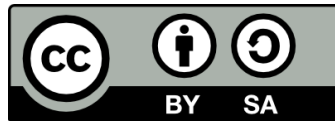


# The Complete Street Epistemology Guide

## *How to Talk About Beliefs*

Last Update: 12 May 2018

*The guide is a community resource created and maintained by members of the Street Epistemology Facebook group. Thank you everyone for your valuable contributions!*



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# 1 Introduction

The term "[Street Epistemology](#)" (SE) originates in Dr. Peter Boghossian's book, [A Manual for Creating Atheists](#) (AMFCA). In the book, Dr. Boghossian describes how people often use faith as an epistemology — that is, as a way of coming to knowledge and justifying their beliefs. His central theme is that unreliable epistemologies, such as faith, are used to arrive at potentially harmful false beliefs. Because faith-based belief systems typically encourage or require adherents to spread the belief system, he uses the metaphor of "virus of the mind"

to describe the effects faith has on people. Faith gains traction by presenting itself as a reliable method, akin to trust, by presenting reasonable doubt as an epistemological failing.

While the authors of this guide were inspired by AMFCA to practice SE, we have since encountered a wide range of claims and epistemologies — not always religious or faith-based. In this guide we do not use "virus" or "intervention" metaphors because we are considering not only faith used as a way of knowing, but all ways of knowing and all kinds of beliefs. Some ways of knowing may indeed turn out to be reliable enough to justify the belief in question. As such, the scope has broadened beyond what Dr. Boghossian originally described in AMFCA, creating a space for this guide to offer additional information and advice.

In this guide, we have compiled the best practices and lessons learned by active Street Epistemologists. The community welcomes every opportunity for improvement, driven by constructive criticism, study, and experience. As Dr. Boghossian writes, "It's important for your growth and for the development of the techniques to experiment and develop your own ideas and strategies" [AMFCA, pg 118].

SE dialogues work toward mutual agreement about the reliability of different ways of assessing whether or not a belief is true or likely to be true, without devolving into debate. As a Street Epistemologist, you start from a position of "doxastic openness" in which you acknowledge that the other person's position may be correct. You should be willing to revise your beliefs if this turns out to be the case. Ideally, it becomes increasingly clear to both of you whether or not the methods can be relied upon to lead one to the truth.

You may use Street Epistemology in dialogue because you value truth and because you desire to help yourself and others use methods that are less likely to produce false beliefs. You can expect either party's confidence or beliefs to change as a result of such dialogues. Realizing you have been using an unreliable method may lead you to re-examine your beliefs, alter your confidence, or even renounce a belief having deemed it unlikely to be true. By holding true beliefs about reality on matters of practical consequence, we can all make better choices for our lives and for our communities.

We have organized this guide along the structure of a complete dialogue: preparation, initiating the dialogue, managing the dialogue, targeting epistemology, ending the dialogue, and following up. Much of the advice is generally applicable, or derivable from common experience, or at least came from other fields; very little is unique to SE. What is new is the selection, arrangement, presentation, and synthesis of these techniques to improve the way we form beliefs.

We invite you to try the techniques in this guide yourself, test whether they work, and modify them to suit your conversations with others. We also encourage sharing of the interactions so we may build as a community and expand our own knowledge of reliable epistemologies. Even if you hold a belief that often comes up in dialogues, we don't mind at all if you, as a believer, use Street Epistemology on our beliefs too. We are truth-seekers, and want to find out where we have been using unreliable epistemology to arrive at a belief.

You may come from a critical perspective of SE, and you are welcome to read over this guide and write about it. When you quote or paraphrase from the guide, we ask in the interests of accuracy and fair presentation that you kindly link back to the guide and mention the section heading where you found it so that readers can find the quote in its full context.

## 2 Street Epistemology

### 2.1 What it is

Street Epistemology is a movement to apply the tools of philosophy in everyday conversations in order to encourage people to use reliable ways of forming beliefs. While professional philosophers may publish articles and books, anyone who values truth can engage friends, family, community members, etc. in respectful dialogues about *how* beliefs are known to be true.

The goal is to encourage ourselves and others to examine the methods we use to judge the accuracy of truth claims, and ultimately to improve the reliability of our epistemology. While people may alter conclusions as a result, that is not the express goal. As Dr. Boghossian himself writes, "the core of the dialogue is not changing beliefs, but changing the way people form beliefs" [AMFCA, p72]. Neither participant should fear being persuaded into holding a false belief so long as a high standard for justification is sought. If anyone realizes that they have used an unreliable method to arrive at some belief, how they use that insight is entirely up to them. They are never pressured to accept any specific belief or to act against their own best interests.

### 2.2 Why we do it

Whether you realize it or not, you have arrived at your beliefs using specific criteria: modes of justification. Even when you intend to do good, you can produce bad outcomes when you act upon false beliefs. Street Epistemology addresses the root cause of such bad outcomes — not the people whose actions or inaction produce the outcomes, nor even the probably-false beliefs on which they acted, but the *unreliable methods* by which they tend to acquire such beliefs in the first place. By engaging in dialogue, you can put your epistemology to the test and help yourself and others more reliably arrive at true beliefs.

### 2.3 What it's based on

Street Epistemology is based on [Socratic Method](#) combined with the field of [epistemology](#). Knowing how to formulate good questions will work in most cases to uncover unreliable justifications. However, the better you understand epistemology, the more easily you can see where an interlocutor's implicit epistemology may be unreliable, and the more you will have to offer in terms of reliable alternatives. You will also be better-equipped to engage those interlocutors who make explicit use of epistemological theories or apologetic arguments in justifying their claims.

Next we will mention some specific philosophical ideas used in Street Epistemology. If you have never looked into epistemology, consider reading an introductory philosophy book or taking a class online, and watching the [Wireless Philosophy](#) and [Crash Course Philosophy](#) epistemology videos.

If we had to pick one word to sum up the epistemology that Street Epistemology is based on, it would be [reliabilism](#): the notion that what makes one justified in holding a belief is the truth-conduciveness of the process by which one arrived at the belief. How you get to your beliefs matters, because it affects how likely you are to have true beliefs. Reliabilism is implied in our stated goal of reducing reliance on *unreliable* epistemology. Since we humans are [fallible](#) (we cannot "know that we know") we settle for processes that with limited available evidence lead us to an appropriate degree of confidence regarding claims being true.

However, the Street Epistemologist is not dogmatic: we will use any theory of epistemology and any mode of justification as a tool, provided that for the type of claims at hand it tends to justify true claims and not false claims, with an appropriate degree of confidence. Like everyone we make use of [inductive reasoning](#) and [deductive reasoning](#), while being on guard for [fallacies](#). Being human we too acquire many of our beliefs through [testimony](#) (while being aware of its [problems](#)), and cannot help but make intuitive [coherentist](#) evaluations of plausibility when encountering new claims. However, with [Defeasibility Tests](#) we emphasise [falsifiability](#) — the mode of justification that powers much of modern science. We also compare and evaluate the probabilities of competing explanations using [Bayesian inference](#), and turn to [Occam's razor](#) to favor the simplest process that would generate observed events. We'll even dig into the justification of extraordinary claims in a somewhat [foundationalist](#) manner, by following the chain of justification until it reaches ordinary claims, and seeing whether the inference holds up. One could also say Street Epistemologists are being [pragmatic](#) when we apply [Outsider Tests](#), as we seek the practical consequences that enable us to adjudicate between competing claims.

## 2.4 When to use it

You can use Street Epistemology whenever a truth claim is being made. However it is most useful for extraordinary claims, such as miracles and supernatural phenomena, including:

- Existence of one or more gods or immaterial persons (theism).
- Phenomena that violate or suspend the operation of natural laws (supernaturalism, paranormal and psychic phenomena, miracles, karma).
- Biological death does not end one's existence as a conscious being (afterlife, reincarnation, resurrection).
- The effectiveness of healing modalities that science based medicine rejects as unproven or ineffective (quackery).
- The scientific validity of an idea or system which has never been adequately researched or fails under scientific testing (pseudosciences).
- A covert but powerful force/group is responsible for certain events or situations, where evidence of that force/group is lacking (conspiracy theories).

In such cases, we often encounter the following justifications, and the Street Epistemologist asks whether they are sufficiently reliable to warrant belief in the claim.

