

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 9: Now You Try It #2

I've put together another fact-checking exercise for you. Imagine this as an article you wrote, or that someone submitted to your travel website. Verify or correct all the facts in the piece. Concentrate on points that are out-and-out facts, not matters of judgment. As a hint, you should be able to find at least seven factual errors.

I'll read it out loud for those of you who want to fact check it piece by piece, but you'll probably find it more convenient to download the PDF called Lesson 9 Exercise and work on that with the video off. After I read the exercise, I'll go through it with you fact by purported fact the way I did in the previous lesson.

Leaf Peeping in Vermont

With Columbus Day only four weeks off, Vermont's inns and motels are already reporting near-capacity reservations for the three-day weekend that usually falls around peak foliage time.

The region's oaks, maples and hemlocks sport only a touch of red and gold now, but you can count on the brilliant yellows, scarlets, purples and oranges New England is famous for to show themselves in all their riotous beauty soon.

Fall colors often look like they came from an artist's paintbox, but they're a natural consequence when the region's hardwood trees stop producing chlorophyll and yellow, red and orange pigments begin to overtake and dominate summer's green leaves. The exact timing of peak foliage depends on the season's rainfall, amount of sunshine and high and low temperatures.

During the height of foliage season, Vermont's usual one million residents swell to perhaps a million and a half, and many back roads become slow going as drivers and passengers get caught up in "Oohs" and "Aahs."

With less than one-third of its residents living in cities, it's the most rural state in the U.S. and may have the fewest traffic jams for the remainder of the year. Burlington, home of the University of Vermont, is Vermont's largest city, about eight times bigger than Montpelier, the state capital, scarcely bigger than a village at 7,035 souls.

You can escape the car caravans and enjoy foliage-time hiking in Smugglers Notch State Park, Hubbard Park in Montpelier and especially, Calvin State Forest, named after Calvin Coolidge, our 32nd President, a native of the state.

[Pause]

Did you do the fact checking exercise about leaf peeping in Vermont? If not, please stop the video and do it now. You should have found and corrected at least seven definite errors in the passage, and let's go through it together.

First, if you live in the United States there are a couple of assertions in the first paragraph that are common sense or generally well known and you wouldn't have to confirm, such as the fact that Columbus Day occurs in the fall, that fall is foliage season in Vermont, that most people get a three-day weekend for Columbus Day in October, and people like

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to go to Northern New England, especially Vermont, to look at the changing colors of the trees.

If you needed to check any of these things, it shouldn't be too difficult. For example, you could go to any number of websites on American holidays to confirm when Columbus Day occurs and how Americans celebrate it.

The first real trouble spot in this passage comes in the second paragraph. "The region's oaks, maples and hemlocks." Uh-oh. Hemlocks are evergreen trees and they do not change color or drop their leaves in the fall. Indeed, they don't have leaves - they have needles. That's a definite error.

Some people who have done this exercise have taken issue with the "purple" included with "yellows, scarlets and oranges." Oak and maple leaves don't turn purple. Not exactly, that's right. But it's just a bit of an overstatement, because a bright brownish red can shade off into purple. I've experienced more than 50 autumns in New England, and I would let that one go through. It's a judgment call.

The next thing you want to carefully consider is "hardwood trees." What does that mean and is it a proper label for the type of trees whose leaves turn color in the fall? Let's start with Wikipedia, which is surprisingly unhelpful, because it's too technical for our purpose. It says, "Hardwood is wood from dicot angiosperm trees. ["What?"] It may also be used for those trees themselves: these are usually broad-leaved; in temperate and boreal latitudes they are mostly deciduous, but in tropics and subtropics mostly evergreen."

Unless you have a background in forestry, there are too many unfamiliar words there, and you would also have to figure out what zone Vermont is in to use this definition. I found a glossary of forestry terms on a State of Maryland website that gives us a much simpler definition: Hardwood is "a general term encompassing broadleaf, deciduous trees." The same glossary confirms that "deciduous" means "shedding or losing leaves annually." So we have verified that "hardwood" is used properly in the article.

