

Nonverbal Communication

Theorists of communication estimate that between 70 and 90 percent of human communication is nonverbal. In other words, when you talk to someone, about three quarters of your message doesn't come out your mouth. How you stand, where you look, and your body posture all communicate, sending messages for other people to interpret and return. Everything you do sends a message, or as communication scientists would say, "You can't not communicate."

Fortunately, everyone has lots of practice communicating nonverbally. Before you could talk, you used nonverbal signals like smiling and crying to communicate with your parents. If you travel internationally and aren't fluent in the local language, you communicate nonverbally using gestures. Your posture and facial expression in class show how involved you are in the lesson.

Unfortunately, studying nonverbal behavior can be difficult. Most of the time, you can't see your own expressions, which makes it hard to focus on improving nonverbal communication if you're not sure if you're doing it correctly. Also, many nonverbal reactions are either subconscious or instinctive, and may happen without your conscious control.

Some of the nonverbal messages you project will help you in public speaking. Communicating comfort, interest, rapport, and trustworthiness will make it easier for the audience to agree with you and help drive home your point. Some of the nonverbal messages you send out may interfere with your presentation or irritate your audience. If you spend your speech playing with your notes or trying to hide behind a podium, the audience will notice, and it will affect their impressions of your performance. Improving your nonverbal communication is simply a matter of encouraging the good nonverbal messages you already send out, and editing the bad nonverbal messages out of your speaking style.

Mixed Messages

Nonverbal messages can enhance or undermine verbal messages. If your words, your posture, and your facial expression all agree, your audience will probably find you persuasive and credible. But, if your verbal and nonverbal messages disagree, your audience will believe nonverbal messages over your verbal content. If your voice says, “I’m comfortable,” but your body says, “extreme anxiety,” people will believe your body over your voice. If a child says, “I haven’t taken a cookie,” but they look guilty as they say it, people will believe the body over the voice. Also, nonverbal messages are incredibly powerful, and sometimes affect people at a subconscious level. When you are speaking in public, do your best to make sure that your nonverbal behavior performs relaxed confidence, and that your body and your voice agree.

Bad Habits

Because everyone has slightly different patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication, it is impossible to provide a checklist that will guarantee a good nonverbal impression. Instead, it is easier to start by getting rid of bad nonverbal habits. As you make progress and eliminate undesirable behaviors, you should become more comfortable with your natural communication style. While you will never eliminate every bad nonverbal behavior, eventually your good nonverbal communication will work so well that no audience member will notice the minor problems that remain.

Nonverbal communication is a rich language that can be misunderstood by an audience, just like verbal communication. The most common problem with misunderstanding nonverbal communication is signs of nervousness. Looking down, making yourself small, and crossing your arms at your audience are all powerful nonverbal signs. Unfortunately, those same signs can mean, “I am nervous because I’m learning to speak in public,” “I am nervous because I don’t know what I’m talking about,” or, “I am lower social status than you and my information is not important.” Remember that these different messages are all expressed through the same nonverbal behavior, so your audience will choose which interpretation to use. Also, since most

nonverbal communication is processed unconsciously, your audience may not be aware that they have made that choice.

In order to appear poised and confident, every speaker must learn to control nonverbal adapters, which are unconscious repetitive behaviors that reveal that you are under pressure. These actions may include playing with your hands, tossing your hair, or rocking back and forth. Because the human visual system prioritizes noticing movement, it is hard for an audience to ignore these gestures. If you catch yourself using nonverbal adapters, just relax, refocus, and remember to perform relaxed confidence with your nonverbal behaviors.

The Speaker's Body

It is much harder for the audience to notice small nervous tics than for them to notice large nonverbal expressions of nervous energy. This means that when you express nervousness with your whole body, it is almost impossible to miss. The number one most common bad nonverbal behavior from beginning public speakers is swaying back and forth. Some speakers sway quickly, some sway slowly. Most speakers sway side to side, but some sway front to back, or even at diagonal angles. In order to appear poised and confident in front of an audience, you must be aware of this behavior and work to bring it under control. Don't worry if this improvement happens slowly... eventually, you will find that you think about standing still before you start to sway.

The second most common bad nonverbal behavior is standing contraposto. Contraposto is a very popular stance in ancient Greek art, and always involves having most of your weight on one leg, and your other leg either bent under your body or sticking out to one side. This stance is undesirable because it breaks the confident symmetry of a poised nonverbal presentation. It is also bad because it makes it easy for the speaker to fidget in place. But, worst of all, when you stand with all your weight on one leg, you will want to switch legs at some point and give yourself a rest. When that happens, you will start swaying back and forth.

