

Activity title

Block Printing - a way to mass produce our words and pictures

Time required

1-2 hours

Activity summary

Block printing

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

Make blocks which can be used for printing the same image many times.

What's this all about?

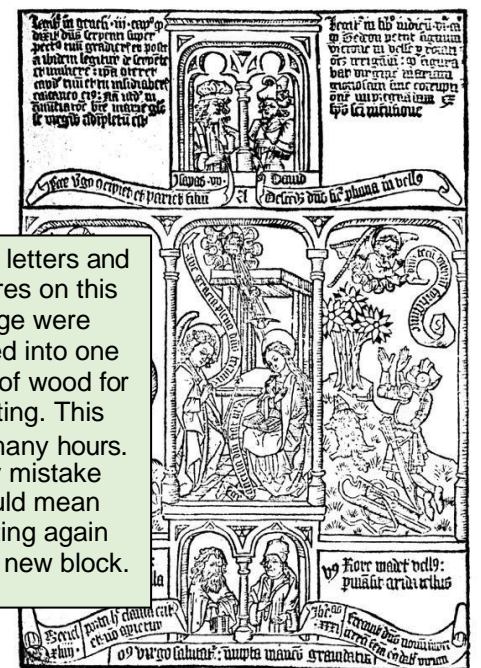
Six hundred years ago, all the books in Europe were written by hand. If a person owned more than five books, they were probably incredibly rich. All posters, pictures and even patterns on materials were painted by hand.

Then someone had a brilliant idea. If you got something that was the shape of the image that you wanted, you could print it again and again. This was much quicker than hand drawing everything.

Pictures or words could be cut into a block of material. These had to be in reverse, so that when they were printed it was the correct way around. The block was coated in ink. The image was then printed by being pressed on the paper or material. This could be repeated as many times as the image was wanted.



Printing a material by hand using a wooden block



All the letters and pictures on this page were carved into one block of wood for printing. This took many hours. Any mistake would mean starting again with a new block.

A print produced using a block made from metal



The metal block

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What equipment will you need?

- **Ink pad or paint**
- **Paper** (to print onto)

There are three options – each uses different things to make your printing block.

Option 1:

- **Modelling material**, such as plasticine or play dough
- **A tool to carve your shape**, such as a fork or spoon handle

Option 2:

- **A potato to make a printing block**
- **Paper towels**
- **The carving tool from option 1**

Option 3:

- **Foam letters**

Printing can be messy!
Wear an apron.
Use scrap paper to cover the surface that you are working on.

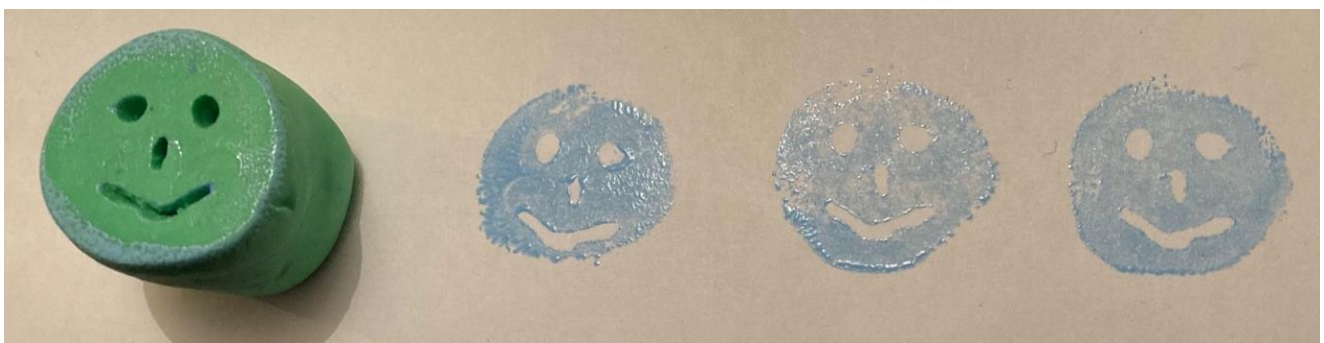
Now try this

There are three things you could do – each uses printing blocks made from a different material. Take your pick but do at least two!

1. Modelling material

- a) Make the modelling material into a shape with a flat side, such as a cylinder or cube.
- b) Use the carving tool to carve a picture or letter into the flat side.
- c) Lightly press the modelling material block into the ink pad or put a little paint on the surface. Be careful not to get paint into the features you have carved.
- d) Print as many copies of your block as you want!

After you carve the modelling material, if you put it in a fridge for a few minutes it will get a bit harder. This will make it easier to use when printing.



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2. Potato

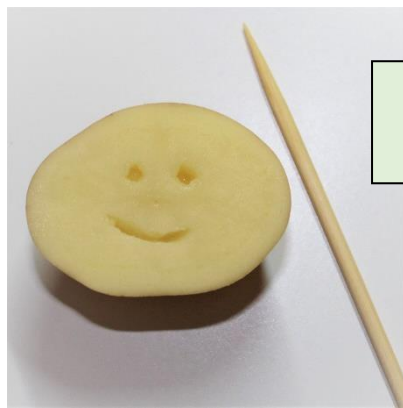
There are two ways to use potatoes for block printing – choose one and try it!

