

4.9.18: Body Language and Gestures

Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies to effectively use body language and gestures to emphasize your message



One of the essential rules, and success factors, for public speaking is authenticity. This is as true for your non-verbal language as it is of the words you say and the ideas you express. Body language and gestures are a form of expression and can be either meaningful or distracting.

Toastmasters International, the global non-profit dedicated to teaching public speaking skills, believes that “gestures are probably the most evocative form of nonverbal communication a speaker can employ.”^[1] In their *Gestures: Your Body Speaks* publication, they identify the following seven benefits of incorporating gestures into your speech:^[2]

1. Clarify and support your words
2. Dramatize your ideas
3. Lend emphasis and vitality to the spoken word
4. Help dissipate nervous tension
5. Function as visual aids
6. Stimulate audience participation
7. Are highly visible

Note: The *improper* use of gestures can have *just as powerful* an effect but will likely be *detrimental*. To avoid this, record yourself presenting and make sure your gestures are consistent with your words. When the two are telling different stories, you create confusion and lose credibility and rapport with the audience.

Body language—how you dress as well as your mannerisms—is another powerful communication element. For perspective on this point, and a powerful speaking and life hack, watch social psychologist Amy Cuddy’s “[Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are](#)” TED Talk. The core idea is that we make judgments based on body language, and those judgments can predict meaningful life outcomes. In one example cited, social scientist Alex Todorov found that one-second judgments of political candidates’ faces predict 70 percent of U.S. Senate and gubernatorial race outcomes. What is perhaps more important, however, is that our body language reflects how we judge, think, and feel about ourselves. The key takeaway from this is that our bodies change our minds. That is, we can change not only how we are perceived but how we perceive ourselves by managing our body language. As a speaker, you must be conscious of, and cultivate, the presence you bring to your speech.

To quote Toastmasters International, “When you present a speech, you send two kinds of messages to your audience. While your voice is transmitting a verbal message, a vast amount of information is being visually conveyed by your appearance, your manner, and your physical behavior.”^[3]

Your use of gestures and body movement should reflect not only your personal communication style but should also match the audience and the environment. A good practice is to “preview” the attendees or venue by sitting in on a prior event, watching a video, or scanning the event’s social feeds. This will give you a sense for audience dynamics and the size of the room. Certainly ask the event organizers in advance about the setup of the room in which you will speak. Consider adjusting your gestures to fit the audience, room size, and acoustics. For example, you may want to tone down your gestures in a smaller space and put more emphasis on vocal rather than physical delivery. This doesn’t mean that you should put your personality on “mute” if you’re a naturally ebullient or expressive person. The key is to manage your mannerisms so they don’t overpower either your audience or your words. If the room is a large auditorium filled with enthusiastic fans, you may want to increase your physical presence with

gestures to better “fill” the space. Rehearse new elements so they become fluid and reinforce rather than detract from your message. Remember that gestures and body language are most effective when they’re used as “visual punctuation.”

1. Toastmasters International. *Gestures: Your Body Speaks*, p. 8. 2011. Web. 26 Jun 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Contributors and Attributions

CC licensed content, Original

- Body Language and Gestures. **Authored by:** Nina Burokas. **Provided by:** Lumen Learning. **License:** *CC BY: Attribution*

CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Man gesturing while speaking. **Authored by:** Derrick Coetzee. **Located at:** https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frank_Schulenberg_speaking_and_gesturing_4.jpg. **License:** *CC0: No Rights Reserved*

4.9.18: [Body Language and Gestures](#) is shared under a [not declared](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- **7.18: Body Language and Gestures** by Nina Burokas is licensed [CC BY 4.0](#). Original source: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-businesscommunicationmgrs>.