



Here's an excerpt from: "Tall Tales and World History"

Have you ever given your students the "thumbs up" sign? Here's the story of where it originated.

Thumbs-Up

An understood gesture of approval



A Fun Fact

Unlike most other animals (*except monkeys*), human beings have an "opposable thumb" that moves independently of the other fingers.

This has given us "refined motor skills," helping us to pick up small objects and build things in great detail.

A Familiar Symbol...

Nobody wants to go see a movie that gets "*two thumbs down*." Even though it's just a flip of the wrist, there's a big of difference between the thumbs-up and thumbs-down. It's the same difference, in fact, as "yes" and "no."

The thumbs-up sign has established itself as a universal sign of approval. Here are some examples:

Person 1: *"Is the pizza good?"*
Person 2: gives the thumbs-up sign

Person 1: *"Would you like a ticket to the tractor pull?"*
Person 2: gives the thumbs-up sign

Person 1: *"Did you survive your brain operation?"*
Person 2: gives the thumbs-up sign

Keep in mind that those are just a few scenarios when it is appropriate to use the thumbs-up sign.

Right now, you're probably thinking that you don't really need a lesson on thumb etiquette. You're probably right. With that said, let's shift our focus to answering the big question surrounding the thumbs-up ritual: *Why?*

What it tells us about World History...

The Roman Gladiators get the credit for the thumbs-up and thumbs-down signs. Actually, credit should go to the thousands of spectators who watched the Gladiators duke it out inside of the coliseum.

Gladiators were professional fighters who entertained Romans from the 2nd century BC until the sport was officially outlawed in the year 325 (*although a few underground Gladiator fights still continued over the next century*). These athletes would fight against each other, slaves, and even wild animals.

Sometimes the stakes were extremely high, and that's where the thumbs-up comes in. After a fight, the audience often had the privilege of deciding whether the Gladiator had performed well enough to fight another day, or whether he should be put to death. The fate of the Gladiator was determined either by the thumbs-up sign or thumbs-down sign.

There is a catch, however. Scholars debate whether the thumbs-up meant "good job" or "kill him." For years, it was just assumed that the thumbs-up was a positive gesture. New evidence suggests otherwise. The thumbs-up may have been the Gladiator's worst nightmare, while the thumbs-down was a signal for the guards to put down their swords and allow the Gladiator to live. It is also likely that the thumb was not kept still (*like in today's gesture*), but instead accompanied by a thrusting motion.

Despite its ancient origins, the thumbs-up did not become common in America until the late 1900s. Part of its popularity can be attributed to fighter pilots during World War II. When they were ready to take off, they gave the thumbs-up to ground crews. Other soldiers witnessed this, and spread the gesture across Europe.

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