



# How to Dumpster Dive

User  
Reviewed

Quick quiz: is dumpster diving :

- A) a sport?
- B) a popular hobby for the frugal?
- C) an environmentally and socially conscious way of life?
- D) all of the above?

The answer is all of the above. As the name implies, dumpster diving (known as "skip diving" or "binning" in Commonwealth English, "canning" in American English, or "dumpster-munching" in many parts of the world) is the process of scavenging trash—not always from dumpsters, however—for useful or valuable items. Believe it or not, though, dumpster diving is quickly approaching mainstream status even in affluent countries. Whether you're looking to furnish your home, fill your fridge, or cash in on other people's trash, this guide will teach you the ins and outs of dumpster diving.

Remember, one man's trash is another man's treasure!

## Steps

- 1 Know your local laws.** In many jurisdictions trash is not considered private property, so dumpster divers cannot be charged with theft, however, some municipalities have ordinances prohibiting scavenging trash, most notably in the United Kingdom. Australian Law reflects a thinly disguised intolerance of the practice. Dumpster divers may run afoul of laws regarding **trespassing**, **invasion of privacy**, environmental, or even in some cases "theft". In addition police in most states have "move on" powers that are often brought to bear on scavengers. Research the laws in your area or contact your local police department to inquire about the legality of diving practices.
- 2 Prepare yourself mentally and adapt your methods to avoid practices you see as disgusting.** If you're still put off by sifting through trash, consider scavenging only items not in rubbish bins, such as furniture and sometimes crates of food.
- 3 Network with other divers.** As you get into dumpster diving, you'll likely meet other divers, and most, but not all, will be friendly and helpful. Share tips and experiences and you'll probably get some good tips in return. Consider joining an online dumpster diving forum or a local club. Other divers can keep a look out for items that you want.
- 4 Find the dumpsters in your area and keep track of when you find the best items and when the garbage collectors come.** In residential areas, find out standard move-in and move-out dates.
- 5 Plan your diving according to what you're looking for.** If you're just looking for unexpected treasures, you can look pretty much anywhere, but if you want something like food, search behind grocery stores and bakeries. Most stores throw out food at the expiration date, though much of it is still good, only a little past its sell-by date. Look for larger items like furniture or electronic items sitting next to trash cans. Look online at dumpster diving forums for tips on where to go in your area.
- 6 Wear appropriate clothing, like protective gloves, long-sleeve shirts and pants to protect you from dirt and cuts.** If you're going to actually enter a dumpster, wear sturdy fabrics such as denim, and cover as much of your body as possible. Protect your feet by wearing thick, fully-enclosed shoes or boots. Wear clothes that you don't care too much about.
- 7 Equip yourself.** At the very least carry a milk crate or stepping stool to help you see and access the contents of dumpsters and bring plastic bags to hold your treasures. Also be sure to bring a flashlight if you're diving at night.

Remember that you don't have to dive right into a dumpster — bring along a long pole to poke around with or one with a grabbing apparatus on the end, and you may not need to venture in at all.

**8 Make sure no one is around and keep a look out.** Dumpster diving is somewhat controversial, and divers are frequently confronted by shopkeepers or homeowners. While a confrontation is no big deal if handled properly, you should still try to avoid it. If you see people in the area, wait a while.

**9 Handle with care.** Be very careful when handling trash or entering dumpsters. Broken glass and sharp objects can cut you, and you could be poked by a used needle. Protective clothing can somewhat help avoid these dangers, but you should always exercise caution when rummaging through bags of trash. If you find anything suspicious, like a weapon, report it to the police without touching the item.

**10 Take only what you need and can realistically use.** Take what you can use, but remember that there are a lot of dumpster divers, and someone may have a dire need for something that you'll just leave sitting in your garage.

**11 Clean up after yourself.** If you've thrown garbage all around, pick it up and put it back into the dumpster. While you're at it, throw away other nearby trash that's on the ground. Leave the area as clean or cleaner than you found it — don't give dumpster diving a bad name.

