

STEP

1

Start Learning **American Sign Language**

In this section:

- **The Top 5 American Sign Language Myths**
- **The 7 Best Ways To Learn American Sign Language**
- *Don't Just "Sign"... Communicate!: A Student's Guide to Mastering ASL Grammar*

The first step when getting involved with ASL is to start learning the language. Notice that I am saying you only need to start learning American Sign Language. You do not need to know everything or be fluent in ASL in order to continue on to the next steps.

This section contains all of the information you truly need to know when you are learning American Sign Language. There is a lot of information out there, but this section outlines the most important information you need to be aware of.

After reading this section, you will know the truth about ASL, all the best ways to learn ASL, and where to learn the most important rules of ASL grammar. This section will save you a lot of time and hours of research, so you can focus on the part of your journey that is the most fun—learning American Sign Language!

The Top 5 American Sign Language Myths

Before learning ASL, it is very important that you know the truth about what you are learning. In this section, I dispel five of the most common myths about American Sign

Language and the Deaf community. Knowing the truth about ASL will help you better understand the language as you begin learning.

Myth #1: ASL is a signed version of English

ASL is not English at all. ASL is a distinct language with its own syntax and grammar. You can learn more about this in *Don't Just "Sign"... Communicate!: A Student's Guide to Mastering ASL Grammar*, which I will be discussing later in this section.

Myth #2: ASL is only capable of communicating concrete ideas

It is falsely believed that American Sign Language is only capable of communicating simple, concrete ideas. However, ASL, like any other language, is capable of communicating abstract and complex ideas. In ASL, you can discuss topics from theology and literature to sports and shopping. ASL is capable of expressing poetry as well as humor and wit. There are no limits to what can be expressed through American Sign Language.

Myth #3: ASL is a universal language

ASL is not a universal language. Deaf people around the world sign different languages just as hearing people around the world speak different languages. There are even regional differences in the U.S.—signs can vary from state to state.



FACT

Today, there are at least 200 different forms of sign language in existence worldwide.

Myth #4: Hearing people invented ASL

One myth about American Sign Language is that it was invented by hearing people. This is false. Sign language in America has existed as long as there have been deaf people in the U.S. Sign language is the natural language of deaf people, so they naturally create sign languages in order to communicate.

The standardized American Sign Language came about when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc founded the first school for the deaf in the United States. Deaf children from around the country came together for the first time, bringing along the signs they used at home. Gallaudet and Clerc used these signs as well as signs from French Sign Language to create a standard signed language to be used in the United States—American

Sign Language. The language was passed from generation to generation primarily in residential schools*. The students spread the use of ASL throughout the U.S. and Canada.



***A residential school** for the Deaf, “school for the deaf,” or “Deaf School” refers to the type of school deaf children attend. They are an educational facility as well as a housing facility for deaf students. Deaf adults who attended residential schools are very proud of that fact.

Myth #5: ASL has always been seen as the official language of the Deaf in America

Even though American Sign Language is now seen as a natural method of communication and education for the deaf, it wasn’t always this way. During the oralism movement in the late 1800’s, most deaf educators discouraged the use of sign language in the classroom. They believed that deaf people needed to learn spoken language to fully function in the hearing world.

However, sign language is and always will be the natural language of the deaf and the center of the Deaf community. During the oralism movement, deaf students continued to use sign language between classes and outside of school. Organizations that supported the use of sign language, like the National Association of the Deaf, were founded and they fought against the belief that oralism was the only way. It wasn’t until 1960 when William Stokoe proved American Sign Language is a natural language that ASL was taken seriously. Oralism proved to be a failure for most deaf people, and American Sign Language was popularly adopted into education once again.

Many hearing people* falsely believe these five myths. Now that you know the truth about ASL, you know what to expect as you begin.



***Hearing people** (or “Hearies”) are non-Deaf people. This term can refer specifically to hearing people who are unfamiliar with Deaf Culture, but this term can also include all hearing people.

The 7 Best Ways to Learn American Sign Language

Most prospective ASL students do not know the best ways to learn ASL. And even if they do know the best ways, many do not know how to access them. There are many different ways to learn ASL.

