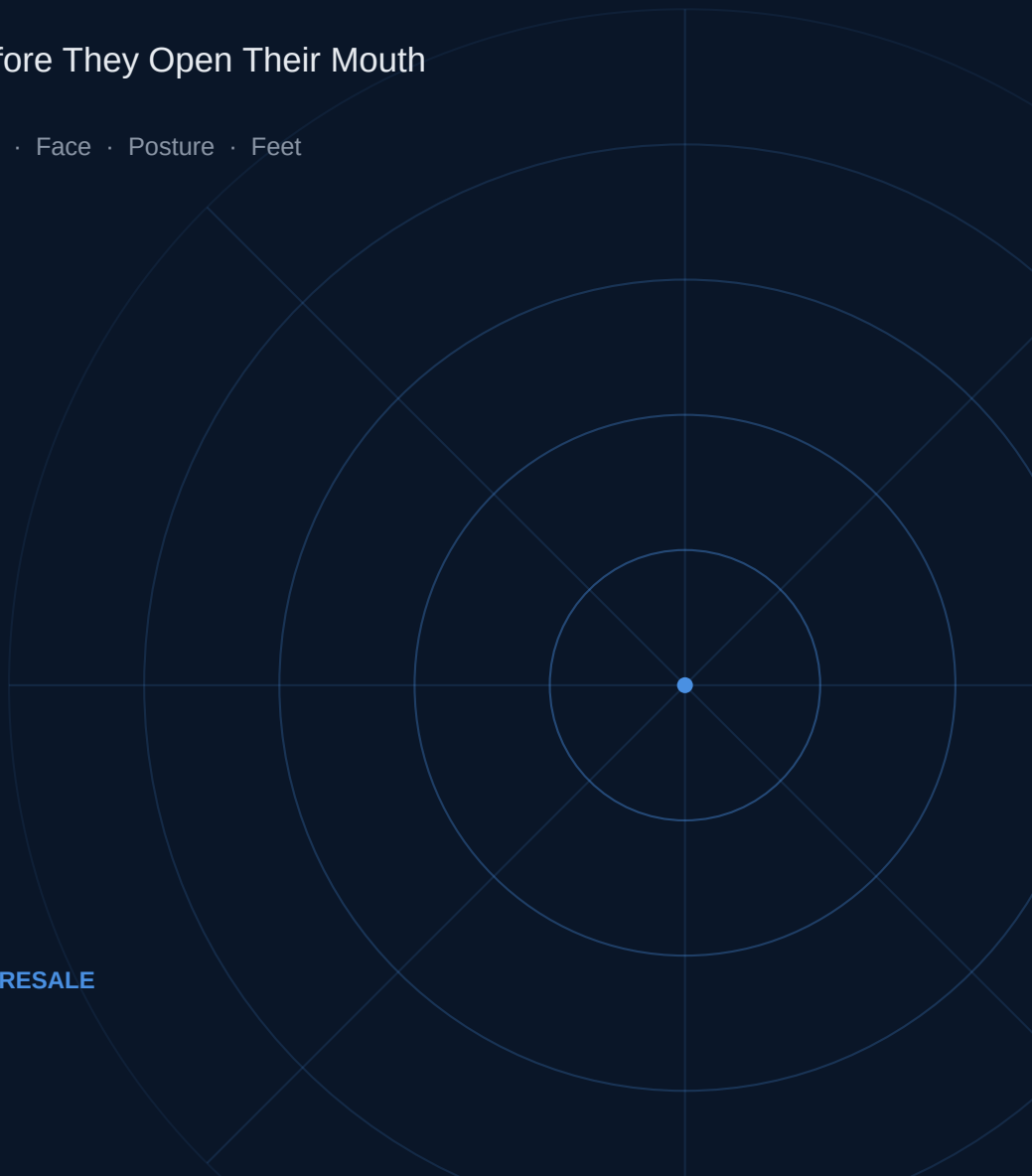
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SEVEN

SECONDS

How To Read Anyone Before They Open Their Mouth

Appearance · Entry · Handshake · Face · Posture · Feet



A FREE FIELD GUIDE · NOT FOR RESALE

INTRODUCTION

What You Are About To See

Every person you meet is broadcasting an enormous amount of information about themselves before they ever say a word, and almost no one is reading it. The face tells you what they actually feel about meeting you in the half-second before the social smile catches up. The handshake tells you whether they see you as above them, below them, or as an equal. The posture tells you whether they are open to the conversation or already closing it down. The feet tell you where they actually want to go, regardless of what their words are saying.

