

Chapter 2

Warming Up with Signing Grammar Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Signing various parts of speech
- ▶ Indicating tenses in your signing
- ▶ Putting together some simple sentences
- ▶ Expressing exclamations
- ▶ Getting more complicated with conditional sentences
- ▶ Using personification and facial grammar

In this chapter, we talk about the building blocks that you need to communicate in any language — nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs — and we tell you how to put them together to form simple sentences. We also tell you how to get your body involved to express verb tenses.

Explaining the Parts of Speech

Both English and American Sign Language have subjects and verbs, as well as adjectives and adverbs that describe the subjects and verbs. Also, English and Sign both allow you to converse about the present, past, and future, so whatever English can do, Sign can do — visually. However, unlike English, ASL doesn't use prepositions as a separate part of speech. As a general rule, most prepositions in Sign, with a few exceptions, act as verbs.



The English language articles — *a*, *an*, and *the* — aren't used in Sign. Likewise, helping verbs, such as *am*, *is*, and *are*, aren't used in Sign, either. ASL is an active language, which means that helping verbs and being verbs aren't necessary.

Distinguishing between noun/verb pairs

Some nouns and verbs in Sign share the same handshapes. You distinguish the part of speech by signing the motion once if it's a verb and twice if it's a noun. Like any language, there are exceptions to the rule.



Though most nouns don't have a verb that looks the same, all but a few nouns need the double motion. Most of the noun illustrations in this book are represented by double arrows. We indicate which nouns don't follow the double-motion rule.

Table 2-1 shows a few noun and verb pairs.

Table 2-1 Nouns and Verbs with Shared Handshapes			
English Noun	Sign	English Verb	Sign
CHAIR		SIT	
PLANE		FLY	
CAR		DRIVE	

The following examples compare the noun/verb differences.

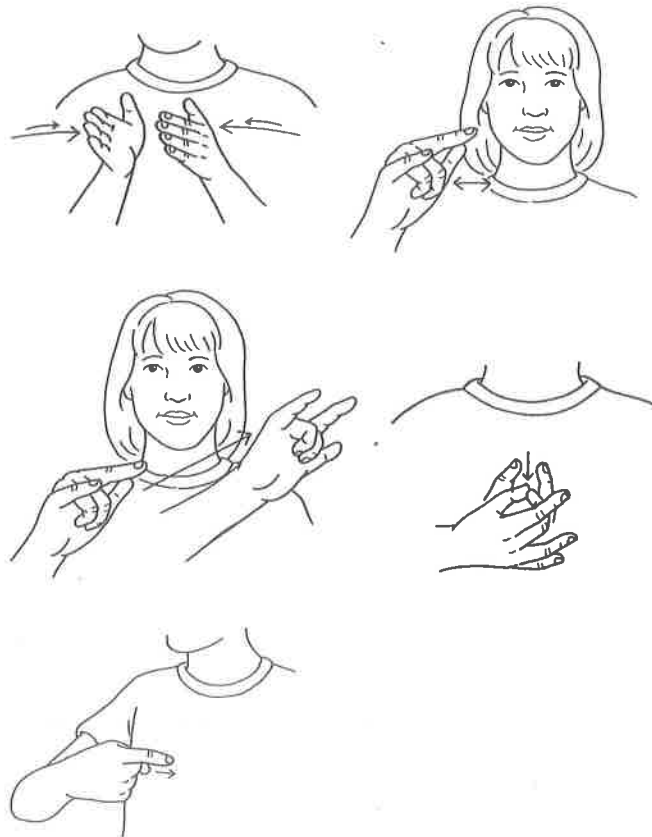
English: Please sit in this chair.

Sign: THIS CHAIR (point) — PLEASE — SIT



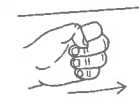
English: I like to fly small planes.

