

## A Study Guide

Prepared by Roberta McNair

for CFI Education

A Place in the World



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## How do you define “Deaf”?

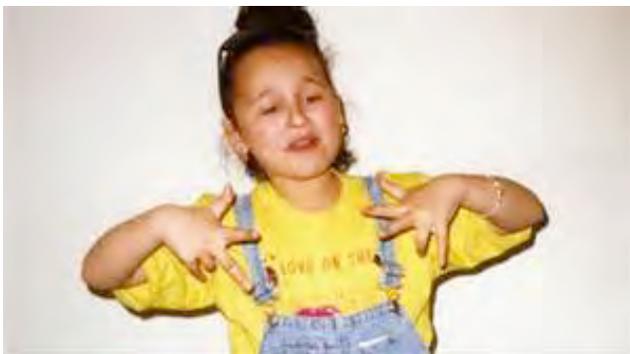
Can't hear?



“Can’t” has a negative connotation.



A different perspective.



I want to change the definition in the dictionary.



I think we should say “don’t hear.”



— Aneta Brodski, *Deaf Jam*

## About the Film



Director/Producer **Judy Lieff**

Co-producer **Steve Zeitlin**, City Lore

Editor **Keiko Deguchi**

Cinematographers **Melissa Donovan, Claudia Raschke Robinson**

### [Sign Language of the Times](#)

#### **Documentary Tells Story of Deaf Teens' Performance Art**

By Allen Ellenzweig, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, May 18, 2012

In feature films, the deaf have made for exotic yet sympathetic characters. From Jane Wyman as the saintly eponymous innocent in “Johnny Belinda” (1948) to Marlee Matlin’s Oscar-winning turn as a self-possessed, sexually confident woman in “Children of a Lesser God” (1986), the portrayal of deaf characters measures our society’s slow acknowledgment that the deaf are, well, people.

But only since the deaf assumed their own political power, starting with the demand in 1988 for a deaf president to lead Gallaudet University—the most prominent American school of higher education for the deaf—have we begun to understand deafness not only as a minority physical status, but as a cultural one, as well.

“Deaf Jam,” a 70-minute documentary screening in May at the Toronto Jewish Film

Festival, focuses on teenage Israeli immigrant Aneta Brodski and a cohort of her high school friends at the Lexington School for the Deaf, in Queens. The film tells the tale of how these young people make their way into the hearing world’s lively spoken-word poetry jam scene by using American Sign Language in its most expressive, even theatrical dimensions. Later, as the Lexington students leave to pursue higher education elsewhere, the film homes in on Aneta, who joins forces with a hearing poetry slammer, Tahani, a student of Palestinian heritage at Columbia University.

Director Judy Lieff’s multiple cameras capture how the enclosed world at Lexington produces a familial camaraderie among the deaf teenagers. Many of these students have traveled up through the grades since they were children, like Aneta’s best friend, Shiran, also an Israeli immigrant. We see the shared defensiveness among these kids as they navigate a world that keeps them isolated in their deaf enclaves, and we witness them creating bonds of mutual support that transcend racial barriers.

It is a delight to watch these sisters and brothers of various cultures signing among themselves with lively ferocity. As they explore the fullest poetic measure of their native sign language with adult ASL teachers, we see the beauty of signing and its capacity for imaginative and spontaneous invention. One of the delights of the documentary’s early scenes is watching the variety of facial, hand and arm gestures and full body maneuvers, all of which give sign language the capacity to be as fully concrete or intellectually abstract as the spoken word. We marvel as Aneta and her friends, male and female, twist their features and contort their bodies in vivid displays of quicksilver communication.

It would be nice to report that the film’s narrative equals the interest of its real-life characters, but there is the occasional lapse into the didactic. Lieff attempts to educate her audience about deaf history—the suppression of sign language in deaf education lasted nearly a

century in favor of enforced “oralism”—and about new challenges to the community, like the cochlear implant, that threaten to diminish the number of deaf people and weaken the bonds of deaf culture. However worthy, these scenes detour the main plot. And while Lieff finds wonderful visual cinematic equivalents for subtitling her young ASL slam poets, the emotional core of Aneta, Shiran and Tahani’s lives are never fully examined, and the Muslim-Jewish issue between Aneta and Tahani remains undeveloped.

Aneta and Shiran are deaf, but they also happen to be bright, energetic, sometimes raucous and angry young women, each with a family story that might well have made its own film. As an introduction to deaf culture, “Deaf Jam” will expand the minds of many in the hearing community. But the film might have done better to aim straight for the heart, which is where these kids live.

### Deaf Jam

Adam Hartzell, [Hell on Frisco Bay, Monday, December 19, 2011](#)

I have not had the experience with a film for a long time like I had with Lieff’s documentary about high school Deaf poets venturing out into the venues of a (hearing) poetry slam. Cinema transfixed me again at the Mill Valley Film Festival like it did the first time. I could not stop [talk]ing about the impact [the] film had on me. Lieff captures the vibrancy of American Sign Language through several tactics of translation. Her willingness to mess with the text of subtitling the poems in the opening sequence is mesmerizing. At the same time, she even took the risk not to translate the ASL later in the film and it is just as powerful sans subtitles. Mixed in with this story of the life of young Deaf folk is a story about the struggles of immigrant children whose parents’ citizenship comes after they enter adulthood and a friendship between a young Israeli Jew and Palestinian Muslim. Lieff and the subjects of her documentary show us how ASL is as perfect a language of cinema as any other, leaving you hoping Lieff and the students she films don’t stop

here. We need these stories. We need this kind of active, engaged cinema.

### Review of Deaf Jam in ASL

Amy Cohen Efron, YouTube



*Amy Cohen Efron giving her review.*

### Judy Lieff, Deaf Jam Director and Producer

Judy Lieff is a filmmaker and teacher. After a career as a professional dancer, she earned an MFA in dance and experimental film/video from the California Institute of the Arts. She began her relationship with the Deaf community through the making of an award winning experimental film *Duties of My Heart*, featuring Terrylene Sacchetti, one of the poet-mentors featured in *Deaf Jam*. Judy participated in the [American Films Showcase 2013/2014](#) program with her first feature documentary, *Deaf Jam*, traveling to South Korea, Zimbabwe, and Turkey.



*Judy Lieff*

Judy is a six-time grant recipient for dance/ media projects, including a National Dance/ Media fellowship from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Judy has years of experience working in

production and post-production on commercials, industrials, shorts, and EPKs for feature films. She has documented dance and other performance events in New York City since 1999 (single and multi camera). Additionally, she has worked as a motion-capture performer/choreographer, and as a stop-motion performer/choreographer on projects, including Terry Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Pat O'Neil's *The Decay of Fiction*.

