We ended the previous issue’s column with the statement that, “the key to successful searching is understanding the organizational scheme of the database.” How do we determine the organizational scheme of a database, and what are some of the schemes used to organize the databases we use frequently? Most proprietary databases – those designed by professionals and sold to institutions like libraries – do not make their organizational scheme easy to find. It takes time and effort to determine how a database is organized, but, in the long run, it saves you time once you begin to search.

Let’s take a database that is used frequently here at LHS: PubMed. PubMed is freely available to the whole world and is maintained by the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). PubMed allows searching both by keyword and by subject heading, the two most common organizational/retrieval schemes used by databases. When you search using a keyword, you are literally looking for any search result that has that exact word in it. When you search by subject heading, you are searching by concept or idea. The word you use may not appear in the search result, but what that word means will appear.

Here is an example. If you search PubMed using the word “nursing”, you will retrieve articles about, nursing homes, lactation, and the profession of nursing: three entirely unique ideas. If, however, you search MeSH (the list of Medical Subject Headings), you will find 80 different concepts linked to the keyword of “nursing.” You can search MeSH by using the drop-down menu following the word “search” at the top of the PubMed screen.

The contrast between searching a database by keyword versus subject heading is important to grasp. Some skillful searchers begin by performing a subject heading search and then narrow or limit their results by adding a keyword search.

For effective and efficient searching remember to look for a database’s organizational scheme and keep in mind the difference between keyword and concept searching.

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