

The **SignWriting Alphabet**

Read and Write Any Sign Language in the World



ISWA 2010

International SignWriting Alphabet 2010

by
Valerie Sutton

The SignWriting Alphabet

The
International
SignWriting
Alphabet
2010
(ISWA 2010)

by
Valerie Sutton

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of the
ISWA 2010
are free to
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Map artwork
by Bill Reese.

This Manual

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SignWriting, a part of Sutton Movement Writing, was first invented by Valerie Sutton in 1974. Sutton Movement Writing records all body movement. The International SignWriting Alphabet (ISWA 2010) records the movements of all Sign Languages.

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www.SignWriting.org • www.SignPuddle.org • www.SignPuddle.net

Dedication

Stephen E. Slevinski Jr. is a remarkable software designer. I knew that my task of creating the SignWriting symbols in my computer would be daunting, but Steve made it possible for me to test the symbols of the International SignWriting Alphabet (ISWA 2008 & 2010) during the development process. Without Steve's fabulous software, SignPuddle, which is our world standard for writing SignWriting dictionaries and literature, SignWriting would not have the library of written literature it has today, written by signwriters in some 40 countries directly on the web. And without Steve's patient, creative and supportive hard work, it would have been very much harder for me to complete this enormous job. Steve not only built special testing software just for ISWA development, to review the symbols, but he also gave me excellent feedback on the symbol organization, coordinating my new improvements with his new software. In short, we make an excellent team, a true partnership. I design the symbols, with the welcome help and influence from signwriters all over the world, and Steve then builds the software needed to fit with the symbols we design. The result of our "Slevinski-Sutton collaboration" will give us all tools for publishing SignWriting Literature for years to come.

So I dedicate the International SignWriting Alphabet (ISWA 2008 & 2010) to Steve Slevinski. Thank you, Steve, for the magical software you provide for all SignWriting users, and for your ever-present technical support, which we all depend upon daily.

Valerie Sutton
Inventor, SignWriting
La Jolla, California
September 15, 2008
and January 17, 2011

Sutton Movement Writing

Sutton Movement Writing is the International Movement Writing Alphabet (IMWA). It is used to record all human and animal gesture. The IMWA can be compared to the International Phonetic Alphabet (the IPA) for spoken languages. The IPA records the details of sound-based-languages. The IMWA records the details of movement-based-languages. Since it is such a large and broad-based writing system, Sutton Movement Writing has been specified for five fields: **SignWriting**, for writing the movements of Sign Languages, **DanceWriting**, for writing dance choreography, **MimeWriting**, for writing classic pantomime, **SportsWriting**, for writing ice skating and gymnastics routines, and **MovementWriting**, for gesture-based research.

Sutton SignWriting

SignWriting is the most-used section of Sutton Movement Writing. With thousands of writers in over 40 countries, SignWriting is becoming the written form for Sign Languages. **The International SignWriting Alphabet**, the ISWA 2008 & 2010, includes all symbols used to write the handshapes, movements, facial expressions, and body gestures of any Sign Language in the world.

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Symbols in the Sutton Movement Writing system, including the **International SignWriting Alphabet (ISWA)** are free to use under the SIL Open Font License (OFL). See next pages...

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The symbols in the International SignWriting Alphabet 2008 (ISWA 2008) are designed by SignWriting inventor, Valerie Sutton (sutton@signwriting.org).

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SignWriting Software

SignWriting has been my life's work, since I wrote the first SignWriting document in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1974. I knew at the time, that there was no doubt, that SignWriting would be used around the world to write any sign language in any country, because the writing system is based on writing body movement. It does not stand in judgement of how people sign, but instead writes what we see and feel. We write "pronunciation" of signs. The SignWriting Alphabet can be used to write any sign language in the world, because signers in each country can learn the symbols and apply the writing system to the sign language they know.

Since the personal computer had not been developed yet, back in 1974 when I first wrote SignWriting by hand, I could not foresee HOW we would someday create the needed "printing press" for mass-producing published SignWriting Literature, but I knew that it was needed, and that it would happen someday.

Since 1974, we have worked towards that goal. There have been two software developers who have had profound influence on my development of SignWriting: Richard Gleaves and Steve Slevinski.

