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FabJob Guide to
**Become an
Archaeologist**



ROBERT LARKIN

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Contents

Welcome	7
About the Author and Our Team of Experts	9
1. Introduction	10
1.1 What is Archaeology?	10
1.2 Who Can Become an Archaeologist?	11
1.3 Benefits of a Career in Archaeology	12
1.3.1 Developing the Science	13
1.3.2 Educating the Public	13
1.3.3 Preserving and Recording the Past	14
1.3.4 Travel	14
1.3.5 Career Satisfaction	15
1.4 Archaeology as A Lifelong Career	15
2. Getting Ready	18
2.1 Job Opportunities in Archaeology	19
2.1.1 Principal Investigator	19
2.1.2 Field Director	20
2.1.3 Field Archaeologist	20
2.1.4 Crewmember	22
2.1.5 Laboratory Staff Member/Manager	22
2.1.6 Report Editor	22
2.1.7 Cultural Resource Manager	23
2.1.8 Academics	23
2.1.9 Related Jobs	24
2.2 A Day In The Life of An Archaeologist	25
2.3 Your Most Important Skills	26
2.3.1 Writing Ability	27
2.3.2 Computer Skills	27
2.3.3 Cartography (Mapmaking)	28
2.3.4 Hiking	28
2.3.5 Photography	29
2.3.6 Statistics	29
2.3.7 Geology/Geomorphology	30

2.4 Education	30
2.4.1 Your Courses	31
2.4.2 Education Requirements for Jobs in Archaeology	32
2.4.3 Speak to a Career Counselor	34
2.4.4 Education Resources	34
2.5 Other Ways to Prepare for Your Career	36
2.5.1 Interview an Archaeologist	36
2.5.2 Volunteering and Field Experience	39
2.5.3 Apply For an Internship	45
2.5.4 Join an Amateur Archaeology Society	46
2.5.5 Contact a Post-Secondary Anthropology Department	46
2.5.6 Have a Personal Plan	47
2.6 More Career Planning Resources	51
3. Getting Hired	54
3.1 Potential Employers	54
3.1.1 A Note About Cultural Resource Management Positions	55
3.2 The Job Market	56
3.3 Finding Job Openings	57
3.4 The Most Desirable Employers	59
3.5 Who to Contact	60
3.6 How to Contact Them	61
3.7 What To Send	62
3.7.1 A CV or Resume	62
3.7.2 A Writing Sample	64
3.8 Qualities Employers Are Seeking	65
3.8.1 Flexibility	65
3.8.2 Honesty	66
3.8.3 Willingness to Learn	66
3.8.4 Field Experience	66
3.8.5 Writing Ability	67
3.8.6 Computer and Technology Skills	67
3.8.7 Team Players	68
3.8.8 Dedicated Employees	69
3.8.9 Hard Workers	69
3.8.10 Publication Record	69

3.9 The Interview Process	70
3.9.1 Prepare for the Interview	70
3.9.2 Your Attire	71
3.9.3 What to Bring	71
3.9.4 Your Interview Behavior	72
3.9.5 What to Expect From the Interviewer	74
3.9.6 Following Up: How and How Soon	74
3.9.7 A Note About Rejection	75
4. Being Successful	76
4.1 Networking	77
4.1.1 Annual Seminars and Conferences in the U.S.	78
4.2 Archaeology Periodicals	80
4.3 Start Your Own Business	80
4.3.1 Tips For Success	81
5. Conclusion	83
Appendix: A Sample Report	84

Welcome

Welcome to **the FabJob Guide to Become An Archaeologist!** In this guide we offer you the tools and techniques you need to enter the intriguing world of the professional archaeologist. If you have always dreamed of unraveling the mysteries of the past and unearthing clues to our very existence, grab your dusty adventure-hat and trusty trowel, and get started!



Mayan archaeological site at Palenque, Mexico

If you are a beginner, this guide will help you decide what skills and talents to develop, where to go to school and what to study, how to make the most of your education, and what types of experience you can start accumulating to make your resume a sure-winner.

If you are already studying to become an archaeologist, this guide will offer **valuable advice** about where to look for jobs, how to approach employers (even if they aren't hiring!) and what markets are your best bets for employment. The guide also goes over the qualities employers are looking for, how to ace the interview, and how to advance your career through networking and professional development once you've secured that elusive first job.

Our guide offers you:

- **Tools** for getting started with volunteer fieldwork
- **Techniques** for becoming involved in a variety of tasks in archaeology
- **Insight** into the types of skills employers are looking for
- **Ways** to maximize your effectiveness during an interview
- **Options** for finding those unadvertised positions

Each section of the guide covers an important area:

The **Introduction** covers what the job entails, interests that are common to many archaeologists, and the many benefits of choosing a career in this field. It also takes a look at the career path of one archaeologist so you can see the diversity of tasks an archaeologist may find him or herself doing.

