

Body Language Cheat Sheet for Writers

All body language must be considered in context, but if you've set your scene and established your characters, a little body language can help!

Anger

Anger is one expression of fight-or-flight mode -- an automatic, instinctive reaction to a threat. In many cases, there is an underlying fear of being harmed. Thanks to autonomic nervous system arousal, the heart rate increases, pupils dilate, and the face may flush. Other signs of anger:

- Balling the fists
- Crossing the arms tightly
- Clenching the fists once arms are crossed
- Tight-lipped smile
- Clenched teeth
- Shaking a finger like a club
- Stabbing a finger at someone

Attraction

- Pupils dilate
- Women will cross and uncross legs to draw attention to them
- Mirroring - (usually unconsciously) mimicking the other person's body language

Closed to Conversation

- Keeping the hands in the pockets (esp. men)
- Arms and legs crossed
- Sitting back
- Folding the hands together on a table (creates a barrier)
- The "figure-four" leg cross (setting the ankle of one leg on the knee of the other) and then grabbing the lower half of the top leg with both hands.

Openness and Honesty

- Exposure of the palms
- Arms and legs unfolded
- Leaning forward

Submissive Signals

- Smiling - that's why some people smile when they're upset or afraid
- Slumping the shoulders
- Doing anything to appear smaller

Distress

- Men in particular have a tendency to stroke or rub the nape of the neck when they're upset. It acts as a self-soothing gesture to deal with a "pain in the neck."
- Crossed arms - arms act like a protective barrier
- Self-hugging - arms are crossed, hands gripping upper arms
- One-arm cross - one arm crosses the body to hold or touch the other arm - women keep a hand on a purse or bag strap to make this look more natural
- Clutching a purse, briefcase, or bag with both arms
- Adjusting cuffs or cuff-links (men's version of the purse-strap grab)
- Folding the hands together in front of the crotch (men)

Lying

Lying causes a subtle tingling in the face and neck, so the gestures below are attempts to eliminate that feeling

- Covering the mouth - can be like a shh gesture, or they may cover the mouth completely - some people try to cover it by coughing
- Touching or rubbing the nose or just below the nose - often a quick, small gesture, not a scratch
- Rubbing the eyes (especially men)
- Scratching the neck with the index finger

Superiority, Confidence, Power, Dominance

- Steepling the fingers (aka setting the tips of the fingers together)
- Folding the hands behind the back
- Thumbs sticking out from pockets when hands are in pockets (can be front or back pockets)
- Hands on hips
- Straddling a chair
- Hands folded behind the head while sitting up (in men; in women this thrusts the breasts out and becomes sexual)

