

Subject Terms (Part 1)

Welcome to “an introduction to subject terms”

In this brief tutorial, you’ll learn:

- (1) What subject terms are,
- (2) How subject terms are used, and
- (3) When subject terms are most effective as search tools in research databases

Before the development of search engines like Google, searching for information was a much more laborious process based on the now-antiquated “card catalogue” system.

Basically, you would look up your topic in the Library of Congress catalogue books to find out what words or phrases it used to describe your subject. Then you would find and flip through all the cards that addressed your topic, one by one.

The information on each card was fairly limited, so you’d probably end up selecting a lot of resources that weren’t helpful, and wasting a lot of time looking at books and articles that you weren’t really interested in. Also, you were limited to the use of a serial approach to searching, instead of using Boolean operators and other time-saving search techniques.

Searching has (obviously) changed a lot since then, but a little known fact is that it is still possible to search for many library resources by subject – not through the use of exhaustive strings of keywords and their synonyms, but through the use of a single, all-encompassing subject term.

Subject terms are words or phrases that are assigned by a cataloguer when a resource is being processed, and that describe major themes and topics addressed in the resources to which they are assigned.

Subject terms are intended to act as “the ultimate synonyms” for the subjects they describe so that you can search a single word or phrase instead of a dozen related words connected by the Boolean operator OR.

For example, instead of searching for:

Age prejudice OR
Age discrimination OR
Ageism OR
Age stereotypes

You can simply look up the appropriate subject term (su: ageism) in a database like EBSCO: Health Source, and use that *one* term instead.

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Subject terms are very useful searching tools, but they also have some limitations that it is important to be aware of.

You might have noticed that I said that subject terms are *intended* to act as the ultimate synonyms for the subjects they describe, and not necessarily that they always do. In general, only five or six subject terms are assigned to each resource, so only using subject terms to search a topic can be a little limiting. Also, sometimes there are several closely-related subject terms that describe your topic, so you need to be sure to search all of them to get the results you want.

What subject terms *do* offer is a way to catch resources that you might have missed by using keywords and synonyms alone, and for narrowing your results lists if you find that you are getting too many irrelevant results.

In general, I suggest using both subject terms and keywords when performing initial searches on a topic in order to maximize your results.

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Thank-you for watching part 1 of “an introduction to subject terms”. In part 2 of this tutorial, you’ll learn:

- (1) How to find your subject terms in a research database, and
- (2) How to use subject terms to retrieve articles during a search.