

Types of Nonverbal Communication

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the eight types of nonverbal communication to further understand how nonverbal communication impacts our interactions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Space

When we discuss space in a nonverbal context, we mean the space between objects and people. Space is often associated with social rank and is an important part of business communication.

People from diverse cultures may have different normative space expectations.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are from a large urban area, having people stand close to you may be normal. If you are from a rural area or a culture where people expect more space, someone may be standing "too close for comfort" and not know it.

Edward T. Hall, who served in the European and South Pacific Regions in the Corps of Engineers during World War II, traveled around the globe. As he moved from one place to another, he noticed that people in different countries kept different distances from each other. In France, for instance, they stood closer to each other than they did in England. Hall wondered why that was and began to study what he called **proxemics**, or the study of the human use of space and distance in communication.

He indicated that there are two main aspects of space: territory and personal space. Territory is related to control.

➞ **EXAMPLE** As a way of establishing control over your own room, maybe you painted it your favorite color, or put up posters that represent your interests or things you consider unique about yourself.

Families or households often mark their space by putting up fences or walls around their houses.

This sense of a right to control your space is implicit in territory. Territory means the space you claim as your own, are responsible for, or are willing to defend.

The second aspect Hall highlights is personal space, or the "bubble" of space surrounding each individual. We recognize the basic need for personal space, but the normative expectations for space vary greatly by culture. From where you stand in an aerobics class in relation to others, to where you place your book bag in class, your personal expectations of space are often at variance with others'.



TERM TO KNOW

2. Time

How aware you are of time varies by culture and normative expectations of adherence to (or ignorance of) time. Some people, and the communities and cultures they represent, are very time-oriented.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The Euro Railways trains in Germany are famous for departing and arriving according to the schedule. In contrast, if you take the train in Argentina, you'll find that the schedule is more of an approximation of when the train will leave or arrive.

Chronemics is the study of how we refer to and perceive time. Tom Bruneau at Radford University has spent a lifetime investigating how time interacts in communication and culture. As he notes, across Western society, time is often considered the equivalent of money, revealing a high value for time. In social contexts, it often reveals social status and power.

IN CONTEXT

Who are you willing to wait for? A doctor for an office visit when you are sick? A potential employer for a job interview? Your significant other or children? Sometimes we get impatient, and our impatience underscores our value for time.

In the same way, how long should it take to respond to a customer's request for assistance or information? If they call on the phone, how long should they be on hold? How soon should they expect a response to an email?

As a skilled business communicator, you will need to know how to anticipate normative expectations and do your best to meet those expectations more quickly than anticipated. Your prompt reply or offer of help in response to a request, even if you cannot solve the issue on the spot, is often regarded positively, contributing to the formation of positive communication interactions.



TERM TO KNOW

Chronemics

The study of how humans refer to and perceive time.

3. Physical Characteristics

You didn't choose your birth, your eye color, the natural color of your hair, or your height, but people spend millions every year trying to change their physical characteristics. You can get colored contacts; dye your hair; and if you are shorter than you'd like to be, buy shoes to raise your stature a couple of inches.

We often make judgments about a person's personality or behavior based on physical characteristics, and researchers are quick to note that those judgments are often inaccurate.

Regardless of your eye or hair color, or even how tall you are, being comfortable with yourself is an important part of your presentation. Act naturally and consider aspects of your presentation you can control in order to maximize a positive image for the audience.

4. Body Movements

The study of body movements, called **kinesics**, is key to understanding nonverbal communication. Since your actions will significantly contribute to the effectiveness of your business interactions, let's examine four distinct ways that body movements complement, repeat, regulate, or replace our verbal messages.

Body movements can complement the verbal message by reinforcing the main idea.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You may be providing an orientation presentation to a customer about a software program. As you say, "Click on this tab," you may also initiate that action. Your verbal and nonverbal messages reinforce each other.

You can also reinforce the message by repeating it.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you first say, "Click on this tab," and then motion with your hand to the right, indicating that the customer should move the cursor arrow with the mouse to the tab, your repetition can help the listener understand the message.

