

Auslan or AUSLAN: an explanation of the correct capitalization

In 1981, I coined the word *Auslan* for *Australian sign language*. I felt that *ASL* as an acronym or abbreviation would have been confusing because *ASL* was already used around the world, including Australia, to mean *American Sign Language*.

Auslan is a blend of letters from the expression *Australian sign language*. Like other blends in English, such as the word *smog* (a blend of *smoke* and *fog*), one does not capitalize every letter in a blend. But *Auslan* is written with the first letter capitalized because it is the convention in English for the name of a language, which is a proper name, to have its first letter capitalized as all proper names do, as in *English* itself.

The title on the cover of the first Auslan Dictionary had the name capitalized and the letters separated by interpuncts thus: A·U·S·L·A·N, i.e., they are not full stops, as in the acronym N.S.W. (also written without full stops as NSW) for New South Wales. The cover is just typological liberty I took for design reasons because it is the heading title of the book. It never occurred to me that anyone would take this to mean the name should be capitalized because it is clearly not an acronym and in that very publication or in any other publication by myself or any linguist is it *never* written in any other way.

The full capitalization of all the letters of the word *Auslan* (as *AUSLAN*) is incorrect except for typological design reasons in titles. The word can still be found in capitals in some publications where it is not appropriate and this appears to have resulted from either a misunderstanding based on the cover of the first Auslan dictionary or the fact that most other sign language names *are* acronyms (*ASL* for *American Sign Language*, *BSL* for *British Sign Language* etc). Another exception is *Libras* (Brazilian sign language) which is similarly a blend. The name for the sign language of the deaf community in Australia has been written in academic publications, nationally and internationally, as *Auslan* for over 20 years (2021 edit: *for over 40 years*).

It is only a small number of misinformed government agencies, service providers or individuals who continue to use capitalization throughout much to the irritation of the deaf community. The deaf community organizations have asked me to explain the correct writing of the name of their language—they write *Auslan* too.

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