

Effective Body Language

Brief: An audience will seek to interpret body movements, symbols of nonverbal language, to interpret the meaning of a speech.

Learning Objective: Understand what body language is and how to effectively use it during the delivery of a speech.

Key Terms:

- **Emblem:** A gesture that acts much like a word in that it has a direct verbal translation and depends upon culturally accepted interpretations.
- **Gesture:** A motion of the limbs or body, especially one made to emphasize speech.
- **Kinesics:** The academic study of the meaning of body movements.

Kinesics

Recall how words are actually symbols of meaning. When your audience hears your speech, they don't directly hear your ideas. Instead, they hear the sound of the words—the verbal language—you've chosen to represent your ideas. To understand your speech, the first task of your audience is to decode your verbal language to try to retrieve your original ideas.

In much the same way, your audience seeks to interpret your body movements—the symbols of your nonverbal language—to understand the meaning of your speech. The academic study of the meaning of these symbols—such as pacing, waving, pointing, touching, and slouching—is called kinesics.

Here are some examples of how your movements during your speech may convey meaning to your audience:

If you lean your upper body slightly toward the audience, they will feel that you are trying to bridge the space of separation.

When you purposefully walk from one side of your presentation area to the other in coordination with changes in sub-points, your audience will perceive you're transitioning from one point to another.

If you cross your arms in front of you, your audience might think you're being confrontational or that you're in deep thought about a question from an audience member.

If you stand still without movement while listening to a question, your audience will think that you're showing sincere interest.

Distracting Movements

While some body movements reinforce your message, unnecessary movements can distract from your delivery. Here are some examples:

If you sway back and forth at the lectern or podium in a pattern without purpose, the audience may follow the movement rather than the message.

If you pace from one side of the front of the room to the other meaninglessly, the audience will follow the movement and lose track of what you're saying.

If you use your hand to move your hair out of your eyes constantly while speaking, the audience will focus on the movement and forget what you are saying.

Gestures

A gesture is a motion of the limbs or body, especially one made to emphasize speech.

Some gestures, known as emblems, act much like words in that they have a direct verbal translation and depend upon culturally accepted interpretations. A wave or making a V with your 2nd and 3rd fingers to create a peace sign are examples of emblems common in the United States.



Other gestures, such as pointing your finger or shrugging your shoulders, are used in parallel with verbal speech to reinforce your verbal message.

Distracting Gestures

Your gestures should reinforce your verbal message. Before you deliver your speech, become aware of your nervous habits, such as twirling your hair or clicking a pen, which will impede your audience's ability to focus on your content.

In general, make sure that the audience can see your hands above the lectern. Hold your hands at least waist-high and make sure to put your notes or other objects on the lectern so your hands are free to move naturally.

From Concept to Action

Are you aware of your nervous body movement habits? In stressful situations do you constantly adjust your glasses or the collar of your shirt? Do you bounce from one foot to another to discharge nervous energy? Or do you stand perfectly still and slouch to make yourself smaller in the hopes of becoming invisible? In everyday life, other people may hardly notice these nervous habits. However, as soon as you stand in front of an audience to deliver a speech, these same nervous habits can loom large, easily distracting your audience from listening to and receiving your message. If you're not sure what your body movement habits are, ask friends for their observations. Or, better yet, ask a friend to video record you practicing your speech. Once you're aware of your nervous body movement habits, you'll be better able to consciously choose more effective gestures.

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"Harmony Peace Hope Sign Language Finger Two Hand." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/photos/harmony-peace-hope-sign-language-1006179/>. Accessed 25 May 2019. [CC0]

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