

Candles

Picture yourself in your home once the sun sets if you can't use electric lights or flashlights. We all know candles were used, but back then artificial light was often expensive and sometimes unavailable. To conserve their supply of candles families often gathered around a table sharing the light from one candle. Consider the long winter when the sun sets early and rises late. How many candles do you think your family would need? An average candle might only burn 4-6 hours.



Beeswax candles burn slowly with a pleasant scent and hold up to warmer temperatures, but wax was expensive. Even if you had a couple of beehives on the farm, you wouldn't have enough wax for all the candles you needed. The majority of people used candles made from animal fat; beef or mutton tallow. Farm families made their own candles in the fall when animals were butchered. The candles could be molded or dipped. Molding made straight, uniform candles but a mold only made 6-12 at a time. If you wanted to make a year's supply of candles and get it done in a day or so, dipping was the way to go.

Candle supplies including a mold, lumps of tallow, sticks with wicks cooling on a rack.

Make Your Own Dipped Candle

You can dip candles with tallow but for a classroom, using wax will give you better results. Wax can be a fire risk if it is overheated. This system will safely control the temperature of the wax. The pot will include both water and wax and act like a double boiler. Once the wax is melted it will float on the top and the water will help control the temperature of the wax.

Fill the pot half full of water and add your wax. Heat the water until near boiling. Once the wax starts to melt you can turn it down to medium. When the wax is melted, you can turn it down even more. The wax should feel very warm, but not so hot that you would burn yourself if you put your finger in it. If the wax starts to cool and congeal along the edges of the pot, the wax is too cool. If it is too hot, the wax will melt the previous layer. If it is too cool, the wax won't properly stick to the candle.

Each student will need a stick, dowel, or even a pencil. The wick or string is tied to the stick. The candle won't be any longer than the height of your pot so figure that as the finished length once it is tied to the stick. I usually had a finished length of 6-7 inches of wick on the

stick. To tell the candles apart later, you can put some masking tape on the end of the stick and write their initials on the tape.

When the wax is ready, the students will line up making a circle, taking turns dipping their candle, dipping down and up, letting it drip into the pot, and moving on. By the time everyone has dipped, the candles are cool enough for the next layer so the students can repeat the process as the circle just keeps going around.

When your candle has reached the desired thickness, hang them to cool overnight. I've made a rack by placing two yardsticks between two tables and then hanging the sticks between the yardsticks.



Supplies

Large pot such as stock pot
Hot plate
Wax
Water
Hot pad
Cotton string or candle wick
Sticks, dowels, or pencils, one for each student
Newspaper or something to cover the table
Cardboard to protect the floor (I usually tape it down)
Optional – hot pot

Hints

- It can take a while for the wax to melt. I've used a hot pot to add hot water to speed it up a bit. I usually do this ahead of time to have it ready.
- As the students dip, they are removing wax. If the level in the pot gets low, you can add hot water and bring the level up higher again. That makes it easier to get a full dip.
- Some students like to think if they leave their candle in the pot, it will thicken faster. The hot temperature will actually start to melt off the earlier layers.
- The candles also get longer and you'll end up with wax beyond the wick. Traditionally the bottoms of the candles were usually trimmed about 2-3 rounds before the last dip. You don't need to do this, but if you want to, you'll need a paring knife to do it right after a dip when the candle is soft.
- It can be difficult to clean a pot completely of wax so I use a cheap pot for this.
- Candles were white or cream colored. Colored wax was very difficult to get. And very few candles then were scented.
- Candle wick is braided so it curls as it burns and stays the same length. Ordinary string will not snuff itself and makes more of a mess. Candles made with string wicks probably shouldn't be burned. You can get candle wick at most hobby shops where you buy your wax. Braided candle wick started to be used in the early 1820s.