

MATERIALITY:

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## TRANSFORMATION, AGGREGATION AND ACCUMULATION

ROSIE GALANIS, GRADUATE FELLOW IN VISUAL ART

GLUCK FELLOWS PROGRAM OF THE ARTS AT UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE



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# TARA DONOVAN

“Often known for her transformation of neutral or mundane materials into elaborate, mind-bending objects that evoke the natural world or other organic material, Donovan’s work in many ways is about work. She manipulates material over and over again, to see what it is capable of becoming, where it might lead, and how it will migrate from an object of practical use to something surreal or sublime. In some instances she reworks a material into both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms, engaging with space and light in nuanced and unexpected ways.”

“Tara Donovan received a B.F.A. (1991) from the Corcoran College of Art and Design and an M.F.A. (1999) from Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work has appeared in numerous solo and group exhibitions at such venues as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the UCLA Hammer Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.”

<https://mccadencever.org/exhibitions/tara-donovan>

<https://www.macfound.org/fellows/73/>

<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/tara-donovan>



Tara Donovan's large-scale installations, sculptures, drawings, and prints utilize everyday objects to explore the transformative effects of accumulation and aggregation.

Click on Tara Donovan's photo on the left to hear her speak about her work.

<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/tara-donovan/>

<https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/tara-donovan-sculpting-everyday-materials>

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# MATERIALITY: TRANSFORMATION, AGGREGATION AND ACCUMULATION

- ▶ Understanding how materials possess the ability to be transformed through action, gesture, and physical manipulation is critical to understanding sculpture. This activity uses the works and studio practice of contemporary artist Tara Donovan as inspiration and a means to explore the transformative properties of material in sculpture.
- ▶ You will use a single material and rely on gesture, action, arrangement and accumulation to transform that material into a three dimensional sculpture. What can happen when you look at everyday materials in a new way and imagine the possibilities of an individual material?
- ▶ You will use paper (or other everyday materials if available) to create your own individual sculptures!
- ▶ The goal of this program is for you to identify and imagine the possibility of transforming everyday materials into art works. You will gain the understanding of how gestures and actions of tactile interaction can transform materials into something entirely new!

# MATERIALITY

ma·te·ri·al·i·ty (Noun)

The quality or character of being material or composed of matter.

Example: "The exhibition explores the materiality of the body."

- ▶ Oxford Languages defines materiality as being composed of matter. In the world of art, the word takes on additional meaning.
- ▶ Everything around you is made of material and exists in a specific way in space.
- ▶ How can you take a material that you see everyday and transform it into something entirely new? Something that feels different and powerful?
- ▶ A change in perspective can come from how you handle the material with your own hands, how you can change it and alter it into a sculpture.
- ▶ Tara Donovan uses materiality as the main subject in her work. The physical properties of the material and how it changes through her interaction with it, drives her work and practice, resulting in abstract sculptures that embody something else entirely.



- ▶ In the work *Untitled (Pins)*, Tara Donovan emphasizes the idea of materiality, using straight pins to make this large cubical sculpture.
- ▶ This piece emphasizes the transformation that occurs in putting tens of thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands, of pins into a geometric form.
- ▶ The presence of so many straight pins in one form creates a very unusual experience. It transforms into a sculpture that seems both contained and dangerous to touch.
- ▶ What are your reactions to this sculpture? How does it make you feel knowing that it is thousands of sharp metal pins?

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Tara Donovan

*Untitled (Pins)*, 2004

straight pins

39" x 39" x 39" (99.1 cm x 99.1 cm x 99.1 cm)

© Tara Donovan

<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/tara-donovan/>

<https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/tara-donovan-b-1969-untitled-straight-pins-5995166-details.aspx>

