

TEACHING  
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE AS A  
SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE



PROCEEDINGS OF THE THIRD NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON SIGN LANGUAGE RESEARCH AND TEACHING



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Proceedings of the Third National Symposium  
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Editors: Frank Caccamise  
Mervin Garretson  
Ursula Bellugi

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# A Way to Analyze American Sign Language (ASL) and Any Other Sign Language Without Translation into Any Spoken Language

Valerie Sutton<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper discusses a new development for American Sign Language (ASL) and all sign languages that can have an important impact on Sign. ASL is a relatively young language, and it is just in recent years that research on Sign has established ASL as an autonomous language. As research continues on the grammatical structure of ASL, more and more people are becoming interested in learning this language. As more people use ASL on a daily basis, there is a growing need for a way to read and write ASL. That need can be met with SUTTON SIGN WRITING<sup>2</sup>. Now ASL and any other sign language can be written in SIGN WRITING and analyzed without translation into any spoken language.

## Introduction

This paper is organized as follows: (a) The English Alphabet and Its Impact on Those Who Speak English; (b) SIGN WRITING and Its Impact on Those Who Use ASL; (c) An English Gloss of ASL Is Not the Same as Writing in ASL; (d) SIGN WRITING Can Be Detailed (Phonetic) or Simplified (Phonemic); (e) Mass Printing of Written ASL; and (f) Conclusion.

## The English Alphabet and Its Impact on Those Who Speak English

How many times per day would you guess an English-speaking person uses the English alphabet? In every word in the morning newspaper, in business letters, telegrams, street signs, textbooks, telephone directories, voting ballots - the English alphabet appears and reappears constantly in our daily lives. We take it for granted that there was always a way to read and write English. We also take it for granted that we ourselves know how to read and write. We forget that in history, spoken language developed first, and written language second. We also forget how long it took us to learn to read and write the language we already knew how to speak.

The best way to understand the impact of the English alphabet on our daily lives is to try to imagine our daily lives without the alphabet. Take away all written material, all newspapers, books, telephone directories, and you will imagine a very barren and frustrating world. Without the alphabet or any other written form for English, you would find your communication with others greatly reduced.

That is why literacy in English is so highly respected in our society, and illiteracy is considered a handicap. We all know that an illiterate person has the frustration of being cut off from a very important part of our daily communication - reading and writing.



Because we were born at a time in history when there was a written form for our language and when the average citizen could read and write, it was taken for granted that we would go to school and learn to read and write too. We never questioned the benefits of reading and writing our language, because those benefits were already proven by generations before us.

But what would it be like if we were born in another era, before the invention of the alphabet? We would speak our language, English, and communicate daily with others, but our communication would be limited to a small group of people. We would only know of events in our small community. We could not record any of our theater or poetry. Our traditions would be handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth only. Our knowledge of other cultures and their languages would be minimal.

Picture someone from the outside entering this narrow community, bringing the good news that now there is a new invention called the alphabet. This new invention, the alphabet, will make it possible for us to read and write our language. Why should we? Who wouldn't be skeptical of the benefits of something we never used before?

Slowly, over many generations, some people would learn to read and write, and then more and more until reading and writing English would become a normal part of daily life, as it is today. Now no one is skeptical of the benefits brought by the invention of the alphabet!

#### SIGN WRITING and Its Impact on Those Who Use ASL

SIGN WRITING can be to ASL what the English alphabet is to the English language. SIGN WRITING is a series of symbols that makes it possible to read and write ASL. Now you can read and write what you sign.

Surprised? Skeptical? If so, that is a natural reaction to anything that is new. But SIGN WRITING can bring the same important benefits to ASL that the alphabet brings to English. Hopefully, literacy in ASL in generations to come will be something taken for granted by those who use the language.

