

# CLUES FROM THE PAST: archaeology

## HOW TO “READ” AN ARTIFACT

Meets Illinois State Standards: 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17

(Subject Areas: Language Arts, Social Studies, Critical Thinking)

### Background Information for Teachers

Archaeologists are those who study the human past through its material remains. Usually, these remains must be removed from the ground, using systematic methods and a variety of tools and technology.

The material remains archaeologists find are termed **artifacts** (AR-tih-facts), which they define as “objects made and used by people.” By carefully collecting and analyzing artifacts, archaeologists are attempting to date and describe the beliefs, customs, and knowledge of past societies.

### Objectives

- Understand that artifacts can offer information about people, places, and societies
- Use observation and reasoning to make inferences and to draw conclusions from artifacts
- Understand that inferences must be tested against other information
- Discover the analytical approaches used by archaeologists

### Materials

One penny for each student

Paper and pencils

### Suggested Time Needed

One class period

### Suggested Procedure

1. Ask students to imagine they are archaeologists living many years in the future. In excavating a site, they have found a coin from an unknown society.

2. Hand out one penny to each student.

3. Ask students to examine the penny and write down all they notice on both sides of the coin.

Some examples:

- what pictures, words, and numbers do they see?
- what is the coin made of?

4. Ask students to consider what this coin could tell future archaeologists about the unknown society. Answers could include:

- time the society existed (from date on penny)
- the people had a religion—they believed in a god
- the people knew how to work in metal (penny is made of metal)
- the people knew how to construct buildings
- some men in the society wore beards

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**5.** Next, tell the class that the penny might suggest some other ideas. Put the following list on the board and ask students: a) if they feel the statements are true; b) how a penny could suggest those ideas. List of additional ideas from the penny:

- the man on the penny is a god
- the building is a temple for worshipping the god
- a statue of the god is inside the temple
- the people of this society had two languages (English and Latin)

**6.** Students might say the man on the penny is Lincoln and that almost nobody knows Latin. Remind them a future archaeologist might not be aware of Lincoln or the languages of the unknown society, so he or she could only make educated guesses, or hypotheses, from the objects.

**7.** Ask students what archaeologists might unearth that would help test their guesses from the penny.

Answers could be:

- books about religious beliefs
- pictures that identify Lincoln as a president, not a god
- few or no more Latin inscriptions.

Remind students that ideas about the past change as archaeologists continue to uncover new evidence.

### Take-Home Activity

- Ask students to make a list of 10 things in their room at home that could be clues about themselves for a future archaeologist.
- Have students imagine that an archaeologist finds the ten items. Ask them to write a paragraph describing what the archaeologist might infer about the student.
- Back in class, students could exchange lists to see if they can tell to whom the ten items belong.

# LESSON PLAN

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