

Learning British Sign Language



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Formerly
RNID •)))

“I began learning British Sign Language (BSL) when I was 11, at lunchtime classes in school. My school had a unit for Deaf students, who were in some of my classes. I remember being completely mesmerised by sign language, and desperate to communicate with my Deaf peers.

I passed my BSL Level 1 just before my GCSEs, and continued learning at evening classes. I've recently finished my Level 6 language development course and I'm hoping to start my portfolio soon. This will enable me to study to become a qualified interpreter if I wish (I'm seriously considering it!).

My aim has always been to learn to communicate with Deaf BSL users, so I can learn about Deaf culture and Deaf humour. The Deaf community is so welcoming, and it's great to share jokes that non-signers completely miss!

If you're thinking of learning BSL, go for it! It's definitely worth it.”

Clare Baars, London



You'll find this leaflet helpful if you're thinking about learning British Sign Language (BSL). It tells you what your options are and where to look to find courses near you. It also includes the BSL fingerspelling alphabet and photos of some basic signs to get you started.

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Please contact our Information Line if you'd like this leaflet in large print, braille or audio (see back page for contact details).

What is British Sign Language?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the most common form of sign language used in the UK. In March 2003, the UK government officially recognised BSL as a language in its own right.

BSL has evolved naturally, as all languages do. It involves a combination of hand shapes and movements, lip patterns, facial expressions and shoulder movements. It has its own grammar and is structured in a completely different way to English.

In BSL, you start with the main subject or topic. After that, you refer to something about the topic.

For example: **English:** What is your name? **BSL:** Name – what?



Name



What



Who uses BSL?

BSL is the language of the UK's Deaf community, which has its own set of social beliefs, behaviours, art, history and values. People within the Deaf community describe themselves as 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' to express their pride in their Deaf identity.

BSL is the first language of both Deaf and hearing children who have Deaf parents whose first language is BSL. It may also be used by Deaf children who have hearing parents.

Based on the 2011 census, we estimate that there are at least 24,000 people across the UK who use sign language as their main language, although this is likely to be an underestimate. Many people, including those with hearing loss, learn BSL as a second language. Some people learn for their personal interest or because they have a friend, relative or colleague who is Deaf. Others learn BSL because they wish to begin a career working with people who are Deaf.

What is fingerspelling?

Fingerspelling is the BSL alphabet (see page 8 for what this looks like). Certain words – usually names of people and places – are spelled out on fingers. However, fingerspelling alone isn't sign language.

We produce free cards, bookmarks and posters showing the fingerspelling alphabet. To order, contact our Information Line (see back page for contact details).

Are all sign languages the same?

No, sign languages are as varied as spoken languages. Different countries have their own unique sign language, but some sign languages do have a similar structure. BSL is only used in the UK. In Northern Ireland, people who are Deaf use Irish Sign Language (ISL) or BSL.

Are there regional variations?

Yes, there are regional differences in sign language, just as there are different dialects of English. In different parts of the country, certain signs will have different meanings, and there will be different signs for one word. For example, there are 10–12 variations of ‘holiday’.

How can I learn BSL?

As BSL is a 3D language, it’s difficult to learn to sign from a book, website or video alone. These are useful resources, but the best way to learn BSL is to take a course taught by a qualified BSL tutor who is fluent in the language. Most BSL tutors are Deaf and hold a relevant teaching qualification.

Some BSL courses offer a very basic introduction to BSL, but most offer qualifications. Courses that offer qualifications are accredited by nationally recognised awarding bodies such as Signature and the Institute of British Sign Language (IBSL). They are usually part-time or evening classes that run from September to June. But you may be able to find an intensive course with daytime or weekend classes.

What BSL qualifications are available?

If you’re new to BSL, the first qualification you can get is a Level 1 award. A Level 1 BSL course is designed to give you a basic introduction to the vocabulary and structure of BSL. There are three different units and you’ll be assessed after each one. The topics you’ll cover include meeting people, weather, numbers and directions.

You can then continue to Levels 2, 3, 4 and 6, if you wish. Level 6 is equivalent to a degree.

What qualifications do I need to become a BSL interpreter?

