



# Verifying information on the fly

Presenter: Gerri Berendzen

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# About me

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# What we'll cover today

- ❑ Why fact-checking is important even if you don't have gobs of time to do it.
- ❑ Getting into the fact-checking mindset.
- ❑ What specific red flags should be on your fact-checking list.
- ❑ Making a list of trusted resources.
- ❑ Some tips on verifying info on the fly.
- ❑ Making and using an accuracy check list.

# Why verify information?

*I like this explanation in “The Chicago Guide to Fact-Checking,” by Brooke Borel:*

Errors of fact, even small ones, become cracks in the foundation of any story. A story may survive a small crack, but it makes the reader wonder about the rest of the structure.

# The problem with fact-checking

While the internet makes it easier than ever to find sources for our fact-checking work, the nature of the internet means we often have to work faster than ever.

We just don't have the time to do it all.

# The problem with fact-checking

But ... since we don't have to head to the library for every little thing, we should have time to make some level of fact-checking part of every edit.

# **Verification begins with questions**

Writers and editors need to ask:

- **How do we know this?**
- **Who said this and how do they know?**
- **What is the source of this information?**

# Verification maxims

- If something seems too good to be true (or too big or too unusual), it probably is. Question it.
- If a question immediately pops in your mind when you read something, don't ignore it.
- If it seems like a coincidence, check it out.

# Should you check everything?

Most editors and writers don't have the luxury of that much time.

- Know what type of information is most often wrong.
- Know the problems areas — your own and those of the people you deal with (sources, writers).
- If you are doing niche editing, have a solid knowledge about that niche.

# Question

What's at the top of your “always check this” list?

Name spellings

Dates and URLs

Lists of numbers

Titles

Polls

# Top areas on my fact-checking list

- Numbers — dollar amounts, years and other numbers.
- Names and dates, especially if they are unusual or seem unlikely to be true.
- Links.
- Inconsistency and repetition.
- Absolutes. “The only,” “the best,” “the number one,” “highest,” “worst” statements.
- Information from biased sources.
- Any information or visuals that do not ring true.
- Information exclusively from social media.

# Verifying information fast

Develop a list of trusted resources

Know which resources you don't have to check out each time because you trust them.

When you are on a new resource, how do you evaluate it?

Who runs the site? Do they have an agenda?

Make friends with the "About" page.

# Keep a library of trusted resources

## GENERAL KNOWLEDGE:

**CIA World Factbook:** <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>

**U.S. Census Bureau:** <https://www.census.gov> (library tab)

**Library of Congress:** <https://www.loc.gov/>

**Fedworld:**

<https://www.webharvest.gov/peth04/20041015000423/www.fedworld.gov>

**National Archives:** <https://www.archives.gov> (look at the research our records page)

**State “Blue Books”** (print and online)

**National Geographic Atlas of the World** (print); also [maps.nationalgeographic.com/maps](https://maps.nationalgeographic.com/maps)

**Google Books**

**WolframAlpha:** <https://www.wolframalpha.com>

# Keep a library of trusted resources

## FACT-CHECKING SITES:

[PolitiFact](#): Fact-checking journalism, looking mostly at news and the things leaders say..

[FactCheck.org](#): A nonpartisan, nonprofit “consumer advocate” for voters.

[Washington Post Fact Checker](#): News-based fact-checking.

[Snopes](#): Calls itself the it’s the oldest fact-checking site online, dealing in news, viral information and common “folk tales.”

[Fact Check from Duke Reporters' Lab](#): Journalism research from the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

[SciCheck](#): FactCheck.org’s SciCheck focuses exclusively on false and misleading scientific claims.

[FlackCheck](#): From the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, FlackCheck.org is the political literacy companion site to the award-winning FactCheck.org.

[NPR FactCheck](#): From National Public Radio

# Keep a library of trusted resources

## Resource from audience members:

Tin Eye: [tineye.com](https://tineye.com)

Google Images

Yale Book of Quotations

Census Reporter.org

National Association of Realtors ([nar.realtor](https://nar.realtor))

FDA.gov

Shelter Animal Count.org

State university experts and libraries

Eia.gov (for energy information, oil, gas, renewables)

ClinicalTrials.gov for medical trials info

## **Keep a library of trusted resources**

What is your favorite general information or political fact-checking resource?

