

ASLSJ stands for American Sign Language Sign Jotting. I needed a way to jot down notes about ASL words. So, I created a writing system for ASL.

The basic patterns of any language are called phonemes. Yes, the word phoneme refers to sound, but the concept is well-understood to be segments of language.

ASLSJ documents seven groups of phonemes: Body-relative location, Hand-relative location, Palm-facing direction, Handshape, Hand movement and repetition, Body and Head facing and movement directions and Facial expressions, and fingerspelling. Just like all other writing systems, ASLSJ cannot capture exactly or completely all the features of an ASL conversation. It is designed to capture enough information to understand meaning.

All phoneme icons represent the signer's point of view, which is a mirror image of how you see someone signing at you in a video or from a stage. The goal is to write down the correct directions on paper for you to sign words correctly.


ASL conversations have the concept of describing the largest thing first and working down into the details. ASLSJ words are assembled with this concept in mind.

The first phoneme group is Body-relative location. This phoneme needs three parts to describe a location of the dominant hand in three dimensions: height, side, and depth.


All left-side or right side references are relative to the specific signer's dominant hand. Therefore, I will use phrases like "dom hand," "dom side," "nondom hand," and "nondom side." Since most ASL words are signed in front of the body, depth references are either "out from body," "on body," or "above/below ear/shoulder." Depth directions are "out" or "in."

The default location for the dom hand is chest height, dom side chest, and out from body. ASLSJ words do not need to specify this phoneme when the dom hand is in the default location.


The dom hand height is generally one of nine positions: Forehead/temple, Eye, Nose/ear, Mouth/cheek, Chin/jaw, Throat/neck, Upper chest/shoulder, Chest/upper arm, Stomach/forearm. Each height-position icon has a small circle on one side to indicate the dom side of the speaker.

Forehead/temple: 


Eye: 


Nose/ear: 


Mouth/cheek: 

Chin/jaw: 

Throat/neck: 

Upper chest/shoulder: 


Chest/upper arm: 

Stomach/forearm: 


The dom hand side position is one of five positions: Nondom arm, Nondom side chest/face, Center chest/face, Dom side chest/face, and Dom side arm.

Nondom arm: 


This represents a bent nondom arm.

Nondom side chest: 


This represents an arrow bending left.

Center chest: 

This represents a dotted center line.

Dom side chest: 


This represents the right side cheek puffed out.


Dom arm: 

This represents an arrow bending right.

The dom hand depth position is one of three positions: Out from body, on body, Below ear.

Out from body: 


On body: 


Below ear: 


The second phoneme group is Hand-relative location. The nondom hand is often used as a prop upon which the dom hand performs an action. The dom hand can be away from the nondom hand, upon the nondom hand, wrapped around the nondom fingers, wrapped by the nondom fingers, or meshed between the nondom fingers. The nondom hand can be located in one of six directions from the dom hand: nondom side, dom side, above, below, out from, or in from the dom hand.

Nondom hand on nondom side,

Dom hand away: 


Dom hand on: 


Dom hand wrapping: 


Dom hand wrapped: 


Dom hand meshed: 

Nondom hand on dom side,

Dom hand away: 

Dom hand on: 


Dom hand wrapping: 


Dom hand wrapped: 


Dom hand meshed: 

Nondom hand above,

Dom hand away: 

Dom hand on: 


Dom hand wrapping: 


Dom hand wrapped: 


Dom hand meshed: 


Nondom hand below,

Dom hand away: 

Dom hand on: 

Dom hand wrapping: 


Dom hand wrapped: 


Dom hand meshed: 

Nondom hand out,

Dom hand away: 

Dom hand on: 


Dom hand wrapping: 


Dom hand wrapped: 


Dom hand meshed: 

Nondom hand in,

Dom hand away: 

Dom hand on: 

Dom hand wrapping: 

Dom hand wrapped: 

Dom hand meshed: 

The third phoneme group is Palm-facing direction. The palm of the hand can be facing one of six directions: nondom side, dom side, up, down, out, in. For each of these palm-facing directions, the fingers can be pointing in one of four directions, spinning around the palm-facing axis.

The triangle  $\Delta$  represents the side of the hand with the thumb jutting forward.

The curve and straight line  $\smile$  represent the back or palm of the hand with the thumb curved away to the side. The point of the triangle  $\blacktriangle$  or the straight line  $\sqcap$  represent the finger pointing direction.

A single dot  $\cdot$   $\Delta$  represents the palm of the hand. Two short lines  $\smile$   $\Delta$  represent the back of the hand. A straight line in the finger-pointing direction  $\smile$   $\Delta$   $\text{---}$  means the wrist spins around the nondom/dom or out/in axis. A slanted line  $\smile$   $\Delta$   $\text{---}$  spins around the up/down axis.

