Master ASL!
LEVEL ONE

By
Jason E. Zinza

Sign Illustrations by:
Xiaohong Fang
James Sbarra
Linda C. Tom
Svetlana Zinovieva

Non-sign art by:
James Sbarra

Sign Media, Inc.
4020 Blackburn Lane
Burtonsville, MD 20866-1167
www.signmedia.com
For my parents, because they gave me this language,
and for my students, who wish to learn it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .................................................. ix
Student Introduction ................................................. xi
Becoming Acquainted: Master ASL, Level One .................. xiii
Things to Know ......................................................... xv

## Unit One: Welcome

Unit 1 Vocabulary & Key Phrases ............................... 2
Meet the Characters ................................................. 3
Lesson: Greetings ..................................................... 4
Vocabulary: How are you? ......................................... 5
Structure:
  - Conjugating To Be .............................................. 6
  - Eye Contact ..................................................... 8
  - Closing Signals ................................................. 9
Lesson: Names ........................................................ 9
Structure: One-word replies ...................................... 10
Lesson: Introductions .............................................. 11
Vocabulary: Introductions ........................................ 12
Deaf Culture Note: Interacting With Deaf People ........... 14
Structure: The Question-Maker ................................... 15
Vocabulary: Making Conversation ............................. 17
Lesson: Signing Good-bye ......................................... 19
Vocabulary: Farewells ............................................. 20
Focus: How Do People Learn ASL? .......................... 22–23
Structure: Facial Expressions &
  Non-Manual Signals ............................................. 25
Vocabulary: Signing with Facial Expressions ................. 26
Vocabulary: Using NMS ........................................... 29
Structure: Signing Yes and No ................................... 30
Vocabulary: Conversation ......................................... 30
Journal Activities ................................................... 33
Review: Unit 1 .......................................................... 34–35

## Unit Two: Getting Started

Unit 2 Vocabulary & Key Phrases ............................... 38
Receptive Skills: My Advice ....................................... 39
Vocabulary: My Advice ........................................... 39
Lesson: Asking for Help ............................................ 40
Vocabulary: Directionality ........................................ 41
Structure: The WH-Face ............................................ 42
Receptive Skills: I don’t understand .......................... 43
Vocabulary:
  - Helpful Signs .................................................. 44
  - Activities ......................................................... 47
Deaf Culture Note: Labels & Identity .......................... 48
Vocabulary: In the Classroom ..................................... 50
Focus: What is deafness? What is Deafness?
  - What is Deaf culture? ........................................ 52–53
Structure: The Signed Question Mark ......................... 54
Vocabulary: Making Conversation ............................. 55
Lesson: The Days of the Week .................................. 57
Vocabulary: Signing About Activities ........................ 59
Structure: When signs ............................................. 59
Receptive Skills: My Routine ..................................... 60
Vocabulary: When? .................................................. 61
Structure: The WH-Signs ......................................... 64
Vocabulary: Making More Conversation ..................... 66
Journal Activities ................................................... 68
Review: Unit 2 .......................................................... 69–70

## Unit Three: Getting to Know You

Unit 3 Vocabulary & Key Phrases ............................... 72
Receptive Skills: Where are you from? ......................... 73
Vocabulary: Where are you from? ............................. 73
Lesson: Where do you live? ..................................... 74
Vocabulary:
  - Background Signs ............................................. 75
  - Interests .......................................................... 77
  - States & Provinces ............................................ 78–79
Lesson: Names of Cities & Towns .............................. 81
Vocabulary:
  - Well-Known City Signs ..................................... 82
  - Distance .......................................................... 83
Deaf Culture Note: Name Signs .................................. 84
Focus: Is Sign Language Universal? ............................ 86–87
Structure: Topic-Comment Structure .......................... 88
Vocabulary: Topic & Comment .................................... 89
Structure: Possessive Signs ....................................... 92
Vocabulary:
  - Colors .......................................................... 93
  - Favorites ......................................................... 94
  - Email ............................................................. 96
Lesson: Numbers & Questions I ................................. 98
Structure: Numbers 1–5 ............................................ 99
Vocabulary: Addresses & Telephones .......................... 99, 100
Lesson: Numbers & Questions II ............................... 103
TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Unit Four: Family & Friends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthday Variations</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months of the Year</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasons</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Holidays</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson: Talking About the Weather</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Basics</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Activities</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review: Unit 3</td>
<td>113–114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review: Units 1–3</td>
<td>115–118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Review: Unit 4** | 162–163

