Learning how spot lies and liars is an acquired skill. Like lock picking, paragliding, or playing the violin, the learning curve for lie spotting is huge. I read the book and still can’t spot lies. I need practice, feedback, and coaching. However, I am convinced that if one were to diligently apply the strategies of this book they would become proficient lie spotters. Even if one is not interested in learning these skills this book is a fascinating read about how experts conduct interviews that result in confessions in an astonishing number.
When you ask an honest person a direct question you get a direct answer because they’ve got facts and truth on their side and don’t need to add any other information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONER</th>
<th>INNOCENT SUSPECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Did you steal that money?”</td>
<td>“No.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Did you get drunk?”</td>
<td>“No.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Did you sleep with that person?”</td>
<td>“No.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

When you ask a guilty person a direct question they try to bolster your faith in their integrity by adding a string of “convincing statements.” They don’t have truth on their side and need to bolster their case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONER</th>
<th>GUILTY SUSPECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Did you steal that money?” (boss to employee)</td>
<td>“How could you ask such a thing?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Ask my friends—I wouldn’t do that!”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Why would I do that so near my retirement?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I can’t believe you would think I’d do that!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Did you take drugs?” (parent to teenager)</td>
<td>“I’ve never given you any reason to think that!”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Why don’t you trust me?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“You’re accusing me just because my friend got caught.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Did you molest that child?”</td>
<td>“Young man, I would never do that!”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“That would be perverted!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I am not a pervert.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Did you drown your children?”</td>
<td>“I love my children.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Why would I do anything to hurt them?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Convincing statements” are persuasive because they sound sincere when delivered calmly, with strong emotion, when reasonable, and especially when they are something we’d probably say! But rather than allowing these statements to derail our questions, it’s a good strategy to agree with them as much as possible and then get right back to your inquiry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUSPECT</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“How could you ask such a thing?”</td>
<td>“It does seem unfair, doesn’t it. But I gotta ask….”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ask my friends—I wouldn’t do that!”</td>
<td>“I’m sure your friends will back you, but I gotta ask…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Why would I do that so near my retirement?”</td>
<td>“I know it doesn’t make sense, huh? But I gotta ask…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am not a pervert.”</td>
<td>“That’s good, because I’m a dad; if I thought you were a pervert I don’t think I could stay in the same room as you. As I was saying…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I love my kids.”</td>
<td>“We know you love your kids. That’s evident to everybody. But we want to talk to you about what really happened.”</td>
</tr>
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Some typical “convincing statements.”

“No one would ever question my honesty.” “I have a great reputation.” “I’m an honest person.” “My word is my bond.” “It’s not in my nature to do something like that.” “I always try to do the right thing.” “I would never jeopardize my job (marriage) by doing something like that.” “How could you even think I could be involved in something this serious?” “I have worked here for over twenty years.” “I love you. I would never do anything to hurt you.”
What Deception Sounds Like
Summary of Chapter 5, Spy the Lie (St. Martin’s Press, 2012) by Philip Houston, et al

If you ask someone a direct question such as, “Did you do your homework?” “Did you have sex with that person?” or “Did you steal that laptop?” and if they answer in any of the following ways it does not prove they are lying. But it does raise red flags and suggests the need to pursue the issue further.

