

Non-Manual Marker Games

Twenty activities, grouped by what they practice

How to use these

Twenty ways to drill non-manual markers — the facial expressions and body movements that carry grammar and tone in ASL. They are grouped by what they practice, so an activity can be dropped into whatever lesson is already running.

Most need nothing but a prompt list. A few need cards printed ahead of time; each activity notes what to prepare.

Warm-ups and drills

Facial expression practice

Mirror work on the four core markers: brows raised for yes/no, brows furrowed for WH-questions, puffed cheeks for size or effort, head nod and shake for yes and no. Then match each expression to a sample sentence.

TEMPLATE

A printable expression chart pairing sentences with markers — “Are you tired?” with raised brows, “What’s your name?” with furrowed.

Question drills

Students work through a set of questions, using the marker each question type requires. Brows up for yes/no, brows furrowed for WH.

TEMPLATE

A worksheet with blanks for students to write, then sign, their own yes/no and WH-questions.

Sentence transformation

Take one neutral sentence — “I went to the park” — and sign it again as excitement, then as confusion. The hands do not change; only the face does.

TEMPLATE

A list of neutral sentences with room to note each tone practiced.

ASL Mad Libs

Fill-in-the-blank sentences such as “I feel ____” or “The ____ is very big.” Students pick the word, then use a marker to emphasize the choice they made.

TEMPLATE

Pre-made Mad Lib worksheets with blanks for emotions and objects.

Expression freeze

Call out a sentence type or an emotion — “ask a yes/no question,” “show anger.” Students freeze their faces into the marker and the rest of the class guesses what was called.

TEMPLATE

A call-out list of sentence types and emotions for the instructor.

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Questions and structure

Guess the question

One student signs a question and the class decides whether it is yes/no, WH, or rhetorical — judging by the face alone.

TEMPLATE

Sentence prompts, one per card, for students to draw and sign.

WH-question hunt

Hide WH-question prompts around the room. Students find one, sign it with furrowed brows, and score the point only if the marker is right.

TEMPLATE

Printable WH-question prompts, cut small enough to hide.

Contrastive structures

Sentences that set two things against each other: "I like coffee, but not tea." "She prefers dogs; he prefers cats." Body shift and head tilt carry the contrast.

TEMPLATE

A worksheet of unfinished comparisons for students to complete and sign.

Emotion and tone

Emotion charades

A student draws an emotion card — happy, angry, sad, confused, excited — and signs any sentence carrying it. The others name the emotion.

TEMPLATE

Emotion cards with both the word and an icon, for quick reading.

Emoji to ASL

Students draw an emoji card and build a sentence whose marker matches the face on it.

TEMPLATE

Emoji cards with the emotion labeled underneath.

Emoji ASL game

The same idea run for the whole room. Put an emoji on the screen and every student signs a sentence to match it.

TEMPLATE

Emoji flashcards or a slide deck for the front of the room. Close cousin of *Emoji to ASL* — that one runs from cards in hand, this one from the board.

Emotion swap

One student signs a sentence with a happy tone. The next re-signs the same sentence as sad, or annoyed, changing only the face.

TEMPLATE

A list of sentences plain enough to hold up under several tones.

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Storytelling and narrative

Storytelling challenge

A short story from a prompt — a lost dog, a favorite day at school — with markers carrying the surprise, the happiness, the confusion.

TEMPLATE

Printable story prompts on cards for random selection.

Story switch

Students tell a story one sentence at a time while you call out marker changes mid-story: “switch to angry.” They adjust on the spot and keep going.

TEMPLATE

Story prompts short enough to survive being interrupted.

Facial focus stories

A story told with the hands kept small and plain, so that nearly all the meaning rides on the face. Classmates report back what they understood.

TEMPLATE

Simple story prompts that lean on emotion rather than detail.

Team games and relays

NMM bingo

Boards filled with markers — raised brows, head shake, puffed cheeks. Students mark off each one they see or use during a practice session.

TEMPLATE

Customizable bingo cards drawn from the full marker list.

Role-playing scenarios

Scenario cards — order food at a restaurant, ask directions to the library — played out with attention to the markers each exchange needs.

TEMPLATE

Printable role-play cards for classroom use.

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Team games and relays, continued

Expression relay

Teams take turns. One member draws a card pairing a marker with an emotion, signs a sentence using both, and the team names the combination.

TEMPLATE

Cards pairing one marker with one emotion.

Expression battles

Two students sign sentences with opposite tones — happy against angry. The class votes on whose markers read more clearly.

TEMPLATE

Sentence prompts neutral enough to swing either direction.

Expression match relay

Teams race to match marker cards to the sentences and expressions posted on the whiteboard.

TEMPLATE

Marker cards plus a set of sentences to match them against.

Tips for success

Exaggerate while practicing — clarity first, subtlety later. Watch context, since the same expression can change what a sentence means. And build in peer feedback: students usually cannot see what their own face is doing.