

Putting on the Moves: A Writer's Guide to Body Language and Styles

From the July 2010 Write Brain

Presenter: Morgen Leigh Thomas

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My good friend Elvis and I attended the July 20 Write Brain, *Putting on the Moves: A Writer's Guide to Body Language & Styles*. Writers should apply theories about human communication to their fictional characters to bring them to life, sociologist Morgen Leigh Thomas told the audience.

Morgen reminded us to “show, don't tell.” If you rely solely on the words spoken by your character, you're missing out on character development opportunities in your fiction. What our characters say – their words – is a small part of communication. How they say it is more important, while the non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, posture, hand gestures, and the use of personal space account for the lion's share of human communication.

I'd like to write a story about my friend Elvis. If I hadn't heard Morgen's Write Brain talk, I might make the mistake of merely recording his words. This is the “what he says” part of communication.

“Don't you step on my blue suede shoes,” Elvis said.

Boring.

How does Elvis feel? How serious is the perceived threat to the beloved shoes? Just reporting his words doesn't tell the reader much. Only 7%, according to Morgen. I'll try adding the “how he says,” or the delivery.

“Don't you step on my blue suede shoes,” Elvis whimpered.

By adding how he delivered the words, we learn a little more. Elvis is in a state of anxiety and fear.

I might want to spice up his dialogue even more with symbolic gestures. These are one aspect of the non-verbal element of human communication. Symbolic gestures include raising your hand to ask a question, crooking your finger to request that a victim follow you, giving a thumbs up sign to show approval, or flipping a certain finger to indicate disapproval.

Symbolic gestures are dependent upon a shared cultural understanding. A hand gesture in America may mean something different—or have no meaning—in another country. You can use this to your advantage in your writing. Imagine the possibilities, as characters from different cultures, generations, or planets come into contact.

“Don't you step on my blue suede shoes.” Elvis shook his index finger in warning.

Now Elvis is on the offensive, giving a non-verbal symbolic gesture to warn the potential shoe-stomper.

Body language is another part of non-verbal communication that writers can use to make fictional characters come to life. Unlike symbolic gestures, body language may be unintentional. “We think we are paying attention to our words,” Morgen said, but we might be saying something else with our bodies.

“Don’t you step on my blue suede shoes,” Elvis sang, his lip curling in his trademark sneer, and his hips swiveling suggestively.

Now the reader realizes that Elvis is not fearful or angry, nor is he requesting politely that you refrain from treading on his shoes. That’s not seriously his concern because he’s clearly in control of the situation. Which brings us to the second half of the Write Brain.

Morgen introduced the Four Styles of Body Usage. People define themselves in terms of their bodies' varying capacities for control.

You may know the Disciplined Style – that annoying friend who would rather go to the gym to lift weights than hang out with friends at the pizza parlor. He is all about routine and regimentation. Athletes aren’t the only folks in this category. You’ll also find the Disciplined Style in a monastery, where physical deprivation of another sort takes place. Both the jock and the monk are big on self-control.

The Mirroring Style is so named because it reflects the dominant cultural values. The person is concerned with surfaces and appearances, and aligns him or herself with what is desirable in order to be desired. This style includes those struggling to keep up with the Joneses, or starving to fit into size 0 jeans.

The Dominating Style, as might be expected, seeks to subjugate the world around him or her. This style doesn’t really exist in the absence of other people to dominate.

The Communicative Style is prevalent in caregivers. This person is a good listener, because he or she is seeking mutual satisfaction in a relationship.

Finally, Morgen reminded us that people – and our characters - don’t exist in a vacuum. There is cultural context to consider. The fact that people don’t look at the same items the same way can enrich our writing. Is the dandelion a weed, a salad ingredient, wine material, or a pretty flower? The differences in how our characters view the world can lead to compelling conflict.

Don’t tell Elvis, but I really think those blue suede shoes are hideous and impractical. And yet Carl Perkins chose to write a song about them, which Elvis made into a huge hit. I suspect it had more to do with the delivery and body language than the words.

SIDEBAR:

Human communication is:

7% words

38% delivery – how those words are spoken

55% non-verbal – symbolic gestures and body language

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