

Who Was William Stokoe?

Dr. William C. Stokoe (pronounced "Stoh-key") was a hearing linguist and professor at Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University). He was born in 1919 and had no personal connection to the Deaf community when he was first hired.

But Stokoe changed Deaf history forever when he recognized and proved that ASL is a real, natural language, not just "English on the hands."

What Did People Think About ASL Before?

Before Stokoe's research (in the 1950s and early 1960s), many hearing people — including educators — believed:

- ASL was just broken English or gestures.
- Sign language had no grammar or structure.
- Deaf children should be taught only oral speech ("oralism").
- Signing was discouraged or banned in many schools.

These beliefs led to the oppression of Deaf people and their language.

What Did Stokoe Discover?

When Dr. Stokoe began teaching at Gallaudet in 1955, he watched Deaf students sign with each other — and he was fascinated.

He noticed patterns, rules, and rich structure in the way they signed. He realized that ASL was not random — it was organized, rule-based, and expressive, just like spoken languages.

Stokoe's Groundbreaking Work

1. He Created a Way to Study ASL

Stokoe developed a linguistic system to analyze ASL — breaking signs into three parts (still used today):

Part	Description	Example
Location (tab)	Where the sign happens on the body or in space	forehead, chest, neutral space
Handshape (dez)	The shape of the hand during the sign	fist, flat hand, V shape
Movement (sig)	The motion of the hand	tapping, circling, sliding

These parts showed that signs are made up of smaller pieces, like phonemes in spoken language.

2. He Published a Book: 1960

In 1960, he published:

“Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf”

This was the first scientific study that said:

- ASL is a real language
- It has its own grammar and structure
- It is different from English

Reaction: At First, People Didn't Believe Him

Many people — even some Deaf educators — didn’t believe Stokoe at first.

- They were taught that spoken and written language were the only “real” languages.
- Sign language was still looked down on in schools.

But over time, linguists, educators, and the Deaf community began to see that his research was right.

More Contributions

- In 1965, Stokoe co-wrote the first ASL dictionary with Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline: “*A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*”

- He founded the journal Sign Language Studies in 1972, the first publication focused on sign linguistics.

Why Is William Stokoe So Important?

1. He Changed How the World Sees ASL

His work helped prove ASL is not a code for English, but its own complete, natural language.

2. He Helped Validate Deaf Culture

By recognizing ASL, he also helped legitimize Deaf culture and identity. Language is central to culture.

3. He Opened Doors in Education

His research helped inspire bilingual-bicultural education, where Deaf students learn in both ASL and English.

4. He Changed Linguistics

He opened up a whole new field: the linguistic study of sign languages. Today, there are researchers all over the world studying signed languages thanks to his early work.

Legacy and Honors

- William Stokoe is often called "The Father of ASL Linguistics."
- Though hearing, he was deeply respected by the Deaf community.
- A statue of Stokoe stands on the Gallaudet University campus today.
- His work is required reading in Deaf Studies and Linguistics programs around the world.

Summary Chart

Fact	Details
Name	Dr. William Stokoe
Job	Linguist at Gallaudet College
Year of Breakthrough	1960
Key Book	<i>Sign Language Structure</i>
Discovery	ASL is a real language with its own grammar
Impact	Changed Deaf education, validated ASL, inspired linguistic research