

TOP SECRET

THE CULPER CODE

SPY MISSIONS

A 2-DAY Revolutionary War Espionage Challenge

ENCODE • DECODE • COLLABORATE • PROTECT INFORMATION

MISSION 1: Become a Culper Agent
MISSION 2: Break the Code
FINAL DEBRIEF: Can You Be Trusted With Information?

Teacher Overview

This package expands two original classroom activities into a complete two-day Culper Code experience. In Day 1, students learn how the Culper Code worked and create a coded sentence for another group. In Day 2, groups decode one another's messages, solve a teacher-created intelligence message, and discuss the responsibility that comes with receiving sensitive information.

Historical Foundation

During the Revolutionary War, George Washington relied on intelligence gathered by the Culper Spy Ring. Major Benjamin Tallmadge organized a numerical code book containing 763 entries for words, names, and places. The code protected both information and identities if correspondence was intercepted. The authentic code also included an alphabet substitution system for spelling words that were not represented by a number.

Source: George Washington's Mount Vernon, "The Culper Code Book."

Important Source Note

The complete historical Culper Code Book is available free from Mount Vernon. This package uses a student-friendly selection of authentic entries for classroom practice rather than reproducing the entire 763-entry source. Teachers can display or print Mount Vernon's full code book when students need additional words.

DAY 1 - Become a Culper Agent

GRADE BAND	5-7
TIME	35-50 minutes
MATERIALS	2 index cards per group, Culper Quick Code or full Mount Vernon code book
GROUPING	Groups of 3-4
CHALLENGE	Create a sentence using the Culper Code for another group to solve.
LEARNING TARGETS	I can explain why spies used codes during the American Revolution. I can use a code book to encode information accurately. I can collaborate to create a message another group can decode.

Launch

Tell students they are joining an intelligence network during the American Revolution. Their job is not simply to make a secret message - it is to communicate information in a form that would be difficult for an enemy to understand if the message were intercepted.

Mini-Lesson: Two Ways the Code Works

1. **NUMBER CODE:** Common words, people, and places have assigned numbers. For example, the authentic code uses 711 for Gen Washington, 727 for New York, 729 for Setauket, 72 for British, 680 for war, and 596 for secret.
2. **ALPHABET SUBSTITUTION:** If a needed word is not in the numerical dictionary, students can spell it using the code's substituted alphabet. This makes the system more flexible but also slower to use.

Activity

Give each group two index cards and a code reference.

Groups compose one short, school-appropriate intelligence sentence in plain English.

Students convert the sentence into Culper Code. Encourage them to use number entries whenever possible and the alphabet substitution only when necessary.

On the second card, groups write the plain-text answer and keep it hidden as their verification key.

When finished, pair the group with another finished group for Day 2. Collect all coded cards so answers cannot be changed.

Day 1 Reflection

How did your group decide what sentence to create? Which part of encoding required the most careful collaboration?

Question to Ponder Until Day 2

If someone trusted you with sensitive information, what responsibility would you have to that person and to the information?

CONFIDENTIAL: CULPER AGENT BRIEFING

During the American Revolution, military leaders needed information about troop movements, fortifications, plans, and supplies. But sending that information was dangerous. A letter could be stolen or intercepted before it reached its destination.

George Washington's intelligence network used aliases and a numerical code book to make messages harder for British forces to understand. Major Benjamin Tallmadge developed the Culper Code Book, which contained 763 numbers representing words, people, and places.

Your Mission

Your group will create an intelligence message that another group must decode. Accuracy matters. One incorrect number or letter can change the meaning of a message.

Agent Protocol

Keep your plain-text answer card private.

Use the number code whenever your word appears in the code book.

Use the substitution alphabet for words that are not listed.

Check every symbol and number before submitting your message.

Do not reveal another group's message or answer.

Remember: the mission is successful only if your communication can be decoded accurately.

Why Codes?

Explain in your own words: Why would a code book be useful if a spy's letter were intercepted?

Culper Quick Code - Authentic Selected Entries

These entries are drawn from the historical Culper Code Book. Use the full Mount Vernon code book when you need a word that is not included here.

#	WORD	#	WORD	#	WORD
1	a	5	and	8	about
23	agent	38	attack	40	action
47	ammunition	48	be	50	by
52	but	54	bring	55	boat
59	battle	60	better	72	British
73	camp	77	change	78	carry
85	Congress	86	captain	87	careful
94	courage	98	conduct	101	caution
106	cannon	115	correspond	120	date
121	day	123	do	130	dispatch
132	danger	142	detect	143	defense

144	deceive	153	discover	156	deliver
158	during	166	engage	167	enclose
177	explore	178	enemy	188	friend
190	find	192	fort	193	fleet
220	go	222	guide	235	general
242	he	243	his	244	him
249	have	253	hope	255	horse
256	house	266	honest	268	honor
280	I	281	if	282	in
283	is	284	it	289	island
298	instruct	300	intrust	317	important
342	key	343	king	345	know
346	law	347	land	348	love

