

# WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

leading skeptics discuss  
**105 practical ways**  
to promote science and  
advance **skepticism**



edited by Daniel Loxton

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# THE PROJECT

In 2007, I called for a renewed focus on classical skeptical activism in an article called “Where Do We Go From Here?” (released as an audio essay on *Skeptic* magazine’s official podcast *Skepticality*,<sup>1</sup> in PDF form at Skeptic.com,<sup>2</sup> and in print by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry’s *Skeptical Briefs* newsletter.)

Letters of response flooded in — and a common theme emerged. Many people wrote to say, “Alright, I’m convinced. I’m ready to become a skeptical activist. *Now* what?”

That was a very big question. Attempting to craft a substantial answer, I re-read a concise 2004 *Skeptic* magazine article entitled “50 Things You Can Do To Encourage Critical Thinking.” This point-form list of practical suggestions (by magician Andrew Mayne) captured my feelings exactly: *concrete, positive action* is the point of skepticism as a movement. At the end of the day, we’re in this thing to discover reality, to expose fraud — and to *help people*.

That seemed like a great foundation to build on. With Mayne’s permission, I developed an expanded new list of over 100 suggestions for skeptical activism. Then, I invited prominent skeptical writers, organizers, and activists to comment on each of these suggestions.

The response was exhilarating. Many leading skeptics gave generously of their time and experience, enthusiastically sharing wisdom and advice. I collated that flood of comments into a master document, in the format of a panel discussion — and then sent *that* out for further commentary. Over months, the project went through several rounds of comment and counter-comment — followed by many more rounds of editing, restructuring, and proofing.

The result is a sprawling and rich document, to which 13 skeptics contributed almost 30,000 words. Their comments comprise a fair cross-section of skeptical thought: contributors came from all of the national U.S. skeptics groups and also five of the leading skeptical podcasts — plus the world’s leading creationist watchdog, an important filmmaker, an influential independent web innovator, and the head of one of the most effective national skeptics groups overseas.

I’d like to thank all those who joined me on the project. Even more, I extend my gratitude to all those readers and emerging leaders who choose to discuss and develop these ideas from this point forward.<sup>3</sup>

I hope you find this topic as inspiring to consider as I have.

Daniel Loxton  
*Skeptic* magazine  
Editor, *Junior Skeptic*



<sup>1</sup> [http://media.libsyn.com/media/skepticality/063\\_skepticality.mp3](http://media.libsyn.com/media/skepticality/063_skepticality.mp3)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.skeptic.com/downloads/WhereDoWeGoFromHere.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Share your feedback and ideas about skeptical activism at [www.skepticforum.com/activism](http://www.skepticforum.com/activism)

# HOW TO READ THIS DOCUMENT

At over 30,000 words, this document is less a large article than a small book — a book with 105 subsections. This may sound a little unwieldy, but not to worry: the many subsections *can be read selectively, or out of order*. Each subsection comprises a panel discussion about one particular idea or strategy, some brief and some extensive. Each can be read in isolation.

Or, for those who prefer a convenient way to survey the entire list, a point-form “Quick Reference Guide” version is included as an Appendix (starting on page 56).

This Quick Reference Guide includes bullet points drawn from the larger panel discussion. It may also be read and linked to in html format at [www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext](http://www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext)

To make it easier to find the topics of greatest interest, both the full discussion and the Quick Reference Guide version are organized under the following umbrella headings:

- **SUPPORT MAJOR SKEPTICAL ORGANIZATIONS** (page 5)
- **LEARN & COMMUNICATE** (page 12)
- **INVESTIGATE** (page 21)
- **LOCAL ORGANIZING & FUN** (page 23)
- **YOUR COMMUNITY** (page 27)
- **INTERACT WITH MEDIA** (page 30)
- **SCHOOLS** (page 33)
- **LIBRARIES** (page 36)
- **POLITICAL ACTION** (page 37)
- **CONSUMER ACTIVISM** (page 40)
- **FILM & VIDEO** (page 42)
- **ONLINE ACTIVISM** (page 44)
- **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS** (page 52)

plus, the distilled, point-form

- **QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE** (page 56)

Finally, be aware that this is not an exhaustive list, but merely a place to begin. No such list can ever be complete, so long as motivated skeptical activists continue to innovate and bring their best ideas forward. To share your ideas about skeptical activism, visit [www.skepticforum.com/activism](http://www.skepticforum.com/activism)

# SUPPORT MAJOR SKEPTICAL ORGANIZATIONS

## 1. Donate money to skeptical organizations.

**Daniel:** I'm wryly aware of my conflict of interest on this point — I work for a skeptical organization. But I'm also well placed to appreciate that skeptical organizations are typically shoestring operations with their eyes on many worthy projects they simply can't afford. Most are understaffed, often with staffers who subsidize the organization by doing a lot of pro bono work. Out-of-date tools limit many groups. With severe budget limitations, many create outreach materials with frankly sub-professional production values — which makes it difficult for even the Big Three U.S. skeptics organizations to truly compete in the marketplace of ideas.

Make no mistake: the bizarrely successful market penetration of paranormal ideas like Intelligent Design or alternative medicine is built on money. Lots and lots of money.

The Skeptics Society, James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), and

Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI, formerly called the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP) are all registered nonprofits who are able to accept tax-deductible donations.<sup>2,3,4</sup> All function in part on donations made at the pocket change scale. All are willing to explore conditions and special arrangements for larger contributions.

**Ben:** Supporting skeptical organizations is critical, because they serve as *public* voices for reason. It's all well and good for individual people to be skeptical of things, but organizations can do outreach much more effectively than solo skeptics. Without organizations to support higher-profile skeptics, we wouldn't reach nearly as many people.

**Daniel:** Here's an important suggestion that sounded slightly ghoulish to me when I first encountered skepticism in my teens, but which now already (in my 30s) seems to me moving and noble: consider providing for a skeptical organization in your will.

This is a standard thing for nonprofits. In some circumstances, this can even result in a larger inheritance for your loved ones — and your bequest really can make a lasting, critical impact for skepticism. This was certainly the case for the Australian Skeptics.

**Karen:** Yes. A decade ago the Australian Skeptics received a generous bequest that allowed us to employ a CEO and editor, to maintain and improve our magazine (one of the world's top three!), to support research, and to fund scholarships and awards. This support was fundamental to the continuation and growth of our organization.

**Kylie:** You could include a bequest in your will — or you could also consider a donation now for one special thing that will always be associated with you or someone you love.

**Karen:** I'd also suggest that people consider supporting overseas organizations, particularly those in less affluent countries beset by the paranormal and pseudoscience. This support need not always be financial, but could extend to promotion, donations of DVDs and magazines, and more. For example, The Australian Skeptics is proud to be associated with Leo Igwe of the Nigerian Skeptics. Leo is a frequent contributor to *The Skeptic* (he has also written for *Skeptical Inquirer*). His articles discuss the severity of supernatural beliefs and practices throughout Africa, such as witchcraft, voodoo, and dangerous scams.

Want to **survey the full list** of suggestions before digging into the detailed discussion? Check out the point-form **Quick Reference** version, included as an Appendix starting on page 56.

A Quick Reference version of these 105 suggestions for skeptical activism is also available in html format at Skeptic.com<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.skeptic.com/about\\_us/donate.html](http://www.skeptic.com/about_us/donate.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/support-us.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.csicop.org/about/donate.html>

**Ben:** Karen's point about outreach in "Third World" countries is very good. While we in North America, Europe, and Australia naturally focus on combating the paranormal and pseudoscience at home, many countries, particularly in Latin America and Africa, are also in great need of skeptical resources. I'm pleased to have worked with skeptics in South America<sup>1</sup> in particular. And financial donations go much further in those countries as well.

**Daniel:** It's important to support the larger national and regional groups, and overseas groups as well.

Also, remember that there are many, many smaller groups (there's quite likely one in your town or on your campus, and if not you could start one) for whom a few donations of donuts, pizza money, or beer may be the pivotal difference between energized communities of local activists and a bunch of frustrated individuals with better things to do on a Tuesday.

**Eugenie:** The organization I work for, the National Center for Science Education, specializes in working at the grassroots to defend the teaching of evolution in public schools (i.e., we oppose the teaching of any of the various forms of creationism as science.)

I also am on the board of the Bay Area Skeptics, a local interest group of skeptics formed in the early 1980s. Grassroots organizations can provide hugely satisfying experiences and perform useful functions — but the amount of satisfaction and usefulness is directly proportional to the amount of effort exerted! So yes, support your local skeptic group, especially with your time.

**Swoopy:** While I agree it is important to donate to these organizations, many of whom subsist purely on the generosity of their base, I would also recommend to those who run those organizations not to ask for funds too often — and to temper the way in which they express the need for financial support.

Case in point: one of our local organizations, which has been around for over 20 years, opens each meeting or program with a call for funds and a passing of the basket. While folks are tithing, the treasurer often reiterates the organization's rising expenses and financial woes. It has unfortunately put us off of attending as many meetings as often as we were in the beginning, as it seemed like more of a call for money than a social gathering.

**D.J.:** Swoopy's point makes sense, since none of us likes to be hard-sold by a charity. On the other hand, I would encourage the skeptical community to actually be *less* shy about asking for money from the grassroots. Our cultural competitors have no shame in asking for money to support their various causes promoting paranormal and supernatural beliefs.

I think the skeptical community should show more pride in its activities, the kind of pride that shows the movement is worth the financial support of everyone we meet.

All that said, some of the most generous skeptical activists I work with are generous not with their money alone, but with their time especially. The strength of this movement, but a strength not fully realized, is the volunteer time that people all over the country are willing to invest to advance our shared values.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Radford is the Managing Editor of the Spanish-language skeptical magazine *Pensar*: <http://www.pensar.org/>

## 2. Buy stuff from skeptical organizations.

**Daniel:** Again, I have a conflict of interest (my job is making kids' science content sold as part of *Skeptic* magazine), but this is again a topic well worth mentioning.

All the major skeptics groups and many regional ones are supported to a large degree by the sale of stuff: conference registrations, magazine subscriptions, books, lectures on DVD, and so on.

In many instances, buying stuff from a skeptics group can have a compounding value: you can directly support a skeptics group with money, while also collecting resources that inform you and make you a more effective activist. Then, you can pass that benefit along by donating your used magazines, lectures, and books to local libraries, campus groups, or relatives — and also by putting to work your growing expertise as a skeptic.

**Jeff:** Some DVDs and other materials are only available from skeptical sites, and some of the content is fantastic. They make great gifts, really! Also, you can have books signed by Randi at no extra cost if you buy them from the JREF. (The Skeptics Society and CSI often offer similar deals.)

**Pat:** The Skeptics Society started out earning its operating funds by selling items rather than by asking for donations. The catalog in the back of *Skeptic* magazine is one of the things that has kept it afloat.

**Tim:** It is also worth noting that when the products you buy are produced by mainstream publishers, you help sustain a market for these materials. That helps ensure that more of them get made. When a publisher considers releasing a skeptical book, they are going to look at sales of previous skeptical books to determine the economic viability. Likewise with TV programs, DVDs or any other mass-market product. So if you are waiting for James Randi's *next* book, maybe you should buy his *previous* book — to ensure he gets paid to write the next one.

**Ben:** Tim makes an excellent point about encouraging mainstream publishers through sales. Folks like Joe Nickell and myself have a hard time getting big publishers interested in skeptical material. They say, "There's not much market for skeptical books." We often go with smaller publishers — which are often very good, but don't have the resources or interest to really push into the mass market. Supporting authors and publishers does help sustain the market.

**Tim:** Also, keep an eye out for skeptical websites that have affiliate stores for Amazon (and other retail sites), and buy things from there. You pay the same price you would have anyway, but the skeptics' website gets a cut. And don't forget: this includes purchases of non-skeptic-related items!

I blogged about this<sup>1</sup> and included a list of sites which have Amazon Affiliate stores. If you regularly buy from Amazon, simply remembering to use the right bookmark when starting a shopping session could mean many dollars for your favorite skeptical website, blog, podcast or organization.

**D.J.:** Our collective movement has so much room to grow in this department! Skeptical types seem to bristle at anything that seems to be "selling out."

Our promotional products need to appeal to multiple distinct audiences: college students and hip young activists who like rocking the boat a bit with their t-shirts and jewelry; soccer moms and soccer dads who are interested in skepticism less as activists and more as hobbyists; and, older academics as well.

What I have learned from the Gay / Lesbian / Bisexual / Transgendered (GLBT) movement is that sometimes merchandising isn't at all about activism, but just about *visibility*. In that regard, the skeptical movement needs both the "activist wear" — t-shirts and bumper stickers that push the envelope — and also more mainstream and middle-of-the-road products like canvas library bags and polo shirts with more understated, branded messages.

<sup>1</sup> <http://skeptools.wordpress.com/2008/09/06/what-can-you-do-shop-at-amazon/>

**Kylie:** Remember, “stuff” can include badges, bags, toys — a wide range of fun material that doesn’t have to be just literature-related. Get in touch with artists. Will they make a special design to lift the novelty a little more on what you have to offer?

**D.J.:** Range is essential. A quick look at the Human Rights Campaign’s website shows this great array: products from ties and tie-tacks and cufflinks, to welcome mats and blankets.

When merchandising skepticism, we should admit that the younger rabble-rousers and the older, more moderate science-types will respond to different products. We need distinct product lines, each *designed by the sort of people that product line is supposed to appeal to*.

**Daniel:** D.J.’s points are correct: we do need range, and we do need dignified materials that can carry our brand to a mainstream audience.

I’d go further: one of the major obstacles to the mainstreaming of skepticism is that our production values are amateurish in general. This isn’t surprising. So far, our materials have typically been produced by amateurs: academics, activists, and volunteers. Not a bad start, but only a start. Mainstream visibility requires fully professional, mainstream standards of presentation — and that’s something we need to start reaching for.

Which brings us full circle: buying stuff from skeptical organizations helps provide the funding needed for those fundamental improvements.

### 3. Write to encourage your favorite skeptics and skeptical organizations.

**Jeff:** Honestly, with the amount of negative feedback we receive, a short note to say “Thanks for being there” can really brighten someone’s day. Consider doing that when your favorite skeptical organization does something you particularly like.

**Swoopy:** Not only should we write to skeptics, skeptical organizations, and their various publications in order to support them, but we should provide feedback to the various skeptical bloggers and podcasters.

Statistics show that the majority of feedback received (especially in the case of letters to the editor or email feedback) is initiated in order to express a complaint or disagreement. Our skeptical heroes need to hear our positive feedback, and receive the occasional pat on the back, which goes a long way towards bolstering morale and encouraging these folks to continue their important work.

**Ben:** A little encouragement goes a long way. As a skeptical writer / investigator, it’s pretty typical that you only hear from people when they are mad at you, or are defensive about something that’s been investigated. It’s always refreshing to hear encouragement, and it means a lot to me to have people say they appreciate my work.

**D.J.:** The professional skeptical and pro-science organizations are woefully understaffed and overworked. I can think of dozens of instances when colleagues were feeling beleaguered by the Sisyphean tasks confronting us, only to be completely rejuvenated by a kind word of appreciation. I should also say that when sending constructive feedback to these skeptical nonprofits, being courteous and civil is especially important: imagine what a downer it is to work a ten-hour day “battling the opposition” only to hear draining or discouraging comments from someone on your team.

**Karen:** Letters to the editor, feedback on blogs, supportive calls to radio talk shows, emails in reply to website and magazine articles — all are appreciated, and all remind us that we have an active audience. Be heard, have your say, interact with us, suggest new topics to investigate, comment, criticize, contribute to and engage with your community.

**Kylie:** You could even create fan pages and networking sites for your favorite skeptics, organizations, and projects.



#### 4. Offer to donate computer equipment, software, or other useful stuff to skeptical organizations.

**Daniel:** Have some file cabinets in good condition, or own a pizza parlor? It never hurts to ask if skeptical organizations in your area could use free or discounted stuff.

**Jeff:** If you work for a printing house or a company that makes pens (or whatever), see if they'd be willing to donate some services to a skeptical organization.

We recently received a video projector that will come in handy, and someone else donated a bunch of JREF stickers. This stuff can really help. And to echo what Ben says, yes, a lot of this comes out of our own pockets. A lot.

**Swoopy:** Depending on the organization's nonprofit status, donations of this sort may be tax deductible. Making these sorts of goods and services donations not only benefits the organization but also the donor.

**D.J.:** I think this is especially important for newer community groups (even more so than campus groups, which often have access to campus resources such as computers and projectors). As Swoopy notes, in-kind donations are fully tax-deductible.

One caution: sometimes it is better for the organization to receive the cash that selling your used equipment would bring as opposed to trying to shoe-horn a use for your hand-me-down.

**Jeff:** Be sure your used equipment is actually usable. Many organizations are burdened with obsolete 286s and dot matrix printers.

#### 5. Offer general volunteer services to skeptical organizations.

**Daniel:** If you live near the headquarters for a skeptical organization, you can offer to help. The offer is always appreciated, but remember: it is a drain on the time of experienced staff to organize volunteers, especially at first. There are also a

limited number of general tasks that can be usefully done by a volunteer off the street.

For that reason, it's helpful to have a realistic idea of the un-sexy tasks that might be useful, such as moving a stack of boxes from here to there or putting the same pamphlet into thousands of identical envelopes.

**Jeff:** Physical help is always welcome. We have a gentleman who's showing his support by painting the exterior of the JREF building. That's a huge savings to us.

**Daniel:** Make sure your motivation isn't just to chum around. Just having a stranger in an office can slow down the whole operation, so be focused. Have a clear idea of the commitment you can make. Keep it short at first ("Thursday from one till five PM") and don't ever offer anything you can't stick to. Plan to work.

Finally, don't waste the time of staff with complex coordination — it isn't worth it for anybody. If your schedule doesn't mesh with the organization's needs, simply offer to check back in a few months.

**Kylie:** All the same, people in key roles need to be willing to step back and let other people help out or get work experience. At times, we can all think that we're the only one who can handle a big task.

I fear for those groups who do keep the reins in the hands of only a few. It leads to people drifting on, not feeling valued for what they can offer — and people are one of the most important resources we have.

**D.J.:** I believe the best kind of skeptical volunteering is in the area of activism. Yes, local skeptical groups need assistance with event management and promotions, outreach and setting up pub nights; but, if you *really* wish to increase our impact in society, consider volunteering as a watchdog researcher for one of the national organizations, reporting various paranormal trends, or coordinating a state-wide letter-writing campaign....

## 6. Offer *expert* knowledge or services to skeptical organizations.

**Daniel:** More valuable are volunteers with special skills to contribute: artists, web designers, technicians, photographers and other professionals are all welcome. (I donated pro bono art to *Skeptic* and similar magazines for years before taking on *Junior Skeptic*.)

Please don't get carried away with your offers, though. Don't exaggerate your abilities, take on a pro bono burden you can't really deliver, or lock yourself into something you'll wind up regretting. That's a waste of everyone's time and good will — especially yours!

(Also, a note to beginners: it's bad form to start a query letter by telling experienced, dedicated staff that they're doing a terrible job! Skeptical organizations are well aware of the room for improvement, but they're generally doing amazing things with very limited resources. They don't appreciate letters that begin, "Your website sucks, and..."

If you think you can help, just say so.)

**Jay:** Web developers, software engineers, graphic artists and software project managers have a great deal to offer any skeptical organization. The web is the easiest and least expensive way for skeptical organizations to get their message out. Offering your skills could turn a mediocre or non-existent website into an important tool for your favorite organizations. (This is discussed in detail in the "Online Activism" section.)

**Pat:** Every skeptical writer, lecturer, artist and researcher that I know has spent many years — sometimes decades — subsidizing their efforts with their own money. Skeptical organizations live or die on the efforts of self-starters.

Almost all of the art in *Skeptic* magazine is donated by professionals.

**Karen:** Skeptics are a talented bunch; why not harness skeptics' skills as spokespeople, advisors and speakers? Where else can you find a group that includes neuroscientists, astrophysicists, teachers, artists and more?

**Eugenie:** A local skeptics group can always use someone who has some experience with the media. Talk radio, especially, is chock full of pseudoscience, and a member who knows how to contact radio station hosts (or more likely, their producers) and knows how to pitch a guest can provide a wonderful service to a skeptical group — as well as to the community!

Be sure to vet the members of the organization for who would do best on radio, who on television, who to submit op-ed columns to the local newspaper, etc. You don't want your shaggiest college professor doing the television show, but his / her personal grooming proclivities are less likely to be important on the radio, for example.

**Ben:** Genie's absolutely right about vetting members, and especially "spokespeople." I see cases where skepticism is represented not by the most articulate or intelligent person in a group, but by the person who *most wants to be on TV*. If that spokesperson says something stupid, that looks bad for all of us. If they say something libelous, well....

**Jeff:** Lawyers and PR people are always welcome.

**D.J.:** This movement is a direct result of skeptics who are skilled in other fields, devoting expertise to further the cause. Consider all the professional magicians who have used their background to advance skepticism. I think we can do a much better job of actively reaching out to the professions, and creating opportunities for them to actively serve the movement. How often has there been a movement-wide call for lawyers to help with a specific project, or educators, or doctors? One budding success story: the growing network of doctors that now comprise the Commission for Scientific Medicine, one of the programs at the Center for Inquiry.

## 7. Offer *unique services* — such as your personal mega-stardom.

**Daniel:** If you're something like a skeptical movie actor, prominent artist, major novelist, or rock star: Oh, gosh yes, nonprofit skeptical organizations would love to have your help!

