

Researcher's Resources

SignWriting

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1. A brief historical overview

1.1. *Early history*

SignWriting was developed by an American, Valerie Sutton, at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark in 1974. She had invented a movement writing system called Sutton DanceWriting in 1973. When she was invited to teach her system to the Royal Danish Ballet in the Fall of 1974, newspaper articles caught the eye of Danish audiologist and signed language researcher Lars von der Lieth at the University of Copenhagen. Signed languages were just being recognized as real languages; Lieth and other researchers needed a way to record the movements of the languages they were studying. Sutton adapted her system for signed movements, which she called SignWriting. The name is now a registered trademark of Sutton's nonprofit organization, the Center For Sutton Movement Writing, La Jolla, California. For more information about the early history of SignWriting, see:

- (1) 1966–1974 DanceWriting begins; Precursor to SignWriting
<http://www.SignWriting.org/hist002.html>
- (2) 1974–1978 SignWriting begins in Denmark; the early years
<http://www.SignWriting.org/hist003.html>
- (3) 1975–1980 SignWriting begins in USA; MIT, NTD, NSSLRT, NTID, <http://www.SignWriting.org/hist004.html>

1.2. *SignWriter newspaper*

Sutton hired Deaf native ASL signers and proceeded to publish the first newspaper written in the signed movements. The SignWriter Newspaper was written directly in ASL by hand; it was published from 1981–1984. There were also articles in four languages side by side — Danish Sign Language, American Sign Language, Danish and English. For more information on the history of this newspaper, see:

- (4) 1981–1984 SignWriter newspaper; native signers begin writing
<http://www.SignWriting.org/hist005.html>

1.3. *SignWriter computer program*

In 1986, the first version of the SignWriter Computer Program was released, programmed by Richard Gleaves. At present, SignWriter 4.3 is in MS-DOS, and SignWriter 5.0 for the Macintosh and Windows is planned for release in the year 2000. For more history on the SignWriter Computer Program, see:

- (5) 1986–1999 SignWriter software development; Apple IIe to MS-DOS to Java, <http://www.SignWriting.org/prog004.html>

1.4. *Native signers use SignWriting*

Deaf researcher and teacher Lucinda O’Grady Batch formed the Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting, under the auspices of the Center For Sutton Movement Writing, in 1986. The purpose of the DAC is to encourage members of the Deaf Community to contribute to SignWriting’s further development; for more information, see:

- (6) 1986–1999 The DAC, Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting
<http://www.SignWriting.org/sw116.html>

DAC members work on dictionaries, instruction videos, and ASL literature when there is funding. For information on literature written by the DAC, see:

- (7) Children’s stories written in ASL
<http://www.SignWriting.org/child000.html>
- (8) Deaf Author’s Series written in ASL
<http://www.SignWriting.org/authors.html>

As more Deaf people wrote their own signed languages in SignWriting, there was a natural “evolution” of writing styles. For a history of changes and improvements, see:

- (9) 1974–1998 How SignWriting has changed; The evolution of writing styles, <http://www.SignWriting.org/hist008.html>

2. **About the system itself**

2.1. *SignWriting printing, handwriting & shorthand*

There are three sections of the system in use today: SignWriting Printing, Handwriting and Shorthand. The Shorthand and Handwriting are used for quick notetaking and daily writing. The notes can then be typed by computer in SignWriting Printing. Examples of each can be seen at:

- (10) SignWriting Printing
<http://www.SignWriting.org/ling004.html>
- (11) SignWriting Handwriting
<http://www.SignWriting.org/curs000.html>
- (12) SignWriting Shorthand
<http://www.SignWriting.org/ling005.html>

2.2. SignWriting — How it works

Figure 1 illustrates a sign written in SignWriting. The notation indicates facial expression, handshape, and signed movement.

