



# **Accessible Arts & Media Resource Guide**

**A guide to  
Singing & Signing**

[www.aamedia.org.uk](http://www.aamedia.org.uk)



## About Accessible Arts & Media

We're a charity based in York and we've been running inclusive arts and media learning projects since 1982. We're a small charity with a big heart and our work's built around the belief that everyone can learn, everyone can be creative, and everyone can connect with and contribute to their local community.

We run a range of fun, inclusive creative learning programmes, from singing and signing choirs to specialist sensory activities that support wellbeing; accessible music making groups; creative media projects; and creative sensory activities including fabulously glittery arts and crafts, messy play, sensory stories and music and movement.

A lot of different people take part in our projects. From disabled adults and young people, to older people with dementia and memory loss and people with mental ill-health. We also work with schools, community groups and local businesses.

Our work is centred around co-production - we level the playing field by providing everyone with the support and space they need to have an equal say. And we make sure that everyone has a lot of fun along the way!

If you've downloaded and used any of our resources, we'd love to hear more about how you've been using them, you can drop us an email at [info@aamedia.org.uk](mailto:info@aamedia.org.uk) or tag us on social media.

If you've enjoyed using our resources and you'd like to make a donation to support the cost of creating them, you can [donate via our website](#). As a small charity, we really appreciate your support.

## Introduction to Accessible Arts and Media's Singing and Signing Resource Packs

Our singing and signing resource packs are designed to be accessible for a wide range of groups and abilities. Our work in singing and signing has mainly been with young people and adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. However, we've also used these resources with primary school children, older people, people living with dementia and community choirs.

Each resource pack contains links to two videos: one of an AAM leader performing the song along with the backing track, and the other of the leader teaching the individual signs, words and melody. The packs also include sheet music, a backing track, a vocal track and a sign sheet with all the words and signs needed for the song.

# The Accessible Arts & Media approach to teaching Songs and Signs

## Warm ups

We've always considered warm-ups a crucial part of any singing activities at Accessible Arts & Media (AAM). In our experience, a good warm up generally leads to much better singing later on in the rehearsal or performance.

We always warm up 3 areas - our:

- 1 Bodies** - a warmed up body helps promote better and more resonant singing. It also improves signing and any movements needed for the song.
- 2 Voices** - It's really important to warm up our voices before singing. One of the best ways to do this is to 'slide' the voice around gently, from lower to higher notes and vice versa.
- 3 Hands** - also need warming up in preparation for **signing**. We recommend using a variety of different signing activities at the start of every session. This is a great opportunity to learn the different handshapes that we use in signing and put them into practice by learning some words that have that handshape. Look ahead at the songs that you'll be singing in the session and see if there are any tricky signs that need practicing, this will then make learning the song easier.

It's important to do different types of warm-ups so participants don't become too used to doing the same thing each time (although groups do have their favourites!). Changing warm-ups makes sure everybody gets the best out of each session.

## Themed Warm-Ups

One of the types of warm-ups we use a lot is a 'themed' warm up. As a group, we take an idea or setting, such as 'the seaside' or 'getting up in the morning'. We then create a series of body movements and stretches, and voice preparations/vocal sounds inspired by that theme.

We usually have a session leader and a participant up at the front to lead the warm-up. Members of the group sometimes write their own warm-up, which they then lead. We keep the warm-up notes in our rehearsal folder, with signs, photos and words to act as prompts in future sessions.

## Teaching Songs and Signs

We've developed our own methods for teaching singing and signing from more than 20 years' experience running singing and signing projects. The methods are based on what we've learned from teaching people with a wide range of needs and abilities across different projects and in different settings.

### Step 1) Signs

AAM leaders always learn the signs themselves first before teaching them to the group. We teach each sign individually, then combine the signs phrase by phrase; building up slowly until we can go through a verse, a chorus, etc. We take time to get the hand shapes right, especially with more complicated signs. Our support workers, carers and group members also support each other to practice getting the signs right.

