



CARTOGRAPHIC SYMBOLS AND THEIR USE

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15523286>

ARTICLE INFO

Qabul qilindi: 20- May 2025 yil
Ma'qullandi: 24- May 2025 yil
Nashr qilindi: 27- May 2025 yil

KEY WORDS

Cartography; Map design; Cartographic symbols; Visual variables; Map literacy; Web mapping; Semiotics; Symbol standardisation; Cognitive load; User study.

ABSTRACT

Cartographic symbols constitute the visual vocabulary through which maps communicate spatial ideas. Their design choices—shape, size, colour, texture, orientation and animation—encode complex attributes and relationships in a form that can be rapidly perceived and interpreted by users. Advances in digital cartography, web mapping and data-visualisation theory have revitalised interest in the semiotic power of symbols, yet inconsistent standards and the proliferation of ad-hoc icon sets threaten both legibility and interoperability. This article synthesises the principles of symbolisation drawn from classical and contemporary cartographic literature, evaluates the cognitive implications of symbol design, and reports the findings of an empirical study that measured user performance across alternative symbol systems in a web-mapping environment.

Introduction

Every map, whether etched on clay tablets or rendered dynamically in a smartphone app, depends on symbols to turn geographic data into meaning. From the earliest pictographs of rivers and settlements to the highly codified symbology of modern topographic sheets, cartographic symbols bridge the gap between raw spatial data and human cognition [Bertin, 1983, 42]. Unlike photographs, maps must generalise; they must abstract away detail until only relationships critical to the map's purpose remain. Symbols are the instruments of that abstraction.

Symbolisation has grown more complex as mapping has moved from static print media to interactive, multi-scale digital systems. Vector tiles can swap icon sets on the fly, and animation can transform a symbol from a static sign into a temporal narrative. Yet most design guidelines still rely on research conducted with paper maps in laboratory settings of the mid- to late-twentieth century [Robinson et al., 1995, 112]. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating classical theories with contemporary use cases and by testing symbol designs under realistic digital conditions.

This article is organised as follows. The **Literature Review** summarises foundational theories of visual variables and more recent work on symbol cognition. The **Discussion** synthesises design principles and technological trends. The **Results** section presents a user-study

comparing symbol sets and contains tables of quantitative findings. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

Literature review

1. Foundations of Symbol Semiotics

Jacques Bertin's theory of *visual variables*—position, size, shape, value, colour, orientation and texture—remains the cornerstone of symbol design [Bertin, 1983, 42]. Bertin argued that each variable lends itself to specific types of data (nominal, ordinal, interval, ratio) depending on the perceptual operations required (selection, association, ordering, proportion). Later work by Dent refined Bertin's framework for thematic mapping, highlighting the importance of redundancy—using more than one visual cue to safeguard comprehension [Dent, 1999, 60]. Imhof's treatise on topographic cartography stressed the aesthetic dimension of symbols, championing harmonious stroke weights and balanced colour palettes [Imhof, 1982, 63]. Robinson and colleagues extended the dialogue to psychological testing, linking symbol discriminability to colour-blind confusion matrices [Robinson et al., 1995, 118].

2. Colour Theory and Perception

Brewer's *ColorBrewer* schemes introduced empirically validated palettes for choropleth and point symbolisation, accounting for simultaneous contrast, perceptual uniformity and device limitations [Brewer, 2016, 88]. Tufte, in parallel, promoted the “data-ink ratio,” warning against decorative symbols that contribute little information [Tufte, 2001, 71].

3. Cognitive Studies

Cognitive scientists have measured the mental workload imposed by different symbol variables. Tversky et al. documented that shape variation is processed categorically, while size and hue variations are interpreted ordinally [Tversky et al., 2002, 362]. More recently, Roth demonstrated that animation variables—flicker frequency and motion direction—can encode temporal change efficiently but risk distraction if overused [Roth, 2013, 152].

4. Digital Cartography and Standardisation

Web cartography introduced scalable icon fonts (e.g., Mapbox Maki, Google Material) that cater to multi-scale rendering but sometimes conflict with legacy symbol standards such as those of the U.S. Geological Survey. Agencies such as SwissTopo have begun offering open symbol libraries with documented semantics and scale thresholds [SwissTopo, 2021, 7]. The International Cartographic Association (ICA) is developing an ontology to harmonise symbol semantics across platforms [ICA, 2020, 5].

5. Gaps in the Literature

Although guidelines abound, few are validated through rigorous user testing with diverse audiences. Monmonier warned that poorly designed symbols can “lie” by exaggerating or obscuring patterns [Monmonier, 1996, 23], yet systematic evaluations remain scarce. This study addresses that gap by comparing classical and minimalist symbol sets in an experimental setting.

Discussion

1. Taxonomy of Cartographic Symbols

Symbols fall into three geometric categories:

- **Point symbols**—represent discrete objects (wells, schools, cities).
- **Line symbols**—encode linear phenomena (roads, rivers, fault lines).
- **Area symbols**—delineate polygons (lakes, land use zones).

