Making a MeSH of things

Introducing MeSH and other search term tools
Making a MeSH of things

What is MeSH?

MEDical Subject Headings (MeSH) are available on some medical databases such as Ovid Medline.

MeSH is a search tool. You do not have to use it. However it is a useful checking device to ensure you have captured all the key terms for your research.

The literal meaning of mesh is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a material formed of a network of threads, wires, etc.

MeSH can direct you to a network of related terms associated with your research topic.

Lost for words?

When conducting an in-depth piece of research it is important that all relevant terminology is identified. The inclusion of a comprehensive range of terms in your searches demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the variants in terminology and ensures the searches have not missed any key terms.

It is important that all components of your research topic are addressed. Sometimes your initial scoping searches may appear to focus on one element of the research and this may appear to give an unbalanced approach to the proposed research. When this is challenged, a common response is “I couldn’t think of any more words for the other part”.

You do not have to have equal numbers of terms in each section of your research topic, however you need a sufficient range to increase the number of articles yielded from your database searches.
**MeSH and search strings**

A search string is a list of similar terms (concepts) or synonyms that could be interchangeable. A search string should be logical and encompass most of the core terms and alternative terms that relate to a particular part of the question. MeSH tools can help identify any gaps in your search strings and ensure that no key terms are missed.

There may be several ways of describing similar concepts. For example, to answer the question below, you may find similar terms that could be used for each concept.

**Question:** Evaluate the training provided for community health workers in the care of people with dementia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Concept</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Community health</th>
<th>Dementia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Related Concepts</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Primary health/care</td>
<td>Alzheimer’s disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>Community mental health services</td>
<td>Vascular dementia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuing Medical Education</td>
<td>Psychiatric social workers</td>
<td>Dementia with Lewy bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Etc...</td>
<td>Etc...</td>
<td>Etc..</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MeSH can help you find concepts related to those you first think of.

**MeSH and target audiences**

Databases have specific target audiences in mind. Different professions may have preferred terms for particular subjects. For example, dementia OR alzheimer’s disease.
Databases prioritise their subject terms according to their target audiences and index their records to reflect their clientele. Thus, you need to be aware of this when you construct your searches. MeSH will not necessarily be the same across all databases, however there are usually similarities.

**Where do I find MeSH?**

MeSH is a tool found within most (but not all) of the Ovid platform databases. The MeSH option is usually found underneath the search box in the Ovid platform databases. There is a small tick box next to *Map Term to Subject Heading* – this is the MeSH option and the box needs to be ticked for the MeSH tool to work.

This is a MeSH search for the term *dementia* in Ovid Medline:

1. Open Ovid Medline and type in your search term in the search box. Tick the Map Term to Subject Heading box (MeSH) and press Search:

   ![MeSH search screenshot]

2. The screen will display one or several terms that match or are related to your original term. You may explode or focus these terms to yield more or less records. The scope note gives a definition of the term and may offer previous terminology used for that term in the past:
3. You can uncover more terms by clicking on the blue hyperlinked terms. These are known as MeSH Trees because these terms have branched from the original term you searched for. This screen also indicates how many records contain that term within the database:

MeSH helps you “talk” to the database. You will need to experiment with the MeSH functionality in order to ascertain if your preferred choice of term/s is going to yield a high range of search results or too few.

You can add or replace any terms you find in the search trees to your search strategy. You can also ignore them! Your own knowledge of subject terms may be more accurate than the terms that the database suggests.

Remember - MeSH in one Ovid database could be different in another Ovid database - so try a couple out.

**MeSH alternatives**

Some database platforms give you more help constructing your searches than others. Suggest Subject Terms, Thesaurus and Auto-Complete options are all variants of the MeSH functionality but they are not all the same and some are more sophisticated than others.
Suggest Subject Terms – CINAHL (EBSCO platform)

The *Suggest Subject Terms* box can be found above the search boxes on EBSCO CINAHL:

![Image](image.png)

This is similar to *Map Term to Subject Heading* (MeSH). CINAHL also incorporates an auto-complete functionality.

Thesaurus – British Nursing Index (Proquest platform)

The thesaurus option finds related categories to the search term you entered:

![Image](image.png)

Auto-complete – Proquest platform

When you begin to type in the search box the *auto-complete* predicts what topics you may be interested in:
Databases with no search-building help

Some databases do not have any search tools to help you construct your searches. It is advisable to start with databases that do offer help with search terms. By compiling a list of terms that you have accrued in those databases, you can experiment with these in the databases that do not offer search tool options.

Do I have to use MeSH or Suggest Subject Terms etc.?

MeSH is a tool – you do not need to use this. During your years of study and/or continued professional development you will have acquired your own in-built MeSH in your head that you can draw upon. You may not need or want any additional terms.

MeSH is useful as a checking device to ensure the database/s you have selected will give you the range of results you require. The terms the databases suggest may not be your preferred terms, or may include terms you had not previously considered.