

# SignWriting Basics



Valerie Sutton



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by  
Valerie Sutton

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This book is based on the  
**Lessons in SignWriting Textbook**  
by Valerie Sutton

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Lucinda O'Grady Farnady

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The SignWriting Press  
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# Lessons in SignWriting Videos



You can learn SignWriting from tutorial videos, with the **Lessons In SignWriting Video Series**.

The SignWriting videos are on YouTube, on a channel named **SignWriting Channel**. This channel includes the Lessons in SignWriting videos, and other videos about SignWriting.

For more information on learning SignWriting go to [www.signwriting.org/lessons](http://www.signwriting.org/lessons).



**What Is SignWriting?**



**With SignWriting,  
you can....**



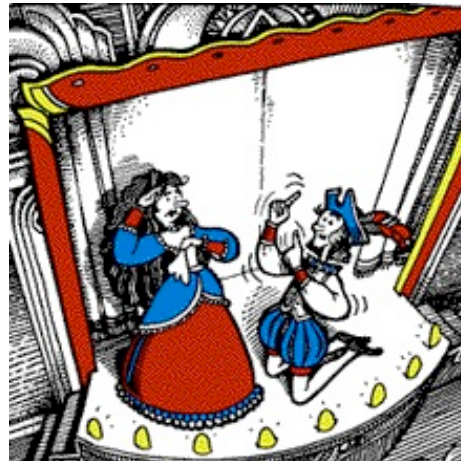
Cartoons by Frank Allen Paul



**READ**  
Sign  
Language



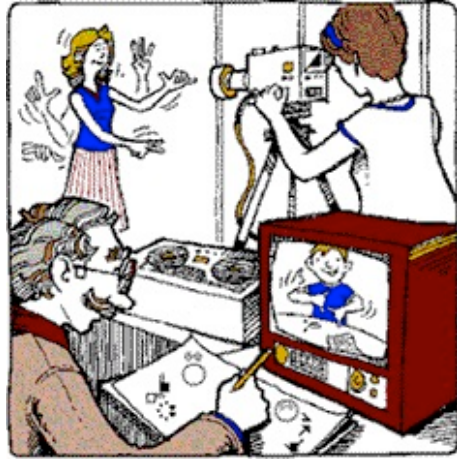
**WRITE**  
Sign  
Language



**PRESERVE**  
Sign Poetry  
and Theater




**LEARN**  
 Sign  
 Language




**TRANSCRIBE**  
 Sign  
 Language




**SHARE**  
 Sign  
 Language




**MEET**  
 Other People  
 Who Write  
 Sign Language

## Viewpoints

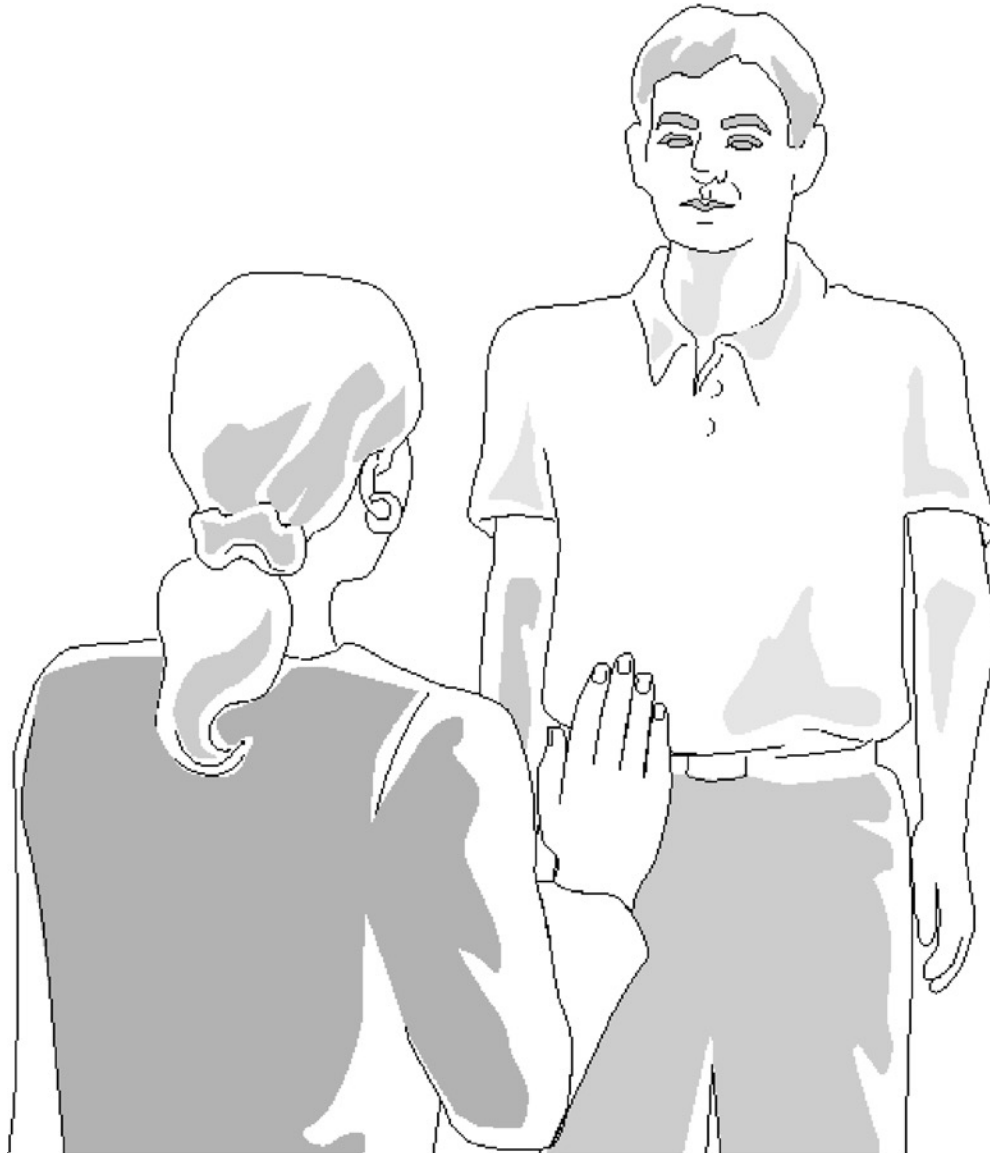
When someone is signing to you, you see the signs as an observer. The signer's right hand is on your left. This is called the **Receptive Viewpoint**.



**Receptive Viewpoint**

# Viewpoints

When you are signing to someone else, you see the signs from your own point of view. This is called the **Expressive Viewpoint**.



## **Expressive Viewpoint**

## Expressive Viewpoint

Signs are written in the **Expressive Viewpoint**. You see the signs from your own point of view.

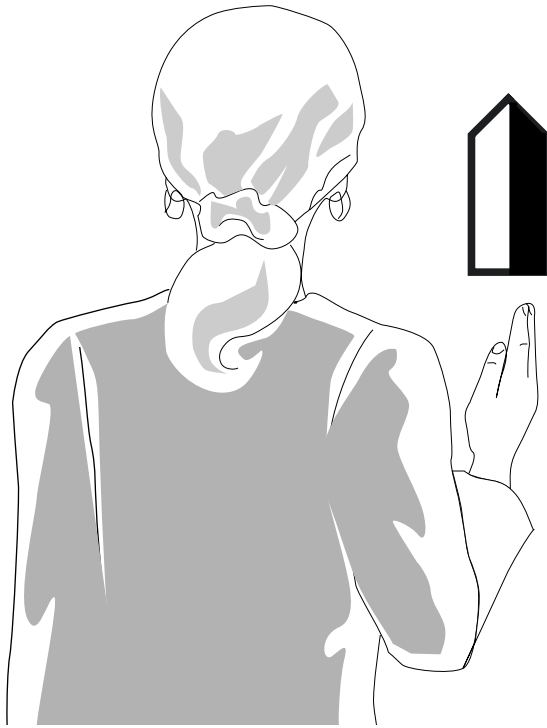


## Palm Facing

When you see **the palm of your hand** while you are signing, the symbol for the hand is a light, hollowed-out symbol.

The palm of the hand is always written with a light symbol.





