

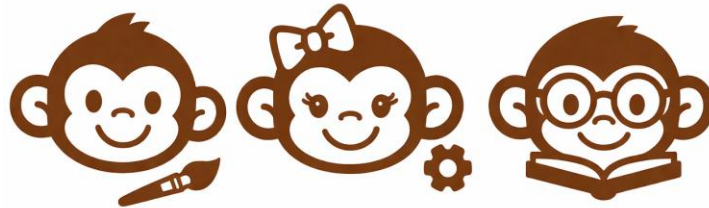
The Case of the Missing Trophy

Fourth Grade Mystery

Lesson Plan / Mini Unit

Subject Area	English Language Arts
Recommended Grade	4th Grade + (see standards in the back)
Activity Focus	Close reading, evidence-based reasoning, discussion, and written claim support
Created by	Christina Dennis, M.Ed.

Monkey Buddies Activity



Imagination Lives Here

Student Story Page

"The Case of the Missing Trophy"

The Maplewood School science fair trophy had been sitting on the shelf outside the front office all week. It was a tall gold trophy with a spinning model of the solar system on top. Everyone who walked by stopped to look at it. On Friday morning, it was gone.

Principal Carter was not happy.

She pulled the security log and made a list of everyone who had been near the office Thursday afternoon and evening. Three names stood out. She called them in one at a time.

Derek was a seventh grader and the starting point guard for the Maplewood Wolves. He was tall, funny, and pretty much known by everyone in school. He had also finished second place at the science fair, losing first place by only two points. His project on water filtration had taken him three months to build.

When Principal Carter asked where he had been Thursday after school Derek said he went straight home. Later she found out that it was not true. His teammate Marco told the gym teacher that the whole team had stayed late for practice until six o'clock. The gym is right next to the office hallway.

On Friday morning, the trophy turned up in Derek's locker.

Derek looked genuinely shocked. He said he had no idea how it got there. He also mentioned that his locker combination was written on a sticky note inside his binder. He had left his binder in Mr. Henderson's science class on Thursday afternoon and never went back to get it.

Jordan was a sixth-grade cheerleader. She was in Mr. Henderson's science class with Derek. She had been seen near the front office Thursday after school. When Principal Carter asked why she was there Jordan said she was returning a library book. The library is right across from the office.

Jordan had never been in trouble before. She was polite and answered every question carefully. But the librarian told Principal Carter later that no books had been returned Thursday afternoon.

Cheer practice ran until five thirty on Thursdays. Jordan never minded when cheer and basketball practice fell on the same night. She had been harboring a crush all season. On her way out, she would have walked right past the front office.

Jordan and Derek were in the same science class. They sat two rows apart.

Ms. Finch had worked at Maplewood School for eleven years. She was reliable and hardworking and took a lot of pride in keeping the building clean. She had cleaned the front office Thursday evening and said the trophy was on the shelf when she started. She could not say for certain it was there when she finished.

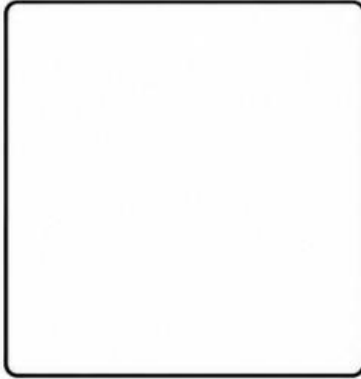
A teacher who had stayed late grading papers said she saw Ms. Finch carry a large bag to her car around eight thirty that night. Ms. Finch said it was just her cleaning supplies as always.

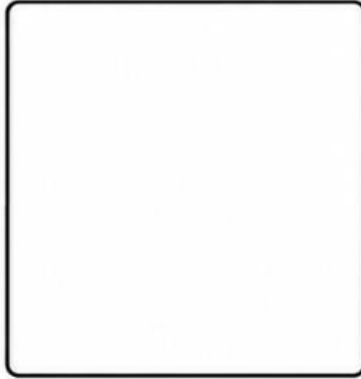
Over the last school year, Ms. Finch filed two written complaints this year about the hallway near the gym. "Those inconsiderate jocks were always trying to dunk their trash in the basket and missing," she had written. Nobody had been held accountable. The mess was always there waiting for her at the end of the day.

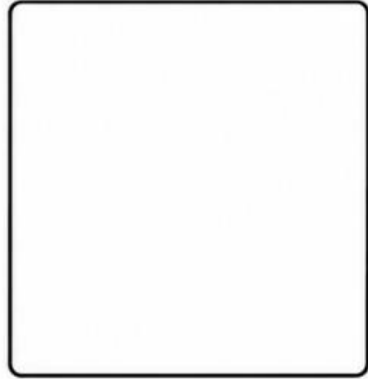
Principal Carter sat at her desk and looked at her notes. She had three people with three different stories. She had one trophy in the wrong place. And she had a lot of questions that nobody had answered yet.

Now it's your turn. Who do you think did it and why?

Crack The Case.







The Culprit Is

My Evidence

Teacher Facilitation Guide

"The Case of the Missing Trophy"

Purpose: This activity is intentionally open-ended. There is no single correct answer. The goal is for students to practice reading carefully, identifying evidence, and defending a claim in writing or discussion.

Lesson Snapshot

Grade Level	4th Grade
Suggested Time	30-45 minutes
Materials	Student story page, activity sheet, pencil, optional highlighters
Learning Goal	Students will use text evidence to make and defend a claim about a mystery.

