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# THE HIDDEN MESSAGE

A short story for  
learning to learn



# The Hidden Message

- **Theme:** Strategic thinking and learning from experience
- **Reading time:** 20 minutes
- **Level:** 8-12 years old

## SUMMARY

Sara, Olivia and Max discover a mysterious postcard that leads them on a quest full of enigmas and hidden messages. Using their wits, organisation and ability to question their ideas, they progress through a series of challenges to unravel a forgotten mystery. This adventure teaches them that the key to success lies in observing, analysing, and continually re-evaluating their strategies.

## KEYWORDS

observation, reasoning, analysis, organisation, critical thinking

## Chapter 1: The Unsolved Mystery

The sun was shining, and a warm summer breeze was blowing through the town. It was a typical Saturday morning. Sara, Olivia and Max were hanging out at the Riverview Community Centre, discussing their plans for the day.

As Sara listened, her mind kept returning to the detective novel she had just finished. She was still thinking about the twists and clues when something caught her eye: a worn postcard, half hidden between a stack of books on the coffee table.

She exclaimed, 'Hey, there's something stuck between those books, it looks like a postcard!'

As she pulled it out, she realised it wasn't just a postcard, but an old black-and-white photo of a building. Max leaned in to take a closer look. 'I recognise that building, but it looks a bit different now,' he said, frowning.

Sara took the photo from him and turned it over. Her eyes widened. 'Oh, look! There's writing on the back. It says, "Find the hidden message before it's too late."'

'What does that mean, and what's the hidden message?' Olivia asked curiously. Sara, who was always full of big ideas, began to explain, 'It must be a riddle or something we have to solve.'

Olivia then declared, 'It's time for us to investigate. Let's start our new adventure!'

Max, looking closely at the postcard, said, 'Let's go take a look inside the building in the photo. We can start by trying to find any hidden messages or symbols.'



### What about you?

- Did you notice how the friends took time to think about the postcard?
- How did brainstorming—sharing all the ideas that came to mind—help them figure out what to do next?
- Have you used brainstorming before?



**Can you explain how the friends made sure their plan was working and how they decided what to do next?**

**According to you, what is the mysterious message about? What would you do next to discover the meaning of all this?**

## Chapter 2: The Search Begins

That same day, the trio set off to investigate the building from the postcard. It stood at the edge of town, old and abandoned.

When they stepped inside, they noticed unusual symbols carved into the wooden doorframe.

Sara frowned, pulling out her notebook. ‘Before we try to figure this out, let’s **go over everything we’ve discovered so far.**’

Max nodded and flipped to a fresh page in his notebook. He started **summing up** their findings:

1. The black-and-white postcard
2. The message: *“Find the hidden message before it’s too late”*
3. The strange symbols carved into the doorframe

Olivia tapped her chin. ‘Alright, now let’s think. What do we still need to figure out?’

They took turns **asking questions**:

- \* ‘What kind of message could be hidden?’
- \* ‘Could the symbols be part of a code?’

- \* 'Have we seen these symbols anywhere else before?'

All three started thinking about the answers and **considering different possibilities**.

Max thought for a moment. 'If it is a code, maybe it leads to something important.'

Sara added, 'Or maybe the message isn't about the building itself, but about something inside it.'

Max suddenly gasped. 'Wait! The symbols on the doorframe—what if they match something we've already seen?' Olivia's eyes widened. 'Like the postcard!'

Max quickly pulled it from his pocket. They compared the markings. Sure enough, the same strange symbols were printed along the edges of the postcard.

'We were right!' Sara said excitedly. 'Now we just have to figure out what they mean.'

### What about you?

- Do you think it is helpful to go over everything you've learned before making a decision? Why?
- How do asking questions help you solve a mystery (or a problem in real life)?



**What do you think the symbols mean? How would you figure it out?**



### Chapter 3: Deciphering the Symbols

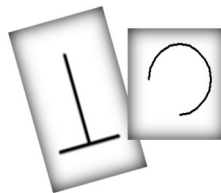
Sara studied the symbols closely, her brow furrowing in thought. ‘What if they’re part of a code?’ Max’s eyes lit up as an idea sparked in his mind. He had seen something like this in a puzzle book before! ‘Wait! Some codes use symbols to stand for letters or numbers. What if these symbols are part of the alphabet?’

