Introduction to Sign Writing®
Based on the textbook...

Lessons in Sign Writing®
About SignWriting®

SignWriting is opening new frontiers of communication for signers. This present generation of Deaf adults, who are learning to read and write signed languages for the first time, are setting the groundwork for future generations.

SignWriting does not change American Sign Language (ASL). It is simply a set of visually designed symbols that records how people sign. SignWriting captures on paper the visual subtleties of any signed language in the world, because it records body movement.

I developed SignWriting out of respect and awe for the beauty and sophistication of all signed languages. I am not a linguist, but I have a tremendous love for learning languages. I will never cease in my fascination and utter amazement at the richness of ASL. Because I respect ASL, I want to write it and preserve it.

Obviously I have not done this enormous task alone. SignWriting has been developed through a collaboration. I am most grateful for all of our Deaf staff members who have helped me improve SignWriting and shape its destiny. SignWriting is a living, ever-expanding writing system that is changing for the better, as more Deaf people become involved.

This manual, About SignWriting, is a brief summary of basic SignWriting symbols. Please feel free to contact us anytime for information on other SignWriting publications. We would love to hear from you!

With all good wishes -

Valerie Sutton
Inventor, SignWriting
Receptive Viewpoint

When someone is facing you, signing to you, you view the signs as an observer. The signer's right side is your left side. This is called the "Receptive Viewpoint".
Expressive Viewpoint

When you are signing to someone else, you see signs from your own point of view. This is called the "Expressive Viewpoint".
The Expressive Viewpoint

You read and write signs as if you are looking at your own hands, from your own perspective.

Palm of Hand

When you see the palm of your own hand while you are signing, the symbol for the hand will be white, or hollow.

The palm of the hand is always written with a white, or hollow symbol.
Side of Hand

When you see the side of your own hand while you are signing, the symbol for the hand will be one-half black, and one-half white.

The white part of the symbol shows where the palm of the hand faces. The dark part represents the back of the hand.

Back of Hand

When you see the back of your own hand while you are signing, the symbol for the hand will be black, or filled-in.

The back of the hand is always written with a black, filled-in symbol.
Left Side of Head

The head is written with a circle, viewed from the back.
When the left hand is near the left side of the head, the symbol for the hand is placed to the left:

**

Note: An asterisk means touch. Two asterisks mean touching two times. For more information on contact symbols, see page 24.

know

(hand on the left side)
Right Side of Head

The head is written with a circle, viewed from the back. When the right hand is near the right side of the head, the symbol for the hand is placed to the right:

know

(hand on the right side)

Note: An asterisk means touch. Two asterisks mean touching two times. For more information on contact symbols, see page 24.
Left Side of Face

Pretend you can see **through the back of the head**.
You are reading and writing how your face "feels" when you sign:

**know**

(mouth pushed up on the left side)
Right Side of Face

Pretend you can see through the back of the head.
You are reading and writing how your face "feels" when you sign:

Your face feels like this:

know

(mouth pushed up on the right side)
3 Basic Handshapes

Closed Fist
When the fingertips touch the palm of the hand, it is called a **Closed Fist**.

A **Closed Fist** is written with a **square**.

Open Fist
When the fingertips touch each other, it is called an **Open Fist**.

An **Open Fist** is written with a **circle**.
3 Basic Handshapes

Flat Hand

When the fingers stretch straight up, and touch each other, it is called a Flat Hand.

A Flat Hand is written with a rectangle, with a tip for the fingertips.

Closed Fist

Both the letter S and number 1 in ASL are written with a square for the Closed Fist, since the fingertips touch the palm:

Open Fist

Both the letter O and letter D in ASL are written with a circle for the Open Fist, since the fingertips touch each other:
Palm Facing

Front View
The hand is parallel with the wall.
Palm Facing

Top View
The hand is parallel with the floor.

space at knuckle joint means hand is parallel with the floor
Palm Facing

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Top View
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space at knuckle joint means hand is parallel with the floor
6 Contact Symbols

1. Touch  
2. Grasp  
3. In-between  
4. Strike  
5. Brush  
6. Rub

**Touch**

*Touch Contact* is written with an asterisk.

*Touch* is defined as the hand gently contacting another part of the body.
Grasp

Grasp Contact is written with a plus sign.

Grasp is defined as the hand grasping a part of the body or a piece of clothing.

In-between

In-between Contact is written with an asterisk between two lines.

