



MAJOR FEATURE 1 FINGERSPELLING

KEY SKILL 1.1

Spell the word correctly

Description of the Skill

ASL uses a great deal of fingerspelling. In fact, research suggests that fingerspelling is used more extensively in ASL than in many other signed languages (Padden & Clark Gunsauls, 2003; Nicodemus et al., 2017). As a result, being able to accurately produce and understand fingerspelling is an integral part of ASL mastery. Fingerspelling is not produced randomly; rather, it is used in specific ways and for particular parts of speech. For example, fingerspelling is used most frequently for nouns (e.g., “Toyota,” “pizza,” “studio”), but also may be used to express the meaning of certain adjectives (e.g., “busy,” “dark,” “tight”), prepositions (e.g., “to,” “on,” “about”), and a few verbs (e.g., “try,” “do,” “miss”).

Correct spelling. Spelling words correctly is an important skill in interpreting work. All fingerspelled words should be spelled both correctly and completely. In order for a word or name to be fingerspelled correctly, all letters must be present. For example, when fingerspelling the English word “sidewalk,” the interpreter

must produce all of the letters S-I-D-E-W-A-L-K. When “Maria” is mentioned, her name must be fingerspelled correctly as M-A-R-I-A, not as M-A-R-I-E or as M-A-R-Y.

Omissions and additions. Some misspellings occur because of the omission or addition of letters. For example, if the source message is about securing a “patent” for a new invention, P-A-T-E-N-T must not be fingerspelled without the N (an omission), and it must not be fingerspelled with double letters such as T-T (an addition).

Omissions and additions may occur because an interpreter doesn’t know how to spell a word, is hurrying, or is not paying careful attention to the fingerspelling production. An occasional misspelling may occur when letters are omitted or added, but frequent omissions and inaccurate additions may indicate a specific error pattern and should be noted and addressed by the interpreter.

Possible Errors

- 1.1a Misspells words (e.g., fingerspells “Ukraine” incorrectly as U-C-R-A-I-N-E).
- 1.1b Omits letters (e.g., fingerspells “papaya” incompletely as P-A-P-Y-A, omitting the second A).
- 1.1c Adds letters (e.g., fingerspells “new” incorrectly as N-E-U-W, with an added U).

KEY SKILL 1.2

Fingerspell essential English terms that should be retained in the ASL interpretation

Description of the Skill

There are times when English terms must be retained precisely in ASL. For example, proper nouns (e.g., C-H-R-I-S, C-A-L-V-I-N K-L-E-I-N) must be fingerspelled unless, or until, agreed-upon signs exist. Jargon, that is, the specific language related to technical fields, professional fields, or specific groups that create insider “lingo,” often requires fingerspelling.

Fingerspell proper nouns. Proper nouns are the names of people, places, and things that are capitalized when written in English—such as “Barbara,” “Niagara Falls,” and “Tupperware.” Names of books and films such as *Gone With the Wind* and *Star Wars* are also proper nouns and therefore should be fingerspelled.

Fingerspelling vs. signs. Signs which exist for proper nouns should not be used to indicate someone or something entirely different that happens to have the same name. For example, the sign for MCDONALDS-RESTAURANT should not be used as a shortcut to refer to a person whose surname is McDonald; that is, “Juanita McDonald” should be fingerspelled in full.

Proper nouns can include regional variations; a particular sign used in one location may not be appropriate to use in another. For example, if interpreting in Canada, the name of the city of “Winnipeg” most often is signed, but if interpreting in the United States, “Winnipeg” probably would be fingerspelled, assuming the signing participant is not familiar with the signs for the names of Canadian cities.

Names of some towns are fingerspelled, especially the names of towns that are not large metropolitan cities, or not common to the context in which one is interpreting (e.g., M-A-R-Y-S-V-I-L-L-E, W-I-N-D-S-O-R). The city of “Lubbock” has a sign, but that sign may not be familiar to many people outside of Texas, so the interpreter should fingerspell L-U-B-B-O-C-K. However, there is a commonly used sign across the United States and Canada for “Texas,” so most often TEXAS is signed rather than fingerspelled.

When the source message contains two or more specific terms that are signed in exactly the same way in ASL, the terms must be fingerspelled, not signed. For example, the nouns FILE and FOLDER are often signed in exactly the same way. When these terms are used in an office environment and the speaking participant is describing the different ways to handle “files” and “folders,” fingerspelling is a common strategy used to distinguish between them until agreement is reached about how to differentiate between the sign’s two possible meanings.



Consider specific goals within each setting when determining when to use fingerspelling. Suppose that an interpreter is working with a Deaf ninth-grade student who has an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP states that one of the objectives over the next semester is for this student to increase his use of English idioms. In this case, one of the goals would be to include as many English idioms in the interpretation as possible so that the Deaf student can learn when and how they are used. Thus, as part of the student's education plan, the interpreter must fingerspell English idioms to retain the exact words that are used in the context, and then interpret the meaning in ASL. If, for example, the teacher says, "It is raining cats and dogs outside," the interpreter might include the sign QUOTE, then fingerspell the idiom, then provide the interpretation by signing *RAIN 'puffed cheeks' indicating "raining hard." The interpreter's goal is to produce a literal translation (R-A-I-N-I-N-G C-A-T-S A-N-D D-O-G-S) and convey an ASL interpretation (*RAIN) in order to provide the student with access to the English idiom and its meaning in order to support the student in achieving the IEP goal for that semester.



It is vital that all significant and/or unique information in the source message be retained in the interpretation. For example, in interpreting a discussion about "a new doctor at the hospital, Dr. Alex," the name of the doctor must be fingerspelled in the interpretation, and the sign DOCTOR must not be substituted for the doctor's full name. The title "Doctor" in this instance should be fingerspelled, D-R, in addition to fingerspelling the doctor's name, A-L-E-X.

