

Archaeology of East Oxford

Recording Guide

Accurate and thorough recording is crucial in archaeology because the process of excavation is destructive. We cannot recover missed information once a test pit has been finished.

Archaeologists have specific ways of recording often referred to as recording 'conventions'. If all archaeological recording uses these conventions, reports can be understood by everyone trained in using and reading them. This saves prevents the confusion that might occur if we all recorded information differently. We want to share our findings with as many people as we can!

The process of completing a recording sheet for everything you excavate is a crucial part of the job. The descriptions and drawings help build-up ideas about the history of the landscape, and help us to analyse all of the data in detail once all the excavation, surveying and research has been completed. Recording also helps us create a permanent record of what we see and find. Remember, we cannot re-excavate so we try and create as detailed a picture as we can, one which could be reinterpreted in the future!

Please use black ink and write nice and clearly: the information gets photocopied and needs to be clear

Please remember to use millimetres and metres only for any measurements

Always start you context numbers at 100 (rather than 1). Numbers then increase as you excavate. So your turf, if you have it, would be 100 and your first excavated context or spit 101.

Always double check you are recording the right spit, context and test pit numbers on bags, labels and recording sheets

If you are ever in doubt- just ask!



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Describing your spit or context

Note: The numbers used for each section in this guidance correspond to the numbers used on the recording cards.

1. Compaction

Loose: easily excavated with a trowel does not stick together

Friable: some resistance to trowel, but sticky but crumbles in fingers

Firm: needs effort to excavate. Is either very dry or very fine grained and so sticks together

Compact: needs a mattock!

- Is the soil at all varied in its compaction?
- Was it wet, damp or dry when dug.

2. Colour

(There are three parts to the description)

1. Is it a light, mid or dark colour
2. Give its main colour (e.g. brown)
3. Then modify that if necessary e.g. dark, *yellowish* brown.

You may need to do more than one description if the soil is varied. Use the words below to describe the colour:

MAIN COLOUR	MODIFIER
pink	pinkish
red	reddish
yellow	yellowish
brown	brownish
green	greenish
blue	blueish
white	
grey	greyish
black	

3. Composition and texture

Texture: is it generally smooth, silky, sticky, sandy or gritty. Describe any variation.

Composition: You are describing the proportion of different grain-sized sediment making up the spit or context that you are recording. Sand, clay and silt are the most common components e.g. silty sand, sandy clay, silty clay. Stones or pebbles/cobbles *could* be part of the composition if there are lots of them (more than 15%).

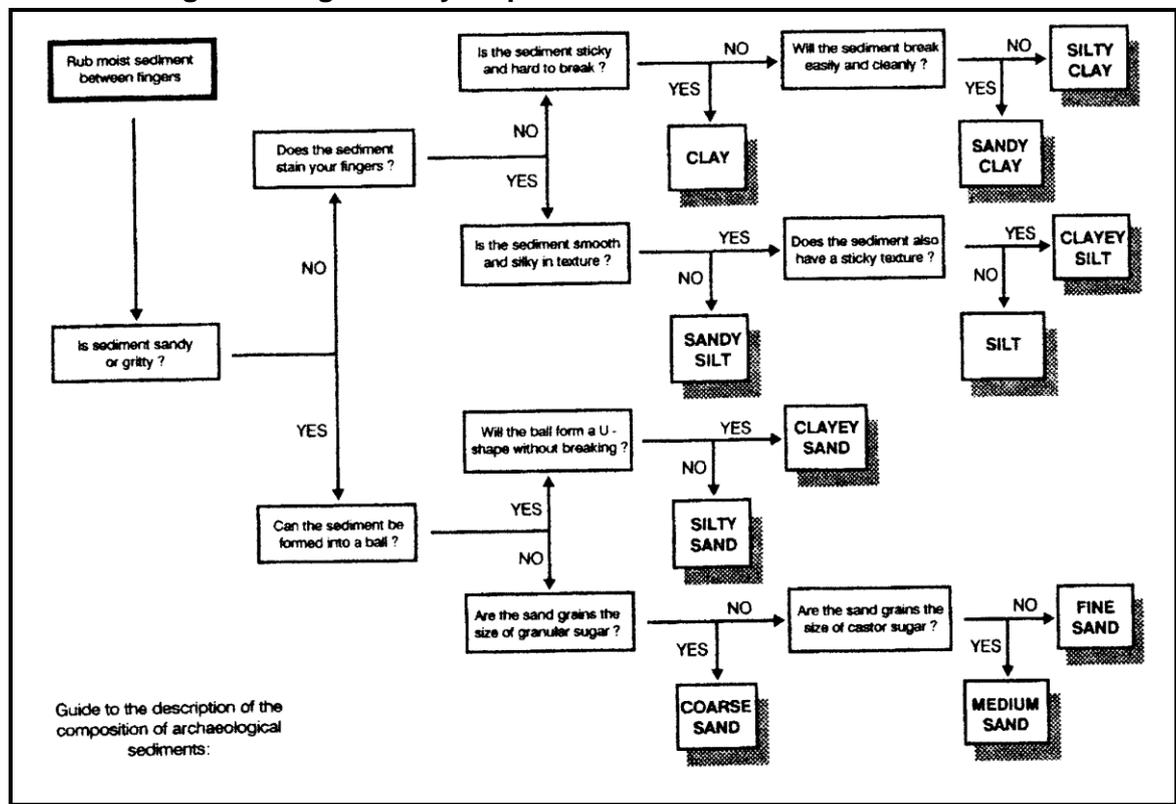
Decide the proportion of different grain-sizes within the context. The table below gives an idea of the ranges. Thus silty (40%) sand (60%): the greatest proportion comes last.

