



Arizona Commission
for the deaf and the hard of hearing

Comparison: The Signer and the Sign Language Interpreter

ASL

American Sign Language (ASL) is a natural and complete language with its own grammar. It is visual communication and is often assumed to simply be a set of gestures that represents English. Research has proven that ASL is independent from spoken and written English.

Some ASL signs may contain more information than English word because it includes inflection. Some English words have multiple signs in ASL. Some ASL signs have more than one English equivalents



Comparison

Signer: does not necessarily meet the level of fluency expected from sign language interpreters.

People who sign may:

- Know basic sign language
- Learn sign language from a book
- Have been or be enrolled in one or two sign language classes
- Know many signs but not the ASL grammar
- Have no knowledge of regional signs
- Socialize little or not at all in the deaf community
- Have limited fluency
- Not be a professional

Instructional books do not illustrate in 3-D, meaning readers may miss out on directional movements. Learning ASL requires knowledge about deaf culture, discourse, and linguistic variables.

Sign Language Interpreter: bilingual and fluent in English and ASL

Sign language interpreters:

- May have grown up using sign language
- Have essential knowledge of Deaf Culture and a background in ASL
- Are formally trained through interpreter preparation program, including cross-cultural communication, language process, and interpreting ethics
- Are familiar with regional signs
- Know deaf people and are involved in the deaf community
- Can interpret effectively for a sign language user
- Are certified professionals

Sign language interpreting is best left to the professionals. A well-meaning but unqualified signer may unintentionally harm deaf and hearing people.

For instance, there are 28 or more definitions for English word “run” but more than 50 ASL signs. Also, there is one ASL sign for understand although the word carries several definitions.

You can separate signers from interpreters by asking where they learned sign language, how many classes they have taken, whether they socialize in the deaf community, and whether they have enrolled in an interpreter preparation program or hold national interpreter certification.

References

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