

Deaf Culture Question of the Week - January 12 – 16, 2009

If someone asks you, What is the sign that means “pick up”? The correct answer is:

- a. Your hand reaches down as if grasping and picking up an imaginary object
- b. Your thumb and index finger are used as if pinching onto something and picking something up
- c. Your two hands reach down and with palms facing each other grasp on to the sides and act like you are picking something up
- d. All of the above and many more

Scroll down for the answer

Answer: “d” – All of the above and many more. The concept of “to pick something up” in ASL is expressed with handshapes and actions/motions that are called “instrumental classifiers”. To pick something up in ASL depends on “the something” being picked up. Your hand and the action/motion of the sign conforms to the object you are picking up. If the object is a small ball, like a tennis ball, the sign for “to pick up” will look like “a” above. If the object you are picking up is a piece of paper the sign for “to pick up” will look like “b” above. If the object is a basketball the sign for “to pick up” will look more like “c” above (unless you are Michael Jordan, then it would look like “reaching down with one hand and grasping with 5-claw-hand onto the ball). If the object is “the end of a sofa” and you are picking up the sofa so that your friend can “pull the rug” out from under “to pick up” will have palms facing up with fingers bent and movement of both arms up.

Each time “to pick up” is expressed the way the sign is formed matches the object that is being “handled”. The properties of the object – heavy, thin, small and round, large and round, large and bulky etc. are reflected in the handshape and movement of the instrumental classifier sign “to pick up”. Actually there is no standard sign “to pick up” because this particular verb must conform to the objects being picked up. The handshape and movement of the instrumental classifier will be different for each object that is picked up.

Instrumental classifiers occur anytime objects are handled. “To turn” will depend on what kind of handle is being grasped and turned (a doorknob, a car steering wheel, a ships wheel, a fried egg, a combination lock). “To open” will depend on what is being opened (a jar, a window, a door, a treasure chest, a lock). Any time you use your hands to show how something is grasped, held, used or manipulated it requires that you use an instrumental classifier and that the instrumental classifier will conform to the natural shape, position etc. of your hand(s) when they perform the action in the real world. There are some uses of instrumental classifiers shown at this website: http://www.aslvideopedia.com/index.php/site/category_select/C13/ In general a very useful website with depiction of ASL signs in isolation and in short story/narrative contexts.