If scientifically illiterate minor celebrities can catapult dud causes like the anti-vaccine movement into the national discourse — and sadly they can — you better believe sharp cookies like Joss Whedon or Hugh Laurie or Natalie Portman could be crucial allies for encouraging critical thinking.

**Ben:** A great recent example is Danica McKellar, a beautiful Hollywood actress who wrote a book called *Math Doesn't Suck*, aimed at teens (especially girls), to encourage math skills and critical thinking. She's a great emissary for skepticism and science.

**Jay:** Celebrities within the skeptical community should also help promote smaller, up-and-coming organizations or initiatives. As the saying goes, a rising tide raises all ships.

**Karen:** Organizers: don't be afraid to politely ask for those unique services. Today, there are many high-profile individuals, academics and celebrities identifying as skeptics or atheists. Invite them to speak at your conference or local meeting, to contribute articles to your magazine, and to publicly promote the movement.

**Kylie:** Although a skeptical movie actor, artist, novelist or rock star might be very pressed for time, they could perhaps give an interview or discount to a skeptics group. Perth-based comedian Tim Minchin did just that for the New York City Skeptics when he performed in their town, and he kindly made a special effort to be interviewed for our vodcast (video podcast) when he was back in Australia for a short while.

**D.J.:** Again, let's hear it for magicians! They have key expertise in investigating paranormal claimants; they've played a unique role in the history of skepticism...

**Daniel:** ...and many are willing to throw their celebrity behind our cause.

## 8. Help write grant proposals for skeptics' organizations.

**Daniel:** I single this out because it is an area in which skepticism has tremendous room for improvement and growth. Most science outreach efforts in our culture are supported in large part by grants — but skeptical efforts tend to be funded exclusively by private donation, the sale of stuff, or the out-of-pocket support of those doing the work.

**Jeff:** Yes! This is so important. Grants are time consuming and vital. If you can do this, many organizations need your help.

**D.J.:** The downside of this is that grant writing is a highly specific expert skill-set. If you have that expertise, please do offer to volunteer your expert services.

**Kylie:** Do research into untapped funding sources, and refer groups to these opportunities. Be creative. Remember that Dr. Richard Wiseman received the pro-paranormal Perrot-Warwick scholarship for psychical research and parapsychology — as he was indeed *investigating*, albeit as a skeptic!

## LEARN & COMMUNICATE

### 9. Know your stuff! Follow the skeptical literature, and the paranormal literature.

**D.J.:** I think that more credulous titles like the *Fortean Times* or Llewellyn's *New Worlds* series *are* skeptical reading. I often read this type of stuff every bit as much as the skeptical magazines. It keeps one abreast on current claims and trends.

**Karen:** Attend local non-skeptical events such as psychic fairs, public talks and workshops. Be informed about historical and existing paranormal and pseudoscientific beliefs. *Skeptics should know what believers believe.*

**Eugenie:** I can't echo Karen loudly enough. Most reasonably large communities have plenty going on that skeptics should become aware of. Also, if your local organization has a newsletter or Internet blog, write-ups of these local events can provide important copy available nowhere else.

**Kylie:** One valuable experience I had was taking the University of Edinburgh's online course in parapsychology. This merely required paying the unit fee and having weekly Internet access. We cannot miss learning opportunities that enable us to understand the history and mindset of both the skeptic and the believer, to know our own biases and work on improving the field for the future.

**Jeff:** Read the book reviews in *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer*. I know I don't have time to read all the books, but the book reviews allow me to be conversant about the ideas inside. It's like a digest of current skeptical thought.

And, every once in a while, visit a New Age shop and poke about. Don't be afraid to buy something that looks interesting. Yes, you're in some very small way "supporting woo-woo," but the knowledge you'll gain will have a net positive impact on skepticism.

**Ben:** Yes, do your homework and know your stuff. No one expects you to have an encyclopedic knowledge of all skeptical topics, but there are great resources (such as Bob Carroll's *The Skeptic's Dictionary*) that can bring you up to speed. And, of course, regularly reading skeptic magazines will help. Keep up on the believer stuff as well. (To be honest, though, there's little new in most mystery-mongering magazines. Much of it rehashes old material: "Oh, look! Another piece on Edgar Cayce, and one on the Bermuda Triangle!")

**Daniel:** Of course Ben's point is correct: the paranormal literature rehashes a lot of old stuff (as does the skeptical literature). But, those topics will be brand new to many people getting involved now. And, even for old dogs, there is always more to learn on those old topics. If scholars can spend their entire careers on just Shakespeare, the combined lives and claims of hundreds of major paranormal characters are a bottomless pit for researchers.

Certainly my experience with *Junior Skeptic* is that every time I turn a focused spotlight on these old topics, I illuminate new corners no one ever looked into before. That's true because there is so much nonsense — and so few critical "nonsenseologists."

### 10. Sample broadly from the wider skeptical literature.

**Karen:** We're all busy skeptics, but we should try to expose ourselves to a wide variety of books, magazines, podcasts, forums, and blogs. This is like keeping up with the current affairs of skepticism. It's not good to become insular by favoring one or two sources.

**Daniel:** The access points for the skeptical literature are changing. It used to be that people would first stumble across *Skeptic* or the *Skeptical Inquirer* or a book by Randi, Shermer, or Sagan. Now, it seems to me that many people first discover one skeptical podcast or another, or an

online community like the JREF Forum — and then, hopefully, branch off from there.

But I've had the experience fairly often recently of meeting people who identify as skeptics, have opinions critical of the paranormal, but have never dipped deeply into the wider skeptical literature. They may not even realize that the major skeptics magazines exist.

Now, I certainly don't mean to argue that any one type of media is superior. (I'd really argue the opposite: we're much better off when we cast a wide net.) But, I think it is important for people to realize that many of the key topics of skepticism were robustly investigated and thoroughly debunked decades ago. People need to know where to look for those older investigations.

**Kylie:** Younger skeptics are frustrated when they discover they are reinventing initiatives that were already in place 10 or more years ago!

**Ben:** I'm always amazed when younger folks know little about the research that Randi, Ray Hyman or Joe Nickell, for example, did decades ago (or, for that matter, research I did only four or five years ago). I don't know if it's laziness, or lack of scholarship, but the older skeptical literature (books, magazines, even TV shows) can be incredibly important, interesting, and relevant.

**Kylie:** The older generation can greatly help by documenting what they have done, sharing history, and urging a revisit to certain claims. The Australian Skeptics have collected the entire run of back-issues of their *The Skeptic* journal on CD, with a searchable index — straightforward, and a great start.<sup>1</sup>

**Daniel:** Likewise, selected articles from most issues of the *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Skeptic* are available online for free.

The *Skeptical Inquirer* is especially generous in this respect. Although I have an almost complete collection going back to 1976, I often search out the articles I need at CSICOP.org<sup>2</sup> — and then pull out my physical copies to mark up and fill up with post-its.

## 11. Learn what makes professional marketing and communication effective.

**Daniel:** You may not be a design professional; and, if you're working at a grassroots level your resources are going to be limited. (Resources are severely limited even for national skeptics groups.) But it still pays to note the difference between what marketing pros do and what disorganized, angry, or inexperienced amateurs do.

Pictures matter. Spelling matters. "Framing science" matters — a lot. Your message may be just what everyone needs to hear, but it's worthless unless you can convince somebody to listen to you.

At the most local level, it matters whether you proofread and spell-check your blog, take care to be courteous in your forum posts, and are giving and humble in your personal conversations.

At the national or global level, skeptics would do well to remember all the gazillions of dollars beer manufacturers find it advisable to pour into marketing — and people *already want beer*.

Skepticism is a way, way, way harder sell, so we can't be shy about *selling* it. Overall, I think skepticism has perhaps C-minus production values, while the public takes A-plus slickness for granted. We're getting there, slowly, but we have a long way to go.

**Kylie:** Don't take it personally if someone questions your approach or wants more information on why you believe "this is going to work."

We should be encouraged to be skeptical and try the "devil's advocate" hat on. Take stock, and have fair critics who expect high standards.

Step into the shoes of outsiders. Stop to ask, "Does the fact that this is appealing to *me* necessarily mean is it going to catch the interest of non-skeptics? Or, will it appeal only to the existing core audience? Will this *communicate*, or merely play to the base?"

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.skeptics.com.au/skeptic/greatcd.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.csicop.org/si>

**Daniel:** Kylie has often called for greater accountability and introspection regarding the effectiveness of our skeptical outreach efforts. She's right that we should value constructive criticism from our peers.

On the other hand, my feeling is that our production values and communication strategies are still *so* rudimentary that we've got our work cut out for us just reaching for things we *obviously* need to improve. We need to pursue the things that make any communication effective: self-evident, rock-bottom basics like, "Use nice pictures," and "Don't condescend" and "Talk in a warm and friendly way." Once we have our ducks somewhat in a row, we can refine further from there.

**Swoopy:** Find a press or media kit online compiled by a reputable organization. Learn from the strengths and weaknesses of that document, and then create your own. This may include conducting an online survey of your readers / listeners / members to compile necessary metrics, and purchasing stock photos or artwork. There are tools the pros use that are not cost prohibitive; many are available online for free.

Show the completed document to someone you trust before making it available to the public, and then update it regularly.

**Kylie:** Remember, there are actual degrees in science communication and it has become quite a respected field. You might consider doing any classes that are available. Certainly, contact people with qualifications in that particular discipline for advice — many are skeptics already!

**Daniel:** There's a lot to learn to do this stuff right. Luckily, we can learn from experts. If you're going to participate in media interviews, I recommend the very useful and insightful book, *A Scientist's Guide to Talking With the Media: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists*.

## 12. Develop skeptical lectures for specific audiences: women's groups, colleagues from your own industry, seniors associations, and so on.

**Daniel:** It's important to tailor your presentation to your audience. That isn't cynical. It's just good communication — and good manners! If an audience gives you their valuable time, you shouldn't waste it with off-topic material.

Guys like Michael Shermer, who lecture frequently about skeptical topics, have several prepared lectures they can dip into depending on the needs of their audience: a basic intro to skepticism lecture, a lecture about their current area of research, and so on.

It's likely that you have a special knowledge of the needs of a particular group, perhaps because of your profession. This knowledge can allow you to shine light on specialized paranormal mischief in that area — mischief the wider skeptical community may not even know about, let alone be able to communicate effectively about.

**Jeff:** If you get a chance, take a Toastmasters course or attend a media training class. This stuff isn't always intuitive.

**D.J.:** I don't think everyone is cut out to be a public speaker, any more than I believe everyone is cut out to be a paranormal investigator.

If you want to develop skeptic and science lectures, my advice is to first learn the fine art of public speaking. I have witnessed people turned off of skepticism as a result of poorly prepared or delivered talks on the subject. The way you present your message is at least as important as the message itself.

### 13. Learn from other activist organizations.

**Daniel:** Skepticism isn't the first good cause to seek public support and sympathy. We don't need to reinvent the wheel.

If you have experience with other forms of activism, whether for political, environmental, or social causes, draw on what you've learned in those other areas. If you have little such experience, learn from the most responsible and effective campaigns you see around you.

Do please remember, though, that skepticism already has lousy optics. People approve of animal welfare whether animal rights advocates sound extreme or not. Skepticism has no such existing sympathy. Our first challenge is to overcome a stigma for being cranky naysayers. The only way to do that is to keep to the high ground.

To a large degree, our ability to speak about science and critical thinking in a humble, morally centered, and socially aware tone *is* the message.

**Jeff:** Though I disagree with PETA, they've done some very interesting things to get their message across such as creating a contest for laboratory-grown meat. I don't think the contest was serious; I think they were trying to get people to think. We can learn from any organization, regardless of their cause.

**Kylie:** I was particularly inspired by the strategies used for the "World Homeopathy Awareness Week" campaign this year, which included a ready-to-use PowerPoint presentation, flyers about homeopathy, details of recommended titles to read, discs for handing out, a list of speakers for people to contact — even a "first aid course" teaching package! If this is what can be done, why not do something similar for a "skeptical week"?

**Ben:** I agree with Daniel about skepticism having a negative connotation. While the term "skeptic" is fine, it has little or no traction with the public — what the hell *is* a "skeptic?" I suggest people focus on the very positive aspects of skepticism, such as the importance of critical thinking and the ways in which skeptics help people.

**Pat:** As an advertising professional of some 40 years, I'd like to say a word in favor of the term "skeptic," and make a few comments about naming and branding.

When we started Skeptics Society and *Skeptic* magazine, we agonized over the possibility that we were choosing a "negative" term when we selected the word "skeptic." It turned out to be one of the best decisions we ever made.

- Do pick a memorable, short, simple name — like a nickname.
- Don't pick a clever acronym, or a name that must be explained to be appreciated. It's like a joke: if you have to explain it, it doesn't count.
- Don't expect to find a word that means exactly what you want it to mean to all people. It probably doesn't exist. Corporations know this when they name new products with made up words that carry no baggage, like Xerox, Kleenex or Kodak.

If you are involved in social activism of course you usually can't use a made up name. After all, corporations have millions of dollars of advertising money to introduce their new names to the public. Try to redefine what used to be a negative or neutral term — like "gay" or "black."

Michael Shermer has been very successful in redefining the skeptical viewpoint as a positive. A few signs that we made a good decision going with *Skeptic*:

- No one has any trouble remembering it.
- It is always right up on the top of search engines.
- The press has always loved it. When media people call they usually tell us, "We wanted to include the skeptical point of view..."

It has entered the popular culture in to the point where we are featured in cartoons and even quiz show questions. TV shows and film set dressers often ask for permission to use *Skeptic* magazine as a prop in their productions.

#### 14. Learn from other outreach efforts.

**Daniel:** It's distasteful to me to think of skeptical activism as "evangelical," but that doesn't mean that we can't learn a few tricks from the hard-won experience of political and religious promoters throughout history.

For a substantial, illuminating, and frequently hilarious rumination on a niche literature eternally struggling with such challenges (serving its base while doing outreach; staying on message while also being persuasive to a broad audience; striving to be popular while also remaining serious and high-minded) I cannot recommend more highly Daniel Radosh's book *Rapture Ready*.

This tour of Christian pop culture kept reminding me how truly primitive skeptical outreach remains. If Christian pop culture trails the sophistication of secular pop culture by a few years, skepticism (in my view) trails both by *decades*.

**Eugenie:** Indeed, stressing our enthusiasm for science and critical thinking is a far more positive message than bashing pseudoscience. One tends to do better with a positive message than a negative one.

**Jeff:** One thing I'd love to see more of is skeptics' groups doing things that improve our image in the community — say, a local roadside clean-up effort. We need to be seen as more community focused than we have been in the past.

**Ben:** Yes. Skeptics need to be vocal, but also have a positive profile. How about skeptic food drives during the holidays? Or giving toys to needy kids? Or raising money for a worthy cause?

**D.J.:** Effective activism and outreach is not rocket science, but there is a body of knowledge honed by professionals in the field over the last few decades. Mere commitment to a beloved cause does not automatically make one a great activist. The big risk is thinking that all it amounts to is just common sense, which leads to grassroots folks ignoring or dismissing the best thinking in the field, the most tried and true methods — which often means an incessant

"reinvention of the wheel."

Best strategy: ape the methods of other successful organizations, to the extent that they are ethical (not every strategy of our cultural competitors should be adopted, even if they are very effective). Great examples for me personally include the Campus Crusade for Christ, HRC and Oxfam America.

#### 15. Communicate through your current channels.

**Daniel:** Are you surprised to hear that (Lo! These many long years ago) my college radio show had a strong skeptical theme?

Many of us have platforms for skeptical communication already, especially if we're involved in creative professions like writing, art, or music. But almost all professions offer at least the opportunity to take a strong stance against the pseudoscience particular to that field. Install audio systems? You know your industry peddles magic cables and googahs all too often. Work in a pharmacy, a bookstore, a winery? Pseudoscience is everywhere, and standing up for the truth isn't proselytizing — it's just good ethical business practice.

**Ben:** One way I spread skepticism through my "current channels" is to include it in some of the film reviews I do. I've been a part-time reviewer for 15 years now, and when a film touches on some sort of paranormal topic (such as crop circles in *Signs*, ghosts and Electronic Voice Phenomena in *White Noise*, remote viewing in *Suspect Zero*, etc.) I often include a paragraph explaining the skeptical truth behind the story. Look at the things you may be doing or writing, and see if you can work in some skeptical comment into the content.

**D.J.:** Communicating skepticism through our current channels may be the most important strategy in this document: come out as a skeptic, always, and without fail. Even when your best friend or most respected colleague at work utters something unbelievable, speak up.



I serve on the “young friends” board of the St. Louis Public Library, and often over the last few months was the lone skeptical voice against the prevailing view that the best way to attract people to the library’s events was to schedule paranormal themed activities: host a talk about how the main branch of the library is haunted, or create a “spooky Halloween event,” etc. And of course, this has a great rationale: when the library hosted Grant Wilson from *Ghost Hunters* last year, the place was standing room only, and they are still talking about it. Still, not only did I feel obligated to speak up, I felt obligated to do my best to speak up in a way that would be persuasive.

**16. Write for skeptical magazines (such as *Skeptic*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, and *The Skeptic*) print newsletters (such as CSI’s *Skeptical Briefs*) and electronic newsletters (such as the Skeptics Society’s *eSkeptic*).**

**Daniel:** Be advised: not everyone can do this! Good writers are rare, qualified skeptical experts rarer still — but neither quite so rare as you may fear.

When I first contacted *Skeptic*, it was to offer pro bono art, not to submit articles. I believed I was unqualified to write for a skeptical magazine, even though I was well versed in the skeptical and paranormal literature and had a strong background in writing. Then, when I later got the chance to try some writing for *Skeptic*, it worked out great.

My advice? Don’t go into skeptical writing with unreasonable expectations either way. Don’t be shocked if your article is rejected. (*Skeptic* receives far more submissions than it can print.) Don’t be offended if an editor asks for substantial changes. (This is pretty much a given.)

But don’t be afraid to try!

**Karen:** As a magazine editor, I can say that we’re always in search of well-written articles, columns, book and film reviews, reports and letters.

High school, college or university students may be able to get a start by undertaking work experience with their local skeptical organization. This is how I got started. Students can become involved in research, investigating, writing, and organizing events. Likewise, organizations can offer internships, work experience and class credit for writing articles and attending conferences and seminars.

**Ben:** I agree with Karen: offer to do volunteer writing or research for magazines or investigators. That’s how I started at *Skeptical Inquirer*: I offered to write some short “News & Comment” pieces, just for publishing credit (be sure you’re a decent writer!). It may lead to other opportunities.

**Daniel:** Short pieces that are close to your area of expertise are the best place to start: small news items, book reviews, even letters to the editor. Don’t submit some sort of a huge manifesto as your first article! Stay small and focused.

And remember: study the submission guidelines for the publication to which you submit! *Skeptic* has a whole page for this,<sup>1</sup> as does the *Skeptical Inquirer*.<sup>2</sup>

**17. Explore new frontiers for skepticism.**

**Pat:** One crying need is for science and skeptical articles written for women’s magazines.

For example, some years ago Academy Award-winning documentarian Jessica Yu (recently a *Grey’s Anatomy* director) wrote a fabulous article called “Psychics R Us: How I Became a Skeptic” for an LA-based gossip magazine. The article compared her experiences with low-end psychics against her experiences with high-end psychics. (Of course, all turn out to provide the same fake service for wildly divergent fees.) The Skeptics Society gave her a journalism award for that article.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.skeptic.com/the\\_magazine/contribute.html](http://www.skeptic.com/the_magazine/contribute.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.csicop.org/si/guide-for-authors.html>

**Karen:** Pat is right. This is an important target audience. Articles that think critically are vital to counteract the horoscope pages, psychic advertisements and frivolous, credulous articles typically espoused within this genre. There are plenty of topics to tackle within the seemingly limited confines of women's magazines. Write about health and nutrition, facts about parenting, myths, hoaxes, swindles, and scams — anything that offers a skeptical slant, common sense, self-help, and humor.

**Kylie:** You can always point out that a horoscope page is taking up valuable space in a publication that could always use it for advertising — that's what happened to *Vanity Fair*. Remember not to be discouraged if you cannot get into women's publications, as many depend on the credulous-based advertising.

**Ben:** Avoid preaching to the choir. Publish skeptical articles and pieces where the believers will encounter them. That's one reason I often publish in *Fortean Times* magazine: many of the readers are believers, but they are open to well-researched skeptical material.

**Jay:** Skeptics in the Pub, started by London skeptics around 1999, is a great example of bringing skepticism to an unexpected place. Having a skeptical meeting in a place where non-skeptics can be exposed and have their curiosity nudged is a great idea.

**Eugenie:** Science education standards in every state require teachers to teach critical thinking and science as a way of knowing. What better way than to use topics students are curious about? I have used the Australian Skeptics' video programs, which tested whether dowsing works, as a way to teach students how to set up a scientific test (controlling variables, blinding, double blinding, etc.). Teachers are enthused about this approach.

But teachers are very busy, and don't have a lot of time to work up new classroom exercises. Skeptics should develop classroom exercises (the more experiential, the better) that would be available online. This would be very popular, I predict.

**D.J.:** Over the last few years, a new opportunity has opened up to CSI as a venue for advancing skepticism: the Center for Inquiry's summer camp, Camp Inquiry. And the workshop we give for children ages 7 – 14 on skepticism as "intellectual karate" gets great feedback, including coverage by NPR's *All Things Considered* this last summer.

