

From the Bestselling Dictionary

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# The American Sign Language Handshape Starter



A Beginner's Guide

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- Illustrations of More Than 800 Primary ASL Signs Arranged by 40 Standard Handshapes
- Organized by Commonly Used Everyday Topics
- Introduction to Basic Signing and ASL Structure
- Full Glossary of English Vocabulary for All Signs



**Richard A. Tennant and  
Marianne Gluszak Brown**

*Illustrations by Valerie Nelson-Metlay*

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**Richard A. Tennant**  
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# Contents

	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>The American Manual Alphabet</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>The American Manual Numbers</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>American Sign Language Handshapes</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Classroom Vocabulary</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Question Words</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Action Words</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Prepositions</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>People</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Thoughts/Emotions</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Sports</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Opposites</b>	<b>98</b>

**Contents**

<b>11</b>	<b>Animals</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Days of the Week/Time</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Holidays/Religion</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Travel/Transportation</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>Colors</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>Weather/Seasons</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>Clothing</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>Health/Body</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>Sentence Builders</b>	<b>156</b>
	<b>Index of Terms</b>	<b>171</b>
	<b>Subject Index</b>	<b>198</b>

# Introduction

*The American Sign Language Handshape Starter* is designed to be a first book for learning American Sign Language. Readers will find more than 800 signs with which to build their signing vocabulary. The *Handshape Starter* is arranged into twenty different topic areas, with the signs organized by handshape rather than in alphabetical order. This unique format allows users to search for a sign they recognize but whose meaning they don't know. This handy reference will be especially helpful to new sign language students.

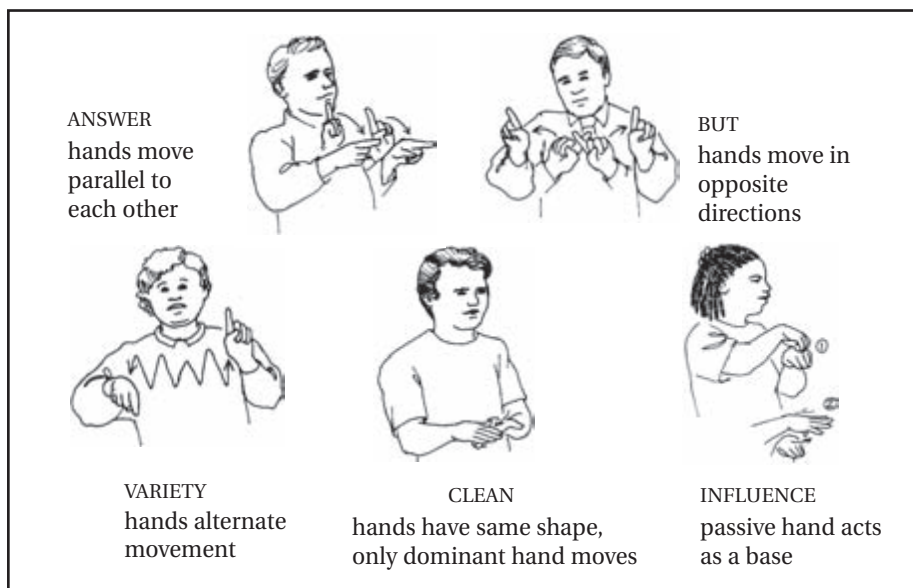
The *Handshape Starter* also includes an index of all the English words that correspond to the signs in the book. This list is arranged in alphabetical order. Some English words are listed several times, but with different page numbers. This is because an English word can have more than one meaning. For example, *run* and *present* each have several meanings; accordingly, each meaning is represented by a different sign.

## A Brief Explanation of American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual/gestural language. It is the first language of many Deaf people in North America. ASL developed naturally over time, and it has all of the same features as other languages. It is a rule-governed system that uses symbols to represent meaning. In spoken languages, those symbols are words; in ASL, the symbols are specific hand configurations and movements that are modified by facial expressions to convey meaning. These gestures or symbols are called *signs*.

ASL is a unique and distinct language that does not depend on speech or sound. It is not derived from any spoken language, nor is it a visual code to represent English. ASL has its own vocabulary, which includes idioms, slang, style, and regional variations; it also has a distinct grammar that governs the rules for sentence construction.

