"GOOD" FLAG, "BAD" FLAG

How to Design a Great Flag

These principles of good flag design distill the wisdom of many people who have written on the subject, including Philippe Bondurand, Frederick Brownell, William Crampton, Michael Faul, Jim Ferrigan, Richard Gideon, Kevin Harrington, Lee Herold, Ralph Kelly, Rich Kenny, David Martucci, Clay Moss, Peter Orenski, Whitney Smith, Steve Tyson, Henry Untermeyer, and Alfred Znamierowski.

What is NAVA?

The North American Vexillological Association (NAVA) is an international, non-profit, scholarly organization dedicated to vexillology, the study of flags and their cultural, historical, political, and social significance. With members across North America and around the world, NAVA comprises flag scholars, designers, collectors, conservators, educators, merchants, manufacturers, historians, and hobbyists. For more information about its activities, publications, and membership, visit www.nava.org.

Note:

Design principles are guidelines, not rules—they help designers create flags that will be effective, widely adopted, and loved. In some cases it makes sense to depart from the guidelines to reach a creative, compelling, or politically acceptable solution.

Like all fields of design, flag-design (vexillography) has a rich and complex history with many nuances. Any full account is beyond the scope of this booklet. Interested readers should seek out the many excellent and informative papers and perspectives in periodicals such as NAVA's *Raven* and *Vexillum*, along with the flag-design resources and case studies on www.nava.org.

It can be tempting to use these principles to denigrate poorly designed flags. The specific examples here only serve to illuminate the principles by showing flags that fail to follow them.

"GOOD" FLAG, "BAD" FLAG

How to Design a Great Flag

USE 5 BASIC PRINCIPLES TO CREATE AN OUTSTANDING FLAG FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION, CITY, TRIBE, COMPANY, FAMILY, NEIGHBORHOOD, OR EVEN COUNTRY!

COMPILED BY TED KAYE

North American Vexillological Association
The World's Largest Organization of Flag Enthusiasts and Scholars

WHAT IS A FLAG?

A flag's purpose is to represent a place, organization, or person, generally on a rectangular piece of cloth, to be seen at a distance, often moving, and reproduced in quantity and in many sizes.

The 5 principles of good flag design will lead to a successful flag that accomplishes that purpose.

Flags began thousands of years ago, first used for military purposes on land and then as identifying signals at sea. They evolved to represent royal houses, then countries and other levels of government, businesses, military ranks and units, sport teams, and political parties.
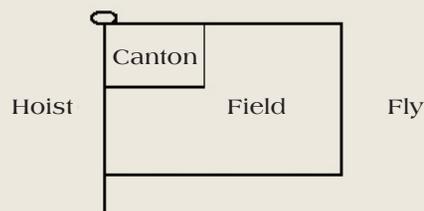
Ultimately, a flag's design should reflect its intended use—flying from a pole, hanging downward, draping limp, displayed with other flags, portrayed from lapel-pin to football-field size.

Flags grew out of heraldry—the practice of designing coats of arms—and follow many of the same design principles. Following this guide will help any person or group produce a great flag.

A flag should be simple, readily made, and capable of being made up in bunting; it should be different from the flag of any other country, place or people; it should be significant; it should be readily distinguishable at a distance; the colors should be well contrasted and durable; and lastly, and not the least important point, it should be effective and handsome.

— William Porcher Miles, 1861

ANATOMY OF A FLAG

Canton

Hoist · Field · Fly

THE FIVE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF FLAG DESIGN

1. **KEEP IT SIMPLE**
   The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory . . .

2. **USE MEANINGFUL SYMBOLISM**
   The flag's images, colors, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes . . .
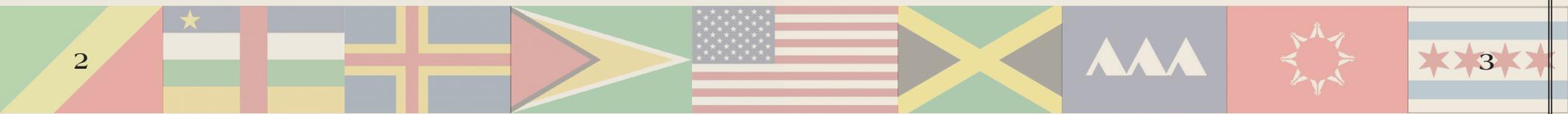
3. **USE 2–3 BASIC COLORS**
   Limit the number of colors on the flag to three, which contrast well and come from the standard color set . . .

4. **NO LETTERING OR SEALS**
   Never use writing of any kind or an organization's seal . . .

5. **BE DISTINCTIVE OR BE RELATED**
   Avoid duplicating other flags, but use similarities to show connections . . .

1. KEEP IT SIMPLE

THE FLAG SHOULD BE SO SIMPLE THAT
A CHILD CAN DRAW IT FROM MEMORY . . .

Flags flap. Flags drape. Flags must be seen from a distance and from their opposite side. Under these circumstances, only simple designs make effective flags. Furthermore, complicated flags cost more to make, which often can limit how widely they are used.

Most poor designs have the elements of a great flag in them—simplify them by focusing on a single symbol, a few colors, large shapes, and no lettering. Avoid the temptation to include a symbol for everybody.

Ideally the design will be reversible or at least recognizable from either side. Don't put a different design on the back.

YES

BANGLADESH

With two strong colors and a single symbol—the rising sun of independence (slightly offset to the hoist), this flag succeeds admirably.

NO

TURKMENISTAN

This very complicated rug contains 5 traditional patterns! Better to leave it off and keep the moon and stars.

YES

REP. OF THE CONGO

With bold, contrasting colors, large shapes, and parallel lines, this flag is also easily recognized when reversed.
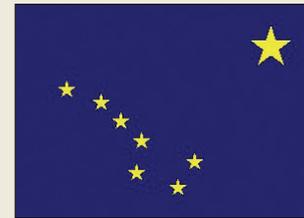
NO

WEST VIRGINIA (USA)

The seal itself is complex, the white background is boring, and the overall design differs from other state flags only in its blue border.
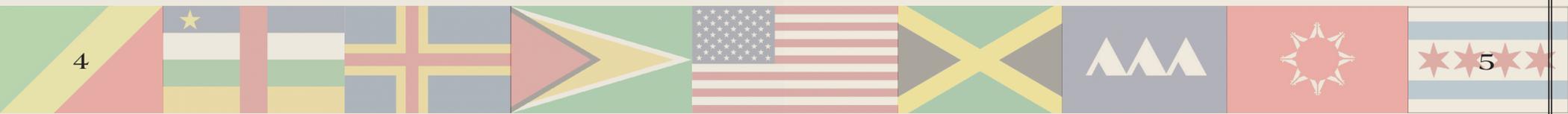
YES

ALASKA (USA)

The stars, a standard U.S. symbol, form the "Big Dipper" constellation and the North Star, representing the northernmost U.S. state.

NO

BEY OF TUNISIA

Replete with stars, crescents, and the Sword of Ali, this 19th-century design's overwhelming complexity defeats its purpose.

2. USE MEANINGFUL SYMBOLISM

THE FLAG'S IMAGES, COLORS, OR PATTERNS SHOULD RELATE TO WHAT IT SYMBOLIZES . . .

Symbolism can be in the form of the "charge" or main graphic element, in the colors used, or sometimes even in the shapes or layout of the parts of the flag.

Usually a single primary symbol is best—avoid those that are less likely to be representative or unique. Colors often carry meanings: red for blood or sacrifice, white for purity, blue for water or sky.

Diagonal stripes are an alternative to the generally horizontal and vertical stripes of European countries.

