A Fortune 500 CEO once said that when he had to choose between two candidates with similar qualifications, he gave the position to the candidate with the better handshake.

Extreme? Perhaps, but he’s actually not alone in his judgment. While analyzing interactions in job interviews, management experts at the University of Iowa declared handshakes “more important than agreeableness, conscientiousness, or emotional stability.” And seven other studies have shown that a handshake can improve the quality of an interaction, producing a higher degree of intimacy and trust within a matter of seconds.

If, of course, it goes well. But all too often, it doesn’t. How, then, do you make sure your handshake works for you, not against you? Follow these steps to learn the key ingredients of a gold-star handshake.

1. Be Prepared
First things first: In any environment where you’re meeting people, make sure your right hand is free. Shift anything you’re holding to your left hand well in advance—you don’t want to have to fumble at the last moment. You should definitely avoid holding a drink in your right hand, especially if it’s cold, as the condensation can make your hand feel clammy.

2. Consider Your Body Language
Next, remember that a handshake isn’t just about a single action; there’s a lot more that goes into it. If you’re seated, always rise before shaking someone’s hand. If you’re standing, keep your hands out of your pockets—visible hands make you look more open and honest.

Finally, keep your head straight, without tilting it in any way, and face the person fully. Make sure to use plenty of eye contact, and smile warmly, but briefly (too much smiling could make you appear over-eager).

3. Get in Position
When you’re reaching out your hand to shake, keep it perfectly perpendicular, neither dominant (palm down) nor submissive (palm up). When in doubt, angle your thumb straight up to the ceiling. Open wide the space between your thumb and index finger, which will ensure you get optimal thumb-web contact (which makes for the ideal handshake).

4. Make Contact
To ensure the right level of contact between your hand and your partner’s, keep your palm flat—not cupped—when you reach out to shake. Then, make contact diagonally. Try to wrap your fingers around your partner’s hand, scaling them one by one, as if you were giving a hug with your hand. You will almost have your index finger on their pulse—almost, but not quite.

5. Shake It
Once full contact is made, lock your thumb down and squeeze firmly, about as much as your partner does. Shake from your elbow (not your wrist), about 2-3 pumps.

6. Practice Often
Sound like a lot? It is, until you get the hang of it. Try practicing with friends or family—people who will give you truly candid feedback—particularly before a job interview or networking event. This type of practice is what will truly make perfect, and make an amazing difference when you’re meeting new people.

Handshakes to Avoid
Finally, of the many handshake blunders people can make, let’s review a few of the worst offenders. Many of the clients I’ve worked with were shocked to learn that they’d been guilty of one of these without realizing it, and in doing so lost points with someone they wanted to impress before they even said saying a word.
**The Dead Fish:** This one is particularly common among women, but it’s perhaps the worst—a limp, lifeless hand extended and just barely shaken. It’s the type of handshake that can ruin a meeting before it even begins.

**The Knuckle Cruncher:** This grip may be a demonstration of machismo, but it could also be the result of a person genuinely unaware of his (or her) strength. Alternatively, some women have been taught that the stronger their grip, the more seriously they will be taken—and they clamp down as if their life depended on it.

**The Dominant:** In this case, the hand is extended palm down—seems subtle, but it conveys the intention of having the upper hand in the interaction.

**The Two-Handed:** We’ll close this woeful list with the classic two-handed handshake (also known as The Politician’s Handshake)—when you feel your partner’s left hand closing in on your right hand, wrist, arm, shoulder, or neck. The only time this is OK is when the person you’re meeting is already a good friend (and even then I’d reserve it for those times when you want to convey special warmth).