

Verbal and nonverbal online communication

This chapter explores the concept of verbal and nonverbal communication and how they differ in face-to-face and online education. After reading the chapter, you should be able to:

- ✓ Explain the difference between verbal and nonverbal communication in digital learning,
- ✓ Describe various ways of using nonverbal communication in online teaching,
- ✓ Distinguish the cues for detecting interest in your audience and ways to influence it.

The chapter includes the following sections:

1. *What is verbal and nonverbal communication?*
2. *The role of the educator – the importance of a role model*
3. *How to communicate verbally and nonverbally in the digital realm*
4. *Verbal and nonverbal communication in face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous education*
5. *Overcoming challenges and misconceptions*
6. *Questions for reflection*
7. *References and resources*



Design: [Jackson Best](#)

1. What is verbal and nonverbal communication?

According to some definitions, “**communication** is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour”¹.

The primary function of communication is to share information and feelings. Effective communication is vital to educate, train, socialise, motivate, entertain, and persuade. There are different types of communication – intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, mass, direct and mediated, synchronous, and asynchronous. Communication can be of different types – speaking, listening, visualising, observing, reading and writing.

To be an effective educator it is vital to be able to communicate effectively. Through effective communication, we can not only convey information, but encourage effort, modify attitudes, and stimulate thinking. Without effective communication messages can be distorted, stereotypes developed, and the learning process stifled.

There are many ways to facilitate effective communication. Your ability to masterfully use verbal language, body language, tone of voice, and visual cues affect how well you will be understood. Both verbal and nonverbal communication skills are vital to delivering an understandable message.

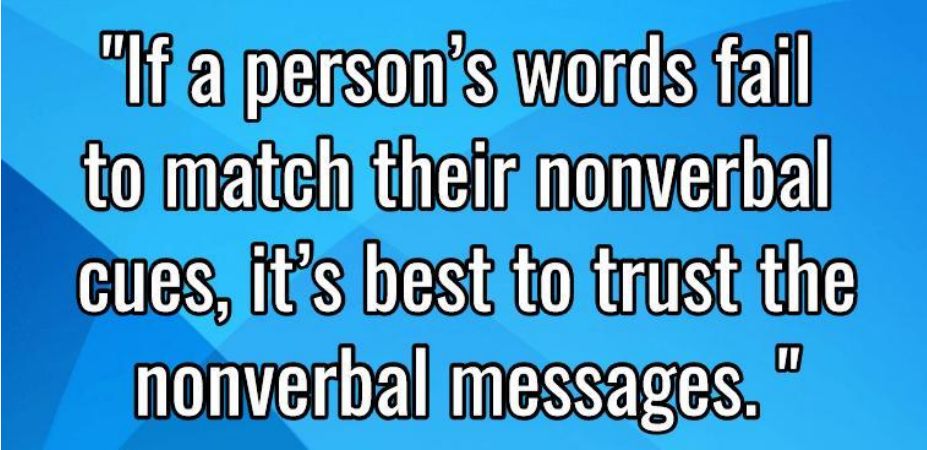
Verbal communication is the process of using words to share our ideas, information, and knowledge with other people. It can be oral, written or sign language.

Nonverbal Communication is the process of sharing meaning that we want to communicate without spoken or written words. For nonverbal communication, we use body language, hand movements, facial expressions, gestures and postures. Our nonverbal communication can be conscious or subconscious on both sides when we are in the role of communicator or receiver of the information.

Before we move to the practical tips on how to be effective communicators in digital educational programs, we need to clarify one misconception of the term “nonverbal communication”. In the research [“Nonverbal communication in text-based, asynchronous online education”](#) author Rima Al Tawil shares her finding that some scholars very often use “nonverbal communication” and “body language” interchangeably. “Therefore, they assume that text-based online courses lack any type of nonverbal communication because body language is nonexistent.”²

¹ [Merriam-Webster definition](#)

² Al Tawil, [2019](#)



"If a person's words fail to match their nonverbal cues, it's best to trust the nonverbal messages."

Design: [Kaya Jackson](#)

2. The role of the educator – the importance of a role model

Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire wrote, "Teaching is not just transferring knowledge".³ We as educators know that to teach is to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge.