### Step 2) Melody

After the signs, we teach the melody using the same method. We start with each phrase, then combine phrases until we can sing a whole verse or chorus. We teach by call and echo, with the leader singing a phrase first then the group singing it back. Again, we take time over this. A phrase might need several repetitions until people become familiar with it.

### Step 3) Put the Signs and the Melody Together

Once we've built a good understanding of the signs, we put the signs and the melody together. We begin practicing slowly, phrase by phrase, until we feel the group is ready to sing that section of the song along with the backing track.

When we're learning a song that has a fast backing track, we use Speedshifter - a really useful online tool from ABRSM (the music examining board) that allows you to slow the track down without changing the pitch. Speedshifter also allows you to raise or lower the track by 3 tones without affecting the speed, which can be a useful tool in rehearsals too. (**See section 4** for a link to the ABRSM website where you can download Speedshifter).

## Involving participants as leaders

As with warm-ups, we believe it's really important to have members of the group up at the front as co-leaders, helping to teach signs and songs. This is a brilliant way to build their confidence and leadership skills. Providing learning-disabled co-leaders with opportunities to lead and share their skills also promotes an extremely positive model of disability. Co-leaders work alongside the conductor or leader to teach a particular song. They work on the same song each week, so they become familiar with it and the way it's taught. Co-leaders also lead the same song during performances and outreach workshops.

By tailoring this method of co-leading to suit the individual, we make sure each member has their time to shine. This can be anything from leading a full song or warm-up to doing a small solo, depending on the individual's confidence, ability and experience.

Accessible Arts & Media has devised one of the first Workshop Leader Training Programmes in the UK for adults and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. The trainees work with a choir leader to co-lead a workshop in singing and signing or accessible music making in a range of settings, such as schools, colleges and conferences.

For more information about our trainee-led workshops [please visit our website](#).

## Sign Supported Communication

At AAM we place equal weighting on both the signing and the singing. However, we realise that some leaders using this resource may be new to signing, so we've included the following information to help you build your signing skills.

Sign Supported Communication (SSC) uses signs to enable people who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally to communicate more easily. SSC uses signs alongside speech, with individual signs similar to those used in British Sign Language (BSL). However, it differs from BSL in a number of ways. In SSC only the key words in a sentence are signed and SSC users **always** speak **and** sign a word at the same time. In BSL, every word used in a sentence is signed and these signs often occur in a different order to the way a sentence is spoken. BSL users also don't always speak and sign a word at the same time.



Just as spoken English has many different dialects; signs can also vary between sign providers and between regions in the country. Makaton is a very popular sign provider used by many schools and sometimes there are slight variations. Whenever teaching signs to a group who use a form of SSC, it's important to teach the signs they already know. Changing a sign to suit what the group already use is always best practice. This could mean using signs from BSL or Makaton for example, if those are ones your group normally use.

## Principles of Signing

- **Use the hand that is most comfortable to you when signing. This is referred to as your 'working' hand.** If you're naturally right-handed, your working hand will be your right hand and your left hand will be your 'supporting' hand. If the sign uses 2 hands, your working hand will be the 'moving' hand.
- **Always speak and sign. Speak as you would normally.** Don't use exaggerated lip patterns as this distorts the lip movements, making it harder for people who "read" your lips to understand you. The spoken word and the relevant sign should be used at the same time as each other.
- **Only sign the key words** in the sentence and speak and sign in the spoken English word order. Communicate using vocabulary appropriate for the level of the group you're working with to ensure the message is understood.
- **Some signs are directional**, using movement to provide more context for that word. For example, 'help' could mean, help me (the sign moves towards you); help you (the sign moves towards the person being offered the help; or help us, (the sign moves in a circular direction). The sign for help should always move towards the person(s) requiring the help.
- **The signs are used to help convey the meaning** of what is being communicated. This means that it's important the signs are formed correctly and clearly.

