**Body Language in Composition**

Body language in a photograph never occurs in a vacuum. Other elements of the image influence how we interpret the physical appearance and posture of the subject. Consider the role of body language in the overall composition of the shot:

*Angles and Lines*: How do the lines formed by the person’s arms, legs, head, hands, and body interact with each other, other lines in the image, and the frame? Do they reinforce each other, as in feeling peacefully horizontal, firmly vertical, energetically diagonal, or do they compete with each other in interesting ways? Portrait photographers will tell you that shots are more appealing when the shoulders and head are at an angle to each other, as opposed to being lined up, which looks like a mug shot - unless, of course, you’re going for a mug shot effect that feels solid, direct and even aggressive, as in the body language of the “full face threat” when you confront someone head on.

*Shapes*: How do the shapes formed by the person’s arms, legs, head, hands, and body interact with each other, other shapes in the image, and the frame? Consider the psychological meanings associated with those shapes. For example, circular formations of the body suggest unity and enclosure, as in hugging oneself - while triangular shapes imply groundedness, as in standing with feet planted wide and firm. But is there a diagonal line elsewhere in the photo that threatens to pierce the circle, or a indecisively curvy shape wiggling behind the subject with strong akimbo legs? Does a subject’s body and outstretched arm form a boxy, claustrophobic square with the frame, or perhaps a dynamically tilted triangle?

*Movements*: As we noticed in the description of message clusters, body language can present movements of closing in, contracting, opening, expanding, crossing, coming closer, and shifting away. How do other aspects of the image influence these sensations – such as a receding perspective, the visual rhythm of repeating elements, bubbling bokeh, blur, and gradated changes in tone, color, shapes, and complexity? Do they supplement, balance, or contradict those movements?

*Tactile Sensations*: We associate touching and tactile sensations with body language, like being stiff, loose, hard, soft, rough, smooth, and relaxed. Consider how textures in the image complement, balance, or compete with those sensations.

*The Environment and Symbolic Elements*: Obviously, the environment will have a big impact on how we interpret the subject’s body language. A relaxed, reclining man with a dangling arm will strike us very differently when he’s lying in bed at home or on a bench in a crowded subway station. Also consider the impact of the symbolic elements in the image, such as a person curled up next to a small bicycle, a bright light shining behind a woman deep in contemplation, or a woman raising her nose as she walks by a fancy car.

**Two Shots and Group Shots**

…we continually find ourselves amazed at how much the body language reveals about individual people, their relationship to other people, and to the group as a whole. It’s quite fascinating to discover that the photos taken early in the semester can actually predict what will happen later in the groups, mostly because they capture subtle interpersonal dynamics that have not yet fully surfaced.

*Personal space*: We all have this invisible zone around our bodies that we consider our own personal space. Only people with whom we are intimate are allowed into this zone. When anyone else enters it, we might feel intruded upon or threatened. Think about the discomfort of being in a crowded elevator. In a photo of two or more people, can you see the personal spaces of the subjects? Does the size of the space vary for different people? Is someone inviting, tolerating, or trying to eject someone else from that personal space?

*Distance and Proximity*: This overlaps with the idea of personal space. We can think of physical distance between people in a group as possibly indicating the degree of emotional closeness between them. Who is standing next to whom? What people are far apart? Generally speaking, the more physically close all the people are in a group, the more cohesive that group is.

*Orienting and touching*: Touching, looking at, and leaning, reaching, or pointing towards another person might also indicate intimacy, or the desire for it. Is the direction of this body language one-way, or reciprocated?

*Clusters*: Every group of three or more people tends to have subgroups – i.e., people who feel more bonded to each other than to the other people in the group. In a photo you can often see the subgroups as clusters of people who are physically closer to, orienting towards, or touching each other. Sometimes you’ll see people positioned between clusters, as if they belong to and provide a link between those subgroups.

*Loners*: People who feel less attached to the group, or have been overlooked, ignored, or ostracized by the group members, tend to stand off to side, lean away, or look away from the group.  
  
*Position in the group*: The position people assume within the group shot might reveal something about their psychological status in the group. More dominant or influential people tend to stand in front, in the center, or above others; more submissive or less influential people stand behind, below, or off to the sides. Standing above the group might also indicate protectiveness, as if the person is watching over others. Notice also if anyone is being crowded out of the shot, or is trying to squeeze their way in. What might that say about their role in the group?

*Group shape*: The shape created by the group might reveal its psychological characteristics. Curves are relaxed. Straight lines and distinct rows suggest formality. Circles, as in a group hug, indicate unity. Triangular formations feel secure and grounded. Think of the classic “stable” family shot where two parents sitting below a child who is between them. The parents provide the visual and psychological foundation of the family unit.