In choosing symbols, consider their history, cultural heritage, emotional value, branding, and usage—assure they resonate with the people or institutions represented. Stylized or silhouette symbols often succeed better than realistic depictions.
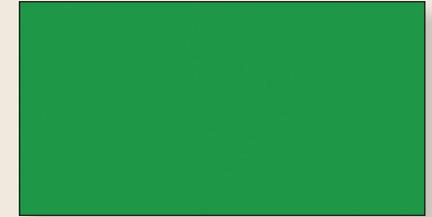
YES

ITALY

Based on the revolutionary flag of France, the vertical orientation of Italy's stripes represented a challenge to the typical horizontal stripes of the ruling kingdoms of Europe.

NO

LIBYA (1977–2011)

Although Libya's green field was chosen for its Islamic symbolism, a solid-color flag is too simple to represent a country, and is meaningless when depicted in grayscale.

YES

IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY (USA)

"Hiawatha's Belt", a symbol for five tribes since before 1600, appears on the traditional blue of wampum shell beads.

NO

NAVAJO NATION (USA)

Over 20 graphic elements overwhelm the viewer and none are large enough to be seen easily.
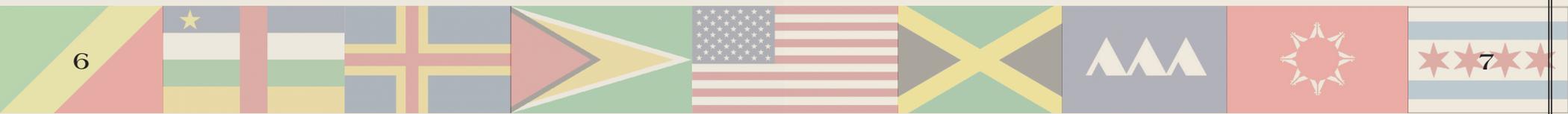
YES

UKRAINE

The light blue and yellow represent the sky over wheat fields—both the color and the direction of the stripes carry the meaning.

NO

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

Believe it or not, this flag depicts the flags of all the member countries, and must be changed each time one joins, drops out, or changes its flag!
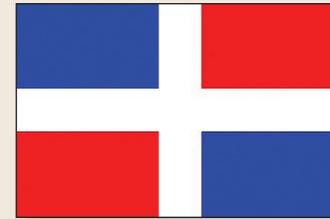
3. USE 2—3 BASIC COLORS

LIMIT THE NUMBER OF COLORS ON THE FLAG TO THREE, WHICH CONTRAST WELL AND COME FROM THE STANDARD COLOR SET . . .

The basic flag colors are red, blue, green, black, yellow, and white. They can range from dark to light. Occasionally other colors are also used, such as purple, gray, and orange, but they are seldom needed in a good design.

Separate dark colors with a light color, and light colors with a dark color, to help them create effective contrast. A good flag should also reproduce well in "grayscale", that is, in black and white shades.

More than four colors are hard to distinguish and make the flag unnecessarily complicated and expensive. Flag fabric comes in a relatively limited number of colors—another reason to stick to the basics.

YES

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

These colors provide balance and contrast, leaving a white cross as "negative space" in the middle of the flag.

NO

DOMINICA

By using ALL six basic flag colors, this flag creates unnecessary cost and complexity. Who can see the parrot's red and black eye?

YES

AMSTERDAM (NETHERLANDS)

These colors contrast well, even though the red and black are not separated by a light color.

