

# Fact Checking Made Easy

## Part IV: Applying Your Learning

### Lesson 13: Course Conclusion

What do I most hope you'll take away from this course? Several points.

First, accuracy matters. You're not being a good citizen if you carelessly put out information you haven't properly confirmed. In fact, sloppiness can do great harm to your reputation. One of my clients was testing a financial services website for his client, and when his testers encountered spelling mistakes and other careless errors, they all – without exception – flat-out refused to continue using the site, out of fear that it would lose or steal their money. Trust suffers where there are mistakes.

As I was finishing up this course, I ran across a study by the website Career Builder, which surveyed more than 2,000 hiring managers. 60 percent of them had found mistakes (the study called them “lies”) on a resume. A majority of those managers said they automatically disqualify candidates whose resumes don't check out. The same thing happens when investors look at your site or potential clients are reading your article and you put Tasmania in Africa rather than Australia, or you say that there are approximately 10 hectares in an acre when actually hectares are more than twice as big as acres. Trust is a fragile thing.

The stakes are highest when you're in a profession that depends on getting the details right, such as health care, the law or money management. People can die or have their lives ruined when they follow what you wrote, where you substituted 5 centimeters for 5 millimeters or put a decimal point two places over from where it should be.

Second, there's a whole lot of misinformation out in society and online. I hope you'll be a little more critical now when you encounter supposed facts that are exciting and surprising. Consider the source (or the lack thereof), be skeptical of information coming from organizations or individuals with an axe to grind, listen to the little voice in your head that says “Really??” and go the extra mile in your checking.

Fact checking is so much easier now than when I was freelancing for magazines in the 1980s. I had to make a lot of phone calls to find experts on arcane subjects and then to interview them for the information I needed. I could often be found at the library looking things up in reference books or on microfilm or calling librarians for help on specific questions.

Do I really expect you to go into everything with the fierce level of detail we used in this course? Not necessarily. Fact checking is easier and faster when you exercise good information hygiene and careful habits in the first place. With a little practice, it doesn't take long to check whether Calvin Coolidge really was the 32nd president of the United States and was born in Vermont. You're surely a better information detective now than when you started this course.

If you do inadvertently let an error slip by you, don't make excuses. Simply apologize and make the appropriate corrections. Some years back, the *Boston Herald* ran a front-page story when its reporter spotted dozens of errors in galleys of a Zagat [and by the way, I looked it up to confirm that it's pronounced zaGAT rather than ZAgat] guide to

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Boston restaurants. The mistakes included reviews of restaurants under construction as if they were already open; a restaurant praised as the best place in the city for brunch, although it had stopped serving brunch a year before; a “rooftop” restaurant that wasn’t on the roof, described as having a view it didn’t and couldn’t have; and on and on.

The person responsible for the errors was no novice. She was a contributing editor to *Conde Nast Traveler* and a former senior editor at *Boston Magazine* who should have known better. Making her situation worse, the writer told the *Herald*, “When you single-handedly do 803 restaurants, there are going to be things that slip between the cracks...” Oh boy, was that a terrible response! I’m sure she wasn’t going to get restaurant reviewing jobs after saying that. Publisher Tim Zagat, on the other hand, said the right thing: “An error is an error. It shouldn’t have happened.”

Do take the time to fact check. This is Marcia Yudkin. Good luck!