

Selected resources and information about fact-checking

Books about fact-checking, written by fact-checkers (available in print and ebook)

- *The Chicago Guide to Fact-Checking* (2016), by Brooke Borel
(includes detailed information on why, what, and how to fact-check, checking different types of facts, evaluating sources, and exercises to help you “think like a fact-checker”)
- *The Fact Checker’s Bible* (2004), by Sarah Harrison Smith
(includes guidance on working with authors and editors, talking to sources, plagiarism and fabrication, libel, and special types of fact-checking)

A few excerpts

- Borel (Introduction): “It is the fact-checker’s job to unbraid the pieces of the story and examine each strand, testing its strength and probing for weak points; in the process, fact-checking also attempts to uncover whether any vital pieces of the story are missing. The fact-checker takes a hard look at the writer’s sources to assess if they are trustworthy; decides whether the writer used the facts fairly and accurately to build the story; and pushes back against the writer and editor, who are now invested in the story and its structure, if the evidence doesn’t support the way the story is written... A caveat: Although its very name implies a rigid objectivity, fact-checking is rarely cut-and-dried. Truth and facts can be more slippery than you think... Fact-checking, too, is not a static practice, but one that changes not only with the times but from one publication to another and even from one type of story to another.”
- Borel (Chapter 2): “When a fact-checker asks what they need to check, the answer is: everything... To give a non-exhaustive list of examples:
 - The spelling of names and places
 - Physical descriptions of people, places, and things
 - Dates
 - Ages
 - Quotes
 - Numbers
 - Measurements and conversions
 - Geographic locations and descriptions
 - Scientific or technical explanations
 - Titles, job descriptions, and affiliations
 - Details about products including prices, specifications, and descriptions
 - Quotes from movies or other well-known media
 - Historical quotes or stories, even those that are widely assumed to be true
 - Illustrations and photos, including the captions
 - Definitions and word choices
 - Overarching arguments
 - Even the thing you just checked last week
 - Even things you think you know are true...”

- Smith (pp. 11-12): “At a first-rate magazine, a checker will begin a checking project by reading a piece carefully two or three times, underlining facts that need to be checked and thinking about any potential difficulties the piece presents. After conferring with the editor of the piece, he’ll call or e-mail the author, asking for information about the sources the author used. He’ll ask the author for notes, tapes, and any other material the author may have used in preparing the piece. The two will discuss a general plan for the checking. Then the checker will review the author’s source material, read the notes, call the sources, find new ones, and generally do all he can to confirm the facts of the piece... The checker will discuss his changes with the author and give his changes to the editor. The checker will continue to work until all the facts are checked, including the new facts that may be added by the author or editor during the period before the piece goes to press... Checking protocol varies, depending on each publication’s institutional standards.”
- Smith (pp. 27-31): “Finding and evaluating sources is probably the most important work that fact checkers and writers do, because the quality of the source material used in writing and checking a piece determines the accuracy and breadth of the published work... A good checker goes beyond the author’s material to find additional support for the facts and thesis of the piece. The checker may come across information in new sources that casts doubt on the writer’s facts and can use this new perspective as a basis for a suggested correction or to add a greater level of complexity to a piece that may be injudiciously skewed... Of course, not all sources are equally valuable. It takes experience, good judgment, and a little inside information to assess their merits. Human sources, newspapers, books, the Web, and Nexis and other online news sources each have their strengths and critical weaknesses. A good fact checker will keep them in mind... Don’t rely on any one source exclusively to check any kind of fact. Cross-check with different sources whenever possible.”

Fact-checking and accuracy tips

- “44 Tips for Greater Accuracy,” by Frank E. Fee, Jr. (on avoiding errors in newspapers, but good advice in general): <http://www.unc.edu/~ffee/teaching/accuracy.htm> Some highlights:
 - Always do the math. Don't rely on another person's figures.
 - Always check a map when describing a site, route, etc.
 - Never ASSUME anything!
 - Always follow the Rule of Fair Comment. A one-sided or one-source story is simply not a complete story and can never be an accurate one.
 - Always make copy clear and unambiguous at a glance.
 - Don't be too busy or too proud to check a fact.
 - Always beware of superlatives— “the biggest,” “the best,” “the worst,” etc.
 - Always analyze any correction you see — yours or another's. Ask: How did the error occur? How could it have been avoided? What would I do next time?
 - Always give any sensitive, unusual or tricky material one last look.
 - In doubt? Always call the writer, the wires, even the source. We're after the truth, not just a plausible narrative.
 - Always remember: Errors can come in clusters. Finding one may not find them all. There may be others. “Fee's Theorem”: The most severe error in any one passage of a story will divert attention from the less severe errors in the same passage. The bigger the error, the more likely it will be the only one caught at that reading.

