

## Auslan is a sign language

There is no one sign language that is universal among all deaf people. Australian sign language (Auslan), like other true sign languages around the world, is not based on the dominant language of the society. Auslan has its own syntax and its own lexicon. It has its own way of organising meaning, just as any other language has. Auslan has grammatical rules, a semantic system and a phonological system like all other sign languages. Auslan is based on two-handed signs and incorporates a two-handed alphabet (fingerspelling). Around 10,000 deaf Australians currently use Auslan as their community language.

### The evolution of Auslan

British deaf people who migrated to Australia in the 19th century brought their sign language with them. Over time, an Australian sign language evolved and developed its own unique characteristics. Like any other living language, Auslan continues to evolve over time, to meet the communication needs of deaf people.

### The structure of Auslan

Sign languages use a variety of ways to convey meaning, including:

- **Hand shapes** - research has shown that Auslan currently has 37 major hand shapes and 25 variations.
- **Orientation** - signs are oriented to the body, with the palm facing different directions.
- **Location** - signs may be placed in different locations in relation to the body.
- **Movement** - large-scale movements through space or small movements of hands and fingers.
- **Facial expressions, natural gestures and body language** - many standard facial expressions, such as shaking the head for 'no' or raising the eyebrows to form a question, are used extensively to convey emotion, emphasis and intensity.
- **Fingerspelling** - the alphabet is spelled out on the fingers when there is no established sign; for example, when using jargon or a person's name.

### Learning Auslan

Many TAFES and organisations like the Victorian Deaf Society provide regular Auslan classes. A dictionary of Auslan, written by Trevor Johnston, is available. It provides a lot of information about the language and individual signs.

### Where to get help

- Vicdeaf Tel. (03) 9473 1111
- Victorian Council of Deaf People Tel. (03) 9521 2466 (TTY/Voice)
- Australian Association of the Deaf - Sydney Office Tel. (02) 9871 8400 (TTY only) Brisbane Office Tel. (07) 3357 8266 (Voice)
- Vicdeaf Auslan and Interpreting Service (VAIS) Tel. (03) 9473 1117/8 - TTY number: 03 9473 1143 - Fax number. (03) 9473 1144

### Things to remember

- Sign languages rely on the use of space, movement and facial expression to express all the nuances, force and subtleties of language.
- Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is recognised in the Australian Government Language Policy as a community language.
- Australian Sign Language evolved and developed its own unique characteristics.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

## Victorian Deaf Society

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