



What is an Artifact?: Thinking like an Archaeologist

Grade: 3rd-5th

Subjects: History, Virginia Studies, English

Time: 1 hour

Class Size: Adaptable

Skills: Observation, deductive and analytical reasoning, interpretation, classification

Strategies: Students will be introduced to the concept of material culture. They will use analytical skills and deductive reasoning to analyze objects as an archaeologist would.

We suggest completing this lesson before a field trip to Jamestown.

Student will:	SOLs
VS.1 Students will demonstrate skills for historical thinking and geographic analysis by: a) analyzing and interpreting artifacts and primary and secondary sources to understand events in Virginia history VS.2 Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between physical geography and the lives of native peoples of Virginia by: f) describing how archaeologists have recovered new material evidence at sites including Jamestown VS.4 Demonstrate an understanding of life in the Virginia colony by describing everyday life in colonial Virginia	VS.1, VS.2, VS.4
3.1, 4.1, 5.1 Demonstrate an understanding of scientific reasoning, logic, and the nature of science by planning and conducting investigations in which data is collected, objects with similar characteristics are classified, and inferences are made and conclusions are drawn	Scientific Investigation, Reasoning, and Logic

Background

Archaeologists use artifacts to understand how people of the past lived. While excavating, archaeologists record both artifacts and their provenience (where they are found on a site). In the lab, archaeologists clean, further analyze, and catalogue these objects into a computer database that records all of their attributes. Archaeologists then use these attributes to understand how an artifact and the space where it was found were used within the past.

This task is complicated by the inherent multiple meanings within objects. For example, candles can provide light (utilitarian), be used for prayer (religious), or decorate a home (emotional). Archaeologists must therefore use both low- and high-level analysis to fully understand their finds.

This lesson uses grocery receipts to simulate archaeological “finds lists.” Students will attempt to analyze objects as an archaeologist would by noting their attributes and categorizing them according to their use(s). Students will then use these observations to deduce what an object can reveal about its owner’s lifestyle.

Resources and materials: Several grocery receipts and included student worksheet.



Note: Students may bring in their own receipts. Teachers should evaluate receipts before the lesson for age-appropriate items.

Procedure

- 1) Review vocabulary terms with students. Explain what a finds list is and how archaeologists use artifacts to learn about people and cultures of the past. Note how archaeologists use lists and databases to help organize, access, and interpret their data.
- 2) Review how one object can have many different meanings. An example using a candle is below. Teachers may elect to bring in a candle or choose another object. Remember that meanings can change based on where an object is found.

Item: Candle

Attributes: Made of wax, tall, thin, yellow, small wick

Use(s):

Utilitarian- used during a power outage, for camping, bug repellent, scent

Emotional- romantic dinners, home décor, comfort

Celebratory- birthday cake, Halloween

Sacred- prayer, church services, religious ceremonies

- 3) Have students work individually or part of small groups. Provide each student or group with a grocery receipt (or receipts). Explain that the lists are their archaeological “finds.” Using the worksheet below, have them analyze their “artifacts” as an archaeologist would.
- 4) Discuss their answers as a class. Use the following discussion questions to guide the conversation.
- 5) If there is time or as homework, ask students to explore the Jamestown artifact collection at <https://historicjamestowne.org/collections/artifacts/>. Have them choose one artifact and write a short paragraph about how archaeologists used it to know more about life at James Fort.

Discussion Questions

- Were students surprised about the amount of time archaeologists spend in the field versus the lab? Why or why not? *Answers will vary.*
- Why is it important for archaeologists to record an artifact’s attributes and provenience? *Provenience shows where an artifact was found. Archaeologists use the information to know more about how areas of a site were used in the past. An artifact’s attributes can help archaeologists know where and how an artifact was made. Even if an artifact does not survive into the future, archaeologists can still use the information stored in a database to study it.*
- What buying patterns did the students notice in their lists? See if they came up with similar interpretations. Again, be careful about making assumptions. *Answers will vary. Students may notice that some groups bought more food than others, which may indicate a larger family in the home. More than one object may show personal preference or storing for future use.*

To learn more and view additional lesson plans visit *Jamestown Rediscovery* at <https://historicjamestowne.org>



Name: _____

What is an Artifact?: Thinking like an Archaeologist

Vocabulary

Archaeologist: a scientist who studies how people lived within the past

Artifact: an object made or used by a person in the past

Assemblage: a collection of artifacts

Excavation: the scientific removal of soil and artifacts from an archaeological site

Finds list: a record of all artifacts found at a site or part of a site

Material culture: a broad term meaning all objects made and used by a group of people that show how they live or lived

Provenience: the exact spot on a site where an artifact was found, including how deep in the ground

Site: a place used by people in the past, often containing artifacts

Background

Archaeologists at Jamestown have excavated more than 3 million artifacts. Each object helps understand more about how people lived at the site throughout the past 400 years. While excavating, archaeologists make a finds list by recording both the artifacts they locate and where they were found. The artifacts are then brought to a lab where archaeologists clean, identify, and catalog the artifacts into a database. Each of an artifact's qualities (such as its provenience, what it is made of, and how large it is) are recorded. These clues help archaeologists understand more about how people in the past used the object and the spaces within James Fort. For every month they spend in the field, archaeologists spend about three months in the lab cataloguing artifacts and writing reports on their finds.

Directions

You have been given a list of items. Pretend that these items are artifacts you have found on an archaeological site. Study them as an archaeologist would and answer the questions below.

1) When were these items bought?

2. Where were they bought? If you have two or more receipts, are they from the same street or town?

3. Some items may give you clues about the ages of the people in the home. For example, what would diapers tell you? What about senior citizen vitamins?



Do you see any items on your list that could tell you about people's ages? What are they and who might use them?

4. Look for buying patterns. For example, is there more fresh or frozen food? Did the buyer get more than one of something?

5. Are there non-food purchases such as medicine, magazines, or clothing?

6. Look at your shortest receipt. Can you decide which item was the reason for going to the store? Which ones were unplanned? For example, if you see a receipt with diapers, baby food, and a magazine, which would be the item that the buyer saw and wanted in the store?

7. Archaeologists use objects to understand how people used different spaces within the past. For example, if they find broken plates, utensils, and food waste together it is likely that they are excavating near a kitchen.

Look at your shortest receipt. Imagine that you did not know the name of the store where your items were bought. Using only the items you see, could you guess what kind of store it was?

8. Now imagine you have a long list of items. Would it be easier or harder to guess the type of store where they were bought? Why?



9. Your teacher reviewed how one object can have many uses. Pick one item from your list and complete the chart below either by yourself or with your partner(s). How many attributes and uses can you think of? Be careful of making assumptions! (For example, would you say there was a baby girl in the house because there was a doll purchased? Who else could use it?)

Item	
Attributes	
Use(s)	

10. What could your answers tell you about who bought this object and how they live?