



ABC's 20/20 with John Stossel

Myths, Lies and Downright Stupidity

Subjects: Social Studies and Language Arts

Grade Levels: 6–12

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Synopsis

According to ABC newscaster John Stossel, "There are a lot of popularly held beliefs out there that simply aren't true. Yet the media tend to report on many of them as though they were hard facts." In this segment of ABC's 20/20, Stossel debunks a top ten list of beliefs on topics ranging from the common cold to the amount of garbage that Americans generate. (Are we "drowning in garbage"—or not?) In order to disprove these "lies, myths" and examples of "downright stupidity," Stossel interviews and obtains data from public health experts, sociologists, politicians, the IRS, and ordinary Americans, among others.

The DVD contains the following chapters. Chapters 1 and 7 are science-related, while the other chapters present social studies topics. You might use any or all chapters as part of a language arts unit focussing on critical thinking, drawing conclusions, and identifying facts and opinions.

abc NEWS
Classroom Edition

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Chapter 1: The Common Cold

Myth #10—Getting cold can give you a cold. Stossel interviews a public health expert, some Polar Bears (wintertime swimmers who brave icy waters), and some shivering young men playing a game of “skins against shirts” football. The upshot? Viruses—not chilly weather—cause colds.

Chapter 2: Less Free Time

Myth #9—We have less free time than we used to. With the help of a sociological researcher and some typical American families, Stossel discovers that we have *more* free time today than in the past.

Chapter 3: Two Incomes Needed

Myth #8—American families need two incomes. Or do they? Stossel reveals that most families could do without that second income if they would be willing to give up the quest for luxuries such as third cars.

Chapter 4: Money and Happiness

Myth #7—Money can buy happiness. Mega-rich brothers Russell Simmons and Reverend Run, who earned their millions in the hip-hop music business, agree that satisfying work, close families, and religious beliefs make people happy—not money. A researcher backs up their claim.

Chapter 5: Republicans Shrink Government

Myth #6—Republicans shrink the government. Stossel uses government budget statistics to show that even though Republicans rail against “Big Government,” it doesn’t stop them from bulking it up. Stossel also reveals that Republican lawmakers generate as much “pork” as their Democratic counterparts.

Chapter 6: Fair Share of Taxes

Myth #5—The rich don’t pay their fair share of taxes. Stossel interviews Al Sharpton, a contender for the Democratic Party’s 2004 presidential

nomination. Sharpton claims that the richest one percent of taxpayers (those earning over \$300,000 per year) should be paying at least fifteen percent of the total tax burden. But Stossel uses IRS statistics to show that these wealthy few are actually paying 34 percent!

Chapter 7: Chemicals Killing Us

Myth #4—Chemicals are killing us. In the 1960s and 70s, Americans turned against the pesticide DDT, largely in reaction to the book *Silent Spring* by environmentalist Rachel Carson. Yet Stossel interviews a disease control expert who contends that, if used wisely, this chemical could kill malaria-carrying mosquitoes and save millions of lives. Stossel argues that due to “political correctness,” U.S. government agencies refuse to help fund lifesaving DDT spraying in countries such as Uganda. The pro-DDT expert calls this refusal “medical malpractice” and “murderous.”

Chapter 8: World’s Too Crowded

Myth #3—The world is getting too crowded. Although there are billions of people living on our planet today, there is plenty of room for all, Stossel asserts. In fact, if the entire world population moved to Texas, we would be less cramped than current New York City residents are. Stossel uses United Nations statistics to contend that we are producing more than enough food for all. Famines, he says, are due to civil wars and mismanagement of food supplies rather than overpopulation.

Chapter 9: Drowning in Garbage

Myth #2—We’re drowning in garbage. According to Stossel, this misconception was fueled by a 1987 news story about a garbage barge on the Mississippi River. The barge was full of compacted trash from New York, and due to some business snafus, the owners could not find a landfill that would accept their smelly cargo. Stossel interviews a landfill professional who explains that actually we Americans have plenty of room to bury our garbage for thousands of years to come.

Chapter 10: Life: Better or Worse?

