

Part I
**Getting Started with Body
Language**



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In this part ...

- ✓ Find out more about the origins of body language and how it's evolved.
- ✓ Discover how body language reveals people's attitudes, beliefs and emotions.

Chapter 1

Defining Body Language

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding out how body language speaks
 - ▶ Gesturing for a purpose
 - ▶ Understanding what you're communicating
-

In the big scheme of things, the scientific study of body language is a fairly recent phenomenon, with documented research covering only the last 80 years or so. In order to better understand the thoughts and emotions behind human behaviour, psychologists, zoologists and social anthropologists have conducted detailed investigations into the use and components of body language – part of the larger family known as non-verbal behaviour.

When you take the time to focus on your own and others' physical movements and expressions, you can spot and interpret unspoken thoughts, feelings and intentions that reveal more about a person than that individual may want you to know. You can even identify some people by a particular gesture or expression such as pursed lips, swaying hips, fiddling fingers or an arched brow.

By observing people's body language you can detect their inner state. Are they despondent, in turmoil or feeling cool, calm and collected? Through a twitch of the mouth, flare of a nostril or change of posture, people unconsciously reveal their thoughts, intentions and feelings. In this chapter, you begin discovering how to interpret non-verbal language and you explore the

gestures and actions that reveal attitudes, thoughts and intentions. You also have a quick dip into some of the research into this silent language and glance at the similarities and differences within non-verbal behaviour across the globe. In addition, you find out how you can use gestures to enhance your relationships and improve your communications.

Discovering How Body Language Conveys Messages

When cave-dwellers discovered how to decipher grunts and to create words to convey their messages, their lives became a lot more complex. Before verbal communication, they relied on their bodies to communicate. Their simple brains informed their faces, torsos and limbs. They instinctively knew that fear, surprise, love, hunger and annoyance were different attitudes requiring different movements and facial expressions. Emotions were less complex then, and so were gestures.

Speech is a relatively new introduction to the communication process and is used to persuade and influence others and to convey information, including facts and data. Body language, on the other hand, has been around forever. Without relying on the spoken word for confirmation, the body's movements also persuade and influence others by conveying feelings, thoughts and intentions. Like it or not, your body speaks through signs and signals.

According to research conducted by Professor Albert Mehrabian at the University of California, Los Angeles,

55 per cent of the message in face-to-face communication is relayed through body language when the message contains emotional content. You only have to experience any of the following gestures or expressions to know how true is the adage, 'Actions speak louder than words':

- ✓ Someone raising her fist to you
- ✓ A warm embrace
- ✓ A finger wagging in your face
- ✓ A child's pout
- ✓ A lover's frown
- ✓ A parent's look of worry
- ✓ An exuberant smile
- ✓ Your hand placed over your heart

[Figure 1-1](#) shows two different gestures - one conveying a positive message and the other a negative one.



Figure 1-1: His gesture is aggressive while hers is protective.

Creating an impression within moments

You can tell within the first seven seconds of meeting someone how she feels about herself by the expression on her face and the way she moves her body. Whether she knows it or not, she's transmitting messages through her gestures and actions.

You walk into a room of strangers and, from their stance, movements and expressions, you receive messages about their feelings, moods, thoughts and intentions. Look at the teenage girl standing in the corner. From her slouching shoulders, her lowered head and the way her hands fidget over her stomach, you can tell that this is not a happy camper.

Another young woman in this room of strangers is standing amongst a group of contemporaries. Her eyes twinkle, she throws back her head as she laughs, her hands and arms move with ease and openness and her weight is evenly distributed between her feet, which are placed beneath her, hip width apart. This woman is projecting an image of self-confidence and joie de vivre that draws people to her.

Like it or not, how you position your head, shoulders, torso, arms, hands, legs and feet, and how your eyes, mouth, fingers and toes move, tell an observer more about your state of being than any words you can say.