### **Steve Zeitlin, Deaf Jam Co-producer**

Steve served as co producer of *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, a documentary about the South Bronx funded by ITVS and broadcast on public television across the U.S. as part of the *Voces* series of Latino Public Broadcasting. He received his PhD in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania and is the director, cofounder, and director of photography of City Lore, an organization dedicated to the preservation of New York City's—and America's—living cultural heritage. He also co-directs the *People's Poetry Gathering*, a national poetry festival in New York City. Prior to arriving in New York, Steve Zeitlin served for eight years as a folklorist at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and is coauthor of a number of award-winning books on America's folk culture. He has also co-produced a number of award-winning film documentaries, including *How I Got Over*; *The Grand Generation*; and *Free Show Tonight*, on the traveling medicine shows of the 1920s and 30s. His early documentaries were selected by Folkstreams.net for streaming online.

[City Lore](#) produces documentary films and collaborates with filmmakers whose work relates to the organization's mission. Sponsored films include Ric Burns' *Coney Island* and the five-part series *New York: A Documentary Film*; *City of Dreams*, a film about women artists in New York City; and *Deaf Jam*.

### **Aneta Brodski, Featured Poet**

Aneta Brodski is an Uzbek-born, Israeli-immigrant teenager living in Queens, New York. She is passionate, driven, and well-liked by her high school classmates. Unique among her classmates, Aneta longs to fully participate in the

hearing world, although both of her parents and her younger brother are Deaf.

While she is comfortable with and unashamed of her deafness, she does not want to be defined by it. She longs to be understood by everyone around her in the bustling city. Some of her classmates feel that Deaf culture is—and should be—claimed by a fierce embrace of Deaf identity and respect for the unique beauty of its language.

At her school, Aneta joins an extracurricular program to learn American Sign Language poetry. She and her fellow students gradually find their inner voices in the poems they create. Aneta's world opens up as she is tantalized by the possibility of competing in a poetry slam with mostly hearing competitors.

With ties to rap and hip-hop culture, the U.S. National Poetry Slams for youth have gained momentum across the country, highlighting a highly verbal and rhythmic form of self-expression. Aneta is one of the first Deaf youth to participate in a major slam event, and despite some initial anxiety about how the Deaf performers might be received, she courageously takes the stage.



Aneta meets and then collaborates with Tahani—a hearing Palestinian slam poet. They create a hearing/Deaf duet touching on their shared personal and cultural experiences—generating a new form of slam poetry that crosses boundaries, cultures, and languages, and speaking to the hearing and the Deaf.

[Aneta Brodski Besecker: Facebook](#)

## Deaf Poetry and Performance

### What is ASL Poetry?

ASL Poetry is a vibrant three-dimensional art form where body movements convey meaning. There is no paper or text. Rhymes are measured in hand shapes and meter in movements. Images cut and dissolve as its verses transcend all spoken word. In relation to literary poetry, the similarity of hand-shapes can act as alliteration, and using the same hand-shape repetitively works as rhyme. Visual Vernacular (a term originated by Bernard Bragg) involves cinematic concepts. The technique involves references to close-ups, wide shots, images dissolving into other images as well as “cutting” back and forth between characters to show different points of view on a scene.

Translation for ASL poetry into a written or oral form involves crossing modalities. In ASL poetry the body is the text. It exists in performance or through a video recording, not on paper. Rhyming schemes are based on visual elements such as facial expression, movement, locations of the signs, and hand shapes. Therefore an oral or written translation of an ASL poem can only be an approximation of what is being expressed.



*Dual slam*

### ASL Poetry Competition

River of Words, Saint Mary’s College of California, Moraga

The River of Words international art and poetry contest is open to any child in the world, from 5 to 19 years of age, who has not yet completed high school. It is a program of Saint Mary’s Center for Environmental Literacy.

### Sign Language Poetry

The visual power of sign language poetry as a tool for self-expression resonates for both hearing and Deaf poets. In the United States, many schools now offer sign language as a foreign language option. Just as English has become the dominant language of use globally in business, communications, and other fields, American Sign Language has become the default language among signers internationally (e.g., Signmark, the Finnish Deaf rap artist who is signed with Warner Music Record Label, uses ASL in all of his songs in order to reach a wide deaf audience. See <http://www.signmark.biz/bio/>). Overall, the public’s interested in sign language is growing.

Deaf poetry has been described “as a kind of writing in space ... a language in motion, and, like oral poetry, truly inseparable from its realization in performance.” (Edward S. Klima and Ursula Bellugi, “Poetry Without Sound,” 1983). There are features in ASL poetry that are analogous to literary poetry. The similarity of hand shapes, for instance, acts as alliteration, and using the same hand shape repetitively works as rhyme. In ASL poetry, a dramatic visual art form, the poets use body language, rhythm, and movement to create a cinematic equivalent to oral poetry.

### Outreach

90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. Many of these children are brought up in households where sign language is not used, and their most effective form for communicating their deepest thoughts is closed off.

### **Mission**

Deaf Jam Reaches Out aimed at engaging Deaf communities in the U.S. and beyond, revitalizing the endangered art form of American Sign Language (ASL) poetry and storytelling, and empowering Deaf youth. The goal was to cultivate communities of young ASL poets and link them with their hearing peers engaged in the burgeoning spoken word movement. The intention was to inspire Deaf teenagers to use ASL poetry as a rich expressive medium for communication, and to provide Deaf teens with

the tools and motivation to participate in poetry slams—competitions of verbal artistry that have become an international phenomenon.

There are slam scenes in Canada, Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, Israel, Switzerland, Nepal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, the Czech Republic, Sarajevo, Bosnia, Denmark, South Korea, India, and Greece (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry\\_slam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry_slam)).



*Signmark's 2010 album Breaking the Rules*

## A Social Perspective

### *Selected Events from the Deaf Timeline*

A.D. 345–550—Early Christians See Deafness as Sin

St. Augustine tells early Christians that Deaf children are a sign of God’s anger at the sins of their parents. Meanwhile, Benedictine monks take vows of silence to better honor God. To communicate necessary information, they develop their own form of sign language.

1500s—Deaf Education Develops

The physician Geronimo Cardano of Padua, Italy, attempts to teach his Deaf son using a code of symbols.

1620—Juan Pablo Bonet, an advocate of early sign language, writes the first well-known book of manual alphabetic signs for the Deaf in 1620.

1760—French Sign Language Established  
A French priest, Charles Michel De L’Epe, establishes the first free public school for the Deaf in France. De L’Epe tries to develop a bridge between the Deaf and hearing worlds through a system of standardized signs and finger spelling.

1788—Charles Michel De L’Epe publishes a dictionary of French sign language.

