

2023

Time to Escape! Using Escape Rooms in the Middle Grades Classroom

Rebecca Harper

Augusta University, rharper7@augusta.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scamle>



Part of the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harper, R. G. (2023). Time to escape! Using escape rooms in the middle grades classroom. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 138-143.

This Article is brought to you by the USC Aiken at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Published online: March 2023
© South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

Time to Escape! Using Escape Rooms in the Middle Grades Classroom

Dr. Rebecca Harper
Augusta University
RHARPER7@augusta.edu

Abstract: Motivation and student engagement are at the forefront of quality instructional design and implementation. While traditional teaching methods may have been effective in the past, today's diverse student body, with their rich literacy experiences in both print and digital worlds, demand unique classroom engagements. Because problem solving and critical thinking skills are ones that are required for student success both in and out of school, instructional opportunities should be designed with this in mind. One way to address the diverse skills and needs of today's students, along with the instruction of academic skills needed for success, is through the implementation of literacy escape rooms. Using literacy escape rooms can provide students with opportunities to practice and refine several academic skills in a highly motivating and engaging setting.

Keywords: literacy, engagement, motivation, problem solving, escape rooms

Introduction

Today's young adolescents need ample time and opportunities to practice problem solving, think and critically question, and work collaboratively in a team setting. These, along with experiences that are motivational, impactful, and engaging, can be the key to successful learning opportunities for students at all levels, but especially at the middle grades level. Plus, because today's classrooms are highly diverse, not only in student background, culture, and language, many classrooms have students with a wide range of ability levels and interests. With this in mind, escape rooms become prime opportunities to plan, create, and implement activities that motivate students *and* address content.

As a literacy educator, I am constantly searching for ways to introduce, reinforce, and refine the necessary skills that today's students need for literacy achievement. These skills often are centered around the ability to articulate arguments, read for different purposes, identify textual evidence, summarize, close read, and analyze, to name a few. In many instances, teaching these skills through traditional instructional methods and scripted curriculum programs focus on teaching these skills in isolation. However, real world literacy application requires consumers of texts to conduct these skills in tandem, across a variety of genres for multiple purposes. Plus, offering students lesson engagements that are standards-driven, but engaging and hands-on can create learning

experiences that can motivate and challenge middle grades students.

One of the main challenges in the middle grades classroom is that of engagement and motivation. Classroom teachers may find themselves competing with several outside factors that can affect classroom instruction and student engagement. While lectures and teacher led engagements focusing on "stand and deliver" methods are often part of core traditional instruction, this antiquated delivery modality may not take into account today's sophisticated learners who demand high level engagement and interaction. Remember, these young adults are consumers of material that is often instantaneous and interactive. In fact, much of what they consume online through social media and their online perusals appeals to multiple senses and is not one dimensional in delivery. Instead, students are often consuming texts that include visual and auditory components along with opportunities for reaction and response. This can sometimes make a traditional instructional delivery method for lessons ineffective. Thus, teachers may find that seeking out unique and novel methods for instruction can address the need for effective but engaging lessons.

Regardless of the content area or learner level, problem solving and critical thinking are skills needed in order to prepare students for life outside of the classroom. While project-based learning is sometimes used to help students address these highly sophisticated skills, they are not employed consistently across all content areas. Plus, in some instances, hands on lessons and engagements may be relegated to specific classrooms like science, for example, where labs are integral parts of the curriculum. However, offering students learning opportunities to practice problem solving skills and collaborative engagements in all content areas is imperative for student success, both in and outside of the classroom.

