

AUSLAN: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

Almost 20,000 people use Auslan to communicate every day, yet this uniquely Australian language remains much of a mystery. Here's an introduction to the language of Australia's deaf and hearing impaired community.

What is Auslan?

Auslan is short for **Australian sign language**, a language developed by, and for, Australians who are deaf or hearing impaired. It's a visual form of communication that uses hand, arm and body movements to convey meaning.

Is Auslan used in other countries?

No, Auslan is uniquely Australian. Just like different languages are spoken around the world, people who are deaf use different sign languages depending on where they come from (it's estimated there are **130 sign languages** around the world). Due to historical similarities, Auslan is more like British Sign Language (BSL) than American Sign Language (ASL), which means Australians can often understand BSL and vice versa.

How did Auslan come about?

Auslan dates back around 200 years, when British, Irish and Scottish immigrants brought sign language to Australia. Over time, Auslan developed its own unique traits. And just like other languages, Auslan continues to evolve as the Australian deaf and hearing impaired community grows.

Does Auslan use English grammar?

No, Auslan has its own grammatical system that's totally separate from English. Like all sign languages, Auslan is a visual-gestural language which means it uses movement to convey grammar and meaning at the same time. In contrast, English relies on word order and sentence structure. Interestingly, Auslan's grammatical structure is closer to Chinese or French than English. Here's an example:

"I saw a beautiful red car this morning" (English)

"Red car beautiful this morning I saw" (Auslan)



What is fingerspelling?

Finger spelling is used by signers in the Auslan community when there isn't a commonly understood sign for a particular word, such as the names of places or people. Studies show that fingerspelling is used in about 10% of communication by Auslan users.

How does Auslan work?

Auslan relies on a combination of hand shapes, movements and facial expressions to deliver messages. These can include a combination of:

- Hand shapes – Auslan has 38 hand shapes with 28 variants
- Orientation – This is the direction of your palm and hand in relation to your body. For example, making a sign near the head suggests 'thinking'.
- Location – Signs are made near different parts of the body to convey meaning
- Movement – Small or large movements of the head, arms and hands can suggest different words
- Expression – Head and facial movements or expressions are used to convey emotion and emphasis.

How do children learn sign language?

Children pick up sign language just like they would learn a spoken language. From about six months, babies will start to “babble” with their hands. By their first birthday, they’ll typically produce their first sign, which is also around the time children learning spoken languages say their first word.

As signing children grow and learn more complex words, their ability to create accurate handshapes will improve too. For example, signing toddlers might produce signs like ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘eat’ and ‘goodbye’ but are likely to make errors in handshapes or movements, similar to the way young children are initially unable to pronounce all the sounds in English words. By two years of age, children will typically understand two-sign combinations such as “want milk” and by five, have a solid understanding of basic sign language grammar.

Did you know?

Just like English, Spanish or Chinese, Auslan is recognised as a language in its own right. Auslan was recognised as an official language by the Australian Government in 1991.

Where can I learn it?

Interested in learning Auslan? A great starting point is to look up the organisation for deafness advocacy in your state. Try **Deaf Can:Do** in South Australia, **Deaf Services** in Queensland, **Tasdeaf** in Tasmania, **Vicdeaf** in Victoria, **WA Deaf Society** in Western Australia and **The Deaf Society** in New South Wales.

Are there other types of sign language?

Yes, Auslan is just one of the many ways Australians who are deaf or hearing impaired communicate with each other. Another popular form of manual communication is key word sign (formerly known as Makaton), which uses hand signs to support children and adults with speech difficulties.

HEARING LOSS IS ON THE RISE

1 in 4

Australians with hearing loss 2050

1 in 6

Australians with hearing loss 2015

Useful links

Want to know more? Here are some useful resources:

- The basics of Auslan
<http://deafchildreinaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/What-is-Auslan-2012.pdf>
- A brief history of Auslan
<http://www.deafau.org.au/info/auslan1.php>
- Summary of Auslan
<http://tasdeaf.org.au/what-is-auslan>
- What makes Auslan unique
http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Sign_language_auslan



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