



[Return to Main Page](#)

## Gestures: Body Language and Nonverbal Communication

By Gary Imai

### Contents

- **Gestures- Nonverbal Communication**
    1. **An Introduction**
    2. **The Ultimate Gesture**
    3. **Skills Needed**
    4. **Elevator Behavior**
  - **Asian Gestures**
    1. Asian Pacific Cultural Values
    2. Common Asian Gestures
    3. China
    4. Japan
    5. Korea
    6. Philippines
    7. Taiwan
  - **American Gestures**
    1. Common Gestures
      1. Worksheet
      2. Right, Wrong, or Rude
      3. Universal Hand Gestures
    2. Head, Legs, and Feet
    3. Arms, Hands, and Fingers
    4. American Stereotypes
  - **Activities**
  - **Appendix**
    1. Body Language Quote
    2. "The English Language," a poem
- 

### Gestures

#### An Introduction

Do we expect other cultures to adopt our customs or are we willing to adopt theirs? This might translate to how business or even foreign relations are to be conducted. Do we compromise or force others peoples to deal only on our terms? We may not have time to hear a language , but taking time to learn the "signals" is a powerful communicator.

As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant to the myriad motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day. And as many of us cross over cultural

borders, it would be fitting for us to respect, learn, and understand more about the effective, yet powerful "silent language" of gestures.

The world is a giddy montage of vivid gestures- traffic police, street vendors, expressway drivers, teachers, children on playground, athletes with their exuberant hugging, clenched fists and "high fives." People all over the world use their hands, heads, and bodies to communicate expressively.

Without gestures, our world would be static and colorless. The social anthropologists Edward T. Hall claims 60 percent of all our communication is nonverbal. In that case, how can we possibly communicate with one another without gestures?

Gestures and body language communicate as effectively as words- maybe even more effectively. We use gestures daily, almost instinctively, from beckoning to a waiter, or punctuating a business presentation with visual signals to airport ground attendants guiding an airline pilot into the jetway or a parent using a whole dictionary of gestures to teach (or preach to) a child.

Gestures are woven inextricably in to our social lives, but also that the "vocabulary" of gestures, can be at once informative and entertaining... but also dangerous. Gestures can be menacing (two drivers on a freeway), warm (an open-armed welcome), instructive (a police man giving road directions), or even sensuous (the liquid movement of a Hawaiian hula dancer).

Bear in mind that the following gestures are in general use, but there may always be exceptions. In recent years, Western and contemporary values and ideas have become more popular and has either influenced, altered, and even replaced, some of the more traditional gestures, understanding human behavior is tricky stuff. No two people behave in precisely the same way. Nor do people from the same culture all perform exactly the same gestures and body language uniformly. For almost any gestures there will probably be a minority within a given nationality who might say "Well, some might attach that meaning to it, but to me it means..." and then they will provide a different interpretation.

In the world of gestures, the best single piece of advice is to remember the two A's - "Ask" and be "aware." If you see a motion or gesture that is new or confusing, ask a local person what it signifies. Then, be aware of the many body signs and customs around you.

Source: Axtell, Roger E. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons, 1991.

### **The Ultimate Gesture**

According to Roger G. Axtell, the "ultimate gesture" carries certain welcome characteristic unlike any other single gestures.

- First, this "ultimate gestures" is known everywhere- and I stress "everywhere" - in the world. It is absolutely universal.
- Second, it is rarely, if ever, misunderstood. Primitive tribes and world leaders alike know and use this gestures. The tribesmen - like you, no doubt - recognize it in others and use it themselves.
- Third, scientists believe this particular gesture actually releases chemicals called

endorphins in to the system that create a feeling of mild euphoria.

- Fourth, as you travel around the world, this gesture may help you slip out of the prickliest of difficult situations.

What is this singular signal, this miracle mien, this giant of all gestures?

It is quite simply, the smile.

Use it freely , use it often.

Source: Axtell, Roger E. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons, 1991.

### **Managerial skills needed by the year 2000**

1. **RESPECT:** This mean the capability of demonstrating respect in whichever way a specific culture requires: respect for age, respect in manner of speech, respect with eye contact, respect with hand or body gestures, respect for personal privacy, and so on.
2. **TOLERATING AMBIGUITY:** This refers to the skill of reacting positively to new, different, and at times, unpredictable situations.
3. **RELATING TO PEOPLE:** This means placing the management of people on an equal level with "getting the job done." Too often, American managers are totally result-oriented without sensitivity to the " people ingredient."
4. **BEING NON JUDGEMENTAL:** This is the ability to withhold judgment until all information is accumulated, while also taking into account cultural idiosyncrasies that could color judgment.
5. **PERSONALIZING ONE'S OBSERVATION:** This is the skill of recognizing that each person sees the world from his or her own platform of observations.
6. **EMPATHY:** This skill, the ability to place yourself in another person's shoes, is on of the higher level skills in intercultural relationships.
7. **PERSISTENCE:** This is the companion word to "patience." Both are firm requirements in dealing with people from other societies around the world.

- Brent R. Ruben

A global statesman who cares about people encompasses the several skills above plus three more-dignity, professionalism , and propriety.

"A statesmen is a person who can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you actually look forward to the trip."

Source: Hariis, Phillip R. and Robert T. Moran. *Managing Cultural Differences*. Gulf Publishing Co., Houston. 1977.

### **Elevator Behavior**

Next time you walk on to a crowded elevator, don't turn around and face the door. Instead, just stand there facing the others. If you want to create even more tension, grin. Very likely the other passengers will glare back, surprised, grim, and upset.

Reason? You have broken the rules.

This demonstrates how, even in the most mundane situations, we have a silent set of rules for bodily behavior in public settings.

When \_\_\_\_\_ people enter an elevator, they each...

one or two	...lean against the walls of the elevator.
four	...occupy a corner.
five or six	...all turn to face the door. ...get taller and thinner. ...hands and purses and briefcases hang down in front of the body, or "fig leaf position." ...must not touch each other in any way unless the elevator is crowded, and then only at the shoulder or lightly against the upper arm. ...have a tendency to look upward at the illuminated floor indicator.

Source: Axtell, Roger E. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons, 1991.

[Return to the top of this page.](#)

## Asian Gestures

### Asian Pacific Cultural Values

- Filial piety or respect for one's parents or elders.
- Unquestioning respect for authority. One is taught to respect those who lead, to be loyal, trustworthy and to follow through on assignments.
- Patriarchal authority of the elder. The parents define the law and the children are expected to abide by their requests and demands. The father is generally authoritarian, distant and reserved but his position is respected.
- Extended family - an extension of filial piety. Asians in the past have valued large families. Extended family included the immediate family and relatives. It is the responsibility of the family members to provide for the elders. In the Asian family, as one approaches old age, it is the beginning of relaxation and respect.
- Loyalty to family. Independent behavior that may disrupt the harmony of the family is highly discouraged.
- Concept of shame. One must not bring dishonor or disgrace to one's self or family.. Also, this concept is used as a controlling factor in the behavior of the family.
- Vertical authority - Goes from top to bottom in the extended family. One is not encouraged to criticize or confront an individual publicly.
- Father and son relationship is important because sons are valued to continue on the family name.
- Control of emotions, self discipline and self control is emphasized. This suppression of emotions gave rise to the stereotypical notion of "the inscrutable Asian." One should only speak when spoken to, speak only if one has something important to say, have inner stamina/strength to tolerate crises. be a solid performer and not show any emotion.
- Asian women are expected to carry on domestic duties, marry and have children.

- Education is highly valued. Children learn to obey at home and are expected to do so at school. They are taught to follow all the rules and regulations, respect authority and to spend all of their time studying to obtain high grades. Scholastic achievement is highly prized and co-curricular activities are given low priority,
- Group consensus is valued in the decision-making process. Collective decision-making, collective responsibility and teamwork are stressed. Rugged individualism is not esteemed.
- Interdependence not individualism is valued. Put group/family needs before individual needs.
- Perseverance, conformity, loyalty, hard work and frugality are values sought after.
- Fatalism. Acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty. Willingness to be patient accept things as they are.
- Humbleness. The visibility of the group not the individual is stressed. Power is shared collectively. Not polite to accept public recognition or to call attention to oneself. Hard work will be recognized and rewarded.
- Success syndrome. Becoming successful is paramount. Find the safest and least visible routes to success. Choose careers that are safe but respectable. Fear of failure and fear of bringing shame to the family are dominant forces. Risk taking is not encouraged. Success = Stability/Respectability.

Source: Leadership Management Institute(LMI). "Asian Pacific Cultural Values." Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics. (1990).

