

Learning from objects

Initially you may want to give children a worksheet like this to help them analyse an object. Ultimately they should be able to frame their own questions and set about answering themselves.

Looking at an object

The main things to think about	Some further questions to ask	Things found out by looking	Things to be researched
Physical features What does it look and feel like?	What colour is it? What does it smell like? What does it sound like? What is it made of? Is it natural or manufactured substance? Is the object complete? Has it been altered, adapted, mended? Is it worn?		
Construction How was it made?	Is it handmade or machine-made? Was it made in a mould or in pieces? How has it been fixed together?		
Function What was it made for?	How has the object been used? Has the use changed?		
Design Is it well designed	Does it do the job it was intended to do well? Were the best material used? Is it decorated? Do you like the way it looks? Would other people like it?		
Value What is it worth?	To the people who made it? To the people who use it? To the people who keep it? To you? To a bank? To a museum?		

Suggested activities using the handling set

The artefacts road show

Children examine mystery objects. What can we learn from this? One object per groups, reporting back to the whole class from comparing the findings of different groups.

In the bag

Place the object in the bag. One child can feel it but not see it and answer questions about it from the other children with either yes or no. The object must be guessed in 20 questions to win.

Mix and match

Put the object labels into the middle. See if the children can match the right objects to the right label.

Rubbish and decay

Ask the children to examine the objects. Which parts will decay over time and which will survive? How will future archaeologists interpret these objects? What about objects which survive from the past?

Originals and replicas

Modern replicas are used to replace historical objects too rare or fragile for handling. Discuss reasons for reproductions, for example, of Victorian toys. Compare the real objects to a re-construction. It is a good copy? Was it made the same way?

Sorting

Ask the children to put objects in order according to various criteria, such as age, fragility, and value.

Time capsules

Which modern things might we put in a time capsule to help the future generation understand us? How might we mislead them? How might this influence our attitude towards those objects, which survived from the past?

These ideas and many more can be found in 'Learning from objects – a teacher's guide', by G. Durbin, S. Morris & S. Wilkinson, 1996, England Heritage.