

American Symbols: The Flag, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal

by Tim Bailey

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources. This unit is built around the use of visual evidence and critical thinking skills.

Students will understand the significance of several iconic American symbols: the Flag of the United States of America, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal of the United States. The iconic symbols of America are those objects that create an understanding of America's history, principles, and aspirations while at the same time creating a sense of unity in our culture. The students will demonstrate their understanding of these symbols and their meaning through class discussions and drawn or written assessment activities as directed in each lesson.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to (SWAT)

- Demonstrate an understanding of symbols in context
- Draw conclusions based on visual evidence
- Identify and explain the meaning of symbols
- Distinguish between patriotic symbols and other forms of symbols
- Explain why symbols are important in their daily life

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 3

GRADE LEVEL(S): K–2

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.6: Distinguish between information provided by pictures or other illustrations and information provided by the words in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.7: Use the illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.5: With guidance and support from adults, focus on a topic, respond to questions and suggestions from peers, and add details to strengthen writing as needed.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2.7: Explain how specific images (e.g., a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.2: Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW

In this first lesson, the students will examine the current US flag and the Revolutionary-era “Betsy Ross” flag. They will learn about the symbolism of the different parts of the flag and demonstrate their understanding through drawing and writing about one of the parts of the flag.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed the first Flag Act: “Resolved that the flag of the United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation.” The flag of the United States has gone through many incarnations as states have been added to the Union. At first, a stripe was added for every new state as well as a star (Imagine what our flag would look like if they had continued that idea!), but the basic design has stayed the same from the “Betsy Ross” flag with its circle of thirteen stars to our fifty-star flag of today. In this lesson the students will learn the symbolism of the flag:

- The thirteen stripes represent the original thirteen colonies.
- The number of stars on the flag represent the number of states in the Union.
- The stars on a blue field represent the creation of a new constellation.
- Red symbolizes Hardiness and Valor.
- White symbolizes Purity and Innocence.
- Blue symbolizes Vigilance, Perseverance, and Justice.

MATERIALS

- The Flag of the United States of America
- The “Betsy Ross” Flag (Although the attribution is disputed, Betsy Ross is traditionally given credit for sewing the first national flag.)
- Graphic Organizer: The Flag of the United States of America

PROCEDURE

1. Class Discussion: What is a symbol? Discuss the fact that a symbol is a picture or object that stands for an idea. For example, in math a “+” symbol means to add one number to another number. On a traffic light, the color red means “Stop,” while the color green means “Go.” Let your class brainstorm other symbols that they are familiar with.
2. Class Discussion: The students will closely examine the flag of the United States of America. Use your own classroom flag or the illustration in this lesson. Ask the following:
 - a. What colors are on the flag?

- b. How many stripes are there and how many stripes are there of each color?
 - c. How many stars are there?
3. Use the illustration of the “Betsy Ross” flag and ask the same questions, as well as this one: Why is this flag different from the one in our classroom? Use this question to introduce the information in the Historical Background.
4. Explain unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Terms you might discuss include: constellation, hardiness, valor, purity, innocence, vigilance, perseverance, and justice.
5. Hand out the Graphic Organizer: The Flag of the United States of America. Ask the class what the “=” symbol in the middle of the organizer represents.
6. Direct the students to complete the organizer based their grade level and language ability. The students will complete the organizer by first drawing one of the symbols of the flag (a white star, a red stripe, a white stripe, or a blue field) in the left-hand box. Then, they will add an illustration, key words, or even sentences to identify and explain what the star, stripe, or field symbolizes. For example, a drawing of a red stripe might be followed by a drawing of a superhero or a sentence alluding to strength and bravery. If time allows, you can have them analyze more than one symbol.
7. Debrief with the class and have them share and explain their analyses.

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will examine the Statue of Liberty. They will learn about the symbolism of the different parts of the statue and demonstrate their understanding through drawing and writing about one of the parts of the statue.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Statue of Liberty was a gift from the people of France to the people of the United States of America. Sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was asked to design the statue for America's 100th birthday in 1876. Problems with raising money for the base of the statue and the statue itself set the project back ten years, but on October 28, 1886, the Statue of Liberty officially opened in New York harbor. Today it continues to greet travelers to New York and inspire all who look upon Lady Liberty.

