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American Sign Language for Everyone

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This course is structured in four units: culture, conversation, community, and composition. During the first few lessons centered around culture, the goal is to establish a cultural foundation for learning American Sign Language (ASL). In the remaining three units, the course will focus on the vocabulary and phrase structures required for conversational skills, the vocabulary and narrative skills for describing and engaging with community environments, and the compositional skills for creating stories, poems, and opinion statements.

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UNIT 1: CULTURE

Lessons 1–6



In this unit, you will learn about the history of sign language and deaf people, the linguistic parameters of ASL, and the basic cultural norms of sign language communication. These lessons will allow you to master the building blocks of ASL.

Lesson 1— Gestural Language and Communication

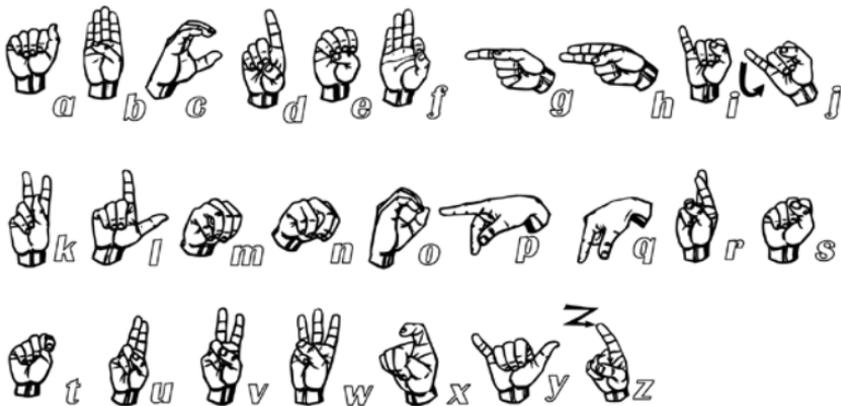
Unlike most other world languages, ASL is gestural, meaning that you use your hands, body, and facial expressions. The first lesson of the course focuses on the concept of gesture. The goal is to orient you to the dynamics of gestural language and communication. By the end of the lesson, you will become more comfortable and confident with learning a gestural language, more mindful of gestures you may already use, and more aware of the role of gestural language and communication in human history.

Lesson 2—The ASL Alphabet

This lesson focuses on establishing a cultural foundation for learning ASL. In this lesson, you'll work on developing proficiency in the ASL alphabet. The goal of the lesson is to develop proficiency in reading and signing fingerspelled words. Fingerspelling is the use of the ASL alphabet to spell out English words, including names and specific terms, and occasionally to describe sounds. The learning objectives for this lesson are to identify all the letters of the alphabet, to decipher fingerspelled words, and to fingerspell two- to four-letter words.

Fingerspelling the letters on license plates is a common strategy for developing fluency. Other texts with which you can practice fingerspelling include billboards, cereal boxes, and book titles. To practice reading signed letters and numbers, you can use a great free website: asl.ms.

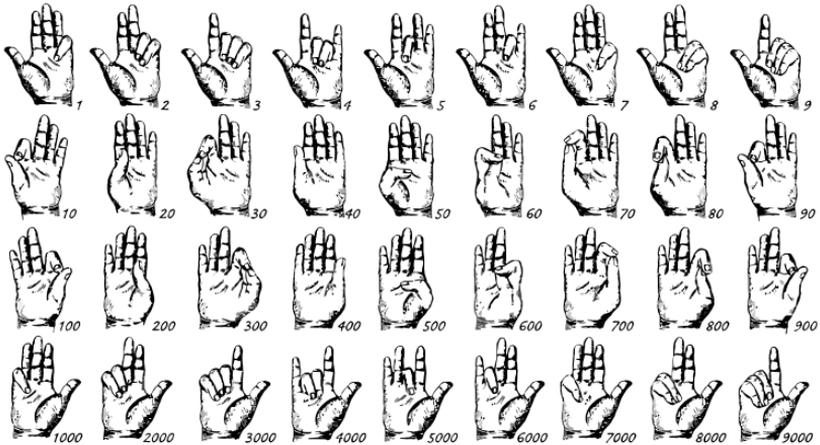
Signed alphabets are manual codes for the letters of spoken languages. These systems were first formally introduced in Western society by Spanish monks, who used gestures to communicate with each other during vows of silence and with individuals receiving last rites, and later in teaching deaf students.



