

Teaching the Archeological Process  
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## BACKGROUND RESEARCH

How does an archaeologist decide where to excavate? Though a site may be found quite accidentally, most often it is the result of research. It all starts with a question. For example:

1. What was the chronology (order) of historical events in an area or region?
2. What objects or artifacts\* can be found to add to our knowledge about the history or culture of a region or time period?
3. How did people live or die in ancient societies?

Another reason an archaeologist may excavate a site is because they have been hired by a construction company. Construction applications are reviewed by government agencies before building projects can disturb the ground and possibly endanger archaeological and historic resources.

Archaeologists then begin preliminary research. This may include title research (finding out the sequence of who owned a piece of property and when), visiting a local historical society, the library, etc. Most archaeologists consult with a Geographic Information System specialist for the purpose of obtaining historic and current maps.

Once a site has been decided on, the archaeologist must obtain permission from appropriate government bodies.

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\*An artifact is an object made and used by people in a specific place at a certain time.

## GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. Where could an archaeologist do research in order to find information about a particular site?

2. What kinds of questions do archaeologists want to answer?
3. Why would a construction company hire an archaeologist?

## FIELDWORK

The site to be excavated is placed on a survey grid and trenches or units are laid out in positions which look the most promising based on the research. The trenches may vary in size from two square meters to ten meters square. Often a site which has not been excavated before will have its trenches scattered so as to have the best chance of finding the richest deposits.

Field work is done in a meticulous manner. The archaeologist measures out the trench or unit that will be excavated. He or she takes measurements using a level. All measurements and information from a unit are recorded on a data sheet. The fieldworkers gently remove layers of soil, looking for features\* and artifacts\*\*. As they find artifacts, they are placed in labeled bags. The bags are labeled with the unit number, the stratigraphic\*\*\* level, the names of the excavating team, and the date. The artifacts found in each trench or unit will then be taken to the lab for analysis.

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\*A feature is a change in soil color.

\*\*An artifact is an object made and used by people in a specific place at a certain time.

\*\*\*Stratigraphy is the sequence of layers or deposits which have formed due to human occupation. These layers may be floor surfaces, building fill, post holes or any number of occupational activities which leave their mark on the archaeological record. It is only through an understanding of the stratigraphy of a site that the archaeologist can work out which layers are earlier than others.

### GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. Where is information from a unit or trench recorded?
2. Where are artifacts placed when they are located? Why?
3. What is stratigraphy and why is it important?

## LABORATORY WORK AND ANALYSIS

A lot of work is carried out on the material retrieved from an excavation long after the field work has been completed. Artifacts\* of ceramic, glass, stone and bone are carefully washed in plain water to remove loose dirt. These artifacts are then sorted by material. Some categories include ceramic, glass, building materials (nails, window glass, wood timber), organics (leather or cloth), bone, shell and seeds. Standard descriptions of all kinds of artifacts have been developed and given codes. A computer is used and the codes are entered as data. In this way statistical studies may be carried out and catalogues can be printed.

In the laboratory some archaeologists will concern themselves with pottery, another glass. Some will catalogue the animal bones and others will examine the metal objects. In the end, each has to rely on the others.

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### GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. What is the first thing that happens in the lab to an artifact?
2. What categories are artifacts sorted into?
3. What are artifacts catalogued?

## INTERPRETATION

Archaeological investigation should only be undertaken by trained professionals. Many years of school and practical experience go into understanding the proper theory and method for excavating and interpreting sites.

After research, fieldwork, laboratory work, and analysis are completed, the archaeologist writes a report of what has happened at the site. This report includes the archaeologist's interpretation of the relevance of the site. Also included in the report is information about the artifacts found (date and place of manufacture if possible), including pictures and illustrations. An archaeological report generally contains large numbers of artifact drawings. This is to allow other archaeologists to examine the finds and make comparisons with their own site. No site is dug nor interpreted in isolation. At all times the archaeologist at one site is trying to fit their site into the general framework of history that has developed from work at other sites. Each site will be different and have its own local variations but what is important is how that site relates to others.

The product of archaeological research is the publication of site reports, histories, books and the presentation of lectures and exhibits so that the public may learn of the past.

If you think you have found archaeological remains, be certain to contact your local government or museum to find out the correct procedure for preserving the history around you!

### GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. What is included in an archaeologists report?
2. Why isn't a site dug in isolation?
3. What should you do if think you've find archaeological remains?