In another example, a lecturer speaking about the most important element in writing a speech uses the phrase "A is for audience." The interpreter fingerspells both "A" and "audience"; if the signer

doesn't understand the fingerspelled English term "audience," then AUDIENCE would be signed as well. The phrase "A is for audience" reminds speechwriters that the audience is the most important thing to keep in mind when writing a speech. Because of the importance of the specific word "audience," the interpreter must fingerspell A-U-D-I-E-N-C-E to underscore its relationship with the letter A. In more typical circumstances, the sign AUDIENCE would be used to refer to a group of people taking a class, attending a presentation, or watching a sports event, and the word "audience" would not be fingerspelled.

Jargon. One aspect of the English language is the use of jargon. Jargon is a type of language that is used within a particular setting and in a specific context. This language is not likely understood by people who are not involved in these settings and contexts. Jargon is often associated with a particular trade or occupation, profession, or academic field. Other terms that are used to refer to various aspects of jargon are "shoptalk," "slang," and "buzzwords."


When jargon refers to key technical terminology, the terms are usually fingerspelled. Examples of jargon include military terms such as "iron rations" (rations used in emergency survival situations) and "pink mist" (a distinct effect created by certain types of gunshot wounds). In education, terms such as "portfolio" (evidence of what the student has learned in his course or program) and "pedagogy" (strategies or styles of instruction) typically are fingerspelled. Specific jargon should be fingerspelled unless signs have been agreed upon between the signing participant and the interpreter, preferably pre-assignment, or as the need arises during the interpretation.

Newly introduced English lexicon. English words that have been coined recently and are beginning to be infused into the popular lexicon also should be fingerspelled. Decades ago, terms such as "breakdancing," "computer," and "microwave" were new, and they were fingerspelled until signs representing these concepts became common and replaced the fingerspelling of these words. Relatively

new English lexicon and phrases such as “e-readers,” “bitcoins,” “Google,” and “imperial purple” have been around for a while, but in many cases it is still necessary to initially fingerspell these terms—or parts of these terms—to be sure that the precise message is interpreted without ambiguity.


Two-part English lexicon. A phenomenon that sometimes occurs in interpretations is splitting the interpretation of an English word, and especially an English compound word, into a combination of fingerspelling and signing; that is, part of the compound word is fingerspelled and the other part is signed (e.g., F-R-O-S-T BITE, as in “the dangers of frostbite”), or both parts of the compound word are signed (e.g., MAN HUNT, as in “a manhunt has been organized to find the suspected arsonist”). As a rule, however, English compound words—such as “frostbite” and “manhunt”—cannot be conveyed accurately with such combinations. “Frostbite” might be interpreted as F-R-O-S-T BITE (fingerspelling F-R-O-S-T, then signing the second part of the compound word, BITE), but this is an inaccurate ASL combination of fingerspelling and signing. The entire word should be fingerspelled, or the meaning of the word should be interpreted (e.g., SKIN FREEZE). Furthermore, the use of the sign BITE applies an incorrect semantic meaning in this context. The sign BITE means something or someone actually “biting” someone or something, which does not convey the meaning of a serious medical condition caused by severe cold.

“Manhunt” means a search/hunt for a person who could be a man, woman, or child. When interpreting the sentence “The next item on the agenda is the protocol for manhunts,” the entire English compound word “manhunt” must be fingerspelled, because the signed phrase MAN HUNT means “The man is hunting,” which, again, is a very different meaning from the English source message.



In most cases, fingerspelling one component of an English compound word and signing the other part is inaccurate. However, there are exceptions to the rule.

Some signed/spelled compounds in ASL commonly use a combination of fingerspelling and signs. These uses have been standardized in the language and must be learned by socializing within the Deaf community and/or through taking formal ASL courses. For example, the term “hardware” (referring to computers and their peripherals) sometimes is produced as HARD W-A-R-E. Likewise, “son-in-law” sometimes is signed S-O-N LAW. Other commonly used signed/spelled compounds are BLACK M-A-I-L, HOME L-E-S-S, and BLACK B-O-A-R-D.



Possible Errors

- 1.2a Omits terms (e.g., only points to the board members and does not fingerspell their names when they are first introduced, or fingerspells only some—not all—of the names, rather than fingerspelling the names of all the board members).
- 1.2b Signs terms that should be fingerspelled (e.g., signs CANADA AIRPLANE, rather than spelling the specific airline name, A-I-R C-A-N-A-D-A).
- 1.2c Signs English jargon that should be fingerspelled (e.g., signs SWORD for the meaning of “broadsword” a specific type of sword, rather than fingerspelling B-R-O-A-D-S-W-O-R-D).
- 1.2d Fingerspells a word for which a common sign exists after signing it, although doing so is not necessary to ensure clarity (e.g., signs PURPLE, then fingerspells P-U-R-P-L-E, rather than simply signing PURPLE, a common sign).
- 1.2e Combines fingerspelling and signing within words (e.g., signs COLOR and then fingerspells F-U-L, rather than signing COLORFUL).

KEY SKILL 1.3

Use acronyms and abbreviations accurately

Description of the Skill

Acronyms and abbreviations are used commonly in both English and in ASL due to their economy and convenience. In English, acronyms are pronounceable words that are formed by combining either the initial letters of a series of words or parts of words from a set phrase. For example, the acronym “SCUBA” is pronounced as a single word, formed from the initial letter of each word in the phrase “Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus.” Similarly, the name of a famous Swedish store—pronounced as one word, “IKEA”—is an acronym formed from the initial letter of each word in “Ingvar Kamprad Elmtaryd Agunnaryd,” a phrase combining the founder’s name, the farm where he was raised, and his hometown in Sweden.

In English, abbreviations are formed by combining letters to make a shorter version of words and phrases; in many cases these abbreviations are pronounced as individual letters, not as words. For example, “AC”—pronounced as two individual letters “A” “C”—is a common abbreviation for “air conditioning.” Also, “YWCA”—pronounced as four individual letters “Y” “W” “C” “A”—stands for “Young Women’s Christian Association.”

