



## Lesson 3: State Seal and Flag

### Essential Understanding

Symbols (like seals and flags) reflect their creators' history, geography, and culture. People care about symbols for different reasons.

### Activity Description

Students will learn about Montana's state seal and flag by reading an article. They will learn about principles of flag design. They will think about how they would symbolize the essence of Montana by designing their own versions of the flag and writing about their process.

### Objectives

At the conclusion of the lesson students will have:

- Understood the importance attached to symbols.
- Read about disagreements over the design of the Montana state flag.
- Created their own redesign of Montana's state flag and written an explanation about the symbols they used to represent Montana.

### Time

Two to three 50-minute class periods

### Materials

#### Footlocker/User Guide Materials:

- Montana state flag
- Excerpts from Phil Drake, "Montana's Flag Takes Hits in Poll, but Still Beloved." *Great Falls Tribune*, June 10, 2015 (reprinted below).
- [Lesson 3 PowerPoint](#): "Montana's State Flag," available on the flash drive or at

<http://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/education/docs/footlocker/Symbols/Lesson3.pptx>.

#### Teacher or Student Provided Materials:

- Blank paper
- Colored pencils/crayons/markers

### Pre-Lesson Preparation

Review the lesson plan.

Print copies of reading: "Montana's Flag Takes Hits in Poll, but Still Beloved."

Familiarize yourself with [Visual Thinking Strategies \(VTS\)](#). Developed first as a way to engage students in analyzing fine art, this technique uses "open-ended questioning and student-centered facilitation techniques, including strategies for listening and paraphrasing, to create student-driven and engaging group discussion environments." It also engages "students in discourse ... with an emphasis on providing evidence while considering and building off the contributions and perspectives of their peers." (<http://teachers.mam.org/collection/teaching-with-art/visual-thinking-strategies-vts/>). You can find more information, including videos that show VTS in action at the [Visual Thinking Strategies website](#): <http://www.vtshome.org/>.

Arrange to project "Montana's State Flag" PowerPoint.

### Procedure

#### Part 1

1. Analyze the Montana State Flag using VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) (10 minutes).

Start by sharing a picture of the flag on a large screen (or print out multiple copies for students to view at their desks). Give the students time to observe it individually and

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## Montana State Symbols

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silently (1-2 minutes). Then ask the simple question: “What is going on here?” It is important to ask this question exactly as you see it written. Once a student volunteers to share what he or she sees, paraphrase his or her answer: “I hear you saying...”

You can also have a student expand on what they see by saying: “What do you see that makes you say that?” Again, paraphrase the best you can the student’s answer before moving on to the next student.

If things start to become quiet, ask the question: “What more can you find?” This is important to ask in this exact way, since the question implies that the observation is not only with the eyes (as in “what more can you see”), but also with the emotions and other senses. Again, paraphrase student answers before asking (if relevant): “What do you see that makes you say that?” Plan on spending about 10 minutes discussing the image, and understand that there will be some silence as students think of what else they can find.

2. Discuss the meaning of symbols (like flags and seals) with the class. (If you already completed Lesson 1: Tribal Seals and Flags, you can foreshorten or omit this discussion.) Define the word “symbol” (something that represents an idea). Ask students to offer examples from their immediate surroundings (the American flag, clock, numbers, stop signs, handicapped parking signs, and other road signs, bathroom signs, etc.).

Analyze what these symbols mean, and if there is one common meaning for each—or if they might mean different things to different people. Ask the students what Montana’s flag and seal represent.

3. Have students work in pairs to read the article, “Montana’s Flag Takes Hits in Poll, but Still Beloved.” The two-person student teams should alternate reading aloud to

one another, switching each time there is a new paragraph. Or they can read aloud each section at the same time.

Have them answer the following questions with their partner:

- Who does not like the flag design? Why don’t they like it?
- Who does like the flag design? Why do they like it?
- Underline at least one unfamiliar word. Looking at it in context, what do you think it means?

Discuss student findings as a class. List on the board: Who liked the flag (and why)? Who didn’t like the flag (and why)?

4. Write the word *vexillology* on the board. What do students think it means? Look at the context clues. Talk about the suffix “ology.” Do students know any other words that end in “ology”?

Let students know that it comes from the Greek word *logia*, which means “study.”

