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## Unlock the Box at Your Library

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# Unlock the Box at Your Library

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AMANDA PUETZ was raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she developed a love for green chile, hot air balloons, and making books. She has a bachelor's degree in Biology and a master's degree in Library Science. At the library, she delights in teaching others to make books by hand and exploring our world with families through STEAM programming. In her spare time, she amuses her dog by picking out tunes on the ukulele.

**A**re you fascinated by the escape room craze sweeping the nation but unsure how to bring it to your library? An escape room is an immersive experience in which a group works through a series of themed clues and puzzles to solve a mystery and “escape” a room within a given amount of time, usually an hour. Libraries can provide a similar experience by having patrons open a series of locks on a hasp closing a single box. Patrons race the clock to open the box. Holding an Unlock the Box program at your library is more achievable than you might think. You need a few reusable supplies, a set of clues and puzzles around a central story, a space to convert, and an enjoyment of puzzles.



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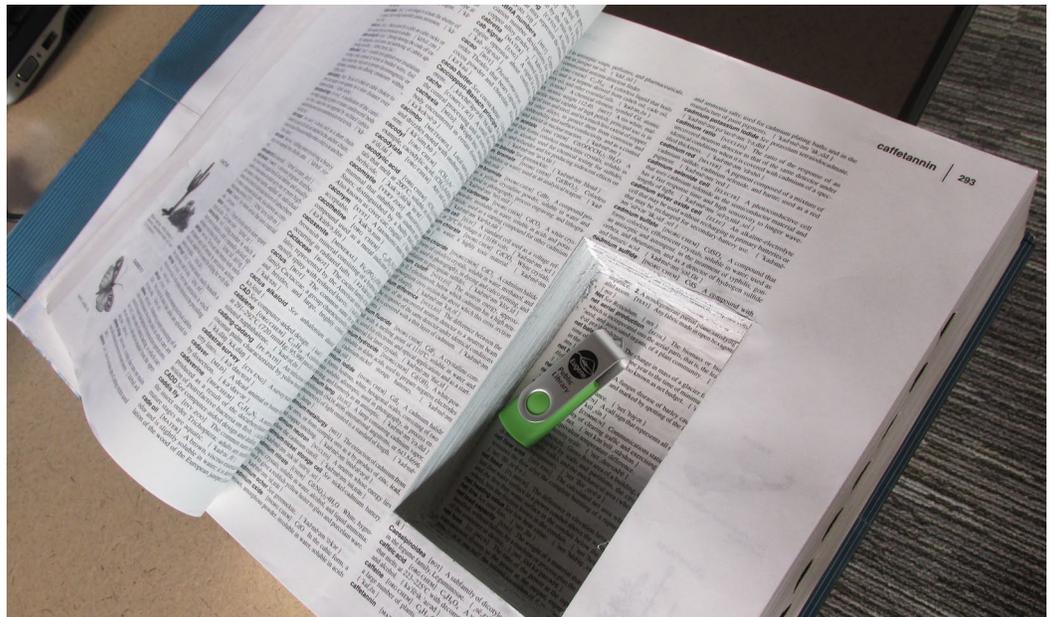
**C**ultivating critical thinking skills, building teamwork, encouraging creativity, and exercising good communication skills are just a few of the intangible benefits Unlock the Box programs offer patrons. And on top of all that, these programs are *fun*! Patrons will be excited to attend, and, if you post pics of the successful (or not!) groups on your library's social media sites,

Without a dedicated programming space, Sheldon Branch Library transforms its teen area into an astronomer's lab for a wormhole-themed Unlock the Box program.



you can build interest in the programs. Unlock the Box programs work for almost any age group. Adults and teens love challenging, topical puzzles. You can even create programs for elementary and preschoolers based on favorite picture book characters.

**H**aving a single basic kit on hand will enable you to hold countless puzzle programs for all ages. An example of a solid starter-kit includes: a large box that can be locked, a small lock box, a USB flash drive, an invisible ink marker, a UV flashlight, letter locks (2), number locks (2), a key lock, a directional lock, and a hasp so you can use multiple locks on the large box. All the locks except for the key lock are reprogrammable, so switching between programs is as easy as resetting the locks. Each program will also require a set of unique clues and props centered on a theme or situation you've created. These can be as simple or elaborate as you choose. A favorite prop at our library is a repurposed dictionary with a secret hole cut in the middle. Writing in invisible ink is always a hit. Explore spy craft books in your library's juvenile non-fiction section for inventive ideas on writing in codes and passing secret messages.



We stash the UV flashlight or USB flash drive inside the repurposed dictionary for participants to find during the program.

