

Testing is a universal feature of social life. Throughout history people have been put to the test to prove their capabilities or to establish their credentials; this is the stuff of Homeric epic, of Arthurian legend. The expertise of those involved in testing is seen as remote and obscure, and the tests they produce are typically associated in us with feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. Testing for purposes of detection or to establish identity has become an accepted part of sport (drugs testing), the law (DNA tests, paternity tests, lie detection tests), medicine (blood tests, cancer screening tests, hearing, and eye tests), and other fields. Tests to see how a person performs particularly in relation to a threshold of performance have become important social institutions and fulfil a gatekeeping function in that they control entry to many important social roles. In modern societies such tests have proliferated rapidly.