Lesson 12: Information Responsibility

Has anyone ever said to you, "Don't believe everything you read"? I think that's sound advice, yet it's possible for you to take it too far. Skepticism is good, but also you need to accept it when people who are more knowledgeable than you or who have invested unbiased effort in discovering the truth share their findings. An excellent phrase to use in responsible handling of information is "According to..." When you cite trustworthy sources, you show a conscientious regard for the truth.

What about sharing personal information you've heard from other people? I'm a little leery when I see business consultants or coaches tell stories about their well-known clients. Did the client give them permission to share that? I always wonder. And was the information shared as a form of name dropping, to make themselves seem more important?

I tend to come down on the side of caution and confidentiality when sharing information about others, whether that's neighbors, friends, clients or colleagues. I invite you to think about that, yourself. When the little anecdote you want to share makes a point independently of who the story is actually about, why not disguise the people involved slightly to avoid any potential embarrassment or feeling of exposure on their part? Use a different first name, describe the client as being in a different industry or turn a man into a woman or vice versa, for example. In most things you would write, such a disguise is totally harmless.

On the other hand, if you're telling a long, involved story about someone whom you've disguised but otherwise telling the truth about, it might be good to signal that you've cloaked their identity. For instance, "I once had a boss, let's call him Ted, who..."

Be careful about trusting your memory about facts. While preparing this course, I was convinced I'd run across a certain story in a book or article by Jakob Nielsen, a usability expert. However, I hunted for the story in the indexes of Nielsen's books and in the archives of his articles and couldn't find it. I still wanted to say the story came from Nielsen, and I felt I'd quoted him in something I'd once written. Yet when I did a search of my hard drive and found an article containing the story, it wasn't Nielsen at all.

Also be aware that the ear and the eye can distort information. We can hear or see what we are expecting or what we believe rather than what was actually said or written. When I proofread the text of this course before creating the videos, I came across a sentence I had written a few weeks earlier that seemed to imply that the capital of Finland was not Helsinki. This spun me into a few minutes of bafflement. "What, Helsinki isn't the capital of Finland? Of course it is," I thought. "What could I have been thinking?" I looked it up, and yes, Helsinki is indeed the capital of Finland. Only after several minutes did I notice that my text actually said that "Without fact checking, we would have referred to the capital of Finland as Helskinki." The point was the extra "k" in the name of the city, which wasn't getting through to my brain.

Along these lines, avoid what I call "over-correcting" information instead of checking, especially when it comes to proper names. If you see someone's last name written as "Millar," with an "a," don't assume it should really be "Miller." If someone other than

the Moby Dick character or the figure from the Bible has a first name of "Ishmeal," with "ea" instead of "ae," don't fix it. It may be an idiosyncratic spelling that the person was given at birth. Check.

And while we're on the topic of writing with a sense of information responsibility, make sure you have procedures in place to ensure that you're not inadvertently copying someone else's work and presenting it as your own. You can prevent unintended plagiarism by using some clear and consistent way in your notes that marks a difference between your own thoughts or writing and what you've copied and pasted from elsewhere during online research. For example, always put someone else's words inside quotation marks, followed by the author's name and the source, or highlighting text in a particular color. After all, just as you don't want to have to send out an apologetic correction to your list, you don't want to have to respond to accusations that you copied someone else's work without attribution.