
Flag Day: How a Symbol Gets Its Meaning

Bloom's Level: Understand

Standard:

NCSS.I.1 — Culture and Cultural Diversity

NCSS.THEME.II — Time, Continuity, and Change

TEKS §113.20(b)(20)(B) — Significance of Important Landmarks

STUDENT EDITION



The American flag's 50 stars represent each state, while the 13 stripes honor the original colonies that declared independence in 1776.

Flag Day: How a Symbol Gets Its Meaning

Why Does a Piece of Cloth Matter So Much?

Imagine standing in a crowded stadium as the national anthem plays. Thousands of people turn their eyes to the same object — a rectangular piece of fabric with red and white stripes and a field of white stars on blue. Some people place their hands over their hearts. Some sing loudly. Some feel a lump in their throats. How did a simple arrangement of colors and shapes come to carry so much emotional power? That question is at the heart of Flag Day, celebrated every June 14th, and it connects directly to how all cultures create and share meaning through symbols.



The American flag's 50 stars represent each state, while the 13 stripes honor the original colonies that declared independence in 1776.

From the Continental Congress to Your Classroom

The American flag didn't appear out of nowhere. On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed the **Flag Resolution**, which stated that the flag of the United States would have thirteen stripes alternating red and white, and thirteen stars on a blue field. Those thirteen elements represented the original thirteen colonies that had declared independence from Britain just one year earlier.

You may have heard the story of **Betsy Ross** sewing the first flag in Philadelphia. While that story is popular, historians aren't certain it's completely accurate. What we do know is that the basic design reflected a young nation trying to announce itself to the world — saying, in effect, "We exist, we are united, and here is our symbol."

As the country grew, so did the flag. Each time a new state joined the Union, a new star was added. Today, the flag carries **50 stars** — one for every state — and still has the original **13 stripes** honoring the founding colonies. The design was officially

standardized in **1912** under President William Howard Taft, who established exact proportions and the arrangement of stars so that every flag would look the same.

The Flag Code: Rules for a Symbol

In 1942, Congress passed the **U.S. Flag Code**, a set of guidelines explaining how the flag should be displayed and treated. For example, the flag should never touch the ground, should be lit if flown at night, and should be folded in a specific triangular pattern. These rules exist because symbols only carry meaning when a community agrees to treat them with care and consistency.

Think of it this way: a stop sign only works because everyone agrees that red means stop. If people ignored it, the symbol would lose its power. The same logic applies to the flag — the rules around it reinforce its importance as a shared national symbol.

The Same Flag, Different Meanings

Here is where things get genuinely interesting. Symbols don't have just one fixed meaning — their meaning can shift depending on who is looking at them and when. Throughout American history, different groups have interpreted the flag in different ways.

For many Americans, the flag represents freedom, sacrifice, and national pride. For others, it has at times represented painful chapters of history, including periods when the promises of freedom were not extended equally to all people. During protest movements, some Americans have displayed the flag in nontraditional ways to draw attention to unfinished work in the pursuit of equality.

This is not unusual. Across cultures and throughout history, powerful symbols are almost always **contested** — meaning people debate and reinterpret what they stand for. A symbol's ability to spark strong feelings, even disagreement, is actually evidence of how meaningful it has become. Recognizing that different people can look at the same symbol and describe entirely different experiences is an important step in understanding both history and one another.

Summary: Symbols Are Living Things

The American flag began as a practical solution — a way to identify ships and soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Over more than two centuries, it grew into something far more complex: a symbol of national identity that means different things to different people, yet still holds a community together.

On Flag Day, we don't just celebrate a design. We reflect on how symbols are created, how they evolve, and how they mirror the values and struggles of the people who carry them. Understanding that process helps us become more thoughtful citizens — not just of one country, but of a diverse and ever-changing world. The next time you see the flag, try to summarize what it means to you — and then consider how someone with a different background might describe it differently.

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Lesson Objective

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to explain how the American flag developed as a cultural symbol and why it can hold different meanings for different people. You will also be able to describe how symbols reflect the values, history, and diversity of the communities that use them.

