

body language

how to read body language signs and gestures - non-verbal communications - male and female, for work, social, dating, and mating relationships

Body Language - technically known as kinesics (pronounced 'kineesicks') - is a significant aspect of modern communications and relationships.

Body Language is therefore very relevant to management and leadership, and to all aspects of work and business where communications can be seen and physically observed among people.

Body language is also very relevant to relationships outside of work, for example in dating and mating, and in families and parenting.

Communication includes listening. In terms of observable body language, non-verbal (non-spoken) signals are being exchanged whether these signals are accompanied by spoken words or not.

Body language goes both ways:

Your own body language reveals your feelings and meanings to others.

Other people's body language reveals their feelings and meanings to you.

The sending and receiving of body language signals happens on conscious and unconscious levels.

(N.B. US and UK-English spellings, e.g., 'ize' and 'ise' are used in this page to allow for different searching preferences. Please feel free to change these according to your local requirements when using these materials.)

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body language warning

Body language is not an exact science.

No single body language sign is a reliable indicator.

Understanding body language involves the interpretation of **several consistent signals** to support or indicate a particular conclusion.

Skip the background theory and history, and [go straight to the body language signals and meanings](#).

body language - basics and introduction

Body language is a powerful concept which successful people tend to understand well.

So can you.

The study and theory of body language has become popular in recent years because psychologists have been able to understand what we 'say' through our bodily gestures and facial expressions, so as to translate our body language, revealing its underlying feelings and attitudes.

Body Language is also referred to as 'non-verbal communications', and less commonly 'non-vocal communications'.

The term 'non-verbal communications' tends to be used in a wider sense, and all these terms

are somewhat vague.

For the purposes of this article, the terms 'body language' and 'non-verbal communications' are broadly interchangeable. This guide also takes the view that body language/non-verbal communications is the study of how people communicate face-to-face aside from the spoken words themselves, and in this respect the treatment of the subject here is broader than typical body language guides limited merely to body positions and gestures.

If you carry out any serious analysis or discussion you should clarify the terminology in your own way to suit your purposes.

For example:

Does body language include facial expression and eye movement? - Usually, yes.

What about breathing and perspiration? - This depends on your definition of body language.

And while tone and pitch of voice are part of verbal signals, are these part of body language too? - Not normally, but arguably so, especially as you could ignore them if considering only the spoken words and physical gestures/expressions.

There are no absolute right/wrong answers to these questions. It's a matter of interpretation.

A good reason for broadening the scope of body language is to avoid missing important signals which might not be considered within a narrow definition of body language.

Nevertheless confusion easily arises if definitions and context are not properly established, for example:

It is commonly and carelessly quoted that 'non-verbal communications' and/or 'body language' account for up to 93% of the meaning that people take from any human communication. This statistic is actually a distortion based on [Albert Mehrabian's research theory](#), which while itself is something of a cornerstone of body language research, certainly did not make such a sweeping claim.

Mehrabian's research findings in fact focused on communications with a strong emotional or 'feelings' element. Moreover the 93% non-verbal proportion included vocal intonation (paralinguistics), which are regarded by many as falling outside of the body language definition.

Care must therefore be exercised when stating specific figures relating to percentages of meaning conveyed, or in making any firm claims in relation to body language and non-verbal communications.

It is safe to say that body language represents a very significant proportion of meaning that is conveyed and interpreted between people. Many [body language experts and sources](#) seem to agree that that between 50-80% of all human communications are non-verbal. So while body language statistics vary according to situation, it is generally accepted that non-verbal communications are very important in how we understand each other (or fail to), especially in face-to-face and one-to-one communications, and most definitely when the communications involve an emotional or attitudinal element.

Body language is especially crucial when we meet someone for the first time.

We form our opinions of someone we meet for the first time in just a few seconds, and this initial instinctual assessment is based far more on what we see and feel about the other person than on the words they speak. On many occasions we form a strong view about a new person before they speak a single word.

Consequently body language is very influential in forming impressions on first meeting someone.

The effect happens both ways - to and from:

When we meet someone for the first time, their body language, on conscious and unconscious levels, largely determines our initial impression of them.

In turn when someone meets us for the first time, they form their initial impression of us largely from our body language and non-verbal signals.

And this two-way effect of body language continues throughout communications and relationships between people.

Body language is constantly being exchanged and interpreted between people, even though much of the time this is happening on an unconscious level.

Remember - while you are interpreting (consciously or unconsciously) the body language of other people, so other people are constantly interpreting yours.

The people with the most conscious awareness of, and capabilities to read, body language tend to have an advantage over those whose appreciation is limited largely to the unconscious.

You will shift your own awareness of body language from the unconscious into the conscious by learning about the subject, and then by practising your reading of non-verbal communications in your dealings with others.

body language is more than body positions and movements

Body language is not just about how we hold and move our bodies.

Body language potentially (although not always, depending on the definition you choose to apply) encompasses:

how we position our bodies

our closeness to and the space between us and other people (proxemics), and how this changes

our facial expressions

our eyes especially and how our eyes move and focus, etc

how we touch ourselves and others

how our bodies connect with other non-bodily things, for instance, pens, cigarettes, spectacles and clothing

our breathing, and other less noticeable physical effects, for example our heartbeat and perspiration

Body language tends not to include:

the pace, pitch, and intonation, volume, variation, pauses, etc., of our voice.

Arguably this last point should be encompassed by body language, because a lot happens here which can easily be missed if we consider merely the spoken word and the traditional narrow definition of body language or non-verbal communications.

Voice type and other audible signals are typically not included in body language because they are audible 'verbal' signals rather than physical visual ones, nevertheless the way the voice is used is a very significant (usually unconscious) aspect of communication, aside from the bare words themselves.

Consequently, voice type is always important to consider alongside the usual body language factors.

Similarly breathing and heartbeat, etc., are typically excluded from many general descriptions of body language, but are certainly part of the range of non-verbal bodily actions and signals which contribute to body language in its fullest sense.

More obviously, our [eyes](#) are a vital aspect of our body language.

Our reactions to other people's eyes - movement, focus, expression, etc - and their reactions to our eyes - contribute greatly to mutual assessment and understanding, consciously and unconsciously.

With no words at all, massive feeling can be conveyed in a single glance. The metaphor which describes the eyes of two lovers meeting across a crowded room is not only found in old romantic movies. It's based on scientific fact - the strong powers of non-verbal communications.

These effects - and similar powerful examples - have existed in real human experience and behaviour for thousands of years.

The human body and our instinctive reactions have evolved to an amazingly clever degree, which many of us ignore or take for granted, and which we can all learn how to recognize more clearly if we try.

Our interpretation of body language, notably eyes and facial expressions, is instinctive, and with a little thought and knowledge we can significantly increase our conscious awareness of these signals: both the signals we transmit, and the signals in others that we observe.

Doing so gives us a significant advantage in life - professionally and personally - in our dealings with others.

Body language is not just reading the signals in other people.

Importantly, understanding body language enables better self-awareness and self-control too.

We understand more about other people's feelings and meanings, and we also understand more about these things in ourselves.

When we understand body language we become better able to refine and improve what our body says about us, which generates a positive improvement in the way we feel, the way we perform, and what we achieve.

body language definitions

As explained, the terms body language and non-verbal communications are rather vague.

So what is body language? And more usefully, what might we regard it to be, if we are to make the most of studying and using it?

The Oxford English Dictionary (revised 2005) definition is:

"body language - noun - the conscious and unconscious movements and postures by which attitudes and feelings are communicated [for example]: his intent was clearly expressed in his body language."

The Oxford Business English Dictionary offers a slightly different definition. Appropriately and interestingly the Oxford Business English Dictionary emphasizes the sense that body language can be used as a tool, rather than it being an involuntary effect with no particular purpose:

"body language - noun - the process of communicating what you are feeling or thinking by the way you place and move your body rather than by words [for example]: The course trains sales people in reading the customer's body language."

The OED dictionary definition of **kinesics** - the technical term for body language - depends on the interpretation of 'non-verbal communication':

"kinesics - the study of the way in which certain body movements and gestures serve as a form of non-verbal communication."

Body language is more than those brief descriptions.

Body language certainly also encompasses where the body is in relation to other bodies (often referred to as 'personal space').

Body language certainly also includes very small bodily movements such as facial expressions and eye movements.

Body language also arguably covers all that we communicate through our bodies apart from the spoken words (thereby encompassing breathing, perspiration, pulse, blood-pressure, blushing, etc.)

In this respect, standard dictionary definitions don't always describe body language fully and properly.

We could define body language more fully as:

"Body language is the unconscious and conscious transmission and interpretation of feelings, attitudes, and moods, through:

body posture, movement, physical state, position and relationship to other bodies, objects and surroundings,

facial expression and eye movement,

(and this transmission and interpretation can be quite different to the spoken words)."

Words alone - especially emotional words (or words used in emotional situations) - rarely reflect

full or true meaning and motive.

We find clues to additional or true meaning in body language.

Being able to 'read' body language therefore helps us greatly:

- to know how people feel and what they mean, and

- to understand better how people might be perceiving our own non-verbal signals, and (often overlooked)

- to understand ourselves better, deeper than the words we hear ourselves saying.

body language - background and history

Philosophers and scientists have connected human physical behaviour with meaning, mood and personality for thousands of years, but only in living memory has the study of body language become as sophisticated and detailed as it is today.

Body language studies and written works on the subject are very sparse until the mid-1900s.

The first known experts to consider aspects of body language were probably the ancient Greeks, notably Hippocrates and Aristotle, through their interest in human personality and behaviour, and the Romans, notably Cicero, relating gestures to feelings and communications. Much of this early interest was in refining ideas about oration - speech-making - given its significance to leadership and government.

Isolated studies of body language appeared in more recent times, for example Francis Bacon in *Advancement of Learning*, 1605, explored gestures as reflection or extension of spoken communications. John Bulwer's *Natural History of the Hand* published in 1644, considered hand gestures. Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* in 1806 looked at using gestures to improve speech-making.

Charles Darwin in the late 1800s could be regarded as the earliest expert to have made serious scientific observation about body language, but there seems little substantial development of ideas for at least the next 150 years.

Darwin's work pioneered much ethological thinking. Ethology began as the science of animal behaviour. It became properly established during the early 1900s and increasingly extends to human behaviour and social organization. Where ethology considers animal evolution and communications, it relates strongly to human body language. Ethologists have progressively applied their findings to human behaviour, including body language, reflecting the evolutionary origins of much human non-verbal communication - and society's growing acceptance of evolutionary rather than creationist theory. Austrian zoologist and 1973 Nobel Prizewinner Konrad Lorenz (1903-89) was a founding figure in ethology. Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*, discussed below, is an ethologist, as is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) a leading modern thinker in the field. Ethology, like psychology, is an over-arching science which continues to clarify the understanding of body language.

The popular and accessible study of body language as we know it today is very recent.

In his popular 1971 book *'Body Language'*, Julius Fast (1919-2008) wrote: "...kinesics [body language] is still so new as a science that its authorities can be counted on the fingers of one

hand..."

Julius Fast was an American award winning writer of fiction and non-fiction work dealing especially with human physiology and behaviour. His book *Body Language* was among the first to bring the subject to a mainstream audience.

Significantly the references in Julius Fast's book (Birdwhistell, Goffman, Hall, Mehrabian, Schefflen, etc - see [body language references and books](#) below) indicate the freshness of the subject in 1971. All except one of Julius Fast's cited works are from the 1950s and 1960s.

The exception among Fast's contemporary influences was Charles Darwin, and specifically his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, written in 1872, which is commonly regarded as the beginnings of the body language science, albeit not recognised as such then.

Sigmund Freud and others in the field of psychoanalysis - in the late 1800s and early 1900s - would have had good awareness of many aspects of body language, including personal space, but they did not focus on non-verbal communications concepts or develop body language theories in their own right. Freud and similar psychoanalysts and psychologists of that time were focused on behaviour and therapeutic analysis rather than the study of non-verbal communications per se.

A different view of human behaviour related to and overlapping body language, surfaced strongly in Desmond Morris's 1967 book *The Naked Ape*, and in follow-up books such as *Intimate Behaviour*, 1971. Morris, a British zoologist and ethologist, linked human behaviour - much of it concerned with communications - to human 'animalistic' evolution. His work remains a popular and controversial perspective for understanding people's behaviours, and while his theories did not focus strongly on body language, Morris's popularity in the late 1960s and 1970s contributed significantly to the increasing interest among people beyond the scientific community - for a better understanding of how and why we feel and act and communicate.

An important aspect of body language is facial expression, which is arguably one part of body language for which quite early 'scientific' thinking can be traced:

Physiognomy is an obscure and related concept to body language. Physiognomy refers to facial features and expressions which were/are said indicate the person's character or nature, or ethnic origin.

The word physiognomy is derived from medieval Latin, and earlier Greek (phusiognominia), which originally meant (the art or capability of) judging a person's nature from his/her facial features and expressions. The ancient roots of this concept demonstrate that while body language itself is a recently defined system of analysis, the notion of inferring human nature or character from facial expression is extremely old.

Kinesics (pronounced 'kineesicks' with stress on the 'ee') is the modern scientific or technical word for body language.

The word kinesics was first used in English in this sense in the 1950s, deriving from the Greek word kinesis, meaning motion, and seems to have first been used by Dr Ray Birdwhistell, an American 1950s researcher and writer on body language. (See [references](#)).

The introduction of a new technical word - (in this case, kinesics) - generally comes after the establishment of the subject it describes, which supports the assertion that the modern concept of body language - encompassing facial expressions and personal space - did not exist until the 1950s.

Proxemics is the technical term for the **personal space** aspect of body language. The word was devised in the late 1950s or early 1960s by Edward Twitchell Hall, an American anthropologist. The word is Hall's adaptation of the word proximity, meaning closeness or nearness. (See [personal space](#).)

