

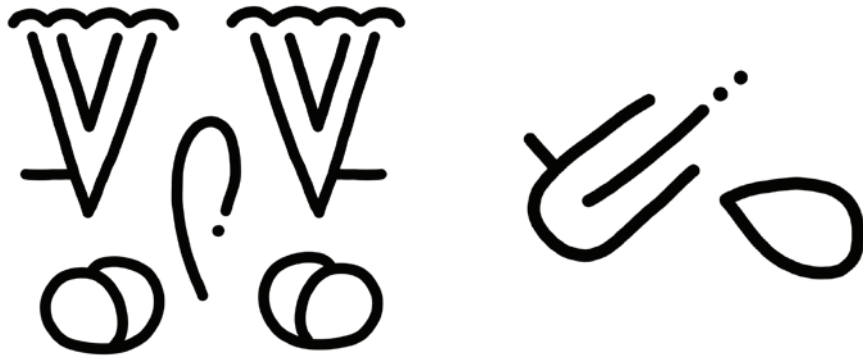
# HOW TO **WRITE** AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE



Adrean Clark



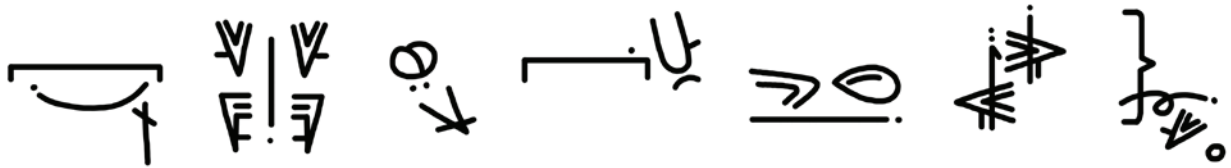
# How to Write American Sign Language



by  
**Adrean  
Clark**



*For all generations of signers. May the past be preserved and the future built.*



## **How to Write American Sign Language**

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Published by ASLwrite in Burnsville, Minnesota.

Si5s concept by Robert Arnold.

Photographs by Julia Dameron and Erik Call.  
Models (in order of appearance): Julia Dameron, Montrell White, and Amber Zion.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9858768-0-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012912030

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# Acknowledgments

This book would not be possible without the vision of Robert Arnold ([si5s.org](http://si5s.org)). His hours spent tutoring me and our time working together on developing this amazing language are much appreciated. He also had valuable input on the contents of this book.

I could not have become fluent without the help of Julia Dameron ([juliadameron.com](http://juliadameron.com)), who was instrumental in creating the early American Sign Language Writing Dictionary. Our days writing pushed the boundaries of the written language.

There are also a few other people who contributed: Erik Call, Montrell White, Amber Zion ([amberzion.com](http://amberzion.com)), Alison Aubrecht ([facundoelement.com](http://facundoelement.com)), and Raymond Luczak ([raymondluczak.com](http://raymondluczak.com)). Erik took the digibet photographs, while Julia shot Montrell and Amber as the models for the Diacritics and Composition chapters. Alison and Raymond helped test this book, making sure the content was clear and accessible.

What you read in the forthcoming pages would not be as polished without the fantastic editing skills of John Lee Clark, who also happens to be my husband. Our sons remind me every day of the importance of the language of love, and for that I'll always be thankful.

Adrean Clark



# Introduction

*“If I cannot write in my own language, then who am I?”*

Robert Arnold pondered this question one day as he wrote in English. A native Deaf signer, he felt incomplete in that he was borrowing another language to express his thoughts. This troubled him for years. Finally, in a coffee shop in New York City, a solution burst upon him as he doodled a few handshapes on paper. Those early digits were the beginning of a way to write in his native language, American Sign Language.

Robert is not the first to invent a method for writing ASL, but his is the first to provide a support for fluency. Si5s, named after the handshapes for the word “signing,” is a full-fledged writing language that provides scaffolding for advanced concepts. It is to signed ASL what written English is to spoken English.

