



# VERBAL INDICATORS OF OMISSION LIES

This guide provides a brief overview of the interview protocols and verbal cues that can be used to detect omission lies.



“ ..verbal cues emerge when people lie through omitting information. ”

## INTRODUCTION

Omission lies refer to deliberately not reporting information. They may be difficult to detect, because all the lie teller says could be truthful. Yet, verbal cues emerge when people lie through omitting information. Two interview protocols that have been designed in the last 15 years could be used to detect omission lies:

1. The Strategic Use of Evidence (SUE) and;
2. Cognitive Credibility Assessment (CCA).

SUE and CCA aim to exploit different strategies truth tellers and lie tellers employ in interviews. Truth tellers are willing to be forthcoming and to tell it all. Lie tellers wish to avoid reporting incriminating facts (facts that gives away that they are lying) and try to keep their stories simple.

### STRATEGIC USE OF EVIDENCE (SUE)

Suppose a source handler possess CCTV footage showing that a source had lunch the day before with someone else. The question is whether this is an innocent lunch (e.g., meeting a relative) or a lunch the source handler should be worried about (e.g., meeting someone from a hostile organisation).

A popular interview style would be to show the source the CCTV footage and ask him who that person is. That is a poor interview style from a lie detection perspective. The difficulty lie tellers face is that they do not know what investigators know about the topic of investigation. They therefore run the risk of presenting information that contradicts the evidence investigators possess. If investigators play open card and tell interviews what evidence they have, lie tellers could tell a story that provides an innocent explanation for this evidence. In a SUE interview, investigators withhold the evidence they

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## INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

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possess whilst asking questions about the relevant time-period (“What did you do yesterday”? followed by questions that zoom in on lunch time). Lie tellers’ inclination to avoid presenting incriminating evidence means that they tend to be reluctant to mention that they had lunch in the restaurant. They (i) fabricate details about their activities during the entire day (outright lie); (ii) are truthful about their activities but fabricate details about what they did during lunch time (embedded lie); or (iii) report their activities truthfully but just skip one activity: The lunch (omission lie). In any case, their recall contradicts the CCTV footage evidence. Lie tellers’ statements are typically more inconsistent with the evidence than truth tellers’ statements.

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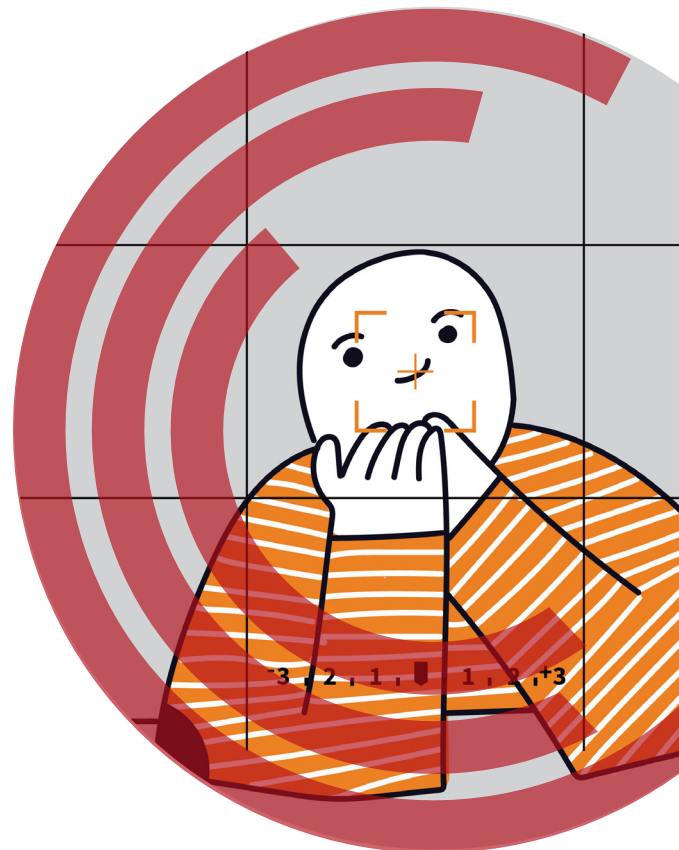
**Lie tellers’ statements are typically more inconsistent with the evidence than truth tellers’ statements.**

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### COGNITIVE CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT (CCA)

Suppose the topic of interest is not that the source had lunch with someone else, but what is discussed with the other person during that lunch. SUE cannot be used on this occasion because the possible evidence investigators may have (e.g., CCTV-footage) does not reveal what has been discussed. In this scenario -and in all other scenarios where evidence is unavailable- using CCA is the alternative option. Lie tellers’ inclination to avoid reporting incriminating evidence is only relevant in situations where investigators possess

evidence. However, lie tellers’ tendency to keep stories simple is relevant in situations where evidence is unavailable. CCA focuses on this strategy. More precisely, it attempts to contrast this strategy with truth tellers’ inclination to tell it all. Truth tellers never spontaneously report all information that they have witnessed in the first recall, for at least four reasons: (i) they do not know how much they are required to say, (ii) they find story-telling difficult, (iii) are not motivated to tell it all, or (iii) find it difficult to retrieve information from memory. CCA includes interview techniques that addresses all four aspects, such as the Model Statement, Ghostwriter Method, introducing a supportive interviewer and asking interviewees to sketch while narrating. This should have a larger effect on interviewees who are forthcoming (truth tellers) than on interviewees who are trying to keep it simple (lie tellers).



## VERBAL CUES

In omission lies research, two verbal cues are typically examined: **total details** and **complications**.