**Unit Five: School Days**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Qualities</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Qualities</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive Skills: <em>Friends</em></td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Qualities</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Activities</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review: Unit 4</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive Skills: <em>Where do you go to school?</em></td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do you go to school?</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson: Places Around Campus</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Locations</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson: School Personnel</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure: The Agent Marker</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Locations</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson: What are You Studying?</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Year are You?</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework</td>
<td>183–184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Variations</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus: Deaf Education: Decisions &amp; Controversies</td>
<td>186–187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure: Initialization</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf Culture Note: Gallaudet University</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson: Classifiers</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure: Identifying Classifiers</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary: Classifiers</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL: 1</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL: ( \wedge )</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL: 3</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive Skills: <em>Accident</em></td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson: Signing Time</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-Spot</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginnings &amp; Endings</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure: Multiple Meanings</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Activities</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review: Unit 5</td>
<td>206–207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Unit Six: Sports & Activities
Unit 6 Vocabulary & Key Phrases .................................. 210
Receptive Skills: The Storytelling Competition ......................... 211
Vocabulary: The Storytelling Competition .................................. 211
Lesson: Sports & Activities ........................................ 212
Vocabulary:
Signing About Sports .................................................. 213
Sports ................................................................. 214
Deaf Culture Note: The Football Huddle ................................ 219
Structure: Experience & Finish ............................................ 220
Vocabulary: Signing About Activities .................................. 222
Structure: The Five Parameters ......................................... 224
Lesson: Classifiers: CL: 5 ............................................ 225
Vocabulary: CL5 ......................................................... 225
Focus: The Literature of American Sign Language .................. 225–227
Structure:
CL: Bent V ................................................................ 228
CL: B & Base B ................................................................ 228
Vocabulary:
Classifiers ............................................................... 229
ASL Storytelling ............................................................ 230
Structure:
Using Tense in ASL .......................................................... 231
Tense Markers .............................................................. 231
Tense Syntax .................................................................. 231
Lesson: Signing in the Past Tense ........................................... 232
Vocabulary: The Past ....................................................... 233
Receptive Skills: Dummy Hoy ........................................... 235
Vocabulary: Dummy Hoy .................................................. 236
Lesson: Signing in the Future Tense ....................................... 236
Vocabulary: The Future .................................................... 237
Lesson: The Rule of 9 ....................................................... 240, 241
Vocabulary: Duration ....................................................... 240
Structure: Tense Markers & Number ..................................... 242
Journal Activities ........................................................... 244
Review: Unit 6 ................................................................. 245–246
Review: Units 4–6 .............................................................. 247–252

Unit Seven: My Daily Routine
Unit 7 Vocabulary & Key Phrases .................................. 254
Receptive Skills: What's Your Routine? .................................. 255
Vocabulary: What's Your Routine? ....................................... 255
Lesson: Daily Routines & Activities .................................... 256
Vocabulary:
Signing “Every” ............................................................. 257
Every Days ................................................................. 258
Morning Routines .......................................................... 259
Evening Routines .......................................................... 261
Structure: Spatial Organization ......................................... 262
Receptive Skills: Activities .............................................. 266
Lesson: Personal Hygiene & Care ....................................... 267
Vocabulary: Frequency .................................................... 270
Lesson: Household Activities ............................................ 270
Vocabulary: Household Activities ....................................... 271
Structure: Nouns-verbs pairs in ASL .................................... 273
Lesson: Signing About Clothing ........................................ 275
Vocabulary: The Right Clothes? ........................................ 275
Focus: The Sign Language Continuum .................................. 276–277
Vocabulary: Clothing ....................................................... 278
Deaf Culture Note: Turn-taking & Exchanging Information ........ 281
Lesson: Describing Clothing .............................................. 283
Vocabulary: Describing Clothing ........................................ 283
Lesson: Classifiers: CL: C .............................................. 286
Vocabulary: Classifiers .................................................... 286
Journal Activities ........................................................... 288
Review: Unit 7 ................................................................. 289–290

