

Beliefs and 'evidence'

1) Ask the students to write three things they believe. Why do they believe those things? Do they think they have good reasons to believe? Are they more confident of some beliefs than others?

- Example beliefs: I believe it is raining. I believe that Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth. I believe that life exists on other planets.

2) Ask the students if they can think of an example of when their beliefs were mistaken. How did they realise? Why were they mistaken? (Possible answers might include belief in the tooth fairy or the discovery that something in the news was not true.)

3) Introduce the students to some of the reasons we believe things and the ways we can be mistaken.

Extension activity: students could be asked to create a mind map of the different reasons we believe things and annotate it with the reasons our beliefs might be mistaken.

| Reason to believe | Example | Ways we can be mistaken |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Personal experience | I saw/heard it happen. | Our memory could be incorrect. It might have been an illusion or a hallucination. Seeing something happen once doesn't mean it will happen the same way again next time. |
| Authority | I read it in a book/on the internet. | The author might be biased, lying, or mistaken. |
| | Someone told me it was true. | That person might be lying or mistaken. |
| | Lots of other people believe it. | It's possible for lots of people to be wrong. |
| Instinct/desire | I have a strong feeling inside me that it is true/I really want it to be true. | Wanting something to be true won't make it true. Different people may feel differently and they can't both be correct. |
| Scientific evidence | I did an experiment to test it. | Scientists can make mistakes. Experiments need to be repeated to check their results. |

4) Using the table above, offer some examples to help the students understand the different ways our beliefs can be mistaken. E.g. ask if the above reasons are good reasons to believe the following claims: a) Water flows downhill. b) Elephants are scared of mice.

5) Ask students to carry out the [Beliefs and evidence activities](#) and discuss their conclusions. Students who complete it could try carrying out the activity on some beliefs of their own.

6) Once the students have had a chance to read the [Understanding the world information sheet](#), ask them to use what they know about the humanist approach to understanding the world to decide which of the beliefs in the activity a humanist might hold and what evidence a humanist might find persuasive.

Beliefs and 'evidence' activities

Activity 1: Recognising we make mistakes

Cut up the **beliefs** and put them upside down in a pile. Then cut up the pieces of '**evidence**' and put them upside down in a separate pile.

Work in pairs. Select one of the beliefs. Then select one of the pieces of 'evidence' for a belief. Imagine that is the **only** 'evidence' you have for the belief.

- 1) Decide whether you think that would count as good evidence for the belief.
- 2) If that was the only evidence, how might your belief be mistaken?
- 3) What further evidence might you want?

Activity 2: What makes good evidence?

Pick a belief and then decide what evidence would make you hold that belief. Is some evidence better than other evidence? (E.g. Is it better to trust your senses or what people tell you? Is it better to trust science or your feelings?) What makes good evidence?

'Evidence':

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| My friend told me it was true | I saw it |
| I dreamed about it | Lots of people believe it |
| My teacher told me it was true | I really want it to be true |
| I did an experiment to test it | I read it in the newspaper |
| It just feels like it must be true | I've read it in lots of books |
| A religious leader said it was true | There is scientific evidence for it |
| I thought carefully about it and worked out that it must be true | Most scientists believe it is true |

Beliefs:

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|---|---|
| I believe water freezes at zero degrees because... | I believe King Henry VIII had six wives because... |
| I believe plants need water to survive because... | I believe prayer makes a difference because... |
| I believe ghosts exist because... | I believe penguins live in Antarctica because... |
| I believe sugar is bad for your teeth because... | I believe vaccinations can help cure disease because... |
| I believe dinosaurs lived millions of years ago because... | I believe elephants are scared of mice because... |
| I believe in an afterlife because... | I believe god exists because... |
| I believe UFOs have visited Earth because... | I believe there is life on other planets because... |
| I believe people feel pain when they hurt themselves because... | I believe astrology can predict the future because... |