

# SignWriting

*Sign Languages Are Written Languages!*



## Part 1: SignWriting Basics

by  
Valerie Sutton

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Valerie Sutton

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First Edition

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**The SignWriting System was first  
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**This book is based on the  
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**SignWriting Lessons Online**  
<http://www.SignWriting.org/lessons>

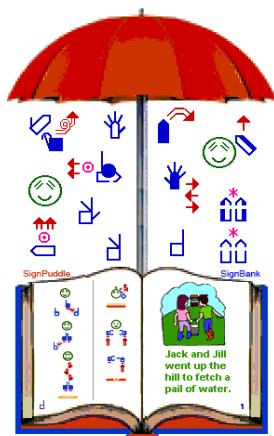
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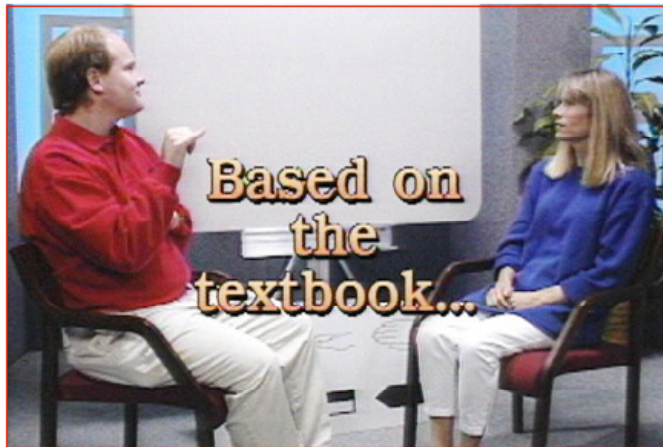
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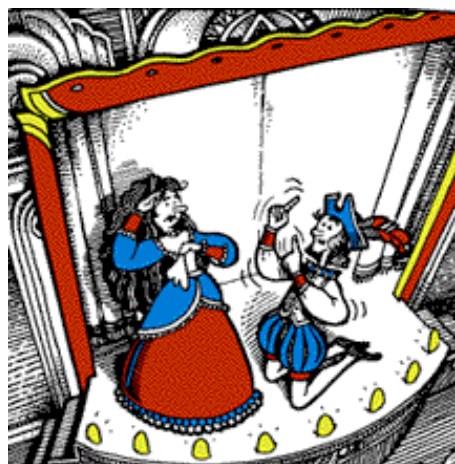
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**READ**  
Sign  
Language



**WRITE**  
Sign  
Language



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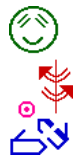




**LEARN**  
Sign  
Language



**TRANSCRIBE**  
Sign  
Language



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Language



**MEET Signers**  
Who Write  
Sign Language Too!

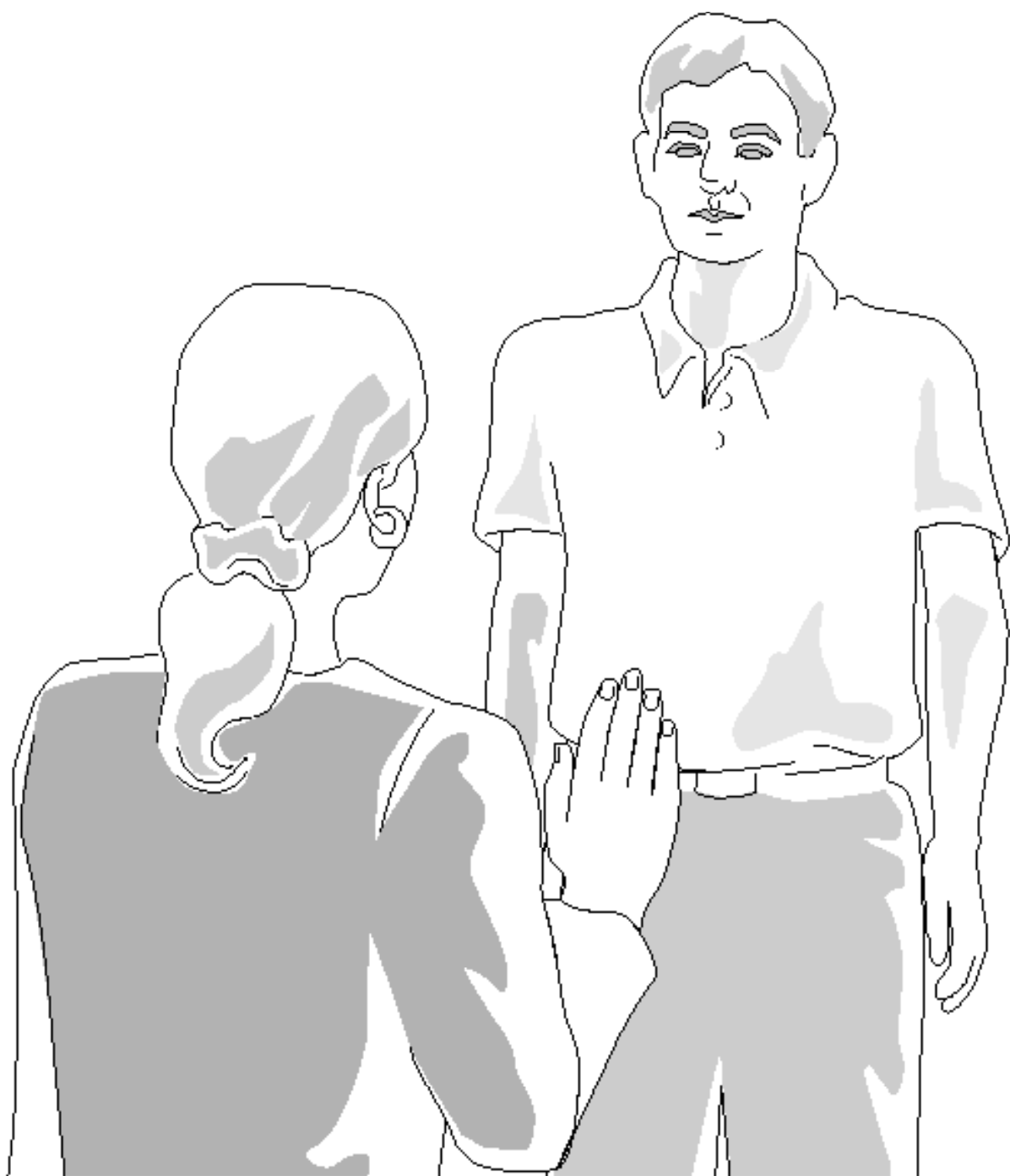
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## Receptive Viewpoint

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



## Expressive Viewpoint

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

## The Expressive Viewpoint

Read and write signs as if you are looking at your own hands, from your own perspective.

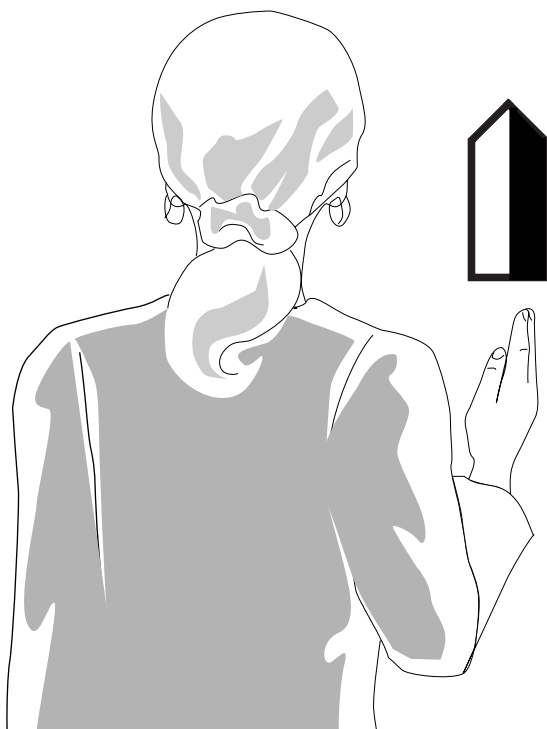


## Palm of Hand

When you see the palm of your hand, while you are signing, the symbol for the hand will be white, or hollow.

The palm of the hand is always written with a white, hollow symbol.

