

Swastikas and Other Hate Symbols

Compelling Question: What is the impact of hate symbols?

| Grade Level | | Time | Common Core Standards |
|-------------|-----|------------------|--|
| K-2 | 3-5 | 45–60 Minutes | Reading: R1, R2 Writing: W1, W5 Language: L1, L2 |
| MS | HS | | |



Web Related Connections

Lessons

[Antisemitic Incidents: Being an Ally, Advocate and Activist](#)

[Antisemitism Around the World: Global 100®](#)

Additional Resources

[Awareness to Action](#)

[Conversations that Matter: Understanding and Discussing Antisemitism with Young People](#)

[Antisemitism Today \(en Español\)](#)

Key Words

ancient
antisemitism
graffiti
iconography
infamy
intimidation
Ku Klux Klan
lynching
non-conformity
notoriety
potent
racism
rebellion
skinheads
subculture
symbol
transcended
white supremacy

LESSON OVERVIEW

We see symbols every day in all aspects of our lives. Symbols are used to convey ideas, qualities, emotions, material objects/products, opinions and beliefs. Unfortunately, symbols are also used to convey hate and bias. Lately, we have seen a lot of hate symbol graffiti in public spaces and specifically the swastika, which in most circumstances is understood as an expression of antisemitism. There has reportedly been an increase in antisemitic incidents, including the display of swastikas on school and college campuses, sidewalks, places of worship, online, on doors, buildings, dorm rooms, buses, school and public bathrooms, vehicles and other places. The proliferation of other hate symbols is also of increasing concern.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to reflect on the importance of symbols in our society, understand more about specific hate symbols, and identify strategies for responding to and eliminating hate symbols.

[Note to Teacher: Since this lesson focuses on the swastika and other hate symbols—hate symbols that target a range of identity groups including Jewish people, people of color, etc.—it is important to be mindful that seeing and discussing these symbols could be upsetting for some or many of your students. Some students may feel relieved or comfortable discussing these issues in class and others may feel nervous, uncomfortable or angry to be talking about a topic so close to home. Prior to teaching the lesson, assess the maturity of your students in being able to handle this challenging content, review your classroom guidelines for establishing a safe learning environment and provide opportunities for students to share their feelings as the lesson proceeds.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will reflect on the significance of symbols in our society.
- Students will learn about specific hate symbols and teach their classmates what they learned.
- Students will identify what can be done as individuals, school or a community to confront hate symbols.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Symbols](#) (to project on board/smart board)
- [Background Reading on Hate Symbols](#) (one hate symbol per small group members)
- [Persuasive Letter Organizer](#) (one copy for each student)

 PROCEDURES

Information Sharing

1. Show a variety of images of **Symbols** (positive, neutral and negative) and as you show them—one at a time—ask students: What does this symbol mean or represent?
2. Elicit and define **symbol** as a person or a concept that expresses, represents, stands for or suggests an idea, quality, belief, action or material object. Explain that symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas or visual images and are used to convey other ideas.
3. Ask students to share other examples of visual images or symbols. As examples are shared, explain that they can be (1) neutral like a logo for a product or social media platform, (2) positive like an emoji or (3) negative like a swastika. If students don't share negative or hate symbols, ask: *What symbols of hate have you seen and/or heard about lately?* Make three columns on the board/smart board and put each of the symbols in each of the categories as students share examples of symbols:

| Neutral | Positive | Negative |
|---------------|-----------------|----------|
| Snapchat logo | Blow kiss emoji | Swastika |
| | | |