**12 Clean items thoroughly.** Cleaning is especially important with food. Check packaged items for holes and leaks and take special care to wash produce, preferably in a mild bleach and water solution. The food you buy in grocery stores is usually treated in this way anyway, so this isn't a drastic step.

**13 Clean yourself thoroughly.** Take a good shower with soap to wash the dirt and germs off.

**14 Learn from your dumpster diving experiences and try to stay flexible as there are many unknowns when it comes to dumpster diving.** Share what you've learned with others and help out those less experienced than you.

**15 Finally, this is a dangerous job.** Dumpsters are the dirtiest places and can spread diseases. They may kill you and/or your family members. Dumpster truck comes once or twice a week. If you get trapped in the truck you are likely to be crushed.

## Community Q&A

Is dumpster diving legal in Greenville, NC?

 North Carolina State Legislation states that it is completely legal to salvage trash if no 'No Trespassing' signs are present at a business. That or locked gates/fences. Happy diving!  
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What is the best time of day to go dumpster diving?

 Try to go after the store's closing hours to avoid confrontation. Going before the store opens is not always a good idea, as the stock and receiving crew often work early hours.  
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What will the cops do if they catch me dumpster diving?

 It depends on the laws in your area. In places were it is legal, they may just ask you to move along. If they show up due to a complaint or if you are trespassing, you may get fined. It is best to find out your state and local ordinance laws.  
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What if it doesn't say "Private Property"? Also, can I dumpster dive in the GameStop trash can?

 If it doesn't state Private Property, or if it has no locks/gates, you can dive legally. GameStop has two dumpsters: one for trash, another for paper products. But you won't exactly find a gold mine of usable products; one time I got lucky with a internally damaged Xbox 360. Keep in mind that it is completely legal if no clear trespassing signs are present. But the employment may find your salvaging bothersome and change what gets dumped on purpose to discourage

you.

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### Do stores like Wal-Mart and Wegmans lock their dumpsters?

wikiHow Contributor

Most Wal-Marts, and stores like them, have a trash compactor, which you DO NOT want to mess with. It could also be considered trespassing.

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### Can I go dumpster-driving in the trash at the mall?

Redstoneplankz

If there are no signs, then yes.

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### Is there an age limit on dumpster diving?

Redstoneplankz

Nope. Dumpster diving is legal, and not controlled except when the dumpster is locked.

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### What is the best way to learn the garbage pick-up schedules without scoping out the areas?

wikiHow Contributor

It may be possible to go to a library to view the schedule online. Try to figure out the company that manages the waste in that area, usually found on the truck, and search 'pick up schedule.' Or you could call as if you were researching companies to get service and just name the street.

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### Is it legal behind big malls?

Redstoneplankz

If there are no signs, then yes.

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### How do I make money out of collecting garbage? I might take stuff I need, but I understand that people have made money from it.

wikiHow Contributor

You really can't get rich from dumpster diving, but you may find working electronics, furniture, etc. that you can clean up/fix and sell on eBay, Craigslist, Facebook, or other local used listings.

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### Can you answer these readers' questions?

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On **How to Use Skype on an iPhone**, a reader asks:

How can you translate on Skype using an iPhone?

Your answer...

Reply

On **How to Add Apps to a Smart TV**, a reader asks:

How can I download an app to a Vizio Smart Cast?

Your answer...

Reply

On **How to Get a Plumbing License in Florida**, a reader asks:

How can I get a plumbing license transfer from out of state?

Your answer...