Some of the signs of ASL are formed with one hand, while others are formed with two hands. When a sign is formed using only one hand, the signer's natural hand dominance determines which hand is used. The same is true for two-hand signs in which only one hand moves. The hand that moves is



**Figure 1.** Examples of how two-hand signs can be formed.

called the *dominant* hand, while the other hand is called the *passive* hand. The illustrations in this dictionary show models with a right-hand dominance.

Two-hand signs can be produced in one of three ways:

1. Both hands form identical handshapes and they move in unison—in parallel movements or in opposite directions—or alternately;
2. Both hands form identical handshapes but only the dominant hand moves; or
3. The hands form different handshapes and only the dominant hand moves, while the passive hand is restricted to a limited set of handshapes. In this situation, the dominant hand carries the essential information while the other hand acts primarily as a base. (See figure 1 for examples of all three conditions.)

## Parameters of a Sign

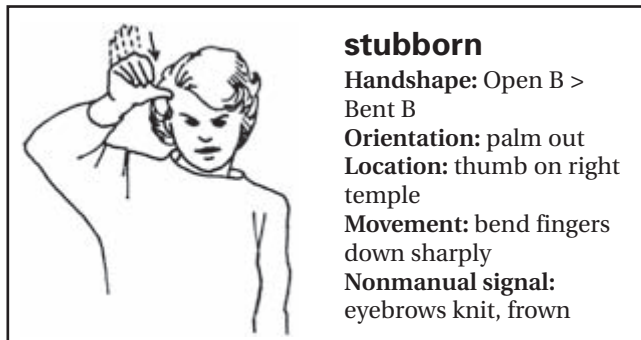
Every sign is a composite of basic components or *parameters*. The parameters of a sign are handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and nonmanual features or signals. If any of these five parameters change, the meaning of the sign also changes. All of the sign descriptions written in this book include each of these parameters (see figure 2).



## Handshape

The handshape is the most obvious parameter of a sign. The most frequently used handshapes are the letters of the American Manual Alphabet and the manual numbers (see pages 10 and 11); however, some

are modifications of these handshapes (for example, Bent B, Flattened O), or combinations such as L and I (as in the sign I-LOVE-YOU), and 1 and I (as in the sign TENT). In order to make this book as accessible as possible, the signs have been organized using forty-one of the possible handshapes. Handshapes that are quite similar to each other (for example, K and P) have been arbitrarily grouped under one of these handshapes. The chart on pages 12 and 13 contains the handshapes used in the *Handshape Starter*; this ordering is neither truly alphabetic nor numeric but a selective combination of both. The handshapes and their order are fundamental to the use of this book.



**Figure 2.**

*All sign descriptions include the five parameters of a sign.*

## Palm Orientation

Orientation refers to the direction in which the hand is turned. The direction that the palm faces (up, down, left, or right) is a useful way of describing the orientation because once the palm is described, the direction of the fingers and back of the hand is obvious.

## Location

Signs are formed on or near only certain areas of the body. Approximately 75 percent of all signs are formed in the head and neck area because there they can be seen more easily. The location of a sign frequently contributes to its meaning. For example, many signs that denote feelings are formed near the heart, whereas signs related to cognitive concepts are formed near the head.

## Movement

Meaning also can be expressed through movement. The direction in which a sign moves may indicate the initiator or recipient of the action. For example, if the sign **HELP** moves out from the signer, that means the signer is offering help to someone.\* If the sign moves in toward the signer, someone is helping the signer.

The repetition of the movement may indicate several things—the frequency of an action, the plurality of a noun, or the distinction between a noun and a verb. The size of the movement may indicate volume or size, and the speed or vigor of the movement combined with the appropriate nonmanual expressions may convey many adverbial aspects of what is being conveyed. Generally, the signs in this book show basic movements to which a skilled signer may add the semantic variations.