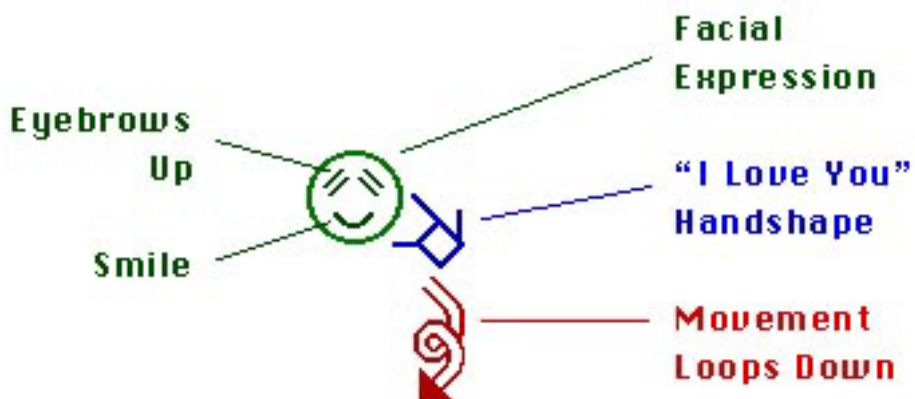


Figure 1

Figure 2 shows several sentences from Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The fifth sign in the left column is the same as that seen in Figure 1 — the sign for Goldilocks.

SignWriting Printing Sample of Sentences From Goldilocks

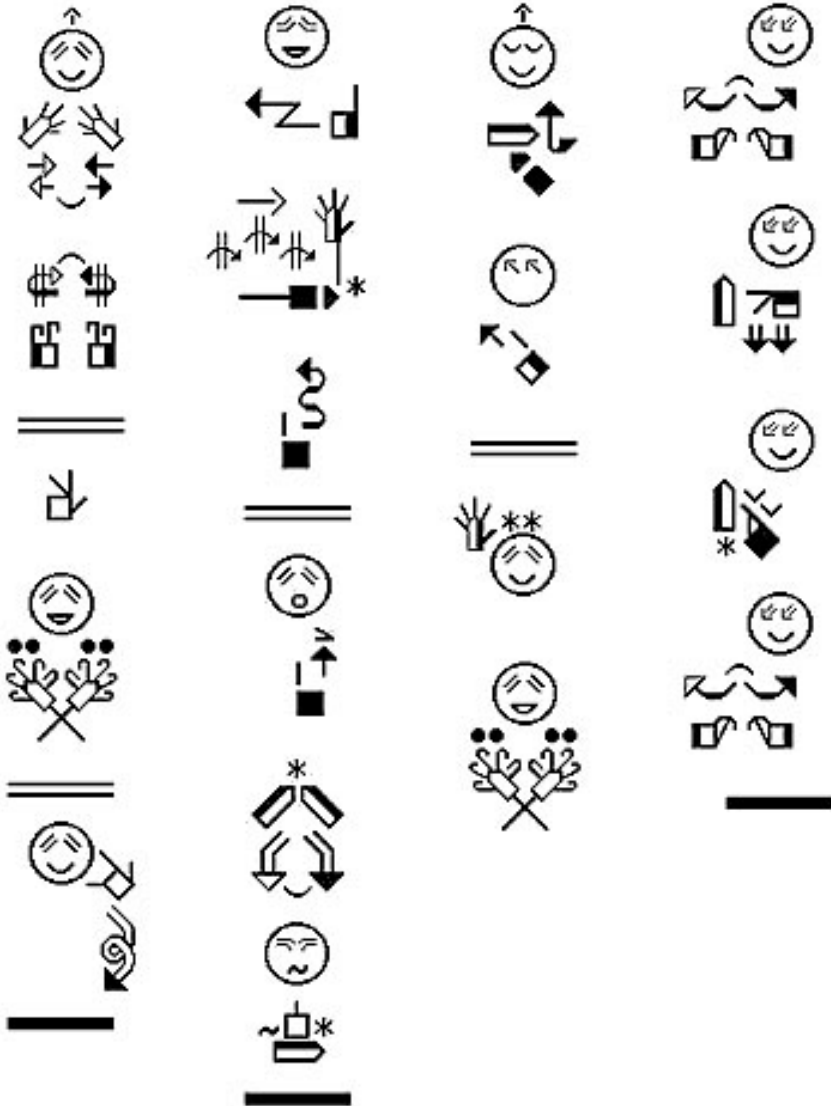


Figure 2

Figure 3 shows video pictures of three signs THREE, BEARS, and GOLDILOCKS and their corresponding representations in SignWriting.

