

# Principles of Nonverbal Communication

*by Sophia*



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about each principle of nonverbal communication and explore how it influences the interactions you have everyday. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Nonverbal Communication Is Fluid

Chances are you have had many experiences where words were misunderstood, or where the meaning of words was unclear. When it comes to **nonverbal communication**, meaning is even harder to discern. We can sometimes tell what people are communicating through their nonverbal communication, but there is no foolproof "dictionary" of how to interpret nonverbal messages.

Remember, nonverbal communication is the process of conveying a message without the use of words. It can include gestures and facial expressions, tone of voice, timing, posture, and where you stand as you communicate. It can help or hinder the clear understanding of your message, but it doesn't reveal (and can even mask) what you are really thinking. Nonverbal actions flow almost seamlessly from one to the next, making it a challenge to interpret one element, or even a series of elements.

We perceive time as linear, flowing along in a straight line. We did one task, we're doing another task now, and we are planning on doing something else all the time. Sometimes we place more emphasis on the future, or the past, forgetting that we are actually living in the present moment whether we focus on "the now" or not. Nonverbal communication is always in motion, as long as we are, and is never the same twice.

Nonverbal communication is irreversible. In written communication, you can write a clarification, correction, or retraction. While it never makes the original statement go completely away, it does allow for correction. Unlike written communication, oral communication may allow "do-overs" on the spot: You can explain and restate, hoping to clarify your point. You can also dig the hole you are in just a little bit deeper. We've all said something we would give anything to take back, but we all know we can't.

In other words, oral and written communication allow for some correction, but that correction still doesn't erase the original message or its impact. Nonverbal communication takes it one step further. You can't separate one nonverbal action from the context of all the other verbal and nonverbal communication acts, and you can't take it back.

In a speech, nonverbal communication is continuous in the sense that it is always occurring, and because it is so fluid, it can be hard to determine where one nonverbal message starts and another stops. Words can be easily identified and isolated, but if we try to single out a speaker's gestures, smile, or stance without looking at how they all come together in context, we may miss the point and draw the wrong conclusion.

You need to be conscious of this aspect of public speaking because, to quote an old saying, "Actions speak louder than words." This is true in the sense that people often pay more attention to your nonverbal expressions than your words. As a result, nonverbal communication is a powerful way to contribute to (or detract from) your success in communicating your message to the audience.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Nonverbal Communication

Communication using physical gestures or visual displays; the portrayal of a person's words.

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## 2. Nonverbal Communication Is Fast

You express yourself via nonverbal communication all the time without much conscious thought at all.

#### IN CONTEXT

Pretend you are at your computer at work. You see that an email has arrived, but you are right in the middle of tallying a spreadsheet whose numbers just don't add up. You see that the email is from a coworker and you click on it. If the email contains unwelcome news, your emotional response will likely be immediate.

If the author of the email could see your face, they would know that your response was one of disbelief and frustration, even sadness, all via your nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication gives our thoughts and feelings away before we are even aware of what we are thinking or how we feel. People may see and hear more than you ever anticipated.

Your nonverbal communication includes both intentional and unintentional messages, but since it all happens so fast, the unintentional ones can contradict what you know you are supposed to say or how you are supposed to react.

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## 3. Nonverbal Communication Can Add to or Replace Verbal Communication

People tend to pay more attention to how you say something than what you actually say. In presenting a speech, this is particularly true.

We communicate nonverbally more than we engage in verbal communication, and often use the following nonverbal expressions to add to, or even replace, words we might otherwise say.

### 3a. Illustrators and Emblems

We use a nonverbal gesture called an **illustrator** to communicate our message effectively and reinforce our point.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Your coworker Andrew may ask you, "Barney's Bar after work?" as he walks by, and you simply nod and say, "Yeah." Andrew may respond with a nonverbal gesture, called an **emblem**, by signaling with the "okay" sign as he walks away.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Illustrator**

Similar to an emblem, a gesture that reinforces a verbal message.

##### **Emblem**

Similar to an illustrator, a nonverbal gesture that carries a specific meaning and can replace or reinforce words.

### 3b. Regulators

In addition to illustrators or emblematic nonverbal communication, we also use **regulators**, which are meant to control communication by either encouraging or discouraging it.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If someone is telling you a message that is confusing or upsetting, you may hold up your hand, a commonly recognized regulator that asks the speaker to stop talking.

#### IN CONTEXT

Say you are in a meeting presenting a speech that introduces your company's latest product. If your audience members nod their heads in agreement on important points and maintain good eye contact, that is a good sign. Nonverbally, they are using regulators encouraging you to continue with your presentation.

In contrast, if they look away, tap their feet, and begin drawing in the margins of their notebooks, these are regulators suggesting that you better think of a way to regain their interest or else wrap up your presentation quickly.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Regulator**

A nonverbal gesture or expression meant to control communication by either encouraging or discouraging it.

### 3c. Affect Displays

**Affect displays** are another nonverbal indicator; these displays are meant to demonstrate emotions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** An affect display that might accompany holding up your hand for silence would be to frown and shake your head from side to side. When you and Andrew are at Barney's Bar, smiling and waving at coworkers who arrive lets them know where you are seated and welcomes them.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Affect Display**

A nonverbal indicator meant to demonstrate emotions.