For us to understand what Si5s is, we must also understand what it is not. Previous attempts at writing in ASL fall into two groups. The first group tends to be direct illustration—drawn images of the face, body, arms, and other pictorial details. Si5s is not like that, because it uses only the lines and strokes necessary to convey each distinct sign.

The other group is made up of notational systems, which some linguists have used to record on paper signs, such as “Pro-1” representing the sign “me.” Those systems tend to be complex and difficult to learn. Si5s is connected enough to signed ASL that you can read a ASL word on paper for a sign you have never seen before and be able to sign it right, in the same way an English speaker can pronounce a new word accurately without having heard it spoken before or reading a pronunciation guide in a dictionary.

To further understand the nature of written ASL (Si5s), study the following chart:

Signed ASL	Written ASL
Handshapes	Digits
Palm Orientation	Diacritics
Movement	Movement Marks
Spatial Orientation	Locatives
Nonmanual Signals	Extramanual Marks

The chapters in this book follow the same format, to allow for easier comprehension. An effort has been made to provide ideal content for both classroom and home study. If you are fluent in ASL, then half the work is already done! The rest is a matter of practice.

It is our dream that one day we will enter a library or a bookstore and find there stacks of books in written ASL. As we open those books, we are drawn in, connecting with the rich literary roots of our community and its language.

The author will be you.



# Chapter One: The Digibet

American Sign Language is visual communication. Concepts are mostly conveyed through the hands, supported by the body and facial expressions. To learn written ASL, we need to know what consists the language. The five main components of ASL are handshapes, palm orientation, movement, spatial positioning, and extramanual signals (also known as nonmanual signals).

Of all five components, the most essential are the *handshapes*. Each handshape has its own meaning, and it is built upon to show a variety of concepts. In written ASL, handshapes are represented by *digits*.