Another common bad nonverbal behavior is revealing when you have made a mistake. Remember that the audience doesn't have a copy of your speech, and they have no idea how it is supposed to proceed. Especially for minor errors, the only way the

audience will know there is a problem is if you use dramatic nonverbal behaviors that make it impossible to miss the mistake. Some students flinch when they start having trouble. Other students will sigh heavily and look at the floor. A few students will show a flash of irritation or defeat. Each of these nonverbal messages tells the audience that your speech is not going as planned, so practice looking poised and confident, especially when things aren't going well.

The rest of this section will cover appropriate behaviors for the speaker's body, from head to feet.

Head

Make sure that your hair is fixed so it won't fall into your face. If you have a short haircut, this is easy. If you have longer hair, make sure that it's pulled back or pinned so that you don't have to worry about it. If your hair falls into your face, fix it once, then ignore it if you can. If you continually fix your hair as you speak, it will undermine your credibility, since repeated grooming gestures are nonverbal adapters.

Some of the most common questions from beginning public speakers are about eyes and eye contact. First, there is no set time limit on how long you should maintain eye contact with a specific member of the audience. A general principle is that you should look at someone for a few sentences, or long enough to make one point. Right before it starts to feel uncomfortable, change your focal point to a different audience member and continue. Remember not to look away from or past your audience. Refusing to look at the people you're talking to may be interpreted as a sign of deception. Also, remember not to follow a predictable, mechanical pattern of eye contact. If you scan across your audience repeatedly, they will notice. It is fine if you don't want to meet your audience's eyes directly. If you look at the bridge of their nose instead, they won't be able to tell the difference if you are farther than five or six feet away.

Neck, Shoulders, Back, & Waist

Your neck, shoulders, back, and waist should all be held relaxed but upright. If you lean your neck forward, you will look like a vulture. If you try to push your neck

backwards, you will give yourself extra chins. Make sure to center your shoulders in line with your torso, then consciously relax a little more. If you roll your shoulders forward, it will make you look smaller and put pressure on your lungs. If you roll your shoulders back, it will focus attention on your chest and make your gestures look awkward. Remember to consciously relax your neck and shoulders, because tension in those areas can cause agitation and interfere with your ability to breathe fully.

Arms, Hands, & Gestures

Imagine a box that extends as wide as your arms can reach, with the bottom at the level of your belt and the top at the level of your eyes. This is called the gesture box, and your hands should be inside it when you make conscious gestures. If you gesture lower than your belt, the gesture won't have time to develop fully and it will look odd to the audience. If you try a few of these gestures in front of a mirror, you will see the problem. Make sure that you gestures match the speed of your verbal performance. If your speech is angry, excited, or high energy, your gestures should be wide and quick to match. If your speech is calm and relaxed, your gestures should be slower and more fluid. As always, remember to change your gestures to stay synchronized with your vocal delivery. Don't fold your arms in front of you, since it creates a nonverbal wall between you and the audience and can signal confrontation and disinterest. Try not to let your hands rest together in front of you on your belly or belt line. If your hands rest together while you're speaking, you will play with them as a nonverbal adapter. Also, remember that every word in your speech does not require a gesture. When it's important or you need additional emphasis, use gestures to drive home your point. Between these moments, let your hands rest at your sides without swinging from the shoulder or playing with your belt or pockets.

Knees & Feet

When you stand to give a speech, keep your knees slightly bent, but not so the audience can see that they're bent. If you lock your knees, there is a risk that you will pass out and fall over, which cannot possibly help your performance. You will know

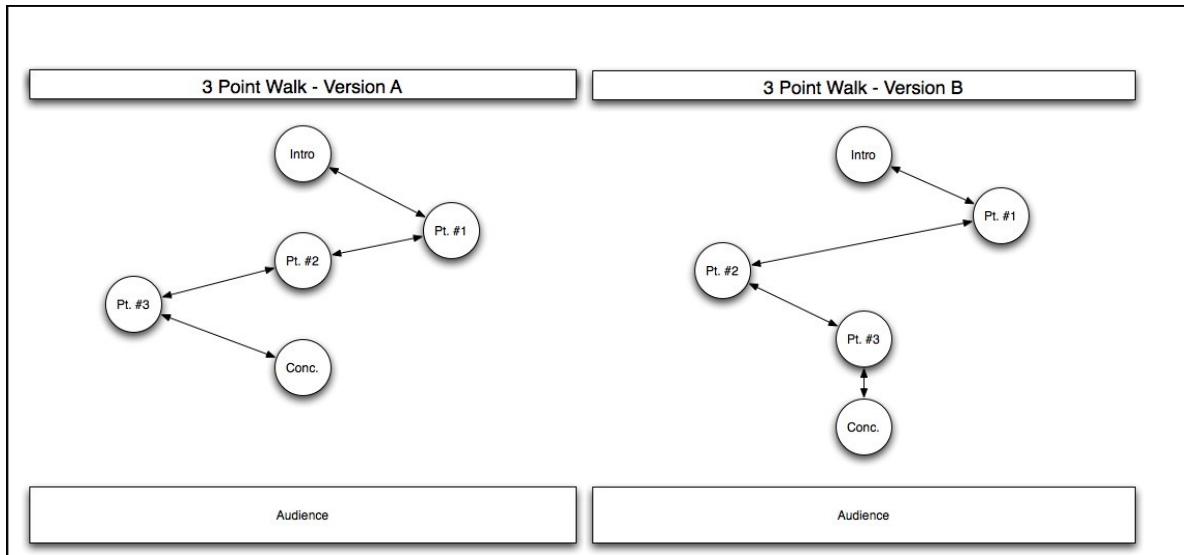
your knees are bent too far if your knuckles fall behind your hips. Make sure that your knees are pointed at the audience, and try not to stand pigeon-toed or bow-legged.

