



Literacy leads to a better life.

When someone can read, the professional teacher says the person is “literate.” Reading English presents challenges because one word can have the same sound, but many spellings. Each version of spelling means something different. Storybook characters are written to have emotion. A phrase can mean something completely different if a character just says it or if she starts dancing and sings the same words loudly.

Reading English can be a lot like reading nonverbal communication. The reader might know all the versions of a word, or might not. In this way, nonverbal communication has its own kind of literacy, too. For example, Americans use handshakes to communicate an expression of enthusiasm or agreement.

Some Americans do not realize their handshake conveys so many messages, which can create unintended results. Sharon makes it through her interview with assistant manager Johnny and shakes this hand as her final gesture. Johnny notices her hand feels limp. Johnny thinks she lacks enthusiasm and conviction. Sharon does not pass that interview and never learns why.

Julie studied interviewing skills including body language. She came prepared to practice what she learned and offered a firm handshake. Johnny sensed her enthusiasm and passed her to the second interview. His boss Michael had two great candidates. Ultimately, it was the nonverbal communication coming from Julie that convinced him she was the one for the job.

Jobs can be won or lost with the style of a handshake. The applicant’s knowledge and “literacy” in the nonverbal communications of a job interview can lead to success or bewildering failure.

Lisa Quast, former Mrs. Washington and author, offered tips to job seekers concerning common nonverbal mistakes during interviews:

- Unusual handshakes: Avoid “dead fish” or limp handshakes that communicate insecurity. She said the “handshake of steel” (too hard) can project arrogance. Too long, and you might seem desperate.
- Eye contact: She said avoid too much or too little, “keep it casual or relaxed, not creepy.”
- Out-of-control gestures: Tapping pencils, shaking legs and twirling hair can be distracting. Exaggerated gestures can knock coffee cups off tables.
- Odd clothing can tell the manager you will not fit into the company’s culture. Dress in a way that fits the profession or environment.
- Too much perfume or cologne isn’t just a distraction, it can pose a health risk for sensitive individuals.
- Poor posture sends messages that include lack of confidence or lack of interest.



Quast said that while she never relies on nonverbal communication by itself, she does use the behaviors to reveal inconsistencies or show her the big picture of the person she is considering.

Awareness of nonverbal communication and being able to communicate messages nonverbally with success becomes increasingly important in hard economic times. This awareness and skill could also be called nonverbal literacy.

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