



Classroom Activities

The Confessions

VIDEO OVERVIEW

Watch video [Chapter Three](#) of the FRONTLINE film *The Confessions*.

After being interrogated relentlessly for many hours, four U.S. Navy sailors separately confessed to committing a violent rape and murder despite the lack of any evidence linking them to the crime. Based on their confessions, and despite there being no DNA match at the crime scene, each of the men was sent to prison for the crimes. In this video chapter from *The Confessions*, students will consider why someone would give a false confession and examine the different types of evidence that can be used to identify perpetrators of a crime.

GETTING STARTED

Watch the video clip and start a discussion about why an innocent person might confess to a crime, and assess how that confession ranks with other types of evidence used in criminal cases. Go further in this topic with *The Confessions* lesson plan, in which students evaluate the strengths and limitations of different types of evidence, including physical evidence, eyewitness accounts and confessions.

VIDEO THEMES

- Although it may be hard to believe, people sometimes confess to crimes they did not commit. The way a person is questioned during interrogation, as well as the personality of the person involved, may contribute to a false confession.
- Interrogation techniques such as yelling or lying about evidence are legal as long as the suspect is not threatened or coerced into confession.
- Defendants may plead guilty—even if they are not—in the hopes of reducing the severity of the crime they are charged with or to get a more lenient sentence. This is called plea bargaining.
- In real-life court cases, unlike fictional ones on TV or in the movies, it is often difficult to determine the truth of what happened.

- Many different kinds of evidence can be used to make a case about a person's guilt or innocence in a crime. Each type of evidence has strengths and limitations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When interrogating suspected criminals, police are allowed to make accusations, lie about or make up evidence, yell at the suspects or get in their faces. In the case shown in the video, the police told one of the men that he had failed a polygraph (lie detector) test, even though he had passed it. Why do you think it is legal for police to lie when questioning a potential criminal? Do you think that is right? What do you think police should and should not be allowed to do during an interrogation?
- Before being questioned by police, suspects must be told their Miranda rights, which give them the right to remain silent and to speak to an attorney. Why might these men have waived their rights? In what ways might their innocence have affected their perception of the importance of remaining silent or having a lawyer present? How might their story have been different if they had insisted on exercising these rights?
- In this case, DNA tests of hair and bodily fluids did not indicate that any of the four men were at the crime scene. Why didn't the DNA test results help clear these men of the crime?
- Eventually these men were found guilty of the crime in court, even though there was no evidence linking them to the crime, and a positive DNA match identified another man who had confessed to the crime. How could that happen? In what ways were the following parties responsible for the outcome: the four men themselves; the police; the lawyers; and—in the case of a court trial—the jury?
- This case took place in Virginia, which not only has a death penalty, but also has the highest total number of executions of all the states in the nation. How did the possibility of the death penalty play into this story?

GO FURTHER

The Confessions Lesson Plan: "Weighing the Evidence"

Web-exclusive Resources:

- [What Most People Don't Know](#)—Some facts and details not in the film
- [False Confessions and Interrogation](#)—Research and study on what makes people confess to crimes they have not committed

CREDITS

Developed by:

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.

Written by:

Leslie Comnes, M.A., is an education writer specializing in teaching materials that focus on topical issues in environmental education, science and social science. In addition to FRONTLINE, she has written for Project Learning Tree, the Center for Ecoliteracy, the Council for Environmental Education and many other national organizations.

FEATURED LESSON PLAN: WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

Overview:

In this lesson plan, students will watch the third video chapter of *The Confessions*; read about a fictional case; examine and compare the different pieces of evidence involved in the case; and discuss in small groups whether, based on the evidence, they think the suspect is guilty or innocent and why.

