

Mesopotamia Lesson 1

Here's What I See

The Basics

Age Range: 4th grade and up.

Objective: To introduce the participants to objects from Mesopotamia.

Performance of Skill Expectations/Enduring Understandings: The participants will continue developing observational skills through a discussion of new artifacts.

Prerequisite Lessons: *Introductory Lesson 1: The Key to Understanding Artifacts*. You may also want to view a video of this activity modeled on the *An Artifact Speaks* website at <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/artifact/videos/models>.

Estimated Materials Preparation Time: 5 minutes.

Estimated Time to View the Background Videos: 30 minutes.

Duration: Instructor discretion.

Materials Provided in the Box: Two cuneiform tablets, counting tokens, Artifact Information Sheets, Cuneiform Information Sheet.

Materials Provided Online: Three background videos on cuneiform and early writing found at <https://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/projects/waynecuneiform/>.

Materials to be Provided by the Instructor: A smartboard; chalkboard; or easel pad and associated writing materials; a tray to put the tokens on.

Other Notes: None.

Concepts/Vocabulary (Do not introduce this vocabulary until the observation activity is over and the artifacts are being described.)

- Cuneiform: an ancient Mesopotamian writing system used to write multiple languages.
- Scribe: a professional writer who does writing for others.

Procedure

Preparation:

Prior to the day of the activity:

1. The Spurlock Museum's director, Wayne Pitard, has recorded a series of three background videos on cuneiform writing. They can be found online at <http://go.illinois.edu/cuneiformvideos>. Part 1 introduces the viewer to cuneiform

writing. Part 2 is a discussion of the training required to become a scribe. Part 3 is a demonstration of how cuneiform is written on clay. The videos give information not normally found in textbooks and other general studies of Mesopotamia, such as how a multi-columned, multi-sided tablet is read. It is highly recommended that the instructor watch these videos as an introduction or a refresher on Mesopotamian writing.

On the day of the activity:

2. Have the artifacts to be discussed out of the box and ready for presentation.

3. Have the short, introductory video found at the address below ready to show the class: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPIIm66gJ6zA>

(NOTE: The scribes in the video are not writing cuneiform properly, but the rest of the video has good, general information.)

Introduction/Instruction: Explain to the participants that when historians/archaeologists/anthropologists look at artifacts, they look for patterns: characteristics that are common among all artifacts of a certain type for a certain group of people. They examine how and why those patterns may vary among the different places where those people live or how the patterns have evolved over time.

Explain that for this lesson, they will be playing a game called “Here’s What I See.” As you walk around the room with an artifact, the participants will look at it then raise their hands when they have an observation to make about it. The observation is stated as, “Here’s what I see. I see a _____.” Observations are things they actually see—facts—not assumptions or conclusions they have made from what they see. They are looking for aspects of the artifact, the things that are recognizable and can be compared among artifacts. An easy example to model before looking at the ancient artifacts is a watch. Good observations for a watch might be (depending on the watch):

- “I see numbers.”
- “I see a word.”
- “I see moving parts.”
- “I see a buckle.”
- “I see metal.”

Tell the participants not to worry about stating an observation that seems obvious. Sometimes the obvious thing is a very important thing (e.g., you may get 10 observations about a statue, but no one will say that it is a male or female figure portrayed).

Before taking observations, suggest that the participants speak loudly enough for all to hear, because you want to see how many observations they give before you get a repeat.

Development: For the Mesopotamia lesson, there are two sets of artifacts for the participants to observe. Have each set shown and discussed separately. The first set is the two cuneiform tablets. The second set is the clay tokens. Place the tokens on a tray, so you can show the set all at once as you walk around. For each set, ask the students to either state an observation about one of the artifacts or an observation that is a comparison of an aspect of each one. Write down the answers (or have a helper do this). This helps reduce the number of repeated answers. It also can serve as an aid in

discussion of what kinds of observations the participants are making. Once you have a nice list of observations for a set, see what types of observations have already occurred and which ones you may need to prompt. For example, the participants may talk a lot about the shape of an artifact, but not give their observations on the type of material it is made from. They may have their thoughts on the material, but not mention size or color. Ask the participants for specific observations on the aspects of an artifact that they haven't mentioned yet.

Closure: Once each set of artifacts has been shown and the observations made, ask the participants to give their guesses on what the artifacts are. If the artifacts are guessed correctly, have the participants tell you what they already know about them. Use the information from the Artifact Information Sheets and Cuneiform Information Sheet to give the participants any information they may not have given during the discussion. Play the cuneiform video from YouTube. Here are a few key facts:

Cuneiform Tablets:

- Cuneiform is the earliest writing system.
- The writing is made on clay with a stylus.
- The round tablet was used by a student who was learning to become a scribe.

Counting Tokens:

- The tokens represent specific quantities of specific commodities (grain, wool, or sheep).
- They are considered the precursors of writing and counting.

Reflection: Generate a short discussion with these questions:

- What was the most fun about this activity?
- Why is it important to learn about the skill of observation when studying other cultures?

Assessment: This game will be played multiple times if all of the *An Artifact Speaks* loan boxes are borrowed. Use the game to assess how well the participants' observation and description skills develop over time.

Expansion: Have the participants create a list of 5-10 things that they would consider important modern commodities. Next, have them come up with suggested designs for a set of tokens that would represent these commodities in three different quantities.