Lesson 3: Your fact-checking routine

Let's talk now about what your fact checking routine should look like. You need to start off with a formal system for this, and when it becomes a firm habit, you can let the system become somewhat more informal. However, you will never reach a point at which you can dispense with all fact checking, so do not imagine that eventually it just becomes seamlessly integrated with your writing process. I can tell you from painful experience that just when you think you are beyond having to check things is when you make a bonehead mistake that subscribers have to call to your attention.

Here is what I recommend. After you have written what you believe to be your final draft, print out your manuscript. Yes, whether it is short or long, print it out. It is easier to catch mistakes on paper than on a screen.

As I did in Lesson 2, underline, or circle, or highlight everything that needs to be checked. When you have checked it, add a check mark beside each item you checked.

If there is something that is unusually troublesome or hard to check, then don't let that hang you up. Make a marginal note so you'll come back to it and go on to the next item, until you get to the end. Then go back and deal with the iffy items.

Do not publish until you have checked everything that needs to be checked. If that means you need to delay a couple of days for that pesky last hard-to-check item, it's worth it.

Don't forget to fact check captions and headlines along with body text. For some reason, mistakes tend to be especially hard to spot in type that is very large and easy to overlook when it's in an out-of-the-way location. One of my books had an excruciating typo on the back cover because the publisher never sent me a proof copy of the back cover to look over, even though I saw and checked everything else prior to publication.

If you have items like proper names or dates that crop up throughout your manuscript, jot them on a separate piece of paper as you go along, so you don't ever have to look up the same thing twice. Here is a sample list. Is it University of Idaho or Idaho University, for example? Was it Alec or Alex? Don't trust your memory. And do not trust your intuition. If you have more than nine or ten such items, then arrange them alphabetically, like this. Editors call this a style sheet, and there's nothing fancy about it – it's just a convenience.

If it's not feasible to create a printout for fact checking, then an alternate procedure would be to go through the manuscript and highlight in color everything that needs to be fact checked, and then as you confirm each item, undo the corresponding highlighting. Do this on a duplicate copy of your file, so the original stays unmarked.