In-between is defined as touching between two parts of the body, usually between fingers.
**Strike**

Strike Contact is written with two lines crossing two lines.

Strike is defined as the hand forcefully contacting a surface.

**Brush**

Brush Contact is written with a circle with a dark dot in the center.

Brush is defined as movement that contacts and then moves off a surface.
Rub
In a Circle

Rubbing Contact in a circle is written with a spiral symbol.

Rub is defined as contact that moves, but stays on the surface.

Rub
In A Line

Rubbing Contact in a line is written with the same spiral symbol...but...the symbol is connected with an arrow.

When the Rub Contact symbol is connected with an arrow, it rubs in a straight line (not in a circle). It moves in the arrow's direction, staying on the surface.
6 Finger Symbols

1. Middle Joint Closes
2. Middle Joint Opens
3. Knuckle Joint Closes
4. Knuckle Joint Opens
5. Knuckles Open-Close Together
6. Knuckles Open-Close Alternating

Middle Joint finger movements are written with small dots.

Knuckle Joint finger movements are written with small arrowheads.
Middle-Joint Closes

When the middle-joint of the finger closes (bends down or in), this closing finger movement is written with a dark dot.

The dot is placed near the finger joint that does the movement. Two dots represent two closings.

Middle-Joint Opens

When the middle-joint of the finger opens (bends up or out), this opening finger movement is written with a hollow dot.

The dot is placed near the finger joint that does the movement. Two dots represent two openings.
Knuckle-Joint Closes

When the knuckle-joint of the finger closes (bends down or in), this **closing knuckle movement** is written with a small arrow that points down.

The arrow is placed near the knuckle joint that does the movement. Two arrows mean 2 closings.

Knuckle-Joint Opens

When the knuckle-joint of the finger opens (bends up or out), this **opening knuckle movement** is written with a small arrow that points up.

The arrow is placed near the knuckle joint that does the movement. Two arrows mean 2 openings.
Knuckle-Joints

Alternate

The fingers do not move together in a unit. Instead they move in opposite directions. One moves up, as the other moves down. This is called alternating.

Knuckle-Joints

Open-Close

The fingers move together in the same direction, as a unit. The knuckle-joints of the fingers open and close (bend up and down) together. This open-close knuckle movement is written with one row of small connected arrows pointing up and down.

Knuckle-Joints

Alternate

The fingers do not move together in a unit. Instead they move in opposite directions. One moves up, as the other moves down. This is called alternating.

This alternating knuckle movement symbol is written with two rows of small arrows pointing up and down.
Up-Down Movement

Up-Down movement is parallel with the front wall. It is written with **double-stemmed** arrows:
Forward-Back Movement

Forward-Back movement is parallel with the floor. It is written with single-stemmed arrows:

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Movement To The Side
Movement to the side can be viewed from either the Front View or the Top View. It can be written with either single or double-stemmed arrows:

Right Hand Moves
Movement with the right hand is written with dark arrowheads:
Two Hands Move As One Unit
When both hands contact, and move together in the same direction, they move as one unit. The movement is both right and left. It is written with a neutral arrowhead, that is neither dark nor light:

Left Hand Moves
Movement with the left hand is written with light arrowheads:
Do not confuse these arrows:

- Single stemmed arrows mean forward.
- Double stemmed arrows mean up.
A double-stemmed arrow means that the movement is straight up or down, parallel with the front wall. The movement is flat with the front of your body.

A single-stemmed arrow means that the movement is forward or back, parallel with the floor. You are looking down, on top of the movement.
The SignWriting Web Site

http://www.SignWriting.org

The SignWritingSite is an educational web site with over 300 web pages to explore. It includes a Library of Literature and free SignWriting Lessons Online. Four ongoing courses are featured teaching: 1. Symbols 2. Penmanship 3. Grammar and 4. Reading. Special features are posted twice a month by the system’s inventor, Valerie Sutton. The Site also includes seven forums: the Sponsor’s Forum, the Teacher’s Forum, the Research Forum, the Linguistics Forum, the Software Forum and the SignWriting Email Forum. There are other sections, such as the SignWriting History Archives, Deaf Opinions on SignWriting, Questions & Answers, and web pages for the classrooms participating in the SignWriting Literacy Project. SignWriter Shareware and Fingerspelling Fonts can be downloaded free of charge, and a Catalog Online lists SignWriting publications.