Cryptography Worksheet — Breaking the Code

You have been given this encrypted message, and all you know is that it has been encrypted using a Mono-alphabetic Substitution Cipher. *Can you break it?*

GFS WMY OG LGDVS MF SFNKYHOSU ESLLMRS, PC WS BFGW POL DMFRQMRS, PL OG CPFU M UPCCSKSFO HDMPFOSXO GC OIS LMES DMFRQMRS DGFR SFGQRI OG CPDD GFS LISSO GK LG, MFU OISF WS NGQFO OIS GNNQKKSFNSL GC SMNI DSOOSK. WS NMDD OIS EGLO CKSJQSFODY GNNQKKPFR DSOOSK OIS 'CPKLO', OIS FSXO EGLO GNNQKKPFR DSOOSK OIS 'LSNGFU' OIS CGDDGWPFR EGLO GNNQKKPFR DSOOSK OIS 'OIPKU', MFU LG GF, QFOPD WS MNNGQFO CGK MDD OIS UPCCSKSFO DSOOSKL PF OIS HDMPFOSXO LMEHDS. OISF WS DGGB MO OIS NPHISK OSXO WS WMFO OG LGDVS MFU WS MDLG NDMLLPCY POL LYEAGDL. WS CPFU OIS EGLO GNNQKKPFR LYEAGD MFU NIMFRS PO OG OIS CGKE GC OIS 'CPKLO' DSOOSK GC OIS HDMPFOSXO LMEHDS, OIS FSXO EGLO NGEEGF LYEAGD PL NIMFRSU OG OIS CGKE GC OIS 'LSNGFU' DSOOSK, MFU OIS CGDDGWPFR EGLO NGEEGF LYEAGD PL NIMFRSU OG OIS CGKE GC OIS 'OIPKU' DSOOSK, MFU LG GF, QFOPD WS MNNGQFO CGK MDD LYEAGDL GC OIS NKYHOGRKME WS WMFO OG LGDVS.

What keyword was used to encrypt this message?

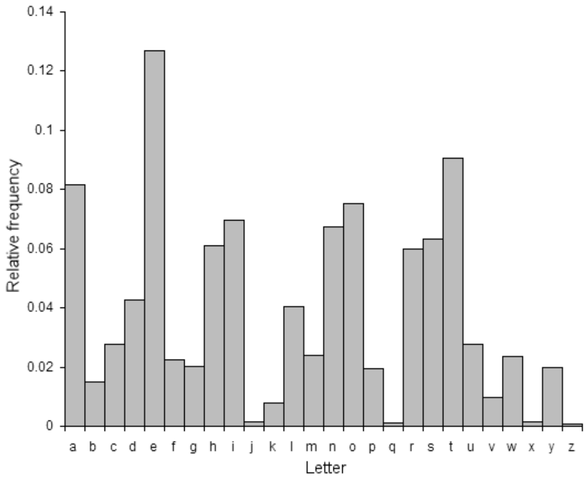
How might this information be useful?

Teacher’s Notes — Breaking the Code

The plain text reads:

> "one way to solve an encrypted message, if we know its language, is to find a different plaintext of the same language long enough to fill one sheet or so, and then we count the occurrences of each letter. we call the most frequently occurring letter the 'first', the next most occurring letter the 'second' the following most occurring letter the 'third', and so on, until we account for all the different letters in the plaintext sample. then we look at the cipher text we want to solve and we also classify its symbols. we find the most occurring symbol and change it to the form of the 'first' letter of the plaintext sample, the next most common symbol is changed to the form of the 'second' letter, and the following most common symbol is changed to the form of the 'third' letter, and so on, until we account for all symbols of the cryptogram we want to solve."

It is an extract from *A Manuscript on Deciphering Cryptographic Messages*, written by Al-Kindi around 850 AD, but lost until found in 1987. It is the first known description of the process we now call *Frequency Analysis.* The method he describes of using a piece of text is traditionally how it was done, but today we have published figures for the frequency of letters in written text. For English they are given by the graph.



Once some are starting to make some head way with the decryption, a discussion of methods will help those who are struggling. Some key questions to help the decryption process are

1. What is the most common letter in English? (E)
2. What words in English only have 1 letter? (A or I)
3. If you have tIe so regularly, what letter does I represent? (H)

These should get all the pupils thinking in the right direction.

Giving them blank tables to fill in as they work out what each letter stands for will also help them keep track of what they have done. The completed grid is below, but note that some pupils might fill it out the other way round, so “m” on top goes to “A” on bottom (this is the ciphertext turning into the plaintext).

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z
M	A	N	U	S	C	R	I	P	T	B	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	L	O	Q	V	W	X	Y	Z

The keyword for this encryption is “MANUSCRIPT”, which is clear from the grid. This might be useful if you intercept another message from the same person, who might have used the same keyword assuming it is still safe.

Grids for recording letters in Breaking the Code

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z