History of SignWriting

Valerie Sutton

1966-1974
DanceWriting

1974-1978
SignWriting

1975-1980
NTID, National Theatre of the Deaf

1981-1984
SignWriter Newspaper

1981-1997
SignWriting Publications

1974-1998
Changes to SignWriting

1988-2004
SignWriting Software

2005-2018
SignWriting Symposium

2004-present
SignPuddle Software, Unicode

1966-1974

DanceWriting

SignWriting evolved from DanceWriting, a movement notation system designed to write the movements of the human body.

As a result, SignWriting was not created with any prior knowledge of signs or sign languages. Nor is it tied to any one sign language. Instead, it can record all sign languages using the same set of symbols.

In other words, with SignWriting you do not need to know what signs mean in order to write them, since the writing system records only body movements. Signers can thus use it to record not only their own sign language, but other sign languages as well.

Of course, as SignWriting was used by more and more people, certain linguistically-based writing conventions were adopted (such as expressive writing and vertical writing). But despite these changes the writing system fundamentally remains a movement notation. Today SignWriting far exceeds DanceWriting in its number of users.

In the past, other dance notation systems have been used experimentally to record the movements of sign languages. But SignWriting is different, because it is used by hundreds of people, mostly Deaf, all over the world. By 1997, SignWriting had become the written form for sign languages in fourteen countries.

Listed below are the key events in the early history of DanceWriting, which led to the invention of SignWriting.

1966
DanceWriting Begins

Valerie Sutton begins professional ballet training at age 15. She invents a stick-figure notation system for recording ballet steps, for her own personal use.

1970-1972
Records Historic Danish Ballet Steps

Sutton moves to Copenhagen, Denmark, at age 19, to train with teachers of the Royal Danish Ballet. At that time, the world-renowned, historic ballet steps of the Royal Danish Ballet, called "the Bournonville Schools", were being forgotten for lack of recording. Sutton used her personal dance notation system to record and preserve these historic dances. The project stimulated the improvement of the writing system.

December, 1973
Sutton Movement Shorthand, The Classical Ballet Key, Key One

Written by Valerie Sutton. This was the first DanceWriting textbook. It is an historic record of how the system was originally invented. Within one year after publication, this first text was out-of-date because of improvements in the system. No longer in print.

Fall, 1974
DanceWriting Taught To The Royal Danish Ballet

Eight-week course taught by Sutton to 30 dancers, by special invitation from Ballet Master Flemming Flindt.

Fall, 1974
Danish News Articles About DanceWriting Stimulate SignWriting

Sign Language researchers at the University of Copenhagen read about DanceWriting, and asked to see a demonstration of it.

1974-1978

SignWriting

In 1974, Lars von der Lieth and his research team at the University of Copenhagen needed a way to record signs and gestures. They asked Sutton to record the movements from videotape. This was the beginning of SignWriting.

Of course, SignWriting did not look the same then. SignWriting today has been tested and used by many different groups of people, and the system has benefited from its years of use. But in 1974, SignWriting was basically DanceWriting from the waist up, with a few differences.

Listed below are some of the highlights of that time period.

Fall, 1974
SignWriting First Invented In Denmark

Developed for research use at the University of Copenhagen by Valerie Sutton, at the request of researcher Lars von der Lieth, Jan Enggaard, and others on the research team, at the Audiologopædisk Forskningsgruppe at the University of Copenhagen.

Fall, 1975
**Examples of Notation of a South Pacific Sign Language**

This booklet recorded mime-like gestures and home signs of a lone Deaf man, based on research by Rolf Kuschel. It included pictures with SignWriting illustrations. No longer in print.

Fall, 1976
Examples of Notation of Danish Deaf Sign Language

This booklet showed Sutton's first attempts at recording Danish Sign Language in 1974, 1975 and 1976. It is no longer in print.

As you can see by the example below, a stick figure drawing, with shoulders, arms and hands recorded movement from left to right on the page, position by position. The sentence below says "It is father."
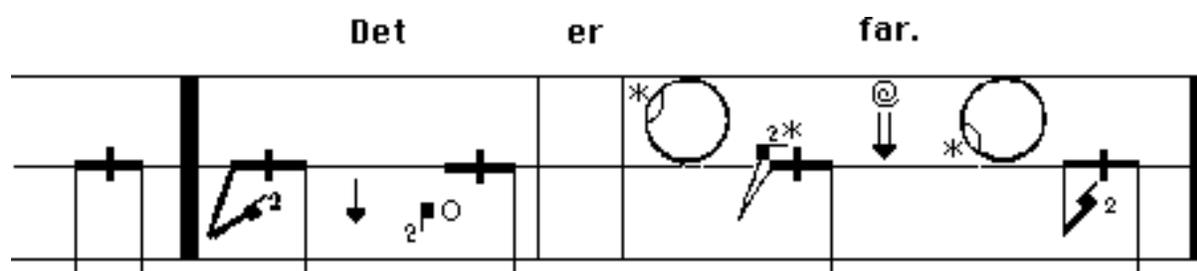
Spring, 1978
Hørende Danskeres Gestus-Repertoire
(Hearing Danes' Gesture-Repertoire)

Written by Jan Enggaard. This published research used SignWriting to record hearing person's gestures. The research was conducted at the Audiologopædisk Forskningsgruppe, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

1975-1980

NTID, National Theatre of the Deaf

The years 1975-1980 were transitional years, as the focus slowly shifted from DanceWriting to SignWriting. From 1975 to 1985, DanceWriting was a requirement for graduation at the Boston Conservatory of Music, in the Dance Department. Valerie Sutton was on the Conservatory's faculty from 1975 to 1979. Then, in 1979, Sutton became a 6-month consultant to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), in Rochester, New York, working with Dr. Frank Caccamise and his team on a series of booklets called "The Technical Signs Manuals", which used symbols from SignWriting for illustrations. These books continue to be published today.

The early years in Boston were important ones. In 1977, Judy Shepard-Kegl was a graduate student in linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Judy was open-minded to the idea of writing signs, and arranged for the first SignWriting workshop in the United States, to the New England Sign Language Society (NESLS), held at MIT. The group, which consisted of sign language linguists from MIT, Northeastern University, Brandeis, University of Massachusetts and Boston University, was a spirited group, and the ensuing debate brought up important issues. That first workshop influenced the system for the better.

1977 was a year filled with first experiences. The National Theater of the Deaf was the first group of Deaf adults to learn SignWriting, and Sutton presented her first paper on SignWriting to the National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching in Chicago. During her presentation, Sutton invited Dr. Stokoe to talk to the group as well.