## Palm Facing

When you see **the side of your hand** while you are signing, the symbol for the hand is partly filled-in, so it is half light and half dark.

The light part of the symbol shows which way the palm of the hand faces. The dark part indicates the back of the hand.



## Palm Facing

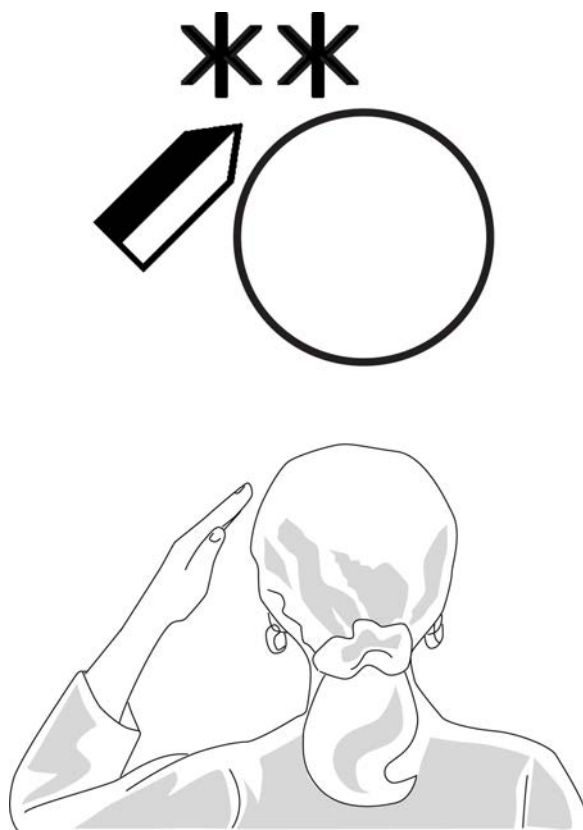
When you see **the back of your hand** while you are signing, the symbol for the hand is a dark, filled-in symbol.

The back of the hand is always written with a dark symbol.

## Writing The Head

The head symbol is written with a circle. It represents your head as seen **from behind you**.

Because signs are written expressively, when your left hand is near the left side of your head, the hand symbol is placed **to the left** of the head symbol.



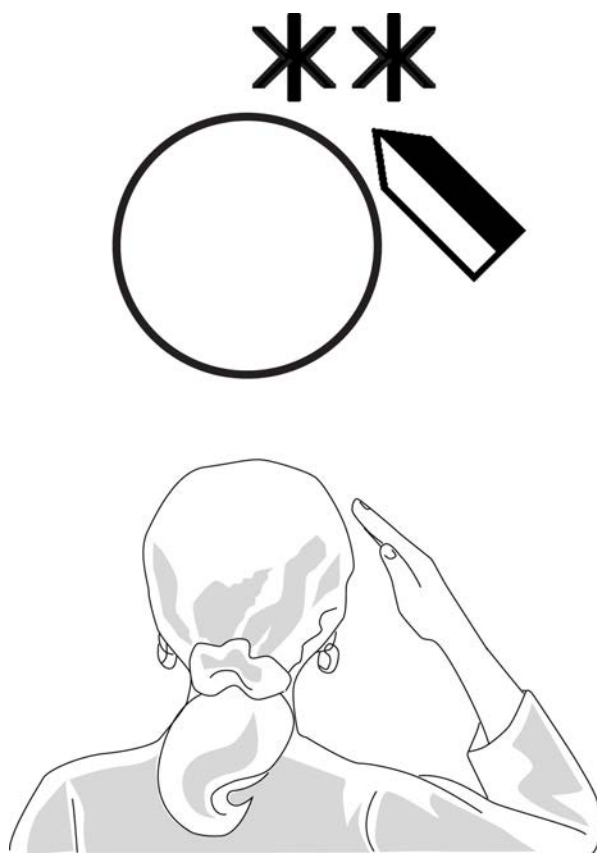
**know**  
(hand on the left side)

Note: The asterisk symbol means **touch**.  
Two asterisks mean **touching twice**.

## Writing The Head

The head symbol is written with a circle. It represents your head as seen **from behind you**.

Because signs are written expressively, when your right hand is near the right side of your head, the hand symbol is placed **to the right** of the head symbol.



**know**  
(hand on the right side)

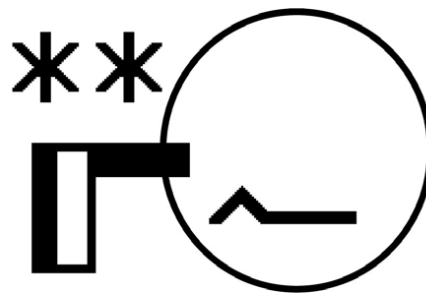
Note: The asterisk symbol means **touch**.  
Two asterisks mean **touching twice**.

# Writing The Face

In face symbols your head is transparent, so you can see your facial expressions (and any hands contacting them) through the back of your head.

Because signs are written expressively, you write how **your face** feels to you, not how it looks to someone else.

Your face  
(seen from behind)  
**feels** like this

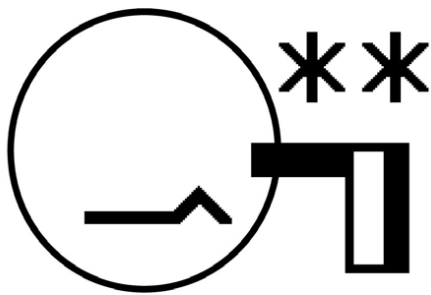


**know**  
(mouth pushed up  
on left side)

# Writing The Face

In face symbols your head is transparent, so you can see your facial expressions (and any hands contacting them) through the back of your head.

Because signs are written expressively, you write how **your face** feels to you, not how it looks to someone else.



Your face  
(seen from behind)  
**feels** like this



**know**  
(mouth pushed up  
on right side)

# Hands

**Hand symbols** show the handshapes and position of your hands while you are signing.



**Fist**



**Circle**



**Flat**



**Index**



**Index on Circle**



**Five Fingers Spread**



**know**



**hit**



**dinner**

# Basic Handshapes

## Closed Fist

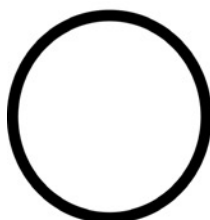


The hand symbol **Fist** represents a closed fist, where the fingertips touch the palm of the hand.

It is written with a square.

---

## Open Fist

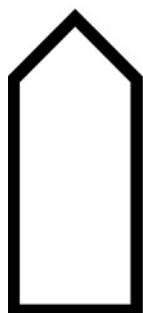


The hand symbol **Circle** represents an open fist, where the fingertips touch the tip of the thumb.

It is written with a circle.

---

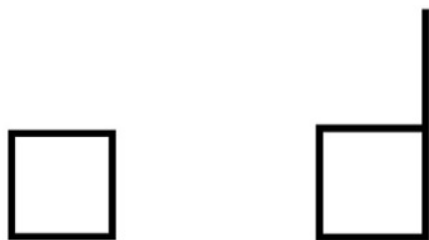
## Flat Hand



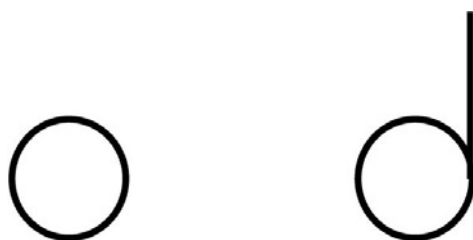
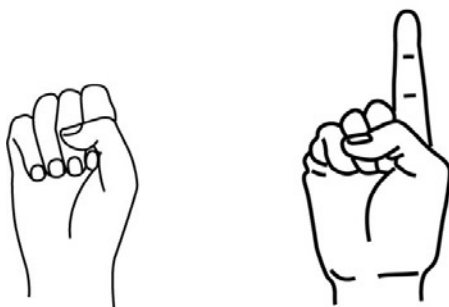
The hand symbol **Flat** represents a flat hand where the fingers extend straight up, while touching each other.

It is written as a rectangle with a tip at one end.

