

Secret Codes

Ken Beatty



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What's the book about?

These are discussed in this book. What are they? What do you know about them?



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What do you know?

1.2

Write in the boxes below.

Who uses secret codes?	Why do they use them?
soldiers	to keep war secrets from other soldiers

Codes for Life

The most common codes and ciphers are in your wallet and they are used every day.

Do you use secret **codes**? Do you look for and understand strange **symbols**? Do you send and receive messages that only a few other people can understand?

You are probably not a spy, but you certainly use a great number of secret codes, **ciphers**, symbols and messages. Everyone does! For example, which of these symbols makes you think of the word *stop*?



Stop signs

Most of these symbols for *stop* are familiar around the world, but some symbols have different meanings for different people. The colour red might mean *stop* or *danger* to some people, but in China it often means *let's celebrate*.

code /kəʊd/ (n) words, letters or signs that are used together, instead of ordinary writing or speech, to send secret messages. A *bar code* is a number of black lines on a product that can be read by a computer. If you *break a code* or *decode* a secret message, you discover its meaning.

symbol /'sɪmbəl/ (n) a sign (for example, a picture) for a quality, idea or organisation

cipher /'saɪfə/ (n) a method of changing the letters of words with other letters, numbers or symbols to make a secret message. If you *decipher* a message, you *break the cipher* and find the hidden message.

symbols for ideas like *stop* are not meant to be secret. Many codes are just shorter or faster ways of explaining other ideas. A stop sign really says, 'Please wait here for a moment and look around. Are you sure there are no other cars or people that might cause you to have an accident?' It would take too long to read all this at every corner.

Even language is a code. Although you can read the words in this book, you probably could not understand a common word like *stop* in more than a few languages. Other languages might look like secret codes to you. On the other hand, you may use or invent a new language that older people do not understand. Do you understand the word codes in **text** messaging? For example, do you understand this message? GR8 2 C U * This is not meant to be secret code, but many people do not understand it.

● Personal codes

Only your close friends may understand your personal codes, like hand signs, lesson notes and the special meanings of the clothes you wear. Your clothes often show that you are in a certain mood or belong to a certain group. For example, what does it mean when you wear a T-shirt and jeans? It could be a code to tell other people that you are relaxed. Uniforms are formal clothes that give information about a person's school or job. Among soldiers, a uniform and its decorations give a lot of information about the soldier's position and abilities.



A child in uniform

A mistake in your choice of clothes is usually just embarrassing, but sometimes it is dangerous. A few years ago, **gang** members killed a young man in Los Angeles while he walked in the wrong part of the city wearing a red jacket. Red was the colour of another gang. Each gang painted symbols on local buildings to mark their space. This was another kind of code, but the young man probably could not understand their meaning or the danger he was in.

* GR8 2 C U: Great to see you.

text /tekst/ (n) the writing in a book or magazine (not the pictures)

gang /gæŋ/ (n) a group of people, especially trouble-makers or criminals

■ money and prices

But the most common codes and ciphers are in your wallet and they are used every day. Most paper money and bankcards include one or more code numbers to try to stop people printing or stealing money.

Secret codes are also used on almost everything you buy. Bar codes can be read by computer; they give information about the product, including its name and how much it costs. Two shops can use the same bar code on the same product, but decide to price it differently.



A bar code

Long before computers, though, there were other ways to hide information about prices. Shop managers sometimes used an easy-to-remember ten-letter word like *background* to write the cost of products. The letters in *background* represented the numbers *zero* to *nine*.

b	a	c	k	g	r	o	u	n	d
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

For example, the manager of a carpet shop could write the four letters *urad* on a carpet to show that it cost him £75.19. When a customer came into the shop, the manager could look at the code and start to discuss the price. The shop manager knew exactly what he could afford to charge.

■ Simple ciphers

Each letter or symbol in a simple cipher represents a different letter. In the simplest cipher, each of the twenty-six letters in the English **alphabet** represents a different letter, like the next letter. In this example, the letters are listed from the last to the first.

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
z	y	x	w	v	u	t	s	r	q	p	o	n
n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z
m	l	k	j	i	h	g	f	e	d	c	b	a

The message *Do you have a secret for me?* becomes *wl blf szev z hvxiug uli nv*. But cipher breakers might guess that single-letter words in the ciphered message

represent /ˌreprɪˈzɛnt/ (v) to be a sign for something

alphabet /ˈælfəbet/ (n) all the letters that are used when writing a language

Ken Beatty

British English

Original

For thousands of years people have used codes and ciphers to keep secrets from people who will do anything to learn them. How did secret messages cause a queen to lose her head? How have lost languages finally been understood? How did one little-known language help a country win a war? Read this book and find out.

Number of words (excluding activities): 18,395

Series Editors: Jocelyn Potter and Andy Hopkins

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Secret Codes

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ISBN 978-1-4058-5222-7



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