By the end of this short guide you will be able to walk into a room and know, within the first seven seconds of meeting someone, whether they are anxious or comfortable, whether they are claiming a status they have not earned or carrying one they have, whether they are genuinely glad to see you or performing the warmth, and whether the conversation is going somewhere or already ending in their head.

You will start to notice the moment a friend's body closes off when you bring up a specific topic, and you will know that topic matters more than they admitted. You will see the flicker of contempt that crosses someone's face during a meeting, and you will know they have already written off the speaker. You will catch the cold damp hand of someone who is hiding their stress behind a confident voice, and you will know to slow down with them rather than push.

What follows are six channels the body broadcasts in the opening seconds of any encounter, with the specific signals to look for in each one and what those signals reliably mean. None of this requires special training, only attention. Once you have seen these patterns a few times, you cannot unsee them.

The next time you walk into a room, you are going to start noticing things you never noticed before.

THE MAP

The Six-Channel Scan

01 APPEARANCE
what they wear, carry, protect

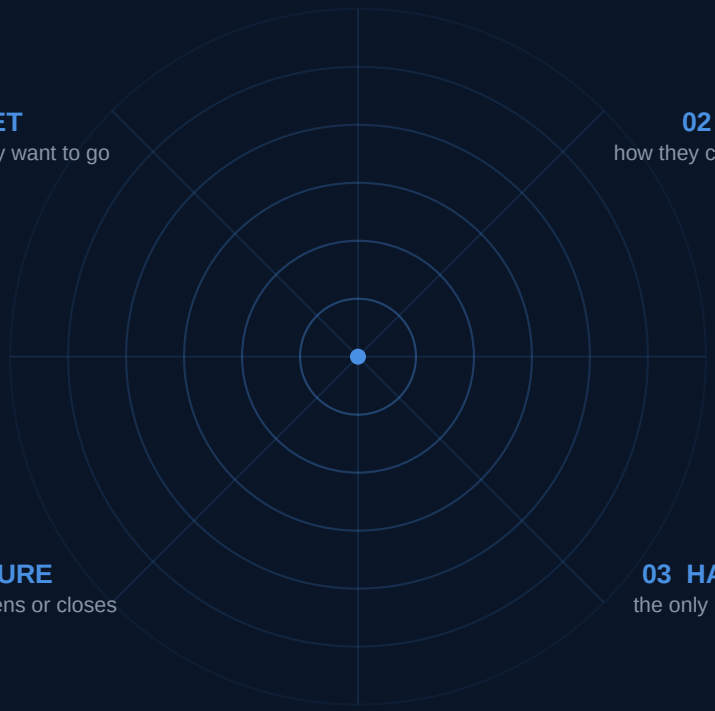
02 ENTRY
how they cross the threshold

03 HANDSHAKE
the only physical contact

04 FACE
the half-second before the smile

05 POSTURE
where the body opens or closes

06 FEET
where they actually want to go



THE TIMELINE

These signals fire in a predictable order, almost every time:

0s	Appearance, already broadcasting before they even enter
1-2s	Entry behaviour, the doorway and the first scan
3-4s	Handshake, the only physical contact and the densest single read
4-5s	Face, the first emotional flash before the social mask catches up
5-7s	Posture and feet, where the body actually wants to go

CHANNEL ONE

Appearance

The clothes were chosen hours before you met, the haircut weeks before, and the watch months before. None of these decisions were made in front of you and none of them can be hidden from you, which makes appearance the slowest channel of communication and therefore the most reliable. It tells you less about what the person is feeling in this moment and more about who they are, where they think they belong, and where they wish they belonged.