What the Evidence Shows by Suspect

Derek

- Lied about going straight home ⚠️
- Was in the building during the time the trophy went missing ⚠️
- Trophy was found in his locker ⚠️
- Had motive – he lost the science fair by only two points ⚠️
- His locker combination was accessible to anyone who had his binder ⚠️
- Left his binder in a classroom where multiple students had access ⚠️
- Appeared genuinely shocked when the trophy was found ⚠️

Jordan

- Lied about returning a library book – the librarian confirmed no books were returned ⚠️
- Was in the building during cheer practice on the same night ⚠️
- Would have walked directly past the front office on her way out ⚠️
- Was in the same science class as Derek and sat two rows away and had access to his binder ⚠️
- Had an emotional connection to Derek through her crush ⚠️
- Motive could go two ways; She took it for him OR she framed him ⚠️
- Has no prior record of trouble ⚠️

Ms. Finch

- Was alone in the office Thursday evening ⚠️
- Cannot confirm the trophy was there when she finished cleaning ⚠️
- Was seen carrying a large bag to her car that night ⚠️
- Had a documented grudge against the basketball team ⚠️
- Filed two formal written complaints about the gym hallway ⚠️
- Had the most physical access and the most time alone in the office ⚠️
- Eleven-year employee with no prior issues ⚠️

Discussion Questions

- What is the difference between evidence and opinion?
- Can someone be guilty just because the trophy was found in their locker?
- What does it mean when someone lies about where they were even if they didn't commit the crime?
- Could more than one person be involved? How would that change things?
- What would you need to know to feel MORE confident in your answer?
- Is a written complaint enough to establish a motive? Why or why not?
- Why might Jordan have lied about the library book even if she is innocent?
- Does Ms. Finch having eleven years at the school make her more or less suspicious?

Talking Points for Each Suspect Choice

If a student picks Derek

- Ask them to explain why he would put the trophy in his own locker
- Ask whether finding stolen property on someone is always proof they took it
- Ask them to consider who else had access to his locker combination

If a student picks Jordan

- Ask them if she had more than one motive and which motive they think is stronger.
- Ask them why she would lie about the library book if she was just at cheer practice
- Ask them how she could have gotten Derek's locker combination
- Ask them what her plan would have been after taking it

If a student picks Ms. Finch

- Ask them whether opportunity plus motive equals guilt
- Ask them what they think was in the bag
- Ask them why an eleven-year employee would risk her job over trash on the floor
- Ask them how the trophy ended up in Derek's locker if she took it

If a student thinks more than one person is involved

- This is a fantastic critical thinking leap. Encourage them to map out how it could have worked
- Ask them to assign roles. Who took it and who planted it
- Ask them what each person's payoff would be

If a student is unsure

- This is completely valid. Ask them to identify which suspect they find MOST suspicious and why
- Ask them what one additional piece of evidence would make them more certain

Extension Activities

- **Write a confession** from the perspective of the suspect you chose
- **Write a newspaper article** about the missing trophy for the Maplewood School paper
- **Draw the crime scene** and label where each suspect was Thursday evening
- **Write a follow up scene** where Principal Carter questions one suspect again
- **Debate** - split the class into three groups, each defending a different suspect. (This depends on class size and teacher preference.)

Common Core Standards Alignment Table

Activity: "The Case of the Missing Trophy" Mystery Activity

Subject Area: English Language Arts

Recommended Grades: 4 through 8

Activity Type: Close reading, evidence-based reasoning, written and oral argumentation

Area	Standard	Grade	Description
Reading: Informational Text	RI.4.1	4th	Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences.
Reading: Informational Text	RI.5.1	5th	Quote accurately from a text and explain what the text says explicitly and what is inferred.
Reading: Informational Text	RI.6.1	6th	Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn.
Reading: Informational Text	RI.7.1	7th	Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly and what is inferred.
Reading: Informational Text	RI.8.1	8th	Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis, including where the text leaves matters uncertain.
Writing	W.4.1	4th	Write opinion pieces on topics supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
Writing	W.5.1	5th	Write opinion pieces supporting a point of view with logically ordered reasons and evidence.
Writing	W.6.1	6th	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
Writing	W.7.1	7th	Write arguments to support claims with logically ordered reasons and relevant evidence.
Writing	W.8.1	8th	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence while acknowledging counterclaims.
Speaking and Listening	SL.4.1	4th	Engage in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
Speaking and Listening	SL.5.1	5th	Engage in collaborative discussions, coming prepared and following agreed-upon rules.
Speaking and Listening	SL.6.1	6th	Engage in collaborative discussions, posing and responding to questions with relevant evidence.
Speaking and Listening	SL.7.1	7th	Engage in collaborative discussions, posing questions that elicit elaboration and acknowledging new information.
Speaking and Listening	SL.8.1	8th	Engage in collaborative discussions, posing and responding to questions and acknowledging new information expressed by others.
Language	L.4.3	4th	Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing and speaking.
Language	L.5.3	5th	Use knowledge of language and its conventions, including choosing words for effect.
Language	L.6.3	6th	Use knowledge of language and its conventions, including maintaining consistency in style and tone.

Teacher Note: Although this packet is designed for fourth grade, the text and standards alignment can be adjusted for upper elementary or middle school discussion and writing practice.