

What is Your Character's Signature Gestures?

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What is a signature gesture? It's a nonverbal, repeated movement your character is known for, that you perform in a particular way that is unique and identifiable. Common, well-known gestures include the thumbs-up/thumbs-down, the peace sign, air quotes, shrugging, pointing, eye rolling, saluting, and tipping your hat. The list goes on and on! Some famous examples are Matilda's defiant power pose (hands on hips, feet splayed, face in profile), Hamilton's triumphant fist punch towards the sky, the cocky hair-combing of the T-Birds in Grease, and J. Pierrepont Finch's fourth-wall-breaking look towards the audience in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

Task

Have your class brainstorm a list of well-known physical gestures. How many can you name? What do they mean? Do they mean different things to different people?

Why use gesture?

So why should you create a signature gesture for your character? For starters, it creates an interesting physical layer to your character. A signature gesture helps to identify your character from the others through their unique movement, and defines your character as someone different from you, the actor. It shows off your character's personality. For example, eye rolling immediately identifies you as impatient, a high-five indicates a playful personality, and a firm, close-up handshake demonstrates a person not to be messed with.

Some gestures can indicate multiple personality traits. For example, a pointed figure could indicate someone of a scolding or authoritative nature (such as a parent or a teacher), but it could also be used by a helpful person giving directions. Conversely, different characters might have similar personality traits, but use different gestures to demonstrate them. A well-placed smirk and shrug of the shoulder can be flirtatious, but so could a raised eyebrow, a wink, or a hair toss.

Signature gestures also give the audience something to look forward to. When your character enters the stage, the audience will immediately be drawn to you, anticipating your signature gesture and when it will be used next. It creates a sense of familiarity and fun.

Task

From your list of physical gestures, have your class identify a personality trait that goes with each gesture; for example, pointing = authoritative, thumb sucking = immature or babyish. Some gestures might work with multiple personality traits.

How do you differentiate them? (Feel free to demonstrate the differences!)

When should you use gesture?

When should you use a signature gesture? The best times to employ your signature gesture are at significant moments in the show, to make your point stronger – such as a funny comment, a fit of anger, or as an exclamation at the end of a sentence – or on a repeated phrase or joke. Signature gestures are also commonly used on the “button” at the end of a song, where the music finishes. The High School Musical jump is a well-known gesture that is repeated in each of the films and stage musicals, and is always used on the button of the final song of the show.

How can you find your character’s signature gesture? This is something you’ll explore during your rehearsal period and on your own time. Try different gestures to see what works for your character. Work with your fellow actors to ensure you are the only one doing your signature gesture, to keep your movement unique to your character. Or, look for places where others could “steal” or use your signature gesture – perhaps to taunt your character, to mimic your character, or to achieve or get something your character wants or has. For example, think of when Roxie Hart uses Velma Kelly’s gestures (such as crying into a handkerchief and fainting) while on trial in the musical Chicago – this prompts Velma to sing the song “Class.”

Work through your script and note important or significant moments where your signature gesture could improve or emphasize what you are saying or doing. Ask for feedback from your director, to ensure that your signature gesture works for your character and doesn’t upstage you or the other performers.

Task

Have your students come up with three possible signature gestures. Try using them during rehearsal. What feels most natural, and/or what looks best onstage.