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# THE PUZZLE OF THE LOST KEY

A short story for  
learning to learn



# The Puzzle of the Lost Key

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

## SUMMARY

Max, Sara, and Olivia discover a mysterious box containing a key that appears to unlock a strange door. Determined to unlock its secret, they embark on a methodical investigation, analysing clues, devising strategies and re-evaluating their approaches. As their adventure unfolds, they discover that beyond the mystery, the key teaches them the importance of thought and organisation in solving puzzles.

## KEYWORDS

analysis, organisation, reflection, perseverance, strategy

## Chapter 1: The Mysterious Puzzle

It was a warm Saturday morning, and the sun was shining brightly. Max, Sara, and Olivia sat at their secret spot under the oak tree in the park, talking about how well their school project had gone. As laughter filled the air, Max suddenly remembered the real reason he had called them there. He pulled out a small ornate box from his backpack. It was made out of wood with intricate carvings on it. 'I found this old box in the attic,' he said. 'Did you find something inside?' asked Sara. 'There was a small key, and I've tried, but it doesn't open anything in my house,' replied Max.

'Strange!' said Olivia. 'I feel it's a part of something bigger,' Max stated. 'What if this is our new adventure?' Olivia wondered excitedly.

Sara raised an eyebrow, intrigued. 'What do you mean? Like a treasure hunt?'

'I don't know,' Max replied, 'but there's this strange symbol on the key. I also conducted some research, and I discovered a clue while reading an old book. It mentions a hidden room in the park, accessible only with a special key. This must be it!'



Olivia, who was a little nervous, examined the key closely. 'You did some research, and that's a great idea. But how are we going to figure this out? What if we never find the right lock?'

Max felt a little low; 'I don't know. We have to look around and hope we find something that matches the description.'

Sara, thinking about her previous experiences, suggested, 'Before we move ahead, we should take a step back and analyse what we know so far. How can we approach this?'

Olivia frowned thoughtfully, twirling a strand of her curly hair, ‘We should think about how we proceed. We need to plan and define the steps, so we don’t miss out on any clues.’

Max and Sara looked at Olivia, surprised by her suggestion. ‘What do you mean?’ Max asked.

Olivia explained, ‘Instead of rushing into the mystery, let’s reflect on how we’re going to solve it. Let’s talk about what we know, what we’re unsure about, and how we can approach this logically.’

### What about you?

- Can you remember an incident when you reflected on how to deal with it best? Did it help you look at the problem differently?
- How do you respond to new situations? Do you dive in or take time to analyse the problem?

## Chapter 2: The Big Plan

The three friends sat down under a tree, and Olivia started making a list of what they already knew on her notepad:

1. Max found a box in his attic containing a key
2. The key doesn’t open any rooms, chests, or drawers in Max’s house
3. A special symbol decorates the key
4. According to the book, a hidden room can be unlocked with this very key

Max added, ‘I forgot to mention, the book also contained a map of the park.

Unfortunately, it was hard to read as it was quite old. There are some markings on the map, and I think those are clues.’

Sara carefully jotted down every detail on her notepad. ‘Great! Now, let’s think about what we don’t know. We don’t know where the room is or how to interpret the map,’ Olivia summed up.

Sara thought for a moment. 'What should our first step be?'

'Analysing the map!' Max said eagerly.

Olivia smiled. 'Okay, great! So first, let's look at the map. Do you notice anything out of the ordinary?'

Sara looked at the old, faded map. She noticed, 'There are some inscriptions around the park, near the old fountain, but they're not very clear. It looks like we'll have to go there and figure it out.'

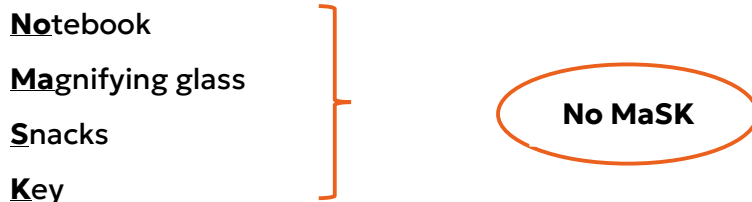


'We know the fountain very well, so we can start there,' Sara suggested.

Olivia guided them again. She asked, 'Before we rush ahead, let's pause and reflect. Do we have all the necessary tools to figure this out? Should we bring something with us?'

Max thought about it. 'We'll need a magnifying glass to look at the map, a notebook, snacks and the key.'

'That's a lot to remember, but we can use an acronym method', suggested Olivia. She wrote an example on her notepad:



The three friends gathered all the supplies, took a moment to reflect on the plan, and set out towards the fountain.



### What about you?

- Like the acronym method, do you also have strategies to remember important details or steps?
- The three friends gathered their tools and planned before starting. Do you also plan to save time and avoid mistakes?



**Can you guess what happens next? What do you think they will find in the park?**

## Chapter 3: Solving the puzzle

The trio reached the fountain and started their search. They began scrutinising the fountain and its surroundings. Max used his magnifying glass to study the faint markings on the map. Sara and Olivia inspected the surroundings of the fountain for any inconsistencies.

Sara spoke up, ‘This feels like a wild goose chase. We’ve looked everywhere around the fountain and found nothing.’

Olivia nodded, reflecting on their efforts. ‘Let’s think for a moment. What have we learned so far?’

‘We know there are markings on the map that indicate a room that can be opened with the key. The room is supposed to be in this park, somewhere close to the fountain,’ Max summed up.

‘What else can we try?’ Sara asked.

Max rubbed his chin. ‘We might be missing something. What if the key goes somewhere else? What if we misunderstood the map?’