Follow ASL norms. Some acronyms and abbreviations in ASL are different from those in English. The interpreter should follow ASL norms, rather than how the acronym or abbreviation is pronounced or spelled in English. For example, the United States now uses standard two-letter abbreviations for the names of the states, but these conventional abbreviations are not always the same in ASL. In ASL, some state names are conveyed with signs—for example, NEW-YORK and CALIFORNIA. Other state names are abbreviated differently in ASL than in English. For example, Massachusetts is abbreviated MA in written English, but in ASL the fingerspelled abbreviation is M-A-S-S. Florida is abbreviated “FL” in English, but in ASL the fingerspelled abbreviation is F-L-A.


At times, interpreters may be influenced by how the acronym or abbreviation is pronounced in English. For example, in English, “GPA” (i.e., grade point average) is pronounced as individual letters, but in ASL it is commonly signed as a word, rather than as individual letters.

In some cases, acronyms are pronounced as words in English and fingerspelled as words in ASL. The regional acronym BART (“Bay Area Rapid Transit”) is pronounced as “BART” in English and is fingerspelled B-A-R-T in ASL. When interpreting for people from the San Francisco Bay area, fingerspelling the full name in place of using the acronym B-A-R-T would mark the name as something unique in the discourse. That is, fingerspelling B-A-Y A-R-E-A R-A-P-I-D T-R-A-N-S-I-T would suggest that the phrase is unique or special, and this would be inappropriate.


In some cases, ASL utilizes an acronym or abbreviation for words or phrases that are pronounced in full in English. For example, in ASL “air conditioning” is abbreviated as A-C, and “teaspoon” is abbreviated T-S-P. Fingerspelling the entire English word would be an error in these instances.

Another ASL norm for abbreviations is illustrated by the use of certain titles. For example, when the title “doctor” is used to identify a person’s professional title—as in “Dr. Lowenberg”—“doctor” is abbreviated and fingerspelled as D-R in ASL. It is important to note that this particular abbreviation, often referred to as lexicalized fingerspelling (see Lexicon Key Skill 3.3: Produce lexicalized fingerspelling, compounds, and noun-verb pairs accurately) is produced with a specific movement: the fingerspelling begins with production of the D-handshape facing the interpreter, and then twists outward on the production of the letter R. When producing a name, it is not correct to use the ASL sign DOCTOR, which is used only to mean a medical doctor in general, not a specific doctor. In addition, it is not correct to fingerspell D-O-C-T-O-R.

There are abbreviations in English in which the initial letter of each word is pronounced, as in “L” “O” “A” for “leave of absence”; this type of abbreviation can be fingerspelled in ASL either as a word (acronym) or as individual letters (abbreviation).



Generally speaking, acronyms and abbreviations are fingerspelled as words in ASL, regardless of how they are pronounced in English. For example, “SCUBA,” “IKEA,” “AC,” and “YWCA” typically are fingerspelled as words, not as individual letters.



In summary, interpreters should understand that ASL finger-spelling production of acronyms and abbreviations does not always follow English pronunciation or spelling conventions, and therefore interpreters must become familiar with the conventions of both languages.

Use ASL acronyms and abbreviations rather than fingerspelling entire phrases. Many acronyms and abbreviations can and should be used in ASL, even when they are not used in the English source language. For example, “software” often is fingerspelled using the abbreviation S-W. Likewise, in an accounting office, an interpreter may use A-R to abbreviate “accounts receivable” and A-P to convey “accounts payable.” When working in a specialized industry, interpreters must become familiar with the acronyms and abbreviations commonly used in that setting, and adhere to the preferences of the deaf individuals who work in that environment.

Learn and use acronyms and abbreviations that are used frequently within the Deaf community. Common acronyms within the Deaf community include those for the names of Deaf- and interpreter-related organizations and agencies such as A-A-D-B (American Association of the Deaf-Blind), C-O-D-A (Children of Deaf Adults), and W-F-D (World Federation of the Deaf). M-C is used to mean “Merry Christmas” in some regions. Abbreviations of the

names of large companies such as M-S (Microsoft), H-P (Hewlett-Packard), and F-B (Facebook) often are used in ASL. (It is interesting to note that, in English, the abbreviation “H” “P” is commonly used to refer to Hewlett-Packard, but “M” “S” is not typically used for “Microsoft.”)

People leaving an informal social gathering often express the phrase “Take care” in ASL as T-C. (Note: T-C can be used for “Good night” or “See you. Goodbye.”) In ASL, T-C means “take care,” but it typically is used among friends. Its use is informal and would not be appropriate in more formal circumstances—for example, when saying goodbye to a lawyer or closing a speech. The interpreter’s awareness of the situation and of the participants involved in the communication event supports the selection of a suitable choice for the interpretation.

If the signing participant has moved to town recently and is not familiar with the local signs, especially for popular landmarks in the area, the interpreter should avoid using local abbreviations or acronyms. After the first or second time that the interpreter signs or fingerspells the complete term, the abbreviation/acronym could then be produced to indicate the relationship between the signs/fingerspelling of the complete term and the abbreviation/acronym for that term. Once firmly established, the abbreviation/acronym can be used to refer to that term.

Distinguish between the formal and informal use of acronyms and abbreviations. Common acronyms and abbreviations in ASL are produced as fingerspelled words. It is only when the speaker is using the name or the acronym or abbreviation in a formal manner or context that the interpreter’s production utilizes individual letters instead of words to retain the formality in the communication event.

Acronyms and abbreviations are fingerspelled in several ways. One way when producing letters in ASL to form an acronym or an abbreviation is to add a short pause between individual letters, accompanied by a slight circular or left-right shaking movement. This deliberate production can convey a sense of extra clarity and formality. For example, speaking participants in formal settings


may use the full name of a university or an organization, such as the Canadian Association of the Deaf. However, it is unnecessary for the interpreter to fingerspell the organization's full name throughout a three-day conference. If the signing participant is familiar with this organization, the interpreter should form the acronym C-A-D with a pause between letters and small circular or left-right shaking motions accompanying each letter, indicating that the speaker is speaking in a formal manner or register. Once the formality has been indicated, it is not necessary to continue forming the acronym in this way.