Standard: NCSS.I.1 — Culture and Cultural Diversity; NCSS.THEME.II — Time, Continuity, and Change; TEKS §113.20(b)(20)(B) — Significance of Important Landmarks

Bloom's Level: Understand

Bloom's Goal: Students will demonstrate understanding by explaining how the American flag's meaning has evolved over time and why the same symbol can represent different things to different cultural groups.

Explanation: At the Understand level, students move beyond simply recalling facts to making sense of ideas and putting them into their own words. In this lesson, that means students will interpret how historical events shaped the flag's design and explain why symbols like the flag can carry multiple meanings across diverse communities.



As new states joined the Union, new stars were added to the flag. This is how the same symbol can change over time while keeping its core meaning.

Application Questions

Read each question carefully, think about what you learned in the article, and write a thoughtful response in your own words.

1. Explain why the American flag has 50 stars and 13 stripes. What do these design elements tell us about the history of the United States?

Think about: Think about what the article says about the original 13 colonies and what happens to the flag each time a new state joins the country.

2. The article compares the flag to a stop sign. In your own words, explain what this comparison means and why rules like the U.S. Flag Code help a symbol keep its meaning.

Think about: Think about why a stop sign only works if everyone agrees to follow it, and how that same idea applies to the way people treat the flag.

3. The article says that the American flag can mean different things to different people. Why is it important to understand that the same symbol can have different meanings depending on who is looking at it?

Think about: Think about how a person's background and experiences might shape the way they feel when they see the flag, and what that tells us about culture and history.

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Primary Source Analysis (DBQ)

Read the primary source excerpt below carefully. Then answer the four analysis questions that follow. Use evidence from the source and what you have learned about Flag Day and American symbols to support your answers.

A Schoolteacher's Letter on Flag Day Observance [Letter]

Dear Superintendent Harris, I write to you on this fourteenth day of June, 1917, to express my strong support for making Flag Day a formal occasion in our public schools. Each morning, my students recite their pledge before the flag, yet many do not understand what those stars and stripes truly represent. The thirteen stripes remind us of the courage of the original colonies, and each star speaks to the growth of our great Union. In these uncertain times, with our nation at war abroad, I believe it is more important than ever that young citizens learn to regard the flag not merely as a piece of cloth, but as a living symbol of our shared ideals — liberty, unity, and sacrifice. I urge you to dedicate at least one lesson each year to its history and meaning. Respectfully yours, Margaret L. Whitfield Public School No. 7, Cincinnati, Ohio

— Margaret L. Whitfield, schoolteacher, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 14, 1917

1. Who wrote this letter, and what was her purpose in writing it? How might her role as a schoolteacher affect the point of view she expresses about the flag? [Sourcing]

2. The letter was written in 1917, during World War I. How might the historical context of the United States being at war have influenced the author's feelings about teaching students to respect the flag as a national symbol? [Context]

3. According to the letter, what do the thirteen stripes and the stars on the flag represent? What three ideals does the author say the flag stands for, and why does she believe students should learn about them? [Close Reading]

4. The article explains that different Americans can look at the same flag and describe entirely different experiences. Does Margaret Whitfield's letter reflect all possible perspectives on the flag's meaning, or does it represent just one viewpoint? What perspective might be missing from her letter? [Corroboration]

Timeline Construction

Below are five important events in the history of the American flag, each labeled with a letter. They are NOT in the correct order. Your tasks are: (1) Arrange the events in chronological order by writing the letter IDs from earliest to latest, and (2) For each event, answer the significance prompt in one or two sentences explaining why that event mattered.

A. Congress passed the U.S. Flag Code, establishing official guidelines for how the flag should be displayed and treated.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why was it important for the government to create formal rules about how the flag should be handled and displayed?

B. President William Howard Taft officially standardized the flag's design, establishing exact proportions and the arrangement of stars.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why did it matter that every American flag would now look exactly the same, with uniform proportions and star placement?

C. The Continental Congress passed the Flag Resolution, declaring that the United States flag would have thirteen alternating red and white stripes and thirteen stars on a blue field.

Date / Period:

Significance:

Why was creating an official flag design significant for the newly independent United States?

D. The United States declared independence from Britain, an event the flag's original thirteen stars and stripes were designed to represent.

Date / Period:

Significance:

How did the act of declaring independence shape the symbols and meaning built into the first American flag?

E. A fiftieth star was added to the flag as the last of the fifty states joined the Union, bringing the flag to its current design.

Date / Period:

Significance:

What does the addition of a new star each time a state joined the Union reveal about how symbols can grow and change alongside a nation?

Reflection Questions

Answer each question thoughtfully using what you learned from the article and your own ideas.

1. How did the design of the American flag change over time, and what do those changes tell us about the growth of the United States?

Think about: Consider why stars were added to the flag and what the original 13 stripes represent.

2. Why do you think the U.S. Flag Code includes rules about how the flag should be treated, such as never letting it touch the ground?

Think about: Think about what the article says about how symbols keep their meaning when people agree to treat them with care.

3. The article says the American flag can mean different things to different people. Why is it important to understand that a symbol can have more than one meaning?

Think about: Think about how a person's background or experiences might shape the way they feel when they see the flag.

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Discussion Questions

Read each question carefully and think about what you learned in the article. Use evidence from the text and your own reasoning to answer each question in complete sentences. Be prepared to share your thinking with the class.

1. The article explains that the American flag's design changed over time as new states joined the Union. What does this tell us about how symbols reflect the history and growth of a culture or nation?

2. According to the article, different groups of Americans have interpreted the flag in very different ways. Why might the same symbol carry different meanings for different people, and what does that tell us about the relationship between symbols and lived experience?

3. The article compares the flag to a stop sign, saying that symbols only work when a community agrees to treat them with care and consistency. Do you think this comparison is a good one? What are the similarities and differences between the two symbols?

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Close Reading Passage

Read the passage carefully. Then answer the five questions that follow. Use evidence from the text to support your responses.

Flag Day: How a Symbol Gets Its Meaning

The American flag began as a practical solution — a way to identify ships and soldiers during the Revolutionary War. On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed the Flag Resolution, establishing thirteen stripes alternating red and white, and thirteen stars on a blue field. Those thirteen elements represented the original colonies that had declared independence from Britain. As the country grew, a new star was added for each new state. Today the flag carries 50 stars and still has the original 13 stripes. Yet the flag's meaning has never been fixed. For many Americans, it represents freedom, sacrifice, and national pride. For others, it has at times represented painful chapters of history. During protest movements, some Americans have displayed the flag in nontraditional ways to draw attention to unfinished work in the pursuit of equality. A symbol's ability to spark strong feelings — even disagreement — is actually evidence of how meaningful it has become.

1. According to the passage, what did the thirteen stripes and thirteen stars on the original flag represent? **[Comprehension]**

2. How has the design of the American flag changed as the country grew, and what has stayed the same? [Comprehension]

3. The passage states that the flag's meaning has "never been fixed." What does this suggest about how symbols function within a diverse society? [Inference]

4. Why might some Americans choose to display the flag in nontraditional ways during protest movements? What does this reveal about the relationship between symbols and social change? [Inference]

5. The author ends the passage by saying that a symbol's ability to spark "strong feelings — even disagreement" is "evidence of how meaningful it has become." How does this word choice shape the reader's understanding of contested symbols? [Craft]

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Multiple Choice

Read each question carefully and choose the best answer from the four choices provided.

