

**GETTING
STARTED WITH**
educational
Escape Rooms
in the ELA classroom



Play is the highest form of
research.

Games are the most elevated
form of investigation.



maybe Einstein

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: WHAT'S THE DEAL?



In an educational escape room:

1. You design a series of activities (puzzles, tasks, or challenges) which reflect a specific theme or storyline.
2. Your students work against the clock to complete them in an effort to restore the 'problem' to its resolution.



An ELA Escape Room, or break-out challenge, is an excellent way to engage your students and encourage learning in a fresh way.



Escape Rooms are an **excellent** way, therefore, to tap into the unique characteristics of our learners!

High-intensity + hands-on, your students will reason through different puzzles, tasks, or challenges as they maneuver their way through your escape room.

This handout will help you understand the basics of the ELA Escape Room and get started in creatively designing your own!

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: INSTRUCTIONAL INTENTIONS

Before you begin designing your ELA Escape Room, you'll need to determine your **instructional intentions** first.

There are several questions to ask yourself in order to do this:



Context

- *Where in the learning process are we? Will the escape room appear at the beginning of a unit? In the midst of a novel study? At the end of a learning cycle?*



Assessment

- *How will I use the data gained from this activity? As a pre-assessment of student knowledge/understanding? As a formative assessment of progress? As a summative assessment of growth over time?*



Learning Goals

- *What do I want to measure? What do I intend for my students to learn?*

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: THE THEME

Once your instructional intentions are clear, you can lean in to the fun part...selecting a theme!

What **storyline** will you organize your ELA Escape Room around?

Imaginary/Fantastical scenarios

- *Zombie apocalypse? Armageddon? Science experiments gone wrong? Space invasions? Treasure hunts?*

Novel Study

- *To introduce the context of a novel? To introduce or explore characters or setting? As a means of assessing comprehension? To linger on deeper themes or concepts + analyze?*

Research

- *To introduce and explore contemporary issues? To seek out solutions for real-world problems? To explore the potential of XYZ?*

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: CHOOSING ACTIVITIES

Your students will reason through different puzzles, tasks, or challenges as they maneuver their way through your escape room.

Just like traditional classroom stations, you'll need to decide how many station activities you want to have. This will depend on *time* of course, but also on the *heft* + *complexity* of each activity.

You can think about **activities** in three, basic ways:



these kinds of activities involve critical and creative **brainwork** (e.x. *ciphers*)



these kinds of activities involve core class **content** (e.x. *locating literary devices*)



these kinds of activities are designed to provide the players with relief and an energy **boost** (e.x. *trying to get an Oreo into your mouth with the starting point being on your forehead...and no, you can't use your hands!*)

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: CHOOSING ACTIVITIES

Your students will reason through different puzzles, tasks, or challenges as they maneuver their way through your escape room.

TIP: As you design your station activities, aim for a range of puzzles, tasks, and challenges, making sure to insert a few 'quick wins' here and there to avoid burn-out or frustration!

There are a number of moving parts inside each station of your break-out challenge, so let's dig further into these terms but...

before I forget to say it, try not to get too tripped up in the jargon!

Keep your focus on how you're going to make your students think critically and hit learning targets...that's *it!*

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: CLUES

Clues give your students a sense of direction either once they get to a station and are met with a puzzle, task, or challenge, OR to help them move from one station to the next.

Once your students complete an activity--and thus, crack the code or bust the lock!--they should automatically receive the next clue to point them in the next direction!



Clues are hints which spur the game along. These are messages or riddles which contain clever key words or images to suggest the player's forward-direction.

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: UNDER LOCK + KEY

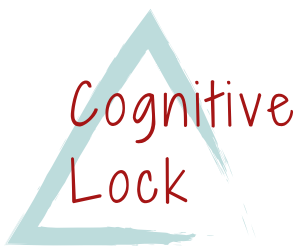
As your students complete an activity, it should reveal, or unlock, the next clue somehow.

That clue might either be a set of digits to **physically** unlock something, OR it may be a word/phrase, image, riddle (or otherwise!) that simply points them in the **direction** of the next station.

We'll refer to these as physical locks and cognitive locks, respectively, so let's take a look at each!



Students successfully complete an activity which reveals a string of numbers or letters, giving them the ability to physically unlock something (e.x. a lock on a locker)



Students successfully complete an activity, which--once answered properly--will reveal another clue that leads them in the next direction of the challenge (e.x. puzzle pieces, once in order, reveal a message on back)

Physical Locks

Traditional Locks:

- ABC lock
- 3-digit lock
- 4-digit lock
- Directional lock

These are the kinds of locks you might purchase on Amazon, but you can certainly borrow them from your everyday environment, too. Students would need a series of letters or numbers to physically open these.

