

LEARN AMERICAN **SIGN LANGUAGE**

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO START SIGNING NOW

COMPLETE BEGINNER'S GUIDE • 800+ SIGNS

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>> INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of American Sign Language (ASL)! ASL is a vibrant, easy-to-learn language that is used by approximately half a million people each day. This book will lead you through everything you need to know to have a basic knowledge of ASL, including the basics of signing (including handshapes, palm orientation, location, movement, and facial expressions), grammar and sentence structure, and some helpful tips for learning ASL.

The first thing you should know about ASL and its language is that ASL is not English! Even though English speakers and users of ASL utilize the same written language, spoken English and ASL are quite different from each other. ASL has a separate foundation than spoken (or written) English, and its users have different needs. We ASL speakers not only have our own grammar and structure rules, we have unique and different ways of expressing ourselves. The more you learn about ASL and Deaf culture, the more you will come to understand the way Deaf people communicate! This introduction will give you a good place to start.

THE BASICS OF SIGNING

First thing's first: "Which hand should I use?" is a common question for a new learner of ASL. However, it's really as simple as using whatever hand you're most comfortable with. (That way, your signing won't look "stiff.") This hand is referred to as your "dominate hand" throughout the book. You should also use your dominate hand for finger-spelling (spelling out words you don't know the sign for or that have no sign).

Before you jump right into learning words in ASL, it's important to understand a few of the fundamentals of the language, so you can be sure to sign correctly. Signs have five different aspects you should know about, called the five main parameters of ASL: Handshape, Palm Orientation, Location, Movement, and Facial Expression.

HANDSHAPES

ASL has a variety of handshapes that are used to create signs or classify them (see below). These handshapes may be actual shapes (for instance, holding your hands like whiskers when making the sign for "Cat"), or the letter of the alphabet that that sign begins with (for instance, "Fruit" is signed using the handshape "F"). Learning the manual alphabet



CAT >> Make your hands look like whiskers when signing “Cat.”

FRUIT >> Many signs, like “Fruit,” are formed with a handshape in the letter of the alphabet they begin with.

(pages 12–15) is a great place to start when learning ASL—both because the alphabet is used in so many signs, and because you can “finger spell” words you don’t know.

Classifiers

Classifiers are handshapes and movements that describe size, shape, weight, action, and/or quantity in ASL. By using classifiers, a gift you received quickly and easily becomes a giant, heavy gift you received, and a story about walking down the street can instantly be transformed into a story about two people walking down the street, simply by modifying the sign. In proper ASL grammar, a classifier is used after you sign the main sign.

Although I’ve tried to give you lots of examples of classifiers you can use for various words throughout this book, the sky’s the limit when it comes to classifiers. Basically, there’s no rule saying what handshape you can’t use, as long as you indicate the right size, shape, direction

of movement, and/or location. (Just remember to sign the original word first!) Therefore, it’s important to practice your ASL signs using a variety of handshapes, so that you can be comfortable using them to modify your signs.

PALM ORIENTATION

The second parameter of a sign is your palm orientation—which way your palm is facing. It’s important to note the orientation of your palm because different palm directions can have drastically different meanings! For instance, “Year” and “Bar mitzvah” are signed using a similar movement, but the palms are facing in different directions.

LOCATION

Location is exactly what it sounds like—where you sign. While signing, you have to make sure you’re signing in the right location. For instance, to sign “Summer,” you move an “X” handshape across your forehead. To sign