

# Metro signage

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OK, DC Metro riders and tourists: you are in downtown DC, say the Archives stop, and you have to get to National Airport. Hint: it's in Virginia. As you come down the escalator, you see a train on the Fort Totten track. Do you run for it?

Of course, the answer is no. You need the Huntington line, because Huntington is a small township in Virginia (pop 8,300), several kilometers South of the airport. Fort Totten was a Civil War-era border fort; its location on today's map would be in DC but near Maryland. So you need Huntington.

Nobody cares about the terminus of a train line. OK, sometimes they do, like when a subway line ends at an airport or a train line ends at Chicago. But a healthy city train line crosses a city so thoroughly that its ends are out in the suburbs or country, where few people really know what's there. The center is the well-known and focal part, and yet subway lines are identified by the outskirts at either end. Even if the line ends at Wonderland, people still can't necessarily find that on a map.

The problem is endemic to virtually every subway line out there. Perhaps it's an effort to pretend that the subway line is really a full-blown train: when jumping cities, I don't take the Southbound train, I take the Penn Line to Washington from Perryville. I'd have no idea where Perryville is, but that I once screwed up and took the Penn Line from Washington to Perryville by mistake. [It's really beautiful up there.]

Here are things that people do care about: Northbound. Southeast. Via downtown. Transfer to the Green line. If you're a Londonder, then you know the only line out there that doesn't name directions by the endpoints: the circle line, which has no choice but to go clockwise and counterclockwise. [One eve, bored and entirely lacking any money, I just rode the circle line most of the night. I read a textbook on UNIX and eventually fell asleep, which led to my eventually winding up out at a suburban terminus, when the train switched lines and I didn't know. And that's why I'm a computer geek today.]

¿Is it because the terminus is unchanging, while directions like *via downtown* change depending on location? No, because the terminus can change too. Some trains consistently have a spur for the especially far-flung stations, so every other train in one direction on one track has a different name. The DC Red line is Shady Grove / Grovesvenor on one end to Silver Spring / Glenmont on the other. So if your mnemonic is by first initials, you're as badly off as can be.

About an hour ago as I write this, I was in Metro Center, looking at the board listing the arrivals of trains, checking to see which train I should take, and up came *Fr Heights*, arriving in 1 minute. DC residents can take me up on this quick geography test: there are three lines that go through Metro Center, none of which have a terminus

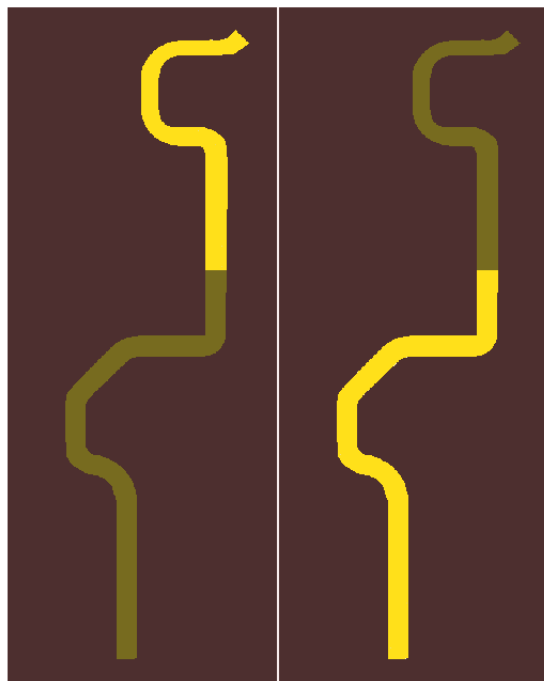


Figure 1: The yellow line in two directions. Can you tell which you need to go from your current stop in DC to get to Virginia?

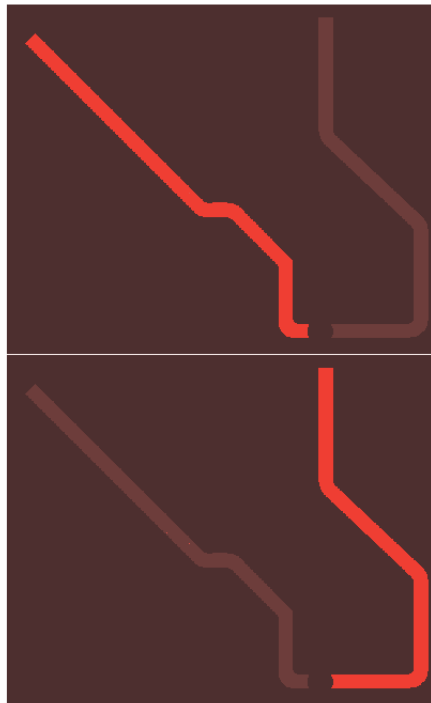


Figure 2: An hour ago, I was at Metro Center, and needed the next train East. That would be the one on the bottom.

at Fr Heights, so ¿which train is arriving in 1 minute? ¿How quickly can you scan the 86 stations on the full Metro map to find out?

**Graphics** On to the graphics problem, which is that there are none. Metro markers meant to be read in a half-second, like pylons by the escalators or signs on station walls designed to be read from a still-moving train, typically give routes as a list of names with no real context. You are at the top of the list, and the train is going down the list, whether the train is actually going North or South. The idea of a You Are Here tag at the bottom of the list that then works its way up was evidently too high-concept.

Meanwhile, the metro map is the informal logo of the transit system, and is displayed ten times at every station and on every train. Every tourist starts his or her trip by giving it an eyeing for a minute or two, and the basic shape of the odd lines like the Red or Blue take little study to quickly recognize.

So let me kibbitz. Let's say that the Washington Metro doesn't want to use terms

like *Northbound*, *Southbound*, or *via Downtown DC* to describe the directions of the Red Line, which it evidently doesn't. Figure Two offers another means of representing the same information, recognizable in half a second from a moving train. If you have even a tenth of a clue, having a diagram like Figures One or Two on a pylon would immediately tell you if you're going the right way.

I like the graphics approach partly because routes like the Red Line do not have a true Northbound or Southbound, but its twistiness is exactly what makes the graphic in Figure Two immediately recognizable.

If you have a long enough line, then it ends in the suburbs or an edge-of-nowhere rural area. That's healthy and good. But it's just plain fiction to assume that everybody involved, including tourists here for the day, are familiar with the geography of such far-flung locations. Please, Metro planners: use descriptors that are descriptive, like simple graphics, compass directions, or at the least hint as to whether a train is going North or South. Neither commuters nor tourists know what it means that a train is heading toward Branch Avenue or Franconia-Springfield. Terminus names are useless.