Subject-based searching

Subject-based searching allows you to search for resources based on the subject of the item, not on keywords appearing within a document. Effective subject-based searches usually work within controlled vocabularies, meaning that the database uses selected terminology to represent specific topics.

Terms in a controlled vocabulary have been applied by professional cataloguers, so the search process is more consistent and has fewer “false positives” than regular keyword searching where you would retrieve documents that only mention the words you are searching for in passing. If you use a controlled vocabulary, you also do not have to come up with multiple synonyms for the same concept or deal with different arrangements of words that mean the same thing.

For instance, discrimination, voting rights, section 1983, first amendment, and other similar concepts might all found by using the controlled vocabulary “civil rights.”

Controlled vocabularies are found in many databases and library catalogs, including ours – One of the ways you can use controlled vocabulary is to refine your searches. Here we have found a casebook on water law. Under “Subject” we see there are several ways of describing this concept. If we click on “Water Rights, United States Cases,” we can review a variety of subject headings – some of them are narrower than our original, and at least one of them is broader. Depending on what we were looking for, we might use these links to improve our research.

Let’s walk through a complete example of how to use subject headings to search for materials on international water law.

When you use subject headings to refine your research, it is not so crucial that you select the perfect result. In our case, we will click into the first record to review the subject headings.

In addition to the 49 titles that Georgetown Law Libraries’ offer that are on this topic, we can see other related topics. So if you were more specifically interested in water rights in Latin America, you could review that subject heading.

LegalTrac, a database of legal periodicals, also allows you to search by subject headings. When in LegalTrac, you can click on “subject guide search” and enter your search terms. Select the most appropriate subject topic from the drop-down list.

You can also review the sub-topics to see if those are helpful to refine your search.

Subject heading searching is extremely helpful when you have a huge database such as a legislative history repository, such as ProQuest Congressional.
Notice that if we searched for the same words without using subject searching, we would get more than double the hits. This is due to the fact that subject terms have been assigned in a consistent manner, ensuring that what you find is *about* that topic, and doesn’t just *mention* it. When you just do keyword searching, any mere mention of the words you are looking for will retrieve that document. For instance, documents about air pollution that contrast it with water pollution without substantively discussing water pollution would be retrieved in a keyword search. This can be very inefficient.

If you have questions about this or any other topic, please contact a reference librarian.