353	last	354	learn	356	letter
371	man	372	map	376	make
377	met	378	me	379	my
381	move	396	messenger	411	name
412	new	413	no	414	not
415	night	439	order	443	observe
469	pay	470	peace	471	plan
473	port	477	paper	482	prudent
486	people	500	prepare	506	protect
532	quick	533	question	540	read
548	ready	555	river	578	remember
587	see	591	send	592	ship
593	safe	596	secret	598	sentence
600	signal	601	silent	613	soldier

615	security	625	the	626	that
627	this	629	they	630	there
633	time	634	to	679	wind
680	war	681	was	682	we
683	will	684	with	685	when
689	want	690	wait	691	write
692	who	693	wish	707	you
708	your	711	Gen Washington	712	Clinton
722	Culper Sam	723	Culper Junr.	724	Austin Roe
725	C. Brewster	727	New York	728	Long Island
729	Setauket	733	Boston	735	Connecticut
739	Virginia	745	England	755	France
763	Head Quarters				

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Culper Substitution Alphabet

If a word does not appear in the numerical dictionary, spell it using the historical substitution alphabet below. Read each pair as: plain letter -> coded letter.

A↴e	B↴f	C↴g	D↴h	E↴i	F↴j	G↴a	H↴b	I↴c	J↴d	K↴
N↴p	O↴q	P↴r	Q↴k	R↴l	S↴u	T↴v	U↴w	V↴x	W↴y	X↴

Practice A - Number Code

Decode: 711 / 683 / 591 / 1 / 596 / 356

Plain text: _____

Practice B - Alphabet Substitution

Encode the word SPY using the substitution alphabet.

Coded word: _____

Practice C - Mixed Method

Write a short message that uses at least three number-code words and one alphabet-substitution word.

MISSION 1: CREATE THE INTELLIGENCE

Agent Names: _____

Step 1 - Draft the Plain Message

Keep it short enough to encode carefully. Your message must be school-appropriate and should sound like information an agent might need to communicate.

Step 2 - Identify Code-Book Words

Underline words that can be replaced with numbers. Circle words that will need to be spelled with the substitution alphabet.

Step 3 - Encode

Step 4 - Quality Check

- ☐ Every number matches the intended word.
- ☐ Every substituted letter follows the alphabet key.
- ☐ Spaces or separators make the message readable.
- ☐ Our answer card exactly matches our intended sentence.

Agent Verification

One group member signs after the entire team has checked the message:

Agent signature: _____

DAY 2 - Break the Code

TIME	35-50 minutes
MATERIALS	Coded messages from Day 1, Culper code reference, Mission 2 sheet
CHALLENGE	Solve another group's coded message and the teacher's coded message.
LEARNING TARGETS	I can decode information accurately. I can explain why intelligence requires trust and responsibility.
SUCCESS	The decoded message matches the original group's verification card.

Activity

Return a different group's coded message to each team. Do not give them the answer card.

Groups decode the message and record both their reasoning and final translation.

Compare the translation to the original group's hidden verification card.

After all groups finish, share the messages as a class.

Display the Teacher Master Code Challenge. Students solve silently and record an answer before anyone shares aloud.

Close with the Responsible Information discussion.

Facilitation Note

The original lesson asks students not to blurt out the teacher message. Keep that feature: it creates a useful parallel between possessing information and choosing how responsibly to handle it.

MISSION 2: BREAK THE CODE

Decoding Team: _____

Intercepted Message

Copy the coded message you received:

Decode Log

[illegible]

Final Translation

Verification

Did your translation match the sending group's answer card? YES / NOT YET

If not, where did the error occur? _____

Teacher Master Code Challenge

Display only the coded line first. Students should solve independently or with their group and write the answer before sharing.

Challenge Message

711 / 683 / 591 / 1 / 596 / 356 / 634 / 763

Teacher Answer

Gen Washington will send a secret letter to Head Quarters.

Second Challenge - More Difficult

625 / 596 / 396 / 683 / 381 / 634 / 729 / 4 / 415

Teacher Answer

The secret messenger will move to Setauket at night.

Extension: Create Your Own Teacher Message

Use the full Mount Vernon code book to create a message tied to the Revolutionary War content your class is currently studying. For a stronger historical-thinking task, include a person or place from the proper-name section and ask students why protecting that specific information would matter.

FINAL DEBRIEF: INFORMATION & TRUST

Codes are interesting because they hide information. But the deeper leadership question is what a person does once information has been entrusted to them.

Return to the Question from Day 1

If someone trusted you with sensitive information, what responsibility would you have to that person and to the information?

Discuss

Is keeping information private always the responsible choice? Why or why not?

What is the difference between privacy and secrecy?

When might a person need to share sensitive information with a trusted adult?

Why would Washington need to trust the people in an intelligence network?

How could one careless decision affect an entire group?

What personal qualities would make someone trustworthy with important information?

Historical Connection

The Culper system protected information and identities because intercepted intelligence could endanger military plans and the people gathering information. Students should distinguish that wartime context from everyday situations: personal safety concerns, threats, or information that could indicate someone is in danger should be shared with a trusted adult rather than treated as a secret to keep.

Exit Reflection

Complete the sentence: Being trusted with information means...
