



INSTITUTE FOR
HUMANE EDUCATION

TRASH INVESTIGATORS

by the Institute for Humane Education

PURPOSE

What's in our trash that doesn't need to be there? Participants investigate a trash source, analyze which items can be removed from the waste stream, and consider how they can reduce their own waste production.

GRADES

4-8

TIME

30 minutes

MATERIALS

- a garbage can filled with trash items; latex gloves for every student
- newspaper or plastic sheeting on which to spread the trash

SUBJECT AREAS

Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies/History

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Common Core for grades 4-5: <http://bit.ly/1a5rLNc>

Common Core for grades 6-8: <http://bit.ly/18sRZoR>

PREPARATION

Choose a trash can to analyze (it could be from the cafeteria, hallway, school office, or a classroom). At the end of a day, before the trash is dumped by the school custodian, bring it to your classroom and secure it with a note that it should not be emptied, so that you will have a day's worth of trash to analyze the next day.



PROCEDURE

1. Show students the can full of trash. Then spread newspaper or plastic on your desk or floor and dump out the entire contents of the trash. Divide the class into groups, and have several students come up and choose one or more items for their group. If there are enough pieces of garbage for each student, then have every student take an item or two. Provide latex gloves for each student.
2. Have students analyze their item(s) by answering the following questions:
 - Could this item have been recycled instead of thrown in the trash?
 - Could this item have been composted instead of thrown in the trash?
 - Could it have been prevented from ever entering the waste stream?
 - Is this item a want or a need?
 - Could this item have been reused in some creative way instead of thrown in the trash? If so, how? (This is the fun part of this

activity. Encourage students to think imaginatively about what else the item could have been used for. They will likely generate some unusual ideas!)

3. Have students report on their item(s). If their item was not recyclable, compostable, or reusable in some creative way, have them return the item to the trash can. When all the students have reported, have them look in the trash can again. How do the contents of this trash can compare to its original contents?
4. Facilitate a discussion about waste, resource use, landfills, incinerators, consumerism, etc., and invite students to consider if and how they might reduce their own trash production.

EXTENSIONS

1. Have students (and yourself) do this activity at home for a week and schedule a time to discuss what you learned.
2. Plan a visit to your local landfill, incinerator, recycling center, or transfer station.