

Non-Manual Markers

Twenty-four markers, grouped by the job they do

Why they matter

Non-manual markers are facial expressions and body movements that carry grammatical information, tone, and emotional context. They handle negation, questions, intensity, and much more — often the face is doing as much work as the hands.

Grouped here by function rather than numbered in a list, so you can find the marker you need by the job you want it to do.

Grammar and structure

Raised eyebrows

Yes/no questions and conditional statements. Also shows surprise or focus.

EXAMPLE

“Are you coming?” — brows up across the whole question.

Furrowed eyebrows

WH-questions — who, what, where, when, why, how. Also marks something negative or contrasting.

EXAMPLE

“What time is it?”

Head nod

Agreement, affirmation, or a simple yes in response.

EXAMPLE

“Yes, I want to go.”

Head shake

Negation, disagreement, or a simple no.

EXAMPLE

“No, I don’t want to go.”

Head tilt

Conditional and contrastive statements. Sometimes focus, or a questioning tone.

EXAMPLE

“If you go, I’ll go.” — tilt held on the if-clause.

Eye shifting

A change of subject, location, or object. It also carries the direction of a verb.

EXAMPLE

Look toward each person while signing **SHE GIVE-HIM BOOK.**

Neutral face

No expression at all. Marks something plain and factual, with nothing added to it.

EXAMPLE

“The book is on the table.”

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Size, manner, and degree

Mouth morphemes

Small mouth movements that carry tone, size, and other characteristics of the sign.

P	Small or tight — a small thing, or a tight situation.
B	Wide open mouth. Something large or intense.
F	Smiling, mouth slightly open. Something light or playful.
Tsk	Tongue clucked. Disapproval, annoyance, hesitation.
Mmm	Mouth closed, humming. Approval, a good outcome.

Pursed lips

Something is small or narrow.

EXAMPLE

"That's a small room." / "I can only squeeze through there."

Same mouth shape as *lip pursing* under Emotion — the context tells them apart.

Puffed cheeks

Something is large, heavy, or takes real effort or strength.

EXAMPLE

"That box is heavy."

Emotion and reaction

Open mouth

Surprise, shock, or astonishment. Also used for intensity — a reaction to something unexpected.

EXAMPLE

A surprised "Wow!", or expressing disbelief.

Widened eyes

Surprise, shock, or something exciting.

EXAMPLE

"Wow! You did that?"

Mouth "O" or "A"

Something round or large. Also marks a sudden realization.

EXAMPLE

A moment of realization, or a reaction to it.

Tongue out

Disgust or distaste. Sometimes used for extreme emotion such as frustration.

EXAMPLE

A look of displeasure.

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Emotion and reaction, continued

Nose wrinkle

Distaste, disgust, or dislike.

EXAMPLE

Reacting to something unappealing.

Frowning or pinched face

Frustration, confusion, or something being difficult.

EXAMPLE

"This is hard."

Facial tightening

Tension, stress, or difficulty.

EXAMPLE

"I'm stressed about the test."

Lip pursing

Disapproval, hesitation, or uncertainty.

EXAMPLE

Reacting to something mildly disagreeable.

Same mouth shape as *pursed lips* under Size — that one is size, this one is attitude.

Shoulder shrug

Uncertainty or indifference — I don't know, or I don't care.

EXAMPLE

A shrug while signing **I DON'T-KNOW**.

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Questions and uncertainty

Squinted eyes

A question or confusion. Also shows something happening at a distance.

EXAMPLE

When you are unsure of something.

Squinted eyes with furrowed brows

Confusion, doubt, or questioning.

EXAMPLE

When you don't understand and are asking for clarification.

Raised eyebrows with head tilt

Curiosity, questioning, or disbelief.

EXAMPLE

"Really?"

Eyebrow flutter

Surprise, confusion, or a question. The brows move or alternate rather than holding.

EXAMPLE

When you are unsure and trying to clarify.

Jaw jut

A question, or a focused questioning tone.

EXAMPLE

"What do you mean?" or "Huh?"

The face is not decoration

Several of these markers share the same physical shape and are told apart only by what surrounds them. Pursued lips can mean *small* or mean *I disapprove*; raised eyebrows can open a yes/no question or express disbelief. Teach the context along with the shape.