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Statutory guidance

GCSE Subject Level Guidance for British Sign Language

Published 13 November 2025

Applies to England

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Introduction

This document is part of a suite of documents which outlines our guidance for awarding organisations offering GCSE Qualifications in British Sign Language. This guidance will come into effect at 12.01am on Thursday 13 November 2025.

This document sets out guidance which applies to all GCSE Qualifications (graded from 9 to 1) in British Sign Language. It supports the GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for British Sign Language.

This document constitutes guidance for the purposes of section 153 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (the '2009 Act'), Condition GCSE(BSL)1 and Condition GCSE(BSL)2.

An awarding organisation has a legal obligation under the 2009 Act to have regard to this guidance, where relevant, in relation to each GCSE Qualification in British Sign Language that it makes available or proposes to make available. Condition GCSE(BSL)1 and Condition GCSE(BSL)2 impose the same obligation in respect of the guidance below which is issued under those Conditions.

An awarding organisation should use the guidance in this document to help it understand how to comply with the GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for British Sign Language.

Guidance set out in this document

This document provides guidance in relation to assessments and on assessment objectives, for GCSE Qualifications (graded 9 to 1) in British Sign Language.

Guidance in relation to assessments for GCSE Qualifications in British Sign Language

Condition GCSE(BSL)2.3 allows us to specify requirements and guidance in relation to assessments for GCSE Qualifications in British Sign Language.

We set out our guidance for the purposes of Conditions GCSE(BSL)2.3 below.

Access to dictionaries

The preclusion on access to dictionaries in Condition GCSE(BSL)3.1 does not prevent an awarding organisation providing the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary in assessments, if it considers this necessary.

In line with the requirements specified under Condition GCSE(BSL)2.3, in its assessment strategy, an awarding organisation must set out its approach to providing meanings for unfamiliar vocabulary.

Language and accessibility of assessments

In line with the requirements specified under Condition GCSE(BSL)2.3, an awarding organisation must design its assessments for Learners who have no prior knowledge of British Sign Language before taking the qualification.

In complying with that requirement, we will expect an awarding organisation to design and set its assessments so that:

- (a) questions and instructions are given in English or in a language neutral form (such as images or videos), unless the use of British Sign Language is intended to form part of the assessment of a Learner's understanding, and
- (b) the Level of Demand of any use of British Sign Language in questions and instructions does not breach Condition GCSE1.1.

In line with the requirements specified under Condition GCSE(BSL)2.3, an awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to maximise the accessibility of assessments in relation to assessment objectives AO1, AO2 and AO3.

In complying with that requirement, we will expect an awarding organisation to do the following:

- (a) seek to ensure that instructions, questions and tasks which are not given in a language neutral form:
 - (i) are provided solely in English or British Sign Language only where necessary,
 - (ii) are also provided in subtitled British Sign Language videos where the sole use of English is not necessary, and
 - (iii) where necessary to avoid the use of a particular sign or signs that form part of the assessed content, use fingerspelling rather than signs included in the vocabulary list in the specification for the qualification.

- (b) seek to ensure that questions in the Assessments by Examination –
 - (i) use selected response items (including visual response options),
 - (ii) minimise the number of open responses in written English, and
 - (iii) provide, where appropriate, visual stimulus materials that Learners may reference in their responses to avoid the need for Learners to describe signs in writing.

We will expect an awarding organisation to preclude the use of British Sign Language or other sign-based communication support such as Sign Supported English as a Reasonable Adjustment in relation to assessments which assess assessment objectives AO1, AO2 and AO3.

Where assessment objective AO4 is assessed through a separate Component, an awarding organisation may allow the use of British Sign Language or other sign-based communication support such as Sign Supported English as a Reasonable Adjustment to that assessment if the Learner :

- (a) can demonstrate attainment directly, and
- (b) is not placed at an advantage or disadvantage in relation to other Learners who do not have the same Reasonable Adjustment when taking the assessment.

Vocabulary and grammar

In designing and setting its assessments, we will expect an awarding organisation to ensure that, where Learners are assessed on their ability to infer plausible meanings of single signs, the supporting context is made clear in the question or instructions for the task.

Guidance on assessment objectives for GCSE Qualifications in British Sign Language

Condition GCSE(BSL)1.2 allows us to specify requirements and guidance relating to assessment objectives for GCSE Qualifications in British Sign Language.

We published our requirements in relation to assessment objectives in GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for British Sign Language, and reproduce assessment objectives AO1 to AO4 and their respective weightings in the table below.

N/A	Objective	Weighting
AO1	Demonstrate understanding of recorded and interactive British Sign Language	35%
AO2	Produce British Sign Language as rehearsed and unrehearsed language	30%
AO3	Articulate signs with accurate use of lexicon and grammar, and with appropriate use of interaction strategies	20%
AO4	Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the history of British Sign Language	15%

We set out below our guidance for the purposes of Condition GCSE(BSL)1.2. This guidance explains how we expect awarding organisations to interpret these assessment objectives in terms of:

- the discrete ‘strands’ within each assessment objective that questions and tasks could target and/or seek to credit – our expectation is that each and every question or task should target or seek to credit at least one of these strands, and may target or seek to credit multiple elements across one or more assessment objectives;
- the coverage expectations, such as in relation to the different strands within each assessment objective and how those strands should be sampled over time; and
- the key areas of emphasis in each assessment objective and the particular meaning for the subject of any key terms and phrases used; defined terms are shown in bold text, followed by their definitions.

