

# Master ASL!

## LEVEL ONE

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**For my parents, because they gave me this language,  
and for my students, who wish to learn it.**







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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The cover of **Master ASL! Level One** features only my name, but behind it stretch the names of students, teachers, reviewers, professors, editors, artists, illustrators, sign models and more — simply too many to list individually, but incomplete if just one is overlooked. In the limited space below I thank those people who are my foundation, my unflagging advocates, and my tireless partners in the pursuit of excellence. Foremost, I am grateful to Dr. Marilyn Severson, Dr. Luke Reinsma, Dr. Kathryn Bartholomew, Dr. John West, and Dr. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher of Seattle Pacific University for being outstanding servant scholar role models. I emulate each in my teaching and passion for the learning process, which leads me to acknowledge the many students I have taught at the high school, community college, and university levels; truly, my students are my teachers. I appreciate beyond words their patience and insight as they provided feedback on my ideas, materials, and teaching methods. As with any textbook, this work belongs to them. Fortunately for them, **Master ASL!** took a different path and relies on the insight into language learning and teaching inspired by Dr. Penelope Eckert and Dr. Eve Clark of Stanford University. Additionally, a heartfelt thank you goes to Dr. Samuel Mbongo of the University of California at Berkeley, for sparking the inquiry that led me here: “Tell me about your culture.”

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This project could not have been possible without the dedication of my editor, Barbara Olmert, and my Producer/Director, Verden Ness, at Sign Media, Inc. A note to aspiring writers and curriculum developers: You want to work with Barbara and Verden. While they may have privately rued the fateful day we sat and discussed my ideas, I cannot think of anybody who has been more enthusiastic, supportive, and excited about **Master ASL!** In closing, I am keenly aware that I wrote this book; it is Barbara that brought it to fruition. I am lucky to have worked so closely with such an outstanding woman.

And lastly, I owe everything to my community, my culture, my people of the eye.



## STUDENT INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to **Master ASL! Level One**. This textbook introduces you to American Sign Language (ASL), the language used by the majority of Deaf Americans, and to the culture of the Deaf World. The Master ASL series was developed in response to the tide of interest in American Sign Language among people of all ages and is designed to provide a thorough foundation for using ASL as a second language with your Deaf neighbors, children, coworkers, and friends.

In the not-so-distant past, few hearing individuals aside from children of Deaf adults and those who worked closely with the Deaf knew ASL. Signing in public drew stares, quizzical looks and often, mocking or teasing by people amused by the sight of individuals talking with their hands. In this environment the Deaf community came together and formed a close, tight-knit culture where ASL flourished and being Deaf was not considered a handicap but simply a way of life. Today, the Deaf community forms one of many minority cultural groups in the United States and Canada, and interest in learning ASL has surged, bringing with it greater opportunities for mutual benefit. Using ASL in public is now a common, and proud, experience for both Deaf and hearing people.

While attitudes are changing, more work remains to be done. Though ASL and Deaf individuals are seen on TV, in movies, the theater, restaurants, stores and crowded classrooms, many people view deafness as an obstacle or a pitiable handicap. Deaf individuals are routinely denied employment because companies are uncertain how Deaf employees can communicate with their hearing colleagues, applicants for driver's licenses are asked "Can Deaf people drive?" and the many contributions the Deaf have made to the larger hearing society are generally unknown and overlooked. As quickly as an ASL class is offered, it is filled with students who often think ASL is an easy language — and other language teachers, administrators, and counselors reflect this misunderstanding as well.

Do not be misled by these gross misunderstandings and myths surrounding American Sign Language: ASL is not easier to learn than spoken languages. ASL is a unique, visual language that does not simply match a sign to an English word. Instead, ASL has its own grammar, structure, and specific features that pose a challenge to learn, like other spoken languages. Indeed, students of ASL must develop a pleasing visual accent, exactly like learning a satisfactory accent in spoken languages! The best way to learn any language is by direct, frequent contact with the people who use the language on a daily basis. Take a chance and initiate signed conversations with Deaf people!

The following pages provide you with an introduction to several important aspects of American Sign Language that will assist your experience with **Master ASL! Level One**. Take a few minutes to read these pages and refer to the DVD that accompanies this text. You will use both the text and DVD as a study guide to help you learn American Sign Language.

Good luck!

Jason E. Zinza  
[www.masterasl.com](http://www.masterasl.com)



# BECOMING ACQUAINTED: MASTER ASL! LEVEL ONE

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**Master ASL! Level One** includes a student textbook, student companion, and a DVD.