Myth #1—Life is getting worse. To debunk this pessimistic viewpoint, Stossel enlists the help of a few cheerful centenarians and economist Stephen Moore, author of *It's Getting Better All the Time: 100 Greatest Trends of the Last 100 Years*. Today, they point out, killer diseases such as diphtheria and rheumatic fever are all but forgotten. Due to advances in medicine, we live far longer. Thanks to labor-saving devices, our jobs and daily chores are far less grueling. And despite what some say, our air and water are growing less rather than more polluted. To emphasize this, John Stossel takes a dip in New York's Hudson River, where it's no longer illegal to swim.

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Objectives

The student will:

- learn about scientific topics such as disease control and environmental pollution;
- explore ethical, philosophical, and sociological issues such as the relationships among meaningful work, free time, family income, desire for material goods, and happiness;
- use critical thinking to detect faulty logic and distinguish between fact and opinion;
- determine whether to accept others' opinions as valid, based on their credentials and the kinds of evidence they present;
- begin to understand and appreciate differences in historical perspectives, recognizing that interpretations are influenced by individual experiences, societal values, and cultural traditions;

Background Information

John Stossel

Born in 1947, John Stossel is a 1969 graduate of Princeton University, where he earned a BA in psychology. He started his journalism career as a researcher for a Portland, Oregon, television station. When ABC TV first hired him, Stossel became the consumer editor on *Good Morning America*. He joined ABC's newsmagazine show, *20/20*, in 1981 and rose to the role of co-anchor (with Barbara Walters) in 2003. Stossel began hosting his own one-hour specials in 1994. On these and on his *20/20* opinion segment called *Give Me a Break*, he deals skeptically with topics ranging from pop culture to politics to censorship to widely believed but unfounded fears. Stossel has received many honors for his work, including 19 Emmy Awards.

Preview Questions

Ask these questions prior to viewing Chapter 1: The Common Cold.

1. What do you think causes people to catch colds? Can going outside without a coat on an icy winter day cause you to catch a cold? How do you know?

Ask these questions prior to viewing Chapter 2, 3, 4.

2. How would you define “free time”? How many free hours do you think you have per week, when school is in session? Do you think Americans have more or less free time today than they did when your parents or grandparents were your age? What evidence can you cite to support your belief?
3. How many families do you know in which both parents work? Do you think that most American families need two incomes in order to survive financially? What evidence can you cite to support your belief?
4. You’ve probably heard people say that money can’t buy happiness. Do you think this is true or false? Do you think you and your family would be happier if you had a little or even a lot more money? Explain why you think so.

Ask these questions prior to viewing Chapter 5 & 6.

5. What do politicians mean by the term “Big Government”? Which national political party is traditionally against Big Government, the Republicans or the Democrats? Where did you hear that this is so?
6. Almost every American who works or has an income pays taxes. Do you think that very wealthy Americans pay their “fair share” of taxes?

What percentage of our country’s tax burden do you think the richest one percent should pay? How about the richest five percent? Can you guess what percentage they *actually* pay?

Ask these questions prior to viewing Chapter 7, 8, 9.

7. What do you think of when you hear the word *chemicals*? Can you name some helpful chemicals? Some toxic ones? What are pesticides? Have you heard of a pesticide called DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane)? Do you think it is harmful or helpful?
8. Have you heard the terms “population explosion” and “population bomb”? What do they mean? About how many people are alive today? Is the world’s population growing or shrinking? Are there too many people alive today, too few, or about the right number? Explain why you think so and where you learned this information.
9. What happens to our garbage after trash collectors pick it up? What is a landfill? Do we have enough space in which to stow all the garbage that we discard? How do you know?



Ask these questions prior to viewing Chapter 10.

10. In the early 1900s, were people healthier, safer, or happier than they are today? Were people’s jobs and household chores harder or easier? Think about news you read in the

newspaper, hear on the radio, or watch on TV. Does the news give you the impression that things today are getting better or worse? Explain your answer.

Postviewing Questions

Ask these questions after viewing Chapter 1: The Common Cold.

1. What causes people to come down with colds? Whom does John Stossel interview in order to prove this? If getting cold does not cause colds, why do people catch more colds during winter?

Ask these questions after viewing Chapter 2, 3, 4.

