

Insights into Auslan

Fingerspelling.

(Adapted by Anne Horton from "Australian Sign Language: An introduction to sign language linguistics" by Johnston and Schembri)

- Fingerspelling is using your hands to represent the letters of a writing system. In English, this means using 26 different hand configurations to represent the 26 letters of the English alphabet. As such, fingerspelling is not a signed language in and of itself, rather it is a manual code for representing the letters of the English alphabet.
- It appears that fingerspelling was first used by hearing people to represent the written form of spoken language, however fingerspelling is now completely integrated into natural signing.
- When fingerspelling a word, the word is spelled out letter by letter.
- Fingerspelling is generally mixed in with signing and is especially used for spelling nouns (place names, people's names, objects' names) or for spelling words that don't have a sign. The only time fingerspelling might be exclusively used is in an educational setting such as the Rochester Method, or with Deaf/Blind people (or in very dark lighting conditions) whereby the letters are spelled onto the hand of the Deaf/blind person.
- Fingerspelling can also be used even when there is a sign for the word. This is likely to happen when wanting to emphasise a word, to impress someone, or to hide meaning from an onlooker who can't read fingerspelling (such as a child).
- There is more than one fingerspelling code for the English alphabet used in Australia:
 - By far the most widely known and used is the two-handed alphabet that has its origins in Britain
 - Less widely known is the one-handed (Irish) alphabet that is gradually fading out as the signing population ages (since it's discontinued use in education during 1875-1950's).
 - The one-handed American alphabet on the other hand, is increasingly known by Deaf Australians, especially younger people or those who travel overseas frequently, because of the prestige of ASL (American Sign Language) around the world.
- In the rapid fingerspelling of native signers of Auslan, not all the letters of a word are fingerspelled and the parts blend together, so it is often only the overall sign shape that is recognised, not the shapes of the individual letter signs themselves.

Auslan Vocabulary

Fingerspelling Alphabet.



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Fingerspelling Tips.

- The types of words that are fingerspelled are predictable and most commonly will be nouns (names of people, places and things for which there is no sign).
- Context helps to anticipate what word is coming next and can help to anticipate what the word might be.
- After seeing only 2-3 letters of a word our mind starts working out what the word might be. This is made easier by the rules of English spelling which lead us to expect only certain letter combinations.
- Deaf people's signing includes about 10% fingerspelling (average).
- Older deaf people tend to fingerspell more than younger people.
- The most commonly fingerspelled words are: SO, TO, IF, BUT, DO, AT.
- Some signs are based on fingerspelling: FF (father), MM (mother).
- With informal signing, signers often fully fingerspell an English word when they first introduce it into the conversation, but then later simply fingerspell the first letter of the word to refer back to it (especially with names of people and places).
- Some single letter can have a whole word meaning if they are used in the right context with the right lip movement eg: YEAR ("Y"), CENT ("C"), WEEK ("W"), MONTH/METRE/MINUTE ("M")
- Handshapes for a single letter may vary (eg: B and C) depending on the surrounding letters.
- When practising fingerspelling, practise with words you would spell in real life.
- Keep your lip-movements in sync with your fingerspelling.
- Practise! Practise! Practise!

Fingerspelling Production and Reception.

- Fingerspelling should be fluent – one letter flowing on to the next.
- The rhythmic cluster of letters in their syllables makes *patterns* that are much easier for others to read (rather than letter by letter).
- Sometimes in rapid fingerspelling, not all of the letters are spelt. This is fine as long as the overall *pattern* of the word is maintained.
- Disjointed fingerspelling breaks the *pattern* of the word (and makes it hard for someone else to read it).