Start ASL
The Fun Way to Learn American Sign Language… for free!

ASL 1 READINGS

Only these articles are necessary for the assigned readings, however you may click on the links to find more information on the Start ASL website
History of Sign Language

Deaf History

The events that occurred in the history of sign language are actually pretty shocking.

How the deaf experience life today is directly related to how they were treated in the past. It wasn't long ago when Deaf people were strongly oppressed and denied even their basic rights.

There are many famous deaf people who have made a name for the deaf throughout the history of sign language and proved that deaf people can, in fact, make history.

Aristotle was the first person to make a recorded claim about the deaf. His theory was that people could only learn through hearing spoken words. This was the beginning of the oppression of deaf people in the history of sign language. Deaf people were therefore seen as being unable to learn or be educated at all.

Therefore, they were denied even their basic rights. In some places, they weren't allowed to marry or own property. Some were even forced to have guardians. The law had them labeled as "non-persons."

This claim was finally challenged during the Renaissance in Europe. Scholars were making their first attempts to educate the deaf and prove the 2,000 year old beliefs wrong. This mark in the history of sign language was the beginning of the development of signed language.

The Beginning of Deaf Education

Geronimo Cardano, an Italian Physician, was one of the first scholars to recognize that learning does not require hearing. In the 1500s, he found that the deaf could be educated by using the written word. He used his methods to teach his own deaf son.

At around the same time in Spain, Pedro Ponce de Leon was educating the deaf children of Spanish noble families. Pedro Ponce de Leon was a Benedictine monk and was very successful with his teaching methods.
Juan Pablo de Bonet was inspired by Leon's success to use his own methods to teach the deaf as well. He was also a Spanish monk and used the earlier methods of reading, writing, and speechreading as well as his own manual alphabet to educate the deaf. This was the first known manual alphabet system in the history of sign language. The handshapes in this alphabet represented the different speech sounds.

Organized education of the deaf did not exist until the 1750s. This was when the first religious and social association for the deaf was established in Paris by Abbe Charles Michel de L'Epee, a French priest. Abbe de L'Epee is one of the most important people in the history of sign language.

A common story retold throughout the history of sign language claims that L'Epee met two deaf sisters by chance when visiting a poverty stricken part of Paris. Their mother wanted him to educate her daughters in religion. After discovering their deafness, he was inspired to educate them. Soon after, he completely devoted his life to deaf education.

Abbe Charles Michel de L'Epee established the first free public school for deaf children in 1771. It was called the Institut National des Jeune Sourds-Muets (National Institute for Deaf-Mutes). Children came from all over the country to go to this school. The children had been signing at home, and L'Epee learned all of these different signs. He used the signs he learned to teach his students French.

These signs soon became a standard language L'Epee taught. More schools were founded, and the many students brought this language home to their communities. This first standard language in the history of sign language is now known as Old French Sign Language. This language spread widely throughout Europe as more and more students were educated.

Today, Abbe de L'Epee is known in the history of sign language as the "Father of Sign Language and Deaf Education" because of the twenty-one schools he established and all he has done for the deaf.
Many people say that Abbe de L'Epee invented sign language. This is not true. If you want to know who invented sign language, read my "Who Invented Sign Language" article.

Although Abbe de L'Epee claimed sign language was the natural language for the deaf, a man named Samuel Heinicke supported the oral method. Oralism was brought about as people used a system of speech and speechreading to teach deaf students instead of signs and fingerspelling. Samuel Heinicke was a German educator. He taught his students how to speak by having them feel the vibrations of his throat when he spoke.

After all of this positive advancement in the history of sign language, oralism was the bump in the road.

Like Abbe de L'Epee is the "father of sign language," Samuel Heinicke is known as the "father of oralism."

In relation to the deaf-blind, the first deaf-blind person to be educated was Laura Bridgman. She was born 50 years before Helen Keller, but is usually not credited with being the first deaf-blind person to learn language.

