BODY LANGUAGE – A MAN’S GUIDE

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Edition 1 – July 2012
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People love the idea of a "reader."

TV has shows like *House* and *Lie to Me*, where tiny body movements or personality quirks reveal big secrets.

Literature has Sherlock Holmes, who could tell a man’s profession from his handshake.

Palm-readers and fortune-tellers have been consulted since before the oracles of ancient Greece, and continue to thrive into the 21st century.

It’s a good trick.

But it’s more than a trick.

We give away our inner thoughts every second, and there is a science to reading the unspoken language we use. You don’t need a degree in psychology or human evolution to understand it, either.

The language of our bodies is something we signal naturally.

You just need to learn to pay attention to it and pick up a few words of the language – with a little practice you’ll be reading people in ways you never were able to before.
Introduction: Body Language Matters

Understanding the basics of body language and unspoken communication goes a long way in any man’s life. It’s not very different at all from understanding the language of clothing and what your attire says about you.

A man who pays attention can both present himself in the way he wants and understand what others want from him. This is why our guide focuses on two important aspects of body language:

- **How to "read" other people’s bodies to see what they're thinking and feeling.**
- **How to control your body so that it's always "saying" what you want it to.**

You don’t need to be a professional gambler or a spy to take advantage of the former. Being able to see and understand people’s reactions to you makes it easy to be thoughtful -- and can come in handy in business settings too, for obvious reasons.

And the second skill is pure practicality. Training yourself to move with confidence and to look open, honest, and attentive keeps you from undermining yourself
accidentally. There's also a "cause and effect" loop -- the more a person stands and moves like a confident leader, the more naturally he thinks like a leader.

**But Does It Really Work?**

This is everyone's initial reaction -- the "too good to be true" doubts. Is watching people’s hands or eyes really going to tell you if they're lying, flirting, sick; in love? Will shifting your posture really get you better tips, close a deal, reassure a loved one; scare off a mugger?

The answer is a conditional yes.

No reading is perfect, even by a trained professional. Experienced liars and con men have likely read up on body language and will be controlling their movements to avoid detection. And in many cases we need intuition as much as training -- a lot of important non-verbal cues happen so fast that we can't process them consciously unless we re-watch the exchange in slow motion. If that luxury isn't available, we have to count on our instincts to notice and give us a "feeling" for the situation.

But with that said, there is an impressive amount of information that can always be gathered from another person's body language. And controlling your own has an influence on other people that works whether they're aware of what you're doing or not -- the reactions are hardwired into our brains.

So yes -- it really works. We wouldn't be wasting your time if it didn't.

*How Hard Should I Be Thinking About This?*
That's a more complicated question. You do need to pay attention. But if you spend a meeting frantically watching other people's movements and trying to remember what they mean, you're not going to get any benefit. In fact, you're going to be distracted, less effective at both verbal and non-verbal communication than you usually are, and in general missing the whole point.

Practice in controlled situations is the solution.

Use no-pressure moments in your life like going to the grocery store to pause and observe people's bodies. Try to read their stances, gestures, and facial expressions. Restaurants, parks, public streets, stores, and any other public setting are all good places to practice when business or your social life isn't on the line.

You'll be surprised at how quickly a lot of the basics internalize. You won't be Sherlock Holmes overnight, but you'll quickly lose the need to consciously think "he's opening his palms to me -- that means he wants me to trust him." The understanding will be there, and you'll react accordingly.
Hand gestures can be small, and eye movements require you to be right up close. But the way a person stands can be read at a distance.

The ways we stand and move our limbs come from our primate ancestry. Many of our gestures are still shared with our closest ape relatives. Stance is usually most directly tied to survival-related feelings: stress, defensiveness, aggressiveness, dominance, etc.

**Dominant Stance: A Man in Control**

Keep in mind that dominant and aggressive are two different things. A man who feels secure and in charge is different from a man who's looking for a fight.