In another example, in the sentence "This \$10,000 award is being given to the National Association of the Deaf," using the acronym N-A-D indicates that the abbreviation is commonly understood by the signing participants in the audience; incorporating the circular or shaking movements highlights the formality of the presentation.

By contrast, after a meeting about scheduling a Deaf presenter for an upcoming conference, a speaker might say, "It has been a pleasure to visit the office of the National Association of the Deaf." It would be correct in this situation for the interpreter to sign N-A-D with no special movements. However, in a situation in which the organization is unknown to the participants, the organization's name should be signed and/or fingerspelled in full.


When the speaking participant uses a formal register, the interpreter should use an equivalent ASL formal register:

1. The most formal interpretation would be to fingerspell or sign the entire name of an organization.
2. The next level of formality would be to fingerspell the letters in the organization's acronym or abbreviation, using either small circular or slight shaking movements. This option is used when the signers are familiar with the acronym/abbreviation.
3. The least formal method would be to fingerspell the acronym as if it were a common term.



The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf is abbreviated as “RID.” In spoken English, RID is referenced by pronouncing all three initials: “R” “I” “D.” The organization’s abbreviated name is not pronounced as the word “rid” (as in “Please get rid of the litter”). On occasion, people do pronounce “RID” as one word, as an acronym, but this is incorrect.

Although RID is pronounced in English as three separate letters, not as a word, it can be produced in ASL by fingerspelling R-I-D as a word if the signing participants are familiar with this national organization of interpreters in the United States. Further, RID can be signed in a formal manner by using small circular movements or small shaking movements for each letter.



Possible Errors

- 1.3a** Forms acronyms or abbreviations inaccurately (e.g., fingerspells C-A-D as three individual letters when interpreting regularly for members of the California Association of the Deaf, rather than fingerspelling C-A-D as a word).
- 1.3b** Does not use acronyms or abbreviations when they could and should be used (e.g., fingerspells the English word “database” in full, rather than using the common abbreviation D-B).
- 1.3c** Uses acronyms or abbreviations for terms or names spoken in initial remarks, which does not provide the signer equal access to specific terminology or names (e.g., fingerspells the abbreviation I-R-B, rather than fingerspelling the committee’s full name—“Institutional Review Board”—the first time it is mentioned in full).
- 1.3d** Makes no distinction between the formal and informal use of acronyms or abbreviations (e.g., fingerspells

N-M-C-D-H-H as a regular abbreviation in interpreting the announcement, “The ten-thousand-dollar award goes to the New Mexico Commission for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing,” rather than using a more formal approach by fingerspelling each letter with either a small shaking movement or a small circular movement).

KEY SKILL 1.4

Execute fingerspelling accurately to provide clarity and to indicate emphasis, importance, and uniqueness

Description of the Skill

Fingerspelling is used to provide clarity (e.g., distinguishing between A-I-R-P-L-A-N-E and A-I-R-L-I-N-E), and to indicate emphasis (e.g., N-O-T), importance (e.g., F-I-R-S-T), and uniqueness (e.g., T-R-I-P-L-E-T-S).

Fingerspelling provides clarity when there is potential for misunderstanding, as in instances where one sign closely resembles another. For example, in some regions, the sign RED◀BERRY can mean “strawberry,” “raspberry,” or “cherry.” Therefore, the use of this sign may lead to ambiguity, vagueness, and puzzlement in certain contexts. Fingerspelling S-T-R-A-W-B-E-R-R-Y makes it clear that the topic being discussed is a “strawberry dessert” rather than a “raspberry dessert” or a “cherry dessert.”

Emphasis is used to direct attention to specific words and phrases. In spoken English, emphasis can be conveyed by use of vocal intonation or volume, or by lengthening a word. In ASL, fingerspelling is one way to direct attention to specific information and to stress main points. For example, fingerspelling U-N followed by signing COMFORTABLE highlights the concept of a person being “not comfortable at all!” This also suggests that some type of change is needed, such as having a better chair at a workstation, or that the Deaf massage therapist needs to be aware of her client’s serious lack of comfort when the therapist massages her feet.

Fingerspelling can be used to indicate the relative importance of specific information being presented in an interpretation. For example, if the kitchen is the most important room to renovate for the best return on the dollar when reselling a house (compared to bathrooms and the basement), fingerspelling K-I-T-C-H-E-N may denote this significance. Fingerspelling also can be used to warn of hazards or to advise caution by adding importance to words such as H-O-T, P-O-I-S-O-N, or S-H-A-R-P.

Fingerspelling also can direct attention to the uniqueness of information that is being provided by the speaking participant. For example, when the speaker talks about the “unusual gold tones of the sunshine when the rays strike the gray horse,” fingerspelling G-O-L-D, rather than signing GOLD, can indicate the uniqueness of the color reflected on the horse.

Point to the fingerspelling hand. Pointing to the fingerspelled word with the opposite hand can increase clarity, or indicate emphasis, importance, or uniqueness. Pointing is often aimed at the wrist or the back of the hand.

Alter rhythm and/or cadence. When changes in the rhythm or cadence of fingerspelling are used to increase clarity, or indicate emphasis, importance, or uniqueness, the production looks noticeably different from the fingerspelling that occurs in other parts of the interpretation. The movements from one letter to the next may be made more emphatically, with greater articulation and precision, compared to typical fingerspelling production.

Pair fingerspelling with eye gaze. When fingerspelling is used in order to increase clarity, or indicate emphasis, importance, or uniqueness, the interpreter’s eye gaze is directed either toward the signing participant or to the interpreter’s own fingerspelling hand, signaling the need for attention to it. The eye gaze is most often directed toward the signer when the message is directed toward him.

