

INTRODUCTION TO ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology is the study of past human behaviour using scientific analysis of material remains. Archaeologists use a variety of evidence to examine and interpret past human behaviour, including artefacts (objects that have been created or changed by people), documents, oral histories, features such as the remains of buildings, artwork, and human remains.

When historians study the past, they often rely on archaeology to help piece together historical narratives and chronologies. This is especially important when studying Ancient Australia because the typically Western approach to historical study (e.g. the heavy reliance on documents and structural remains to understanding the past) cannot always be applied to the study of Ancient Australia. We must instead rely on other forms of evidence, in particular archaeology and oral histories, to answer the important archaeological and historical questions *what, where, when, who, why* and *how*.

Introduction to Archaeology activities for students can include an examination of various unfamiliar, obscure or obsolete items. These can be purchased very cheaply at opportunity shops and recycling depots or donated by parents or the students themselves. Objects could be empty perfume bottles, old tools, floppy disks or telephones. Select items that your students will be unlikely to recognise and as they are examining them, they can answer questions such as:

- *What is it? What is it made of?*
- *When was it made/used? How do you know?*
- *Where was it made/used? How do you know?*
- *Who would have used it? How do you know?*
- *Why was it important to its owners?*
- *How precious was it to its owners? How can you tell?*

ACTIVITY STATIONS

Another way to introduce students to the various stages of archaeological investigation is to create station activities. You can set up all or only a few of these stations, depending on space and resources.

Sorting

This is where students must sort numerous similar objects (e.g. buttons, keys, shells, coins, beads or bottle tops) into various categories. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Categories could be colour, shape, size, material, age, etc. Encourage students to come up with as many different categories as possible.

Drawing

Students are presented with an interesting artefact (e.g. an unusual bottle, a decorated teapot, a pair of old glasses, a skull, etc.) and they can have a go at drawing it as accurately as possible.

Jigsaw Puzzle

This activity requires some pre-planning. Students will need to wear gloves (cheap gardening gloves are fine) to protect their hands from sharp edges. The task is to piece together a variety of broken ceramic objects. This works best if the objects are several identical items, e.g. five dinner plates with the same design, three teacups from the same set, etc. To add another layer of difficulty, remove a few key pieces so that none of the objects have every piece.

Digging

For this activity, you can do small scale or large scale. For small scale, you will need plastic tubs and trays, sand or dirt, a variety of small artefacts for students to dig up, gloves, trowels, buckets, and dustpans and brushes. All this equipment can be purchased at a hardware shop. Pour some sand or dirt into the plastic tubs and then bury the artefacts for students to find. Ensure students scrape away the layers, rather than digging holes. They may want to use paint brushes to gently brush away the sand/dirt around the artefacts, which they can place in a plastic artefact tray. Use the dustpans and brushes to clear away any excess dirt and place this in the buckets.

Sieving

For this activity you will need gloves, sand/dirt, buckets, small artefacts, a tarpaulin and some garden sieves. Fill the buckets halfway with sand or dirt and mix in some small artefacts. Students take it in turns to pour a small amount of dirt onto the sieve and sift through to see what they can find.

Washing

This is where students can have a go at washing artefacts. You will need shallow plastic tubs/trays, gloves, old toothbrushes and paint brushes, and a large bucket of pre-dirtied artefacts (smearing them with mud and leaving them to dry overnight works well). Students need to assess whether the artefact they have chosen can be washed in water (ceramics, glass, stone) or whether it needs to be dry-brushed (bone, wood, leather, metal or anything else organic, fragile or likely to rust).

Analysis

This is where students can analyse artefacts to answer the important archaeological and historical questions *what, where, when, why, who* and *how*. Sample questions might be:

- *What is it made of?*
- *Where was it used?*
- *When was it used?*
- *Why was it discarded?*
- *Who made it?*
- *How was it made?*

Analysis extension activity: students use callipers or rulers to measure each artefact and record significant details, such as colour, size, shape, markings or decorations, text, etc. and do a rough sketch of the artefacts.