Lesson 3—Numbers in ASL

This lesson focuses on learning numbers. The learning objectives are to identify and decipher signed numbers, to sign numbers and numerical vocabulary, and to articulate brief phrases using numbers. In this lesson, you'll work on developing proficiency in reading and signing numbers in a variety of contexts. Signed numbers in ASL are used for counting, discussing money, and sharing other numerical information, such as phone numbers, addresses, and birthdays. Unlike signed alphabets, signed numbers are natural gestures that have been used since ancient times. There have been multiple systems used across time and between cultures, and they are still commonly used today as a form of manual communication, particularly in marketplace trading and in other activities, such as umpiring baseball games and signaling in sports, ordering food items, and signaling numbers.

Have you ever used your hands to communicate about numbers? Maybe you used your fingers to tell how much of something you wanted. Or perhaps you used your hands to count while calculating during math problems. You've probably used signed numbers at some point in your life—and probably continue to do so!



Lesson 4—The Importance of Introductions in Deaf Culture

The goal of this lesson is to help you develop proficiency in basic introductions. The learning objectives are to identify basic introduction vocabulary, use basic introductory phrase structures, and gain insight into the use and importance of introductions in Deaf culture. In the future, when you encounter a signing deaf person—whether at work, in a business, or in a social setting—you will be able to share and obtain important information about yourself and the person you are meeting. You will also be able to introduce people to each other or describe someone you wish to introduce.

In Deaf culture, introductions allow people to learn about each other and possibly identify shared experiences or social networks. For example, when one deaf person meets another deaf person, they often ask where they are from, where they went to school, and what other deaf people they might know in common.

Another important element of introductions in Deaf culture is sharing sign names. A sign name is a person's name in sign language. This name may be influenced by the letters of a person's birth name, their personality features, their physical features, or other characteristics that have led them to be identified by that sign. Siblings in deaf families are often given sign names that follow a corresponding pattern. A sign name is almost always given by a deaf person, whether it is a parent, teacher, classmate, or friend. The more you interact with deaf people, the sooner you will be given your own sign name!

Other information that is often shared during introductions is whether a person is deaf, hearing, hard of hearing, late deafened, a CODA (child of deaf adults), or associated in some other way with the Deaf community, such as a sign language interpreter.

By now, you should be able to spell your name! Have you tried to do this yet? You should even be able to share basic information, such as your birthday, phone number, and address.

Lesson 5—Facial Expressions and Greetings in ASL

This lesson focuses on expression. The goal of this lesson is to familiarize you with the role of expression in signed languages and develop proficiency in basic greetings. You'll learn to identify and use facial expressions to convey emotion, identify and use signs conveying emotion, and master basic greeting vocabulary and phrase structures.



Like gesture, facial expressions are a key component of human communication—in both spoken and gestural languages. Facial expressions are used for a variety of purposes in signed languages, including intonation, intensity, and other grammatical information, such as question markers. The use of a facial movement can change the entire meaning of a sign, and facial expressions can sometimes communicate entire meanings on their own. All parts of the face are used in expression, with the greatest focus on the eyes, eyebrows, mouth, and jaw. In this lesson, you'll learn about facial expressions, feeling signs, and some basic questions, such as asking how someone is feeling.

Do you ever feel like you can read someone's entire mood or even their thoughts by looking at their facial expressions? Or do people ever tell you that they can read your facial expressions quite easily? Do you make strong facial expressions, or do you keep a poker face? Gesture and body movements can convey a great deal of information.

