

A vertical grammar progression for ASL, aligned to ACTFL proficiency descriptors — text type, functions, and performance expectations.

ACTFL proficiency is not tied to seat time.

The ranges below are targets that help teachers plan instruction and assess growth in Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational signing.

Vertical level targets

ASLdeafined level	Primary ACTFL target range	Text type focus
Beginner	Novice (Low–Mid)	Words and phrases progressing to simple sentences with memorized and practiced structures.
Intermediate	Intermediate (Low–Mid/High)	Sentences and strings of sentences developing into connected sentences with greater detail and clarity.
Advanced	Advanced (Low–Mid)	Connected sentences developing into paragraph-length discourse with narration and description.
Advanced Plus	Advanced (Mid–High)	Paragraph-length discourse with strong control, and the ability to handle complications and sustain accuracy.
Level 5	Advanced High → Emerging Superior	Consistent advanced discourse approaching multi-paragraph structure, register control, and analytical awareness.

ACTFL emphasizes growth in functions (what learners do), contexts and content, text type (words and phrases, sentences, paragraphs, multi-paragraph discourse), and accuracy.

Gloss notation used in this document

ALL CAPS a signed concept	fs- fingerspelled	IX index, or pointing	IX-left referent set to the left
q yes/no question brows	wh-q WH question brows	top topicalized	cond conditional clause
rhet rhetorical question	RS: role shift	CL:3 classifier handshape	++ repetition
LIST-1 listing on the non-dominant hand		GIVE-me-you directional verb, from and to	

1 Beginner

2 Intermediate

3 Advanced

4 Advanced Plus

5 Level 5

Students build sentence-level control: basic gloss conventions, time and topic order, introductory non-manual markers, and simple spatial referencing.

ACTFL target
Novice (Low–Mid)

Basic Glossing System

- Gloss represents signs, not spoken English.
- ALL CAPS used consistently for signed concepts.
- English helper words are omitted when not signed.
- Goal: accurate, readable sentence-level gloss.

ME STUDENT
TODAY SCHOOL ME GO
MY NAME fs-P-A-U-L

Novice Low–Mid

Learners rely on high-frequency language and produce short, highly practiced messages. Text type is primarily words, phrases, and simple sentences.

Time – Topic – Comment

- Time markers are placed first to establish context.
- Topic is introduced before comment or action.
- Students produce short structured sentences without English word order.

YESTERDAY HOMEWORK ME FINISH
TOMORROW TEST I STUDY

Novice Mid → Intermediate Low

Moves learners from isolated elements toward sentence control and early sentence strings by organizing meaning through predictable structure.

Basic Non-Manual Markers

- Yes/no question facial grammar, with raised brows.
- WH-question facial grammar, with furrowed brows.
- Negation using headshake or NOT, as appropriate.

q YOU FINISH?
wh-q WHERE YOU LIVE
UNDERSTAND NOT

Novice Mid

Supports comprehensibility and basic interaction by adding grammatical meaning beyond vocabulary, through questioning and negation.

Indexing and Pronouns

- Pointing replaces English pronouns: I, you, he, she, they.
- Students set up a single referent in space and point back to it.
- Accuracy focus: consistent location and clear reference.

BOY IX-left TALL
IX-me LIKE COFFEE
TEACHER IX-right NICE

Novice Mid → Intermediate Low

Builds the foundation for interpersonal exchange by establishing meaning through spatial reference and simple cohesion.

1 Beginner

2 Intermediate

3 Advanced

4 Advanced Plus

5 Level 5

Students expand from single sentences into connected signing: topic chains, directional verbs, listing, and early role shift.

ACTFL target

Intermediate (Low–Mid/High)

Topic Chains

- Maintain the same topic across two or three connected sentences.
- Reduce English repetition by using spatial reference and cohesion.
- Increase detail and organization: who, what, where, why.

DOG IX-left BIG
IX-left BARK++
NEIGHBOR IX-right ANNOY

Intermediate Low–Mid

ACTFL describes growth from discrete sentences to strings of sentences and connected sentences in interpersonal communication.

Directional Verbs

- Verb movement shows subject-object relationships.
- Students use directionality to keep clear who does what to whom.
- Common targets: GIVE, HELP, ASK, TELL.

GIVE-me-you
ASK-you-me
HELP-3-1

Intermediate Mid

Supports the ability to initiate and sustain conversations by improving accuracy and cohesion across connected sentences.

Listing and Visual Organization

- Non-dominant hand listing organizes multiple items.
- Students use listing to structure explanations and comparisons.
- Improves presentational clarity and audience comprehension.

LIST-1 HOMEWORK LIST-2 TEST LIST-3 PROJECT
LIST-1 DOG LIST-2 CAT LIST-3 FISH

Intermediate Mid

Strengthens presentational organization by expanding sentence strings into more coherent, structured messages.

Basic Role Shift

- Shoulder shift and eye gaze show a change of speaker.
- Students show simple dialogue and reactions.
- The goal is clarity, not performance yet.

MOM IX-left
RS: CLEAN-ROOM NOW
RS: CHILD OK

Intermediate Mid → High

Helps learners sustain interaction and add detail by managing perspective, a step toward organized paragraph-level discourse.

1 Beginner

2 Intermediate

3 Advanced

4 Advanced Plus

5 Level 5

Students move into paragraph-level discourse: conditionals, sustained non-manual grammar, contrastive structure, and cohesion across longer signing.

ACTFL target
Advanced (Low–Mid)

Conditional Clauses

- Raised eyebrows held across the conditional clause.
- A clear pause before the result clause.
- Students express cause, effect, and consequences.

cond STUDY HARD, PASS EASY
cond RAIN, GAME CANCEL
cond NOT PRACTICE, SKILL DROP

Advanced Low

ACTFL notes Advanced-level performance includes narrating and describing in major time frames and handling a complication using paragraph-level communication.

