GOOD FLAG, BAD FLAG
How to Design a Great Flag

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This guide was compiled by Ted Kaye, editor of *RAVEN*, a Journal of Vexillology (published annually by NAVA).

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 dedicated to vexillology, the study of flag history and symbolism. For more information about its activities, publications, and membership, visit www.nava.org or write:

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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!

North American Vexillological Association
The Flag Experts of the United States and Canada

COMPILED BY TED KAYE

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.

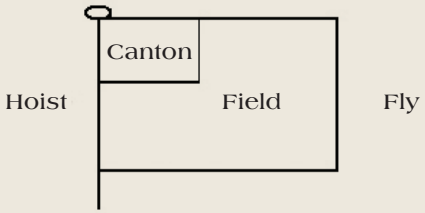
The 5 principles of good flag design will lead to a successful flag that accomplishes that purpose.

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.

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.*
>
> — National Flag Committee of the Confederate States of America, 1861

ANATOMY OF A FLAG



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.

GOOD

BANGLADESH

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

BAD

TURKMENISTAN

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

GOOD

CONGO

With bold, contrasting colors, large shapes, and parallel lines, this flag is also easily recognized when reversed.

BAD

WEST VIRGINIA (USA)

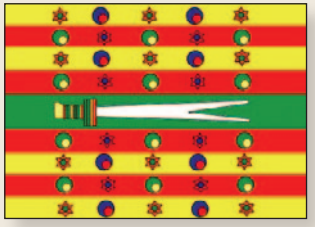
The seal itself is complex, the white background is boring, and the overall design differs from other state flags only in its blue border.

GOOD

ALASKA (USA)

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

BAD



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 often used by former colonies as an alternative to the generally horizontal and vertical stripes of European countries.

GOOD

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.

BAD

LIBYA

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.

GOOD

IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY (USA)

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

BAD

NAVAJO NATION (USA)

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

GOOD

UKRAINE

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

BAD

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.

GOOD

AMSTERDAM (NETHERLANDS)

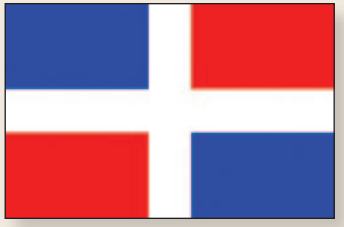
These colors contrast well, even though the red and black are not separated by a light color.

BAD

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.

GOOD



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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

BAD

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?

GOOD

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.

BAD

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.

GOOD

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.

BAD

LOIR–ET–CHER (FRANCE)

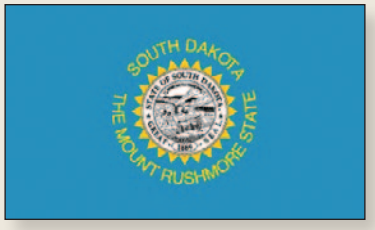
All those words, plus an indistinguishable gray shape . . . Better to have used the stylized dragon on a more interesting background color.

GOOD

SOUTH CAROLINA (USA)

The palmetto tree represents the "Palmetto State" far better than the state's seal could. The crescent moon is in the position of honor.

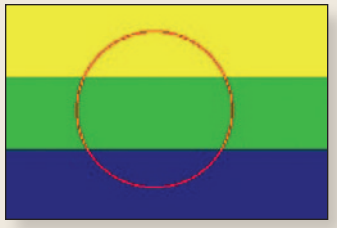
BAD



SOUTH DAKOTA (USA)

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

GOOD



PEGUIS NATION (CANADA)

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

BAD

FT. PROVIDENCE, NWT (CANADA)

Despite the overall pattern recalling Canada, this flag (for an Indian community) stumbles with a virtually indistinguishable seal.

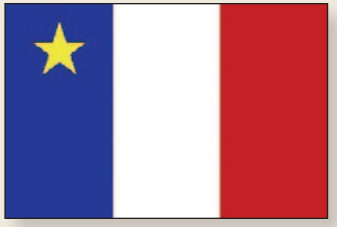
5. BE DISTINCTIVE OR BE RELATED

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": http://www.fotw.net, or your local library.

GOOD



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.

BAD

MANITOBA (CANADA)

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

GOOD

GHANA

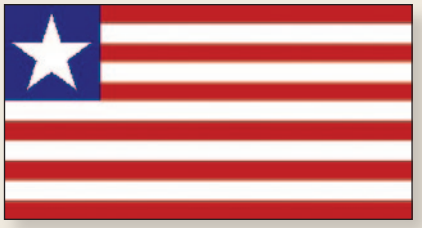
Using the same colors used by many countries in Africa, this flag shows a strong connection to its neighbors' flags.

BAD

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!

GOOD



LIBERIA

Founded by freed slaves from the U.S., Liberia reflects that heritage with a similar yet distinctive flag.

BAD

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. But depart from these five principles only with caution and purpose.

COLORADO (USA)

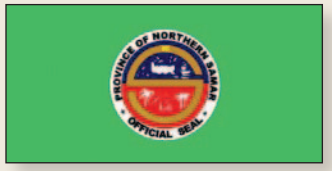
MARYLAND (USA)

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 FLAGS AND THE BAD FLAGS:



DRAW YOUR FLAG!