

POWER OF OBSERVATION



PROBLEM:

A man is on trial for robbing a convenience store, and several witnesses report seeing him at the scene. During the trial, the defense sets up an experiment to discredit the eye-witness testimony. See how you do on this experiment.



ONLINE ACTIVITY:

Have the students watch the video at <http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/grafs/demos/15.html>. Tell the students that during the movie they are to count the number of times the team in white passes the ball to each other. Each student should count to his or her self and make no comments during the movie.

Afterwards, poll the students to see how many "saw something odd" during the movie (don't be specific yet). Some students will have seen the gorilla, and some students will have no idea what you are talking about. Be prepared to show the video again.

TEACHER NOTES:

The video was made as part of an experiment by Harvard professors Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris designed to test peoples "inattentional blindness." In the original study, only 42% of the people observing the video noticed the gorilla walking through the middle of the scene.

The purpose of this activity is to illustrate the unreliability of eye-witness testimony. People watching this video will either count the number of passes correctly and not see the gorilla, or see the gorilla but not count the correct number of passes (and in some cases, they will both miss the gorilla and incorrectly count the passes).

Unreliable eye-witness testimony is an ongoing concern for law enforcement—many convictions that have been overturned by DNA evidence were based on faulty witness testimony. It should be stressed most witnesses do not intentionally lie when on the witness stand—human observation is limited by memory, suggestion, and interpretation. Studies have shown that even the classic "police line-up" can mislead witnesses and even alter their memories.

The faultiness of eye-witness testimony strengthens the importance of forensic science in determining guilt and innocence. Whereas memories can be confused or altered, the evidence stays the same.

MATERIALS:

Ability to watch the described video



CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT:

This activity can be done with the students at multiple computers, or the video can be shown to the whole class on one large screen (make sure the students are silent during the video). If the later option is chosen, the teacher can follow up with various oral questions for discussion, or can ask the students to each write down the answers to the questions (or simply ask the students to "write a brief description of what you saw in the video").