

## WORDS TO LIVE BY



Jennifer Morehead

“In an information economy, where writing and communicating are more important than ever, learning to edit is such a critical skill. It makes you a better writer. It makes you a better reader. It will make you look smarter. It may help you get a date. (My friend met her future husband online when his grammatically correct, typo-free Match.com profile caught her eye.) And some people will discover that they love it for its own sake. You know who you are.”

—Jennifer Morehead

*Copy Editor, Washington Post*

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Jennifer, see the “Professional Thoughts” feature later in the chapter.

# 2

## BEING ACCURATE, RELYING ON THE FACTS

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand why you need to be picky as a journalist.
- Understand the value media professionals have in the digital age.
- Assess ways in which you can fight against fake news.

- Apply the basics of fact-checking for simple mistakes in areas such as spelling and math.
- Define and differentiate between primary and secondary sources, especially in terms of their value and accuracy.
- Identify places where you can find information and which sources of information are the best to use in specific situations.
- Examine the broader issues of accuracy, including acknowledging potential biases, sticking exactly to what people said and using multiple sources to verify concepts.



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As you collect information as a media writer, make sure your content is as accurate as possible.

“By defeating the Soviet Union in the ‘Miracle on Ice’ game, the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team won the gold medal.”

“Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world.”

“Dr. Jonas Salk, born of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, invented polio in the 1950s.”

If taken at face value and with a quick glance, each of these items would likely be viewed as a fact. The movie “Miracle” details the Olympic hockey team’s triumph at the Lake Placid games, where they

defeated the Soviets and prompted Al Michaels’ famous broadcast call: “Do you believe in miracles?” The name “Mount Everest” has become synonymous with giant obstacles to be overcome, and a quick peek at the Wikipedia page for it notes that it is “Earth’s highest mountain.” If you Google the words “Salk” and “polio,” thousands of entries show up.

However, these three statements are wrong.

The United States did defeat the Soviet Union in the Miracle on Ice game and did win the gold medal in those Olympics. However, winning the game didn’t earn the team the medal. After beating the Soviets, the U.S. team had to defeat Finland in the finals to win gold.

Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world, as mountain height is measured from sea level to the top of the peak. However, the “tallness” of a mountain is traditionally measured from the base of the mountain to its peak. This means that Mauna Kea in Hawaii, which has an appreciable amount of its base underwater, is 33,476 feet tall and thus is taller than Mount Everest (29,029 feet).

Dr. Jonas Salk was born of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and was involved in polio research in the 1950s. That said, he invented the polio vaccine, not polio itself.

It would be easy to dismiss these errors as insignificant or a bit of nerd-level trickery. “Aw, you know what I meant,” is often the complaint people make when confronted with errors like these.

However, you can’t be almost right most of the time if you work in a media organization. You have to be entirely right all of the time or at least push yourself toward that goal. Accuracy is the most important aspect of your job, regardless of whether you are publishing a newspaper,

broadcasting a news report, issuing a press release or sending out an advertisement. A factual inaccuracy can crush the best writing, the most creative ad and the most innovative campaign.

In this chapter, we will outline why accuracy should be at the forefront of your mind. We will also examine where most people get tripped up in the world of facts. Finally, we will discuss how best to check the accuracy of your work and how to avoid major pitfalls along the way.



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Taking good notes and verifying your content with sources can keep your work free from errors.

## WHY IS JOURNALISM SUCH A PICKY FIELD?

In the movie version of the Neil Simon play “Biloxi Blues,” the main character maintains a journal in which he writes his thoughts about people and life in general during his time at a boot camp in 1945. When one of his musings leads to a confrontation among several men, he finds himself understanding the power of the written word:

“People believe whatever they read. Something magical happens once it’s put down on paper. They figure no one would have gone to the trouble of writing it down if it wasn’t the truth. Responsibility was my new watchword.”

If you take that concept and pair it with the line famously attributed to Mark Twain about how “a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes,” you can see why journalism requires the utmost attention to accuracy.

The goal of good media writers is to inform the readers of something that will benefit the media organization and its audience members. This shared bond of trust is what keeps people showing up at public events, heading to the stores and reading news stories. The more mistakes we make in journalism, the harder it is to maintain that bond. Even more, not everyone who publishes information, sends out tweets or reaches out to the public in other ways shares our professional duty to the truth. As you will see later in this chapter, many people have no problem starting rumors and spreading lies. For some people, it is a joke, whereas for others it is a chance to take advantage of an unsuspecting public. In any case, this misinformation makes it harder on media practitioners who hold themselves to a higher standard.

