

# Signs & their Glosses

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**WORDS** are the **SYMBOLS** of spoken languages. **SIGNS** are the **SYMBOLS** of signed languages. Rarely does one word equal one sign.

When a word is associated with a sign is called a **GLOSS**. In simplest terms, a GLOSS is a label. In ASL it is an English word or words that we use to name ASL signs so that we can talk about these signs. The word or words associated with that sign do not relay the sign's meaning. At best they approximate the meaning of the sign. A GLOSS is a label with very weak adhesive—it's not stuck on very securely. Some signs have several different possible glosses. For instance, the words: "IMPORTANT", "WORTH" and "VALUE" could all be used to label the same ASL **SIGN**. It's vital that you remember that English has a variety of different words for some meanings so that you don't get stuck on just one. Take for example the sign I call "WORK" you might also call it "LABOR", "EMPLOYMENT", "JOB", "TOIL" or even "OCCUPATION". Get stuck on the label and you might just miss my meaning. As an English speaker learning ASL this is easily the most important thing for you to understand.

There is **NO SIGN** for any **ENGLISH WORD!---**  
ASL signs correspond to meanings not to words.

It is more important to know the meaning of the sign than to know its name. It might even be possible to function fluently in ASL without knowing a single GLOSS for any of the signs you know! But that would sure make it difficult to study and learn. Therefore, we introduce you to the SIGN and its GLOSS at the same time so that you can look it up, write it down, practice and organize it. Just remember that a GLOSS is not the meaning of the sign, it's just a label that we put on a sign so we can talk, read or write about ASL. One must know ASL to understand its glossed form. Glosses are **NOT** Translations—they're labels!

Remember that a **g l o s s** is nothing more than a **l a b e l** for an ASL sign.

*...and you will find inner peace.*

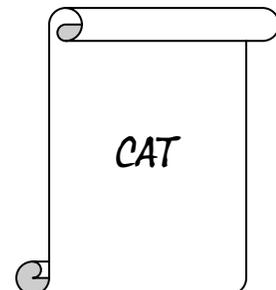
The Meaning



The Sign



The Gloss



**THE MEANING IS SMALL FURRY ANIMAL THAT PURRS.**



**THE SIGN IS A MANUAL MOVEMENT**

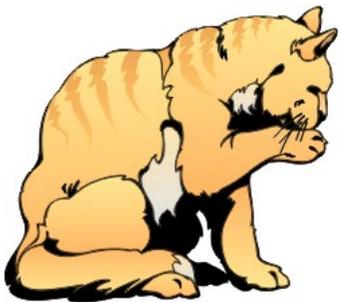


**THE GLOSS IS AN ENGLISH WORD USED TO LABEL THE SIGN.**

# Symbols, meanings & glosses

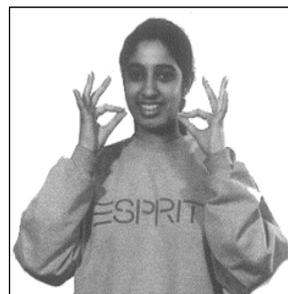
All languages use symbols to refer to things and concepts that exist in within the realm of human experience. In spoken languages those symbols are called **WORDS**. In manual languages the symbols are called **SIGNS**.