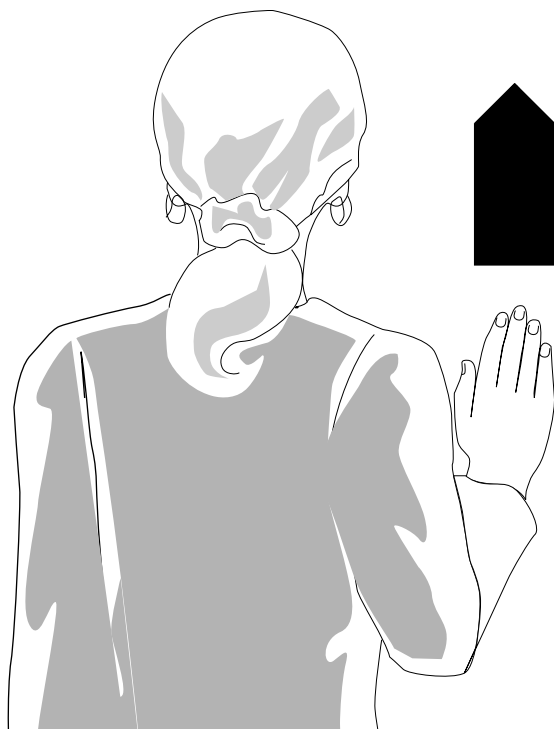




## Side of Hand

When you see the side of your hand while you are signing, the symbol for the hand will be half black and half white.

The white part of the symbol shows where the palm of the hand faces. The dark part represents the back of the hand.



## Back of Hand

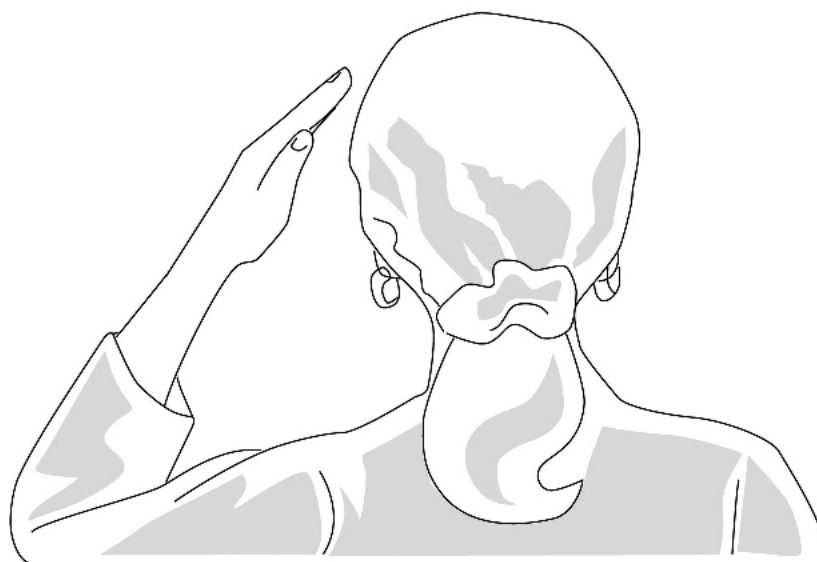
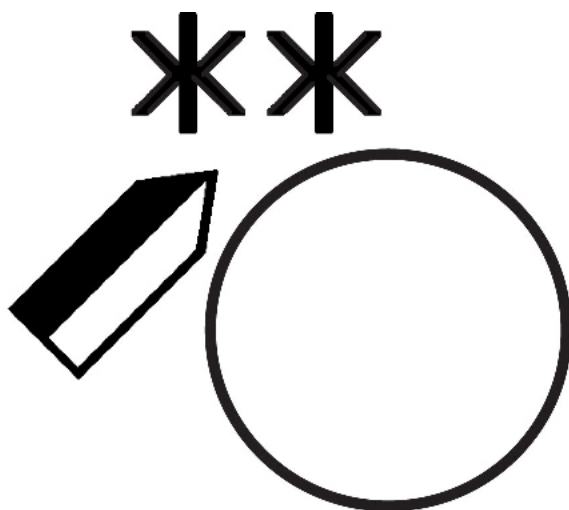
When you see the back of your hand while you are signing, the symbol will be black, or filled-in.

The back of the hand is always written with a black, filled-in symbol.



## Left Side of Head

The head is written with a circle, viewed from the back. When the left hand is near the left side of the head, the symbol for the hand is placed to the left:



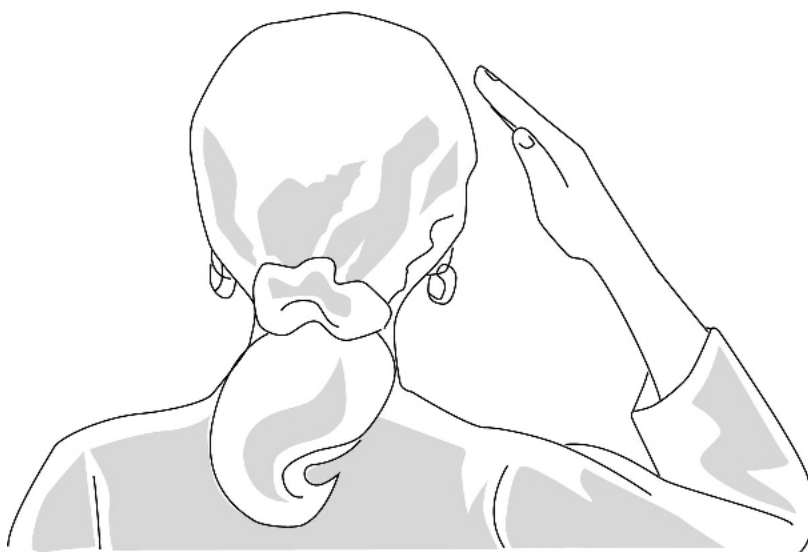
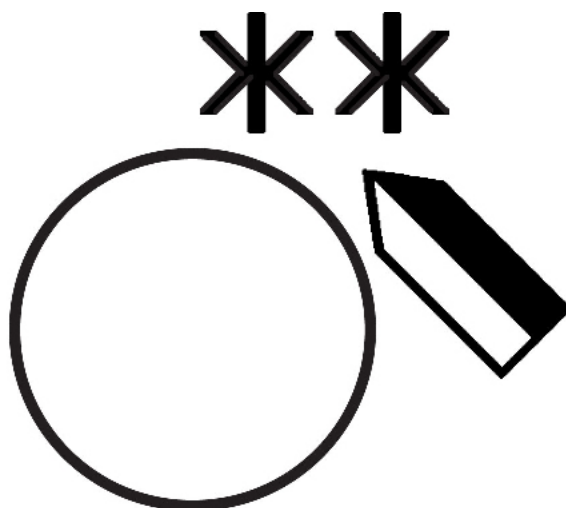
**know**  
(hand on the left side)

Note: An asterisk means **touch**.  
Two asterisks mean **touching two times**.



## Right Side of Head

The head is written with a circle, viewed from the back. When the right hand is near the right side of the head, the symbol for the hand is placed to the right:



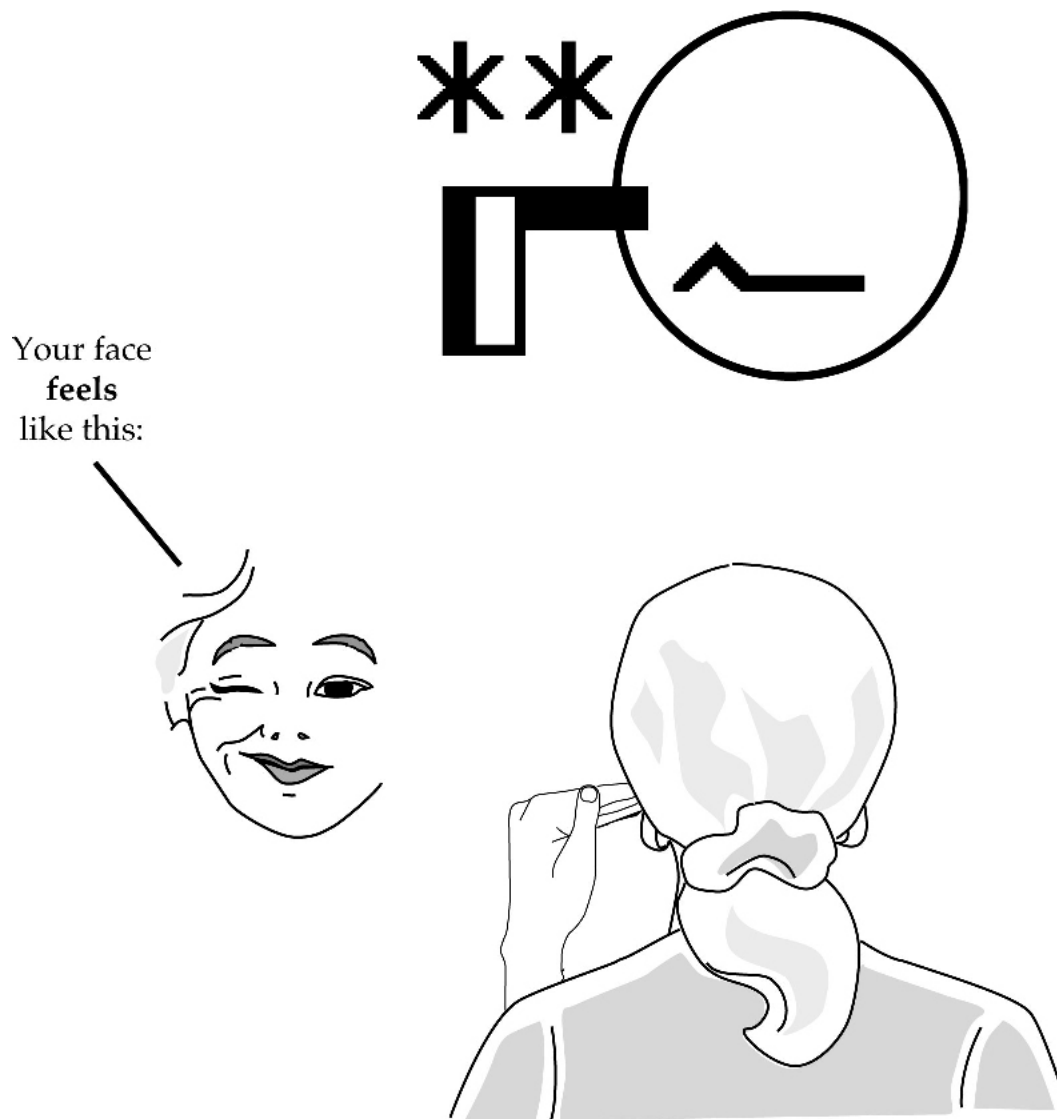
**know**

(hand on the right side)

Note: An asterisk means **touch**.  
Two asterisks mean **touching two times**.

## Left Side of Face

Pretend you can see through the back of the head.  
You are reading and writing how your face “**feels**” when you sign:

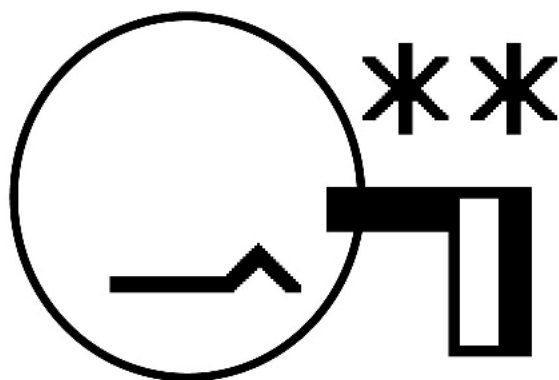


**know**

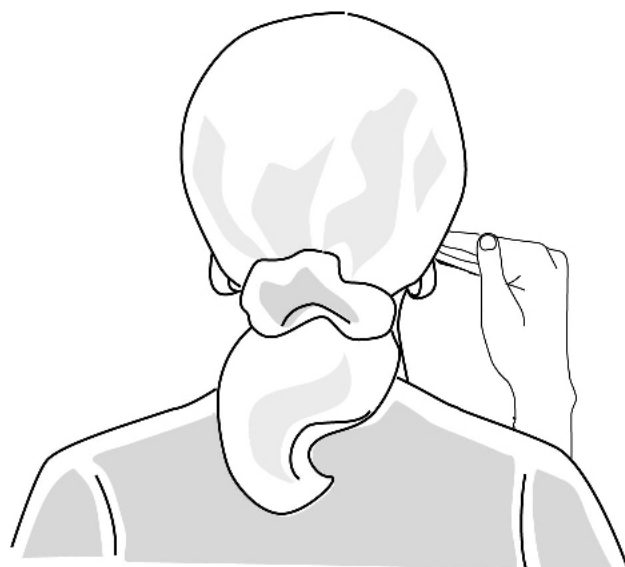
(mouth pushed up on left side)

## Right Side of Face

Pretend you can see through the back of the head.  
You are reading and writing how your face “**feels**” when you sign:



Your face  
**feels**  
like this:



**know**

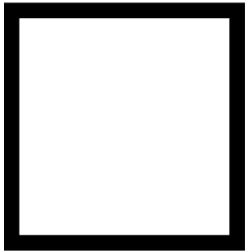
(mouth pushed up on right side)





### 3 Basic Handshapes

#### Closed Fist

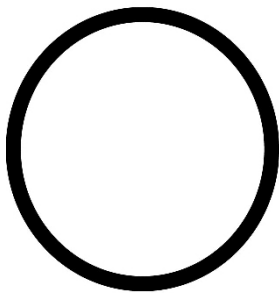


When the fingertips touch the palm of the hand, it is called a **Closed Fist**.

A **Closed Fist** is written with a square.

---

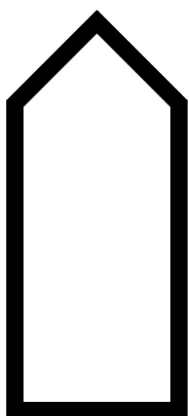
#### Open Fist



When the fingertips touch each other, it is called an **Open Fist**.

An **Open Fist** is written with a circle.

### 3 Basic Handshapes



#### Flat Hand

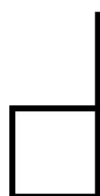
When the fingers stretch straight up, and touch each other, it is called a **Flat Hand**.

A **Flat Hand** is written with a rectangle, with a tip for the fingertips.

---

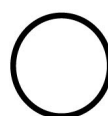
#### Closed Fist

Both the letter S and the number 1 in ASL are written with a square for the Closed Fist, since the fingertips touch the palm:



#### Open Fist

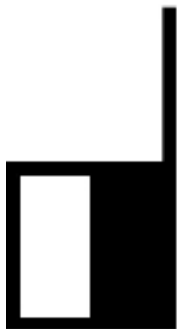
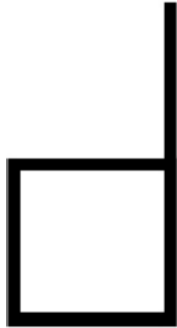
Both the letter O and the letter D in ASL are written with a circle for the Open Fist, since the fingertips touch each other:



# Palm Facing

## Front View

The hand is parallel with the front wall.

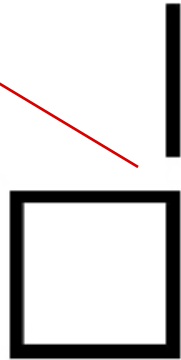


# Palm Facing

## Top View

The hand is parallel with the floor.

space at  
knuckle joint  
means hand  
is parallel  
to the floor



# Palm Facing

## Front View

The hand is parallel with the front wall.



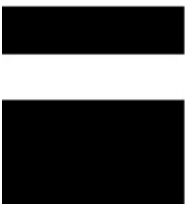
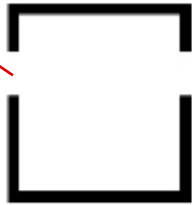


# Palm Facing

## Top View

The hand is parallel with the floor.

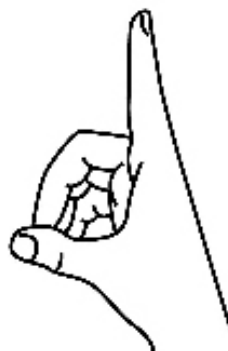
space at  
knuckle joint  
means hand  
is parallel  
to the floor



# Palm Facing

## Front View

The hand is parallel with the front wall.

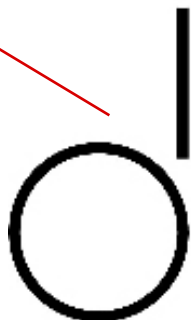


# Palm Facing

## Top View

The hand is parallel with the floor.

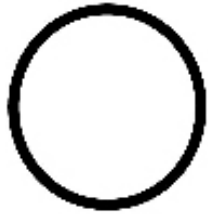
space at  
knuckle joint  
means hand  
is parallel  
to the floor



# Palm Facing

## Front View

The hand is parallel with the front wall.



# Palm Facing

## Top View

The hand is parallel with the floor.

space at  
knuckle joint  
means hand  
is parallel  
to the floor

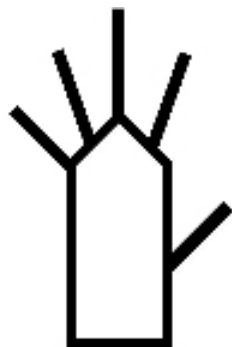




# Palm Facing

## Front View

The hand is parallel with the front wall.

