

Foundation Skill Series

Map Reading Skills



The first maps used in the U.S. were enhanced, two or three-color topographic maps with details added such as water (lakes and streams), rock features (cliffs and boulders) and vegetation boundaries. Now, most maps contain five colors, and in some cases six, and provide much greater information.

Brown: Land forms

Contour lines are indicated in brown. Differences in elevation of land forms are shown with a contour interval indicated in the margin of the map. Additional symbols are provided to show e.g., earth bank, knoll, depression, small depression, pit, broken ground, etc.

Black: Man-made objects

Black indicates man-made objects including roads, trails, power lines, stone walls, fences, buildings, etc. It can also be used to indicate boulders, boulder fields and clusters, etc., as well.

Blue: Water features

Blue represents lakes, ponds, rivers, water channels, marshes, wells, and any significant body of water.

Green / White / Yellow: Vegetation

This group of colors covers vegetation. Green means a forest of moderate thickness; the darker the green, the thicker the forest. White is typically open forest or open area. Yellow is used on some maps to show open areas. Green vertical stripes are used to indicate undergrowth.

Magenta and Pink: Updates

Magenta and pink are used on some maps to indicate updates or changes to the current version of the map made during the most recent re-survey or review of data, new construction or any changes in of bodies of water or prominent features since the last map publication.