Pair fingerspelling with signing. A common ASL grammatical structure involves pairing fingerspelled words with signs for the same words, for reasons of clarity, emphasis, importance, or uniqueness. For example, when signing SUN or MOON, the interpreter may choose to also fingerspell the word in order to provide clarity, because the signs can be confusing due to similarities in their production. This pairing strategy also may be used to emphasize an English word, or to indicate importance or uniqueness. Pairing signing and fingerspelling for these reasons—clarity, emphasis, importance, or uniqueness—is acceptable; however, this practice should not be overused or used without reason. Signing and then fingerspelling common nouns should be avoided. Occasionally the constant use of fingerspelling and signing, or signing and fingerspelling, becomes habitual in the interpreter’s effort to ensure that the message is coming across. This may occur when an interpreter has extra time to produce the interpretation and uses signing-then-fingerspelling as a filler. If signing and fingerspelling are paired for no apparent reason, the result is redundancy, which is considered an error.

Use techniques purposefully. Any means of directing attention to fingerspelling should be used purposefully. If these techniques are overused, they lose their significance; underusing them results in a loss of information related to the term’s significance.

Possible Errors

- 1.4a Points to the hand while fingerspelling when the reason for doing so is not clear (e.g., points with the non-dominant hand to the fingerspelling hand every time the name “Sheree” is fingerspelled, rather than limiting pointing to instances that are important, emphatic, or unique, or that require clarity).
- 1.4b Uses inaccurate rhythm or cadence (e.g., does not vary the rhythm and cadence from the interpreter’s typical fingerspelling, rather than using a rhythm that is sufficiently

different to characterize a stronger, more deliberate delivery, and thus increase clarity, or indicate emphasis, importance, or uniqueness).

- 1.4c Uses inaccurate eye gaze for clarity, emphasis, importance, or uniqueness (e.g., directs eye gaze toward the interpreter’s hand while every word is produced, rather than using this strategy only when terms in the interpretation must be delivered in a way that increases clarity or indicates emphasis, importance, or uniqueness).
- 1.4d Does not pair signs with fingerspelling when necessary for clarification or emphasis (e.g., signs COSTA RICA but does not fingerspell it when interpreting in a setting where COSTA RICA is not a commonly known sign), rather than signing and then fingerspelling COSTA RICA, C-O-S-T-A R-I-C-A, to be sure the interpretation is clear and can be understood easily).
- 1.4e Overuses fingerspelling for clarity, emphasis, importance, or uniqueness (e.g., produces B-U-T with an emphatic “punch” for each letter every time it is used, rather than limiting the emphasis to instances in which it is needed).
- 1.4f Underuses fingerspelling for clarity, emphasis, importance, or uniqueness (e.g., fingerspells all words without making any distinctions to indicate which words are important, rather than conveying varying levels of importance among terms in the source message by changing the way in which the fingerspelling is produced).

KEY SKILL 1.5

Articulate individual letters clearly

Description of the Skill

In clear fingerspelling, each individual letter is formed, and each movement is complete. There should be a clear distinction between each of the fingerspelled letters.

Form clear, individual letters. There are several acceptable ways to form individual letters. For example, the letter O can be formed with the thumb touching only the index finger, or the thumb touching all four fingers on the same hand. Whichever formation one uses, fingerspelling should be clearly articulated. The signing participant should not have to decipher whether the fingerspelled letter is an O or an E.

For a right-handed interpreter, Z is produced by drawing a Z in the air—just as one would see it when reading—beginning the articulation of the letter near the midline of her body, and completing it with a final movement ending on the right side of her body; the final movement should not be directed toward the midline of her body. A left-handed interpreter articulates Z in exactly the opposite manner, beginning at the midline of her body, but creating a backward representation—a mirror image—of the letter, with the final movement ending on the left side of her body.

Fingerspell in a physically relaxed manner. Fingerspelling should be a natural component of the interpretation. Movements from one letter to the next should be made easily. Letters should be formed without stress or strain. By contrast, forming E with the fingers bunched and a space between the thumb and other fingers is not common and can be damaging to an interpreter's hand and arm because of the excessive cramping caused by producing the letter E in this manner.

Produce double letters accurately. Fingerspelled double letters must be produced accurately. Double letters can be produced in at least three ways:

1. In fingerspelling the word “Will,” W-I-L-L, or “soon,” S-O-O-N, the interpreter maintains the L-handshape or the O-handshape while moving it slightly from the midline of the body to the side of the body to indicate a double letter.
2. In fingerspelling the word “Will,” W-I-L-L, or “soon,” S-O-O-N, the interpreter maintains the L-handshape or the O-handshape, while slightly bouncing the letter either in the same location or by moving it slightly away from the midline of the body.
3. The interpreter produces a very slight opening and closing of the A-, D-, E-, O-handshapes to indicate a double letter. This option cannot be used with letters that do not open and close—for example, L-, B-, Y-handshapes.

Avoid forming extra letters. Sometimes interpreters form additional letters when moving from one letter to the next. The interpreter may open her hand to a C-handshape when moving from the S-handshape to the A-handshape, rather than simply moving her thumb from the front of her fist to the side of her fist. For example, when spelling S-A-D, an interpreter might open and close her hand when moving from the fingerspelled S to the A, so that the fingerspelled word is S-C-A-D; in this example, no opening and closing of the hand should occur. No extra letters should be present.

Possible Errors

- 1.5a Fingerspells individual letters incorrectly or ambiguously (e.g., articulates the P-handshape with the palm facing forward so that it looks like a K, rather than producing the P-handshape palm down, correctly and clearly).
- 1.5b Fingerspells with fingers/hand that appear to be very tight (e.g., produces the fingerspelling in a tense, cramped manner, rather than with relaxed, smooth, and defined transitions between all letters).
- 1.5c Does not produce double letters accurately (e.g., produces only one M when fingerspelling “Jimmy,” rather than producing a clearly distinct M-M).

- 1.5d Introduces extra letters while fingerspelling when moving from one letter to the next (e.g., fingerspells “aspen” with the hand opening to the letter C when moving from A to S (A-C-S-P-E-N), rather than fingerspelling without producing additional letters).

