Communication on the Ocean
Nautical Flags

Introduction:

For as long as humans have been using boats, there has been a need to communicate between vessels. Before cell phones or radios, flags were used as a way to communicate information. Originally, different fleets of ships or country's navies had their own codes. A single flag could represent a word or phrase and placing it at different locations on a ship could change the meaning. As ship uses, military tactics, and technologies advanced codes became more complicated. Eventually, a group of countries came together to create the International Code of Signals which today is managed by the United Nations' International Maritime Organization.

The current International Code of Signals has a flag to represent each of the 26 letters of the English alphabet, the numbers 0 through 9. These flags can be used alone or combined to signal specific words or phrases or they can be combined to spell out whole words. Single flag signals are used for urgent messages or common phrases. For example, the "A" flag is used to signal a scuba diver is in the water and the "C" flag is used to answer "yes" to a question.

Understanding a shared code is important for communication at sea since much of the world's ocean is used by multiple nations. And having a code that can be used if other forms of communication aren't working (out of range of cell service or radios are nonfunctional) can be critical to maintaining vessel and crew safety.

In this activity you'll learn the meaning of, to recognize, and to use the flag letters of the International Code of Signals.

Full text if the International Code of Signals – http://www.seasources.net/PDF/PUB102.pdf

Part One:

Below are the patterns of the 26 letters of the nautical flag alphabet. Use the color guide to fill in the colors of each flag.
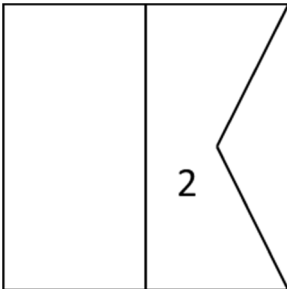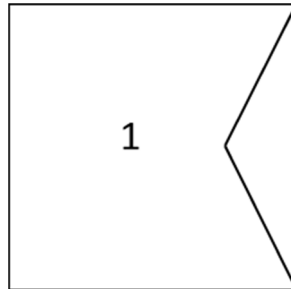
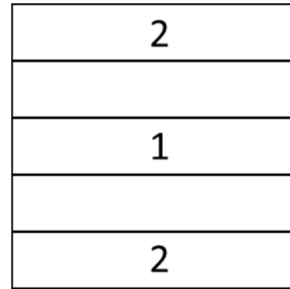1 – RED   2 – BLUE   3 – YELLOW   4 – BLACK   Leave spaces with no number WHITE
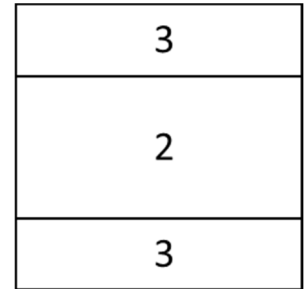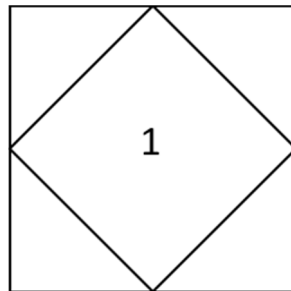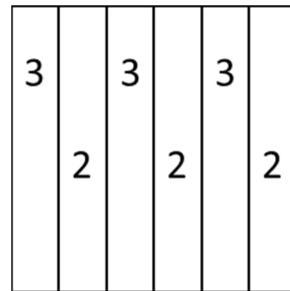
2 (A)	1 (B)	2 / 1 / 2 (C)	3 / 2 / 3 (D)
2 / 1 (E)	1 (F)	3 3 3 / 2 2 2 (G)	1 (H)
3 / 4 (I)	2 / 2 (J)	3 / 2 (K)	3 4 / 4 3 (L)