My advice: focus on the youngsters in their current organizations. Become a voice of reason in Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts or the local after school program in your neighborhood. Including magic or workshop elements on optical illusions and how easy it is for our mind to play tricks on us may increase interest.

Eugenie's point about online resources is a good one: Both CSI's web-based Inquiring Minds program and *Junior Skeptic* are poised to become such resources.

**Daniel:** I think Derek & Swoopy of *Skepticality* have accomplished something truly extraordinary by creating the SkepTrack<sup>1</sup> program at Dragon\*Con in Atlanta. The science fiction community and geek culture always seemed to me a very fertile ground for skeptical outreach (I personally discovered the skeptical literature at a small science fiction convention in the late 1980s, when CSICOP's late, great Barry Beyerstein spoke on a panel), and Derek & Swoopy have really seized the opportunity.

In terms of raw attendance numbers, Dragon\*Con's SkepTrack is now one of the largest skeptics conferences in the world. More importantly, a significant percentage of the SkepTrack audience will be encountering the skeptical perspective *for the first time*.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.skeptrack.org/>

## 18. Learn what skeptics are doing overseas.

**Daniel:** Many people are surprised to discover that their own country has an active national skeptics organization. An extensive list of international skeptical organizations is maintained by CSI.<sup>1</sup> Links to many international groups are also available at Skeptic.com.<sup>2</sup>

For skeptics based in North America, it is an illuminating and humbling exercise to familiarize yourself with the many groups across the world — and the special challenges each faces within their culture, language, and region. Especially noteworthy groups exist in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Italy, India, and the U.K.

**Jeff:** Don't assume your country's problems are what other countries should focus upon. The U.S. has different concerns from the U.K., which has different concerns than Korea, and so on.

**Swoopy:** One aspect of the Internet as an outlet for skepticism is both a great benefit and a source of special challenges: its audience is global. On *Skepticality* we are often plagued by email feedback from residents of other countries, who do not connect with us when we discuss problems specific to the United States.

Remember to label your discussion with your location (or the location you are discussing) and be specific. Seek out skeptical topics of interest in terms of our “pale blue dot” as well as your own backyard — but tell your audience what you'll be focusing upon each time.

**D.J.:** Our movement would be heartened to see what skeptics in other countries have to contend with: witch-burning in Nigeria, God-men in India....

The real benefit is in connecting with overseas skeptics, and letting their successes be our successes. Case in point: the U.K.'s Skeptics in the Pub has influenced the growth of a large network of similar skeptical drinking clubs around the world.

**Kylie:** When the *Skeptic Zone* podcast was asked to present at Dragon\*Con 2008 on the panel called “Global Skepticism,” we emailed about a dozen skeptical groups worldwide and quite a few responded. It was gratifying that they wrote back, and intriguing to learn of their different approaches, sensitivities, and areas of need.

## 19. Remember that “skepticism” is different from “atheism.” Many active skeptics are religious.

**Daniel:** Skepticism is an *approach to testable physical claims*. Atheism is a conclusion regarding an *untestable metaphysical claim*. These are not the same thing.

You can be both a skeptic and an atheist. I am, and this is demographically common amongst skeptics. But please remember, there are many other skeptics who do hold or identify with some religion. Indeed, the modern skeptical movement is built partly on the work of people of faith (including giants like Harry Houdini and Martin Gardner).

You don't, after all, have to be against god to be against fraud.

**Pat:** Well spoken. Couldn't have said it better myself.

**Jeff:** It's not necessary for skeptics to agree on every issue, especially ones that cannot be proved or disproved. Science is a poor judge of philosophy. If someone says they are both a Christian and a skeptic, don't assume you know what they believe. By excluding those who claim some religious status, you are making your world smaller.

**Kylie:** It's frustrating when people refuse to acknowledge skepticism's value because it might challenge religious beliefs. But it must be just as frustrating for deists to be told they're shut out of skepticism because of their faith. I'd like to see more Muslim skeptics, more Jewish skeptics, more “everybody skeptics.” And, I've worked in faith-based schools where it's been demonstrated to me that it is possible.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.csicop.org/resources/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.skeptic.com/about\\_us/related\\_organizations.html](http://www.skeptic.com/about_us/related_organizations.html)

## 20. Make allies. Be cooperative.

**Daniel:** Skeptics, atheists, and humanists are infamous for splintering over doctrinal differences and interpersonal politics. That's ridiculous — there are far too few skeptics (and far too much work to be done!) to bog down into such nonsense.

It reminds me of the time I asked a member of a particular colony-based Anabaptist sect what the difference was between his group and a splinter group they held very much at arm's length. "Mostly the hats," he told me.

Look, don't *do* that. What we need is help, not ideological purity. Find friends wherever you can. Build bridges. Work with people.

I'd call out one point for special emphasis: skepticism as a movement should be open to common ground with faith-motivated activists, (including those who do not identify themselves as skeptics).

Let's not forget that leading critics of religion have historically been very prominent supporters of pseudoscience (as in the original séance culture), while religionists remain the leading skeptical watchdogs for certain types of paranormal scams (like so-called "prosperity Gospel" and miracle healing schemes).

**Tim:** I agree strongly that we can work with religious groups on some specific issues. One of the most detailed debunkings of iridology I've read is on the website of the evangelist Dr. John Ankerberg. Recently I saw many critical articles about the "Lakeland Revival" and faith healer Todd Bentley written on Christian blogs. We need to ally with these people where possible.

**Eugenie:** Yes. In the controversy to keep evolution in the schools and keep creationism out of science class, my best allies are members of the mainstream clergy groups (who don't want to see biblical literalism — they don't believe in it — presented as science).

Years ago in Kentucky, I was involved in a local controversy over the teaching of creationism, and one of the prominent

ministers in town supported our anti-creationist group. In a casual conversation, I discovered that — unlike me — he supported prayer in school. Well, we can agree on not teaching creationism in science class, and disagree on whether kids should start the day with a teacher-led prayer. Similarly, if you are an atheist and a skeptic, this should not impede your cooperating with someone who is a believer and a skeptic. Stress what you have in common. It is always easy to find ways you differ — but easier than you think to find ways you are similar.

**Jeff:** Yes — find allies for *specific* issues, not *all* issues. If you disagree with someone about something, focus on what you agree on. I do skeptical work with a member of PETA. We disagree on PETA, but we agree on the anti-vax movement.

**Ben:** Look for groups with whom you may not necessarily agree on all issues, but with whom you can find common ground.

**D.J.:** Skeptical activists should build alliances with competitors of both types: cultural and organizational.

- **Cultural competitors as allies:**

While involved with a skeptical group at Washington University, our best friends on campus were the Campus Crusade for Christ — not because we agreed about the answers, but because each group valued the same sorts of questions. We would meet together on occasion for drinks or to watch *Life of Brian*. We even went together to a Billy Graham Crusade, only to debate the issues afterward.

- **Organizational competitors as allies:**

The skeptical movement needs to get past this notion that our groups shouldn't compete. There are differences among the skeptical and humanist groups, both philosophical and strategic. But the point remains: differences don't make collaboration impossible, especially around specific issues of activism. The best model here for me is the GLBT movement.

**21. Remember, the goal of skeptical investigation isn't to cast rhetorical doubt on paranormal claims, but to *discover what's true*.**

**D.J.:** Investigate, yes. But don't assume that your skepticism alone provides the bonafides to be a paranormal investigator any more than it qualifies you to be a crime scene investigator. Learn investigative methods, rules of evidence, and interview or interrogation techniques.

**Daniel:** Don't get ahead of the evidence. Often, an honest investigator will be forced to conclude, "I don't know what happened here." Most claims of paranormal experiences are unsupported anecdotes of the form, "I saw a UFO. Explain that, Mr. Skeptic!" Those cases can't be solved, as rule — there's nothing to investigate.

Don't jump to conclusions. Definitely don't plug in a standard general explanation as the answer for a specific case. Just say, "We'll have to keep digging into this. In the meantime, it's worth keeping in mind that similar cases have resulted from X and Y."

**Kylie:** One of the best pieces of advice I ever got was to walk in not as the skeptic, guns blazing and prepared to debunk — but to ask questions. Take the opportunity to be just another tourist, just another observer. *Then* take that data, sit down after and think it over.

**Ben:** Poorly done research by debunkers (instead of investigators) gives skepticism a bad name. Joe Nickell and I wince when we hear "a skeptic" incorrectly discredit some phenomenon, only to be proven wrong.

For example, when I was investigating the Santa Fe Courthouse Ghost mystery in 2007, one amateur skeptic announced that the strange image was obviously not a ghost but instead a rare phenomenon called ball lightning. In fact, the image didn't resemble ball lightning at all. The

careless debunking by that "skeptic" made all skeptics look like they didn't know what they were talking about.

This is a discussion for a book chapter instead of a short section, and I don't want to discourage investigation. But the take-home message: If you're going to do it, *do it right*. Read about investigations in skeptical books and magazines; talk to investigators; do your research. Know your skeptical principles and logical fallacies.

**Jeff:** This is a pet peeve of mine. It's fine to form a hypothesis, but don't try to confirm it — try to disprove it.

I recently saw a photo of a spider eating a bird. My first thought was "hoax," but I did the research and found that the photo was genuine. I also learned why I thought it was a hoax, which was very interesting.

**D.J.:** Never reject a claim out of hand. Otherwise, you are investigating not with an open mind, but obviously to showboat. I think these questions are genuinely worth investigating. If they aren't, they should not be investigated — even by a debunker who aims to teach the public how gullible they are.

**Karen:** We should treat each case anew, each experience as unique, and not as "just another ghost story." Think it over, discuss it with colleagues, research and analyze the data before making premature pronouncements. If you don't have the patience, and if you don't have the understanding, don't do it.

**Jay:** A good skeptic should have a good attitude. Whenever you are dealing with people you have to consider their feelings. They may have a great deal invested in what you are investigating. You will often find that your critical inquiry is not welcome. People don't want their beliefs questioned or proven false. With this in mind, you need to handle your investigations with tremendous care. Even if you do a great job at showing the truth, you will accomplish nothing if you have a standoffish attitude.

## 22. When you receive a chain email, Google it. Then tell the sender what you discovered and gently encourage them to Google the next one for themselves.

**Daniel:** I do this now almost as a hobby. In my experience, these emails are always well-known hoaxes that can be solved in the first three Google hits (frequently by Snopes.com). Often, they are old hoaxes, sometimes originating before I was even born.

**Ben:** Google is good, but Google ain't god; neither is Wikipedia, so crosscheck your sources. Snopes is especially good.

**Kylie:** Such claims are great material for classroom lesson plans — media literacy and library studies are all about checking sources!

## 23. Dig into a local paranormal mystery.

**Daniel:** In many cases, regional stories have escaped deep critical investigation. With some effort and academic skills, you can personally contribute to the skeptical literature while also learning more about your own community.

**Ben:** To be honest, I have mixed feelings about grassroots skeptical investigations into the paranormal. On one hand, it is absolutely true that we need more scientific paranormal investigators. There are fewer than a dozen of us in the world, and nobody's getting any younger. On the other hand, it isn't helpful if fledgling skeptical investigators barge into a mystery with an insulting attitude, poor investigative skills, or an inadequate understanding of the facts.

Here's the good news: many "unexplained" mysteries can be solved simply through good research and solid scholarship. Though I'm a big fan of field-work and on-site investigations, many mysteries evaporate by checking facts, cross-checking sources, and applying some critical thinking. In my experience, probably a third of the mysteries I investigate are explained by doing

thorough library and Internet research. It's a great way for amateur skeptical investigators to get a foot in the door and get some solved cases under their belt.

Over the years I have been approached by people who have an interest in skeptical investigation, but who don't really know where to begin. If my workload allows it, I'm happy to give them guidance and even help them prepare a short article about their investigation.

**Kylie:** If you're serious about investigation, it's important to really talk to the stakeholders concerned. This may include the paranormalists who have their own view of the matter. Being willing to listen and record all views is not only part of being a good networker, it demonstrates that you are not the "closed minded" one. There are also psychological, cultural and emotional aspects that should be considered. Be sure to step out if you are out of your depth.

## 24. Test something. Construct a well-controlled experiment.

**Kylie:** Try doing it with cheap materials — then outline it, write it up, and distribute it as a lesson plan. Having fun, interesting and different experiments that can be done safely by kids could not only contribute to educational groups but follows in the footsteps of popular books like *How to Fossilize your Hamster*.

**Ben:** This is a good idea, but remember: a "well-controlled experiment" sounds easy but can be very difficult to do in practice. To construct a solid experiment, you should be familiar with scientific protocols, blinding, control groups, statistical analysis, etc. Even professional scientists and researchers spend years trying to eliminate sources of error in studies. It can be done — and has been done — but is very hard with only one or two people.

Your best bet is to do this in conjunction with a skeptics group in your area. The Independent Investigations Group, a part

of CSI's Hollywood branch, has done several experiments.

Or, you may wish to stick to informal, preliminary, just-for-fun exercises like the following, which are easier to do and easier to explain to others:

- **Ouija board test:**<sup>1</sup> Have a group seek answers from a Ouija board in the normal way, then hang a cloth or place a piece of cardboard between the board and the participants' eyes, so they can freely move their hands but can't see the board. See how clear the messages are then.
- **Have your chi or energy "adjusted"** at a local holistic energy clinic. Then go to a different energy clinic across town for an analysis. See what they say. If they say you need work, you might ask them how they know, since your energy was "corrected" a short while ago.

**Jeff:** Keep things very, very simple. This is what we strive to do when we formulate tests for the JREF's Million Dollar Challenge. A well-designed test should have unambiguous, self-evident results with no subjective judgments needed. It should have the fewest number of variables possible.

**D.J.:** Proceed with caution here. Poorly constructed tests can damage the skeptical enterprise and have far-reaching negative consequences, actually fostering paranormal belief. It is better for you not to test a paranormal claim, than to be too much of a contrarian.

Become schooled in the methods of science first. While a local skeptics group can help, ideally you will connect with scientists involved in research. You may be helpful in identifying claimants, or assist in other ways.

If you can track down a copy of it, I would recommend Martin Gardner's *How Not to Test a Psychic: Ten Years of Remarkable Experiments With Renowned Clairvoyant Pavel Stepanek*, or Richard Wiseman's *Deception & Self-Deception: Investigating Psychics*.

## LOCAL ORGANIZING (& FUN)

### 25. Employ sound organizational practices.

**Daniel:** The world is full of professional administrators and policy guidelines for a reason: it is all too easy for unfocused groups to descend into wasteful, frustrating disarray.

If you're thinking of organizing a local group, take some time to think about how to structure your group for success. What is the group for? How will decisions be made? Who will do the work? How are conflicts to be resolved?

**Eugenie:** Grassroots organizations have similar problems whatever their purpose: they tend to be volunteer-run (unless they are extremely fortunate like the Australian Skeptics!) which means the people in charge are by definition doing something else. Unless you are very careful, the workload ends up on the shoulders of a small group of people, and burnout becomes a serious problem.

**Kylie:** We see it happen all the time. Those with motivation lead projects, but top-down, personality-dependent projects are vulnerable. If that organizer loses focus, what happens next? If a few key members quit, is that the end of everything?

Organizers should also be careful not to make promises they can't keep. For example, registering as a nonprofit group takes time and expertise, not just waving a magic wand and saying it is so. Best not to announce your nonprofit plans until after you get the paperwork done.

**Karen:** Grassroots skeptics groups are still public voices for skepticism. Ensure that your committees and boards are filled with knowledgeable and responsible spokespeople to represent our movement.

<sup>1</sup> Be aware that classroom exercises with an occult flavor can be a source of serious conflicts with parents and school staff, as well as possibly frightening to small children. Exercise caution and social responsibility when planning any such exercises.

## 26. Start a skeptics club at your high school or on your college campus (or join if one already exists).

**Kylie:** Thankfully, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have made this much easier!

**Brian:** Having done a fair amount of speaking for such groups, I can assure you that this is a field ripe for improvement. High school skeptics clubs rarely exist at all, and college clubs are usually underfunded, under-attended, and unfocused. These kids are bravely taking their first steps into a terribly important world, and are rarely given the hand they need.

Know a high school or college-age skeptic? Help them get a club started at their school. You need look no further than the many skeptical magazines, books, blogs, podcasts, and forums for a limitless supply of extremely high quality material. You'll find that nearly all of this material is brand new to nearly all club members.

**Karen:** Skeptical groups, clubs, societies and think tanks are popping up on campuses everywhere. Demographically similar humanist, freethought, and atheist groups are also common. Find one near you, or start one.

**Daniel:** Students may find that it's best to give their club a clear mandate for either skepticism *or* atheism (or humanism or freethought) *but not both*.

My own experience in skeptical student organizing was that as soon as the subject of religion arose, all other topics of discussion got shoved aside.

Don't get me wrong — it's fine to form an atheist group if that's where your interest lies. But, if you think core skeptical topics (alternative medicine, psychic scam artists, conspiracy theories, UFOs, and other paranormal stuff) are important, create a group focused on *those* topics.

The time-tested old CSICOP model works very well: if you want to pursue skepticism and atheism, just form two groups. That will help keep everything

clear and welcoming, and help prevent conflict and frustration. (Many new skeptics groups flame out over just this issue.)

**D.J.:** Note to non-students: be sure to be supportive of the growing network of skeptical campus groups already out there, even though you are off-campus. You can do so by offering yourself as a speaker, helping with funding, networking off-campus groups with campus groups, and providing leadership and direction. Over 200 such groups currently exist, and are networked through the website [campusinquirer.org](http://campusinquirer.org), amongst other places online.

But don't assume that every student group is waiting for you to tell them how to grow: college skeptics have even more of an anarchist streak than off-campus skeptics. Nudge, yes. But don't push.

## 27. If your city or region has no local skeptics group, start one. This could be a serious activist organization, something as loose and fun as a local "Skeptics in the Pub" — or anything in between.

**Daniel:** Most robust regional groups (such as the New England Skeptical Society) got their start when a handful of like-minded people turned to each other and said, "Gee, why isn't there a skeptics group around here? There sure is a lot of bizarre local nonsense."

It doesn't take much to get started, just three or four people who really care about the subject matter. Even CSI and the Skeptics Society started like this: a few nerds on a mission, people just like you or I. It is within your reach to build something in your community.

**D.J.:** For me, the real point of local skeptical groups is to provide community for like-minded doubters. Yes, the activism and outreach is very important, but the most effective local groups thrive in proportion to their social activities and sense of togetherness.



**Karen:** I recently attended a local gathering of skeptics where someone remarked that organizing skeptical events “is like herding cats, because skeptics don’t do groups.” This is nonsense. Skeptics enjoy parties and functions, and having coffee, dinner or drinks with friends. Simply socializing with like-minded people and discussing common (sense) interests is not being part of “the flock.”

**Daniel:** Back when we were both starving undergrads, I helped my brother run a skeptics lecture series in a downtown coffee shop. Like art openings, these coffee-shop lectures were open to the public, and had the draw of offering essentially free entertainment for students. (We put out a donation box by the till.)

The events were also almost free to put on, thankfully. Jason found a café willing to host them on weeknights (skeptics drink coffee, after all), and rounded up local speakers who were able to lecture for free. The most expensive part was putting up flyers at the local campuses and bulletin boards. It was wonderful fun, and excellent public outreach.

**Kylie:** Equipment can also be borrowed for a short term. I recall as a young woman how a local Girl Guide’s hall would happily lend out their audio-visual equipment as they themselves had little need for it. How many skeptics are a part of community groups that aren’t skeptical but may well be sympathetic to those starting out?

**Karen:** Remember to network and advertise skeptical events.

**Tim:** Sites like Meetup.com, Facebook.com, and Twitter can be instrumental in organizing these.

**Jeff:** Don’t forget Craigslist, or ads in the local free paper.

**Tim:** Also, [skepchick.org](http://skepchick.org) maintains a central calendar of skeptical events worldwide. Make sure your event gets listed there. That calendar is a Google Calendar, so you can pull it into your personal calendar, sync it to your phone, etc.

**D.J.:** Here is some counterintuitive advice: try to make sure that the members of your skeptical group aren’t all exactly the same kind of skeptics. How much more impact our movement would have if these 120 meetings of skeptical groups in cities around the United States each month engaged their larger community, as opposed to remaining a group of a dozen curmudgeons meeting at a bar to drink over another reason why ghosts don’t exist.

### 28. If a local skeptics group already exists in your area, support it.

**Karen:** By all means, create new clubs and groups in your city or university campus. But remember, networking with existing groups and becoming affiliated with a major group are ways to support the movement overall. There’s strength in numbers.

**Swoopy:** Don’t forget to support your local grassroots group even if you’re also involved in larger regional or national skeptical activism.

**Kylie:** You can help by donating knowledge. Where’s a good place for meetings? Where’s a pub or hall that will give a discount or a library where they won’t mind if you hold and advertise a lecture?

**Karen:** Support local groups further still by offering to present talks, attending events, and by subscribing and contributing to their magazines or newsletters.

When I lived in rural Australia I once had a visit from some Christian friends. Within hours, they’d located the local branch of their church, and had already made Christian contacts. Similarly, when I travel, I scope out any local events and try to find out what’s on in town. Better to attend Skeptics in the Pub in London or Orange County than to drink alone in a new city! Why not make those Facebook “friends” into friends in real life?

## 29. Participate in (or organize) a “Skepticamp.”

**Daniel:** “Skepticamp” is a new concept that is gaining momentum: small-to-medium-scale, self-organized skeptics conferences at which the audience members are also the speakers. The idea is to harness the potential of the “long tail” of the skeptical movement — offering a voice to all of us who have passion and expertise to share but who cannot take on the role of a “professional” skeptic.

