

FLAGS

A flag is a piece of cloth of a single color or of several colors. It is mounted onto a stick on one side, and the other side waves in the air. Flags were originally used about 3000 years ago. They were a way for people to identify things (such as ships or armies) from far away. A ship could *run up a flag*, identifying itself as belonging to a friend... or a foe. Flags were used to identify armies in battles, and people would *rally 'round the flag* when the army needed to regroup.

Flags are also used as a means of communication. Special codes exist by which people can communicate with each other using flags. One such "language" is used with semaphores. By holding two flags and moving them in different positions, people can communicate across great distances. Semaphores have been used since the 1700s, and are still used today for emergency communication between ships.

Flags themselves can contain the message, as well: a red flag means danger; a yellow flag means quarantine. If a ship is flying a yellow flag, it means that the people on that boat are sick with some disease, and that you should stay away if you don't want to be sick.

Flags can also be used to convey information in the way they are flown. For example, a flag flying upside down is a distress symbol. In many countries, if a flag is flying over a government building, it means that the government is in session. A flag flown at half-mast is a sign of respect and mourning at the death of a leader.

Vexillology is the study of flags. Vexillologists study different flags for their meanings. Most vexillologists divide flags into basic categories according to their usage, their shapes, and their patterns.

Flags that are used to identify a person or a group can be national flags, owned by individuals or used by governments; they can be organizational flags; they can be personal flags.

Most flags that are used to identify a person or a group are rectangular, although other shapes are used in flags. Each of the shapes has a name, such as *burgee* (used in boating), *swallowtail*, and *pennant* (which you may know from sports teams).

Patterns are important in helping to identify a flag, and the patterns and colors on a flag are often filled with symbolism.

The patterns on a flag are described with special terminology. The background of the flag is called the *field*. If the flag has four equal sized sections, it is *quartered* (or quartered diagonally). Some flags have a different design in the upper quarter: this area is called the *canton*. The field can also be *serrated* (divided by a jagged line), *triangle*, *trapezoid*, or *arrowhead* (divided by a geometric pattern), or it may have a border. Many flags are patterned with *crosses* and *bars*. Some flags are decorated in a simple *bi-color* or *tri-color* pattern, vertically or horizontally. Many flags are decorated with designs from *heraldry*, including stars, suns, *lozenges* (diamond shapes), crescents, *chevrons* (a V shape), and checkers.

Name _____ Date _____

The following words appear in the FLAGS text. Use context clues and/or a dictionary to define the terms as they are used in the text.

1. bar _____

2. bicolor _____

3. border _____

4. canton _____

5. checkers _____

6. chevrons _____

7. crescents _____

8. crosses _____

9. distress _____

10. foe _____

11. heraldry _____

12. lozenges _____

13. mourning _____

14. pennant _____

15. quarantine _____

16. quartered _____

17. rally _____

18. semaphore _____

19. serrated _____

20. trapezoid _____

21. triangle _____

22. tricolor _____

23. vexillology _____

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ABOUT FLAGS

1. When were flags probably first used?
 - a. in the 1700s
 - b. in the last century
 - c. about 3000 years ago
 - d. about a thousand years ago

2. Which of the following is *not* a use for a flag?
 - a. to signal people far away
 - b. to vex people
 - c. to identify something from far away
 - d. to show membership in an organization

3. Vexillology is
 - a. the study of flags
 - b. the care of flags
 - c. proper flag etiquette
 - d. a way of communicating with flags

4. The patterns on a flag...
 - a. make it possible to identify the flag
 - b. are a form of decoration
 - c. are described in special terms
 - d. all of the above

WRITE THE CORRECT WORD FROM THE WORD BOX ON THE LINE.

1. _____ a flag language
2. _____ the flag color that means "danger"
3. _____ a flag flying upside down indicates this
4. _____ a flag flown at half-mast indicates this
5. _____ the background of the flag
6. _____ a flag with four equal-sized sections
7. _____ diamond shapes in flags
8. _____ the flag color that means "disease"
9. _____ regroup around the flag
10. _____ divided by a jagged line

distress	field	lozenge	mourning
quartered	rally	red	semaphore
serrated	symbolism	vexillology	yellow

ANSWERS TO FLAGS

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Definitions may vary; accept all reasonable definitions.

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1. c
2. b
3. a
4. d

1. semaphore
2. red
3. distress
4. mourning
5. field
6. quartered
7. lozenges
8. yellow
9. rally
10. serrated