

# Learn to Discern



# B.S.-DETECTION TIPS!

from Neil Postman and Carl Sagan

Quotes from  
**Bullshit and the Art of Crap-Detection**  
by Neil Postman 1969 (sk comments in italics)

How can you defend yourself from media, bias, persuasion and manipulation?

"As I see it, the best things schools can do for kids is to help them learn how to distinguish useful talk from bullshit. Every day in almost every way people are exposed to more bullshit than it is healthy for them to endure; helping kids to activate their crap-detectors should take precedence over any other legitimate educational aim."

"Varieties of bullshit with transcendent significance: (this is a perfectly good example of bullshit, since I have no idea what the words "transcendent significance" might mean and neither do you.) Thus, we have our first variety of bullshit: pomposity or style over substance. People are daily victimized by pomposity in that they may feel less worthy by people who use fancy words to hide their own insufficiencies. Education has made respectable this form of bullshit."

"When I hear such talk my own crap-detector achieves unparalleled spasms of activity."

"Superstition is ignorance presented in the cloak of authority. A superstition is a belief, usually expressed in authoritative terms for which there is no factual or scientific basis. Among the more intriguing of these are the beliefs that people learn more efficiently when they are taught in an orderly, sequential and systematic manner; that one's knowledge of anything can be "objectively" measured; and even that the act of "teaching" facilitates what is known as "learning."

We learn because we want to, and we learn what we want to learn. Adults learn best when can relate new information to their lives, and to their existing knowledge.

"The most amusing of all our superstitions is the belief that education will result in one's becoming a more decent, liberal, tolerant, and civilized human being. I have not noticed that teachers are any more humane than mechanics or certified public accountants."

"There are dozens of other forms of bullshit, including earthiness, which is based on the assumption that if one uses direct, off-color, four letter words like crap and shit, one somehow is making more sense than people engaged in pomposity."

"What can be done? We will not find 'answers' in schools. As Carl Rogers has said, teaching is an overrated activity; and any impression to the contrary is, in my opinion, mostly superstition."

Unfortunately, teachers today may lose their zeal because of the endless testing and the disrespectful working conditions including low wages, lack of supplies, little freedom, and large class sizes. We can support them by creating learning opportunities - for all ages - wherever we can find them!

"Crap-detecting is an art. Each person's crap-detector is embedded in their value system; if you want to teach the art of crap-detecting, you must help students become aware of their values. This is precisely why you will not find it in school."

"Postman's 3<sup>rd</sup> Law: At any given time, the chief source of bullshit with which you have to contend is yourself."

"Postman's 4<sup>th</sup> Law: Almost nothing is about what you think it is about. All human communications have deeply imbedded and profound hidden agendas. Most of the conversation can be assumed to be bullshit of one variety or another."

"Postman's 5<sup>th</sup> and final law: There is no more precious environment than our language environment."

"An idealist usually cannot acknowledge his own bullshit, because it is in the nature of his "ism" that he must pretend it does not exist. In fact, I should say that anyone who is devoted to an "ism" - Fascism, Communism, Capitalism - probably has a seriously defective crap-detector."

***"Just as societal norms are created through language and action, they can be dismantled through language and action." - Brett Lunceford***

## Carl Sagan's Baloney Detection Kit from *The Demon-Haunted World* (1995) (edited by sk)

Sagan proposes a rigorous but comprehensible "baloney detection kit" to separate sense from nonsense. Intellectual tools that can help us separate wishful thinking from genuine probability and to recognize a fallacious or fraudulent argument.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."
- Encourage debate on the evidence exploring of all points of view. (How many different points can you find?)
- Arguments from authority carry little weight - "authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. In science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.
- Consider more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the considerations.
- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way-station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.
- Can you count or measure your point? What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. (Complex, qualitative assessments are crucial to humanness, however.)
- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) - not just most of them. (author's emphasis)
- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us, when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well, to choose the simpler. Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified.... You must be able to check assertions out. Skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.

Elsewhere in *The Demon-Haunted World*, Sagan states that the loss of control over media and education has rendered people "unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true." He goes on to say that well-supported scientific theories carry the same weight - or less - than explanations made up on the spot by authorities. He is afraid that people have lost the ability to "knowledgeably question." With a little effort at the start - that will quickly become habit - we can learn to discern, ask powerful questions, and improve our media environments!

**Calling Bullshit:** Here's a quandary: how are we going to help people get unstuck by recognizing and addressing all the bullshit in the world?

### HELPFUL WEBSITES:

**CALLING BULLSHIT FREE COURSE!!** "Bullshit is everywhere, and we've had enough. We want to teach people to detect and defuse bullshit where ever it may arise." [www.callingbullshit.org/videos](http://www.callingbullshit.org/videos)

**WHICH FACE IS REAL?** Can you tell which image is a real person and which one was made by a computer? Learn to defend yourself against 'deep fake'! [www.whichfaceisreal.com](http://www.whichfaceisreal.com)

**DEBUNKING HANDBOOK** – Free to download and print! (Available in 12 languages!)  
<https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/debunking-handbook-2020/>

**TRUTH-O-METER** [www.politifact.com](http://www.politifact.com)

"A fact-checking website that rates the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others who speak up in American politics". They do this to "to give citizens the information they need to govern themselves in a democracy."

