

Deaf History Month and ASL

• Keep 'em Reading •

by | Kathy MacMillan

Interest in American Sign Language (ASL) has increased exponentially in recent years—the Modern Language Association reports that enrollment in ASL classes increased 433% between 1998 and 2002. Yet the average hearing person's knowledge about ASL and Deaf Culture is sketchy at best. Use the resources below to acquaint your students with the proud history of this language and the people who use it.



Fast Facts about ASL and Deafness

- The term “deaf” refers to being unable to hear. Uppercase “D”—“Deaf” refers to Deaf Culture, the collection of attitudes, experiences and views that make up the core of the deaf community. Members of Deaf Culture are proud users of ASL, and see their deafness as a difference, not a disability.
- American Sign Language is a language with its own grammar, structure, vocabulary and syntax. It is primarily used in the United States and Canada. Signed English, Manually Coded English and other sign systems have been developed over the years to help deaf students learn English, but these are not languages—they are merely codes that use some ASL signs to represent English.
- Ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents, which means that they often do not have early exposure to language.
- The first school for the deaf in the United States opened in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. This marked the first time that deaf people from all over the country came together, and the beginnings of ASL. ASL is a blend of French Sign Language (brought to the school by teacher Laurent Clerc, a deaf Frenchman), home signs brought by each student and Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, brought by the many students

from that island, which for two hundred years had a sizable deaf population.

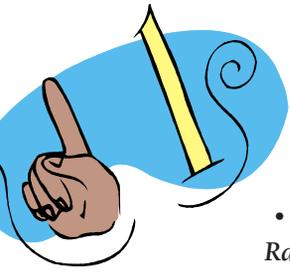
- Many deaf people do not like the term “hearing impaired.” Most prefer “deaf,” as this term does not come from outside the community, and does not imply brokenness of any kind.

Resources

Deaf Culture and Experience

- *Dad and Me in the Morning* by Patricia Lakin, illustrated by Robert Steele. Albert Whitman & Co., 1994. 1–4. A deaf boy and his hearing father spend a morning together watching the sunrise. Though Lakin slips in several details of the deaf experience, such as a flashing alarm clock, hearing aids, signing and speech-reading, this story shows how much deaf and hearing children have in common. A great lead-in to discussions of our overall similarities.
- *Let's Learn About Deafness: Classroom Activities* by Rachel Stone-Harris. Gallaudet University, 1988. Includes activities and worksheets appropriate for the primary grades, focusing on deaf culture, terminology, basic sign language and famous deaf people.
- *Moses Goes to a Concert* (1998); *Moses Goes to School* (2000); *Moses Goes to the Circus* (2003) by Isaac Millman. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. K–4. These excellent picture books illuminate the world of Moses, a deaf child, while incorporating basic sign language instruction into the text and bright, child-friendly illustrations. Use *Moses Goes to a Concert* to challenge your students' notions of what deaf people can and cannot do. Explore the similarities and differences between deaf and hearing stu-





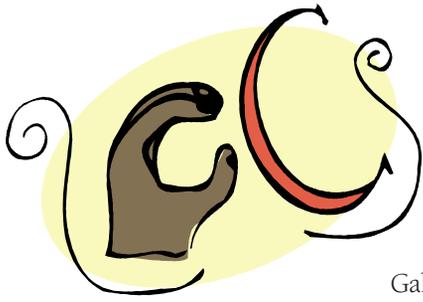
dents in *Moses Goes to School*, an excellent snapshot of a school for the deaf. Learn animal signs with *Moses Goes to the Circus*.

- **Secret Signs: Along the Underground Railroad** by Anita Riggio. Boyds Mill Press, 1997. 2–5. Luke, a young deaf boy, must overcome his fear when he becomes the only one who can pass on information about a safe house to slaves along the Underground Railroad. Riggio's suspenseful story brings a new angle to a part of history students already know, and she draws effective, though not overdone, parallels between the “secret signs” of the slaves and the sign language of the deaf, another oppressed community.