To learn more about Skepticamp, visit the Skepticamp site,<sup>1</sup> or check out pioneer Reed Esau’s essay “Raising Our Game: The Rationale to Embrace Skepticamp,” available in text format as a PDF<sup>2</sup> or as an audio essay (on the *Skepticality* podcast) with a feature interview with Reed.<sup>3</sup>

**Ben:** I’ve discussed the idea with Reed, and I’d be happy to participate in future Skepticamps.

**Kylie:** Having watched this grow during its early stages, I’m very excited to think where this could lead — and how Skepticamp can tap into the wider community. Get involved! There are many ways one can have a hand in organizing without over-committing.

## 30. Start a skeptical book club at your local bookstore, community center, or college.

**Kylie:** Or even just join an existing book club and suggest skeptical books to add to the list! Creating reading guides for the book and suggested links and discussion notes can help the group too.

Or, start up a community book club that specifically aims to use texts that will complement what teenagers are studying in their science classes — and become not only a book club, but also an informal tutoring/discussion group.

**Swoopy:** Most large brick and mortar book chains like Borders, Barnes & Noble, or Chapters host local book clubs and reading groups, and will advertise the group in their monthly newsletter. The bookstore

might even feature your book club selection somewhere in the store, drawing additional attention to titles of interest. Begin with a bestseller like *The God Delusion* or *Why Darwin Matters* and appeal to readers on both sides of the issue in order to gain more attendance and encourage meaningful conversation.

**D.J.:** Brilliant strategy to get in under the radar. And there are such great books to focus on.

One caveat: since it is a public venue, you should expect (and welcome!) participants who are emphatic believers in various paranormal and supernatural claims. A bookstore’s book club will of course not allow you to deny anyone’s participation on the basis of personal belief — and it would be inappropriate to try. Make sure you have the social skills to allow for a diversity of opinion!

## 31. Celebrate the birthday of your favorite scientist — or some other scientific landmark — in a fun way, and invite lots of people.

**Ben:** At CFI we used to do a “Friday the 13th Superstition Bash.” We invited the public, and gave short talks or exhibits on luck, superstition, and curses.

**Daniel:** The single greatest party I’ve ever attended was a spectacular (but relatively inexpensive) “wake” my brother Jason organized for the space station Mir. Under a starry sky, our hushed group gathered on a cliff overlooking the sea. We filled a huge, glowing paper hot air balloon, and released it into the cloudless night. Quietly toasting Mir and human adventure with swigs of vodka, we watched our balloon — until it went silently dark, and fell into the sea...

Then we returned to the house to join the rest of the large crowd for live Russian folk music. And, y’know, a backyard full of fire twirlers. (Perhaps those were representative of Mir’s reentry?)

<sup>1</sup> <http://skepticamp.org>

<sup>2</sup> <http://skeptic.com/downloads/raising-our-game-oct-2008.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://media.libsyn.com/media/skepticality/090\\_skepticality.mp3](http://media.libsyn.com/media/skepticality/090_skepticality.mp3)

**32. Buy a telescope and host a star party for students and adults to get them interested in science. Or, build a social outing around a science theme, such as a nature walk.**

**Daniel:** Late one night I popped out to walk the dog, and was surprised to find that the tow truck driver from next door had an 8-inch reflector telescope set up in the parking lot across from our building. Within minutes, my neighbor was showing me the moons of Jupiter! I saw Europa, and learned that it's one thing to see high-res photos, and viscerally a whole different experience when "the photons die in your eye."

What most impressed me, though, was this: several different young couples and groups from the bar crowd stumbled across this impromptu observatory on their way home — and stayed, awestruck, to see Jupiter or Saturn themselves!

When astronomy becomes a highlight of Friday-night clubbing — now, *that's* science outreach!

**Jeff:** Want to impress a kid? Take him outside and show him a star. Then say, "That's not a star, that's a satellite. People like us put that there."

**Tim:** Especially impressive are iridium flares, which are caused by low-earth-orbit satellites. They are extremely bright, but only last a short time (under a minute). They look like very slow moving meteors. You can look them up at [heavens-above.com](http://heavens-above.com). Passes of the International Space Station can be impressively bright these days too.

## YOUR COMMUNITY

**33. Help organize community events that support science (perhaps centered around the popular topics of astronomy, zoology or health).**

**D.J.:** Science centers and science museums often have programming that could be made more skeptical through the involvement of local skeptical activists. Case in point: the St. Louis Science Center recently hosted a Festival of Science, and wanted to feature a presentation about the paranormal. When schedule conflicts limited the involvement of the region's best-known skeptics, the Science Center opted for a speaker who was pro-paranormal. Had more local skeptics been involved, the venue could have been used to advance reason and critical thinking instead of belief in the unbelievable.

**34. Get a booth at community fairs and events and fill it with information about being a skeptic.**

**Eugenie:** This can be a great organization builder, as well as provide a lot of fun for organization members. These days you can usually get a cheap canopy for less than \$100 at Costco, so take up a collection and get a "booth" you can take around to street fairs or other events.

**Swoopy:** Community fairs are a common and useful way for minority subcultures to do community outreach and to find more members. Look at the booths and materials other groups use, and learn from those.

**Ben:** Yes, this is a good idea — but remember to make it fun! Emphasize the interesting, cool aspects of skepticism. Maybe have a Bigfoot track on the table (instead of a list of logical fallacies) to interest people and get the conversation started. Have flyers for local groups.

### 35. Help distribute flyers, put up posters, or notify the press when skeptical or science speakers are giving local talks.

**Ben:** Yes, get the word out any way you can: email, flyers, posters, small ads. Don't be shy!

**Jeff:** Tease folks. Put a puzzle on there, and then put the answer on your site. Make them come visit you. Science fans can't resist stuff like this.

### 36. Arrange field trips for grown ups to science museums.

**D.J.:** Ideally, do this through your local skeptical group or Center for Inquiry, who can use the organizing assistance. At the center in Los Angeles, we have arranged for regular tours of Griffith Park Observatory, and such field trips are among some of our most popular offerings there.

**Swoopy:** Those familiar with audio can also create "sound seeing" tours of these places. Many podcasters have done this with their favorite locales. The BBC and NPR have both been pioneers of this type of program. Record ambient noise where you are, and describe vividly what you see as you walk through your local museum / planetarium / zoo. Many respected museums have done these types of guided tours for visitors for years, but audio description doesn't require visual accompaniment. All-audio virtual tours are especially helpful for the visually impaired.

**Pat:** We love the geology tours put on by the Skeptics Society's official geologist, Don Prothero. These have ranged from a half-day trip to view the San Andreas Fault for fossil or gem collecting, to multi-day excursions through the jaw-dropping scenery of the American Southwest. Prothero lectures at all stops, and each participant gets a booklet explaining the terrain. Most people are willing to pay a little something for the trip and lectures so these are also good fundraisers.

### 37. Volunteer at your local science museum.

**Jeff:** My mother does this. It's easy and rewarding — and you get a discount at the gift shop!

**Kylie:** Your local science museum may even offer work experience opportunities.

**Daniel:** Skeptics are in the business of science communication — and science museums have been ground zero for science outreach for over a century.

This is one of the major places for skeptics to study and learn. An inside look at how museums work (and the problems they face) could be profoundly useful to you.

### 38. Offer to teach a class on skepticism and science at an adult education center.

**Kylie:** Quite often, these "open learning" or "annex" groups also teach some very dubious or dangerous alternative practices. Having a class that tackles these could be useful.

**Brian:** Don't *not* do this simply because you're worried that you won't have enough to say. Consider all the skeptical blogs and podcasts out there to be your reference material. My podcast, *Skeptoid*, is specifically licensed for this type of use. You don't even need my permission. There's over 100 class curricula for you right there. I'm sure that most of the other blogs and podcasts you like will give you similar permission.

**39. Put together a handout on local “haunted history” legends and their likely explanations for your town’s historical society, or develop a skeptical “ghost” tour.**

**Jeff:** Put some cool stuff on there too. A pamphlet of “none of this is real” isn’t very fun. Cool, real stuff has happened almost everywhere. Find it.

**Karen:** Historical groups are interested in folklore, but ultimately, they deal in fact and are sensitive to our aims and objectives. Let’s work with them.

Often, local historical societies and townspeople resent paranormal legends. For some, it is tourism — but for others, it is harassment. Years ago, I inquired into the Guyra Ghost, the alleged poltergeist activity that took place in rural Australia during the early 1920s and drew international attention. To this day, this small rural community is hassled by ghost hunters, and the residents won’t even reveal the whereabouts of the house in question. The original house has even been modified to avert attention. I investigated the stories, and the town historical society was thrilled to be able to counter the paranormal claims with a factual account and skeptical analysis of the events.

**Daniel:** I once attended a Halloween “ghost walk” tour organized by a local convent. It was long on architecture and short on ghosts, but it was fascinating. I think skeptics could raise a similar “truth behind local legends” concept to a highly entertaining and informative level.

My hometown (Victoria, British Columbia) has a rich history of paranormal legends: a once-famous sea monster, a local reptilian humanoid, and more ghosts than you could shake a stick at. We’re also ground zero for the “Satanic panic” of the 1980s (the star of *Michelle Remembers* recovered her alleged Satanic Ritual Abuse memories just up the street from here). But Victoria isn’t unusual in that respect — every town has its own weird mysteries and macabre historical legends.

**40. Donate recent back issues of skeptical magazines to waiting rooms at doctors’ and dentists’ offices or local hospitals. (For more thoughts about magazine back issues and used books, see “Libraries,” starting on page 36.)**

**Kylie:** Magazines traditionally grab the reader quickly and are more likely to be mentioned in conversations, which is why donating skeptical and science magazines to doctors’ offices should be encouraged. Let’s challenge quack medicine by making reflection start in the waiting room!

**41. Invite health care professionals (and other experts) to speak to seniors’ centers about medical quackery (and other rip-offs).**

**Jeff:** Ask your family doctor for an hour of his or her time, but make the experience as smooth and easy as you are able. Personally introduce the speaker, and lead the Q & A session yourself.

**Daniel:** Seniors are often the target of other scams as well, from real estate rip-offs to psychic cons to predatory antiques dealers. Any suitable expert on any relevant topic might make a valuable speaker. If your local police department has a “Bunko Squad,” they may have an informed outreach officer available to speak.

**Kylie:** Do your homework beforehand. Certainly get to know the senior center and what their concerns are. Are they being targeted by a particular group and need to talk it over?

**42. Prepare accurate, thoroughly cited fact sheets on health fraud and quackery. If you know a doctor, solicit their editorial assistance. Give the sheets to seniors' centers, pharmacies, doctors' offices, hospitals and church groups to distribute.**

**Karen:** Be sure to include additional book and Internet resources and (thoroughly referenced) facts. People always like to seek supplementary information, and usually head straight to the minefield that is the Internet, where it can be hard to differentiate fact from fiction. It is better to supply reliable sites that have accurate information, guiding users past the misinformation and manufacturers.

**Kylie:** There's a variety out there already, many produced by health care professionals. Don't be afraid to contact consumer rights groups and watchdog sites like Quackwatch.org for additional resources.

Don't be that crank. Reserve the traditional indignant letter to the editor for the most serious breaches. And, even then, *be polite*. Resist the urge to get in zingers. Assume the reporter and editors are lovely people who acted in good faith — and then *courteously* tell them how their conclusions were mistaken.

**Ben:** Remember to check your facts, and provide sources in your response.

**Jeff:** Send a short, concise, and thoughtful paragraph every time you see an article that offends. If you can include some humor in it, I find it's more likely to get published.

**Kylie:** Request a "second opinion." Ask that the views of people with legitimate qualifications be included to rebut the claims of alternative practitioners.

**Tim:** In a larger city, it can be hard to keep up with all the different media. You can use Google Alerts to set ongoing searches on the websites of your local media outlets for skeptical topics. You will get an email when a new article appears that matches your search criteria. When the recent Bigfoot hoax was a breaking story here in Atlanta, I used this to keep up with the local coverage.

## INTERACT WITH MEDIA

**43. If a newspaper, radio show, or TV program makes a serious error or badly distorts the public understanding of science, write a concise, formal letter to the editor or producer.**

**Daniel:** This is one of the most common avenues for grassroots skeptical activism, and also one on which many fledgling activists badly misstep.

I'll tell you a secret: by and large, reporters and editors work very hard to ensure that their reporting is accurate. At the same time, it is as inevitable as taxes that errors will creep in. How could they not? Many reporters, especially for daily papers, write several articles a day!

And every reporter knows that no matter how hard she works, no matter how accurate she may be, some crank will write in to tell her *boss* that she's a lazy moron.

**44. If news media make a moderate error of fact or interpretation, write a short friendly letter *directly to the actual reporter*.**

**Daniel:** Reporters don't like to make errors. If you catch one, write *directly to that reporter* and give them the information they were missing. Make sure to also tell them what you *did* like about their article, and back up your corrections with citations. Help them get it right next time. Be on their side!

**Kylie:** Building up a friendly relationship with that journalist may also help in the future when it comes time to break a story or promote an event.

**45. If you see media get it *right*, send a letter of appreciation to the reporter — and tell their boss how much you loved it, too.**

**Daniel:** I can tell you from experience that most people write to complain. That can be disheartening, and it can certainly dull a tired reporter's edge. On the other hand, one letter of support can justify days of extra digging, make rewarding that extra angle of investigation — and give a reporter the incentive to ask even tougher questions next time.

I can't emphasize this point enough. One letter of support for good reporting is worth ten complaints about bad reporting!

**Ben:** Once again Daniel is 100% correct. Complain about the bad journalism, but also compliment the good journalism. I've been on both sides of the coin, and it's definitely helpful.

**Brian:** Not only does this reinforce good behavior, it gives you an opportunity to expand the skeptical angle on the story. If your letter is in the form of a letter to the editor for publication, feel free to expand a bit on what the reporter wrote. Underscore the skeptical aspect of the story, and explain why that's so important.

**46. Organize a skeptical letter-writer's club at your favorite online forum, aimed at polishing draft letters to the editor on pseudoscientific topics.**

**Kylie:** Highlight current media stories each week and create "form letter" templates that could be tailored for anyone to forward on — just the basics for those who are unfamiliar with how to structure short, snappy letters that actually have a chance at being printed. Find other online commentaries and news items to help resource the reporter's story.

**47. Put together fax numbers and email addresses of local news reporters and radio personalities. Send them topical information they can use (such as a well-referenced fact sheet when a movie relating to science or the paranormal is about to be released).**

**Daniel:** I'd caution activists not to spam reporters. But if you have verifiable background information about a topic that's in play in the current news cycle, by all means tell journalists about it. If nothing else, this will tip them off that there is "another side of the story," which reporters often have their eyes open for anyway. Keep it short, on point, and factual.

This works. During a national news story in Canada (about a particular alternative medicine flap), I wrote to a select few newspaper health reporters and health editors to tip them off with some essential background information. That resulted in prominent news stories with deeper factual content and a much more skeptical tone than they might otherwise have had.

**D.J.:** This is especially important if you are doing it as a volunteer for a local skeptical organization. The added benefit is that your media activism serves as outreach for the group.

#### 48. Write to section editors and individual reporters to make story suggestions.

**Brian:** Be aware that many newspapers (especially small, local papers) are often hurting for content, and 99% of the press releases they receive are from people hoping to get their product or service promoted for free. If you can give them a fresh suggestion with no commercial angle, there's a good chance they'll jump on it.

**Karen:** Cultivating friendships with the media is useful too, especially science broadcasters and consumer watchdogs. Complimentary copies of your magazine will be welcomed and may have a positive influence on their future articles and themes. Investigations can be replicated for TV or magazines, and articles can be republished to reach a new and different audience.

#### 49. Submit book reviews to local papers and newsletters on important skeptical books.

**Jeff:** See if you can apply the content to something local for maximum impact.

**Kylie:** This is particularly useful if the author's book tour is heading your way or if there is the possibility of the text being used in a course or unit being taught in a school.

#### 50. With the cooperation of your local university science departments, create a science telephone line for reporters and media researchers to call with questions.

**Jay:** This would be a great idea for a local skeptics group to organize. To make it easier you could use email. This way you will have the time to research your answers. You can use the contacts you make to expand your group's network.

**Daniel:** The basic concept here is very important: it's crucial that reporters be able to easily locate and consult reliable, quotable experts on both the findings of real science and the truth behind pseudoscientific claims.

The big skeptics groups take a lot of this burden, but local and regional reporters will usually prefer to talk to relevant local experts if they're available.

**Karen:** Provide access to expertise. Skeptical organizations both large and small should compile a list of specialists who can act as media representatives on particular niche topics. The media come calling for information regarding topics from psychics to physics. Not everyone is a skeptical "generalist." Most of us have specialty topics that we can address with greater depth than others.

**Kylie:** This might be better incorporated into an existing university press office, who may be willing to refer certain enquiries to you. All of this hinges on a good media release and networking! Skeptics groups can benefit from a "media officer" to write press releases, maintain media contacts, and refer reporters to relevant specialists within the skeptical community.

#### 51. Start an "Ask a Skeptic" column in your local paper or newsletter.

**Brian:** Small local newspapers are often starved for decent content, so don't overlook this easy and fun opportunity to reach a lot of people in your community.

**Daniel:** Be aware, though, that a column is not a license to mouth off, no matter how large or small the paper; it's a privilege and opportunity extended to you by the editor and readers. Don't make them regret it by being difficult to work with — or rude in print.

Be prepared to be flexible. Don't melt down if some particular column gets rejected. Expect edits. Nobody likes them, but it's not your newspaper!



(I actually know a skeptic who stormed away from a regular column in a huff over very minor edits. Who does that help?)

Most of all, be sensitive to the wide variety of opinions held in good faith by your audience. Remember that we're in this to help people, not to score points.

**Kylie:** Choose topics with care! Companies advertise next to these columns and finding useful and considered issues to address will help pave the way a bit without alienating the readership — or stopping money from coming in!

Also, don't forget that a "local newspaper" could easily be a school paper, campus magazine, or street press.

## SCHOOLS

### 52. Go to school board meetings. Learn what issues impact your local schools, and respectfully speak on behalf of science if the opportunity presents itself.

**Jeff:** And then get on the board! You want to make a real and meaningful change? Here it is.

**Kylie:** As secular rights lobbyist Lori Lipman Brown said at Dragon\*con: this was how the creationists got into the school board and began altering the curricula in the U.S.A.! It is possible to gain a voice and support science by taking part!

**Jay:** This is crucial front-line skepticism that every school district needs. I can't stress enough how important it is for science and critical thinking to be taught in our schools. With pseudoscience and faith-based beliefs on the rise, the first line of defense should be a proper education.

### 53. Speak to the members of your Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) about science and critical thinking.

**Kylie:** Check what's on booklists and syllabi. Start discussions about recent research into abstinence-only education and creationism in schools.

**Jeff:** Expect a lot of pushback on controversial ideas. These are their kids you're talking about, and clear thinking is often overruled by emotion. That said, don't shy away from it either. Ultimately, what you're doing is in their kids' best interests.

### 54. Volunteer as a guest speaker for classes and school assemblies.

**Brian:** Be sure to do this at the beginning of the year while there's still time to get on the schedule. They do have budgets, so don't be shy about suggesting some of the more popular skeptical speakers who will be delighted to come to the school and present a talk on critical thinking or science. The Secular Student Alliance keeps a list of available speakers, as do other organizations.

**Karen:** As a parent or community member, find and recommend speakers and relevant shows for your local schools. For example, Australia's Mystery Investigators<sup>1</sup> visit schools and demonstrate simple, practical and fun experiments that illustrate the scientific method and explain, test (and disprove) phenomena such as water divining, spoon bending, and fire-walking.

**Kylie:** I was asked back to a former workplace to help run the student book club. Being a speaker and consultant can take many different forms!

I would also strongly suggest getting in touch with support and parents groups for gifted students. Camps, activities, lectures and summer school programs to enrich and extend the education of students are always needed.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mysteryinvestigators.com/>

### 55. Provide tutoring to students (of all ages) in the sciences, basic literacy, or English as a Second Language (ESL).

**Karen:** Literacy and education are fundamental to skepticism.

**Kylie:** As a former ESL teacher, I can certainly say that poor English comprehension is as much an obstacle in science or math classes as in humanities subjects.

### 56. If you're a university or college professor, teach critical thinking classes — or work skepticism into your existing classes.

**Karen:** Academics should consider teaching skeptical courses at universities and colleges. At Australia's Griffith University, Dr Martin Bridgstock developed the popular "Science, Skepticism and the Paranormal" course (and textbook). At a time when many institutions offer units in naturopathy and herbal medicine, it's important that we counter this with courses that teach practical critical thinking skills.

Academics need to bear in mind that skepticism is relevant to scholarship of all kinds. If you lecture or teach, don't ignore the myths of your field, but treat them, and explain the facts.

**Jeff:** If critical thinking classes already exist at your local college, contact the professors and ask them if you could be a guest speaker. Have a succinct subject to teach, and give them all the materials ahead of time. I've done this: the class and professors love it.

**Ben:** A few years ago, I was giving a talk at the local skeptics group, and one person in the audience turned out to be a professor at the University of New Mexico. Since that time he's started teaching a class on critical thinking and has asked me to guest lecture a few times a year to his class. It's a great way to get the message out.

### 57. If you're qualified, write textbooks or develop curricula that include skepticism, critical thinking, and sound science (particularly evolution).