Lesson 6—The Linguistic Parameters of ASL

This lesson focuses on language. Signed languages, like spoken languages, are different all around the world, and even ASL has variations based on interaction with the English language and with regional and cultural differences in dialect. Despite these differences, signed languages all have fundamental similarities in the phonological parameters. The goal of this lesson is to familiarize you with phonological elements of ASL and help you develop proficiency in conversational structures about language background. The learning objectives in this lesson are to understand the phonological parameters of ASL, develop an awareness of linguistic variation within the Deaf community, and use ASL to describe language background and proficiencies.

Researchers such as William Stokoe and language organizations such as the Modern Language Association have determined that the sign languages of deaf people are natural languages in their own right, complete with vocabulary, syntax, and phonological patterns. William Stokoe's book *Sign Language Structure* suggests that the parameters of ASL include three aspects: handshape, movement, and location. More recently, researchers have added orientation and expression, or nonmanual markers, to these parameters.



UNIT 2: CONVERSATION

Lessons 7–12



This unit is designed to help you develop your proficiency in conversational structures. The topics include questions, commands, everyday activities, food signs, time signs, and transportation and location signs. By the end of this unit, you will be able to produce and comprehend a variety of simple conversational narratives.

Lesson 7—Asking Questions in ASL

This lesson focuses on questions. The goal of this lesson is to develop proficiency in the vocabulary and syntactical structures of question phrases. The three learning objectives are to identify and use the facial expressions and nonmanual markers necessary for yes/no and *wh*- questions, identify and use *wh*- questioning words, and create questioning phrases using topic-comment sentence structure. The topic-comment structure of ASL, otherwise known as topicalization, consists of first establishing the topic and then stating a comment.

Signed languages use an entirely different modality of communication, functioning in space and relying on visual (and/or tactile) input. While spoken languages often present smaller bits of information that can be retained for longer periods of time in the auditory memory, signed languages align with the visual memory system, which holds a greater quantity of information but for a shorter duration of time. To accommodate this memory system, signed languages typically establish the topic before providing commentary, while spoken languages may often articulate comments and questions before identifying the topic.

When you engage in conversations, what is the first thing you express? It is typically a question, such as "how are you?" or "what is your name?"



The facial expressions for yes/no and *wh*- questions change the meaning of the sentence. When signing yes/no questions, you open your eyes wide, lift your eyebrows, and tilt your chin downward. When signing a *wh*- question, you squint your eyes and eyebrows and bring your shoulders forward.

Lesson 8—Making Commands in ASL

This lesson focuses on developing proficiency in the vocabulary and conversational structures that are used to follow and create commands involving the body and objects and to follow three-step directions.

Commands, like questions, are basic phrase structures that are articulated with facial expressions that convey their meaning. Unlike question phrases, command phrases do not use significant changes in eyes and eyebrows. As a command is very straightforward, so is the facial expression that is used to communicate that you are giving someone instructions to act on, which may include slightly raised eyebrows that serve as a prompt for comprehension or affirmation—which is then affirmed by completion of the command.

It is possible that commands were among the earliest forms of primitive communication, such as telling someone to be quiet when a danger or prey was near, to leave, to come closer, to follow, or to look in a certain direction. Commands are critical to our survival as humans because they allow us to advocate for ourselves and to work together as a community.

Lesson 9—Using Semantic Classifiers in ASL

The goal of this lesson is to develop proficiency in describing everyday activities and routines. You will review question and command signs and phrases and learn to read and produce signs and phrases about hobbies, chores, and errands. The lesson will also cover asking and answering questions about preferred activities and giving commands about activities.