The early years were also filled with experiments. One day Sutton received permission from a school in Manchester, New Hampshire, to visit a class of Deaf students for one hour. There, Sutton wrote the sign for "hello" on the blackboard in SignWriting. The students guessed it immediately. They became quite excited when they found they could read basic signs in a matter of minutes.

They jumped up and started writing signs themselves on the blackboard. Then other students would try to guess what they wrote... and they guessed correctly!

These kids were all skilled in signing, but did not necessarily know how to read English well. It was an inspiring experience that has since been repeated with other classes and other teachers.

Below is a listing of the events and publications from 1976 to 1980.
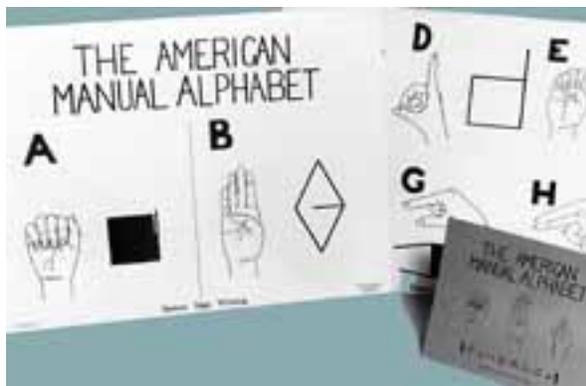
Spring 1976
American Manual Alphabet in SignWriting

Illustrated by Jayne Gunderson. No longer in print.

Spring, 1977
First SignWriting Workshop in USA, at MIT in Boston

A group of Sign Language linguists from the New England Sign Language Society learned SignWriting. The workshop was held at MIT, arranged by Dr. Judy Shepard-Kegl, then a linguistics graduate student at MIT. (Years later, Judy and her husband James, established schools for the Deaf in Nicaragua, using SignWriting to teach deaf children to read and write.)

Summer, 1977
SignWriting Workshop, National Theatre of the Deaf

Troupe of Deaf actors learned to read and write signs for one week with Valerie Sutton in Connecticut. This was the first time the system was introduced to Deaf adults in the USA.

Summer, 1977
Goldilocks And The Three Bears, First Edition

Written in SignWriting by Betty Beekman, from the National Theater of the Deaf. Two other versions have been written. Second Edition. Third Edition.

Summer, 1977
Sutton Movement Shorthand; Writing Tool For Research

First paper on SignWriting presented in the USA by Valerie Sutton, in Chicago, Illinois, at the First National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching.

July, 1978
SignWriting, Sutton Movement Shorthand, The Sign Language Key, Key 5

First SignWriting textbook, with 8 hours of video and audio instruction. It is an historic record of how the system was written in the 1970's. No longer in print. Textbook: ISBN 0-914336-06-1. Audio and videotapes: ISBN 0-914336-07-X

Fall, 1979
NTID Technical Signs Manuals

SignWriting symbols are used in a series of Technical Signs Manuals, produced at NTID in Rochester, New York, under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. In 1979, Valerie Sutton was a full-time consultant to the project for six months, and is the author of the second manual, which teaches the SignWriting symbols. Over 10 manuals have since been published. The movement symbols of SignWriting are blended with life-like illustrations, showing technical signs used in different professions.

Fall, 1979
Sutton Speech Writing

This booklet described and illustrated Sutton's attempts at writing the detailed movements of the mouth, jaw and tongue while speaking. It was written while Sutton was a consultant at NTID. Audiologists and speech pathologists at NTID stimulated the project. Sutton analyzed detailed videos of speech production, and developed a system for notating the movements (see example below). Indirectly this was an influence on SignWriting, since some movements of the mouth are recorded when writing sign languages. This booklet is no longer in print.
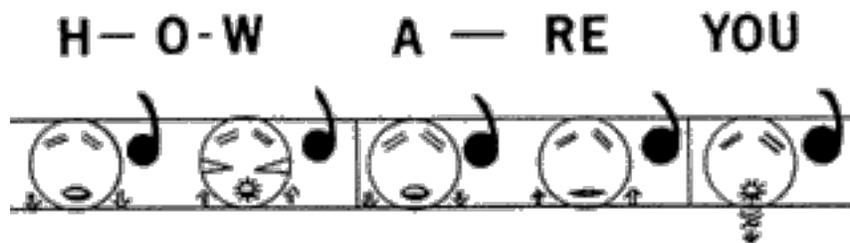
October 26, 1980
A Way To Analyze American Sign Language and Any Other Sign Language Without Translation Into Any Spoken Language

Paper presented by Valerie Sutton at the National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching in Boston, Massachusetts.

1981-1984

SignWriter Newspaper

The SignWriter Newspaper was a 12- to 24-page newspaper, published quarterly. Most articles were written in two languages: English and American Sign Language. It was distributed free to Deaf people in 41 countries.

Today's SignWriting publications would not be the same, if it were not for the research and development done through the publication of the SignWriter newspaper. It had a significant influence on how SignWriting is written today.

The first Deaf journalists on the newspaper staff were pioneers. They were the first group of Deaf adults to truly become skilled at writing their native language. At that time, sign languages were not considered written languages. It was a controversial idea to try writing signs, and everyone who worked on the newspaper staff experienced resistance to this concept, from both Deaf and hearing people. New ideas take time for acceptance, something the staff had no choice but to learn the hard way.

But there were many strong supporters of SignWriting too. The newspaper was a catalyst for debating the issue of sign language literacy. It was also a catalyst for developing a way to type signs.

In 1981 there was no way to type SignWriting. Each issue of the SignWriter Newspaper was written by hand with ink pens.

Or wax symbols were manually pressed on paper with specially designed "transfer sheets".

It took 3 months to write one issue by hand. The first issue, published in Fall 1981, was written by the founding editor Nancy Ellen Woo (now Nancy Romero). Nancy continued to write each issue for several years. It was tiring, painstaking work.

Lucinda Struxness (now Lucinda Batch), was the first Deaf reporter to write articles in American Sign Language. Newspaper staff members (from left to right) Kevin Struxness, Dennis Schemenauer, illustrator Frank Allen Paul, and Lucinda Struxness.