1817—First American School for the Deaf Founded

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, an American interested in Deaf education, travels to Europe where he meets the Archbishop Roche Sicard, the author of “Theory of Signs,” and successor to De L’Epe. Sicard sends one of his instructors, Laurent Clerc, and the pair found the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut.

1847—American Annals of the Deaf first proposes the idea of higher education for the Deaf.

1850s—A Deaf State Is Proposed

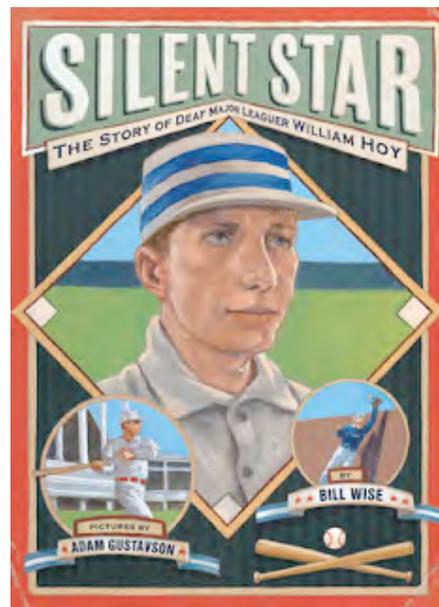
John Flourney proposes to Congress that land be set aside in the western territories for the creation of a Deaf state, where Deaf people could better enjoy their own community and flourish

unrestrained by prejudice and the restrictive good intentions of hearing society.

1864—The Enabling Act is signed by President Abraham Lincoln and Gallaudet College Opens.  
Abraham Lincoln signs the charter for the Washington, D.C.,-based college for the deaf. Originally known as the National College for the Deaf and Dumb, it is the only accredited facility for the Deaf in the United States to offer college degrees. Today, Gallaudet remains a leader in higher education for the Deaf.

1880—The Conference of Milan Endorses Oral Education

In a move with repercussions well into the future, this international gathering of Deaf educators pronounces oral education methods superior to manual communications systems. The American Delegation expresses the only opposition to the vote. Manual education had made great strides in the United States at that time.



1880s–1920s—Deaf Players Change Baseball and Football

In 1901, baseball’s American League gets its first grand slam thanks to William “Dummy” Hoy, a Deaf player. Umpire hand signals are developed so that Hoy can see a strike call from the outfield. In the 1920s, Gallaudet University’s football team

keeps its plays a secret by hiding signed instructions in a huddle formation.

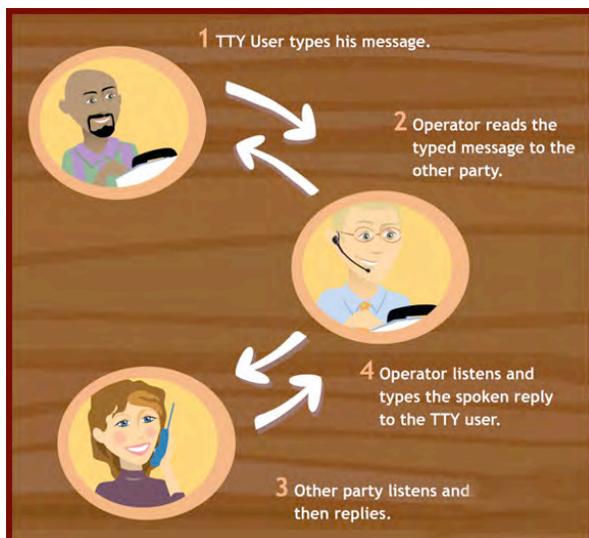
1894—The National Deaf Mute College is renamed as Gallaudet College in honor of Thomas H. Gallaudet, its first President.

1909—William Howard Taft overturns Roosevelt’s earlier decision to prohibit Deaf people from taking civil service exams for federal jobs.

1910s–1950s—Deaf Employment Skyrockets  
During World War I and II the Deaf are not allowed to serve in the U.S. military. Many take manufacturing jobs and new Deaf communities flourish. In Europe, the Deaf are allowed to serve. In the field, commands are given using special signs that can be seen at a distance.

1958—President Dwight Eisenhower signs PL 85-905, establishing the Captioned Films for the Deaf Program.

1960—William C. Stokoe Jr., a professor and pioneer researcher in [American Sign Language](#) (ASL) who taught at [Gallaudet University](#), publishes his findings about sign language as a legitimate language. In 1965, a Dictionary of ASL on Linguistic Principles is published. Pilgrim Imagining starts open captioning in the Caption Films for the Deaf Program, under U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare.



1964—Phone for Deaf Invented and National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) Established  
Robert Weitbrecht, who is Deaf, invents the

teletypewriter (TTY), which enables Deaf people to use phone lines to call each other and type out their conversations. Located on the campus of the Rochester Institute of Technology, NTID is the first technological college for Deaf students in the world.

1964—Oral Deaf Education Labeled ‘Failure’  
Congress issues the Babbidge Report on oral Deaf education and concludes that it has been a “dismal failure.”

1966—The National Theater of the Deaf is Established.

1970s—Total Communication Leads to Mainstreaming

Total Communication, a combination of manual and speech-based instruction for the Deaf, is developed and promoted. The Total Communication system becomes the foundation for a new approach to Deaf education within public school systems. By 1975, Public Law 94-142 is passed, requiring “handicapped” children in the U.S. be provided with free and appropriate education, allowing many to be mainstreamed into regular public schools, where they receive special instruction but interact with the general public school population.

1973—Disabled Gain Right to Equal Access  
The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 includes a section requiring federally funded organizations to provide TTY phones and interpreters for the Deaf.

1975—On November 29th, President Ford signs PL 94-142 into law. The law guarantees each disabled child to receive a free, appropriate public education.

1984—Allen Ginsberg visits the National Theater of the Deaf for the Deaf Beat Summit.

1986—Gallaudet becomes a University.

1987—Deaf Actress Wins Oscar  
Marlee Matlin becomes the first deaf actress to win an Academy Award, for her role in the movie “Children of a Lesser God.” NTID hosts the first National Deaf Poetry Conference.

1988—‘Deaf President Now’ Protest Held  
Students and faculty at Gallaudet University protest the selection of another hearing

president. After eight days of student protests, I. King Jordan is named the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University. Congress recommends that American Sign Language be used as the primary language for the Deaf, with English as a second language.

1990—Americans with Disabilities Act Passed  
Discriminatory practices and obstacles to accessibility for the handicapped are both outlawed. The law has a huge impact on the wheelchair dependent, and it also requires greater communications, education, and employment opportunities for the Deaf.

1990—Deaf Schools Termed ‘Restrictive’  
The 1972 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is re-adopted and amended to recommend that disabled students should attend schools with the “least restrictive environment.” Residential deaf schools are struck a blow as they become labeled the “most restrictive environment.” Enrollment plunges, and some schools close their doors.

2003—The British Government recognizes British Sign Language as a bona-fide language.

[More on ASL History](#)

### [\*A Role for Sign Language Interpreters\*](#)

By Lynette Taylor, *Street Leverage*



*Speaker and ASL public interpreter*

As a coda when I left home to go to college, I never dreamed that I was leaving my mother tongue. It never dawned on me that there wouldn't be Deaf people where I was going and that ASL would be nowhere in sight. Never were my eyes so lonely.

Much like an immigrant leaving their homeland, I had to go in search of my motherland. Luckily, I had a map. One given me by my mother that not only taught me the way to ASL and but also how to travel. She taught me that when you meet the community, you come bearing gifts, whatever they may be; in my case it was interpreting. It was through volunteer interpreting that I found my way back home. But I couldn't have done it without a map.

### **What role, if any, do interpreters have to play in the preservation of ASL?**

The question itself raises brows among my Deaf friends and colleagues. When I mention language preservation and interpreters in the same sentence I see their discomfort, a concern that this discussion could usher in the next wave of experts, of well-intended “linguistic rescuers” and do even more damage, becoming yet one more blotch on the “structural canvas of colonization.” Given the Deaf community's history in the struggle for linguistic rights, it's a valid concern, one I share.

### **Uphold the purity of the language of signs**

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf's (RID) founding elders understood that once sign language became commerce a shift would occur not only between the language and the indigenous holders of the language, but also between the Deaf community and its interpreters. In an attempt to safeguard the linguistic sovereignty of the Deaf community and preserve the language of the community, they included tenet 11 in the original 1965 code of ethics to address our moral and ethical responsibility to the preservation of the language and the well-being of the Deaf community. “The interpreter shall seek to uphold the dignity and purity of the language of signs. He shall also maintain a readiness to learn and accept new signs, if these are necessary to understanding.”

I propose we create a new code of ethics for RID, one that acknowledges the vision of our elders and supports the efforts of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and National Association of the Deaf (NAD), and the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disability (CPRD). By making the “linguistic human rights of deaf people” the canvas of our field, we have a chance to, in the words of Veditz, “love and protect our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift god gave to deaf people.”

### **Deaf angel/the other’s perspective**

When your language is the dominant language, or the language of power, it’s everywhere, like the air you breathe, and is easy to take for granted. But when it’s not, you are often reminded just how fragile the thread of language can be. It was sheer serendipity that the language found my mother. A visiting physician from Chicago happened to pass through the small mining town where my mother lived. He had heard about the meningitis outbreak and came to see how people in the town fared. Someone told him about my mother, that she had gone deaf from spinal meningitis, so he went to visit her. When he met my grandparents he told them about Illinois School for the Deaf. He told them there was even a special college she could go to one day, Gallaudet. For my grandparents, college was never even a dream; both of them had to quit school and go to work by the time they were eight years old. It took everything they had to save enough money for the train ticket to send my mother to school. The year was 1930.

### **The road not taken**

That same day, the physician also visited another family with a deaf daughter. Unlike my grandparents, they didn’t send their daughter to the school for the Deaf but kept her home, isolated and locked in the upstairs attic for years. Every year when we visited, my mother would drag me to their house so I could interpret her pleas as she tried to convince them that sign language would help their daughter.

When they died fifty years later, the deaf woman came down from the attic. She emerged as a feral woman/child language-less. That memory seared itself in my language. My mother was acutely aware how it easily could have been her who ended up language/less. She told the story of the “doctor who saved her” so often that we ended up calling him the “deaf angel.” Even though he didn’t know sign language, he led my

mother not only to her language, but to life. That is what language does, gives life, like the air we breathe.

It’s a haunting experience to think that someone else could take away your right to language, to self, to human rights but stories like these still happen.

### **Who are the language cartographers?**

Language transmission isn’t the only hurdle Deaf children face. Linguistic racism is another. Hunter, a three year old deaf pre-schooler finds his name sign, (hunter,) the subject of controversy. He “has been prohibited from signing his own name because school administrators believe the gesture he uses looks too much like a gun.”



*Hunter and the sign for his name*

By banning it they sent a message to the public that is reductive and racist: Sign language is not only a mime, but a dangerous mime at that. What is not pointed out, however, is that the English word Hunter is just as reflexive as the sign. I guess the message is loud and clear: As long as the hunter is English then it’s safe.

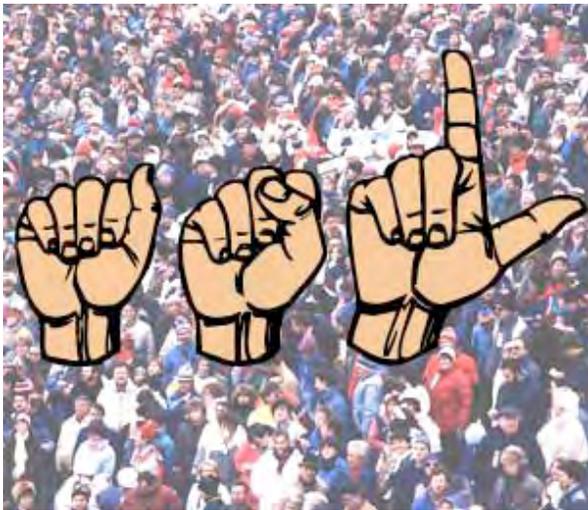
... Once sign language became a language for profit it became a resource to be mined (both from within and without). Like all cultural resources, it could be exported, deployed and uprooted from its native soil into the land of commerce, where its value lay in the profit it could make in the market, not in the happiness and soul it could bring to a community. The amputation of the language from the Deaf body has led us down an ethically complicated path. ...

With the heart of the language no longer at the center of the community, it puts at risk not

only the life of the language, but also the life of the community.

### What can we do?

If we revisit each of the stories, they are stories about getting lost and finding our way. About having maps. About making maps. About the price of being lost. To draw a map, you must have travelled the land. Our place in this story of preservation is about providing a map to lead people home. Leading deaf children to their elders, leading hearing parents to a thriving community that welcomes them and leading ourselves to a more compassionate place. We are all constrained by the conditions of the canvas. And yes, the gesso our colonialist narrative is written on is one of audism, pathology, and linguistic racism, but if we repaint the canvas and let the Deaf community be the language cartographers, there will be a new narrative, perhaps a nation without borders.