Non dom hand palm-facing uses a mirror image icon with underline:  $\smile$   $\underline{\smile}$

Palm nondom side,

Fingers up:  $\Delta$

Fingers out:  $\Delta$

Fingers down:  $\nabla$

Fingers in:  $\nabla$

Palm dom side,

Fingers up:  $\Delta$

Fingers out:  $\Delta$

Fingers down:  $\nabla$

Fingers in:  $\nabla$

Palm up:

Fingers out:  $\cdot$

Fingers nondom side:  $\cdot$

Fingers in:  $\cdot$

Fingers dom side:  $\cdot$

Palm down:

Fingers out:  $\cdot$

Fingers nondom side:  $\cdot$

Fingers in:  $\cdot$

Fingers dom side:  $\cdot$

Palm out:

Fingers up:  $\cdot$

Fingers nondom side:  $\cdot$

Fingers down:  $\cdot$

Fingers dom side:  $\cdot$

Palm in:

Fingers up:  $\cdot$

Fingers nondom side:  $\cdot$

Fingers down:  $\cdot$

Fingers dom side:  $\cdot$

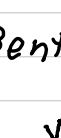
The fourth phoneme group is Handshape. The handshape icons represent the finger and thumb positions as you would see from the back of your hand.

The fingers can each be in one of eight positions: extended together, extended apart, crossed, curved together, curved apart, bent together, bent apart, or closed to palm. The thumb can be in four positions: up-touching the knuckle of the next finger, side, out, circle-touching the end of the next finger, or closed-around the other closed fingers or to the palm.

The ASL Manual Alphabet has specific handshapes to represent the standard English Alphabet letters and the ten Roman numerals. As the thumb is actually harder to control in everyday signing, many ASL words leave the thumb extended to the side. These are called an "open" version of the Manual Alphabet handshape. Extended fingers tend to get bent forward to save the muscle effort required to twist the wrist to point the fingers in a specific direction. These are called a "bent" version of the Manual Alphabet handshape.

Non-dom handshape uses the same icon with an underline.

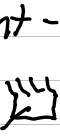
Letter A: thumb up, fingers closed



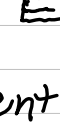
Open-A: thumb side



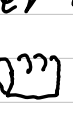
Bent-A: thumb out



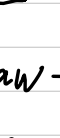
Letter B: t. closed, fs. up together



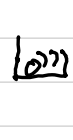
Open-B: t. side



Bent-B: t. side, fs. bent together



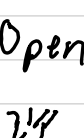
Number 4: t. closed, fs. up apart



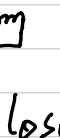
Bent-4: t. closed, fs. bent apart



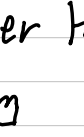
Letter C: t. out, fs. curved together



Number 5: t. side, fs. up apart



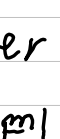
Claw-5: t. out, fs. curved apart



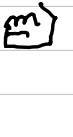
Letter D: f1 up, t. circle, fs. curved together



Letter E: fs. curved together, t. circle



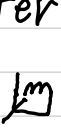
Letter F: t. circle, f1 bent, fs. up apart



Open-F: t. side



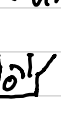
Letter G: t. out, f1 bent, fs. closed



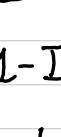
Closed-G: t. circle



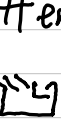
Letter H: t. closed, f2 up together, fs. closed



Open-H: t. side



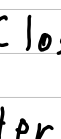
Bent-H: t. side, f2 bent together



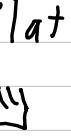
Letter I, Letter J: t. closed, f3 closed, f1 up



Bent-I: f1 bent



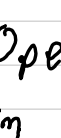
Letter K: t. closed, f1 up, f1 bent, fs. s closed



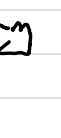
Open-K: t. side



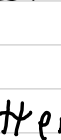
Letter L: t. side, f1 up, fs. closed



Number 1: t. closed



Bent-L: f1 bent



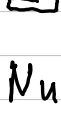
Number 8: f1 up, t. circle, f1 bent, fs. up apart



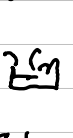
Open-8: t. side



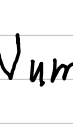
1-I/Horns: t. closed, f1 up, f2 closed, f1 up



