

Cask of Amontillado Digital Escape Room

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OVERVIEW

This instructional session centered on cultivating students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities while enhancing comprehension of Edgar Allan Poe's (1846) "The Cask of Amontillado." Conducted within a 10th-grade classroom setting, the session empowered students to discern and engage with the text's pivotal themes and concepts through an immersive digital escape room experience. This article elaborates on the preparatory activities that preceded the escape room and the instructional approach employed during the escape room activity. The activity served as a formative assessment within a broader unit addressing short stories.

Topics: Characters, Digital Escape Room, Foreshadowing, Suspense, Theme

Time: Five 50-minute class periods (four class periods for reading and instruction; one for the escape room)

MATERIALS

- ["Can You Escape?" Google Form](#)
- [Escape Room Answer Sheet](#)
- [Escape Room Puzzles Resource](#)
- [Escape Room Question Set](#)
- [Escape Room Answer Key](#)
- [Escape Room Image](#)
- [Copy of the short story "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allan Poe](#) (Poe, 1846)
- [Catacomb Sounds](#) (Sword Coast Soundscapes, 2018)
- Computer

CONTEXT-AT-A-GLANCE

Setting

A small rural high school in the Central United States.

Modality

Face-to-face using an online learning management system.

Class Structure

Class sessions were organized into 50-minute blocks, allowing students the full duration of the escape room activity. The classroom typically accommodates 15 desks, arranged in rows of three to four.

Organizational Norms

Students were in a classroom with two instructors and a paraeducator who were able to help them throughout the activity.

Learner Characteristics

This lesson was tailored for sophomore students who thrive on challenging and competitive activities. Within the class, there was one student with an Individualized Education Plan.

Instructor Characteristics

This lesson was taught by a student-teacher completing a Bachelor of Science in Secondary English Education.

Development Rationale

This initiative seamlessly incorporated technology and gamification into a secondary classroom, replacing traditional worksheets with an escape room experience that encouraged literary analysis and enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Design Framework

Inquiry-Based Learning; Digital Escape Room Design (Neumann et al., 2020, 2022)

SETUP

To set up the environment, the classroom lights were dimmed and dark ambient “catacomb sounds” were played from a YouTube video (Sword Coast Soundscapes, 2018). This helped to create an atmosphere related to the story.

The digital escape room was embedded in Google Classroom. The instructor took 10 minutes explaining how the structure would work. Pointing out that students would need to use clues presented in both the Escape Room Image (PNG) and the [Escape Room Google Form](#) to crack the codes. The students had software on their computers that blocked some sites used for puzzles, so the crossword puzzle and riddle cards had to be printed out for student access. Both of these resources can be found on page nine of the Escape Room Puzzles resource (DOCX).

This activity met the following Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE, 2023) standards for English Language Arts:

- RL.9-10.5 Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

There were other standards addressed throughout the short story unit, but the standards listed above were directly applied to the use of the digital escape room.

CONTEXT AND SETTING

The educational setting in question was a rural community school, officially designated as a 1A division high school, meaning it had a student population between 10 and 109 students. The learning representation took place through face-to-face instruction, with the escape room presented digitally through Google Classroom. Class sessions adhered to a structured framework, with each session lasting 50 minutes, a design optimized for the integration of an escape room activity that played a central role in the learning representation. Within the classroom, an arrangement of approximately 15 desks, organized in rows of three to four, was chosen

to facilitate collaborative problem-solving during the escape room experience. This aligned with practices for face-to-face escape room settings suggested by Cain (2019), Clarke et al. (2017), and Kinio et al. (2019).

The organizational norms within this setting were important in shaping the learning representation. Students had the benefit of two instructors and a paraeducator, ensuring consistent support during the implementation of the escape room activity. This support mirrored the support mentioned by Neumann et al. (2020) in encouraging groups of students to collaborate and support each other in successfully completing the activity. Notably, this support system was vital in addressing the diverse learner characteristics present in the class, which primarily consisted of sophomore students who excelled academically, displaying a penchant for challenging and competitive academic pursuits. A key factor in class-wide successful completion of the activity was the inclusion of a student with an Individualized Education Plan that provided accommodations related to accessing additional time for assessments. The paraeducator who was present during the activity was partly responsible for assisting this student with their everyday assignments and activities.