Before you start, get a responsible adult to cut the potato in half. You can now make two different images or try both methods if you want!

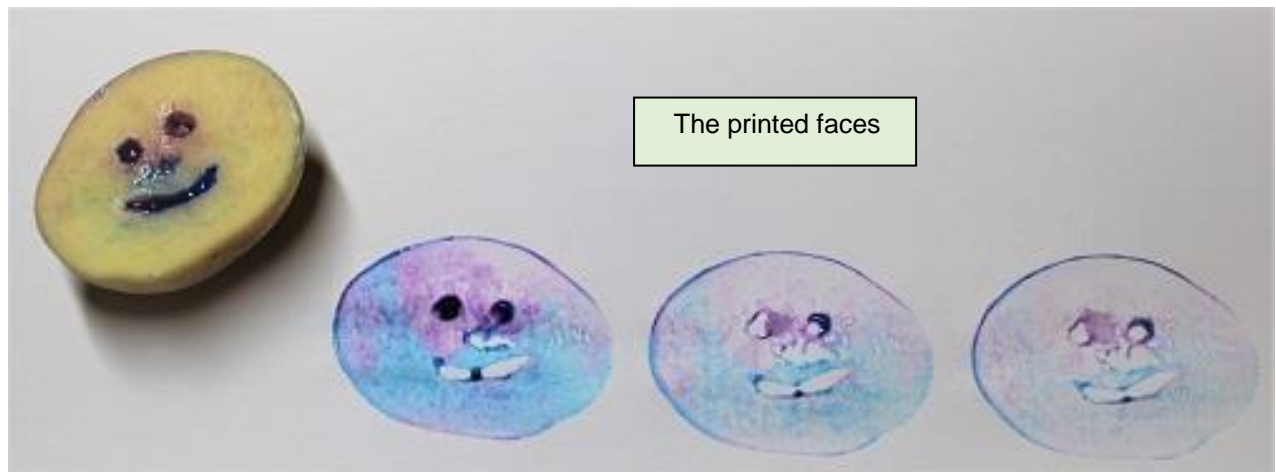
Method one – cut the image into the potato

- Use the carving tool to carve a picture or letter into a potato half.
- After carving, place the potato face down onto a paper towel. This will soak up moisture so it will print better.
- Lightly press the potato into the ink pad **or** put a little paint on the surface. Be careful not to get paint into the features you have carved.
- Print as many copies of your block as you want!

Remember that your print will be the opposite way round, so you will need to carve your picture or letter 'back to front'.



Potato with a face carved using a stick



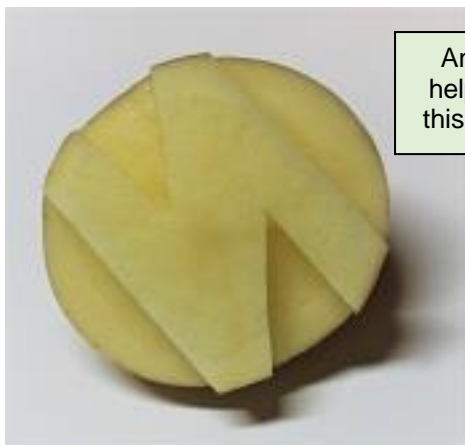
The printed faces

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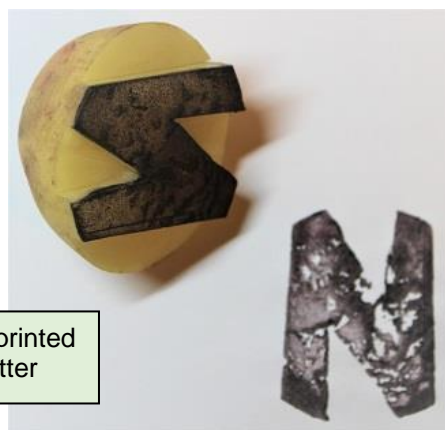
Method two – cut away the parts of the potato not needed in the image

- Choose the shape you want to print – letters and shapes work well. Remember that the printed version will be the 'back to front' image of your block.
- Use the carving tool to carve away the parts of the potato around the shape that you want.
- After carving, place the potato face down onto a paper towel. This will soak up moisture so it will print better.
- Lightly press the potato into the ink pad or put a little paint on the surface.
- Print as many copies of your block as you want!

You could get a responsible adult to cut away the potato around your shape using a knife.



An adult helped cut this letter N



The printed letter

3. Foam Letters

- Choose the letters for your name.
- With the letter back-to-front, lightly press the letter into the ink pad or put a little paint on the surface.
- Gently press the side with the ink onto the paper.
- Repeat for the next letters until you have your name!



Foam letters – paint is applied on this side



Tom's name printed with foam letters

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You could also

Try making a picture with more than one colour. Use two printing blocks, one for each colour. Can you work out a way to make sure that the pictures line up properly?

The following websites can be used for additional background information:

- BBC Bitesize – Indian block printing: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0115jb8>
- YouTube – How it was made? Woodcut printing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgCYovIFRNY>

What results are expected?



Block letter printing



Potato printing



Printing using shapes made from modelling material

With thanks to Hawthorns Primary School, Worthing, for sharing these resources which were created as a series of activities to celebrate 150 years of the IET.