Publisher Valerie Sutton worked with assistant editor Meriam Ina Schroeder on the newspaper's layout and design.
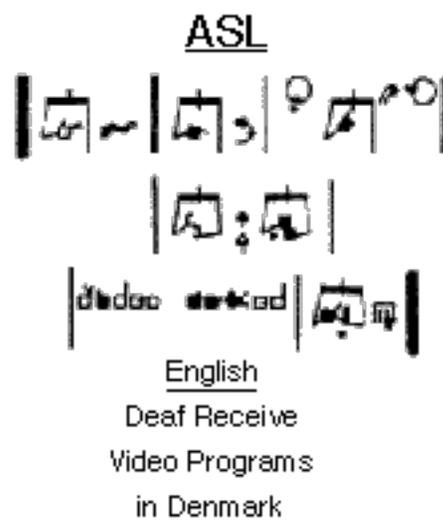

Managing editor Susan Diamond Bucher edited each sign language article, working with Deaf reporters on writing American Sign Language grammar.

Dennis Schemenauer and illustrator Frank Allen Paul created a cartoon strip written in SignWriting.

Vicki Santillanes wrote a "Dear Vicki" column in American Sign Language, answering questions from the Deaf community.

Newspaper articles were published in four languages:

1. Danish Sign Language (DSL)
2. American Sign Language (ASL)
3. Danish
4. English

DSL

Danish
Døve Faar
Videoprogrammet
i Danmark

ASL

English
Deaf Receive
Video Programs
in Denmark

1981-1997

SignWriting Publications

Spring, 1981
SignWriting for Everyday Use

This was the main reference textbook for serious students of SignWriting during the 1980's. Author: Valerie Sutton. Illustrations by Jayne Gunderson, Amy Blake and Ken Merchant. 450 pages. Spiral bind. Out-of-date. No longer in print. This book was replaced by a new textbook, called *Lessons in SignWriting*.

Spring, 1981
First SignWriting Literature Series

This literature was experimental since there had never been a way to read and write American Sign Language before. Over the years, writers became more skilled at recording ASL properly. There is now a Second Literature Series written in ASL.

This first Literature Series, back in 1981, was written in Signed English or PSE. It included 7 booklets:

1. How's That Again? by Paul Menkis
Sign language poem written in SignWriting

2. Pledge of Allegiance
Written in SignWriting by Margaret Oliver

3. A Poem For Deaf People by Tina Samper
Sign language poem written in SignWriting

4. Ecclesiastes
Bible passage written in SignWriting

5. Silent Night
Sign language song written in SignWriting

6. Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Second Edition

Written in SignWriting by Nancy Ellen Woo (now Nancy Romero).
Other versions: First edition by Betty Beekman at National Theater of the Deaf. A third edition by Darline Clark, was written in ASL in 1997.

7. Cinderella, First Edition

Written In SignWriting by Nancy Ellen Woo (now Nancy Romero). This was published in the "SignWriting For Everyday Use" textbook, as well as in a separate booklet. Illustrations by Jayne Gunderson. No longer in print. A second edition of Cinderella was written by Darline Clark in ASL in 1997.

Summer, 1981
What Is SignWriting?

Four-page visual description of SignWriting's uses. Cartoons by Frank Allen Paul

Fall, 1981
SignWriting Tote Bags

Strong canvas, blue ink on white. Two sizes. Design is out-of-date. No longer available.

Fall 1981 First Issue
SignWriter Newspaper

First newspaper written in Sign Language, by Nancy Ellen Woo, distributed to 41 countries.

1982 First Edition - 1993 Fourth Edition
NTID Technical Signs Manual Two: Reading Technical Sign Diagrams

Written by Valerie Sutton and the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Two teaches the SignWriting symbols used in the Technical Signs manuals.

1982 First Edition
NTID Technical Signs Manual Three: Mathematics

Written by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Three teaches signs used in Mathematics. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

1982 First Edition
NTID Technical Signs Manual Four: Communications

Written by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Four teaches signs used in Communications. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

1982
SignWriting For Research Use

Textbook by Valerie Sutton teaching the way SignWriting first developed at the University of Copenhagen in the 1970's. The writing is detailed, and geared towards researchers. SignWriting has improved so much since this publication that today's writing is just as detailed, but without all of the complication.

1982
SignWriting Shorthand For Sign Language Stenography

Textbook by Valerie Sutton teaching Shorthand. At that time, a new profession called "Sign Language Stenography" was under development. Experiments were made with recording signs at speed in classrooms. Stenographers learned how to write without looking at their hands. This book taught that system. Since then, the Shorthand has been adapted for use as a daily handwriting system for everyone.

1982
SignWriting Basic Teacher's Certification Manual

This was a training manual for educators to become qualified SignWriting Instructors. From 1981-1984, teachers received certificates after completing training. Thirty-one instructors received certification in the 1980's. The teacher certification program ceased in 1984.

1983 First Edition
NTID Technical Signs Manual Five: Career Education

Written by Brenda Liebman Aron and the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Five teaches signs used in career education. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

1983
Sutton's Sign-Symbol-Sequence

This was the first publication describing and teaching Sutton's system for looking up signs by SignWriting symbols in Sign Language dictionaries.

1983
SignWriting Card File Dictionary

ASL Dictionary on 3" by 5" cards. New cards were sent to members monthly. This forced students to learn how to put the signs in Sign-Symbol-Sequence.

1983-1984
Dictionary: Danish Sign Language – American Sign Language,
American Sign Language – Danish Sign Language

Dictionary written wholly in SignWriting. If this dictionary had been completed, it would truly have been historic. There was no spoken language in the dictionary. Everything was written in two languages, Danish Sign Language and American Sign Language, including the foreword and introduction.

The work was compiled by Karen Albertsen, Annegrethe Pedersen, and others at the Deaf Center For Total Communication in Copenhagen, Denmark, collaborating with Valerie Sutton and her team in the USA. The work was halted when it became apparent that a typing program for SignWriting was greatly needed. Writing the whole dictionary by hand with ink pens and transfer sheets became too much work.

April, 1984
SignWriting Updates

Document reporting how Deaf Americans skilled in SignWriting were requesting to write SignWriting from the expressive viewpoint.

Spring-Summer, 1984, Final Issue
SignWriter Newspaper

Featured an article by Bernard Bragg.

1985
NTID Technical Signs Manual Six: English

Written by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Six teaches signs used in teaching English. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

1985
NTID Technical Signs Manual Seven: Religion

Written by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Seven teaches signs used in religion. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

August, 1985
Learn Signing With SignWriting – Video & Booklet

Bernard Bragg and Valerie Sutton teach SignWriting to hearing people who want to learn basic signs. Also included Patty Duke, William Schallert, Meredith McRae, and Stephanie Edwards.

