

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 7: Confirming research results

Let's suppose now that you read some statistics on another blogger's site or in a newspaper and you want to use them in a post of yours or in your book in progress. Not so fast! As we argued earlier, it's not in your best interest to pass along misinformation, so you'll want to make sure the snippet you read is accurate.

The first thing to do is to see if any sources are listed for the information you found. This might show up in several different forms:

- “According to...” What follows might be a certain author or researcher; an institution such as a hospital or university; or a government entity. On infographics you would look for “Source:”
- A link to a page where the complete study or an abstract (that is, a summary) of it can be found.
- A complete footnote citing author, title, date, page number and so on.
- A vague reference to who discovered the information or when.

If there is no source given or only such a loose one that it doesn't give you a foothold for looking further, allow suspicion to enter your mind. The data might be legitimate, it might be an urban legend, it might have been completely fabricated or the facts might have been garbled in transmission. Here's an essential point to remember: No matter how many times you see the same “fact” repeated online or in written materials, if you can't trace it back to an authoritative source, it may be bogus.

For example, you may have heard about a study of college graduates where they tracked the percentage of people who had written down their goals and then looked at what they achieved 20 or 40 or 50 years later. This study is supposed to have showed that the three percent of graduates with written goals achieved 10 times the wealth of those who had no written goals. Sometimes the claim is that the three percent of graduates with written goals had a higher net worth than the other 97 percent combined.

Some people say the study was done by Harvard Business School, others that it studied the Yale University class of 1953. You will find thousands of references to this study online and in books. Nobody pins it down to a named researcher or a published journal article or anything that specific. Yale University says there was no such study done at Yale, as far as they can determine. A cadre of crack researchers at *Fast Company* magazine were unable to find a verifiable source for this study. I don't ask you to take this on faith, of course - you can find the links for several convincing attempts to track down the supposed study in the PDF transcript of this lesson:

<http://sidsavara.com/personal-productivity/fact-or-fiction-the-truth-about-the-harvard-written-goal-study>

<http://www.fastcompany.com/27953/if-your-goal-success-dont-consult-these-gurus>

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3002763/why-setting-goals-could-wreck-your-life>

If your source of information doesn't link to a definitive source for your study or statistics, then I recommend you do a Google search using whatever proper nouns,

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categories and perhaps numbers you have. For instance, let's say that you read a blog saying that psychologists say that teenagers who have divorced parents are three times more likely than children of non-divorced parents to need psychological help. The blog didn't give the name of a university, researcher or scholarly journal where this study appeared, but by plunking the following terms into Google - "teenagers divorced parents three times psychological help" - we come up with the attribution, *Peter Hill "Recent Advances in Selected Aspects of Adolescent Development" Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 1993*. This looks legitimate. It takes just another minute or two to plunk that reference into Google and discover that yes, there is indeed a study by that author and with that title in that journal. While Wiley, the publisher, lets you read the first page of the article for free, that page doesn't contain the statistic in question.

And here's a little-known trick: If you add "filetype:PDF" just after the title of the journal article in Google, you'll find out whether anyone (authorized or unauthorized) has posted the whole article online. In this case that search gets you access to the whole article. Mission accomplished, as long as you can decipher the psychological jargon to make sure the "three times" statistic was accurately quoted. In any case, you would have done much better in this instance than with that mythical Harvard or Yale goals study.

If the ultimate source of information you can track down is not a university or a government entity, consider whether the alleged source of information is trustworthy. For instance, the numbers you want to use come from a blog post that says, "According to the Coalition for the Truth About Climate Change..." unfortunately, that sounds like it may be a biased source of information. Also look for the date of the information. The teenaged kids of divorced parents study was published in 1993, which seems rather long ago to me. That was almost a generation ago.