- Bio (life)-ology
- Geo (earth)-ology
- Zoo (animals)-ology

The first half of the word “vexillology” comes from the Latin word *vexillum* (“flag”).

So “vexillology” is the study of flags.

5. Ask students to share their opinions about the flag.

Tell them: It was created in the 1890s. Ask: Does it still represent Montana? Does it reflect what you love about the state?

### Part 2

1. Remind students of what the people in the *Great Falls Tribune* article liked about Montana’s flag (it reflects our state’s geography, highlights important parts of

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our history, and is familiar) and what they did not like (it has too many colors, it is too similar to other state flags, it has words).

2. Tell students that today you are going to examine the question: If the state wanted to replace the flag, what should a new flag look like? Tell them that they will be creating possible designs for a new state flag, but first they are going to learn a little about flag design.
3. Vexillologists (people who study flags) have developed five principles for flag design. These are things they think make a good flag. Show PowerPoint, discussing each design principle in relation to the Montana flag and then in relation to proposed replacement flags. (When viewing replacement flags, give students an opportunity to comment on other aspects of the flags—expressing why they do or don't like them.)
4. Write Your Way In (5 minutes)

Provide students with the following prompt: If you were going to design a new flag for the state, what symbols would you include and why? What other things would you consider in your design?

Let them know that they will be thinking hard and writing for five minutes nonstop, as soon as you say, "Go!" You will be using a timer and they must keep on going, not lifting their pencils until the five minutes are up. If they are stuck for what to write next, encourage them to write, "I am thinking!" until they think of more to say. Remind them they can use their imaginations! Create a sense of urgency! For this exercise, they should not be concerned with their spelling, etc. They should just think and pour out their thoughts on paper. When the timer goes off at the end of five minutes, everyone must stop.

5. Give the students time to create their own state flags. After they have drawn their flag, have them write a few sentences explaining their symbolism and the other choices they made. (Let them know that these sentences will be displayed, along with their drawings, so they should write neatly, work to spell all the words correctly, and properly punctuate their sentences.)

Attach their explanations to the bottom of their flags and display the flags around the classroom or in the hall for others to see.

### Extension Activities

Have students evaluate the Northern Cheyenne flag against the principles of flag design. (Call up an image using an internet search.)

**Background information:** "The diamond shape [on the Northern Cheyenne flag] represents the Morning Star, which was also another tribal name of Chief Dull Knife. His descendants are called "The Morning Star People." ... The Morning Star on the flag has a simple design but its message is the past and present survival of the people. The Morning Star will rise each day and bring light to the Cheyenne people now and to those yet to be born. The Northern Cheyenne identify themselves as the people of Chief Morning Star and Little Wolf, who led their people on a heartbreaking journey back from their forced placement in Oklahoma to their homelands in the great Northern Plains." (From *Crossing Boundaries Through Art: Seals of Montana Tribal Nations* (Helena, MT: Indian Education, Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015), 49.)

**Teaching note:** You can find background information on other tribal seals and flags in *Crossing Boundaries Through Art* as well. However, if you choose to have students evaluate other tribal flags, note that they do not, for the most part, follow the principles of flag design as determined by the vexillologists.

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*Montana State Symbols*

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Emphasize that this does not mean they are bad flags—just as our Montana state flag is not a bad flag. Be aware of students’ feelings and make sure that no one feels their tribal nation or identity is under attack.

Design a simple survey to collect quantitative data about the flag’s design. **Note:** Questions should be “closed (yes/no) questions.” For example: Do you like the Montana state flag? Do you think it should be changed? Have students survey family members and as a class, compile and analyze the data. You may wish to have students gather qualitative data as well by

interviewing family members about how they feel about the flag. **Note:** These interview questions should be “open questions” that can’t be answered by a simple yes or no.

**Additional Resources**

“The Commission’s Report on the Guiding Principles on [Flag Design](#)” has more good information on flag design (“Vexillographic Best Practice”) and includes a glossary of terms. <http://nava.org/navanews/Commission-Report-Final-US.pdf>





## “Montana’s Flag Takes Hits in Poll, but Still Beloved,”

by Phil Drake

Originally published in the *Great Falls Tribune*, June 10, 2015, excerpted and modified with permission of the author

It’s 1898 and Col. Harry Clay Kessler is molding a group of volunteers into the 1st Montana Infantry to fight in the war against Spain.