In line with the obligations set out in Condition GCSE(BSL)1.2, we expect awarding organisations to be able to demonstrate how they have had regard to this guidance.

For example, an awarding organisation could map how it has regard to the guidance as it:

- develops its sample assessment materials;

- delivers the qualification;
- develops and applies its approach to sampling the elements into which the assessment objectives are divided; and
- monitors the qualification to make sure it addresses all elements appropriately.

AO1 Demonstrate understanding of recorded and interactive British Sign Language: 35%

Strands	Elements	Coverage
Not applicable	1a – Demonstrate understanding of recorded British Sign Language	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment). 25% of the total qualification marks
Not applicable	1b – Demonstrate understanding of interactive British Sign Language	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment). 10% of the total qualification marks

Interpretations and definitions

For element 1a the emphasis is on Learners' understanding of the assessed language in response to recorded Stimulus Materials produced by the awarding organisation.

For element 1b the emphasis is on Learners' understanding of the assessed language during interactive tasks.

Where AO1 marks are allocated, tasks will assess Learners' understanding of the prescribed vocabulary and grammar, ensuring full coverage of the subject content requirements over time. Awarding organisations will be required to set out their approach to sampling the vocabulary and grammar in their assessment strategies.

Where AO1 marks are allocated, there is to be no reward for the use or quality of Learners' English in responses.

AO2 Produce British Sign Language as rehearsed and unrehearsed language: 30%

Strands	Elements	Coverage
Not applicable	1a – Produce British Sign Language as rehearsed language	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment). 10% of the total qualification marks
Not applicable	1b – Produce British Sign Language as unrehearsed language	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment). 20% of the total qualification marks

Interpretations and definitions

The emphasis in AO2 is on the ability to communicate effectively in British Sign Language, where the assessment focuses on the clarity and coherence of the whole British Sign Language ‘signed sentence’ and ‘signed text’ delivered by the Learner. (‘Signed text’ and ‘signed sentence’ are defined in the subject content, Annex A, paragraph 9.)

AO2 addresses the expectation for Learners to create short, clear, coherent and meaningful British Sign Language sentences that support effective communication that is capable of being understood by a proficient British Sign Language signer (as required by the subject content).

The focus in AO2 is on the overall, whole message, rather than being a granular consideration of accuracy and articulation, which is addressed by AO3.

It is expected that AO2 would be assessed in combination with AO3, as appropriate.

For element 1a the emphasis is on Learners’ ability to produce the assessed language in rehearsed tasks, where there is a greater expectation for fluency and cohesion.

For element 1b the emphasis is on Learners’ ability to produce the assessed language during interactive tasks, where Learners’ use of British Sign Language is meaningful and cohesive, but fluency may not be as developed as in rehearsed

AO3 Articulate signs with accurate use of lexicon and grammar, and with appropriate use of interaction strategies: 20%

Strands	Elements	Coverage
Not applicable	Not applicable	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment)

Interpretations and definitions

AO3 addresses expectations in relation to knowledge and accurate application of vocabulary and grammar, as set out in the subject content, including the requirements in Annex B. This includes the expectation that: “Students will be expected to demonstrate accuracy of articulation of signs and fingerspelling in relation to features of location, handshape, movement and orientation, and understand how the forms of signs may be related to sign meaning.”

The emphasis in AO3 is on the technical accuracy of Learners’ use of the assessed language, rather than the ability to communicate, which is addressed by AO2.

AO3 must be assessed in combination with AO2 for productive and interactive tasks, as appropriate to the task.

Marks for the appropriate use of interaction strategies will not be expected in any production-only tasks.

AO4 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the history of British Sign Language: 15%

Strands	Elements	Coverage
Not applicable	1a – Demonstrate knowledge of the history of British Sign	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment). No more than 5% of the total qualification

Language	marks should be rewarded for items assessing element 1a (demonstrating knowledge) in isolation. Elements 1a and 1b may be targeted together, although there should be a greater emphasis on marks for element 1b.
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Not applicable	1b – Demonstrate understanding of the history of British Sign Language	Full coverage in each set of assessments (but not every assessment). Elements 1a and 1b may be targeted together, although there should be a greater emphasis on marks for element 1b.
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Interpretations and definitions

For element 1a the emphasis is on Learners' knowledge of the history of British Sign Language, whereas for element 1b the emphasis is on Learners' understanding.

Where marks are allocated for element 1b, tasks should assess Learners on the basis that they have had substantial and meaningful engagement with the specification content.

Where AO4 marks are allocated, there is to be no reward for the use or quality of Learners' English (or British Sign Language) in responses.

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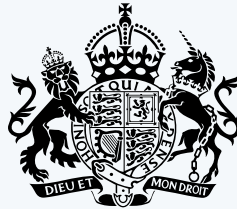
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