**Karen:** If you have the expertise, contribute to and write textbooks. I have published articles in English literature textbooks, ostensibly for language analysis, but the skeptical themes will hopefully sink in too.

**Kylie:** Get on mailing lists and sign up for any science teaching magazines that allow for general public subscription. Keeping an eye on curriculum development can help suggest niches that can be filled.

After nearly five years of networking and interacting with fellow philosophy teachers in my state, I became a presenter and co-author of a compulsory philosophy unit that prominently features skepticism, critical thinking and ethics in a state-wide course for high school students. All of our materials are online and we are a part of a body that promotes philosophy in schools internationally, from pre-primary up.

### 58. Get some friends to contribute and create a skeptical scholarship award for local high school students.

**Karen:** Encourage your own organization to set up a new award or scholarship at secondary or tertiary level.

**Daniel:** Or, try to involve local technology companies in sponsoring a new scholarship.

**Jeff:** Contact your local skeptic organization — or a regional or national skeptics group — and fund a scholarship through them. It doesn't really have to be local.

## 59. Sponsor a science writing contest for your local schools.

**Brian:** If you can get your hands on a decent prize or college savings bond, sponsor a contest for local students to write a scientific or critical thinking paper. If you inform the local newspapers, they'll not only cover and help to publicize it, they may well offer to co-sponsor it with you.

It's often a tough sell if you use the word "skepticism," so consider going with "critical thinking" or "critical analysis" instead. There are many topics in our world that a budding young scientist can analyze by applying the scientific method.

**Kylie:** Get in touch with other groups — state science teachers associations, college groups, even a local technical bookshop — and see if they can be a part of your project, or if you can augment something they've already got running.

**Pat:** You might also want to consider something like a T-shirt, poster, or bumper sticker contest.

**Daniel:** Whether for writing or art, contests should have an enticing prize (some fame plus some cash) and be promoted widely. In high school I entered such contests systematically, and it really came down to a simple calculation: the cash value of the prize, divided by my estimate of my chances of winning, divided by the number of hours it would take me to enter.

For this and other reasons, many contests wind up with a very poor response rate relative to the time and effort required to create and administer them. (It takes a *lot* of work to conceive, organize, advertise, and judge a contest.)

Luckily, there are additional (inexpensive) carrots that also appeal to students: a turn in the limelight, and impressive credentials to include in a scholarship résumé.

Even then, though, students have to hear about the contest to enter. Getting the word out can also be a challenge, so I recommend looking at what others

have done. A relevant recent example is an essay contest sponsored by the Western Australia Skeptics. You can read a detailed postmortem of the contest's first year in a 2006 issue of *The Skeptic*, available for free online.<sup>1</sup>

## 60. Contribute prizes to local school science fairs. Or, if you are a scientist, volunteer your services as a judge.

**Kylie:** This is a very useful strategy — putting a public face on skeptics and presenting us as positive contributors to educational ventures.

## 61. Encourage more scientists to show up at career day.

**Jeff:** This is often difficult. Consider who has a message to get out. Big companies may want to do this for PR.

**Kylie:** Remember that "science" can be food science, mining, astronomy, local museums, genetics, forensic science.... Get a range of possibilities and let the scientists have the opportunity to use their science communication skills!

## 62. Remember: skepticism isn't only for scientists!

**Karen:** Think outside science. Skepticism is relevant to *education*. Period. Encourage your children, students and colleagues to think critically about every topic, from economics to history. "Critical thinking," "common sense"— by any name, skepticism has practical applications in all areas.

**Jeff:** For example, consider "Home Economics" class (or whatever it's called now). Running a household is all about skepticism: lead kids on a shopping excursion and show them how to see through deceptive marketing and advertising.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.skeptics.com.au/journal/2006/3.pdf>

## LIBRARIES

**63. Donate materials to the research libraries of skeptical organizations — especially hard-to-find historical material.**

**Daniel:** My *Junior Skeptic* studio, the Skeptics Society, the JREF, and CSI all have research libraries (as do other national and regional groups, and some podcasts). Most accept donations of science and paranormal books, videos, periodicals, and ephemera. If you have relevant material you'd like to contribute, please contact the organizations or speak to their librarians about their needs. (Storage space is always an issue.)

**Kylie:** To help out with the storage problem Daniel mentions, use your scanner. Burn a disk or pop digitized information onto a space-saving portable hard-drive and donate that to a skeptical organization.

You might also donate to help the group host some research items online. It not only saves space but makes the material more accessible to researchers from other groups.

**Karen:** If you have sufficient space and resources, start your own skeptical library, large or small. Where feasible, make the library accessible to other skeptics — and to believers.

**Eugenie:** Amazon.com has a “wishlist” feature with which skeptical organizations with libraries can list desired books and other materials. Then individuals who wish to support a skeptics organization can know what to donate.

**D.J.:** If there can be a Christian Science Reading Room in every city, why not “Science Reading Rooms,” outreach centers supported by the donations of books by area skeptics? All Centers for Inquiry maintain libraries of various sizes with just such a mission. In addition, CFI has funded or provided libraries of skeptical books to campus and community groups around the world, including groups in Russia, China, Poland, and India.

The Center for Inquiry's headquarters in Amherst, NY, maintains the largest skeptical library of its kind in the world, over 80,000 volumes. And almost all of it was donated or bequeathed over the years, including the Martin Gardner Papers and Books collection, the Steve Allen Notebooks, the Gordon Stein Papers, the Hal Verb *Little Blue Book* Collection, in addition to signed works by Robert G. Ingersoll, various first editions of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, and some 19th Century Spiritualism items. It also houses a complete repository of titles published by Prometheus Books.

Why is all this important? The skeptical enterprise is an intellectual endeavor, and increasingly one of serious scholarship. As such, libraries ought to be the very hub of skeptical intellectual work.

**64. Donate skeptical books, DVDs, and magazine subscriptions to local and school libraries — especially material suitable for kids!**

**Pat:** Some donors have given us small grants for the specific purpose of sending *Skeptic* magazine subscriptions to libraries.

**D.J.:** You can buy gift subscriptions to the various skeptical magazines for libraries, but a note of caution: many libraries will not accept a one-year subscription, since they don't want small runs of a periodical in their stacks.

Consider funding a five- or ten-year run of a skeptical magazine for your local library, but meet with the librarian first to pave the way: let them know the subscription you're donating is something they can depend on to help build their holdings.

**Tim:** WorldCat ([worldcat.org](http://worldcat.org)) can give you a precise list of libraries in your area that have specific skeptical books. Look up your favorite skeptical books to find which ones are under-represented at libraries in your area. Donate those.

Some libraries dislike adding books one at a time, because they have many branches and cataloging a new title is costly. Instead they will take patron requests, and add books that have been requested repeatedly. The bottom line is you should check with your local librarian for the best way to contribute.

**Jeff:** Having worked at a library, I can say that DVDs are more likely to be accepted than books. Buy some videos from your favorite skeptics organization and donate them after you watch them, and you've done three good things with one purchase.

Don't forget school libraries. My kids' libraries have copies of *Flim Flam!* now.

**Daniel:** Keep fiction in mind. For example, the original *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?* series is an unadulterated skeptics show that is available in DVD box sets (as is the more recent, true-to-the-original *What's New Scooby Doo?* series).

## 65. Speak at libraries.

**Ben:** I do this a lot — I regularly give free talks for my local community centers and libraries.

In 2008 I did a series of free lectures on skeptical topics as a fundraiser for my local community library. It worked out great for everyone: the local skeptics group was plugged at the bottom of the promotional material for the event; the public got a chance to be exposed to skepticism; and the library made some money from donations. Sure, it took a few hours of preparation and a few weeknights, but it was a great way to spread skepticism, raise the profile of skeptics, and help the community all at once.

## 66. Volunteer to put together a display at your local library on great books of skepticism and science.

**Kylie:** Science Week, recent high-profile book releases, and notable anniversaries and holidays (Darwin Day, Einstein's birthday) would all be useful occasions to target.

**Jeff:** This works. Make sure it's interesting, and has as little text as possible. You're just trying to grab someone who's walking by.

## POLITICAL ACTION

### 67. Make friends with politicians.

**Daniel:** If you are not visible, you are not able to influence events. There is a reason why all those business leaders have all those lunches, why people visit the offices of their elected officials, why people attend city council meetings, and so on. If you want skepticism to have a voice in your community and in government, you will have to talk to people. The odds are good that you personally will be the only lobbyist for skepticism in your area — if you choose to do it. Make yourself, your organization, and your concerns known to politicians....

**Karen:** And other community leaders.

**Jeff:** And then become one.

**68. When legislation comes up that deals with *paranormal topics* (like the regulation of alternative medicine), write to your elected officials to tell them about the scientifically responsible position you support.**

**Kylie:** Point out that it is ethically important to protect the health of their constituents — and also in their own best interests to be on the side of the health of their voters!

**Daniel:** Unfortunately, politicians tend to go with the tide, and the public is broadly in favor of paranormal nonsense — especially in the alternative medicine arena. When I've written to my representatives about these issues, I've been very disappointed by the responses.

But that can't discourage us. Remember, silence is assent — and scam artists will always lobby loudly and effectively. It is important to speak up, even if the only thing we accomplish is to remind our elected officials that there are multiple positions to be juggled within their constituencies.

And, reminding them to do their due diligence on these issues is an ethical imperative. Chances are good that you personally possess specialized information your official doesn't have. Without your input, politicians are unlikely to even ask the right questions.

Be aware that a letter carries more weight than an email, and that a face-to-face meeting is much better than either. Many representatives have office hours set aside for constituents who wish to voice their concerns.

**69. When legislation comes up that deals with *genuine science topics* (like climate policy, or funding for basic research), write to your elected officials to tell them about the scientifically responsible position you support.**

**Daniel:** Again, bad science is loud. Industry, ideological think tanks, and paranormal scam artists will make sure their voices are heard. The question is, will you have

a voice of your own — or will you let pseudoscience be the only game in town?

**Kylie:** Consult a well-known scientific authority on the subject so you can get copies of papers or even a good sound bite to help back you up.

**70. When elected officials say something *scientifically wrongheaded* or supernatural, write to tell them how much you *disapprove*.**

**Brian:** Stretch your reach as much as possible. Whenever you write a politician, also copy it to local news publications as an open letter. Post it everywhere that's relevant on the Internet too.

**Kylie:** This also can be sent to their opposing member!

**Daniel:** Yes, that's what I do.

**71. When elected officials say something *scientifically literate* or responsible, write to tell them how much you *appreciate* it.**

**Daniel:** Like reporters, politicians expect to be constantly bitched at. No matter what they do, someone will be unhappy about it. Another complaint is just another page in the stack.

What they really want to know is, "Am I doing the right thing?" and (especially) "Does anybody *like* what I'm doing?" If your representative gets something right, don't miss the chance to tell them that!

**Kylie:** A change of government is always a great opportunity. Propose advisors, suggest projects they can support — and get to know their interests so you can tap into them when relevant claims arise.

**Pat:** A note of caution: when you are acting as a representative of a U.S. nonprofit group, remember: political activity is not allowed.

## 72. Support candidates for office that advocate science as part of their platform.

**Swoopy:** As I was reminded during Hal Bidlack's recent run for Congress (in his home state of Colorado), folks can volunteer to phone bank for candidates even if you are not in their home district. Cell phone plans with unlimited long distance have made this affordable for anyone. Contact the campaign headquarters of candidates you admire, and offer to help.

**Kylie:** Offer to hand out pamphlets, or to be a part of the polling day entourage. Remember, however, that you should not necessarily support a given candidate just because they are relatively pro-science — it doesn't trump everything else that you'd vote for!

**Daniel:** Again, this is for private citizens only. It is generally unlawful in the U.S. (and many countries) to promote any candidate while speaking as a representative of a nonprofit skeptical organization. When speaking on your own behalf, do as your conscience advises.

## 73. Strive to keep the skeptical movement free from political bias or affiliation.

**Daniel:** By all means, use every tool of skepticism in your political life. But, while sound science may inform our personal politics, please do remember that all political positions are ultimately subjective opinions (i.e., policies we personally support in order to achieve the ethical goals we personally consider important).

Because political opinions are subjective, skeptics can (and do) occupy all parts of the political spectrum. These political fault lines have the potential to fracture and marginalize the skeptical movement.

Whatever our personal politics, they are simultaneously *outside of science* and *opposed by many of our fellow skeptics*.

Furthermore, your personal views on politics — whatever they happen to be — are also *alienating to some portion of the public with whom we're attempting to communicate*.

But it gets worse. Even more more damaging: the minute we allow any shadow of political ideology to hang over skepticism or skeptical organizations, *our science becomes suspect*.

If we wish to be effective advocates for unbiased, evidence-based reasoning, we should strive to set aside our personal political ideas whenever we wear our "skeptic" hats.

**Jeff:** The JREF has been accused of having a "liberal bias" recently, simply because we had a few articles that seemed to be supportive of Obama. The truth is the JREF is apolitical, and we're actually *required* to be to maintain our nonprofit status. I don't even know what the other employees' politics are.

People choose sides in politics for many reasons, and *there is no skeptical party*. Stick to the facts, and try not to judge people based on labels. There are skeptics all across the political spectrum for a variety of reasons.

**Kylie:** I am reminded of a skeptic named John Lombard, who helped establish China's first formal skeptical organization (in cooperation with Chinese scientists and intellectuals in Beijing). If John had allowed political bias (against communism, against socialism, or what have you) to limit his work, he could not have been so effective in advancing global skepticism.

## CONSUMER ACTIVISM

### 74. Write to *retail stores who make unscientific claims or offer pseudoscientific products. Let them know what you found irresponsible, and how they could improve.*

**Daniel:** Be polite, and be sure to offer clear, concrete, *cheap* solutions if possible (such as moving pseudoscience books from the science section to the New Age section).

**Swoopy:** This has been proven to work. Case in point, a letter writing campaign to Walgreen's pharmacies, by members of the James Randi Educational Foundation, helped to reduce (or in some cases eliminate) the sale of the book *Natural Cures They Don't Want You To Know About* by Kevin Trudeau from their stores.

The rational argument was that a book of unsafe, untested "cures" (by an author that has been fined and sued by the FCC for dangerous quackery) should not be sold at the same place where people buy dispensed prescription drugs from real doctors. This resonated at the corporate level and resulted in meaningful change of policy, even though Trudeau's book was a bestseller.

**Kylie:** It's on tasks like these that we should be networking with consumer affairs groups, government watchdogs, and like-minded nonprofit organizations to combine energies. After all, the Australian government's *Little Black Book Of Scams* (free online as a 1.3 MB PDF<sup>1</sup>) has an entire section on psychics and fortunetellers.

Forward articles about these products to the stores, and point out that they regularly monitor recalls and product safety — it's not that dissimilar.

**D.J.:** Agreed: this marriage of skeptical activism and consumer advocacy is especially important in the area of complimentary and alternative medicine. The public welfare concerns raised by untested medical treatments should inspire the righteous indignation of all skeptical activists.

**Jeff:** Still, refrain from "reorganizing the shelves" by moving woo books out of the science section and into humor, for example. It's funny, but it just annoys the staff.

**D.J.:** Such vandalism not only annoys staff, but also perpetuates the view that skeptical people are nay saying, crotchety and unable to allow for opposing views.

**Tim:** If it is a particular local business and they are not receptive to changing their ways after you contact them, make it known via the web. Look up the business in Google Maps as if you were going to visit it, and then click the "write a review" link and document your experience. (On Yahoo Maps this link is called "rate it", other services also have similar features). Your comments could intercept people right before they are about to visit the business!

### 75. When *manufacturers make unscientific claims or offer pseudoscientific products, write to them too. Let them know what you found irresponsible, and how they could improve.*

**Kylie:** Many companies and publishing groups have Ethics and Mission statements you can refer to. This was the approach that Australian skeptic Loretta Marron<sup>2</sup> took with a magazine aimed at the elderly. The magazine claimed their highest priority was the well-being and safety of their readers. When Marron pointed out that the products they were advertising and the lectures they were promoting were in fact taking advantage of people, they pulled those ads.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/tag/TheLittleBlackBookOfScams08>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.healthinformation.com.au>



**76. Write to *media companies* who promote pseudoscientific programs or carry advertising for pseudoscientific products. Let them know what you found irresponsible, how they could improve — and what impact this will have on your viewing or reading habits.**

**Brian:** You'll often see advertisements in magazines or newspapers for pseudoscientific, or even fraudulent, products. These are always worth a letter to the editor, particularly in cases where the advertisement runs counter to the publication's mission (*Popular Science* being the best example).

**Jeff:** Be careful to figure out where the ad is coming from!

For example, if you're watching *MythBusters* and an ad for "Smiling Bob's Paranormal Emporium" comes on, it *could* be from Discovery. Or, it could be from the satellite company, the local cable network — or somewhere else. It's not easy to find out, but don't assume that Discovery approved the ad. If it's a local ad, it did *not* come from the national network, as a rule.

**77. Share critical information about companies who make unscientific claims or offer pseudoscientific products on your blog, on Facebook, and in conversation.**

**Brian:** Whenever appropriate, kill all these birds with the same stone. Write a letter to a TV network or magazine editor, and post that as an "open letter" on your blog or social networking profile page. Email it to any relevant email lists. Post it to forums. Send it to publications that compete with the one you addressed it to, and to any relevant local or national news sources. The sky's the limit.

**Tim:** Many different sites provide a way for users to submit reviews of products. Search engines and some Web 2.0 sites are starting to collect and aggregate these reviews centrally. So by writing a review that points out the unscientific claims made, you could reach a huge audience.

**Kylie:** Be aware that such comments can be traced back to you. Do not make false or questionable accusations.

**78. Work with — and learn from! — consumer watchdog and consumer advocate groups.**

**Jeff:** Consider expanding your view of what is "skeptical." *Consumer Reports* is, in my opinion, a skeptical magazine.

**Daniel:** Yes, that is a foundational role for organized skepticism: consumer protection in fringe science areas. Skeptics should consider other consumer protection efforts as projects closely parallel to our own work.

**Ben:** I loudly echo Jeff's comment: *Consumer Reports* is very much a skeptical magazine. I've often thought that CSI or JREF or the Skeptics Society should make an effort to team up with the Consumers Union (publishers of *Consumer Reports*).

**Kylie:** A consumer affairs TV show called *The Investigators* was a formative influence on my skeptical outlook. From the U.K.'s *Consumer Direct* to Australia's *Choice Magazine*, these groups are our best complement — and our competition! Learn how they get the job done on their sites, publications and outreach, as they are already ahead in many aspects.

**Karen:** These organizations are our natural allies. Reframe pseudoscientific and paranormal criticisms as consumer complaints, and see the sparks fly. Was it the lack of evidence for psychic abilities, or dubious business practices that saw the demise of the "Miss Cleo" psychic hotline empire?

## FILM & VIDEO

### 79. Start your own public access or YouTube-based TV series. Invite local scientists, educators and writers to discuss good skepticism.

**Brian:** Public access doesn't have much reach — not many people will watch your show — but it is a great resource for production. You'll walk out of there with a semi-professionally produced video, and now you can really distribute it. Put it on the Internet and tell everyone you know. If your video is any good, it will grow on its own from there.

**Jeff:** These days, I think YouTube is better. More audience, easier, etc.

**Randy:** With the advent of YouTube and new video technology, virtually everyone has the ability to shoot, edit and post their own short videos. It's a new language that the general public is learning not just to read (as they always have known), but now also to "write."

### 80. Film a skeptical movie. (Remember, YouTube and similar services provide venues for short, low budget efforts.)

**Brian:** I made a 40-minute video introduction to critical thinking called *Here Be Dragons*, and made it available for free at [HereBeDragonsMovie.com](http://HereBeDragonsMovie.com). A lot of teachers listen to my podcast *Skeptoid*, and they wanted something they could show in their classrooms. I was lucky to have enough listeners that I got a number of talented professionals to contribute their services to the movie: music, computer graphics, and additional photography.

If you decide to undertake such a project, I suggest spending most of your time soliciting and coordinating people to help. The best parts of my movie are the parts contributed by people who have more movie-making talent than me.

**Ben:** A skeptical movie sounds great, but realize that it's a hell of a lot of work to make something look good.

**Daniel:** Yes, even with modern desktop editing software, professional-quality video projects are a lot more work than most people suppose — a lot!

But venues like YouTube do make it much easier to tackle such projects. As a result, some wonderful new material has appeared, often from independent skeptics. Some, like "Captain Disillusion" (whose slickly produced YouTube shorts systematically expose other, hoaxed YouTube videos<sup>1</sup>), have a film background that gives them some technical skills and (much more importantly) a realistic approach to production. Learn from what they do. Elementary practical guidelines (use a simple backdrop, a small cast, and a short script) can make all the difference between a successful project and just more pie in the sky.

Full motion graphics is an area in which skepticism remains very primitive. (Heck, our visual presence is primitive overall, even for the major magazines.) But mark my words: skepticism won't come of age until it develops a capability for professional investigative journalism — and video will be an important part of that future.

### 81. Arrange small social screenings of skeptical movies. Consider documentaries such as those from the Skeptics Society's Caltech lecture series.<sup>2</sup>

**Daniel:** The basic "movie night" is an easy start for a small skeptical group trying to figure out activities. At my local university, the humanist club has regular video screenings with free pizza (paid out of fundraising). Have some fun, chit chat about some ideas — not a bad place to start.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/CaptainDisillusion>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.skeptic.com/category/AV>

## 82. Organize a larger film screening with panel discussion. Host it at your local campus, public library, community center, or at a local movie theatre.

