

## GESTURES: YOUR BODY SPEAKS

How to Become Skilled  
in Nonverbal Communication



**WHERE LEADERS  
ARE MADE**



# GESTURES: YOUR BODY SPEAKS

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**M**ore than half of all human communication takes place nonverbally. You are constantly sending nonverbal messages – even as you read these words. When you speak in public, your listeners judge you and your message based on what they see as well as on what they hear. Here's how to use your body to effectively enhance your message.

## **GESTURES: YOUR BODY SPEAKS**

When you present a speech, you send two kinds of messages to your audience. While your voice transmits a verbal message, a vast amount of information is being visually conveyed by your appearance, your manner, and your physical behavior.

Research shows that more than half of all human communication takes place nonverbally. When you speak before a group, your listeners base their judgment of you and your message on what they see as well as upon what they hear.

In public speaking, your body can be an effective tool for adding emphasis and clarity to your words. It's also your most powerful instrument for convincing an audience of your sincerity, earnestness, and enthusiasm.

However, if your physical actions are distracting or suggest meanings that do not agree with your verbal message, your body can defeat your words. Whether your purpose is to inform, persuade, entertain, motivate, or inspire, your body and the personality you project must be appropriate to what you say.

To become an effective speaker, you must understand how your body speaks. You can't stop sending your audience nonverbal messages, but you can learn to manage and control them.

That's the purpose of this manual: To help you learn to use your entire body as an instrument of speech. As you read on, you'll learn how nonverbal messages affect an audience, what kinds of information they transmit, how nervousness can be alleviated by purposeful physical actions, and how to make your body speak as eloquently as your words. Included are how-to sections on proper speaking posture, gestures, body movement, facial expression, eye contact, and making a positive first impression on an audience.

Also featured is a special evaluation form that can help you identify your body's spoken image. With it you'll be able to determine your nonverbal strengths and challenges and eliminate any physical behavior that detracts from what you say during a speech. You can then use your body as a tool to make you a more effective speaker.

## **ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS**

Your goal in public speaking is to communicate. To be an effective speaker, you must project earnestness, enthusiasm, and sincerity by making your manner and actions affirm what you say. If they don't, the results can be disastrous.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say." When you speak, people not only judge your speech – they also judge you. If they are not convinced of your earnestness and sincerity, they are also unlikely to accept your spoken message.

What you are is more clearly communicated through your nonverbal behavior than through your words. When presenting a speech, your listeners will use their visual sense to determine if you:



- ▶ are sincere
- ▶ welcome the opportunity to address them
- ▶ truly believe what you're saying
- ▶ are interested in them and care about them
- ▶ are confident and in control of the situation.

### The Principle of Empathy

Part of the impact your physical behavior has on an audience can be explained by the concept of empathy, the ability to share in another person's emotions or feelings. When you speak, the people in your audience tend to mirror your attitudes. They unconsciously feel what you feel and respond accordingly. So it's vital that your body faithfully portray your true feelings.

If you appear relaxed and confident, your audience will also feel relaxed and confident. If you smile at your listeners, they will perceive you as a friendly person and smile back at you. And, most important, if they're convinced you are sincere and trustworthy, they will pay attention to what you say and evaluate it on its own merits.

Of course, this process can work the other way. If you appear uneasy, your audience also will be uneasy. If you frown – even unconsciously – your listeners usually will frown back at you. If you don't look at them, they will feel excluded. And if you fidget, they will perceive a lack of self-control and lose confidence in you and in what you say.

### Why Physical Action Helps

When you demonstrate purposeful, effective physical action while speaking in front of an audience, you provide a true barometer of your feelings and attitudes. But there are other benefits as well:

#### 1. Messages Are More Memorable.

People become bored with static presentations. That's why television newscasts almost always include film showing some kind of action. If a fire, protest demonstration, or some other visually exciting activity occurs, the newscast will usually lead with it – even if it's not the most significant news story. A newscast focusing on "talking heads" would soon lose viewers, who could get as much information from radio.

On the other hand, it's difficult not to look at a moving object. At Toastmasters meetings you've probably noticed how people pay attention to visual distractions. A late-comer's arrival or a flashing timing light usually siphons attention away from a speech.

## Learn to Look for Body Language

Amid polite applause, the speaker shuffled toward the platform, his face registering the look of someone being led to the guillotine. Upon arrival, he set down a pile of notes and sighed audibly. After tugging at his necktie, adjusting his eyeglasses and clearing his throat, he fixed a doleful gaze on the room's back wall.