## Nonmanual Signals

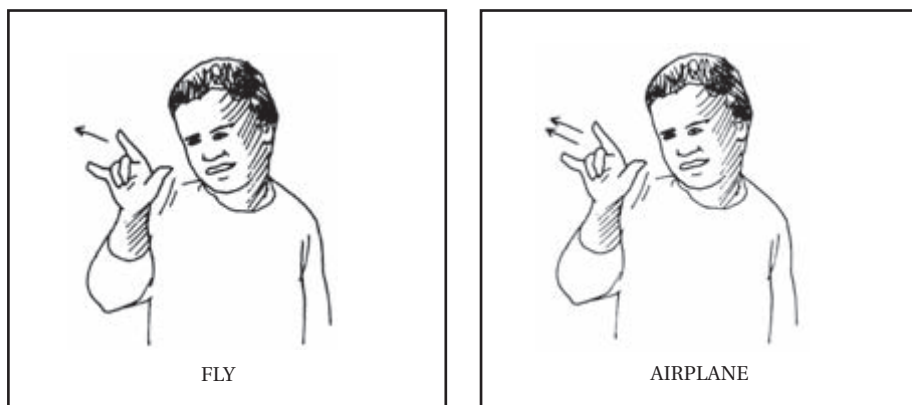
If you have executed each of the first four parameters, you can succeed in correctly making a sign. However, being a good signer involves more than just executing signs correctly. In spoken languages, the tone of the speaker's voice adds additional meaning to the message. In signed languages, additional semantic information is carried through the signer's body and facial expressions. This nonmanual parameter occurs at the same time that the sign is produced to contribute to its meaning. The signed message is quite different if you shake your head no or nod your head yes while signing **HAPPY**.

## Nouns and Verbs

Signs for related nouns and verbs are formed in very similar ways. In a two-dimensional illustration, the signs may actually look identical because the difference in movements cannot be shown easily. Typically the verb forms have a single large movement, whereas their noun counterparts are often signed smaller and with a double movement (see figure 3). Some examples of ASL noun/verb pairs are **AIRPLANE** and **FLY**, **CHAIR** and **SIT**, and **FOOD** and **EAT**. Both forms of the sign do not appear in the *Handshape Starter*. The difference between the two forms is indicated by the notation *SM*

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\* ASL signs appear in small capital letters to represent the English meaning of root signs.

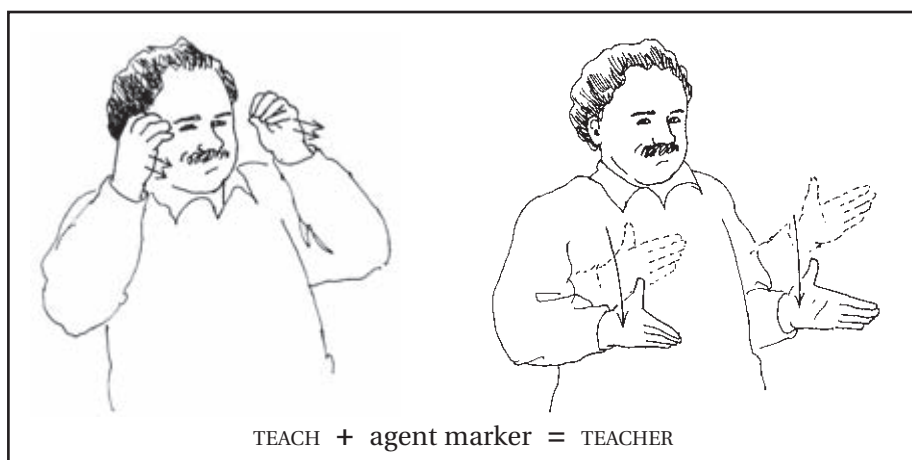


**Figure 3**

*The only difference between some noun and verb signs is indicated in the movement.*