## Textbook

In the textbook you will find extensive lessons on:

### Language & Structure

- *ASL Up Close*, highlighting important functions of ASL grammar
- *Eyes On ASL*, presenting the basic rules of signing in ASL
- *Accent Steps*, tips and advice to help hearing students improve their ASL skills
- *Expression Corner*, exposing students to ASL idioms, phrases, and expressions

### Culture

- *Deaf Culture Notes*, featuring relevant aspects of Deaf culture
- *ASL Focus*, a two page section examining an important issue in the Deaf World
- *Did You Know?* sections presenting information about the Deaf World
- *Deaf Culture Minute*, explaining cultural tidbits
- *I Want to Know*, answering common questions about ASL

### Comparison & Reflection

- Exposure to Deaf art
- Poetry and other writings by Deaf authors
- Journal opportunities to analyze and reflect on aspects of ASL, Deaf culture, and the Deaf experience

## Student Companion: Fingerspelling, Numbers, and Glossing

The student companion includes:

- ASL Fingerspelling, including 200 exercises to develop fingerspelling skills
- ASL Numbers, with more than 150 exercises provided to develop ASL numerical skills
- Glossing instruction and exercises to assist students to become familiar with the notation system used by many people within the fields of ASL and Deaf studies
- A glossary for linguistic, social, and cultural terms addressed in **Master ASL!**

## DVD

DVD segments are highlighted in the textbook with the DVD icon. The DVD component contains:

- Select dialogues from each unit
- Narratives that incorporate the language and cultural skills featured in each unit
- Shorter narratives on a variety of topics relevant to each unit
- Language and structure lessons with examples on each feature of ASL grammar covered in the text
- Examples of ASL literature, including ABC and classifier stories, handshake rhymes, and number stories



## THINGS TO KNOW

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### Important Terms

Explanations of all terms in bold are found in the glossary section of the **Student Companion: Fingerspelling, Numbers, and Glossing**.

### Eye Contact

The most important background knowledge to have before learning American Sign Language is to understand the role of eye contact. In Deaf culture, not maintaining eye contact during a conversation is considered rude. Develop or improve the habit of looking people in the eye as you sign to others and as you watch others sign to you. Your eyes are like your ears! Breaking eye contact signals that you aren't paying attention, are day-dreaming, or don't wish to participate in the conversation. Keep in mind that maintaining eye contact does not mean to stare!

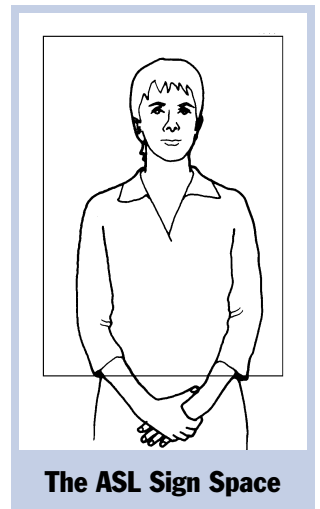
You may be surprised how quickly your ASL teacher notices that you don't have eye contact. Since Deaf people generally rely on their eyes far more than hearing people, broken eye contact is easily spotted.

### The Sign Space

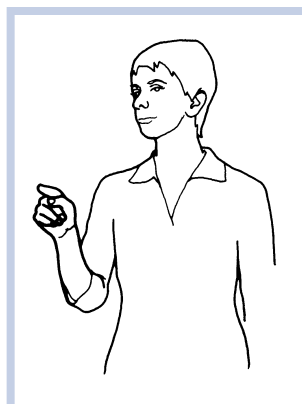
An important concept to understand is the ASL **sign space**. This refers to the area in which most signs are made in normal conversation. Signing outside the sign space is uncomfortable on your hands, wrists, and shoulders. Generally, most signs are centered to the right or left of your middle torso.

### Which Hand Do I Use?

Sign with the hand that feels most comfortable and natural for you, which tends to be the hand with which you write. The hand you use most often to sign with is called the **dominant hand**, and the other is called the **non-dominant hand**. Switching the dominant and non-dominant hands in conversation is a common error that should be avoided. If you are left handed and your teacher is right handed, you do not need to match or produce mirror-image signs. Allow your eyes and brain to tell your hands what to do.



**Dominant Left Hand**



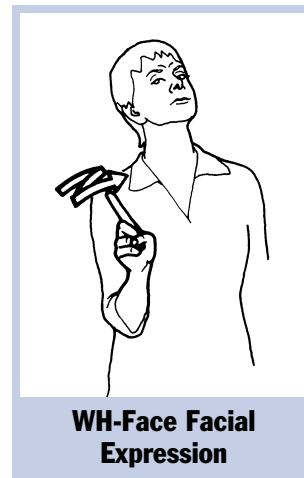
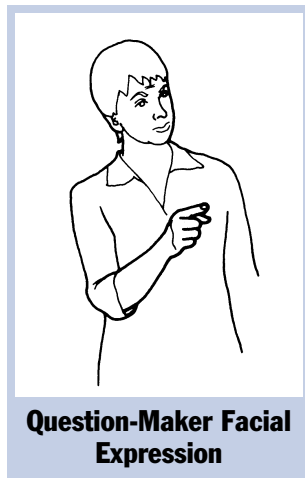
**Dominant Right Hand**

