6 American Sign Language
Syntax

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Syntax is the study of constructing sentences. Syntax also refers to the rules and principles of sentence structure.

In ASL, syntax is conveyed through word order and non-manual markers. This section can be confusing, so don't get discouraged if you don't understand the first time.

Word Order

ASL sentences follow a TOPIC-COMMENT structure. This is the same as the English "subject" "predicate" structure. However, instead of the topic always being the subject, the topic in ASL is whatever the comment is referring to. This can either be the subject of the sentence or the object.

The subject of a sentence is the person or object doing the action, the verb of a sentence is the action, and the object of a sentence is what is receiving the action. For example, in the sentence "The boy kicked the ball" the subject is "boy," the verb is "kicked," and the object is "ball."

There are a few different variations of word order in ASL depending on the vocabulary you are using and what you are trying to accomplish.

Word Order with Plain Verbs

When using plain verbs, ASL sentences can follow a variety of different word orders.

While English usually only follows Subject-Verb-Object word order, all of the following sentences are correct in ASL for the English sentence "Mother loves Father," when using plain verbs:

Subject-Verb-Object (SVO)	"MOTHER LOVE FATHER" "SHE LOVE HIM" "MOTHER LOVE HIM" "SHE LOVE FATHER"
Subject-Verb-Object-Subject (SVOS or SVO+Pronoun)	_____aff "MOTHER LOVE FATHER, MOTHER" ___aff "SHE LOVE HIM, SHE"
Object-Subject-Verb (OSV) ("Topicalization")	_____t "FATHER, MOTHER LOVE" ___t "HE, SHE LOVE"
Object-Subject-Verb-Subject (OSVS or OSV+Pronoun)	_____t _____aff "FATHER, MOTHER LOVE, MOTHER" ___t __aff "HE, SHE LOVE, SHE"

You may also see these word orders used:

Verb-Object-Subject (VOS): "LOVE RICE I"

___t
Object-Verb-Subject (OVS): "RICE, LOVE I"

Object-Subject-Verb Word Order

In ASL, you can use either the subject or object as the TOPIC of a sentence. Using the subject as the topic is using an "active voice" and is in Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order. Using the object as the topic is using a "passive voice" and is in Object-Subject-Verb (OSV) word order.

Below are examples of each:

"Topic" is	Example	Topic	Comment	Literal Translation
Subject (SVO) "active voice"	GIRL KICK BALL	GIRL	KICK BALL	"The girl kicked the ball."
Object (OSV) "passive voice"	____t BALL, GIRL KICK	BALL	GIRL KICK	"The ball was kicked by the girl."

When the object is the topic of the sentence, this is called "topicalization." Topicalization is another kind of sentence structure that involves different non-manual markers than a simple SVO structure.

These sentences from the plain verb examples are topicalized sentences:

  _____t
"FATHER, MOTHER LOVE" (OSV)
 __t
"HE, SHE LOVE" (OSV)
  _____t   _____aff
"FATHER, MOTHER LOVE, MOTHER" (OSVS)
 __t   __aff
"HE, SHE LOVE, SHE" (OSV+Pronoun)

We will discuss topicalization non-manual markers later in this section.

Word Order without Objects

All of the following sentences are correct in ASL when signing a sentence without an object:

Subject-Verb (SV)	"MAN STUPID" "HE STUPID"
Subject-Verb-Subject (SVS or SV+Pronoun)	___aff "MAN STUPID HE"
Verb-Pronoun (V+Pronoun)	__aff "STUPID HE"

However, Verb-Subject (putting the verb before the subject of the sentence) would NOT be correct in ASL. For example, "STUPID MAN" is not a correct ASL sentence.

Word Order with Directional Verbs

Directional verbs add additional meaning to sentences which, in turn, contributes to different word order variations. Because the subject and object of the sentence can be shown with just the movement of the directional verb, sometimes only the verb is signed with a certain directional movement.

All of the following sentences are correct in ASL when using directional verbs:

Subject-Verb-Object (SVO)	"I-GIVE-you BOOK" "he-GIVE-her BOOK"
Subject-Verb-Object-Subject (SVO or SVO+Pronoun)	___aff "HE he-GIVE-her BOOK, HE" ___aff "MAN he-GIVE-her BOOK, MAN" ___aff "MAN he-GIVE-her BOOK, HE"
Object-Subject-Verb (OSV) ("Topicalization")	____t "BOOK, he-GIVE-her"
Object-Subject-Verb-Subject (OSVS or OSV+Pronoun) ("Topicalization")	____t __aff "BOOK, he-GIVE-her, HE"

Time-Topic-Comment

When you talk about a past or future event in ASL, you would establish the time-frame before signing the rest of the sentence.