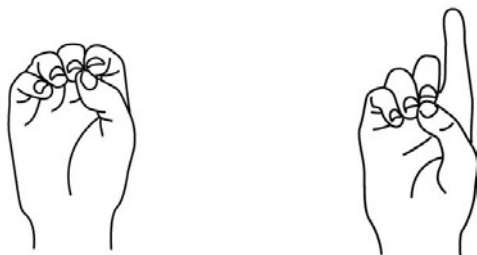
## Related Handshapes



In ASL, the letter S and the number 1 are both written with a square, because both handshapes are based on a **closed fist**.



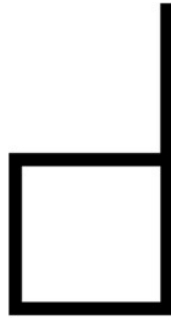
In ASL, the letter O and the letter D are both written with a circle, because both handshapes are based on an **open fist**.





# Index

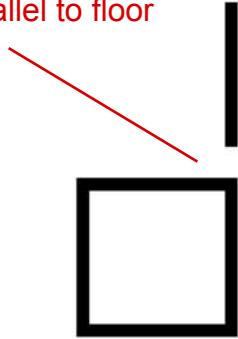
The hand is parallel to the front wall, and is shown in **Front View**.



# Index

The hand is parallel to the floor, and is shown in **Top View**.

Gap in symbol means  
hand is parallel to floor



# Fist

The hand is parallel to the front wall, and is shown in **Front View**.



# Fist

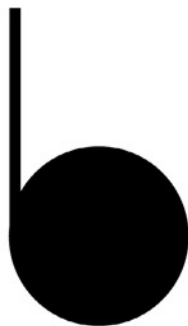
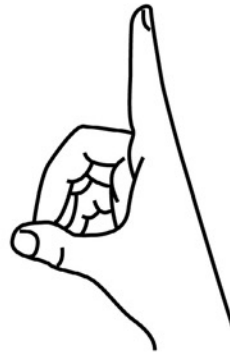
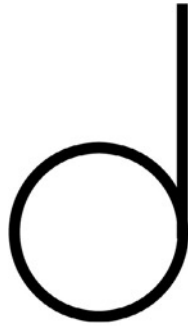
The hand is parallel to the floor, and is shown in **Top View**.

Gap in symbol means  
hand is parallel to floor



# Index on Circle

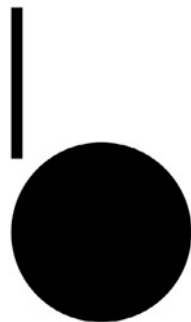
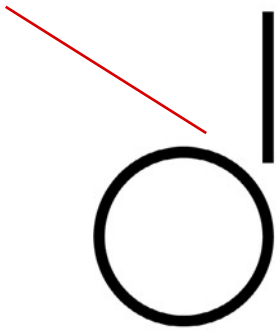
The hand is parallel to the front wall, and is shown in **Front View**.



# Index on Circle

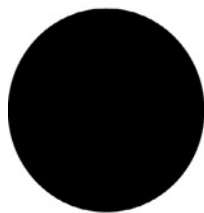
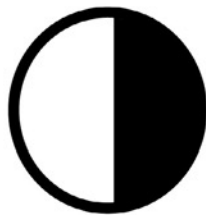
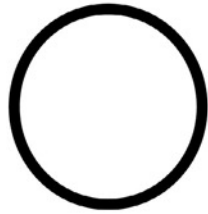
The hand is parallel to the floor, and is shown in **Top View**.

Gap in symbol means  
hand is parallel to floor



# Circle

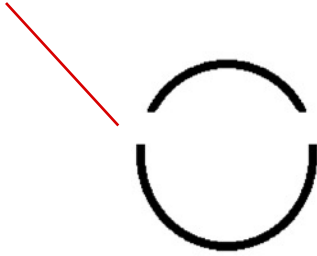
The hand is parallel to the front wall, and is shown in **Front View**.



# Circle

The hand is parallel to the floor, and is shown in **Top View**.

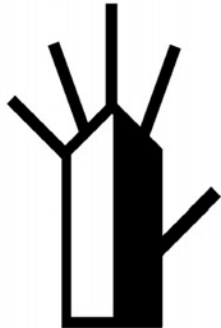
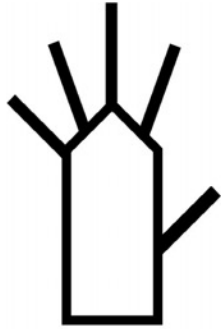
Gap in symbol means  
hand is parallel to floor





# Five Fingers Spread

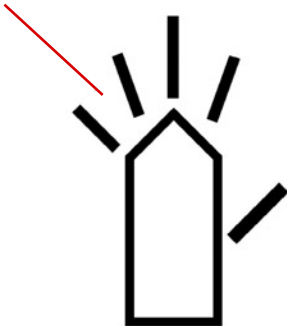
The hand is parallel to the front wall, and is shown in **Front View**.



# Five Fingers Spread

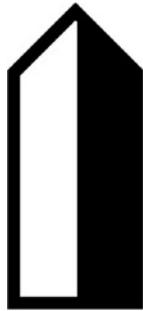
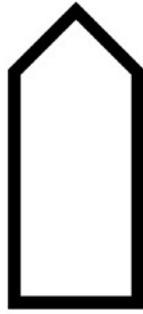
The hand is parallel to the floor, and is shown in **Top View**.

Gaps in symbol mean  
hand is parallel to floor



# Flat

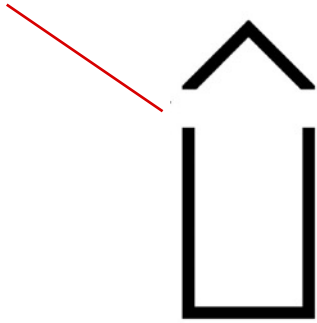
The hand is parallel to the front wall, and is shown in **Front View**.



# Flat

The hand is parallel to the floor, and is shown in **Top View**.

Gap in symbol means  
hand is parallel to floor

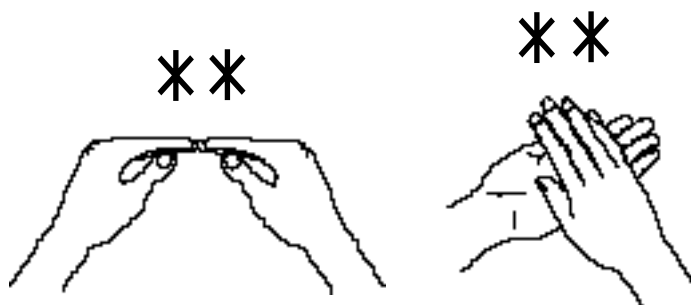


# Contact

**Contact symbols** show different kinds of contact between your hands, or between your hand and another part of your body.

*	<b>Touch</b>
+	<b>Grasp</b>
*	<b>Between</b>
#	<b>Strike</b>
⊙	<b>Brush</b>
Ⓢ	<b>Rub</b>

Repeated contact is written by placing multiple contact symbols next to each other in a sign.



**more**



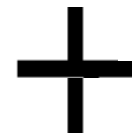
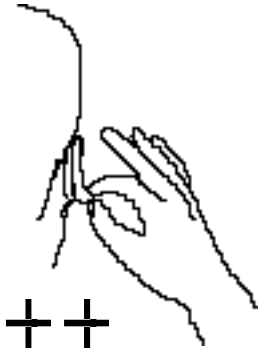
**school**



**Touch**

The contact symbol **Touch** is written with an asterisk.

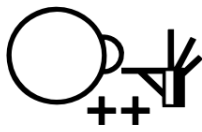
It shows the hand gently contacting another part of the body.



## Grasp

The contact symbol **Grasp** is written with a plus symbol.

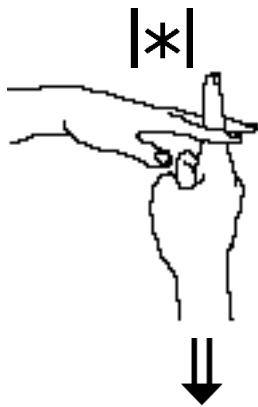
It shows the hand grasping or pinching a part of the body or a prop, such as clothing.



earring



congratulations



## Between

The contact symbol **Between** is written with an asterisk between two lines.