# TRANSFORMATION

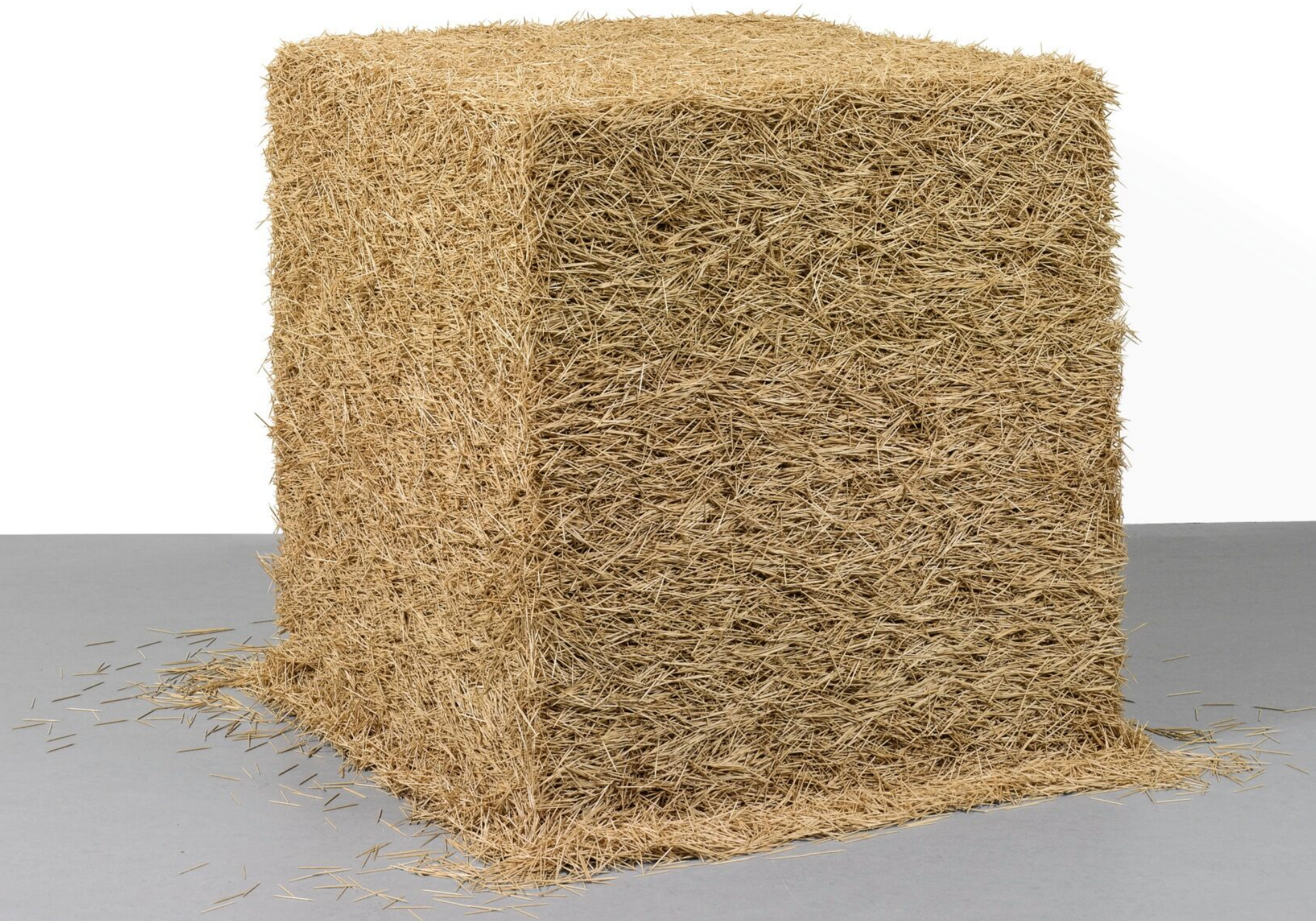
trans·for·ma·tion (noun)

A thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance.

Example: “The landscape has undergone a radical transformation.”

- ▶ Oxford languages defines transformation as a dramatic change in form or appearance. This is particularly important in sculpture and other types of art.
- ▶ Tara Donovan transforms materials into sculpture in a variety of ways. Sometimes she piles the same material together to make a large mass, or sometimes she might fold or bend a material to transform the shape and how it moves in space.
- ▶ How can you use the act and idea of transformation to turn paper into something entirely different?





- ▶ This piece titled *TOOTHPICKS*, is very similar to *Untitled (Pins)* in the way that Donovan puts the material together into a geometric form of a cube.
- ▶ Despite the similarities, *TOOTHPICKS*, has a completely different emotion and presence. Even one change, using toothpicks rather than straight pins creates an entirely new work. Donovan is allowing the material of the toothpicks to transform as she sculpts them into this form.
- ▶ What are some differences you notice between these two works?
- ▶ How did changing the material, but keeping the same cubic form, alter how this sculpture is viewed and interpreted?

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Tara Donovan

*TOOTHPICKS*, 2000

wood toothpicks

42.5" x 40" x 40" (108 x 101.6 x 101.6 cm.)

<http://www.sothebys.com/fr/auctions/ecatalogue/2017/contemporary-art-day-auction-n09762/lot.506.html>

## AGGREGATION

ag·gre·ga·tion (noun)

The formation of a number of things into a cluster.

A cluster of things that have come or been brought together.

Example: "A galaxy is an aggregation of stars and gas."

