

How to be an Effective Speaker
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Body language

I always think a great orator convinces us, not by force of reasoning, but because he is visibly enjoying the beliefs which he wants us to accept.

W. B. YEATS

So far I have emphasized the importance of planning and structuring a talk, but you will never make a successful speaker if you only have a good speech; in fact you could even be an effective speaker without a good speech. Some speakers can spend so long searching for the exact word, the imaginative example, or the eloquent turn of phrase that they fail to pay attention to those vital qualities which will ensure their success in front of an audience.

Audiences are not impressed with words. They are impressed with:

- Enthusiasm
- Vitality
- Sincerity

How to make a good first impression

Even before you open your mouth, your audience will have made several assumptions about you and, in the light of their own experience and prejudices, you will have scored plus or minus points. If you think this is unfair, consider your own internal conversation as you sit in a railway station or an airport lounge — aren't you assessing and criticizing everyone you see? We all do it as individuals, to everyone we come in contact with, and audiences as a whole are no different; they are curious about the speaker who will be part of their lives for the duration of the talk.

You never have a second opportunity to make a first impression, so whether you are entering a room for an interview, an informal meeting or an annual conference, your audiences will assess you the moment they can see you.

Smile!

Human beings have a very simple way of showing friendship, and yet judging by how little it is used, you would think it was very difficult and very expensive. Smiling at your audience says **I am happy to be here and I am glad you are here too.** Now I know that you are probably feeling the exact opposite, but that is the very reason why you should smile.

Why let everyone know you are feeling nervous? No one can



"No one can see your pounding heart or churning stomach or your dry mouth, so why reveal on your face the turmoil that's going on inside your body?"

see your pounding heart or churning stomach or your dry mouth, so why reveal on your face the turmoil that's going on inside your body? If you think that smiling is inappropriate for your position or your subject, reconsider your view because I am sure your audience would like to welcome a friendly rather than an unfriendly speaker. Even an undertaker smiles in sympathy. Remember you don't need an ear to ear grin, only an **I am happy to be here and glad you are here too** expression.

How to make an entrance

You have fixed your "I am happy" expression on your face. You enter the interview room, lecture hall or meeting venue and you walk confidently to a chair or podium. You are making a first impression so let your body language say, "Here is a worthwhile and interesting person." In a small group, you will probably be shaking hands, always remembering to maintain eye contact and murmuring pleasantries about the weather, the baseball score or your/their journey, as you sit down. If you are speaking at a large conference center, you will know what to expect because you will have rehearsed your entrance already. (See Chapter 10, Visiting the Site.)

Once settled, you can look around and take a few quiet, deep breaths. Don't look at your cards or even touch them. No amount of silent rehearsing will help you make a better speech at this stage. Instead concentrate on what is happening about you and listen to the other speakers. For many people these final few moments before they speak are the worst, but try not to let yourself be controlled by feelings of panic—you should be well rehearsed and looking forward to giving a good performance.

Why is body language important?

However you look or move, you will be giving off signs to your audience as to your inner feelings. Being aware of your particular mannerisms and nervous gestures enables you to correct them and present a confident unself-conscious image.

In spite of my experience, I am always apprehensive standing in front of an audience, but people tell me that I look totally in control and relaxed. In fact I am in control, but I am *not* relaxed; that might sound uncomfortable to you as maybe you are aiming to be a casual, informal and unpretentious speaker. Let me remind you of the line attributed to Mark Twain. "It takes three weeks to write and perfect a good impromptu remark." I believe that nobody is born a good speaker and that you have to work at your body language to *appear* relaxed and natural in the same way as Mark Twain worked on what appeared to be a throwaway line.

The perils of bad body language

If your inner panic shows itself in your fidgety feet and fiddling fingers, your audience will feel uncomfortable because they want and expect you to be in control. In addition, they will not have confidence in you, your ideas or your product or service. They will not believe in you, they won't listen well and will quickly forget what you have said. If you look confident and believe in yourself, you will have credibility and your listeners will be eager to hear what you have to say.

As you stand facing your audience, I don't think for one moment that you will feel cool, calm and confident—I expect you will be suffering anything from mild apprehension to abject terror, depending on the extent of your experience. At this stage don't worry about your *feelings*—the next chapter covers how to cope with nerves—for at this point you want simply to *look* cool, calm and confident. The rest of this chapter shows you how you can achieve this.