Spring 1986
Four Ways Of Writing SignWriting

by Valerie Sutton. Detailed SignWriting, SignWriting Printing, Handwriting, and Shorthand.

1987
NTID Technical Signs Manual Eight: Theater

Written by Keith Cagle and the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Eight teaches signs used in theater. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

Fall, 1987
Computers In Sign Language Education

Paper by Richard Gleaves and Karen van Hoek, discussing the use of the SignWriter computer program for teaching language to Deaf people.

April & September, 1990
Lessons In SignWriting Textbook, First Edition

No longer in print.

February, 1991
Lessons In SignWriting Workbook, First Edition

Students learn to read and write ASL, based on the Signing Naturally videotapes published by DawnSignPress. No longer in print.

September, 1991
Sutton's American Sign Language Dictionary, First Edition

850 ASL signs written in SignWriting. Paper Cover Bound. 56 pages. Written by members of the Deaf Action Committee. Prepared with the SignWriter Computer Program. No longer in print.

1988
NTID Technical Signs Manual Nine: Social Work

by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Nine teaches signs used in social work. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

Spring, 1989
SignWriter Newsletter, First Issue

Written by members of the Deaf Action Committee. Mailed to 7000 people.

1990
Lessons In SignWriting Textbook, First Edition

No longer in print.

February, 1991
Lessons In SignWriting Workbook, First Edition

Students learn to read and write ASL, based on the Signing Naturally videotapes published by DawnSignPress. No longer in print.

September, 1991
Sutton's American Sign Language Dictionary, First Edition

850 ASL signs written in SignWriting. Bound, paper cover. 56 pages. Written by members of the Deaf Action Committee. Prepared with the SignWriter computer program. No longer in print.

1991
NTID Technical Signs Manual Ten: Science

by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Ten teaches signs used in science. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

1991
NTID Technical Signs Manual Eleven: Legal

by the NTID team under the direction of Dr. Frank Caccamise. Manual Eleven teaches signs used in legal matters. SignWriting symbols are used in the illustrations.

1991-1997
SignWriter Newsletter

Written by members of the Deaf Action Committee. From 1991 to 1996, the newsletter was printed and mailed to around 7000 people biannually. In 1996, mailings ceased and the newsletter was posted twice a year on the SignWriting website.

Summer, 1992
Written ASL From Deaf People's Perspective

Poster presentation by Lucinda O'Grady Batch. Article discusses writing signs down the page. Presented to an International Sign Language Linguistics Research Conference at UCSD, in La Jolla, California.

1993, 1994, 1995
Sutton's American Sign Language Dictionary, Second Edition

Written in SignWriting by the Deaf Action Committee for SignWriting, and Valerie Sutton. Includes over 3000 ASL signs. Published as a three-ring hard-backed notebook, with five sections. ISBN 0-914336-56-8.

1. English-ASL
2. ASL-English (sample only)
3. About This Dictionary
4. About Sign Language (which includes lessons in reading and writing ASL grammar, using SignWriting)
5. About SignWriting (which teaches SignWriting symbols)

1994
Deaf Perspectives on SignWriting, Video and Booklet

Available in all video formats. 17-minute video featuring four Deaf native ASL signers discussing opinions on SignWriting. In ASL with voice interpretation in English. Includes booklet with transcription of the video. ISBN 0-914336-71-1.

1994, 1995
Lessons In SignWriting, Textbook and Workbook

Written by Valerie Sutton. For the serious SignWriting user. Lessons In SignWriting is a practical textbook which serves as a general reference book for writing the movements of any sign language in the world. Illustrations, diagrams and photographs are in American Sign Language. It teaches every symbol in the SignWriting system, and offers practical applications for reading and writing. This Second Edition includes fifteen lessons in a three-ring, hard-backed notebook. A separate workbook is included, with the title "Symbol Workbook". Textbook ISBN 0-914336-55-X. Symbol Workbook ISBN 0-914336-57-6.

Spring, 1995
Lessons In SignWriting, Video Series and Booklets

Available in all video formats. Learn SignWriting at home or in the classroom with these two educational videos. The Lessons In SignWriting Video Series was broadcast on USA cable television as educational programming. Two Deaf native signers, Lucinda O'Grady Batch and Kevin Clark, teach the basics of SignWriting in American Sign Language (ASL), with English voice and captions on the screen. The series includes two videos.

Video 1: Introduction to SignWriting (21 minutes)
Video 2: SignWriting Basics (31 minutes)

Each video includes a booklet with a transcription of the English voice plus a review of the instruction. ISBN 0-914336-72-X.

Spring, 1996
SignWriting Greeting Cards

Card designs: "Hello!", "Thank You!", "Get Well!" and "Happy Birthday!" written in American Sign Language in SignWriting.

Spring, 1996 - Spring, 1997
SignWriting Workbook Series

Five workbooks designed to encourage students to write SignWriting on their own. Series ISBN 0-914336-58-4.

1. Short Story Workbook
A person flying in an airplane, a clown, a ballerina dancing, a family of four, etc. Students are inspired to write a short story about the illustrations. Illustrations by Amy Blake.

2. Cinderella Workbook
The complete story of Cinderella illustrated on 30 pages. The students write the story in SignWriting in their own sign language. Illustrations by Jayne Gunderson.

3. Geography Workbook
Illustrations of maps inspire students to write about geography and their own country, culture and history.

4. Marine Workbook
Illustrations of marine life, fish, shells and ships.

5. USA Photo Workbook
Photos of items used daily in the USA.

August 7, 1996
Teacher's Report, SignWriting in Nicaragua

Written by Darline Clark Gunsauls. Darline describes her experiences teaching Deaf children SignWriting in Nicaragua, in the summer of 1996.

September 20, 1996
SignWriting website

First SignWriting publication on the internet. Special features demonstrating written sign languages were posted on the website on the first and third Mondays of every month.

1996, 1997
Who Uses SignWriting?

Detailed reports and illustrations explain how SignWriting is used in ten countries. This booklet is updated on a regular basis.

1997, 1998
Second SignWriting Literature Series

The series includes:

1. Children's stories written in ASL (see below)
2. Poetry written in ASL
3. Deaf culture and history written in ASL

The SignWriting Children's Stories Series is a set of five booklets written in English and American Sign Language. The booklets include numerous color illustrations.

1. Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Third Edition
Written in ASL by Darline Clark. Illustrations by Tom and Robin Christ. Posted on the SignWriting website, April, 1997. ISBN 0-914336-40-1.

