

Subject Searching

When you do subject searching in an online database, like a catalog or an article database, you are searching for your search word only in the **subject field** of the record for the book or article. The subject field contains the **subject heading** that has been assigned to describe the content of the book or article.

Subject headings can also be called **descriptors** in online article databases. Online catalogs and article databases frequently have a list of descriptors that is either called a **controlled vocabulary** list or a **thesaurus**. (This is particularly true of article databases containing professional materials such as journals.) The controlled vocabulary list for the C.O.D. Library online catalog is called the Library of Congress Subject Headings. These lists of subject headings or descriptors dictate the way you can do a subject search for your information.

Advantage of a Subject Search

Advantage: You will get fewer and more relevant results than if you do a keyword search. Remember, the keyword search will look everywhere in the record for your search word regardless of its relevancy. The subject search, on the other hand, will only look in the subject field where the main topics of the item are listed.

Disadvantage of a Subject Search

Disadvantage: You are restricted to the controlled vocabulary for the given database. You either have to know that vocabulary or have access to the controlled vocabulary list. The search word that you choose to search that sounds like a legitimate term to you may not be the word chosen by the creator of the controlled vocabulary list. If you don't pick the right word, you will not find your information!

EXAMPLE of a Subject search in the C.O.D. Library Catalog:

Topic: Polish Americans. Notice that "Polish Americans" is a Subject (Heading) in the record below.

Author [Erdmans, Mary Patrice](#)
Title **Opposite Poles : immigrants and ethnics in Polish Chicago, 1976-1990 / Mary Patrice Erdmans**
Publ date University Park, Pa. : Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998

LOCATION	CALL NO.	STATUS	MESSAGE
General	F548.9.P7 E73 1998	ON SHELF	

Phys descr x, 267 p. ; 24 cm
Note Includes bibliographical references (p. [233]-248) and index
Subject [Polish Americans -- Illinois -- Chicago -- History -- 20th century](#)