

# CREATIVE ESCAPES

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Escape rooms have become popular forms of entertainment that offer a unique immersive game experience. Players are tasked with a mission that must be completed during a set time to win the game. Whether it be solving a crime or finding a missing artifact, the adrenaline rush that comes from the ticking timer only adds to the experience. Commercial escape room companies routinely charge \$25 to \$50 per person to play their games. Offering a free escape room at your library can be an excellent opportunity to bring new patrons into the building, while reminding regulars that their local library is much more than just books.

As part of our Summer Reading Program, we have built an escape room at the Maitland Public Library two years in a row. In 2023, with permission from the author, we created an Enola Holmes adventure targeted at players ages eight and up. Inspiration was drawn from characters and references from the popular book series. This year, our Pirate Quest game was geared towards our teen and adult patrons, recommending a minimum age of 10 to play. We drew inspiration from assorted pirate lore to create our game's story.

There are a few things to consider as you start planning your escape room build. These should help you get the ball rolling, if you are unsure where to begin.

## **Location**

Take inventory of your available spaces. Do you have a meeting room, study space, or office that can be temporarily repurposed for the escape room? Depending on the floor plan, even a well-placed supply closet can become an escape room. The size of this space will help you decide how many people can attend each game session, as well as the number and type of puzzles your space can support.

The space we have dedicated to our escape rooms is in our Community Meeting Room. It is a very large space, so we used folding room dividers and hanging fabric panels to create walls and define the parameters of the game area. This space has a television mounted on one wall and a built-in bookshelf. We decided to incorporate these features, rather than try to hide them. In our Enola Holmes game, a portrait was displayed on the TV, and a newspaper article later revealed the answer based on that photo clue. We used a video animation for our Pirate Quest game to make the TV look like a ship's window overlooking the ocean. Animated curtains would open at set intervals to reveal the needed clue. By using a video, we could also incorporate sounds that helped the players feel more immersed in the theme of the game- waves crashing, the creak of the wooden pirate ship, and seagulls cawing in the distance. The bookshelves provided a great space to hide clues, puzzles, and decorative props.

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We have a portable puppet stage we used as a wall in the game area. Most commercial escape room companies use cameras and intercoms to keep an eye on their players and to communicate with them. We designate an in-room host who stands in the puppet stage to offer the same support without the need for added technology.



### Theme

There are countless themes to inspire your escape room. We have used Enola Holmes and Pirate Quest as themes in the past, but there is no end to the possibilities. Some other themes that have been considered have been *First Day of School*, *Grocery Store Mystery*, and *Spaceship Shenanigans*. Your only limit is your imagination.

Do consider that just as we need a license to show movies in our libraries, we want to make sure that we are not violating any copyrights with our themes and props. Picking generalized themes, characters that are in the public domain, or getting permission from their creators is your best bet here.

### Time Duration

Commercial escape rooms, on average, are 60-minute-long adventures. We have done 30-minute-long games to allow more groups to participate on a given day. You want to factor in that each puzzle you create should take players around five minutes to solve. If you were planning a 30-minute game, four or five puzzles would be ideal. If a puzzle is more complicated, it may take more time. Having colleagues or volunteers test your puzzles beforehand will help you fine-tune your anticipated game run time.

You want to factor in your reset time when deciding your schedule. We allowed 15 minutes between each group to allow for celebration and conversation with the players, and to reset the game. Be sure to budget time for these things, or you could find yourself falling behind schedule on the day.

### Audience

Younger players may struggle with complicated puzzles. Older players may breeze through easier puzzles and escape the room too quickly to appreciate the game experience. Your audience's age and assumed skill level will determine how easy or hard your puzzles will need to be. Plan what clues or nudges you might give based on the areas of the room you expect players may become stuck on, and the ages of the players who might need those hints.