As a literacy educator, and as a former middle grades teacher, I find myself looking for additional ways to motivate and engage students while they build and enhance their literacy skills and competencies. In my experience, I have found that young adults are taking part in a number of highly sophisticated literacy skills in their personal lives that are often not utilized to their full potential in the academic classroom. Because the traditional ways in which we teach literacy skills can sometimes feel disjointed and unauthentic, finding examples of these academic skills that students are executing in their personal lives can create connections and relevance between the academic and home worlds. My interactions with adolescents have provided me with multiple examples of literacy skills that are practiced outside of school. These include:

- Responding to texts (reactions to social media posts, videos, or photos online)

- Research (Locating information through multiple sources about their favorite sports figure, music icon, or actor counts as research)
- Summarizing material (Athletes develop highlight reels with clips of plays from games, kids write posts for social media, and give a summary of their days when asked, “How was your day?”)
- Making inferences (Check out the real-world example given in *Writing Workouts* (Harper, 2023))

And the list goes on. What this tells us is that students have experience with a number of literacy skills and seem to do quite well with them when the material they are tasked with is relevant, authentic, engaging, and connected to their interests and background knowledge. As an educator, all of these real-world observations prompt me to plan and develop instructional engagements that transfer this knowledge into spendable classroom capital. This aligns with the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)’s position statement which lists the five essential attributes of a successful middle school as responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). In addition to the five attributes, Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe characteristics of a successful middle school including:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Educators are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.

With this in mind, I began developing and designing escape rooms that could be integrated in the middle grades classroom. Escape rooms have increased in popularity over the past decade and are essentially hands-on problem-solving experiences that require teams of individuals to collaboratively solve a series of puzzles to “escape” the room. Puzzles are often presented in a variety of formats and require multiple skills for solving. Ranging in complexity and structure, these puzzles may include cryptograms, ciphers, hidden messages, logic problems, word games, and more. These interactive experiences require individuals to use a specific subset of skills to successfully complete and solve the problems. Plus, because these puzzles are most often solved through a collaborative team effort, figuring out how to work together to solve puzzles that each require a very specific set of subskills is another challenge. Teams not only need to possess a series of competencies that can help them solve the puzzles, but they also have to figure out the best ways to communicate and delegate within their teams in order to be successful. After experiencing an escape room with a group of friends, I knew they could be used in classroom instruction and set out to design my own.

When planning an escape room for the classroom, one of my main goals was to make certain that the academic standards teachers are charged with addressing are front and center. In today’s classrooms, making certain that instructional activities are directly tied to standards and targets is imperative. Fortunately, literacy escape rooms easily address a number of sophisticated academic skills including:

- Close read
- Textual evidence
- Comprehension
- Character analysis
- Synthesizing material
- Key word/vocabulary skills

These skills are in addition to the ones that students will employ that are content and discipline specific. What is different about utilizing an escape room for instruction is that many students are unaware of the academic skills they must employ to solve the problems. As a result, many students will readily approach the task without the same level of apprehension that may occur when presented with a traditional academic task.

In my experience, creating an escape room around a novel, major event, or concept in a content area can be an effective mode for instruction and assessment. For example, developing an escape room as a culminating assessment for a class novel or a larger unit can be a natural fit. They also serve well as modes of review for topics that students have background knowledge and experience with. Plus, they are fantastic instructional methods that can be implemented during what is traditionally considered down time for instruction including exam days, early release days, or dates leading up to a major holiday or break. But how does one go about creating one? Actually, it’s not too difficult once you get started, and the time spent creating and implementing them are well worth it.

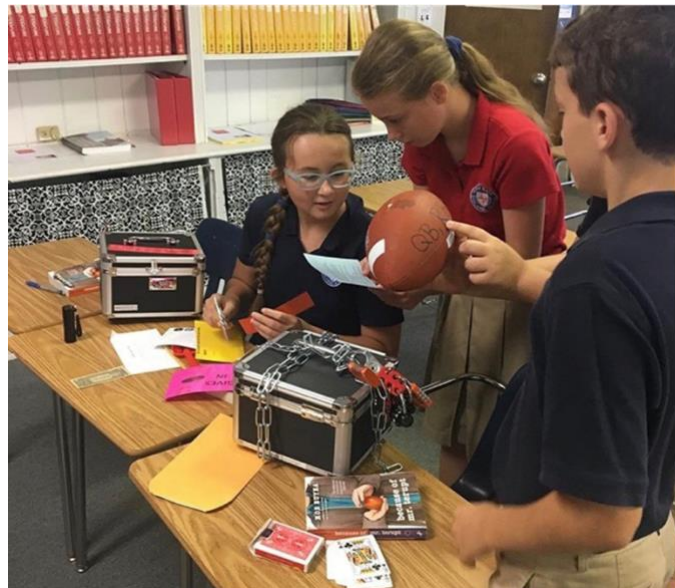
Two of my favorite escape rooms I developed were centered around novels. One was based on the novel, *Because of Mr. Terrupt*, written by Rob Buyea and the other was focused on Shelia Turnage’s novel *Three Times Lucky*. Each of these escape rooms served as the culminating assessment for the novels. However, planning escape rooms was something new for me as I had no experience whatsoever, but I actually found this to be a plus. As I began to plan both of these escape rooms, I knew I wanted the clues to tie back to characters or events in the novels because this would allow yet another opportunity for me to assess reading comprehension. I started by making a list of the main characters and events and began brainstorming possible clues that might work based on each of the character’s individual traits and interests or based on the event of focus. In order for students to be able to solve each puzzle, they would need to know enough about each character or event in order to solve the puzzle.

For example, in *Three Times Lucky*, one of the main characters is called Colonel. I looked online for the military symbols for multiple ranks, including colonel and posted images around the room. Students had to figure out which

symbol or insignia represented the rank of colonel and use it to solve a clue. This clue was a direct connection to one of the main characters in the novel, but I also included clues about the setting. Because the setting of the novel was a café, I posted menus around the room with a variety of entrees listed. Students had a clue that stated, “Mr. Jesse’s last meal.” They had to recall what the character ordered at the café in the novel to find the corresponding dish on the menu. The price of the entrée was the code for one of their locks.



In *Because of Mr. Terrupt*, one character was a practical joker who was always playing tricks on his classmates. I created a clue that was written in mirror image on a slip of paper that said, “Batman’s Nemesis.” In their packet of clues was a deck of playing cards. Students had to figure out that the joker in the deck of cards had one of the lock codes written on it. Another character in the same novel loved to garden. Students used small plastic shovels (included in their packet of materials) to dig up a clue in the class garden. The clue was a cipher that students had to use to solve a cryptogram in their puzzle boxes.



While I made certain to connect clues back to the novels, I also worked to make certain that the materials they needed in their kits also were connected. For example, because Mo in *Three Times Lucky* sends messages in a bottle to her mother, students found that their instructions for the escape room were given to them in a small glass bottle.



As you can see, each clue that was created tied directly back to the material in the novel that students read. Because each clue was related to a specific detail in the book, the literacy escape room became an easy assessment for reading comprehension. As an extension, students wrote a response where they connected each clue to the appropriate character and then explained why they knew this to be accurate.

Over the years, I have developed a number of escape rooms across many content areas for multiple grade levels. Although the clues listed above are based on novels, it is easy to create ones that can be used in content classrooms too. Over the years, I have developed ones on body systems, math concepts, elementary school novels, and social studies time periods and events. Almost any subject area or content concept can be developed into an escape room.

For example, the science escape room I created focused on body systems and was used as a culminating assessment after

students finished their unit on body systems. We included a clue based on each body system and used a variety of sources and material for the clues. In this escape room, I included QR codes linking video clips which students accessed via their phones, images and diagrams from their science textbooks, and material that required students to use their knowledge about body systems to travel to the appropriate place for the correct code. For example, one clue stated, “Your excretory system does most of its work in this room.” Students had to use their knowledge about that system to determine that they needed to travel to the student restroom where a lock code was written on the bathroom mirror. Plus, despite the fact that this escape room was used in a science classroom, there were clues that incorporated student knowledge of other content areas for solutions. For example, one clue included a map of the school with certain classrooms marked with an order of operations sign. The clue instructed students to follow the order of operations and students had to go to the designated rooms in order so that they could get the code in the correct order.