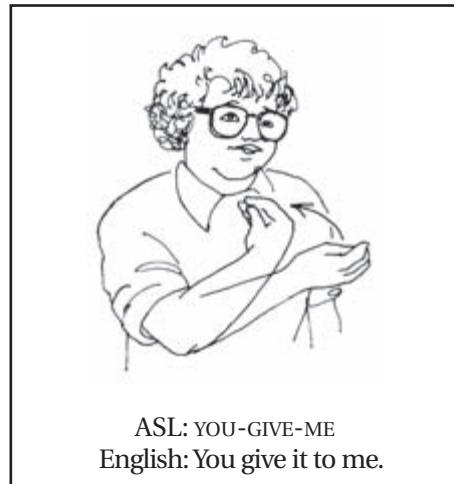
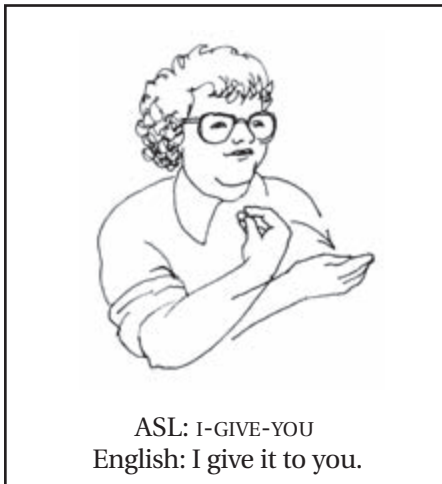
(single movement, for the verbs) or *DM* (double movement, for the nouns) after the English entry for the sign.

Another distinction between nouns and verbs is created by adding the *agent marker* to the verb sign. This marker, also known as the *-er* sign or *person marker*, changes a verb to a noun (for example, TEACH + agent marker = TEACHER) (see figure 4). The agent marker also conveys the same idea as the inflections *-an*, *-ist*, *-ent*, and *-or* in English (for example, LEARN + agent marker = STUDENT; POLITICS + agent marker = POLITICIAN).



**Figure 4.**

*The agent marker is added to a noun sign to indicate a person. This allows the signer to specify an occupation or nationality.*



**Figure 5.**

*Directional verbs allow the signer to incorporate the subject and object of the sentence into the verb.*

Most verbs are explicitly signed along with the subject and object of the sentence. These are called *regular* verbs, and they do not change in movement or location. However, some verbs can use space to incorporate both the subject and object of the sentence in the verb sign itself. These *directional* verbs use movement to or from the signer to express who or what gives or receives the action. Examples of directional verbs are GIVE, INFORM, DEFEND and BORROW. Directional verbs are very efficient since an entire sentence is expressed with the use of one sign (see figure 5). With some directional verbs, the palm orientation may reverse. For example, for the sign PITY, the palm faces in toward the body when signing YOU PITY ME and faces out toward the referent when signing I PITY YOU.

*Locational* verbs are signed on or near the area of the body to which the action refers. Signing HURT near the mouth indicates a toothache; near the head, a headache; and so on. Similarly, signing SURGERY near the appendix versus signing it near the heart gives clear information about what kind of surgery was performed.

## Fingerspelling

The American Manual Alphabet has a handshake to represent each letter of the English alphabet (see page 10). Signers use the manual alphabet to spell out or provide a visual representation of English words (*fingerspelling*).

Because fingerspelling is derived from English, its role in ASL is generally limited to proper names of people and places, brand names, and titles. Technical terms are fingerspelled only if no sign currently exists and/or it is important to know the English term. Keep in mind that fingerspelling should feel comfortable. Take your time, try not to say the names of the individual letters as you sign them, and practice in front of a mirror to see both the expressive and receptive perspectives simultaneously.

Most people find it easier to fingerspell than to read someone else's fingerspelling. When you read someone's fingerspelling, it helps to remember that this is similar to reading text. Readers do not read text letter by letter, they see whole words and the configuration of words or phrases. In addition, they use context. The principles of learning how to read text apply to reading fingerspelling as well. Don't look for individual letters when someone is fingerspelling, rather look for clues, such as the length of a word, its position in the sentence, the configuration of the word, easily recognized letters, and sentence context to help you make an educated guess.

## General Arrangement of the *Handshape Starter*

The *Handshape Starter* is divided into twenty major subject categories. Within each category the signs are arranged in order of the initial handshape that is used in producing the sign. Additionally, the one-hand signs precede the two-hand signs. Each sign illustration is accompanied by its equivalent English vocabulary and a sign description. The description includes the handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and when appropriate, nonmanual signals. Notes are included with some descriptions to give suggestions as to the sign's use, alternate variations, or preferred signs.