Unit Eight: Describing People
Unit 8 Vocabulary & Key Phrases .................................. 292
Receptive Skills: My Grandfather ......................................... 293
Vocabulary: My Grandfather .............................................. 293
Lesson: Describing People .................................................. 294
Vocabulary: Describing the Body ........................................ 295
Lesson: Signing Ethnicity .................................................... 297
Vocabulary: Ethnicity ....................................................... 297
Structure: Alternative Ethnicity Signs .................................. 299
Deaf Culture Note: Deaf Native Americans ......................... 299
Lesson: Describing Hairstyles ............................................. 301
Vocabulary: Hairstyles ....................................................... 301
Receptive Skills: A Good Hair Day? ..................................... 303
Focus: Sometimes Normal, Sometimes Disabled, Sometimes Handicapped? .................................................. 304–305
Lesson: Describing Characteristics ...................................... 307
Vocabulary: Characteristics ................................................. 307
Receptive Skills: My Friend Tara ......................................... 310
Lesson: Signing About Health .............................................. 312
# Table of Contents

**Vocabulary:** Health ........................................... 313  
**Structure:** Location Changes ................................. 315  
**Lesson:** Describing the Natural World ...................... 316  
**Vocabulary:** Natural World ................................... 317  
**Journal Activities** ........................................... 319  
**Review:** Unit 8 .................................................. 320–321  
**Review:** Units 7–8 ............................................. 322–327  

## Unit Nine: My Home & Community

**Unit 9 Vocabulary & Key Phrases** .......................... 330  
**Receptive Skills:** What's Your Hometown Like?  .......... 331  
**Vocabulary:** What's Your Hometown Like? ................. 331  
**Lesson:** Where Do You Live? ............................... 332  
**Vocabulary:** Types of Housing ............................. 332  
**Structure:** Have ................................................. 333  
**Vocabulary:** Places Around the House .................... 335  
**Structure:** Spatial Visualization ............................ 336, 337  
**Lesson:** Places Around Town ................................ 339  
**Vocabulary:** Places Around Town ........................ 339  
**Focus:** The Deaf and Hearing Worlds ...................... 342–343  
**Structure:** Using CL: Claw With Spatialization .......... 344  
**Deaf Culture Note:** Collective Values ....................... 346  
**Lesson:** Signing About Money ............................. 347  
**Vocabulary:** Money Signs .................................. 348  
**Structure:** Money Signs ...................................... 348  
**Receptive Skills:** Lost & Found? ............................. 350  
**Lesson:** Getting Around Town ............................... 352  
**Vocabulary:** Getting Around Town ......................... 352  
**Structure:** Using CL: Bent V ................................. 353  
**Receptive Skills:** My Commute .............................. 355  
**Journal Activities** ........................................... 358  
**Review:** Unit 9 .................................................. 359–360  

## Unit Ten: Making Plans

**Unit 10 Vocabulary & Key Terms** .......................... 362  
**Receptive Skills:** Making Plans ............................. 363  
**Vocabulary:** Making Plans .................................. 363  
**Lesson:** Signing About Work and Study .................... 364  
**Vocabulary:** Work and Study ................................ 366  
**Structure:** Signing "To Be" .................................... 367  
**Lesson:** Going to the Grocery Store ......................... 371  
**Vocabulary:**  
- Fruits & Vegetables ........................................... 372  
- Meat & Dairy .................................................. 373  
- Desserts & Sweets ............................................ 374  
- Meals & Fast Food ........................................... 376  
**Lesson:** A Trip to the Zoo ..................................... 378  
**Vocabulary:** Animals .......................................... 379  
**Receptive Skills:** The San Diego Zoo ......................... 381  
**Journal Activities** ........................................... 382  
**Review:** Unit 10 ................................................ 383–384  
**Review:** Units 9–10 ............................................ 385–389  

