Using a Database Thesaurus: How to Find the Best Terms to use in your Search

Searching databases can be a bit tricky, especially because you need to be very specific in how you search, and what words you use. Coming up with the right terms to use in a particular database can be challenging, and what works in one database might not work in another. But many databases include a thesaurus, which can help you find the best terms to use for your topic.

A database thesaurus is similar to a traditional thesaurus: it provides synonyms and related terms to the word you’re searching. But a database thesaurus tells you exactly what word or phrase to use for a particular idea or term.

Each item in the database is tagged with one or more keywords or subjects, to help researchers quickly find information, and determine if it is relevant for their research.

To create these keywords or subjects for each resource, databases use a controlled vocabulary: meaning they decide what phrase or term to use for a particular idea, and only use that phrase or term when categorizing or tagging the resources in the database. Let’s try an example.

Starting at the library homepage, library.jhu.edu, I’ll pick a database from the Databases by name menu on the right side of the screen. In this example, we will use the database called Academic Search Complete. I’ve already tried a few searches in this database for a new topic, “music education”. I want to try using the thesaurus to ensure I’m using the right terms. In this database, the thesaurus is in the upper left of the screen, and it is called “Subject Terms.”

When I click on Subject Terms, I am taken to a new page with a search box. I can type in my term, “music education,” select “Term Contains”, and click browse. The first line in the results tells me to use “Music -- Instruction & study” instead of music education. I can click on this to get more information. This new list shows me more subject terms that can be helpful as well. Clicking on any one of these will give me more information about the particular term. “Scope Note” tells me what this database considers their definition “Music -- Instruction & study,” and below is a list of broader, narrower, and related terms. I can now take any of these terms and use them in my search to get better results.

This strategy can be used in almost any database. Look for links such as “Thesaurus,” “Subject Terms,” or “Descriptors,” and you’ll be able to search for the proper terms to use for a particular database. Not all databases use the same terms, so check each time you search in a new one.

For more search tips, look at our guide, Find Books, Articles and More, at guides.library.jhu.edu/find. You can also get help at ask.library.jhu.edu.