

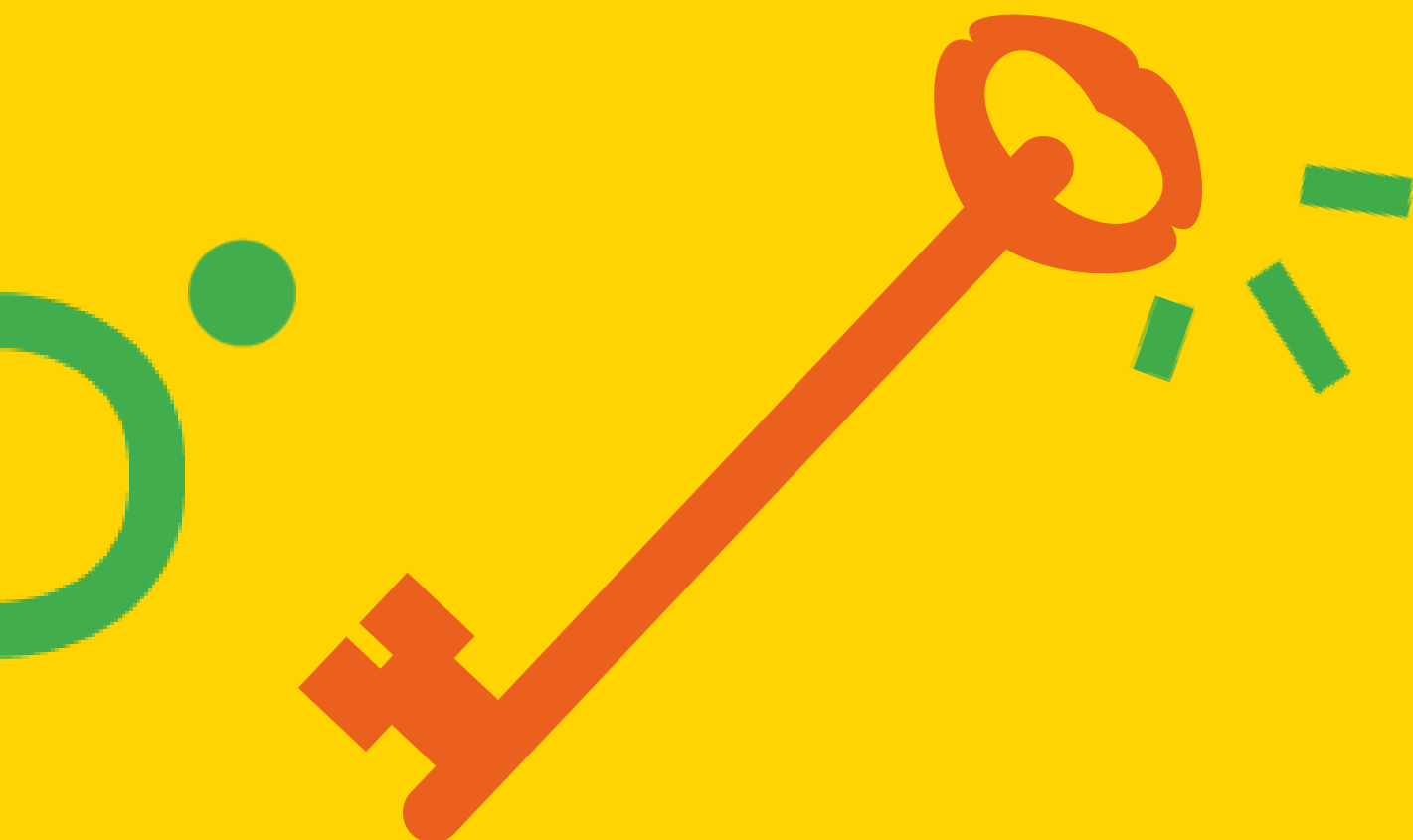


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THE SECRET KEY

A short story for
learning to learn



The Secret Key

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

SUMMARY

Olivia, Max and Sara discover a mysterious key at the top of a hill. Guided by clues and riddles, they must use thinking and collaborative strategies to solve an ancient mystery. Along the way, they learn to analyse problems, organise their discoveries and learn from their mistakes. Their adventure shows them that the key to success is often about how you approach challenges.

KEYWORDS

analysis, organisation, reflection, perseverance, strategy

Chapter 1: Discovering The Key

As the sun set and the dusk breeze hit the lanes of Riverview, three friends, Olivia, Sara, and Max, were riding up a small mountain on their bikes. Summers were always spent biking, swimming, chasing, and doing other fun activities. As they reached the mountain top, they parked their bikes and lay on a green patch while staring at the sky.