From the word kinesics, Ray Birdwhistell coined the term **kine** to refer to a single body language signal. This is not to be confused with the ancient and same word kine, meaning a group of cows. Neither word seems to have caught on in a big way, which in one way is a pity, but in another way probably makes matters simpler for anyone interested in the body language of cows.

The Greek word kinesis is also a root word of kinaesthetics, which is the 'K' in the [VAK \('see hear feel'\) learning styles model](#).

Kinaesthetics (also known as kinesthetics) in the study of learning styles, is related to some of the principles of body language, in terms of conveying meaning and information via physical movement and experience.

Body language is among many branches of science and education which seek to interpret and exploit messages and meaning from the 'touchy-feely' side of life.

For example, the concepts of [experiential learning](#), [games and exercises](#), and [love and spirituality at work](#) - are all different perspectives and attempts to unlock and develop people's potential using ideas centred around kinaesthetics, as distinct from the more tangible and easily measurable areas of facts, figures words and logic.

These and similar methodologies do not necessarily reference body language directly, but there are very strong inter-connections.

[Bloom's Taxonomy](#), and [Kolb's Learning Styles](#) are also helpful perspectives in appreciating the significance of kinaesthetics, and therefore body language, in life and work today.

The communications concepts of [NLP \(Neuro-linguistic Programming\)](#) and [Transactional Analysis](#) are closely dependent on understanding body language, NLP especially.

body language - nature or nurture?

Body language is part of human evolution, but as with many other aspects of human behaviour, the precise mixture of genetic (inherited) and environmental (learned or conditioned) influences is not known, and opinions vary.

Julius Fast noted this, especially regarding facial expressions. To emphasise the shifting debate he cited for example:

Darwin's belief that human facial expressions were similar among humans of all cultures, due to evolutionary theory.

Bruner and Taguiri's (see [references](#)) opposing views - in the early 1950s, after thirty years of research, they largely rejected the notion that facial expressions were inborn.

and Ekman, Friesan and Sorensen's findings (see [references](#)) - in 1969, having discovered consistent emotional-facial recognition across widely diverse cultural groups, which supported Darwin's evolutionary-centred ideas.

The discussion has continued in a similar vein to the modern day - studies 'proving' genetic or environmental cause - 'nature' or 'nurture' - for one aspect of body language or another.

The situation is made more complex when one considers the genetic (inherited) capability or inclination to learn body language. Is this nature or nurture?

It's both.

Body language is partly genetic (inborn - 'nature') - hugely so in certain aspects of body language - and partly environmental (conditioned/learned - 'nurture').

Some body language is certainly genetically inherited and consistent among all humans. Other body language is certainly not.

The use and recognition of certain fundamental facial expressions are now generally accepted to be consistent and **genetically determined** among all humans **regardless of culture**.

However the use and recognition of less fundamental physical gestures (hand movements for example, or the winking of an eye), and aspects of personal space distances, are now generally accepted to be **environmentally determined** (learned, rather than inherited), **which is significantly dependent on local society groups and cultures**.

Certain vocal intonation speech variations (if body language is extended to cover everything but the spoken words) also fall within this environmentally determined category. (See the ['other audible signals'](#) section.)

In summary, we can be certain that body language (namely the conscious and unconscious sending and receiving of non-verbal signals) is partly inborn, and partly learned or conditioned.

Body language is part 'nature' and part 'nurture'.

body language and evolution

The evolutionary perspectives of body language are fascinating, in terms of its purpose and how it is exploited, which in turn feeds back into the purpose of body language at conscious and unconscious levels.

Human beings tend to lie, deceive, manipulate, and pretend. It's in our nature to do this, if only to a small degree in some folk.

For various reasons people intentionally and frequently mask their true feelings. ([Transactional Analysis theory](#) is very useful in understanding more about this.)

In expectation of these 'masking' tendencies in others, humans try to imagine what another person has in their mind. The need to understand what lies behind the mask obviously increases according to the importance of the relationship.

Body language helps us to manage and guard against these tendencies, and also - significantly especially in flirting/dating/mating rituals - body language often helps people to communicate and resolve relationship issues when conscious behaviour and speech fails to do so.

Body language has evolved in spite of human awareness and conscious intelligence: rather like a guardian angel, body language can help take care of us, connecting us to kindred souls, and protecting us from threats.

While the importance of body language in communications and management, etc., has become a popular interest and science in the last few decades, human beings have relied on body language instinctively in many ways for many thousands of years.

Early natural exponents of interpreting body language were for example the poker players of the American Wild West. The winners had not only to be handy with a six-shooter, but also skilled in reading other people's non-verbal signals, and controlling their own signals.

Before these times, explorers and tribal leaders had to be able to read the body language of potential foes - to know whether to trust or defend or attack.

Earlier than this, our cavemen ancestors certainly needed to read body language, if only because no other language existed.

Humans have also learned to read the body language of animals (and vice-versa), although humans almost certainly had greater skills in this area a long time ago. Shepherds, horse-riders and animal trainers throughout time and still today have good capabilities in reading animal body language, which for many extends to the human variety. [Monty Roberts](#), the real life 'Horse Whisperer' is a good example.

Body language, and the reading of non-verbal communications and feelings, are in our genes. Were these factors not in our genes, we would not be here today.

On which point:

Women tend to have better perception and interpretation of body language than men. This is perhaps a feature of evolutionary survival, since females needed good body language skills to reduce their physical vulnerability to males and the consequential threat to life, limb and offspring. Females might not be so physically vulnerable in modern times, but their body language capabilities generally continue typically to be stronger than the male of the species. Thus, women tend to be able to employ body language (for sending and interpreting signals) more effectively than men.

[Katherine Benziger's theories of brain types and thinking styles](#) provides useful additional perspective. Women tend to have more empathic sensitivity than men, which naturally aids body language awareness and capabilities. Aside from gender differences, men and women with strong empathic sensitivity (typically right-basal or rear brain bias) tend to be better at picking up body language signals.

the six universal facial expressions - recognized around the world

It is now generally accepted that certain basic facial expressions of human emotion are recognized around the world - and that the use and recognition of these expressions is genetically inherited rather than socially conditioned or learned.

While there have been found to be minor variations and differences among obscurely isolated tribes-people, the following basic human emotions are generally used, recognized, and part of humankind's genetic character:

These emotional face expressions are:

Happiness

Sadness

Fear

Disgust

Surprise

Anger

Charles Darwin was first to make these claims in his book *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872. This book incidentally initially far outsold *The Origin of Species*, such was its wide (and controversial) appeal at the time.

Darwin's assertions about genetically inherited facial expressions remained the subject of much debate for many years.

In the 1960s a Californian psychiatrist and expert in facial expressions, Paul Ekman, (with Sorenson and Friesen - see [references](#)) conducted and published extensive studies with people of various cultures to explore the validity of Darwin's theory - that certain facial expressions and man's ability to recognize them are inborn and universal among people. Ekman's work notably included isolated tribes-people who could not have been influenced by Western media and images, and essentially proved that Darwin was right - i.e., that the use and recognition of facial expressions to convey certain basic human emotions is part of human evolved nature, genetically inherited, and not dependent on social learning or conditioning.

body language analysis

Body language is instinctively interpreted by us all to a limited degree, but the subject is potentially immensely complex. Perhaps infinitely so, given that the human body is said to be capable of producing 700,000 different movements (Hartland and Tosh, 2001 - see [references](#)).

As with other behavioural sciences, the study of body language benefited from the development of brain-imaging technology in the last part of the 20th century. This dramatically accelerated the research and understanding into connections between the brain, feelings and thoughts, and body movement. We should expect to see this effect continuing and providing more solid science for body language theory, much of which remains empirical, i.e., based on experience and observation, rather than scientific test.

Given the potential for confusion, here are some considerations when analysing body language:

context

Body language also depends on context: body language in a certain situation might not mean the same in another.

Some 'body language' isn't what it seems at all, for example:

Someone rubbing their eye might have an irritation, rather than being tired - or disbelieving, or upset.

Someone with crossed arms might be keeping warm, rather than being defensive.

Someone scratching their nose might actually have an itch, rather than concealing a lie.

sufficient samples/evidence

A single body language signal isn't as reliable as several signals:

As with any system of evidence, 'clusters' of body language signals provide much more reliable indication of meaning than one or two signals in isolation.

Avoid interpreting only single signals. Look for combinations of signals which support an overall conclusion, especially for signals which can mean two or more quite different things.

culture/ethnicity

Certain body language is the same in all people, for example smiling and frowning (and see the [six universally recognizable facial expressions](#) above), but some body language is specific to a culture or ethnic group.

See [examples of cultural body language differences](#) below.

Awareness of possible cultural body language differences is especially important in today's increasingly mixed societies.

Management and customer service staff are particularly prone to misreading or reacting inappropriately to body language signals from people of different ethnic backgrounds, a situation made worse because this sort of misunderstanding tends to peak when emotions are high.

Personal space preferences (distances inside which a person is uncomfortable when someone encroaches) can vary between people of different ethnicity.

In general this article offers interpretations applicable for Western culture.

If you can suggest any different ethnic interpretations of body language [please send them](#) and I'll broaden the guide accordingly.

body language is relative to age and gender

Many body language signals are relative.

A gesture by one person in a certain situation can carry far more, or very little meaning, compared to the same gesture used by a different person in a different situation.

Young men for example often display a lot of pronounced gestures because they are naturally energetic, uninhibited and supple. Older women, relatively, are less energetic, adopt more modest postures, and are prevented by clothing and upbringing from exhibiting very pronounced gestures.

So when assessing body language - especially the strength of signals and meanings - it's important to do so in relative terms, considering the type of person and situation involved.

faking/deception

Some people artificially control their outward body language to give the impression they seek to create at the time.

A confident firm handshake, or direct eye contact, are examples of signals which can be quite easily be 'faked' - usually temporarily, but sometimes more consistently.

However while a degree of faking is possible, it is not possible for someone to control or suppress all outgoing signals.

This is an additional reason to avoid superficial analysis based on isolated signals, and to seek as many indicators as possible, especially subtle clues when suspecting things might not be what they seem. Politicians and manipulative salespeople come to mind for some reason.

Looking for 'micro gestures' (pupils contract, an eyebrow lifts, corner of the mouth twitch) can help identify the true meaning and motive behind one or two strong and potentially false signals.

These micro gestures are very small, difficult to spot and are subconscious, but we cannot control them, hence their usefulness.

boredom, nervousness and insecurity signals

Many body language signals indicate negative feelings such as boredom, disinterest, anxiousness, insecurity, etc.

The temptation on seeing such signals is to imagine a weakness on the part of the person exhibiting them.

This can be so, however proper interpretation of body language should look beyond the person and the signal - and consider the situation, especially if you are using body language within personal development or management. Ask yourself:

What is causing the negative feelings giving rise to the negative signals?

It is often the situation, not the person - for example, here are examples of circumstances which can produce negative feelings and signals in people, often even if they are strong and confident:

- dominance of a boss or a teacher or other person perceived to be in authority

- overloading a person with new knowledge or learning

- tiredness

- stress caused by anything

- cold weather or cold conditions

- lack of food and drink

- illness or disability

- alcohol or drugs

- being in a minority or feeling excluded

- unfamiliarity - newness - change

Ask yourself, when analysing body language:

Are there external factors affecting the mood and condition of the individual concerned?

Do not jump to conclusions - especially negative ones - using body language analysis alone.

body language - translation of gestures, signs and other factors - quick reference guide

When translating body language signals into feelings and meanings remember that one signal does not reliably indicate a meaning.

Clusters of signals more reliably indicate meaning.

This is a general guide. Body language should not be used alone for making serious decisions about people.

Body language is one of several indicators of mood, meaning and motive.

This is a guide, not an absolutely reliable indicator, and this applies especially until you've developed good capabilities of reading body language signs.

Some of these signs have obvious meanings; others not so.

Even 'obvious' signs can be missed - especially if displayed as subtle movements in a group of people and if your mind is on other things - so I make no apology for including 'obvious' body language in this guide.

Also remember that cultural differences influence body language signals and their interpretation. This guide is based on 'Western World' and North European behaviours. What may be 'obvious' in one culture can mean something different in another culture.

body language signs translation

The body language signals below are grouped together according to parts of the body.

Left and right are for the person giving the signals and making the movements.

This is a summary of the main body language signals. More signals and meanings will be added.

[Suggest any other signals](#) that you wish to know, and I'll add them.

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signals to support or indicate a particular conclusion.

[eyes](#) | [mouth](#) | [head](#) | [arms](#) | [hands](#) | [handshakes](#) | [legs and feet](#) | [personal space](#)

eyes - body language

Our eyes are a very significant aspect of the non-verbal signals we send to others.

To a lesser or greater extent we all 'read' people's eyes without knowing how or why, and this ability seems to be inborn.

Eyes - and especially our highly developed awareness of what we see in other people's eyes - are incredible.

For example we know if we have eye contact with someone at an almost unbelievable distance. Far too far away to be able to see the detail of a person's eyes - 30-40 metres away or more sometimes - we know when there is eye contact. This is an absolutely awesome capability when you think about it.

Incredibly also, we can see whether another person's eyes are focused on us or not, and we can detect easily the differences between a 'glazed over' blank stare, a piercing look, a moistening eye long before tears come, and an awkward or secret glance.

We probably cannot describe these and many other eye signals, but we recognise them when we see them and we know what they mean.

When we additionally consider the eyelids, and the flexibility of the eyes to widen and close, and for the pupils to enlarge or contract, it becomes easier to understand how the eyes have developed such potency in human communications.

A note about eyes looking right and left..