You can start training to become an interpreter once you’ve achieved a minimum of Level 4 in BSL. You will only become a qualified sign language interpreter when you’ve achieved a minimum of a Level 6 BSL qualification and a Level 6 interpreting qualification.

Where can I find BSL courses?

If you’re looking for an introduction to BSL, you may be interested in the Action on Hearing Loss Start to Sign course (see page 19). Local colleges, Deaf clubs and your local authority (council) may also run BSL courses – contact them to find out what they offer.

You can find courses that offer BSL qualifications by visiting the websites of Signature and IBSL:

Signature: signature.org.uk/where-can-i-learn

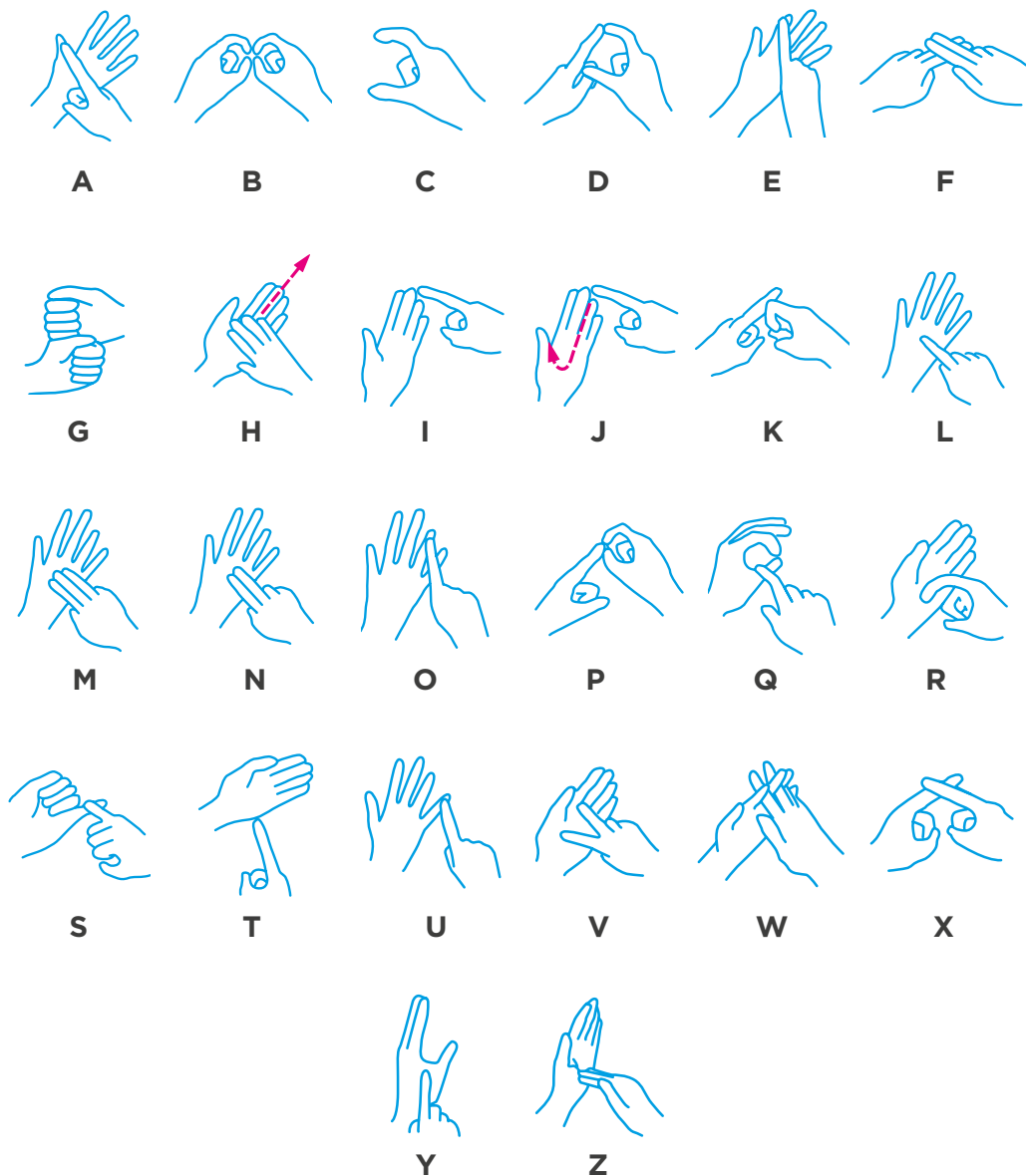
IBSL: ibsl.org.uk/centres

How much does a BSL course cost?