2. Humpty Dumpty
Written in ASL by Darline Clark & Dave Gunsauls. Illustrations by Lisa Moore. Posted on the SignWriting website, September, 1997. ISBN 0-914336-41-X.

3. Cinderella, Second Edition
Written in ASL by Darline Clark. Illustrations by Jayne Gunderson. Posted on the SignWriting website, November 3, 1997. ISBN 0-914336-42-8

4. Snow White
Written in ASL by Darline Clark. Illustrations by Ida Candelaria.

5. Sleeping Beauty
Written in ASL by Darline Clark. Illustrations by Ida Candelaria.

September 22, 1997
Sutton's American Sign Language Picture Dictionary, First Edition

First attempt at a special dictionary for Deaf children. Intended for both parents and teachers, as a language teaching tool. The signs are written on one side, the words on the other side, with pictures in-between. Cover up the words to remember the signs, or cover up the signs to remember the words. Vocabulary can be looked up by word or sign. ISBN 0-914336-50-9**.**
Posted on the SignWriting website.

1974-1998

Changes to SignWriting

Introduction

History shows that writing systems tend to evolve with use. It takes time for experimentation. And SignWriting is no exception.

I remember when I went to school in the 1950's, it seemed to me that reading and writing English magically appeared. ABC was taken for granted. Writing English was established. There were rules, and you were not allowed to break them. I never considered saying to my teacher: "This spelling doesn't make sense, so let's change the rules!"

But, of course, when I was a little girl I didn't realize that reading and writing English took centuries to develop. Not only did the alphabetic characters change over hundreds of years, but spellings were not standardized for a long time either. People spelled differently because there were no rules in the beginning. English writers couldn't predict back in the Middle Ages, what written English would look like in 1998.

That is why all of us, who are working with the development of SignWriting, are committed to the idea that SignWriting will evolve with use. We are trying to find a balance between being flexible towards changes that seem to happen naturally, and also providing structure for students learning to read and write. It is a fascinating process, and we all feel privileged to be a part of it.

Early Origins

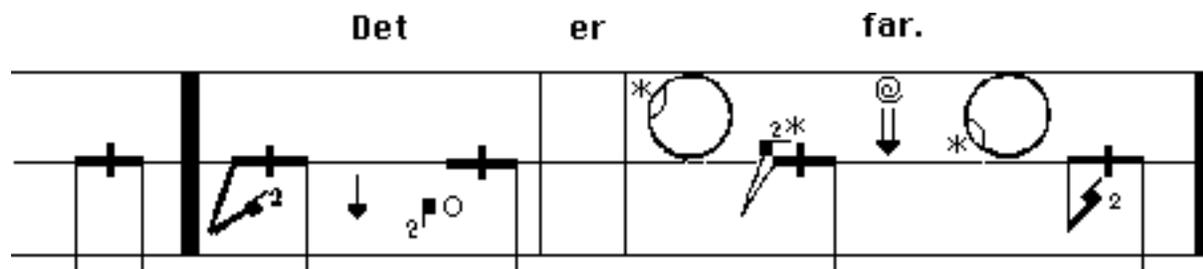SignWriting was originally created from DanceWriting, in 1974.

DanceWriting places a "stick figure drawing" on a five-lined staff.
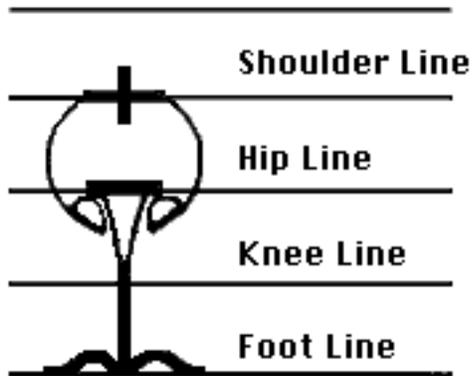
SignWriting 1974-1980
Detailed SignWriting

Below is an example of how SignWriting looked from 1974 to around 1980. You can see how it came from DanceWriting. Instead of a five-lined staff, there was a three-lined staff for the upper body.

This was called "Detailed SignWriting", and its goal was to write every detail possible. It was usually transcribed from videotape for research purposes.

Signs were written from left to right, facing the reader (receptive viewpoint). The shoulder line was placed on the center line of the staff. Facial contact was written to the left of the stick figure. Each sign was separated by a vertical line. A thick vertical line began and ended each sentence. Small numbers were used to show which fingers were projecting. In the diagram above, the number 2 indicates the index finger.

The above sentence is written in Danish Sign Language. It can be translated as "Det er far." in Danish, which means "It is father." in English.

SignWriting 1980-1986
Three Ways To Write

By 1982 SignWriting was easier to use, and people could choose between three styles of writing:

– Full-Body SignWriting
– SignWriting Handwriting
– SignWriting Shorthand

All three styles were written receptively, facing the reader. All were written from left to right.

**Full-Body SignWriting in the 1980's**

Full-Body SignWriting stemmed from the "Detailed SignWriting" of the late 1970's, but the three-lined staff was discarded. Who needed those unnecessary lines? And no more numbers for fingers. Each handshape had a special look. Readers memorized the shape of each handshape.

The example below is written in Danish Sign Language. The Danish gloss is "gide-ikke male hus". The English gloss would be "don't feel-like paint house."
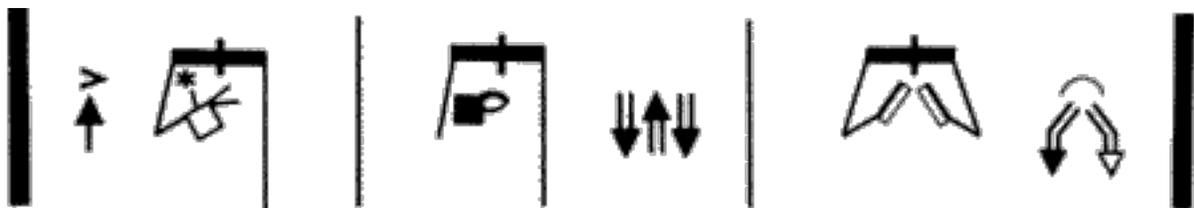
SignWriting Handwriting in the 1980's

