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***British
Sign Language***
FOR
DUMMIES®

**by City Lit Faculty of Deaf Education and
Learning Support**

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A John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, Publication

British Sign Language For Dummies®

Published by
John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
The Atrium
Southern Gate
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 8SQ
England

E-mail (for orders and customer service enquires): cs-books@wiley.co.uk

Visit our Home Page on www.wiley.com

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Illustrations © 2008 Elise Pacquette

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Chichester, West Sussex

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-470-69477-0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2



About the Authors

City Lit, based in London, is the largest adult education college in Europe, providing thousands of part-time courses each year, from the visual and performing arts, to languages, humanities, complementary therapies, and counselling.

City Lit's Faculty of Deaf Education and Learning Support offers one of the most comprehensive programmes in Europe for D/deaf learners and those interested in working in a deaf-related field. With over 60 years' experience, the provision is nationally and internationally viewed as a centre of excellence, and the department is frequently contacted to offer advice, support and training on a wide variety of issues related to deafness, deaf learners, and working with deaf people.

Learners come from all over the country and beyond – so unique is the programme and so highly regarded are the expertise and skills of staff (who are D/deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing). The team includes teachers of the deaf, of lipreading and sign language; teacher trainers, interpreters, communicators, note takers (manual and electronic) and hearing therapists.

City Lit's annual Deaf Day celebration is a free national event providing a large exhibition and many exciting workshops. Usually held in March or April, it is open to all. For more information please visit www.citylit.ac.uk

Melinda Napier is Deaf from birth and comes from a Deaf family. She has worked at City Lit for over 25 years, managing the Communication and Training Programme Area. She has taught on Teacher Training courses since 1981 and has vast experience of teaching BSL from Level 1 to Level 4. She was with the Association of British Sign Language Tutors and Assessors from the very start and is now its Chair. She lives in Surrey and loves London, her children and new Australian granddaughter. She is living in the hope that her granddaughter will learn from the book to communicate with her grandmother in BSL not AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language)!

James Fitzgerald has been working within the faculty of Deaf Education at City Lit for the past 9 years. In that time, he has worked as a note-taker, a communication support worker, a lip-speaker, a support tutor and now as a qualified BSL/English interpreter. In addition to interpreting, James coordinates the faculty's Business Training & Interpreting Unit and delivers deaf awareness and communication courses with a Deaf colleague to staff at City Lit, and to external businesses around London. Apart from BSL, James has a love of log-fires and wellington boots, and lives in leafy Surrey with his wife and four kids . . . and seven ducks!

Elise Pacquette (the illustrator) attended Norwich School of Art and Design, where she studied for a BA (Hons) in Illustration, and an MA in Fine Art. Whilst working as a prop maker in London, she started learning BSL. She has worked at City Lit since 2002 as a Senior Communicator and is currently studying a PGDip in BSL/English interpreting. She lives in London with her husband and two young children and regularly receives painting commissions to fit into her free (!) time. She loves baking, singing, painting, and (oh, yes) signing.

Authors' Acknowledgements

With a huge thanks to all the staff and students from the City Lit Faculty of Deaf Education and Learning Support whose contributions and support have been invaluable in putting together this resource. We are confident that all new learners of BSL will not only benefit from their hard work but will also enjoy themselves learning the language of the Deaf community in Britain!

Publisher's Acknowledgments

We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

Some of the people who helped bring this book to market include the following:

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Introduction

You may have seen people signing in the streets, restaurants, or shops and didn't know what they were saying. Perhaps you wondered whether they were using proper language or just miming. You may have heard of *Deaf culture* but didn't know what the term meant. You may have bought this book because you want to learn signing and communicate with a deaf person you know, a work colleague, or a neighbour so here is your opportunity to learn their language and be able to hold basic conversations with them.

Whatever the reason why you're reading this now, *British Sign Language For Dummies* introduces you to basic sign language and helps you get an understanding of Deaf culture. You cannot learn sign language without understanding a bit of Deaf culture as they go hand in hand, and once you understand both, you become a better signer.

