

Handout 2 - American Sign Language

Sign language is one of the ways deaf people communicate. Like spoken languages, there are many types of sign language, with some estimating 130 distinct sign languages used around the world. As with spoken language, countries which are culturally similar develop their own dialect of sign language. For example, British sign language features different hand gestures than American sign language, which mirrors some of the differences found in the spoken and alphabetically spelled versions of British and American English. For example, Americans spell the color gray with an 'a', while the British spell the same color grey.



Photo: Brandon Esau

Signers also develop accents. Accents develop naturally when those who share a language are isolated and develop an exaggerated form of the language which allows them to be identified as part of a specific community. Accents can develop based on geography, age, ethnicity, and a variety of cultural lines. For example, New Yorkers are known for their quick, direct, and blunt way of speaking, which reflects the frenzied energy of living in New York City. ASL signers in New York City are known to use their hands to issue a similarly rapid succession of signs as their speaking counterparts. ASL signers from the southern United States use a slower, more drawn-out delivery in their signing which reflects the spoken drawl many associate with the region.

While grammar and accent vary in signed languages, all feature the same elements: handshape, movement, location, palm orientation, and non-manual signals like facial expression. By changing these elements, signers communicate subtleties, for example, inflating one's cheeks while signing about an object can signal that the object being referenced is large.

American Sign Language (ASL) Alphabet and Numbers 1-9