*Body contact*: The way people look when they physically connect to teach other speaks volumes. Hugs can look tentative with lots of space between rather tense bodies, or as if the people are emotionally melded into one. Notice if the various elements of body language are consistent with each other when people connect physically. Are the arms, legs, hands, torso, and face all conveying the same emotion, or are they each saying something different? Is someone looking away when they are kissing? Is one arm hugging tightly while the other hangs limply at the side?

**Position in a Room**

If you’re shooting an event, consider the possibility that where people sit in the room reveals something interesting about their personalities. Teachers and public speakers often notice this. People who sit up front want to be close to the action or to the person in charge of the action. They don’t mind that others behind them might be looking at them. People who sit in the back might be the slackers who want to doze, the observers who like to get the big picture of what’s happening in the room, the suspicious types who protect their backs, or the people who want to avoid attention or attract it by being the rebellious heckler in the back of the room. Those who sit by the windows might be the daydreamers who like gazing into the wide open space outside, while those who sit by the door anticipate a quick exit. The shy people might sit somewhere in the middle of the group, hoping to blend in inconspicuously.

**Body Position, Face, General**

*Aggression*: Frowning, snarling, baring teeth, staring, with redden face, rigid body, clenched fists, and large, threatening and insulting gestures, you display unexpected, sudden movements, intrude on someone’s space, and deliver unwanted or hostile body contact.

*Concentration and Attention*: Very still, with fixed gaze, furrowed brow, and an open body (as opposed to looking closed off), you lean your body and tilt your head towards the person or object on which you are concentrating. You seem unaware of distractions.

*Boredom*: Yawning, looking tired, with a blank expression and a slouching or leaning body, you tap your toes, drum your fingers, doodle, glance at your watch. You don’t seem to be paying attention to someone or something that should be your focus.

*Closed off*: With crossed arms, ankles, or legs, you look down or away. You wrap your arms around an object. You are trying to hide, hold yourself, or curl up as if in fetal position.

*Defensiveness and Protection*: You cover vulnerable parts of your body, lower your chin, cross your arms, close and then cross your legs. While averting your eyes, you look rigid and try to make yourself small. You use an object for a protective barrier and your arms and hands to fend off things that seem threatening.

*Deceptiveness*: With a tense body, forced smile, hands in pockets, sweating, you bite the inside of your mouth, look away, and appear distracted.

*Dominance and power*: By standing erect and above, with legs spread and hands on hips, you make yourself bigger and higher than others. Your face is disapproving, frowning, sneering. You look people directly in the eye. You invade and occupy their territory, break the rules, and possess objects of power.

*Contemplation* (as in thinking, judging, evaluating): With folded and steepled hands, pursed lips, intense gaze but relaxed body, you touch your mouth, chin, or the sides of the nose. You seem lost in thought.

*Openness*: Your legs, arms, and hands are open and receptive. Your body and eyes are relaxed. You remove your jacket and unbutton your collar.

*Readyness* (being poised for some action): You lean and point your body and eyes towards a specific direction. Your body is slightly tense as you prepare to stand up or grip something with your hands.

*Relaxation*: With a relaxed gaze, open hands, and gentle gesturing, you appear unconcerned and happy. Your shoulders and limbs are hanging loosely. Your body looks tensionless, balanced, even sagging.

*Sexuality and Romance*: With dilated pupils and a fixed gaze, you point your feet and hands towards the other person. You lean in while you seductively play with something in your hand, something sexually symbolic. You copy the other person’s body language, preen, brush your fingers through your hair, caress yourself, display your body and expose some part of it while pursing, touching, and licking your lips. Moving into the other person’s personal space, you brush by, gently touch, then caress the body.

*Submissiveness*: You are very still. Sweating, with a white face, you smile with your mouth but not your eyes. You touch your face, tug your hair, and offer your hands out with palms up. With chin down, you turn your head to look away. You hunch over, crouch, curl up to make yourself small.

**The Face and Hands**

*Sadness*: The eyelids droop as the inner corners of the brows rise and, in extreme sadness, draw together. The corners of the lips pull down, and the lower lip may push up in a pout.

*Surprise*: The upper eyelids and brows rise, and the jaw drops open.

*Anger*: Both the lower and upper eyelids tighten as the brows lower and draw together. Intense anger raises the upper eyelids as well. The jaw thrusts forward, the lips press together, and the lower lip may push up a little.

*Contempt*: This is the only expression that appears on just one side of the face: One half of the upper lip tightens upward.

*Disgust*: The nose wrinkles and the upper lip rises while the lower lip protrudes.

*Fear*: The eyes widen and the upper lids rise, as in surprise, but the brows draw together. The lips stretch horizontally.

*Happiness*: The corners of the mouth lift in a smile. As the eyelids tighten, the cheeks rise and the outside corners of the brows pull down.