

# Origins of Initialized Signs

- **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 (especially in schools), borrowing from English spelling and vocabulary naturally happened.
- **Manual Codes for English (MCE):** In the mid-20th century, educational systems promoted "Signed English" or "SEE" (Signing Exact English). These systems tried to represent English word-for-word. To create enough signs for all English words, educators often added **handshapes corresponding to English letters** (like "G" for GREEN, "Y" for YELLOW, "P" for PURPLE).
- **Bilingual Influence:** Even before SEE, some initialization existed in early ASL through natural borrowing from fingerspelling. But the big wave of initialized signs became much more common during the 1950s–1970s because of pressure to make ASL more "English-like" in schools.

## Why They Spread

- **Teaching Tool:** Teachers found initialization useful for distinguishing concepts that might otherwise share similar signs.  
Example: *MATH* vs. *ALGEBRA* vs. *GEOMETRY* each used different initialized handshapes.
- **Lexical Expansion:** ASL didn't always have distinct traditional signs for every English academic or technical term. Initialized signs allowed the Deaf community and educators to quickly create new vocabulary.
- **Prestige of English:** For much of Deaf education history, English was seen as the "prestige language." Borrowing its letters made ASL appear more aligned with spoken/written English, especially in schools that discouraged natural ASL use.

## Community Response

- **Acceptance:** Some initialized signs are widely accepted and feel natural to Deaf signers today (e.g., *FAMILY*, *CLASS*, *TEAM*). They've been used across generations and are part of core ASL vocabulary.
- **Resistance:** Other initialized signs (especially "SEE-inspired" ones like *YELLOW* or *BLUE*) are often criticized as unnecessary or "far from ASL." Many Deaf people prefer the older, more iconic signs without letters.
- **Ongoing Debate:** Linguists and community members still discuss which initialized signs are authentic ASL and which are remnants of English-dominated educational policies.

**In short:** Initialized signs first emerged from fingerspelling borrowings but spread widely during the push for Signed English in Deaf schools (1950s–1970s). Some have stuck and are now standard ASL, while others are still debated or rejected.