

How Can We Reduce Household Waste?

by Mary K. Pratt



HOUSEHOLD WASTE

Household waste includes all the trash created by the things we throw away. And we throw away many things. In the United States, the average person throws away about 4.5 pounds (2 kilograms) of stuff every day. Only 1.5 pounds (0.7 kg) of that gets recycled or composted. The remaining 3 pounds (1.4 kg) is household waste.

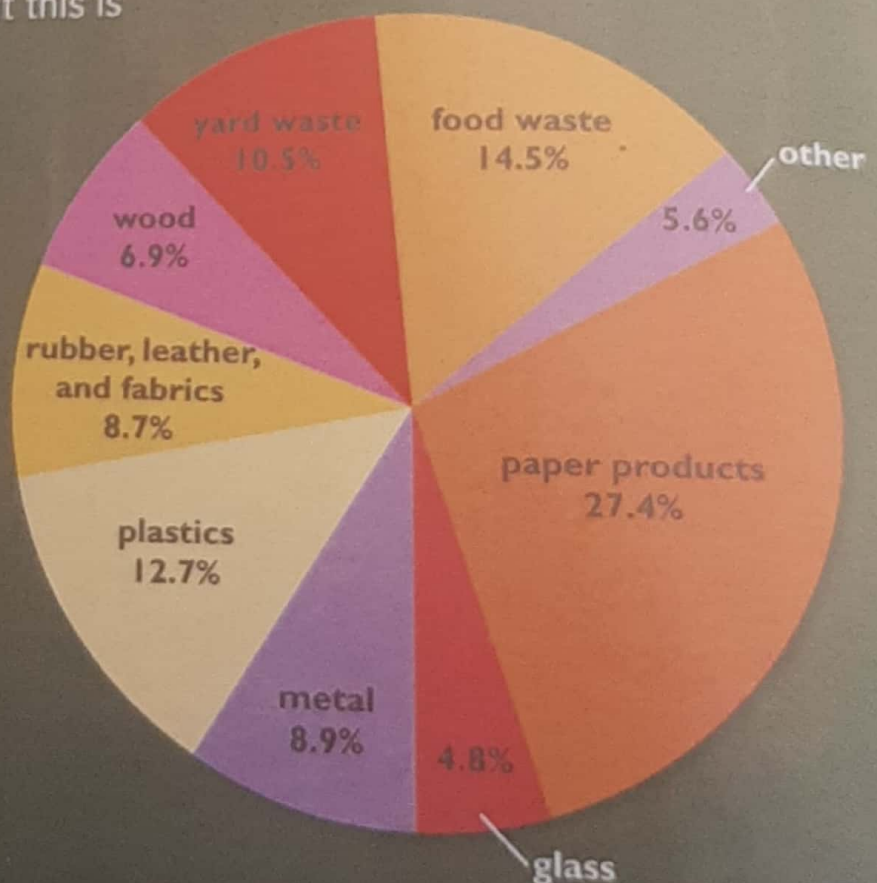
What happens when you add up all the household waste Americans create? It comes out to about 164 million tons (149 metric tons) each year. But this is

only an **estimate** from the US government. No one knows the exact amount of household waste Americans create. In fact, some experts believe it might be up to seven times that amount! In any case, a huge number of unwanted items end up in the garbage. And all of this garbage has serious effects on our environment.

estimate If you give an estimate, you give an amount or size that is not exact.

