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ASL Grammar Guide

One common misconception about American Sign Language (ASL) is that it is essentially signed English. However, like any other language, ASL has its own system of grammar that is integral to effective communication and understanding. This handout describes the various grammar rules and patterns of ASL and gives examples of how they can be applied in signed conversation.

Each illustration in this handout can be clicked to view a video example of the represented sign. If you are viewing a physical copy of this handout, visit the American Sign Language section of ACE's Helpful Handouts page to access a digital copy with embedded links. Alternatively, you can visit www.handspeak.com and use the ASL dictionary to search for video examples of specific signs.

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Sentence Structure

ASL commonly uses a type of sentence structure called topicalization. Topicalization is when the topic of a sentence is placed at the beginning of the sentence. For instance, in English, the topicalized form of the sentence, “I see my friend” would be “My friend, I see them”. This is often referred to in ASL as a *topic/comment* structure, in which the *topic* (my friend) comes before the *comment* (I see them) in the sentence. Any description of the topic, such as including adjectives, would also come before the comment. The sentence “I see a big orange cat” would be signed as follows:

- CAT, ORANGE, BIG, I SEE.

As a very visual language, ASL often requires signers to visualize a sentence and arrange their signs accordingly. Sentences that involve cause-and-effect statements, real-time sequencing, or general-to-specific details follow a specific pattern.

Cause-and-effect sentences in ASL tend to place the *cause* before the *effect* in the sentence. For example, in the statement “I feel calm when I go to the park”, the cause of “go to the park” would be expressed before the effect of “I feel calm”.

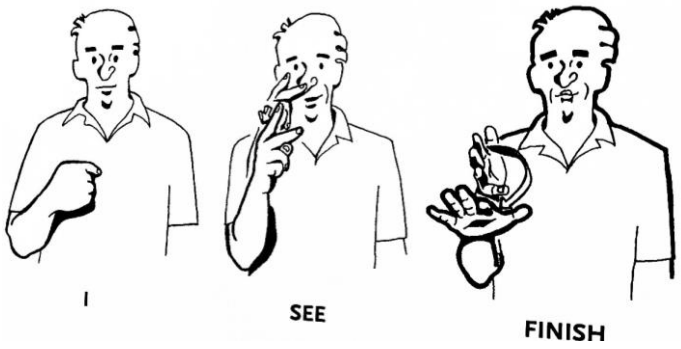
- PARK GO-TO, FEEL CALM ME.

Some sentences involve real-time sequencing, where events must be arranged in chronological order according to how they happened in real time. For instance, the sentence “I’m worried because my brother didn’t call me after he left” would be rearranged as:

- MY BROTHER LEAVE, CALL NOT, WORRIED I.

In sentences where a signer is setting a scene, the signer should move from general to specific details. For example, in the statement “I am excited after moving to my new house in Virginia”, the signer would begin with the biggest detail (“Virginia'') and work their way down to the smallest detail (“I”).

- VIRGINIA, HOUSE NEW, MOVE FINISH, EXCITED I.



Verbs are not conjugated based on tense in ASL, so every verb is in its base form. This means that "ate", "eats", "eating", and "eaten" are all expressed by the sign EAT. The tense is established separately by including a time indicator in the sentence. Time signs are usually placed at the beginning of the sentence, before the topic, which tells the watcher when the rest of the sentence takes place. Signers can also express tense using a sign that relates the progress of the activity, like in the image above, which uses the FINISH sign to indicate that the action is in the past and translates to "I saw".

Basic sentence structure in ASL follows the pattern of Time + Topic + Comment. The word order can change depending on the needs of the signer, but this is the most common format.

- Time = Any necessary time indicators (establishes tense)
- Topic = The main focus of the sentence (a noun)
- Comment = What is being said about the topic (includes the verb)

For example, in English, one might say, "I went to the library yesterday." In ASL, the sentence might be structured like this:

- Time = YESTERDAY
- Topic = LIBRARY
- Comment = I GO-TO

As is the case with English sentence structure, sign choice and order often vary based on context. The example above is shown in Object-Subject-Verb (OSV) order, in which the object (the library) is the topic. However, the sentence can also be arranged in Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, in which "I" is the topic and "GO-TO LIBRARY" becomes the comment:

- YESTERDAY I GO-TO LIBRARY

Both sentences are grammatically correct, and different factors can influence which structure the signer chooses, such as how familiar the watcher is with the library, and therefore what level of emphasis is needed.

When a question is asked in ASL, the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, WHICH, or HOW sign is located at the end of the sentence, or if emphasis is needed, both the beginning and the end. This word order reflects topic/comment structure. For example, in English, one might ask, "What is your name?" In ASL, the sentence would be structured in this way:

- YOUR NAME WHAT?

Additionally, while English often employs different forms of the verb "to be" in sentences, this verb is not used in ASL and should not be included in signed conversations.

When using negating signs in a sentence, such as NOT or NONE, the negative sign typically follows the word it is negating. For example, "I don't have any pets" would be signed as:

- PET HAVE NOT.

Non-Manual Markers

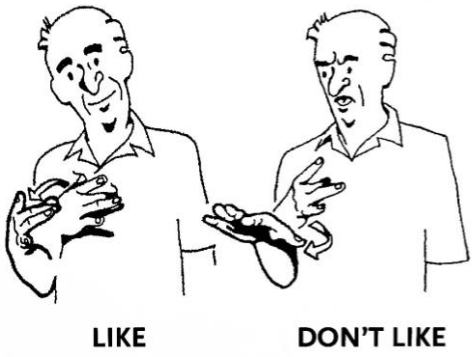
In ASL, a non-manual marker (NMM) is an action that gives context or meaning to what is being signed, similarly to how tone of voice adds meaning to spoken words. Non-manual markers include facial expressions and body language.

Facial expressions are particularly important when it comes to questions.

When asking yes/no questions, the eyebrows are raised with the final sign. Signers will also lean forward slightly and hold the final sign. This can be seen in the example on the right, which translates to "Are you hungry?" Rhetorical questions, in which the signer intends to answer their own question, are also accompanied by raised eyebrows. Typically, the signer leans slightly back and raises their eyebrows when asking the rhetorical question, then leans slightly forward, returning the brows to normal, to answer it.

When asking *wh*- questions that use WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, WHICH, or HOW, the eyebrows move downward with the final sign. This can be seen in the example below, which translates to "Why didn't you eat last night?" These are questions where the answer is more complex than yes/no. In English, *wh*- words are sometimes used outside of questions, but in ASL these signs should only be used for questions.

Signs expressing emotions should be accompanied by matching facial expressions. For instance, statements like I DON'T LIKE are signed with an expression of dislike or disgust. Non-manual markers can also provide emphasis or extra detail to a sign. Lengthening the hand movement in the sign LONG would express VERY LONG. Emphasizing the hand movement in TIRED, as well as slumping the shoulders, would mean VERY TIRED. The emphasis and facial expression used with the sign AFRAID indicates whether the signer is *nervous* or *terrified*.

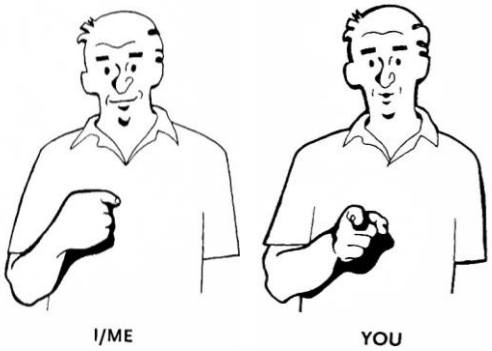


Non-manual markers are used for commands and requests. A sentence, such as "close the window", is recognized as a command when signed vigorously and accompanied by a frown. This can be turned into a request by excluding the frown and adding a PLEASE sign to the statement.

Finally, non-manual markers can also be used to indicate negation. In addition to using negative signs, such as NOT and NONE, signers can negate a statement by shaking their head while signing. For instance, signing UNDERSTAND while shaking the head means "I don't understand".

Signing Space

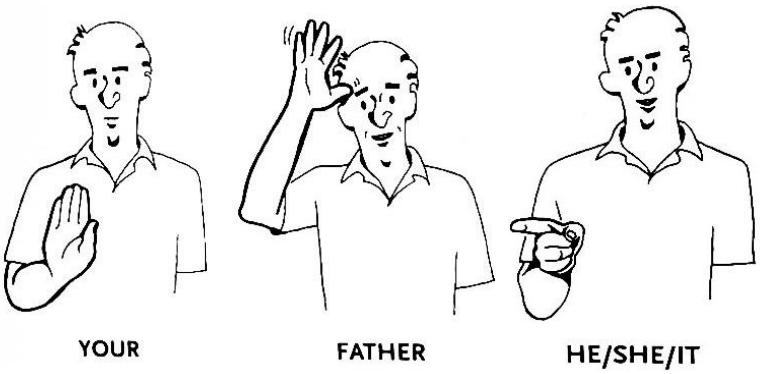
The placement of signs in the space around the body gives important context to conversations in ASL. This is referred to as the *signing space*. In the signing space, the *sight line* is an imaginary line that runs straight from the signer's chest toward the watcher.



This sight line gives meaning to pronouns in ASL. There are no different signs for words like "he", "she", "they", or "it". Instead, the signer uses the sight line to differentiate pronouns. The signer points to their own chest to indicate "I" or "me", and points directly forward at the watcher to indicate "you". When referring to a person/place/thing within view, the signer will point in that direction. If the

person/place/thing being referenced is not within view, the signer will point outside of the sight line, to the left or right.

By indicating someone or something outside of the sight line, the signer has established a place in the signing space. For the remainder of the conversation, the signer can use that space to refer to that person/place/thing. For instance, if a signer pointed to their left and signed MY DAD and later in the conversation moved the HELP sign to the left, this means I HELP MY DAD without having to specify the person again. This continues until something new is established in that space. This is similar to how pronouns are used in English: once "my dad" is established in spoken conversation, it is understood that the word "he" is referring to the speaker's dad until another person is mentioned.

