

# Open Forum 1

## Web Site Transcript

### Chapter 1

Hi! I'd like to welcome all of you to the international student orientation at Norwalk College. I hope that your travels from your home country have been easy and that you all are settling in well. I believe I've met everyone, but just in case, I'm the director for international student affairs—the person you can come to if you are having problems with your classes, your housing, visas... even if you just want someone to talk to. You are always welcome to stop by my office.

We'll have several short workshops today and will be talking about some common issues that international students face. The first one that I want to deal with is about communication, and in particular, non-verbal communication.

Now all of you have been studying English for some time. You have a good vocabulary, and you probably know all about verb tenses and modals, and can ask directions, and order from a menu. But communication is not only verbal. That is, talking is not the only language we use to communicate. Another way we communicate is through non-verbal communication, or body language.

The term body language means the movements we use and the facial expressions we have (like smiling or frowning), the way we sit or stand, the way we touch or look at someone, the distance we stand from another person. Some psychologists say that more than 60% of our communication is actually done through body language. We do it without thinking, or without ever having been specifically taught what the gestures or expressions mean. The problem is that body language is a little bit different in each culture and this can often cause some problems with communication.

Here's an example. In many places it may be a little rude or disrespectful to look at another person directly in their eyes as you talk with them, so many international students will avoid this eye contact. But in America, we expect it. We think of eye contact as a sign of honesty and straight-forwardness. American parents actually encourage their children to look people in the eye when speaking. Just imagine a conversation where an international student was trying to be respectful by not looking into the eyes of her American classmate. The American might wonder why her classmate wouldn't look directly at her, and the international classmate would be wondering why she was being stared at. The end result is an awkward and frustrating interaction.

Here's another one. Americans shake hands firmly when they greet each other because to Americans, a firm handshake signifies strength and power. But a soft or limp handshake is considered a sign of weakness. In some cultures, handshakes are less common, or a gentle, soft handshake is acceptable. So students need to know that when shaking hands, it's important to be firm.

In America, a "thumbs up" sign—a thumb raised in the air—is a sign of a good job. Also, a thumb and forefinger together with the other fingers straight means "okay." Be careful though. In other countries like Germany, Brazil, or Japan this "okay" symbol can have other meanings. So be aware of who you're talking to when you use this gesture.

Here's another important one. In America, holding hands and kissing are reserved for people in love. In fact, Americans generally do not touch each other, and they like to keep distance between them and the person who they're speaking with. But there are many exceptions. For instance, friends, especially women, might hug when saying goodbye, and small children often hold hands.

I'm going to hand out a list of some common examples of non-verbal communication that are specific to American culture. Now, I don't want you to panic. You don't need to know all of these examples of body language. It's more important just to be aware of differences in body language between cultures. If you're not sure what a gesture means, it's okay to ask.

Oh! I forgot an important example of body language. If ever you're worried about your ability to communicate, there is one gesture that is the same in every country. Everywhere around the world, people use the smile to communicate pleasure and happiness. So smile as often as you want to, because it is an expression understood by everyone!

Now, our next speaker is Molly Wilcox. She's the head of the ESL department. And she'll tell you about the ESL courses and the placement exam. Thank you very much for your attention.