

Subject Headings

You can search a library's catalogue by title or author to locate a particular book. However the search may be more challenging if you have a topic instead of a title or author. With a topic, you'll ideally locate the best subject headings "representing" the topic in the catalogue. Subject headings are sometimes referred to as a "controlled vocabulary".

Organizations such as the *Library of Congress (LC)*, the *American Psychological Association (APA)* and the *National Library of Medicine (NLM)*, determine words or phrases that'll "represent" concepts – this is known as a "controlled vocabulary". Each controlled vocabulary will be different. When used in a search, the controlled term (i.e. the subject heading) will retrieve information relevant to that topic. Most academic library catalogues, including Novanet and WorldCat Local, use the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* as the controlled vocabulary.

The following examples will help illustrate the purpose and value of subject headings:

1) "World War Two"

When we hear or read this phrase, we know a mid-20th century war is being referred to. If searching for information on this event we might use the phrase "World War Two", "World War 2", or even "World War 11" in your strategy. Which one is correct? Answer: None of these terms is the Library of Congress subject heading.

The controlled or preferred search term is *World War, 1939 – 1945*.

2) "Depression"

Another word that illustrates the complexities of language is **depression**. This word has several meanings, some of which are noted below:

Discipline: Economics

An extended or severe period of recession. Depressions occur infrequently. The most recent Great Depression occurred in the 1930s; prior to that they occurred in the periods 1873–96, 1844–51, and 1810–17. Depressions are usually associated.....

From: *A Dictionary of Finance and Banking*

Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) or preferred search term: *depressions*

Discipline: Psychology

A mood, state of sadness, gloom, and pessimistic ideation, with loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities.....

From: *A Dictionary of Psychology*

LCSH or preferred search term: *depression*

Discipline: *Meteorology*

A cyclonic circulation of winds towards the low pressure at the centre, where convergence occurs. It can produce violent, damaging thunderstorms with winds of force 12 or above on the Beaufort scale.

From: *A Dictionary of Environment and Conservation*

LCSH or preferred search term: *fronts (meteorology)*

Lesson Learned

We can't assume we know a subject heading for a particular topic. Identifying and using the best subject heading is an important step in the research process.

For example:

If your essay topic is "Write about the impact of the Great Depression on farming" you'll benefit by using the subject heading "*depressions – 1929*" because you're immediately focusing on that historical event. You won't have to wade through book titles such as, *Depression in Children* or *Yoga for Depression* to identify books on your topic.

See: "*Finding the Best Subject Heading for your Research*" to learn more about identifying subject headings.

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