- **There are 4 aspects to producing a correct sign:**
  - 1 **Hand shape** - how the hands are formed, e.g., when your hand is flat with all of your fingers spread out, this is known as an 'open hand' shape. When you create a fist and then extend your index finger, this is known as an 'index hand' shape.
  - 2 **Orientation** - how the hands are placed i.e., which direction or position the palms face and the hands point.
  - 3 **Placement** - where the hands are placed, i.e., where in the signing window should your hands be. See appendix 1 for more information on the signing window.
  - 4 **Movement** - this is a change in any of the above. For example, this could be the formed sign shape circling, or moving in a specific direction, or the hand shape changing from one shape to another.

*Appendix 1 contains more information about 'producing a correct sign' and we've also [created a series of short videos to explain the Signalong approach to signing on our website](#). In these videos we cover the four main elements of producing a correct sign: handshape, orientation, placement and movement.*

- **Total Communication should be used whenever communicating.** This involves using all available means of communication. For example, speech, signing, body language, facial expression, tone of voice, objects of reference and touch e.g., hand-over-hand.
- **Show the sign in a meaningful way** e.g., use the correct body language and facial expression for the sign and word. When you communicate, always think from the point of view of the receiver. For example, if you're making the sign for 'happy', make sure you have a smile on your face!
- **Signing and total communication should be used across the whole session** to help improve access for a wide range of ability levels.

## Further Information

Below is a list of websites with more information on signing and singing, and other web-based resources you might find useful:

- The Signalong Group - <http://www.signalong.org.uk/>
- British Sign Language - <http://www.britishsignlanguage.com/>
- Makaton - <http://www.makaton.org/>
- Sing Up Song Bank - <http://www.singup.org/songbank>
- Singing for the brain (an Alzheimer's Society project) - [http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents\\_info.php?documentID=760](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=760)
- Sing and Sign (helping babies to communicate before speech) - <http://www.singandsign.com/>
- Singing Hands - <http://www.singinghands.co.uk/>
- Speedshifter - <http://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/practice-tools-and-applications/speedshifter/>



## Copyright Information

### Accessible Arts & Media's Singing and Signing Resources

These resources have been created to be used by people as easily as possible within a range of settings, and with the minimum of restrictions. However, there is some copyright information you need to be aware of.

#### Music

Many of the songs in our resources have been written or devised by one of AAM's singing and signing groups (Hands & Voices, IMPs (Inclusive Music Projects)) working alongside one of our Singing and Signing Leaders including: Chris Bartram, Mollie Taylor, Kath Fathers, Sam Dunkley, Kate Pearson and Anna Snow. Our leaders have also created the backing track to accompany their individual songs. Each track is used with their permission.

The copyright in the contents of this resource bank is owned by AAM or its licensors. The text, images and videos contained in this website belong to AAM and are protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights. AAM's resources must only be used for non-commercial purposes. Any copies downloaded and reproduced from the website must retain any copyright and intellectual property information. No part of this resource bank may be reproduced, broadcast or sold for commercial use without written permission from AAM.

#### Signs

Copyright for the signs used in our resources is held by our signing partner, Signalong. AAM has been granted permission to incorporate the line drawings within each sign sheet through the licence we hold with Signalong. For more information, please contact Signalong: <https://signalong.org.uk/contact>.