The instructors’ previous experiences and dispositions equally influenced the design process, with the lesson designed and delivered by a student teacher in the process of completing a Bachelor of Science in Secondary English Education. The student teacher had previously completed a digital escape room as part of an undergraduate Classroom Management course (see Short, 2024 in this issue) and found the experience to be engaging, motivating, and educational. Based on this experience, the student teacher felt that use of a digital escape room would be appropriate to the current instructional conditions of her classroom. This condition necessitated an engaging instructional strategy to cater to the varied needs of students who were being asked to complete instructional activities after long days of state-mandated testing. The overarching development rationale was underpinned by the objective of seamlessly integrating technology and gamification into the secondary classroom. The primary aim was to replace conventional worksheets with an escape room experience, that would foster literary analysis, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

In terms of the instructional framework, Inquiry-Based Learning served as the guiding principle. This approach sought to ensure active student engagement in the learning process, promoting inquiry and self-directed exploration. The design of the escape room itself was informed by materials from an Association of Educational Communications and Technology workshop on creating a digital escape room (Neumann et al., 2022). The design followed the 10-step process outlined by Neumann et al. (2020).

In summary, the unique rural setting, the class structure, organizational norms, learner characteristics, and instructor attributes collectively converged to significantly influence the design of this learning representation, tailored to address the particular challenges and opportunities of this educational context. Nevertheless, we believe that the learning representation that follows could be easily modified to fit other unique instructional contexts.

LEARNING REPRESENTATION

The learning for this lesson took place in two separate parts over the span of five days. The first part consisted of four days and covered background information about Edgar Allen Poe, provided time for students to read “The Cask of Amontillado,” and allowed for discussions about important concepts from the story. The second part was the final day, in which students completed the digital escape room activity. A brief overview of the first part is below to contextualize the second part, which is the focus of this lesson.

PART 1: INITIAL INSTRUCTION AND READING

We began our unit by reviewing who Edgar Allen Poe was and the important literary elements to remember while reading “The Cask of Amontillado.” We focused on suspense and foreshadowing and spent one 50-minute class period introducing and building background on the story. Then we began to read. For reading, we utilized small groups that were randomly assigned.

After the class completed reading the story, which took about two 50-minute class periods, we had small group discussions to ensure students

understood the details of the plot. It was important to go over the story with students and to make sure that students understood the story thoroughly because they would have to apply such knowledge while decoding the escape room’s clues. The day after reading, we spent one 50-minute class period having a class discussion about “Cask.” The instructor chose to use a Save The Last Word For Me discussion structure, in which each student selects three main takeaways from the text and presents them to their groups. The group then comments on the three takeaways before the student who originally shared the takeaways provides a rationale for their selection process and outcomes (Buehl, 2017). Various other class discussion strategies would also be appropriate for reviewing details from the story. Students were familiar with some of these strategies from prior class periods, so the instructor also used sentence starters and talking chips to promote class discussion.

PART 2: USING THE DIGITAL ESCAPE ROOM

After four days of instructional activities, it was time for the escape room. Before starting the escape room, the story plot and characters were reviewed one last time.

The instructor then went over how to access the escape room with the students and helped them find the first answer, which was in the directions of the first question (Escape Room Question Set DOCX). After that, students were given the opportunity to work independently or with a partner. Students were allowed to use their story and discussion notes in completing the escape room’s challenges (Figure 1; Escape Room Image PNG). To encourage students to work hard on the escape room, students were told that those who finished the escape room first, second, and third would receive extra credit toward the unit exam. Students who did not finish were not penalized, though students were not told about the lack of penalty until the end of class when it became clear that some students would be unable to finish.