Sign: SMALL PLANES — FLY — LIKE ME



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Modifying with adjectives and adverbs



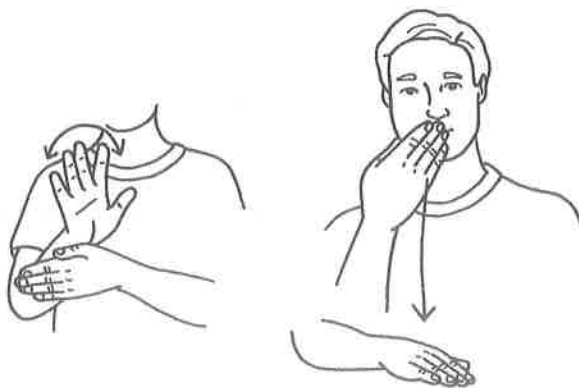
In English, a modifier can come before or after the word it modifies, depending on the sentence. However, in Sign, you typically place the adjective or adverb — the modifier — after the word it modifies. But sometimes in Sign, you may find yourself expressing the modifier at the same time you sign the word it modifies, just by using your face.

Your facial expressions can describe things and actions in ASL. For instance, if something is small or big, you can show its size without actually signing **small** or **big**. You can describe a small piece of thread by pursing your lips, blowing out a little air, and closing your eyes halfway. If something is very thick, puff out your cheeks. You can convey that it's raining hard or that a car is moving fast by moving your eyebrows or shaping your mouth a certain way. (Turn to Chapter 1 for more on using expressions and body language.)

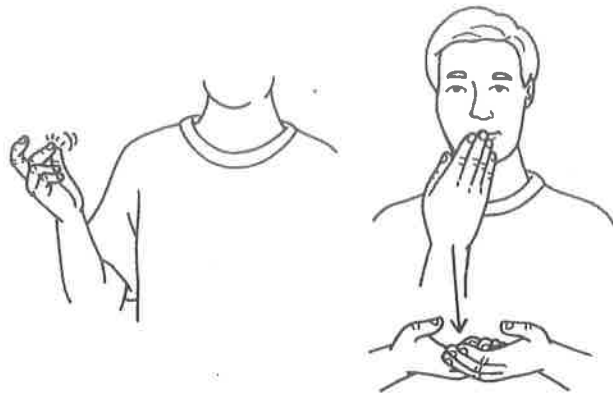
The following examples show adjectives and adverbs placed with nouns and verbs. We also provide tips on how to use facial expressions to really get your point across when describing things in Sign.



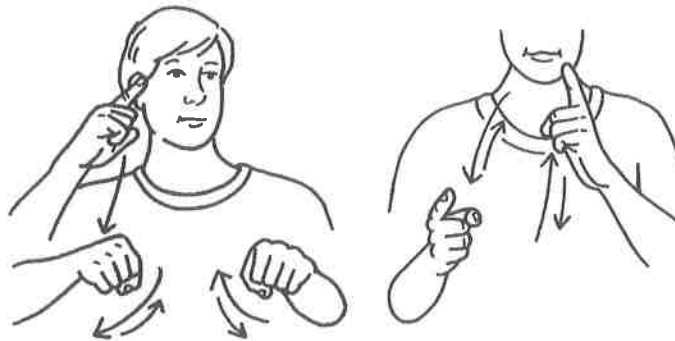
PRETTY GIRL: Raise your eyebrows, form your mouth into an "o" shape (like saying ooh), sign "pretty" and then "girl."



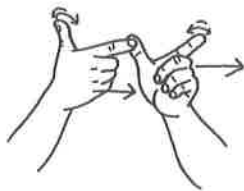
BAD MOVIE: Sign the word "movie" and then turn your mouth down in a frown and scrunch your eyebrows together while signing the word "bad."



GOOD DOG: Sign the word “dog” first, then slightly smile and raise your eyebrows as you sign the word “good.”



TALK LOUDLY or LOUDLY TALK



RUN VERY FAST: Sign the word “run” while scrunching your eyebrows together and clenching your jaw tight with your mouth slightly open.



Some adverbs used in English, such as the words *very* and *really*, are also used in ASL. Others must be incorporated into the verb by using facial expressions.

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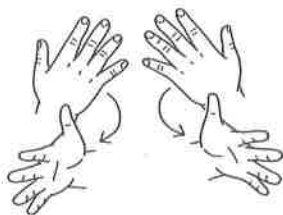
Talking Tenses

To communicate tenses in Sign, you need your hands *and* your body. Showing tense in ASL is partly a matter of where you sign in relation to your body.

Think of your body as being in the present tense, which is a fairly safe assumption, we hope.

To place everything you sign into past tense, you sign **finish** at chest level or higher, depending on the level of intensity, at either the beginning or end of the sentence (most signers do it at the beginning for clarity), while saying the word *fish*, a shortened version of *finish*. This sign signals that everything has already happened.

You can also use the **finish** sign when making an exclamation. (For more on this sign's uses, see the section "Exclaiming in Simple Sentences" later in this chapter.)



Signing in future tense works pretty much the same way as signing in past tense. You indicate future tense by signing and saying **will** at the end of a sentence. The farther you sign the word **will** from the front of your body, the farther into the future you go. Here's an example:

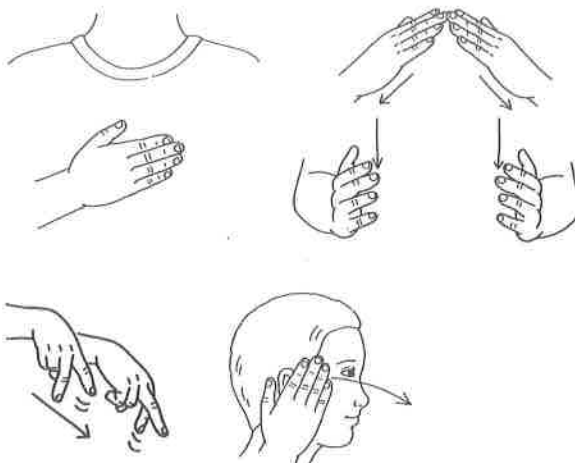
English: He will go later.
Sign: HE GO — WILL



You can also sign **will** to show affirmation. For example:

English: Mike is walking over to my house.

Sign: MY HOUSE — M-I-K-E — WALKING — WILL



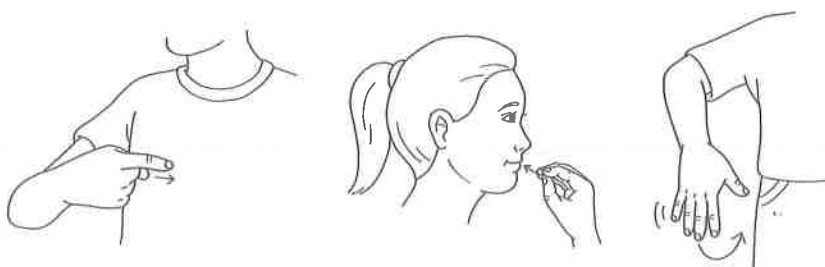
You can easily sign an event that's going to happen in the future. A simple rule to follow: Mention what's planned or intended and then sign **will**.



Here's a time-sensitive concept that doesn't quite fit into past, present, or future tense. To show that you're not yet finished with or you haven't even started a task, sign the unaccomplished deed and then sign **not yet** while shaking your head slightly from side to side, as if saying *no*, at the end of the sentence. You don't pronounce *not yet*, though; you simply sign it. The following sentence gives you an idea of how you can use this expression:

English: I haven't eaten.

Sign: ME EAT — NOT YET



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Structuring Sentences

Putting a sentence together in English is pretty basic. You usually put it in subject-verb-direct object order, perhaps throwing in an indirect object between the verb and the direct object. In ASL, however, you can choose to assemble your sentence in different orders, depending on the dialogue.



You can sign simple sentences in a natural English order. However, most of the time, you can get your point across in a variety of ways.



Although Sign is an official language, it isn't a written one. Some people have attempted to make an artificial Sign system for writing purposes, but few people know it because its use is so limited. Because ASL isn't meant to be a written language, it has no punctuation. To write about Sign, as in this book, you must translate it as closely as possible into a written language such as English.

