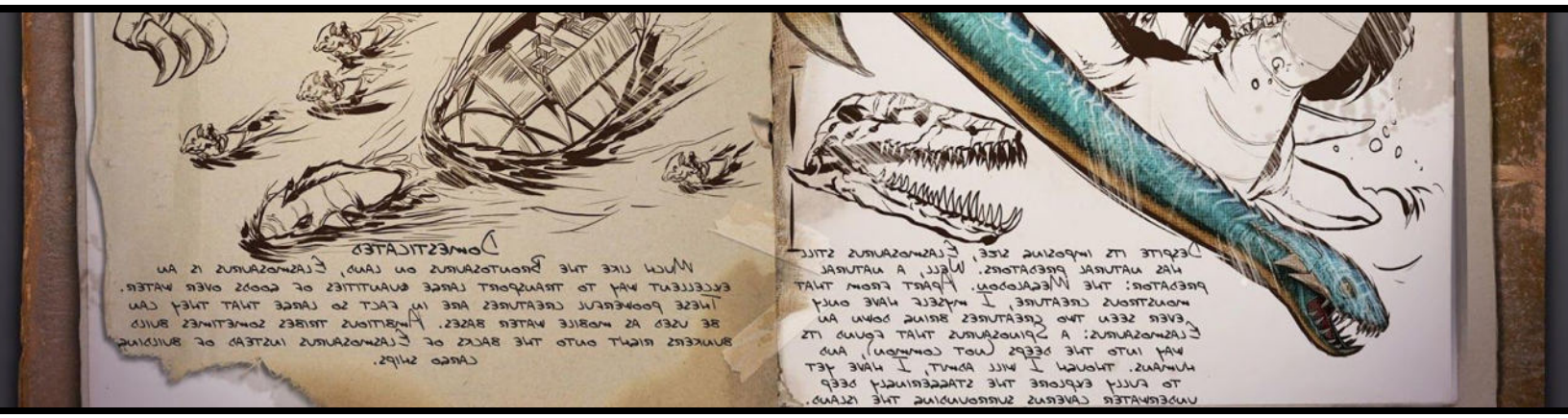
SMART SPIN
Encyclopedias as Adventures

Supported by:
EDUCATE
EDUCATION · RESEARCH · EDTECH
UCL Institute of Education

Hoaxes & Pranks Smarty

History is littered with attempts to to deceive and defraud, or simply trick and fool. Hoaxes and pranks have mislead and duped even the smartest people. Some hoaxes were very malicious, some pranks are playful. Some have been funny, others were very serious. Some fooled many, others only a few. What can we learn about these famous hoaxes and known pranks and how can we be wise enough to avoid falling victim to misinformation and lies while enjoying fun tricks and hijinks?

TO THE COLLECTION > MAIN TOPIC >



Smarties are inspirational guides for educational activities. Click on the red button below to know more about them.

Smarties are complemented by our **Smart Spin** online encyclopedia. Click on the green button below to explore it.

SMART SPIN WHAT'S A SMARTY? MORE SMARTIES

Table of Contents

1. Being Fooled

SOMETHING TO DISCUSS

The following points can be brought to your learner as questions to think about, as discussion points, or for writing an essay on the subjects.

Cottingley Fairies

- ➔ How is it that even smart people are sometimes fooled? Do you know of any incidences where someone who is considered smart, or someone you know as being smart, was fooled by a hoax or a prank?
- ➔ How could Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of one of the greatest detectives in all of fiction, fall for a fabrication by two young girls? Was it because he so wanted to believe it?
- ➔ Mark Twain has a famous quote that might be relevant to Conan Doyle's situation - "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."
- ➔ ★ Occam's Razor (click to see the topic; see the Occam's Razor section in this Smarty) is a principle from philosophy, which Conan Doyle might have been wise to use in the case of the Cottingley Fairies. Suppose there exist two explanations for something that had happened, or a claim made by someone. According to the principle, the simpler explanation is usually better, or the correct one. Another way of saying it is that the more assumptions you have to make, the more unlikely an explanation is. Now, this isn't true every time, but in most cases it is, and is a good way to identify hoaxes. In the case of the Fairies, it is much simpler to assume that the girls somehow faked the photos, whereas for fairies to actually exist - many more assumptions need to be made, such as that there is magic in the world and magical creatures that no one has ever seen before.

