

50 REVIEW GAMES GAME 02

Mystery Sign

Questions, deduction, and vocabulary that sticks

Mystery Sign is an engaging review activity that encourages students to use critical thinking and ASL to identify a hidden vocabulary word. One sign is chosen in secret; students narrow it down by asking yes/no questions until someone names it.

TIME NEEDED

10–15 minutes

GROUP SIZE

Class, groups, or pairs

GRADE LEVELS

Middle, High, College

01 Purpose & Objective

Review vocabulary while strengthening receptive skills, expressive signing, question formation, and critical thinking. Because students must ask before they can guess, the activity rewards strategy rather than speed — and it gives quieter students a low-risk way to participate.

Students will identify a mystery vocabulary sign by asking yes/no questions in ASL and systematically eliminating possibilities.

02 Materials & Skills

Materials

- Vocabulary cards or a posted word bank (*optional*)
- Whiteboard for tracking eliminated words (*optional*)
- Timer (*optional*)

ASL Skills Practiced

- Receptive and expressive ASL
- Yes/no question formation with nonmanual markers
- Vocabulary recall and categorization
- Sign parameter awareness

03 Setup

1. **Choose the word bank.** This week's list, a full unit, or a mixed review. Post it where students can see it, or keep it hidden for a harder round.
2. **Secretly select one word.** Write it down or hold the card face-down so there is no question later about what the answer was.
3. **Set the question rule.** Questions must be signed and must be answerable with YES or NO.
4. **Establish the answering signal.** Agree in advance on how the leader will respond — a clear YES, NO, or MAYBE with matching facial grammar.
5. **Explain the rules and model one round** before the first real round begins.

Before You Start

Everything in the materials list is optional on purpose. Mystery Sign can be run with no materials at all when you have five minutes left in the period.

04 Directions

1. A teacher or student leader secretly chooses a vocabulary word.
2. Students take turns asking yes/no questions in ASL. No voicing, no fingerspelling the answer.
3. The leader answers YES or NO with appropriate nonmanual markers.
4. After each answer, the class eliminates possibilities. Cross words off the board so the narrowing is visible.
5. Any student may guess — but a wrong guess costs the group one question.
6. When the sign is identified, the leader produces it clearly and the class repeats it together.
7. Choose a new word and a new leader, then repeat.

05 Sample Questions to Model

Post a few of these to get students started. Remind them that yes/no questions in ASL need raised eyebrows and a slight forward head tilt. The parameter questions are what make this game distinctly ASL rather than a translated version of Twenty Questions.

LINE OF QUESTIONING

EXAMPLE (GLOSS)

Category ANIMAL, IT? | FOOD, IT? | PERSON, IT?

Location or use FIND IT KITCHEN? | USE IT SCHOOL?

Attributes BIG, IT? | EXPENSIVE, IT? | ALIVE, IT?

Sign parameters SIGN TWO-HAND? | SIGN NEAR FACE? | SIGN MOVE-TWICE?

Fingerspelling WORD START LETTER-B? | WORD SHORT, ONLY-3 LETTER?

06 Variations

Beginning

Use 8–10 familiar words, posted and visible. Allow a question bank on the board and cap each round at six questions.

Intermediate

Use an entire lesson's vocabulary. Every question must differ from those already asked — repeats are a wasted turn.

Advanced

Remove the posted word bank. The student who guesses must use the sign in a complete sentence or short dialogue.

Challenge Mode

Students take turns serving as the Mystery Sign Leader while classmates ask the questions. Add a question budget of ten, a two-minute clock, or team play where a wrong guess passes the turn. The leader may offer one clue — but only after five questions have been asked.

07 Assessment Ideas

Observe students for:

- ☐ Question formation and word order
- ☐ Handshape, movement, and location
- ☐ Reasoning that builds on earlier answers
- ☐ Raised eyebrows and forward head tilt
- ☐ Receptive understanding without repeats
- ☐ Participation and turn-taking

08 Troubleshooting

IF THIS HAPPENS

TRY THIS

Students guess immediately

Require a set number of questions before any guess is allowed.

The same three students ask everything

Go around the room in order, or give each student two question tokens to spend.

Questions drift into voicing

Reset with a silent round — no voices at all, teacher included.

Rounds run long

Shrink the word bank, or let the leader answer CLOSE or FAR instead of a flat NO.

Paul's Best Practice

Give students time to think before offering clues. The silence feels long to the teacher and short to the students — count to ten before you step in.

The discussion is often more valuable than the final answer.

Why It Works

Students practice meaningful communication while reviewing vocabulary in a fun, low-pressure setting. There is no wrong question, only less useful ones, so students who hesitate to sign in front of the class have a safe entry point. The elimination structure also forces them to hold several vocabulary words in mind at once and compare them — retrieval practice that a worksheet cannot replicate.

Quick Tips

- ✓ Rotate leaders every round so the role never belongs to one student.
- ✓ Encourage everyone to ask at least one question.
- ✓ Mix new and previously learned vocabulary so old words stay active.
- ✓ Keep the eliminated words visible — seeing the list shrink builds momentum.
- ✓ End on a win, not on a timer. Stop while students still want another round.

Continue Exploring

Next in the collection:

- ▶ **Game #3: Last Student Standing**
- ▶ **Game #4: Find Someone Who... (Review Edition)**
- ▶ **Game #5: Partner Teach**

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