

Email Messages From Educators & Researchers

Who Use The SignWriter Computer Program

...Speaking in Support of Further Software Development...

November 10, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITING AS A TOOL FOR SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS FOR DEAF STUDENTS.

As a science and mathematics teacher for many years at Norway's upper secondary school for deaf students, I have been involved in the development of sign terminology for these subjects. To be able to preserve the terminology developed, the SignWriting system of Valerie Sutton and the Deaf Action Committee has been of outstanding value. We presently have a physics dictionary with about 600 new and special terms, a mathematics dictionary of about the same size, a chemistry dictionary of about 300 signs and a biology dictionary of about 500 signs. The system is also used in class, to give the students a proper bilingual education. As an example, in a mathematics class we were discussing asymptotes on the graph of hyperbolas. In Norwegian, as in English, there is only one word covering both the horizontal and the vertical asymptotes. In Norwegian Sign language, these two have different but related signs. When both the Norwegian expressions and the Signs were written on the blackboard, it made the deaf students proud to see the efficiency of their language, and it made it easier for them to understand the concepts. It is my belief, based on experience and on the research I am currently doing, that by the use of SignWriting the educational level of deaf students will get higher, and we will see more deaf mathematicians and scientists, as well as deaf people in other professions.

Sincerely yours,

Ingvild Kristine Roald
Research fellow, Department of Applied Education
University of Bergen, N-5020 BERGEN, Norway
e-mail: ingvild.kristine.roald@psych.uib.no
Department phone: +47 55 58 48 30
Department fax: +47 55 58 48 80
Private phone: +47 55 28 34 34

October 31, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITING AS A TOOL FOR LITERACY FOR DEAF STUDENTS.

I am a linguist with a particular interest in writing systems; I have followed with interest the development of SignWriting and its recent successes. The work that Ms.Sutton has done over the past twenty-five years in devising this versatile writing system is phenomenal. Over the years, her work as been supported by her own funds, by private contributions and some grants, and by much volunteer labor. Now she must have more monetary support at this crucial time when she is working to get the very idea of the use of written form of signed languages accepted within the Deaf education establishment and Deaf communities.

Ms.Sutton has to convince those with an interest and stake in Deaf education both that it is possible, and that it is desirable, for Deaf children to learn to read first in their own native language, rather than having to spend large amounts of their early years of schooling learning to read whatever language is spoken around them, a language which they cannot hear or speak, before they can be taught the basic school content subjects that all other children concentrate on.

At the same time, Valerie Sutton is working with Deaf scholars and teachers of the Deaf in a number of countries around the world to adapt the symbolic system of SignWriting to other signed languages. As she did with Danish Sign Language and with American Sign Language, Ms. Sutton provides these groups with information and consults with them as they begin to use SignWriting symbols to write their own languages. The same benefits of early literacy that DSL users have experienced and that ASL users are now beginning to experience,, will come to Deaf children in Taiwan, Brazil, Israel, Spain, Nicaragua, and the other countries where SignWritng is adopted: better educated Deaf people will have better opportunities in life.

Ms. Sutton had work within the last few years developed sophisticated computer software that allows one to write and send signed language messages and to publish books using SignWriting. It is crucial that her work not be slowed or halted by lack of funds just at this time when it seems that resistance to writing gestural languages can be overcome and great strides can be made toward providing Deaf children with genuine education. A Deaf child would learn to read first in his/her own native signed language (and later, of course, would also learn to read as a second language the dominant language of the country); textbooks written in the appropriate signed language would be used for mathematics, history, and so forth, and these subjects could be taught up to the normal standards of the country. In this manner the education of the Deaf could expand away from an exclusively 'overcoming a handicap' focus to a comprehensive focus of 'providing the most complete education for this minority group.' The real handicap for Deaf persons is lack of a full education equal to that of hearing persons.

Up until now, the missing ingredient in all of this was a writing system designed specifically for languages that use movement rather than sound; Valerie Sutton and her associates have given us that system in SignWriting. Now is the time to ensure that in the future the Deaf will enjoy the benefits of literacy in their own languages. I urge you to fund Ms.Sutton's valuable continued work in this effort.