## Contact Us

If you have any questions, require any additional training or support, or would like us to run a singing and signing taster workshop with your group to get you started, please contact:

✉ [info@aamedia.org.uk](mailto:info@aamedia.org.uk)  
☎ 01904 626965  
📘 [facebook.com/aamedia.org.uk](https://facebook.com/aamedia.org.uk)  
🐦 [@aamedia\\_org\\_uk](https://twitter.com/aamedia_org_uk)  
📷 [@accessibleartsyork](https://www.instagram.com/accessibleartsyork)

## Appendix 1 - More Information on Producing A Correct Sign

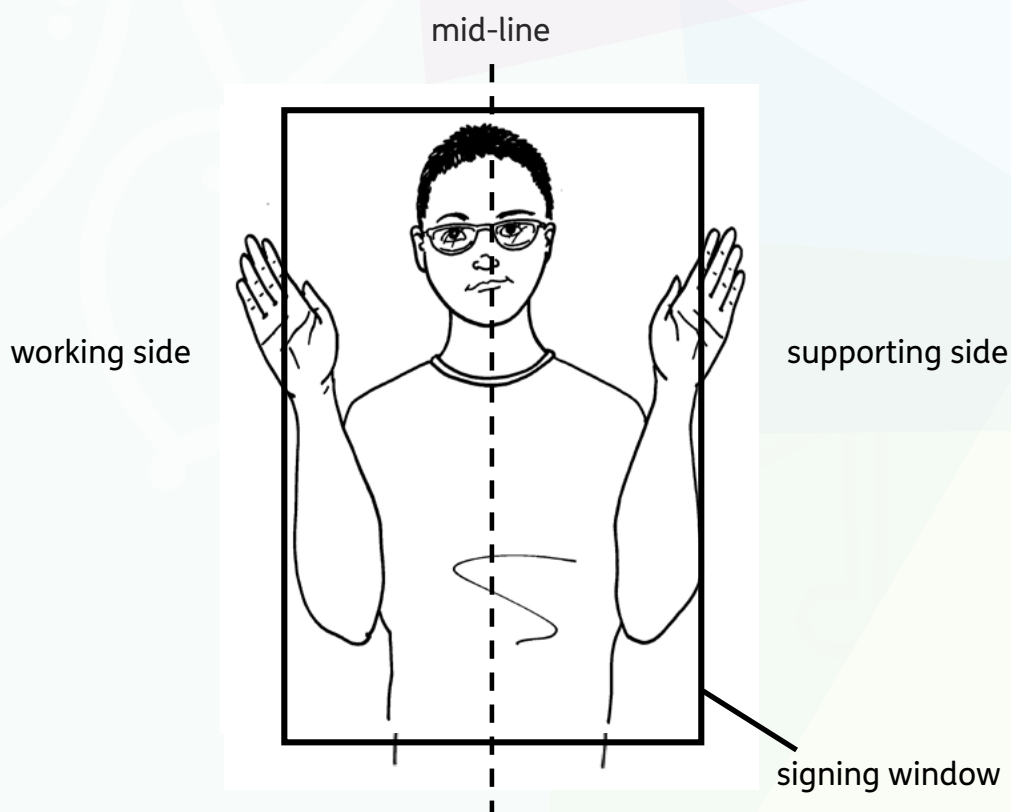
In this section you'll find more information about 'producing a correct sign'. We've also created a series of short videos to explain the Signalong approach to signing on our website:

<https://www.aamedia.org.uk/resources/singing-and-signing-training-videos>

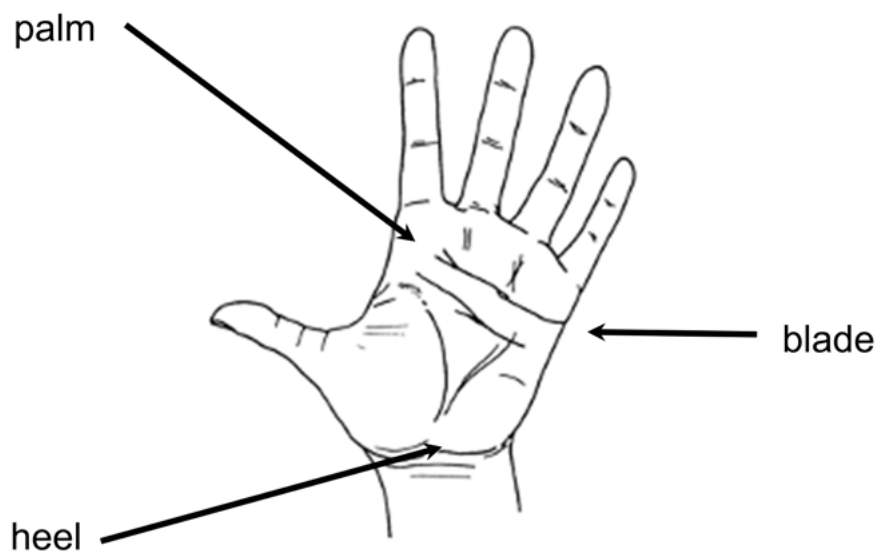
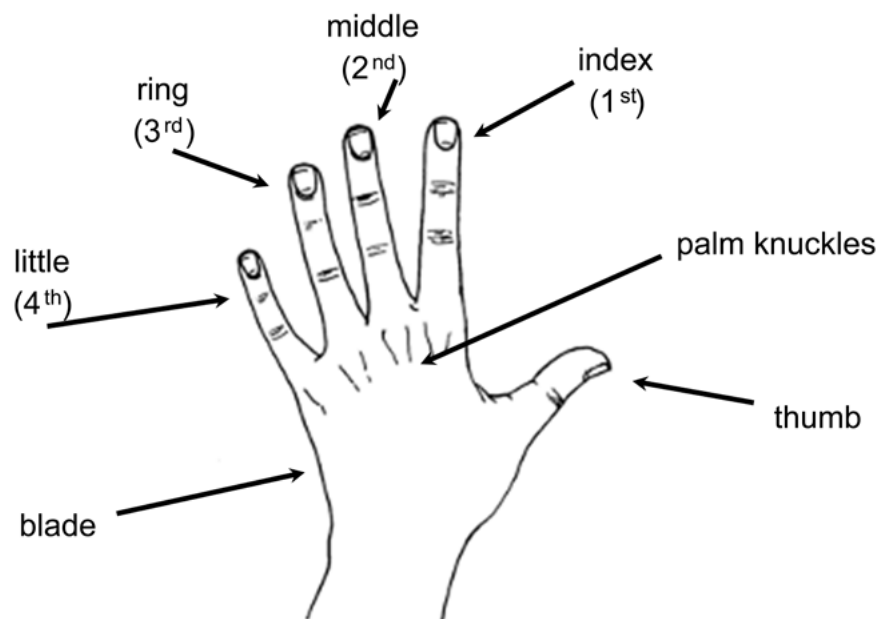
### Placement

All signs start within an area known as the signing window. This extends from the top of the head to the waist and just beyond each shoulder (see below diagram). The placement of the sign can be used to add meaning, and sometimes moves outside the window. For example, signs relating to the ground or floor, or low down on a person (e.g., "socks") would be signed at waist level or at the bottom of the signing window. Signs relating to the sky or ceiling would be signed at head height or at the top of the signing window.

