

Sentence Structure

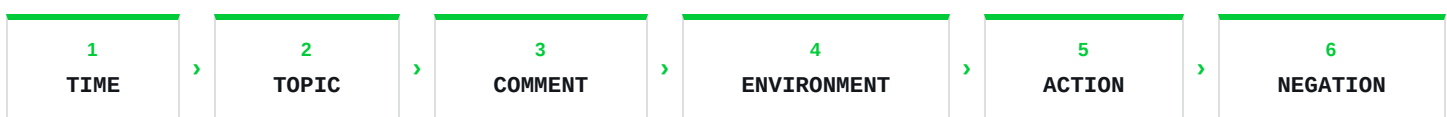
Word order, tense markers, and negation

Before we begin

ASL drops the words it does not need. Sign only what carries meaning — English words disappear, but the picture does not.

and it the a is are to was

Word order



The six parts

1 • Time

When it happened. Set the time first so your listener knows where in time the picture sits.

YESTERDAY NEXT WEEK
NOON

2 • Topic

The subject or object — usually the noun. If a sentence has two, choose the one that matters most to your message.

Picture it: which one pops out at you?

3 • Comment

The relevant information about the topic. Describe it before anything happens to it.

Size Color Collar Tail

4 • Environment

Where it happens. Set it up realistically so it matches the topic and the action that is coming.

GRASS OUTSIDE HOUSE

5 • Action

The verb. It comes last, after everything is set up. Introduce the topic, describe it, then show what it is doing.

6 • Negation

English says *don't understand*. ASL signs the action first, then cancels it.

UNDERSTAND NOT

Draw the picture, then show the action

Every rule above is the same idea: an ASL sentence is built the way a picture is drawn. Put the subject on the paper, color it in, set it somewhere real — and only then let it move.

ENGLISH Yesterday I did not see the big black dog playing outside in the grass.
ASL GLOSS YESTERDAY DOG BLACK BIG GRASS OUTSIDE ME SEE PLAY NOT

Drawing the Picture

One sentence, built a layer at a time

Building a sentence

STEP 1 Topic	DOG
STEP 2 Comment	DOG BLACK BIG
STEP 3 Environment	DOG BLACK BIG GRASS OUTSIDE
STEP 4 Action	DOG BLACK BIG GRASS OUTSIDE ME SEE PLAY
STEP 5 Time & negation	YESTERDAY DOG BLACK BIG GRASS OUTSIDE ME SEE PLAY NOT

THE FINISHED SENTENCE

YESTERDAY DOG BLACK BIG GRASS OUTSIDE ME SEE PLAY NOT

WATCH THE DIRECTION

The sign **SEE** moving from the signer out toward the signer's dominant side means they are talking about **someone**, not something.

Time indicators and negation

Where the time goes

- › **Past** — always at the beginning.
- › **Future** — at the beginning, or after the topic but before the action.
- › **Present** — not needed. We live in the present.

You may still sign **TODAY** up front if there is any chance of confusion.

TODAY SCHOOL ME GO NOT

An actual time comes first

If you have a real clock time — not just a tense marker — it always goes at the very front of the sentence, ahead of everything else.

NOON TODAY DOG BLACK BIG GRASS OUTSIDE ME SEE PLAY

Negation goes last

English puts the *not* in front of the verb. ASL signs the action first, then cancels it.

UNDERSTAND NOT

ME GO NOT

Ready, Set, Go

Rewrite each English sentence in ASL gloss

How it works

Write your name, hour, and the date. Read each English sentence below and rewrite it in ASL gloss on the line underneath, using the word order rules from this lesson. Drop the words ASL does not need. Try your best.

Name

Hour

Date

Practice

1 The little girl and boy go to school every weekend.

2 Later today our team goes out to eat and drink.

3 The girl is coming to my house tonight to eat chicken.

4 The people here didn't understand the lesson.

5 There is no communication in my family.

6 The performance concluded at 7:30 pm.

7 I am studying for final exams next week.

REMEMBER THE ORDER

TIME › TOPIC › COMMENT › ENVIRONMENT › ACTION › NEGATION