### Subject and Keyword Searching

Understanding the differences between, and strategic uses of these types of searches will help you develop appropriate and comprehensive search strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Subject Searching</strong></th>
<th><strong>Keyword Searching</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relies on a pre-determined, fixed list of words, or subject headings, called a <strong>controlled vocabulary</strong>. (Ex. The National Library of Medicine’s Medical Subject Headings (MeSH))</td>
<td>Does not rely on a controlled vocabulary. Allows for the use of <strong>everyday language</strong> and terminology. Sometimes called free-text or text-word searching.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Must be searched using the exact <strong>terminology</strong> and <strong>format</strong> of the controlled vocabulary.</td>
<td>Allows for <strong>inconsistency</strong> in the use of language to describe a concept.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Searches only the <strong>Subject Field(s)</strong> of a bibliographic record.</td>
<td>Searches <strong>multiple fields</strong> of a bibliographic record, such as the title, notes, and abstract or full-text when available.</td>
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<td>Provides <strong>consistency</strong> in the description of the content of materials.</td>
<td>Can be <strong>truncated</strong> to search for word variations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depending on the database can be combined using <strong>Boolean</strong> operators.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Uses:**
- Assures that you have **retrieved all records** indexed using a particular subject heading.
- Especially good for **basic categories** of information such as diagnosis and therapy.
- Can increase the **precision** of a search and the **relevance** of items retrieved.
- Most controlled vocabularies are arranged in a **hierarchy** or **structure** that reveals relationships between terms. This feature can be used to move easily to more general and/or more specific headings.

Notes:
- Remember to consult the subject field(s) of relevant records retrieved in a search for useful subject headings.
- Remember to consult other text fields (title, abstract, etc.) of relevant records for other vocabulary that might be useful in a search.
- Keep track of the strategies that you use to be more systematic about searching.

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Uses:
- Allows for retrieval of relevant records that are **indexed differently**.
- Allows for **flexibility** when subject headings are too general or specific.
- Due to language inconsistencies, can result in the retrieval of **less relevant** items.
- Good for searching **topics that are too new** to have been added to a controlled vocabulary.
- A good keyword search will help you **identify appropriate subject headings** to use in further iterations of a search strategy.