This creates a TIME-TOPIC-COMMENT structure. The same rules of word order for the TOPIC-COMMENT structure apply, only now a "time sign" is added to the beginning of the sentence.

Here are some examples:

Word Order	Sign Example	Literal Translation
Time-Subject-Verb-Object	LAST-WEEK GIRL KICK BALL	"The girl kicked the ball last week."
Time-Subject-Verb	YESTERDAY HE WALK	"He walked yesterday."
Time-Subject-Adjective	2-YEARS-AGO HE UGLY	"He was ugly 2 years ago."

Time signs are usually only signed at the beginning of sentences.

Sentence Types

There are a few different sentence types in ASL. These sentence types are not the same as word order. Word order shows the order in which you can sign your words. Sentence types show how to use word order along with non-manual markers to form certain types of sentences.

Questions

There are three types of questions used in ASL--wh-word questions, yes/no questions, and rhetorical questions. The only way to decipher between these questions in ASL is by the use of non-manual markers.

"Wh" Word Questions (whq)

Wh-word questions are questions that require more than a yes or no answer. These are normally questions that use the words who, what, when, where, why, or how. The wh-word is normally signed at the end of the question.

Non-Manual Markers:

- Lower your eyebrows
- Lean your head forward
- Hold the last sign in your sentence (usually the wh-word)

Wh-Word Question

Examples:

1.   __whq
   HE/SHE WHO? ("Who is he/she?")
2.   ____whq
   YOU LEARN SIGN WHERE? ("Where are you learning sign?")
3. _whq   __whq
   WHO YOUR TEACHER WHO? ("Who is your teacher?")

These common phrases are exceptions to the rule:

4. _____whq
   HOW YOU? ("How are you?")

5. _____whq
   WHAT TIME? ("What time is it?")

6. __whq
   TIME? ("What time is it?")

Yes/No Questions (y/n)

Yes/no questions are questions that only require a simple yes or no answer.

Non-Manual Markers:

- Raise your eyebrows
- Lean your head forward
- Hold the last sign in your sentence

Yes/No Question

Examples:

1. _____y/n
   DEAF YOU? ("Are you Deaf?")
2. _____y/n
   STUDENT HE/SHE? ("Is he/she a student?")
3. _____y/n
   YOU MARRIED YOU? ("Are you married?")

"Question Mark Wiggle"

A "question mark wiggle" is sometimes used to add doubt or incredulousness to a question. You would sign a question mark wiggle with a question like, "You really think she'll win that race?" and use a yes/no question facial expression. A question mark wiggle is signed by taking your index finger and flexing it a little into almost an x-handshape a few times at the end of a question.

Rhetorical Questions (rhq)

Rhetorical questions are not actual questions—a response is not expected. After asking the rhetorical question, you would immediately give the answer and other information. Rhetorical questions are used often with "why" questions in place of the word "because".

Non-Manual Markers:

- Make a statement using a neutral expression
- Ask a "wh" question with your eyebrows raised during the "wh" word
- Answer your own question with a neutral, affirmative, or negative expression

I...WHY?

EAT...NOT

Examples:

1.   __rhq _____neg
   I HUNGRY, WHY? EAT LUNCH NOT.
   ("I'm hungry. Why? I didn't eat lunch")
   ("I'm hungry because I didn't eat lunch")
2.   __rhq _____aff
   THAT WOMAN, WHO? MY MOM.
   ("Who is that woman? My mom")
   ("That woman is my mom")
3.   __rhq _____aff
   I PASS CLASS, HOW? I STUDY.
   ("I passed the class. How? I studied")
   ("I passed the class because I studied")

Declarative Sentences

Declarative sentences are statements. These can be affirmative, negative, or neutral statements and each are recognized by the different non-manual markers that are used.

Affirmative Declarative Sentences

Non-Manual Marker:

- Nod your head while signing (use appropriate facial expression to show the degree or intensity of your affirmation)

Examples:

1. _____aff
   SHE DEAF SHE ("She is Deaf")
2. _____aff
   I HUNGRY ("I'm hungry")
3. _____aff
   I WASH CAR FINISH ("I washed the car")

Negative Declarative Sentences

Non-Manual Markers:

- Shake your head
- Scrunch up your face
- Frown
- Use appropriate facial expression to show the degree or intensity of your negation

Examples:

1. _____neg
   ME GO CAN'T ("I can't go")
2. _____neg
   I HUNGRY ("I'm not hungry")
3. _____neg
   I WASH CAR NOT-YET FINISH ("I'm not finished washing the car")
4. _____neg
   I NOT HUNGRY ("I'm not hungry")
5. ___neg
   I HAVE NONE CHILDREN ("I have no children")

6. _____neg
   I NOT HAVE TIME ("I don't have time")

Neutral Declarative Sentences

Non-Manual Marker:

- Neutral head position (no shaking or nodding)

Examples:

1. I GO HOME ("I'm going home")
2. MY SISTER WANT GO STORE ("My sister wants to go to the store")
3. I EAT FINISH ("I'm done eating")

Conditional Sentences (cond)

Conditional sentences follow an if/then structure where the non-manual markers for the "if" part of the sentence differ from the ones for the "then" part of the sentence.