I will be sharing with you the *best* ways to learn. This information has never been explained in this much detail before. Reading this section will save you time as well as make sure you are learning from the best resources out there.

Which way you choose to learn ASL will depend mostly on your resources—where you live, how much money you can spend, and how much time you have. If you have an abundance of these resources, I highly encourage you to learn ASL using *all* of these different ways. The more ways you learn, the more well-rounded your language development will be.



"I think by far the best way to learn is socializing and using the language daily or as often as possible. Some people find it hard to have contact with the language daily but I just try to use all resources available to me." - Jennifer Turner from South Florida

#1 - Interacting with the Deaf Community

The *best* way to learn any language is from a native user. Here are 20 ways to meet, interact, and learn from Deaf people:

- 1. Sign with Deaf friends.** If you have any friends who are Deaf, this is a great place to start. Your friend can give you private lessons or you can simply get together often and sign to each other. You can go over 10 new signs with your friend every time you get together.
- 2. Attend Deaf Events.** Deaf events are a great way to meet deaf people. These events may consist of meeting at a coffee house, meeting up for ice cream, attending a fundraiser, etc. You can find Deaf events in your area on the OhSoEz website. (www.ohsoez.com)
- 3. Hire a Deaf babysitter.** If you have a Deaf person frequently visiting your house, you can use it to your advantage. I'm sure the babysitter wouldn't mind teaching you (and maybe your children) some ASL. Every time you see him or her, you can learn 10 new signs and practice them while you're out! A good place to find a Deaf babysitter is at a Deaf school or a Deaf program in your area.
- 4. Volunteer at a Deaf school or for a Deaf program.** If there is a Deaf school or program in your area, get involved! You can learn ASL *and* give back to your community!
- 5. Use a Deaf dating service.** If you're single, you can check into Deaf dating services. There are many available online—and I've heard this is a great way to meet Deaf people.

6. **Find a Deaf club.** Deaf clubs have always been a very popular place for Deaf people to socialize. If there are any in your area, I highly suggest checking them out.
7. **Start a sign language club.** You can place a newspaper ad for anyone interested in joining your club. You may find a lot of hearing people who are interested and even some Deaf people who would love to get involved.
8. **Hire a Deaf tutor.** If there are Deaf tutors available to you, it would really be worth your time and money to be tutored personally by a Deaf person. You will be amazed at how much you learn in a short amount of time when you communicate regularly with a Deaf person.
9. **Attend Deaf plays/shows.** Keep on the lookout for any local plays or shows put on by Deaf people. Some areas even have their own Deaf theaters. You can contact the National Theatre of the Deaf to see if they are touring in your area.



TIP

A good way to practice is to go on a “Deaf date”—go out with a friend and only use ASL.

10. **Attend interpreted shows/services.** If you can’t find shows that are done *by* Deaf people, you might be able to meet a few Deaf people by attending an interpreted play, show, church service, etc.
11. **Volunteer at a Deaf Service Center.** Deaf Service Centers are advocates for deaf people and make sure they are always accommodated as required by law. By volunteering at one of these centers, you may be able to meet many Deaf people.
12. **Volunteer at a residential school.** Residential schools are schools where deaf children live and learn in a sign language environment. This is a great place to meet and interact with Deaf adults and children.
13. **Volunteer at a school with a mainstream program.** A mainstream program is a program for deaf children at a public school. Using interpreters, deaf children are able to attend public schools with hearing children. This is a great place to meet and interact with deaf children and interpreters.
14. **Mentor with an Interpreter.** If you know any sign language interpreters, or have any interpreting programs near you, you may be able to mentor with an interpreter. This is a great way to learn ASL from someone who is fluent, as well as meet and interact with deaf people.

