An Intro to ASL Grammar Rules [American Sign Language]

ASL grammar rules may seem intimidating at first, but once you understand the basics, you’ll be using sign language more fluidly in no time!

First and foremost, a common misconception about ASL is that it is just a signed version of English, word-for-word. This leads to the flawed assumption that ASL and English share similar grammar rules.

However, ASL is a visual language, independent of English, with its own grammar and syntax. If we examine English, we might notice that its structure is very linear and restricted. Each word has its own place in a sentence and the sentence would no longer make sense if you change the order of a verb or adjective.

On the other hand, sign language grammar is much more flexible, allowing for multiple word orders to represent the same concept. For more information, check out the video below:

Intro to ASL Grammar Rules

Let’s look at a few important concepts in sign language grammar. Note: Since ASL does not have a written form and is not English, we write the signed words in what is called “ASL gloss.” This is a word that can be represented in English and is written in all capital letters.

ASL Sentence Structure

Here are two basic sentence structures in ASL grammar:

Time + Topic + Comment + Referent

Topic + Comment + Referent

In these basic sentence structures:

Time = the tense.

Topic = the subject.

Comment = what is being said about the subject.

Referent = refers to the subject you are talking about.

Let’s take the essential elements from a simple English sentence and frame it as a sentence signed in ASL. The sentence we’ll look at is: “I am going on vacation tomorrow.”

In ASL, the elements of this sentence are:

Time – tomorrow

Topic – vacation

Comment – go

Referent – I

So you would sign this sentence in ASL as: “Tomorrow vacation go I.”

Did you notice a difference in the words used? The word “going” is written as GO. In ASL, the same signs are used regardless of tense, so we write them in their basic, unconjugated form when filling in the sentence frame.

What determines the tense for GO is the time we use, such as: TOMORROW, YESTERDAY, TODAY, SUNDAY, NEXT WEEK, etc. For this reason, the time portion must be in the beginning of a sentence in ASL.

Pro tip: When a question is asked in ASL, the WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, and WHICH words go at the end of the sentence, (or both the beginning and the end).

Facial Expressions in ASL

Facial expressions also play a key role in sign language grammar. Our eyebrows frame how our sentences are stated.

In English, we must alter the words and their order to change a statement into a question. In ASL, word order does not matter since we use the eyebrows to indicate whether the sentence ends with a question mark, exclamation mark, or period.

When asking questions with WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, and WHICH, our eyebrows move downward to indicate curiosity or inquiry, like in the image below. When we ask YES or NO questions, our eyebrows are raised.

ASL grammar rules - facial expressions

The second purpose of facial expressions in ASL grammar is connected with emotional expression. When we sign HAPPY, SAD, or MAD, our facial expression must match the sign. This means that signing HAPPY with a sad face is grammatically incorrect.

Also, we use our faces to add emphasis to a sign. In English, if we want to reiterate the importance of a point, we could add the word “very” before “important” to provide emphasis. To show emphasis in ASL, we add facial expressions instead of an additional sign.

Furthermore, just like English, ASL does have a tone to it and that is the third purpose of facial expressions. For example, how many ways can you say the word “fine” and create a different meaning? You can be fine (happy), fine (annoyed), or fine (angry).

ASL expresses tone by creating a happy, annoyed, or angry face, in addition to emphasizing the sign FINE. This can be done by making the sign bigger, signing it for a shorter amount of time, or changing the movement of the sign.

Body Language and ASL Grammar

asl grammar - body language

Body language is just as important as facial expressions in sign language grammar. It includes any sort of added movement that accompanies a sign.

For example, consider the sign for UNDERSTAND. Hold your hand near your forehead with your index finger touching the pad of your thumb. Then, flick your index finger so that it points up.

The sign for DON’T UNDERSTAND is the exact same sign… Crazy, right? What makes the concept different is the addition of a head shake, which negates the message. We sign the same word while shaking our head side-to-side, completely changing the grammar and meaning of our message.

Think in Concepts

Just like any other language, ASL expresses meaning and concepts, not words. We cannot assign one English word to one sign because oftentimes, one sign can equate to multiple meanings in English. ASL can also use one sign to represent an entire sentence in English.

For example, the sign for ASK is directional, meaning the movement of the sign indicates who is being asked. “I ask her” or “she asks me” can both be demonstrated simply with the sign for ASK. The only difference is the direction your palm is facing.

You can also say “I asked her repeatedly” or “I asked her continually” while still using the one sign for ASK. (In this case, you would repeat the same sign in the same direction a few times). Meanwhile, in English, it would take four words or more to express this idea sufficiently.

In addition, ASL does not use the English words “and,” “or,” “the,” “of,” and “is” to convey information. Instead, these concepts are expressed through facial expressions, role shifting, and pointing.

Now that you’ve learned a few ASL grammar rules, take your skills to the next level and sign up for free classes on TakeLessons Live. Class sizes are small and allocate time for practice with other students, plus you get real-time feedback from expert ASL instructors!