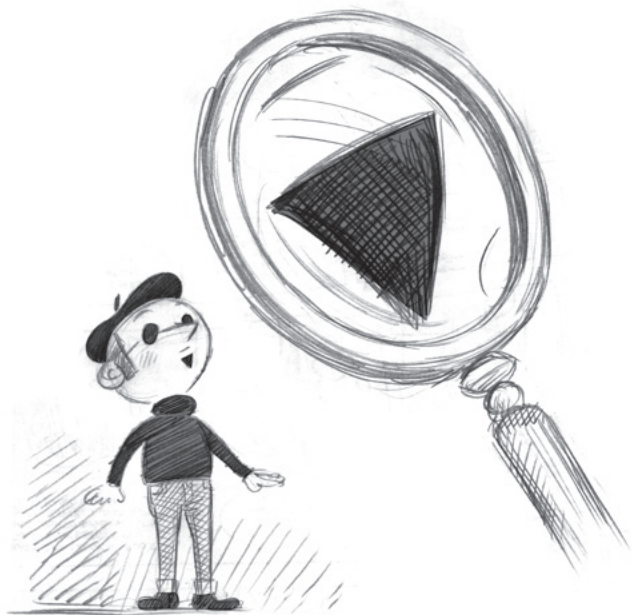


THE  
**TADDLE CREEK**  
**GUIDE**  
TO FACT-CHECKING FICTION





THE TADDLE CREEK GUIDE TO FACT-CHECKING FICTION

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# THE CONTENTS

|                         |    |
|-------------------------|----|
| WHY FACT-CHECK          | 1  |
| WHAT TO FACT-CHECK      | 2  |
| WHAT ELSE TO FACT-CHECK | 6  |
| HOW TO FACT-CHECK       | 8  |
| EXAMPLES                | 12 |



## WHY FACT-CHECK

A fact is anything that is known to be true: the colour of a house, the balance of a bank account, a historical date. Fact checking, therefore, is the act of confirming the accuracy of a presented fact. The practice of fact checking in print media generally is associated with North American consumer magazines, its creation often credited to nineteenth-century-era *Time* magazine, under Henry Luce and Briton Hadden. (*The New Yorker*, under founder Harold Ross, is also frequently given credit for helping popularize the practice.)

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 paid to read your story, and to the sources who have trusted you to tell their story. Factual mistakes tarnish the reputation of both writer and publication. Plus, mistakes that lead to libel can land a publication in court, and potentially put it out of business.

Fact-checking fiction may seem like an oxymoron, considering the meaning of the word "fiction." Fiction and poetry often do not undergo the fact-checking process today, be it in literary journals, general-interest magazines, or books. But they should—and this guide will tell you why.

Though fictional stories take place in a reality created by their writer, they usually are based in the real world—if not in the present day, then in the past or future. By setting a fictional story in a location that can be identified with and understood, it is easier for the writer to draw the reader into his fictional world. A misspelling of the name of a real-life public figure or place in a fictional story can be jarring to the reader and momentarily pull them out of the world the writer has spent so much time crafting. Obviously, genre fiction, such as science fiction or fantasy, will not contain as many real-world references as a story set on present-day Earth, but even futuristic sci-fi may contain familiar places, product names, or historical facts.

Thankfully, checking fiction is much easier than checking non-fiction. Although small magazines and presses may not have the time or resources to fact-check their fiction and poetry, this guide assumes the ideal: a professional, completely thorough level of fact checking. The information presented here should be useful for whatever level of thoroughness you wish to set, and easily understood by professionals or novices, such as interns or volunteers.

A thorough fact check can save you from embarrassment and even heighten your credibility. Plus, why make mistakes if you can avoid them?

## WHAT TO FACT-CHECK

It is impossible to list every type of fact that can present itself in a given story. A keen mind and a wealth of knowledge are important tools that help a fact checker be resourceful in knowing where to find facts and what parts of a story need to be checked. Let common sense be your guide, and learn to question everything. Was the 2001 Honda Civic available in bright yellow? Was the 2005 Toronto phone book really 1,568 pages long? Was the first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* published in 1963? Is Bonhomme's fringed belt red, green, yellow, blue, and white? Did Douglas Coupland really coin the phrase "generation X"? Did the Chicago Black Sox baseball scandal take place in 1919?

