

50 REVIEW GAMES GAME 14

Vocabulary Pyramid

Broad clue, closer clue, closest clue

Vocabulary Pyramid is a team activity in which students describe an ASL vocabulary word from a broad category down to a specific situation. Guessing early is worth more, so clue-givers have to decide how much to give away — and every level asks for a different kind of description.

TIME NEEDED

15–25 minutes

GROUP SIZE

Pairs or small teams

GRADE LEVELS

Middle, High, College

01

Purpose & Objective

Review vocabulary through increasingly specific ASL clues while strengthening expressive and receptive communication. The three levels push students from categorizing an idea, to describing it, to using it — three genuinely different skills applied to the same word.

Students identify mystery vocabulary using progressively more specific ASL clues.

02 Materials & Skills

Materials

- Vocabulary cards from recent lessons
- Timer (optional)
- Score sheet (optional)

ASL Skills Practiced

- Expressive ASL
- Receptive ASL
- Descriptive language
- Categorization
- Critical thinking

03 Setup

1. **Divide students into teams of three to five.** Small enough that everyone gives clues, large enough that guesses come quickly.
2. **Prepare vocabulary cards from recent lessons.** Words students have met but not mastered work best — a word nobody knows stalls at Level 1.
3. **Explain the three levels before the first round.** Walk through one card together so everyone sees how the clues narrow.

Before You Start

Model a full pyramid yourself with a word the class already knows. Students who have seen one played out give far better Level 1 clues than students who have only heard the rules.

04 The Pyramid

Each clue narrows the field. Guessing early is worth more, so a strong Level 1 clue is worth more than a perfect Level 3 one.

LEVEL 1

Category Clue

3 POINTS

Give a broad category — Food, Animal, School, Emotion, Transportation.

LEVEL 2

Description Clue

2 POINTS

Describe characteristics, function, appearance, or location without using the sign.

LEVEL 3

Context Clue

1 POINT

Use the vocabulary naturally in a signed sentence or real-life situation.

ALSO SEE

Level 1 is the whole of **Game #21: Category Challenge**, and the describing skill behind Level 2 is what **Game #13: Hot Seat** and **Game #18: Guess My Word** train on their own.

Scoring

Award points by the level the word was guessed on: three points after Level 1, two after Level 2, one after Level 3. Teams quickly learn that a vague category clue costs them.

05 Sample Pyramid Cards

Four worked examples — model the game with these, then build your own.

APPLE

- 1 Food
- 2 Round fruit, usually red or green
- 3 *I EAT EVERY-DAY.*

TEACHER

- 1 Occupation
- 2 Works with students
- 3 *TEACHER HELP ME LEARN.*

LIBRARY

- 1 Place
- 2 Many books, quiet
- 3 *I GO THERE STUDY.*

DOG

- 1 Animal
- 2 Four legs, barks
- 3 *MY DOG FRIENDLY.*

Reading the Level 3 Line

The Level 3 clues are written in ASL gloss — the sentence as it is signed, not as it would be spoken in English. Sign it; do not read it aloud.

06 Directions

1. One student draws a vocabulary card.
2. They begin with the Level 1 category clue.
3. If no one guesses, they give the Level 2 description.
4. If still needed, they give the Level 3 context clue.
5. Score the round, then rotate to a new clue-giver.

07 Variations

Beginning

Use familiar vocabulary and picture support.

Intermediate

Require complete ASL descriptions at every level.

Advanced

Students build their own Pyramid cards for classmates.

Challenge Mode

Require every clue to be given entirely in ASL — no fingerspelling and no mouthing English words. This is where the game stops being translation and starts being description.

08 Assessment Ideas

Observe students for:

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Accuracy of clues | ☐ Descriptive skills |
| ☐ Vocabulary knowledge | ☐ Team communication |
| ☐ Categorization at Level 1 | ☐ Participation as giver and guesser |

The Level 1 clue tells you the most. A student who can name the right category instantly understands where the word sits in the language, not just what it looks like.

Paul's Best Practice

Encourage students to think about concepts rather than English words. The best clues help a classmate picture the idea; the weakest ones are an English synonym with the sign removed.

A great clue builds the picture. A weak one just points at the dictionary.

Why It Works

Students review the same vocabulary from three angles in under a minute — where it belongs, what it is like, and how it is actually used. That is far more durable than repeating a sign until it sticks. The scoring does quiet work too: because an early guess is worth more, students are rewarded for precise thinking rather than for talking longer, and teams start coaching each other on what makes a clue good.

Quick Tips

- ✓ Let students create new Pyramid cards once they know the format.
- ✓ Mix old and new vocabulary in the same stack.
- ✓ Celebrate creative clues, not just fast guesses.
- ✓ Keep a running score on the board to sharpen Level 1 clues.
- ✓ Swap the clue-giver every card so no one settles into the role.

Continue Exploring

Next in the collection:

▶ **Game #15: Memory Match**

▶ **Game #16: Sign Detective**

▶ **Game #17: Team Challenge**

Paul A. Fugate

Founder & CEO, ASLdeafined

Extend the Activity

Have teams write pyramid cards for each other and keep the strongest ones. A class-built deck grows all year, and writing a good Level 1 clue turns out to be harder — and more useful — than guessing one.