Ten Rules of ASL Grammar

Topic/Comment || Tense With Time || Simple Yes/No || Long Yes/No || Information Seeking
|| Pronominalization || Rhetorical || Ordering of Simple Sentences || Conditional || Negation

Just like most other languages, American Sign Language has a set of rules that it follows when being signed. You will be tested various times on your knowledge of the rules, as they are key to learning true ASL. A tool you can use to remember the rules is "TRIPSTONCL", you've probably heard about it in class, and it goes like this:

1. Topic/Comment
2. Rhetorical
3. Information Seeking
4. Pronominalization
5. Simple Yes/No
6. Tense With Time
7. Ordering of Simple Sentences
8. Negation
9. Conditional
10. Long Yes/No

Below are the definitions of each grammatical rule, and an example of each written in English Gloss (and then put into English).

**Topic/Comment** - In a simple topic/comment sentence, the topic is described first, followed by the comment.

Example: HER MONEY LOST, SHE UPSET
English: She's upset that she lost her money
The topic was described first (her money was lost) and then the comment followed (she was upset).

**Tense with Time** - The time sign is placed at the beginning or near the beginning of a sentences.

Example: YESTERDAY, ME STAY HOME
English: I stayed home yesterday.
The time sign was "yesterday" and was located near the beginning of the sentence.

**Simple Yes/No** - Short sentences that ask a yes/no question. The order of the signs varies.

Example: EXERCISE YOU WANT YOU? with eyebrows raised
English: Do you want to exercise?
The sentence given was short and the answer would be a yes or a no; the order of the signs could be moved around as well and mean the same thing.

**Long Yes/No** - Long yes/no questions, sometimes they use a topic/comment format.

Example: CAT BLACK TREE CLIMB, YOUR? with eyebrows raised
English: Is that black cat climbing the tree yours?
The question was longer than that of a simple yes/no; the topic was described before the comment (which was the "your" part).
**Information Seeking** - Simple questions that ask for information. They can have variable sentence structures, and rely sometimes on non-manual signals to distinguish them from a declarative sentence.

Example: OLD++ YOU? *with eyebrows squeezed*
English: How old are you?
The question was short and simple, the sentence structure doesn't really have much to change though. Normally, non-manuals would be used in all three question situations.

**Pronominalization** - Pronouns are indicated by pointing to either a person or thing that is present, or a place in the signing space that is used as a referent point for a person or thing. Pointing is mostly done with the index finger, but eye gazing and other handshapes are sometimes used.

Example: MY BROTHER VISIT-ME
English: My brother is visiting me.
In this case, the pronominalization was when "he" was used; you could either be pointing at the brother or a spot in your signing space to refer to as "he".

**Rhetorical** - In a rhetorical question, the signer asks a question and then answers it.

Example: ME KNOW ASL? YES.
English: I know ASL.
The signer asked his or her question, and then answered it; by doing so, we knew he or she knows ASL.

**Ordering of Simple Sentences** - In simple sentences, the verb can be placed before or after the object of the sentence.

Example: GAME ME PLAY
English: I'm playing a game.
The sentence was short and simple, and we were allowed to move around the verb and not have it change the sentence.

**Conditional** - In a conditional sentence, the condition is described first, then the outcome of the condition is described.

Example: SUPPOSE SHE SEE ME, ME HAVE-TO LEAVE
English: I will have to leave if she sees me.
In most conditional statements, the word "suppose" is used; the condition was said first (suppose she sees me), and then the outcome came afterward (I'll have to leave).

**Negation** - You can negate a thought by placing a negative sign before the verb or by first describing a topic and then signing the appropriate negative sign, or by giving a negative head shake.

Example: ME NOT WATCH FOOTBALL GAME.
English: I'm not watching the football game.
In this case, the word "not" was the negation portion of the sentence, making the sentence negative.