



Signs, Signals, and Codes

Scouts BSA · Hobbies

Name

Started

Completed

Signs, Signals, and Codes is all about communicating without everyday speech. You will learn Morse code, sign language, braille, trail signs, and even secret codes. It's fun, useful, and great for teamwork.

Requirements

Every official requirement, in plain language. Check the official wording when you sign off (scouting.org/merit-badges/signs-signals-and-codes/). Tips and examples are ideas, not extra requirements.

- ☐ **1** Talk with your counselor about why signs, signals, and codes matter and why people rely on these various ways to communicate. Briefly discuss how they began and developed over time

Tip: Look around your town for signs and symbols and talk about how they help people understand quickly.

- ☐ **2** Explain why signaling matters in an emergency. Discuss with your counselor the distress signals you could use to get the attention of air searchers if you're lost outdoors or need help in a disaster, and show them with photos or drawings

Tip: Learn common distress signals and when you would use them outdoors or on the water.

Example: Explain what you'd do if lost on a hike or stranded on the water: three blasts on a whistle, three fires or piles of rocks in a triangle, a signal mirror flashed at a plane, or a bright cloth spread out in an open space.

3 Morse code and American Sign Language

Tips for this section: Practice Morse code with a flashlight and learn a few ASL signs with a buddy.

Example for this section: Send a short message in Morse with a flashlight or buzzer to a buddy, then switch roles. For ASL, learn the alphabet plus greetings like hello, thank you, and nice to meet you, and practice a short conversation.

- ☐ **3a** Describe Morse code and the ways people send it. Use Morse code to spell your first name, and send or receive a 6–10 word message in it

- ☐ **3b** Describe American Sign Language (ASL) and how people use it today. Use ASL to spell your first name, and send or receive a 6–10 word message in it

4 Semaphore and nautical flags

Tips for this section: Make two simple flags and practice letters with a friend.

- ☐ **4a** Briefly explain to your counselor what semaphore is, and why, how, and where it's used

- ☐ **4b** Explain to your counselor how semaphore flags differ from nautical flags

4c Use semaphore and nautical flags

- ☐ **4c1** After finishing 4a and 4b, spell your first name in semaphore, and send or receive a 6–10 word message in semaphore

- ☐ **4c2** After finishing 4a and 4b, use pictures or photos to identify 10 nautical flags and discuss why they matter

- ☐ **5** Explain how braille is read and how it helps people who are blind or have low vision communicate, then do 5a and 5b

Tip: Learn the braille alphabet and try writing a short message by pressing dots into paper.

Example: Write a message of at least six words, like "Troop 12 meets on Monday nights," in braille by pressing a pencil tip into the back of thick paper so the dots rise on the front. Then decode a six-word braille message from your counselor or a friend.

- ☐ **5a** Using sight or touch, read the braille letters that spell your name, and decode a braille message of at least six words

- ☐ **5b** Write a braille message of at least six words and share it with your counselor

6 Sound signals and silent signals

Tips for this section: Practice whistle and hand signals during patrol games until everyone knows them.

- ☐ **6a** Describe to your counselor six signals in use today that rely only on sound. Discuss the upsides and downsides of sound signals compared with other kinds

- ☐ **6b** Show your counselor six silent Scout signals that are all different, and use them to direct how your patrol or troop moves and acts

- ☐ **7** On a Scout outing, mark a trail of at least one mile for your patrol or troop, using six or more kinds of trail signs and markers. Once they've followed it, use Leave No Trace and the Outdoor Code to put markers back where they came from

Tip: Lay out the trail yourself with sticks and stones, let your patrol follow it, then put everything back where you found it.

Example: Use sticks and stones to mark a one-mile route in a park with trail signs like "this way," "turn right," and "gone home." Let another patrol follow it, then remove the signs so the area looks untouched.

8 Signals used in different activities: Choose 3 of 5

Tips for this section: Pick activities you enjoy, like sports or boating, and learn the signals used in each.

Example for this section: Pick three activities you know, like basketball referee signals, swim lifeguard whistles, and crane or construction hand signals. Learn five from each and teach them to your patrol.

- ☐ **8a** Demonstrate five hand signals that sports officials use, and tell what each means and why it's used

- ☐ **8b** Demonstrate five hand signals that heavy-equipment operators use, and tell what each means and why it's used

- ☐ **8c** Demonstrate five signals used by aircraft carrier catapult crews, and tell what each means and why it's used

- ☐ **8d** Demonstrate five hand signals that cyclists use, and tell what each means and why it's used

- ☐ **8e** Demonstrate five signals from an activity you and your counselor choose, and tell what each means and why it's used

- ☐ **9** Show your counselor 10 symbols people see in everyday life. Create a symbol of your own, share it, and explain its meaning. Then do 9a through 9c

Tip: Collect photos of everyday symbols, then sketch a symbol for your patrol or family.

- ☐ **9a** Show 10 traffic signs and explain what each one means

- ☐ **9b** With a topographic map, explain the purpose of a map legend and why it matters. Find 10 map symbols and say what each one stands for

- ☐ **9c** Discuss text-message symbols and why people use them so much. Share 10 favorite emoticons or text symbols, and see whether a parent, guardian, or your counselor can tell what each means or how it's used

- ☐ **10** Briefly discuss the history of secret writing (cryptography). Invent a code, use it to write a message of 25 words or fewer, and give it to a friend or fellow Scout. Then show your counselor the message and key and discuss how well your code works

Tip: Read about famous codes in history, then make your own cipher and challenge a friend to crack it.

Example: Read about the Navajo Code Talkers or the Enigma machine, then build a simple cipher such as a shifted alphabet or a keyword code. Challenge a friend or parent to crack your message.