1. **Failure to answer.** If the facts aren’t on their side they’ll stonewall, clam up, or pretend not to hear.
2. **Failure to deny.** If you ask a direct question and they don’t answer directly with a “Yes,” or “No,” be careful.
3. **Non specific denial.** If you ask a direct question and they waffle, “I didn’t do anything,” or “I would never do something like that,” be cautious.
4. **Isolated denial.** If they give long winded answers that don’t directly relate to your question, be on guard.
5. **Reluctance to answer.** If they dodge your question with, “I’m not sure I’m the right person to ask,” or “Gee, I’m not sure I can answer that,” then look out.
6. **Repeating the question.** This could be their attempt to “buy time” to think up a lie, OR it could indicate their discomfort with silence. Guilty people find silence awkward.
7. **Non-answer statements.** Truth tellers answer “Yes” or “No” to direct questions. Liars tend to stall, “That’s a good question,” “I’m glad you asked that,” “I knew you were going to ask me that,” “That’s a legitimate concern.”
8. **Inconsistent statements.** Liars need to have perfect memories. It’s hard to keep all the detailed fabrications straight and contradictions when retelling their stories are red flags. Often the second statement which contradicts the first statement contains some truth. If a person admitted earlier to stealing $500 and then later says, “I stole $1000” don’t pounce on the contradiction. Instead, zero in on the new info, “Is it possible that it could have been more than $1000?” Solicit their cooperation.
   “Okay, how does this new info fit with the earlier info you gave me. Help me understand how we got from there to here.” (Keep a careful eye on their visual cues—see below).
9. **Going into attack mode.** When backed into a corner liars react, “How dare you ask this!” “You’re sick for even asking this question.” “None of your business!” “Who made you God?”
10. **Inappropriate questions.** If someone responds with an irrelevant or weird question to your direct question they may be hiding something. Clarifying questions are okay and to be expected.
11. **Overly specific answers.** Honest people reply with direct answers. Liars reply with convoluted, complex, and overly detailed answers.
12. **Inappropriate level of politeness.** Good manners are fine but “out of the blue” cordiality (“Yes, sir,” “Yes, ma’am,” “That’s a nice tie,” etc.) could be an attempt to win your confidence.
13. **Inappropriate level of concern.** Guilty people try to minimize the importance of your questions, “Why are you making such a big deal out of this?” “Why are you worried about this?”
14. **Process or procedural complaints.** “Why ask me?” “How long will this take?” Guilty people like to get you off the trail of seeking truth by raising irrelevant or unrelated issues.
15. **Failure to understand a simple question.** This could be either a stalling technique or an attempt by a liar to narrow the interrogation to some issues that the liar can answer truthfully.
16. **Referral statements.** “As I said earlier…” “I already answered that….” We are more influenced by repetition than we realize. The liar who repeats his/her lie over and over can wear us down and increase our credulity.
17. **Invoking religion.** Dressing up the lie with “God told me,” “With God as my witness,” or “I swear on a stack of Bibles,” can be persuasive if we have a bias for persons of faith.
18. **Selective memory.** “I don’t recall,” is a tricky response because there’s no way we can prove they don’t remember. But not remembering what your wore on your first date is different than not remembering if you had sex with someone.

19. **Exclusion qualifiers.** This is a way a liar can answer your question truthfully without telling the whole truth. “Not really…” “Fundamentally…” “Basically…” “For the most part….” “Yes and no…” “Probably….” A good response: “If you had to pick out one thing that you do agree with, what would that be?”

20. **Perception qualifiers.** This is a way a liar can add to their believability. “Frankly…” “To tell you the truth…” “Honestly….” “To be perfectly honest….” “Candidly…” “Truthfully….” Truth tellers let their yes be yes and their no be no.
Since no one is a human lie detector the best we can do is look for hints of deception which include both verbal and visual clues. This list describes the visual clues. By themselves they may mean nothing. But combined with one or more of the above mentioned verbal clues we may have a liar on our hands.

1. **Nodding “Yes” while saying, “No.”** Deceptive people do this without thinking.
2. **Hiding mouth and eyes.** A subconscious fear of seeing other’s reactions to a lie or being scrutinized by those that are being lied to.
3. **Throat clearing or swallowing.** Anxiety about lying can lead to dry mouth.
4. **Hand-to-face activity.** Fear of getting caught in a lie results in an anxious fight or flight response. Blood rushes from the face causing itchiness or mild discomfort.
5. **Anchor-point movement.** Watch for movement of the part of their body that’s giving the person stability (feet, buttocks, hands on arm rests, etc). Anxiety causes a shift in those anchor points. If possible, it’s good to put the one you’re interviewing in a swivel chair! Watch for movement.
6. **Grooming gestures.** Anxiety can also leak out by flipping hair behind ears, adjusting glasses, ties, or blouse collars, or wiping sweat off their brow.

Other signs that may not be signs!

7. **Poor eye contact.** There are a host of reasons why a person has bad eye contact. Even diverted eyes when you ask a pointed question does not necessarily indicate deception. It could be low self esteem.
8. **Closed posture.** A person who gets defensive will sometimes cross their legs. But a person who is getting relaxed will cross their legs, too, so this isn’t a fool proof sign of deception.
9. **General nervous tension.** Liars get nervous, but so do innocent people being interrogated by cops.
10. **Preemptive responses.** Answering a question before it’s completed could indicate an innocent person eager to get the truth out fast, or a guilty person eager to get a lie out fast. Thus quick answers are no guarantees of anything.
11. **Blushing or twitching.** These behaviors have proven to be not nearly as definitive as items 1-6 above.
12. **Clenched hands.** Could indicate an innocent person’s fear of authority figures, fear of false accusation, or a guilty person’s fear of getting caught in a lie.
13. **Baselining.** Asking questions for which we know the answer teaches interviewers what truth tellers look like when they tell the truth. Thus when interviewees drift from that baseline it could indicate deception. However, people are complicated and change for reasons other then lying. Smart liars can rig the system by answering simple questions with lie indicating signs, so later when they do tell a lie interviewers can’t tell the difference.
Sample Interview Questions
Adapted from Chapter 9, Spy the Lie (2012) by Philip Houston, et al

1. “What do you think should happen to the person who did such a thing?” Or, “If somebody did what they say you did, what do you think should happen to somebody who did that, if it was up to you?”