Introductory courses may be free or low cost. The cost of accredited courses that offer Level 1 qualifications varies greatly depending on the provider – they can reach £400 or more. The cost of courses usually increases for courses teaching more advanced levels of BSL.

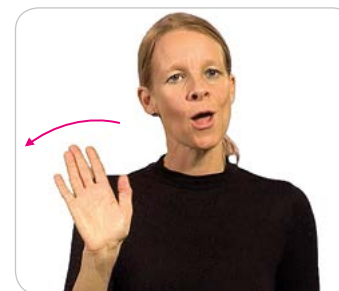
Some local authorities offer funding for parents of deaf children so that they can learn BSL. But the availability and level of funding varies greatly between local authorities. If you’re the parent of a deaf child, visit the NDCS website to find out more: ndcs.org.uk/family_support

Fingerspelling alphabet



Which basic signs are good to learn first?

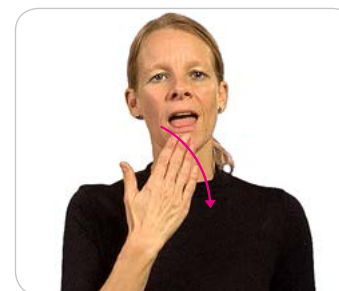
Everyday signs



Hello



Goodbye



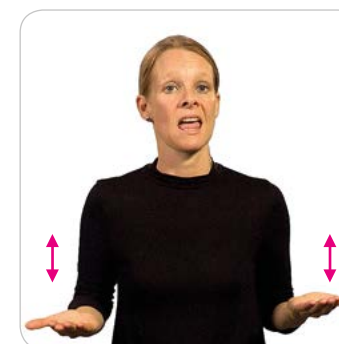
Thank you



Please



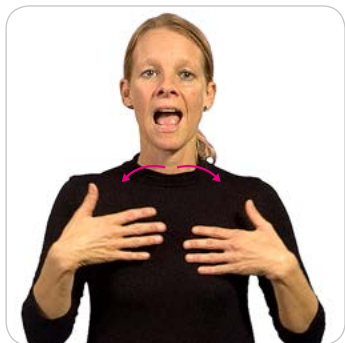
Sorry



Today



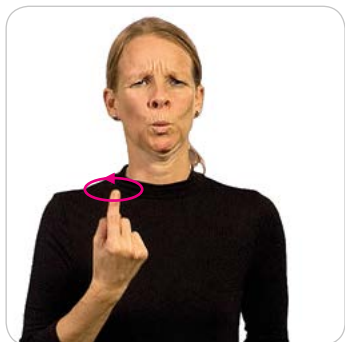
Questions



How are you?



Question



Who



What



Ask (directional verb)



