

# Fingerspelling

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Fingerspelling is the way letters of the alphabet are shown in signed languages. It is commonly used to supplement a signed language, which is visual in nature. There are three main types of fingerspelling used in South African Sign Language (SASL): initialised, lexicalised, and neutral fingerspelling.



## What is fingerspelling?

By itself, fingerspelling is not recognised as a signed language; the alphabet letters (a–z) belong to spoken/written languages. SASL is regarded as independent of other languages; it is produced by hands, upper body movement, and facial expression. The accuracy of signs is determined by five parameters: handshape, movement, location, palm orientation, and non-manual features. This is similar to the use of spelling and pronunciation in written and spoken languages.

Despite differences between the various language families, a lot of vocabulary is borrowed between languages. Eventually, some of these words become part of the language itself. Like other languages, SASL borrows from other languages in vocabulary. Fingerspelling helps with such words.



### Initialised, lexicalised, and neutral fingerspelling

The handshapes of words using **initialised fingerspelling** resemble the fingerspelling of the first letters of English words. For example: 'respect' is signed with the initial 'r' letter shape. While most signs are borrowed from English, several are taken from other local languages within the various deaf communities. For example, deaf people from isiXhosa-speaking families in the Eastern Cape use a different sign dialect for 'come back/go back/make a u-turn' in that the handshape resembles fingerspelling for the letter 'j' for the isiXhosa word *jika*.

In **lexicalised fingerspelling**, the whole word - usually a short word - is spelled to perform the function of a sign. For example, the word 'if' can be fingerspelled I-F within a sentence in SASL.

Finally, **neutral fingerspelling** is used in SASL to fingerspell proper nouns and words that have no known signs. Our names and surnames have to be fingerspelled because they represent spoken languages. Neutral fingerspelling is also used in SASL to illustrate a word instead of producing its sign or to introduce a sign for a word.

### Why is fingerspelling important?

Fingerspelling is an important part of a signed language. It confirms the fact that deaf people co-exist with hearing people and their spoken languages and the fact that SASL is part of a family of languages. Fingerspelling helps to enrich our signed language and provides an important link between hearing people and deaf people. It can also be used as a tool for connecting hearing people to deaf people. For instance, hearing people can learn sign vocabulary by fingerspelling words to a deaf person and asking how to sign that word.

SASL is a real, developed language of its own. While fingerspelling is important in the language, it's no substitute for the language itself. To learn SASL, contact Wits Language School: [www.witslanguageschool.com](http://www.witslanguageschool.com) | 011 717 4208 | [ws@wits.ac.za](mailto:ws@wits.ac.za).

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