How many of us, without a written form for Sign, have wished for a way to record a new sign we just learned, but did not have a way to write the movements of the sign? How many of us have wished to write a letter to a friend expressing something in ASL, know that when we wrote it in English it would lose in translation? How many plays, poems, stories, in ASL have been forgotten because they were never written down? Future signing generations will be able to learn about the signing in our generation as soon as we start to read and write all that we sign.

SIGN WRITING is very new, and one common question arises: What are the benefits of reading and writing Sign? Although the benefits of literary are immeasurable, here are some of them:

1. Writing in ASL will enrich the deaf community with literature in their own language, helping to preserve the culture and traditions of this community.
2. Writing ASL will improve the teaching of sign language to both deaf and hearing people.
3. Writing ASL will aid linguistic research in the analysis of the structure of the language.



4. Writing ASL will help prove the bilingual status of those fluent in ASL and a spoken language.
5. Writing ASL will improve the teaching of English and other spoken languages to deaf people fluent in ASL.
6. Writing ASL will improve and increase communication between ASL users all over the world.
7. Writing ASL will improve and increase communication between deaf and hearing people, since hearing people are often cut off from learning ASL because of the lack of written literature available. As written ASL is found more and more on public library shelves, more and more hearing people will be made aware of ASL and the people who use it.

What about those deaf people in other countries who use another sign language other than ASL? Are they to be cut off from reading and writing their language? No. The same SIGN WRITING symbols that record ASL can record any sign language in the world.

Again, we take it for granted that other languages use the same alphabet we do. English, Spanish, German, French, Danish and other languages use many of the same symbols to write the sounds they make. A comparison can be made with SIGN WRITING. ASL, Spanish Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Chinese Sign Language - all the sign languages of the world can now be written with SIGN WRITING symbols.

Writing Sign may improve and increase communication between signers from foreign countries. Dictionaries are now possible between the different sign languages of the world. Learning to read and write other sign languages can only bring the deaf communities in different countries closer together

### An English Gloss Is Not the Same as Writing in ASL

In the past researchers have struggled to write sign language with various forms of English glosses. Comparable to describing Russian with German words, or Spanish with Danish words, glossing Sign with English words is using one language to write the other. Just as German words cannot depict the sounds made in the Russian language, English cannot describe the movements made in Sign. ASL, and other sign languages, without a written form, have had no choice but to be translated into English or some spoken language. Even when English words are placed in ASL word order, the words cannot write the movements of Sign in their original visual form. English glosses leave out details of palm facing, direction of movement, handshape, third dimension, dynamics of movement, detailed facial expressions, and the individual signer's dialect and style of signing.

SIGN WRITING provides the needed pictorial handwriting for depicting the detailed movements of Sign. Writing in ASL means writing the movements of each sign in SIGN WRITING. An English gloss is not the same as writing in ASL. A gloss requires translation from Sign to English words, where writing the movements of ASL in SIGN WRITING requires no translation into English or any spoken language. (See Figure One.)



FIGURE ONE

**AN ENGLISH GLOSS  
OF ASL  
IS NOT THE SAME AS  
WRITING IN ASL**

---

AN ENGLISH GLOSS OF A DANISH SENTENCE:

Like that is it so much.

THE SAME SENTENCE WRITTEN IN THE DANISH LANGUAGE:

Saadan er det saa meget.

THE SAME SENTENCE TRANSLATED CORRECTLY INTO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

That's the way it goes.

or

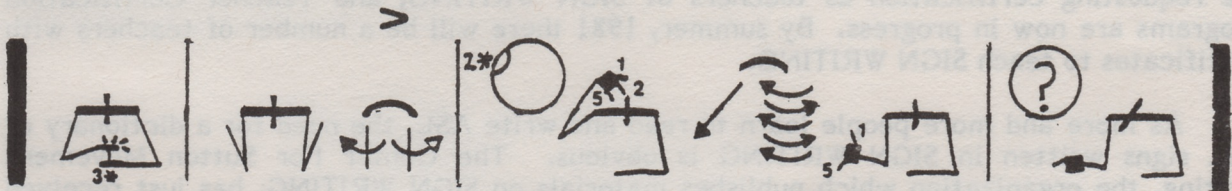
That's the way the cookie crumbles.