## Index

**Vocabulary and Subject Index** ............................... 391
The cover of *Master ASL! Level One* features only my name, but behind it stretch the names of students, teachers, reviewers, professors, editors, artists, illustrators, sign models and more — simply too many to list individually, but incomplete if just one is overlooked. In the limited space below I thank those people who are my foundation, my unflagging advocates, and my tireless partners in the pursuit of excellence. Foremost, I am grateful to Dr. Marilyn Severson, Dr. Luke Reinsma, Dr. Kathryn Bartholomew, Dr. John West, and Dr. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher of Seattle Pacific University for being outstanding servant scholar role models. I emulate each in my teaching and passion for the learning process, which leads me to acknowledge the many students I have taught at the high school, community college, and university levels; truly, my students are my teachers. I appreciate beyond words their patience and insight as they provided feedback on my ideas, materials, and teaching methods. As with any textbook, this work belongs to them. Fortunately for them, *Master ASL!* took a different path and relies on the insight into language learning and teaching inspired by Dr. Penelope Eckert and Dr. Eve Clark of Stanford University. Additionally, a heartfelt thank you goes to Dr. Samuel Mbongo of the University of California at Berkeley, for sparking the inquiry that led me here: “Tell me about your culture.”

Special gratitude goes to those who encouraged me throughout this long project: Dana Vollmar, Aundrea Love, Stephanie Pintello, Glenna Ashton, Alyssie Rasmussen, my Mission Springs family who constantly rallied support and delivered much-needed pats on the back, all my proud coda brothers and sisters, and my colleagues at the Center for American Sign Language Literacy at Gallaudet University. Without them, *Master ASL!* simply would not be.

The Level One sign models were poised and articulate from start to finish, even after long days spent under bright lights. Krystle Berrigan, Rita Corey, Chris Corrigan, Maher Eshgi, and Kami Padden have each placed their own stamp on the overall character of *Master ASL!,* and I am grateful for it. Similarly, the artists and illustrators whose works fill these pages elevate ASL instruction and the field of sign illustrations to a new level of excellence.

This project could not have been possible without the dedication of my editor, Barbara Olmert, and my Producer/Director, Verden Ness, at Sign Media, Inc. A note to aspiring writers and curriculum developers: You want to work with Barbara and Verden. While they may have privately rued the fateful day we sat and discussed my ideas, I cannot think of anybody who has been more enthusiastic, supportive, and excited about *Master ASL!* In closing, I am keenly aware that I wrote this book; it is Barbara that brought it to fruition. I am lucky to have worked so closely with such an outstanding woman.

And lastly, I owe everything to my community, my culture, my people of the eye.
**STUDENT INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to **Master ASL! Level One**. This textbook introduces you to American Sign Language (ASL), the language used by the majority of Deaf Americans, and to the culture of the Deaf World. The Master ASL series was developed in response to the tide of interest in American Sign Language among people of all ages and is designed to provide a thorough foundation for using ASL as a second language with your Deaf neighbors, children, coworkers, and friends.

In the not-so-distant past, few hearing individuals aside from children of Deaf adults and those who worked closely with the Deaf knew ASL. Signing in public drew stares, quizzical looks and often, mocking or teasing by people amused by the sight of individuals talking with their hands. In this environment the Deaf community came together and formed a close, tight-knit culture where ASL flourished and being Deaf was not considered a handicap but simply a way of life. Today, the Deaf community forms one of many minority cultural groups in the United States and Canada, and interest in learning ASL has surged, bringing with it greater opportunities for mutual benefit. Using ASL in public is now a common, and proud, experience for both Deaf and hearing people.

While attitudes are changing, more work remains to be done. Though ASL and Deaf individuals are seen on TV, in movies, the theater, restaurants, stores and crowded classrooms, many people view deafness as an obstacle or a pitiable handicap. Deaf individuals are routinely denied employment because companies are uncertain how Deaf employees can communicate with their hearing colleagues, applicants for driver's licenses are asked “Can Deaf people drive?” and the many contributions the Deaf have made to the larger hearing society are generally unknown and overlooked. As quickly as an ASL class is offered, it is filled with students who often think ASL is an easy language — and other language teachers, administrators, and counselors reflect this misunderstanding as well.

