

Top Tips for Written Communication with Deaf BSL Users

This guide outlines steps you can take to communicate better with BSL users over letters or emails.



Fast track guide to BSL

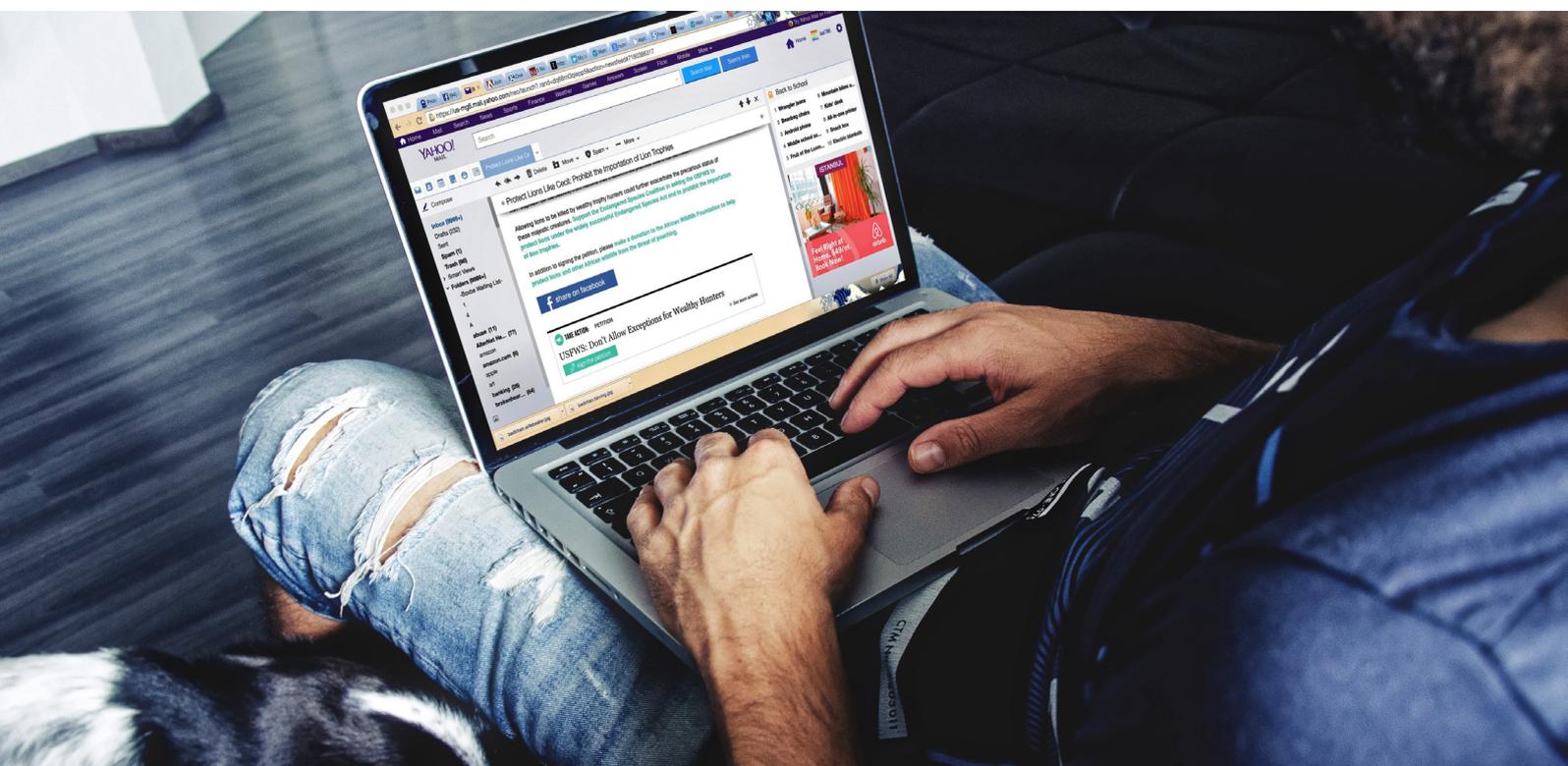
Many Deaf people have British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language. BSL is a language in its own right and is very different to English. It does not follow the same grammatical and sentence structure as English, for example 'what is your name' is 'name you what'. British Sign Language uses a grammatical structure often referred to as a Topic Comment Structure. This basically means that the topic is stated first and then a comment about that topic is stated and explained afterwards. This structure is similar to a lot of foreign languages.

Unlike speakers who have other languages as their first language, BSL users cannot be immersed in the language around them as they cannot hear it, making it harder to learn English. This can often show itself in the writing of a BSL user and often impacts upon reading and reading comprehension.

Communication Courtesy

When communicating with Deaf people via email or letter, it's important not to assume a person's literacy levels; however it's good practice to make sure that your written communication is as clear as it can be. Below are some tips to help you with this.

- Consider the layout of the text. Can you make it easier to read by using headings or bullet points?
- Keep content focused and short as possible – delete any unnecessary content.
- Use simple grammatical structures and shorter sentences.
- Use an active voice rather than a passive; for example 'Sue will contact you' is easier to understand than 'You will be contacted by Sue'.



- Keep vocabulary simple. Avoid jargon and substitute less frequently used words for simpler ones; for example change 'purchase' to 'buy'.
- Avoid Idioms such as 'back to the drawing board', they often don't translate well into BSL and the meaning is lost and confusing.
- Check for any ambiguity and remove it.
- Never assume a Deaf person has relevant background knowledge. Deaf people do not have access to information as easily as 'hearing people'.
- Make sure that any contacts you provide are accessible to Deaf people – avoid landline numbers.
- It's useful to be able to check the readability of a document using Word or Outlook – a quick search on the internet will show you how.

