

# Tell an Artifact's Story

Examine and describe objects, writing a creative story from observations

## OBJECTIVES

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At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Examine an artifact in order to identify and document details
- Demonstrate writing with objective and subjective language
- Interpret and offer constructive criticism to another student's summary
- Write and reflect on an interpretive narrative that may include both objective and subjective language

## VOCABULARY

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**Artifact:** any portable object made, modified, or used by humans. "The town museum has a collection of local artifacts on display."

**Attribute:** a characteristic or property of an object, such as weight, size, or color. "One important attribute of this vase is its light weight—just six ounces!"

**Culture:** a set of learned beliefs, values, and behaviors (the way of life) shared by members of a society. "Many people think that placing a high value on independence is an important part of American culture."

**Archaeology:** the study of people in the past using material remains (physical objects and other clues that have been preserved and discovered). "The people excavating the old house site have training in archaeology."

**Objective:** representing facts. "Archeologists study artifacts" is an example of an objective statement.

**Subjective:** representing one's own opinion or perception about something. "Archeologists have the coolest jobs" is an example of a subjective statement.

## MATERIALS

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- Printed worksheet or paper to write on for each student
- Artifacts to observe (with a fieldtrip to a museum, printed photographs, or using a virtual museum)
- Internet access (if using a virtual museum)
- Pencils or pens

## GRADES: 6-8

**Subjects:** Social Studies, Language Arts, History

**Standards:**

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-8.3.D](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-8.10](#)

**Skills:** observation, description, evaluation, comparison, interpretation, writing

**Duration:** 45-90 minutes

**Class size:** up to 30; pairs

# BACKGROUND

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Whether the objects archeologists recover are whole or in fragments, they must be analyzed and documented by their attributes or characteristics, such as: shape, size, color, type of material, and how they were made. Archeologists then try to determine what the function or purpose was. This is often challenging to figure out and a specific effort is required by archeologists not to assign purposes or understandings of artifacts based on subjective perceptions. Objective comparisons to other found artifacts, previously discovered artifacts, as well as knowledge of that culture, is required in helping to interpret more about the artifact. Attributes of an artifact might include symbolism for a culture, which is a characteristic that can be more difficult to be objective about. It can be challenging to know what previous cultures were actually thinking. In sharing their discoveries, archeologists emphasize the objective details. However, they sometimes weave subjective responses into their interpretations in order to offer possible explanations.

This lesson plan can be altered to fit more specific learning objectives and adapted to specific resource constraints. For example, the artifacts highlighted during this lesson could come from a particular time period or culture. You may find it enriching to visit a local museum or inquire if they have resources online or to be loaned. Many museums offer virtual options as well. In selecting artifacts to describe, students should avoid objects that have few distinctive qualities, such as plain pottery fragments, and not read any interpretive labels. Larger or more detailed items offer more opportunities for students to describe.

# PROCEDURES

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1. Introduce the vocabulary words to the students by asking the class what objects in the classroom or at home an archaeologist might find as an artifact hundreds of years from now. What are the attributes of the object? What would it tell someone about our culture?
2. Have a brief class discussion about objective vs. subjective language using objects from the classroom as examples (e.g., “the chair is grey” vs. “the chair is uncomfortable”). Encourage precise and specific language.
3. Students are to select an artifact examine. *Note: if visiting a physical museum, contacting the education or program staff in advance can help this process go more smoothly. If using an online gallery, you may find it beneficial to make your own curated collection of artifacts from which students can choose (either by downloading certain 3D models or photographs in advance).*
4. Students are to complete #1-2 in the instructions independently (about 10 minutes).
5. Ask for volunteers to read their descriptive artifact summaries to the group. The other students are to listen, and try to identify any objective, as well as subjective language they hear in the summary. They may also share which details made the greatest impression upon them. The focus should be on objective attributes. Subjective writing may also be identified and explored.
6. Pair students off so that they may work with a partner to complete #3-4 in the instructions. If practical, try to ensure that partners did not select very similar artifacts. (10-15 minutes is suggested).
7. Reconvene as a group and ask students to evaluate their successes and challenges in identifying the correct artifact. Where many students successful in identifying the artifact they read about? Were there any commonalities in the successes? What did students find helpful and what did they find confusing when reading about an unknown object?
8. Students are to complete #5 in the instructions. *Note: if time is short, this portion of the lesson can be completed in a separate class period.*
9. Provide time for final reflections about the interpretive narratives/artifact stories. The discussion prompts in the “Wrapping Up” section in this lesson plan may help.

