

Secret Symbols

Sir Isaac Newton is well known for his mathematical and scientific achievements, yet few people know about his work as an alchemist. Some people believe that Newton pursued alchemy with the hopes that it might help him better understand great truths about nature and the universe. Many alchemists described their work in symbols and metaphors. In this activity, you will use a glossary of alchemical symbols to interpret a passage from a famous alchemical text called *The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*.

Procedure

- 1 Read the text passage on this page. Use a pencil or highlighting pen to mark any words or phrases you think might be clues to the text's meaning.
- 2 As a team, use the description of common symbolism for alchemical substances, principles, and elements on the "Keys to the Stone" handout to decipher the text. Note that some symbols and images have more than one meaning.
- 3 Together, write your interpretation of the text on a separate piece of paper, and then share your work with the class. When interpreting the text, refer to the line number in which the word or phrase appears.

Questions

Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1 Compare your team's interpretation of the text to others in the class. Did different teams come up with the same answer? Why or why not? Discuss and defend your choices.
- 2 Newton used his own symbols and phrases to describe the steps he took when performing alchemical experiments. Explain why he might have done this.

The *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*

The *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* is a famous alchemical text that appears to have first been published in Germany around 1599. The text was later translated into Latin, Greek, and English. The author, "Basilius Valentinus," claimed to be a Benedictine monk. The author's true identity is unknown. The text itself contains 12 coded passages, or keys, that describe the process of creating the Philosopher's Stone, a mythical substance believed to cure disease, confer immortality, and turn ordinary metals into gold. The following is a part of the first step, which involves preparing the materials to be used in the creation of the stone.

- 1 *If you would operate by means of our bodies, take*
- 2 *a fierce grey wolf, which, though on account of its*
- 3 *name it be subject to the sway of warlike Mars, is*
- 4 *by birth the offspring of ancient Saturn, and is found*
- 5 *in the valleys and mountains of the world, where he*
- 6 *roams about savage with hunger. Cast to him the*
- 7 *body of the King, and when he has devoured it, burn*
- 8 *him entirely to ashes in a great fire. By this process*
- 9 *the King will be liberated; and when it has been*
- 10 *performed thrice the Lion has overcome the wolf,*
- 11 *and will find nothing more to devour in him. Thus*
- 12 *our Body has been rendered fit for the first stage*
- 13 *of our work.*

