



Garbage Council

In this role-playing activity, students will imagine themselves as different items of solid waste. After a short, guided visualization, they will speak on behalf of their waste item at the Garbage Council. Students will discuss the best ways to dispose of and reduce waste.

Purpose:

Canadians produce more garbage per person than just about any other country in the world. The average person in Ontario generates a whole ton of trash per year! ¹ The majority of this waste can be diverted from landfills by reducing, reusing, recycling, and composting. The key lies in education – learning about different types of waste, how it can be properly disposed etc. This interactive activity is a fun way for students to learn about their waste and to inspire them to take action.

Materials:

- Waste items for each category
- Materials to make badges or masks
- Garbage Council ambassador speeches (see below)
- Information on different waste items

Time required:

- One to two periods depending on students' prior knowledge
- One extra art period prior to the council session, if the students are making badges or masks

Before you start:

- Teachers can participate as a waste category not chosen by the students.
- Build anticipation the week before the Garbage Council. Show the students examples of each type of garbage and provide interesting facts about it.
- Have the students create badges or masks that will identify them as the type of garbage they are representing. Use signs (see below) to make groups.

Step-by-step instructions:

Part 1 – Identifying the problems

A. Post signs around the room indicating the different groups of garbage. The signs can include: Compost, Paper and Cardboard, Plastics, Glass and Metal, and Garbage.

B. Have students gather their masks or badges and divide into groups, according to their waste category. Shuffle the groups so the students are evenly distributed.

C. Have students brainstorm in their groups about the variety of problems that their type of waste can cause and potential solutions. Issues may include: Ability to be recycled, rate of decomposition, possibility for reuse, etc.

D. Provide students with ambassador speeches and additional resources, or book a research session in the computer lab for students to find more information.



Part 2 – Guided visualization

- A. Have students lie down on the spot to prepare for the guided visualization. Dim the lights.
- B. Ask the students to put on their masks or badges. The visualization should be done in a soft, relaxing voice. Use a slow pace to allow time for students to imagine what it is you are saying.

Script

As you listen to the sound of your breathing, begin to think about the type of waste you have chosen. Think about your own life at school, at home and outside -- what things did you use today and then throw away? How did you dispose of the items? Were there any food scraps that could have been composted? Were there items with recycling codes on them? Did you put them in the blue box? Were there items without codes or that you were unsure of where to dispose of them properly? Were there items you could use again?

Imagine that you are now one of these items. You are now the only voice that the item has. How do you think it would feel to be this item? How would you like to live in a landfill site? How do you think it would smell there? What kinds of sounds would you hear? What would the view look like?

What do you know about the item you now speak for? Say its name quietly to yourself. As you lie here, imagine you are becoming this item. Imagine your body changing shape to look like this item. How big or small are you? How does the surface of your new body feel? Is it smooth like an aluminum can or crinkly like a paper bag? Are you flexible like plastic wrap or hard like glass? Perhaps you are wet and slimy like the insides of the pumpkin you carved at Halloween.

What does the world look like through the eyes of this item? Try to imagine your life cycle. How do you think you were made? How far did you travel to get to the person who used you? How were you used? Could you be used more than once or are you disposable? Would you want to be used and discarded if you could be recycled and used again? How would you feel if you went through the entire process of being made and transported, only to be wasted and tossed carelessly aside by the person who used you? Would you feel frustrated, sad, angry?

Now slowly sit up and open your eyes. As you do, remember that you are now looking through the eyes of this item. Look around you at the other items who are in the room with you. These are your neighbours, the other garbage in the landfill site. You have gathered here today to meet with one another.

Part 3 – Garbage council

- A. Ask the students (still with their masks on) to form a large circle.
- B. Begin by welcoming the “waste” to the council. Remember that all of you are in role and are speaking as one of the types of waste at the council. Start by saying the following: We have gathered here today because many of us are not being



- disposed of properly. We are ending up in landfills that are overflowing with garbage, garbage that could have been reduced, reused, recycled or composted. We have come to share our concerns about the ways we are thrown out and to offer our wisdom to find solutions. Many of us are great resources that had to struggle to find our way out of garbage bags to get here. Thank you for making the effort to attend this council, my fellow waste, and welcome to all of you.
- C. Introduce a talking stick. Explain that only the person holding the talking stick may speak while everyone else gives that person their full attention.
 - D. Have students introduce themselves with their speeches.
 - E. After everyone has introduced her/himself, invite the “waste” to speak as they wish. They can share their thoughts on how it feels to be their type of waste in Ontario currently, and what their worries are.
 - F. When you feel the council is ready to end, ask if any “waste” would like to share their ideas about ways they can be reduced, reused, recycled, or composted to help humans change their ways.
 - G. Before moving out of this activity, it is important that you help the “waste” to make the transition back to human form. This can be done by having them lie down again (where they are) and doing a very short visualization, such as the following:

Now, become aware that it is time to say good-bye to the landfill for now. It is time for you to become a human again. But we must not forget what was said here today. Even though we are going to become humans again, we must not forget that we are the ones who are responsible for all of the waste we create. Remember this in you daily life. As you remove your mask, be aware that you are now the ambassador for all waste.