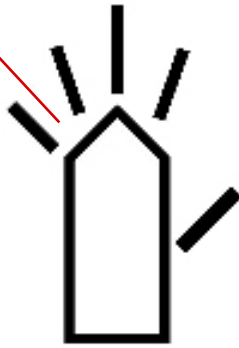


# Palm Facing

## Top View

The hand is parallel with the floor.

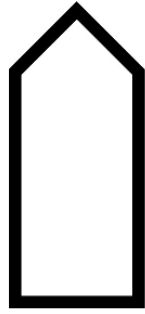
space at  
knuckle joint  
means hand  
is parallel  
to the floor



# Palm Facing

## Front View

The hand is parallel with the front wall.

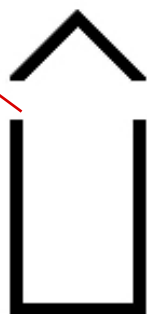


# Palm Facing

## Top View

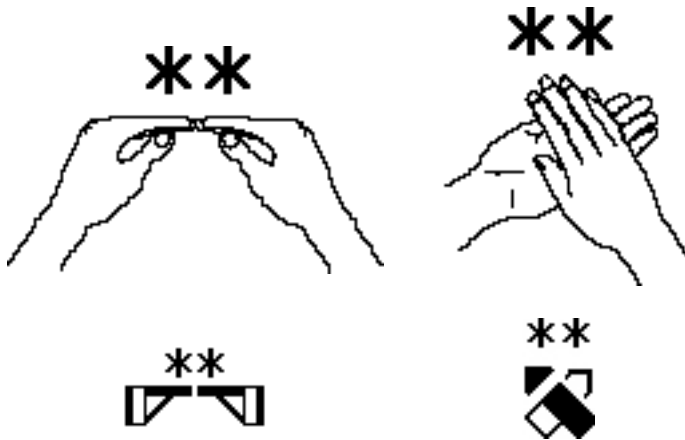
The hand is parallel with the floor.

space at  
knuckle joint  
means hand  
is parallel  
to the floor




## 6 Contact Symbols

*	1. Touch
+	2. Grasp
*	3. Between
#	4. Strike
⊙	5. Brush
@	6. Rub



more

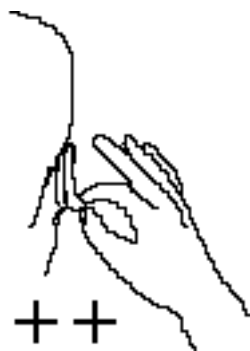
school

  
**Touch**

**Touch Contact** is written with an asterisk.

**Touch** is defined as the hand gently contacting another part of the body.





earring



congratulations

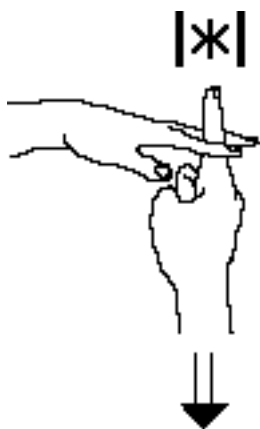


## +

### Grasp

**Grasp Contact** is written with two crossed lines.

Grasp is defined as the hand grasping or pinching a part of the body or a prop, such as clothing.



disappear



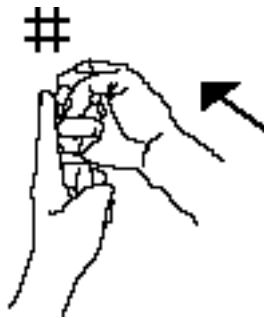
America

## |\*|

### Between

**Between Contact** is written with a Contact Symbol between two lines.

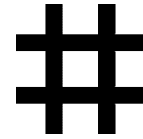
Between is defined as contacting between two fingers or other parts of the body.



hit



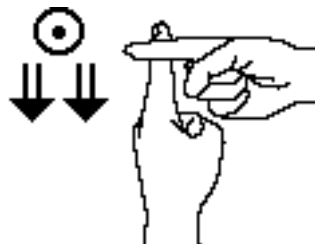
clap



## Strike

**Strike Contact** is written with two lines crossing two lines.

Strike is defined as the hand contacting a surface **with force**.



excuse me



monthly



## Brush

**Brush Contact** is written with a circle with a dark dot in the center.

Brush is defined as movement that first contacts and then **moves off** the surface.



## Circular Rub

**Circular Rub Contact** is written with a spiral.

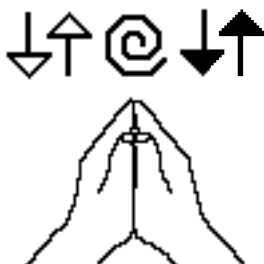
**Rub** is defined as contact that moves, but **stays on the surface**.



coffee



chocolate



## Straight Rub

**Straight Rub Contact** is written with the same spiral symbol, but the spiral symbol is **connected with a straight arrow**.

When the Rub Contact symbol is **connected with an arrow**, it rubs in a straight line (not in a circle). It stays on the surface but moves in the direction of the arrow.



neat



eager



## 6 Finger Symbols



1. Squeeze, Middle Joint Closes



2. Flick, Middle Joint Opens



3. Hinge, Knuckle Joint Closes



4. Hinge, Knuckle Joint Opens



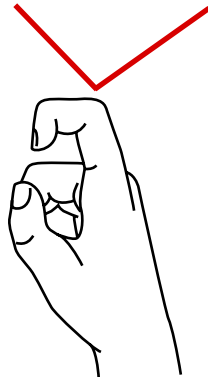
5. Hinge, Knuckles Open & Close Together



6. Trill, Knuckles Open-Close Alternating



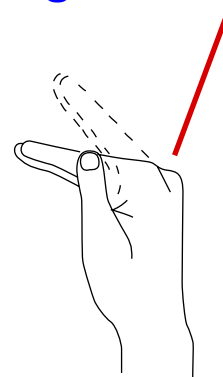
**Middle Joint  
Squeeze & Flick**



**Middle Joint** Finger Movements, also called Squeeze and Flick Movements, are written with small dots.



**Knuckle Joint  
Hinge & Trill**



**Knuckle Joint** Finger Movement, also called Hinge and Trill Movements, are written with small arrows.

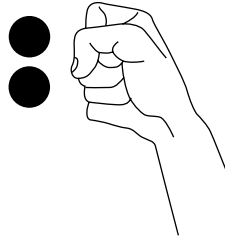


## Middle Joint

# Closes

When the middle joint of the finger squeezes tight (bends down or in), this **closing finger movement** is written with a **dark dot**.

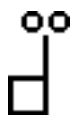
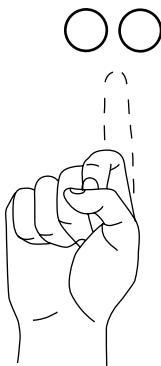
The dot is placed near the finger joint that does the squeezing. Two dots represent two squeezes..



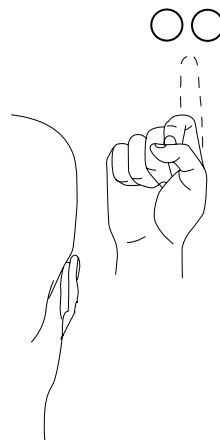
huh?



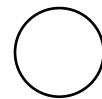
milk



eleven



understand



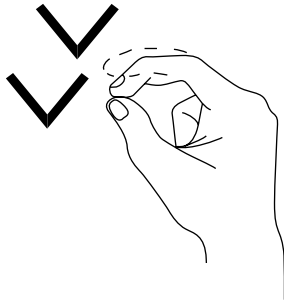
## Middle Joint

# Opens

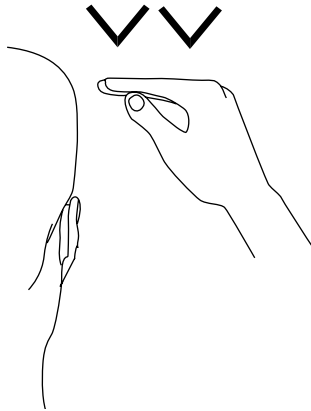
When the middle joint of the finger flicks open (goes from bent to straight), this **opening flicking movement** is written with a **hollow dot**.