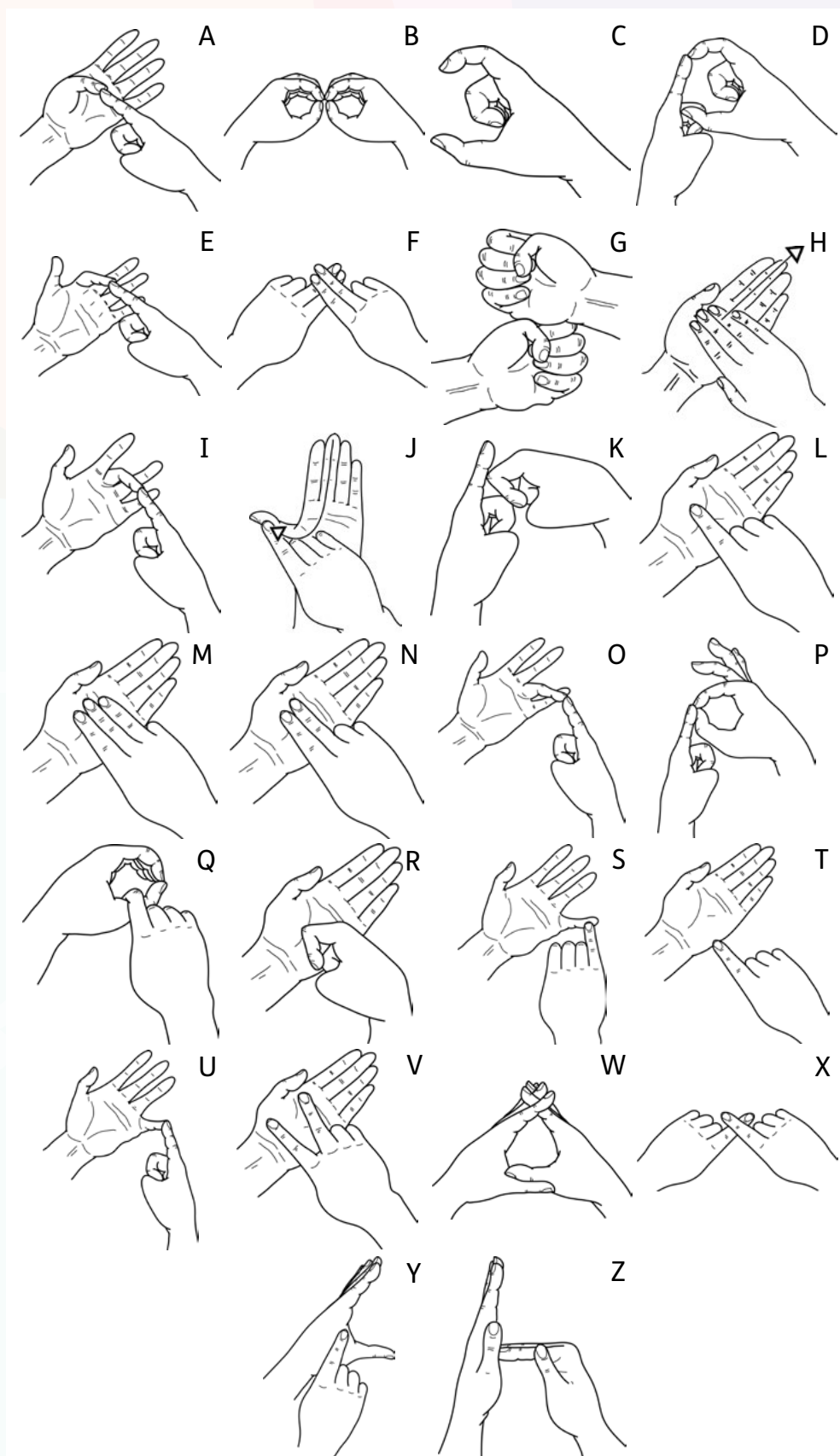
All of the illustrations in the SIGNALONG manuals are performed by a right-handed signer. Because some people are left and right-handed signers, we refer to the "working hand" and "supporting hand". – **REMEMBER YOU NEED TO BE CONSISTENT**; this avoids confusion and gives a point of focus to the person you're signing to.



## Parts of the hand



## Signalong Letter Shapes - based on BSL



## Basic Hand Shapes



FLAT HAND



OPEN HAND



CLAWED HAND



BENT HAND



CUPPED HAND



BUNCHED HAND



CLOSED HAND



FIST HAND



"C" HAND



FULL "C" HAND



"O" HAND



FULL "O" HAND



"M" HAND



"N" HAND



"R" HAND



"V" HAND

The last six shapes are based on the right-hand shape of British two-handed finger spelling but could also apply to the left hand. All shapes can be further clarified, e.g.: working hand slightly bent, or loosely cupped. If a finger is described as extended it is generally understood that the rest of the hand is closed.