Do not be misled by these gross misunderstandings and myths surrounding American Sign Language: ASL is not easier to learn than spoken languages. ASL is a unique, visual language that does not simply match a sign to an English word. Instead, ASL has its own grammar, structure, and specific features that pose a challenge to learn, like other spoken languages. Indeed, students of ASL must develop a pleasing visual accent, exactly like learning a satisfactory accent in spoken languages! The best way to learn any language is by direct, frequent contact with the people who use the language on a daily basis. Take a chance and initiate signed conversations with Deaf people!

The following pages provide you with an introduction to several important aspects of American Sign Language that will assist your experience with **Master ASL! Level One**. Take a few minutes to read these pages and refer to the DVD that accompanies this text. You will use both the text and DVD as a study guide to help you learn American Sign Language.

Good luck!

Jason E. Zinza
www.masterasl.com
Master ASL! Level One includes a student textbook, student companion, and a DVD.

**Textbook**

In the textbook you will find extensive lessons on:

**Language & Structure**
- *ASL Up Close*, highlighting important functions of ASL grammar
- *Eyes On ASL*, presenting the basic rules of signing in ASL
- *Accent Steps*, tips and advice to help hearing students improve their ASL skills
- *Expression Corner*, exposing students to ASL idioms, phrases, and expressions

**Culture**
- *Deaf Culture Notes*, featuring relevant aspects of Deaf culture
- *ASL Focus*, a two page section examining an important issue in the Deaf World
- *Did You Know?* sections presenting information about the Deaf World
- *Deaf Culture Minute*, explaining cultural tidbits
- *I Want to Know*, answering common questions about ASL

**Comparison & Reflection**
- Exposure to Deaf art
- Poetry and other writings by Deaf authors
- Journal opportunities to analyze and reflect on aspects of ASL, Deaf culture, and the Deaf experience

**Student Companion: Fingerspelling, Numbers, and Glossing**

The student companion includes:
- ASL Fingerspelling, including 200 exercises to develop fingerspelling skills
- ASL Numbers, with more than 150 exercises provided to develop ASL numerical skills
- Glossing instruction and exercises to assist students to become familiar with the notation system used by many people within the fields of ASL and Deaf studies
- A glossary for linguistic, social, and cultural terms addressed in *Master ASL!*

**DVD**

DVD segments are highlighted in the textbook with the DVD icon. The DVD component contains:
- Select dialogues from each unit
- Narratives that incorporate the language and cultural skills featured in each unit
- Shorter narratives on a variety of topics relevant to each unit
- Language and structure lessons with examples on each feature of ASL grammar covered in the text
- Examples of ASL literature, including ABC and classifier stories, handshape rhymes, and number stories
Important Terms
Explanations of all terms in bold are found in the glossary section of the Student Companion: Fingerspelling, Numbers, and Glossing.

Eye Contact
The most important background knowledge to have before learning American Sign Language is to understand the role of eye contact. In Deaf culture, not maintaining eye contact during a conversation is considered rude. Develop or improve the habit of looking people in the eye as you sign to others and as you watch others sign to you. Your eyes are like your ears! Breaking eye contact signals that you aren’t paying attention, are day-dreaming, or don’t wish to participate in the conversation. Keep in mind that maintaining eye contact does not mean to stare!

You may be surprised how quickly your ASL teacher notices that you don’t have eye contact. Since Deaf people generally rely on their eyes far more than hearing people, broken eye contact is easily spotted.

The Sign Space
An important concept to understand is the ASL sign space. This refers to the area in which most signs are made in normal conversation. Signing outside the sign space is uncomfortable on your hands, wrists, and shoulders. Generally, most signs are centered to the right or left of your middle torso.

