NO PREP

Wrapping Paper, Packaging, and Holiday Waste

A Sustainability Check

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

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The Holiday Waste Spike

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The Holiday Waste Spike

Every December, store shelves explode with wrapping paper, gift bags, ribbons, and boxes. At the same time, delivery trucks drop off piles of online orders, each wrapped in layers of cardboard, plastic air pillows, and foam. From the outside, the season looks colorful and generous. From the perspective of a landfill or recycling center, it looks like a sudden waste surge. In many communities, the amount of municipal solid waste (the everyday trash from homes and businesses) jumps noticeably between late November and early January. Why does this happen? One reason is simple volume. People buy more items, exchange more gifts, and receive more packages than at almost any other time of year. Another reason is packaging design. Many holiday products come with extra decorative boxes, plastic windows, or specialty inserts that make them look attractive on the shelf but are difficult to recycle. On top of that, many people host large gatherings, which means more disposable plates, cups, and food containers. All of those choices add extra bags to the curb on collection day. Environmental scientists are especially interested in what kind of waste increases. Paper products, cardboard, and certain types of plastic can be recycled, but only if they are clean, sorted correctly, and accepted by the local program. When holiday waste includes glittery paper, metallic foils, mixed materials, and food-covered containers, a big portion ends up in landfills or incinerators instead. Understanding the difference between what feels "recyclable" and what actually is recyclable is a key skill for anyone who wants to celebrate without creating quite so much trash.

What Really Happens to Wrapping Paper

At first glance, all wrapping paper looks like paper, so it must be recyclable, right? Unfortunately, the reality is more complicated. Standard, uncoated paper, like a simple printed tissue or a plain kraft paper roll, usually can be recycled if your community accepts mixed paper. But holiday wrapping often includes foil layers, plastic films, or heavy ink coatings that are difficult for paper mills to process. Some rolls even have a thin layer of plastic laminated to the surface to make them shiny and tear-resistant. That product still looks like "paper" to you, but to a recycling machine, it behaves more like a mixed material. Tape, ribbons, and glitter make things worse. When people leave long strips of tape or plastic bows attached to used paper, those non-paper materials can clog sorting equipment or weaken recycled pulp. Glitter and metallic inks introduce small plastic particles that don't break down easily. From the perspective of a recycling center, this kind of wrapping becomes contamination: material that either has to be removed by hand or sent to the landfill. A lot of holiday waste also comes from gift bags and tissue paper. Many gift bags have plastic handles, metal grommets, or glossy coatings. Tissue paper is often dyed or so thin and low-quality that it doesn't hold up well in the recycling process. Some communities accept it; others do not. Because rules vary, students and families need to check local guidelines instead of assuming that everything with a snowman on it belongs in the blue bin. Here is a simplified snapshot of common holiday materials and their typical recyclability (always check local rules):

Packaging, Returns, and the Hidden Footprint

Wrapping paper is only part of the story. The boxes and padding that protect gifts in transit also play a huge role in holiday waste. When you order a small object online and it arrives in a large cardboard box filled with plastic air pillows or foam, you are seeing the results of protective packaging designed to prevent damage. That packaging has its own resource footprint—trees cut for cardboard, fossil fuels used to make plastics, and energy spent in factories, warehouses, and trucks. In theory, cardboard is one of the success stories of recycling. It is relatively easy to collect, flatten, and reprocess into new boxes or paper products. However, when cardboard gets soaked with grease, food, or heavy tape, it may be rejected by recyclers. Plastic films and air pillows are even trickier. Some can be recycled at special drop-off locations, but they usually cannot go into home single-stream recycling bins

without causing equipment jams. When people toss them in anyway, hoping they'll be sorted out somehow, they are "wishcycling"—recycling based on hope rather than accurate information. Holiday returns add another layer. When customers send items back, those products must be inspected, repackaged, or sometimes discarded if damaged or opened. This can double the amount of packaging and transportation used for a single item. Economists talk about the external costs of these systems—impacts on landfills, energy use, and climate that are not reflected in the price on the tag. For environmental science students, holiday packaging and returns are a clear example of how consumer habits and business practices intersect with the physical limits of recycling systems.

Key Information

Material	Usually Recyclable?	Notes
Plain kraft wrapping paper	Often yes	No foil, glitter, or plastic; remove tape
Foil or glitter wrapping paper	Usually no	Mixed materials and contamination
Cardboard shipping boxes	Yes (if clean and flattened)	Remove tape, labels, and plastic inserts when possible
Plastic bows and ribbons	No	Reuse if possible; otherwise trash
Tissue paper	Sometimes	Often low-quality fiber; rules vary by community

Case Study – The Overflowing Blue Bin

After New Year's, Jordan's city switched to a new single-stream recycling system. Residents could now put paper, cardboard, metal cans, and some plastics into one big blue cart. The first week of January, Jordan noticed that almost every cart on the block was overflowing with flattened boxes, crumpled wrapping, and plastic packaging. On collection day, a note appeared on several carts: "Contaminated – Contains Non-Recyclable Materials." Curious, Jordan asked the sanitation worker what had gone wrong. The worker pointed to glittery wrapping paper, plastic ribbons, and foam packing blocks mixed in with the cardboard. "The system can't handle all this," she said. "When there's too much contamination, we have to send entire loads to the landfill." Jordan realized that even though neighbors felt good about filling their recycling carts, some of their holiday waste was actually making recycling less effective for everyone.

1. What specific materials in the neighbors' carts caused the recycling load to be labeled "contaminated"?

2. Why did Jordan's neighborhood's "good intentions" of recycling actually reduce the effectiveness of the new system?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, a common problem with holiday wrapping paper is that it:

a) Is always made from 100% recycled content

b) Cannot be used on cardboard boxes

c) Often contains foil, plastic, or glitter that makes it hard to recycle

d) Never uses tape, ribbons, or bows, so it stays clean enough for the bin

2. The term wishcycling refers to:

a) Choosing to bike to the store instead of driving a car or truck to cut fuel emissions

b) Throwing items into the recycling bin based on hope rather than knowing local rules

c) Reusing cardboard boxes for storage

d) Recycling only during the holiday season

3. In a single-stream recycling system, one major risk of putting non-recyclable holiday items into the bin is that:

a) The materials are shipped to another country to be sorted by hand at a recycling plant there

b) The items instantly turn into compost instead of recyclables

c) The truck will automatically skip your house forever

d) Contamination can cause entire loads to be sent to the landfill instead of being recycled

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Municipal solid waste	A) Environmental impacts not included in the product's price
2. ___ Contamination	B) Everyday trash produced by homes and businesses
3. ___ Single-stream recycling	C) Tossing questionable items into recycling based on guesswork
4. ___ Wishcycling	D) System where paper, plastics, and metals are collected together
5. ___ External costs	E) Materials that don't belong in recycling but end up mixed in

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. When glitter, plastic bows, or food residue mix with otherwise recyclable materials, they create _____ in the recycling stream.

2. Combining all major recyclables in one cart for collection is called single-_____ recycling.

3. The extra environmental damage caused by packaging and returns that is not reflected in the item's price is an example of external _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Using the table from the reading, explain why plain kraft wrapping paper is usually a better environmental choice than glittery or foil wrapping paper.

2. Describe two actions a household can take during the holiday season to reduce packaging and wrapping waste while still enjoying gift-giving.

3. How could clearer communication from cities or recycling programs help reduce wishcycling and contamination after the holidays? Give one specific example.