

The 5 Parameters of ASL

Think of these parameters as the **"ingredients"** that make up every ASL sign. If you change one of the parameters, you could completely change the meaning of the sign—just like changing one letter can change a word in English.

1. Handshape



This is the shape your hand makes when signing.

- **There are over 40 handshapes** in ASL.
- Some common ones: **A, B, C, S, 1, 5**, etc.
- ✨ Changing the handshape can make a sign totally different!

Example:

- **"Apple"** uses an X handshape near the cheek.
 - **"Onion"** uses the same X handshape, but it's twisted near the eye.
Same handshape—different location = different sign!
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2. Palm Orientation



This refers to the **direction your palm is facing** during the sign.

- Up, down, toward you, away from you, to the side.
- A small change in palm orientation can change meaning.

Example:

- **"Mine"** = palm facing your chest.
- **"Yours"** = palm facing away, toward the other person.

They use the same handshape and location, but the orientation flips the meaning.

3. Location



This is **where on the body or in space** the sign is made.

- Signs can be made near the head, chest, shoulders, hands, or neutral space.
- Moving a sign's location can change the word.

Example:

- **"Mother"** is signed at the **chin**.
 - **"Father"** is signed at the **forehead**.
Same handshape and movement—but the location makes the difference!
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4. Movement



This describes **how the sign moves**—up/down, in/out, circular, side to side, tapping, etc.

- Movement gives the sign meaning.
- Repeating or changing the movement can affect tense, emphasis, or meaning.

Example:

- **"Sit"** = one tap of two fingers on the other hand.
 - **"Chair"** = repeated tapping motion.
Same handshape and location, but different movement = different signs.
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5. Non-Manual Markers (NMMs)



These are the **facial expressions and body movements** that go with the sign.

- Includes eyebrows, eye gaze, mouth shapes, head movement, and body posture.
- NMMs help show grammar (like questions), emotions, or tone.

Examples:

- **Yes/No questions** = eyebrows **up**
- **Wh- questions** (who, what, where, why, when) = eyebrows **down**, head tilted
- **"Not"** = shaking your head while signing

Quick Recap

Each ASL sign is made up of these 5 ingredients:

1. **Handshape** – what your hand looks like
2. **Palm Orientation** – which way it faces
3. **Location** – where it happens
4. **Movement** – how it moves
5. **Non-Manual Markers** – facial expressions & body movements

✳ Change one = you might say something totally different!