



Archaeology

Imagine...

Imagine that you are an archaeologist, working on an excavation at an ancient site. The sun is shining, but it's not too hot. You're feeling refreshed after your lunch break and are joking with your friends in another trench nearby. As you carefully trowel back the soil, you begin to see changes in the colour and texture of the soil. Before long you see signs that indicate that what you are digging might be an ancient grave or burial. The patch of different coloured soil is big – bigger than a post hole or a small rubbish dump – almost the size of a person; and in one or two places you can see the glint of something hard and white appearing from within the ground. Bones.

First task

Describe how you would go about excavating the grave or burial that you have just discovered.

This task encourages you to think about what archaeological excavations might involve in practice. This is because archaeology is not just the study of what people have found and written about. It is also an activity that is done. Try to think about what tools you might need. What sort of information might you try to recover? What sort of artefacts might you encounter? What would be important to do and why would those things be important? What difficulties might you encounter and how would you overcome them?

Second task

Now that you have carefully excavated the grave, recorded all of the information that you could and retrieved all of the artefacts, answer the following question:

What can a grave or burial tell us about people in the past?

There is no single 'correct' answer to this question. Indeed, there are all sorts of different directions that you could explore. Perhaps you are fascinated by what human skeletal remains can tell us about how people lived and how they died. Or perhaps you are more interested in the artefacts that are sometimes buried with people and what they can tell us about both the dead and the living. This is not a complete list of all of the different ways we can investigate a burial. Feel free to use your imagination!

Whatever direction you choose to take, your answer should refer to actual archaeological examples that you have found through your own reading and/or research online. This is because what we are looking for most of all is your ability to take an artefact or set of evidence and show us that you understand how those things can tell us about people in the past.

Writing Tips

For both of these tasks it will be important to write clearly and concisely. Before writing anything, take a step back and think about what you are being asked to do. What pieces of information do you need to convey in Task 1? What do you think you are being asked in Task 2?

Some people find that it helps to sketch a mind map laying out all of the points that you want to make and the information you will need to include.

After you have thought about the task, plan what you want to say. A piece of academic writing is not just a list of points, it is a clear and accurate description or a convincing argument. Plan your key points and what you need to include in order to support what you are going to write.

Structuring your pieces of writing is also really important. As a general guide, think about dividing your responses to both tasks into three sections: an introduction, the main body of your text, and a conclusion. An introduction should do just that: introduce the topic and what you are going to say. The conclusion, on the other hand, should sum up everything you have said to come to a final, overall statement. It will be important to include your own opinion, based on the evidence you have gathered, in your conclusion.

Feel free to include figures, whether they be diagrams or photographs! It is always nice to have diagrams to illustrate complicated points that you are making in the text, or photographs of particular artefacts or aspects of sites that you are discussing. If you do include any figures, remember to label them and refer to them in your text.

Helpful Resources

Both of these tasks will get you to think about what archaeology is and the exciting (sometimes bewildering!) range of things that it can involve. That said, we do not expect anyone to do these tasks with any prior knowledge or training in archaeology. So, to help you explore the subject and find out about what excavations involve, the sorts of things that archaeologists look at and how artefacts can be examined, here is a list of free online resources.

An obvious starting point for many are Google searches and Wikipedia. To delve more deeply into the subject you can explore the following:

‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’ is both a book and a radio series (available via the link below), which takes 100 different objects from different periods in different parts of the world and explores the stories that they can tell us.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nrtd2/episodes/downloads>

The Archaeology Data Service provides a number of online archives for teaching and learning. The interface can be a bit clunky, but there is a wealth of information there on real archaeological projects and the things they have found.

<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/learning/schoolsResources.xhtml#General%20Resources>

Current Archaeology is an independent consumer magazine aimed at archaeology enthusiasts. Here you can find many free articles about a range of archaeological topics.

<https://archaeology.co.uk>

Council for British Archaeology website contains lots of useful and current information about archaeology today.

<https://www.archaeologyuk.org>

Spoilheap is an organisation that not only carries out archaeological work, but also maintains a website that is full of useful resources for both learning and teaching archaeology.

<http://www.spoilheap.co.uk/index.html>