# Library Instruction Session Outline

Understanding Subject Headings for Black Studies Research

## Description

This course is designed to delve into the concept of subject headings. While subject headings are typically discussed in the field of library science and mainly pertain to catalogers, the creators of this resource strongly believe that having a foundational grasp of the origins and usage of subject headings will benefit students and researchers. This comprehension will empower them to employ the appropriate terminology to retrieve information from databases and library collections specifically curated for accessing materials related to Black Studies.

## Estimated class time

60 to 75 minutes

## Learning objectives aligned with the ACRL Information Literacy Frameworks

| **ACRL Frameworks** | **Learning Objectives**  By the end of this library class, students will be able to: |
| --- | --- |
| Searching as Strategic Exploration | * Use subject headings to search for information using databases. * Know how to find materials across a wide variety of disciplines. * Identify different database platforms and tools tailored for accessing Black Studies materials. |
| Authority Is Constructed and Contextual | * Understand how subject headings are created and assigned. |
| Research as Inquiry | * Question terms are based on their need, circumstances, and inquiry type. |

## 

## Pre-class subjects (10 min.)

* **Introduction (5 min.)** 
  + The librarian will introduce themself.
    - (Optional) Provide one professional fact
      * Briefly explain what a librarian does and what their expertise is.
    - (Optional) Give one personal fact
      * The librarian can elaborate on their identities, such as which ones hold privilege and which don’t.
      * The librarian can talk about preferred hobbies.
* **Anticipatory Set (5 min.)[[1]](#footnote-0)** 
  + Ask the students: How do you find information?
    - Gather information from the audience. Let them explain their information-searching habits. (Hopefully, most people will say they go to Google first to find information. However, some people might say they use Chat GPT).
    - Briefly explain the difference between searching on Google vs a Database
    - Because databases use controlled vocabulary and only show you what you asked for, we will focus on database searching.

## Part 1: Library Terms (10 min.)

* **Introduction of library terms relevant to research. (5 min.)**
  + Students will get familiar with the following terms:
    - Database
    - Knowledge organization system (KOS)
    - [Subject Headings](https://libguides.ala.org/catalogingtools/subjects) (SH)
* **Database search example (5 min.)[[2]](#footnote-1)** 
  + Demo a search using “Sundown Town” (Official SH) vs “Gray Town” (Variant term, not standardized version)
    - The librarian might select other relevant terms from the[Additional Documents Black Studies Headings](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VOap_sX1O5bre6euqb7GfpiEajaZIp5rlb5-tV2ziQo/edit?tab=t.0) file.
  + Perform an individual search using the official SH. Then, do a search using the related term, which is a non-official term.
  + Compare the results. Show the students how to read the catalog record. Point out the subject terms section to let them know they can learn other ways to describe their topic and find more information.

## Part 2: Biases in Subject Headings (20 min.)[[3]](#footnote-2)

* **What’s going on with KOS? (5 min.)**
  + Knowledge organization systems (Classification systems, subject headings, and indexes) present information users with the following problems: lack of consistency in word choice, dated terminology, and “the tendency of presenting historically marginalized people as fundamentally different from white heterosexual men” (Howard and Knowlton, 2018).
* **Biases in Library of Congress Controlled Vocabularies (5 min.)** 
  + LC authorities are the most used controlled vocabularies in USA libraries
  + Examples LC Lists
    - [Demographic grouped terms](https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCDGT/2023-DEMOGRAPHIC.pdf)
    - [Individual PDF Files: By Beginning Letter](https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCSH/freelcsh.html)
* **Pair Activity (10 min.)**
  + [Pair Activity Worksheet 1](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YPVUjW_dLzUeC5KxEwW1GTtCZZew4C2ihMJnO-1ssms/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.gjdgxs)

## Part 3: Display Database Listing to Students (10 min.)

* **Point out the Black and African American Studies (Black Studies) databases[[4]](#footnote-3)** 
  + Once the students learn how to use subject headings for their research, point out the databases they can use for Black Studies.
  + The librarian can take this opportunity to reinforce searching strategies with subject headings, show the students how to read and navigate the record of the retrieved resource and stress the importance of locating and reading the subject terms portion in the record. Understanding the information that the subject terms portion of the record provides will help the students gain the vocabulary needed to refine their search strategies.
  + By paying attention to the subject terms portion of the record, students can learn about the multiple disciplines connected to the Black Studies field. Creating awareness and remembering that the Black Studies field is interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary will help students understand that one single database is insufficient to find the information they seek. They must explore databases from different disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics).

Part 4: Boolean Operators (15 min.) (Optional, not included in the slides)

* Having students practice what they have learned and start their research assignments in class is an excellent way to assess what the librarian has taught in class.
* If time allows, the librarian can review Database Search Logic (Boolean Operators) (5 min.)
  + The librarian can use the [Black Studies Headings](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VOap_sX1O5bre6euqb7GfpiEajaZIp5rlb5-tV2ziQo/edit?tab=t.0) document to demonstrate a visual approach to Boolean Logic and follow up with an activity.
  + Suggested group activity: [Group Activity Worksheet 2](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yzjYhifxCCh4NbsUABFgrNBLgrhlWOh7oZ8CakXaHIk/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.gjdgxs) (10 min.)

Final Thoughts (5 min.)

* Allow time for questions, comments, or feedback
* Summarize main points.

1. *The anticipatory set will help introduce the main topic of the lesson, which is understanding the use and application of subject headings.* [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *This demo's purpose is to show the students that using appropriate terms in their searches increases the chances of finding the information they are looking for.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. *It is essential to discuss the limitations of creating subject headings, including the context in which they are created and the decision-making process for determining the most appropriate terms. This session aims to raise awareness about this process; however, it doesn't intend to negatively criticize or diminish the value of the classification system and the people involved in it. If people know the pros and cons of KOS then they can cleverly use the knowledge to enhance their research skills.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *The list of databases will differ from institution to institution as each library has access to the different databases. This is an excellent time to show students the research guide(s) the library has on Black, Africana, African American Studies or related topics.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)