

Saving Paper in Schools



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Some areas of your school may be off-limits without permission from your teacher or principal, and some projects should be done with at least one partner. Check with your teacher before beginning any activities or projects related to this fact sheet.

Why It Matters

Producing and disposing of paper pollutes land, air and water, threatens wildlife and affects human health.

A single sheet of paper may seem like an insignificant thing. But the use of thousands of sheets each day can have a huge impact on the environment. That's especially true in schools, where students and teachers and other staff all use lots of paper.

It all starts when trees are cut down, which hurts both forests and the animals that live in them. Cutting down forests even affects the earth's climate, since trees absorb carbon dioxide, one of the greenhouse gases that cause global warming. (The paper industry also creates lots of greenhouse gases -- it's the third largest source of global warming pollution in the world!)

Next, the lumber is turned into wood pulp, which is then transformed into paper. This process releases many harmful chemicals into the air and water. Often, paper is bleached with chlorine, which produces some very harmful substances. The most dangerous is dioxin, which builds up in soil and water, where it's taken in by

plants and animals. At each step in the food chain it becomes more concentrated. So people who eat food contaminated by dioxin may wind up eating significant amounts of this chemical, which can cause severe health effects, including cancer, a weakened immune system, hormonal changes, and neurological problems.

Finally, once the paper has been made, it becomes a huge waste problem. Each year, Americans throw away enough office and writing paper to build a 12-foot wall stretching from New York to California. (And that doesn't even include all the newspaper, magazines and catalogs we throw away.) That paper takes up valuable space in landfills, while the ink can pollute local rivers and streams. And, of course, when we don't recycle it, new paper has to be made from still more trees.

What Kids Can Do

When it comes to paper, the three R's — reduce, reuse and recycle — are especially important. Don't forget that the kind of paper matters, too. Below are some things you can do to cut down on paper use. Check out the next section for ideas on steps your school should take.

- **Get double duty out of your writing paper:** Use both sides of the page in your notebooks and when you use scrap paper.
- **Print single spaced:** Single-spacing your documents uses half the paper.
- **Use the back side of paper:** Lots of paper is printed on only one side. Keep it and reuse the second side as scratch paper.
- **Recycle paper:** When both sides of the paper have been used, don't throw it out — recycle it. The rules and methods for recycling differ from area to area, so it's important to find out what materials can be recycled and how they should be sorted.
- **Buy recycled paper:** When you buy notebooks or notebook paper, choose paper that has been recycled and made without chlorine bleach. See the next section for more information on what to look for.



What Your School Can Do

- **Use alternatives to paper:** Sometimes it's possible to skip using paper altogether. Maybe your teacher can use the blackboard or bulletin boards more. The school office could post some notices on a bulletin board instead of sending them to every teacher, or use the public address system more often. People in the school office could stop using cover sheets when they send faxes, and use email when possible.
- **Buy recycled paper:** Before buying paper, school officials should check its post-consumer content, which explains how much of the paper was previously used and then recycled into new paper. They should buy paper made from at least 30 percent post-consumer waste. The Environmental Protection Agency's Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines page: <http://www.epa.gov/cpg/> can help them find recycled paper.
- **Buy paper made without chlorine bleach:** It's also important to avoid paper that has been bleached with chlorine. The paper your school uses should have either a PCF (processed chlorine free) or TCF (totally chlorine free) label. Wondering what those phrases actually mean? Here's what you need to know: PCF should be the first choice, because it's used for recycled paper. It tells you that the paper wasn't rebleached with chlorine. If your school sometimes buys unrecycled (virgin) paper, the TCF label is what to look for. TCF means that virgin paper has been made without chlorine or chlorine-containing products. The Chlorine Free Products Association: <http://www.chlorinefreeproducts.org/> can help school officials find these types of paper.
- **Make recycling easy by setting up folders or bins:** If you're going to recycle, you need a place to store the used paper. Your school should have recycling folders or bins wherever paper is used. This will not only remind everyone to recycle, but also make it more convenient. The areas near copy machines and printers are good spots. Putting recycling containers near regular garbage cans also encourages people to keep paper separate from trash.

Check out the Project Ideas fact sheet for examples of activities that you can do in your school. All of these projects can go toward earning the Green Flag Award at your school.

The Green Squad is a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in collaboration with the Healthy Schools Network.
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