

# Urban Legends

## Legends spread from person to person

Urban legends are a type of [folklore](#), defined as the handed-down beliefs, stories, songs, and customs of ordinary people ("the folk"). One way to differentiate urban legends from other [narrative](#) forms (for example, popular fiction, TV dramas, and even news stories) is to compare where they come from and how they're propagated. Unlike novels and short stories, which are produced by individual authors and formally published, for example, urban legends emerge spontaneously, spread "virally" from person to person, and are rarely traceable to a single point of origin. Urban legends tend to change over time with repetition and embellishment. There can be as many variants as there are tellers of the tale.

## They're usually false, but not always

Though it's become synonymous in common parlance with "false belief," academic folklorists reserve the term "urban legend" (aka "contemporary legend") for a subtler and more complex phenomenon, namely the emergence and propagation of folk narratives — viral stories that are indeed usually false but which may also, on occasion, turn out to be true, or at least loosely based on real events. The crucial factor is that the story is *told* as true in the absence of verification. Folklorists are generally more interested in the social context and meaning of urban legends than their truth value.

Factual or not, when an urban legend is told it's meant to be believed. The teller is apt to rely on skillful storytelling and/or reference to putatively trustworthy sources — e.g., "it really happened to my hairdresser's brother's best friend" — in lieu of actual proof or evidence.

## List of common characteristics

Accordingly, your typical urban legend will exhibit most or all of the following characteristics:

- It's a narrative (a story).
- It's of spontaneous (or indeterminate) origin.
- It's likely to take the form of a cautionary tale.
- It's alleged to be true though its veracity is unproven.
- It's marginally plausible.
- It's likely to be attributed to a putatively trustworthy secondhand source (e.g., "a friend of a friend," "my boss's wife," "my sister's accountant," etc.).

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- It circulates by being passed from individual to individual, orally or in writing.
- It varies in the telling.

## **Here's How to Tell if You are Reading an Urban Legend:**

1. Consider the form of the information passed along to you. Is it a narrative — a story with a beginning, middle and end? Does it feature a surprising twist and/or end with a 'punch line' reminiscent of a joke? If so, it may be an urban legend.
2. Urban legends usually toe a fine line between outlandishness and plausibility. Does the story seem a little suspect, yet believable? Was it told to you AS IF it's true? Often the teller of an urban legend will even begin with the statement, 'This is a true story...'
3. Look for statements like 'This really happened to a friend of a friend' (or 'I heard this from the wife of a co-worker,' or 'You won't believe what happened to my brother's housekeeper's son,' etc.).
4. Have you heard the same story more than once from different sources, possibly even with different names and details? If you've heard more than one version, it's probably an urban legend.
5. Consider whether there's evidence to suggest the story you've heard is false, and/or there are commonsense reasons to disbelieve it.
6. Does the story seem too good to be true; too horrible, or too funny to be true? If so, there's a good chance it's an urban legend and NOT true.
7. Check books and Websites about urban legends to see if the story is listed there (see resources below).
8. Research any factual claims in the story to see if there is published evidence to support them. The burden of proof is on the teller of the tale.

## **Tips:**

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1. Contrary to popular belief, urban legends aren't always false. The key factor is that they are told AS IF true, though no supporting evidence is offered (apart from the solemn word of 'a friend of a friend').
2. Email versions of urban legends tend to lose some of their story-like qualities, circulating in the form of warnings or alerts instead of personal anecdotes. But they are still urban legends.

Emery, David. "What Is an Urban Legend? - Question and Answer." About Entertainment. About.com, n.d. Web. 16 Feb. 2015.