

# Learning Semaphore with Girl Guides

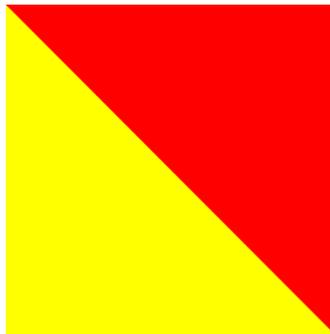
Semaphore is a way of signalling messages using flags.

We use two flags together to make the shape of one letter at a time.

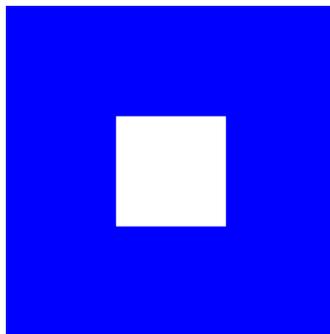
## About the Flags

Semaphore flags are based on the Nautical Flags – a set of flags where there is one design for each letter of the military alphabet. Nautical flags are square in shape.

Semaphore signalling is usually done on water, from ship to ship. For Semaphore signalling on water, we use the Nautical flag for O – the Oscar Flag. It's yellow and red triangles.



Sometimes Semaphore is also done on land – often in mountain ranges, from one mountain top to another. For Semaphore signalling on land, we use the Nautical flag for P – the Papa Flag. It's blue with a white box in the middle.



If you don't have any flags of your own, you can make some by cutting out 8x8 inch squares of cardstock and colouring them in. Attach them to a nice long stick (about two feet) for a pole.

To talk about:

- Why don't we use the Nautical Flags to spell out messages? (because it's slow, because you need a lot of space on a line to spell even just a couple of words, because duplicate letters in messages means you'd need to carry around a lot of extra flags)

- Why do we use Oscar on water, and Papa on land? (because the blue Papa flag is hard to see on water, and the red/yellow Oscar can be hard to see in fall on land).

## Did You Know...

Semaphore signalling was practiced extensively by Girl Guides in the 1940s, so they would be ready to signal emergency messages to their community in time of war.

You could get a badge for semaphore. To earn the badge, you had to be able to signal twelve words a minute!

The Guides of the 1940s would practice to waltz music. If you can hum the Blue Danube Waltz, imagine having to change letters on every downbeat. That would take a lot of practice!

## The Stance

To start, get in the proper stance. Feet should be about shoulder width apart. Toes point slightly outward.

Keep your torso straight and strong, facing completely forward. You should not twist or turn while signalling – only your arms should move.

## Holding the Flags

Hold the flags about halfway up the stick.

This allows for the bottom part of the stick to become “fused” with your forearm. Your arm should feel like an extension of the flag’s pole.

Your arms should never bend at the elbow while signaling – keep them strong and straight at all times, with the flag coming straight out from the end of your arm.

## Basic Positions

There are only five positions for each arm – practice them now!

- Straight up
- 45 degrees out and up
- Straight out from your shoulders at 90 degrees to your body
- 45 degrees out and down
- Straight down in front of your body

## Start a Conversation

Semaphore is a conversation – you need a signaller and a receiver. Both people in the conversation need a set of flags, so they can “talk” back and forth.

The signaller starts by indicating that they are ready to send a message. We do this by flapping the flags straight out on either side, like a bird getting ready to take off. Be gentle with the flags! Flap slowly, just three or four times to get the attention of the receiver.

The receiver then signals that they noticed the signaller and that they are ready to receive messages. They do this by making the “received” shape, which is the same as the letter K.

Now the signaller is ready to start spelling out words.

## Communicate!

This exercise works best with two girls on each side – two signalling, and two receiving. On each side, one girl works the flags, while the other girl holds the signals guide up for the flag girl to see, and double checks the shape she is making for each letter to make sure it is right.

The signalling team should stand about 10 feet away from the receiving team at the start.

Remember! The semaphore instruction sheets show you what shape you should be making from the *receiver's point of view*. So, if you are making the signal – you need to make it in mirror image to what the sheet is showing. Try to imagine you are standing BEHIND the sheet of paper or person shown on the sheet and then do what they are doing. The other member of the sending team should check the shape – when facing the signalling girl, the shape should match the paper.

To spell out words, you signal letter by letter, then make the “end” signal to indicate the word is finished (both flags straight down in front of you, and crossed).

Although in real semaphore, you’d signal letter after letter quickly, for these exercises it’s best to have the signalling team signal just one letter; then let the receiving team acknowledge when they think they have figured it out (with the acknowledgement letter, K). Then the sending team can move on to the next letter.

This process is slow, so the receiving team often needs a paper and pencil to mark down the letters they have already seen, or they forget!

Some things to try:

- Leader gives each sending team a secret word to spell – a good word to start with is HELP, or the message SEND FOOD.
- Draw a card from the semaphore deck – the sending team gets to see the word; the receiving team gets the “hint” about the word. Now see if you can signal it.
- Try moving farther away from each other – how far away can you still see the flags and the shape they are making? Can you spell your names to each other at this distance?

- Think up your own longer message and try signalling it, once everyone is getting more comfortable at learning the signals.
- Be sure to rotate and give everyone a turn with the flags.

## Other Fun Things To Try

- Spell out your name in Nautical Flags – How do you say your name in the military alphabet?
- Spell out your name in semaphore, and draw pictures in a row to remind you how to spell it out.
- Decode secret messages (on paper) that are written in semaphore or nautical flag code.