Having trouble locating locks? Here are some creative alternatives:

Creative Alternatives:

- Your filing cabinet as a lock
- Money boxes or pouches you borrow from a club or your campus financial officer
- Your bike lock (or your neighbor's!)
- Your dad's briefcase (*or that of a student's!*)
- The lock box on your house (*if you're selling it!*)
- An iPhone or tablet (*clue tells which app to visit following unlock!*)
- An email log-in (*first memo in inbox provides next clue!*)
- Google Forms (*we'll talk about this one all by itself shortly!*)

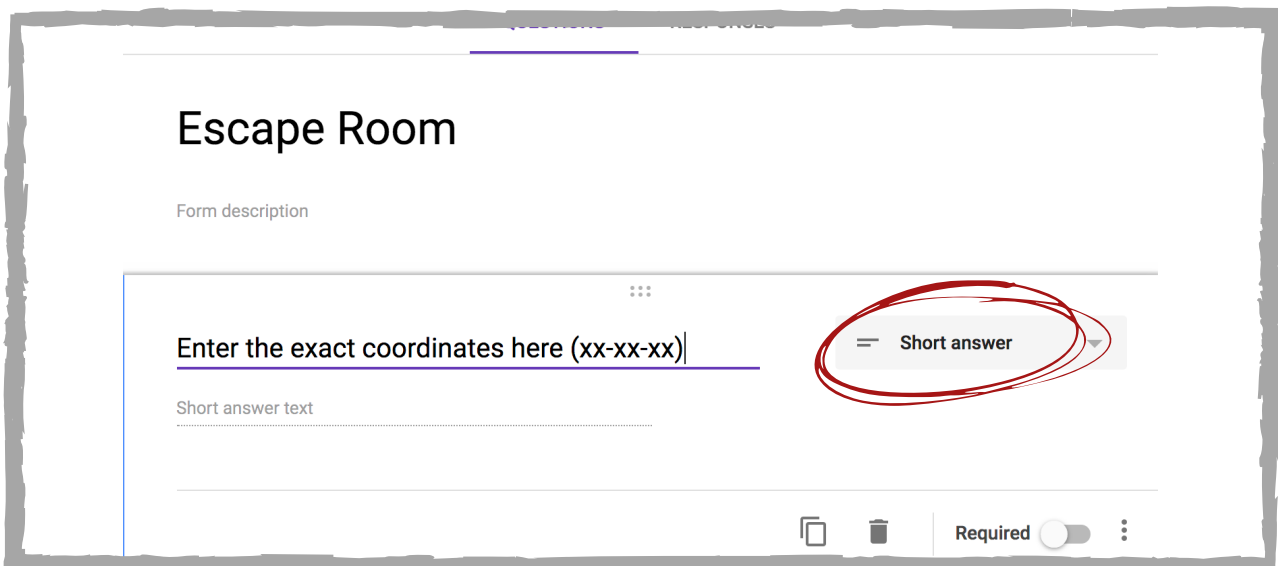
Physical Locks 2.0

Using Google Forms as a Physical Lock

Interested in weaving technology into your Escape Room? Try using Google Forms to give your layout a digital edge (while also cutting down on prep work!)

HOW-TO...

1. Create your Form's first Section.
2. For the first question, select the 'Short Paragraph' response option.



The screenshot shows a Google Form titled "Escape Room". Below the title is a "Form description" field. The main question is "Enter the exact coordinates here (xx-xx-xx)". To the right of the question, the "Short answer" response type is selected and circled in red. Below the question is a "Short answer text" input field. At the bottom right of the form, there are icons for copy, delete, and a "Required" toggle switch.

