

# The 4 Skills Needed to Make a Great Impression

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Making a great first impression is crucial -- not only in your professional life, but socially, too. But first impressions are not always easy, and if you fail to catch someone's attention, it may be game over for you.

Check out these tips to help you always make a lasting impression on someone you meet.

## Put your hands up!

I'm a TED Talk junkie, and I've often wondered why some talks generate enormous traffic, and some fall flat, even if the talks themselves are equally interesting. Could it have to do with [first impressions](#)? To find out, I designed an experiment. I had a team of coders analyze hundreds of hours of TED Talks, looking for differences between the least and most viewed videos. We counted hand gestures and measured vocal variety, [smiling](#) and body movement.

Here's what we found: The most popular TED Talkers used hand gestures to instantly build [trust](#) with their audience. The most popular used an average of 465 hand gestures (yes, our coders counted every single one). The least popular TED Talkers used an average of 272 hand gestures. And TED superstars Temple Grandin, Simon Sinek and Jane McGonigal topped the charts with more than 600 hand gestures in just 18 minutes.



### Related: [How to Master the Art of the First Impression](#)

This effect isn't specific to TED Talks. More than 30 years ago, researchers Robert Gifford, Cheuk Fan Ng and Margaret Wilkinson found that, among other aspects, job candidates who used more hand gestures in their interviews were more likely to get hired.

Why do hand gestures have such an impact? They can show intention. Think back to the caveman days. When a stranger approached our caveman ancestors, the best way to tell if the stranger had good or bad intentions was to look at their hands. Were they carrying a rock or a spear? Then as the stranger introduced themselves, our ancestors watched their gestures to make sure they weren't going to reach out and attack or steal precious belongings. My theory: Even though we aren't often subjected to physical harm today, this ancient survival mechanism remains.

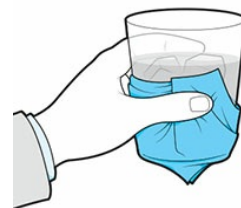
When someone can see your hands, they feel more at ease and are more likely to befriend you. I have found that the absolute easiest thing you can do to improve your first impression is to keep your hands visible. So when you walk into a room or are waiting to meet someone, keep your hands out of your pockets. Pockets are *murderers* of rapport. Don't let desks, purses or laptops block them, either. And never, ever skip a handshake. The moment we have skin-to-skin touch with someone, our body produces something called oxytocin. Researcher Paul Zak discovered the power of this little hormone to facilitate trust. In one experiment, he was able to manipulate the trust of participants simply by giving them a dose of oxytocin. Think about that. They don't call it "the connection hormone" for nothing.

## How to give a perfect handshake

**Keep it dry.** Nothing is worse than a slimy palm. If you're at a party, wrap some extra napkins around your drink. The innermost will absorb condensation; the rest are your wipe.

**Keep it vertical.** Offering your palm up is considered by some to be a submissive or weak gesture, whereas forcing someone into the palm-up position by putting your hand out palm down can be seen as domineering.

**Be firm.** How can you tell if a peach is ripe? You squeeze until you feel a tiny bit of resistance. Same goes for people. Squeeze until you feel their muscles tighten, and then stop. And never give someone a limp hand -- it's deadly for rapport.



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## Stand like a winner

Projecting an air of confidence is absolutely critical when meeting someone new. Why? It's simple. Because, as humans, we want to be associated with winners, not losers. We want to be led by winners, not losers. And in the first few seconds of an interaction, we're looking for indications of confidence. We're trying to decide if the person we are speaking with looks like a winner or a loser. And that person is looking for the exact same thing in us.

So what does a winner look like? Researchers Jessica Tracy and David Matsumoto wanted to find out. To do this, they compared how various sighted and blind Olympic athletes behaved after they won or lost a race. Did those people display the same forms of pride and shame? The answer was yes -- across cultures, and regardless of whether an athlete had ever seen other athletes with their own eyes, the behavior of winning and losing was identical. Winners typically raise their arms over their heads, expand their chests and tilt their heads up toward the sky. Losers bow their heads, slump their shoulders, and pin their arms tightly to their sides.



The fact that athletes instinctively use the same body language shows us how innately programmed we are to nonverbally broadcast victory and defeat. When we're proud, we want people to notice us, so we take up space. When we feel defeated, we try to deflect attention by taking up as little space as possible.

Now, as much as I want you to look like a winner, the traditional winner's pose is a bit much for everyday interactions. Instead, I use something I call the launch stance. This is a slightly toned-down version of the winner's posture: Keep your shoulders down and back; aim your chin, chest and forehead straight in front of you or slightly up; keep space between your arms and torso -- not too much -- and, again: Keep those hands out of your pockets.

**Related:** [8 Great Tricks for Reading People's Body Language](#)

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## Look 'em straight in the eye

Once we decide someone is a winner, we want to know if we should align with them -- if, so to speak, they should be on our team. This is the differentiator between a good first impression and a great one. So we ask ourselves questions: *Does this person like me? Would this person respect my opinion? Will this person include me? Will this person help me?* If the answers are no, we'll never warm to that person.

And if you're the one being evaluated, how do you communicate that you're worth aligning with? Easy: eye contact.

One of the most powerful examples of eye contact is in a video done by activist Jae West and her team at [Liberators International](#), an organization that aims "to coordinate, record and distribute monthly global acts of freedom," and whose YouTube channel is filled with many daring acts of kindness and awareness-raising. The video is called "[The World's Biggest Eye Contact Experiment](#)." In this video, strangers are asked to participate in one minute of sustained eye contact with another stranger. "We were definitely nervous going into it," says West. "It's quite confronting to stare a stranger in the eye and allow yourself to be vulnerable."

