

# EDUCATIONAL DVD COMPANION GUIDE

## Deaf Jam

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Welcome to the Deaf Jam Educational Guide. It has been a primary goal of the film to contribute to revitalizing the amazing and endangered art form of American Sign Language (ASL) poetry. We hope to inspire a new generation of deaf poets and open a window into the complexities of ASL poetry to those discovering it for the first time.

The following guide is a detailed explanation of the extras on the DVD along with sample exercises to inspire practice and facilitate the creation of poems individually or as collaborations. All of the exercises and extras on the DVD were taken from the actual workshops that Aneta participated in during the making of the documentary.

Thank you for delving into the material. If you have further questions or would like to bring an artist to your school or organization for workshops, please contact [deafjamdoc@gmail.com](mailto:deafjamdoc@gmail.com).

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Judy Field".

Dir/Prod Deaf Jam



## Educational DVD Features

### Handshapes

One of the best ways to get started in ASL poetry and storytelling is to focus on the use of handshapes and imagery inherent in the language. In the examples shown, handshapes are used to visually paint a picture and tell a story, the same literary techniques used in written languages to describe a setting, develop characters, and create a plot sequence of actions. ASL handshapes used in this way are not tied to English letters or to counting numbers. They may be used as particular signs, ASL vocabulary, or as classifiers. ASL handshape poetry and stories depend less on dialogue and more on imagery, the description and action in written prose.

In Exercise #1, Terrylene and Manny suggest choosing one handshape to explore through creative storytelling. Terrylene offers an example using the "1" handshape. She quickly tells a story of a thirsty person whose desire is quenched with a drink. In Exercise #2, Terrylene directs the students to create an image, a scene in ASL, using one handshape. Aneta complies with her "5" handshape scene of a motor-boat skimming across a lake to the shore, surrounded by forested mountains and the sun overhead. See if you can identify Aneta's use of the "boat" in Act 1 and 2 of the film.

### Number Handshape poem

In this example, Terrylene uses a sequence of number handshapes from 1-15 to tell a story of a romantic flirtation that begins with a woman walking along and a dropped handkerchief returned by an attractive other, which then results in an embrace between the two characters. The final "15" handshape uses the sign for "heaven," shown while Terrylene has her back to the audience.

## Sample ASL Poetry Assignments

### 1) Select one, two or three handshapes to use. Create:

- An environment or setting description
- A person(s) or character(s) description
- A short story or scene, including actions

### 2) Use handshapes to create an ASL version of an image taken from a magazine, poster, art, the internet, etc.

- Describe the image in a limited set of handshapes.
- Develop a story or scene, adding action, what happens before, after, or about the image

**3) Use handshapes to create stories or scenes following a determined sequence, for example, ABC (alphabet), number (1-10, etc.), or a spelled word (name, theme, etc.). An example of a handshape poem, in which Aneta spells Volleyball to relate a story, can be found on the [Deaf Jam website](#). Don't use this exercise first. Wait until students have demonstrated ability to separate handshapes as classifiers vs. handshapes as letters, numbers, and initialized vocabulary. Note that Terrylene used a sign "heaven" with the "15" handshape. Although the handshape is used in a vocabulary sign rather than as a classifier, it is completely separate from counting and is not initialized as a link to English spelling.**





## Educational DVD Features

### Rhythm

Terrylene challenges the students to brainstorm all the ways that rhythm exists in ASL poetry and storytelling. Together they list body movement, facial expression, pacing, handshapes, and repetition. The clip that follows features a section of Terrylene's poem "Tick Tock" which demonstrates the use of rhythm, not only in the nearly robotic clock rhythm of her body and head movements, but also in the use of repeated handshapes and the one-two, one-two-three pacing of her sign movements.

Repetition and pacing, alternating between normal speed and slow motion signing, are techniques useful to developing ASL poems and stories once the initial images have been explored and determined through handshapes.

Try it! Choose an image and a handshape to explore its features, or select a handshape and link variations of its use in a sequence of action and description to tell a short story. When the signs are set in order, experiment with slowing parts to create emphasis or repeating them, either consecutively or at various points in the composition. What effect does each technique have on the performance?

## Sample ASL Poetry Assignments

### 4) Return to a story or scene from a previous exercise.

- Vary the pacing of the action between normal speed and slow motion signing.
- Choose particular signs/classifier sequences and repeat them, varying the pacing and/or using the repetition at intervals throughout the work.



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### Transformation #1

In this first advanced exercise, [Peter Cook](#) shows how the technique works, a subtle shifting of one handshape to the next, first keeping the handshape as the context evolves, then changing the handshape within the next context before shifting once again to a new context with the handshape intact, a bit like French braiding. Danny skillfully follows through with his own transformation work.

### Transformation #2

In the second example, Peter moves away from concrete images and deliberate handshape to handshape transformations. Instead, he asks students to show an abstract idea, in this instance “falling in love.” Students must improvise images to express it through handshapes. Aneta is up to the task!

