



Center for Accessibility, 901 G Street, NW, Room 205D, Washington, DC 20001  
Voice: (202) 727-2142; Videophone: (202) 559-5368; Email:  
DCPLaccess@dc.gov

## **Let's Communicate in American Sign Language**

### **Beginning Level**

**In the Beginning Level class, you should expect to learn at least 100 signs, basic rules of ASL grammar, and basic conversational skills. Each of these lessons is a guide to help you focus on what you will learn in each class. Your instructor may introduce practice sheets, other handouts, links to books and video recordings on ASL. Please take advantage of every opportunity you can to read/view other resources on ASL. Look for opportunities to attend community events with ASL users (i.e. Signing Starbucks, ASL Dinner Club, Gallaudet University events, virtual ASL meetups, etc.). The best way to learn a language is to use it with others.**

LESSON ONE – History and Culture Background of ASL	2
LESSON TWO – Introduction: Getting Acquainted	6
LESSON THREE – More Getting Acquainted	7
LESSON FOUR – Question Words	7
LESSON FIVE – Family Related Words	8
LESSON SIX - Home Related Words	9
LESSON SEVEN – Time to Eat	9
LESSON EIGHT – More Food Words	10
LESSON NINE – Colors	11
LESSON TEN – Antonyms	11
LESSON ELEVEN – People	12
LESSON TWELVE – Animals	12
LESSON THIRTEEN – Weather and Nature	13
LESSON FOURTEEN – Travel	14
LESSON FIFTEEN – Sports	14

## **LESSON ONE – History and Culture Background of ASL**

What we know as American Sign Language (ASL) originated in 1816, when Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, sent Rev. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to Europe in search of an appropriate teacher for his deaf daughter Alice Cogswell. At that time, there was no formal sign language the way we know it today, nor were there any public schools for deaf children. There were home-made signs, and deaf children, if they were educated at all, were home-schooled or attended private schools.

Rev. Gallaudet visited a few European countries before going to France. In France, he visited a school for the deaf in Paris, and met a deaf teacher named Laurent Clerc, who was fluent in French Sign Language. Rev. Gallaudet invited Clerc to come to the US and help him start a school for the deaf. What is now known as the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, the first public school for deaf children in the US, was founded in April 1817.

Using his native French Sign Language as a basis for the new language that we know as American Sign Language, Clerc introduced a then-new system of education and communication and language for the American Deaf Community.

ASL is a language with its own rules and structure. It is not English and should not be voiced as if it was spoken English. Pidgin Signed English (signs in English word order – Manually Coded English) combined with speaking is often used by people who grew up with English as a first language. Some people are able to sign ASL while speaking English but it takes lots of practice. It is easier to learn ASL if you turn off the English in your head and focus on ASL as a language rather than as coded English. ASL is not coded English.

So for this class we will not use voice, unless it is necessary for teaching vocabulary or explaining a concept.

### **The basic sentence structure of ASL is:**

Time + Subject + Verb + Object + Adjective/Adverb/Other descriptors/qualifiers

**In English you would say or write:**

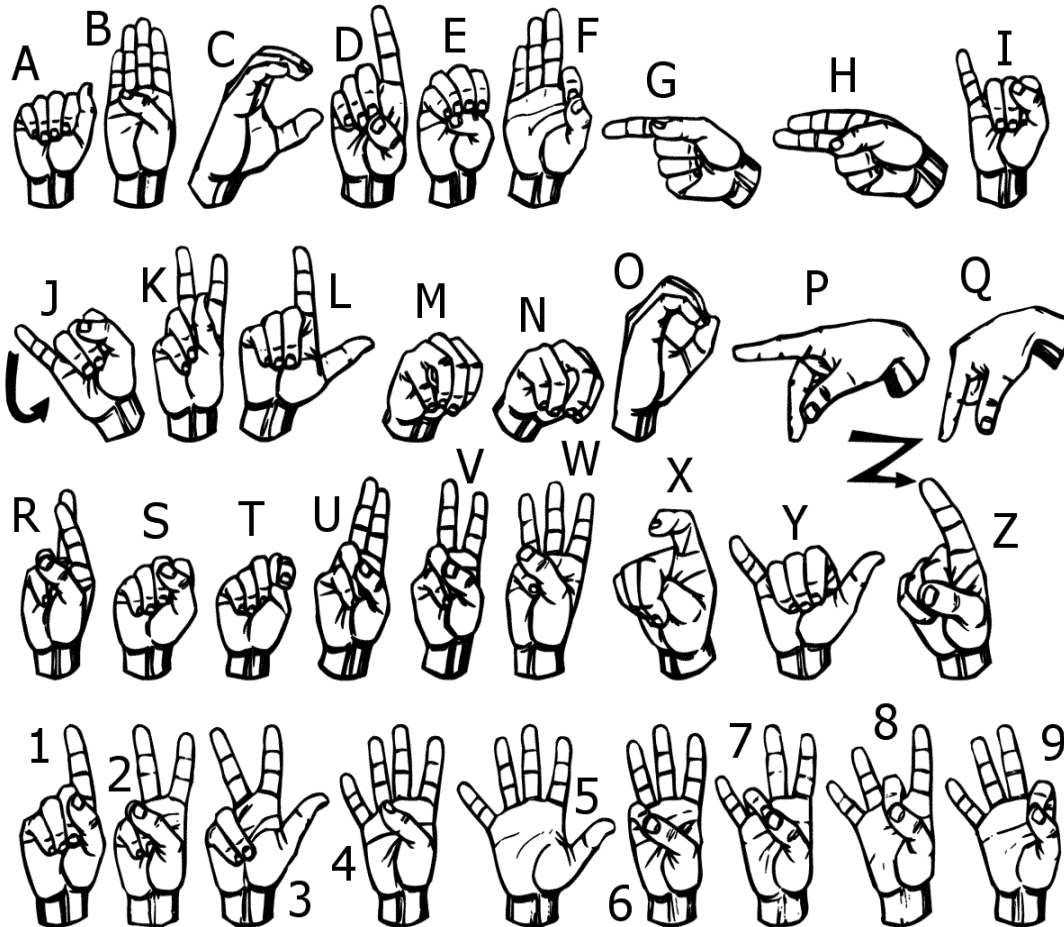
“I am going to the store now to buy candy for the party.”