SignWriting Handwriting was the forerunner to Stacked SignWriting in the 1990's, but at the time we didn't know that! It was an experiment. The stick figure was discarded. Hand symbols, movement symbols, and facial expressions were written from left to right. The stick figure drawing was used only occasionally, for special torso movements or contact with the hips or shoulders.
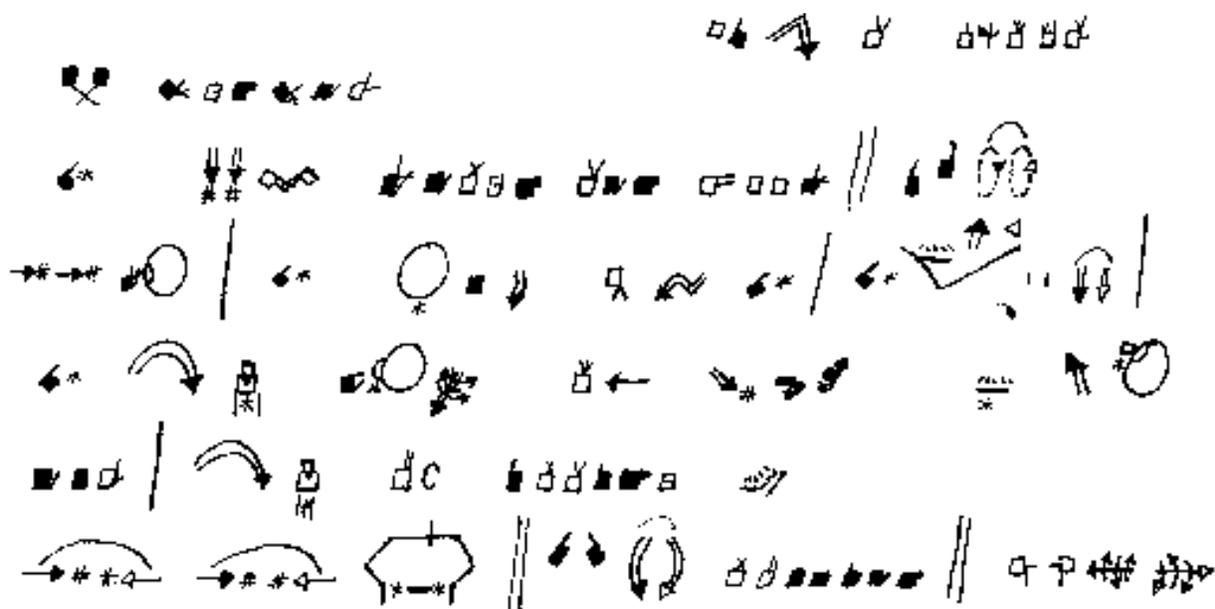
SignWriting Shorthand in the 1980's

SignWriting Shorthand was actually a stenography system, written on special stenography tables. It was written at the speed of movement, and required special training. Plans were made to establish a new profession called "Sign Language Stenography".
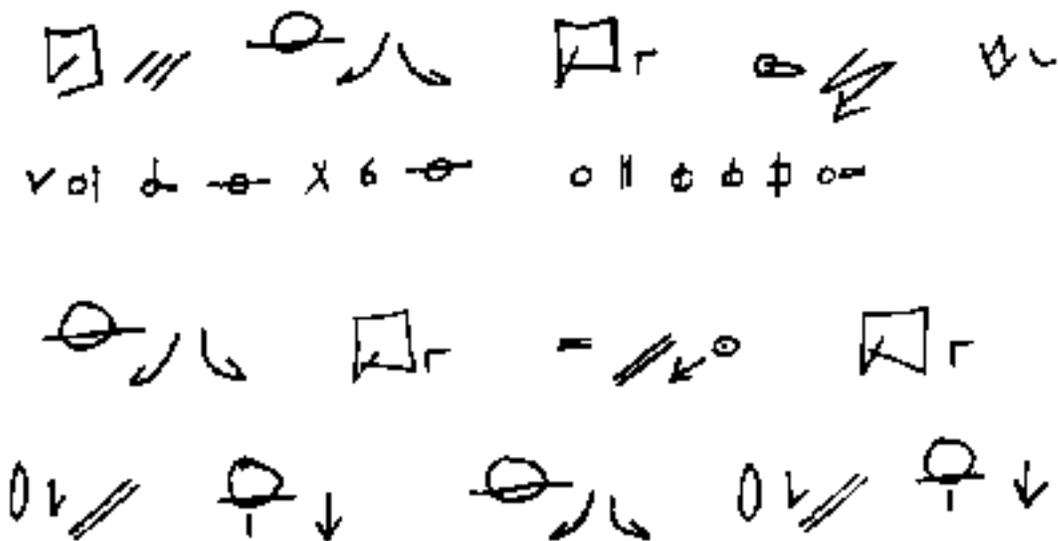
SignWriting 1986-1996
Writing Becomes Expressive and Stacked

Expressive Writing

The evolution to expressive writing began in 1984, when two Deaf staff members, Lucinda O'Grady Batch and Meriam Ina Schroeder, made it known that they wanted to write SignWriting expressively. Their feelings were so strong they could not be ignored. "After all", they both pointed out, "we are not demonstrating individual signs on videotape, we are expressing our own language from our own perspective. We see our own hands when we write, not someone else's." They were correct. But it was an adjustment, because every textbook and every document published in SignWriting for the preceding ten years had been written receptively. Imagine all of the work and money to change every book and every article written in SignWriting! It was truly overwhelming. The change took more than four years to complete. And yet, it was worth the decision to do it. What was really impressive was how quickly other countries agreed to the change, and updated their own textbooks. Denmark, for example, jumped at the chance to write expressively, and rewrote their textbooks immediately. The response was so strong in favor of expressive writing by skilled SignWriters that we have never regretted the switch.

Stacked Writing

The evolution to stacked writing began around 1986. It became clear that more and more Deaf people were choosing the Handwriting, but instead of writing the symbols in a line from left to right, they were naturally stacking the symbols to look like the human body. Facial expressions were placed on top, with the hands and movement symbols underneath. Stacking mimics the way signs look in real life. Dennis Schemenauer, a native signer and Deaf staff member, was a help on this issue. He expressed hope that we would make stacking symbols official, and I never forgot his advice.

Stacked SignWriting slowly started to evolve in the late 1980's. By 1990 it was the DAC's published standard, but the stacking was done only within signs. Each sign was written as a small stacked unit, and the units were then placed from left to right on the page.

Below is an example of Stacked SignWriting, written in 1991 by Deaf staff member Donald Baer. Notice that the signs are written expressively, from the writer's perspective. The hand symbols are positioned beneath the facial expressions, so that each sign is written as a small stacked unit.

SignWriting 1996-1997
Writing Goes South!