- **Faith:** When given as a reason for belief, it can be understood as firm confidence in the claim in excess of what is warranted by evidence. [[SEP: Faith](#)]
- **Numinous, revelatory, or mystical experiences** [[SEP: Religious Experience](#)]
- **Personal experiences:** answered prayers, "worked for me" therapies.
- **Testimony:** including personal anecdotes, tradition, authorities. Testimony is particularly vulnerable to errors and omissions by the reporter, intentional or not (even if only unreliability of perception and memory), and further errors if second hand. [[IEP: Testimony](#)],[[SEP: Epistemological Problems of Testimony](#)]

## 3 Preparing for dialogues

Prior to conducting Street Epistemology, take steps to prepare mentally as well as practically. This section covers mindset, materials, location, medium, and recording.

### 3.1 Developing the right mindset

#### 3.1.1 Promote good epistemology, not specific beliefs

Aim to improve the reliability of the methods we use to form beliefs — for your interlocutor and yourself. Stand in stark contrast to the street preachers, evangelists, debaters and others who aim to persuade others to adopt specific beliefs, by whatever means works, regardless of whether they are reliable guides to truth. Use Socratic dialogue to seek agreement on how reliable different ways of knowing are, with the long-term goal of everyone holding justified beliefs where it matters most.

**Ask yourself:** Do you seek to understand and promote better ways of knowing what claims are true, and not to promote specific claims of your own?

#### 3.1.2 Model doxastic openness

Model the epistemic attitudes that you want to see everywhere. In particular, be genuinely open to revising your own beliefs. You cannot fairly expect the interlocutor to be willing to revise their beliefs if you are not willing to do the same.

**Ask yourself:** If an interlocutor shows that they are using reliable epistemology that justifies belief in their proposition, would you honestly be willing to revise your own beliefs?

#### 3.1.3 Be collaborative and respectful

Be respectful, honest, curious, collaborative, empathetic and non-judgmental. Seek to understand what the interlocutor believes and how they justify their belief. Form a collaborative partnership to clarify the justifications and evaluate their reliability. Remind yourself that while beliefs deserve questioning, people deserve respect.

**Ask yourself:** Are you prepared to behave in a respectful, empathetic, and collaborative manner with your interlocutors?

### 3.1.4 Have an optimistic growth mindset

Treat each dialogue as an opportunity to practice and improve your skills, no matter the outcome. Cultivate an attitude of acceptance regarding outcomes. Not every request for a dialogue will be accepted; in fact, most are not. Be aware that in many discussions, you and the interlocutor will not come to agreement on anything of substance.

Also, note that even after reaching agreement that certain methods are unreliable, it is common for people to hold onto beliefs they no longer know to be true due to **social and emotional factors**.

**Ask yourself:** Do you see every interaction and every mistake as an opportunity to learn and grow? Do you accept that a mixture of outcomes is perfectly normal and that there are factors at work that you have no influence over?

### 3.1.5 Know what success looks like

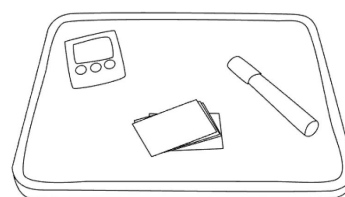
Take care to view your interactions as a potential learning experience for all parties, and not as some sort of “conquest”. Instead, strive to “sow seeds of doubt that will blossom into ever-expanding moments of doxastic openness” [AMFCA, pg 51]. Think of your questions as a pebble in the interlocutor’s shoe that will cause them to revisit the conversation all day long.

**Ask yourself:** In holding this dialogue, what do I want for myself, for the interlocutor, and for the relationship? What would a successful dialogue look like?

## 3.2 Presentation and materials

All you really need to bring is yourself and the right mindset. However, if you wish to carry out dialogues on the street, some materials can be helpful.

Bring writing materials such as a **whiteboard** and **marker**, or **clipboard** and **pad of paper**. Dialogues wander, and writing down the interlocutor's key points helps bring structure and focus, helps to avoid talking in circles, and enables you to illustrate epistemology with diagrams. Being prepared also shows that you are not a random passer-by but someone who is approaching people for a reason: namely to hold dialogues with the public about how they form beliefs.



Common SE Materials

Bring a **timer** or use the timer on your **phone** to limit the length of the dialogue. The timer helps to focus the dialogue and shows that you respect/value their time. When the time expires, it gives both of you an opportunity to exit the dialogue. You can always continue if

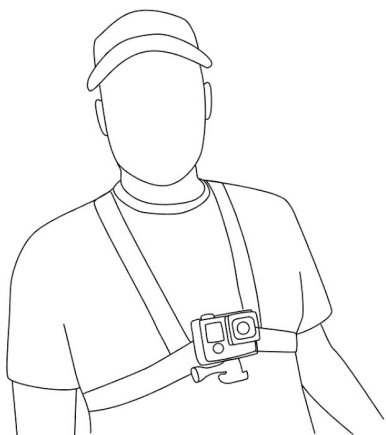
both parties are comfortable doing so. If you have trouble with dialogues running on, try setting a backup timer and when it goes off tell the interlocutor that you have to leave right now and suggest following up at another time.

Consider bringing **contact cards** or providing contact information to facilitate follow-up dialogues.

### 3.3 Recording dialogues

Consider recording your dialogues in order to monitor and improve your own performance, solicit constructive feedback, and demonstrate your techniques to others. Another option is broadcasting your dialogues using live-streaming technologies, like [Periscope](#). If you decide to record or broadcast dialogues, here are some tips.

Try to make the process of recording dialogues unobtrusive: if you are distracted by the filming process, it will likely distract your interlocutor as well.



**Hands-Free Recording Equipment**

Learn and follow local laws on recording people. Always ask for permission to record and to release the footage on video hosting sites, and remove any personal information beyond their first name from the recording. If an interlocutor does not want to be filmed, offer to [digitally blur](#) their face and remove even their name from the recording. They may then agree.

Holding the camera in your hand will produce poor quality video. Use something to attach the camera to your body, such as a chest harness. The footage will be more stable and it will free up your hands. A tripod is bulkier to carry around, but may allow you to both be in the scene.

Consider factors such as wind and distractions. You can modify equipment with a fuzzy wind breaker to reduce wind noise. Pay attention to background noise or unexpected noises, and turn your body so the noise is behind you. If the interlocutor is with friends, ask to move a few steps away to reduce noise and interruptions.

If a bystander insists on standing nearby, despite your requesting a one-on-one interview, you could assign them the task of holding a timer or capturing video from another angle. If the bystander interrupts your dialogue, use hand signals for “later.” Do not turn your head or body towards the interruption, to avoid disrupting the recording of your interlocutor.

<b>A Mobile Recording Setup</b>	
GoPro	Any model. 720p Wide with Max FPS seems to provide best quality at maximum storage efficiency.



Class 10 micro SD Card	32GB provides 2-3 hours of storage. 64GB recommended. Avoid exposure to liquids and static electricity. Deep format before each use.
GoPro Hero Chest Mount Harness	Essential. Allows hands-free use.
GoPro Batteries	Charge and leave charging until you are ready to head out. Don't expect a fully-charged battery to function days after sitting off-charger. Take several batteries with you and change in between talks.
GoPro Case	Replace solid, waterproof backing with open backing. Consider drilling holes in case to optimize sound capture. Add wind-reducing baffles to sides and/or backing minimize noise.

### 3.4 Choosing the medium

**Face to face encounters.** When speaking face-to-face, communication is enhanced through facial expressions, voice inflection, and body language. You can tell if the interlocutor is beginning to feel uncomfortable long before they express their discomfort in words, and correct misunderstandings immediately. Face-to-face is simply the highest-bandwidth communication medium possible between two people.

**Video calls/conferencing.** You might use a video call and lose some resolution in facial expressions and body language or be forced to cope with delays between replies. Though not as good as face-to-face discussions, this can be a good approximation.

**Audio only.** You can use an audio call although you'll lose all of the visual information and cues.

**Real time text chat.** With text chat you lose all visual and auditory information so the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations is greater. The less visual information you have, the more time you need to spend on clear communications that show the utmost respect. The cost is in time: a dialogue that takes minutes face-to-face can take hours over text.

**Email / Comment Threads.** By far the least effective medium for Street Epistemology is email or comment threads. Over email, a short dialogue can take weeks. It is tempting to tackle multiple points and ask multiple questions in a single message, which is antithetical to the single thread that characterizes Socratic dialogue. Comment threads have the additional disadvantage of being public, making interlocutors more likely to double-down to save face. If you begin a dialogue over a text-based medium, offer to hold a face-to-face meeting, or at least a video or audio call. If you must use text, keep your replies short and to the point: a couple sentences to summarize their main idea, followed by your one most promising question.