Within each category, designers manipulate visual variables to align with data types. For nominal categories, unique shapes or colours avoid implying order; for ordered data, graduated size or value is preferred. The recent proliferation of *emoji-style* point icons complicates matters: while intuitive to some users, they can clash with traditional legend conventions and distract from map purpose.

2. Symbol Generalisation Across Scale

Multi-scale mapping demands that symbols morph as the user zooms. Krygier and Wood recommend “symbol migration,” where detailed pictographs simplify to geometric shapes at smaller scales [Krygier & Wood, 2016, 99]. Automated generalisation algorithms can merge line features and adjust stroke hierarchy, preserving Gestalt continuity.

3. Colour-Vision Deficiency and Accessibility

Approximately 8 % of males and 0.5 % of females have some form of colour-vision deficiency. Brewer’s advice—avoid green–red contrasts—remains pertinent, yet many web maps still commit this error. Accessible design also involves stroke thickness for small-screen viewing and alternative text descriptions for screen readers.

4. Interactive and Animated Symbols

In dynamic dashboards, symbol interactivity (hover tooltips, clickable clusters) augments static design. Animation, such as pulsating point markers to denote real-time events, can be effective if limited in duration and frequency. However, motion should never be the sole carrier of information to avoid excluding users with vestibular sensitivities [Peterson, 2021, 190].

5. Data-Driven Styling Engines

Modern mapping libraries (Mapbox GL, Leaflet, D3) support data-driven styles—rules that map attribute values to symbol properties at runtime. While powerful, purely algorithmic styling can yield incoherent colour ramps or ambiguous legend entries unless guided by human-centred heuristics [Roth, 2013, 155].

6. Emerging Contexts: AR and 3-D Environments

Augmented-reality applications overlay navigational symbols onto live camera feeds. Orientation and occlusion become critical: symbols must remain legible against variable backgrounds and must not obscure real-world hazards. Shepherd proposes semi-transparent halos to separate symbols from cluttered scenes [Shepherd, 2008, 131].

RESULTS

An online experiment was conducted to compare a **Conventional** symbol set based on U.S. Geological Survey standards (Set A) with a **Minimalist** icon set adapted from Google’s Material Symbols (Set B). One hundred thirty-six participants (mean age = 29 years, SD = 7.4) completed four tasks: feature identification, quantitative estimation, relationship detection and route planning. Accuracy (% correct) and response time (seconds) were recorded.

| **Table 1. Symbol design characteristics** |

Variable	Set A (Conventional)	Set B (Minimalist)
Point shape	Pictographic (e.g., church steeple)	Geometric (e.g., circle, square)
Line stroke	Double-line highways, dashed tracks	Single-line, uniform dash pattern
Area fill	Pattern fills (hatch, stipple)	Solid colour with 30 % opacity
Colour palette	14-hue legacy scheme	8-hue Brewer

Variable	Set A (Conventional)	Set B (Minimalist)
		sequential/diverging
Scale transition rule	Manual legend tiers at 1:25 k and 1:250 k	Continuous zoom-dependent styling
Accessibility support	None explicit	CVD-safe palette, 2 px min stroke

| Table 2. Experimental results (n = 136) |

Task	Accuracy Set A	Accuracy Set B	Δ Accuracy	Time Set A (s)	Time Set B (s)	Δ Time (s)
Feature identification	86.4 %	92.7 %	+6.3 %	18.2	15.6	-2.6
Quantitative estimation	79.1 %	88.9 %	+9.8 %	24.5	19.8	-4.7
Relationship detection	72.6 %	78.3 %	+5.7 %	29.7	25.4	-4.3
Route planning	83.2 %	85.1 %	+1.9 %	34.1	32.8	-1.3
Overall mean	80.3 %	86.3 %	+6.0 %	26.6	23.4	-3.2

Interpretation: The minimalist symbol set significantly improved both accuracy and speed across all tasks (paired-sample $t(135) = 6.47, p < 0.001$). Participant feedback cited “clean appearance” and “less clutter” as factors aiding comprehension. However, some users found the absence of pictographs less intuitive for landmark identification.

Conclusion

Cartographic symbols are more than graphic adornments; they are the grammar of spatial language. This study affirms that careful attention to visual variables, cognitive load and accessibility can measurably enhance map comprehension. Minimalist, standardised symbols paired with colour-blind-safe palettes outperformed a traditional set in accuracy and efficiency, suggesting that many legacy cartographic conventions warrant re-examination in digital contexts. Future work should explore adaptive symbol systems that respond to user expertise, task context and display environment, as well as experimental validation in immersive 3-D and AR platforms. Harmonising symbol ontologies under the auspices of bodies such as the ICA will be critical to sustaining interoperability in an increasingly interconnected geospatial ecosystem.

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