- ▶ Aggregation is a very specific way of working with material.
- ▶ It refers to building up a cluster, using one material in mass quantities to achieve a transformation.
- ▶ Tara Donovan uses the action of aggregation in many of her works, collecting a large amount of pencils, straws or perhaps tape to go beyond the material, to see how the physical properties can change through the action of her using her hands to alter things into a sculpture that takes on its own identity.



- ▶ Donovan uses a single material, in this case paper plates, to create round spherical forms. Notice how much the gesture can change when she creates different shapes.
- ▶ This sculpture seems more natural, with round organic forms connecting to one another.
- ▶ By accumulating paper plates and transforming them into something that looks like a cell or perhaps bubbles, Donovan makes the viewer look at the material in a new way.
- ▶ People often use paper plates for eating and other craft activities. What are some ways you can imagine transforming this material into a sculpture?

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Tara Donovan

*UNTITLED (PAPER PLATES)*, 2006

paper plates and glue

18.5" x 27.6" x 19.7" (47 x 70 x 50 cm.)

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2020/contemporary-art-london/tara-donovan-untitled-paper-plates>

## ACCUMULATION

ac·cu·mu·la·tion (noun)

the acquisition or gradual gathering of something.

a mass or quantity of something that has gradually gathered or been acquired.

Example: “the accumulation of paperwork on her desk”

- ▶ Accumulation refers to the results of gathering a material.
- ▶ Tara Donovan uses accumulation as a method of gathering materials for her sculptures. In order to make such large work, she must accumulate tens of thousands of each material to make the transformation that she is seeking.
- ▶ What is something that accumulates in your home and life? People often have accumulations of such things as paper, cotton balls, tissues, toilet paper, napkins, the list can go on and on!



- ▶ In this piece *Untitled* from 2014, Donovan uses shards of acrylic (a type of plastic) to create these crystal like formations.
- ▶ In aggregating this material into round curved shapes, she is able to bring up the ideas of cave and rock formations, but also perhaps a fuzzy animal. What does this sculpture remind you of?
- ▶ Note how the material is hard and sharp, yet has the feeling of softness, this is a fantastic example of transformation.

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Tara Donovan

*Untitled*, 2014

acrylic and adhesive

64" x 52-1/2" x 41-1/4" (162.6 cm x 133.4 cm x 104.8 cm)

© Tara Donovan

<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/tara-donovan/>

# FORM

/fôrġ/ (noun)

The visible shape or configuration of something

A particular way in which a thing exists or appears; a manifestation

Example: “the form, color, and texture of the tree”

(verb)

Bring together parts or combine to create something

Make or fashion into a certain shape or form

Example: “form the dough into balls”

- ▶ The word form in art can be both a noun and verb. It can refer to the making of something or to the object itself.
- ▶ You will be using paper to make a variety of forms, each form will feel and look different depending on how you act upon the material.
- ▶ Tara Donovan often creates form that seem organic or like something from nature. What type of forms do you want to create?



- ▶ In the work *Untitled* from 2015, Donovan uses Slinkys to create a large scale form.
- ▶ Because of the spring like construction of a Slinky, she is able to interlock the materials to create a form, while still allowing the light and shadow to come through, almost as if it is piercing the sculpture.
- ▶ Many people have experience playing with a Slinky, perhaps moving it back and forth or watching it move itself down a flight of stairs.
- ▶ Note how Donovan has transformed the Slinky in both accumulating a large amount of them, and the way she has twisted and locked them together.

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Tara Donovan

*Untitled*, 2015

Slinky®s,

81" x 74" X 59" (205.7 x 188 x 149.4 cm)

© Tara Donovan

<https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/33174/Tara-Donovan-Untitled>

# GESTURE

ges·ture (noun)

A movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning.

Example: “Alex made a gesture of apology”

- ▶ Many people think of the word gesture as something the body does to help express an emotion.
- ▶ In art, gesture means something similar, it refers to the actions and decisions that the artist has made, and how those decisions express something.
- ▶ Tara Donovan uses bodily gestures in her work, allowing the materials to create organic curves and movements, this is often why her work is compared to natural forms.
- ▶ There are an infinite amount of gestures that can be put into a sculpture. These are often associated with action verbs. For example, when an artist tears, bends, folds, cuts or crumples a material, each action will create a different gesture in the work. This affects how the sculpture is viewed and interpreted.
- ▶ What gestures will you create in your sculptures?