Next, according to the article, the trees "stop producing chloroform." This might instantly strike you as wrong, because chloroform is a chemical that knocks people out temporarily. What was meant here is chlorophyll, which is - well, let's look that up. All the dictionaries say that it's green and a component of plants. If you determined that "chloroform" was incorrect but you didn't know what the right term was, you would need to look for a scientific description of the process at work in fall foliage colors. Simply type "why do leaves turn color in the fall" into the Google search box, and you get the answer right away from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. That's a source you can trust!

To confirm the next sentence about the timing of peak foliage you may need to read some explanations of the process at scientific websites, like this nice one created by the Buffalo Museum of Science [<http://www.sciencebuff.org/collections/research-collections/botany/bright-fall-colors/>], and some state tourist sites, which have a vested interest in explaining why the timing is different from year to year - like at the website of the Vermont Department of Tourism [<http://www.vermontvacation.com/fallfoliage2010/fallfoliage.asp>], which has a page

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called Foliage Forecaster that includes this: “The exact timing of the color change varies year to year.”

Going on to the next paragraph, does Vermont have one million residents? Nope, not even close. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2020 it had just over 643,000 residents. So that’s definitely wrong. What about how many extra people flock in to see the foliage? Well, that’s way off as well. Looking up “fall foliage industry Vermont,” I found a 2011 article on the Vermont Public Radio website quoting the Vermont Tourism Department that 3.5 million visitors come to Vermont each fall.

The next fact to check is that one-third of Vermont residents live in cities and that it’s the most rural state in the U.S. According to the U.S. Census bureau, in 2010 38.9 percent of Vermonters lived in a small city or an urban area. That’s pretty close to one-third. You might adjust it to “slightly more than one-third.” This source said Vermont was indeed the most rural state. However, I also turned up an article saying that in 2010 Maine surpassed Vermont slightly as the most rural state. So let’s look more closely.

<http://www.dailyonder.com/how-rural-are-states/2012/04/02/3847>

<http://bangordailynews.com/2012/03/26/business/census-maine-most-rural-state-in-2010-as-urban-centers-grow-nationwide/>

The first source says, “The most rural state is Vermont, with 82.6 percent of its population living in either rural areas or small cities.” The second source says that 61.3 percent of Maine’s population lived in rural areas, compared to 61.1 percent for Vermont. I would tend to go with the second source’s interpretation of “most rural,” since small cities are not really rural, and therefore correct this statement to say that Vermont is the second most rural state in the U.S. Whether it has the fewest traffic jams apart from foliage season is presented as a matter of speculation, and it’s plausible, so we don’t need to look it up.

On to Burlington - is it the home of the University of Vermont? Yes, that’s easy to confirm and no one says otherwise. Do make sure that it’s “the University of Vermont” and not “Vermont University.” Is it Vermont’s largest city? Most definitely. In 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau it had a population of 44,743. Next, is Montpelier the Vermont state capital? Yes, and in 2020 it had 8,074 people. Now we have to do some math. Is Burlington’s population eight times larger than Montpelier? No, that’s way off. That would put Burlington’s population at almost 65,000, not 44 thousand and some.

We have only a few more items to check! Are there such places in Vermont as Smugglers Notch State Park, Hubbard Park (and is it in Montpelier?) and Calvin State Forest? The answers are yes, yes, yes and no. Here a tricky thing is that you can’t simply look up a list of Vermont state parks and find that Smugglers Notch is listed but Hubbard isn’t and Calvin State Forest isn’t. Hubbard Park is a *city* park in Montpelier and a state *forest* wouldn’t be listed with state *parks*. As a bonus, the page on Hubbard Park in Montpelier says that it has a stand of red oaks, which means that it would indeed probably be a nice place to see fall colors.

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As for Calvin State Forest, however, it's in fact called the Calvin Coolidge State Forest. So that's an error.

And what about Calvin Coolidge himself? At Wikipedia and elsewhere, you can quickly confirm that he was born in Vermont - on July 4th, no less. However, he was the 30th president of the United States, not the 32nd. That's the last error in our exercise.

How did you do? If you caught all or nearly all the factual mistakes in the exercise, give yourself a pat on the back. If not, take stock of what you missed and what you need to do differently next time around. Take a break and then let's do this one more time.