

The History of American Sign Language

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Junior Division

Individual Performance

Process Paper:

465 words

# Process Paper

At the beginning, I wanted to do my project on Native American coding. However, I had to pick two ideas, so I put Early Forms of Sign Language down as my second choice, because I had recently read a book about American Sign Language (ASL). Later, I was instructed to do my project on Early Forms of Sign Language. With my research, I began to fall in love with my project, and I learned about ASL and its history. My topic relates to the annual theme because language is a very important way of communication. My theme shows how the Deaf community of America struggled with having an accessible way of communication and a solid way of understanding. ASL is the key to understanding for up to one half million American citizens.

I conducted my research with website articles from sources like Gallaudet University, the National Archives, and the Disability History Museum. I also used books and speeches. I even interviewed a friend, Ms. Adrienne, who is an ASL interpreter. With my research I found that there are many signed languages, so I changed my topic to, specifically, “The History of American Sign Language.”

I decided to do a performance for my project because I have always loved performing. I thought that the project would be more enjoyable if I did something I liked. I started by writing the script. In my script, I followed the events that led to modern day ASL by telling the story in chronological order.

The creation of ASL started with the opening of the American School for the Deaf in 1817, founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc in Hartford, Connecticut. Together they created the fundamentals of ASL with help from the Deaf community. Language is one of the most important forms of communication, and because of the hard work from these two men, the Deaf and mute community of America has since been able to communicate, using a language known nationwide.

My topic is significant in history because it concerns the creation of an entire language and a way of communication for a whole community. Every human being has the right to communication, and the right to an education system that fits them best. The tough history of ASL and the perseverance from the American Deaf community show how people will never stop fighting for their equal rights and that the right to communication should never be denied. Although ASL has often been challenged, it has survived through the efforts of the descendants of Gallaudet and Clerc, including Edward Gallaudet (Gallaudet’s son) and the Deaf community. Today, ASL is the third most used language in the United States, after English and Spanish, and it has an entire community of people with their own unique culture and history.

# Annotated Bibliography

## Primary Sources:

Cogswell, Alice, and Mason Codswell. "Letters Between Alice Cogswell and Mason Cogswell." *Yale Medical Library*, American School for the Deaf, 11 Oct. 1815. *Disability History Museum*, [www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=728](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=728).

These are two letters between Alice Cogswell and Mason Cogswell, where Alice first wrote to her father about a story she had learned in school, and Dr. Cogswell then wrote a letter explaining what Alice had written. I used this source to understand Alice's desire to learn, and how much her writing progressed over the years of her education. This source helped me understand that Alice was studying with her sibling's teacher, Miss Huntly, while Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was overseas.

Cogswell, Alice. "Quote from American School for the Deaf Annual Report, 1820 ." *U.S. Deaf History*, 8 Sept. 1819, [usdeafhistory.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/alice-cogswell-bio.pdf](http://usdeafhistory.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/alice-cogswell-bio.pdf).

This quote was written by Alice Cogswell after three years of schooling at the American School for the Deaf. In her quote, she talked about the hopes she had for the school. I used this source to develop my narrative, and it helped me understand how deeply Alice cared about the school.

Cogswell, Alice. Received by Emily Phillips, *Yale Medical Library*, American School for the Deaf, 30 May 1821. *Disability History Museum*, [www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=698](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=698).

This is a letter Alice wrote to one of her good friends while she was studying at the American School for the Deaf. I find Alice's writings as great primary sources, because she puts much detail in them, which makes understanding her life very easy. This letter helped me understand details about the school's progress, and I used this source to better build Alice's character.

Cogswell, Alice. Received by Lewis Weld, *Yale Medical Library*, American School for the Deaf, 19 Dec. 1828. *Disability History Museum*, [www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=726](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=726).

In this letter, Alice writes to a friend explaining how her life is going. I used this letter to understand the impact the American School for the Deaf had on Alice, and I was able to see that Alice had become a good writer, she had made many friends, and she was able to communicate with others. I used this letter to develop Alice's lines in the performance to show that in the 1800's, deafness was thought of as a mental disorder, but Alice Cogswell proved that this stereotype was wrong.

