

Body Language

George Bernard Shaw said once: "Put a mask on a hypocrite, and he can no longer lie." This can be understood in the following way: most of us are experts in facial expression. When we lie, or alter the truth, we utilize primarily our face to convince people that what we are saying is true. However, often our bodies reveal the truth, even when our faces don't.

If the face is covered, the expression of the body becomes the only tool available for communication. Few of us are experts in the body's language, even though the body is always saying something!

Here are some elements to focus on, to learn to read what a body might be expressing at any given moment:

Are the feet planted firmly on the ground, or are they moving nervously about? Is the chest caved inward, or filled up? Is the balance on the front foot, or the back? What are the arms doing, are they far from the torso, are the shoulders up, or back? Are the hands relaxed, or clenched, or very purposefully positioned?

Some simple movement exercises can help you discover what role your body plays in everyday expression and on the stage. Excluding facial expressions, you can watch your body express itself with elements such as timing and tempo, posture, gestures, and movement qualities. In this series of exercises, each section builds on the previous ones, so try to do these in order.

First, lie down on your back and relax. Become aware of all the muscles in your body from your feet up to the top of your head. See if you can imagine yourself to be a neutral being, a human being with no expression. What does that mean to you? How would you get up? How would you sit? Walk? Stand? What would your face look like?

Really strive to be expressionless in every way. That means not robotic, not stiff, not limp, not slow, not fast, not light, not heavy, not sad, not happy, well, you get the idea! Get as close as you can to this goal, come to your own interpretation of neutral, as best as you can.



*Now choose one part of your body to "lead" with, traveling across the room, while keeping the rest of your movement neutral. This could be your nose, your belly button, your right knee, anything! See how leading with that part of your body affects your movement. Does it express something?

*Now choose one of the following movement qualities:

Slow	Fast
Heavy	Light
Jerky	Smooth

See if you can maintain your neutrality in movement, except for this one element that you have chosen. Have your audience tell you what they see. Was it expressive? What did you feel when you did it?

*Now choose one emotion or feeling to express. Notice how that changes your body! Here are some to choose from, and of course you can create your own list!

Happy	Sad
Tired	Enthusiastic
Angry	Serene
Mischievous	Grateful

Notice how an emotional expression shapes your body. Pay attention to which part or parts of your body are most affected by each emotion.

*Now exaggerate that physical expression. For example, if feeling proud makes you puff up your chest, puff it up to a greater degree. Maintain that physical statement while you walk, sit, talk to someone. This can be a basis for a character!

*Finally, try that same exercise with a character mask. Each mask you have the opportunity to wear for this exercise may speak to you as to what elements or qualities to try. By starting with neutrality, and then isolating the physical expressions, you begin to have control over your own body's language!

This PDF file was added to the Viewer's Guide in 2002.