In general, something that stands for something else. A symbol may be an aesthetic device or a sign used to convey information visually, thus saving time, eliminating language barriers, or overcoming illiteracy.

Symbols are used in art, mathematics, music, and literature; for practical use in science and medicine; for road signs; and as warnings – for example, a skull and crossbones to indicate dangerous contents.

Sign representing something that has an independent existence. The most important use of symbols is in language. To say so, however, does not solve the perennial philosophical questions as to the nature of the linguistic sign. Signs are usually iconic, or related to what they signify, whereas linguistic signs are generally arbitrary. The question remains whether the word *chair* stands for any chair, for a particular chair, or for the idea of a chair—a problem often involved in philosophical arguments for nominalism and realism. A secondary linguistic symbolism is writing. Another, still connected with language, appears in systems of logic and mathematics (see also number).

Modern science has in its development profited from the conciseness provided by many symbols. In chemical symbols, for example, each element is represented by one or two letters (e.g., carbon, C; zinc, Zn). Some symbols are derived from non-English names, e.g., Ag for silver (Latin *argentum*). A chemical formula is written in chemical symbols.

In art a distinction of terms is introduced that modifies the term symbol. Although the drawings at Altamira are considered symbolic in one sense (i.e., a drawn reindeer is the symbol for a live reindeer), they are said not to be symbols in another more common sense, since they are partially iconic. If the artist had merely drawn two horns to represent an entire reindeer, the two horns might be said to be a symbol for a reindeer. Such symbolism is all-pervasive in every kind of art, especially because it lends itself to rapid, comprehensive, and compact use.

Religious symbolism is best known in its more ancient form from the discoveries of archaeologists; this is especially important in the study of Egyptian religion, in which the symbol of the god often appeared more frequently than the likeness of the god himself. Greek religion, on the contrary, seemed to eliminate symbols of gods in favor of actual images. In Judaism and Christianity religious symbolism is important, notably in the prophetic passages in the Bible and in the uses of public worship (see, for example, candle; incense; liturgy; sacrament; see also iconography).

Modern patriotism, particularly in the United States, has found a revered symbol in the flag, which began, like all heraldry, as a means of recognition. Trade symbols are sometimes quite widespread; although the wooden Indian signifying the tobacco shop has disappeared, barber poles are still common. The investigations of Sir James Frazer in comparative religion and those of Sigmund Freud in psychology, extreme though they may be, have shown that human beings tend always to use a wide symbolism, even in thinking itself, to cover ideas they avoid out of fear, propriety, or some other motive.

*The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018*
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA