

Seeing Objects as Clues

Concept:

Objects from day-to-day life change over time and offer clues to the lives of people in the past. Unlike written information, which often shows a particular point of view, artifacts don't take sides. Historians "read" artifacts to learn more about the people who made and used the objects, changes in technology and design, how and where the object was used and made, and the values associated with the object. This lesson will provide students with some of the skills necessary to "read" objects.

Note: This activity has been modified from one called "Every Attic Tells a Story" created by the Frick Art and Historical Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Materials: Containers of a variety of artifacts from the past. Each container might hold the same (or very similar items) or completely different items.

Note to the teacher: Search your basement, junk drawers, and closets. You will be surprised at the treasures you will find! Flea markets and thrift stores are also excellent sources of inexpensive items. You can also create some of the items yourself. For example, you can write a letter dated

Suggestions for Containers and their Contents include:

1. A container that was found in the attic of a house and includes a variety of objects that are old and used as opposed to contemporary or new.
 - Photographs, especially those which have names, dates and places on the back
 - Yearbooks or scrapbooks, especially those which have hand written sentiments inside
 - Books which have been written in (For example a book with a message to the recipient inside the front cover: *Merry Christmas, 1954! Love, Grandpa*)
 - Clothing such as hats, a fancy dress, gloves, soccer shoes or an old fur stole
 - Items which may have been souvenirs such as a pennant, a snow globe, or anything that has the name of a place on it
 - Old postcards, letters, valentines
 - Pet items
 - Items related to childhood: toys, books, child's drawings, etc.
 - Military-related items: Army uniform, mess kit, etc.
2. A purse which was left on a bus (Thrift stores are great resources for inexpensive purses and wallets):
 - A ticket stub
 - Photographs
 - Identification badges
 - Travel sized toothpaste

- Pen with a hotel's name on it
 - Notepad with grocery list included
 - Packet of tissues or handkerchief
 - Pacifier
 - Fancy gloves/child's mittens
 - An old CD
 - Map
3. A piece of luggage left at the airport:
- Several T-shirts with distinctive phrases or locations on them (*Green Bay Packers, High School Musical, I ♥ New York*)
 - Toiletry items
 - Map of distant city or state
 - Any tourist's guidebook such as *Frommer's Guide to Paris*
 - Photos
 - Variety of pens from different hotels
 - Any items which can be interpreted as souvenirs
 - Variety of postcards from different locations

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students/group.
2. Use a sample object to interpret with the entire class. Introduce the idea that this item was found in your attic. Pass it around the room so that all students have the opportunity to examine it closely. Complete the worksheet on this object with the entire class. Then brainstorm with your students to answer these questions.
 - Why was the object left in the attic?
 - Who owned it?
 - Why wasn't it thrown away?
 - When was it used?
 - Is there anything significant about the object that tells you about its former owner?
 - Where is the owner now?
 - Did the owner live in the house or did the object get there some other way?
3. Distribute one container of objects to each group of students.
4. Distribute one worksheet for each object in the container to each group.
5. Instruct students to closely inspect and analyze each object in their container and to complete one worksheet for each object. It is suggested that this step be completed as a group activity and that students thoroughly analyze and interpret one object before moving on to another.

6. After students have completed a worksheet for each object, they can begin to piece their story together.

7. Students should brainstorm about the container's previous owner(s) and his/her/their relationship to the objects in the container, creating a short explanation for the group's container that includes each of these elements.

Objects as Clues Worksheet

Adapted from the "Every Attic Tells s Story" worksheet created by the Frick Art and Historical Center

Complete the following worksheet for each of the objects in your container. Be sure to work together as a group to complete each worksheet. If you are uncertain of an answer or are guessing at an answer, show this by putting the answer in parentheses.

Look At It

What is it?

What condition is it in? Record any damage or wear. How was the object damaged?

What is written on it? (Names, dates, places, etc. Be sure to record any "manufacturer's marks – writing stamped on it at the time it was made to identify the company that made it or the date it was made)

What adjective(s) best describe(s) it?

Think About It

What do you think it was originally used for? Would it be used every day, during certain seasons, or for special occasions?

Who was the original owner?

When was it made and/or used?

Where would it have been made and/or used? (Was it made my hand or in a factory?)

Would it have been used for work or play?

How valuable do you think it was to the person who used it?

Imagine . . .

How/where/why did the owner get it?

Why did the owner stop using it?

Why was it saved?

How does it related to other objects in your container?

What does the object tell us about the life and times of the people who made or used it?

Does a version of this object exist today? If so, what changes have been made in the way the object looks and works? Why were those changes made?