Subject vs Keyword Searching

Have you ever noticed the drop-down box for search type when you’re working in the Library catalog or databases? If not, give it a try! Focusing your search by author or title is pretty straightforward, but what about searching by subject or keyword? What’s the difference? Well, it turns out there are some key differences.

What are the key differences between Keyword and Subject searching?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword Search</th>
<th>Subject Search</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Rigid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches EVERYTHING available in an item’s record</td>
<td>Only searches content in the “subject” field of an item record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses general, plain language - just like how we speak to each other</td>
<td>Uses focused, controlled vocabulary - sometimes sounds weird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great way to run preliminary searches</td>
<td>Best saved for later, more specific searches</td>
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What does this look like in action?

Let’s compare subjects and keywords from some familiar territory: The Hunger Games. Even if you’re not the biggest fan, you probably have at least an idea of what the story is about. We’ll consider the third book, Mockingjay, and compare some typical keywords to the Library of Congress Subject Headings used in our MINERVA catalog records. Take a look:

**Keywords**
- War
- Survival
- Game Shows
- Dystopias
- Romance
- Future
- Social Classes

**Subjects**
- Insurgency
- Survival
- Television Programs
- Interpersonal Relations
- Contests

Are they identical? No. These 2 lists have a lot in common though, even if no one has EVER used the term “interpersonal relations” in conversation! These are the quirks of controlled language in action!

Why not try a few more examples? Jump into MINERVA and search for some of your favorites (select ALL MINERVA LOCATIONS). Taking time to notice patterns, similarities, and differences between your terms and Library of Congress terms will make you a better searcher when the stakes are higher!
How do I use these searches in my own work?

Keyword searching is a piece of cake. It’s the way we search Google and other search engines, and it’s the way we think and talk to each other.

As for subject searching, save it for late in the game, when you find the perfect source and want more of the same. Like this:

**Start with Keyword searches**

![Keyword search example](image)

Notice that our sample keywords are very basic. Library resources work best when you scale back and stick to searching words and short phrases. Avoid using full sentences or questions!

**Use the tools your chosen database offers to narrow results**

For the sample search shown on this page, ProQuest presented 14 different filters to refine our search results. This is one of many ways the databases set themselves apart from open web search engines. Take advantage of any relevant filters to turn an overwhelming results set into a focused and useful set.

**Find the PERFECT article**

![Article preview example](image)

Don’t forget to consider highlighted search terms and content previews while you run through your results!

**Refine your search according to relevant subject terms!**

![Subject search example](image)

When you find an article that’s just right, find the “Abstract” or “Details” area of the record to look for subject terms. Often, they’re linked, so you can click through to find any database content marked with that same subject heading. If you like more than one subject heading, you can always try an advanced search and enter the terms into the search boxes and choose the “subject” search option yourself. Again - only content marked with those subject headings you entered will be in the result set.