

Basics

Communication is not only about the words we use. In fact, many communication experts believe that non-verbal language is just as important as what we are saying – if not more important. Appropriate body language and gestures can help you communicate more effectively. They can have a big impact not only on the way others see you, but also on how you feel about yourself.

The academic context

Whether you are taking part in a group discussion or giving a presentation in front of your class, your body language can either work in your favour or against you.

Key features

Hands

- We often don't know what to do with our hands when speaking. Use them to express yourself more clearly. For example, if you are presenting three points, count on your fingers to illustrate that.
- Some gestures can be interpreted negatively, such as folding your arms or crossing them over your body, hiding your hands behind your back or in your pockets, or holding your hips. If you're not comfortable letting your arms hang alongside your body, hold your hands just above the belt line. This way you can make gestures and then return to that position.

Eyes

- Make eye contact with your audience. You will be able to check if they understand what you are saying and are interested in it. In a conversation, though, you don't usually maintain extended eye contact, which can be seen as intimidating.

Posture

- A relaxed and open posture can make you look and feel more confident. On the other hand, a closed posture, hiding your body and making yourself smaller, can make you seem – and feel – anxious. Look at Figures 1 and 2 for examples of open and closed postures.



Figure 1: Open posture



Figure 2: Closed posture

Standing position

- Don't turn your back to the audience. Even if you're describing slides, stand sideways when you're showing them.

Gestures

- Even though they can be very helpful for getting your message across, be careful with your gestures in a multicultural environment. Gestures can mean very different things in different cultures. But remember: smiling is universal!

The other person

- It's also important to pay attention to the body language of the audience or the person you're talking to.
- If they are not interested in what you are saying, they may have their arms crossed, show few changes in facial expression, have their body turned away from you and maintain little eye contact (see Figure 3). A good way to bring someone's attention back is to involve them, for example by asking them a question.

- An interested person, on the other hand, is more likely to have an open posture, facing you and making regular eye contact (see Figure 4).
- It's also important to notice if the other person's body language indicates they didn't understand something – people often show this by frowning and turning their head slightly – in which case you can rephrase what you just said or check if they are happy for you to continue.
- In a conversation, people don't usually raise their hand if they have something to say! If you notice someone opening their mouth slightly, raising their shoulders and leaning slightly forward, this is usually a sign they want to say something. Pause and give them time to take part.



Figure 3: Bored audience member



Figure 4: Interested audience member

Challenges / difficulties

It can be hard to pay attention to body language when you are focusing on getting the message right. For that reason, rehearsing what you want to say beforehand, including any body language you intend to use, can make a big difference.

How can I develop this skill?

The Worksheet will give you some practice techniques. Although it can feel intimidating to have another person talk about your body language, one of the best ways you can develop your confidence is by practising with a partner. See what they can tell you about the way you use your body.

Learning outcome

Being aware of your body language and using it in your favour can help you express yourself more clearly and persuade others.

Theory to practice

Read what some students said about interactions in the classroom. How can better body language help them?

I get so nervous when I give presentations that I hide my hands behind my back so that no-one sees them shaking!

Kristina

I find it difficult to take part in discussions, especially when I have something to say. I never know when my turn is.

Lijun

I get confused with my slides: I forget what's on them, and if I turn around, the audience can't hear me properly.

Raahim

I never win debates. My teacher says she likes my ideas but I don't seem confident enough.

Paulo

When I'm presenting, I keep repeating myself because I'm not sure if they understood what I said.

Aadne

Ways to get more practice

Ask a colleague to film you giving a presentation or discussing a topic in class. Watch the video with the sound turned off, paying attention only to your body language. Do you look confident or insecure? How do you use your hands? Show the video to a different colleague. Do they have the same impression?