*Each **lock** should appear as it's own separate section. That way, participants can't move on until that section is complete!*

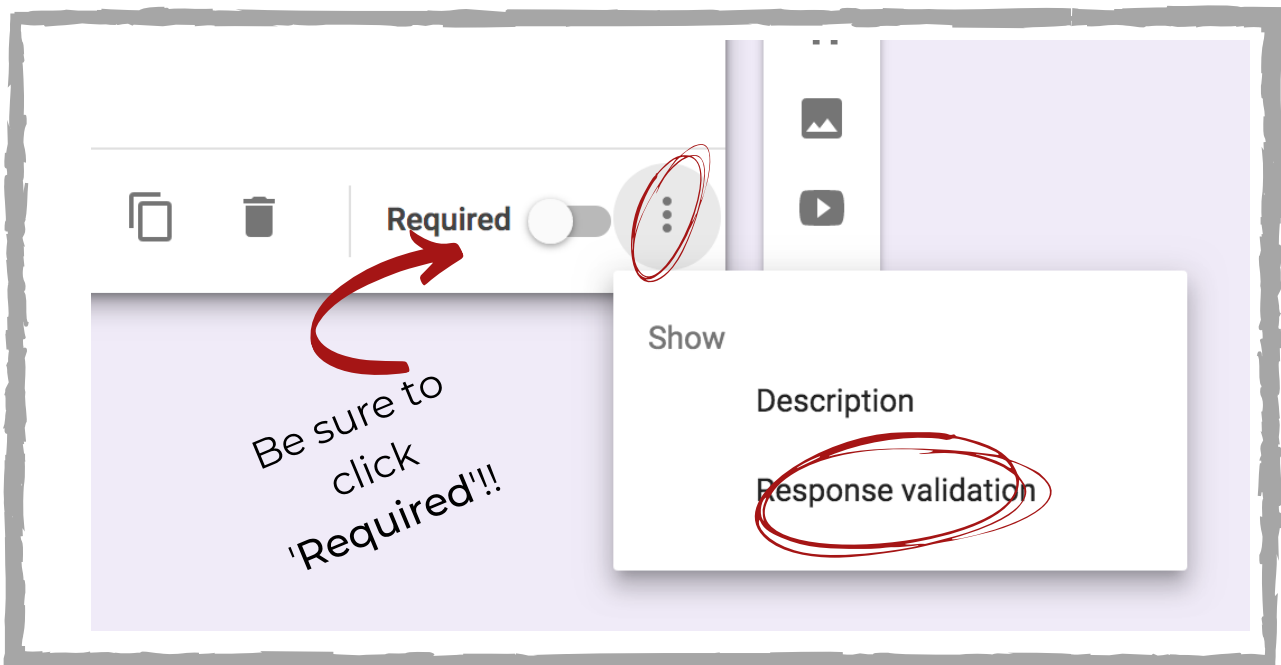
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HOW-TO...

3. Click on the three, vertical dots at the bottom of the box.
4. Select 'Response Validation.'



Physical Locks 2.0

Using Google Forms as a Physical Lock

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HOW-TO...

5. Select 'Equal To' and enter in the exact response as it should appear.
6. Include a response to indicate if students are entering an incorrect response (e.x. 'Nope! Keep trying!')

Enter the exact coordinates here (xx-xx-xx) Short answer

Short answer text

Number Greater than Greater than or equal to Less than Less than or equal to Equal to Not equal to

Number Custom error text ×

230417 'Nope! Give it another shot!' ×

Required

Now your students will be required to enter their response exactly as it should be in order to 'unlock' the next clue!

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: UNDER LOCK + KEY

Your students will reason through different puzzles, tasks, or challenges as they maneuver their way through your escape room.

While physical locks are admittedly *fun* for the students, you certainly don't need to have one at **every** station!

Plenty of your activities can be presented in the form of a **cognitive lock**, which reveals new clues once an activity is completed.
No padlock required!

For instance, a classic ELA writing activity involves cutting an essay into strips, then asking students to piece it together using transitional cues. (This would be considered a **'task'**, by the way, because it involves core, learning content!)

So, *Option 1*: the essay is pieced back together, it might reveal the clue on the back side.

OR, *Option 2*: there might be a series of letters circled inside the essay and--when in the right order--reveals a word or phrase to serve as the next clue.

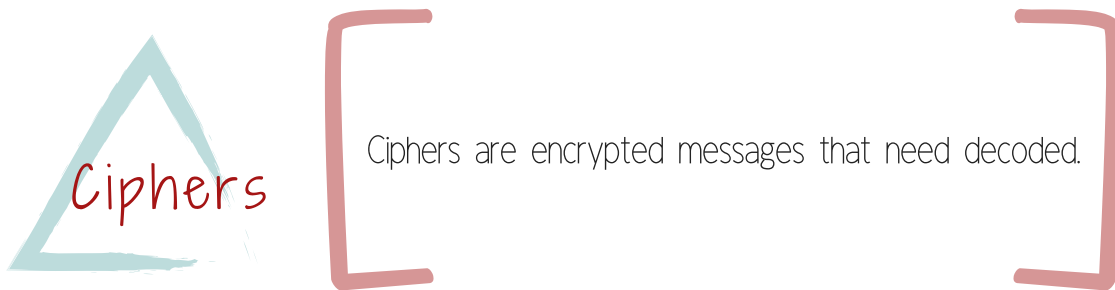
So notice we didn't need to physically unlock anything...it just appears!

