

# HOW IMPORTANT ARE NONVERBAL SIGNALS?

Ed Barks



## **How Important Are Nonverbal Signals?**

Fifth edition

By Ed Barks

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## It's What You Don't Say

Your audience is keeping an eagle eye on you as you speak. Yes, they are listening to your words. And make no mistake, they are also soaking up every gesture and vocal attribute you display. How important are these nonverbal cues?

To better answer that question, let's examine the story from a different angle. Imagine yourself not as the speaker, but as an audience member.

Picture in your mind the times you have attended presentations and couldn't wait to escape the room. The speaker may have been a world renowned expert in their topic with top notch content. But they stood still in the dark while using slides as a crutch. Or spoke in a monotone. Or avoided all eye contact with the audience. Neglecting to utilize critical nonverbal communication methods, they soon lulled everyone to sleep.



**“IT’S NOT WHAT YOU SAY THAT COUNTS,  
IT’S WHAT YOU DON’T SAY.”**

Tom Kennedy, host of the 1960s TV game show “You Don’t Say”

Now, consider a brighter scene, one in which you witnessed a [mesmerizing speaker](#). They shared not only fascinating insights, but did so in an engaging manner by utilizing nonverbal skills masterfully. If you looked around the room, you likely saw your fellow audience members on the edges of their seats, paying rapt attention.

Your Video tools (the way you look) and Audio tools (the way you sound) help transmit your message in a more persuasive fashion. But don't think for one moment that, because you can summon a raise of the eyebrow or modulate your rate of speech, you have mastered the ability to communicate in public.

Your nonverbal tools pave the way for smoother acceptance of your message, yet they will not, in and of themselves, deliver it for you.

## What's in It for You?

It is my job as a [communications strategy consultant](#) to business and association executives and other thought leaders to translate the research from academic jargon into everyday language. A [media training workshop](#) means little if the discussion becomes too technical.

Most of my clients don't care about the research methods surrounding nonverbal communications, nor should they. They care about results. They are intently focused on providing more persuasive presentations, heightening their reputation in the press, or delivering a more [powerful message to Capitol Hill](#).

Why? These outcomes lead to benefits such as:

- An enhanced reputation
- More confidence in public settings
- Brighter career options
- Attainment of business and public policy goals

A consultant must be [alert to the research](#), without getting so bogged down in the minutiae that they become a college lecturer instead of a hands-on provider of useful business information. As a university professor of mine was fond of saying, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach."

Debate sometimes flares among communications practitioners and scholars over how much we communicate nonverbally. Here is my practical viewpoint: The precise percentages aren't all that important. Your nonverbal

tools may account for 50 percent of your ability to communicate, 99 percent, or anywhere in between. What is clear from decades of research is that the relationship between nonverbal tools and an ability to connect with audiences, reporters, and policymakers is irrefutable.

"How can one identify problem elements in one's own nonverbal communication and improve one's communication effectiveness?"

— Albert Mehrabian

As Joe Navarro writes in his marvelous book *What Every Body Is Saying*, “One of the fascinating things about an appreciation for nonverbal behavior is its universal applicability. It works everywhere humans interact.”

## Valuing Your Video Tools

I break down nonverbal communication into two areas: Video tools and Audio tools. This makes it more straightforward to analyze strengths and challenges during communications training workshops. Moreover, it empowers my clients with a practical, easy to use system that helps them gauge their progress over the long run.

The main job of your Video tools is to help others judge how pleasant or positive you are. On the flip side of that coin, of course, this can also lead them to believe you are negative or cranky.

“Words...are the great foes of reality.”

— Joseph Conrad

What traits make up your Video tools?

- **Action:** An erect posture, appropriate and natural gestures, a tilt of the head, and a forward lean allow you to better connect with an audience, a reporter, or public officials.
- **Facial expression:** Facial feelings communicate a wide range of emotions. Perhaps the most powerful symbol is the smile. Just don’t try to fake these expressions. Few of us possess that talent. Also note that overdoing it connotes high anxiety.
- **Eye contact:** Pay attention to your audience, not your notes or slides. Solid eye contact suggests honesty, confidence, and credibility.
- **Wardrobe:** Save the fashion statements for your personal time. When on the professional clock, aim for an image of authority.
- **Props:** Plot out how you plan to use, and then dispense with, anything you must handle, from a book to your product to a remote control device.