The results were overwhelming. More than 100,000 people participated in the experiment in 156 cities around the world. After just one minute of eye contact, stranger after stranger ended their moment in tears, hugs and astonishment.

Why is eye contact so powerful? Like a handshake, we're programmed to interpret the right amount of eye contact as a nonverbal signal of goodwill -- because when you like someone, you look at them more. Just don't overdo it. Body language experts Barbara and Allan Pease say the ideal is to look someone in the eye 60 to 70 percent of the time you're interacting with them. If you do far less than that, you can appear timid and nervous. More, and you're off-putting. But in that sweet spot, you're making a connection that lasts.

**Related:** [15 Body Language Secrets of Successful People](#)

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## How to move

What do you say when you don't say anything? Lillian Glass, Ph.D., a body language expert and communications consultant, tells us six things to watch for.

**1. Stop fidgeting.** "You've got to eliminate tapping your fingers, shaking your leg, tapping your feet," she says. Those are signals that you're insecure and uncomfortable. And appearing insecure makes others less inclined to engage with you.

**2. Be sure to lean in.** "If you're leaning away from someone in conversation, that's a huge body code saying, 'I don't want anything to do with you.' Lean into the conversation to show your comfort level."

**3. Watch the face.** Your autonomic nervous system kicks into overdrive if you're feeling nervous or lying, making you itchy. Pulling on your nose or scratching your cheek can signal deception, while chewing on a pen cap "gives off a sense of being judgmental."

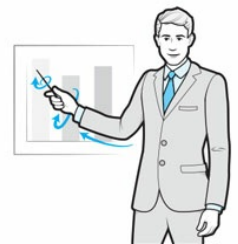
**4. Easy on the blinking.** When we're nervous, we blink more than usual, Glass says. "Your nerves are firing rapidly, your subconscious is working overtime and your eyes dry up to compensate."



**5. Mind the goods.** People tend to unconsciously cover their genitals when they stand up. “Your natural human instinct is to protect the most vulnerable parts of the body,” Glass says. But doing so “weakens your position and makes you look insecure.”



**6. Flail = fail.** “Sometimes if you don’t know how to use your hands properly, you start flailing all over the place,” Glass says. But don’t be too stiff. “You have to flow, be easy at the wrist and the elbow, which will show you have command of the situation.”



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**Trash the script**

Sometimes we're lazy or plain afraid of tackling new topics in social situations. I get it. We have our scripts -- *Where are you from? What do you do?* -- and we stick to them. But what's the point of following nearly identical social scripts every time you talk to someone? What's the point of trying to talk to a new client if the conversation is so boring they won't remember it anyway?



Good conversation has tons of sparks: little bursts of pleasure we remember. In the brain, sparks are marked by dopamine, a neurotransmitter released when we feel pleasure. Importantly, that little chemical also helps your long-term memory. "You can think of it like a Post-it Note that reads, 'Remember this!'" says molecular biologist Dr. John Medina.

"Getting one's brain to put a chemical Post-it Note on a given piece of information means that information is going to be more robustly processed." In other words, being memorable boils down to inducing chemical pleasure. When you produce dopamine during a conversation, you not only give your partner more enjoyment; you are also assigned more significance, which increases your memorability.

How do you trigger dopamine? By asking fresh questions that ignite new ideas, introducing topics we hadn't thought about, and stimulating in-depth discussions. In 2016, to better understand this, my company teamed up with the organizations Mercy Corps, Society for Information Management and Girls Inc. We randomly partnered more than 300 participants and gave each pair seven slips of paper. On each slip, one of the following questions appeared:

- What's your story?
- How are you?
- What was the highlight of your day?
- What do you do?
- Has anything exciting come up in your life?
- What brings you here?
- What personal passion project are you working on?

Once everyone was seated, we ran them through what was essentially the networking version of speed-dating. When we rang a bell, they picked up one of the slips and had a conversation based on it. After three minutes, we rang another bell and they rated the quality of that conversation -- from 1 (for boring) to 5 (for stellar). We wanted to see which subjects would rank the highest.

And here are the results, in order from most to least interesting. 1. What was the highlight of your day? 2. What personal passion project are you working on? 3. Has anything exciting come up in your life? 4. What's your story? 5. What brings you here? 6. What do you do? 7. How are you?

Notice that the least effective sparkers are the ones people tend to use the most. Coincidence? No. We stick to social scripts out of habit. We use the same dull conversation starters over and over again because they are in our comfort zone. But we need to stop that. Nothing spark-worthy happens in your comfort zone.

All this advice really drives toward one thing: When we meet new people, we have to quickly decide if we want them in our lives. First impressions are a survival mechanism, a way to instinctively react to external stimuli and decide whether you should stay or flee. If you want someone to stay, you need to quickly win them over. Keep your hands visible, make eye contact, stand like a winner and try nontypical conversation sparkers. That's how you'll turn strangers into acquaintances, acquaintances into friends and prospects into clients. That's how you become memorable.

**Related:** [9 Phrases Smart People Never Use In Conversation](#)

## How to make eye contact

It's imperative to making a strong connection -- but how much is too much? Here are three ways to perfect your gaze.

**1. Hold it.** Eye contact during a conversation increases brain stimulation and, as a result, recall of the conversation. But it doesn't take much: A 2006 study found that maintaining eye contact just 30 percent of the time significantly increased a listener's memory.

**2. But not for too long.** Research shows that holding eye contact longer than three seconds without taking a break can be interpreted as aggressive, causing listeners to feel defensive and resistant to what you're saying.

**3. And take breaks.** Eye contact and word generation share cognitive resources, according to a 2016 study. That means maintaining too much eye contact can sap your brain and impact your ability to verbally respond.

