Online escape room games and low-stakes quizzing

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Introduction

Low-stakes testing is considered a good tool in our repertoire, allowing us to understand what progress students have made and what needs consolidation before moving on. If students feel like they're being tested, it can lead to higher anxiety and less clarity in thought. But exploring content when it's okay to get things wrong lowers the pressure and gives students the opportunity to recall facts without the fear of looking bad.

Gamifying learning is an ideal way to help with this. Many games have become popular recently, including Bloket, Kahoot and others. But one of the most useful is an 'escape room' game. This concept can be used across all key stages, with different levels of difficulty.

For those who haven't delved into the world of escape room games, they're often created as in-person events with puzzles and activities based around a series of rooms, all of which combine and lead to finding a key to unlock the door. They've had a surge in popularity in recent years, becoming a multi-million pound industry. They range in themes from horror to family-friendly topics such as 'Wizard School' and pirate adventures. Their surge in popularity is something that we can easily use as a hook to get students engaged and into learning.

It would be fabulous to create a live escape room event in school, but unlikely to be possible: it would be intensive in terms of time, space, money and more. And it wouldn't be something simple that could be used for classroom low-stakes testing. But during the Covid lockdowns, a huge number of online versions of escape rooms came onto the market, allowing friends and families to work together on puzzles via video calls and attempt to solve the mysteries. This format is easy to replicate in the classroom using resources you already have and can easily make, alongside Google Forms (or your preferred brand of quiz creator).

What can you gain from using escape room tasks?

You can use escape room tasks for a variety of functions in your classroom:

- ▶ To check understanding in the lead-up to an assessment.
- ▶ To introduce new content.
- ▶ As a revision tool (where students create their own).

Each of these uses can be aimed across all age ranges just by adapting the difficulty level of the questions. You can also make use of quizzes and worksheets that already exist as the basis for questions. The quiz questions are self-marking, too, meaning there's no assessment work to do after the event when you're using them to check understanding or introduce new content.

Watching students' conversations, noting where regular questions are asked and seeing where groups get up to – even if they don't finish the puzzles – can also give us a huge amount of information for future planning. When created by students as revision tools, these escape room quizzes can be shared within a group, creating a whole set of games for them to revise from.

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JÉRÔME ROMMÉ

How does an escape room task work?

You set a series of seven to ten challenges, and divide your class up into teams. The teams have to try and work out the answers: the first two teams get prizes (for example house points, but occasionally you might like to try sweets).

With GCSE students, you can sometimes get them to work individually so that you can check the depth of understanding of your quieter students. This does mean, however, that you can't follow the conversation as easily to identify common misconceptions.

As the teacher, you take the role of Game Master. Students can come and ask you for hints when they get stuck. If you wander around the classroom listening to their conversations, you can immediately tell who in each group has got a firm grasp on the content and who has gaps in their understanding. When the same hints are requested by multiple groups, you know this is something you need to revise with them in a future lesson.

The role of the Game Master is to help guide students through the task. If you're covering content you feel they should really know well, you can add an incentive not to ask for hints – for example, one minute added to their 'escape time'. Most of the time, however, it can be quite good to be open with giving hints, since you can use it as a teaching opportunity. As usual, refuse to just give the answers, as you would in a normal lesson, but help gently guide students towards working it out for themselves, and thereby giving themselves a greater sense of satisfaction.

You can create a sense of occasion by putting something on in the background – maybe some music, or a timer if you're asking them to listen to extracts to work out key features independently. It can be fun to add a bit of drama at the start of the lesson when getting them to line up outside – maybe dividing them into teams before they enter the classroom, and then starting the timer the moment they enter the room. Doing this encourages a very quick set-up and getting on with the game.

Useful resources

Here are two resources to help you get started. The first is a game created for my Year 7 pupils on instruments of the orchestra. The second is a blank template set up for ten questions, which I give to classes to create their own revision resources. This template can be used with Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. Below are instructions on how to set up your own Google form escape room, but hopefully these two examples will be useful in helping you to get started.

The key to creating any escape room game is to gather resources you already have – worksheets, listening activities and so on can all be included. You can create questions that have one-word answers, or ones that require students to work out multiple answers and put them in as a code – for example, the attached Year 7 game asks students to work out a code based on true or false answers, meaning it tests a wider range of understanding in one question.