Early observations about body language

Before the twentieth century, only a few forays were made into identifying and analysing movement and gesture. The first known work exclusively addressing body language is John Bulwer's *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand*, published in 1644. By the nineteenth century, directors and teachers of drama and pantomime were instructing their actors and students how to convey emotion and attitude through movement and gesture.

In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin explores the connection between humans, apes and monkeys. These species use similar facial expressions, inherited from a common ancestor, to express specific emotions. Out of Darwin's work grew an interest in *ethology* - the study of animal behaviour.

In the late 1960s, Desmond Morris created a sensation when his interpretations of human behaviour, based on ethological research, were published in *The Naked Ape* and *Manwatching*. Further publications and media presentations continue to reveal how much our non-verbal behaviour is based on our animal nature.

Transmitting messages unconsciously

In addition to your ability to consciously choose precise gestures and actions to convey a particular message, your body sends out signals without your awareness. Dilated or contracted pupils and the unconscious movements of your hands and feet indicate an inner emotion that you may wish to conceal. For example, if you notice that the pupils of someone's eyes are dilated, and you know that she's not under the influence of drugs, you'd be correct in assuming that whatever she's looking at is giving her pleasure. If the pupils are contracted, the opposite is true.



While body language speaks volumes, be careful when ascribing feelings and attitudes based solely on non-verbal behaviour. Individual signals can be easily overlooked or misidentified if they're taken out of their social context. Look for clusters of gestures and expressions that involve several parts of the body. Also observe breathing patterns to gauge someone's internal state. For more about how your breathing patterns influence the way you behave, have a look at *Communication Skills For Dummies* by Elizabeth

Kuhnke (Wiley). At times, you may want to conceal your thoughts and feelings, so you behave in a way that you believe hides your true emotions. And then, wouldn't you know it, out pops a giveaway gesture, barely perceptible to the untrained eye, sending a signal that all's not what it appears. Don't kid yourself that no one notices. Just because these micro-gestures and -expressions are fleeting doesn't mean that they don't send powerful messages.



In the 1970s, Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen developed the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) to measure, describe and interpret facial behaviours. This instrument is designed to gauge even the slightest facial muscle contractions and determine what category or categories each facial action fits into. It detects what the naked eye can't and is used by the police, film animators and researchers of human behaviour.

According to research conducted by Professor Mehrabian, when people are discussing feelings and emotions in a face-to-face setting and an incongruity exists between the words themselves and the way you deliver them, 7 per cent of the message received is conveyed through your words, 38 per cent is revealed through your vocal quality and a whopping 55 per cent of your message is expressed through your gestures, expression and posture. Mehrabian's premise is that your non-verbal behaviours are directly tied to your feelings, whether you're conscious of the connection or not. Although sceptics contest Mehrabian's figures, the point remains that body language and vocal quality significantly contribute to the meaning of the message.



Gunther is the CFO of a global corporation and is a charming, successful and popular man. In addition, he is used to getting what he wants, when he wants it. You know the time has come to step lively when Gunther points his index finger in your direction, raises his chin, lifts his eyebrows and barks out a rapid-fire command, even if he has a smile on his face. For more about how smiling informs communication, flip to [Chapter 6](#).

Substituting gestures for the spoken word

Sometimes a gesture is more effective in conveying a message than any words you can say. Signals expressing love and support, pleasure and pain, fear, loathing and disappointment are clear to decipher and require few, if any, words for clarification. Approval, complicity or insults are commonly communicated without a sound passing between lips. When you frown, smile or sneer you don't need words to clarify your meaning.

When words aren't enough or the word mustn't be spoken out loud, you can gesture to convey your meaning. For example:

- ✓ Putting your index finger in front of your mouth while at the same time pursing your lips is a common signal for silence.
- ✓ Putting your hand up sharply with your fingers held tightly together and your palm facing forward means 'Stop!'
- ✓ Winking at another person hints at a little secret between the two of you.

- ✓ Putting up your middle finger is an obscene gesture conveying contempt.

