

# Deaf Perspectives on SignWriting®

Video Series



## History of SignWriting

### 1. How Deaf Opinions Changed



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## **Deaf Perspectives on SignWriting® Video Series**

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featuring...



**Lucinda  
O'Grady Batch**



**Bonita Ewan**

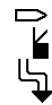


**Denny Voreck**



**Kathleen Say**

and...



**Valerie Sutton**



**Lucinda  
O'Grady Batch**

"It is important to have a way to preserve old ASL signs, as well as more current ones"

Hi. My name is Lucinda O'Grady Batch. I am Deaf. I come from a Deaf family. I went to a Deaf school in New Jersey. When I came to California I got a job working at Salk Institute which focuses on sign language research. I also have taught American Sign Language (ASL) classes and I have been involved in the field of ASL in general.

Now, let me explain a little about the DAC, which stands for the Deaf Action Committee. That started in about 1988. Valerie Sutton is a hearing woman who invented SignWriting way back in 1974. I got involved in SignWriting in about 1981. In 1988, we decided to set up the Deaf Action Committee for the purpose of having several Deaf people involved working on the SignWriting project.

We meet weekly to work on newsletters and the distribution of those newsletters, as well as a sign language dictionary. It is important to have a way to preserve old ASL signs as well as more current ones, and to be able to share them

throughout the United States. That project is also helpful internationally for research purposes. So, that's what we have been doing to date.

I have been involved with the SignWriting project for a long time. In 1981, when I first got involved, I wasn't sure if it was necessary or a good idea, but after I started learning I could see its true value, especially for research.

We do a lot of research work and SignWriting is a wonderful way to document that research. It can also be used in language education. More and more schools for the Deaf are using the "bilingual-bicultural approach" in the classroom. SignWriting could be added to the curriculum in such programs, to enhance Deaf people's own language, ASL.

The purpose of this videotape is to find out other Deaf Action Committee member's perspectives on SignWriting, whether it be positive or negative, and what uses they foresee.





**Bonita Ewan**

"It is a wonderful opportunity for Deaf people to preserve ASL and ASL stories"

Hi. I'm Bonita Ewan. I grew up in Maryland. I am the fourth generation of Deaf people in my family. I went to a Deaf school in Maryland and I graduated from Gallaudet in Communications. I work at Salk Institute as well. I work with ASL research.

When I first heard about SignWriting, I strongly disagreed. I thought it was totally unnecessary. I wanted to meet Valerie Sutton, because I was curious. So I met her and she asked me if I was interested in working with SignWriting and I thought "Sure. Why not?" I felt a little bit like a hypocrite, but I wanted to see if it was interesting and sure enough...I became fascinated with SignWriting.

I had never really thought about it, but it is a wonderful opportunity for Deaf people to be able to understand and to preserve ASL and ASL stories.

You know, some hearing teachers are not good at presenting ASL stories but this would be a marvelous tool for them to use. In the future, I wish we could add facial expressions because that's my love and I believe that Deaf schools could use that. It would also be good for mainstreaming programs and for use with ASL storytelling. So I hope that is what it is used for in the upcoming future.





**Denny Voreck**

"My suggestion for increasing the use of SignWriting is to start a pilot program at a Deaf school"



Hi. My name is Denny C. Voreck. I graduated from Fremont School For The Deaf in 1984, and from Gallaudet in the class of '92, but I am loyal to the class of '89.

I heard a lot about SignWriting. I think the first time I heard about it was at Cindy O'Grady Batch's wedding. I met Valerie Sutton there. She showed me SignWriting. It looked like Chinese characters to me. It was really weird. But I didn't say anything. I thought it was a little bit crazy. Later, I asked Cindy if she still worked with Valerie Sutton. She said yes, and told me a little bit about it. I was skeptical. I thought "Who really cares?"

After I had graduated, I thought "Why not give it a chance? Work with it a little bit. It can't hurt to try!" So, I talked with Valerie Sutton and later on she called me and said there was a position available. I started learning how to write following the rules. It was a little frustrating getting to know the system. The palm of the hand is represented by white. The back of the hand is represented by black. If the symbol is cut, it represents a different plane to show the third dimension. As I was trained, I started picking up more and more.

