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How to Communicate with Body Language

It is often said that in face-to-face [communications](#), the words we speak actually account for less than 10% of the meaning that we convey, while [body language](#) accounts for more than half of our message (our [tone of voice](#) supposedly communicates the rest). [Body language](#) is important, and if your words say one thing but your body says another, the person you are speaking to is more likely to believe the message your body is communicating. Here's how to start using body language to improve your day-to-day [communications](#) and, more importantly, to [improve your quality of life](#).



Steps

1. **Be natural.** It's easy to find [big lists of what certain gestures mean](#), and entire [dictionaries](#) have been written that attempt to decipher the meaning of every [posture](#), blink of the eye, or muscle twitch. The meanings of signals differ from one person to the next, however, and there are vast cultural differences, as well. What's more, it is not possible to control all your muscles so that each gesture and [facial expression](#) delivers the meaning you want it to deliver. Even if you were to succeed in controlling your body language "by the book," you would look fake.
2. Identify your own body language patterns. People spend a lot of time looking at your body language. What are they seeing? Make a conscious effort to think about what your body is doing in different interactions with different people. A [mirror](#) can be useful to examine facial expressions and posture, but mainly you just want to pay attention to what your body does when you're [angry](#), [nervous](#), [happy](#), etc.



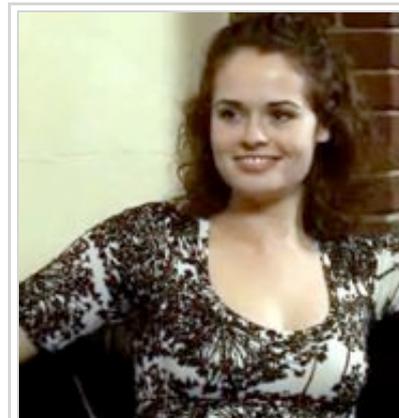
Is he saying [hello](#), [goodbye](#), or [stop](#)?

- Determine whether your body language is in sync with your message. Your body language is effective if it communicates the message you want it to [communicate](#). Does your posture communicate [confidence](#), or does it make you seem unsure of yourself even as your

words express confidence? If your non-verbal signals match your words, you'll not only communicate more clearly, you'll also be perceived as **being more charismatic**.



Withdrawn and insecure



Confident and inviting

- Look at the big picture. Don't stay awake at night wondering if your right index finger is effectively communicating your approval of something. Different parts of your body work together to communicate meaning in "message clusters," and generally the more strongly you feel about what you're talking about the more parts of the body are actively communicating. You don't have to have every little nuance "correct" as long as the overall effect of the cluster is in sync with your message.
3. Correct the big problems. If you take away one thing from this article, it should be that body language should be natural, and you don't need to obsess over it. That said, there are certain situations that may merit "relearning" certain aspects of your body language.
- If you give persistent, very obvious counterproductive signals, it may be worth your time to fix them. For example, if you're constantly hunched over or touching your face, you'll never look **confident, approachable**, or at ease. Improving your posture and working to eliminate nervous tics can be difficult and will take time, but if you focus your efforts only on the big things, you'll quickly improve your overall non-verbal communication.



Touching one's face signals anxiety

If you have recently entered a new culture, you may

If you have recently entered a new culture, you may need to adjust your body language. Cultural norms regarding body language (i.e. how far away you should stand from someone, how much eye contact you should make, and what gestures are considered taboo), vary considerably, and if you don't speak the same body language as the locals, you're liable to be misunderstood a great deal, sometimes with very serious implications.



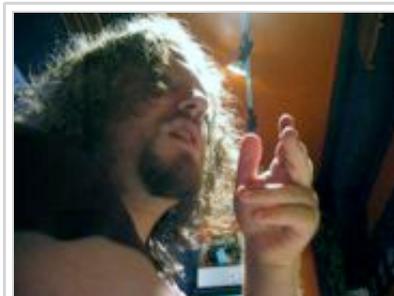
Hand gesture commonly used in Argentina to roughly convey "What the hell are you thinking?"

- Concentrate on difficult situations. Most of our day-to-day interactions are with people we know fairly well. As people get to know you better, they become better at reading your body language, which means (for better or for worse) that they're less likely to misinterpret your non-verbal cues. With this in mind, then, it's most important to make sure your body language is clear in interactions with people you don't know very well. These situations (first dates or job interviews, for example) may merit some special attention. Get in front of a mirror and practice these interactions. Speak aloud as you normally would, and carefully watch what your body is doing. Even better, videotape yourself for several minutes and then watch the [video](#) to identify how you might present yourself better.



