



Recycle Right Supplement: Recycling FAQs

The Recycle Right lesson covers some of the common mysteries and questions related to recycling. In an effort to keep the content from being overwhelming, not all recycling rules or rationale are included in the video lesson. Please refer to these FAQs to help answer any follow-up questions from your students.

1. **Why should we leave plastic caps on bottles and jugs?**

Putting the lid back onto clean recyclables makes sure the lid will actually get recycled. If it is loose in the recycling, it is too small and falls through the grates of the machines and ends up as trash.

2. **Why should recyclables be clean before putting them in the recycling bin?**

Recyclables with leftover food or liquid can be a problem at recycling facilities for a couple of reasons. The first is they can spill onto other recyclables and make them too dirty or wet to be recycled. They can also be a health risk (and also pretty gross!) for the workers at the facilities who sort materials. To make sure materials will actually get recycled, dump out remaining liquids and scrape out any food scraps.

3. **Why can't black plastic be recycled?**

Two reasons. The first is that black plastic is a low-value material due to the pigment in the plastic. Color-wise, the easiest plastic to recycle is clear plastic. The second reason is that the sorting optics at a recycling facilities can't detect black plastic as it does not reflect light. It is best to avoid black plastic, but if you do end up with it, it should go in the trash. More info: <https://eureka recycling.org/ditching-black-plastic/>

4. **What does the recycling symbol mean?**

The recycling symbol, which consists of three arrows that make a triangle is used to *suggest* that an item is recyclable. It is important to note that this sign is not regulated and that there are materials that, in theory, are recyclable somewhere, but may not be in most communities. When determining if something is recyclable, the recycling symbol is usually accurate, though for plastics, the number in the symbol is important (see next question).

5. **What do the numbers inside the recycling symbol mean?**

The numbers in the recycling symbol tell us what kind of plastic polymer the item is made from. There are seven types of plastic we commonly see, with the most common being #1, #2, and #5. The good news is that those are the three types of plastics we can recycle in our state. As a general rule, any plastic that is in the form of a bottle or jug is recyclable.

6. **Why is it important to keep plastic bags and other plastic film out of recycling?**

Plastic film is stretchy or flexible plastic film including plastic bags from stores, garbage bags, ziplock-type bags, plastic air pillows used for packaging, plastic mailers (like those you receive from online orders), bubble wrap, and plastic packaging (like a bread bag, the plastic wrap on a case of water bottles or the plastic packaging around toilet paper or paper towels). Plastic film should never go into your curbside recycling because it gets caught in the sorting equipment. This can be dangerous for the workers, can damage machines, and leads to excessive repair and downtime. The facility that recycles all of St. Paul and Minneapolis recyclables, Eureka has to have staff spend approximately 2 hours *every day* removing plastic film from their equipment. There are some places (like in grocery stores or retail stores) that might have a dedicated collection bin for plastic film. This is the only way to potentially recycle plastic film. So in short, it should never go in a regular recycling bin, but can go in specific collection bins. The best option is to avoid using it in the first place, if possible.

7. What materials are recycled vs. down-cycled?

Some materials, including glass and metals like aluminum and steel, can be recycled indefinitely. This means that the recycling process doesn't degrade the material, so one aluminum can can be recycled into another aluminum can indefinitely.

Other recyclables, like plastic and paper products (cardboard, paperboard, and paper) are down-cycled, meaning that the material degrades each time an item is recycled. So for example, if we recycle a plastic bottle, that recycled plastic alone cannot make a new bottle. Because the plastic degrades during the recycling process, new virgin (or brand new) plastic must be added. Plastics can only be recycled a couple of times. Sometimes, recycled plastic is used to make plastic bottles or containers, as well as synthetic textiles. Polyester, acrylic, spandex -- these are all made of plastics (recycled or not) and it is likely that most of us are wearing these synthetic textiles regularly (check your clothing tags if you are curious!). Furthermore, many types of plastic are not recycled due to the inefficiencies of recycling them or lack of markets. The degradation of plastics is related to the environmental and human health challenge of microplastics.

8. Why are some items recyclable in some communities and not in others?

The items accepted for recycling can vary depending on where you live. This is because recycling only works if there is a market (or demand) for the recycled commodity. So we can recycle all we want (supply) but if there isn't a market (demand) for that recyclable material, the equation doesn't work and the unwanted plastics end up as trash. The good news is that recycling works in our state, and we have some of the best recycling participation rates in the country!

9. Does recycling actually work in Minnesota?

Recycling exists, and recycling works in Minnesota! This is because we have strong recycling markets in the upper midwest; there are companies in our region that want to buy recycled materials to manufacture the material into something new. We also have strong environmental policy in our state that ensures that residents and businesses have access to recycling. A fun resource to explore is the Recycling Exists website, which follows the journey of recyclables collected right here where we live to see how and where they are recycled and what they are recycled into! <https://recyclingexists.com/>

10. What happens when trash or food scraps end up in the recycling bin?

Anything that goes into the recycling bin that should not have is referred to as 'contamination'. Common examples of contamination are food scraps, dirty food containers, liquids, plastic bags and wrappers, and paper towels and napkins. If there is enough contamination in a load of recyclables, it is possible that the entire load of recycling is rejected and is processed as trash. Contamination is a big challenge for recyclers and we can all do our part by making sure only recyclables go into recycling bins.



Find more resources at
RecyclingandEnergy.org/education/k-12-lessons

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