



# Public Service Announcement

Sign languages are as diverse as the countries and cultures they represent. It's a common misconception that there is one universal sign language. In reality, each country has its own unique sign language, and even within countries, regional variations can exist. There have been attempts at developing a universal sign system, such as International Sign (IS) for the purposes of cross-cultural/linguistic access; however, even within this system variations exist across countries and language power is a barrier for who can receptively and expressively use IS.



**Country:**  
United States of America

**Sign Language:**  
American Sign Language

**Regional Variations:**  
West Coast (California), Southern, New York, Midwest, New England, DC, The Valley (Texas), New Mexico

**Cultural Variations:**  
Black American Sign Language (BASL)



American Sign Language (ASL) is not the same as British Sign Language (BSL), which is different from Australian Sign Language (Auslan), and so on. Just as spoken languages vary across borders, sign languages reflect just as much cultural and linguistic diversity.



# A Common Misconception

"Spanish Sign Language" is not sign language used by communities you perceive to speak/use Spanish. That is a common misconception and a request that is commonly made here in the United States. Trilingual interpreters, proficient in American Sign Language (ASL), spoken Spanish (taking into account Spanish linguistic variation), and spoken English, often find themselves fielding such requests. Inquiries for a "Spanish Sign Language interpreter" stem from the oversimplified perception of language. To clarify, "Spanish Sign Language" is, in fact, the sign language used in Spain. It is distinct from ASL, which could potentially be used by individuals from Spanish-speaking families residing in the United States.



## Ask, Don't Assume

Don't assume someone's (sign) language proficiency based solely on their nationality or hearing status. When you're looking for an interpreter, consider these points:



**Country of Origin:** Politely ask about the individual's country of origin and the sign language, spoken and/or written language(s) they use.

**Immigration/Migration History:** Keep in mind that immigrants to the United States may have learned American Sign Language if they arrived young or had access to ASL. Always inquire about their preferred language(s).



**Access to Language:** Not everyone from a particular country has had access to formal sign language education in their country of origin or otherwise. Some Deaf individuals may use informal or home sign systems, which may be unintelligible to those not familiar with the individual or their communication system. Collaborating with a **Deaf interpreter**<sup>1</sup> a trained Deaf language consultant may be necessary and is encouraged when possible.

By acknowledging the rich diversity of sign languages and taking care to coordinate interpreters appropriately, we can ensure effective communication and respect the individual identities and experiences of Deaf individuals from all over the world.

<sup>1</sup>A Deaf individual who has experience with cultural and linguistic brokering/negotiating between individuals with diverse language use/experience. Their brokering process may include the use of (in)formal languages, gestures, modeling, etc to facilitate effective communication.