

Effective Body Language

One significant way in which public speaking differs from writing is that when you are speaking, you have the opportunity to use your body to communicate. You can use your body to **clarify the meaning** of your message; establish a relationship with your audience; facilitate **feedback** between you and your audience; and increase your **credibility**. There is no one correct way to use your body. Rather, you can think creatively about how different choices in body language will reinforce the content and purpose of your speech.

DRESS AND GROOMING

When deciding what to wear and how to present oneself to the audience, speaker often consider the cultural expectations of their audiences, the formality of the speaking engagement, the persona they seek to create, and their personal preferences in order to feel comfortable, confident, and authentic.

POSTURE

Like your dress, your posture sends a message to the audience about who you are. Think about the persona you want to establish when speaking. Often, speakers want to appear confident and authoritative. One way to convey this confidence and authority (and allow you to better project your voice) is to

- Stand up straight while pulling your shoulder blades back slightly
- Imagine that your head is being pulled upwards by a string toward the ceiling
- Distribute your weight evenly on both feet, knees relaxed
- Uncross your arms

Sometimes a different kind of posture will better suit your purpose; leaning in towards the audience may invite a feeling of intimacy or demonstrate humility, for example. Or, folding your arms or dropping your chin may convey emotion –frustration, anger, sadness, fear – appropriate for a particular narrative.

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

Like your posture and other movements, effective facial expressions will be dictated by your context and your purpose. In general, animated expressions that feel natural and express your meaning will be best received by your audience. For example, forcing yourself to smile through the entire speech may seem insincere and undermine your message if the content is serious or solemn. It is always a great idea to solicit feedback from others on the nature of your facial expressions. Consider having your speech filmed by a SAW mentor in

the SAW Center so you can see yourself “in action” and monitor/modify your expressions as you see fit.

EYE CONTACT

For many North American audiences, eye contact is the single most important way a speaker can establish a rapport with the audience. Some speaking coaches advise looking over the heads of the audience in the hope that this will make everyone feel included. In contrast, others argue that this leaves everyone feeling overlooked! These eye-contact advocates advise that speakers pick a few individuals scattered throughout the room and look directly at them at various times throughout the duration of the speech. For this approach, the effect is greater if the speaker holds eye contact for at least 2-3 seconds.

MOVEMENT THROUGH SPACE

Speakers often find that walking purposefully around the room, the stage, or even the podium itself helps to hold the attention of the audience, enhance the message of the speech, and release nervous energy. Depending upon the particular movement (a step, a stroll, a dash!), and the timing of that movement within the speech, difference effects can be achieved. A deliberate movement might

- Signal the beginning of a new idea or a major point in the speech
- Foster immediacy – a sense of psychological closeness – between the speaker and the audience
- Clarify a change from a serious to a humorous point
- Inject energy into the atmosphere in the room
- Physically demonstrate a process or activity

In contrast to purposeful movement, random or continuous movement may distract your audience, create monotony, and increase nervousness.

GESTURES

Like your full body movements, hand gestures may strengthen or detract from your message. Gestures can

- **Repeat** a verbal point – as when you hold up three fingers while saying “there are three points to consider here”
- **Contradict** an assertion – as when you claim ease and comfort but flair your arms
- **Substitute** for an exclamation – as when you raise a clenched fist or form a V with your fingers
- **Complement** a claim – as when you say “stop right there” and hold up the palms of your hand

- **Emphasize** a declaration – as when you throw open your arms while saying “welcome”
- **Regulate** the interaction between you and your audience – as when you extend your palms to invite a response

Gestures have different meanings in different cultures. Speakers, therefore, often consider not only their message but their perspectives of the audience when choosing which gestures to make. At the very least, most speakers do not want to cause offense. As you decide how to gesture, consider these suggestions:

- **Stay natural** – your gestures should seem relaxed rather than rigid, mechanical, or forced
- **Be definite** – once you have committed to the gesture, follow through and make sure it is visible
- **Be consistent** with your message – excitement warrants a vigorous gesture; sobriety, a subdued one
- **Vary the movement** – avoid using the same gesture for emphasis throughout your entire speech
- **Be judicious** – if the gestures are extreme, your audience will focus on them and not your message
- **Tailor** the gestures to the size of the audience – in a large auditorium you will have to amplify gestures as well as your voice
- **Replace nervous ticks** with intentional action – rather than thinking “don’t fidget with my hair or clothes,” tell yourself “do rest my hand at my side”.
- **Practice** with a SAW peer mentor or friend who can give you feedback on your body language

NOTE: Your speech begins the moment you are called to stage, platform, or front on the room and leave your seat. Stand, walk, and approach the podium or stage with purpose and confidence.

Sources: Beebe, Steven A. and Susan J. *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach*, 7th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2009.

O’Hair, Dan, Rob Stewart, and Hannah Rubenstein. *A Speaker’s Guidebook*, 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004.