

Secret Messages Through History

Mediterranean Hall

Educators Guide and Lesson Plan created by Kay Shields,
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Grade Level

3rd Grade

Time Required

60 minutes

Supplies/Materials Needed

- Caesar cipher decoder printed on cardstock
- Paper fasteners
- Posters with example codes to teach the students how to use the cipher
- Worksheets with codes to break
- Plain notebook paper
- Pencils

Standards

3rd Grade SS TEKS

3.1(A)

3rd Grade RLA TEKS

3.11, 3.12, 3.1, 3.7

Key Vocabulary

Code – a system used to change or hide a message

Cipher – a code that changes letters or symbols according to a rule

Essential Question(s)

- Why have people used secret codes throughout history?
- How can writers communicate information using symbols and codes?
- How does decoding information help us understand history?

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Learn how codes and secret messages have been used throughout history.
- Create and decode simple secret messages.
- Write a coded message using complete sentences.
- Explain why coded communication was important in historical events.

Pre-Museum Visit

Direct Instruction: Historical Background

Say: Throughout history, people have needed to send information across distances. Sometimes they wanted only the intended receiver to understand it. A messenger might be stopped, or a written message might be found. Codes helped protect important information.

Say: People have used codes when they did not want an enemy or an unauthorized person to understand a message. Codes have been used by governments, military groups, spies, and ordinary people. During World War II, for example, Navajo Code Talkers used the Navajo language to transmit important military messages.

Keep the history discussion focused on **communication, language, problem-solving, and service**. Explain that Navajo was not merely a puzzle invented for a game; it was a living Indigenous language used by Navajo service members

Encode – to change an ordinary message into code

Decode – to change a coded message back into ordinary language

Key – the rule or guide that explains a code

Messenger – a person who carries information from one place to another

Evidence – details that support an answer or idea

within a specialized military communication system. There are alphabet-number substitutions and letter-shift ciphers as well. *Teach students specifically about the Caesar cipher.

Museum Visit

Mediterranean Hall

Introduction: Look at the hieroglyphics. Have students examine them to see if they can understand the message they might be communicating. Look at the Rosetta Stone.

Say: The Rosetta Stone, uncovered in 1799, was the key to unlocking the mystery of Egyptian hieroglyphics. It contained the same message written in three scripts: Greek, Demotic (a language used by everyday Egyptians), and hieroglyphics. Because scholars could read Greek, they compared the texts and realized they all said the same thing. This breakthrough allowed researchers to finally decipher hieroglyphics and better understand ancient Egyptian civilization.

Direct Instruction: Caesar Cipher Decoder

Say: The Caesar Cipher is one of the earliest known encryption methods, named after Julius Caesar, who used it to send secret military messages. The cipher works by shifting each letter of the alphabet a set number of places. For example, with a shift of three, A becomes D. Though simple by modern standards, the Caesar Cipher introduced the basic idea of coded communication.

Show the poster with this message: WHADV. Ask students to read the message. When they are unable to, **say:** Someone used a Caesar Cipher with a shift of +3. Can we break the code?

Guide students:

- W → T
- H → E
- A → X
- D → A
- V → S

Message = **TEXAS**

Ask: Why might someone want to keep a message secret? Who in history might have used secret messages?

Guided Practice: Working the Cipher

Students can work in pairs to practice encoding and decoding short messages on the practice page using the Caesar cipher.

Independent Practice: Secret Messenger Activity

Say: Imagine you are a messenger delivering important information during a historical event. Write a 2 - 3 sentence message. Encode the message using a Caesar Cipher (+3). Trade papers with a partner. Decode the partner's message. Write the decoded version underneath.

Partners should:

- *Decode each word.*
- *Write the complete sentence.*
- *Add correct capitalization and punctuation.*

Example message: THE SETTLERS ARRIVED TODAY. EVERYONE IS SAFE.

(encoded: WKH VHWWOHUV DUULYHG WRGDB. HYHUBRQH LVVDIH.)

Discussion/Closure

- What was challenging about breaking a code?
- Why do you think leaders in history used coded messages?
- How did writing and history work together in today's lesson?

