



ABC's 20/20 with John Stossel

Myths, Lies and Downright Stupidity II

Subjects: Social Studies and Language Arts

Grade Levels: 6–12

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Synopsis

According to ABC co-anchor John Stossel, "We've all grown up hearing all sorts of wives' tales. Some of them seem to make good sense, but a lot turn out to be just nonsense." In this special segment of ABC's 20/20, Stossel debunks a top ten list of beliefs—some suggested by 20/20 viewers—on topics ranging from psychics to SUVs to upscale skin cream. In order to disprove these "lies, myths" and examples of "downright stupidity," Stossel and other ABC reporters interview doctors, swimmers, a vehicle safety test driver, and the editor of *Skeptic* Magazine, among others.

The DVD contains the following chapters, which present information on social studies, science, and consumer protection 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

105 Terry Drive, Suite 120, Newtown, PA 18940
(800) 295-5010

Chapter 1: When the Moon's Full

Myth #10—Strange things happen during a full moon. Emergency room nurses and police officers may claim that a full moon brings out people's lunacy, but records disprove this. To help cite statistics that debunk this belief, John Stossel calls on editor Michael Shermer of *Skeptic* Magazine.

Chapter 2: Low Carb Foods and Weight

Myth #9—Eating low carb foods means that you'll lost weight. A *Good Housekeeping* nutritionist shows that most so-called "low carb" food products have just as many calories—and may cost up to three times as much—as products without this trendy label. "Low carb" foods may even contain additives that make people sick!

Chapter 3: Pressure to Have Sex

Myth #8—Girls feel the most pressure to have sex. A Kaiser Foundation study reveals that teenaged boys worry about this issue more than girls do. That's because of peer pressure—from other boys.

Chapter 4: Psychics Solve Crime

Myth #7—Psychics use psychic powers to solve crimes. Desperate to find her missing sister, Kathy Kupka is willing to accept help from anyone—even a psychic who charges exorbitant fees for her services. Stossel contends that despite their reputation for extra sensory perception, no psychic has ever solved a single crime. The reporter cites FBI data to prove his point.

Chapter 5: Shaving Makes Hair Grow

Myth #6—Shaving makes hair grow back thicker. Many moms caution their adolescent daughters not to start shaving their legs; shaving, they warn, will make the hair to grow in coarser and thicker. Balding men cling to the hope that shaving their heads will result in a healthy new crop of hair. But barbers and a dermatologist agree that hair thickness depends on heredity, not shaving.

Chapter 6: Guessing Baby's Gender

Myth #5—Pregnant women carry girls high, boys low. When it comes to determining an unborn child's sex, folksy beliefs like this one abound. They're fun, says an obstetrician, but groundless. Besides, today's expectant parents can find out via ultrasound whether to start collecting pink or blue baby clothes.

Chapter 7: Swimming After Eating

Myth #4—Swimming after eating is dangerous. To help prove that eating before you swim is perfectly safe, ABC medical reporter Dr. Jim Johnson treats some hungry swimmers to quarter pounders and fries. A college swimming professor concurs with Dr. Johnson's findings.

Chapter 8: Destroying Forests

Myth #3—We're destroying our forests. Actually, Stossel reports, we have more forestland today than we did in the 1920. This is because many acres of unneeded farmland have reverted back to forest.

Chapter 9: Expensive is Better

Myth #2—The more expensive a skin cream is, the better it works. Two forty-something women volunteer to test wrinkle creams. One uses an exquisitely packaged product with a French name and a \$450 price tag. The other uses a prescription cream that is far less expensive. Since it contains wrinkle-banishing retinoids—and the pricey product doesn't—the cheaper cream wins.

Chapter 10: SUVs are Safer

Myth #1—SUVs are safer than cars. With the help of *Consumer Reports'* director of auto testing, *20/20* shows that sport utility vehicles aren't safer, after all. Their tank-like bulk and height may make drivers and passengers *feel* protected (and regal, riding high above the traffic), but in an emergency, SUVs are harder to maneuver and more likely to roll over.