As an (online) educator, it is your responsibility to create an effective learning environment where learners will have the opportunity to develop required competencies.

Your role is not only to teach the subject but develop relationships with your learners. Different research shows that educators who foster positive relationships with their students create an educational environment more beneficial to learning and meet students' developmental, emotional and academic needs.

To do so, one of the most important soft skills you need to master, as an educator, is communication. You need to be an excellent communicator and know how to speak to a variety of different people to do your job effectively. You need to be able to communicate with learners, as well as with colleagues. To be a great teacher, you need to know how to talk *with* people... not *at* them.

³ [Pedagogy of Freedom](#)

3. How to communicate verbally and nonverbally in the digital realm

Tips for verbal communication

In communication theory there is a concept of **immediacy** - “Immediacy behaviours can be defined as verbal and nonverbal communicative actions that send positive messages of liking and closeness, decrease the psychological distance between people, and positively affect student state motivation.”⁴ This concept is well developed and used in face-to-face education in contrast to the online learning context.

When an educator has well-developed verbal immediacy it enhances interaction, communication, and collaboration between learners. Here are some ideas that can help you to develop your verbal immediacy to use in online synchronous educational programs.

- **Be conscious of how you breathe.** To be a more confident and effective communicator who can use both verbal and nonverbal communication in the digital classroom, you need to master the art of breathing. One of the most common pieces of advice is to develop diaphragmatic breathing techniques - breathing slowly, and deep from the belly; it will help you to control the speed of speech and stay relaxed.
- **Project your voice.** Breath control and projection are critical skills for educators. The idea is to speak loudly and project without yelling. We already mentioned the importance of breathing from the diaphragm. Use the ‘ha’ exercise for the practice. Take a big breath in, expand your abdomen out and your lungs down – and then using “ha” force all that air out. This exercise will help you to work on the projection of your voice. When you are using all your air on one sound at once, you can be loud and force that sound out. Using this technique helps you to send your sound as far out as possible. For more exercises about voice projection, you can click [here](#).
- **Warm up your voice.** Relax your jaw and avoid tightening it. Your articulation, tone of voice and ability to control your speech will improve due to the free movement of air. Look into [different exercises for warming up the voice](#) of professional singers.
- **Speak clearly at a moderate pace.** In any setting, the rate of your speech is crucial. If you speak too fast and don’t take the necessary pause, it will make your learners feel rushed. However, speaking at a pace too slow can disengage them. Try to use a conversational, personal style in your presentations, lectures, or discussions. It will help you to control your breath, keep an even pace, and centre your body.

⁴ [Instructor's corner: Nonverbal immediacy behaviors and online student engagement](#)

- **Use different tones of voice.** If you are a good storyteller, it gives you a huge advantage. In an online setting and audio recordings having a varied tone of voice is a huge advantage.
- **Don't be afraid of silence.** Silence is a very important part of any educational process. It gives time and space to learners for reflection, analysis of the information you provided, organising their thoughts, and finding words for expressing their opinion. Silence can also make space for questions and discussion. But keep in mind that if a pause is too long it can cause discomfort, anxiety, or a feeling of disconnection, so pay attention and use it with caution. According to expert advice, the recommended length for a pause and silence can be anywhere from five to ten seconds.
- **Be a communication superhero.** This is a slogan from the software site [Krisp](#). This site will help you to eliminate background noise, minimise distractions, feel more confident and “activate your communication superpower”. Another interesting tool is [Bouncy Balls](#) which automatically warns you when it's getting too loud in the digital classroom. You can program the website's settings so that if noise reaches a certain level, the site will issue a calming, "Shhhhhh." This is perfect for whole or small group activities in breakout rooms.

Tips for nonverbal online communication

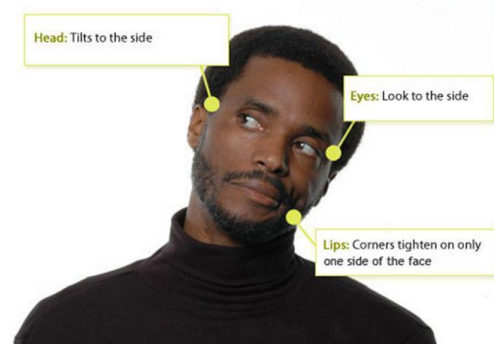
Not only what we say, but how we say something in a digital classroom can make a difference for our learners. In digital education, the interaction between educators and learners is limited, and this is especially true with nonverbal communication. If possible, set up a teaching environment with enough space so you can move freely.