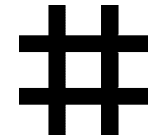
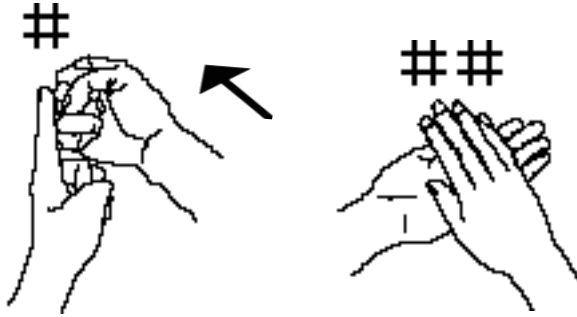
It shows contact between two fingers or other parts of the body.



disappear



America



## Strike

The contact symbol **Strike** is written with a hashtag.

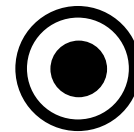
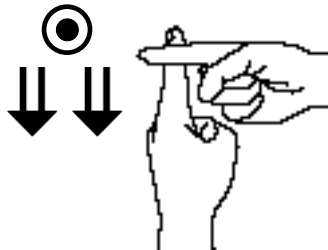
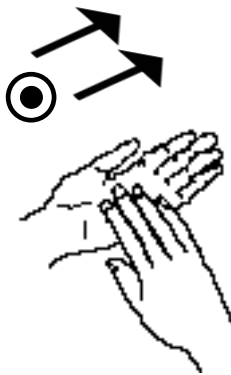
It shows the hand contacting a surface **with force**.



hit



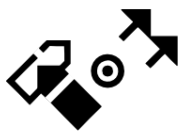
clap



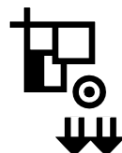
## Brush

The contact symbol **Brush** is written with a circle containing a dot.

It shows movement that first contacts and then **moves off** the surface.



excuse me



monthly



## Circular Rub

The contact symbol **Circular Rub** is written with a spiral symbol.

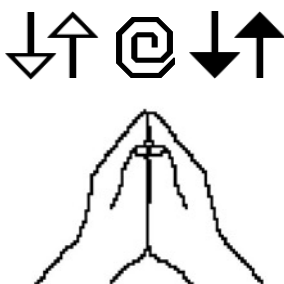
It shows contact that **moves in a circle** while **remaining** on the surface.



coffee



chocolate



## Straight Rub

The contact symbol **Circular Rub** can show rubbing in a **straight line** (rather than a circle).

Straight rub contact is written by placing movement symbols next to the rub symbol.

The contact moves in the direction of the movement symbols.



neat



eager



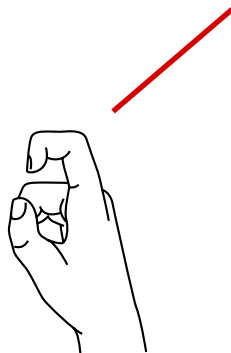
# Finger Movement

Finger Movement symbols show the movement of your fingers.

- Finger Bends in Middle
  - Finger Straightens in Middle
  - ∨ Finger Bends at Knuckle
  - ∧ Finger Straightens at Knuckle
  - ∩ Fingers Bend and Straighten Together at Knuckles
  - ⋈ Fingers Alternately Bend and Straighten at Knuckles
- 



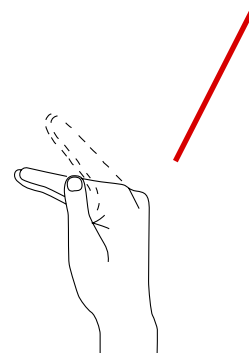
## Finger Bends and Straightens in Middle



Finger bend and straighten movements in the **middle** of a finger are called **Squeeze** and **Flick** movements.



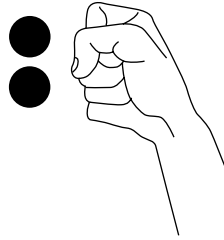
## Finger Bends and Straightens at Knuckle



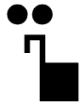
Finger bend and straighten movements at the **knuckle** are called **Hinge** and **Trill** movements.



## Finger Bends in Middle



This symbol is written with a **dark dot**. It shows a finger bending in the middle, like a claw. It is also called a **Squeeze** movement.



huh?

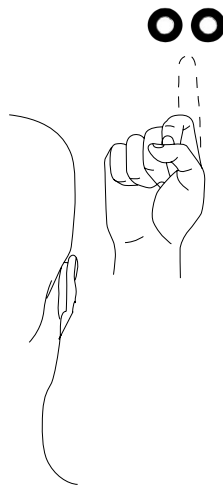
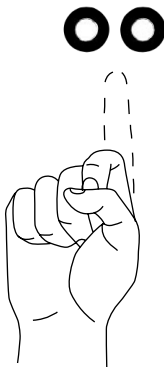


milk

This symbol is placed near the finger that bends. Two of these symbols represent two bends of the finger.



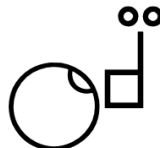
## Finger Straightens in Middle



This symbol is written with a **light dot**. It shows a finger bent in the middle, straightening out. It is also called a **Flick** movement.

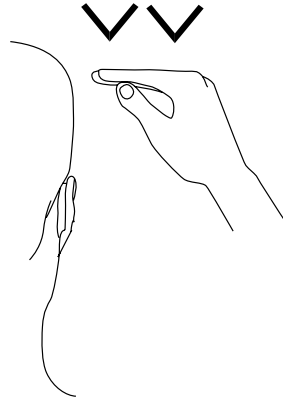
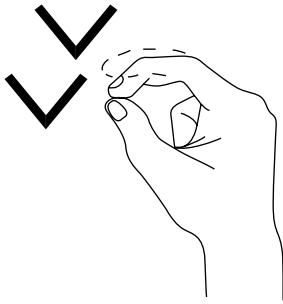


eleven



understand

This symbol is placed near the finger that straightens. Two of these symbols represent two straightenings of the finger.



## Finger Bends at Knuckle

This symbol is written with a **down arrow**. It shows a finger bending at the knuckle, like the hinge on a door. It is also called a **Hinge** movement.

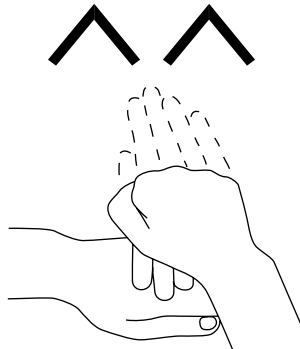


twenty



boy

This symbol is placed near the finger that bends. Two of these symbols represent two bends of the finger.



## Finger Straightens at Knuckle

This symbol is written with an **up arrow**. It shows a finger bent at the knuckle straightening out, like the hinge on a door. It is also called a **Hinge** movement.

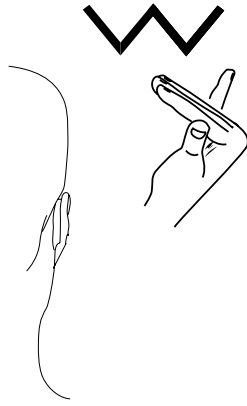
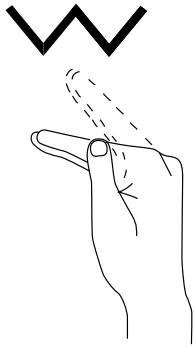


send



send-send

This symbol is placed near the finger that straightens. Two of these symbols represent two straightenings of the finger.



## Fingers Bend and Straighten Together at Knuckles

This symbol is written with a row of connected **down arrows**. It shows that all four fingers bend and straighten together as a unit, at the knuckles, like the hinge on a door. It is also called a **Hinge** movement.

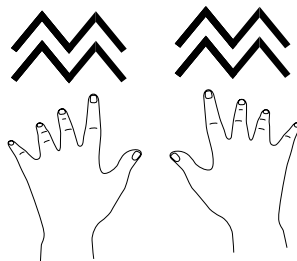
This symbol is placed near the fingers that bend and straighten together.



goodbye



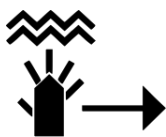
why



## Fingers Alternately Bend and Straighten at Knuckles

This symbol is written with a double row of connected **up arrows**. It shows that all four fingers bend and straighten independently, at the knuckles, like typing on a keyboard. It is also called a **Trill** movement.

