

# Traffic Signs & Traffic Lights

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Virtually everybody in the developed world frequently encounters traffic signs and lights. And, since road traffic crosses borders, there is a trend toward a significant amount of uniformity in these signs among the nations of the world. Certain shapes and colors of signs are “standard” or “uniform.” However, local and regional variations remain. This article will concentrate on the major types of traffic signage, many examples of which are nicely presented on postage stamps. (By the way, traffic signs are alternately referred to as highway or road signs, but the authors prefer to use traffic sign terminology.)

The main reason for displaying traffic signs on postage stamps is for traffic safety publicity campaigns, but a few stamps show traffic signs as part of traffic-related topics. Traffic signs can also be found as incidental parts of postal items covering many other unrelated topics. This article will present some of the better postal examples of traffic signs, giving the reader an overview of this commonly encountered but seldom explored topic.

## Traffic Sign Categories

Traffic signs can be categorized by type, but the categories are defined somewhat differently in Europe and the USA. But, generally, there are three main types of traffic signs: regulatory, warning, and guide. There are other types of signs as well for special uses, but this article focuses on the main types of traffic signs which are most often encountered on highways or roads almost everywhere in the world.

The first category, regulatory signs, can be further subdivided into three types of signs: priority (mainly stop and yield signs), mandatory (which tell drivers what they must do), and prohibitory (which tell drivers what they must not do). These types of signs will be covered by giving examples as found on postal items from countries worldwide. The authors have found more than 700 postal items showing traffic signs from at least 75 countries. Only postal items with the best and clearest examples will be shown in this article, leaving the more subtle and less apparent items for the reader to explore on the authors’ website noted at the end of this article.

## Stop Signs

One of the unique traffic sign shapes is the octagonal stop sign, which is found in most countries with few exceptions. This priority sign requires drivers to stop, giving priority to other traffic before proceeding.

Red is by far the most common stop sign color, but a white or yellow background is allowed in some countries. There is also a white border around the red background for the stop signs in most countries. While the white STOP



Figure 1. Central African Republic - 1975 (Scott 232)



Figure 2. West Germany - 1971 (Scott 1056)



Figure 3. Argentina - 2007 (Scott 2440)



Figure 4. Uruguay - 1989 (Scott 2393)



Figure 5. Turkey - 1987 (Scott 2369)

legend in the center is the most common wording, it may be replaced by equivalent words in other languages or even by a pictogram (such as the palm of a raised hand in Israel, an example of which will be shown before the stop sign topic is complete).

The first postage stamp examples of stop signs are English-language octagon-shape red-with-white-border “STOP” signs from Central Africa (Figure 1) and West Germany (Figure 2). The Central Africa stamp was issued in 1975 as part of a set of stamps displaying many traffic signs. The West German stamp was issued as part of two sets of stamps issued to publicize new traffic rules that took effect in 1971.

For another example of a stop sign, a stamp design from Argentina (Figure 3) uses a red center and white border and the octagonal shape for Road Safety Year, with a “PAREMOS” legend, meaning, literally, “let’s stop” or “we stop.” The stamp design also displays an overturned vehicle to convey what might happen by failing to stop. The “PARE” (stop) sign on a self-adhesive stamp from Uruguay (Figure 4) was issued in 1989 for their National Road Safety Union. Spanish legends on red octagonal stop signs are standard in South America. Another example is a postage stamp from Turkey issued in 1987 for road safety (Figure 5). The word “DUR” in Turkish is “stop” in English. The red octagonal sign with a white border is placed on a tilted and broken wine glass to signify the connection between drinking alcohol and automobile accidents.

As promised, an example of the unusual style of stop sign used in Israel, with the palm of a raised hand in place of the word ‘stop,’ is found as part of the pictorial cancel on a first day cover (Figure 6) for an otherwise comical set of traffic safety stamps. This type of stop sign was not found on any postage stamps, only in this black-and-white cancel. Note, however, that the stop sign still employs the octagonal shape, which is almost universal around the word.

