



# Truth or Fiction?

"This is hilarious – no wonder some people were offended! This is the message that the Pacific Palisades High School California staff voted unanimously to record on their school telephone answering machine. This is the actual answering machine message for the school. This came about because they implemented a policy requiring students and parents to be responsible for their children's absences and missing homework.

"The school and teachers are being sued by parents who want their children's failing grades changed to passing grades – even though those children were absent 15–30 times during the semester and did not complete enough school work to pass their classes. The outgoing message:

'Hello! You have reached the automated answering service of your school. In order to assist you in connecting to the right staff member, please listen to all the options before making a selection:

- To lie about why your child is absent – Press 1
- To make excuses for why your child did not do his work – Press 2
- To complain about what we do – Press 3
- To swear at staff members – Press 4
- To ask why you didn't get information that was already enclosed in your newsletter & several flyers mailed to you – Press 5
- If you want us to raise your child – Press 6
- If you want to reach out and touch, slap or hit someone – Press 7
- To request another teacher, for the third time this year – Press 8
- To complain about bus transportation – Press 9
- To complain about school lunches – Press 0
- If you realize this is the real world and your child must be accountable and responsible for his/her own behavior, class work, homework and that it's not the teachers' fault for your child's lack of effort: Hang up and have a nice day!'

This was a widely spread email – especially around the education community. As with most of these kinds of emails, it is wise to check its validity. [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) is an excellent site for doing just that. To give an understanding of what the site is about, some of the FAQs are listed below.

**Q: *Is everything on this site about 'urban legends'?***

A: In a strict folkloric sense, no. Urban legends are a specific type of folklore, and many of the items discussed on this site do not fall under the folkloric definition of "urban legend." We are following the more expansive popular (if inaccurate) use of "urban





legend" as a term that embraces not only urban legends but also common fallacies, misinformation, old wives' tales, strange news stories, rumors, celebrity gossip, and similar items.

**Q: Why do you have some true stories listed as "urban legends"?**

A: An "urban legend" is not the same thing as a "fictional tale" or an "apocryphal anecdote," although many people mistakenly use the term in that sense (e.g., "That's not true; it's just an urban legend!"). A tale is considered an urban legend if it circulates widely, is told and re-told with differing details (or exists in multiple versions), and is *said* to be true. Whether or not the events described in the tale ever *actually* occurred is completely irrelevant to its classification as an urban legend.

For example, the tale about a student who mistakes a math problem thought to be unsolvable for a homework assignment and solves it is an urban legend, even though something very similar did once happen in real life. The tale is still an urban legend, however, because over the years many of its details (i.e., when it happened, where it happened, the identity of the student, the reaction of the student's instructor) have changed as it has spread.

**Q: I know an urban legend that really happened, but your site doesn't list it as true (or vice-versa). Why not?**

There are several reasons why this might be so:

- We rate an urban legend as "true" when there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the legend *began* with a real-life event. If the actions described in an urban legend play out in real life *after* the legend has begun circulating, that is not an example of what we consider a "true" urban legend — it is a phenomenon known as "ostension" (and when someone *deliberately* enacts the events described by an urban legend, that is known as "pseudo-ostension").
- Many urban legends describe events so general and plausible that they might very well have happened to somebody, somewhere, sometime. But since seldom can a legend's origins be traced to a specific, identifiable occurrence, we rarely categorize them as "true."
- Many of the texts we discuss contain a mixture of truth, falsity, and exaggeration, which cannot be accurately described by a single "True" or "False" rating. Therefore, an item's status is generally based upon the single most important aspect of the text under discussion, which is summarized in the statement made after the "Claim:" heading at the top of the page. It is important to make note of the wording of that claim, since that is the statement to which the status applies.
- Many legends present events that may have taken place in real life only a few times (or once, or even never) as if they were frequent, everyday occurrences, and we make



a distinction between "This once happened" and "This is a common, on-going occurrence." For example, many people have read warnings about the dangers posed by [kidnappers](#) who allegedly abduct children at malls or amusement parks by taking their victims into bathrooms, drugging them, cutting and dyeing their hair, changing their clothing, and smuggling them out exits disguised as the opposite sex. This legend is classified as false because we have found no credible evidence that a kidnapping has ever been pulled off using this scheme. Even if we *did* uncover evidence that such a kidnapping once took place, however, we would still classify the legend as false, because an essential feature of the legend is a warning that this type of kidnapping is a regular occurrence, and one real-life instance does *not* constitute a regular occurrence.

So, before forwarding on emails which offer FREE LAPTOPS or FREE gift cards, take a few minutes to check things out on [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com). By the way - follow this link to read the "rest of the story" regarding the Pacific Palisades High School.

<http://www.snopes.com/humor/iftrue/palisades.asp>

