

Fact Checking Made Easy

Part II: Fact Checking Skills

Lesson 5: Getting names right

In this lesson, when we talk about names, we mean all kinds of names – all proper names. Names of people, their job titles, names of places, names of companies, schools, government departments, books, movies and so on. If it is something that you normally write with initial capital letters, then it is something you need to check.

Some crucial warnings: Do not go by memory or by intuition when it comes to proper names. Check. Do not use reason. Check. Do not go by ear. Check it. Do not accept something just because it looks right. Check it. Do not, on your own, correct something that looks wrong. Check it. Many proper names are spelled illogically and unintuitively, or follow the rules of a language you may be unfamiliar with.

Getting it right means that you don't write "Southern Maine University" when it's actually "University of Southern Maine." You don't write "Stephen Spielberg" when it's actually "Steven Spielberg." You don't cite Mary Callahan Erdoes as CEO of JPMorgan Chase when she is CEO of J.P. Morgan Asset Management. You don't put Sioux Falls in Iowa when it's in South Dakota (Sioux City is in Iowa).

You'll have a chance to practice this, with my answers, a bit later in the course. Before that, I'd like to share some comments on pitfalls about proper names that I've seen trip people up.

Did you know that in some Asian cultures, the family surnames come first and what we would call the person's "first name" or "given name" comes second? For example, with Mao Zedong, the Chinese leader, Mao is his family name and Zedong is his given name. That is why he was called "Chairman Mao" and not "Chairman Zedong." Asians who emigrate to the West generally reverse their names to fit our naming pattern.

Do not Westernize or Anglicize a person's name. A science writer ended up in print saying that the inventor of X-rays was William Roentgen. Actually it was Wilhelm Roentgen. A reader wrote in, "You wouldn't call the composer John Bach (instead of Johann Sebastian Bach)."

If someone's name comes from a language with a non-Roman alphabet, such as Russian, Chinese, Hebrew or Arabic, the process of writing that name with our alphabet is called transliteration. Much of the time there is more than one way to transliterate a foreign name, or any foreign word, for that matter. That is why you might see the last name of Libya's former leader written as Qaddafi, Kaddafi, Gaddafi and his first name written as Muammar or Moamar. Likewise, the Russian composer Tchaikovsky's name might also be spelled Tchaikovski or Tschaikovsky. None of these are right or wrong. Pick a spelling you see being used by a source you respect, and be consistent in using it.

If you're writing about someone who has a rather complicated name, generally you should write his or her full name the first time you mention him or her. Then you can use a simplified version of the name. For example, the correct name of the famed U.S. civil rights leader is Martin Luther King, Jr. You should include the "Jr." when you first write about him. In later mentions, you'd refer to him as "King," "Dr. King" or "Martin Luther King." Likewise, Latin American names often have a full version that includes both the

Fact Checking Made Easy

father and mother's surnames and a shorter version with the mother's name omitted. Even so, if the person generally is referred to and refers to himself or herself only with the father's surname, then that's what you should use. For instance, Fidel Castro's birth name was Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz, with Castro being his father's name and Ruz his mother's name. Alejandro, of course, was his middle name. The world knows him as Fidel Castro. I've never actually seen him referred to as Fidel Castro Ruz, so you're pretty safe writing about him simply as Fidel Castro.

The same goes for well-known people who present themselves with a middle initial, such as John F. Kennedy, John D. Rockefeller, Cecil B. DeMille – or use a first initial and a middle name, like F. Scott Fitzgerald or J. Edgar Hoover.

Something delicate that sometimes comes up with names of people who are not famous is which pronoun to use for them – “he” or “she.” This can be an embarrassing mistake to make, and when I wrote for magazines I would sometimes have to ask about it when I interviewed someone over the phone and they had an androgynous voice. It also came up for me recently when I wanted to write about a blogger who has a Dutch or German first name and whose androgynous headshot doesn't unambiguously settle whether the person is a man or a woman. I poked around the person's website, looking for telltale pronouns in the blogger's bio and testimonials. That settled it – she's a “she.” It's fair to assume that someone would not tolerate a mistake about that on their own website.

If you haven't seen the person's photo, bio or which pronouns others who would know use about him or her, try to confirm the person's gender. First names may not be definitive. I know a few “Michaels” who are women and some “Gails” or “Lynns” who are men. And in literary history, of course, there is George Eliot, whom you would not want to refer to as a “he.”

Some of the same issues come up when it comes to place names. For example, the capital city of China used to be called “Peking” in one transliteration system and is now called “Beijing” in the transliteration system more commonly used now. People can get just as attached to and fussy about place names as they can about personal names. For instance, a town in Massachusetts called Manchester, fed up with being confused with Manchester, New Hampshire, Manchester, Connecticut and other towns by the same name, officially changed its name to Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts. Note the hyphens! They are part of the name!

In the United States, and I would guess in some other countries as well, there is an organization called The U.S. Board on Geographic Names, which approves standardized place names in the U.S. and around the world for use by the U.S. federal government. In 1891, this organization laid down several principles that have for the most part lasted to this day, with some exceptions brought about by fierce local lobbying. This may seem like a little bit of fact-checking trivia, but actually knowing these principles can put you on the right track when spelling American place names correctly.

“-burg” rather than “burgh” (except for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Alburgh, Vermont)

“-boro” rather than “-borough” (except for Marlborough, Massachusetts)

Eliminate apostrophes (except for Martha's Vineyard and a few other places)

Fact Checking Made Easy

Avoid hyphens (except for Winston-Salem, North Carolina and just a few others)

Avoid diacritical marks – accents on e’s or umlauts on o’s or tildes on n’s

Remember the science journalist who mistakenly wrote “William Roentgen” instead of “Wilhelm Roentgen”? Don’t Americanize or Britishize the spellings of place names. For instance, if you are British, don’t write “Centre City, Philadelphia” (it should be “Center”) and if you are American, don’t call the M3 motorway a “freeway” or a “turnpike.”

When it comes to names of organizations, be mindful of word order and prepositions. The Institute of Holistic Money Management could be an entirely different entity from the Holistic Money Management Institute. The website of the U.S. Board *on* Geographic Names gets kind of huffy pointing out that it is NOT called the U.S. Board *of* Geographic Names.

I’ve had some head-scratching fact-checking experiences when it comes to company names. You would think it would be a simple matter to confirm the correct spelling of a company’s name. Is it Kmart, K-mart, K Mart or Kmart? You would think the company’s signage would settle it, right? Or a quick peek at the company’s corporate website?

As I deduced afterwards, I happened to need the official name of Walmart at a point in time when the company was changing the way it spelled its name. From 1960 to 1992, the Arkansas-based retail chain spelled its company name with a hyphen: Wal-Mart. In 1992, they replaced the hyphen with a star: Wal*Mart. In 2008, they dropped the star in their signage, making it Walmart. However, the hyphen remains in the official legal name of the corporation: Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. And in 2010 when I was trying to check the spelling, I saw dozens of inconsistencies at the company’s corporate website, in both text and photos. Fortunately, it doesn’t happen that often that a company spells its own name in different ways, but if this seems to be happening, I suggest you call or email the PR department of the corporate headquarters for clarification.

[grab logos from <http://corporate.walmart.com/our-story/history/walmart-logo-timeline>]

With corporate and organizational names, be mindful not only of spelling, but also the placement of special characters, word division and so on. It’s Facebook, not Face Book, and Jamba Juice, not Jambajuce or Jamba-Juice.