The first thing to read is fit rather than brand, because expensive clothes that fit poorly are the tell of someone who spent the money but never developed the eye for what real fit looks like, while inexpensive clothes that fit perfectly belong to someone who has the eye and the patience and probably the kind of taste that money alone cannot buy. Status follows fit far more reliably than it follows logos, and the person whose entire outfit is curated and quiet with nothing screaming for attention is signalling a higher position than the person in the same room wearing visible designer labels.

The second thing is congruence with the room, because someone notably overdressed is usually anxious or trying to claim a position the room would not give them automatically, while someone notably underdressed is either secure enough not to care or so high in status that the rules do not apply to them, and the rest of their behaviour will tell you which.

The third is what they protect, because the phone clutched in the hand, the bag held across the body, the jacket kept on indoors, and the sleeves pulled down over the hands are all comfort objects, and the body reaches for them when it expects to need protection. The phone in particular has become the modern shield, a way to keep one hand occupied so it does not look idle and to have a ready reason to look away if eye contact gets too costly.

The fourth is the watch and the shoes, which are the two appearance details that carry the most concentrated information, because the watch is the most intentional piece of signalling on the body of most adults and the shoes are the place where caring or not caring becomes visible since most people stop curating below the knee. The fifth is the hair, which is the only part of the appearance that gets attention every single day, which means a noticeable change in cut or colour is almost always signalling that something else in the person's life has changed too.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

- Whether they are claiming a status or carrying one
- Whether they expected today to matter, or did not
- What they reach for when they need protection
- What is going on in their life this week

CHANNEL TWO

The Entry

The way someone crosses a threshold is one of the closest things to a free psychological X-ray you will ever get, because by the time they have stepped into the room and taken three paces they have already shown you their relationship to status, their default vigilance level, and what they are optimising for in this environment, and almost none of it was conscious on their part.

Some people pause for a half-second after stepping in and let their eyes move across the room before they commit to a direction, which is a high-status and high-vigilance entry from someone who is reading the room before letting the room read them. Others walk in head down with their eyes on the floor or on a phone, angled toward the shortest path to a chair or a corner, which is the entry of someone who wants to be in the room without being seen entering it, and which can come from shyness, from learned habits of low exposure, or from the simple discomfort of being noticed.

The performative entry is loud and arms-wide and pitched for the room rather than the person being greeted, and it is almost always a status claim from someone asserting a position they do not have automatically, because real high-status confidence does not need to announce itself and the room will orient toward it without effort. The neutral entry is steady and unremarkable and is the entry of someone for whom this room and these people are simply normal, with nothing to prove and nothing to fear.

Independent of which entry type someone runs, the gaze pattern in the first second is one of the most diagnostic signals you will ever see. Some people scan for the most powerful person in the room and will calibrate everything they do to the hierarchy. Others scan for an exit and have low trust in the situation. Others scan for someone they know and are looking for affiliation. Others scan for the most attractive person and are running a romantic operating system without quite realising it. Each of these tells you what the person is optimising for, and most of them have no idea they are doing it.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

- Whether they read rooms or just walk into them
- Whether they are claiming attention or trying to avoid it
- Their default trust level in this environment
- What they are unconsciously optimising for

CHANNEL THREE

The Handshake

The handshake is the densest piece of data you will collect in the entire opening encounter, because it is the only physical contact in the first seven seconds and the body cannot perform contact the way it can perform a smile. Five elements fire simultaneously during a handshake and almost no one can manage all of them at the same time, which means at least one of them will leak the truth about the person.

The crushing handshake is almost never strength, it is the performance of strength by someone who has not internalised actual confidence, because genuinely powerful people tend to offer firm but unremarkable pressure since they have nothing to prove with their grip. The limp fingertip handshake is the opposite tell of someone who did not commit to the contact, which can come from social discomfort, from a quiet status read in the other direction, or simply from low engagement with this particular interaction. Calibrated firmness sits between the two, full grip and matched pressure, which is what genuine confidence offers and also what trained operators have been coached to deliver.

