Learning British Sign Language
“I began learning British Sign Language (BSL) when I was 11, at lunchtime classes in school. My school had a unit for Deaf students, who were in some of my classes. I remember being completely mesmerised by sign language, and desperate to communicate with my Deaf peers.

I passed my BSL Level 1 just before my GCSEs, and continued learning at evening classes. I’ve recently finished my Level 6 language development course and I’m hoping to start my portfolio soon. This will enable me to study to become a qualified interpreter if I wish (I’m seriously considering it!).

My aim has always been to learn to communicate with Deaf BSL users, so I can learn about Deaf culture and Deaf humour. The Deaf community is so welcoming, and it’s great to share jokes that non-signers completely miss!

If you’re thinking of learning BSL, go for it! It’s definitely worth it.”

Clare Baars, London
You’ll find this leaflet helpful if you’re thinking about learning British Sign Language (BSL). We tell you how and where you can learn BSL, and provide some photos of basic signs to get you started!

Contents

- What is British Sign Language? ........................................ 4
- Who uses BSL? ............................................................ 4
- What is fingerspelling? ................................................ 5
- Are all sign languages the same? ................................. 5
- Where can I learn BSL? ............................................... 6
- What qualifications are available? ............................... 6
- Fingerspelling alphabet .............................................. 8
- Which basic signs are good to learn first? ...................... 9
- Where can I get more information and support? ............. 18
What is British Sign Language?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the most common form of sign language used in the UK. In March 2003, the UK government officially recognised BSL as a language in its own right.

BSL involves a combination of hand shapes and movements, lip patterns, facial expressions and shoulder movements. It has its own grammar and is structured in a completely different way to English.

In BSL, you start with the main subject or topic. After that, you refer to something about the topic.

For example: **English:** What is your name? **BSL:** Name – what?

Who uses BSL?

BSL is the language of the UK’s Deaf community, which has its own set of social beliefs, behaviours, art, history and values. Deaf people within the Deaf community describe themselves as ‘Deaf’ with a capital ‘D’ to express their pride in their Deaf identity.

BSL is the first language of both Deaf and hearing children who have Deaf parents whose first language is BSL. It is also used by D/deaf children who have hearing parents.
Based on the 2011 census, we estimate that there are at least 24,000 people across the UK who use sign language as their main language, although this is likely to be an underestimate.

Many people, including those with hearing loss, learn BSL as a second language. Some people learn for their personal interest or because they have a friend, relative or colleague who is Deaf. Others learn BSL because they wish to begin a career working with people who are Deaf.

What is fingerspelling?

Fingerspelling is the BSL alphabet (see page 8 for what this looks like). Certain words – usually names of people and places – are spelled out on fingers. However, fingerspelling alone isn’t sign language.

We produce free cards, bookmarks and posters showing the fingerspelling alphabet (sometimes called the manual alphabet). To find out more, and to order, contact our Information Line (see back page for contact details).

Are all sign languages the same?

No, sign languages are as varied as spoken languages. Different countries have their own unique sign language, but some sign languages do have a similar structure. BSL is only used in the UK.

In Northern Ireland, people who are Deaf like to use Irish Sign Language (ISL) and BSL.
Are there regional variations?

Yes, there are regional differences in sign language, just as there are different dialects of English. In different parts of the country, certain signs will have different meanings, and there will be different signs for one word. For example, there are 10–12 variations of ‘holiday’.

Where can I learn BSL?

As BSL is a 3D language, it’s very difficult to learn to sign from a book, website or video alone. These are useful resources if you want to remind yourself of signs, or practise at home, but the best way to learn BSL is to take a course taught by a qualified BSL tutor who is fluent in the language. Most BSL tutors are Deaf and hold a relevant teaching qualification. The courses will usually be part-time or evening classes.

You can find out where BSL courses are held in your area by contacting your local council – search online or look in your local phone directory for contact details.

What qualifications are available?

Qualifications in BSL are offered by nationally recognised and accredited awarding bodies such as Signature and the Institute of British Sign Language (iBSL).

If you’re new to BSL, the first qualification you can get is a Level 1 Award. This course is designed to give you a basic introduction to the vocabulary and structure of BSL. The duration of the course can vary, but the awarding body will set the minimum number of tuition hours that must be involved. There are three different units and you’ll be assessed after each one. The topics you’ll cover include meeting people, weather, numbers and directions.
You can then continue to Levels 2, 3, 4 and 6, if you wish. Level 6 is equivalent to a degree. Once you have achieved a minimum of Level 4 in BSL, you can start training to become an interpreter. You will only become a qualified sign language interpreter when you have achieved a minimum of a Level 6 BSL qualification and a Level 6 interpreting qualification.

To find out where you can study for these qualifications, contact our Information Line (see back page) or visit the following websites.

Signature: signature.org.uk/where-can-i-learn
iBSL: ibsl.org.uk/centres
Fingerspelling alphabet

A B C D E F
G H I J K L
M N O P Q R
S T U V W X
Y Z
Which basic signs are good to learn first?

**Everyday signs**

- **Hello**
- **Please**
- **Thank you**
- **Sorry**
- **Goodbye**
Questions

How are you?

Question

Ask (directional verb)

Who

What
Learning British Sign Language

**Good**

**Bad**

**Happy**

**Sad**

**Family**

**Husband/Wife**
Mother
Father
Brother
Sister

Food and drink

Sandwich
Fruit
Time

Morning

Night

Today
Tomorrow

Yesterday

Work

Work

Office
Textphone

Telephone

Email

Computer
Where can I get more information and support?

**Action on Hearing Loss** has a wide range of expert information on deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss, and what can help people take control: choosing hearing aids and products, learning to lipread, understanding their rights, and getting the right support.

You can find our leaflets and factsheets on our website at [actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets](http://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets) or order copies from our Information Line (see back page for contact details). Please let us know if you’d like our information in large print, Braille or audio.

You can also contact our **Information Line** or visit [actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://actiononhearingloss.org.uk) for free, reliable information, and to find out about: services in your area, becoming a member and receiving our magazine, the latest research developments, choosing the right products, and getting involved as a volunteer or supporter.

**Information you can trust**

The Information Standard certifies us as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. For a list of references for this leaflet, please email **references@hearingloss.org.uk**

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If you’d like to join our Readers’ Panel, to help us create new publications and improve our existing ones, please let us know.
Action on Hearing Loss Membership

Stay informed

Become a member today to receive regular, up-to-date information on deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss.

From as little as £12.50 a year, you’ll receive:

• Our quarterly magazine packed with expert tips, product reviews, inspiring real-life stories and research news.

• A comprehensive guide to deafness and tinnitus.

• 10% discount* on products from our online shop and catalogue.

• The opportunity to influence our future direction by voting in Trustee elections.

Join today:

• Call 020 7296 8264 (telephone) or 020 7296 8246 (textphone).

• Join online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/join

* Minimum spend is £40 excluding postage and packaging and VAT. Action on Hearing Loss reserves the right to change the promotion at any time.
Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID) is the largest UK charity helping people who are confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss.

We give support and care, develop technology and treatments, and campaign for equality. We rely on donations to continue our vital work.

To find out more, visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Questions about deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss?
Contact our free, confidential Information Line:

Telephone 0808 808 0123
Textphone 0808 808 9000
SMS 0780 000 0360
(standard text message rates apply)
Email information@hearingloss.org.uk

Join us

Action on Hearing Loss
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