2. Do Americans have more or less free time today than they did in the past? Why is this so? How does Stossel refute the assumption that Americans have very little free time? What is the number one free time activity in America? Why do Americans *think* they have less free time than they actually have?
3. Do most American families need two incomes in order to survive financially? Working mom Sherri Kowalski dislikes her job—so why does she continue to do it? What does “keeping up with the Joneses” mean? If it meant that you could buy expensive possessions, would you continue to do a job that you hated? What do you think about the fact that the Kowalskis have three cars?
4. Are very wealthy people happier than those with less money? What do Russell Simmons and his brother Reverend Run say about this issue? Do you believe them? Why or why not? According to Jean Chatsky (the researcher/author that Stossel interviews) can having an extra ten or twenty thousand dollars per year make a low-income family happier?

Once a family's income reaches \$50,000 per year, will earning an even greater income make them happier still? What *does* make people happy, according to the people Stossel talks with? Why do you think so many people are convinced that more money will make them happier?

Ask these questions after viewing Chapter 5 & 6.

5. In the past 75 years, have Republican presidents and lawmakers made our national government smaller or larger? If this is so, why do you think Republican politicians continue to criticize “Big Government”? What is legislative “pork”? Why does U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski think that her state, Alaska, deserves more federal money than other states? What happens when she begins to argue that Alaska's museums should be federally funded because they are “different” from museums in other states? What kinds of programs do you think our federal government should and should not pay for? Why?
6. Does John Stossel convincingly show that rich Americans *do* pay their “fair share” of our national tax burden? Who is Al Sharpton, and why does Stossel interview him? According to IRS statistics, what percent of taxes do the wealthiest one percent pay (those who make over \$300,000 per year)? What percent do the top five percent pay (those earning over \$125,000 per year)? Do these statistics surprise you? If you still think that rich Americans don't pay their fair share of taxes, what facts would you need to find in order to support your opinion?

Ask these questions after viewing Chapter 7, 8, 9.

7. Before you watched this portion of the show, did you believe that “chemicals are killing us”?

Did John Stossel's arguments change your mind? Stossel states that "It's the dose that makes the poison." What does this mean? Do you agree with this statement? Why did Americans turn against the pesticide DDT? Do you think that USAID (the U.S. Agency for International Development) should change its policy and begin funding DDT spraying programs in countries such as Uganda? Give reasons for your opinion.

8. Define the expressions "population explosion" and "population bomb." John Stossel does not believe that our world is growing too crowded. How does he support his opinion?
9. What happened in 1987 that caused Americans to worry that we were "drowning in garbage"? Whom does Stossel interview in order to disprove this impression?

Ask these questions after viewing Chapter 10.

10. If you didn't already think so, did this portion of the show convince you that people are better off today than they were in the early 1900s? What did you learn that you did not know before you watched the show? What persuasive techniques does John Stossel use to convince you to share his point of view? What do diphtheria, influenza, and rheumatic fever have in common? According to author Stephen Moore, why did many people leave their farms and move to towns and cities?

Suggested Activities

1. Prior to viewing *Lies, Myths, and Downright Stupidity*, distribute copies of the Response Chart at the end of this Guide. Have students fill in the chart as they watch the DVD. Then invite them to share and discuss their opinions, feelings, and questions about the issues that John Stossel raises. Help students distinguish verifiable facts from opinions that Stossel and his interviewees present. If some students disagree with conclusions that the *20/20* reporter draws, encourage them to explain why. Ask them to do library and Internet research to back up their views.
2. Read aloud the following statements. Ask students to tell who makes the statement, and what the speaker means by it.
 - "I don't know, but I've been told: Polar Bears just don't catch cold!"
 - "If I didn't have this job, financially we wouldn't make it."
 - "If I know fifteen billionaires, I know thirteen unhappy people."
 - "We want our country back for ordinary Americans!"
 - "It's a very delicate issue to use in another country something we won't use in our own country."
 - "How many people do they want us to lose before we use DDT?"
 - "In the United States there's plenty of land to properly dispose of our solid waste for thousands of years."
 - "The good old days weren't so good. Life was nasty, brutish, and short."

Activities to accompany Chapter 1: The Common Cold.

3. Have students conduct a survey to determine whether older people are more likely to believe the myth that “getting cold will give you a cold.” Tell them to write survey questions that do not reveal the truth—that viruses cause colds, not cold weather. Before they conduct their survey, students should write a hypothesis that predicts what their research will reveal. Then they can survey grandparents, parents, schoolmates, and friends of various ages. Have students write a few paragraphs to sum up their survey results. Ask them to include graphic aids in their summary.
4. Some medical researchers believe that people are more likely to become ill when they are physically exhausted and/or living under emotionally stressful conditions. Have students do Internet research to find recent scientific studies on these topics. They can report their findings to the class in short oral presentations.

