It's a Secret
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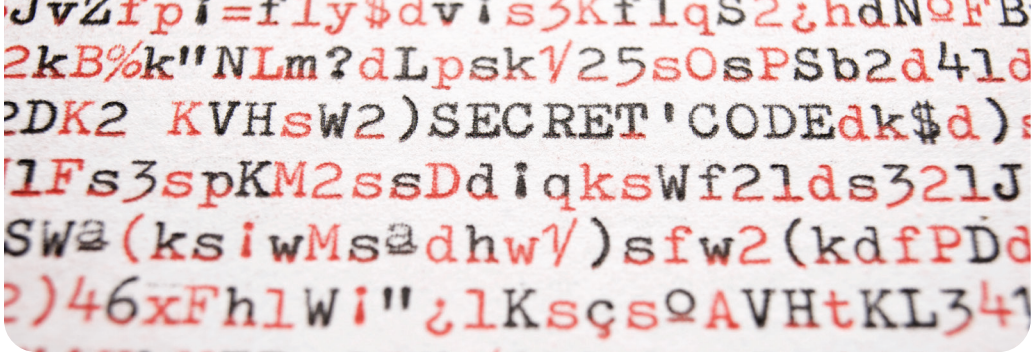


It's a Secret

Discover some of the coolest methods of secret communication.

As long as people have communicated and written messages, they've also wanted to keep some of those messages private. From secret codes to hidden messages to unwritten signals, take a look at some of the coolest secret communications in history.

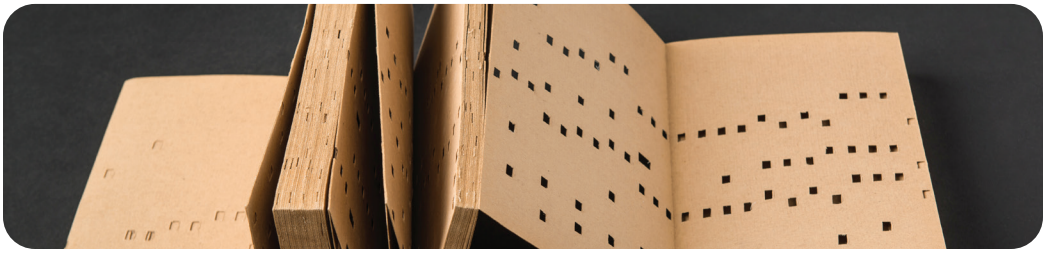
Clever Codes and Ciphers

DID YOU KNOW?

People sometimes used kites to send secret messages during times of war in ancient China.

Imagine that you had a secret message you needed to send, but you didn't want just anyone to read it. How would you prevent prying eyes from peeking? Many rulers and leaders throughout history faced the same problem. They didn't want their letters or orders to fall into enemy hands. One way people tried to keep this from happening was by writing in a secret code or cipher. Codes and ciphers are methods of disguising messages so that only the people who know the code or cipher can understand them. In a code, the sender uses words that have secret meanings. When using a cipher, the sender rearranges the letters of the message to scramble it. In both instances, the message must be decoded, or unscrambled, before it makes sense.

One of the earliest known ciphers was created about 2,000 years ago, by ancient Roman leader Julius Caesar. To keep his letters secret, Caesar wrote them with each letter in the alphabet shifted forward or backward a certain number of letters.



A cipher book with letter slots to read secret messages.

For example, if you wanted to write a message using this method, you might shift each letter forward once. Instead of writing the letter "a" in a word, you would write the letter "b." Whenever a word contained the letter "b," you would write a "c" instead—and so on for each letter. Today, this is known as the Caesar Cipher.

Hidden Messages

FUN FACT

During the American Revolutionary War, soldiers often used invisible ink to send messages.

Throughout history, codes and ciphers haven't been the only ways to keep messages private. Rather than hiding the information in the message with a cipher, some people decided to hide the message itself instead! One way of doing this was by using invisible ink. It might sound like magic, but it's actually quite simple—in fact, one recipe has been in use for more than 1,000 years. Some 1,400 years ago, people in the Middle East began using lemon juice as ink. When it dries, this "ink" disappears, becoming invisible. When warmed up again over a flame or other source of heat, the juice turns brown and appears again!

Other people attempted to keep their letters safe by making them almost impossible to open. In the 1200s in Europe, some people began to use letterlocking. This involved cutting and folding letters in complicated patterns that kept them "locked" shut. While the letters weren't really locked, the folds and cuts were so complex that a person who tried to open the letter without knowing the proper way could destroy it!

A painting from the early 1900s depicts Indigenous Americans using smoke signals to communicate.

Secret Signals

Codes, ciphers, invisible inks, and locked letters helped prevent people from uncovering secret information. However, these written messages could still fall into the wrong hands! One way to get around this was by sending messages that weren't written down at all. From the ancient Greeks to several Indigenous American nations to the ancient Chinese, many cultures sent secret messages using smoke signals. One way to do this was to add different chemicals from natural substances to a large bonfire to turn the smoke different colors, such as white or black. These colors had special meanings to the people receiving the message. Another way to send smoke signals was to use a blanket to carefully and quickly cover a large fire, and then remove it. This would cause a cloud of smoke to fly into the sky. The number of clouds sent flying could signal different things.

Today, people still use codes, ciphers, and secret messages for many reasons. Some of these are meant to keep information safe, and others help people communicate in different ways. And some are just for fun! But no matter the reason, as long as people can write, read, and communicate, they will create secret ways to do so.

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