

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 6: Getting the numbers right

Let's move on to numbers, another crucial element in fact checking.

Numbers includes amounts, percentages, dates, statistics, street numbers, phone numbers, distances, measurements and more. In many instances, you have more than one option for checking numbers – check each number both ways when you can.

Let's say you're writing about health, for example, and you said that one in every 10 Americans has kidney disease. It's a good idea not only to find a credible government or healthcare source that verifies that "one in every 10" fact but also to find the absolute number of kidney disease sufferers compared to the total population. Do the math yourself, as well.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website, the incidence of chronic kidney disease is 10% of all adult Americans. Right there is a small discrepancy. It's not the same to say that "one in every 10 Americans has kidney disease" as to say "one in every 10 American *adults* has kidney disease." If adults are way more likely to have this problem than children are, your statement is not accurate. It's a simple thing, of course, to update what you wrote to "one in every 10 American adults has kidney disease."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2013 population of the United States was estimated at 316 million. Going back to our original statement, if one in 10 Americans has kidney disease, that means almost 32 million Americans would have it. A CDC website says about 20 million Americans have it. So it does turn out that there's a significant factual difference between "one in every 10 Americans" and "one in every 10 American adults." Part of your job while fact checking is to notice and correct for such little (or not so little) nuances.

Do the math - or the arithmetic, perhaps I should say, because sometimes it's a matter of simple addition and subtraction. If you want to say that the Declaration of Independence was signed 238 years ago, then 1776 plus 238 had better add up to the current year, which it would if that's 2014.

With dates, make sure you remember that the 17th century refers to the 1600s and the 19th century refers to the 1800s, and so on.

It's important also to know that whereas people in the United States usually abbreviate dates as month/day/year, in other countries people often write them as day/month/year. That means that if you see a date written as 4/7/2015, you can't be sure whether that means April 7 or July 4.

With measurement units, make sure you are not mixing up meters and yards or feet, or Centigrade and Fahrenheit.

With geography, numbers come up in distances - and do you mean distances as the crow flies or as human beings can actually travel, which can be quite different in ways that may or may not matter to the point you are making.

Phone numbers of course need to match reality, and the best way to check that is to actually call the numbers you're listing, including the area code. Know the customary

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way to write international phone numbers. They should start with a plus sign for the country code.

Make sure numbers are internally consistent within your article or blog post. If you have charts, tables or an infographic, the numbers in the pictorial sections need to match what the text says and vice versa.

And finally, make sure you actually deliver the number of points you announce in your title or within your text. You don't want to have promised 50 ways to leave your lover and give only 48. That's easy to miss when you revise something you've written and forget to go back and fix other parts of your draft.

You'll have a chance to check some numbers in the exercises to come.