A detail is defined as a unit of information and total details refer to all units of information provided. A complication is an occurrence that affects the story-teller and makes a situation more complex. Complications typically includes a cluster of details. Examples are “It was far too hot in the restaurant because there was no air conditioning” and “I arrived too late at my appointment because I was stuck in traffic”. A meta-analysis showed that truth tellers typically report more complications than lie tellers in outright/embedded lies scenarios ( $d = .58$ ) (Vrij, Palena et al., 2021). Complications make a statement more complex which goes against lie tellers’ inclination to keep their stories simple. In addition, a story can typically be well understood without complications so lie tellers may decide to leave them out.

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**Lie tellers’ tendency to keep their story simple has also be found in omission lies scenario.**

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Finally, lie tellers find reporting complications suspicious (Maier et al., 2018) and wish to avoid saying things that raise suspicion. Complications can be counted in real time (Vrij, Fisher, & Leal, 2023) and are resistant to countermeasures (Vrij, Leal, Deeb et al., 2023). Complications are diagnostic veracity indicators in countries across

the world, including in Italy (Caso et al., 2023), India (Dando et al., 2023), Lebanon (Vrij, Leal, Deeb et al., 2023), United Kingdom (Vrij, Leal, Jupe et al., 2018), USA (Vrij, Leal, Mann et al., 2017), and Mexico, Russia and South Korea (Vrij & Vrij, 2020).

Lie tellers’ tendency to keep their story simple has also be found in omission lies scenarios (Leal et al., 2023b, c).

## VERBAL VERACITY CUES: DETAILS AND COMPLICATIONS

In CCA research, two verbal cues are particularly examined: Total details and complications.

### OMISSION LIES EXPERIMENTS

Omission lies experiments are scarce and we are not aware of any researchers apart from us who have conducted this type of research. We have carried out four omission lies experiments to date (Leal et al., 2020, 2023a, b, c). The same format was used in all four experiments. Truth tellers and lie tellers took part in the same event (different events were used in each experiment). Truth tellers were instructed to report the entire event truthfully whereas lie tellers were instructed to omit a specific part of the event. They could be truthful about the remaining part of the event. We audiotaped and transcribed the statements and counted the number of details and complications reported. For the analyses we disregarded in the truth tellers’ statements the details and complications about the parts of the event lie tellers were instructed to omit. In other words, we compared the parts of events that both truth tellers and lie tellers reported truthfully.

In Leal et al. (2020a), the event involved participants having a conversation with someone

else. Lie tellers were instructed to omit part of that conversation in their interview. In Leal et al. (2023a), the event involved participants witnessing a meeting. Lie tellers were instructed to pretend that only three rather than four people were present in a meeting. In Leal et al. (2023b) the event involved participants carrying out various activities, including meeting an agent who gave them a list of names. Lie tellers were instructed to omit that the agent gave them a list of names. In Leal et al. (2023c) the event involved participants following a target who carried out several activities. Lie tellers were instructed to omit one of these activities (the target meeting someone else).

Table 1 presents the results of the four experiments. We present the d-scores representing the differences between truth tellers and lie tellers in reporting details and complications. We considered the number of details and complications in the entire interview, without considering the experimental manipulations introduced in the experiments (such as using a Model Statement,

Reverse Order recall or Sketching). We did so because we only have data from four experiments,

Table 1a shows that the four experiments revealed similar results. Even though we compared the parts of the events that both truth tellers and lie tellers truthfully reported differences between them emerged. In all four experiments did truth tellers report more complications than lie tellers and in three of the experiments did truth tellers report more details than lie tellers. Table 1b provides the d-scores, representing how large the differences were between truth tellers and lie tellers. Particularly for complications, the differences were substantial. We explain these results via lie tellers' inclination to keep their story simple. In Leal et al. (2023b), we correlated the self-reported strategies from the interviewees with the number of details and complications they reported. We found negative correlations between keeping it simple and the number of details ( $r = -.46$ ) and the number of complications ( $r = -.33$ ) they reported.

Experiment	Topic of omission	Details	Complications
Leal et al. (2020)	Conversation	T > L	T > L
Leal et al. (2023a)	Person in a meeting	ns	T > L
Leal et al. (2023b)	Part of an interaction	T > L	T > L
Leal et al. (2023c)	Part of a mission	T > L	T > L

Table 1a. Summary of Results of Omission Lies Experiments.

Note: T > L means truth tellers reported more details and complications than lie tellers. 'ns' means not significant.

Experiment	Topic of omission	Details	Complications
		<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>
Leal et al. (2020)	Conversation	0.68	0.81
Leal et al. (2023a)	Person in a meeting	0.02	0.71
Leal et al. (2023b)	Part of an interaction	0.33	0.49
Leal et al. (2023c)	Part of a mission	0.43	0.36

Table 1b. Summary of Results of Omission Lies Experiments

## CONCLUSION

When lie tellers lie through omitting information, lie detection could be challenging because all they say may be entirely truthful. Yet, our research shows that verbal cues give such lies away: Lie tellers reported fewer details and fewer complications than truth tellers in omission lies scenarios. The same findings emerged when people lie through fabricating information in outright or embedded lies. The reason for this similarity is the strategies lie tellers reported to have used. Lie tellers are more inclined to keep their stories simple in both outright/embedded lies and omission lies scenarios and keeping stories simple is negatively correlated with reporting details and complications.

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### About the project

This guide was produced from the CREST project that examines the use of Cognitive Credibility Assessment techniques regarding omissions when reporting on past events and genuine/deceptive beliefs and attitudes. You can find all the outputs from this project at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/online-efficacy-of-cognitive-credibility-assessment/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/online-efficacy-of-cognitive-credibility-assessment/)

## READ MORE

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