



Week 2: Part 1.2: Census Searching Tips

General Census Searching Tips for the Internet

Begin by limiting the information you fill in on search forms. Don't complete every box on the Search form - the LESS you enter, the MORE results you'll get. If you fill in lots of boxes then usually only one of them needs to be wrong on the census (or the database) for you to completely miss the person you're seeking.

Search one year / country at a time. When using Ancestry in particular, I usually only search one census year at a time and often only one country at a time as well (e.g. Scotland 1881). This allows for a more 'powerful' search as you can take advantage of information written down only in that year. Multi-year and multi-country searches strip away search fields that are only pertinent to one year or country.

Always allow for mistakes. For example, it's rarely advisable to specify an exact year of birth, and I generally recommend allowing a margin of 2 years either side. This of course also goes for spelling mistakes, mistranscription mistakes, etc. Just because you can't find someone does not mean they are not there – you may have to try another census database where the transcription was different, etc.

Ages listed in censuses can be confusing. Even if the age is shown correctly on the census, the year of birth can still be incorrect - that's because, by convention, the year of birth is calculated by subtracting the age from the census year.

Search by first name only if it's unusual. It's often fruitful to search on first names alone, especially when one of the names is unusual for the period. The more unusual a surname is, the more likely it is to be spelled incorrectly. This is a particular problem when searching for people who have migrated from a country where a language other than English is spoken.

Don't count solely on Soundex. While the Soundex search option, when available, is a great way to pick up alternative spellings, it may not get them all. OWENS and OWEN, for example, are commonly seen variations of the same name - yet they have different Soundex codes. Therefore, a search for OWENS will not pick up OWEN, and vice-versa.

Try a wildcard search. If you aren't sure how to spell a name, some census search engines allow you to use special symbols called wildcards to represent some unknown letter or letters in a word. Most (including Ancestry.co.uk) allow you to use an * to represent an unknown number of characters at the end of a word (a search for john* might return john, johns, johnson, johnsen, johnathon, etc.) Usually you need to have at least three characters preceding the *. Another commonly used wildcard character is the ? which is often used to represent a single character within a word (a search for sm?th would match both smith and smyth).

Familiarise yourself with nicknames. It's not uncommon to find families providing census takers with their formal birth names in one census, and then using the names their friends and family called them by in another. Mary might be listed as Polly, Alexander as Alex or Al, and Elizabeth as Betsy, Bessie, Beth or Eliza.

Check the middle names too. As with nicknames, in many areas of the world it is common for an individual to be known to families and friends by their middle name. Be sure to search for middle names, baptismal names, and other alternative names.

Search by surname and location. When you're pretty sure you know where an ancestor was living but traditional searches just aren't turning him/her up, try searching by surname only - restricting by county, parish, or town as necessary to bring the number of results down to a reasonable number for browsing. You may even discover previously unknown relatives!

Search for initials. When you can't narrow down the location enough to use surname only search, and you can't find them listed under their first name, check for initials. Sometimes those census enumerators were lazy! Initials may have been used for first name, middle name or both. M C Owens would come up under a search for either 'M Owens' or 'C Owens,' for example.

Search for siblings, children or other family members. When an every name index is available, don't forget about the rest of the family...your ancestor's first name may have been hard to read, but her brother's may have been a bit easier.

Search for neighbours. If your ancestors have been living in the same place for a while, search for people who were listed nearby in neighbouring census years. If you find a neighbour in the index, then head to his/her page and check a few pages on either side for your ancestor.

Leave out the name entirely. When all else fails, and the search engine offers enough other options, forego the name and search by other known facts. Searching for someone living in Glasgow in 1861 who was born in France in 1789 will narrow down the field considerably. Sometimes this is the only way you'll find those people whose names were seriously mangled during the indexing process. Searching by first name only, along with other identifying information such as date and place of birth, can also turn up possible matches for women who have married.

They may have been away from home on census night. Don't assume that every member of the household was at home on census night - many had to travel in connection with their work. So, that person who matches otherwise, but is just not where you expected them to be on the census, may be the correct person.

Online census databases

I often use Ancestry with its greater range of search options to narrow down individuals and households before spending my credits on ScotlandsPeople for the actual image of the Scottish census. It is important to get the census image, though, as mistakes are often made on transcriptions.

- At **FamilySearch** (www.familysearch.org) you can search indexes to the 1850-1940 United States censuses, 1841-1911 English/Welsh censuses (not complete), the 1841-91 Scottish censuses, and the 1831-1916 Canadian censuses (not complete) for free. For many of the UK censuses you will be able to view images through links to the pay-to-view/subscription site Find My Past. For US censuses, the images are available on FamilySearch for free.

You can specify two members of the household (the head of the household and one other) to cut down the number of results. You can also limit the search by birth country, birth year, and age range on the British censuses.

- On **Ancestry** (www.ancestry.co.uk), you can search UK/US/Canadian & some European censuses, with images included for many of them (there are no images available for Scottish censuses, though).

You can specify the forename of a spouse, or the forenames of the parents. You can also search by place of birth, address, occupation, relationship and more. However, for most of these search options, you'll need to search the individual country's census, i.e. Scotland 1891 or England 1861. It's usually a good idea to search for a younger child in a family, as the lower the age, the more likely it is to be shown correctly on the census.

- At **findmypast.co.uk**, you can search English and Welsh censuses (1841-1911) and view images of these & Scottish transcriptions for 1841-1901.

You can search these censuses for any two people in the same household (and they don't even need to be related!). You can also search by address and by occupation.

- On **FreeCen** (www.freecen.org.uk) you can search UK censuses for free by name, occupation, age range, census place, birth place, and more. English and Welsh censuses are particularly well represented; Scottish ones are a bit sketchier. No images here, just transcripts.
- On **Scotland's People** (<http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>) you can search and download images from Scotland's censuses from 1841-1911. You can search by surname and two forenames, sex, age range, county and district and for shipping records.

Links to other census databases and information

Census Online: your guide to online census records (<http://www.census-online.com/>) 'The web's largest directory of links to online census transcriptions! This directory includes links to U.S. federal censuses and indexes, state and territorial censuses, tax lists, voter lists, military pensioner lists, etc.'

Lastly...

Look at: <http://www.geneamusings.com/2010/01/navigating-ancestrycom-census-databases.html> for interesting tips when trying to switch between searching different census years on Ancestry!