Vertical Writing

The evolution to vertical writing began around 1994. Deaf staff members –Lucinda O'Grady Batch, George 'Butch' Zein, Kathy Say, Bonita Ewan, and Kevin Clark – all expressed interest in writing down the page in columns. It was something we talked about, but I must give Lucinda Batch credit for expressing it to me on a regular basis. She gave me the necessary shove to take the courage and make it official. So in January 1997, I officially announced that we were switching over to writing vertically in all of our DAC publications.

Once again, I was amazed by how quickly others agreed to this change, and decided to adopt it. Antonio Carlos da Rocha Costa was the first to publish SignWriting written vertically, in the foreword to the Brazilian children's story "Uma Menina Chamada Kauana", which was posted on the SignWriting website in January 1997.

It was a major change to write vertically, and not everyone became used to it. Many groups continue to write from left to right, and that is fine – change cannot take place immediately. That is why it is called "evolution", not "revolution"!

For examples of vertical SignWriting, see the following children's stories in the library section of the SignWriting website:

Cinderella, Part One
Darline Clark, November 1997

Humpty Dumpty
Darline Clark and Dave Gunsauls
September 1997

Goldilocks and the Three Bears
Darline Clark, April 1997

SignWriting 1997-present
Handwriting Becomes Cursive

Cursive Writing

If you have wondered why there isn't a fast way to write by hand, you're not alone – it's a natural question. Computers have solved SignWriting's publishing issues. But what about hand-writing SignWriting for daily use?

In 1997 a new style of SignWriting, Cursive SignWriting, began to evolve. It stems from the old SignWriting Shorthand, which is slowly changing from a "stenography system" for professionals, into a "cursive handwriting" for daily use. Of course, just as with writing English, one must learn to "print block letters" before one learns to write cursively. So Cursive SignWriting will be useful mainly for skilled writers.

The following page shows an example of Cursive SignWriting.

minorities

Different Applications, Different Writing Choices

Even as the newer styles of SignWriting were developed, some people continued using the older styles. And that is fine! For all we know, the older ways of writing may be useful for generations to come. The clearest example of this is "Full-Body SignWriting", which continued to be used in Denmark, and made a comeback in Norway.

The example below shows the Full-Body SignWriting that was used in Denmark. This excerpt is taken from the Danish textbook "Tegnskrift" (by Karen Albertsen, Bente Sparrevohn, and Annegrethe Pedersen), which was published in 1989. As you can see, minor changes were made to the writing system. There is always a head on the stick figure, whether there is a facial expression or not. The shoulder line is a thin line, not a thick line. The stick figure is written from the expressive viewpoint.

MEN   IDE   ELASTISK
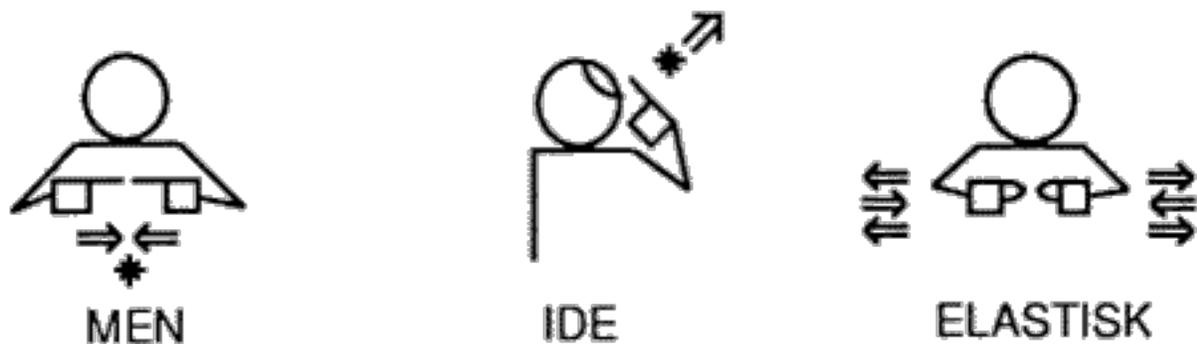
Generally it seems to be hearing educators who find the stick figure useful for beginning students, especially hearing parents of Deaf children. I understand that there are several groups of hearing parents learning SignWriting in Scandinavia. I have heard that both Denmark and Norway have such classes available. And apparently some of those groups prefer Full-Body SignWriting.

Interestingly enough, the American Deaf staff members of the DAC feel strongly that the stick figure is not necessary. Of course, they are Deaf adults who are skilled in SignWriting, a very rare group indeed. Most of the changes to SignWriting have originated from Deaf adults skilled in using it.

From my personal perspective, it feels good to know that SignWriting has been useful, no matter which style of writing is preferred. I feel quite excited each time I hear of a new application for SignWriting. I want to thank all of you for trying to write signs. I know experimenting can be frustrating at times. But your efforts are what have made the writing system improve.

1988-2004

SignWriting Software

February, 1988
SignWriter //, Version 1.0

Stand-alone application for Apple //e and //c computers.

SignWriter // was a a historic software application, because it was the first time SignWriting could be typed. It was a true word processor for signs, supporting automatic word wrap, Find and Replace, and other features. Considering the limited amount of computer memory available in those days, it typed signs surprisingly well.

The SignWriter keyboard design and packaging design were by Valerie Sutton. Richard Gleaves wrote the software manual, which was packaged in a folder with the floppy disks and keyboard cards. This was the forerunner to the SignWriter PC application.

SignWriter was designed and developed by Richard Gleaves, with programming contributions by Mark Allen.

May, 1988
SignBank I, for "Word-Sign" Dictionaries

Desk accessory for Apple Macintosh computers.

SignBank I created "word-sign" dictionaries, where signs written in SignWriting were looked up by typing in a word. The signs in SignBank I could be copied and pasted into other applications such as PageMaker, speeding up the composition of SignWriting text in digital publications. And SignBank dictionaries could be printed out in whole as hard-copy documents.

SignBank I was an excellent system for storing signs in a dictionary. However, it was not a true typing program like SignWriter. In SignBank the SignWriting symbols did not rotate or flop as entire symbols. Instead, to create a sign in SignBank you would type symbols into a Macintosh paint application, edit them manually pixel by pixel, then copy and paste the completed sign as a graphic image into the SignBank dictionary.

SignWriter ended up being used more than SignBank, because it edited signs at the symbol level rather than the pixel level, and because it provided the same, if not better, dictionary capabilities.

SignBank I was developed by Michael Ogawa as a Macintosh desk accessory. (Desk accessories were small programs which could run in parallel with other Macintosh applications.) SignBank I included SignWriting fonts created by Valerie Sutton.

