

# American Sign Language Fact Sheet

## FACTS ABOUT AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

American Sign Language (ASL) is one of the most widely used languages in the United States.

ASL is primarily used by Deaf and hard of hearing Americans and Canadians. In addition, ASL is used by:

- hearing children of deaf parents
- hearing siblings and relatives of the deaf, and
- hearing adults who are becoming deaf and are learning ASL from other deaf individuals.

Additionally, a growing population of hearing, second-language students are learning ASL in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms.

ASL is a visual language. It has its own grammatical rules and semantics.

ASL is deeply rooted in the Deaf Community and Culture. Early sign language was already in use in Colonial America, notably in Martha's Vineyard Island where many deaf people once lived. In 1817, Laurent Clerc, the first deaf teacher in American came from Paris, France, to Hartford, Connecticut, with Thomas Gallaudet to set up the first school for the deaf. He used French Sign Language in his teachings, which led to the standardization of early American Sign Language into modern American Sign Language. The folklore, the history of Deaf people, cultural values, and arts are expressed and preserved through ASL.

There are approximately 250,000-500,000 ASL users in USA and Canada (Baker and Cokely, 1980). Most of them use ASL as their primary language.

At least thirty-five states have recognized ASL as a modern language for public schools. Hundreds of colleges and universities (at least 750, according to Cokely, 1986) in the United States are offering ASL classes. Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, offers a four-year bachelor-degree program in ASL.

Abundant resources on ASL research, evaluation, curriculum, literature, books and videotapes are available for students and teachers.

Qualified ASL teachers are certified by a national professional organization, the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA). There are state organizations affiliated with ASLTA. Check the ASLTA website at [www.ASLTA.org](http://www.ASLTA.org) for more information about state and local chapters. The ASLTA, Chapters of ASLTA, and some universities (e.g., Gallaudet University, Columbia University, Western Maryland University, University of Rochester, and Keuka College in New York) offer training in teaching ASL.

## ASL BENEFITS

- Hearing students and deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream programs at public schools and colleges and universities improve communication and interaction

- Used by deaf students at schools for the deaf
- Using ASL as an instructional tool in educational programs helps many deaf and hard of hearing students learning English better
- Hearing families of deaf and hard of hearing children improve the quality of family communication and interaction at home, through better understanding and acceptance of ASL
- Hearing children of deaf parents by improve their family communication and interaction through better understanding and acceptance of ASL
- Hearing and deaf and hard of hearing employees by improve their ability to communicate and work together, and develop better awareness and sensitivity to the deaf and hard of hearing
- Deaf and hard of hearing people interested in becoming ASL teachers benefit by improving job opportunities in teaching
- Hearing people become interested in being trained as interpreters for the deaf and hard of hearing people. There is a great need to increase the availability of qualified interpreters in the community (e.g., in hospitals, courts, governmental agencies, community activities, local/county/state legislatures), and mainstream programs in schools and colleges and universities.
- Professionals in public and private agencies and educational settings serving deaf and hard of hearing people (e.g., teachers, counselors, consultants, therapists, specialists) enhance their ability to understand and communicate with the deaf and hard of hearing.

## HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN SIGN LANGUAGE?

Learning sign language takes time. You cannot learn it in five minutes or overnight. To pick up enough signs for basic communication and to sign them comfortably, without excessive stiffness, can take one or two years. Some people pick up signs slower than others, and if that is the case, don't let it discourage you. Everyone learns sign language at their own speed. Be patient and you will succeed in learning the language. The rewards will be well worth the effort!

You can learn American Sign Language (ASL) by attending a sign language class. Usually they can be found at community colleges, universities, libraries, churches, organizations/clubs of the deaf, and so on. You can also expand your knowledge of ASL by practicing your signs with deaf people, be they friends or coworkers. Generally, they are patient about showing new signers the correct way to sign something, and usually, they will slow down their signing so that you can understand them. People will also be willing to

repeat words or statements if you do not understand them the first (or even the second) time. Keep in mind, however, that deaf people are human: they do lose patience from time to time. If that happens, do not take it personally. Put yourself in their shoes: if you had to slow down your normal speaking speed to the point where you say one word at a time and repeat yourself more than once, you might lose patience yourself.

You need to remember that sign language is a visual language. This means that the brain processes linguistic information through the eyes instead of ears. It also means that facial expressions and body movements play an important part in conveying information. It is possible to sign without using facial or body expressions, but doing so may give a mixed message and may confuse your deaf listeners. It will also look odd or unnatural.

Sign language by itself is not an universal language—each country has its own sign language, much like the thousands of languages spoken by hearing people all over the world. Like any spoken language, American Sign Language (ASL) is a living language with its own rules of grammar. Like all verbal languages, ASL grows and changes over time to serve and accommodate the needs of its native users. If you were to travel to another state and had an opportunity to speak with a deaf person of that state, you may even notice that she or he will make some signs differently from you. These signs are known as “regional” signs, and you can think of them as the equivalent of “accent.” It does not mean that deaf people in your state are signing their signs incorrectly, as opposed to those used by deaf people in another state. It is just a normal variation in ASL, and such regional signs add flavor to your understanding of ASL. It is important to remember that when you discover there is no sign for a word, it does not mean you can invent or make up a new sign. To do so may violate the grammatical rules of ASL, and may offend many deaf people. So fingerspell unknown terms.

Most importantly, speed is not crucial in sign language, although it can appear that way. It is more important to sign clearly, even if you have to do it at a slower pace. When deaf people often ask you to repeat yourself, it is a sign that you should slow down and try to sign as clearly as possible. Do not feel embarrassed if you sign slowly. To get your message across to others, to connect with another person, and to be understood—all these are important. There are no shortcuts to effective communication. Good luck!

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## ORGANIZATION

### American Sign Language Teachers Association

(ASLTA)

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## COLORADO COMMISSION FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

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