**In ASL you would sign:**

“Now me go store... ‘reason-why or for-for-what’ candy for party.”

**Alphabet and Numbers**

Not all words have signs for them, so if you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell it. Look at the fingerspelling and number chart on the next page while learning and practicing these. Practice them 15 to 20 minutes every day until they become second nature.



## **FINGERSPELLING TIPS**

### **The most important rules are:**

1. Don't bounce or punch your hand with each letter. Keep your hand steady in one point in space.
2. Don't look at your hand when fingerspelling. Keep eye contact with your viewers.
3. Maintain the same palm orientation. Keep your palm oriented facing outward toward the person(s) you are taking to as much as possible.

There are some letters that require a different palm orientation, but keep the change minimal (G, H, J, P, Q).

4. Use the same hand to fingerspell more than one word. Do not switch between right and left hands.
5. If you mouth the word while spelling, mouth out how the word sounds, do not say the individual letters.
6. Don't move your hand horizontally. Keep it steady in one point in space.
7. Don't fingerspell out of the assigned "fingerspelling space". Your hand should be near your dominant-hand shoulder, and your elbow should be close to your body.
8. Don't block your face. If you do, you will block your facial expressions, and your eye contact with your viewer.
9. If it hurts do not do it.

NOTE: As with any language, there are always exceptions to the rules.

### **When to fingerspell**

- Proper nouns (brands, names: people, pets, etc.)
- Places and proper nouns with no signs (ex: states, cities, restaurants, stores, etc.)
- Technical vocabulary
- Specific nouns: "carpet" "tool"
- Clarification
- Abbreviations/acronyms
- When you do not know the sign

### **Double letters**

- The rules for double letters vary depending on the position in the word

- Typically, double letters repeat at the beginning (ex: Aaron) and in the middle of the word (ex: Miller). Move laterally at the end of the word (ex: Bill).
- Ending: move your hand slightly to the right or left (depending on what hand you use).

### **Where to look:**

- Look at the signer's face around the chin level.
- Never look at the signer's hand

### **What to look for:**

- Look for the shape of the word by seeing the shape of the letters (tall, down, side or moving)
- Tall letters: b, d, f, l, r, u, v, w
- Down letters: p, q
- Side letters: g, h
- Moving letters: j, z and sometimes x

### **FOR PRACTICE FUN, TRY (Slowly at first!):**

1. Fingerspelling every other letter in sequence forward and backward:  
(a, c, e, g, i, k, m, o, q, s, u, w, y) (b, d, f, h, j, l, n, p, r, t, v, x, z)  
(z, y, x, w, v, u, t, s, r, q, p, o, n) (m, l, k, j, i, h, g, f, e, d, c, b, a)
2. Fingerspelling forward with one hand and while simultaneously backwards with the other hand. (i.e. – when one hand makes an “a” the other hand makes a “z” together at the same time)  
(a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z)  
(z, y, x, w, v, u, t, s, r, q, p, o, n, m, l, k, j, i, h, g, f, e, d, c, b, a)  
For additional fun with this exercise, try different letters at random.  
No need to follow ABC sequence.
3. Finger counting odd numbers, then even numbers  
(1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10)
4. Finger counting backwards  
(10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1)
5. Fingerspelling license plates
6. Fingerspelling addresses of everyone you know
7. Fingerspelling telephone numbers of everyone you know
8. Fingerspelling words while reading the newspaper

## Group games:

1. Form small groups and each person in the group takes turns spelling a letter or number in sequential or random order. Try to go as fast as you can.
2. First person in the group spells a word. Next person takes the last letter and spells another word. Next person takes the last letter of that word and spells a different word. (i.e. – first person: “house”; next person: “ear”; next person: “rabbit”; etc.).

