

Origins of initialized signs

Name _____

Date _____

ORIGINS

Where the letters inside these signs came from.

CONTACT WITH ENGLISH

Initialized signs developed as part of ASL's long history of contact with English. Because ASL and English have always coexisted in American Deaf communities, and especially in schools, borrowing from English spelling and vocabulary happened naturally.

MANUAL CODES FOR ENGLISH (MCE)

In the mid-twentieth century, educational systems promoted Signed English and SEE, or Signing Exact English. These systems tried to represent English word for word. To produce enough signs for every English word, educators often added handshapes matching English letters.

Example: G for GREEN, Y for YELLOW, P for PURPLE.

BILINGUAL INFLUENCE

Some initialization existed in early ASL well before SEE, through natural borrowing from fingerspelling. But the large wave of initialized signs arrived between the 1950s and the 1970s, under pressure to make ASL look more English-like in schools.

WHY THEY SPREAD

Three reasons initialization took hold so quickly.

TEACHING TOOL

Teachers found initialization useful for separating concepts that might otherwise share a similar sign.

Example: MATH, ALGEBRA, and GEOMETRY each took a different initialized handshake.

LEXICAL EXPANSION

ASL did not always have a distinct traditional sign for every English academic or technical term. Initialization let the Deaf community and educators build new vocabulary quickly.

PRESTIGE OF ENGLISH

For much of the history of Deaf education, English was treated as the prestige language. Borrowing its letters made ASL appear more aligned with spoken and written English, especially in schools that discouraged natural ASL.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

How Deaf signers regard these signs today.

ACCEPTANCE

Some initialized signs are widely accepted and feel natural to Deaf signers today – FAMILY, CLASS, TEAM. They have been used across generations and belong to core ASL vocabulary.

RESISTANCE

Other initialized signs, especially SEE-inspired ones such as YELLOW and BLUE, are often criticized as unnecessary or far from ASL. Many Deaf people prefer the older, more iconic signs that carry no letter at all.

ONGOING DEBATE

Linguists and community members still discuss which initialized signs count as authentic ASL and which are remnants of English-dominated educational policy.

TALK ABOUT IT

Which initialized signs do you use without ever thinking about the letter inside them? Historically, who was making the decisions about which signs would carry English letters, and who lived with those decisions? Does knowing where a sign came from change how you feel about using it? Deaf signers disagree on that last one, and the disagreement is part of the story.

IN SHORT

Initialized signs began as borrowings from fingerspelling, then spread widely during the push for Signed English in Deaf schools between the 1950s and the 1970s. Some have stuck and are now standard ASL. Others are still debated, or rejected outright.