Sears List of Subject Headings - Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Sears List of Subject Headings?

The Sears List of Subject Headings is a thesaurus-like database delivering a core list of headings, together with patterns and examples to guide the cataloger in creating further headings as needed. Since the first edition in 1923, the Sears List has served the unique needs of small and medium sized libraries, suggesting headings appropriate for use in their catalogs and providing patterns and instructions for adding new headings as they are required. The successive editors of the List have faced the need to accommodate change while maintaining a sound continuity. The new and revised headings in each edition reflect developments in the material cataloged, in the use of the English language, and in cataloging theory and practice. The aim is always to make library collections as easily available as possible to library users.

Where can I find the front matter for the Sears List?

The front matter for the Sears List is located in PDF format on the Sears List of Subject Headings database information page. You can access this page, by selecting “More Information” under Sears from the Choose Database screen, or by clicking the Help icon next to the search box in the Basic or Advanced Search screen.

You can also directly access the front matter here.

Why do I need the front matter?

The front matter is essential to understanding how to use the Sears List of Subject Headings in your library. It tells you how to determine the subject of a work and discusses the principles of cataloging, types of subject headings, the grammar of subject headings, and particular areas of difficulty when cataloging. The front matter also discusses catalog maintenance, which includes how and when to add new headings, references, and issues central to cataloging in the twenty-first century.

The front matter also gives examples of key headings in the Sears List and provides a list of cancelled and new replacement headings in each edition, with legends within the list that identify earlier forms of headings. Also available in the front matter is a list of subdivisions for which there is a specific provision in the Sears List.

What Sears hopes to offer is a basic list that includes many of the headings most likely to be needed in small libraries together with patterns and examples that will guide the cataloger in creating additional headings as needed. New topics appear every day, and books on those topics require new subject headings. Headings for new topics can be developed...
from the Sears List in two ways, by establishing new terms as needed and by subdividing the headings already in the List. Instructions for creating new headings based on the pattern in Sears and sources for establishing the wording of new headings are given in the Principles of the Sears List, also known as the front matter. The various kinds of subdivisions and the rules for their application are also discussed in the front matter.

**What is included in this database?**

- Search results ranked according to relevance, whether the user is viewing brief or full display.
- Agreement with the Dewey Decimal Classification system to ensure that subject headings conform to library standards.
- Scope notes accompanying all new and revised headings where classification of the specialized use of a term may be needed.

**What are scope notes?**

Scope notes are intended to clarify the specialized use of a term or to distinguish between terms that might be confusing. If there is any question regarding what a term means, the cataloger should simply consult a dictionary. There are times, however, when subject headings require a stricter limitation of a term than the common usage given in a dictionary would allow, as in the case of *Marketing*, a term in business and economics, not to be confused with *Grocery shopping*. Here a scope note is required. Scope notes also redirect users to narrower or more specific headings that might be appropriate. For example, the scope note for the heading *Gardening* instructs users to use the more specific terms *Landscape gardening* or *Horticulture* where appropriate. A third use of scope notes is to distinguish when to use a heading to indicate the topic of the book being cataloged or the form. For example, the scope note for the subject heading *Poetry* instructs that it should be used for materials on poetry, while the heading *Poetry – Collections* should be used to catalog a collection of poetry.

See also notes offer instructions to catalog material with related subject headings, related subdivisions, or suggested patterns. For example, the see also note for the heading *Encyclopedias and dictionaries*, which is used to index books about these items, instructs users to use the subdivisions *Dictionaries* or *Encyclopedias* after things or classes of people for encyclopedias and dictionaries about those things or classes of people. A philosophical encyclopedia would receive the heading *Philosophy – Encyclopedias*. Therefore, the see also note distinguishes between the topical use of the main heading *Encyclopedias and dictionaries* from the use of the related subdivisions that indicate the form of the materials being cataloged. In other instances, the see also note will suggest a pattern with which to consistently create subject terms. For example, the see also note for the main heading *Birds* instructs users to create headings for types of birds after the examples *Birds of prey* or *Canaries*.

