Teacher Resource Sheet

Reading the stones

What this lesson is for

Children treat local carved stone as real but limited evidence. They record only what they can read, place the oldest date beside this year, and name what the stones leave out. The walk makes the source real; the sort makes the limit stick.

In the curriculum (NCCA Primary SEE, 2025)

Stage 3, My locality: Identity and heritage. History: research aspects of the story of their locality and the island of Ireland, including significant events, people, customs and the origins of place names.

Stage 3, My locality: Identity and heritage. History: identify specific patterns of change or continuity in how different generations in the locality live and work.

Before the lesson

- Plan the walk or visit at least a week ahead: check the route, and arrange supervision and permission as your school's policy requires.
- Print one stones sheet for each child; it comes with the lesson.
- Prepare clipboards, or sturdy library books or cardboard backs, and pencils for the class.
- Have the example headstone image ready on the board.
- Check the school record for the nearest graveyard, memorial or dated stone. Only take the walk if that record names a real place the class can reach on foot in about five minutes each way with readable carving. If there is no walkable site, read the headstone on the board from the start.
- Arrange at least one other adult so two adults are with the class off site.

How the hour runs

1. Look and wonder	4 min	4. Back in class: our dates on the line	8 min
2. Read and learn	5 min	5. What the stones can and cannot tell us	8 min
3. Reading the stones	28 min	6. What we learned	4 min

Teaching tips

- Model one full row on the stones sheet before children begin recording, and say out loud that one clear name and one clear date is enough.
- Circulate among the children during the activity to keep the work quiet and practical.
- Add the oldest and newest dates the class read to the timeline as cards before you ask what the stones mean.
- The timeline makes the time gap visible: a child places each card you add.

What to watch for

- Attempting to rub or touch the stone; remind them to write only what can be read without touching.
- Guessing at worn letters; stress that blanks are acceptable and useful evidence.
- Sharing personal family stories in discussion; keep focus on the writing shown.
- **A common wrong idea:** “The stones show everyone who lived in this place.” Say plainly that many people had no stone. Point back to the sort card for people who had no stone, and keep the talk on what this carving does and does not show.

Lesson 5

Help and stretch

- Support: Accept one clear date and one name from a child who found little.
- Extension: Ask how sure we can be when letters are worn.
- Extension: Ask how many years older the oldest stone is than the newest.

If you are short of time

If the walk runs long, add only the oldest date on the timeline. Never cut the stones sheet or the final sort and wrap.

Background for you

Memorial stones became common from the 1700s for families who could pay a carver. Earlier burials often left no lasting marker. What usually survives is a name, a death year, an age, and a short chosen phrase. Daily work, looks, and feelings almost never appear. Rain and lichen wear letters away, so a blank on a child's sheet is honest recording, not failure.

We do not know how many people of a place never had a stone. The stones near a school show only those who were marked. On a wet day the Lee family stone on the board (1741 and 1742) stands in for a local site and still shows the same limits: some names and dates, silence about others.

Key words

inscription	writing cut into stone
evidence	something real we can use to find out about the past

Children will ask

Why are some letters worn away? Rain, wind and lichen slowly wear the edges of the carving. That is why we leave blanks instead of guessing.

Did everyone get a stone? No. Many people were buried with no stone at all. The stones only show people whose families put one up.

Handle with care

The lesson is about writing on stone, not grief. Stay practical: names, dates, readable letters. Never ask a child about a family grave. If a child is upset, they walk with an adult and need not speak about it.

Activity sheet answers

1. Record Record what is carved on each stone you can read.
Mark rows that copy only letters the child can really read, name the kind of stone, and give any clear date or age. Blanks for worn letters are right. Shape matches the example: Mary Byrne; a headstone; 1891, aged 64. Wet day: Lee stone from the board.

2. Sketch Sketch the oldest piece of writing you find.
A simple sketch of the oldest carved writing found, showing letter shapes or the stone face. Trying the oldest piece matters more than neatness. Wet day: sketch from the Lee headstone on the board.

3. Dates Write the oldest date and the newest date you found.
The oldest and newest dates the child actually recorded on their sheet. Wet day from the Lee family stone: oldest 1741, newest 1742.