## WHY MEDIA PROFESSIONALS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

The role of media professionals has changed a great deal over the past several decades. In the pre-internet era, newspapers and TV newscasters selected and presented information, giving certain stories and ideas a sense of importance. This selection process, known as **gatekeeping**, allowed media professionals to determine what people would and would not see. Public-relations practitioners were often limited in how they sent their messages to the audience, as news reporters could pick and choose which events were covered and which topics were highlighted. Advertisers had fewer venues they could use to publish advertisements, because of the limited number of broadcast channels and the presence of only one or two newspapers per geographic region.

Today, the internet has opened up the floodgates of information, making the job of professional media operatives different but even more crucial. Anyone can start a website and post content of any kind. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media channels give people the opportunity to spread information quickly. Public-relations practitioners and advertisers no longer need to rely on newspapers or TV stations to reach potential audience members with important content.

However, these endless possibilities can overwhelm readers and viewers, leaving them at the mercy of unscrupulous or uninformed individuals. Therefore, media writers are important not only as content creators but also as tour guides. They help people separate fact from fiction, reality from myth and honesty from dishonesty.

Your goal as a media practitioner, regardless of the area in which you work, is to establish a bond of trust with your readership and do your best to present accurate information. In doing so, you will help guide your readers as they decide what to think, what to believe and what to do. Every time you provide accurate information, you give your readers another reason to believe what you tell them. However, any error, no matter how minor, can destroy all the good work you have done.

## ADAPT

### THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS

**Fake news** takes on a variety of meanings, depending on who uses the term. To some people, fake news includes satire sites like *The Onion*, which seek to mock news or poke fun at public figures. Others argue that any partisan news that fails to reflect their own worldview falls into the category of fake news. Still others see fake news as being hoaxes that internet trolls use to trick journalists and readers into believing and spreading false information. As a media professional, producing or sharing incorrect information is something you need to avoid, regardless of whether it comes from a source who has an axe to grind or a person who just wants to fake you out.

Hoaxes crop up on social media often and gain momentum when people fail to check sources or question the veracity of the information. During the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, dozens of hoaxes emerged on social media. In one case, a list of tips on how to fight the virus began circulating on Facebook, claiming to be from a “Stanford Hospital board member.” This list included things like drinking a few sips of water every 15 minutes and holding your breath for 10 seconds. “Drinking water or other liquid will wash (the virus) down through your throat and into the stomach. Once there, your stomach acid will kill the virus,” the “expert” noted. As for holding your breath? “If you complete it successfully without coughing, without discomfort, stiffness or tightness, etc., it proves there is no Fibrosis in the lungs, basically indicates no infection.” An epidemiological scholar referred to the advice as “totally bogus.”<sup>1</sup> Another coronavirus-related claim, this time on Twitter, erroneously stated that action movie star Chuck Norris died after contracting COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>



David McNew/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Breaking news events, like the helicopter crash that killed basketball legend Kobe Bryant, can lead to misinformation and disinformation. Reporters must remain vigilant in their coverage.

In many cases, the desire to be first on an important development can lead you astray. In January 2020, basketball icon Kobe Bryant died when the helicopter he was riding in crashed into a hillside near Los Angeles. The other eight people aboard the copter, including Bryant’s daughter, Gianna, died immediately as well. In a rush to beat others to the story, ABC chief national correspondent Matt Gutman stated on air that four of Bryant’s children were on board instead of just Gianna. Although Gutman later realized his error and apologized for his mistake, ABC News suspended him for making a false statement.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike in previous eras, fake news is everywhere, and it is becoming exceedingly difficult to distinguish

it from real news. To help you avoid getting faked out, here are some helpful tips:

- **Consider the source:** Where information comes from is crucial in determining how much credence you should put into a story. Think about when you were in grade school and you heard some unbelievable story from “that one kid” on the playground who always was making stuff up. Chances are, you learned to stop believing him after you discovered that there wasn’t a pool on the roof of the gym and that there was no such thing as “No Pants Wednesday.” However, when your teacher or the principal told you something, you tended to give it serious consideration. Apply the same basic rule when you consider information you find online. “Who told you that?” should be one of the first questions you ask when you get information that doesn’t seem to pass the smell test. Also, as copy editor Jennifer Morehead notes later in this chapter, it makes sense to rely on official sources like .gov sites instead of places like “IAmTheMasterOfAllCoolThings.blogspot.com.”
- **Strength exists in numbers:** If you get information from a single source online, don’t pass it along without looking for similar information from other sources. Just because the source you found isn’t one you know all that well, it doesn’t always follow that the information isn’t accurate. Sites outside of the mainstream media break news and share information all the time. However, if the information is incredibly important or shocking, the mainstream media outlets will follow up with their own stories. However, if you find only one source for your story that the president of the United States is actually an alien from Saturn, it’s a pretty safe bet you’re looking at some level of fake news.
- **The root of the rumor:** Along the same lines as the previous point, just because a quick Google search reveals dozens of stories on a given topic, it doesn’t always follow that the information is true. Some sites frequently refer to their own content only and create an echo chamber of information that lacks external support. Good media writing will have multiple and varied sources. Most media outlets will find similar sources, but they don’t all tend to rely on the same people. In other words, if 12 media outlets produce a story on the importance of a new drug or the impact of a new virus, all 12 will likely talk to a scientist or a doctor. However, each outlet will likely use different scientists and doctors than the other 11 outlets. If everyone is talking to the same “root source,” you have reason for concern. Dig into stories that cite only a single source or all come back to a single story online before you pass the information along as true.
- **Click the links:** The purpose of links is the same as the purpose of citations in a research paper you would do for a class: Support the claims you are making. However, just because a link exists, it doesn’t always follow that the information behind it will support or validate the claims in a story. Click the links and see where they lead you. Does the information at the other end of that click really support the key aspects of what author says it does? Does the link lead you to a credible outside source, or does it lead only to other stories by the same author, spouting the same general information? The more you examine the links and the sources to which they lead, the less likely you are to believe something that isn’t true.
- **Be suspicious:** One of the best ways to avoid letting fake news trick you is to be a bit paranoid about every piece of information you receive. The Russian proverb “Trust, but verify” should guide you through anything you read. Independently verify the information in a piece before you pass it along to others. Check the quality of the sources before you put your own reputation on the line. A good way to process “facts” in a piece is to assume everything you see is incorrect until you can prove it to be true. Some people may say that’s a bit too paranoid, but it’s better to be overly suspicious than to be wrong.

## MAKING SURE YOU ARE SURE

Journalists often use the line “if your mother says she loves you, go check it out” as a basic rule for accuracy. In other words, don’t assume that something is true, even if you believe it to be. A mild sense of paranoia will keep you on your toes and force you to view every fact you use with a sense of suspicion. This can help you make sure that you are sure before you state something with certainty.





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PolitiFact is one organization that examines the claims of politicians and rates how accurate they are through the use of its “Truth-o-Meter.”

Some things may seem unworthy of your attention, but you should realize that someone is always watching. One famous example comes from the contract of the rock band Van Halen in 1982. The “rider,” which lists specific demands the band makes beyond the common contract language, was 53 pages long and told promoters that they needed to provide M&M’s candy but added this: “Warning: absolutely no brown ones.” This requirement forced some employee at the venue to pick through the bowls of candy and remove all the brown and tan M&M’s. The band members later explained that this was not a case of being ridiculous with their demands, but rather a way to test the staff at the venue. If brown M&M’s were in the bowls, they assumed that bigger issues, such as lighting, staging and security, might also be suspect.<sup>4</sup> The lesson here is a simple one: If your readers can’t trust you with the simple issues, how can you expect them to trust you with the bigger ones?

As a writer, you want to get everything right on the first try. You want to make sure all of your facts are solid, the names are spelled properly and the content is unimpeachable. This is a noble effort, but more often than not, you will make mistakes, and somebody needs to catch them before your piece goes public.

To make absolutely sure that you are as accurate as possible, you want to edit your own work with the presumption that everything you have just written is wrong. Assume that every name is spelled wrong, every number is wrong, every address is wrong and every statement on the screen is factually inaccurate. Then, start your edit with the approach that you need to prove that each thing on the screen is right.

In other words, don’t assume “Jim Smith” is spelled correctly. Assume it’s wrong until you can find a source that shows you the name really is spelled “J-I-M S-M-I-T-H.” Do the same thing with every other element in your piece, and you will solidify the overall accuracy as best as you can. If nothing else, when your boss asks, “Are you sure this is spelled right?” you can reply with, “Yes. Here is my source.”