Max, the keen observer, was lost in thought when suddenly a sparkling object caught his eye. He sprang to his feet and tried to get a better look. What he saw was quite intriguing. The sparkling object was a golden key with beautiful engravings. It had an unusual shape and was unlike anything Max had seen before.



Olivia and Sara came running, eager to find out more about Max's discovery. Sara, with her overflowing imagination, started spinning some stories around the key. She wondered, 'What if it's the key to open the castle or a treasure?'. After discussing the possibilities, they all agreed that the best way to solve the mystery was to explore the area. Sara then exclaimed, 'Let's begin our quest!'

With great enthusiasm, the group hurried down the mountain on their bikes, carrying the mysterious key. As they made their way to the Riverview Leisure Centre, they continued to excitedly guess the key's secrets.

Once they reached their destination, Olivia took the key out of her pocket. That's when she felt something unusual about it. 'There is something on this key... This engraving is different from any other', she stated. Max immediately pulled out a magnifying glass from his bag and looked closely. He found a small text that looked like a riddle. It said:

"A stretched path hangs above,

It will lead you to me.

When you walk across,

You will unravel the mystery."

While Max was reading it aloud, Olivia and Sara thought hard to make connections. Nothing seemed to work. But then Olivia remembered what her teacher had taught

her: **breaking the task into smaller sections helps to make meaningful connections.** ‘We can try breaking down the riddle to analyse it’, Olivia then suggested. Max reread it: ‘A stretched path hangs above; it will lead you to me.’

‘What can this be?’ asked Max anxiously. Sara thought for a moment and questioned, ‘It is a path, and it is hung, and when we take that, we go across.’ Max and Olivia excitedly answered, ‘It is the hanging bridge!’. Confidently, Max, Olivia, and Sara bid each other adieu and decided to meet near the bridge the next day to unlock the secrets of the mysterious key.



What about you?

- Do you break down tasks or riddles to make them easier to understand?
- What do you do when you have to work on a complicated task?

Chapter 2: The Hidden Castle

The next day, the trio reached the bridge with great anticipation. Across the hanging bridge, a canopy of trees seemed to stretch for miles. Sara, who was a little anxious about the height of the bridge and the unknown on the other side, asked, ‘Is it safe to go there?’. The others reassured her as much as they could. Together, they crossed the bridge to the other side. The sun was peeking through the thick canopy, casting spotlights on the ground. Carefully, the trio moved ahead and reached a castle hidden among the trees.

They cautiously approached the large building. There, right in front of them, a door appeared. Olivia took out the key and placed it in the lock. All three of them watched eagerly as the key turned in the lock. When they heard a definite click, it was clear that their entrance was granted. The door opened with a creak. As they stepped inside, it felt like entering a world untouched by time. Dusty drapes framed enormous stained-glass windows, casting faded colours on the stone floor. A wide staircase led upward beneath a vaulted ceiling where a chandelier hung, its crystals catching the faint light.



Olivia broke the silence. 'This place... it feels so old. Do you think we're the first to set foot here in a long time?'

Max, ever the sceptic, narrowed his eyes. 'I wouldn't be surprised. The key led us here, and if the riddle's any indication, this castle is meant to be a mystery. But there's something off about it. It's almost too quiet.'

Sara, however, seemed to be amazed. 'I don't know, I think it's beautiful! Look at all these details! This place must have a story to tell.'

They crept forward across the creaking floorboard. At the centre of the room stood an old table that had a puzzle on it. The trio moved closer to the puzzle and started to inspect it. The puzzle was unlike anything they had ever seen before; it was made of a strange mix of gears, symbols, and engravings. The corners of the puzzle were connected. Sara and Max took the corners and pulled them open, revealing the centre of the puzzle. A set of blocks, each with different symbols, appeared in the centre, all seeming to follow a precise sequence.

Olivia leaned in, furrowing her brows. 'Okay, these seem very familiar to me; I am sure to have seen this somewhere.' Sara pointed to a series of symbols that were carved on the wall near an enigmatic door. She exclaimed, 'These are the same as the puzzle!'. Max closely examined them and said, 'Yes, but they are arranged in a different order.'

Olivia squinted and leaned in closer. 'You're right!' she said. 'These symbols match the ones on the puzzle. But they're not in the same order. Maybe we need to figure out how to arrange them properly.'

The trio stood there for a moment, pondering how to solve the puzzle before them. It was as if the castle itself was challenging them to discover its secrets, testing their minds and their ability to work together.

'We need a plan,' Max said after a pause. 'Let's take it step by step to figure out where each symbol belongs.'

Olivia nodded, her eyes bright with determination. 'Together, we can do this. **We need to stay focused and keep track of the clues. One step at a time.**'

Sara smiled. 'Let's solve this puzzle and see where it leads us.'