It is okay to use the same word again that you or someone else had spelled. For variety, ask students to sign the word they spelled if they know the sign.)

## LESSON TWO – Introduction: Getting Acquainted

There are many signs you may already know without realizing it. How do you think the following are signed? **Try them:**

hello	their	go	cold
goodbye	there	think	warm
I/me	time	love	hot
my	eat	drive	up
mine	drink	swim	down
you	talk/say	exercise	telephone
your	sleep	baseball	typing
we	see	basketball	piano
us	hear	football	violin
our	listen	bowling	guitar
he	write	dancing	horn
she	book	jump	drum
it	walk	sit	
they	come	stand	

## LESSON THREE – More Getting Acquainted

### Vocabulary

hi/hello	no	thank you
good	ready	name
meet	nice	morning
yes	please	how
fine	my	happy
have	day	what

Practice in pairs or groups of no more than 4.

If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell.

- Hi, how are you? I am fine.
- What is your name? My name is ....
- Where are you from? I am from ....
- Did you have a good morning? What did you do?
- Are you ready to eat? What do you want to eat? Where do you want to eat?
- Are you going to exercise?
- Did you call me this morning?
- What are you planning to do today?
- Do you love to swim?

Based on what you have learned so far, make up some statements and questions of your own and have a conversation with your classmates.

## LESSON FOUR – Question Words

### Vocabulary

who	which	these
what	because	those
when	how	to
where	this	from
why	that	

Practice in pairs or groups of no more than 4.

If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell.

- Will I see you later?
- Will you drive me home?
- Where are you going today?
- When do you want to eat?
- Why did you sleep late?
- Where are you from?
- Did you remember your sign language book?
- Are you learning sign language and fingerspelling?

Based on what you have learned so far, make up some questions of your own and have a conversation with your classmates. If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell it.

## **LESSON FIVE – Family Related Words**

### Vocabulary

Family	wedding	children
baby	wife	grandmother
sister	husband	grandfather
brother	partner	cousin
daughter	sweetheart	in-laws
son	niece	girl
aunt	nephew	boy
uncle	mother	divorce
married	father	

Practice in pairs or small groups. Use the sentences below and make up your own. If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell.

- Are you married?
- Do you have a small family?
- How large is your family?
- How many children do you have?
- Where does your family live?
- Do you see your family often?

## **LESSON SIX - Home Related Words**

### Vocabulary



Room	home	basement
dining room	kitchen	living room
bathroom	chair	new
toilet	table	old
window	bed	door
house	bedroom	

Practice in pairs or small groups. Use the sentences below and make up your own. If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell.

- Did you buy a house?
- Where is your house?
- How many rooms are in your house?
- What kind of rooms do you have in your house?
- What did you buy for your house?
- Is your house old or new?
- How many years have you lived in your house?
- How many people live in your house?

## **LESSON SEVEN – Time to Eat**

### Vocabulary

Hungry	Glass	Tea
Meal	Order	Hamburger
Breakfast	Wine	Fish
Lunch	Red	Meat
Supper	White	Cheese
Dinner	Beer	Eggs
Restaurant	Soda	Chicken
Bread	Water	Vegetables
Toast	Milk	Fruit
Sandwich	Coffee	Soup

Practice in pairs or small groups. Use the sentences below and make up your own. If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell.

- What do you like to eat for breakfast? Lunch? Supper?
- What restaurants do you like to go to?
- Would you like a glass of fine red wine?
- How do you like your hamburger cooked?
- Do you prefer soda, milk, tea, or coffee?

## LESSON EIGHT – More Food Words

### Vocabulary

turkey	tomato	apple
potato	onion	cake
ham/pork	carrot	pie
bacon	pear	ice cream
lamb	blueberry	chocolate
French fries	strawberry	vanilla
spaghetti	peach	delicious
salad	banana	full
lettuce	orange	
waiter/waitress		

Practice in pairs or small groups. Use the following sentences and make up your own. If you don't know the sign for a word, you may fingerspell.

- Has the waiter/waitress taken your order yet?
- What entrée did you request? What is the special of the day?
- What kind of salad do you prefer? What is your favorite dessert?
- Wasn't that a delicious meal?
- Do you cook a lot at home?
- What are some of your favorite recipes?

