
5 RULES

FOR TAKING A SECURITY
CLEARANCE POLYGRAPH

ELIMINATING THE STRESS FROM THE SECURITY CLEARANCE SCREENING TEST

A polygraph is a sweat-inducing, made-for-TV spectacle that even the government considers to have dubious results (there is a reason polygraph findings aren't admissible in court). But individuals in national security careers have to put aside their concerns about the reliability of a lie detector machine. Whether you're applying for a job with the border patrol or as a CIA agent, a number of cleared careers require a successfully completed polygraph examination.

The vast majority of both Secret and Top Secret security cleared positions do not require a polygraph. A variety of Sensitive Compartment Information (SCI) and Special Access Program (SAP) positions require a successful polygraph, in addition to the completion of a Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI).

If you're facing a security clearance polygraph screening, it's helpful to know what to expect—not so you can learn countermeasures, or try to “beat” the system—but so you can eliminate one of the greatest aspects the exam tests for: fear. So, wipe the sweat from your hands; here are the three things you need to know about a security clearance polygraph and five rules for a no-sweat test.



3 Things to Know About a Security Clearance Polygraph

1 Not all polygraphs are created equally.

There are two primary types of security clearance polygraph: the Counterintelligence (CI) and Lifestyle polygraph.



COUNTERINTELLIGENCE:

Covers questions of espionage, sabotage, and terrorist activities. Designed to root out contact with a foreign national or the compromise of classified information.

LIFESTYLE: Deals more with the personal questions you answered on your SF-86, such as illegal activity, drug use, or falsification of the security clearance forms.

A full-scope polygraph combines the questions of the CI and lifestyle polygraph.



2 You're *not* going to be asked deeply personal, subjective questions.

Most of the questions on a security clearance polygraph are yes or no questions pulled directly from the SF-86. The security clearance polygraph is no time for speculation or oversharing. Most of the questions are yes or no questions, and you should provide yes or no answers.

“My professional opinion is that the government’s real motivator for use of the polygraph is scare value,” said Sean Bigley, national security attorney and managing partner of Bigley Ranish LLP. “The polygraph is more about getting scared people to admit what they would have otherwise omitted on their SF-86 than it is about actually digging up deception independently. Bearing that in mind, here is the reality: **the scare tactic works subconsciously on many people.**”



3 You won't be asked hypothetical questions.

This is critical to remember—and it means you shouldn't be offering up hypothetical answers. The polygraph doesn't care about what you "think" or "believe"—what matters is what you've done. Don't overthink your responses, and don't try to hide the truth.

Just like your SF-86, you are better off being truthful when you answer questions in a security clearance polygraph. Just as issues can be mitigated in a "whole person" security clearance determination—seemingly self-incriminating polygraph responses may also be mitigated if you provide truthful answers.

Just ask former CIA Director John Brennan.

During a 2016 conference of the Congressional Black Caucus, Brennan was asked if a history of activism would prevent more diverse candidates from pursuing government careers. Brennan responded by recounting a story from his own security clearance polygraph screening. In 1980 Brennan was polygraphed as a part of his initial application process to work for the CIA. He was asked a standard counterintelligence polygraph

question: "Have you ever worked with or for a group that was dedicated to overthrowing the United States?"

Brennan recalled that he had previously voted for a Communist Party candidate. He told the polygraph examiner he was neither a Republican or a Democrat, but had voted for the Communist Party candidate as a protest vote. He also noted that he was not a member of the Communist Party.

The line of questioning moved on, and Brennan expected to be kicked out of the running (this was 1980—the blustery winter of the Cold War). Rather than being denied a job or a clearance, Brennan passed the polygraph, and got the job. Would he have passed if he had lied about his Communist Party vote? Not likely.

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5 Rules for Taking a Polygraph

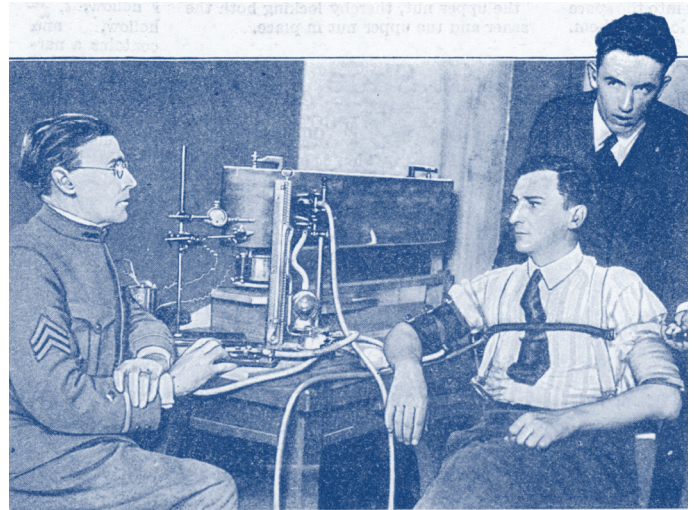
1 Follow your usual routine.

Many applicants worry that something like caffeine will hinder their performance on the polygraph. But it's more likely to hurt you if you drink a cup of coffee every morning, and then skip it the morning of the polygraph. The same goes with prescription medications. If you normally take a particular medication every day, continue to do so the day of your security clearance polygraph. That said, if you have a pre-existing medical condition, advise your agency prior to taking the polygraph. Generally, pregnant women or those suffering from an illness (such as a cold) should not take a polygraph.

