



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: Interviewing/Interrogation: 10 Common Indicators of Deception - Part 1

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Learning Objective: The student shall be able to list and explain 10 signs of deception that untruthful suspects often exhibit during an interview or interrogation.

In many arson cases, it is often the interviewing and interrogation skills of the investigator that are instrumental in solving the case. It is critical that investigators are aware of and study both the verbal and nonverbal behavior of a subject to detect possible deception. Suspects and witnesses often reveal more than they intend through their choice of words.

The following 10 signs are often indicative of possible deception in written and oral statements indicating that an individual may be withholding, altering or fabricating information:

- 1. Lack of self-reference** — truthful people make frequent use of the pronoun “I” to describe their actions. Deceptive people often use language that minimizes references to themselves. One way to reduce self-references is to describe events in the passive voice. For example, “The front door was left unlocked” rather than “I left the front door unlocked.” Another way to reduce self-references is to substitute the pronoun “you” for “I.”
- 2. Verb tense** — truthful people usually describe historical events in the past tense. Deceptive people sometimes refer to past events as if the events were occurring in the present. Describing past events using the present tense suggests that people are rehearsing the events in their mind. Investigators should pay particular attention to points in a written or verbal narrative where the subject shifts to inappropriate present tense usage.
- 3. Answering questions with questions** — blatant lies carry the risk of detection, so even liars prefer not to lie to investigators. Before answering a question with an outright lie, a deceptive person will usually try to avoid answering the question at all. One common method of dodging questions is to respond to a question with a question. Investigators should be alert to responses to direct questions such as: “Do I seem like the kind of person who would do something like that?” or “Where was I at 11 p.m. last night, why is that important?”
- 4. Equivocation** — the subject avoids an interviewer’s questions by filling his or her statements with expressions of uncertainty, weak modifiers and vague expressions. Investigators should watch for words such as: think, guess, sort of, maybe, might, perhaps, more or less, approximately, or about. Vague statements and expressions of uncertainty allow a deceptive person leeway to modify his or her assertions at a later date without directly contradicting the original statement.
- 5. Oaths** — although deceptive subjects attempt to give interviewers as little useful information as possible, they try very hard to convince interviewers that what they are saying is true. Deceptive subjects often use mild oaths to try to make their statements sound more convincing. Deceptive people are more likely than truthful people to inject expressions into their statements such as: “I swear to God,” “as God is my witness” or “on my mother’s grave.” Truthful witnesses are more confident that the facts will prove the veracity of their statements. They simply convey information and feel less of a need to convince others of their innocence.

Additional information on interviewing and interrogation techniques can be obtained at <http://www.hamletsmind.com/>.

(Source: Clikeman, Paul M., *The 10 Tell-Tale Signs of Deception*, *Fraud Magazine*, January/February 2012.)