Describe any patches that are different – these are called lenses e.g. clay, and changes within the soil.

Grain sizes, finest first:

Clay	
Silt	
Fine Sand	0.02mm – 0.06mm
Medium Sand	0.06mm – 0.20mm
Coarse Sand	0.20mm – 2.00mm
Fine Pebbles	2 mm – 6 mm
Medium Pebbles	6 mm – 20 mm
Coarse Pebbles	20 mm – 60 mm
Cobbles	60 mm – 200 mm

The following flow diagram may help:



4. Inclusions

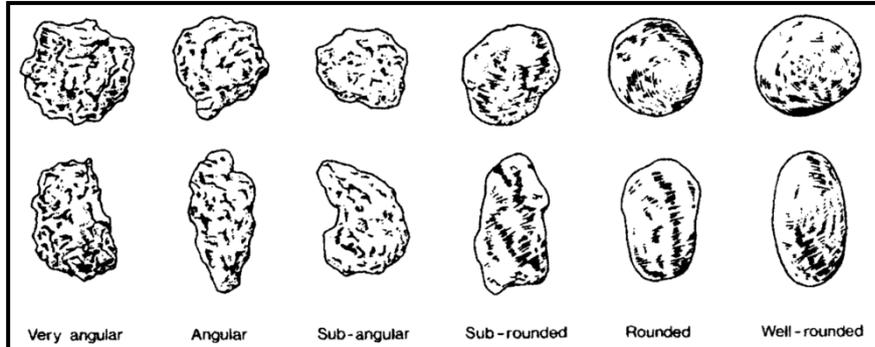
This is a description of everything not covered in 'composition' such as stones, charcoal, snails. Decide their proportion within the soil or describe these inclusions as rare, occasional, or frequent in the soil e.g. very occasional flecks of charcoal or 5% rounded fine pebbles.

Are the inclusions spread unevenly: do they cluster more densely in particular parts of the trench?

What condition are they in: are they burnt, fragmentary, shattered, abraded (very worn), polished, complete, well-preserved.

Note range of sizes of stones; is the stone *well sorted* – i.e. mostly all the same size; *moderately sorted* - a small range of sizes; or *poorly sorted* – wide a range of sizes. **What shape are the stones?** See below.

Shape chart



5a. Finds (e.g. pottery, bone, teeth, shell (edible), etc.)

Describe what you find in each spit or context, what sizes they are and what condition they are in. Are they burnt, fragmentary, shattered, abraded (very worn), polished, complete, well-preserved. Are there any cut marks? Be as detailed as you want and continue on a spare sheet if necessary!

5b. Small finds such as coins are special finds that need to be recorded with the exact measurements for their location.

6. Nature of the Boundaries

If there are any changes in the soils are they sudden or gradual? If there is no distinct line between the spit/context you are recording in relation to that above or below, you could describe the boundary as diffused. If there is a clearly visible change from one soil to the next, this is a clearly defined boundary.