In addition to repeating your message, body movements can regulate conversations.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Nodding your head to indicate that you are listening may encourage the customer to continue asking questions. Holding your hand up, palm out, may signal them to stop and provide a pause where you can start to answer.

Body movements also substitute or replace verbal messages. Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen (1967) found that facial features communicate our feelings to others, but our body movements often reveal how intensely we experience those feelings.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If the customer makes a face of frustration while trying to use the software program, they may need assistance. If they push away from the computer and separate themselves physically from interacting with it, they may be extremely frustrated.

Learning to gauge feelings and their intensity as expressed by customers and colleagues takes time and patience, and your attention to them will improve your ability to facilitate positive interactions.



TERM TO KNOW

Kinesics

The study of body movements

5. Touch

The study of touch in communication is called **haptics**. In the workplace, you may interact with people by shaking hands and making casual conversation. This interaction can help establish trust with your colleagues.

While giving a presentation, you probably wouldn't touch people in the audience, but you would interact with visual aids, note cards, and other objects. How you handle them can communicate your comfort level.

It's thus always a good idea to practice using the technology, visual aids, or note cards you will use in a speech during a practice session. Using the technology correctly by clicking the right button on the mouse or pressing the right switch on the overhead projector can contribute to your credibility.



TERM TO KNOW

Haptics

The study of touch in communication.

6. Paralanguage

Paralanguage is the exception to the definition of nonverbal communication. You may recall that we defined nonverbal communication as not involving words, but paralanguage exists when we are speaking, using words. Paralanguage involves verbal and nonverbal aspects of speech that influence meaning, including tone, intensity, pausing, and even silence.

Perhaps you've also heard of a pregnant pause, a silence between verbal messages that is full of meaning. The meaning itself may be hard to understand or decipher, but it is there nonetheless.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Your coworker Jan comes back from a sales meeting speechless and with a ghost-white complexion. You may ask if the meeting went okay. "Well, ahh..." may be the only response you get. The pause speaks volumes. Something happened, though you may not know what. It could be personal if Jan's report was not well-received, or it could be more systemic, like the news that sales figures are off by 40 percent and pink slips may not be far behind.

Silence or vocal pauses can communicate hesitation, indicate the need to gather thought, or serve as a sign of respect. Sometimes we learn just as much, or even more, from what a person does not say as from what they do say.



TERM TO KNOW

Paralanguage

Verbal and nonverbal aspects of speech that influence meaning, including tone, intensity, pausing, and silence

7. Artifacts

Artifacts are forms of decorative ornamentation that are chosen to represent self-concept. They can include rings and tattoos, but may also include brand names and logos.

From clothes to cars, watches, briefcases, purses, and even eyeglasses, what we choose to surround ourselves with communicates something about our sense of self. They may project gender, role or position, class or status, personality, and group membership or affiliation.

Paying attention to a person's artifacts can give you a sense of the self they want to communicate, and may allow you to more accurately adapt your message to meet their needs.



TERM TO KNOW

Artifact

In communication contexts, a form of decorative ornamentation chosen to represent one's self-concept.

8. Environment

Environment involves the physical and psychological aspects of the communication context. More than the tables and chairs in an office, environment is an important part of the dynamic communication process.

The perception of one's environment influences one's reaction to it.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Google is famous for its work environment, with spaces created for physical activity and even in-house food service around the clock. The expense is no doubt considerable, but Google's actions speak volumes. The results produced in the environment, designed to facilitate creativity, interaction, and collaboration, are worth the effort.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that nonverbal communication occurs in different forms, including **space**, **time**, **physical characteristics**, **body movements**, **touch**, **paralanguage**, **artifacts**, and **environment**. Many of these types of nonverbal communication have cultural associations that establish shared expectations, allowing effective nonverbal communication to take place.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Artifact

In communication contexts, a form of decorative ornamentation chosen to represent one's self-concept.

Chronemics

The study of how humans refer to and perceive time.

Haptics

The study of touch in communication.

Kinesics

The study of body movements.

Paralanguage

Verbal and nonverbal aspects of speech that influence meaning, including tone, intensity, pausing, and silence.

Proxemics

The study of the human use of space and distance in communication.