Laura Bridgman

Helen Keller is the most well-known deaf-blind person (she has taken the credit before Laura Bridgman). Even though she wasn't the first deaf-blind person to be educated, Helen was the first one to graduate from college, and she did it with honors.

In relation to the deaf-blind, the first deaf-blind person to be educated was Laura Bridgman. She was born 50 years before Helen Keller, but is usually not credited with being the first deaf-blind person to learn language.

Helen Keller

Another common topic in the Deaf Community is deaf people and sports. My favorite deaf athlete is William "Dummy" Hoy. Dummy Hoy was the first deaf major league baseball player. He hit the first grand-slam home run in the American league, and created the hand signals that are still used in baseball today.

I think it is so amazing that one deaf athlete can have so much impact and break so many records in baseball, yet many people don't know about him. Truly amazing.

American Sign Language

The history of American Sign Language didn't truly begin until 1814 when deaf education was introduced to the U.S.

There is virtually no information about American Sign Language history before this time.
In the early 1800s, though, we know there were about 2,000 deaf Americans. There was no standard language at this time in Deaf history, but various signing systems were created in the deaf communities that are now known as Old American Sign Language. The American Sign Language of today is actually related to this language.

The actual history of American Sign Language is traced back to 1814 with Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (a very important person in American Deaf history). Gallaudet was a minister from Hartford, Connecticut. His neighbor, Mason Fitch Cogswell, had a nine-year-old deaf daughter named Alice Cogswell. Gallaudet realized that Alice was very smart despite the fact that she couldn't hear or speak, and wanted to teach her how to communicate.

Gallaudet had some success with teaching her how to spell and read, but he didn't know the most effective way of educating a deaf child. So, Gallaudet gained support from the community and raised enough money to travel to Europe. Since there was an educational deaf history in Europe, this was where Gallaudet could study the proven methods for educating deaf children.

Gallaudet first met Abbe Roche Ambroise Sicard in London. Sicard was Abbe de L'Epee's successor and the head of the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris. Sicard was in London presenting his theories about deaf education and demonstrating his successful teaching methods.

Two accomplished deaf teachers from the National Institute were with him: Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc (Clerc is also another very important person in American Deaf history). Both of them were once Sicard's students. Gallaudet was in awe at all he learned in London. Sicard extended an invitation to visit the National Institute in Paris, and Gallaudet accepted.

Gallaudet attended daily classes with Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc at the National Institute for two months. He studied their teaching methods and even took private lessons from Clerc.

When Gallaudet was getting ready to return to America, he asked Clerc to join him. Clerc was one of Sicard's best teachers, and Gallaudet knew that he would be a huge help in establishing a school for the deaf in America. Clerc agreed to travel to America.

In 1817, Gallaudet and Clerc's American Asylum for Deaf-Mutes (now the American School for the Deaf) was established in Hartford, Connecticut. This was a huge
milestone in American Deaf history. This was the first free public school for the deaf in America. Alice Cogswell was the first to enroll.

The school grew quickly with Gallaudet as principal and Clerc as head teacher. Deaf people from all over the United States were brought together for the first time. Just like at Abbe de L'Epee's school, the children brought signs from home with them. American Sign Language stemmed from these signs as well as the signs from the French Sign Language that Gallaudet learned from Clerc.

Gallaudet retired in 1830. Until the 1850s, Clerc continued to teach at the school. By 1863, there were twenty-two schools for the deaf in the US. Most of them were founded by Clerc's students and trained teachers (both deaf and hearing). They continued to use Clerc's teaching methods in these schools.

**ASL Higher Education**

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet died in 1851. However, two of his sons continued his work in the deaf education field. Thomas Gallaudet founded Saint Ann's Church for Deaf-Mutes in 1852 in New York City. Edward Miner Gallaudet, his younger brother, became a teacher at the school in Hartford.

Edward always wanted to establish a college for the deaf, but the extravagant funding always seemed impossible. However, in 1857, Amos Kendall sent Edward a letter. Kendall was a wealthy philanthropist from Washington who donated acres of his land in Washington, D.C. to establish a residential school he called the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind.