---

AN ENGLISH GLOSS OF A SENTENCE IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE:

Touch finish California you?

THE SAME SENTENCE WRITTEN IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE:



THE SAME SENTENCE TRANSLATED CORRECTLY INTO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

Have you been to California?

---



## SIGN WRITING Can Be Detailed (Phonetic) or Simplified (Phonemic)

SIGN WRITING can be detailed for researchers or simplified for daily use. The detailed section of SIGN WRITING was invented first. I (the author) was requested by the University of Copenhagen in Denmark in 1974 to invent a way to write the movements of the Danish Sign Language.<sup>3</sup> The invention began phonetically. Just as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a set of symbols that records the idiolects and dialects of spoken languages, SIGN WRITING's detailed section is an international phonetic writing system for writing the dialects of all sign languages. The detailed section records exactly what it sees, without making any linguistic decisions. For this reason the detailed SIGN WRITING is an excellent tool for linguistic research. It is accurate yet flexible. It is not based on knowledge of sign language. This enables researchers to record and study sign languages they do not know.

After teaching the detailed SIGN WRITING to different groups in the United States (where it is used, for example, for research on the Technical Signs Project at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York), it became apparent that a simplified version of SIGN WRITING was needed for daily use. We do not use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to write our English language for daily use. It is most often used for linguistic research. And in the same way, the detailed section of SIGN WRITING is designed for the research lab.

English words are spelled the same across the United States. Even though there are different dialects that pronounce the words differently, we still write the words the same. This standardization of spelling makes it easier to learn to read and write. If everybody spelled words differently it would be much harder!

The simplified version of SIGN WRITING is evolving. Many details that are important for research, but not important when writing a letter to a friend in ASL, are being eliminated. Most important, a "standardization" of "spelling" (writing) each sign is evolving. Before, each signer who used SIGN WRITING was writing (spelling) each sign differently. Now signers are beginning to write (spell) signs the same way each time. In time, all people who learn to read and write ASL will learn a standardized spelling for each sign which will make it much easier to learn to read and write. (See Figures Two and Three).

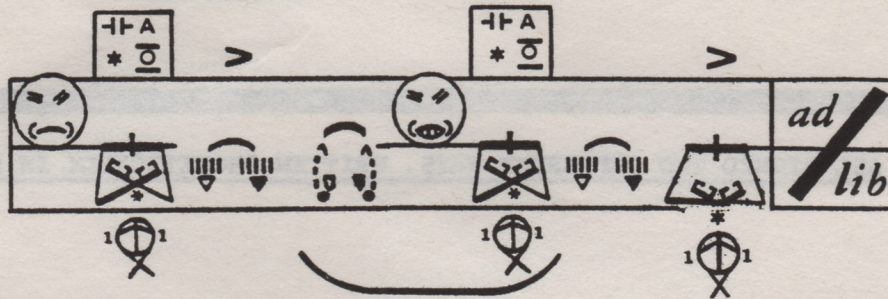
The use of SIGN WRITING is beginning to spread. In the winter and spring semester of 1981 courses and workshops on SIGN WRITING are scheduled at California State University at Northridge (CSUN), University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Golden West College, Pierce College and Saddleback College in Southern California, with more courses scheduled for summer and fall sessions. Many professionals who work with SIGN are requesting certification as teachers of SIGN WRITING, and Teacher Certification programs are now in progress. By summer, 1981 there will be a number of teachers with certificates to teach SIGN WRITING.

As more and more people learn to read and write ASL, the need for a dictionary of ASL signs written in SIGN WRITING is obvious. The Center For Sutton Movement Writing, the organization which publishes materials on SIGN WRITING, has just received funding to publish the first edition of Sutton's American Sign Language/English, English/American Sign Language Dictionary. The first edition is scheduled to be published by June, 1981. Distinguished experts on Sign are on the Reviewing Committee for the Sutton dictionary. The first edition will have 1100 signs, with future editions planning up to 10,000 signs.



