



# ASL

American Sign Language (ASL) is a rich and expressive language used by Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in the United States and parts of Canada. ASL is a complete, complex language that employs signs made with the hands and other movements, including facial expressions and postures of the body. It is the primary language of many North Americans who are deaf and is one of several communication options available to people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

To learn ASL is to embrace a culture and community with its own history, values, literature, and social norms. This document provides potential learners with an introduction to ASL and its culture, along with example phrases and a discussion about career prospects associated with ASL skills.

## The Culture of ASL

ASL is intrinsically tied to the Deaf community and their culture, which is rich, diverse, and steeped in history. Deaf culture is a social belief system in which being deaf is viewed as a type of human experience rather than a disease or a disability. ASL users share a common sense of identity and pride in their language and heritage. Social events, storytelling, poetry, and Deaf theater are all vital components of Deaf culture, often characterized by their vibrant use of ASL.

Deaf culture is a rich social fabric encompassing the values, norms, and behaviors of the Deaf community, united by the use of sign language. For new language learners, understanding Deaf culture is as important as acquiring the language itself. It's about recognizing the importance of visual attention, the value placed on direct communication, and the community's history of overcoming barriers. Respect for Deaf space and understanding the significance of eye contact and facial expressions are crucial. Engaging with Deaf culture often involves learning about Deaf history, art, and poetry, which can deepen the appreciation for the language and facilitate a more meaningful connection with the Deaf community.

## Learning ASL

Learning ASL is more than just mastering a set of manual signs; it's about understanding the Deaf worldview and becoming part of a welcoming and supportive community. Like learning any language, it requires time, patience, and practice. Here are some basic phrases in ASL along with their descriptions:

- **Hello:** Extend your fingers and cross your thumb in front of your palm. Bring your hand up to the side of your forehead and move it away from your head, as if you're saluting.
- **How are you?:** Start with the sign for 'HOW', which is done by placing both hands in front of you, palms up, and then rolling them around each other a few times. Follow this by pointing to the person you are asking.
- **Thank you:** Touch the fingers to your chin and bring your hand forward and down in the direction of the person you are thanking.
- **Sorry:** Form a fist with your dominant hand, place it in the middle of your chest, and move it in a circular motion.
- **Yes:** Make a fist with your dominant hand and then move it up and down, like a head nodding 'yes'.
- **No:** Form an 'N' by placing your thumb and index fingers together, and then wave your hand back and forth.
- **Nice to meet you:** Sign 'NICE' by brushing your dominant hand over your other hand, palm up, then signing 'MEET' by pointing to both yourself and the person you're greeting with your index fingers, and then signing 'YOU'.

Practicing these phrases with others and in ASL classes will help you improve your fluency and become more comfortable with the language.

## ASL Grammar and Structure

ASL grammar differs significantly from English. It uses a topic-comment structure, where the topic is often established first, followed by additional information or comment. Facial expressions, body movements, and non-manual signals are crucial grammatical elements that convey tone and context, serving functions similar to voice intonation in spoken languages. Word order can vary but often follows a Subject-Object-Verb pattern, although variations for emphasis or clarity are common. Questions often use specific facial expressions and body language, and may place the question word at the end of the sentence. Repetition and spatial referencing are also key components in conveying meaning. For new learners, understanding and practicing these unique aspects are essential to becoming fluent in ASL.

## Career Prospects with ASL Skills

Proficiency in ASL can lead to numerous career opportunities. Here are some fields where ASL skills are valuable:

- **Interpretation and Translation:** ASL interpreters are in high demand in various settings such as educational institutions, healthcare facilities, legal courts, and public services.
- **Education:** Teachers of the Deaf, ASL instructors, and educational interpreters help make education accessible to Deaf and hard-of-hearing students.
- **Social Work and Counseling:** Professionals with ASL skills can provide more effective support and counseling services to Deaf and hard-of-hearing clients.
- **Healthcare:** ASL-fluent healthcare providers can offer better care to Deaf patients through clear communication.
- **Advocacy and Community Services:** Organizations that serve the Deaf community often seek employees who are proficient in ASL.

American Sign Language is a vibrant and important part of the Deaf culture. Learning ASL opens the door to a new way of communicating and connects you to a warm and rich community. Not only can it be personally rewarding, but it also offers a plethora of professional opportunities. Whether you're seeking a career that specifically requires ASL or you just want to become more inclusive in your communication, knowing ASL is a valuable skill.

## Where Can I Start at LaGuardia Community College

At LaGuardia Community College, the Modern Languages and Literatures Program offers dynamic courses in diverse languages, fostering global understanding and communication skills. Our dedicated faculty prepare students for exciting, multilingual futures, embracing cultural richness and enhancing career opportunities in our interconnected world. For more information about our world language courses and schedule, visit <https://lagccml.github.io>.