Most of the illustrations include arrows that show how the hands move. A double-headed arrow or a double arrow is used when the movement is repeated. Many signs move from an initial position to a final position. In this book, the first position is sometimes represented by dotted hands and the final position by solid hands. When signs have two distinct parts, as in compound signs, the two positions are numbered to show the sequence of production.

As mentioned in an earlier section, an agent marker is added to a root sign to indicate that a sign refers to a person. In the *Handshape Starter*, the

signs that can be formed with an agent marker do not have separate entries. Instead, they are listed in italics within parentheses after the English word for the root sign to indicate that the agent marker must be added to form that inflected sign. They are also listed in the index.

## Sign Order within Handshape Groups

### One-Hand Signs

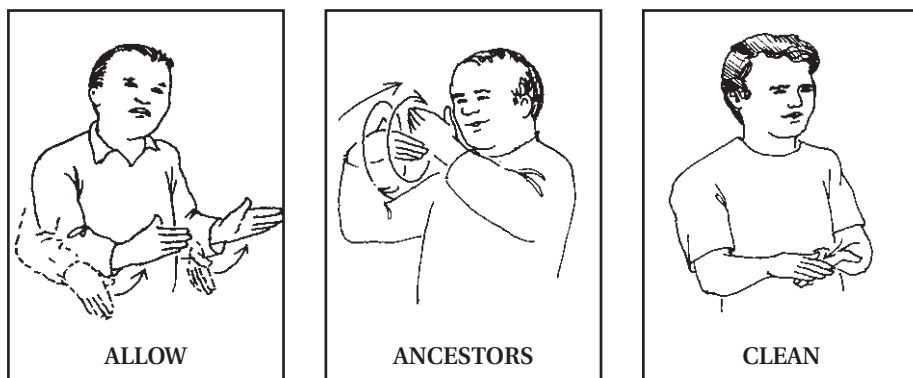
The signs within each handshape group are ordered in a specific sequence to assist the user in finding a sign. The signs presented first are those that do not change in handshape during sign production. Next are the signs that change handshape. The change is indicated by an arrowhead (>) between the handshapes; for example, *LADY* appears as *Open A > 5*.

The one-hand signs have one more level of ordering—signs that are formed in space and do not touch the body appear before signs that do touch the body. Within the group of signs that touch the body, the ones that are formed on the head or neck precede those that touch the torso. Although this arrangement may not be important for small handshape groups, it will be very useful for quickly locating a particular sign in the handshape groups that contain many illustrations.

### Two-Hand Signs

The order of the two-hand signs is determined by the initial handshape of the dominant hand. Signs in which both hands have identical handshapes and both hands move appear first. The handshapes for these signs are separated by a colon (*A : A*, the first *A* being the handshape for the dominant hand and the second *A* being the handshape for the passive hand). The following list explains how the signs are further ordered to assist the user:

1. Hands have the same handshapes and move simultaneously;
2. Hands have the same handshapes and move alternately;
3. Hands have the same handshapes, but only the dominant hand moves;
4. Hands have different handshapes, and the hands are ordered first by the handshape and movement of the dominant hand and second by the handshape of the passive hand. (See figure 6 for examples of ordering.)



**Figure 6.**

*The two-hand signs are ordered so that signs with identical hand movement are followed by signs with alternating hand movement, which are then followed by signs in which only the dominant hand moves.*

## **Index**

The final section of this book is an index, an alphabetical listing of all the English words that correspond to the signs in the book. Each entry in the listing directs the user to the page where the sign illustration for that word appears. By using this index, the user can quickly find the illustration needed to translate the English word or concept into sign.

