

Introduction to Archaeology: Approach an Object like an Archaeologist

Grade: 4th - 8th

Discipline: History/Archaeology

Length: 40 min.

Goals: Students will gain a basic understanding of what archaeology is, what an artifact is, and how to use close examination to ask questions of an artifact. Students will be able to use close-looking skills to gather evidence and formulate conclusions based on that evidence.

Essential Question(s):

1. What is archaeology?
2. Why does archaeology matter?
3. What is the relationship between archaeology and history?

Assessment: Students will complete a "[Approach an Object like an Archaeologist](#)" worksheet. They will also participate in class discussion. At the end of the class students will write a one sentence answer to the question "Why does archaeology matter?"

Materials/Resources:

- A selection of objects (these can be from around the school or brought in). These can include: shoe, a walkie talkie, a watch, a hole punch, a sweater, a pair of scissors, a travel mug, or anything else you can think of! This activity works best if the objects don't have a lot of text (i.e. not a book, pamphlet, newspaper, etc.)
- One "[Approach an Object like an Archaeologist](#)" worksheet per student
- [Revolutionary War Artifact Images Slideshow](#)
- A sticky note for each student.

Vocabulary:

- **Archaeology:** The study of ancient and recent human past through material remains.
- **Artifact:** An object showing human workmanship or modification
- **Material Remains:** Physical evidence of human habitation, occupation, use, or activity
- **Context:** The place where an artifact was found, including its relative position to the things around it. This helps determine the age of the artifact and gives clues about its use.

Outline of Lesson

Introductory Discussion: What is archaeology? (5 minutes)

- Display the term archaeology on your board or screen.
 - It's nice to have this visible at the start of the discussion, as it's a tricky one to spell and pronounce.
- Questions to prompt students:
 - Have any of you heard of archaeology?
 - What do you think of when you hear the word "archaeology?"
 - What is your best guess for what it might be?
- Define **archaeology**:
 - The study of ancient and recent human past through material remains.
- Define **material remains**:
 - Physical evidence of human habitation, occupation, use, or activity.
 - Examples of material remains can be anything from coins, to pottery, to personal belongings, to weapons, or even something like a shoe. If a human used and modified it, it usually counts as material remains!
 - Objects that are material remains are usually referred to as artifacts.
- Define **artifacts**:

- Artifacts are objects that show human workmanship or modification. That means they are something made or changed by people.
- So, archaeologists are people who study the history of humans by looking at their *stuff*. They use objects to help figure out the stories of the past.
- Something that is very important for archaeologists to consider is **context**. **Context** is the place where an artifact was found, including its relative position to the things around it. This helps determine the age of the artifact and gives clues about its use. The “artifacts” we’re going to look at today have been removed from their context, so we’re missing that information.

Approach an Object like an Archaeologist (15 minutes)

- Introduce the activity:
 - Let’s practice approaching an object like an archaeologist!
 - Introduce the concepts of close looking.
 - Explain to students that, even though the objects are familiar, they need to approach them as if they do not know what they are. The students are acting as archaeologists approaching a mystery object!
- Divide the class into groups.
- Pass out the [“Approach an Object like an Archaeologist: Artifact Investigation Handout”](#)
- Give each group an object to investigate.
- After students have had a while to answer the questions about their object, give them the opportunity to share and discuss as a class.
 - What did you determine about your object?
 - What evidence do you have to support your conclusions?
 - What did you learn by going through this process?

Brainstorm break: Why does archaeology matter? (5 min.)

- Discussion question:
 - Why do you think archaeologists study objects (material remains) instead of just things that people wrote down in the past?

- Modern example: A person is trying to learn about you. Would they get a clearer picture of you by only reading your journal, or by reading your journal and looking through all the things in your bedroom?

Skill test: Let's look at some Revolutionary War artifacts! (10 min.)

- Introduce artifacts:
 - These are actual objects used by people in Vermont during the American Revolution. That means they are almost 250 years old!
 - These artifacts are extra special because our archaeologists recovered them from the bottom of Lake Champlain! At the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, our archaeologists do a lot of work underwater. They even scuba dive to investigate objects!
- Display and discuss photos of artifacts on screen using [this slideshow](#).
 - Depending on the level of interest and focus at this point, you can lead students through the same investigative process they used on their modern “artifacts” in the earlier activity.
 - Alternatively, you can have students just share impressions and questions about what they are seeing.
 - You could also help students to imagine the person who might have used that artifact. Build up a character sketch together.

Concluding Activity (5 min.)

- Pass out sticky notes
- Ask students to summarize the main thing they learned in one sentence.
- Have students share theirs by sticking them to the whiteboard and reading theirs out as they do.