Here are some practical guidelines for nonverbal online communication:

- **Use facial expressions.** Our face is extremely expressive, able to communicate countless emotions without saying a word. Learners are more involved when they hear an active, rich voice and at the same time observe facial expressions. Be aware that you as are communicating with your facial expressions and watch your learners' expressions as well. Because you are an educator – a person in charge and with power – your facial expressions can impact how learners perceive the educational environment and information. A face with honest, genuine expression will help to attract and keep the attention of your learners. Sometimes you can use different facial expressions to accentuate, stress, or exaggerate information that you are presenting verbally.

Try to use these tips:

- Respond as you would in real life. If somebody says something interesting, raise an eyebrow.
- If learners are showing good results, answering correctly, give them a big smile and nod
- When you nod, your movement attracts peripheral vision and learners will be drawn to you.
- Support your learners by using your face as well as your voice.



Try to learn how to read emotions from the facial expressions of learners. Look into the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley - [Test Your Emotional Intelligence](#)

- **Look at the camera and make eye contact.** Making eye contact with learners, and with the webcam when giving online discussions or lectures is key to success. Take deep breaths, and focus on the present moment, which will centre you and keep your eyes focused. Try to be as natural as you can and be as enthusiastic as possible about the information you are sharing. If you are recording a video, you can make and use notes. Just make sure to keep the notes close to the camera so that your eyes are not moving back and forth too much. Check this video about [How to be confident on the camera.](#)
 - Don't look away from the camera lens - it will break contact with the audience, and the audience can lose interest immediately.
 - Looking into the "virtual eyes" of your learners shows respect and caring.
 - Not looking at the camera lens can make you look unsure, nervous and untrustworthy.
 - The tips in [this video](#) will ensure you never break eye contact with your online audience again.
- **Stand or sit straight and relaxed.** When you stand or sit in front of a camera, make sure to keep your back straight and feet shoulder-width apart, with your dominant foot slightly in front of your other foot. Don't lock your knees, keep them relaxed; it will improve your posture and you will feel more confident.
- **Maintain your presence and focus.** The best way will be to have a relaxed posture and a straight back, for this you need to breathe from your diaphragm. Pay attention to this advice when recording yourself.

- **Gestures.** To make what you say more compelling, try to use your hands and body deliberately at particular moments of importance when you want to stress something. Watch yourself not to use this technique too often, as it might become distracting. When you record video, feel free to use gestures, just pay attention to the frequency and camera angle.

Gestures and body position can reveal a person's stress level. In the digital setting pay attention to your learners' posture. Can you read if they are relaxed or stiff? Body language expert, [Joe Navarro](#) tells us that interest is shown by leaning forward to hear better.

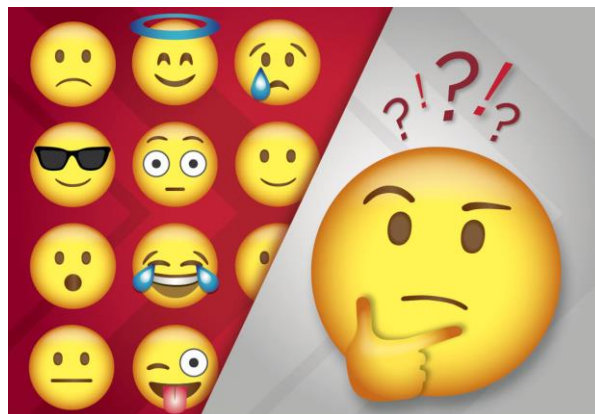
*Tip: If you sense that learners are tired and bored, break the pattern – use an unusual but very helpful tip – **encourage stretching**. It will increase the amount of oxygen, help with circulation, and provide a natural burst of energy. Check this video [Online Teaching Gestures](#).*

- **Use Hand Signals** - Watch this [video about hand signals](#) for class discussions. This technique could be used for small online classes where you can see all participants on one screen.
- **Set the Stage.** Our environment is part of our nonverbal communication with learners. So, put some effort into preparing your physical space where the webcam is used. Find a neutral background with minimal distractions. Make sure that you have enough room to move around and use a whiteboard or relative objects for visual displays. Try to move a little slower and very intentionally when working in front of a camera or recording a video. Your goal is to draw learners' attention to the lesson content or your movements, depending on what you want to draw their attention to and what will be the best way to help them learn. As a rule, our eyes tend to be drawn to movements, so make sure that any movements in your background are intentional and planned by you.
- **Tone of voice, timing, and place.** Observe carefully and ask yourself: What does the voice of the learner sound like – is it confident, warm and interested or passive, inactive and blocked? Are the learners disinterested and cold or tense and overwhelming? Are their nonverbal communication cues congruent with their surroundings? How fast is their body language response? Pay attention – all these questions can be answered through careful observation, and they will be invaluable for you to communicate effectively with your learners.

- **Using Emoticons.** In asynchronous teaching, emoticons perform nonverbal communication functions. Psychology researchers from the University of Chichester in the UK propose that we are not using enough emojis. In digital communication, emojis can be engaged as a substitute for the missing body language, which research shows to be responsible for as much as 55% of communication, while another 38% come from the pitch and tonality of a person’s voice.

Incorporating emojis or images can aid the person reading your text message to decode its tone. “Emojis can help immensely in communication as a proxy cue of the attitude of the communicator,” [said Dr Banerjee](#). “[They are] **quasi-nonverbal cues**. Emoticons allow receivers to correctly understand the level and direction of the emotion, attitude, and attention expression. Apart from conveying the attitude, emojis can also provide reassurance that the receiver may need.”

Check out interesting teaching tools and [how visual cues could help you](#) in your digital classroom.



Design: [UW-MADISON SCHOOL OF BUSINESS](#)

- **Clusters**
Don’t judge nonverbal communication signs in isolation, separately. All body language signs should be considered in relation to each other instead of being judged individually.

Watch out for the cultural differences in nonverbal communication!

In different countries, certain forms of nonverbal communication can have different meanings. If you work in a multicultural setting, make sure that you understand the specifics of your learners’ nonverbal communication cues. Among the wealth of information provided by the internet, check out this source about [Cultural differences in nonverbal communication](#).

4. Verbal and nonverbal communication in face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous education

Face-to-face education	Synchronous education	Asynchronous education
<p>The main difference between F2F and digital communication in an educational setting is that in face-to-face communication you have more opportunities and possibilities to see and feel members of the group, which makes it easier to “read” nonverbal cues from learners.</p> <p>There is a fascinating study about Neural Synchronisation during Face-to-Face Communication, where the brains of participants were scanned while they were engaged in different kinds of communication. The conclusion is that there is a better “neural synchronisation” between people when they are involved in face-to-face communication.</p> <p>Fact is, for educators it is much easier to use non-verbal cues in their communication and read learners’ nonverbal messages when working in a real, face-to-face setting.</p>	<p>Synchronous educational programs run in real-time, with learners and educators attending together from different locations. The main strengths of synchronous online learning are real-time interpersonal communication by using natural language and immediate feedback.</p> <p>Like in face-to-face education, in a synchronous mode of teaching and learning verbal gaps are filled out by nonverbal cues, which provide visual, optical illustrations that help to emphasise, affirm, or deny the meaning of the verbal message.</p> <p>Remember that teaching in a synchronous digital classroom requires more focus on communication, as in the digital realm everything is more challenging. How you are seated at the camera, can be interpreted as a message - you are leaning forward or withdrawing and leaning back communicates powerful information about your emotional state and attitude.</p>	<p>The major difference between verbal and nonverbal communication in synchronous and asynchronous modes of education is that in asynchronous verbal communication</p> <p>There is a common belief that nonverbal communication doesn’t exist in asynchronous online education. But <u>recent research</u> “Nonverbal Communication in Text-Based, Asynchronous Online Education” and our own experience confirms that even though limited, there are some methods and tools to transmit nonverbal messages.</p> <p>Try to use several techniques:</p> <p>2D visuals that include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Surrogates for body language in the form of pictographs, emojis, and emoticons ○ Profile pictures and photographs of family and pets ○ Illustrations in the form of graphics and diagrams ○ Font style, colour, size, and format Text layout and length⁶

