



REPORTING IN REVERSE

Fact-checking for magazines

What is fact-checking

A fact is anything that is known to be true: the colour of a house, the balance of a bank account, a historical date, and so on. Fact checking is the act of confirming the accuracy of a presented fact. Fact-checking in the print media generally is associated with North American consumer magazines, and usually said to have begun at *Time*, in the 1920s, under Henry Luce and Briton Hadden.

The *New Yorker*, under founder Harold Ross, frequently is given credit for helping popularize it.

WHY DO WE FACT-CHECK

Fact-checking is both a point of pride, and a way to avoid being sued. If you're reporting real-life events, it's your duty to ensure the information you're presenting to your readers is accurate. Relaying false information does a disservice to the reader who has paid to read your story, and to the sources who have trusted you to tell it accurately. Plus, mistakes tarnish the reputation of both the writer and publication: if a reader spots too many errors in a magazine, they'll probably stop trusting it. They'll probably stop buying it, too. At the same time, while getting someone's height wrong by an inch or two probably won't be noticed by many people, getting more serious facts incorrect—facts that may end up libeling a source—can land a publication in court, and potentially put it out of business.

WHO FACT-CHECKS

Ideally fact-checking is undertaken by a trained professional: someone with one or more university degrees, a few languages at their disposal, and a wide-ranging world knowledge. But the reality of the Canadian magazine industry in the 21st century is that checking often is undertaken (if at all) by junior staffers or interns. That doesn't change the fact that a checker needs to be knowledgeable, worldly, curious, sharp, and attentive, with an eye for detail. Although checkers don't use their personal knowledge to prove a fact (checkers never assume to know facts, they check them), the more knowledge a checker has, the better they'll be at their job.

WHAT TO CHECK

Ideally, check every single fact in a story. But if you're short on time and resources, be sure especially to check proper names, numbers, and consistency of story. Quotations from a source should be checked for the facts they contain, but never read quotes back to a source directly—they may regret something they said and try to take it back. (Never show a story to a source before publication; if they see something they don't like, they potentially can get an injunction to prevent or hold publication.) Remember that letters to the editor, opinion pieces, and reviews, contain checkable facts too.

Finally, don't stop at the story itself: check headlines, decks, bylines, author bios, and captions. Even photos and illustrations need to be checked to ensure they accurately portray their story.

Resources

To learn more about fact-checking, read *The Fact Checker's Bible*, by Sarah Harrison Smith.

HOW TO FACT-CHECK

Checking usually takes place once a story has been edited, but before the copy editing process begins. A checker should start by reading a story two or three times, highlighting every fact. Before beginning the checking process, they should discuss their approach with the editor, in the event there are any nervous sources or other potential pitfalls involved. Authors should provide checkers with all of their source material: notes, documents, interview recordings, photos, and source contact information, though a checker may still end up having to do some digging on their own.

Each fact should be checked with a primary source. A primary source is the most authoritative source for a given fact: asking a source their age is consulting a primary source. Checking that fact with the source's friend is consulting a secondary source. Checking a company's financials via its annual report is consulting a primary source. Checking those same numbers via a newspaper article is consulting (at best) a secondary source. Once checking is completed, any potential changes should be discussed with the writer and editor. (If necessary, a legal team may be brought in to vet the piece for libel.) Just like no two stories are the same, every checking process is different. There is no definitive norm.

FICTION AND POETRY

Fictional stories are just that. But that doesn't mean they don't contain facts. Authors can create worlds that differ greatly from the world we know, but most times their stories take place in the reality we're accustomed to. So be sure to check the names of real-life people, places, and brands, as well as geography and historical events referenced.

HIGHLIGHTING YOUR STORY

Checking should be done on paper: print out your story with wide margins and lots of space between lines for notes. There are many ways to mark up a story for fact checking, and none of them are wrong if they get the job done properly. One of the most common ways is to use a coloured highlighting marker to highlight every fact. Some checkers will take this further and use a different colour highlighter for every source they'll be contacting; others use a specific colour to highlight all proper names. You can

also simply underline each fact with a pencil. As you check your facts, draw a checkmark above each word that has been confirmed. Do not check off facts that are found to be incorrect. Instead, write the correct information in the right margin (use a separate piece of paper if necessary) and draw a small circle with an X in it in the left margin, beside the line containing the error. When you've completed checking your story, you'll easily be able to see where corrections need to be made by scanning down the left margin.