## Facial Expressions

What happens when you speak in a monotone voice, devoid of inflection or expression? Usually people tune out or become bored and disinterested in the conversation. The same results happen when you sign without using **facial expressions**. Auditory information, such as tone of voice, emotion, and intent must be made visual in American Sign Language. Throughout **Master ASL! Level One** you will learn the essential facial expressions and when to use them, a challenge for many students. Facial expressions not only convey emotion and meaning, but ASL grammar as well.

Do not become frustrated if you feel you're trying hard with facial expressions and your teacher wants more. The point of facial expressions is to clearly convey grammar and meaning, and sometimes what hearing people think is "good enough" falls short of what ASL requires. Note that you do not match each sign with a specific facial expression. Instead, match your face to the overall meaning of what you're signing. If you're unsure about something, make a puzzled expression while signing *I'm confused*. Some facial expressions are used more often than others in ASL, especially the two Question Faces. The Question-Maker must be used when asking a general question such as *Are you learning ASL?* and the WH-Face for questions using the signs *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *which*.

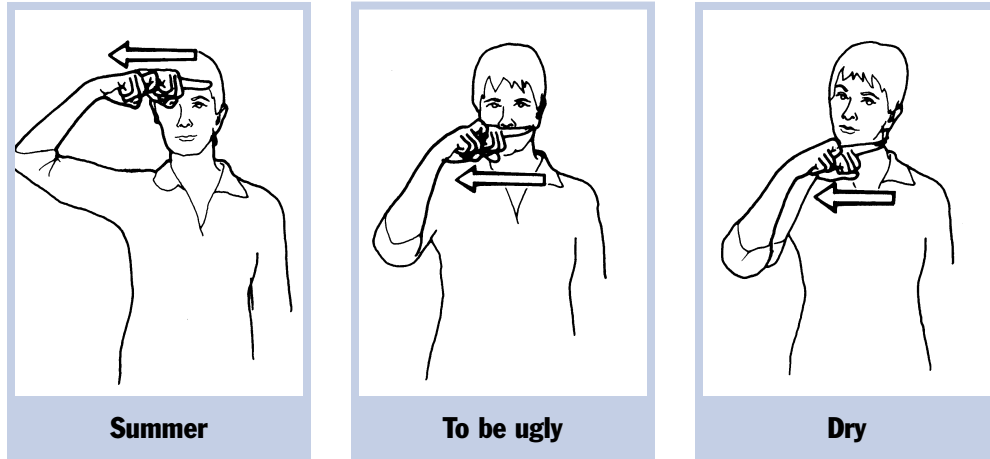
To help you develop your facial expressions, **Master ASL!** incorporates exercises designed to improve your confidence and skill. Practice the expressions as a way to loosen up your facial features to reflect the intended emotion, and don't feel intimidated or embarrassed: You do not look as silly as you may think! For inspiration and practice, watch any of the well-known Deaf storytellers and emulate their animated facial expressions.





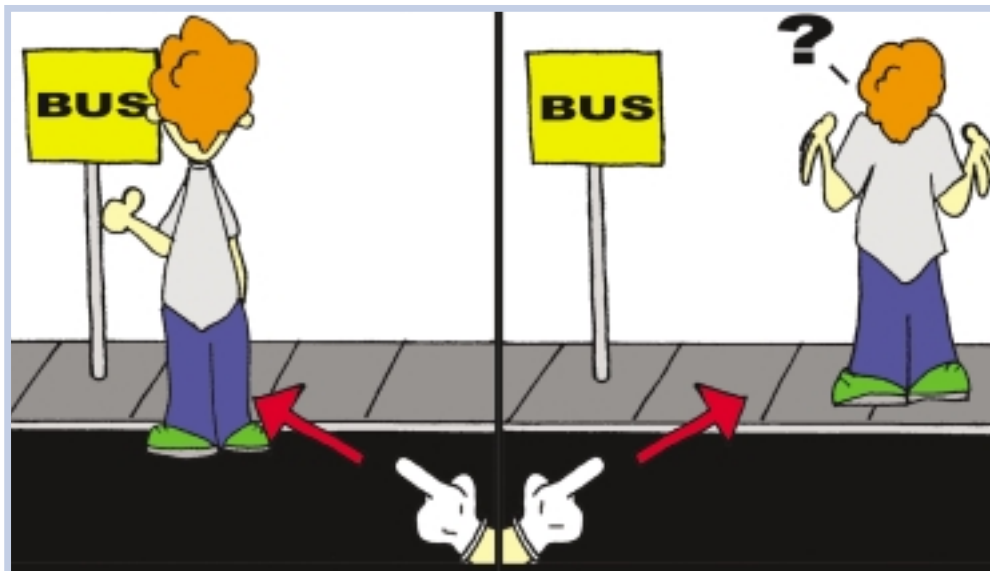
**Precision is Important**

Signing clearly is the same as speaking clearly. Sloppy, uncertain signing is exactly like mumbling. Sloppy signing also causes careless errors that drastically affect meaning. In the famous example below, one handshape has three different meanings based on the location where the sign is made.