November, 1988
SignBank II, for "Sign-Word" Dictionaries

Desk accessory for Apple Macintosh computers.

SignBank II was an experiment testing how a dictionary application could access and order signs by their SignWriting symbols instead of English words. Signs were entered into the dictionary with metadata specifying the sign's sort order in the dictionary.

To implement this, the SignWriting symbol categories were displayed in a series of boxes. Before a sign was pasted into the dictionary, the user had to specify what sequence of symbols to use when looking up the sign in the dictionary. The user would click on the symbols in the boxes to establish the symbol search sequence for the sign, and then paste the sign into the dictionary. SignBank II could then print the dictionary with the signs ordered by their SignWriting symbols, rather than by English words.

SignBank II was designed by Valerie Sutton, and developed by Michael Ogawa. It was an important program, since it helped everyone think through the various issues involved with sorting written signs.

Spring, 1989
SignWriter PC, **version 1.0**

DOS application for IBM PC and PC-compatible computers.

SignWriter PC was created by porting the existing SignWriter application from the Apple // to the IBM PC, and then adding features such as an expanded SignWriting symbol set, integrated sign dictionary, and support for multiple languages.

SignWriter PC was designed and developed by Richard Gleaves, with programming contributions by Barry Demchak.

1993, 1994, 1995
SignWriter PC, **version 4.3**

DOS application for IBM PC and PC-compatible computers.

SignWriter 4.3 supported the sign languages, fingerspelling, and spoken languages from fourteen countries. Command names appeared on the screen in one of eight spoken languages: Danish, English, French, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, or Swedish.

Fingerspelling keyboards and sign-language dictionary files were provided for fourteen countries: Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Nicaragua, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the USA. The USA sign dictionary included over 3000 ASL signs.

The SignWriter Dictionary Manager utility supported merging dictionary files, converting sign dictionaries to SignWriter text documents, and printing sign dictionaries in publication-quality format.

SignWriter PC supported Epson-compatible dot-matrix printers, Hewlett-Packard compatible inkjet or laser printers, and Postscript laser printers. It printed SignWriting documents on US letter or A4 paper.

The SignWriter PC package included five manuals, seven computer disks, and full technical support. Program package ISBN 0-914336-63-0. A shareware version of the package was downloadable from the SignWriting website.

SignWriter PC required an IBM PC-compatible computer with 640K bytes of internal memory; CGA, EGA, or VGA graphics; and two megabytes of disk space. It could also be used on a Macintosh with the SoftPC or Virtual PC software emulators.

SignWriter PC was designed and developed by Richard Gleaves, with programming contributions by Barry Demchak.

July, 1997
ColumnMaker Utility for SignWriter PC

DOS application for IBM PC and PC-compatible computers.

ColumnMaker was a utility which printed the contents of SignWriting documents as vertical writing. In SignWriter PC, documents always appeared onscreen as horizontal writing.

ColumnMaker was included as part of the regular SignWriter PC package. It was developed by Richard Gleaves.

August, 1997
SignWriter Java, Version 5.0

Cross-platform Java application.

SignWriter Java was a word processor for SignWriting. It featured a graphical user interface, integrated sign dictionary, and the ability to write documents onscreen using vertical columns of text.

SignWriter Java was compatible with documents created by SignWriter PC, and converted these documents to use the higher-resolution SignWriting Java symbols.

SignWriter Java was developed by Rich Kadel and his colleagues at DTAI, Inc. It worked on Macintosh, Windows, and Linux computers, and was distributed free of charge.

2002, 2004
SignBank, for "Sign-Word" and "Word-Sign" Dictionaries

Suite of applications for Macintosh and Windows computers.

SignBank was the name of a series of software applications which created sign dictionaries in SignWriting. SignBank 2002 and 2004 were developed as replacements for the original SignBank I and II applications.

SignBank 2002 provided users with the ability to look up signs by words, words by signs, or signs by symbols. It also supported multiple languages, and the creation of sign dictionaries with images, animation, and video as part of each dictionary entry.

SignBank 2004 included a new application named the Symbol Archive, which presented the complete symbol set for the International Movement Writing Alphabet (IMWA). This was the current SignWriting symbol set version at the time.

SignBank 2002 and 2004 were developed by Todd Duell as a set of FileMaker applications. The SignBank Viewer application was used by schoolchildren in the SignWriting Literacy Project.

2005-2018

SignWriter Symposium

The SignWriting Symposium was a conference organized by the Center for Sutton Movement Writing. In the six years it was held, the conference brought together 74 presenters from 16 countries to share their work with SignWriting. The presentations were in four categories – education, literature, software, and research – and the presenters were signers, teachers, researchers, and software developers.

The first conference was held in Brussels in 2005. The teachers and researchers who attended discussed ideas for Deaf education.

The second conference was held in 2014 as an online event, and live streamed on YouTube and Google Hangouts. Similar conferences were held in 2015 and 2016.

Online conferences were held in 2017 and 2018, but these were not live streamed. Instead, presenters created their presentations offline, and submitted them to the conference organizers (Valerie Sutton and Steve Slevinski) for publication online.

Each presentation from every year of the conference is archived in the Symposium section of the SignWriting website.

2004-present

SignPuddle Software, Unicode

2004
SignPuddle

Web application for laptop and desktop computers.

SignPuddle is a word processor for SignWriting. It supports drag-and-drop symbol editing, an integrated sign dictionary, and the sign languages of more than 40 countries. It is now the standard application for using SignWriting.

SignPuddle documents and dictionaries are stored in the cloud. They can be searched for specific signs and symbols, or exported from SignPuddle as PDF files.

SignPuddle supports the ISWA 2010 SignWriting alphabet, and uses a high-quality TrueType font for displaying the SignWriting symbols.

SignPuddle was developed by Stephen E. Slevinski Jr. It works on Windows, macOS, and Chrome OS computers. It can be used free of charge.

2006-2015
Unicode

SignWriting is the first writing system for sign language to be included in the Unicode standard for writing the languages of the world.

In 1999 the DAC and Irish National Body jointly submitted an application to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), requesting that the sign languages of the Deaf be included in the Unicode standard. The ISO approved this application in 2000.

In 2006 the SignWriting script was officially recognized as a world script by the ISO as Script ISO-15924, with script code "Sgnw".

In 2015 the Sutton SignWriting Block was added to version 8 of the Unicode standard.

Michael Everson and Stephen E. Slevinski Jr. played key roles in making SignWriting a part of the Unicode standard.