**What is the scope of the Sears list?**

Sears offers a basic list that includes many of the headings most likely to be needed in small libraries together with patterns and examples that will guide the cataloger in creating additional headings as needed. By being flexible and expandable, Sears has been able to fill the needs of various kinds of libraries. The degree or level of specificity required...
for a collection depends entirely on the material being collected. While a small library is unlikely to need very narrow
topics of a technical or scientific nature, it is not at all unlikely that it might have a gardening book on *Iris*. That term is
not in the List, but it would be added as a narrower term under *Flowers*. It is the role of the cataloger to know their
collection, know its emphases, and know something of the way people use it to be prepared to assign subject headings
to it.

**What is new in the 21st edition?**

The major feature of this new edition of the Sears List is the inclusion of more than two hundred and fifty new subject
headings. New headings in this edition reflect the changing needs of library users, which include addressing the growing
literature in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Advances in computing have
necessitated the establishment of headings such as *Brain-computer interfaces, Cloud computing, iPad (Computer),* and
*Linked data (Semantic Web)*. The impact of the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent worldwide economic
recession is reflected in the expanding literature on economics. Headings have been established to meet this growth,
such as *Deflation (Finance), Derivative securities, Financial risk, International economic integration,* and *Subprime
mortgages*. A number of new headings relating to education have been established, such as *Massive online open
courses* and *Research—Methodology*. New headings for sports have been established, such as *Aikido, Paralympic
games,* and *World Cup (Soccer)*. In these and other areas many provisions have been added for creating more new
headings as needed. Many of the headings new to this edition were suggested by librarians representing various sizes
and types of libraries, by commercial vendors of bibliographic records, and by the catalogers, indexers, and subject
specialists at EBSCO Information Services. In addition, Sears now conforms to the cataloging standards of Resource
Description & Access (RDA).

In addition to those new headings, the sixth edition of *The Sears List Canadian Companion* has been incorporated into
this edition of the Sears List. This inclusion aims to improve the efficiency and accessibility of the Sears List for
catalogers by assembling the vocabulary into one volume. It also reflects the increasing international use of the Sears
List in library cataloging. Those headings that originated in *The Sears List Canadian Companion* are not identified as
such, as this edition of Sears List and those going forward should be treated as one inclusive vocabulary.

The Sears List of Subject Headings is available both in print and online. There is also a Spanish edition in both print and
online.

For a full list of the canceled and replacement headings, please see page xlv of the front matter.

**How do I use the Sears List?**

For a comprehensive guide on how to use the Sears List, please refer to pages xv-xxix of the front matter.
What is the principle of specific entry?

The principle of specific entry means that a specific entry is preferred to a general one. For a book about dogs, the heading Dogs is preferred to Domestic animals or Mammals. On the other hand, Collies might be too narrow a term for some libraries, even though the principle of specific entry would place a work about collies under that particular heading, and Sears has a general reference under Dogs that says: See Also: types of dogs, e.g. Guide dogs; and names of specific breeds of dogs [to be added as needed].

What is the principle of unique heading?

The principle of unique heading means that one subject heading, and only one, is used for all items on that particular subject. Therefore, the choice of subject headings must be logical and consistent. References should be inserted in the catalog wherever it is anticipated that patrons are likely to approach the topic through different terminology.

I have a book in my hand and have determined the subject – how do I know whether I need to create a new heading for it?

When a cataloger has determined what an item to be cataloged is about and formulated that concept into words, the next step is to find the subject heading that expresses that concept. The first thing to be determined is whether or not there is already an existing heading in the List for that concept. If, for example, there is a book on lawsuits, the cataloger may think of the terms Lawsuits, Suing, and Suits. Upon consulting the List it becomes clear that those words are not headings but references to the established heading Litigation. Litigation is slightly broader than Suing but is more suitable as a subject heading because it includes the matter of defending oneself against lawsuits. In this case the cataloger enters the book into the catalog under the heading Litigation. A new heading is not necessary.