### 3.5 Choosing your interlocutors

You may not need to do much choosing; Sometimes interlocutors will come to you by offering a belief that you find worthy of examination. Your interlocutors may be friends, family, acquaintances, people you meet at social gatherings, people you meet on the street, or people you encounter over social media.

Be cautious when your relationship with the interlocutor is valuable to you. This raises the stakes. It's possible for a dialogue to go sour, especially when you are just starting out. You don't want to risk that in a relationship where there could be serious consequences. On the one hand, if it is a strong relationship, like a good friend or family member, it may easily handle a challenging dialogue involving deeply-held beliefs.

Take care when attempting Street Epistemology at work. A dialogue about deeply-held beliefs may go poorly and have long-term negative consequences. It may also be inappropriate or against the rules to discuss deeply-held beliefs in cases where you are expected to interact with someone on a purely professional level.

### 3.6 Choosing the Location

You may not have to choose a location; Be prepared for spontaneous opportunities for Street Epistemology whenever someone expresses a belief for which you lack a reliable way to know that it's true. Such opportunities can happen anywhere: chatting in the checkout, on the bus, over lunch with a co-worker, or in social situations such as conferences, out with friends, or at a party.

Like Socrates, you may wish to put the "street" into Street Epistemology by engaging the public in face-to-face dialogues about the epistemology behind their beliefs. Choose places where people are milling about and chatting in public already, where striking up a dialogue with a stranger is safe and socially acceptable. For example: public squares and markets, public gatherings of any sort, public college campuses, tourist sites, and pedestrian malls lined with cafés and shops. Avoid noisy or uncomfortable places for dialogue, such as public transport areas or streets with motorized traffic. Avoid places where your right to conduct interviews might be questioned, such as shops and private campuses, and places like quiet parks, where interacting with strangers breaks with social norms. If you are planning to ask people for a recorded interview, choose a quiet, well-lit location to minimize distracting sounds and interruptions.

If striking up a dialogue with strangers seems daunting, you may wish to begin in an online location instead of out in the "real world", but remember that the quality of communication will be reduced. You may find a good balance on public video chat systems.

There are some places in the world where political topics, especially criticism of the government, or criticism of certain religions, is dangerous. Never practice Street Epistemology if it places anyone's (especially your own) personal safety at risk.

## 4 Beginning the dialogue

If you are already on good terms with the person, starting a dialogue with them should not present a problem. This section deals mainly with the more difficult case of how to start epistemological dialogues with strangers

### 4.1 Approaching people on the street

Having [chosen the location](#), casually observe and identify friendly-looking people who seem relaxed. Avoid anyone who looks to be in a hurry. Even if a hurried person agrees to speak with you, they may not be able to focus on the dialogue. Look for people who are sitting down or strolling about. Be aware that approaching total strangers and asking them about what may be deeply-held beliefs can be stressful. It is normal to feel nervous and shaky or to doubt your abilities. Consciously acknowledging that it is normal to be nervous in such situations can paradoxically help to calm your nerves. You can also gradually increase your engagement with the public. Start by smiling and greeting people as they walk by. Slowly increase the number of sentences with each passerby (“**Good afternoon! Amazing weather today, yes?!**”) until you are ready to ask someone to actually stop and speak with you. After you have had a couple of dialogues, a feeling of confidence and optimism in being able to have deep discussions with a complete stranger may replace the anxiety you felt at the start.

### 4.2 Initiating the dialogue

After getting someone's attention, get right to the point with a polite and simple question, such as, “**Do you have five minutes to chat about how you arrived at your god belief?**”, or a similar question about any other belief. A question like this is non-intrusive and interesting. Smile and look people in the eye when you ask. When a person declines your request simply wish them a nice day, and move on. Accept that the choice to decline is a perfectly valid and normal response to a request. When a person accepts your request, thank them and greet them, and try to make them as comfortable as possible. Ask their first name and provide yours, using their name throughout the dialogue.

As mentioned in "[Preparing useful materials](#)", set a time limit on the interview. Ideally between 5 and 15 minutes. Avoid talking for more than 1 hour. It is difficult to maintain focus for much longer and you'll end up talking in circles. You also want your dialogue to be memorable, and it's very difficult to remember and reflect on all the topics covered in a marathon session.

### 4.3 One person at a time

Engage only one person at a time. The interaction will be much more honest, open, and sincere. An audience or bystander may interject and knock the dialogue off-track, make the interlocutor less willing to open up, and make them self-conscious of their status so that they are more likely to double-down or attempt to save face when privately they are beginning to doubt. If you are in the middle of a dialogue and a bystander cuts in to hinder the discussion,

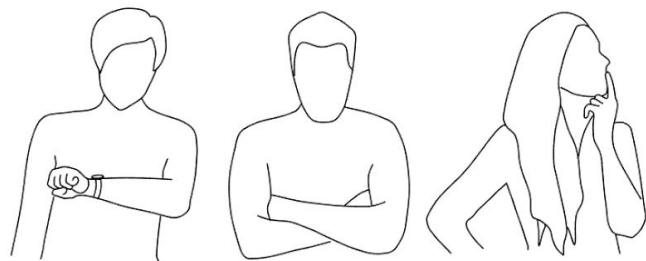
remember that the interlocutor can see what is happening as well. Offer the bystander a future conversation once the interlocutor and you are done talking. This also applies to discussions in other mediums such as text chats.

## 4.4 Building rapport

After having successfully engaged an interlocutor, establish a friendly environment and build rapport. You can ask general, small-talk questions first to make them comfortable. Asking their opinions about topics of current or local interest, can put them at ease, but also helps you build some context about them. Creating a sense of ease will help both your dialogue partner and you relax. You may also be able to build examples later on in the dialogue from these early clues about your interlocutor.

Adopt collaborative stance with the interlocutor. You are there to seek truth and reliable ways of knowing what's true, not to prove yourself right and them wrong. Frame the dialogue as a partnership. For example: **“How can we figure out whether there is a reliable way to know that this is true?”** Questioning deeply held beliefs can be uncomfortable. Strive for a balance between giving a pass on unreliable epistemology, and challenging a belief so directly that they end the dialogue.

Pay attention to your tone, body language and facial expressions, and maintain a relaxed manner. Watch for nonverbal clues that rapport is being lost: crossed arms, looking around, looking at their watch, nervousness, shaky hands. Point out that they appear worried, and offer to continue the dialogue another day. You can even ask if they feel comfortable continuing the conversation. The offer may put them more at ease and they may agree to continue. Reiterate your collaborative intent.



**Pay attention to body language**

Use humor carefully. Some people take their beliefs very seriously, and may interpret attempts at humor as disrespectful of their beliefs or mocking them. If you do like to use humor in building rapport, use it on a subject other than the belief under discussion.

## 4.5 Eliciting a controversial belief

After building rapport, elicit a belief worth discussing: one where you find the claim to be implausible, where you presently lack any reliable way to know that the claim is true, and where you think there are important consequences to holding the belief. The belief may already be on the table, in which case you can skip to the next step. If not, here are some ways to go about finding one.

You might try defining the subject up front by saying something like, **"Do you have a few minutes for a quick interview?"** then **"I'm interviewing people on the reliability of the methods they use to form their god beliefs - do you have any such beliefs?"** If you're specifically targeting faith, AMFCA-style, you might say **"Do you rely on faith to be confident about your religious beliefs?"** Asking different opening questions can lead to very different subjects of dialogue.

Religion is the most common topic of dialogues but there can be many others. You can ask whether they believe in any supernatural or paranormal phenomena such as ghosts or psychic powers. If the interlocutor lacks all supernatural beliefs, there is still plenty of pseudoscience, quackery and conspiracy theorizing out there. Don't use those terms, however, as the negative connotations may put the interlocutor on the defensive. Ask instead what they think about climate change (it's a hot topic), theories outside mainstream science, alternative medicines and therapies, and whether they think some powerful but covert group is secretly responsible for major events. See "[When to use it](#)" for more suggestions.

Even if the interlocutor holds no supernatural, pseudoscience or conspiracy-theory beliefs that doesn't mean all their beliefs are well-justified. You may even agree with them on something, but it turns out that the interlocutor got lucky and came to believe it by means of an unreliable method. For example, if someone relies on personal experiences of hot summers in recent years to conclude that climate change is real, there is still room to improve that person's epistemology.

Finally, even people who apply high epistemological standards to claims about what's real may have more lax standards in their political or ethical beliefs. In such areas, the influence of morals, values and the complexity of human societies does make it much more difficult to judge how well their beliefs concord with reality. You might ask what they believe about a current political or societal topic of interest.

