

Everyday Artifacts

Estimated Time: 45 minutes

SUMMARY

Archaeologists study objects made by people who lived in the past. Archaeologists call these objects **artifacts**. By studying artifacts, archaeologists are able to make interpretations about how people in the past lived and what these people did. In this activity, kids will explore objects around their homes, made by people, to make an interpretation about how their families live.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

- How archaeologists study artifacts
- The importance of **context**, or the location where the artifact is recovered

Materials Used	Resources Used
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common objects found in multiple areas of your home, like pens, pencils, books, dolls, or action figures (picked out by child) • Pencil and paper to create a context recording sheet (example provided) and a data recording sheet (example provided) • Measuring tape or ruler • Cooking scale (optional) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solving Mysteries with Archaeologists! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOJICdMvWAI&t=192s

WHAT TO DO

1. Discuss the idea of artifacts with the student. These are objects that people in the past made. Although not all archaeologists study artifacts, the information that archaeologists learn from studying artifacts helps them understand how people in the past lived.
2. Look around your home for objects that were made by people. There are likely hundreds of items around your home that were made by people. This includes all types of objects from plates and bowls to the oven and even the floor that you walk on. These are all things made by people and are artifacts!
3. Identify a type of object that you can find in multiple places around your home. This could be markers, pens, books, toys, etc. The object should be relatively small so you can pick it up and measure it. Furniture won't work! This activity will be using pens as an example, but feel free to use whatever object type your child prefers.
4. Before you get started, you will want to make a Context Recording Sheet and a Data Recording Sheet, so you are prepared to start recording information about the object you find, in my case pens, when you find them! See the next page for a few examples.
5. Go to a room in your home and look for your type of object (i.e., pens). When you see them, use the below Context Recording Sheet to note what is around those pens. Are there lots of pens in one location or just one pen? What other objects are near that pen?

- a. Exactly like an archaeologist excavates, you are recording where you find things and what is around them. Archaeologists expose artifacts and other objects as they recover information about a location where people lived.

Context Recording Sheet Example

Room	Location in room	# of pens	Other objects around the pens
Kitchen	Next to light switch	6	Mail, pad of paper, stamps, banana hanger, cutting boards
Bedroom	Nightstand	1	Journal, books, eyeglasses, watch

6. Once you record the pens you have found in the room, you will want to record a little more information about each pen. If you are finding multiple pens in one location, you will want to assign numbers to the pens so you can keep track of the information you record about each pen. An easy way to do this is to use a letter like K for kitchen as the first character of your “Pen #” and then just number the pens sequentially. For example, the pen I found in the bedroom would be B-1.
7. Now, you can record the characteristics of each pen. What does the object look like? What color is it? What is its size? How much does it weigh? And are there any words on the object?

Data Recoding Sheet Example

Pen #	Color	Ink color	Length (mm)	Weight (g)	Other notes
K-1	Black and gray	Red	15	7	Words on pen: Sharpie Pen Fine
K-2	Green and silver	Black	14.5	6	Words on pen: SIUE STEM Center
K-3	Red and black	Black, blue, red, & green	15	23	Pen includes 4 types of ink with pencil lead and eraser

8. Once you have recorded the information about the objects you decided to study, you get to do the most important things archaeologists do: Make an interpretation about people!
9. Start off by looking at one room. Where are the pens mostly found? For the kitchen example, all the pens are located near the light switch with mail, stamps, pad of paper bananas, and cutting boards. Why would all the pens be located in one location near these other objects? What explanation would you come up with to explain how people used the objects you studied? Does this explanation work for all the rooms where you found the objects you studied?
10. Now look at all the measurements you took on each pen, or object you studied. What information can you learn from the individual measures you took on these objects? Do all these objects come in the same color or many colors? Why might the color be important? Are all the objects about the same size or do they come in many different sizes? Is the size important for how people use the object?

TIPS

- If you would like kids to incorporate more math, you can have them find the basic descriptive statistics for the objects they studied. They can find the average (mean) length and the range (maximum and minimum measurements). These are measurements that all archaeologists include when they report their studies.
- Archaeologists record the type of artifacts they recover, where they recover them, and what other objects are near that object. This helps them understand the location where people used or threw away an object and what other objects they may have been using this artifact with.
- This activity is very much like what archaeologists do when they study artifacts in a laboratory. They record what people in the past made the artifact from, the size and completeness of the artifact, how much the artifact weighs, and other important information about the artifact.
- It is fun to think about the other objects around the object your child is studying and how it does or does not relate to their object of study. In the case of my pens, I keep pens in my kitchen to make grocery lists, record important reminders, and send out mail. This is why there is a pad of paper and stamps near the pens. The presence of the bananas has nothing to do with the pens. For archaeologists, we are often trying to figure out how people used objects in the past—that is we have no idea how or why people would have used what we recover. In some cases, we may find an object near another and make an interpretation about the relationship between these two objects when they really don't have much to do with each other—it was just chance that they happened to be found next to each other.
- Another important thing to remember about archaeology is that archaeologists are looking for patterns in the way people used things, made things, discarded things, etc. We try to study as many artifacts as possible to make interpretations. Popular culture often depicts archaeologists studying one very important artifact, but we rarely do this because we can't find patterns in how people do things by just studying one object. Asking your child what interpretations they could make about the objects in your home based on just one object is an interesting way for kids to critically think about the importance of including multiple samples in their study. If I just studied my one pen that has four different ink options, I might think all pens have four ink options, but in fact, most do not. This is why archaeologists, and other scientists, study multiple samples.
- Remember, please do not try to excavate in your yard or other areas. Excavating in your own yard can be dangerous. Utility lines are often buried underground. It is also important for students to know that archaeologists learn a lot of information from the location where artifacts are recovered. It is important to leave artifacts in the location where they are found so archaeologists can learn as much as possible from that artifact. By digging up artifacts, kids could potentially destroy important scientific information. **If you want to report an archaeological site and live in Illinois, call the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office at 217-785-1279, in Missouri call 573-751-4827.**