[Figures 1-2](#) and [1-3](#) illustrate these behaviours.



Figure 1-2: She's sending a clear message without saying a word.



Figure 1-3: Wide eyes, open mouths and hands to head and face gestures tell you that these people have witnessed something shocking.



Nick and Holly were involved in a tough business negotiation. At one point during the meeting, Nick started to give away too much information. Holly calmly placed her index finger over her lips while resting her chin on her thumb. This was a sign to Nick for him to listen more and talk less.

Gesturing to illustrate what you're saying

When you describe an object, you frequently use gestures to illustrate what the object is like. Your listener finds it easier to understand what you're saying when your body creates a picture of the object rather than relying on words alone. If you're describing a round object, for example a ball, you may hold your hands in front of yourself with your fingers arched upward and your thumbs pointing down. When describing a square building, you may draw vertical and horizontal lines with a flat hand, cutting through the space like a knife. If you're telling someone about a turbulent ride on a boat or plane, your arms and hands may beat up and down in rhythmic fashion. You may hold your arms out wide when describing a large object and hold your fingers close together when you're illustrating a small point (see [Figure 1-4](#)). The point is that gesturing is a practical way to convey visual information.



Figure 1-4: Her tight, contained gesture is describing something small.



Because some people are more comfortable processing information through the visual channel, illustrate your messages through gestures. This helps create a clear picture and adds energy to your voice. If you want to help a blind person experience what you're describing, hold her hands in the appropriate position.



Lotsie is a dedicated traveller and frequently speaks to students about her adventures. As she describes her climb up Mount Kilimanjaro she acts out those moments when the air is so thin that she's hardly able to breathe and when she struggles to put one foot in front of the other. She mimes leaning on her walking stick, bending over with the weight of her equipment, gasping for air and pausing between shuffled steps as she puts one foot in front of the other. Her listeners share her pain and determination through her gestures, posture and facial expressions.

Physically supporting the spoken word

Appropriate gestures add emphasis to your voice, clarify your meaning and give impact to your message. Whether you're sending out signals of interest or signs of disgust, when your body movements reflect your emotions you help your listener understand how you're feeling.

In addition to reinforcing your message, specific hand signals reflect your desire to communicate clearly. Watch well-schooled politicians standing at the podium. See how their hands move in a precise, controlled manner

(see [Figure 1-5](#)) - no wasted gestures, just those specific ones that tell the tale they want you to believe.



Figure 1-5: This precise chopping gesture demonstrates firmness and conviction.



When you're making a formal presentation, use illustrative gestures to help your audience remember the points you're making.



During the introduction to your presentation, as you establish the points to be covered, list them separately on your fingers. You may hold your fingers up in front of you, or touch them individually on one hand with a finger from your other hand as you say the point. When talking about point one in your presentation, point to the first finger, or gesture to it; when you reach point two, point or gesture to your second finger, and so on. This technique helps both you and your listener focus on the subject and stay on track.

Note: Many British and American people begin counting with their index finger. Many Europeans begin counting with their thumb. See [Chapter 15](#) for more on cultural differences in body language.

Experienced lawyers, celebrities and anyone else who takes their public persona seriously strive to emphasise their messages through considered movements, gestures and facial expressions. By carefully timing, focusing and controlling their actions, they court the people they want by using open, welcoming gestures and dismiss others with a flick of the wrist.



When you're giving bad news and want to soften the blow, adapt your body language to reflect

empathy. Move close to the person you're comforting and tilt your body towards hers (see [Figure 1-6](#)). You may even touch her on the hand or arm or place your arm around her shoulder if she doesn't object.



Figure 1-6: The woman on the right is expressing her care and concern for the other woman who appears depressed.

Revealing feelings, attitudes and beliefs

You don't have to tell people how you're feeling for them to know. Look at someone deep in thought. As she leans forward, looks downward, wrinkling her forehead in contemplation and rests her chin on her hand, she's replicating Rodin's sculpture, *The Thinker*. Equally so, a child throwing a tantrum with stomping feet, clenched fists and a screwed up face is letting you know that she's not happy. The body says it all.

