

SYMBOLISM

A Secret Language!

Symbols are everywhere. They communicate without words, giving ideas almost instantly. They are a universal language that can be understood even by people who can't read. Look at each of these symbols – do you immediately know what they mean? They all communicate some information, give a message that you might be looking for in your daily life.



Symbolism in writing is when a literal object symbolises (stands for, represents) something that is not literal, like an idea or feeling. For example, chains are literal objects that we can see, touch, or hold. But seeing chains often makes people think of ideas that are connected to them, such as slavery, freedom (or lack of freedom), prison, cages, etc.

To figure out the symbolic meaning of an object, ask these questions:

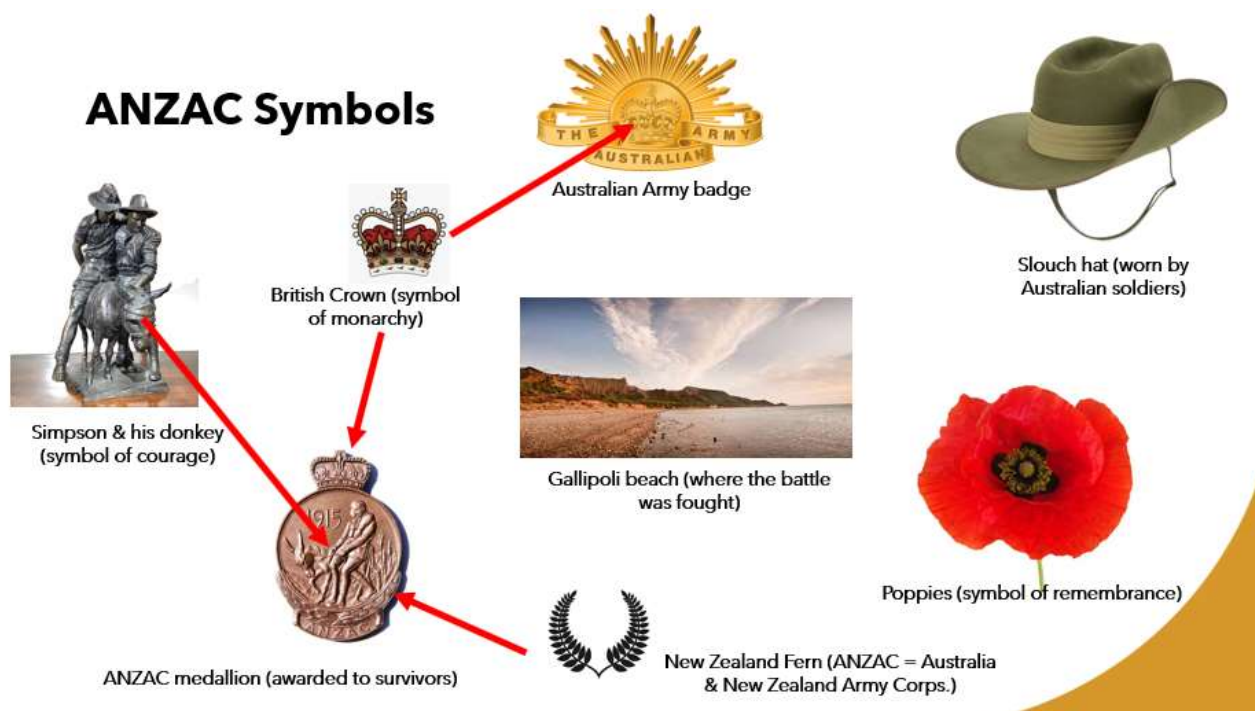
- What is the first thing that comes to mind when I look at this object?
- Who uses this object?
- What is it used for?
- When and where does it come from?

Think of a spear. What comes to mind when you think about spears? Maybe things like war, battle, bloodshed, or violence. When and where do spears come from? They were used in all kinds of countries and places, but mostly a long time ago – in ancient Greece and Rome, in Australia or America by the Aboriginal people and Native Americans. Who used them? Probably soldiers or warriors, but also fishermen. What did they use them for? Fighting and killing – both animals and other people. So with all of that in mind, you might use a spear to symbolise savagery. A writer named William Goulding did just that in his famous book *Lord of the Flies*. The book is about a group of schoolboys stranded on an island and their attempts to govern themselves. A major theme is the idea that people will return to their violent, primitive, animal-like instincts if they are separated from civilised society with its rules, laws, and authority. By having the boys carry spears, the author indicates symbolically that the boys have become less civilized and more savage.

Practice looking for symbols – how many can you spot in this image? There are at least six! Answers on the next page.



ANZAC Symbols



Why use symbols?

Symbols allow writers to hint at deeper layers of meaning – more complex than a simple literal statement could convey. Depending on the context, culture, or the reader's personal experience, symbols can carry lots of different meanings. Symbols are like a 'shorthand', a code or a reference that can express many things in a few words. Symbols also appeal to readers' imaginations and stick with them.

Common symbols

Some symbols are used very often, not just by writers but in advertising or the media to represent common ideas. Symbolic meanings are often attached to certain colours, seasons or animals.

Object	Symbolic meaning
Lion	Strength, royalty, courage
Snake	Death, evil, wisdom/cunning
Autumn	Change, maturity/getting older, harvest
Spring	New life, growth, birth, renewal, romance
Red	Love, passion, blood, heat, danger
White	Purity, innocence, cleanliness, peace

Recognising symbols in written texts

Symbols in writing are not always obvious or easy to recognise. A good strategy is to look for patterns or repetition. Read carefully and see if you can spot any objects or things that are mentioned more than once – this is probably not a coincidence!