Designing a Literacy Escape Room

One important item to consider is the nature in which a literacy escape room is planned and developed. Unless you plan on purchasing a ready-made escape room online (which I don’t recommend), ample time needs to be allotted to create and plan one. These are not engagements that can be planned in a day. Instead, I have found it works best to develop clues and puzzle ideas over the course of a unit as this can help contribute to better quality escape rooms. I normally give myself several weeks to create one so that there is ample time for me to modify and revise any clues as needed.

The nature of escape room planning also lends itself to a collaborative teaching approach. Because so many of them can include cross curricular skills, working alongside a colleague when planning and implementing these can make the task of creation a little easier. Plus, because escape rooms often require several materials, sharing these with a colleague can also decrease the initial expense for a teacher.

If I am building an escape room based on a novel, I have found that some of the clue ideas come to me as I am reading. For example, when designing the one based on Sheila Turnage’s novel *Three Times Lucky*, I knew I wanted to use a clue connected specifically to the color lavender which was also the name of one of the supporting characters. I went to a local hardware store and picked out a variety of paint chip samples that were light purple in color, but of which only one of the samples was called lavender. Because the paint colors also had a numeric code next to it, I had an automatic lock code that I could incorporate. This particular clue idea was rather easy to include and was a direct connection to the book.

Materials Needed

Literacy Escape Rooms can be as extravagant as you want or as simplistic as your budget allows. Teachers may find that some of their local state educational organizations offer grant programs that might serve as good financial resources for

these projects. Regardless, there are a few materials that are necessary to make your project successful.

- A variety of locks (These should be a combination of three, four, and five numerical locks, along with four and five letter locks so word clues can be created. You could also use a padlock with a key as one of your locks as well.)
- Lockboxes (I typically use one similar to these that are found on Amazon. They work well because they already include a combination lock and have room inside the box where any instructions, clues, and accessories that are needed for the escape room can be stored. However, you can simply use a lunch box with a handle or put all your locks on one hasp if you do not have a lockbox.
https://www.amazon.com/Vaultz-Combination-Lock-Box-Documents/dp/B004Q86PNI/ref=sr_1_8?crd=1DNSXLBI8KGE7&keywords=combination+lock+box&qid=1645368975&smid=A3MBJ9LSQAUIC0&prefix=combination+lockbox%2Caps%2C110&sr=8-8
- Black light flashlights (These are great for use with clues written in invisible ink.)
https://www.amazon.com/Morpilot-Flashlight-Ultraviolet-Blacklight-Inspection/dp/B01MZ0D414/ref=sr_1_6?crd=1626GM7U9E1D1&keywords=black+light+flashlights&qid=1645369131&prefix=black+light+flashlights%2Caps%2C122&sr=8-6
- Hand-held mirrors from the dollar store (These are great for clues that are written in mirror image text, which can be easily accomplished using Microsoft Word.)
- Pens with glow in the dark ink for writing messages that can only be viewed under a black light.
- Hasps (These are used for attaching multiple locks.)
https://www.amazon.com/Safety-Jaw-Steel-Lockout-Hasp/dp/B007I9SVI4/ref=sr_1_5?crd=3DXCX80SB9RP2&keywords=hasps&qid=1671499625&prefix=hasp%2Caps%2C389&sr=8-5
- Different color card stock for the creation of color-coded clues.
- Window markers for writing clues on classroom windows or mirrors.
- Plastic protective paper sleeves or lamination materials so clues can be written on with dry erase markers and then wiped clean.

Tips for Creating Clues

Because Escape Rooms require students to solve a variety of puzzles and rely on an individual’s ability to follow instructions to the letter, there are a few tips to employ that can help improve student success.

