

American Sign Language (ASL)

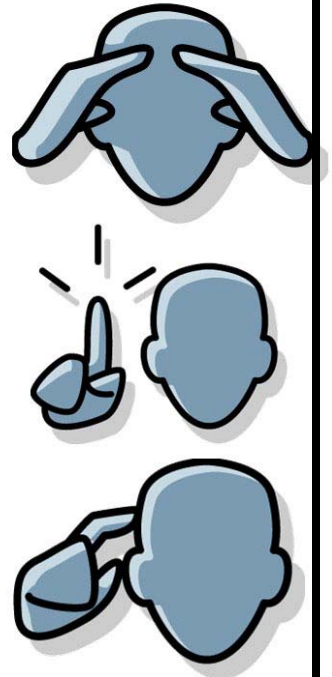
American Sign Language (ASL) is used by Deaf Americans, as well as by hearing-capable people who wish to communicate effectively with the deaf. It is unknown exactly how many individuals use ASL; estimates vary from the hundred thousands to the millions. It is a “manual language,” meaning that words are not formed through combinations of sounds but through combinations of gestures of the hands, arms, body and facial expressions. Signs generally fall into one of three categories:

- Transparent: People unfamiliar with sign language can usually correctly guess the meaning
- Translucent: The meaning makes sense to non-signers once it is explained
- Opaque: The meaning cannot be guessed by non-signers

Most signs fall into the third category, and it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for non-signers to understand fluent sign language.

ASL is a visual language with its own syntax and grammar and was first classified as a world language in 1998. It originated in the early 19th century at the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, which was the first school for the deaf in the United States. Syntax is indicated using spatial locations, movements (of hands and facial features) and context. For example, if someone signs a noun and then points to a certain spot, pointing to that spot again is a reference back to that noun. Signers use the speed of their motions to indicate the intensity of the words they are speaking (for instance, they will sign more quickly to say “very fast” than they will to say “fast”). Motion of the eyebrows can indicate the kind of question the signer is asking: when asking a yes/no question the signer will raise his or her eyebrows, while lowering the eyebrows indicates a question asking who, what, where, when, or why.

Sign language may have uses beyond communicating with the deaf, though not all experts agree about them. For instance, some people teach sign language to their babies before they are physically able to communicate verbally, and there is a theory that this speeds up the child’s cognitive development. Sign language has allegedly also been taught to chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas, with some



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trainers claiming the primates are able to master over a hundred signs. There is some controversy, however, over whether the primates are in fact signing as a language (in effect, “speaking ASL”), or merely gesturing, and linguists generally reject the idea that the primates are, in fact, signing.

1. Who uses ASL? _____

2. What attributes does ASL have that make it an actual language and not just an established way of gesturing?

3. Explain how facial expressions are used to communicate questions in ASL.

