

The most important tool while studying abroad is communication. However, when studying in another country, you will find that even if the locals speak English, their usage of body language, terminology or even signs can be very different. Make this a safe trip, and plan ahead. Be aware of the following tips to help you make communication easy and effective.

Nonverbal Communication

A smile, a simple wave, an affirmative head nod, the universal sign for check please - all are examples of gestures that I took for granted before my study abroad experience. Because the motions we use in the States are inherent to me and come automatically, it had not occurred to me that there would be such a difference in the gestures that are used among countries. This was one thing I did not learn much about before study in France.

One example that came up during my stay in Paris shows the frustration that can develop due to miscommunication because of incorrect gestures. One day I was having a discussion with a native French speaker, so I was trying to take great care with choosing my words since I knew he would be able to pick up my mistakes very quickly. As the discussion continued, it grew into an argument. I was arguing my point and trying to clearly explain my position in French when I slapped the palm of my hand for emphasis on a point. Since I was by no means done talking I continued. Once again, I slapped my hand while debating.

The second time I made this gesture my friend started laughing at me - something you don't want to happen when you're arguing in a foreign language! I started to think, "What did I say? Am I making no sense?" So I asked him, "What?! Why are you laughing?" He explained to me that in France when someone slaps their hand as I had done, it means that the conversation is over. He was amused that I had, by his standards, terminated the conversation twice, yet I kept on talking. - Tammi Brusegaard, France

Obviously, there is more to communicating than just the words you use. In every culture there is a whole realm of nonverbal communication that consists of things we aren't usually conscious of, such as gestures, eye contact, physical distance between people, facial expressions, and touching behavior. As Tammi found out in France, other cultures will often have very different meanings for these nonverbal behaviors than what you are used to.

Communicating Nonverbally

Nonverbal communication is often not discussed in the language classroom, but it is an important aspect of intercultural communication nevertheless. Most of us, if we have not been overseas, will not be very aware of the various ways we gesture with our hands, and we take our facial expressions for granted. Various studies of facial expression have shown that many cultures around the world have similar ways of expressing emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy. But they also show that the same expression can have more than one meaning; for example, in some cultures a smile can mean that the person is embarrassed. In addition, the extent to which facial expressions are used varies across cultures. The Japanese, for example, tend to display fewer facial expressions than people in the U.S. or Latin America.

Most students who go overseas are not going to be aware of all the nonverbal language of the host culture before they get there. The longer you are in the host country, the more naturally you will be able to use the nonverbal behaviors that are appropriate for various situations.

You can use two basic strategies for picking up the nonverbals more rapidly: **observation** and **practice**.

- **Observe:** Make a conscious effort to watch carefully how people communicate with each other nonverbally. How close do they stand to each other? Do they maintain direct eye contact? If there a lot

of vigorous gesturing when they are speaking? What gestures do they use? Make a note of whether these patterns change between friends versus casual acquaintances.

- **Practice:** Make attempts to perform the nonverbal behavior with groups of host nationals you feel comfortable with and who will let you know tactfully whether you are doing the behavior appropriately. Both of the above strategies require spending a great deal of time with people in your host country. The second strategy, while very important, may be more difficult than the first. Much of the difficulty of nonverbals is that, even if they are learned and understood, actually performing them may seem unnatural or uncomfortable to you.

Despite these hurdles, making attempts at using the appropriate nonverbals will be appreciated by people with whom you interact. For example, a student in Japan who does not know to bow slightly when greeting someone of higher status will come off as disrespectful. If you stand too far apart or refuse to touch casually in many Latin American countries, the host might think you are cold and unfriendly. To engage in these nonverbals properly demonstrates your sensitivity to the other culture, as well as your willingness to adapt.

The Five Channels of Nonverbal Communication

The following five channels of nonverbal communication carry as much or more information than the verbal message, but often these are not clear.