1. What was the main purpose of the Flag Resolution passed by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777?
 - A. To establish official rules for how the flag should be folded and stored
 - B. To officially describe the design of the United States flag
 - C. To add a new star to the flag for each territory gained
 - D. To replace the British flag with a completely new national symbol
2. Why does the American flag have 13 stripes even though there are now 50 states?
 - A. Because 13 is considered a lucky number in American culture
 - B. Because Congress decided 13 stripes looked better than 50
 - C. To honor the original 13 colonies that declared independence from Britain
 - D. To represent the 13 members of the Continental Congress
3. What does it mean when the article says that symbols are "contested"?
 - A. Symbols are protected by law and cannot be changed
 - B. People debate and disagree about what a symbol stands for
 - C. Symbols lose their meaning over time and must be replaced
 - D. Only government officials can decide what a symbol means

4. According to the article, why did President William Howard Taft standardize the flag's design in 1912?

- A. To add new stars for states that had recently joined the Union
- B. To make the flag easier to manufacture in large quantities
- C. To ensure that every flag would have the same proportions and star arrangement
- D. To change the colors of the flag to brighter shades of red and blue

5. The article compares the flag's rules to a stop sign. What is the main point of this comparison?

- A. Both the flag and stop signs use the color red to communicate danger
- B. Symbols only have power when a community agrees to respect and follow them
- C. Government rules are necessary to control how people behave in public
- D. The flag and stop signs were both created by Congress in the same year

6. Which of the following best explains why the American flag's meaning can differ from person to person?

- A. People in different states are taught different versions of the flag's history
- B. The flag's design has changed so many times that people are confused about its meaning
- C. Symbols reflect the varied experiences and perspectives of the people who view them
- D. The U.S. Flag Code allows each citizen to choose their own interpretation

7. What was the original practical purpose of the American flag when it was first created?

- A. To decorate government buildings during national holidays
- B. To identify ships and soldiers during the Revolutionary War
- C. To signal peace agreements between the colonies and Britain
- D. To mark the borders between the original thirteen colonies

8. Based on the article, which statement best describes how the American flag has changed over time?

- A. The flag's stripes have been updated each time a new state joined the Union
- B. The flag's design has remained exactly the same since 1777
- C. Stars have been added as new states joined, while the 13 stripes have stayed the same
- D. The flag's colors were changed from the original design to make it more visible

9. According to the article, what does the fact that a symbol can spark strong feelings and disagreement tell us about it?

- A. The symbol has failed to unite people and should be redesigned
- B. The symbol has become deeply meaningful to the community
- C. The symbol is too complicated for most people to understand
- D. The symbol was created without considering the needs of all citizens

10. How does understanding that different people can interpret the same symbol differently help us as citizens?

- A. It teaches us that symbols should be replaced with ones everyone agrees on
- B. It shows us that only historians can correctly explain what symbols mean
- C. It helps us better understand history and develop empathy for diverse perspectives
- D. It proves that national symbols are less important than local traditions

True / False

Read each statement carefully. Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false based on what you have learned about Flag Day and the American flag as a cultural symbol.

1. The Continental Congress passed the Flag Resolution on June 14, 1777.
 True False
2. The original American flag had fifty stars to represent the fifty states.
 True False
3. The thirteen stripes on the American flag honor the original thirteen colonies.
 True False
4. Historians are completely certain that Betsy Ross sewed the very first American flag.
 True False
5. The U.S. Flag Code was passed by Congress in 1942 to provide guidelines for displaying and treating the flag.
 True False
6. According to the Flag Code, it is acceptable for the American flag to touch the ground.
 True False

7. President William Howard Taft officially standardized the flag's proportions and star arrangement in 1912.

True False

8. Symbols like the American flag always carry one fixed meaning that never changes over time.

True False

9. Flag Day is celebrated every year on June 14th.

True False

10. The fact that people debate and reinterpret what the flag stands for is evidence of how meaningful it has become as a symbol.

True False

Vocabulary

Study each vocabulary term and its definition below. These words will help you better understand how symbols, culture, and national identity are connected. As you read, look for these terms in the article and think about how each one is used in context.

Flag Resolution

The official decision made by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777, that established the design of the first American flag with thirteen stripes and thirteen stars. Explain in your own words:

Continental Congress

The governing body of representatives from the American colonies that made important decisions during the Revolutionary War era, including approving the first flag design. Explain in your own words:

symbol

An object, image, or design that represents an idea, belief, or group of people and carries shared meaning within a culture or community. Explain in your own words:

colonies

The original thirteen territories in America that were under British rule before declaring independence and becoming the first states of the United States.

