

# Auslan

## What language does the deaf community in Australia use?

The Deaf community in Australia uses Australian Sign Language, known as Auslan. Many countries around the world will have their own documented sign language which differs from country to country. You will find Swedish Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, New Zealand Sign Language, American Sign Language are all unique to their countries.

Many people assume that sign languages developed recently and that all sign languages are the same, but sign languages have been known to exist as far back as Egyptian times in 5000BC.

As with spoken languages, sign languages developed to meet the needs of a particular group of people. Large numbers of different signed languages, like spoken languages, developed in isolation from each other.

It is believed that early convicts and settlers in the Australian colony brought British, Irish and Scottish Sign Language with them. Much later when educational institutions were established the differences in some vocabulary items were noted as a result of the origins of the people who worked in those schools.

The differences in vocabulary still exist today but are not considered a communication problem for users of Auslan. On the other hand, learners of Auslan often comment on these differences and the struggles to remember a variety of signs for the same thing.

## Is sign language the same as a spoken language?

Sign languages are known as visual-gestural languages. This means movements of the hands and body are made in the space in front of a signer and seen by the person they are communicating with. The grammar of sign language perfectly meets the needs of deaf people who rely on vision for communication.

Sign languages use a different structure to spoken languages. Spoken languages are known as auditory/verbal languages. In these languages, one word follows the next and the meaning is conveyed through the word order. With sign languages, the grammar and the meaning can be expressed at the same time, for example, signs are combined with facial expressions to show the different emotions and meaning.

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## How did Auslan start in Australia?

The first schools for the deaf in NSW and Victoria were started by people from the United Kingdom in the 1860s. These people introduced their country's signing into the schools and over time, the language has changed to meet the needs of Australian Deaf people. While Auslan is based on a mixture of British, Scottish and Irish Sign Languages there are also many signs which have naturally arisen to fill lexical gaps. Like many languages generally, both spoken and signed, Auslan has borrowed from American Sign Language (ASL) and others.

## Why is Auslan a naturally occurring language?

Auslan, like any other language, has grown to meet the needs of its users. True languages are living and constantly growing with new words and expressions being added by the people who use the language in their daily lives. For Auslan, these people are the Australian Deaf Community. For this reason Auslan is referred to as a community language under Australia's Language and Literacy Policy.

## Why don't deaf people talk when using Auslan?

Deaf people are visual people. Auslan capitalises on vision, not sound. Auslan also uses a different structure to English. Signs in an Auslan sentence do not occur in the same place as words in an English sentence. Therefore, it is impossible to use a visual language and a spoken language at the same time.

## Does Auslan have a written form?

Because it is a visual/spatial language, Auslan has no written form. It is very difficult to invent a system that shows all the grammatical features of any sign language. There are some projects attempting to write in sign language around the world, but these are very complicated and are only in their infancy.

## Do all deaf children use Auslan in school?

No. In the past, there has been a great deal of misunderstanding about Auslan. Many people did not believe that Auslan was a fully developed language, equal to English and able to be used in the education of deaf children. This belief culminated at a conference of teachers of the deaf in Milan, Italy in 1880 where hearing teachers of the deaf voted that the use of sign languages to teach deaf children in schools should be banned. From that time, up until the 1980s, most deaf children in the world were taught through speaking, listening and lipreading. This approach is known as oralism. While oralism took many years to arrive in Australia, it eventually became the popular way of teaching deaf students. Deaf teachers of the deaf, who used sign language, were therefore not provided with opportunities to work in government schools until the early 1980s.

This attitude is now changing. Deaf teachers are able to work in government schools and children can be taught through Auslan.

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If Auslan is used in schools, it will be in one of two types of programs. They are:

1. Languages Other than English (LOTE) programs, in the same way that Japanese, Italian or Indonesian are taught to students in schools, for a few hours each week; or
2. A bilingual educational program which means children are taught the content of their lessons in Auslan and taught to read and write in English. Auslan is taught as the first language and English is taught as the second language. Both English and Auslan are given equal status.

## **Is Auslan easy to learn?**

Learning Auslan is similar to learning any other language in that it takes time and practice. It also depends on how motivated the student is and the reasons for their learning. As with other languages, interaction with skilled users of Auslan is important for successful acquisition.

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## Resources

Here are some resources currently available for sale. Contact the Deaf Children Australia Help Line for more information.

- Johnston, T. 1998. **Signs of Australia Dictionary. A New Dictionary of Auslan (Australian Sign Language.)**  
Available from Deafness Resources Australia.
- Bernal, B., & Wilson, L  
**The Deaf Children Australia Dictionary of Auslan - English to Auslan. 2004**  
Available from Deaf Children Australia.
- Johnston, T. **Signs of Australia. CD Rom.**  
Available from Deafness Resources Australia
- Johnston, T., Thornton, D. & Napier, J. **Discovering Auslan. CD Rom.**  
Available from Deafness Resources Australia.
- Wilson, L. **The Deaf Children Australia Dictionary of Auslan Images. CD Rom. 2005.** Available from Deaf Children Australia
- Deaf Children Australia. **Auslan for Families. Videos.**  
These are available in English, Turkish, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin.  
Available from Deaf Children Australia.
- **Deaf Children Australia Pocket Dictionaries: Animals; People; Home.**  
Available from Deaf Children Australia.

## Further Resources

If you don't have access to the Internet, contact the Deaf Children Australia Help Line for a printed copy of this web site information.

<http://www.wadeaf.org.au/auslan>

*Auslan. Australian Sign Language*

This is from the WA Deaf Society and it gives a good explanation of Auslan

<http://www.aceinfo.net.au/support/FAQ/fagdra.htm>

[ACE Frequently Asked Questions. What is the Difference Between Signed English and Auslan](#)

<http://www.aad.org.au/publication/auslan.htm>

[Auslan Policy](#)

This provides a good description of Auslan and the views of the Deaf community on Auslan.

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