### **Common Asian Gestures**

- GREETINGS GESTURES
  - Handshaking
  - Bowing
  - Avoid direct eye contact
- BEKONING GESTURES
  - To beckon someone, the palm faces downward and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion.
  - Avoid using fingers in pointing to an object.
- TOUCHING GESTURES
  - Not touch oriented societies
  - Avoid public display of affection
  - Pushing (bumping) in crowds
- OTHER NON VERBAL GESTURES
  - Respect to elderly people
  - Smiling often can cover a gamut of emotions: happiness, anger, confusion, apologies, or sadness.
  - Displaying an open mouth (such as yawning or a wide-open laugh) is considered rude, especially with women who cover their mouths when giggling or laughing.
  - Try to maintain a balanced posture, stand or sit erectly or squarely. Don't slouch or put on the ground with arms in the lap or on the armrest. Crossing the legs at the knees or ankles is the preferred form rather than with one ankle over the other knee.
  - Silence (listening) is a sign of politeness and of contemplation. During conversations, be especially careful about interrupting.

### **China**

- GREETINGS GESTURES
  - The western custom of shaking hands is the customary form of greeting, but often a nod of the head or slight bow is sufficient. Hugging and kissing when greeting are uncommon.
  - Business cards are often exchanged, and yours should be printed in your own language and in Chinese. Also, it is more respectful to present your card (or a gift or any other article) using both hands.
  - The Chinese are enthusiastic applauders. You may be greeted with group clapping, even by small children. When a person is applauded in this fashion it is the custom for that person to return the applause or a "thank you."
  - When walking in public places, direct eye contact and staring is uncommon in the larger cities, especially in those areas accustomed to foreign visitors. However, in smaller communities, visitors may be the subject of much curiosity and therefore you may notice some stares.
- TOUCHING GESTURES
  - Generally speaking, the Chinese are not a touch-oriented society (especially true for visitors). So avoid touching or any prolonged form of body contact.
  - Public displays of affection are very rare. On the other hand, you may note people of the same sex walking hand-in-hand, which is simply a gesture of friendship.
  - Don't worry about a bit of pushing and shoving in stores or when groups board public buses or trains. Apologies are neither offered or expected.
  - Personal space is much less in China. The Chinese will stand much closer than Westerners.
- BECKONING GESTURES
  - To beckon someone, the palm faces downward and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion. Avoid use the index finger, palm up and toward you, in a back forth curling motion toward your body. That gesture is used only for animals and can be considered rude.
  - The open hand is used for pointing (not just one or two fingers,)
  - Also, avoid using your feet to gesture or to move or touch other objects because the feet are considered lowly and dirty.
- OTHER NONVERBAL GESTURES
  - Avoid being physically intimidating (be humble), especially with older or more senior people.
  - Posture is important, so don't slouch or put your feet on desks or chairs.
  - Silence is perfectly acceptable and customary. Silence (listening) is a sign of politeness and of contemplation. During conversations, be especially careful about interrupting.
  - Chinese like to avoid saying "no." A gesture that is often used to signal "no" or that "something is very difficult" (pausing to rethink) is to tip the head backward and audibly suck air in through the teeth.
  - On public streets, spitting and blowing the nose without the benefit of a handkerchief is fairly common, although the government is waging a campaign to reduce this in the cities. It used to be regarded as ridding the body of a waste- an act of personal hygiene . However, today it is a sign of "low" class or uneducated.

## Japan

In summary, for most visitors the Japanese are complex and difficult to understand. Remember two things: (1) style, or the way things are done, is just as important as substance, or what is being done; and (2) watch your Japanese hosts carefully and follow their example.

- GREETING GESTURES

- The graceful act of bowing is the traditional greeting.
- However, they have also adopted the western custom of shaking hands, albeit with a light grip and perhaps with eyes averted. Meanwhile, to show respect for their customs, it would flatter them to offer a slight bow when being introduced.
- Avoid hugging and kissing when greeting.
- It is considered rude to stare. Prolonged direct eye contact is considered impolite or even intimidating.
- It is considered rude to stand with your hand or hands in your pockets, especially when greeting someone or when addressing a group of people.
- The seemingly simple act of exchanging business cards is more complex in Japan because the business card represents not only one's identity but one's station in life. Yours should be printed in your own language and in Japanese.

- TOUCHING GESTURES

- The Japanese are not a touch-oriented society, so avoid open displays of affection, touching or any prolonged form of body contact.
- Queues are generally respected; it is only in crowded train and subway stations where the huge volume of people causes touching and pushing.

- BECKONING GESTURES

- It is considered insulting to point to someone fingers extended and the thumb folded into the palm.
- To beckon someone, the palm faces downward and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion.

- OTHER NONVERBAL GESTURES

- Because of the high regard for graciousness and restraint, one should not shout, raise the voice in anger, or exhibit any excessively demonstrative behavior.
- Among the Japanese, smiling often can cover a gamut of emotions: happiness, anger, confusion, apologies, or sadness.
- Displaying an open mouth (such as yawning or a wide open laugh) is considered rude in Japan, especially with women who cover their mouths when giggling or laughing.
- Try to maintain a balanced posture stand or sit erectly or squarely. Do not slouch or put your feet on desks or chairs. When seated have both feet squarely on the ground with arms in the lap or on the armrests. Crossing the legs at the knee or ankles is the preferred form rather than with one ankle over the other knee.
- Silence is perfectly acceptable and customary. Silence (listening) is a sign of politeness and of contemplation. During conversations, be especially careful about interrupting.
- One way to show concentration and attentiveness is to close the eyes in contemplation and nod the head slight, up and down.
- Japanese men like to avoid saying "no", but one gesture that is often used to signal "no" or that "something is very difficult" is to tip the head backward and audibly suck air in through the teeth.

- OTHER NONVERBAL GESTURES
  - A gesture saying "I do not know," or "I don't understand" or "No, I am undeserving" is waving the hand back and forth in front of one's own face (palm outward).
  - The "O.K." gesture in Japan may be interpreted as the signal for "money" or "give me change in coins."
  - Blowing your nose in public is considered rude. The handkerchief is used primarily for wiping the mouth or drying the hands when leaving the washroom. Paper tissues are used for blowing the nose and then discarded.
  - When entering a private home or traditional restaurants with tatami (bamboo mats) floors, it is usually customary to remove your shoes and place them with the toes pointing toward the outdoors.
- BOWING
  - Many westerners view the bow as an act of subservience, but in Japan that would be completely wrong. For the Japanese a bow signals respect and humility, two qualities coveted throughout Asia.
  - Although it is not absolutely necessary, but a slight bow demonstrates that you respect their customs. And in Japan, where style and grace and courteousness are revered, that simple act would surely be noted, appreciated, and probably remembered.
  - WHO BOWS FIRST? AND HOW LOW DOES ONE BOW? In Japan, it is extremely important to know the rank of people with whom you come in contact.
    - "The person of lower rank bows first and lowest."
    - "The higher the rank of the person facing you, the lower you bow."
    - "The lower the bow and the longer one holds the position, the stronger is the indication of respect, gratitude, sincerity, obeisance, humility, contriteness, etc."
    - With equals match bows, adding an extra one when you want to show a slight edge of respect.
    - When unsure of status, the safest move is to bow a shade less low than the other person.
    - The proper form is to bow (about 15 degrees) with hands sliding down toward the knees or at the sides, back neck stiff, and eyes averted. The formal bow (about 30 degrees) with palms on knees and often bobbing up and down. Never bow with a hand (of both hands) in your pockets.

Sources:

Axtell, Roger E., ed. *Do's and Taboos Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons, 1993.

Axtell, Roger E. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. John Wiley & Sons, 1991.

DeMente, Boye. *Japanese Etiquette & Ethics in Business*. Passport Books, 1987.

## **Korea**

- GREETING GESTURES
  - Among themselves, bowing is the traditional form for both greeting and departing.



- Western and Korean male friends usually greet with both a slight bow and shaking hands. When shaking hands, both hands are sometimes used. Women usually do not shake hands, especially with men, but usually just nod slightly. The senior person offers to shake hands first, but the junior person bows first. However, shake hands with a light grip and perhaps with eyes averted.
- Avoid hugging and kissing when greeting.
- Prolonged direct eye contact is considered impolite and even intimidating.
- Business cards are traded respectfully. Keep the card on the table in front of you as just one small gesture of respect.
- When saying good-bye, the traditional gesture is the bow, but the younger generation has adopted the western custom of waving good-bye by moving their arm side-to-side.
- TOUCHING GESTURES
  - Generally speaking, the Koreans are not a touch-oriented society (especially true for visitors.) So avoid touching or any prolonged form of body contact.
  - Public display of affection are very rare. On the other hand, you may note people of the same sex walking hand-in-hand, which is simply a gesture of friendship.
  - Don't worry about a bit of pushing in stores or when groups board public buses or trains. Apologies are neither offered or expected.
- BECKONING GESTURES
  - The open hand or the middle finger is used for pointing.
  - To beckon someone, the palm faces downward and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion. Using the arm and hand up, palm toward the face is used only for calling dogs and children.
- OTHER NONVERBAL GESTURES
  - Respect is always shown to elderly people, so it is appropriate to rise when a person-- especially an elderly man enters the room or giving up a seat on a subway. However, an elder may not give up a seat for a young boy.
  - Men generally have priority in Korea: Go through a door first, walk ahead of women, and women may help them on with their coats.
  - Among the Koreans, laughter is used to disguise many emotions: anger, frustration, and fear.
  - Loud talking or laughing is usually avoided. Koreans, especially women will cover their mouths laughing, resulting in giggling rather than wide open-mouth laughing.
  - Periods of silence are common and accepted, even during dinners.
  - Correct posture is important, especially when seated. Don't slouch or put your feet on desks or chairs. Try to maintain a balanced posture, stand or sit erectly or squarely. When seated have both feet squarely on the ground with arms in the lap or on the armrests. Crossing the legs at the knees or ankles is the preferred form rather than with one ankle over the other knee.
  - When walking in public, keep to the left side of the walkway and stairway.
- OTHER NONVERBAL GESTURES
  - It is considered impolite to enter a room without knocking first.