AMERICAN WASTE

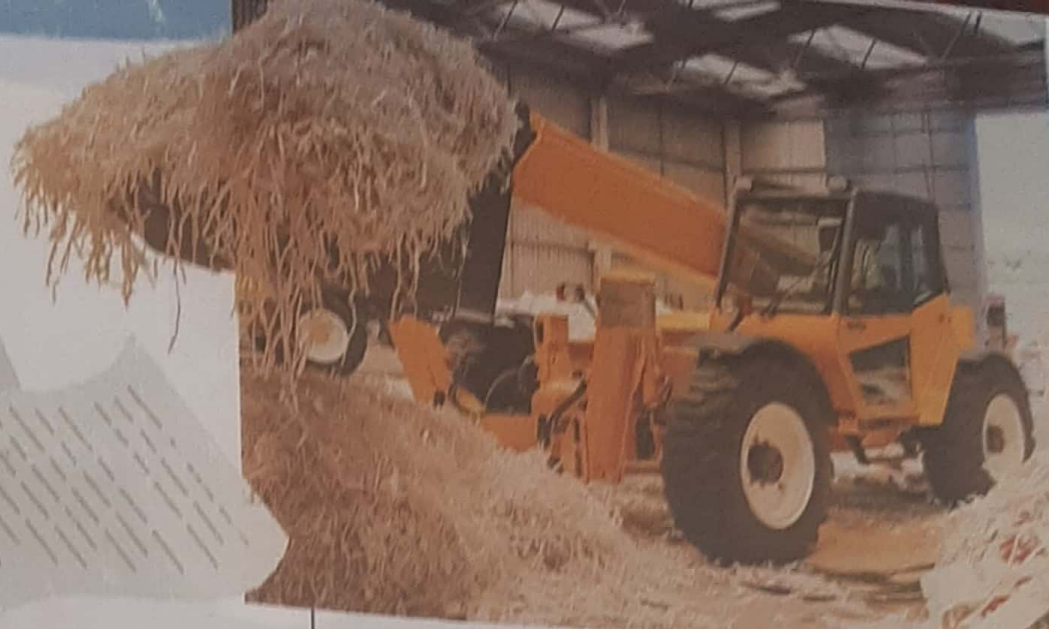
(including recyclables)



Types of Household Waste

3 There are four basic categories of household waste. The first category is paper, plastic, metal, and glass. The second category is food waste and yard waste. Cleaning products make up the third category. The fourth category is e-waste, or electronic waste. This includes items such as old cell phones and TVs.

4 Each of these types of waste has different effects on our planet. The good



A worker moves shredded paper at a recycling center. Next, water will be added to the paper and it will be turned into pulp.

news is that we can fight the effects of every type of household waste. When we recycle and reuse waste, we keep these materials out of landfills. This helps clean the land, air, and water. It also improves our health. Let's explore each type of waste and find out what we can do to reduce its effects.



Plastic bottles decompose slowly in landfills. They should be recycled.



PAPER, PLASTIC, METAL, AND GLASS

5 Paper makes up more than one-quarter of the materials Americans throw away. Paper trash includes things such as notebooks and magazines. It also includes the cardboard and paper packages on the things we buy.

6 Another quarter of waste comes from plastic, metal, and glass. This includes items such as plastic bags and old toys. It also includes glass jars and metal cans. Soda cans are usually made of a metal called aluminum. Foods such as beans and soup usually come in cans made of steel.



Newspapers are one type of paper trash.
What are some others?





Americans recycle 71 percent of their steel cans. But they recycle only 50 percent of their aluminum cans.

Effects of Pollution from Paper, Plastic, Metal, and Glass

7 When products are thrown away, they often end up in landfills. These are places where trash is buried in the ground. Other trash items are burned in incinerators.

8 Landfills and incinerators cause problems for our planet. For instance, when paper rots in landfills or burns in incinerators, it sends out greenhouse gases. These gases trap heat in Earth's atmosphere. Greenhouse gases are important because they make our planet warm enough for life. But too much greenhouse gas leads to higher temperatures.

9 Things made of plastic take a long time to decompose, or break down into smaller bits. So these products stay as

they are for hundreds of years and take up space in landfills. They often leach, or leak, dangerous chemicals into the environment. When plastic is burned in incinerators, it releases chemicals into the air. Many of these chemicals are harmful to people and plants.

In the United States, more than half of all waste ends up in landfills.





This water sample from the ocean contains hundreds of pieces of plastic.

- 10 Sometimes trash does not even make it into landfills or incinerators. Many household items end up as litter in parks, forests, rivers, lakes, and oceans. The litter problem is so big that vast sections of the ocean are covered with bits of plastic.
- 11 All that litter puts toxic chemicals into the land, water, and air. This can make plants and animals, including humans, very sick. Animals can also get trapped in plastic trash and starve. Sometimes animals eat small pieces of trash because they think it is food. These animals often get sick and die as a result.