Deaf History

- **Apple Is My Sign** by Mary Riskind. Houghton Mifflin, 1981. 4–6. This novel follows ten-year-old Harry as he returns to his parents' apple farm after his first term at a school for the deaf in Philadelphia at the turn of the century. Riskind's dialogue reflects ASL syntax, and the use of fingerspelling in the plot offers an excellent chance for students to practice their own fingerspelling during a readaloud.
- **Deaf Heritage: A Student Text and Workbook** by Felicia Mode Alexander and Jack R. Gannon. NAD, 1981. 2–8. This classic resource offers information on important deaf figures from the 1800s to 1980, and includes brief readings for students on deaf schools, ASL, the oral movement, deaf artists, sports, theater and writings by deaf authors. Time lines help keep dates straight, and comprehension questions and follow-up activities appear at the end of the book.
- **Discoveries: Significant Contributions of Deaf Women and Men** by Anita P. Davis and Katharine S. Preston. Butte, 1996. Each of these twenty-two biographical entries on deaf people from all walks of life includes a short sketch, related activities incorporating a variety of skills, vocabulary pages and enrichment pages. This book provides information about both well-known and lesser-known figures, such as educator Laurent Clerc, actress Linda Bove, sculptor Douglas Tilden and mountain climber Heidi Zimmer.
- **The Printer** by Myron Uhlberg, illustrated by Henri Sorenson. Peachtree Publishers, 2003. 1–4 This story, narrated by the hearing son of a deaf father, focuses on the father's experiences at a 1940s printing plant, where the hearing printers do not communicate with him at all. The deaf man sees a fire and springs into action, catching the attention of the other deaf printers and signing his message across the noisy pressroom. Thanks to the quick action of the deaf printers, every man in the building escapes. Later, the hearing printers gather around the boy's father and tell him “Thank you” in his own language. Uhlberg, himself the son of a deaf printer, explains the historical background of this fictional story in an informative Author's Note. Directions for making a newspaper printer's hat appear on the final page of the book.
- **History through Deaf Eyes** edited by Cathryn Carroll. Gallaudet University, Clerc Center, 2002. 2–6. Three young deaf students visit a deaf history exhibit, and learn about sign language and deaf history as the statues come to life. From the prince of Lydia in the sixth century B.C.E. to more recent seminal figures such as Laurent Clerc and Helen Keller, this book presents the highlights of deaf history in an accessible way, without ever shying away from its uglier parts. Activities and resources accompanying the exhibit are available at depts.gallaudet.edu/deafeyes/index.html.
- **Movers and Shakers: Deaf People Who Changed the World** by Cathryn Carroll and Susan M. Mather. DawnSignPress, 1997. 3–6. These twenty-six brief stories tell of deaf people who overcome the prevailing attitudes of their time to show that, as Dr. I. King Jordan famously said, “deaf people can do anything hearing people can—except hear.”
- **Victory Week** by Walter P. Kelley, illustrated by Tony L. McGregor. Deaf Life Press, 1998. 1–5. In language accessible to younger children, a child narrator tells the story of the 1988 “Deaf President Now” movement at Gallaudet University, which resulted in the appointment of Gallaudet's first deaf president.





- ***The Week the World Heard Gallaudet*** by Jack R. Gannon.

Gallaudet University Press, 1989. 2–6. Though the epilogue is outdated, this triumphant book captures the spirit, heart and courage of the eight-day student protest of 1988 that led to the appointment of the first deaf president of Gallaudet University. Filled with quotes, photos and contemporary newspaper excerpts, this is an excellent way to introduce an important part of deaf history to students.