Think of your body as if it were a movie screen. The information you project derives from your inner life of thoughts, feelings and intentions. Your physical body is the vehicle onto which the information is displayed. Whether you're anxious, excited, happy or sad, your movements and expressions tell your tale. Here are some examples:

- ✓ People who feel threatened or unsure of themselves touch their bodies as a means of self-comfort or self-restraint. Gestures such as rubbing their foreheads, crossing their arms and holding or rubbing their fingers in front of their mouths provide comfort and protection (see [Figure 1-7](#)).
- ✓ People who perform specific gestures reserved for religious rituals reveal their beliefs and values. Upon entering a Catholic church, the congregation dip their fingers into holy water and cross themselves. Before entering the home of many Jewish people, you may touch the mezuzah by the front door. Muslims bow in prayer facing east. By performing these gestures, people are demonstrating their respect for the culture, its traditions and values. See [Chapter 15](#) for more about cultural differences and body language.

- ✓ People in a state of elation often breathe in deeply and gesture outwards with expanded arms. Pictures of winning sportspeople frequently show them in the open position with their arms extended, their heads thrown back and their mouths and eyes opened in ecstasy.
- ✓ Footballers who miss the penalty kick and city traders who get their numbers wrong often walk dejectedly, with their heads down and their hands clasped behind their necks. This hand position is a comforting gesture and the head facing downwards shows the individual's despair.
- ✓ People who are despondent, or feeling down and depressed, reveal their feelings by the slouch in their step, their drooping heads, limp lips and downward-cast eyes. Positive people, on the other hand, reveal their feelings with an upright stance, a bounce in their step, lifted lips and eyes that twinkle with liveliness and engagement.




- ✓  Not every bent head signals depression. Sometimes it just means that you're reflecting, thinking or absorbing information. If you're thinking hard for example, your head most likely rests in your hand or on your fingertips unless you're pacing the room as you consider your options, in which case you still might rest your chin on your thumb as you stroke your cheeks and lips with your index finger. You can find out more about body language and mental states in *Persuasion & Influence For Dummies* by Elizabeth Kuhnke and *Neuro-Linguistic Programming For Dummies* by Romilla Ready and Kate Burton (both Wiley).



Figure 1-7: Both men are holding back and seeking comfort.



Kate's mother is 94 and lives in a nursing home. Often, when Kate visits her, the elderly woman doesn't recognise her. While Kate is used to this situation, she still feels sad as she considers the passage of time and family relationships. When she speaks of her mother her voice is low, her eyes are downcast and her shoulders slightly slumped. Kate's own daughter, Rosie, recently had a baby girl, Kate's first grandchild. As Kate speaks of little Sienna, her eyes sparkle, her voice lifts and her chest expands with happiness. Kate's different postures and facial expressions project the differences in her feelings.

Holding your hands over or near your heart, as shown in [Figure 1-8](#), is an expression of how much something means to you. You often see this gesture when people give and receive compliments.



Figure 1-8: The hands over the heart, the tilted head and the open smile indicate happiness and appreciation.

Noticing your own body language

My husband suggested that people may only demonstrate body language when someone else is around to see and respond to it. I found that an interesting thought and retired to my office to consider the implications on my own postures and gestures. As I sat at my desk reflecting on what he said, I noticed I was leaning back in my chair with my head tilted upwards, one arm folded over my body supporting the elbow of my other arm. My chin was resting lightly on my thumb as my index finger gently stroked my cheek. I couldn't help but think of the question: 'Do falling trees in the forest make a noise if no one's around to hear it?'

