

English vs. ASL

How the two languages build a sentence differently

Using this chart

Ten places where English and ASL make different choices. The point is not that one is simpler than the other — both are complete languages, and each one solves the same problems its own way.

Students who translate word for word from English get stuck on exactly these ten things. Work down the ASL column and the reasons become clear.

The comparison

Word order

ENGLISH

Subject, then verb, then object. The order rarely moves.

"I will go to the store tomorrow."

ASL

Topic first, then the comment about it. The order shifts to put the important thing up front.

TOMORROW STORE I GO

Pronouns

ENGLISH

Spoken pronouns carry the reference: he, she, it, they.

"She is my friend."

ASL

Pointing, called indexing, does the same job for subjects and objects.

IX-SHE MY FRIEND

Verb tense

ENGLISH

Tense lives inside the verb: go, went, will go.

"Yesterday, I went to school."

ASL

A time indicator at the start of the sentence sets the tense, and the verb itself does not change.

YESTERDAY SCHOOL I GO

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The comparison, continued

Articles

ENGLISH

Articles mark the nouns: **a, an, the**.

a

an

the

ASL

No articles at all. The noun stands on its own.

a

an

the

To be verbs

ENGLISH

Linking verbs join the subject to what follows.

am

is

are

was

were

ASL

Omitted. The subject and what is said about it sit side by side, and context does the linking.

am

is

are

was

were

Negation

ENGLISH

Add **not**, or a negative contraction such as don't or won't.

"I don't understand."

ASL

A headshake, the sign NOT, or negation carried on the face — often more than one at once.

NEG

I UNDERSTAND

WH-questions

ENGLISH

The WH-word opens the sentence: who, what, when, where, why, how.

"What are you doing?"

ASL

The WH-word typically goes at the end, with the eyebrows lowered across the question.

EYEBROWS DOWN

YOU DO WHAT

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Yes / no questions

ENGLISH

The voice rises at the end to mark the question.

“Are you tired?”

ASL

Raised eyebrows, a head tilt, and a hold on the last sign.

EYEBROWS UP

TIRED

Conjunctions

ENGLISH

Joining words carry the connection: and, but, because.

and

but

because

ASL

A shift of the body, a change in facial expression, or a specific sign does the joining.

FINISH

WHY

Adjectives

ENGLISH

Usually placed before the noun they describe.

“a red ball”

ASL

Usually placed after the noun. Name the thing, then describe it.

BALL RED

A note on the underlined labels

The small label above a gloss is a non-manual marker — a headshake or an eyebrow position held across those signs. English carries that work in the voice; ASL carries it on the face.