Eye communication

I could see it in his eyes

When I am training managers in effective speaking, I have to be very careful not to overrun my time when we reach the session on eye contact, because I am convinced that it is one of

the most important factors towards creating a good speaker — and I love talking about the subject.

Why is it important?

Looking at someone demonstrates that you are interested in them. Consider some of the common phrases about people in love — “she only had eyes for him” — “they couldn’t take their eyes off each other” If you see two people standing together and talking, you can judge how intimate they are by observing the extent of their eye communication.

People can also use their eyes to give messages of uninterest. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to talk to someone at a party who is looking constantly over your shoulder and around the room.

Eye contact also denotes authority. Powerful people give more eye contact than those who are less confident.

We say that he has a shifty look when someone avoids looking at us, but we also tell our children that staring is rude. Somewhere in between a shifty look and a stare is the correct eye contact, and it varies according to the degree of intimacy in our relationships. With eye contact, we can demonstrate our concern, love, dislike, boredom, disdain, even hatred — “if looks could kill.” **We express our emotions through our eyes.**

Where is the audience?

I’m sure you have seen speakers who stare at the ceiling throughout their talk as if their script were written up there in large print. For a variation they glance at the floor or out of the window to an imaginary listener sitting outside.

Some speakers follow the ludicrous advice, sometimes given to novice public speakers, to find a friendly face in the audience and speak to it. After a few minutes of continuous scrutiny, the poor victim is asking himself, why me? The rest of the audience is feeling excluded from what appears to be an exclusive monologue; finding a friendly face is unfair both to the “face” and to the rest of the listeners present. Avoid speaking only to the most powerful or influential person present for the same reason.

Speakers tend to look at their notes, at the back of the room, at the overhead projector screen or even at a blank flip chart — anywhere but at the audience.

Why is it difficult to look at the audience?

Before I answer that, let me ask you a question. Do you want your audience to know that you are feeling nervous? No, of course not, and that is the reason why you find it difficult to look at them. You know instinctively that you express your emotions through your eyes and so if you don’t look at them, they won’t be able to see how nervous you are.

Having people looking at you is unnerving, you feel put on the spot, cornered and trapped, so you distance yourself from the situation by looking out of the window. You feel, quite illogically, that if you don’t look at them, they will be able to see less of you.

What happens when we don’t make eye contact

People who are interested in each other make eye contact when they are talking because they want to know how their listener is receiving their message. When you don’t look at the audience, they feel (probably unconsciously) that you are not interested in them, or in their reaction to your talk; they feel the same way as you do if someone at a party talks while looking over your shoulder; they feel you don’t care whether they listen or not; and because they do not feel involved by you their concentration lags. **If you don’t pay attention to your audience, they will not pay attention to you.**

This was demonstrated to me recently when a speaker deliberately only made eye contact with half of his audience during a forty-minute presentation. It was a medium-sized group of thirty people and afterwards when they were asked to assess the speaker, half of them found him interesting, challenging and entertaining and the other half found him uninspiring, boring and ineffective. You can guess what had made such a radical difference in their views.

How is your eye contact?

During the course of your everyday life, pay attention to the eye contact other people make with you and try and note how easy or difficult you find it to look at people when you are talking in a variety of different situations. Ask friends for feedback on your own eye contact. Practice maintaining contact for longer than usual without it becoming uncomfortable.

How to overcome your reluctance to look at the audience

Here are some games to help you gain confidence when you are speaking.

Look around the group and check what color your listeners' eyes are; how many are wearing glasses; do they have thick or thin eyebrows; do the eyebrows meet in the middle? Imagine you are looking through a one-way mirror and they can't see you. These games work in a relatively small group.

In a larger group you can look at noses or at foreheads and no one will realize that you are not looking at their eyes.

As your confidence grows, try to look at their eyes and faces to see how they are reacting to your talk. In a larger group, you will need to make a W or M shape through the audience with your eyes in order to look at every part of the hall or conference center.

I have spoken from platforms where the bright lights aimed at the speakers make it impossible to see beyond the first row or so, but I know that it is not apparent to the audience that they are invisible and so I look out into blackness and move my eyes around as if I am looking at each person present.