This is not about reinventing material, but instead adding an element of fun to existing material. You can create games around a chapter in a textbook, or even where all the answers are on display boards around your room.

Escape room games can also work well when listening to a piece of music – possible listening questions might include:

▶ Name the first instrument that plays.
▶ What is the texture in the chorus?
▶ What cadence is used at the end of the extract?

You can use multiple-choice questions, but ensure that students know what they have to type – for example:

▶ Which of the following families does the solo instrument belong to?
  ▶ Strings
  ▶ Brass
  ▶ Woodwind
  ▶ Percussion
  Type your answer below.

If you need additional questions or material, you might like to try asking AI to help create it. For example, copy and paste a document about a set work and ask it 'Using the following material create a ten-question quiz along with answers'. You must ensure, though, that the questions and answers are accurate (although it can also be fun to ask your students to identify the wrong ones – but that's for a different type of task!).

Case study: orchestra escape room (KS3)

Click here for access to the complete game (you'll need to make a copy in order to be able to see it).

My Year 7 pupils had completed a series of homeworks learning about different orchestral instruments. They've also learnt a little ukulele and guitar within the year so far, as well as previously exploring different types of voices. I was going to be setting them an assessment on identifying instrumentation and wanted to get a clearer idea of where their current understanding lay (particularly as students can be adept at outsourcing their homework answers!).

Before the lesson, I set up the Google form on their VLE, and put a one-hour timer up on the board. Once the class arrived, I went outside and divided them into groups, telling them the timer would start from the moment I entered the classroom. I briefly explained they would need to log onto their virtual classroom, open the assignment and then follow all questions, and that the three quickest teams to escape would get house points (three for each first-place team member, two each for second place, and one each for third). This was close to our house cup being presented, so it added a great sense of motivation.

Students entered quickly, with a sense of excitement, found themselves a space and got a laptop for each group set up. Their group work was exceptional. On some questions (for example: are all the strings on a guitar made of the same material?) they would send a student to find the answer or have a look at the instrument while they continued working on the other answers. It quickly became apparent which students were struggling more. I kept a notebook by me in the lesson and scribbled notes about misconceptions and common hint requests as we went through the quiz.

Some groups tried to listen for answers from other groups – this soon led to a little rivalry, and also the deliberate planting of incorrect answers into conversation. All the time they were doing this, they were thinking over and manipulating the correct answer in their minds, making it even more likely they would remember it in the long term.

Some difficulties surprised me (the question about whether you play a guitar with a bow was well discussed – I was convinced they'd laugh at that one, rather than thinking it might be true), but this helped me to understand where I had presumed understanding and not been explicit enough. A little humour and a demonstration of guitar versus bowed stringed instruments later, and I'm sure they will remember a lot of other facts about the guitar and stringed instruments (for example that different materials are used for the strings on a guitar, and that you can play two notes at the same time on a stringed instrument).

All of my groups managed to complete the room in under the allotted hour, which gave me the last ten minutes of the lesson to start addressing some of these misconceptions, along with adapting my future lesson plans to cover the rest before their assessment.

The best part was seeing students discussing and debating answers without any worry about being wrong. They were formulating and consolidating their understanding of instruments by verbalising their thoughts, without feeling that the whole class's attention was on them. I learnt a lot about where individuals and the class as a whole were, without having any additional marking to complete after the lesson – giving me that time to adapt my lesson plans.

How to create your own escape room game

1 Write your questions into a Google form like a normal quiz. You want questions that have one-word answers, or that create a code that students can enter (for example, T and F for true and false, or Y and N for yes and no).

2 Split each question into a different section on the Google form by clicking the two lines icon to the right of the question:
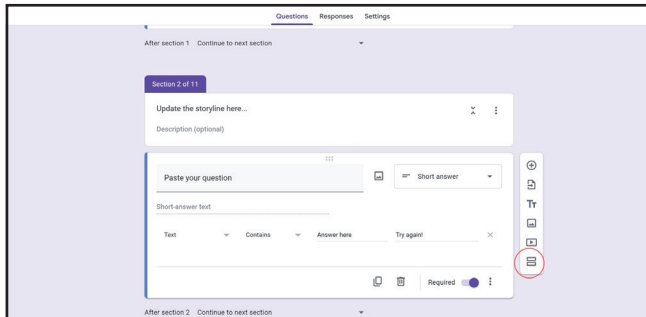
3 Make each question compulsory by clicking the 'required' switch at the bottom of the question.

