

Body Language in Presentations

Bodies talk! A presentation is not merely spoken; body language is often at least as effective, if not more, as the carefully chosen words. It pays to be aware of your mimic, your voice and your gestures.

Presenting as an art form

Presenting in front of an audience is an art. Of course the main focus is on what you say. Without a meaningful message, any presentation is doomed to fail. But even if you do have something worth listening to, then be aware that your audience will focus on your performance as much as on your words. Correct body language can actively support your story, as well as help you connect to the audience. We focus on some simple rules of nonverbal conversation.

Eye contact

Eye contact starts when you walk towards the stage. Focus on several people in the audience. Take a few seconds of silence before you start talking, at least until the audience has quieted down. Use this pause to make an open eye contact in the room. Never place yourself behind the pulpit or table immediately, but rather do this when you actually need it. Maintain eye contact throughout the presentation.

React

Show, by means of gestures or facial expression (smiling, nodding), that you are aware of what is happening in the audience, and that you are able to respond without losing the focus of your story.

Up close and personal

Go to your audience, literally. Try and get as close to them as possible. When projecting on a screen, you can even stand in the middle of the audience and look at the presented information from their point of view. This creates a bond, where you make yourself part of the audience.

Movement

Gestures can enliven a presentation, if used with care and moderation. Your hands should be neither in your pockets nor on your back. They should be visible and preferably in the bodily region between your belt and your chest. An admonishing finger can be perceived as arrogant if overused, but can be used to emphasise certain points in your presentation.

Technical aids

When using PowerPoint, focus on the three Ts: "Touch, Turn, Talk". When showing a new slide, you may turn away from the audience and look at the image. This focuses the attention on the projected information. Never talk when doing this! After a brief view, turn back to the audience before discussing the projected slide.

Voice

Be aware that your voice pitch and how fast you talk affect your presentation. Try to speak calmly and pronounced, in a natural way.

Clothes

Stick to what your audience knows. When speaking to a group of business men in jeans, you will alienate yourself from the audience. Don't do this unless this was the effect you were looking for. The reverse is equally true: imagine a speaker in a pinstripe suit in front of a casually dressed audience. Check beforehand about the dressing code.

Never do this

The rules aren't very difficult, and in fact very similar to those of a face to face conversation. Which is basically what a presentation is; you just happen to have a lot of faces to talk to! But even when realising this is simply a conversation, there are a few things to be avoided at all cost:

Focusing on a single person. Maintaining eye contact does not mean focusing on just one person in the audience throughout your presentation. Most likely, this one person will feel quite uncomfortable, while the rest feels excluded.

Look beside or over your audience. The “looking in the general direction” trick is one that works poorly: it is not a substitute for genuine eye contact and your audience will hear less of your presentation.

Playing with papers or other handheld items. If you do use notes pages, feel free to show them. No one expects you to recite a memorised text. But don’t play with it; it will distract from what you are saying.

Talking with your back towards the audience. Don’t ever do this, not even with a projected presentation. A large part of your words will be lost in limbo.

Getting the message across

If you can manage to focus on these rules and, at the same time, discuss your subject with enthusiasm, the audience will easily record and remember the words that make your story.