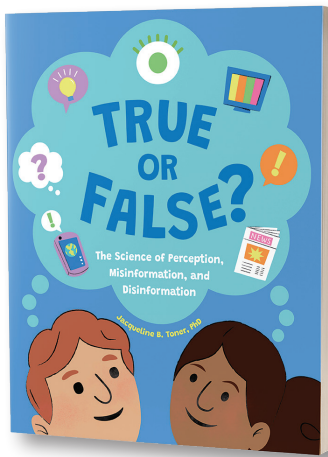




AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

True or False: The Science of Perception, Misinformation, and Disinformation: Interview With the Author



Dr. Jaqueline B. Toner wrote *True or False: The Science of Perception, Misinformation, and Disinformation* for middle grade and high school readers. It explores what psychology tells us about development and persistence of false perceptions, beliefs and the difficulty of correcting them, and provides ways to debunk misinformation and think critically and factually about the world around us.

Magination Press interviewed Dr. Toner about writing *True or False* and the process of teaching kids about critical thinking.

Magination Press: What inspired you to write *True or False*? Why now? Why middle and high school? Why not for adults?

Dr. Toner: While there are popular books available for adults on the topics covered in the book, I'm not aware of any geared towards this age group. I loved psychology topics when I was a young teen and hope readers will find the information intriguing.

MP: You start the book with a quiz in Chapter 1. It includes eleven statements that many people believe (or once believed) are true. Did you ever believe any of the statements in the quiz? If you did, how did you feel when you found out that the statements were false?

DT: Great question! I absolutely believed a number of them! Others I wasn't sure about. Learning they weren't true made me wonder what other things I believed that were false. That, for me, spurred a healthy skepticism about what I heard and read and an interest in science. I hope my readers feel the same way.

MP: Throughout the books, you include sidebars that engage readers and challenge them to think more deeply or experiment with perception and understanding. Can you explain why you included each of them and what you hope readers will gain from them?

—Research

—Try this

—Did you know?

—Now you know

DT:

—Research: I want to help readers to be constructively skeptical. By including findings from research studies, readers are introduced to the notion that how people feel and act can be explored through scientific study. After reading this book, when they hear someone state “facts” they may begin to question what that information is based on.

—Try this: My readers are thinkers. The “Try This” examples are there to help them think about things in new and deeper ways.

—Did you know? I love cool facts that come from scientific studies. I especially love when those facts are surprising. I suspect that readers drawn to this book will love them too!

—Now you know: Many of the books’ chapters have a lot of information which is probably new to readers (and the adults in their lives). I hope it will help to have a list of information at the end of each chapter to summarize what they have learned.

MP: People may have heard of debunking. What is “prebunking?”

DT: “Debunking” statements (that is correcting wrong information) may work. But it turns out that it’s more effective to warn someone ahead of time that information they are about to hear is false. That’s call “prebunking”.

MP: Why is it so important for people to understand how science works?

DT: The goal of social science is to understand, predict, and sometimes influence thoughts and behaviors. It requires carefully considered studies that try to rule out (or control for) outside influences on a result. In this way, science explores whether the way we think things (and people) work is accurate. It differs from opinion by gathering evidence to prove or disprove ideas. A good scientist accepts when the results of their science indicate they are wrong. A really good scientist then goes on to explore why.

MP: Can you elaborate on the role of social media and social pressure in general on how people, and especially teens and young adults, develop beliefs? What challenges do they pose to critical thinking?

DT: It isn't just young people; everyone is impacted by social influences. The rise of social media has supercharged this kind of influence. We are all most likely to be influenced by people close to us or people we look up to. Messages from social media and information from people we admire can easily be accepted as true. When a message comes from someone we respect, the easiest thing to do is accept it. It takes energy to question what you hear and think things through and even more energy to explore it further. In other words, critical thinking takes work! Although my book is directed at young people, I hope they will share what they learn with parents, other relatives, and even their teachers in their quest to become more effective consumers of information.

MP: After working on this project, do you look at information and your perceptions differently? What advice do you have for readers about putting this new knowledge into action?

DT: I spent years researching this book to find interesting, and sometimes surprising results of research. It was a blast! I loved being surprised by what researchers have learned about what we think we know and the cool ways they worked to uncover answers to questions. I hope my readers will come away with some interesting facts but, more importantly, with questioning minds. I hope they will start asking things like:

Who says so?

How do they know that?

What else could be true?

This Article's Author

Jacqueline B. Toner, PhD is a retired clinical psychologist with over 30 years in private practice working with children and parents. She earned her PhD from University of Virginia and serves as Chief Facilitator for a medical resources project with Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and Carnegie Mellon University. Dr. Toner has co-authored several books with Claire A. B. Freeland, PhD including *What to Do When Mistakes Make You Quake*;; *What to Do When It's Not Fair*; *Psychology for Kids: The Science of Mind and Behavior*; *Depression: A Teen's Guide to Survive and Thrive*; and *Yes I Can: A Girl and Her Wheelchair*. She is also the author of *What to Do When the News Scares You*. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

True or False? The Science of Perception, Misinformation, and Disinformation

Written for pre-teens and young teens in lively text accompanied by fun facts, *True or False?* explores what psychology tells us about development and persistence of false perceptions and beliefs and the difficulty of correcting them, plus ways to debunk misinformation and think critically and factually about the world around us.