

# Modern Police Interrogation Techniques Use Subtle Psychological Manipulation

Nothing guarantees a criminal conviction more than a confession. But getting a confession—especially a confession that will hold up in court—is no easy task. To overcome a suspect’s natural impulse to deny guilt—and to avoid having an interrogation halted by a request for a lawyer—criminal justice experts have developed sophisticated interviewing techniques that employ subtle psychological manipulation and observation of body language to bring out the truth.

Perhaps the most influential expert in modern criminal interrogation was the late John E. Reid. Although trained in the use of the polygraph (lie-detector), Reid discovered he could achieve better results through emotional bonding and empathy than with technology. Reid went on to found his own company, John E. Reid and Associates, which continues to teach his technique to police departments throughout North America.

The nine steps of the “Reid Technique” are:

- 1) **Direct Confrontation.** The interrogator lays out the evidence that led to the suspect’s arrest, and then offers the suspect an early opportunity to confess.
- 2) **Deflection.** If the suspect does not immediately confess, the interrogator suggests that some other person or set of circumstances forced the suspect to commit the crime, this providing the suspect with moral justification for his/her actions. This is called developing a “theme,” which may change over the course of the interrogation depending on how the suspect responds.
- 3) **Dominance.** The interrogator insists on doing all the talking, laying out various scenarios to explain how the crime may have occurred. By prohibiting the suspect from responding, the interrogator gives the suspect little or no chance to deny guilt (Once denials start, a confession becomes increasingly difficult to obtain) as well as few opportunities to demand an attorney.
- 4) **Turning Objections into Justifications.** At this point, the suspect will give some character-based reason why he/she could not have committed the crime (“I hate violence!”), which a trained interrogator can then twist into an acceptable excuse for why the suspect did what he/she is accused of (“So you really didn’t want to kill him, did you?”)
- 5) **Expressing Empathy.** The interrogator continues to express empathy for the suspect, suggesting that he/she would have reacted just like the suspect did under similar circumstances. Again, the idea is to offer the suspect an opportunity to justify the crime within some socially acceptable framework.
- 6) **Offering Alternative Themes.** Often, at this point in the interrogation, the suspect becomes quiet and submissive. The interrogator should now offer a number of alternative “themes” or scenarios—along with possible motives—and observe which gets the most response from the suspect.
- 7) **Posing the “Alternative Question.”** Once a likely scenario has been established, the interrogator offers two scenarios, the major difference being that one has a more socially acceptable motive than the other. (e.g., “You hated her,” vs. “She gave you no choice.”) At this point, the suspect will usually select the “safer” option, but either way, guilt has been admitted.
- 8) **Repetition.** The interrogator has the suspect repeat the confession in front of one or more new

witnesses, such as other police officers.

9) **Documentation.** The interrogator orders the confession written up and then signed by the suspect as quickly as possible.

To make the Reid system work, it's also vital that the interrogator be trained in reading subtle changes in body language, including eye movements, that can be telltale signs of lying, evasion or insincerity.