



VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Can You Dig It? An Adventure in Archaeology

Why do archaeologists spend so much time digging in deserts (and at other sites all over the world) to find old bones and broken pots? Through hard work and careful recovery of **artifacts**, which is the term for the objects they discover, archaeologists can piece together a picture of what life was like in the past. A successful **dig** can tell us how people from the past made their houses, what sort of clothes they wore, what their religious beliefs were, and even what kinds of food they ate. All these clues teach us about the **cultures** of the people who lived before us.

To make sure that they are creating an accurate idea of how people lived, however, archaeologists must be extremely careful. Objects that have been buried or hidden for hundreds (even thousands) of years can be very delicate, and digging is often a destructive process. Also, the way a dig site is laid out and documented can be just as important as the objects found there, because often objects that are found together can tell us about one another. This means scientists must use an organized system to record every step of the archaeological process. Let's take a look at how archaeologists dig up clues from the past.

Vocabulary: archaeology
 artifact
 context
 culture
 dig site
 grid
 grid unit

Objective: Students will learn about the process that allows archaeologists to record exactly where individual artifacts and groups of objects are discovered, and discover why observing artifacts in **context** is important to learning about the people of the past.

Activity: Set up a rope grid on the classroom floor and scatter a variety of everyday “artifacts” within. Pictures of ancient artifacts can be substituted for modern objects if you prefer. Explain to students that although this is a **dig site**, an archaeologist can’t just grab a shovel and “dig in.” There’s a lot that needs to happen first.

Example of a dig site grid:

1A	1B	1C
2A	2B	2C
3A	3B	3C

It’s important to document not only the exact place where each artifact is found, but also which artifacts were found together and how they were arranged. This is called **context**. For example, Egyptian tombs were arranged so that the objects placed there could serve specific purposes in the afterlife. Finding one goblet doesn’t tell us much about a site, but finding a goblet, a sarcophagus, and a set of canopic jars almost certainly means that we’ve discovered a tomb!

Once archaeologists dig up a site, its original arrangement is lost forever. So before anyone touches a shovel, scientists make a precise record of the site as it was discovered. They set up a grid (like the one pictured here) and label each **grid unit** (each square within the grid is called a grid unit). Then, a recorder uses grid paper to draw the objects exactly as they were found. Because of this documentation, when archaeologists examine each artifact later, they can look at the drawing and understand how the artifacts related to one another.

Have students use grid paper to draw a record of the artifacts you have laid out. Help them label their grid units (1A, 1B, etc.) and tell them to make sure each artifact is recorded in the proper grid unit(s). Once students finish drawing, ask them what can be learned from the artifacts at this site. Do the artifacts tell us anything about the people who left them behind?

This activity has been adapted from resources developed in partnership with the Science Museum of Virginia in 1999.