(Left and right are for the person giving the signals and making the movements)

Eyes tend to look right when the brain is imagining or creating, and left when the brain is recalling or remembering. This relates to right and left sides of the brain - in this context broadly the parts of the brain handling creativity/feelings (right) and facts/memory (left). This is analysed in greater detail below, chiefly based on [NLP theory](#) developed in the 1960s. Under certain circumstances 'creating' can mean fabrication or lying, especially (but not always - beware), when the person is supposed to be recalling facts. Looking right when stating facts does not necessarily mean lying - it could for example mean that the person does not know the answer, and is talking hypothetically or speculating or guessing.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
Left and right are for the person giving the signals and making the movements.			
looking right (generally)	eyes	creating, fabricating, guessing, lying,	Creating here is basically making things up and saying them. Depending on context this can indicate lying, but in other circumstances, for

		storytelling	example, storytelling to a child, this would be perfectly normal. Looking right and down indicates accessing feelings, which again can be a perfectly genuine response or not, depending on the context, and to an extent the person.
looking left (generally)	eyes	recalling, remembering, retrieving 'facts'	Recalling and then stating 'facts' from memory in appropriate context often equates to telling the truth. Whether the 'facts' (memories) are correct is another matter. Left downward looking indicates silent self-conversation or self-talk, typically in trying to arrive at a view or decision.
looking right and up	eyes	visual imagining, fabrication, lying	Related to imagination and creative (right-side) parts of the brain, this upwards right eye-movement can be a warning sign of fabrication if a person is supposed to be recalling and stating facts.
looking right sideways	eyes	imagining sounds	Sideways eye movements are believed to indicate imagining (right) or recalling (left) sounds, which can include for example a person imagining or fabricating what another person has said or could say.
looking right and down	eyes	accessing feelings	This is a creative signal but not a fabrication - it can signal that the person is self-questioning their feelings about something. Context particularly- and other signals - are important for interpreting more specific meaning about this signal.
looking left and up	eyes	recalling images truthfulness	Related to accessing memory in the brain, rather than creating or imagining. A reassuring sign if signalled when the person is recalling and stating facts.
looking left sideways	eyes	recalling or remembering sounds	Looking sideways suggests sounds; looking left suggests recalling or remembering - not fabricating or imagining. This therefore could indicate recalling what has been said by another person.
looking left down	eyes	self-talking, rationalizing	Thinking things through by self-talk - concerning an outward view, rather than the inward feelings view indicated by downward right looking.
direct eye contact (when speaking)	eyes	honesty - or faked honesty	Direct eye contact is generally regarded as a sign of truthfulness, however practised liars know this and will fake the signal.
direct eye	eyes	attentiveness,	Eyes which stay focused on the speakers eyes,

contact (when listening)		interest, attraction	tend to indicate focused interested attention too, which is normally a sign of attraction to the person and/or the subject.
widening eyes	eyes	interest, appeal, invitation	Widening the eyes generally signals interest in something or someone, and often invites positive response. Widened eyes with raised eyebrows can otherwise be due to shock, but aside from this, widening eyes represents an opening and welcoming expression. In women especially widened eyes tend to increase attractiveness, which is believed by some body language experts to relate to the eye/face proportions of babies, and the associated signals of attraction and prompting urges to protect and offer love and care, etc.
rubbing eye or eyes	eyes	disbelief, upset, or tiredness	Rubbing eyes or one eye can indicate disbelief, as if checking the vision, or upset, in which the action relates to crying, or tiredness, which can be due boredom, not necessarily a need for sleep. If the signal is accompanied by a long pronounced blink, this tends to support the tiredness interpretation.
eye shrug	eyes	frustration	An upward roll of the eyes signals frustration or exasperation, as if looking to the heavens for help.
pupils dilated (enlarged)	eyes	attraction, desire	The pupil is the black centre of the eye which opens or closes to let in more or less light. Darkness causes pupils to dilate. So too, for some reason does seeing something appealing or attractive. The cause of the attraction depends on the situation. In the case of sexual attraction the effect can be mutual - dilated pupils tend to be more appealing sexually than contracted ones, perhaps because of an instinctive association with darkness, night-time, bedtime, etc., although the origins of this effect are unproven. Resist the temptation to imagine that everyone you see with dilated pupils is sexually attracted to you.
blinking frequently	eyes	excitement, pressure	Normal human blink rate is considered to be between six and twenty times a minute, depending on the expert. Significantly more than this is a sign of excitement or pressure. Blink rate can increase to up to a hundred times a minute. Blink rate is not a reliable sign of lying.
blinking infrequently	eyes	various	Infrequent blink rate can mean different things and so offers no single clue unless combined

			with other signals. An infrequent blink rate is probably due to boredom if the eyes are not focused, or can be the opposite - concentration - if accompanied with a strongly focused gaze. Infrequent blink rate can also be accompanied by signals of hostility or negativity, and is therefore not the most revealing of body language signals.
eyebrow raising (eyebrow 'flash')	eyes	greeting, recognition, acknowledgement	Quickly raising and lowering the eyebrows is called an 'eyebrow flash'. It is a common signal of greeting and acknowledgement, and is perhaps genetically influenced since it is prevalent in monkeys (body language study does not sit entirely happily alongside creationism). Fear and surprise are also signalled by the eyebrow flash, in which case the eyebrows normally remain raised for longer, until the initial shock subsides.
winking	eyes	friendly acknowledgement, complicity (e.g., sharing a secret or joke)	Much fuss was made in May 2007 when George W Bush winked at the Queen. The fuss was made because a wink is quite an intimate signal, directed exclusively from one person to another, and is associated with male flirting. It is strange that a non-contact wink can carry more personal implications than a physical handshake, and in many situations more than a kiss on the cheek. A wink is given additional spice if accompanied by a click of the tongue. Not many people can carry it off. Additionally - and this was partly the sense in which Bush used it - a wink can signal a shared joke or secret.

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mouth - body language

The mouth is associated with very many body language signals, which is not surprising given its functions - obviously speech, but also those connected with infant feeding, which connects psychologically through later life with feelings of security, love and sex.

The mouth can be touched or obscured by a person's own hands or fingers, and is a tremendously flexible and expressive part of the body too, performing a central role in facial expressions.

The mouth also has more visible moving parts than other sensory organs, so there's a lot more potential for variety of signalling.

Unlike the nose and ears, which are generally only brought into body language action by the hands or fingers, the mouth acts quite independently, another reason for it deserving separate detailed consideration.

Smiling is a big part of facial body language. As a general rule real smiles are symmetrical and

produce creases around the eyes and mouth, whereas fake smiles, for whatever reason, tend to be mouth-only gestures.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
pasted smile	mouth	faked smile	A pasted smile is one which appears quickly, is fixed for longer than a natural smile, and seems not to extend to the eyes. This typically indicates suppressed displeasure or forced agreement of some sort.
tight-lipped smile	mouth	secrecy or withheld feelings	Stretched across face in a straight line, teeth concealed. The smiler has a secret they are not going to share, possibly due to dislike or distrust. Can also be a rejection signal.
twisted smile	mouth	mixed feelings or sarcasm	Shows opposite emotions on each side of the face.
dropped-jaw smile	mouth	faked smile	More of a practised fake smile than an instinctive one. The jaw is dropped lower than in a natural smile, the act of which creates a smile.
smile - head tilted, looking up	mouth	playfulness, teasing, coy	Head tilted sideways and downwards so as to partly hide the face, from which the smile is directed via the eyes at the intended target.
bottom lip jutting out	mouth	upset	Like rubbing eyes can be an adult version of crying, so jutting or pushing the bottom lip forward is a part of the crying face and impulse. Bear in mind that people cry for reasons of genuine upset, or to avert attack and seek sympathy or kind treatment.
laughter	mouth	relaxation	Laughter deserves a section in its own right because it's such an interesting area. In terms of body language genuine laughter is a sign of relaxation and feeling at ease. Natural laughter can extend to all the upper body or whole body. The physiology of laughter is significant. Endorphins are released. Pain and stress reduces. Also vulnerabilities show and can become more visible because people's guard drops when laughing.
forced laughter	mouth	nervousness, cooperation	Unnatural laughter is often a signal of nervousness or stress, as an effort to dispel tension or change the atmosphere. Artificial laughter is a signal of cooperation and a wish to maintain empathy.
biting lip	mouth	tension	One of many signals suggesting tension or stress, which can be due to high concentration, but more likely to be anxiousness.
teeth	mouth	tension,	Inwardly-directed 'displacement' (see body language)

grinding		suppression	glossary) sign, due to suppression of natural reaction due to fear or other suppressant.
chewing gum	mouth	tension, suppression	As above - an inwardly-directed 'displacement' sign, due to suppression of natural reaction. Otherwise however can simply be to freshen breath, or as a smoking replacement.
smoking	mouth	self-comforting	Smoking obviously becomes habitual and addictive, but aside from this people put things into their mouths because it's comforting like thumb-sucking is to a child, in turn rooted in baby experiences of feeding and especially breastfeeding.
thumb-sucking	mouth	self-comforting	A self-comforting impulse in babies and children, substituting breast-feeding, which can persist as a habit into adulthood.
chewing pen or pencil	mouth	self-comforting	Like smoking and infant thumbsucking. The pen is the teat. Remember that next time you chew the end of your pen...
pursing lips	mouth	thoughtfulness, or upset	As if holding the words in the mouth until they are ready to be released. Can also indicate anxiousness or impatience at not being able to speak. Or quite differently can indicate upset, as if suppressing crying.
tongue poke	mouth / tongue	disapproval, rejection	The tongue extends briefly and slightly at the centre of the mouth as if tasting something nasty. The gesture may be extremely subtle. An extreme version may be accompanied by a wrinkling of the nose, and a squint of the eyes.
hand clamped over mouth	mouth / hands	suppression, holding back, shock	Often an unconscious gesture of self-regulation - stopping speech for reasons of shock, embarrassment, or for more tactical reasons. The gesture is reminiscent of the 'speak no evil' wise monkey. The action can be observed very clearly in young children when they witness something 'unspeakably' naughty or shocking. Extreme versions of the same effect would involve both hands.
nail biting	mouth / hands	frustration, suppression	Nail-biting is an inwardly-redirected aggression borne of fear, or some other suppression of behaviour. Later nail-biting becomes reinforced as a comforting habit, again typically prompted by frustration or fear. Stress in this context is an outcome. Stress doesn't cause nail-biting; nail-biting is the outward demonstration of stress. The cause of the stress can be various things (stressors). See the stress article for more detail about stress.

head - body language

The head is very significant in body language.

The head tends to lead and determine general body direction, but it is also vital and vulnerable being where our brain is, so the head is used a lot in directional (likes and dislikes) body language, and in defensive (self-protection) body language too.

A person's head, due to a very flexible neck structure, can turn, jut forward, withdraw, tilt sideways, forwards, backwards. All of these movements have meanings, which given some thought about other signals can be understood.

The head usually has hair, ears, eyes, nose, and a face, which has more complex and visible muscular effects than any other area of the body.

The face, our eyes and our hands, are the most powerful parts of our body in sending body language signals.

The head - when our hands interact with it - is therefore dynamic and busy in communicating all sorts of messages - consciously and unconsciously.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
head nodding	head	agreement	Head nodding can occur when invited for a response, or voluntarily while listening. Nodding is confusingly and rather daftly also referred to as 'head shaking up and down'. Head nodding when talking face-to-face one-to-one is easy to see, but do you always detect tiny head nods when addressing or observing a group?
slow head nodding	head	attentive listening	This can be a faked signal. As with all body language signals you must look for clusters of signals rather than relying on one alone. Look at the focus of eyes to check the validity of slow head nodding.
fast head nodding	head	hurry up, impatience	Vigorous head nodding signifies that the listener feels the speaker has made their point or taken sufficient time. Fast head nodding is rather like the 'wind-up' hand gesture given off-camera or off-stage by a producer to a performer, indicating 'time's up - get off'.
head held up	head	neutrality, alertness	High head position signifies attentive listening, usually with an open or undecided mind, or lack of bias.
head held high	head	superiority, fearlessness, arrogance	Especially if exhibited with jutting chin.
head tilted to one side	head	non-threatening,	A signal of interest, and/or vulnerability, which in turn suggests a level of trust. Head tilting is thought

		submissive, thoughtfulness	by some to relate to 'sizing up' something, since tilting the head changes the perspective offered by the eyes, and a different view is seen of the other person or subject. Exposing the neck is also a sign of trust.
head forward, upright	head / body	interest, positive reaction	Head forward in the direction of a person or other subject indicates interest. The rule also applies to a forward leaning upper body, commonly sitting, but also standing, where the movement can be a distinct and significant advancement into a closer personal space zone of the other person. Head forward and upright is different to head tilted downward.
head tilted downward	head	criticism, admonishment	Head tilted downwards towards a person is commonly a signal of criticism or reprimand or disapproval, usually from a position of authority.
head shaking	head	disagreement	Sideways shaking of the head generally indicates disagreement, but can also signal feelings of disbelief, frustration or exasperation. Obvious of course, but often ignored or missed where the movement is small, especially in groups seemingly reacting in silent acceptance.
pronounced head shaking	head	strong disagreement	The strength of movement of the head usually relates to strength of feeling, and often to the force by which the head-shaker seeks to send this message to the receiver. This is an immensely powerful signal and is used intentionally by some people to dominate others.
head down (in response to a speaker or proposition)	head	negative, disinterested	Head down is generally a signal of rejection (of someone's ideas etc), unless the head is down for a purpose like reading supporting notes, etc. Head down when responding to criticism is a signal of failure, vulnerability (hence seeking protection), or feeling ashamed.
head down (while performing an activity)	head	defeat, tiredness	Lowering the head is a sign of loss, defeat, shame, etc. Hence the expressions such as 'don't let your head drop', and 'don't let your head go down', especially in sports and competitive activities. Head down also tends to cause shoulders and upper back to slump, increasing the signs of weakness at that moment.
chin up	head	pride, defiance, confidence	Very similar to the 'head held high' signal. Holding the chin up naturally alters the angle of the head backwards, exposing the neck, which is a signal of strength, resilience, pride, resistance, etc. A pronounced raised chin does other interesting things to the body too - it tends to lift the sternum (breast-bone), which draws in air, puffing out the chest, and

			it widens the shoulders. These combined effects make the person stand bigger. An exposed neck is also a sign of confidence. 'Chin up' is for these reasons a long-standing expression used to encourage someone to be brave.
active listening	head / face	attention, interest, attraction	When people are listening actively and responsively this shows in their facial expression and their head movements. The head and face are seen to respond fittingly and appropriately to what is being said by the speaker. Nodding is relevant to what is being said. Smiles and other expressions are relevant too. The head may tilt sideways. Mirroring of expressions may occur. Silences are used to absorb meaning. The eyes remain sharply focused on the eyes of the speaker, although at times might lower to look at the mouth, especially in male-female engagements.

