Literature searching: Subject headings

[Based on literature search advice from Leeds University]

Searching with subject headings

Subject headings are a controlled vocabulary that a database uses to classify what an article is about. They are sometimes referred to as controlled terms or thesaurus terms. Using subject headings can improve your search results and should be used in systematic searching when possible.

Each database refers to subject headings differently e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cinahl</td>
<td>Cinahl heading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medline</td>
<td>MESH (Medical Subject Headings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proquest</td>
<td>Thesaurus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These options help you to map to the most appropriate subject heading for a keyword.

More about Cinahl headings

CINAHL headings are arranged in a hierarchy. The explode feature finds the term and any terms indented below it.

Example

When you explode the term nursing care you also get all of the terms listed beneath it (from ambulatory care nursing to transcultural nursing).

If a term has a + next to it, then it also has a set of “children” terms. These will also be included in the explode.

TIP! Exploding search terms is recommended

An indexer chooses the most appropriate headings from a controlled vocabulary list and adds them to an article’s record to help describe the major topics of that article. This can be particularly useful if the title of the article is unclear or if there is no abstract included.

Major headings will be used where the search term is a central theme within the article whereas a minor subject heading will denote that your term is a subsidiary topic within the article.
Why search with subject headings?

- Keyword searching only finds references where your search words or phrases appear in the title or abstract. You may not have thought of all the relevant keywords or synonyms, or the author may not have included the terms you were expecting at all, despite it being a major topic of the article.

- Using subject headings should retrieve those articles that are about that subject, even if the article itself doesn't use those words.

When should I use subject headings in my search?

You should include subject heading (as well as keyword) searches in your strategy if you are undertaking a systematic-review or in-depth piece of work. Subject headings can vary between databases, so you need to investigate each database separately to see their preferred language. The complete reference for any article will show you the subject headings assigned to it.

- Subject heading searches work best in databases that are highly structured, like Cinahl, Medline, Embase and PsycINFO. Subject heading searches in these databases have to be carried out on the Advanced Search screen, with the box marked "Map term to subject heading" ticked.

More about mapping

- For example, in PsycINFO, if you type in "CBT" the database will map you to the recognised subject heading for this term, which is cognitive behavior therapy. All references where that is a major topic should be indexed with that subject heading.

- Medline offers a similar mapping option as the search default. Any keyword used is automatically checked against the MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) for alternative terms. This broadens your search results.

- It is usual practice to carry out a subject heading search for each concept you identify in your search question.

Tip! Search for a known key paper by title, display the citation to see which subject headings the database indexers have given that article and consider adding relevant ones to your own search strategy.