From 1986 to 1996, Richard Gleaves developed the SignWriter Computer Program for the Apple //e, Apple //c and MS-DOS. The SignWriter Computer Program was the first true "typewriter with keyboard entry" of SignWriting symbols:

SignWriter DOS

www.SignWriting.org/forums/software/sw44

Richard Gleaves

<http://www.signwriting.org/forums/software/lisbon/lisbon02.html>

From 2004 to present, Steve Slevinski continues to develop software for SignWriting, bringing SignWriting into the internet age with popular broad-based applications that have become SignWriting standards, such as the popular SignPuddle Online, the PersonalPuddle, the PocketPuddle, the SignPuddle Server, Binary SignWriting (BSW), Cartesian SignWriting (CSW), the SignWriting Spatial Alphabet Font (SAF), the SignWriting Wiki for encyclopedia articles wiki-style, and the 2008 & 2010 SignWriting Image Server (SWIS) and the ISWA 2008 and 2010 HTML Reference Manual:

SignPuddle Online

<http://www.signbank.org/signpuddle>

SignWriting Image Server (SWIS)

<http://www.signbank.org/swis/>

ISWA 2010 HTML Reference

<http://www.signbank.org/iswa/>

Binary SignWriting (BSW)

<http://www.signbank.org/bsw/>

SignWriting Wiki

<http://www.signbank.org/wiki>

Steve Slevinski

www.signwriting.org/library/history/contributors/Slevinski.html

From 1996-2004, in the time between the development of the SignWriter Computer Program, and the development of SignPuddle, I worked closely with Filemaker programmer Todd Duell, from For-

mulations Pro, to develop a way to sort dictionaries by the symbols of SignWriting. Todd and I took the idea of an old program I had developed in the 1980's with programmer Michael Ogawa, called **SignBank**. In the 1980's SignBank included two small Macintosh DeskAccessories: **SignBank I** sorted dictionaries by English alphabetical order, and **SignBank II** sorted dictionaries by SignWriting alphabetic order, which we called "the Sign-Symbol-Sequence®".

The Sign-Symbol-Sequence term developed because most signers think of "alphabetical order" to mean the English alphabet. It never occurred to most signers, that their native signed languages could now be written languages, and that the symbols used to write their handshapes, movements and facial expressions could be placed in a sequence, that then sorted dictionaries by handshape, movement and facial expression. The concept that Deaf children could learn to "look-up" signs in a dictionary based on which handshape was used first or second in a sign was a totally new concept.

The result of my work with Todd Duell was profound for future software developers. The new SignBank Database Software built inside FileMaker Pro, gave us the experience we needed to learn how to publish large sign language dictionaries sorted by Sign-Symbol-Sequence. We learned that we needed more than the Sign-Symbol-Sequence. We also needed "SignSpelling Sequence" data that the computer could recognize. Later, Steve Slevinski built into SignPuddle Software a special "SignSpelling Sequence data" area for users, and SignPuddle can now export signs and import them into SignBank, for publishing large SignWriting multi-lingual dictionaries.

SignBank Database Software is available free for download. It includes SymbolBank, a database that stores all symbols of the ISWA 2010. There is also a web-version of Sutton's SymbolBank:

Download SignBank

<http://www.SignBank.org/signbank.html>

SymbolBank on the Web

<http://www.MovementWriting.org/symbolbank>

I would also like to thank and acknowledge other programmers who have contributed to SignWriting history, such as Dr. Antonio Carlos da Rocha Costa from Brazil, who developed the first version of **SWML (SignWriting Markup Language)** and his computer science students, who developed their own SignWriting software, including a SignWriting program that is popular: **SW-Edit**, by Rafael Piccin Torchelsen. Brazil produced several web-based programs for SignWriting including **Sign WebMessage** by Vinícius Costa de Souza and **DicionarioLibras** by Pedro Augusto Marques.

