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"Codebreaker" Lesson Plan Guide

by Jay Martel

Unit Overview

Duration: 1 week

Grade Level: 9–12

Program: Florida Teens Read (FTR)

Subject Integration: ELA, Media Literacy, Civics, Social-Emotional Learning

Essential Question: *What is the relationship between information, power, and truth—and what does it cost to crack a code that someone powerful wants kept hidden?*

Learning Objectives — Students will be able to:

- Analyze how Martel structures "Codebreaker" as both a thriller and an interactive puzzle for readers
 - Examine themes of government surveillance, institutional power, and individual agency
 - Evaluate how grief and action interact in Mia's character development
 - Engage with real-world questions about privacy, whistleblowing, and who controls information
 - Express understanding through analytical writing, research, and creative response
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ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN

Day 1: Mia's World Shatters — Crisis, Agency, and First Moves

Objective: Establish the inciting incident and analyze Mia's immediate response to catastrophic loss

Materials: Book, character agency analysis chart

Opening (10 min):

- Quick-write: "If everything you relied on disappeared overnight, what would be your first move—and what would that move reveal about you?"
- Partner share

Main Activity (35 min):

- Introduce Mia and the opening events: What happens? In what order? How does Mia respond?
- Discuss: What does it tell us about Mia that she moves into action rather than paralysis?
- Introduce the father's clues: What does it mean that he prepared for this? What does it imply about what he knew—and what he didn't tell her?
- Establish the central dramatic question: What is the truth about Mia's family—and who wants to keep her from finding it?

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "What does Mia's immediate response to crisis reveal about who she is?"

Assessment: Comprehension, character agency analysis, central mystery identification

Day 2: Codes, Patterns, and Critical Thinking

Objective: Engage with the code-breaking structure as both a narrative device and a critical thinking exercise

Materials: Book, simple cipher examples, code-breaking materials

Opening (10 min):

- Warm-up: Solve a simple cipher together as a class — Caesar cipher or substitution code (teacher-prepared)

Main Activity (35 min):

- Discuss: How does Martel use the codes to make readers active participants rather than passive observers?



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- Analyze the father's codes as a narrative choice: What kind of relationship do they imply between father and daughter?
- Introduce Logan: What does he bring to the partnership—and what does Mia risk by trusting him?
- Critical thinking exercise: What makes a good code? What makes it crackable? What does that have to do with information and power?

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "Why does the code-breaking structure work as a narrative device—what does it do for the reader that exposition couldn't?"

Assessment: Critical thinking engagement, narrative device analysis, trust framework

Day 3: Government, Surveillance, and the Antagonists in Power

Objective: Examine the implications of federal agents as antagonists and what the novel suggests about institutional power

Materials: Book, brief reading on government surveillance (teacher-selected), civics discussion framework

Opening (10 min):

- Think-pair-share: "What does it mean for a story that the most dangerous people are working for the government? What is the author suggesting?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Analyze the federal agents as antagonists: How does their institutional authority make them more threatening than ordinary villains?
- Introduce real-world context: Brief reading on documented cases of government surveillance or overreach
- Discuss: What does the novel imply about the relationship between institutional power and truth? Who controls the narrative?
- Explore whistleblowing: When is exposing government secrets justified? What does Mia's story suggest?

Closing (5 min):

- Discussion: "What rights should protect individuals from government surveillance? Does the novel take a position?"

Assessment: Civics engagement, power analysis, real-world connection, argument articulation

Day 4: Family Secrets and the Renegotiation of the Past

Objective: Analyze what Mia discovers about her family and what it means for her understanding of herself

Materials: Book, theme synthesis chart

Opening (10 min):

- Partner discussion: "If you discovered that a parent had a secret life, what would you most want to know—and what would you be afraid to find out?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Track Mia's discoveries: What does she learn about her parents? How does each revelation change her understanding of her own history?
- Discuss: What is the difference between a secret that protects someone and a secret that controls them?
- Theme synthesis: Information, power, family, and grief — how do these themes converge in the novel's final act?
- Writing prompt: "What does the novel suggest about the cost of truth—is finding it always worth what it takes?"

Closing (5 min):

- Share one sentence from writing prompt; discuss as a class

Assessment: Thematic synthesis, analytical writing quality, personal reflection

Day 5: Research, Advocacy, and Creative Response

Objective: Apply learning through research-based or creative analytical writing

Materials: Research materials, writing supplies, project choice cards

Opening (10 min):

- Preview project options; students select and begin



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Main Activity (35 min):

- Option A: Research a real government surveillance or whistleblower case (Snowden, Ellsberg, Friedman). Write a one-page analytical comparison to the novel's themes
- Option B: Analytical essay — "How does Martel use the code-breaking structure to explore the relationship between information, power, and individual agency?"
- Option C: Write the scene from the father's perspective as he prepares the codes — what is he thinking, what does he know, and what does he hope Mia will be able to do?
- Share in pairs or with the class

Closing (5 min):

- Class closing: "One thing 'Codebreaker' made me think about power, truth, or family secrets differently is..."

Assessment: Research quality, analytical writing depth, creative insight

Differentiation

- **Advanced learners:** Research the philosophy of epistemic justice—who gets to be believed, and why—and connect it to the novel's themes around information and power
 - **Students needing support:** Character agency graphic organizer; cipher warm-up with scaffolding; sentence starters for analytical writing
 - **Grief sensitivity note:** Mia's mother dies in the opening pages. Some students may have experienced recent loss. Acknowledge this directly at the start of the unit and provide private journaling options.
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Materials List

- Class set of "Codebreaker"
- Teacher-prepared cipher warm-up for Day 2
- Brief government surveillance reading for Day 3 (teacher-selected)
- Civics discussion framework (Day 3)
- Theme synthesis chart (Day 4)
- Research materials and project choice cards (Day 5)