

This guide gives brief information on how to choose textwords and subject headings to run a comprehensive literature search. More details can be found on the Library Help webpages www.lshtm.ac.uk/library/help/help.html.

Textwords

Most users of online search tools are familiar with using textwords to search. When you use textwords, you are searching for particular words or phrases in the title, full-text, abstract etc. Most search tools allow you to specify which parts of the reference you search.

When you choose your textwords, you should start by compiling a list of words and phrases which an author may have used in the title or abstract.

Example

If you are interested in schoolchildren, there are many words and phrases which authors can use to describe this topic. Some are listed below, I'm sure you can think of more.

schoolchild school child school-child
schoolchildren school children school-children
girl girls boy boys
child children
youth young person young people
teenager adolescent
pubescent pre-pubescent

Remember to include the following:

- UK and US spelling,
- UK and US terminology,
- abbreviations and non-abbreviated terms
- disease names and their vectors (if appropriate)
- generic and trade drug names (if appropriate)

Including as many different terms as you can makes a huge difference to the comprehensiveness of your literature search.

Subject headings

Some medical databases allow you to search for articles written about a pre-defined subject. This is done using a feature called subject headings.

Each database has a list of thousands of pre-defined subjects which it covers. These are arranged in a hierarchy of broad topics (eg sexually transmitted diseases) down to very specific ones (eg HIV Seropositivity). The Medline system is called MeSH (Medical Subject Headings). Each subject heading



has a very well defined subject, any article which is about that subject, as defined by the database, will be indexed with that heading.

Before an article is added to the database, it is indexed with a selection of these subject headings, specifying which subjects the article is about and other relevant information such as the study type or the country of study.

Example

Hernandez R. et al. Screening for open angle glaucoma: systematic review of cost-effectiveness studies. J Glaucoma 2008; 17(3):159-68.

This article is indexed with the following MeSH terms.

Cost-benefit analysis	Ophthalmology/economics
Databases, factual	Perimetry/economics
Glaucoma, Open-Angle/diagnosis*	Predictive Value of Tests
Glaucoma, Open-Angle/economics*	Tonometry, Ocular/economics
Humans	Vision Screening/economics*
Intraocular Pressure	Visual Fields
Mass Screening/economics*	

The MeSH terms with an asterisk next to them are the **major subject headings** or the focused subject headings. These denote the main subjects covered by the article.

Some of the subject headings have a slash followed by another term. These are called **subheadings** and denote that the article covers a particular aspect of this subject. Sometimes more than one subheading is listed.

The subject headings are arranged in a hierarchy. You can use this hierarchy to broaden or narrow your search. Below is the hierarchy for the Mass Screening subject heading in MeSH.

Diagnostic Techniques & Procedures
 Mass Screening
 Anonymous Testing
 Genetic Screening
 Mass Chest X-Ray
 Multiphasic Screening
 Neonatal Screening

Articles are indexed using the most specific subject heading available. So articles indexed using mass screening do not specify in the text which screening technique is being used. Articles which do specify are indexed under the specific technique being discussed. To find articles indexed with a term, plus any of the narrower terms appearing underneath it in the hierarchy, just **EXPLODE** your term. So exploding the term mass screening will find the articles indexed with the term mass screening, plus those indexed with anonymous testing, plus those indexed with genetic screening etc. Some databases automatically explode your subject heading terms, others require you to switch term explosion on. Refer to the database help pages for further information.