- Touch (haptics)
- Eye Contact (oculesics)
- Gestures (kinesics)
- Personal Space (proxemics)
- Timing matters (regulators)

Touch (haptics) - refers to how we use touch in the process of communication. All cultures have rules dealing with who, how, why, when, and under what circumstances people may engage in physical contact. Public or private touching (or its absence) communicates an enormous amount of information, beginning with how you greet someone (handshake, kiss(es) on the cheek, embrace, bow, etc.), continuing throughout a conversation to the leave-taking and conclusion of a meeting. You should find out about the conventions of touching in the culture you are going to. See the bibliography at the conclusion of this section for some excellent additional readings on the do's and don'ts of touching cross-culturally.

Eye Contact (oculesics) - refers to the role of eye contact in communication. Americans depend on direct eye contact as a sign of active listening and, often, sincerity and honesty. Without such connection they may feel that they are out of contact with the other person. In some Arab and South Asian cultures, the prolonged stare can be seen as a sign of aggression. Therefore, many Asian or African (and for that matter, many Native American) groups tend to avoid eye contact, which is misinterpreted by Americans as evidence of evasion or suspicious behavior.

Gestures (kinesics) - refers to the role of body movements (hands, head, face, torso, etc.) as messages in communication. Gestures may parallel speech or be employed independently as commands, commentary, or even to deliver contradictory signals. All cultures use expressive gestures. They range from the very subtle to the grandiloquent and operatic. Americans fall somewhere in the middle of the range, so to them Italians may seem wildly expressive, while Japanese are perceived as hard to read because of the economy of their body language. While there are some universally understood gestures, there are many more which are highly localized. A simple head nod from side-to-side can mean yes to an East-Indian, no to an American, and I agree to a Brazilian. Once you arrive overseas, it's essential to learn the codes of the society in which you will be living. See the bibliography at the conclusion of this section for more sources of information.

Personal Space (proxemics) - refers to the use of space in communication. This includes your personal space or comfort zone during conversation. All human beings are territorial to some degree and, although personal space is always context-sensitive and variable, group norms exist for all cultures. The size of our specific space

is unconsciously acquired in early childhood. Interpersonal space in sitting, standing, and speaking have cultural meanings and may trigger intense emotional responses when violated. Knowing the general rule-of-thumb about traditional boundaries in your host country is essential. Remember how you feel when you think someone is violating your space! Overseas you may have to alter your personal space and knowing this in advance will make adjustments easier. More about this later in this section.

Timing matters (regulators) - relates to the pace of verbal exchanges, turn-taking, starting and/or completing the exchange, and pauses, silences, and interruptions during conversation. All cultures have well-established patterns that they see as important to maintain a correct flow in a conversation. This can be very subtle, but when people are out of sync, miscommunication can result. All this hinges on timing. When they are excited, Americans are quick to interrupt another speaker, and often use a relatively direct communication style (see Task 8 for more about Communication Styles). In some cultures this style of communication will be considered brash and insensitive (much of Asia, for example) while to others it may seem restrained and even somewhat impersonal (Australia and Russia). Knowing something about how to appropriately enter, exchange information, indicate that you are listening, and take leave in a conversation abroad will help you both be understood and to understand another culture more fully.

communicating while overseas in a connected world

If you talk to someone who studied overseas thirty years ago, you'll probably hear tales of the weeks he spent on a ship carrying him and his steamer trunks to a faraway locale where nothing besides the occasional letter would interrupt his isolation from the life he'd known before. Today, study away is as much an experience of personal transformation as ever, but it definitely involves less detachment from other people and places. First, transportation advances made distances much, much smaller. Then, communication tools such as mobile phones and the Internet built us a borderless world of instant, constant contact.

Now, you can be physically here, but virtually anywhere. When you go overseas, where "here" is changes and a change of routine is probably in order. Though you'll stay in contact with family and friends, time you spend plugged into your home life is time you won't have to build a new one overseas. Dedicate yourself to connecting with a new network of friends and acquaintances overseas who understand intimately the surroundings that are shaping your time overseas—and that will continue to shape your future.

communicating with those at home

Immersing yourself in your new host culture will be your primary goal, but your experience overseas won't take place in complete isolation from parents, teachers, and friends at home. Keeping in touch can give you perspective on both your host culture and your life back home while easing the minds of your loved ones while you're away. Just be sure to recognize how constant communication will affect your study away experience.