**Randy:** We've conducted over 50 screenings of my movie *Flock of Dodos: the Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus*<sup>1</sup> around the country, with post-screening panel discussions.

Film is not a particularly good educational medium, but it can be a very powerful motivational medium — getting people very interested in a subject. With my movie the audience doesn't learn that much about the issue, but they do tend to get very interested in it and want to learn more.

Bringing out a panel of experts after the screening gives people a chance to have their questions answered directly. This can be a great way to provide, in public, a demonstration of critical thinking by experts as they analyze the issues of the movie.

**Kylie:** You could do something similar with fictional films. Take some classics like *Ghostbusters*, *Contact* or even *Signs* and do a before-and-after discussion about the facts and fantasy — this could be a really fun activity with a quiz about some elements with prizes!

**Jeff:** This is a great idea. Hand out a flyer of “questions” before the film, and then do a discussion piece afterwards. Offer snacks.

**Daniel:** As a Darwin Day celebration, my brother once organized a screening of the semi-historical classic *Inherit the Wind* in a large college lecture hall. The film was followed by discussion, cake, and other activities. It was a heap of fun, educational, and well attended.

**D.J.:** Caution: if you screen a movie without a license, you very likely will be violating copyright laws, which could bring serious negative consequences to a local skeptical organization. You can purchase single-use licenses through various companies.

The Center for Inquiry had to go through quite some rigmarole to arrange

it so that we can legally sponsor movie nights at the various centers throughout North America. Another option is to screen something that already permits such public use. The TED Talks,<sup>2</sup> for example, are distributed under a Creative Commons License. Other possibilities include movies like *Flock of Dodos* and *The God Who Wasn't There*, whose producers will personally grant permission to skeptical groups for screenings.

## 83. Organize a video contest.

**Randy:** Video contests allow the opportunity to actually lead the creative talents of the broad audience. You pick the topic; they will provide the programming.

**Kylie:** This is also something that young people can do. It taps into a popular medium that they're already familiar with.

**Randy:** The more narrow you make the topic, the fewer the submissions; but, on the other hand, the more alluring the prize (and cash usually works best), the larger the number of submissions.

There are many ways to run contests. I've run ones where the contestants are given six months to slowly develop their ideas and make a supposedly flawless product, and others where everyone comes together, gets 24 hours to go from concept to finished product. I hate to say it, but the difference in quality between the two formats isn't that large. Which is why these days I kind of like the 24-hour events better.

It's also a chance to involve interesting people as judges. Your local evolution professor might not have much time to follow your contest, but if you ask her to be a judge of the film, suddenly she'll find it a lot more interesting.

**Daniel:** My town has a community film society that does film challenges on a regular basis. If your town has something similar, talk to them about their experiences and about possibilities for working together to develop a contest.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.flockofdodos.com/>

<sup>2</sup> The lectures comprising the “Technology, Entertainment, Design” conferences: <http://www.ted.com/>

## 84. Organize a film festival.

**Randy:** If you go to [www.withoutabox.com](http://www.withoutabox.com) you'll see there are literally thousands of film festivals now in the U.S. — many addressing very specific topics. You can organize your own festival and run it one of two ways. Either you can have people submit films (like the contest above), or you can seek out a selection of existing films that you want to screen.

For example, the University of Virginia ran an excellent showcase at the Virginia Film Festival a couple of years ago titled, "God in the Cinema," in which they showed a dozen or so recent documentaries that examined various aspects of political activism by religious groups in the U.S. Pick a topic and you can do the same.

**Kylie:** I recall one great season at my college where a group of lecturers chose their favorite films, explained why and held a Q & A afterward. Why not turn it into a panel discussion on a pro-paranormal or science fiction film? Discuss the good and bad science in it and start a debate.

## ONLINE ACTIVISM

### 85. Start a skeptical podcast — or help an existing show!

**Daniel:** The Internet has placed some fabulous outreach tools in the hands of everyday skeptics, tools that not even the biggest national groups were dreaming of just five years ago.

**D.J.:** What has been said about the new opportunities of new digital media is true: the growth of skeptical podcasting demonstrates that there are not only new means to get the word out, but also new audiences to receive it. I predict only more and better shows as the technology advances.

**Daniel:** If you are thinking of launching a new show, do consider the possibility of market saturation. There are many high-quality skeptical podcasts today, and it does nothing to help the overall cause to simply poach audience from those shows.

This big picture was one of the reasons *Skeptic* joined forces with *Skepticity* as our "Official Podcast." Why compete when we can help like-minded projects?

On the other hand, there is always room for a unique voice or unique focal point: a focused look at your own country, region, or special area of expertise will always be a useful contribution — as will skeptical shows in any non-English languages in which skeptical programming happens to be harder to come by.

**Kylie:** I don't personally see saturation, but I do agree that there should be a range of topics and specialties: from parenting, to health, to gaming superstitions (like *Natural 20* podcast), to beauty myths (*Lipgloss and Laptops*).

**D.J.:** The glory of the new medium is that cream rises to the top, so to speak, and so I say the more the merrier. I do believe that the best and most talented skeptical spokespeople have not been discovered yet. Likewise, the skeptical community has not yet achieved the best application of digital outreach.

But here is some advice: don't assume that because it is easy to get a podcast on the net (it has become almost single-button easy these days) that it is easy to do a *good* podcast. The leading podcasts require a lot of time and a certain kind of perfectionism. Ginger Campbell, of the excellent *Brain Science* podcast, devotes anywhere from 20 – 40 hours a week to her various podcasting efforts, for instance.

And even if your podcast is done with a certain level of technical proficiency, are you qualified to speak to the public about skepticism? I don't think we should feel skittish about arguing that spokespersonship for any given cause requires a certain philosophical and knowledge proficiency. This is true

whether we're talking about traditional media appearances, public lectures, or skeptical podcasting.

**Jay:** As my fellow podcasters know, it is a time-consuming and thankless endeavor — that we love! If you are passionate enough to start a podcast, then I suggest you research podcasting to find out the details. You will need to not only come up with interesting content but to have a good understanding of podcast production including hardware, software and marketing. Like any other media, you will need something to make you unique. There is always room for great, creative work. I think there always will be.

- The existing blogger will probably be delighted to have your help providing content (so long as you're a decent writer and have something interesting to say).
- You're increasing the strength of an existing resource that already has mindshare, rather than increasing fragmentation.

**Karen:** Your blog doesn't have to be solely skeptical in content. Myths and misconceptions abound, whether you're into cooking (think dangerous diets), music (think urban legends about bands) or antiques (think fakes and forgeries). Critical thinking has applications for every topic.

**Kylie:** It has become a trend, recently, to have "blogging networks." Young Australian Skeptics<sup>1</sup> is one such group, which aims to gather and unite like-minded bloggers who each have their own individual sites. Such a practice allows autonomy and yet support for both the contributors and readers.

**Tim:** I'm a big proponent of specialization here. We have plenty of general-purpose skeptical blogs and sites already. We need more sites that drill down to specific topics and cover them in excruciating detail. You can then become the "go to" site for that topic. Your own career or training is a natural choice here, or simply latch on to some specific skeptical topic, then study it and make it your own.

The other nice thing is that certain skeptical topics are finite in extent. Once you've covered the topic fully, your site can continue to be a reference for other skeptics even if you aren't actively updating it. Free hosting services are ideal for this type of thing, for obvious reasons.

**Daniel:** My experience researching for *Junior Skeptic* is that a really serious, really focused look will usually uncover things which were previously either barely known or totally unknown in the literature — often, the essential, central facts of the case. That's true even for large, popular, long-covered topics, and of course niche

### 86. Start a skeptical blog focused on your special area of interest or expertise. Or, contribute to an existing blog.

**Daniel:** The blogosphere is a crowded place, but a new angle is always a valuable and welcome contribution. Recently, for example, I've been pleased to see new blogs focused on skepticism for parents and skepticism in nursing.

**Brian:** When I first added the forum area to the Skeptoid.com site, I realized that there was already a lot of fragmentation on the Internet for skeptical forums. I didn't want to increase that entropy, so instead of starting a new forum and making the fragmentation problem worse, I asked the James Randi Education Foundation if we could make the *Skeptoid* forum a section within their existing forums. They agreed, and that's where the *Skeptoid* forum lives today.

So if you're considering starting a new blog or forum, also consider becoming a contributor to an existing blog instead. The advantages of doing so are many:

- You'll start with an existing audience.
- Contributing the occasional article is much less of a commitment than taking on a whole new blog yourself.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youngausskeptics.com>

or regional topics tend to have even bigger research gaps.

This isn't surprising. On the one hand, proponents do crappy research. I mean *really* terrible — often failing for *decades* to lock down the most basic facts or origin stories for their own topic or claim. Skeptics, on the other hand, must be conversant in many dozens of widely divergent areas — from iridology to telekinesis to Bigfoot to “thoughtography” — and familiar with *hundreds* of specific proponents, arguments, and cases. With so few skeptics working on these topics, it's inevitable that important facts will remain hidden, waiting for *you* to truly shine the spotlight on them for the first time.

### 87. Support an existing skeptical podcast or blog with money, expert help, assistance with booking interview guests, or promotion.

**Daniel:** If national skeptical organizations are shoestring operations, independent online efforts are typically out-of-pocket labors of love. Most are not able to issue tax receipts, but would nonetheless appreciate any help you can offer.

**Jay:** Helping existing podcasts is a great idea. My podcast (*The Skeptics' Guide To The Universe*) has been fortunate to have several people donate their time and skills. We have people help us with website development and graphics, forum administration, live events, and marketing and sales. They have become a crucial part of our organization.

**Brian:** The best way someone can help out my podcast is to tell their friends about it, forward the online transcripts via email to friends and coworkers, and generally help to promote it while helping to spread good information. One person doing this is worth more to me at the end of the day than a single monetary donation; this is partially why I don't accept donations. I'd rather you help by doing something that costs you only two minutes of your time and is better for me in the long run.

**Tim:** Again, don't forget to look for Amazon Affiliate stores or other affiliate links on the site. It's a quite painless way to contribute, especially if you purchase things through that site anyway.

### 88. Review your favorite skeptical podcasts on iTunes.

**Brian:** I don't consider skeptical podcasts other than mine to be “competition” — I see them as teammates. So I'm always happy to give positive feedback wherever it's due.

Also, I'm always sure to recommend other positive reviews by marking them as “Helpful” and negative reviews as “Not helpful.” (I only do this when it's warranted, of course.)

**Kylie:** Even if you have a strong favorite, resist the temptation to slam the efforts of others. If we are indeed “on the same team,” act that way in your own public pronouncements.

**D.J.:** Such reviews are important: the more reviewed a show is on iTunes, the more likely it is that new listeners will hear it. If you like a show, be sure to help promote it. And if you are like me, you aren't a partisan for just one show or another; you are a partisan for the skeptical movement.

**Jay:** If you are going to leave feedback, try to be positive and constructive. I agree with Kylie that we need to act like we are all on the same team. We not only need your feedback to support and improve our shows, we need to show a positive face to the rest of the world. Those curious enough to read a podcast's feedback could easily be turned away from skepticism in general.

## 89. Link to the websites of skeptical organizations.

**Tim:** Linking is vital to a website's placement in Google and other search engines. Studies show that search engines are the starting point for much of the navigation on the net, and the source of a majority of any site's traffic. Thus good search engine placement is vital for our outreach efforts, because this is how non-skeptics will notice our content. Learn some basic search engine optimization techniques such as how to use rel="nofollow" and other specialized tags to control who you give your precious "Google juice" to.

**Daniel:** Do consider hosting nice banner links to your favorite skeptical groups on your own site. Webmasters at each skeptical organization will be happy to help you with graphics and urls.

**Karen:** Don't forget to support your fellow struggling independent bloggers, webmasters and webmistresses. Form networks with other bloggers, swap links, disseminate news, and participate in Webring, such as The Skeptic Ring,<sup>1</sup> and Circles (such as The Skeptic's Circle<sup>2</sup> and the Skeptics of Carlos Circle<sup>3</sup>).

## 90. Contribute to skeptical online forums (such as the JREF Forum<sup>4</sup> or the Skeptic Forum<sup>5</sup>).

**Kylie:** I would suggest these as jumping-off points only. Skeptical online forums are useful for tracking current concerns and news, but they are subject to the same hazards as other forums: cliques, flame wars, and general time wasting. Network beyond to people who are active in a real-world community.

**Jeff:** Online forums are the best way to meet like-minded people. They have plenty of drawbacks, but they are the breeding grounds for most of the new ideas in the skeptics movement today.

**Kylie:** I would also strongly suggest making proactive suggestions to improve the content of online forums. Adult-only content can be a real deterrent. If people are serious about connecting to minority groups, we must also feature appropriate material. If we want, for example, more female involvement in skepticism, we should not tolerate pornographic jokes on skeptical forums.

Set parameters for what is appropriate and allow people the option to take it elsewhere.

**Tim:** The JREF Forums played a vital role in the creation of my website Whatstheharm.net. I started a discussion on the idea and received a ton of fantastic input from the forum members. Even the logo for the site came from another forum member.

That said, forums can definitely become a time sink if you let them.

This can be managed. On JREF there are over 25 different sections, but I only ever visit five of these, mainly the ones that are on specific skeptical topics. That way I avoid getting dragged into time-consuming discussions of non-skeptical topics. Most forums also provide RSS feeds now, which allow you to easily skim new topics in your feed reader without having to actually visit the forum and get "sucked in" to the latest off-topic discussion.

<sup>1</sup> <http://l.webring.com/hub?ring=skeptic>

<sup>2</sup> <http://skepticscircle.blogspot.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://skepticsofcarlos.wordpress.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://forums.randi.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.skepticforum.com/>

## 91. Contribute (very politely!) to online paranormal forums.

**Daniel:** Skeptical activism is subheading within science communication and outreach. True communication requires two things: you have to talk to people who don't already agree with you; and, they have to listen to what you say.

Online discussion forums for paranormal topics are a good place to cut your teeth, and they enable direct dialogue. However, they can be very difficult places to make a positive impact, and there are many severe pitfalls for beginners.

**Swoopy:** Many skeptics are tempted into the forums of paranormal websites merely to argue with the “locals.” Often, that only creates more friction, and cements the opinion that skeptics are cynics in rational clothing.

**Daniel:** There's an old line that “a woman must be twice as good at a job to be considered half as qualified as a man.” That's roughly the situation for skeptics among paranormal proponents: they expect the worst from you, and even your best-intentioned comments will tend to confirm that expectation. You're the bad guy just by politely sharing your thoughts, an unwelcome presence just by showing up.

Also (and this can't be emphasized too much), there is every chance that the proponents, focused as they are on their particular area of interest, really do know the minutia of their area far better than you do. This makes it very easy to come across as both arrogant and uninformed.

To deal with this, you must have tremendous patience, courtesy, sensitivity — and the humility to listen carefully. Yes, you have things to learn from the people you're talking to!

**Swoopy:** Consider the benefits of being a humble observer in order to compile evidence, and save the debate for the appropriate time and place.

**Daniel:** Always, always be polite. No sarcasm. No slurs. No name-calling. (Words like “woo” are right out.)

Have thick skin. There are, let's face it, crazy people on the Internet. Some of them amuse themselves by baiting skeptics. Reply politely to their substantive points, and simply ignore their insults. This can be frustrating, but you can do it.

**Brian:** We have a skeptical email discussion list on the Skeptoid.com website called Skeptalk, and its greatest weakness is that it's often a bunch of choir members preaching to each other. When we do get unskeptical people on, they greatly contribute to the interest of value of the list. The reverse is also true: your participation in an unskeptical Internet forum will increase its value to the other members.

Although this should cut both ways — Skeptalk absolutely welcomes and encourages opposing viewpoints, and unskeptical forums should too — it often doesn't in practice. I got the name *Skeptoid* from an unskeptical forum that branded me with “Warning: skeptoid alert” the moment I posted to suggest an alternate explanation for the topic being discussed. (Then I got banned.) Well, at least I got one post in, and maybe it did someone some good. Hopefully some forums will welcome your participation, but even if others don't, your one post probably has some value.

**Swoopy:** Some paranormal forums actually encourage skeptics to participate in order to make their website more credible. As long as the forum moderators are willing to ensure that the resident skeptic will be afforded the same respect as the other posters, and the conversation remains civil, this is a win-win situation. The skeptic can monitor paranormal trends, relate verifiable evidence, and foster critical thinking among the forum members.

**Ben:** My own experience on the pro-paranormal panels has been rather dismal. I used to post fairly often on the Bigfoot / monster site Cryptomundo.com, but I finally gave up. Too much time wasted trying to correct the misinformation and misunderstandings. A few people wrote that they enjoyed my skeptical point of view, but I got tired of “debating” people who knew little or nothing about the topic, and hadn't bothered to read any of the skeptical research.



**Karen:** When you're ready, take it up a notch and contribute skeptical articles to *pro*-paranormal magazines and websites. I have written skeptical articles about ghosts, psychics, Electronic Voice Phenomena and other topics for sites such as Haunted America Tours. Ben Radford recently contributed to *Fortean Times*. Facts and common sense, well written and presented with humor, will be read, and remembered.

I also regularly do interviews with non-skeptics. This usually makes for spirited conversation! Don't pass up on interviews, discussions and debates with believers. These people are our target audience. Skeptics shouldn't always preach to the choir. You might not convince everyone, but you might affect *someone*.

## 92. Share skeptical news stories with your friends, and let them know when skeptically minded shows are going to air.

**Daniel:** Social networking sites have revolutionized the ease with which many people share skeptical news items and resources. For example, Facebook provides a "Share on Facebook"<sup>1</sup> button you can drag onto the bookmarks bar of your browser. With that, you can post items of interest to your personal profile with a single click. (These items then get fed out over your News Feed.)

**Swoopy:** There is also the opportunity to discuss the skeptical side of decidedly paranormal programs. For example, my sister really enjoys watching *The Ghost Hunters* on the Sci-Fi channel. While I don't want to diminish her enjoyment of the program as entertainment, I have pointed her to Alison Smith's SAPS (Skeptical Analysis of the Paranormal Society) website<sup>2</sup> so that she can take a critical look into some of the *Ghost Hunters'* claims for herself.

## 93. Join skeptical "Groups" on Facebook, and "Become Fans" of skeptical Facebook "Pages." Support skeptical presences at other social networking sites.

**Daniel:** Activity at skeptical Facebook Pages and Groups is a low-pressure way to increase the visibility of skepticism. Member numbers are a key factor in the credibility of Facebook Groups. Joining any such Group also places a link on your personal profile, and interactions (posting on the "wall" for a Group or Page, becoming a member, uploading a fan photo, and so on) may be fed out onto your News Feed (depending on your privacy settings) where they may interest your friends.

**Kylie:** Use these Pages and Groups as free networking opportunities — like Meetup.com, Facebook can open up a whole new range of local supporters who might not know they were looking for you.

## 94. Find and share resources through YouTube (and similar video hosting services).

**Kylie:** YouTube is also a great venue to seek out resources to point out to friends.

**Jeff:** You can be a YouTube aggregator. YouTube is huge now. Find the good stuff, and create a page or blog and point it out to the rest of us.

**Daniel:** Yes, a lot of wonderful old hard-to-find skeptical documents are now a click away on YouTube and Google Video. Check out gems like Uri Geller bombing on the Johnny Carson show, Michael Shermer's TV series *Exploring the Unknown*, Randi's "Carlos" hoax, or the famous Peter Popoff exposé.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.facebook.com/share\\_options.php](http://www.facebook.com/share_options.php)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.skepticalanalysis.com>

## 95. Contribute responsible book reviews on Amazon (and other book review sites) for both skeptical and paranormal books.

**Jay:** I often find that books I'm interested in don't have any reviews.

**Brian:** I give positive reviews for skeptical books where they're due. Fortunately there's plenty of skeptical material out there that's of high quality.

**Kylie:** We should write reasoned, researched, and polite critiques of the popular credulous and pseudoscientific texts. Responsible reviews could lead potential buyers to recognize an alternative interpretation to the back-cover blurb.

with reliable references. In addition, provide external links to relevant books, articles, and websites.

**Brian:** Yes, put links in Wikipedia articles to high quality skeptical sources that you know. For example, I see more and more that people have linked paranormal articles to the online transcript for one of my *Skeptoid* episodes.

**Daniel:** I don't think the importance of linking from Wikipedia to relevant skeptical sources can be overstated. For almost any paranormal topic, the Wikipedia entry is the number one Google hit, and therefore the number one source for curious readers. That makes Wikipedia the *single most important place to put skeptical links anywhere on the web*.

Amazingly, those citations can be placed *at any time, by any skeptic — for free*. That's a staggering opportunity, yet we've barely started to make use of it.

I hasten to underline the “relevant” part of “relevant skeptical sources.” Do not spam Wikipedia! Simply cite legitimate sources overlooked by previous Wiki contributors, and link to those sources appropriately, following Wikipedia's standard editing practices.

Tim Farley's article, “Why Skeptics Should Pay Close Attention to Wikipedia”<sup>1</sup> is a great practical introduction to this rich opportunity.

**Tim:** Another quick note about Wiki links. Linking from Wikipedia to skeptical websites is a good thing in terms of skeptical outreach. Definitely continue to do this where appropriate.

However, this does *not* help the Google rankings for skeptical sites at all. This is because Wikipedia applies the “nofollow” attribute to all outbound links to cut down on attempts to spam.