Watch the angle of the offered palm during the approach, because the palm rotated downward signals that the person is claiming the dominant position and their hand will end up on top of yours, while a palm rotated upward signals submission and their hand will end up below yours, and a vertical palm-to-palm grip signals an equal footing. Almost none of this is conscious, the body is acting out the social hierarchy the person has already assigned to the encounter before either of you has spoken.

A standard handshake lasts about three seconds, so significantly shorter is a withdrawal from someone who did not want the contact, and significantly longer is an attempt to mark the encounter as more important than its surface. A cold damp hand is autonomic stress that the person cannot control no matter how much they want to, while a warm dry hand is regulated and present. The free hand also tells you something, because if it comes up to clasp your shoulder during the handshake the person is performing intimacy that may or may not be real, and if it stays in a pocket they are committing only halfway to the contact.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

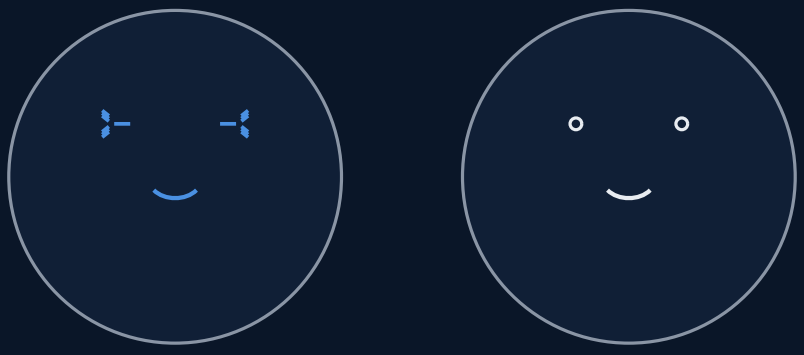
- Where they place themselves on the hierarchy with you
- Whether their stress level matches their voice
- Whether their warmth is real or performed
- Whether they are committing to the encounter or going through the motions

CHANNEL FOUR

The Face: The Real Smile

The face has more than forty muscles, but most people can only voluntarily control about ten of them, which means the other thirty are running on their own, twenty-four hours a day, and they will tell you the truth about anyone who has not spent ten thousand hours in front of a mirror learning to override their own physiology.

The single most useful read on the entire face is the difference between a real smile and a performed one, because a genuine smile activates two muscles while a fake smile only uses one. The real smile pulls the corners of the mouth up and also tightens the muscle around the eyes, which raises the lower eyelid slightly and creates the small lines at the outer corners of the eyes. That eye-tightening muscle fires only when the person actually feels what they are showing, and almost no one can activate it on command.



REAL

eyes tighten, lines appear at corners

PERFORMED

eyes stay open, only the mouth moves

The fake smile uses only the mouth, which is why the eyes stay flat or even slightly cool, and it is the reason you can sometimes feel vaguely uneasy after what looked like a warm greeting. Your fast system caught the discrepancy your slow system has not yet named. Once you have seen this difference clearly a few times, you will start spotting it everywhere, in friends, in colleagues, in the people on television.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

- Whether the warmth they are showing you is real
- When their feeling has shifted, even before their words do

CHANNEL FOUR

The Face: The Seven Flashes

Seven facial expressions produce the same muscle pattern in every culture on earth, including in tribes that had never seen a Western face, which makes them essentially universal. They are also fast, often appearing on the face for less than a quarter of a second before the social mask takes over, but once you know what to look for you will start seeing them everywhere.

