

Sign Language for Beginners

Quick Reference Notes

1. What is ASL?

American Sign Language is a complete visual language with its own grammar and syntax, used primarily by the Deaf and hard of hearing in North America. It is not based on English and has regional and cultural variations.

2. It's Not All About the Hands

Facial expressions and sign intensity help convey meaning and emotion. For example, the same sign can express different things like light rain vs. pouring rain depending on movement and facial expression.

3. The 5 Parameters of a Sign

Each ASL sign can be broken into five parts:

- Handshape
- Palm orientation
- Location
- Movement
- Non-manual signals (facial expressions, body language) Even slight differences can change the meaning of a sign.

4. Which Hand Do I Use?

Use your dominant hand for one-handed signs and as the active part in two-handed signs. Be consistent. It's okay if your instructor uses the opposite hand.

5. Fingerspelling

You'll use fingerspelling frequently for names, places, and words without a sign. Start by learning the ASL alphabet clearly before moving on to spelling words and reading fingerspelling.

6. Numbers

Numbers are used less than fingerspelling, but still essential. Remember the orientation difference: numbers 1-5 face inward by themselves, but outward in age and quantity signs.

7. Sign Variations

ASL includes regional, generational, and personal differences—just like spoken dialects. Signs also evolve over time, especially for technology.

8. How Do I Become Fluent?

Through practice, immersion, and time. Meredith shares her story of growing up around the Deaf community and studying ASL in college—fluency takes effort, but it's achievable.

9. Learning Your First Signs

Common beginner signs include:

- Hello
- My name is...
- Nice to meet you Use resources like signing dictionaries and cross-reference to confirm accuracy.

10. Practice and Immersion

Practice regularly with:

- Online exercises and quizzes
- Mirrors or self-recordings
- Teaching others
- Attending Deaf events and meetups