

USING OBJECTS TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE PAST

Using primary sources to find out about the past is an important part of students' history learning. Being able to handle and explore objects using all their senses develops students' enquiry and critical thinking skills. As they look closely, listen to, touch and even smell an object, asking and answering their own questions to unlock its secrets and stories, learning about the past becomes more meaningful, relevant and memorable for students.

Use the activities below as part of students' general research into their exhibition theme and to support the creation of labels, guides and other information and activities for your exhibition. Museums in the Tees Valley have a range of loan boxes to bring the past to life in the classroom. They include objects, clothes and other primary sources and cover topics such as World War I, The Stockton & Darlington Railway, Victorian life, Explorers and Captain Cook, Journeys, Seaside Holidays and Portraits. See our [Museum loan boxes and equipment guide](#) for more information.

The [Making a Mark in the Tees Valley resource](#) also has lots of high-resolution images of museum objects that can be printed, used on whiteboards or added to programmes and applications.

Making a Mark in the Tees Valley www.npg.org.uk/mamteesvalley



ACTIVITIES

Try these activities to help students explore objects and develop their skills in looking, describing, questioning, hypothesising, testing and recording.

Top tip: keep curiosity and motivation alive by not revealing what an object is or the answers to students' questions (if you know them) until the end of an investigation. Do prompt with further questions though...

LOOKING CLOSER

Looking closely is an important skill for using objects and other primary sources to find out about the past. But how good are we at really looking at something in detail? Do we look more closely when we have a reason to look?

- Show the students a mystery object. Ask them to look at it very closely and remember as much as they can about it.
- Cover the object and then give out paper and pencils and ask them to draw it in as much detail as they can remember.
- After a few minutes, allow the students another short look at the object. Cover it again and allow them to continue drawing (they should observe a lot more intensely and draw with more confidence the second time). Repeat as many times as required.

When the students have had enough time to finish their drawing, the object can be uncovered again for a final look. Talk about the object and encourage students to ask and answer their own questions about it (the next activity is a good way to continue their enquiries).

Less complex objects can be chosen for younger students. Questioning could focus around simple concepts such as colour, shape, size, materials. Students can bring in their own mystery objects to school for their peers to draw and investigate.



QUESTIONING AND HYPOTHESISING

Encouraging students to ask and answer their own questions are key skills for historical enquiry.

Sit the students in a circle on the floor and show them a mystery object. Tell them you need their help to find out more about it. Slowly pass the object around the circle. Encourage each student to investigate it carefully but thoroughly. Remind them to hold it low over their laps so it won't be damaged if dropped.

When the object has gone full circle, pass it around again. This time, each student must ask a different question about the object and try and answer it with the help of their peers, using the object as evidence, before passing it on (some ideas for questions are included below). When the object has gone full circle for a second time, the group can come up with a hypothesis about what the object might be – it doesn't matter if they are incorrect, as long as they can justify their reasoning with the evidence they have unlocked through their investigation. When the investigation is complete, reveal as much information about the object as you know. Any unanswered questions can lead students to further research, through a museum visit, online or using the library for example.

Some useful questions for investigating objects include:

- What colour is it?
- What is it made from?
- Does it make a noise?
- What does it smell like?
- What was it made to do?
- Who was it made for?
- Are there any moving parts?
- Is it decorated?
- Is it complete – is anything missing?



WOULD I LIE TO YOU?

Students work in two teams. Give each team an object and a small piece of information about it. The students thoroughly explore each object and invent three fictional but believable names, uses and owners for the object. They give these to the other team, along with the real name, use and owner of the object. The other team then thoroughly examine the object and decide which of the four descriptions is correct from their investigation. This can be extended by giving students access to secondary sources (books, online, questioning an expert etc) to help with their investigations.

DRAWING FOR LOOKING AND RECORDING

Drawing an object helps us look at it much more closely. It's also a useful way of recording information. The goal is to get down as much detail as possible – it's not about creating a work of art. Try these tips to help students look closely and record accurately and in detail:

1. Divide a piece of paper into six squares. Students look closely at an object and record different details in each square e.g. its overall shape, a label, a pattern, a handle etc
2. Students draw the object from an unfamiliar angle – e.g. turn it upside down
3. Working in pairs or groups, each student draws the same object but from a different viewpoint. Compare and discuss drawings.
4. Students draw a very small object, or part of an object on a very large piece of paper
5. Label drawings to show materials, size, sounds, moving parts etc.



MUSEUM MIX-UP

Students work in two groups. Give the first group a set of objects. The group explores the objects. They then write a catalogue card or museum label for each object, containing as much information as possible. The second group must match the cards to the correct objects. Extend this activity for older students by giving them objects with as many similarities as possible. Younger students can use a set of objects with more obvious differences.

DEVELOPING VOCABULARY

Describing objects in detail not only helps students to look closer and explore objects more thoroughly, but also develops their historical and topic-related language and vocabulary.

Try these activities:

1. Place an object in a 'feely bag'. Students describe the object using only their sense of touch.
2. Working in pairs, one student describes an object (unseen by their partner), while their partner draws it from their description. The partner who is drawing must not ask any questions. Discuss ways in which the resulting drawing is accurate and inaccurate and how the description could be improved. Keep practising with different, increasingly complex objects. When they think they are really good at describing, students can try creating a detailed written description and test it by asking a partner to make a drawing from their description.



HISTORY DETECTIVES

When students have had an opportunity to develop their historical enquiry skills through some of the activities above, challenge them to become history detectives. Give them a mystery object or set of objects to investigate. Ask them to think carefully about which methods they will use. They can complete a table with the following headings to organise their findings:

- What we know
- What we think is possible
- What the evidence is
- What we need to find out
- Where we could find out more

Try including a mystery object in your exhibition and asking visitors to try and work out what it is.