# DETAILED SIGN WRITING

(Phonetic Transcriptions of Signs)



## Detailed SIGN WRITING:

- 1 Is based on animation principles, with many drawings and Movement Symbols to show the picture and feeling of movement
- 2 Is written on a three-lined staff to show accurate levels
- 3 Includes symbols for the third dimension and palm orientation
- 4 Writes details not seen on the drawings in Special Information Boxes.
- 5 Includes Dynamics Symbols for writing the quality of movement.
- 6 Uses Repeat Symbols for repeated signs
- 7 Includes other details, such as timing and props (not shown in above diagram)

# SIMPLIFIED SIGN WRITING

(Standardized Spellings of Signs)



## Simplified SIGN WRITING:

- 1 Usually uses one drawing and one Movement Symbol per sign
- 2 Is not written on the three-lined staff
- 3 Does not use symbols for the third dimension or palm orientation
- 4 Does not use Special Information Boxes
- 5 Uses few Dynamic Symbols
- 6 Does not use Repeat Symbols
- 7 Only writes the minimal amount of information necessary to recognize one sign from the other



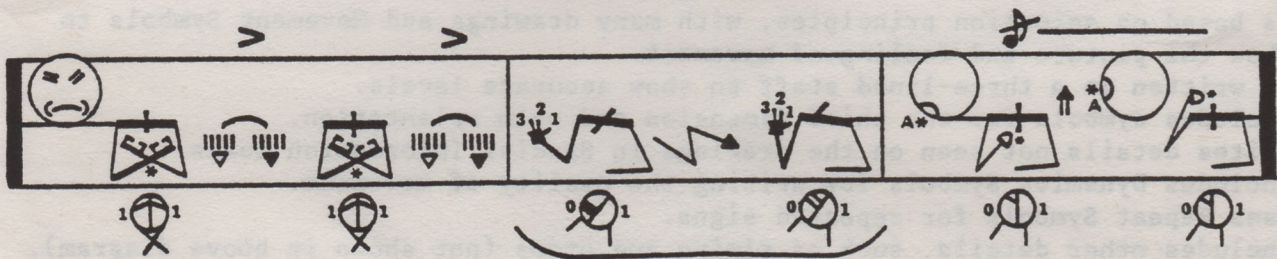
FIGURE THREE

# PHONETIC OR PHONEMIC DETAILED OR SIMPLE SIGN WRITING CAN BE EITHER

THE SAME SENTENCE IN ASL SIGNED TWO DIFFERENT WAYS, WRITTEN PHONETICALLY IN SIGN WRITING

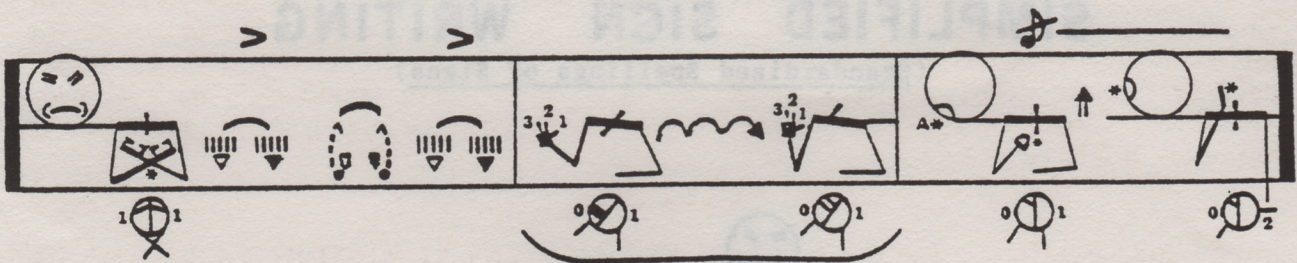
Variation One:

The three bears came home.