# The American Manual Alphabet



**A**



**B**



**C**



**D**



**E**



**F**



**G**



**H**



**I**



**J**



**K**



**L**



**M**



**N**



**O**



**P**



**Q**



**R**



**S**



**T**



**U**



**V**



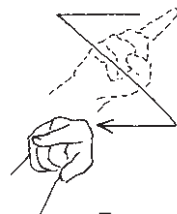
**W**



**X**



**Y**



**Z**



## The American Manual Numbers



**1**



**2**



**3**



**4**



**5**



**6**



**7**



**8**



**9**



**10**

# The American Sign Language Handshapes



**A**



**Open A**



**B**



**Open B**



**Bent B**



**C**



**D**



**E**



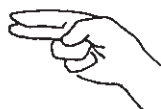
**F**



**Open F**



**G**



**H**



**I**



**K**



**L**



**Bent L**



**M**



**N**



**Open N**



**O**



**Baby O**



**Flattened O**



**R**



**S**



**T**



**U**



**V**



**Bent V**



**W**



**X**



**Y**



**L-I**



**1-I**



**1**



**3**



**Bent 3**



**4**



**5**



**Bent 5**



**8**



**Open 8**

# 1

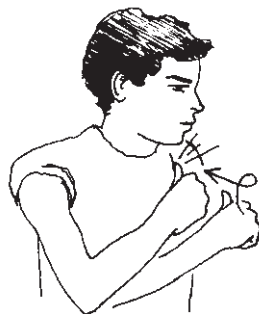
## Classroom Vocabulary

**patient, bear,  
long-suffering,  
patience, stand,  
tolerance,  
withstand**



**Handshape:** A  
**Orientation:** palm left  
**Location:** lips  
**Movement:** move thumb down to chin

**attitude**



**Handshape:** A  
**Orientation:** palm left  
**Location:** below left shoulder  
**Movement:** make small circular movement, ending with thumb on chest

**sorry,  
apologize,  
regret,  
remorse,  
repent**



**Handshape:** A  
**Orientation:** palm in  
**Location:** center of chest  
**Movement:** circle hand on chest  
**Nonmanual signal:** head and eyes lowered; "sad" expression

**pride, proud**



**Handshape:** Open A  
**Orientation:** palm down  
**Location:** lower chest  
**Movement:** slide thumb up chest  
**Nonmanual signal:** shoulders thrust back; erect posture

**hello, hi,  
greet**



**Handshape:** B  
**Orientation:** palm left  
**Location:** forehead  
**Movement:** move hand forward and tilt fingers forward  
**Nonmanual signal:** head tilts back; smile

**lecture,  
oration,  
presentation,  
speech,  
testimony**



**Handshape:** Open B  
**Orientation:** palm left  
**Location:** near head  
**Movement:** shake hand forward and back from wrist several times

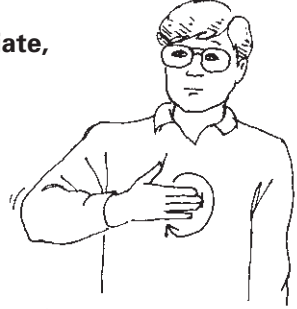
## Classroom Vocabulary

**thank you,  
thanks**



**Handshape:** Open B  
**Orientation:** palm in  
**Location:** mouth  
**Movement:** move hand forward  
**Nonmanual signal:** head bows; smile

**please,  
appreciate,  
enjoy**



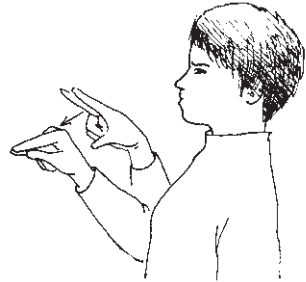
**Handshape:** Open B  
**Orientation:** palm in  
**Location:** palm on chest  
**Movement:** make small circles on chest  
**Nonmanual signal:** smile

**Europe**



**Handshape:** E  
**Orientation:** palm in  
**Location:** near forehead  
**Movement:** move hand in small circle

**no**



**Handshape:** Open N > Flattened O  
**Orientation:** palm out  
**Location:** neutral space  
**Movement:** close fingers sharply to thumb  
**Nonmanual signal:** head shakes "no"

**point,  
period**



**Handshape:** Baby O  
**Orientation:** palm out  
**Location:** neutral space  
**Movement:** sharply bend wrist forward

**thus,  
therefore**



**Handshape:** Baby O  
**Orientation:** palm out  
**Location:** neutral space  
**Movement:** draw top part of a triangle