However, Koreans may not wait for you to come to the door and open it. They may knock and then enter.

- When walking in public places, direct eye contact is uncommon in the larger cities. However, visitors may be the subject of much curiosity and therefore you may notice some stares.
- Blowing your nose in public is considered rude, especially at a meal. Paper tissues are used for blowing the nose and then discarded.
- When entering a private home, it is usually customary to remove your shoes.
- Spitting (except for young women) and burping in public is acceptable.

### **Phillipines**

#### ■ GREETING GESTURES

- Handshaking is the common custom, with both men and women shaking hands in a friendly and informal fashion.
- Filipinos may greet one another with the "eyebrow flash" which is merely a quick lifting of the eyebrows.

#### ■ TOUCHING GESTURES

- Generally speaking, the Filipinos are a touch-oriented society.
- People of the same sex may be seen holding hands in public places, which is simply a gesture of friendship.
- Don't worry about a bit of pushing and shoving when using public transportation, Filipinos seldom queue or observe orderly lines.

#### ■ BECKONING GESTURES

- Instead of pointing to an object, Filipinos will shift their eyes toward it, or purse the lips and point with the mouth.
- To beckon someone, the palm faces downward and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion. Never curl your index finger back and forth because that is considered insulting.

#### ■ OTHER NONVERBAL GESTURES

- It is considered rude to stare. Prolonged direct eye contact is considered impolite and even intimidating.
- Respect is always shown to elderly people.
- Among the Filipinos, laughter is used to convey both enjoyment and pleasure but also to mask embarrassment over another person's misfortune.
- Speaking in aloud voice is considered ill-mannered and rude.

### **Taiwan**

#### ■ GREETING GESTURES

- The western custom of shaking hands is spreading rapidly and is now probably the customary form of greeting, but often a nod of the head is sufficient. Hugging and kissing when greeting are uncommon.
- Repeatedly blinking the eyes at someone is considered impolite.
- Business cards are often exchanged, but it is considered impolite to "scrutinize" card in their presence; place it near you for reference rather than quickly putting it aside or in your pocket. Also it is more respectful to present your card (or a gift or any other article) using both hands.
- One gesture of special respect for the elderly is to cover your left fist with your right hand or place palms together, and raise both hands to your heart.

#### ■ TOUCHING GESTURES

- Generally speaking, The Taiwanese are not a touch-oriented society.

- Public displays of affection are very rare. On the other hand, you may note people of the same sex walking hand-in hand, which is simply a gesture of friendship.
- BECKONING GESTURES
  - The open hand is used for pointing (not just one or two fingers).
  - To beckon someone. the palm faces downward and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion. Never use the index finger, palm up and toward you, in a back and forth curling motion toward your body. That gesture is used only for animals.
  - Also, avoid using your feet to gesture or move or touch other objects because the feet are considered lowly and dirty.
- NONVERBAL GESTURES
  - Great respect is afforded the elderly, so it is important to let your actions reflect this. Speak to them first, hold doors open for them, rise when they enter a room, give up your seat if no others are available, remove glasses (especially sunglasses) when addressing them, etc.
  - Posture is important, so don't slouch or put your feet on desks or chairs.
  - The gesture to indicate "no" is to lift your hand to face level, palm facing outward, and moving it back and forth like a windshield wiper, sometimes with a smile.
  - Loud, boisterous, or rude behavior is a strong taboo in Taiwan, however loudness may be accepted in restaurants.

[Return to the top of this page.](#)

---

### American Gestures

- COMMON GESTURES
  1. Americans are a not touch (touch/not touch)oriented.
  2. In normal social situations, Americans generally stand about 30 inches apart from one another, which is also considered their personal "comfort zone."
  3. At sporting events or the theater, Americans usually slide into a crowded aisle while facing forward (forward/the people).