Download SW-Edit from Brazil

<http://www.signwriting.org/downloads/>

For more information about other SignWriting software, go to:

SignWriting Software Forum:

<http://www.signwriting.org/forums/software/>

The **Flemish Sign Language Online Dictionary** (WoordenBoek), was produced by developers Bart Braem & Stephen Aerts. Visitors to their web site: <http://gebaren.ugent.be> can search by spoken language or SignWriting symbols to find signs written in SignWriting side by side with videos of signs, including multiple dialects.

Flemish Sign Language Dictionary

<http://gebaren.ugent.be>

<http://www.signwriting.org/belgium/flemishdict01.html>

Thanks also to programmers who started SignWriting software projects, and because of lack of funds or other issues, could not complete the entire project, but gave us software that is used nonetheless, such as the partially completed SignWriter Java program by DTAI software, which was later improved by Christian Cooke; the SignWriter Tiger project by Daniel Noelpp Ly; and SignWriter Python by Lars Majewski, which has given us add-ons to SignWriter DOS:

SignWriter Java

<http://www.signwriting.org/forums/software/sw50/>

SignWriter Tiger

<http://www.signwriter.org/>

SignWriter Python

<http://signwriter.takdoc.de/>

There are a variety of **SignWriting TrueType Fonts** available, developed by Michael Everson, Steve and Dianne Parkhurst, and Stefan Woehrmann. TrueType Fonts are truly appreciated:

Sutton True Type Fonts by Michael Everson

<http://www.signwriting.org/catalog/sw214.html>

In 2011, three new SignWriting software projects, among others, are appearing on the horizon: the new **SignWriter Studio Program** for Windows (www.signwriterstudio.com), by Jonathan Duncan in Honduras; the Internet Draft submitted to the IETF by Steve Slevinski, and ongoing work towards Encoding SignWriting in the Universal Character Set (Unicode) by Michael Everson.

Valerie Sutton
January 17, 2011

ISWA 2010

International SignWriting Alphabet 2010

SignWriter, our first "typing program", back in 1986, was designed for the first personal computers developed by Apple, the Apple //e and //c. Designer and programmer Richard Gleaves created a little in-house "Symbol Editor" program just for the two of us, so we could share the job of entering all of the SignWriting symbols into the computer. In the beginning, to get the programming work started, Rich did a good majority of the symbol entry, but once he taught me how to use the Symbol Editor, I took over the important and exciting work of entering the symbols, one by one in bitmapped format. It was not uncomplicated work. Rich developed a way that we would only have to enter four out of 16 possible flops and rotations of each symbol, and his programming of SignWriter code would then do all the flops and rotations internally. I then designed the SignWriter keyboards. I decided where to place the symbols on which keys, and then Rich programmed it so when we typed a key, up would appear a screen with choices for more symbols that were available in a layer underneath the first key. The SignWriter Computer Program typing method is used to this day in the old SignWriter DOS program. It became the standard that we based future coding of SignWriting symbols upon.

The symbols in Rich Gleaves' Symbol Editor had an ID number like this: 001-01-01-01, which represented the symbol number, the variation, the fill and the rotation for each symbol. Later, in SignBank development, we added two more numbers in the front like this: 01-01-001-01-01-01, for Category and Group numbers. To this day, the old Gleaves ID numbering system is used when categorizing the International SignWriting Alphabet, 2010.

Steve Slevinski has now provided us with modern database software that is web-based. Search for symbols online, not only by the old ID numbers, but also by Slevinski's new BaseSymbol number, and other newly developed methods for searching:

Binary SignWriting

<http://www.signbank.org/bsw/>

Developing the ISWA 2008 and 2010 has been a labor of love for me, and would not have happened with such precision, without the encouragement and collaborative efforts of Steve Slevinski, who has developed software using the ISWA 2008 and 2010. Steve also took the initiative to establish the International SignWriting Alphabet 2010 on the internet by writing and submitting, on January 1st, 2011, an Internet Draft entitled **"Encoding the graphemes of the SignWriting Script with the x-ISWA-2010"** to the IETF (<http://www.ietf.org/>) the Internet Engineering Taskforce. The mission of the IETF is to make the Internet work better by producing high quality, relevant technical documents that influence the way people design, use, and manage the Internet. The IETF will be reviewing the document, and once reviewed, the International SignWriting Alphabet 2010 will be a viable part of internet programming.