While some signs for activities, errands, and chores have arbitrary signs, many are iconic, and some can even be communicated using gestures. For example, you may have used the sign for “eat” as a gesture when asking someone if they want to eat or commanding them to eat. Other activities may use classifiers, which are handshapes that can depict verbs in action. There are a few kinds of classifiers, including descriptive, semantic, locative, instrument, element, body, and body part. In this lesson, you will use instrument classifiers, which demonstrate how objects are handled. For example, the sign for “drove” shows you handling a wheel, and the sign for “sew” shows you handling a needle and thread.

In many activities, you can use gesture, role-play, and classifiers to communicate about activities that you may not know the signs for or to demonstrate the speed, intensity, or other aspect of an activity you are participating in. For example, you might sign SEW quickly to show that you were moving fast or extend your handshape to show the size of the wheel you were handling in a car.

Lesson 10—Signing about Food and Dining in ASL

The goal of this lesson is to develop proficiency in the vocabulary and phrase structures used to describe culinary and dining experiences. By the end of this lesson, you should be able to communicate with others to make a plan for dining. And perhaps you can continue conversing about the food as you enjoy your meal!

When deaf people gather to eat or converse, they often rearrange furniture and other items into settings that are conducive to visuospatial communication. This is part of an architectural and design concept known as DeafSpace. An ideal DeafSpace dining experience is a round table, at which everyone can see each other, with good lighting and minimal objects to block the view.



Lesson 11—Time Expressions in ASL

As you move through this unit on conversation, you should feel more proficient in conversational structures with a larger bank of ASL vocabulary knowledge to draw from. When building your conversations, though, you may have wished for more knowledge on verb tense or sequencing. This lesson focuses on time words. You will learn the vocabulary and conversational structures used in describing time. The lesson will review topicalization grammar and introduce verb tense, sequencing phrases, time signs, frequency signs, parts of the day, and days of the week.



Lesson 12—Discussing Location and Transportation in ASL

The goal of this final lesson in this unit on conversation is to describe geographical locations and methods of transportation. You will learn how to share information about residential and travel locations, experiences, and interests. Conversations will include a strong review of spatialization.



UNIT 3: COMMUNITY

Lessons 13–18



This unit will increase your proficiency in communicating about your environments. These lessons cover school vocabulary, community signs, and describing people, objects, and settings. By the end of this unit, you will be able to describe people, situations, and surroundings.

Lesson 13—Describing Educational Experiences in ASL

This lesson focuses on school signs. The main objective is to describe educational experiences. In addition to discovering the role of deaf schools in ASL history and the importance of describing educational experiences in Deaf culture, you will review some signs that are relevant to describing a school environment. ASL has most often been transmitted through schools, and through them the Deaf community has grown and thrived.



Lesson 14—The Importance of Community in Deaf Culture

This lesson focuses on the vocabulary and phrases used to describe aspects of a community. In the lesson, you will learn how to sign about places and occupations, use spatialization to identify the location of places in a community, and develop an awareness of community values in Deaf culture.

Mastering basic signs and conversational structures that are used to navigate community environments is useful when working with deaf and hard of hearing colleagues, teaching deaf students, or even just encountering deaf people in the community. If you're a professional who interacts with all members of the community you're part of, these skills will serve you well. The more people there are who sign, the more inclusive a community becomes.

The Deaf community is a strong network that connects people through a shared language and living experiences, without them necessarily being in the same neighborhood or geographic area. But most deaf people also interact with members of their geographic community—both deaf and hearing—and interact with other deaf people in shared spaces such as schools. Maintaining a strong connection with the Deaf community gives these individuals a sense of identity and belonging and a greater ability to navigate a variety of communities.

Although many deaf people never attend schools for the deaf, they're still able to develop their identity through interactions such as school programs, university events, performance events, summer camps, and many other activities organized by members of the Deaf community. Activism in organizing opportunities for deaf people to gather and learn about their shared language and culture is immeasurably important for the well-being of deaf and hard of hearing people around the world.