## Basic Fact-Checking

A simple **fact check** can take a significant amount of time if you do it right. You need to examine each fact you put into anything you write and then look for any way in which that item might be inaccurate or misleading. Here is a short list of steps to take during a basic fact check:

### Check Spelling

Accuracy is about making sure you are right, and to that extent, you need to spell all words correctly. If you have a document full of typos or misspelled words, you will have serious credibility issues. As you write, if you are unsure of the spelling of a word or you aren’t sure if the word means what you think it means, stop and look it up right away. Don’t just punch down something to hold its place and think, “I’ll get to this later.” Media professionals of all kinds have found themselves squirming of embarrassment when they forget to go back and swap out their “decent guess” for what they should have written in the first place.

You should always run a computer-based spell check on every piece you do and examine each spelling suggestion carefully. Don't click the "replace all" button or rapidly click the "replace" button as errors pop up. Look at each offering the software provides, and then pick the right replacement.

You also need to do a line-by-line examination of your pieces for words that might be spelled properly but weren't what you meant to write. For example, if you want to study something carefully, you want to "assess" it, not "asses" it. Also remember that there is an "L" in "public." One of the more embarrassing examples of this mistake happened to WLOS-13 in North Carolina during the coronavirus outbreak. As part of a segment regarding social distancing and avoiding contact with others, a graphic titled "Touching Pubic Spaces" ran behind the journalist throughout the entire piece. In each case, the word was spelled properly, but it wasn't an accurate representation of what the writer meant. Spell check doesn't catch your best intentions, so carefully reread your work for any spelling errors or word glitches.

### Review Proper Nouns

The spell-check function on most word-processing systems will catch errors in the spelling of common words. However, the names of people, places and things often look like mistakes to the electronic dictionaries.

If you misspell someone's name or the name of someone's group, you will insult that person and make him or her less likely to work with you. That is why you need to do a letter-by-letter examination of every proper noun in anything you write.

When you interview a source, as you will learn how to do in Chapter 5, have the person spell his or her name. It also helps to ask at that point how the source wishes to be cited in your work. Richard Smith could prefer Rich, Rick or Ricky, so it helps to ask. As you take notes on this, write each letter in your notebook carefully so you can go back and check your finished piece against your notes. A recording to back up your notes is also a good idea, when possible.

If you need to use other material to check a proper noun, use a source you trust, such as a company directory or an official website. Again, go letter by letter to make sure you get it right. Also, take a quick check of any style guides your organization might use. The stationery might list your group as "Smith-Rock Corporation," but your style guide might require that all references in formal documents refer to it as "Smith/Rock Corp." The Associated Press Stylebook also is helpful in standardizing official company names and titles.

Finally, check the entire document for consistency. If one part of your news story mentions "Gov. Charles Smith," and five sentences later, he is referred to as "Smyth," one version of the name is obviously wrong. You should also check what you wrote against other pieces you or your organization already published. If one press release lists your boss as Chairman Roman Meijas and the second one lists him as Assistant Chairman Roman Meijas, you will likely confuse your readers. Even worse, if your audience is a media outlet, that confusion will then be broadcast to a larger population, and the error will continue to propagate.

### Look Into the Numbers

Media professionals often joke that they got into journalism because they can't do math. Like it or not, math is a part of this field, and you need to come to grips with it, because numerical errors can create a lot of problems for you and your readers.

Look at math in your writing and make sure it's right. In obituaries, do the math from the person's birth date to the person's death date and make sure the age is right. Just because someone was born in 1940 and died in 2020, it doesn't mean the person was 80 years old.

When someone is talking about money or percentages, take the time to walk through the math. Think of it like a story problem from grade school. "OK, if the tax brought in \$50,000

and the fees brought in \$90,000, how does that add up to \$150,000?” You might locate math errors that need to be addressed, or you might be missing part of the equation that makes this odd-looking math make sense.

Understand the difference between percentages and percentage points. If your company institutes a policy stating that it donates 10% of its profits to charity, you might need to write a press release about that. If your company says that it plans to increase that amount by 50% next year, this means it will be donating 15% of its profits to charity ( $10\% \times 0.5 = 5\%$  plus the original  $10\% = 15\%$ ). If it says that it will increase its donation by 50 percentage points, you have a huge increase ( $10\% + 50 \text{ percentage points} = 60\%$ ).

Always do the math yourself to double-check any figures you want to use. Also, make sure to check back with the source of those figures to verify your conclusions and your approach to the math.

### Check Places

When you list places for your events, double-check the addresses against a map and a directory. If you hold an event at 1111 S. Main St. and you list it as 1111 N. Main St., you might be a bit lonely. Also, differences exist among streets, avenues, boulevards and more. In some large metropolitan areas, like Manhattan, both streets and avenues are numerically based, so you need to know whether you are heading to Fifth Street or Fifth Avenue.