Post-Visit Activity

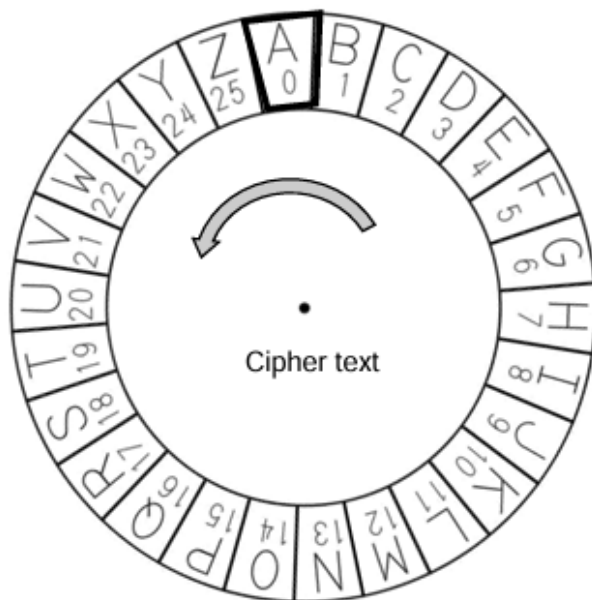
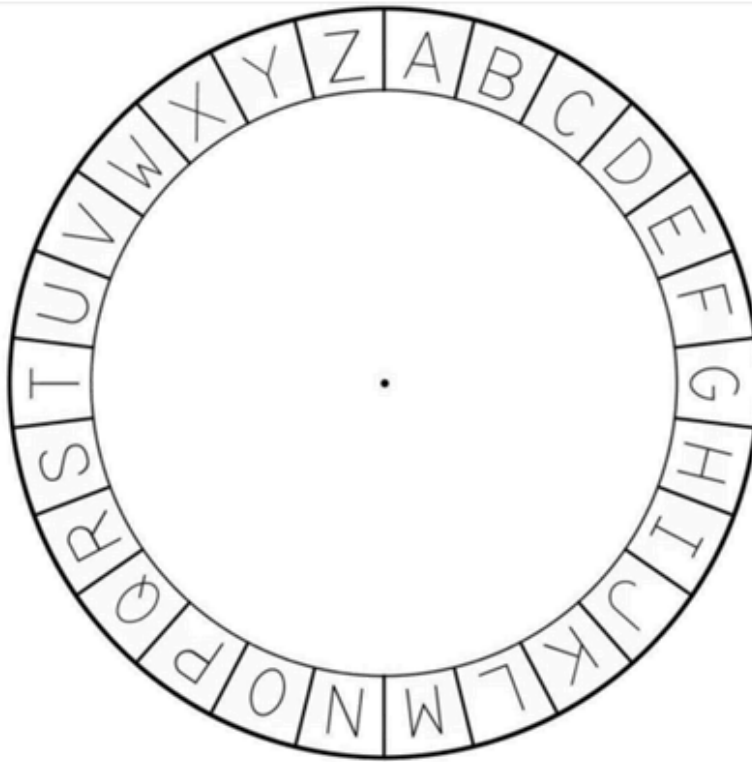
Write your Own Code

Students can use the Write your Own Code form to create their own code and then write a secret message. Then they can trade papers and let classmates decode their message.

Museum Visit Variations/Extensions

- Make "blackout poetry" with a copy of the Declaration of Independence or the first page of the Constitution
[blackout_poem_instructions_with_declaration.pdf](#)

Direction: Print on cardstock for a stronger cipher. Cut out both the large circle and the small circle. Using a paper fastener, attach the smaller circle on top of the larger circle, lining up the dots.



WHADV

1. Cipher Text: SKDUDRK, Caesar Cipher shift of +3

S	K	D	U	D	R	K

S	L	U	D	P	B	G

P	X	P	P	C

[illegible][illegible]

Direction: Using the Caesar Cipher you made, unscramble the following codes to become more familiar with the decoder.

1. Cipher Text: SKDUDRK, Caesar Cipher shift of +3

S	K	D	U	D	R	K
P	H	A	R	A	O	H

2. Cipher Text: SLUDPBG, Caesar Cipher shift of +3

S	L	U	D	P	B	G
P	Y	R	A	M	I	D

3. Cipher Text: PXPPC, Caesar Cipher shift of +3

P	X	P	P	C
M	U	M	M	Y

4. Cipher Text: KLHURJOBKLFV, Caesar Cipher shift of +3

K	L	H	U	R	J	O	B	S	K	L	F	V
H	I	E	R	O	G	L	Y	P	H	I	C	S

Bonus Challenge: Cipher Text: URVHWWDVWRQH, Caesar Cipher shift of +3

U	R	V	H	W	W	D		V	W	R	Q	H
R	O	S	E	T	T	A		S	T	O	N	E

Direction: Imagine you are a messenger delivering important information during a historical event. Write a 2 - 3 sentence message. Encode the message using a Caesar Cipher (+3). Trade the encoded message with a partner and see if they can figure it out.

WRITE YOUR 2 – 3 SENTENCES HERE.

(cut, rip or fold the paper on the dotted line)

Write your encoded message here and then trade it with a partner.