➔ In several of Conan Doyle's stories, Sherlock Holmes identifies the felon by using the following principle: “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must contain the truth.” Do you think this principle supports Conan Doyle’s way of thinking about the Cottingley Fairies, or did he ignore the wisdom of his own creation?

RELATED TOPICS

★ Cottingley Fairies

By the Numbers

➔ How many hoaxes do you think have never been revealed? What do you think are the main reasons why these hoaxes have not been exposed (yet?)?

➔ In your opinion, how many people today still believe in hoaxes that have already been revealed or exposed as false? Why do you think that is? Is it because the have not received the news? Is it because they choose to continue to believe or were simply not convinced?

➔ What is the biggest hoax that you know of (spin through the collection to discover)? Does it have the most victims, or did it have the largest impact on its victims? Was it the most believable, the most elaborate, the most impressive?

Reasons

➔ What do you think are the main reasons people instigate hoaxes? Are there different reasons for pranks?

➔ Which hoaxes and pranks did you (or can you) find in the collection that were done for personal gain, such as financial benefit or reputation boost? Which ones were out of vengeance (such as in the case of Beringer’s Lying Stones)? Which ones were about innocent fun (such as in the case of Lake Mendota Statue of

Liberty)? Which ones have been started by people who actually believed the falsehood they spread (such as in the case of Clever Hans)?

What about you?

- ➔ Have you ever believed something that turned out to be a hoax, or have been fooled by a prank? Have you ever pulled a prank on someone else?
- ➔ Did you ever suspect that something is a hoax (or untrue) when others believed it to be true? Were you right, wrong, or is the truth still unknown?

---

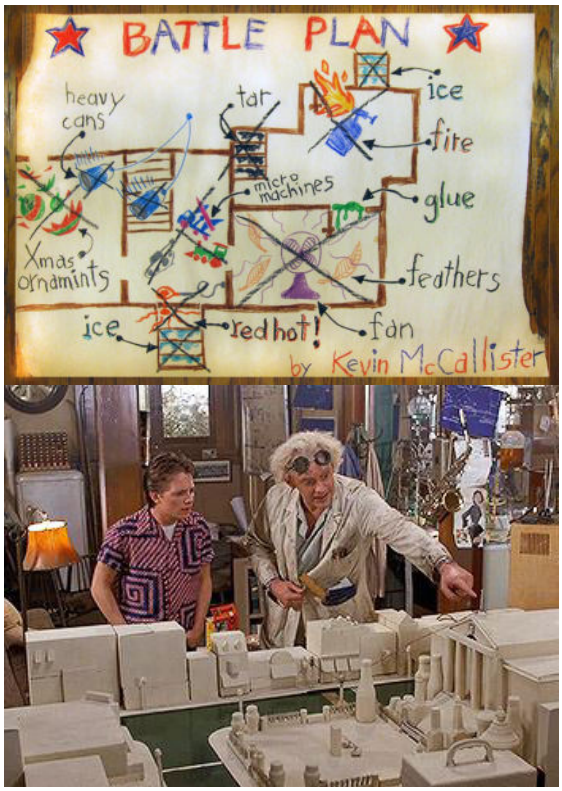
2. April Fools 

In this activity, your learner is directed to pull an April Fools prank. You may guide her or him through the process, making sure of course that it is all in good and safe fun.
You may discuss with them their previous experience with April Fools and pranks.

- ➔ Did you ever take part in an April Fools prank? What was the prank? How did you do it? Was it your idea? Did anyone else help? Who did you prank? What was the result?
- ➔ Have you ever fallen for an April Fools prank? What was the prank? Who pranked you? Was anyone else pranked? How did you find out it was a prank (did you figure it out or was it eventually revealed)? How did you feel when you found out?
- ➔ What other April Fools pranks do you know of, in which you were not involved nor the target? They may have been done, or directed towards, someone you know, or you may have read or heard about them.*

Ask you learner to plan and pull a harmless prank for the next April Fools, or just plan one and discuss it.

