

Every ASL sign can be broken down into five separate features called **parameters**.

For a sign to be correct, all five have to be right. Change just one and you may be saying a different word entirely — the same way changing one letter changes an English word.

FOR EXAMPLE

MOTHER and FATHER use the same handshape and the same movement. Only the location changes — chin for MOTHER, forehead for FATHER.

1

Handshape

What your hand looks like

2

Palm orientation

Which way it faces

3

Location

Where it happens

4

Movement

How it moves

5

Non-manual markers

What your face and body do

1 Handshape

The shape your hand makes while signing.

- ASL uses more than 40 distinct handshapes.
- Many come from the manual alphabet and the number system, but not all of them do.
- Common mix-ups: 1 and D, D and F, E and O.

SAME LOCATION

Only the handshape changes.

RESTAURANT R handshape

ARIZONA A handshape

TWIN V handshape

NAPKIN bent B handshape

All four are made in the same place, at the mouth and chin.

TRY IT

Sign RESTAURANT, ARIZONA, TWIN, and NAPKIN one after another. Keep your hand in the same place and let only the handshape change.

2 Palm orientation

The direction your palm faces as you produce the sign.

- Palm up, palm down, palm left, or palm right.
- Palm outward, away from you, or palm inward, facing you.
- A small turn of the wrist can change the meaning.

SIGNS THAT DEPEND ON ORIENTATION

Watch which way the palm turns.

SCHOOL

STOP

ARRIVE

MY and YOUR are the clearest pair: palm in toward your chest, or palm out toward the other person.

TRY IT

Sign MY, then YOUR. Notice that your wrist does the work — the hand itself stays the same.

3 Location

Where on the body or in space the sign is made.

- Near the head, chest, shoulders, hands, or in neutral space.
- The signing space runs from about four inches above the head down to about four inches below the belt, and out to the elbows.

SAME HANDSHAPE AND MOVEMENT

Only the location changes.

SUMMER forehead

UGLY nose

DRY chin

Move the sign down the face and the word changes.

TRY IT

Sign SUMMER, then UGLY, then DRY. Same hand, same movement, walking down the face.

4 Movement

How the hands move while the sign is produced.

- Up and down, in and out, circular, side to side, or tapping.
- Direction can carry meaning — a sign moving away from you or toward you shows who is doing what to whom.
- Repeating a movement can change the word, the tense, or the emphasis.

SIGNS THAT CHANGE WITH MOVEMENT

Same hands, different motion.

STOP

SOME

REJECT

SIT is one tap. CHAIR repeats the tap.

TRY IT

Sign SIT, then CHAIR. One tap, then repeat the tap. Nothing else changes.

5 Non-manual markers

The signals made without the hands — face, head, and body.

- Eyebrows, eye gaze, mouth shape, head movement, and body posture.
- Facial expressions fall under non-manual markers.
- They carry grammar, emotion, and tone, and often stretch across a whole phrase rather than a single sign.

NON-MANUAL GRAMMAR

The face does the work.

YES / NO QUESTION eyebrows up

WH- QUESTION eyebrows down, head tilted

NOT shake your head

Without the face, the grammar is missing.

TRY IT

Ask a partner a yes/no question, then a wh-question, without changing your hands. See if they can tell which was which from your eyebrows alone.

Reading someone else's signing

Not everyone signs perfectly, and you will not always catch every parameter. If you pick up two of these three, you can usually work out the sign from context.

Handshape

What shape is the hand?

Location

Where is it made?

Movement

How does it move?

Use context and deduction to fill the gap — then ask if you are still unsure.

One thing to keep straight

Two out of three is a strategy for **understanding other people**. It is not a standard for your own signing.

When you sign, aim for all five parameters every time.

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|----------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Handshape | What your hand looks like |
| 2 | Palm orientation | Which way it faces |
| 3 | Location | Where it happens |
| 4 | Movement | How it moves |
| 5 | Non-manual markers | What your face and body do |
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Change one — and you might say something completely different.