01	02	03	04	05	06	07
HAPPY	**SAD**	**ANGER**	**FEAR**	**SURPRISE**	**DISGUST**	**CONTEMPT**
raised cheeks lines at eye corners	inner brows up corners pull down	brows down lips pressed thin	brows up and together lips stretched	brows up jaw drops open	nose wrinkles upper lip lifts	ONE corner of mouth pulls tight

Of these seven, the most important one to know by sight is contempt, because contempt is the only emotion the human face produces asymmetrically, with one corner of the mouth pulling tight while the other side stays relaxed. No other emotion does this, which means that if you ever see a one-sided lip pull during a conversation, especially when someone is being praised or introduced, you have just been shown contempt. The person feels superior to whatever they are reacting to, and they are not quite hiding it.

The other essential read is the flicker before the smile, because the genuine emotion someone actually felt about seeing you arrives on their face about half a second before the social smile catches up, which means if a flash of boredom or irritation or surprise crosses their face just before they smile at you, that flash is more accurate than the smile that follows it.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

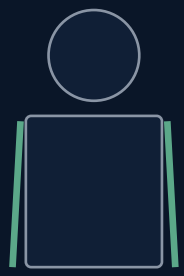
- What they actually feel about something, not what they say about it
- Whether you have been quietly judged
- Whether their reaction caught up with their words, or replaced them

CHANNEL FIVE

Posture

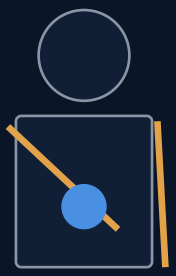
The body has been running a single rule for longer than language has existed, which is to orient toward what you want and turn away from what you do not, and the rule is so consistent that it functions as a compass. Wherever the front of the body is facing is where the person wants to be and who they want to be with, and wherever the body is turning away from is what they are quietly rejecting.

The most useful posture read is the torso shield, which is what the body does automatically when it feels threatened, judged, or exposed. Crossed arms, a hand brought to the chest, a bag pulled across the lap, a folder held in front of the heart, or a coffee cup pulled close to the body are all variations of the same instinct, which is to put a barrier between the front of the torso and whatever is perceived as the source of discomfort. None of these gestures is conscious, and all of them mean the same thing.



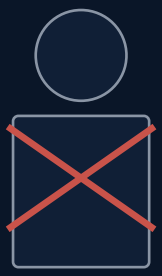
OPEN

no barriers



PARTIAL

object as buffer



SHIELDED

arms cross, distance demanded

What matters most is the transition rather than the static posture, because a person who starts a conversation open and gradually moves through partial to fully shielded is responding to something specific, and whatever was being said in the moment they began closing is worth examining. Sudden stillness is also worth watching for, because when someone who had been moving naturally goes completely still after a question or a remark, you have hit something the body is now deciding how to respond to.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

- When the conversation crossed a line for them
- What topic the body wants to escape
- Whether they are leaning into the encounter or leaning out

CHANNEL SIX

Feet

Almost no one watches the feet, which is exactly why the feet are the single most honest channel on the human body. The face has been trained since childhood to lie, the hands have learned to gesture and shake and wave, and the torso has learned to orient politely, but the feet have not been schooled at all and they still operate on the same logic the body has been running for tens of millions of years, which is to point toward what they want and away from what they want to escape.

Whichever direction the feet are pointed is the direction the person actually wants to go, regardless of where their face is looking or what their words are saying. If you are talking to someone whose torso is turned toward you but whose feet are pointed at the door, the conversation is over and they have not yet told you. If their feet are pointed at another person across the room, they are more interested in that person than in you. If the feet are pointed at the food, they are hungry, and if they are pointed at the exit, they are leaving. Watch the feet at parties, watch the feet during difficult conversations, watch the feet when you are pitching something, because the information is almost always in the feet before it is anywhere else on the body.

Beyond pointing, the feet leak in three other ways that are worth knowing. Locked feet wrapped tight around the legs of a chair are self-restraint from someone who wants to move and is stopping themselves, which usually shows up when a person disagrees with what is being said but cannot openly contest it, and the lock is the body immobilising itself while the mouth produces a controlled response. Bouncing or tapping feet are the body burning excess energy that has nowhere else to go, sometimes from boredom but often from suppressed anxiety, frustration, or anger that the person is not expressing in their words.