If you decide to include a set of directions, make sure the directions work. Drive or walk the route yourself or have someone who isn't familiar with the area examine the route to see if it makes sense. Physically doing this will help you find out if you missed a turn or if you accidentally have someone going the wrong way down a one-way street.

## CONNECT

### THE TELEPHONE GAME

If you want to connect with your audience in terms of accuracy, you can think of a game that almost always ends with a disconnect. Children often play “telephone,” a game where one person whispers something to another person, that person whispers it to the next person, and so on. Somewhere along the way, the message inevitably will be misinterpreted or mangled, and in the end, you will end up with something that is nothing like the original statement.

As you examine your work for accuracy, keep the telephone game in mind. If you don't have a **primary source** or a solid **secondary source**, you run the risk of passing along information that might have been

altered. A primary source allows you to take information from someone or something that was present for whatever it is you are researching. These sources can include a person who witnessed a shooting, the original text of a speech or a video of a news conference. Secondary sources are like the second person in the “telephone” game: They retell or interpret what the primary sources provided them. Wikipedia, a magazine article and a person who is telling you a story they heard from a friend are all examples of secondary sources.

You want to get as close as you can to the original source so you have fewer chances to make errors.

### Where to Find Your Facts

When it comes to fact-checking, you want to have confidence in the sources of information you use to verify your writing. Here are some places you can go to complete your fact check and verify your information:



## Source Documents

Whenever possible, get copies of original documents so you can compare what people have told you with what someone wrote. People have an uncanny way of being inaccurate or confused, while documents tend to remain exactly the way they were written.

Even some of the most famous quotes are factually incorrect when you check them against the source material. The phrase “Money is the root of all evil” attempts to convey the way in which materialism can lead decent people to make horrible choices. However, if you look up 1 Timothy 6:10 in the King James Bible, you will find that the quote actually reads, “The love of money is the root of all evil.”

Humphrey Bogart’s character, Rick Blaine, never said “Play it again, Sam” in “Casablanca,” Darth Vader never said “Luke, I am your father” in “The Empire Strikes Back” and Hannibal Lecter never said “Hello, Clarice” in “Silence of the Lambs.” Each of these is off slightly in some way, which is just one more reason you need to look things up at the source.

If you can get your hands on source material, you can cite it with much more certainty. When you are researching a topic, or interviewing a source, seek email correspondence, meeting minutes, official documents and other similar items. Keeping copies of these items handy can be helpful in checking your work.

## PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS

JENNIFER MOREHEAD

Regardless of the size of the story or overall impact of the piece, Jennifer Morehead subscribes to a simple philosophy when it comes to checking writers’ copy for errors.

“I’ve tried to approach stories of every kind in the same basic way: They \*must\* be accurate, they \*must\* be clear. . . . Someone always notices,” she said. “Errors in any story, from local crime briefs to big features, erode credibility.”

Morehead has served as a copy editor for some of the country’s most recognized and exalted news sources. She currently serves as a copy editor at the Washington Post. She edits the Sunday op-ed section and handles copy editing for print and online stories and blogs for the national, foreign, metro, life/arts and business desks. Prior to her stint at the Post, she was a copy editor for the New York Times, the Houston Chronicle, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the San Francisco Chronicle.

Morehead said that no writer ever creates perfect copy, but the more mistakes a media organization makes, the less credibility it will have in the eyes of its readers.

“It’s easy to think that ‘no one will notice’ the little stuff,” she said. “A misspelled name? A math error? An incorrect statistic from a baseball game that was played

in 1973? When dealing with details, keep three words in mind: Someone always notices. How do we know? Because news organizations get multiple emails, tweets, calls and letters every day from readers pointing out even the smallest factual mistakes, not to mention grammatical ones.”

To catch and correct these errors, Morehead said she uses several editing techniques, including reading a story multiple times.

“My first read of a story is the fact-checking read,” she said. “I start at the beginning, and anytime I come to a proper name, a date, a number (any kind of number, from a percentage to a death toll to someone’s age), statistics, a quote from a previously published source (such as another article, a book or a transcript), a title, a time, historical references or just about anything else presented as fact, I check it, most often using the Internet. I most heavily rely on articles from my own publication, for consistency’s sake, as well as primary documents or official websites. If I’m checking the spelling of an



Jennifer Morehead

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astronaut's name, for instance, I go to NASA.gov, not something like ThisIsMyAwesomeSpaceBlog.com."

