

NAMING NAMES

A DISCUSSION ABOUT DATA-ENTRY FIELD LABELS FOR PERSONAL NAME COMPONENTS

It is an unfortunate fact that most data-entry forms on the Internet fail to take advantage of the dynamic medium, so that a single form layout is used regardless of the place of residence or cultural background of the person filling in the form. Equally unfortunate is that the fixed form that most data entry forms have has been defined by the cultural norms of the society in which the form or site were set up.

The same can be said of field labels, and this document discusses labels used for personal name components in English.

PREFIX, FIRST NAME, FORENAME, MIDDLE NAME, LAST NAME, SUFFIX

Look for an English-language definition of *given name*, *surname* or *family name*, and you will often be told that a *given name* is synonymous with *first name* whilst *surname* or *family name* are synonymous with each other and with *last name*. Any definition which indicates a relative positioning of a name component, such as *prefix*, *first name*, *last name* or *suffix* is culturally defined. It reflects the predominant name ordering in Anglo-Saxon societies such as the USA and the UK, and fails to take into account different naming patterns across the world. A majority of the world's population order their names differently, putting, for example, the *surname/family name* before the *given name(s)*.

This being the case, field labels such as *prefix*, *first name*, *last name* or *suffix* must never be used on a data-entry form being used by an international audience. Apart from showing cultural insensitivity, it will encourage the site visitors to fill the components in in the order in which they write them. This leads to *surnames/family names* being entered into the *given names* field and *vice versa*, a data quality nightmare for the company collecting the data as names can rarely be re-fielded automatically to correct the errors after data-entry.

GIVEN NAME

A *given name* is the name given to a person at or near to birth; or a name taken later in life to replace this name, such as a nick name. To prevent the cultural bias and resultant data quality problems resulting from the use of labels such as *first name*, *forename* or *Christian name*, *given name* is the best field label to use on data collection forms.

SURNAME OR FAMILY NAME

Most definitions of these terms assume that they are synonymous. There are, however, differences between them.

In short, a *surname* is any name additional to a *given name*, and it can be a personal one or a family one. A *family name* is a name which links members of a family. Having a largely Anglo-Saxon heritage, I have a family name, Rhind, which links me to my mother, father and siblings. In my case, that name is also my *surname*, inherited from my father. This is the reason that most definitions from Anglo-Saxon sources equate the two labels, and that often in the mind of people from this culture *surname* equates to a name which is inherited, though this does not have to be the case.

Family name is, in short, a subset of *surname*.

In other societies, though, a *surname* may exist whereas a *family name* does not. Women may marry and retain their own surnames. Icelanders use patronymics – the name of the child’s father with the local-language equivalent of “son” or “daughter” added to it. This functions as a *surname* – a name extra to the *given name*. However, as each person in a family unit can have a different *surname*, this does not function as a *family name* – Icelanders have *surnames* but not *family names*.

This said, though *surname* is less culturally-loaded than *family name*, it is less universally understood by people who do not speak English as a mother language, and to ensure better data quality, both (for example, in the form “*Surname/family name*”) can profitably be used on data-entry forms.

BY-NAME, BESTOWED NAME, HYPOCORISTIC NAME, NICKNAME, INHERITED NAME ...

... address name, reference name, maiden name, birth name, legal name, adoptive name, initialism, assumed name, stage name, pen name, religious name, pseudonym, epithet, added name, honorific, patronymic, matronymic, dynastic name, filial name, name determined by birth order or day of the week, locative surname, locational surname, occupational surname, toponymic surname, topographic surname, descriptive surname. Naming is a complex subject and many terms exist for parts of a personal name. If a data-entry form is posted on the Internet, one cannot know beforehand how the person’s name is formed, and any attempt to collect personal name data using other terms is unlikely to be successful.

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