## 4.6 Eliciting the interlocutor's confidence

Getting a sense of how confident your interlocutor is in the belief early on as will help you to work out how to proceed, and work out how much their confidence has changed (if at all) as an immediate result of the dialogue.

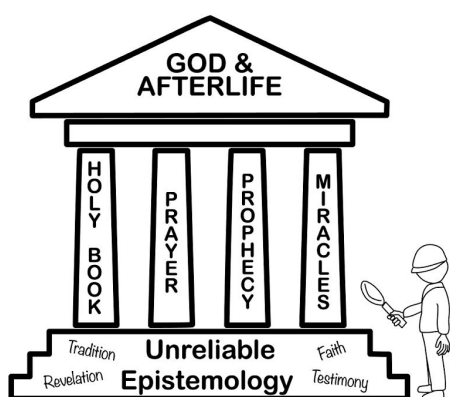
The easiest way to gauge the interlocutor's confidence is by listening to how assured they sound when talking about their belief. You can make them aware of their own level of confidence by asking directly, **"How confident are you that the belief is true?"** You might present a "belief scale" by asking, **"On a scale from zero to one hundred, how confident are you that your belief is true?"** If they are uncomfortable putting a number on their confidence, accept a qualitative strength of belief such as "absolutely", "almost certainly", "very confident", "probably", etc. If they resist or hesitate to qualify their degree of confidence, just go with it and move on.

For someone absolutely confident (100%), you might first examine human fallibility. If they are fairly confident (70-99%), you may look at their major sources of confidence. If they are not very confident (<50%), you may ask what is holding them back from discarding the belief. At the end of the talk, ask about the interlocutor's confidence level again. Compare it to their confidence at the beginning to get a feeling for how far (if any) they have moved and in which direction.

## 4.7 Eliciting the interlocutor's epistemology

The interlocutor's epistemology is the method of justification that they use to know the belief is true, such as faith, testimony, or personal experience. There may be many. To elicit their way of knowing, you might ask **"How did you (originally) conclude that this belief was true?"** By asking about how they originally formed the belief, they are less likely to fall back on answering "How do you make your belief sound reasonable to someone else?"

If they offer multiple justifications, you could ask **"What are the top three things that make you confident that your belief is true?"** — this gives you some options to pick the most promising line first. If you suspect the interlocutor is in fact relying on a specific method (such



as faith) but is reluctant to expose reliance on a method that may seem less persuasive to others, you might ask about that method directly — **"What role does X have in your knowing that the belief is true?"**

Be aware that the first justification that the interlocutor gives is not necessarily a major contributor to their confidence. They may be repeating what they've heard others say, or what they think sounds reasonable to others, instead of what really gives them confidence in the belief. You may examine that justification and agree that it's unreliable, only to find that the interlocutor

doesn't care. To avoid this, ask the interlocutor **"How confident would you be in the belief without X?"** If it turns out that X matters little to their confidence, try again by asking **"What gives you the most confidence that your belief is true?"**, and check that they would indeed be less confident without that critical foundation.

The interlocutor may give a justification for their belief that relies on an equally extraordinary claim, such as a specific miracle. In this case think of yourself as a foundation inspector. Work with the interlocutor to determine whether their beliefs are built on solid ground or shifting sand. Dig deeper into the foundations of the interlocutor's belief system by asking, **"What gives you confidence that X is true?"** Keep digging until you reach a justification that is not based on something extraordinary. At that point you are ready to begin inspecting the quality of the foundation, determining the reliability of the methods that the interlocutor uses to know that the foundational belief is true.

## 5 Managing the dialogue

This section provides general-purpose techniques for managing the dialogue.

## 5.1 Building respect

Respect is like air: you only notice it when it's not there. The moment mutual respect is lost between you and the interlocutor, the dialogue ceases to be about the original subject, and becomes *entirely* about respect until respect is restored or you part ways. As such, you can only make progress so long as there is mutual respect.

Take care to affirm that you value the interlocutor as a human being, and that you believe that they are well-meaning and intelligent. In matters of social interaction "perception is often reality", meaning that if the interlocutor perceives your behavior as disrespectful, that suffices to make your behavior disrespectful. People take things personally; If you call someone's ideas stupid, they will likely think that you are calling *them* stupid. People also read between the lines; If you suggest that they don't truly believe something they will think you are calling them a liar. Of course, people do have bad ideas, and do tell lies. The trick is in addressing a specific behavior, pattern of behavior, or set of ideas, while simultaneously affirming the person.

Some interlocutors may begin with little respect for you. For example, they may peg you as an amoral, untrustworthy, spiritually blind heathen. They may assume that you have no respect for them and treat you likewise. This makes it important to build rapport and respect first before getting into deep dialogue. Be sensitive to any indications that the interlocutor has taken offense or is becoming aggressive. If this happens, don't forge ahead with challenging questions — step out of the dialogue, and rebuild respect. Only then return to the dialogue.

One way to rebuild respect is with contrasting. For example, after asking the interlocutor whether it's possible they are mistaken about the cause of an experience, they might take that as an insult to their intelligence and start defending their education. If this happens, continue with what you don't mean: **"I'm not questioning your intelligence or education,"** then contrast with a clarification of what you do mean: **"When I asked whether you could be mistaken, I meant whether anyone—even the most intelligent and well-educated of people—could make an error in attributing the cause of an experience."**

When the interlocutor is unaware of some fact or holds a [common misconception](#), don't feign surprise by saying something like, "I can't believe you don't know that". People know the difference between feigned surprise as a put-down and genuine surprise at an unexpected response.

## 5.2 Remaining calm

It's easier said than done to remain calm and relaxed, since interlocutors may express a myriad of emotions, including anger and disgust when they begin to doubt the underpinnings of deeply cherished beliefs. By remaining calm, you can help to calm your interlocutor as well. Of course you should always end the interview if confronted with hostility.

You can help to remain calm by reminding yourself that you are not in a battle. You are collaborating with your interlocutor to find the best way of knowing what is true. Most of us have tried and failed to argue people out of seemingly unreasonable positions, and found the collaborative approach more successful in moving dialogue forward — as well as more pleasant for all parties!

You can also model the behavior you want to see: take time to consider your answers, and they may take time to consider your questions. If you sense discomfort, you can de-escalate in response. Slow down and recap where you are and what you are trying to achieve together. You will learn to notice when you are becoming impatient or agitated and take a step back to refocus.

Redefine what "success" means. Even if you do not achieve any detectable change in your interlocutor's confidence, you may still have planted some seeds in their mind that they will ponder later. Your interaction may have dispelled previously held, negative opinions about atheists for example. If onlookers were present, some of them may have been swayed even if the person you were talking to wasn't. Review the section on "[Developing the right mindset](#)" often.

Finally, remember that nobody is perfect and we all make mistakes. Every conversation is an opportunity to learn from what went well (or not so well), and to improve your skills. See [Reflecting on your performance](#) for a list of elements to review and assess after each interview. Focus on the ways you can improve, rather than the mistakes you've made.

### 5.3 Answering questions about your beliefs

If asked about your own beliefs you should be prepared to answer. When doing so, model the epistemic stance you would like to see in your interlocutors: analyzing beliefs, seriously considering ways in which your belief could be false, and doxastic openness - clear and genuine willingness to revise your beliefs if warranted.

You may be asked about your beliefs if you ask a good question for which your interlocutor doesn't have a ready answer. To deal with this, offer to discuss your beliefs *after* the timed interview, or in a follow-up discussion where the tables are turned. You might say that you are interested in how we might know whether their claim is true, rather than promoting your own beliefs. If the interlocutor asks if you believe X when you are fairly sure you do not, you might reinforce your openness by saying, **"Right now I lack a reliable way to know X, but I'm interested to find out whether there is one."** If your interlocutor is truly interested in what you believe and why, it can wait until after the interview or a follow-up discussion. You may only be seconds away from the end, if the interlocutor agrees that the way of knowing they've been using is not reliable.

When you do answer their questions, model reliable epistemology by apportioning your confidence to the available evidence and remaining open to new evidence. You can present things you believe about reality that seem inconsistent with the interlocutor's belief. Use "I" statements to admit the possibility that you are mistaken, instead of presenting your beliefs



as definite facts. Presenting contrary claims as definite facts may get you into a debate because the interlocutor will reject them. Phrase things to avoid triggering the interlocutor's prejudices: if they seem prejudiced about "atheists", say instead that you think gods are unlikely. Also avoid referring to their belief with what they might take as a pejorative terms, for example "conspiracy theory" or "pseudoscience". This is called "[unpacking](#)" a contentious concept.