### 3d. Adaptors

**Adaptors** are nonverbal displays intended to help an individual feel comfortable in a particular environment or to communicate a certain emotion.

A **self-adaptor**, such as playing with your hair, involves you meeting your need for security by adapting something about yourself in a way for which it was not designed, or for no apparent purpose.

An **object-adaptor** involves the use of an object in a way for which it was not designed.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You may see audience members tapping their pencils, chewing on them, or playing with them, while ignoring you and your presentation. Or perhaps someone pulls out a comb and repeatedly rubs a thumbnail against the comb's teeth. They are using the comb or the pencil in a way other than its intended design— an object-adaptor that communicates a lack of engagement or enthusiasm toward your speech.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Adaptor**

A nonverbal display intended to help an individual feel comfortable in a particular environment or to communicate an emotion.

##### **Self-Adaptor**

An adaptation of an aspect of oneself in a way for which it was not designed, or for no apparent purpose.

##### **Object-Adaptor**

An adaptation of an object for a purpose other than its intended design.

### 3e. Complementing, Repeating, Replacing, Masking, and Contradicting

Intentional nonverbal communication can complement, repeat, replace, mask, or contradict what we say.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When Andrew invited you to Barney's, you said, "Yeah" and nodded, **complementing** and **repeating** the message. You could have simply nodded, effectively **replacing** the "yes" with a nonverbal response.

**Masking** involves the substitution of appropriate nonverbal communication for nonverbal communication you may want to display

➞ **EXAMPLE** You could have decided to say no to the invitation, but might not have wanted to hurt Andrew's feelings. Shaking your head "no" while pointing to your watch, communicating work and time issues, may mask your real thoughts or feelings.

Finally, nonverbal messages **contradicting** verbal communication can confuse the listener.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Complementing**

A method of reinforcing verbal communication with a nonverbal display.

##### **Repeating**

A method of echoing verbal communication with a nonverbal display.

##### **Replacing**

A method of substituting verbal communication with an equivalent nonverbal display.

#### **Masking**

A method of obscuring a potentially unfavorable message via a more appropriate nonverbal display.

#### **Contradicting**

The act of displaying nonverbal communication that reflects a different message than the corresponding verbal communication.

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## **4. Nonverbal Communication Is Both Universal and Contextual**



### **THINK ABOUT IT**

Consider the many contexts in which interaction occurs during your day: in the morning, at work, after work, at home, with friends, with family—the list could go on for quite awhile. Now consider the differences in nonverbal communication across these many contexts. When you are at work, do you jump up and down and say whatever you want? Why or why not? You may not engage in that behavior because of expectations at work, but the fact remains that from the moment you wake until you go to sleep, you are surrounded by nonverbal communication.

If you had been born in a different country, to different parents, and perhaps as a member of the opposite sex, your whole world would be quite different. Yet nonverbal communication would remain a universal constant. It may not look the same, or get used in the same way, but it would still be nonverbal communication in its many functions and displays.

Still, nonverbal communication can be confusing. We need contextual clues to help us understand, or begin to understand, what a movement, gesture, or lack of display means. Then we have to figure it all out based on our prior knowledge (or lack thereof) of the person and hope to get it right. Talk about a challenge.

Nonverbal communication is everywhere, and we all use it, but that doesn't make it simple or independent of when, where, why, or how we communicate.

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## **5. Nonverbal Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional**

It's important to remember that not all nonverbal communication is done deliberately.

### **IN CONTEXT**

Suppose you are working as a salesclerk in a retail store, and a customer communicated frustration to you. Would the nonverbal aspects of your response be intentional or unintentional?

Your job is to be pleasant and courteous at all times, yet your wrinkled eyebrows or wide eyes may

have been unintentional. They clearly communicate your negative feelings at that moment. Restating your wish to be helpful and displaying nonverbal gestures may communicate "no big deal," but the stress of the moment is still "written" on your face.

Can we tell when people are intentionally or unintentionally communicating nonverbally? Ask ten people this question and compare their responses. You may be surprised.

It is clearly a challenge to understand nonverbal communication in action. We often assign intentional motives to nonverbal communication when in fact their display is unintentional, and often hard to interpret.

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## 6. Nonverbal Messages Communicate Feelings and Attitudes

Researchers Steven Beebe, Susan Beebe, and Mark Redmond have offered three additional principals of interpersonal nonverbal communication that serve our discussion, one of which is that you often react faster than you think.

Your nonverbal responses communicate your initial reaction before you can process it through language or formulate an appropriate response. If your appropriate, spoken response doesn't match your nonverbal reaction, you may give away your true feelings and attitudes.

Additionally, psychologist Albert Mehrabian asserted that we rarely communicate emotional messages through the spoken word. According to Mehrabian, we communicate our emotions nonverbally 93 percent of the time, with at least 55 percent associated with facial gestures. Vocal cues, body position and movement, and normative space between speaker and receiver can also be clues to feelings and attitudes.