Olivia’s face brightened. ‘That’s a great idea! And if it doesn’t work, we’ll try something else.’

Grabbing a magnifying glass, they leaned in closer, carefully studying both the postcard and the doorframe. Max pulled out his notebook and quickly sketched the strange symbols. Then, he started comparing their shapes to letters and numbers, searching for a pattern.

The three of them worked together, tossing around ideas. Sara double-checked each step, making sure they weren’t missing anything. Whenever they got stuck, she helped them stay organised and rethink their approach.

After a while, they had made a few discoveries: the letter **T** was flipped, the **O** was incomplete, and other letters had slight changes.



‘We’re onto something,’ Sara murmured, her excitement growing. ‘Now we just have to figure out what they spell.’

Max studied their notes one more time. Slowly, he connected the dots. His heart raced as the answer became clear.

‘It spells **TOWN HALL!**’ he exclaimed.

Sara gasped. ‘Of course!’

The trio double-checked their findings and nodded in agreement—the message indicated that it pointed to the town hall.

Olivia clapped her hands. ‘That makes so much sense! The old town hall has a tower—it’s one of the oldest buildings in town.’

Sara nodded. ‘Then that’s where we need to go! But before we head there, let’s take a moment to think about what we’ve done so far. Did our strategies work?’

Max thought for a moment. ‘We **planned** to match the symbols with letters, and that worked. When we got **stuck**, we reminded ourselves **to look at other clues**.’

Olivia added, ‘And we **didn’t rush**. We checked our progress along the way and **changed our strategy** when needed.’

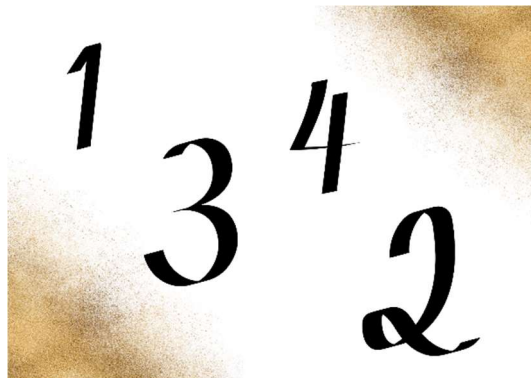
Sara smiled. ‘Good teamwork! Let’s meet tomorrow first thing in the morning at the old town hall!’

#### What about you?

- Do you ever think about what worked and what didn’t when solving a problem? Why is that helpful?
- Why do you think the friends kept checking their progress? How does that help when you’re trying to complete something important?

## Chapter 4: A New Discovery

The following day, the three friends arrived at the town hall. At the entrance, they found the random numbers 4, 3, 2 and 1.



The trio looked at the numbers curiously, as they had encountered something similar before. Max suggested that they use **the 5 whys technique** to move forward.

Max explained, 'It involves noting down 5 whys about the numbers, and each answer will lead to the next question.' 'Oh! That's an exciting strategy to use, let's begin,' said Sara. Together, they thought of some questions:

- \* **Why** are there random numbers on the wall?
- \* **Why** only numbers? Are they connected to a clue, letters or words?
- \* **Why** are the numbers not repeated?
- \* **Why** do the numbers appear to be random? Could they be a code or pattern?
- \* **Why** are the numbers not aligned or grouped?

They noted the numbers and climbed the stairs to the top of the town hall tower. Light filled the small room, and as they entered, their footsteps echoed in the empty space.

There, they found an old rusty chest. Max took out his book and tried to open the lock on the chest using the numbers from the entry. Unfortunately, the chest would not open, and the three friends were disappointed.



Olivia remembered the questions they had written down and said, 'Maybe they're related to another clue?' As Max examined the rusty chest with his magnifying glass, he spotted a symbol that could represent the plus sign. The trio added the numbers together, but the lock did not open. After several attempts, they decided to add each number on its own, which gave them 2, 6, 8 and 4. That was the winning combination!

Max carefully turned the knob of the chest, and with a creak, the chest clicked open. Inside the chest, they found a journal. Max opened it, and there was a note that said

**"To uncover the truth, you must observe, question, and connect the pieces. Only those who think beyond the obvious will see the hidden path."**

The trio sat down, and Max started jotting down what they knew:

1. The numbers on the wall
2. The clue, adding up the numbers which were used to open the chest
3. The message on the journal: "Observe, question and connect the pieces."