About This Book

This book focuses on British Sign Language (BSL) with some simple explanations of grammatical rules. We assume you bought this book because you want to learn BSL, not to learn about grammatical jargon in depth. There are plenty of books around that explain the linguistics aspects of sign language.

Like any spoken language, BSL has regional signs and dialects. For this book, we have chosen the most common signs, the ones that are understood all over the UK.

This book is categorised according to subject. You can use each chapter as a building block for the next chapter, or you can skip around wherever you please. Just choose a subject that interests you and dig in. Just remember that it is fun to learn BSL and you can practise with your friends. Don't worry if you couldn't get the hang of it, just keep on practising and your Deaf friends will help you.

Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate through this book, let us explain some conventions we've used when writing this book:

- ✔ Whenever we use a sign in lists, examples and dialogues, we print the word version of the sign in capital letters to show that it's the closest equivalent to its English counterpart.
- ✔ When we are about to introduce a new sign, we print it in **bold** in the text, so that you know you're about to learn a new sign.
- ✔ We capitalise the letter **D** in the word Deaf whenever it means culturally Deaf (explained in depth in Chapter 1)
- ✔ The text for both signs and English always come before the equivalent illustrations.
- ✔ The illustrations have arrows on them to show the direction of the sign. A wavy line indicates that the fingers of the signing hand wiggle up and down. See the sign for 'when' on page 36.
- ✔ To save space, words that are fingerspelled do not have illustrations, and you can refer to Chapter 1 or Cheat Sheet if you need help remembering how to sign a letter or number.
- ✔ Web sites appear in monofont.

This book also includes a few elements that other *For Dummies* books do not have. The elements that you'll find are as follows

- ✔ **Starting To Sign:** Seeing signs in actual context in the text and on the online content helps you understand how to sign the dialogues in correct grammatical order.
- ✔ **Fun & Games activities:** These visual games help you practise your signing skills and are a good way to have fun while checking your progress; and you can have more fun if you practise this with a friend.

The English sentences are translated into British Sign Language (BSL) and are not to be taken as word-for-word translations.

Foolish Assumptions

We hate to assume anything about anyone, but when writing this book, we had to make a few foolish assumptions about you. Here they are (we hope we were right):

- ✔ You have little or no experience in this type of communication, but you have a genuine interest.
- ✔ You don't expect to be a fluent signer after learning from this book. You just want some basic signs in simple sentences.
- ✔ You want to learn about the grammatical rules of BSL, but in a practical way, rather than by spending hours learning theory.

- ✓ You want to learn a few signs in order to be able to communicate with Deaf friends, family members and colleagues.

How This Book Is Organised

This book is divided by topics into parts, then divided into chapters. The following sections let you know what kind of information you can find in each part.

Part I: Starting to Sign

This part introduces you to the concept of communicating with different groups of Deaf people with a range of hearing losses, and how to attract their attention, as well as looking at some principles of good communication. Chapter 2 helps you to understand fingerspelling and how to make sense of signing and facial expressions.

Part II: Everyday BSL

In this part, you learn how to communicate with Deaf people using basic signs and sentence structure. You will be able to ask and understand simple questions, express and recognise basic facial expressions.

Part III: Getting Out and About

All the signs you need from giving directions, making plans, meeting friends and getting around are in this part.

Part IV: Looking into Deaf Life

Read this part to learn about Deaf history of education, community and culture as well as finding out how Deaf people use technology to get better access to information.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Here you can find useful tips to help you improve your signing skills. This part gives you ideas for good communication and helps you overcome any uncertainty you may feel. You'll also be amazed by some information you didn't know about Deaf people.

Part VI: Appendixes

This book has two appendixes. Appendix A gives you all the answers to the Fun & Games questions. Appendix B gives you detailed instructions for accessing and using the online content that accompanies this book.

Icons Used in This Book

To help you find certain types of information more easily, we've included several icons in this book. You find them on the left-hand side of the page, sprinkled throughout:



This icon gives the handy hints and tricks of the trade that can make signing easier.



This icon emphasises important information that you should take away with you.



This icon warns you to avoid making a mistake or offending a Deaf person, so take note of what these paragraphs have to say.



This icon highlights useful tips about BSL grammar rules.



