

What Will Survive?

Organic and Inorganic Remains

By Shelby Brown (J. Paul Getty Museum)

This lesson requires students to think about the materials that survive in archaeological sites. Students evaluate their classrooms and homes and decide whether furniture and other objects (artifacts) will likely survive many years into the future or will be lost. There are always pieces missing in the physical record, and archaeologists and historians try to fill in the blanks.

Grade Levels

6-10 (but fun for all ages)

Goals

Students confront how much organic evidence of the human past has been lost over time as they evaluate their own classrooms and homes to identify what may survive. They consider the difference between observation and inference and the problems of interpreting damaged evidence. This lesson can be used as part of an introduction to a simulated dig or other archaeology project, or it can function alone as an exercise in thinking about the remains that historians and archaeologists use to interpret the past.

How well archaeological remains survive is strongly affected by their materials and the various environments in which they lie, often for centuries, before being discovered. Organic remains are susceptible to decay and are affected by humidity and air. At most sites, they are lost forever. Inorganic artifacts survive better, although they too can rust, tarnish, or otherwise become unstable.

Terminology

- ▷ **Artifacts** are the objects people leave behind that give us clues about past cultures. They can be organic, inorganic, or both.
- ▷ **Organic** (once living) remains easily decay and turn into dirt. They survive well only if they are protected in a hot/dry, waterlogged, or very cold/frozen environment, or in an airtight place. Things made of plants and animals are organic (food, paper, wood, leather, fabric).

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

▷ **Inorganic** (never living) remains survive far better than organic materials, although they too can break down when exposed to the elements. Examples of inorganic remains include clay, stone, cement, plastic, glass, and metal.

▷ **Observation** is perception with your senses, while **Inference** is a conclusion you draw.

Time Needed

Excluding the time students may spend looking at material remains in their homes, or on homework if it is assigned, the teacher's presentation and class discussion should take about 45 minutes.

Required Preparation

The teacher may want to "seed" the classroom with specific organic and inorganic objects before discussion begins. Otherwise, no preparation is needed.

In the Classroom

The teacher presents and students discuss or review the properties of organic (living or once living) remains and inorganic (never living) remains.

Students should look around the classroom and list things that are organic and inorganic. What might survive for many hundreds of years to tell future archaeologists about us?

- A binder may have metal rings and a plastic body, but paper will be lost.
- Posters and pencils will decay, along with most trash.
- A plastic or metal lunch box may survive, but usually not the lunch – although under hot and dry conditions a residue of food could conceivably remain.
- A laptop or mobile phone may survive but will not function.
- How likely is it that anything that survives will still function?
- Will students' names endure into the future? (Will brand names be misunderstood as people's names in the future?)

Given what will (perhaps) survive and what will be lost, what kinds of conclusions may future archaeologists draw about the classroom? What incorrect conclusions might they reach? What would students like them to know?

For Students to Do Outside the Classroom

- List ten items of furniture or objects found in a room or a place you often visit (for example, a bedroom, a school locker). The list should reflect aspects of your life, interests, and style. Carefully note for each item whether it is organic, inorganic, or has elements of both.
- Assume 1,000 years have passed, and the area has not been preserved in a dry or airless environment. List what will be left after all the organic materials decay.

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

- Summarize what you think an archaeologist in the future will be able to say about the items you selected, and therefore about you. Will your name, interests, or tastes (favorite colors, music, or anything else) survive?

Back in the Classroom

The teacher may ask students to hand in their lists of ten items, but it can also be useful and fun in addition (or instead) to put students in small groups to discuss and identify what kinds of personally significant remains may survive. Groups can share their conclusions. Individual students may also choose to share which of their possessions they hope will survive, in the classroom or elsewhere, to provide information for future archaeologists.

Resources

Books on Archaeology

Bahn, Paul. 2018 (2nd ed.). *Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University.

Muckle, Robert J., and Stacey L. Camp. 2021 (3rd ed.). *Introducing Archaeology*. Toronto: University of Toronto.

Sutton, Mark. Q. 2018 (5th ed.). *Archaeology: The Science of the Human Past*. Abingdon: Routledge Press. (Too expensive for those who just want a quick resource, but useful for a deeper dive)

White, John R., and Mattie Oveross. 2019 (2nd ed.). *Hands-On Archaeology: Authentic Learning Experiences that Engage Students in STEM*. Waco Texas: Prufrock Press. (Grades: 4-5)

Online Overviews of Archaeology

Archaeological Institute of America (AIA): Archaeology 101

<https://www.archaeological.org/programs/educators/introduction-to-archaeology/>

Society for American Archaeology

<https://www.saa.org/about-archaeology/what-is-archaeology>

National Geographic

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/archaeology/>

Earth Science Week: What Will Survive

<https://www.earthsciweek.org/classroom-activities/what-will-survive>