

American Sign Language (Asl) Encyclopedia Article

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American Sign Language (Asl)

Language of hand gestures and symbols, most of which express an idea or concept rather than a word, used for communication with deaf and hearing-impaired people.

American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan) is a language of hand gestures and symbols widely used by deaf and hearing-impaired people for communication. ASL has its own grammar rules, and puts words in different order than English. Linguists have studied ASL since the 1960s, and designate ASL as meeting all the requirements of a language—it has grammar rules and uses symbols to express ideas and concepts. ASL uses a single gesture to express many ideas and concepts—it does not require the communicator to reproduce every word in a spoken English-language sentence in gestures. Beginning signers often use ASL signs in the same order as they would words in an English sentence—this is known as "pidgin signing." Most deaf people can understand ASL signed this way. As signers become more fluent in ASL, the appropriate grammar rules and word order become easier to sign. Sign language gestures may be formed with either the left or right hand. When deaf people communicate with each other, they often use ASL; when a deaf person communicates with a hearing person, ASL may be modified to more closely parallel English-language sentence structure.

For Further Study

Books

Cokely, Dennis, and Charlotte Baker-Shenk. *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource Text on Curriculum, Methods, and Evaluation*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1990.

A conversation in sign language.

Gallaudet University Press. Wide range of publications for adults and children, including sign language dictionaries. Call (202) 651-5488.

Humphries, Tom, and Carol Padden. *Learning American Sign Language*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.

Moore, Matthew S., and Linda Levitan. *For Hearing People Only: Answers to Some of the Most Commonly Asked Questions about the Deaf Community, Its Culture, and the "Deaf Reality."* Rochester, NY: Deaf Life Press, 1992.

Audiovisual Recordings

Beginning American Sign Language Videocourse. Salem, OR: Sign Enhancers, 1992.

Practice Sentences: Interpretation, English to ASL. Salem, OR: Sign Enhancers, 1994.
(videorecording)

Organizations

Publications and visual aids on sign language available from Sign Media, Inc.

Address: 4020 Blackburn Lane

Burtonsville, MD 20866-1167

Telephone: toll-free (800) 475-4756 (voice or TTY)