

The symbols of graduation

After many years of time spent toiling classrooms and study halls, many students welcome graduation. Graduating high school or college is a major milestone. It is associated with many symbols that have endured for some time. As graduates prepare to receive their diplomas or degrees, they might be curious to know what's behind some notable symbols of graduation ceremonies.

- **Gown:** The gown is a customary garment worn on graduation day. The Georgia Institute of Technology says gowns historically were heavy robes worn by medieval scholars for warmth in the largely unheated universities. Today, graduates don gowns not for warmth (as most graduation ceremonies take place in the spring and summer), but to symbolize the level of degree being conferred.

- **Cap:** A cap, also known as a mortarboard, often goes hand-in-hand with a graduation gown. Historians surmise the flat, square shape represents either a mason's mortarboard to symbolize hard work. Others say it may be the shape of a book to signify academic achievement.

- **Tassel:** The turning of the tassel is a relatively modern tradition. The tassel, which is attached to the mortarboard, initially was an ornament but has since evolved into a traditional element. The Honor Society says the practice of moving the tassel from one side of the cap to the other symbolizes completion of this important academic milestone. Typically, graduates move the tassel from the right to the left. The right side represents the student being a candidate, while the left means he or she is now a graduate. While some sources date the tradition to the early 1900s, the current tradition has been traced to the 1960s

and 1970s.

- **Cords and stoles:** Graduates may adorn their graduation garb with other elements. Cords are twisted ropes that often represent high grade point averages or participation in honor societies. Stoles are satin scarves that often denote participation in specific organizations or a student's cultural heritage, according to the University of Colorado Boulder.

- **Diploma:** A diploma is a legal document. Historically, diplomas were written on thin sheepskin and rolled into tubes. Students may receive a prop diploma on graduation day or empty diploma folio. Later on the actual document will be mailed or made available for pickup.

- **Rings:** Some graduates have opted to purchase class rings. Students will often wear the ring with the school name facing them while still a student. Upon graduation, the ring will be turned so the name faces outward, presenting the completed coursework to the world.

- **Commencement speech:** The word "commencement" means "beginning," which is fitting for a graduation ceremony. Instead of marking the end of something, commencement is for students who are about to start a new chapter.

Graduation rituals and symbols have endured through the ages, and are likely something students and their families will encounter as they prepare for the ceremony to come.

