Paleo-Indians, British soldiers, lumbermen, pioneers, fishermen, and miners are just a few of the many different kinds of people that once lived in the state we now call Michigan.
If you guessed “People” then you would be CORRECT!

Archaeologists study people who lived in the past. Sometimes people confuse archaeology with paleontology or geology. Paleontology is the study of fossils, like dinosaur bones. Geology is the study of rocks and the history of the earth.

When people think about archaeology, they usually think about digging. Archaeologists gather information by digging, much the same way that historians go to libraries or to archives to seek information. Archaeologists dig (called excavating) archaeological places (called sites) where people once lived.

An archaeologist’s main tool is not a shovel, but a mason’s trowel. This small hand tool with sharp metal edges is perfect for carefully scraping away bits of dirt at a time. As archaeologists dig, they keep records about what they find and

Archaeologists spend some of their time digging, writing down what they find, and noting the location of each item.
To reconstruct the past, archaeologists prepare to excavate a site by first creating a grid of squares of the same size, using stakes and strings. Squares are often five feet or larger.

Square holes allow the archaeologist to see, excavate, and record the various soil levels and the artifacts that each level contains. Digging randomly scattered circular holes would make it difficult to understand the site.

Soil excavated from each level is shaken through a screen to separate the artifacts, broken pottery, and animal bones from the soil. These artifacts are put into a bag labeled with the numbers that identify the square and the level within the square.

Often archaeologists discover what they call features: fireplaces, storage and trash pits, postholes, wall trenches, and burials. These features are carefully recorded by drawing and taking pictures so that a map of the entire site can be created.

When the excavations are complete, archaeologists refill all the excavated squares so that the land will look like it did before the excavations took place.

Archaeologists wash, sort, and analyze the artifacts and prepare a detailed report of the discoveries. This phase of archaeology takes much longer than the excavation. It may not be as much fun as digging, but it is just as important. Without the final report, we will never know the importance of the discoveries that were made.

what they see in the soil. They write notes, make drawings, take photographs, and make maps and videotapes. After the artifacts have been removed, the site is forever changed. This makes the records they kept during the dig important.

Archaeologists look for objects (called artifacts) that were made and used by people who lived at the site. A bone comb, an antler spoon, and the other objects found at an Indian village site are artifacts. Archaeologists look for animal bones and seeds from plants that tell them about the foods people ate. Archaeologists also look for features. Features are
not artifacts. They are things like food storage pits or trash pits that are now filled in. To archaeologists, dark stains in the soil often reveal features.

Artifacts found at an Indian village site have a story to tell. An iron knife, kettle fragments, and glass beads tell us that the Indians were trading with French fur traders. A comb, a spoon, and necklace ornaments show us that they were still making things out of bone, antler, and shell, as they had been doing for hundreds of years. The artifacts tell us the Native Americans held on to traditions and customs, although their lives had changed with the arrival of Europeans. The artifacts are more than just interesting objects for display in a museum. They help us understand about the people who lived before us.

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WHAT DO I study?

PALEONTOLOGISTS
study the fossils of plants and animals.

GEOLOGISTS
study the earth’s rocks and minerals.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS
study the people who lived in the past through the items they left behind.

Label each picture: P (for Paleontologist), G (for Geologist), or A (for Archaeologist)

1. __________
2. __________
3. __________
4. __________
5. __________
6. __________
7. __________
8. __________
9. __________