How deeply a fictional story should be fact-checked is something to be decided by the fact checker, the editor, and, most importantly, the author. In the end, the author of a fictional work has every right to see the world in any way she wants, whether that means China is in Africa, the sky is green, or Earth has two moons. It is fiction, after all. But, as noted earlier, a story usually will have its basis in the world you know. This guide is written under the assumption that authors want the elements of their stories to be as factually accurate as possible.

There are three elements that should never be overlooked when



fact-checking fiction: consistency, historical accuracy, and the spelling of real-world proper nouns.

### *Consistency*

Often an author will go through several drafts in the course of writing a story. Many key elements may change during this process, including the names of characters or places. It is important to be sure such elements are consistent throughout the story.

As you read through a story, make a list on a separate sheet of paper of every character's name, their relation to the other characters, and any other important information about them that may surface again in the story, such as age, hair colour, or number of siblings. Also make a list of the places characters visit: cities, streets, bars, etc. Every time one of these elements reappears in the story, check it against your list to make sure spellings and other facts are correct and consistent.

Pay special attention to a story's sequence of events and keep a separate list if you need to. If a character is driving across the country, make sure he doesn't make a pit stop in Thunder Bay, Ontario, while travelling from Sault Ste. Marie to Timmins. Likewise, make sure a character doesn't show up for work on page 10 at the job he got fired from on page 3.

If a story has a lot of facts to check, especially pop-cultural or historical elements, it may be a good idea before you start to ask the author exactly when the story is meant to take place. It is important to be sure a character's actions are possible given the time frame stated. For example, it would be impossible for a college-aged character in a story taking place in 1997 to mention having read Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version* in high school.

### *Historical accuracy*

Historical fiction will be much harder to check than present-day fiction, though, hopefully, the author has done some research and will be able to help in the checking process. You'll want to check not only

events, but that real-life people, items, ideas, and places mentioned actually existed at the time in question. Again, historical accuracy may sound like an oxymoron when dealing with fiction, but unless there's a purposeful reason, you likely don't want a character in a story walking down a street in 1984 listening to an iPod, or someone in 1991 reminiscing about a Toronto Blue Jays' World Series win.

*Proper nouns: people*

If a fictional story references a real person, city, street, or brand and that real-world element is misspelled, readers are likely to notice. Aside from being jarring, such mistakes simply are sloppy.

Obviously there is no need—and no way—to check the names of made-up characters in a story (though, if a character's name is spelled in an unorthodox way, such as “Wiliam,” confirm with the author that it is spelled that way on purpose). The names of real-life people often find their way into fictional stories, however, and should be checked with an authoritative source.

These “characters” will usually be celebrities or historical figures, so checking the spelling of their names via an official Web site or reputable history reference should be easy. Remember: fan sites and media outlets are not primary sources.

If the real-life person being named is an artist of some sort, checking his or her name won't be hard. Contemporary artists will almost always have some sort of online presence. Spellings can also be checked via album covers, book jackets, movie credits, and official programs, images of which can often be found on the Web via image search, retail site, or auction house. (Don't rely on a retail listing—look at the actual image.)

There likely is a reputable guide or directory for any area of public life imaginable, be it the arts, business, politics, and so on. For historical figures, you may need to consult a reputable history book, encyclopedia, or museum. As an absolute last-ditch resource, refer to another source you feel is reputable in its fact checking (note that newspapers do not usually fact-check). In such cases, cross-check at least three different

sources. It's unlikely that three reputable outlets spelled the name of a public figure wrong on the same day.

Sometimes fictional stories may name-drop other fictional characters or places. In such cases, go to the original fictional source to check the spelling and other details.

*Proper nouns: media and works of art*

Many of the above-mentioned sources can also be used to check the titles of books, movies, television shows, and other works of art.

