

Secret Message Scytales

FOR HUNDREDS OF years, people have used codes and ciphers to send secret messages. In ancient Greece, commanders in the Spartan army needed to communicate over long distances. With no mail system, telephones, or computers to help them, soldiers carried messages on foot. Often enemies would attack the messengers and steal the dispatches, hoping to learn the army's plans.

Because of this, the Spartans came up with a special cipher, using a thin strip of paper or leather and a rod-shaped object called a scytale. These scytales were usually made of wood and could be as thin as your finger or as thick as your wrist. No matter what the size, scytales always came in identical sets of two.

An officer would wind a thin strip of paper around a scytale so that the twists of paper touched each other. Then he would write his message across the paper in rows from left to right. When finished, he would unwind the strip and send it to another officer who had the twin scytale.

On its own, the message would look like random letters. But when the ribbon of paper was wound onto the matching scytale, the letters lined up and the message was revealed. This way, if the Spartan commander's dispatch fell into enemy hands, no one could understand it.

To send your own scytale message, turn the page!



by Angela Ackerman
Art by Matt Novak

Chief Pot Scrubber.



What You'll Need:

- 2 identical cylinders (toilet paper rolls, wooden rods, or thick markers)
- piece of paper
- pen or pencil
- scissors
- envelope



What to Do:

1. Give one of the identical scytals to a friend.
2. Cut a long strip of paper about as wide as your finger. This will be for your secret message.
3. Wind the paper around the scytale starting at the left edge. Hold the end in place with your thumb or use a small piece of tape. Make sure there are no gaps between the twists of paper.
4. Once the scytale is wrapped in paper, cut off the extra paper, if any. Then take a pen and write your message, left to right, in rows.
5. Now unwind the paper, fold it, put it in an envelope, and send it to your friend, who will be able to wind it around the matching scytale to decode your message!

