

DIY Escape Room Activity for Work Teams

Give your team 35 minutes to rebuild a scrambled archive handoff using four linked clues and a final passphrase.

Host guide / Letter / Work team building / 35–45 minutes

Read the guide privately first if this activity has hidden answers. Print single-sided at Actual size / 100%. Cut only sheets marked CARDS. Keep answer keys with the host.

What you need

- Four printed puzzle cards or sheets, kept in numbered stage order
- One host-only answer and hint sheet
- Paper and pens for team notes
- A timer
- Four envelopes (optional; the host can simply hand out the next stage)

How to run it

1. Before the activity, print the four puzzle cards and the host key. Keep the host key face down or in a separate folder. Put each puzzle card in its own envelope if you want a light escape-room feel; no actual lock or locked room is used.
2. Brief the team: "You are the handoff crew at the fictional Meridian Archive. A traveling exhibit's checkout packet is due in 35 minutes. The index has been scrambled, and the Relay Room's simulated release checkpoint needs a four-letter passphrase. Solve the stages in order; the room is not physically locked."
3. Invite participants to choose or rotate roles: reader, recorder, pattern finder, skeptic, and timekeeper. With a small team, one person can hold more than one role.
4. Give Stage 1 to the team. Hand over the next stage when they explain the previous answer or after they spend the agreed hint time. Do not require a guess without reasoning.
5. Offer one hint at a time, starting with the first hint on the host key. A team may ask for a hint at any point; a hint does not cost points unless the group chooses that rule.
6. When the team gives the final passphrase, read the ending and spend five minutes debriefing which clue or role helped the group move forward.

Story and objective

At the fictional Meridian Archive, a small team is preparing a traveling exhibit for handoff to its next venue. The final packet is not dangerous or secret; it is simply out of sequence after a mock systems reset. The Relay Room checkpoint will accept the packet only after the team reconstructs the order of four records and recovers a passphrase. Participants are not trapped, and the host should state this plainly before play. The activity works in a meeting room, classroom, or online call with shared printouts.

- Objective: solve four sequential stages and report the passphrase OPEN.
- Story deadline: 35 minutes in the fictional scenario; allow 35–45 minutes of real play.

- The host simulates envelope releases; a physical lock is optional and unnecessary.

Team roles and pacing

The activity is designed for three to eight participants. Roles make the collaboration concrete without assigning one person permanent control. A reader voices each clue; a recorder writes candidate answers; a pattern finder looks for ordering or cipher rules; a skeptic checks that each answer follows the printed instruction; and a timekeeper tracks the round. Rotate roles between stages so every participant can contribute.

- Reader: reads the card and repeats exact instructions.
- Recorder: tracks the current output and any rejected paths.
- Pattern finder: proposes an ordering or decoding rule.
- Skeptic: checks the answer against every clue.
- Timekeeper: gives a five-minute warning and protects time for the debrief.

Hint and debrief guidance

Give a single nudge at a time. Wait briefly after each hint so the team can test its own idea. These clues point toward the operation, not the result. The four methods are sorting, a letter shift, time ordering, and indexed extraction. The debrief can ask which clue helped the team agree on a method and how it checked each answer. This is a discussion activity, not a validated measure of job performance or team quality.

- Stage 1 — Hint 1: The labels contain a numeric field that can establish a consistent order.
- Stage 1 — Hint 2: After sorting, inspect the first character of each title.
- Stage 2 — Hint 1: The previous answer tells you how many alphabet positions to move.
- Stage 2 — Hint 2: Apply the same backward shift to each encoded letter; keep the word breaks.
- Stage 3 — Hint 1: Treat each time as a point on the same afternoon clock.
- Stage 3 — Hint 2: Put the entries in increasing time order, then read their bracketed digits.
- Stage 4 — Hint 1: Each digit is a one-based position in a word, and the digits are used in order.
- Stage 4 — Hint 2: Pair digit one with word one, digit two with word two, and continue through the list.

Host setup and reset

Print one copy of each player puzzle for the team. Keep the host key and scripted ending separate from player-facing sheets. The host can reset the game by returning pages to numbered order and clearing written answers. If more than eight people attend, make two crews and give each the same staged set; compare how they divided the work rather than racing for a prize.

- Optional setup: place the numbered stages in envelopes.
- Optional scoring: one point per solved stage, with no penalty for hints.
- When the team solves the passphrase, read this ending aloud: "The checkpoint turns green. The Meridian Archive confirms that the exhibit handoff packet is complete and ready for the next venue. Your crew restored the index by comparing evidence, checking the sequence, and sharing the work. The Relay Room is now clear."

- Reset: collect the pages, erase notes, and restore Stages 1–4 to order.

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WG09-001 / Puzzle stage 1

STAGE 1 — THE LABEL WALL

Four exhibit labels were copied from the handoff index, but they are out of order. Sort the labels by archive ID from lowest to highest. Then write the first letter of each exhibit title, in that sorted order.

ID 27 — Meridian Route Map

ID 03 — Lighthouse Lens

ID 42 — Pier Bell

ID 15 — Atlas of Tides

What four-letter word do the initials spell?

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WG09-002 / Puzzle stage 2

STAGE 2 — THE NIGHT MESSAGE

The index says to use the number of letters in your Stage 1 answer. Move each letter in the message backward by that many places in the alphabet. Keep the spaces.

GLIGO XLI GPSGO

What instruction does the decoded message give you?

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WG09-003 / Puzzle stage 3

STAGE 3 — THE SHIFT LOG

“Check the clock” means put these entries in time order, earliest to latest. Read the boxed digit at the end of each entry in that order.

14:15 — checksum marked ready — [4]

14:05 — crew check-in recorded — [2]

14:20 — archive copy synced — [1]

14:10 — route map verified — [8]

What four-digit sequence do you get?

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WG09-004 / Puzzle stage 4

STAGE 4 — THE RELEASE CHECKPOINT

Use your four-digit sequence from Stage 3. For each digit, take that numbered letter from the next word below. Use the first digit with the first word, the second digit with the second word, and so on. Read the four letters in order.

1. ROSTER
2. WORKSHOP
3. BRIEF
4. NEXTSTEP

What passphrase releases the handoff packet?

Host answer key

Keep this section separate from player cards. Accept equivalent wording where the meaning matches.

01. LAMP

Sort by ID: 03 Lighthouse Lens, 15 Atlas of Tides, 27 Meridian Route Map, 42 Pier Bell. Their initials are L-A-M-P. This is the key for Stage 2.

02. CHECK THE CLOCK

LAMP has four letters, so shift each cipher letter backward four places: GLIGO becomes CHECK, XLI becomes THE, and GPSGO becomes CLOCK. The instruction tells the team how to read Stage 3.

03. 2841

Sort the entries as 14:05, 14:10, 14:15, and 14:20. The corresponding digits are 2, 8, 4, and 1. Use this sequence in Stage 4.

04. OPEN

The sequence is 2-8-4-1. The second letter of ROSTER is O; the eighth letter of WORKSHOP is P; the fourth letter of BRIEF is E; and the first letter of NEXTSTEP is N. The passphrase is OPEN.

Hosting questions

Does the room need to be physically locked?

No. This is a paper-only simulation. The host hands out stages or uses optional envelopes, and should tell participants that nobody is actually locked in.

How many people can play?

The activity is written for three to eight people on one team. Larger groups can split into two teams and compare collaboration approaches.

How long does it take?

Plan 35–45 minutes, including a short debrief. The fictional deadline is 35 minutes, but the real session should remain flexible.

Can the team ask for hints?

Yes. The host key includes one progressive hint for each stage. Hints can be free; there is no required penalty system.

Can I use this as an employee evaluation?

No. It is a team activity, not a validated measure of performance, communication skill, or job fit.

Original AI-assisted resource with AI editorial review. Independent human playtesting and physical printing have not been completed. Answer, listen, or pass.