Making the right sign in the wrong place or vice versa affects meaning. “Close enough” or sloppy signing interferes with comprehension. As a beginning signer, it is natural to make mistakes as you develop dexterity with your hands and fingers, but be sure to practice often to gain confidence and improve your skills.

Part of signing precisely is understanding that ASL makes visual sense. If you talk about someone and point to him or her during the conversation, and then that person leaves, you still point to the area where he or she was located before. Likewise, if you’re talking about going *there*, but point in the opposite direction, you communicate something entirely different! How does the illustration below emphasize visual sense?



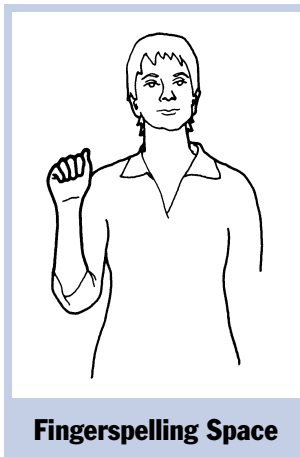
## ASL is Not English

American Sign Language is not English. This key concept is essential in learning ASL. You must learn to think in ASL rather than using ASL signs matched to English words. If you "mouth" words or talk silently in English while signing, then you are not using American Sign Language. You can sign in ASL and "speak" English at the same time as easily as you can speak Spanish in English word order. It simply doesn't work. Signing and talking at the same time is not ASL, period. Some Deaf people do sign and mouth English words at the same time, but only when they choose to sign in English word order. Deaf people do this most often when signing with hearing people who are not fluent in ASL. Surprise Deaf people and gain their respect by using ASL properly! You will learn of other types of signing, but only ASL is a real language. Other forms are called Signing Exact English (SEE) and Pidgin Sign English (PSE). If you don't use ASL syntax (the way signs are ordered into sentences) and facial expressions, then you're not signing in ASL.

The best way to learn ASL or any foreign language is to keep an open mind and respect the differences between each language.

## Fingerspelling

Fingerspelling is an important part of ASL, but it is not a substitute for signs you should learn. Fingerspelling is used for specific purposes so avoid the temptation of fingerspelling words or sentences. Try to communicate in other ways before using fingerspelling apart from the particular instances when fingerspelling is required. Learning to fingerspell is challenging for most ASL students, but remember it is a step by step process. The illustration below details the **Fingerspelling Space**, the location your hand is held while fingerspelling.



Refer to your **Student Companion: Fingerspelling, Numbers, and Glossing** to begin your study of fingerspelling.

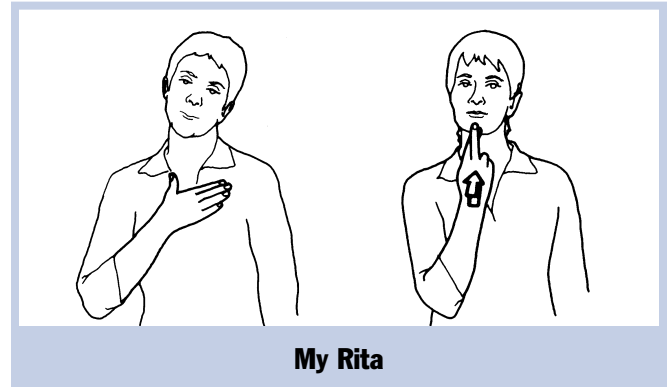
## The Five Parameters of ASL

Each ASL sign can be broken down and analyzed into five separate features called **parameters**. For a single sign to be correct, each of the five parameters must be used correctly. Below are explanations of these parameters with examples to help you understand the concept.

### 1. Handshape

The handshape difference between *me* and *mine* is simple to identify, yet ASL students often confuse the two. Common handshape errors include the differences between: I/D, D/F, E/O.