Rebecca Larche Moreton
301 South Ninth Street, Oxford MS 38655, USA
mlrlm@olemiss.edu, rebeling@mailhost.tcs.tulane.edu

October 22, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITING AS A TOOL FOR RESEARCH

Here at the Neuropsycholinguistics Laboratory at the University of Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil, a large team of researchers are conducting research projects with state and federal funding using SignWriter 4.3 to accomplish:

1) The Brazilian Sign Language Dictionary with 16,500 illustrations in both formats, book format and CD ROM format, which is supported by the Brazilian Federation of Education and Integration of the Deaf, and which is going to have a decisive impact on the quality of teaching of Brazilian deaf children nationwide; 2) The multimedia communication system SignPhone, which runs in local networks and in the brief future in the Internet also.

SignPhone allows face-to-face and telecommunication among tetraplegic and cerebral palsied deaf people (as well as deaf people with other severe and motor impairments such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) and hearing people (even blind hearing people) based on digitized speech output, SignWriting and animated signs, which can be selected by automatic scanning and devices sensitive to air-puff, eye-gaze, eye-blink, etc.

We are very anxious for the advent of SignWriter 5.0, which is going to serve us as a vital research and technological tool for the betterment of our computer communication systems, and as a consequence, for the improvement of communication and life quality of deaf people with very severe motor impairments.

Thanks to the tireless work of Valerie Sutton and of people from the Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting we have been able to improve our technological and scientific standards of excellence, and we do count on your vital support for SignWriter 5.0 and hence the success of noble projects that depend on SignWriting on a worldwide scale.

Yours sincerely,

Fernando C. Capovilla, Ph.D.
Psychology Professor.
Experimental Cognitive Neuropsycholinguistics
University of Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo, SP, Brazil
ZIP Code: 05508-900
e-mail: capovilla@usp.br

October 28, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITER AS INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR THE DEAF

I'm a lecturer and researcher in Computer Science in Brazil since 1980. I've been working in federal and private universities in both applied and theoretical subjects.

Since 1996 an important part of my effort concerns promoting software development dealing with the SignWriting system for writing deaf sign languages. A few students already developed several prototype systems to help processing sign languages written in SignWriting: sign database systems (to support the development of electronic dictionaries and sign language translators), sign language talks and chats (to the adequacy of sign language dialog systems in the Internet), SignWriting animation (to help people learn SignWriting by watching dynamic signs), etc.

In last September the Brazilian government research funding agency CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico) decided to support the cooperative research project I'm coordinating (called SignNet - adapting the Internet technologies to sign languages and the special educations of deaf students) with a grant for the next two years.

It's a cooperative research project involving three other research groups in Rio Grande do Sul, including the Escola Concórdia/ULBRA (specialized in deaf education) and the Museu de Ciências e Tecnologia/PUCRS (a modern interact science museum recently open to the public).

I hope you can support Valerie Sutton and the Deaf Action Committee in her effort to accomplish the implementation of the SignWriter program, version 5.0, which is a must need tool for people writing in SignWriting.

I'm in all aspects ready to give you any other information you may need about our work with SignWriting, if it can help you judge of the importance the writing system invented by Valerie Sutton has for the deaf community all around the world and also, to my view, to the computer industry, as it can help make computers satisfy special user needs that up to now have not been adequately satisfied.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Antonio Carlos da Rocha Costa

Escola de Informática
ESIN/UCPEL
Universidade Católica de Pelotas
R. Félix da Cunha 412
96010-000 Pelotas, RS, Brasil
fone: 0532-22-1555 r.227, fax: 0532-25-3105
email: rocha@gmc.ucpel.tche.br
<http://gmc.ucpel.tche.br>

October 29, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR IMPROVING SIGNWRITER SOFTWARE

Since 1987, SignWriting has been part of the curriculum for students taking Sign Language as one of their chosen subjects for the university entrance exam in Norway. During the years, we have been using the system for collecting signs, especially for new subjects, that the deaf people were barred from before. Through this system, we can easily write exactly what is being said in sign language.

For my own doctoral thesis, I needed to do a structured interview, containing 48 questions, and in order to have the questions in the same form for each participant, I needed to have the whole manuscript written down. Without SingWriter, this had not been possible.

On the other hand, we now feel an urgent need of upgrading of the old DOS program. We know that Valerie Sutton is doing a tremendous work on this, as is the programmers that she has been able to find funding for. But this funding is not enough. We therefore would ask you to give whatever aid you are able to give.

There are several hundred signed languages around the world, eagerly awaiting to be included in the society of written languages. The rich oral (signed) tradition that these languages now carry, can easily be lost, and the poetry and drama that they incorporate as well. Most deaf people are born to hearing parents, and the time for delivery of this tradition from one generation of deaf people to the next is short. The need for a written form of these languages is therefore even greater than for the spoken languages.