*Finger signs for ASL*

### Language belongs to the indigenous

But to achieve that we all must help. We must begin by recognizing that the language belongs to the indigenous people. We must visit those lands so we can help lead others there. We must commit to creating physical gathering spaces so that languaculture can thrive. This is the primary purpose of Community Forums—to provide the arena for languaculture transmission and for community to build. ...

### We must be patient with each other, but we must also hurry

Invite elders and community members to your RID meetings. While many of us have grown up in Deaf households, we do not know what it means to be Deaf and can't impart the lessons of navigating the hearing waters that is so vital for the future of the community's survival. Record the stories. They are leaving us. We need them for our children.

We need to revisit the foundation of RID and place safeguards that ensure our commitment to the linguistic human rights of Deaf people. So let's hand the brush back to the Deaf community and a new world we paint.

*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*  
— Dylan Thomas

## About Deafness and ASL

### Hearing Loss

Hearing loss, deafness, hard of hearing, anacusis, or hearing impairment (a term considered derogatory by many in the deaf community) is a partial or total inability to hear. In children it may affect the development of language and can cause work-related difficulties for adults.

Hearing loss is caused by many factors, including genetics, age, exposure to noise, illness, chemicals and physical trauma. Hearing testing may be used to determine the severity of the hearing loss. While the results are expressed in decibels, hearing loss is usually described as mild, mild-moderate, moderate, moderately severe, severe, or profound. Hearing loss is usually acquired by a person who at some point in life had no hearing loss.

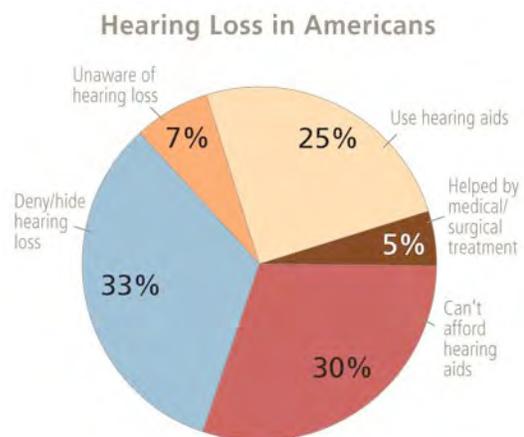
There are a number of measures that can prevent hearing loss, including avoidance of loud noise, chemical agents, and physical trauma. Testing for poor hearing is recommended for all newborns. But, in some cases such as due to disease, illness, or genetics, it is impossible to reverse or prevent. Hearing aids are partially effective for many. Depending on the kind of hearing loss, hearing implants can be effective.

Globally hearing loss affects about 10% of the population to some degree. It caused moderate to severe disability in 124 million people as of 2004 (108 million of whom are in low- and middle-income countries). Of these, 65 million developed the condition during childhood. It is one of the most common medical conditions presenting to physicians. It is viewed by some in the deaf community as a condition, not an illness. Treatments such as cochlear implants have caused controversy in the deaf community.

#### **Genetic causes**

Hearing loss can be inherited. Around 75–80% of all cases are inherited by recessive genes, 20–25% are inherited by dominant genes, 1–2% are inherited by X-linked patterns, and fewer than 1% are inherited by mitochondrial inheritance.

When looking at the genetics of deafness, there are two different forms: syndromic and nonsyndromic. Syndromic deafness occurs when there are other medical problems aside from deafness in an individual. This accounts for around 30% of deaf individuals who are deaf from a genetic standpoint. Nonsyndromic deafness occurs when there are no other problems associated with an individual other than deafness. From a genetic standpoint, this accounts for the other 70% of cases, which attributes to the vast majority of hereditary hearing loss. Syndromic cases occur with diseases ... that have deafness as one of the symptoms or a common feature associated with it. The genetics that correspond with these various diseases are very complicated and are difficult to explain scientifically because the cause is unknown. In nonsyndromic cases where deafness is the only “symptom” seen in the individual it is easier to pinpoint the physical genes.



#### **Neurobiological factors**

From a neurobiological perspective, there are two reasons that could cause a person to be deaf: Either there is something wrong with the mechanical portion of the process, meaning the ear, or there is something wrong with the neural portion of the process, meaning the brain.

The process of understanding how sound travels to the brain is imperative in understanding how and why these two reasons would cause a person develops hearing loss. The process is as

follows: Sound waves are transmitted to the outer ear; sound waves are conducted down to ear canal, bringing the sound waves to the eardrum where they vibrate; these vibrations are now passed through the three tiny ear bones in the middle, which cause the fluid to move in the inner ear; the fluid moves the hair cells; the movement of the hair cells cause the vibrations to be converted into nerve impulses; the nerve impulses are taken to the brain by the auditory nerve; the auditory nerve takes the impulses to the medulla oblongata; the brainstem sends the impulses to the midbrain; which finally goes to the auditory cortex of the temporal lobe to be interpreted as sound.

This process is complex and involves several steps that depend on the previous step in order for the vibrations or nerve impulses to be passed on. This is why if anything goes wrong at either the mechanical or neural portion of the process, it could result in sound not being processed by the brain, hence, leading to hearing loss.

### Deaf Culture



Deaf Culture by Nancy Rourke

Deaf people may have a variety of different beliefs, experiences, and methods of communication, although there are often commonalities, as well. This may be influenced by the age at which hearing was lost and the individual's personal background. "All Deaf people want to be hearing," is a common myth, and one that many in the hearing world believe. While some individuals with hearing loss want to become hearing, this is not the case for

everyone. Some take pride in their deafness or view themselves as a minority rather than a disability group.

Jack Gannon, a professor at Gallaudet University, said this about [Deaf culture](#): "Deaf culture is a set of learned behaviors and perceptions that shape the values and norms of Deaf people based on their shared or common experiences." Some doctors believe that being deaf makes a person more social. Dr. Bill Vicar, from ASL University, shared his experiences as a Deaf person: "[Deaf people] tend to congregate around the kitchen table rather than the living room sofa ... our good-byes take nearly forever, and our hellos often consist of serious hugs. When two of us meet for the first time we tend to exchange detailed biographies."

Deaf culture is not about contemplating what Deaf people cannot do and how to fix their problems, an approach known as the "pathological view of the Deaf." Instead, Deaf people celebrate what they can do. There is a strong sense of unity between Deaf people as they share their experiences of suffering through a similar struggle. This celebration creates a unity between even Deaf strangers. Vicars expresses the power of this bond when stating, "If given the chance to become hearing most [Deaf people] would choose to remain deaf."

### American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is the predominant sign language of Deaf communities in the United States and most of anglophone Canada. Besides North America, dialects of ASL and ASL-based creoles are used in many countries around the world, including much of West Africa and parts of Southeast Asia. ASL is also widely learned as a second language, serving as a lingua franca. ASL is most closely related to French Sign Language (FSL). ...