Sara thoughtfully said, ‘The journal is asking us to observe, and maybe there are more clues.’

### What about you?

- Are you familiar with the 5 whys technique?
- The three friends jotted down everything they knew, and this helped them plan and analyse their next steps. Does it also work for you?



**What do you think happens next? What does the word found in the chest mean?**

## Chapter 5: A Hidden Key

The three friends decided to scan the inside of the chest. Max, with his magnifying glass, noticed some faded markings inside the chest and some tiny dots on the grid. Olivia speculated, ‘It’s a pattern, and it’s on the floor, too.’

Sara and Max approached the tile on the floor that appeared to be loose. They carefully lifted the tile, revealing a tiny brass key underneath. The group gathered around and began searching for something that could be unlocked using the key. Sara, Olivia and Max moved around, searching for the lock. Olivia spotted an old cabinet tucked against the wall. Max inserted the key, and to his great surprise, it worked! Inside the cabinet were:



1. a map of the town with an X mark near the edge of the forest
2. a handwritten note that said:

**“The truth lies where the light meets the trees. Follow the map, and trust the process.”**

Olivia grinned, ‘This must be our next clue.’

It was a long day of solving puzzles and strategising, so the trio decided to meet the following day. However, before they left, they took a moment to reflect on their

progress. Sara declared, ‘Tomorrow, let’s head to the edge of the forest and see where the map leads us.’

The following day, Sara, Max and Olivia gathered at the forest’s edge with the map in their hand. The trio could not hold their excitement, and the message in the journal echoed in their minds: *“The truth lies where the light meets the trees.”*

Max, the planner, suggested, ‘Before we go in, let’s think about the strategy we can use to work smart and not get lost.’

Sara pulled out the notebook and started listing:

1. Stay together and follow the map
2. Take notes and constantly rethink
3. Reflect on the clues
4. Jot down discoveries

The forest was quiet except for the soft crunch of leaves beneath their feet. They walked carefully, following the map. Soon, they stumbled upon a tree with markings on it; these were identical to those on the postcard and chest. Using the magnifying glass, they noted the symbols and started decoding them.

There was a triangle, a crescent moon, the numbers 7 and 1, and several letters—Z and R were upside down, while G and E were flipped.



**And you, can you decipher the symbols? How will you proceed?**

The friends gathered around, brainstorming what the symbols could mean. They quickly noticed a pattern—the letters seemed tilted or reversed.

Olivia scribbled them down and rearranged them. ‘We have **A, C, L, I, N, R, G, and E,**’ she said.

Sara frowned. ‘This isn’t a word... it looks all mixed up.’ Max thought for a moment. ‘Remember what the journal said? “Connect the pieces.” Maybe the letters form a word we’ve already come across.’

The trio stared at the letters, thinking hard. Then, all at once, their faces lit up. ‘It spells **CLEARING!**’ exclaimed Max and Sara. Olivia wondered, ‘What’s a clearing?’ Sara explained that it’s an open, unobstructed area in a forest or wood where sunlight reaches the ground.

### What about you?

- The three friends used the associative technique to connect the code to the letters. Have you ever tried using the associative technique?

## Chapter 6: The Clearing

The trio followed the direction of the wooden marker until they reached a **small clearing** where beams of sunlight cut through the trees. In the centre lay a **half-buried wooden box**.

Max, mindful of the past discoveries, wondered:

- \* ‘Why is the box here?’
- \* What could it contain, and how is it connected to the journal?’

Sara dug carefully, brushing off the dirt, and together, they lifted the box. It had a **number lock**—three digits this time.

Olivia reminded them, ‘Let’s look at the journal again. Maybe it holds a clue we’ve missed.’

Sara flipped through and gasped. ‘Here! There’s a faint line under three numbers: **4, 3, and 2**. That must be the combination!’

Max turned the dial to 4-3-2, and with a satisfying **click**, the box opened.

Inside was an **old letter** wrapped in velvet. Sara read it aloud:

‘Congratulations, young explorers. You’ve cracked the mystery through patience, teamwork, and curiosity. This is not the end but the beginning of your adventures. The world is full of puzzles waiting to be solved—keep observing, questioning, and reflecting.’

