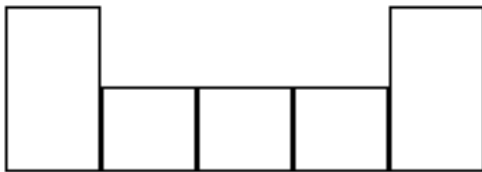


Fingerspelling: Reading the Envelope

New signers (and even some who are not-so-new) often state that one of the most challenging aspects to learning ASL is reading fingerspelling. Some will have no trouble signing with another person, but when a fingerspelled word pops up, they freeze!

There's an easy way to help solve this problem. Fingerspelling should be read as an 'envelope,' as a whole, not as list of letters in a sequence. To help you with this, think back to kindergarten when you were learning to write your letters and making them into words. You probably saw shapes like the ones below. These boxes helped you figure out which letters went in which box and helped you form the word *as a whole*.

Fingerspelling is no different.

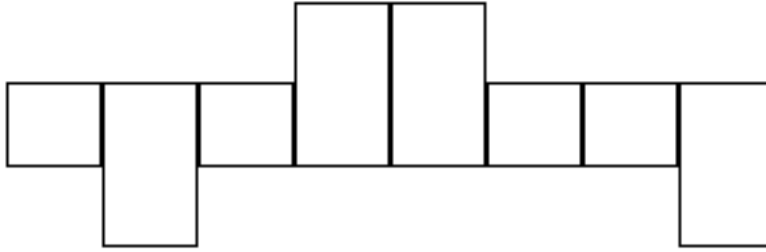


If I gave you the lower-case letters A, B, C, E, and H, you could easily see that, based on the shapes of the letters, there would be a limited way that the letters could be arranged to make a common word. In this case, BEACH.

Now, think of this 'envelope' approach if someone fingerspelled the word BEACH. The sign for B is tall (fingers outstretched); the signs for E, A, and C are short (fingers not outstretched); and the last block would be different than the written example above. You would need to lay that tall block on its side to show the sign for H, which has fingers outstretched but 'on the side' (or parallel to the floor).

This approach becomes even easier if you can catch the first letter and the last letter, which you almost always can. Then context clues help you fill in the rest!

So, if someone is telling you about their vacation, and they spell the word BEACH, you might catch the B at the beginning, and the H at the end, and notice that the three letters in the middle never extended away from the palm. Yes, it's still challenging, but this approach will make it much, much easier.



Let's look at another example. The word above is a little longer, but it represents the word SPELLING. The fingerspelling envelope is not much different. The S is short, the P extends down (just like the print P), the E is short, the double L is tall, the I is, well technically between short and tall, the N is short, and the G is like the P, it extends down.

If you saw this word fingerspelled, you might catch the S at the beginning, and the G at the end. You would likely catch the P in the second spot (because it extends down, taking a fraction longer for the signer to sign, giving you a fraction longer to catch). And the double Ls in the middle are always easier to catch (any double letter is easier to catch). So, using context to help you, if you saw sp*ll**g, and knew that your friend was telling you about the subject they struggle with in school, you would likely know that HISTORY, ENGLISH, and MATH don't fit that envelope, making it easier to understand the word.



This third example might be a little tougher, because there are no extended letters at all. But, if your signing friend is talking about his or her least favorite teacher and why, and you caught M at the start and N at the end, it might help you know that they were saying MEAN as the reason why. Honestly, without extended letters, it is a little more challenging to catch, but knowing the beginning and ending letters, and using context clues to help you, you will have a better chance to understand the fingerspelled word.

And, of course, practice makes perfect. So try this method, and see if catching fingerspelled words doesn't become just a little bit easier!