



Can you Crack the Code? Teacher Guide

In this activity, students will learn more about the important role the Navajo tribe played in World War II by examining the Navajo Code Talkers and working to read and write in Navajo code.

Materials/Preparation

- Print 1 copy of the Navajo Code Dictionary (2 pages) per 2 students (they will work in pairs)
- Print 1 copy of the Student handout (2 pages) per 2 students (they will work in pairs)

Suggested Procedures

1. Begin by reviewing information about the southwest tribes. Ask: *what tribes lived in the southwestern region? What do you know about them?*
2. Explain to students that the Navajo tribe lived in the southwest and they played a very special and important role in the history of the U.S. Some background information on the Navajo Code Talkers from the CIA website is below. You may wish to read this information to students, or rephrase it in a way that makes sense to your class.

Navajo Code Talkers

In a battle, it is extremely important that messages are delivered and received as quickly as possible. It is even more important that these messages are in a code so the enemy does not know about any plans before they happen.

During World War II, the Marine Corps used one of languages spoken in the world to create an unbreakable code: Navajo.

The Navajo language is very complex and at the time, it did not have a written form - it was only a spoken language. In 1942, a man named Philip Johnston came up with the idea of using Navajo code in the Marine Corps. Johnston had grown up on a Navajo reservation and spoke the language fluently himself. The government approved his idea, and 29 Navajos began creating a written form of the language to use as a top secret code. They started by taking words from the Navajo language and applying them



to war terms. Then, they created an alphabet system for spelling out words as well. They also used word substitutions to make the code almost unbreakable!

The Code Talkers, as they were called, were involved in every major operation with the Marines in the Pacific theater in World War II. All of their messages were sent without any errors. Throughout World War II, about 400 Navajos were in the Code Talker program. They were treated with respect by their fellow marines, and the original 29 Code Talkers received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2000.

Information above adapted from www.cia.gov.

Additionally, more information, including interviews with real Code Talkers and videos about the program can be found at <http://navajocodetalkers.org/>.

3. *Optional:* You may also wish to show the following video to the class.
Navajo Code Talkers WW2 (2:45)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rSvm3m8ZUA>
4. After hearing this information, clarify any questions or misconceptions students may have. Ask: *why do you think the Navajo Code Talkers were so important in our history? What may have happened if the Marines didn't use Navajo code for their messages?*
5. Tell students that today, they will all become Navajo Code Talkers! First, they will see if they can “crack the code” by reading words and sentences written in Navajo code. Then, they will create their own messages in code for classmates to read.
6. Have students get in partner groups. Pass out the 1 copy of the Navajo Code Dictionary to each partner group. Have them look over the words. The Navajo actually developed many code words for the letters of the alphabet -- this dictionary contains just one example for each letter.
7. Tell students that when a Navajo received a message in code, he would hear a string of Navajo words. The Code Talker would use only the first letter of the word in English translation, and put those letters together to form a word. An example is below.
8. Teachers may wish to do this example first with students:



SHUSH, NE-AHS-JAH, NE-AHS-JAH, BA-AH-NE-DI-TININ

Shush means Bear (bear = B)

NE-AHS-JAH means Owl (owl = O)

NE-AHS-JAH means Owl (owl = O)

BA-AH-NE-DI-TININ means Key (key = K)

The translation is “BOOK”

9. Have students work with their partners to decode the first page of the student handout. When they finish, have them write their own messages in Navajo code. Have partners exchange their code with another partner group and see if they can crack each other's coded messages.
10. When students are finished, reflect on the process. Use the following questions to guide discussion.
 - a. *What was challenging about writing in Navajo code? What was challenging about reading/breaking Navajo code?*
 - b. *What did you learn about the Navajo language?*
 - c. *Did you learn anything new about the Navajo Native American culture?*
 - d. *Do you think the Navajo Code Talkers would have enjoyed this job? Why or why not?*



Navajo Code Dictionary

Alphabet Letter	Navajo Word	Literal Translation
A	WOL-LA-CHEE	ANT
B	SHUSH	BEAR
C	MOASI	CAT
D	BE	DEER
E	AH-NAH	EYE
F	TSA-E-DONIN-EE	FLY
G	JEHA	GUM
H	TSE-GAH	HAIR
I	TKIN	ICE
J	AH-YA-TSINNE	JAW
K	BA-AH-NE-DI-TININ	KEY
L	AH-JAD	LEG
M	NA-AS-TSO-SI	MOUSE
N	A-CHIN	NOSE
O	NE-AHS-JAH	OWL
P	BI-SO-DIH	PIG
Q	CA-YEILTH	QUIVER
R	AH-LOSZ	RICE
S	KLESH	SNAKE

Continued on next page



Navajo Code Dictionary

Alphabet Letter	Navajo Word	Literal Translation
T	D-AH	TEA
U	SHI-DA	UNCLE
V	A-KEH-DI-GLINI	VICTOR
W	GLOE-IH	WEASEL
X	AL-NA-AS-DZOH	CROSS
Y	TSAH-AS-ZIH	YUCCA
Z	BESH-DO-TLIZ	ZINC

Content and information from:

<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/n/navajo-code-talker-dictionary.html>



Navajo Code Talkers Student Handout

Can you crack the code to read these words and sentences?

1. TSE-GAH, AH-NAH, AH-JAD, AH-JAD, NE-AHS-JAH

2. KLESH, MOASI, TSE-GAH, NE-AHS-JAH, NE-AHS-JAH, AH-JAD

3. NA-AS-TSO-SI, WOL-LA-CHEE, D-AH, TSE-GAH TKIN, KLESH
MOASI, NE-AHS-JAH, NE-AHS-JAH, AH-JAD

4. TKIN AH-JAD, TKIN, BA-AH-NE-DI-TININ, AH-NAH
BI-SO-DIH, TKIN, BESH-DO-TLIZ, BESH-DO-TLIZ, WOL-LA-CHEE.



Navajo Code Talkers Student Handout

Now, write your own words or sentences in Navajo code! Exchange with a friend and see if they can read your code!

1. Code: _____

Translation: _____

2. Code: _____

Translation: _____

3. Code: _____

Translation: _____

4. Code: _____

Translation: _____