Lastly and most importantly, if you don't know something, simply answer "I don't know". Demonstrating the willingness to be okay with uncertainty may help them feel safe in doing the same.

## 5.4 The "Spider on the ceiling"

If your interlocutor pauses for an unusually long time to answer a question they will often tilt their head and look up as if observing a spider on the ceiling. Be alert for this. When it happens they may be experiencing an "[aporia](#)" — a state of puzzlement or a sudden inability to resolve an internal contradiction. This is a very good thing! Don't interrupt the pause; allow them to reflect on their answer. It provides an opportunity for them to recognize the discrepancy and consider how it affects their justification for the belief. If you speak too soon, you interrupt that important process. This pause for reflection may be more powerful than anything you could say in those few seconds.

Use the pause yourself to assess the state of the dialogue and think about the next steps. Rushing them to answer will likely come across as rude, and doesn't give them time to reflect, leading them to fall back on standard responses. They will speak when they have collected their thoughts. Learning these deliberate pauses may be challenging if you are accustomed to debating, as it can be difficult to resist jumping in with your next question. Nevertheless, you should practice it at every opportunity as it is very important.

Note that pausing for the interlocutor to answer is not the same as allowing the interlocutor to dominate the dialogue with verbose answers that distract from the purpose of the interview. An occasional polite interruption may be necessary to keep the dialogue on track.

These pauses are often the best time to end the encounter and thank your interlocutor for their time. You should also consider a "spider moment" to be a success even if you achieve nothing more in the dialogue. It signifies that they have genuinely reflected on whether or not their beliefs are truly justified.

## 5.5 Summarizing their position

Take care to avoid misunderstandings by focusing intently on what your interlocutor is telling you and clarifying the interlocutor's position before asking a challenging question. If you have to, write key points down so you can later revisit them. If you are having trouble making out their words, try summarizing their statements back to them and check whether you heard them correctly. What goes for the words also goes for concepts: if their point is difficult, rephrase it in a way that you find easier to grasp and ask whether you understood them

correctly. Don't move on to your question if they have not agreed that you understood them. If you later discover that you have misunderstood their position, recognize and apologize for the error.

When summarizing their position, talk about what you've heard rather than what they've said: **"What I'm hearing is ..."** or **"If I understand you correctly, ..."**. Don't put words into their mouth with "you" statements such as, "You mean that ..." or "What you're saying is ..." Such statements may sound accusatory and trigger defensiveness. You may however phrase your summary in a way that makes flawed reasoning more obvious, but do so free from terms that imply a negative value judgement. This gives the interlocutor a chance to spot the flaw and refine their statement.

Summarize the interlocutor's beliefs with non-possessive phrasing: talk about "the belief" and "this way of knowing" rather than "*your* belief" or "*your* way of knowing". Talk about the belief as an independent thing that you are both examining. This will help them feel safer questioning it. People build part of their identities on certain core beliefs, which is partly what makes those beliefs extremely tenacious, and why people take offense when they are questioned [Geoffrey L. Cohen: Identity, Belief, and Bias, 2012]. By consistently referring to "the belief" not "your belief", you avoid conflating their identity with what they believe. This can put them more at ease during the interview and more willing to question the belief.

## 5.6 Asking questions effectively

Asking challenging questions about our ways of knowing is at the heart of SE. *What* to ask is covered under [Examining epistemology](#), and you can find thousands of examples of questions in the [Atheos App](#). Here we look at *how* you ask your questions. The delivery of your questions will have a major impact on how they are received. You should ask them in an open, neutral manner, free from assumptions. Ask yourself, "Would I consider this a fair question if it were asked about my beliefs?" If not, maybe it's not a fair question to ask about their beliefs.

### 5.6.1 Asking open questions

Try to ask your questions in an open manner. Phrase it as an open-ended "how", "what", or "why" question. These invite explanations, which give you the opportunity to better understand your interlocutor's position and choose the best approach to examine the foundational belief. Compare that to a yes/no question or a "who" or "where" question which needs only a short answer. For example, "Do you believe in God?" is closed (yes/no), while **"What beliefs do you have regarding a god or gods?"** is open and invites a nuanced explanation of their position. Sometimes there is no natural way to open up your question — because what you are offering is in fact a statement. It's okay to use such "..., do you agree?" statement-questions sparingly to move the dialogue forward by agreement.

### 5.6.2. Using neutral language

Find ways to make your questions neutral. For example, if you present a defeasibility test by asking "What evidence would lower your confidence in the belief?", the word "lower" implies

that you want to take away their belief. This may trigger a defensive response to protect their belief instead of analyze it honestly. However, if you replace "lower" with the more neutral word "change", as in **"What evidence would change your confidence in the belief?"**, the question becomes non-threatening by admitting answers regarding evidence that would increase their confidence.

Ask your question using "we" instead of "you", as if you are colleagues working together on the problem. For example, **"How might we use faith to decide which claim is correct?"** instead of the more-accusatory "How might *you* use faith...". This is part of building a collaborative partnership with your interlocutor. You can also use "one" instead of "you" to make a question less personal and more general: **"How does one being raised with this belief make it true?"** versus "How does your being raised with this belief make it true?"

Avoid leading questions and words that carry emotional or moral judgments. For example, "You can't use faith to determine which claim is correct, can you?" is leading, negative, and closed. It seems to imply only "No, I can't" as a valid answer. Compare that to asking **"How might we use faith to determine which claim is correct?"** This is neutral and open. It allows for the possibility that the interlocutor has a way to do so, even if you think there isn't one.

Keep in mind that you will learn by doing. You will likely ask questions poorly at first, and only discover this after reflecting on the conversation later. Don't get discouraged though. It will definitely get easier with practice!

## 5.7 Giving and receiving feedback

We all need feedback to learn and grow — but it can be challenging to deliver it without raising defenses and receive it without becoming defensive. You might receive unsolicited feedback for example if you are asking too many questions, or interrupting the interlocutor. You might solicit the interlocutor's feedback after the dialogue to discover ways to improve your manner, and what you are doing well. You can accept feedback more easily by setting aside your ego: tell yourself that this is feedback on your behavior and a great opportunity to learn and improve — it is not an attack on your value or character.

As you receive feedback, so should you be willing to give feedback to your interlocutors. You might give positive feedback, such as encouraging the interlocutor when they show willingness to revise beliefs, when they engage openly with difficult questions, when they become more ok with not knowing, and when they determine to act on a realization that some way of knowing is not so reliable. You might also find yourself in the uncomfortable position of giving negative feedback about difficult behaviors such as rambling, derailing the dialogue into unrelated topics, delivering lengthy monologues, evading questions, responding to every question with the same few talking points, being aggressive or using insults.

How you deliver the feedback has great impact on the outcome for yourself, the interlocutor and the relationship. Most importantly, ensure that safety is in place — if you sense

defensiveness, your feedback will only make them more defensive (see [Building respect](#)). Assuming you are in a position where your feedback won't be perceived as an attack, deliver it by first outlining the situation where the behavior occurred, then describing what they did, and lastly by explaining the impact, positive or negative, that their behavior had. Pause to let them absorb it, and let them suggest what they might do in future, only giving your recommendation if they ask for it.

## 6 Examining epistemology

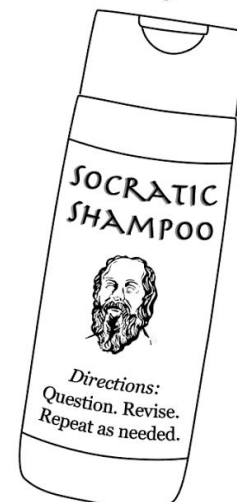
Here we get to the heart of the matter - exactly how do you work towards mutual agreement on whether a way of knowing is sufficiently reliable to justify using it to believe the claim in question?

### 6.1 The Socratic method

Socratic dialogue is the core dialectical technique used in Street Epistemology. Your questions help the interlocutor to use what they already know to see where they may have gone wrong in reaching a conclusion. Socratic Dialogue is far more powerful than presenting counter-arguments which they can find any reason to dismiss. As presented in AMFCA, the Socratic method proceeds through five steps:

1. **Wonder:** The big question.
2. **Hypothesis:** The interlocutor's proposed answer to the question.
3. **Elenchus:** Question and answer to discover what other reasonable propositions are likely to be true that refute the hypothesis. Proceed by mutual agreement at every step - elenchus is not a debate.
4. **Accept or Revise:** Refine or revise the hypothesis - either without vulnerability to that elenchus, with reduced confidence, or even rejecting it. On the other hand, if the hypothesis survives repeated attempts at elenchus, provisionally accept it.
5. **Act accordingly:** Reduce confidence in and reliance on the hypothesis that is refuted by elenchus.

