

Reasons to Learn Sign Language

First off, what is sign language? For deaf or hard of hearing people, sign language is the way they communicate visually. Using their hands and certain gestures, finger-spelling, etc, the deaf community has created not only a language but a language style all their own.

In the United States, there are two main types of sign language. American Sign Language and English Sign Language. ESL is based on written English. It has the same pattern as in “the green tractor.” It also has signs for small English words like ‘I’ and ‘the’. ASL, however, is strictly its own language. Yes, it is in English, but the grammar and structure of the sentences is different. For example, instead of saying “the green tractor” ASL users would say “tractor green”. Some things are flipped, and some are missing. A lot of ‘small’ words are not used and there are a lot more gestures than finger spelling.

One difficulty in learning sign language is that different areas have different signs. Where three fingers on the cheek can mean the color gray in Texas, it can mean black in Florida. There are standards, sure, but variations are abundant. The beauty of sign language, however, is that you don’t have to be accurate. Your facial expressions and movements mean way more than the words you say. It’s almost like being a mime. You have to tell a story without ever saying a word.

That’s another issue to watch out for. In sign language, like in spoken languages, there is no punctuation. When you speak English, you raise the tone of your voice in order to indicate a question. But how does that work when you’re using your fingers? It’s all in the expression. A cocked head, a raised eyebrow, even a shrug can indicate a question being asked.

Whatever the case may be, learning sign language is worth it. Not only does it allow you to learn to use your expressions and body to tell a story, it also makes you aware of what people mean, rather than what they say. You become much more observant. Sign language is also a great distance communicator. Don’t want to shout to your friend across the store? Sign it. Want to say hi to someone out the window? Tell them all about your day without ever going outside. You are limited only by how well you can see and be seen.