- ▶ In the sculpture *Untitled (Mylar)*, Donovan uses mylar (a polyester film that is used for balloons, packaging and insulation) to create an immensely large form that takes up almost an entire room!
- ▶ Using only mylar, no glue or adhesive, Donovan folds and manipulates the material into these spherical forms that often appear in her sculptures.
- ▶ She is using the reflective nature of this material to play with light and shadow.
- ▶ Compare and contrast this sculpture with *Untitled (Paper Plates)* and *Untitled* from 2014. All of these works use similar round spherical forms to organize the material. How are the transformations of material different or similar. How does the work transform if it is made out of paper plates, plastic, or polyester?
- ▶ Which one do you think is more effective?

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Tara Donovan  
*Untitled (Mylar)*, 2011  
Mylar and hot glue  
Dimensions Variable  
© Tara Donovan

<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/tara-donovan/>



- ▶ For the sculpture titled *Bluffs*, Donovan accumulated thousands of buttons in order to arrange them into this form.
- ▶ She employs the action of stacking the buttons in order to achieve transformation. The plastic buttons take on the characteristics of a natural crystal, looking like stalagmites, the natural growth formations that are often eroded inside cave structures.
- ▶ What is something you have collected multiples of in your home that can be used for a sculpture?
- ▶ Some examples of action verbs that can be used to transform material are stacking, interlocking and folding.

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Tara Donovan

*Bluffs*, 2013

buttons and glue

48" x 25" x 27" (121.9 x 63.5 x 68.6 cm.)

<https://www.artfixdaily.com/artwire/release/9336-tara-donovan-untitled-opens-at-pace-pop-up-gallery-in-california>



Tara Donovan  
*Colony*, 2005  
pencils  
4" x 136" x 113 1/2" (10.2 cm x 288.3 cm), overall installed  
© Tara Donovan

<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/tara-donovan/>

- ▶ For the sculpture *Colony*, Donovan uses only small sections of wood pencils to create what seems like an entire landscape.
- ▶ The pencils are merely placed on the floor, easily moved or rearranged, this material has the potential to become many forms and ideas.
- ▶ Perhaps it is a map of a country or continent, or perhaps it is a cityscape or forest of trees.
- ▶ The way in which Donovan uses her accumulation of pencils to transform them and aggregate them into this sculpture is part of what makes her work so interesting!



Tara Donovan  
*Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)*, 2003/2008  
styrofoam cups and glue  
installation dimensions variable  
© Tara Donovan

<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/tara-donovan/>



- ▶ In the work *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)*, Donovan uses an accumulation of only Styrofoam cups, aggregating them into these large scale sweeping cloud like formations.
- ▶ She is able to transform this man made material into a form that feels natural, evoking the idea of clouds, mountains or water.
- ▶ Donovan is able to achieve this transformation because of her decision to arrange the cups in this specific way, lining up all the openings of the cups, and allowing light to pass through them.