This symbol is placed near the fingers that alternately bend and straighten.



fingerspell



typing

# Straight Movement

**Straight Movement symbols** show movements of your hands, face, and head.



**one half**

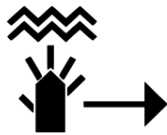


**disappear**



The movement symbol **Wall Plane Straight** is written with a double-stemmed arrow.

It shows straight movement which is parallel to the front wall.



**fingerspell**



**hit**



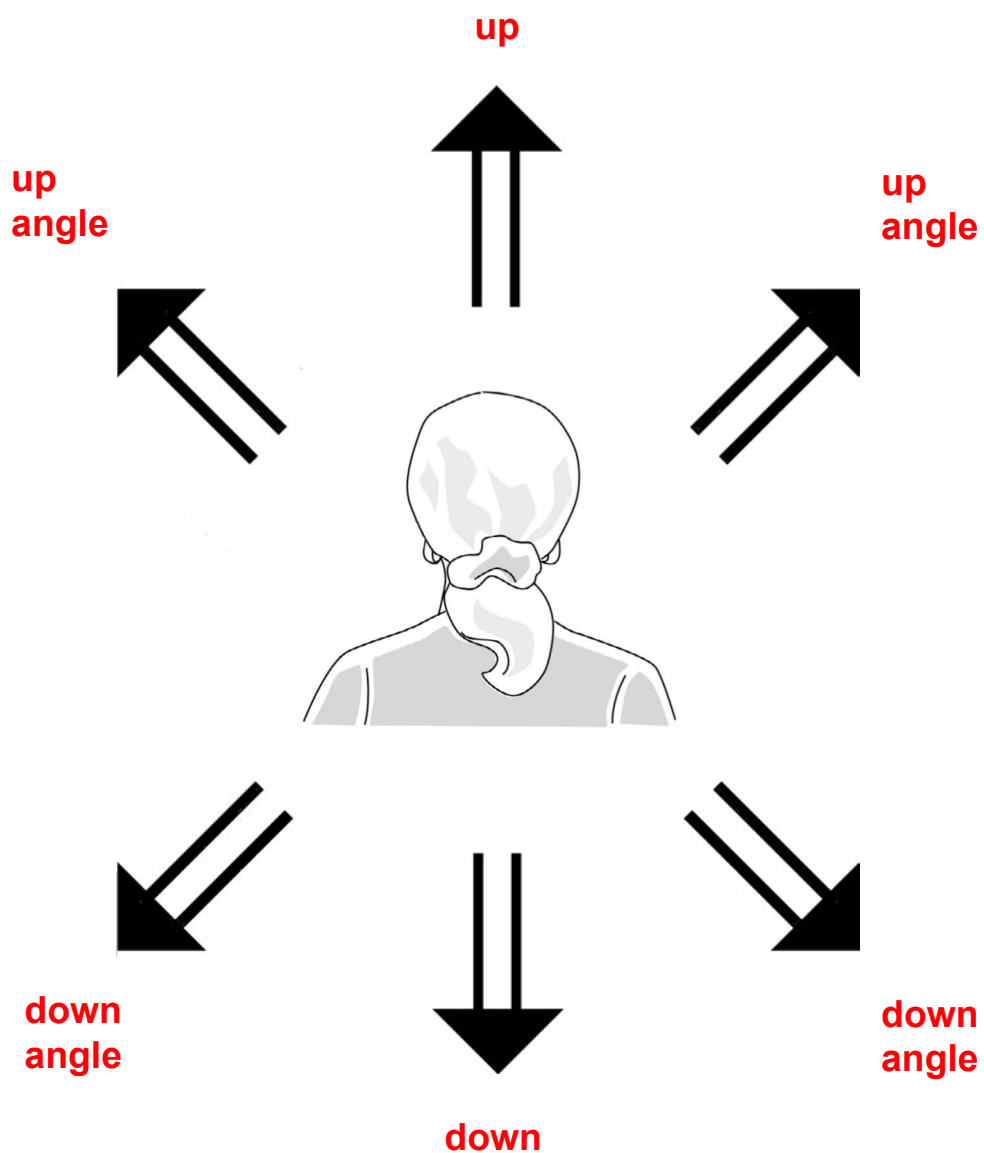
The movement symbol **Floor Plane Straight** is written with a single-stemmed arrow.

It shows straight movement which is parallel to the floor.

# Movement Direction

## Parallel to Front Wall

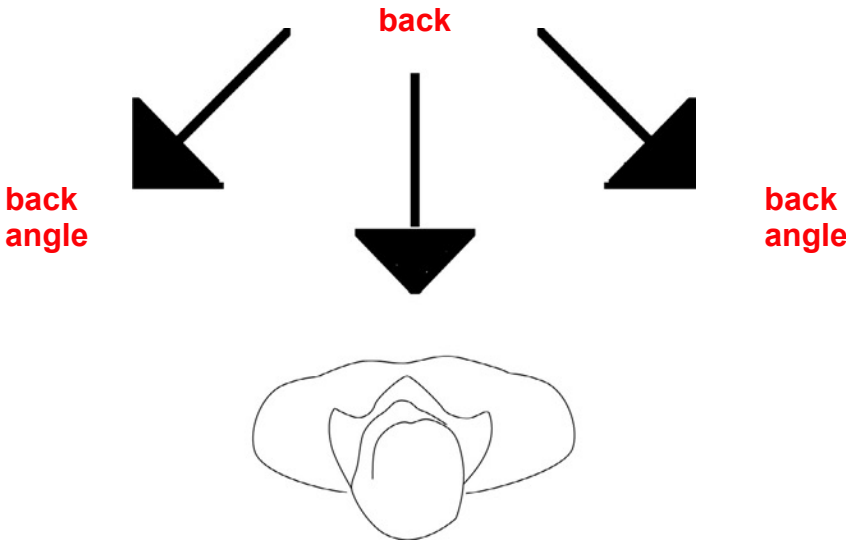
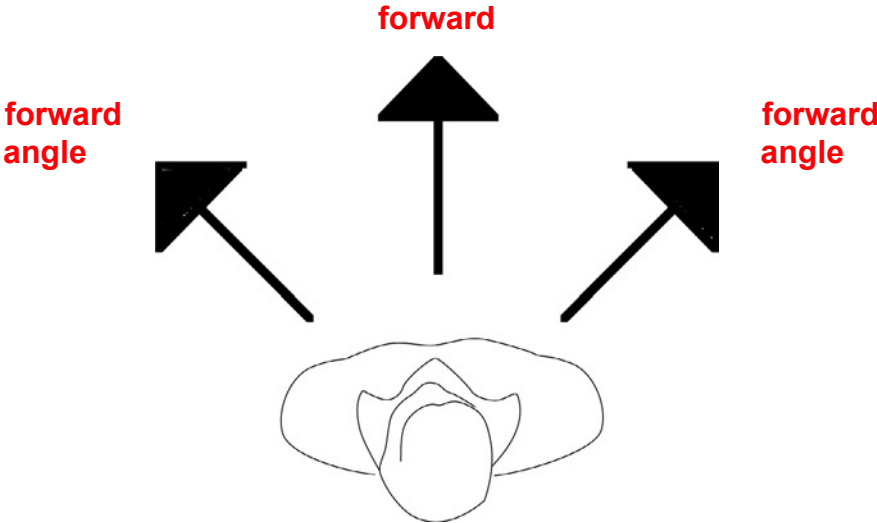
Straight movement symbols can point in eight different **directions**, to show the path of the movement through the signing space.



