

How to spot a liar: The language of deception

1. Warm-up: Two truths and a lie

Get ready to be a little deceptive! Think of three statements about yourself. Two should be true, and one should be a lie. Share them with a partner and see if they can guess which one is the lie.

- **Example:** "I have traveled to more than 10 countries. I can speak three languages fluently. I once won a hot-dog eating contest."

Discussion: What made the lie difficult or easy to spot? What kind of details make a story believable?

(This is an open speaking activity. Answers will vary.)

2. Vocabulary: The words of deception

Match these key terms related to deception with their correct definitions. You will hear these words in the video.

1. **Deception**

e. The act of misleading someone or making them believe something that is not true.

2. To fabricate	a. To invent a story or information to deceive someone.
3. To distance oneself	g. To create separation or disassociation from something, like a statement or an event.
4. Subconscious	f. Relating to the part of the mind that influences actions without one being aware of it.
5. Convoluted	b. Unnecessarily long and complicated.
6. Tell-tale sign	d. An obvious sign that reveals something hidden, like a lie.
7. To pad (a story)	c. To add extra, often irrelevant, details to make a story seem more substantial.

3. Video: How to spot a liar

Watch the video about linguistic deception detection. First, listen for the four main patterns in the language of people who are lying.

[Watch the video on YouTube](#)

Part 1: The four patterns

According to the video, liars tend to:

1. Refer to themselves **less**.
2. Use more **negative** language.
3. Explain events in **simple** terms.
4. Use longer and more **convoluted / complex** sentence structures.

Part 2: Comprehension check

Watch the video again and answer these questions based on the details provided.

1. Why do liars often feel guilty on a subconscious level?

Because their subconscious knows they are lying, which creates feelings of guilt.

2. When denying doping, how did Lance Armstrong distance himself from the situation?

He described a hypothetical situation involving another person ("some guy in France," "Jean-Francois so-and-so") instead of talking about himself directly.

3. What was the key difference in the language used by John Edwards when he was denying paternity versus when he was admitting it?

When denying, he used long, convoluted sentences and impersonal terms ("the child," "the woman"). When admitting, his statement was short, direct, used the child's name, and he accepted his role as the father.

4. The video suggests we hear between 10 and 200 lies per day.

4. Grammar focus: Hedging language

When we suspect someone might be lying, but we are not 100% certain, we use **hedging language**. This allows us to express doubt or possibility without making a direct accusation. It is a more cautious and polite way to discuss sensitive topics.

- **Modal verbs:** He **might** not be telling the truth. That **could** be a fabricated story.
- **Adverbs:** He is **reportedly** involved. The statement is **allegedly** false.
- **Verbs of perception:** It **seems** that the details are inconsistent. It **appears** that he is distancing himself.
- **Distancing phrases:** **According to** his statement... **There is a tendency for** his stories to be...

Rewrite these direct, accusatory statements using more cautious hedging language. Use a different hedging technique for each one.

1. This is a lie.
→ It **seems/appears** that this is not entirely accurate.
2. He is hiding something.
→ He **could/might** be hiding something.
3. She fabricated the entire story.
→ **Allegedly/Reportedly**, she fabricated the entire story.
4. His explanation is too simple.
→ His explanation **seems/appears to be** suspiciously simple.
5. They are guilty.
→ All the evidence **seems to point towards / seems to suggest** their guilt.

5. Useful phrases for expressing suspicion politely

In a real-life conversation, directly calling someone a liar can cause conflict. Use these phrases to gently express skepticism and ask for more information.

Expressing gentle doubt:

- "I'm not sure I'm following you completely."
- "That's interesting. I heard a slightly different version."
- "Something about that doesn't quite add up for me."

Asking for clarification:

- "Could you walk me through that one more time?"
- "So, just to be clear, you're saying that...?"
- "Is there any way to verify that information?"

Pointing out inconsistencies:

- "Help me understand, because I thought you said earlier that..."
- "That seems to contradict the initial report."
- "There are a few details that appear to be inconsistent."

6. Speaking practice: The weak excuse

Work in pairs. Read your scenario and role-play the conversation. Try to use the hedging language and useful phrases you've learned.

Student A: You were supposed to meet your friend (Student B) for coffee an hour ago, but you didn't show up or answer your phone. Now, you call them. Your excuse is: "I am so sorry! My phone died, and then I couldn't find my wallet, and then I helped an old lady carry her shopping up five flights of stairs. It was crazy!" Your goal is to make your story sound believable.

Student B: Your friend (Student A) is calling you an hour late with a very elaborate excuse. You are skeptical. Your goal is to gently question their story to find out what really happened without starting an argument. Use phrases like "That sounds like a lot to happen at once..." or "So your phone died before you could leave the house?"

After you finish, switch roles and try again with a new excuse!

(This is an open speaking activity. Answers will vary.)

7. Writing: Analyze a statement

Read this short statement from a politician accused of missing an important vote to go on vacation. Analyze it based on the four linguistic patterns from the video. Write a short paragraph explaining why the statement might sound deceptive.

"Regarding the situation last Tuesday, there was an unfortunate and sudden family health scare that required immediate attention. Of course, public service is the highest priority, but family must come first in these terrible, unexpected circumstances. Any suggestion that people in this office would neglect their duties is absurd and hateful. The focus should be on the important work that gets done every single day for the community."

Think about:

- Does the speaker use "I"? How do they refer to themselves or their office?
- Is there any negative or emotional language?
- Is the explanation of the event simple or detailed?
- Is the sentence structure long and convoluted? Does it contain irrelevant details?

Sample Answer:

This statement shows several tell-tale signs of deception. First, the politician avoids self-reference, using the phrase "people in this office" instead of "I" to distance themselves from the situation. Second, the language is highly negative and emotional, with words like "unfortunate," "terrible," "absurd," and "hateful" used to evoke sympathy and anger. Third, the explanation for the absence—a "family health scare"—is kept extremely simple, with no verifiable details. Finally, the sentences are long and convoluted, padding the statement with irrelevant details about public service and family values to distract the listener from the central accusation.