Lesson 1

Objectives inspired by, lesson material copied from, vocabulary transcribed from, and sentences and story by Bill Vicars. No endorsement implied nor given.

Objectives

- I am able to define the term ASL.
- I know and can read the common handshapes used in ASL.
- I am able to read, write, and fingerspell my name in ASL.
- I am able to read, write, and count to five in ASL.
- I am able to briefly describe the history of ASL.
- I am able to briefly describe the history of SignWriting.
- I am able to briefly state the gist of Deaf Culture.
- I have a *basic* idea of the meaning of the difference between ASL and Signed English.
- I have a *basic* idea of the meaning of Pidgin (concat signing).
- I know which direction to read and write SignWriting.
- I am able to explain how the glyphs of SignWriting are organized.
- I have a *basic* idea of how dictionary order works.
- I know how SignWriting works with left handed signing.
- I am able to read, recognize, and sign the vocabulary for this lesson.
- I am able to read, recognize, and sign the practice sentences for this lesson.
- I am able to read the practice story for this lesson.
- I have done a practice quiz.
- I have checked with my instructor regarding how and where to take any graded quizzez.

ASL: A Brief Description

Let me start by sharing with you *my* definition of ASL: "American Sign Language is a visually perceived language based on a naturally evolved system of articulated hand gestures and their placement relative to the body, along with non-manual markers such as facial expressions, head movements, shoulder raises, mouth morphemes, and movements of the body."

Now let's look at a couple of other definitions. According to `www.dictionary.com` we have:

> **American Sign Language** *n. Abbr.* **ASL**: The primary sign language used by deaf and hearing-impaired people in the United States and Canada, devised in part by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet on the basis of sign language in France. Also called **Ameslan**.

A quick trip to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (`www.m-w.com`) and we get:

Main Entry: **American Sign Language**
Function: *noun*
Date: 1960
: a sign language for the deaf in which meaning is conveyed by a system of articulated hand gestures and their placement relative to the upper body

I've also seen this definition show up in *many* places:

> "American Sign Language is a visual-gestural language used by 500,000 members of the North American Deaf community."

Here is a variation on that same theme:

> "American Sign Language is a visual-gestural language used primarily by members of the North American Deaf community."

Now let's discuss those definitions a bit.

Did you notice the date of that entry from Merriam-Webster? 1960! ASL hasn't been "recognized" as a language for very long has it? Oh sure, ASL has been used in; America since the early 1800's (and earlier if you include the signing that was being done in America prior to Thomas Gallaudet bringing Laurent Clerc from France), but it wasn't until 1960 that "experts" *started* recognizing it as a full-blown autonomous language.

We should say "at *least*" 500,000 people use ASL. That is an **old** statistic from the 1980's. My estimate is more along the lines of: 2 million people are using ASL on a daily basis and at least 500,000 of those people are using it as their primary means of communication. Millions more people know "some" sign language and use it "once in a while." For example, a grandmother of a deaf child. She may have taken a six-week community education course and now she knows just enough to offer her grandson candy and cookies.

"ASL is a visually perceived, gesture-based language." That means it is a language that is expressed through the hands and face and is perceived through the eyes. It isn't just waving your hands in the air. If you furrow your eyebrows, tilt your head, glance in a certain direction, twist your body a certain way, puff your cheek, or any number of other "inflections" — you are adding or changing meaning in ASL. A "visual gestural" language carries just as much information as an oral/aural (mouth/ear) language.

Is ASL limited to just the United States and Canada?

No. ASL is also used ***in varying degrees*** in the Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Zaire, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Kenya, Madagascar, Benin, Togo, Zimbabwe, Singapore, Hong Kong and many other places. (Source: Grimes, Barbara F. (editor), (1996). "Languages of USA" *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, 13th Edition.* Institute of Linguistics.)

Is ASL a ***universal*** language? Nope. Not even close. Those countries I just mentioned also have *their own* signed languages. For a idea into how non-universal it is, take a look at the number of languages listed on `https://www.signbank.org/signmaker.html`! ASL is the dominant signed language in *North America*, plus it is used *to some extent* in quite a few other countries, but it is certainly not understood by Deaf people everywhere.

American Sign Language: Handshapes

A student wrote: "I was looking at some of the signs, but couldn't tell which way my hands should be facing. For example one of the versions of the sign pizza uses a 'p' handshape. Is the 'P' facing me or the person I'm signing to?"

Dr Vicars: When fingerspelling, in general the palm of your hand faces toward the watcher. For the sake of comfort your palm is actually pointed a bit off to the right of the person to whom you are spelling. (Unless you are left handed, then it will be opposite.)

Letters like G, H, and P point a bit off to the right of the person to whom you are signing. Some signers point these letters almost directly to the left. Both methods are "okay." Use a position that feels comfortable to you yet is clear to the observer. In most pictorial sign language dictionaries, unless it says or shows otherwise, you can assume the sign is angled toward the watcher. It is important to note though that sometimes when you aim a sign at yourself or move a sign toward yourself you are doing so to create additional meaning. (Mine vs. yours / done to me vs. done to you.)

When it comes to writing these letters, for now just "draw" them in a column down the page. We will cover how to correctly write them in future lessons.

A:

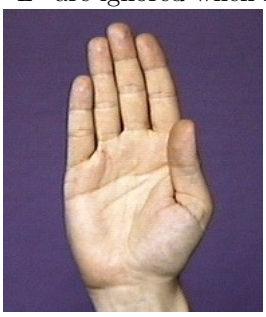
When reading "letter A" it will look like . When watching someone else sign you the letter "A", it will look like  to you. When writing "letter A" you should make it look like .

Don't worry too much about how to read and write "A" for now (unless it's in your name). Just know for now that a filled in area is drawn by using an "X" to fill it in and that we will be showing the SignWriting for each of these handshapes along with the picture.

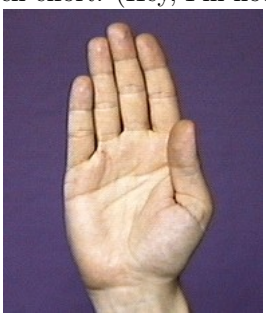
B:

"B" Version 1: The thumb of the letter "B" generally has a "slight" bend, but not as much as depicted in most books. The picture of "B" in my `http://asl.ms` website was taken in a series as I was spelling the ABC's.

You might notice that a "B" being produced after an "A" tends to have little or no bend. If you videotape a skilled signer fingerspelling the word "about" at *high* speed, the "B" will generally have little or no bend in the thumb. If you video record that same person spelling of the term "MBA" the "B" will have a very noticeable bend. The letter B is spelled regardless of any signing differences, just like the different sounds for "L" are ignored when reading and writing English. Here's how I do the letter "B" in general:




"B" Version 2: Some people cross the thumb over the palm. I don't do it this way because it takes too much effort. (Hey, I'm not lazy, just efficient.) This is how most "books" show it:



Shannon: What is a "b" palm? It doesn't relate to signing the letter "b" right?

DrVicars: When used to describe a sign, a "b" palm is like the letter "b" but you don't have to bend the thumb around onto the palm. The thumb is just alongside the palm in a natural

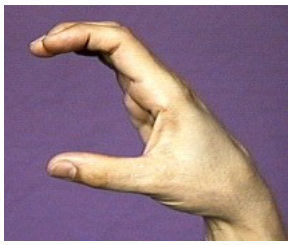
position, with the fingers touching each other (side by side, extended). Think of a traffic cop telling oncoming traffic to stop.

Shannon: Okay that's what I guessed; just wanted to make sure.

"Classifier B," "Flat hand," or "B palm."

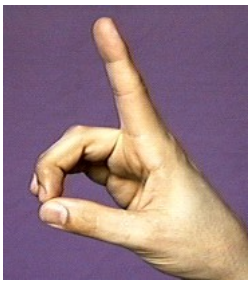
This handshape uses a "B" hand with the thumb alongside instead of folded across the palm. This handshape is used to describe flat, rectangular objects or surfaces. Examples: the roof of a house, a sheet of paper, a table, a box ...

C:



When used as a **size** and **shape** specifier this handshape shows things that are round or cylindrical. Examples: pole, cup, or telescope. This handshape can also be used to specify placement. You could show where certain things are in a room. For example, a TV or a microwave. To describe a TV or microwave you could use **index** fingers to trace its outline, or **b-hands** to show its size and shape.

D:



E:

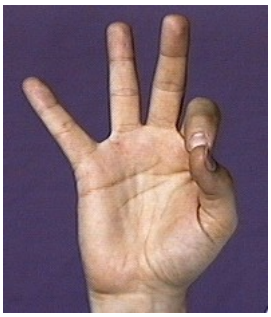
You might see an “e” that rests only three fingers on top of the thumb when someone is spelling a name or a word that places the letter “m” before the “e.” For example: “James.”

Or suppose you spell the name “J-A-N-E?” The “E” might end up looking like this:

There is even a version of “E” that uses only “one” finger (the index finger perched on top of the thumb). This version often shows up after the letter “L.” None of these variations changes the symbol used to write the “E”, just like you still spell “input” even if a particular speaker says something more like “inmput.” The particular “E” used is not a separate letter, it’s just a part of that signer’s accent!

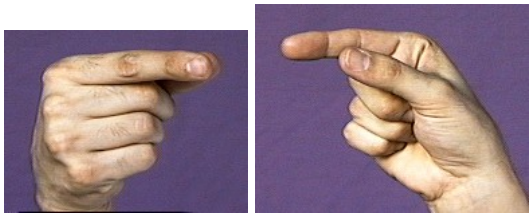
Note: Sometimes you’ll see people do an “e” with an opening between the fingertips and the thumb. I sometimes call that a “screaming E” or a “Hearing person’s E.” (Some people call it a “bear claw E.”) However it is fairly common in the Deaf Community and even used by quite a few Deaf people. I recommend that ASL teachers stay flexible — just like Spanish teachers have accepted several forms of the “d” sound. I also recommend we not consider it “wrong” but simply another version of “E” that shows up from time to time depending on the person’s particular accent.

F:



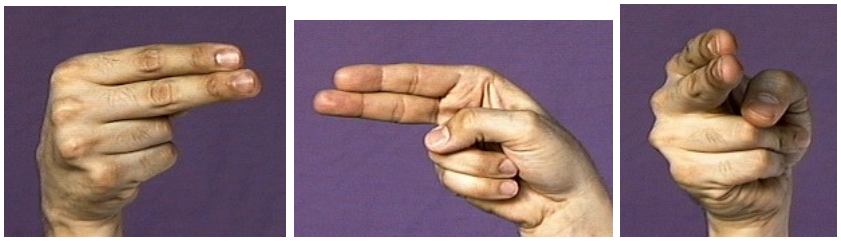
Tip: Do "not" get hung up on debating if the tip of the finger is on top of the thumb or the pad of the index finger is on top of the thumb. The exact form of an "F" varies a bit depending on surrounding letters. However — some people care "a lot." If you have the unfortunate experience of being taught by such a person just smile and do it their way.

G:



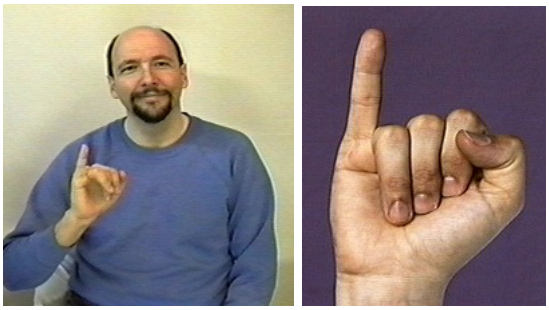
You'll also see a "G" done with the thumb jutting up. That is just another variation.