ELA ESCAPE ROOMS: UNDER LOCK + KEY

As your students complete an activity, it should reveal, or unlock, the next clue somehow.

Ciphers are those encrypted messages which need a good 'hacking'. These can therefore be used as a **puzzle** at one of your stations.

In doing so, it can give your escape room that genuine, Sherlock Holmes, problem-solving vibe!



The answer coming out of a cipher could be anything, from a set of numerical digits, to a clue word that would take your students to the next station in the game (*so, clarification: these can be used to open physical locks or serve as a cognitive lock*).

There are *TONS* of ciphers you can use (and in wide-ranging complexity!)

Take Morse Code for instance. This is a cipher that uses a series of dots (.) and dashes (-) to encrypt information. Computers use 0 and 1 in the same way.

Ciphers

There are TONS of ciphers (some of which are waaay over my own head!). To get started, try some of these:

Easier, 'Quick Wins':

- Letter scramble code (*letters appear in random order*)
- Reverse or mirror coding (*letters are backwards*)
- Puzzle piece-together (*a physical puzzle*)
- Alphabet-to-number codes (*where A= 1, B=2, etc.*)
- Bolded or italicized words inside a text (*forms a clue when brought together/ordered properly*)
- Popsicle sticks (*when arranged properly, reveal clue*)
- Color-code using a familiar pattern (*i.e. rainbow, so colored pieces get put into proper order to reveal clue*)

Harder, 'May Need Resources or Support'

- Symbol codes
 - *clue is written in digital code via 'Wingdings' font*
 - *clue is written in a string of emojis*
 - *Morse code (check out this ['morse code translator'](#))*
- Keyboard coding (*where Q=1, W=2, E=3, etc.*)
- Language translation
- Letter shifting (*splitting alphabet in half, then matching up, so A = N, B= O, C = P, etc.*)

Ciphers

Con't

Harder, 'May Need Resources or Support' (con't):

- Color Code (*where R=1, O=2, Y=3, etc.*)
- Text evidence code (*locating exact information then tallying up word count*)
- Picture match-ups (*once missing item(s) is/are located, these can be arranged into a message*)
- Disappearing ink + blacklight (*where message is hidden/invisible until students figure out how to reveal it*)

Difficult-ish:

- Book key code (where students convert numerical numbers representing the page, line, and words of a text into clue words)
 - *[page.line.word] + [page.line.word] + [page.line.word]*
- Pigpen code (*also called the tick-tack-toe cipher*)

A	B	C	J	K	L
D	E	F	M	N	O
G	H	I	P	Q	R

	S		W
T	X	Y	
	V		Z

Ciphers

As I said, there are TONS of ciphers you could try with your students, depending on the type of class you teach and how much you want to challenge them.

Keep in mind, the goal is *not* to totally frustrate or burn your players out! Aim for a range of activities at a variety of difficulty-levels as well!



For a mad-crazy list of ciphers, **VISIT:**
<https://www.wikihow.com/Create-Secret-Codes-and-Ciphers>
or click the image to the left!

COMBINING CIPHERS:

The options are seriously endless, guys. Check out this one I drummed up:

EXAMPLE | *Imagine your students walking up to a station that has a bunch of plain popsicle sticks inside a paper cup. Next to it is a clue, which appears in the form of a QR code. This then takes players to a YouTube video teaching them how to turn their phone into a black light. Then boom! The clue magically appears on those plain popsicle sticks!*

RESOURCES

MOOD
MUSIC



Set the mood with these background tunes!

VISIT:

<https://tabletopaudio.com/>

or click the image to the left!

COUNT-
DOWN
CLOCK



Pump up the intensity with this countdown timer!

VISIT:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BB0cEV5Ca4>

or click the image to the left!



Yo, I'm Jill!

I live on macha green tea lattes +
nerdy lesson planning sessions.
I'm on a mission to flip the script on
how we teach today's writers.
I empower secondary ELA teachers
with the

resources + mindset

they need to make the
writing process

more

relevant, authentic, and applicable

for today's learners and tomorrow's
leaders.



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