Examining Key Types of Gesture

Humans are blessed with the ability to create a wide variety of gestures and expressions from the top of the head to the tips of the toes. Gestures can show intention, such as leaning forward just before rising out of a chair, and no intention, such as crossing arms and legs. Certain gestures, frequently referred to as signature gestures, are acts you perform and by which you are identified. Others are displacement gestures: you perform them for no reason other than to shift some energy. Local customs call for specific gestures and other gestures are universal, performed and interpreted the same way across the globe.

Unintentional gestures

Unintentional gestures are types of body language that inhibit your ability to act. They hold you back from speaking and make it hard for your body to budge. As opposed to intentional gestures – those movements you specifically choose to support your spoken message – unintentional gestures usually surface without conscious thought.

Examples of unintentional gestures are:

- ✓ Folded arms
- ✓ Lips pressed together
- ✓ A hand or finger in front of the mouth
- ✓ Crossed legs

When your arms are folded you can't strike out. When your lips are sealed your thoughts remain silent. When your legs are crossed you can't run away. These gestures prevent you from moving and speaking, which may not be such a bad thing. Standing or sitting with your legs crossed is no position to take if you want to get somewhere quickly. The scissor stance is a prime example of a gesture that keeps you in your place. One leg is crossed over the other, rendering you immobile (see [Figure 1-9](#)). When someone adopts this position, you know she's staying put.



Figure 1-9: Crossed arms and legs, fingers cupping the mouth and chin, and a side-ways look tell you she's holding something back.



Because the scissor stance contains no sign of impatience, the gesture can come across as submissive. You take up less space as you make yourself smaller. Men seldom adopt this stance while women frequently do. Physiological reasons make the pose more or less comfortable for the two genders. People who move freely, not locking themselves into awkward physical positions, are considered to be more dominant than those who are constrained and hesitant in their movements.

Signature gestures

A signature gesture is one that you become known by, a common gesture that you perform in a particular way. Some examples are:

- ✓ Twirling your hair around your finger
- ✓ Pointing your finger
- ✓ Sticking your tongue out
- ✓ Patting your eyebrows
- ✓ Stroking your throat
- ✓ Winking

You provide clues about your personality through your signature gestures. They set you apart from others and draw their attention to you.

Red carpet sweetheart Shailene Woodley understands the value of having a gesture to add to her brand. One of the originators of the sassy hand on the hip photo pose, she has replaced that ubiquitous gesture with a double-handed Hang Ten pose, also described as Cowabunga Hands by *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Extend your thumbs

and little fingers on each hand while folding your middle fingers into your palms, and bingo – you look like a rock star. You could also adopt Miley Cyrus’s go-to signature pose by quirking, commonly known as sticking out your tongue. Watch Andy Murray after a big win on the court. The British number one tennis player points both index fingers skyward and makes a little head nod as if he were communicating with someone above. Sticking with the tennis champions, Rafael Nadal is recognised by his signature gesture of tugging at the back of his shorts just before serving. When the Seattle Mariners’ closing pitcher Fernando Rodney saves a game, he points to the sky as if shooting an arrow in a movement similar to Usain Bolt’s ‘To Di World’ gesture (see the nearby sidebar for details).

Celebrating victory with a lightning bolt

After Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt picked up gold at the Beijing Olympics in 2008 he adopted a pose that’s become synonymous with the star athlete. The gesture, which Bolt calls ‘To Di World’, is now referred to colloquially as ‘bolting’. To adopt this pose, you spread your feet, lean backwards, cock your right arm while you extend your left one forward and point both index fingers towards the sky. Although then-International Olympic Committee boss Jacques Rogge branded it ‘disrespectful’ and ‘showboating’, Bolt continues to celebrate his victories with this gesture. During his visit to Jamaica in March 2012, Prince Harry received world media attention when he and Bolt adopted the pose together on a Jamaican running track. Bolt has incorporated the pose into his Puma sponsorship campaign as well as in a commercial promoting tourism in his homeland.

The late Diana, Princess of Wales’s most vividly remembered signature gesture was her lowered head and eyes looking upward from beneath her lashes and brows. This look was so closely identified with the princess that it’s become known as the Shy Di look.