H:

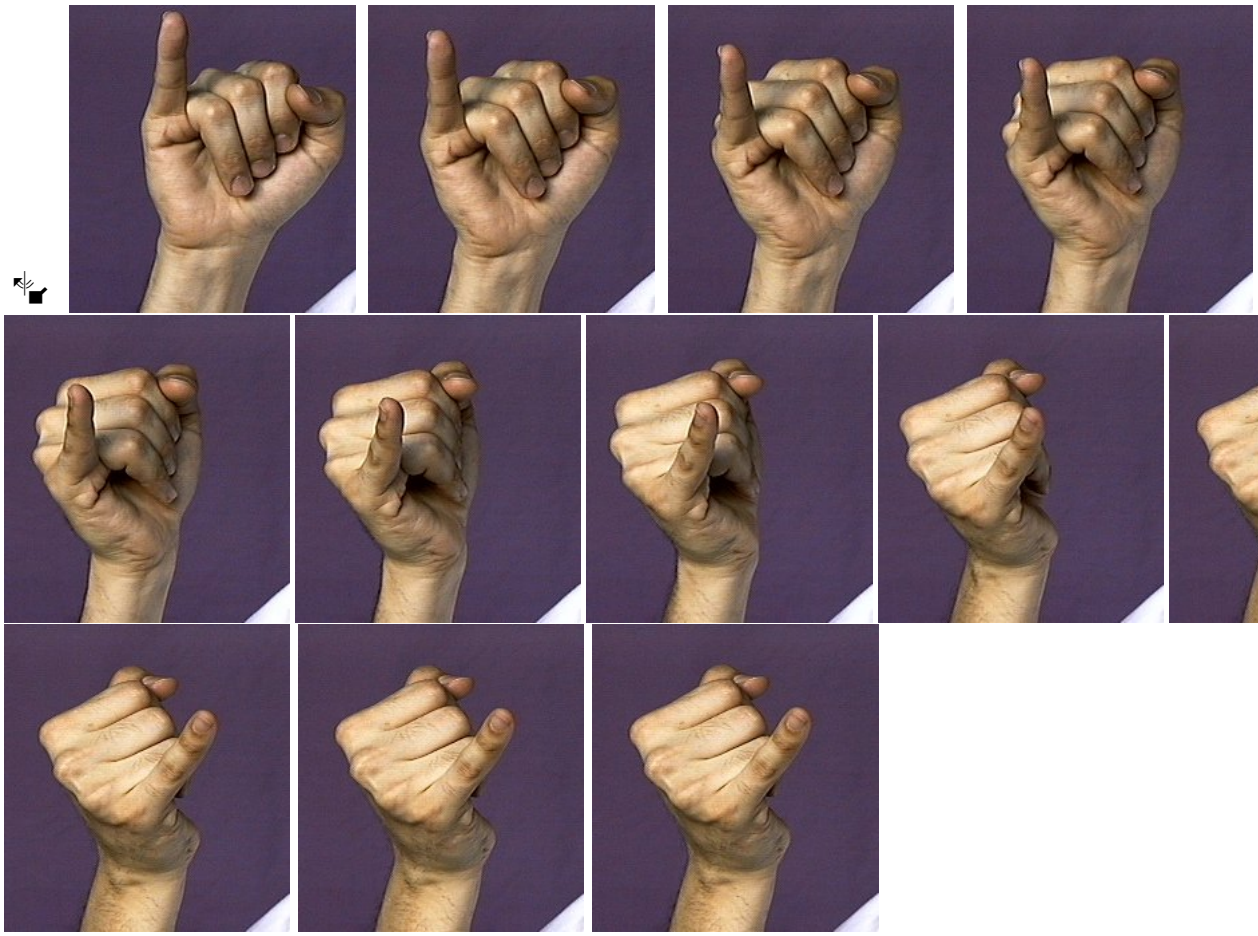


You'll also see an "H" done with the thumb jutting up. That is just another variation.