Explain in your own words:

standardized

Made uniform or consistent so that something always looks or works the same way, such as when President Taft established exact rules for the flag's design in 1912.

Explain in your own words:

U.S. Flag Code

A set of official guidelines passed by Congress in 1942 that explains the proper ways to display, handle, and care for the American flag.

Explain in your own words:

national identity

The shared sense of belonging and pride that connects the people of a country through common history, values, and symbols like a flag.

Explain in your own words:

contested

Described as having different or opposing meanings that people debate, as when a symbol like the flag is interpreted differently by various groups throughout history.

Explain in your own words:

cultural diversity

The variety of different backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, and experiences that exist among people within a community or society.

Explain in your own words:

protest

A public action or demonstration in which people express disagreement with a law, policy, or social condition in order to call for change.

Explain in your own words:

Exit Ticket

Answer both questions below in 1-2 sentences each. Use what you learned from today's lesson to support your answers.

1. Explain why the American flag has 50 stars and 13 stripes. What does each element represent?

2. Why might the same flag mean different things to different people? Use an example from the lesson to support your answer.



The American flag's 50 stars represent each state, while the 13 stripes honor the original colonies that declared independence in 1776.

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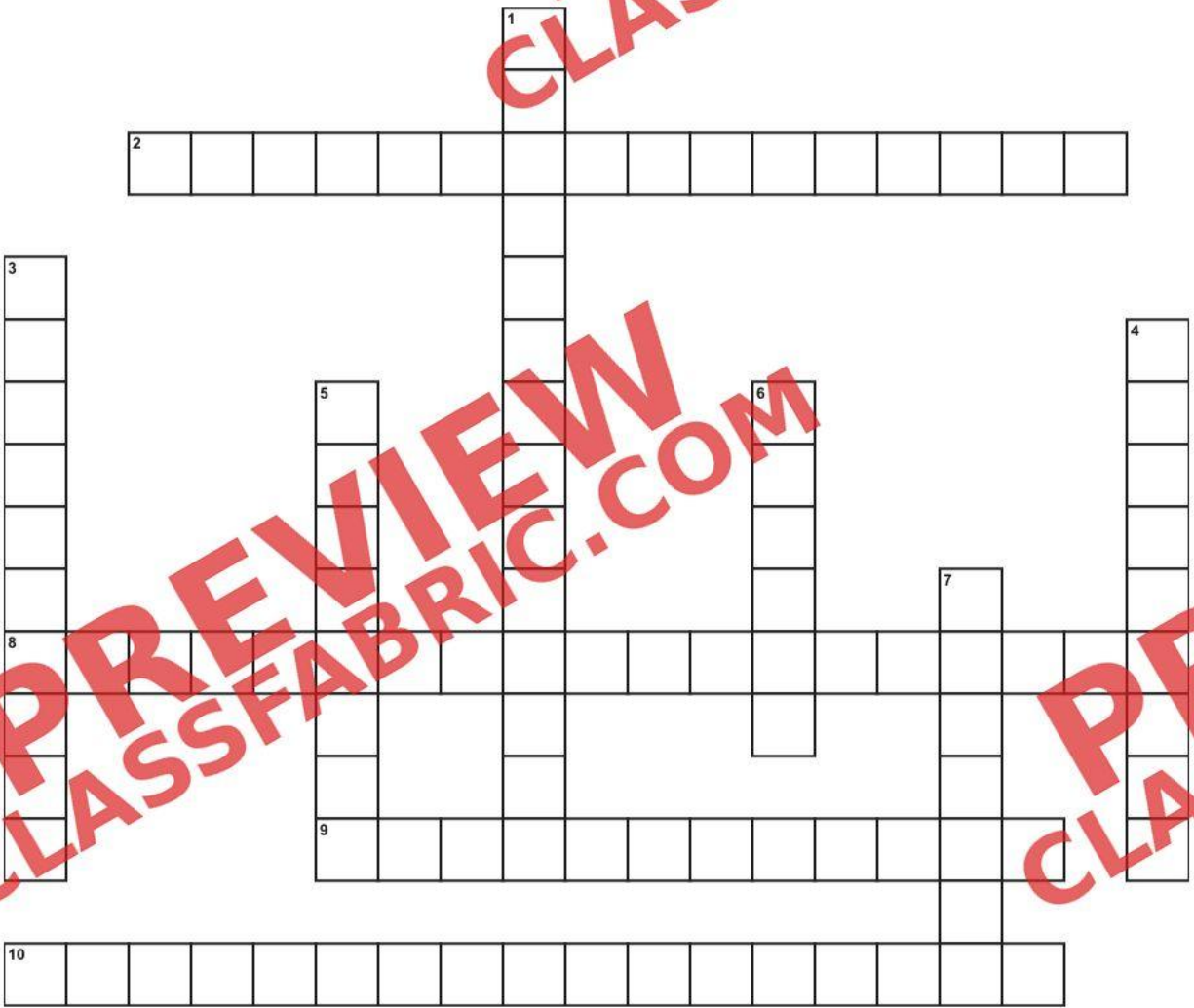
As new states joined the Union, new stars were added to the flag. This is how the same symbol can change over time while keeping its core meaning.