KEY SKILL 1.6

Pause correctly within and between fingerspelled words

Description of the Skill

Fingerspelled words should move smoothly from one letter to the next with even pauses between each letter and with slightly longer pauses between fingerspelled words.

Pauses within words. Using equal pauses between all letters—including double letters such as B-B and T-T—is important. A person’s name, “Anne,” must be spelled with the production of each N requiring the same amount of time as the production of each of the rest of the letters. If N is produced as if it were only one letter, not two, then the person’s name becomes “Ane” instead of “Anne,” which can result in the wrong name being written on a check or the person’s name not being found on the hotel registry.

Pauses between words. The pauses between words should be slightly longer than those between letters. It should be clearly evident when one word ends and another word begins. For example, when fingerspelling a company’s name like “East Central Electric,” a pause slightly longer than that used between letters should occur after E-A-S-T and another after C-E-N-T-R-A-L. These slightly longer pauses should be of equal length. If these pauses are uneven in length, then it is difficult to determine where the words begin and end. It may appear to be two words, rather than three words. In addition, if no pauses are present, then run-on words and sentences occur.

Possible Errors

- 1.6a** Uses uneven pauses between letters (e.g., fingerspells F-R-A-N-pause K-L-I-N, rather than using a smooth rhythm with equal pauses when fingerspelling F-R-A-N-K-L-I-N).
- 1.6b** Does not pause between words (e.g., fingerspells M-E-R-Y-L-S-T-R-E-E-P with no pause, rather than with an appropriate pause between the first and second names: M-E-R-Y-L pause S-T-R-E-E-P).
- 1.6c** Uses uneven pauses between words (e.g., fingerspells T-H-E long pause H-I-T-C-H short pause H-I-K-E-R-S short pause G-U-I-D-E pause T-O pause T-H-E long pause G-A-L-A-X-Y, rather than fingerspelling the title of the book with pauses of equal length between all the words).

KEY SKILL 1.7

Fingerspell words at an understandable pace

Description of the Skill

In general, fingerspelling is produced at an even rate of speed. Fingerspelling should be produced at a pace that allows the signing participant to understand it easily, and that accommodates the context, the participants, and the purpose of the communication event. When the speed of production changes, it should occur for a particular reason, not haphazardly.

Rapid fingerspelling is acceptable if the word is commonly fingerspelled in the context and for the specific signing participants in a particular interpretation event. If novel information—such as “TD Monnex” (an insurance company) or “myopia” (nearsightedness)—is fingerspelled at the same rate used for familiar and commonly used words—such as “Sharon” and “hotel”—this would be considered too fast. Fingerspelling at a rate that is much slower and more careful than necessary, especially for common words such as CAR or BILL, is considered an error; it can

create the impression that either the interpreter or the speaker is being patronizing.

It is common—and accurate—to fingerspell at a careful and slower-than-normal rate in order to ensure clarity, or to indicate emphasis, importance, or uniqueness (as discussed earlier, in Key Skill 1.4: Execute fingerspelling accurately to provide clarity and to indicate emphasis, importance, and uniqueness). Regardless of the rate of speed the interpreter uses, the fingerspelling must be comprehensible to the signing participant.

Possible Errors

- 1.7a Fingerspells too rapidly (e.g., fingerspells uncommon names and unique spellings—such as “Martie” and “Lynda”—at a regular pace, rather than slowing down slightly and fingerspelling carefully to communicate the unique spelling of the names).
- 1.7b Fingerspells too slowly and carefully (e.g., fingerspells at a slow pace even when the word is a common name like “Jose,” rather than fingerspelling at a regular speed).

KEY SKILL 1.8

Accompany fingerspelling with appropriate mouthing

Description of the Skill

Mouthing often co-occurs with fingerspelling, but not always. When mouthing is used, the English words being fingerspelled should be mouthed simultaneously. For example, while fingerspelling F-O-R-D, the interpreter mouths the word “Ford.” It is important to produce natural mouth movements, without exaggerating them.

Pair mouthing with fingerspelling. Mouthing is often present with fingerspelling. The mouthing should occur at the same time as the word is fingerspelled. Mouthing should not occur before or after


the fingerspelled word. If proper names—such as “Erica Hope” or “Eva Rose”—are fingerspelled, the names are mouthed at the same time that the fingerspelled words are produced. The same is true for titles of books and films, brand names, and company names. In addition, the fingerspelling should occur in neutral space in front of or slightly to the side of the shoulder area. The fingerspelled hand should not be up near the mouth.

Mouth whole words while fingerspelling. When mouthing is present with fingerspelling, the full word should be mouthed rather than individual letters. Mouthing individual letters is not appropriate. The exception is when letters themselves are spoken, as occurs when spelling a name (e.g., when interpreting “Her name is spelled “J” “A” “Q” “U” “I” “E”); the interpreter may mouth the fingerspelled letters in the same way as the individual letters would be pronounced).


Mouth naturally while fingerspelling. Mouthing words is a common practice when fingerspelling. When fingerspelled words are mouthed, the mouthing should be natural. Exaggerated or contorted mouth, lip, or tongue movements should not be present. In situations where mouthing is not used—for example, when interpreting a very private conversation, or because of the signer’s preferences—the interpreter’s lips should not be clamped tightly shut or pursed; instead, they should be closed softly or opened slightly. Unnatural mouthing or lip positioning causes the message to be difficult to understand and should not occur.

Possible Errors

- 1.8a** Does not synchronize mouthing with the fingerspelling (e.g., mouths “Nike” after fingerspelling the brand of shoe N-I-K-E, rather than mouthing “Nike” simultaneously while fingerspelling N-I-K-E).
- 1.8b** Locates the fingerspelling hand next to the mouth (e.g., fingerspells G-U-C-C-I next to the mouth, rather than fingerspelling lower, at the shoulder level).