## Additional Hand Shapes



"Y" HAND



INDEX HAND



THUMB HAND



LITTLE FINGER



OPEN PINCHED



CLOSED PINCHED



PARALLEL BENT



PARALLEL FLAT



"L" HAND



TUCKED HAND



## Orientation

Orientation is a combination of PALMS FACING and HANDS POINTING.

### Palms Facing

There are SIX directions that the palms can face, these are palms facing:

- **IN** - palm faces the opposite side of the signing window
- **OUT** - palm faces their own side of the signing window
- **UP** - palm faces the top of the signing window or ceiling
- **DOWN** - palm faces the bottom of the signing window or floor
- **FORWARD** - palm faces ahead of the signer
- **BACK** - palm faces towards behind the signer

Remember, this is where the PALM is facing, and is irrespective of the hand shape. If in doubt check using a flat hand before forming the hand shape for the sign.

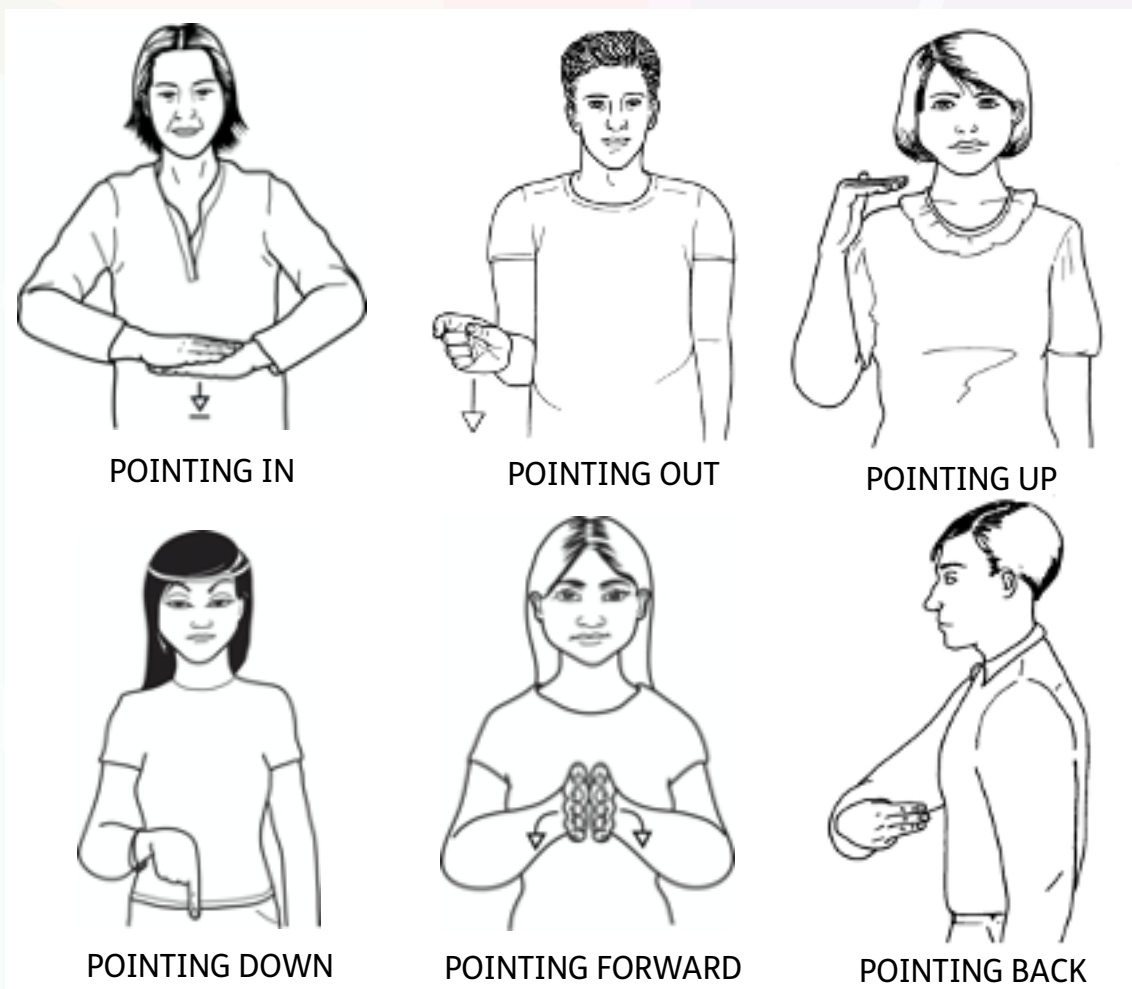


## Hands Pointing

There are SIX directions that the hands can point, these are hands pointing:

- **IN** - hand points to the opposite side of the signing window
- **OUT** - hand points to their own side of the signing window
- **UP** - hand points to the top of the signing window or ceiling
- **DOWN** - hand points to the bottom of the signing window or floor
- **FORWARD** - hand points to ahead of the signer
- **BACK** - hand points to towards behind the signer

Remember, this is where the **HAND** is pointing (from the wrist or heel of the hand to the palm knuckles), **NOT THE FINGERS**, and is irrespective of the hand shape. If in doubt check using a flat hand before forming the hand shape for the sign.