Lesson 15—Topicalization and Spatialization in ASL

This lesson focuses on describing objects. The objectives of the lesson are to create phrases about objects using topicalization and spatialization, describe simple images using adjectives and descriptive classifiers, and describe the placement of objects using prepositions and location classifiers. By the end of this lesson, you should be able to identify and describe familiar objects with increasing detail.



Lesson 16—Describing Settings in ASL

This lesson focuses on describing settings. The objectives are to learn environmental vocabulary and element classifiers, describe rooms and buildings using adjectives and classifiers, and describe scenes using weather and landscape vocabulary, classifiers, and phrases.

Describing environmental scenes can be a fun and inspiring aspect of using ASL. Unlike spoken languages, ASL has a visuospatial dimension that allows the language to describe settings in vivid and panoramic ways.



Lesson 17—Describing People in ASL

This lesson focuses on describing people. The objectives of the lesson are to identify people by appearance using ASL adjectives and descriptive classifiers; describe characters using relationship, occupation, and personality signs; and communicate descriptive information in simple exchanges and narratives. Throughout the lesson, you will review descriptive adjectives and learn new vocabulary about physical features, hairstyles, mannerisms, clothing, occupations, relationships, and personality traits. By the end of the lesson, you will be able to describe family members, pets, and fictional characters.

Lesson 18—Discussing Social Activities in ASL

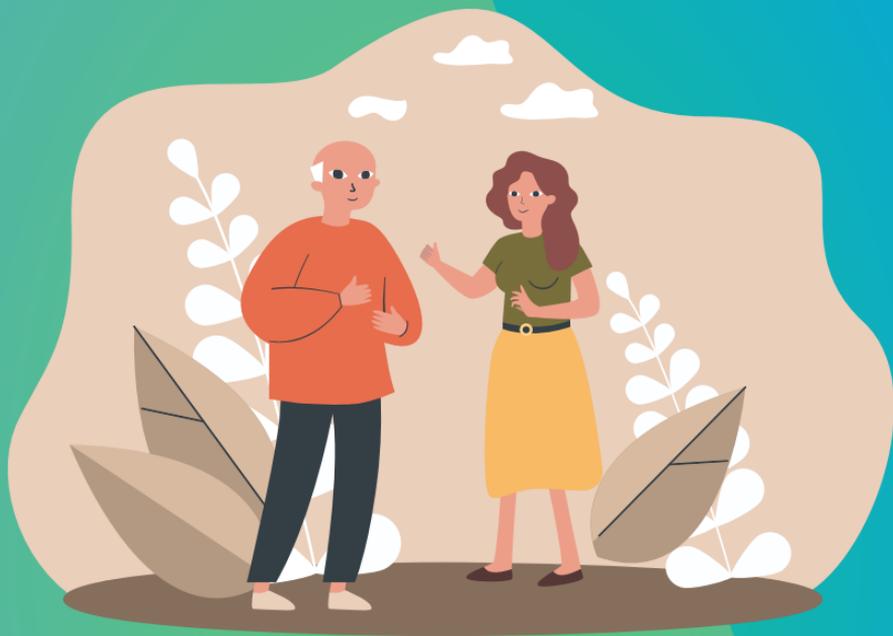
This lesson focuses on describing sports, hobbies, interests, and activities that take place with others. The objectives of the lesson are to use indexing and plural classifiers to indicate partnerships and groups in social activities, integrate information about character and activities to set the context for a situation, and describe activities with others in past, present, and future tenses. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to describe simple situations using the narrative skills you have learned in the first three units of the course.

By now, you should be comfortable with describing your community and environment, including people, places, and objects.



UNIT 4: COMPOSITION

Lessons 19–24



This unit focuses on expanded narrative skills using ASL literary forms. These lessons are designed to increase your ability to create simple ASL narratives and literary compositions. By the end of this final unit, you will be able to craft simple compositions across a variety of ASL literary genres. The topics include narrative structure, storytelling, visual vernacular, poetry, symbolism, and opinion statements.