Which Hand Do I Use?
Sign with the hand that feels most comfortable and natural for you, which tends to be the hand with which you write. The hand you use most often to sign with is called the dominant hand, and the other is called the non-dominant hand. Switching the dominant and non-dominant hands in conversation is a common error that should be avoided. If you are left handed and your teacher is right handed, you do not need to match or produce mirror-image signs. Allow your eyes and brain to tell your hands what to do.
Facial Expressions

What happens when you speak in a monotone voice, devoid of inflection or expression? Usually people tune out or become bored and disinterested in the conversation. The same results happen when you sign without using facial expressions. Auditory information, such as tone of voice, emotion, and intent must be made visual in American Sign Language. Throughout Master ASL! Level One you will learn the essential facial expressions and when to use them, a challenge for many students. Facial expressions not only convey emotion and meaning, but ASL grammar as well.

Do not become frustrated if you feel you’re trying hard with facial expressions and your teacher wants more. The point of facial expressions is to clearly convey grammar and meaning, and sometimes what hearing people think is “good enough” falls short of what ASL requires. Note that you do not match each sign with a specific facial expression. Instead, match your face to the overall meaning of what you’re signing. If you’re unsure about something, make a puzzled expression while signing I’m confused. Some facial expressions are used more often than others in ASL, especially the two Question Faces. The Question-Maker must be used when asking a general question such as Are you learning ASL? and the WH-Face for questions using the signs who, what, when, where, why, and which.

To help you develop your facial expressions, Master ASL! incorporates exercises designed to improve your confidence and skill. Practice the expressions as a way to loosen up your facial features to reflect the intended emotion, and don’t feel intimidated or embarrassed: You do not look as silly as you may think! For inspiration and practice, watch any of the well-known Deaf storytellers and emulate their animated facial expressions.
Precision is Important

Signing clearly is the same as speaking clearly. Sloppy, uncertain signing is exactly like mumbling. Sloppy signing also causes careless errors that drastically affect meaning. In the famous example below, one handshape has three different meanings based on the location where the sign is made.

Making the right sign in the wrong place or vice versa affects meaning. “Close enough” or sloppy signing interferes with comprehension. As a beginning signer, it is natural to make mistakes as you develop dexterity with your hands and fingers, but be sure to practice often to gain confidence and improve your skills.

Part of signing precisely is understanding that ASL makes visual sense. If you talk about someone and point to him or her during the conversation, and then that person leaves, you still point to the area where he or she was located before. Likewise, if you’re talking about going there, but point in the opposite direction, you communicate something entirely different! How does the illustration below emphasize visual sense?
THINGS TO KNOW

ASL is Not English

American Sign Language is not English. This key concept is essential in learning ASL. You must learn to think in ASL rather than using ASL signs matched to English words. If you "mouth" words or talk silently in English while signing, then you are not using American Sign Language. You can sign in ASL and "speak" English at the same time as easily as you can speak Spanish in English word order. It simply doesn't work. Signing and talking at the same time is not ASL, period. Some Deaf people do sign and mouth English words at the same time, but only when they choose to sign in English word order. Deaf people do this most often when signing with hearing people who are not fluent in ASL. Surprise Deaf people and gain their respect by using ASL properly! You will learn of other types of signing, but only ASL is a real language. Other forms are called Signing Exact English (SEE) and Pidgin Sign English (PSE). If you don't use ASL syntax (the way signs are ordered into sentences) and facial expressions, then you're not signing in ASL.

The best way to learn ASL or any foreign language is to keep an open mind and respect the differences between each language.

Fingerspelling

Fingerspelling is an important part of ASL, but it is not a substitute for signs you should learn. Fingerspelling is used for specific purposes so avoid the temptation of fingerspelling words or sentences. Try to communicate in other ways before using fingerspelling apart from the particular instances when fingerspelling is required. Learning to fingerspell is challenging for most ASL students, but remember it is a step by step process. The illustration below details the Fingerspelling Space, the location your hand is held while fingerspelling.

Refer to your Student Companion: Fingerspelling, Numbers, and Glossing to begin your study of fingerspelling.
The Five Parameters of ASL

Each ASL sign can be broken down and analyzed into five separate features called parameters. For a single sign to be correct, each of the five parameters must be used correctly. Below are explanations of these parameters with examples to help you understand the concept.