What Can We Do?

¹² You can reduce the amount of trash you create. Start by buying only what you need. When you do buy something, look for items made from recycled materials. Also, look for products that have little or no packaging. One good choice is buying whole fruits and vegetables instead of those in boxes or bags. When shopping, bring reusable bags instead of using disposable plastic bags.

¹³ When you are ready to get rid of something, look for ways to reuse it. For example, an old shoe box can become a storage bin. If you do not want an item that is in good condition, give it to someone else. If no one wants it, try to recycle it. If you have to throw it out, dispose of it properly so it does not become litter.



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People are also finding ways to make better use of all our trash. For example, some clothing is made from recycled plastic bottles. Scientists are also studying whether a certain fungus can eat a common type of plastic. That would help cut back on all the plastic trash that fills up landfills.



FOOD WASTE AND YARD WASTE

- 15 Food and plant materials make up another quarter of the trash in the United States. Food waste is all the food people throw out. It includes meal scraps and food that went bad before it could be eaten. Plant waste usually comes from the yard. It includes grass clippings, leaves, and branches.

Effects of Food Waste and Yard Waste Pollution

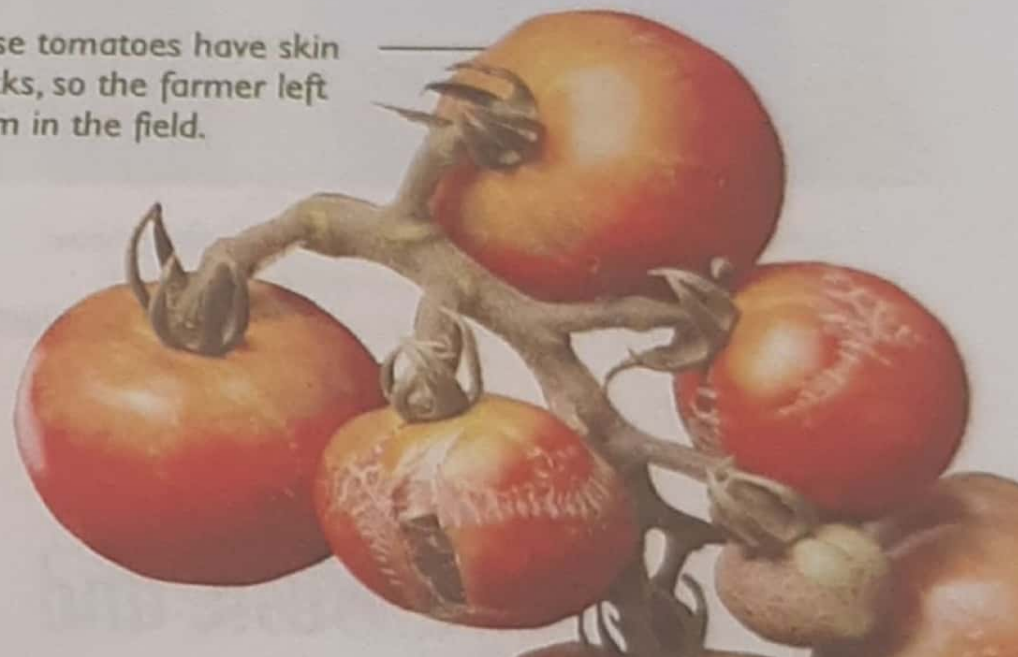
¹⁶ In the United States, farmers produce more than 590 billion pounds (268 billion kg) of food every year. But Americans waste between one-quarter and one-half of that food. Farmers sometimes let fruits and vegetables rot in fields. They often do this when the food is not an ideal shape or color, because this makes it harder to sell.

¹⁷ Stores throw away a lot of food, too. They want customers to have plenty of choices. So, they stock more food than they plan to sell. They also get rid of many foods that do not look perfect.

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People waste a lot of food at home as well. Families often fail to use their food before it goes bad. And many people buy more food than they can use. When food and yard waste ends up in landfills, it rots. This creates methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.