Sometimes books, albums, and movies are renamed after their initial release. David Bowie's second album was released at different times, originally as *Man of Words/Man of Music*, and again as *Space Oddity*. The 1998 Kirsten Dunst movie *Strike!* was originally known as *The Hairy Bird*, and later released as *All I Wanna Do*. Also, some books or albums may have different titles in different countries, including *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which was published in the United States as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*; or the Rolling Stones' self-titled debut album, released in the U.S. as *England's Newest Hit Makers*.

Other times an incorrect collective memory can lead to potential errors in titles. Newer editions of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* may spell the book's title as *1984*, which technically is incorrect. Other examples include *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (the 1865 book) versus *Alice in Wonderland* (the 1951 animated movie) and *Moby-Dick* (the 1851 book) versus *Moby Dick* (the 1956 movie—and, for that matter, the actual spelling of the character's name in the book's pages). Meanwhile, some publications change their titles over time—the *Toronto Daily Star* became simply the *Toronto Star* in 1971, for example.

If you can't find an out-of-print or obscure publication online, don't forget about your local library.

*Proper nouns: places*

For Canadian place names, *Taddle Creek* refers to the spellings listed in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. For names not found in *Oxford*, it refers

to the Canadian Geographical Names Database (searchable online).

For foreign place names, *Taddle Creek* refers to the spellings listed in the *National Geographic Atlas of the World*. (Be sure not to Canadianize proper names, i.e., Pearl Harbor, not Pearl Harbour.)

Check official city Web sites or tourism boards, if necessary, to confirm the spellings of street names, public squares, and parks, or do an image search for official signs.

*Proper nouns: brands, products, and companies*

Most products and brand names can be confirmed via image search (especially useful for defunct names) or on official company Web sites.

Watch for brand names that are commonly (and incorrectly) used generically, such as Styrofoam or Band-Aid—they need to be capitalized. (Note that not all trademarks are universal: Aspirin, for example, is now generic in the U.S. but still trademarked in Canada.) The Canadian Trademarks Database and the International Trademark Association (both searchable online) are helpful in this area.

Company names, stores, and departments should all easily be found on Web sites or in directories, though if your story doesn't take place in the present day, be sure to research further to confirm the name hasn't changed (Eaton's briefly was spelled as "Eatons"). Be wary of checking names from logos, which may not show things like proper hyphenation or spacing between words (the hyphen in 7-Eleven is not obvious from the store logo, for example). When possible, check names from the legal information or privacy policy on a company's Web site, or via the trademark associations mentioned above.

## WHAT ELSE TO FACT-CHECK

*Quotations*

When quoting from printed matter, such as a line from a book or poem, it is important to check that the quote matches the original source exactly. Do not change spelling, style, or punctuation to conform

to your house style. If quoting a song, don't rely on a lyric sheet if you're able to listen to the song itself (preferably recorded by the artist being referenced). If you don't have it readily available, try downloading or streaming it. Lines from movies and TV shows aren't quite as easy to check, but can often be found in many of the same ways. (It is important to be aware that quoting artistic works without permission is illegal, though many small presses and publications make the choice—whether consciously or out of ignorance—to do it anyway.)

### *Spelling*

For the sake of consistency, it is important to have an official house dictionary. *Taddle Creek's* overarching spelling guide is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, though it commonly refers to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Canadian readers tend to prefer “Canadian” spellings (-our and -re endings versus -or and -er, etc.), making Oxford the most obvious choice, though *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* is also a highly respected resource, especially if your publication is aimed at a U.S. market. Whichever dictionary you use, you may want to deviate in some cases due to personal preference. Be sure your reasons for deviating are sound and keep a list of all words that differ from those found in your dictionary. For words not found in your dictionary (more and more the case, with the *Canadian Oxford*, especially for newer words, since it is no longer being updated), find the most reputable source you can (genre-specific dictionaries, for example) and add them to your house list so you won't have to look them up again in the future.

For French spellings, *Taddle Creek* refers to the *Collins Robert French Dictionary*.

For foreign languages, defer to the most authoritative and reputable source available. Fact checkers are responsible for checking the spellings of any unusual or foreign words. If a whole passage is in a foreign language and you are not fluent in that language, find someone to consult who is.