Layers with diffused boundaries



Layers showing clear defined boundaries

7. Contamination

Are there living roots or traces of old root systems; animal burrows or worm holes or any signs of more recent disturbance in your spit or context? Recording any disturbance in your soil helps us to understand how things might have been moved from their original resting place, to a different spit or context such as movement by worms or root action.

8. Describing cuts

This is recording the shape and character of the cuts which define ditches or holes of any kind (usually seen because they have filled up with a different composition and colour of soil than the surroundings). You need to describe: the shape in plan; the slope of the sides (how steep, does the slope change); the nature of the base (flat, concave, u-shaped) and the top of the sides (sudden or gentle break); and give the dimensions (depth, length and width as excavated) and the orientation.

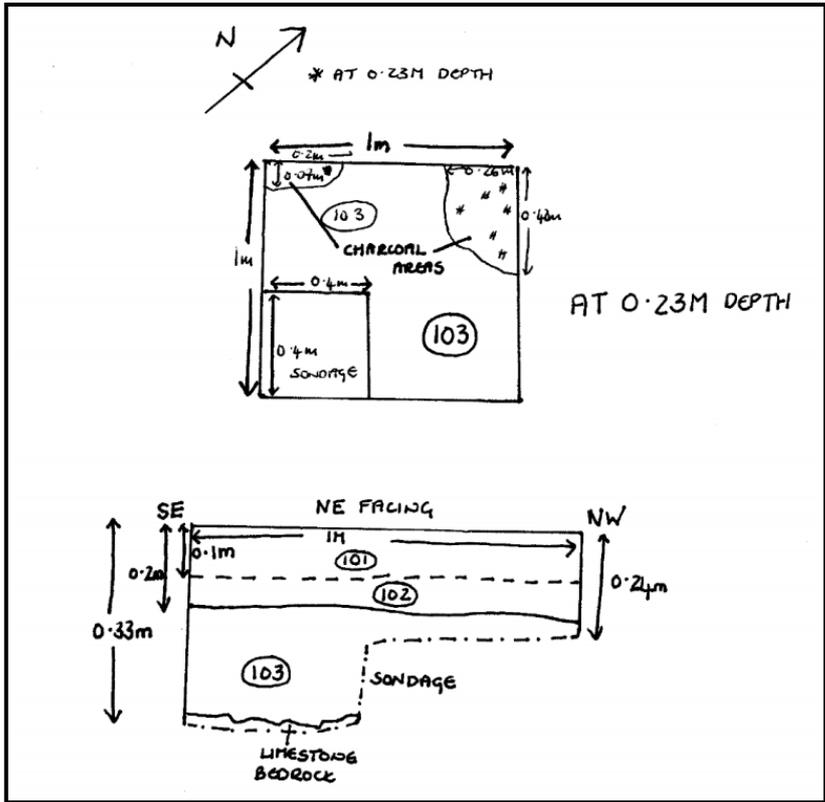
9. How was it dug?

This simply refers to the method you used to dig the context. Dig you use a mattock to loosen the soil then a trowel and shovel? Dig you just use a trowel? Record that information here.

Drawing

Archaeological drawing doesn't require brilliant artistic skills- just an ability to sketch out outlines and features, and to annotate them with directions, measurements and some description of features.