- Steve Buttry’s “Tips on verifying facts and ensuring accuracy” and his accuracy checklist:
<https://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2010/10/28/tips-on-verifying-facts-and-ensuring-accuracy/>
<https://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2011/01/04/my-version-of-craig-silvermans-accuracy-checklist/>
- “Check the facts: 10 tips for copy editors,” by Pam Nelson, ACES:
<http://grammarguide.copydesk.org/2012/01/02/check-the-facts-10-tips-for-copy-editors/>
- “Tips from a fact-checker,” by Kristen Hare, Poynter: <http://www.poynter.org/2014/tips-from-a-fact-checker-ultimately-its-about-the-care-that-you-take-with-a-piece/309211/>
- “Must-reads for fact-checkers (existing and aspiring),” by Alexios Mantzarlis, Poynter:
<http://www.poynter.org/2015/must-reads-for-fact-checkers-existing-and-aspiring/380337/>
- “10 fact-checking tips for journalists,” by Peter Sands, Index on Censorship:
<https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2016/04/magazine-10-fact-checking-tips-journalists-verification/>
- “DIY Toolkit: Introduction to Fact-Checking for Journalists,” by Teresa Chin, Youth Radio:
<https://youthradio.org/teach-youth-radio/lesson-plan-introduction-to-fact-checking-for-journalists/>
- “7 ways to make your work easy to fact-check,” by Laura Shin, Poynter:
<http://www.poynter.org/2012/7-ways-to-make-your-work-easy-to-fact-check/188634/>
- “Surviving the grind of fact-checking,” by Heather Pringle, The Open Notebook:
<http://www.theopennotebook.com/2014/11/25/surviving-fact-checking/>
- Example sentence showing what you fact-check, from “Fact checking at *The Nation*”:
<http://www.nationinstitute.org/files/managed/Nation%20Intro%20to%20Fact%20Checking.pdf>

Below is an example sentence broken down into components for fact checking.

“The late Zuleika Dobson, CEO of Beerbohm Industries—worth \$17.5 million—was the author of the 900-page, 1987 novel *My Life as a Pigwig*. In her introduction she said, “It’s not fair that CEOs get picked on.”

What do you check?

- That she is indeed “the late.”
- The spelling of her first name, last name, and the company.
- That C.E.O. is her correct title, rather than president or something else.
- That she was worth \$17.5 million. Or was the company worth that? The fact is vague. Was she worth this at her death? According to whom? Make a note for clarification.
- That the last numbered page is 900.
- The year the book was published. Make sure it was the first year it was printed, not a second or paperback edition.
- That it’s a novel, not an autobiography or something else.
- That she was the author, not a co-author or editor.
- The title of the book. Did it have a subtitle?
- Did she write the introduction, and is this where the quote is from?
- Is part of the quote missing? Are the words and punctuation copied exactly?

Magazine fact-checking

- “Fact-checking at *The New Yorker*,” by Peter Canby, excerpt from *The Art of Making Magazines*, CJR: http://www.cjr.org/critical_eye/fact-checking_at_the_new_yorker.php
- “Checkpoints,” by John McPhee, *The New Yorker*: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/checkpoints>
- “An Ode to Fact-Checking,” by Mac McClellan, *Mother Jones*: <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2011/12/mac-mcclelland-burma-fact-checking-politifact>
- “Fact Check!” by Atossa Araxia Abrahamian, *The New Inquiry*: <http://thenewinquiry.com/features/fact-check/>

Cautionary tales

- “How Did This Happen,” *New York Times* Public Editor on the Walter Cronkite obituary errors: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/opinion/02pubed.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=public%20editor&st=cse
- *Columbia Journalism Review* investigation on the reporting, editing, and fact-checking failures of the *Rolling Stone* University of Virginia rape story: http://www.cjr.org/investigation/rolling_stone_investigation.php
- T. Rees Shapiro’s *Washington Post* articles on the *Rolling Stone* defamation trial, such as: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/07/02/our-worst-nightmare-new-legal-filings-detail-reporting-of-rolling-stones-u-va-gang-rape-story/>
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/jury-finds-reporter-rolling-stone-responsible-for-defaming-u-va-dean-with-gang-rape-story/2016/11/04/aaf407fa-a1e8-11e6-a44d-cc2898cfab06_story.html
- “Shattered Glass,” by Buzz Bissinger, *Vanity Fair* (about Stephen Glass and *The New Republic*): <http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/1998/09/bissinger199809>
- “Jonah Lehrer’s Journalistic Misdeeds at Wired.com,” by Charles Seife, *Slate*: http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2012/08/jonah_lehrer_plagiarism_in_wired_com_an_investigation_into_plagiarism_quotes_and_factual_inaccuracies_single.html
- “Book Publishing, Not Fact-Checking,” by Kate Newman, *The Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/09/why-books-still-arent-fact-checked/378789/>
- “Gay Talese Isn’t Alone: Why Aren’t More Books Factchecked?” by Ryan Holiday, *The Daily Beast*: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/07/03/the-book-publishing-fact-checking-fiasco.html>
- “Why doesn’t anyone fact-check science books?” by Shannon Palus, *Slate*: http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2016/08/why_doesn_t_anyone_fact_check_science_books.html
- “Will Book Publishers Ever Start Fact-checking? They’re Already Starting,” by Boris Kachka, *Vulture*: <http://www.vulture.com/2015/06/will-book-publishers-ever-start-fact-checking.html>