Objectives

The student will:

- learn about scientific topics such as Earth's moon, low-carbohydrate food products, human physiology, and North American forestland;
- explore sociological and consumer protection issues such as old wives' tales about pregnancy, psychics who claim to solve crimes, and vehicle safety;
- determine whether to accept others' opinions as valid, based on their credentials and the kinds of evidence they present;
- draw upon historical and scientific knowledge during the examination of social issues;



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 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 & 2.

1. Do you think the full moon affects people's behavior? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What are "carbs"? What do you know about "low carb" diets and food products? Do you know anyone who has gone on the Dr. Atkins diet? What did he or she eat while on the diet? Did the person lose weight?

Ask these questions prior to viewing Chapter 3 & 4.

3. Who feels more pressured to have sex, teenaged girls or boys? Why do you think this is so?
4. What is a psychic? What kinds of services do psychics provide? Do you know anyone who has asked a psychic for help? Can psychics solve crimes? How do you know?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing
Chapter 5 & 6.**

5. If someone starts shaving her legs, will the hair grow in thicker and coarser? How about facial hair and hair on people's heads—will shaving make it grow in thicker? How do you know?
6. If a pregnant woman does not have an ultrasound or another medical test that reveals her unborn child's sex, are there other ways to tell whether it is a boy or girl? How? Where did you hear about these methods?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing
Chapter 7 & 8.**

7. Is it safe to swim right after eating? Who told you so? Have you ever gone swimming soon after eating? What happened?
8. In the United States, do you think we have more or fewer acres of forestland today than we did in the early 1900s? How do you know? What is "old growth" forest? What is a tree farm?

**Ask these questions prior to viewing
Chapter 9 & 10.**

9. Think about personal-care products such as skin cream and shampoo. Generally speaking, do you think that more expensive products work better than cheaper ones? How do you know? If you had a lot of money, would you buy a skin cream that cost over \$100 for a month's supply? Why or why not?
10. Does your family own an SUV (sport utility vehicle), or do you know another family who owns one? How is riding in an SUV different from riding in an ordinary car? Do you think SUVs are safer than cars? Give reasons for your answer.

Postviewing Questions

**Ask these questions after viewing
Chapter 1 & 2.**

1. Do more strange things happen during a full moon than at other times? Whom does John Stossel interview regarding this issue? Why do professionals such as nurses and police officers believe in this myth? What are "faulty memory patterns"?
2. What are "carbs"? Does eating low carb foods mean that you'll lose weight? Do most foods that are labeled "low carb" have fewer calories than other foods? Generally speaking, do low carb food products cost more or less than ordinary ones? How can low carb products harm consumers?

**Ask these questions after viewing
Chapter 3 & 4.**

3. How do the *20/20* reporters show that boys feel more pressured to have sex than girls do? Why do some teenaged boys feel embarrassed if they are not sexually active? Do you agree with the teens whom *20/20* interviewed for this segment? Why or why not?
4. Can psychics solve crimes? Why do some police investigators believe that they can? How does John Stossel disprove this myth? What did you think of the psychics whom Stossel interviewed? Do you think most psychics believe in their own powers? Why is Polly Klaas's father angry with psychic Kathlyn Rhea? Why do you think so many people believe that psychics have "second sight"?

Ask these questions after viewing Chapter 5 & 6.

5. Whom does *20/20* interview to show that shaving does not cause hair to grow back thicker? Why do you think so many people believe that this is true?

6. Is it true that pregnant women carry girl babies high and boys low? Why do you think people continue to believe old wives' tales such as this one? What is ultrasound? Why do you think some people would rather be surprised than use medical tests to discover their child's sex before it is born?