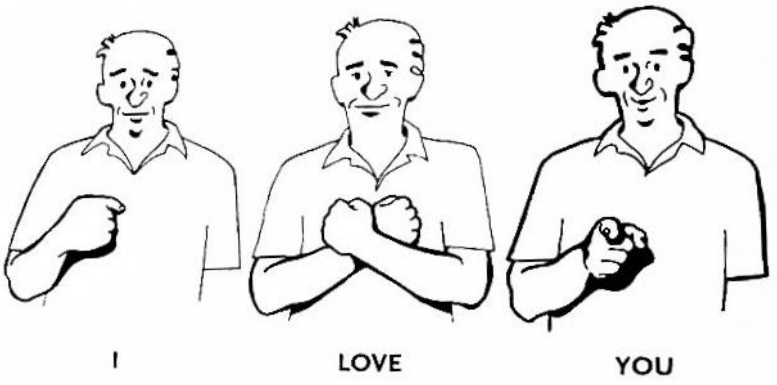


Signing space is also used to distinguish time and gender. Typically, signs relating to the future are moved forward, away from the signer, while signs relating to the past are moved backwards, over the signer's shoulder. This can be seen in the signs for FUTURE and PAST, as well as signs that incorporate these concepts like LAST WEEK or NEXT YEAR. The space around a signer's head can also be used to distinguish gender. The lower half of the head, below the nose, typically contains female signs. The upper half, above the nose, typically contains male signs. Gender-neutral signs are usually kept in the middle, beside the nose. This can be seen in the signs for MAN and WOMAN, as well as variations of family member signs like NEPHEW, AUNT, and COUSIN.

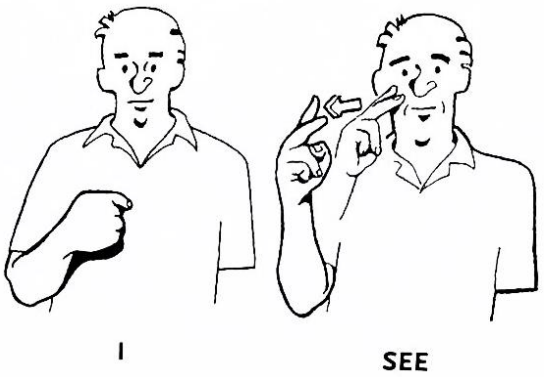
Sign Movement

One important aspect of signing verbs is verb directionality. ASL contains three different types of verbs: non-directional verbs, one-directional verbs, and multi-directional verbs. These categories are determined by whether or not the movement of the verb sign includes the subject and direct object of the verb.

Non-directional verbs include signs where the movement does not indicate the subject or the object of the sentence. For instance, the sign for LOVE requires the signer to also include signs for the subject and object separately, such as I LOVE YOU, to give the sentence meaning.



One-directional verbs express the direct object of the sentence through movement, but not the subject. For example, the verb SEE always originates from near the signer's eyes, no matter who is doing the seeing, and thus the subject, such as I or YOU, must be established separately. However, although the SEE sign always starts in the same place, it moves in the direction of the direct object, so the direct object of the sentence does not need to be signed separately.



Multi-directional verbs indicate both the subject and the direct object through the movement of the sign. For instance, if the HELP sign is moved from the signer to the watcher, this means I HELP YOU. If it is moved from outside of the sight line toward the signer, this means HE/SHE HELPS ME or THEY HELP ME.

In addition to verb directionality, sign movement can also be used to express plurality. For example, creating movement in the singular sign for TREE to show multiple trees results in the sign for FOREST. The signer can also indicate plurality by using specific quantity signs, including approximate signs, such as MANY, or exact values, such as NINE.

Sign movement can also differentiate between signs that look very similar. For example, the signs for CHAIR and SIT are nearly identical. They are distinguished by the movement of the sign; CHAIR involves a double-tap movement against the fingers, while SIT is tapped only once.

Handshape

The "Rule of 9" is a grammar rule that describes how number signs can be incorporated into certain signs to provide additional information, up to the number nine. For instance, the sign for DAY usually uses the 1 handshape. However, any number handshape from 1-9 can be used with the same motion and palm orientation to indicate a specific number of days.

When describing a list in conversation, the signer should represent the list with a spread 5 handshape on their non-dominant hand, with each finger indicating an item on the list. This strategy is commonly used for listing family members in order of age.

MY

HIS/HER/ITS

Classifiers are handshapes that represent nouns. They are often used to show action or movement. For example, the handshape for the number 3 turned on its side is a common classifier for a vehicle and can be used to show the car's movement in conversation.

YOUR

OUR

While pronouns are often indicated simply by pointing, signers indicate possessive pronouns by directing a flat hand, palm facing out, toward the person to whom they are referring. The handshape used distinguishes between YOU and YOUR.

Additional ASL Resources

For additional American Sign Language (ASL) resources, please see the following Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) handout: Helpful Resources for ASL Students.

Information and illustrations for this handout were obtained from *The American Sign Language Phrase Book*. Video examples were obtained from the Handspeak ASL dictionary. Other references include Lifeprint, SigningSavvy, and the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT).

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