

How Do People Get Name Signs in ASL?

One of the most fascinating traditions in American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf culture is the practice of giving *name signs*. Unlike spoken names, which are simply said aloud, a name sign is a unique sign that identifies a person within the Deaf community. It carries cultural weight, connects people to the community, and reflects both identity and history. But where did this practice start, and how do people actually get a name sign?

The Origins of Name Signs

The tradition of name signs goes back to the early development of signed languages in Deaf schools. In the 19th century, when Deaf communities in the United States began forming particularly around the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut...students and teachers needed ways to distinguish between people quickly and efficiently in visual conversation. Fingerspelling each name letter-by-letter was possible, but slow. Instead, Deaf communities began assigning visual "nicknames," which evolved into the cultural practice of giving name signs.

This tradition continues today not only in ASL, but also in signed languages around the world, each with their own systems for creating and passing down name signs.

Who Gives a Name Sign?

A key aspect of Deaf culture is that you don't create your own name sign. Instead, it is given to you—most often by a Deaf person. This reflects the idea that a name sign is a mark of connection and acceptance into the community. For hearing people learning ASL, being given a name sign by Deaf peers or mentors is often considered an honor, showing that they are recognized as part of the community.

Types of Name Signs

Name signs generally fall into two categories:

1. **Descriptive Name Signs**

These are based on a person's physical features, personality traits, or unique behaviors. For example, someone with curly hair might receive a name sign that incorporates a curly hand movement, while someone known for always smiling might get a sign based on that expression.

2. Arbitrary Name Signs

These are more standardized and often use an initial from the person's English name, placed on a neutral location of the body (like the shoulder, cheek, or side of the head). Arbitrary signs don't describe the person physically but still provide a quick and efficient way to reference them in conversation.

Sometimes, over time, a descriptive name sign may replace or supplement an arbitrary one, depending on how the community sees and interacts with the individual.

Cultural Rules and Respect

Name signs are not casual nicknames; they are deeply tied to identity in the Deaf community. Some important cultural guidelines include:

- **Only the Deaf community gives name signs.** It's considered inappropriate to make one up for yourself.
- **Respect is built into the process.** Receiving a name sign means you've been noticed and accepted.
- **Name signs evolve.** Sometimes, a person's name sign may change as they grow, change professions, or become well-known for something else.

For example, many famous Deaf people are recognized by their name signs in addition to their spoken or written names.

Why Name Signs Matter

Name signs are more than just convenient labels. They represent belonging, identity, and culture. For Deaf people, a name sign is often the primary way they are known within the community. For hearing ASL learners, receiving one is often a special moment that marks a deeper level of connection and respect.

Final Thoughts

The tradition of name signs in ASL started as a practical solution, but it has grown into a meaningful cultural practice. Whether descriptive or arbitrary, name signs reflect the creativity, identity, and values of the Deaf community. If you're new to ASL, remember: a name sign isn't just handed out casually—it's a cultural gift. And like all gifts, it's best when received with respect and gratitude.