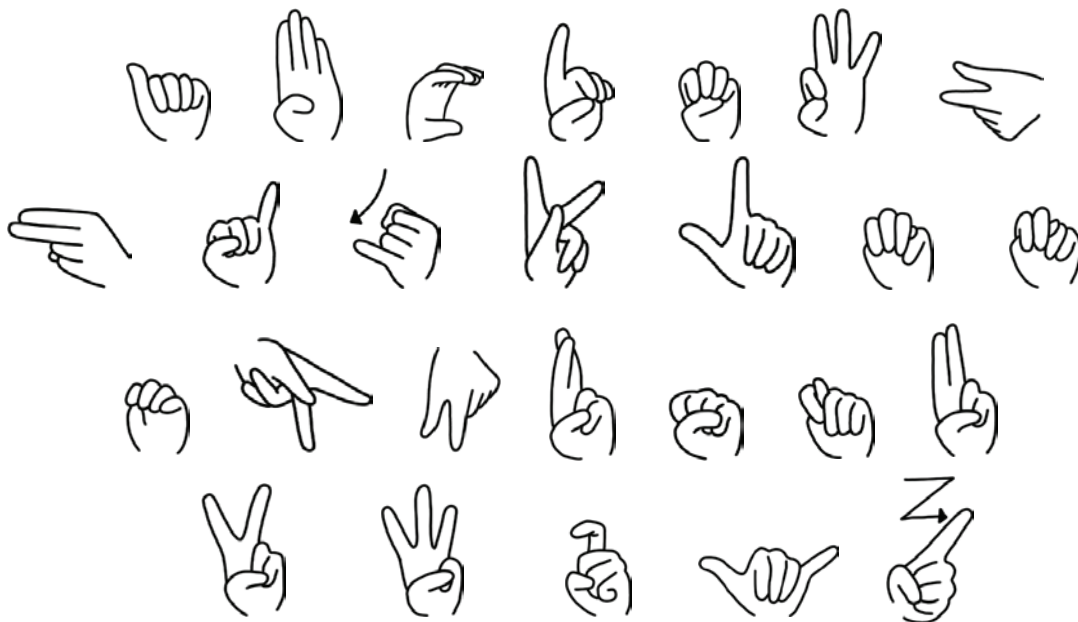


Handshape



Digit

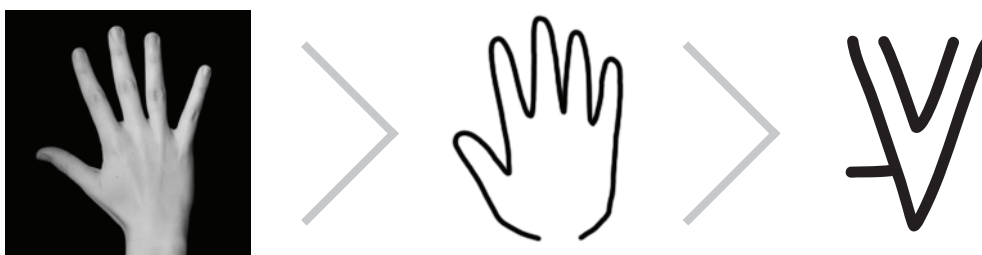
When we think of handshapes in ASL, we usually think of the manual alphabet.



The manual alphabet, while useful for fingerspelling terms and initialized signs, is not native to ASL and does not feature all of the handshapes that are used most often. What we will draw on instead is the *digibet*, or  $\forall \ominus \supset$ .

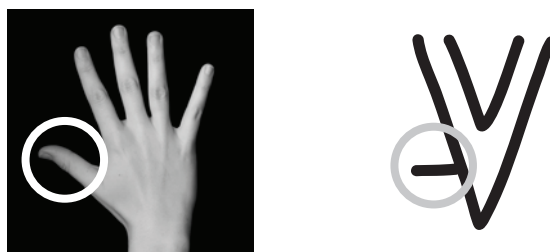
### Reading the Digibet

The word “digibet” comes from combining “digit” and “alphabet.” It is easier to visualize a digit when you match the written digit with the actual handshape.



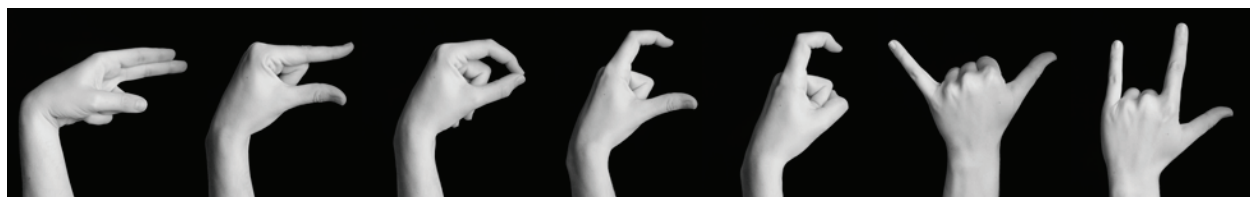
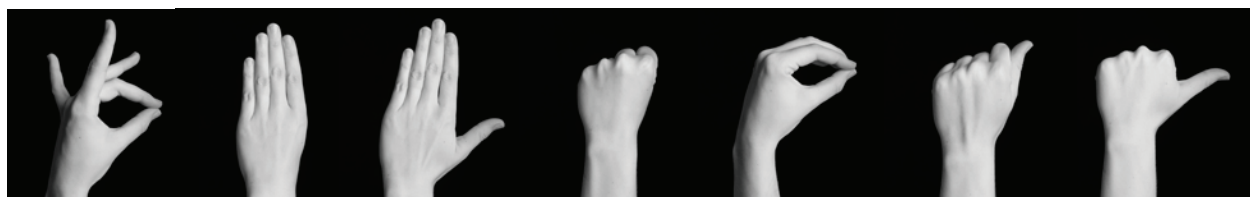
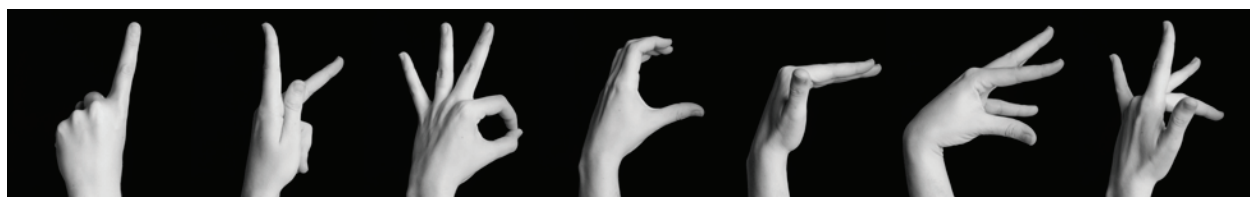
The next couple of pages have 30 of the most commonly used digits, which represent the building blocks of American Sign Language. They are also sequenced into the digibet. While used frequently, those digits do not encompass all of the possible handshapes that signers use. (The extended digibet is in the Resources section.)