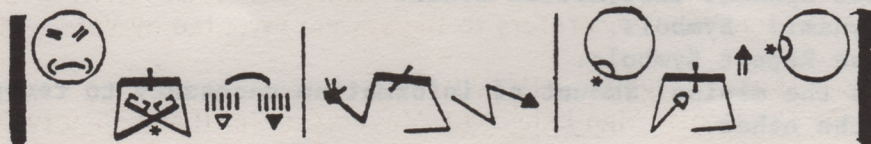
Variation Two:

The three bears came home.



THE SAME SENTENCE WRITTEN PHONEMICALLY IN SIGN WRITING, REPRESENTING ALL VARIATIONS & DIALECTS  
(Must Evolve With Time And Use)

The three bears came home.





The Sutton dictionary will be unlike any other Sign dictionary in history. It will be unique because the standardized spellings and phonetic transcriptions are included for both ASL and English. Its format is similar to the Cassell's series of bilingual dictionaries for spoken languages. There will be a section for looking-up the English word first, and then reading the equivalent in ASL, and there will be a section for looking-up the ASL sign first, and then reading the equivalent in English. This means that the symbols of SIGN WRITING have an order to them so that they are "alphabetized." (See Figure Four.)

### Mass Printing of Written ASL

One of the biggest events in the history of written English was the invention of the printing press. When English was published and distributed to wide audiences, the reading and writing of English became widespread. Now ASL and all sign languages have a written form, but how many people know that? For people to learn to read and write, they need literature to read. And for literature to be published quickly, we need machines that will print written ASL quickly.

At the time of this writing, SIGN WRITING must still be written by hand or transfer sheet before it goes to the press. The process is slow. But two computer programs for printing SIGN WRITING are now beginning. The first is at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, in collaboration with Dr. Robert Gonsalves, Professor of Electrical Engineering. The second is a computerized typing device for SIGN WRITING which is under consideration by a major corporation. When these or other printing devices for SIGN WRITING are completed, the Sign world will see a surge of new publications written in ASL. Meanwhile publications in ASL are continually being written by hand. For a list of publications, contact The Center for Sutton Movement Writing, Box 7344, Newport Beach, California, 92660.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I have written a letter to you in SIGN WRITING. It is written in the simplified version of SIGN WRITING, and it is in Signed English. A translation of the letter into English says: Dear Friend: Now you can read and write what you sign. Here is your first letter in SIGN WRITING. Please write me a letter again in SIGN WRITING. Thank you. Love, Valerie. (See Figure 5.) I look forward to receiving letters from you to me in SIGN WRITING too!

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Valerie Sutton is the inventor of SUTTON MOVEMENT WRITING & SHORTHAND, a general movement writing system that writes any kind of movement. SUTTON MOVEMENT WRITING is divided into four major sections: SIGN WRITING, DANCE WRITING, SPORTS WRITING, AND SCIENCE WRITING. She is the founder of The Center For Sutton Movement Writing (The Movement Shorthand Society, Inc., Newport Beach, CA and Boston, MA)

<sup>2</sup>The name SIGN WRITING is a trademark of The Movement Shorthand Society, Inc. and application for registration of the trademark with the Patent & Trademark Office in Washington, D.C. was made in October, 1978. The name SIGN WRITING has been used in interstate commerce since July, 1978. The name SIGN WRITING with or without the name SUTTON before it always refers to the system invented by Valerie Sutton.

<sup>3</sup>Portions of that original work in Denmark are available under the title: Examples Of Notation Of The Danish Sign Language, Movement Shorthand Society Press.