**A** great way to get a feel for how the pieces come together to form a game is through viewing puzzles that others have created. One site I found helpful and inspiring is [www.BreakoutEDU.com](http://www.BreakoutEDU.com). Breakout EDU provides tools and support for puzzle programs in classrooms and libraries across the country. You can sign up for a free account to access the plans for dozens of puzzle programs—you just have to set your locks, print out the clues, and go! You can pay for a premium account to access more game plans. Not every game uses all the locks, and you can remove or change any of the clues to fit the time or age restraints of your program.



Logistics for Unlock the Box programs you may want to consider include required materials and props, the size of group your space can comfortably accommodate, the need for a sign-up sheet, the time needed to set up (and re-set) the scene, and what will be inside your locked box. You will monitor the group's progress and keep them informed of how much time they have left; you can also offer hints if they get stuck along the way. This support keeps the stress level down and encourages the group to keep moving to the end of the game. Before you let your group into the room to play, tell them the story behind your game and remind them of a few helpful tips: communication is key, take notes, and don't force anything—you don't need to break anything to find clues. When the final lock is sprung, and the box opens, your group can find any small giveaway item you can imagine: bookmarks, candy, stickers, etc. They can also find the object of the puzzle: the vial of antidote serum that will save the world from the impending epidemic, or the nuts and bolts an imp took from your car so you'd miss starring in the school ballgame!

Looking at the programs held at the Eugene Public Library, we reach multiple ages by hosting programs for both teens and families. The themes for our teen Unlock the Box programs were Houdini Mysteries and Wormhole Time Travel. A group of co-workers and I came up with each theme and created the puzzles and clues patrons used in the games. For the Wormhole Time Travel program, we listed constellations and stars from a star chart in a specific order. Participants had to connect pieces of the star chart, then follow the constellation/star list to get the code to the directional lock. For example, the Big Dipper to the Cancer constellation is "down." For the Houdini program, we created a poster cipher translating a series of symbols into letters. Then we wrote symbols corresponding to the word "feats" in invisible ink on playing cards. Participants had to find the invisible ink clues with the UV flashlight, put the symbols in order according to the cards, and then decipher the letters to get the word to unlock one of the locks on the box.



A group works through the star chart puzzle.



Extra steps were taken to ensure the Unlock the Box programs ran smoothly. We ran all-staff playtests of the programs at each location. Having staff members play the games before the public served many purposes. It worked as a quality check, helping the “game masters” ensure that there were no mistakes in the clues and that the games were not too easy or too difficult. It gave staff a hands-on demonstration of how the kit works to jump-start inspiration for future programs. Participating staff came away from the playtests excited about the programs and eager to promote them to patrons. And last but not least, staff got the benefits of working out puzzles in a collaborative environment, strengthening the work team and building communication skills.

Namely, familiar picture books are the foundation of Unlock the Box programs for families. Since these programs are aimed at a range of ages, puzzles included tasks such as sorting by color, adding two primary colors to get a secondary color, and unscrambling letters to reveal a word. I used one program straight from the Breakout EDU website (*Froggy Gets Dressed*). The second program was created based on characters from the *Pete the Cat* books. I read a Froggy or Pete story to get the group in the right mood before introducing the puzzles. The *Pete the Cat* program found Pete adventuring in a different picture book. There were a series of boxes to unlock, each containing a few puzzle pieces. After all the boxes were opened, participants put the puzzle together to discover which book Pete had visited. Parents and children work together to count, sort, decode, and open locks. Families enjoy the challenge and come away from the programs with a shared sense of accomplishment.

Glee and satisfaction are the most common responses from participants of our Unlock the Box programs. Patrons and staff have been equally animated in their responses. One participant enthused, “That was the most fun I’ve ever had at the library!” You can capitalize on this zeal and sneak in plugs for library services. If you’ve got a maker-space, you can use 3D-printed objects as clues or use the UV light bit from your littleBits collection to find an invisible ink message. Have your LEGO club build themed props for your Unlock the Box programs. If your library loans novel objects, tie those into the puzzles. Patrons will remember the unique characteristics of the program and return to the library looking for more.

Excited and ready to hold your own Unlock the Box program? Start browsing puzzle ideas on the Breakout EDU website, brainstorm favorite themes, and write some clues in invisible ink. Be on the lookout for inventive ways to encode lock combinations. Mock up mini puzzles for co-workers to unravel. Or stop by a branch of the Eugene Public Library in May or June to try your hand at unlocking a box in a program for adults. Did you notice the acrostic in this article? You are all set to Unlock the Box! 