Activities to accompany Chapter 2, 3, 4.

5. Stossel interviews sociologist John Robinson of the University of Maryland. In order to calculate how much free time people actually have, Robinson has asked them to keep time diaries. Have students estimate how much free time they have during a typical week when school is in session. Then have them keep an honest, detailed time diary for a week. (Assure them that they may keep their diary private if they wish to.) At the end of the week, ask how students’ estimates compared with their findings. Encourage them to tell what surprised them most about the ways they spend their time. Ask whether they want to spend their

time any differently, based on what they have learned.

6. Have students do Internet or library research on one of the following, or on another time- and laborsaving device or machine:

- the washing machine
- the clothes dryer
- the dishwasher
- the microwave oven
- the vacuum cleaner

Students can create a bulletin board display showing what life was like without the invention, who invented it, how he or she thought of the idea, how it has developed since it was invented, and how much time it saves.

Sources on this topic include:

- Homework Help on the website **About.com**. Go to <http://inventors.about.com>. Use the Search function to find information on specific inventions.
 - *Inventors: From Da Vinci to Bird* by Straun Reid (Usborne Books, 1994)
 - *1,000 Inventions and Discoveries* by Roger and Frances Bridgman (DK Publishing, 2002)
 - *Toilets, Toasters & Telephones: The How and Why of Everyday Objects* by Susan Goldman Rubin and Linda Zuckerman, editor (Harcourt, 1998)
7. Ask students to name some household and personal items that they consider necessities, and some others that they would categorize as luxuries. For example, is a television set a necessity or a luxury? How about a refrigerator? A telephone? A cell phone? A car? A second or third car? A home computer? Encourage debate

regarding the most controversial items. Finally, have students vote on each item and re-categorize it if necessary. Based on this discussion, students can write an essay that defines the terms *necessity* and *luxury*.

8. John Stossel interviews brothers Russell Simmons and Reverend Run to help answer the question *Can money buy happiness?* Have students research and write short biographies on the brothers' careers. Students can read their biographies aloud to the class. You might use this activity as the basis for a discussion on the following question: *If someone who is very wealthy says that money can't buy happiness, should we believe him or her? Why or why not?* [Note that most Internet articles on these brothers mention drugs (in the brothers' past)]
9. There are many popular songs about the relationship between wealth and happiness. Invite students to compile a list of these. They can obtain recordings and listen to the songs and/or read their lyrics. Have students choose songs from various decades of the 1900s, as well as more recent recordings. They can categorize the songs into those that say money *can* buy happiness such as "We're in the Money" (by Al Dubin, 1933) and those that say it can't, e.g., "Money Can't Buy Me Love" (by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, 1964). Some students may wish to write their own song lyrics or poems about money and happiness.

Activities to accompany Chapter 5 & 6.

10. Have students search the Internet for recent articles, press releases, and editorials on "big government," "government bloat," "pork barrel legislation," and "deficit spending." They can print out the articles and scan them for portions that link Republicans and/or Democrats to expanding government programs.

After students read the articles, lead a discussion on the following question: *Do more Democrats than Republicans vote to expand the federal budget, or do the two major parties seem equally responsible for "big government"?*

11. If any students have part-time jobs, invite them to use their paycheck stubs to calculate the percentage of earnings that is deducted from their paycheck each pay period. Have students do library and Internet research to create a glossary on tax terms. Ask them to define terms such as the following:
 - Tax bracket
 - tax refund
 - tax return
 - Tax deduction
 - tax shelter
 - Social Security number
12. Have students collect and read current and archived newspaper and magazine articles on the federal income tax cuts that Congress passed in the early 2000s at the urging of President George W. Bush. Also encourage them to read editorials and lawmakers' press releases that express various points of view on the cuts. Then have students form three groups and report on the tax cuts in the following ways:
 - a. Present a factual account of the Bush tax cuts.
 - b. Hold a debate on the following question: *Was it wise or unwise to cut taxes during this time period? (Consider the state of the U.S. economy, as well as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the struggle to prevent terrorism.)*
 - c. Make predictions regarding future effects that the cuts may have on the federal budget.

