

# What is SignWriting?

[www.signwriting.org](http://www.signwriting.org)

# SignWriting is...

SignWriting is a writing system which uses **visual symbols** to represent the (**parameters of signs**, such as) *handshapes, orientations, locations, movements, and (non-manual signals like) facial expressions* of signed languages. It is an "alphabet" - a list of symbols used to write any signed language in the world.

The SignWriting alphabet can be compared to the alphabet we use to write English, the **Roman alphabet**. The Roman alphabet can be used to write many different spoken languages. While each language may add or subtract one or two symbols, the same basic symbols we use to write English are used to write Danish, German, French and Spanish. The Roman alphabet is international, but the languages it writes are not.

In the same way, the symbols in the SignWriting alphabet are international and can be used to write American Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Norwegian Sign Language, British Sign Language, Dutch Sign Language – (you can write) any signed language you choose.

SignWriting makes it possible to have books, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, and literature written in signs. It can be used to teach signs and signed language grammar to beginning signers, or it can be used to teach other subjects, such as math, history, or English to skilled signers.

# Definition of SignWriting Comprehension Questions

1. What are the **parameters** of signs that SignWriting is based upon?
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the **Roman alphabet**? Is it used only for English?
3. How many signed languages can SignWriting be applied to?
4. Name 5 uses of SignWriting.

# Why Was SignWriting Invented?

A message from Valerie Sutton...

People ask me why I have chosen to dedicate my life to developing a way to read and write signed languages, and it is hard to answer the question in two sentences! So instead, let me tell you my personal perspective, looking back....

In my youth, I was a dancer. I am an American who moved to Denmark at age 19, in 1970, to work with the Royal Danish Ballet. I developed a way to read and write all body movement called [Sutton Movement Writing](#). DanceWriting was the first part of the invention. SignWriting came second. I did not get involved with Sign Language because I wanted to work with deafness. I started to write Sign Language because I believe in preserving languages for future generations, and signed languages are beautiful languages that deserve to be preserved.

Just as I preserved the historic dance steps of the Royal Danish Ballet in [DanceWriting](#), I also began writing Danish signs, and even though I did not know what they meant at the time, Deaf people whom I met in Denmark could read the signs and they knew what they meant! I decided that I would dedicate my life to developing the written form for hundreds of "movement based" languages, adapting Sutton Movement Writing to fit the needs of each movement language.

# Why Was SignWriting Invented?

## Continued...

Where did I get such an idea? It all happened when I arrived alone in Denmark, a total stranger and new to the country. I did not know one word in Danish back then. I am now bilingual in Danish and English. Danish is my second language.

The experience of becoming bilingual as an adult had a profound effect on me. I loved learning to read and write Danish words. And I cannot imagine how it would be, if there was no way to read and write either of the languages I know.

That is why I believe so strongly in reading and writing all signed languages. Reading and writing makes it easier to learn other languages, it preserves the history and traditions of the culture, and it has a profound influence on the rest of the world. When a language is written, it places it on an equal footing with other written languages, which brings the language attention and respect. Through this process, those who use the language learn about their own culture. They see themselves in a new positive light. There are some who argue that signed languages do not need to be written! No language has to be written - but when we do, we all are richer for it.

# Why Was SignWriting Invented? Continued...

I used to take the bus a lot, at age 19, when I first moved to Copenhagen. I am glad, when I stood on the Danish bus, that there was a way for me to read the signs on the bus, which were written in both Danish and English. Years later, in 1984, I returned to Denmark because SignWriting was used in the [Danish school system](#), and I visited some classes of Deaf children learning to read and write Danish and Danish Sign Language. There, on the walls of the classroom, and in the hallways, were signs written in Danish and Danish Sign Language in SignWriting. It was a feeling of déjà vu, and a memory I will never forget!

Valerie Sutton

# Origins of SignWriting Comprehension Questions

1. What is the name of the inventor of SignWriting?
2. Was the inventor Deaf or hearing?
3. What type of writing did the inventor develop first?
4. How did SignWriting evolve from the inventor's original creation?