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arms - body language

Arms act as defensive barriers when across the body, and conversely indicate feelings of openness and security when in open positions, especially combined with open palms.

Arms are quite reliable indicators of mood and feeling, especially when interpreted with other body language.

This provides a good opportunity to illustrate how signals combine to enable safer analysis.

For example:

crossed arms = possibly defensive

crossed arms + crossed legs = probably defensive

crossed arms + crossed legs + frowning + clenched fists = definitely defensive, and probably hostile too.

While this might seem obvious written in simple language, it's not always so clear if your attention is on other matters.

Body language is more than just knowing the theory - it's being aware constantly of the signals people are giving.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
crossed arms (folded arms)	arms	defensiveness, reluctance	Crossed arms represent a protective or separating barrier. This can be due to various causes, ranging from severe animosity or concern to mild boredom or being too tired to be interested and attentive. Crossed arms is a commonly exhibited signal by subordinates feeling threatened by bosses and

			figures of authority. N.B. People also cross arms when they are feeling cold, so be careful not to misread this signal.
crossed arms with clenched fists	arms	hostile defensiveness	Clenched fists reinforce stubbornness, aggression or the lack of empathy indicated by crossed arms.
gripping own upper arms	arms	insecurity	Gripping upper arms while folded is effectively self-hugging. Self-hugging is an attempt to reassure unhappy or unsafe feelings.
one arm across body claspng other arm by side (female)	arms	nervousness	Women use this gesture. Men tend not to. It's a 'barrier' protective signal, and also self-hugging.
arms held behind body with hands clasped	arms	confidence, authority	As demonstrated by members of the royal family, armed forces officers, teachers, policemen, etc.
handbag held in front of body (female)	arms	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.
holding papers across chest (mainly male)	arms	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal, especially when arm is across chest.
adjusting cuff, watchstrap, tie, etc., using an arm across the body	arms	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.
arms/hands covering genital region (male)	arms / hands	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.
holding a	arms /	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.

drink in front of body with both hands	hands		
seated, holding drink on one side with hand from other side	arms / hands	nervousness	One arm rests on the table across the body, holding a drink (or pen, etc). Another 'barrier' protective signal.
touching or scratching shoulder using arm across body	arms / shoulder	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.

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hands - body language

Body language involving hands is extensive.

This is because hands are such expressive parts of the body, and because hands interact with other parts of the body.

Hands contain many more nerve connections (to the brain) than most if not all other body parts. They are extremely expressive and flexible tools, so it is natural for hands to be used a lot in signalling consciously - as with emphasizing gestures - or unconsciously - as in a wide range of unintentional movements which indicate otherwise hidden feelings and thoughts.

A nose or an ear by itself can do little to signal a feeling, but when a hand or finger is also involved then there is probably a signal of some sort.

Hands body language is used for various purposes, notably:

- emphasis, (pointing, jabbing, and chopping actions, etc)

- illustration (drawing, shaping, mimicking actions or sizing things in the air - this big/long/wide/etc., phoning actions, etc)

- specific conscious signals like the American OK, the thumbs-up, the Victory-sign, and for rude gestures, etc.

- greeting people and waving goodbye (which might be included in the above category)

- and more interestingly in unconscious 'leakage' signals including interaction with items like pens and cigarettes and other parts of the body, indicating feelings such as doubt, deceit, pressure, openness, expectation, etc.

Body language experts generally agree that hands send more signals than any part of the body except for the face. Studying hand body language therefore yields a lot of information; hence the hands section below is large.

There are many [cultural body language differences](#) in hand signals. The section below focuses on Western behaviour. Much applies elsewhere, but avoid assuming that it all does.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
palm(s) up or open	hands	submissive, truthful, honesty, appealing	Said to evolve from when open upward palms showed no weapon was held. A common gesture with various meanings around a main theme of openness. Can also mean "I don't have the answer," or an appeal. In some situations this can indicate confidence (such as to enable openness), or trust/trustworthiness. An easily faked gesture to convey innocence. Outward open forearms or whole arms are more extreme versions of the signal.
palm(s) up, fingers pointing up	hands	defensive, instruction to stop	Relaxed hands are more likely to be defensive as if offered up in protection; rigid fingers indicates a more authoritative instruction or request to stop whatever behaviour is promoting the reaction.
palm(s) down	hands	authority, strength, dominance	Where the lower arm moves across the body with palm down this is generally defiance or firm disagreement.
palm up and moving up and down as if weighing	hands	striving for or seeking an answer	The hand is empty, but figuratively holds a problem or idea as if weighing it. The signal is one of 'weighing' possibilities.
hand(s) on heart (left side of chest)	hands	seeking to be believed	Although easy to fake, the underlying meaning is one of wanting to be believed, whether being truthful or not. Hand on heart can be proactive, as when a salesman tries to convince a buyer, or reactive, as when claiming innocence or shock. Whatever, the sender of this signal typically feels the need to emphasise their position as if mortally threatened, which is rarely the case.
finger pointing (at a person)	hands	aggression, threat, emphasis	Pointing at a person is very confrontational and dictatorial. Commonly adults do this to young people. Adult to adult it is generally unacceptable and tends to indicate a lack of social awareness or self-control aside from arrogance on the part of the finger pointer. The finger is thought to represent a gun, or pointed weapon. Strongly associated with anger, directed at another person. An exception to the generally aggressive meaning of finger pointing

			is the finger point and wink , below.
finger point and wink	hands/ eyes	acknowledgement or confirmation	The subtle use of a winked eye with a pointed finger changes the finger point into a different signal, that of acknowledging something, often a contribution or remark made by someone, in which case the finger and wink are directed at the person concerned, and can be a signal of positive appreciation, as if to say, "You got it," or "You understand it, well done".
finger pointing (in the air)	hands	emphasis	Pointing in the air is generally used to add emphasis, by a person feeling in authority or power.
finger wagging (side to side)	hands	warning, refusal	Rather like the waving of a pistol as a threat. Stop it/do as you are told, or else..
finger wagging (up and down)	hands	admonishment, emphasis	The action is like pressing a button on a keypad several times. Like when a computer or elevator won't work, as if pressing the button lots of times will make any difference..
hand chop	hands	emphasis - especially the last word on a matter	The hand is used like a guillotine, as if to kill the discussion.
clenched fist(s)	hands	resistance, aggression, determination	One or two clenched fists can indicate different feelings - defensive, offensive, positive or negative, depending on context and other signals. Logically a clenched fist prepares the hand (and mind and body) for battle of one sort or another, but in isolation the signal is impossible to interpret more precisely than a basic feeling of resolve.
finger tips and thumbs touching each other on opposite hands ('steeping')	hands	thoughtfulness, looking for or explaining connections or engagement	Very brainy folk use this gesture since it reflects complex and/or elevated thinking. In this gesture only the fingertips touch - each finger with the corresponding digit of the other hand, pointing upwards like the rafters of a tall church roof. Fingers are spread and may be rigidly straight or relaxed and curved. Alternating the positions (pushing fingers together then relaxing again - like a spider doing press-ups on a mirror) enables the fascinating effect (nothing to do with body language), which after enough repetition can produce a sensation of having a greased sheet of glass between the fingers. Try it - it's very strange. Very brainy people probably don't do this because they have more important things

			to think about. It's their loss.
steeped fingers pointing forward	hands	thoughtfulness and barrier	The upwards-pointing version tends to indicate high-minded or connective/complex thinking, however when this hand shape is directed forward it also acts as a defensive or distancing barrier between the thinker and other(s) present.
palms down moving up and down, fingers spread	hands	seeking or asking for calm, loss of control of a group or situation	Seen often in rowdy meetings the gesture is typically a few inches above the table top, but is also seen standing up. The action is one of suppressing or holding down a rising pressure. Teachers use this gesture when trying to quieten a class.
cracking knuckles	hands	comforting habit, attention-seeking	Usually male. Machismo or habit. Meaning depends on context. No-one knows still exactly how the noise is made, but the notion that the practice leads to arthritis is now generally thought to be nonsense.
interwoven clenched fingers	hands	frustration, negativity, anxiousness	Usually hands would be on a table or held across stomach or on lap.
index finger and thumb touching at tips	hands	satisfaction, 'OK'	This is generally seen to be the 'OK' signal, similar to the 'thumbs up'. The signal may be to oneself quietly, or more pronounced directed to others. There is also the sense of this suggesting something being 'just right' as if the finger and thumb are making a fine adjustment with a pinch of spice or a tiny turn of a control knob. The circle formed by the joined finger and thumb resembles the O from OK. The remaining three fingers are spread.
thumb(s) up	hands	positive approval, agreement, all well	In the Western world this signal is so commonly used and recognized it has become a language term in its own right: 'thumbs up' means approved. It's a very positive signal. Two hands is a bigger statement of the same meaning.
thumbs down	hands	disapproval, failure	Logically the opposite of thumbs up. Rightly or wrongly the thumbs up and down signals are associated with the gladiatorial contests of the ancient Roman arenas in which the presiding dignitary would signal the fate of the losing contestants.
thumb(s) clenched inside	hands	self-comforting, frustration, insecurity	As with other signals involving holding or stroking a part of one's own body this tends to indicate self-comforting. Also thumbs are

fist(s)			potent and flexible tools, so disabling them logically reduces a person's readiness for action.
hand held horizontally and rocked from side to side	hands	undecided, in the balance	Signalling that a decision or outcome, normally finely balanced and difficult to predict or control, could go one way or another.
rubbing hands together	hands	anticipation, relish	A signal - often a conscious gesture - of positive expectation, and often related to material or financial reward, or an enjoyable activity and outcome.
hand(s) clamped over mouth	hands / mouth	suppression, shock	See mouth/hand clamp entry in mouth section, which is a subject in its own right.
touching nose, while speaking	hands / nose	lying or exaggeration	This is said to hide the reddening of the nose caused by increased blood flow. Can also indicate mild embellishment or fabrication. The children's story about Pinocchio (the wooden puppet boy whose nose grew when he told lies) reflects long-standing associations between the nose and telling lies.
scratching nose, while speaking	hands / nose	lying or exaggeration	Nose-scratching while speaking is a warning sign, unless the person genuinely has an itchy nose. Often exhibited when recounting an event or incident.
pinching or rubbing nose, while listening	hands / nose	thoughtfulness, suppressing comment	In many cases this is an unconscious signalling of holding back or delaying a response or opinion. Pinching the nose physically obstructs breathing and speech, especially if the mouth is covered at the same time. Rather like the more obvious hand-clamp over the mouth, people displaying this gesture probably have something to say but are choosing not to say it yet.
picking nose	hands / nose	day-dreaming, inattentive, socially disconnected, stress	Nose picking is actually extremely common among adults but does not aid career development or social acceptance and is therefore normally a private affair. When observed, nose-picking can signify various states of mind, none particularly positive.
pinching bridge of nose	hands / nose	negative evaluation	Usually accompanied with a long single blink.
hands	hands /	rejection of or	Not surprisingly gestures involving hands

clamped on ears	ears	resistance to something	covering the ears signify a reluctance to listen and/or to agree with what is being said or to the situation as a whole. The gesture is occasionally seen by a person doing the talking, in which case it tends to indicate that other views and opinions are not wanted or will be ignored.
ear tugging	hands / ears	indecision, self-comforting	People fiddle with their own bodies in various ways when seeking comfort, but ear-pulling or tugging given suitable supporting signs can instead indicate indecision and related pondering.
hands clasping head	hands / head	calamity	Hands clasping head is like a protective helmet against some disaster or problem.
hand stroking chin	hands / chin	thoughtfulness	The stroking of a beard is a similar signal, although rare among women.
hand supporting chin or side of face	hands / chin, face	evaluation, tiredness or boredom	Usually the forearm is vertical from the supporting elbow on a table. People who display this signal are commonly assessing or evaluating next actions, options, or reactions to something or someone. If the resting is heavier and more prolonged, and the gaze is unfocused or averted, then tiredness or boredom is a more likely cause. A lighter resting contact is more likely to be evaluation, as is lightly resting the chin on the knuckles.
chin resting on thumb, index finger pointing up against face	hands / chin	evaluation	This is a more reliable signal of evaluation than the above full-hand support. Normally the supporting elbow will be on a table or surface. The middle finger commonly rests horizontally between chin and lower lip.
neck scratching	hands / neck	doubt, disbelief	Perhaps evolved from a feeling of distrust and instinct to protect the vulnerable neck area. Who knows - whatever, the signal is generally due to doubting or distrusting what is being said.
hand clasping wrist	hands / wrist	frustration	Clasping a wrist, which may be behind the back or in open view, can be a signal of frustration, as if holding oneself back.
running hands through hair	hair / hair	flirting, or vexation, exasperation	Take your pick - running hands through the hair is commonly associated with flirting, and sometimes it is, although given different supporting signals, running hands through the

			hair can indicate exasperation or upset.
hand(s) on hip(s)	hands / arms	confidence, readiness, availability	The person is emphasizing their presence and readiness for action. Observable in various situations, notably sport, and less pronounced poses in social and work situations. In social and flirting context it is said that the hands are drawing attention to the genital area.
hands in pockets	hands / arms	disinterest, boredom	The obvious signal is one of inaction, and not being ready for action. Those who stand with hands in pockets - in situations where there is an expectation for people to be enthusiastic and ready for action - demonstrate apathy and lack of interest for the situation.
removing spectacles	hands / spectacles	alerting wish to speak	For people who wear reading-only spectacles, this is an example of an announcement or alerting gesture, where a person readies themselves to speak and attracts attention to the fact. Other alerting signals include raising the hand, taking a breath, moving upwards and forwards in their seat, etc.
playing an imaginary violin	hands / arms	mock sympathy or sadness	The 'air violin' has been around a lot longer than the 'air guitar', and is based on the traditional use of violin music as a theme or background for sad scenes in movies and in music generally. The 'air violin' is not typically included in body language guides; it's here as an amusing gesture which demonstrates our conscious practice and recognition of certain signals.
thumb and fingers formed into a tube and rocked side to side or up and down (mainly male)	hands	offensive - mockery, dissatisfaction, expression of inferior quality	A conscious signal, usually one-handed. Insulting gesture if directed at a person, typically male to male, since it mimics masturbation, like calling a person a 'tosser' or a 'wanker' (UK) or a jerk-off (US). This is obviously rude and not used in respectable company such as the queen or a group of clergymen. The gesture is also used as a response to something regarded as poor quality, which might be a performance or piece of work or a comment on a product of some sort. The allusion is to masturbation being a poor substitute for sex with a woman, and that those who masturbate are not 'real men'. Unsurprisingly the gesture is mainly male, directed at other males, especially in tribal-like gatherings. Rare female use of this gesture directed at males can be very effective due to its humiliating value. For obvious reasons the

			gesture is unlikely to be used by females or males directed at females.
two-fingered V-sign, palm inward (mainly male)	hands / fingers	offensive - derision, contempt	A consciously offensive and aggressive gesture, also called 'flicking the Vs', widely but probably incorrectly thought to derive from the 1415 Battle of Agincourt in the Hundred Years War when the tactically pivotal Welsh longbowmen supposedly derided the beaten French soldiers' and their threats to cut off the bowmen's fingers.
two-fingered V-sign, palm outward	hands fingers	victory, peace	British 2nd World War leader Winston Churchill popularised the victory usage, although apparently, significantly if so, first used the palm inwards version until he was told what it meant to the working classes.

