



"America Recycles: Small Acts, Big Impact" November 2024 Lesson Plan - High School

Lesson Overview

In this high school lesson, students will dive deeper into the environmental, economic, and societal impacts of recycling. Through critical thinking exercises, analysis of real-world waste management data, and a debate on the efficacy of recycling, students will explore how small individual actions can create large-scale environmental change. The lesson includes research into current recycling technologies, the global impact of waste, and a group project to design a local recycling initiative. This lesson ties into **America Recycles Day, held annually on November 15**, which is a national effort to raise awareness about the importance of recycling and encourage sustainable practices. Students will gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and benefits of recycling and be encouraged to think critically about its role in sustainability efforts. They will also have the opportunity to participate in the [Planet Aid America Recycles Clothing Drive](#) from November 15th to December 2nd!

Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will:

1. Analyze the environmental, economic, and societal impacts of recycling in the U.S. and globally.
2. Critically evaluate the current state of recycling systems, including limitations and opportunities for improvement.
3. Develop solutions to increase recycling participation and improve systems in local communities.
4. Debate the effectiveness of recycling as part of a broader sustainability effort.

Time:

1 hour + optional extension activities

Materials Needed:

- Waste and recycling data reports (local, national, and global)
- Printable debate handouts and fact sheets
- Reading materials (suggested below)
- Video or documentary (suggestion provided below)
- Computers/tablets for research
- Posters, markers for campaign design



Introduction (10 minutes)

1. **Discussion Starter:** Ask the class, "What happens to your trash after you throw it away? What happens to recyclables?"
 - Share this stat: In the U.S., only about **32% of waste is recycled**, despite the availability of recycling programs in most communities.
 - Ask: "Is that enough? Why or why not?"
2. **What is Recycling?:** Define recycling as the process of converting waste into reusable materials. Discuss the importance of recycling in terms of resource conservation, energy savings, and reducing pollution.
3. **Global Impact:** Highlight that waste is a global problem. For example, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch has grown to more than **1.6 million square kilometers** (about twice the size of Texas), consisting mostly of plastic waste.
4. **Tie to America Recycles Day:** Introduce **America Recycles Day** (November 15), a national event that encourages individuals to learn more about recycling and commit to improving their recycling habits. Explain that this lesson focuses on how small recycling efforts can lead to a big impact on both local and global scales.

Video (10 minutes):

Show a segment from a documentary like "**The Story of Stuff**" or "**Plastic Wars**" (PBS Frontline) that explores the global waste crisis, the realities of recycling systems, and how corporations are involved. This video should challenge students to think critically about the broader context of recycling and waste management.

Data Analysis and Group Discussion (15 minutes):

1. **Objective:** Use real-world data to understand recycling's effectiveness and its impact.
2. **Data Analysis:** Provide students with charts and graphs that illustrate recycling rates, landfill usage, and the environmental and economic costs of waste mismanagement in the U.S. and globally.
 - Examples: Recycling rates for different materials (e.g., aluminum, paper, plastic), energy savings from recycling, landfill growth trends, and recycling participation rates.
 - You can find some charts and graphics about recycling on the Planet Aid website. Here's a good one:
<https://www.planetaid.org/blog/recycling-across-the-globe>



- You can also find several charts and graphs addressing different aspects of recycling and waste on the EPA (United States Environmental Protection Agency) website here:
<https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling>

3. Discussion Questions:

- What materials are recycled the most? Why?
 - How does recycling conserve resources and reduce pollution?
 - Are there materials that should be recycled more? What's holding us back?
 - How does the U.S. compare to other countries in recycling?
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Class Debate: "Is Recycling Effective?" (15 minutes):

1. **Objective:** Engage students in critical thinking about the challenges and benefits of recycling.
 2. **Debate Setup:** Split the class into two groups—one group will argue that recycling is an essential part of combating climate change and waste management, while the other will argue that recycling systems are inefficient and that there are better solutions.
 3. **Preparation:** Give students 5 minutes to research and prepare their arguments using fact sheets, data, and points from the video.
 4. **Debate:** Each group presents their case, followed by a rebuttal round and a concluding summary. Encourage students to think about alternatives to recycling, such as reducing consumption or reusing materials.
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Group Activity: Designing a Local Recycling Initiative (15 minutes):

1. **Objective:** Create actionable solutions to improve local recycling efforts.
2. **Project Guidelines:** In small groups, students will design a community recycling initiative. This could be a campaign to improve recycling participation at school, a local composting program, or an effort to reduce plastic use. The [Planet Aid America Recycles Clothing Drive](#) is a great one to join and includes marketing materials!
 - Groups should consider: How will they increase participation? What educational materials will they use? How will they measure success?
3. **Presentation:** Each group will briefly present their initiative to the class, explaining why their approach is effective and how it aligns with the theme "Small Acts, Big Impact."

Closing Reflection (5 minutes):

1. **Class Discussion:** Reflect on the key takeaways from the lesson. Ask students:
 - How has your perspective on recycling changed?
 - What do you think is the biggest challenge to effective recycling in your community or globally?
 - What small act will you commit to in order to make a big impact on waste reduction?
 2. **Call to Action:** Encourage students to think critically about their own waste habits and to consider participating in a local or school-wide recycling drive for [America Recycles Day](#) on November 15.
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Extension Activities:

1. **Research Project:** Assign students to research the effectiveness of recycling policies in other countries (e.g., Sweden, Japan, or Germany) and present how the U.S. could improve based on those models.
 2. **Guest Speaker:** Invite a local government representative or environmental organization to discuss recycling policies and challenges in your area.
 3. **Social Media Campaign:** Have students create and share social media posts that promote proper recycling habits and raise awareness of local recycling programs.
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Suggested Books and Articles:

- **"Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash"** by Susan Strasser – An in-depth look at the history of waste and recycling in America.
- **"Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash"** by Edward Humes – Explores America's waste problem and the people working to solve it.
- **"Plastic Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and How You Can Too"** by Beth Terry – A practical guide on reducing plastic use and waste.