A   B   C   D

E   F   G   H

I   J   K   L

M

2, 2, 2, 2

N

2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2

O

1, 3

P

2

Q

3

R

1, 1, 1, 1, 3

S

2

T

1, 2

U

1, 1

V

1

W

2, 1

X

2

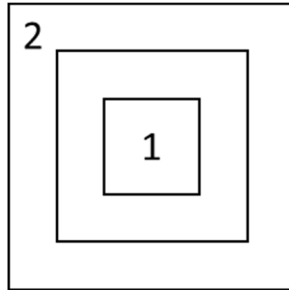**Y**

3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3
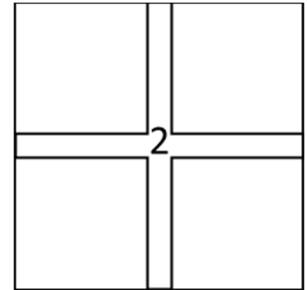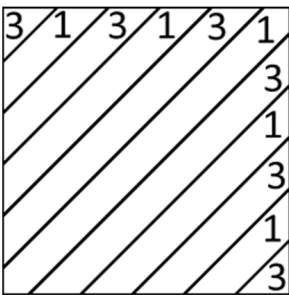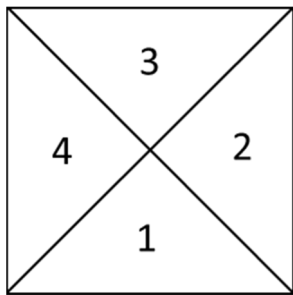
Z

3, 4, 2, 1
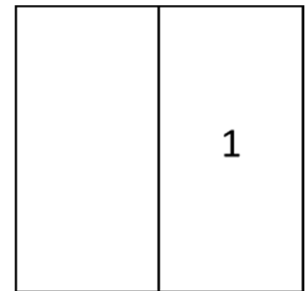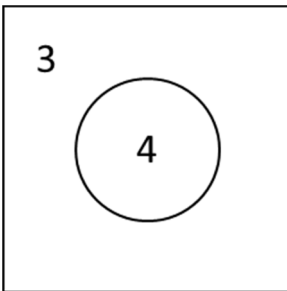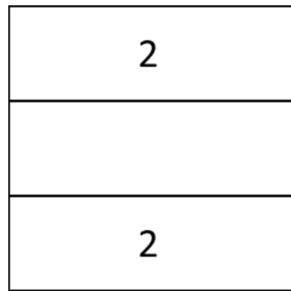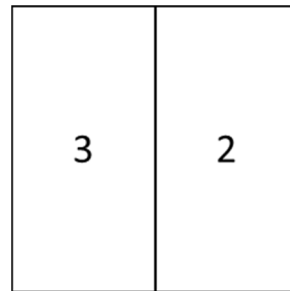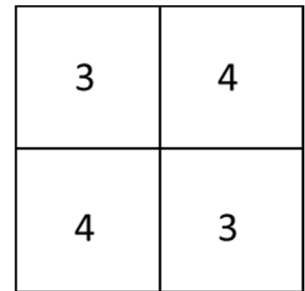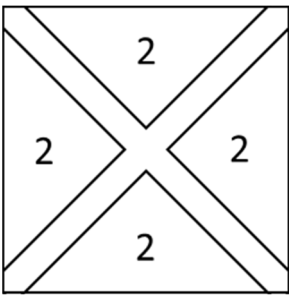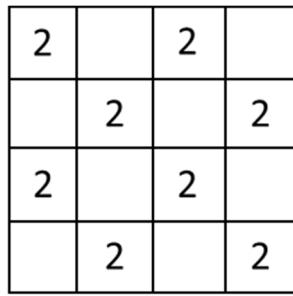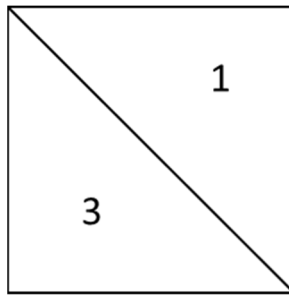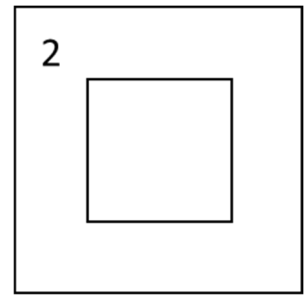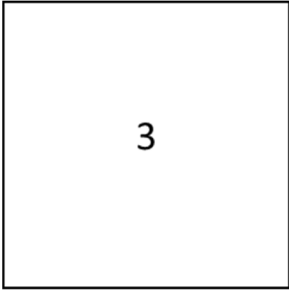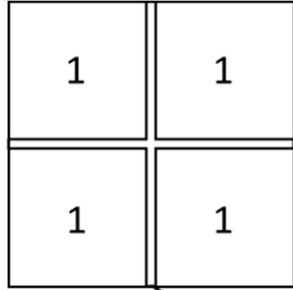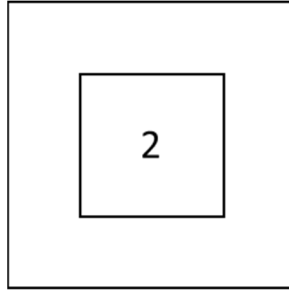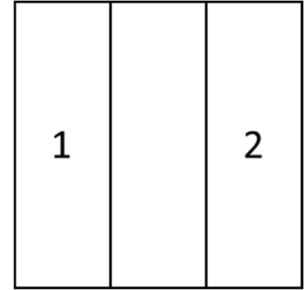
Color Guide:

1 – RED   2 – BLUE   3 – YELLOW   4 – BLACK   Leave spaces with no number WHITE

Part Two:
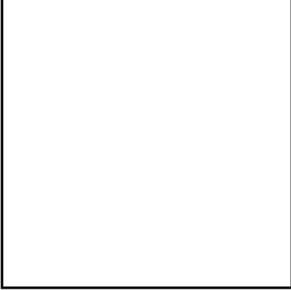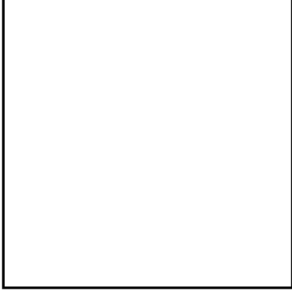Use your flag alphabet from Part One to decode the following message.

Part Three:
For the following communications between vessels, draw the flags that would be flown to signal the message.
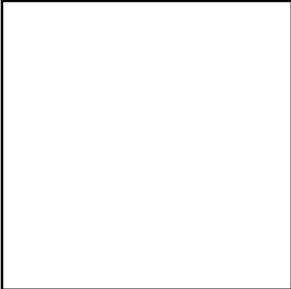
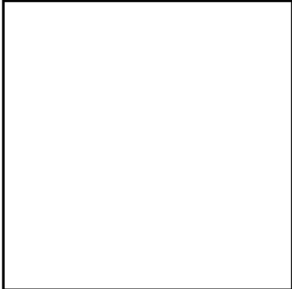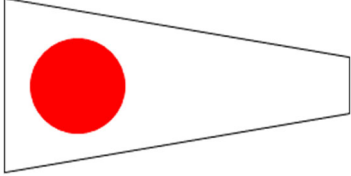| Vessel 1: What is the name of your vessel? |
| --- |

Code: C S

C	S

Vessel 2: *Fill in whatever name you'd like*

Vessel 1: What is your course (what direction are you heading)?

Code: M D 1

M	D	1

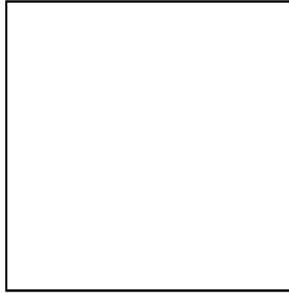**Vessel 2:** My course is 270 (I'm heading 270° [West])

Code: M D 2 7 0

M	D

2	7	0

Vessel 2: Is there fishing gear on my course (is there fishing gear in my way)?

