The world’s foremost gesture researcher is Dr. David McNeill, a professor emeritus at the University of Chicago. The capstone of his career is his book *Why We Gesture: The Surprising Role of Hand Movements in Communication*. His research, plus that of many others around the globe, reveals a “gesture–speech unity” with “gesture as the orchestrating force of the whole.” It proves that “gesture-orchestrated speech is essential to speech.” Gesture is an integral part of how people think and speak. If you want to speak well, you must consciously jump-start your unconscious instinct to gesture.

If anyone has ever told you to inhibit your gestures, keep your hands at your sides, or grip the lectern to stop gesturing, that antiquated advice is completely wrong. Immeasurable damage is inflicted on the skills and instincts of speakers with this unscientific, unhelpful, and frankly nonsensical advice from these uninformed gesture deniers.

For those unconvinced by science, we can look to art for exactly the same answer. William Shakespeare’s suggestion about gesturing and speaking is a paraphrase of McNeill’s gesture–speech unity. Hamlet’s Advice to the Players about how to “Speak the speech” includes this about gestures: “Suit the action to the word and the word to the action.” Five centuries apart, Shakespeare, through his most famous character, and twenty-first-century gesture researchers reached the same conclusion.

Another researcher at the University of Chicago asked the nature-or-nurture question about gesturing. Dr. Jana Iverson studied congenitally blind children who have never seen a gesture. Surprisingly, they gesture when they talk, even when they know a listener is blind—and they do so in the same way as children with normal vision. In the brain there is a clear connection between the flow of gesture and the flow of language. “The fact that someone who has never seen gestures before will gesture while speaking,” she writes, “even to someone who they know can’t see, suggests that gesturing and speaking are tightly connected in some very fundamental way in our brains.” This neurological connection makes gesturing while speaking essential.

Science debunks the false claim that gestures distract listeners. Quite to the contrary, gestures help listeners understand and are the reason people say, “I see what you mean.” See what? Gestures. The journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction* published a special issue called *Gesture and Understanding in Social Interaction* (Vol. 27, No. 3). The findings were unequivocal that gestures help speakers talk and listeners comprehend.

One study found that “scores for accuracy of hearing the spoken sentence were twice as high when the sentences were presented combined with gesture than when they were not.” In another study, the listeners were told a short story and then given a partial transcript of the story and asked to fill in the missing parts: “It was found that those parts of the story accompanied by well-
defined gestures were filled in with greater accuracy.” Another study found “strong support for the view that people obtain information from gestures accompanying speech that they integrate with the information conveyed in the speech.” Still other studies concluded that “gestures together with speech can provide the recipient with a more complete understanding of the utterance, and that gestures sometimes may even provide a component that is crucial for its understanding.” If you want listeners to understand and remember your speech, gestures are a necessity.

Finally, gestures help you find the words to say. Research has revealed: “Gestures assist a speaker in the process of accessing words. A speaker uses gesture to discover a word being searched for.” Gesturing greases the wheels of thought. The wisecrack “If you didn’t gesture, you couldn’t talk!” is true! People who restrained their gestures recalled 20 percent less than people who gestured freely. The evidence is overwhelming that gesturing assists your listeners and you. Here is the simple way to jump-start your natural gestures.

Be ready to gesture. Hands at waist height, then double karate chop immediately.