

## **Does where you sit in the classroom say a lot about you?**

By Julie Mastrine

<http://college.usatoday.com/2012/01/05/does-where-you-sit-in-class-say-a-lot-about-you/>

Where students choose to sit in a classroom can have an effect on how professors perceive them, says Chris Hakala, a psychology professor and director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Western New England University.

Students who sit in the front of the classroom may find it easier to develop a better relationship with their professor, unlike those who choose to sit in the very back.

Although choosing to sit in the front of the classroom may improve classroom engagement, it won't necessarily translate into better grades, he says.

"In bigger classes, students in front do tend to be better students," Hakala says. "That being said, if you tell a bad student to sit up front, it's not going to do a lot."

Still, sitting closer to the front of the room does have an effect on student-teacher rapport, which is linked to greater academic performance. Students who choose to sit in the front may find it easier to maintain eye contact, and there is a greater likelihood that the student will be spoken to, he says.

Perhaps most importantly, students up front are more likely to pay attention.

"Classroom attention is important. A student who can't focus or who can't be brought back to the situation is not going to learn," Hakala continued. "There's a lot of research on the waxing and waning of attention in the classroom. In lecture, students' attention tends to bottom out about 30 minutes into class, which is just when faculty are getting to the most important information. Proximity to the professor does have an impact on that."

Although there has been a lot of research done on seat placement in classes, Hakala says the data is hard to interpret because it relies on correlation.

"It's not clear if they sit up front because they're good students or if good students just prefer to sit up front," he says.

Other factors may dictate whether a student chooses to sit in the front of the classroom. Chief among them: Where their friends are sitting, how good their eyesight is, if they were late to class and the front happens to be all that's available, says Deborah Ricker, Dean of Academic Services at York College of Pennsylvania.

Still, as a lecturer, Ricker says seating choice alone has little to no impact on her perception of a student's work ethic, and many of her colleagues agree.

“Teaching and learning is less about where the student sits and more about how a student thinks, works and behaves,” she says. “I have personally had some very talented students sit in the middle and back of the classroom near the door.”

Although where students choose to sit in the classroom doesn't make or break academic performance, it can have an effect on your level of engagement, says James Black, director of the Center for Academic Achievement at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pa.

“You have to realize that where you sit communicates something to the professor and affects your engagement in the classroom, but it's not more important than learning the material and studying,” he says.

Black admits that when he was a student, he tended to sit in the back of the classroom and was nervous about speaking up during class.

“From that perspective, I understand why students may not want to sit in the front, which is why I encourage them to not alienate themselves from the professor,” he says.

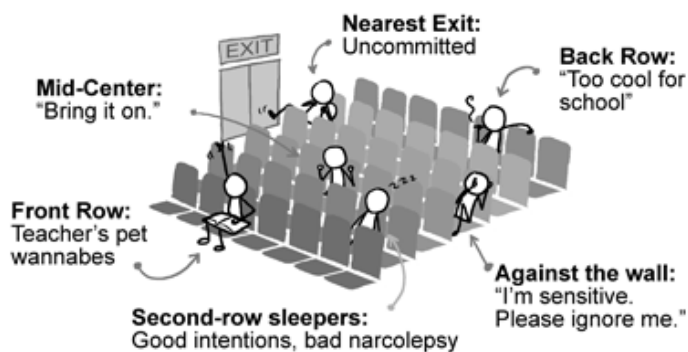
Still, it's important for students to feel comfortable, no matter where they choose to sit.

“If students aren't feeling that confident, they don't need to sit up front and feel stressed the whole time,” Black says. “Maybe sit halfway back and make sure to make eye contact with the professor. Then you can gain more confidence and start to move up to the front.”

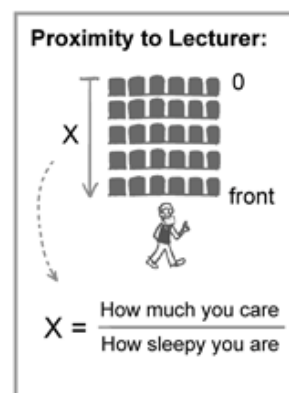
- Where did you sit in the classroom today and why?
- What does this say about you according to this article?
- Do you agree?
- Will you sit in the same seat tomorrow? Why or why not?

### WHERE YOU SIT IN CLASS/SEMINAR

And what it says about you:



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## Seating Arrangements in Nonverbal Communication

By Sinay Tarakanov

<http://www.study-body-language.com/seating-arrangements.html>

In this article I'm going to talk about seating arrangements: what's going on in the back of our mind when we choose a certain seat? Can we arrange that to make it better?

I'm sure you're familiar with this scenario – you just arrived to a new, unfamiliar and crowded place and now is decision time - choose a place to 'land' yourself into. Well... how do you choose it?

Sometimes the answer is quite simple - you got a favorite seat or you just spotted someone you like and want to talk with, so you sit near him\her. But even then, why did you choose your favorite spot specifically 'there'? What if it's a new room full of strangers? What about a class or a lecture room, will you choose the front row or position yourself as far as possible to the back?