In his letter, he asked Edward to be the superintendent of this school. Edward accepted the job, but still wanted to establish a college for the deaf.

Edward presented his idea to Congress. Congress passed legislation in 1864, signed by President Lincoln, allowing the Columbia Institute to grant college degrees.

Interesting fact: Abe Lincoln's hands on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. form the letters A and L in American Sign Language.

In 1864, the Columbia Institute's college division (the National Deaf-Mute College) opened. This was the first college for the deaf in Deaf history. After Kendall died in 1869, the remaining eighty-one acres of his estate were eventually sold to the Columbia Institution.

In 1891, the first training center for teachers of the deaf was established at the school.

In 1893, the National Deaf-Mute College was renamed Gallaudet College in honor of Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet.
In 1986, the school's name was changed again to **Gallaudet University**.

Gallaudet University is known today as the first and only liberal arts university for the deaf in the world. And it's in our very own Washington, D.C.!

**Speech versus Sign**

Sign language is now accepted as a natural method of communication and education for the deaf. However, it wasn't always this way.

Even though sign language became widely used by both deaf and hearing people, supporters of oralism believed the deaf need to learn spoken language to fully function in the hearing world.

In 1867, the **Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf-Mutes** in New York and the **Clarke Institution for Deaf-Mutes** in Northampton, Massachusetts, began educating the deaf using only oral methods, and encouraging all deaf schools to do the same. Methods of teaching speech, speechreading, and listening spread to school all across the country.

One of the most devoted supporters of oralism was **Alexander Graham Bell** (yes, the man who invented the telephone). Bell started a school in Boston in 1872 to train teachers of the deaf to use the oral method. He was one person in the history of sign language who really tried to damage the lives of deaf people.

In 1890, he established the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, Inc. This is now called the **Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf**.

The debate of signed communication versus spoken language intensified during 1880 to 1990. In 1880, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf met in Milan, Italy, to address this issue. Many educational leaders attended this conference. This meeting is now known as the **Milan Conference**.

The supporters of oralism won the vote. Congress passed a declaration stating "the incontestable superiority of speech over sign for integrating the deaf-mute into society and for giving him better command of the language."

The results of this conference were devastating. Over the next ten years, the use of sign language in educating the deaf drastically declined. Some
oralism supporters wanted to eliminate sign language entirely. This milestone in the history of sign language almost brought the Deaf back to ground zero after all of their progress.

80 percent of deaf children were taught in oral programs by 1920. Teachers of the deaf went from being 40 percent deaf and 60 percent hearing to only 15 percent deaf in the 1860s.

Even though oralism won the battle, they did not win the war. Outside of the classroom, sign language was still widely used. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was founded in the United States and supported the use of sign language. They gained a lot of support concerning the verdict at the conference in Milan. The NAD kept the use of sign language alive as they argued that oralism is not the right educational choice for many deaf people.

In 1960, something big happened. William Stokoe, a hearing Gallaudet College professor, published a breakthrough monograph that proved ASL is a real language once and for all.

Stokoe presented his thesis in Sign Language Structure that American Sign Language is a unique language separate from English. He testified that ASL is not a translation of English, but a language with its own grammar and syntax. Stokoe stated that ASL can communicate abstract ideas and complex information just like spoken languages.

American Sign Language was henceforth recognized as an important national language.

Stokoe later co-authored the Dictionary of American Sign Language in 1965. He also established the Linguistic Research Laboratory at Gallaudet University in 1970.

In 1964, Congress issued the Babbidge Report on the oral education of the deaf. The report stated that oral education was a "dismal failure." This finally dismissed the decision made in Milan.

A movement that began in 1970 did not choose either signed or oral education for the deaf. Instead, the movement attempted to blend several educational methods to form Total Communication. This method became a new philosophy for the approach to deaf education.
Allowing deaf people the right to any information through all possible means, Total Communication can include fingerspelling, sign language, speech, pantomime, lipreading, pictures, computers, writing, gestures, facial expressions, reading, and hearing aid devices.

