

## ASL: Time

A key element to becoming more proficient with American Sign Language (ASL) is understanding how to incorporate the concept of time into signed conversations. This handout will address time-related vocabulary, grammar, and learning tips.

This handout uses ASL Gloss, which is a system that uses capitalized English words, punctuation, and symbols to represent ASL structure in writing. This means that names of signs are indicated by words written in all-uppercase letters, such as TIME. Words and sentences in English are indicated by “quotation marks.” If using the digital version, most illustrations in this handout can be clicked to view a brief 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 on the Germanna website to access a digital copy with embedded links. Alternatively, you can visit [www.handspeak.com](http://www.handspeak.com) and use the ASL dictionary to search for video examples of specific signs.

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## General Time Signs

As with many signs in ASL, time signs often resemble what they represent, creating a direct link between the sign's form and its meaning. This can be a helpful trick for remembering the wide variety of time signs.

For example, the sign for TIME taps the wrist as if gesturing to a watch. The signs for SECOND, MINUTE, HOUR, and LATER resemble the hands moving on the face of an analog clock. The sign for DAY arcs over the flat, non-dominant arm similar to the sun moving across the sky. The sign for WEEK moves horizontally across the non-dominant hand as if illustrating a week on a calendar, and the sign for MONTH does the same vertically. The sign for YEAR revolves around the non-dominant fist similar to the Earth revolving around the sun.



TIME



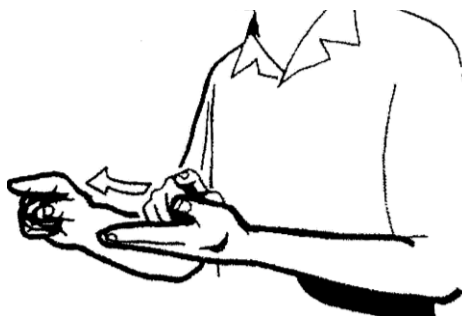
MINUTE



HOUR



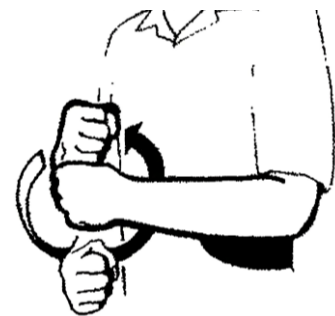
DAY



WEEK



MONTH



YEAR

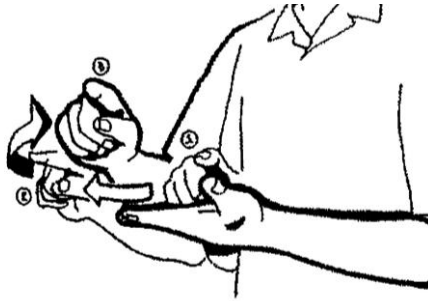
## Past, Present, and Future

When using time signs related to the past and future, signers establish a signing space timeline. Signs referring to the future, such as FUTURE, NEXT WEEK, and TOMORROW, occur in front of

the signer and move forward. Signs referring to the past, such as PAST, LAST YEAR, and YESTERDAY, are moved backwards, over the signer's shoulder. Signers can also express how recent an event is by using distance along the timeline. For example, extending the arm movement further in FUTURE suggests a more distant event. Signs placed closer to the signer's body can indicate more recent events.



**FUTURE**



**NEXT WEEK**



**TOMORROW**



**PAST**



**LAST YEAR**



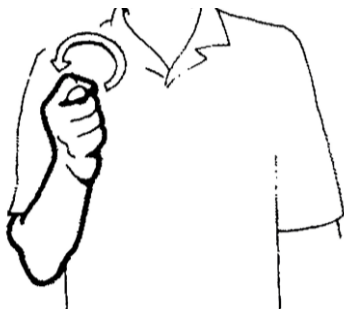
**YESTERDAY**

Signs referring to the present, such as NOW, TODAY, and TONIGHT, are kept close to the signer's body, in the center of the timeline. Signs such as NOW and PRESENT/TODAY are similar and distinguished by a second bounce. Multiple signs also use the NOW sign in combination with a time sign. For example, TODAY and TONIGHT can be signed as NOW+DAY and NOW+NIGHT.

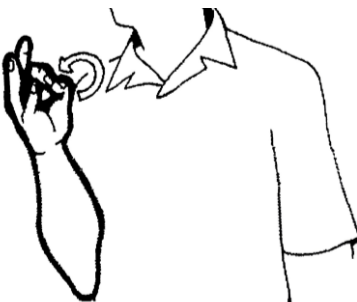
Note: Verb signs do not change based on when the action occurred. Instead, tense is established using separate time indicators in the sentence, usually at the beginning. For example, adding the PAST sign before the signed sentence PARK I GO-TO would translate to "I went to the park."

## Days of the Week

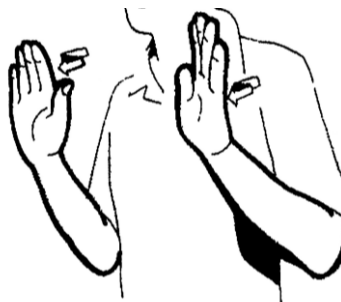
The signs for the days of the week follow a general pattern. The first letter of each day of the week is moved in a circle twice in front of the signer, with the palm facing inward or to the side. The two exceptions to this are THURSDAY, which uses the letter H instead of T, and SUNDAY, which uses flat hands, outward-facing palms, and small circles.