Sincerely yours,

Ingvild Kristine Roald
Research fellow, Department of Applied Education
University of Bergen, N-5020 BERGEN, Norway
e-mail: ingvild.kristine.roald@psych.uib.no
Department phone: +47 55 58 48 30
Department fax: +47 55 58 48 80
Private phone: +47 55 28 34 34

October 27, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITING AS A TOOL FOR DEAF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

My name is Stefan Woehrmann. I'm a teacher at a school for deaf and hard of hearing pupils in Germany. Only a few months ago, I heard about a new instrument to help improve literacy in deaf students dramatically. I got in contact with Valerie Sutton and the Deaf Action Committee. They invited our school to participate in the **SignWriting Literacy Project** and donated lots of materials to our school. Valerie Sutton offered as much technical support, time and energy as one can imagine, to get us started here in Germany. This new instrument is the **SignWriter 4.3 computer program** that allows us to type signs of all different kinds of Sign Languages in the world in a precise manner. Please allow me to explain a little more, why this computer program might become such a tremendous support in teaching deaf students.

Deaf pupils experience great difficulties in developing a normal standard of literacy. At our school we are tremendously interested in improving literacy of our deaf students. The variety of literature they have to work through during vocational training is immense. We have to accept though that in many cases our educational aims to enable them to read written texts or to express themselves in German are not reached. With **SignWriter 5.0 - which we anxiously wait for** to be ready for use soon - we will have possibilities that were unknown before.

Just imagine if you would like to learn German. - How would you do it? No problem - there are multimedia tools as well as teachers. You can travel to Germany and live here for a while. There are lots of other possibilities to get familiar with this foreign language. So, for a hearing, hard working person, it's not too difficult to reach a standard that allows you to communicate well in German.

But don't forget - you are fortunate because you can **hear all these new words** in German, and the grammatical structures, and you can compare them to your own native language, which you grew up with. You were able to develop a first language on a high level because of your ability to grasp the words and phrases people were using around you as a child. Your auditory channel functioned like a highway to your brain to allow a very high frequency of communicative pieces and patterns. Now you might learn vocabularies or grammatical structures of another language just by writing them next to each other. Reading left side (mother tongue) reading right side foreign language there is no difficulty to get more and more familiar with the new language because you can hear.

Imagine now our deaf pupils, how do they learn written or spoken language? They can't hear it. They can't see sounds. So the only way is to allow them to read the words, the sentences of the spoken language and to sign the words. In the past we developed lots of picture-books. **Look at the picture . What's the name of this?** In German there is this terrible article -problem...**der , die das**....Deaf children have a hard time to understand this!

We ask deaf children to write whole sentences in order to describe stories or actual events. It is such a difficult task for them. And yet they experience almost no trouble to express themselves with gestures and elements of sign language. But they become **frozen** when they are asked to formulate the same content in German. Almost automatically - even the oral educated deaf children - develop their own signs and gestures for all kinds of things of their interest. In the past there hasn't been any possibility to write these **visual signs** down on paper, which the deaf child (or adult) choose in order to name things, emotions, actions, past or future oriented thoughts.

So before now, we didn't have a way to read and write sign language. And that is the most important point people have to be aware of, when we discuss the importance of the SignWriting system and the SignWriter computer program. It's a tool to write a language that couldn't be written and read before, in such an easy to grasp manner. Now not only linguists and specialized scientists are able to read and write Sign language in very sophisticated systems, but children and teachers and parents can use this tool as a practical help to improve their communicative skills.

Following the child's lead is a golden rule to allow children to improve their language skills. Now with SignWriting - we would be able to pick up exactly those vocabularies which the children are in need of at a special phase of language development. Just writing down and collecting the signs the children use to express what's on their mind. Add to that the German language and they can start to build up their dictionaries and grammar books. It's a brilliant tool!

So with the new **SignWriter 5.0 computer program** teachers and children will be able to write down what they want to express - if they need to express it in Sign Language. I say to my little students: **Whatever you want to sign to me - why don't you write it down in SignWriting first, and then type it for me on the computer ?**

Then it's my job to explain to my pupils how to express this idea in German words. Through this process, deaf children are allowed to improve their language skills while using a similar method as the hearing do. In their natural communication system, Sign Language, they feel more comfortable and it serves as a platform to teach German vocabulary. But not only single words! - Being able to read sign language and spoken language they are able with much more ease to compare the different grammatical structures and learn from that too.