The signs SUPPOSE, IF, and #IF are also commonly used with the conditional facial expressions to mark the beginning of conditional statements.

Non-Manual Markers:

- Raise your eyebrows during the "if" part of the sentence
- Then make a question or declarative statement for the "then" part of the sentence

TODAY RAIN,   *GAME CANCEL.*

Examples:

1. _____cond _____aff
   TODAY RAIN, GAME CANCEL.
   ("If it rains today, the game will be cancelled")

2. _____cond _____y/n
   TODAY RAIN, YOU LEAVE YOU?
   ("If it rains today, are you going to leave?")

3. _____cond ___whq   ____whq
   TODAY RAIN, WHERE YOU GO WHERE?
   ("If it rains today, where will you go?")

4. _____cond ___aff
   MILK CHEAP, I BUY.
   ("If the milk is cheap, I will buy it")

5. __cond _____aff
   I SICK, LEAVE EARLY.
   ("If I'm sick, I will leave early")

Topicalization (t)

When you use the "object" part of the sentence as the topic of the sentence (OSV word order), this is called topicalization. The facial expression used for the "object" part of the sentence differs from the rest of the sentence. This creates a "passive voice" instead of the "active voice" that is used with SVO structure.

Topicalized Statements

Non-Manual Markers:

- Raise your eyebrows for the "topic" part of the sentence
- Then make a neutral, affirmative, or negative declarative statement for the "comment" part of the sentence

Examples:

1. _____t _____aff
   MY DAD, THAT MAN. ("That man is my dad")

2. _____t _____aff
   FATHER, MOTHER LOVE. ("Mother loves father")

3. _____t   ___"pah"
THAT KEY, I FINALLY FIND
("I finally found that key")

4. _____t ____aff
THAT DRAWING, I DRAW. ("I drew that drawing")

Topicalized "Wh" Question

Non-Manual Markers:

- Raise your eyebrows for the "topic" part of the sentence
- Then lower your eyebrows to ask the "Wh" question

...GIRL, WHO?

Examples:

1. _____t __whq
THAT GIRL, WHO?
("Who is that girl?")

2. _____t __whq
THAT DRAWING, WHAT?
("What is that a drawing of?")

3. _____t __whq
TWO-OF-US LEAVE EARLY, HOW?
("How are we going to leave early?")

Negation

To **form a negative**, you can:

- Sign NOT before the word.

- Shake your head while signing the word.

- Use reversal of orientation for some signs.

- Frown while signing the word.

Non-manual markers are a very important part of negation. For example, if you sign, "I DON'T-LIKE HAMBURGER," a different facial expression can change the meaning to: "I really dislike hamburgers."

Reversal of Orientation

Reversal of orientation is one way to form a negative. When you reverse your palm orientation of some signs, you can express the opposite of the meaning of the original sign.

For example, you can change the sign for WANT to DON'T-WANT by signing WANT then reversing your palm orientation so your palms are facing downward while using a negative facial expression.

WANT   *DON'T-WANT*

You can use reversal of orientation for the signs WANT, KNOW, and LIKE to mean DON'T-WANT, DON'T-KNOW, or DON'T-LIKE.

Pronouns and Indexing

Indexing is when you set up a point to refer to a person or object that is or is not present in the signing area. This is also known as referencing or creating referents.

If the person or object is present, you can just point at him, her, or it to mean HE/HIM, SHE/HER, or IT.

If the person or object is not present, you would first need to identify the person or object. Then, you can "index" the person or object to a point in space. Once you have set up this referent, you can refer back to that same point every time you want to talk about that person or object.

To refer to referents, you would use these types of signs:

- Personal Pronouns
- Possessive Pronouns
- Directional Verbs

For example, if you are talking about Bill and Suzy, you can sign Bill's name and point to your left. Then, you can sign Suzy's name and point to your right. When continuing your dialogue about Bill and Suzy, you would then point to your left or right whenever you refer to them (you would no longer need to spell out their names).

Indexing on your non-dominant hand

You can also use your non-dominant hand as a way to index and talk about your friends or family.

For example, when you are talking about your siblings, you can index them on your non-dominant hand by pointing to different fingers for each sibling, starting with your thumb for your oldest sibling and working your way down to your last finger for the youngest.