**Daniel:** Tackling Wikipedia is also something that could be easily coordinated as an organized project by any number of skeptics. Why not pick some terrible Wiki pages and make fixing them a project for your local group? Or, set it up as a collaborative project based at your favorite skeptics forum or social networking site?

## 96. Contribute responsible edits to Wikipedia.

**Daniel:** It's popular to complain about Wikipedia, but practically everyone uses it (at least as a first step). For many in the general public, Wikipedia will be the *only* source they consult on a given topic.

Unfortunately, the topics for skeptics are niche topics, and are thus less subject to Wikipedia's many-eyes error-correction process. Often, believers will write something lopsided and wrong, and that will stay up uncorrected — unless a skeptic happens to make a personal decision to fix it.

You can help students and the public by making responsible, careful edits to Wikipedia entries about science, skepticism, and the paranormal. It costs nothing to do, and it's profoundly useful. Best of all, any skeptic can do it, easily, at his or her own convenience.

Remember, though: Wikipedia has strict guidelines for contributors, which you must follow. Anything else is vandalism.

**Karen:** Wikipedia is the People's Encyclopedia and a high-ranking resource for most paranormal and pseudo-scientific topics. Do contribute, do follow the rules, and do support your annotations

<sup>1</sup> <http://skeptools.wordpress.com/2008/12/08/why-skeptics-pay-attention-wikipedia/>

**Kylie:** Many skeptics may not realize that a SkeptiWiki<sup>1</sup> has been in operation for several years now. If people are interested, there is already a keen and dedicated group of skeptics regularly refining topics — it can use some help!

**Daniel:** The bigger skeptics groups all host key resources online. Wikipedia is one of the best, most visible, and easiest ways to cross-index those otherwise independent resources in a way that is searchable by subject. Even if institutional rivalries exist, Wikipedia is a convenient neutral ground.

I've started to do this as a basic practice: when I add primary or key resources at Skeptic.com, I promptly cite them in the relevant Wikipedia articles.

**Kylie:** Let's stop being known on just our own sites and get skeptical organizations known in reference sites like Wikipedia, by becoming editors, writers and just plain tidying up the references and links so people can know "who to call." Remember to keep an eye on it though! Errors abound with every change.

**Daniel:** Yes, maintenance is crucial. Wikipedia articles can evolve on a day-to-day basis. You can't stop change from happening, but you can help prevent gross inaccuracies or vandalism from taking the articles in crazy directions.

**Kylie:** Show younger people how to do Wiki edits responsibly. I've done this as a lesson with Year 8 students, as an alternative to report writing, and found that the pride they had in mastering the page formatting and editing standards really rewarding. The interactive nature of images, videos, links to other sites and even the need to correctly reference, made for a great term of work.

### 97. On your blog or in Amazon "Listmania," create suggested reading lists of books about skepticism.

**Karen:** These might include books for beginners, kids, popular science, and specialty topics. Post these lists to your blog or website, or you can use these lists to create handouts for public events.

### 98. If you are a student, use your technological networking talents for skeptical activism — but get credit for it!

**Kylie:** Online activity has the reputation of detracting from schoolwork. If young people blog, they have to be realistic — not only about what time it takes from their studies, but also how they can make it count towards their grades or be recognized for what it's worth.

Rather than pouring effort into undirected work at less-coordinated "social" blogging networks with no mission statements, some students find ways to reap academic rewards for their work online. Doing this requires dialogue with teachers, as well as support and awareness from parents.

Students who are interested in this type of work should get in touch with science youth groups, education support, and monitored message boards so they are not only safe but also reaching an audience that needs to be reached. (Merely preaching to the choir or becoming involved in adults' flame wars can be quite demoralizing for a young person!)

<sup>1</sup> [http://skepticiwiki.org/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://skepticiwiki.org/index.php/Main_Page)

# PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

## 99. Wear your skepticism.

**Karen:** Wear a skeptical t-shirt, or read a skeptical magazine in a café, and you're bound to attract comments, questions, and displays of interest. Should you happen to engage in a conversation about a skeptical topic with friends, family or even strangers, swap email addresses. Follow-up with email links to relevant articles, definitions and explanations (e.g. Bob Carroll's Skepdic.com), and suggest books that offer a skeptical perspective.

**Kylie:** This can also extend to wearing shirts for photo opportunities! The homemade "Stop Sylvia Browne" shirt that I made the day before I headed to my first skeptics conference in Melbourne ended up being photographed and put on the front page of the Australian Skeptics site. At the time, the "Stop Sylvia Browne" site was still under development, but it helped raise some interest.

At Dragon\*Con, badges were all the rage and certainly not that expensive to create and distribute. And as I showed myself, creating an iron-on transfer image can help those at home produce the message themselves!

**Swoopy:** Don't be afraid to create your own apparel. Even though there are many groups and businesses that make fabulous skeptical wearables like Evolve Fish, if you don't find anything that appeals to you, make your own.

Websites like Cafe Press and Zazzle make it easy to create your own apparel with your own text and graphics. These companies are happy to create "one-off" pieces of wearable art. Most are quite reasonably priced, ship internationally, and have quick turn around.

## 100. Give your friends skeptical magazines, books and videos for their birthdays or other occasions.

**Daniel:** In my opinion, your relationships with your loved ones are *far* more important than scoring points about metaphysics. Be honest about your beliefs, but don't be pushy: give gifts that genuinely address the interests of your friends and relations, and share with an open heart: "I found this book really inspiring. I don't know if you'll agree with everything it says, but I think you might dig it because of your interest in X." And then, don't bug them to read it. Just plant the seed.

**Brian:** I like to practice this in an insidious kind of way. To hook a friend on a skeptical publication or website or whatever, I find some article that I know my friend already agrees with, and give them that. This avoids the stigma of approaching them with something that's confrontational right off the bat. I let them discover the rest for themselves. More than once, using this technique, I've uncovered a closet skeptic.

**Jeff:** Remember: friend first, skeptic second. People are more important than their beliefs. If you find things getting too heated, stop. It's not worth it.

**Ben:** I agree with Daniel, Brian, and Jeff... If the gift receiver isn't that into skepticism, try a good overall skeptical science book like *The Demon-Haunted World*.

**D.J.:** Years ago, friends of ours in Buffalo, a young couple, seemed undecided about evolution and the scientific outlook. And so, we conspired to "save them:" we gave them a set of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* on DVD one Christmas. This had the added benefit of giving a great reason for a series of movie nights with them.

**Tim:** Another good reason to do this is to sell more skeptical books, magazines and videos. Skeptical products have to live in the marketplace, and if they don't sell well, publishers will not want to create more of them.

### 101. Don't call people names.

**Daniel:** Seriously. Don't. Skeptics are often perceived as bullies and jerks. The minute you call someone a "woo woo" or "idiot" or "fool," *that perception of skeptics becomes correct*. Ad hominem are just as ugly and counterproductive coming from skeptics as from anyone else.

**Jeff:** Penn & Teller call people names to protect them from legal action, but I think it's best to stick with the simple facts. Bob Park says that ridicule is the best way to expose frauds and other liars, and it seems to work for him, but taking the high road is always safe.

**Kylie:** I'll never forget my horror at seeing someone at a Dragon\*Con 2008's SkepTrack conference throw an (empty) water bottle at a person who defended paranormal claims — actual physical violence. We cannot, cannot afford to have this stereotype perpetuated. As skeptical rock musician George Hrab said in response to that event, "Please be as level-headed as you can, and it's difficult sometimes, I know."

### 102. Practice "lifestyle evangelism."

**Daniel:** Skeptics have the reputation of being surly naysayers — partly because some skeptics are! The best way to combat that stereotype is to rise above it: be nice to people. Seriously. Be a good neighbor. Be helpful. Never be rude about your skepticism.

**Karen:** We've all heard the same arguments before: skeptics are cantankerous, closed-minded cynics. If you agree with this, speak for yourself.

**D.J.:** Never be rude about your skepticism, but never think that merely disagreeing equals rudeness. And the real way to practice lifestyle evangelism is to make sure your lifestyle allows you to be around people who disagree with you

about the fundamental questions. If you only ever socialize with fellow skeptics, you're going to be less effective at "sharing the gospel."

### 103. Have genuine conversations.

**Daniel:** We skeptics are in the communication business, and communication begins with respect and approachability. As Eugenie Scott told me, "Persuading people means treating them with respect — which is something we all ought to be doing anyway."

People believe weird stuff. That doesn't mean they're morons. Remember to genuinely talk to people — and that means genuinely listening. Seek common ground. Be sensitive to their hopes, dreams, and reasoning. Give up any sense of superiority you may be suffering under.

After all, many active skeptics started out as believers in the paranormal. (I certainly did.)

**D.J.:** Realize that a "genuine conversation" won't always change someone's mind. Often, the best way to follow up on a genuine conversation or disagreement is to let your friend continue to be wrong.

But where persuasion is an appropriate goal, conversation is always better than argument. When I was in college, I loved to go to an area in University City where the street preachers preached. I loved to engage them in argument, but it was mere sport. Had I intended to persuade them of the error of their ways, a much better setting would be over coffee sometime.

**Eugenie:** Sometimes skeptics just enjoy a good argument, and it's so much fun to flatten that UFO fan with your superior knowledge! But after you have assuaged your ego, what have you accomplished?

Figure out what your goal is. If it is to increase the number of people who think critically, who understand science, and who are (ideally) enthusiastic about it, then work towards that goal. Smugly

enjoying a “good fight” isn’t going to accomplish that goal, however pleasing it may be in the short haul.

Also, many of the interactions we have with people are going to be fleeting: maybe one or at the most two conversations. I call this “drive-by science.” Don’t think that you will convince someone in one pass that his or her beliefs about Bigfoot or some other paranormal enthusiasm are wrong: it isn’t going to happen. Be content with opening the door a bit to a broader understanding the next time the person thinks about the issue.

**Ben:** Always treat believers with the respect *you* expect. In my decade of paranormal investigation, I have never told anyone they were stupid or crazy because they believed in the paranormal. Instead of saying, “You’re wrong and here’s why,” try, “Well, what you think could be true, we don’t know everything. But is it possible that there’s another explanation? What about this...?”

**Karen:** A lesson I learned recently is to never “dumb it down.” I wrote an article for a paranormal website, and then rewrote it a year later for the Young Australian Skeptic’s site.<sup>1</sup> I realized that I’d “dumbed down” the article for my paranormalist readers, and needed to significantly intellectualize it for the young skeptics!

I didn’t like the disparity I’d created. It reminded me of the time some colleagues wanted me to simplify “linguistics” to “language.” I thought that this underestimated the intelligence of my students. Treating people as stupid can offend, or worse, can fail to educate.

By all means, write in an audience-appropriate manner, but don’t assume that people are unintelligent. Don’t treat ‘em dumb, if you don’t want ‘em dumb.

#### 104. Offer advice and assistance to people around you.

**Karen:** We periodically receive emails and calls from people who are frightened by seemingly inexplicable experiences in their home or workplace. If you can, offer to investigate, or posit explanations for any strange activity. This is a preferable alternative to ghost hunting groups who only offer confirmation bias that the “haunting” is real, and suggest these hauntings can be “solved” by enlisting the assistance of a psychic or religious figure.

**Daniel:** Sometimes people are genuinely relieved to hear a plausible explanation for weird stuff in their own lives. It’s always surprising to me to be seen as the good guy for a change, but it does happen. For example, several times friends, acquaintances, or even strangers have told me about their terrifying personal experiences with something that was *obviously* sleep paralysis.

Most people who experience sleep paralysis have never heard of it, and have no idea what happened to them. It can therefore be extremely frightening, erode quality of life, or even throw an experienter’s entire worldview into question. If a hostile ghost, demon, or alien attacks you in the “safety” of your own bed (which is how sleep paralysis feels to many people) that can obviously be a shattering, life-altering event.

In some such instances, revealing that a common, harmless phenomenon matching their experience is well known to science can bring swift, profound, and welcome relief to people you encounter in everyday life.

**Jeff:** I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating: organize your skeptic group to do something public and non-skeptical, such as cleaning a park, river or highway. Let people see your group as part of the community rather than outside it.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youngausskeptics.com/>

## 105. Remember, skepticism starts with you.

**D.J.:** For me, the phrase “skepticism starts with you” means applying the tools of skepticism first and foremost (and most often) to my own thinking. I think skepticism should be less of a weapon against others and more of a tool for self-improvement. With a background both in fundamentalist Christianity and occult practices at various times in my youth, I see skepticism to be best when it is self-applied.

**Karen:** As activists for skepticism, we are taking on the responsibility of educating others, and therefore need to continue to educate ourselves. We are always representatives for skepticism, and should always be ready to discuss a skeptical perspective, where appropriate, with our children, family, friends, colleagues and strangers. This isn't proselytizing; this is promoting science, education, logic, and healthy skepticism.

**Jeff:** The most important three words in skepticism are “I don't know.” If you're comfortable saying that, others will be too. Our job isn't to get any particular fact across — it's to encourage a thoughtful mindset.

**Swoopy:** Especially for those who have gained recognition or fame through media exposure, it's important to remember that you may be the only example of skepticism that many people come in contact with. This means that your general attitude and disposition are under the microscope of public scrutiny.

While we as a group may debate loudly amongst ourselves and engage in hypercritical discussion of topics we are passionate about, consider that the public at large may find this type of debate off-putting. Don't cement the curmudgeonly label that the skeptic movement is working hard to dispel. Especially for those in the public eye, it never hurts to be a little more general, more inclusive, and more polite.

This free project is hosted by the Skeptics Society. Find many more resources at

The screenshot shows the website interface for www.SKEPTIC.com. At the top, the word "SKEPTIC" is written in large, bold letters. Below it, a navigation menu includes links for "home", "about us", "lectures", "the magazine", "eSkeptic", "junior skeptic", "podcast", "reading room", "forum", and "shop skeptic". The main content area features a "CURRENT ISSUE OF SKEPTIC MAGAZINE" section with a cover image and a list of articles: "The Psychology of the Ponzi Scheme", "Psychic Secrets; Faith Healing; Klatu; JFK; The Great Self-Esteem & Positive Thinking Debate, How People Decide Who to Trust About Science Claims; The Garden of Eden; It's Origins & Meaning; The SkepDoc on: Gulf War Syndrome & What to Eat ...". There are also links to "BROWSE the contents >" and "SUBSCRIBE to the magazine >". Other sections include "UPCOMING GEOLOGY TOUR" with a photo of a group of people, "THIS WEEK'S eSKEPTIC" featuring a photo of three men and the title "Reasons to Believe" ... Or Not, and "FILM REVIEW" with a photo of a man in a hat. A search bar and a "GET OUR NEWSLETTER" form are also visible.

**www.SKEPTIC.com**

- ✿ SIGN UP for *eSkeptic*, our free weekly electronic companion to SKEPTIC magazine
- ✿ BROWSE the fascinating and provocative *eSkeptic* archives, sample SKEPTIC articles, and listen to Skepticity podcasts
- ✿ BE INFORMED about upcoming lectures, conferences and other events
- ✿ ORDER back issues, books, and DVDs, as well as recordings of our Distinguished Lecture Series at Caltech
- ✿ SUBSCRIBE to SKEPTIC magazine
- ✿ VIEW skeptical topic video clips

# APPENDIX: QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Also available online at [www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext](http://www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext)

## SUPPORT MAJOR SKEPTICAL ORGANIZATIONS

### 1. Donate money to skeptical organizations.

- Skeptical organizations have their eyes on many worthy projects they can't afford.
- Many skeptics groups are registered nonprofits and able to accept tax-deductible donations, including The Skeptics Society, the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), and the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI, formerly called the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims Of the Paranormal, or CSICOP).

### 2. Buy stuff from skeptical organizations.

- Most skeptics groups are supported by the sale of conferences, magazine subscriptions, books, lectures on DVD, and so on.
- Buying skeptical products helps sustain a market for these materials.

### 3. Write to encourage your favorite skeptics and skeptical organizations.

- A little encouragement goes a long way.
- Also support skeptics with feedback on blogs, and supportive calls to radio talk shows.

### 4. Offer to donate computer equipment, software, or other useful stuff to skeptical organizations.

- "In kind" donations of this sort are often tax deductible.
- Only donate used equipment if it is usable. Many organizations are burdened with obsolete equipment.

### 5. Offer general volunteer services to skeptical organizations.

- Have a realistic idea of the un-sexy tasks that might be useful (such as moving boxes or stuffing envelopes).
- Be focused. Have a clear idea of the commitment you can make. Keep it short at first and don't ever offer anything you can't stick to.

### 6. Offer *expert* knowledge or services to skeptical organizations.

- Volunteers with special skills (lawyers, artists, web designers, technicians, photographers and other professionals) are especially welcome.
- Don't exaggerate your abilities, take on a pro bono burden you can't really deliver, or lock yourself into something you'll wind up regretting.

### 7. Offer *unique* services — such as your personal mega-stardom.

- If you're a movie actor, prominent artist, major novelist, or rock star, nonprofit skeptical organizations would *love* to have your help.

### 8. Help write grant proposals for skeptics' organizations.

- Most science outreach efforts in our culture are supported by grants, but skeptics groups tend to be funded by private donation, direct sales, and out-of-pocket support from those doing the work.
- Grant writing is a highly specific expert skill-set. If you have that expertise, please do offer your expert services.



## LEARN & COMMUNICATE

### 9. Know your stuff! Follow the skeptical literature, and the paranormal literature.

- Skeptics should *know what believers believe*.
- Do your homework!

### 10. Sample broadly from the wider skeptics literature.

- Some people who identify as skeptics have never dipped deeply into the wider skeptical literature.
- Expose yourself to a wide variety of books, magazines, podcasts, forums, and blogs.
- Major skeptics magazines have placed many older articles online.

### 11. Learn what makes professional marketing and communication effective.

- Your message is worthless unless you can persuade people to listen to you.
- Proofread, spell-check, and take care to be courteous.
- Our production values and communication strategies still need to improve.
- If you're going to participate in media interviews, consider reading *A Scientist's Guide to Talking With the Media: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists*.

### 12. Develop skeptical lectures for specific audiences: women's groups, colleagues from your own industry, seniors associations, and so on.

- Tailor your presentation to your audience.
- You may have special knowledge of the needs of a particular group, perhaps because of your profession. Shine light on specialized paranormal mischief in that area.
- Take a Toastmasters course or attend a media training class. Learn the fine art of public speaking.
- Poorly prepared or delivered talks can turn people off of skepticism.

### 13. Learn from other activist organizations.

- If you have experience with other forms of activism, draw on what you've learned in those other areas. Learn from the most responsible and effective campaigns you see around you.
- Skeptics have to overcome a stigma for being cranky naysayers. We must keep to the high ground.
- If you form a skeptics group, *do* pick a memorable, short, simple name. *Don't* pick a clever acronym, or a name that must be explained to be appreciated.

### 14. Learn from other outreach efforts.

- Skeptics can learn from the hard-won experience of political and religious promoters throughout history.
- Stressing our enthusiasm for science and critical thinking is a far more positive message than bashing pseudoscience.
- Don't think that effective activism and outreach requires only common sense. Grassroots activists should not ignore the tried and true methods honed by professionals.

### 15. Communicate through your current channels.

- All professions feature pseudoscientific ideas particular to that field. Speak out within your own area of expertise.

### 16. Write for skeptical magazines (such as *Skeptic*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, and *The Skeptic*) print newsletters (such as CSI's *Skeptical Briefs*) and electronic newsletters (such as the Skeptics Society's *eSkeptic*).

- Start with short pieces close to your areas of expertise: small news items, book reviews, even letters to the editor. Stay focused.
- Study the submission guidelines!
- *Skeptic's* guidelines: [www.skeptic.com/the\\_magazine/contribute.html](http://www.skeptic.com/the_magazine/contribute.html)
- *Skeptical Inquirer's* guidelines: [www.csicop.org/si/guide-for-authors.html](http://www.csicop.org/si/guide-for-authors.html)

**17. Explore new frontiers for skepticism.**

- Avoid preaching to the choir. Publish skeptical articles where *believers* will encounter them.
- Consider publishing in “women’s” magazines and pro-paranormal magazines.
- The science fiction community and geek culture are fertile ground for skeptical outreach. The SkepTrack program at Dragon\*Con is now one of the largest skeptics conferences in the world.

**18. Learn what skeptics are doing overseas.**

- An extensive list of international skeptical organizations is maintained by CSI at [www.csicop.org/resources/](http://www.csicop.org/resources/)
- Skeptic.com also links to many international groups at [www.skeptic.com/about\\_us/related\\_organizations.html](http://www.skeptic.com/about_us/related_organizations.html)
- Especially noteworthy groups exist in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Italy, India, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and the U.K.
- Don’t assume your country’s problems are what other countries should focus upon.

**19. Remember that “skepticism” is different from “atheism.” Lots of active skeptics are religious.**

- Skepticism is an approach to *testable, physical* claims. Atheism is a conclusion regarding an *untestable metaphysical* claim.
- Many skeptics are religious. The modern skeptical movement was built partly by people of faith (including giants like Harry Houdini and Martin Gardner).
- You don’t have to be against god to be against *fraud*.

**20. Make allies. Be cooperative.**

- Skeptics, atheists, and humanists are infamous for splintering over doctrinal differences and interpersonal politics.
- We need *help*. Build bridges.
- Work with religious groups. (Our best allies for defending evolution are members of the mainstream clergy groups.)

