

Getting to Know Your Coins

Coin collectors seem to have a language all their own when it comes to describing the features of their coins. Each part of a coin's design has a distinct name. Getting to know the proper name for each part will help you describe your coins to other collectors.

A Coin's Sides

Coins have three sides: front, back and edge. The front side of a coin is known as the *obverse*. This side is often called the "heads" side because many coins throughout history have depicted a person on their obverse.

The back side of a coin is called the *reverse* or "tails" side. The reverse of a coin often has a design that is symbolic of the country that issued it. For example, the obverse of the US five cent coin (or nickel) features a portrait of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. The reverse of the coin features the home of Jefferson – Monticello – which has become a famous US landmark.

The third side of a coin is its edge. On a US dime, quarter or half dollar, the edge is "reeded" which refers to the grooves that are struck into the coin. The US cent (or penny) and nickel have a plain (smooth) edge. Current US dollar coins – the coins that feature a former president or a Native American theme – have "lettered" edges, which is the name for an edge that features words, numbers and/or other symbols.

A coin's edge should not be confused with its *rim*. The rim is the portion of either the obverse or reverse of a coin that is closest to its edge. The rims on US coins are raised; this helps protect each coin's design.

Do you have examples of the coins listed above? If you do, take them out and compare their edges.

A Coin's Designs

Coins almost always have a design on their obverse (front) and reverse (back). Most times, these designs "stick up" from the flat surfaces of the coin. If you look at the obverse of a US quarter, you'll notice that the portrait of George Washington is raised up from the surface of the coin. The word *relief* is used to describe the parts of a coin's design that are raised. The flat surfaces of a coin are referred to as its *fields*. If a design is sunk into or below the field, it is referred to as *incuse*.

A Coin's Words, Numbers and Letters

Coins feature a variety of words, numbers and individual letters as parts of their overall design. These are referred to as the coin's *inscriptions*. There are different names for each type of inscription.

Words that refer to the nation that issued the coin or to its denomination (or value) are called *legends*. On US coins, the inscriptions "United States of America" and "One Cent" or "Five Cents" (or any other denomination) are its legends.

Inscriptions such as "In God We Trust," "E Pluribus Unum" and "Liberty" are called *mottoes*. A motto is a word or phrase that has important cultural meaning within the country that struck the coin.

The numbers on a coin usually represent a date, either the date the coin was struck or a commemorative date tied to the person, place or event being honored by the coin. Numbers are also sometimes used to identify the coin's denomination or "face value."

The single letters "P" "D" "S" or "W" on US coins are *mintmarks*. A mintmark identifies which mint facility struck the coin.

Time to Explore

To help you master the different terms described here, get out some coins from your collection – it doesn't matter if they are US coins or coins from other countries – and use the definitions above to identify each of the coin's features.

You can also use the pictures of the Kennedy half dollar on the next page to practice.

Once you get used to calling each of the parts of a coin by its correct name, you'll be able to accurately describe your coins to collectors anywhere!

Name the Coin Parts



Image courtesy of www.usmint.gov.