## Applying Your Audio Tools

Prosody is a fancy word the academics use to describe the vocal intonations that accompany speech and help convey meaning. For ease of understanding, I label these your Audio tools. They tend to transmit your level of authority or influence to your listeners, and consist of:

- **Pitch:** No one wants to be subjected to a sleep-inducing monotone or an annoying singsong voice. Vary your inflection and modulation, but don't overdo it. Keep your pitch consistent with your persona.
- **Articulation:** Public communication requires a somewhat more formal style of speaking, especially with so much communication occurring over video. If your enunciation is letter perfect, congratulations. Don't change.
- **Volume:** Throw in an occasional change of pace. Speak louder, then softer to better maintain your listeners' attention.
- **Emotion:** In my experience, this is the most often ignored factor, and dangerously so. If you don't care, why should an audience or a reporter be concerned?
- **Rate:** As with pitch and volume, the key here is to vary your rate over the course of your interview or presentation.

Harmonious Video tools and Audio tools bolster your message, so don't accentuate one set at the expense of the other. Baseball teams with great pitching and no hitting rarely capture the World Series. Similarly, all the homerun sluggers in the world cannot make up for a poor pitching staff. Balance is what it's all about when utilizing your nonverbal tools.

## Take Everything in Context

While we all heed nonverbal signals when we listen to speakers and watch the news on TV — at least on an intuitive level — it is important not to place undue weight on individual signals. Taking these indicators out of context can lead to significant misunderstanding.

“Observing in context is key to understanding.”

— Joe Navarro

Extrapolating one cue to represent an overall attitude is dangerous, especially if you are dealing with someone you don't know well. Does that squint indicate a lack of clarity or is it habitual due to poor eyesight? Does that halting voice reveal uncertainty or might it belong to someone fighting a cough or cold?

Imagine this situation. You are speaking to an audience and note one listener with their arms consistently folded across the chest. The knee-jerk reaction among many consultants is to assume they are closed to your message. Maybe. But it is possible they are simply chilly, comfortable, or any number of other feelings.



Or envision this circumstance. [You are on Capitol Hill](#) talking with a staff member for a key senator when you notice their eyes begin to dart from side to side. Are they looking to escape from you and your efforts at persuasion or just watching for the boss to make an appearance?

It is important to take into account the broad range of nonverbal qualities if you hope to put together an accurate assessment. If that audience member with arms folded also plays with their mobile device, fidgets maniacally, then gets up and leaves, that likely indicates an aversion to your presentation. If, however, they lean forward, take notes, and nod occasionally, they may just be cold.



What about that Senate staffer? If they point their feet toward the door while nodding rapidly, you would be wise to shift gears or wrap up your conversation. On the other hand, if they engage actively in the discussion with a well-modulated voice, you are likely hitting your target.

The main thing is to keep matters in context both as you receive and as you send nonverbal cues.

## Standing on the Corner

Communication is a two-way street. While you are sending silent signals to others, you also stand to gain by using your powers of observation. It takes time and practice to get better at reading nonverbal indicators. And, just like some of us can shoot a basketball or paint a masterpiece better than our fellow humans, some are innately more talented when it comes to nonverbal interpretation.

How can you improve your capacity for gleaning these body language cues? Find a place where you can people-watch without attracting undue attention to yourself or coming across as a creepy gawker.

Granted, this is harder given pandemic conditions, though on Zoom and other video services you can still note some nonverbal signals. The fact remains we can only see each other from the chest or shoulders down. What does this mean?

- [As a presenter](#), you need to accentuate your Audio tools and facial expressions.

- As an observer, you should examine those nonverbal signs you can see with greater alacrity.

Airports are great sites for scrutinizing body language. You have people rushing about, generally paying less attention to their surroundings (this could also be a haven for pickpockets, too, but let's not go there). Plus, you often witness bare and frazzled emotions.



If you live in a major metropolitan area, the subway is a prime observation platform. Shopping malls, concerts, and sporting events are also perfect venues. So is your gym, though again, beware of coming across as the creepy character who stares at others. Of course, you can always stand on a street corner and casually observe.

One final suggestion: Your workplace. Want some insights into what the boss really thinks of you (only if you truly want to know; some of us would be better off kept in the dark)? Or you may wonder just how supportive your direct report really is. Let me emphasize again that nonverbals cannot supply definitive answers. They can, however, indicate which way people are leaning, and give you intelligence that tells you that you need to check things out more closely.

## The Fascination with Lie Detection

It is difficult to spot a liar. Books and articles (and those pop-psychology [TED talks](#)) have displayed a fascination with lie detection. Book titles can sometimes be like clickbait, with the author's main aim to get you to buy, or at least read, their work. I strongly advise you to steer clear of any source that claims an ironclad ability to tell when someone is lying.