4. List as many as possible and begin to focus in on the negative or hate symbols, adding as many examples as possible. Explain to students that we are going to focus on understanding the origins, meaning and current day usage of several hate symbols.
5. Explain to students that there has been a lot of hate symbol graffiti in public spaces and specifically swastikas, which in most circumstances are understood as an expression of antisemitism. ADL tracks hate incidents, including antisemitic graffiti. ADL's 2025 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents found that incidents decreased 33% from 2024 but remained considerably higher than incidents in years prior (~70% higher than in 2022). This 'new normal' is anything but: 2025 is the third-highest year for antisemitic incidents since ADL began tracking incidents in 1979.
6. Ask students: *What is a swastika?* Explain that since 1945, the swastika has served as the most significant and notorious of hate symbols about antisemitism and white supremacy for most of the world outside of Asia. Explain that we are going to discuss this hate symbol as well as others.
7. Share a few examples of recent incidents at schools that involve swastikas:
 - A group of high school students were suspended after administrators discovered that they had laid down on a field on the school's campus and formed a human swastika.
 - At a college, there were five swastikas discovered in campus restrooms. At that same university, a Jewish professor at the school revealed that someone left human feces in front of his office a few days after the presidential election.
 - In one school district, there were a variety of incidents involving swastikas and other antisemitic graffiti. There were swastikas found in the boys' bathroom and locker room, a carving of a swastika and other antisemitic graffiti into a wooden bench in the locker room and two other swastikas were written on that bench.

Turn and Talk: Hate Symbols

1. Have students turn and talk with a person sitting next to them. They will take 5–6 minutes to respond to the following question, each taking a turn to share:
 - Have you ever seen a hate symbol and if so, what was it?
 - What was the first thing you felt or thought when you saw it?
 - How do you think it made others feel who saw it, especially the group targeted by the hate?

- After students talk in pairs, bring students back together and ask if anyone wants to share their thoughts with the whole class.



Reading Activity

- Explain that the class will be using a “jigsaw” strategy to learn more about hate symbols. Divide students into six small groups and explain that the jigsaw strategy provides an opportunity for small groups of students to learn about different aspects of a topic and then teach each other.
- To manage the jigsaw, have students count off by 6s (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and so on). Explain that each group will be assigned to one of the groups below and will be given one symbol from the [Background Reading on Hate Symbols](#) to read. Give students their readings and allow ten minutes for them to read silently. Have students in each group sit in groups to read their article.

Group #1: Swastika

Group #2: Burning Cross

Group #3: Confederate Flag

Group #4: Noose

Group #5: SS Bolts

Group #6: Celtic Cross

- Divide students into new small groups so that each group has someone who read a different article (i.e., each group will have a person that read articles 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6). When the groups are formed, give each student 2–3 minutes to summarize their assigned article and share information about the hate symbol they learned about. They should address the following if it was included in their reading or preliminary research: (1) the origin of the symbol, (2) the group(s) targeted, and (3) how the symbol is used currently.
- After the small group sharing and discussion, reconvene the class and engage all students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Was it easy or difficult to summarize the information in your article and share with others?
 - What new information did you learn by reading your article and hearing about other hate symbols?
 - What makes each of these symbols unique? What do they all have in common?
 - When people see these hate symbols in their everyday lives, how do you think they feel when they see them? How do you think targeted group(s) feel when they see them?
 - What do you think the impact of hate symbols are on individuals? Communities? And society at large?
 - What are some things we can do to prevent and stop hate symbols from being written/drawn?

Important note to teacher: Collect all of the Background Reading on Hate Symbols handouts. This is to prevent the hate symbols from circulating around the classroom and school. After collecting the handouts, discard them so they cannot be used again. We want to be careful not to unintentionally perpetuate the use of hate symbols.



Writing Activity: Persuasive Letter Writing

- Explain to students that they are now going to identify actions they can take to do something about the hate symbols they see and have learned about. First, brainstorm different things they can do by asking: *What are some actions we can take when we see a hate symbol? What can we do to prevent people from using/drawing hate symbols?* As students brainstorm ideas, if relevant, organize those action ideas into categories such as individual, community/school, online and society or world.

2. Tell students they are going to write a persuasive letter to someone. Using the Persuasive Letter Organizer, they will identify who the best person is—individual person, school principal, Mayor, social media company, etc. Explain to students that in the letter, they will include:
 - a statement about what their position is
 - background information about the hate symbol(s)
 - reasons the hate symbol(s) should be challenged
 - what they propose to be done
 - what they are asking the letter recipient for
3. Have students begin working on the [Persuasive Letter Organizer](#) and complete as much as possible given the time allotted. They can complete it for homework during the course of a few days or week. The letter may require additional research about the hate symbol, prior actions taken, etc.