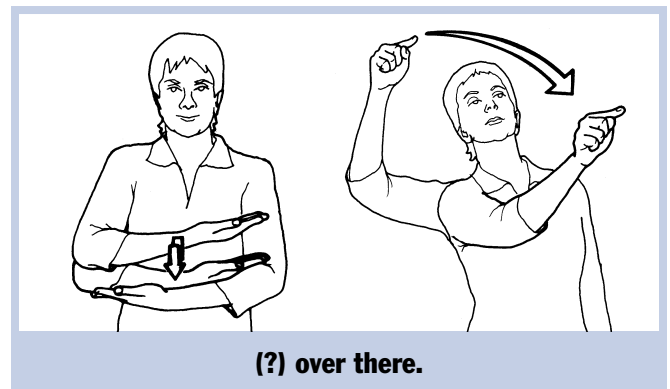
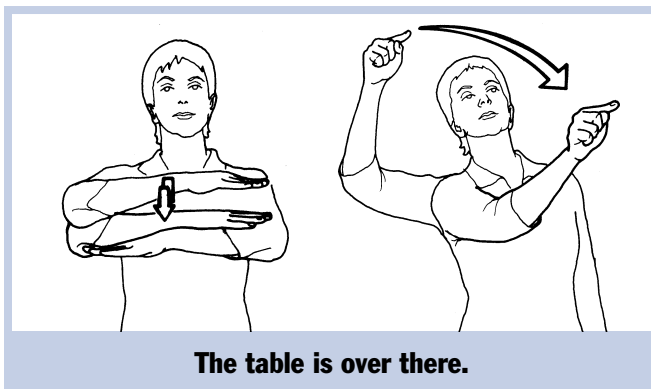
**Sample sentence: *I am Rita/My Rita.***



### 2. Palm Orientation

Palm orientation errors are easy to make if you are unsure whether a sign faces up, down, left, or right. Signing while nervous or without practice causes many palm orientation errors. Often, these mistakes are "big" and obvious.

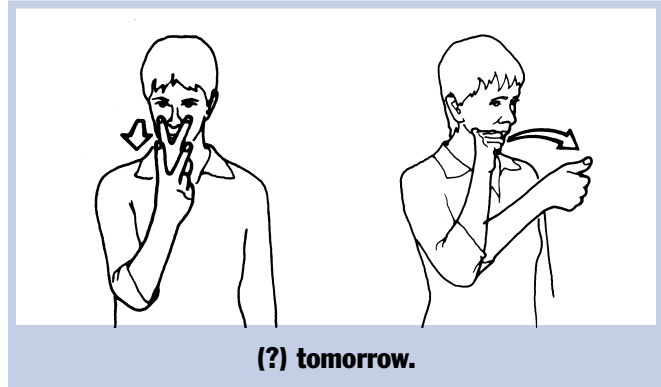
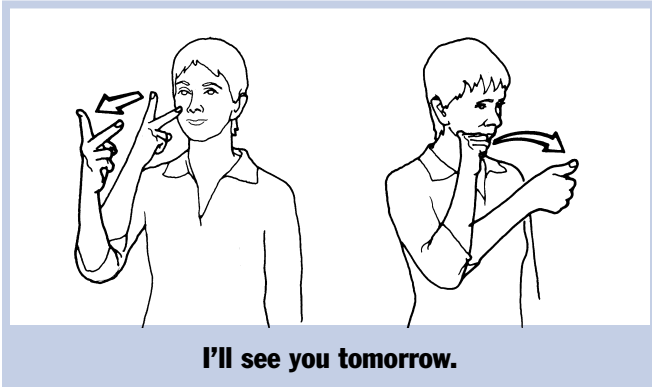
**Sample sentence: *The table is over there.***



### 3. Location

Avoid making location errors by remembering most signs are made in front of your body in a comfortable location. If your arms feel awkward, it's a clue the sign's location may be wrong. Keep in mind that some signs are directional and originate away from the body but end close, or begin close to the body and terminate away, as in the sign *to drive to*.

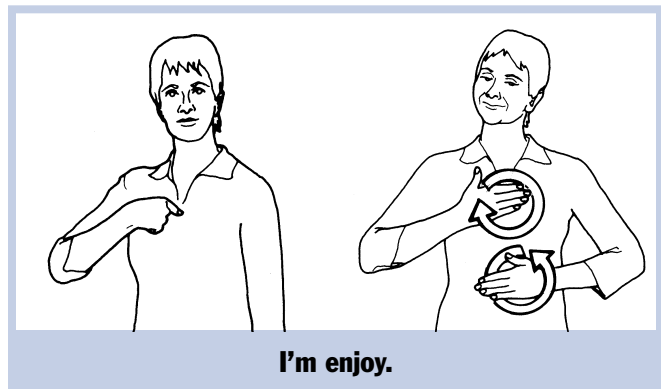
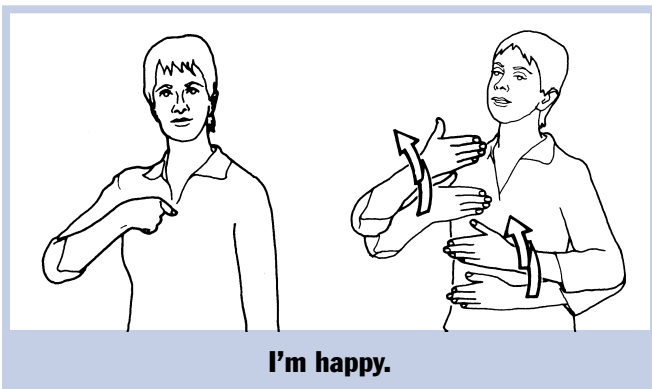
**Sample sentence: *I'll see you tomorrow.***



