

How to Read Virtual Body Language in Email

By [Steve Tobak](#) | November 1, 2011



You can tell a lot about someone from the way they chat, text, or email online. Attitude, humor, aggression, it's all detectable if you pay attention and know what cues to look for. It's called *virtual* body language and it's for real.

No, I'm not smoking something. Physical body language isn't the only way to read people's emotional state. It leaks out whenever we communicate. I mean, you can tell a lot from someone's voice over the phone, right? Well, we all have a *voice* when we write, as well.

The more we communicate virtually, the more important it is to be able to read and assess those critical nuances virtually. This isn't a new thing. Virtual communication has been around for a long, long time. Electronic mail predated the internet by decades and big companies had their own internal networks way back in the 80s.

We're not talking about casual conversations here. We've been negotiating, doing business deals, and hiring and firing people via email for years. Why do it blind when you can pick up all sorts of nuances from the way people write, same as you would from their voice and body language?

Before we get into the cues, there are some things to keep in mind:

- As with real body language, it helps if you have a baseline on the individual. In other words, everything is relative to how a person ordinarily communicates.
- Another thing virtual and real body language have in common is that some cues can mean several different things, so you really should take all the cues in aggregate.
- When someone's emailing or messaging via smartphone, that changes things since they tend to be shorter, but you can usually tell when that's the case.
- You can delete and rewrite an entire email if you realize you've overreacted, but you can't really put real-time communication back in your mouth. So, for example, when someone seems angry or acts out in email, that means they're probably *really* upset.

- Some people are more comfortable with online communications and therefore more transparent than those who aren't used to it and might tend to write like polite robots. That brings us to the first of ...

10 Virtual Body Language Cues

1. **People who write the way they speak are easy to read.** That's a growing trend as our society gets used to online communication. For example, I write pretty much the same way I speak, so you can infer the same cues from my writing as you would if we were speaking. What you read is what you get, and you can definitely read my mood in my writing.
2. **Short can mean annoyed or angry.** When someone's unusually short with they're writing, they're annoyed, pissed off, or angry. Maybe at you, maybe at someone or something else, but they're taking it out on you, that's for sure.
3. **Verbose means pleased or happy.** When someone's unusually verbose in their writing, especially combined with a generally positive tone, means they're feeling good or happy. That might or might not be related to you or the topic at hand, depending on the content.
4. **Genuine humor and humility is a good sign.** People who write with genuine humor and humility are usually relatively straightforward people you can trust. Of course, it helps if you can tell the difference between *genuine* humility versus *over-the-top* self-deprecation, for example. The latter can be kind of creepy.
5. **Flame mail is aggressive behavior, period.** You probably don't need me to tell you this, but when you receive what we affectionately call flame mail - where someone lets loose on you in a big, ugly way - that's aggressive behavior. In other words, they're acting out like a child throwing a temper tantrum and it's not about you, it's about them. I know it's tempting to think it's just a misunderstanding, but ask yourself, why did they assume the worst?
6. **Consistently precise grammar can mean controlling behavior.** Controlling people and control freaks are typically precise in their communication. The same is true whether they're feeling good or ripping you a new one.
7. **Don't take emoticons verbatim.** People often use emoticons to express an emotion they'd like to get across, even when they're not feeling it themselves. That, in itself, says something about them. Sometimes people say something controversial or argumentative and put a happy face after it, as if to soften it. I think that's sort of passive aggressive.
8. **Overly expressive means drama queen.** People who are over-the-top expressive, in terms of emoticons and exclamation marks, for example, are more or less needy, attention-seeking drama queens. They're saying *look at me, listen to me*.
9. **Constant use of shorthand or abbreviation can mean chaotic or self-centered.** You know how some people are always in a rush, running late, harried, breathless. Well, they write the same way. Oftentimes those people are self-centered and want to communicate how *important* and *busy* they are by under-communicating. Makes *you* work harder, so it is selfish, when you think about it.
10. **Overly formal means they see you as an authority figure or are selling something.** Of course, certain industries and types of communication tend to be formal. Barring that, people who are unusually polite probably see you as an authority figure and want to make a good impression or they're trying to sell you something or get something from you.