Cogswell, Alice. Received by Mary Cogswell, *Yale Medical Library*, American School for the Deaf, 28 Oct. 1829. *Disability History Museum*, [www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=733](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=733).

In this letter, Alice writes to her mother about her time in Philadelphia. I used this source to understand how the American School for the Deaf impacted Alice's life and some challenges with communication she still faced. In the letter, Alice explains some social gatherings she attended, and she explains that she struggled with communicating with some people who didn't know American Sign Language (ASL); however, because of the American School for the Deaf, Alice was able to write this letter, and she was able to communicate through ASL and writing.

Cogswell, Mason F. Received by John Braidwood, *Yale Medical Library*, American School for the Deaf, 20 Apr. 1812. *Disability History Museum*, [www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/edu/detail.html?id=691&annotations=38¶graphs=1-8#aa4](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/edu/detail.html?id=691&annotations=38¶graphs=1-8#aa4).

This letter was written by Dr. Cogswell (Alice Cogswell's father) to John Braidwood, a man Dr. Cogswell had heard about in the *National Intelligencer*, a newspaper published in Washington, D.C. This letter helped me understand that Dr. Cogswell truly saw Alice as a smart little girl who really wanted to learn, and Dr. Cogswell had hopes about opening a school for the deaf before he met Thomas Gallaudet, which was not clarified in any secondary source. I used this source to build Dr. Cogswell's character, and this letter also shows how determined Dr. Cogswell was to establish Deaf education, because he would write letters, like this one, to total strangers to try to get their support on the matter.

"Dr. Cogswell and Alice Cogswell's Tombstone." *Find a Grave*, Hartford Connecticut, [www.findagrave.com/memorial/68658423/alice-cogswell](http://www.findagrave.com/memorial/68658423/alice-cogswell).

The reason I used Alice's tombstone as a primary source is because of the epitaph, which explains that, without the Cogswell's, the American School for the Deaf would have never been established. This helped me understand that Alice was remembered as a hero, and it helped me create my historical argument.

Gallaudet, Thomas. "Sermon, On The Duties And Advantages Of Affording Instruction To The Deaf and Dumb." 1824, *Disability History Museum*, [www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=692](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=692).

This source is a sermon given by Gallaudet to convince his fellow brethren to donate money to the education of Deaf students. This powerful speech explains that Deaf citizens should be given the same right to an education and a way of communication as others. I used this source to be able to hear Gallaudet's own words on the topic so I could better develop Gallaudet's lines in my performance, and this source helped me understand how devoted Gallaudet was to educating Deaf students.

Lincoln, Evelyn. Received by Jerold M. Jordan, The White House, 24 Oct. 1962, Washington, DC, *National Archives*,

[jfk.blogs.archives.gov/2018/04/13/national-deaf-history-month-exploring-the-record-of-advocacy/](https://jfk.blogs.archives.gov/2018/04/13/national-deaf-history-month-exploring-the-record-of-advocacy/).

During the 1960's the Deaf community and their supporters had raised awareness about Deaf culture and the discrimination they faced. In the summer of 1965, the International Games for the Deaf was held in the U.S. I used this source to understand how the Deaf community and their supporters fought for their equal rights, and this source helped me understand how they raised awareness about their culture.

O'Donnell, Kenneth. Received by James B. Lloyd, The White House, 18 Oct. 1962, Washington, DC, *The National Archives*, [jfk.blogs.archives.gov/2018/04/13/national-deaf-history-month-exploring-the-record-of-advocacy/](https://jfk.blogs.archives.gov/2018/04/13/national-deaf-history-month-exploring-the-record-of-advocacy/).

This letter is written in response to James B. Lloyd's suggestion that a teacher from Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University) interpret in ASL the President's speech in California. The letter from Kenneth O'Donnell explains that there was no room for an interpreter on the trip. I used this source to get first-person information on my project topic, and it helped me understand the struggle the Deaf community had with communication.