This icon helps you to understand bits of information about the culture of the Deaf people.

Where to Go from Here

The beauty of this book is that you can go anywhere you want. You may find it helpful to start with the first two chapters to get down the basics, but if that's not your thing, feel free to jump in wherever you want. Find a subject that interests you, start signing, and have fun!

Part I

Starting to Sign

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I never thought I'd have to say this, but this is a public library. Please tell your friends to keep their signing to a whisper."

In this part . . .

This Part gets you up and running with BSL. We talk in detail about the different sorts of people with hearing loss, and introduce you to the basic ground rules for good signing communication.

We also show you a few basic signs, including the BSL signs you already knew without realising.

Chapter 1

Discovering Who's Who – And How They Communicate

In This Chapter

- ▶ Looking at appropriate terms for deaf people
 - ▶ Communicating: how different groups of deaf people communicate in different ways
 - ▶ Making yourself more lipreadable
 - ▶ Looking at some principles of good communication
-

In this chapter, we talk about the different terms used to describe people who don't hear. This is the starting point of good communication – getting the descriptions right. We look at the differences between those who describe themselves as 'deaf' (with a small 'd') and those who use 'Deaf' (with a big 'D'). We look at the variety of communication tactics which you can use with different groups, and show that not all deaf people sign, and not all deaf people lipread. Knowing what's what and being flexible will make a big difference to your whole experience of communication.

Different Groups of Deaf People

Terminology is changing all the time – that's what happens with all living languages. In any subject there may be words that become commonly used, and those that go out-of-date . . . and some that no longer carry their original meaning at all and can even become offensive.

Who's dumb?

Deaf-related terminology changes like that of any other language. Take 'deaf and dumb', for example, which was originally used to mean someone without hearing or speech. Decades ago, this was a common term and there were 'schools for the deaf and dumb'. Older people may still use this term, but its

meaning has now changed and the term can cause offence. Dumb now has another meaning, ‘stupid’, and nobody wants to be called stupid! There may be many reasons why a deaf person chooses not to use their voice – one of them being that they are a BSL user’s – and BSL is not a spoken language. Deaf-mute is also not used. It may be more appropriate to say ‘deaf without speech’ if the deaf person has chosen to use other methods of communication. True ‘muteness’ is a different matter and is not directly related to deafness.



Generally unacceptable terms to describe deaf people include: deaf and dumb, deaf-mute, stone deaf, Mutt and Jeff, special needs (a better term might be ‘have special requirements’ or ‘additional requirements/support’), non-hearing (what woman would call herself non-male, for example?) and anything with ‘-challenged’ at the end.

Understanding who's who

So what about other terms? What terms used to describe deaf people are generally acceptable to use now, and what do they mean? The following sections cover some terms and their descriptions that you may find useful.

deaf

When you use the word *deaf* (with a small ‘d’) you’re referring to anyone with a hearing loss, for whatever reason, and at whatever level. The term is mostly used by deaf people who use methods *other than* sign language to communicate.



Out of a population of about 60 million, there are approximately 9 million in the UK who have a hearing loss to some degree. That’s 1 in 7 of the population!

Deaf

Deaf (with a capital ‘D’) is quite a different matter, and refers to the Deaf community. Just as we might use capital ‘B’ for British or ‘A’ for Australian, so a capital ‘D’ is used to show that this is about a person’s identity, not about their medical condition. The defining characteristic of a Deaf person is that they use BSL as their first or preferred language. People who are Deaf often share a common ‘Deaf culture’ which includes Deaf history, education, clubs, social events, sports (such as the Deaf Olympics) as well as sign language. Those who do not use sign language would not use the capital ‘D’ (unless of course it’s at the start of a sentence!). Sometimes you may see the term **D/deaf** which includes those who are ‘hearing impaired’ as well as those are part of a linguistic minority group (BSL users).



BSL is the first or preferred language of about 70,000 Deaf people in the UK.



You can be part of the Deaf community without actually being Deaf yourself. A CODA is a Child Of Deaf Adults who is hearing, but raised in the Deaf community by parents who are Deaf. A CODA is likely to be bilingual – switching easily from BSL to spoken English, but may consider BSL to be their first language.

Hard of hearing

Hard of hearing is not just a term for an old person who may be losing their hearing. You can be hard of hearing at any age for many reasons. The term tends to refer to someone with a mild or moderate hearing loss. Hard of hearing people might rely on the hearing they've got (residual hearing), and use technical devices such as hearing aids and loop systems to amplify the sound. A HOH person may also be relying a lot on lipreading to communicate, and has possibly joined a lipreading class to help them with this. More often than not, someone who is HOH has lost their hearing later in life, in any regards after they have acquired language. So a hard of hearing person is, a lot of the time, said to have an 'acquired hearing loss' rather than a 'congenital' one (i.e. born deaf).



Out of 9 million people in the UK with a hearing loss of some degree, approximately 8.3 million of these are 'hard of hearing'.

Hearing impaired

Hearing impaired is a generally acceptable term used to describe someone who has a hearing loss. It could refer to someone who is born deaf, or became deaf later in life. Some people prefer the term 'hearing impaired' to being described as 'deaf', especially if they are relying on residual hearing.



The term 'hearing impaired' would *not* be used by someone who is Deaf (with a capital 'D'), as he or she is part of a Deaf cultural community, and doesn't consider himself or herself to be 'impaired' by their deafness.

Deafened

We might say 'that music was deafening' if it's particularly loud and those with so-called 'selective hearing' might say they are 'deafened' to the sound of your voice. But this term also refers to a unique group of deaf people – those who have suddenly lost their hearing (normally in adulthood) and have acquired a severe or profound level of deafness. This might be caused by several things, including noise damage (for example a bomb blast, or industrial noise), a trauma to the head (such as a car accident), an illness, or even a severe reaction to medication. Of course, the cause might also be unknown. A deafened person has perhaps not had any time to get used to losing their hearing. It could even happen overnight. Imagine if that happened to you, how your life would change. Your ability to communicate with your family, friends, at work, on public transport . . . everything will have been affected. You can no longer hear the radio, the TV, use the phone, or hear that double-glazing salesman at the door (some would say that's the only advantage!). If

you suddenly lose your hearing, you won't automatically know how to lip-read – it's not something you've ever had to do. You're also unlikely to want to learn BSL – what would be the point, if your family or friends don't know how to sign?

One of the other challenges with being 'deafened' is that other people may have no idea you have a hearing loss. After all, your voice would stay the same; there'd be no issue with your speech. You may not wear hearing aids, as they can take a while to get used to, and some deafened people might be concerned about the stigma of wearing them. It's not as if you'd be wearing a bright pink t-shirt saying 'I'm deafened', so others are likely to be completely unaware and babble on regardless. This can cause a huge amount of frustration and bewilderment, which is why 'deafened' people are in a group of their own. They have unique communication requirements, and support needs.



There are approximately 150,000 deafened people in the UK

Deafblind

Deafblind is the term used to describe someone with a dual sensory loss – it could be that a person was deaf and lost their sight later, or blind, and lost their hearing later. Or they may have been hearing and sighted and lose effective use of both senses later in life. Due to immunisation against *Rubella*, it's becoming rarer for a child to be born both deaf and blind (the main cause was the mother contracting *Rubella* while pregnant). Someone who is part of the Deaf community (see above) and loses their sight (maybe due to a syndrome called 'Usher') would write Deafblind (with a capital D), for the same reasons as given above.



In the UK, there are approximately 24,000 registered deafblind people.

... And how do they communicate?

The preferred method of communication for a deaf person will usually depend on which of the main groups he or she belongs to. The following sections walk you through each of these preferred methods.

Deaf (capital 'D')

British Sign Language! The language of the Deaf community in the UK. Presumably you're reading this book because you want to learn to sign. Well this is the group to practise with. Don't go practising your signs on anyone who happens to be wearing a hearing aid. It's only Deaf people who use BSL as their first and preferred language, in Britain. Unless they've learned the language for another reason, anybody else won't know what you're on about, and might think you're performing a mime act.

