# Thesaurus Searching (using the database’s subject index)

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## What is a thesaurus?

When an article is added to the database, someone reads the article and assigns terms to it which identify what subject areas the article covers.

The terms come from a set list of terms specific to that database.

The terms each database has available depend on who the audience of the database is.

If it rains once a year it might be enough to say, ‘It’s raining’, if it rains more frequently, then we might want some more details – heavy/light/drizzle/torrential – do we need an umbrella?

In the same way, PsycINFO is written for psychologists who are using all sorts of psychological terms frequently, so the database has more, detailed, psychological terms in the list than say, CINAHL has.

## Why should I try one?

If there are lots of ways of describing something, a thesaurus term can save you having to think of and list all the terms individually.

A pressure sore could be

Pressure ulcer\* OR bed sore\* OR decubitus ulcer\* OR pressure sore\*

But you could get articles which use any one of these terms by using the single thesaurus term

Pressure ulcer

## Why should I try one?

It can help you link concepts together

If we search for

patient\*

AND

attitude\* OR thought\* OR feeling\* OR perspective\* OR view\* OR opinion\*

We will get the patient perspective,

but also anyone else’s thoughts or views where a patient is involved.

Using the thesaurus term Patient Attitudes instead will give only articles which are about the patient’s thoughts and feelings.

## Why should I try one?

If you have terms/phrases where the words can appear in lots of different contexts a thesaurus term can save you looking through thousands of irrelevant results.

Imagine searching for play therapy

Play AND Therapy

On CINAHL this gives 11,560 results, including…

In contrast, the thesaurus term Play Therapy gives only 591 results and they are all about play therapy.

## What’s it called?

Although thesaurus is the general name for these lists of subject terms, they’re known as different things on different databases

AMED – Subject Heading

BND, Social Services Abstracts & PsycINFO - Thesaurus

CINAHL – CINAHL Headings

Cochrane & PubMed – MeSH (Medical Subject Headings)

## How do I use them?

N.B. The following examples use AMED subject terms. The way the term is written varies on each database.

You can use a thesaurus term instead of, or alongside, your keywords.

Replace

Palliative OR terminal OR death OR dying

With

Palliative care/

You can add them together with AND or OR, just like keywords

Palliative care/ OR terminal care/

See the individual How to… guides to Thesaurus searching on the database of your choice to see them in action.

## Further help

If you’re wondering what the \* means, then you can look at our guide Truncation and Wildcards

For more help with what AND and OR mean and when to use them look at our When to use AND and OR guide

If you want help with what search words to use, watch Constructing a Search Strategy

If you have questions you’d like to ask a librarian…

## Any Questions?

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Ask for help if you need it.