In order to have an even money shot at unmasking an untruth you need to first have a grasp of an individual's baseline nonverbal behavior. Good luck if your conversational partner is someone you're meeting for the first time.

For those who think they are the original lie detection machine, consider these two pieces of research from Paul Ekman and Maureen O'Sullivan. First, most of us might as well flip a coin, for the rate of accuracy for lie detection among the population rests near the 50 percent level. Ekman and O'Sullivan found that only Secret Service agents regularly outperformed that mean.



Second, in separate findings, they assessed more than 12,000 people's lie detection talents. They did find a number of "truth wizards" — those who could detect deception accurately above 80 percent. Care to guess how many wizards populated that group of 12,000? Twenty-nine. Not 29 percent — Twenty-nine total! Far less than one one-hundredth of one percent. What does this mean? You and I had best have that coin handy the next time we try to ascertain who's lying.

## Your Words Still Count

The art of developing a magnetic message is beyond the scope of this publication (for a more thorough treatment, see Chapter Eight in [\*A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers\*](#)). Suffice to say that you give your organization an advantage when you devote time and energy to crafting an airtight message, for few organizations do so on a regular, sustained basis.

Here is how I frame the picture for my clients: Your message is vital. After all, you decide to speak before an organization or choose to [allow a reporter to interview you](#) because of the message you seek to impart, not because you want to wow them with a dazzling smile or impress them with your ability to enunciate perfectly.

"There is no sign of deceit itself — no gesture, facial expression, or muscle twitch that in and of itself means that a person is lying."

— Paul Ekman

Note well that a focus solely on acting techniques or the timbre of your voice misses the mark.

Yes, those abilities matter (or this paper would be rendered meaningless), but do not believe for one moment that you will achieve success on the podium or in the press if you master only your nonverbal tools.

Cast a wary eye upon anyone who claims their ability to teach you acting methods will, in and of itself, transform you into a good speaker. That is only part of the equation. While they may have experience when it comes to displaying body language, they likely have little to no expertise in helping you craft a magnetic message capable of winning converts in the business world. Ignoring that aspect would prove risky for you and your company.

Your message and your nonverbal signals are intricately intertwined. Make your message attractive to your listeners by adorning it with sharp Video and Audio performances to

give that message a sense of magnetism. You need all of your communications skills — verbal and nonverbal — operating at a high level if you want to achieve communications success.

Citing Joe Navarro, “Nonverbals are ubiquitous and reliable. Once you know what a specific nonverbal behavior means, you can use that information in any number of different circumstances and in all types of environments.”

## Beyond Video and Audio Tools

Much of the seminal research into nonverbal communication was conducted in the 1970s by Albert Mehrabian, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA. He found one of the most persuasive nonverbal indicators to be the immediacy of communication.

Just think how important this becomes when you take questions from the audience, engage in an interview with a reporter, or answer questions from lawmakers on Capitol Hill. People who answer more quickly are seen as more persuasive and truthful.

Do not interpret this to mean that you should shoot from the hip [during Q&A](#) just so you can issue a rapid response. What it does suggest is the need to anticipate questions and decide during your preparation phase which part of your message best responds to a particular issue.

A trait Mehrabian labels “speech disturbance frequency” also plays an important role in how the crowd perceives you.

If you litter your speech with excessive ums, ers, or overly long gaps, your listeners can build a negative attitude toward you. They might think you are trying to pull the wool over their eyes and will quickly lose any positive feelings they have toward you.

“Words are really a mask. They rarely express the true meaning; in fact, they tend to hide it.”

— Hermann Hesse

This leads to a question I have heard from clients who come to me for [public speaking counsel](#): Should I try to eliminate every single “um” from my speech? No. I believe a conversational style works best in most presentation and media situations. Most of us express the occasional disturbance and, in my view, that is fine. If, however, every sentence is replete with such disruptions, communication begins to suffer and the problem does need to be addressed.

At the same time, if your speech pattern reflects no disruptions, don't try to build them in. I have heard executives try this in a laughable attempt to evoke an "everyman" persona during [media interviews](#). It comes across as terribly phony. Viewers tend to bristle at these obviously bogus ploys. Why some people feel a need to mess with a strength many would die for is beyond me.

There are certain organizations, such as Toastmasters, and some consultants that try to stamp out every er and um. I suggest you pay them no attention unless, again, the disruptions are excessive and need to be corrected because they interfere with delivery of your message.