- The natural pose for a dominant human is open and squared-off, fearlessly exposing vulnerable vitals (stomach, chest, neck) in a show of confidence:

- Legs are spread about shoulder-width apart (if we were all still naked, the purpose of this would be to display our genitals. The instinct remains even though that's frowned on nowadays).

- Head is raised and chin is thrust slightly forward, exposing the neck.
• Arms hang comfortably at the sides or are clasped hand-in-hand behind the back -- never in front of the body, which would indicate defensiveness.

• Center of mass faces toward the person or people being interacted with. The head doesn't swivel to peer sidelong, the whole body turns to look.

• When seated, feet are planted slightly apart and legs are spread (again, this is an instinctive gesture that would expose the genitals). Hands rest apart on the table or armrests rather than interlacing in front of the body.

As you can see, the dominant posture is characterized by openness in the front of the body. It says "I'm here and I'm not afraid of you." Expect to see policemen, politicians, and experienced leaders making use of this stance. It's also a good default to train yourself into, as it's comfortable for you and inspires respect in others.

**Aggressive Stance: A Man Seeking Control**

An aggressive man is not a man in control -- it's a man who wants to be in control. This is the body language of challenge and, potentially, violence. Keep an eye on men exhibiting this behavior. They probably aren't actually thinking about violence in a conscious way, but their instincts are preparing them for a fight of some kind. They may need some calming down before you can deal with them rationally.

• Weight is forward in this pose, on the balls of the feet, as if crouching to spring.
• Legs are close together, with the dominant leg usually leading by a half-step or so. Again, this is preparing the muscles for sudden use.

• Head tilts forward and chin lowers slightly to protect the neck. Since this could be interpreted as a gesture of fear or weakness, the upper body tilts slightly forward toward other people's personal space to compensate.

• Arms tend to raise toward other people -- finger-pointing is common in an aggressive stance, as are emphatic gestures. They won't necessarily look like a boxing stance, but the aggressive man will find reasons to have the hands up and in front of himself.

• The body turns slightly so that one shoulder or the other guards the center of mass and the vitals are less exposed.

• If seated, the upper body leans forward, often with the palms flattened face-down on the table, as if to help launch the man out of his seat.

You often see these postures on stock brokers, salesmen, political aides, lawyers, and other people who are seeking an argument. If you find yourself adopting the aggressive body language, try to consciously shift it into the more centered and open dominant stance. It's always better to look like a man who's already in control than a man who feels the need to fight for control.
Defensive Stance: A Worried Man

It’s easy to spot a man who is not at ease. Their body language will be all about protection and cover. Someone standing like this feels bad about something. They may feel intimidated by the social situation, or they may perceive themselves as being at a disadvantage, or they may just be concealing something and worrying about getting caught.

- Weight leans away from other people and the feet are turned, pointing away toward an avenue of escape.
- Shoulders are raised and chin is lowered, protecting the neck.
- Arms cover the front of the body. This often manifests as folded arms, or as the hands clasped together in front of the groin.
- If seated, arms are held in close to the body, such as leaning on the elbows with crossed arms or interlacing the hands on a tabletop in front of the chest.

Someone exhibiting these signs is worried and needs calming. It’s best to give them personal space and make soothing gestures to accompany your words (more on calming gestures later). If you find yourself folding your arms in front of yourself or moving to protect your core, recognize that something is making you uncomfortable, and work to correct that, while shifting your body into a more open stance to give yourself confidence.
Mixed Signals

It's common to see someone's posture exhibiting more than one of these traits at once. Take posture cues with a grain of salt and look for other body language signals, like the gestures and eye movements we'll talk about in later sections.

In many cases the feet and arms will be better indicators than the torso. Most men have been told to "stand up straight" often enough in their life that they artificially yank themselves upright even when they're nervous or angry. Arms folding defensively, feet pointing away toward an escape route, or legs shifting as if to lunge are all good indicators that a confident stance isn't heartfelt.
Part 2: Talking with Your Hands

There’s an old joke that goes "if you want an Italian to shut up, tie his hands behind his back."

