

Words, People, Places & Ideas in The Lifespan of a Fact
Curated by Christy Montour-Larson

*JOHN: On the same day in Las Vegas when sixteen-year-old Levi Presley jumped from the observation deck of the 1,149-foot tower of the **Stratosphere Hotel and Casino**, lap dancing was temporarily banned in the city's 34 licensed strip clubs...*

Stratosphere Hotel and Casino: The tallest observation tower in the United States. The tower is topped by a pod which includes a revolving restaurant, lounges, and observation decks. The top of the tower also has several thrill rides. The observation tower, which cost \$70 million to build, was topped off on November 4, 1995. Five people, bypassing security measures, have committed suicide by jumping from the tower's observation area, between 2000 and 2007. Another person died after jumping from the tower in 2014.



*EMILY: The photography has been in and ready but the copy needs a final **fact check**. The right volunteer will QUICKLY comb through it for press next Monday. Find me your best person. I'll buy them a pack of red pens.*

Fact Check: A process that seeks to verify sometimes factual information, in order to promote the veracity and correctness of reporting. Fact-checking can be conducted before (*ante hoc*) or after (*post hoc*) the text is published or otherwise disseminated. Internal fact-checking is such checking done in-house by the publisher; when the text is analyzed by a third party, the process is called external fact-checking.



*JIM: I was a **joint concentrator** in Computer Science and Journalism. I wrote a few stories and some editorials for **The Crimson**.*

Joint concentrator: A Harvard term. A fancy way of combining two majors into one. the combined pursuit in which a student develops a program that integrates two fields in a coherent plan of study

The Crimson: The daily student newspaper of Harvard University, founded in 1873. It is the only daily newspaper in Cambridge, Massachusetts and is run entirely by undergraduates.



JIM: What's... KanKAKee?

EMILY: KANKakee. Illinois. Our beloved production facility. The largest in the country.

Kankakee, Illinois: Population - 26,024. 55 miles south of Chicago. A few years ago, Kankakee was listed as one of the worst cities in America.

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*JIM: **David Foster Wallace** called him one of America's most significant living writers. He thinks **essays** are an irreducible literary art form, like fiction and poetry, but he hasn't published anything in like a long time, right?*

David Foster Wallace: an American author of novels, short stories and essays, and a university professor of English and creative writing. Wallace is widely known for his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, which *Time* magazine cited as one of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005. In 2008, he died by suicide at age 46 after struggling with depression for many years.

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EMILY: Now tell me what you bring to the project.

JIM: Well, there's my experience at the Crimson – I did some fact checking there – and I really think I can help you because of other skills of mine: C++, Python, Lisp--

EMILY: And what are those?

*JIM: Computer languages. Well, **scripting languages** most of them—*

Scripting languages: a specific kind of computer languages that one can use to give instructions to other software, such as a web browser, server, or standalone application.

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*EMILY: We need to make a **good faith effort** – confirm every detail.*

JIM: Be rigorous.

*EMILY: Don't be **roughshod**.*

Good faith effort: a sincere intention to be fair, open, and honest, regardless of the outcome of the interaction.

Roughshod: To treat in a harsh, arrogant, inconsiderate manner; domineer over.

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JOHN: I don't write articles. I wrote an essay.

Article vs Essay: Article is a piece of writing that is included with others in a newspaper, magazine or other publication. It is written to inform the readers about some concept. Essay is a short piece of writing on a particular subject. It is generally written as a response to a question or proposition.

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*EMILY: Well, let me tell you there is nothing more important than story. To me, anyway. **What is story to you?***

Storytelling: “We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.” – Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human*.

Humans are more likely to engage with and adopt messages that make them feel personally involved by triggering an emotional response. Research shows that messages delivered as stories can be up to 22 times more memorable than just facts. When we hear a story that resonates with us, our levels of oxytocin increase, which boosts our feelings of trust, compassion, and empathy. It motivates us to work with others and positively influences our social behavior. Because of this, stories have a unique ability to build connections.



*JOHN: You're not **Daniel Menaker** and this isn't **Mr. Shawn's "New Yorker."** Check a few dates and get it back to her, she'll say "fine" and everyone will be happy.*

Daniel Menaker: (1941 –2020) was an American fiction writer and editor. He started as a fact checker at *The New Yorker* in 1969, where he remained 26 years, rising from fact checker to editor. He later became chief editor at Random House, overseeing works by a raft of luminaries like Salman Rushdie. He also wrote a half-dozen well-received books of his own.

William Shawn (1907 –1992) was an American magazine editor who *The New Yorker* from 1952 until 1987. Soon after his arrival in New York City in 1933, he began working as a fact checker at *The New Yorker*. Shawn rose to assistant editor and oversaw the magazine's coverage of World War II. In 1946, he persuaded the magazine's founder and editor, Harold Ross to run John Hersey's story about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as the entire contents of one issue. J.D. Salinger adored him, and dedicated *Franny and Zooey* to him. He is the father of actor Wallace Shawn.



*EMILY: "Four." It's a **diphthong**. The "Uh" in "wun" is a **pure vowel**.*

Diphthong: Comes from the Greek word, diphthongs. It literally means “having two sounds.” Also known as a gliding vowel, is a combination of two adjacent vowel sounds within the same syllable. One of the best diphthong examples is the word “oil.” Here, we have two vowels working side by side and, together, they create a sound different than anything “O” or “I” alone can produce.

Pure Vowel: One whose articulation at both beginning and end is relatively fixed, and which does not glide up or down towards a new position of articulation. Also known as: monophthongs



*EMILY: We **flattened the management tree**, re-engineered everyone towards a streamlined and actionable editorial process, so all new hires in Editorial also train to be fact checkers. No full-time fact checking department, we added functionality in **digital informatics** –*

Flattened the management tree: A flat organizational structure is the method that an organization employs to delineate lines of communication, policies, authority and responsibilities. It determines the extent and nature of how leadership is disseminated throughout the organization as well as the method by which information flows.

Digital informatics: the study of computational systems, especially those for data storage and retrieval. Mostly used in context of data science and library science.



*JOHN: Readers care how events play out on a deeper level. They care about the meaning behind the **confluence** of the events.*

JIM: But events didn't confluence the way you said.

Confluence: a coming or flowing together, meeting, or gathering at one point.



*JOHN: There are nine sections to the essay. One whole section talks about the mythic and religious significations of **the number nine**. It's integral.*

The Number Nine:

- The number nine is understood in Judaism to express the concepts of work, deed, outcome or result. Such as a woman pregnant for nine months.
- According to the Bible, the number nine is a symbol of finality or completeness. Jesus Christ died exactly at the 9th hour of the day when he was crucified on the cross.
- The number nine is revered in Hinduism and considered a complete, perfected and divine number because it represents the end of a cycle in the decimal system, which originated from the Indian subcontinent as early as 3000 BC.
- Buddha was believed to have nine virtues, which he was (1) Accomplished, (2) Perfectly Enlightened, (3) Endowed with knowledge and Conduct or Practice, (4) Well-gone or Well-spoken, (5) the Knower of worlds, (6) the Guide Unsurpassed of men to be tamed, (7) the Teacher of gods and men, (8) Enlightened, and (9) Blessed.
- Nine, as the highest single-digit number, symbolizes completeness in the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahai symbol of the nine-pointed star reflects the importance of the number.
- Ramadan, the month of fasting and prayer, is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.
- In Chinese culture, nine is strongly associated with the Chinese dragon, which has nine forms and is a symbol of magic and power.

- In Norse mythology, the universe is divided into nine worlds which are all connected by the world tree Yggdrasil. Odin hung himself on an ash tree for nine days to learn the runes.
- Mictlan, the underworld in Aztec mythology, consists of nine levels.
- The Mayan underworld Xibalba consists of nine levels.



*EMILY: ...I have all the time in the world to sit here and listen to you list the entire canon of the **expository essay**.*

Expository essay: “Expose” means to uncover or lay something bare, or to discover something in a way that others know what it is. An expository essay is a genre of writing which tends to explain, illustrate, clarify, or explicate something in a way that it becomes clear for readers. Therefore, it could be an investigation, evaluation, or even argumentation about an idea for clarification.



JOHN: This isn't a business to me. It's not a business.

*EMILY: It is also a business. **The whole industry is falling down around me.** Ad sales through the floor, an aging audience – circulation literally dying. We sell high-end ads because of cutting-edge writing, writing shareholders call monetized content.*

Magazine industry: PricewaterhouseCoopers forecasts that magazine revenues will decline at a compound annual rate of -0.5%, from \$68.43 billion in 2015 to \$66.62 billion in 2020. In addition, magazine circulation revenue is predicted to fall more dramatically than that of newspapers as consumers prefer free digital content. Unfortunately for the industry, the move towards digital will not be enough to solve magazines' financial challenges. Digital revenue will still only comprise 30% of total revenue in 2020, compared to 16% in 2015, as readers eschew spending money on digital magazines, and advertisers pay less for digital ad space than print ad space.¹



*JIM: You say **people kill themselves more often in Las Vegas than anyplace else.** That a person here is more likely to kill himself than be killed.*

Suicide in Las Vegas: In Las Vegas, the odds of dying by suicide are twice as high as in the rest of the country. Suicide is a risk for residents and visitors alike, according to a study in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*. When residents of Las Vegas leave, their risk for suicide goes down. One explanation could be the fast-growth, boomtown nature of Vegas. Such rapid growth can lead to a lot of social isolation and a lack of community cohesiveness. Those who are predisposed to suicide disproportionately choose Las Vegas to either reside in or visit.

¹ <https://journal.businesstoday.org/bt-online/2018/the-future-of-the-magazine-industry>

More than 90 people, both tourists and locals, have committed suicide inside a casino or on hotel properties in Clark County since 1998. Twenty have jumped from casinos and parking garages.²



JOHN: O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Praise ye the Lord.

Psalm 117: With just two verses and seventeen words, it is the shortest psalm in the Book of Psalms. It is also the shortest chapter in the whole Bible. And it is the 595th of the 1,189 chapters of the King James Version of the Bible, making it the middle chapter of the KJV. Martin Luther devoted thirty-six pages to this psalm, expounding it in four important categories.



*JIM: When the blogs and the fan sites and Twitter and **4chan** and **Reddit** and whatever in the whole, insane Internet – when they start tearing you down brick by red brick, they’re not going to say “Wow, John D’Agata altered certain details in the service of poetic truth,” they’re going to say, “Wow, John D’Agata lied.”*

4chan: an anonymous English-language imageboard website. The site hosts boards dedicated to a wide variety of topics, including video games, music, literature, fitness, politics, and sports, among others. Registration is not available and users typically post anonymously; As of May 2021, 4chan receives more than 20 million unique monthly visitors, with more than 900,000 posts made daily.³

Reddit: an American social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website. Registered members submit content to the site such as links, text posts, images, and videos, which are then voted up or down by other members.



JOHN: How long is the coastline of England?

EMILY: Where are you going?

*JIM: The mathematician **Mandelbrot**.*

Benoit B. Mandelbrot (1924 –2010) was a Polish-born French American mathematician who wrote “How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension” first published in 1967. The paper is one of Mandelbrot’s first publications on the topic of fractals, an irregular geometric structure. This discussion implies that it is meaningless to talk about the length of a coastline; some other means of quantifying coastlines are needed.



² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-suicide-capital-of-america/>

Discussion Questions:

As you watch the play, listen carefully to the arguments that Jim and John make. In the end, do you feel that one is right? Which side did you take, and why?

Do you feel that, in the case of this essay, John has a duty to tell the truth? How do you see Emily and John coming to an agreement? Place yourself in their positions: how would you solve this issue?

Jim says, "Facts privilege some people." What do you think he means by that? Do you agree?