**Ask these questions after viewing
Chapter 7 & 8.**

7. Whom does ABC's Dr. Johnson interview to find out whether it is dangerous to go swimming right after eating? What does he discover? Have you ever gone swimming or exercised vigorously after eating a snack or a full meal? How did you feel? Have you ever had a cramp or a "stitch"? What was that like?
8. Were you surprised to learn that the United States has more forestland today than in 1920, even though logging continues? How did we gain more forests? What is the difference between a tree farm and a forest?

**Ask these questions after viewing
Chapter 9 & 10.**

9. Were you surprised to learn that the \$450 wrinkle cream was ineffective? Why did the prescription cream do a better job of making wrinkles vanish? What is "medical imaging"? What are retinoids? Why do you think some consumers think the most expensive products must be the best? How do advertisements entice people to buy "high end" items? Did an expensive product ever disappoint you? Tell what happened.
10. According to the *Consumer Reports* auto safety expert, in what ways are SUVs less safe than ordinary cars? Define the terms *invincibility*, *maneuverability* and *rollover*. Why do you think so many American families own SUVs? Would you like to own one? Why or why not?

Suggested Activities

1. Prior to viewing *Myths, Lies, 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 the program raises. Help students distinguish verifiable facts from opinions that reporters and interviewees present. If some students disagree with conclusions that John Stossel 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.

"We're both nurses and we know this for a fact: It is *crazy* in the hospital when it's a full moon."

- "We remember the hits. We forget the misses."
- "They'll say 'carb controlled' or 'carb smart.'"
- "Your waistline isn't going to subtract those."
- "It gets me nervous, like, knowing I'm at this age and I haven't done it yet."
- "When the body is finally found, they retrofit the statement to see how it fits...."
- "It's about thirty minutes or thirty miles from here."
- "My father told me that the second I start shaving, it's going to feel like sandpaper."
- "You have a fifty percent chance of being right or wrong."

- “We will lose species forever. They’ll go extinct.”
- “We have a mix in America of unnatural tree farms and real natural forests.”
- “If your goal is to raise funds, you have to scare people.”
- “All Clé de Peau Beauté products undergo rigorous clinical and quality testing before coming to the marketplace.”
- “I feel safer because I can see out above things.”
- “You’ve got this sort of Sherman tank around you. You feel isolated from the road.”

3. Have students design and conduct surveys to find out whether most people believe or disbelieve the ten examples of “conventional wisdom” that John Stossel presents on the DVD. Encourage students to interview a variety of people (based on traits such as age, income level, cultural group, and political affiliation). Guide them to write survey questions that sound neutral rather than biased. Before they conduct their surveys, students should write hypotheses that predict what their research will reveal. Have students write short essays to sum up the data that they collect.



Activities to accompany Chapter 1.

4. Encourage students to investigate various cultures’ beliefs and folklore about the moon. Have them collect moon-related poetry, song lyrics, myths, legends, and old wives’ tales. They can also collect words with roots that mean “moon,” such as *lunatic* and *month*; and moon-related idioms such as *howling at the moon*, *moonstruck*, and *mooning over* someone or

something. Students can illustrate their findings and compile them in a booklet for your classroom library. Possible sources include the following:

NASA Webpage on Moon Mythology

<<http://lunar.arc.nasa.gov/history/mythology.htm>>
Moon Tales: Myths of the Moon from Around the World by Rina Singh (Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 1999)

5. The moon may not cause craziness, but its gravitational pull does affect tidal patterns on Earth. Have students research the relationships among the sun, the moon, and Earth’s tides. They can draw diagrams and create a bulletin board display that shows their findings. One source might be NASA’s informational website for high school students:
 <<http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/9-12/features/index.html>>.

Activities to accompany Chapter 2.

6. Have students define the word *carbohydrate* and research pros and cons of low-carbohydrate diets for growing teenagers. Ask them to compare low-carb diets to those based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s food pyramid. One source might be the website TeenHeathFX.com, which has a section on dieting. Researchers can prepare oral reports and present them to the class. Ask them to include visual aids in their presentations.
7. If possible, invite a nutritionist to class to answer students’ questions on healthy eating, exercise, and dieting to lose weight. Students might ask questions such as the following:
 - Will eating fewer carbohydrates help you lose weight?
 - What is the Dr. Atkins diet? Is it a healthy diet? Why or why not? How does it compare to diets that direct people to count calories

or points, such as Weight Watchers?