- ➔ What's funny about it? Is it clever? Is it silly? Is it impressive?
- ➔ What would it include (photos, customs, food, crafted objects, magic tricks, etc.) and who would be the target (family, friends, strangers, etc.)?
- ➔ How will you prepare and set it up? What do you (or anyone else) need to do in "real time" (i.e. while the prank is in progress)?
- ➔ A good prank has a good reveal (it's like the punchline of the prank). When and how do you plan on revealing that it is just a prank? What do you expect the reaction to be?
- ➔ Good plans have "visual aids". Can you make sketches, diagrams (e.g. blueprints), or even models that depict the setup and progress of the prank? (See to the right Kevin's battle plan from the movie Home Alone, and Doc's model from Back to the Future).
- ➔ How are you making sure that no one is going to get hurt, insulted or humiliated by the prank?
- ➔ Were you inspired by other April Fools pranks, such as famous ones, ones you know about, or in which you were targeted?*



** You may have your learner do some research to find their favorite April Fools stories to discuss them using any of the questions and instructions in this section. For example, you may ask them about who was involved, how the pranks were executed and*

revealed and what was used. You may also ask your learner to use the information they have about the pranks and write them in the form of a plan (i.e. as if they were planning it), and include any visual aids they see fit.

RELATED TOPICS

- ★ April Fools topic
- ★ April Fools collection: We created a collection just for April Fools' Day pranks.

---

3. Break it Down

SOMETHING TO DO

Have your learner spin through the collection and fill in a table (example shown below) or pages (printable in next page), breaking down the details of each hoax (or prank). You may state the amount of details you expect, and add sections to the suggested ones below (for example, how many people were affected, your rating of the level of cleverness or cruelty of the hoax, what can be learned from it, etc.). Ask your learner what conclusions they can gather from the comparison.

Hoax (title)	Instigator (person)	Target (person)	Included (what)
Beale Ciphers	Thomas J. Beale	Unknown or not specific. Robert Morriss was entrusted with the ciphertexts.	Three ciphertexts stating the location of a buried treasure. Pamphlets were distributed.

Description (what)	Timeline (when)	Revealed (how)	Instigator's gain
The instigator created the ciphertexts and then disappeared.	The pamphlets were published in 1885. The hoax is still a mystery today.	The ciphers were never revealed as a hoax, only one was solved.	It's unclear what the instigator stood to gain from the hoax.

Hoax or prank (title):

Instigator (who did it):

Gain (what did they gain, or wanted to achieve):

Target (who was the victim):

Timeline (when it happened and for how long):

Included (what was used):

Description (what happened):

Revealed (how was it exposed):

4. Know Better

Discuss with your learner, using the following questions, ways to consume news and other media critically and intelligently. You may want to use these for guidelines for an essay that your learner will write.

How can you protect yourself from falling for falsities and disinformation?

- ➔ Can you separate your own beliefs from the facts? Can you identify your instinctive judgement (which can sometimes be very accurate and correct, as explained in the book Blink) from a deeper process of examination?
- ➔ Can you hold from trusting what is claimed before analyzing all the available information? Do you have all the necessary information to make such analysis?
- ➔ Can you separate between *disinformation* (“false information spread deliberately to deceive”) and *misinformation* (“honest mistake”)?
- ➔ Ask yourself: Do the information I have in order to form an opinion come from a reliable source (such as a trusted publication or an expert in the field)? Even reliable sources may sometimes make mistakes or be mislead themselves. Am I basing my opinion only on the credentials and reputation of the source? Can I find other sources to provide additional support for the information? Do I need to cross-reference the information I obtained?
- ➔ Even with the good information, the right conclusions are not a guarantee. When presented with a claim, can you trace the logical path from information to conclusion? Can you identify when wrong assumptions enter your own process of drawing conclusions from reports presented to you.
- ➔ Can you think of methods that can help you better evaluate claims and assumptions? Can you think of questions that you can ask yourself, or to use when consuming information, that can focus your mind on finding the right details and reaching the right conclusions?