I started working at home on my own computer. I could follow my own schedule. I really enjoyed that a lot. In the middle of the night, if I had nothing to do, I could start working on the SignWriting project. As I became more familiar with the SignWriter computer program, I was fascinated, and I started to tell my friends about it.

My suggestion for increasing the use of SignWriting would be to start a pilot program at a Deaf school, for example, the Fremont or Riverside Schools For The Deaf. See if it works. Maybe start at the elementary school level and see if the children are successful in learning. If it is effective, it may be used as a model nationwide. It could be used as a model for Gallaudet University and the world...maybe later the Universe! Who knows?!!

Now, I feel that SignWriting is very innovative and different. It is unique! All great inventions start with experiments. And sure...a lot of experiments fail, but great inventions happen starting with experiments. I encourage you to see how compatible SignWriting is with ASL. Its success really depends on the Deaf Schools, educational systems, administration, the Deaf Community, and politics.





**Kathleen Say**

"I hope the Deaf Community will accept writing Sign as a part of the language"

Hi. My name is Kathy Say. I went to the Arizona School For The Deaf and after graduation, went to Gallaudet. After I graduated there, I moved to Washington state where I was the supervisor for the school for the Deaf for a year and a half. I moved here to San Diego where I work as a researcher at Salk Institute and I have been there for two years.

I would say back when I was in high school was the first time I heard about SignWriting. I couldn't understand what that would possibly be for, and what it was worth. I was very much against it. When I came here to San Diego I heard again about SignWriting. I thought "People are still talking about SignWriting!" I decided to go and see for fun what it would be like. I met Valerie Sutton and I started to learn and I learned a lot. And I also learned how valuable it is. I learned more and more and more.

When you learn something you have to start with the basics and then it gets easier after that. You can read and write it easily.

Just like written English, you have to start learning words and then later sentences and continue from there. It is very important to have a strong foundation. ASL is the same way.

SignWriting is not formally in the school systems yet, but for research purposes it is very important and it can also lead to the educational system for preserving sign language in the future. It teaches the children the different grammatical structures, that is to say, the structure of ASL and how it differs from English structure. It would be nice to have SignWriting for the future and I hope that one day it will be incorporated into the educational system through the "bilingual-bicultural approach".

I hope the Deaf Community will accept writing Sign as a part of the language, as a written language, because many languages have a spoken form as well as a written form. Why can't we have two forms? A manual form, and a written form? It would really be nice to have both. I hope that that will happen.





## Valerie Sutton

"ASL is a really beautiful language. I would never want to change it. I want to preserve it."



Hello. My name is Valerie Sutton, and I am the inventor of SignWriting®. I am a hearing person. People ask me if I grew up with Deaf people, or maybe I had Deaf people in my family, or maybe I went to school with Deaf people. No. I never knew Deaf people when I was growing up. I wish I had, of course.

But I was always fascinated with sign language. I think a lot of hearing people are fascinated with sign language. I was a dancer.

I loved ballet. I was in training all of my childhood to become a dancer. I went to Denmark and I wrote their dance steps. I invented a way to write dance movement on paper. We call it "DanceWriting®".

I never thought that I would work with Deaf people. I had no idea that would happen. It is an interesting story. There were some articles in the newspapers in Denmark about my DanceWriting system. I got a call "out of the blue" from the University of Copenhagen.



It was back in 1974-1975. They had research on sign language. They wanted to put down the movements of sign language on paper, but they had no way to do that.

They saw the article on DanceWriting in the newspaper and gave me a call. They asked me to show my DanceWriting system to their university group. I was really surprised, but interested. They asked me if I could use my DanceWriting system to put down the movements of sign language on paper. I said Ok. I sat in front of a videotape machine watching Danish Sign Language for three months. I had no idea what they were saying, but, I was fascinated. I compared my DanceWriting system with sign language, and put signs down on paper. That's the way I developed SignWriting for the first time.