NO

CHINESE ADMIRAL (1882)

Too many colors! At the least, the yellow and white should be separating the dark colors. While the dragon is in the position of honor, it is very hard to distinguish.
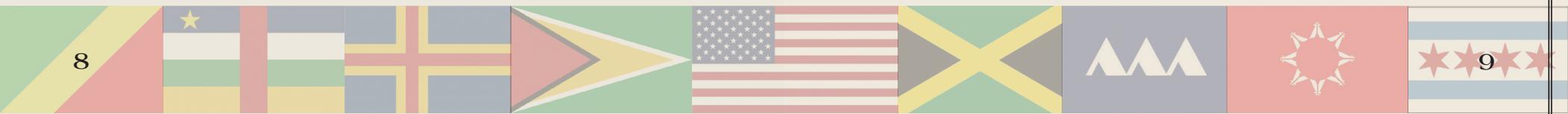
YES

NEW MEXICO (USA)

Red and yellow recall the state's Spanish heritage, while the sun symbol comes from the Zia Indians. This design was voted the best U.S. state flag by NAVA members.

NO

VIRGINIA (USA)

Imagine, 18 different colors in the official flag specifications! Not only are they difficult to distinguish, but having so many colors drives up the manufacturing cost.
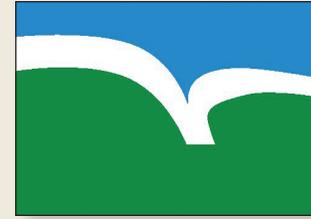
4. NO LETTERING OR SEALS

NEVER USE WRITING OF ANY KIND OR AN ORGANIZATION'S SEAL . . .

Words defeat the purpose: why not just write "U.S.A." on a flag? A flag is a graphic symbol. Lettering is nearly impossible to read from a distance, hard to sew, and difficult to reduce to lapel–pin size. Words are not reversible—this forces double– or triple-thickness fabric.

 Don't confuse a flag with a banner, such as what is carried in front of a marching band in a parade, or draped behind a speaker's platform—such banners don't flap; they are seen from only one side; and they're usually seen closer-up.

 Seals were designed for placement on paper to be read at close range. Very few are effective on flags—too detailed. Better to use some element from the seal as a symbol. Some logos work; most don't.

YES

NO

CÔTES D'ARMOR (FRANCE)

Rather than the logo style frequently used by French departments and regions, Côtes d'Armor uses a stylized seagull in the shape of its coastline.

LOIR–ET–CHER (FRANCE)

All those words, plus an indistinguishable gray shape . . . Better to have used the stylized salamander on a more interesting background color.

YES

NO

SOUTH CAROLINA (USA)

The palmetto tree represents the "Palmetto State" far better than the state's seal could. The crescent is in the position of honor.
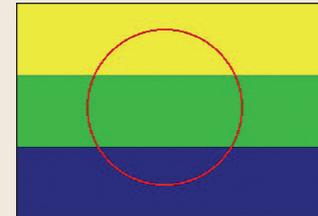
SOUTH DAKOTA (USA)

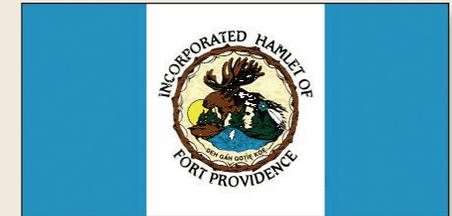This flag uses a seal AND lettering! The name of the state actually appears twice.

YES

NO

PEGUIS NATION (CANADA)

The contrasting colors with a single central symbol represent this Indian nation far better than could any seal.

FT. PROVIDENCE, NWT (CANADA)

Despite the overall pattern recalling Canada, this flag (for a Native community) stumbles with a virtually indistinguishable seal.
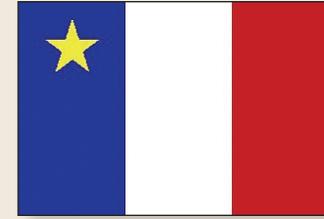
5. BE DISTINCTIVE OR BE RELATED

AVOID DUPLICATING OTHER FLAGS, BUT USE SIMILARITIES TO SHOW CONNECTIONS . . .

This is perhaps the most difficult principle, but it is very important. Sometimes the good designs are already "taken". However, a flag's symbols, colors, and shapes *can* recall other flags—a powerful way to show heritage, solidarity, or connectedness. This requires knowledge of other flags.