## Front View

# Movement Direction

Parallel to Floor

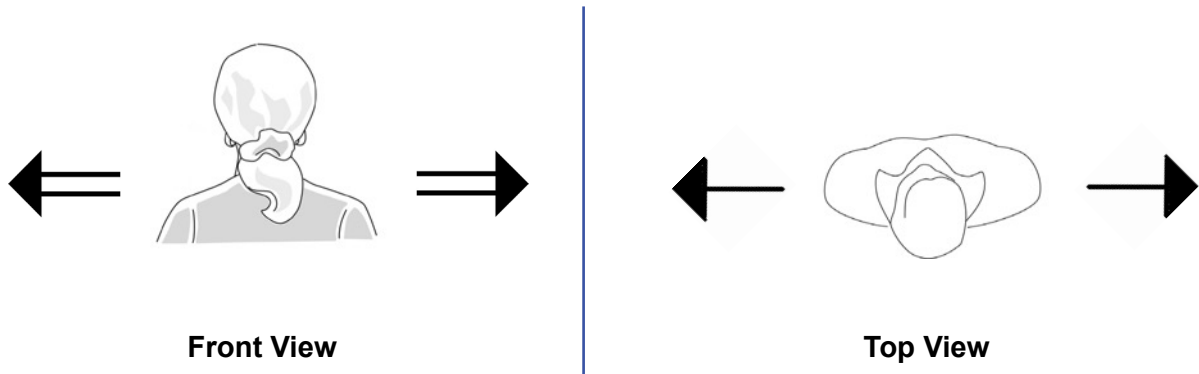


**Top View**

# Movement Direction

Movements can point **straight to the side** of the signer.

Movement to the side is the same from both the Front View and Top View of the signing space. It can be written with **double-stemmed** or **single-stemmed** arrows.



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# Movement Arrowhead

The **arrowhead** on a movement symbol identifies what is moving.

**Hollow  
Arrowhead**



**Solid  
Arrowhead**

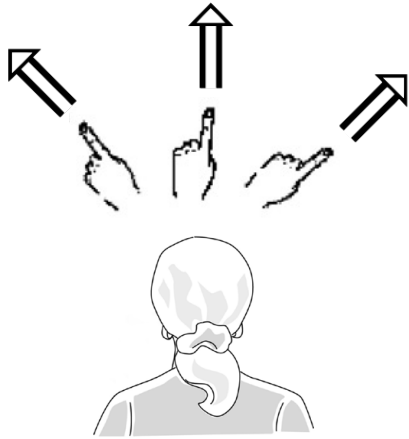


**Open  
Arrowhead**

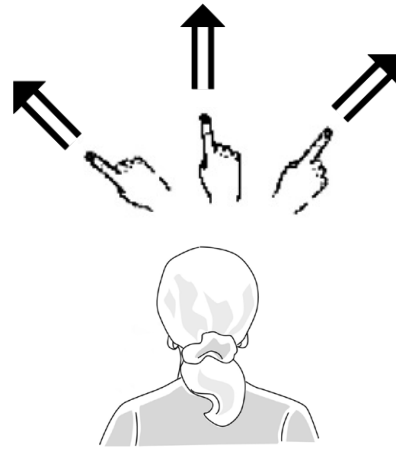




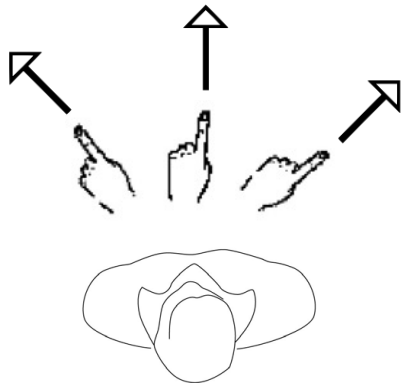
# Movement Arrowhead



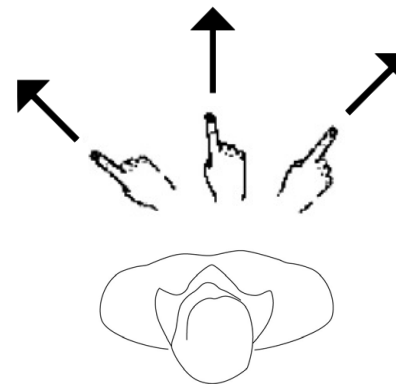
**Left Hand**



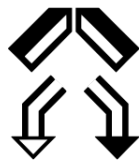
**Right Hand**



**Left Hand**



**Right Hand**



**house**



**way**

# Movement Arrowhead

For hand movements, a movement symbol defines a **path** through the signing space which the hand follows as it moves.

A hand movement symbol with an **open** arrowhead shows **both** your hands sharing the same movement path.

Hands sharing the same movement path either stay in contact as they move, or remain close to each other.



**I help you**



**follow**



**plan**

For face and head movements, an **open** arrowhead shows movement of the specified part of the face or head.

Because it is used to show several types of movement, the open arrowhead is called a **General Arrowhead**.

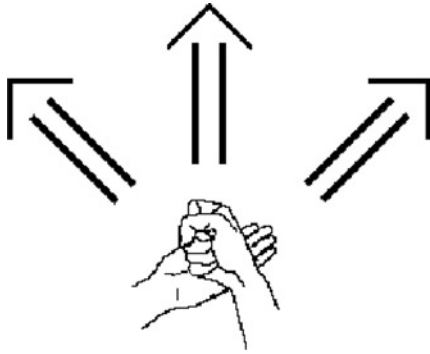


**Eyegaze  
Forward Angle**

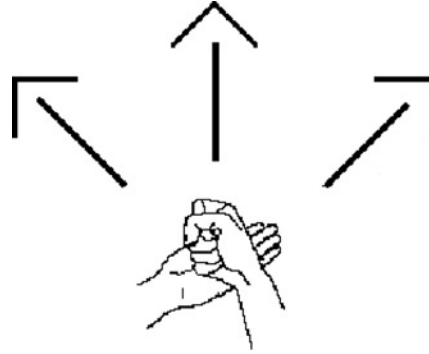


**Head Movement  
Forward**

## Review – Movement

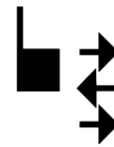
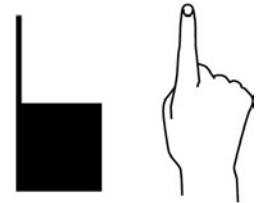
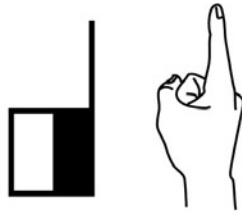
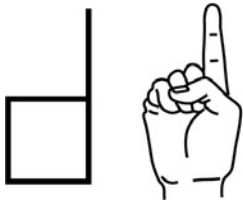


**Double-stemmed**  
movement symbols show  
movement parallel to the  
**Front Wall.**



**Single-stemmed**  
movement symbols show  
movement parallel to the  
**Floor.**

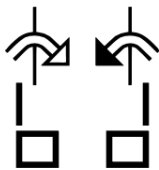
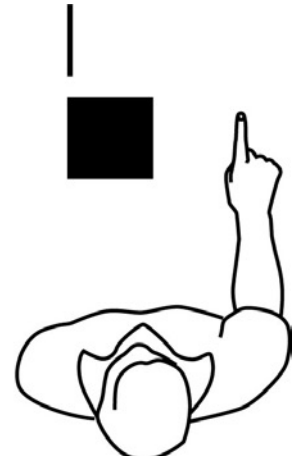
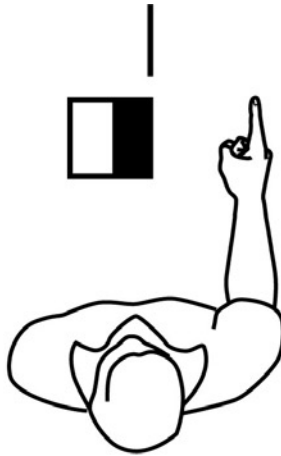
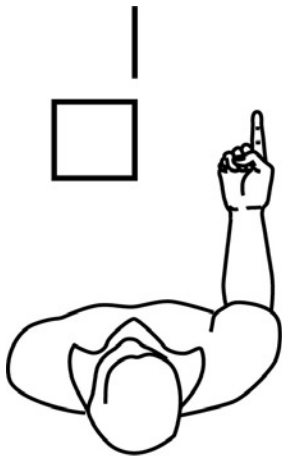
# Writing Signs



**one half**

**Deaf**

**where**

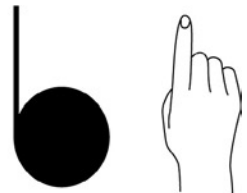
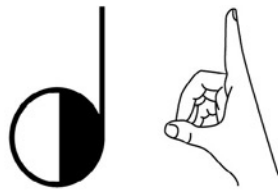


**happen**

**you**

**also**

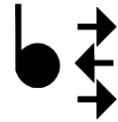
# Writing Signs



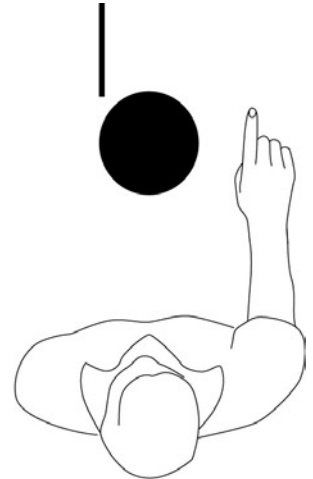
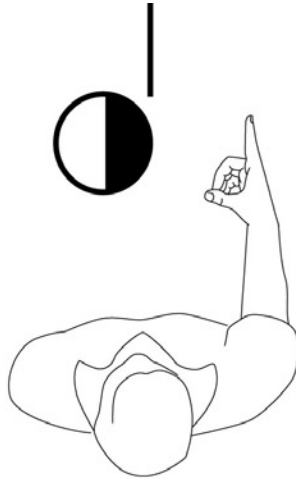
dinner



dating



democracy



do-do?

