

# Making Cloth Napkins

eco-cycle

## Snapshot

Turning tattered textiles into reusable napkins saves trees and keeps reusable fabric from going to waste.



<https://bit.ly/eco-cycle-zero-waste-schools-guide>

**Objective:** Students will understand how the making and disposal of paper napkins increases waste, negatively affecting habitats and depleting natural resources.

**Age Groups:** K-6<sup>th</sup> grade

**Setting:** Classroom or activity space

**Project Duration:** 30-60 minutes, plus time for background learning and collecting fabric

## Materials:

- Unwanted textiles
- Collection bin
- 12"x12" wood or cardboard frames (one per four students)
- Scissors or pinking sheers
- Permanent or fabric markers
- Stamps/pads
- Smocks for clothing protection (optional)

## Why This Project Matters:

Every year, millions of trees are cut down to make disposable napkins. Some of these trees are from old-growth forests in North America and around the globe, our last original forests! It does not have to be this way!

Using cloth napkins instead of paper napkins saves trees, reduces waste in landfills, protects animal and plant habitat, saves energy, and reduces air and water pollution.

When cloth napkins are made from unwanted textiles (towels, t-shirts, bedsheets, etc.), the environmental benefits increase because the material gets reused and is not discarded. The consumption of energy and the resources required to manufacture new cloth napkins is also avoided.

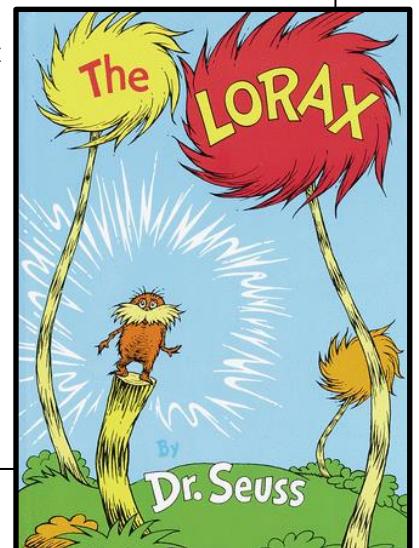
## Project Summary:

In this activity, students will make simple cloth napkins using unwanted fabric. They will decorate their napkins with markers and stamps to make their own unique, eco-friendly treasures.

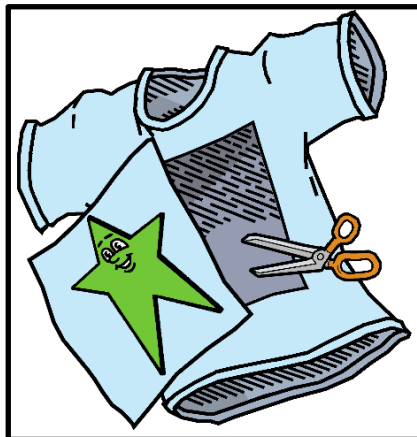
## Implementation:

### Background learning:

1. Read *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss and have a discussion comparing 'thneeds' with paper napkins.
2. Have students estimate how many paper napkins they use in a week at school and at home. You may also choose to include tissues and/or all disposable paper products that get discarded in the trash.



- For upper elementary students: Calculate the number of paper napkins used by the school cafeteria in a school year. Ask the school kitchen for an unopened package of paper napkins and find out how many napkins it contains. Then ask how many packages are used in the average school week. To get your estimated total number of napkins used in a school year, multiply: **number of napkins/package x number of packages/week x number of weeks/school year**.
- Calculate the number of trees used each year to supply your school with paper napkins. Weigh the unopened package of paper napkins in ounces. There are 16 ounces in a pound, and 117 pounds of paper can be made from a 35-foot-tall pulpwood tree. To get your estimated total number of trees used for paper napkins in a school year, multiply: **weight of package in ounces x number of packages/week x number of weeks/school** and divide that number by **16** (ounces/pound). Take this new number in pounds and divide it by **117** (pounds/tree) to get the number of trees used for paper napkins over the course of a school year.



#### *Making napkins:*

- Organize an “Unwanted Textiles Drive” at school or in the classroom. Advertise with announcements, newsletter information, posters, and/or emails to families. Place collection bins in the school lobby or classroom. Ask for used/unwanted (not brand-new) t-shirts, sweatshirts, sweatpants, pajamas, sheets, and towels. (Fleece is not absorbent enough. Cottons work best.) *Specify that fabrics must be clean!* (Another option is to contact a textile or clothing manufacturer, or fabric store, to see if they might donate scrap fabric.)

#### **Extensions:**

- Create incentives for student to use their napkins during school lunches throughout the school year.
- Facilitate a “napkin party” to celebrate reuse. Challenge students to bring in all the reusables they will need to eat a snack (container, cup, utensils and of course, napkin). Brainstorm ahead of time which types of snack foods produce minimal trash. Have kids sign up to bring waste-free treats.
- Have students find out how much money their school spends on paper napkins each year. What could that money be used for instead?
- Help students make a set of cloth napkins to give as a holiday gift.

2. Make 12”x12” frames or templates out of wood or used cardboard boxes for students to trace on fabric. Plan to have at least one frame per group of four students.
3. For very young students, cut the fabric into strips 12” wide prior to the activity (so students will only have to make one cut).
4. Before making the napkins, assemble work surfaces (long tables protected with newspaper) and line up extra adult supervision.
5. Help younger students line up the frames with the end of the fabric and trace the line with a marker. Older students can hold and trace the template themselves.
6. After cutting out their napkins, students can decorate them using stamps and markers.
7. Encourage students to take their napkins to lunch daily and to make napkins for their friends and family.
8. Donate leftover, still usable textiles to a thrift store.



**Assessment:**

Quiz students in the cafeteria or classroom after their napkin-making session. Ask them how using a cloth napkin instead of a paper one helps the environment.

**Related Activities:**

- Waste-Free Lunch 1: Classroom Challenge – Chapter 2
- Waste-Free Lunch 2: School Contest – Chapter 2
- “One or None” Paper Towel Campaign – Chapter 5
- Getting Artsy with Reuse – Chapter 8
- Creative Crayon Recycling – Chapter 20