**INVESTIGATE****21. Remember, the goal of skeptical investigation isn’t to cast rhetorical doubt on paranormal claims, but to discover what’s true.**

- Don’t assume that your skepticism alone qualifies you to be a paranormal investigator, any more than it qualifies you to be a crime scene investigator.
- Learn investigative methods, rules of evidence, and interview techniques.
- Don’t get ahead of the evidence. Definitely don’t plug in a standard general explanation as *the* answer for a specific case.
- Poorly done research by debunkers gives skepticism a bad name.

**22. When you receive a chain email, Google it. Then tell the sender what you discovered and gently encourage them to Google the next one for themselves.**

- These emails are usually well-known hoaxes (often *old* hoaxes) that can be solved in seconds with a Google search.
- Snopes is an especially good resource regarding Internet hoaxes.

**23. Dig into a local paranormal mystery.**

- Regional stories often escape critical investigation. With some effort and academic skills, you can personally contribute to the skeptical literature while also learning more about your own community.
- Never barge into a mystery with an insulting attitude, poor investigative skills, or an inadequate understanding of the facts.

#### 24. Test something. Construct a well-controlled experiment.

- A “well-controlled experiment” can be *very* difficult to do in practice. To construct a solid experiment, you must be familiar with scientific protocols, blinding, control groups, statistical analysis, etc.
- Professional scientists sometimes spend years trying to eliminate sources of error in their studies.
- A well-designed test should have unambiguous, self-evident results with no subjective judgments needed. It should have the fewest number of variables possible.
- Poorly constructed tests damage the skeptical enterprise.
- Consider studying Martin Gardner’s *How Not to Test a Psychic: Ten Years of Remarkable Experiments With Renowned Clairvoyant Pavel Stepanek*, Richard Wiseman and Robert Morris’s *Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants*, or Susan Blackmore’s *In Search of the Light*.

## LOCAL ORGANIZING (& FUN)

#### 25. Employ sound organizational practices.

- Structure your group for success. What is the group for? How will decisions be made? Who will do the work? How are conflicts to be resolved?

#### 26. Start a skeptics club at your high school or on your college campus (or join if one already exists).

- Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have made organizing easier.
- Clubs should have a clear mandate for either skepticism or atheism but not both. This helps avoid conflict and frustration.

#### 27. If your city or region has no local skeptics group, start one. This could be a serious activist organization, something as loose and fun as a local “Skeptics in the Pub” — or anything in between.

- It doesn’t take much to get started, just three or four people who really care about the subject matter. Even CSI and the Skeptics Society started like this.
- Skeptical groups provide community for like-minded doubters. Skeptics enjoy parties and social functions as much as anyone else!
- Variety of opinion is healthy for a skeptics group. Be welcoming and inclusive.

#### 28. If a local skeptics group already exists in your area, support it.

- Support your local grassroots group even if you’re also involved in larger regional or national skeptical activism.
- You can help by donating knowledge, attending functions, offering to present talks, and by subscribing to and contributing to their magazines or newsletters.

#### 29. Participate in (or organize) a “Skepticamp” conference.

- “Skepticamps” are self-organized, small-to-medium-scale skeptics conferences at which the audience members are also the speakers.
- To learn more about Skepticamp, check out pioneer Reed Esau’s essay “Raising Our Game: The Rationale to Embrace Skepticamp.”
- Read the essay in text format at (PDF) at <http://skeptic.com/downloads/raising-our-game-oct-2008.pdf>
- Listen to the essay in audio format on the *Skepticality* podcast: [http://media.libsyn.com/media/skepticality/090\\_skepticality.mp3](http://media.libsyn.com/media/skepticality/090_skepticality.mp3)
- Visit <http://skepticamp.org>

**30. Start a skeptical *book club* at your local bookstore, community center, or college.**

- Most large brick and mortar book chains like Borders, Barnes & Noble, or Chapters host local book clubs, and will advertise the group in their monthly newsletter. The store might even feature or display your book club selection.
- Be inclusive of people of all positions and opinions!

**31. Celebrate the birthday of your favorite scientist — or some other scientific landmark — in a fun way, and invite lots of people.**

- A party is a great way to communicate that science is uplifting and important — and worth celebrating!

**32. Buy a telescope and host a star party for students and adults to get them interested in science. Or, build a social outing around a science theme, such as a nature walk.**

- Share the experience of awe. It's one thing to see high-res photos of other worlds, and viscerally a whole different experience to see them with your own eyes!

## YOUR COMMUNITY

**33. Help organize community events that support science (perhaps centered around the popular topics of astronomy, zoology or health).**

- Science centers and science museums often have programming that could be made more skeptical through the involvement of local skeptical activists.

**34. Get a booth at community fairs and events and fill it with information about being a skeptic.**

- This can be a great organization builder — and fun for members.
- Look at the booths and materials other groups use, and learn from those.
- Remember to make it *fun*! Keep text to a minimum. Have stuff like Bigfoot tracks to handle and get the conversation started. Have flyers for local groups.

**35. Help distribute flyers, put up posters, or notify the press when skeptical or science speakers are giving local talks.**

- Get the word out any way you can: email, flyers, posters, small ads. Don't be shy!

**36. Arrange field trips for grown ups to science museums.**

- Most people are willing to pay a little something for the trip and lectures so these are also good fundraisers.
- You could also create audio tours of these places.

**37. Volunteer at your local science museum.**

- It's easy and rewarding — and you get a discount at the gift shop!
- Skeptics are in the science communication business — and science museums are ground zero for science outreach. Learn how they do it!

**38. Offer to teach a class on skepticism and science at an adult education center.**

- “Open learning” or “annex” groups sometimes teach some very dubious or dangerous alternative practices. Having a class that tackles these could be useful.

**39. Put together a handout on local “haunted history” legends and their likely explanations for your town’s historical society, or develop a skeptical “ghost” tour.**

- Historical groups are interested in folklore, but they deal in fact and are sensitive to our aims and objectives. Work with them.

**40. Donate recent back issues of skeptical magazines to waiting rooms at doctors’ and dentists’ offices or local hospitals.**

- Challenge alternative medicine: make reflection start in the waiting room!

**41. Invite health care professionals (and other experts) to speak to senior centers about medical quackery (and other rip-offs).**

- Seniors are often the targets for scams: healing schemes, real estate rip-offs, psychic cons — even just predatory antiques dealers. Any suitable expert on any relevant topic might make a valuable speaker.

**42. Prepare accurate, thoroughly cited fact sheets on health fraud and quackery. If you know a doctor, solicit their editorial assistance. Give the sheets to seniors' centers, pharmacies, doctors' offices, hospitals and church groups to distribute.**

- Be sure to include additional book and Internet resources as well as (referenced) facts.
- Don't be afraid to contact consumer rights groups and watchdog sites like Quackwatch.org for additional resources.

## INTERACT WITH MEDIA

**43. If a newspaper, radio show, or TV program makes a *serious error* or badly distorts the public understanding of science, write a concise, formal letter to the editor or producer.**

- Reporters and editors work hard to ensure accuracy.
- If you write a letter to the editor, assume the reporter and editors acted in good faith — and then *courteously* tell them how their conclusions were mistaken.

**44. If news media make a moderate error of fact or interpretation, write a short *friendly* letter *directly to the actual reporter*.**

- Help the reporter get it right next time. Be on their side!
- Building a friendly relationship with the journalist may also help when it comes time to break a story or promote an event.

**45. If you see media get it right, send a letter of *appreciation* to the reporter — *and tell their boss how much you loved it, too*.**

- One letter of support for good reporting is worth ten complaints.

**46. Organize a skeptical letter-writer's club at your favorite online forum, aimed at polishing draft letters to the editor on pseudoscientific topics.**

- Highlight current media stories each week and create “form letter” templates people can build on.

**47. Put together fax numbers and email addresses of local news reporters and radio personalities. Send them relevant, topical information they can use (such as a well-referenced fact sheet when a movie relating to science or the paranormal is about to be released).**

- Do *not* spam reporters. *Do* share essential background information on topics in play in the current (or upcoming) news cycle.
- At minimum, this will tell reporters that there is “another side of the story.”

**48. Write to section editors and individual reporters to make story suggestions.**

- Share fresh suggestions with topical or local hooks, and in which you have no commercial stake.
- Cultivate friendships with reporters.

**49. Submit book reviews to local papers and newsletters on important skeptical books.**

- See if you can apply the content to something local for maximum impact.
- This is particularly useful if the author's book tour is heading your way.

**50. With the cooperation of your local university science departments, create a science telephone line for reporters and media researchers to call with questions.**

- Reporters need easy access to reliable, quotable experts on both the findings of real science and the truth behind pseudoscientific claims.

**51. Start an “Ask a Skeptic” column in your local paper or newsletter.**

- This is an easy and fun opportunity to reach a lot of people in your community.
- Be prepared to be flexible. Expect edits!
- Consider contributing to school newspapers, campus magazines, and street press publications.

## SCHOOLS

**52. Go to school board meetings. Learn what issues impact your local schools, and respectfully speak on behalf of science if the opportunity presents itself.**

- This is crucial front-line skepticism that every school district needs.

**53. Speak to the members of your Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) about science and critical thinking.**

- Expect pushback on controversial ideas, but, don't shy away from it. What matters is the kids' best interest.

**54. Volunteer as a guest speaker for classes and school assemblies.**

- PTA boards are often in charge of finding presenters for school assemblies.
- Make contact at the beginning of the year while there's still budget and time to get on the schedule.
- Recommend speakers and relevant shows for your local schools.

**55. Provide tutoring to students (of all ages) in the sciences, basic literacy, or English as a Second Language (ESL).**

- Literacy and education are fundamental to skepticism.
- Poor language comprehension is a serious obstacle to learning about science.

**56. If you're a university or college professor, teach critical thinking classes — or work skepticism into your existing classes.**

- Skepticism is relevant to scholarship of all kinds.
- If critical thinking classes already exist at your local college, contact the professors and ask them how you can help.

**57. If you're qualified, write textbooks or develop curricula that include skepticism, critical thinking, and sound science (particularly evolution).**

- Textbooks and curricula are written and reviewed by people — and you may be able to influence that process for the better.

**58. Get some friends to contribute and create a skeptical scholarship award for local high school students.**

- Set up a new local award yourself — or contact a regional or national skeptics group and fund a scholarship through them.

**59. Sponsor a science writing contest for your local schools.**

- Involve local media (to promote and possibly fund the contest).
- It takes a lot to conceive, organize, advertise, and judge a contest.
- Contests should have an enticing prize (some fame plus some cash) to ensure a reasonable response rate.
- Read a detailed postmortem of an Australian skeptics writing contest in a 2006 issue of *The Skeptic*, available for free online.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.skeptics.com.au/journal/2006/3.pdf>

**60. Contribute prizes to local school science fairs. Or, if you are a scientist, volunteer your services as a judge.**

- This presents skeptics as positive contributors to educational ventures.

**61. Encourage more scientists to show up at career day.**

- “Science” can be food science, mining, astronomy, forestry, local museums, genetics, forensic science....

**62. Remember: skepticism isn’t only for scientists!**

- Skepticism is relevant to education. Period. Encourage your children, students and colleagues to think critically about every topic, from economics to history.

## LIBRARIES

**63. Donate materials to the research libraries of skeptical organizations — especially hard-to-find historical material.**

- The *Junior Skeptic* studio, the Skeptics Society, the JREF, and CSI all have research libraries (as do some regional groups and podcasts).
- Most accept donations of science and paranormal books, videos, periodicals, and ephemera.
- Contact the organizations or speak to their librarians about their needs.

**64. Donate skeptical books, DVDs, and magazine subscriptions to local and school libraries — especially material suitable for kids!**

- Some libraries dislike adding books one at a time. Check with your local librarian for the best way to contribute.
- Consider funding a five- or ten-year run of a skeptical magazine.
- WorldCat (worldcat.org) can give you a precise list of libraries in your area that have specific skeptical books.
- DVDs are more likely to be accepted than books.

**65. Speak at libraries.**

- This is a great way to spread skepticism, raise the profile of skeptics, and help the community all at once.

**66. Volunteer to put together a display at your local library on great books of skepticism and science.**

- Science Week, recent high-profile book releases, and notable anniversaries and holidays (Darwin Day, Einstein’s birthday) would be useful occasions to target.

## POLITICAL ACTION

**67. Make friends with politicians.**

- If you are not visible, you cannot influence events. Make yourself, your organization, and your concerns known to politicians and other community leaders.

**68. When legislation comes up that deals with *paranormal topics* (like the regulation of alternative medicine practitioners), write to your elected officials to tell them about the scientifically responsible position you support.**

- Silence is assent — and scam artists lobby loudly and effectively.
- Remind elected officials that there are multiple positions to be juggled within their constituencies.
- A letter carries more weight than an email.

**69. When legislation comes up that deals with *genuine science topics* (like climate policy, or funding for basic research), write letters to your elected officials to tell them about the scientifically responsible position you support.**

- Will you have a voice of your own — or will you let pseudoscience be the only game in town?

**70. When elected officials say something scientifically wrongheaded or supernatural, write to tell them how much you *disapprove*.**

- Whenever you write to a politician, cc it to their opposing member.

**71. When elected officials say something *scientifically literate or responsible*, write to tell them how much you appreciate it.**

- Politicians *want* to know when people approve of their actions. If your representative gets something right, tell them that!
- U.S. nonprofit groups are barred from political activity.

**72. Support candidates for office that advocate science as part of their platform.**

- This advice is for *individual private citizens only*. It is unlawful in the U.S. (and many countries) to promote any candidate while speaking as a representative of a nonprofit skeptical organization.
- When speaking on your own behalf, do as your conscience advises.

**73. Strive to keep the skeptical movement free from political bias or affiliation.**

- While sound science may inform our personal politics, political opinions are subjective.
- Skeptics occupy all parts of the political spectrum.
- These political fault lines have the potential to fracture and marginalize the skeptical movement.
- Any shadow of political ideology renders our science suspect.

## CONSUMER ACTIVISM

**74. Write to *retail stores* who make unscientific claims or offer pseudoscientific products. Let them know what you found irresponsible, and how they could improve.**

- Be polite. Offer clear, concrete, *cheap* solutions (such as moving pseudoscience books from the science section to the New Age section).
- Network with consumer groups, government watchdogs, and like-minded nonprofit organizations.

**75. When *manufacturers* make unscientific claims or offer pseudoscientific products, write to them too. Let them know what you found irresponsible, and how they could improve.**

- Many companies and publishing groups have Ethics and Mission statements you can refer to in making your case.

**76. Write to *media companies* who promote pseudoscientific programs or carry advertising for pseudoscientific products. Let them know what you found irresponsible, how they could improve — and what impact this will have on your viewing or reading habits.**

- Advertisements for pseudoscientific or fraudulent products are worth a letter to the editor — particularly in cases where the advertisement runs counter to the publication's mission.
- Be aware that TV ads may be inserted by the national network, the satellite company, or the local cable network.

**77. Share critical information about companies who make unscientific claims or offer pseudoscientific products on your blog, on Facebook, and in conversation.**

- Many websites provide means for users to submit product reviews.
- Do not make false, questionable, or speculative accusations.

**78. Work with — and learn from! — consumer watchdog and consumer advocate groups.**

- Consumer protection in fringe science areas is a foundational role for organized skepticism.
- Skeptics should consider other consumer protection efforts as projects closely parallel to our own work.



## FILM & VIDEO

### 79. Start your own public access or YouTube-based TV series. Invite local scientists, educators and writers to discuss good skepticism.

- Public access is a great resource for production. You'll walk out with a semi-professionally produced video that you can publish online.
- YouTube and new video technology allow virtually everyone to shoot, edit and post their own short videos.

### 80. Film a skeptical movie. (Remember, YouTube provides a venue for short, low budget efforts.)

- Be aware that it's a lot of work to make even a short movie look good.
- Some skeptics are creating great content for YouTube.
- Full motion graphics is still an area in which skepticism remains primitive.

### 81. Arrange small social screenings of skeptical movies. Consider documentaries such as those from the Skeptics Society's Caltech lecture series.

- The basic "movie night" is an easy start for a small skeptical group.

### 82. Organize a larger film screening with panel discussion. Host it at your local campus, public library, community center, or at a local movie theatre.

- Follow a screening with expert panel discussion and questions.
- Do not screen a movie without a license. Purchase single-use licenses through various companies, or show films distributed under a Creative Commons License.

### 83. Organize a video contest.

- Video contests harness the creative talents of the broad audience.
- Video is especially suitable for young people.
- Talk to your community film society about developing a contest together.

### 84. Organize a film festival.

- There are thousands of film festivals in the U.S. — many addressing very specific topics.
- Organize your own festival. Either have people submit films, or seek out a selection of existing films you want to screen.

## ONLINE ACTIVISM

### 85. Start a skeptical podcast — or help an existing show!

- Skeptical podcasting gets the word out in new ways, and also creates new audiences.
- The leading podcasts require a lot of time and technical proficiency — as well as skeptical expertise.

### 86. Start a skeptical blog focused on your special area of interest or expertise. Or, contribute to an existing blog.

- It's valuable to tackle specialized topics.
- Consider becoming a contributor to an existing blog, which comes with more audience and less commitment.

### 87. Support an existing skeptical podcast or blog with money, expert help, assistance with booking interview guests, or promotion.

- Contribute skills, links — or just get the word out about you favorite show or blog!

### 88. Review your favorite skeptical podcasts on iTunes.

- The more reviewed a show is on iTunes, the more likely it is that new listeners will hear it.
- Be positive and constructive.
- Support the skeptical movement, not one show over another.

### 89. Link to the websites of skeptical organizations.

- Linking is vital to a website's placement in Google and other search engines.

**90. Contribute to skeptical online forums (such as the JREF Forum or the *Skeptic* Forum).**

- Online forums have drawbacks, but are a great way to meet like-minded people and develop ideas.
- Make suggestions to improve the content and policies of online forums.

**91. Contribute (very politely!) to online paranormal forums.**

- Skeptics shouldn't just preach to the choir.
- To have any positive impact at a pro-paranormal site, we must have tremendous patience, courtesy, sensitivity — and the humility to *listen carefully*.
- You might not convince everyone, but you might plant a seed.

**92. Share skeptical news stories with your friends, and let them know when skeptically minded shows are going to air.**

- Social networking sites like Facebook make it easy to share skeptical news items and resources.

**93. Join skeptical “Groups” on Facebook, and “Become Fans” of skeptical Facebook “Pages.” Support skeptical presences at other social networking sites.**

- Activity at skeptical Facebook Pages and Groups is a low-pressure way to increase the visibility of skepticism.

**94. Find and share resources through YouTube (and similar video hosting services).**

- Be a YouTube aggregator. Find the good stuff, and create a page or blog and point it out to the rest of us.
- Old hard-to-find skeptical documents are now a click away on YouTube and Google Video.

**95. Contribute responsible book reviews on Amazon, for both skeptical and paranormal books.**

- Write reasoned, researched, and polite critiques.

**96. Contribute responsible edits to Wikipedia.**

- For many in the general public, Wikipedia will be the *only* source they consult.
- Help students and the public by making responsible, careful edits to Wikipedia entries about science, skepticism, and the paranormal.
- Wikipedia has strict guidelines for contributors, which you must follow.
- For almost any paranormal topic, the Wikipedia entry is the number one Google hit. Amazingly, skeptical links and citations can be placed on that top page any time, by any skeptic — for free!
- Tim Farley's article, “Why Skeptics Should Pay Close Attention to Wikipedia” is a great practical introduction to this rich opportunity: <http://skeptools.wordpress.com/2008/12/08/why-skeptics-pay-attention-wikipedia/>

**97. On your blog or in Amazon “Listmania,” create suggested reading lists of books about skepticism.**

- These might include books for beginners or kids, popular science material, and specialty topics.

**98. If you are a student, use your technological networking talents for skeptical activism — but get credit for it!**

- Some students find ways to reap academic rewards for their online efforts.
- This requires dialogue with teachers and parents.

## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

**99. Wear your skepticism.**

- Skeptical clothing attracts questions and conversation.
- Don't be afraid to create your own apparel. Websites like Cafe Press and Zazzle make it easy to create unique one-off items with your own text and graphics.

**100. Give your friends skeptical magazines, books and videos for their birthdays or other occasions.**

- Don't be pushy. Give gifts that genuinely address the interests of your friends and relations.

**101. Don't call people names.**

- Ad hominem are just as ugly and counter-productive coming from skeptics as from anyone else.

**102. Practice "lifestyle evangelism."**

- Be nice to people. Be helpful. Never be rude about your skepticism.
- Make sure your lifestyle allows you to be around people who disagree with you about the fundamental questions.

**103. Have genuine conversations.**

- Genuinely *talk* to people — and that means genuinely *listening*. Seek common ground. Give up any sense of superiority.
- The goal is to increase the number of people who think critically and understand science. Do not be tempted to satisfy your ego with a "good fight."

**104. Offer advice and assistance to people around you.**

- Sometimes people are genuinely relieved to hear a plausible explanation for eerie experiences in their own lives.

**105. Remember, skepticism starts with you.**

- Apply the tools of skepticism first and foremost (and most often) to your own thinking.
- You may be the only skeptic that many people come in contact with. Your general attitude and disposition are under the microscope of public scrutiny.
- It never hurts to be a little more general, more inclusive, and more polite.

**MORE ONLINE**

This Quick Reference Guide version of the 105 suggestions for skeptical activism is also available in html format at [www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext](http://www.skeptic.com/article/WhatDoIDoNext)

Want to participate in the conversation about these ideas? Discuss, debate, and add to the list at the Skeptic Forum [www.skepticforum.com/activism](http://www.skepticforum.com/activism)

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