NOTE: For recommended follow up research, have students use the ADL following resource: [Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database](#). Explain that they should only visit those websites for more information as you don't want students to inadvertently visit hate group websites.
4. When students have completed writing their letters, have them share with the rest of the class. As appropriate, mail, email or consider posting online or on social media.

Closing

Have students think about a symbol they would like to create that expresses the opposite of hate—for example: love, respect, diversity, inclusiveness or friendship. Have students say aloud what those symbols would look like and if time permits, give students a few minutes to draw those symbols and then share with the class.

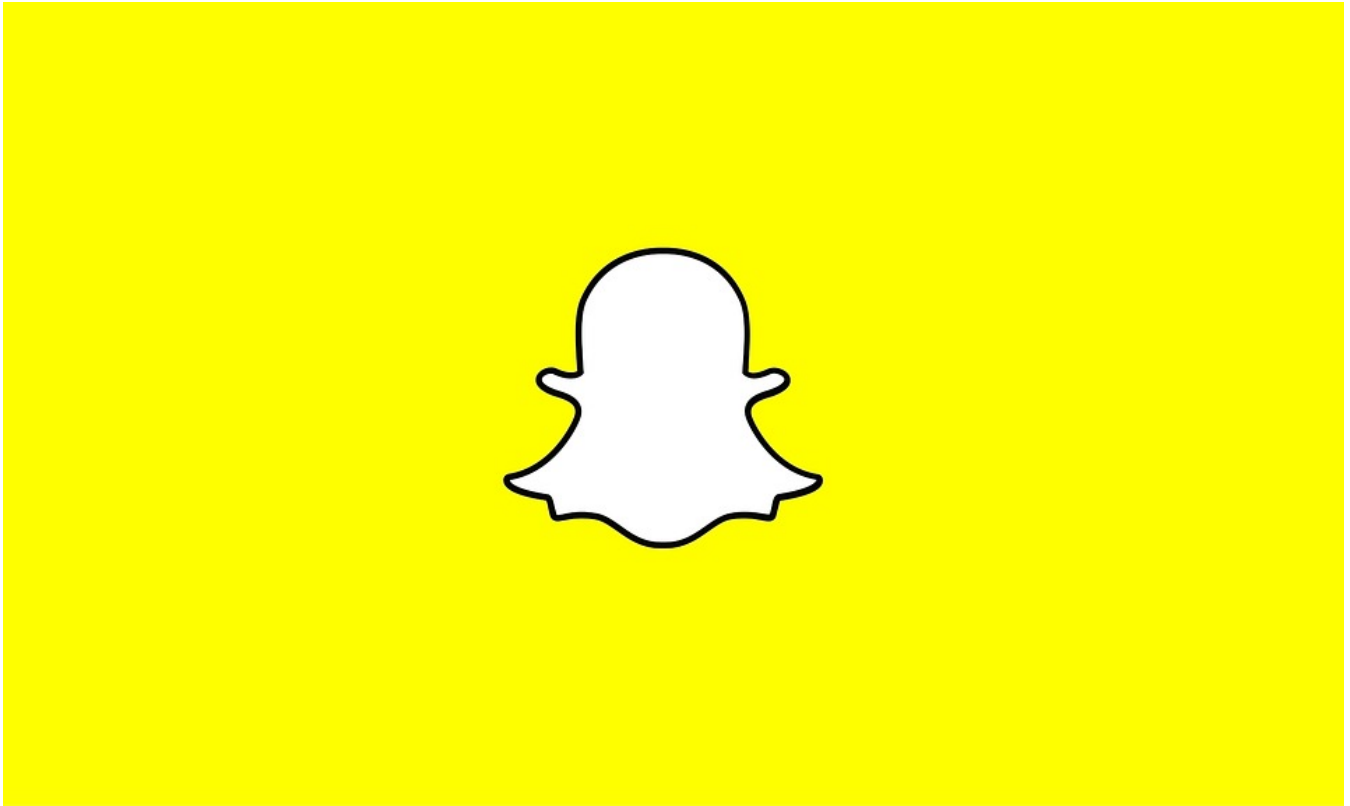
ADDITIONAL READING

- [Anti-Semitism](#) (Associated Press)
- [Audit of Antisemitic Incidents](#) (ADL)
- [History of the Swastika](#) (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)
- [Antisemitic incidents, partly fueled by campus protests, reached record-breaking high in 2024, according to the ADL](#) (CNN)

Common Core Standards

| CONTENT AREA/STANDARD |
|---|
| Reading |
| R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. |
| Writing |
| R1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. |
| R5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach. |
| Language |
| L1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. |
| L2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing. |

Symbol



SNAPCHAT

Symbol



CRYING OR SAD

Symbol



STARBUCKS

Symbol



LGBT PRIDE

Symbol



MONEY

Symbol



WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE

Background Reading on Hate Symbol: Swastika



The swastika is an ancient symbol that emerged independently among many cultures on several continents. Before the 20th century, its use (including in the United States) was almost always benign. Even today, the swastika is a common symbol across Asia, used by Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of other religions, where it is often associated with good fortune.

However, in the early 20th century, various right-wing adherents of the so-called “völkisch” movement in Germany, a movement in large part dedicated to uncovering a romanticized and largely mythical German/“Aryan” past, adopted the swastika as a symbol. The use of the swastika in this context subsequently influenced Adolf Hitler to adopt the swastika as the primary symbol for the Nazi Party in 1920. The murderous legacy of the Nazi regime, especially the Holocaust, permanently converted the swastika into a symbol of hate, antisemitism and infamy.

Since 1945, the swastika has served as the most significant and notorious of hate symbols, antisemitism and white supremacy for most of the world outside of Asia. Its display is prohibited in Germany and some other countries, leading some right-wing extremists to devise variants or alternatives to the swastika that would evoke a similar effect. In the U.S., the swastika is overwhelmingly viewed as a hate symbol.

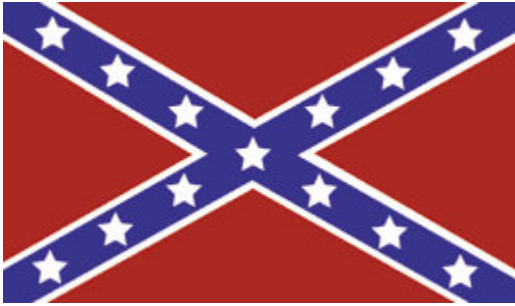
The swastika, along with the letters “KKK” and the numbers “666,” is one of the most common forms of “shock” graffiti in the United States, typically spray-painted by juveniles who are not actually white supremacists but simply want to use the image to shock and alarm people. Among white supremacists, the swastika is a very common symbol, rendered in many different ways and often combined with other hate symbols. White supremacy encompasses many forms of hate including antisemitism, racism, anti-Muslim, anti-LGBTQ, etc.

Background Reading on Hate Symbol: Burning Cross



The image of the burning cross is one of the most potent hate symbols in the United States, popularized as a terror image by the Ku Klux Klan since the early 1900s. Cross-burnings (called "cross-lightings" by Ku Klux Klan groups, to make it seem as if they are not destroying a Christian cross) have long been used as a traditional symbol by Klan groups, used both in Klan rituals as well as in attempts to intimidate and terrorize victims of Klan groups. So widely associated with racial intimidation has this symbol become that most criminal cross-burning incidents do not actually have a connection to a Ku Klux Klan group. The symbol of the burning cross has also transcended the borders of the United States, as tattoo images of Klansmen standing in front of burning crosses are not uncommon among European and other white supremacists.

Background Reading on Hate Symbol: Confederate Flag



In 1860-61, eleven southern states seceded from the United States to protect the institution of slavery, forming the Confederate States of America and precipitating the Civil War. During the war, the Confederacy and its military forces used a variety of flags, but the flag that became most associated with the Confederacy was the so-called "battle flag." Organizations such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans adopted the flag as a symbol of Southern heritage but the flag also served as a potent symbol of slavery and white supremacy, which has caused it to be very popular among white supremacists in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Today, the use of the Confederate flag is recognized as a symbol of white supremacy and racism with recognition that the symbol is offensive to many Americans.