**Public Law 94-142** was passed in 1975, requiring handicapped children in the US to be provided with free and appropriate education. This law allowed many to be mainstreamed into regular public schools. The students still receive special instruction, but are able to interact with the general public school population.

Another huge event in the history of sign language was the **Deaf President Now (DPN)** movement. The DPN movement unified deaf people of every age and background in a collective fight to be heard. Their triumph was a testament to the fact that they don't have to accept society's limitation on their culture.

In 1995, a woman named **Heather Whitestone** became the first deaf woman to be named Miss America in the Miss America pageant. She showed the world that a deaf person can do anything a hearing person can do, and that all things are possible with God's help.
Deaf Culture

Deaf Culture was first truly recognized in 1965 (only about 40 years ago!)

The idea that Deaf people had a culture of their own was first written in the *Dictionary of American Sign Language* by William Stokoe, Carl Croneberg, and Dorothy Casterline.

This was a huge step for Deaf people. Before this book was written, the medical industry and those involved in Deaf education only saw Deaf people in terms of their hearing loss. The thought of Deaf people being a part of their own culture was unheard of...

Nonetheless, Deaf culture is exactly what Carol Padden defines as a culture: a set of learned behaviors of a group of people that share a language, values, rules for behavior, and traditions.

I only share general information about Deaf Culture on this page, so I highly recommend *The ASL Student’s Essential Guide to Learning ASL and Getting Involved in the Deaf Community* if you are learning ASL. The guide includes all of the essential Deaf Culture information you need to know so you will better understand the Deaf community and be fully prepared to talk to Deaf people. Learn More...

There are many famous deaf people who introduced the world to Deaf Culture and proved that deaf people can, in fact, make history.

**Language**

Language and culture go hand-in-hand (no pun intended!) Without language, it's impossible to learn the culture. Without culture, language has nothing to refer to.

The members of Deaf culture do share a language...American Sign Language, of course!

It was not until the *Dictionary of American Sign Language* was published that ASL was regarded as a real language. William Stokoe was the first to break ASL down into its linguistic components and prove that it truly is a language...not merely "English on the hands" or "pictures in the air" like people thought.

American Sign Language is a living, breathing linguistic masterpiece that is specially made for the Deaf.

**Values**

The culture of the Deaf consists of a few important values:

**Language**
American Sign Language is the most highly regarded asset of Deaf Culture. Spoken English is almost completely useless to the Deaf. Even if they can learn to read lips, the comprehension of English doesn't even come close to the language of ASL. If the ears don't work, why would you force them to?

ASL is the natural language for the Deaf. To equate the fluency of English to hearing people, ASL is the match for Deaf people. They are not meant to use a language that is not their own, nonetheless be forced to.

The Deaf also aim to preserve ASL. There are many language systems that have been invented to try to "help" deaf children learn English (Sign Supported Speech, Signed English, and Cued Speech, to name a few). These are not languages and are not supported in Deaf culture. They have, if anything, deprived deaf children of their true language and ability to communicate effectively.

ASL is so important for Deaf people to communicate, they created vlogs (video logs). They are similar to blogs, but consist of videos. That way, the Deaf can communicate with each other in their first language.

**Speech**

*Not* speaking is highly valued in this culture. Like I stated before, speech is commonly forced on deaf children and represents confinement and deprivation to the Deaf adult. When speech education is forced, deaf children are deprived of one of their core needs...language. The only language that is truly possible and effective is ASL.

When a hearing friend of a Deaf person turns and continues conversation as usual with another hearing friend, the Deaf person is left out. This is incredibly rude when the person could have signed or kept the Deaf friend included on what was being said (interpreting).

Exaggerated mouth movements can be seen as rude. There are only a limited number of mouth movements that are used while signing. Much-more-than-necessary mouthing can be seen as making fun of the Deaf (and you don't want that!)

**Socializing**

Socializing is a very important value of Deaf culture. Because there are so few Deaf people in an area, social lives are invaluable. In a society where the Deaf are commonly misunderstood, the support of others is more than necessary.
Back before text messaging and modern technology, Deaf people would only communicate with each other in person or in letters. They would take advantage of the little time they had to mingle with another Deaf person...

