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 include some photos of basic signs to get you started.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact our free Information Line:

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

My parents use sign language and they taught me as a baby. It’s such an expressive and impressive language that utilises not just your hands, but body language and facial expressions too. When people see that I can use sign language, they also want to learn it – and those who do learn fall in love with it, just like I did.

Andrew Palmer (pictured on the cover)
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What is British Sign Language?

People who are deaf communicate in different ways – they may use speech and lipread, they may use a type of signed communication, or they may use a combination of different methods.

British Sign Language (BSL) is the most widely used type of signed communication in the UK and a language in its own right. It 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?

How many people use BSL?

BSL is the first or preferred language of around 125,000 adults who are deaf in the UK, plus an estimated 20,000 deaf children.
Many people who are hearing also learn and use BSL. Some learn for their own interest, others learn because they have a friend, relative or colleague who is deaf – or 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). We also have cards of the Welsh, Irish and deafblind fingerspelling alphabets. To find out more, and to order, please contact our Information Line (see last 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 in spoken languages. In different parts of the country, signs will have different meanings, or there will be different signs for one word. For example, there are 10–12 variations for ‘holiday’.
Where can I learn BSL?

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 authority (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 the Level 1 Award in BSL. This course is designed to give you a basic introduction to the vocabulary and structure of BSL. It usually runs over the course of one year and involves at least 60 hours of tuition. 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. The Level 6 NVQ Certificate in BSL is equivalent to a degree. After achieving the Level 6 qualification, you can train to become a sign language interpreter.
To find out where you can study for these qualifications in your area, contact our Information Line (see last page) or visit the websites of Signature (www.signature.org.uk/learn) and iBSL (www.ibsl.org.uk/html/teachlearn/ourcentres.html).

**Action on Hearing Loss BSL courses**

Our experienced trainers can come to where you work to teach an introductory **Start to Sign** course or **Signature’s Level 1 Award in BSL**. Contact our Information Line (see last page) to find out more.

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**Start to Sign!**

*Start to Sign!* is Action on Hearing Loss’ British Sign Language (BSL) support book for beginners. It contains colour photographs of more than 800 signs, plus lots of information on the development, structure and grammar of BSL.

When you buy the book, you also get free online access to BSL video clips.

To order, contact our Customer Services team on **01733 361199** (telephone), **01733 238020** (textphone), email **solutions@hearingloss.org.uk** or shop online at **www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/buystarttosign**.
Fingerspelling alphabet
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
Feelings

Where

When

Why/Because

How

Like

Dislike
Good

Bad

Happy

Sad

Family

Husband/Wife
Mother

Father

Brother

Sister

Food and drink

Sandwich

Fruit
Biscuit

Chips

Tea

Coffee

Water

Wine
Time

Morning

Night

Today
Tomorrow

Yesterday

Work

Work

Office
Textphone

Telephone

Email

Computer
Where can I get further information?

We produce a wide range of free information covering hearing loss, deafness, tinnitus and related issues such as ear problems, hearing aids, communication support, benefits, rights, equipment and deaf awareness. Our leaflets are a good place to start as they cover the basics, while our factsheets go into more detail.

You can find our publications on our website at www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets or order free copies from our Information Line (see last page for details). Our friendly, fully trained Information Line Officers will also answer any queries you have.

You can find lots of other useful information online at www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Alternative formats

If you’d like any of our leaflets or factsheets in Braille, large print or audio format, please contact our Information Line.

Information you can trust

We are certified by The Information Standard as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. For a list of references for this leaflet, please email references@hearingloss.org.uk

Can you help us improve our information?

We’d love to hear what you think of this leaflet - please email reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk And do let us know if you’d like to join our Readers’ Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones.
STAY INFORMED

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

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% introductory discount* on products to help with hearing loss.
• 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 www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/join

* Applies to products from our catalogue and online shop. Minimum spend is £40 excluding postage and packaging and VAT. Action on Hearing Loss reserves the right to change the promotion at any time.
We’re Action on Hearing Loss, the charity working for a world where hearing loss doesn’t limit or label people, where tinnitus is silenced – and where people value and look after their hearing. We can’t do this without your help.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

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