

ASL grammar quick reference

Name _____

Date _____

HOW TO READ THIS

These are the patterns that turn a string of signs into an ASL sentence. Word order does part of the work and your face and body do the rest, so read every entry below as two things at once: what the hands do, and what the face does at the same time.

1 SENTENCE STRUCTURE

- ♦ ASL typically uses topic-comment structure: name the topic, then say something about it.
Example: "I am going to the store." → STORE I GO.

2 WH- QUESTIONS

- ♦ WH-words usually go at the end of the sentence.
- ♦ Furrow your brows and tilt your head, and hold it for the whole question.
Example: "Where are you going?" → YOU GO WHERE?

3 YES / NO QUESTIONS

- ♦ Raise your eyebrows, tilt your head forward, and hold the last sign.
Example: "Are you hungry?" → YOU HUNGRY YOU?

4 NON-MANUAL MARKERS (NMMs)

- ♦ **WH- questions** — furrowed brows
- ♦ **Yes / no questions** — raised eyebrows
- ♦ **Negation** — head shake
- ♦ **Affirmation** — head nod
- ♦ **Topic marker** — raised brows with a slight pause

5 NEGATION

- ◆ Use a head shake, the sign NOT, or both together.

Example: “I don’t like coffee.” → COFFEE I LIKE NOT.

6 DIRECTIONAL VERBS

- ◆ The movement of the verb carries the subject and the object – who is doing it, and to whom.

Example: GIVE, SHOW, and HELP all move from the doer toward the receiver.

7 TIME INDICATORS

- ◆ Time comes first in the sentence, before the rest of the comment.

Example: “Yesterday I went to school.” → YESTERDAY SCHOOL I GO.

8 CLASSIFIERS

- ◆ Classifiers stand in for a noun, or describe its size, shape, and movement.
- ◆ CL:1 a person · CL:3 a vehicle · CL:5 a group · CL:B a flat surface, and more.

9 ROLE SHIFTING

- ◆ Used to show dialogue, or more than one point of view.
- ◆ Shift your body and your eye gaze to mark each person you are speaking as.

10 GLOSSING TIPS

- ◆ Write glosses in all capitals: I GO STORE.
- ◆ No punctuation – use markers instead, such as whq, y/n-q, and nmm.
- ◆ Underline or label classifiers and directional verbs.

PRACTICE

Gloss each of these in ASL word order, then write the non-manual signal it needs: “Are you going to the party tonight?” “I did not finish my homework.” “Where did you buy that jacket?” Then sign all three and check that your face matches what you wrote down.

REMEMBER

Grammar in ASL lives on the face as much as in the hands. A question with the right word order and the wrong eyebrows is not yet a question. When you practice, watch your face in a mirror before you worry about your handshapes.