Morehead also said she uses her own internal compass to note statements that don't seem entirely accurate so she can check them against other sources.

"I'm also on the lookout for statements that just seem 'off,'" she said. "Real examples I've encountered: No, Robert E. Lee is not buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The movie 'Xanadu' is about a roller disco, not a roller derby. No, Americans don't have a right to the 'ballet'—that would be the ballot."

The editing process for Morehead is about more than parsing arcane grammar rules or picking at a writer's story. She said the value of editing is about making a piece of copy valuable to the people who are reading it.

"Editing is about clarity and getting to the point—choosing the right words to express your idea in an effective way," Morehead said. "The bits of writing that newspaper copy editors do as part of our jobs—headlines

and captions—are intended to connect with an audience; successful display type makes readers pay attention. I can imagine either of these skills being useful in a PR or advertising setting. For instance, my mother sometimes writes fundraising letters for charitable causes she's involved in. These letters have to be compelling from the start, so people will continue reading and be moved to respond, hopefully with a check. My mom will often call me to work out those opening lines, and I draw on years of editing good and bad newspaper leads to help come up with attention-grabbing language."

Regardless of the field, Morehead said learning how to fact-check, clean copy and improve writing will provide anyone in media writing with an important set of skills.

"Editing helps you develop attention to detail, fact-checking skills, a wide range of knowledge about all kinds of subjects, and a certain kind of diplomacy and tact that comes from having to nicely explain to writers why they're wrong," she said.

## Legacy Media

Newspapers, magazines, books and other publications in the realm of "legacy media" aren't always infallible, but at least you know from where they came. Whether they are in a traditional "dead-tree format" or posted to a legacy media's website, you can be sure that editors, copy editors and other experts have likely seen the content at some level before it was disseminated publicly. This should make you feel slightly more confident in what you get from these publications than you would from a website that has an unknown origin. In addition, most of the **dead-tree publications** will archive their content both physically and digitally, which allows you to research as far back as the archives reach.

## Official Websites

When you use .gov or .edu websites, you are accessing information from a governmental or an educational outlet. In most cases, these can be more trustworthy than .com, .net or .us sites, which anyone can start. Beyond those sites, you can look at official sites for specific organizations associated with your writing. If you are building a media kit for a client and you want to provide some history about the client's organization, you can use the organization's website as a solid source. If you are writing a news article about the hiring of a chancellor at a local university, you can find biographical data for that person on that university's website and the sites of the chancellor's previous jobs. You can both cite this information and link to it as you support your statements.

## Your Own Work

In some cases, you become the expert on a topic as you research it, cover it, publicize it or market it. After a while, you know more about the issue or product than anyone else. When this happens, you can rely on your previous work to prevent you from having to redo all

your research every time you work on that topic. If you digitally archive your work, a search can be easy. If you keep boxes of papers around you, it can be more difficult, depending on your approach to organization. However, when you do quality work at the forefront of your research, you can reap the benefits again and again.

## EXAMINING THE BROADER ISSUES

You might have everything spelled right and the math done perfectly, but that doesn't mean you have an accurate piece of writing. Anything you produce can have errors that go beyond corrections you can make with a Google search and a dictionary. Bigger concepts, nuanced word choices and similar issues can put you in hot water just as easily as a misspelled name or an incorrect street address. Below is a list of some key areas you should examine before finalizing any piece of writing:

### Become a “Nondenominational Skeptic”

As we have said repeatedly in this chapter, the goal of good journalists is to be accurate above all else. That can be easier or harder depending on the nature of what we are fact-checking.

It's easy to dig into a piece or challenge a statement when the information comes from a source you dislike or espouses a position with which you disagree. It can be much harder to accept facts that run counter to your own personal belief system, or to challenge statements with which you agree. This is an unfortunate byproduct of living in a society in which people have gotten comfortable with the idea that they are entitled not only to their opinions on issues, but also to their own facts. Making things worse, people can quickly and easily find support for their opinions with an internet search, even if those opinions are laughable at best. When anyone can espouse an opinion online as fact and others can cite it as “proof” that their position is real, life can be quite difficult for journalists, who need to be factually accurate.

One of the best things you can do for yourself in the bigger picture of fact-checking is to become a “nondenominational skeptic.” What this means is that you should treat all content as equal, regardless of whether it confirms or refutes your personal worldview. Treat every statement as if it must pass a rigorous vetting, no matter if it came from your best friend or your worst enemy. Question each statement with the same level of concern, regardless of whether it came from a religious leader or a loan shark.