The Statue of Liberty has an iron framework with a copper skin. That copper skin is only a little thicker than a penny. Even with such a thin skin, the statue weighs about 450,000 pounds. It rises 305.5 feet from the ground to the tip of the torch, and Lady Liberty herself is more than 111 feet tall from her feet to the top of her head. The Statue of Liberty, a symbol of Liberty itself, is also a combination of many other symbols:

- The tablet in her left hand is inscribed with "JULY IV MDCCLXXVI" (July 4, 1776) to recognize the creation of the United States of America.
- The seven rays on her crown represent the seven continents of the Earth.
- At her feet are broken chains and shackles to represent the throwing off of tyranny and oppression.
- The torch is a symbol of liberty. In fact, it is the source of the statue's official name: Liberty Enlightening the World.
- Lady Liberty is striding forward, symbolic of leading the way and lighting the path to Liberty and Freedom.

MATERIALS

- The Statue of Liberty, View #1. Source: National Park Service.
- The Statue of Liberty, View #2. Source: National Park Service.
- The Statue of Liberty, View #3. Source: National Park Service.
- The Statue of Liberty, View #4. Source: National Park Service.
- Graphic Organizer: The Statue of Liberty

PROCEDURE

1. Class Discussion: What is a symbol? Review the concept introduced in yesterday's lesson.

2. Class Discussion: Pass out the Statue of Liberty, View #1. The students will closely examine the image of the Statue of Liberty. Ask the following:
 - a. Describe what the statue looks like.
 - b. What is the statue doing?
 - c. What are some interesting details that you can see?
3. Show the students the other three views of the Statue of Liberty and discuss the information in the Historical Background.
4. Explain unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Terms you might discuss include: tablet, continents, shackles, tyranny, oppression, liberty, enlightening, and striding.
5. Pass out the Graphic Organizer: The Statue of Liberty.
6. Direct the students to complete the organizer based their grade level and language ability. First, they will draw one of the symbols of the statue (the tablet, the crown, chains and/or shackles, the torch, or another illustration that shows a symbolic aspect of the statue) in the left-hand box. Then, with an illustration, key words, or even sentences, the student will identify and explain what the image symbolizes. For example, a drawing of the tablet that the statue is holding might be followed by a drawing of a birthday cake for America or a sentence describing a Fourth of July celebration. If time allows, you can have them analyze more than one symbol.
7. Debrief with the class and have them share and explain their analyses.

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will examine the Great Seal of the United States. They will learn about the symbolism of the different parts of the seal and demonstrate their understanding through drawing and writing about one of the parts of the seal.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before it adjourned on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress of the newly created United States of America passed a resolution: “Resolved, that Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.” The new country needed a symbol that would represent the United States and be recognized around the world. However this task was easier said than done. In the end, it would take six years and two more committees before the Great Seal of the United States was adopted on June 20, 1782. The purpose of the Great Seal is to serve as the recognized symbol of America, and for more than 200 years it has been used as the official emblem displayed and stamped on treaties, government appointments, and other important documents, including US passports. However, it is probably most recognized as the illustration on the back of the \$1 bill. The metal die and counter die of the Great Seal and its press are housed at the State Department in Washington, DC, and can only be used with the permission of the Secretary of State. While the Great Seal is a symbol of America, it is composed of many other symbols:

- The American bald eagle, our national bird, symbolizes Liberty, Freedom, and Independence.
- The shield held by the eagle shows that we can protect and defend our country independently, without aid from others.
- Just as on the American flag, the stripes on the shield represent the first thirteen colonies, and just as on the flag, the colors themselves are symbolic. (Have the students recall what the colors represent from Lesson 1).
- The blue field on top of the stripes represents the US Congress and how it binds the states together. In addition, the color blue is symbolic. (Have the students recall what the color means from Lesson 1).
- The banner in the eagle’s beak bears the country’s motto, “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of many, one), meaning that while we are many individual states and people, we are one country.
- The olive branch represents Peace.
- The arrows represent War.
- The eagle is facing the olive branch, meaning that peace is always the first choice, but we can fight if we must.
- The stars in the cloud represent the new constellation of the United States surrounded by rays of light (called a “glory”) shining through as America takes its place among the countries of the world.