I have worked on this new set of symbols for the ISWA 2010, in bitmapped PNG format, slowly but surely, since 2004. The International SignWriting Alphabet is an improvement over the 2004 International MovementWriting Alphabet (IMWA 2004). The old IMWA included symbols that were not used in SignWriting, such as symbols for writing sports (skateboarding), and symbols for writing anthropological studies (the writing of movements of the arms while holding an axe and cutting trees for carving Norwe-

gian viking boats). Yes...those were real projects that were written in Sutton Movement Writing...but they were not symbols that were relevant to writing the Sign Languages of the world!

So the International SignWriting Alphabet 2008 included only those symbols needed to write Sign Languages, including some new handshapes for writing Ethiopian Sign Language, and improved Movement Symbols and Facial Expressions needed for writing Sign Language storytelling. Symbols needed for advanced sorting routines in dictionaries were moved to the back of the ISWA 2008, since they are not needed for daily writing. This meant a large re-numbering of all symbols. I also collapsed 50 groups of symbols into 30 groups, making it easier to use.

Then, in 2010, Steve Slevinski asked me to improve the design of the ISWA 2008 one step further, because Steve felt changes were needed from the programming perspective. This gave me an opportunity to correct a few things that were needed, plus move some symbols to a better natural order.

Now, the ISWA 2010 is the world standard for SignWriting software. We do not plan to make any more changes to the symbolset. SignWriting software can now become stable around the world.

Valerie Sutton
January 17, 2011

The History of SignWriting's Palette-Column-Row Configuration

Since the first SignWriting software was developed in 1986, the SignWriting Script categorizes and finds SignWriting symbols in this fashion: First, one searches for the Base Palette, a grid with 96 spaces in 6 columns and 16 rows. Second, one searches for the symbol in one of six columns, called a Fill. Third, one searches for the symbol in one of sixteen rows, called a Rotation. This is called the Base-Fill-Rotation configuration, or the Palette-Column-Row configuration. The Palette-Column-Row configuration can be credited to software designer Richard Gleaves, with input from SignWriting inventor, Valerie Sutton. Richard's software design influenced how the SignWriting Script is programmed three decades later. The Gleaves-Sutton collaboration produced three milestones:

1. The First Sign Language Processing Program: SignWriter for the Apple //e & //c, and SignWriter DOS were developed from 1986-1996. Complete SignWriting documents and dictionaries could be created on a computer for the first time.

2. The First Symbol Encoding: Using his design of Palette-Column-Row, Gleaves designed a special Symbol Editor with blank Palettes, and both Richard and Valerie entered the symbols in Columns and Rows, dot by dot, to create the symbols that appear on the screen when using the SignWriter Computer Program.

3. The First Typewriter Keyboard Design for SignWriting: Type a key, and the BaseSymbols within a Group appear as choices on the screen. The Symbol Palette was hidden from the user, but there

nonetheless. Type another key, and the Fill Column choices appear. Type another key, and the Rotation Row choices appear. With the chosen symbol selected on the screen, the user can tap on one of five Special Command Keys to choose another Fill or Rotation on the hidden Symbol Palette.

In 2002, Valerie Sutton worked with Todd Duell to create the SignBank Database, and Valerie opened up the Palettes, Columns and Rows to be fully viewed by the user, for drag and drop programming, based on Richard Gleaves' original design for SignWriter.

In 2004 to present, Steve Slevinski's SignPuddle Software uses the Palette-Column-Row for drag and drop. Steve has also encoded the Palette-Column-Row configuration in his Binary SignWriting (BSW) and his Cartesian SignWriting (CSW) and in his Internet Draft for the International SignWriting Alphabet 2010, submitted to the Internet Engineering Taskforce (IETF) on January 1st, 2011. Steve coined the term Palette-Column-Row, based on the older terminology BaseSymbol-Fill-Rotation.

In Steve's own words: "Why do we use palette-column-row? Text encoding! The encoding supports the processes we apply and the most significant information is first. The palette-column-row illustrates the inner relation between the symbols and is used for symbol transformation. These relations were designed by Valerie. See the "Symbol Transformation" section of www.signpuddle.net/plaintext.

