

What's in Your Trash?

How to Conduct a Waste Sort

TIME:

Approximately one hour, with 5-15 students

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- One plastic tarp
- One 5-gallon plastic bucket
- One scale for weighing material
- One bag of garbage from area of interest (i.e. classrooms, cafeteria, or offices)
- Latex-free gloves for each student
- Waste category signs (available online)
- Garbage can and recycling bin
- Clipboard
- Waste sort reporting forms (available online)



BEFORE THE WASTE SORT:

Identify an area of your school to conduct the waste sort (cafeteria, gym, a classroom, or a covered area outside). You will need room to lay down a tarp.

TIP: Obtain permission to conduct the waste sort in your selected area. If necessary, coordinate the trash collection with your custodian.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Do not sort waste from bathrooms or health rooms.
- Always wear gloves when sorting trash.
- Consider wearing closed-toed shoes on the day of the waste sort.

PROCEDURE:

1. **Put on gloves.**
2. **Lay out tarp. Place bag of trash in center of tarp.**
3. **Arrange waste audit signs around the perimeter of the tarp.**
4. **Using the waste audit form, record the date, names of students involved, and area of the school where the trash was collected.**
5. **Explain the 10 categories of waste to the students. Check for understanding by asking what types of materials go in each category.**
 - a. Example: Ask students what types of plastic are recyclable and what types are garbage.
6. **Weigh the bucket and record on the waste audit form.**
7. **On the waste audit form, record the weight and volume of the bag of trash.**
 - a. Volume: estimate volume by comparing to the 5-gallon bucket
 - b. Weight: weigh bag of trash using scale
8. **Empty the contents of the bag onto the center of the tarp.**
9. **Sort the garbage into categories, as described on the waste audit signs.**

- a. Remind students that the material was determined by someone else to be garbage and must be handled as such.
 - b. Remind students to walk on the tarp and be aware of their neighbors during the sort.
- 10. On the waste audit form, record the weight and estimate the volume for each of the categories.**
- a. Weight: put materials in bucket and weigh with the scale. Be sure to subtract the weight of the bucket so that your results aren't skewed (this can be done after the audit).
 - b. Volume: estimate volume (in gallons) by observing what percentage of the bucket is full.
- 11. Make notes at the bottom of the waste audit form about the interesting things you find in the trash.**
- a. Example: If you find 5 water bottles or 10 uneaten oranges, write this down so you can share this information with others in your school.
- 12. Clean up the tarps**
- a. Place garbage in the garbage can and recycling in the recycling bin
 - b. Wash tarps, buckets, and scales
 - c. Remove gloves and wash hands

CALCULATING PERCENTAGES:

After completing the waste sort, use the data gathered to determine percentages by weight and volume for each material. Use these figures to chart or graph your school's waste by weight and volume. Share this information with other staff and students in your school to raise awareness about waste reduction and recycling!

For further assistance or to borrow waste sort equipment, contact

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