Advanced Searching I: Searching by Subjects

What is searching by subject, and why is it useful?
Searching by keyword has its limits. The same keyword can have a whole range of meanings, or the same idea could be described by a number of keywords. This could mean a simple keyword search finds too much to sift through, or omits important articles.

Subjects (also often known as subject headings, subject terms or subject descriptors) are labels added to the articles listed in databases covering particular topics. These subject labels are applied consistently regardless of how the topic is described in the article itself. This makes a subject search a lot more reliable way of tracking down articles on a specific topic than a keyword search.

The image above shows an example of search result from a database. This was the top result for a keyword search for climate change and policy in the database Academic Search Premier. The subjects listed in the article information show the alternative subject term CLIMATIC changes – Government policy.

How do I search by subject?
The easiest way to discover subject terms is illustrated above: do a keyword search and then pick out subjects from your list of results. If you click on the title of an article to access its details, the list of subject terms usually allows you to click on a single subject in order to use it in a new search.
To put together a more complex search including one or more subject terms, you will need to use the database’s search boxes. Copy and paste the subject term into the search box, and then pick the right type of search, as illustrated below.

Note that there may be more than one option for searching by subject. Common options include finding the whole subject term, and finding a word appearing anywhere in the subject term.

**Do all databases support searching by subject?**

The majority of databases subscribed to at De Montfort University use subject terms, particularly databases which relate to specific subject areas. The more specific the area covered by the database, the more specific the subject terms will be.

**What are the limitations of searching by subject?**

Useful journal articles for your research will not always appear in a subject search. For example, a particular theory might have been widely applied to your area of study, but if that area of application wasn’t introduced in the article itself, it would not be listed under that subject.

To find articles that are related to your topic but not covering that topic, you can try using citation searching to learn about the links between journal articles. An additional Advanced Searching helpsheet is available on citation searching.