Discourse Cohesion

- Establish referents once, then maintain them across multiple sentences.
- Use IX and spatial anchors instead of renaming repeatedly.
- Add sequencing for clear organization.

3 FRIEND LIST-1 JOHN IX-left LIST-2 MARIA IX-right
IX-left CALL IX-right
IX-right IGNORE

Advanced Low → Mid

Aligns with paragraph-length discourse that is organized and cohesive. Learners connect ideas and sustain meaning beyond connected sentences.

Contrastive Structure

- Use left and right space to compare two ideas, people, or viewpoints.
- Maintain the contrast across the full explanation.
- Parallel structure increases clarity and sophistication.

BOY IX-left STUDY++
GIRL IX-right PROCRASTINATE++
RESULT IX-left PASS IX-right FAIL

Advanced Low → Mid

Supports advanced functions such as explaining and comparing, and cohesive paragraph-length discourse with detail and organization.

Sustained Non-Manual Grammar

- Hold non-manual markers across longer chunks, not just one sign.
- Differentiate a rhetorical question from a WH-question.
- Use NMM to mark topic, condition, contrast, and emphasis.

rhet PROBLEM WHAT? MONEY FINISH
top ASL, ME LOVE
cond YOU PRACTICE, YOU IMPROVE

Advanced Mid

Aligns with the accuracy and control needed to sustain organized paragraph discourse for familiar and some new topics.

1 Beginner

2 Intermediate

3 Advanced

4 Advanced Plus

5 Level 5

Students deepen linguistic control through depicting verbs and classifiers, aspectual modification, rhetorical structures, and visual cause and effect.

ACTFL target

Advanced (Mid-High)

Classifier Narratives

- Select the correct classifier handshape: entity, handling, or SASS.
- Maintain orientation, path movement, and spatial consistency.
- Depict events clearly so the story is visually coherent.

CL:3 CAR DRIVE-DOWN-HILL

CL:3 CAR SWERVE

HIT CL:1 PERSON-FALL

Advanced Mid → High

Supports rich paragraph-level narration and description with detail and organization by expanding text type through visual depiction.

Aspectual Modification

- Modify movement to show duration, frequency, intensity, or continuity.
- Students choose aspect intentionally, based on meaning.
- The goal is morphological control, not just repetition.

WAIT (long-drawn movement)

KNOCK++

SEARCH-continual

GIVE-each

Advanced Mid → High

Aligns with the increased accuracy and control expected as learners sustain advanced-level tasks with confidence and competence.

Rhetorical Structures

- Use a rhetorical question to introduce a point, then answer it.
- Raised brows on the setup, a pause, then confident delivery.
- Used for persuasion, explanation, and emphasis.

WHY FAIL? NOT STUDY

PROBLEM WHAT? MONEY FINISH

REASON WHAT? TIME NONE

Advanced Mid → High

Strengthens presentational discourse by organizing explanations and supporting points of view with clarity and cohesion.

Visual Cause and Effect

- Use space and depiction to show event sequences.
- Maintain cause and effect logic across the narrative.
- Students integrate classifiers, role shift, and non-manual markers.

CL:3 CAR SPEED-UP SUDDEN-STOP

RS: DRIVER SCARED

CL:1 PERSON JUMP-ASIDE

Advanced High

Supports detailed narration and description with an unexpected complication, and the strong organization typical of advanced-high performance.

1 Beginner

2 Intermediate

3 Advanced

4 Advanced Plus

5 Level 5

Students sustain advanced discourse and begin approaching superior-level expectations: multi-referent narratives, embedded clauses, register control, and linguistic analysis.

ACTFL target

Advanced High → Emerging Superior

Multi-Referent Narratives

- Establish three to five referents once, and maintain them consistently.
- Shift between referents smoothly, without re-labeling.
- Re-anchor when needed to keep the audience oriented.

LIST-1 JOHN IX-left LIST-2 MARIA IX-center LIST-3 SAM IX-right
IX-left TELL IX-center
IX-right IGNORE IX-center FRUSTRATE

Advanced High → Emerging Superior

Builds toward superior discourse by sustaining complex organization and extended text type. Advanced-high proficiency includes confident, detailed narration across contexts.

Embedded Clauses

- Layer clauses naturally using topic-comment logic.
- Avoid English relative clause structure.
- Maintain clarity while adding detail.

MAN IX-left LIVE NEXT-DOOR
IX-left NICE
cond IX-left HELP-me, I THANK

Advanced High → Emerging Superior

Aligns with the ability to create cohesive, detailed discourse that integrates supporting information and maintains organization.

Register and Style Variation

- Shift style for formal presentation versus casual conversation.
- Choose discourse structures intentionally: rhetorical setup, sequencing, role shift.
- Demonstrate respectful, context-appropriate language use.

FORMAL: INTRO TOPIC, SUPPORT, CONCLUDE
CASUAL: QUICK EXCHANGE IX-me/IX-you
NARRATIVE: SETUP SPACE, ROLE SHIFT

Advanced High → Emerging Superior

Superior-level descriptors emphasize supporting opinions and discussing topics more abstractly using longer discourse. Register control is a key bridge.

Linguistic Analysis

- Identify depicting verbs and classifiers, and explain the choice.
- Name the aspectual modification used, and why.
- Explain the function of non-manual markers in the message.
- Self-correct and justify revisions.

ANALYZE: CL:3 + PATH MOVEMENT
EXPLAIN: WAIT-durative vs WAIT++
IDENTIFY: cond / top / rhet markers

Advanced High → Emerging Superior

ACTFL emphasizes consistent control and the ability to sustain advanced tasks. Analysis strengthens intentional performance across modes.