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### Resources

Not all libraries operate on the same budget. Sticking to things you can create yourself will help keep expenses down. Do you have a hoard of cardboard tubes or scrap fabric? Do you have access to padlocks or locking cash boxes? All of these things can help keep the budget down. Remember, any locking containers you purchase can be used repeatedly, meaning that your investment this time will mean less money spent next time. Last year, we spent \$35 for a 5-letter combination lock, a locking fake dictionary, and assorted craft supplies. This year, we spent around \$25, most of which was on colored duct tape that will be used for other projects. Some decorations and props were borrowed from staff members or were reused from other programs. Depending on your existing resources, you may be able to build your escape room for even less. Use what you have, build or borrow what you can, and buy only what you need.

### Skills

Use the skills of the people on your team. If you have staff members or volunteers who are more artistically inclined, ask them to help build or decorate your game space. Some people are naturally more puzzle-oriented than others are. Ask for their involvement in designing and creating the puzzles. A single-page-sized jigsaw puzzle might be easier for some to create, while an intricate magnetic treasure map maze might require more combined efforts.

When we realized that we needed a large treasure chest, one of our teen volunteers created this one from a cardboard box and craft sticks. Pieces of a braided leather belt were used for the locking hasp. Electrical tape and wires were used for handles on the side of the box.



### Puzzles:

Once you have worked out the where, what, and how of it all, the next big hurdle is deciding what puzzles you want to include and how to build them. There are many great how-to videos online to help you determine how to build what you want to include in your game. There are also walk-throughs of existing escape rooms to help you understand how your room should flow. If there are commercial escape room companies in your area, contact them and explain your mission. Ask if they would be willing to give you a tour of one of their games to help you get inspired.

All of the puzzles we have used so far have been built by members of our staff. Here are some examples:

- Scytale - This cipher style can be traced back to Ancient Greece. A strip of fabric or leather is fitted to a set size tube or rod. When wrapped around this rod, the letters on the fabric align to spell out a word or phrase. Our scytale used a length of ribbon wrapped around a narrow cardboard tube. When placed in the room, it resembled a torch. Our decoded message gave a 3-digit combination.



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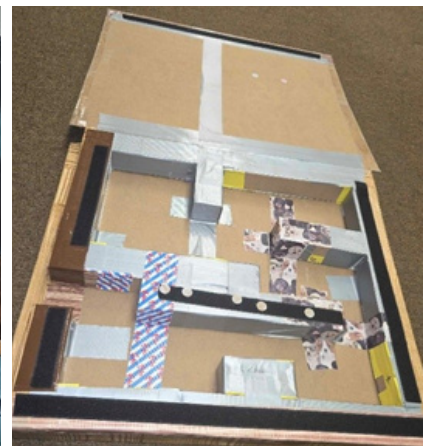


- Overlapping Layers - This puzzle can be translated into signs, pictures, or flags. One layer has holes or gaps, and the other has information revealed when the two pieces are fitted together. Our pirate flag was a great “reveal” layer. Our “info” layer was a list of birds. The quantity of each revealed bird was the code for a 3-digit combination lock. Two parrots were hanging from the ceiling, three seagulls appeared when the animated curtains opened on the TV screen, and zero pigeons were aboard our ship.

- Hidey-Hole Puzzle - Multiple tubes of varying depth are paired with multiple pegs of varying length. When placed correctly, the pegs appear level with one another. The sequence in which the pegs are placed reveal a word or string of numbers that can be used as a combination. Our puzzle featured five peg positions. Yours could have as many as you like.



- Hidden Maze - The inside of the maze was constructed out of cardboard channels and duct tape. A magnet is used on the outside to guide an object through the maze, and out through a hole in the side. Once the object was retrieved, it gave players a needed combination for a locked fake book. A secret message was used to guide the path the object would need to take through the maze.



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### Our Success

In 2023, we ran our escape room multiple times over three days and had 82 people play. This year, we offered 21 sessions over three consecutive days. 103 people played the game with a 100% completion rate. Every group had the chance to take photos to celebrate their success and ask questions about the room. Every person who played the game left with a smile, and only positive things to say about their experience. Some patron feedback included how much fun they had, how they wished other libraries would offer free programs like this, and expressions of gratitude.

Building your own escape room, on a minimal budget, is not as difficult as you might think. All it takes is a little bit of creativity, some elbow grease, and maybe a paper towel roll or two. What adventures will you create?

