

## **2 Delivery, Non-verbal Communication and Nerves**

In some ways, this is the most important chapter in the book. In it, we want to look in detail at speaking situations and the major tools you'll be using as you speak: your voice and your body language.

We mentioned these topics in Chapter 1, and stressed how many considerations you have to keep in mind in order to be a good speaker. It isn't easy, but, as with most aspects of spoken communication, you'll find that you improve rapidly with practice. From our point of view as lecturers, it's one of the most rewarding parts of teaching such skills: provided that students really want to improve, they will; each presentation is likely to be better than the previous one.

This is partly because what we try to do is to set up good speaking habits. Most poor presenting is the result of bad habits such as not looking at the audience or muttering instead of speaking clearly. Yet most people are quite capable of making eye contact and speaking clearly; they may not even realise that they don't do these things, and it can come as quite a shock if they see a video of their performance. If they then take one aspect of their presentation, such as their poor enunciation, and work at improving it, they will find that not only will their words soon become clearer but they will also start to speak more clearly as a matter of habit, without having to think about it at all. They can then take the next feature they want to improve and work at setting up another good habit. In this way, surprisingly quickly, they will become better presenters as well as gaining more confidence – and confidence, as we shall see, is one of the keys to speaking well.

In most chapters in this book, we've given you regular checklists to help you to put our advice into practice. In this chapter, there's just one near the beginning, which helps you to assess the qualities of your own voice, perhaps with the help of a friend. After that, we've suggested exercises which will help you to become aware of your voice and your non-verbal communication and show you how to use them effectively.

## ► Using your voice

### Voice checklist

It's a good idea to start this section by thinking about your own voice. Ask yourself some questions:

- Is my voice loud, perhaps too loud?
- Is my voice soft, perhaps too soft?
- Do I speak too slowly?
- Do I speak too quickly?
- Is my voice monotonous?
- Do I articulate clearly, or do I mutter?
- Will my accent cause my audience any particular difficulty?
- Do I run out of breath and gasp for air as I speak?

You may be unsure about the answers to some of these questions, but, if so, we expect that your friends will help you out!

### Volume

Let's start with the first and second questions, which obviously belong together. Is your voice too loud or too soft? You may be interested to know that a 'yes' answer to the first question is comparatively rare. While loud voices aren't uncommon, voices which are too loud for the setting and circumstances in which they're used are unusual, and the owner of such a voice is likely to be aware of the problem.

#### *Loud voices*

If you have a naturally loud voice, you obviously have a built-in advantage: people are going to be able to hear you. You will probably find it easy to assert yourself, which means that you must take care not to trample on other people's ideas if they're different from yours. If you're working as part of a group, always try to listen to other points of view before giving your own, and see if it's possible for you to start by saying something friendly, such as 'I really like what you're suggesting, but perhaps...' rather than going straight for the disagreement.

When you talk to an audience, either a small group or a large number, you will be helped, as most people are, by trying out the room or lecture theatre in advance. Take a friend with you and ask him or her to sit at the

back. First of all, speak naturally, and check whether you can be heard. Then try decreasing the volume slightly, as long as your friend can hear easily from the back of the room. Remember that people absorb sound, so when the room is full, you'll need a little more volume than when it's empty, but there's only a small difference and you mustn't exaggerate. Speak several times at what you and your friend feel is the right volume. You may find that nerves make you want to speak more loudly, but now that you've established the right volume for the space, try to reproduce that same feeling. It may take a bit of practice, but you're setting up the good habit of adjusting the volume at which you speak to suit the venue.

Sometimes, of course, you'll be speaking in a small space such as your tutor's room, and then you'll need to adjust to the different environment. Speak more slowly and with more pauses (see also pp. 19–21), and watch for the reactions of the person you're speaking to – if they tend to move away or sit right back in the seat, you may be overwhelming them with sound. If you can lower the pitch of your voice (see p. 2), this will help, as it's essential that you don't raise the pitch and shout, which is hard on your voice and uncomfortable for the listener.

Later in this section, we'll be suggesting some voice exercises for people who speak too softly. You might also like to try them, especially those connected with breathing correctly; you could, for instance, use the humming exercise (p. 9) and concentrate on gradually reducing the sound rather than increasing it.

### *Soft voices*

It's much more likely that you discover your voice is too soft, so that people can't easily hear you. Is this always the case, or only when it's a formal occasion and you're speaking to an audience? If you decide it's the latter, then ask yourself why this is so. Do you hate speaking in public so much that you instinctively want to hide from people, to withdraw into your own space where you have to speak only to yourself? If you feel like this, you need to build up confidence – but don't try too much all at once. Here are some ways in which you can help yourself; don't expect instant results, but with every achievement, you'll increase your chances of success next time:

- Join in small group conversations, even if it's only to say a few words.
- Agree with another speaker out loud. Don't just think 'What a good idea' – say so. You'll please someone else in the group as well as gaining confidence by hearing your own voice.
- Try to ask a question in a seminar group. Work out in advance what you want to say and, if possible, tell a friend in the group, so that he or she can support you and perhaps agree with you as soon as you've finished.

- Be willing to take a tutor or lecturer into your confidence. If you can see that you're going to have to speak by yourself, either to read a seminar paper or make a presentation on your project, tell the member of staff in charge how difficult this is for you. He or she may well let you sit down rather than stand, or let you share a paper so that someone else will do some of the talking. Give him or her the chance to be supportive.
- If you can, play a very small role in a group activity. If you have to say just a couple of sentences, your ordeal will be short, and if your group is supporting you, you will be helped to feel really pleased with yourself afterwards.
- Always go in advance to the room in which you have to speak, and sit or stand in the position you'll need to take. Look round at the empty space and make yourself at ease with it as far as possible, so that it seems familiar when the time comes.
- Read all that we say about nerves (pp. 29–31) and try out our advice.
- Always praise yourself for any achievement, however small, and encourage your friends to congratulate you, too. The better you feel, the more confident you will be and the more you will be able to project your voice.

When you find yourself rehearsing before you speak to a real audience, imagine a friend sitting at the back of the room. Ignore the other people who'll be there and focus on giving your information to just this one friend. You'll need to throw your voice out so that your friend can hear you and keep your head up so that you can see him or her. Rehearse this and you'll be setting up a good habit for the event itself.