⁶ “Nonverbal Communication in Text-Based, Asynchronous Online Education” - <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1207480.pdf>

	<p>“Leaning slightly forward sends a positive sign of engagement. We lean back or pull back from people and things and ideas that we’re not particularly on board with,”⁵</p> <p>One of the most important nonverbal tools is eye contact. Unfortunately, in the digital realm, we cannot have direct eye contact. To create a feeling that you are looking directly into your learner’s eyes, you should stare directly at the webcam. But like everything else, it has downsides - by staring at the webcam learners and educators may miss out on important visual cues when the presenter is delivering on-screen.</p> <p>One tip from experts is to put a little smiley face drawn on the post-it above the camera so you have the feeling that you are talking to a real person. It adds to your voice some warmth and creates an environment where people feel comfortable.</p>	<p>By using emoticons, you could convey excitement, frustration, passion, and other various emotions. You can emphasise key ideas by choosing font and format. It could be a way to show others how one feels about the topic. When we communicate personal perspectives and emotions in a meaningful discussion usually the level of engagement and motivation increases.</p> <p>One other interesting way to bring nonverbal communication to asynchronous education is so-called ASET; this is an abbreviation for “Electronic Style, Effort, and Tone”. It includes the writing style, choice of words and expressions, tone, structure, layout and format.</p>
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⁵ [Virtual meeting 101](#)

5. Overcoming challenges and misconceptions⁷

One of the major challenges, when we talk about communication, is how to detect a lack of interest in the virtual classroom. One way is to observe body position, it can tell you a lot – whether the learners are facing you or not, whether they are looking at you or turning their head away, whether they are crossing their arms or not, do they seem tight or relaxed, etc. Let's look at some of the major signs that you can observe in your virtual classroom.

Arms and Upper Body

The obvious sign of the lack of interest is “closed” gestures, for example, crossed arms or using other objects to create barriers. Crossed arms in front of the chest, usually is a sign of a desire to distance oneself from an unpleasant person or topic. On the contrary, when a person has open hands with the palms facing another person (in this case virtual, on-screen counterpart), it shows openness and calmness.



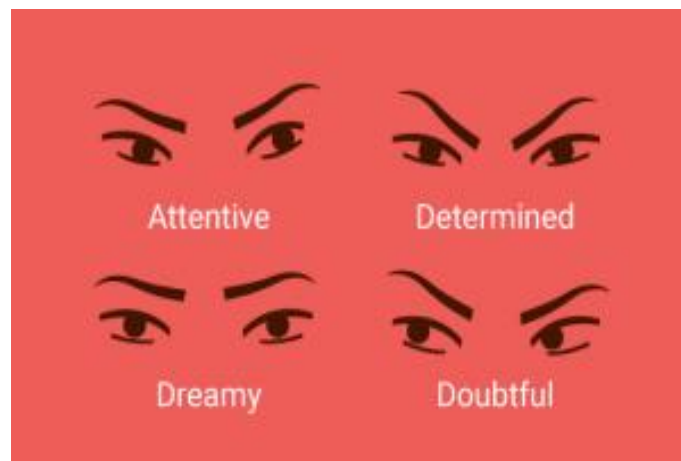
Design: Maya Kolarova - *[How to recognize a lack of interest in the virtual classroom](#)*

The hand clenching is another gesture that shows the desire to “close” oneself off. Like other negative gestures, this one also shows the learner's discomfort. Sometimes clenching could be combined with using an object, such as a pencil or a pen. If the object is held between both hands and is pointed at the person who is speaking it can be considered an aggressive gesture. It shows disapproval and the desire to “attack” an opponent or even to “destroy” what is being said or discussed.

⁷ This whole section is adapted from the article [“Virtual classroom insights: how to recognize a lack of interest in your students”](#)

Eyes

Besides hand gestures, you should be conscious of the gaze of your learners, which can indicate a fading interest level and low motivation. Usually, your focus lasts longer when you are interested and motivated. When a gaze wanders around and explores its surroundings, it is an indicator of a lack of interest. We, as educators, must bear in mind that facial expressions such as eye-rolling convey a strong message of disagreement and not necessarily a lack of interest. Moreover, after a couple of eye rolls, the student may be willing to verbally agree or disagree – whichever the case requires – to move on from the topic at hand.



