

How to Beat a Polygraph Test

THE DIRTY LITTLE SECRET behind the polygraph is that the “test” depends on trickery, not science. The polygraph operator exhorts the examinee to answer all questions truthfully, but secretly assumes that denials to certain questions - called “control” questions - will be less than truthful. One commonly used control question is, “Did you ever lie to get out of trouble?” The polygrapher steers the examinee into a denial, warning that anyone who would lie to get out of trouble is fundamentally untrustworthy. But secretly, it is assumed that everyone - even those truthful about the matter under investigation - has lied to get out of trouble.

The test is scored by comparing physiological reactions to these probable-lie control questions with reactions to relevant (e.g., “Did you do it?”) questions. If reactions to the “control” questions are greater, the examinee passes; if reactions to the relevant questions are greater, he/she fails. This simplistic methodology has no grounding in the scientific method and results in many innocent people being wrongly branded as liars.

Polygraph tests also include irrelevant questions like “Is today Friday?” The polygrapher falsely explains that such questions provide a “baseline for truth,” because the truth of the examinee's answers will be obvious. But in reality, irrelevant questions are not scored at all and merely serve as buffers between sets of relevant and control questions.

Spies, terrorists, sex offenders, and other criminals who understand the trickery behind the “test” can beat it by covertly augmenting their physiological reactions to the control questions. This can be done by biting the side of the tongue or merely thinking exciting thoughts. Although polygraphers frequently claim they can detect such countermeasures, no polygrapher has ever demonstrated any ability to do so, and peer-reviewed research suggests that they can't. This being the case, why should any reliance be placed on polygraph results? For more information, visit AntiPolygraph.org, a non-profit, public interest website dedicated to exposing and ending polygraph waste, fraud, and abuse.

AntiPolygraph.org