

SYMBOLS TELL A STORY

What is a symbol?

Level: Middle School (grades 6-8)



Yvonne Arken's entry, Ketchikan, Alaska MS 14-1-4-90

Background

Flags have been part of history for over 5,000 years. The colors and symbols used on flags represent powerful ideas and can unite people who share common ideals. The Alaska State flag was designed by Benny Benson and was adopted as the state flag because it provided a much-needed symbol of strength and independence during the campaign for Alaska statehood. When studying history, we see that humans have always used symbols, usually with simple shapes, images and colors, to convey abstract ideas. Effective symbols can easily be understood by many people and across cultures. Learning how to understand the meaning of symbols can help students develop abstract thinking skills.

Summary

Students compare the symbols and designs found on the Alaska State flag with medieval heraldry flags or Alaska Native designs. They present to the class a personally meaningful image, using the vocabulary and symbolic meanings they have discovered through research.

Estimated Time

120 minutes

In this activity students will focus on the following:

Alaska Performance Standards at Benchmark 2

Reading

1. Apply knowledge of word origins, structure and context clues to determine meaning of new words and comprehend text

Writing

3. Use the conventions of standard English including grammar, sentence structure, paragraph structure, punctuation, spelling and usage in written work
5. List and document sources using a given format

Assessments

- Have the students use a scoring guide (see sample) to evaluate themselves after they have given their presentations.
- Have the students write a short explanation of what they could improve the next time they do a presentation.

Activity

Step One: Compare

- Ask the students what they already know about symbols. Use a two-column format to record the ideas, including both the symbolic object and what it stands for. (For example: blue can stand for sky; black can stand for night; cross can stand for a Christian religion; six-pointed star can stand for the Jewish religion, etc.)
- Look at Alaska's flag. What symbols did Benny Benson use and what did he believe they stood for? (See exhibit catalog, *Eight Stars of Gold*, pp. 9,15, back cover.) Discuss what other things the colors blue, gold and the Big Dipper might stand for.

Step Two: Research

- Have the students select and research symbols that have been used by cultures to represent something abstract. Choices might include medieval flags (called heraldry), flags used at sea, or Alaska Native art such as totems from Southeast Alaska or art designs used by Yup'ik artists on baskets or clothing. (See notes on totem design in Resources.)
- Have the students consider that a symbol may have different meanings, depending on the culture or time in history when it was used. Discuss possible reasons for the differences. Encourage the students to find as much information as possible about the symbol(s) they research.
- Brainstorm possible sources for research, such as, encyclopedias, books on symbols, Internet searches by a specific category such as totem meaning, heraldry symbols, books on flags, etc. Option: Consider having

a few students gather appropriate books and materials from the library or printed from the Internet and have them displayed and ready for the class to use.

- As a class, practice recording important information, including what the symbol is, its meaning, and the source of the information, i.e. website address, or book and page number. Practice using the dictionary to get the correct information about any word origins or etymology. Help the students locate the appropriate guides for decoding the abbreviations used. (EXAMPLE: star (star) n. [OE. steorra] , explain that OE. means from the Old English, source: *Webster's New World Dictionary*)
- Discuss and agree on one or two formats for students to use when they present what they learned to the class. For example, the students may create a drawing with symbols and a written paragraph that explains what they learned and why they selected particular symbols. Prepare a simple scoring guide or rubric that can be used to evaluate the presentation.
- Provide enough time for students to do their research and create and rehearse their presentation.

Step Three: Present and Display

- Depending on the format(s) selected for the presentations, provide enough time so that all of the students can share what they learned. If time is limited, consider using the "Gallery Walk" approach, where student work is hung on the wall as in an art gallery. The class members then circulate around the room where they can either use a checklist of things to look for at each display, or leave written comments on a piece of paper posted below each display.

Materials

- An Alaska flag, as large as possible
- Words to Alaska's flag song, (back cover of exhibit catalog)
- Scoring Guide (Sample of Student Self-evaluation)

Resources

Exhibit catalog: Spartz, India. *Eight Stars of Gold: The Story of Alaska's Flag*. Juneau: Alaska State Museum, 2001.

Crampton, William. *Flag*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. ISBN 0-394-82225-2. The Eyewitness series provides clear information and photography to beautifully illustrate the topic. In this book students will discover the story of flags and banners close up – their history, their meanings, and how they are used.

Jeffries, David. *Flags*. New York: A Franklin Watts Library Edition, 1985. ISBN 0-531-100008-1 This easy-to-read fact book provides simple overviews and clear illustrations about the main topics in the study of flags.

Mayo, Gretchen Will. *Star Tales: North American Indian Stories About the Stars*, Illustrated by the author. New York: Walk & Co., 1987. 96 pp. Ages 8+. ISBN: 0-8027-6672-2

This is a folktale collection about the nighttime sky taken from many Northern United States and Canadian Indians. Each story has a carefully researched introduction concerning its origin. The tales are told with simplicity and humor.

Monroe, Jean Guard & Roy A. Williamson. *They Dance in the Sky*. Illustrated by Edgar Steward. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987. 130 pp. All Ages. ISBN: 0-395-39970-X Chapter two, "The Celestial Bear, Stories of the Big Dipper," is especially appropriate. It includes a collection of legends from various North American Indian cultures to explain the sky world. It also includes a bibliography, index and glossary. There are only a few stories from the Northwest.

Video

The Box of Daylight: A Tlingit Myth of Creation, Sealaska Heritage Foundation, 1990. 9 minutes. This beautifully narrated myth tells how Raven brought the stars, moon and sun to the people on earth. Using authentic masks and regalia, actors bring the myth to life.

"When you look at these totem poles, Chilkat blankets and carved wooden hats, do you wonder: Who made these? What are they used for? What do they mean to the people who made them? To my people, the Tlingit Natives of Alaska they record the history of our families and tribes. They document our relationship with the land, with the fish, with the game that has sustained us throughout the ages. When we wear them and put them in our houses they tell people who we are, what is our lineage. They give us self-respect. They are more like the coats of arms of the noble families of Great Britain than the paintings of Picasso or sculpture of Michelangelo."

—from the introduction by Walter Porter

Vocabulary

Symbol n. An object used to represent something abstract

Sample Scoring Guide for Self-evaluation

- Did you do your best work?
- Did you work hard, enjoy the project, and feel good about what you completed?
- Did you work well with your teammates? What did you contribute to the team effort? Did you do your fair share of work?
- Did you communicate clearly? Did your audience seem to understand your main points?
- Was your presentation well organized?