As it happened, during my search for the teenaged children of divorced parents study I landed on a site that had definite earmarks of credibility problems. At the top of the web page, it said, "These days most people accept divorce as a way of life, completely unaware of the damage they are doing to their children. Tell your friends, acquaintances and co-workers to read these shocking statistics about divorce and children. It may help them to reconsider divorce."

Just from that opening, it's clear there's an agenda operating on this page. And when you look further, you would see that every single statistic listed on this page - 18 bullet points in all - indicates a negative impact on children from divorce. Clearly this may not tell the whole story. Someone probably compiled this page with a one-sided conclusion in mind. All in all, you should probably look for a less biased and more up-to-date presentation of the research in question if you want to be credible.

Suppose all you can find is something like this, "Sociologists at Lehigh University discovered that..." and then the conclusion of the research is described. If you want to confirm that research and find out more or provide a link, you can actually contact Lehigh University and ask. When I was writing for national magazines I did this sort of thing all the time.

Institutions like universities, hospitals and government agencies want you to be giving out accurate information about what they're up to, and they usually have a specific

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person or department in charge of doing that. Yup! You want to look for something called a Media Relations department or a Media Relations person. If that fails, look for the Public Relations (or PR) department of the university or whatever it is. Most organizations list the contact information right on the Web. By Googling “Media Relations Lehigh University,” for example, I got right to the person in charge and the corresponding contact information. Don’t be intimidated by the fact that the person listed is a Vice President. That person’s staffers will normally help you with your query, and promptly too. It’s part of their job to do so.

And as I mentioned earlier, when you have only vague details about a study, you can enlist the help of a big-city reference librarian. These are public employees who are highly trained in tracking down facts, and they love a challenge. You don’t have to have a library card at their library to get their assistance. You contact the Reference Desk of the library and tell them what you’re trying to find or confirm. If it’s something they can look up in five minutes or less, they’ll take a look for you right then, while you’re on the phone. If not, they’ll either give you suggestions for how or where to search most productively for your information or take your contact information and get back to you later.

I used to do this all the time when I was writing for magazines. Prior to the Internet, I had to know things like what was the name of the French agency corresponding to the FBI or how many pairs of sunglasses are sold in the U.S. every year. No matter how weird your question, they will never ask you who you are or why you need to know.

I have one more important suggestion to make about passing along statistics you’ve read. Run them by your common sense. Do a rough “Could it be...?” test to see whether they’re even in the range of plausibility. For example, my local paper had an article with a callout quote in big letters: “We lose two hours of life for every hour we sit,” writes James Levine, who invented the treadmill desk.”

This is a really catchy statistic, don’t you think? Two things right away prompt me to be suspicious. First, it’s so catchy that it might well be too good to be true. Two for one, really? Not 2.45 to one or five to 3.89? Second, did you catch the fact that the person touting the statistic has a vested interest in getting us to be scared of spending our workday sitting? The source of this statistic invented something we can buy to escape the dreaded fate in the statistic.

Of course it could still be true. So I sat down and did the math. Could we lose two hours of life for every hour we sit? Let’s say you’re 55 years old and you’ve been through 12 years of schooling and 38 years of a desk job since the age of 5. And let’s say that conservatively, that means you have sat 8 hours a day for 50 years since age 5. Doing the math of hours per day times days per year times the number of years, that means you’ve sat approximately 146,000 hours since age 5. Then applying the two-for-one statistic, sitting would have taken off 292,000 hours from your life. According to this expert, that means you would have shortened your lifespan by 33 years. (A year has 8760 hours.) Is that believable to you? Not to me.

Do you want to look into this a little further? Doing a Google search on “sitting shortens your life by years” turns up a recent Australian study that found that sitting more than

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three hours a day could shorten your life by two years. That's a far cry from 33 years, and all this - the overly neat statistic, the vested interest and the huge difference from other research results leads me to conclude James Levine - or the reporter who wrote the article I read - is most likely exaggerating. I would therefore take a pass on using that startling statistic of losing two hours of life for every hour we sit.