What is a symbol? In works of literature and art, have you ever noticed how some characters, events, or objects take on a meaning beyond just what they appear to be? For example, a rose might not just be a flower; it might also represent love. An owl is not just a bird, but wisdom. The nature of a symbol is that it functions to express a larger idea or truth.

In this activity, you’ll learn more about symbols by studying examples from The Golden Compass, a classic fantasy novel by Philip Pullman. Read through some highlights of this book below, and then answer the questions that follow.

Story Highlights from The Golden Compass:
• Tells the story of 12-year-old Lyra Belacqua, an orphan who becomes aware of many parallel worlds that exist in the universe—and the dangers that her own world is facing.
• Symbols in Lyra’s world help her find her way.
• In Lyra’s world, a person’s soul lives on the outside of his or her body, in the form of a daemon—an animal spirit that accompanies the person through life.
• A child’s daemon can change shape—going, for example, from a cat to a dog to a lizard.
• As a person ages, his or her daemon settles into one form, according to that person’s character and nature. For example, a person with a dog daemon would tend to follow authority, whereas one with a cat daemon would tend to be more independent.
• As Lyra attempts to save her world, she uses a device known as an alethiometer. Also known as the golden compass, the alethiometer seeks out, instead of true north, truth itself.
• The face of the alethiometer is divided into 36 arcane symbols, each of which may convey many different meanings, in combination with any of the others. By setting the dials, one can ask any question imaginable.

Questions:
1. Why do you think a child’s daemon can change shape, but an adult’s daemon has only one form?
2. What kind of personality would you expect someone with a leopard daemon to have? What about a monkey? Do further research to find out the different symbolic meanings animals have in different cultures.
3. Why do you think animals appear as symbols in many different cultures?
4. In The Golden Compass, Lyra has to learn to “read” the alethiometer by interpreting its symbols. What are instances in the real world where pictorial symbols are used to represent words?
5. How might the alethiometer itself be considered a symbol?