Tucked-away feet hidden under the chair or hooked behind its legs are a low-status or self-protective posture from someone who feels they do not quite belong in the room they are in, while a confident person at ease in their environment tends to spread out, with feet flat or relaxed and taking up the floor space they are entitled to. The rarest and most diagnostic foot signal is the foot rise, where in a moment of unexpected positive news a heel or both feet briefly lift off the floor, which is one of the most reliable signals of genuine joy you will ever see, because the body is literally lifting itself.

WHAT YOU CAN READ

- Where they actually want to go
- What they are biting back instead of saying out loud
- Whether they feel they belong here, or are bracing through it
- When something just landed well, even if their face does not show it

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

The Seven-Second Sequence

Run the channels in order, every time you meet someone new, until the sequence becomes automatic. The first few times it will take the full seven seconds and feel deliberate, after a few weeks of practice it will compress to two or three seconds, and after a few months it will run silently in the background and you will start to forget you are doing it.

SECOND 1 — **Appearance scan**
Take in the whole picture before they reach you. Fit, congruence, what they carry, what they protect.

SECOND 2 — **Entry behaviour**
How did they cross the threshold? Where did the eyes go first? What are they optimising for?

SECONDS 3-4 — **The handshake**
Pressure, palm angle, duration, temperature, free hand. The richest piece of data in the encounter.

SECOND 5 — **The first face**
The half-second before the social smile is where the truth lives. Watch for the flicker.

SECOND 6 — **Posture**
Open, partial, or shielded? Leaning toward you or away? What did the body do when you spoke?

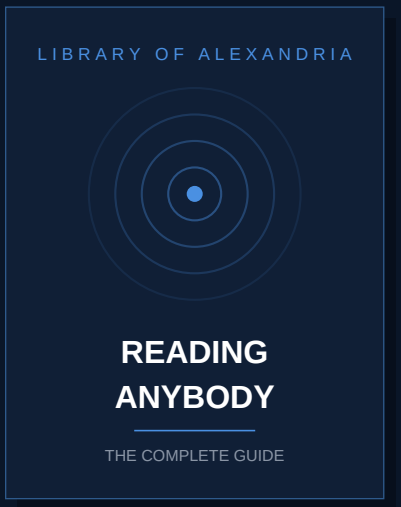
SECOND 7 — **The feet**
The final and most honest read. Where are they actually pointed?

WHEN THE CHANNELS DISAGREE

- Trust the feet first. They are the least-trained part of the body.
- Trust the torso second. It is slow to be managed.
- Trust the face only in the first half-second, before the mask catches up.
- Trust the words last. They are the most managed channel, and the easiest to fake.

What you can read is endless.

What you have just learned covers the first seven seconds of an encounter, which is the doorway into something much larger. The body keeps broadcasting throughout every conversation, every meeting, every quiet evening with someone you thought you already knew. The signals do not stop after the opening impression. They only deepen.



WHAT ELSE BECOMES READABLE

- **WHEN SOMEONE IS LYING TO YOU**
  The cluster of signals that always shows up the moment the truth and the words come apart.
- **WHO ACTUALLY HOLDS POWER IN A ROOM**
  How status moves silently through a group, and why the loudest voice rarely owns it.
- **WHETHER PEOPLE ACTUALLY LIKE YOU**
  How to tell when the warmth you are getting is performed, and when it is real.
- **WHO IS ATTRACTED, AND WHO IS PRETENDING**
  What the body does in the first thirty seconds of romantic interest, and when it is faking.
- **WHEN A NEGOTIATION IS ALREADY OVER**
  How to read the moment the other side has decided, often minutes before they say a word.
- **WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF THEMSELVES**
  What clothing, posture, voice, and what they protect tell you about their inner story.
- **WHAT YOU ARE BROADCASTING WITHOUT KNOWING IT**
  Once you can read others, you start seeing yourself the way they see you.

EXPLORE THE COMPLETE GUIDE →

The full guide, by Library of Alexandria.