Why Are Rocks Important?

You know that you can recycle paper, aluminum, and plastic. Did you know that the Earth also recycles? One thing the Earth recycles is rock. A rock is a naturally occurring solid mixture of one or more minerals. Some rocks also contain the remains of living things.

Rock is an important resource for human beings. Early humans used rocks as hammers and other tools. They shaped rocks like chert and obsidian into spear points, knives, and scrapers. Rock is also used in buildings, monuments, and roads. The figure below shows how rock has been used as a building material in ancient and modern civilizations.

It may seem like rocks never change, but this is not true. In fact, rocks are changing all the time. Most of these changes are slow, which is why it seems like rocks do not change. The processes by which new rocks form from older rock material is called the rock cycle.
What Processes Shape the Earth’s Surface?

Many different processes are part of the rock cycle. These processes shape the features of our planet. They form the mountains and valleys that we see around us. They also affect the types of rock found on the Earth’s surface.

WEATHERING, EROSION, AND DEPOSITION

Weathering happens when water, wind, ice, and heat break down rock into smaller fragments. These fragments are called sediment. Sediment can move over the Earth’s surface through erosion and deposition.

Erosion happens when water, wind, ice, or gravity move sediment over the Earth’s surface. Over time, sediment that has been eroded stops moving and is deposited. When sediment stops moving, it is called deposition. Sediment can be deposited in bodies of water and other low-lying areas.

HEAT AND PRESSURE

Rock can also form when buried sediment is squeezed by the weight of the layers above it. In addition, temperature and pressure can change the minerals in the rocks. In some cases, the rock gets hot enough to melt. This melting produces liquid rock, or magma. When the magma cools, it hardens to form new rock. The new rock contains different minerals than the rock that melted.
THE ROCK CYCLE

Geologists put rocks into three main groups based on how they form. These groups are igneous rock, sedimentary rock, and metamorphic rock. *Igneous rock* forms when melted rock cools and hardens. *Sedimentary rock* is made of pieces of other rock (sediment). *Metamorphic rock* forms when heat and pressure change the chemical composition of a rock.

Remember that the rock cycle is made of all of the processes that make new rock out of older rock material. Weathering, erosion, deposition, heat, and pressure are some of the processes that are part of the rock cycle. The figure below shows how the processes in the rock cycle can change rocks from one kind to another.

As you can see, rocks do not have to follow a single path through the rock cycle. An igneous rock may be weathered to form sediment, which then forms sedimentary rock. The igneous rock could also melt and cool to form a new igneous rock.

The path that a rock takes through the rock cycle depends on the forces that act on the rock. These forces change depending on where the rock is located. For example, high pressures and temperatures below the Earth’s surface can cause metamorphic rock to form.

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Compare** How are igneous rocks different from metamorphic rocks?

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**TAKE A LOOK**

5. **Use a Model** Find two paths through the rock cycle that lead from sedimentary rock to igneous rock. Use a colored pen or marker to trace both paths on the figure.
How Do Geologists Classify Rocks?

Remember that rocks can be divided into three groups based on how they form. Each main group of rock can be divided into smaller groups. These divisions are also based on the ways rocks form. For example, all igneous rock forms when magma cools and hardens. However, different kinds of igneous rock form when magma cools above the ground and when it cools underground.

Each kind of rock has specific features that make it different from other kinds of rock. Geologists can learn how a rock formed by studying its features. Two features that are especially helpful for classifying rocks are composition and texture.

COMPOSITION

The combination of elements or compounds that make up a rock is the rock’s **composition**. The minerals in a rock determine the rock’s composition. For example, the sedimentary rock limestone is made mainly of the minerals calcite and aragonite. In contrast, the igneous rock granite contains the minerals feldspar, quartz, and biotite. These two rocks contain different minerals and have different compositions.

![Limestone and Granite](images)

Composition can help geologists classify rocks. This is because different minerals form under different conditions. For example, remember that the mineral garnet forms under high temperatures and pressures. Therefore, a rock with garnet in it probably formed under high temperature and pressure. Such a rock is probably a metamorphic rock.

**Math Focus**

7. Calculate Rock A contains 10% quartz and 45% calcite. The rest of the rock is mica. What percentage of the rock is mica?
 TEXTURE

The sizes, shapes, and positions of the grains that make up a rock are the rock’s texture. The texture of a rock can be affected by different things. The texture of a sedimentary rock is mainly affected by the sediment that formed it. For example, a sedimentary rock that forms from small sediment pieces will have a fine-grained texture. The figures below show some examples of sedimentary rock textures.

Fine-grained

Siltstone
Siltstone is made of tiny pieces of sediment, such as silt and clay. Therefore, it has a fine-grained texture. It feels smooth when you touch it.

Medium-grained

Sandstone
Sandstone is made of pieces of sand. It has a medium-grained texture. It feels a bit rough, like sandpaper.

Coarse-grained

Conglomerate
Conglomerate is made of sediment pieces that are large, such as pebbles. Therefore, it has a coarse-grained texture. It feels bumpy.

The texture of an igneous rock depends on how fast the melted rock cools. As melted rock cools, mineral crystals form. When melted rock cools quickly, only very small mineral crystals can form. Therefore, igneous rocks that cool quickly tend to have a fine-grained texture. When melted rock cools slowly, large crystals can form, which make a coarse-grained igneous rock.

Fine-grained

Basalt
Basalt forms when melted rock cools quickly on the Earth’s surface. It has a fine-grained texture because the mineral crystals in it are very small.

Coarse-grained

Granite
Granite forms when melted rock cools slowly underground. It has a coarse-grained texture because the mineral crystals in it are large.

TAKE A LOOK

8. Explain What determines the texture of a sedimentary rock?

9. Describe How does granite form?
1. Compare  What is the difference between weathering and erosion?

2. Identify  Complete the diagram to show how igneous rock can turn into sedimentary rock.

   ![](image)

   igneous rock → weathering → erosion and deposition → layers of sediment → sedimentary rock

3. List  What are two features that geologists use to classify rocks?

4. Describe  What determines the texture of an igneous rock?

5. Explain  How can a rock’s composition help geologists to classify the rock?