

Searching with Subject Headings

- Subject headings are a controlled vocabulary that a health-related library database uses to classify what an article is about.
- Using subject headings complements keyword searching by retrieving those articles that are *about* that subject, even if the article itself doesn't use those words.
- Subject headings should be used in systematic literature reviews, where it is usual practice to carry out a subject heading search alongside your keywords for each concept you identify in your research question.
- Subject headings can vary between databases, so you need to investigate each database separately to see their preferred language

The library databases that include subject headings are:

- [CINAHL](#): see example below
- [MEDLINE](#): same process as CINAHL example below
- [Proquest Nursing and Allied Health](#): use the advanced search to find the subject heading search box
- [Cochrane Library](#): use the advanced search to find the medical subject heading (MeSH) search box
- [PsycARTICLES](#): same process as CINAHL example below

An example using CINAHL

Step 1

Go to the [library CINAHL page](#) and click **Access CINAHL**

Step 2

Enter a concept term from your research question into the search box, e.g.

Searching: **CINAHL Plus with Full Text** | [Choose Databases](#)

Suggest Subject Terms

Step 3

Tick the **Suggest Subject Terms** box and click **Search**

Suggest Subject Terms

Step 4

Tick the subject heading that is most relevant for your research question. Exploding search terms is recommended as this will find the maximum number of results.

Results For: sleep

Check box to view subheadings. | Click linked term for tree view. | Explode (+) | Major Concept | Scope

	Explode (+)	Major Concept	Scope
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sleep	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sleep Apnea, Central	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Sleep Disorders, Circadian Rhythm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

If you are not sure what a particular heading means, click on the scope note icon next to it:



Step 5

Click **Search Database**

Search Database

Search Term	Explode (+)	Major Concept
Sleep	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Step 6

Click on Search History and you will see that your Search Term appears as (MH "Sleep+") and has retrieved 30,273 results

Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Actions
<input type="checkbox"/> S1	(MH "Sleep+")	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (30,273)