

Rules of Glossing

What glossing is, and the eight rules that govern it

What glossing is

Glossing is a system for writing American Sign Language down, using English words and symbols. ASL has no written form of its own, so glossing is how we describe on paper what the hands, face, and body are doing in a sentence.

A gloss is not a translation. It is a record of the signs, in the order they are signed.

The eight rules

1

Capital letters for signs

ASL signs are written in all capital letters.

ENGLISH I love you.

ASL GLOSS I LOVE YOU

2

Fingerspelling

When a word is fingerspelled, mark it with **fs-** in front of the word.

ENGLISH Her name is Ava.

ASL GLOSS HER NAME fs-AVA

3

IX — indexing and pointing

The symbol **IX** marks pointing to, or referring to, a person, place, or thing.

ENGLISH She is my friend.

ASL GLOSS IX-SHE MY FRIEND

Rules of Glossing

The eight rules, continued

The eight rules, continued

4

Non-manual markers

Facial expressions, head movements, and other non-manual markers are written on a line above the signs they affect.

ENGLISH I don't understand.

NEG

ASL GLOSS **I UNDERSTAND**

The line marked **NEG** means a headshake held across those signs to show negation.

ENGLISH Are you tired?

EYEBROWS UP

ASL GLOSS **TIRED**

Raised eyebrows turn a statement into a yes/no question.

5

WH-question word order

WH-questions — who, what, when, where, why, how — go at the **end** of an ASL sentence.

ENGLISH Where is the bathroom?

EYEBROWS DOWN

ASL GLOSS **BATHROOM WHERE**

6

Time → Topic → Comment

ASL sets the time first, then the topic, then says something about it.

ENGLISH I will go to the store tomorrow.

ASL GLOSS **TOMORROW STORE I GO**

Rules of Glossing

The eight rules, continued

The eight rules, continued

7

Role shifting

When you show dialogue or switch to another person's perspective, mark the shift with **RS**.

ENGLISH She told me she was tired.

ASL GLOSS **IX-SHE SAY (RS-SHE) TIRED**

8

Classifiers

Classifiers represent objects, shapes, movements, and locations. Write the classifier, then what it is doing in parentheses.

ENGLISH The car drove by fast.

ASL GLOSS **CAR CL:3 (ZOOM PAST)**

CL:3 is the vehicle handshape; the parentheses describe its movement.

More examples

I like pizza.

I LIKE PIZZA

The plainest case — subject, verb, object.

Yesterday, I went to school.

YESTERDAY SCHOOL I GO

The time marker goes at the front.

What is your favorite color?

EYEBROWS DOWN

YOUR FAVORITE COLOR WHAT

WH-word last, brows lowered.

Are you a student?

EYEBROWS UP

YOU STUDENT

Brows raised makes it a yes/no question.

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More examples of the rules in action

More examples, continued

My mom said, "Go to bed now!"

MY MOM SAY (RS-MOM) GO BED NOW

Shift your body slightly to show the change of speaker.

If it rains tomorrow, I will stay home.

EYEBROWS UP

IF TOMORROW RAIN, I STAY HOME

Raised brows across the if-clause mark the condition.

That book, I don't like it.

BOOK THAT, I NOT LIKE

Topic first, then the comment about it.

My friend told me, "I am hungry."

MY FRIEND SAY (RS-FRIEND) I HUNGRY

The role shift carries the quoted words.

The car turned left and parked.

CAR CL:3 (DRIVE-LEFT STOP PARK)

One classifier carries the whole sequence of movement.

I don't want to go to the party.

HEAD SHAKE

PARTY I NOT WANT

The headshake reinforces the negation.

The cup is on the table.

**TABLE CL:B (FLAT-SURFACE), CUP CL:C
(PLACE-ON)**

CL:B is the table, **CL:C** is the cup placed on it.

Reading the marker line

The small underlined label above a gloss shows a non-manual marker and how far it reaches. It is held across those signs, not added at the end.

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Reinforcement activities for the classroom

Using these

Eleven activities, ordered roughly from easiest to hardest. The first few check whether students can read and write gloss; the later ones ask them to produce it under pressure or from a live source.

Activities

1 • Sentence conversion

Give students English sentences to write out in ASL gloss.

I am happy.
She gave me a book.
What is your name?

2 • Matching game

One set of cards with English sentences, another set with the gloss. Students match each pair.

3 • Fill in the blanks

Hand out gloss sentences with a sign missing and have students supply it.

TOMORROW _____ I GO
Answer: STORE

4 • Marker challenge

Give a sentence and have students add the right non-manual marker.

YOU SICK (_____)?
Answer: eyebrows up

5 • Glossing detective

Hand out gloss with a deliberate mistake in it and have students find and fix it.

I GO YESTERDAY SCHOOL
Correct: YESTERDAY SCHOOL I GO

6 • Sentence expansion

Start from a bare gloss. Students add time, classifiers, or a role shift.

DOG RUN
becomes
YESTERDAY DOG CL:4 (RUN-FAST) PARK

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Reinforcement activities, continued

Activities, continued

7 • Charades with classifiers

Write scenarios on slips of paper. Students act them out with classifiers while the class guesses the gloss.

A small car driving fast.
A person walking slowly.

8 • Role-shift dialogue

Assign characters and have pairs act out a short conversation, shifting the body between speakers.

MOM SAY (RS-MOM) GO CLEAN ROOM.
(RS-CHILD) LATER I DO.

9 • Glossing race

Put an English sentence on the board. Teams race to gloss it correctly; first correct team scores.

Next week, we will visit my grandmother.
NEXT-WEEK WE VISIT MY GRANDMA

10 • Describe and translate

Show a picture. Students write a gloss sentence describing it, using classifiers and correct structure.

A boy kicking a soccer ball.
BOY CL:1 (STAND) CL:1 (KICK BALL CL:0)

11 • Story translation

Give groups a short English story, or play a short ASL story or conversation, and have them write the gloss for the key sentences.

A man was walking when he saw a bird in a tree. The bird flew away.
MAN WALK CL:1, SEE BIRD TREE CL:V
(PERCH). BIRD CL:V (FLY-AWAY).

Checking student work

There is often more than one acceptable gloss for the same English sentence. Look for the things the rules actually govern: time at the front, WH-word at the end, topic before comment, markers written above the signs they cover.