SHORT PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

Overview: For each short paper assignment, you’ll find a reference (a chapter or section of a book, or a journal article) connected with any topic that relates sign languages and is interesting to you, and turn in a thoughtful, clearly written summary and discussion of your reference.

Topic choice: You’re welcome to explore any topic that you find interesting. Your topic must, of course, relate somehow to signed languages. This includes a wide range of topics, including (but not limited to) the following:

• Descriptions of the structure or social context of a particular signed language
• Universal properties of all signed languages
• Policies about the use of signed language in educational, legal, or other contexts
• The history of a particular signed language, or of attitudes towards the language
• Acquisition of signed languages, by humans or non-humans
• The relationship between natural signed languages and other manual communication systems

Beyond the specific focus of each of your papers, the following general topics should each be addressed in one (or more) paper; the order and combination in which you address these topics is up to you.

• At least one paper focusing on linguistic structure (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics…). This can be a grammatical description, or a grammar-oriented discussion of how some structure is acquired or processed, how it has changed over time, or similar.
• At least one paper focusing on language in society (education, social context, variation, dialects, gender…).
• At least one paper on a (natural) signed language other than ASL.

You should have at least one paper focusing primarily on ‘linguistic structure’ and at least one on ‘language in society’ (rather than always blending both types of topics), to allow for deeper engagement. A paper on either of these topics, or a different paper entirely, may address a non-ASL signed language.

Finding references: You should select reliable academic references. Be careful to choose references that are at an appropriate level for you to understand, and limited enough in scope for you to write a 2-3 page discussion (see details below). Some ideas of places to look for interesting references are below.

Any topic that you identify could potentially be quite huge. Keep in mind that these are quite short response papers, and focus on finding references (or parts of references) that contain enough content to give you something meaningful and interesting to write about, without being overwhelmingly long or problematically complex.

If you are having trouble finding a good reference, please come talk to me! This is typically a fairly easy kind of question to answer in person, though it can be somewhat more difficult via e-mail, so please plan ahead.
Writing up your paper: For each paper, you should turn in a thoughtful, fairly concise response to your chosen reference. This should include a brief summary of the piece, or of a section that you focus on. You should also include some discussion of what you find interesting, questions that arise, and ideas that you might (or could) pursue further. Also provide evaluation of the author’s argument: are you convinced that their conclusions are correct? Why or why not? Treat this like an extended, formal reading response.

Length: 2 (full) to 3 pages. Please type, use a standard 12-point font, double-space, and use one inch margins. Use page numbers, staple if necessary (please print two-sided!), and make sure to include your name.

Topic: To count towards the long-term goals of writing (at least) one paper each on the three focuses noted above, you must explicitly identify the focus of each paper: please label each as linguistic structure, language in society, non-ASL language, or no focus specified.

Writing: This is a formal writing assignment. It should be thoughtfully organized, with a brief introduction and conclusion and sensible connections between ideas throughout. You must proofread and spell-check your work before turning it in.

Citations: You must give full bibliographic information for any source you cite – here, this really means for your central reference. Make sure to include page numbers for any direct quotations.

Any bibliographic style is fine with me; if you are searching for a style, APA is nice: http://www.library.cornell.edu/resrch/citmanage/apa

Papers will be graded using rubrics. These may differ slightly from one short paper to the next; the rubric for each paper will be posted on the class website at least one week before the paper is due. It is in your very best interest to take a look at the rubric before writing your paper!
Some thoughts on finding a good, accessible reference for your paper.

Most of you are beginning linguistics students. While it’s excellent to be ambitious, please don’t try to get your head around anything that feels dauntingly hard. The purpose here is to give you a chance to explore something you think is interesting; there are plenty of ways to do this that don’t require any more background than you have now. It would also be easy to find something that’s many levels beyond where you are now; there’s also plenty available at your level, so no need to pick something that will result in agony. So – where can you look for articles?

Browse the library.

Some sign language-oriented books are filed around P117 (in the “General linguistics” section); these are often collections of individual papers describing aspects of linguistic structure and/or experimental results, as well as some grammars.

Many others are in the rather unfortunately-named “People with disabilities” section, around HV2400; a handful of grammars are here, as well as books on deaf culture, diversity, and education.

Browse sign language-oriented journals.

Journal articles will range from relatively accessible to extremely technical. If you want to work with a technical article, focusing fairly narrowly (e.g. on only one of three experiments, or on the major claim but not all supporting details) may make this more tractable. While it’s important that you can describe and discuss the author’s central argument, you are certainly not responsible for mastering every individual detail.

The Stanford library has subscriptions to sign language-oriented journals including:

- Sign Language & Linguistics
- Sign Language Studies
- American Annals of the Deaf
- Journal of Deaf Studies and Education

Search in databases.

If you have a specific topic in mind, you can search in a general database like JSTOR or Google Scholar, or a subject-specific database like Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (best for linguistic structure topics) or PsychINFO (which has many experimental papers).

Come talk to me.

If you have a specific topic in mind, I’m happy to help look for interesting references at whatever level is right for you; I know it can be difficult to find the right search terms in a new field. If you’re not sure what you’re interested in, I’m happy to talk about possibilities. I also have various references in my office, including some general introductory overviews, that you’re welcome to use.