Underneath the letter was a small **bronze compass**; it was an ancient compass that belonged to a traveller. The trio decided to take it to the leisure centre and preserve it there as a token of their journey into solving mysteries.



After that, the trio sat together, reflecting on their adventure. Each of them questioned and analysed the decisions that they took to move ahead.

- ✓ **Sara:** ‘We solved the mystery because we kept questioning everything. The 5 Why’s helped us dig deeper.’
- ✓ **Max:** ‘Planning and tracking our progress made sure we didn’t miss any clues.’
- ✓ **Olivia:** ‘When we got stuck, we reflected and adjusted our strategies—like decoding symbols and revisiting the journal.’

Sara concluded, ‘This adventure taught us so many important strategies that could be used to dig deeper into solving problems.’

Olivia grinned, ‘This summer has been amazing! I can’t wait to see what adventures await us at school.’

The friends laughed, the forest echoing with their excitement. They had uncovered the hidden message, but more importantly, they had discovered the power of **teamwork** and **critical thinking**.

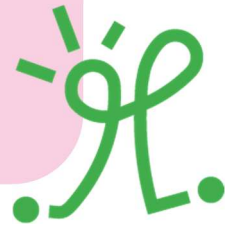
### What about you?

- The three friends reflected on the events that they experienced. Is it important to have this reflection? Do you think back on your experiences? How does it help?

### Today, I learnt...

The friends solved the riddle using the following:

- Observing the clues carefully.
- Organising and planning their progress.
- Questioning their hypotheses to adapt to new discoveries.



### Questions for reflection

- Why is it important to think about different approaches to solving a problem?
- How does the '5 Whys' technique help you analyse a situation?
- Why is it useful to check and adjust your strategies when faced with a difficult puzzle?

## QUIZ

### Question 1

When they found the postcard, what was the first thing they did?

1. Immediately set off to find the building.
2. Read and analyse the message before taking action.
3. Ask an adult to tell them what to do.
4. Throw the card away, thinking it was useless.



Which approach do you think works best?

### Question 2

What technique did they use to work out the numbers on the wall?

1. They guessed without thinking.
2. They used the '5 Whys' technique to analyse the clues.
3. They asked someone else to solve the riddle for them.
4. They chose a code at random.



When you're faced with a problem, do you prefer to organise your ideas or improvise?

### Question 3

Why did they manage to open the box in the end?

1. Because they used reflection and observation.
2. Because they broke into the box.
3. Because they were lucky.
4. Because they asked for help without trying themselves.



How do you approach a challenge that seems difficult at first?

## TOOLBOX

**These tools and exercises can help you in the way you learn.**

**We all learn in different ways.**

**Choose the tool that best suits your needs.**

You can download the tools on the website of the project.

### 1/ Brainstorming

**Objective: Plan your learning better, check what you already know, and find ways to overcome difficulties**

Use brainstorming when you have a difficult task, want to learn something new, or just want to think about how your learning is going and what you can do to make it even better! This tool will help you understand how your brain works when you're learning.

### 2/ ASCQ strategy

**Objective: Evaluation, self-revision, self-reinforcement**

This critical reflecting activity helps you learn how to take responsibility of your own writing, to improve your text's outcome and to enhance your self-reflection skills. It presents the metacognitive strategy ASCQ - **ASk** and **AnSwEr Critical Questions**, which shall guide you to improve your arguments in an argumentative text.

### 3/ Reflection diaries

**Objective: Learning planning, time management**

Before the learning process begins, you will fill in the chart with all relevant information. This way you will get an idea of the time needed for doing the activity and the steps on how to finish the activity.

## 4/ Six thinking hats

### **Objective: Changing perspectives**

You can use this tool when you need to talk about a problem, an idea, or a story in a group. It helps you see things in different ways and decide together what's best.



CogniQuest is a project created by organisations and schools from Belgium, Croatia, France, Greece and Poland.

Together, they have developed tools to help you think about your thinking. This is called metacognition - a fancy word that means “learning how to learn”.

Through these tales, you’ll discover different ways to solve problems, stay focused, and reflect on how you learn best.

Explore the whole CogniQuest collections on the website of the project:

[www.cogniquet.eu](http://www.cogniquet.eu)



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