"It's a great pleasure to be here today," he said. "I have a message of extreme importance for you."

Many people in the audience were already fidgeting. It was obvious that others were focused elsewhere. Ten seconds after it began, the speech was already over. Why?

To begin with, the speaker set himself up for failure by sending his listeners a double-edged message. What they saw contradicted what they heard, and when this happens, the audience inevitably trusts only what it sees!

Even though the speaker's words expressed pleasure in addressing the audience, his nonverbal message said, "I don't want to be here." Those same words declared that his speech was important to his listeners – but his body indicated that his message wasn't important to him. Simultaneously, his facial expression gave the appearance that he cared very little about his audience.

None of these visual messages was performed consciously; they were generated by simple nervousness and inexperience. Yet they branded this unfortunate speaker as insincere and indifferent – even though he was none of those things.

People also remember messages that reach multiple senses. We remember more of what we see than what we hear. However, we remember best when both our visual and auditory senses are involved.

As a speaker you can capitalize on these tendencies by providing visual stimuli that capture your audience's attention and enhance retention of your verbal messages. Gestures, body movements, facial expressions – all of these can be valuable tools when skillfully employed.

## 2. **Punctuation Adds Meaning.**

Written language has a whole array of symbols for punctuating messages: commas, periods, exclamation points, and so on. But when you speak, you use an entirely different set of symbols to show the audience what parts of your speech are most important and to add power and vitality to your words.

Some are performed with the voice. Just as effective are gestures, body movements, and facial expressions. However, to achieve the greatest possible impact, you should coordinate your voice and body, making them work together. The more communication methods you employ, the more effectively you will communicate.

## 3. **Nervous Tension Is Channeled.**

Being nervous before a speech is, to a certain extent, healthy. It shows you care about doing well. Many of the world's top entertainers readily admit they are nervous before a performance. But true fear – the kind that ruins a speech – will keep you from becoming an effective speaker.

Fear and nervousness in public speaking work on three levels: mental, emotional, and physical. A speaker's mental and emotional fears are conquered by self-confidence – a byproduct of preparation and experience. You can best control the physical manifestations of fear and nervousness, however, through conscious use of gestures and body movements.

Public speaking activates the adrenal glands. Your heartbeat quickens. Your breathing becomes shallow and more rapid. Your muscles tense. Since the body will do almost anything to relieve tension, you might unconsciously perform mannerisms that will distract your audience – unless you can dissipate the tension.

Gestures and body movements can help you harness your nervous energy and make it work for you instead of against you.

# **FIVE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR BODY SPEAK EFFECTIVELY**

How can you marshal your nonverbal tools – posture, gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and eye contact – and use them effectively when you speak? In this section you'll learn five general methods for strengthening your body's spoken image.

## 1. **Eliminate Distracting Mannerisms.**

Dr. Ralph C. Smedley, the founder of Toastmasters International, wrote, "The speaker who stands and talks at ease is the one who can be heard without weariness. If his posture and gestures are so graceful and unobtrusive that no one notices them, he may be counted truly successful."

When your actions are wedded to your words, you will strengthen the impact of your speech – even if the audience doesn't consciously notice them. But if your platform behavior contains mannerisms not related to your spoken message, those actions will call attention to themselves and away from your speech. In fact, rather than adding physical characteristics, sometimes the enterprising speaker must work on removing impediments.

What are these impediments? At your next Toastmasters meeting, watch the speakers closely. You'll probably detect at least a few visual distractions in each person's delivery.

Some mannerisms involve the whole body, such as

- ▶ rocking
- ▶ swaying
- ▶ pacing.

Others that commonly plague inexperienced or ineffective speakers include

- ▶ gripping or leaning on the lectern
- ▶ tapping the fingers
- ▶ biting or licking the lips
- ▶ jingling pocket change
- ▶ frowning
- ▶ adjusting hair or clothing
- ▶ turning the head and eyes from side to side like an oscillating fan.

Most of these actions have two things in common: First, they are physical manifestations of simple nervousness; second, they are performed unconsciously – the speaker isn't aware that he or she is doing them.

Most of us are aware of our verbal mistakes. But unless we have access to video equipment and can have our movements recorded, many of our distracting mannerisms go unchallenged. The first step in eliminating superfluous mannerisms is to obtain an accurate perception of your body's spoken image. And to do this, you need help.

On page 17 is a special form designed to give you an appraisal of how you appear as a speaker. With the help of this form and a fellow club member, you'll discover if you have any bad habits.

