

Basic Rules for ASL Glossing

A beginner-friendly reference: what gloss is, the twelve rules students need, and every symbol in one place.

A tool, not a language

Gloss writes ASL signs using English words. It is a teaching and learning aid — not a full writing system for ASL.

Signs, not speech

Gloss records what is signed, in the order it is signed. It does not follow English grammar and is not spoken English written down.

Always an approximation

Gloss cannot fully show movement, use of space, or facial grammar. Treat it as a bridge to real ASL, never a replacement.

01 The core rules

12 RULES

RULE 01

Write every sign in ALL CAPS

Capitals mark a word as a sign rather than spoken English. This applies to every glossed word, including names and numbers spelled with letters.

HELLO MY NAME ME fs-J-O-H-N

RULE 04

Mark fingerspelling with fs-

Write lowercase fs- in front of the word, then capital letters with a hyphen between each one. Fingerspell names, places, and unfamiliar words.

MY NAME fs-P-A-U-L
SCHOOL NAME fs-O-U

RULE 02

Drop English grammar words

Remove words that are not signed in ASL — is, am, are, was, were, be, the, a, an, to, of.

English: I am a student.
ME STUDENT

RULE 05

Hyphenate one sign that needs two English words

When a single ASL sign takes more than one English word to name, join the words with a hyphen.

SELF-ESTEEM BEST-FRIEND
ICE-CREAM HIGH-SCHOOL

RULE 03

Use ASL word order: time – topic – comment

Time words come first, the topic next, and the comment — the action or description — last.

English: I go to school today.
TODAY SCHOOL ME GO
YESTERDAY HOME+WORK ME FINISH

RULE 06

Join two or more signs with +

When one English idea is built from several separate signs, connect them with a plus sign.

HOME+WORK BOY+FRIEND
MOTHER+FATHER TEACH+AGENT

RULE 07

Show repeated movement with + or ++

A plus after a sign means the movement repeats — for habitual action, emphasis, or plural meaning. Add a second plus for many repetitions.

AGAIN+ WORK+
PRACTICE++ KNOCK++

RULE 08

Write numbers as digits

Numerals, never number words. Nouns after a number stay singular, because ASL does not add an English plural -s.

ME HAVE 2 BROTHER
CLASS 30 STUDENT

RULE 09

Skip punctuation — label the face instead

Gloss uses no periods, commas, or question marks. Meaning comes from word order and facial grammar, so write the non-manual marker in front of the phrase it covers.

q YOU FINISH HOME+WORK
wh-q YOU NAME WHAT

RULE 10

Note non-manual markers when teaching

Facial expression and body movement carry grammar. Use the standard short labels — **q** yes/no question, **wh-q** WH-question, **neg** negation, **top** topic.

neg ME UNDERSTAND NOT
top DOG ME LIKE

RULE 11

Point with IX-

Pointing replaces English pronouns. Gloss it as **IX-** plus who or what is being pointed at — but only once that person, place, or thing has been set up in signing space.

The boy is loud.
BOY IX-boy LOUD
He is a teacher.
MAN IX-man TEACH+AGENT

RULE 12

List on the non-dominant hand with LIST-

The non-dominant hand holds the list. Number each item as **LIST-1**, **LIST-2**, and so on. Listing organizes information clearly and visually.

LIST-1 HOME+WORK LIST-2 TEST LIST-3
PROJECT
LIST-1 BOOK LIST-2 PEN LIST-3 PAPER

One symbol, two jobs. The plus sign marks both multi-sign concepts (Rule 06) and repeated movement (Rule 07). Position tells you which: between two words it joins them, after a single word it repeats it. Some programs use a caret for compounds instead — **HOME^WORK** — so if your students see that elsewhere, it means the same thing as **HOME+WORK**.

02 Symbol reference

WHAT EACH MARK MEANS

SYMBOL	WHAT IT SHOWS	EXAMPLE
ALL CAPS	The word represents an ASL sign, not spoken English.	ME LIKE ASL
-	Separates letters in fingerspelling; also joins English words that are one ASL sign.	fs-J-O-H-N ICE-CREAM
fs-	The word is fingerspelled, not signed.	MY NAME fs-P-A-U-L
+	Between signs: one concept built from two or more signs.	HOME+WORK TEACH+AGENT
+ ++	After a sign: repeated or habitual movement.	WORK+ PRACTICE++

SYMBOL	WHAT IT SHOWS	EXAMPLE
IX-	Pointing to a person, place, or thing already set up in space.	IX-me GO HOME TEACHER IX-there WAIT
LIST-	An item held on the non-dominant hand.	LIST-1 BOOK LIST-2 PEN
q	Yes/no question — eyebrows raised.	q YOU LIKE ASL
wh-q	WH-question — eyebrows furrowed.	wh-q WHERE YOU LIVE
neg	Negation — head shake across the phrase.	neg ME LIKE COFFEE NOT
top	Topic marking — eyebrows raised on the topic, then the comment.	top ASL ME LEARN++
VERB-a-b	Directional verb: the movement runs from one person to another.	GIVE-me-you ASK-you-me HELP-her-him
RS:	Role shift — the signer takes on another person's role.	RS: MOM SAY CLEAN-ROOM
CL:	Classifier showing shape, movement, or location.	CL:1 WALK-PERSON CL:3 CAR-DRIVE
(mouth:)	English mouth movement that accompanies the sign.	FINISH (mouth: finally)
IX-left / IX-right	Body shift setting two subjects in contrasting places.	BOY IX-left GIRL IX-right

Pick one indexing style and stay with it. Some materials write **IX-me**, **IX-you**, **IX-him**; others use person numbers — **IX-1**, **IX-2**, **IX-3**. Both are standard. Mixing them in one lesson is what confuses students.

03 English into gloss

WORKED EXAMPLES

ENGLISH SENTENCE	ASL GLOSS
I am a student.	→ ME STUDENT
I go to school today.	→ TODAY SCHOOL ME GO
Hello, my name is John.	→ HELLO MY NAME ME fs-J-O-H-N
I finished my homework yesterday.	→ YESTERDAY HOME+WORK ME FINISH
The store is expensive.	→ STORE IX-store EXPENSIVE
He is a teacher.	→ MAN IX-man TEACH+AGENT
I have two brothers.	→ ME HAVE 2 BROTHER
Where do you live?	→ wh-q WHERE YOU LIVE
Did you finish your homework?	→ q YOU FINISH HOME+WORK
I don't understand.	→ neg ME UNDERSTAND NOT
Tomorrow we have a test.	→ TOMORROW TEST

English helping verbs left in**AVOID** ME AM STUDENT**USE** ME STUDENT

Nothing is signed for am, is, or are, so nothing appears in the gloss.

English plural -s added**AVOID** ME HAVE 2 BROTHERS**USE** ME HAVE 2 BROTHER

The number already carries the plural. The noun stays as it is.

English word order kept**AVOID** ME GO SCHOOL TODAY**USE** TODAY SCHOOL ME GO

Time first, then topic, then comment. Time words never trail at the end.

Punctuation instead of face**AVOID** YOU FINISH HOME+WORK?**USE** q YOU FINISH HOME+WORK

The question mark does no work in ASL. The raised eyebrows do, so label them.

Quick teacher tip

Glossing is a learning tool, not a perfect writing system. Don't grade it like spelling. If a student can do these three things, the gloss is doing its job:

1 read it back

2 visualize the signing

3 produce conceptually accurate ASL

Gloss is a bridge to ASL. It is never a substitute for it.