Gesture	Meaning
Americans shake hands, and from an early age they are taught to do so with a firm., solid grip.	When greeting one another.
American children are taught to look others directly in the eyes.	When greeting and conversing. If not, means shyness or weakness.
Arm raised and the open hand "waggles" back and forth.	Signaling "hello" or "good-bye." Or trying to get someone's attention.
Americans will often wave to another person and then turn to make hand scoop inward; or raise the index finger ) palm toward one's face, and make a "curling " motion with that finger.	To beckon or summon another person.
Palm facing out with the index and middle fingers displayed in the shape of a "V."	"Victory" or "peace."

Thumb and forefinger form a circle with the other three fingers splayed upward; it is used frequently and enthusiastically.	"O.K." meaning "fine" or "yes."
Thumb up with a close fist.	Meaning support or approval, "O.K." or "Good Going!" or "Good job!"
Fist raised with index finger and little finger extended.	Texas rallying call "hook 'em horns." Baseball meaning "two outs."
Whistling	Pretty woman, cheering at sporting events, applauding performances.
Nodding and shaking the head.	Yes and No
Extend the forefinger and make a circular motion near the temple or ear.	Something or someone is "crazy."

### RIGHT, WRONG, OR RUDE

- Handshake - Although generally adopted around the world. Southeast Asians press together; Japanese bow; Middle Easterners and many Asians favor a gently grip.
- DIRECT EYE CONTACT - Asians, Puerto Ricans, West Indians, African American, Native Americans considered it to be rude, or disrespectful, or intimidating, or may indicate sexual overtones.
- WAVING - "No" to most Europeans. Europeans raise the arm and "Bob" the hand up and down at the wrist."
- BECKONING - Europeans and Asians raise the arm, palm facing down, and make a scratching motion with fingers. In Australia and in Indonesia, curling the index finger is used for beckoning animals.
- "V" FOR VICTORY--In England, palm facing inward toward the face is an obscene gesture.
- THE O.K GESTURE--In France it means zero. In Japan it means money or coins. In Brazil, Germany, and the former USSR., it is obscene gesture.
- THUMBS UP --Also used for hitch-hiking in American. In Nigeria a rude gesture. In Australia, if pumped up and down is an obscene gesture. In Germany and Japan, the signal for "one."
- WHISTLING--Throughout Europe, whistling at public events is a signal of disapproval, even derision.
- NODDING AND SHAKING HEAD--Opposite meaning in Bulgaria, parts of Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Iran, and Bengal.
- CRAZY-- In Argentina, "you have telephone call."

### UNIVERSAL HAND GESTURES

MEANING	HAND GESTURE
I am tired.	Pressing the palms together and resting the head on the back of the hand while closing the eyes as if sleeping.
I am hungry.	patting the stomach with the hands
After eating, I am full.	taking the hand and making a circular motion over

	the stomach.
I am thirsty.	Using the hand and making a circular motion over the stomach.
I am cold, or it's cozy or a sign of eager anticipation.	rubbing the hands together.

**AMERICAN GESTURES**

AMERICAN MEANING	GESTURE
Greetings	hand shake
Farewells	raise the hand and with the full, open palm wave the hand back and forth raise the hand and with a full, open palm wave the hand up and down at the wrist.
Beckoning	raise the hand, with the index finger, raised about head high or a little higher raise the hand and with the full, open palm wave the hand back and forth to attract attention; curl the index finger in and out
O.K.	Thumb and forefinger making a circle.
Good Job	Thumbs up
"Victory" or "peace"	holding the index and middle fingers upright

**AMERICAN GESTURES - HEAD**

Yes	nodding the head up and down
No	Shaking the head side to side.
Thinking or confused or skeptical	scratching the head
Shows attentiveness, listening	direct eye contact
sharing a secret or flirtatious	winking with one eye
Flirtatious gesture by men	eyebrow flash(raising the eyebrows)
incredulity or amazement	rolling the eyes
I can't hear you	cupping the ear
someone or something is crazy	rotating the forefinger (index) around in front of the ear
disgust or What's that smell?	Wrinkling the nose
smells bad or stinks	holding the nose with thumb and forefinger
Approval	whistling
disapproval	hiss and boo
rude, crude, insulting	spitting
tiredness or boredom	yawning
derision	sticking out the tongue

contemplation, I am thinking	chin stroke, tapping the head with forefinger
------------------------------	---

**LEGS AND FEET**

When seated, crossing legs	male: crosses at the ankles; rest ankle of one leg on top of the knee of the other leg; some cross the legs at the knees. female: crosses the legs at the knees; crosses the legs at the knees and curls the upper foot around the calf of the lower leg.
aggressive and very masculine stance	standing with feet apart (wide stance)
feminine stance	standing with feet apart (narrow stance)
military exhibiting respect and attention	heels together, toes pointed out at a slight angle

**ARMS, HANDS, AND FINGERS**

goal, touchdown, victory, or surrender	upraised arms
defensive, disagree	folded arms
aggression, resistance, impatience, or anger	standing with the hands of the hips bowed outward (arms akimbo)
praise and appreciation	hand-clapping or applause
Affection, friendship with children	hand holding
anger, resentment, or opposition	shaking the fist
"hand loose" or "relax"	holding thumb and little finger extended
American Sign Language for "I love you."	lifting the hand up, palm out, and extending the thumb, forefinger, and little finger.
Congratulations	high five
suicide	hand cuts across the throat
"choke." performed badly American Red Cross for "I am choking."	hand to the throat
Impatience	hand cuts across the top of the head
"you have a telephone call."	with a fist, extended the thumb and little finger widely holding it up to the ear.
Hitchhiking, Baseball meaning "Out."	make a fist with thumb up and making a sweeping motion.
Waving Goodbye	extend the hand outward, palm down, fingers spread, and then bobbing the whole hand up and down.
Money	rubbing the thumb and forefinger together
pointing	extend the hand with the index finger
"No, no, don't do that."	wagging the forefinger back and forth
Good luck	crossing the fingers

get someone's attention, music	snapping the fingers
--------------------------------	----------------------

## STEREOTYPES

### HOW VARIOUS PEOPLE OF THE WORLD VIEW AMERICANS

- Carelessness: With dress, possession, time, money. rules, manners, ceremonies, nature, relationships, politics, and more.
- Generous/Hospitable: As victors in war, as neighbors, as UN benefactors.
- Self Indulgent: Pursuing material things.
- Sentimental/Romantic: Prone to extremes in emotional expression; open.
- Materialistic: Usually honest; ambition and success are paramount; vastness.
- Confident and Self-confident: Even brash, yet demand almost too much of self.
- Complacent Yet Arrogant: Ethnocentric, embarrassingly so; misunderstand honor.
- Colonists: Ethnocentrically imperialistic; disregard for other systems; overly proud of own systems.
- Competitive Yet Egalitarian: A paradox to most in children to adult varieties; class and rank may be temporary; no real aristocracy.
- Resourceful: combining all of the above; lovers of common sense and results, inventions, innovation, and flexibility; "now" oriented.
- Independent and Difference: Individually feeling not to :fit other's mold," but fiercely if encroached upon as an American.

Source: Tyler, V. Lynn. *Intercultural Interacting*. (1987)

## STEREOTYPES

### HOW VARIOUS PEOPLE OF THE WORLD VIEW AMERICANS

- Pace of Life: The emphasis in America on punctuality and efficiency is often distressing to people from Africa, Asia, and Latin Countries.
- Friendship: Americans are gregarious on the first meeting, and this is often misinterpreted as an intended deep friendship.
- Service and Egalitarianism: because of a general absence of subservience in the United States, visitors find many waiters, taxi driver, bellboys, and other service employees what they consider as too egalitarian. In their home countries, the relationship would be, by American standards. Almost fawning.
- EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIVENESS: American seem to stand in he middle of the spectrum; to the effervescent Latins we appear cool, and yet to the reserved Asians we appear too forward and impulsive.
- INDIVIDUALS, FREEDOM, AND PRIVACY: some visitors are deeply impressed by the degree of individual freedom, particularly in the political arena, that an American enjoys. Others are disturbed by what they consider too much freedom, such as the widespread personal ownership of weapons.
- SELF-RELIANCE AND THE NUCLEAR-AGE FAMILY: feelings are mixed by on the one hand, the female's strong family role and the independence of children, and on the other hand the disregard for aged family members and strong family unity.
- INFORMALITY AND MORALITY: because many cultures dress more

carefully and conservatively, they automatically relate what we consider casualness and fashion with looseness in morality, even sexual provocation.