Subjecting yourself to nouns and verbs in simple sentences

Unlike English grammar rules, which dictate that the subject must go before the verb, Sign allows you to put the subject before or after the verb when dealing with simple sentences; it doesn't matter which word comes first. The same goes for exclamations; you can place them at the beginning or the end of a simple sentence (see the section "Exclaiming in Simple Sentences" later in this chapter). The following examples illustrate how simple sentences work.

English: He ran.

Sign: HE RAN

Sign: RAN HIM

English: She fell.

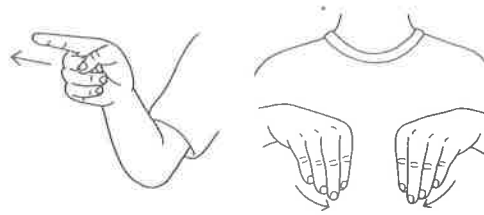
Sign: SHE FELL

Sign: FELL HER

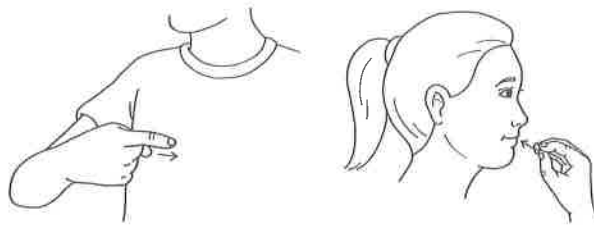
Placing subjects and objects

To incorporate direct and indirect objects into your signing, first start with a basic subject-verb sentence. You can sign it in subject-verb or verb-subject order. Here are some examples:

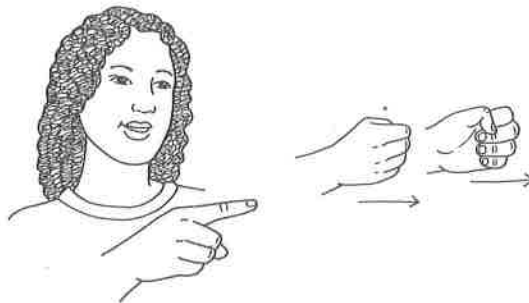
English: He sells.
Sign: HE SELLS



English: I eat.
Sign: ME EAT



English: She drives.
Sign: SHE DRIVES



Although these short sentences get the point across, the world would be pretty boring if that's how people communicated all the time. So add a direct object to each of these sentences to make them a little more interesting.

In case you haven't had a grammar class in a few years, a *direct object* is a word that goes after the verb and answers the question *what?* or *whom?* However, in ASL, the direct object can go either before the subject or after the verb.

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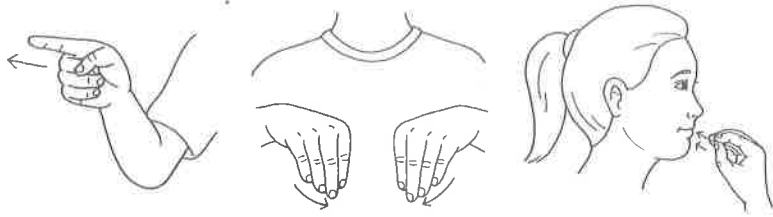
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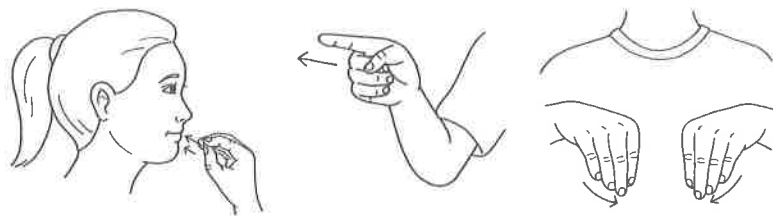
st start with a
verb-subject

English: He sells food.