Grade Level:

Grades 9-12

Subject Area:

Forensic Science, U.S. Government, Civics, Psychology, Law

Objectives:

The student will:

- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different types of evidence, including physical evidence, eyewitness accounts and confession
- Decide whether there is sufficient evidence to determine if a suspect committed a crime
- Identify the knowns and unknowns of a case and explore the concept of doubt

Estimated Time:

One 50-minute class period. For classes able to spend more time or that need additional background, please see the teaching strategies outlined in the Lesson Extensions.

Materials Needed:

Internet access and equipment to show the class online video clips [Chapter Three](#) of *The Confessions*: "And Still No DNA Match..." (length: 13:20)

Handout 1: *The Confessions*—Notes

Handout 2: You Decide

Procedure:

1. Ask students whether they can think of a time when they have (or someone they know has) admitted to doing something wrong that they didn't actually do. If so, have them briefly share the circumstances and why they did it. If no one offers an example, ask students whether they could imagine a situation where they might admit to something they didn't do, such as to protect a family member or friend.

2. Explain that they will be watching a clip of a FRONTLINE story about four different men—known as the "Norfolk Four"—who each confessed to a violent crime they did not commit. Ask students:

- What are some reasons someone might make a false confession like that?
- If someone were to confess to committing a crime, would you believe that confession over other evidence at the crime scene, such as fingerprints, eyewitness accounts and so on?

3. Before showing the chapter, give students a brief synopsis of what happened in the story prior to this segment:

A U.S. Navy sailor came home to his apartment in Norfolk, Va., to find that his wife, Michelle, had been brutally raped and murdered. Police questioned his neighbor Danial Williams about the case, and Williams claimed to be innocent. Although he passed a polygraph (lie detector) test, the police told Williams that he had failed it. After more than 11 hours of interrogation, Williams confessed to the crime.

After test results of DNA from the crime scene did not match Williams' DNA, police concluded that Williams must have had an accomplice. They interrogated his roommate, Joe Dick Jr., who said that he was innocent. After many hours of intense interrogation, Dick also confessed to the crime. Since Dick knew he was innocent, he assumed that the DNA test would set him free. (For more details, see the [Case Timeline](#)).

4. Give students copies of Handout 1: *The Confessions*—Notes. Have students view Chapter Three: "And Still No DNA Match..." (length 13:20) and take notes on the handout as they watch. After viewing, have them rank the evidence in terms of how strongly it connects the person to the crime.

5. Tell students they will have a chance to examine evidence in a different case and evaluate whether it is sufficient to prove that the suspect committed a crime. Divide the class into groups of four to six students. Give each student a copy of Handout 2: You Decide, and have them read the case.

6. Direct groups to list and analyze the various kinds of evidence involved in the case using the table on Handout 2. They should then try to come to an agreement about whether Cameron is guilty or not, based on the evidence. Ask them to be ready to explain their decision.

7. Lead the class in a discussion about the case and students' findings, comparing this case to the Norfolk Four case.

- Did your group conclude that Cameron was guilty or not guilty? On what did you base your decision?
- Was your group's decision the same or different from your individual decision? If it was different, what made you change your mind?
- How did Cameron's admission to taking the picture play into your group's decision? Do you believe that he would admit to doing something he didn't do? In what ways does this situation resemble the Norfolk Four case? How is it different?
- In the United States, jurors may not find a person guilty if there is more than a "reasonable doubt" of his or her guilt. What does that mean? Does anyone have any remaining doubts about their group's decision about Cameron? Based on the evidence described in the film, do you think a jury could have had reasonable doubts about the Norfolk Four's innocence or guilt?
- Can we ever know for certain whether a suspect is innocent or guilty of a crime? What safeguards does our justice system have to protect both the victim and the accused in the face of uncertainty?

