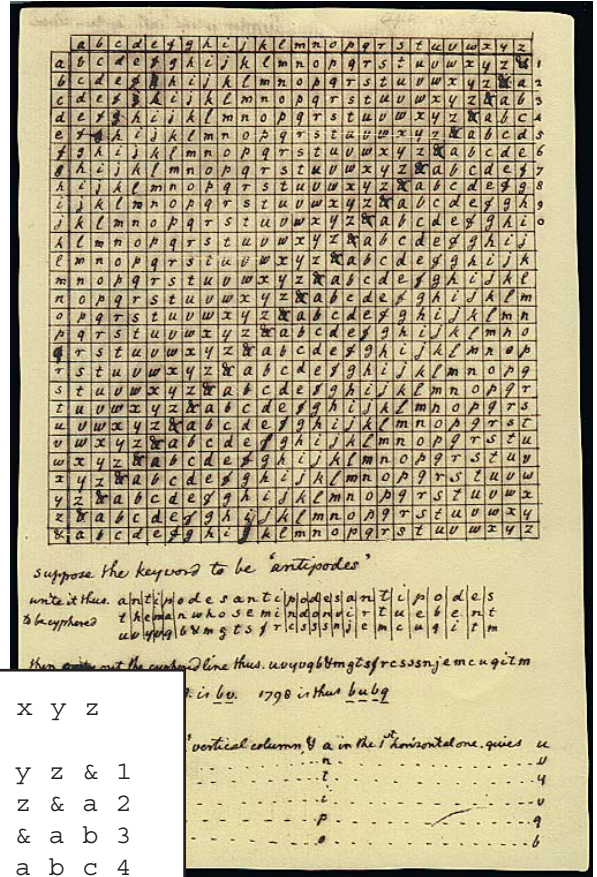


# Writing in Code: Thomas Jefferson & Meriwether Lewis

When the plans were laid for the exploration of lands beyond the Mississippi River, even Congress was not fully informed about Lewis and Clark's mission. British and Spanish spies still hoped to claim rights to the lands where the Corps of Discovery planned to explore. It was important, then, for President Jefferson and Captain Meriwether Lewis to have some way of communicating about the Corps' progress in secret.

President Jefferson sent Captain Lewis a system of secret writing on April 30, 1803. In this letter, Jefferson provided a 28-column alphanumeric table and explained how it could be used to translate a message with a special keyword.



a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& 1
b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a 2	
c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b 3		
d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c 4			
e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d 5				
f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e 6					
g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f 7						
h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g 8							
i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h 9								
j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i 0									
k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j										
l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k											
m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l												
n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m													
o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n														
p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o															
q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p																
r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q																	
s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r																		
t	u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s																			
u	v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t																				
v	w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u																					
w	x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v																						
x	y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w																							
y	z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x																								
z	& a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y																									
&	a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z																									

In his letter (shown to the right), Jefferson wrote the first line to be encoded — “The man whose mind on virtue bent.” Next Jefferson wrote a sample keyword “antipodes” above, repeating it for the length of the line. The third line is encoded, with the help of the alphanumeric table.

To help you follow how this system works, look at the transcribed letter that follows.

[President Jefferson writes,] *“suppose the keyword to be ‘antipodes’ write it thus.*

a n t i p o d e s a n t i p o d e s a n t i p o d e s [keyword]  
t h e m a n w h o s e m i n d o n v i r t u e b e n t [line to be encoded]  
u v y u q b & m g t s f r e s s s n i e m c u g i t m [line in code]

*then copy out the ciphered line thus.* uvyuqb&mgtssressniemcugitm.

*Numbers are thus.* 18 is bv. 1798 is thus bubq.”

[Jefferson then explained,] *“The method is this. Look for the t in the 1st vertical column, & the a in the 1st horizontal one gives u; h [in the 1st vertical column] and the n [in the 1st horizontal one gives] v; ....”*

To help you unravel this puzzle, look at the transcribed version of Jefferson’s 28-column alphanumeric table, on the previous page. Begin with the first two lines: keyword and line to be encoded. Find the letter you want to change in the second line. Then locate the letter above it in the keyword to plot the coded letter. For example, the first letter from Jefferson’s message is the letter “t”. Just above the letter “t” is the letter “a”. With your left hand, locate the “t” in the first column of the table, and with your right hand, locate the “a” in the first row. Draw your fingers together along the column and down the row to get the coded letter “u.” Write that underneath the “t” and move on to the next letter.

To decode a message, you would reverse the process. Write the coded line, and then write the keyword above it. In Jefferson’s example, the second letter in the encoded line is “v.” The letter above, from the repeated keyword antipodes, is “n”. On the alphanumeric table, find the “n” in the first row. Then read down this column to find the letter “v”. With your fingers, follow that row left to the first row of letters, to the “h” Write that underneath the “v” and move on to the next letter.

## ACTIVITIES:

1. Write a letter telling of what you think about one of the following, as though you were Meriwether Lewis telling President Jefferson of the wonders of your trip. Lewis was not any better at spelling than most people of his time. This is one time where phonetic spelling is acceptable.

The letter should start with the place the letter is written and the date (sometime in 1803–1806). Typical letters from this time would be signed “Your obedient servant” or “yr. obdt. svt.” and often started with mention of the weather and general standard of health.

a. Compare and contrast the negative response from the Teton Sioux with the friendly visit with the Arikara. or the Nez Perce and Shoshone tribes. Remember that Sacajawea was a member of the Shoshone and eased this portion of their trip.

Philatelic activity: Identify Indian stamps that could illustrate your report.

b. Describe the “barking squirrels” (prairie dogs), the bison and the “white bears” (grizzly bears) as though you were the first person seeing them. Use a sketch to supplement your observations.

Philatelic Activity: Identify stamps showing the grizzly, prairie dog and buffalo.

c. Tell the President how you managed to get sufficient food to survive the winter in Fort Mandan. Include details about York’s dancing for food, black smithing war tools and hunting parties.

Philatelic activity: Identify stamps that show Blacks dancing, smithing, hunting buffalo.

2. Challenge Activity: In his letter Jefferson used another example, an imaginary first message from Lewis to him: “I am at the head of the Missouri. All is well, and the Indians so far friendly.” The back of Jefferson’s letter says that he established a cipher with Captain Lewis, using the keyword “artichokes.” How would that message read in code?

ANSWER: isfjwawpmbvhowptxnktn&li&waxmcuwgawpnfe&uwv&cqfjgibngl&i

Now translate your letter into code, using the keyword “artichokes.” Then trade your letter with another classmate’s and translate their letter out of code.