

# Curious OBJECTS

*These learning packs introduce some of the 'curious objects' in Cambridge University Library's collections.*

*Library staff have suggested learning activities and discussion topics for use in the Curious Objects exhibition and the classroom.*

## Unexpected Materials – Key Stage 2: Science

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### Contents of this learning pack

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## Introduction

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This session in the Curious Objects exhibition focuses on the unusual materials that can be found in a library.

Children will expect to find books in a library – made from paper. But Cambridge University Library has a collection of more unusual objects made from a wide range of different materials.

After a starter flashcards activity which introduces the animal and plant sources of natural materials, the group will focus on materials and methods for recording text.

## Information for session leaders

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### Materials flashcards

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On arrival to the exhibition, ask the children what they expect to find in a library, and what materials these things will be made from. This should elicit books, made from paper (and cardboard, cloth, leather, cord and glue...)

Of course they are right, but this exhibition is unusual. As well as books, Curious Objects features lots of objects you wouldn't expect to find in a library, like tortoiseshell playing cards, a wooden boomerang and glass spearheads.



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Distribute one materials flashcard to each child in the Curious Objects exhibition.

Ask the children to find their partner – one will have a picture of a plant or animal, and the other the word for a material you can make from it. Some of these are simple (tree and paper) while others will require more support (flax and linen).

Once all the pairs are matched, send them to find an object made from that material. Ask if they can find more than one, or help another pair once they have completed their task.

Which objects surprised them most? Which materials would we expect to be replaced by plastic nowadays?

How do the children feel about seeing materials made from elephants or turtles? But what are the downsides of using plastic today for many objects which would once have been made of natural materials?

## Communication bingo

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Have the children done any writing themselves today?

How did they do it? Pen, pencil and paper? Pen on a mini whiteboard? Texting on a phone? Typing on a computer? Which materials did they use?

Now that we have seen some of the unusual materials in the exhibition, we are going to focus on ways to record writing.

Libraries are a bit like museums for the written word. Staff here look after all sorts of books and other artefacts preserving writing. They have to know all about many different materials so they can look after them properly.

But why did humans invent writing? What's so useful about it?

One of the main reasons is that it helps us pass down information and record knowledge across distances of time and space. Before writing, knowledge had to be communicated through speaking or drawing.

Ask children to imagine that they find themselves in a forest. If they wanted to write a message, what materials could they find to let them do this easily?

- Bark and charcoal (or maybe ink made from plants)
- Clay with incised script
- Wood with incised script
- Bones with incised script

The choice of materials and techniques for writing is affected by the raw materials available, and how much effort it takes to process them. Paper making, for example, is a complicated process.

Distribute the communication bingo activity sheets and ask children to work in pairs to cross off as many examples as they can find.

After around 20 minutes, or when most pairs have nearly completed the task, come together to discuss what they found.

As well as thinking about the materials available and how difficult it would be to create, the choice of material affects how well written communication survives.

Ask who found the stamped clay receipt. What was it for, and how old was it? (Recording the sale of pig fat, around 4200 years old).

Who has been given a receipt in a shop before? What was it made from? Will it still be here in 4000 years?

## Classroom extension

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You could extend this learning in the classroom in various ways.

One idea would be to ask groups of children to research different methods of recording written communication (for example, clay with cuneiform, bamboo books, oracle bones, papyrus, wax tablets, parchment and paper) and then present their findings by attempting to sell their product to a group of 'Dragons'.

### Questions for the Dragons to ask:

- How old is your method?
- Where was it invented?
- What is it made from?
- How expensive or rare is the material?
- Is it an easy or a complicated process to make your writing material?
- Does it require any machines or specialised equipment?
- What do you use to make marks on your material? Is this hard to make?
- What sorts of format can your material be made into? Scrolls, books...?
- Is it durable? In a hot, dry climate? In a cool, damp climate?
- Is it a beautiful or high-status product?
- Is it recycled?
- Is it easily portable?