Controlled Vocabulary Searching

What is controlled vocabulary?

A controlled vocabulary is a standardised, pre-defined set of terms used by a database to describe and categorise articles or information based on their content.

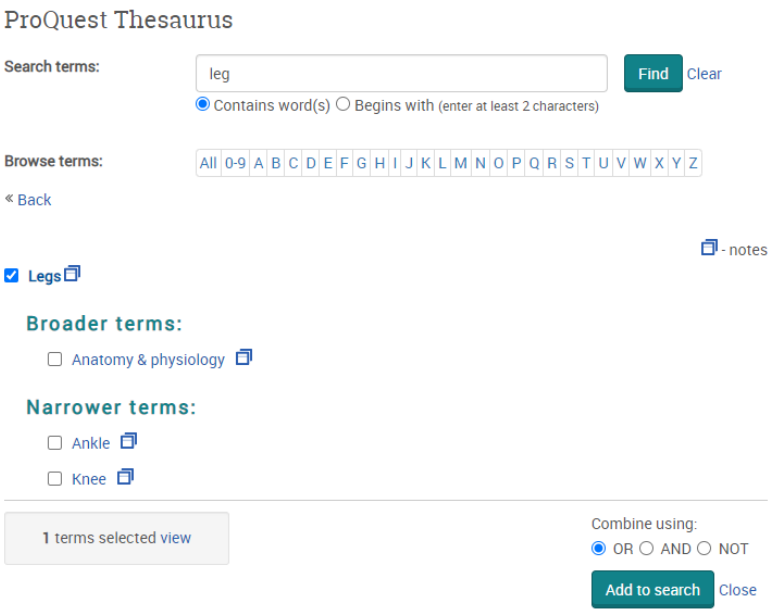
Controlled vocabulary may also be referred to as subjects, subject headings, subject terms, descriptors, thesaurus, or index terms, depending on the database you are using.

Using controlled vocabulary to search can help you to find a greater number of relevant results more quickly.

How is controlled vocabulary searching different to keyword searching?

Imagine you want to find articles that are about the human leg. Typing the keyword 'leg' into a database will return results where the word leg features anywhere in the record. So, leg may be the focus of the article, appearing multiple times in the text or it could just appear once and be mentioned in passing. Either way, all of these articles will appear in the results list. If the database is multidisciplinary, these results could also include articles about furniture (chair legs) or other irrelevant topics.

If you search using controlled vocabulary, the database will find articles that are actually about the human leg – a human indexer behind the scenes will have reviewed the articles and assigned them the appropriate subject term of 'leg'. The keywords that are used throughout the article may not even include the word 'leg' - it could be that the author uses the terms knee or ankle instead, but they will be included in the results because the indexer recognised that articles including these terms (sometimes called 'narrower terms') are also about the leg. So rather than having to do separate searches for knee, ankle, and so on, you find all the relevant results at once.



Controlled vocabulary searching can be a useful thing to do at the beginning of your literature search as you may find inspiration for other keywords or phrases you might like to use to enhance your search in other databases.

However, controlled vocabulary is at its most effective when you combine it with your own keywords. Using keywords alongside a controlled vocabulary means that you can pick up misspellings, plus any articles that are waiting to be index or that an indexer may have missed (they are only human after all!)

Which databases at Newcastle University use a controlled vocabulary?

The University Library subscribes to a number of subject databases that use a controlled vocabulary. The best way to find these databases is via your subject guide.

Some examples include:

- PsycInfo (Psychology)
- Medline (Medical/Biomedical Sciences)
- Business Source Complete (Business)
- Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (Modern Languages)
- Education Abstracts (Education)
- Natural Sciences Collection (Natural Sciences)
- GreenFILE (Environmental Studies)
- CAB Abstracts (Agriculture & Biology)

Database platforms (such as EBSCO, ProQuest or Ovid) provide access to controlled vocabulary in different ways. On some databases you can start typing your keywords into the search box and appropriate terms will automatically be suggested for you. On others, you may need to select advanced search or look for a link to the thesaurus.

Each database will have a unique, subject specific controlled vocabulary dataset too, so you may get the best results by searching databases individually rather than searching several databases across a platform at once.