

How to Engage Students in Historical Thinking Using Everyday Objects

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Critical Thinking

Asking students to examine their own possessions from the perspective of a historian in the future helps them sharpen their analytical skills.

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Social studies students regularly consider the past through its written and material culture, whether that means diving into daily life in colonial America through letters or examining ancient coins to better understand the spread of the Roman Empire.



Students can learn a lot about the work of historians by applying this approach to items from their own daily lives. I've found that if I remind my students that in the future, our lives and culture will be reconstructed in a similar fashion, they're

intrigued, and if I challenge them to imagine what a student 100 or 200 years from now might infer when examining a contemporary artifact, they're keen to get to work.

It might seem like an unorthodox approach, but again and again, my students have analyzed their own artifacts within this historical framework and have been pushed to think in new ways, both creatively and conceptually. This activity fits into a variety of curricula, as it gets students to practice evaluating artifacts so that they can make hypotheses about a society from its material culture and weigh how different interpretations of historical objects can shape our understanding of the past.

Step 1: Explain What Artifacts Are

“An artifact,” according to *National Geographic*, “is an object made by a human being. Artifacts include art, diaries, tools, and clothing made by people of any time and place.”

When you introduce this activity to your students, emphasize to them how many objects fall under the umbrella of “artifact.” Musical instruments, written material, kitchenware, school supplies, jewelry, and athletic apparel are all artifacts.

Students can benefit from looking at examples that underscore how historians can draw important conclusions from virtually any example of material culture. Point students to artifacts in museums, such as those on display in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Ancient Greek pottery and Egyptian sarcophagi are artifacts, but so are the objects housed at the National Videogame Museum, the Las Vegas Neon Museum, and the International Banana Museum, which boasts “25,000 banana-related items and pictures.”

Step 2: Share How to Analyze Artifacts

Once students are comfortable with the definition, review how historians and archaeologists analyze artifacts.

The National Archives encourages students to first decide what an artifact is made of before asking a series of questions that include the following:

- Who used it? List reasons you think so.
- What was it used for? List reasons you think so.
- What does this tell you about the people who made and used it?
- What does it tell you about technology at the time it was made?

Similarly, the Library of Congress offers advice for examining all manner of primary sources, as well as providing a useful analysis tool.

Step 3: Have Students Choose and Research an Artifact

Ask students to choose an artifact from their personal life. They can bring it to school or submit an image if you are teaching remotely.

The next part is the hardest and takes some imagination. Ask students to pretend they are a researcher, archaeologist, or student in the future conducting a detailed analysis of the artifact in question, and have them answer the following questions about the artifact:

- What is its significance?
- How does it exemplify the culture of 2021?
- What does it suggest about society in the early 21st century?
- What does it say about the technology of 2021?

This exercise demands that students make several cognitive leaps. First, they must consider what life might look like many years from now. Second, they have to analyze their own artifact as a person living in the future they envisioned. What would that person think of the world in which we live? Tie this to the curriculum in the following ways:

- Assign a writing response in which students must make evidence-based conclusions.
- Ask students to peer-edit another student's conclusions, paying close attention to the way claims are supported.
- Evaluate how differing interpretations of the artifact could shape the way history is made.
- Consider what the artifact might say about belief systems, commerce, technology, or social organizations.

Step 4: Analyze Artifacts Together in Class

Once students have gathered and analyzed their own artifacts, I ask them to share the artifacts with the class (physically if we are in a classroom or via an image uploaded to the discussion board if I'm teaching remotely) and task them with analyzing another student's artifact in the same way they analyzed their own.

As I review the images and comments in real time, I call on students to further explain what their own artifact says about society or to elaborate on their analysis of someone else's artifact. When I wasn't teaching remotely, I also took my class on a walk around the school and had them analyze everyday objects, such as posters in the hallways, signs for upcoming school events, trophies, murals, and classroom resources, with the eye of an archaeologist seeing them for the first time.

A few of the everyday objects my students have identified as their artifacts were a family photo album, a school-issued iPad, and a Christmas tree, which led their classmates to make inferences not only about the student to whom the artifact belonged but about the larger society and culture. These discussions ranged from the technological proficiency and socioeconomics of a school capable of providing one-to-one devices to what a Christmas tree might tell us about religious or secular customs.

In a virtual setting, analysis of artifacts can serve as an opening or closing activity (for the latter, use it as an exit card or a final discussion post). To abbreviate the exercise, ask students to answer one or two prompts about a contemporary artifact and make inferences about their own culture from a different point of view.

The activity can even tie into current events. We have posters at school asking students to "wear a mask." Share something like this with the kids. If a researcher encountered this artifact in a museum years from now, what would they think?

When working with artifacts, consider incorporating David Macaulay's *Motel of the Mysteries*, a humorous children's book about an archaeologist in the future who discovers an American motel room from 1985 and tries to understand its artifacts (he assumes that the TV, for instance, is an altar).

To encourage high-level work and accountability, use a rubric with clear objectives. For example, you might ask for analysis that includes making an inference regarding technology. Do your own analysis and show the class, or share exemplar work so that students know what is being asked of them. The templates offered by the National Archives and the Library of Congress also help students stay on track. To discourage students from giving a superficial analysis, provide them with specific questions to answer or learning objectives to meet.