



National Teacher Training Institute



Lesson Plan

Piercing the World of Silence

An Introduction to
The Miracle Worker
and sign language

Written by Shelly Turk

Suggested Grade Level: 8 - 9

Time Allotment: One 45-minute class period

Overview: Helen Keller became both deaf and blind after a childhood illness, and through the persistence of her teacher, Anne Sullivan, Helen learned to communicate through sign language. As an adult, Helen Keller influenced both our nation and the world to improve perceptions of handicapped persons, advance women's rights, and develop inventions and jobs to better the lives of the blind and deaf.

By participating in this lesson, students will learn the sign language alphabet, become acquainted with difficulties faced by handicapped persons, and be introduced to Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, and *The Miracle Worker*. This lesson will ideally be used as an introduction to a larger unit on the drama, *The Miracle Worker*.

Subject Matter: English/Literature/Drama

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Discuss and gain awareness of blindness and deafness.
- Manually perform the sign language alphabet.

- Identify words spelled in sign language.
- Recognize the obstacles Helen Keller had to overcome before becoming one of the most influential women in our nation's history.

Standards:

From the Montana State Standards for Literature:
(Available online at www.opi.state.mt.us)

Standard 4: Students interact with print and non-print literary works from various cultures, ethnic groups, traditional and contemporary viewpoints written by both genders.

Standard 5: Students use literary works to enrich personal experience and to connect to the broader world of ideas, concepts and issues.

Media Components:

VIDEO

Perspectives on Greatness: The World I See (Biography on Helen Keller)
Hosted by: H. V. Caltenbome, Hearst Metronome News, Inc., 1962.

WEB SITES

The Alphabet (American Sign Language) by Scott Gaertner

<http://www.where.com/scott.net/asl/abc.html>

This web site displays American Sign Language through animated photographs. Included is an animated quiz section where students can test themselves on sign alphabet recognition. You will need to download QuickTime in order to fully utilize both this and the following site. You may find QuickTime free of charge at www.apple.com/quicktime/download.

Animated American Sign Language

<http://www.bconnex.net/~randys/index2.html>

This web site includes an animated alphabet through hand drawings, a brief history of sign language, answers to frequently asked questions about sign language, a fingerspeller, and links to events and services related to ASL and Deaf culture.

Materials:

Sign Language Reference Sheets: [American Sign Language Alphabet](#) (An Adobe Acrobat document)

Prep for Teachers:

Prior to teaching this lesson, bookmark the web sites used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom. Load QuickTime onto each computer as well (to enhance video components of the sites.) QuickTime is available free at www.apple.com/quicktime/download.

Prep the video so that it is at the desired location for Step 8 of the Introductory Activity. Learn the [manual alphabet](#) on the linked reference sheet (an Adobe Acrobat document).

When using media, provide students with a FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION, a specific task to complete and/or information to identify during or after viewing of video segments, Web sites, or other multimedia elements.

Introductory Activity:

Step 1. Ask your students to close their eyes tightly, and to keep them closed until you tell them to open them. Ask them to imagine that they are now blind. What difficulties and changes would they face as a blind person? (*Some answers may include not being able to drive or watch TV, not being able to see colors or styles when they get dressed, not being able to shop easily, etc.*) Tell them to open their eyes.

Step 2. Tell students you would like them to plug their ears with their fingers for a count of twenty and think about what difficulties and changes they would face as a deaf person. Tell them you will give a hand signal for them to stop. After your signal, ask the students to comment. (*Some ideas might include not hearing music, not being able to have ordinary conversations, not being able to attend class and take notes as easily, etc.*)

Step 3. Tell students this last exercise will involve closing their eyes and plugging their ears. Students should imagine what difficulties they would have as a blind and deaf person. Ask them to count slowly to ten, and then stop for discussion. After the ten count, ask students what additional difficulties they might face with this handicap. (*Answers might include no perception of words/language, no clear definition of the world around them, and total dependence on others for their needs.*)

Step 4. Ask the students which handicap would be most difficult to have. (*Blind/deaf*) Ask them which handicap might be easier to deal with, and why. (*Answers will vary.*)

Step 5. Ask the students which handicap they think would be most difficult to teach, and why. (*Most will say blind/deaf*) Ask the students how they would attempt to teach a blind/deaf child. (*Some may suggest using sign language.*)

Step 6. Give your students the following information:

In the 1800s, in a town named Tuscumbia, Alabama, a baby became very sick. Her illness resulted in her becoming both deaf and blind. Her name was Helen Keller, and she lived in a time when few advances had been made in the education of handicapped persons. Her parents consulted various doctors, and even considered placing Helen in an asylum for "mental defectives." On the verge of giving up, the Kellers hired a girl named Anne Sullivan to teach Helen.

We will be reading *The Miracle Worker*, a play about Miss Sullivan's first experiences with Helen, which included the use of sign language.

