

Learning from Artifacts

Before Your Visit

Here is a simple exercise to get your students ready for their museum visit. Museums tell the story of the past through objects or artifacts made by or used by people in those times. Learning to “read” an artifact is a skill to be acquired through practice just like reading a book.

Select an object that may be unfamiliar to students. It can be anything. The important thing is to teach students how to really look at an object and to use logic to sort out the following information about it:

Five questions to ask about any object:

1. What is it?
2. What was it used for?
3. Who made the object? Used it? Owned it?
4. What is the object’s social significance? Why was it chosen for this gallery?
5. How has it changed over time? Do we use the same object today? If we no longer use the object, what has taken its place?

Ask students to describe the artifact’s physical characteristics and to guess the use of the object both in the present and in the past. Discuss how students developed their ideas about the object. Did the student have to touch the object to determine if it was hard or soft? Did he or she have to lift it to know if it was heavy or light? If not by physically testing the object, then how did they make a judgment? (Prior knowledge of the characteristics of similar objects allows us to make predictions about new objects.)

At the Museum

Give each student a notepad and pencil. Have each student select an artifact they saw and describe it using these five questions:

1. What is it? Describe or draw the object. What does it look like, feel like, sound like? How big is it? What is it made from? Does it have a smell or a taste?
2. What was it used for?
3. Who made the object? Used it? Owned it?
4. What is the object’s social significance? Why was it chosen for this gallery?
5. How has it changed over time? Do we use the same object today? If we no longer use the object, what has taken its place?

In the Classroom

Make a game of it. Ask the students to describe the artifact (using the five questions) without naming it. Other class members should wait until the description is finished before guessing the name of the object being described. Once the correct answer is received for each artifact, discuss why the artifact was important to the person or persons using it. Ask them why it is important to preserve and display objects like these for future generations. Ask them if they learned anything new as a result of seeing this object.