# Signs

Icons
Indexes
Symbols

# Signs

Before we study the use of **icons**, **indexes**, and **symbols** in design we should take a step back and understand their meaning in relation to **signs**, a subcategory of **semiotics**.

Broadly speaking, semiotics is the interdisciplinary study of how various forms of communications are encoded with meaning—including, but not limited to, behavioral, verbal, and visual communication.

Signs, at their most basic, are a component of semiotics that provide an individual with content through sensory perception. A sign is anything that creates meaning or that can be used to represent something else. Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founders of semiotics, defined signs has having two parts, the signifier and the signified.

### Signifier

A signifier is the form of a sign. The form might be a sound, a word, a photograph, a facial expression, an illustration, and many others.

### Signified

The signified is the concept or object that a sign represents. A vacation destination, feeling happy, or a notice of danger.

# Icons, Indexes, and Symbols

Charles Sanders Peirce, the second founder of semiotics, took this categorization one step further by breaking down signifiers into one of three types: an icon, index, or symbol.

This may seem confusing at first, but It is important to understand that what we describe as an icon, such as on a website, is a sign but not necessarily an icon. For example, a menu icon is actually a symbol learned in context of site functionality but is not an actual icon. Notice, we are more likely to say *addition symbol* for the mark +, which is in fact, a symbol.

## Icon

An icon has a physical resemblance to the signified, the thing being represented, as with an illustration for example. An illustration of a automobile is an icon for an automobile.

## Index

An index shows evidence of what's being represented. For instance, using the palm of the hand to indicate stop. An index cannot exist without a connection between the signifier and the signified as the presence of the former implies the existence of the latter. For example, a weather graphic in the form of a sun, cloud, and rain drops is an index for a partly sunny day with a chance of rain.

## Symbol

A symbol has no resemblance between the signifier and the signified. The connection between them must be learned, just as with various alphabets. There's nothing inherent in the letter "A" to indicate what it represents. It is an arbitrary mark that has been given cultural significance with meaning that must first be learned.
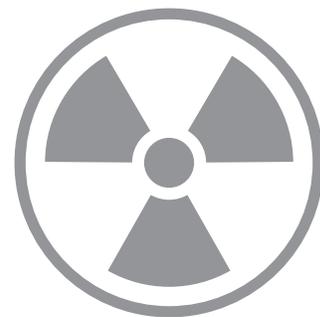
# Iconic Representation

The three types of signifiers as defined by Peirce have been expanded upon by Yvonne Rogers of the University College London's Interaction Centre. Though the names may conflict with icon, index, and symbol, their definitions are similar, if not more specific, and can aid in our understanding of how signs are used and perceived.

### Resemblance Icon (similar to icon)

A resemblance icon is a simple and direct likenesses of the object it represent. For example, a camera icon on a smartphone to signify a camera app.

### Exemplar Icon (similar to index)

An exemplar icon, more complex than resemblance icons, depicts a common example of the action, object, or concept being represented. The fork-knife pictograph representing restaurant, for example.

### Symbolic Icon (similar to index)

A symbolic icon conveys meaning at a higher level of abstraction than with an exemplar icon, and is best used when the actions, objects, or concepts being represented are well-established. Examples would be an image of a padlock for security, or a cracked wineglass to indicate something is fragile.

### Arbitrary Icons (similar to symbol)

An arbitrary icon has no relationship to an object or concept which it represents and its association must be learned. A computer on/off power button graphic is an example of an arbitrary icon.
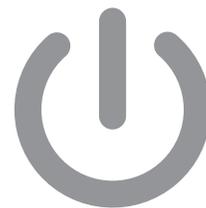
# Creating and Applying Signs

So, what does this all this mean for visual designers? To begin with, we should remain conscious of how we conceive of and utilize the signs we create. Who is the target audience? What will be the context of their use? Do they take advantage of commonly held conventions? Can meaning be inferred or will it need defining? These and many more questions must be assessed as we develop signs of all types from simple logos to complex design systems.

Secondly, we cannot assume that customers or audiences will interpret signs as we have conceived them to be read. It is our responsibility to research, develop, and use best practices in order to be sure the intended message is clear and the end user's experience is a positive one. There is nothing more frustrating to others when they cannot navigate their way through an application, make their way through a public center, or identify an organization by its logo.

| Icon | Index | Symbol |
|------|-------|--------|

## Common Passenger and Pedestrian Symbols