

Mouth Morphemes

Movements of the mouth that change what a sign means

What they are

Mouth morphemes are movements you make with your mouth while you sign. Most of them work as adverbs: they emphasize a sign, or add meaning to it, without any extra sign being made.

The hands say what happened. The mouth says how.

Size, manner, and degree

OO

Something is small, thin, or smooth — or that it is **really** the way the adjective it accompanies describes.

CHA

Large size or a large amount.

MM

Something is normal or regular, in size or in action.
Nothing unusual is happening.

LIPS PURSED

Something is typical. It takes no effort — it is easy, or a pleasure to do.

HOW YOU MAKE IT

Lips pushed forward and puckered. Sometimes called the duck face.

PUFFED CHEEKS

Something is large or fat. Also used for a time far in the future or far in the past.

STA-STA

Intensity or effort. You are working hard at whatever the sign is doing.

HOW YOU MAKE IT

The mouth opens and closes.

One sign, three different mouths

The clearest way to show what a mouth morpheme does is to hold the hands still and change only the mouth. Sign **WRITE** three times: with **MM** you are just writing, with **TH** you are scribbling carelessly, with **TIGHT MOUTH** you are writing with great care. The hands never changed.

Mouth Morphemes

Movements of the mouth that change what a sign means

Size, manner, and degree, continued

TIGHT MOUTH

Extreme care, diligence, and deliberation. You are being very careful.

HOW YOU MAKE IT

Lips pressed firmly together.

TH

Carelessness, or a lack of deliberation. Mindless, sloppy, or you simply do not care.

HOW YOU MAKE IT

Tongue protruding between the teeth.

CS

Something is very near, in time or in space. Just now, or just here.

HOW YOU MAKE IT

Teeth clenched. The name stands for *cheek to shoulder*.

Tied to a particular sign

FISH

Used when signing the word FINISH.

AHH

Used with signs that show or extend a length of time, such as **ALL-DAY**. Also used when you are astounded or shocked.

PAH

Used when signing FINALLY or SUCCESS.

Not the same as mouthing English

A mouth morpheme is part of the ASL sign, not an English word being spoken silently alongside it. **TH** is not the letters T and H, and **CHA** is not a word — they are mouth shapes that carry meaning of their own.