



# Artifacts Tell a Story

Penny Jarrett, Katy Beth Culp, Mound House Education Staff

**Grade Level:** 4 & Up

**Subject(s):** Science, English, Social Studies

**Key Terms:**

- Archaeology
- Artifact
- Feature
- Excavation
- Interpret

**Florida State Standards:**

LAFS.4.RF.3.3                      SC.4.N.1.3  
 LAFS.4.SL.1.1                    SC.4.N.1.4  
 LAFS.4.SL.2.4                    SC.4.N.1.7  
 LAFS.4.L.3.6  
 LAFS.4.W.1.1 – 1.3  
 SC.35.CS-CS.2.3

LAFS.5.SL.1.1                    SC.5.N.1.6  
 LAFS.K12.SL.1.1                SC.5.N.2.1  
 LAFS.5.SL.2.4  
 LAFS.K12.SL.2.4  
 LAFS.K12.SL.2.6  
 LAFS.5.L.1.1 – 1.2  
 LAFS.K12.L.1.1 – 1.2  
 LAFS.5.L.3.6  
 LAFS.5.W.1.1 – 1.3  
 LAFS.K12.W.1.3

**Summary:**

**Archaeology** is the study of the material remains left by past communities and typically uncovered through excavations. An **archaeologist** is a person who studies human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of artifacts and other physical remains. **Artifacts** tell archaeologists information about a site and the people who lived there. An assortment of “artifacts” are given to each student group to **interpret** in their own archaeological study and provide a written and/or oral report.

**Objectives:**

Students will sort through a variety of items that will act as “artifacts” for the purpose of this activity, and work as a group to answer the same questions archaeologists ask. This activity gives students a hands-on experience of what it’s like to be an archaeologist.

**Materials:**

- Bags or boxes to store items
- “Artifact” items – Number of items per group is suggested to equal one item per student
  - Potential “artifacts”: item with a date on it (like an expiration date or a newspaper), clothing, jewelry/watch, snack, food packaging, sport equipment, dive flag, fishing equipment, scissors, plastic toys, name badge, family photo, coins, souvenir, musical instrument, book, shells, screws, measuring tape, pet supplies and craft item



## Artifacts Tell a Story

### Background:

What is an artifact? An **artifact** is any object that was made, changed, or used by a human being. It can be difficult to tell if a natural object, such as a shell, was used by a human being unless there are physical changes on it; however, when found with other artifacts, its context will give us clues. Generally, the term **artifact** is applied to tools and other portable objects. Structures created or modified by humans that cannot easily be moved, such as building foundations, wells, agricultural terraces, pits, and post holes, are called **features**.

Artifacts discovered during an excavation are carefully collected, cleaned, labeled, recorded, and photographed, and then transported to a lab to be analyzed. Only a very small percentage of an archaeologist's time is spent in the field; the rest is spent in the lab studying the artifacts in their entirety to understand what was recovered. Archaeologists will look at material types (ceramics, glass, metals), tools, decorations, etc. to make educated guesses about the time period and culture of the people who occupied the site.

However, the artifacts and features don't tell archaeologists the whole story. Materials in the archaeological record do not always survive (weathering, decomposition, etc.) and/or can go missing (looting, bioturbation - movement by animals, etc.). This missing information changes the way archaeologists are able to understand and interpret a site. Historic documents are also used to understand past cultures.

### Procedure:

- Introduce activity by explaining to students that they are now junior archaeologists, who are back at the lab. They need to work together and analyze what was found at the excavation site. The items they will be examining = artifacts for the purpose of this activity.
- Divide the class into small groups.
- Give each group a bag or box of "artifacts" and allow them time to study and discuss the contents.
- Students are asked to discuss and answer the following questions typically asked by archaeologists.

### Student Discussion Questions:

- What time period did they live? (Item with date on it, provides this information)
- Did they live in a settled community or in the wilds?
- What did they eat? How did they get their food?
- What hobbies/interests did they have? What did they do for fun?
- Did animals play a role in their lives?
- What tools and equipment did they use?
- What contact did they have with other people?



### **Student Writing Assignment: Social Studies and Language Arts**

Option 1: After the small group discussion, each student selects an “artifact” to write a paragraph about. They should include information such as the time period represented, how the “artifact” would have been used, where the “artifact” most likely came from, and anything else they can come up with about the item and the person’s culture.

Option 2: Students work together to create a story about the person/people and their culture including as many “artifacts” in the story as possible. The goal is to use their imagination to bring the person/people represented by the “artifacts” to life for their fellow classmates. The story would answer the questions they have discussed in their group. The group presents their story to the other students.

### **Post-Activity Classroom Discussion**

Discuss what typically does and does not survive in the archaeological record. Hard materials such as pottery, animal bones, shells, stone, and metal are long lasting. Items that readily decompose such as plant material and food are more difficult to identify. How does the environment (deserts, caves, tropical, underwater) affect preservation? How does this bias our knowledge of the past?

### **Suggested Books: Elementary School**

Duke, Kate 1997 Archaeologists Dig for Clues. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

McIntosh, Jane 2000 DK Eyewitness Books: Archeology. New York: Dorling Kindersley.

Panchyk, Richard 2001 Archaeology for Kids: Uncovering the Mysteries of Our Past: 25 activities. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc.

Posner, Jack 1997 The Magic School Bus Shows and Tells: A Book about Archaeology. New York: Scholastic Inc.

### **Classroom reading and discussion: Article on the Calusa and Mound Key**

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2018/06/ancient-native-american-kings-house-found-florida-archaeology-science/>

### **Key words:**

- Archaeology – The study of people and cultures from the past through material evidence
- Archaeologist – Scientist who studies archaeology
- Artifact – An object made by a human being, typically an item of cultural or historical interest to archaeologists
- Feature – An immovable element of an archaeological site usually showing evidence of structures created or modified by humans, such as building foundations, wells, agricultural terraces, pits, and post holes
- Excavation – A place where archaeologists expose, record, and process research; scientific digging
- Interpret – Explain the meaning of