When searching, we always use the palette, but may or may not use the column and row. This type of searching provides an easy filter from a large target set to a smaller meaningful set. When comparing symbols, we compare these three aspects. When sorting, we sort first by palette, next by column, and finally by row."

7 Symbol Categories

Category Names & Descriptions



1

Category 1 Hands



About Category 1

Handshapes from over 40 Sign Languages are placed in 10 groups based on the numbers 1-10 in American Sign Language. For example, all of the hands that have a single index finger extended, are located under Group 01: Index.

Category 1: Hands

- Group 01: Index
- Group 02: Index Middle
- Group 03: Index Middle Thumb
- Group 04: Four Fingers
- Group 05: Five Fingers
- Group 06: Baby Finger
- Group 07: Ring Finger
- Group 08: Middle Finger
- Group 09: Index Thumb
- Group 10: Thumb

2

Category 2 Movement



About Category 2

Contact symbols, small finger movements, straight arrows, curved arrows and circles are placed into 10 groups based on planes: The Front Wall Plane includes movement that is “parallel to the front wall” and the Floor Plane includes movement that is “parallel to the floor”.

Category 2: Movement

- Group 11: Contact
- Group 12: Finger Movement
- Group 13: Straight Wall Plane
- Group 14: Straight Diagonal Plane
- Group 15: Straight Floor Plane
- Group 16: Curves Parallel Wall Plane
- Group 17: Curves Hit Wall Plane
- Group 18: Curves Hit Floor Plane
- Group 19: Curves Parallel Floor Plane
- Group 20: Circles

3

Category 3 Dynamics & Timing



About Category 3

Dynamics Symbols are used mostly with Movement Symbols and Punctuation Symbols, to give the “feeling” or “tempo” to movement. They also provide emphasis on a movement or expression, and combined with Punctuation Symbols become the equivalent to Exclamation Points. The Tension Symbol, combined with Contact Symbols, provides the feeling of “pressure”, and combined with facial expressions can place emphasis or added feeling to an expression. Timing symbols are used to show alternating or simultaneous movement.

4

Category 4 Head & Face



About Category 4

Group 22 includes head movement and positions of the head. Starting from the top of the face and moving down, Groups 23-26 include detailed facial expressions and movement of parts of the face and neck.

Category 3: Head & Face

Group 22: Head

Group 23: Brow Eyes Eyegaze

Group 24: Cheeks Ears Nose Breath

Group 25: Mouth Lips

Group 26: Tongue Teeth Chin Neck

5

Category 5 Body



About Category 5

Torso movement, shoulders, hips, and the limbs are used in Sign Languages as a part of grammar, especially when describing conversations between people, called Role Shifting, or making spatial comparisons between items on the left and items on the right. The symbols of the body that are in Category 5 are important when writing sign language storytelling and poetry. All sign languages have some signs that point below the hips, or touch the torso, or hunch the shoulders, or touch the arms and wrists.

6

Category 6 Detailed Location



About Category 6

The symbols in Category 6 are detailed Location Markers that are not used when writing signs on a daily basis. Location is written and read in SignWriting **WITHOUT** these symbols.

The symbols in Category 6 are only used in computer software to assist in giving further details for sorting large sign language dictionaries that are sorted by SignWriting symbols. Sometimes signs that are slightly different, may have similar SignSpelling data, and the symbols in Category 6 can help decide which sign should come first and which should come second, in the dictionary.

