

Tips and Tricks: Writing a Good Reason Statement for Changing a Record

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When you add a source or change information in FamilySearch, the system asks you to provide a reason why you think that the source should be added to the person or that the change is accurate.

You could type, “This is my grandfather. I knew him.” But that might not help other users when they try to decide if the information listed is correct.

Guiding Principle

The guiding principle for a good reason statement is to provide enough information that others know what made you decide to add the source or change the information. If they find more information, they can decide if the change is still accurate.

Tips

Here are some tips for writing a useful reason statement.

Ask yourself, “How do I know this is correct?” It changes your answer to something like:

“The census record and this record for Sean O’Brien have the same name, the same birth year, and the same wife’s name; this is where the family lived; and the names and ages of the three children in the census (Sarah, James, and Thomas) match three of his five children in the tree.”

If the name is very unusual, you could also point to that as a reason you believe the source should be attached to the person in the tree.

If you're changing information, explain why the new information is correct.

Here's an example for Maria Perez Gomez, whose record in the tree said she died 15 January 1901:

“The death certificate for Maria Perez Gomez states that she died on 12 January 1901. It also states that she was buried on 15 January 1901.”

(It also helps if you can attach the source so that others can see that your change is correct.)

If you have an explanation why some of the information in the record contradicts the information in the tree, it would be useful to include the explanation in your reason statement.

“I believe this census record for Tom Smith should be attached to this Thomas Smith because Tom is short for Thomas, the birth years match, the fathers' names are the same (James), the mothers' names are the same (Mary), and the names and ages of the two siblings in the census record (Susan and David) match two of the four siblings in the tree. The disagreement in birthplaces could be that the census taker repeated James' birthplace for all the members of the household.”

Be kind.

Rather than writing, “This is my grandmother. I know better than whoever put the wrong information in,” you might write, “I believe the following information is correct because...”

There are differing opinions about whether you should mention yourself in a reason statement. (“I believe that this record should be attached” versus “This census record should be attached.”) Either is acceptable. The important thing is to provide enough information that others can understand why you added the source

or made the change.

Sometimes you may feel that you are stating the obvious—in effect saying, “Hey, the information matches.” But it’s still helpful for others to know which matching information led you to your decision.

New Knowledge about Your Ancestor

Sometimes you find a record that adds to your knowledge about a person. Be sure to include what you learned in the reason statement, especially if someone else might not notice or understand its significance.

A Real Example

Here’s a real example from Family Tree:

Michigan marriage records show that Laura Washburn married John R. Benedict. Later, a Laura Benedict married William Emens. Civil war pension records explain that Laura Benedict was widowed and then married William Emens.

Using the new **Search Records** feature to look for records for John Call Benedict (who was Laura’s youngest son) shows a match for John Call Benedict in the 1870 census. Myron S. Benedict (John’s older brother) and John C. Benedict were indexed with the William B. Emens family.

But the census image also shows that Laura Benedict actually lived in the same household with the Emens and the Benedict boys. (Line 18, column 1 shows they were all in dwelling-house 84.)

For some reason, the census taker listed her above William B. Emens and separated her from her sons (lines 22 and 23).

And there’s more. The indexer who indexed the record listed Laura Benedict, age 45, born in New York, as a separate household. Her indexed record

doesn't include her two sons to help identify her.

So when the indexed census record is attached as a source for Laura, the reason statement ought to explain why this Laura Benedict on the 1870 census is the same person as the Laura Benedict in the tree whose two youngest children were Myron and John C.

The reason statement could be something like:

This index record does not include all the members of the household who are listed on the census. The actual census image shows that Laura Benedict lived in dwelling-house 84 with the William B. Emens family and her two sons, Myron Benedict, age 12, and John C. Benedict, age 8.

Benefits

When everyone puts specific information in their reason statements, you can look at the attached sources and decide if the records really are about your ancestor. You can look at a change and decide if the change was accurate.

And you won't have to try to remember why you added a source or made a change. You can just read your reason statement. If your 3rd cousin in South Africa emails and asks why you changed the marriage date and place for your 3rd great grandparents, you won't have to research the answer—it's in your reason statement.

When everyone puts specific information in their reason statements, everyone benefits.