How much is too much communication? That depends on your perspective—and on who you're talking to. Maybe when you're on your home campus, you're in touch daily with your family, and even more frequently with friends. Realize, though, that time you spend elsewhere virtually (via telephone, e-mail, or social networking) is time you can't spend interacting with the people and place where you're studying. While away, adjust your communication habits and adapt to being unplugged a little more often.

set expectations

You'll need to reconcile how you plan to stay connected (and how often your friends and family at home expect to hear from you) with the communication tools overseas. Things you take for granted at home like unrestricted, affordable Internet access, telephones in your residence hall, and inexpensive international calling may be hard to come by. Determine the best ways to communicate with those at home as part of your pre-departure preparation. Ask your study away advisor or program representative questions like these:

- What kind of access will I have to landline and mobile phones?
- Will my current mobile phone work? Do I need to purchase a SIM card from my host country?
- What type of Internet access will I have? Will I have access on campus? What about in my dormitory, residence hall, or homestay?

Once you understand the communication tools that are available, explain to your friends and especially your family how often you'll be in touch. Some students find that talking to people back home less frequently helps them immerse more completely into local life; others find that talking to their parents once a week promotes a realistic understanding of their experience overseas. If you have readily available Internet access, Internet phone calls and instant messaging are great ways to be in touch when international calls are too expensive. E-mail can help you get around the obstacle of large time zone differences—and has the added benefit of being reflective and thoughtful if you take a little time to write it.

put things in perspective

As you immerse yourself overseas, you'll begin to develop a sense of your new surroundings. When you contact those at home, though, remember that they haven't seen what you're seeing or experienced what you're experiencing. Your everyday environment may be beyond the realm of their imagination if you don't put the stories you tell in context both from a geographical and a cultural perspective. That lack of context, plus the anxiety and emotion that comes with having a loved one far away, make it easy for misperceptions to occur. For example, if you say you're not feeling well, parents might get the impression that you need immediate medical attention (and may not have access to quality health care). If you say you're having a bad day, they may get the idea that you're depressed (and perhaps that your resident director should watch you more closely). Be truthful, but be sensitive to what you are saying and how it might be interpreted.

a little isolation helps you grow

When times are tough, your instinct may be to call home to hear a familiar voice. Speaking to someone who knows and understand you will give you comfort in unfamiliar circumstances, but the resilience you build by coping with challenges on your own is one of the greatest benefits of studying away. When homesickness or frustration strikes, try engaging in even more local activities and seeking out even more locals for conversation or support. Reaching out to my parents and friends who are far away may not only make them worry, but will distract you from the local life you could be enjoying. The more issues you resolve on your own, the more independent and adaptable you'll become.

communicating with locals overseas

get in touch with the culture

It's easy to get the idea that the web of worldwide communications has somehow resulted in some standard way that humans communicate worldwide. Of course, that isn't the case. Remember how large a role culture plays in how communications are typically delivered, received, and handled. While an informal e-mail writing style may be acceptable to professors on your home campus, opening an e-mail to a professor in your host country with "Hey, Prof, how's it going?" may not be as well received. In fact, e-mailing professors may not be appropriate at all. In some countries, you may need to speak with them in person before or after class or during their office hours, which may not be followed as strictly as they are in the U.S. When you speak with a professor almost anywhere overseas, you should be more formal than you are used to; don't slip into the informal like you might with friends.

Similarly, in some countries and cultures, a telephone call of any kind is meant to be private, so mobile calls are taken only in a quiet room or outside. Follow the advice of your resident director and the cues of your host culture. Learning how to communicate according to local customs is part of learning how people do things in your new home—and how to make positive, lasting personal connections.

seek help locally

Communication devices—especially mobile phones—make staying healthy and safe easier. You can connect to

those at home as easily as to those next door, but your needs in both emergency and non-emergency situations are usually best met by local support services. It's easy to pick up the phone and tell your parents you've just injured your knee in a soccer match, but there's not much they can do to get you help. When you arrive overseas, learn how best to communicate with your resident director and other local resources in times of need. Informing your family is always a good idea, but take care of your immediate needs first.

