

ASLdeafined

Grammar Progression Model

ACTFL-Aligned Expanded Edition (Beginner → Level 5)

Purpose: Provide a clear vertical grammar progression for ASL learning, aligned to ACTFL proficiency descriptors (text type, functions, and performance expectations).

Important: 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 (Approximate ACTFL Ranges)

ASLdefined Level	Primary ACTFL Target Range	Text Type Focus (ACTFL)
Beginner	Novice (Low–Mid)	Words/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; 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/content, text type (words/phrases, sentences, paragraphs, multi-paragraph discourse), and accuracy.

BEGINNER – Foundational Structure

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

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.

Sample gloss examples:

ME STUDENT

TODAY SCHOOL ME GO

MY NAME fs-P-A-U-L

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Novice Low–Mid (Interpersonal / Presentational)

Aligned descriptors: 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/action.
- Students produce short structured sentences without English word order.

Sample gloss examples:

YESTERDAY HOMEWORK ME FINISH

TOMORROW TEST I STUDY

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Novice Mid → Intermediate Low

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

Basic Non-Manual Markers (NMM)

- Yes/No question facial grammar (raised brows).
- WH-question facial grammar (furrowed brows).
- Negation using headshake/NOT (as appropriate).

Sample gloss examples:

q YOU FINISH?

wh-q WHERE YOU LIVE

UNDERSTAND NOT

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Novice Mid

Aligned descriptors: Supports comprehensibility and basic interaction by adding grammatical meaning beyond vocabulary (questioning, negation).

Indexing and Pronouns (IX)

- 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.

Sample gloss examples:

BOY IX-left TALL

IX-me LIKE COFFEE

TEACHER IX-right NICE

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Novice Mid → Intermediate Low

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

INTERMEDIATE – Expanding Structure

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

Topic Chains (Connected Sentences)

- Maintain the same topic across 2–3 connected sentences.
- Reduce English repetition by using spatial reference and cohesion.
- Increase detail and organization (who/what/where/why).

Sample gloss examples:

DOG IX-left BIG

IX-left BARK++

NEIGHBOR IX-right ANNOY

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Intermediate Low–Mid

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

Directional Verbs (Agreement Through Movement)

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

Sample gloss examples:

GIVE-me-you

ASK-you-me

HELP-3-1

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Intermediate Mid

Aligned descriptors: 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.

Sample gloss examples:

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

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Intermediate Mid

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

Basic Role Shift (Early Dialogue Control)

- Shoulder shift + eye gaze shows speaker change.
- Students show simple dialogue and reactions.
- Goal: clarity, not performance (yet).

Sample gloss examples:

MOM IX-left

RS: CLEAN-ROOM NOW

RS: CHILD OK

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Intermediate Mid → Intermediate High

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

ADVANCED – Structural Control

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

Conditional Clauses (IF/WHEN Structures)

- Raised eyebrows held across the conditional clause.
- Clear pause before the result clause.
- Students express cause/effect and consequences.

Sample gloss examples:

cond STUDY HARD, PASS EASY

cond RAIN, GAME CANCEL

cond NOT PRACTICE, SKILL DROP

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Low

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

Discourse Cohesion (Maintaining Referents)

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

Sample gloss examples:

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

IX-left CALL IX-right

IX-right IGNORE

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Low → Advanced Mid

Aligned descriptors: Aligns with paragraph-length discourse that is organized and cohesive; learners connect ideas and sustain meaning beyond connected sentences.

Contrastive Structure (Body Shift Grammar)

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

Sample gloss examples:

BOY IX-left STUDY++

GIRL IX-right PROCRASTINATE++

RESULT IX-left PASS IX-right FAIL

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Low → Advanced Mid

Aligned descriptors: Supports advanced functions (explaining, comparing) and cohesive paragraph-length discourse with detail and organization.

Sustained Non-Manual Grammar (Clause-Length Control)

- Hold NMM across longer chunks (not just one sign).
- Differentiate rhetorical question vs WH-question.
- Use NMM to mark topic, condition, contrast, and emphasis.

Sample gloss examples:

rhet PROBLEM WHAT? MONEY FINISH

top ASL, ME LOVE

cond YOU PRACTICE, YOU IMPROVE

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Mid

Aligned descriptors: Aligns with advanced accuracy and control needed to sustain organized paragraph discourse for familiar and some new topics.

ADVANCED PLUS – Morphological Expansion

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

Classifier Narratives (Depicting Verbs)

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

Sample gloss examples:

CL:3 CAR DRIVE-DOWN-HILL

CL:3 CAR SWERVE

HIT CL:1 PERSON-FALL

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Mid → Advanced High

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

Aspectual Modification (Verb Inflection)

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

Sample gloss examples:

WAIT (long-drawn movement)

KNOCK++

SEARCH-continual

GIVE-each

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Mid → Advanced High

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

Rhetorical Structures (Setup → Answer)

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

Sample gloss examples:

WHY FAIL? NOT STUDY

PROBLEM WHAT? MONEY FINISH

REASON WHAT? TIME NONE

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced Mid → Advanced High

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

Visual Cause & Effect (Sequencing + Space)

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

Sample gloss examples:

CL:3 CAR SPEED-UP SUDDEN-STOP

RS: DRIVER SCARED

CL:1 PERSON JUMP-ASIDE

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced High

Aligned descriptors: Supports detailed narration and description with an 'unexpected complication' and strong organization typical of advanced-high performance.

LEVEL 5 – Discourse & Linguistic Mastery

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

Multi-Referent Narratives (3–5 Anchors)

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

Sample gloss examples:

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

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced High → Emerging Superior

Aligned descriptors: Builds toward superior discourse by sustaining complex organization and extended text type; advanced-high proficiency includes confident, detailed narration across contexts.

Embedded Clauses (Layered Meaning)

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

Sample gloss examples:

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

ACTFL Alignment

Target range: Advanced High → Emerging Superior

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

Register & Style Variation (Audience-Aware ASL)

- Shift style for formal presentation vs casual conversation.
- Choose discourse structures intentionally (rhetorical setup, sequencing, role shift).

- Demonstrate respectful, context-appropriate language use.

Sample gloss examples:

FORMAL: INTRO TOPIC, SUPPORT, CONCLUDE

CASUAL: QUICK EXCHANGE IX-me/IX-you

NARRATIVE: SETUP SPACE, ROLE SHIFT

ACTFL Alignment
Target range: Advanced High → Emerging Superior
Aligned descriptors: Superior-level descriptors emphasize supporting opinions and discussing topics more abstractly using longer discourse; register control is a key bridge.

Linguistic Analysis (Meta-Awareness)

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

Sample gloss examples:

ANALYZE: CL:3 + PATH MOVEMENT

EXPLAIN: WAIT-durative vs WAIT++

IDENTIFY: cond / top / rhet markers

ACTFL Alignment
Target range: Advanced High → Emerging Superior
Aligned descriptors: ACTFL emphasizes consistent control and the ability to sustain advanced tasks; analysis strengthens intentional performance across modes.