



~ Mindful Reduction of Waste: Trash Sorting ~

How can we reduce what we send to landfills while helping to restore Earth's soil?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

-  Distinguish common compostable and recyclable goods from landfill waste
-  Understand why composting and recycling are better alternatives to “throwing things away”
-  Be stewards of the environment in their everyday lives

Academic Vocabulary

compost /'kām,pōst/ *noun*. - decaying organic waste product that can be used as a fertilizer for an assortment of biological activity

landfill /'lan(d),fil/ *noun*. - a large pit in the Earth that stores slowly degrading human waste materials

Directions

1. **Prepare to sort through your trash!** Grab a tarp, or ask for permission to use a table in your house, covering it with any material that can be cleaned off easily. Grab a trash bin in your house-- your kitchen trash bin will likely be the best for sorting.

 **Did you know...**

-  Failing to recycle correctly (i.e. putting something in the recycling bin that is not actually recyclable) can contaminate the entire bin, causing all of the contents to end up in the landfill.
-  When you help produce compost, you are promoting the generation and restoration of the soil that helps food grow! Compost is a great additive to soil because it becomes a delicious treat for the soil microbiome-- bacteria and fungi-- which, in turn, helps the soil retain water, reduces erosion, sequesters carbon from the atmosphere, and helps channel nutrients to create healthy plants.
-  Americans [produce nearly twice as much waste](#) than the average consumer of other major countries.
-  The [leading landfill “fillers”](#) in terms of volume (paper products) and weight (food waste) are items that could have been recycled or composted .

2. Watch [this YouTube Video](#) to see a trash sorting demonstration, and then perform the trash sort yourself by following along with this lesson.

Mindset development... To limit our impact on the environment -- and in many cases, to make the environment better -- Americans need to reframe how we think about waste. If we have an item we need to “throw away,” we should think in the following stepwise way:

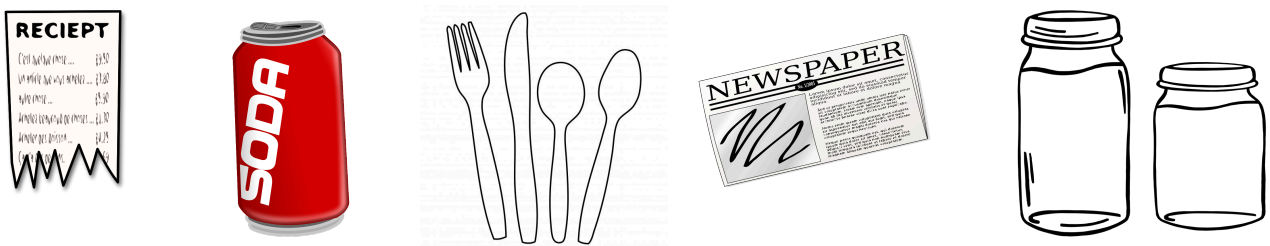
- 1) Can this item be [reused or repurposed](#), or given away? -- a net **positive** for the environment
- 2) Can this item be composted? -- a net **positive** for the environment
- 3) Can this item be recycled? -- a net **positive** for the environment, with [some potential drawbacks](#).
- 4) OR is this item something I should put in the trash? -- generally seen as a net **negative** for the environment, though landfills have [become more sanitary and environmentally friendly](#).

3. After spreading your tarp out or preparing your sorting surface in some other way, **empty the contents of your trash bin onto the surface, and begin sorting** according to these rules:

- a. **Composting pile:** Does the item come directly from a plant or animal? Is the item made of [organic material](#) (i.e. is it carbon-based, which is to say did it come from something living)? Does the item have a compost symbol or say the word “compostable?” Is it a pizza box, paper towel, napkin, tissue, or a paper-based utensil (plate, spoon, fork) that is *not* lined with plastic? If you answered YES to any of these questions, then it is likely your item can be composted! Below are some examples:



- b. **Recycle pile:** Does this item have a recycle symbol on it? Is it made of glass, paper, or aluminum? Is it a bottle, cup, plastic utensil, letter, advertisement, receipt, cardboard box, can, or jar? If you answered YES to any of these questions, then it is likely your item can be recycled! Below are some examples:



- c. **Trash pile:** Does this item NOT fit into the categories above? Are you sure you cannot repurpose this item? Are you sure this item does not have a “compost” or “recycle” symbol on it? Is this item [a plastic bag from the grocery store, a bottle cap, a wire hanger, or styrofoam](#)? If you answered YES to any of these questions, then this item belongs in the trash, and will go to a landfill.

4. **Count the number of items that were put into your compost and recycle categories.** Are you surprised by how many things in your trash bin that can be sorted in a more environmentally-friendly way? Do this same sorting activity next week, and see if you and your family have improved your sorting habits!