## Diagonals

Sometimes an orientation falls between two planes and is described as a diagonal, with a "/" denoting the planes it lies between.

## Movement

Once the hand shape and orientation has been described, the sign can sometimes move. Movement can take place in the same six directions as the palms face and hands point.



MOVEMENT IN



MOVEMENT OUT



MOVEMENT UP



MOVEMENT DOWN



MOVEMENT FORWARD

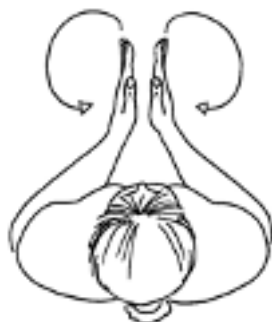


MOVEMENT BACK

## Circling



CIRCLING IN  
(HORIZONTAL)



CIRCLING OUT  
(HORIZONTAL)



CIRCLING IN  
(VERTICAL)



CIRCLING OUT  
(VERTICAL)



CIRCLING FORWARD



CIRCLING BACK

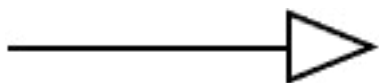
## Formation

A formation is when two hands, not necessarily in the same shape or orientation, move as though fixed together.



## Appendix 2 Guide to Movement Symbols

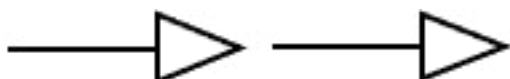
basic arrow to show direction of movement



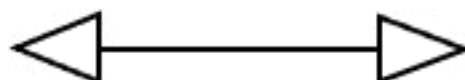
hand moves backwards and forwards



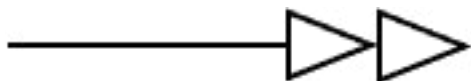
broken movement



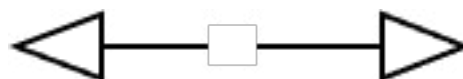
movement in one direction then the other



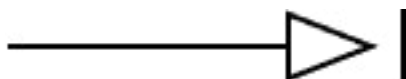
repeated movement



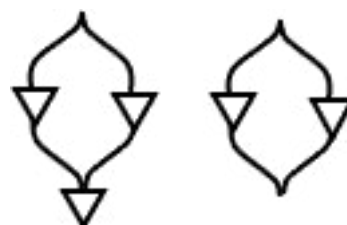
hands move apart



hands or fingers open and then close



Sign ends with stress



open shape closes



closed shape opens



contact on point down



small, repeated movements