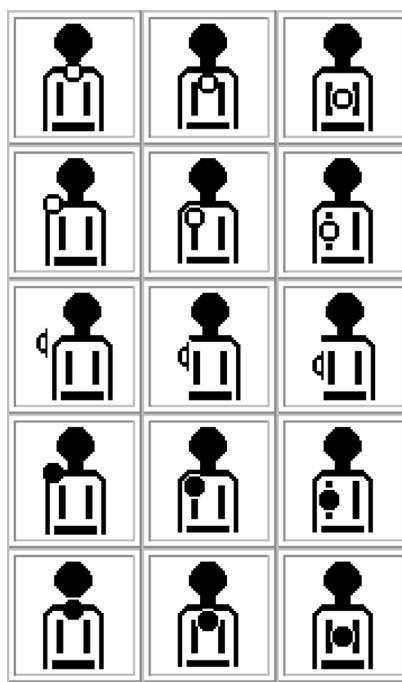
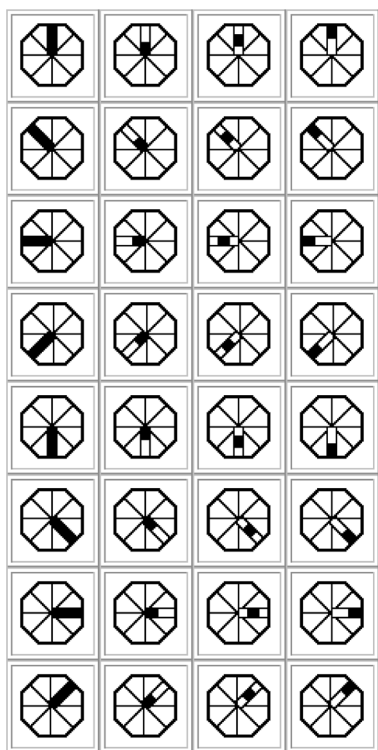
7

Category 7 Punctuation

About Category 7

Punctuation Symbols are used when writing complete sentences or documents in SignWriting. The Punctuation Symbols do not look like the symbols for punctuation in English, but they do have similar meanings. SignWriting punctuation symbols include a period, comma, colon, semi-colon, exclamation point and so forth.

...some samples of symbols in Category 6...



Categories & Groups in the ISWA 2010

Category 1: Hands
Category 2: Movement
Category 3: Dynamics & Timing
Category 4: Head & Face
Category 5: Body
Category 6: Detailed Location
Category 7: Punctuation

Category 1: Hands

Group 01: Index
Group 02: Index Middle
Group 03: Index Middle Thumb
Group 04: Four Fingers
Group 05: Five Fingers
Group 06: Baby Finger
Group 07: Ring Finger
Group 08: Middle Finger
Group 09: Index Thumb
Group 10: Thumb

Category 2: Movement

Group 11: Contact
Group 12: Finger Movement
Group 13: Straight Wall Plane
Group 14: Straight Diagonal Plane
Group 15: Straight Floor Plane
Group 16: Curves Parallel Wall Plane
Group 17: Curves Hit Wall Plane
Group 18: Curves Hit Floor Plane
Group 19: Curves Parallel Floor Plane
Group 20: Circles

Category 3: Dynamics & Timing

Group 21: Dynamics & Timing

Category 4: Head & Face

Group 22: Head
Group 23: Brow, Eyes, Eyegaze
Group 24: Cheeks Ears Nose Breath
Group 25: Mouth Lips
Group 26: Tongue Teeth Chin Neck