As you study the digibet, watch the position of the thumb. This gives you important information on the direction the right and left hands are facing. The thumb location is also called the *chereme*, the smallest unit in writing that orientates the writer and reader.

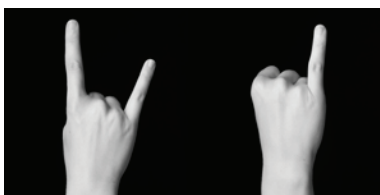
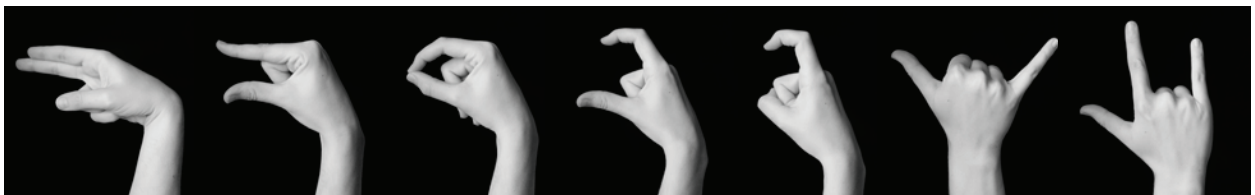
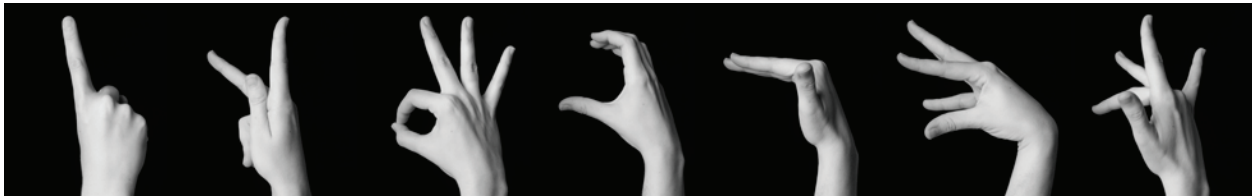


Note that palm orientation is marked by the separation of the right/left hand digits. Other ways to show this orientation are covered in later chapters.

# Left Hand | The American Sign Language Digibet



# The American Sign Language Digibet | Right Hand



The signer's hand dominance is also revealed by the cheremes. If you tend to sign using your right hand, that is your dominant hand. You would use the right-hand digibet more, especially when fingerspelling words. This is a unique feature of written ASL, allowing readers to identify left- or right-handed signers by their writing.

## Writing Digits

The digibet may look foreign at first, but as you take time to read and write them, the patterns behind the handshapes will become clear. They are split into three categories, and each category is named by the first handshape in the extended digibet sequence:

Open Digits ( $\forall$ ): Handshapes that mainly have the fingers in an extended position.

Closed Digits ( $\odot$ ): Handshapes where the fingers and thumb are touching each other in a mostly inward position.

Mixed Digits ( $\supset$ ): Handshapes that have both extended fingers and touching fingers. They aren't quite open or closed, but a combination of both.