Sara suddenly had an idea. ‘What if the room isn’t hidden in plain sight? Maybe the clue isn’t about something nearby that we missed but about the fountain itself.’



Max was puzzled. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well... it might be a wild guess, but...’ Sara wondered. ‘What if the key unlocks a hidden compartment within the fountain? We haven’t tried using the key yet, and maybe that’s where it’s supposed to fit!’

The trio took a step back and reflected on what they had accomplished so far. They then reconsidered their options to take the right steps. Now, with **renewed focus**, they decided to try the key in the fountain.

After closely inspecting the fountain with his magnifying glass, Max found the same symbol as the one on the key. Right in the middle, a small slot that they hadn’t noticed before appeared. Max slid the key into the lock, and to their surprise, the key turned. The fountain’s base began to move, revealing a hidden underground passage!

The trio looked down the passage in surprise. ‘This is incredible! I never thought there could be a secret passage right here, right under the fountain!’ declared Max.

Max decided to explore the passage. Olivia and Sara looked hesitant but decided to follow Max into the passage.

#### What about you?

- When you have difficulties finding an answer to a task, do you sometimes step back and take the time to reflect on the clues?
- Does this help you to think of another way to approach the challenge?



What do you think is in the hidden room?

## Chapter 4: The Hidden Room

The trio descended into the passage. It was dimly lit. Dust bits swirled in the air, and a scent of old paper and leather bindings filled their noses. Shelves of ancient volumes lined the chamber, and strange artefacts—jade amulets, worn scroll cases, and ornate quill pens—rested on wooden tables.

On the walls hung faded portraits of figures in old-fashioned clothing. Olivia recognised the style of dress from a history book. Sara pointed at one of the portraits, 'Hey, that's John Dewey, a thinker, educationalist, scholar and one of the earliest settlers in this region.' Sara ran her finger along the edge of a shelf, leaving a clean line in the dust. 'I remember reading about him,' she said. 'He lived here over a century ago, preserving knowledge during a time when travelling scholars risked losing important works to fire, war, or decay.'



Max pulled a large volume from a shelf and flipped through its yellowed pages. Within the margins, careful handwriting noted observations on plants and animals that no longer populated the area, records of old trades between towns, and sketches of machinery that predated their modern tools. He ran a finger over the inked lines. 'It's like a time capsule,' he whispered, 'a snapshot of the past left behind for someone who cared enough to look.'

In a small alcove, Sara found a rolled parchment sealed with an ancient wax stamp. When she carefully pried it open, they saw it was a hand-drawn map of the region from centuries ago—rivers in different courses, forests that had since been cut down, and unfamiliar landmarks. The notes in the margins were in Dewey's handwriting, describing local legends of hidden knowledge buried underground so that when times changed, people could rediscover their roots and learn from ancient wisdom.

'This room wasn't just hidden for fun,' Olivia said, her voice hushed. 'It was deliberately concealed to protect and preserve history. John Dewey and others like him must have built this secret library to ensure future generations wouldn't lose touch with their past.'



Standing in the quiet underground chamber, the trio realised they had stumbled upon more than a puzzle; they had uncovered a tangible connection to those who came before them. The books, artefacts, and notes here tell the story of a community's heritage. This secret place is an archive of knowledge waiting to be rediscovered.

The trio decided to share the information about this hidden place and the rich heritage of their town with everyone.

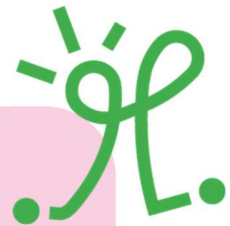
### What about you?

- When the three friends find themselves in a new situation, they take the time to list the collected new information and try to organise it.
- Is it something you often do? Will this help you to become a better learner?

### What should we remember?

According to the friends, to solve a mystery, you:

- Organise and plan to structure your research
- Reflect on and analyse your strategies to make adjustments
- Evaluate your progress to avoid getting stuck



### Questions for reflection

- Why is it important to take time to think before you act when faced with a problem?
- Do you think memorisation techniques such as acronyms can help in complex situations?
- How can re-evaluating a strategy help you avoid going in the wrong direction? Have you used this technique before?

## QUIZ

### Question 1

When Max found the box, what was the group's first reaction?

1. They immediately tried to open every door in the house.
2. They took time to think and analyse the clues.
3. They looked for an answer on the Internet.
4. They gave up, thinking it was just a box with no point.



**Which approach do you think works best?**

### Question 2

Why did they use an acronym to prepare their expedition?

1. To have fun with letters.
2. To make it easy to remember what they had to take with them.
3. Because they wanted to impress someone.
4. Because they didn't know how to organise their equipment.



**What tools do you use to remember important information?**

### Question 3

Why did they manage to open the trapdoor under the fountain?

1. Because they thought about it and tried out different possibilities.
2. Because they found the solution by chance.
3. Because they forced the fountain to open.
4. Because they asked someone else to do it for them.



**How do you think when a solution doesn't work the first time?**

## 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/ The KWL tool

**Objective: Collaborative reflection, self-monitoring, planning and organising, making connections, critical thinking and evaluation**

This activity encourages you to observe, reflect, and connect your real-world experiences with classroom learning.

### 2/ Comic

**Objective: Reflection, monitoring, metacognitive learning strategy**

Comics can be used to express your ideas with images, often combined with text or other visual information. The mix of art and storytelling can entertain, inform, or provoke reflection.

### 3/ Photo captions

**Objective: Collaborative reflection, self-monitoring, planning and organising, making connections, critical thinking and evaluation**

This activity encourages you to observe, reflect, and connect your real-world experiences with classroom learning.



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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Code project: 2023-1-FR01-KA220-SCH-000158225