at several of the subject headings. Note that **Methylphenidate** appears in many of the subjects. From this, one can deduce that Methylphenidate is the controlled vocabulary term for ritalin. In FirstSearch's PsycINFO\_1887, clicking on methylphenidate will retrieve 1,456 citations. Conducting just a keyword search on ritalin would have missed over 1,000 citations.

There are many advantages to controlled vocabulary. Once you do find the correct term, all of the information you need is grouped together under that one term. You do not need to think of synonyms for your topic. Information that is retrieved with a subject search will be much more relevant--it won't just be an article *mentioning* ritalin--it will be *about* ritalin.

Searching with controlled vocabulary or indexing terms is thus very efficient and precise.

### Keyword Search

Free-text, or keyword searches are used with computerized databases. Whatever term you put into the computer will be retrieved by the computer--it will find that term in *any field* of the record. Thus, if you input the term AIDS expecting to retrieve acquired immune deficiency syndrome, you will be surprised to also retrieve citations on teacher's aids, aids in business work, etc., etc. Every article that *mentions* AIDS will be retrieved--whether or not it is actually *about* AIDS. Articles written by John Aids will be retrieved as well.

Keyword searching is less precise than controlled vocabulary searching; you will retrieve far more hits, but they will be much less relevant.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to free-text. The advantages: It is excellent for searches which involve new concepts or terminology, since indexing terms take several years to evolve. It is also good for a topic which is extremely specific--for example, a particular psychological test. The disadvantages: YOU must think of all the synonyms. Also, your search will contain quite a bit more "false drops" (i.e. garbage).

## **Which should you use?**

Actually, it is best to use both. Begin a computer search with a free-text, or keyword search. Once you have found articles that are relevant, LOOK at the indexing terms (subject terms or descriptors).

Next, use the subject words to construct another information search.

You can do so by clicking on the relevant subject term in FirstSearch--this will pull up all of the records using that term.

Conversely, you can write down several words from the subject terms, combine them with AND, click on the keyword box in FirstSearch and choose SUBJECT PHRASE.

Although there will be some overlap with your keyword and subject searches, you will find many different sources while using the two ways of searching the same topic.