Your next step is to eliminate any physical behavior that doesn't add to your speeches. You can accomplish this by being aware of your problem areas and by conscious self-monitoring during future presentations. If you have several problem areas, work on one at a time. As each is eliminated, move on to the next.

## 2. **Be Natural, Spontaneous, and Conversational.**

The single most important rule for making your body speak effectively is to be yourself.

Today's favored speaking style can best be described as amplified conversation. It's much more informal than the grandiose style that characterized public orators in years past. The emphasis is on communication and the sharing of ideas – not on performance or sermonizing.

Don't try to imitate another speaker. Instead, let yourself respond naturally and spontaneously to what you think, feel, and say. Strive to be as genuine and natural as when you talk with friends or family members.

## 3. **Let Your Body Mirror Your Feelings.**

The "father of modern public speaking," Dale Carnegie, wrote, "A person under the influence of his feelings projects the real self, acting naturally and spontaneously. A speaker who is interested will usually be interesting."

If you are interested in your subject, believe in what you are saying, and want to share your message with others, your physical movements will come from within and be appropriate to what you're saying.

By involving yourself in your message you'll be natural and spontaneous without having to consciously think about it.

#### 4. **Build Self-Confidence through Preparation.**

Nothing influences a speaker's mental attitude more than the knowledge that he or she is thoroughly prepared. This knowledge inspires self-confidence, a vital ingredient of effective public speaking.

When you're well-prepared, your behavior can be directed outward toward your audience instead of inward toward your own anxieties. You'll be less likely to send visual messages that contradict what you're saying, and you will find it easier to be natural and spontaneous. Almost effortlessly, you'll project the magic qualities of sincerity, earnestness, and enthusiasm.

Practice and rehearse your material until it becomes part of you, but do not try to memorize your speech verbatim. This can defeat your preparation because the conscious effort required to recall each word will make you nervous and tense. Instead, know your material so well that you need only memorize the flow of ideas. You'll find the words will spring forth spontaneously.

#### 5. **Use Your Club as a Learning Laboratory.**

The key to improving your performance in any endeavor is to practice. Your Toastmasters club offers you a practical workshop where you'll gain valuable experience. It's a place where mistakes cost you nothing and the audience is always patient, supportive, and helpful.

Attend meetings faithfully and speak as often as possible. Welcome feedback provided by your evaluators and closely heed comments relating to your physical platform behavior. By incorporating what you learn from this manual into your regular assignments, you'll become adept in all facets of public speaking.

## **YOUR SPEAKING POSTURE**

How you position your body when you speak communicates its own set of visual messages to an audience. More than anything, it reflects your attitude, telling your listeners whether you're confident, alert, and in command of yourself and the speaking situation.

Good speaking posture has other benefits to a speaker. It helps you to breathe properly and project your voice effectively. It also provides a good starting point from which to gesture or move your body in any direction. And by helping you to feel both alert and comfortable, it helps decrease nervous tension and minimize random, distracting movements.

What constitutes proper speaking posture? Ask another person to read the next two paragraphs aloud as you follow the instructions:

Stand straight but not rigid, with your feet about six to 12 inches apart and one slightly ahead of the other. Balance your weight evenly on the balls of your feet. Lean forward just a little. Your knees should be straight but not locked. Relax your shoulders, but don't let them droop. Keep your chest up and your stomach in. Your head should be erect and your chin up, but not uncomfortably so. Let your arms hang naturally at your sides, with your fingers slightly curled.

Now, take a few deep, full breaths. Do you feel comfortable? Your stance should be alert but not stiff, relaxed but not sloppy. If this position doesn't feel natural for you, try repositioning your feet slightly until your body feels in balance.

Do not maintain the same position throughout a presentation. But when you move from one spot to another, perform a gesture or vary your stance, be sure to balance your body once your movement is concluded.



## GESTURES

A gesture is a specific bodily movement that reinforces a verbal message or conveys a particular thought or emotion. Although gestures may be made with the head, shoulders, or even the legs and feet, most are made with the hands and arms.

Your hands can be marvelous tools of communication when you speak. But many inexperienced speakers are unsure what to do with their hands. Some try to get them out of the way by putting them in their pockets or behind their backs. Others unconsciously relieve nervous tension by performing awkward, distracting movements. A few speakers over-gesture out of nervousness, waving their arms and hands wildly.

A speaker's gestures can suggest very precise meaning to an audience. The Indians of North America devised a sign language that enabled people with entirely different spoken languages to converse. Sign language has also made it possible for deaf people to communicate without speaking.