1. Color code clues. For example, if I am including a cryptogram for students to solve along with a cipher, I make sure those clues are the same color. That way, students know that the clue on red paper goes with

the cipher that is also presented on red paper. This can help students solve their puzzles in a more efficient manner. In addition, you might also include a corresponding colored sticker on any ancillary materials that students will use to solve a particular clue. For example, if I need to use the mirror to solve the clue on a yellow paper, I may put a yellow sticker on the mirror as well.

2. Include at least one puzzle that requires students to collect information from another area in the room or school. For example, in an escape room I designed on body systems, we included a clue that said, “Your digestive system needs fuel from this room.” Students had to figure out that they needed to go to the cafeteria where they found a clue/code written on the wall.
3. Develop clues that require students to use different types of tools to solve them. For example, you might write a clue in invisible ink so students have to use a black light to see it or create clues written in mirror image so that students have to use a small handheld mirror to read them. Another clue I created was written in Morse Code and students had to use a corresponding chart to decipher it. Another clue required students to blow up a balloon and then pop it with a safety pin to get the code inside.
4. If possible, include some type of digital clue. For example, in a science escape room that I designed on body systems, we had a QR code that students scanned which took them to a YouTube video. They then had to answer a question based on the video.
5. Clues that require students to work with a partner can be beneficial. For example, cryptograms can sometimes require collaboration between students and rely on a separate set of subskills.
6. If possible, include clues that have objects placed for display in the classroom that students must use to help solve their clues. For example, in one escape room, I had a football on display. Written on the football in black magic marker was “QB, RB, QB.” In their packet of clues, students were given football trading cards. Using the information on the football, students had to figure out that if they lined up the football players by their positions (quarter back, running back, quarter back) the numbers on their jerseys created a code for one of the locks.

Managing the Escape Room

Once you have planned, developed, and created your Escape Room materials, it is important to determine how it will be executed, as this is equally important and can help you have a successful experience.

- Assign group members PRIOR to the activity. This allows the teacher to pair students together who have a variety of strengths which can result in a more successful engagement. In most instances, it is best not to allow students to pick their own groups. And don't simply do a random count off; you need to be

strategic here about your grouping. For example, you don't want to end up with four kids who are extroverts and want to take charge. It simply won't work!

- Decide how many locks and puzzles you want your students to solve. If you have never done an escape room, I would start with about three puzzles and locks.
- Because I recommend having at least one puzzle that require leaving the room to answer, it is important to determine WHO in the collaborative group will be doing the traveling. In some classes with smaller numbers, we have allowed the entire group to travel where in other situations we elected one person from each group as the “traveler”. We gave this student a special pass that they had to show teachers before they left the room to go get a clue. Choosing this student ahead of time can assist with possible classroom management issues. (Don't be tempted to leave out traveling clues as students enjoy getting to hunt for the answers.)
- Make sure you include a “Directions” card in the packet of supplies. This way, students can refer back to the directions if they have questions about what they are required to do. If possible, keep the directions the same for all escape rooms so that a routine is established for how the complete the task. For example, you might always include a red clue as the last clue they need to solve. Keeping that clue constant (always red) can help students as they determine which ones to solve first. Make sure the instructions are not too hard to follow-simplicity is best.
- Don't try to do the escape room with all of your classes on the same day. It takes some time to reset the locks and get the clues back to their original homes, so trying to do the same escape room with all your classes on one day, probably won't work. Instead, I recommend splitting it up so you can have time to reset the locks, redistribute the clues, and replenish any of the consumable clues. I might plan to conduct an escape room with my first, third, and seventh period classes in one day, and then on the next day, complete the escape room with my second and sixth period classes, for example.
- Before implementing the escape room, start integrating puzzles as bell ringers or tickets out the door. Giving students some practice with solving a variety of puzzles prior to the culminating task can help improve student success rate.
- Include one “Hint” card that teams can “cash in” to the teacher for a hint about a puzzle they are having a hard time with. However, with hints come penalties. I typically impose a five-minute penalty for using a hint card. This means that if students solve the entire series of puzzles and have cashed in their hint card, they must wait five minutes as a penalty before they are declared the winner. During this time, another team *could* still win. This penalty helps students determine if they really need a hint or if they simply

need to look at the problem in another way as a group. Plus, when cashing in the hint, all team members have to agree to use the hint, thus relaying the importance of collaboration and teamwork.

