

First Year Seminar
Homework Assignment 8
Learning about Pseudoscience

Reading Assignment: due Tuesday, April 17
Shermer, chapters 3, 13 and 14

Description: You will learn about a pseudoscience topic from the web. Each member of your group will write an individual report, and your group will present a brief (15 minute) presentation on your topic to the class. Your group's topic cannot match the topic of the book report of any member of your group.

Many topics are acceptable, but here are some suggestions:

- Atlantis** – A lost continent with advanced technology – or just a story.
- Auras** – Colors that surround a person, which tells about their personality, emotions, etc.
- Chiromancy** – Also known as Palmistry, or Palm Reading
- Crop Circles** – Aliens travel the light years so they can decorate crop fields
- Dowsing** – with the help of a forked stick or other device, dowsers find water or other materials deep underground
- The Face on Mars** – There's a face – sort of – on the surface of Mars.
- Feng Shui** – Energy lines can help you decorate your home.
- Magnet Therapy** – Placing a magnet on your body can help heal it.
- Noah's Ark** – The big boat from the Bible story, has it been found?
- Nostradamus** – The most famous of all prophets, but how accurate were his prophecies?
- Polygraphs** – More commonly known as “lie detectors,” they are used by police but are considered inadmissible in courts.
- Therapeutic Touch** – A method of diagnosing and treating a variety of physical disorders by holding the hands near – but not touching – the patient.

Written Report: Rough Draft Due midnight Tuesday, April 24
Final Draft Due midnight Thursday, April 26

I would like you to write a brief report (minimum 1500 words) explaining some of the basic ideas behind the pseudoscience claim, evidence for or against it. Your sources may be only web sources, if you want, but should include both skeptical and non-skeptical sources. I recommend you keep track of specific sites and the claims made on those sites, and compare them to counterclaims from skeptical sites.

One of the best skeptical sources for basic information is the Skeptic's Dictionary,
<http://www.skeptdic.com>

You should have no trouble finding additional materials. Ideally, you should be able to critique the website, explaining what evidence is presented for or against a claim.

Outline: Due Tuesday April 24

A brief ungraded group document outlining what will be done by whom on Thursday. One line per person is acceptable.

Oral Report: Thursday April 26

I would like you to present a fifteen minute presentation on the pseudoscience topic of your choice. This portion will be a group activity. The contents should be similar to above, but the presentation may be different, since you will be working as a group.