

How to Gesture Effectively

By Lenny Laskowski

Gestures are reflections of every speaker's individual personality. What is right for one speaker may not be right for another; however, the following six rules apply to anyone who seeks to become a dynamic effective speaker.

1. Respond naturally to what you think, feel, and see. - It is natural for you to gesture, and it is unnatural for you not to. If you inhibit your impulse to gesture, you will probably become tense.

2. Create the condition for gesturing, not the gesture. - When you speak, you should be very involved in communicating-not thinking about your hands. Your gestures should be motivated by the content of your presentation.

3. Suit the action to the word and the occasion. - Your visual and verbal messages must function as partners in communicating the same thought or feeling. Every gesture you make should be purposeful and reflective of your words so the audience will note only the effect, not the gesture itself. Do not overdo the gesturing. You will draw the listener away from your message. Young audiences are usually attracted to a speaker who uses vigorous gestures, but older, more conservative groups may feel irritated or threatened by a speaker whose physical actions are overwhelming.

4. Make your gestures convincing. - Your gestures should be lively and distinct if they are to convey the intended impressions. Effective gestures are vigorous enough to be convincing yet slow enough and broad enough to be clearly visible without being overpowering.

5. Make your gestures smooth and well timed. - Every gesture has three parts:

The Approach - Your body begins to move in anticipation.

The Stroke - The gesture itself.

The Return - This brings your body back to a balanced posture.

The flow of a gesture - The approach, the stroke, the return-must be smoothly executed so that only the stroke is evident to the audience. While it is advisable to practice gesturing, do not try to memorize your every move. This makes your gesturing stilted and ineffective. The last rule is perhaps the most important but also the hardest.

6. Make natural, spontaneous gesturing a habit. - The first step in becoming adept at gesturing is to determine what, if anything, you are doing now. The best way to discover this is to videotape yourself. The camcorder is completely truthful and unforgiving. If you want to become a better speaker, you need to make the camcorder your best friend.

Videotape yourself and identify your bad habits, then work at eliminating them, one at a time. You will need to continue to record yourself and evaluate your progress if you expect to eliminate all your distracting mannerisms.

To improve gestures, practice - but never during a speech. Practice gesturing while speaking informally to friends, family member, and coworkers.