- Offer some incentive for completing the escape room as a reward. This can vary, but I have included rewards of candy and treats, homework passes, or other incentives that students would like.

While creating literacy escape rooms does take some time and planning, the potential rewards for student engagement, motivation, and skills make up for the effort. After implementing escape rooms with different groups of students, I am always met with, “Will you come back and do another one?” That’s all I need to make sure I keep coming back with more.

References

Bishop, P.A. & Harrison, L.M. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Columbus, OH: Association for Middle Level Education. <https://www.amle.org/the-successful-middle-school-this-we-believe/>.

Harper, R. G. (2023). *Writing workouts, grades 6-12: Strategies to build students’ writing skills, stamina, and success*. Corwin Literacy.

About the Author



Dr. Rebecca G. Harper is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy in the College of Education and Human Development at Augusta University where she teaches courses in literacy, qualitative research, and curriculum, and serves as the EdD program director. Her research focuses on writing and critical literacy, and the ways in which authentic literacy can

Presenting...

Save 20%
at Corwin.com
with code
SAVE20

Writing Workouts

Strategies to Build Students' Writing Skills, Stamina, and Success

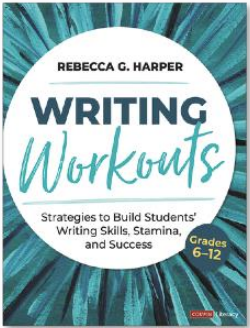
Rebecca G. Harper

Student Writers Go the Distance with a Strength-Training Approach

Writing Workouts provides a method for instruction that gives students the fun they want and the targeted skill practice they need. Slinky paragraphs, pop-up poems, paint chip plotting, and many other activities get the serious business of teaching critical and creative writing done. Author Rebecca Harper shows you how to go about it systematically, so writing is tied to relevant lessons and writing standards. Help students learn to:

- Hone skills in persuasive writing, argument, fiction, poetry, memoir and more
- Toggle between brief and multi-step writing tasks, to build stamina (and not hyperventilate when faced with complex compositions)
- Tap into auditory, visual, and kinesthetic, and digital components of crafting
- Think about word, sentence, and paragraph-level techniques
- Jump the high-jumps of research writing by getting good at each smaller leap

Students in middle school and high school often feel they are forever-sprinting toward a high-stakes writing task. With *Writing Workouts*, you help students crowd out stress with a strength-training approach to success.



\$28.95, 248 pages, ISBN: 9781071867044

Good writers don't wing it—they have a plethora of skills. They list, picture, circle, strategize and revise to make language come alive. They know what to use and when. Like ace athletes, they are highly trained, well-versed in the techniques found in this lively book.

Three
EASY WAYS
to order!

ONLINE


corwin.com

CALL

(800) 233-9936

MAIL

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, CA 91320



Scan me

Learn more at [Corwin.com](https://www.corwin.com)

CORWIN

foster engagement, agency, and empathy in students. She is the Director of the Augusta University Writing Project and the author of *Content Area Writing that Rocks (and Works)!*, *Write Now and Write On: 37 Strategies for Authentic Daily Writing in Every Content Area*, and *Writing Workouts: Strategies to Build Students’ Writing Skills, Stamina, and Success*.

Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Harper, R. G. (2023). Time to escape! Using escape rooms in the middle grades classroom. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 138-143.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double-blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: March 2023

© South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education