

Codes in Everyday Life

Snapshot: In this activity, students examine the ways we use codes to protect personal information in our daily lives and compare these modern day codes to system used by the Union Army to protect information.

Activity overview for teachers

Begin the activity by having students brainstorm a list of things people use every day that require passwords. Ask students the following questions to initiate a class discussion:

- Why is it important to protect our information?
- How easy is it to get into someone's phone number or account information if it requires a password?
- What can happen if someone gets ahold of our passwords?
- How do governments protect their information?
- What can happen if someone gets ahold of government information?

Explain to students that the Union Army set up their own telegraph office during the Civil War and used coded telegrams to communicate important information. If necessary, refer to the "The Telegraph in the Civil War" Explainer and/or the "Cipher in the Civil War" Explainer.

Ask students to imagine they are President Lincoln, but it's modern times. The war is still on and as president they need to communicate to military leaders. Of course, Lincoln used the telegram. Here students would be thinking about using modern technologies such as SnapChat or text messaging.

Ask students to vote on which form of communication they would use and ask them to explain why. Ask them what the risks and benefits of using a code are.

Directions for students

Step 1 - If Lincoln had options: Imagine you are Abraham Lincoln and you need a way to communicate instructions to your troops. However, it is the modern day, so you can choose to send your information either by email, text message, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, or some other service. Make a list of risks and benefits for each form of communication is and decided whether you would have to use a code if you used any of these services.

Step 2 - Form of communication: Think about the risks and benefits of using a code. Then, decide which form of communication you would use to transfer an encoded message and be ready to explain your choice to the class.