If you want to communicate with a Deaf BSL-user, and you don't use BSL yourself, try to think visually. Use some more gestures (as appropriate) and communicate more with your face. Raise your eyebrows to ask questions, nod to show you have understood, shake your head to indicate 'no' . . . and smile if you're saying something positive! Deaf people are pretty good at reading your body language and facial expressions, so limber up and show what you mean to say! Keep using the English language but avoid using long complex sentences or jargon, and keep to the point.



For Deaf Sign Language users, English may not be their first language. It can be pretty difficult to lipread a language you don't know well.



Don't switch your voice off and stop moving your lips when talking to a BSL user (unless you're using BSL yourself). Even if English is not their mother tongue, the Deaf person will want to get information from your lips and may benefit from hearing some sound from your speech to accompany lipreading – if they have some residual hearing or use hearing aids.



You don't need to gesture everything! Just key points, to get your message across. If you're asking about their Christmas holidays, you don't need to perform a whole Nativity play to get across the word 'Christmas'. Don't labour it – just find another way of saying 'Christmas' – for example, 'December the 25th' (showing 2 and 5 on your hands). You can always write down key words too!

Hard of hearing

If they use English – keep using English. But don't use BSL for this group. Keep using your voice, and be aware that a hard of hearing person will most likely be lipreading you. Some hard of hearing people will have attended lipreading classes, and may be making effective use of recognising speech patterns. However, even the best lipreaders only get a maximum of about 30 per cent from lip-patterns alone. Lipreaders take in information from body language, facial expressions, the context and other clues to make informed decisions about what a phrase or word might be on the lips. It can take a lot of skill and a lot of experience, and can be extremely frustrating for the lip-reader, but there are things you can do to make lipreading much more effective. See the section below for some lipreading tips.

A hard of hearing person may also use various pieces of equipment to help with communication. Depending on their type and level of deafness, they may find a loop system helpful, or may use radio aids or other amplification systems. Sometimes it may help if you speak up a little bit – but don't shout! Shouting will distort your lips and could give you an aggressive facial expression. And who likes to be shouted at anyway? Speaking more clearly is much more effective. Something to bear in mind: there's really no need to exaggerate your lips. Rubber lips not only make you look peculiar, they don't help with lipreading either! Keep it natural.

Deafened

If you suddenly lose your hearing, you will naturally try to lipread, but lipreading is likely to be hard work and exhausting, especially if you are recently deafened. For some deafened people, lipreading is just too difficult, so the main communication choice would be the use of pen and paper. But remember – there’s not a problem with language . . . so you don’t need to simplify your English. Just write everything down, as normal. Just because you’ve lost your hearing, doesn’t mean you’ve lost your language too. A deafened person will normally respond using their own voice. So if you shout to make yourself understood, you might get shouted at in reply!



Don’t go heavy on the gestures and animated facial expressions with a deafened person. Just use natural gestures. A deafened person is quite unlike a visually-communicative Deaf signer, and if they’re stereotypically English, they’re not going to be comfortable expressing themselves with wild gesticulations, and will not thank you for doing so either. It’s also hard to lipread if you’re used to a stiff upper-lip!

Deafblind

How a deafblind person communicates depends on lots of things – their level of deafness and blindness, as well as on when they became deaf or blind. Someone born blind who then loses their hearing would use different forms of communication to someone born deaf who then loses their sight. A Deaf BSL-user who loses their sight later in life is still a member of the Deaf community, and might want to keep using BSL so may use ‘hands-on BSL’ by putting their hands over the person signing to feel the movements. The person they are talking to would need to modify their signing slightly to compensate for the fact that their facial expressions (an important part of BSL) cannot be seen clearly.

A lot of deafblind people choose to communicate using the ‘deafblind manual alphabet’ which is BSL fingerspelling modified so that it is done onto one hand of the deafblind person, who reads it through touch. Some ‘signs’ are also made into the palm as shortened ways of saying things such as ‘yes’ and ‘no’ or ‘again’. Some deafblind people can pick up deafblind manual at more than 80 words per minute, without the need to pause between words. Of course, not everyone can spell that fast, but many deafblind manual interpreters may operate at that speed. If the person has a good knowledge of English, full sentences are spelled out onto the palm. If English is not their preferred language, the same rules apply as if you’re writing on paper – everyday words, to the point, simple sentences and not too much waffle. Yes – you can still waffle using deafblind manual!