Nothing much has changed since then!

Deaf people will stay at a gathering very late to get in as much time as possible with their friends. When a hearing gathering generally ends around 10 at night, a Deaf gathering can end at 3 in the morning!

There are many Deaf events available to everyone (deaf and hearing!) who wants to socialize with the Deaf. Visit http://www.ohsoez.com to find events in your area.

**Literature**

Much like the American culture, Deaf cultural values are not openly written or explained. Deaf children learn how to fit in with Deaf culture from positive and negative feedback about behaviors and from the stories and literature that are passed down through the generations.

There is a wealth of Deaf art, poetry, stories, theatre, media, games, jokes, and books that teach the culture (most of which are not written down!) These avenues always demonstrate and support the way Deaf people live their lives: being Deaf and proud!

My absolute favorite artistic informational piece about Deaf culture is the film *Through Deaf Eyes*. If you have not seen this movie, you need to.

There are many famous Deaf actors and actresses who have brought the Deaf Community and ASL into people's homes. Linda Bove played Linda the Librarian on *Sesame Street*, Marlee Matlin won an Academy Award for her debut performance in *Children of a Lesser God*, and Bernard Bragg is a very well-known theater actor (whom I have met personally), to name a few.

**Rules for Behavior**

Deaf people are not only part of a like-minded group. They are part of a culture that has a set of learned behaviors that you need to know to be able to "fit in."

**Eyes**
In hearing culture, it is rude to stare. However, in Deaf culture, staring is necessary. If you break eye contact while a person is signing to you, you are incredibly rude! That’s like plugging your ears when someone is speaking to you!

**Facial Expression**

In hearing culture, facial expression is very limited. If you move your face or body a lot while you are talking, you can be seen as "weird" (and nobody wants to be weird!)

However, in Deaf culture, facial expression and body movement is required for ASL. It's part of ASL grammar! It's OK to be "weird" in Deaf culture...it's normal! And absolutely necessary!

**Introductions**

In hearing culture, you normally introduce yourself by your first name only.

Deaf people, however, introduce themselves by their full names, and sometimes even what city they're from or what school they went to. By city, I mean the city you grew up in, not what city you are currently residing in. And by school I usually mean a residential school you attended. The Deaf community is very small, and Deaf people like to find those specific commonalities with each other.

**Labels**

What Deaf people call themselves is something that also needs to be taken into consideration.

In hearing culture, the terms used to describe deaf people have to do with their hearing loss. The term "hard of hearing" is better than "deaf." Hard of Hearing people are generally regarded as being easier to communicate with and fit in better with hearing people. Deaf people, on the other hand, are seen as being difficult to communicate with and that they may not even speak. The term "hearing-impaired" is also used to be "politically correct" to identify them both.

In Deaf culture, though, the terms are quite the opposite. There is one label for people who are part of Deaf culture...

Deaf.

This label has nothing to do with hearing loss. Regardless of how much better your hearing is than the next guy, you're still all "deaf." Using the term "hard of hearing" can
be seen very negatively...like you're saying you're better than everyone else (because that's the one-up in hearing culture).

You will also see both the terms "deaf" and "Deaf" used. They are referred to as "little d" and "big D." "Little d" deaf refers to people who have lost their hearing. "Big D" Deaf refers to people who are involved in Deaf culture and share the values, behaviors, and language of that culture. Just because you are deaf, doesn't mean you are Deaf. And in some cases, just because you are Deaf doesn't mean you are deaf (as is the case for some hearing children of Deaf parents--CODAs).

The term "hearing-impaired" is seen even more negatively because that says there is something wrong with being Deaf (which is the complete opposite of what Deaf people believe!) Most hearing people believe that deafness is a handicap. But, au contraire! It indeed, is not. Deaf people can do everything except hear. Everything! Deafness is not a handicap. The only real handicap of deafness is when deaf children are deprived of true communication--ASL.