### 4. Movement

Movement affects meaning, as seen in these examples. Practicing and paying attention to ASL vocabulary is key to knowing the movement needs of particular signs. If your hands and arms feel awkward or constricted, check the sign's movement parameter for a possible error.

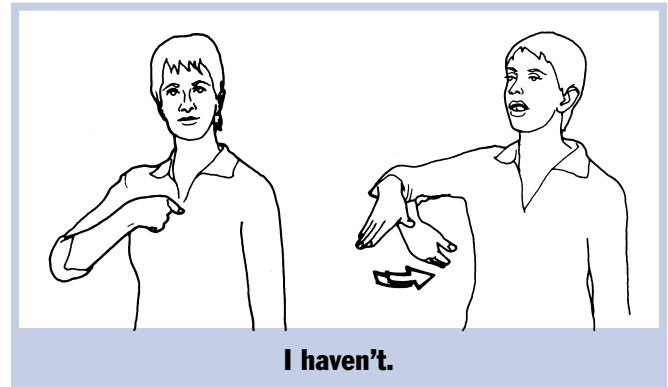
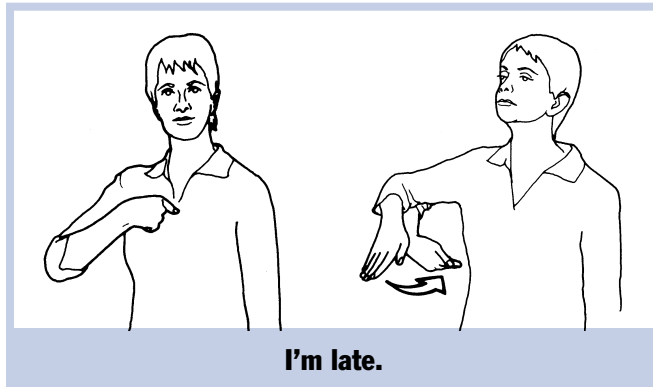
**Sample sentence: *I'm happy/I'm enjoy.***



## 5. Non-manual signals / facial expressions

Specific **non-manual signals** (NMS) alter the meaning of a sign. Facial expressions, head nods / shakes, eyebrows, nose, eyes, and lips each carry meaning that can be attached to a sign.

**Sample sentence: *I'm late/I haven't.***



## Illustrating American Sign Language

Illustrating a visual, three-dimensional language like ASL poses several challenges. A primary challenge is showing the movement parameter of each sign. Illustrating movement relies on the use of arrows to show different types of movements and changes.

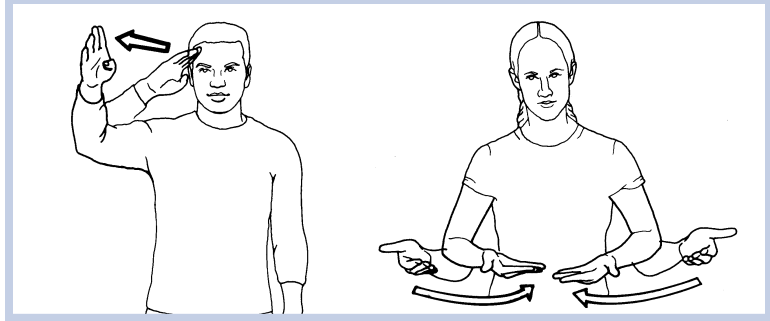
1. Types of movement
  - a. Arc
  - b. Straight line
  - c. Circle
  - d. Alternating in-and-out
  - e. Twist of the wrist
  - f. Finger flick
2. Changes in movement
  - a. Location changes — one or both hands move/s from one location to another
  - b. Direction changes — one or both hands change/s direction
  - c. Handshape changes — one or both hands change/s handshape in mid-sign

Each arrow shows the beginning and ending location of any movement, with the arrowhead indicating the final resting position of the handshape. Familiarize yourself with the following explanations of how movement is illustrated in **Master ASL! Level One**.