Lesson 19—Narrative Structure in ASL

This lesson focuses on narrative structure. The objectives of this lesson are to learn and use sequencing signs and transitional phrases; identify who, where, and when to establish the context of a situation; and create simple narratives with a beginning, middle, and end.

Tense is often established at the beginning of a phrase in ASL. When you say phrases or actions happening currently, you generally refer to the space where the body is. Words and phrases representing the future use the space in front of the body, and the past is behind the body.

When you describe situations or tell stories, you also integrate sequential vocabulary. These terms and phrases help move a narrative along, transition between parts of a story, and help establish a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Lesson 20—Storytelling and Handshape Stories

This lesson focuses on storytelling. The main goal of the lesson is to develop proficiency in crafting fictional narratives. The objectives of this lesson are to describe characters and setting to introduce the context of a story, use role-shifting and dialogue to develop the plot of a story, create simple stories with a problem and solution, and develop awareness of the role of ASL literature and storytelling in Deaf culture. By the end of the lesson, you should be able to retell a traditional story in ASL and have some ideas for stories you'd like to translate or create in ASL. You will also work on creating handshape stories, an ASL literary tradition that uses a limited number of handshapes to tell a story.



Deaf author Cynthia Peters explains that modern ASL literature functions within the literary canon of the dominant culture as a counterculture that serves to both celebrate and educate. Peters suggests that deaf performance artists have been present throughout history—frequently as mimes and jokers who strongly emphasized the use of the body in performative literature—and that society is now contending with the power of ASL as it recognizes its value in literary compositions and celebratory performances.

As in many other cultures, signed languages were originally passed down using live oral traditions. As signed languages were preserved and disseminated in the same way that spoken languages were into written form, the oral tradition had a greater significance, and thus storytelling has remained an essential component of Deaf culture, the Deaf community, and the body of knowledge on the deaf experience. While the invention of the motion picture created a new avenue for documenting and preserving sign language literature, the oral traditions and community values surrounding storytelling remain.



Role-shifting, where a signer takes on the role of different characters in a story, has emerged as a critical structural element in building compositions, shifting perspective, and articulating detail. Role-shifting can be used as a form of transitioning between units of information, such as lists or sequences, or it can be used to indicate a variety of perspectives when telling stories. It can also function as a tool for facilitating transitions in perspectives and dialogue.

Lesson 21—Visual Vernacular and ASL Performances

This lesson focuses on visual vernacular. You will develop skills in the art of visual vernacular and role-shifting. In this lesson, you will use gesture, role-playing, and classifiers to enhance visual stories and create simple visual vernacular compositions. The term *vernacular* refers to a specific dialect of a language and is typically associated with spoken language. The use of *visual vernacular* as a term to describe an art form specific to Deaf culture is, as Cynthia Peters describes, the function of a literary counterculture that serves to both educate and celebrate.

Visual vernacular as an art form was made famous in the 1960s by Bernard Bragg. He was a deaf performer who was involved in setting up the National Theatre of the Deaf, an award-winning performance art and education group that focused on connecting Deaf and hearing communities through the use of ASL performances accompanied by spoken English.

As part of everyday ASL, visual vernacular uses strong movement, iconic signs, gestures, classifiers, and facial expressions to enhance the effects of a story or narrative. As an art form, it is performed by primarily deaf artists, combining elements of signed languages, such as mime, poetry, and cinematographic techniques. Watching a visual vernacular artist is similar to reading a graphic novel. In visual vernacular, the artist shifts between different perspectives to describe characters, setting, and actions. The cinematic techniques used in visual vernacular are managed through the use of role-shifting.

Lesson 22—ASL Poetry

This lesson focuses on poetry. The goal of this lesson is to develop skill in ASL phonological play through rhythm and rhyme. You will identify and use visuospatial phonological patterns, create simple rhyming words and phrases, and create simple rhythmic compositions.

Poetry is an important part of Deaf culture and literature. It is used to share feelings and ideas, connect as a community, and promote community values, and it is often used as a tool to advocate for the community.