## Secondary Sources:

Collazo, Victor. *ICYMI: A History of Deaf Education and ASL in the US*, 26 Mar. 2019, [blog.cyracom.com/icymi-deaf-education-a-history-of-american-sign-language-in-the-united-states](https://blog.cyracom.com/icymi-deaf-education-a-history-of-american-sign-language-in-the-united-states).

I used this source to understand why American Sign Language was banned from schools for 100 years. This source helped me understand that Alexander Graham Bell, the famous inventor, had a big impact on banning ASL from classrooms and that he believed in the importance of this matter because his father had created a competing language to ASL, called Visible Speech. Because Bell was so powerful and famous, people listened to him, thus resulting in the long absence of ASL in schools.

Gallaudet, University. "Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet." *Gallaudet University*, Gallaudet University, 12 Jan. 2021, [www.gallaudet.edu/about/history-and-traditions/thomas-hopkins-gallaudet](http://www.gallaudet.edu/about/history-and-traditions/thomas-hopkins-gallaudet).

I used this source to understand who Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was. It explained the story of the opening of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. It helped me to build the foundation of my project.

Harvard University. *Deaf History Timeline*, Harvard University, [projects.iq.harvard.edu/asl/deaf-history-timeline](https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/asl/deaf-history-timeline).

I used this source to understand the chronology of the events of my topic. It helped by providing clear dates for the events that took place. Because of this timeline, I was able to deeply understand what happened in which year over the course of three centuries.

“History of Gallaudet.” *Academic Catalog - Gallaudet University*, [gallaudet.smartcatalogiq.com/2020-2021/Undergraduate-Catalog/about-gallaudet/history-of-gallaudet](http://gallaudet.smartcatalogiq.com/2020-2021/Undergraduate-Catalog/about-gallaudet/history-of-gallaudet).

I used this source to add details about Gallaudet University to my performance. This article helped me know what dates to add, and it clearly explains the history of Gallaudet University. This source helped me understand the importance of Gallaudet University in Deaf education.

Hurley, Molly. *A History of American Sign Language: Molly Hurley*. YouTube, Team TVS, 26 Nov. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-zWWYKCMAC](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-zWWYKCMAC).

I used this source to understand what inspired Thomas Gallaudet to travel to Europe. It helped me to understand why the school was opened and what American Sign Language is. I used this video to add more details to my performance, and it helped me learn some simple ASL.

Jay, Michelle. “Alice Cogswell – The Beginning of American Deaf Education.” *Start ASL*, 1 Oct. 2010, [www.startasl.com/alice-cogswell/](http://www.startasl.com/alice-cogswell/).

I used this source to understand how old Alice was when she met Thomas Gallaudet, when she was born, and other details about her life. This source helped me better understand who Alice Cogswell was. I used this biography to build Alice’s character and better understand her life.

Jay, Michelle. “History of American Sign Language.” *Start ASL*, Michelle Jay, 1 Oct. 2019, [www.startasl.com/history-of-american-sign-language/#:~:text=The%20history%20of%20American%20Sign%20Language%20really%20started%20in%201814,years%20old%20named%20Alice%20Cogswell](http://www.startasl.com/history-of-american-sign-language/#:~:text=The%20history%20of%20American%20Sign%20Language%20really%20started%20in%201814,years%20old%20named%20Alice%20Cogswell).

I used this source to understand how Thomas Gallaudet, Laurent Clerc, Alice Cogswell, and Edward Gallaudet contributed to the beginning of American Sign Language. This article helped me understand my topic by providing brief biographies of these people, and it described how the American School for the Deaf in Hartford came to open and what happened after that.

Mathay, Emily. “National Deaf History Month: Exploring the Record of Advocacy.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, 13 Apr.

2018,

[jfk.blogs.archives.gov/2018/04/13/national-deaf-history-month-exploring-the-record-of-advocacy/](https://jfk.blogs.archives.gov/2018/04/13/national-deaf-history-month-exploring-the-record-of-advocacy/).

This source includes many letters and photographs from important events that significantly influenced the Deaf community and American Sign Language in the 1960's. I used this source to be able to better understand how the Deaf community fought for their rights to communication. This author helped me understand my topic by explaining how difficult it was for the Deaf community to communicate with and understand hearing individuals.