The recruits at Fort William Henry Harrison are given a 45-star U.S. flag to carry as their regimental colors.

But that, however, is not good enough for Kessler, according to the [montanakids.com](http://montanakids.com) website. He wants something special to distinguish Montana troops from the others and decides to carry a unique Montana silk flag, 60 inches by 44 inches embroidered with the state seal.

“Col. Kessler’s Flag” left for the Philippines in 1898 and received a grand welcome upon its return in 1899 from the Spanish-American War.

By that time, members of the media (known then as “newspapers”) tout the banner as the unofficial state flag. Kessler gives the flag to the governor, who displays it around Montana. Today, that flag is at the Montana Historical Society. According to the Montana Secretary of State’s website, it became the official state flag in 1905.

When the design for Montana’s state flag was adopted in 1905, it consisted of the State Seal on a blue background. In 1981 Rep. Mel Williams of Laurel sponsored legislation to add the word “Montana” above the State Seal. This was done to help identify Montana’s flag when it was flying near other, similar flags.

According to the Secretary of State’s website, the flag represents the state’s history of mining



This banner served as the model for Montana’s state flag. Col. Kessler’s original banner is now in the collection of the Montana Historical Society Museum, Catalog number X1942.02.01.

and farming as it features a pick, shovel and plow. A sun rises over mountains, forests, and the Great Falls of the Missouri River. A ribbon contains the state motto “Gold and Silver” in Spanish.

It’s likely that Kessler would roll in his grave (which is in Pennsylvania) if he were to learn his beloved flag ranked 49th out of 50 in a recent online poll sponsored by a group that knows a thing or two about flag design. . . .

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The survey was sponsored by Ted Kaye, compiler of “Good Flag, Bad Flag,” and the North American Vexillological Association, a group dedicated to the study of flags ...

[What’s wrong with the flag?] As it stands now, Montana’s flag ... gets lost in the pack, Kaye said.

“It’s important to understand that half of the U.S. flags have a seal on a blue background,” he said. “That means they are virtually indistinguishable from one another from a distance.”

He said some states try to cure the problem by branding it.

“Instead of improving the design, they put their name on a flag,” he said. “Can you imagine a country putting its name on a flag? Like France?”

“The important point is that a flag is a graphic symbol. That means if you have to put words on your flag, your symbolism has failed.”

Ahem, that was one of the tweaks Montana made to its flag. In 1981, the Legislature passed a bill to put the word “Montana,” or as Kaye likes to call it: “anatom” if it’s flapping in the breeze, on its flag. That year, then-Secretary of State Jim Waltermire specified the colors. ...

Then in 1985, lawmakers ruled the lettering be in Helvetica, to eliminate a variety of letter styles used on the flag.

Kaye described Montana’s allegiance to its flag akin to wearing rose-colored glasses or pure, blind love.

“It’s sort of like the mother of an ugly baby,” he said. “She loves the baby because it’s her own, and she is used to it.”

He said a proprietary relationship and familiarity leads people to defend bad designs. ...

His advice to Montana? What would he do if he were to design this state’s flag?

“The most compelling imagery I think Montana could put on its flag is mountains, because that is your name, or something representing the big sky.”

Only simple flags are effective, Kaye said, adding that he recommends trying to come up with a design by drawing in a 1-inch by 1½ inch box.

He said state seals were designed to be viewed on a piece of paper, close up, not moving. Flags are seen at a distance, on fabric, flapping on both sides. ...

The rankings have left some people, well, rankled.

“I don’t know who voted on this; obviously they weren’t Montanans or we would have ranked higher than 49th,” said Pat Verzani, the co-owner of Montana Flag and Pole in Helena.

She said the design of Montana’s flag “makes sense,” noting it has representations of agriculture, mining and even the Great Falls of Great Falls.

“If I was going to change the flag, I don’t know how I would change it.” ...

If she were to do the rankings, Verzani said she would put Montana in the top 20.

“I think it’s one of the prettier flags,” she said.

For Tom Cook, public information officer with the Montanan Historical Society, it’s not just about looks.

“I can’t speak for the ranking, but the history of our state flag is a patriotic and important one,” he said in an email. “A flag stands for something more than a beauty contest.” ...

“It’s more than an image, it’s part of Montana,” he said. “When you are fighting under a flag and celebrating a flag, you look up at it and see more than the colors; you see your state.”...