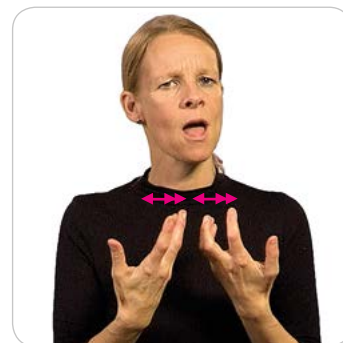
Where



When



Why/Because

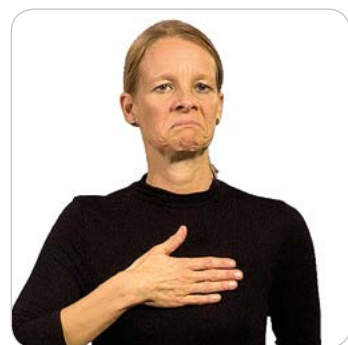


How

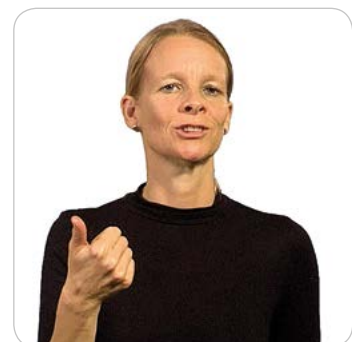
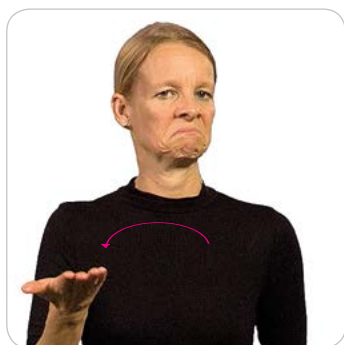
Feelings