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handshakes - body language

Firmness of handshake is not the reliable indicator of firmness of character that many believe it to be. Firm handshakes tend to be those of confident people, especially those who have spent some time in business, and who realise that most people in business consider a firm handshake to be a good thing. Handshakes that are uncomfortably firm show a lack of respect or awareness, especially if used in cultures (Eastern especially) where firm handshaking is not normal.

Handshaking evolved from ancient times as an initial gesture of trust, to show that no weapon was being held. Naturally also the handshake offers the most obvious way to connect physically as a way to signal trust or friendship. In more recent times, especially from the 1800s onwards, a handshake became the way to confirm a commercial transaction. Handshaking by women became common practice much later, reflecting the change of social attitudes and the increasing equality of women, for whom a hundred years back such physical contact was considered improper. Women have throughout time generally been subservient to men, hence the very subservient female curtsy gesture (also spelled curtsy), which survives now only in traditional situations such as meeting royalty, or ending a stage performance.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
handshake - palm down	handshake	dominance	Usually a firm handshake, the 'upper hand' tends to impose and/or create a dominant impression.
handshake - palm up	handshake	submission, accommodating	Usually not a strong handshake, the lower hand has submitted to the upper hand dominance. How all this ultimately translates into the subsequent relationship and outcomes can depend on more significant factors than the handshake.
handshake	handshake	seeking to	Whether genuine or not, this handshake is unduly

- both hands		convey trustworthiness and honesty, seeking to control	physical and (often) uncomfortably domineering.
handshake - equal and vertical	handshake	non-threatening, relaxed	Most handshakes are like this, when neither person seeks to control or to yield.
pumping handshake	handshake	enthusiasm	A vigorous pumping handshake tends to indicate energy and enthusiasm of the shaker towards the other person, the meeting, situation or project, etc). There is a sense of attempting to transfer energy and enthusiasm, literally, from the vigorous handshaker to the shaken person, hence the behaviour is popular in motivational folk and evangelists, etc.
weak handshake	handshake	various	Avoid the common view that a weak handshake is the sign of a weak or submissive person. It is not. Weak handshakes can be due to various aspects of personality, mood, etc. People who use their hands in their profession, for example, musicians, artists, surgeons, etc., can have quite gentle sensitive handshakes. Strong but passive people can have gentle handshakes. Old people can have weak handshakes. A weak handshake might be due to arthritis. Young people unaccustomed to handshaking can have weak handshakes. It's potentially a very misleading signal.
firm handshake	handshake	outward confidence	Avoid the common view that a firm handshake is the sign of a strong solid person. It is not. Firm handshakes are a sign of outward confidence, which could mask deceit or a weak bullying nature, or indicate a strong solid person. Strength of a handshake is not by itself an indicator of positive 'good' mood or personality, and caution is required in reading this signal. It is widely misinterpreted.
handshake with arm clasp	handshake	seeking control, paternalism	When a handshake is accompanied by the left hand clasping the other person's right arm this indicates a wish to control or a feeling of care, which can be due to arrogance. To many this represents an unwanted invasion of personal space , since touching 'permission' is for the handshake only.

legs and feet - body language

Legs and feet body language is more difficult to control consciously or fake than some body language of arms and hands and face. Legs and feet can therefore provide good clues to feelings and moods, if you know the signs.

Men and women sit differently, which needs to be considered when reading leg body language. Partly due to clothing and partly due to sexual differences, men naturally exhibit more open leg positions than women, which should be allowed for when interpreting signals. Certain open-leg male positions are not especially significant in men, but would be notable in women, especially combined with a short skirt.

Older women tend to adopt more modest closed leg positions than younger women, due to upbringing, social trends, equality and clothing. Again take account of these influences when evaluating signals.

Also consider that when people sit for half-an-hour or more they tend to change their leg positions, which can include leg crossing purely for comfort reasons. Again allow for this when interpreting signals.

Leg signals tend to be supported by corresponding arms signals, for example crossed arms and crossed legs, which aside from comfort reasons generally indicate detachment, disinterest, rejection or insecurity, etc.

N.B. Where the terms 'leg crossing' and 'crossed legs' are used alone, this refers to the legs being crossed at both knees. The 'American' or 'Figure-4' leg cross entails the supporting leg being crossed just above the knee by the ankle or lower calf of the crossing leg. This makes a figure-4 shape, hence the name. The posture is also called the American leg cross because of its supposed popularity in the US compared to the UK, notably among males.

signal	part of body	possible meaning(s)	detailed explanation
leg direction, sitting - general	legs/knees	interest, attentiveness (according to direction)	Generally a seated person directs their knee or knees towards the point of interest. The converse is true also - legs tend to point away from something or someone which is uninteresting or threatening. The rule applies with crossed legs also, where the upper knee indicates interest or disinterest according to where it points. The more direct and obvious the position, the keener the attraction or repellent feeling.
uncrossed legs, sitting - general	legs	openness	In sitting positions, open uncrossed leg positions generally indicate an open attitude, contrasting with with crossed legs, which normally indicate a closed attitude or a degree of caution or uncertainty.
parallel legs together, sitting (mainly	legs	properness	This unusual in men, especially if the knees point an angle other than straight ahead. The posture was common in women due to upbringing and clothing and indicates a sense of properness.

female)			
crossed legs, sitting - general	legs	caution, disinterest	Crossed legs tend to indicate a degree of caution or disinterest, which can be due to various reasons, ranging from feeling threatened, to mildly insecure.
crossing legs, sitting - specific change	legs	interest or disinterest in direction of upper crossed knee	Generally the upper crossed leg and knee will point according to the person's interest. If the knee points towards a person then it signifies interest in or enthusiasm for that person; if it points away from a person it signifies disinterest in or a perceived threat from that person. Signs are more indicative when people first sit down and adopt initial positions in relation to others present. Signs become less reliable when people have been sitting for half-an-hour or so, when leg crossing can change more for comfort than body language reasons.
American or figure-4 leg cross	legs	independent, stubborn	The 'American' or 'figure-4' leg cross is a far more confident posture than the conventional 'both knees' leg cross. It exposes the genital region, and typically causes the upper body to lean back. The crossed leg is nevertheless a protective barrier, and so this posture is regarded as more stubborn than the 'both knees' leg cross.
American or figure-4 leg cross with hand clamp	legs / arm / hand	resistant, stubborn	This is a more protective and stubborn version of the plain American leg cross, in which (usually) the opposite hand to the crossing leg clamps and holds the ankle of the crossing leg, effectively producing a locked position, which reflects the mood of the person.
open legs, sitting (mainly male)	legs	arrogance, combative, sexual posturing	This is a confident dominant posture. Happily extreme male open-crotch posing is rarely exhibited in polite or formal situations since the signal is mainly sexual. This is a clear exception to the leg/knee point rule since the pointing is being done by the crotch, whose target might be a single person or a wider audience. Not a gesture popularly used by women, especially in formal situations and not in a skirt. Regardless of gender this posture is also combative because it requires space and makes the person look bigger. The impression of confidence is increased when arms are also in a wide or open position.
ankle lock, sitting	legs	defensiveness	Knees may be apart (among men predominantly) or together (more natural in women). There is also a suggestion of suppressing negative emotion.
splayed	legs	aggression,	Splayed, that is wide-parted legs create (usually

legs, standing		ready for action	unconsciously) a firm base from which to defend or attack, and also make the body look wider. Hands on hips support the interpretation.
standing 'at attention'	legs / body	respectful	Standing upright, legs straight, together and parallel, body quite upright, shoulders back, arms by sides - this is like the military 'at attention' posture and is often a signal of respect or subservience adopted when addressed by someone in authority.
legs intertwined, sitting (female)	legs	insecurity or sexual posing	Also called 'leg twine', this is a tightly crossed leg, twined or wrapped around the supporting leg. Depending on the circumstances the leg twine can either be a sign of retreat and protection, or a sexual display of leg shapeliness, since a tight leg-cross tends to emphasise muscle and tone. Assessing additional body language is crucial for interpreting such signals of potentially very different meanings.
legs crossed, standing (scissor stance)	legs	insecurity or submission or engagement	Typically observed in groups of standing people at parties or other gatherings, defensive signals such as crossed legs and arms among the less confident group members is often reinforced by a physical and audible lack of involvement and connection with more lively sections of the group. Where legs are crossed and arms are not, this can indicate a submissive or committed agreement to stand and engage, so the standing leg cross relays potentially quite different things.
knee buckle, standing	legs / knees	under pressure	Obviously a pronounced knee buckle is effectively a collapse due to severe stress or actually carrying a heavy weight, and similarly a less obvious knee bend while standing can indicate the anticipation of an uncomfortable burden or responsibility.
feet or foot direction or pointing	feet	foot direction indicates direction of interest	Like knees, feet tend to point towards the focus of interest - or away from something or someone if it is not of interest. Foot direction or pointing in this context is a subtle aspect of posture - this is not using the foot to point at something; it is merely the direction of the feet when sitting or standing in relation to people close by.
foot forward, standing	feet	directed towards dominant group member	The signal is interesting among groups, when it can indicate perceptions of leadership or dominance, i.e., the forward foot points at the leader or strongest member of the group.
shoe-play (female)	feet	relaxation, flirting,	A woman would usually be relaxed to display this signal. In certain situations dangling a shoe from

sexual

the foot, and more so slipping the foot in and out of the shoe has sexual overtones.

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personal space

The technical term for the personal space aspect of body language is **proxemics**. The word was devised by Edward Twitchell Hall (b.1914), an American anthropologist and writer on body language and non-verbal communications, especially relating to cross-cultural understanding. His 1963 book, *Proxemics, A Study of Man's Spacial Relationship*, no doubt helped popularize the new word. Here is [Edward Twitchell Hall's website](#) - he's an interesting character, and one of the founding fathers of modern body language theory. His other books are listed in the [body language references section](#) below. Robert Ardrey is cited by Julius Fast as another significant expert and writer in personal space.

Proxemics - personal space - is defined as (the study of) **the amount of space that people find comfortable between themselves and others**.

Personal space dimensions depend notably on the individual, cultural and living background, the situation, and relationships, however some general parameters apply to most people, which for Western societies, are shown below.

There are five distinct space zones, which were originally identified by Edward T Hall, and which remain the basis of personal space analysis today. The first zone is sometimes shown as a single zone comprising two sub-zones.

zone	distance	for	detail
1. Close intimate	0-15cm 0-6in	lovers, and physical touching relationships	Sometimes included with the 2nd zone below, this is a markedly different zone in certain situations, for example face-to-face contact with close friends rarely encroaches within 6 inches, but commonly does with a lover.
2. Intimate	15-45cm 6-18in	physical touching relationships	Usually reserved for intimate relationships and close friendships, but also applies during consenting close activities such as contact sports, and crowded places such as parties, bars, concerts, public transport, queues and entertainment and sports spectating events. Non-consenting intrusion into this space is normally felt to be uncomfortable at best, or very threatening and upsetting at worst. Within the intimate zone a person's senses of smell and touch (being touched) become especially exercised.
3. Personal	45-120cm 18in-4ft	family and close friends	Touching is possible in this zone, but intimacy is off-limits. Hence touching other than hand-shaking is potentially uncomfortable.
4. Social-consultative	1.2-3.6m 4-12ft	non-touch interaction, social,	Significantly hand-shaking is only possible within this zone only if both people reach out to do it. Touching is not possible unless both people reach to do it.

		business	
5. Public	3.6m+ 12ft+	no interaction, ignoring	People establish this zonal space when they seek to avoid interaction with others nearby. When this space is intruded by another person is creates a discomfort or an expectation of interaction.

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mirroring - matching body language signals

When body language and speech characteristics are mirrored or synchronized between people this tends to assist the process of creating and keeping rapport (a mutual feeling of empathy, understanding, trust).

The term synchronized is arguably a more accurate technical term because mirroring implies visual signals only, when the principles of matching body language extend to audible signals also - notably speech pace, pitch, tone, etc.