As the escape room took place, the teacher walked around the classroom and checked-in with students. The teacher made sure to check-in with students as they asked for help, as well as if students seemed to be getting off task. Students most commonly got off task because they did not know where to look for the clue needed to progress. The teacher sat with these students and asked guiding questions such as “what

are you specifically having trouble figuring out?” or provided guidance such as “this hint mentions Montessor, have you tried clicking on Montessor yet?” This additional support seemed to help students understand what they needed to do to progress toward solving the escape room’s puzzles. The teacher made sure to check-in with each student/pair of students at least 2-3 times throughout the 50-minute period, though some students required more check-ins than others if they seemed stuck or otherwise off task.



Figure 1. The digital escape room created for “The Cask of Amontillado.”

Upon completion of the escape room, students were asked to reflect on their experiences with the escape room. This was presented as an exit ticket where students wrote an evaluation of the escape room on a sheet of notebook paper. Students were asked to respond thoughtfully to the following questions:

1. Did you complete the escape room during class? If not, what question did you stop at?
2. Would you say that this task is more difficult or less difficult?

Most students responded that the escape room was challenging but they were able to finish it during class.

DIGITAL ESCAPE ROOM DESIGN

The background story of the escape room was established through Poe’s (1846) “Cask,” and the audience, length of time for the escape room, and difficulty were informed by the learner and classroom characteristics previously described. The takeaways for the escape room were informed by the standards

listed above and questions were developed to guide students toward these learning outcomes.

Per Step 3 of the Digital Escape Room Planning Template (Neumann et al., 2020), each puzzle consisted of a question related to a specific takeaway from the studious reading of “Cask.” The questions for each puzzle are (see Escape Room Question Set DOCX):

1. Who even is he really?
2. What is the family motto?
3. I wonder what his motive is?
4. Why would I even wear this costume?
5. What happens when you only see 1st person POV?
6. I don’t know if I’ll ever get out!
7. Do you know anyone who can help?
8. Order the plot events chronologically.

The virtual catacomb was created as a Google Drawing (Escape Room Image PNG). Additionally, images of items from the story were found using images from Openclipart and placed within the digital environment linked to each puzzle/question after the first question, which was provided in the directions (see Images Used in Escape Room section). To have stable links for each puzzle, any link that would send students to an image was generated from storing the image within the instructor’s Google Drive. This helped prevent the need to update or change links when using the escape room. It is worth noting that the images in this publication were recreated for this article due to licensing restrictions. The original images were various pieces of clip art found online, and not all of them were openly licensed.

In total, there are seven puzzle solutions for students to find. These passcodes were found by completing crossword puzzles and Wordle puzzles, as well as deciphering memes, social media posts, riddles, and other images. The Wordle, crossword puzzle, seeing eye chart, prescription, and tweet were all made using different free-to-use websites (see Appendix B of Neumann et al., 2020). The instructor linked all of the clue activities to the [Google Drawing](#) by hyperlinking the various images of items related to the story. The various puzzles can be found in the Escape Room Puzzles Resource (DOCX) and are linked here (see Puzzle Resources section for tools utilized):

1. [Tweet](#)
2. [Prescription](#)
3. [Symbolism Meme](#)

4. [Eye Chart](#)
5. [Wordle](#)
6. [Crossword](#)

The answers to the puzzles are provided on the Escape Room Answer Key (DOCX).

When creating the Google Form used for the escape room, each question was placed in its own section. Quiz settings for the Form were enabled. These settings allowed for students to have to insert the precisely correct answer into each question to move forward (see Neumann et al., 2020, for specific details). These settings also allowed students to auto-check their answers and to track their progress toward escaping.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

This lesson was taught twice and both times there were students who enjoyed the process and other students who really did not enjoy the process. Looking back, the instructor wishes she had provided an alternate assignment for students who needed modifications or lost motivation to complete the assignment due to the difficulty. The instructor allowed students to work in pairs but only a couple of students opted to work in pairs. If the lesson were to be taught again, the instructor would assign student pairs/groups that would allow students to receive extra support from their peers. This would have better aligned my practices with the implications from Neumann et al. (2020).

Overall, however, the students enjoyed this activity. Most students found it challenging but not impossible. Students appreciated being allowed to work collaboratively, putting their heads together to come up with answers. One thing that could have improved student participation would have been structuring groups to include students who needed more support. We believe that creating more heterogeneous groups would have allowed more students to complete the escape room without frustration.

