

How to Look Smarter

The Tactics People Use to Look Intelligent Often Backfire; Fancy Words Don't Work



Many people who want others to think they're intelligent end up misfiring. WSJ's Sue Shellenbarger explains how to look and sound smart the right way. Photo: Getty



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While trying to look intelligent, a lot of people do things that make them look dumb.

For instance, people use big words or put on a poker face—tactics that can backfire for some, studies show.

A growing amount of research is teasing out how people form first impressions of others' intelligence—and how well it works when you try to manage those impressions. The cues people look for in assessing each other's intelligence are simple. But they aren't always easy to pull off

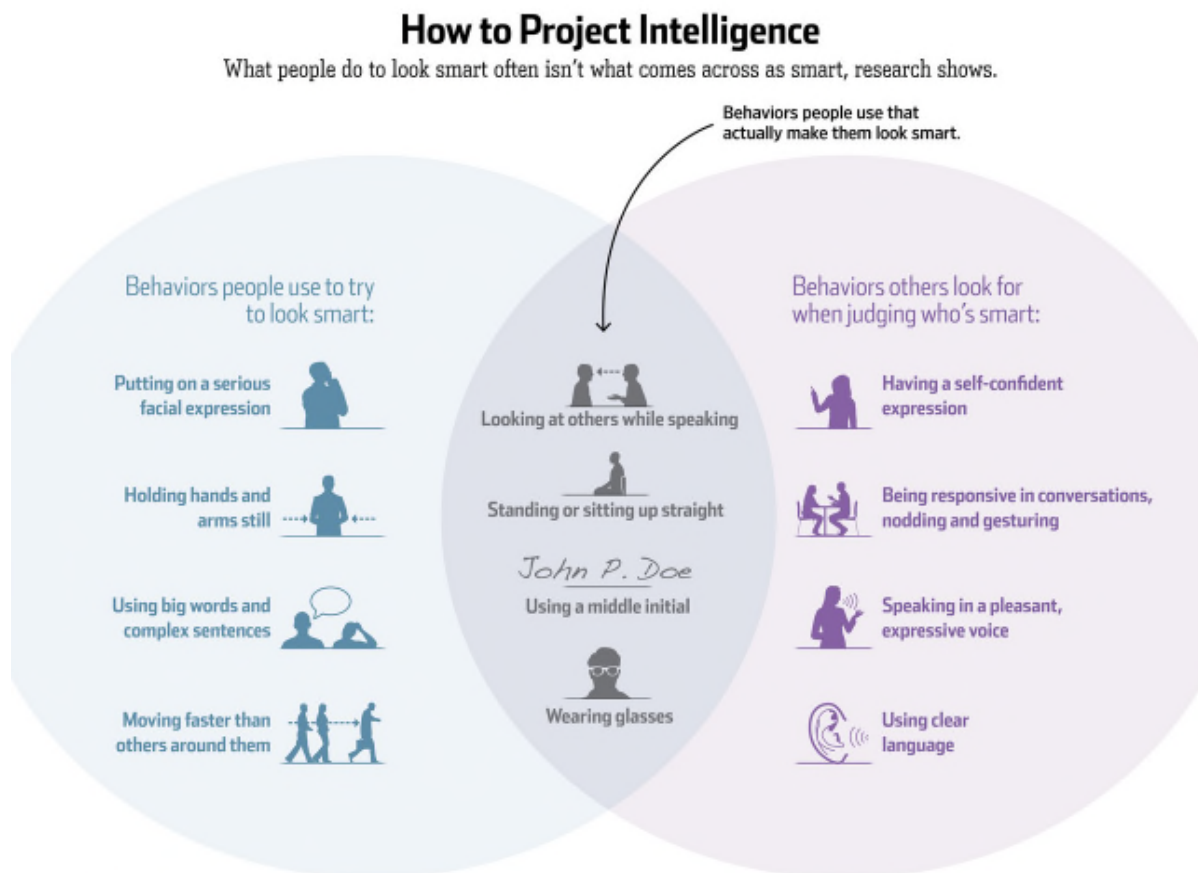
under pressure. They include showing self-confidence, speaking clearly and smoothly, and responding thoughtfully to what others are saying, research shows.

And put away that phone: One of the strongest and most accurate signs of intelligence is looking at others when you are speaking to them, says Nora A. Murphy, an associate professor of psychology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, who has conducted six studies on the topic. In one, Dr. Murphy compared, in the same study, the behaviors people adopt when trying to look smart with the cues observers use in sizing up others' intelligence.

In a 2007 study of 182 graduate students, some participants were instructed to try to appear intelligent during a videotaped discussion with a partner. Each also took an IQ test. Other people were asked to watch the videos and make a judgment about the participants' likely IQ. Separately, researchers watched the videos for 28 different behaviors.