THE CONCEPT



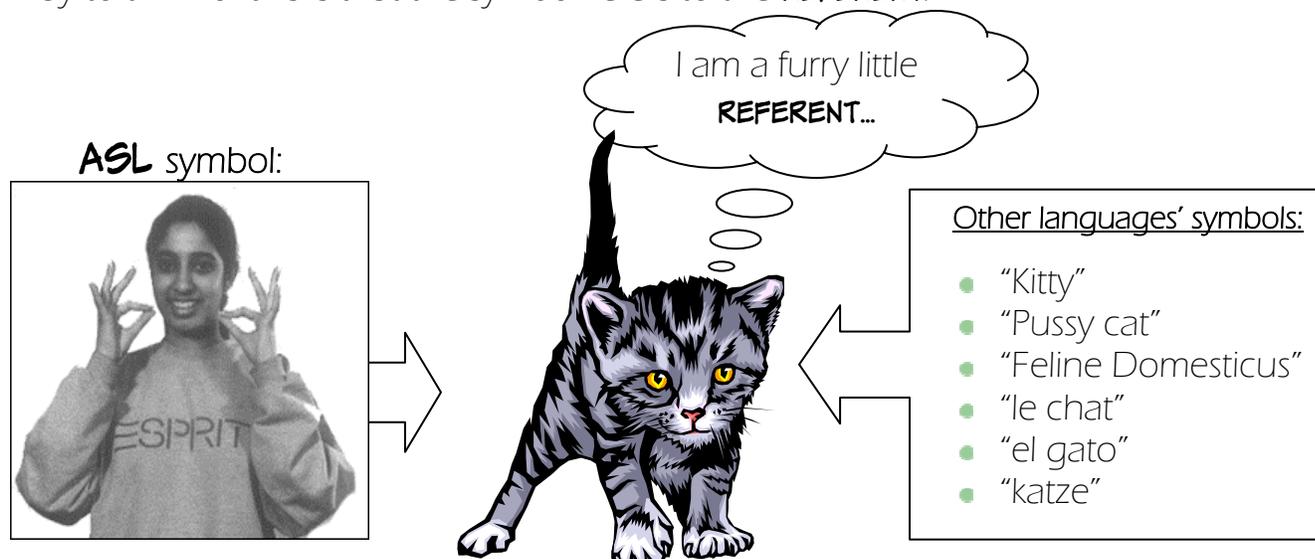
(THE REFERENT)

THE SIGN:



(THE SYMBOL)

The meaning associated with any given symbol is called the **REFERENT**. Another way to think of this is that the symbol refers to the **REFERENT**.



## Sounds & Silence

Let's not overlook the fact that in all of the spoken languages above, the real symbol is actually a sound: a spoken word. In the box above are merely the written forms of each word: The way that the symbol is written down. Spoken languages with written forms work off of a transcription of the spoken word. Each word is broken down to its smallest units of sound and represented by characters from that language's alphabet. If you know the alphabet and the sounds of the language, you can "sound out" a word that you have never seen or heard before.

Likewise, a GLOSS is the way that a SIGN is written down. But a GLOSS is not a transcription; it's just a label. It doesn't give you any information about how to produce or recognize the manual sign. A gloss is an English label for the sign, not a break-down of the Sign's parts. If you wanted to break the sign down, you'd have to break it down to its four fundamental parameters:

- ➔ HAND-SHAPE
- ➔ PALM-ORIENTATION
- ➔ LOCATION
- ➔ MOVEMENT

*Ground-Breaking Linguist, William Stokoe, presented a method of writing down signs based upon these parameters. His label for the sign "CAT" is...*

*/\_ \ F > F < ^*

*I think you'll agree that an English GLOSS is a little simpler!*



Because there is no conventional accepted way of transcribing the signs of ASL signs on its own terms (Even though Dr. Stokoe gave it a brilliant try) ASL remains to this day, an un-written language. To write it down we have to use an unconventional means, or we have to use English Glosses to write down our ASL signs. In most cases, Video technology does a much better job of recording signed communication than pen and paper ever could.

Keep in mind that the purpose of every language is to convey meaning. Fluent speakers only think about their words when they misspeak (slip of the tongue), use the wrong word, or can't find the word to match their meaning. Likewise, fluent signers only think of their signs when they mis-sign (slip of the hand), use the wrong sign, or can't find the sign to match their meaning. Language is not about sending and receiving symbols; it's about sharing meaning.

**Are the voices in my head bothering you?...**  
**because They're totally messing with me!**

So, Glosses are labels not meanings!... That's all pretty straight forward with concepts as simple as cats, dogs and other concrete concepts. But where we run into real trouble is in the complexity of ASL where it differs from the complexity of English. The most important thing you can do is to LET GO of your ENGLISH... strive to quiet the voice that plays in your head as you sign, or watch another signer. This voice will mislead you, confound your understanding, and impede your progress as a signer. Your goal is to learn to think in pictures—I have seen regular use of ear-plugs work wonders in this developing this talent. Give yourself time; it won't happen overnight. But it won't happen at all if you keep practicing thinking in words with a little voice playing in your head (or on your lips) as you practice your ASL. Give yourself time, but give it plenty of thought. And perhaps invest in some ear plugs. *The little disposable foam ones are the best.*

# Basic conventions of written gloss

***Never forget: A GLOSS is a very limited tool! It cannot tell you the meaning of the sign or how to produce it! It's merely a tool for referring to signs that you've learned.***

**CAPITALS:** Because they are labels, GLOSSES appear in all UPPER CASE or CAPITAL letters. This makes them readily distinguishable from English words.