4 Ensure that the question is set to 'short answer' on the right.

5 Click on the three dots beside the 'required' section:
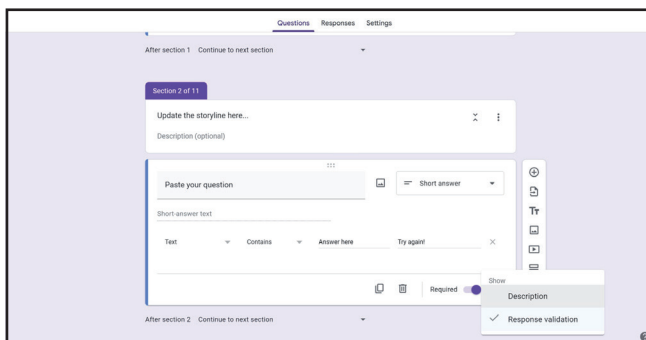
6 Switch on 'response validation'. You then have some options as to whether you want numbers or text, and whether you want exact answers, numbers greater than, etc.

7 Type in the answer and finally add in something in case students get it wrong. If you're feeling kind, you might want to add a hint. If you're not, just put something like 'Try again!'.

If you do this for each question, your students will have to be able to answer each one correctly to move on to the next section. At the end, either link to a related online game they can play, or give them a keyword or code they have to come and say to you to get their house point or a prize. Another idea is for the final 'word' to be terminology they will be learning in the next lesson, with a final challenge to find the definition and then come and explain it to you.

Before setting your escape room quiz

Always test your quiz out by clicking on the eye icon at the top and putting each of the answers in. This allows you to look for spelling mistakes, or where you've accidentally added a space at the end of a word, etc.

Also make sure that in your instructions, it's really clear whether students should be using capital letters.

If you have the capacity to get another teacher to try it, that can be helpful too. There will inevitably be one question with something not quite correct, and it's always helpful to find that before students confuse themselves by trying to make answers fit rather than basing their answers on knowledge.

Wider uses: student versions and all-year groups

Once students have played these escape room games a couple of times, they can get very excited about creating their own. If you give them a template to use, rather than getting them to do all the editing, they will be focused on the content and revision rather than creating the form itself. You can access a template to share with students by clicking here. This template is automatically set up so that students have ten questions to create. If you want them to do more, simply follow the instructions earlier in the resource.

You should set the quiz template up so that students are forced to make a copy, so that you don't have them all editing the same document. This is done easily by adapting the address:

1 Copy the URL of the original.
2 Change '/edit' at the end of the URL to '/copy'.

A word of warning: do not attach the document to Google classroom. Doing so automatically changes it to a form ready for them to complete. Instead, copy and paste the address into the instructions.

It helps to give students some guidance, for example to create a game based on a particular list of vocabulary, or linked to a knowledge organiser for the topic. Encourage them to share their games, play games that others have made and give feedback, meaning they continue to revise.

Use for GCSE and A level

Some students really struggle when anything looks like an exam paper. By playing escape room games, you can get them used to question stems and what typical answers can look like. These can easily be based on exam-style papers. For example, for a GCSE style question:

1 Which of the following instruments plays in the introduction?
▶ Flute
▶ Oboe
▶ Clarinet
▶ Recorder

2 Which of the following rhythms is played by the drums in the chorus (insert notation picture here, with a letter beside each one).

3 Using the score pictured, what cadence is used at the end of the first phrase?

All of these are typical GCSE exam questions, but by putting them in an escape room format there's less intimidation for students. Do this enough times and they will spot the similarity when you place a paper in front of them. Just be prepared to help support them in their answers – this is not a test, but a chance for them to familiarise themselves with question styles.

Final thoughts

There is massive scope for creativity with these games, and also a chance to encourage a little healthy competition in your room across all the key stages. These escape room games cannot replace formal testing, and they need to be simplified (or appropriate scaffolding put in place) to ensure that all questions are doable to stop students being disheartened. But as a no-marking method of checking understanding and helping students understand the written side, they can be really invaluable – and fun.