The dot is placed near the finger that flicks. Two dots represent two flicks.





twenty



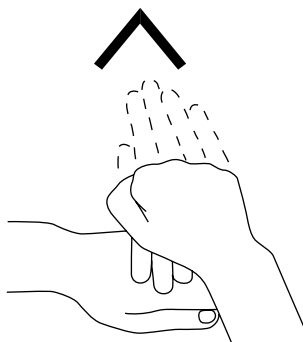
boy



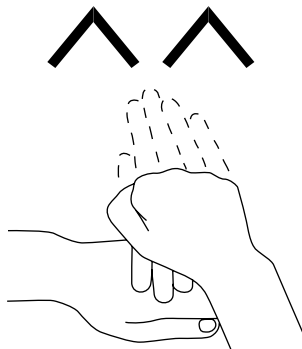
## Knuckle Joint

## Closes

The middle joint of the finger locks, while the knuckle joint bends down, like the Hinge on a door. This **closing knuckle movement** is written with a small arrow that points down. The arrow **pushes** the fingers down. Two arrows mean 2 hinges.



send



send-send



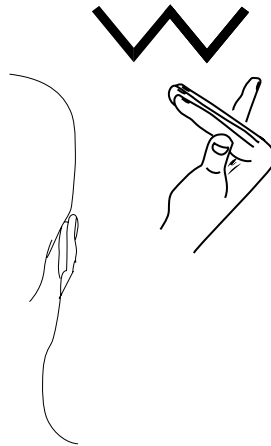
## Knuckle Joint

## Opens

The middle joint of the finger locks, while the knuckle joint bends up, like the Hinge on a door. This **opening knuckle movement** is written with a small arrow that points up. The arrow **pulls** the fingers up. Two arrows mean 2 hinges up.



goodbye



why



## Knuckle Joints Open-Close

The fingers move together in the same direction, as a unit. The knuckle-joints of the fingers open and close (bend up and down) together. This **open-close knuckle movement** is written with one row of small connected arrows pointing up and down.



fingerspell



typing

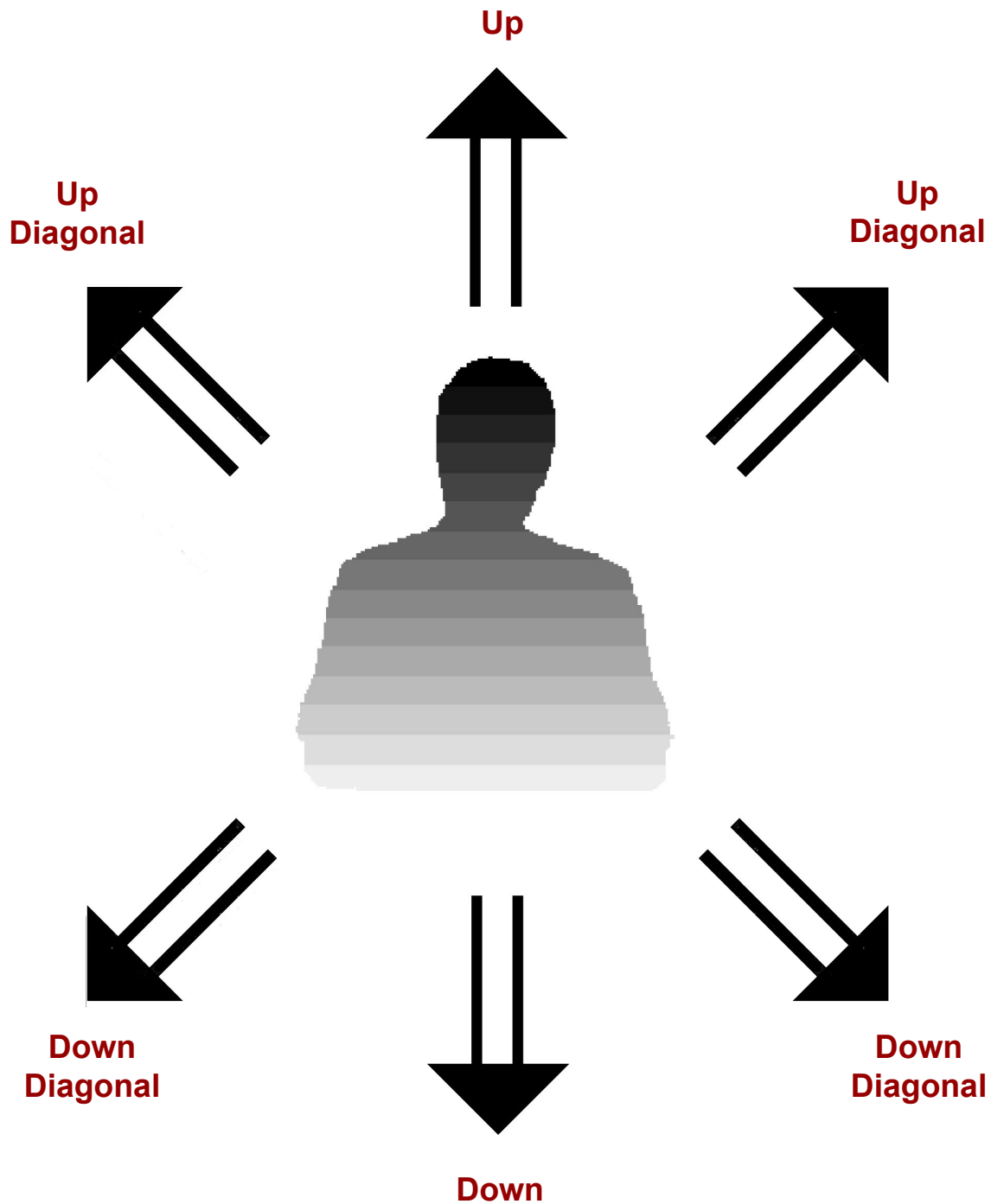


## Knuckle Joints Alternate

The fingers do not move together in a unit. Instead they hinge in opposite directions. One moves up, as the other moves down. This **Alternating Finger Movement**, also called **Finger Trills**, is written with two rows of small arrows pointing up and down.

# Up-Down Movement

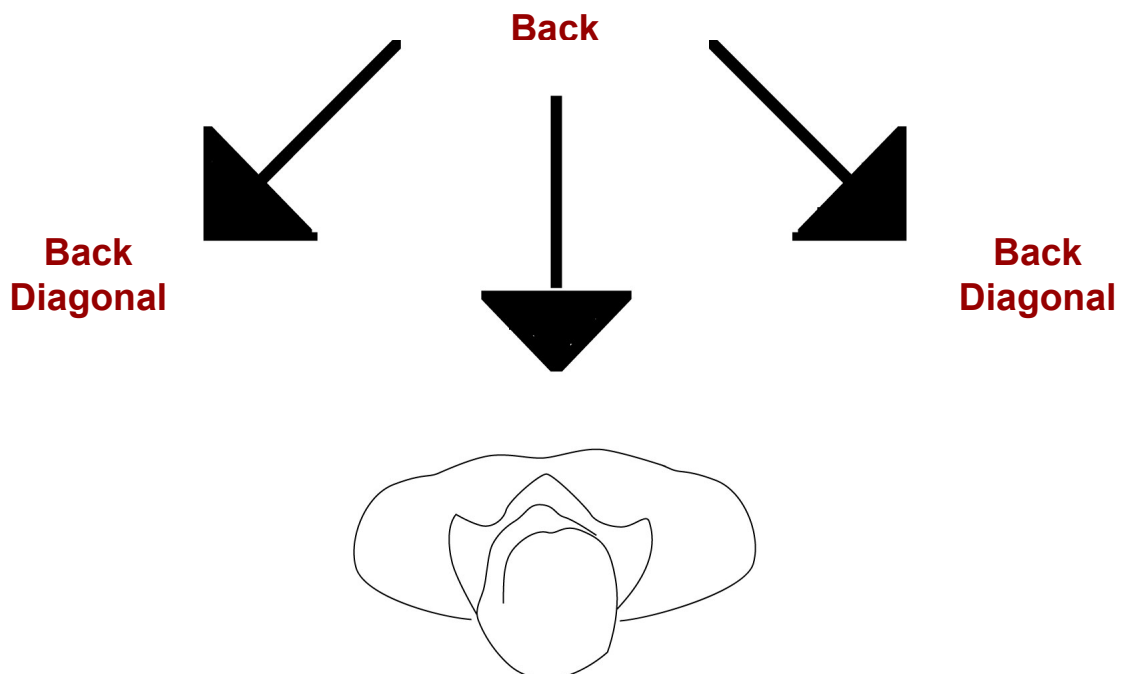
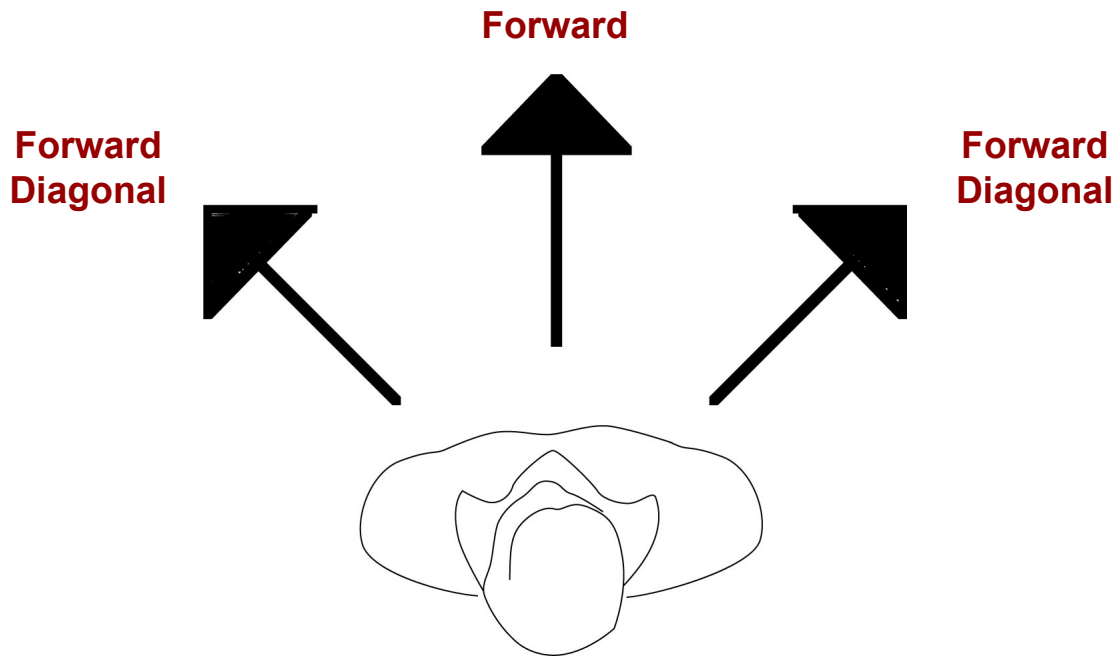
Up-Down Movement is parallel with the Front Wall or your chest.  
It is written with double-stemmed arrows:





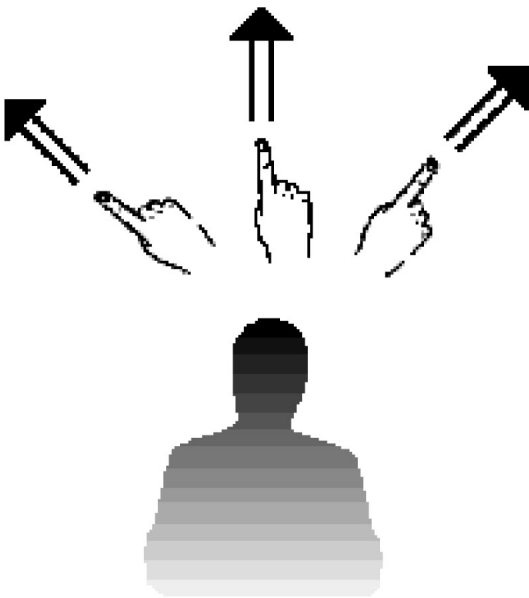
# Forward-Back Movement

Forward-Back Movement is parallel with the Floor or a table top.  
It is written with single-stemmed arrows:

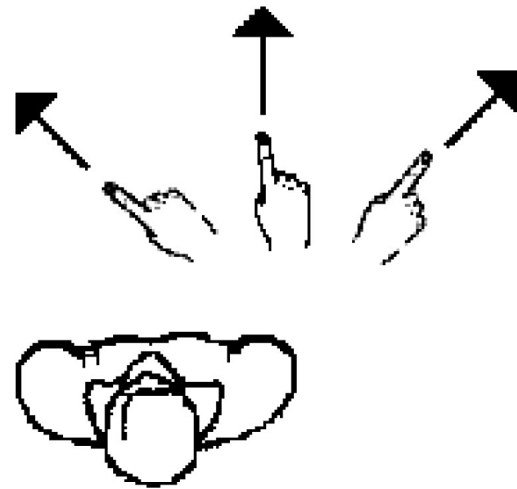


## Movement With The Right Hand

A dark arrowhead.



Front View

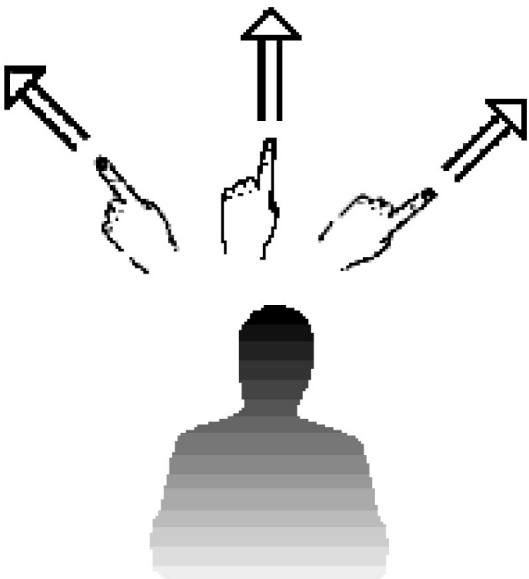


Top View

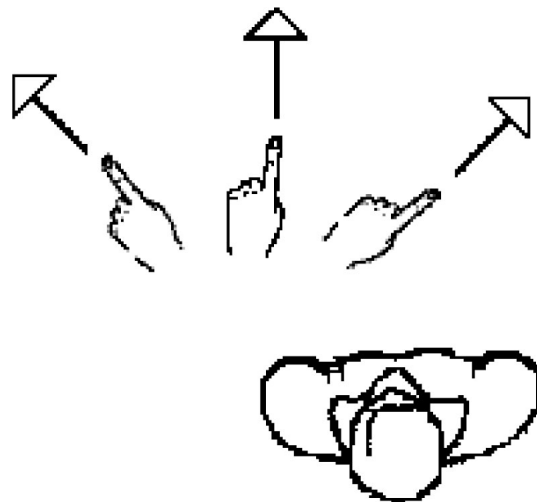
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## Movement With The Left Hand

A light arrowhead.



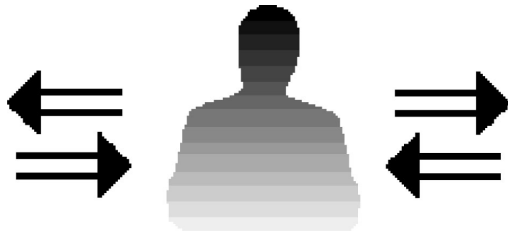
Front View



Top View

## Movement To The Side

Movement to the side can be viewed from either the Front View or the Top View. It can be written with either double-stemmed or single-stemmed arrows.



Front View



Top View

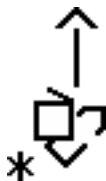
## General Arrowhead Writes Overlapping Paths

When a right movement arrow writes **ON TOP OF** a left movement arrow, the two movement paths **overlap each other**. The two arrows blend together. The dark arrowhead and the light arrowhead become one arrowhead, called the **General Arrowhead**.

Often the hands are contacting when moving in overlapping paths, but it is **NOT ONLY** for contacting hands. For example, two hands can be parallel, side by side, without contact, and then both move to the same side, so that the right arrow writes on top of the left arrow. This creates a **General Arrowhead**.



follow



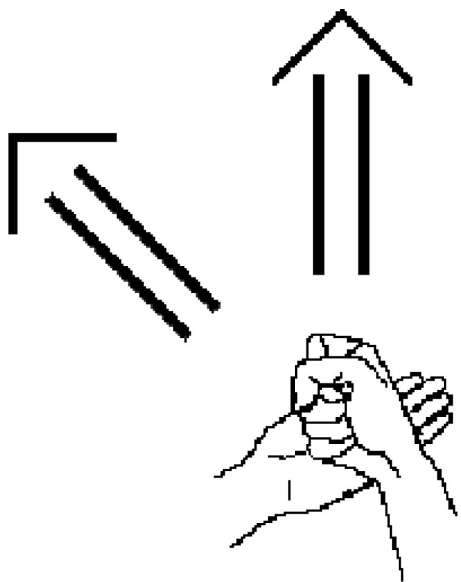
I help you.



