How Urban Legends Work

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Generally speaking, an urban legend is any modern, fictional story, told as truth, that reaches a wide audience by being passed from person to person. Urban legends are often false, but not always. A few turn out to be largely true, and a lot of them were inspired by an actual event but evolved into something different in their passage from person to person. More often than not, it isn't possible to trace an urban legend back to its original source -- they seem to come from nowhere.

## **What Do Legends Mean?**

On the [Internet](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/internet-technology-channel.htm) and in universities all over the world, you'll find a lot of people interested in the role of urban legends in modern society. Many folklorists argue that the more gruesome legends embody basic human [fears](https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/emotions/fear.htm), providing a cautionary note or moral lesson telling us how to protect ourselves from danger.

The most famous cautionary urban legend is the "hook-hand killer" tale. In this story, a young couple on a date drive off to a remote spot to "park." Over the [radio](https://electronics.howstuffworks.com/radio.htm), they hear that a psychopath with a hooked hand has escaped from a local mental institution. The girl wants to leave, but her boyfriend insists there's nothing to worry about. After a while, the girl thinks she hears a scratching or tapping sound outside the car. The boyfriend assures her it's nothing, but at her insistence, they eventually drive off. When they get to the girl's house, the boyfriend goes around to the passenger side to open her door. To his horror, there is a bloody hook hanging from the door handle.

The warning and moral lesson of this story are clear: Don't go off by yourself, and don't engage in premarital intimacy! If you do, something horrific could happen. When the story first circulated in the 1950s, parking was a relatively new phenomenon, and parents were terrified of what might happen to their kids. Most people who tell the story today don't take it very seriously. Like the tale of the [vanishing hitchhiker](http://www.snopes2.com/horrors/ghosts/vanish.htm), it has graduated from urban legend to "campfire ghost story," a tale passed on to others for amusement, not told as gospel truth.

As gang violence increased in the 1990s, cautionary tales began to focus more on criminal groups, rather than lone lunatics. In many cities around the United States, concerned citizens have been spreading a report of a [gang](https://people.howstuffworks.com/street-gang.htm) initiation rite in which gang members drive at night with their headlights turned off. When another driver flashes his or her headlights to signal that their car's lights are out, the gang pursues and kills them. Even people who don't believe this wholeheartedly may err on the side of caution. After all, with so much gang violence going on, why take a chance by flashing your lights?

The rash of stories circulating about food contamination is a logical extension of the way Americans eat these days. More often than not, we are fed by faceless corporations and nameless restaurant employees. We're aware that we are putting a lot of trust in people we know nothing about, and this fear is played out in our urban legends. As a general rule, if an urban legend touches on something many people are afraid of, it'll spread like [wildfire](https://science.howstuffworks.com/nature/natural-disasters/wildfire.htm). Urban legends also express something about the individual who believes them. You are much more likely to believe and pass on legends that have some resonance with your personal fears or experience.

In this way, urban legends provide valuable insight into the cultures that create them. Legends evolve as cultures evolve, so new themes and variations pop up all the time.

People didn't begin talking about "urban legends" until the 1930s and 1940s, but they have existed in some form for thousands of years. Urban legends are simply the modern version of traditional folklore. In most cultures of the world, folklore has always existed alongside, or in place of, recorded history. Where history is obsessed with accurately writing down the details of events, traditional folklore is characterized by the "oral tradition," the passing of stories by word of mouth.

In this tradition, the storyteller will usually add new twists and turns to a story related by another storyteller. Unlike mythology, these stories are about real people in believable situations. Just as with modern legends, old folk tales often focus on the things a society found frightening. Many of the "fairy tales" we read today began life as believable stories, passed from person to person. Instead of warning against organ thieves and gang members, these tales relayed the dangers of the forest. In old Europe, the deep woods was a mysterious place to people, and there were indeed creatures that might attack you there. We do have a lot of fears in common with our ancestors, of course. As is clear in "[Snow White](https://lifestyle.howstuffworks.com/family/activities/how-disney-princess-works.htm) and the Seven Dwarves," the fear of food contamination has been around for quite a while.

## **Urban Legends and the Internet**

The methods of passing urban legends have evolved over time. In the past 10 years, there has been a huge surge of urban legends on the [Internet](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/internet/basics/internet-infrastructure.htm). The most common venue is forwarded [e-mail](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/e-mail-messaging/email.htm). This storytelling method is unique because usually the story is not reinterpreted by each person who passes it on. A person simply clicks the "Forward" icon in their e-mail and types in all his friends' e-mail addresses. Having the original story gives e-mail legends a feeling of legitimacy. You don't know the original author, but they are speaking directly to you.

Forwarded e-mail legends are often the work of one or more pranksters, not the product of many different storytellers. For these authors, the thrill is seeing how far a legend will spread. As with word-of-mouth legends, there are all sorts of e-mail hoaxes. Cautionary legends are very common in e-mail forwards, often focusing on made-up [computer viruses](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/virus.htm) or Internet scams. Even a skeptical person might forward this sort of message, just in case it's true. A similar sort of e-mail legend is the charity or petition appeal, which outlines a good cause or a horrible miscarriage of justice and then instructs you to add your name to a petition and send it on to everybody you know. There are real e-mail petitions, of course, and these do help out good causes. It can be tricky to spot a hoax, but one indicator is that the e-mail includes no address to send the list to when it is completed. Additionally, if a message begins with "This is not a hoax or urban legend," it probably is.

One of the most famous e-mail legends, [the Neiman Marcus cookie recipe](http://urbanlegends.about.com/science/urbanlegends/library/weekly/aa071397.htm), combines a great story with an appeal to fight injustice. The e-mail is a personal account of a mother and her daughter eating at a Neiman Marcus store. After their meal, they order a couple of Neiman Marcus chocolate cookies, which they enjoy immensely. The mother asks the waitress for the [recipe](https://recipes.howstuffworks.com/), and is told that she can buy it for "two-fifty." Later, when she sees the Neiman Marcus charge on her credit card, she realizes that she has been charged $250, rather than $2.50. The customer-service representative refuses to refund her money, because the company's recipe is so valuable that it cannot be distributed cheaply. In order to exact revenge on the company, the mother claims in the e-mail, she has decided to distribute the recipe freely over the Internet, and she encourages you to send it to everyone you know.

The recipe in the message does make delicious cookies, but they are not the sort sold at Neiman Marcus, and there is no $250 Neiman Marcus cookie recipe. In fact, when the message was first circulated, Neiman Marcus didn't even make such a chocolate chip cookie. Amazingly, this story has been around in various forms since the 1940s. In the 1980s, the overcharging company was Mrs. Fields. Years before that, it was the Waldorf Astoria hotel in [New York](https://adventure.howstuffworks.com/new-york-city-guide.htm), and the recipe was for a "Red Velvet Cake."

These sorts of e-mail stories demonstrate just how deep-rooted urban legends are. No matter how much "information technology" we develop, human beings will always be drawn in by the unsubstantiated [rumor](https://people.howstuffworks.com/gossip.htm). In fact, information technology actually accelerates the spread of tall tales. By definition, urban legends seem to have a life of their own, creeping through a society one person at a time. And like a real life form, they adapt to changing conditions. It will always be human nature to tell bizarre stories, and there will always be an audience waiting to believe them. The urban legend is part of our makeup.