

Frequently Asked Questions

General Information on Starting a Career in Archaeology

FAQs

School

Question: What classes should I take in high school to become an archaeologist?

Answer: It is best to have a well-rounded course schedule for college preparation that includes English, math, science, and arts. Archaeology is a very comprehensive discipline which incorporates ideas and information from many other disciplines of study. Find something that interests you, such as architecture, arts, music, mathematics, social studies, political science, or even economics. There are ways to make your interests applicable to archaeological study. A liberal arts education is very useful for a career in archaeology. But there are also some very technical aspects to archaeology, it is important to have a basic knowledge of chemistry, geology, and geography.

Question: What kind of education do I need to become an active archaeologist?

Answer: At the very minimum you need a 4-year college degree, usually in Anthropology. Most supervisory or analytical jobs in archaeology require a Masters degree (M.A., M.S.), which usually takes another 1-3 years. Finally, to become a professor and to manage really large, interesting projects requires a Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), which runs another 4+ years beyond the other two degrees. Archaeologists are often in their early thirties before they are finished with school.

Question: Can you recommend a good school for archaeology?

Answer: Most large universities, and many smaller ones, offer undergraduate programs in anthropology with an emphasis in archaeology. Determining the best schools to attend is closely related to what your specific interests are. Many schools focus on different parts of the world: some schools are good for learning about ancient civilizations in central Mexico, while others may be better for learning about Egypt, China, or the Southwest U.S.

The Society for American Archaeology provides some useful information in the [Careers, Opportunities, & Jobs in Archaeology](#) section of their valuable web site, including a discussion about archaeological graduate school ranking.

There are a number of useful web sites that provide detailed contact lists for universities with archaeology graduate programs:

archaeology.about.com

gradschools.com

graduateguide.com

For a more detailed reference, the American Anthropological Association has for sale [The 2001-2002 AAA Guide](#) which lists information for all colleges and universities in the United States that offers B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Anthropology.

Question: How do I get into graduate school for archaeology?

Answer: There is an interesting Web based series provided by About.com which has a page devoted to advanced archaeological training, called [Getting Into Graduate School, the series](#). This site provides general answers about what to expect in the application process and why it is important to get advanced education for archaeology.

[The 2001-2002 AAA Guide](#) is recommended to gain information about department graduate programs and contact information.

Field Experience

Question: How can I get archaeological field experience?

Answer: Many college students begin with a formal field school offered for university credit. Other field work may be available through local clubs and organizations, such as the local historical society or science and history museum. There are other volunteer organizations, such as the [Passport In Time](#) Program offered by the US Forestry Service.

ArchNet does not maintain a list of fieldwork opportunities, but we do link to a number of other sites that provide current lists of projects seeking crew members.

[Archaeological Fieldwork Opportunities](#)

archaeologyfieldwork.com

Employment

Questions: What is the probability of finding a career in this field or what is the current job market?

Answer: There are fewer jobs than specialists, particularly for academic positions. Therefore, in addition to going to higher education at a college or university, it is also important to get practical experience excavating and surveying. Start volunteering on archaeological field projects for the experience during college, and continue to do field work at every opportunity. Also, while in college try to do an internship with a local cultural resource management firm

conducting salvage archaeology or a museum. Every bit of experience and relevant work leads to recommendations, this all adds up to a better chance at finding future work.

For an idea of what kinds of work are available at the advanced stages (post-Ph.D.) look at the [Careers, Opportunities, & Jobs in Archaeology](#) section of the Society for American Archaeology Web page.

Question: Who would employ me (what companies)?

Answer: Depending upon your education and experience there are numerous opportunities to work in archaeology. There are two general avenues for archaeologists. The first is in the in the domain of Cultural Resource Management (CRM) projects. Typically, private CRM firms fulfill contracts for salvage archaeology. This is an important component of archaeology, as highway and urban development expand, more cultural resources are lost to construction. CRM firms are contracted to assess the damage to cultural materials, and will on occasion excavate and save as much of the cultural resources as is possible prior to destruction of the archaeological site. Government organizations also hire archaeologists to work at military bases, parks and forests so as to maintain publicly owned cultural resources. Museums, universities, and colleges will hire archaeologists for teaching positions and encourage independent research from those positions. However, these may require a Ph.D. and are highly competitive.

Question: What parts of the country or world would I live in?

Answer: There are private archaeology firms or government preservation offices in every state in the United States. The possibility for employment depends upon the working budget of those organizations and varies from state to state. Some projects last only a few weeks, while others may extend for months or years.

Salary

Question: What is an typical paycheck for an archaeologist?

Answer: The simple truth is that archaeologists don't usually make large salaries compared to some other careers, such as engineering. However, they are comparable to other social sciences and humanities. A beginning archaeologist with a four-year college degree can usually bring in \$20-25,000 annually, depending on what part of the country you live in. This is usually working on government lands or for private companies in Cultural Resource Management or salvage archaeology. Professors at a university, and project leaders (with Ph.D.) typically have starting salaries that range from \$35-50,000. However, these jobs are extremely competitive.

Job Satisfaction

Question: What are the positive aspects of being an archaeologist?

Answer: The answer to this question can be as varied as there are individuals answering the question, but generally it is agreed that archaeology is a very physically and mentally demanding career. The challenge of such work attracts people who like the outdoors, traveling and problem solving. It can be highly satisfying to teach the public about local history and science through various public outreach opportunities. And it cannot be denied that the archaeological finds are fascinating and provide a deep sense of connection with people of the past.

Question: What are the negative aspects of being an archaeologist?

Answer: Salaries for social sciences are lower than other sciences. As a student, working part-time, it is difficult to raise a family or buy a home on an archaeology salary. Full-time work pays more, but often requires more travel. The short-term duration of many archaeological projects can be a problem when seeking more stable employment. However, more permanent employment is available with an advanced degree, but there are more specialists than permanent positions available. Yet, even with these challenges, many people find archaeology a satisfying career.

Further Information

For more information see the following links:

[Frequently Asked Questions about a career in archaeology in the U.S.](#) by David L. Carlson

[Learning more about archaeology](#) an online guide to frequently asked questions about starting a career in archaeology in Britain, by Current Archaeology magazine.

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