

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, Friesen 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.

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.

[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, storytelling	Creating here is basically making things up and saying them. Depending on context this can indicate lying, but in other circumstances, for 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 remembering sounds	or	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 contact (when listening)	eyes	attentiveness, interest, attraction		Eyes which stay focused on the speakers eyes, 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 withheld feelings	or 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 part 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 its 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 grinding	mouth	tension, suppression	Inwardly-directed 'displacement' (see body language 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.

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-redirectioned 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.

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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, submissive, thoughtfulness	A signal of interest, and/or vulnerability, which in turn suggests a level of trust. Head tilting is thought 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,	head / body	interest, positive	Head forward in the direction of a person or other subject indicates interest. The rule also applies to a

upright		reaction	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. <u>Mirroring</u> 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	defensiveness,	Crossed arms represent a protective or separating

arms (folded arms)		reluctance	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 clasp 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,	arms	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.

tie, etc., using an arm across the body			
arms/hands covering genital region (male)	arms / hands	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.
holding a drink in front of body with both hands	arms / hands	nervousness	Another 'barrier' protective signal.
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 an seeking 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	hands	admonishment,	The action is like pressing a button on a keypad

wagging (up and down)		emphasis	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.
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	hands	frustration, negativity,	Usually hands would be on a table or held across stomach or on lap.

fingers		anxiousness	
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.
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 exaggeration or	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 clamped on ears	hands / ears	rejection of resistance something or to	Not surprisingly gestures involving hands 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	hands / chin	thoughtfulness	The stroking of a beard is a similar signal, although rare among women.

chin			
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, vexation, or 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	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

(mainly male)			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.