Other types of speech disruptions — such as changing a sentence in mid-stream, delivering incomplete sentences, omitting words, repeating yourself unnecessarily, offering a slip of the tongue, and stuttering — signal heightened anxiety or discomfort.

We all fall victim to such disruptions every now and then.

“It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent.”

— Madeleine Albright

As with um and er, if you find them becoming too much a part of your routine, your judges in the audience will subtract points from your score. If that is the case, seek guidance from a reputable consultant who can suggest improvement strategies.

## Congruency Counts

Your nonverbal and verbal tools must work in harmony with one another. If your vocal inflection, for instance, does not match your words (the academics call this “asynchronous”), the audience will sense that something is amiss. This impacts your credibility, driving down your odds of persuading your listeners be they reporters, policymakers, or any other audience.

Try this experiment in the privacy of your office or home. Furrow your brow as you enthusiastically tout an innovation your company has developed. Or smile broadly as you announce a record financial loss for the most recent quarter. It's tough to do since it runs contrary to our desire for congruence.

Yes, these are make-believe constructs. But think how often similar disconnects occur in the real world. How many times have we seen the speaker who says how excited they are to be with us while using a flat voice strangled by trepidation? And what about the

politicians who tell us of their painless plans to cut taxes while glossing over, with a Cheshire Cat grin, the fact that it will cause deficits to balloon.

It is important for presenters and media subjects to recognize the importance of congruence. If you claim to be excited, leverage your vocal inflection and widen your eyes, for example, to prove it to your audience. If, on the other hand, you are reacting to a crisis, maintain a voice of dignity and avoid the use of excitement-inducing gestures.

## Your Next Steps

Where do you go from here? Regular reviews of your nonverbal performance when you speak in public, deal with reporters, and [petition public officials](#) is mandatory if you plan to increase influence for yourself and your organization. Assess your Video tools and Audio tools every few months. Shine a spotlight on your strong points when you speak. Work over the long run to either improve those qualities you find challenging or eliminate them from your repertoire.

In addition, the Recommended Resources included in Appendix B will help advance your learning as you work to sharpen your nonverbal tools. As the weeks and months go by, you will no doubt want to add your own exercises to this list. I encourage you to

[contact me](#) with your favorites so they can be shared with our fellow learners in future editions of this publication.

“(W)hen it comes to gauging someone’s commitment to a conversation, the best place to look is at their legs and feet.”

— Peter Collett

Highly accomplished communicators realize that self-monitoring to ensure congruence and a high level of nonverbal performance takes them only so far. They need a

set of expert eyes and ears that can ensure their tools are synchronized.

Witness the adage, “he that is his own lawyer has a fool for a client.” Most people who have not studied nonverbal interaction specifically — or, more broadly, communications in public forums — simply do not know what to look for without an expert’s guidance.

Your success depends on gaining counsel from a professional who can properly interpret the research and lead you to a higher communications performance. A [skilled communications consultant](#) can help you chart a course for continued improvement.

The stakes are high when you communicate in public — too high to risk a nonverbal faux pas. Your next new client, big sale, promotion, or public affairs victory may hang in the balance.



## Appendix A: Recommended Resources

Some resources on nonverbal communications are quite good. Others, often penned by general writers with no particular communications expertise, lack depth or contain bad information. References recommended here have been created by communications experts who know their stuff. In assembling this list, I've aimed toward practical resources that business executives will find useful. For that reason, I've mostly avoided academic and technical sources.

**Collett, Peter.** *The Book of Tells*. London: Bantam, 2004. The author delves into what our nonverbal signals tell others. A thorough index makes this a most useful volume.

**Ekman, Paul.** *Emotions Revealed* (second edition). New York: Times Books, 2007. Ekman is one of the world's foremost researchers into facial expressions, and this is one of the seminal works on that topic. While he leans toward the technical at times, this is a must-read for those seeking deep insights into nonverbals.

**Ekman, Paul.** *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage (fourth edition)*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. Originally published in 1985, Ekman offers insights into nonverbal communication.

**Ekman, Paul, and Maureen O'Sullivan.** September 1991. "Who Can Catch a Liar?" *American Psychologist*, 913-920.

**Knapp, Mark L., Judith A. Hall, and Terrence G. Horgan.** *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014. A thoroughly sourced review of writings on nonverbal topics, tending toward a psychological and academic tone. A highly useful feature: Thought-provoking questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.

**Mehrabian, Albert.** *Nonverbal Communication*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972. One of the early definitive texts on nonverbals, it still stands the test of time. Those seeking a fuller understanding would be wise to turn to this groundbreaking research on how people receive your nonverbal signals.

