

SYMBOLS HAVE MEANING

Purpose: Students will explore the concept that freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment is not limited to the spoken or written word. By understanding the idea that messages can be sent and interpreted through symbolic speech, students will realize that the intent of the First Amendment expands into contemporary events, often controversial and sometimes difficult to comprehend.

Procedure:

1. Ask students if they know what the word "symbol" means? Clarify that a symbol is something that stands for, or represents, something else. Can they locate symbols in the classroom? Point out that one of the most common symbols found in most every classroom in the nation is the American flag. Ask students if they know what the flag symbolizes?
2. Give each pair of students the "Symbols- Who Am I?" worksheet and ask them to discuss each of the four symbols pictured, identifying the name of the symbol and writing down what they believe the symbol represents. Conduct a class discussion of their conclusions.
3. Use the handout "What Do Our National Symbols Mean?" to reinforce student conclusions. Assign four students to stand, each representing one of the four symbols, and read aloud the passage from the handout describing the symbolism behind the eagle, the Liberty Bell, the flag, and Uncle Sam. Remind students that because symbols send a message about our country and what it values, these symbols are actually "speaking" but not actually using spoken or written words. As Americans, we grow up, understanding what symbols mean and the messages they send.
4. To elaborate upon the idea of symbolic speech, ask students to play a brief game of "Simon Says" led by the instructor. In the game, ask students to repeat only symbolic gestures and facial expressions, such as "frown", "smile", "wave your hand", "give a thumbs up", and "stick out your tongue." After the game, ask students to recall the gestures and facial expressions you asked them to repeat. With each, ask students to tell you the message they sent when repeating the gesture. For example, when they waved their hand, did they send the message of "hello"? When they smiled, did they send a message they were happy? What is a message sent when someone sticks out their tongue or gives a "thumbs up"?
5. Inform students that such actions are called symbolic speech. Similar to the messages sent by the national symbols, a person's actions can send a message, even though the message is not spoken aloud. Elicit more examples of symbolic speech that students might have seen, such as a military person saluting an officer or the President of the United States saluting soldiers; children standing when the flag passes by; waving a flag; placing a wreath on a grave; marching in a parade, etc.

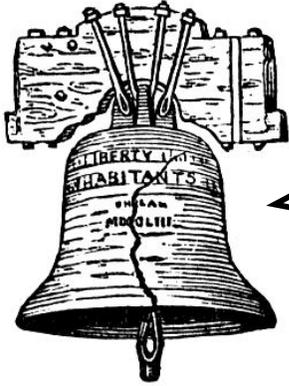
6. Inform students that sometimes people want to send a message that they are unhappy with our government or some of the decisions our leaders make. In some cases, they have taken the symbol of our nation, the American flag, and have mistreated it in ways such as tearing it down from its flagpole, burning it, stomping on it, or ripping it apart. Ask students to imagine seeing someone mistreating the flag. What reactions do they feel? Do they want to protect the flag and what it represents? Do they think people should have the right to burn the flag? Why or why not? (Note to teacher: The Supreme Court has ruled that it is not unlawful to burn the American flag.)

7. Remind students that the writers of our Constitution wanted to protect everyone's freedom to express their ideas, even if they are ideas that many others disagree with. In addition, our Founding Fathers wanted to protect all the different ways people can send messages and express their ideas, such as using symbolic actions- even actions such as burning the flag. Conduct a classroom discussion, asking students to list other ways that citizens can express dissatisfaction with our government or its leaders in peaceful ways that do not include disrespectful symbolic speech, such as burning the flag.

8. Extension: Inform students that over the past years, several amendments to the Constitution have been proposed- all aimed at protecting the American flag from mistreatment. Do they think the Founding Fathers would approve of such an amendment? Would it change the meaning of the First Amendment? If so, how? Display one proposed amendment, included in this lesson. (Note to teacher: The proposed amendment is a separate PDF file.) Ask students to write a letter to one of their congressional representatives, stating their opinion regarding such a flag protection amendment. Allow time for volunteers to read their letters aloud.

9. Option: Inform students regarding the appropriate and respectful manner in which the flag is to be displayed by using the abbreviated "Standards of Respect" handout from the American Legion.

Symbols of Meaning for Americans



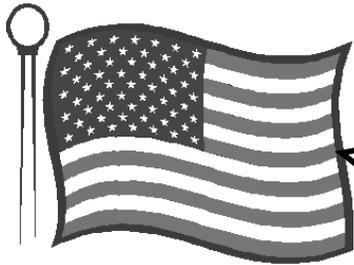
Who am I?

What do I stand for?



Who am I?

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Who am I?

What do I stand for?



Who am I?

What do I stand for?

What do Our National Symbols Mean?

LIBERTY BELL

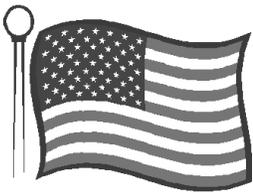


I was rung when the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Since then, I have become the symbol of freedom. As part of tradition, you can hear my ring every July 4th. I don't remember when the first crack appeared on me, but I was repaired so I could be tolled for Washington's birthday. Today, I have a special home in Philadelphia and am gently rung each July 4th. Come see me sometime! You can read these words on me:
"Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."



BALD EAGLE

I was made the national bird of the United States in 1782. I can be seen in many places, such as on the President's flag, and on the one-dollar bill. For six years, the members of Congress debated over what our national emblem should be. I was chosen because I symbolize strength and courage.



STARS AND STRIPES

As the United States flag, I stand for the nation, its states, and its people. I have undergone many changes since 1777. Congress said that I should be made up of thirteen red and white stripes and thirteen white stars on a blue field. Stars have been added to me every time a new state joins the union. Currently, I fly 50 stars, but still have the same 13 stripes, which stand for the original 13 colonies that started the United States of America.



UNCLE SAM

How I became a symbol for the government of the United States is a mystery. Some people say I was named after a businessman who supplied the army with food during the War of 1812. I have been drawn by many artists in cartoons and on posters, so I might look different from place to place. But, I still stand for our republic and its government.

Standards of Respect for the United States Flag



The Flag Code, which formalizes and unifies the traditional ways in which we give respect to the flag, contains specific instructions on how the flag is not to be used:

- The flag should never be dipped to any person or thing. It is flown upside down only as a distress signal.
- The flag should not be used for any decoration in general. Bunting of blue, white and red stripes is available for these purposes.
- The flag should never be used for any advertising purpose. It should not be embroidered, printed, or appear on anything intended to be discarded after temporary use.
- The flag should not be used as part of an article of clothing, except that a flag patch may be used on the uniform of military personnel, fireman, policeman and members of patriotic organizations.
- The flag should never have placed on it any mark, word, number, or drawing of any kind.
- When the flag is lowered, no part of it should touch the ground or any other object; it should be received by waiting hands and arms.
- The flag should be lighted at all times, either by sunlight or by an appropriate light source.
- The flag of the United States of America should be at the center and at the highest point of the group when a number of flags are grouped and displayed together.
- When the flag is presented, individuals should stand at attention until the flag has passed by. It is also recommended that the hand be placed on the heart as the flag passes.
- To store the flag it should be folded neatly and ceremoniously.
- The flag should be cleaned and mended when necessary.
- When a flag is so worn it is no longer fit to serve as a symbol of our country, it should be destroyed by burning it in a dignified manner. (Most American Legion Posts regularly conduct a dignified flag burning ceremony, often on Flag Day, June 14th. Many Cub Scout Packs, Boy Scout Troops, and Girl Scout Troops retire flags regularly as well. Contact your local American Legion Hall or Scout Troop to inquire about the availability of this service.)