

Build Your Own Code

Snapshot: In this activity, students learn the nature and importance of secret codes by building their own codes to use with a partner. This activity can be completed in one class period (about 50 minutes).

Activity overview for teachers

The purpose of this activity is for students to take the perspective of President Lincoln in order to brainstorm how he would have responded to a particular situation and to create an encoded message similar to how a telegraph operator would have done to transfer Lincoln's message to Major Anderson. To begin the activity, students will receive the following prompt:

It's early March 1861; the newly inaugurated president Abraham Lincoln has a decision to make. After Lincoln's election, South Carolina seceded from the Union and attacked Fort Sumter in the Charleston Bay. Although the fort was not captured, the South Carolina militia blockaded the fort so no supplies could get in. The commander of the fort, Major Robert Anderson, informed President Lincoln that he had enough supplies to last until the middle of April. Lincoln had a decision to make. Should he try to force a resupply, surrender the fort, tell Anderson to fight back, or something else? Pretend you are President Lincoln and write a top-secret message to Major Anderson with instructions. Keep your message short and to the point.

Below are some general approaches students might use in crafting their messages.

- Surrender at once.
- Gather basic supplies and flee.
- Supplies are on the way - hold your ground.
- Organize your troops and attack the South Carolina militia as soon as possible.

After coming up with a message in response to the prompt, students will encode the message using a code they have just come up with during class. Then, they will pass the encoded message and the key to a classmate to see if the message can be decoded.

Note: To increase the difficulty level of this activity, instead of having students pass the encoded message along with the key, students can pass the encoded message and the original message to see if their classmate can figure out the code.

Directions for students

It's early March 1861; the newly inaugurated president Abraham Lincoln has a decision to make. After Lincoln's election, South Carolina seceded from the Union and attacked Fort Sumter in the Charleston Bay. Although the fort was not captured, the South Carolina militia blockaded the fort so no supplies could get in. The commander of the fort, Major Robert Anderson, informed President Lincoln that he had enough supplies to last until the middle of April. Lincoln had a decision to make. Should he try to force a resupply, surrender the fort, tell Anderson to fight back, or something else? Pretend you are President Lincoln and write a top-secret message to Major Anderson with instructions. Keep your message short and to the point.

Step 1 - Composing a message: Write a brief message from the perspective of President Lincoln in response to the prompt provided by your teacher.

Step 2 - Building your own code: Create a code that you can use for your message.

Step 3 - Explaining your code: Write a key explaining how your code works.

Step 4 - Encoding the message: Encode the message using the code you created.

Step 5 - Testing your code: Pass your encoded message and the key to a classmate so that they can use the key to decode the message.