The use of gestures in communication varies from one culture to the next. In some cultures, such as those of Southern Europe and the Middle East, people use their hands freely and expressively when they speak. In other cultures, people use gestures less frequently and in a more subdued way.

The specific gesture we make and the meanings we attach to them are products of our cultural training. Just as cultures differ, so do the perceived meanings of gestures. For example, nodding one's head up and down signifies agreement or assent in Western cultures – but in some parts of India this gesture means the exact opposite. A common gesture used in the United States – that of making a circle with the thumb and forefinger to indicate approval – is considered an insult and an obscenity in many areas of the world.

To be effective, a speaker's gestures must be purposeful – even if they're performed unconsciously. They must be visible to the audience. They must mean the same thing to the audience that they mean to the speaker. And they must reflect what's being said, as well as the total personality behind the message.

### Why Gestures?

All good speakers use gestures. Why? Gestures are probably the most evocative form of nonverbal communication a speaker can employ. No other kind of physical action can enhance your speeches in as many ways as gestures. They:

- ▶ **Clarify and support your words.** Gestures strengthen the audience's understanding of your verbal message.
- ▶ **Dramatize your ideas.** Together with what you say, gestures help paint vivid pictures in your listeners' minds.
- ▶ **Lend emphasis and vitality to the spoken word.** Gestures convey your feelings and attitudes more clearly than what you say.
- ▶ **Help dissipate nervous tension.** Purposeful gestures are a good outlet for the nervous energy inherent in a speaking situation.
- ▶ **Function as visual aids.** Gestures enhance audience attentiveness and retention.
- ▶ **Stimulate audience participation.** Gestures help you indicate the response you seek from your listeners.
- ▶ **Are highly visible.** Gestures provide visual support when you address a large number of people and the entire audience may not see your eyes.

## Types of Gestures

Despite the vast number of movements that qualify as gestures, all gestures can be grouped into one of the following major categories:

**Descriptive gestures** clarify or enhance a verbal message. They help the audience understand comparisons and contrasts, and visualize the size, shape, movement, location, function, and number of objects.

**Emphatic gestures** underscore what's being said. They indicate earnestness and conviction. For example, a clenched fist suggests strong feeling, such as anger or determination.

**Suggestive gestures** are symbols of ideas and emotions. They help a speaker create a desired mood or express a particular thought. An open palm suggests giving or receiving, usually of an idea, while a shrug of the shoulders indicates ignorance, perplexity, or irony.

**Prompting gestures** are used to help evoke a desired response from the audience. If you want listeners to raise their hands, applaud, or perform some specific action, you'll enhance the response by doing it yourself as an example.

Gestures made above the shoulder level suggest physical height, inspiration, or emotional exultation. Gestures made below shoulder level indicate rejection, apathy, or condemnation. Those made at or near shoulder level suggest calmness or serenity.

The most frequently used gestures involve an open palm held outward toward the audience. The meaning of this type of gesture depends on the position of the palm. Holding the palm upward implies giving or receiving, although this gesture is sometimes used as an unconscious movement, with no specific intended meaning. A palm held downward can express suppression, secrecy, completion, or stability. A palm held outward toward the audience suggests halting, repulsion, negation, or abhorrence. If the palm is held perpendicular to the speaker's body, it tends to imply measurement, limits in space or time, comparisons, or contrasts.

## How to Gesture Effectively

Gestures reflect each speaker's individual personality. What's right for one speaker probably won't work for you. However, the following six rules apply to almost everyone who seeks to become a dynamic, effective speaker.

### 1. Respond Naturally to What You Think, Feel, and Say.

When you present a speech, you naturally express yourself through gestures. No matter what our personality or cultural background may be, every one of us has a natural impulse to punctuate and strengthen our words with gestures.

The trick is not to suppress that impulse by retreating behind a mask of impassiveness; this can only create a buildup of tension. At the same time, don't get gestures out of a book or from another speaker. Be genuinely and spontaneously yourself. If you impose artificial gestures onto your natural style, your audience will sense it and label you a phony.

Some people are naturally animated, while others are naturally reserved. If you naturally use your hands freely when you converse informally, use them freely when you give a speech. If you're by nature a reserved, low-key person, don't change your personality just to suit public speaking situations.

### 2. Create the Conditions for Gesturing – Not the Gesture.

Your gestures should be a natural outgrowth of your own unique thoughts and feelings. They should arise naturally and habitually from your attitude toward the message you present.

