

Introduction to Artifact Analysis

Artifacts provide a visual representation of history.

By engaging directly with artifacts, documents, photographs, works of art and other objects, students are able to put in context what they have learned in the classroom.

Artifact Analysis Activity 1: Soda Can Analysis



We analyze artifacts every time we walk through the grocery store and examine the different brands of food for sale. Students, however, might not be aware that, during their shopping trips, they are using the same skills archeologists, historians, and museum workers use when looking at an artifact and determining its history. In order to provide students with a low-stress introduction to artifact analysis, ask them to analyze an object they see every day - like a soda can.

Vocabulary:

Artifact (*noun*): An object made by a human being that generally has archaeological or cultural importance.

Analysis (*noun*): The examination of something in detail in order to understand it better.

Steps:

1. Explain to the class that they will analyze a soda can and the makers and users the soda can. Note: this activity can be done with any object that is familiar to students (i.e. - a box of dish soap, a cereal box, or other objects that have a brand name and other of details on the packaging).
2. Pass the soda can around the room. Each student must give one observation about the can. For example, "It's red," "It has print writing on it," or "It has a recycling sign on it." Students may not repeat observations given by another student.
3. After each student had made their observation, ask the class what they think each observation says about the people who made and use the soda can. (e.g. - example the fact that the soda can has a recycling sign on it might mean that the people who use the can are environmentally conscious; the bright colors of the can might mean that it's meant to catch your eye. Point out to the students that they are analyzing their own society by looking at details on a can.)
4. Explain to the students that the same skills they have just practiced - listing details about an object and deciding what each detail means about the people who made and used the object - are used to analyze historic artifacts like the ones found in a museum.

Artifact Analysis Activity 2: Unlocking Historic Artifacts



Once students have learned the basics of artifact analysis, they can begin to analyze older artifacts. Through observation and analytical deduction - the same skills learned and practiced during the soda can activity - students will examine artifacts and determine the artifact's **provenance**. This activity asks students to use their imagination and create a story for unidentified artifacts. Dig out old records, pull out worn shirts, and even ask students, parents, and grandparents to provide artifacts for analysis.

Vocabulary:

Provenance (noun):	The source and ownership history of a work of art, literature, or artifact.
Primary Source (noun):	Original materials from the time period that have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation. Usually the first formal appearance of results in physical, print or electronic format which present original thinking, report a discovery, or share new information.
Secondary Source (noun):	Accounts written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight that provide interpretations and evaluations of primary sources.

Steps:

1. Split the class into groups of four or more. Give each group a different artifact. Note: the artifacts used for this activity do not need to be authentically historic. Worn books, dishes, clothing, or rope, and even objects from nature such as bird nests or feathers can be used - be creative with your artifact selection.
2. Ask each group to make a list of observations about the artifacts. Each student in each group should make an observation. As a group, students write their observations down.
3. Once the groups have finished making their observations, they create a history or provenance for the artifact. Ask students to answer the who, what, when, where, and why of the artifact. Who used this artifact? What did it do? When was it made? Where was it used? Why might it be something of historic importance today? What does it tell us about the past? Ask students to write a description of their artifact's provenance.
4. Ask each group to provide a reason why their artifact might be put on display in a museum.
5. Ask each group to share their created artifact's provenance with the class.
6. Ask students if the artifacts displayed in a museum have histories that are made up. How do historians learn the provenance of historic artifacts? Do they research using **primary** or **secondary sources**, or both? Explain that, in a museum, the artifacts on display will have their history written on labels so that visitors can learn why each of the artifacts is important to preserve.