'Mirrored' or synchronized body language between two people encourages feelings of trust and rapport because it generates unconscious feelings of affirmation.

When another person displays similar body language to our own, this makes us react unconsciously to feel, "This person is like me and agrees with the way I am. I like this person because we are similar, and he/she likes me too."

The converse effect applies. When two people's body language signals are different - i.e., not synchronized - they feel less like each other, and the engagement is less comfortable. Each person senses a conflict arising from the mismatching of signals - the two people are not affirming each other; instead the mismatched signals translate into unconscious feelings of discord, discomfort or even rejection. The unconscious mind thinks, "This person is not like me; he/she is different to me, I am not being affirmed, therefore I feel defensive."

Advocates and users of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) use mirroring consciously, as a method of 'getting in tune' with another person, and with a little practice are able to first match and then actually and gently to alter the signals - and supposedly thereby the feelings and attitudes - of other people, using mirroring techniques.

Speech pace or speed is an example. When you are speaking with someone, first match their pace of speaking, then gently change your pace - slower or faster - and see if the other person follows you. Often they will do.

People, mostly being peaceful cooperative souls, commonly quite naturally match each other's body language. To do otherwise can sometimes feel uncomfortable, even though we rarely think consciously about it.

When another person leans forward towards us at a table, we often mirror and do likewise. When they lean back and relax, we do the same.

Sales people and other professional communicators are widely taught to mirror all sorts of more subtle signals, as a means of creating trust and rapport with the other person, and to influence attitudes.

Mirroring in this conscious sense is not simply copying or mimicking. Mirroring is effective when movements and gestures are reflected in a similar way so that the effect remains unconscious and subtle. Obvious copying would be regarded as strange or insulting.

See [NLP \(Neuro-Linguistic Programming\)](#), and [Empathy](#).

body language of seating positioning in relation to others

Lots of unnecessary friction is created in work and communications situations due to ignorance and lack of thought about seating positions.

The 'science' of where people sit in relation to each other, and on what and around what, is fascinating and offers opportunities for improving relationships, communications, cooperation and understanding.

Here are some guidelines.

These points are generally for the purpose of a leader or someone aspiring to lead, or coach, counsel, etc. They also relate to one-to-one situations like appraisals, interviews, etc.

Sitting opposite someone creates a feeling of confrontation. For one-to-one meetings, especially with emotional potential (appraisals for example) take care to arrange seating before the meeting to avoid opposite-facing positions. If you cannot arrange the seating give very deliberate thought to seating positions before you sit down and/or before you invite the other person to sit - don't just let it happen because commonly, strangely, people often end up sitting opposite if free to do so.

Consider the rules about [personal space](#). Do not place chairs so close together that personal space will be invaded. Conversely sitting too far apart will prevent building feelings of trust and private/personal discussion.

Sitting opposite someone across a table or desk adds a barrier to the confrontational set-up and can create a tension even when the relationship is good and strong. It's easy to forget this and to find yourself sitting opposite someone when there are only two of you at the table. Sitting opposite across a table is okay for lovers gazing into each other's eyes, but not good for work, counselling, coaching, etc.

Sitting behind a work-desk (the boss behind his/her own desk especially) and having someone (especially a subordinate) sit in a less expensive lower chair across the desk emphasises authority of the boss and adds unhelpfully to the barrier and the confrontational set-up. This seating arrangement will increase the defensiveness of anyone already feeling insecure or inferior. This positioning is favoured by certain bosses seeking to reinforce their power, but it is not helpful in most modern work situations, and is not a good way to increase respectful natural authority anyway. Incidentally the expression 'on the carpet' - meaning being told off or 'bollocked' - derives from the extreme form of this positional strategy, when the victim, called into the office would stand to receive their bollocking on the carpet in front of the boss who sat high and mighty behind his desk. (The boss would typically be male, and beaten/abused/neglected as a child, but that's another story.)

Sitting at a diagonal angle of about 45 degrees to another person is a comfortable and cooperative arrangement. This is achieved naturally by both sitting around the same corner of a

square table, which also enables papers to be seen together without too much twisting.

The same angle is appropriate for and easy-chairs around a coffee-table. A table ceases to become a barrier when people are sitting at a diagonal angle, instead it becomes a common work surface for studying papers, or exploring issues together.

Sitting side by side on a settee is not a good arrangement for working relationships. It threatens personal space, and obstructs communications.

Low settees and easy-chairs and low coffee tables cause people to sink and relax back are usually unhelpful for work meetings. For this reason much seating in hotel lounges is entirely unsuitable for work meetings. People naturally are more alert and focused using higher formal table and chairs.

Interviews and appraisals can benefit from relaxed or more formal seating depending on the situation. Importantly - make a conscious choice about furniture depending on the tone of the meeting, and how relaxed you want the meeting to be.

The 45-degree rule is approximate, and anyway under most circumstances seating angles are influenced by furniture and available space. Importantly, simply try to avoid opposite or side-by-side positions. An angle between these two extremes is best - somewhere in the range of 30-60 degrees if you want to be technical about it.

Round tables are better than square or oblong tables for group and team meetings. Obviously this works well because no-one is at the head of the table, which promotes a feeling of equality and teamwork. King Arthur - or the creator of the legend (King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table) - opted for a round table for this reason. The term 'round table' has come to symbolise teamwork and fairness, etc., for a long time. Unfortunately round tables aren't common in offices, which means thinking carefully about best seating arrangements for square or oblong tables.

A confident leader will be happy to avoid taking the 'head of the table' position, instead to sit among the team, especially if there are particular reasons for creating a cooperative atmosphere.

Conversely it is perfectly normal for a leader to take the 'head of the table' if firmness is required in chairing or mediating, etc. It is usually easier to chair a meeting from the head of the table position.

Theory suggests that when a group sits around a table the person sitting on the leader's right will generally be the most loyal and aligned to the leader's thinking and wishes. A (likely) mythical origin is said to be that in Roman times a leader would place their most loyal supporter to their right because this was the most advantageous position from which to attempt an assassination by stabbing (given that most people then as now were right-handed). Assassination by stabbing is rare in modern work meetings, so positioning an opponent on your right side (instead of allowing the normal opposite positioning to happen) can be a useful tactic since this indicates confidence and strength.

In large gatherings of 20-30 people or more, a 'top table' is often appropriate for the leader and guest speakers. While this seems like a throwback to more autocratic times, it is perfectly workable. Groups of people above a certain size are far more likely to expect firm direction/leadership, if not in making decisions, certainly to keep order and ensure smooth running of proceedings. Therefore seating arrangements for large groups should provide a clear position of control for the chairperson or event leaders.

body language in different cultures

Here are some brief pointers concerning body language variations and gestures in cultures which differ from Western (US/UK notably) behaviour.

I welcome refinements and additions to this section. [Please send](#) any you can contribute.

People in/from parts of India may to shake their head from side to side as a sign of agreement and active listening. In the UK/west we tend to nod our head to agree and affirm and to show we are listening; in India it is not unusual for people to move their heads from side to side in giving these reactions. It is also seen as respectful practice. (Thanks S Churchill. Incidentally on this point, sideways head-shaking of this sort is not a vigorous twisting movement; it is usually more of a sideways tilting of the head from one side to the other.)

This point (thanks R Fox) concerns eye contact. Eye contact (other than unwanted staring) is generally regarded as a positive aspect of body language in Western cultures, which in this context typically refers to white European people and descendents. A specific difference regarding eye contact can be found in some black Caribbean cultures however, whereby young people tend to be instructed not look at someone eye to eye when being told off or disciplined. When cultures meet obviously this provides potential for friction, given the 'Western' expectation in such situations, for example, "Look at me when I'm talking to you".

Filipino people (and in fact many other people of all races) can find it offensive/uncomfortable when beckoned by a repeatedly curled index finger - the gesture evokes feelings of having done something wrong and being chastised for it.

In some Australian Aboriginal cultures, it is disrespectful to look an elder, or person of a rank above you, in the eyes. It is a sign of respect to drop your eyes, (whereas in Western culture not meeting somebody's gaze is commonly considered to be a negative sign, indicating deceit, lying, lack of attention, lack of confidence, etc).

Showing the soles of the feet is insulting and rude in many Asian and Arab cultures. Similarly pointing the foot or feet at anyone is rude. Feet are considered dirty.

In Arab culture the left hand is commonly considered unclean due to associations with toilet functions, and should therefore not be offered or used for touching or eating. When in doubt in Arab environments, using the right hand for everything is a safer idea.

In Arab countries the thumbs-up gesture is rude.

The eyebrow flash may be considered rude or to carry sexual connotations in Japanese culture. Informal male-female touching is less common and can be considered improper in Japan.

The American-style 'OK' sign - a circle made with thumb and index-finger with other fingers fanned or outstretched - is a rude gesture in some cultures, notably Latin America, Germany and the Middle East.

Beckoning gestures in Eastern cultures are commonly made with the palm down, whereas Western beckoning is generally palm up.

The offensive British/Western two-fingered V-sign is not necessarily offensive in Japan and may be considered positive like the Western palm-outwards 'victory' or 'peace' V-sign in the West.

In some countries, Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria for example, moving the head up/down or from side to side may have additional or different meanings to those conventionally interpreted in the UK/US. Specifically, in Turkey, aside from using conventional (US/UK-style) head nodding and shaking, some people may also signal 'no' by moving their head up. (This is a refinement of previous details about head movements in body language, and [I welcome more information](#) especially from people overseas as to precise variations to US/UK conventional meanings in signally yes and no, and anything else, with head movements.)

Arab handshaking tends to be more frequent and less firm - on meeting and departing, even several times in the same day.

In Japan the male bow is still commonly used, when the depth of the bow increases with the amount of respect shown, and is therefore a signal of relative status between two people.

In The Netherlands people touch the temple with the index finger in order to indicate someone (or an action) is smart or intelligent. Touching the forehead with the index finger means someone (or an action) is stupid or crazy. In Russia these meanings are reversed.

Here are some **Japanese body language** insights, especially for doing business in Japan (thanks R Wilkes):

High-pitched laughter means nervousness.

On introduction, do not offer a handshake. Depth of bow is impossible to judge without immense experience: it is sufficient for a Westerner to bow shallowly.

Business cards should be exchanged at the first possible opportunity. The card received should be held in **both hands** and examined carefully, and then stored, preferably in a wallet, on the upper half of the body. Holding a person's identity in one hand is casual/disrespectful. The trouser pocket is a rude place.

Blowing one's nose into a handkerchief in public is obscene. (What other bodily waste do you wrap up in cotton and put in your pocket?..)

Japanese businesses (unless they cannot afford it) have two types of meeting room: a Western style room with central table, and a room with sofas. The sofa room is for non-antagonistic meetings. In general, the 45 degree rule seems to apply here - better to sit on adjacent sides than across from one another. This room can be a great place to cut deals. Nevertheless, the 'table' room is where transactions are formalised. There the host of the meeting sits nearest to (and preferably with his back to) the door. (This is probably chivalric in origin - he is first in the way of any invader to the room.) His team sits on the same side of the table in descending rank. The chief guest sits opposite him and similarly the minions decline to the side. The head of the table is not generally used in bilateral (two parties) meetings except by people brought in to advise on components of the agenda. A great boss may spend much of the meeting with his eyes closed. He is considering what is being said by the subordinates and does not need visual distraction. However, if he has a firm steer to give, he will instruct his deputy and this will be relayed immediately.

Loss of eye contact is quite normal with lower ranking people: if they drop their head, this indicates deep thought.

Otherwise, pure body signals are quite similar to Western ones, with one notable exception: touching the tip of the nose from straight ahead signals 'I/me'.

The Japanese language does have a word for 'no' but it is rarely used in business for fear of causing offence or loss of face. "Yes, but..." is substantially more acceptable.

I welcome refinements and additions for body language in other cultures. [Please send](#) any you can contribute.

(Thanks to D Ofek, G van Duin, L Campbell, F Suzara, M Baniyadi, S Aydogmus, and particularly to R Wilkes for the Japanese section.)

flirting, courtship, dating and mating - sexual body language

Many signals in flirting, [dating](#) and mating body language are covered in the [general translation signals](#) above, and the fundamental principles of social/work body language also apply to the development or blocking of sexual relationships.

Of course lots of flirting, and more, goes on at work, but for the purposes of this article it's easier to keep the two situations separate.

There are some differences which can completely change the nature of a signal given in a sexual context. Sitting opposite someone is an example, which is confrontational at work, but is often intimate and enabling for sexual and romantic relationships: full constant eye-to-eye contact is helpful for intimacy, as is full frontal facing between male and female for obvious reasons.

Personal space must also be considered in a different way in social-sexual situations compared to work and non-sexual situations: At work, the primary consideration is given to respecting the personal zones and not invading closer than the situation warrants. In a sexual flirting context however, personal space becomes the arena for ritual and play, and within reason is more of a game than a set of fixed limits.

Dancing is further example of how body language operates at a different level in sexual-social situations. Different tolerances and tacit (implied) permissions apply. It's a ritual and a game which humans have played for thousands of years.

Dancing relates strongly to the attention stage of the dating/mating/courtship process. In many ways courtship echoes the selling and advertising model [AIDA](#) (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). This is also known as the Hierarchy of Effects, since steps must be successfully completed in order to achieve the sale at the end. For example, nothing happens without first attracting attention, a point commonly ignored by people looking for a mate. The attention stage is even more critical in crowded and highly competitive environments such as nightclubs and dating websites.

And while not technically part of body language, environment is a vital aspect of dating and mating. The environment in which the dating activity is pursued equates to market/audience-targeting in business. People seeking a mate are effectively marketing themselves. Commonly people head to where everyone else goes - to nightclubs and dating websites - but crucially these environments are highly unsuitable markets for many people, for instance those not good at dancing, and those not good at writing and communicating online. Just as a business needs to find the best markets and ways of reaching its target audience, so in dating people can seek environments where they can best display their strengths and where relevant 'buyers' will be.