- H. Debrief. Ask students to share their feelings and their thoughts about what it was like to be waste. Have them consider questions like the following:
 - How did they feel when they were representing the waste?
 - Was there anything that surprised them?
 - Did they learn anything new about environmental issues?
 - How might our world be different if waste was disposed of properly?
 - How might students take action to help solve the problems identified?

Moving Forward:

- As a class, create a list of ideas for how you can help reduce the amount of garbage being created at home and at school.
- Perform a waste audit.
- Take action and start a recycling or composting program at your school.
- Research other exciting ways your class can reduce their waste (e.g. yard sale, Litterless Lunch campaign, clothing swap, etc.).

Extensions and adaptations:

For mature students, you may want to have some students play the human role. As the council is in progress, invite one or more students to put down their masks or badges and come into the circle, playing the human role when they feel called to do so. In this way, everyone can take a turn to listen as a human.



Garbage Council Ambassador Speeches:

Drink Boxes: I am an ambassador for drink boxes. We are one-time use items. Our lifespan is short but our numbers are great! Five billion drink boxes are thrown away in North America each year. It takes a lot of energy to recycle us, so much so that some municipalities won't even bother. There is a danger of us becoming obsolete, being replaced by Earth Rangers who think that reusable water bottles are a better choice than one-time use items like us. But that's okay because at the landfill site where most of us end up -- we rule the garbage heap!

Aluminum Cans: I am an ambassador for aluminum cans. We, too, are one-time use items; however, we CAN be recycled very easily. In fact, it takes 95 per cent less energy to produce new aluminum from recycled cans than from raw materials! We are very proud of our superior ability to be recycled and we look forward to being made new again. It insults us when careless humans toss us into the garbage rather than the blue box. We are then forced to co-exist with that rowdy "non-recyclable" crowd for up to 300 years in a landfill site! That's how long it takes to break down an aluminum can by natural processes. What a wasteful use of earth's resources!

Paper & Boxboard: I am an ambassador for paper and boxboard. We help students read and we can hold tissues, cereal and provide the surface upon which toilet paper is rolled. We can be used many times over. We come from trees the first time but after that we can be made into new paper again and again... as long as we are discarded in a blue box each time. About 1/3 of all household waste is paper and if sent to a landfill site with the rest of the garbage, it can take months to break down naturally. And then more trees have to be cut down to make up for the loss. Things are looking up for us though. Humans are learning to recycle more and more paper and the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association says that 71 per cent of the fibre used in making paper now comes from recycled fibres that used to go into landfills.

Cardboard: I am an ambassador for cardboard. Because we are most commonly used for boxes, we are often mistaken for boxboard. However we look much different with our corrugated wavy central core. We, too, are a paper product and can easily be recycled if only humans would package us properly on recycling day. We are heavy, bulky items that need to be flattened and bundled to be transported easily to the recycling depot. Without this preparation, we are destined to end up in a landfill site and more trees have to be taken to sustain the industry.

Coded plastics: I am an ambassador for coded plastics. Plastics have a bad reputation because we never break down naturally and worse than that, we release toxic chemicals into the environment the whole time. We are found all over the world, filling up landfill sites, floating on remote ocean currents and even vacationing on the polar ice caps far from civilization! Despite our bad rep, we're not really that bad. Unlike our "un-coded" cousins, we "coded" plastics can be recycled and made new again if only humans would look for the little triangular recycling symbols when they are finished with us and put us in the blue box. Better yet, if they looked for the codes before they made their purchase,



they could avoid buying those rebellious “un-coded” plastics that can’t be recycled at all. If we don’t get to the blue box, there’s no hope for a productive future for us.

Un-coded plastics: I am an ambassador for “un-coded plastics”. We have been manufactured to provide humans with the quick and carefree lifestyle they have chosen to lead. Once we have served our purpose, we are freed from human servitude and are either sent to a landfill site or are free to roam the far corners of the earth. We live forever. We pollute the soil, the oceans and the air. We are proud that we cannot be recycled. We don’t care about the environment. As long as humans don’t care either or bother to check for those plastic codes when they are making their purchases, we will continue to reign as the longest lived type of waste on the planet!

Glass: I am an ambassador for glass. We are made from melted sand. We are great containers for things like strawberry jam, ketchup and beverages. A glass bottle that is not recycled and instead sent to a landfill would take about one million years to break down, but humans have learned quite early on that glass is very easily recycled and they have been participating in glass recycling programs for decades now...long before other recycling programs ever existed! More humans are getting better at separating different coloured glass when they recycle, making it even easier for manufacturers to use! Keep up the great work, humans!

Compostables: I am an ambassador for compostables. We are all natural and the most biodegradable items in household waste. We are the apple cores, the broccoli stems, and the corn cobs that humans don’t eat. We are the grass clippings, fallen leaves and used Christmas trees. We make up 1/3 of all household waste. If disposed of properly in a compost bin or green bin program, we can become nutrient rich soil again and be used to grow new fruits, veggies and flowers. If sent to the landfill site with those un-natural items, it slows down the time it takes for us to break down, and we don’t get to be re-used. Humans need to become aware of how important it is for us to get back to the soil and start nourishing new plants and animals.

1 Government of Canada, “Greening Government.” Online:
www.greeninggovernment.gc.ca.