

Subject Headings Lesson

Moodle Assignment Outline



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All you ever wanted to know about subject headings... or maybe more than you wanted to know

Ever wonder how online catalogs can find books about a topic, place, or person that you are searching for? Read through the topics below, click on the links, and complete the activities to find out.

1. What are Subject Headings?

Subject headings are standardized terms or phrases that classify materials, identifying and pulling together all information about a subject. A subject heading represents a single concept (a topic, place, or person) and may appear as a single word or a multiple-word phrase, examples include: ‘Automobiles’, ‘Hospitals’, ‘Electrochemistry’, ‘Woman in motion pictures’, ‘Database management’, ‘Einstein, Albert’ and ‘France’.

2. A Brief History of Library of Congress Subject Headings

A system devised in 1898 and originally intended as a subject cataloging tool for the Library of Congress' own use, most online catalogs and databases around the world use Library of Congress subject headings. Library of Congress subject headings have become the standard for subject cataloging and indexing in public, private and commercial databases- organizing many different sources of information, not just books. This means that subject headings from library to library remain consistent because they are all using the same terminology. Library of Congress subject headings are constantly under review in consideration of advances in technology and cultural, social, and language changes.

3. Why use subject headings?

If library users could only locate items by ‘title’ or ‘author’, they would have to spend a lot of time searching for items about the same subject because that type of search doesn’t identify items with the same type of content. Subject headings indicate the contents of books in terms that their titles do not use. Searching for an item by ‘keyword’ will also find items that have that ‘keyword’ in the ‘title’ or ‘author’ fields, but may not necessarily contain the content the user is looking for.

4. Try it out in the the DHSLC online catalog

Open up Researcher (from the Alexandria menu go to ‘Show’ and click on ‘Researcher’

Type ‘Hemingway, Ernest’ in the search box and return (or click on ‘Search’)

The results show all books in the library's catalog that Alexandria (this library's cataloging system) has determined have anything to do with Ernest Hemingway- whether he wrote the book or whether the book is about him as a subject.

Let's say you are writing a report on Ernest Hemingway and you want to find a book about him. You need to do a subject search instead.

Go back to Researcher

Click on the orange tab that says 'New Search'

When the search window opens up 'Hemingway, Ernest' should still be in the 'Search' bar

Click on 'Subject'

Quiz Question #1. Did Alexandria return fewer results?

These results show all the books in the library's catalog that are about Ernest Hemingway this time. Because 'Hemingway, Ernest' is a Library of Congress subject heading all books about him should show up in your new results. As long as a book is cataloged properly in the online catalog with the correct subject heading, a user should be able to find all books the library has on any given subject.

Another way to think about how a subject heading search works is to compare the way Google searches for the words you type into a Google search box. Google is searching the web for any reference to the words you type in the search box to find something that matches what you are looking for.

In a 'Subject' search, Alexandria searches through all the Library of Congress subject headings of all the books in the library. Results returned will be books with Library of Congress subject headings that match the word(s) you have typed in the search box.

If you do a 'Title' search, Alexandria is searching through all the titles of all the books in the library to find the words you have typed in the search box. Results returned will have titles that match the words you have typed into the search box.

If you just do a general search (by hitting return or by clicking on 'Search') then Alexandria searches through all the information on all the books in the library and returns any book that matches the words you type in a search box, whether the words are contained in the title, author, or subject headings of the book. More results will be returned, but you will have to determine which books contain information about the subjects you want.

5. The Problem with Subject Headings

If you want to search for a specific subject in Alexandria to find a book about that subject, you can just type in the subject you want and the Alexandria will return books with that subject, right? Unfortunately no- not every time. In order to find books in a subject heading search you have to type an official Library of Congress

subject heading into the search box. In order to find a book about cars, you have to now that the official Library of Congress subject heading for 'cars' is 'Automobiles'.

6. Try it out in the the DHSLC online catalog

Go back to Researcher

Type "cars" in the search box

Click on 'Subject'

Quiz Question #2. What book is returned?

Quiz Question #3. Is the book about cars?

Now try a new search using an official Library of Congress subject heading.

Click on the orange tab that says 'New Search'

Type "automobiles" in the search box

Click on 'Subject'

**Quiz Question #4. How many books are returned for this search?
(Look in the upper right hand corner of the search results)**

Quiz Question #5. Are all the books about cars?

7. Frustrated?

So you may be wondering, "What's the point of using subject headings if I have to know exactly what words to type in?" Good question. Some cataloging systems search for all official Library of Congress subject headings related to the words typed into a subject search. Alexandria does not. The cataloging system that the Dexter District Library has purchased does have a thesaurus to assist with subject searches- it's not always completely accurate, but it does help the average patron find more books in an online catalog about the subject they are interested in.

8. Try out the Dexter District Library Online Catalog

Type "cars" into the search box.

Change the search type from 'keywords' by clicking on it and selecting 'subject' instead.

Click on 'Search'

**Quiz Question #6. How many items are returned for this search?
(Look in the gray bar at the top of the search results)**

Quiz Question #7. Do all the results seem to be about cars (as in automobiles)?

Quiz Question #8. How can you tell?

Hint: What did you do to find the subjects in Alexandria?

Now try a new search using an official Library of Congress subject heading.

Go back to the Dexter District Library Online Catalog
Type “automobiles” in the search box
Click on ‘Subject’

**Quiz Question #9. How many books are returned for this search?
(Look in the gray bar at the top of the search results)**

Quiz Question #10. Do the results seem to be about cars (as in automobiles)?

Tell me what you think...

Quiz Question #11. What have you learned so far in this assignment to justify using Library of Congress subject headings?

If you can’t think of anything- do a Google search on subject headings or check out the links provided in this assignment and see what you can find.

Quiz Question #12. Tell me something new that you learned about subject headings.

9. Fun with Subject Headings

Click on ‘Subject Heading Choices’ below to see a list of Library of Congress subjects headings for books in the DHSLC. Choose one group of subject headings (books usually have more than one subject heading in order to identify everything the book is about) and write a 50 word script for a movie preview about an imaginary movie (you know, like the ones that start out with the man with the deep voice saying something like “In a world...”).

Your movie preview script should:

- be about a movie with the same content that the subject headings represent
- make reference to all the subject headings listed
- include the title of your imaginary movie
- be at least 50 words
- include your word count

Use Pages to create your movie preview script and copy and paste your final text below.

You don’t have use the exact same words as the subject headings, for example for “automobile” you can use “cars”. Go ahead and use the thesaurus tool in Pages to help you find words similar to the subject headings.

Be creative- make it an “advertisement” for a movie you would love to see!

Book #1

Survival skills
Television programs
Interpersonal relations

Book #2

Physicians
Suspense fiction
Political fiction

Book #3

Secret societies
France
Spy stories

Book #4

Single women
Darcy, Fitzwilliam (Fictitious character)
Love stories.

Book #5

North Carolina
Romantic suspense novels
Love stories

10. Sources:

<http://www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/subjectheadings.html>

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/jomc/academics/dri/loc/lcsh3.html>

<http://www4.uwm.edu/libraries/guides/subhd49.cfm>

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9808/lcsh-100.html>

<http://www.loc.gov/library/libarch-thesauri.html>

<http://authorities.loc.gov/>

Book #1: The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

Book #2: Seizure by Robin Cook

Book #3: The Alchemist in the Shadows by Pierre Pevel

Book #4: Me and Mr. Darcy by Alexandra Potter

Book #5: The Lucky One by Nicholas Sparks