

Auslan and Key Word Sign - How are they different?

While Key Word Sign uses signs from Auslan, they are NOT the same.

Auslan – Australian Sign Language

Auslan is the language of the Deaf community in Australia. People who are born deaf, who become deaf at some point in their lives, or who are children of deaf parents, often learn and use sign language. It is a visual language as rich and as complex as any spoken language.

Different countries have their own sign languages. The Australian deaf community uses Auslan (Australian Sign Language), but other countries have their own sign language, even if they speak English eg British Sign Language (BSL) in England, American Sign Language (ASL) in the USA. The order of the signs used in a sentence may be similar, but the actual signs used will vary across cultures.

Sign language has developed over centuries in communities where deaf people have lived and worked together. It has evolved in the same way that spoken language has evolved. As with spoken languages, communities may have a sign vocabulary that is like a dialect and is specific to an area or region. Signs for some words can be different in different parts of a country. This is similar to what happens with spoken language, for example in Australia we say “togs” or “bathers” in Victoria, but “swimmers” up north. We eat “cantaloupe” in Victoria, and “rockmelon” up north.

The Auslan language has a robust, ever-expanding vocabulary of formal signs and natural gestures that allow deaf people to communicate about all the things that a verbal person in the hearing community does, from technological advances to political figures.

Sign language does not follow English word order. A sentence in Auslan is not a direct translation of spoken language. Auslan has its own grammar which uses many visual strategies like body language and facial expression. Often finger spelling is used (26 signs that represent the letters of the alphabet). Deaf people tend not to use speech.

The Auslan dictionary, more recently published as Signs of Australia: A New Dictionary of Auslan, and online as Auslan Signbank: <https://www.auslan.org.au/>, are available as a source of signs.

Key Word Sign (KWS)

Key Word Sign (KWS) uses signs from Auslan, but with a different population. KWS is used with children and adults who either cannot talk or whose speech is difficult to understand. Usually they can hear, but KWS may be appropriate even for a person who is deaf if they have other disabilities which impact on their communication and language development.

A key word approach is used, meaning main or key words of the sentence are signed while the message is spoken normally.

KWS also uses features from Auslan such as adding body language, facial expression, and natural gesture. This helps to add information and reinforce the meaning of what is being communicated using formal Auslan signs.

	Auslan	Key Word Sign
Who is it used with?	Language of the Deaf community	Person can hear
	It is a full and rich language	Speech may be difficult to understand
	It is an important part of cultural and linguistic identity for people who are Deaf	Person may need support to understand spoken language
How are signs used?	Signs are primarily used; possibly some sounds and lip patterns	Signs used with speech
	Has unique grammar that is very different to English	Speak in normal grammatical sentences Sign the key words only
	Sign production techniques are part of the language of Auslan	Natural gestures and sign production techniques are used