### THINK ABOUT IT

Is your first emotional response always an accurate and true representation of your feelings and attitudes, or does your emotional response change across time?

We are all changing all the time, and sometimes a moment of frustration or a flash of anger can signal to the receiver a feeling or emotion that existed for a moment, but has since passed. Their response to your communication will be based on that perception, even though you might already be over the issue.

This is where the spoken word serves us well. You may need to articulate clearly that you were frustrated, but aren't any longer. The words spoken out loud can serve to clarify and invite additional discussion.

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## 7. Nonverbal Communication Is More Often Believed Than Verbal Communication



### THINK ABOUT IT

Building on the example of responding to a situation with facial gestures associated with frustration before you even have time to think of an appropriate verbal response, let's ask the question: Which would you believe—someone's actions or someone's words?

According to [William Seiler and Melissa Beall \(2013\)](#), most people tend to believe the nonverbal message over the verbal message. People will often answer that "actions speak louder than words" and place a disproportionate emphasis on the nonverbal response. Humans aren't logical all the time, and they do experience feelings and attitudes that change.

Still, we place more confidence in nonverbal communication, particularly when it comes to lying behaviors.

According to [Miron Zuckerman, Bella DePaulo, and Robert Rosenthal \(1981\)](#), there are several behaviors people often display when they are being deceptive:

- Reduction in eye contact while engaged in a conversation
- Awkward pauses in conversation
- Higher pitch in voice
- Deliberate pronunciation and articulation of words
- Increased delay in response time to a question
- Increased body movements such as changes in posture
- Decreased smiling
- Decreased rate of speech

If you notice one or more of these behaviors, you may want to take a closer look. Over time, we learn people's patterns of speech and behavior, and form a set of expectations. Variation from their established patterns, combined with the clues above, can serve to alert you to the possibility that something deserves closer attention.

Our nonverbal responses have a connection to our physiological responses to stress, such as heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductivity.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Polygraph machines (popularly referred to as "lie detectors") focus on these physiological responses and demonstrate anomalies, or variations. While movies and TV crime shows may make polygraphs look foolproof, there is significant debate about whether they measure dishonesty with any degree of accuracy.

Can you train yourself to detect lies? It's unlikely. Our purpose in studying nonverbal communication is not to uncover dishonesty in others, but rather to help you understand how to use the nonverbal aspects of communication to increase understanding.

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## 8. Nonverbal Communication Is Key in the Speaker/Audience Relationship

When we first see each other, before anyone says a word, we are already sizing each other up. Within the first few seconds, we have made judgments about each other based on what we wear, our physical characteristics, and even our posture.

Are these judgments accurate? That is hard to know without context, but we can say that nonverbal communication certainly affects first impressions, for better or worse. When a speaker and the audience first meet, nonverbal communication in terms of space, dress, and personal characteristics can contribute to

assumed expectations. The expectations might not be accurate or even fair, but it is important to recognize that they will be present.

There is truth in the saying, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." Since beginnings are fragile times, your attention to aspects you can control, both verbal and nonverbal, will help contribute to the first step of forming a relationship with your audience. Your eye contact with audience members, use of space, and degree of formality will continue to contribute to that relationship.

As a speaker, your nonverbal communication is part of the message and can contribute to, or detract from, your overall goals. By being aware of it, and practicing with a live audience, you can learn to be more in control.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that we communicate not only through words, but also through nonverbal communication. With nonverbal communication, meaning is more difficult to establish and control because **nonverbal communication is fluid** and **nonverbal communication is fast**, but it is critical to consider because **nonverbal communication can add to or replace verbal communication** through nonverbal cues like **illustrators and emblems, regulators, affect displays, adaptors**, or other indicators that **complement, repeat, replace, mask**, or **contradict** the words that we say.

You also learned that nonverbal communication is complex because it is **both universal and contextual** and it **can be intentional or unintentional**. It can **communicate feelings and attitudes** that a speaker might otherwise choose to contain. Because of this, **nonverbal communication is more often believed than verbal communication**. For all of these reasons, it is **key in the speaker/audience relationship**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Adaptor

A nonverbal display intended to help an individual feel comfortable in a particular environment or to communicate an emotion.

### Affect Display

A nonverbal indicator meant to demonstrate emotions.

### Complementing

A method of reinforcing verbal communication with a nonverbal display.

### Contradicting

The act of displaying nonverbal communication that reflects a different message than the corresponding



verbal communication.

**Emblem**

Similar to an illustrator, a nonverbal gesture that carries a specific meaning and can replace or reinforce words.

**Illustrator**

Similar to an emblem, a gesture that reinforces a verbal message.

**Masking**

A method of obscuring a potentially unfavorable message via a more appropriate nonverbal display.

**Nonverbal Communication**

Communication using physical gestures or visual displays; the portrayal of a person's words.

**Object-Adaptor**

An adaptation of an object for a purpose other than its intended design.

**Regulator**

A nonverbal gesture or expression meant to control communication by either encouraging or discouraging it.

**Repeating**

A method of echoing verbal communication with a nonverbal display.

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