



American Sign Language (ASL) Basics

American Sign Language (ASL) is a natural, complete language with its own grammar. Because it is based on visual communication, it is often assumed to be a set of gestures that represent English. However, research has proven ASL to be a true language independent from spoken and written English.

Some ASL signs may contain more information than the equivalent English word because they include inflection. Some English words have multiple signs in ASL. Some ASL signs have more than one English equivalent.

People who sign may:

- Know basic sign language
- Learn sign language from a book
- Have completed or are enrolled in sign language classes
- Know many signs but not ASL grammar
- Have limited knowledge of regional signs
- Have limited fluency
- Not be a licensed professional

Instructional books do not illustrate in 3-D, meaning readers may miss the important aspect of directional movement. Learning ASL also requires study of Deaf Culture, discourse and linguistic variables. Signers do not usually meet the level of competency required to become a licensed sign language interpreter.

Sign language interpreters may:

- Have grown up using sign language
- Have knowledge of Deaf Culture and a background in ASL
- Are formally trained through interpreter certification programs, including cross-cultural communication, language process and interpreting ethics
- Be familiar with regional signs
- Know deaf people and are involved in the Deaf Community
- Interpret effectively for a sign language user
- Be certified, licensed professionals
- Be bilingual and fluent in English and ASL

Fact Sheet

To know more,
contact ACDHH directly.

The Arizona Commission for the
Deaf and the Hard of Hearing

1400 W. Washington, Room 126
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

602.542.3323 V/VP

602.364.0990 TTY

800.352.8161 V/TTY

602.542.3380 FAX

info@acdhh.az.gov

acdhh.org

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