

ASL and US Deaf Culture Guidelines

These are some interesting facts and patterns about ASL and US deaf culture. These topics give an idea of the linguistic complexity of ASL and social complexity of Deaf culture!

Sign Parameters

A sign typically has four parameters that distinguish it from any other sign. Categorizing signs in this way is a great way to remember signs and a fun way to group signs. Each of the four lists below give examples of signs that vary in only one parameter: the title of the list.

Handshape <ul style="list-style-type: none">● PLEASE/SORRY● THINK/KNOW● WHITE/LIKE● MEET/INTERCOURSE● APPLE/CANDY● CAR/WHICH● ACCENT/VAMPIRE	Palm Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none">● THINGS/CHILDREN● SCHOOL/PROOF● TEACH/INFORMATION● SOCK/STAR● MORNING/NIGHT● DONKEY/BUNNY● NAME/CHAIR
Movement <ul style="list-style-type: none">● PAIN/OPPOSITE● WAIT/FIRE● CHEESE/PAPER/SCHOOL/COLLEGE● COFFEE/MAKE● PLEASE/MY● TIRED/ANIMAL● CHAIR/TRAIN	Location <ul style="list-style-type: none">● MOTHER/FATHER● SAY/ME● UGLY/DRY/SUMMER● MAKE/MAKE-OUT (kissing)● DOCTOR/KNOW● APPLE/ONION● TIME/GLASS

Fingerspelling

Names, loan words, specific terms, and short words are often fingerspelled in ASL using the ASL manual alphabet. Some signs are lexicalized spellings of a word, which means that they are fingerspelled in a particular, or stylized way. Some examples are #DOG, #BACK, #BANK, #JOB. We can see vestiges of lexicalized words in WHY, and WHO, and some words are still lexicalized, but use the French initial, such as in WITH, and SEE.

Non-Manual Markers

In addition to the four parameters above, many signs specify a shoulder tilt, body lean, eye gaze, and/or facial expression. Facial expressions in ASL might not mean what you expect! Many beginning ASL users tend to shy away from using facial expressions, but it is grammatically important to do so.

ASL Special Features

ASL has many features not found in English and many other spoken languages.

Classifiers: A classifier is a category of signs that convey movement, number, shape, and interaction of a specific objects in a linguistically productive way. The object is depicted with a specific handshape. Examples: cars (3), people (1), airplanes (ILY), head (S), door (B), leg (1).

Directional Signs: Some signs in ASL incorporate the subject, and/or objects. I-ASK-YOU is one sign, and differs from YOU-ASK-ME only in movement and orientation.

Variation

The word “economics” is pronounced either as “eh-conomics” or “ee-conomics”, but “bet” and “beet” are distinct words that cannot undergo the same variation. Embrace this fact for ASL too---that some aspects of signs, sometimes only in a specific context, can be varied liberally, whereas other aspects must be observed carefully.

One large reason for variation within ASL is that there is an invented system called Signed Exact English (SEE), that has almost all of its signs initialized to follow distinctions in English. For example, in SEE, the sign for “I” and the sign for “me” are different, as are “has”/“have”. Some signers will use the SEE signs for RED, LANGUAGE, LIFE, (all of which are initialized), while other signers will insist on using the ASL sign.

Mouthing: Some signers will mouth (make the mouth movement without sound) of the English word corresponding to their sign, while other signers might not. Some signers might rely on mouthing words for lip-reading.

Deaf Culture

People in the Deaf community usually identify as hearing, hard-of-hearing (HoH), or Deaf. These labels are used to signal aspects of personal identity and may only loosely be related to a medical diagnosis. Many Deaf/HoH people do not use the term “disability”, “impairment” or “loss” in reference to their Deaf identity, and they may prefer identity-first language (“deaf man”) over person-first language (“man who is deaf”).