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# Typo Tales and Tactics

**Why careful proofreading is essential for all your business documents, and how to avoid the embarrassing errors that could wreak havoc with your reputation**

by Marcia Yudkin

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## Misprint disaster

Overzealous proofreading can create catastrophe, as can poor proofreading or none at all.

Mail-order sporting goods giant L.L. Bean barely averted disaster last week when its back-to-school [catalog](#) arrived in millions of homes. The catalog invited people to call a phone number that belonged to a Virginia company instead of the Maine-based mega-retailer. L.L. Bean paid the Virginia company an unnamed sum of money (surely six figures!) to immediately take over the misprinted phone number.

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**The misprint's cause:** An employee who "knew" a toll-free number starting with "877" should really have started with "800."

**The remedy:** Don't assume anything. You could be wrong! Somehow that employee hadn't heard that toll-free numbers now may begin with "877" and not only "800." I've seen this sort of mis-correction again and again with proper names. A business author I admire often gets listed in bibliographies as "Murray Raphael." True, "Raphael" is more logical than "Raphel," but it's wrong.

Before you correct, check! With a phone number, that's especially easy. Just reach for your [keypad](#) and punch it in.

### More misprint mischief

"To be or to be." That's how one of the most famous sentences in the English language began several years ago in a new edition of Shakespeare's "Hamlet." Six professional proofreaders failed to catch the mistake, which received national publicity and gave the publishing company a red face.

Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal* once devoted eight column inches to ridiculing a conference on critical thinking that sent out a [press release](#) referring to the conference's "world renown" researchers "in field of thinking" such as our former surgeon general "C. Everett Coop." (He spells it "Koop.")

Not convinced that misspellings make a difference?

In Wellesley, Massachusetts, a man handed a bank teller a note that read: "Give me your 10s and 20s and no die pack." Distracted by the misspelling of "die" for "dye," the teller had to reread the note to realize that this was an attempted stickup. Indignant, she crumpled up the note and told the guy, "I'm not giving you any money. Now get the hell out of here." He obeyed, his message having failed to get across.

### Careless? Readers care!

A supervisor at a utility company showed me a post-interview thank-you letter from someone the company badly wanted to hire. "Dear Debbie,..." the note began. The trouble was, the supervisor's name appeared on all company materials as "Debra" and her friends called her "Deb." The interviewee's other good qualities overrode this gaffe, but just barely.

Another letter she showed me opened, "Dear Mrs. Fostcrow,..." The trouble this time was that although she indeed was



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married, the applicant had had no way of knowing that and therefore was either careless in [writing](#) or thirty years behind the times. This letter went straight to the "no" pile.

Lest you think that only job applicants foul up like this, the [newsletter](#) of Spectrum, a New York City translation and multilanguage font service, recounts the case of Mellon Bank's Foreign Language Services, which published an ad headlined "Finally, a bank that speaks plain simple Swahili." Actually, the bank gave readers reason to doubt they'd put decimal points in the right places when they spelled "Swahili" with two "l's" instead of one.

Details do count in marketing. Check, recheck and triple check your stuff. I'm telling this to myself as well as you, because *The Marketing Minute* went out to subscribers last week with a typo. Sorry!

### **Typo prevention tactics**

It once happened to me: the word "pubic" in my book where it should clearly have been "public." And in an expensive mailing, I once caught my fax number where my phone number should have been, just before the piece went to the [printer](#).

Typos can wreak havoc on your business. To prevent such gaffes:

- Let your printouts sit at least overnight before finalizing them. Rereading after time has lapsed helps you spot glaring errors.
- Actually dial all phone or fax numbers to make sure you haven't transposed digits or worse. Test URLs in the same way, and carefully examine zip codes and street numbers.
- In a recurrent publication, like a newsletter, or a letter you're adapting for a new recipient, make sure you've appropriately changed all dates and no-longer-relevant information deep in the piece.
- Is it Kmart or K-Mart or some other variation? Confirm the spelling of all place names, company names and proper names.
- Take another look at stated prices. Missing decimal points, switched numbers, shipping costs updated in one spot and not another all bollix up the ordering process.

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