TUESDAY



FRIDAY



SUNDAY

## Months of the Year

The months of the year are typically represented in ASL by fingerspelling the first three letters of each month. For example, JANUARY is signed as J-A-N. The shorter month names, specifically MAY, JUNE, and JULY, are fingerspelled fully.

## Years

When signing the numbers for certain years in ASL, the approach depends on the year being referenced and can be broken into three categories.

For years before 2000, the year should be signed as two two-digit numbers in a row. For example, the year 1948 would be signed as 19 and then 48.



19-48

The years 2000-2009 require a different approach. The signer will start with the number two, facing out, followed by two zeroes in a smooth movement, followed by the final number. For example, the year 2003 would be signed as 2, 0, 0, and 3.

For years 2010 and beyond, the number should be signed in the same way as years before 2000. For example, 2025 would be signed as 20 followed by 25.

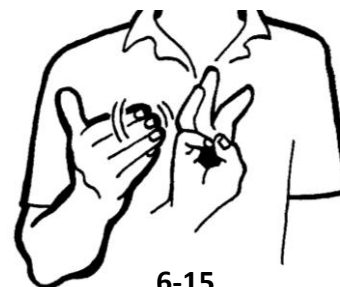
When referring to time periods, such as the 1900s, signers use the same strategy to sign the year and follow the number with the letter S, twisted to face the signer.



19-11

### Time of Day

The number signs for time of day in ASL are usually structured by signing the hour and the minute beside each other, with a slight pause in between. For instance, the time 3:15 would be signed as 3 and 15. Like with fingerspelling, the individual numbers are signed from left to right. The TIME sign is often included beforehand for clarity.



6-15

As with years, the palm should be facing outward for the numbers 1-5, as opposed to facing inward when these numbers are signed individually. The 0 should be included for any times where the number of minutes is between 1-9. For example, 3:08 would be signed as 3 followed by 0 and 8.



4-4-5

AM and PM are typically represented by using a sign that indicates the time of day after the number, such as MORNING.

The general signs for time of day, such as MORNING, NOON, AFTERNOON, and NIGHT, can be remembered by the way they resemble their meaning. MORNING shows the sun (represented by the dominant hand) coming up over the horizon (represented by the non-dominant arm). NOON shows the sun directly overhead, with the arm angled straight up. AFTERNOON has the palm moving further down again toward the non-dominant arm. The sign for NIGHT has the fingers dipping below the horizon of the non-dominant hand.



MORNING



NOON



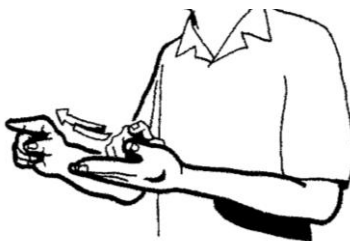
AFTERNOON



NIGHT

## Frequency and Duration

The difference between a regular time sign (such as WEEK) and a time sign related to frequency (such as WEEKLY) is determined by the motion. WEEKLY and MONTHLY are very similar to WEEK and MONTH but feature an extra repetition of the original sign's movement. The sign for DAILY is very similar to TOMORROW, simply repeated twice. The sign for YEARLY has the signer point forward twice after placing two fists atop each other.



**WEEKLY**



**YEARLY /  
ANNUAL**

Duration signs, such as ALL DAY and ALL NIGHT, are similar to their original signs but use a flat handshape. ALL DAY replaces the 1 handshape of its original sign and follows the same motion. ALL NIGHT uses a similar arcing motion with a flat palm but beneath the non-dominant arm, similar to the sun moving below the horizon.



**ALL DAY**



**ALL NIGHT**

## Seasons

The sign for SPRING (as well as GROW) is depicted by opening the dominant hand while moving it upwards through the non-dominant hand, representing a seedling emerging from soil. SUMMER curls a finger along the brow as if wiping off sweat. AUTUMN uses a brushing gesture near the elbow to represent fluttering leaves, and WINTER (as well as COLD) has the signer make a shivering motion with the fists tucked near the body.



**SPRING**



**SUMMER**



**FALL /  
AUTUMN**



**WINTER**



## Grammar Rules

Non-manual markers (NMMs) are facial expressions and body language that add meaning or context to signed conversations. They have several uses when signing about time. For example, in English, one might ask, “What time is it?” In ASL, this can be expressed by signing TIME and lowering the eyebrows to indicate a question.

One time-related grammar rule in ASL is the Rule of 9. This rule states that any number handshape 1-9 can be incorporated into several time signs to express a more specific duration of time. For example, the sign DAY typically uses the 1 handshape, but the signer can also use the 4 handshape, with the same palm orientation and movement, to indicate four days.

## Additional ASL Resources

For additional American Sign Language (ASL) resources, please see the following Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) handouts:

- [Helpful Resources for ASL Students](#)
- [ASL Grammar Guide](#)

The illustrations for this handout were obtained from *The American Sign Language Phrase Book*. Video examples were obtained from the Handspeak ASL dictionary and the ASLU (Lifeprint) YouTube channel. Other references include the ASL THAT YouTube channel, Lifeprint, and the *Signing Naturally Student Workbook*.

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