- **CRIME:** our open society and free press, especially the sensational press, cast an image around the world of a country besotted by crime. many visitors come here fearing their own safety.
- **TIPPING, TAXES AND SALES:** in many countries, tips are included in the costs of a meal or hotel room: the same with sales tax. as a result, visiting consumers become wary of our tipping and tax practices. they also are confused by American merchandising in determining when a sale is truly a sale.
- **RACE RELATIONS:** this social problem is well-known to visitors and views are as mixed and confused as our own. Many come here to find the problem less explosive than they imagined, while others cannot understand our apparent impassiveness.
- **TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP:** in many cultures, the teacher is not only a firm disciplinary figure but high on the social hierarchy. Therefore, visitors are shocked to see what they consider disrespectful attitudes toward teachers and school administration by American students and parents alike. Other visitors admire the informality of the student-teacher relationship here and the freedom of expression and individual growth.
- **LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR COUNTRIES:** The American's general lack of knowledge about world geography, compounded by our pervasive monolingual society, are great disappointments to most visitors.

Sources:

Fieg, John and Lenore Yaffee. *Adjusting to the U.S.A.* Meridian House International, Washington, D.C. (1977)

Harris, Philip R. And Robert T. Moran. *Managing Cultural Differences.* Gulf Publishing Co., Houston. (1977).

[Return to the top of this page.](#)

---

## Suggested Activities

### Gesture Activities

- Using Sir Francis Bacon's 17th century quote *Body Language* students should interpret and discuss its meaning for today and the 21st century.
- Using the hand-out, *The English Language*, have students read aloud the poem and discuss why it is or may be difficult for non-English speaking people to read.
- Have students discuss the rules of standing in an elevator.
- Students should identify some hand gestures understood in most cultures by completing the *Universal Hand Gesture* chart.
- Students should brainstorm/cluster/web what they know of Asian Pacific cultural values.
- Using a Venn diagram or chart, students compare and contrast gestures between Asian countries
- Using a Venn diagram or chart, students compare and contrast Asian gestures with American gestures.
- Given American gestures, students try to derive the meanings.



- Given the meanings of American gestures, students try to show the appropriate gestures.
- Students brain/cluster/web appropriate American gestures.
- From what they know of American gestures, students (individual or partners) complete the handout of *Common American Gestures*. Compare those answers to the handout, *Right, Wrong, or Rude*.
- In small groups (divided by body parts: head, arms, hands, fingers, legs, feet, posture, etc.), students cluster appropriate American gestures.
- Students brainstorm/cluster/web appropriate American teenage gestures (large or small group discussions, individual).
- Create a "survival" gesture book for foreign visitors (the do's and taboos).
- Create a "survival" gesture book for foreign teenage visitors (the do's and taboos).
- Students should interview someone who has recently lived in or visited an Asian country about gestures from that country.
- Students should interview others for appropriate gestures from another culture, region, group, or family.

#### Stereotype Activities

- Students should cluster Asian stereotypes and discuss the reasons for these stereotypes. May be used as an interview activity
- Immigrant students should cluster American stereotypes (how the world views Americans) and discuss the reasons for these stereotypes. May be used as an interview activity.
- Students should cluster teenage stereotypes (how do adults view teenagers). May be used as an interview activity.

#### Evaluation/Reflection

- Using an understanding of Asian Pacific gestures, explain the reasons for some of the more common Asian gestures.
- Discuss the reason why students need to be aware of another culture's gestures.
- Discuss any positive and/or negative effects of stereotyping a particular group.

[Return to the top of this page.](#)

---

## Appendix

### Body Language

If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins them.

- Sir Francis Bacon

### The English Language

I take it you already know  
 Of tough and bough and cough and dough?  
 Others may stumble, but not you  
 On hiccough, thorough, slough and through.  
 Well don't! And now you wish, perhaps,  
 To learn of less familiar traps.  
 Beware of heard, a dreadful word  
 That looks like beard but sounds like bird.

And dead: it's said like bed, not bead,  
For goodness sake don't call it deed!  
Watch out for meat and great and threat  
(They rhyme with suite and straight and debt).  
A moth is not a moth as in mother  
Nor both in bother, nor broth in brother,  
And here is not a match for there,  
Nor dear and fear, for bear and pear.  
And then there's dose and rose and lose -  
Just look them up - and goose and choose  
And cork and work and card and ward  
And font and front and word and sword  
And do and go, then thwart and cart,  
Come, come! I've hardly made a start.  
A dreadful language? Why man alive!  
I've learned to talk it when I was five.  
And yet to write it, the more I tried,  
I hadn't learned it at fifty-five.  
- Author Unknown

Source: Axtell, Roger E. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Hosting International Visitors*. John Wiley & Sons, 1990.

[Return to the top of this page.](#)

[Return to the 1996 Table of Contents.](#)

[Return to the TASSI main page.](#)