Basic Search Strategies: Keyword and Subject Searching

At the conclusion of this section, you will be able to explain the differences between **keyword** and **subject** searching, and perform effective searches in the library catalog and in the library article databases, utilizing keyword and subject searching strategies.

### What is a Keyword?

Keywords are the words that you decide to use when you’re searching for information. They are the words that appear in your research topic.

**EXAMPLE:**
In searching the library catalog for information on the history of the death penalty in the United States, keywords would be ‘**history**’, ‘**death penalty**’, and ‘**United States**’.

---

**NOTE:** When you are searching in the library catalog, the Boolean operator AND is implied, similar to a Google search.
Your search retrieved 42 items.

A keyword search searches all of the fields in the catalog record, including the **title**, **summary**, and **table of contents**. It looks for the keywords by themselves, and even in a different order.
What are Keywords and Keyword Searching?

- Keywords are the words that appear in your research topic. (or keyword = natural language)
- Keyword searching is a good starting strategy.
- It searches all of the fields in a catalog or database record, including title, author, table of contents, and summary.
- It may retrieve too many or too little results.
- It may retrieve irrelevant results.

What is Subject Searching?

Subject terms, also known as descriptors, come from a pre-determined, or controlled, vocabulary.

EXAMPLE: The Library of Congress subject terms that academic libraries use for subject searching in their library catalogs.
A subject search searches only the subject, or descriptor, field in the library catalog or library database record.

Subject terms tell you what the book is about, so click on the subject to find additional material on this topic.
You now have 18 items with this subject term. You can be more specific and search the additional subject terms listed here.

What is Subject Searching?

- **Subject terms**, also known as **descriptors**, come from a controlled or pre-determined vocabulary. Academic libraries use the Library of Congress subject headings for subject searching in their library catalogs.
- Subject searching searches only the subject or descriptor field in the catalog or database record.
- This type of search will help focus search results.
- Subject searching usually retrieves relevant results.
Let's do the same keyword search in the library database ‘Academic Search Complete.’ Combine your keywords using the Boolean operator AND.

The search retrieved 157 results. Browse through the result list looking for a relevant article. Click on the title to see the complete article record.
Look for the subject terms that have been assigned to this article...

...enter your subjects into the search boxes, and select ‘subject terms’ from the drop-down menu.
This subject search retrieved 11 highly focused articles. Subject searching with a controlled vocabulary is a strength of both library article databases and the library catalog. Internet search engines like Google and Yahoo do not have this feature, so it is difficult to narrow your searches to highly relevant results.
SUMMARY

In this module you have learned to:

- explain the differences between **keyword** and **subject** searching.
- perform effective searches in the library catalog and in the library article databases, utilizing keyword and subject searching strategies.