Background Reading on Hate Symbol: Noose



The hangman's noose has come to be one of the most powerful visual symbols directed against African-American people, comparable to the emotions that the swastika evokes for Jewish people. Its origins are connected to the history of lynching in America, particularly in the South after the Civil War, when violence or threats of violence replaced slavery as one of the main forms of social control that whites used against African-Americans. The noose quickly became associated with the Ku Klux Klan.

In the early twentieth century, when the rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan coincided with the height of lynching incidents (most of the victims of which were African-American), the noose became cemented as a key hate symbol targeting African-American people. The noose may appear as a drawing or rendering, but also quite common is the use of actual nooses to intimidate or harass African-Americans (or sometimes other people of color) –for example, by leaving one at someone's home or at their workplace.

Background Reading on Hate Symbol: SS Bolts



Also known as: Cracker Bolts, SS Lightning Bolts, Lightning Bolts

The SS Bolts are a common white supremacist/neo-Nazi symbol derived from Schutzstaffel (SS) of Nazi Germany. The SS, led by Heinrich Himmler, maintained the police state of Nazi Germany. Its members ranged from agents of the Gestapo to soldiers of the Waffen (armed) SS to guards at concentration and death camps.

The SS symbol is derived from the "sowilo" or "sun" rune, a character in the pre-Roman runic alphabet associated with the "s" sound. The Nazis derived many of their symbols from such pre-Roman images. Because the sowilo rune resembles a lightning bolt (with flat ends instead of pointed ends), the SS symbol has come to be associated with a lightning bolt image.

Following World War II, the SS bolts symbol was adopted by white supremacists and neo-Nazis worldwide. Most white supremacists use it in its Nazi form, as two bolt-like images with flattened ends. However, sometimes the symbol may have pointed bottom ends or pointed tops and bottoms. These variants of the SS bolts are most frequently associated with prison tattoos.

The SS bolts are typically used as a symbol of white supremacy but there is one context in which this is not necessarily always so. Decades ago, some outlaw biker gangs appropriated several Nazi-related symbols, including the SS bolts, essentially as shock symbols or symbols of rebellion or non-conformity. Thus SS bolts in the context of the outlaw biker subculture does not necessarily denote actual adherence to white supremacy. However, because there are a number of racists and full-blown white supremacists within the outlaw biker subculture, sometimes it actually is used as a symbol of white supremacy. Often the intended use and meaning of the SS bolts in this context is quite ambiguous and difficult to determine.

Background Reading on Hate Symbol: Celtic Cross



Also known as: Odin's Cross, Sun Cross, Wheel Cross

The white supremacist version of the Celtic Cross, which consists of a square cross interlocking with or surrounded by a circle, is one of the most important and commonly used white supremacist symbols. Although usually called a Celtic Cross by white supremacists, its origins date to the pre-Christian "sun cross" or "wheel cross" in ancient Europe. Norwegian Nazis used a version of the symbol in the 1930s and 1940s. After World War II, a variety of white supremacist groups and movements adopted the symbol. Today, this version of the Celtic Cross is used by neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, Ku Klux Klan members and virtually every other type of white supremacist.

The Celtic Cross, as typically depicted, is a traditional Christian symbol used for religious purposes as well as to symbolize concepts like Irish pride. As such, it is a very common symbol and primarily used by non-extremists. Most renditions of the traditional Celtic Cross feature an elongated vertical axis (often accompanied by Celtic knotwork) that resembles that of other Christian crosses. Although white supremacists will occasionally use this version of the Celtic Cross, the overwhelming use of this version of the Celtic Cross is non-extremist and, in the absence of other hate symbols, does not denote white supremacy or racism.

It is the short "sun cross" version of the Celtic Cross, surrounded by a circle, that is more commonly used by white supremacists, although even here care must be taken always to judge it in context.

Persuasive Letter Organizer

Directions: Use this organizer to outline your persuasive letter before writing.

| |
|--|
| <p>State your position about the hate symbol & what you think should be done about it.</p> |
| <p>Provide background information about the hate symbol(s).</p> |
| <p>List at least three (3) the use of the hate symbol(s) should be challenged (use examples, statistics, quotes, etc.).</p> |
| <p>What I propose should be done about the hate symbol.</p> |
| <p>What I'm asking the letter recipient for.</p> |
| <p>Summary/Final Statement and Request</p> |