

Keyword vs. Subject Searching: What's More Effective?

When using the catalog (books, DVDs, etc.) or a database (magazine, journal and newspaper articles), there are two basic ways to search for information: **keyword** or **subject**. There are benefits and drawbacks to both methods of searching for information. Here are some key points for each:

Keyword	Subject
Use "natural language" words to describe your topic. Any common words/phrases can be used as keywords.	Uses "controlled vocabulary" words assigned by someone to best describe a book, DVD, or article. Did they use "plastic surgery" or "cosmetic surgery"?
More flexible way to search - you can combine several topics in a single search (using Boolean operators: and, or, not).	Less flexible way to search – typically, you can only search for one, typically broad, subject at a time.
Will look for search terms in multiple fields: author, title, subject, abstract.	Will only look for subject term in the subject heading field of a record.
May retrieve many irrelevant results that won't be very useful.	Results typically very precise and relevant to the topic.

Keyword Searching

A keyword search is the broadest search you can perform, since it will look for your search term(s) in multiple fields: title, author, abstract (summary), and subject/descriptor. Below is a sample keyword search from the **Academic Search Premier** database:

The screenshot shows the EBSCO Research Databases search interface. At the top, there are navigation buttons for 'Basic Search', 'Advanced Search', 'Visual Search', and 'Choose Databases'. Below these is a green navigation bar with links for 'Sign In to My EBSCOhost', 'Keyword' (circled in red), 'Publications', 'Subject Terms', and 'Cited References'. The search input field contains the text 'video games and violence' and has 'Search' and 'Clear' buttons next to it. Below the input field, there is a dropdown menu showing 'in Academic Search Premier' with a blue question mark icon to its right.

In this case, we are looking for magazine and journal articles that deal with "violence in video games." Notice how we identified our keywords – **video games** and **violence** – and used the Boolean operator "**and**" to combine our terms together. The ability to identify your keywords, and ignore unnecessary words, is one secret to effective keyword searching.

With the search above, the database retrieved hundreds of articles dealing with some aspect of violence in video games. Let's look at the record for one of the articles retrieved below:

Title:	Do <i>Video Games</i> Make Kids More Violent?	Find More Like This
Source:	CQ Researcher ; 11/10/2006, Vol. 16 Issue 40, p948-649, 2p	
Document Type:	Article	
Subject Terms:	* COMPUTER games * VIDEO games * VIOLENCE * VIDEO games & children * VIDEO games & teenagers	
Company/Entity:	AMERICAN Psychological Association (Organization) DUNS Number: 086352101	
Abstract:	The article presents a discussion on whether violent behavior of computer games player can be blamed to the video games . The American Psychological Association adopted a resolution recommending the reduction of violence in video games after experts' findings indicate that exposure to video game violence increases youth's aggressive thoughts and behavior.	

Notice that our keywords (in bold) show up in the abstract field of the article, and as a result, the article was retrieved. The article looks to be quite relevant to our topic, and we'll use for our research paper.

However, the broad nature of keyword searching can be its biggest disadvantage, since many irrelevant articles may be retrieved. Remember, the database is simply looking for your search word(s) across many fields, regardless of its meaning. A keyword search using the term "**race**" may return some interesting results. We will get articles dealing with **racial issues**, as well as results from the latest **NASCAR race**.

Use Keyword Searching If:

- There is no subject heading for your topic (the topic is very current)
- You want to combine multiple topics using the Boolean "AND" operator (eating disorders AND ethnicity)
- You want to use common words and search multiple fields (title, author, abstract, etc.)
- You don't mind looking at a number of irrelevant articles

Subject Searching

A subject search involves searching only the subject/descriptor field of a database – it will not search for your words in the title, author, or abstract fields. Subject headings or descriptors are assigned by a person to best describe what an item (article, book, DVD, etc.) is about. For consistency, subject headings assigned to an item will be selected from an approved list of terms (such as the **Library of Congress Subject Headings**). However, it is

often difficult to guess what term is used for the official subject heading – do they use “plastic surgery,” “cosmetic surgery,” or some other term? A good database will direct you to the correct subject heading. Let’s see how this might work using the **online catalog** to look for books and audiovisual material as we prepare for an informative speech on cosmetic surgery.

We’ll try a subject search in the online catalog, and guess that they use the term “cosmetic surgery”:

[Search Tips](#)

You are searching: Community College of Southern Nevada

[Quick Search](#) | [Advanced Search](#)

Did we guess right with the term “cosmetic surgery”?

Cosmetic Surgery is not used in this library's catalog.

Surgery, Plastic is used instead.

Search for [Surgery, Plastic](#)



No, we didn’t. But the database uses a “**See**” reference to guide us to the correct subject heading: in this case, “**Surgery, Plastic**” (who would have guessed). By clicking on the correct subject heading, we will retrieve all the books and audiovisual materials on our topic. Keep in mind that we will only retrieve material if the term “**Surgery, Plastic**” shows up in the **subject field** (not the title, author, etc.):

Title [BodySculpture : plastic surgery of the body for men & women](#)

Author [Engler, Alan M](#)

Publ info New York : Hudson Pub., c2000

Subject [Surgery, Plastic](#)

Descript x, 309 p. ; 23 cm

Subject searching will return very precise results. If the item is not on the subject of "Surgery, Plastic," we will not see it.

Use Subject Searching If:

- You are searching for a single, broad topic (global warming, stem cell research, illegal immigration, etc.)
- You desire relevant, precise results
- You want the system to suggest related terms and concepts