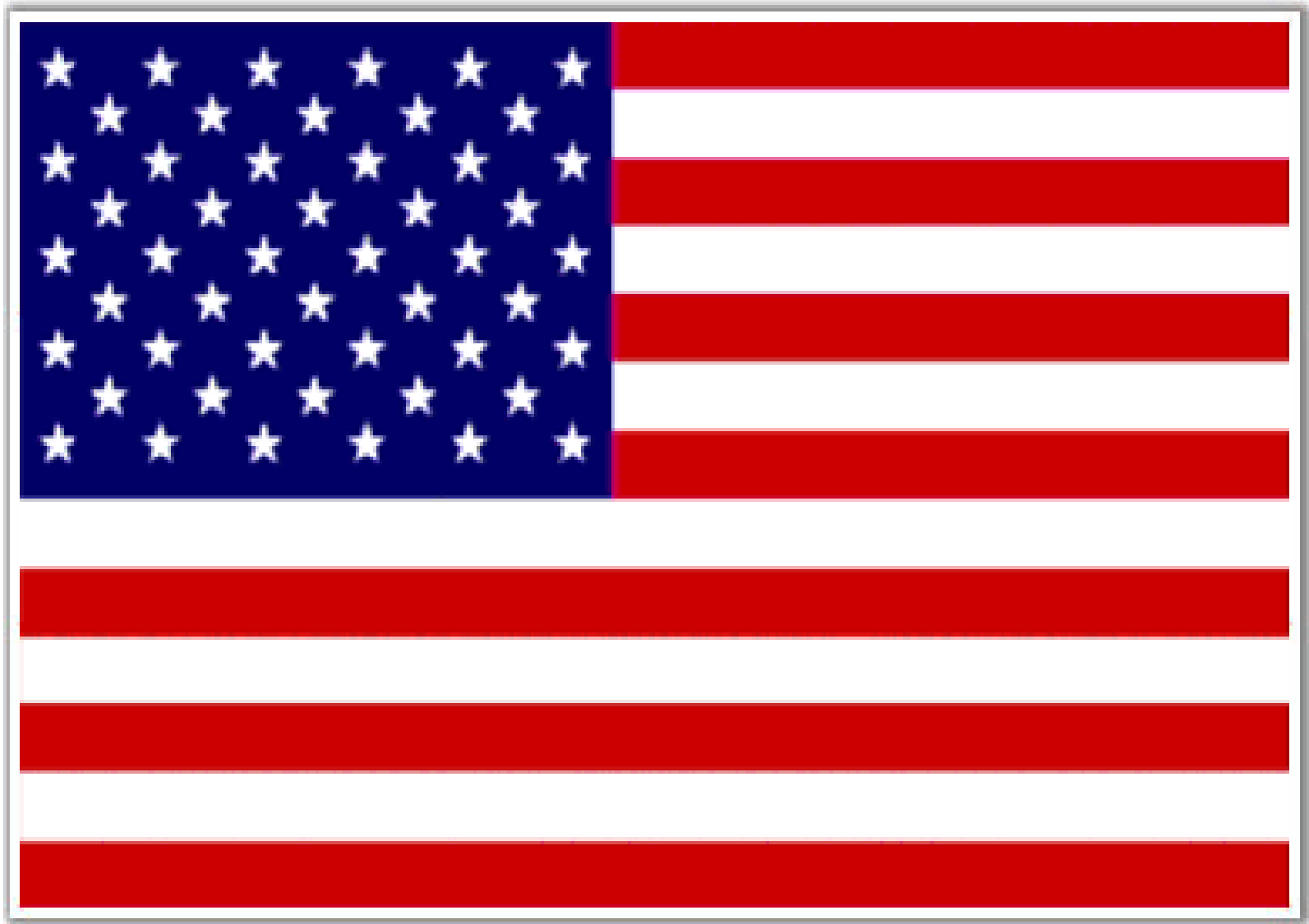
MATERIALS

- The Great Seal of the United States, Front. Source: US Department of State
- The Great Seal of the United States, Back. Source: US Department of State
- The Back of a \$1 Bill
- Graphic Organizer: The Great Seal of the United States