I imagine that these questions seem trivial, and you don't truly plan your seating arrangement. In most cases you got a 'default' pattern of behavior to guide you, or some social codes that help you understand what's an acceptable behavior, and what's not (you won't enter your boss's office and seat on his chair, right?).

So, in this article, I want to dive a little deeper into the psychology behind such choices. I will also discuss how you can make use of seating arrangements in certain circumstances; such as making your guests feel at home or positioning yourself in the right spot in the audience to feel involved and attentive.

### **Keep Your Distance, Politely.**

I mentioned that we have a 'default' pattern when it comes to choosing a seat and it's especially true when talking about unfamiliar circumstances.

What happens is that most people choose their seat by a very predictable way: they will usually pick a seat that allows them to have a lot of personal space; but in the same time, they won't sit too far from other people, as if not to offend them by keeping too much distance.

For example, if there is a single row of chairs, and a stranger is already sitting in the last seat of that row, you'll probably choose a seat somewhere in the middle of that row – it allows you to have your "own" space and it doesn't look like as if you're trying to keep away from the other person. The next guy\girl will probably choose the first seat for themselves – again, from the same reasons.

This rule does not apply to urinals in the men's room – in that case the best option is to stand as far as you can from others until there is no option left but to stand adjacent to someone else (and then again, preferably adjacent only from one side).

What I want to emphasize here is simple – we like our space and will try to keep distance from strangers. But, in the same time, we like to have people around us and we will acknowledge their existence by sitting somewhere near.

### **A Sense of Security**

Our sense of security grows mostly from our ability to control ourselves and our environment. I said from the ability and not from the actual control, because we don't have to exercise it in order to feel secure. For example – if you're a really strong guy, and you feel certain about your physical strength, you won't have the need to show everyone that you can lift 300 pounds just to reassure yourself about it. An insecure person on the other hand will often seek the approval and attention of others to reinforce his sense of security.

But why am I talking about it in the context of seating arrangements?

Because if you're in charge, you can arrange the settings of your house or office to make someone feel more secure. It doesn't mean that you need to provide your guests helmets and instruction manuals on how to defend themselves. It does mean creating an aura of safe and comfortable place to interact. Suppose you wish to get the cooperation or friendship of a certain person, how would you arrange your place to make him feel welcome and comfortable around you?

It's simple - **allow him a sense of control over his close environment.** To set the right stage:

\***Avoid being territorial**, remove any signs of "intruders beware", hide your scary dog and make your guest feel at home.

\***Give him enough free personal space**, and allocate enough room of your table (if you use one) for his use, even if it's only to rest his arms somewhere.

\***Seat your guest with his back to a wall** or other solid element. Don't seat him with his back to a door, window, or a passageway. People get nervous when there is a possibility that something will sneak on them from behind and attack them, on a subconscious level of course.

\***Set an equal footing** for you both. If you wish to establish trust and empathy you need to cause the other party to feel equal and similar to you. Seat your guest in a chair similar to yours, don't elevate yourself above him. In addition, try to sit with him by the corner, or on the same side of the table.

This seating arrangement can obviously be reversed if your aim is to make the other party feel insecure and edgy around you, you evil schemer...

## **Front Learning**

Now let's talk a bit about classrooms, lecture rooms or any other setting that consists of a stage and an audience. From a listener in the audience point of view, there is a big difference in the attention, motivation and retention of the lecture, depending on his\her sitting position in the room.

I want to emphasize that this is a 2 way street – our choice of seat is derived from our feelings of involvement and motivation, and during the lecture our position in the audience in reverse affects these feelings.

When planning seating arrangements, **the front rows** are usually reserved for higher status persona and VIP concerned in the presented activity. It's the most exposed and "involved" row – so it's consists mostly of people who are truly concerned with the subject and\or the person who speaks or performs. E.g. the dedicated students in school.

The participants in **the middle** are also a very attentive and involved group. This group will usually participate the most due to the added sense of security surrounded by others.

Clearly, on the other side of the spectrum you can find the people who are either too shy or uninterested to be in the front or the middle – hiding in **the back or to the sides**. E.g. the "tired" students in school.

From my experience, I found out that people tend to fill the last and middle rows before they enter the front rows when they are not familiar with the lecturer or the place. The reasoning behind this is understandable – The first row feels an exposed and vulnerable position -people who sit behind you can watch you while you can't see them. When it's a familiar setting however, people feel more comfortable with the speaker and the subject so they will allow themselves to sit closer to feel more involved.

So where is best to sit? If you wish to learn the most and feel included– choose the front or the middle of the hall. If you wish to get a good nap – I'm sure you'll find your hiding spot. If you're not sure, I still recommend sitting in a central position because otherwise you might feel like missing the show.

## **Reflection:**

1. What is your “default” pattern of behaviour when it comes to arriving to a new space, alone? Does this change if you are with a friend?
2. Where do you sit in a movie theatre when you are the first to arrive? Why?
3. Does your choice of seat change if you were to arrive to the theatre when the lights are off and the movie has started? Why or why not?
4. Do most classrooms allow you “a sense of control over your close environment”? Explain your answer.
5. If your answer to #4 is no, what can be done to change this. If your answer is yes, provide a suggestion that could improve the standard classroom environment.