

Be Smooth

Smoothness characterizes the gestures and pace of a natural, comfortable speaker. Her movements are not fast and jerky; they are slow and smooth, and her pace of speaking is slower and smoother as a result.

This connection between the speed of gesturing and the pace of speaking is especially important at the very beginning of a presentation. It is important to start gesturing immediately, using movements that are slow, smooth, and expansive. If you do not, your inhibited and restrained initial gestural impulse will lead to small, fast, jerky mini-gestures, which will make you speak too quickly. Your train of thought will be more likely to derail, and you will make a weaker first impression on the audience.

If you begin gesturing at the outset, your natural gestures will make you look and feel comfortable, and will help you speak at a measured and deliberate pace. You will have more time to say carefully what you want to say. Hence you will look, sound, feel, think, and speak more effectively from the beginning. The positive first impression you make will grab the listeners' attention.

The secret of coordinating gestures and words at the proper pace is to practice this complex challenge alone, aloud, and on your feet. Don't leave beginnings to chance and inspiration.

Practice Beginnings with Gestures

Decide, in advance, exactly what you are going to say at the beginning of your presentation. This is one of the few times that you should practice saying verbatim—word-for-word—what you want to say in the first few sentences. Do not trust that on the spur of the moment you will spontaneously say exactly the right thing. It won't happen. (And you leave yourself vulnerable to saying something you regret. It is often at unplanned, spontaneous beginnings that awkward, inappropriate, or downright embarrassing things pop out of a presenter's mouth.)

Once you have found the precise wording of the very first sentences, then think about how to match your gestures to your words and

ideas. This coordination, described in the discussion of jump-starting your gestures in Chapter One, involves deciding what words and ideas you will place “on the shelf” of gesturing. Remember that this invisible, imaginary shelf is where you place your hands in the ready position prior to speaking. Once you begin to speak, your gestures occur at and on this waist-high shelf. Plan logical gestures at the beginning.

You may decide that gesturing on the introductory boilerplate (“Good morning, my name is _____ and I’m the managing partner here at _____...”) doesn’t feel quite right, although it is possible to gesture naturally even on the boilerplate. (Put your name on the shelf with one hand and your firm on the shelf with the other.) But immediately after that, what is the first substantive sentence you will say? Your first sentence might be this question:

How will the current *economic conditions* impact our firm’s hiring of *new associates*?

Thinking logically, you have two subjects, *economic conditions* and *new associates*. As you say this sentence, place *economic conditions* on the one hand, and *new associates* on the other. Try that, and see how it feels to put those two concepts on the shelf. Logically connect your gestures to what you are saying, so they function as a visual aid for the listeners. Emphasizing key words lets your audience see what you’re talking about: economic conditions, on the one hand, and new associates, on the other.

When you end your first substantive sentence with your body in this open and loose position, you send important symbolic messages to your audience as a first impression. The open position of the body says: “Trust me, I’m being open with you. I’m not hiding anything. I’m loose and natural, not uptight and stiff.” In addition, you have jump-started your body’s instinct to gesture, freeing your brain from any need to worry about what your hands are doing. Think about and practice your initial gestures so that you can quit thinking about them. Instinct will take over when you gesture immediately.

Here is another example. Questions are a good way to begin a presentation since they can be delivered using the questioning gesture:

hands about body width apart, palms up. Say aloud the question above using a single, open questioning gesture.

How will the current *economic conditions* impact the firm's hiring of *new associates*?

Once you've decided what you intend to say to begin, and which gesture will fit logically with those words, practice coordinating your words with gestures. Thinking about your choice is not sufficient; your muscles need to feel the action. Stand up in a room alone and speak aloud.

Practice so your gestures and your voice have muscle memory. Thinking about gesturing isn't enough; you must practice. (More about muscle memory in Chapter Four.)

There is one more thing you can do to prepare your muscles to gesture immediately and naturally. This mental preparation for physical activity is borrowed from sports psychologists.

Visualize Your Performance

Sports psychologists advise athletes to visualize their actions prior to competing. Athletes practice what they call "mental rehearsal." The Olympic skier imagines the moment when the buzzer sounds and she pushes off to plunge down the mountain in the giant slalom. The sprinter sees the moment when the gun goes off and he explodes out of the starting blocks. As a speaker, you can sit and visualize the initial gestures you've practiced. Visualizing an action that has been ingrained through practice frees you to gesture with even greater skill and confidence.

Athletes warm up and loosen up physically until right before a competition commences. Sitting in a room about to make a speech, you don't have that same luxury. You may have to sit for a long time before you get to stand up and speak. Even if you warmed up prior to walking into the room, sitting for a long time will cool you down again.

Visualization will help you to be ready when finally you hear the words, "Please welcome our next speaker." As you sit there, think of the words you will say first. See in your mind's eye the gestures you'll use to