

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 2: What to check

Let's start with a simple paragraph that might appear in a travel blog.

Nicknamed “the Garden Isle,” Kauai is the smallest and newest of the four major islands in the Hawaiian island chain. Many travelers find it the most charming, with cascading waterfalls, fiery volcanoes, and exciting surf spots. Although considerably more populated than when Captain John Cook discovered it in 1787, Kauai has an abundance of unspoiled spots where you can enjoy warm ocean breezes amid the fragrance of pineapples and wild coffee bushes.

Now please pause the video (or download the PDF labeled “Lesson 2 Exercise” if that's more convenient for you to look at) and identify every item in this passage that should be checked. Just identify the items, you don't need to actually check them.

How many should-be-checked items did you identify? This is only three sentences, but did you count at least 10 items that should be checked? If not, pause the video again and take another look.

A good rule of thumb for what should be checked is anything you could conceivably be wrong about. So let's go back through our passage and identify the items that should be checked, one by one.

Nicknamed “the Garden Isle” – is that true? (Actually yes.)

Kauai is the smallest – is that true? (Of the four major islands, yes, of all the Hawaiian islands, no.)

and newest – is that true? (No, the Big Island of Hawaii is the newest of the four major Hawaiian islands.)

of the four major islands in the Hawaiian island chain – is that so? (Yes.)

Many travelers find it the most charming (Well, whether it's charming is a matter of opinion, and I suppose this statement could be false, if nearly everyone gave it horrible reviews on Trip Advisor and elsewhere, which isn't the case.)

with cascading waterfalls – DOES Kauai have waterfalls? (Yes.)

fiery volcanoes – DOES Kauai have fiery volcanoes? (No. That would be a major blooper if you didn't catch it because all of Kauai's volcanoes are extinct.)

and exciting surf spots – DOES Kauai have surfing? (Yes.)

Although considerably more populated than in 1787 – is that true? (They didn't have an official census back then, but histories of Hawaii would probably say how many people lived on Kauai when it was discovered, and there are about 65,000 people living on the island now.)

when Captain John Cook discovered it – is that true? (Well, this is one of those items that is easy to get wrong. Captain Cook did discover Kauai, but his name was Captain James Cook, and that is indeed C-O-O-K, not C-O-O-K-E, by the way.)

in 1787 – is that true? (No, it was 1778. Another item that you could very easily have mixed up in your notes or in your head.)

Fact Checking Made Easy

Kauai has an abundance of unspoiled spots where you can enjoy warm ocean breezes amid the fragrance of pineapples and wild coffee bushes – is that true? (Much of that sentence is the sort of thing you can get away with if you're a travel writer or fiction writer, unless Kauai were totally built up (not true), with only cold ocean breezes (not true), and the passage also implies that pineapples grow on Kauai (yes, although not much) and coffee grows wild there (that's tricky, because while there is some coffee growing wild on Kauai, it all comes from coffee farms that were earlier abandoned and overgrown).

One question that came up when I tested this passage on a few writer friends is, what is the difference between fact checking and proofreading? Doesn't proofreading usually involve some fact checking? And shouldn't I have added checking how the name Kauai is spelled to the list?

My answer is yes, it is a good idea to confirm *all* spellings of proper names as part of fact checking. I travel to Hawaii a lot, and I'll admit that it took me a number of trips to get into my head the proper spelling of Kauai. Even so I could have it wrong. And you could. If the spellings of Kauai or of Hawaii, the state, were on your list of items to check, then you were right.

As for proofreading and fact checking, they overlap to some extent. But I have a separate Udemy course on proofreading coming soon to explain the parts where they do not overlap. Proofreading includes catching typos and grammatical errors, which we don't cover here. However, if you have a good proofreading routine, then fact checking becomes an extension of that, or vice versa. We'll go on to your fact-checking routine next.