

Trash audit activity

Ages teen+

Duration:

One week (not continuously!)

Materials needed:

Paper

Pen or pencil

Overview:

Every single year, 8–12 million tons of trash enters our ocean. That’s roughly the equivalent of a garbage-truck’s-worth of trash per minute. In the United States, each person produces approximately 4.40 pounds of garbage **every single day**—and most of it could be recycled or composted.

To reduce waste and the enormous amount of garbage being produced, you’re going to be taking a deep dive into your garbage—not literally, but close!—to figure out what’s in your trash. Because, let’s face it, when you “throw away” something, it never really goes away.

Reducing your waste can be difficult and it’s a family effort, not just based on a single individual. Try to involve all the members of your household during your week-long trash audit.



ACTIVITY

Every day for one week, you're going to spend time figuring out what's in your garbage and what type of trash you're producing in each of the rooms in your home that has a trash can in it.

Grab a piece of paper and a pen or pencil to make a list of the items in each trash can using a chart like the one shown below. If you'd like more of a challenge, you can incorporate an additional column for labeling if the item is:

- Compostable (example: paper, cotton product, natural fiber, food);
- Garbage (example: thin plastics, Styrofoam, broken glass, kitchen grease); or
- Recyclable (this changes based on what county you live in—be sure to check your local waste management site).

For each trash can, count how much of each material is being thrown away each day. Move the material that you've counted to a different bag (paper works great!) and keep it in a different place to ensure that you're not double-counting. If you have access to a scale, you can also weigh the items in each category.

Some questions to ask yourself as you go through each room:

- Am I or the people in my household throwing away multiples of the same item (for example, paper plates and plastic cups)? If so, can we switch to an item that's more sustainable?
- Are there items in the garbage that could go into the compost or recycling (for example, used napkins, food scraps and tin cans)?
- Are there items in the recycling that should be in the garbage (for example, broken glass)?
- Is the recycling clean and dry?
- How can I and the people in my household find better ways of using products in the trash? Can we purchase them in bulk to reduce packaging? Can we make them on our own?

At the end of the week, total up the "amount" columns for each of your categories and consider where you can make sustainable changes, then share your results and thoughts with the people in your household. If you feel inspired, share your data on social media with things that you found interesting or surprising—and encourage others to do a trash audit and to switch to more sustainable alternatives!

Example chart:

Date and item	Amount

Example more advanced chart:

Date and item	Amount	Material type	Weight

Additional resources:

- [Eco Collective zero waste store](#)
- [Waste Management Guides](#)
- [Trash is for Tossers](#)
- [Scoop Marketplace zero grocery waste store](#)
- [Beyond Plastic](#)
- [Zero Waste Home](#)
- [Zero Waste Washington](#)
- [Puget Sound Keeper Alliance](#)