With renewed purpose, the trio set to work. As they began to decipher the puzzle's pattern and move the pieces, the sound of a distant click echoed through the stone walls. They were indeed on the right track. The room seemed to hold its breath as the pieces fell into place. Something shifted. They turned to look at the door once more; had it moved? Had their actions triggered something? The air around them seemed charged with anticipation. To their great amazement, the door at the back of the entrance hall opened. They walked through it and discovered that it led to a big chamber, a hall where three more doors appeared.



They realised they had solved the first part of the puzzle, but that there were other games to solve.

‘We’re on the right track,’ Max said with excitement. ‘This is only the beginning.’

The trio exchanged glances and prepared to uncover the castle’s deepest secrets.

What about you?

- How do you react when you have to solve a difficult puzzle?
- When you try to solve a puzzle, do you take the time to think about the best way to solve it, or do you dive in and see where it goes?

Chapter 3: The plan

Having entered the big chamber, the three friends were considering their next steps. They realised they would need more indications to complete their quest. Olivia, the planner, suggested, ‘I think we should spread out to find more clues.’ Max and Sara followed Olivia’s request and separated to check the main entrance and the big chamber for more clues. Max found an old ledger with faded writings. Sara uncovered a journal near the window, and Olivia found torn pieces of what seemed to be a map lying on the floor.

As she pieced it together, she realised that it was a map of the castle, showing different parts of the castle and its hidden rooms. When they regrouped, Max suggested, ‘We need to organise what we have found.’

Max began to make the following list:

- **What we have found:**
 - ✓ An old ledger
 - ✓ A journal
 - ✓ Torn pieces of a map.
- **What we don't know:**
 - ✗ The purpose of the map
 - ✗ If there are clues in the ledger
 - ✗ The contents of the journal

Sara, who was better at imagining stories, suggested that the only way to make sense of their findings was to note down questions related to the clues and connect them. They each took turns listing the clues and brainstorming the possibilities of where the clues could lead them.

They examined the map pieces more carefully. Max suggested, 'We need to plan, and we can't guess. Let's first organise the clues by location and importance, and then prioritise the one that might be the most important.'

Olivia agreed. She was amazed at Max's clever plan and asked him where he had learned this. Max replied, 'It's a technique that helps us **to plan our missions according to their importance.**'

Sara also suggested, 'If we break the task into smaller tasks, it will surely help us. Just like the riddle.'

Together, they brainstormed, planned and organised. Once their plan was set, they decided to start with the room marked on the map called "The Monitoring Chamber." This was the first location indicated on the map, and they undoubtedly believed that it could provide them with more insight into the castle's layout.



They moved closely and entered the chamber, which was surprisingly unlocked. Max checked the old ledger for notes about the chamber while Sara inspected the journal. The chamber was small but peculiar, with shelves filled with old books, and in the centre was a table. It was covered with drawings, charts, and a map with movable markers.

‘This is interesting,’ said Max, ‘It looks like the actual map of the castle.’ Carefully, they looked into the map and realised that the ledgers had references to the symbols they had seen earlier. They matched the symbols to the map’s markers, which corresponded to different rooms. When they aligned the markers, a drawer in the table popped open, revealing a key and another clue: **‘Sometimes, you have to retrace your steps to find the right path.’**

‘This clue is telling us to revisit something,’ Olivia said. ‘Maybe it’s telling us to go back to the hall to check the next room?’ ‘What is the name of the other room?’ asked Max curiously.

‘It’s called “The Reflection Hall”’, Sara pointed out. ‘It’s marked right here on the map, and the name sounds meaningful.’

What about you?

- When you are very busy and you have a lot of things to do, do you try to think about what is important and what is not?
- Do you then do the most important activities first?

Chapter 4: The Reflection Hall

After opening the second door of the hall, the trio entered the Reflection Hall. It was dimly lit and decorated with mirrors of different sizes. Each mirror was framed in ornate carvings, making it unlike any other regular mirror. As Max approached a mirror, he was surprised to find that it did not reflect his appearance! Instead, it depicted vivid scenes from the past, including his actions, decisions, and doubts during the journey.

‘This is strange!’ he exclaimed. It showed him while he was giving up on a difficult math problem during a school test. In turn, Olivia approached the mirror as well. It revealed the confusion she had experienced during their first puzzle-solving challenge. ‘Maybe the purpose of these mirrors is not to remind us of our mistakes but rather to show us what we’ve learnt.’ said Olivia thoughtfully.



Sara's mirror showed her doubts about joining the adventure and the team. She admitted, 'Yes, I was sceptical about joining in, and I almost didn't come. Additionally, I was worried that I would hold everyone back.'

