

# Activity Page for Kids

Can you HEAR me now? Or rather, can you SEE me now?

Communication is very important at sea. Do you know how ships communicate today? Radios? Satellite phones? What if those things are broken? What if the people on the other ship do not speak the same language as you? What can you do?

Have you ever seen a ship flying lots of colorful flags? They are not just for decoration, they also have a purpose! They are the International Code Flags and Pennants. Seafaring nations have agreed on the code, so ships from different countries who speak different languages have a common way to “talk” while at sea or with people on shore. The British created the first international code in 1855. It has changed over the years. Naval officers can give orders. Merchant captains can talk to tugboats or send messages to passing vessels. They can communicate.

There are twenty-six flags and ten pennants. Can you guess why? Each flag represents a letter of the alphabet and has a name that begins with that letter. It’s called the phonetic alphabet. You may have heard soldiers use it in movies. For example A is Alpha and Z is Zulu. Some messages are used so often that captains only have to fly one flag. For example, when the flag for A (Alpha) flies alone it means “Diver Down,” that a scuba diver is underwater near the ship. The Z means “I Require a Tug.” The ten pennants represent numbers (0-9). Finally there is one answering pennant and three repeaters used for longer messages.

The number of flags used can also have meaning. A group of code flags are called a signal. One flag signals (like “Diver Down”) are urgent or common messages. Five flags signals tell time and position. Signals can contain up to seven flags. When you read the code these signals do not spell words, but sailors either know the signal or can look it up.

It is hard to see some colors at sea, so the flags are only: red, blue, yellow, black, and white. To be seen clearly, some colors cannot be matched with other colors. Look at the flags. Can you figure out which colors work the best together?

Sometimes the captain of a big sailing vessel would bring along his family on a voyage. He would often give his kids the job of organizing and working with the signal flags.

Signal flags are used to call for help, to warn others of dangers, and pass on other important messages. Would you like that job? It’s an important job because you would be helping the ship to communicate.



You can cut out and keep the code chart so you too can read signals. You could also make your own set of flags to send messages!

Use the code chart to decode this message.