# Beware of some resources

Some website are helpful but with a caveat.

Example: City-Data, <http://www.city-data.com/contacts.html>

Includes both public records (good) and user-generated info (iffy)

# Questions

Which resource is most reliable?

Wikipedia

A major newspaper's archive

A print encyclopedia

An advocacy organization's website

# Wikipedia?

Wikipedia can save you a lot of time, but ...

NEVER use Wikipedia as your only source. Verify Wikipedia.

Most Wikipedia entries have links to outside sources.

# Verifying information fast

Look for the original source material.

Is it a document? Can you get it?

Is it a quote? Where did the person who said it get the information?

Is it a study? Where did the information in the study come from?

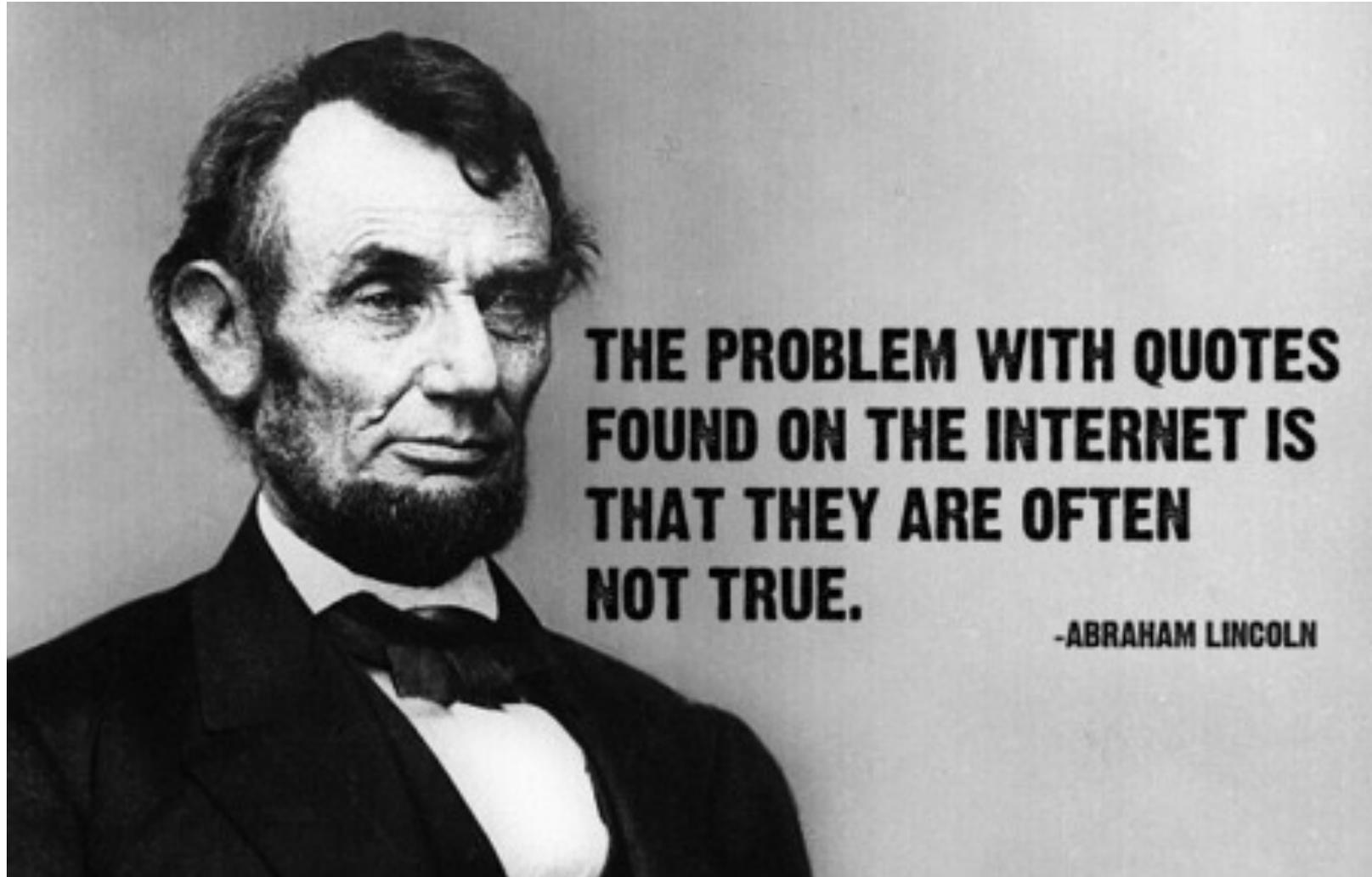
# Verifying information fast

Governments should be able to provide copies of budgets, bills, etc.

Don't quote a story about a survey or poll.  
Quote the original poll.

Look for the original source of a quote — a speech, book, etc.

# Treat online quotes with suspicion



# Use an accuracy check list

- Have one for each job.

## **COPY EDITING CHECKLIST**

### **Critical editing**

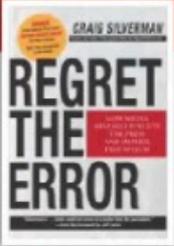
1. Does the story make sense?
2. Are all of the major questions answered?
3. Is the story fair? Who or what might be missing?
4. Is the background complete enough that all readers will have a sense of relevance?
5. Are there any sensitivity issues in either individual word usage or description?
6. Do links go to something that is relevant to the story and that answers the questions raised? Are the links from a trusted source of information? Are there any bias issues with the links?

### **Accuracy checks**

1. Are the names correct? Are they spelled the same in every instance? (Check against headlines, cutlines, other display text.)
2. Are the ages and dates correct?
3. Are the titles correct — check for people, but also for businesses, institutions, books, works of art, etc.
4. Are the locations, addresses correct?
5. Did you check the phone numbers against directories or call the numbers?
6. DID YOU DO THE MATH?
7. Did you check website URLs to make sure they work?
8. Did you check the links to make sure they work?

*This is my personal checklist,  
which is on my blog:  
[gberendzen.com](http://gberendzen.com)*

