

## Foundations of BSL: Getting Started

Before you dive in to learning BSL, there are some key things you should know to make your learning experience smoother and more effective. Here are 10 essential points to keep in mind before you embark on your learning journey. This information will set you up for success and help you appreciate the true wonder of BSL.



### 1. BSL is a visual language and has no official written form.

BSL is a visual-gestural language relying on handshapes, facial expressions, body language and other elements to convey meaning. This makes BSL very difficult to capture in a written format.



### 2. Not all sign languages are the same.

Most countries have their own sign language. In the United States, ASL (American Sign Language) is primarily used and it's largely different to BSL. ASL is more closely related with the sign language used in France, LSF (or Langue des Signes Française). BSL does share many similarities with the sign languages of Australia (Auslan) and New Zealand (NZSL); sometimes these sign languages are grouped together and called BANZSL (British, Australian and New Zealand Sign Language). BSL is an important part of not only deaf history, but also British history.



### 3. BSL has a different sentence structure to English.

A common misconception is that BSL is a signed version of English; it isn't. English typically follows the sentence structure known as subject-verb-object (although can be correctly used in other structures too). BSL's sentence structure is topic-comment. For example in English, you might say "I sat on a bench at the park" but in BSL, you build the picture with the larger elements first so you would sign "PARK BENCH ME SIT". You'll learn more about the structure of BSL as your learning journey progresses.



### 4. BSL is an official British language.

The British Sign Language Act 2022 legally recognises BSL as a language in England, Scotland and Wales. BSL is a complete language naturally evolving amongst it's users like any other language. Sign Supported English (SSE) uses BSL signs but in the same structure as English. SSE isn't a language in its own right as it blends English and BSL. Makaton is a supplementary communication system that borrows BSL signs but also uses speech and symbols specifically to aid those with learning or communication difficulties.



### 5. You need more than just your hands.

BSL makes use of more than just hand movements. Facial expressions, lip patterns, head and body movements are all used in BSL. For some signs, it's acceptable to *mouth* the English word at the same time as using the sign but for other signs a specific lip pattern is required, e.g. the sign for EXPENSIVE requires you to puff your lips out. More advanced signers tend to use more non-manual features (beyond just the hand movements).



## 6. How many people use BSL?

There are various statistics which give us an idea about the number of BSL users in the UK, however these are estimates because population surveys such as the census are carried out in written format which makes access an issue for BSL users. Scotland's 2022 census asked a question specifically about BSL for the first time and 117,300 people said they can use BSL. This would equate to approximately 2.13% of Scotland's population (5.49 million), applied equally to the UK's population overall (68.3 million) that would give an estimate of 1.46 million people in the UK that can use BSL at some level. The British Deaf Association estimate that for over 87,000 Deaf people, BSL is their preferred language over English. There's a lot of people in the UK that could benefit from learning BSL; according to the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, 1 in 3 or over 18 million adults in the UK have hearing loss or tinnitus.



## 7. BSL has regional variations.

Much like all languages including English, BSL has regional variations. These differences can be confusing for new learners especially as the differences are not the same as regional variations in English. For example, in English you might call a bread roll *a cob*, *a batch* or *a bun* but in BSL the sign visually representative so doesn't change. However, in BSL you will encounter variations for common signs such as the number TEN, the sign for TOILET and there's many variations for colours! BSL is a language that has passed on through Deaf communities and Deaf schools with no widely accepted written form. In today's world, the language is easier to record and share thanks to modern-day technologies, thus the language is becoming more standardised. Regional variations are an important part of the history of BSL and tend to be an interesting conversational point rather than a challenge.



## 8. The difference between deaf and Deaf.

The word *deaf* is generally used to describe anyone with a hearing loss regardless of the reason, although individuals may have their own preferences. When a capital D is used for the word *Deaf*, this specifically refers to the Deaf community members who use BSL. You may see the term *d/Deaf* used to include those with a hearing loss and Deaf BSL users.



## 9. Which hand should you use?

While both hands are required for many BSL signs, your dominant hand should be used for one-handed signs and perform the main action in two-handed signs. The analogy of a pen and paper might help you to visualise what to do, with your dominant hand being the pen and non-dominant hand the paper. Switching your dominant hand mid-conversation will disrupt the flow and be harder for the person watching you to understand. For the ambidextrous, choose whichever you wish but don't switch. If you are undertaking BSL exams, it's important you get this correct.



## 10. Learning BSL is a step towards creating a fairer society in the UK

BSL users who have been Deaf from a young age often face barriers and difficulties in the form of social exclusion, employment opportunities, access to education and more. While BSL is an official British language, there's a common misconception that written English or subtitles is sufficient for Deaf people. For many Deaf people, British Sign Language is their first language so by learning even just basic BSL and being aware of the issues that Deaf people face, you can help create a society that encourages communication equality for British Deaf people.