How Paper Is Recycled

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If you live in a city or town that mandates separating waste into different types, you probably wondered what happens to it all after the sanitation people come and pick it up. Paper that is about to be recycled is usually of three types. The first is scraps of paper that are recycled internally in paper mills. When paper mills manufacture paper, many raw materials are left unused. These raw materials are then recycled back into the paper mill. The second type is paper that is discarded before it reaches store shelves, such as paper wasted in packaging. The third type is paper that has been used by the consumer (you and I).

The third type of paper is almost any paper you can think of. Old newspapers, office papers, magazines, paper from homes, and telephone directories. Ink is removed from the paper using an industrial process called de-inking, which was developed by a German jurist named Justus Claproth.

The used paper is mixed with water and chemicals to break it down. The result is then chopped up into smaller pieces and heated, which breaks the paper down further into cellulose, which is an organic plant material. The cellulose in plants is what gives them their sturdy structure. It is also why certain raw vegetables are difficult to chew. This sturdiness gives paper its durability. This resulting mixture is called "pulp." Next, it is put through an industrial strainer, which removes any glue or plastic still present in the mixture. Since glue and plastic are not organic substances, they don't break down when those particular chemicals and heat are applied to them. Next, the mixture is bleached, to give it its distinctive white color (or dyed, if it is colored paper). More water is added, and finally it can be used to make new paper. Since the cellulose fibers are plant material and not everlasting like plastics, the most they can be recycled is about 7 cycles. Even then, they get shorter with every cycle, resulting in less paper produced, and eventually they are worn out.

Even then, seven cycles are still much more eco friendly than just single use. Statistics put over thirty percent of municipal waste by weight(before recycling) to be comprised of paper and paper products(US Environmental agency, report released 2007). In theory, you can also produce a form of recycled paper at home. I had tried an experiment once, which I will write about soon.

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