# Use an accuracy check list



## ACCURACY CHECKLIST

*Story:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Sources:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**While Reporting**

- Ask sources to spell name & title
- Record or transcribe interviews
- Verify claims with reliable sources
- Save links and other research
- Ask sources what other reports got wrong

\_\_\_\_\_

**Final Checks Before Submission**

- Numbers & Math
- Names
- Titles (people, books etc.)
- Locations
- Compare quotes to notes/recording
- Quote Attribution
- Definitions
- URLs
- Spelling & Grammar
- Spellchecker Errors

\_\_\_\_\_

**Story Specific Items**

- 
- 
- 

This is a list from Craig Silverman’s book “Regret The Error.”

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to find on the for free.

# Use an accuracy check list

[Here's some check points from the late Steve Buttry:](#)

**Note facts that need further verification.** Even if you don't have time now, note possible problems.

**Cut and paste quotes.** Be sure to insert attribution (and a link) before you paste.

**Check numbers and math.** Don't just check your own math. Ask someone else to check it for you.

**Check names.** And not just against your notes or the author's notes.

**Check attribution.**

**Verify URLs and phone numbers.**

**Assumptions.** Scan the work for assumptions. When you find them, challenge them.

**Read the actual passage to an expert.**

**Fix errors in resources whenever you can.**

# Accuracy check best practices

- Use checklists; have one for each job.
- Determine what needs to be on the checklist.
- If your organization has a policy to do accuracy checks with sources, determine in advance how much of an article a source can see before publication.
- Don't rely on seeing ACs or CQs in copy. People still make mistakes, so spot check — and check anything that sounds wrong.

# The Pocket Guide to Bullshit Prevention

By: Michelle Nijhuis | April 29, 2014

- 1. Who is telling me this?**
- 2. How does he or she know this?**
- 3. Given #1 and #2, is it possible that she or he is wrong?**
- 4. If the answer to #3 is "yes," find another, unrelated source.**
- 5. Repeat until answer to #3 is "really f—ing unlikely."**

**UNTIL PROCESS IS COMPLETE  
ASSUME BULLSHIT**



www.michellenijhuis.com

# Thanks for joining me today

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