When working with character string columns, a couple of misconceptions often arise around the issue of missing values.

1. An *empty string*, also called a *zero-length string*, is *not*the same thing as a **NULL**value. A literal empty string is written in a SQL expression as a pair of opening and closing quotes with nothing between them (**''**). When working with real-world data, watch out for string columns in which the absence of a known value is represented by an empty string instead of a **NULL**. The expressions required to find and handle empty strings are different than the expressions to find and handle **NULL**s. For example, to filter out the rows that have an empty string in the column named **string\_column**, you would use: **WHERE string\_column != ''**or **WHERE length(string\_column) > 0** instead of: **WHERE string\_column IS NULL** When you are working with real-world data, always inspect the data to determine how missing values are represented. If necessary, ask the person responsible for maintaining the data to tell you how missing values are represented.
2. The literal string **'NULL'**is also not the same as **NULL**. This literal string is *not*a missing value, it's a four-character string composed of the letters N, U, L, and L. The letters could also be in other cases: **'null'**or **'Null'**for example. Imagine being the technology journalist Christopher Null, whose last name (not a pseudonym!) often is not recognized by applications that don't distinguish between the literal string and the missing value **NULL**! (Read about it in "Hello, I'm Mr. Null. My Name Makes Me Invisible to Computers.")

Be mindful of these issues when you work with character string columns.