Design: Maya Kolarova - *[How to recognize a lack of interest in the virtual classroom](#)*

Facial Cues

In digital classrooms, one of the challenges is that instead of seeing the whole person, generally, we see only the shoulders and face of our learners. Our advice is to pay attention to the faces. Human faces are very informative, and you can tell a lot about your learners' engagement and motivation level by observing their faces; you can decode emotional states or reactions to a message. One important part of the face to get information from is the eyebrows. They form a significant part of a facial expression. Even a slight change in the eyebrows can completely change one's look. [According to Paul Ekman there are universal emotions](#) that are easily recognizable all over the world such as contempt, disgust, happiness, fear, sadness, surprise, and anger. Of course, this is only one of the theories among a lot of others about emotions ([James-Lange Theory of Emotion](#), [Cannon-Bard Theory of Emotion](#), [The Two-Factor Theory of Emotion](#), [Richard Lazarus's - The cycle of emotion](#))



Design: Maya Kolarova - *How to recognize a lack of interest in the virtual classroom*

You can use the information you could “read” from the faces of your learners to evaluate whether they understand the material well enough, whether they are exhausted, etc. For example, smiling is the natural reaction of people when they are pleased and when they have a positive attitude towards other people. In the virtual classroom when we see smiling learners, it helps us to keep going. The effect of a nod is almost the same. Nods show interest while shaking head sideways expresses disagreement. The lack of smiles and nods could be read as a concerning nonverbal cue of disinterest and lack of motivation. But at the same time keep in mind that all these tips are generalisations. Any human interaction is very personal, so after all, listen to your heart and make your own decisions.

One more thing to keep an eye on is the pace of speech. When learners begin to speak very slowly, it often means they are trying to buy more time. The reason can be that learners are distracted and cannot follow the speed of the educational process.

Some other cues

There are many small nonverbal signs that, when considered separately, do not indicate disinterest or lack of motivation, but when put together, such cues can be signals for educators that something needs to be changed. Examples of such cues are frequently checking a cell phone, constantly looking around, looking at the watch, yawning, eye rubbing, as well as all other things that can create a distraction from the learning process.

6. Questions for reflection

1. *Reflect, analyse, and compare face-to-face teaching experience with online educational processes regarding verbal and nonverbal communication. Think about challenges you've encountered. What was missing in the process?*
2. *To be able to communicate effectively online, think about your own attitude toward online education and how you feel when you are taught or study online (do you get tense, anxious, think that it's a waste of time, are bored, or do you like it, does it motivate you, inspire you?) This kind of reflection will help you to understand how your personal attitude influences group dynamics.*
3. *Observe and study how you use your body when teaching online today – observe your breathing pattern, your voice timbre and tempo, your posture in front of the screen, and the distance you keep between you and the camera – can others see only your face or your torso and hands too? This kind of observation will help you to define which skill you would like to work on.*
4. *What are three main skills that you would like to work on starting right now, today?*

7. References and resources

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Webpages

- [Effective Communication](#)
- [5 Ways to navigate Non-verbal Communication in the digital classroom](#)
- [4 tips on Nonverbal communication in the online classroom](#)
- [Non-verbal communication in Text-based, Asynchronous Online Education](#)
- [Make online messaging personal by embracing the nonverbal](#)
- [The importance of nonverbal communication in virtual meetings](#)
- [Effective communication for teaching and learning](#)
- [Verbal vs Nonverbal communication explained](#)
- [Communication in online classes: 6 tips to help you improve](#)
- [Essential Soft Skills for Teachers](#)
- [Virtual Classroom Nonverbal communication](#)
- [Use Hand signals when remote teaching](#)
- [Improving Verbal and Nonverbal Communication with Students Online and Face to Face](#)
- [Virtual Classroom Insights: How to recognise a lack of interest in your students](#)
- [Nonverbal Communication](#)
- [Online learning Tools: Asynchronous Communication](#)