

Life of an Item Toolkit

Challenge Objective:

Investigate the life cycle of a product, explore how it contributes to litter, and share ways to reduce its impact.

Challenge Overview:

Through this toolkit, you'll become a product detective. You can do this on your own, with friends, as a club, or with your class. You can...

- Pick an everyday item to investigate
- Research how it's made, how it's used, and where it goes when thrown away
- Explore best-case vs. worst-case outcomes for the product
- Share your findings in a creative way with your community



Short on Time? Choose Your Path:



Researcher:

Focus on the Research and Expert Interview portions.



Storyteller:

Skip to Research and Document your Findings.



Explorer:

Check out the Explore and Document steps.



Advocate:

Make change through the Document and Action steps.

RESEARCH

Goal:

Discover the story of your chosen item.

Activity:

Pick an item to research (examples: soda can, chip bag, sneaker, notebook, straw).

Break it down into discovery stages:

- **Raw materials:** What's it made of? Where do they come from?
- **Manufacturing:** How is it produced? Energy, resources used?
- **Use:** How long do people typically use it?
- **Disposal:** What usually happens (trash, recycle, compost)?
- **End life:** Best-case vs. worst-case outcomes.

Use sources like:

- Product/company websites
- Articles or short videos on product life cycles
- Recycling/composting guides

Reflection Questions:

- How resource-heavy is this item to make?
- How long is it useful before it's thrown away?
- What happens if it's not disposed of properly?

EXPLORE

Goal:

See how your item moves through the world and observe it's impact.

Activity:

Choose one or more of the following options for hands-on exploration.

- **Community observation:** Visit a park, school, or local street and look for discarded examples of your item. Note how it's littered, where it ends up, and who might be using it.
- **Track your own usage:** Over a few days, collect data on how you and your household use and dispose of the item. Record how long it lasts and where it goes afterward.
- **Check disposal points:** Find recycling bins, trash bins, or donation/reuse stations near you. Note if your item can actually be recycled or reused there.



LEARN FROM AN EXPERT

Goal:

Connect your research and insights with expert or industry perspective.

Choose One:

- Interview a recycling coordinator, local waste hauler, or the manufacturer of your item.
- Email your questions or ideas to one or more experts.

Sample Questions:

- What's the most common mistake people make when disposing of this item?
- What's the best way to extend its life or dispose of it responsibly?
- What solutions are industries exploring for this product?
- Are there innovative recycling, reuse, or refill programs for this item?



DOCUMENT YOUR FINDINGS

Goal:

Turn your research into a story.

You can include:

- A lifecycle map of your item
- Notes or facts about each stage
- Images, drawings, or charts
- Your comparison of best vs. worst case

This can be compiled into:

- An illustrated storyboard or comic
- A short video or animation
- A foldable zine or mini-book



TAKE ACTION

Goal:

Share your findings with others in a creative way.

What's one way you can bring this to your community? Choose one of the following actions (or create your own!):

- Give printed copies of your comic to peers or younger students to spark discussion
- Post your video to a school club or local social media accounts
- Screen your project at an assembly, club meeting, or community event
- Hand out mini-zines in your school library, club meetings, or at a local environmental event.
- Leave copies of your project in community spaces
- Use your product to teach a short lesson or workshop on the item's lifecycle and responsible disposal



REFLECTION

Ask yourself:

- What surprised you most about your item's life cycle?
- How does knowing this story change how you'll use or dispose of it?
- How can sharing this knowledge inspire others to make better choices?

When you see how a simple product can pollute the environment, you can change your habits and make choices that protect the planet.

