

# How to read a brand

*Brands are read from left to right or top to bottom, flying or hanging*

The branding iron dates as far back as ancient Egyptian times. Egyptians branded their horses and cattle to prove ownership. Brands were later used in Roman times to brand slaves. In the early 1800s, the brand was introduced to Americans by travelers from Spain. At this time, the brand was mainly used by the vaquero cowboy, who would brand his cattle with a certain symbol or mark. His neighbors would do the same. Then, the neighboring cattle would graze the same area during the summer months. Their owners quickly learned that it was much easier to round up the cattle and prove ownership when the cattle were branded.

In those days, brands were heated over an open flame. Of course, today's cowboys can select from a number of options that provide a consistent temperature and heat source, like electric branding irons or propane torches that are also easily transportable. Freeze branding is also a legal proof of ownership in North Dakota and an option for branding. The liquid nitrogen or denatured alcohol and dry ice is used to cool branding irons, which can then be applied to the animal's hide. Rather than burning the skin, freeze branding alters the natural pigmentation of the animal's hair, making the hair of the branded area grow back white.

It is hard to tell when it happened, but, over time, brands developed a language of their own and brand inspectors are still required to read brands in "brand-abetical" order — left to right, top to bottom. Reading a brand in this format is fairly easy, once you learn the language.

At its most basic, a livestock brand is composed of a few simple letters and numbers, possibly in combination with a basic shape or symbols, such as a slash (/), circle (O), half-circle (C), cross (+) and bar (-). But these characters can also be embellished. Each character can also be rotated or reversed. Every addition and variation results in a unique character that is named accordingly.

The vast array of combinations made possible by these characters and variations ensures that unique and identifiable brands can be created — without repetition — using only limited formal language.

Rotations are just one way brand letters can be modified. Multiple symbols may be joined together forming a type of ligature — a term used in typography to describe a single character representing two or more letters together. Brands with multiple figures or letters are read from the outside in. North Dakota law prohibits the NDSA from registering brands with symbols inside



**H L Straight  
Away**



**H L Monogram**



**Reverse L H**



**Reverse L H  
Monogram**



**H L Stacked**



**H L Stacked  
Monogram**



**H Flying L**



**H Hanging L**



**L Hanging H**





of symbols. However, those that were registered prior to 1951 can continue to be registered.

In the brand book, brands are arranged alphabetically under letters, symbols and numerals in the following order:

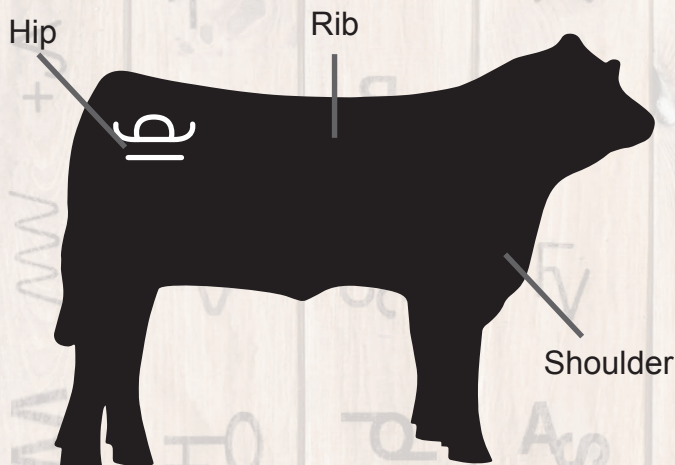
- Bar under
- Quarter circle under
- Bar over
- Quarter circle over
- Bars at side
- Slash
- Cross
- Diamond
- Triangle
- Box
- Heart
- Star
- Arrow
- Mill iron

When it comes to getting your brand approved, location is as important as the design. Because of their intersecting lines, brands containing Bs, 8s and Rs are most susceptible to blotching because there is so much heat concentrated in a small area. Therefore, select brands carefully. What looks nice on paper may not look nice in practice. The same brand can be registered more than once in the state as long as its located on a different location of the animal or a different species.

Some brands are more difficult to read than others.

Throughout the years, brands have been a source of family pride and, today, many folks are not only using them as the return-address for their livestock, but they're adding the mark to all sorts of property, like woodcrafts, apparel, luggage or even grilled steaks.

Current North Dakota brands expire Jan. 1, 2026. Contact the NDSA brand recorder at (701) 223-2522 or [brands@ndstockmen.org](mailto:brands@ndstockmen.org)



Hip, rib and shoulder brands are available on cattle. Neck, face and jaw brands are also available on other species.

	are listed as "7"
	are listed as "L"
	are listed as "M"
	are listed as "W"
	are listed as "A"
	are listed as "V"
	are listed under the letter "A"
	are listed under the letter "C"
	are listed under the letter "I"
	are listed under the letter "O"

### Brand position abbreviations

First letter:	Second letter:	Third letter:
L - left R - right	H - hip R - rib S - shoulder J - jaw N - neck F - face	C - cattle H - horse M - mule SH - sheep G - goat SW - swine B - buffalo