

Every ASL sign is built from these five parts. **Change one and you can change the meaning completely** — the same way changing one letter changes a word in English.

1 Handshape

The shape your hand makes.

- There are over 40 handshapes in ASL.
- Common ones include A, B, C, S, 1, and 5.

EXAMPLE

APPLE and CANDY are both made at the cheek with the same twisting movement. APPLE uses an X handshape; CANDY uses a 1 handshape. Only the handshape changes.

2 Palm orientation

The direction your palm faces.

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

EXAMPLE

MY is signed with the flat palm against your chest. YOUR is signed with the flat palm turned out toward the other person. The handshape stays the same.

3 Location

Where the sign is made on the body or in space.

- Near the head, chest, shoulders, hands, or in neutral space.
- Moving a sign somewhere else can change the word.

EXAMPLE

MOTHER is signed at the chin. FATHER is signed at the forehead. Same handshape, same movement — only the location changes.

4 Movement

How the sign moves.

- Up and down, in and out, circular, side to side, or tapping.
- Repeating or changing movement can affect tense, emphasis, or meaning.

EXAMPLE

SIT is one tap of two fingers onto the other hand. CHAIR repeats that tap. Same handshape, same location — only the movement changes.

5 Non-manual markers (NMM)

The facial expressions and body movements that go with the sign.

- Eyebrows, eye gaze, mouth shape, head movement, and body posture.
- Non-manual markers carry grammar, emotion, and tone.
- They often stretch across a whole phrase, not just one sign.

Yes / no question
Eyebrows up

Wh- question (who, what, where, why, when)
Eyebrows down, head tilted

NOT
Shake your head while signing

Quick recap

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

Face and body

Change one — and you might say something completely different.