



Understanding Map Symbols and Reading a Map Key

KS2 GEOGRAPHY

MAP READING

CARTOGRAPHY

Ages 9-12 ⌚ 4 min read

What Are Map Symbols?

Map symbols are tiny pictures or marks used to show real-world features on a map. Instead of drawing something at its actual size, mapmakers use simple symbols to represent schools, hospitals, forests, roads, mountains, and towns. Without symbols, maps would be impossible to read because you couldn't fit everything at the right size.

Maps are much smaller than the real world, so **cartographers** (map makers) use a special language of symbols to tell the story of a place. These symbols work like a code that helps you understand what you're looking at.

Think of it like a video game—instead of showing every single tree in a forest, the game uses one small tree picture to represent a whole forest. This makes everything easier to see.

What Is a Map Key?

A **map key** (also called a **legend**) is the instruction manual for reading a map. It's usually a small box on the map that explains what each symbol means. Without a key, you'd be staring at strange little pictures and have no idea what they represent.

The map key shows each symbol on one side and its meaning on the other. For example, a small house symbol might mean a settlement, a dotted line might mean a footpath, and a blue area might show water.

Think of it like the instructions that come with a board game—without them, you wouldn't know what the pieces do or how to play.

Common Map Symbols You'll See

Different maps use different symbols depending on what they show. **Ordnance Survey maps** (the official maps used in the UK) use symbols like a tiny church cross for churches, a hospital symbol for hospitals, and green patches for parks. Roads are

shown as different colored lines—thick black lines for major roads and thinner lines for smaller ones.

Tourist maps might show restaurants with a fork and knife, museums with an 'M', and train stations with a railway symbol. Weather maps use special symbols to show sunshine, rain, clouds, and snow.

Why Symbols Matter

Map symbols make it possible to understand geography quickly. When you can recognize symbols, you can find places, plan journeys, and understand how the world is organized. Learning to read maps is a skill that helps you navigate cities, understand distances, and explore places you've never been before.

Every time you use **Google Maps** or look at a paper map on a holiday, you're using symbols and a key. It's a universal language that helps people all around the world understand the same information.