### Cinematic techniques

Next Peter introduces the concept of cinematic techniques in ASL poetry and storytelling. He begins by allowing the audience to see a scene from two perspectives by standing the two characters side-by-side, action to reaction, repeated throughout the scene. Shiran’s movements are completely in sync with Peter’s. Danny and his partner also create a scene with perspectives from two characters taking turns back and forth, this time with a twist, as the control of the action shifts from one to the other. Note that Peter bans dialogue from the work. Dialogue inherently shifts between characters, no surprise camera angles there, which justifies Peter’s label of “boring.”

In the following clip, Peter moves the cinematic technique back to ASL storytelling, as he takes on both characters within one storyteller, adding to that the techniques of slow motion and

## Sample ASL Poetry Assignments

### 5) Use the techniques of ASL transformation to morph one handshape into another.

- a) Pass the handshape down a line or around a circle or toss from one student to another, first accepting it then changing its use and meaning, the context.
- b) Pass handshapes again, but now maintain the context and change the handshape within it before passing it on to the next student.
- c) Create transformation poems individually. They may morph randomly or they may be a linked sequence of images that tell a story.

### 6) Given a particular abstract feeling or concept, transform it into an ASL poem through a set of images and actions using handshapes.

### 7) Add pacing and/or repetition to the work created using transformation techniques.

### 8) Experiment with role shifting in ASL storytelling, the use of cinematic techniques to create two characters with perspectives shifting between them.

- a) With a partner, create a short story or scene between them, using actions and reactions but avoiding dialogue.
- b) Shift the storytelling from two to one person. Take turns, one person performing as the other coaches and vice versa. Not eye gaze, shoulder turns, smooth transitions from action to reaction, etc.
- c) Add repetition and/or pacing to the work.



## Educational DVD Features

repetition previously discussed in the section on rhythm. He subtly shifts his body from one character to the next, not moving from his performance space, in other words keeping his feet planted, but using his gaze, eye contact, shoulder turns, action and reaction in the space as he imagines each character relating to the other in turns throughout the same scene between FBI agent and the accused as previously played with Shiran. The addition of slow motion and repetition serve to emphasize the cinematic shifts and build moments in the story, enhancing its literary value through ASL elements.

The examples shown are starting blocks for cinematic work. ASL literature employs a variety of cinematic techniques. Long shots alternate with close ups, scenes pan from one angle to another, allowing the viewer to watch the ASL story unfold as creatively as its performer delivers it. Experiment with the assignments Peter shared or explore cinematic techniques and transformations of your own!



## Sample ASL Poetry Assignments

**9) Explore other cinematic techniques. Retell a story or scene or image from long shot vs. close up perspectives. For example, an image of "person walking" can be signed with a "1" handshape showing a body from a distance, a "2" handshape showing legs from a bit closer, or a "B" handshape showing feet from close up. Each handshape can be modified through movement, orientation, and concurring use of facial expression and body changes to create specific meaning in context.**

- a) Try telling a story or creating a scene using handshapes to show it all from long shot perspective, as if each element is small or far away through narration.
- b) Next try telling the same story or scene completely from a close up perspective, becoming each element in turn, making each "big."
- c) Combine perspectives from the previous two versions, alternating between "big" and "small" or close up and long shot images to create an ASL story or scene.

**10) Finally create ASL poems and stories, skillfully employing any or all of the techniques learned: handshape imagery, pacing, repetition, rhythm, transformations, role shifting, and cinematic techniques. Play with performance variations, building from one person to duet, passing down a line, group work, chorus and lead, etc. Create works around a central theme or occasion, or vary the mood from humorous to solemn. Arrange a celebration of work or a slam competition, developing works with an audience in mind. Have fun!**



### Tahani on Writing

Here Tahani mirrors the works of Peter, describing her poetry from its roots in deep feelings, its soul, to the techniques of showing, not telling. Creating a series of images and artfully linking them to mean more than the sum of the parts. Tahani carefully chooses her words to express, to embody, to empower her visions just as Peter so precisely communicates his soul through his signs. Here too is seen Tahani's use of rhythm in the lines she writes and in the performance she delivers.

### Aneta's Nuyorican Performance (full version)

Note all the techniques infused in Aneta's work. Handshape transformations are there, but what more? Find the rhythm in her signs, her movements, her facial expression. Look for repetition, use of slow motion at particular points in the poem. How do they function to emphasize images? Aneta also uses cinematic techniques in her work. Her characters shift, perspectives change; she alternates from long shot to close up and vice versa in several key moments.

*Note to teachers: You may try this with students or turn subtitles on to see techniques labeled throughout the poem. Go to the main menu and select subtitles on.*

### Aneta and Tahani Duet (full version)

In this spirited performance of the duet poem created and performed by both Aneta and Tahani, challenge yourself to identify the literary elements and techniques used in both languages, as many as you can. What effect do they have on the work? How are they amplified throughout dual languages used simultaneously? How can students learn from this example and apply it to their own work? As both Peter and Tahani advised, techniques can be learned, but they must be tools used to help build from the soul of the literary work created.



### Additional Resources

[Signing the Body Poetics: Essays on American Sign Language Literature](#)

[American Sign Language Handshape Chart](#)

[Peter Cook - Poet, Artist, Educator](#)

