

Cipher used by President Thomas Jefferson, adapted from a form devised by Robert Patterson

Step 1

First, the message is written out in rows with numbered columns. The number of columns is determined by the letter writer, but the first line usually ends at the end of a word, and the columns are numbered in groups of nine. Punctuation was often not used with this type of message.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5
J	A	M	E	S	M	O	N	R	O	E	W	A	S
O	U	R	F	I	F	T	H	P	R	E	S	I	D
E	N	T	B	E	F	O	R	E	B	E	C	O	M
I	N	G	P	R	E	S	I	D	E	N	T	H	E
W	A	S	A	D	I	P	L	O	M	A	T	A	N
D	U	S	E	D	C	O	D	E	D	L	E	T	T
E	R	S	T	O	W	R	I	T	E	T	O	T	H
O	M	A	S	J	E	F	F	E	R	S	O	N	

Step 2

The grid to be used to create the coded message should have as many rows as there are columns in the original grid.

First, a random number of blocks at the beginning of each row are filled in with insignificant letters, which are not part of the message (shaded areas below). The number of random letters should vary from row to row. Next, each of the first nine numbered columns are transcribed into the first nine rows (chosen randomly) of the new grid (keeping each column of letters in tact in a separate row). The number of the corresponding column is noted at the beginning of the row. Any blank spaces left at the end of a row are filled in with insignificant letters. Repeat the process for the remaining columns from the original message.

7	K	O	C	O	T	O	S	P	O	R	F	N	R	V
4	E	W	L	C	P	E	F	B	P	A	E	T	S	W
1	U	S	J	O	E	I	W	D	E	O	T	C	H	E
9	M	C	I	R	P	E	D	O	E	T	E	O	N	Y
5	W	L	U	B	E	Z	S	I	E	R	D	D	O	J
2	T	M	N	Y	A	U	N	N	A	U	R	M	H	G
6	Q	O	P	M	F	F	E	I	C	W	E	F	L	J
3	S	M	R	T	G	S	S	S	A	B	Q	U	W	O
8	H	R	V	T	E	N	H	R	I	L	D	I	F	P
4	O	P	F	C	A	I	O	H	A	T	T	N	D	A
2	L	A	A	E	E	E	N	A	L	T	S	E	L	G
3	R	T	W	S	C	T	T	E	O	O	H	V	R	I
5	V	I	M	R	N	W	S	D	M	E	N	T	H	K
1	H	O	R	B	E	M	D	E	R	L	W	C	O	S

Step 3

Create keys to be used for decoding the message. The Letter Key (below) indicates the number of insignificant letters there are at the beginning of each row. These letters will be ignored when the message is deciphered. The Line Key indicates the number of the column the line came from in the original message. It will be used to reassemble the lines into columns to decode the message.

LETTER KEY: 3.5.2.3.6.4.3.1.5/4.3.2.6.1

(number of insignificant letters at the start of the row)

LINE KEY: 7.4.1.9.5.2.6.3.8/4.2.3.5.1

(column number from the original message)

The recipient receives the message without any row numbers or shading (as below), and uses the keys to decipher the message.

K	O	C	O	T	O	S	P	O	R	F	N	R	V
E	W	L	C	P	E	F	B	P	A	E	T	S	W
U	S	J	O	E	I	W	D	E	O	T	C	H	E
M	C	I	R	P	E	D	O	E	T	E	O	N	Y
W	L	U	B	E	Z	S	I	E	R	D	D	O	J
T	M	N	Y	A	U	N	N	A	U	R	M	H	G
Q	O	P	M	F	F	E	I	C	W	E	F	L	J
S	M	R	T	G	S	S	S	A	B	Q	U	W	O
H	R	V	T	E	N	H	R	I	L	D	I	F	P
O	P	F	C	A	I	O	H	A	T	T	N	D	A
L	A	A	E	E	E	N	A	L	T	S	E	L	G
R	T	W	S	C	T	T	E	O	O	H	V	R	I
V	I	M	R	N	W	S	D	M	E	N	T	H	K
H	O	R	B	E	M	D	E	R	L	W	C	O	S

Decoded Message

When reassembling the message the insignificant letters that were found at the end of the lines will reveal themselves as insignificant when reading the rows left to right as intended (see below).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5
J	A	M	E	S	M	O	N	R	O	E	W	A	S
O	U	R	F	I	F	T	H	P	R	E	S	I	D
E	N	T	B	E	F	O	R	E	B	E	C	O	M
I	N	G	P	R	E	S	I	D	E	N	T	H	E
W	A	S	A	D	I	P	L	O	M	A	T	A	N
D	U	S	E	D	C	O	D	E	D	L	E	T	T
E	R	S	T	O	W	R	I	T	E	T	O	T	H
O	M	A	S	J	E	F	F	E	R	S	O	N	K
T	H	B	W		F	N	P	O	L	E	H	D	
C	G	Q			L	R		N	W	L	V	A	
H		U			J	V		Y	C	G	R		
E		W							O		I		
		O							S				

James Monroe was our fifth president. Before becoming president he was a diplomat and used coded letters to write to Thomas Jefferson.