

**NL Association of the Deaf**

Helping all who hear to see.

# American Sign Language 101

# To the Student

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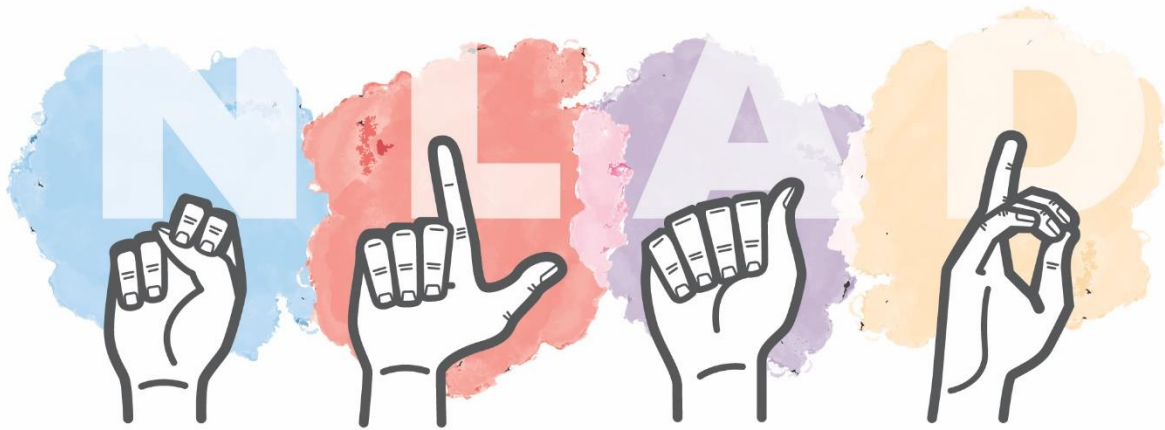
You are now beginning to learn American Sign Language (ASL), the sign language used by Deaf people in the United States and Canada. It is important to note that you are learning American Sign Language because there are many sign languages throughout the world which differ from one another in structure and vocabulary.

American Sign Language is structured to assist you learn through vocabulary and sentences needed to communicate in common life situations. The sentence structures you need to know are presented to you in context that is, the grammar and vocabulary are tied together in some meaningful communicative situation. You will learn cultural notes which will help you master this language as well as give you cultural information to help you interact better with Deaf people.

You should be aware that this handout is not intended to be self-instructional. No handout can be truly self-instructional when the objective is to learn a language that uses gesture and vision. This book will serve as a resource and reference for your learning ASL. The exercises in this book will help you remember and practice what your ASL instructor has presented in class. American Sign Language cannot be learned in a few weeks. It will take about a year to master ASL fluency depending on the amount of class time and the amount of interaction and exposure using ASL with the Deaf community. Speed and fluency will depend on interaction time.

As you learn ASL, remember that it is the language of a unique cultural group of Deaf people. Try to improve your ASL skills by interacting with members of the Deaf community. You will learn to develop an appreciation and respect for the Language and Culture of people who are Deaf.

Enjoy learning ASL! Good luck!



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# American Sign Language Lesson 1

## **American Sign Language**

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American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual-gestural language used primarily by Deaf people in the North America. ASL is a linguistically complete natural language. ASL is a language which uses manual communication instead of sound to convey meaning — simultaneously combining hand shapes, orientation, and movement of the hands, arms or body, and facial expressions to fluidity express a speaker's thoughts. ASL is not universal language.

### **ASL History**

In the early 1800's, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a hearing minister and a graduate of Yale University met and became friends with a young deaf girl named Alice. Gallaudet took an interest in teaching the girl and succeeded at teaching her a few words. The girl's father Dr. Mason Cogswell, encouraged Gallaudet to become involved with the establishment of a school for the Deaf.

So, in 1815 Gallaudet headed for Europe in search of methods for teaching the deaf. He approached a number of program directors, (the Braidwood schools, the London Asylum, etc.) but none of them were willing to share their techniques with Gallaudet.

Fortunately, while in England Gallaudet met up with the director of a Paris school for the deaf, a man by the name of Sicard.

