

# Glossed sentences

By Rick Mangan ©2004

A GLOSS for a single sign is simply the “name” or “label” given to that sign so that it can be referred to in spoken or written form. The gloss tells us very, very little about the *meaning* of the sign. This is a much trickier endeavor that you might at first think due to the fact that *some* signs and their glosses *DO* correspond one-to-one with their English counterparts. This creates a false sense of security for English speaking ASL students. It can deceive them and lead them to the false conclusion that there are, and should be, reliable, 1-to-1 correlations between ASL signs and English words. In *MOST* cases this is *completely* false. Think of the multiple meanings of the English word “run”, and you have some idea of what I’m talking about. The Random House unabridged Dictionary lists 178 meanings of the word “run”. The way you ‘run’ for office, ‘run’ to the store, ‘run’ the 30 yard dash, ‘run’ amok and ‘run’ a computer program would all have very different meanings and would require different ASL signs. With this single example you can see how a 1-to-1 correspondence is out of the question and highly unlikely (even within a single language). So we see, a gloss is simply a tool for naming a sign so that we can talk about it.

A GLOSSed sentence is simply a written transcript of the signs that you use to sign an ASL sentence. Even though ASL is not a written language (we cannot ‘sound out’ an ASL sign by reading) signs that are produced by the signer *CAN* be written down in the order that they are used by referring to each sign by its GLOSS. We know that ASL is much more than just signs.

Non-manual behavior, spatial information, and speed variations, etc., are often integral to the meaning of entire sentence and pose real challenge to the writer. Each linguist seems to have a different way of dealing with these challenges. At this point one of the easiest ways to deal with this type of information (if it *must* be dealt with) is to insert parenthetical English phrases that explain it.

Parentheses are used to add this kind of information to a sign:

**WALK**(*slowly*) or **BRIGHT**(*squint*)

Quotation marks are often used to add referential information to a classifier:

**CL:FF** “overhead fluorescent lights”.

In short, a glossed sentence is simply a transcription of a manual event. Its only function is to create a paper record of signed communication. It is not a written version of sign language. ASL still remains an unwritten language. The glossed sentence is merely a method of notating ASL so that the sentence can be recreated at a later time. In this way a glossed sentence is like a recipe.

The process does not begin on the paper. In fact, the pen and paper should not meet until the real work is done.

## The Process:

1. Get a picture of the meaning in your head
2. Figure out how to sign that picture
3. Research any signs you need that you don't know (this is a life-long task)
4. Sign it.
5. Analyze it:
  - a. Does it convey the picture in your head?
  - b. Does it convey the meaning accurately?
  - c. Does it flow well? (Might it flow better if the order of some signs is rearranged?)
6. Perfect it.
7. Write down your signs.

Please notice that unlike English, one cannot sit down to write an ASL story. English easily goes from the writers mind to the page. As I wrote this document, I began by sitting down at my keyboard. This works in English because the writer can pseudo-produce the words in his head just by thinking them. But ASL doesn't flow so easily to the page without first passing through the hands first. ASL is 4-dimensional; it doesn't sit well on the 2-dimensional page.

I want you to think of a GLOSSed sentence as a *RECIPE*. Its whole purpose for existence is so that another signer can reproduce or approximate your sentence without actually seeing you sign it, or to "record" it on paper, so that you can reproduce it again yourself later. Would you sit down and write down a recipe without first trying it yourself? Of course not. You would experiment, try different ingredients, cook it and taste it. You'd probably make notes and try a few variations along the way as well. Only after that process would you write it down so that it could be reproduced later.

A GLOSSed sentence is a *recipe* for an ASL production.