What Symbol Best Represents the United States?

Supporting Questions

1. How do people use the United States flag as a symbol?
2. What symbols represent the United States?
3. Do symbols mean the same thing to everyone?
# 2nd Grade Civic Symbols Inquiry

## What Symbol Best Represents the United States?

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<td>Complete a What I Think / What I Learned / What I Know chart and share findings with a partner.</td>
<td>Conduct a survey of how three others feel about a national symbol, and share the results with the class.</td>
<td>Discuss what the flag represents when it is used in different contexts.</td>
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### Formative Performance Task

**ARGUMENT**

What symbol best represents the United States? Construct an argument that addresses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence.

**ACT**

Suggest a symbol for the class or school that represents an agreed-upon value. Conduct a class- or building-wide vote on whether to adopt the symbol.
Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of symbols and representation. By investigating the compelling question “What symbol best represents the United States?” students explore what each American symbol represents, how we use these symbols, and what we, as US citizens, value. At heart, a symbol is a word, object, or action that represents something else; in this inquiry, each symbol represents a set of ideas that Americans recognize and value. The study of symbols, citizenship, and community provides the foundation for students to think critically about values that people hold dear and how those values may be expressed.

In addition to the Key Idea listed earlier, this inquiry highlights the following Conceptual Understanding:

(2.3d) Symbols of American democracy serve to unite community members. This inquiry embeds a portion of the Taking Informed Action sequence through the formative performance tasks. The understand element is developed through Supporting Questions 1 and 2, while the assess element is represented in Supporting Question 3. The action piece—developing a new symbol for the class or school—can be done in addition to, or as a substitute for, the Summative Performance Task.

NOTE: Some of the sources in this inquiry draw on events around Hurricane Sandy. Teachers should exercise their judgment and discretion and, if they deem it appropriate, substitute alternative sources.

NOTE: This inquiry is expected to take four to six 30-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiries to meet the requirements and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “What symbol best represents the United States?” students work through a series of supporting questions, performance tasks, and sources in order to construct an argument using evidence from a variety of sources.

Staging the Compelling Question

Teachers can engage students in a discussion about symbols by showing them three to five examples of emoticons and asking them to describe what each symbol represents and why people use emoticons.
Supporting Question 1

For the first supporting question—“What symbols represent the United States?”—students explore the idea of symbols representing something a group stands for by researching national symbols and what each one represents. Featured Source A provides students with images and text related to eight American symbols: the United States flag, the National Anthem, the bald eagle, the Pledge of Allegiance, Independence Hall, the Statue of Liberty, the Liberty Bell, and the White House. The formative performance task begins when teachers present students with the image of each symbol and ask them, along with a partner, to write down their initial impressions of each symbol on the first two columns of a What I Think/What I Learned/What I Know chart. Using Featured Source B, a set of descriptions of the symbols, students can complete the third, What I Know, column of their charts.


Supporting Question 2

To answer the second supporting question—“Do symbols mean the same thing to everyone?”—students conduct research outside of the classroom to explore the notion that the values and ideals represented by American symbols may resonate with people in different ways. The formative performance task calls for students to share the results of a survey in which they ask three to five people what they think the chosen symbol means. (Note: Teachers should plan to have a class brainstorming exercise to generate and come to agreement on a common set of survey questions.) As this task is a continuation of the preceding one, the featured sources are the same.

Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question—“How do people use the United States flag as a symbol?”—uses the flag as a case study of the relationship between symbols and values. Since students may be very familiar with the flag, teachers can use the image bank in the featured sources as an opportunity for the class to discuss how the United States flag is used in a variety of ways (e.g., a sign of patriotism, loyalty to the United States, and overcoming adversity). The formative performance task calls on students to think about and participate in a discussion about what the flag represents in each of the selected images.
Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have worked with a variety of sources that show how symbols represent ideals and values that hold meaning for groups of people. Symbols can be interpreted differently, however, so the inquiry enables students to examine the range of meanings generated by each symbol. Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understanding and the ability to use evidence from multiple sources to support their arguments around the question “What symbol best represents the United States?” Students might write a paragraph, create a poster, or present their arguments to a small group.

Students’ arguments likely will vary but could include any of the following:

- The ____ is the best symbol for the United States because it represents freedom, and without our freedom, we wouldn’t be the United States of America.
- The ____ and the ____ are the best symbols for the United States because they represent the ideals and values that we stand for, like courage and freedom.
- The ____ is the best symbol for the United States because it represents how hard we fought for our freedom.
- The ____ is the best symbol for the United States because it unites us when we are in times of sadness (or happiness, hardship, tragedy, etc.).
- There is no one best symbol for the United States because all of the symbols show different ideas about us.

NOTE: The symbol each student chooses is of lesser importance; more important is how students support their arguments with evidence.

Students have the opportunity extend their arguments and to Take Informed Action by drawing on their understandings of symbols representing values and suggesting a new symbol for their class or school that represents an agreed-upon value. Students might conduct a class- or building-wide vote on whether to adopt the symbol.
Supporting Questions 1 and 2

**Featured Source**

**Source A**: Image bank: Symbols of the United States

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Image 1: Bald eagle.
© iStock / © naturediver.

**The Pledge of Allegiance**

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Image 2: The Pledge of Allegiance.
The National Anthem

The Star-Spangled Banner

O say can you see, by the dawn’s early light,
What so proudly we hail’d at the twilight’s last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
O’er the ramparts we watch’d were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

Image 4: The United States National Anthem.
Image 5: Independence Hall.

Image 6: The Statue of Liberty.
Public domain. Photo by Derek Jensen.
Image 7: The Liberty Bell.
© Tony Fischer and licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 license.

Image 8: The White House.
© iStock / © albertdebruijn.
Supporting Question 2

**Featured Source**

**Source B:** Symbols of the United States, Ben’s Guide to the U.S. Government website

**NOTE:** The site goes directly to an explanation of the significance of Independence Hall. Descriptions of other symbols of the United States—the Liberty Bell, United States flag, bald eagle, White House, Star-Spangled Banner, Statue of Liberty, and Pledge of Allegiance—are accessible on the left-side navigation pane.

Supporting Question 3

**Featured Source**

**Source A:** Image bank: Uses of the United States flag

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Image 1: Soldiers returning from war.

Image 2: Flag displayed at a baseball game.
Public domain. Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Eric Wilson, Texas National Guard.
Image 3: Flag displayed at the site of Hurricane Sandy wreckage.
Public domain. Photo by Walter Jennings/FEMA.

Image 4: Flag images on stamps.
© iStock / © Edward Grajeda.
Image 5: Flag image on astronaut Joan Higginbotham's space suit. Public domain. Photo courtesy of NASA/JSC.

Image 6: Flag flying outside a home. © istock/© Fribble.