Code: T K
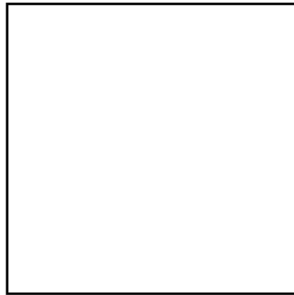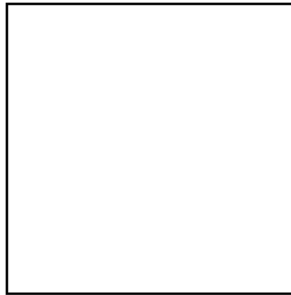
T	K

Vessel 1: No

Code: N

N

Part Four:

For the following scenarios, select the appropriate flag to hoist. Use each flag only once.

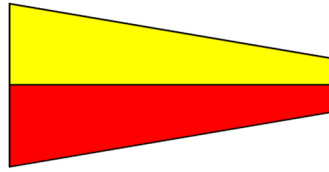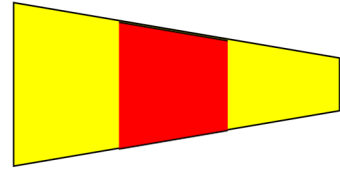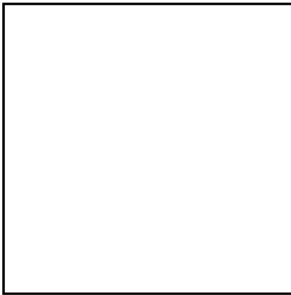**Flag Options:**

A – Diver in the water, Stay clear, go slow

O – Man overboard

U – You are running into danger

V – I require assistance
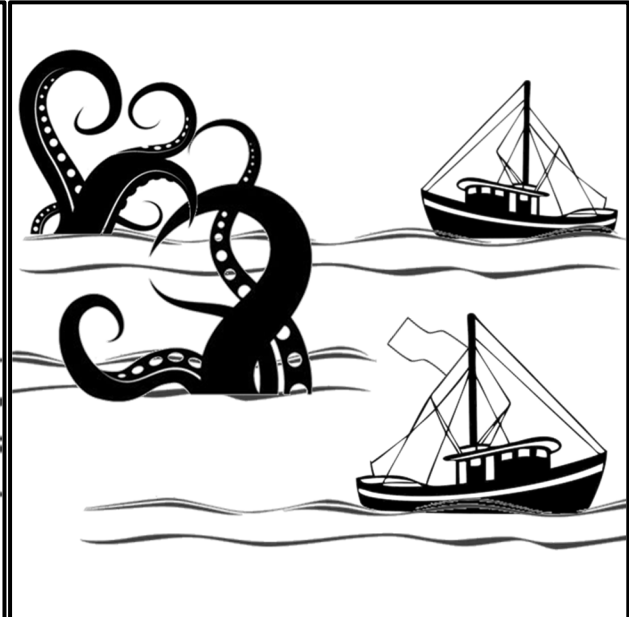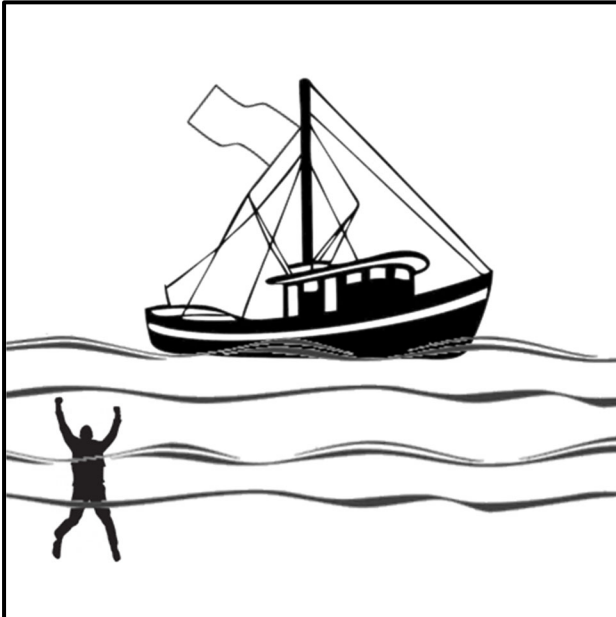
Part Five:

Now that you have seen examples of how flag codes are used, it's time to get creative! Think of some scenarios/communications that *you* might want to communicate by code. Use the spaces below to describe/show what the situations/messages are and what flag or combination of flags you would use.

Situation/message	Flag(s)

Situation/message	Flag(s)

Answers

Part One:

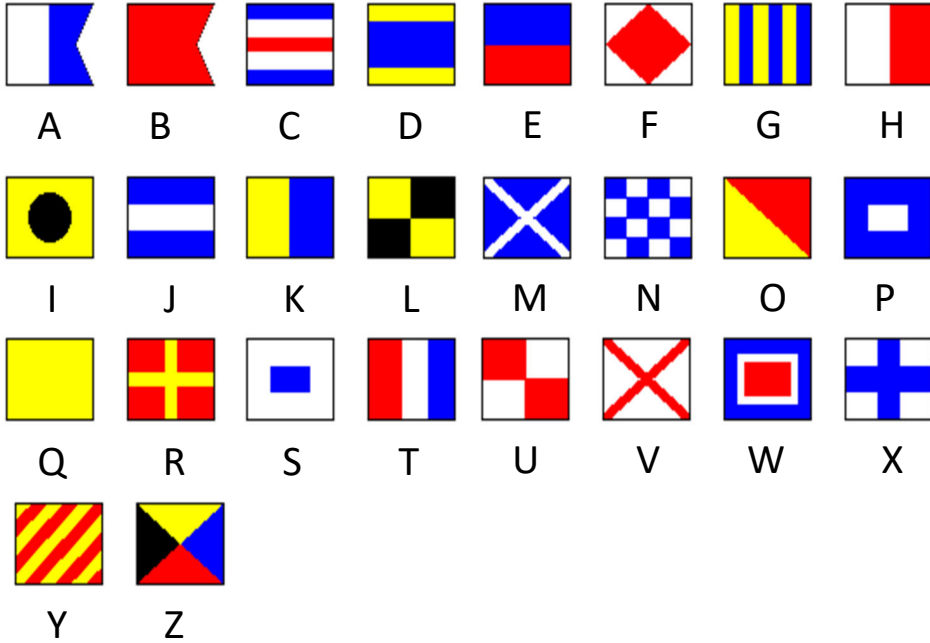| A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H

I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P

Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X

Y	Z

Part Two:

Sailing, sailing, o'er the bounding main; For many a stormy wind shall blow

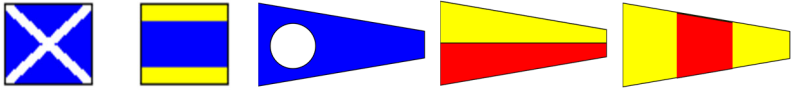**Part Three:**

Vessel 1: What is the name of your
Code: C S

Vessel 2: *Fill in whatever name you'd like*

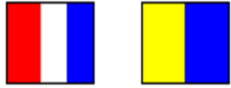| **Vessel 1:** What is your course (what direction are you heading)? |
|---|
| Code: M D 1 |

Vessel 2: My course is 270 (I'm heading 270° [West])

Code: M D 2 7 0

Vessel 2: Is there fishing gear on my course (is there fishing gear in my way)?

Code: T K

Vessel 1: No

Code: N

Part Four: