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I IMAGINE that Dr. Susan Leslie Lydon was very surprised to read in my column that she had passed away.

Believe me, I do try to reserve my column for things that are true. Dr. Lydon is alive and well, as her husband, Michael Lydon informed me. And fortunately for me, he was very gracious about it.

In a nice little column about Kara -- the Palo Alto grief counseling center -- I misread my notes and inadvertently confused Kara executive director Lydon's late wife with his present wife.

No one could be more dismayed about that than me.

Whenever I visit a school, I am the one who is always telling students how we must check and double-check every detail and that accuracy is critical. But once in a while, the human machine hiccups and something goes haywire.

Of all of the things that can happen to journalists, the worst is getting it wrong. Aaargh!

We journalists like to cite this old expression that hangs in some newsrooms:
"If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

We are serious about that.

Something that always has a big potential for error is names because they are so individual.

A mistake that I once made on a name illustrates the need to double-check spelling.

Since that error, if someone says his name is Sam -- I say "Is that Sam, spelled S-a-m?"

A long time ago, a woman phoned to tell me she liked a story I wrote even though I had misspelled her name. Since her first name was "Mary," I assumed, with alarm, that I had goofed on her last name.

To my great surprise, her first name was Merrye. If only I had asked her how to spell "Mary."

One could argue that a Merrye or a Leeza should tell you, but the responsibility is on the reporter.

People give me the look as they confirm that, yes, Sam is spelled S-A-M. Dumb question. I suppose they feel that it is expected that I might check Balthasar or Hirohiko, but Sam or Sue?

I've been through the school of hard knocks on names, and I know that there are Johns and Jons, Jims and Jyms, Elises and Eleases, Briannas and Breannas, Adrians and Adriennes, Yims and Yimms, Smiths and Smythes and De Sousas and DeSouzas.

If the reporter hears: "This is Mrs. Yett's initiative," does the quote say "Mrs. Yetz's," "Yetts'" or "Yett's?" It our duty to ask.

Speed is one enemy of accuracy. But on a rare occasion, you may also simply mishear.

In the 1970s standing in the back of a crowded auditorium covering a panel on sexual assault, I heard the panelist say she had been raped. If I'd had any doubt about what she said, I would have sought clarification or simply not used her quote. It was only after a startling phone call that I learned that she had said she was *nearly* raped.

The last thing any reporter wants to hear is that there has been a mistake. Readers take us to task for that.

The best compliment we can receive praises our accuracy.

Someone has said that to err is human, but when the eraser wears out ahead of the pencil, that is overdoing it.

I don't know anyone like that. But there is always the danger that if mistakes occur too often, people will begin to mentally assign our product solely to uses we writers would rather not think about, such as lining the pet cage or, as one person said, using it "to make wobbly things level."

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