## BUILDING YOUR OWN SCULPTURE

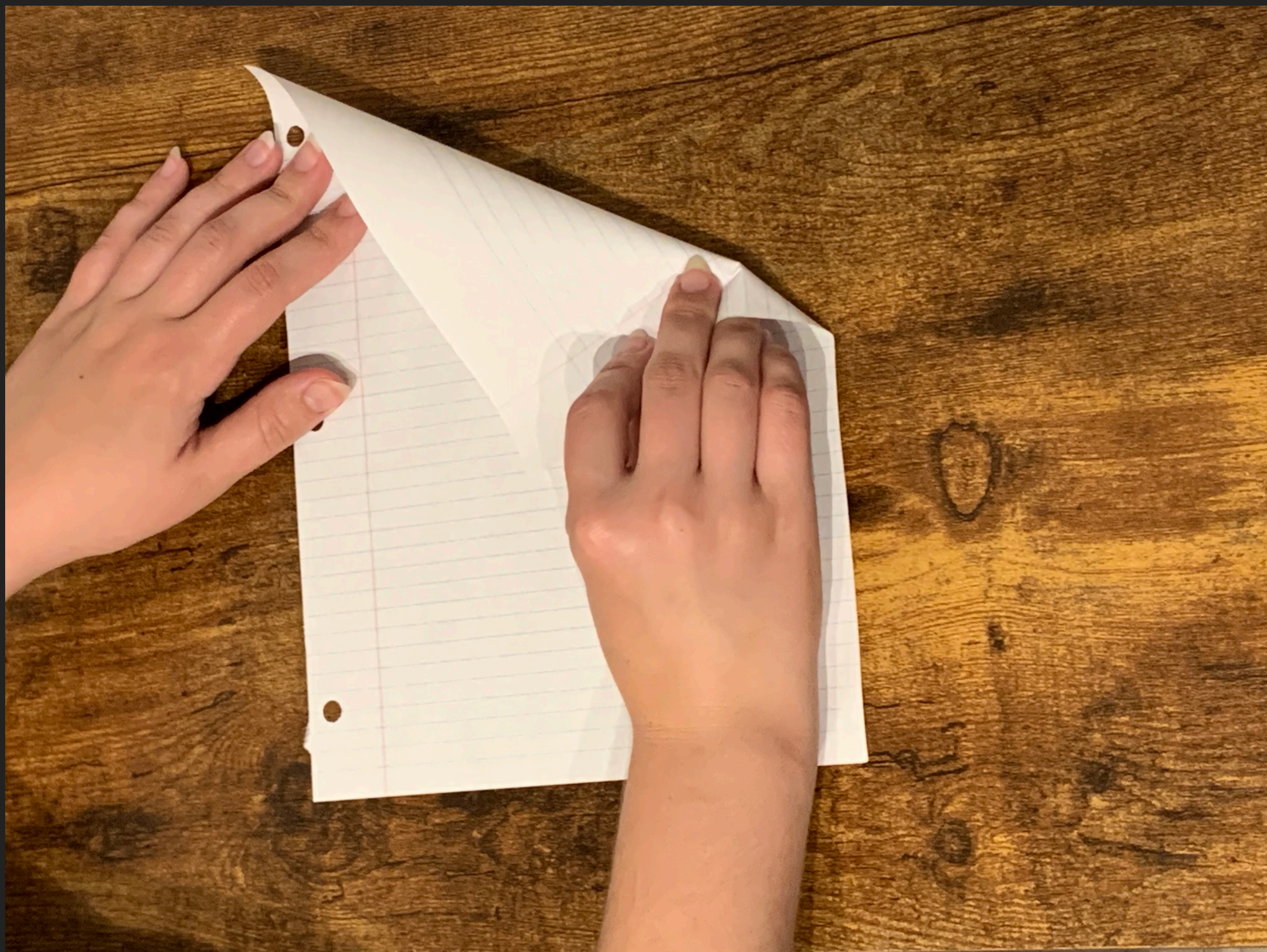
- ▶ Now that you've gained knowledge about Tara Donovan and creating a sculpture using one material, it is time to make some of your own!
- ▶ Step 1: Gather as much paper as you want to work with, at least 5-10 sheets. You can use any type of paper that you have on hand, printer paper, notebook paper and construction paper are a few examples.

## BUILDING YOUR OWN SCULPTURE

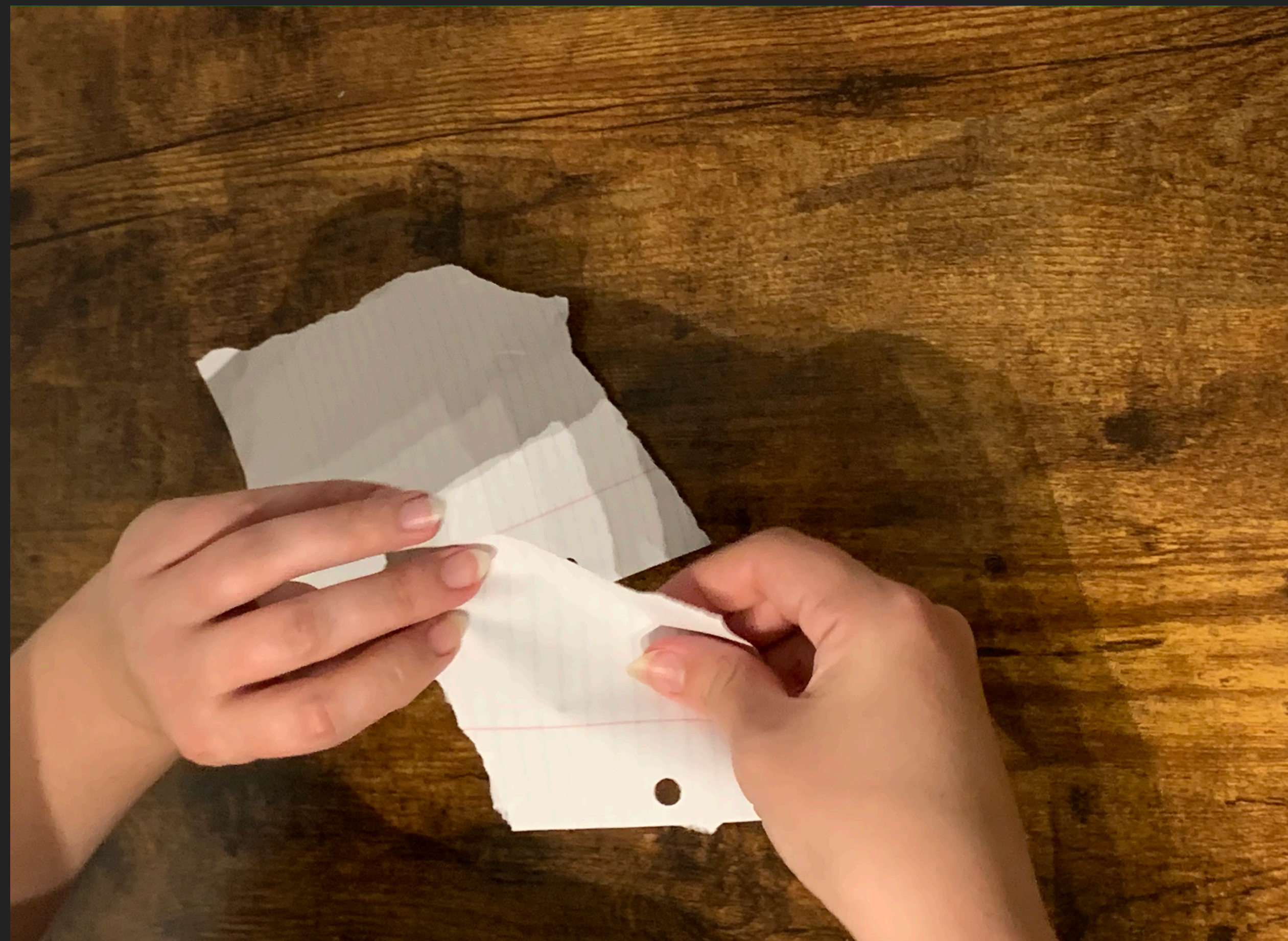
- ▶ Step 2: Now comes the exciting part! Let your creativity flow as you explore transforming the paper through your physical action, how will you use the ideas of transformation, aggregation and accumulation to make your own unique sculptures?
- ▶ A great way to explore different ways of working only with paper is to consider what action verbs you might enact upon your material. Will you tear, rip, crumple, twist, braid, or smoosh your paper? Let your hands guide you to transform the paper.

# ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

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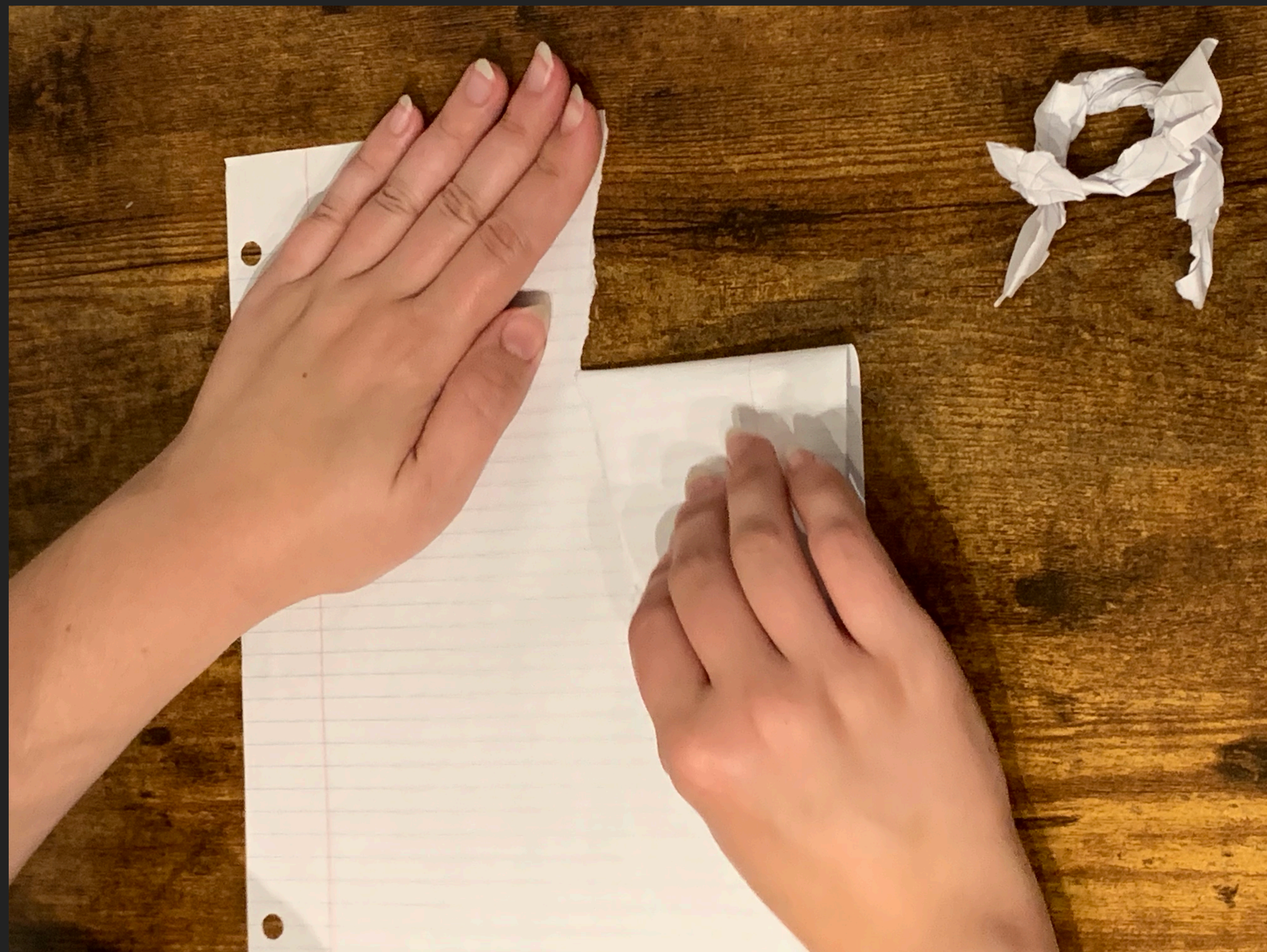
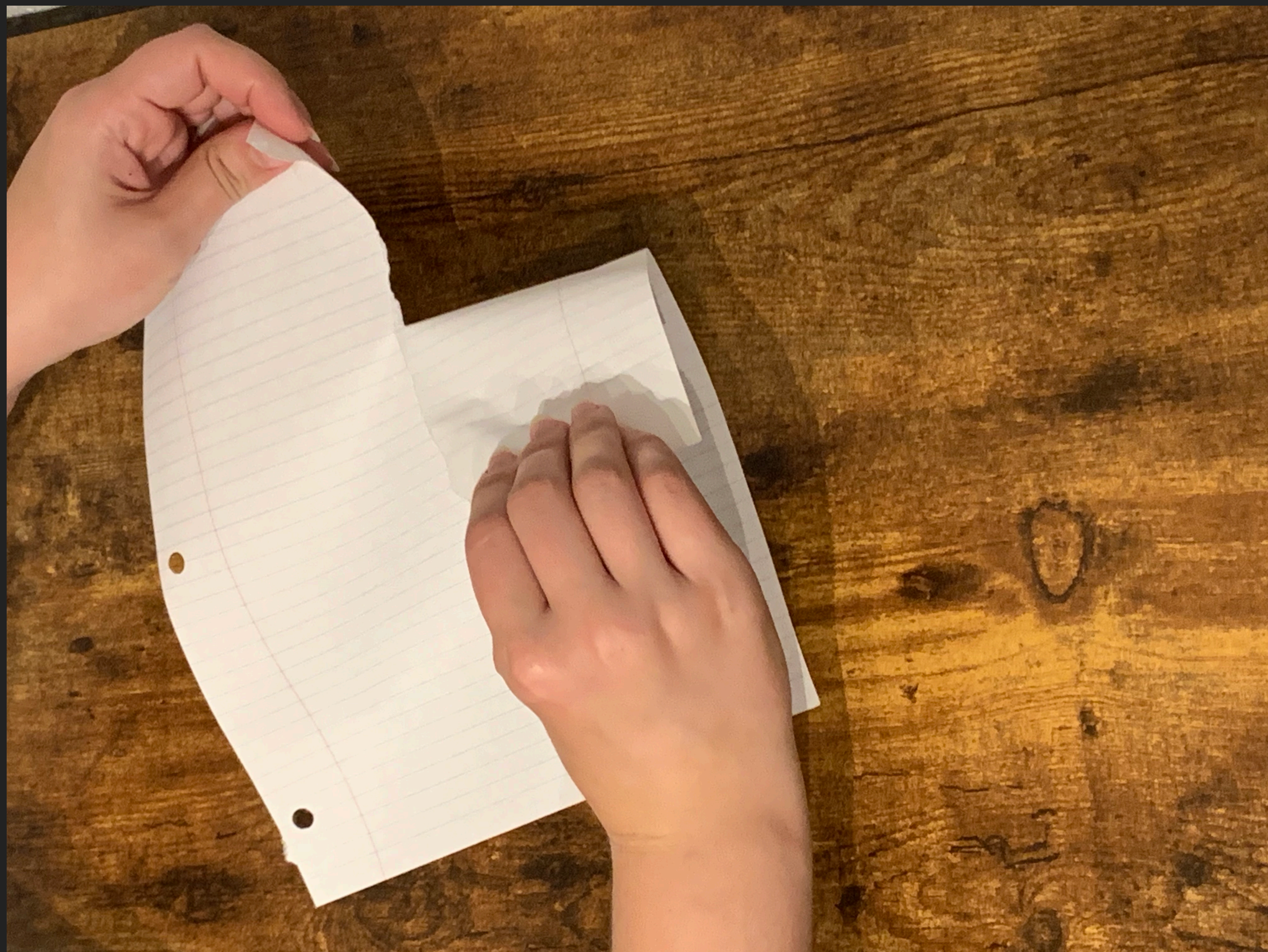
Folding