Letter M: f3 bent together, t. up, f1 closed



Letter N: f2 bent together, t. up, fs. closed

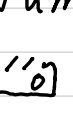


Bent-N: t. out

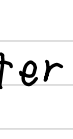


Closed-N: t. circle

Letter O: t. circle, fs. curved together



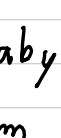
Flat O: t. circle, fs. bent together



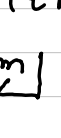
Letter P = Letter K

Letter Q = Letter G

Letter R: t. closed, f1 crossed, f1 up, fs. closed



Open-R: t. side



Bent-R: t. side, f1 bent crossed, f1 up, fs. closed



Letter S: t. closed, fs. closed



Letter T: f1 bent, t. up, fs. closed



Letter U: t. closed, f2 up together, fs. closed



Bent-U: f2 bent together



Letter V: t. closed, f2 up apart, fs. closed



Number 3: t. side



Curved-V: f2 curved, apart



Claw-3: t. out, f2 curved apart



Number 7: f2 up apart, t. circle, f1 curved, f1 up



Open-7: t. side



Letter W: t. closed, f3 up apart, f1 closed



Number 6: f3 up apart, t. circle, f1 curved



Open-6: t. side



Letter X: t. closed, f1 curved, fs. closed



Open-X: t. side



Baby-C: t. out



Baby-O: t. circle



Letter Y: t. side, f3 closed, f1 up



Bent-Y: t. out, f3 closed, f1 bent



Letter Z = Number 4

The fifth phoneme group is hand movement and repetition. Each hand can move in the six primary directions, angled between two directions, circle or arc along two directions, make a large circle along two directions, or move one direction with a bounce arc. The palm can change facing direction and the hand can change shape in place or along the movement path. Movements icons have a small circle on one side to indicate the speaker's dom side.

Movement to Nondom side, dom side, up, and down use a plain arrow:  $\leftarrow \rightarrow \uparrow \downarrow$

Movement out and in use stacked triangles. The "furthest out" triangle is smaller to represent an object shrinking in the distance:  $\triangleleft \triangleright$

Changing Palm-Facing direction is an S. This represents a twisting wrist: S

Changing Handshape is an h. This represents an extended or closed finger: h

Angled direction uses two directions separated by an x:  $\leftarrow x \downarrow$

Curved direction uses two directions separated by an n:  $\uparrow n \rightarrow$

Large circle uses two directions separated by concentric circles:  $\rightarrow @ \downarrow$

Movement in often ends up on body, so, the On body depth position implies movement in:  $\rightarrow$

Movement from dom side arm near the head often ends up on dom side head. So, the dom side head position implies movement dom side: D

Movements can be grouped together using square brackets. Multiple angle-bracket groups imply sequential actions:  $[\leftarrow n \downarrow][D]$

Repeated movements are identified by curved brackets. Circular movement is a repeated arc movement:  $(\leftarrow n \downarrow)$

Place a movement group within a repetition group to repeat a movement along a path:  $(\downarrow [n \rightarrow])$

Nondom hand movement is a plain arrow or stacked triangles with an underline. The nondom hand often parallels, mirrors, or repeats the dom hand movement:

parallel out:  $\triangleleft \underline{\triangleright}$

mirror circles:  $(\leftarrow n \downarrow \underline{\rightarrow})$

repeat down:  $(\downarrow [\underline{\downarrow}])$

The sixth phoneme group is Body/Head facing/movement and facial expressions. This group is only intended to identify the most basic and common movements for the head, face, and torso. It is not intended to document full-body choreography.

The Body is represented by  $A_b$  and the Head is represented by  $M_b$ . These are followed by a single direction to indicate facing direction or a repetition group to indicate movement:  $A_b \downarrow M_b (\rightarrow)$

The face has many muscles allowing for a vast amount of nuance. I use an icon representing the eyebrows, eyes, nose, and possibly mouth and eye lids. They are effectively simple emojis.

☹️ 😊 😏 😬 😇 😈

The seventh phoneme group is fingerspelling. It uses a "y" to prefix fingerspelled words. Some words are spelled at a certain location on the body. So, the "y" may be prefixed by a Body-relative location.

y-USA

y-The-Netherlands

56D \* y-VP



Sentences are put together using commas and periods. If there is no Body-facing direction after a comma or a period, the sentence is presumed to be speaking at the audience. When a person is being quoted, put a Body-facing direction before the quotes to indicate a secondary audience assumed for the duration of the quote.

Ab → A [L] B, Si + [L] [to] to [to],  
 (downside) He, tells me,

Ab ← "A [L] B Ab ↓ [L] ↓ [↓],  
 (no downside) Your (down) clothes,

(back to audience) S [L] B [L] B h [L] !"  
 [I] hate!"