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Flag Day: How a Symbol Gets Its Meaning

CROSSWORD PUZZLE



Flag Day: How a Symbol Gets Its Meaning

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

2. The shared sense of belonging and pride that connects the people of a country through common history, values, and symbols like a flag.
8. The governing body of representatives from the American colonies that made important decisions during the Revolutionary War era, including approving the first flag design.
9. Made uniform or consistent so that something always looks or works the same way, such as when President Taft established exact rules for the flag's design in 1912.
10. The variety of different backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, and experiences that exist among people within a community or society.

DOWN

1. The official decision made by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777, that established the design of the first American flag with thirteen stripes and thirteen stars.
3. A set of official guidelines passed by Congress in 1942 that explains the proper ways to display, handle, and care for the American flag.
4. Described as having different or opposing meanings that people debate, as when a symbol like the flag is interpreted differently by various groups throughout history.
5. The original thirteen territories in America that were under British rule before declaring independence and becoming the first states of the United States.
6. An object, image, or design that represents an idea, belief, or group of people and carries shared meaning within a culture or community.
7. A public action or demonstration in which people express disagreement with a law, policy, or social condition in order to call for change.

Flag Day: How a Symbol Gets Its Meaning

WORD SEARCH

Q F C O N T I N E N T A L C O N G R E S S N U K
D P X P O D H Z Z L N H L I V V K R Y N R M S T
E Y D Z I B R C S W N J S S O L E N O B S H F W
P R O T E S T Z R O Z P W B A L D R Y I K R L C
Y F T R A O P A S S K J M Y G J Y R U B M U A C
K L G P Q B G I B Y Q B A T Z M G H J T V S G M
J A C S K Y D M A M D A W W V G R V S J I W C X
W G R Z Z A I C L B U J S W R R Z A Q M U N O N
X R P S Y V D U O O D F T A P W Z O D L G L D A
G E Q D G Q V S M L P S A E U A R J H S E G E T
Q S W E G L Q S V I N A N U D E L M T M F I D I
T O B S C O F A F G E G D U B Y Y Z U X P C R O
Z L E S I Z B S B X Y Y A R D X W E U E N J Y N
Y U P H G K Y E X I V R E G Z Q B C D J C W A
U T U O Z L T W W J Y M D B S W H W I C M G F L
Y I C D K W S V I D D T I E C O L S V M H T L I
V O O E N X V J S L G U Z S O H A G T R F H L D
R N L D X T D R G B R A E H P Z U C A N C S U E
N K O Z A E Y I L V T E D V H H G Q E K N E A N
Z F N S Z F C H L T G S G I U A B R R I I E P T
L K I M Q Q Q I E A Y D H C O N T E S T E D B I
C Q E A R Q A C P C R N D O Q Q T A S A T X U T
F T S R T Q E N Z U D V T F M Q F F N Q Z E F Y
M C U L T U R A L D I V E R S I T Y N L V W B P

FIND THESE WORDS

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standardized
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