I'm a psychologist and teacher for the deaf - dealing day by day with the problems and difficulties that hinder deaf pupils to achieve better results in literacy. I was fascinated how quickly my first grade children could understand the written name signs in SignWriting. Almost without any problems they translated the first few SignWriting symbols into German words. We are at the very beginning. I'm still learning and we all hope that you would support the SignWriter 5.0 computer program that would lift our possibilities in the process of developing fruitful tools upon a higher level. The DOS version is just a first step - but Valerie Sutton and her team are working hard to get SignWriter 5.0 done, and they need your support.

Feel free to contact me any time. Be assured that right now many people aren't aware that this SignWriter computer program is a blessing for all of us who are engaged in improving language skills in deaf students. Thank You very much for your attention.

Stefan Woehrmann
Landesbildungszentrum für Hörgeschädigte Osnabrück
August-Hölscher Strasse 89,
49080 Osnabrück, Germany
Telefon: 0541/94100
Fax: 9410160
stefanwoehrmann@hotmail.com

November 3, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITING AS A LITERATURE-TRANSLATION TOOL

I am working with a group of Deaf Japanese to translate the Bible into Japanese Sign Language. Although our translation is published on videotape, we need a way to cue the signers as they stand in front of the camera recording our translation. SignWriting is the only way we know to write signs without using Japanese. (The problem with using Japanese to cue for Japanese Sign Language is that it pulls the signer toward the "Signed Japanese" mode, which is a different grammatical structure entirely from Japanese Sign Language, decreasing the "Deaf feel" of the signing.)

We have used SignWriting in the past, but the DOS based program has a very high learning curve compared to a Windows or MAC based program, is slower to use, and only very highly motivated people are willing to use it. SignWriting has tremendous potential to further empower the Deaf community and give them access to printed materials in their own language. If SignWriting were to take hold in Japan, the effects would be revolutionary, but it will not happen without an easily usable program to write signs via computer.

SignWriting is tremendously versatile in its ability to express nuances of Signed Languages. We would love to see the day when we could publish the Bible using SignWriting. Even before that day, we would love to be able to use it to cue our signers as they record it onto videotape.

I was delighted to hear that you are considering funding this important program, and pray that you will meet or even exceed the grant request to create a program that could revolutionize Deaf education and further empower the Deaf community.

Mark Penner
5-72-7-5 Naka Kiyoto
Kiyose Shi, Tokyo To 204-0012, Japan
Tel: 0424-92-6942
Fax: 0424-92-6914
penner@mx5.nisiq.net
<http://www.deaf.or.jp/vibi/>

October 28, 1999

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SIGNWRITING AS A BENEFIT TO THE DEAF COMMUNITY

I am a staff pastor responsible for deaf ministry at First Federated Church in Des Moines, Iowa. As a pastor, I am constantly aware of the power of the written word. Believers in Jesus historically have been known as the People of the Book, because we value the written communication we have received from God. As I grew up, my parents taught me the value of reading and writing, and instilled in me a love for learning and studying. I was fortunate to receive this as a young child, because it has stayed with me my whole life.

However, deaf people in general have been denied this benefit because of two critical misconceptions. The first misconception is that deaf people must use English (or whatever national spoken language is prominent in their country) to be intelligent. The second misconception is the idea that sign languages in general cannot be written. This has made deaf literacy a difficult task since it relies on their ability to internalize a language they cannot hear to achieve literacy.

However, the work that Valerie Sutton and her organization is doing is something that can greatly benefit the deaf community around the world by giving them the ability to communicate in their language on the written page. This is not something that is isolated to religious matters. Reading and writing have always been a key tool for any culture to develop a rich heritage and have a significant impact on its population.

I highly recommend this as worthy of your support. The resources that Valerie Sutton's organization seeks to create will be a very important and critical tool for empowering the deaf community around the world. Your part in supporting these resources will play an important part in helping sign languages around the world earn their rightful respect as languages capable of every expression just like spoken languages.

If you have any questions about my support for this, or would like further details why I consider this a very worthy investment, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Stuart Thiessen
First Federated Church
4801 Franklin, Des Moines, IA 50310
(515) 255-8856 TTY, (515) 255-0052 Fax
EMAIL: sthiessen@radiks.net