2 Don't overthink.

The polygraph examination consists primarily of "yes" or "no" questions that should be simple. If you're the kind of person who thinks there are no right or wrong answers, or who tends to doubt a choice after it's made, this may affect you. The physiological receptors simply don't have a great way to vet out a "maybe" in a response.

"The term of art among polygraph examiners for people who tell the truth but register a lie is 'guilt grabber,'" notes David Brown, author, Army veteran and regular contributor to ClearanceJobs.com. "Ironically, it can afflict those of outstanding integrity, who fail examinations because, due to an exceeding sense of responsibility, feel guilty for injustices that are totally unrelated to their actions or lives.

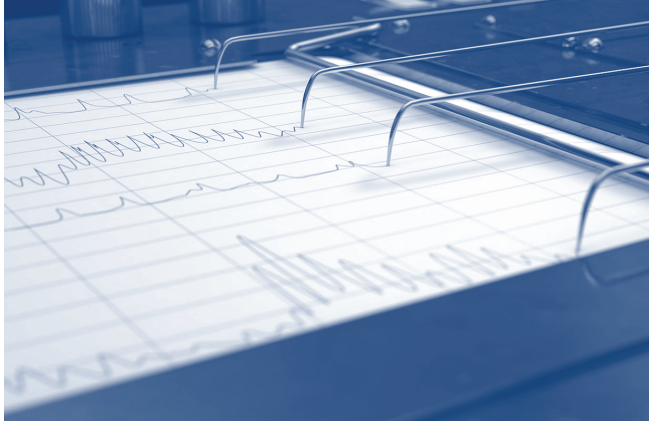


Some are incorrectly flagged because they feel guilty for thinking about doing wrong."

If you're someone who tends to over-think things, go ahead and share that with the polygraph examiner. Just don't find yourself going so far as to admit to something that isn't true, when the reality is you're thinking your way around an issue.

3 Don't over-volunteer information.

You should expect your security clearance polygraph to include basic yes or no questions. If at any time during the polygraph you're asked to speculate in providing a response—don't do it. This isn't a job interview, where you need to dazzle your examiner with your savvy and finesse. Sometimes "I don't know" really is the correct answer. If you receive a question that comes out of left field, or that appears to purport information you didn't include on your



SF-86 (and which isn't true), it's okay to honestly plead your ignorance to your examiner.

If you're asked to elaborate on a response provided on your SF-86, stick with the facts. "I might have been driving drunk before that disorderly conduct charge" is a more speculative (and incriminating) response than sticking with the facts: "I had been drinking, and was later arrested for disorderly conduct." And again, if "I don't know" is the real answer, it's okay to give that as your answer.

4 Ask the polygraph examiner questions.

It is better to make sure you're answering the question correctly than stumble your way through a response where you're unclear. It's common to be nervous during a polygraph—and the exam factors that into your responses. Don't add confusion to the mix. There is a pre-interview stage to the security clearance polygraph—and it is the most important aspect of the exam, particularly for nervous candidates.

"No questions are surprises, and the pre-exam interview is designed specifically to allow you and the examiner to word the questions in such a precise fashion that the answer is either yes or no," said Christopher

Burgess, veteran CIA officer and a regular contributor to ClearanceJobs.com. "Therefore, if you are intending to be deceptive, you will have a problem. Conversely, if you are truthful, then you shouldn't have any problem, as you are answering questions which you helped the examiner craft."

CAVEAT: The polygraph examiner is not your buddy. They have an important job function to perform. Don't interrupt the exam to ask "how you're doing" or try to get your examiner to tell you how you did following the test. The results will be reviewed by another examiner prior to any decision, anyway.

5 Don't "study" to try to beat the polygraph.

You should expect to be asked if you've prepared for the exam or spoken with others about it. That's why it's best to avoid asking other applicants what their polygraph was like (their ease or discomfort is not likely to reflect your personal experience, anyway). And countermeasures such as controlled breathing will be detected by the professionals conducting the exam. It's okay to review what to expect from news articles, or information sources provided by the agency's website, but if you need to employ measures to try to "beat" the polygraph test—you probably shouldn't be working in a national security career in the first place.

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The Mechanics of the Polygraph (How Does It Work?)

The exam consists of:

Pre-Test Phase: Meet your polygraph examiner and ask any questions. Fill out a consent form and receive notification of your rights. Review all questions before the test starts. This is your chance to make sure you understand the questions, and that you're able to provide accurate answers—*use it!*

In-Test Phase: After being hooked up to monitoring equipment, the examiner asks all questions and analyzes the results, which are fed from the sensors on your body into a laptop.

Post-Test Phase: If the test is inconclusive or deception is detected, you may be asked follow-up questions, or “problem” questions may be rephrased. You will not be notified of your results on the spot, but they will be reviewed by another examiner and you will be contacted later with your results.

A polygraph measures physical responses to questions using:

Two pneumograph tubes placed around your chest and stomach to measure respiration.

A blood pressure cuff to measure blood flow and heart rate.

Small cuffs attached to your fingertips to measure electrodermal activity (sweaty fingers).

A sensor pad on the chair seat.

