

ASL Dialogue Practice Guide

Topic ideas & techniques to help students build real conversational fluency

Dialogue practice is one of the best ways to build real ASL fluency — it pushes students beyond memorized vocabulary into natural conversational flow. Below is a set of leveled topic ideas, followed by techniques for sharpening dialogue skills specifically.

Dialogue Topic Ideas by Level

BEGINNER

- Introducing yourself (where you're from, family)
- Ordering food at a restaurant
- Asking for directions
- Talking about the weather
- Making weekend plans
- Shopping for clothes (size, color, price)

INTERMEDIATE

- Job interview roleplay
- Doctor's office visit (describing symptoms)
- Making a complaint (returning a broken item)
- Planning a trip together
- Debating a simple opinion (favorite movie, best season)
- Catching up with an old friend (storytelling about what's changed)

ADVANCED

- Discussing a current event or controversial topic
- Negotiating (e.g., splitting chores with a roommate)
- Explaining a process to someone (teaching a skill)
- Interpreting a misunderstanding / miscommunication
- Group discussion with 3+ signers (harder — requires turn-taking skills)

Techniques to Get Better at Dialogues

1

Practice in pairs, not solo

Dialogue is interactive — solo drilling won't build the timing and responsiveness real conversation needs. Rotate partners often so students adapt to different signing styles.

2

Work on non-manual markers (NMS)

Facial grammar (eyebrow raises, head tilts, mouth morphemes) carries as much meaning as handshapes. Practice the same sentence with different NMS to see how meaning shifts (statement vs. yes/no question vs. topic).

3

Drill conversation regulators

These keep dialogue flowing: attention-getting (tapping, waving), turn-taking cues, backchanneling (nodding, "oh I see"), and eye contact management. New signers often forget these, making conversation feel stilted.

4

Use information-gap activities

Give each partner different info (like an incomplete schedule) and have them fill in the gaps through dialogue only, no writing. This forces real communicative use, not scripted recitation.

5

Video yourself, then watch it back

Students often don't realize how much they're relying on mouthing English or missing eye contact until they see it on video.

6

Practice repair strategies

Teach students what to do when they don't understand: asking for repetition, asking someone to slow down, or rephrasing. This is a real conversational skill, not a failure.

7

Increase receptive load gradually

Have a fluent signer or teacher "play both roles" in a video dialogue so students only watch and interpret, building receptive skills separately from expressive ones.

8

Role-swap dialogues

Do the same scenario twice with roles reversed, so each student practices both sides of the interaction (e.g., customer and cashier).

Tip: rotate through 2-3 of these techniques per class session rather than trying all of them at once — depth beats breadth when building conversational fluency.