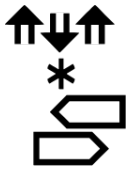
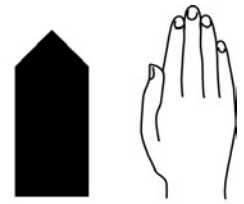
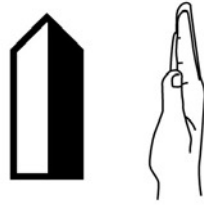
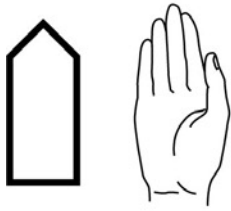


dessert



doctor

# Writing Signs



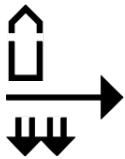
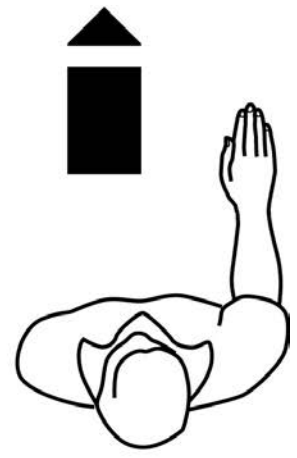
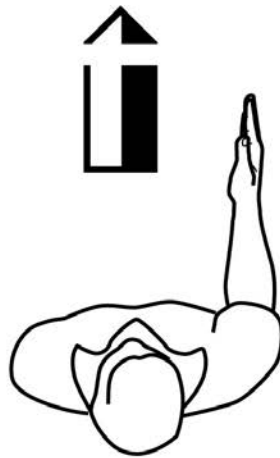
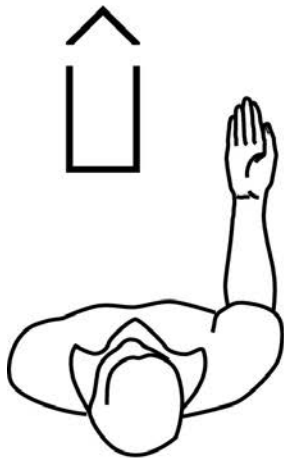
**window**



**house**



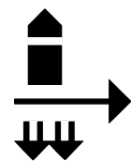
**his, hers**



**things**



**way, street**



**children**

# Writing Sentences

Punctuation symbols are used to write sentences in sign texts.



**Pause**



**End of Sentence**

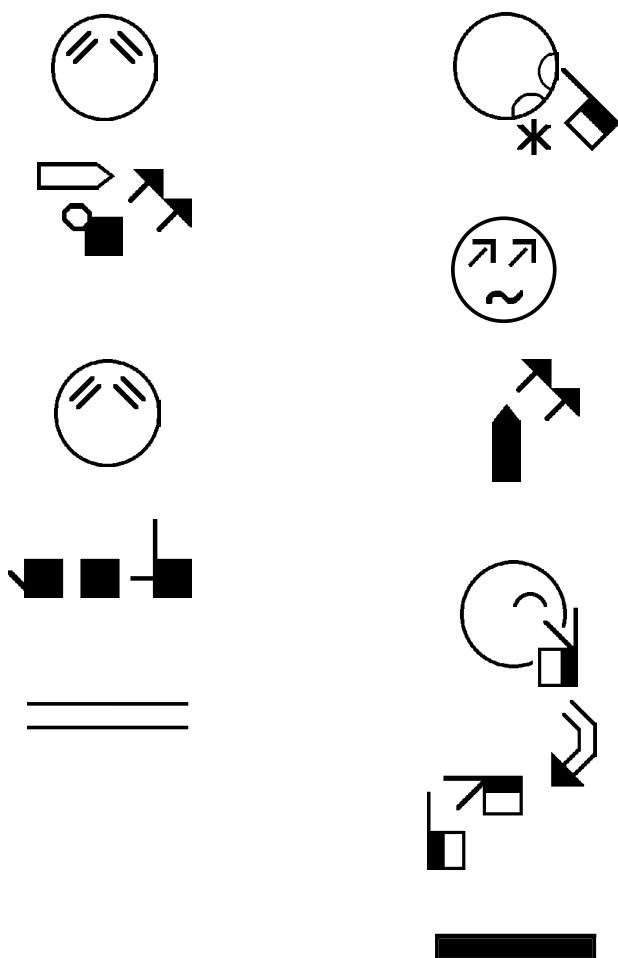


**Question Pause**

# Writing Sentences

Sentences in SignWriting are written **down the page**, from top to bottom.

Successive lines of writing are written from left to right, across the page.



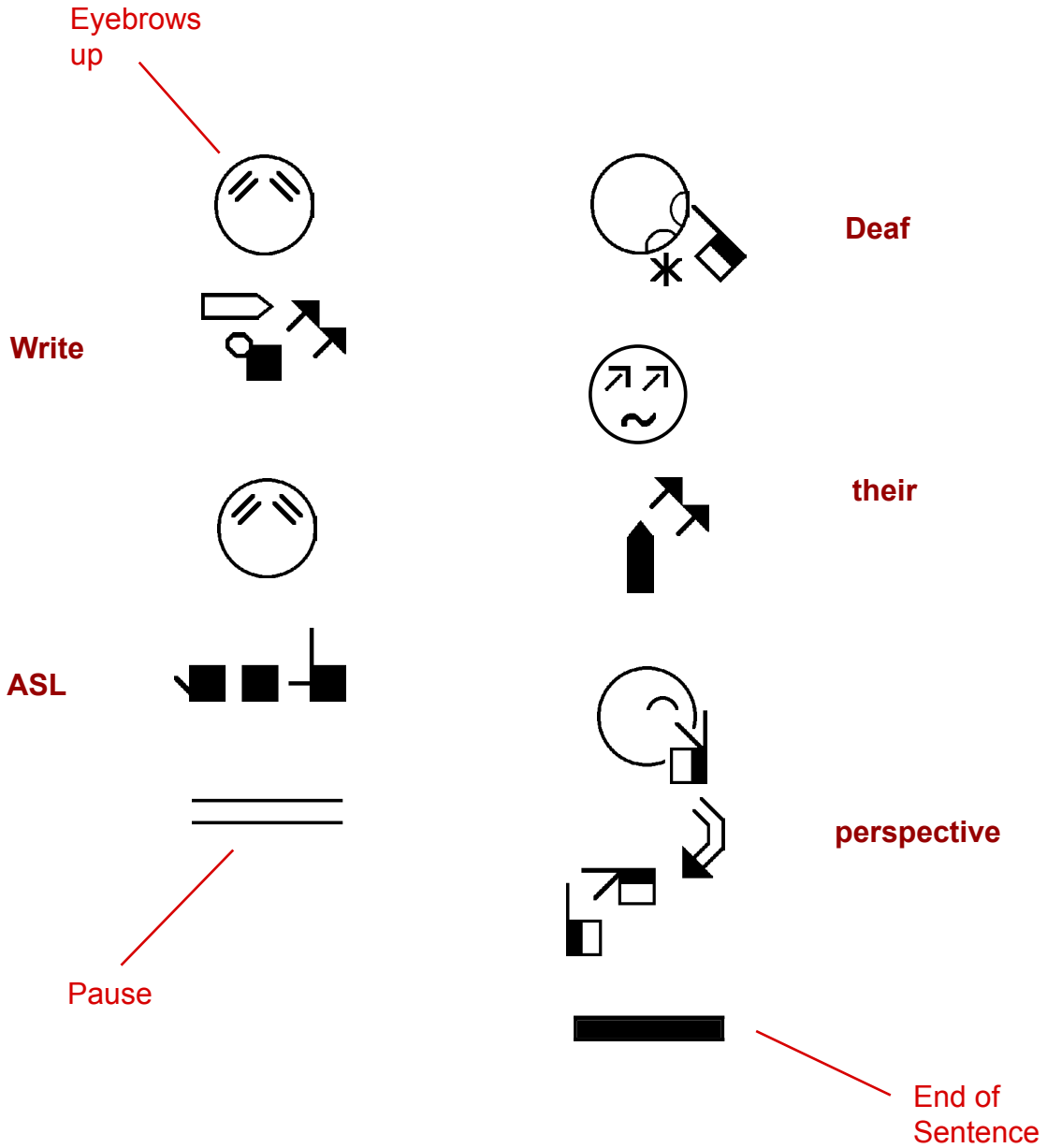
**Writing ASL from the Deaf perspective.**