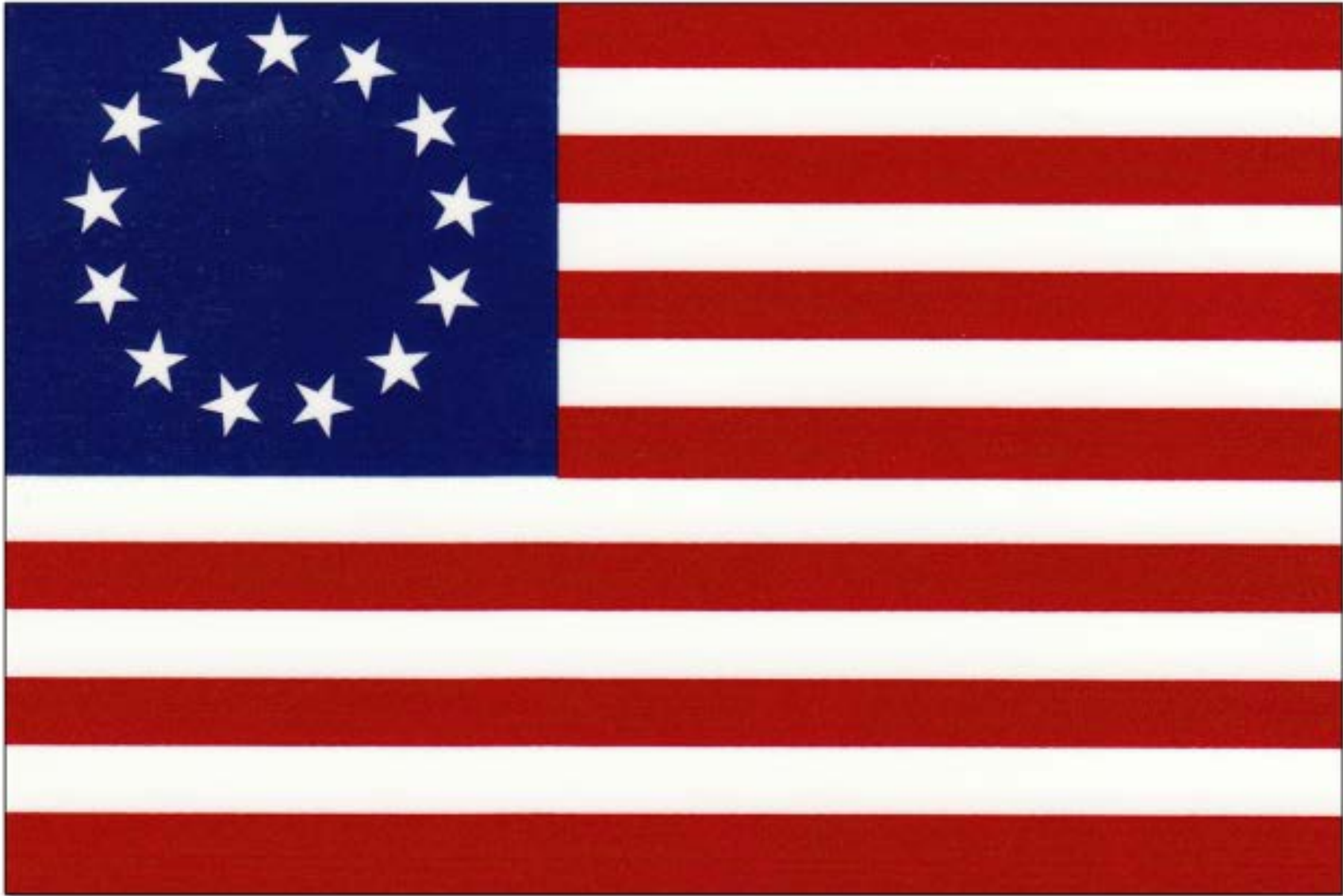
PROCEDURE

1. Class Discussion: What is a symbol? Review the concept from the last two lessons.
2. Class Discussion: Pass out the image of the front of the Great Seal and have the students examine it closely.
3. Ask the following:
 - a. Count and list the different objects on the seal. Is there a pattern? (arrows, leaves on the olive branch, stars, and stripes)
 - b. Why does the number thirteen keep recurring? (the original thirteen colonies)
 - c. What are some interesting details that you can see? (List the symbols as the students identify them.)
4. Show the students the illustration of the dollar bill (or an actual dollar bill) and discuss the information in the Historical Background. (The illustration of the pyramid on the dollar bill is the reverse side of the Great Seal. However, other than being printed on the dollar bill, it is not used on official documents or commonly used for display.)
5. Explain the unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Terms you might discuss include: treaties, committees, emblem, die and counter die, independence, and constellation.
6. Hand out the Graphic Organizer: The Great Seal of the United States.
7. Direct the students to complete the organizer based their grade level and language ability. First, they will draw one of the many symbols of the Great Seal. Then, with an illustration, key words, or even sentences, the students will identify and explain what it symbolizes. For example, a drawing of the shield might be followed by a drawing of people behind a shield with arrows, bombs, and bullets bouncing off of it or perhaps by a few sentences describing how it is the job of the government to protect the people. If time allows you can have the students analyze more than one symbol.
8. Debrief with the class and have them share and explain their analyses.
9. Extension Activity: If time permits or as a follow-up you can have the students analyze the reverse (back) of the Great Seal. The US State Department website has information on the reverse side's symbolism.