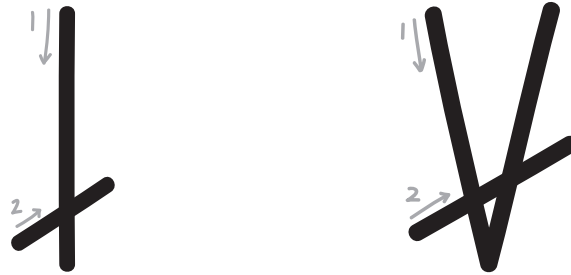
The listed digits together create the name sign for the digibet,  $\forall\odot\supset$ . By looking at the basic shape of the handshapes we can also understand how exactly the digits are written. Always start writing using the larger line first. You may also trace the digit examples with your index finger to become familiar with the shape and stroke order.



The chereme also tips us off on which direction to start writing the digit. If the thumb sticks outward, then the following patterns emerge:



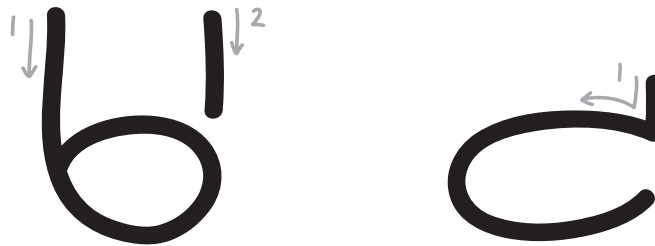
Once the thumb makes contact with the index and other fingers, lines cross over each other:



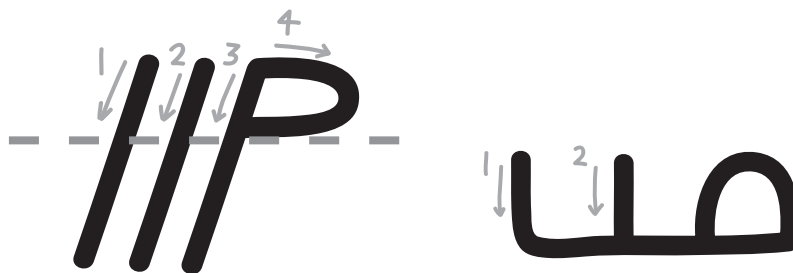
A quarter-view also emerges in some handshapes:



Sometimes the thumb disappears altogether, leaving the shape of the palm and fingers. When this happens, the little finger takes on the role of the chereme:



A digit may also be related to another digit. Can you see how in the following example?



Another way to become familiar with the digibet is by memorizing the manual alphabet. Here it is again, in left-handed and right-handed versions.

### Left-Handed Manual Alphabet

A ⤵ B ∪ C ⊙ D 6 E ∞ F 6 G ∟  
 H ∞ I ∩ J ∩ K 6 L ∟ M ∞ N ∞  
 O ⊙ P ∞ Q ∩ R ∟ S ⊙ T ∟ U ∟  
 V ∟ W ∟ X 5 Y ∟ Z ∟

### Right-Handed Manual Alphabet

A ∩ B ∪ C ⊙ D ∟ E ∞ F ∟ G ∩  
 H ∞ I ∟ J ∩ K ∟ L ∩ M ∞ N ∞  
 O ⊙ P ∞ Q ∩ R ∟ S ⊙ T ∩ U ∟  
 V ∟ W ∟ X ∩ Y ∟ Z ∟

∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟

Laurent (left-handed)