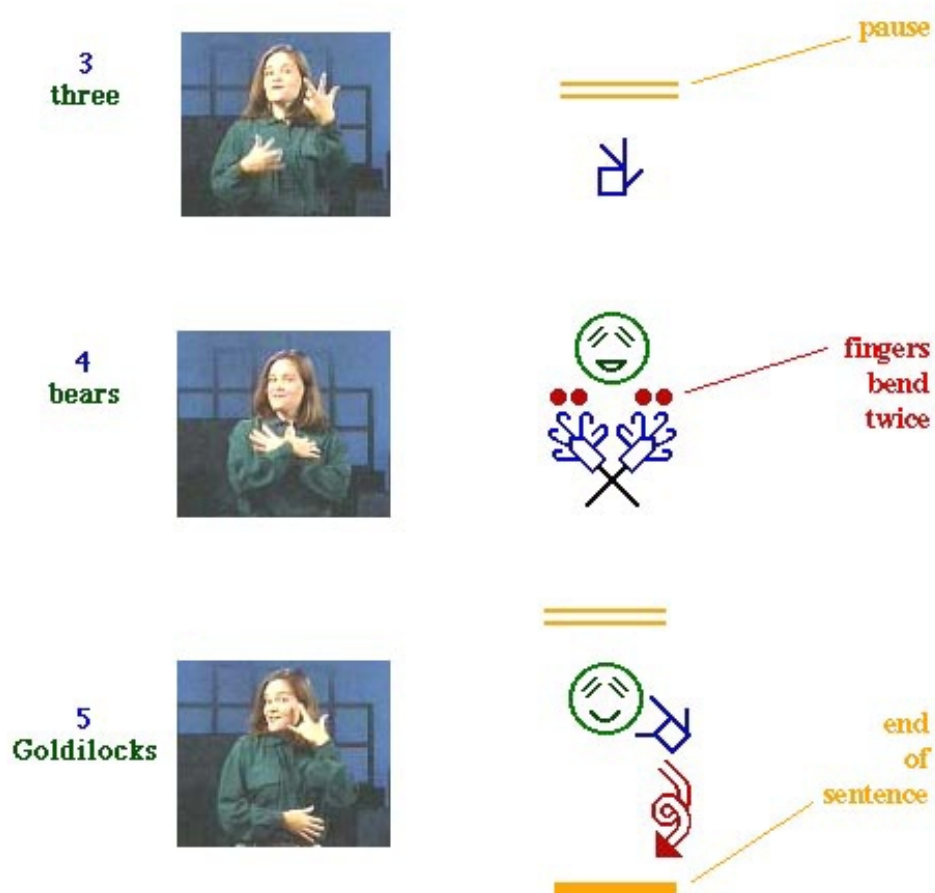


Figure 3

Figure 4 gives more details of the two signs THREE and BEARS.

The sign THREE requires notation for only its handshape and which way the palm faces. The sign BEARS requires more information. The 'claw' handshape is formed with five spread fingers bent in a claw. The symbol is white because the palms are facing the chest. Dark dots over the fingers means that the middle joints of the fingers bend in a closing motion. Two dark dots means two closings, or 'close-close'. In this case they are used to describe the motion of 'scratching' like a bear. There are crossed arm lines extending from the hands. The arm lines are only written when there is something special, like crossed arms. The thick line at the end of the sentence can be compared to the period at the end of a sentence in English.