When you speak, you should be totally involved in communicating – not in thinking about your hands. Your gestures need to be motivated by the content of your presentation. By immersing yourself in your subject matter, you will create the conditions that will enable you to respond naturally with appropriate gestures.

### 3. **Suit the Action to the Word and the Occasion.**

Your visual and verbal messages must act as partners in communicating the same thought or feeling. When a speaker fails to match gestures with words, the outcome can be wooden, artificial, and sometimes comical. Every gesture you make should be purposeful and reflective of your words. In this way your listeners will note the effect rather than the gesture.

Make sure the vigor and frequency of your gestures are appropriate for your words. Use strong, emphatic gestures only when your feeling for the message calls for them. On occasion, you may need to adapt your gestures to fit the size and nature of your audience. Generally speaking, the larger the audience, the broader and slower your gestures should be. Also keep in mind that young audiences are usually attracted to a speaker who uses vigorous gestures, but older, more conservative groups may feel irritated or threatened by a speaker whose physical actions are too powerful.

Your gestures during a speech are also affected by the logistics of the speaking situation. When you speak from a physically confining position, you may be restricted from using broad, sweeping gestures. A common example of a confining speaking position is a head table, where people are seated close to the speaker.

### 4. **Make Your Gestures Convincing.**

Your gestures should be lively and distinct if they're to convey the intended impression. A gesture performed in a half-hearted manner suggests that the speaker lacks conviction and earnestness.

Every hand gesture should be a total body movement that starts from the shoulder – never from the elbow. Move your entire arm outward from your body freely and easily. Keep your wrists and fingers supple, rather than stiff or tense.

Effective gestures are vigorous enough to be convincing, yet slow enough and broad enough to be clearly visible. Your gestures should be distinct but not jerky, and they should never follow a set pattern.

### 5. **Make Your Gestures Smooth and Well-Timed.**

Any single gesture has three parts: the approach, the stroke, and the return. During the approach, your body begins to move in anticipation of the gesture. The stroke is the gesture itself, and the return brings your body back to a balanced speaking posture.

The flow of a gesture – balance, approach, stroke, return, balance – must be smoothly executed in such a way that only the stroke is evident to the audience.

Just as timing is an essential ingredient of comedy, a gesture's timing is just as important as its quality. The stroke must come on the correct word – neither before nor after it. However, the approach can be initiated well before the stroke; in fact, you can obtain an especially powerful effect by approaching a gesture several seconds in advance, then holding the approach until the exact instant of the stroke. The return simply involves dropping your hands smoothly to your sides – it doesn't have to be rushed.

Don't try to memorize gestures and incorporate them into a speech. Memorized gestures usually fail, because the speaker cues himself or herself by the word the gesture is designed to punctuate. This results in the gesture following the word, which looks artificial and foolish.

## 6. Make Natural, Spontaneous Gesturing a Habit.

The first step in becoming adept at gesturing is to determine what you're doing now. Use the evaluation form on page 17 and the help of a fellow Toastmaster to find out if you have any bad habits. If you do, strive to eliminate them from your body's spoken image.

To improve your gestures, practice – but don't wait until the day of your speech! Work on enhancing your gesturing abilities in front of friends, family members, and co-workers. Relax your inhibitions, gesture when you feel like it, and let yourself respond naturally to what you think, feel, and say. Through awareness and practice, you can make appropriate gesturing a part of your habitual behavior.

## BODY MOVEMENT

Body movement – changing your position or location during a speech – is the broadest, most highly visible kind of physical action you, as a speaker, can perform. Because of this, it can be either a tremendous asset or a tremendous liability to your delivery system.

When you move your entire body in a controlled, purposeful manner during a speech, you can benefit in three ways. To begin with, body movement can **support and reinforce what you say**. And, of course, motion will almost always **attract an audience's attention**. Finally, using body movement is the fastest, most effective means of **burning up nervous energy and relieving physical tension**.

All of these characteristics, however, also have the potential to work against you. One rule for making body movement your ally and not your enemy is this: Never move without a reason.

The eye is inevitably attracted to a moving object, so any whole body movement you make during a speech invites attention. Moving for a reason in league with your verbal message stimulates the alertness and attentiveness of your audience while simultaneously enhancing what you say.

Watching a stationary object is tedious, so you don't want to glue yourself to one spot while you speak. On the other hand, your body movement should be governed by moderation. Too much body movement – even the right kind – can become distracting to an audience. Ideally, you should seek a middle ground that consists of enough movement to keep your listeners' attention, yet not enough to divert attention away from what you're saying.

