

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Feb 4 - 8, 2013
Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

When asking a question in ASL like “Do you like school? which of the following grammatical devices is appropriate?

- a) Fingerspell **d-o** and sign the rest of the question ending with a question mark sign

- b) Have your eyes focused on the person you are asking the question to, raise your eyebrows and hold your head slightly forward while signing **like school you**

- c) Sign “do” using the sign that looks like **act/activity** and then sign the rest of the sentence. But you don’t need a question mark sign because the sign for **do/act** shows you are asking a question

- d) Use the grammatical devices explained in answer choice “b” but add the question mark sign at the end.

Go to the bottom of this message for the answer.

Answer: “b” –ASL questions that are answered with “yes” or “no” (called yes/no questions) are communicated using a set of non-manual signals. Non-manual signals are things like facial expressions and body postures; all the relevant grammatical signals that aren’t the signs themselves. For yes/no questions the grammatical signals used to communicate that a question is being asked are:

- Raising the eyebrows
- Moving the head slightly forward
- Looking directly at the person you are communicating with

Both ASL and English use grammatical devices to signal that a yes/no question is being asked. ASL uses non-manual signals to communicate the question. In English beginning a question with “Do/does” or “Is/are” and changing voice inflection signal that a yes/no question is being asked.

ASL and English differ in how they accomplish communicative acts like asking questions. These differences exist primarily because ASL and English are being expressed in two entirely different modalities; that is, English through the speech/vocal mechanism and ASL via the hands, face, and body. One would expect there to be dramatically different solutions to the grammatical distinctions that all languages need to make in order to communicate clear messages.