Fact-checking science, understanding studies and statistics

- “Fact-Checking Essentials,” Science Literacy Project: <http://www.scienceliteracyproject.org/content/fact-checking-essentials>

- “5 tips for fact-checking claims about health,” by Alexios Mantzarlis, Poynter: <http://www.poynter.org/2016/5-tips-for-fact-checking-claims-about-health/399315/>
- “5 things to keep in mind when fact-checking claims about science,” by Alexios Mantzarlis, Poynter: <http://www.poynter.org/2015/5-things-to-keep-in-mind-when-fact-checking-claims-about-science/383198/>
- “How to be a Savvy Science Reader,” by Erik Klemeti, *Wired*: https://www.wired.com/2016/09/savvy-science-reader/?mbid=social_twitter
- “We’re So Confused: The Problems With Food and Exercise Studies,” by Gina Kolata, *New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/11/upshot/were-so-confused-the-problems-with-food-and-exercise-studies.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>
- “Academic research and studies: How they work and why journalists should care,” Journalist’s Resource: <http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/introduction-studies-academic-research-journalists>
- “How to read and understand a scientific paper: a guide for non-scientists,” by Jennifer Raff, *Violent Metaphors*: <https://violentmetaphors.com/2013/08/25/how-to-read-and-understand-a-scientific-paper-2/>
- “Statistical terms used in research studies: A primer for media,” Journalist’s Resource: <http://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/statistics-for-journalists>
- NASA’s Global Climate Change Facts: <http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>
- Climate Feedback (scientists fact-check journalism): <http://climatefeedback.org/>
- SciCheck (FactCheck.org site for science-based claims): <https://www.factcheck.org/scicheck/>

Fact-checking politics

- “PolitiFact’s Guide to Fact-checking” video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezo_wsHoxyc (in a nutshell: find source of a claim, go to original source, use other sources to verify claim, love and fear the internet, beware Wikipedia, be skeptical and verify everything)
- Political fact-checking sites:
 - PolitiFact: <http://www.politifact.com/>
 - FactCheck.org: <http://www.factcheck.org/>
 - *Washington Post* Fact Checker: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/>
- “Fact-checking under President Trump,” by Alexios Mantzarlis, Poynter: <http://www.poynter.org/2016/fact-checking-under-president-trump/437671/>

Other resources

- “When it comes to fact-checking, why do politicians get all the attention,” by Tamar Wilner, Poynter (with links to various fact-checking sites): <http://www.poynter.org/2016/when-it-comes-to-fact-checking-why-do-politicians-get-all-the-attention/437947/>
- Quote Investigator (fact-checks quotes, traces original sources): <http://quoteinvestigator.com/>
- Snopes (fact-checks rumors, urban legends, social media): <http://www.snopes.com/>
- USA.gov data and statistics: <https://www.usa.gov/statistics>
- Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine (to bypass link rot): <https://archive.org/web/>
- *Verification Handbook*, edited by Craig Silverman (guide to verifying digital content and social media for emergency coverage): <http://verificationhandbook.com/>

- Craig Silverman’s 2007 book, *Regret the Error* (out of print, but copies available online)
- Poynter Institute posts on fact-checking: <http://www.poynter.org/category/fact-checking/>
- American Press Institute posts on fact-checking: <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/topics/fact-checking/>
- *Columbia Journalism Review*: <http://www.cjr.org/index.php>
- Journalist’s Resource (research and tip sheets on news topics): <http://journalistsresource.org/>
- “20 cognitive biases that screw up your decisions,” by Samantha Lee & Shana Lebowitz, *Business Insider*: <http://www.businessinsider.com/cognitive-biases-that-affect-decisions-2015-8>
- “Cognitive bias cheat sheet,” by Buster Benson, *Better Humans*: <https://betterhumans.coach.me/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#.pvm8rl8t5>

Evaluating sources

- **The CRAP test** for evaluating sources, created by librarians and adapted by me and others:
 - **Currency:** How current is the information, source, or site? Is it current enough for your topic or purposes, or is more recent info, data, etc. available elsewhere?
 - **Reliability:** What’s the quality and accuracy of the information? Does it cite sources for information, data, or quotations? Have facts and statistics been used or described fairly or taken out of context? Does the source lead you or link to other sources, and if so, what are their quality or relevance?
 - **Authority:** Who is the author, publisher, or sponsor? What are their credentials, are they reputable, is their work cited by other reputable sources? Does the author support their claims, and if so, with evidence or anecdotes? Does the URL ending tell you anything about the site (.com, .edu, .gov, .org)? Are there advertisements on the site?
 - **Purpose/Point of View:** Is this fact or opinion? Is it biased? Is the author or site associated with a special-interest group? Are alternative views presented and addressed, and if so, how? Why was the site created—to argue a position, sell a product, inform readers? Who’s the intended audience?
- “Crap Detection 101,” by Howard Rheingold: <http://blog.sfgate.com/rheingold/2009/06/30/crap-detection-101/>
- “The Pocket Guide to Bullshit Prevention,” by Michelle Nijhuis: <http://www.lastwordonnothing.com/2014/04/29/the-pocket-guide-to-bullshit-prevention/>

