

Body Language



When we speak, our body talks, too. Effective use of body language adds visual emphasis to the sounds we make. We add the sense of sight to the sense of hearing, making our messages more comprehensible, more interesting, and more memorable. We can emphasize a point, add feeling, give directions and dimensions, or even contradict ourselves through body language.

In short, our bodies – hands, face, torso, even feet – are our most readily available and most versatile visual aid. So use it!

Our message begins via body language even before we approach the lectern. While we're sitting, waiting for that fabulous introduction, how we feel can express itself: nervous, enthusiastic, relaxed, or bored. Our approach to the lectern – whether with a spring in our step or a dallying delay – sends a message to our audience.

Once we're at the lectern, a gracious handshake for the person who introduced us followed by a warm smile for our audience can go a long way toward initiating real rapport. Start now with the eye contact which says – louder than any words – “I'd like to talk to YOU.” Continue to look at your listeners throughout your speech.

Once the presentation is launched, gestures and facial expressions can become your best friend or your worst enemy. Make them a friend by being sure that they agree with your words. When you express grave concern, do so with both your body and your words. Simultaneously, too!

Timing of gestures is very important. Gestures that are too early or too late can be quite confusing. So can gestures that are too long or too fast. Let your audience see the gesture, but when it has served its purpose, put it away.

Directional gestures allow the head to provide an extra dimension to body language beyond just facial expressions. The head can direct the audience's attention. Beware the head, also, for it offers ample opportunity for distractions as well as attractions: Glasses can be pushed up on the nose, taken off, and put back on; ears can be pulled, the chin can be scratched, rubbed, or touched endlessly.

Natural body language enhances your message simply through allowing your body to express the feelings your words convey. When you speak of pleasant events, allow your face to smile, your back to straighten, and your eyes to glow. When angry, show a clenched fist and a frown. Counting can help listeners keep up with your points *if* they coincide with the words.

Moving around behind the lectern is a very good way to dispel nervous energy. Such movements can add to a presentation if they are controlled and meaningful. Stepping toward an audience can say, without words, that the speaker would like to be closer to the listener. Simply stepping away from an obstructing lectern can give the impression of openness to a message. Stepping backward or leaning forward can express shock or intense feeling. However, too much movement behind the lectern can be distracting. When moving around be sure that you keep your body facing your listeners.



Dramatic gestures can cause dramatic reactions – use them carefully. The size of the gesture should fit the size of the audience.



The hands and arms are the greatest assets and liabilities in gesturing. Use them to show dimension, action, or emotion. Beware of the repetitious, excessive, or one-sided gesturing. Make giving or taking gestures, but avoiding accusing gestures such as finger pointing. Be aware of what a gesture means to your listener. One way to overcome bad habits with the hands and arms is to watch yourself in a mirror when you practice your presentation. Videotaping is even better. Gestures, like any other part of speaking, must be practiced to be perfected. Practice them for timing, appropriateness and expressiveness.

Be sure your movement and gestures come from your content. Write your speech, practice your speech, add gestures and movement to emphasize your points as you practice your speech again and again.

Remember, your body is constantly sending messages to your listeners and potential listeners. Be sure those messages are the ones you want “heard.”