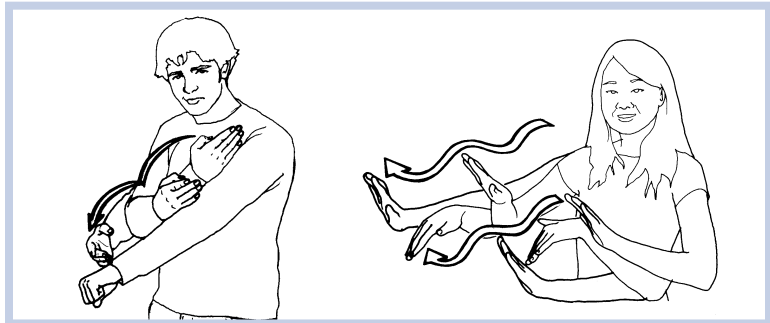
## THINGS TO KNOW

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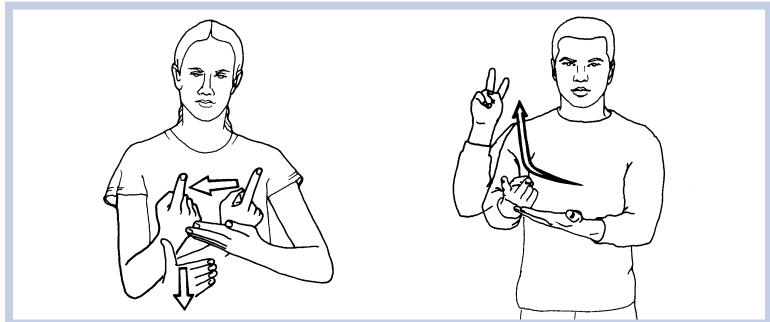
1. *Single movement in one direction.* One or both hands may move in the direction shown by the arrow.



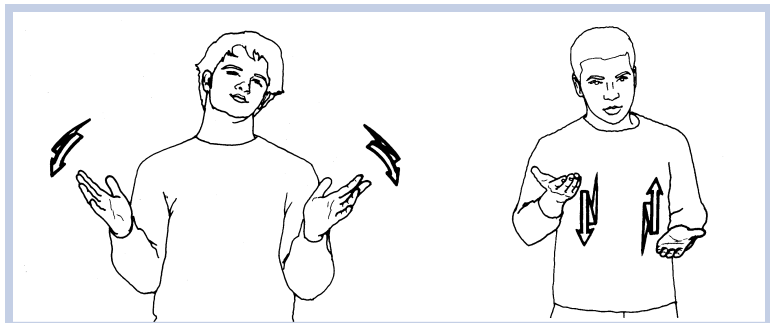
2. *Plural movement in one direction.* Some signs include several small changes in location and type of movement before reaching its final location.



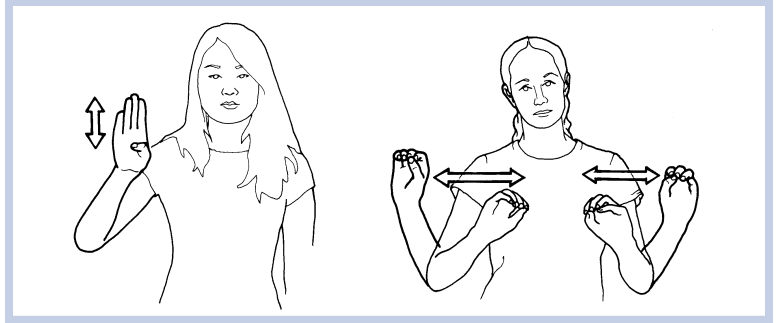
3. *Single movement, with change in direction and/or handshape change.* Direction changes may include handshape changes. If a handshape changes while moving, the new handshape continues to the sign's final location.



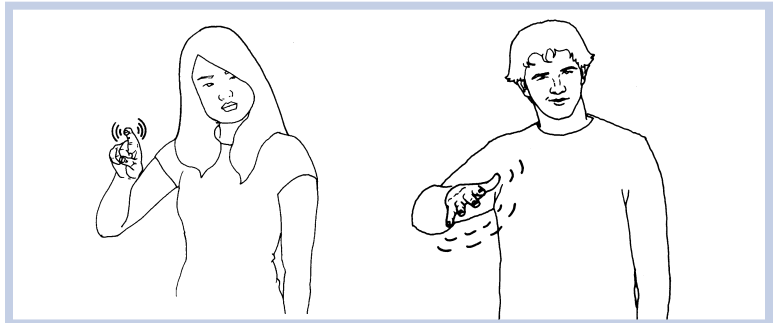
4. *Double movement.* Many signs have a double back-and-forth or tapping movement. This movement may be up-down, side-to-side, or in-out. Generally, the movement or tapping occurs twice and does not move very far. This arrow is also used with head shakes and nods.