ASL originated in the early 19th century in the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut, from a situation of language contact. Since then, ASL use has propagated widely via schools for the deaf and deaf community organizations. Despite its wide use, no accurate count of ASL users has been

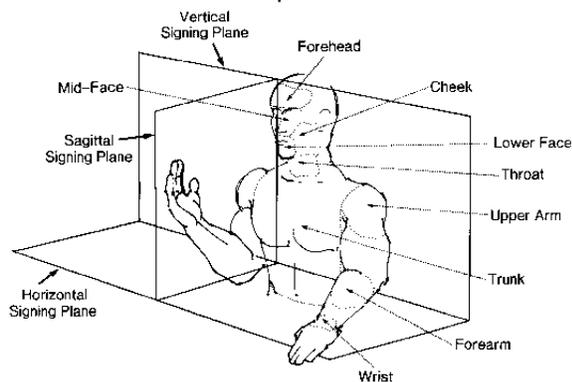
taken, though reliable estimates for American ASL users range from 250,000 to 500,000 persons, including a number of children of deaf adults. ASL users face stigma due to perceptions of the superiority of spoken language to signed language, compounded by the fact that ASL is often glossed in English, due to the lack of a standard writing system.

ASL signs have a number of phonemic components, including movement of the face and torso as well as the hands. ASL is not a form of pantomime, but iconicity does play a larger role in ASL than in spoken languages. English loan words are often borrowed through fingerspelling, although ASL grammar is unrelated to that of English. ASL has verbal agreement and aspectual marking, and has a productive system of maintaining words without changing their form from English.

### Five Components

Traditionally, the five elements of ASL are:

1. [Handshape](#)
2. [Orientation](#)
3. [Location](#)
4. Movement
5. Non-manual Expression



*The signing planes for ASL*

#### 1. Handshape

- Thumb-to-finger distance varied to indicate size
- Finger wiggling, rubbing, or flicking
- Grasping or pinching
- Change in handshape as part of a sign

#### 2. Palm Orientation

- Wrist twisting or shaking
- Change in palm orientation as part of a sign

#### 3. Location

- Location on the Face, Head, or Body
- Location on the non-dominant hand
- Handshape of the non-dominant hand
- Location relative to the non-dominant hand
- Type of contact made with the location (touch, rub, brush)
- Reference location in the signing area
- What the signer's eyes are looking at

#### 4. Movement

- Direction
- Shape of motion (circular, straight, arc, etc.)
- Size of motion
- Speed of motion
- Emphasis
- Pauses
- Repetition
- Symmetry (how the non-dominant hand moves compared to the dominant hand)

#### 5. Non-manual Features or Signals

- Head tilt, nod, or shake
- Direction the signer is facing
- Eyebrow expression
- Eyelid expression
- Nose expression
- Mouth emotion
- Mouth shapes (lips, tongue, teeth, and cheeks)
- Mouth movement (changing mouth shape as part of a sign)
- Shoulder expression



*Video with Aneta Brodski on The Magic of Technology*

### Reliance on Technology

Members of the Deaf community often rely quite heavily on the use of technology for communication. While most Deaf citizens may have access to this technology, students who are enrolled in Deaf education programs may receive

products that are on the cutting edge. Traditionally, these Deaf education programs provide students with the skills and training necessary to master social media, closed captioning, and other products that may stimulate other senses.



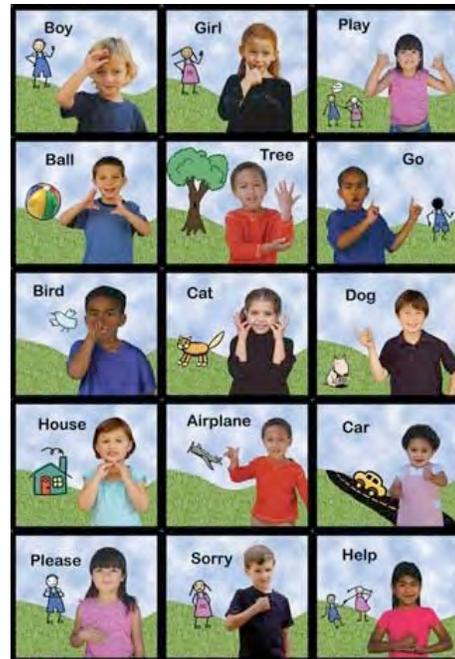
[Aneta appears in a video promoting Verizon's Quantum video technology for ASL communication](#)

### [Sign Language in Other Cultures](#)

Ever since ancient times, whenever there have been a few Deaf people gathered, it is natural, even intuitive, for them to develop some form of sign language. However, just like other languages, dialects, meanings, and gestures in sign language vary from one region to another. In the western world, French Sign Language was one of the first to gain prominence. Later, a similar version was modified into American Sign Language, or ASL. Today, there are several different sign languages that are used around the world. They are advanced enough to have their own grammar, syntax, and signing rules.

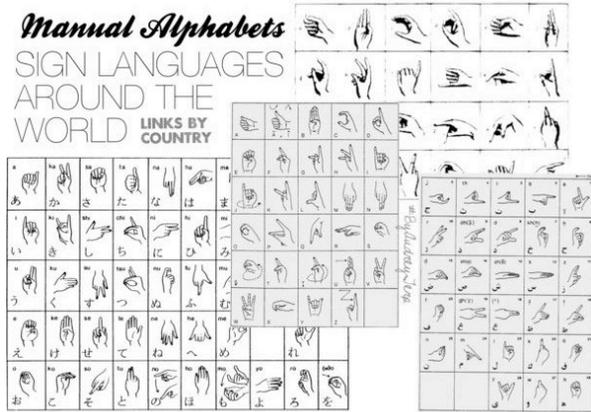
Since ASL is one of the most commonly known forms of communication for the Deaf, many people incorrectly assume that it is a universal language. The truth is quite far from this. Think of all the countries where English is the native language. This would include England, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Although hearing people from these countries all speak English, they speak different forms of the language, with different accents. Similarly, Deaf people also use different sign languages to communicate. A Deaf person traveling to a foreign country would not necessarily understand the sign language used there. Apart from gestures and signals being different, it is also the grammar and structure of the language that

would vary. It is important to note that sign language does not use the same grammatical structures as written language. Be careful when signing since some signs or gestures can be interpreted as vulgar or offensive when translated into a different language. There are also some languages, such as Japanese Sign Language, that may incorporate a lot more mouthing of words compared to ASL.



Deaf children in foreign countries are taught how to learn sign language from a young age. This enables them to acquire the language very naturally, as other hearing children quickly learn their local language. Learning a sign language alphabet is one way for Deaf adults to start when traveling to a foreign country. While signing, the sign language alphabet can be used for fingerspelling, especially in regards to names or ideas that do not already have a dedicated sign. Even those who are fluent in ASL can benefit from taking a course on how to learn sign language before traveling abroad. Keeping a sign language dictionary handy helps tremendously in translating and learning new vocabulary. Most developed countries legally recognize native sign language, but there are still some languages that are not officially acknowledged. There is also an International Sign Language that ... is used at

international conferences and events when Deaf people from around the world gather in one place and need to communicate with each other. It combines parts of various other languages and also has its own sign language alphabet.



[Finger alphabets](#)

## The Cochlear Controversy

### Cochlear Implant Controversy

Being deaf is traditionally defined as an inability to hear. For many people, being deaf is considered to be quite challenging, and in fact, is even classified as a disability. For others—especially those who were born without the ability to hear—it is just another type of existence. Individuals who struggle with being deaf may choose to undergo life-altering medical procedures, which may be effective at restoring sound perception. Individuals who are dissatisfied with their current lifestyle should make a decision on their own personal preferences, and not those of the Deaf community.

Cochlear implants are not embraced by all members of society. Many people who are part of the Deaf culture consider treatments designed to reverse deafness to be unacceptable. The cochlear implant controversy can be especially heated, because individuals who undergo this procedure are perceived as being embarrassed by or ashamed of their condition. The stance against the use of cochlear implants is strongest among individuals of the Deaf community who were born without the ability to hear, though some individuals who lost their sense gradually frequently share the position.



*Cochlear implant*

### Preserving the Linguistic Human Rights of Deaf People

From *Harm Reduction Journal*, by Tom Humphries et al., 2012

#### **Abstract**

Children acquire language without instruction as long as they are regularly and meaningfully engaged with an accessible human language. Today, 80% of children born deaf in the developed world are implanted with cochlear devices that allow some of them access to sound in their early years, which helps them to develop speech. However, because of brain plasticity changes during early childhood, children who have not acquired a first language in the early years might never be completely fluent in any language.

If they miss this critical period for exposure to a natural language, their subsequent development of the cognitive activities that rely on a solid first language might be underdeveloped, such as literacy, memory organization, and number manipulation. An alternative to speech-exclusive approaches to language acquisition exists in the use of sign languages such as American Sign Language (ASL), where acquiring a sign language is subject to the same time constraints of spoken language development.

Unfortunately, so far, these alternatives are caught up in an “either–or” dilemma, leading to a highly polarized conflict about which system families should choose for their children, with little tolerance for alternatives by either side of the debate and widespread misinformation about the evidence and implications for or against either approach.

The success rate with cochlear implants is highly variable. This issue is still debated, and as far as we know, there are no reliable predictors for success with implants. Yet families are often advised not to expose their child to sign language. Here absolute positions based on

ideology create pressures for parents that might jeopardize the real developmental needs of deaf children.

What we do know is that cochlear implants do not offer accessible language to many deaf children. By the time it is clear that the deaf child is not acquiring spoken language with cochlear devices, it might already be past the critical period, and the child runs the risk of becoming linguistically deprived. Linguistic deprivation constitutes multiple personal harms as well as harms to society (in terms of costs to our medical systems and in loss of potential productive societal participation).

### *Cochlear Implant Surgery*

A cochlear implant is a small device that is surgically implanted to help improve the hearing of those who are deaf or extremely hard of hearing. Sometimes cochlear implants are referred to as a bionic ear and there is no shortage of discussion regarding the cochlear implant controversy. So what is a cochlear implant and what does it do? The device is designed to help those who are deaf because of damage done to the tiny hair cells found in the cochlea, a part of the inner ear. The patient must undergo cochlear implant surgery in order for the hearing to improve. Worldwide, there are over 200,000 people who have undergone cochlear implant surgery. A small amount of those people received a cochlear implant in both ears, which is referred to as bilateral implants. While cochlear implant surgery is not a complete solution to deafness, it can greatly improve peoples' ability to receive a higher sound quality and understand speech more clearly.

There have been some issues surrounding the concept of cochlear implants. Not everyone believes it is the best solution for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Some of the cochlear implant controversy comes directly from the deaf community itself. Members of the deaf community are extremely proud of their deaf culture and don't want to change their way of life to accommodate the hearing population by undergoing cochlear implant surgery. Many people are starting to see the positive side of

getting a cochlear implant, especially for young children. While the cochlear implant controversy is still very real, many people now realize that often cochlear implant surgery is the best option for kids who are so young that they still have a chance to be able to hear vocalizations, music, speech, and other sounds.

There is much more to having a cochlear implant than just the cochlear implant surgery itself. Ongoing speech therapy often accompanies cochlear implant surgery to ensure that the patient can process and understand spoken words and sounds. This therapy can be costly, but it is well worth it for those who were previously deaf or extremely hard of hearing. Results in terms of improved hearing will vary from patient to patient, but most people who undergo cochlear implant surgery experience some percentage of improvement in terms of hearing quality. When someone asks "what is a cochlear implant" the question can often be answered by saying that it is a life-changing device that can alter someone's hearing for the better. This amazing device is complex yet precise, and it provides people with a new lease on life that they may have never had the ability to experience before.



Language Deprivation by Nancy Rourke

## Activities and Questions for Class Discussion

1. There are three major schools of thought regarding deafness and cochlear implants: never get implants, only get implants as a child after learning sign language, and always get implants at any age if possible. The main reason for rejecting cochlear implants seems to do with Deaf culture, pride in which would be compromised by “accommodating” the hearing population. Unqualified support for having cochlear implant surgery seems to confirm the reason given by those who reject the technology, because becoming “mainstreamed” by having the ability to hear is a primary factor for undergoing the procedure. Those who take the middle ground understand the importance of sign language for communication and cultural connection with other deaf people, yet they understand the value of making the attempt to give a deaf person the opportunity to hear—especially a child—while knowing success isn’t a certainty.

Read the [National Institute of Deafness and Other Communications Disorders page on cochlear implants](#), the [National Association of the Deaf’s analysis of the cochlear-implant question](#), [Deaf Teenager Against Cochlear Implants](#), and [Deaf Culture – Deaf Community Acceptance](#). In a group, weigh the arguments and opinions for and against cochlear implants by putting yourselves as these characters:

- the parent of a deaf baby
- the parent of a child who was born deaf
- the parent of a mainstreamed deaf child whose deafness occurred after verbal language was established
- an adolescent who does not know ASL and attends a mainstream school that uses signed English
- an adolescent who uses ASL and participates in Deaf culture
- an adult who has become deaf by age 25

Cover these areas in your discussion and debate:

How does the weight of scientific facts vs. opinion or anecdotes affect your character because of his or her relationship to parents/children, teachers/classmates, friends, and colleagues?