Category 5: Body

Group 27: Trunk
Group 28: Limbs

Category 6: Detailed Location

Group 29: Detailed Location

Category 7: Punctuation

Group 30: Punctuation

30 Symbol Groups

Group Names & BaseSymbol Palettes



The SymbolGroup Palette

30 Symbol Groups

Group 1: Index Finger

14 Base Symbols

Group 2: Index Middle

16 Base Symbols

Group 3: Index Middle Thumb

38 Base Symbols

Group 4: Four Fingers

8 Base Symbols

Group 5: Five Fingers

58 BaseSymbols

Group 6: Baby Finger

30 Base Symbols

Group 7: Ring Finger

22 Base Symbols

Group 8: Middle Finger

19 Base Symbols

Group 9: Index Thumb

40 Base Symbols

Group 10: Thumb

16 Base Symbols

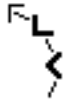
Group 11: Contact

17 Base Symbols

*	⊙⊙				
**	⊙				
*	@				
+	@@				
++	@				
+	⌒				
#	⊖				
##					
#					
⊙					

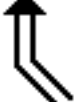
Group 12: Finger Movement

20 Base Symbols

Group 13: Straight Wall Plane

43 BaseSymbols

Group 14: Straight Diagonal Plane

16 BaseSymbols

Group 15: Straight Floor Plane

35 Base Symbols

Group 16: Curves Parallel Wall Plane

30 BaseSymbols

Group 17: Curves Hit Wall Plane

17 BaseSymbols

Group 18: Curves Hit Floor Plane

30 BaseSymbols

Group 19: Curves Parallel Floor Plane

14 Base Symbols

Group 20: Circles

20 BaseSymbols

Group 21: Dynamics & Timing
8 BaseSymbols

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Group 22: Head

11 Base Symbols

Group 23: Brow, Eyes, Eyegaze

32 BaseSymbols

Group 24: Cheeks Ears Nose Breath

17 BaseSymbols

Group 25: Mouth Lips

30 BaseSymbols

Group 26: Tongue Teeth Chin Neck

20 Base Symbols

Group 27: Trunk

9 Base Symbols

Group 28: Limbs

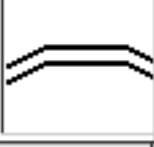
9 BaseSymbols

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Group 29: Detailed Location
8 Base Symbols

Group 30: Punctuation
5 BaseSymbols

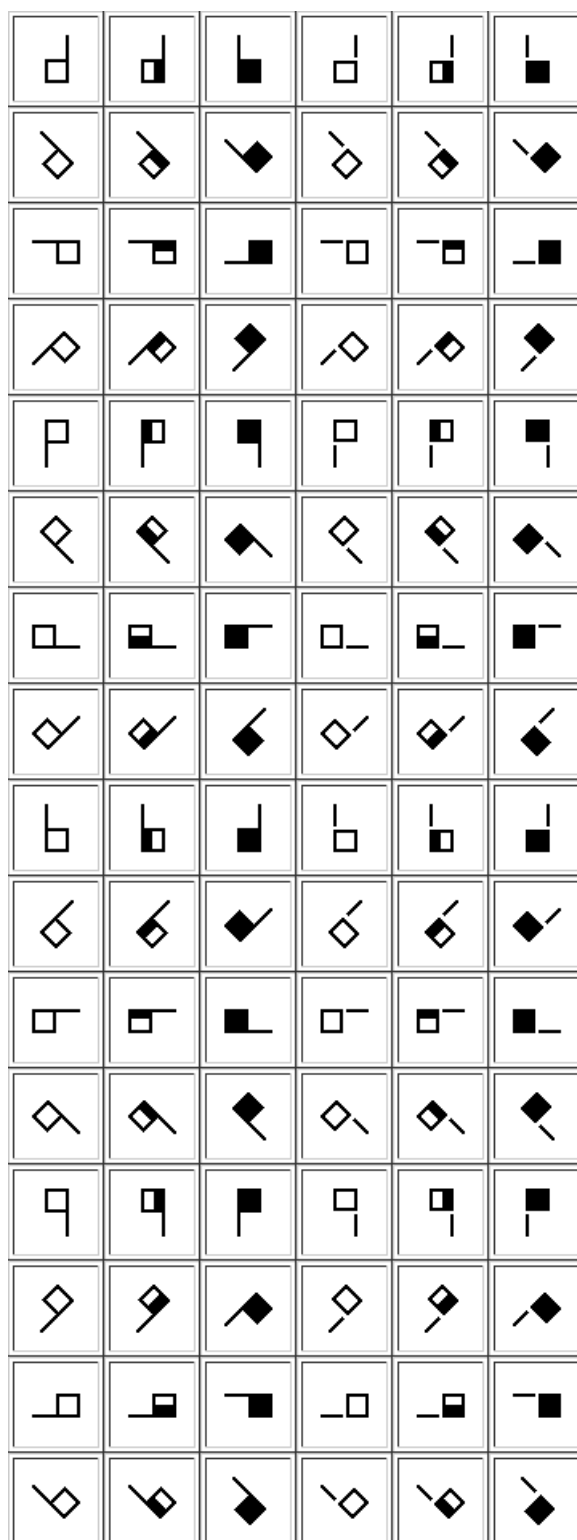
652 BaseSymbols

BaseSymbol Names & Symbol Palettes



Symbol Palette for BaseSymbol 01-01-001

Index



Symbol Palette for
BaseSymbol 01-01-002
 Index on Circle