## LESSON NINE – Colors

### Vocabulary

color	orange	silver
black	red	dark
blue	pink	light
brown	purple	clear
tan	white	spotted
green	yellow	plaid
grey	gold	striped

### Practice suggestions:

- Look around the room and describe the colors of things you see; i.e.– the walls, the chairs, the tables, etc.
- Ask the others in your class to describe the color clothes they are wearing.
- Tell stories using some of the colors in this lesson as well as words from previous lessons.

## LESSON TEN – Antonyms

### Vocabulary

happy	know	take
sad	don't know	put
beautiful	want	borrow
ugly	don't want	lend
love	interested	bored
like	not interested	remember
don't like	clean	forget
hate	dirty	

### Practice suggestion:

Using the signs you have learned so far, choose your own discussion topics and sign to each other. The instructor may suggest topics and should make sure everyone is participating in the discussion.

## LESSON ELEVEN – People

### Vocabulary

individual

person

people

(All of the following signs are made by using the sign for “person” after the noun or verb.)

artist	musician	student	
dancer	neighbor	supervisor	(pedestrian
driver	painter	teacher	worker
lawyer	reader	thinker	
leader	runner	trainer	(employee)
librarian	scientist	typist	Writer/author
manager	singer	waiter	
mover	speaker	walker	

Sign each of the words and add the sign for “person.” Take turns describing yourself. For example, “I am a/an ....”

Do the same thing in describing a friend or family member. For example, “My friend/family member is a/an ... “

**Other professions/titles:** doctor, nurse, aide, policeman, fireman, hair stylist, barber, tailor, cook, engineer, architect, consultant, director, conductor, politician, president, vice president, senator, congressman, ambassador, king, queen, prince/princess

Make up your own questions and have a conversation with your classmates.

## LESSON TWELVE – Animals

### Vocabulary

Animal	Goat	Chicken	Gorilla	Wolf
Dog	Pig	Duck	Elephant	Fox
Cat	Mouse	Turkey	Bear	Snake
Horse	Rat	Turtle	Lion	Butterfly
Donkey	Rabbit	Frog	Deer	Bee
Cow	Squirrel	Fish	Tiger	Spider
Sheep	Bird	Monkey		

**Practice.** Take turns signing the following and make up your own sentences.

- I have three pets: a dog, a cat, and a fish.
- We saw elephants, lions, and tigers at the zoo.
- The large farm has many animals: cows, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens.
- We saw a bear and some deer while camping in the woods.
- The spider climbed up the wall.
- There were ducks, turtles, and frogs at the pond.
- The snake slithered through the tall grass.

### **LESSON THIRTEEN – Weather and Nature**

#### Vocabulary

Weather	Summer	Clear	Nature
Temperature	Fall	Wind	Earth
Hot	Winter	Clouds	Sun
Cold	Snow	Water	Moon
Cool	Rain	Melt	River
Spring	Lightning	Ice (freeze)	Tree
(grow)	Umbrella	Flood	Flower
			Mountain

**Practice.** Take turns signing the following and make up your own practice sentences. Have a discussion with your classmates.

- What is your favorite time of year?
- Has it rained a lot today?
- When do you think we will have our first snow fall this year?
- Is the weather cool today?
- Tell your classmates what the weather was like yesterday.
- Did you need an umbrella yesterday?
- What do you think the weather will be like tomorrow?

## LESSON FOURTEEN – Travel

### Vocabulary

Travel	Suitcase	Flat tire	Bus
around	(luggage)	Gasoline	Train
Vacation	Car	Parking	Airplane
(trip)	Drive	Traffic	Bicycle
Visit	Ride	Subway	Ship (boat)

**Practice.** Use the following to stimulate conversation.

- What was your favorite trip?
- What other countries have you travel to (or would like to travel to)?
- Do you plan to travel around this summer?
- Where are you going (or have gone) on vacation this year?
- Will you visit your friends and relatives?
- How many suitcases do you usually carry on trips?
- Do you prefer to travel by car, bus, train, airplane, or ship?

## LESSON FIFTEEN – Sports

### Vocabulary

Football	Skating	Ping-pong	Hunting
Baseball	Boxing	Bowling	Game
Basketball	Wrestling	Horseback	Tournament
Volleyball	Hockey	riding	Olympics
Soccer	Golf	Archery	
Skiing	Tennis	Fishing	

**Practice.** Use the following to stimulate discussion:

- What is your favorite sport?
- Do you go to see football games often?
- Do you play baseball? Do you like to go skiing?
- Who won the recent tennis tournament?
- Where will the Olympics be next year?
- Is boxing dangerous?
- Did/Does your school have a soccer team?
- What sport or game do you like to play in your spare time?