Guilty people know they’re sentencing themselves so they tend to go extra light on punishment.

2. “What happened last night?”

Don’t begin the interview with “Did you break into that house?” which is what a guilty person will expect and for which they’re ready to say “No.” Start with a question they don’t expect, “What happened last night?” An innocent person will answer quickly, “Somebody stole that guy’s laptop.” A guilty person will stall for time trying to figure out how much to say, “How should I know? You’re asking me what happened? I wasn’t anywhere near that place last night.” Then follow up with another unexpected question…

3. “Is there any reason that any of the neighbors will tell us that they saw you in the neighborhood last night?”

A guilty party won’t know if someone did in fact see them and will play it safe, “Well, I did swing by last night.” A guilty person will want to appear cooperative; since they don’t have the truth on their side they’ve got to get into “positive image management” mode.

4. “Why do you say that?”
5. “How do you know that to be true?”
6. “On what do you base that information?”
7. “What else?”
8. “Tell me more.”
9. “I don’t understand.”
10. “Which ‘Sam’ are you referring to?”
11. “Tell me again what time you left.”
12. “Is it possible you were there longer?”
13. “What haven’t we discussed that we should talk about regarding your relationship with that person?”
Preventing Psychological Entrenchment
Adapted from Chapter 10, *Spy the Lie* (2012) by Philip Houston, et al

Psychological entrenchment is another way of saying, “Digging in their heels” “Getting defensive,” and “Shutting down.” If the person you’re interviewing feels trapped, pressured, or cornered you must either end the interview or back up and help the person feel safe, engaged, and listened to. Stay cool! Being lied to can be infuriating but the non-confrontational approach is best.

1. **Avoid asking negative questions.** “You’ve never stole any money?” “You’re sure you don’t know whose number that is on your phone?” “You can’t remember how much you drank?” These pressure questions reinforce the position they took earlier. Negative questions make backing down or telling the truth that much harder.

2. **Use prologues for key questions.** For example,

   “The next thing I need to ask you about is drug use. Now, before we get into that, let me explain why it’s important that we ask this question, and what we’re looking for. First of all, we know that a lot of folks have tried things. That’s not a particular concern to us. What we are worried about is if someone has a significant drug problem.”

   A. Prologues lend legitimacy to a question. Telling the person why your question is important increases the odds they’ll tell the truth.

   B. Prologues imply grace. Statements like “A lot of folks have tried things,” “Nobody’s perfect,” and “Everybody makes mistakes,” increase the odds the person will open up.

   C. Prologues create safety. Statements like “That’s not a particular concern to us,” “We don’t want to make a big deal out of this,” and “In the grand scheme of things this isn’t a deal breaker,” make it easier for a person to tell the truth. (Caution: don’t imply law breaking isn’t a big deal; it is).

   D. Prologues diffuse blame. Statements like, “I probably didn’t make myself clear when I explained the rules around here,” “There is low morale throughout the whole department,” “We need to tighten up our accounting practices around here,” help a person feel safe in opening up.

3. **Overcome psychological alibis.** If we ask, “Did you ever meet Mr. X?” and they say, “I don’t remember,” or “I’m not sure,” don’t pound them with statements like, “How can you not remember?!” or, “Quit lying!” This only increases their silence. Instead, gently probe, “Is there any reason anyone might tell us that he saw the two of you together?” Or, “I know this was a while ago but is it possible that the two of you might have met?” Of course it’s possible; any thing is possible. They can’t deny the possibility of such a meeting so they say, “Yes, it’s possible.” Then ask, “Okay, what do you remember about that meeting?”

4. **Broaden your focus.** By asking non-confrontational questions we increase the amount of data we collect. If we ask, “Have you ever used illegal drugs?” and they say, “I experimented with marijuana once,” don’t focus on the “When?” or “With who?” questions. Broaden your focus by asking, “Okay, what other things have you tried?” We’re nudging the person to give more data.