Archaeology Vocabulary

**Archaeology**- The scientific study of past people and cultures. Archaeologists work with objects (*artifacts*) made and used by people in the past. In the U.S., a resource must be at least 50 years old to be considered “archaeological.” Human remains are considered “archaeological” if they have been buried for 75 years. Archaeology isn’t something only done in Egypt! Hundreds of thousands of fascinating archaeology stories are found in the U.S.- some from as far back as the end of the last Ice Age (15-20,000 years ago).

**Archaeology site**- An area in which past people lived, worked, were buried, etc. Archaeology sites can be as small as a camp site or as large as a city. There is likely an archaeology site in your town- maybe even in your backyard!

**Excavation**- Controlled, scientific digging, often by the measured removal of a few centimeters at a time. Artifacts and features are recorded as they are uncovered. Archaeologists gain a better insight into what was going on at a location and for how long by working slowly. In theory, the further down you excavate, the older something in the ground is. Careful and slow excavations also protect fragile finds.

**Excavation unit**- A square pit excavated by archaeologists. Perfectly square units are just the key for making maps and taking accurate measurements. Units are laid out in a grid pattern (like a checkerboard) and are assigned grid coordinates (becoming a unit’s name/location tag) so that the unit can be found again on a map. The excavation results, maps, and photos from all of the units on the grid will align to show a picture of how past people used a site. Several units in a line are often called a “trench.” A “block” is a cluster of attached excavation units.

**Artifacts**- Anything that has been made or modified by human beings. For example, an animal bone is not an artifact. However, if the bone is from someone’s dinner or was shaped into a tool, then it is considered an artifact.

**Features**- Similar to an artifact, but not something you can pick up. They often appear as stains in the dirt. Features are the result of human activity and are very important clues for archaeologists. Features include garbage pits, roads, holes dug for posts, pits, foundations of houses, and more.

**Context**- One of the most important words in archaeology, context is the whole story of an archaeological resource- where it is, what other things are around it, above it, and below it. These clues help researchers refine a story. This is why it is important to leave artifacts in place. If you remove one or a handful, you could change the whole understanding of what happened or who lived at an archaeology site in the past.
Here are some tools regularly used by archaeologists regularly use to do their work.

**Trowel**
Small, handheld tool also used by bricklayers. Trowels are used for careful, precise work. Paint brushes are only used for hard surfaces (rock, shell, brick, etc.). Brushing dirt might smear away the edges of a feature. Trowels are preferred.

**Flat Headed Shovel**
Square shovels more precisely scrape back layers of dirt. They make neat, flat, regular rows, rather than scooped gouges. This archaeologist is excavating in the last unit of a long trench.

**Scale**
The black and white stick on the bottom left helps viewers understand how big this feature is. This scale is 1 meter long. The remains of this burned house in this block are just over 10 meters wide.

**Screen**
A wooden frame with wire mesh that is used like a giant sifter. Screens help separate artifacts from excavated dirt.

**Folding Rule**
A sturdy wooden ruler that folds up for easy storage. The archaeologist here uses two folding rulers in this trench to help create a map of the cross section of a deep feature.