Lesson Extensions:

- Investigate the psychology of false confessions in criminal cases, starting with FRONTLINE's collection of [Research & Studies](#). For a good overview, see Richard P. Conti's article "[The Psychology of False Confessions](#)." Create a graphic organizer that illustrates different causes and consequences of false confessions.
- Read two articles from the FRONTLINE website that represent opposing sides of the question of whether false confessions are a problem in our justice system: "[False Confessions?](#)" by Paul G. Cassell and Brandon L. Garrett's "[The Substance of False Confessions](#)." Debate whether the way suspects are interrogated needs changing.
- Conduct an in-depth study of why some people are convicted of crimes they did not commit. [The Innocence Project](#) provides profiles of a number of individuals who were wrongly convicted and imprisoned, but were later exonerated after DNA testing proved them innocent. Choose five different profiles and analyze the contributing causes and evidence that led to the initial convictions and subsequent exonerations.
- Invite an experienced police officer into your class to find out how the police in your area interrogate suspects. Prepare for the visit by reading about "[Perfectly Legal Interrogation Techniques](#)." Find out from the officer which interrogation techniques are legal in your area and which are not legal.

RELATED RESOURCES

THE NORFOLK FOUR:

The Wrong Guys: Murder, False Confessions, and the Norfolk Four

By Tom Wells and Richard A. Leo

This nonfiction book provides a detailed chronicle of what happened in the case of the Norfolk Four.

***The Washington Post*: "[The crumbling case against the 'Norfolk Four'](#)"**

This opinion piece by Margaret Edds outlines some of the outstanding issues on the case.

FALSE CONFESSIONS:

***The New York Times*: "[Confessing to Crime, but Innocent](#)"**

This article by John Schwartz describes new research that helps shed light on why innocent people might confess to a crime they didn't commit.

["False Confessions?"](#)

The author of this article, Paul G. Cassell, cautions against overstating the problem of false confessions and makes the point that not obtaining the confession of a guilty person poses a greater threat.

EVIDENCE:

["Physical Evidence"](#)

This forensic science textbook chapter describes and illustrates some of the many different types of physical evidence.

["The Psychology of Confession Evidence"](#)

This research article by Saul Kassin examines the psychology of confession evidence, including how it affects jurors.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS:

FRONTLINE: [The Confessions](#)

Read and compare interview transcripts of Richard Leo (co-author of *The Wrong Guys*, a book on the Norfolk Four); Jay Salpeter (co-author of *A Criminal Injustice*, a book on the 1988 Marty Tankleff false-confession case); Danny Shipley (attorney for Danial Williams, the first of the Norfolk Four); and Michael Fasanaro Jr. (Navy lawyer who represented Joe Dick Jr., one of the Norfolk Four).

PURCHASING THE FILM

The Confessions can be purchased from [PBS Educational Media](#).

RELATED STANDARDS

[Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects](#)

RI 11-12.3: Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

RI 11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

SL 9-10.1, 11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL 9-10.2, 11-12.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media.

SL 9-10.3, 11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

RH 9-10.2, 11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary.

[Content Knowledge](#): A compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Civics, Standard 3: Understands the sources, purposes, and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good.

Civics, Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.

Civics, Standard 18: Understands the role and importance of law in the American constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protection of individual rights.

Handout 1

Name: _____

The Confessions—Notes

1. What possible reasons for giving a false confession are identified in the film chapter?

-
-
-
-
-
-

2. Note the different kinds of criminal evidence referenced in the film chapter and record below how each was used in the Norfolk Four case. After watching the film, rank each type of evidence in terms of how strongly you think it connects the suspect to the crime, with 1 being strongest and 5 being weakest.

Type of Evidence	How It Is Used in the Case	How Strongly Does It Connect the Suspect to the Crime?
DNA test		
Confession		
One suspect accusing another		
Photo identification		
Polygraph test		

Handout 1—Answer Key

Name: _____

The Confessions—Notes

1. What possible reasons for giving a false confession are identified in the film chapter?

- depression
- confusion
- fear
- shock
- fatigue
- torture

2. Note the different kinds of criminal evidence referenced in the film chapter and record below how each was used in the Norfolk Four case. After watching the film, rank each type of evidence in terms of how strongly you think it connects the suspect to the crime, with 1 being strongest and 5 being weakest.