Olivia, Max and Sara understood that **mistakes and doubts are a part of the process**. Every time they faced a challenge, they found a solution and moved forward. Olivia nodded, 'Maybe these mirrors are reminding us to focus on what we have gained.'

The trio started sharing their reflections, thinking deeply and pondering their journeys. 'I have learned that giving up too quickly makes things harder.', Max admitted. 'If I am stuck, I need to prepare for the challenges and face the situations.'

Sara added, 'I have realised that my fears do not define me, and I can face challenges and even contribute in ways that I possibly did not think I would.'

Olivia smiled. 'And I've learned that staying focused and believing in a team is more powerful than trying to do everything on my own.'

As they voiced their thoughts, Max saw a clue in the faded letters of the ledger and read:

"Growth is the key to opening every locked door on your path."

When she heard these words, Sara remembered reading the exact same sentence in the journal. She also recalled finding a number on that very page. Sara frowned and looked through the pages. She then said excitedly, 'I knew I had seen this before! The number next to the sentence is 4! I think we should be looking for something related to the number!' Olivia immediately scanned the room and found a drawer labelled with the number 4. She opened it and found another key. A tag attached to it revealed the name of the next chamber.

Chapter 5: A moment of crisis

As the final chamber was locked, Max tried to insert the key they had found. Unfortunately, it wouldn't turn; 'It's stuck,' stated Max with frustration.



Olivia suggested, 'Let's take a moment to think and analyse what we have learned so far.' 'Maybe we don't need to use the key to open the door,' said Olivia.

Sara examined the door. 'Look! The engravings are the same as the patterns in all the chambers.' Max's eyes lit up, 'The key also has similar engravings.' 'What if we just place the key on the engraving?'

They reflected on their past experiences and retraced their steps. As soon as they placed the key on the engravings, a loud click echoed through the castle, and the door opened with a creak.

The three friends stepped inside the chamber; it was a simple room with a table, with a note that read:

"The final step is often the simplest one."

'What does that mean?' Max wondered aloud. Sara thought for a moment, 'Maybe it says not to overthink and that the answer is right in front of us.'

Sara stepped back, her mind racing. 'Maybe we missed something. Did we do something wrong?'

The tension in the air thickened. Doubts began to surface. Sara noticed something and said, 'There is a symbol shaped like a diamond on the note. That must be a clue!' Sara said as she glanced around the room. There, right in front of her, she saw it! 'I found a marking that looks like a diamond!' screamed Sara.



Max, Olivia, and Sara stood in front of the wall with the markings and tried pushing against the diamond form. After a few attempts, the wall opened, leading them to another chamber. This chamber was grand, with towering shelves and intricate carvings on the walls. In the centre of the room was a treasure chest. They opened it with great curiosity and found historical remnants of the town, including the stories of the people of Riverview, the town's plan, and many other valuable documents.

As they gathered all their precious findings and left the castle, the golden key still gleamed. It was not just an object but a representation of the experiences, decisions, and friendships they had experienced during this adventure. The treasure they had

found was not an object to possess, but it was the preciousness of wisdom, teamwork, and self-awareness.

What about you?

- Have you ever retraced the events or steps to solve or analyse a problem?
- Have you ever thought about the mistakes that you have made and tried to figure out how you could have avoided them?

Today, I learnt...

The friends succeeded by using the following tips:

- Organise and plan so that you do the actions in the correct order
- Take the time to break down difficult challenges to solve them
- Reflect on mistakes to learn and grow
- Persevere – even small steps can lead to big wins!



Questions for reflection

- Why is it helpful to make a list of what you know and what you don't know?
- How did the planning help the friends to solve the riddles?
- Have you ever learnt anything important by going back over your mistakes?

QUIZ

Question 1

When did the friends find the key? What was their first move?

1. They immediately looked for a lock.
2. They thought about what the key could mean by analysing the clues.
3. They tried to open several doors at random.
4. They gave up thinking it was useless.



Which approach do you think works best?

Question 2

What strategy did they use to solve the riddle of the symbols?

1. They guessed the solution at random.
2. They compared the symbols with those on the wall and organised their ideas.
3. They mixed up the symbols without a precise plan.
4. They waited for a clue to appear on its own.



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

Question 3

When they reached the last door, why did they change their approach?

1. Because they remembered their past experiences.
2. Because they tried to use force.
3. Because they wanted to give up.
4. Because they asked someone else for help.



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

TOOLBOX

This exercise can help you in the way you learn.

We all learn in different ways.

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

1/ Generative knowledge interviewing

Objective: Self-awareness, pattern recognition, making connections between experiences, reflection, critical thinking

This activity helps you reflect on the way you think and act when you face problems or challenges. By telling short stories about real-life situations and talking about them with a partner, you will discover the strategies you use without even realising it.



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



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