Just as purposeful movements beckon for attention, so do random movements. The body will do almost anything to rid itself of tension. Inexperienced speakers commonly perform such body movements as rocking, swaying, and pacing without being aware of what they're doing. If public speaking makes you nervous and tense, try to incorporate enough purposeful body movement into your speeches so your body won't unconsciously indulge in distracting mannerisms.

Another valid reason for body movement is to enhance understanding of your message. The means suggested by most types of body movement are less precise than those aroused by individual gestures, but body movement can still be an effective visual complement to your spoken word.

Stepping forward during a speech suggests you are arriving at an important point. A step or two backward indicates you've concluded an idea and are willing to let the audience relax for a moment and digest what you've just said. A lateral movement implies a transition – that you're leaving one thought and taking up another.

In some instances, you can use body movement to illustrate or dramatize a specific point. For example, if you're describing a physical action – such as throwing a ball, or a runner straining to break the tape and win a close race – you can help your listeners clearly visualize what you're saying by acting out your description.

The final reason for body movement is perhaps the simplest: Getting from one place to another. In almost every speaking situation, you must walk to and from the point where you deliver your speech. And if you

incorporate visual aids into a presentation, you will be moving about as you use them. The key to effective movement lies in making those movements easy, natural, and smooth.

When changing your speaking position during a speech, always lead with the foot nearest your destination. If you're going to step to your left, lead with your left foot. Never cross one foot over the other when you begin a movement.

## FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

An impassive expression may be an asset to a good poker player, but to a speaker it is a barrier to effective communication.

People watch a speaker's face during a presentation. Politeness, of course, is one reason for this, but equally important is the need to obtain visual data that will make the speaker's message more meaningful.

Facial expression is often the key determinant of the meaning behind a message. Here's an example. If a friend were to smile warmly at you and say, "You're crazy," would you feel insulted? Probably not; in fact, you might even take it as a sign of endearment. But what if this statement were accompanied by a contemptuous sneer? The verbal message would be the same, but your reaction would no doubt be drastically different.

When you speak, your face communicates your attitudes, feelings, and emotions more clearly than any other part of your body. According to behavioral psychologists, people can easily recognize – simply by observing a speaker's facial expressions – such distinct feelings as surprise, fear, happiness, confusion, disgust, interest, disbelief, anger, and sadness.

To an audience, your face serves as a barometer for what's inside you. Your listeners will watch your face for clues about your sincerity, your attitude toward your message and your earnestness in sharing your ideas with them.

Remove expressions that don't belong on your face. These include distracting mannerisms and unconscious expressions which are unconnected to your feelings, attitudes, and emotions. Both types of unwanted facial expression usually are manifestations of nervousness.

Just as nervous speakers exhibit distracting gestures and body movements, they also may release excess energy and tension by unconsciously moving their facial muscles. Examples of random facial expressions include licking or biting the lips, tightening the jaw, raising the corners of the mouth and making twitching movements of any part of the face.

## Learn to Look for Body Language

Sometimes we learn best by watching others and picking up our cues from them. If you are unsure about what types of gestures, expressions, and other body movements you would like to incorporate into your own speaking style, observing the techniques of others might be a good first step. For instance:

**Become a people watcher.** The next time you are at a shopping mall, amusement park or other well-populated area, take some time to observe others. Not only is human behavior fascinating, but watching how others act and react can be invaluable for a speaker studying visual behaviors.

**Watch television.** Here's the catch: the sound must be turned down! Vintage shows such as "I Love Lucy" are especially instructive when watching body signals. But even the most straightforward news broadcaster communicates nonverbally; contrast the subtleties of this type of communication with the more exaggerated style displayed in broad physical comedy.

**Study photographs.** Ever wonder why the saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words," continues to be popular? Once you've studied old family photographs, the reason will be self-evident. Although social conventions of the time may have something to do with the way the people were posed, a great deal can be inferred from the proximity of the subjects, how – or if – they are physically connected, and the nature of their facial expressions.



An audience considers these expressions as indicators of nervousness and a lack of confidence, experience, and preparation. Such behavior can also make an audience nervous and decrease its receptivity to the speaker's verbal message.

Once you are aware that you display distracting facial expressions, work toward controlling your apprehensions about speaking. Thorough preparation and involvement in your subject matter will help you project confidence and control.