Activities to accompany Chapter 7, 8, 9.

13. Have interested students read *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (available in paperback from Mariner Books, 2002; 40th anniversary edition).

The Gale Group publishes a downloadable Study Guide to help students read this nonfiction classic. Have students hold a book talk in which they summarize the information they learned from *Silent Spring* and discuss their opinions and feelings about the issues that Carson presents.

14. Have students create a timeline that shows the history of DDT use in the United States. One possible source of information is the Environmental Protection Agency's website. <<http://www.epa.gov/history/topics/ddt/02.htm>>
15. Have students research malaria. Assign subtopics such as the following to individuals or pairs:
 - how malaria is carried and who discovered this important scientific fact;
 - what malarial symptoms are, and how the disease kills people;
 - how the disease can be prevented and cured;
 - how many people malaria currently kills per year, and where most of its victims live;
 - why disease control experts such as Amir Attaran and Roger Bate disagree with USAID (the U.S. Agency for International Development) regarding the use of DDT to combat malaria.
 - Have researchers present their findings to the group as part of a roundtable discussion.
16. Point out that apparently CNN founder Ted Turner (the interviewee who scolds Stossel) believes that the world *is* getting too crowded. Ask students how the *20/20* reporter counters Turner's statement that "Eventually, you stand around in the desert with nothing to eat." After doing research on world population statistics and on famines in Africa and elsewhere, have students write a persuasive

essay that tells whom they agree with—Stossel or Turner—and why.

18. Have students research landfills. They can draw a diagram that shows a landfill's parts and describes each part's function. Students can find a detailed article on this topic on the website **HowStuffWorks.com**. <<http://people.howstuffworks.com/landfill6.htm>>
19. Have students find answers to the following question: *How successful are recycling programs in the United States today? Are they accomplishing their goals?* To find answers, students might visit websites sponsored by environmental advocacy groups such as the National Resources Defense Council <nrdc.org> or the Sierra Club <sierraclub.org>. Ask students to brainstorm a list of changes that might make recycling programs more effective.

Activities to accompany Chapter 10.

20. Have students conduct a survey based on the following question: *In the United States, generally speaking, are we better or worse off today than we were one hundred years ago?* If students wish to, they can include more specific survey questions regarding work, free time, environmental pollution, and medical treatment. Tell them to attempt to interview a variety of people (based on traits such as age, income level, cultural group, and political affiliation). Before they conduct their survey, students should write a hypothesis that predicts what their research will reveal. Have students write a few paragraphs to sum up their survey results.

Resources

Internet

If you have access to the Internet, here are some sources of information on issues that John Stossel discusses on the DVD:

Partial Transcript of John Stossel's *Lies, Myths, and Downright Stupidity*

http://abcnews.go.com/sections/2020/2020/myths_john_stossel_040123-6.html#anchor***

KidsHealth

<http://kidshealth.org>

This site on children's health features sections for parents, kids, and teenagers.

World Population Information from the U.S. Census Bureau

<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/world.html>

Includes up-to-the-minute statistics as well as projections that extend to the year 2050.

Environmental Protection Agency

<http://www.epa.gov>

The EPA's website includes a Kids' Club and a section for teachers. Students can use the website's Search function to find information on a variety of topics related to environmental pollution and the EPA's activities.

National Resources Defense Council

<http://www.nrdc.org>

News and historical information on environmental threats, protection, and legislation. Links to publications and related websites. Includes a Search function that can be used to research environmental topics.



Activity #1: Response Chart

As you watch *Lies, Myths, and Downright Stupidity*, use the second column of the chart to record your reactions to the information John Stossel reports, as well as the opinions and conclusions that he and others express. Also jot down any questions that come into your mind as you view the show.

"Lie, Myth," or Example of "Downright Stupidity"	Your Own Opinions, Feelings, and Questions
#10 Getting cold can give you a cold.	
#9 In America we have less free time than we used to.	
#8 American families need two incomes.	
#7 Money can buy happiness.	
#6 Republicans shrink the government.	
#5 In America the rich don't pay their fair share of taxes.	
#4 Chemicals are killing us.	
#3 The world is getting too crowded.	
#2 We're drowning in garbage.	
#1 Life, Better or Worse?	