What to avoid in eye contact

Once you have conquered your fear of looking at your listeners, you must improve the quality of your contact. Little short jerky glances are not good eye contact. Remember you are communicating your interest in your audience. Sweeping your eyes over people's faces will not convince them that you are seeking their reaction to your talk. Practice looking at each person for at least two to three seconds. If this is too difficult at first,

practice on inanimate objects at home or in the office. Learn to gauge for yourself how long a two-to-three-second eye rest is.

To check your eye contact after a talk, try to remember how each person looked — was the financial director frowning? Who smiled at your anecdotes? If you can recall their facial expression, you were making good eye contact.

Facial expression

Your eye contact is essential in audience communication, but if you are looking at them and frowning or appear depressed, they will not believe that you are enjoying speaking to them. So remember your "I am happy" expression and if you have some difficulty raising a smile when you are suffering from nerves, look slowly at your audience one by one (this is particularly effective in a small group) and imagine that they are all sitting on the toilet!

When I was first promoting Speakeasy (my company), I met a number of rather pompous senior businessmen who made me feel unsure of myself and, on a couple of sales visits, I felt that I had not presented myself well because I had felt intimidated by them. On the next occasion, I wrote a note on the top of my pad to help myself to speak to the man and not be overawed by his position. I wrote "think of him playing football in the nude, think of him playing with a toy duck in the bath."

If you find yourself in a difficult situation where you fear your own feelings may hinder your performance, play a game to overcome your doubts. Think happy and avoid frowning at your listeners — it's not their fault that you feel nervous. You may have to exaggerate your smile if you are one of those people who can look rather somber because, in repose, the corners of their mouths turn downwards.

Hands

When a speaker is fairly accomplished, it is often her hands which will reveal that she is feeling apprehensive.

What not to do with your hands

Fiddling with rings, watch, cuff-links, buttons, pens, rubber bands, paper clips, spectacles, cuticles and nails, confidence cards, coins in pocket, pointers.

Touching and patting face, hair, pockets, desk, table.

Clutching back of chair, notes, side of lectern.



"I am amazed at the range of activities that speakers find for their hands."

Scratching any part of the body.

Hiding them behind back, in pockets, in lap, by folding arms, or by sitting on hands.

Pointing at the audience.

Wringing in despair

Rubbing together in enthusiasm.

I am amazed at the range of activities that speakers find for their hands and I am sure that you have seen living examples of most of those that I have listed above.

What to do with your hands

Keep them empty and still

Your hands do not have a separate identity—they are part of your arms and, in general, only need to move if you are making a gesture, and should only hold your confidence cards.

Arm gestures

You will see speakers making small gestures as if their arms were paralyzed to the wrist or to the elbow. It is all part of the self-consciousness of being in front of an audience. Somehow they feel that if they make small gestures, they will not be quite so visible to the audience.

Remember your arm begins at your shoulder—always use all of your arm. Don't tuck in your elbows to your waist or make jerky, half-hearted, meaningless gestures. I remember a tall woman in one of my courses who, through shyness, stood hunched up, making tiny movements with her hands. We advised her to stand tall, make eye contact and use her arms to express her enthusiasm. The result was startling—she became regal and was very impressive. Without even opening her mouth, she looked like a self-confident, interesting speaker

When should you make gestures?

When we are not under stress, our gestures coincide with what we are saying. We use them to emphasize a point: "I won't stand for this a moment longer"; we indicate a place: "The management out there think that the union members." We

can express an idea. a spiral staircase, or a size, "We have an enormous majority" "The spare part we needed was expensive but very small."

Some people naturally use more gestures than others; people from the Latin countries tend to use more gestures than those from Northern Europe. These are natural gestures and you should continue to use them if this is your style. Under stress many people wave their arms in meaningless repetitive movements as if they were trying to shake off a persistent insect. Watch yourself on video if possible, or in front of a full length mirror, to check if you have any mannerisms you want to eliminate.

Useless gestures, as opposed to those with a purpose, reveal nervousness and become a distraction to the audience. Don't be afraid to use your arms, though, because standing rigid like a wooden soldier is as unnatural as waving your arms about unnecessarily.

What to do with your hands when you are not using your arms

Keep your hands empty and still by the sides of your body. This will feel odd, but it looks very natural. But don't keep your arms glued to your sides because, when a gesture is required, your hands will only make little waving movements somewhere down by your thighs.

