

Final Paper: *Modern Truth Detective*



Your job on this paper is to become a modern truth-detective and thoroughly analyze an extraordinary claim you are skeptical about in contemporary society. The ultimate goal is to determine whether you think there is any truth behind the claim, to analyze the persuasive techniques which are used to convince the public of its validity and to give advice to the reader about how to avoid being duped. Imagine that your final paper is the kind of thing that might be published in *Skeptic Magazine* or would be aired on *Penn & Teller's Bullshit!* or *Mythbusters*.

Be creative and find something fun. I encourage you to directly encounter the extraordinary claim in person if possible. Attend a free workshop. Pretend you're a customer. Act like you're interested in joining a group.

Due Date: Tuesday, December 14, 10AM – *NO LATE PAPERS*

Caution: While being a truth-detective can be fun and empowering, it also can be dangerous. *Do not spend any money for this project.* Be savvy about giving any personal information. If you're going to e-mail people, create a hotmail or yahoo account for free so you won't get spam for the rest of your life. Most importantly, if you're going to do "undercover" work, *do not go alone!* Remember you are encountering people whose job is to take advantage of your psychology and emotions. They're professionals. Be safe and wary.

Examples: Start at skeptdic.com or quackwatch.org or snopes.com if you're looking for ideas.

- Get rich quick seminars or courses: real estate investment, stock market tips, etc.
- Infomercials selling products on TV or elsewhere
- Online or e-mail scams: phishing, Nigerian con, etc.
- Dianetics seminars or anything similar from an organization/group who wants to get you to join
- Multi-level marketing: Amway, Value Star, Cutco, etc.
- Psychic phenomenon: tarot card readers, people who speak to the dead, intentions & water crystals etc.
- Conspiracy Theories: Holocaust deniers, man-on the moon, 9-11, Illuminati, Da Vinci Code spinoffs, white helicopters etc
- Pushy Sales techniques at used car lots or for time shares
- Alternative Medicine: aura therapy, chiropractors, acupuncture, ayurvedic medicine etc
- Diet theories: Macrobiotic diets, "living foods" diets etc.
- Free I-Pod or other giveaways, lotteries or sweepstakes
- Causality Theories: immunizations cause autism, colonics make your healthier,
- Supernatural theories: ghost hunters, feng shui, mediums

Paper Content

All these topics need to be covered in your paper. I suggest you consider this a kind of outline for the organization of your paper.

1. **What exactly is this claim trying to get you to buy, believe, join or do?** Be specific.
2. **Background/History of the claim:** Explain the historical and social context of this claim. Is this part of a larger category or “trend”? How long has it been around? Have there been any notorious lawsuits or controversies about this issue?
3. **Why were you initially skeptical about this claim?**
4. **Describe/Analyze your experiences encountering the claim.** How did you first discover this claim? As you infiltrated their “argument” what persuasive (and possibly even manipulative) techniques and spin were used to seduce you? Analyze their methods thoroughly along with your own (and other participants’) reactions.
5. **What reasons are given to get you to believe their claim?** First, focus on the explicit arguments they presented i.e. *you’ll get thinner, you’ll discover how to get rich, our patient’s backs stopped hurting, we conducted a rigorous scientific experiment that showed happy crystals were formed* etc. Then, look at more implicit arguments being used on you: *social pressure, if you buy this you’ll get lots of good looking women surrounding you, appeals to vanity or greed, appeals to authority* etc.
6. **ANALYZE their arguments & evidence thoroughly.** *The questions below are just examples of the kinds of things to answer when conducting your analysis. They might not all apply to the kind of claim you chose.*
 - a. Why don’t you think their evidence is good enough? The Baloney Detection Kit might be helpful as well as the Lessons and Guide to Testing Evidence found in *Unspun*.
 - b. Were there any common fallacies or spin techniques present in their “evidence”?
 - c. What kinds of thinking errors were they encouraging you to make?
 - d. What other possible explanations are there for the results they present?
 - e. How are they manipulating people’s emotions or psychological needs with their argument?
 - f. What elements of deception (if any) did you detect?
7. **What do bona fide experts or public skeptics have to say about the “evidence”?** This is important! Do some research and don’t forget to check-in with LMC experts.
8. **What harm (if any) could happen to someone who believes the claim? What recommendations might you make for friends/family who encounter this kind of claim?**

Project Parameters: You may work on this individually, or in a group of up to three people. However, if you work as a group you **MUST** include at least one *personal encounter* as part of your project. Groups also must do a 15-20 minute presentation to which every member contributes approximately equally. In addition, while the group can turn in ONE paper as its final product, in section 4 there must be both individual descriptions of each member's impressions and then comparative analyses of these perceptions.

Individual Project: Final Outcome: 7-10 page paper.

Group Project: 10-13 page paper, 15-20 minute class presentation.

Paper Guidelines

Your paper should be TYPED, either 1 1/2 or double spaced with reasonably sized margins and font size. This is a transferable Honors class, thus I expect your work to be college level, without typos, spelling errors or grammatical mistakes. Use the MLA or APA format to cite your resources.

This project is our Final Exam and it is worth 20% of your class grade.

Three possible topic choices must be given to Jennifer on TUESDAY, December 30.