*Style*

Without question, the more knowledge any one person in the editorial process has, the better a story will be. To that end, it certainly doesn't hurt for a fact checker to be aware of a publication's house editorial style. If the checker knows a magazine's style is to write "January 17" instead of "Jan. 17," there is less chance it will get by the proofreader—assuming there is one. If you don't have a house style, make sure such things are at least consistent throughout the story you are checking.

*Display and Illustrations*

If you have the opportunity to see the story you checked in layout form, go over it once more to check the display (title, byline, photo credit, dedication). If the piece has any sort of graphic element, check the caption and any other copy attached to it. If a quote has been pulled out from the piece to act as a visual element, make sure everything is spelled correctly, that the context of the quote makes sense, and, if it has been altered for space, that it still retains the intended meaning. If possible, cross-check the title and author's name on the title page, in the author's bio, and on the contents page.

If an artist has been employed to illustrate scenes in a story, the illustrations should be checked as well. Make sure characters and locations match their descriptions in the text and that their actions in the illustration are as described. Is the hairstyle correct? Is the name of the café on a sign the same as in the story? Does a man's shirt button left over right? Check the illustration just as you would check the text.

## HOW TO FACT-CHECK

*Sources*

The most important thing for a fact checker to understand is the difference between primary and secondary sources. A primary source is the most authoritative source for a given fact. Checking the title of a book by looking at that book's cover is an instance of consulting a primary

source. Checking the title of a book by looking at a retail listing for that book is an instance of consulting a secondary source. Checking a book's ranking on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list via the paper itself is consulting a primary source. Checking the same ranking by reading a news story in another paper or magazine is consulting a secondary source. Whenever possible, check your facts against a primary source.

### *Process*

It is best to fact-check a story after it has been through the editing process, otherwise you could miss checking some facts inserted by the editor.

Print out the story, leaving wide margins and lots of space between lines for notes. Read through the piece once or twice, and highlight each fact to be checked. As each fact is found to be correct, place a check mark above every word you've highlighted (it's best to work in pencil). For proper names, carefully check off each individual letter to be sure you've got the spelling right.

If something is found to be incorrect, do not check the word or words off: use standard proofreading marks and/or make notes in the margin explaining what is to be changed and why, then draw a small circle with an X in it on the far-right of the page beside each line in which a change is to be made, one X for each correction. This will help you easily find all the errors later by simply scanning down the margin.

Try to make all of your corrections on the checking copy. If you need to use additional sheets, make a note on the checking copy and attach the sheets when you are finished. If any facts are problematic or require a great deal of research, photocopy or print off your new checking material for discussion with the editor or author. (If your workflow is entirely digital, this may be less relevant.)

Be sure to go over all corrections with both the author and the editor. If you were unable to confirm any facts, discuss whether the section can be reworded to make it factually accurate. In the end, it will be the editor's and/or the author's decision as to whether or not a correction is made.

Sometimes, especially if you are also acting as the copy editor or proofreader, you may have the chance to see the story in layout form once it has been corrected. Use this as a chance to make sure all of your changes have been made correctly.

If you'll be fact-checking on a regular basis, keep a library—both real and virtual—of resources at your disposal. Bookmark useful Web sites you think you'll refer to often, and have a few important books on hand. Most small presses and publications can't afford a large number of reference books, but a good dictionary, style guide, and grammar guide are musts. Being good at searching the Web and knowing how to navigate library catalogues are important skills for a fact checker. Whatever sources you use, be sure you use them consistently, and be sure they are reliable and up to date. Judgment as to what constitutes a reliable source can only come with time, though in many cases, common sense should prevail.

#### *A note on checking non-fiction*

Though most of the tips discussed in this guide can also be used to check non-fiction articles, fact-checking non-fiction is a much more complex and delicate process. However, given that many literary magazines also publish interviews, essays, reviews, and the like, below are a few basic things to know when checking non-fiction stories.

Fictional people can't sue you. Real people can. For that reason more than any other, it is much more important to check non-fiction articles, and to do so thoroughly. If you publish interviews or other lengthy non-fiction articles on a regular basis, it is a good idea to have someone on your editorial staff with a knowledge of libel and its defences. Frequent mistakes, big or small, can also undermine a publication's reputation.

