

Urban Legends

An **urban legend**, **urban myth**, **urban tale**, or **contemporary legend** is a form of modern folklore consisting of stories that may or may not have been believed by their tellers to be true. As with all folklore and mythology, the designation suggests nothing about the story's veracity, but merely that it is in circulation, exhibits variation over time, and carries some significance that motivates the community in preserving and propagating it.

Despite its name, an urban legend does not necessarily originate in an urban area. Rather, the term is used to differentiate modern legend from traditional folklore in pre-industrial times. For this reason, sociologists and folklorists prefer the term *contemporary legend*.

Urban legends are sometimes repeated in news stories and, in recent years, distributed by e-mail. People frequently allege that such tales happened to a "friend of a friend"; so often, in fact, that "friend of a friend" has become a commonly used term when recounting this type of story.

Some urban legends have passed through the years with only minor changes to suit regional variations. One example is the story of a woman killed by spiders nesting in her elaborate hairdo. More recent legends tend to reflect modern circumstances, like the story of people ambushed, anesthetized, and waking up minus one kidney, which was surgically removed for transplantation--"The Kidney Heist."

The term "urban legend," as used by folklorists, has appeared in print since at least 1968. Jan Harold Brunvand, professor of English at the University of Utah, introduced the term to the general public in a series of popular books published beginning in 1981. Brunvand used his collection of legends to make two points: first, that legends and folklore do not occur exclusively in so-called primitive or traditional societies, and second, that one could learn much about urban and modern culture by studying such tales.

Many urban legends are framed as complete stories with plot and characters. The teller of an urban legend may claim it happened to a friend, which serves to personalize, authenticate and enhance the power of the narrative. Many urban legends depict horrific crimes, contaminated foods or other situations which would affect many people. The compelling appeal of a typical urban legend is its elements of mystery, horror, fear or humor. Often they serve as cautionary tales. Some urban legends are morality tales that depict someone, usually a child, acting in a disagreeable manner, only to wind up in trouble, hurt, or dead.

Write an ORIGINAL urban legend!

DUE October 28 for Periods 1, 2, and 4; DUE October 31 for Period 6

Directions: (100 points)

- 1.** Your story must be original, and it must follow the elements of an urban legend (see above).
- 2.** Your story must have a beginning, middle, and end, following the plotline diagram structure.
- 3.** You must include dialogue between characters.
- 4.** Your story needs to be between 1-2 pages. Can be typed or handwritten—MLA heading at the top!
- 5.** Make it scary!

Bloody Mary

She lived deep in the forest in a tiny cottage and sold herbal remedies for a living. Folks living in the town nearby called her Bloody Mary, and said she was a witch. None dared cross the old crone for fear that their cows would go dry, their food-stores rot away before winter, their children take sick of fever, or any number of terrible things that an angry witch could do to her neighbors.

Then the little girls in the village began to disappear, one by one. No one could find out where they had gone. Grief-stricken families searched the woods, the local buildings, and all the houses and barns, but there was no sign of the missing girls. A few brave souls even went to Bloody Mary's home in the woods to see if the witch had taken the girls, but she denied any knowledge of the disappearances. Still, it was noted that her haggard appearance had changed. She looked younger, more attractive. The neighbors were suspicious, but they could find no proof that the witch had taken their young ones.

Then came the night when the daughter of the miller rose from her bed and walked outside, following an enchanted sound no one else could hear. The miller's wife had a toothache and was sitting up in the kitchen treating the tooth with an herbal remedy when her daughter left the house. She screamed for her husband and followed the girl out of the door. The miller came running in his nightshirt. Together, they tried to restrain the girl, but she kept breaking away from them and heading out of town.

The desperate cries of the miller and his wife woke the neighbors. They came to assist the frantic couple. Suddenly, a sharp-eyed farmer gave a shout and pointed towards a strange light at the edge of the woods. A few townsmen followed him out into the field and saw Bloody Mary standing beside a large oak tree, holding a magic wand that was pointed towards the miller's house. She was glowing with an unearthly light as she set her evil spell upon the miller's daughter.

The townsmen grabbed their guns and their pitchforks and ran toward the witch. When she heard the commotion, Bloody Mary broke off her spell and fled back into the woods. The far-sighted farmer had loaded his gun with silver bullets in case the witch ever came after his daughter. Now he took aim and shot at her. The bullet hit Bloody Mary in the hip and she fell to the ground. The angry townsmen leapt upon her and carried her back into the field, where they built a huge bonfire and burned her at the stake.

As she burned, Bloody Mary screamed a curse at the villagers. If anyone mentioned her name aloud before a mirror, she would send her spirit to revenge herself upon them for her terrible death. When she was dead, the villagers went to the house in the wood and found the unmarked graves of the little girls the evil witch had murdered. She had used their blood to make her young again.

From that day to this, anyone foolish enough to chant Bloody Mary's name three times before a darkened mirror will summon the vengeful spirit of the witch. It is said that she will tear their bodies to pieces and rip their souls from their mutilated bodies. The souls of these unfortunate ones will burn in torment as Bloody Mary once was burned, and they will be trapped forever in the mirror.