Like



Dislike



Good



Bad



Happy

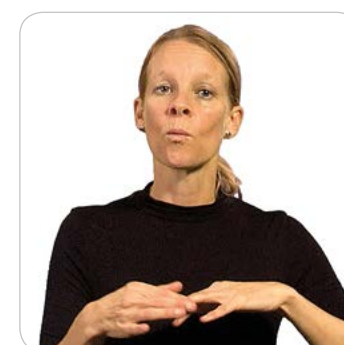


Sad

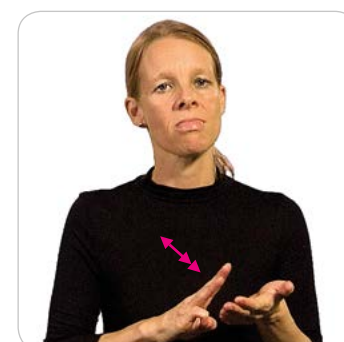
Family



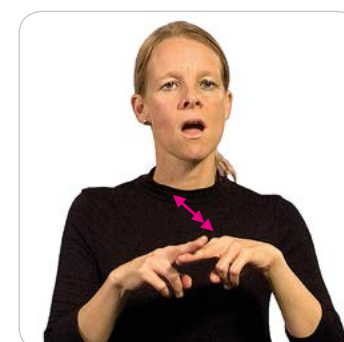
Family



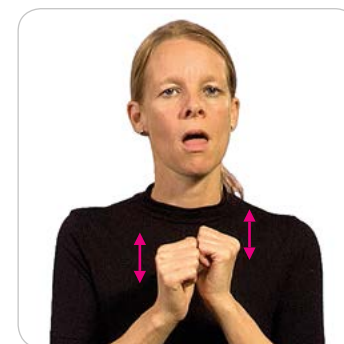
Husband/Wife



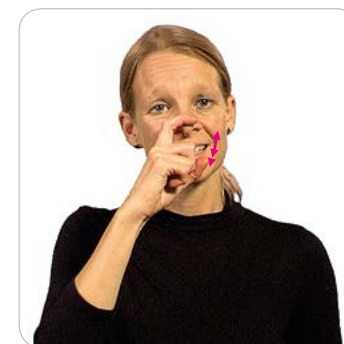
Mother



Father

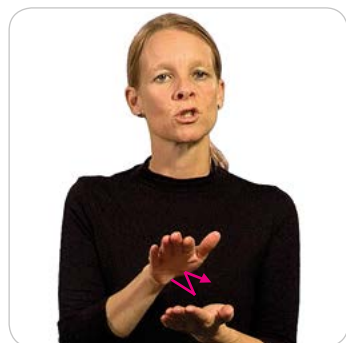


Brother

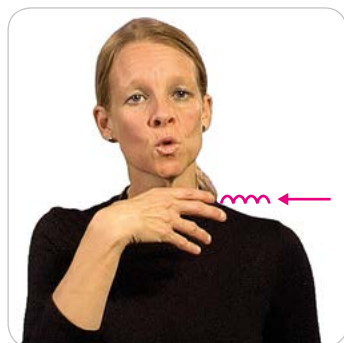


Sister

Food and drink



Sandwich



Fruit



Biscuit



Chips



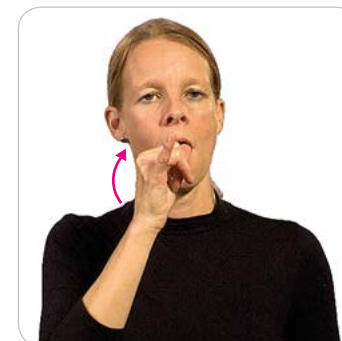
Tea



Coffee

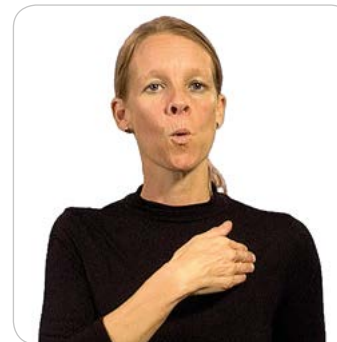


Water



Wine

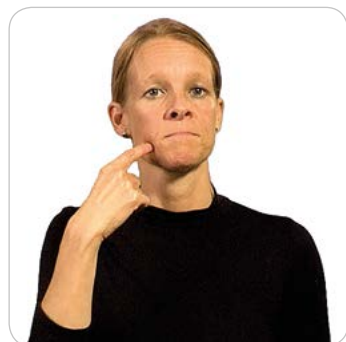
Time



Morning



Night



Tomorrow



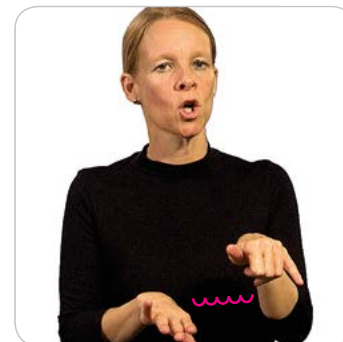
Yesterday

Work



Work

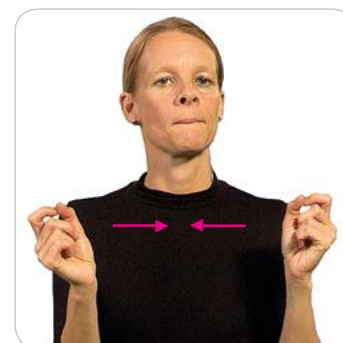
Office



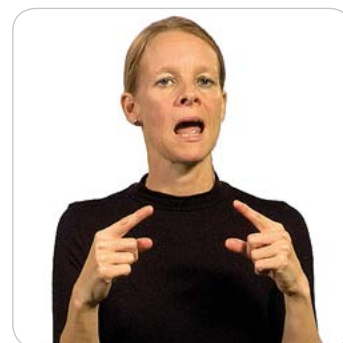
Textphone



Telephone



Email



Computer

Where can I get more information?

Action on Hearing Loss has a wide range of information on all aspects of deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss. We have the latest information on hearing health, hearing aids and cochlear implants, products and technology, communication support, disability rights and benefits.

Visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk or contact our Information Line (see back page) for free, reliable information. You can also find out about: services in your area, becoming a member and receiving our magazine, the latest research developments, and getting involved as a volunteer or supporter.

To see our full range of leaflets and factsheets, visit

actiononhearingloss.org.uk/publications

Information you can trust

The Information Standard certifies us as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. For a list of references for this leaflet, please email references@hearingloss.org.uk

Did you find this information helpful?

Please tell us what you think of this leaflet. Did you find it useful? Could we improve it? Please let us know by emailing reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

If you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create and review information for our website and publications, please let us know.



Action on Hearing Loss BSL courses



To book your place on a course at a location near you, contact our Access Solutions team:

☎ Telephone **03332 405 658**

✉ Email access.solutions@hearingloss.org.uk

Find out more at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/training

Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID) is the largest UK charity helping people who are confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss.

We give support and care, develop technology and treatments, and campaign for equality. We rely on donations to continue our vital work.

To find out more, visit **actiononhearingloss.org.uk**

Questions about deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss?

Contact our free, confidential Information Line:

Telephone 0808 808 0123

Textphone 0808 808 9000

SMS 0780 000 0360
(standard text message rates apply)

Email information@hearingloss.org.uk

Join us

 Action on Hearing Loss

 @ActionOnHearing



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Action on Hearing Loss is the trading name of The Royal National Institute for Deaf People.

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