

Etymologies and Origins

In many cases, signs for related words or concepts are very similar, having developed out of one root sign. The resulting signs are more specific, and often belong to a particular subcategory of language, such as the many religious signs listed below.

Sign	Root Sign(s)	Changes
daughter	girl + baby	--
wife	girl + marry	--
sister	girl + same	--
pollution	smell + mix	--
ministry	work	+ initial m*
minister	lecture	+ initial f (for friar)
Passover	cracker	+ initial p
Gospel	news	+ initial g (for good)
testament	commandment	+ initial t
holy, hallowed	clean	preceded by h **
divine	clean	preceded by d
righteous	clean	preceded by r
pure	clean	preceded by p
sanctify	clean	preceded by s
sacrifice	offer	preceded by s
repent	change	+ initial r
reason	think	+ initial r
theory	imagination	+ initial t
fiction/fantasy	imagination	+ initial f
usually/used to	habit	+ initial u
tradition	habit	+ initial t
organization	group	+ initial o
department	group	+ initial d
society	group	+ initial s

team	group	+ initial t
association	group	+ initial a
principal	over	+ initial p
business	work	+ initial b
duty	work	+ initial d
function	work	+ initial f
environment	situation	+ initial e
circumstance	situation	+ initial c
free	save	+ initial f
deliver	save	+ initial d
liberty	save	+ initial l
independent	save	+ initial i
communicate	conversation/talk	+ initial c
dialogue	conversation/talk	+ initial d
interview	conversation/talk	+ initial i
interpret	change	+ initial i
translate	change	+ initial t
constitution	law	+ initial c
rules/regulations	law	+ initial r
principles/parliamentary	law	+ initial p
will (legal)	law	+ initial w
board	member	+ initial b
senate	member	+ initial s
congress	member	+ initial c
legislature	member	+ initial l

While some signs may seem somewhat arbitrary, many ASL signs have interesting origins and histories. The following examples are religious signs with interesting historical origins:

Meaning	Description of Sign	Origin
Catholic	indicate cross on forehead	Catholic practice of crossing one's self
Baptist	move "a" hands right and down	mimics motion of baptism by immersion

Episcopal	indicate arc from underside of wrist to elbow	represents flowing sleeve of Episcopal robes
Methodist	rub palms together	religious fervor of early Methodists
Quaker	with hands clasped, thumbs rotate around each other	Quaker practice of twiddling one's thumb while waiting for the Spirit
church	"c" rests on back of "s" hand	church built upon a rock
Passover	strike "p" near elbow ("cracker" + initial p)	unleavened bread at Passover
priest	"g" hand traces around side of neck	represents priestly collar
nun	"n" hand traces upper face	indicates shape of nun's veil
Jesus	touch right middle fingertip to left palm, reverse	indicates nail holes from crucifixion