Perhaps you're not suffering unduly from nerves, but just have a naturally soft voice. The advice in the previous paragraph will help you, too, but you may need to practise some voice exercises in order to increase your volume. Let's look at a couple.

### **Voice exercise**

Go into an empty room and stand at one end. Now think of some words which have explosive sounds, such as *Stop!*, *Crash!* or *Bang!* Imagine a scene in which you need to shout one of these words (someone is about to walk under a bus, and you yell *Stop!*). Then do so, very loudly, and notice as you do how you take a deep breath and move your mouth, quite instinctively. Now try saying the words

*Continued*

again, this time not shouting, but speaking as loudly as you can, taking a breath and moving your mouth as before. When you've tried this a few times, use other words which don't have quite such a forceful sound – perhaps *Good morning*, as the hard 'g' sound has something of the same impact.

This will help you if you don't move your lips enough – a common reason for people speaking too softly. You might also like to try the articulation exercise on page 14.

### Voice exercise

Part of your problem with making too little noise might be that you are swallowing your words, keeping your voice far too much at the back of your throat. If you hum, you'll see that the sound comes much more from the mask of your face than from so far back. Humming also helps with breathing properly, essential if you're to speak well. Do you breathe shallowly, so that you just expand your chest space and raise your shoulders? Try to take a deep breath, so that you expand your diaphragm – you should feel the movement right down at the belt of your jeans. Put your hands on your ribcage and feel how it expands, but don't let your shoulders move upwards. Think of taking a breath as filling a jug: start as low as you can, right down at the diaphragm, and gradually fill the space in your body until you have an enormous reserve of air to support your voice.

When you've taken a good, deep breath, hum on one note for as long as you can, letting out your breath in a slow, controlled way. You should be able to keep the note going for at least 20 seconds and probably more. If you're a good athlete, or you sing or play a wind instrument, you will probably manage at least 40 seconds. Do this exercise each day, and you will be able gradually to extend the length of your humming note. Sometimes, start humming very quietly and slowly increase the sound by putting a slight pressure on your diaphragm and then decrease it again. You're learning to control your breathing, which is very important for public speaking. At the same time, you're discovering a way of reducing stress, as deep, controlled breathing relaxes you both physically and mentally. We'll say more about this when we discuss nerves and how to use them.

### *Breath control*

Your breathing supports your voice, which is why we've included this exercise under 'Volume'; if you breathe well, you can increase the volume of sound that you produce just by pressing gently on the diaphragm, as you did when you were humming – much better than trying to force your vocal chords, which are delicate and easily injured.

When you talk to an audience, you'll find that all your breathing work has had a good effect – you will be breathing well as a matter of habit, and you'll find that you can gradually increase the volume with which you speak. It won't happen all at once, of course, and your voice may continue to be soft, but your audience will have a better chance of hearing all you say. Look at them as you speak, especially the people in the back row, and remember that you have to throw your voice out for them to hear, just as you did when you shouted Stop! in an empty room.

### **Pace**

#### *Slow speech*

Now it's time we looked at the second pair of questions about your voice: do you speak too slowly or too quickly? It's very unlikely that you speak too slowly, although sometimes people achieve this effect by breaking up the words they want to say so that there seem to be pauses in places where they aren't helpful to the listeners. Do you think that you might talk (in public) in the way illustrated below?

Good morning... everyone... today we'd like... to present... to you...  
 what seem to us... to be the major causes... of the general strike...  
 in 1926. We'll speak for... about... 20 minutes... and then... we'll be  
 happy to answer... any questions you may have.

If you do speak like this, it's very likely that you have the right attitude, in that you know it's important to talk slowly to an audience, and that a good speaker uses pauses in order to break up the content of the talk into manageable chunks of information. But a message can be broken up too much, so that the listener has no sense of a group of words making a sensible pattern; pauses occur so often and in such unexpected places that they lose their significance. The overall effect is that the speaker is talking slowly, but the individual words themselves may be rushed: the pauses give the impression that very little is said in the time available.

If we look again at the passage above, we'll see that the words fall into groups which produce meaning. 'Good morning, everybody', is such a group; the next is 'today we'd like to present to you'. It's probably better to leave out 'what seem to us to be', as it sounds unnecessarily hesitant – if you

didn't think these were the major causes, why would you be presenting them? If you were giving them as someone else's point of view, you would say so straightaway: 'Joe Bloggs's view of the major causes...'. The next group of words, which are the most important, introduces your subject: 'the major causes of the general strike in 1926'. Within this phrase, you will stress the key elements: *major*, *general strike*, *1926*, and, although slightly less, *causes*. It isn't a long phrase, however, and you should be able to say it easily and clearly in one breath. Don't be tempted to rush the words, as it's essential that the audience knows what your subject is, but don't break them up.

Your next group of words consists of: 'We'll speak for about twenty minutes', which has a unity of meaning, after which you can finish with the last group, 'and then we'll be happy to answer any questions you may have'. If you find it difficult to manage all this in one breath, then look back at the voice exercises on pages 8–9 and practise your breathing.

Whatever your pace of speaking, it's important that you don't break up the flow of meaning. The audience has only the one chance to hear what you want to say, and, as listening isn't particularly easy, you need to phrase everything you say so it can be followed and understood as readily as possible. If you do this, you will also be able to use pauses to good effect, as we'll show in the later section 'Using silence'.

### ***Fast speech***

It's far more likely, however, that your problem is one of excessive speed. Many speakers, particularly those who are inexperienced and very nervous, speak too quickly. You might make a note for yourself on your script or on your cards to remind you at regular intervals to slow down. Let's now look in more detail at the question of fast speaking.

One cause is undoubtedly the speaker's state of mind. If you approach your presentation by thinking that you're going to find it a terrible ordeal and you just wish it were over, then inevitably your subconscious will suggest that if you speak quickly, it *will* soon all be over, and indeed that's true; the effect you have on the audience, however, will be much less satisfactory, and it's worth considering the whole event from their point of view.

Members of the audience have come to hear you because either they have to (it's part of their course) or they want to hear what you have to say. Naturally, both reasons may apply at the same time. What they don't want is to feel that they've wasted their time, and so, by and large, they're ready to listen.

