Subject Headings & Databases: An Introduction

What Are Subject Headings?

Subject Headings, which can also be referred to as "index terms" are controlled vocabulary terms used in database records to make searching easier and more successful. By standardizing the words or phrases used to represent concepts, you don't need to try and figure out all the ways different authors could refer to the same concept.

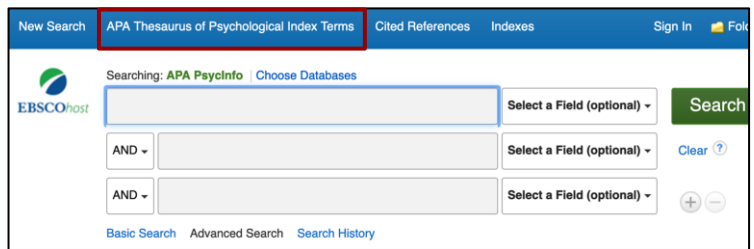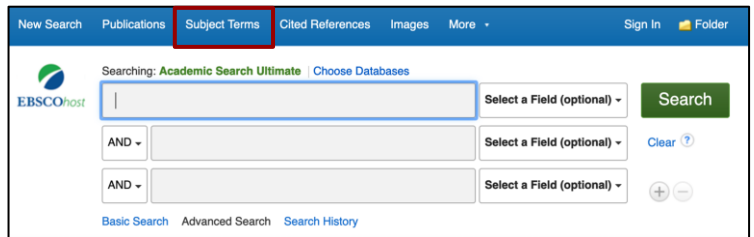## Why is a Controlled Vocabulary Essential for Searching?

With the wide variety of vocabulary used to represent concepts in research literature, finding articles about specific topics can be difficult without the controlled vocabulary of a thesaurus. Controlled vocabulary provides a way of searching for information to ensure that you are seeing *all* of the relevant literature on your topic, despite the different vocabulary used to describe the same concept.

For instance, there are several different words that can represent the concept of "cancer": tumours, carcinoma, neoplasm, etc. Instead of having to search for all of these terms separately to find relevant articles, controlled vocabulary allows you to search just using one word, "neoplasms." This then guarantees you'll see all articles that are related to cancer.
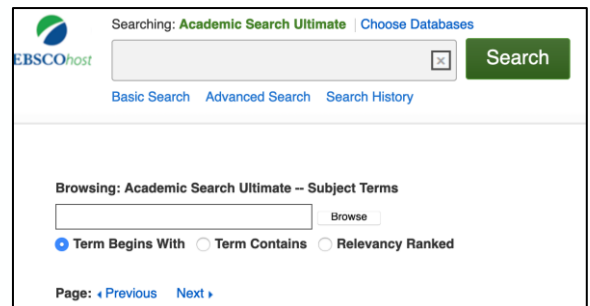
Subject Headings in EBSCO Databases

To explore subject headings in EBSCO databases, the first step is to look at the tabs across the top blue bar of the database's main search page.

Depending on the database that you are using, the subject heading option may be called something slightly different. For instance, on the right you can see that when searching in Academic Search Ultimate, the subject heading search is called "subject terms", while in PsycINFO, the subject heading search is called "APA Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms."
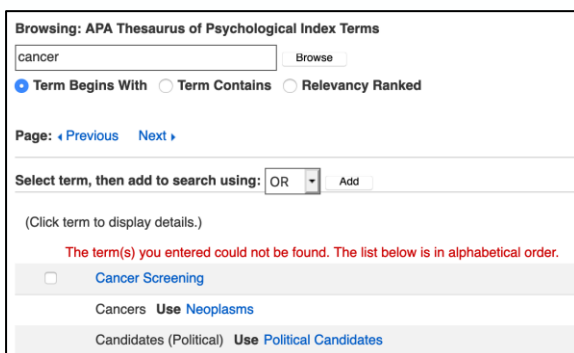

Finding Subject Headings

After clicking on the subject terms tab, you will see a search box appear that invites you to type in a subject. Type in any subject, concept, topic, or term that you would like to explore, and then hit the "browse" button to run your search.