McCully, Emily Arnold. *My Heart Glow: Alice Cogswell, Thomas Gallaudet, and the Birth of American Sign Language*. Hyperion Books for Young Children, 2008.

I used this source to understand the story behind American Sign Language. I used this book to create the scene in my performance in which Gallaudet and Alice meet. This simple book conveniently summarizes primary sources of letters written between Gallaudet and Alice (when she was a child).

Okrent, Arika. *The Story of ASL*. *YouTube*, Mental Floss, 26 Apr. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=betAZeKRpR8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=betAZeKRpR8).

I used this source to understand the origin of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. This source helped me understand my topic by explaining how American Sign Language was created. I used this video to interweave details about the school's roots.

Sharp, Sydney, and Adrienne Rubenstein. Interview with Ms. Rubenstein. 22 Nov. 2020.

In this interview, Ms. Rubenstein, who is a sign language interpreter, explained to me her experience with American Sign Language and told me what ASL is and how it is its own language. I used this source to deeply understand what ASL is, and I was able to ask questions I had about the topic and get real answers from an expert on the topic.

Smith, Vivion. "Laurent Clerc." *Gallaudet University*, Gallaudet University, 12 Jan. 2021, [www.gallaudet.edu/tutorial-and-instructional-programs/english-center/reading-english-as-second-language/practice-exercises/laurent-clerc#:~:text=His%20name%20was%20Laurent%20Clerc,he%20fell%20into%20a%20fire](https://www.gallaudet.edu/tutorial-and-instructional-programs/english-center/reading-english-as-second-language/practice-exercises/laurent-clerc#:~:text=His%20name%20was%20Laurent%20Clerc,he%20fell%20into%20a%20fire).

This article is a brief biography about Laurent Clerc and his accomplishments. I used this source to understand who Laurent Clerc was and how he met Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and this helped me understand Clerc's life and his friendship with Gallaudet.

# Performance Companion Worksheet

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION	
<b>Project Title</b>	The History of American Sign Language.
<b>Student Name(s)</b>	Sydney Sharp
<b>Division/Category</b>	Junior Individual Performance
<b>Performance Runtime</b>	9:07
<b>Performance Companion Worksheet Word Count (starting with the performance overall scenario box; should not exceed 1,270 words)</b>	1,036
<b>Thesis</b>	The creation of ASL started with the opening of the American School for the Deaf in 1817, founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc in Hartford, Connecticut. Together they created the fundamentals of ASL with help from the Deaf community. Language is one of the most important forms of communication, and because of the hard work from these two men, the Deaf and mute community of America has since been able to communicate, using a language known nationwide.
<b>Performance Recording Link</b>	<a href="https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ji29GmyV0wCQ7tRH9wxblqsg3bMfJc7l/view?usp=sharing">https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ji29GmyV0wCQ7tRH9wxblqsg3bMfJc7l/view?usp=sharing</a>

PERFORMANCE OVERALL SCENARIO
<p>Story Setting(s)- 60 <i>Word Limit</i>  <i>Where does the performance take place?</i></p>
Hartford, Connecticut; England; Paris, France
<p>Timeframe- 60 <i>Word Limit</i>  <i>When does the performance take place?</i></p>
1814, 1815, 1816, 1817, 1880, 1978, 2010, 1857, 1864, 1894, 1986.
<p>Story Synopsis - 100 <i>Word Limit</i></p>

The history of American Sign Language (ASL) is troubling and interesting. ASL began with the opening of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. The school was founded by Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. In 1814, Gallaudet met a Deaf girl and was inspired to find a way to communicate with and educate Deaf students, so he traveled to Europe where he met Clerc. Back in America, they opened a school that specializes in Deaf education. Throughout history, ASL has been denied, but because of the opening of the school, ASL is still around.