Be aware that many fingerspelled words, and signs, have specific co-occurring mouth movements different from English mouthing. Check with Deaf community members about local usage for mouthing words such as “Thailand,” “Thomas,” and “PhD.” In some communities, interpreters follow the norms of the local Deaf community’s mouthing of these terms; for example, “TH” is mouthed at the beginning of the signs THAILAND and T-H-O-M-A-S, and “F” is mouthed at the beginning of fingerspelling P-H-D rather than mouthing the individual letters as they are said in English (“P” “H” “D”). In instances such as these, don’t try to make this determination on your own; observe and consult the local Deaf community regarding their mouthing norms for particular words.



- 1.8c** Mouths individual letters while fingerspelling a word (e.g., mouths “C” “A” “N” “C” “U” “N,” rather than mouthing the full English word “Cancun” while fingerspelling C-A-N-C-U-N).
- 1.8d** Uses exaggerated articulation of words (e.g., mouths the name “Wally” with an excessive pursing of lips for “W,” rather than mouthing with natural mouth movements).

KEY SKILL 1.9

Keep the hand and the arm in a relatively stationary, relaxed position and in an appropriate location while fingerspelling

Description of the Skill

The hand and the arm should be held in a relatively stationary position while fingerspelling, perhaps moving a few inches, left-to-right for right-handed interpreters, and right-to-left for left-handed interpreters. The hand and arm should be relaxed while freely moving. There should be a linguistic reason for moving the hand/arm more than several inches in any direction.

Fingerspelling hand is relatively stationary. While fingerspelling, whether the interpreter is right hand-dominant or left hand-dominant, her hand should either remain stationary or move slightly to the right or left, respectively, from the shoulder area of her body. Her hand should not move inward toward the midline of her body unless there is a linguistic reason to do so. Fingerspelling while moving the hand vertically—either up toward the face and head, or down toward the waist—should be avoided. The interpreter’s hand should not jump, rock, or twist.

Fingerspelling hand is in a relaxed position. The most natural position for fingerspelling is with the arm hanging freely at the interpreter’s side (rather than in front of her body or resting on her hip or stomach area), and bent at the elbow so that her forearm is almost parallel to her body. Her hand should be held in a comfortable position, slightly in front of her shoulder area (not her face), palm out toward the signer, and at a comfortable 45-degree angle. If it is comfortable to do so, the interpreter can move her hand to face the signer more directly, but not so much that her wrist is strained in any way (which can cause repetitive strain injury, or RSI).




Interpreting in front of a video camera requires adjustments to the way the interpreter fingerspells in other settings. Consideration of the camera framing is important so that her hands do not go outside of the frame. Because the person viewing the interpretation will be seeing the interpretation only as a two-dimensional representation, the location of the interpreter's fingerspelling hand becomes critical for visibility, clarity, and even mood. If her hand is too far forward toward the camera, this can appear patronizing and "in your face" to the signing participant.

For example, when interpreting a phrase—"take a right at Hancock Street"—the interpreter normally would fingerspell H-A-N-C-O-C-K in the forward space approaching the camera; however, anyone watching this on a video screen may mistakenly perceive that the speaking participant is "yelling" because the fingerspelling appears so close to the signer. In ASL this can appear loud or offensive. The correct approach would be to produce the sign for RIGHT or TURN-RIGHT, then fingerspell H-A-N-C-O-C-K in a location slightly to the right, but not forward toward the camera.




Fingerspelling hand is positioned on its own. When there is fingerspelling in the interpretation, the hand used in producing the fingerspelling should be "on its own," in a comfortable position and appropriate location. The other hand should not constantly point at or be used to support the fingerspelling hand. That is, the non-fingerspelling hand should not hold on to the opposite elbow, arm, or wrist.



Some interpreters support the fingerspelling hand or arm, but doing so is unnecessary, can cause distraction, and is inconsistent with good body mechanics. When the non-fingerspelling hand and arm cross in front of the body constantly, the body becomes misaligned. Ongoing misalignment can result in injury.

Crossing hands and arms in front of the body occurs in ASL when signing, but doing so typically involves simultaneous movements of both hands/arms (e.g., when signing *BASEBALL-BAT*, *RESPONSIBLE*, *REST*). Crossing one hand/arm over the body occurs only occasionally when producing signs (e.g., when signing *SCOTLAND*, *HEART*). Fingerspelling occurs regularly in interpreting work, so an interpreter who develops a habit of crossing one hand/arm in front of her body to support, or to point at, her fingerspelling hand, risks injury to her musculoskeletal structure. In addition to the potential for inflicting physical damage on the interpreter, the constant twisting and turning of the body is also unnecessary and distracting, and can be perceived as meaning that everything in the English source message is emphatic and important.

For additional discussion about this topic, see
Key Skill 8.8: Maintain good occupational health.



Possible Errors

- 1.9a** Executes fingerspelling in a location that is intrusive, distracting, or awkward (e.g., positions hand in front of the face or down at the waist, rather than slightly in front of the shoulder).
- 1.9b** Moves the dominant hand toward the midline of the body while fingerspelling (e.g., interpreter who is right-handed incorrectly moves the hand from right to left while fingerspelling, rather than holding it in one location or moving it slightly from left to right).

- 1.9c Uses excessive vertical movements while fingerspelling (e.g., raises the hand from shoulder level up to near the ear while fingerspelling, rather than keeping the hand in a relatively stationary position without moving it vertically).
- 1.9d Uses excessive horizontal movements while fingerspelling (e.g., fingerspells a five-letter word while extending the hand from the shoulder an excessive distance outward, rather than holding the hand in a relatively stationary position without moving it forward).
- 1.9e Introduces extraneous movements while fingerspelling (e.g., exhibits bouncing or excessive wrist-twisting, rather than holding the hand in a relatively stationary position).
- 1.9f Orients the palm in, facing herself (e.g., fingerspells to herself, rather than orienting the palm out toward the signer).
- 1.9g Holds the arm in an awkward position (e.g., holds the elbow so that it appears to be fixed to the waist, rather than moving naturally while fingerspelling).
- 1.9h Uses the non-dominant hand to support the fingerspelling hand (e.g., constantly braces the non-dominant hand against the forearm of the dominant, fingerspelling hand, rather than allowing freedom in motion for the hand that is fingerspelling).