∩ ∩ ∩ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟ ∟

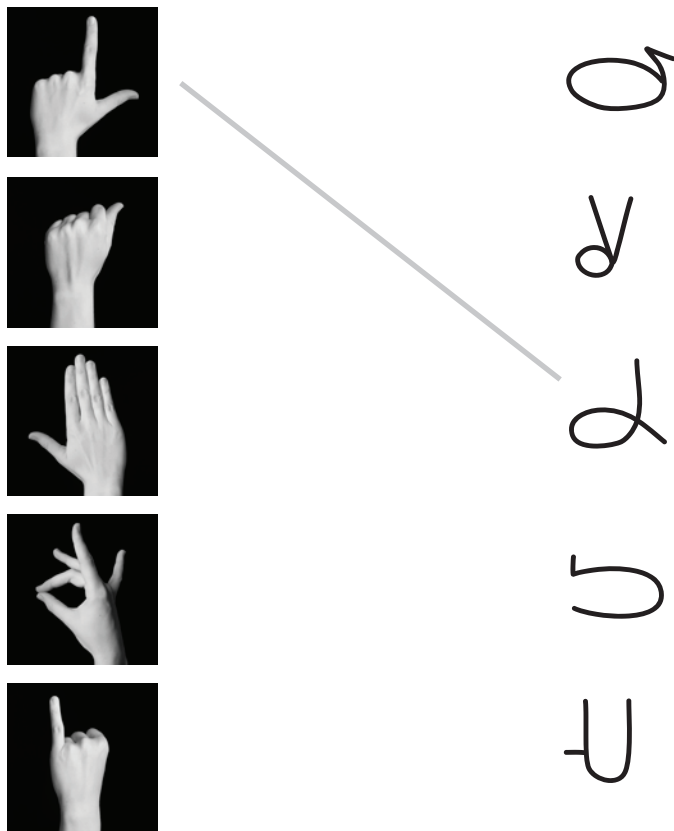
Laurent (right-handed)

It might feel odd to write the digits when you start, but it helps to visualize the handshapes and the digits together in your mind as you write. Over time it will become an automatic process.

In the next chapter, we will add motion to digits through movement marks.

## Exercises:

Match the handshapes to the digits:



What names are spelled out below? Is the writer left- or right-handed?

EDWARD: EDWARD (LEFT-HANDED)