The key to conveying friendliness is remembering to smile. To do so constantly is inadvisable – you might be labeled as inconsequential, and it would be inappropriate during a serious presentation. But by all means smile when it's suitable to the situation. Show your listeners that you are pleased to have the opportunity to share your ideas with them, that you are enjoying yourself, and that you are interested in them.

No rules govern the use of specific expressions. By relaxing your inhibitions and allowing yourself to respond naturally to your thoughts, attitudes, and emotions, your facial expressions will be appropriate and will project sincerity, conviction, and credibility.

## **EYE CONTACT**

Each one of the categories we've just discussed – physical appearance, posture, gestures, body movements, and facial expressions – provide critical nonverbal elements for your speeches. But after your voice, your eyes are your most powerful tool for communicating.

### **Why is Eye Contact Essential?**

When you speak, you involve your listeners with your eyes, making your presentation direct, personal, and conversational. One sure way to break the communication bond is to fail to look at your audience.

No matter how large an audience may be, each listener wants to feel important, to sense a personal connection with the speaker, and to feel that the speaker is communicating directly with him or her. Public speaking, remember, is amplified conversation. Just as a member of a small, informal group feels excluded from a conversation if the speaker doesn't meet his or her eyes, the people in your audience will feel left out if you fail to establish eye contact with them.

In most cultures, the act of looking someone directly in the eyes is a symbol of sincerity. Failure to meet another person's gaze when speaking implies disinterest, lack of confidence, insincerity, or chicanery. The same psychological associations are found in public speaking. In one study, speakers who established eye contact were judged more truthful, honest, credible, friendly, and skillful than those who did not. Only by looking at your listeners as individuals can you convince them that you are sincere, that you are interested in them and that you care whether or not they accept your message.

When you speak, your eyes also function as a control device. Simply by looking at them, you have an influence on your listeners' attentiveness and concentration. On the other hand, if you don't look at them, they won't look at you, and attentiveness to your message will suffer. In turn, the attentiveness generated by your effective eye contact can serve as a source of strength and encouragement for you. When you see that the audience is interested in your message, you will gain confidence and become more comfortable.

Eye contact can also help you overcome nervousness. Fear is the most common cause of nervousness in speaking, and fear is caused by the unknown. Eye contact makes your audience a known quantity. When you look at your listeners and realize that most are interested in your message, your fear will evaporate, and your nervous tension will decrease.

Not only do your eyes send vital messages while you're speaking, they also receive them. Effective eye contact is a feedback device that makes the speaking situation a two-way communication process. Only by looking at your listeners can you determine how they are reacting. Are you performing well? Does the

audience understand what you're saying? Are you holding the audience's attention? Is your message being accepted?

By watching the audience's reactions, you can make immediate adjustments to your presentation. Experienced speakers consider this visual feedback to be the biggest benefit of eye contact. Once you've developed the ability to gauge audience reaction and tailor your words accordingly, you will become a much more effective speaker.

## **How to Use Your Eyes Effectively**

### **1. Know Your Material.**

Being prepared – having control over your verbal message – is a prerequisite for establishing effective eye contact with your audience. You should know your speech so well that you don't have to devote your mental energy remembering the sequence of ideas and words. Your projection must be outward to the audience – not inward toward mental turmoil.

If you can speak effectively without notes, by all means do so. But if you must use an outline or some other form of written reminder, go ahead – just don't let it be a substitute for preparation and rehearsal.

You can use your eyes effectively while using notes, but this requires practice and conscious effort. Many experienced speakers are highly adept at this skill, taking advantage of such natural pauses as audience laughter or the aftermath of an important point to glance briefly at their notes. To make this technique work, you must keep your notes brief – a few simple words or symbols keyed to the sequence of your message. If you know your material and are well-prepared, these cues should be enough to keep you on course and avoid losing eye contact with your audience.

### **2. Establish a Bond.**

When you speak, you are communicating with a group of individual people – not performing before a single unit. So making effective eye contact means more than just passing your gaze throughout the room; it means focusing on individual listeners and creating person-to-person relationships with them.

How do you do this? Begin by selecting one person and talking to him or her personally. Hold that person's eyes long enough to establish a visual bond – perhaps five to 10 seconds, or the time required to say a sentence or share one thought. Then shift your gaze to another person.

You may have noticed the speaker who wags his head from side to side, or slowly shifts his gaze from right to left like an oscillating fan. Always remember that although your eyes need to move from one person to the next, they should not follow any set pattern.

With an audience the size of a typical Toastmasters club, this is relatively easy to do. But if you are addressing hundreds or thousands of people, it's impossible. However, if you pick out one or two individuals in each section of the room and establish personal bonds with them, each listener will get the impression you're talking to him or her directly.