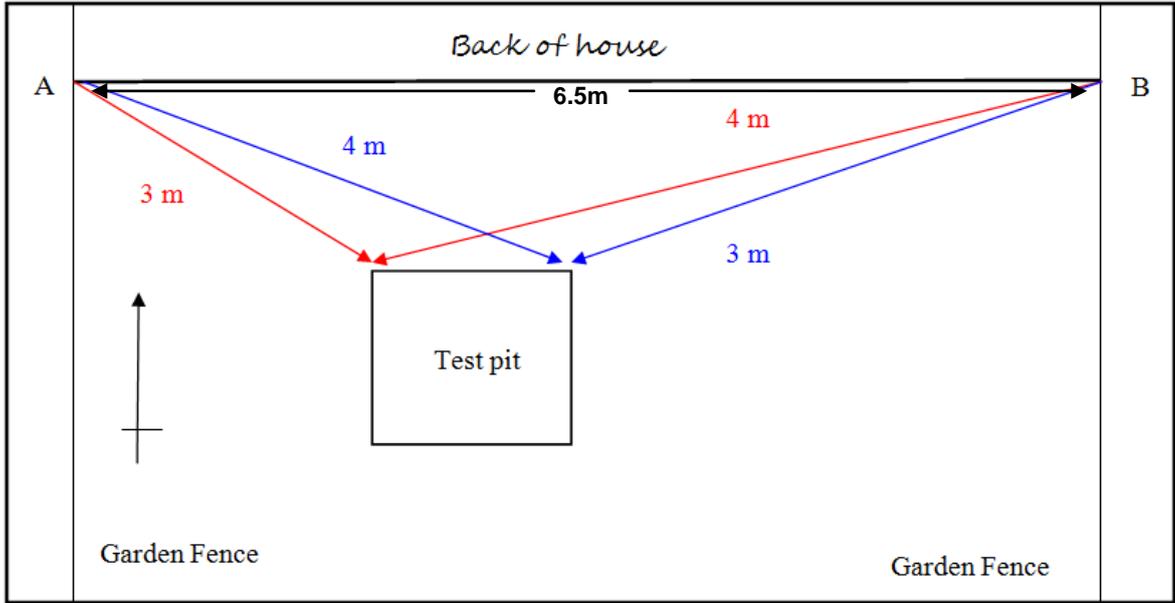
Detailed 'scale drawings' are done using a ruler and measuring tape so only require you to be able to plot and join measured points- almost like a dot-to-dot. A member of the team can instruct you on how to do a scale drawing if one is required. For the most part, you will be drawing a simple measured plan of your test pit, spits and contexts, which won't be to scale, but will need to include written measurements. A good example of a measured plan is shown on the next page.



The top sketch shows a plan of a test pit, with clear measurements of the trench, the depth of context (103), annotation of a charcoal area, and the location of the sondage. It also has the north arrow which is very important.

The sketch below shows a measured elevation drawing of the North East facing trench side (as labelled nice and clearly at the top of the drawing). It illustrates the position of the contexts, their depths and the extent of the excavation.

Some of the lines are dashed, dashed and dotted, or complete. These are 'drawing conventions' that help us record clearly. These are explained on the following page.



Above is an example of a measured plan. The measured plan records the test pit location in relation to two solid non-moving points (called A and B in the diagram to help explain) and a third point on your trench (one of the corners).

You need three points and three measured sides to form a measured triangle, we would be able to use this data to pin point the exact location of your trench if we needed to find it again- to take levels for example. So in this case the two points used are the edges of the house where it meets the garden fence. Starting at point A, a measurement is taken to a corner of the test pit, then from point B to the same test pit corner. Measurements are then taken from A and from B to another corner of the trench. This will mean we know the exact location of our trench for future reference. The drawing has been labelled with features, measurement's and a north arrow.

Limit of Excavation : _____	
Internal edge of Excavation : _____	
Edge of Context : _____	
Edge of Context indeterminate : _____	
Level marked on plan or section : _____	
Context Number : _____ <small>(trench number followed by 3 digit context number)</small>	
Small Find : _____	
Sample : _____	
Cut Hatch : _____	Closer together for steeper slope Length shows breaks of slope.
Slope Hatch : _____	
Limestone : _____	
Sandstone : _____	
Brick : _____	or
Tile : _____	
Cobble : _____	draw as seen
Gravel / Pebble : _____	
Sand : _____	
Clay (as inclusion) : _____	
Clay (pure) : _____	
Mortar : _____	
Shell : _____	
Bone : _____	draw as seen and write bone next to it
Ash : _____	
Charcoal : _____	
Peat : _____	
Coal : _____	
Plaster : _____	
Wood : _____	

Above are some archaeological drawing conventions. You may not use all of them, but ones you will use are limit of excavations, internal edge of excavation and edge of context.

Drawing a cut

How to plan a cut feature (such as a pit)

Cut features (these are things like pits and ditches which were literally 'cut' out in the ground in the past, and refilled with different material- often rubbish) are identified in the soil by colour change and a difference in the content of their fill. The image above shows how to draw a cut feature using the 'cut hatch' symbols shown in the previous diagram. It can be confusing trying to illustrate a feature so do ask for help if you need too.