

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 4: Where to check

The next important topic is where to look things up. What kinds of sources can you rely on? And which are dodgy, unreliable?

Prestigious magazines and major newspapers are relatively reliable. The magazines tend to be reliable because they have fact checkers on staff doing pretty much what I'm teaching you in this course, for every article they're going to publish. Major metropolitan newspapers tend to be reliable even though they do not have fact checkers on staff, for two reasons. First, because their writers and editors are trained to be accurate, and second, readers let them know, usually within hours, if they've let an error slip through. Unfortunately, smaller newspapers often have less highly trained journalists and editors. The paper that covers the rural area in Western Massachusetts where I live most of the year, I wouldn't trust them on anything – not because they're small, but because I constantly see major grammatical errors and lapses in logic in their articles. I wouldn't waste my time writing in about errors because there are way too many of them.

Normally a company's own website or a spokesperson for the company whom you have on the phone can be trusted to get the facts right about that company. An exception is that you can't draw any conclusions about or from missing information there. For example, if an event is not included in a timeline of the company's history, that doesn't mean it did not happen. There may be internal or public-relations reasons why it's not mentioned.

Government websites generally can be trusted, even when it's not directly a government matter.

Unless written by highly credentialed academics, nonfiction books are not reliable because they were generally never fact checked. In addition, published books are almost always less up to date than newspapers or magazines. Reference books are an exception to that, because their very purpose is to be reliable.

You can also check directly with a knowledgeable person. For example, if I needed to fact check a statement about the components or construction of a piece of furniture I would turn to a person I know who is the corporate historian for a prestigious furniture company and teaches salespeople in his firm the ABCs of furniture. Fiction writers do this kind of checking all the time, and they often thank their experts by name in acknowledgements – everyone from a county coroner to a ballistics expert to architectural historians to Secret Service agents. Novelists are making up their story, but the best ones want the story's backdrop to be solid and factual.

You would think that someone talking about themselves would be a first-rate source - they ought to know, right? However, be wary where they might be inflating the truth to make themselves seem more important, wealthy or influential than they actually are. I'll never forget the time I was helping a client polish up her bio, and she casually mentioned that where she'd claimed she had started as a cleaning lady and worked up to owning the largest cleaning company in Rhode Island, that wasn't true. And yet she wanted to leave that statement in!

Fact Checking Made Easy

In addition, don't be swayed by the number of times you see a supposed fact cited online or elsewhere, but with no source provided. Cindy Lovell, executive director of the Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, wrote an article citing 20 quotes that are attributed to Mark Twain all over the Internet but that no one can prove he actually said or wrote, including two I really like, "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education" and "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." Apparently a lot of people feel that if they remember a saying but aren't sure who it came from, it's pretty safe to misattribute it to Mark Twain, Albert Einstein or Bill Gates.

Throughout my career as a freelance magazine writer, which mostly predated the Internet, my secret fact-checking weapon was reference librarians. In those days, they were amazing. They sat alone at a desk surrounded by reference books that they knew backwards and forwards, and they loved a challenge. You could call them up with the weirdest little question and they would know exactly which volume to pull out and flip through for the answer. Part of their professional creed is that they do not ask why you want to know that weird little fact.

If they couldn't find the answer within a couple of minutes, they would either jot down your query and your phone number and call you back on it, or tell you where else to look. For example, there are specialized libraries for business, music, art and probably quite a number of other subjects as well, and you could call up their reference librarians.

If you're stumped on something, try the reference department of the main branch of a big-city library. After you find the phone number, all you need to do is call and ask, "Reference, please." That's it!

Now you may be wondering why I haven't mentioned what to many people is the most obvious resource for fact checking and the one many people always consult first: Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a crowdsourced, publicly created and updated online encyclopedia, and for the most part, on most topics, it is reliable. It does contain mistakes and many omissions. In addition, you could make a mistake in using it. For example, I had an English cousin named Dr. John Yudkin who was a noted pioneer in the field of nutrition. He died in 1995 and has a fairly detailed listing in Wikipedia. However, I have another English cousin named Dr. John Yudkin, who is a generation younger and as far as I know is still alive and active in medical affairs in London. However, the younger Dr. John Yudkin is not listed in Wikipedia, and you could easily get these two men confused by relying on Wikipedia.

Most colleges and librarians these days recommend that you corroborate what Wikipedia tells you with another source. I recommend you do that whenever you have a relatively obscure topic and the Wikipedia entry seems kind of skimpy. Ditto for a controversial topic where some core information might be in dispute. However, for things like the capital of Croatia, the number of people suffering from rheumatoid arthritis or the third president of General Motors, Wikipedia should be fine.

Untrustworthy sources of information and bad places for fact checking include a blogger, information in an online forum, YouTube videos, an article on an individual's website, a newsletter or promotional email you received, pages that come up in a random Google

Fact Checking Made Easy

search and asking someone who is an ordinary practitioner in that field (not a recognized expert). One special peeve of mine is blogs whose entries aren't dated. It's impossible to know whether their information was posted in 2004 or 2014 - which can make a huge difference.

Please take a look at the resource handout for this lesson, which lists some excellent sites for fact checking.

And now we're ready to delve into the core fact checking skills and the two most common kinds of information you'll need to fact check: names and numbers.