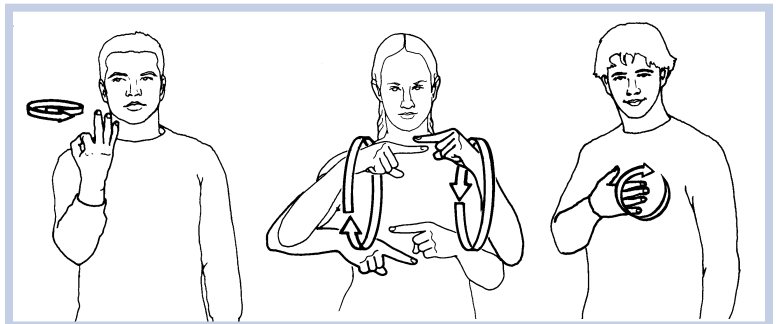
5. *Multiple movement.* This arrow indicates a continuous, repeated back-and-forth or up-down movement.



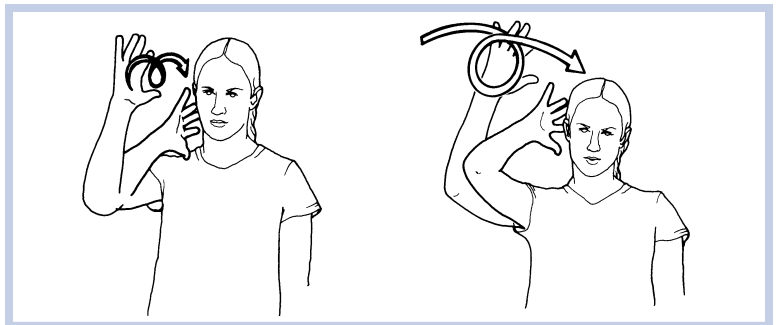
6. *Wiggle movement.* Wiggle your fingers back and forth in a repetitive motion. The wiggle marks may also be located near the head to suggest a very slight back-and-forth motion.



7. *Circular movement.* One or both hands move in a repeated horizontal or vertical circular movement. Some signs with a circular movement may be outward- or inward-directed, and other signs will have both hands moving in opposite circular directions simultaneously.



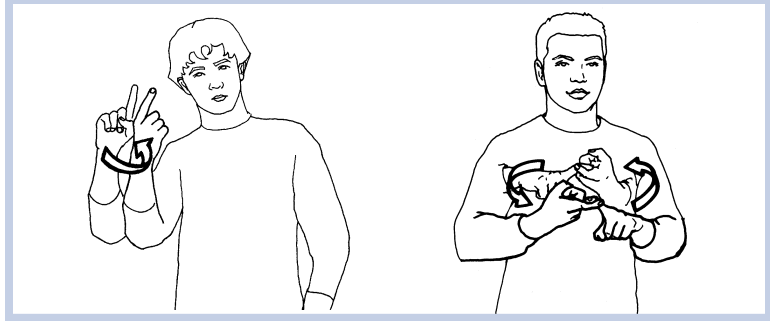
8. *Circular movement with direction.* One or both hands may move forward or backward in a circular movement.



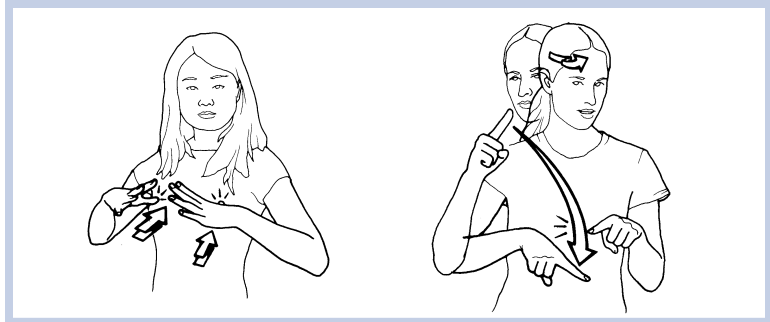
## THINGS TO KNOW

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9. *Twist movement.* Twist your wrist once. Generally only one hand will make a twist movement.



10. *Strike marks.* Strike marks emphasize contact is made between two parts of the body as part of a sign.



11. *Fingerspelling.* Fingerspelling is not like using a keyboard to type individual letters one after the other away from your body. Hold your hand still in the Fingerspelling space (see page xviii) and form each letter “on top” of each other. In some cases you will need to move your hand slightly while fingerspelling. Do not fingerspell letters moving across your torso. Fingerspelling has been illustrated in **Master ASL!** from left to right to make it easier to use and understand. The first sample illustration shows how fingerspelling is actually done and the second shows how fingerspelled words are printed in **Master ASL!**