- What are healthy weights for growing teenagers of various heights? What does the term “body mass index” mean? How do you calculate your BMI?
- Who invented the food pyramid? How do diets based on the food pyramid work?
- Is fast food as unhealthy as some people say? Why or why not?
- How do teens become bulimic or anorexic? If you think a friend has one of these problems, how can you help?

Activities to accompany Chapter 4.

8. Have students do an Internet search on psychics who claim to solve crimes. Guide them to use critical thinking to evaluate sources’ credibility. Ask them to use their findings to write a persuasive essay debunking or supporting the statement *Psychics use psychic powers to solve crimes*. Sources might include:

- *Do the Police Really Use Psychics?* by Katherine Ramsland (posted on Court TV’s Crime Library website) <http://www.crimelibrary.com/criminal_mind/forensics/psychics/11.html?sect=21>
- Psychic Sylvia Browne’s website <<http://www.sylvia.org>>
- *POLICE “PSYCHICS” Do they Really Help Solve Crimes?* by Joe Nickell (posted on the website for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) <<http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/police-psychics.html>>
- Psychic Kathlyn Rhea’s website <<http://kayrhea.tripod.com>>

9. Some coincidences seem too amazing to be purely random. Example: During an idle chitchat session, two college roommates from different states discover that one girl’s best friend in elementary school happens to be the other girl’s first cousin! Have students write autobiographical short stories about amazing coincidences that have occurred in their lives. They can read aloud their stories and debate whether coincidences have more to do with paranormal elements or mathematical probability.

Activities to accompany Chapter 5.

10. Have students do research on human skin, body hair, and nails. Then they can write true/false or multiple choice quizzes on this topic. Pairs of students can exchange and complete their quizzes. Possible sources include the Teens Health section of KidsHealth.com: <http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_body/body_basics/skin_hair_nails.html>

Activities to accompany Chapter 6.

11. Have students collect superstitions, old wives’ tales, and folk wisdom on the following topics. Then they can discuss reasons why people form such beliefs and pass them down from generation to generation.

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| • courtship and marriage | • numbers |
| • sports | • pregnancy |
| • weather | • death |

Students might use the following books as resources:

- *Folk Customs* by Ellyn Sanna (Mason Crest Publishers, 2002)
- *Keep the Buttered Side Up: Food Superstitions from Around the World* by Kathlyn Gay (Walker & Company, 1995)

- *Locker Room Mojo: True Tales of Superstitions in Sports* by Nick Newton and Bill Minutaglio (Middlefork Press, 1999)
- *Popular Superstitions* by Mary Ellen Hughes (Chelsea House, 1999)

Activities to accompany Chapter 7.

12. Have students research and write short biographies on famous American swimmers and divers. Sources might include the U.S. swimming and diving websites: <usaswimming.org> and <usadiving.org>. Students might write about an athlete who represented the United States in the 2004 Summer Olympics, or choose one of the following:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| • Shirley Babashoff | • Buster Crabbe |
| • Pablo Morales | • Amy Van Dyken |
| • Matt Biondi | • Gertrude Ederle |
| • Mark Spitz | • Johnny Weismuller |
| • Tracy Caulkins | • Greg Louganis |
| • Jenny Thompson | • Sippy Woodhead |

Activities to accompany Chapter 8.

13. Have students define the following terms related to forests and logging: *old growth forests, clear cutting, tree farm, controlled burns, roadless forests*. Encourage them to research the ongoing conflict between conservationists and the American logging industry. Ask them to find out what role the federal government plays in this conflict. Then students can debate questions such as the following: *Is it more important to preserve old growth forests or protect jobs that the logging industry creates? Does logging threaten many plant and animal species, or do environmentalists wildly exaggerate this claim?*

Activities to accompany Chapter 9.