You will then see the results from your search. If your search term is listed as the official subject heading in the index, it will pop up in blue. If not, the official subject heading will be suggested to you, as is the case in the image on the left. After searching for "cancer", the index has recommended that one should "use neoplasms" instead.
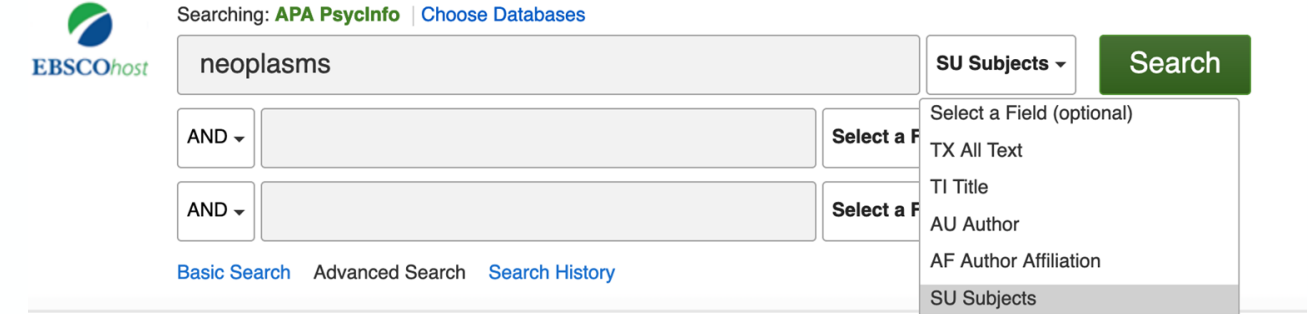
Broader & Narrower Subject Headings

Another way that the subject heading indexes can be used is to find broader and/or narrower subject terms related to your topic.

Let's say that you want your research topic to focus on neoplasms (aka cancer), however you are getting way too many articles popping up in your search results and would like to try narrowing down your topic. If you search for "neoplasms" in the subject terms index, the index will give you a list of "narrower terms", which are just specified subject headings that are related to your topic. The subject terms index can also give you "broader terms" as well, which are broader concepts than that subject term. You can see examples of broader and narrower terms in the image below.

☐ **Neoplasms**	
Year Term Introduced	1967
Broader Terms	☐ Physical Disorders
Narrower Terms	☐ Benign Neoplasms
	☐ Breast Neoplasms
	☐ Endocrine Neoplasms
	☐ Leukemias
	☐ Melanoma
	☐ Metastasis
	☐ Nervous System Neoplasms +
	☐ Terminal Cancer
Related Terms	☐ Antineoplastic Drugs
	☐ Cachexia +
	☐ Digestive System Disorders +
	☐ Gastrointestinal Disorders +
	☐ Human Papillomavirus
	☐ Liver Disorders +
	☐ Oncology
Used for	Cancers
	Carcinomas
	Malignant Neoplasms
	Sarcomas
	Tumors

Literature Searching with Subject Headings

Once you have used the Subject Heading indexes in EBSCO to gather accurate subject headings, you are then ready to run a literature search using the "subjects" field option! On the main search page for the EBSCO database, you will find a "select a field" drop down menu next to each search box. Type in the subject term(s) that you would like to search for and then use this drop down menu to select the "SU Subjects" field (see below). This will now only search the database for articles that have officially been indexed using this subject term!

Additional Resources

Below are additional resources that provide more information and tutorials on using subject headings in the EBSCO databases:

- **Browsing Subject Terms in EBSCOhost Databases - Video Tutorial**
  https://connect.ebsco.com/s/article/Browsing-Subject-Terms-in-EBSCOhost-Databases-Tutorial?language=en_US

- **What is EBSCO's controlled vocabulary?**
  https://connect.ebsco.com/s/article/What-is-EBSCOs-Controlled-Vocabulary?language=en_US

- **Keyword Searching vs. Subject Searching Guide - MIT:**
  https://libguides.mit.edu/c.php?g=175963&p=1160804