Practice in front of a mirror

- Have more than one gesture to "get the message across." If you want to make sure you're not misunderstood, repeat both gestures when you speak the idea aloud. If the listener doesn't pick up on one gesture, he or she will likely be familiar with the other. You don't have to use a body language gesture (or two) for every word, but it's a good idea to have a toolbox of gestures you can use to reinforce very important, but easily misinterpreted, concepts.



Emphasize a point

- Direct the most positive gestures toward the listener. This way you more clearly indicate that you are offering a favorable outcome to the listener as though it were a gift to them. Direct the most negative gestures away from yourself and the listener. This way you clearly indicate that you wish that no obstacle stands in the way of your intended message.



☞ Directing towards



☞ Directing away

6. Say what you mean. For most people, appropriate body language--that is, body language that effectively reinforces the speaker's meaning--comes naturally when they mean what they say. The problem, of course, is that we don't always say what we mean. If you're trying to **lie convincingly**, for example, you'll probably have to alter your body language to prevent it from arousing suspicion. Even when we're not trying to deceive we may not really be saying what we feel. If your **boyfriend** or **girlfriend** asks if you love him or her, you may think you do but also think you don't; the mixed feelings may come out in a mixed message, in which your words say "yes," but your body language portrays your doubt. While much is said about changing your body language to communicate what you want to say, it's often easier to just say what you feel.

7. Use your body language to help you understand how you feel. If you're not quite sure how you feel about something or someone, pay attention to what your body is saying. Just as other people can read your body language to help uncover what you're feeling, you can learn from your body, and, for the most part, you should be able to read your body language better than anyone else can--all you have to do is pay attention. Using body language effectively means not only communicating with others, but also learning more about yourself.



☞ Observe your own expressions

8. Treat the cause, not the symptoms. Body language is very useful as a self-improvement tool, because it can clue us into our own feelings: our strengths, our fears, our hopes, our instincts. There's a multi-million dollar industry filled with people who will tell you how to position your torso and move your eyes in order to look more confident around members of the opposite sex or to seem more competent at work, but the usefulness of such instruction is limited. Even with dedicated practice, body language is hard to convincingly fake. Even if you manage to use your non-verbal cues to communicate feelings you don't really feel, you may, in the end, discover that you are only fooling yourself.

Tips

- One way to work on developing your own system is to study **sign-language**, and then use similar symbols when actually speaking once in a while.
- It is sometimes useful to observe the body language that is appropriate for a given setting or among certain people, and then match your gestures to those of people around you. This sort of imitation may be considered uncharismatic, but if you're not familiar with the culture or with the people with whom you are speaking, it may be the only way to get your message across

or to avoid an embarrassing gaffe.

- Use the most positive (or, if warranted, negative) gestures and facial expressions first and last. While it is true that we make our most memorable impressions within the first 5 to 10 seconds, we also make a crucial impression within the last 5 to 10 seconds as well.
- Once in a while use the opposite gesture of your intended meaning. This is not meant to confuse the listener, but rather to see how well they pay attention to your gestures. If they notice it, consciously or not, they may say something like "Wait a minute, let me make sure I am understanding you."
- Tone of voice and inflection, although audible, are great indicators of meaning. However the actual tones used between people may not be accurately interpreted by the listener. Be careful to not misinterpret another person's tone of voice.
- If you know you are using a sign that may easily be misinterpreted, state so as quickly as possible and state your intended meaning, right away. For example, if you cross your arms for warmth, you may want to say, "I'm cold, are you?" That way the person won't think that you're just being unreceptive.
- Be honest and non-judgemental. Speech and gestures are co-expressive - if you say what you mean, your body language will follow. Also remember that we communicate to exchange ideas and information and that this process is not supposed to be a convoluted courtship dance. Do not try to read too much into a stranger's body language. It makes them uncomfortable and may give the semblance of you judging them.

Warnings

- Not everyone uses the same gestures to convey the same meaning. For example in the US feet spread apart typically conveys the message "I am calm, but standing my ground." In Japan to convey this meaning the feet would typically be together, with the hands directly at the sides.
- People's usage of body language can and usually does change over time.
- Understand that people are liable to misinterpret your body language. Always try to be clear, and try to reinforce your meaning.
- Do not assume that you have correctly identified the meaning of another person's body language without verification. For example, many people believe that if a person's arms are crossed it means that they are distancing themselves. Perhaps they are simply cold!
- Faking a gesture or facial feature to convey a meaning is the same as lying, and it can be interpreted this way. When people say that someone seems phony, they're usually referring to mannerisms that seem faked.

Related wikiHows

- [How to Read Body Language](#)

- [How to Improve Your Posture](#)
- [How to Look Approachable](#)
- [How to Mime](#)
- [How to Smile](#)
- [How to Be a Good Listener](#)

External Links

- [ChangingMinds.org](#) Information about non-verbal "message clusters"
- [Harvard Business School](#) "When Body Language Lies"

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