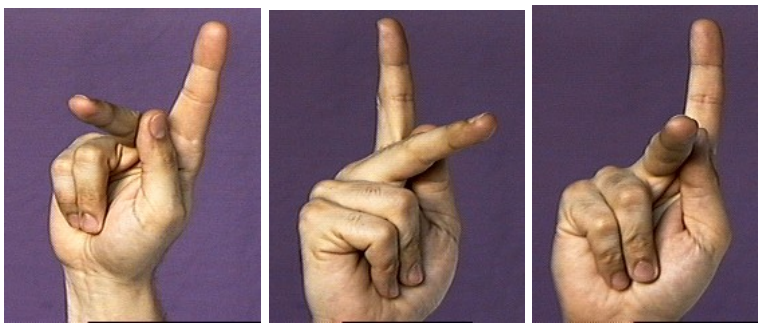
I:



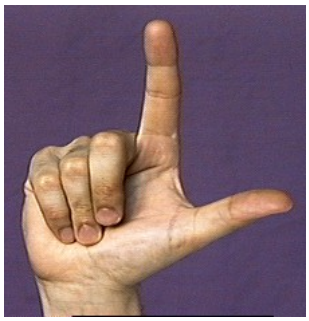
J:



K:



L:



M:

Three fingers draped over the thumb.

In books you often see the fingers draped way over the thumb, like this:

You'll see it both ways, but think about which version would naturally become more popular over the years due to ease of use. It takes extra time to drape the fingers further over the thumb. So you can see why the "loose method" is more popular amongst everyday users of ASL and also why the SignWriting symbol is the looser instead of a tight .

When most skilled signers fingerspell letters like "M, N, & T," they don't bend or wrap the fingers as tightly as the "ABC" alphabet charts tend to depict. The same for not bending the thumb over the palm in the letter "B." Tightly wrapping the fingers over and/or around each other takes too much time. An artist has a long time to draw pretty handshapes. The artist can paint them carefully and in perfect form for the sign language dictionary pages. A Deaf person whips out a several letters per second because he is trying to get his message across rather than impress somebody with how pretty his handshapes are.

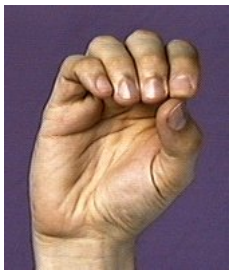
N:

Version 1:

Version 2:

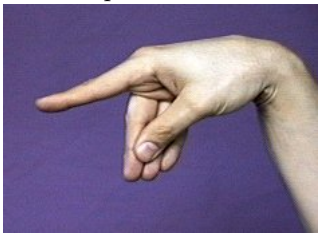
O:



P:

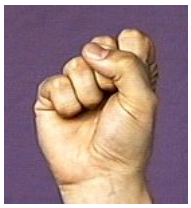

In some parts of the country you will see a “p” done like this:



Q:


R:

S:



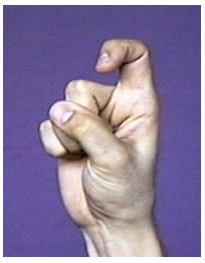
T:

U:

V:

W:

X:



Y:

Z:

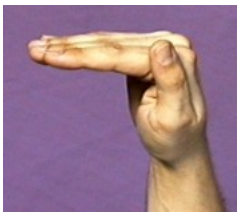
Bent V handshape:

Uses: Things with legs, people and animals that are crouching, small animals.

Examples: a small animal such as a squirrel; a person sitting in a certain location (when done palm facing downward).

A “Bent V” is also good for doing a “double z.”

Bent hand:

- I know and can read the common handshapes used in ASL.
- I am able to read, write, and count to five in ASL.
- I am able to briefly describe the history of ASL.
- I am able to briefly describe the history of SignWriting.
- I am able to briefly state the gist of Deaf Culture.
- I have a *basic* idea of the meaning of the difference between AS
- I have a *basic* idea of the meaning of Pidgin (concat signing).
- I know which direction to read and write SignWriting.
- I am able to explain how the glyphs of SignWriting are organiz
- I have a *basic* idea of how dictionary order works.

Claw hand:

-
- I know how SignWriting works with left handed signing.
- I am able to read, recognize, and sign the vocabulary for this le
- I am able to read, recognize, and sign the practice sentences fo
- I am able to read the practice story for this lesson.
- I have done a practice quiz.
- I have checked with my instructor regarding how and where to

This is where we are!