Sicard was there with two of his deaf pupils, Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc who were also teachers at the school in Paris. They were in England giving demonstrations on how to teach the deaf by using sign language. The Paris school, which had been founded by the Abbe Charles Michel de L'Epee in 1771, was using French Sign Language in combination with a set of methodically developed signs.

Gallaudet persuaded Clerc to return with him to the States and in 1817 the first American school for the deaf was established in the city of Hartford, Connecticut.

Over time, the signs used at that school, plus the signs that were already being used by Deaf people in American evolved into what we now know as American Sign Language.

It is important to note that sign language was being used here in America before Gallaudet and Clerc set up the school. One example (that you might want to research more) took place in Martha's Vineyard. At one time many Deaf people lived there and all or almost all of the townsfolk knew how to sign whether or not they were deaf.

# ASL 101: LESSON 1

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## Vocabulary:

(Note: these are not English words, they are concepts with many meanings.)

HELLO

NAME

DEAF

HEARING (say)

NUMBER

ASL

SIGN (Sign language, signing)

NICE (clean)

MEET (meet-you)

DRAW

WRITE

SAME

DIFFERENT

UNDERSTAND

NOT-UNDERSTAND

PLEASE (enjoy, appreciate)

LEARN

STUDENT (learn)

TEACHER (teach, agent (-er))

THANK-YOU (good)

AGAIN (repeat)

WHAT?

WHERE?

WHO?

WHY?

YES/NO (Affirmative/Negation) SIGN

SIGN NUMBERS 1 – 10

PRONOUNS:

Pointing movement: it, he, she, me, him, her, this, you

Sweeping movement: them, they, those, us, we, you-all, that

## ASL PRACTICE SHEET: 1A

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1. "YOU DEAF YOU?"  
(Are you deaf?)
2. "YOU STUDENT YOU?"  
(Are you a student?)
3. "YOU WHO?"  
(Who are you?)
4. "YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"  
(Do you understand me?)
5. "YOUR TEACHER NAME WHAT?"  
(What is your teacher's name?)
6. "YOU SIGN P-L-E-A-S-E WHAT?"  
(What do you sign "please"?)
7. "YOUR NAME AGAIN PLEASE?"  
(What is your name again?)
8. "HE STUDENT HE?" (point at teacher)  
(Is he a student?)
9. "THIS YOUR?" (Point at any object)  
(Is this yours?)
10. "\_\_\_\_\_WHERE?"  
(Where is Anna?)

# **CULTURE/LANGUAGE NOTES**

## **Introduction to American Sign Language**

Many people mistakenly believe that American Sign Language (ASL) is English conveyed through signs. Some think that it is a manual code for English, that it can express only concrete information, or that there is one universal sign language used by Deaf people around the world.

Linguistic research demonstrates, however, that ASL is comparable in complexity and expressiveness to spoken languages. It is not a form of English. It has its own distinct grammatical structure, which must be mastered in the same way as the grammar of any other language. ASL differs from spoken languages in that it is visual rather than auditory and is composed of precise handshapes and movements.

ASL is capable of conveying subtle, complex, and abstract ideas. Signers can discuss philosophy, literature, or politics as well as football, cars or income taxes. Sign Language can express poetry as poignantly as can any spoken language and can communicate humor, wit, and satire just as biting. As in other languages, new vocabulary items are constantly being introduced by the community in response to cultural and technological change.

ASL is not universal. Just as hearing people in different countries speak different languages, so do Deaf people around the world sign different languages. Deaf people in Mexico use a different sign language from that used in the U.S. Because of historical circumstances, contemporary ASL is more like French Sign Language than like British Sign Language.

ASL was developed by American Deaf people to communicate with each other and has existed as long as there have been Deaf Americans. Standardization was begun in 1817 when Laurent Clerc and Thomas H. Gallaudet established the first School for the Deaf in the U.S. Students afterwards spread the use of ASL to other parts of the U.S. and Canada. Traditionally, the language has been passed from one generation to the next in the residential school environment, especially through dormitory life. Even when signs were not permitted in the classroom, the children of Deaf parents, as well as Deaf teachers and staff, would secretly pass on the language to other students. ASL is now used by approximately one-half million Deaf people in the U.S. and Canada.

