Keyword vs Subject Searching

In the library’s catalog, you have the choice to search by many different fields. This handout focuses on the difference between KEYWORD and SUBJECT searching.

**KEYWORD** searching uses keywords or words that relate to or are similar to the topic you’re researching.

**SUBJECT** searching uses specific language used by librarians to place sources that relate to your topic in the catalog.

Let’s say you’re researching native plants in Florida.

You perform a **KEYWORD** search using “plants” as your **KEYWORD**.

Looking through your results you might notice that many of the books are not specifically about native plants or even specifically about plants!

Let’s look at a record to show you how **KEYWORDS** work:

Here you can see that we get 354 results when we search FSW’s catalog for “plants” and limit the format to books.

1,975 is a lot of books to go through!
Keyword vs Subject Searching

Let's now look at what happens when you perform a SUBJECT search for “plants.”

This book, *The First North Americans: an archaeological journey* is not specifically about plants but there is a chapter that mentions plants and that is why the word is highlighted in the record, and why this book comes up under a KEYWORD search for “plants.”

Let's now look at what happens when you perform a SUBJECT search for “plants.”

Here we see that a SUBJECT search reduced the amount of books to 937!

The SUBJECT search for plants brought back the book: *Native Wildflowers and other Groundcovers for Florida Landscapes* which is exactly on our research topic. Let's look at the record:
Keyword vs Subject Searching

Since we know that this book will be helpful, we want to see what other books are under this subject heading. Clicking on the blue linked subject headings will take us to a catalog search results list like this:

Here we can see that Native Plant Gardening is one of the ways librarians entered this book into the catalog.

So now you can see how SUBJECT searching allowed us to shrink 937 results to just 8 results that are relevant to our research topic.

Use KEYWORD searches to bring back a wide variety of sources and SUBJECT searches to bring back a narrow list of specific results.