The **Getting Ready** section defines the various jobs and approximate salaries available in this field, and describes a typical 'day in the life' of an archaeologist. Next the guide examines each of the most important skills you can have as an archaeologist, and offers resources for you to develop them. This section also talks about the type and level of education you will want to pursue, and finally suggests a number of extracurricular activities to pursue in order to be well prepared for your job search.

Getting Hired, the heart of the guide, presents a step-by-step approach to preparing for, and securing that position in archaeology, from finding employers and contacting them to where to look for job postings, how to prepare your resume and what qualities employers are really looking for, and the interview process from preparation to follow-up.

Finally, **Being Successful** tells you how best to advance your career through networking and continued education, and looks at the possibility of going into business for yourself in the future as an archaeologist.

As a **bonus**, the guide also includes as an **Appendix** a sample of the type of report you will be required to prepare often as an archaeologist, so you will outpace your fellow job applicants by knowing what your employers are looking for ahead of time!

The **FabJob Guide to Become an Archaeologist** is written by and based upon the **opinions and advice of archaeologists** who are working in the industry *right now*. They have shared their insider tips and expert advice for breaking into this highly competitive field. Who else could offer you the same guidance to start your career on the right foot? In addition, all the latest and most comprehensive **online information** about archaeology is at your fingertips with live links for you to learn more immediately about the topics that intrigue you.

The road to becoming an archaeologist is challenging, but this guide will help you navigate the process with ease. You will find yourself moving from wishful thinking to the realization of your career goal: being a successful archaeologist! Not everyone is cut out for a 9-5 office job...where do you fit in? If working outdoors, scientific research, thoughtful interpretation and the potential of new discoveries that could change the way we understand our world and ourselves sound like a **great day at work** to you, read on to learn about how to get started in this fabulous career!

1. Introduction

To understand how to break into this career, you'll want to start with a bit of knowledge about it. This section will introduce you to some basic facts about archaeology and interests of the typical archaeologist, and look at some of the benefits of career in this field. We'll also take a look at what types of activities you are likely to be involved in once you choose archaeology as your profession.

1.1 What is Archaeology?

“It's not what you find, it's what you find out.”
— David Hurst-Thomas, *Archaeology*

Archaeology is the **study of past cultures**. In the United States, the subject of archaeology comes under the broader heading of anthropology, which is the study of culture. Although many definitions of culture exist, it is probably best to think of culture as our way of life. This includes our habits, beliefs, worldview, likes and dislikes, clothing styles, etc. If you've ever traveled abroad, watched TV shows or movies about a foreign land, or spoken with someone from another part of the world, you'll know that culture can vary widely from country to country. For example, what is important to us in our daily lives may not matter at all to people from other countries, and vice-versa.

It is this **great diversity** in culture that fascinates archaeologists. We are interested not only in culture across geographic boundaries, but in cultural change through time. Each culture through time has exhibited patterns of behavior, and the archaeologist is interested in explaining the patterns, and, ultimately, explaining cultural change.

Archaeology is the past tense of cultural anthropology. While cultural anthropologists often study living and contemporary communities, archaeologists study past cultures, mainly by looking at the material things they left behind, called artifacts.



The study of archaeology involves an attempt to reconstruct the lives of people who left the artifacts. Questions are asked related to these items, like:

- **How did people live with each other?**
- **How did they react to and interact with their environment?**
- **Where did they get the food they needed?**
- **When did they start growing food?**

Because the artifacts that are excavated can't speak for themselves, science is used in an attempt to explain what happened in the past. Since written records exist only for about the last 5,000 years (or less, in some areas), archaeology is the **only tool we have to explain the majority of the span of human existence**. Archaeology as a profession has existed for more than 100 years, but it has only been during the past several decades that standardized procedures have been commonly practiced in excavations.

In archaeology, your 'day at work' can range from working in an excavation in the desert of Iraq to working with the Inuit in Alaska. It includes the physical activity in the field and intellectual pursuit in the study or the laboratory. The **fascination with the past**, the **thrill of discovery** and the **wide range of activities** involved in conducting archaeology make it a very desirable pursuit for many people.

1.2 Who Can Become an Archaeologist?

Just about anyone can become an archaeologist if they set their mind to it. However, to be happy in your chosen career, the profession is usually best suited to those who already have an **interest in science** and studying the past. Archaeologists usually have a wide range of science-related interests because a number of activities are required to interpret the past, and archaeology borrows many techniques and equipment from other sciences. For example, an understanding of botany, wildlife science, geology, geophysics, ecology, climatology and other scientific pursuits can all assist you in an archaeological investigation.