Listening is difficult. Your audience is likely to start with considerable goodwill towards you (not least because they're grateful it's you speaking and not them), and they listen at first in the hope of finding that you've

chosen an interesting subject about which they may learn something. If they can easily hear what you say, they will tend to go on listening, and if you are obviously interested in what you're saying, they will catch your interest and so be willing to go on listening (which is why, later, we'll stress the importance of your enthusiasm). If you speak slowly, they will have time not only to hear what you say, but also to understand and assimilate it, make it part of their own knowledge base and, perhaps, think of a useful question to ask. If you speak quickly, there simply isn't time for this process to take place; even if they manage the first part, hearing, or even the second part, understanding, they just don't have time to assimilate the information and make it theirs. As a result, they will remember very little and feel that they have gained no long-term benefit from being present.

Think well of your audience. See them as friends, and as people who want to learn from you because they're interested in what you have to say. It's the truth, anyway, and it will help you to speak slowly for their benefit.

A common problem is speaking from a full script and so being tempted to read rather than to speak. Whether you use a full text or notes, you need to mark them up so that you know when to pause, lift your head and look at the audience. You also need to be as familiar as possible with what you want to say, so that you won't lose your place just because you're pausing and looking at the audience. There is also a marked difference in speed between reading, talking informally and speaking to an audience: you need to practise speaking slowly to make it into a good habit which you can use whenever you need to. If you're going to speak at the recommended speed of about 100–110 words a minute, you'll need to try this out and see what it feels like – it will seem odd at first, but persevere and it will soon become acceptable.

### Voice exercise

By a lucky coincidence, the paragraph above, beginning 'Listening is difficult', contains 198 words, which is ideal for the purpose of practice. Read the paragraph aloud and time yourself, and try again until you manage to take at least a minute and a half to read it. That's just about the speed you need when you talk to an audience.

### Rushed activity

Sometimes, speed is a question of movement as a whole rather than just of speech. If you rush your entry, start to speak too quickly, snatch at visual aids and dash between projector and screen, you are setting up an atmosphere of

speed which is likely to be reflected in your words. One of the most useful things you can do is to get the right rhythm at the beginning of your talk. Stand and look at the audience, and when they look as if they're ready, greet them. Then pause and smile round at them for a moment before you speak again. You will benefit in two ways: you will have looked friendly and welcoming to those who have come to hear you, and you will have allowed yourself time to take control of the situation. You are then much less likely to rush either your activity or your words.

### **Speaking clearly**

If you have your volume and pace under control, you already have huge assets in talking to an audience, but you still need to ensure that you're articulating all the important parts of words, and not swallowing the sound.

### *Dropping your voice*

The rhythms of the English language aren't helpful. We tend to drop our voices as we approach the end of our sentences, which can have the effect of 'hiding' the last word or two, leaving the audience to guess what we said. If, at the same moment, we turn to look at the screen or look down at our notes, those last few words may be completely inaudible. In the same way, an aside can be irritatingly difficult to hear: everything we say in front of an audience should be clearly heard by them. If we make a little comment for our own benefit, such as a muttered '*at least, I hope that's the right date*', or '*well, I think so*', the audience is left not knowing whether they *should* have heard what we said (but didn't) or whether we weren't talking to them (but why not, in a presentation?).

### *Local accents*

Think about your own accent. Most native English speakers have a regional accent of some kind, even if it's very slight, and if English isn't your first language, you may have a strong accent which, in terms of your student group, is particular to you. This is clearly a good thing, as it would be just as boring if we all sounded the same as it would be if we all looked the same. Nevertheless, you must be certain that if you're talking to an audience, they can understand every word you say. If your accent makes you swallow particular sounds, you may find that some words are unclear. For example, a London/southeast accent tends to lose 't' sounds, so that a speaker might say *compu'er* rather than *computer*, or *in'ermi'ent* for *intermittent*. Now the first example, *compu'er*, would probably be clear enough to the audience, but by the time two letters in a word are swallowed, *in'ermi'ent*, the word is being distorted to the point at which it isn't easy to follow. As you think about your own voice, try to decide whether there are some words which you find difficulty in saying clearly – again, a friend might be able to help you.

If your subject of study is scientific or technical, it's especially important that you sound all your words clearly. Inevitably, you will be using a specialist vocabulary containing complex terms, and the audience must be able either to recognise them or remember them later in order to ask a question or check in a subject dictionary. The following voice exercise gives you some difficult expressions to try out; make sure that you can pronounce them clearly, articulating every syllable so that the audience has no doubt about what you said.

### ***Using your mouth***

When you speak, do you move your mouth almost as if you were chewing toffee? One of the most common reasons for poor articulation, not sounding every part of a word clearly, is that the mouth isn't used fully. Notice how some speakers hardly move their lips as they speak and how hard it is to hear their words. If you're projecting your voice to a large audience, make sure that you exaggerate the movements of your mouth – it will feel odd at first, and you may feel that you sound unnatural, but you are helping your listeners to catch every sound and follow every word. Here are some expressions for you to practise saying.

### **Voice exercise**

First of all, imagine that you have a large piece of sticky toffee in your mouth and you're trying not to let it stick to your teeth. Fortunately, there isn't anybody else around, so you can chew as violently as you like. Do this for a moment or two, as it's a good exercise to loosen up the muscles of your jaw and mouth before you begin to speak.

Now say the following phrases aloud, making sure that you make every sound as precisely and energetically as you can:

Electromagnetic compatibility  
(Was every 't' sound clear?)

A medieval knight wearing helmet, hauberk and armour-cap  
(Are the repeated 't' and 'h' sounds clear? Did you say 'darmour'?)

Romantics, realists and impressionists  
(Did you avoid the trap of 'dimpressionists'? )

Peas, beans, broccoli and cauliflowers  
(Are you really making your mouth work hard?)

Hemidemisemiquaver  
(Yes, this really exists, but can you say it clearly?)

### Voice exercise

As you practise speaking in public, imagine that among your audience there are a few people who have a hearing disability (it could happen). They need to supplement their listening by watching your mouth, by lip-reading, in fact. Interestingly, most of us lip-read to a certain extent if we get the chance, although we're generally not aware of doing so. Now you have to use your mouth so that you give as much help as possible to your listeners: if you don't move your mouth or open your lips very far, some of them won't know what you're saying. This exercise has another advantage: it will make you aware of the need to face your audience all the time you're talking. If you turn to face the screen or put your head down as you speak, some people won't be able to take in what you said. If, at the end of your practice, you feel that your imaginary audience will have had the best chance you can possibly give them to hear, understand and assimilate your words, you're speaking clearly.

### Variation in speech

It's a common problem: a speaker has interesting material, but a voice which drones on and on at the same speed and volume until the audience feels positively drowsy. If you've worked through the exercises so far, you'll certainly be heard, but if you're going to capture your audience, you must vary the rhythms of your speech.

### Voice rhythms

We've discussed volume, pace and the need to articulate clearly, but even when you've established these skills, you still might not necessarily be easy to listen to. Some people are lucky enough to be born with voices that are flexible and lively; others just sound monotonous no matter how excited they are by their subject. You now have to make sure that your voice sounds interesting, not just to make it easier to listen to, but also to tell your audience how they have to approach what you want to say. First, it's useful to think how you speak in everyday conversation. If you approach a group of friends in order to tell them some exciting good news, you will instinctively raise your voice to attract attention and then speak in a way that reflects your excitement, with emphasis and stress on key words, and eloquent pauses ('what do you think happened then?' with a pause for them to guess). Suppose instead that you have to give them directions for

getting to your house. You will speak much more slowly, pause, watch them to see if they appear to understand and repeat the key details to help them ('it's the third turning on the right, don't forget, the third'). Now imagine that you want to ask the group an important question. You may wait for a moment or two and make sure that you really have their attention ('hang on a moment, I want to ask if any of you...'). You'll then wait to hear their reply, and the more difficult the question, the longer you'll be willing to wait.

### *Giving emphasis*

The same kind of variety is essential when you're talking to an audience. You want to attract their attention to what you feel is an exciting subject, so you must sound excited. Make sure that you start slowly and with emphasis, and tell them how interesting the topic is. Help them to feel that they *want* to listen to you. Stress the key words – remember the example of the general strike that we used earlier, and how you had to make sure that people listening knew exactly what you were going to talk about.

If you have more complex information to give, perhaps technical or scientific detail, it's much more like the road directions. Slow down, pause, repeat the key details, say the same thing but in a different way: above all, don't overwhelm your audience by trying to say too much too fast. From time to time, ask the audience a question, but make sure that, when you've given them time to think, you supply the answer yourself. They mustn't feel threatened, as if in some way you're giving them a kind of test.

You will have to tell the audience what their approach should be. Everything you say won't be of equal importance; some details will be trivial, but perhaps included as a touch of light relief or a personal comment. The audience has to know what matters, and the way in which you use your voice will tell them. If you want them to take in something of major importance, you need to slow down, pause for a moment and speak slightly louder and more emphatically than before. The tone of your voice will then make it clear that this is an important statement. Then, once you've told them this key fact, speed up very slightly, lower the volume just a trace (but make sure that they can still hear clearly), and they will realise that you have moved on to a lesser point.

If you feel that it'll be difficult to remember this emphasis when you're speaking, mark up your script or notes, perhaps using a highlighter pen on the points you want to stress. It's also helpful to realise that we give emphasis naturally to the first part of a sentence; what follows has a reduced stress and so appears to be less important.

### Voice exercise

Try this out, by giving the same information in different ways. The facts at your disposal are these:

- There are fewer hedgerows than there used to be
- Pesticides are used more widely than in the past
- Insect life has suffered as a result
- This has happened at an increasing rate since the Second World War.

You need to give this information to your audience, in each case putting the stress on a different aspect. So, if you want to stress the timescale, you can say:

- Especially since the Second World War, hedgerows have been removed, pesticides have been widely used and insect life has suffered as a result.

Notice how you say the first six words slowly and emphatically, while the rest of the sentence gets little emphasis. Now say the same thing, stressing the removal of hedgerows.

- The destruction of hedgerows since the Second World War, combined with the increased use of pesticides, has had a detrimental effect on insect life.

Your voice is now emphasising the first four words, and, to a lesser extent, the five which follow. You'll probably also be helped by the stronger word 'destruction' replacing the weaker word 'removed'. The audience knows by your emphasis that you're concentrating on hedgerows and the rest of your information is subordinate to this.

Finally, give the information again, this time stressing the effect on insect life.

- Insect life has been seriously affected, since the Second World War, by the removal of hedgerows and the increased use of pesticides.

*Continued*

Notice that you say the first six words slowly and emphatically, and then allow your voice to move slightly more quickly through the rest of the sentence. You've now told your audience that your talk is focusing on the reduction in insect life and its causes.

In each case, you've given the audience additional information, beyond the meaning of the words. You need to do this, so that your listeners know what's important and what you think about the subject. Try a rather different example:

- Many fine old trees have been cut down to make way for much-needed halls of residence.

Make it clear, as you say this, that in spite of the need for halls of residence, you really regret the loss of the trees. Notice how you say the words 'fine' and 'old' slowly and emphatically, probably lengthening the 'o' sound in the word 'old'. You've conveyed your personal feelings without actually spelling them out. Now change your opinion: you are sorry about the trees, but the need for halls of residence is paramount:

- Some much-needed halls of residence have been built, although sadly some fine old trees have had to be cut down.

Make sure that you give a lot of stress to 'much-needed' and say the last part of the sentence rather more quickly, and even the word 'sadly' doesn't change the fact that you approve of the new building!

You'll have seen that in using your voice for emphasis in this way, you've met two important criteria for talking successfully to an audience: you've told them how they should understand your message without awkwardly spelling it out, and you've achieved variety in your voice by speeding up, slowing down and emphasising the key words. If you use your voice in this way, you are going to be easy to listen to, which will delight your audience.

## ► **Using silence**

A good deal of a successful presentation takes place in silence. In fact, it's a sign of an experienced and confident speaker to be willing to allow silence to happen, without feeling the need to fill the gap with words.

There are moments in talking to an audience when silence is natural. Some of these are:

- at the beginning of your talk, when you wait for the audience to settle down
- as you change a visual aid, whether it's moving acetate onto the projector or just clicking the mouse to show a new image
- when you finish one aspect of your subject, and pause before moving on to the next
- in a natural way, as you give emphasis to a particular aspect
- if you're part of a group, when each person finishes and the audience waits for the new speaker
- as you finish your talk, and ask for questions.

It's worth looking at each of these occasions in more detail.

### **Silence at the start**

The beginning of a talk is difficult and it's important not to rush into speech. Look at your audience and assess when they're ready to listen. Smile at them before you greet them. It's unlikely that you'll have to wait more than a few seconds, although if you're very nervous, it might feel like ten minutes. They need that time to help them to settle down and focus their attention, and so do you. The silence helps you to feel in control of the situation and start the habit of not rushing (see pp. 11–13).

### **Pauses in your talk**

In Chapter 3, we'll say much more about the timing of visual aids, but we need to stress now that, whatever type of aid you're using, it will add to the length of your presentation. You need to make sure that it's correctly on the screen, and the audience needs to look at it and understand it. If you start to speak too quickly, they aren't ready and will miss something of what you say.

The pause between sections of your talk is also helpful to both you and the people who are listening. As you complete the beginning of your talk, for example, and move into the more complex information, pause for a moment to let the audience register the change. You then have that moment to take breath and prepare yourself for the next stage. Again, we talk about this in more detail in looking at the structure of a presentation (see p. 87).

In many ways, a group presentation has its own clear pauses, for example as each speaker finishes and goes to sit down. If the next speaker starts to speak too soon, for instance as he or she walks forward, there's too much activity going on and the audience won't be concentrating fully.

The pause before questions is particularly important, as it gives the audience time to think, judge whether a question is appropriate and find the right words. You mustn't rush this process.

These are the major, natural pauses, but there are others, one of the most useful being the pause that alerts the audience to the importance of what follows. We've already discussed ways of avoiding monotony and giving emphasis, and silence is another useful technique. As you approach a key message in your talk, pause briefly before you introduce it; the silence lets the audience know that they must listen carefully to what follows. As you finish your key statement, pause in the same way again before moving on, so they know you've completed what you wanted to stress.

## Numbers

These pauses are essential in the case of numbers, which are always difficult to hear accurately. If, for instance, you wanted to say that a massive meteor impact about 65 million years ago resulted in an impact crater 113 miles wide, in the Yucatan Peninsula, you would have included two figures that the audience needed to absorb. The first isn't too bad as it's not exact anyway, but there is one small difficulty, which is that the last letter of the preceding word, 't', joins easily to the first sound of the figure, 's'. We tend to say *aboutsixty*, as if it were all one word. Make sure that you separate the two sounds: *about/sixty*, even if it feels artificial to do so. Look again at the section above about speaking clearly, where we discuss in more detail the need to separate sounds.

The other figure, 113, is much harder to say clearly. The difference in sound between 13 and 30 is very slight, and when it's preceded by a hundred, we're distracted from listening as carefully as we should. The problem would be even greater if the following word began with 'n', as in *13 notes*. The most helpful way to clarify the numbers is to give a tiny pause just before and just after the number itself; say *a crater/113/miles wide*, or, in the second example, *just/13/notes*. The slight pause represented by the oblique stroke allows the listener to separate the sounds and so identify what each represents.

## Problem pauses

There are pauses that the speaker chooses to employ, but there's also one more that happens for a different reason: you've forgotten what you're going to say next. Don't worry – it happens to all speakers occasionally, and if you've good notes, it won't be a serious problem. Give yourself time to think and look at your notes in silence. It will in fact be a very short pause, even though it seems ages to you, the speaker. Don't try to fill this gap: if you just pause as you have done for other reasons, the audience, if it

notices at all, will simply assume that it's a pause for effect. However, if you try to fill the silence by saying *er* or *um*, then of course they know that you've got a problem. The golden rule is, don't let the audience know about any difficulties unless you have to – and in this case, you don't.

All these pauses, short in themselves, add up to a surprising amount of silence. The audience will be happy about this, as it gives them time for the essential process we mentioned earlier: listening, understanding, assimilating. It also helps you, as you say less in the time available, stay in control and give yourself useful thinking time. You will be much less likely to run out of breath and gasp for air, as you're giving yourself breathing time, too. Above all, you sound authoritative, because you have the confidence to allow silence to happen.

### ► **Listening to voices**

Human voices are fascinating, both in themselves and the ways in which they are used. Watch and listen to a range of speakers, and notice how they make use of their voices, asking yourself the following questions:

- *Quality of voice*: is it soft, harsh, musical, flat?
- *Volume and pace*: can you hear easily, and have you the time to listen, understand and assimilate the information?
- *Use of voice*: does the speaker vary volume and pace, emphasising the key issues?
- *Articulation*: can you hear and identify each word, including difficult and unfamiliar terms?
- *Silence*: does the speaker pause regularly, and how do you use these silences?

As you become more aware of the effect other people's voices have on you, think about the effect of your own voice on those who hear you. If you use it well, you will notice that people really listen and respond to what you say. How can you build an even stronger relationship with an audience? Your voice needs to be supported by effective non-verbal communication, and that's what we'll now discuss.

### ► **Using non-verbal communication**

#### **Cultural setting**

Before we look at body language in detail, we must make it clear that we're assuming that you will speak within the UK, or at least in a Western

European setting. Non-verbal communication (we'll sometimes use the abbreviation NVC) is strongly linked to culture, and it wouldn't be wise to take the advice we give in this section and use it indiscriminately in front of, for example, a Japanese audience. If you find yourself preparing to speak to an audience in a different part of the world from your own, check with your contacts whether there's any specific aspect of body language which you should avoid, or something which the audience would expect from you.

Having said this, we should add that you can't easily change your body language in a radical way: we'll be giving you lots of advice about using it effectively, but it's unlikely that, in everyday life, you can make it very different – and you'd be causing problems for yourself if you tried. If you speak a foreign language well, you will realise that you do modify your body language as you speak the other language, but it takes a high level of fluency to do this both automatically and convincingly.

You may, of course, be a student who has English as your second or even third language. If so, you will realise that some of your own body language is different from that of other students, and sometimes you may fail to interpret their meaning accurately. Nevertheless, as you're using English for study, you will be reasonably at ease with it, and so the differences of non-verbal communication aren't likely to cause you much difficulty. Certainly, it isn't sensible to give yourself extra anxiety by trying to conform exactly to what other students do naturally, and in any case the audience will be sympathetic and impressed that you're doing so well in a language that isn't your own.

