

What is a Symbol?

This learning experience will support students with primary source analysis and accompanying tasks to answer the compelling question.

Kindergarten



This lithograph was designed by Andrew B. Graham between 1890 and 1900. It shows the great seal of the United States. In the seal, a bald eagle is depicted holding both an olive branch and thirteen arrows. The banner above the eagle includes the traditional motto of the United States. This Latin phrase means “out of many, one.” Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Task Overview:

During this learning experience, students will develop an understanding of the term **symbol** and explore examples of symbols, including national symbols. Through guided exploration and discussion, students will apply their knowledge of what makes something a symbol and how symbols are used to represent ideas, including patriotism. Students will create their own personal symbol to represent themselves as part of their classroom community, using a drawing or paper craft.

Targeted SOLs:

Civics: Citizenship in the Classroom

K.1 The student will apply history and social science skills to practice citizenship in the classroom by

- a. taking responsibility for one's actions;
- b. practicing honesty and showing kindness to oneself and others;
- c. recognizing the purpose of rules and practicing self-control;
- d. caring for one's personal property and respecting other students' property;
and
- e. taking turns, sharing, and working well with others for the good of everyone.

Civics: Patriotism

K.3 The student will apply history and social science skills to define patriotism and explain how communities express patriotism by

- b. identifying national and state symbols including, but not limited to the bald eagle, the dogwood, and the cardinal.

Unpacked Standards:

Students will know (facts)	Students will understand that... (concepts)	Students will be able to (Do) (skills)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● A citizen is a member of a community.● Responsible citizens contribute to their community.● A symbol is an image, object, person, or animal that represents something else.● Some symbols, such as the American flag and the bald eagle, represent ideas such as patriotism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Symbols are used to represent ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Use visuals to identify characteristics of symbols.● Use visuals to explain how people around the world use symbols and have traditions.

Instructor Directions:

This inquiry should take approximately 45-60 minutes and can be broken into separate days as needed.

Suggested times:

- Part One: 5-10 minutes
- Part Two: 20-25 minutes
- Part Three: 20-25 minutes

Teacher Background:



Kindergarten students are beginning to understand what it means to belong to a community and how people show pride in places that are important to them. **Patriotism** should be introduced in a developmentally appropriate way—not as abstract loyalty, but as caring for and respecting one’s country and state through shared symbols and traditions.

National and state symbols help young learners recognize ideas that are important to the United States and Virginia. These symbols represent values such as freedom, strength, beauty, and unity. By learning to identify symbols, students begin to understand that communities use common images to express pride and belonging.

- Library of Congress Blog Post:
[The Bald Eagle, Creature of Nature and an American Symbol](#)
- Library of Congress Primary Source Set:
[Symbols of the United States](#)

Part 1: Staging the Question (Activation/Hook)

- Show students Andrew B. Graham’s image, [E pluribus unum](#). [**Suggestion:** print the image for pairs]
 - Students can use magnifying glasses to view the image and “annotate” the image with markers or using items such as yarn, pipe cleaners, or Wikki Stix.
- Guide students through a [See, Think, Wonder](#) thinking routine. See the [Library of Congress Teacher’s Guide](#) for analyzing photographs and prints. This guide provides questions to support student engagement with source analysis.
 - **See** 👁️
 - Describe what you see in the picture.
 - What do you notice first?
 - What colors do you see?
 - Are there any words, numbers, or letters?
 - What details can you see?

- **Think** 
 - Why do you think someone drew this picture?
 - Do you think this picture was made today or long ago?
 - What do you think is most important in the picture?
- **Wonder** 
 - What are you wondering about this picture?
 - What questions do you have about the eagle?
 - What questions do you have about details in the picture?

