Part I: Essentials of Fact Checking

Lesson 1: Why Fact Check? The Top 5 Reasons

Welcome to Fact Checking Made Easy. I'm Marcia Yudkin, your guide to this important cornerstone of the writing process. Let's begin by running through five reasons why you should incorporate fact checking into your writing routine. Before you publish, post or submit a piece you wrote (or that someone else wrote for you), you should square away its p's and q's. Why?

First, with fact checking you avoid embarrassment. Sarah Harrison Smith, a former fact checker for both the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine*, says that without fact checking, those publications would have referred to "islands off the coast of Switzerland" - Ouch! - or the capital of Finland as Helskinki. Ouch!

You do not want to be the target of snarky "Gotcha!" campaigns in other people's blogs or to suffer the fate of the poor guy asked to take care of a press release, whose errors were then skewered on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. Unfortunately, people are often not shy and not kind when pointing out your published mistakes.

One of my clients knows he has a tendency to make sloppy, stupid mistakes, but it really stung him when someone said as much in a comment on a guest blog post of his, and when a VIP whom he had quoted in another post wrote to ask that he correct the spelling of his name.

And I can't tell you how many one- and two-star Amazon reviews I've seen where readers complain that a book wasn't edited. Sometimes they're referring to proofreading errors (which I cover in an upcoming Udemy course, Proofreading Made Easy), but often they've just been shaking their head at too many ignorant or factual errors. Note that even if you get the message, hire an editor and submit revised text, those reviews remain up, influencing people who care about quality to skip your product.

One of the worst results of not fact checking is when you have to send an apologetic correction to your whole list, to all your subscribers, because you passed along something you heard or read that sounded believable but actually had no basis whatsoever in reality. Gullibility is not an appealing trait. Well, I assume you *would* have the integrity to send that correction – if not, you're in the wrong course!

The larger the audience you have – and that's what you want as a writer, don't you, lots of readers? – the more people are going to say something, to you and to the public, when you write something you should have caught and corrected before it was published. That's why national magazines have fact checkers on staff. They don't want the conversation to be about their cover story having put King Lear in the *Odyssey*, but about what a great point the story made.

Reason 2: With fact checking, you preserve credibility. You have more opportunities you can take advantage of. When important people spot mistakes, they often write off those people or companies for investments or joint projects. You usually don't hear about the chances you've lost right off the bat, but this definitely happens.

Ask an editor or literary agent about her biggest pet peeve, and more often than not, it's people spelling names wrong. It could be their own name that's mangled, or Hemingway spelled with two M's, but their attitude is that someone who gets that wrong isn't someone they want to do business with. Likewise for a venture capital guy looking over your blog to take your measure who sees that you've put the population of North America at almost a billion people. If you got that wrong, how can they trust your financial projections?

When you get important details wrong, you may fail to persuade people who might otherwise accept your arguments or embrace your cause. Let's say you were writing in favor of a regional highway improvement project, and you called it "the I-95 project" when it was in fact "the I-93 project." It's not a simple matter of getting the number wrong. To the people who are wrapped up in this issue, I-95 is over there and totally unconnected with I-93 over here. It stops them in their tracks and their minds can't pay attention to the substance of what you said.

Here are three real-life examples of how people react to what you publish and how you may need to take a wide view to safeguard your credibility as an author or blogger. In the first example, I was writing in my newsletter about prominent people who used standing desks, such as Virginia Woolf, Thomas Jefferson and Donald Rumsfeld. I received an outraged email from a subscriber: "Donald Rumsfeld, don't you know he's a war criminal?" Well, it's a good thing I did know who Rumsfeld was – he was Secretary of Defense under President George W. Bush. He did have a lot to do with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and my subscriber is certainly welcome to his opinion that that makes him a war criminal. But I still feel fine about including him as an example, and I wasn't caught off guard having taken his name from someone else's list in complete trust that this would be an appropriate example.

The second example is an email I got out of the blue about an article written by someone else that I posted on the website for my vacation rental unit in Maui. It was analogous to a guest blog post – a guest article, you could say. The article was about snorkeling in Maui, and the person emailing me said, "Feeding fish – don't you know that's bad, bad, bad?" I had edited the article for correct spelling and grammar, but the recommendation about feeding fish had gone right by me. My email correspondent listed the reasons why snorkelers shouldn't feed fish while snorkeling, and I had to agree that I shouldn't be contributing to the practice that was bad for snorkelers and swimmers, bad for the fish and bad for the ecosystem that I enjoy so much. I went back and took that out of the article.

The third example is an insurance company I do business with that ran a stock photo of a family leisurely riding on bicycles to accompany an article in its newsletter. In the next issue, they printed a letter from a customer who pointed out that the parent in the photo wasn't wearing a bike helmet, although the kids were, and they were thereby setting a poor example for the kids in the photo and the company's customers looking at the photo. The insurance company apologized and agreed with the customer that they chose the photo poorly.

Many of these kinds of issues can be headed off before they get to the point of people writing in in protest. It's part of fact checking to be aware of the examples you are using.

You want to build a reputation for clarity and dependability – and it may be important for you to have a consistent world view in your writing, or at least one that most people find unobjectionable.

And as I was preparing this course, I watched another such example play out in the news. Amazon, the retailing giant, had sent out a letter to thousands of authors asking them to take their side in a dispute they were having with New York-based publisher Hachette. In their letter, they quoted George Orwell as sharing their point of view. Unfortunately, however, the *New York Times* pounced on that part of the letter and demonstrated beyond a doubt that Amazon had taken the Orwell quote out of context. In fact, Orwell was making the opposite point. "A moment's Googling would have revealed [the mistake]," said the columnist for the *Times*.

This sort of inattention makes it so much harder for anyone who has an open mind to believe the rest of Amazon's argument. You certainly don't want people to dismiss your passionate point of view because you didn't look up the quote for yourself.

Reason 3 to do fact checking: to keep the record straight, where you hold truth as a value in itself. Not everyone agrees that truth has value in itself, that unless we are writing fiction, satire, songs or something like that, we should stick to what's actually so. One very famous public speaker, when told that a supposed study he'd been talking up for decades never actually took place quipped, "Well, if it didn't happen, it should have." For him, that was the end of the matter. I'm hoping you have a more conscientious attitude.

Telling the truth is a norm in our society, and you will be in good company for respecting it, yourself. Think of all the people forced to resign prestigious positions because they stretched the truth on resumes or in official bios.

Reason 4 in favor of fact checking is that you'll avoid legal troubles. I had a terrible scare on this front very early in my writing career. My second article for pay was for *The Progressive* on self-styled psychological experts who were arguing that incest was okay. I hadn't researched pornographic magazines but quoted people who had. After the article was published, the *Progressive* editor called me saying he'd had a call from the editor for *Screw* magazine. I had written, "In 1977, *Screw* magazine offered $200 for girl models. Dozens of parents responded." With the editor on the phone, I found my source and read it to the editor. He said, "Wait, that says, 'an *ad* in *Screw* magazine offered $200,' not 'Screw magazine offered $200.'" Oh my. A crucial distinction. I had really messed up. Luckily those lawyers were satisfied with an apology and a correction in the next issue of the magazine.

Certain kinds of factual mistakes and claims can have catastrophic legal and economic consequences. If you repeat a story about someone long after it was publicly proven to have been false, if you say someone was convicted or guilty of a crime when they were only accused of it, if you say a scientist you happen to disagree with is a fraud when no fraudulent incident ever took place, you could land yourself in a world of trouble. Fact checking protects you from such problems.

If you ever have to go to court on an unrelated matter, a habit of playing fast and loose with the facts can reflect very badly on your case, if the other side has a smart lawyer.

Reason 5: By learning how to fact check, you will be able to tell the difference between a hoax or a joke and real information. You won't be one of the people carelessly and shrilly passing along the alarm that "Yikes! Facebook will be closed February 29, 30 and 31." [Pause] Got it? If it's not a leap year, there is no February 29, 30 or 31.

When you develop good fact-checking habits, you won't be conned. A science writer named Sheril Kirshenbaum was working on a book about kissing and kept coming across the claim that kissing burned an average of 26 calories a minute. Never was any source cited. (This is actually one thing that should trigger suspicion.) Eventually she figured out the source of this fake fact: a milk-chocolate Hershey's kiss (candy) contains 26 calories. Aren't you glad Sheril Kirshenbaum didn't fall for this factoid and don't you respect her more for debunking the myth instead of repeating it?

Most of the time, fact checking doesn't take that long once you get used to it. Ideally you'll make it a habit, the way you clear the table and put dishes in the dishwasher after a family dinner or send thank-you notes when you receive gifts. So having covered the "why," let's dig into the "how" of fact checking.