American Sign Language

- ***Come Sign with Us: Sign Language Activities for Children*** by Jan C. Hafer and Robert M. Wilson. Gallaudet University, 2002. This easy-to-follow book presents twenty lessons on basic sign language, broken down into easy chunks such as “Asking Questions” and “Saying Hello,” and accompanied by clear line drawings of the signs discussed.
- ***The Handmade Alphabet*** by Laura Rankin. Dial, 1991. K–3. This lovely wordless picture book presents the manual alphabet in Rankin’s soft colored-pencil drawings. Each manual letter is depicted alongside a creative representation of an object or action whose name begins with that letter: an “A” handshape holds two spears of asparagus, for example, and a pencil partially erases the arm whose hand signs “E.”
- ***Handtalk Zoo*** by George Ancona and Mary Beth Miller. Simon & Schuster, 1991. K–4. A group of children explore the zoo, learning the signs for various animals, food and times. George Ancona’s crisp photographs capture the signs in all their glory—this book is one of the few to attempt to show the motions of signs in the illustrations. An English glossary appears above each sign photo.
- ***Learn to Sign the Fun Way*** by Penny Warner. Three Rivers Press, 2001. The first half of this book shows child-friendly drawings depicting signs in various categories; the second half consists of forty group games that reinforce the concepts of visual language.
- ***Once Upon a Time: Children’s Classics Retold in American Sign Language*** series signed by Ben Bahan and Nathie Marbury. Dawn Sign Press, 1991. K–5. This excellent series of six videotapes features classic fairy tales such as “Rapunzel” presented by native signers, with English voiceover. Each video is accompanied by a book containing the English text of the stories, as well as line drawings of several of the most important signs. Teach the signs before viewing, and challenge students to raise their hands each time they recognize one of them being used.
- ***Signing for Kids*** by Mickey Flodin. Putnam, 1991. 1–5. This book presents ASL vocabulary through line drawings and descriptions of sign formation. The introduction contains useful information about conventions of ASL and deaf etiquette. Most chapters end with an activity suitable for the classroom, such as a worksheet or instructions for signing a song.
- ***You Can Learn American Sign Language*** by Jackie Kramer and Tali Ovadia. Troll Communications, 1999. K–5. A great source of ASL vocabulary, with over three hundred signs arranged by theme in a high-interest graphic style incorporating color photos of real kids and snappy comic illustrations.

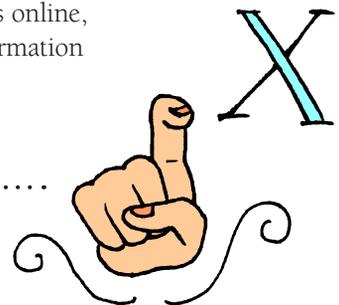
Web Sites about ASL and Deafness

- **ASL Access**, www.aslaccess.org. This non-profit organization helps libraries access a huge collection of ASL videos, and its Web site has something to offer everyone: video reviews, articles and links to many sources of information. Check out the “Where can I find ASL videos?” link to find out if a public library near you owns the ASL Access collection.
- **Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center**, clerccenter.gallaudet.edu. The premiere source of information about deafness online, with fact sheets, teacher guides, information about assistive devices and more.

Activities

Discussion Questions

- What does the word “deaf” mean?



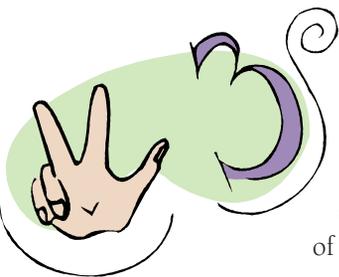
- Why do you think that many deaf people dislike terms like “hearing impaired,” “deaf and dumb” or “deaf-mute”?
- How would your life be different if you were deaf?
- If you were deaf, do you think you would rather be in a school with hearing children and have an interpreter, or in a school for the deaf?
- How is sign language different from spoken language? What are the differences between using our eyes and our ears to communicate?

After reading *Handtalk Zoo*, discuss the pictures:

- Is it always easy to tell how to make the signs from the pictures?
- Why do you think the photographer chose to show the pictures in that way?
- Since ASL uses movement and space, what do you think would be the best way to learn it?

Games

- **Who's the Leader?** This silent game develops visual awareness. Everyone stands in a circle. Choose one guesser to go outside the classroom, then, silently, choose a leader. The leader begins an action, such as tapping his or her head or stepping side to side. The other students must copy the leader. Call the guesser back into the room. The guesser stands at the center of the circle and tries to guess who the leader is. The leader must change the motion every thirty seconds or so, and the other students should try not to watch the leader too obviously. Allow the guesser to try until he or she guesses correctly, then send the leader out into the hall and choose a new leader. This game accustoms children to using their eyes and shows how much can be learned through sight.
- **Colorful Chairs.** This silent game teaches and reinforces color signs. Cut squares of various colors from construction paper. Have everyone sit in a circle, either on chairs or carpet squares. Explain the rules of the game first, and then silently hold up each color and teach the sign to go with it. Pass out the colored squares. Include as many or as few of each color as you like. Make sure that



there is one fewer chair/carpet square than you have people.

Go to the center of the circle and sign a color. Every student who has that color then has to change places, and the person in the center must try to steal a seat. If the center person succeeds, he or she takes the color square from the person whose seat was taken. Then that person has to go into the center of the circle and sign another color. You can add another fun element to this game by teaching the sign for “RAINBOW”—when the person in the center signs this, everyone must trade seats. This is a great reinforcer for color signs, visual awareness and paying attention.

- **Moose.** This guaranteed crowd pleaser teaches animal signs and tests memory, attention and visual awareness. Everyone sits in a circle. The leader is the Moose, and the person to his or her left is the Rat. Assign each student in the circle a different animal sign, and go around the circle to help them practice the signs. Once the game begins, the Moose signs “MOOSE,” followed by one of the other animal signs. Whoever is assigned to the second sign must then sign their animal, followed by another animal from the circle. The game continues like this until someone misses a cue—and becomes the Rat. The former Rat then moves to the right to become the Moose, and the former Moose moves to the right and takes on whatever animal was there. The other students between the Moose and the student who became the Rat also move one space to the right and take on a new animal. The new Moose then starts the signing cycle again. (It may sound a bit complicated, but kids pick it up very quickly!)

Language Arts

- **Exploring Language Differences.** After reading *Moses Goes to School*, discuss the ways in which Moses's school is different from and similar to yours. Use the letter that Moses writes to his pen pal to show how ASL and English are different languages with different structures. Contact your state school for the deaf about setting up a pen pal program.



Creative Expressions

- **Make Your Own Alphabet.** After sharing *The Handmade Alphabet*, have students create their own artistic alphabets by providing a sheet with clip art of the handshapes (available online at www.lesstutor.com/jmaslalphabet.html) and asking them to incorporate other objects into the shapes. For a shortened version of this activity, have students complete only the letters of their first names, or assign one letter to each student.
- **Face Up to It.** After watching one of the videos on the resource list, discuss the ways the signer used his or her face to show meaning. Play “Face Your Feelings” from *Learn to Sign the Fun Way!* (p. 150).
- **Silent Time.** Establish a time in your classroom when students cannot use their voices. Before you turn off your voices, discuss the various ways one can communicate without sound (writing, gestures, sign language, etc.). Silent time is also a great time to learn new signs for objects in your classroom and to use nonverbal attention getting methods such as flickering the lights and waving. Use tickets to motivate even the most reluctant student—at the beginning of silent time, give each student a designated number of two-part tickets. Each time students use their voices during silent time, take one ticket away. At the end, have each student put half of each of their remaining tickets into a drawing for a small prize. This method works astonishingly well—even stickers and dollar store key chains are great motivators.

Geography/History

- **History Map.** Read about the journey that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet took to Europe, which led to the founding of the first school for the deaf in America and the dawn of ASL. Have students make a map showing Gallaudet’s route and where it intersected with Laurent Clerc’s.

Science

- **An Island Where Everyone Signed.** Read about the amazing history of deafness on Martha’s Vineyard (a great place to start is Jamie Berke’s article, “Martha’s Vineyard: Where It

Was Normal to be Deaf” at deafness.about.com/cs/featurearticles/a/marthasvineyard.htm), then use this information to study genetic traits. Robert Mather and Linda McIntosh of the Dana Hall School in Massachusetts have put together an excellent unit on this topic, available at www.tufts.edu/as/wright_center/lessons/pdf/docs/biology.html.

- **Technology for the Eyes.** Have your students make a list of the many pieces of technology that use sound, and ask how these might be modified to use visual signals for deaf people. Use this list as a lead-in to discuss TTYs, captions on TV and light-flashing doorbells. Find out if your school has a TTY that you can show to your students.
- **Using Technology that Connects Us.** Contact your State Relay Service and find out if they have resources for teaching your students about their services. Have students role play making and receiving relay calls, using correct terminology, such as “Go Ahead.” This is a valuable skill for your students to learn, as many hearing people are completely overwhelmed when receiving calls through the relay service.

Classroom Visitor

- **A Deaf Guest.** Contact your state’s school for the deaf or state office on deaf issues and arrange a visit from a deaf teacher or staff member. Ask your deaf visitor to share information about the technologies that he or she uses every day, such as flashing alarm clocks and TTYs, as well as his or her communication preference. (Remember that you will probably need to provide an interpreter for your guest.)

Kathy MacMillan is an ASL interpreter who has presented numerous ASL programs for children and adults. She was formerly the Library Media Specialist at the Maryland School for the Deaf, Columbia Campus, and prior to that worked in public libraries for five years.