Type of Evidence	How It Is Used in the Case	How Strongly Does It Connect the Suspect to the Crime?
DNA test	<i>To determine whether a suspect was actually at the crime scene</i>	<i>Possible ranking (group answers may vary): 2</i>
Confession	<i>To show that the suspect admits that he committed the crime</i>	1
One suspect accusing another	<i>To provide an eyewitness account that a suspect committed the crime</i>	5
Photo identification	<i>To identify a possible suspect</i>	4
Polygraph test	<i>To determine whether a suspect is telling the truth</i>	3

Handout 2

Name: _____

You Decide

Part 1: The Case

The students in Mr. Lee's 4th-period algebra class took their midterm test on Thursday. When Mr. Lee was correcting the tests Thursday evening, he noticed something odd: Two students, Cameron and John, had both gotten 93% on the test, and their answers were nearly identical. Although they sat on opposite sides of the classroom and didn't seem to be friends, Mr. Lee suspected that the boys may have cheated somehow.

Mr. Lee recalled that on Wednesday, both the boys, along with another student, Maya, had stayed after class to ask him questions about the material. He had helped Maya first, then John, and then Cameron. He remembered this clearly because Cameron had always been a shy, quiet student who had never before stayed to ask a question.

When Mr. Lee discussed his suspicion with the school principal on Monday, Principal Brown said she had seen John waiting outside Mr. Lee's classroom on Wednesday morning and then had watched as Cameron came out and the two boys walked together toward the cafeteria. She had paid special attention because she had disciplined John earlier in the month for fighting with another student.

Principal Brown decided to call each of the boys into her office on Friday afternoon. She talked with John first, who said that he and Cameron had studied together for the test on Wednesday afternoon and that was why their answers were similar. He denied cheating in any way.

When Principal Brown talked with Cameron, he also denied cheating. He said he had studied harder than usual by himself, which was why he got a 93%. After a couple more minutes of questioning, however, Cameron changed his story. He nervously explained that when Mr. Lee had turned his back to help Maya after class on Wednesday, Cameron had noticed that the test answers were on top of the filing cabinet, and he had taken a quick picture of them with his phone. He claimed that he had not shared the answers with John or anyone else.

Principal Brown asked to see both boys' phones, but she did not find a picture of the test answers on either of them. Cameron's phone battery was almost dead.

Based on what she had learned, Principal Brown decided to suspend Cameron for cheating. On Monday morning, however, Cameron and his

parents came into her office. Cameron said that he actually hadn't cheated. He said he had lied about taking the picture because he was afraid of what John would do to him if he didn't take the blame. He told her that John had mentioned seeing the test answers on the filing cabinet; but, as far as Cameron knew, John had not taken a picture of them either.

Principal Brown must now decide: Was Cameron guilty of cheating?

Part 2: Analyzing the Evidence

1. What evidence is present in this case? List each piece of evidence in the first column below. Then analyze what that evidence tells you and what weaknesses it may have.

Evidence	What does this evidence tell you?	What weaknesses does this evidence have?
<i>Two tests with same score</i>	<i>The students knew the same answers. They might have cheated.</i>	<i>Can't know reason for same answers. There could be other explanations.</i>

2. Which pieces of evidence indicate that Cameron is guilty? Mark those with "G." Which indicate that Cameron is not guilty? Mark those with "NG."

3. Looking at all the evidence together, what can you know for certain about the case?

4. What is still unknown?

Part 3: Drawing Conclusions

1. Based on the evidence, does your group think Cameron is guilty or not guilty of cheating? What are the reasons for your decision?

2. What kind of evidence was more convincing: the physical evidence (like the tests or the phone battery), the eyewitness accounts or the confession?

3. Are you completely convinced that Cameron cheated? If so, why? If you have any doubt, what additional evidence might have helped you be more certain?