RELATED TOPICS

- ★ Fake News: The recent spotlight put on this topic has brought about the awareness to the need for intelligent consumption of media.
- ★ Media Literacy: Media literacy encompasses the practices that allow people to consume media critically.

Discuss with your learner the socratic method as a way of deriving truth from popular and strongly held opinions.

The Socratic Method

- ➔ The ★ Socratic Method (click to see the topic) is a good tool for examining the validity of claims and opinions, even beliefs that are considered common sense. According to Socrates, “the product of thought is superior to the product of intuition.” His method helps us find the truth by trying to disprove it: “The truth, in so far as a human being is able to attain such a thing, lies in a statement which it seems impossible to disprove. It is by finding out what something is not that one comes closest to understanding what it is.”
  - ◆ Take, for example, the ★ Crop Circles hoax (click to see the topic). Many people consider them the work of aliens trying to communicate with us by vandalizing fields. This belief comes from the assumption that it is impossible for humans to have made these circles without anyone noticing and in such short time, therefore aliens must be the ones who have. However, is it truly impossible? This is the question that Socrates would have us ask in order to find the truth. We do know that few people have made incredible things secretly and quickly (see for example the ★ Lake Mendota Statue of Liberty hoax). Socrates would be pleased with that reasoning because it finds an exception to the assumptions (i.e. it is not

impossible because it has been done before). This still does not disprove the claim that the circles were created by aliens, but it gets us a step closer to finding alternative explanations that might be more logical ones (see Occam's Razor in this section).

➔ Try it for yourself

- Choose an opinion that many people have, or a statement that many people make. You may even choose a claim that is considered common sense (for example, "people need PLENTY of carbohydrates in their nutrition in order to survive").
- Imagine for a moment that, despite the confidence of the people proposing it, the opinion or statement is false. Search for situations or contexts where the statement would not be true (for example, many people live well by consuming only a small amount of carbohydrates, as in low-carb diets).
- If an exception is found, the statement must be false or at least imprecise. The initial statement must be changed to take the exception into account (for example, "people don't need a lot of carbohydrates in their diet in order to live", or "people need only a SMALL AMOUNT of carbohydrates in their diet in order to survive").
- If you find more exceptions to the improved statements, the process should be repeated (for example, there are actually some people who do not eat any carbohydrates, yet live very well and are even in very good health, therefore you may change the statement to - "people don't need ANY carbohydrates in their nutrition in order to survive").

Discuss with your learner the principle of Occam's Razor as a way of forming or choosing the best explanation for a situation or occurrence.

Occam's Razor

- ★ Occam's Razor (click to see the topic) is a great way to evaluate hypotheses and examine claims.
  - Try using this principle to analyze hoaxes that you find in the collection. Review the false claim that a hoax presents and compare it with the truth. What assumptions did the false claim include that are not necessary (or that are fewer) compared to the truth. For example, the Alien Autopsy hoax will have us assume that aliens have visited Earth with only a few people noticing them, that they crashed their spaceship despite their advanced technology that allowed them to travel incredible distances through space, that an autopsy was performed but was poorly documented, that there was a major conspiracy to hide it and that one person was able to retrieve footage from the event despite all the military security that must have been put in place. On the other hand, a much simpler claim can be made, that requires fewer assumptions, and that turned out the be the truth, and it is that the instigator of the hoax filmed a couple of actors and a few props.
  - For another exercise, choose a curios occurrence or situation and try to think of two competing explanation for it. One of them should be simple and have the fewest number of assumptions, whereas the other can be as fantastic as you can imagine with as many assumptions as you can think of. For example, let's say you can't find your favorite hat. One explanation can be that you placed it somewhere but forgot about it, or that mom or dad put it out of sight (because you didn't tidy up your clothes as you were supposed to, did you?). Another explanation can be that the country is actually suffering a shortage of hats and the prime minister has ordered special agents to sneak into people's houses and collect their hats and keep it at a secure underground bunker until the crisis blows over.