KEY SKILL 1.10

Move fingerspelling hand(s) appropriately in space

Description of the Skill

One indication of interpreters' ASL fluency is the ability to use fingerspelling in ways that take advantage of the use of space. The direction and use of horizontal and vertical space while fingerspelling is important. Sometimes it is effective to fingerspell a word in a spatial location that refers to its relationship with something else being discussed. Using both the left and the right hands to fingerspell for linguistic reasons is another way to take advantage of ASL's dynamic language.

Fingerspell in different locations. There may be times when fingerspelling is produced in a particular location for linguistic reasons. For example, when participants in a communication event are introducing themselves, or being introduced, the interpreter may hold her hand slightly farther away from her body than usual, moving it slightly closer to the persons identifying themselves around the room, in order to convey each individual's location. In another example, after signing TURN-RIGHT when interpreting "Take a right at Hancock Street," the interpreter's arm might be extended slightly while she fingerspells H-A-N-C-O-C-K S-T.

As the interpreter fingerspells the individual elements within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (i.e., physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization), her fingerspelling hand moves from lower to higher positions, representing each relative location within Maslow's Hierarchy, which establishes the physiological needs at the bottom of the triangle (representing the most basic need); from this lower position, her hand moves upward slightly after fingerspelling each level of the hierarchy.

The title of the stage play *Wicked* has branded its name with a unique, uneven lettering style. If the signing participant is looking at a poster or is familiar with this particular graphic style, the

interpreter may fingerspell the name in an up-and-down manner to indicate this unique letter formation which conveys that the word is connected to a creative theatrical performance.

There are exceptions to the conventional location of fingerspelling which can and should be used when opportunities arise. For example, conveying the significance of a restaurant owner's announcement about his new sign can be achieved by starting the fingerspelling at the far right of the body and moving leftward across the body. Also, the interpreter's hand may be at the top of her head or above her head to indicate that the restaurant sign is up high, above the interpreter's head. Or, if the new sign runs vertically down the exterior wall of the restaurant, perpendicular to the sidewalk, then the interpreter can move her hand downward while fingerspelling.

Use left and right hand for fingerspelling. At times it is useful and grammatically correct to use both the left and/or right hands to fingerspell. This technique should occur only when there is a specific linguistic reason for doing so. Examples are fingerspelling with the left hand, E-X-I-T, when the "exit" is on the left side of the interpreter; fingerspelling E-X-I-T with both hands simultaneously when interpreting for instructions related to the "two over-the-wing exits on the airplane."

Possible Errors

- 1.10a Fingerspells in only one location (e.g., holds her hand in the same neutral location regardless of the context while conveying the message "Do you prefer eggshell white on the walls or ivory on the walls like the color of the ceiling?," rather than producing I-V-O-R-Y up higher, toward the ceiling slightly).
- 1.10b Does not fingerspell with the non-dominant hand when opportunities arise (e.g., fingerspells with only the dominant hand when comparing and discussing "cars and trucks," rather than using one hand to fingerspell C-A-R and the other hand to fingerspell T-R-U-C-K).

KEY SKILL 1.11

Execute fingerspelling accurately regardless of the length of the word or phrase

Description of the Skill

After the interpreter determines that fingerspelling is the correct option for conveying specific information in the communication event, she should execute the fingerspelling accurately whether the word is short (e.g., “Nike,” “tank,” “oil”) or long (e.g., “liability,” “halogen”). It is equally important to execute fingerspelling accurately whether phrases are short (e.g., “I do”) or long (e.g., “sequential vs. randomized”). Sometimes shorter words or phrases are articulated accurately and longer words/phrases are not, or the opposite may be true. The difficulty of execution can be related to a specific word or similar length of words within the interpretation over the course of the communication event.

Possible Errors

- 1.11a Executes fingerspelling of short words (five letters or less) inaccurately (e.g., fingerspells D-I-E-T inaccurately several times, rather than executing it accurately the first time).
- 1.11b Executes fingerspelling of longer words (more than five letters) inaccurately (e.g., fingerspells A-D-I-D-A-S inaccurately several times before executing it accurately).
- 1.11c Executes fingerspelling of two-word phrases inaccurately (e.g., fingerspells H-U-L-A H-O-O-P inaccurately, rather than executing it accurately).
- 1.11d Executes fingerspelling of longer phrases (more than two words) inaccurately (e.g., fingerspells A-C-E I-N T-H-E H-O-L-E inaccurately, rather than executing it accurately).

KEY SKILL 1.12

Execute fingerspelling accurately despite time constraints

Description of the Skill

At times, the speaking participant's rate of speech becomes too rapid for the interpreter to keep up, and this becomes evident in the interpretation when words that should be spelled are signed. For example, if the speaker rapidly lists the five flavors of ice cream he regularly buys at the grocery store as "Rocky Road, Jelly Bean, Pinwheel Supreme, Latte Delight, and Nutterbutter," it is best practice to fingerspell the ice cream names and not resort to using the signs ROCK ROAD, J-B, L-A-T-T-E HAPPY, or other linguistic meaninglessness. Although this latter strategy of signing, rather than fingerspelling, can be a useful tactic in some situations, when it occurs at times like this it is an error.

Possible Errors

- 1.12a Omits terms that should be present in the interpretation (e.g., does not fingerspell the names of the small towns visited on a trip to Italy, rather than fingerspelling each name despite time constraints).
- 1.12b Uses signs instead of fingerspelling (e.g., signs WIND SUN EAT, rather than fingerspelling the name of the restaurant W-I-N-D-Y AND S-U-N-N-Y P-U-B despite time constraints).
- 1.12c Lacks clarity in fingerspelling (e.g., produces slurred fingerspelling, rather than maintaining clarity regardless of time constraints).