Step 7. Ask the students if they think a deaf/blind child who cannot speak can learn and advance as well as a non-handicapped child. (*Answers will vary.*) Ask them to predict whether or not Helen Keller was able to receive an education, or only to communicate, given her condition and the time period she lived in.

Step 8. Insert the video, *Perspectives on Greatness: The World I See* into your VCR. Provide your students with a FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION, asking them to check their predictions against the facts presented in the video. START the tape at the image of Annie Sullivan helping a young Helen at a desk. The soundtrack previously states, "Things have names." At this image, the soundtrack begins, "From this day her progress is rapid..." STOP the tape on the image of Helen receiving her college diploma from Radcliff College. The soundtrack will say, "...Helen Keller receives her Bachelor of Arts degree." Check for comprehension and if their predictions were accurate. (*Helen learned to write, and to read Braille in English, Latin, French, and Greek. She learned to swim, dive, and ride horseback, along with womanly "arts." She attended Radcliff College and graduated in 1904.*)

Learning Activity:

Step 1. Tell the students that they are going to learn the sign language alphabet in order to experience Helen Keller's principle means of communication. Manually go through the [sign language alphabet](#) twice.

Step 2. Ask your students to log on to *The Alphabet (American Sign Language)* site at <http://where.com/scott.net/asl/abc.html>. Explain that the web site gives the students an opportunity to practice the manual alphabet and to test themselves on their ability to recognize manual letters and words. Provide your students with a FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION, asking: them to memorize the alphabet. Try their first names in sign, and to work on sign recognition through use of the site's Quiz section. Allow students to complete the activity, then check for comprehension. While students are working, fast forward the video tape to its next cue.

NOTE: If students have trouble identifying signs with this site, try *Animated American Sign Language* at <http://www.bconnex.net/~randys/index2.html>. Some students find the artistic renderings on this site easier to use.

Step 3. Perform the [manual alphabet](#) with the class once again. Teach them the phrase "My name is," and have them spell their first names in the blank. Spell a few simple words like "cat" and "rock" to the class, asking for raised hands from those students that can identify the words.

Culminating Activity: Step 1. Sum up the lesson by reminding the students that they have learned about Helen Keller's education, and about sign language. Ask the students to predict what Helen Keller did with her life after leaving college. (*Answers will vary.*)

Step 2. PLAY the tape *Perspectives on Greatness: The World I See* at its new cue. The picture, near the end, will be of a classroom. It directly follows a young woman learning to say, "Persistence spells success." START where the narrator says, "Helen Keller's work has vastly improved the education of blind children..." STOP the tape after the summary at the end. The screen will show Helen Keller as an elderly woman, and the narrator's words are, "... bereft of two of the five senses, she built her world to a greater fullness than most on only taste, and scent, and touch."

Step 3. Discuss the students' predictions, and compare to the tape. (*Helen's work instigated educational advances for the blind and deaf, opened up recreational and household activities for the handicapped, and rewarded her with accolades from presidents and other famous personages.*)

Step 4. Remind the students that they will soon read *The Miracle Worker*, the play that captures the beginning of Helen Keller's remarkable life, and introduces Anne Sullivan, the teacher who penetrated Helen's darkness.

Step 5. As an assessment of the lesson, continue reviewing the students' progress daily on the sign language alphabet throughout your reading of the play. You may wish to spell simple instructions to them to encourage recognition of signed letters.

Cross-Curricular Extensions:

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Further teach students simple sign language using books such as *Signing is Fun* by Mickey Flodin. You may teach an entire lesson with simple sign, or allow students to communicate for one class period using only sign language.
2. Write a journal entry detailing the challenges of one day in each student's life, if the student was blind or deaf. The entry should be like a log of each activity from getting up to going to bed that would be the same or altered by the handicap.

TECHNOLOGY/SOCIAL STUDIES

1. Research the development of education, employment, and related laws for handicapped persons in our country.
2. Read about the accomplishments of Thomas Edison, the deaf inventor.

SCIENCE

1. Research advancements in medicine and treatments for various handicaps.
2. Study how the eye and ear physically function.

MUSIC

Listen to the music of Ludwig van Beethoven, the deaf composer.

Community Connections:

- Invite a deaf interpreter to class to teach and discuss signing. Many large churches or universities employ interpreters for deaf ministry or educational purposes.
- Visit a vision clinic or optometrist.
- Interview a blind or deaf person.
- Visit a public place like a mall, and identify handicap concession such as Braille notations on restroom doors, sloped walks, parking spaces, and automatic doors.

Heluful References:

Butterworth, Rod R. and Mickey Flodin. The Pocket Dictionary of Signing. New York: Perigree Books, 1987.

Flodin, Mickey. Signing is Fun. New York: Perigree Books, 1995.