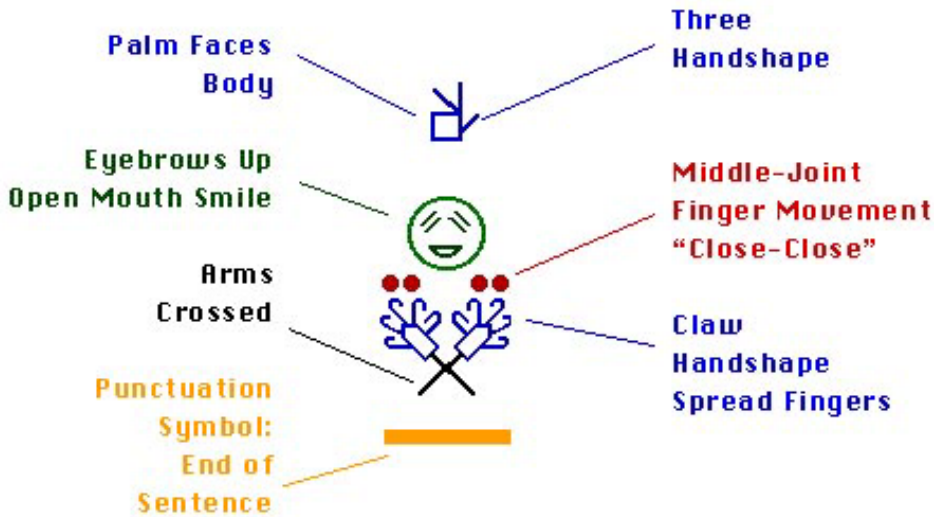


Figure 4

Figure 5 below presents the same signs as Figure 2, written this time in Sign-Writing Shorthand.

SignWriting Shorthand

Sample of Sentences From Goldilocks

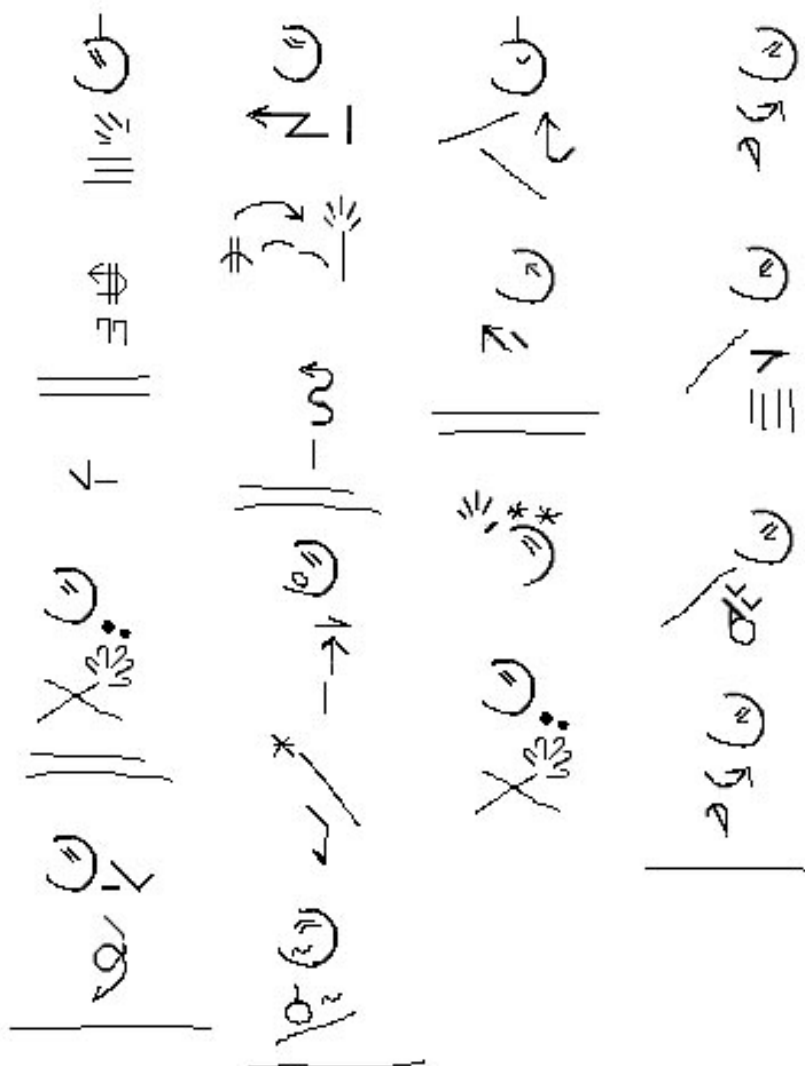


Figure 5

2.3. *Facial expressions, gesture & mime*

SignWriting does not stem from a linguistic base. Therefore, SignWriting is a “movement writing” system, because the movement is written down in a generic form, not based on a prior knowledge of the language being written, but instead based on how the body looks as it moves. This means that SignWriting can write any signed language, with detailed facial expression, gesture and mime. To learn SignWriting, see:

- (13) SignWriting lessons online
<http://www.SignWriting.org/sw130.html>
- (14) Facial expressions
<http://www.SignWriting.org/face000.html>

2.4. *A comparison of transcription systems*

Although SignWriting is not linguistically based, the visual qualities of the system make it easy to use. Because Deaf people use it daily in some countries, it gives linguists a new focus for their studies. For a look at different transcription systems side-by-side, see:

- (15) Writing the same signs in cDifferent transcription systems: Comparing SignWriting, Stokoe Notation, and HamNoSys
<http://www.SignWriting.org/ling001.html>

2.5. *SignWriter capabilities*

Signs, fingerspelling and words from spoken languages can be typed separately or blended together. In addition, part of the software concept is that the availability of dictionaries make learning SignWriting easier.

2.5.1. *Dictionary features*

The beauty of the dictionary in SignWriter is that it can be used by beginners. Each sign is already written in SignWriting, edited by a staff of Deaf native signers. This eliminates “spelling” errors because the signs are written for you. The USA dictionary includes over 3000 entries.

2.5.2. *Three ways to type*

The program automatically opens in Sign Mode. One way to write signs is to copy them from the dictionary into your document. But when the sign you want is not in the dictionary, it can be typed by using the Sign Keyboard. With another

keystroke, you can change from typing signs to typing fingerspelling. Simply type words in the standard orthography, and the fingerspelling symbols in SignWriting appear on the screen. There are also Fingerspelling Keyboards for 16 countries. Figure 6 below shows the ASL alphabet keyboard.

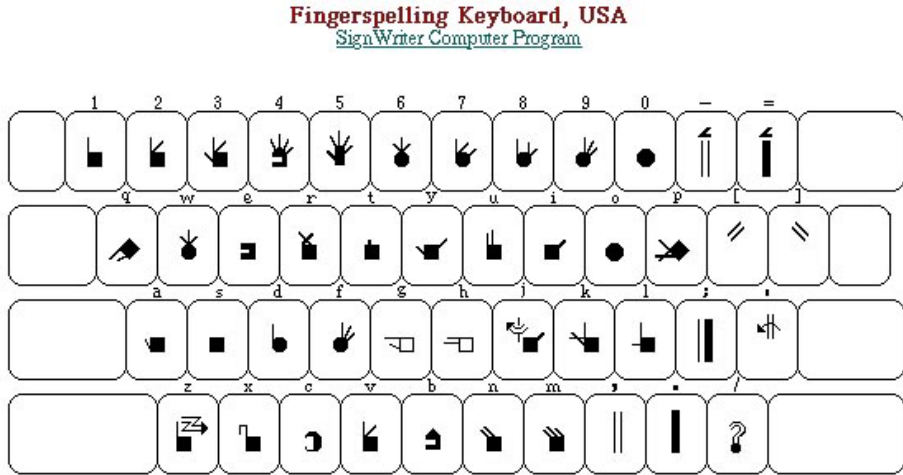


Figure 6

Finally, with one keystroke, you can change from typing signs to typing one of nine spoken languages in the Roman alphabet.

2.5.3. Availability

The SignWriter shareware version is for American Sign Language (ASL) only. It can be downloaded for free from the SignWriting web site:

- (16) SignWriter shareware
<http://www.SignWriting.org/sw128.html>

The SignWriter International Package can be purchased as a package, with a three ringed hardbacked notebook with five instruction manuals and seven floppy disks. It includes signed languages and spoken languages from 16 countries. Nine spoken languages — Danish, English, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish, are available at:

- (17) SignWriter International Package
<http://www.SignWriting.org/sw124.html>

SignWriter 5.0 is a new version of SignWriter for Windows and the Macintosh. Files typed with SignWriter 4.3 will automatically convert to the new SignWriter 5.0 format when it is released. For more information about SignWriter 5.0, see:

- (18) SignWriter 5.0
<http://www.SignWriting.org/prog000.html>

3. Who uses SignWriting?

SignWriter is international in scope, giving users access to many spoken and signed languages within one user interface. The program provides linguists with a tool to study languages. For teachers and parents, it can provide dictionaries, vocabulary lists and grammar lessons. Most importantly, it inspires deaf children to read, write and type languages. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, deaf children as young as 6 years old are typing signs. Linguists, researchers, educators and Deaf people in 16 countries are using the current version. Children in Nicaragua, Albuquerque and Germany are typing by computer. Dictionary files in Spanish Sign Language (Madrid dialect), Norway, Ireland and Taiwan are growing quickly, with over 5000 signs in some of their dictionary files. See the following sites:

- (19) Nicaragua <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw109.html>
 (20) Brazil <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw139.html>
 (21) Denmark <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw105.html>
 (22) Germany <http://www.SignWriting.org/teach016.html>
 (23) Ireland <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw106.html>
 (24) Italy <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw107.html>
 (25) Mexico <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw108.html>
 (26) Norway <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw113.html>
 (27) Spain <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw114.html>
 (28) UK <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw115.html>
 (29) USA <http://www.SignWriting.org/sw116.html>

3.1. *SignWriting in research*

Several dissertations are now being written either about SignWriting, or using SignWriting to illustrate signs throughout documents. Nicaragua is an example of how SignWriting has played an important role in Sign Language Research. Two master's degree theses about SignWriting are posted in their entirety on the web:

- (30) Literacy in Nicaraguan Sign Language
<http://www.SignWriting.org/rese003.html>
- (31) Writing Signed Languages; In support of adopting an ASL writing system, <http://www.SignWriting.org/rese010.html>

3.2. *SignWriting in deaf education*

Being tested in the schools to teach Deaf children in several countries with success, the SignWriting Literacy Project began in 1998 to assist schools in experimenting with SignWriting. The Literacy Project is pioneering a new concept: that deaf children who use a signed language might benefit from learning to read and write their native language. This may in turn help understanding of other written languages, such as English or other spoken languages. The results are published on the SignWriting web site and in an annual SignWriting Literacy Project Report, distributed to educators. The Teacher's Forum on the web, posts information about each class. For information about the project in Albuquerque, see:

- (32) Albuquerque Public Schools; SignWriting Literacy Project
<http://www.SignWriting.org/teach012.html>
- (33) Teacher's reports, Albuquerque
<http://www.SignWriting.org/teach022.html>
- (34) Classroom experiences, Albuquerque
<http://www.SignWriting.org/teach023.html>
- (35) Interviews with deaf students, Albuquerque
<http://www.SignWriting.org/teach024.html>
- (36) Samples of student's SignWriting, Albuquerque
<http://www.SignWriting.org/teach025.html>
- (37) Silent news Article About The Albuquerque Literacy Project
<http://www.SignWriting.org/sw221.html>

For more information, contact:

The DAC

Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting

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