**HYPHENATES:** Some GLOSSES are formed from more than one English word. In this case the words are joined by a hyphen. The hyphen indicates one single sign that is labeled with two or more English words. This occurs in instances where ASL is more efficient than English, where ASL can say in one sign what it takes two or more English words to convey. For instance,

***DONT-LIKE; YOU-ASK-ME; NOTHING-TO-IT; LITTLE-BIT; ONE-UP-ON***

Are all examples of single signs with multiple word labels.

**SIGN COMBINATIONS:** Glosses combined with a plus sign are two separate signs that are joined together to make what appears to be a single sign (this could also be a compound). Here are some examples:

***FOR+ME; LEARN+AGENT; BOOK+STORE; EAT+NIGHT; MOTHER+FATHER***

**TENSE:** Since ASL Verbs do not change for past tense, neither will the glosses we use to write them down. In English, verbs are conjugated for time: "swim" "swam" "swum". Not so in ASL. In ASL the verb is the same no matter when it happens, so when I write down the gloss for that sign it will be SWIM whether I'm talking about tomorrow, last night or three hundred years ago.

**REPETITION:** In ASL, some signs are repeated for specific meaning... for instance LEARN + LEARN changes the sign from the VERB "To Learn" to the NOUN "Learning." You can gloss this moos simply by writing down LEARNING and trust that the reader knows the difference between the noun and the verb. Another example would be TREE. TREE+TREE+ TREE (swept sideways) indicates FOREST. The gloss: FOREST should suffice. But when the repetition has specific meaning (as in the case of a verb) it is worth noting specifically. GIVE+GIVE+GIVE means to give repeatedly... this meaning can be indicated by adding the two PLUS SIGNS to the end of the verb: GIVE++ This indicates the meaningful repetition of the verb.

**FINGERSPELLING:** Words that are to be Fingerspelled are indicated in one of two ways:

- ➡ Separated by hyphens between each Fingerspelled letter: G-L-A-D-Y-S
- ➡ Preceded by the initials FS in parenthesis: (fs) GLADYS

## **BELOW IS A LIST OF COMMON SYMBOLS USED IN THE WRITING OF ASL GLOSSES.**

**The Crosshatch: #** This symbol indicates a loan sign, a sign originating from the fingerspelling of an English word.

**Parentheses: ( )** Additional information about the production of a sign is can added to the written gloss between a set of parentheses. Such information can be abbreviated as in (2h)#DO++, or it may appear as English instructions to add information to a sign: GIVE (left), or to a Classifier CL:1 (man hurries past).

**CL:** The abbreviation CL: indicates a classifier. The information following the colon indicates the hand shape and number of hands.

**The Umlaut** (two dots above a given hand shape) <sup>••</sup> indicate the bending of the fingers of that hand. The 3 (called the “bent three”) is the hand shape used in the sign “INSECT”. This technique is only used in reference to a specific handshape such as a classifier.

### **A COMMON PITFALL**

— By Geoff Mathay

The most common mistake that beginning ASL students make is to equate English words with ASL signs. A word in English, or any other spoken language for that matter, stands for an idea or a concept. A sign in ASL also stands for a concept. A word cannot stand for a sign, nor can a sign stand for a word. Languages do not consist of words or signs. Words and signs are merely the instruments to convey language. The language itself consists of ideas that are arranged in a way that is meaningful to the people using it. Words and signs are the things we use to convey those meanings to another person. There is not magic in a word or sign. The famous quote, “A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet,” says it all; no matter what we call it, we know what it is by the way it looks and smells.

Do not ask what a sign for a particular word in English is, but rather ask how to convey a particular idea in ASL by signs. For example, if you ask me: “what is the sign for metamorphosis?” I will have to tell you that there is none. Does that mean that the idea of “metamorphosis: cannot be expressed in ASL? Not at all. If you had asked me, “how do you express the idea of ‘metamorphosis’ in ASL?” I could have shown you. This example illustrates that often there is no single word in one language which as an equivalent single word in another language.