San Bernardino County Sheriff / Coroner
Gravesite Excavation

I. Locating the grave
   A. Fresh dirt
   B. Raised / lowered ground
      1. Body in graves takes up space of removed dirt
      2. If early grave is leveled as body decomposes the dirt sinks down
   C. Probes
      1. Probe ground with metal rod or rebar
      2. Feeling for non-resistance
   D. Misplaced debris
      1. Weeds in an area of grass
      2. Pile of wood or trash where it doesn't seem to belong
      3. Old mattress in middle of vacant lot
   E. Color
      1. Soil oxidizes
      2. When soil is overturned it may be different color from surrounding surface dirt
   F. Compaction
      1. Recently disturbed soil is easy to dig
      2. Non disturbed soil is very firm
II. Beginning Excavation
   A. Dig slowly with shovel at shallow angle to surface
      1. Be aware of resistance of soil
      2. Don't point shovel into ground and step on it
   B. Find direction of burial
      1. Once any part of the body is exposed, identify it and use its position to uncover rest of body
      2. Expose complete body before removal
III. Archaeological way
   A. Excavate in 10cm levels (about 4")
      1. Expose body completely at each level
      2. Helps reposition any evidence that may be knocked out of situ
      3. Screen all soil removed in each level before continuing downward
   B. Gridding excavation
      1. Grids can help to sketch and map excavation
      2. Grids often get in the way of the work
      3. Examples of portable type grids
IV. Mapping excavation
   A. Sketching remains
   B. Locating evidence
      1. Set one corner of grave as datum
      2. Create 'x' and 'y' axis from datum
      3. Or use azimuth circle and distance
      4. Measure depth below surface
      5. May use line level from datum point
   C. Notes

V. Screening
   A. Loading the screen
      1. Keep amount of dirt in the screen light
      2. Allow screener to completely sort through one load before adding the next
   B. Work slowly to reduce damage
      1. Don't rub dirt clumps against the screen
      2. Gently break them apart with you fingers

VI. Practical Exercise – 8hr class only

Students will work in small groups to excavate and document buried skeletal remains. Students will be expected to excavate in an accepted archaeological manner including screening all remains, removing all material in 10cm levels, and properly measuring and recording.

Skeletal elements are scientific polymer casts of actual human skeletons or non-forensic human remains donated and prepared for educational purposes.

Students will be provided with all necessary personal protective equipment.