These tomatoes have skin cracks, so the farmer left them in the field.





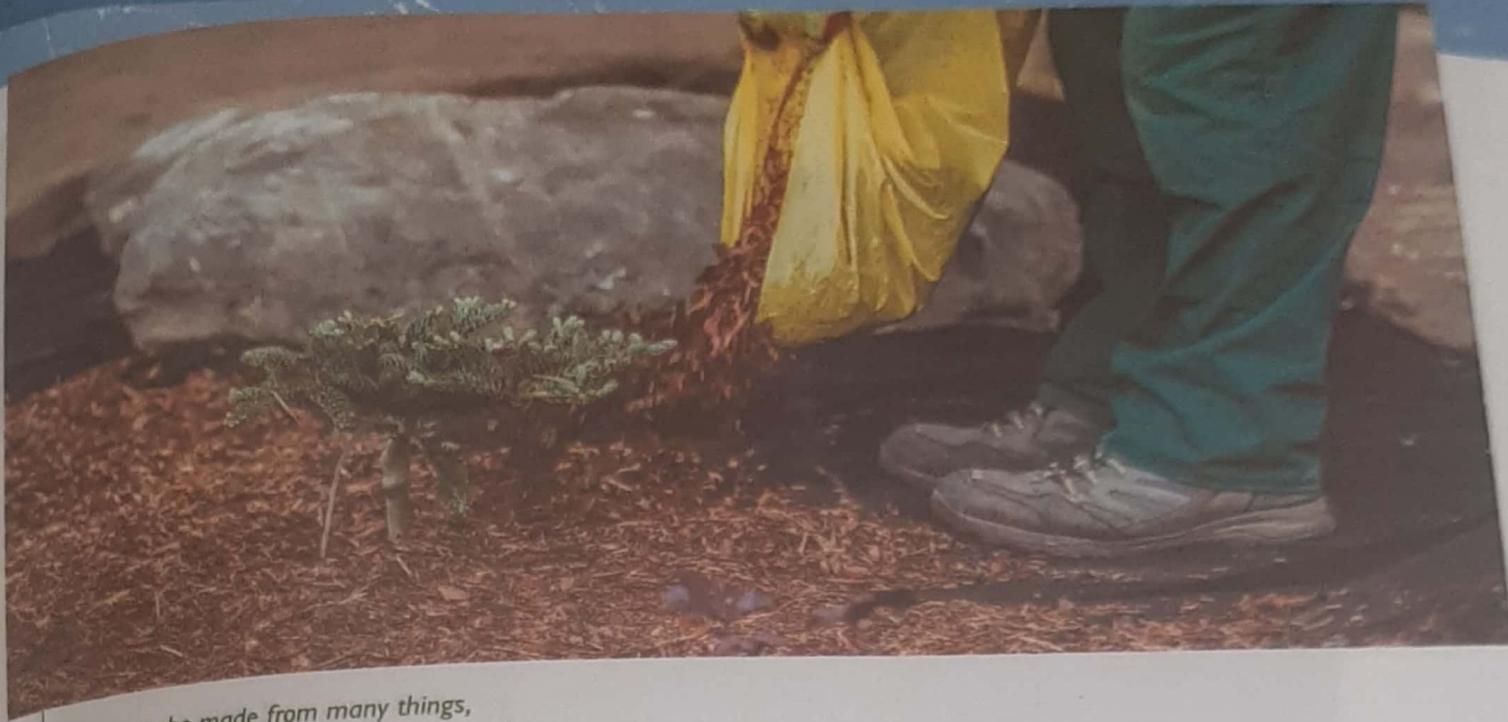
A woman in Seattle shows her three waste bins. Waste in the two large bins will be recycled. Waste in the small black bin will end up in a landfill.

Solutions to Food Waste and Yard Waste Pollution

19 How can you help? Take only the food that you plan to eat. And try not to be too picky. For instance, cut a bruise out of an apple and eat the rest instead of throwing away the whole apple.

0 Governments are getting involved, too. The city of Seattle, Washington passed a law in 2015. It requires people to recycle food waste. The city fines people who do not follow the law.





