

LANGUAGE IN PERFORMANCE

Handshape Stories

Handshape stories are one form of creative play with ASL. In handshape stories all the signs used must be chosen and ordered according to specific rules. There are three kinds of handshape stories: ABC stories, number stories, and one-handshape stories. ABC stories are told using signs in the handshapes of each letter of the manual alphabet, starting with A and ending with Z. This involves using a *pattern* from English, with *signs* from ASL. The ASL signs usually have no relationship to the English letter except for the handshape used. Number stories are similar to ABC stories, but use signs in the handshapes of ASL numbers from 1 to 10, 15, or 20. In one-handshape stories the performer recites a story or poem using only signs in a single handshape.

To appreciate handshape stories, you should first understand how signs are made. Just as spoken languages are made up of different sounds in various combinations, signed languages are made up of certain handshapes that occur in different locations, with various movements and orientations. All signs can be analyzed in terms of these parameters: handshape, movement, location and orientation. As you change any of these parameters, you also change the meaning of the sign. For example, think of the sign for "apple": the X-handshape at the cheek, palm oriented down, and signed with a twisting movement. If you change the *location* of the sign for "apple" to near the eye, the meaning changes to "onion." If you change the *handshape* of the sign for "apple" to the 1-handshape, the meaning changes to a regional sign for "candy." Not all possible handshapes, movements or locations are acceptable in ASL; also, there are ASL handshapes other than those of the letters of the English alphabet. It is the constraint on handshapes—the strict order required—that provides the challenge in creating a handshape story.

ABC Stories. The form of ABC stories is traditional, but the stories themselves vary. The most common types are risqué, humorous, or horror stories, especially among young people, but they may also relate everyday experiences in a way that entertains and delights the listener. ABC stories may be passed on from one group to another, often with creative alterations or new twists.

On videotape, Dr. Sam Supalla first gives a general introduction to the Language in Performance series. Sam then introduces Ben Bahan, who presents his ABC story "Class Reunion." Because some of the handshapes of the manual alphabet are used in very few ASL signs (for example: E, J, M, P, T), Ben takes advantage of name signs to work these handshapes into his story.* See below for a list of the handshapes used in the story, followed by the meaning of the sign Ben uses for that handshape.

* In many name signs, the first letter of the person's name is signed in particular rule-governed locations. See the Level 1 *Student Workbook*, p. 40, for review. Notice that in this story, Ben does bend the rules by using name signs in direct address. Poetic license is assumed for the strict structure of an ABC story.

handshape	meaning	handshape	meaning
A:	"hey there" (informal or intimate sign)	N and O:	"No, I'm wrong."
B:	"hello"	P:	correct name sign
C:	(handshake)	Q:	"How stupid of me!"
D:	"you"	R:	"I didn't realize..."
E:	name sign	S:	"...how old I'm getting."
F:	(looks person over)	T:	name sign of yet another person
G:	"You're thin!"	U:	"You were so funny..."
H and I:	"Hi" to another person	V:	"...as I look back over the years."
J:	name sign	W:	"wow" (modified sign)
K:	"You're smoking now?"	X:	"Friends..."
L:	"I'm surprised at you."	Y:	"...are now..."
M:	another person's name sign	Z:	"...coming from all over."

One-Handshake Story. Sam then introduces Freda Norman, who tells a one-handshake story that illustrates a different form of language play. The objective is to tell a story which is as long as possible without violating any grammar rules, and with appropriate sequencing and organization, while using *only* signs of one handshape. Freda uses the handshape for "5" or "B" which is frequently used in ASL. The story she tells is about a boy, his parents, and the events that occurred throughout the boy's life.

End of Unit 13