We may not do it as much as the Italians (who also touch each other as a matter of routine conversation, far more than Americans of the same level of intimacy would), but everyone talks with their hands, whether they know it or not. Hand position is also much less culturally trained than a straight-backed posture, making it a more natural judge in many situations.

The Open Palm

When you look at someone, pay attention to their palms. Whether you can see them or not tells you a lot about what they’re thinking. An open palm shows that the hands are not holding weapon and are not preparing for a blow. In apes it’s a sign of submissiveness; in humans it also indicates a willingness to listen and cooperate. Men and women both show their palms unconsciously when they’re appealing to other people:

- Politicians will often hold their hands apart from each other, raised above a podium and turned toward the audience in an encompassing gesture, inviting people to share their ideas.

- Celebrities seeking public attention will raise their arms and wave to crowds. When they’re trying to avoid paparazzi or discourage attention, they
tend to put their hands in their pockets or at their sides.

- Con artists and magicians always spread their hands over their tables to demonstrate "nothing to hide here" -- when, of course, they are hiding something.

- A palm turned upward is a universal gesture for beggars and panhandlers, and is often used by people asking for assistance in more formal situations as well.

- The "high five" is a sign of teamwork. It inherently celebrates an achievement that needed more than one person.

- Someone being questioned or arrested by an authority figure can hold his hands up with the palmed turned outward to indicate that he's willing to cooperate.

If you see palms-out gestures on other people it's a sign that they're willing to listen to you. Salesmen look for it -- someone who makes an objection with his hands turned outward is willing to be talked out of the objection, while a refusal made with the hands hidden (arms crossed or hands in the pocket) is likely to be final. Good salesmen and presenters may use excuses to open people's hands up, like handing them a sample or brochure so that the hand has to turn up to accept it.

You can use the palms-out gesture yourself to invite other people to your way of thinking. It's also useful to use any time you see other people indicating defensiveness or hostility with their own body language.
The Closed or Down-turned Palm

A palm facing downward has the opposite associations of one turned upward -- it signifies readiness to clench or strike, and asserts dominance over the person being gestured at. Think of the Roman (and later Nazi) salute, or the raised clenched fist of angry demonstrators -- these are always designed to indicate power and willingness to fight. More subtle variations creep into even non-violent people’s body language when they want to confront or control someone:

- Coaches, bosses, and other people giving instructions often do it while extending one hand with the palm turned inward and down, making little karate-chop motions to emphasize their points.

- Thumping a podium or pulpit with the palm down or the fist closed is typical in speakers who see themselves as directing their audience rather than persuading them.

- A pointing finger turns the palm down and has the appearance of a closed-fist blow, making it an extremely aggressive gesture, especially when used in someone’s personal space (as it often is).

- Both "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" curl the palm inward toward the body, indicating that the person making the gesture is passing judgment -- a dominant
role. In some countries one or both of these are vulgar gestures.

- Similarly, the raised middle finger, shaken fist with the knuckles out, and the "V" all turn the palm away, and are all common rude gestures.

Watch for even passive hiding of the palms as an indicator that you're not getting along with someone. Something as simple as interlacing the hands under the chin rather than holding a pen with the wrist turned upward could be a meaningful sign in a boardroom or meeting situation -- it shows that the listener disagrees with what's being said.

Use palm-hiding gestures yourself when there's a need to communicate urgency and authority, or to signal that someone's presence is unwanted without being rude. The easiest way to do the latter for men is to clasp the hands behind the back -- hiding them in your pockets or by crossing your arms is more defensive, and makes you appear less in control.
**Touching the Face**

When a small child says something that he or she knows is wrong, they invariably clasp their hands over their mouth, as if to hold the words in. That impulse stays with us in subtler forms as we age. Other face and head touches have similar implications:

- **Touching the lips** is a frequent sign of dishonesty, or at least of misleading or withholding information. It’s an unconscious gesture that says "something I’ve said is not entirely right."

- **Having our hair or the back of our heads stroked** is a soothing memory from childhood. Someone who scratches or rubs the back of his head repeatedly may be feeling agitated by something.

- **Supporting the head** is a gesture of weariness. Someone leaning his chin or cheek on his hands is likely bored, tired, or otherwise uninvolved with what’s going on.

Facial gestures require an obvious grain of salt -- someone who scratches the back of his head once or twice quickly probably just had an itch. Someone who repeats the gesture many times throughout an encounter is more likely to be demonstrating real agitation. Look for other signs to confirm whatever you’re reading from a person’s face-touches.

In terms of your own body language, there's little benefit to touching your face most of the time. A hand on the back of the head might be an appropriate gesture during an apology or other moment of vulnerability, but resist the impulse to touch your lips or rest your head in your hands. These only give negative signals.
Part 3: The All-Important Handshake

The handshake as greeting goes back to at least ancient Rome, where men meeting would clasp one another’s forearms. Claims that this was a way to check for hidden weapons are popular but probably apocryphal -- many Roman garments left the forearms bare in the first place, and a man could just as easily hide something in the sleeve of his off-hand or elsewhere on his body. The gesture more likely evolved as a symbolic gesture of sharing strength, suggesting and subtly encouraging cooperation rather than competition.

The modern handshake shares the same ostensible purpose. We use it as a gesture of willingness to cooperate, which is why it is used both as an initial greeting (“Here, let us talk instead of fighting”) and to seal a bargain (“We’re in this together now”). The spread of Western business culture has introduced the handshake even to cultures where it was not originally used, making it one of the most important gestures in a man’s repertoire.

*Taking Charge: A Dominant Handshake*

The dominant handshake -- and this shouldn’t be a surprise if you read the previous section -- is one where your palm turns downward, forcing the other person’s to turn upward to meet it. The rest of the body works to make this a fixed position, so that the other man can’t escape taking the submissive role:
• The arm crosses the center of the chest, putting the handshake slightly on the dominant shaker’s off-hand side. This turns his wrist naturally inward, which points his palm at the floor.

• The arm is usually held stiff at full extension, and the shaking movement comes from the shoulder. This makes the wrist impossible to rotate without also twisting the elbow -- more force than a polite handshake could conceivably muster.

• Fingers will usually be held tightly together as the shake is offered, in an aggressive palm-down gesture, whereas a palm-up shake is more likely to be made with the fingers slightly spread.

So long as you do it firmly rather than forcefully, this is a good handshake to use. It’s important not to pair it with a crushing grip or a step into the other person’s body space, however. The subtle downward tilt of the wrist is more than enough to establish a sense of control. More visibly aggressive body language will prompt negative or defensive reactions from the other person.

If someone tries to force a dominant handshake off on you, step slightly forward on your left foot and rotate your body 45 degrees or so to the left, crossing the "power" shaker’s path in your final step. Your elbow will hook around with the turn as you extend your hand, and his will have to rotate outward to bring his hand back to the new natural meeting point.

If someone’s really determined to force you into a palm-up handshake, don’t struggle with them visibly. Accept the handshake with a two-handed grip, closing the aggressive shaker’s hand between your dominant hand (angled up) and your off-hand (angled down and laid atop his).

**Putting People at Ease: The Submissive Handshake**
Turning your palm upward (as mentioned earlier) is an open and often submissive gesture. It shows that you don’t have any weapons and aren’t prepared to strike, and it opens the center of your body up to show trust. A palm-up handshake can be used to put someone nervous at ease, or to show a willingness to follow other people’s leads if you’re joining an already-established group.

- A palm-up handshake is easiest when the elbow rotates naturally outward: turn your body as if you were about to step to the right of the person you’re shaking with, and let your hand swing slightly outside of your center of mass, with the wrist rotated slightly outward.

- A slight tilt is all that’s needed. You don’t want to look like you’re expecting a palm-slap or offering a secret club shake.

- Grip firmly to compensate for the fact that you’re using slightly weaker body language. You don’t need to crush anyone’s hand, just don’t turn the palm up and then give a limp-fish.

Someone who automatically defaults to this grip might not be a very confident person in general, or they may just be feeling stressed or unsure about the current situation. In either case, give them some personal space and keep your body language open and non-threatening.

This is a good grip to offer when you’re already at an advantage over someone and want them to feel reassured, or in situations where you’re apologizing or taking a similarly submissive role. Avoid it, however, in business dealings, regardless of your position relative to the other shaker.
Two-Handed Shakes

A good handshake is usually a one-handed gesture. Adding a second hand brings much of your body into the other person’s space -- too aggressive and/or intimate for most daily purposes.

Two-handed shakes are best used when you want to display a special connection to someone, highlighting their importance to you at that moment. They can also be used to establish a little control over someone being excessively aggressive or dominant.

The higher on the other person’s arm you go with a two-handed shake, the more intimate it is. Clasping the wrist with your off-hand is reasonably normal for people like politicians and preachers, who need to make every encounter feel special, while touching the upper arm or shoulder should be reserved for close friends and family.
How Hard to Squeeze/How Many Shakes?

The most common handshake questions of all.

Squeeze hard enough that you feel pressure on your skin, but not hard enough to feel pressure on the deeper tissue or the bones. The squeeze can also be briefer than the handshake, only really present for the first up-and-down shake. After that you can relax to a more neutral grip.

Picture yourself holding a small, ripe tomato in your hand. If your squeeze would rupture the skin, you’re probably squeezing too hard.

As far as shakes go, keep it brief. One single up-and-down is brisk and authoritative, two or three is normal, and four or more starts to feel forced.
Part 4: Reading the Eyes

"Liars always look to the left" is a popular -- and untrue -- piece of advice. The reality is that liars can look anywhere they want, and in many cases are likely to look more directly at the person they're lying to in an attempt to seem sincere. But eyes signals can help you read a person, particularly in conjunction with other body language, and most of our eye movements are reflexive, making them harder to fake.

Reading the Pupil

Repeated experiments have proven a consistent reaction in humans: when we like what we see, our pupils widen to let more light in. This plays out visually in a couple of different ways:

- Most professional pictures these days are edited to widen people's pupils.
- People who want to appear interested and attracted -- first dates, for examples -- tend naturally toward low-light environments where pupils will dilate out of necessity.
• Light-colored eyes are thought of as "sexy" or attractive because the light background makes pupil changes much more evident.

You can't do much to open your pupils involuntarily, other than keeping yourself in low-light environments, but you can read someone else's: if their pupils are wide, they probably like what they're seeing or hearing. If their pupils have gone very small (and they're not looking at a bright light source -- use some common sense here), they probably aren't liking what you have to offer. A direct stare with shrunken pupils is a sign of aggression.

Blinking

We have an instinctive desire to block out bad situations -- think of a small child hiding his eyes from a scary movie. In adults, this translates to an increased blink rate in times of stress, fear, or unhappiness. Your brain is literally trying to wipe the "bad" out of existence by closing the eyes.

It's easy to read too much into this. Cop shows often have someone say "look at how much he's blinking -- he's lying!" or something along those lines. This overlooks the obvious reality that being interrogated by police is stressful to most people, whether they're telling the truth or not. A heightened blink rate can mean many things:
• Lots of short, fast blinking is a sign of agitation. It almost always indicated a higher-than-normal blood pressure, and will probably be accompanied by sweating. This could be a sign of mounting fear or anger -- look for other signs to tell which.

• Frequent blinking at a slower rate likely indicates boredom or physical tiredness. It’s a sign that the brain isn’t happy with the situation and would like it to go away, but likely doesn’t signify fear.

• A few rapid blinks followed by normal eyelid movement was probably just an irritation in the eye. If it repeats itself several times over a longer period of time, it may be a nervous tic, indicating agitation or fear.

Don’t read too much into blink rates, but don’t ignore them either. Even if you don’t know the reason, it’s useful to know that someone isn’t feeling as confident or composed as they may be trying to project.

Eye Contact and Gaze Direction

Some of where the eyes look is trained. American and Western European cultures teach eye contact as a gesture of respect, meaning that we spend most of our social interactions looking at one another’s faces. In some Asian countries this is considered overly-aggressive, and men and women from these cultures may tend to look at a speaker’s neck and chest, or over his head.
Some specific gazes may be indicative of more than cultural origin, however. These usually come in brief flicks of the eyes rather than prolonged gazes, but when repeated many times over the course of an interaction they can be very telling:

- Looking at the lower section of someone’s face -- basically the eyes on down to the chin -- is a typical attentive gaze. It’s also the most trained gaze, so someone doing it isn't *necessarily* paying attention; they may simply be doing what they know is polite. The more fixed their stare is on one specific point in the region, the more likely it is that they’re faking it.

- A wider gaze that encompasses not only the face but the upper body is more intimate. It can indicate friendly feelings, or it can simply mean they find you attractive. Either way it’s a positive sign.

- A gaze directed at the top of your face or above your head is an aggressive sign of dominance. It means that the person thinks of themselves as in control of you, and it may be useful for you to use hand gestures to bring their gaze lower.
• People tend to look upward when they work to recall something. Someone who tells you about a memory without any upward glances may very well be lying about his or her recollection, or making it up entirely.

• When we talk to ourselves (out loud or just mentally) we tend to look to the side, as if we were turning to another person. Most people do this in the direction they would naturally rotate, so righties look left, as if they were about to turn with their dominant hand on the outside. This is where the "liars look left" myth comes from -- a lie is essentially something you've weighed and discussed with yourself beforehand, so if the decision to lie (and therefore that discussion) take place on the spur of the moment there's a tendency to look left. However, a rehearsed lie can easily be told without an involuntary leftward glance.

The speed at which these signs happen often makes them impossible to consciously read without a slowed-down playback. If you don't have that luxury, rely on your instinct (your own body's feelings are a reaction to their body's motions, after all) and on other signs they may be making with their hands or posture.
None of the gestures and signals we’ve discussed happen in isolation. Our bodies are constantly in motion. Good observers rely on a general picture over time rather than locking in on one specific motion and basing decisions on that. After all, a man folding his arms briefly may simply be cold or have an itch on one bicep, rather than closing you out.

Think in broad, basic terms about general states of mind and the reasons why certain gestures indicate them:

- Fearfulness and agitation are always going to be characterized by closed, defensive gestures. Arms will cross, heads will lower, and personal space will shrink inwards. Things that could cause offense (and therefore lead to conflict) like broad gestures, prolonged eye contact, or invasion of other people's space will be avoided.
• Aggression is characterized by a readiness to fight: movements become faster and more poised, vital areas are defended with the posture rather than the arms (which are needed for fighting), and gestures tend to invade other people's personal space to intimidate them.

• Dominance and confidence are characterized by openness and lack of defense. The front of the body where all the vitals are will be unprotected, the head will be up, and movements will be contained but firm.

Any of these can, of course, be faked. Someone putting on a false front can easily control the way he stands. Watch for small, quick gestures and eye movements if you have reason to suspect someone of misleading you -- a confident posture with nervous tics and rapid blinking is almost certainly a being faked. Only when the small, involuntary signals match the posture can you be confident of a person's mental state.

There's lots more to body language than just these simple basics. Whole books have been written on the subject, and some men and women have made their academic careers out of the study. Research continues every day.

But learning even these fundamentals of body language can give a man two enormous advantages in life: the ability to know what other people are thinking or feeling, and the ability to influence how others think and feel about him.

We think that's worth a little time and practice.
Additional Reading

Antonio’s Premium Style Information Courses

The Classic Style Guide at A Tailored Suit

Real Men Real Style – Menswear Advice Website

Real Men Real Style’s You Tube Video Channel

Art of Manliness – Men’s Style Section