Secret Codes

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Summary
The book deals with the use of codes for communication. They aim at keeping messages secret, only accessible to those who share the code.

Chapter 1: The writer defines some key terms and describes how codes are present throughout our lives.

Chapter 2: The writer provides examples of secret messages at times of war.

Chapter 3: In this chapter we get to learn secret messages written by queens.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents examples of messages that to this day haven’t been deciphered, or were deciphered when it was too late, like the case of the musical cipher. There’s even a case of a killer who wrote his real name in a cipher which the police haven’t been able to decipher.

Chapter 5: There are different ways to hide messages: inside drawings, in food, even on a person’s body. Secret messages are still used nowadays. People can hide information in a photograph and send it in an email. But one problem will always exist: if people hide messages, some others will look for ways to find them.

Chapter 6: There is information in this chapter about how codes have been used for good purposes. The writer mentions the Braille system for the blind, Hobo signs which helped men who went from place to place looking for work and a system developed to help free slaves. He also describes how the Ku Klux Clan was destroyed because its code became known to everybody.

Chapter 7: The writer presents the connection between secret codes and puzzles in the world of novels and stories.

Chapter 8: This chapter explores different ways of sending secret messages by means of such elements as fire and smoke and other mechanical devices.

Chapter 9: The writer here describes different languages which are used to hide messages from others. Only those sharing the code can understand the messages uttered.

Chapter 10: In this chapter we get to know how the body can communicate by means of body language and sign language.

Chapter 11: The author describes old languages which had to be deciphered to be understood.

Chapter 12: Human nature shows human beings want to learn about secrets.

Background and themes
Secrecy: Human beings need to keep secrets from others while, at the same time, they need somebody to share secrets with.

Power: Those who have information that others don’t are more powerful and can exercise control over others.

Reflection: We take many things for granted. If we stopped and reflected about many aspects of life, we might live in a better world.

Betrayal and trust: It is very difficult to be sure who to trust. Why are some people ready to betray others? Is this more frequent with powerful people like governors, presidents, ministers or royals? Is betrayal ever good or positive?

Arrogance: People may look down on others who seem to be doing stupid things when, actually, they are the ones being fooled.

Learning from one’s past: We can learn a lot about who we are by reading about our ancestors’ lives.

Communication: People have always needed to communicate with each other and keep some information secret from others. This is seen not only throughout history but in the world of literature as well.

Cooperation: Cooperation and working as a team can be the key to success since the whole is much more than the sum of its parts.
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Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

1 Discuss: Have students discuss their ideas about codes.
   What codes do you know? Do we need codes? Why? How long have there been codes?

2 Vocabulary: Divide the class into groups of 3–5 students. Draw the following on the board. Ask groups to complete the web.
   How many words do the groups have in common?

While reading

3 Discuss: Have students talk about colours and codes.
   What does the colour green represent? What about black, and white?

4 Guess: Ask students to read the section title on page 2: ‘Personal Codes’.
   What is the relationship between the title and the picture of a child in uniform?

5 Discuss: Have students talk about clothes.
   What do these clothes mean to you?: a long black dress, a white shirt and a black tie, jeans and tennis shoes, a blue jacket and a blue skirt.

6 Read carefully: Have students read Chapter 2.
   What words are connected with the title of the chapter?

After reading

7 Write: Have students write a message in code.
   Ask students to number the letters of the alphabet.
   They should write a message made up of 6 words using the numbered code. How long do they take to decipher the other students’ messages?

8 Pair work: Have students write more secret messages.
   Ask them to write messages in which they only include consonants and no vowels. Can the other student read the message?

9 Research: Have students do some research about letters in their own language.
   The most common letter in English is ‘i’. Which is the most common vowel in your language? Which is the least frequently used? Which is the most frequently used consonant? Which is the least frequently used? Which letters of the English alphabet are not used in your language? Which letter of your language is not used in English?

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

10 Guess: Have students read the title and the words in italics on page 14.
   What can this chapter be about?
   What was the queen’s mistake?

While reading

11 Guess: Ask students to imagine a day in the life of the prisoner queen.
   What time did she get up? What did she have for breakfast? What did she do in the morning? Who visited her in the afternoon?

12 Role play: Have students work in pairs.
   One of the students is Mary, the other student is a reporter. Imagine an interview between the two.

13 Guess: Ask students to read the title and the words in italics on page 20.
   What letter is the writer talking about? Who wrote the letter? Who received it? Who’s reading it? Where is the fortune? When did all this happen?

After reading

14 Write: Ask students to write a note to Mary offering help.

15 Research: Have students find information on spies and secret codes in history on the Internet or in history books.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

16 Guess: Write the titles of Chapters 5–6 on the board and ask students the following.
   What information can you get?
   What is there in common between the two chapters?

17 Guess: Have students read the words in italics under the titles on pages 26 and 31.
   Would you make any changes to what you thought in activity 16? Why (not)?

While reading

18 Write: Have students write secret messages.
   Tell students they need to send this message: I must see you in the park.
   They must use the code at the bottom of page 26.

19 Artwork: Have students make a collage or a drawing in which they hide a secret message. Can the others find and decode the secret message?

20 Research: Ku Klux Klan
   Have students get information about the KKK. You can guide them with these questions.
   Where did they live?
   What did they do?
   Did they wear special clothes?
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After reading

21 Write: Imagine you’re a blind person. Write a letter to Mr Braille thanking him for his invention.

22 Artwork: Have students make up codes for the rules they are familiar with. Write down the classroom rules and decide on patterns to represent each rule. Make a poster with all the rules.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

23 Guess: Have students read the title and the words in italics on page 38. Who’s Holmes? What message is he talking about? What’s the real message?

24 Discuss: Have students talk about famous detectives. What famous detectives from novels, films and TV series do you know? Where are they from? Where do they work? Choose two of the detectives students mention and have them complete this Venn diagram. What do they have in common?

While reading

25 Guess: Ask students to read the title of Chapter 8 and the words in italics. What is the meaning of the title? What is going to happen? Why do the scientists want to break the code? What code is it? Why couldn’t they?

26 Discuss: Smoke and fire signals. Get students to make a list of disadvantages of smoke and fire signals. Here’s an example: People can’t use smoke signals if it’s raining. People can’t make smoke signals if they can’t light a fire.

After reading

27 Research: Have students talk about Morse code. Look for information about the Morse code. Then send a message to a friend in Morse code. Can he or she decode the message?

28 Write: Have students think about great discoveries. Imagine you’re Morse or Claude Chappe, and your invention is working for the first time. Write to your family and tell them about this.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

29 Guess: Have students read the titles of the two chapters. What are these chapters about? What is there in common between them? What differences do you think you will find?

While reading

30 Pair work: Guess my message. Have students write a message with 6 words and then translate it into Pig Latin. Student A says the message to student B. Can they guess the message?

31 Discuss: Have students talk about body language. What different body language examples exist in your own culture? Can the others understand the meaning?

Chapters 11–12

Before reading

32 Guess: Have students look at the pictures on pages 63–70. What do these pictures have in common? What can these two chapters be about?

After reading

33 Discuss: Have students talk about messages into the future. What messages would you like to send to people in other galaxies and worlds?

34 Write: Here we are! Write a short message to people from another galaxy.

After reading

35 Pair work: Play a secret message game. Have students think of a secret message. They have to decide on one of the ciphers presented in the book and encode the message. The others have to decode the message and say what system has been used.

36 Pair work: Have students guess the secret code. Student A describes one of the ciphers or secret languages and student B has to say the name of the cipher or secret language.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word list and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.