### **3. Monitor Visual Feedback.**

While you deliver a speech, your listeners are responding with their own nonverbal messages. Use your eyes to seek out this valuable feedback. By monitoring these visual messages, you can gauge the audience's reactions to what you say, then adjust your presentation accordingly.

If individuals in the audience are not looking at you, they may not be listening, either. Sometimes this is because they can't hear you. If you are not using a microphone, speak louder and see if that gets a positive reaction. Perhaps they are just bored. If so, you'll need to regain their attention, perhaps

by using appropriate humor, increasing your vocal variety, or adding some purposeful gestures or body movements.

Do your listeners look puzzled? If so, you may need to provide additional explanation for something you've said. Watch them as you do, and when their faces register understanding, move on to the next point or idea.

Are your listeners frowning at you? Remember, an audience unconsciously mirrors the speaker. Maybe you're unconsciously frowning at them. Smile – then see if their expressions change. The same holds true for audience members who are fidgeting nervously: Maybe you've been engaging in a distracting physical mannerism. On the other hand, if their faces indicate pleasure, interest, and close attention, don't change a thing – you're doing a great job.

## **HOW TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION**

First impressions are critical. People meeting for the first time form immediate judgments of one another that forever color their relationships. When you present a speech, you'll be judged by the people in your audience, and the initial impression you make on them will directly affect the success of your presentation.

One of your objectives as a speaker should be to create a visual image that complements and enhances your verbal message. You want your listeners to like you, trust you, and want to hear what you say.

As a Toastmaster, you've already made your first impression on your fellow club members. Remember, however, that your club is a learning workshop that prepares you for outside speeches delivered to other audiences, and in the future you may be speaking in front of business groups and in your community. To many of these audiences, you'll be a stranger and making a good first impression will be crucial.

### **Your Appearance**

Like it or not, your physical appearance strongly influences how others judge you. When you deliver a speech, your appearance conveys a powerful visual message to the audience – a message vital to your success as a communicator.

You can't change your age, height, or facial features, but you can enhance your appearance through proper attire, grooming, and physical conditioning. This manual cannot offer detailed information on these subjects; styles and preferences vary greatly with time, location, and socioeconomic factors. However, a few general comments apply to all speakers.

A good rule of thumb for dress is to be at least as well-dressed as the best-dressed person in the audience. If your listeners will be wearing suits and dresses, wear your best suit or dress – the outfit that brings you the most compliments. Make sure every item of clothing is clean, well-tailored, and well-fitting.

Don't wear jewelry that glitters or jingles when you move or gesture – it might divert attention away from your speech. For the same reason, empty your pockets of bulky objects or things such as pocket change or keys that produce audible sounds when you move.

Audiences like speakers who reflect good health and physical vitality. Research has shown that an audience associates a speaker's well-being with the soundness of his or her verbal messages. So watch your diet and exercise regularly.

### **Before You Speak**

Part of your first impression is made before you are introduced to begin your speech. As the audience is arriving, your preparations should be concluded – you should not have to study your speech. Instead, mingle with the audience, and project the same friendly, confident attitude that will make your speech a success.

When the meeting or program begins, be attentive and courteous. If you are nervous, breathe slowly and deeply. One speaker recommends performing isometrics. These unobtrusive exercise movements go unnoticed by others and are useful in helping to dissipate nervous tension.

### **The First Minute**

When you speak, especially if you are not well-known to the audience, the most crucial part of your presentation is the first minute. During those few seconds, the people in the audience will be making critical judgments about you. They will decide if you're confident, sincere, friendly, eager to address them, and worthy of their attention. And to a large degree, they will base this decision on what they see.

After your introduction, walk purposefully and confidently to the speaking position. Balance your body as you assume your speaking posture. Achieve an immediate connection with the audience by combining direct eye contact with a warm smile. Keep your movements and gestures to a minimum during the first few moments of your speech – let the audience first get accustomed to you.

### **THUMBS UP ON GESTURES!**

As speakers, we need to remember that much of our message is not just in our words, but also in our visual presentation. For some of us, this means enlarging upon our gestures and facial expressiveness as well as developing a stronger sense of eye contact. For others, it means modulating those very same attributes.

Whatever your vocal strengths and speaking skills, your ability to visually communicate your ideas through gestures and other forms of body expression will enhance not just your presentation, but your overall effectiveness as a speaker.

**Make Notes Here**