Your feet should point toward your audience when you speak. Pointing your feet in another direction is exiting behavior, a nonverbal sign that you are ready to leave. Make sure to keep your weight balanced front to back and side to side, as this will help you avoid swaying and contraposto. Also, if you rock on your heels, you will probably lock your knees in the process.

Finally, my advice is to wear simple, sensible shoes when you are learning to speak in public. This makes it easier for you to move with confidence and removes the possibility of broken heels or other shoe malfunctions. I have seen many students break heels while performing, and a few students injure their ankles while concentrating on another part of their performance. Once you feel comfortable and stable while moving in front of an audience, feel free to wear whatever shoes you prefer.

Movement

The traditional movement pattern for public speaking is called the 3-Point Walk or Speaker's Triangle. You should start centered and facing your audience, then move physically around the room as you move through different main points in your speech. You should always move either toward your audience or parallel to them, since moving away is exiting behavior that lessens your connection with the audience and subconsciously encourages them to quit paying attention. All of your movement in front of an audience should be subtle, like an afterthought that underscores the movement in the content of your speech. When you perform the 3-Point Walk, move slowly and continue speaking as you move. Don't stop your speech, march through the required movement, then restart when you arrive at your desired position. All your movement in a public speech should be intentional and controlled. Don't ever pace back and forth in front of an audience, and if you catch yourself pacing, bring yourself to a smooth stop, refocus on controlling your movement, and continue your speech without a pause.



Working With Notes

Your goal in delivering a speech should be to keep your notes as limited as possible. The more notes you have, the more time you will spend reading them instead of maintaining eye contact with your audience. Unless you are specifically practicing manuscript delivery, you should never read a speech word for word. Try not to use floppy paper for your notes, since it makes noise when you move and won't stay straight as you're trying to read it. Worst of all, floppy paper magnifies the effect of shaking hands. It is perfectly normal for your hands to shake a little when you give a speech. If your notes are on cardstock or some type of clipboard, the weight of the notes will help stop your hands from shaking. But if you're holding floppy paper, it will magnify the effect of shaking hands until it's almost impossible to miss.

As a general rule, try not to grip your notes with both hands. If you use both hands on your notes, you will find it very difficult to gesture smoothly. Also, holding your notes this way sets up a nonverbal wall between you and your audience, and can make it easy to hide behind your manuscript. In addition, if you hold your notes with both hands, you are very likely to start playing with them. When you complete a speech, look at your notes or notecard and see if there are new folds or torn edges. If so, then you

probably spent most of your speech distracting the audience by folding and refolding your notes.

My advice is to be careful if you use a podium or lectern to hold your notes. A lot of classrooms have podiums that are delicate or unstable, and may fall over or collapse during the most important part of your speech. Also, most students will grab onto the podium as they speak, and then either lean over it or rock back and forth. Both of these behaviors shatter your poise, and make it more likely that you will fall down. Make sure you check with your instructor to see what notes are allowable for each classroom speech.

Chapter Summary

Nonverbal communication is more important than verbal communication in making sure that your audience receives your message correctly. Everyone communicates nonverbally every time they send a message, so the only real question is whether your nonverbal communication will help or hurt your speech. If your nonverbal communication and your verbal communication disagree, people will trust the nonverbal message over the verbal message. When you speak, control your body to eliminate nonverbal adapters and other bad habits. The most common bad nonverbal behaviors are swaying, contraposto, and nonverbally indicating when you have made a mistake. Discipline your body, learn to stand with poise and control, and make sure that you correct bad behaviors as they happen. Make sure that your movements are carefully controlled, don't play with your notes, and be careful about using a podium. Nobody's nonverbal communication is perfect, so when you catch yourself making a mistake, quietly correct it and continue.