*Mulch can be made from many things,
including wood chips, grass clippings, and hay.*

21 People can generate less yard waste by keeping leaves and grass clippings on the lawn. These materials provide natural nutrition to the landscape. People can shred leaves and grass clippings to make mulch. Mulch is a layer of material that is spread over the ground. It keeps the soil healthier.

22

You can also turn food and yard waste into dirt. This process is called composting. Some people use special bins for their food scraps and yard waste. Other people simply make a pile out in the open. Over time, these materials will naturally decay and turn into dirt. Then you can use the dirt to plant a garden!

E-WASTE

- 23 People today have more electronic devices than ever before. Many homes have TVs, video game systems, and cell phones. These devices make up a growing part of our trash. And just like other kinds of trash, these devices can cause a lot of harm when they are thrown out.

Old cell phones are one example of electronic waste. What are some other examples?





Take good care of your cell phone so it will last a long time.

Effects of E-Waste Pollution

²⁴ Electronic waste, or e-waste, contains many toxic materials. But less than 15 percent of e-waste is recycled. That means most e-waste ends up in landfills or incinerators. When e-waste is buried or burned, the toxic materials can be released into the land, water, and air.

⁵ E-waste contains a high amount of lead. If e-waste is not disposed of properly, lead can leach into people's water supplies. When people drink this water, it can damage their kidneys. It also damages their blood and their nervous systems.

Solutions to E-Waste Pollution

- ²⁶ You can reduce harmful e-waste. First, do not get rid of electronics that still work. Second, when you do get rid of electronics, look for recycling programs at local stores and government offices. These programs should guarantee that the e-waste will be handled responsibly. If your favorite electronics company does not have a recycling program, ask the company to start one.



REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

- 27 You can help stop household waste pollution by following the three Rs: reduce, reuse, and recycle. These Rs are listed in order of importance. That means the most important step is reduce. The less we buy, the less trash we produce.

A worker operates a machine
at a recycling center.

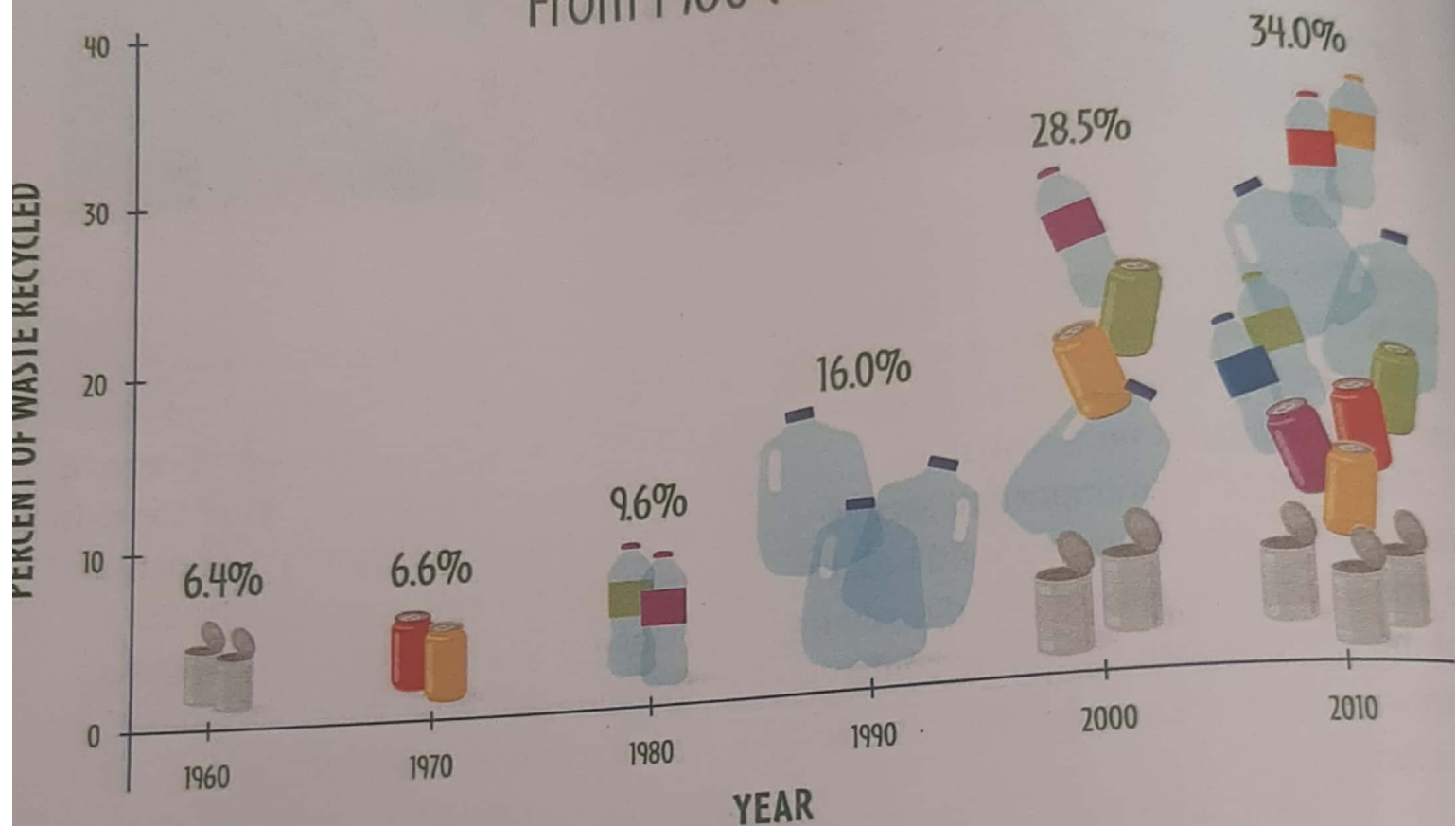
8 So the next time you are at the
store, think about what you really need.
If you can live without something,
consider leaving it on the shelf.