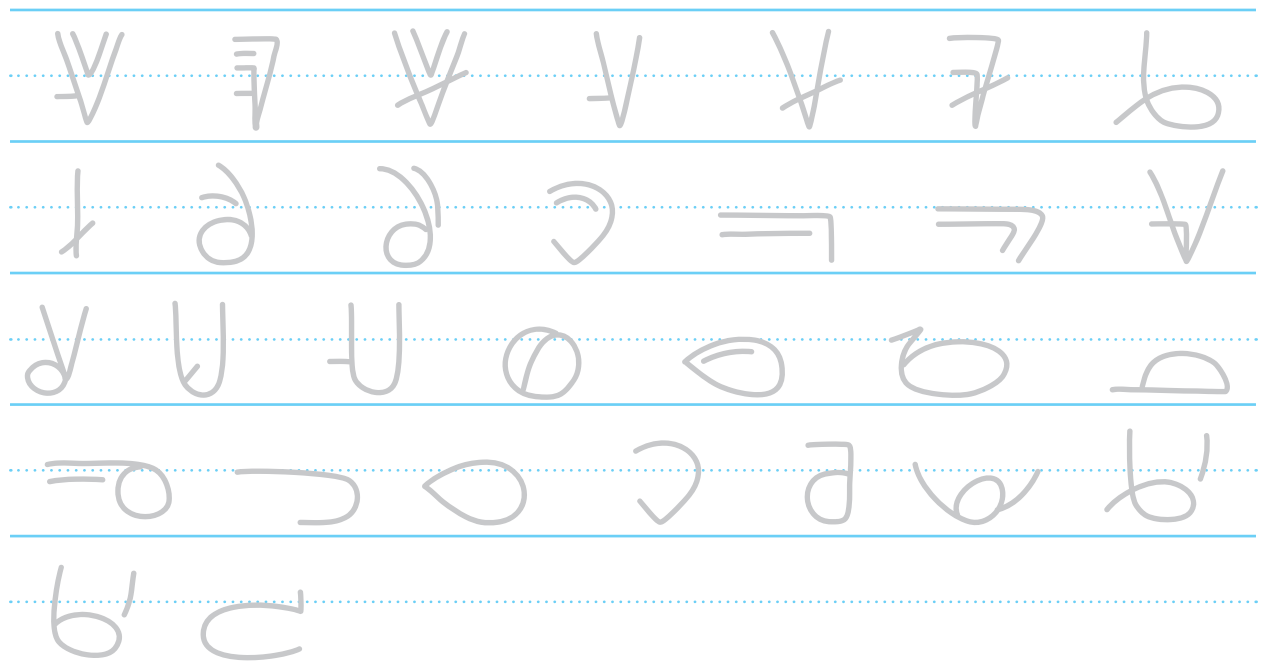
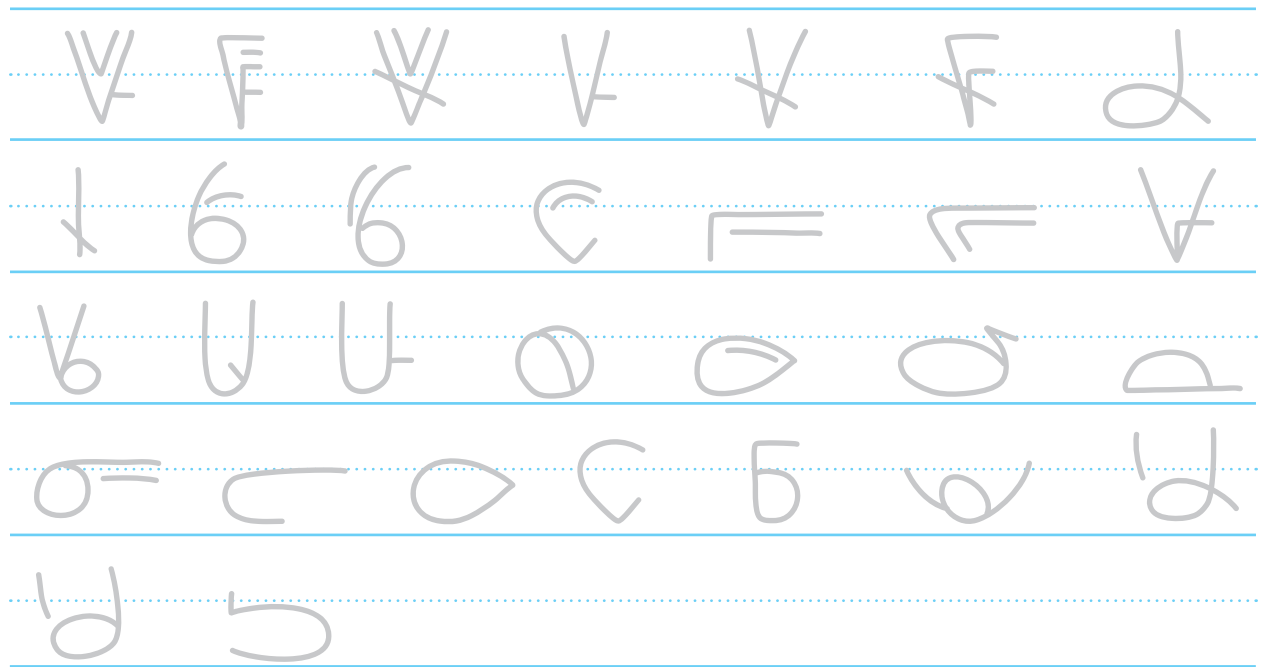
ABC: \_\_\_\_\_

EDWARD: \_\_\_\_\_

EDWARD: \_\_\_\_\_

EDWARD: \_\_\_\_\_

## Practice:



Handwriting practice lines consisting of solid top and bottom lines with a dotted midline, repeated down the page.

Handwriting practice lines consisting of solid top and bottom lines with a dashed midline, repeated 15 times down the page.

Handwriting practice lines consisting of solid top and bottom lines with a dotted midline, repeated 15 times down the page.

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 15 sets of horizontal lines. Each set includes a solid top line, a dashed middle line, and a solid bottom line.

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