Editor's notes and columns are usually easy to check, as they often consist largely, but not entirely, of opinion. Don't check a writer's opinion, but make sure the opinion being given is an informed one and is based on fact. Ask yourself if the writer has the knowledge to make fair comment on the subject being discussed.



Letter writers may sometimes take exception with something printed previously in your magazine, or may point out what they feel is an error. Unless you consider them a primary source for the story in question, don't take their word for anything—double-check to see if they're right. Contact them and ask where they got their information if necessary. Letter writers should always be contacted in any case, usually by phone, to confirm their identity. Be sure to check any headlines, page numbers, or passages referenced in editor's notes and letters.

Reviews consist largely of opinion, but make sure the author has the correct understanding of the item being reviewed (plot, meaning, etc.). Double-check any passages or lyrics being quoted, as well as titles, authors' names, and any publishing information.

If you are checking an interview, essay, or feature article, request copies of the writer's research material to assist you. All the above-mentioned rules (i.e., check everything, use only primary sources) apply. With interview subjects, it is preferable to speak directly to the source to confirm any facts in the story. If the subject is unavailable, ask if the writer has interview recordings or transcripts. In regard to quotations, do not read back quotes to a subject, simply check the facts contained within. It is always best to phrase your questions as statements ("Your eyes are blue") and have the subject answer yes or no. If a source tells you something in an article is incorrect, ask them how they feel it can be corrected and make note. Tell them you will bring their concerns up with the writer, but do not promise a change will be made.

If a source asks to see a copy of the article in question, say you will have to check with your editor first, though it is common industry practice not to allow sources to see advance copies of articles.

Don't forget to check author bios, including the author's name; the names, years, and publishers of their books; the names of journals they've appeared in; and any other factual information. Don't take the author's word on the spelling of a title or a publication date if you can check it elsewhere. If you are unable to track down a book or journal, ask the author for assistance.

If you will be checking non-fiction on a regular basis, you may want to consider taking a course or getting some outside help, especially if stories you're checking often are contentious. *The Fact Checker's Bible*, by Sarah Harrison Smith, is an excellent crash course, as is *The Chicago Guide to Fact-Checking*, by Brooke Borel.

## EXAMPLES

As mentioned earlier, it would be impossible to discuss every type of fact a checker may encounter. Nearly every story will contain a factual error of some kind. This doesn't mean the author is sloppy or lazy (at least not always). Writers of fiction deal in fictional worlds and usually aren't in a factual mindset when they write. For that matter, even writers of non-fiction make honest mistakes from time to time.

Below are a few random examples (with thanks to the authors) involving fact checking that have cropped up over the years, in most cases during *Taddle Creek's* famously thorough editorial process.

### Passage 1

[S]he pulled Neko Case and Her Boyfriends from her handbag and started to unwrap it right there in the food court.

"Hey, watch it," I said. "Gord comes here everyday for lunch."

"I just want to read the lyrics." She didn't pause in the unwrapping process.

—*From the novel A Girl Like Sugar, by Emily Pobl-Weary.*

This is an excellent example of straightforward and non-straightforward fact-checking. Obviously, the band name Neko Case and Her Boyfriends needs to be confirmed (looking at an album cover should suffice). However, it is interesting to note that no Neko Case CD, at least up to the time this story took place, contained a lyric sheet—a bit difficult to check, but not impossible. The argument could be made that the character wouldn't yet know there was no lyric sheet inside,

as the CD hadn't yet been unwrapped, but in the end the author and the editor decided to change the word "lyrics" to "liner notes."

### Passage 2

"Absolutely," Bob says. "It's my bar mitzvah portion. And there's a bit that, if you sound it out, is an opening monologue Billy Crystal once did on *Saturday Night Live*."

—From the short story "Runner," by Gary Barwin.