*Stimulates the mind's natural critical thinking skills...*



*washing away poor epistemology and unreasoned beliefs!*

The contradiction that weakly or strongly refutes the hypothesis may derive from:

- The hypothesis itself - a strong refutation.
- Mutually agreed-on facts - a moderate refutation.
- Claims agreed to be plausible or probable - a weak refutation.

One way to characterize Street Epistemology is simply as the Socratic method applied to wonder-questions of the form "**What ways of knowing are sufficiently reliable to justify**

**holding this belief?"**, where the interlocutor's way of knowing is the hypothesis: "X is sufficiently reliable to justify holding this belief".

The elenchus may show that the same justification applies equally to two or more mutually contradictory conclusions (the principle behind the Outsider Test). Or, the elenchus may show that the justification is a weak test that is passed with ease by other beliefs that you both agree to be false. Such elenchi show that the way of knowing is an unreliable process for generating true beliefs about the types of claim being considered. If the interlocutor cannot find a more reliable process leading to the claim, they should in the long run reduce their confidence in the claim.

Successful elenchus may result in an aporia — that they do not know what they thought they knew. An aporia can provide a moment of doxastic openness in which the interlocutor is more willing to revise their beliefs.

## 6.2 Asking the right questions

Street Epistemology applies Socratic Method to ask challenging questions about how we know what's true. You'll find that there is no simple formula or script, rather it's a skill that takes practice and patience to develop.

However, we can still give some general advice on crafting good questions. First and foremost, stay focused on how they came to their beliefs rather than on whether the beliefs are true or not. Their claims may indeed be true, but we are only justified in believing them if we have a reliable way of *knowing* them to be true. Discovering which process they use is covered in [Eliciting the interlocutor's epistemology](#).

Once they offer some way of knowing, do not assume that their process is unreliable, lest the dialogue devolves into "It is reliable!", "No, it's not reliable!" gainsaying (see Monty Python's [Argument Clinic](#)). Work only from assumptions that the both of you agree on, and work backwards from the interlocutor's starting point. This applies even if they are using faith: you are then in a dialogue where *you* believe faith to be unreliable, and *they* believe otherwise. So meet them where they are — they think faith is a reliable way of knowing, and you ask questions to explore whether or not that is true. Leave open the possibility that they have some way to show that their way of knowing is reliable. Frame it as a collaboration in that you both share the goal of agreeing on *just how reliable this way of knowing is*. It's even possible that you could be the one moving toward their position.

## 6.3 Deepities

Coined by philosopher Dr Daniel Dennett, a [deepity](#) is a proposition or definition that seems profound at first glance by having meanings on multiple levels - but on closer inspection these meanings turn out to be either true but trivial or significant but false (or even nonsensical). Classic deepities include "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen", "love is just a word", "everything is connected" and "reality is created by consciousness". You can find many more examples in the deepities test in the

[Atheos App](#), and a recent paper "[On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit](#)" (Pennycook et al, 2015).

If your interlocutor uses what appears to be a deepity you should not assume that it is a deepity, nor accuse them of using a deepity. Instead, ask them to unpack the meaning(s) of their statement, in plain language. Try to rephrase plainly in a way they might agree with, and ask them what they would change about your rephrasing. Hopefully you can work towards agreeing on a non-deepity version of their definition or claim, which is tractable and won't slip away into a different meaning the moment you ask a challenging question about it.

## 6.4 Faith

Faith mostly comes up in discussions about religious belief, but occasionally in other contexts. When it does, work with the interlocutor to agree on a straightforward definition of faith, and don't start examining the reliability of faith until you've agreed on what faith is. Often people will agree that faith has an element of "choosing to be more confident than you would be if you were relying solely on evidence," though more likely phrased along the lines of "evidence brings you only so far, faith takes you the rest of the way [to knowing]." It can work to first agree with a positively-worded definition of faith as a way of knowing, and then raise equivalent rephrasings that make the epistemological weaknesses more obvious. Don't expect to the interlocutor to agree on "pretending to know things you don't know" as a working definition.

People also make use of the word "faith" to mean strong belief or trust in someone or something ([Merriam-Webster](#)). The "faith as trust" definition makes sense if by "faith in God" one means "trusting God to fulfil certain promises". Such a definition does not make sense in the context of "trusting God to *exist*" - and yet often a believer will say "evidence alone is not enough to know God is real, you also need faith". They're not talking about trusting a human being such as their religious leader or the author(s) of their holy book to be correct about God's reality: they're talking about believing anyway, without the evidence. Even so, an equivocation of faith that allows it to also mean "trust" is much of what gives faith status as a moral virtue in religious circles: to not have faith is seen as being mistrustful or even disloyal. If your interlocutor defines faith in terms of trust, you might still be able to agree that such a definition does not work well for the question of God's very existence. AMFCA also has a section entitled "Disambiguation: Faith Is Not Hope" on page 26 that may help with this.

You may meet sophisticated believers who use the word "faith" differently from popular usage. For example, they may use "faith" to mean the act of committing to a belief that one arrived at through evidence and reason — faith commitment as an act of doxastic closure. In this case, they aren't claiming to use faith as a way of knowing their beliefs are true, but rather as an end state of some other way of knowing. They may also use "faith" to mean simply *acting* on what you consider likely to be true, as in "you have faith when you cross the road". You might have some luck seeking to clarify the difference between "faith in God's existence" and broader uses of the word. Such interlocutors generally claim that to have sufficient (non-faith) evidence to warrant relatively high confidence, so you will have to examine the reliability of these justifications.

## 6.5 Relativism

Relativism in epistemology is the idea that true and false are relative to the context in which they arise [[SEP: Relativism](#)]. In dialogues, you most frequently encounter this in the refrain "My religion is true for me; and their religion is true for them", "All paths lead to God" or "All religions are equally true".

In applying relativism, the interlocutor is treating religious claims as if they are subjective. A subjective claim might be "Chocolate is my favorite flavor of ice cream" or "this ice cream tastes weird to me" — it's a claim about your own preferences or perceptions; true for you, possibly false for someone else. An objective claim is one that is true or false for everyone regardless of their beliefs or opinions (provided they are defining words the same way), such as "The mass of this ice cream is 75-80 grams". Holding a claim to be both subjective (true for me) and objective (as a statement about the external world) entails a contradiction that you can use Socratic elenchus to draw out, if you can first agree on the ideas of subjective and objective claims.

One increasingly common flavor of relativism is the idea that "All gods are the same god." This is subtly different from "It's true for me". It's a *new* claim that contradicts what followers of most religions believe about their God being the real one. It's easy enough to ask questions that make this obvious: people use faith, experiences, and holy books to come to very different and contradictory conclusions about the nature of god. You can also ask how the interlocutor knows that all gods are in fact one, and examine their ways of knowing, as usual.

You can also use the anti-relativism roadmap presented in [AMFCA](#), Chapter 8: Beyond Relativism, which addresses the "It's true for you" brand of relativism. Broadly, you start by addressing whether some people misconstrue reality by coming to false conclusions about it. You then introduce the idea of processes for knowing reality, and whether some are more reliable than others. For example, flipping a coin is an unreliable process for knowing reality — you'll only be right 50% of the time. Then you talk about how to discover which processes are more reliable, perhaps using ideas about evaluating reliability from the section on "[Asking questions effectively](#)".

## 6.6 Outsider tests

Popularized by author John W. Loftus (a former Christian apologist turned atheist) in his book, "[The Outsider Test for Faith: How to Know Which Religion Is True](#)", the Outsider Test for Faith helps interlocutors to see that their reasons for believing are no different from the reasons used by those from other religions, and thus not a good way to judge which religion is true. You can use an outsider test for any kind of evidence used to justify contradictory conclusions. For religions, this includes faith, numinous experiences, fulfilled prophecies, reported miracles, and answered prayers.