15. **Attend deaf/interpreting related workshops.** If you are lucky enough to have any deaf-related or interpreting workshops in your area, attend them! Workshops are very helpful and give you the ability to meet and interact with a variety of new people.
16. **Join RID.** RID is the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. You can join as a supporter, attend events, and play an active role in the interpreting field.
17. **Join a sign language club at a local college or university.** Colleges and universities have a variety of clubs. If there is a school near you, see if they have a sign language club and join it. You can also read the "Sign Language Clubs" article on About.com which lists some colleges and universities with sign language clubs. (deafness.about.com/cs/signfeats2/a/signclubs.htm)
18. **Contact a local resource center for deaf and hard of hearing people.** If you have a local resource center near you (check the Yellow Pages), you can contact them and probably find out a lot of information about the Deaf community in your area.
19. **Contact a hearing and speech center.** If you don't know of any deaf centers, programs, or organizations, a hearing and speech center in your area may be able to tell you where to find some.
20. **Attend a Silent Weekend.** A Silent Weekend is a weekend where Deaf and hearing people get together and go on a weekend trip—where no voices are allowed. This is a great opportunity to completely immerse yourself in the language and culture of the Deaf. I highly suggest finding one of these trips to attend.



QUOTE

"Classes can help some but immersing yourself in the environment is the best way to become fluent in ASL." – Anonymous

Basically, it doesn't matter how you do it, you just need to meet and interact with Deaf friends. You don't need to know Deaf people who can formally teach you ASL—just conversing with Deaf people on a regular basis will greatly improve your skills. This way, you are meeting new people, making friends, and forming bonds when entering into the Deaf community.

However, I do know that not everyone lives near a Deaf community. There may not be any Deaf people that live near you. If you have tried several ways to meet Deaf people and have not met any, then try to work with what you have. Even though the best way to learn ASL is from conversing with Deaf people, there are other ways to learn as well.



Learn with your family—get everyone signing!

#2 - Taking an ASL Class

American Sign Language classes provide the interaction and reinforcement needed to build your confidence. Classes also offer opportunities to practice signing in real-life situations.

Here are some ideas of where to find classes:

- 1. Check your local colleges and universities.** American Sign Language is now recognized as a foreign language and can be used to fulfill required foreign language credit. ASL is accepted to satisfy the foreign language requirement in approximately 180 four-year colleges and universities. And over 600 colleges and universities offer ASL classes. If there are any colleges or universities near you, contact them and see if they offer any formal ASL classes. If you need some help, Dr. Sherman Wilcox of New Mexico has compiled a list of “Universities That Accept ASL In Fulfillment Of Foreign Language Requirements” that is frequently updated. (web.mac.com/swilcox/UNM/univlist.html)
- 2. Contact Deaf schools and programs.** In many areas, the local Deaf schools and Deaf programs offer sign language classes. Many times, these classes are free.
- 3. Contact local social service organizations.** Social service organizations and interpreting agencies are also known to offer sign language classes for the public. Check local speech and hearing centers as well as your state’s commission for deaf and hard of hearing people for referrals.
- 4. Find a community sign language class.** You may be lucky enough to have a community sign language class near you. Public libraries and recreational programs frequently offer sign language classes. Adult education course offerings usually include sign language classes.
- 5. Check Info to Go.** You can read the “Locating Sign Classes” publication on Info to Go to try to find classes. (clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/Clerc_Center/Information_and_Resources/Info_To_Go.html/locating-sign-classes.html)
- 6. Find an online class.** I know not everyone has access to formal in-person ASL classes, which is the best kind of ASL class to take. So, I’m also suggesting online classes. There are a few classes available online—both free and paid.

- a. Free classes:
 - i. Start ASL - (classes.startasl.com)
 - ii. ASL University - (www.lifeprint.com)
- b. Paid classes:
 - i. Signing Online - (www.signingonline.com)
 - ii. Handspeak - (www.handspeak.com)

7. Hire a tutor. I know it can get expensive to hire a sign language tutor, but if you don't have access to any other classes, this is a great way to learn.

If you have difficulty finding a tutor, you can:

- a. Place an ad in the newspaper or in newsletters of social service agencies for deaf people.
- b. Find tutors through databases:
 - i. Language School Teachers - (www.language-school-teachers.com)
 - ii. OhSoEZ - (www.ohsoez.com)
- c. Find tutors through tutor websites:
 - i. Hardcore ASL - (www.hardcoreasl.com/tutoring.html)
 - ii. Cathy's ASL Services - (www.cathysaslservices.com)

8. If you can't afford a certain class, you can volunteer to help the instructor. You can offer to be a teaching assistant, run errands, grade papers, babysit, give the instructor a ride to class, be a substitute, or whatever else you can come up with. If you make yourself available to the instructor, they may let you sit in on their classes for free.