Sign: HE SELLS FOOD

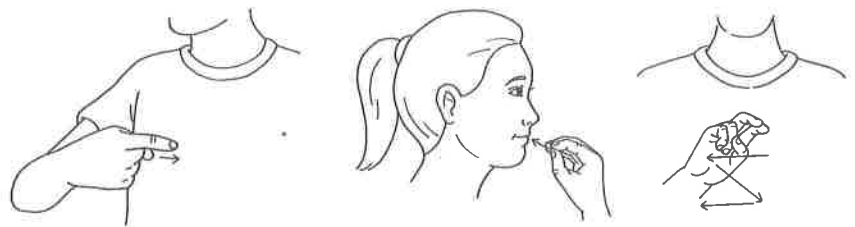


Sign: FOOD HE SELLS

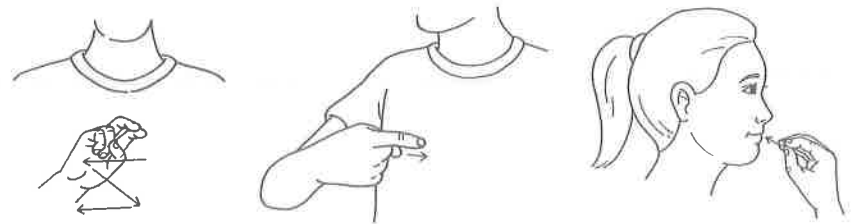


English: I eat pizza.

Sign: ME EAT PIZZA

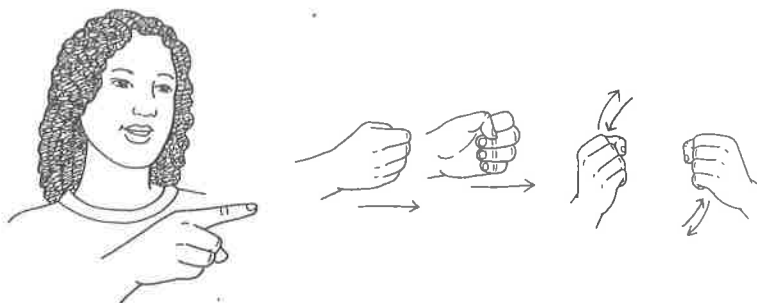


Sign: PIZZA ME EAT



English: She drives a car.

Sign: SHE DRIVES CAR



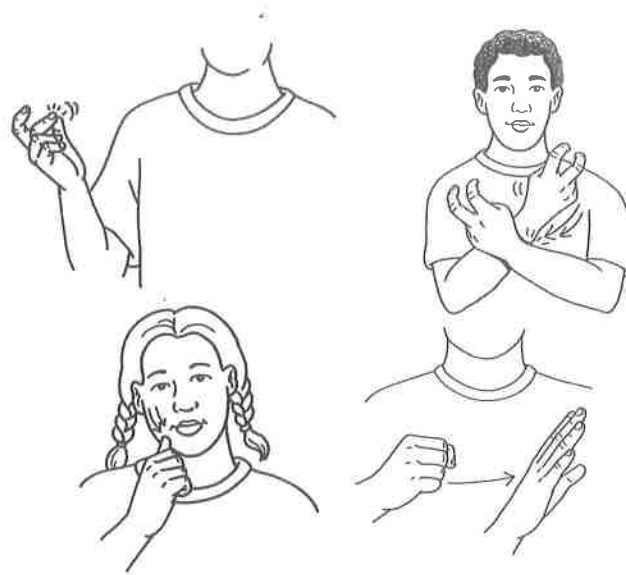
Sign: CAR SHE DRIVES



TIP If you have a sentence that may be misunderstood if you change the word order, leave it in the natural English order. For example, if you want to say *Joe loves Sue*, you need to sign JOE LOVES SUE. Changing it around to SUE LOVES JOE doesn't convey the same meaning. (Having said that, we really hope that Sue does love Joe in return.)

Okay. So you're signing sentences with direct objects. Now, try to take your signing skills one step further by signing *indirect objects*. (Another quick grammar reminder: Indirect objects are words that come between the verb and direct object; they indicate who or what receives the direct object.) You place the indirect object right after the subject and then show the action. These sentences show you the correct order:

English: The girl throws the dog a bone.
Sign: DOG BONE — GIRL — THROW



English: I gave the teacher an apple.
Sign: ME TEACHER — APPLE GAVE