Reply

## Tips

- Never argue with an employee or police officer about your right to dumpster dive. If anyone, including someone just driving by the area, asks you to leave just leave without confrontation.
- Empty your pockets and take off any jewelry before entering a dumpster so you don't lose it in the trash for another diver to find.
- Wear tight fitting jeans, they are less likely to get caught on bins and in fences. But not so tight that you can't move properly
- A cheap set of long-handled fireplace log tongs work wonderfully for retrieving items if you don't want to climb in. A miner's cap with a light or a trustworthy headlamp is better than a flashlight because it allows you to work two handed.
- Before vaulting into a dumpster, hit the side of the dumpster a few times to warn its inhabitants (i.e., possums, raccoons, rats, squirrels) of your impending scavenging. Watch out for possums as they will fight, and rats will run over the top of you to get away.
- Dive with a friend; it's a lot more fun with company and safer, too. A friend can help you out if you become injured, can help defuse confrontations and keep look out.
- Dumpster dive on Sunday when garbage trucks aren't working and you might find some great food and other cool stuff!
- While diving, keep a few cardboard boxes around outside the dumpster in a little pile. If confronted, you can say you were searching for some boxes to help with a move. The employees are more likely to give you a better reaction than if you tell them you were looking for products they sell.
- If confronted by a business owner, resident, rubbish hauler, or police officer, be polite and explain what you are doing. Many times people will assume that you are illegally dumping trash and will not bother you if they understand that you are not. In any case, always be friendly and respectful, and try to understand the other person's point of view: business owners who tell you to leave the premises, for example, may be concerned about their legal liability if you were to be injured.
- Always have a partner to hold the lid open of the dumpster it can hurt if the lid falls on you.

## Warnings

- Do **not** collect beds which can contain bedbugs that are very difficult to get rid of.
- Do **not** smoke or use open flame as a light source while dumpster diving as even just a dropped cigarette or ash can smolder, catch fire and engulf a dumpster very quickly. You have no idea what type of flammable materials may be in or around a dumpster. Trash fires are very hard to put out.
- Never enter a dumpster that is equipped with a compactor.
- Know how to tell when canned products have spoiled, they may contain botulism toxin which can be fatal.
- Do not escalate confrontations. If someone asks you to leave, do so, even if you know your activity to be perfectly legal.
- Never take documents containing personal information or use such information for illegal purposes.
- Do not take any sort of melons from the dumpster. Melons can absorb liquids which rot the melon from inside out. If eaten it can be fatal.
- Do not actually dive into the dumpster; it is a hypothetical term. You should bring a ladder and slowly ease into the dumpster.
- Be mindful of trash pickup times. Be sure that you are not inside a container when it is being picked up to dump.
- For open-topped industrial dumpsters, do **not** lean over the edges of the bin - you can crack ribs this way or get a hernia.
- Do not enter a dumpster when garbage trucks are in the area; if a truck approaches, get out of the dumpster immediately.
- Consider keeping your tetanus, hep A/B immunizations up to date in case you get cut. Broken skin, or fluid contact situations may not injure but they can be fatal.
- Never try to access a dumpster or other trash that is fenced in or that has "no trespassing" signs posted nearby.
- Always wear moderately thick gloves so that you do not cut your hands or prick them with used needles.
- Dumpster diving is illegal in the United Kingdom and is classed as theft. Property which is put in a bin remains the property of the person who owned it until the council or other body collect it. After it has been collected, it becomes the property of that body. People have been prosecuted over this. If you wish to do this you should seek the permission of the legal owner to take any item. Australian law is not a great deal better, but to seek permission is usually to be refused, for fear the owner has left themselves open to injury lawsuit.

- Beware of dumpster lids slamming down on you because of wind or gravity.
- If you get caught, some people may call you awful names (for example "Joe Dirt") for years after the fact. Name-calling is never okay, but be aware of the risks.

### Things You'll Need

- Comfortable, sturdy clothes you don't mind getting dirty
- Cheap pants with leather or denim patches sewn over the knees for added protection
- Strong, fully-enclosed shoes or boots
- Gloves
- Milk crate or stool
- Plastic bags
- A stick or grabbing device for poking about
- Flashlight or headlamp
- First aid kit
- Helmet
- Hand sanitizer
- Tweezers
- Metal fork

### Sources and Citations

- [A Shout Out To Eating Garbage: On Dumpster Diving](#) A CBC National News story (4 minute video) and personal reflections on dumpster diving.
- [FrugalVillage.com](#) An introduction to dumpster diving
- [Freecycle.org](#) List items to give away or items you need—search for your local group

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