One of the most effective ways to begin a career in archaeology is to make the **transition from a similar line of work**. You may think that there is nothing very similar, but I have known a number of archaeologists who made the switch from a related science. When I entered college, I was majoring in marine biology. After my freshman year, I changed my major to anthropology as a result of having taken it as an elective course. Several of my colleagues have followed a similar career path.

While a variety of interests in these general areas will be helpful to you as an archaeologist, you will undoubtedly develop some very specific interests, or specialties within archaeology. Archaeological research is definitely a team effort, as any excavation requires a great deal of labor as well as expertise in a variety of specialties.

Chances are, as an aspiring archaeologist, you already have a number of the typical archaeological interests listed below. If not, give yourself a competitive edge by cultivating an interest in one or more of these areas. Section 2.3 will assist you with more information about each of them and resources for further study.

- **Writing**
- **Computer skills**
- **Cartography (mapmaking)**
- **Hiking**
- **Photography**
- **Statistics**
- **Geology/Geomorphology**

1.3 Benefits of a Career in Archaeology

“The best point is that archaeology offers the opportunity to learn new things every single day, whether you are conducting fieldwork or in the lab analyzing the results of your investigations. As an archeologist, I am able to travel to some unusual and beautiful places and meet a broad range of people in communities small and large.”

—Patricia A. Mercado-Allinger, Texas State Archaeologist

Archaeology attracts many people for a number of reasons. Some of the major benefits of the career, as listed below, are contributing to and being at the forefront of a developing and diverse science, working with and educating the public, being involved in preserving and recording the past, the potential for travel, and career satisfaction.

1.3.1 Developing the Science

Your involvement in archaeology will **help us understand more about past cultures** — the primary goal of archaeology. Your interest in, and pursuit of answers about how people lived in the past, what they wore, when they hunted or farmed, how they built their houses and what they believed in will assist the field of archaeology worldwide, and help satisfy your own curiosity (the trademark of archaeologists everywhere!)

Your involvement will also assist in the reconstruction of history and prehistory in a particular geographical region. As studies are conducted and the results published, other archaeologists will benefit from your work by being able to add the new information to their understanding of that region.

As a practicing archaeologist, you may contribute far more than added knowledge about sites; you could develop **new methods and theories** for investigating past cultures, thereby assisting numerous archaeologists in their quest for tools to use in interpreting the past.

1.3.2 Educating the Public

“Archaeologists study and learn about cultural traditions, and teach the next generation. They contribute to community well-being by being stewards of places and traditions. They are community experts—their cultural muscles benefit from regular workouts.”

—Earl Neller, Archaeologist

Archaeological research is done to further the science, but it is also information that is interesting to the general public, as shown by the popularity of museums all over the country. The general public benefits when popular publications are prepared, museum displays are prepared, or sites are developed for visitation.

Your involvement in archaeology may very well result in contributions of artifacts to establish new exhibits. You will also undoubtedly be involved in conversations with non-archaeologists about saving sites from destruction. Your role as an archaeologist, therefore, includes public education regarding the importance of preservation of our cultural resources.

Although each and every one of us may not be directly related to the people who previously lived in our area, information gained about the past is part of our heritage. We all have the right to know about the past, and studies in history and in prehistory are the efforts that will inform us about our past.

1.3.3 Preserving and Recording the Past

As a professional archaeologist, you will contribute to reports describing the studies undertaken by you and your team, and the information becomes part of the official record forever. If the information is not recorded and the site is destroyed for whatever reason, we are all losers. Since each site offers different information, the data is lost forever. Your interest and expertise, therefore, will be highly valued and will contribute greatly to our understanding of the past.

Although even a legitimate archaeological excavation destroys portions of sites or entire sites, the information obtained from the excavation is preserved. Your involvement in archaeology will therefore assist in the long-term preservation of information regarding history and prehistory.

When sites are destroyed, the **information they contain is lost forever**. Archaeological sites must be viewed as nonrenewable resources. Damage to them makes it virtually impossible for us to piece together past behavior, customs, material culture, etc. Your involvement will not only satisfy your own curiosity about the past, it will also help save information for future generations to learn and enjoy.

1.3.4 Travel

“During schooling there are likely possibilities to work all over the world, depending on project openings of the university, or that you get out and hustle for.”

—Dr. Leland Gilson, former Oregon State Archaeologist

“Most archaeology jobs include abundant fieldwork and travel. They become experts in local geography. They meet many interesting people, and make lots of friends.”

—Earl Neller, Archaeologist

Depending on your specialty as an archaeologist, it is possible that you will have an opportunity to travel. How much and how often varies depending upon your research interests and job type. If you work as a city archaeologist, chances are that you won't be on any 'overnighters,' but if you are a consulting archaeologist covering a multi-state region, travel is inevitable. If you want to be traveling a lot, being a field archaeologist is what you want to do. Usually beginning archaeologists will do more traveling than more experienced archaeologists as well. Depending on the project area for your work, you may even be camping out!

Don't forget to be realistic about what you want now and what you may want in the future. If you currently have a family or are in a relationship of some kind, continually traveling to different project areas, especially for extended periods of time, may make balancing work and family life difficult.

Many archaeologists that I know were able to obtain **excellent field experience and travel a great deal** early in their careers before they had 'roots' established with a family, then they chose more permanent positions requiring only occasional travel, usually within 100 miles or so. The trick is being ready, willing and able to balance the other aspects of your life with your travel requirements.

1.3.5 Career Satisfaction

According to archaeologist Earl Neller, archaeology is a career that satisfies by offering physical, spiritual and intellectual well-being:

- **Physical well-being:** We are outdoors a lot. Archaeologists often spend their workweek out in the field. They spend their weekends and vacations going to archaeological sites. Their bodies get exercise, so they are physically fit.
- **Spiritual well-being:** Archaeologists regularly enjoy the spiritual embrace of being in special places. They care for beautiful things made by people who lived thousands of years ago. They care for beautiful places. They are in touch with the human spirit, and the spirit of special places. Their soul is embraced and restored.
- **Intellectual well-being:** Archaeologists discover things. They figure things out. They advance scientific knowledge. They exercise their mental muscles everyday.

1.4 Archaeology as A Lifelong Career

What follows is an excerpt from a personal career summary kindly provided by archaeologist Earl Neller—it should give you an idea of the **diversity of projects, challenges and rewards** that await you in your chosen profession!

"I have taken part in archeological surveys and excavations in New Mexico, Missouri, Arkansas, California, and Hawaii. Our survey for the National Park Service in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, was intensive and comprehensive. We did more than just provide dots on a map and assign them numbers...we discovered things that nobody had ever seen before, even after decades of survey in Chaco Canyon. Our survey crew discovered that the Canyon had a small number of shrine sites, marked only by tiny pieces of turquoise and barely perceptible alignments of rock, invisible to the casual pedestrian observer. There were many such interesting finds: the 'hunting magic' petroglyph sites, the ancient roadways, the Navajo sweat lodges...

"On weekends, we often drove long distances to visit other ruins, or to look for shrines in places we predicted they should occur. This wasn't part of the job—we weren't paid for it—but it helped us to become familiar with the kinds of ruins and artifacts to be found throughout the Southwest.

"In Chaco Canyon, I supervised the crew of Navajo laborers working on the excavation of Pueblo Alto. For the BLM, I supervised a crew of Navajo stonemasons. In Hawaii, I worked with Americans of diverse ancestry on a daily basis: Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, English, French, German, Scandinavian, and more. Working with people from different backgrounds is interesting, because you get to learn about so many interesting things, and the learning never ends.

"I am especially proud of the job I did at Kalaupapa National Historical Park, where I operated without a budget yet still managed to carry out a cultural resources program that included help to park visitors, help to park staff and programs, help to the NPS administration, help to State of Hawaii staff and agencies, use of volunteers to maintain stone ruins, the production of administrative reports and interpretive materials (including a Kalaupapa archeology video), and the preservation of Hawaiian cultural values with special attention to the use of Hawaiian plants. I think that at Kalaupapa I showed that cultural resources management is more than just writing scholarly articles and attending professional meetings...to be an effective public archaeologist, one needs to be an interpreter, a botanist, a geologist, a map maker, a writer, a scientist and a public servant.

"My professional capabilities as an archeologist have been demonstrated by the completion of a large number of written reports covering a wide range of field projects, from ruins stabilization on federal lands for the Bureau of Land

Management in New Mexico, excavation for the National Park Service in Chaco Canyon National Monument, Section 106 compliance surveys for the U.S. Forest Service in Ozark National Forest in Arkansas, and Section 110 inventory surveys for the National Park Service in Hawaii. I have been responsible for the implementation of federal historic preservation laws in all of my government archeology jobs.

“Throughout my career I have worked with people on volunteer projects, including people of diverse backgrounds and affiliations. Such projects have almost always been outside of work, in evenings or on the weekend. Such projects provide lifelong friendships and a great deal of personal satisfaction. I have given numerous lectures to school groups and private organizations. I taught non-credit night classes on archaeological topics at the University of Hawaii, and led hikes to archaeological sites for the general public. Throughout it all, I have tried to make historic preservation exciting, interesting, meaningful (and painless!) for all concerned.”