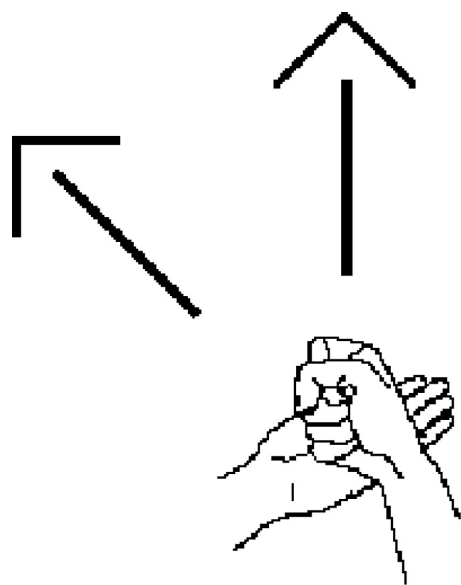
plan



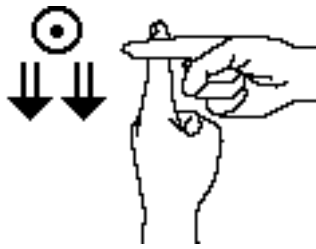
## Do not confuse these arrows:



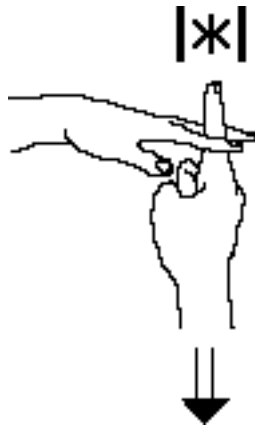
double  
stemmed  
arrows  
mean  
movement  
is **UP**



single  
stemmed arrows  
mean  
movement  
is **FORWARD**



monthly



disappear

## Straight Movement



## Up or Down

A double-stemmed arrow means that the movement is straight up or down, parallel with the front wall. The movement is flat with the front of your body.



excuse me



eager

## Straight Movement



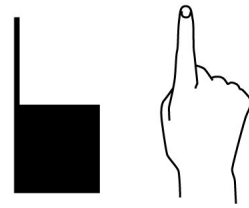
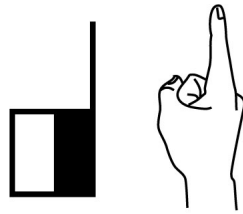
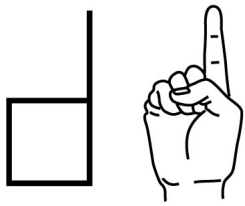
## Forward or Back

A single-stemmed arrow means that the movement is forward or back, parallel with the floor. You are looking down, on top of the movement.



## Front View

Hands parallel with the Front Wall.



one half



Deaf

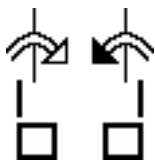
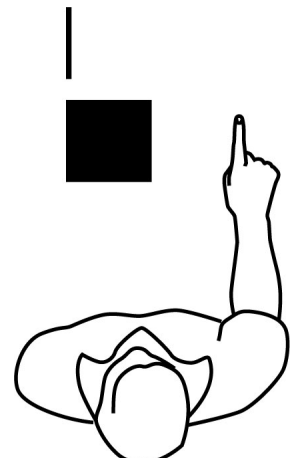
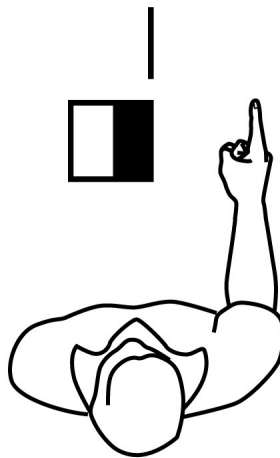
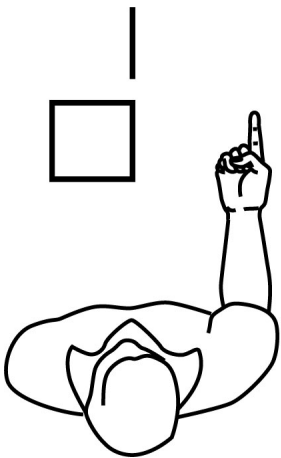


where

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## Top View

Hands parallel with the Floor.



happen



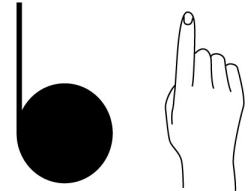
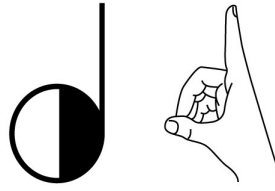
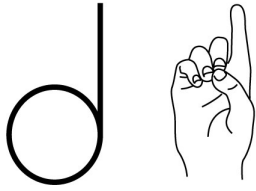
you



also

## Front View

Hands parallel with the Front Wall.



dinner



dating

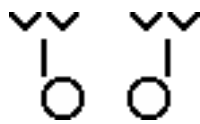
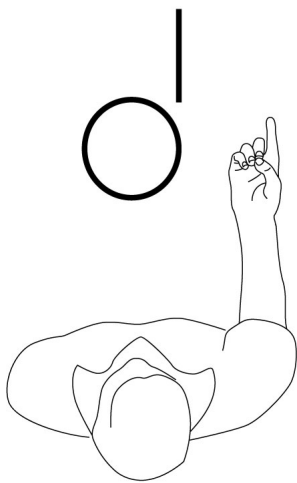


democracy

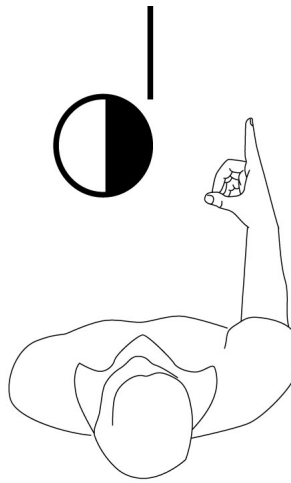
---

## Top View

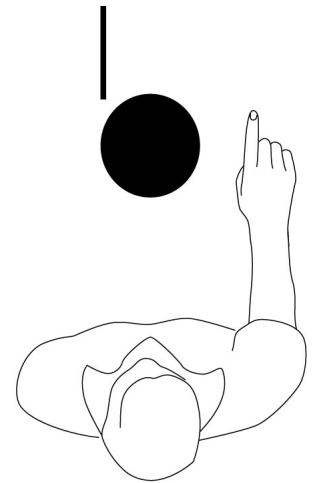
Hands parallel with the Floor.



do-do?



dessert

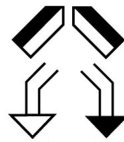
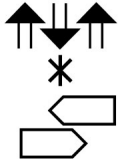
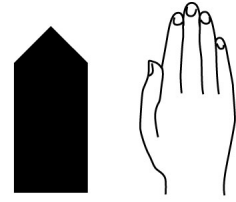
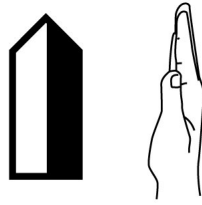
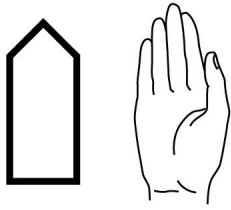


doctor



## Front View

Hands parallel with the Front Wall.



window

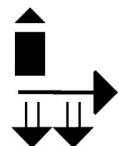
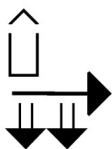
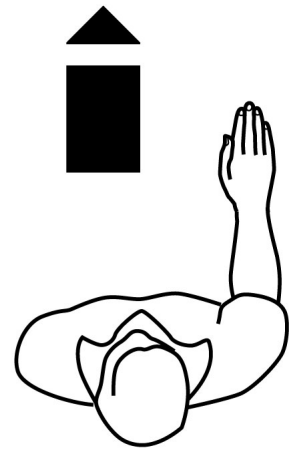
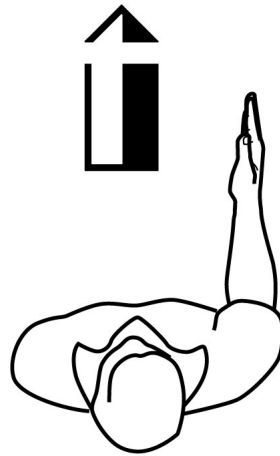
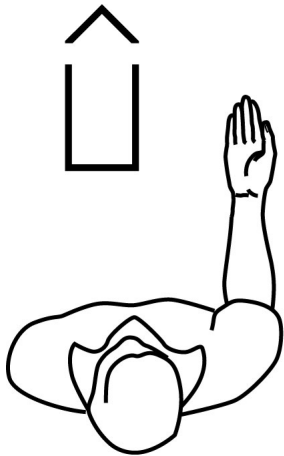
house

his, hers

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## Top View

Hands parallel with the Floor.