So what if you were to meet a deafblind person, and wanted to communicate with them? Let’s say you don’t know hands-on BSL, you can’t get your fingers around deafblind manual, and there’s no-one else nearby who’s learnt it either. What would you do? No running off! If you know how to write and

you've got fingers, you have all you need. You can use the standard alphabet, and spell out words into the palm of the deafblind person's hand. It's called the 'block manual alphabet'. Write in capital letters – it's much easier to distinguish through touch. And make sure you spell out each word properly – one letter on top of the other. Don't go writing essays over their whole body, up the arms and down the legs. They might not thank you for that, and worse . . . they might be ticklish.



Spell out words properly – don't abbreviate to 'U R' instead of 'you are' – as this way has only really been developed from texting. Don't worry if you make a mistake – you can always rub it out! (but not with a rubber . . . and certainly not with tippex!)

Attracting a Deaf Person's Attention?

There's no point in saying 'excuse me' 'now listen . . .' or 'Oi you!'. They won't hear you. And don't be tempted to say 'are you deaf, or what?'. In this situation, you know the answer.

There are several ways of getting a D/deaf person's attention – some ways are more suited to a particular situation, and it depends also on how well you know the person. The important thing is: get the D/deaf person's attention **BEFORE** you start speaking. It's no good getting their attention *while* you're talking – it will take a few moments for the D/deaf person to register your face, adjust themselves to you, the light, and the environment. So allow a few moments before you start speaking, otherwise your first few words or sentences might be lost, and the conversation will have started off on a bad footing. Here are a few ways you might try:

Touching on the arm or shoulder

If you know the person, and you know they are comfortable with this, then touching them lightly on the arm or shoulder might be a perfectly okay way of getting their attention. If you don't know them, you might want to be cautious about using touch – some people are not comfortable with it, for personal, social or cultural reasons. Also – be careful not to grab or startle someone with a sudden touch. You might end up with a black eye.



Don't grab a Deaf person's arm to catch their attention if they are signing. It's the equivalent of sticking your finger in someone's mouth while they're talking!

Waving

Not the Mexican type. More a gentle wave of the arm to catch their eye. Half-way between an air-traffic control signal and a gentle butterfly motion should do the trick. If they don't see you, move a little closer. Don't just stand there waving. You might attract the unwanted attention of some bird-spotters.

Stamping on the floor

Never one-to-one, unless you're two years-old and having a tantrum. But in a Deaf school, the teacher might use this method to get the attention of the whole class. It saves time having to wave at each student – by the time you've got the last person's attention, you've lost it with the first lot. So sometimes stamping the feet is used, as vibrations are sent through the floor, and everyone turns to face the teacher at the same time. Not to be recommended on concrete floors, however. You might just break your foot.



While stamping on the floor or banging on the table might be something familiar within Deaf culture in schools, it's not used in the mainstream – unless you want to come across as angry or impatient. So within a group of hard of hearing people, in a lipreading class perhaps, the teacher would not use this means to get the class's attention. It could easily offend!

Switching the light on and off

This works well to get the attention of a group of people who have a hearing loss. It's always best to establish this way with the group at the outset, or people could think there's a problem with the electrics, or that you're trying to set up a disco. Flashing lights are very much a part of Deaf culture, as they are a visual way of getting attention – whether as a fire alarm, door bell, or to signify the start of a presentation or class (as in a Deaf school).

Watch My Lips!

Lipreading is used as a communication tool for a large number of deaf people, including Deaf BSL users who are communicating with those who don't sign. In fact, everyone uses lipreading to an extent. Have you ever tried to hold a conversation with someone through a closed window? Or across a crowded pub (did he say 'do you want a *pint of coke*', or 'do you want to *buy a goat*'?). You may have noticed that when you can't quite hear what someone is saying, your eyes will automatically flick down to their lips, and you will try to lipread. Try it yourself by watching the news on TV with the volume turned down a bit. You will notice that it's easier to lipread if you can hear some sound – even if only a little. So a good tip to help lipreading . . . keep using your voice (unless you're