# FIGURE FOUR

Examples From

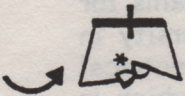
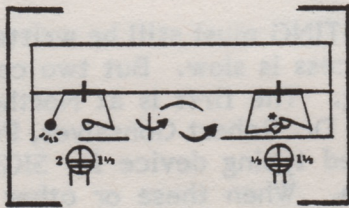
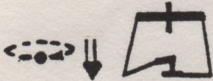
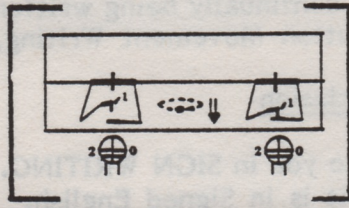
SUTTON'S

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE/ ENGLISH

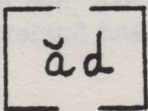
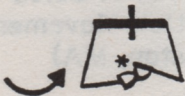
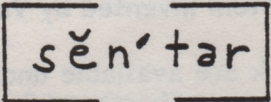
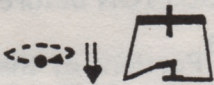
ENGLISH/ AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

DICTIONARY

## American Sign Language/English

SIGN	PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION	ENGLISH EQUIVALENT
		ADD, ADD ONTO
		CENTER, CENTRAL

## English/American Sign Language

WORD	PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION	ASL EQUIVALENT
ADD		
CENTER		

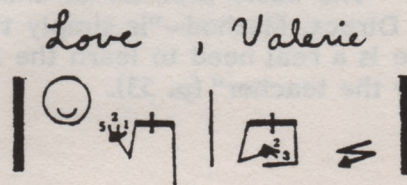
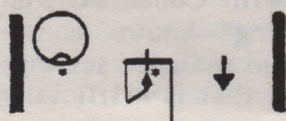
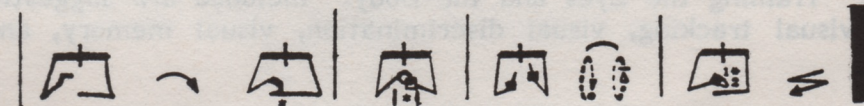
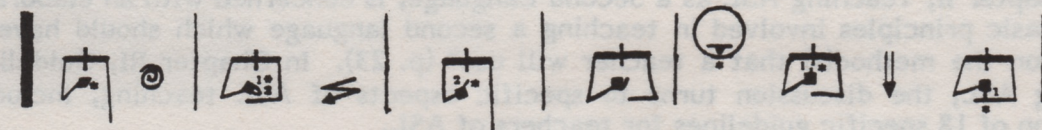
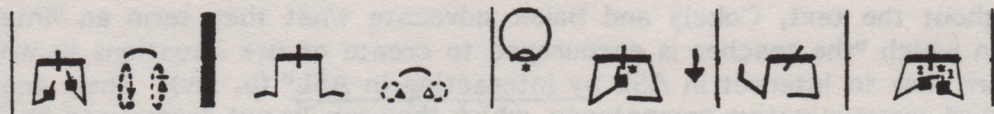
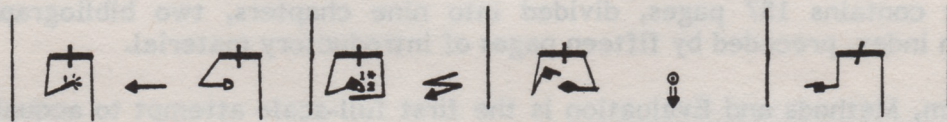
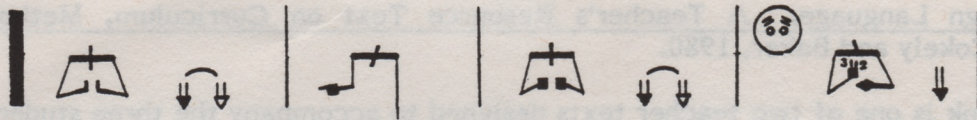
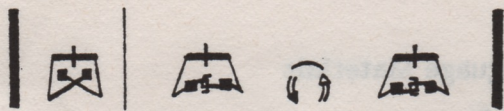
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FIGURE FIVE



Love , Valerie