Before leaving stop signs, an example is provided to illustrate an important feature of the octagonal stop sign shape. The 8-sided stop sign can be recognized by drivers or pedestrians facing the back of the sign. The octagon shape lets them know that oncoming or cross-traffic drivers are seeing a stop sign. A Road Safety Council stamp from Swaziland (Figure 7) shows only the back of a stop sign, but pedestrians can see that drivers should stop. But “STOP” is also written on the road surface as a secondary indication of the command to stop, but that writing does not replace the need for a roadside stop sign.



Figure 6. Israel first day cover - 1997 (Scott 1308-1310)

### Triangular Yield Signs

The yield sign is another type of priority sign. Almost universally, the yield sign has a triangular shape with the vertex of the equilateral triangle pointing down (as opposed to pointing up for warning signs to be covered in the next section). Also called “Give Way” signs, these yield signs are used at road intersections to indicate that a driver must be prepared to stop if necessary for drivers on another approach.

A stamp issued by Surinam in 2002 (Figure 8) shows the international standard yield sign with no legend inside the red-border triangle (ignore the two other partial signs on this item). The yield command is inherent in the downward-pointing triangular design and red border on a white background. However, some countries insert the word “YIELD” inside the triangle or an equivalent word in other languages. This stamp was issued as part of a set of postage stamps depicting several types of traffic signs.

Another good example of an international yield sign is from East Germany (again, ignore the two other types of signs on this item) and is from a set of traffic safety stamps issued in 1966 (Figure 9). Besides these two postal items, the authors have found few other examples of downward-pointing triangular yield signs; the others are much smaller depictions or are included as part of postal items showing many different types of traffic signs.



Figure 7. Swaziland - 2005 (Scott 738)



Figure 8. Surinam - 2002 (Scott 1268)



Figure 9. East Germany - 1966 (Scott 821)



Figure 10. West Germany - 1971  
(Scott 1060)

## Triangular Warning Signs

We cover warning signs next because their triangular shape is similar to yield signs, but with the triangle pointing up rather than pointing down, as in yield signs. These triangular warning signs are used to get the attention of drivers, warning them about various changes in road conditions. Warning signs have a white background with a red border in many countries. These red-border signs are found on many postal items, with some better examples to follow.



Figure 11. Luxembourg - 1970  
(Scott 488)

A West German postage stamp issued in 1971 to publicize new traffic rules (Figure 10) shows a general warning sign that was set up on the side of the road to warn of a stalled car ahead. The black vertical bar in the center may be replaced by symbols appropriate for other types of road hazards, such as intersections or merging traffic, or any number of things worthy of caution or warning for drivers. A postage stamp from Luxembourg issued in 1970 (Figure 11) shows the same generic warning sign found on the first stamp, but this time it is mounted on a signpost to indicate a congested pedestrian and road traffic area.



Figure 12. Spain - 1993  
(Scott 2693)

Warning signs are the most common type of traffic sign found on postal items. That's probably due to the wide variety of warning signs, with various warning messages inside the triangle. So, to find a blank-center warning sign is somewhat unusual. Such a sign is found on a stamp from Spain issued in 1993 for road safety (Figure 12). The blank sign is a generic warning message for motorists to be careful. On the other hand, an excellent example of a red-border triangular warning sign with a specific purpose (to warn of cross traffic from an intersecting road ahead) is found on a West German stamp from 1971 (Figure 13).



Figure 13. West Germany - 1971  
(Scott 1056)

A warning sign with an X-type intersection is found on a stamp issued in 1975 by Central African Republic (Figure 14). Note this sign's yellow central background, whereas most warning signs have a white background. For a different type of warning, a stamp from Surinam from 2003 (Figure 15) shows a traffic sign that indicates a steep grade ahead. Most such grade indications are associated with downhill sections of road, but for this one, the grade is inclined upward (from left to right). Ten percent is quite a steep grade for most roads.

A non-traffic use of a warning sign, with an exclamation mark in the center, is found on a German stamp (Figure 16) issued in 2000 for the 50th anniversary of Technisches Hilfswerk, a civil protection organization consisting primarily of volunteers. The word "einsatz" below the sign



Figure 14. Central African Republic - 1975 (Scott 235)



Figure 15. Surinam - 2003 (Scott 1301)



Figure 16. Germany - 2000 (Scott 2091)



Figure 17. Russia - 2009 (Scott 7184)



Figure 18. Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus - 2013 (Scott 739)

means “at work,” signifying the organization’s commitment to helping in times of need. This is just one example of a traffic sign used for a non-traffic purpose on a postal item. Many other examples of warning signs can be found in the authors’ online list.

