

THE ESSENTIALS OF  
EFFECTIVE GESTURE  
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# THE ESSENTIALS OF EFFECTIVE GESTURE

FOR STUDENTS OF PUBLIC  
SPEAKING

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## PREFACE

It is generally admitted that good gestures help to vitalize, illuminate, and emphasize verbal expression. And if students of the art of speech-making can be led to understand the underlying principles of gesture, and the reasons for its expressiveness, a notable improvement of their style of delivery can be effected. In our instruction and our textbooks dealing with this subject there has been a tendency to inform the student, *ex cathedra*, that he should use such and such a gesture on this and that passage. In thus performing the function of trainers only, we get more or less mechanical results on the passages in question, but we do not give the insight which enables the student to apply the gestures to similar or analogous ideas wherever expressed. To tell him, for example, that "thousands of acres" may be indicated by a broad sweep of the hand is surely less beneficial than to lead him to understand that the passage of the hand through space conveys to the audience the idea of extent. Speaking generally, it is not so much by teaching specific gestures as by pointing out the significance of various positions and lines of movement,

and by helping the student to comprehend why these movements aid his words in conveying certain ideas, that we can get the most valuable and lasting results.

Partly because of the ill effects of dogmatic methods or occult and metaphysical systems, a feeling has become widespread that gesture is a product of instinct and cannot be profitably taught. For this attitude I can see hardly more reason than for the view that singing, painting, and other arts are natural instincts and cannot be taught. People often have a gift for one of these arts; they have personality to express in their performances, and poor instruction may hinder their progress. Yet none will deny the desirability of study in these fields. Nor is the case different with respect to gesture. Even if it were true that there are as many effective styles of gesture as there are speakers, there are, nevertheless, in gesture as in other arts certain technical features and general principles which the student should master as a basis for his own particular mode of expression.

This is particularly desirable in the case of manual gestures, which are so frequently neglected or misused, but which may be employed to great advantage. Facial expression, when a speaker is in earnest, is usually instinctive, and obvious in its meaning; a smile, a frown, a sneer accompanying a welcome, a threat, a sarcastic remark are natural manifestations. But the

most effective manual gestures are not always products of instinct. The chief aims of this little book are, therefore: to discuss the technic of gesture; to indicate the signification of the various positions and forms of the hand; and to determine the reasons for their expressiveness.

I wish here to acknowledge my indebtedness to my former students at the College of the City of New York for many practical suggestions; also to Mr. A. M. Bacon's "Manual of Gesture," which, by its admirable pioneer work in systematizing the subject, has lightened my task at many points. For helpful encouragement, and generous assistance in reading the proof-sheets, I wish to thank my wife, Anna W. Mosher, and my colleagues at the College of the City of New York, Professors Erastus Palmer, and D. W. Redmond.

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COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK,  
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# The Essentials of Effective Gesture

## PART I

### THE NATURE AND TECHNIC OF GESTURE

#### THE USE OF GESTURE

PEOPLE who speak in public generally make motions of some sort. Sometimes these motions are mere spasmodic jerks or flaps of the hand, as if the speaker desired instinctively to express himself visibly, but had no idea what movements to make. In other cases the speaker has converted that instinct into a single definite gesture, such as the clenched fist or the index finger, which is used to accompany (it cannot be said to express) ideas as varied as lofty mountains and stale doughnuts. Some speakers constantly wave their hands wildly and

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unmeaningly about the body, in the mistaken notion that a great display of energy has a convincing and persuasive effect. Still others make no gestures whatever, an unfortunate manner of delivery, but preferable, perhaps, to the use of distracting calisthenics, which frequently mar the style of otherwise good speakers.

The person who speaks in public should make gestures; he misses a great advantage if he doesn't, but they must do more than serve as a mere outlet for nervous energy, more than furnish the stimulation which usually results from their reaction. They must speak distinctly to the audience; they must help to illuminate, vitalize, and enforce his verbal expression. This they can do, for gestures are not only constantly in evidence in our everyday life, but they are as organic a part of our intercommunication as is speech. One has but to watch the participants in the next few conversations he observes, or the next dramatic performance he attends to be impressed with the truth of this statement. We are continually emphasizing, locating, describing, or displaying a mental or emotional state by means of gesture. Many of us do it rather poorly, and this is particularly the case when we stand

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before an audience. So, there are few of us who cannot improve our speaking efficiency by acquiring a better understanding of this important phase of the speaker's art.