Often the best way to start the design process can be looking to one's "roots" in flags—by country, tribe, or religion. Use some of the many resources available to help you with flag identification and history, such as "Flags of the World": www.fotw.info, or your local library.
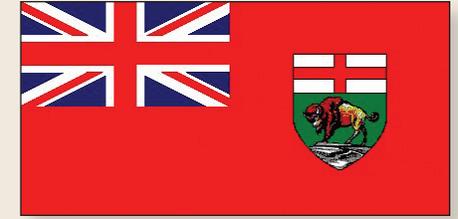
YES

ACADIA (CANADA)

French-speaking Acadians in Canada place a yellow star for St. Mary, their national symbol and patron saint of mariners, on the flag of France.

NO

MANITOBA (CANADA)

While the British "Red Ensign" signifies connectedness within the Commonwealth, the distinguishing feature is the small shield. Better to have used the bison as the main flag symbol.

YES

GHANA

Using the same colors used by many countries in West Africa, this flag shows a strong connection to its neighbors' flags.
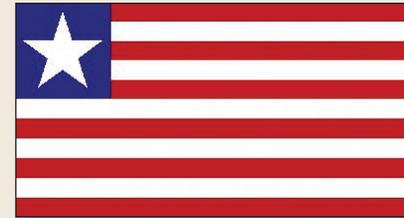
NO

INDONESIA

Except for its proportions, this flag is exactly the same as Monaco's (which had it first), but there is no connection between the two countries. Upside-down it is the same as Poland or as Cantabria, Spain!

YES

LIBERIA

Founded by free African Americans, Liberia reflects that heritage with a similar yet distinctive flag.

NO

VERMONT (USA)

This flag is virtually indistinguishable from 20 other U.S. state flags, all with a seal on a blue field.

A rectangle is the standard flag shape. Keep the width-to-length proportions between 1:1.5 and 1:2. Canadian flags are usually 1:2; U.S. flags are usually 1:1.5 or 1:1.67. Square flags are unusual in North America. Abandon such rectangles only when meaningful.

Flags wear. By retaining a rectangular shape and avoiding symbols at the fly end, a flag can be hemmed repeatedly and given a longer life.

The point of honor is the "canton" area—the upper–left corner. This corresponds to the part of the flag that is seen when it hangs limp from a flagpole. The center or left-of-center position is the most visible spot for a symbol when the flag is flying.

Consider the fabrication methods. Curved lines add to the cost of sewn flags. Holes or "negative space" hurt a flag's fly-ability and wear-ability. "Swallow-tail" shapes fray more easily.

All rules have exceptions. Colorado's "C" is a stunning graphic element. Maryland's complicated heraldic quarters produce a memorable and distinctive flag. Military unit flags often need letters or numbers. California's design recalls a historic relic from 1846. All six colors on South Africa's 1994 design have deep symbolic meaning. But depart from these five principles only with caution and purpose.
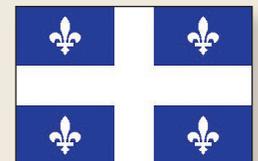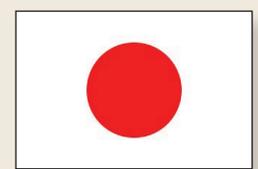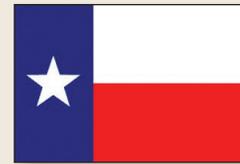
COLORADO (USA)   MARYLAND (USA)   CALIFORNIA (USA)   SOUTH AFRICA

Don't allow a committee to design a flag. Instead, empower individuals to design flags, and use a committee to select among them.

An old rule of heraldry has images of animals look toward the hoist.

And most of all, design a flag that looks attractive and balanced to the viewer and to the place, organization, or person it represents!

FIND THE GOOD DESIGNS AND THE BAD DESIGNS:

DRAW YOUR FLAG!