### **Everyday body language**

In ordinary life, we use body language all the time, mostly without thinking about it, and we recognise it in other people. Practise identifying different aspects of NVC in everyday situations (see the box opposite). How does this apply to a seminar or presentation? The most important relationship on these occasions is that between you, the speaker, and the audience, and all of you will be using body language. You will be using it to build that essential rapport that convinces your listeners of what you're saying and encourages their response; they will be using it to reflect how they feel about your presenting skills (impressed, encouraged, bored) and about your message (interested, agreeing or disagreeing). It's essential, therefore, that you use appropriate NVC as you speak and recognise the signals that the audience is sending out.

So let's go through a presentation, looking at the appropriate body language at each stage. If you're using a full script, you will be more restricted

### **Body language exercise**

As you sit in a lecture, take a moment or two to look round. If it's a good lecture, notice how other students are leaning forward, watching the lecturer and obviously concentrating. If it's a boring lecture (and some are!), notice that some students may be leaning back in their seats, perhaps looking out of the window, moving restlessly and obviously not concentrating.

If you are out in the evening, perhaps in a local pub, watch other people's actions, especially if you can't hear their words. If two people are deep in conversation, try to assess whether they're happy with the situation, whether one of them perhaps wants to get away or whether they're arguing. Look round for someone who's bored, waiting anxiously for a friend to arrive or is very tired. How do you know? You can't hear them, you don't know them, but they're sending out all these messages by their body language, and you are picking up the messages and interpreting them.

than if you have notes, but the principles are the same and we'll look at some of the differences later.

#### **NVC at the start**

The first action that an audience takes when you appear on the scene is to look at you. You may be sitting at the top of the table and they come to join you; you may be already in the audience and have to come to the front; or you may walk into the room and take your place when they are already there. However you appear in front of your audience, they will look at you and start to make up their minds about you long before you speak. What do they see?

If you put your head down, fail to look at them, hunch your shoulders and shuffle your feet, they may reasonably assume that you don't want to talk to them. You're there under protest and you're going to take your irritation out on them. Their immediate reaction is likely to be that if you don't want to talk to them, they don't want to listen to you. You've started to make a poor relationship with them without saying a word.

On the other hand, you might rush into the room (up to the table or whatever), give them a quick glance and half a smile, sit down as quickly as possible and keep your head down. You're clearly nervous, but you know that

you need to show some awareness of the audience and its reactions. The audience will be sympathetic towards your nerves (see pp. 29–31) and perhaps sorry for you, but also apprehensive. If you're so uptight before you even start to speak, will you actually manage to talk to them? Suppose you can't, and you break down, and they are embarrassed. You've established a wary relationship with them: they're unsure about what's to follow and they reserve their judgement to see what happens.

Let's try a different scene. You walk in at a brisk but unhurried pace, your head is up and your first action is to look round and smile at the audience. As you reach your place, you either sit or stand in an alert posture, looking as if you really want to talk to the people in front of you. What happens? As you smile at the audience, they will smile back (people do), which makes them feel good because smiling is a pleasant action, and it encourages you, because you can see that their first response is friendly. They're impressed by your obvious confidence and so, reasonably, they assume that you have something interesting to say and you want to say it. They settle down happily to wait for you to start.

You haven't said a word yet, but you've built up a relationship with your audience, and once it's established in this way, it's surprisingly difficult to change it. It's therefore important that it's a good relationship, one which will support you throughout your talk, and so we'll analyse the details of body language that we gave in the previous paragraph.

### **Walking**

The way you walk is a clue to your emotions. Think of this in ordinary life: if you feel cheerful, you have a lively, almost bouncy style of walking; if you feel miserable, you tend to look down and move more slowly and heavily. You need to convey a cheerful message to your audience in the way you walk.

There's an essential comment that we must make at this stage. If your walk and the other aspects of your NVC are the result of your emotions, you need to have the 'right' emotions, and how on earth can you achieve that? There are two ways. One is to convince yourself. However you really feel before your presentation, tell yourself firmly that it will be a good audience, they'll be friendly and supportive, which is likely to be the case, you've prepared first-rate information and rehearsed it thoroughly, and you look forward to sharing it with them. Say this over and over again, whether it's true or not. Human beings are very open to suggestions, even their own. Nevertheless, it's a huge advantage if you're telling yourself the truth, in other words, if you *have* got interesting information and you *have* rehearsed it thoroughly.

The other way is to act. Pretend that you're taking a role in a play and the script requires you to show a cheerful, enthusiastic state of mind. So you

do, no matter how you really feel. The particularly good news about this is that in producing all the right body language, you start to make the emotion true. NVC is so powerful that, at least in part, it can actually produce the feelings that themselves produce the NVC. Now you know why some good actors can cry on stage whenever tears are needed!

### **Eye contact**

So you've walked confidently to your place and looked at the audience. That look is of enormous importance: in our culture, eye contact between speakers, or between speaker and audience, is essential. In ordinary conversation, we expect the person who's talking to us to look at us, and if they don't, we start to suspect their honesty; we may even think of them as 'shifty', a word we use almost exclusively in this context. In talking to an audience, you can't afford to be seen as in any way untrustworthy, either not believing what you say or trying to hide information that your listeners might quite reasonably expect to know. However nervous you feel, or reluctant to meet the eyes of the people in front of you, you absolutely must make eye contact.

This means that you allow your eyes to meet those of other people, just for a brief instant. Don't try to avoid genuine eye contact by looking just over their heads or at their hairlines, as they will soon become aware of what you're doing. Eye contact has to be brief: if you hold it for too long, you are both likely to start laughing with embarrassment – a terrible distraction in a presentation. Of course, you can't look at everyone all of the time, and if you have a large audience, there will be some people with whom you can't make eye contact, as you might not even be able to see them clearly. The secret is to make eye contact with different people in different parts of the room, so that if a few people are missed, they will understand that you've at least tried to look in their direction.

The most difficult people to make eye contact with are those who are sitting to the immediate left and right of you; they're outside the normal arc of your vision. From time to time, turn slightly in their direction and make eye contact with them so that they don't feel left out. Don't let this become regular, though, or you may look as if you're watching a tennis match.