- Record student responses using the See, Think, Wonder [template](#).
- Explain to students that sometimes we use pictures that stand for something important and these are called **symbols**. Provide students with examples of symbols in your classroom that students are familiar with to build background.
- Explain to students that our country, state, and even our community use symbols to show what is important to us. Sometimes those symbols are patriotic symbols, showing love to one's country.
 - Discuss the [E pluribus unum](#) image and why it is a patriotic symbol [It was made long ago and is of a bald eagle, which is a large and powerful bird. The eagle is holding a banner that has a message meaning that we are a country with many people and states, and we are one country together.]

Part 2: Exploration & Source Analysis

Whole Group

- Explore the idea of symbolism and make connections to patriotic symbols.
 - Explore important definitions:
 - **Symbol** - an image, object, person, or animal that represents something else
 - **Patriotism** - caring for and respecting one's country and state through shared symbols and traditions.
 - Ask students to share symbols they see in their classroom, school, or community.
 - Explain that some symbols are shown to express patriotism. Patriotism can be defined as a love, devotion, and loyalty to one's country.
 - Consider sharing this [National Patriotic Symbols slideshow](#). All images are obtained from the Library of Congress with no known restrictions.

- Using developmentally appropriate language, explain the significance of the bald eagle as a symbol of America.
 - **Example:** An important symbol in the United States is the bald eagle. People who helped start our country admired a bald eagle because it was strong and free. The bald eagle became a symbol of America.
 - Show other American symbols such as the American flag using the [National Patriotic Symbols slideshow](#)
 - Ask students to share more symbols that they think are important to Americans.
 - Create a class concept map showing American symbols including the bald eagle, American flag, etc.
- Explain to students that recognizing and learning the meaning behind symbols helps us understand what people care about and what they want to remember. They will practice looking at pictures and deciding if they are things we see every day *or* if they are symbols, or special objects that stand for something important.

Small Group

- Place students into small groups.
- Provide groups with the [Symbol/Not a Symbol picture cards](#). Guide groups to create two columns and explain how they will sort the picture cards.
 - For teacher reference
 - symbol cards include: heart, bald eagle, stop sign, no littering sign, American flag
 - not a symbol cards include: shoe, orange, school bus, board game
- While groups are working, circulate and provide guided support for groups as they work and sort. Listen for student conversations explaining their thinking. Provide prompting as needed to support student learning.

Independent Practice

- Explain to students that they will select one of the symbol cards from the Symbol/Not a Symbol sort. With their chosen card, they will explain the meaning of the symbol and why it might be important to someone.
- Students will draw the symbol and write or dictate the name of the symbol using the [Symbol Practice](#) handout.

Part 3: Demonstration of Learning/Assessment

- Explain to students that they will be creating their *own* symbol that connects to being a good classroom citizen.
- Connect to classroom citizenship by leading a discussion on what it means to be a good citizen in the classroom. Record answers that students provide.
 - **Examples could be:** being kind, helping others, taking turns, following class rules
- Model creating a symbol for one of the examples provided.
 - **Example:** Draw a heart for being kind to others and think aloud how this symbol represents that idea.
- Explain the [My Own Symbol handout](#) to students and provide the materials you would like students to use. They can draw with pencil and crayon, or use construction paper or other materials to craft their symbol.
- While students are working, circulate and provide writing support as necessary (word banks, sentence frames, etc.). Provide individual prompting questions, such as:
 - “Explain what your symbol is to me.”
 - “What does your symbol stand for?”
 - “How does your symbol show that you are a good classroom citizen?”
- Have students share their completed symbols with the class or in small groups. Completed symbols could be used as a classroom or hallway display to show symbols of good citizenship or in a class book of symbols.

Resources

Student Resources

- [Symbol/Not a Symbol Student Picture Cards](#)
- [Symbol Practice Student Handout](#)
- [My Own Symbol Student Handout](#)

Teacher Resources

- [E pluribus unum](#)
- [See, Think, Wonder Template](#)
- [Library of Congress Teacher Guide - Analyzing Photographs and Prints](#)
- [National Patriotic Symbols Slides](#)
- [What is a Symbol? Slides](#)