1. Handshape

The handshape difference between *me* and *mine* is simple to identify, yet ASL students often confuse the two. Common handshape errors include the differences between: 1/D, D/F, E/O.

*Sample sentence: I am Rita/My Rita.*

![Image of ASL signs for I am Rita and My Rita]

2. Palm Orientation

Palm orientation errors are easy to make if you are unsure whether a sign faces up, down, left, or right. Signing while nervous or without practice causes many palm orientation errors. Often, these mistakes are "big" and obvious.

*Sample sentence: The table is over there.*

![Image of ASL signs for The table is over there and (?) over there]
THINGS TO KNOW

3. Location

Avoid making location errors by remembering most signs are made in front of your body in a comfortable location. If your arms feel awkward, it's a clue the sign's location may be wrong. Keep in mind that some signs are directional and originate away from the body but end close, or begin close to the body and terminate away, as in the sign to drive to.

*Sample sentence: I'll see you tomorrow.*

4. Movement

Movement affects meaning, as seen in these examples. Practicing and paying attention to ASL vocabulary is key to knowing the movement needs of particular signs. If your hands and arms feel awkward or constricted, check the sign's movement parameter for a possible error.

*Sample sentence: I'm happy/I'm enjoy.*
5. Non-manual signals / facial expressions

Specific non-manual signals (NMS) alter the meaning of a sign. Facial expressions, head nods / shakes, eyebrows, nose, eyes, and lips each carry meaning that can be attached to a sign.

Sample sentence: I’m late/I haven’t.

Illustrating American Sign Language

Illustrating a visual, three-dimensional language like ASL poses several challenges. A primary challenge is showing the movement parameter of each sign. Illustrating movement relies on the use of arrows to show different types of movements and changes.

1. Types of movement
   a. Arc
   b. Straight line
   c. Circle
   d. Alternating in-and-out
   e. Twist of the wrist
   f. Finger flick

2. Changes in movement
   a. Location changes — one or both hands move/s from one location to another
   b. Direction changes — one or both hands change/s direction
   c. Handshape changes — one or both hands change/s handshape in mid-sign

Each arrow shows the beginning and ending location of any movement, with the arrowhead indicating the final resting position of the handshape. Familiarize yourself with the following explanations of how movement is illustrated in Master ASL! Level One.
THINGS TO KNOW

1. *Single movement in one direction.* One or both hands may move in the direction shown by the arrow.

2. *Plural movement in one direction.* Some signs include several small changes in location and type of movement before reaching its final location.

3. *Single movement, with change in direction and/or handshape change.* Direction changes may include handshape changes. If a handshape changes while moving, the new handshape continues to the sign’s final location.

4. *Double movement.* Many signs have a double back-and-forth or tapping movement. This movement may be up-down, side-to-side, or in-out. Generally, the movement or tapping occurs twice and does not move very far. This arrow is also used with head shakes and nods.
5. *Multiple movement.* This arrow indicates a continuous, repeated back-and-forth or up-down movement.

6. *Wiggle movement.* Wiggle your fingers back and forth in a repetitive motion. The wiggle marks may also be located near the head to suggest a very slight back-and-forth motion.

7. *Circular movement.* One or both hands move in a repeated horizontal or vertical circular movement. Some signs with a circular movement may be outward- or inward-directed, and other signs will have both hands moving in opposite circular directions simultaneously.

8. *Circular movement with direction.* One or both hands may move forward or backward in a circular movement.
9. **Twist movement.** Twist your wrist once. Generally only one hand will make a twist movement.

10. **Strike marks.** Strike marks emphasize contact is made between two parts of the body as part of a sign.

11. **Fingerspelling.** Fingerspelling is not like using a keyboard to type individual letters one after the other away from your body. Hold your hand still in the Fingerspelling space (see page xviii) and form each letter “on top” of each other. In some cases you will need to move your hand slightly while fingerspelling. Do not fingerspell letters moving across your torso. Fingerspelling has been illustrated in Master ASL! from left to right to make it easier to use and understand. The first sample illustration shows how fingerspelling is actually done and the second shows how fingerspelled words are printed in Master ASL!