At other times the appropriate heading for a book is not a new heading but a new combination of an established heading and a subdivision. If, for example, there is a book on the use and abuse of alcohol on college campuses, the cataloger may first think of the term Drunkenness. In the Sears List, Drunkenness is an unpreferred term and a reference to two established headings: Alcoholism and Temperance. The scope note at Temperance reads: “Use for materials on the virtue of temperance or on the temperance movement.” The book is not about drunkenness in relation to either vice or virtue or the temperance movement, so that heading can be eliminated. Neither is the book really about alcoholism, but at the heading Alcoholism, there is a general reference that reads: “SA [See also] classes of persons with the subdivision Alcohol use, e.g. Employees—Alcohol use; Youth—Alcohol use; etc., [to be added as needed].” At this point the cataloger realizes that the appropriate Sears subject heading for the book at hand would be College students—Alcohol use. College students is already an established heading in the List, but it could be added if it were not.

The cataloger should always keep in mind that it is not only appropriate but also essential that types of things and examples of things not found in the List be established as headings and added to the List locally as needed. If there is a book on gloves, for example, and there is no heading in the Sears List for Gloves, the cataloger thinks of the concept or category of thing that would include gloves. Clothing comes to mind. At the heading Clothing and dress in the List there is a general reference: “SA [See also] types of clothing articles and accessories [to be added as needed].” The cataloger
then establishes the heading *Gloves* and enters the book into the catalog under *Gloves*. It would be inappropriate to enter the book under the heading *Clothing and dress* simply because *Clothing and dress* is in the List and *Gloves* is not. It would mean that a user looking in the catalog under Gloves would find nothing. The general references in the List should reinforce the point that the List does not aim at completeness and must be expanded. Even where there is no general reference, narrower terms for types of things and examples and instances of things must be added as needed.

At times it is nearly impossible to determine what broader concept or category a new subject might be included under. This should not deter the cataloger from establishing any heading that is needed. Take, for example, the case of a book on thumb sucking, a common phenomenon among small children. The nearest terms in the List might be *Child psychology, Child rearing, or Human behavior*, but they are none too near. Nowhere is there a general reference instructing the cataloger to add headings for common childhood phenomena, and still the only appropriate heading for the book would be *Thumb sucking*. Under these circumstances, it would be appropriate to add the heading *Thumb sucking* to the List and enter the book into the catalog under that heading.

**Can I browse the Sears List?**

There is a browse feature for the Sears List of Subject Headings on EBSCOhost. This feature is accessible from any page on the Sears database by clicking on the “Indexes” button at the top left of the screen (next to “New Search”). From there, you may browse by main heading or by record type. To see a detailed record from the browse, select the box next to the heading and click “Add.” The record will have been added to the search bar at the top of the screen. From there, click “Search,” and the record will appear in the search results. You may select multiple records from the browse screen and refine your search using Boolean operators.

We are currently working on expanding this feature to include use, use for, see, and see also terms.

**Can I browse by Dewey numbers?**

Currently, browsing by Dewey number is not available. However, all Dewey numbers in the Sears database on EBSCOhost are linked, so clicking on the Dewey number in a detailed record will give you other records associated with that number.

We are currently working on expanding the browse feature to include Dewey Decimal numbers.

**Is there a Thesaurus on the Sears database?**

Currently, the Sears database does not have a specific thesaurus feature. However, the search function on EBSCOhost searches the fields use, use for, see, see also, related term(s), narrower term(s), and broader term(s). This dynamic searching is present in the basic search and the advanced search, which makes thesaurus-like searching possible. The EBSCOhost search also makes allowances for singular or plural searching. A search for “Cat” brings up “Cats,” “Cats/Literary collections,” “Wild cats,” etc., instead of just “CAT scan” and “Cat’s cradle.”
Where can I find previous editions of the Sears Subject Headings?

You can download the 21st edition of the Sears Subject Headings by clicking to view the front matter.

You can also request previous versions by emailing EBSCO Core Collections.

How often is the Sears List of Subject Headings updated?

The electronic edition of the Sears List of Subject Headings database is updated once a year to stay current with publishing trends in practical subject areas as well as provide coverage for subjects that represent large areas of growth and innovation where new concepts and terms are actively being added to the vernacular. The Sears List was most recently updated in January 2014 with over 100 new terms and covers areas such as technology, computer science, political science, world history, and popular culture. The print edition is published every four years.

Are MARC authority records available for the Sears headings?

Yes. MARC authority records for the complete list of Sears subject headings are available for purchase separately as a single data delivery. For more information and pricing details, please contact an EBSCO Sales Representative: 1-800-653-2726 or email information@ebsco.com.