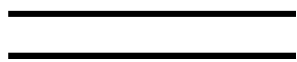
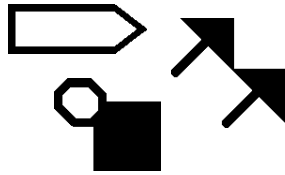


things

way, street

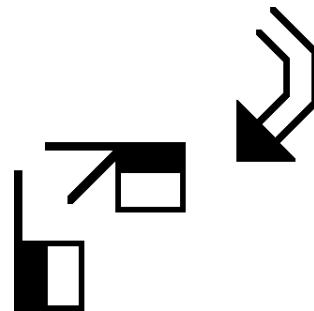
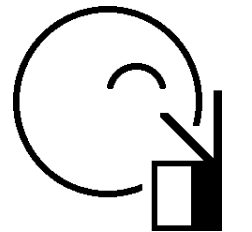
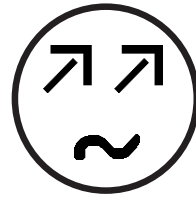
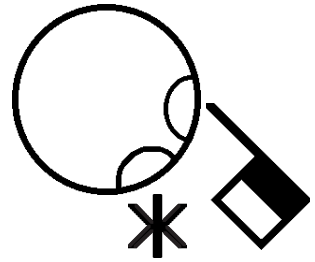
children





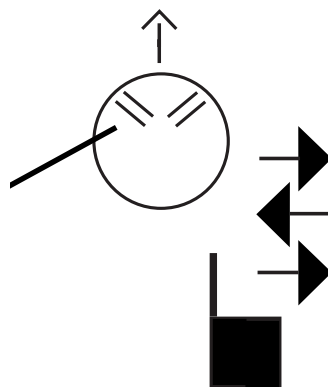
Pause,  
Comma

Period,  
End of  
Sentence



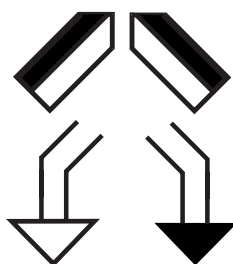
English Translation: Writing ASL from the Deaf perspective.

Eyebrows  
Down



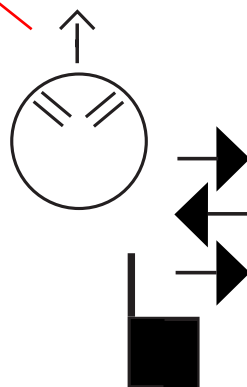
Where

Head  
Forward



house

Question  
Mark,  
Slight Pause  
at End of  
Sentence

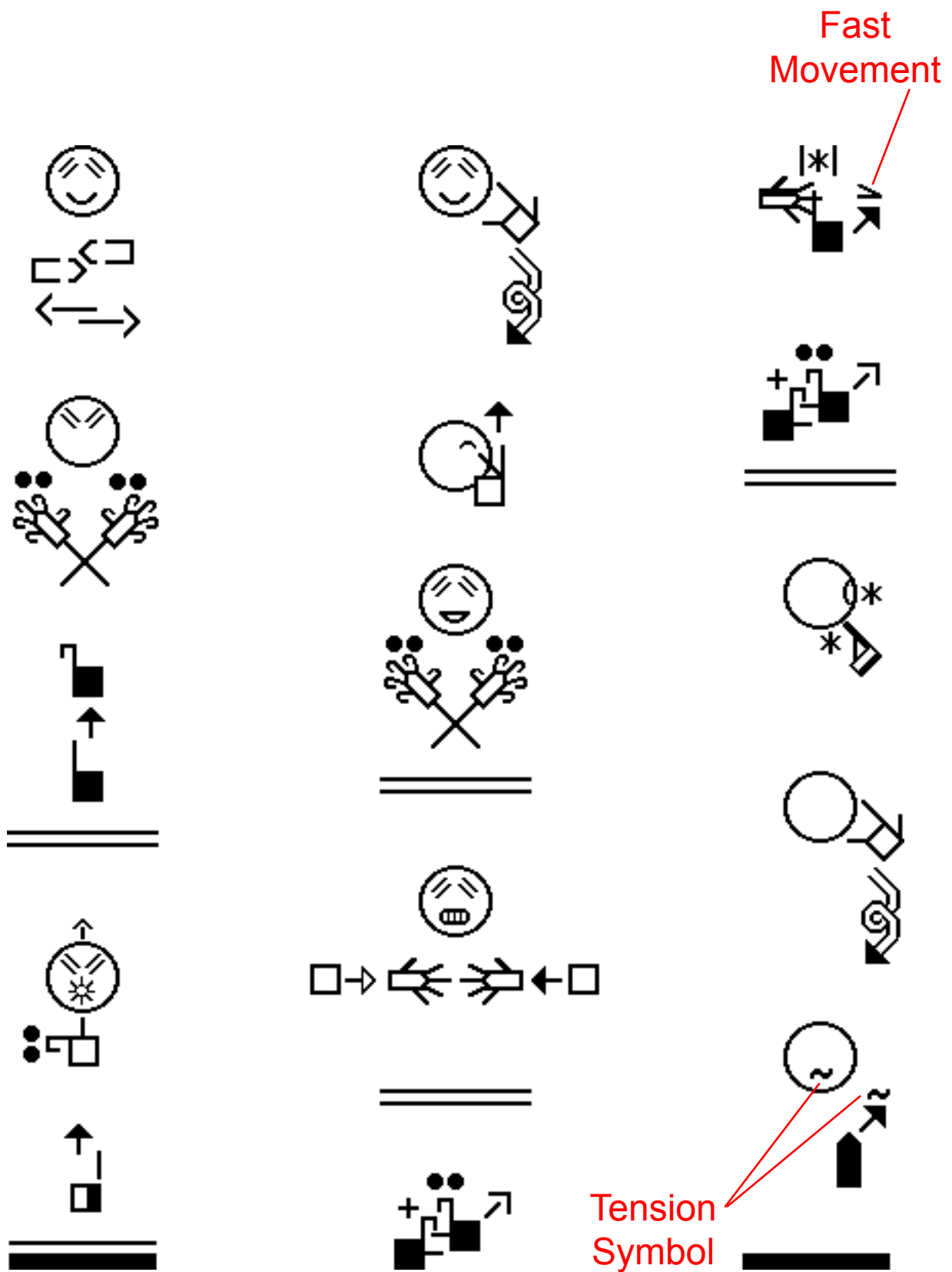


where



?

English Translation: Where is the house?

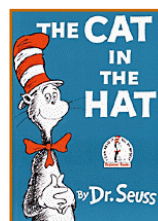


English Translation: Baby Bear asks "Who are you?"  
 Goldilocks saw the bears, became frightened,  
 shot out of the house, and ran all the way home.

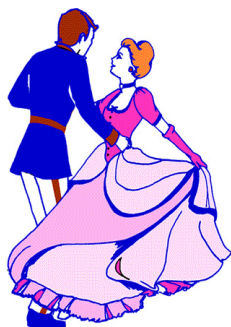




- 1 **Gospel According to John**  
in American Sign Language  
[www.SignWriting.org/library/bible](http://www.SignWriting.org/library/bible)



- 4 **Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss**  
in American Sign Language  
[www.SignWriting.org/library/children](http://www.SignWriting.org/library/children)



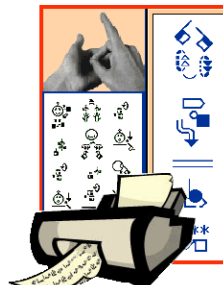
- 2 **Cinderella**  
in American Sign Language  
[www.SignWriting.org/library/children](http://www.SignWriting.org/library/children)



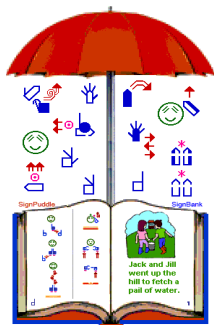
- 5 **SignPuddle Software**  
Write Documents in Any Sign Language  
[www.SignBank.org/signpuddle](http://www.SignBank.org/signpuddle)



- 3 **Sleeping Beauty**  
in American Sign Language  
[www.SignWriting.org/library/children](http://www.SignWriting.org/library/children)



- 6 **SignBank Software**  
Publishing Tool for All Sign Languages  
[www.SignBank.org/signbank.html](http://www.SignBank.org/signbank.html)



## A SignWriting Book

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