# Writing Sentences

Sentences in SignWriting are written **down the page**, from top to bottom.

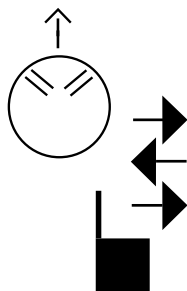
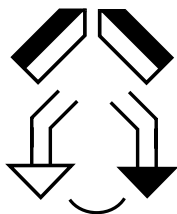
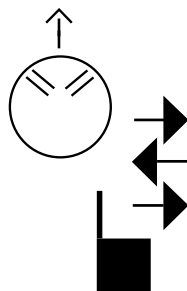
Successive lines of writing are written from left to right, across the page.



**Writing ASL from the Deaf perspective.**

# Writing Sentences

Questions in SignWriting are marked by the sign language grammar and a special **punctuation symbol**.

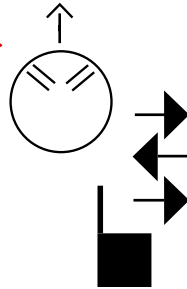


**Where is the house?**

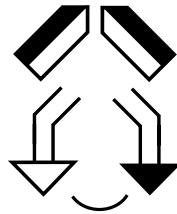
# Writing Sentences

Questions in SignWriting are marked by the sign language grammar and a special **punctuation symbol**.

Eyebrows  
down

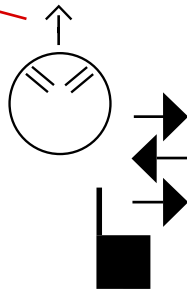


**Where**



**house**

Head  
forward



**where**

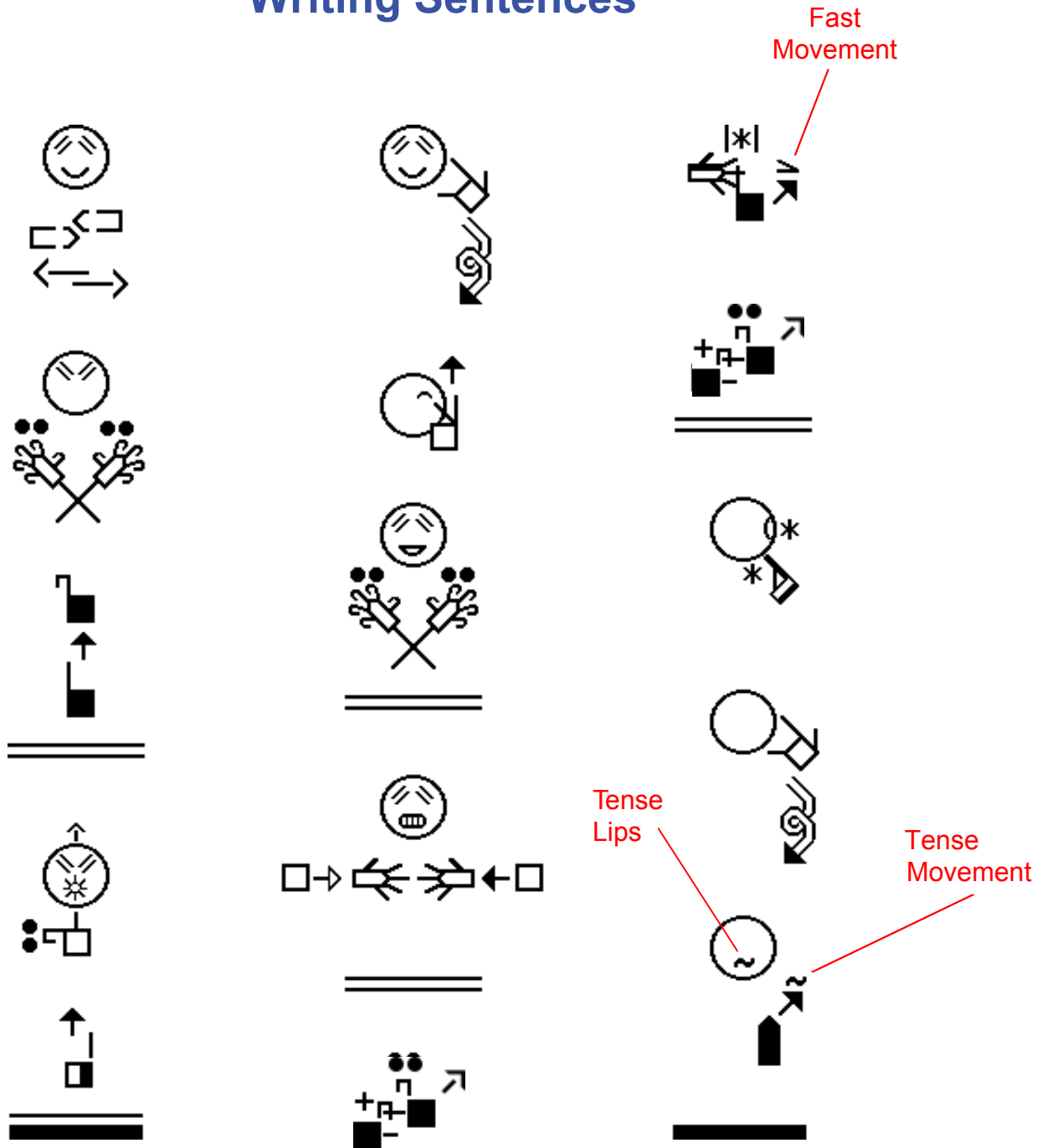


**?**

Question  
Pause

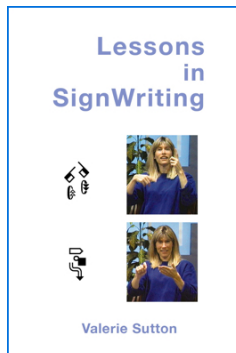
**Where is the house?**

# Writing Sentences



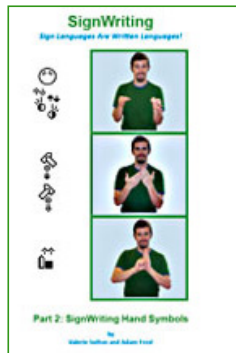
**Baby Bear asks "Who are you?" Goldilocks saw the bears, became frightened, shot out of the house, and ran all the way home.**

# SignWriting Books



## Lessons in SignWriting by Valerie Sutton

Describes the basic SignWriting alphabet. All examples are in American Sign Language (ASL).



## SignWriting Hand Symbols by Valerie Sutton and Adam Frost

Provides a detailed description of the hand symbols in the international SignWriting alphabet.



## American Sign Language Hand Symbols by Adam Frost and Valerie Sutton

Provides a detailed description of the hand symbols used in American Sign Language.



The SignWriting Press  
[www.signwriting.org/shop](http://www.signwriting.org/shop)