One more type of warning sign is provided to show that not all have red borders, nor are they all on a triangular backing. The pedestrian-crossing sign on a Russian postal item (Figure 17) from 2009 is a white triangle on a blue background. The triangular style is indicative of warning signs in most countries of the world despite their color. The pedestrian-crossing sign is depicted as knocked down with a tire-tread pattern over the sign, indicating that an automobile ran over the sign. Interestingly, a similar knocked-down sign is shown on a Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus stamp from 2003 (Figure 18). This sign is a white triangle on a red background, and the tread pattern is slightly offset from that on the first sign!

### Diamond-shaped warning signs

Although less common than triangular warning signs on postal items, diamond-shaped warning signs are used on roads and found on postal items, mainly from North and South America. These warning signs most often have black printing on a yellow background. One example, a stamp from Canada issued in 1966 (Figure 19), shows four black-on-yellow diamond-shaped signs, most with arrows indicating the road direction, bends in the road, or an upcoming intersection. These yellow-diamond signs are common in the USA as well. (Ignore the 5-sided pedestrian crossing sign on this stamp.)



Figure 19. Canada Scott 447 Michel 391 (1966)

A diamond-shaped warning sign issued by Uruguay in 1967 shows a railroad crossing sign (Figure 20). The stamp was issued for the 10th Pan-American Highway



Figure 20. Uruguay Scott C331  
Michel 1107 (1967)

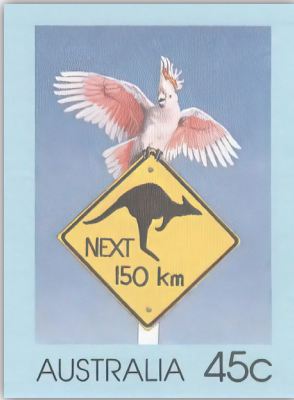


Figure 21. Australia printed  
stamp from aerogramme - 1985



Figure 22. Peru - 2008  
(Scott 1657)



Figure 23. Surinam - 2002  
(Scott 1275)



Figure 24. Central African Republic -  
1975 (Scott 233)

Congress. In the middle of the sign, the railroad track-like symbol with points on top of the railroad ties indicates a gated crossing, with the symbol looking somewhat like a picket fence. The sign would warn of an un-gated crossing if the railroad ties were squared-off on both top and bottom. Railroad crossing signs are used when the road is at the same grade as the track, but not for a bridge or an underpass.

An interesting example of a black-on-yellow warning sign is a printed stamp used on a set of aerogrammes issued by Australia in 1985 (Figure 21). Australia, like much of the Americas, uses this type of warning sign. (The bird sitting on top of the sign is part of the aerogramme design.) Such warning signs for various types of animal crossings are common on roads in much of the world. Several examples of diamond-shaped warning signs are found on a stamp issued by Peru in 2008 for a campaign to obey traffic signs (Figure 22). These warning signs are mainly road direction signs, but there are also others, such as pedestrian and animal crossing signs, a slick-road warning sign, and a tunnel-ahead sign (in the lower middle).

### Round regulatory signs

In addition to the stop and yield priority signs, there are two other types of regulatory signs, most often encountered as round signs (or round designs on a rectangular background) with a red border around the circle. The two are the mandatory and prohibitory types: those requiring motorists to do something and those restricting what motorists can do. The difference between the two is most often the addition of an angled red bar or slash across the circle, an increasingly common universal symbol for a prohibited action, even in non-traffic applications.

Next are two postal item examples of red-border circular regulatory signs. The first one is a mandatory (or allowed) U-turn sign on a stamp issued by Surinam in 2002. The second one is a prohibitory no-parking sign from Central African Republic issued in 1975, with the red slash indicating a prohibited action.

These red-border circular signs can carry a variety of regulatory messages. One of the most essential types of regulatory messages is the speed limit. A 1989 self-adhesive postage stamp from Uruguay (Figure 24) displays a 45 km/h speed limit. This type of red-border circular speed limit sign is common throughout most of the world except in the USA and Canada.

