

BODY LANGUAGE IN PRESENTATIONS

The greatest difference between a presentation and a piece of academic writing is the way in which you are on show. Your appearance and style are very visible and you only have a short time in which to make an impact. This is why the task of making a presentation can become an intimidating hurdle for many people.

But don't worry. There are some straightforward and simple techniques that can enable you to communicate effectively - if you think sensibly and rehearse your behaviour.

What sort of image do you want to present?

If you want your audience to accept you, you need to appear:

- confident
- straightforward
- in command of your subject

These characteristics reassure your audience that you are worth listening to - and it is important that you make them share your confidence. Think back to your own reactions when you have had to listen to a nervous speaker. As an American politician once said, "The key is sincerity - once you can fake that, you've got it cracked!"

Using Your Hands

Try out these various gestures to see how they feel to you, and why they are either effective or distracting. Experience them for yourself.

Don't:

- point at the audience. It makes them feel threatened and produces very negative reactions to the speaker.
- rub your hands together. This is often interpreted as implying that you are lying, and subconsciously washing your hands to rid yourself of the untruth. Get someone else to do this hand movement and watch them while they talk to you. Would you buy a second-hand car from them?

- fold your arms. This comes across as a protective barrier, separating you from your audience and distancing them from your message.
- clench your fists by your sides. This looks very nervous and consequently lacking in confidence.
- put your hands in your pockets. If you are wearing trousers, this can feel reassuring - but you may start to fiddle with your change, which is very distracting to your audience. Even as experienced a politician as Cecil Parkinson completely lost his nerve when Dennis Skinner heckled him about this!

Do:

- use your hands to invite your audience to agree with you. You can do this by keeping your hand open with the palm pointing up. One hand works well - using both hands can start to look either biblical or desperate!
- keep your hand by your side with the fingers open. This looks very natural and relaxed.
- use a pointer if you can, even if it's only a pencil to draw attention to items on your OHP slide. This gives your hands a purpose and can't fail to focus your audience to the points you feel are important.
- make your hand movements co-ordinate with what you are saying. Avoid dramatic gestures, especially if you don't get the timing right! Nothing looks more mechanical and contrived.

Using Your Face

When you are listening to someone, you concentrate on their face. Have you ever raised your eyebrows when you've seen someone you know? This 'eyebrow flash' has been shown to be the widest cross-cultural non-verbal signal that humans use. Expressions are enormously important, so you need to consider them.

- Use the 'eyebrow flash' - sparingly - to signal your warm personality to your audience and to encourage them to feel included.
- Smile at your audience - but *flash* them the occasional reassuring smile. Don't glue on a plastic grin and leave it fixed there. Use personal interaction.
- Spread your attention around your audience. Don't just address one person. Try to make sure that no-one feels isolated. Look at people even if they don't seem to be looking back. They will, and they expect to see you talking to them, and not to the floor or a piece of paper!

Finally, think about your appearance. Dress so that you feel comfortable, but try to give the impression that you deserve to be taken seriously.