Since the late 1800's, Deaf people have been discouraged from using ASL. Many well-meaning but misguided educators, believing that the only way for deaf people to fit into the hearing world is through speech and lipreading, have insisted that deaf children try to learn to speak English. Some have even gone so far as to tie down deaf children's hands to prevent them from signing. Despite these and other attempts to discourage signing, ASL continues to be the preferred language of the Deaf community. Far from seeing the use of sign as a handicap, Deaf people regard ASL as their natural language which reflects their cultural values and keeps their traditions and heritage alive. In this class, you will see how ASL has shaped and is shaped by the culture of Deaf Americans.

## GRAMMAR NOTES

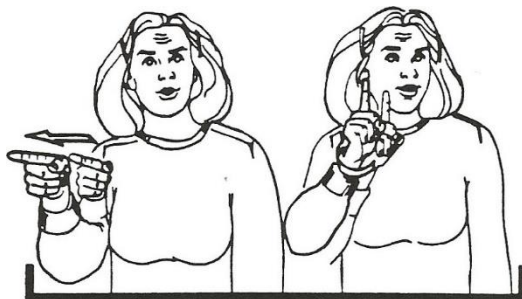
### Forming Questions

You may have noticed your teacher using a lot of facial expressions and head movements while s/he signs. These are called "non-manual behaviors," and they not only show affect or emotion, but also have grammatical functions. Just as speakers of English use vocal intonation to mark sentence types, signers use non-manual behaviors to ask a question, make a negative statement, or to emphasize a point. In this unit, we focus on the non-manual behaviors used for yes/no and wh-word questions.

A **yes/no question** requires a simple yes or no answer. For example, "Do you have children?" or "Do you like coffee?" To ask a yes/no question, a signer should do the following:

- 1) raise eyebrows (widen eyes)
- 2) lean head forward
- 3) hold the last sign in the sentence

For example:



(Is s/he deaf?)

A wh-word question asks who, what, where, when, etc., and requires a statement for an answer. To ask a wh-word question, a signer should do the following:

- 1) lower eyebrows
- 2) lean head forward
- 3) hold the last sign in the sentence (usually a wh-word sign)

For example:

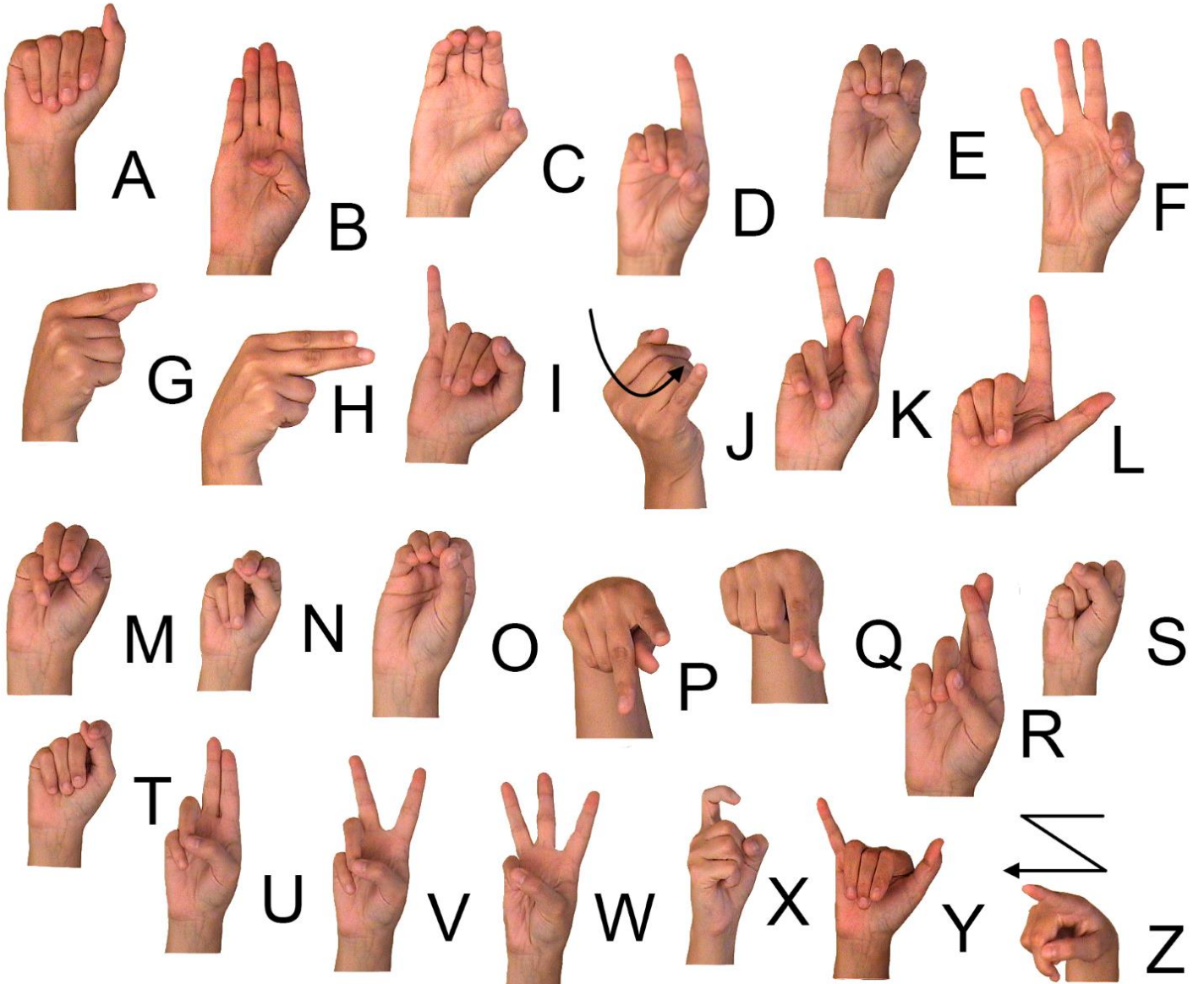


(Who is s/he?)

**NOTE:** When watching someone sign, you should focus on the signer's face. Vital information is conveyed by non-manual behaviors, and by missing facial expressions, you could miss the signer's intent. Avoid the tendency to focus on the signer's hands.



# The Manual Alphabet



**Numbers 1-10**



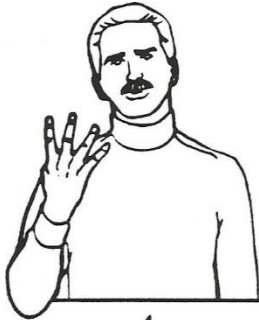
1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10

## ASL HOMEWORK PRACTICE

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1. "NICE me- MEET-you"  
(It is nice to meet you.)
2. "HEARING YOU?"  
(Are you a hearing person?)
3. "ASL TEACHER YOU?"  
(Are you a teacher?)
4. "YOU LEARN SIGN WHERE?"  
(Where are you learning sign?)
5. "YOU LEARN SIGN WHY?"  
(Why are you learning sign?)
6. "YOU SIGN T-H-A-N-K-S WHAT?"  
(How do you sign "thanks"?)
7. "HE STUDENT HE?"  
(Is he a student?)
8. "THEY LEARN SIGN THEY?"  
(Are they learning sign language?)
9. "OUR TEACHER WHO?"  
(Who is our teacher?)
10. "B-I-L-L WHERE?" (spell the name of a student)  
(Where is Bill?)

## ASL 101: Lesson 1

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### Checklist:

- I am able to define the term ASL.
- I am able to fingerspell my name in ASL.
- I am able to count to ten in ASL (numbers).
- I am able to briefly describe the history of ASL.
- I am able to briefly state the gist of Deaf Culture.
- I am able to recognize and sign the vocabulary for this lesson.
- I am able to recognize and sign the practice sentences for this lesson.
- I have taken ASL 101 Lesson 1 Quiz.
- I am done with Lesson 1.