For example, to apply the outsider test to a Christian who claims that faith gives them confidence that Jesus is real, first clarify what they mean by faith. Then ask "**Does the Hindu have faith that Vishnu is real?**" Usually, they will agree. If not, you might have to clarify further what constitutes faith. Then ask something along the lines of, "**If the Hindu and the Christian both use faith to become confident about different gods being real, how can faith help *me* to determine which is real?**"

Pick an outsider religion that is as incompatible as possible with the interlocutor's religion: Hinduism is usually a good outsider to any Abrahamic religion, while Islam makes a good outsider to Hinduism because Islam is emphatically monotheistic. Avoid picking the dominant religion in your area as interlocutors may assume you are trying to convert them.

You can also see the outsider test of faith in the form of a 5-step Socratic dialogue:

1. **Wonder:** How can we reliably know that this god is real?
2. **Hypothesis:** Having faith is a reliable way to know this god is real.
3. **Elenchus:** Do many religions use faith? (yes) Do religions all believe in the same god, with identical attributes? (no) How can one use faith to determine which religion has the correct god? (you can't — the elenchus, ideally provided by the interlocutor themselves)
4. **Accept or revise:** Faith does not reliably lead one to true belief regarding the reality of a specific god.
5. **Act accordingly:** Don't use faith to be confident about the reality of a god.

You can then cycle back to wonder, and the interlocutor may provide other hypotheses. After many hypotheses are found insufficiently reliable, they may begin themselves to question whether there is a sufficiently reliable way to know. Be alert for the "[spider on the ceiling](#)"!

Outsider tests work best in the religious domain, where you find competing claims based on the same ways of knowing. They don't work well in pseudoscience and conspiracy theory domains for example, where you find many independent claims, and people who believe one such claim often also believe many others by using similar ways of knowing. With any kind of claim, you can help the interlocutor find more plausible explanations for the evidence they've provided, as well as real-life instances where people make errors when relying on the same way of knowing that they provided.

## 6.7 Defeasibility tests

Sometimes the interlocutor is doxastically closed in the sense that they believe they *cannot* be mistaken. In a sense, their belief in the claim is stronger than their commitment to reason and evidence. You can use a defeasibility test [McCormick, 2011: [The Defeasibility Test](#)] to introduce a glimmer of uncertainty.

To use the defeasibility test, start by asking "What evidence would change your confidence in the truth of this claim?" Another way to phrase it is literally as a test: "How might we test the belief, in a way that would be difficult to pass if the belief were false?" Avoid using



scientific terms like "hypothesis" and "falsifiable" [\[Wikipedia\]](#) with people unfamiliar with those terms - they may misinterpret you as asking them to demonstrate that their belief is false, when you are really asking them to devise a test that the belief should fail if it were false. Instead, use words like "test", "study", or "examine".

Your interlocutor may give evidence that would make them *more* confident. If they were already 100% confident, you might ask how this is possible. Your next step is to ask, **"And what evidence would make you *less* confident?"** They may say it would take *extraordinary* evidence to reduce their confidence — but do they have extraordinary evidence to support their confidence? They may also cite some specific evidence that would reduce their confidence - as in the "bones of Christ" dialogue in [AMECA](#) [p 59-62]. If this happens, ask them to be more specific about the criteria. You might then discuss the ways in which one could easily discredit any claim of having acquired said evidence, since it would be extraordinary for such "evidence" to exist in the first place. They may suggest evidence that obviously does not or cannot exist, or would be highly unlikely to exist even if the belief were false.

They may even claim that no evidence could alter their confidence — their belief is self-affirming. If they value evidence at all, try asking **"If evidence has no power to alter your confidence, are you really believing based on evidence in the first place?"** This may move them to bring up faith. You may also ask about human fallibility: **"Do humans ever misconstrue reality?"**, and ask how they can distinguish a false self-affirming belief from a true one. They may say their belief is more fundamental than evidence and reason itself, which means you may have encountered a case of presuppositional apologetics [\[Wikipedia\]](#), which is beyond the scope of this guide.

## 6.8 What to avoid

Knowing what to do is half the story. You'll also need to know what *not* to do, particularly when "what not to do" is something that comes naturally or intuitively to people. The following are some easy-to-make mistakes:

**Arguing or debating:** It is a common mistake to revert to the default mode of presenting facts and arguments when the interlocutor makes a claim that you believe to be wrong. It's very tempting to think that if you simply present relevant facts and reasoning, they will realize they are mistaken. Resist the temptation! Presenting good evidence to an unreliable epistemology that doesn't value evidence is not going to help. You will only turn a dialogue into a debate, and the interlocutor may double-down by finding ways to dispute or interpret contrary facts so as to defend their conclusion. This is known as the "backfire effect", net result being that one becomes more confident in a false belief over time due as one finds more ways to discount or reinterpret contrary data to one's own satisfaction.

**Targeting reasonable hypotheses:** If the interlocutor makes some reasonable hypothesis or plausible claim, for example claiming the occurrence of a mundane event in a holy text, you may be tempted to target how they know it happened. Don't do it. Mundane evidence

will do for mundane claims. Stay focused on the extraordinary claims, the ones that call for extraordinary evidence.

**Denigrating the interlocutor's personal experience:** By the same token, don't challenge whether someone in fact experienced something that seemed to them to be transcendent or miraculous. Target instead the process by which they concluded that their experience had a supernatural cause.

**Constructing hypothetical scenarios:** Avoid introducing hypothetical scenarios, because they are weaker than real scenarios. You can see when you are getting hypothetical when you use the [subjunctive mood](#): "If you *were to*...". For example, when the interlocutor says they use faith, and you ask "What if someone *were to* use faith to know that there are unicorns living on a distant planet — how reliable is faith at guiding them to a true belief?" the interlocutor can point out that this is a made-up scenario, it doesn't actually happen. Instead, make the observation that many people right now are actually (not hypothetically!) using faith to believe in many competing religions.

While thought experiments like Russell's Teapot [[Wikipedia](#)] and Brain-in-a-Vat [[IEP](#)] are common in philosophical arguments, prefer to keep the dialogue grounded in the here and now, rather than drifting into hypothetical worlds.

**Asking too many questions:** The too-many-questions mistake shows up more in online comment threads: asking more than one question in your turn, interrupting with another question before the interlocutor has finished their answer, or asking a follow-up question without checking that you understood their previous answer. In comments and email it is tempting to deal with multiple topics and present multiple questions and skip the "Did I understand you?" step, because of the long turnaround time for replies. Don't do it. If you are impatient, upgrade to a call or face-to-face meeting. Think of your one best question and ask it. When the interlocutor replies, rephrase and summarize their point and ask whether you have understood them correctly. If you have, you can move on to the next question. Make the interlocutor's thought process crystal clear to them so that they can see the flaws, and that requires working one step at a time.

## 7 Ending the dialogue

Ending a dialogue in a polite, considerate, positive way can increase the interlocutor's sense of having had a meaningful conversation with you.

### 7.1 When to end the dialogue

Your best moment to end the dialogue is if the interlocutor experiences a moment of realization that they don't know what they thought they knew. Your best indication that this is happening is when you detect a "spider moment". See [The "Spider on the ceiling"](#). Ending the dialogue there leaves the interlocutor pondering their own epistemology. They may continue reflecting on it long after the dialogue. If you end at another point, they are less likely to engage in such reflection.

On the other hand if you see indications that the dialogue is heading downhill, it is better to end it on a positive note. Here are some signs that the dialogue is overdue for wrapping up:

- The time you agreed on for the dialogue is up.
- The dialogue wanes or becomes repetitive.
- Either of you has somewhere else to go.
- Either of you is becoming irritated or impatient.
- Either of you is slowing, shutting down or losing interest.
- Either of you is feeling overloaded - too many questions to think about.
- Either of you seem determined to keep the other there until they "win".

Do not hesitate to end the conversation if the interlocutor appears intoxicated, becomes verbally/physically aggressive, or seems otherwise incapable of understanding your questions. Productive dialogue is impossible under these circumstances.

You may also uncover information which presents an ethical dilemma, such as someone who is developmentally disabled or critically ill and relying on their beliefs for emotional support. Refer back to [Developing the right mindset](#) to ensure you are choosing to engage for the right reasons. If you determine that ethically responsible conditions no longer exist, it's time to wrap up the dialogue in a positive manner.

## 7.2 Ending in a positive manner

These are some things you can do to help end the dialogue on a positive note:

- Thank the person for their time.
- Apologize for any conversational missteps.
- Mention things they did that you thought well of, such as reconsidering beliefs, contemplating change, or engaging with difficult questions.
- Describe a follow-up that have set for yourself as a result of the dialogue and invite them to do the same.
- Invite them to contemplate a relevant question that remains unanswered.
- If they have expressed interest in your sources, provide them with a link, book recommendation, or contact information.
- Ask about a time or place where you might be likely to encounter them again, or exchange details and schedule a follow-up meeting.