To begin with, we should get a clear idea of the general nature and technic of the subject under consideration. For this purpose a brief definition, two important classifications, and a discussion of the technical essentials will serve.

### GESTURE DEFINED

Gesture may be broadly defined as visible expression, that is, any posture or movement of the head, face, body, limbs, or hands, which aids the speaker in conveying his message by appealing to the eye.

### GESTURE CLASSIFIED

Every speech contains expressions of two kinds: one, referring to that which is material; the other, to that which is mental or emotional. For this reason it is desirable to make a corresponding classification of gesture. One class we may call literal; the other figurative.

The term *literal* we apply to gestures when they refer to physical objects, to the material world. Indicating location or extent in space

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by a wave of the hand, picturing the striking of a man with the clenched fist, suggesting the joining of two armies by bringing the hands near together, — these are typical examples of literal gestures.

The term *figurative* we apply to gestures when they express mental or emotional states or actions which are analogous to physical states or actions. For instance, a lofty ambition is suggested by an ascending movement of the hand because it bears an obvious analogy to physical elevation; moral depravity is indicated by a descending movement for a similar reason. To illustrate the figurative gesture by a specific sentence, suppose a speaker wished to express the thought, "The member from Ohio defeated the bill at its first reading." A fitting gesture on this passage would be a descending front movement with the palm down. Why does that gesture mean anything to the audience? Is there between the defeating of a bill and the downward movement of the inverted hand some mysterious relationship which the speaker feels and the audience instantly solves? Not at all. The expressiveness of the gesture depends upon two facts: first, that a defeated bill is figuratively overcome,

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put down; and secondly, that the gesture represents a putting down in the physical sense. Again, to express such an idea as, "The North and the South were rent by civil feud," we bring the hands near together and then fling them apart. Now, obviously, between such a movement of the hands and political or social dissension there is absolutely no actual relationship. But the gesture does portray an analogous physical separation or tearing apart, and thus derives a significance with reference to the passage under discussion. In fact, the gesture expresses to the eye the same analogy that the figurative word "rent" conveys to the ear. As a final example let us take the sentence, "At this assertion the tensity of the audience became extreme." How can this emotional state be expressed by the hands? As before, by a gesture representing an analogous physical state, — in this case, the clenched fist.

In such analogies as those just presented lies the expressiveness of practically all those gestures which really suggest mental or emotional content. If the analogies be well chosen and the gestures well executed, the audience will instantly interpret the movements in the mental

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or emotional sense stated or implied in the accompanying words, without being conscious of the basic physical factor involved. After studying the sections on the special significance of the various positions and forms of the hand, the student should be able not only to give expression to physical states and actions, but also to perceive analogies instantly in the interpretation of the mental and emotional.

Having made this fundamental classification of all gestures as literal or figurative, based upon the nature of the matter expressed, we may consider a second classification of gestures, based upon the purposes for which they are employed, as follows: those used solely to emphasize; those used to describe; those used to locate or distinguish; those used to represent a physical action or posture; those used to express a mental or emotional attitude. It is to be noted that these classes are not altogether mutually exclusive; for example, an emphatic gesture may be expressive of a mental attitude, or a locative gesture may express an emotional state. Moreover, combinations of gestures belonging to two or more classes are often employed; to illustrate: while the hand is making a descriptive gesture, the face may be



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expressing the mental or emotional response to the object depicted.

*The purely emphatic gestures* are those which by a vigorous movement of the hand, accompanied with fitting posture and facial expression, serve to supplement verbal stress by an expression of physical earnestness. As a rule those gestures which are used solely for emphasis are made with a downward stroke, since this is more expressive of force than the upward or lateral movements. For moderate emphasis the hand is stopped in the middle plane; for stronger emphasis the stroke terminates in the low plane. The length and vigor of the stroke determine the amount of stress. It should be noted that here, as elsewhere, a gesture should never be overdone; a movement which is too rapid, too forceful, or too far-reaching is sure to attract attention to itself and appear absurd. In making gestures it is always well to create the impression of reserve power.

*The descriptive gestures* are those used to help the audience visualize persons, scenes, or objects. The most important qualities which can be expressed by this class are extent, size, height, depth, form, and general character of action.