14. Hold a discussion on TV and magazine adver-

tisements that entice consumers to buy luxury items and “high end” products. Students can identify techniques that advertisers use to convince consumers that such purchases will make them happier, more attractive, or more successful. Also discuss the role that packaging plays in selling items such as expensive cosmetics and gourmet food items.

15. Have students choose a kind of product such as peanut butter, moisturizing lotion, or vanilla ice cream. They can purchase the cheapest and most expensive brands available in a super-market and conduct tests to see which brands their classmates prefer. Test participants should give specific reasons why they think one brand is better than the other. Tell students to remove each product from its container before they conduct their tests. Have them write hypotheses that predict what their test results will show. Students can draw bar graphs to show their results.

Activities to accompany Chapter 10.

16. Have students write a series of interview questions to ask SUV owners. Questions might include the following:
- What make, model, and year SUV do you own?
 - Is this your first SUV? If not, how many SUVs have you owned and when did you purchase your first one?
 - What kind of car did you own prior to purchasing your SUV?
 - Why did you decide to buy your SUV? Did any of the following issues influence your decision: reasonable price; more space for your family; safety; stylish appearance; recommendations from friends and family members? Which of these issues influenced you the most?

- How satisfied are you with your SUV, on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 means “very dissatisfied” and 5 means “no complaints at all”). How satisfied are you with specific aspects of your SUV, such as comfort, safety, extras, driving ease, and fuel efficiency?
- Have you seen or read any reports that question the safety of sport utility vehicles? Have these reports made you feel less satisfied with your SUV?
- How likely are you to purchase another SUV in the future? Are you considering buying a differently designed SUV due to safety concerns?
- If you have safety concerns about your SUV, what are these, specifically?

Students can write summaries and create graphic aids to show 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 *Challenging Conventional Wisdom: More Myth-Busting With 20/20*

http://abcnews.go.com/sections/2020/US/myths_040322-1.html

KidsHealth

<http://kidshealth.org>

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

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 forestland conservation and other environmental topics.

Property and Environment Research Center

<http://www.perc.org>

John Stossel interviews an economist who works for this organization. Its mission statement includes the following: “PERC pioneered the approach known as free market environmentalism, which is based on the following tenets: Private property rights encourage stewardship of resources. Government subsidies often degrade the environment. Market incentives spur individuals to conserve resources and protect environmental quality. Polluters should be liable for the harm they cause others.”

The Skeptic Society and *Skeptic Magazine*

<http://www.skeptic.com>

ABC reporter John Stossel calls on Dr. Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic*, to help debunk many of the myths presented on the DVD. According to the website’s mission statement, “The Skeptics Society is a scientific and educational organization of scholars, scientists, historians, magicians, professors, and teachers, and anyone curious about controversial ideas, extraordinary claims, revolutionary ideas and the promotion of science. Our mission is to serve as an educational tool for those seeking clarification and viewpoints on those controversial ideas and claims.”

Activity #1: Response Chart

As you watch *Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity!*, use the second column of the chart to record your reactions to the information you learn. Also jot down any questions that come into your mind as you view the show. If you disagree with any of the opinions and conclusions that the reporters and interviewees express, write some reasons why.

Example of “Conventional Wisdom”	Your Own Opinions, Feelings, and Questions
#10 Strange things happen during a full moon.	
#9 Eating low carb foods means that you’ll lost weight.	
#8 Girls feel the most pressure to have sex.	
#7 Psychics use psychic powers to solve crimes.	
#6 Shaving makes hair grow back thicker.	
#5 Pregnant women carry girls high, boys low.	
#4 Swimming after eating is dangerous.	
#3 We’re destroying our forests.	
#2 The more expensive a skin cream is, the better it works.	
#1 SUVs are safer than cars.	