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People trying to look intelligent had a few behaviors in common. Among them were looking at others while listening or speaking, sitting up straight, putting on a serious face and avoiding



certain gestures, such as touching their hair or face. But just the first two of those behaviors earned them a high IQ score from people watching the videos.

The observers also gave higher IQ ratings to participants who appeared more relaxed and confident. They rated as smarter participants who wore a self-assured expression rather than a poker face, spoke clearly in a pleasant, expressive voice, and were responsive to their conversation partners—gesturing, nodding and “being engaged in the conversation and paying attention,” Dr. Murphy says.

People who tried to appear intelligent risked exposing what they didn’t know, the research shows. Observers were more accurate in estimating the IQs—including lower IQs—of those instructed to act intelligent than in estimating the IQs of controls who weren’t given any instructions. Apparently, participants’ attempts at impression management actually magnified other cues signaling low intelligence.

“The more you try, the more it’s going to be obvious” that you’re trying, Dr. Murphy says.

Some simple stereotypes about intelligence can also shape others’ first impressions. Wearing eyeglasses can lead strangers to regard you as more intelligent, says a 2011 study in the *Swiss Journal of Psychology*.

Using a middle initial makes people expect you to perform better on a competitive intellectual quiz, according to several studies of European and U.S. subjects published last year in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*; middle initials are linked in many people’s minds to higher social status and education.

Those positive first impressions may be shattered, however, as soon as pretentious language starts interfering with others’ ability to understand and communicate with you. People who embellish their writing with long, complicated words are seen as less intelligent by readers, according to a 2006 study in *Applied Cognitive Psychology*.

The workplace, of course, is full of people trying too hard to look smart. Dianna Booher coached a manager who tried to impress others by learning a new word every day and using it all day.

“He’d say, ‘I’m going to use the word ‘ubiquitous’ today,’ and he’d use it three or four different ways in meetings, in hallway conversations, and sometimes it fit and sometimes it didn’t,” says Ms. Booher, a Colleyville, Texas, author and consultant on business communication. Rather than burnishing his image, “he became a laughing stock,” she says.

Others try to project intelligence by talking too much, and too loudly—“hiding inside a barrage of words, hoping no one will notice that they don’t know anything,” says Lisa D. Parker, president of Heads Up Coaching and Consulting in New York.

Ms. Parker has a clock on her office wall. She sometimes quietly times overtalkers and surprises them by revealing just how long they’ve been droning on. She advises them to practice halting the flow: “Ask a question, let somebody else talk, and practice long, slow, deep breaths” to regain self-control.

Onlookers often interpret such behavior as a sign of insecurity and low self-esteem, says Joel Garfinkle, an Oakland, Calif., executive coach and author.

Appearing calm and confident is another cue: People who move faster than others around them are seen as less intelligent, according to a 2007 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Still, some people treat projecting intelligence like a race, says William Arruda, a New York City personal-branding consultant. “In meetings, they think, ‘I always have to have the answer, so I have to blurt out the first thing that comes to my head,’ ” he says.

Others quickly see through such behaviors as a sign of insecurity. Those who do the best job of projecting intelligence, Mr. Arruda says, “are those who are able to say, ‘I don’t know.’ ”

When Dan Cappello, a former insurance executive and stock-exchange floor trader, bought a company that makes equipment for chip manufacturers years ago, he knew nothing about the industry. In initial meetings, he decided to just admit it, and surprised the company’s 40 employees by announcing, “Hey, I don’t understand this. Can you explain this to me?” Mr. Cappello says. He told employees he was eager to learn the business but would focus on his

strengths in sales and marketing to expand the company, says Mr. Cappello, president and CEO of MEI in Albany, Ore. The company has expanded sales tenfold and grown to 300 employees.

The kind of natural, responsive behavior that conveys true intelligence is complicated, says Suzanne Bates, an author on executive presence and chief executive of Bates Communications in Wellesley, Mass. It entails listening carefully, responding in a way that shows understanding, asking questions and welcoming other points of view. “You really can’t fake it,” she says.

You can learn it, though. Carolyn Sandano worried on her first major job out of college years ago, as a marketing specialist for a law firm, that colleagues would look down on her because she didn’t have a law degree. When her boss asked her for a recommendation on buying some software, she wrote a 30-page report bristling with data, big words and erudite sentences. “I wanted everybody to think I was smart,” she says. Instead of reading it, her boss asked her at a meeting to “just boil it down for us.”

These days, the New York City legal-marketing executive is open about what she doesn’t know, and “if I’m wrong, I say so,” she says. She asks a lot of questions and spends 75% of her time listening intently, she says, “as if there were nothing more important in your life right now” than that conversation.

She also shows genuine interest in others’ ideas. “The thing I do that I find people respond to the most,” she says, “is that I am really enthusiastic.”

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