A stamp from Niger issued in 1986 (Figure 25) has a red-border circular sign with just “60” in the center, which is the speed limit in kilometers per hour (km/h). Since nearly all countries of the world use the metric system, the speed limit units are often implied or understood to be in metric units. (Britain is about the only country other than the USA not to use metric speed-limit signs). This type of red-border circular sign is not used for speed limits in the USA, where speeds are in miles per hour, or in Canada, even though road speeds are in kilometers per hour as it is in most of the world. In the US and Canada, speed limit signs use black lettering on a white rectangular background. The authors have found only one such (55 mph) speed limit sign on a Disney-themed postal item from St. Vincent (which can be seen on the authors’ website).

Another example of a red-border circular speed limit sign is seen on a stamp from Argentina issued in 1981. In this case, the speed limit is noted as “80 km”, using the “km” symbol for kilometers, which is only a distance, but the sign implies a speed of 80 km per hour. The next postal example from Greece issued in 1986 shows all or parts of five red-border circular speed-limit signs, all with implied units of kilometers per hour (km/h).

## Rectangular Guide Signs

A clear example of one type of guide or informational sign is a rectangular hospital sign on a USA stamp from 1986 honoring public hospitals. These “H” signs help direct motorists to the nearest hospital or emergency room. The rectangular shape is the default shape for many other types of guide or informational signs, unlike the distinct octagonal, triangular, and round traffic sign shapes already discussed.

Another good example of a guide or informational sign is found on a stamp issued by the Netherlands in 1994 for the 100th anniversary of the first traffic signs placed by a Dutch motoring association. Route-number signs are common on major highways in many countries. On this stamp, the “A100” is made up and is not a valid route number in the Netherlands. Private interests were the first to place road signs in many countries, such as the American Automobile Association (AAA) in the USA and the CAA in Canada. Those signs were later taken over by state or federal government traffic departments and paid for at taxpayer expense.



Figure 24. Uruguay - 1989 (Scott 2397)



Figure 25. Niger - 1986 (Scott 732)



Figure 26. Argentina - 1981 (Scott 1331)



Figure 27. Greece - 1986 (Scott 1567)



Figure 28. United States - 1986  
(Scott 2210)



Figure 28. Netherlands - 1994  
(Scott 864)

There are many other examples of guide or informational signs, but it is beyond the scope of this article to cover more of them. Readers are encouraged to check the authors' website for all such signs that have been found on postal items.

### Summary Table of Traffic Sign Categories

Now that the main types of traffic signs have been covered and examples have been given, a summary table of the major traffic sign types is provided. The table is a highly simplified list of traffic sign types and their most common colors and shapes. Although these are the most common types, variations occur around the world, but there is a trend toward more uniform colors and shapes of signs. It helps when cross-border or international travelers are familiar with traffic signs because they are standard or uniform, making travel by road safer as a result of already knowing the meaning of these traffic signs.

Other traffic sign designs or design variations can be found on postage stamps. In some cases, there are many signs on a single stamp, such as in a stamp issued by North Korea in 1987 (Figure 29) from a set of road safety stamps. Since the authors' website does not provide all the details of each sign on this postal item, readers interested in the exact meaning of each sign are encouraged to look online, where many websites have traffic sign details. Some of these signs are used in more than one country, while other types vary worldwide. Even though there is increasing standardization taking place (in both traffic signs and metric system use), there remain differences among countries or blocks of countries, just as there are differences in which side of the road (right-hand or left-hand) is used to drive (a topic that was previously covered by one of the authors; see the references at the end of this article).

Table 1. Summary Table of Traffic Sign Categories

Category	Sub-category	(Color and) Shape
Regulatory	Priority (stop or yield)	(red) octagonal, or (red-border or black-on-yellow) downward-pointing triangular
	Mandatory (must do)	(red-border) circular
	Prohibitory (must not do)	(red-border) circular with (red) slash
Warning (danger)		(red-border) upward-pointing triangular, or (black-on-yellow) diamond-shaped
Guide (informational)		rectangular

**Traffic lights**

To conclude the traffic sign topic, one of the more common traffic regulatory devices is the traffic light. Although depicted on many postal items, the traffic light is often found as only a small feature in a stamp design. One of the simplest traffic light depictions is seen on an East German traffic safety campaign stamp from 1969 (Figure 30). As on this stamp, the traffic light is most commonly encountered in a vertical design. In that configuration, the red light (for stop) is on top, followed by the yellow light in the middle, and then the green light (for go) on the bottom. These are the most common colors, but there are some less-common color variations in different parts of the world, such as a blue light instead of green light (for go). Another example of a vertical-design traffic light is found on a stamp from Qatar issued for Traffic Day in 1967 (Figure 31). The Traffic Day date is not given but is noted as May 4 on stamps issued for Traffic Day by other Middle Eastern countries.