The Flag of the United States



The “Betsy Ross” Flag



Name: _____

Date: _____

Graphic Organizer: The Flag of the United States of America

The graphic organizer consists of three main parts arranged horizontally. On the left is a scroll-like shape with rounded ends. It has a grey shaded area at the top-left corner, suggesting a rolled-up document, and another grey shaded area at the bottom-left corner. To the right of this scroll is a large, empty rounded rectangle. Between the scroll and the rounded rectangle is a simple equals sign (=) symbol, indicating that the content of the scroll is equivalent to the content of the rounded rectangle.

The Statue of Liberty, View #1



The Statue of Liberty, View #2



The Statue of Liberty, View #3



The Statue of Liberty, View #4



Name: _____

Date: _____

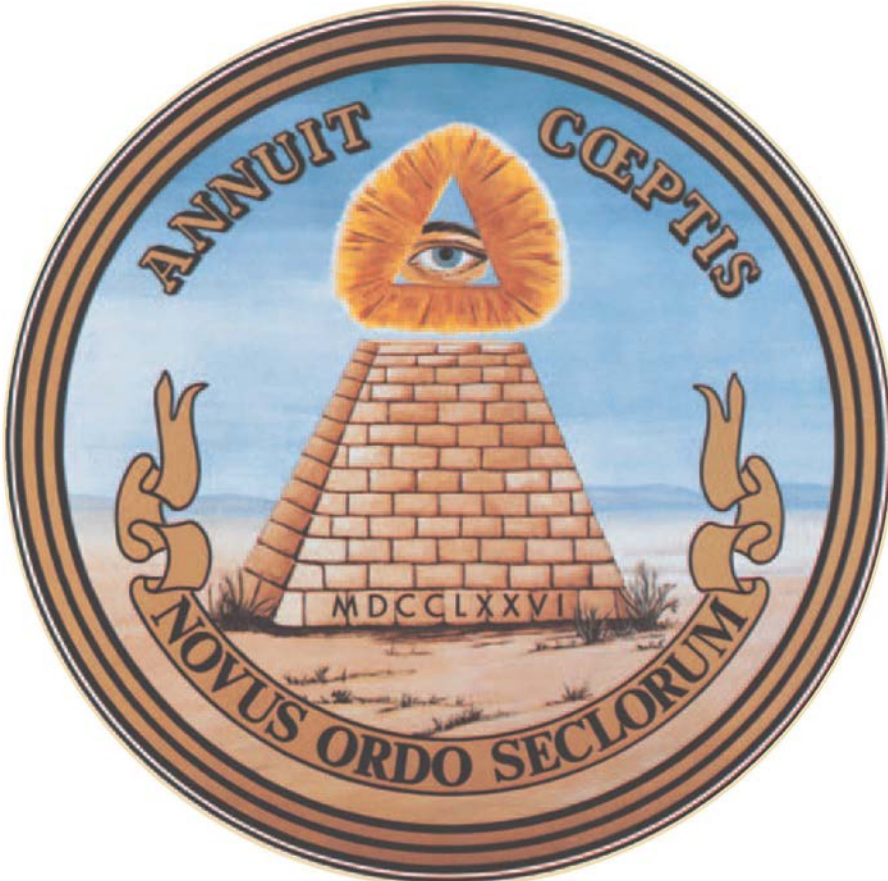
Graphic Organizer: The Statue of Liberty

The graphic organizer consists of two large, rounded rectangular boxes. The left box is connected to the right box by a scroll-like border on the left side. The scroll starts at the top-left corner of the left box and ends at the bottom-left corner. An equals sign is positioned between the two boxes. The right box is empty.

The Great Seal of the United States, Front



The Great Seal of the United States, Back



Back of a \$1 Bill



Name: _____

Date: _____

Graphic Organizer: The Great Seal of the United States of America

The graphic organizer consists of two main sections. On the left is a scroll-like shape with a grey-shaded top-left corner and a grey-shaded bottom-left corner. On the right is a large, empty rounded rectangle. Between these two shapes is a double horizontal line, resembling an equals sign, indicating that the scroll represents the Great Seal and the rounded rectangle is a space for a related concept or analysis.