## CHARACTERS

*Remove rows as needed.*

Character Name	Actor	Description/background for the character <i>10 Word Limit per Character</i>
Narrator	Sydney Sharp	Tells the story through a neutral perspective
Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet	Sydney Sharp	Preacher and a founder of American School for the Deaf
Alice Cogswell	Sydney Sharp	Student of American School for the Deaf
Gallaudet Alumnus	Sydney Sharp	Alumnus from Gallaudet University

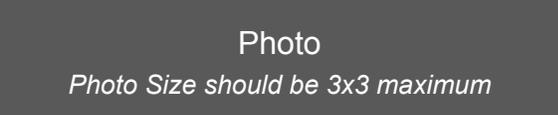
## PERFORMANCE BACKGROUND

Over the next 3 pages, provide photos and descriptions of your performance background. Please remove any scenes that don't apply to your performance.

<b>BACKGROUND BY SCENE</b>	
Scene # All Scenes	
Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the background in this scene? 50 Word Limit</i>
	<p>I used this background for my entire presentation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was only able to perform in my living room, but I tried to make this one background work by using old props. Many of the objects in the background are actually from the 1800's and 1900's.</p>

## PERFORMANCE COSTUMES

Over the next 3 pages, provide photos and descriptions of your performance costumes. Please remove any scenes that don't apply to your performance.

<b>COSTUME(S) BY SCENE</b>	
Scene # All Scenes	
Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the costume in this scene? 50 Word Limit</i>
	<p></p>



I didn't use multiple costumes because in my performance I would change between very different characters. Instead I wore a neutral grey top, to be appropriate for all my characters.

## COSTUME(S) BY SCENE

Scene # All Scenes

Photo

*Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum*

Description

*What is the purpose of the costumes?*

*50 Word Limit*



I didn't use multiple costumes because in my performance I would change between very different characters. Instead I wore neutral black pants, to be appropriate for all my characters.

# PERFORMANCE PROPS

Over the next 3 pages, provide photos and descriptions of your key performance props. Please remove any scenes that don't apply to your performance.

KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE	
Scene # 2	
Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the props? 50 Word Limit</i>
	<p>The purpose of this top hat is to help visually represent the transition to the character Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. In many illustrations of him, he is shown wearing a top hat, so I thought it would be an appropriate prop to represent his character.</p>

KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE	
Scene # 3	
Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the props? 50 Word Limit</i>



The purpose of this scarf is to visually represent the character Alice Cogswell. With all the character transitions, I thought it may have been hard for the audience to follow, so this prop helps them see when I switch to Alice.

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # 4

Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the props? 50 Word Limit</i>
Same as scene 2	Same as scene 2

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # 5

Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the props? 50 Word Limit</i>
Same as scene 3	Same as scene 3

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # 7

Photo <i>Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum</i>	Description <i>What is the purpose of the props? 50 Word Limit</i>



The purpose of this hat is to represent the Gallaudet alumnus. I taped a photo of Gallaudet University's logo onto an old baseball cap for this prop. Playing many characters can be confusing, so I used this prop to help the audience know when I played the Gallaudet alumnus.

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # All Scenes

Photo

*Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum*

Description

*What is the purpose of the props?  
50 Word Limit*



The purpose of this prop is to represent a school environment, because schools often have chairs or stools. Because of some limitations I faced, I couldn't use many different backgrounds when I switched between different scenes, so I used props to help build the settings.

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # All Scenes

Photo

*Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum*

Description

*What is the purpose of the props?  
50 Word Limit*



The purpose of this prop is to be in the background of my performance. Desks are often used in schools, and because I talk about education often in my performance, this prop is appropriate. The first roll top desk was made in the 1800's, so this fits the time frame.

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # All Scenes

Photo

*Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum*

Description

*What is the purpose of the props?*

*50 Word Limit*



The purpose of this prop is to build character to the background of my performance. This is my great, great grandfather's clock, and is from the 1800's, so this clock fits the timeframe. Clocks also fit the school aesthetic, so I believe this prop is appropriate.

### KEY PROP(S) BY SCENE

Scene # All Scenes

Photo

*Photo Size should be 3x3 maximum*

Description

*What is the purpose of the props?*

*50 Word Limit*



This prop is to represent Alexander Graham Bell. Bell is famous for inventing the telephone, and Bell had a big impact on the Deaf community, so I used this prop to represent him. Though this is not the first telephone model, it is still old.