The importance of making eye contact can't be overstated: it's virtually the foundation of the trust that must exist between speaker and audience. There's an odd aspect of it, too: if you make eye contact right at the start, when you first see the audience, you're likely to go on doing so throughout your presentation; if you try to avoid it at the beginning, it will become increasingly difficult, and you may never manage to persuade the audience that they can listen to you with confidence.

## Facial expression

At the start of your talk, you not only look at the audience – you smile at them. Speakers are sometimes reluctant to use facial expression in a formal setting, although they'd use it without thinking if they were talking with friends. Your expression supports your words. Try the following exercise.

### Body language exercise

Try saying the following sentences, and see what happens automatically to your expression as you speak:

*I do agree with what you've said.*

(Did you nod your head slightly, and move it forward a tiny bit towards the person you were agreeing with?)

*No, I entirely disagree.*

(Did you shake your head, moving slightly away from the other person?)

*It's a surprising fact.*

(You probably registered surprise, raising your eyebrows and opening your eyes wider.)

*What a disgusting taste!*

(Did you wrinkle your face up, frown slightly and move your head back?)

In each case, you reacted instinctively to the words you were saying, so that your body language supported the meaning.

In just the same way that a friend to whom you talk socially sees and interprets your body language, the audience also recognises how you feel about what you're saying. It's difficult, but not impossible, to deceive people: try saying *surprising* without looking surprised, or saying 'What a delicious pudding!' while wrinkling your face as you did for the disgusting taste; it isn't easy, is it?

A smile is one of the easiest and most commonly recognised signs of emotion; it suggests friendliness, contentment, shared experience – all aspects of a successful presentation. Start your rapport with the audience by smiling at them and, as we said earlier, they'll respond by smiling back.

## Sitting and standing

Having smiled at the audience, you'll move to the right place and either sit or stand in order to begin to speak. Whichever you do, you need to be

comfortable while looking businesslike. If you choose to sit, because either it's expected, as at a seminar, or there's only a small audience, sit as far back in your chair as you can, thus giving yourself maximum back support. You can put your feet under the chair or together in front of you, but don't stretch your legs out and cross your feet, as this will tend to make you slide down in the chair until you look too casual, too much at ease. It may also tempt your feet to take on a life of their own, crossing and recrossing themselves or describing circles in the air, which may entertain but will also distract your audience. Lean slightly towards the table if you need to do so, but, if you have a script in front of you, don't hunch your shoulders forward over it; put it at the right distance for easy reading and be ready to look up at other people as often as you can.

If you choose to stand, because you have more than about a dozen people in front of you, you need to use visual aids at length (see Chapter 3) or the occasion is very formal, stand in a well-balanced way so that you aren't tempted to rock back and forwards or from side to side. This sort of regular movement can be distracting for the audience. Keep your feet a small distance apart (about 5–6 cm, depending on your height) and balance your weight equally between them. This helps you to stand firmly but not to look too stiff. Standing to attention looks odd and, unless you've been in the army and are used to it, you may find that you start to sway. Put your main weight on the heels of your feet rather than forward on your toes, and don't let either your arms or your legs become too stiff and tense. You need to be able to move as needed without finding that your joints have become locked into position.

### **NVC in the middle of your talk**

You're ready to start your talk and your audience is ready to listen. For the next 20 minutes, or however long it lasts, you'll be using body language to reinforce your meaning. Sometimes it will be totally natural: you use your hand to indicate a height ('so high!'), you pick up the pointer and move back to indicate a detail on the screen, you say something mildly amusing and smile. When you aren't doing any of these things, what do you do with your hands? They present a speaker with a bit of a problem: if you wave them in the air, they can be distracting; if you put them in your pockets, you look too casual; if you fold your arms, you look defensive; if you put your fingers together to form a sort of church roof (a not uncommon habit of politicians), you look as if you might be going to preach a sermon. Clearly, none of these is desirable. Some speakers put their hands behind their back and others just let them hang loosely by their sides, but probably the easiest way to deal with them is to have something to hold: notes and a pointer are the obvious tools which you may be going to use anyway, and even if

you don't need the pointer, nobody is going to worry if you hold one. This is less comfortable if you're sitting down, but then hands are less of a problem if you can keep them tidily under the table or holding your script. Don't forget that if you need to use your hands to stress a point or show something to your audience, you need first to put down anything you're holding. Too many speakers wave a pointer in the air as if they were conducting an orchestra with it, or cling on to notes while trying to change an overhead projector slide and end up dropping everything.

Open hands signify an outgoing nature, friendliness and sympathy with other people; a clenched fist is aggressive. As a result, if you use your hands to indicate someone, perhaps a member of the audience who wants to ask a question, always do so with your hand open, palm outstretched towards the person indicated. Don't use a finger to point (this tends to go with a clenched fist), and move your arm out from the shoulder, not just from the elbow.

### **Movement**

There will be moments when you want to move towards the audience. If, for example, you suggest agreement, the problem you all share, their need to use the information you're giving them, you can strengthen your words by a slight forward movement – if you're standing, take a step or two forwards. At other times, you may need to move back to the screen or turn towards people sitting at the side. These are easy, natural movements, which have the effect of reinforcing your meaning, so helping to build up the essential rapport with the audience. Body language is powerful, so if you say you're happy to answer questions while moving backwards, your audience might well get the impression that you'd rather run away!

### **NVC and questions**

In mentioning questions, we're clearly coming towards the end of your presentation. As you receive a question, look (pleasantly!) at the questioner, and as you finish your answer, look at the questioner again with a smile. In between, while you are giving the answer, look round at the whole audience; this keeps them involved and helps you to continue to project your voice for everyone to hear. If your questioner sits on the front row, you can easily get into conversation with him or her, dropping your voice and forgetting that the rest of the audience wants to hear what you say. Watch how you stand, too: if you turn too far towards a questioner and forget to turn back, you may end up addressing half the audience while the other half is left out.

### **NVC at the end of the session**

Finally, questions are finished, and you are free to sit down or sit back. Remember that you're still on view, and if you sigh with relief that it's all

over, or flop back in your chair with a look of exhaustion, the audience will see this, too. What's more, as it's the last thing they see of you, it's the impression they'll be left with. In a very formal and stressful presentation, such as the one you'll probably have to give in a job interview, this could be disastrous. Leave your audience with a smile and walk off in the same lively, alert way in which you appeared at the start, and both they and you will be left with a sense of a job well done.

