

Attention to Detail

Assessment item: **Verifies data or information before presenting it.**

Too much haste and not enough speed can get you into a lot of trouble when you write. When people say “put it in writing,” they mean that if you present them with a written record, they will take it seriously. The downside of this is that when you do commit something to print and there are mistakes or imperfections in what you put on paper, then it reflects badly on you. Unless you can afford to hire a fact checker, you are going to have to do it yourself.

Consider taking the following action to improve your effectiveness in this area:

1. Check facts and figures against original sources to make sure that no transcription errors have crept in—errors made in copying from one document to another. An errant zero or other number here or there can change everything where quantities are concerned. And don’t stop there: apply tests of common sense and experience-based expertise as a reality check.
2. When quoting someone, try to check that it accurately conveys their intent. Is it in context, or have you taken it out of context? This is not so much a problem where the quoted material appears in a professionally published document such as a book, magazine, or newspaper, but even here, exercise discretion. There are errors in professionally published documents, but few of us see the errata or correction messages that appear later.
3. How do you feel when your name is misspelled or mispronounced? No one likes it when you get their names wrong. Become more conscientious in checking names: Contact the person or ask the switchboard operator to give you a confirmed spelling, or check the organization’s Web site. Don’t be scared to ask—people are rarely hostile when you ask for the correct spelling. In fact, they are flattered that you have actually taken the trouble and are even impressed that you have been so methodical and professional.
4. Never assume that something is “common knowledge.” It pays to be paranoid when you put something in writing. Always apply the “hostile lawyer” test: Imagine yourself in the witness box at a trial, and an extremely hostile lawyer is yelling at you: “Do you seriously expect this court to believe that . . .?” If you can imagine being in these circumstances, calmly and confidently restating what you know to be true (in spite of the histrionics of the counselor in your face), then you have covered yourself well. If you think that you might have trouble in such circumstances, check and double-check your facts.
5. Just as you should never presume that something is “common knowledge,” never presume that something is “obvious.” NASA crashed its Mars climate orbiter, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, into the surface of Mars because of an embarrassingly basic error: one of the scientists programmed in acceleration data using metric units, but the orbiter was “expecting” the imperial units that other scientists had programmed into it.

