Fact-Checking Checklist

Doug Ward
dbward@ku.edu   http://www.kuediting.com

Journalism is a business of haste. When a deadline looms, you don't have time to look up every fact in every story. You have to develop instincts, make quick judgments and draw on your experiences. John Bremner, a longtime editing professor at KU, used to say that an editor "should know something about everything and everything about something – and he should know where to go to find out what he doesn't know."

You're the editor now. Where do you begin? How do you know when something is wrong? What should you look for? And where do you go to find out what you don't know?

This handout is one place to start. It would be impossible to list all the types of errors that you'll come across in editing. Likewise, it would be impossible to list every resource you might use to look things up. But many types of errors occur repeatedly. You will also use many resources again and again. Find books, directories, websites and other sources that work best for you, and keep them at hand.

Don't overdo it, especially with websites. Having too many bookmarked sites is often as bad as having too few. You can easily become overwhelmed with choices or spend valuable time looking for a link when you should be looking up facts.

What follows are some of the most common errors that I've run across in my years as an editor, along with some of the resources I rely on for checking facts. As you edit, constantly ask yourself some questions about what you're reading:

How do we know this?

Are we sure?

How can we find out?

WHAT COULD BE WRONG?

1. **Personal names**. Misspelled names ruin your credibility quickly, but names are often easy to check. The New York Times had a bad string of mistakes with Madeleine Albright's name, and every news organization has its own tales of embarrassment. The lesson is that you can't be complacent, even with names you *think* you know.

An unusual spelling should set off an alarm immediately, as should names that could be spelled more than one way: John and Jon, for instance, or Gene and Jean. If it's a man's name, does it sound like a man's name? If it's a woman's name, does it sound like a woman's name? If it's a name that is used by both men and women, are we sure we have identified the person correctly. For instance, is Kim Wilcox really a she as our story says? (He's not, by the way.)

If we refer to Burkhart low in the story, did we make a first reference to him earlier? If it's a common name, are we sure we've identified the right person? For instance, is the person in the picture really Mary Smith, a senior in architecture, and not Mary Smith, a sophomore in engineering?

And speaking of pictures, do the names in the captions match the names in the stories and the graphics? Always check. Photographers are notoriously bad spellers, but reporters can be sloppy, too. So back them up. Check it out. Also, cut and paste names from stories to captions. That will help you avoid introducing errors of your own. Even when you cut and paste, though, check the photographer's information against the reporter's information. Make sure the names are the same. If they aren't, ask questions.

2. **Company, institution and organization names**. Like personal names, they are often easy to check. Watch for unusual capitalizations (eBay, for instance) or names that are intentionally run together (GlaxoSmithKline). Some publications follow a company's preference exactly and some don't. Check your stylebook. Also watch for variations. Is it the Walt Disney Company or the Walt Disney Corporation? Do we mean Georgia State or Georgia Tech? Is it the Smithsonian Institution or Institute? Is the D.A.R. really Daughters of America: Revolt, as the story says?

3. **Titles and identifications**. Are we sure the person we've identified is a freshman and not a sophomore? The president of the company and not the chairman? A professor and not a visiting lecturer? An employee and not a consultant? A woman and not a man?

4. **Dates and times**. Always ask whether the dates and times in a story are plausible. Was that World War II battle really in 1946? Was Eisenhower still president in 1960? Was Jane Manley really born on Feb. 29, 1899? Was the person's first trial really in 2002, or was it 2001? Is the meeting really scheduled for 12:30 a.m.? Are classes really scheduled to begin on Jan. 15 – a Saturday?

5. **Places**. Check place names as you would any other names. And ask questions about the locations: Is Columbia really in the middle of South Carolina, as the story says? And is it the state capital? Is Haiti really on the same island as the Dominican Republic? Is the headquarters of the World Bank really in Brussels? Does Indiana University really have a campus in Indianapolis?

6. **Directions and distances**. These errors make you look ignorant and foolish. If you place Lawrence east of Kansas City, you're not only lost, but you've lost your audience. So ask: Is Georgia really northeast of Florida? Is it really 400 miles from Rapid City to Pierre, S.D.? Is Burlington, Vt., really 100 miles south of the Canadian border? Does Kazakhstan really border Uzbekistan? Is Guangdong Province really east of Hong Kong? Is McPherson really on Interstate 35?

In captions, is Sally Connor really the woman on the left? Does this picture of downtown Lawrence really show a view to the south, as the photographer said?

7. **Numbers**. Many journalists readily admit their ignorance of math. Don't be one of them. If a story contains numbers, use a calculator and do the math. If the price of a stock increased to $12 from $10, is that really a 20 percent gain, as the story says? If someone was born on March 12, 1950, is she really 54? If she started at a company in 1990, how could she have been there 20 years? Why are we calling someone born in 1982 a teenager? Is the world population really 6.3 billion? The story says 15 percent, but don't we mean 15 percentage points? Was the voter turnout really 96 percent in the last election? Similarly, if a story says seven people were involved and then lists their names, make sure there are seven names. If a story contains a phone number, dial the number and make sure it's right. Likewise, if a story lists a Web address, make sure the URL works.