I got the idea that maybe we should contact Deaf people. Maybe we could publish a newspaper in sign language. I went to my boss and suggested that idea. He said, "Why would Deaf people want to do that?" He had never thought about that before. I was a little discouraged but I went home to my homeland in

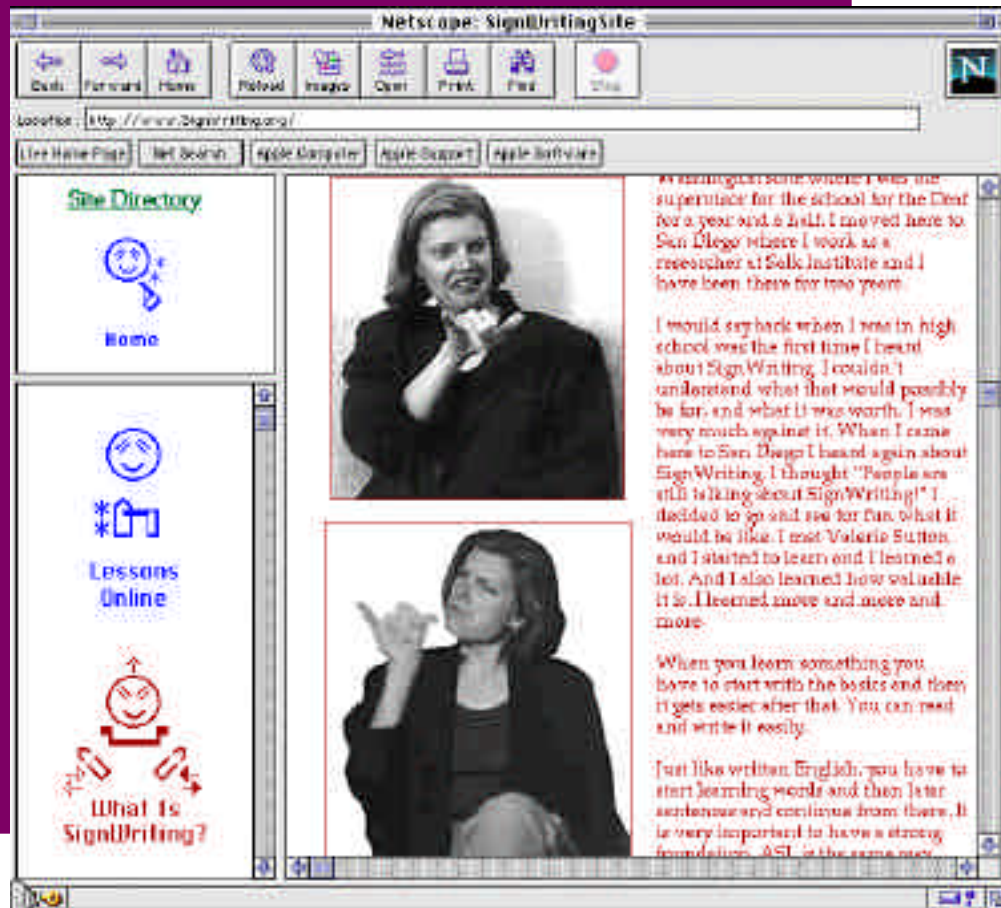
the USA and decided to contact Deaf people. Some Deaf people got involved. They supported me and helped me.

I want to make it very clear that I do not want to change ASL. No. I love ASL. ASL is a really beautiful language. I would never want to change it, I want to preserve it. I would never change to SEE signs. No. A lot of people think that because I am a hearing person that I would do that, but no, I would not.

I write what I see. I know my ASL is not perfect (smile) but those Deaf people who work with me teach me ASL. The Deaf people themselves write ASL. I just invented the symbols in general that can be used to write any sign language in the world.

So...I wanted to introduce myself and I wanted you to meet a few of our Deaf members of the Deaf Action Committee. Thank you for looking at this videotape and we hope to see you again soon. Bye!





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