Here are some extra points to inspire you and your learner:

- ➔ “First off, don’t let the force of the impression carry you away. Say to it, ‘hold up a bit and let me see who you are and where you are from—let me put you to the test’ . . .” This quote by Epictetus (Discourses, 2.18.24) teaches us to be careful not just with claims made by others but also with our own judgements. We lose very little by taking a moment to consider our own thoughts. By putting our impressions to the test as Epictetus recommends—we’re less likely to be carried away by them or make a move on a mistaken or biased one. We’re still free to use our instincts, but we should always, as the Russian proverb says, “trust, but verify.”.
- ➔ Consuming any news can have other implications than falsehood. It can have a strong influence on how we see the world, our society and culture. It can stir strong feelings in us that might have very little to do with reality, or how we should perceive what goes on, even if we are receiving truths. Philosopher Alain de Botton has written a book titled “The News: A User's Manual”, examining news consumption from a philosophical point of you. We highly recommend it and learning from it.
- ➔ In 2005, the epidemiologist John Ioannidis at Stanford caused a storm when he wrote the paper ‘Why Most Published Research Findings Are False’, suggesting that there is a problem with how much of academic research is being conducted, or evaluated. His arguments have been validated by subsequent investigations. Recent articles (here and here, for example) point to an issue with the statistical analysis we apply to findings. On the same subject we recommend the book “How Not to Be Wrong” by Jordan Ellenberg, who discusses this, and also explores how we can use mathematics to be wiser in our daily lives (here’s an interesting talk by Ellenberg).

5. Recommendations

Books about Hoaxes 

“Pranklopedia: The Funniest, Grossest, Craziest, Not-Mean Pranks on the Planet!”, by Julie Winterbottom

★ *Related topic:* Hoax & Prank

“Hoax: A History of Deception: 5,000 Years of Fakes, Forgeries, and Fallacies”, by Ian Tattersall and Peter Névraumont

★ *Related topic:* Hoax & Prank

“True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society”, by Farhad Manjoo

★ *Related topic:* Fake News

“The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine”, by Tom Standage

★ *Related topic:* Mechanical Turk

“The War of the Worlds”, by H. G. Wells

★ *Related topic:* War of the Worlds Radio Drama

“The Deepening Complexity of Crop Circles: Scientific Research and Urban Legends”, by Eltjo Haselhoff

★ *Related topic:* Crop Circles

Barnum's Own Story: The Autobiography of P. T. Barnum

★ *Related topic:* P. T. Barnum

“The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum”, by Candace Fleming and Ray Fenwick

★ *Related topic:* P. T. Barnum

The Hoax, by Clifford Irving

★ *Related topic:* Hughes Biography Hoax

“The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography”, by Simon Singh

★ *Related topic:* Beale Ciphers

“Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution”, by Howard Rheingold

★ *Related topic:* Flash Mob

“Causing a Scene: Extraordinary Pranks in Ordinary Places with Improv Everywhere”, by Charlie Todd and Alex Scordelis

★ *Related topic:* Improv Everywhere

American Tall Tales, by Mary Pope Osborne and Michael McCurdy

★ *Related topic:* Tall Tale

The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man

★ *Related topic:* The Sting (film)

★ *Related topic:* Confidence Trick

Play

Ouija Board, by Hasbro

★ *Related topic:* Ouija Board

“Hoax” Board Game, by Fantasy Flight Games

★ *Related topic:* Hoax & Prank

Listen

Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds

★ *Related topic:* War of the Worlds Radio Drama

Paul Is Live (album by Paul McCartney)

★ *Related topic:* Paul is Dead Hoax

Other Recommendations

➔ 10 Great Science Hoaxes Podcast

Watch

Hype! (1996 documentary)

★ *Related topic:* Grunge Speak

Big Fish (2003 film)

★ *Related topic:* Tall Tale

We Cause Scenes (2013 documentary)

★ *Related topic:* Improv Everywhere

The Hoax (2006 film)

★ *Related topic:* Hughes Biography Hoax