Knowing about flirting body language becomes more useful in a favourable environment.

female indications of interest in a male

Females have very many more ways of attracting attention to themselves than males, and so are able to express interest and availability in far more ways than males tend to do.

Female interest in males is relatively selective. Male interest in females is by comparison constant and indiscriminate.

This is due fundamentally to human mating behaviour, evolved over many thousands of years, in which essentially women control the chase and the choice, and men respond primarily to female availability and permissions. These differences in behaviour perhaps mainly exist because females produce one viable egg per month, about 500 in a lifetime, whereas males make several hundred sperm every day. Do the math, as they say.

As with interpreting body language generally, beware of concluding anything based on a single signal. Clusters of signals are more reliable. Foot pointing, knee pointing, and leg-crossing signals can all be due simply to comfort, rather than expressions of interest or sexual appeal.

Aside from the specific flirting and sexual attraction signs below, females also express interest using the general signalling explained in the earlier sections, e.g., prolonged direct eye contact, active responsive listening, attentive open alert postures and body positions, etc.

Here are the most common female flirting body language signals and meanings, according to experts on the subject:

eye contact - anything more than a glance indicates initial interest.

eye catch and look away - establishing eye contact then looking away or down is said by many experts to be the standard initial signal of interest designed to hook male reaction. The reliability of the signal meaning is strengthened when repeated and/or reinforced with longer eye-contact.

eye-widening - interest, simultaneously increasing attractiveness/appeal.

eyelash flicker - subtle movement of eyelashes to widen eyes briefly.

pupil dilating - interest, liking what is seen, arousal.

looking sideways up - lowering head, slightly sideways, and looking up - also known as doe-eyes, with eyelashes normally slightly lowered - displays interest and vulnerability/coyness, most famously employed by Diana Princess of Wales, notably in her interview with Martin Bashir in battle for public sympathy following her split with Prince Charles.

shoulder glance - looking sideways towards the target over the shoulder signals availability, and hence interest.

smiling - obvious sign of welcoming and friendliness.

moistening lips - lips are significant in signalling because (psychologists say) they mimic the female labia, hence the potency of red lipstick (suggesting increased blood flow) and moistening/licking the lips.

parted lips - significant and potent attraction signal.

preening - especially of hair, which exposes the soft underarm.

flicking hair - often combined with a slight tossing movement of the head.

canting (tilting) head - also exposes neck.

showing inner wrist or forearm - a soft vulnerable area and erogenous zone.

straightening posture - standing taller, chest out, stomach in - a natural response to feeling the urge to appear more appealing.

self-touching - drawing attention to sexually appealing parts of the body; neck, hair, cleavage, thigh, etc. - additionally self-touching is said to represent transference/imagining of being touched - and of course demonstration of what it would be like for the target to do the touching; teasing in other words.

self thigh-stroking - usually while sitting down - same as self-touching.

standing opposite - normally a confrontational positioning, but in flirting allows direct eye contact and optimizes engagement. Refer also to [personal space](#) rules: less than 4ft between people is personal; less than 18 inches is intimate and only sustainable when there is some mutual interest and attraction, especially when direct facing and not in a crowded environment. N.B. Crowded environments distort the personal space rules, where implied permissions (e.g., for public transport and dense crowds or queues) override normal interpretations.

leaning forward - sitting or standing; leaning forwards towards a person indicates interest and attraction.

foot pointing - direction can indicate person of interest.

knee-pointing - as foot pointing.

leg twine - a tight-leg cross 'aimed' (combined with eye contact) at a target, or when sitting one-to-one, increases sexual allure since it emphasises leg shape and tone. When employed flirtatiously, female leg crossing and uncrossing also has obvious sexual connotations and stimulates basic urges in males.

shoe-dangling - positive signal of relaxation or of greater promise, especially if the foot thrusts in and out of the shoe.

pouting - pouting involves tightening the lips together; the tongue rises to the roof of the mouth as if ready to swallow. Pouting displays various emotions, not always a sexual one, for example projection of the lower lip indicates upset. An attraction pout looks more like the initial forming of a kiss.

picking fluff - removing fluff, hair, etc., from the target's clothes is playing in the intimate personal space zone, in which the fluff picking is merely a pretext or excuse.

fondling cylindrical objects - phallic transference, for instance using pens, a dangling earring, a wine glass stem, etc.

mirroring - mirroring or synchronizing gestures and positions is a signal of interest and attraction. See [mirroring](#).

When considering body language in such detail, remember that males and females rely greatly on conversation and verbal communication to determine mutual attraction as soon as the situation allows. Body language in flirting can be significant in indicating a strong match, but just as easily can merely be an initial filtering stage which progresses no further because other (infinitely variable) personal or situational criteria on either or both sides are not met.

Also bear in mind that a lot of flirting happens for fun with no intention of proceeding to sexual or romantic attachment.

The purpose of this page is chiefly to explain body language signals, not to explain human relationships.

male interest in females

As stated earlier there are reasons for the relative sparseness of male signals compared to female flirting signals.

Most men are interested perpetually in most women, and therefore male signals are generally designed to attract the attention of any females, rather than directed at one female in particular.

Male interest is basically always switched on and ready to respond to opportunity when female availability and interest are signalled and noticed.

Men believe they take the lead, but actually mostly women do.

Male signals of interest in females essentially follow normal body language rules, for example widening eyes, dilated pupils, forward leaning, prolonged direct eye contact, active listening reactions, and these come into play once eye contact and/or proximity is established.

The most prevalent signals males use to announce their availability and attract female attention are summarised below. Under many circumstances these might be categorised under the headings 'pathetic' or 'amusing'. The male of the species, despite a couple of million years of evolution, has yet to develop much subtle body language in this area.

posturing - erect stance, chest out, shoulders back, stomach in.

wide stance - legs apart (standing or sitting) - to increase size.

cowboy stance - thumbs in belt loops, fingers pointing to genital area.

hands in pockets - thumbs out and pointing to genitals.

'chest-thumping' - a metaphor describing various male antics designed to draw attention to themselves, often involving play-punching or wresting other males, laughing too loudly, head-tossing, acting the fool, etc.

room scanning - males who are available and looking for females tend to scan the room, partly to look for available females, but also to indicate they are available themselves.

dress - clothing: style, fit, cleanliness, etc - is all an extension of personality and is therefore part of body language.

preening and grooming - adjusting clothes, ties, cuffs, sleeves, tugging at trouser crotch, running hands through or over hair, etc.

smell - certain smells are attractive to females but it's a complex and highly personal area yet to be understood well. Answers on a postcard please.

tattoos - here's an interesting one, commonly ignored in conventional body language flirting guides. Tattoos have dramatically altered in society's perceptions in the past generation. Previously considered indicative of lower class, lower intellect, sailors, soldiers, builders, etc.,

nowadays they are everywhere on everyone. Tattoos have been a significant part of human customs for thousands of years. They are decorative, and also (in evolutionary terms) suggested strength and machismo, since the process of obtaining them was painful and even life-threatening. Certain females are attracted by tattoos on men, especially extensive markings. It's a drastic step to improve one's love life, but worthy of note, because the subject is not as simple and negative as traditionally regarded. Tattoos are significant attention-grabbers, and given the variety of subjects featured, also provide interesting talking points.

body piercings - again more complex than traditionally considered, piercings do attract attention and signify the wearer to be different.

dancing - dancing, in a suitable place of course, has for thousands of years been an opportunity for males and females to display their physical and sexual potential. With the exception perhaps of pogo-ing and head-banging most dance styles replicate sexual movements - lots of rhythmic hip and leg work, contorted facial expressions, sweating and occasional grunting, etc. For those blessed with a level of coordination dancing offers an effective way of attracting attention, especially in crowded competitive situations. For the less rhythmic, the lesson is to find a different environment.

stages of courtship

The initial stages of a (usually) male-female sexual relationship are commonly represented as quite a structured process, summarised below.

Incidentally courtship traditionally refers to the early stages of a male-female relationship leading up to sex, babies, marriage and family life, (followed for many by mutual tolerance/indifference/loathing and acrimonious break-up). Flirting is a common modern term for the early stages of courtship, or the beginnings of extra-marital affairs, which is misleading since most flirting happens for fun and rarely progresses beyond non-sexual touching.

If considering flirting/courtship body language in the context of dating and mating, it's useful to recall the selling and advertising model [AIDA](#) (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), and especially that nothing happens without first attracting attention.

Significantly, women are said generally make the first move - by signalling interest through establishing eye contact, and then confusingly for men, looking away.

The process can disintegrate at any moment, often before it begins, because most men are too interested in themselves or the bloody football on the pub telly to notice the eye contact.

Where the process reaches past the first stage, here broadly is how it is said by body language experts to unfold:

1. Eye contact (females typically lower or avert their eyes once firm contact is made).
2. Returned eye contact (by male).
3. Mutual smiling.
4. Preening, grooming, posturing (male and female).
5. Moving together as regards personal space (male typically walks to female).
6. Talking.
7. Attentive active listening (or simulation of this, sufficient mutually to retain sense of mutual interest).
8. Synchronizing/mirroring each other's body language.
9. Touching (more significantly by the female; subtle touching can happen earlier, and at this

stage can become more intimate and daring).

A generation ago this process took a little longer than it does today. Alcohol accelerates things even more.

You'll see variations of the above sequence in body language books, and no doubt in real life too.

Males tend to react to obvious signs of availability shown by females but miss many subtle signals.

Females give lots of subtle signals, tend not to repeat them too often, and infer lack of interest in a male failing to respond.

It's a wonder that anyone gets together at all.

The fact that most people do confirms that courtship is more complex than we readily understand.

bowing and curtseying body language

Although now rare in Western society bowing and curtseying are interesting because they illustrate the status and relationship aspects of body language, which are so significant in one-to-one situations.

Bowing - Bowing is mainly a male gesture. Bending the upper body downwards towards another person or group is a signal of appreciation or subservience. The bow was in olden times a standard way for men to greet or acknowledge another person of perceived or officially higher status. The bow is also a gesture of appreciation and thanks which survives in entertainment and performance. Male bowing traditionally varied from a modest nod of the head, to a very much more pronounced bend of the body from the hips. Depth of bend reflects depth of respect or appreciation. For added dramatic effect the feet may be moved tightly together. A very traditional Western bow involves a deeper bend combined with the (normally) right-leg pushing backwards or 'scraping' on the ground, hence the expression 'bowing and scraping'. The effect can be augmented by the bowler's hand pressing horizontally on the stomach, and the other arm extended, or sweeping extravagantly in a circular motion, made all the more dramatic if combined with removing a hat. Such behaviour is rare outside of Christmas pantomimes these days, however interestingly even in modern times you will see men slightly nodding their heads in an involuntary 'semi-bow' when meeting a person and wishing to show respect or admiration. As such, the small nod or bow of a head can be a clue to perceived seniority in relationships. Bowing has long been more significant and complex in Eastern cultures, where the gesture carries a similar deferential meaning, albeit it within more formal protocols and traditions. The fundamental body language of bowing is rooted in showing subservience by lowering one's gaze and body, literally putting the bowler at a lower level than the other person. Bowing remains significant in Japanese culture.

Curtsey/curtsy - The curtsey is the female equivalent of the male bow, and in their most extreme versions curtseying and bowing gestures are quite similar. A curtsey is a bend of the knees, combined with a slight bow of the head, and sometimes a lifting of the skirt or dress at each side, at knee-height, by both hands. This skirt-lift dates from olden times when this prevented a long skirt from touching wet or muddy ground. The female curtsey gesture survives in traditional situations such as meeting royalty, or ending a stage or dance performance, in

which you might see an older more flamboyant and deeper curtsey entailing one knee bending sideways and the other leg bending behind. Curtseying has effectively now been replaced by handshaking, although as with male bowing it is possible sometimes to see small head bows by women when meeting and shaking hands with someone regarded as superior or important.

Bowing and curtseying as conscious intentional gestures have effectively disappeared from Western behaviour, but importantly people's body language continues to give much smaller unconscious signals which can be linked to these old formal gestures and their meanings.

body language glossary

This is not an exhaustive collection of body language terminology - just a summary of the main and most interesting definitions.

absorbed actions - actions stimulated through unconscious [mirroring](#).

active listening - listening very attentively and empathizing and reflecting back understanding through body language and usually words too.

adaptors - small signals given when anxious or when behaving in a way that does not comfortably match the feelings, for example lip-biting or face-touching, which are self-comforting signals.

alerting/announcement gestures - indicating need to speak, for example raising a hand, or taking a breath and lifting the shoulders.

american leg cross - the 'American' or 'Figure-4' leg cross entails the supporting leg being crossed just above the knee by the ankle or lower calf of the crossing leg. This makes a figure-4 shape, hence the name. The posture is called the American leg cross because of its supposed popularity in the US compared to the UK, notably among males.

anthropology - the study of humankind in all respects - especially culturally, socially and in evolutionary terms, and how these key aspects inter-relate. The word anthropology is from Greek anthropos meaning human being. Anthropology, like psychology and ethnology and ethology, is a science which over-arches the study of body language, and provides useful (and for serious students, essential) context for understanding the reasons and purposes of body language. Anthropology has been studied one way or another for thousands of years and became established under that name in the 1500s. The Human Genome project, which basically mapped the human genetic code (started 1990, completed in 2003, and ongoing) is probably the largest anthropological study ever performed.

asymmetric/asymmetry - describing gestures or facial expressions, especially a smile, that are not symmetrical (equal on both sides), which tends to indicate incongruence or a mixed signal and not what it might initially seem to mean.

auto-contact - describing self-touching gestures and actions.

autonomic/automatic signals - effectively involuntary stress-induced physiological behaviours, such as crying, shaking, blushing, quickened pulse-rate, and in extreme cases retching, vomiting, fainting, etc. Involuntary in the sense that it is virtually impossible to control these signals because they are controlled by the very basic part of the brain responsible for our most basic bodily functions. Breathing rate is perhaps the exception, which while in many cases will speed as a physiological response to stress, can often be controlled and slowed or

deepened given suitable conscious effort.