Some speakers feel more comfortable with their hands held lightly in front of them at waist level—if you use this position, remember not to clench your hands together so they can't escape. If you do, your gestures will eventually show themselves through jerky elbow and shoulder movements.

Other speakers like to stand with their hands lightly clasped in what is known as the fig leaf position, slightly below your waist. Once again, be sure that your hands are free to make gestures to suit the content of your talk.

If you are holding confidence cards, be sure to gesture with the other hand, however, you can change hands so that you are able to use both during your talk.

Position and posture

Avoiding barriers

Facing an audience, whether it is of five, fifty or five hundred, is difficult and speakers like to hide behind desks, tables or lecterns. If you want to be a good speaker, you must learn to stand totally exposed in front of your audience. Always stand in front of all the barriers.

Pitfalls of lecterns

I am 5'2" and some lecterns are 4'0" high, so how can I be a powerful speaker if my listeners can only see my head peeping over the edge? Even if you are over six feet tall, try to stand to one side of the lectern so that you can refer to your notes and your listeners can see all of your body. This will also make it easier for you to make natural gestures and to move around. If the lectern is fixed with a microphone, you have no choice but to stand behind it. Stand on a box if you are short so that your upper body can be seen. Ask for a radio microphone if you want to move away from the lectern.

Standing and sitting

In Chapter 12, Understanding Your Audience, I have referred to small meetings (about fifteen to twenty people) where it is customary to sit. If you can break this custom, do so, because standing gives you authority, enables you to breathe properly and project your voice and to make better eye contact. The disadvantages of sitting are:

- Your chest is restricted and it is difficult to use your lungs effectively.
- Your eye contact may be limited and you may be tempted to look down at your notes too much.
- Your listeners may not be able to see you.
- It will be very tempting to play with pens and paper clips on the table.

The advantages of standing are:

- You will feel more visible and have more authority
- Your voice projection will be better
- You will have room to make gestures (don't lean on the table or clutch the back of the chair if you are standing behind it).

Stand tall

Act confidently, even if you are quivering inside. If you could see yourself on video, you would be surprised at how little your nerves show. Push back your shoulders and open up your chest as if you are about to begin the first day of your vacation. Remember, if you look as if you believe in yourself, your listeners will accept and retain what you say. They are on your side, so don't disappoint them.

Finding your feet

Like hands, these creatures on the ends of our legs seem to be stimulated by nerves to act very strangely. I have seen normal men and women:

- Hopping from one foot to another
- Taking two steps forward and two steps back.
- Standing on one leg.
- Crossing their legs in the "I want to go to the toilet" stand.
- Rocking to and fro.
- Swaying from side to side.
- Flexing at the knees.
- Rising up on their toes on every third word.
- Rising up on their toes on every third word on a squeaky floorboard.
- Sticking out one foot and "boring for oil" with the heel.
- Going on little undirected walk-about.
- Tracking the pattern of the carpet with the curve of their shoe.
- Walking up and down like a caged animal.
- Standing on the sides of their shoes.

If you can identify any of these traits in your own performance, I suggest you imagine that you are standing in weighted boots, so that it is impossible to move without a conscious decision. You should be aiming for steady, relevant movements, not cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof jerks. You don't have to stay nailed to one spot, but you should be consciously deciding when to move to another spot—to the flip chart, towards a questioner in the audience, to pick up a visual aid—and you should not be at the mercy of your fidgeting feet.

Sometimes I find speakers who have learned to control their feet, but compensate by swinging their hips or swaying or even leaning to one side. Stand upright on two feet a few inches apart, so that your hips are balanced over them and your shoulders and the rest of your body are balanced over your hips. Don't slump or lean on one foot with your hip sticking out. Think of a core of calm confidence which is beaming out from the center of your chest. Remember the following rules of body language and you are now in a position to open your mouth and begin to speak.

Summary—how to look like an effective speaker

- Use your eyes to make contact with your audience and show them that you are interested in them.
- Your face should say, **I am happy to be here and I'm glad you're here too.**
- Your hands should be empty and still.
- Gestures should start from the shoulder and be relevant.
- Don't hide behind barriers.
- Stand tall, don't sit.
- Balance on both feet and wear imaginary lead-weighted boots.
- Let the beam of calm confidence shine out from your chest.