Figure 29. North Korea - 1987 (Scott 2638)



Figure 30. East Germany - 1969 (Scott 1082)



Figure 31. Qatar - 1967 (Scott 124)



Figure 32. Chile - 1996 (Scott 1163c)



Figure 33. Italy - 1957 (Scott 725)

In the vertical traffic light design, the red light is purposely placed on top to make the stop position the most visible or distantly seen part of the traffic light. This has become universal worldwide and is also seen on the traffic light on a stamp issued by Chile in 1996 (Figure 32). So, when red is not found on top, it is assumed to be a design error in the depiction of a traffic light. Such an error is found on the vertical traffic light on a stamp issued by Italy in 1957 (Figure 33). On that stamp, the red is at the bottom, and the two other light colors are not added but remain green like the background color of the



Figure 34. Japan - 1967  
(Scott 910)

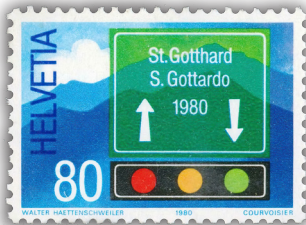


Figure 35. Switzerland - 1980  
(Scott 693)




Figure 36. Egypt - 1989 (Scott 1406)



Figure 37. Kuwait - 1968 (Scott 395)

stamp. This is likely part of the artistic design of the stamp and not a traffic light reality in Italy.

Some traffic lights are aligned horizontally, in which case the red light is placed closest to the inside of the road (next to opposing traffic), and the green light is placed on the outside of the road. A stamp from Japan issued in 1967 has red on the right, which is the inside of the road for left-hand driving (Figure 34). The colors would be swapped with red on the left for a horizontal traffic light in a right-hand driving country. Such an example is found on a stamp from Switzerland issued in 1980 (Figure 35), which depicts a horizontal traffic light used to control one-way traffic through the St. Gotthard Tunnel. Europeans drive on the right, except for England, so the red light is on the left, or inside, of the road.

Finally, although traffic lights are intended for automobiles, they may also facilitate pedestrian movement and special pedestrian crossing lights may be found. In many large cities, pedestrian crossing signs are common, as shown in a stamp from Egypt issued in 1989 with both green and red traffic lights and green “walk” and red “don’t walk” lights on the same posts (Figure 36). Also found on a few postal items from Middle Eastern countries are pedestrian-crossing devices that are lighted globes placed on each side of the street. These globes light up at night based on their “glow,” as depicted in a stamp from Kuwait (Figure 37). This stamp is from a set issued for Traffic Day, specifically noted as “May 4 1968” on the stamp. 

### Authors' Online Traffic Sign Postal Items Page

An up-to-date checklist of postal items showing Traffic Signs (and Traffic Lights) on postal items is available online at (<http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/traffic-signs.htm>). The third author of this article also recently updated the “Traffic Safety” checklist for the American Topical Association. That list includes postal items that show traffic signs and lights (all the items covered here) and other traffic-related items that do not show traffic signs.

### Related References of Interest

Hillger, D.W. and L.F. Sokol, 1988: The modern metric system on postage stamps, *Journal of Chemical Education*, 65(5), (May), 384-387. Most countries have publicized their adoption of the metric system through the use of postage stamps.

Hillger, D.W., 1991: Standards on postage stamps, *ASTM Standardization News*, 19(6), (June), 52-61. Including right-hand and left-hand driving customs or changes in those customs, as found on postal items from around the world.

### About the Authors

The authors have researched and written extensively on the subjects of weather, climate, unmanned satellites on stamps and covers, as well as other topics. For a complete list and electronic reproductions of their publications, see <http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/stamp-articles.htm>. Email correspondence with the authors is welcome using the addresses below.

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