**Mehrabian, Albert.** *Silent Messages*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1981, 1971. This scholar's first book on nonverbal signals contains some interesting findings, but has nowhere near the clarity or systematic research of his 1972 work listed above.

**Morrison, Terri.** *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries (second edition)*. Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media, 2006. Excellent views into the customs and nonverbal styles of business people in other nations.



**Navarro, Joe.** *What Every Body Is Saying*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. An ex-FBI agent leans on his experience interrogating others, and shares it with readers in a no-nonsense, practical manner. To stay current, check out [Navarro's Twitter feed](#), where he is more active than most other experts listed here.

**Nierenberg, Gerard I., Henry H. Calero, and Gabriel Grayson.** *How to Read a Person Like a Book: Observing Body Language to Know What People Are Thinking*. New York: Square One Publishers, Inc., 2009. The authors' recurring recommendation to practice observing nonverbal signals in public places is sound. Beware, however, for the research here is not terribly deep or foolproof. Their take on eye direction, for example, misses the mark, and they seem to believe that crossed arms can mean only defensiveness.

**Pease, Allan and Barbara.** *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2004. Easy to understand yet thorough treatment of nonverbal communication. On the down side, it lacks an index, an unforgivable negative in a reference book.

**Remland, Martin S.** *Nonverbal Communication in Everyday Life (fourth edition)*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2016. While a textbook, this is written mostly in lay language. Remland includes an extensive list of reference material for those interested in a deeper dive. Also of particular interest are the exercises and the readings from authoritative sources laced throughout the chapters.

An author's note: My thanks to the staff at the Jefferson Building's Main Reading Room at the Library of Congress. From the research librarians to the staff that pulls books from the shelves to the cloakroom attendants, we can be grateful for such dedicated, helpful, and pleasant public servants. While I've been using the reading room since my days as a Senate intern decades ago, I never cease to be awed by its grandeur, and humbled to have the opportunity to utilize the world's foremost research facility.

## Appendix B: Suggested Nonverbal Exercises

Below are a handful of drills you can conduct both to assess your perception of nonverbal signals from others and to sharpen your own nonverbal performance. Don't obsess over right or wrong answers. The point is to get you thinking and talking about how we communicate in this manner so that you can use it to your benefit in your everyday professional encounters.

I invite you to [contact me](#) to discuss your discoveries. You may also come up with additional exercises; let me know what you develop so we can share your submissions in future editions of this paper.

- Analyze and discuss with trusted colleagues how much communication you receive from nonverbal indicators vs. the words you hear.
- When communicating with others, how can you use your nonverbal signals to help you in your career or business?
- Similarly, when receiving nonverbal signals, how can you use them to help you in your career or business?
- Think of an instance where you read a nonverbal cue out of context and later proved yourself wrong. How can you avoid such a mistake the next time?
- Consider the last time a business associate came across as a cold fish. What made you think that?
- What nonverbal traits make you think of someone as a leader?
- What nonverbal traits make you think of someone as a follower?
- Which facial expressions hold the most meaning to you? What do they say?
- How have you modified your nonverbal performance during video calls?
- How do you assess others' nonverbal clues different when participating in a video conference?
- Can we change our nonverbal behavior? If so, to what extent? Should we try to change it?
- Which politicians come across as sincere based on their body language? Which seem phony?
- What nonverbal differences have you observed between men and women?

- Could you fake a facial expression and get away with it?
- Is trying to fake a nonverbal signal the same as lying?
- How uncomfortable are people with making eye contact on the street or on the subway or bus?
- How well do you maintain solid eye contact when in a video meeting?
- When listening to someone talk, how do these qualities affect your perception of the speaker?
  - High- vs. low-pitched voice
  - Fast vs. slow rate of speech
  - Loud vs. soft talker
  - An accent or lack thereof
  - Fluid vs. choppy syntax
- Discuss how the nonverbal behavior of you and a client/reporter/member of Congress/boss can affect the outcome of your conversation.
- Try to communicate a thought using only nonverbals. How would you do it? Demonstrate.
- Watch an interview on a TV talk show. Did the subject's nonverbals match their words? Did they appear truthful to you? What did their nonverbals seem to convey that their words did not?

## About Ed Barks

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Ed Barks is a business author and communications strategy consultant. His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need.

He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.



Ed is the author of [four books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5500 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations professionals toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

He is also the founder and community leader of the [C-suite Blueprint blog](#). Keep up with the latest from Ed by joining his *Communications Community* at [www.barkscomm.com](http://www.barkscomm.com).

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