# ASSESSMENT

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Assess student responses in the attribute list and description by identifying the facts written about each object. The use of precise, accurate, and factual details is the basis for objective writing. Subjective responses leave room for disagreement with someone who has a different opinion. Objective writing makes it more likely for students to identify the corresponding artifact.

The interpretive narratives will vary based on each student's chosen artifact. Assessment is to be based on the student's integration and use of objective details within their interpretation of the artifact's proposed function and/or meaning. The use and cohesion of subjective writing should also be taken into consideration. Archaeologists are able to provide richer interpretations if they have access to a wide variety of context clues (e.g., information on other artifacts found nearby, environmental factors, exactly how the artifact was placed). Archeologists also face many interpretive challenges. These include the fact that many context clues are not preserved over time, and are therefore unavailable. Archaeologists also view artifacts from their own cultural perspectives (where and when the archaeologists live). This can result in biases that make interpreting artifacts difficult.

## WRAPPING UP

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Either as a class or in small groups, have students reflect on their written narratives or artifact stories. Use these questions as discussion prompts:

- Your artifact story likely has some subjective elements in it. What other information would you need to know to make these subjective portions more objective?
- If you were an archaeologist interpreting an artifact, what challenges would you face in writing a purely objective interpretation?

## RESOURCES

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- Research Labs of Archaeology, University of NC 3D collections: <https://sketchfab.com/rla-archaeology> (for more context: <http://ancientnc.web.unc.edu/galleries/3d-gallery>)
- Virtual Hampson Museum gallery (Arkansas): <https://hampson.cast.uark.edu/gallery> (for more context: <https://hampson.cast.uark.edu>)
- Colonial Williamsburg Virtual Tours: <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/virtual-tours>



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Created by KC Smith, adapting from "Telling a Painting's Story" in *Collecting Their Thoughts: Using Museums as Resources for Student Writing* (Smithsonian Institution Office of Elementary and Secondary Education). Published in 1996 in *Archaeology and Public Education* Vol. 6 No. 3. Updated by Rebecca Wiewel in 2020 and reviewed by teachers John Lemons, Mari Harris, and Bailey Cavender with funding from the Society for American Archaeology's Public Education Endowment and the Society for Historical Archaeology. Download teaching materials at: [www.saa.org/education-outreach/teaching-archaeology/k-12-activities-resources](http://www.saa.org/education-outreach/teaching-archaeology/k-12-activities-resources)

# TELL AN ARTIFACT'S STORY

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Make a list of the attributes (characteristics) of the artifact you have selected. List as many specific details as possible that describe its appearance. Pay attention to observations that are objective (physical traits you can see) and avoid subjective remarks (your opinions).
2. Use your listed attributes of the artifact to write a descriptive summary. Your summary should be written for someone else to identify the artifact you have chosen just by using your written words. Start with the most distinctive traits from your list, and try to keep your writing as purely factual as possible. Color, shape, material type, and accurate dimensions are examples of objective descriptors.
3. Share your artifact descriptions with your partner. Try to draw a sketch of your partner's artifact based on their written description.
4. Next, try to find your partner's artifact based on their description and your drawing. Don't share any additional hints with your partner. After you have made your final choice, ask your partner if you are correct.
5. Finally, write an interpretive narrative about your artifact (tell the artifact's story). How do you think people used the artifact? How old might it be? Do you think the artifact had any additional meaning (beyond its function) to the people who made and used it? What does this artifact tell you about the culture of the people who made and used it? Use your artifact description for details in this narrative. Subjective writing will likely be required to answer most of these questions, so do your best and try to be creative.

# TELL AN ARTIFACT'S STORY

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NAME

ATTRIBUTES (CHARACTERISTICS):

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DESCRIPTION:

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SKETCH:

NARRATIVE: