

## Flags for communicating: reading A

In sport: In motorbike or motorcar racing, flags are used to communicate with the drivers. The most famous flag is the black and white chequered flag that is waved to show that the race has finished and there's a winner. Other coloured flags include those which inform drivers to slow down or stop.

In football when an assistant referee spots an offside offence he raises his flag, but the height of the raised flag also signals where the foul took place.



At war: The international sign for a ceasefire, or a request for negotiation, is the white flag. Usually it's the weaker party who wants to negotiate, so the flag is often associated with surrendering. If someone is waving a white flag, they are not allowed to be shot at, nor can they start shooting. However, in countries where white is the colour of mourning a white flag can be seen as not meaning surrender.

At sea: It is a legal requirement for all ships to fly flags, known as ensigns, showing their nationality. These can be exactly the same as the national flag, or a variation of it. If in foreign waters, the ship should also fly the flag of the country it is visiting – otherwise it can be assumed the ship is willing to fight! In addition, when arriving at a foreign port the ensign must make it clear whether or not there's anything aboard that customs should know about. If there's commercial cargo on board which hasn't been declared, the captain can be arrested for smuggling.

Other maritime flags include semaphore flags which can be used to communicate between ships over short distances. The semaphore system uses two short poles with square flags, which a flag person holds in different positions to signal letters of the alphabet and numbers. When at sea the flags are red and yellow, but if used on land they are red and white.

Flags on the beach can inform would-be swimmers whether or not it's safe to swim.

In the UK, a red flag indicates danger and nobody should go in the water. In Europe, a blue flag indicates that the beach and water are clean.

## National flags: reading B

At each Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games the first country to enter the stadium during the Parade of Flags is Greece. The Greek flag is always raised at the Closing Ceremony too in recognition of where the games first took place.

The flag of Scotland is the oldest national flag still in use and dates from the ninth century. It's a cross in the shape of an 'x', called a saltire. Jamaica also has this design. However, the oldest state flag comes from Denmark and dates from at least the fourteenth century. Most flags in use today were designed during the last 200 years.



The flags of Morocco and Vietnam are similar. Both have a red background with a large five-pointed star in the middle. However, they are both influenced by very different cultures. The former has Islamic origins. The flag of Turkey dating from 1844 is almost identical to the last flag of the Ottoman Empire. Its crescent, and then the five-pointed star which was added later, have become symbols of Islam and have inspired flags from other Muslim states including Morocco, as well as Tunisia, Malaysia and Pakistan. This includes one of the world's newest flags: Iraq's redesigned flag includes a pale blue crescent on a white background, although there is no star. Vietnam's flag, on the other hand, has communist origins. The flag of the Soviet Union with its golden hammer and sickle (representing the workers) and five-pointed star (representing communism) on a red background influenced communist countries such as Vietnam, along with the People's Republic of China, Angola and Mozambique. Mozambique's flag is the only one that features a modern weapon, and there has been discussion about whether the AK-47 should remain.

Other unique flags include the Nepalese flag which is the only national flag not to be rectangular. Instead there are two triangles, one on top of the other. The flag of Libya is the only flag to consist of a single colour (green) and with no other design on at all. And the flag of Cyprus is also unique in that it features a map of the whole of the country on it; no other flag does this.

## International organizations' flags: reading C

The Olympic flag has five interlocking rings of blue, dark yellow, black, green and red. These colours, on a white background, were chosen because at least one of them was on every national flag at the time it was designed (in 1913). It made its first appearance in the Antwerp games of 1920. Even today every national flag has at least one of the six colours.



The United Nations flag, adopted in 1947, has a pale blue background, with a white map of the world in the centre framed by olive branches. The view of the Earth is centred on the North Pole, with the surrounding olive branches representing peace.

The European flag has been used since the 1950s and appears on all the euro currency banknotes, and the stars of the flag appear on euro coins. Many people think that each star represents one member country of the European Union but this is not true. The number of stars is fixed at 12 regardless of how many countries are members (in fact by 2006 there were 25 member states). The gold five-pointed stars are in a circle on a dark blue background and each one is placed in the position of the hours on a clock. They are placed with one of their five points at the top; the stars do not rotate.

Both the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements are named after the design of their flags. The red cross design is a reversal of the Swiss national flag because the organization was founded by a Swiss called Henry Dunant. Both flags are considered protection symbols in conflict. The red crescent was first used by the Ottoman Empire so as not to alienate Muslim soldiers and was formally recognized in 1929. Over 150 countries use the red cross and over 30 use the red crescent, some use both. However, in 2005 a third protection symbol was introduced: The Red Crystal. This distinctive emblem is 'devoid of any religious, political, ethnic or other connotation'. Eritrea and Israel are likely to be the first two countries to use it. The countries using both the red cross and the red crescent may also start using the red crystal.