DOCUMENTATION TIPS NO. 7

DOCUMENTING MISSING AND UNCERTAIN INFORMATION

In terms of documenting collections, we cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of setting down information clearly, concisely and consistently. But how can you do so when the information available is uncertain or missing? The Info-Muse Network documentation system contains simple and efficient standards for dealing with such situations.

Missing information

When you don't know what information to enter in a field, ask yourself: has any research been done to find it?

Before research

- If no research has been done, **leave the field blank**. A blank field tells the reader that research to find this information remains to be done, or that the field simply does not apply for this object.

  Example:
  The dimensions of the object have not been measured.

  ➢ *Unit Linear*
  ➢ *Height*
  ➢ *Width*
  ➢ *Depth*

After research

- If research has been done to find the information, but without success, enter "**unknown**".

  Example:
  An unsigned piece for which neither the workmanship nor the style can be attributed to a particular artist.

  ➢ *Artist*   unknown

Uncertain

Use a **question mark (?)** if you are not completely sure about the accuracy of the information to be entered.

  Example:
  An object given by a collector who had lived in Togo. You believe that the object comes from Togo, but you have no proof.

  ➢ *Originating Country*   Togo ?

When in doubt

When you are hesitating between two terms, do not enter several possibilities in the same field. Instead, enter **the most probable term,** followed by a space and a **question mark (?)**, in the appropriate field and the least probable term in a remarks field.

Example 1:

An old handwritten record states that an object was manufactured in 1914. Research has shown that a similar object with accession number 2000.23 was manufactured in 1934. Cataloguer Claude Dupont believes that this date also applies to the object in question, but has not done any research to confirm his hunch.

➢*End Date*	1934 ?
Cataloguer Remarks	End date to be confirmed: compare with 2000.23. Old handwritten record states 1914 (C.D.).

and not

End Date	1914 or 1934 ?

Example 2:

A wooden object, documented by Nathalie Tran. She is not sure whether it is pine or spruce, but feels that pine is more likely.

➢*Material*:	wood, pine ?
Cataloguer Remarks	Material to be confirmed: object is possibly made of spruce (N.T.).

and not

Material	wood, pine ?; wood, spruce ?

Exceptions

Mandatory fields

In the Info-Muse documentation system, information must be entered in the *Object Name* and *Specimen Nature* fields. If there is no information available, you cannot leave them blank. Consequently, in these cases only, the Info-Muse Network allows the use of the term "**unidentified object**" for the *Object Name* field and "**unknown**" for the *Specimen Nature* field, rather than other terms with similar meanings, like "undetermined," "unidentified," "unknown object" or "undefined object." Using a single term will make it easier to find such unidentified objects and specimens quickly.

> *Example:*
> You have just acquired an object and assigned it accession number 2004.39 but you do not know what it is.

Accession Number	*2004.39*
➢*Object Name*	unidentified object

Fields with a comma separating information levels

In many fields, a comma can be used to separate information levels, for instance in the *Material, Technique* and *Culture* fields and in those referring to individuals' names and geography. When information for one of the levels is uncertain or missing, enter the information available so as not to interfere with searches.

Specific term unknown or uncertain
If the **specific term** is not known, simply enter the **generic term**. You can also add a note in the *Cataloguer Remarks* field.

Example 1:
A wooden object documented by Beatrice Varruza. She has done some research but has been unable to identify the type of wood used to make the object.

➢ *Material*   wood
  Cataloguer Remarks   Type of wood unidentified even after research (B.V.).
and not
  Material   wood, unknown

Example 2:
A specimen taken by a collector named Takahashi. The cataloguer, Victor Meredith, has been unable to find the collector's first name. In the fields relating to individuals' names, the first name is considered a specific term.

➢ *Collector*   Takahashi
  Cataloguer Remarks   First name unidentified even after research (V.M.).
and not
  Collector   Takahashi, ?

Generic term unknown
If the specific term is known but even after research you cannot identify the **generic term,** simply enter the specific term.

 Example:
An object made from bread.

➢ *Material*   bread
and not
  Material   unknown, bread

New place name unknown
If you know only the former place name, use that name.

 Example:
An object manufactured in Fort George. No research has been done to find the current place name.

➢ *Originating Country*   Canada
➢ *Originating Province*   Quebec
➢ *Originating City*   Fort George

and not
  Originating City   ?, Fort George

Inscription field

For the inscription field, which includes signatures, transcriptions and transliterations, the information may sometimes be wholly or partly illegible or difficult to decipher. If the information is totally illegible, add three suspension points between square brackets […] at that point. If part of the information is illegible but you can deduce what is missing, enter that information in square brackets [xyz].

Example 1:
A piece with an inscription in the bottom left on the back; the final words of the inscription are illegible.

➢ *Inscription*   back, b.l.: Souvenir of a trip to […]

Example 2:
An object has a partly illegible inscription in the centre at the top.

➢ *Inscription*   t.c.: Discovery of [Canada] by Jacques Cartier in 1534

Following these few rules should make it easy for you to find uncertain or missing information with your collection management software and set priorities for future documentary research. In addition, it will make it easier to consult data internally and with common tools such as the Info-Muse database and Artefacts Canada.

Reference
Simard, Françoise and Desmarais, France (second edition), ***Documenting Your Collections: Info-Muse Network Documentation Guide***, Caring for Your Collections series, Montreal, Société des musées québécois, 2002.

Info-Muse Network, Société des musées québécois
June 2004