Is the living in the present of greater importance than looking toward the future for your character?

Does your current involvement or lack of involvement in Deaf culture affect your opinion of cochlear implants for yourself or others?

What could change your character’s feelings about cochlear implants either positively or negatively?

2. Find scientific data on the causes of deafness ([Wikipedia’s](#) okay as one source) and determine if there is consensus among your sources (at least three). Then consult the [Selected Events from the Deaf Timeline](#) and trace how opinions and beliefs about the nature of deafness and trends in acceptance, treatment, and mitigation of deafness have changed over the years. Discuss with a small group or in class how scientific developments, cultural and religious biases, and definitions of normality have affected how the Deaf are viewed, accepted, or rejected.

3. As an absurdist exercise in understanding human communication, read the article below: “Deaf Jam: Man Stabbed After Sign Language Mistaken for Gang Signs.” Then look at the American Sign Language fingersign chart and the graphic examples of gang signs that follow. Compare them and figure out how Robert Neal could possibly have interpreted ASL as “throwing gang signs.”

Is this evidence of overly aggressive behavior, linguistic “tone deafness,” or just plain stupidity? Does it really matter? A man got stabbed! Discuss.

### [Deaf Jam: Man Stabbed After Sign Language Mistaken for Gang Signs](#)

[Sacha Jenkins SHR](#)/Mass Appeal, January 15th, 2013

#### Look what happens when you can't read.

Twenty-two-year-old streets disciple Robert Neal is an alleged gang member in North Carolina, home of great emcees like New York transplants Big Daddy Kane and Ill Bill. Robert Neal allegedly stabbed another man, Terrance Ervin Daniels, 45, who happens to be deaf, not def: Neal allegedly poked Daniels with a kitchen knife because he supposedly confused sign language for the throwing of gang signs.

Now look here: Gangs have been around since the beginning of time. In certain circles, some folks consider America itself to be a big old gang. Gangs control territories and look out for friends and family.



Robert Jarell Neal

Gangs sometimes feast on their own, selling drugs to family members and neighbors, and will even go as far as making pitbulls really mean in an effort to intimidate and create fear in others. In the wild, animals eat each other—some male polar bears will eat their own offspring, and those bears need to get punched in the face by a Big Foot-type figure who can smack some sense into that ass. But I digress.

There are a lot of people in America who can't read, but if you're in a gang and don't know how to read gang signs and you stab a deaf man because you think he's throwing gang signs you needs to get off the crack and get hooked on Finger Phonics. I know the economy is bad but gangs of America, please listen up: the economy has hurt everybody in the game and it's hard to eat, but you can't allow any soldiers into your platoons if they're not Finger Literate. To quote Lord Superb off Ghostface Killah's legendary *Supreme Clientele*: “The streets is rough

out here/the crack game came and had its years/what is a man to dooooo?/brotherman, stay true/stay true.”

Those of you who are gang members who aren't finger literate, please accept my middle finger with a warm smile from me on top of that. It means “brilliant Sea Monkey with Golden Teeth” in Swahili.



ASL Fingersigns

Gang signs



- 1. Athens Park Boys, 2. Bishop, 3. Black Stone, 4. Bloods, 5. Bounty Hunters, 6. Brims, 7. Compton Crip, 8. Crips, Cousin, Crip, 10. East, 11. F\*\*\* You, 12. Harlem Crip, 13. Hoover Crip, 14. Kitchen Crip, 15. Mafia Crip, 16. Mafia Crips, 17. Number Zero, 18. Number One, 19. Bloods Piru, 20. Power, 21. Primo, 22. Underground Crip, Victory



## Resources

### *ASL Resources*

[“A Deaf Poetics,”](#) featuring poetry by and an interview with Peter Cook.

[American Sign Language](#), the Wikipedia article on the language and its origins.

[American Sign Language University](#) is a sign language resource site for ASL students and teachers.

[DeafMovies.org](#) provides a list (most with links) of feature-length ASL movies, short films, Deaf film festivals, and films in other Deaf sign languages.

[History Through Deaf Eyes](#) project at Gallaudet University was established to bring Deaf history to the public and expand our understanding of United States history. It includes an exhibition and a documentary film, [Through Deaf Eyes](#), produced by PBS.

[Learn to Sign Video and Widget](#) with *Deaf Jam’s* video and tool for learning finger signing.

### *ASL Artists*

[Manny Hernandez](#) tells the story of One Feather in ASL.

[Terrylene Sacchetti](#) presents clips from her films and television acting career.

[ASL Poetry Challenge #1](#) Featuring Terrylene Sacchetti and Manny Hernandez.

[Peter Cook](#) recites a poem in sign language, from The United States of Poetry episode “The Word.”

[Doug Ridloff](#) performs as Capital D and with ASL SLAM.

[Debbie Rennie](#) studied at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, which is the first and largest technological college in the world for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

[Signmark](#) (a.k.a. Marko Vuoriheimo) is a Deaf Finnish rapper. He pursued his childhood dream and became the first Deaf in the world to get a record deal.

[D-PAN: Deaf Professional Arts Network](#) aims to make music and music culture accessible to the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community, and to give recognition to Deaf and hard-of-hearing artists everywhere.

[Deaf Media](#) is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to advocating for Deaf arts and to developing cultural, educational, and professional opportunities for the Deaf community.

[Fred Beam](#) founded Invisible Hands International, where he provides artistic direction and an outlet for Deaf artists.

[Connell Crooms](#), a.k.a. Bam Bam, is regarded as one of the best Deaf rappers within the Deaf Community.

[Quest Visual Theater](#) creates, produces, presents, and supports theater that emanates from a visual base and features casts and production staffs that are inclusive.

### *Poetry Resources*

[Youth Speaks](#), the San Francisco organization that champions a local, national, and increasingly global movement of young people picking up pens and stepping proudly onto stages, declaring themselves present. [Brave New Voices Festival 2015](#): Youth Speaks’ Brave New Voices Festival is many things, including but not limited to the home of the International Youth Poetry Slam. Once a year, hundreds of young poets, their mentors, and the organizations that sponsor them come from all over the country—and increasingly the globe—to spend five days together celebrating the voices of our future.

***Must Read, See, or Experience***

[A Journey Into the Deaf-World](#)

[Audism Unveiled](#)

[Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics](#)

[Inside Deaf Culture](#)

[Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature](#)

[The Deaf Studies Digital Journal](#)

[Through Deaf Eyes: A photographic history of an American community](#)

[Wonder Struck](#)