This passage from Gary's surreal story also contains both straightforward and non-straightforward facts. Billy Crystal's name must be checked, as must the show title *Saturday Night Live* (an example of a show whose name changed, from NBC's *Saturday Night* to *Saturday Night*, eventually becoming *Saturday Night Live*). But the fact that Billy Crystal once performed an opening monologue on *Saturday Night Live* must also be checked. Crystal performed a standup monologue on the show in its first season and was also a cast member in the nineteen-eighties, but the phrase "opening monologue" suggests he once hosted the show, which, research shows, he did. (An exceptionally thorough fact checker would also confirm he actually performed the opening monologue on that show, despite the fact it's common for hosts of the show to do so.)

### Passage 3

Watching *Live and Let Die*  
on some popcorn afternoon.  
I tell you about Louisiana,  
the forgetful American Way.  
It's all among Roger Moore,  
speedboats over bridges, alligators  
become crocodiles. Commercials,  
and I think of Huey Long and  
Jimmy Swaggart's warm-up band.

—From the poem "Mid-week Cable," by Joel Baker.

Aside from checking all the proper names (*Live and Let Die*, Louisiana, Roger Moore, Huey Long, and Jimmy Swaggart), a checker would also need to make sure Roger Moore played James Bond in *Live and Let Die*, and that *Live and Let Die* was the one with the speedboats and alligators. (Swaggart's telecasts often featured music—*Taddle Creek* allowed the phrase “warm-up band” as humorous licence.)

#### *Passage 4*

I imagined that he drank milk at night, that his mother still brought it to him in bed and kissed him, that he dreamt Disney characters would come and help him capture all of the smart, beautiful, normal kids and send them away. That one day he and I would meet on the Island of Broken Toys.

—From the short story “I Love You, Pretty Puppy,” by Emily Schultz.

The spelling of Disney must be checked, of course, but so too must the spelling of Island of Broken Toys, which is a reference to the Rankin/Bass Christmas stop-motion television classic *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. A quick check showed the correct name to be “the Island of Misfit Toys,” and the change was made.

#### *Passage 5*

The *Good News Bible* Markus is working on is 1,138 pages, not including the map, chronology, word list, and all the other forwarding pages.

—From the short story “Be Kind To Your Children,” by Michelle Berry.

This passage originally had a different number of total pages and a different list of front and back matter. The *Good News Bible* has undergone many printings, so it would be hard to prove that the author's original number wasn't correct at some point in history, but a quick check allowed the proper, current information to be inserted.

*Passage 6*

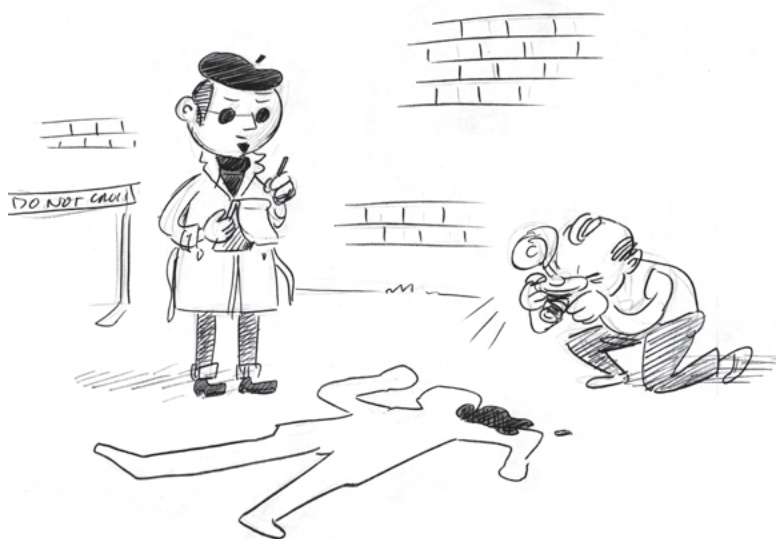
You want to hear about the path you assume I took north to the wide roads and stiff stalks of corn, whether I knew about the tunnels in advance, and so on, so you can amend your own plans of now-constant preparedness, mental networks fizzing as they rewire.

—*From the short story “Moonman,” by Sarah Meehan Sirk.*

Given that the narrator of this story was based in Toronto, it was decided that corn would more likely be found to the west of the city, and so the word “north” was changed.

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*Alternate unused cover.*