9 The second most important step is
reuse. When you do buy something, try
to use it until it wears out. And if you do
not need it anymore, give it to someone
who will use it. That way, it will not go
to a landfill.

30 The third most important step is
recycle. When it is time to get rid of
something, make every effort to recycle
it rather than throwing it in the trash. In
most areas, waste disposal companies
provide separate recycling bins. So
people can easily recycle paper, glass,
and some kinds of plastic and metal.
Some items, such as paint and
batteries, are harder to recycle. But
many areas have centers where these
items can be brought for recycling.

American Recycling Rates

From 1960 to 2010



Working Together to Find Solutions

31 Many places have laws that require people to recycle. The city of Austin, Texas has set a goal to cut the amount of trash it sends to landfills to nearly zero by the year 2040. The country of Sweden has nearly achieved this goal. It sends only 1 percent of its trash to landfills.

32 Household waste is a major problem. But we have the power to solve it. And the solution begins with making smart choices in our everyday lives.



Collaborative Discussion

Look back at what you wrote on page 258. Tell a partner two things you learned from this text. Then work with a group to discuss the questions below. Refer to details and examples in *How Can We Reduce Household Waste?* to explain your answers. Take notes for your responses. When you speak, use your notes.

- 1 Review pages 263–264. What are some of the ways that trash harms people, plants, and animals?

- 2 Reread page 267. What are some reasons that food is wasted in the United States each year?

- 3 How can people reduce the amount of trash they create?



Listening Tip

Show others that you are listening and care about what they say. Look at the speaker and smile or nod when you agree with an idea.



Speaking Tip

If someone says something interesting or helpful, tell that person that you like his or her idea. You can also say why you like it.

Write a Skit

PROMPT

In *How Can We Reduce Household Waste?*, you learned how the trash that people throw away affects our planet.

Imagine that your class is part of a program to encourage recycling in your school. Write a skit in which characters discuss how and why people should recycle. Include facts and other details from the text to support your idea that recycling is important. Don't forget to include some of the Critical Vocabulary in your writing.

PLAN

Identify key details from the text to include in your skit. Look for facts and ideas that could persuade others to recycle.