communicating as part of learning

Intercultural communication is at the heart of study away and international exchange. Personal contact between you and those in both your old and new homes is a big part of that exchange. There's probably such a thing as staying too closely in touch, though.

a little less old, a little more new

If you've made a commitment to speak only in your host country language while away, you'll undermine that if you're doing a lot of texting, e-mailing, and talking with friends at home in English. Take the time to converse with locals in person and over the phone. Include your new local friends in your online life—through e-mail, social networking, blogging, etc.—and use the local language as much as you can. Share music and videos that you like and ask your new friends to share their favorite books, bands, and websites.

storytelling to reflect and enrich

The more you reflect on it, the clearer you'll see how your experience away will impact your life, now and in the future. Writing or telling stories to friends at home and away is one of the best ways to organize those reflections. Chronicle your thoughts, experiences, and opinions by writing, taking photos, making videos, or recording podcasts. You'll be able to remember what you experienced and contemplate what you were feeling long after you've returned home, and you can share those thoughts with friends and strangers worldwide through blogs, social networking, and video sharing sites. A few photos of you, your residence, your homestay family, or your neighborhood can go a long way toward easing concerned parents.

The potential goes way beyond that, though. By bringing the reality of daily lives half a world away to others back home, you'll increase their understanding of the world as it really is—making you an agent of change as well as a study away alumnus. The record you're creating isn't private or temporary, though, so think about what you're saying and showing and who might read or see it. You're sharing a piece of yourself with the world—a world that includes your family, friends, host family, and professors, not to mention your home university and future employers. Be as culturally sensitive in your blog as you would be face-to-face. You'll build relationships between people who otherwise would never have met, and you'll be amazed by what you've learned.

stay connected, be open-minded

- share your stories with those at home to put new experiences in perspective
- keep contact with home in check; find time for new friends overseas
- respect the communication conventions of your host culture
- seek help locally if you need it
- make a record of your thoughts and feelings to help you reflect

Helpful Words and Phrases to Know

If you are studying overseas, it is important to be able to communicate and understand others effectively. The form below is a list of words that will help you communicate through an emergency so that you will be able to ask for help if injured or ask for legal protection if your rights are in jeopardy. If you have a specific health condition, a special need, or if you are allergic to any medication, know exactly how to say so in the native language. Regardless of your language proficiency, there are a few basic words that you should be able to pronounce fluently. Fill out the form below and carry it with you for your reference.

Word	Translation	Word	Translation
Airport		Ambulance	
ATM		Baggage Claim	
Bank		Bathroom	
Bus		Computer	
Consulate		Doctor	
Embassy		Emergency	
Emergency Room		Exchange Rate	
Fire		Fire Station	
Food		Help	
Hospital		Hostel	
Hotel		Insurance	
Internet		Law	
Lawyer		Luggage	
Market		Medicine	
Metro		Metro Station	
Money		Nurse	
Pharmacy		Police	
Police Station		Post Office	
Restaurant		Station	
Store		Street	
Suitcase		Taxi	
Telephone		Thief	
Train		Train Station	
Translation		Translator	
University		Water	

Know how to say basic key phrases in the local language.

In addition to knowing a few vocabulary words, it is also important to know some key phrases in order to communicate effectively and make your study abroad experience enjoyable and safe. Fill out the following form and keep a copy of it with you at all times for your reference.

Arrests	
I am a United States citizen.	I have a right to call the United States Embassy/Consulate.
Please call the United States Embassy/Consulate immediately.	
Food & Water	
Where is the market?	Is this safe drinking water?
Where can I get something to eat?	I can't/don't eat meat/pork, etc.
I am allergic to...	
General Info	
My name is...	I don't understand.
Please speak slowly.	What (time, date, day) is it?
Where is the nearest (bathroom, telephone, bank,)?	Can you give me directions to ...?
Where can I find information about ...?	Can you write this down for me?
Can you show me on this map?	I'm lost.
Can you contact this person for me?	Where is the closest internet café?