Students who were engaged in the escape room had previously shown interest in the activities and readings leading up to the escape room. These students were able to grasp the concepts of the story in a way that aided them in knowing what clues they were looking for in each puzzle. The very few

students who struggled with the escape room were seemingly less engaged with the lead-up activities that would have prepared them for the escape room. It would be beneficial to engage these students more intentionally with the content prior to the escape room activity. Possible examples of such engagement could have included guided notes to help with comprehending parts of the story that would be used for the escape room, or providing example puzzles to students throughout the four days of reading and instruction.

Another thing that would have been helpful when implementing this activity is creating hint sheets that have planned hints for finding each answer. Such a resource would make it easier to guide students in the right direction without giving too much away. As it were, the educators in the room were responsible for providing hints and this took away from some of the accountability of having students try to complete the activity on their own.

Another change we are considering for future iterations of this activity is to incorporate more movement into the learning representation. Considering the escape room was online, students spent most of the class on their devices. If there had been more time to create this lesson, the instructor would have created activities that forced students to move around the classroom to find answers, blending both digital and physical puzzles.

Lastly, the instructor decided to reword the last question which included chronologically ordering plot events. Originally the question set was long and difficult to follow, which was challenging for students to complete. After the question was reworded, it was much easier, and students were more successful.

This activity format could be used in many different lessons. Escape rooms are extremely popular and could be created using nearly any story or lesson topic. We found it beneficial for students to engage in an escape room that had a similar theme as the story they are studying, as the escape room supported the students in making connections from the text to another idea. Students created meaningful connections which helped them latch on to the themes of the text. The instructor would recommend using stories that have darker moods/tones for a digital escape room, but there may also be some application for lighter stories.

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IMAGES USED IN ESCAPE ROOM

- “Barrel (rendered).” is created and shared by kevie with a Creative Commons 0 1.0 Public Domain License. <https://openclipart.org/detail/167894/barrel-rendered>
- “Blank sticky note 1.” is created and shared by lemmling with a Creative Commons 0 1.0 Public Domain License. <https://openclipart.org/detail/17621/blank-sticky-note-1>
- “Casual Man.” is created and shared by algotrune with a Creative Commons 0 1.0 Public Domain License. <https://openclipart.org/detail/260145/casual-man>
- “Dark catacomb hallway” is created by the lead author using deepai.org and the prompt “dark catacomb hallway.”
- “Ilmenskeie Tree Int Moss 2.” is created and shared by glitch with a Creative Commons 0 1.0 Public Domain License. <https://openclipart.org/detail/210089/ilmenskeie-tree-int-moss-2>
- “Jester.” is created and shared by johnny_automatic with a Creative Commons 0 1.0 Public Domain License. <https://openclipart.org/detail/1003/jester>
- “Mason’s Trowel.” is created and shared by algotrune with a Creative Commons 0 1.0 Public Domain License. <https://openclipart.org/detail/283306/masons-trowel>

PUZZLE RESOURCES

Custom Eye Chart Maker, www.eyechartmaker.com/.

Custom Prescription Maker,
www.prescriptionmaker.com/.

"Free, Online Crossword Puzzle Maker - Crossword Labs." crosswordlabs.com/.

Make Your Own Wordle, mywordle.strivemath.com/

"Meme Generator." Imgflip,
imgflip.com/memegenerator.

"Twister: Create Fake Tweets!" ClassTools.Net,
www.classtools.net/twister/



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SUPPORT MATERIALS

- [Can You Escape - Google Form](#) (view only)
- [Can you Escape – Google Form](#) (forced copy)
- [Can You Escape - Google Drawing](#)
- [Can you Escape - Worksheet Version](#)
- [The Cask of Amontillado - CommonLit](#)
- [Escape Room - Answer Key](#)
- [Escape Room Puzzles](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tabitha Cowley is a recent graduate of Emporia State University, where she earned a degree in Secondary English Education. Beginning in the Fall of 2024, she will embark on her teaching career as a middle school English Language Arts instructor. She leverages technology to enhance student engagement and facilitate meaningful connections to literature. Her approach aims to inspire a passion for reading and critical thinking among her students.

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