No matter the source or the content, give it all equally strong vetting and your work will be much stronger overall.

### Stick to What People Said

One of the most famous headlines in New York history came from a complete falsehood. In the mid-1970s, the city of New York teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. Officials had asked President Gerald Ford to provide federal funds to help the city stave off the financial crisis. On Oct. 29, 1975, Ford gave a speech in which he explained that he would not bail out the city. The next day's headline in the New York Daily News proclaimed: “FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD.”

The president never used those words and would later say that the headline wasn't accurate and “was very unfair.” Even though the headline wasn't in quotation marks (something we will discuss more in Chapter 10), it still sounded as though the president had said those words. Decades later, he continued to speak out against the way in which the paper portrayed him.<sup>5</sup>

Although an extreme example, this headline reveals what can happen when you use poetic license and alter the words associated with your sources. When you rely on words that are “close enough” to what someone told you or you swap similar-sounding words, you can land in a big heap of trouble.

If you interview the CEO of your company for a profile on the company’s website, she might say, “We’re going to make consumer confidence a top priority this year.” However, if you write “CEO Jane Johnson said the company will make consumer confidence its number one task,” you have significantly altered what she said. “A” top priority means that this is one item of several at the top of the priority list. That’s not the same as “the” top priority, which means that it is the most important task on the company’s list of priorities. Even worse, if some other news release or profile quoted her saying that something else was “the” top priority, now she looks foolish, and you are to blame.

When you have to write something and attribute it to a source, you want to stick to what the person said. The more you stray from the actual verbiage the person used, the more problems you can cause for everyone involved.

### Avoid Vague Terms

Accuracy is often in the details, and the details aren’t always easy to find. Journalists tend to try to “write around” these problems with vague terms and soft language. Unfortunately, that usually leads to the kinds of “telephone game” problems discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

The use of certain words has led to a number of online “reporter dictionaries” that humorously define what certain words actually mean when you see them. A few vague words that made the cut:

Recently: The reporter lost the press release with the actual date on it.

Allegedly: Someone did something bad, but we can’t prove it.

Reportedly: We stole this from someone else’s report.

Unknown: We can’t figure it out.

Likely: We can’t figure it out, no one will tell us and yet we need to say something about it.

In most cases, you can find terms like this in your own writing, but the reason for their presence is far less funny: You don’t have the facts.

If you find yourself saying something like “arguably,” it means you want to make a statement of fact, but you haven’t done enough research to do so. If you say, “in recent memory,” it means you are afraid you didn’t look far enough back into the history of something.

Instead of sticking with these and other vague terms, do more research to solidify your claims or attribute the information to a source. Instead of saying “This is arguably the biggest merger in recent memory,” tell people exactly what is going on: “The merger of Smith Corp. and Johnson Inc. will create \$15.8 billion in revenue, making it the largest merger of this kind since 2001, according to Smith Corp. CEO Bill Smith.” Then do more research to back up your statement and make sure you are sure.

## Say Only What You Know for Sure

As Chapter 13 notes, people often rely on **hyperbole** to make their points, which leads to suspicious consumers and empty promises. The desire to state that something is “the biggest” or “the first” or anything along those lines can lead writers to create overblown copy that lacks value and that fails to engage readers.

**Logical lapses** can happen when you state something with absolute certainty that isn’t absolute. “All people drink diet soda.” How do we know this? How can we assume that every person on the face of the Earth has participated in this behavior? In most cases, stating an absolute is the first step toward trouble. Watch yourself when you see words like “all,” “always,” “none” and “never,” to name a few. The same is true of words like “worst,” “only” and “greatest.”

When you are writing, you need to make sure you say only what you know for sure. In news, this can be extremely difficult when a breaking news situation has information pouring out of every media outlet and you are worried you might be lagging behind. In the moments after the first plane struck the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, early reports inaccurately stated that the aircraft was a small Cessna-like plane instead of an airliner.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of the disaster, it became clear that this statement was false. The rush to get information on the air from any possible source led to these early errors. Although speed matters a great deal in news, accuracy always trumps it.

If you are promoting a cause, an event or a sale, the desire to inflate the importance of your efforts can make it difficult to avoid hyperbole. As we noted in Chapter 1, audience members react well to oddities and one-of-a-kind opportunities, so pushing your language in that direction seems like a good idea. However, you must explain how you came to your conclusions. If you state that your organization’s charity walk is “the largest in the state,” you need to quantify that statement. Are you saying it has the most participants or it raises the most money? Does it draw the most spectators or lead to the highest number of overall donors? What makes it the “largest?” If you can’t explain it, don’t write it.