Tips for taking an ASL class

If you do find an ASL class near you, here are some tips on how to get the most out of the class.

1. Don't miss class. It is very important for you to attend class--especially at the beginning of the term. This is because a sign language class is meant to be a very interactive environment. It's much easier to feel comfortable enough to interact when you get to know all the students you will be learning with.

2. **Arrive early.** Being early for class gives you a chance to practice and engage in signed conversations before class begins. If you arrive late, it is expected in Deaf culture that you briefly explain why you're late when you enter the classroom. Just walk in, wait for your instructor's attention, briefly explain, and be seated.
3. **Watch the signer's face, not their hands.** You will understand a lot more of what you see this way. Make sure you don't break eye contact--just use your peripheral vision.
4. **Don't talk in class.** Unless your instructor asks you to use your voice, which is called "voicing", stay quiet. If a classmate is struggling to learn something, resist the temptation to voice an English translation. If all else fails, your instructor will write it on the board. Make sure to keep up this signing environment before class, after class, during breaks, and whenever you are around Deaf people.
5. **Participate.** The more you participate in class, the more you learn. You should be communicating often and following as many signed conversations in class as you can—between your instructor and your class, between your instructor and a student, or between students.
6. **Don't worry about making mistakes.** You will make plenty of mistakes, and so will everyone else in your class. Mistakes are part of learning.
7. **Always pay attention to your instructor.** If your instructor needs your attention, he or she will notice immediately if someone breaks eye contact. If you break eye contact, your instructor will stop, wait to get your attention, ask what you missed, and then repeat it for you while the rest of the class waits. Eye contact is very important, so if you need to take notes, try to learn how to do so without looking at your paper.
8. **Let your instructor know immediately when you don't understand.** All you have to do is get your instructor's attention and sign DON'T-UNDERSTAND. This behavior is expected, so don't be afraid to use this sign often.
9. **Don't say you understand if you really don't.** If your instructor asks if you understand something, don't lie. Deaf instructors can normally tell by your body language and facial expression that you don't understand. Letting the instructor move on without understanding something can lead to more confusion later on.
10. **Use the signs you learn from your instructor.** You will probably learn a variety of ways to sign certain words. This is because different regions sign some words differently. Just ask your instructor and sign the word the way he or she signs it.

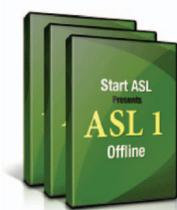
ASL classes are a great way to learn American Sign Language. A lot of times, you will get a Deaf instructor and be able to learn ASL from a native signer. Most classes also attend Deaf events to practice their skills. This will give you both the classroom attention and Deaf community interaction that you need.

Next to learning ASL directly from conversing with Deaf people, ASL classes are the next best way to learn. However, I do know that not everyone has access to ASL classes. If you have not been able to find any classes near you, then try to work with what you have. Even though the best ways to learn ASL are by conversing with Deaf people and taking an ASL class, there are other ways to learn as well.

#3 - Learning from ASL Software

Unlike learning from Deaf people or in a formal class, computer software doesn't provide feedback. However, if you don't have access to better resources, this is a good choice.

Here are some software programs that I recommend:



The Start ASL Offline Package

The Start ASL online classes are available as instant downloads. These files contain all of the ASL 1, 2, & 3 class Lessons, Readings, Videos, and Workbooks. I highly recommend this package for ASL software. While it doesn't include ASL vocabulary videos, it does teach ASL grammar. You also have the advantage of having access to the same classes online, so you can take the classes with you wherever you need to go. (offline.startasl.com)



Rocket American Sign Language

The quality of this software is great, the games are fun, and it's available in an instant download (no waiting for shipping and loading CDs into your computer). This is a good program if you are just starting out. The quizzes are a bit easy if you already know a lot of ASL vocabulary.



QuickStart American Sign Language

I have heard great things about this software. It's great for beginners and is very affordable.