You can also ask one or more questions about the dialogue to get some feedback on how you are doing:

- Did you enjoy the talk?
- What questions did you find most intriguing?
- What did you find frustrating?
- What is the take-away for you?
- What would you rather I did differently?

If they experienced Socratic aporia, ask them to ponder the question that stimulated the aporia for the next time you meet. Also set yourself the task to learn more about any interesting ideas or insights that the interlocutor provided.

Try inviting the interlocutor when reflecting on their belief to anticipate the questions that you might ask them the next time, so that they are well-prepared to answer them. Such reflection enables them to continue the dialogue in their imagination. The net effect should encourage them to think critically about their own epistemology if they were not doing so already.

Should the interlocutor express an active willingness to reconsider their beliefs, don't leave them hanging. If your dialogue is with someone close to you, you are in a position to help them directly, but for strangers, try to ensure that they know what next steps are available and that they have sources of support. For example, you may refer the person to local community groups or other resources.

## 8 After the talk

Reflect on your performance. Consider follow-up dialogues that can go much deeper than a one-time chat. Also, remember to take care of yourself.

### 8.1 Reflecting on your performance

Try reflecting on the dialogue and noting the details soon afterwards. If you recorded the audio or video of your dialogue, consider waiting a day to watch or listen to the recording. The distance helps you reflect on the dialogue from a fresher perspective. Here are some important items to document after a dialogue:

#### Basic data about the dialogue

- Date, time and location
- Name of the interlocutor
- Statement of the belief or belief system investigated
- Foundational belief and ways of knowing
- Before-and-after confidence

#### Summary of the dialogue

- Important questions that you asked and the interlocutor's responses
  - Their method(s) for justifying the belief
  - How they first came to believe it
  - Their definition of faith (if discussed)
- Turning points and important moments in the dialogue
- How you ended the dialogue
- The interlocutor's feedback regarding the dialogue

#### Reflective evaluation

- Whether rapport was good and what affected it
- Specific strategies you used (defeasibility, outsider test of faith, etc)
- Explanation of what worked well (or not) about each of your major questions.

- Indicators of change in the interlocutor: Becoming aware of unreliable way of knowing, willingness to revise beliefs, contemplating change
- Goals for follow-up dialogues with the interlocutor
- Recommendations for dialogues with future interlocutors

Consider using this [Reflection](#) template for reflecting on your dialogues. [Here is an example](#) of the sheet filled out after this [interview](#). Or, create your own template customized to your particular approach to SE.

After completing your self-evaluation, consider sharing the experience with others on the [Street Epistemology Facebook Group](#), Youtube, or other forums and social media platforms. Ask for advice and suggestions for improvement on your next encounter. Sharing your experience is very helpful for other, less-experienced Street Epistemologists.

### 8.3 Continue the relationship

There's no requirement that you maintain contact after your talks, but if you wish to do that, consider exchanging contacts with the interlocutor and setting up a lunch, dinner, coffee or other occasion to follow up with them and continue the dialogue. If the interlocutor is contemplating their beliefs and ways of knowing, you can offer to stay in touch and be available to talk with them.

Prepare well if you are planning to meet with an interlocutor again. Review your last meeting notes or recording. Think about appropriate follow-up questions and possible directions to explore next. If you posed a parting thought, ask if they have any new ideas based on that.

### 8.4 Taking care of yourself

If Street Epistemology remains a hobby that takes a back-seat to family, work, and leisure time, you will find it more fulfilling, and reduce the likelihood of burnout. Some signs of burnout include loss of empathy for your interlocutor, increased frustration in the face of doxastic closure, and loss of humility during your talks. Here are some suggestions on how to take care of yourself.

- Limit your dialogues to a maximum time, never more than an hour, but 10-20 minutes is better. End the dialogue politely if it extends past your personal limit.
- When engaging by correspondence or over a comment thread, watch out for rumination: spending lots of time and effort thinking about what to say next, or replaying the dialogue over in your head. In that case, it may be time to bow out of the dialogue.
- You might review [Developing the right mindset](#), watch some recorded interviews, and talk about what's happening. You may even find it helps to take a break: disconnect entirely, take a vacation where you do nothing related to Street Epistemology for a few weeks. Then dive back in when you've regained a positive frame of mind.

## 9 You're ready!

Congratulations on completing the Street Epistemology Guide! You should now have a good idea of how to do it: the mindset involved, when and where to engage, how to strike up dialogue, how to keep it ontrack and be respectful, how to finish up the dialogue, and of course how to help the interlocutor evaluate their own epistemology.

If you have suggestions for the guide, please file them directly on the [Feedback Form](#) or join us in learning and developing Street Epistemology in the [Facebook Group](#).

Best of luck in helping humanity leave behind unreliable ways of knowing!

## 10 Appendices

### 10.1 Terminology

Many terms are from Dr. Peter Boghossian's "A Manual for Creating Atheists". Here are some helpful definitions of terms as practitioners of Street Epistemology understand them. For crucial words like "faith" and "knowledge", remember to negotiate with your interlocutor to agree on what they mean in the context of your dialogue - or you will only be talking past each other.

- **Apologetics:** Reasoned arguments or writings in justification of something, typically a theory or religious doctrine [[Google](#)]. See John W. Loftus' 2015 book "[How to Defend the Christian Faith: Advice from an Atheist](#)" for why apologetic arguments have failed to be persuasive.
- **Aporia:** An expression of doubt [[Google](#)]. In Street Epistemology, a state of puzzlement caused by realizing that one does not in fact know what one thought one knew. In Socratic Dialogue, successful elenchus produces an aporia, which increases one's doxastic openness.
- **Deepity:** A statement that can be read in two different ways: one way that's true but trivial, and another that's much more intriguing but false [[Guardian](#)].
- **Doxastic Openness/Closure:** The term "doxastic" refers to stances that one takes regarding one's beliefs. Doxastic openness as used in AMFCA [Ch. 3] is the willingness to revise beliefs in response to evidence, while doxastic closure is the unwillingness to revise beliefs.
- **Elenchus:** Refers to the question-and-answer part of Socratic dialogue, in which a hypothesis is refuted or cast doubt upon by developing counterexamples or deriving contradictions [[Google](#)].
- **Epistemology:** The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion [[Google](#)].
- **Interlocutor:** A participant in a dialogue. From your perspective as the Street Epistemologist, the interlocutor is the person you are talking with, sometimes abbreviated as "IL".

- **Knowledge:** As a working definition for examining beliefs, knowledge is justified true belief in a proposition. Differs from everyday usage of knowledge to refer to facts, information or skills acquired through experience or education [[Wikipedia](#)].
- **Socratic Method:** Named after the philosopher Socrates, this is also known as elenchus. It is the use of questions to probe a point of view, stimulate critical thinking, and evaluate the consistency of ideas [[Wikipedia](#)].
- **Street Epistemology:** Coined by Dr. Peter Boghossian in his book *A Manual for Creating Atheists*. An activist approach to helping people reduce their reliance on faith as a way of knowing religious claims to be true. A method of rational dialogue that examines the way we form beliefs, to evaluate which ways of knowing are sufficiently reliable to justify belief. The word “street” indicates that the method is being used on the street with strangers, but in practice, it can be used in casual conversation with acquaintances or people one knows well.

## 10.2 Resources

- [A Manual for Creating Atheists](#), by Dr. Peter Boghossian — the book that started it all. AMFCA is a must read for anyone interested in conducting Street Epistemology
- [Atheos App](#) — Teaches Street Epistemology by presenting multiple-choice responses to things that interlocutors might say.
- [www.streetepistemology.com](#) — an aggregator site for news, debates, critiques, plugs, blogs, videos, and everything else related to Street Epistemology.
- **On-camera dialogues on YouTube, Periscope and Blab** — By watching real people practicing Street Epistemology in the real world, you radically improve your practice of the techniques.
- [The Private Street Epistemology Facebook Group](#) — A closed group for Street Epistemologists, with any amount of experience. It's a place to share lessons and answer questions about how to do Street Epistemology, and hosts occasional live events such as role-plays and video chats.
- [Public Street Epistemology Facebook Page](#) — The public Facebook page where anyone can ask about Street Epistemology and conduct civil epistemological dialogues on any topic.
- The [Street Epistemology Reflection](#) — A template for reflecting on dialogues. [Here is an example](#) of the sheet filled out after this [interview](#).