8. **Superlatives and such**. These should send you scrambling for a reference book. Something may indeed be the biggest, the tallest, the first, the only, the widest, the windiest, the strongest or the oldest, but you'd better be sure.

9. **Huh?** This is a catchall category for things that are highly unlikely or don't make sense. A healthy dose of common sense will help you stop many such errors.

For instance: Is that woman we quote really named Sarah Bellum? Is the bar owner really named Jim Beam? Can that tanker truck really hold 500,000 gallons of water? Did that company really report a profit of $50 billion last year, or should it be $50 million? Does this recipe really call for five cups of horseradish? Why doesn't the recipe for cherry pie include cherries? Was the driver in the accident really a veteran of World War I? Since when do two parallel streets intersect?

HOW CAN I CHECK THAT?

These are some of the resources I consult most often. As you work, you will find other books and websites that you will use frequently. Don't overlook paper resources. It's often faster and easier to look something up in a dictionary or an almanac you have at your desk than it is to find the same information online. I keep just a handful of websites bookmarked, to avoid clutter, and I keep the most useful ones on the toolbar of my browser.

No matter what sites you bookmark, keep them organized. Create a folder with an appropriate name ("fact checking," perhaps) and other folders for more specific sites, perhaps broken down by topic. No site, no matter how rich in facts, is useful if you can't find it amid the clutter of your "Favorites" file.

1. **Dictionaries and stylebooks**. They're fast, they're easy to use and they're right at your fingertips (or should be). The AP Stylebook, especially, has a wealth of material on places, companies, weather, sports, and business.

2. **Almanacs**. They contain an enormous number of facts that are easy to find. Make yourself familiar with at least one. I like the World Almanac and Book of Facts. Online, I find the Information Please Almanac useful. You may have your own favorites. Bookmark one so you can find it quickly.

3. **Maps and atlases**. The easiest way to check directions, distances, locations, place names and capitals. Online versions are handy, but don't overlook the paper versions.

4. **Clips or electronic archives**. When I edit a story about something I'm unfamiliar with, I often start by looking up a related story in an electronic archive. That helps me become familiar with a topic quickly and helps me spot errors in the latest story. Similarly, with an electronic archive, it's easy to check a name or a title against what has been published before. It's also easy to see when there has been a correction on a similar story, so that gives me an idea of specific things to watch for. You can use the wire services in much the same manner.

5. **Google, Bing** and other search engines. They have their limitations, but they will usually guide you to relevant sources and will sometimes flag spelling errors. Just remember that they log pages whether they are reliable or not, whether names in those pages are spelled right or not. It's up to you to take a critical look at any site you use, much as you take a critical look at a story you edit. Always ask, "Can this information be trusted?" I also suggest trying a search engine called **Blekko**, which contains no paid sponsorships and can help you filter the junk.

6. **New York Times Navigator**. This is a page set up by a former colleague, Rich Meislin, and I use it as the home page for my browser whenever I edit. The collection of resources is extensive without being overwhelming, and the page gives quick access to some of the sites I use most often for searching.

7. **Topic-specific sites**. State and city governments, universities, companies and organizations of all sizes have their own websites. You might have to dig a bit to find what you're after, but institutional sites will often help you answer questions about titles, names, dates and missions. They usually have news releases, as well. The "About Us" link is a good place to start. These sites often have an internal search function, as well. Use it.

Also use your imagination when it comes to finding sites that will help you check names or facts. Amazon.com, for instance, is useful for verifying names of books, CDs and DVDs, especially if you can find a picture of the cover. (As with Google and Bing, though, remember that the information on the site itself sometimes has errors.) Network sites contain links to specific television shows. The Academy Awards and the Super Bowl have websites, as do trade groups, mutual funds, stock markets and courts, to name just a few possibilities.

8. **Census.gov**. Gives quick links to an enormous amount of data about the United States and individual states, counties and cities: population, demographics, average income, housing, retail sales. Contains information from the most recent census and from past censuses and other government surveys.

9. **State and Local Government on the Net** (http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm). A wonderful resource for finding information about any state, from sites for governors and legislatures to sites for county and city governments. Arranged so you can search by state, by topic or by local government.

10. **H-Bot**. An online tool created by the Center for New Media and History. It is intended to let users check the accuracy of historical information. It still has many kinks, but it can be useful in tracking down errant historical details.

11. **Hoovers.com**. Has capsules on companies that list their stocks on U.S. exchanges, and information about many private companies, too. Useful for getting an idea of what a company does or makes, and useful for checking names of top executives. Contains links to company websites. Also allows you to browse the names of companies alphabetically. Some information is behind a pay wall, but much of the basic information is free.

12. **Your own experiences**. Read, travel and pay attention to the world around you. The most important resource you have is your brain. It allows you to read something and think, "That doesn't seem right." Learn to trust yourself. It's better to ask a stupid question and be wrong than to let an error slip through unquestioned.