Deaf poetry has been studied by deaf educators for centuries and used as an example of sign language and Deaf excellence in many levels of human culture and society. For example, educational advocates have organized sign language poetry demonstrations in political, social, and cultural settings to illustrate the literary sophistication of signed languages.

Poetry has also been used as a tool for language development and classroom instruction. The elements of ASL poetry that assist in language skills include frequency, repetition, and patterning of handshapes and movements. These devices play a visuospatial role using the parameters of ASL, similar to how rhythm and rhyme are used auditorily within spoken-language poetry and music.

Lesson 23—Symbolism and Figurative Language in ASL

This lesson focuses on symbolism. The goal of the lesson is to develop proficiency in ASL figurative language forms. The objectives are to understand and use contrastive phrase structure, translate similes and metaphors using contrastive phrase structure and descriptive detail, and create original ASL similes and metaphors.



A symbol, or figurative language, is a method of giving shape to one's thoughts or feelings. Sometimes our thoughts and feelings are so abstract—or perhaps so strong—that it benefits us to create a symbol that will illustrate these sentiments.

One kind of symbolic language is called an idiom. Idioms are phrases developed in different cultures that come to represent different things than their literal or concrete meaning. All cultures have idioms, including Deaf culture! An example is signing TRAIN GO, SORRY, which means you missed the point of the conversation.

When comparing and contrasting two things, ideas, people, etc., ASL uses contrastive structure. This includes setting up the topics to be compared on the left and right side, describing the relationship between them or what is being compared, and then returning to either side to add details.

Are you feeling inspired to create stories and poems yet? By this fifth lesson in the composition unit, you should have a strong sense of the different ways that ASL literary forms can be constructed.

Lesson 24—Bring It All Together: Opinion Statements

The objective of this final lesson is to review the course content and articulate clear opinion statements. In the lesson, you will use topicalization and rhetorical structure to express an opinion on a topic, use role-shifting and indexing to structure reasoning statements to support an opinion, and create a multi-phrase opinion statement with a main idea and supporting details.

Signing members of society are able to live productive and fulfilling lives. Deaf people who use sign language include Oscar-winning actors Marlee Matlin and Troy Kotsur. Film stars Nyle DiMarco and Lauren Ridloff are both well-known deaf role models who advocate for sign language access and exposure. Another well-known deaf person is Linda Bove, who played a librarian for more than 30 years on *Sesame Street*, where she communicated with other characters using gesture and sign language. She also published a book with *Sesame Street* called *Sign Language Fun with Linda Bove*.



By this point in the course, you should be able to engage comfortably in concrete conversations, describe your environments, tell simple stories, and experiment with phonological and symbolic devices.

As more people in society learn to sign and accept the use of sign language and gesture, there will be even greater access and opportunities for deaf people in society. In addition to the Deaf community, deaf adults who lose their hearing later in life and children and adults of all ages benefit from proficiency in a gestural sign language.

Through this course, hopefully you have gained skill, confidence, and insight into the language and culture of deaf people. Here are a few suggestions to help you continue your learning and develop your ASL skills:

- Go back and review different lessons, especially in areas you may have struggled with the first time.
- If and when you are able to find someone to practice with, go through the lessons and practice conversing with them.
- Now that you have more knowledge and skills, you can guide another person through the course and support their learning. Teaching what you know is a powerful tool for learning!
- Explore other resources that supplement this course. There are many videos online and deaf-led YouTube and social media accounts that you can follow. This will help you to not only gain more knowledge and exposure to various signers but also continue learning about Deaf culture and the varied experiences of the community.
- Get involved with the Deaf community! You can look online for events in your area, virtual events, or ASL meetups that are organized by and for ASL learners looking to develop their skills. This immersion and interaction with a community of signers is the best way to grow as a signer. The Deaf community will support your journey.



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American Sign Language for Everyone



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