back-channel signals - positive body language reactions to a speaker.

baton signals - gestures which reinforce the rhythm of speech.

barrier - describing signals in which the hands or arms or a table, or adjusting clothing, etc., form a defence or obstruction between two people, such as folded arms.

butress stance - weight bearing leg is straight, while the front leg is forward, usually with the foot pointing outwards from the body. Regarded as a signal of reluctance or readiness to depart.

cluster - term for a group of body language signals, which more reliably indicate meaning or mood than a single signal.

cognitive dissonance - conflicting understanding or feelings - cognition is understanding things through thought; dissonance is disharmony or conflict. This is a widely used term in psychology and the effect arises very commonly in relationships and communications. Conflicting body language signals can sometimes indicate this attitude or reaction in a person.

compliance - submissive behaviour, hence compliance signals or signs, which indicate this.

courtship - an old term for (typically) male-female relations from initial meeting through to going-out relationship stage. Courtship in olden times (broadly since the middle ages up until the mid-late 1900s) referred to quite formal steps of increasing familiarity between male and female, through to intimacy, perhaps with a little touching of hands or kissing, and lots of going out for walks and visits to the cinema or theatre, etc. Sex might not rear its scary head for weeks, months or years; and sometimes, especially if the female was from an elite or religiously obsessed family, not until the wedding night. Nowadays 'courtship' is a much speedier affair and among modern young people can be started, fully consummated and effectively forgotten in a matter of minutes.

denial - signals of denial effectively undo or contradict more conscious typically false or manufactured body language, thereby betraying true feeling or motive.

displacement - a stress signal typically prompted by suppression of natural reaction due to fear or other inhibition, for example biting fingernails, picking at finger(s) or thumb.

distraction - signalling prompted by stress, usually quite inappropriate to the needs of the situation, for example stretching and relaxing, or pausing to take a drink when an emergency arises.

emotional intelligence - also known as EQ, Emotional Intelligence is based on 'feeling intelligence' (rather than IQ - Intelligence Quotient - based on logical intelligence), and the capability to understand and communicate with others very empathically, which requires awareness of emotional behaviour and ability to deal with people sensitively. See [Emotional Intelligence](#).

emphatic/emphasizing gestures - gestures which reinforce the meaning of spoken words, e.g., jabbing fingers, weighing hands.

erogenous zone - any part of the human body particularly sensitive to touching and sexual arousal - the word erogenous first appeared in the late 1800s which suggests when the effect was first analysed and recorded in any serious sense. The word erogenous derives from Eros, the Greek god of love (Cupid is Roman), from which the word erotic also derives. Erogenous zones contain high concentration of nerve endings and are significant in flirting and sex. Aside

from the obvious genital areas and bottoms and breasts, erogenous zones include necks, inner side of arms and wrists, armpits and lips. Incidentally the G in G-spot is named after Ernst Grafenberg (1881-1957) a German-born gynaecological doctor and scientist who as well as being an expert on the female orgasm, was first to invent and commercially market a IUD (intrauterine device or coil) for female birth control.

ethnology - the study of different ethnic people and their differences and relationships. Ethnology is a branch of anthropology, concerned with ethnic effects, and where this involves behaviour it certainly relates to body language. The word ethnology is derived from Greek ethnos meaning nation. The establishment of the science and word ethnology is credited to Slovakian/Austrian Adam Franz Kollar (1718-1783), a nobleman, professor and librarian who became a Court Councilor for the Habsburg Monarchy of the Kingdom of Hungary, as it once was. The modern study and awareness of ethnology is arguably hampered by sensitivities around racism. Ethnic differences between people obviously exist, and ironically where over-sensitivity to racism and equality obstructs debate, society's understanding of these issues remains clouded and confused.

ethology - ethology is primarily the science of animal behaviour, but increasingly extends to human behaviour and social organization. The word ethology first appeared in English in the late 1800s, derived from the Greek word ethos meaning character or disposition. Ethology became properly established during the early 1900s. Austrian zoologist and 1973 Nobel Prizewinner Konrad Lorenz (1903-89) was a founding figure. Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*, is an ethologist. So is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Where ethology considers animal evolution and communications, it relates strongly to human body language. Charles Darwin's work pioneered much ethological thinking.

eye flash - a sudden direct glance to attract attention or warn, usually followed by some other more specific signal.

eyebrow flash - quickly raising and lowering both eyebrows - typically in greetings, recognition, acknowledgement, or surprise. An eyebrow flash can therefore also be a signal of positive interest.

eye shrug - upwards eye-roll signalling frustration.

face frame - framing the face with the hands to hold or attract listeners' attention.

haptics - the study of human touch, from the Greek word haptikos, meaning able to touch. The word haptics in this sense entered the English language in the 1800s, which indicates when human touch began to be a serious area of study.

hybrid expression - a term apparently originated by Charles Darwin, it refers to a facial expression which combines two seemingly different or opposing meanings, for example a smile with a head-turn away from the person the smile is meant for. Hybrid expressions provide further emphasis of the need to avoid reading single signals. Combinations of signals and context are necessary, especially to make sense of hybrid expressions which contain different meanings.

illustrative gesture - gestures which shape or describe the physical dimensions of something by using the hands in the air.

index finger - first finger of the hand - usually the most dominant and dexterous finger, hence used mostly in pointing gestures.

kine - an obscure term describing a single body language signal (devised by body language

expert Dr Ray Birdwhistell, c.1952, from the longer term kinesics).

kinesics - the technical term for body language. **Kinesics** is pronounced 'kineesicks' with stress on the 'ee'). The word kinesics was first used in English in this sense in the 1950s, from the Greek word kinesis, meaning motion.

labial tractors - a wonderful term for the muscles around the mouth. The word labial in phonetics means closure or part closure of the mouth, and additionally refers to the resulting vowel sounds produced, like w, oo, etc.

leakage - leakage signals are the small signs which are most difficult to control or mask, and which therefore offer clues even when someone is generally in good control of their outgoing body language signals.

mask/masking - using body language, usually intentionally, to deceive others as to true feelings or motives.

metronome/metronomic signals - these are any rhythmic tappings or movements which indicate a readiness or self-prompting to speak or take action- a term devised by body language expert Judi James.

micro-gestures - tiny body language 'leakage' signals, often unconsciously sent and interpreted, more likely to be seen and reacted to unconsciously rather than consciously, unless concentrating determinedly.

mime/miming gestures - gestures used consciously to convey a specific message, such as extending the thumb and little finger by the ear to say "Phone me," or wiping imaginary sweat from the brow to express relief after a crisis subsides.

mirroring - the synchronizing or matching of body language (and speech characteristics), usually between two people, which helps build feelings of trust and empathy. [Mirroring](#) works like this because similar signals produce unconscious feelings of affirmation. When a person's signals are mirrored the unconscious mind thinks, "This person is like me and agrees with the way I am. I like this person because we are similar, and he/she likes me too." See [NLP \(Neuro-Linguistic Programming\)](#), and [Empathy](#). Pacing refers to the mirroring of someone's speed of movements.

NLP/Neuro-linguistic programming - a branch of psychology developed in the 1960s which combines language, body movement and thought to optimise self-control and development, and relationships and communications with others. NLP research has fuelled much of the analytical aspects of modern popular body language, notably [mirroring](#) and [eye movements](#).

palm - inside surface of the hand - significant in body language because an open palm has for thousands of years indicated that no weapon is concealed, which survives as perhaps a genetically inherited signal of peace, cooperation, submissiveness, etc.

phallus/phallic - phallus means penis, from the ancient Greek word phallos of the same meaning. Phallic refers to something which looks like or represents a penis, often called a phallic symbol. Phallic symbols are prevalent in psychology and aspects of flirting or sexual body language. The female equivalent term is a yonic symbol, from yoni, Hindu for vulva and a symbolic circular stone representing divine procreation. Yoni was originally an old Sanskrit word, meaning source or womb.

physiognomy - an obscure yet related concept to body language. Physiognomy refers to facial features and expressions which indicate the person's character or nature, or ethnic origin. The

word physiognomy is derived from medieval Latin, and earlier Greek (phusiognominia), meaning (the art or capability of) judging a person's nature from his/her facial features and expressions.

physiology - the branch of biology concerned with how living organisms function, notably parts of the human body.

physiological signals - body language produced by the unconscious basic brain which controls bodily functions, which in body language can be signals such as sweating, blushing, breathlessness, yawning, weeping, feeling faint, nauseous, repulsion, etc.

primary emotions - first identified by Charles Darwin, typically represented as happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, fear, surprise, and linked to [universal facial expressions and recognition](#).

proxemics - the technical term for the personal space aspect of body language. The word and much of the fundamental theory was devised by Edward Twitchell Hall, an American anthropologist in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The word is Hall's adaptation of the word proximity, meaning closeness or nearness.

pseudo-infantile gestures - gestures of childlike vulnerability, often made to avert attack, attract sympathy, or to induce feelings of compassion, attention, etc.

pupil - the round black centre of the eye which enlarges or contracts to let more or less light into the eye. The pupil generally enlarges (dilates) in the dark, and contracts in brightness. Enlarged pupils are also associated with desire and allure. Enlarged pupils are not a symptom of smoking drugs as commonly believed. This is probably a confusion arising from the fact that conditions are relatively dark when such judgements are made.

rictus - a fixed grimace, usually resulting from shock or nervousness. From Latin word meaning 'open mouth'.

scissor stance - standing leg cross. Various meanings very dependant on context and other signals.

self-motivating gestures - gestures signalling attempting to increase mental work-rate or activity, like tapping the head repeatedly or making circular motions with the hands, as if winding the body up.

show - (noun) - a 'show' is term recently adopted by body language commentators referring to a body language signal. The term is slang really, not technical. For terminology to become casually 'hip' in this way reflects the mainstream appeal of body language as a subject.

steeping - forming the fingers into a a pointed roof shape, often signalling elevated thinking or arrogance.

submission/submissive - describing body language which signals inferiority feelings towards another person. May be conscious and formal as in bowing, or unconscious as in slightly lowering the head and stance.

synchronizing - a technical term equating to mirroring or matching of body language between two people. Synchronizing is technically more appropriate since it naturally includes audible signals (voice pace and pitch, etc), whereas the mirroring term normally makes people think of visual signals only. The principles of synchronized body language definitely include audible signals in addition to physical visual signs. See [mirroring](#).

tell - (noun) - a 'tell' - a slang term similar to 'a show' recently adopted by body language

commentators which means a signal.

tie signs/signals - signals between lovers or intimate couples which discreetly convey messages to each other and which are not usually intended for anyone else.

body language references sources and books

Some of the older books listed here have since been republished by different publishers.

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The author Roger E Axtell writes entertainingly and informatively about international body language and behaviours.

other audible signals

This section is not particularly scientific. It's more for interest and to make a general point:

Body language and the spoken words themselves do not provide all the clues, there are others.

Other **audible signals** (apart from the words themselves) also give lots of clues about feeling, mood, motive and personality.

Words themselves convey their own meaning, which is another subject, not least when we think about vocabulary, grammar, word-choice, etc. But what about all the other noises and silences from people's mouths?

Other audible signals which are not generally regarded as part of body language or non-verbal communications include for example:

- pitch (the constant musical note of the voice)

- pace (speed or rate of talking)

- volume - from whispering to shouting

- volume variation (how volume changes in phrases or longer passages of speech)

- intonation and 'musicality' (how the pitch changes according to what is being said)

- timbre (quality or sound of the voice, and how this changes)

- emphasis (of syllables, words or phrases)

- projection (where the voice is being projected to - for example lots of projection, as if talking to a big group, or none, as if mumbling)

- pauses, silences and hesitation

- 'erm's and 'erh's

- gasps, tuts, and other intakes and exhalations of breath

- habits, such as "I think...", "You know...", "Like...",

- laughing and giggling (which can be interspersed within speech, or separate signals, such as nervous laughter)

and all sorts of other audible/vocal effects, including:

- accents and dialects

- accent affectations ('received' or conditioned, false or exaggerated - permanent or temporary, for example social climbers, and ordinary people who have a 'telephone voice', or a voice for talking to authority figures)

- mistakes (spoonerisms, malapropisms, mispronunciation)

- drying up, being lost for words, stuttering (as distinct from a stammer)

- overtalking (feeling the need to fill a silence)

- interrupting

- holding back (someone has something to say but isn't saying it)

- coughs and grunts (some types of coughing suggest something other than a tickly throat)

- belching and burping

- whistling

- tongue clicking, teeth-sucking, raspberries, etc

Technically these signals are not body language or non-verbal communications, but all of these

sounds (and silences) are quite different from the spoken words, and they can all convey more and/or different meaning compared to the spoken words themselves.

All of this audible signalling happens for a purpose. We might not easily know what the purpose is, but being aware of it is the start of being able to understand it better, in others, and possibly also in ourselves.

Commonly the more noticeable unnecessary signals are embellishments or defensiveness - a kind of showing-off or protection.

Other aspects can be more subtle indicators of social background or aspiration, and thereby of relationship and attitude towards other people.

These other audible signals represent a big and complex area which seems yet to have been researched and analysed to the extent that body language has. Also cultural differences are potentially influential, which hinders translation and specific interpretation.

Despite this, initially simply being aware of these signals will begin to shape an appreciation of their significance, and in many cases their underlying meanings.

[Johari](#) enthusiasts might enjoy seeking feedback and asking others about what their own signals mean, that is if you/they are aware of the behaviours.

Certain principles of [graphology](#) (handwriting analysis) are helpful in understanding how people use words and language in a wider sense. The style and nature of our written and vocal expressions inevitably provide a reflection of our feelings and personality.

I am grateful to Sandra McCarthy for her help in producing this guide to body language.

see also

[Transactional Analysis](#)

[Empathy](#) - including [Levels of Listening](#)

[Dating and matchmaking](#)

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