

How to search using Subject Headings

What are Subject Headings?

Most databases have a thesaurus of subject headings. The thesaurus is a controlled (fixed) list of terms for different subjects a bit like in the index of a book. Each record that is added to the database is tagged with the subject headings that best describe the contents or theme of the journal article. For example, a journal article about Alzheimer's Disease might be tagged with the subject headings 'Dementia' and 'Alzheimer's Disease'. Subject headings are also sometimes referred to as thesaurus terms, subject terms or descriptors.

Each database has its own thesaurus of subject headings. The most well-known thesaurus is MeSH (Medical Subject Headings), which is the thesaurus for the Medline database. However, the EMBASE database uses the Emtree thesaurus which has more focus on pharmacological topics, and the PsycINFO database uses the Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms which has more focus on psychology and psychiatry topics.

The thesaurus of a database is structured in a hierarchy with broader, more general terms at the top of the hierarchy and more specific terms underneath. For example, the hierarchy for Dementia might look like this:

- **Nervous System Diseases**
 - o **Brain Diseases**
 - **Dementia**
 - **AIDS Dementia Complex**
 - **Alzheimer Disease**
 - **Aphasia, Primary Progressive**
 - **Creutzfeldt-Jakob Syndrome**
 - **Dementia, Vascular**
 - **Diffuse Neurofibrillary Tangles with Calcification**
 - **Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration**
 - **Huntington Disease**
 - **Kluver-Bucy Syndrome**
 - **Lewy Body Disease**

Why is it useful to search using Subject Headings?

You can search using subject headings to find records which have been indexed with those terms. Searching using subject headings can be helpful as they only retrieve articles that are about your topic. They may also find articles where the keywords you have searched have not been used in the abstract, and they are good for searching across broad concepts.

However, only searching with subject headings may result in you missing very recent records which have not yet been indexed. Or you may miss records that are relevant but may not have been tagged with the terms you have searched for due to inaccurate indexing. There also may not be a subject heading for the particular concept you are looking for.

Therefore, the best searches use a combination of both free text keywords and subject headings.

How do you search for Subject Headings?

When using subject headings there are usually two options for searching. If you '*select*' the term the database will search for any records that have been indexed (tagged) with that specific term.

Exploding the term will search for the term and any terms that come underneath it in the hierarchy. For example, exploding Dementia will also retrieve records that are indexed with any of the terms AIDS Dementia Complex, Alzheimer Disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Syndrome, Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration, Lewy Body Disease, etc. So '*exploding*' the term will result in a broader search of the subject.

Some databases also provide the facility to search for subject headings as a '*Major Concept*' or '*Focus*'. This will search for where the subject heading has been designated as one of the main themes of the article. This can be used to narrow down your search if you have too many results. However, it is not usually used for systematic review searches as it will make your search too narrow.

Since each database has its own thesaurus, when using subject headings, you will not be able to exactly replicate your search in every database. You will need to '*translate*' your subject heading terms for each database that you search. The thesaurus terms used can be quite different from database to database. For example, Medline uses the subject heading '*Antipsychotic agents*' for antipsychotic medicines while EMBASE uses the subject heading '*neuroleptic agent*'. Since databases cover different subject areas, the subject headings included will also differ and it is possible that some databases may not include subject headings for the concept you are looking for.

Please see the videos below for further help on searching using Subject Headings in the main database platforms:

PubMed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD8T50ECYJo>

Ovid

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3736KB9Udnc>

EBSCOhost

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJJPp9yAloA>

ProQuest

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz0wGUfgDIQ>

Cochrane Library

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLD7w63rqB0>