### **Body language exercise**

Take a rest from work and watch a news or current affairs programme on TV. As people are interviewed, look carefully at their body language and try to assess how they're feeling. In spite of their confident words, do you feel that sometimes they are tense (sitting forward stiffly, tensing their hands), or aggressive (jutting the chin forward, tensing the neck and shoulders) or hesitant in their replies (looking around slightly desperately as if for help, fidgeting)? Try to recognise these signs and interpret them. There's a problem, of course, in that some politicians have been trained to use confident body language to hide other emotions – but sometimes you can catch them out if they relax their guard for a moment. Look, too, for genuine concern or involvement, the enthusiasm that an individual may truly feel for the message conveyed.

When you talk in public, you are showing similar non-verbal communication and your audience is watching for it too.

## ► **Nerves**

You may be thinking that the question you'd most like us to answer is how to do away with nerves before a presentation. In that case, you will be disappointed, because the single most important message about nerves is that *they are a good thing*. Be grateful for your nerves and don't try to get rid of them, especially in counterproductive ways such as drinking alcohol, which dries the throat and tends to undermine the tension that you really should be feeling.

### **Advantages of nerves**

Why are nerves so beneficial? Firstly, they produce a flow of adrenalin which lifts your brain power and may help you to remember information you

didn't even know you knew. The same adrenalin has another useful effect: it brightens your performance, adding an edge to it which creates a sense of excitement in your listeners and also, interestingly, in you. This is one of the reasons why students who've particularly dreaded giving a talk often say afterwards, in surprise, 'It was really quite fun, once I got going.' Your audience feels this brightness as a sense of occasion, as if they've gone to the theatre to see a well-reviewed performance and they're looking forward to it. Many of them will also be feeling grateful to you: you're speaking, so they don't have to.

The second advantage of nerves is that they help you to build a rapport with the audience. Audiences sense your nervous tension and are complimented by it. You obviously care about them and want to do well – otherwise, why would you be nervous? There are, alas, other answers to this question, such as 'because you haven't prepared and rehearsed your talk properly', but if you read the following chapters, you'll know how to avoid this pitfall. Inexperienced speakers often worry about letting the audience see that they're nervous, as if there were some kind of disgrace in making the end of the pointer or your notes shake a bit. Audiences don't mind at all, as long as you remain in control. If you lose control and your nerves overwhelm you, then you embarrass them and they don't like that to happen.

### **Overconfidence**

If you aren't nervous, you lose these advantages, and you may face another problem. It's possible to be overconfident, and if you are, this also shows. Overconfidence may mean that the speaker doesn't prepare the material sufficiently thoroughly or rehearse enough. It may also produce a casual, laid-back approach, which the audience perceives as a lack of concern for them. If they don't matter to the speaker, why should they bother to listen? Or, more worryingly, they may take their revenge later by asking extremely difficult questions!

### **Controlling your nerves**

You need, then, to be nervous, but not to be overcome by nerves. Obviously, the best way to achieve this is to make sure that you have plenty of good, accurate information to give, and that you've rehearsed your talk carefully with the appropriate visual aids. You must have confidence in your material and your ability to convey it to others.

#### *Mental attitude*

Having done this, make sure that you have the right frame of mind about the occasion. Ideally, a speaker should be thinking, 'Yes, I'm nervous, but I'm also confident that I can do this.' Such a mixture of nerves and confidence

allows the adrenalin to flow but keeps you in control. Tell yourself, especially in the final half hour or so before your talk, that you've got good material, you've rehearsed it well, the audience will be friendly and also impressed by what you say, and you can make a success of this and fully intend to do so. This auto-suggestion won't remove your nerves, but it's surprising how it increases your confidence.

### *Good breathing*

Make sure that you breathe properly. In discussing ways of using your voice well (pp. 9–10), we talked about the need to breathe deeply from the diaphragm without hunching your shoulders. This is particularly important as you approach your talk, because nerves have the effect of making you raise and tense your shoulders and neck muscles. Notice, next time you're really agitated about something, how you instinctively react with your shoulders and be aware that this has a wider effect. If your shoulders are hunched, you'll tend to stiffen your arms and even clench your hands (a sign of aggression, you remember); you may also stiffen your whole stance, so that you look a bit as if you're on guard duty, but very uncomfortable about it.

Undermine all this by freeing your shoulders. Breathe deeply a couple of times, and as you do so, shake your shoulders gently to make sure that they're relaxed, and then let your arms flop by your side. You're easing the tension in your shoulders and arms, which will communicate itself to your whole body. You will almost immediately stand in an 'at ease' way rather than to attention, and you'll both look and feel more comfortable. Do this again just before you appear in front of your audience.

Deep breathing has a beneficial effect on our whole being, not least on any nervous tension. While you wait to speak, take a good breath, relax your shoulders and then let the breath out slowly and in a controlled way. You can do this, if you practise, without the audience noticing anything, and you will automatically feel more confident, more in control.

There will be moments even during your talk when you can do this again. If you're waiting while the audience looks at a visual aid (they won't be looking at you), do the same little exercise; you might try it as you wait for questions, too. If there is a problem, for instance you lose your place in your notes or use the wrong visual aid, give yourself a moment to put it right in silence, take a deep breath as you do so, and let it out in a slow, controlled way. Then forget the incident, as the audience will. If you continue to worry about it, you'll start to lose confidence; it's much better to accept that little difficulties can arise even in the best and most professional of presentations, and if you've handled it well, nobody will worry.

You're probably thinking that this chapter has given you an enormous amount of advice to absorb, but there's no way you'll remember it all when you come to make a presentation. Of course, you're absolutely right. You remember that, earlier in this chapter, we talked about setting up good habits; that's what you need to do. Decide on one area of your speaking skills that you need to improve, and work at it whenever you have the chance, and especially when you're rehearsing a talk. Don't worry about it as you actually give your talk – you've got other things on your mind – and anyway, you'll probably find that you've set up the habit and it happens automatically. Next time, work at another aspect until that produces another good habit and so on. You'll be surprised at how quickly you can improve your speaking techniques and, what's more, gain confidence. We said at the start of this chapter that confidence is the key to a successful presentation and that's what all this advice has been about. When you *feel* that you're speaking more effectively, you'll be right – you *are*.