## Find More Than One Good Source for Key Facts

The ability to support an argument often rests on the quality and quantity of your source material. If you were arguing astrophysics with a friend who cited the research of the holder of a doctorate in that field, you would look foolish if you said, “According to my 10-year-old cousin . . .” The quality of your source is clearly not as strong as the one your friend has cited.

Oddly enough, it doesn’t necessarily follow that your cousin is wrong and that the Ph.D. is right. This is where examining multiple sources can come into play. It is possible that your cousin’s statement is the same as 99% of the people in the astrophysics community and the expert your friend cited is in the minority.

The key is to examine as many sources as you can, assess the quality of those sources and make an intelligent statement based on what you learn. Always examine the facts from both a qualitative and quantitative angle, and then write only what you can prove or what you can attribute.



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As we say in newsrooms, “If your mother says she loves you, go check it out.”



## The Big Three

Here are the three key thoughts you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Accuracy matters most:** Of all the skills you will learn as you read this book, accuracy is the most important one. A tiny spelling error can crush even the best writers, most creative minds and strongest advocates. Keep accuracy at the forefront of every action you take during your writing and editing processes.
2. **Look it up:** If you don't know something for sure, look it up. You will feel a lot better when you know you have the right answer. If you are certain you know something, look it up anyway. It will feel great to confirm how smart you are. You always want to support your statements with the best information available.
3. **People can be cruel:** Don't assume that everyone operates under the same ethical and accuracy guidelines you are expected to use. People start internet rumors for their own amusement. Some groups and organizations don't care if they are accurate or fair when they make statements. Don't assume that all information you find is of high quality. Verify, reassess and scrutinize anything you find and the sources in which you found it before you put your reputation on the line.

## Key Terms

dead-tree publications 28  
fact check 24  
fake news 22

gatekeeping 21  
hyperbole 31  
logical lapses 31

primary source 26  
secondary source 26

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been the victim of a media hoax? Maybe you heard that your favorite band was getting back together or that a famous actor was dead. How far did you go in checking it out before telling people about it or sharing that information online? When you found out someone "got you" with the hoax, how did you feel?
2. What do you see as the biggest problems regarding accuracy in the media today? This could be the prevalence of minor errors, such as spelling or grammar gaffes. It could also be issues related to bias, which is a charge often leveled against certain PR firms, CNN, Fox News and other media outlets. Why do you think your choice matters most in how people consume information?
3. In some countries, journalists need a license from the government to publish content. The rationale, in some cases, is that licensing creates a common standard of accuracy and integrity among "official" journalists. Do you think licensing journalists is a good idea? Why or why not? Outside of licensing, what do you think should be done to better assure accuracy and limit hoaxes and rumors?

## Give It a Try

1. Think you can tell fake news from the real deal? Check out this online quiz called "Factitious," which was developed by a veteran journalist and a game designer through the game lab at American University. The quiz provides you with clues as to the source as well as hints after the

fact to help you sharpen your fake-finding skills:  
<http://factitious.augamestudio.com>.

2. Take a trip back to grade school and play a game of telephone in your class. Have one person start with a basic fact and develop a simple sentence. The person should write it down and give it to your instructor. Then, do the whispering part of the game,

with each person in a row sharing the sentence until it gets all the way around to the final person. How close was the final version to the original version? Where did it go off the rails? How much effort did it take for you to keep the information accurate? Keep that in mind the next time you see an internet rumor grow and morph over time.

## Write Now!

1. Research one internet hoax that has recently circulated. It can be an erroneous report of someone's death, a major factual inaccuracy in a story of great significance or even an internet meme that has taken on a life of its own. Write a few paragraphs about the hoax, explaining what it is, the origin of the hoax and how eventually it became debunked. Then outline at least three things you learned from this and how you would use those bits of knowledge to help you avoid making a similar mistake.
2. Prepare five statements that could be factually accurate but would require research to disprove.

In at least one of those statements, make a factual error. Then exchange your list of statements with a fellow student and set about analyzing the list of statements you received. Determine each statement to be true or false, explain why that is the case and then cite a source for each answer.

3. Select a story that interests you from a newspaper, magazine or website. Examine each fact within the story and verify its accuracy. Explain where you found the information that supports your verification. If you find an inaccuracy, explain how you determined the item to be inaccurate.

## Notes

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