Tearing

# ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

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Ripping



# ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

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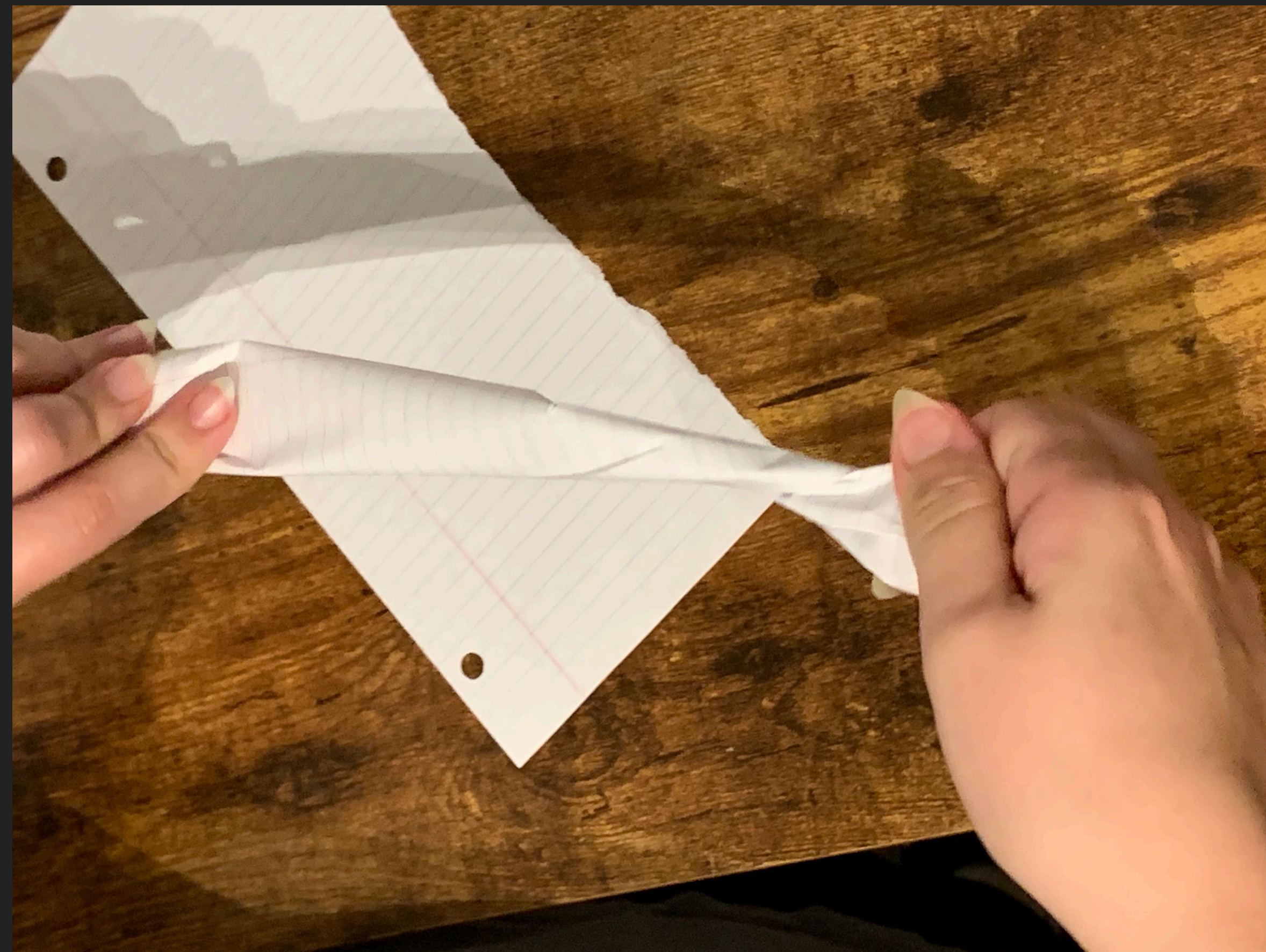
Crumpling

# ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

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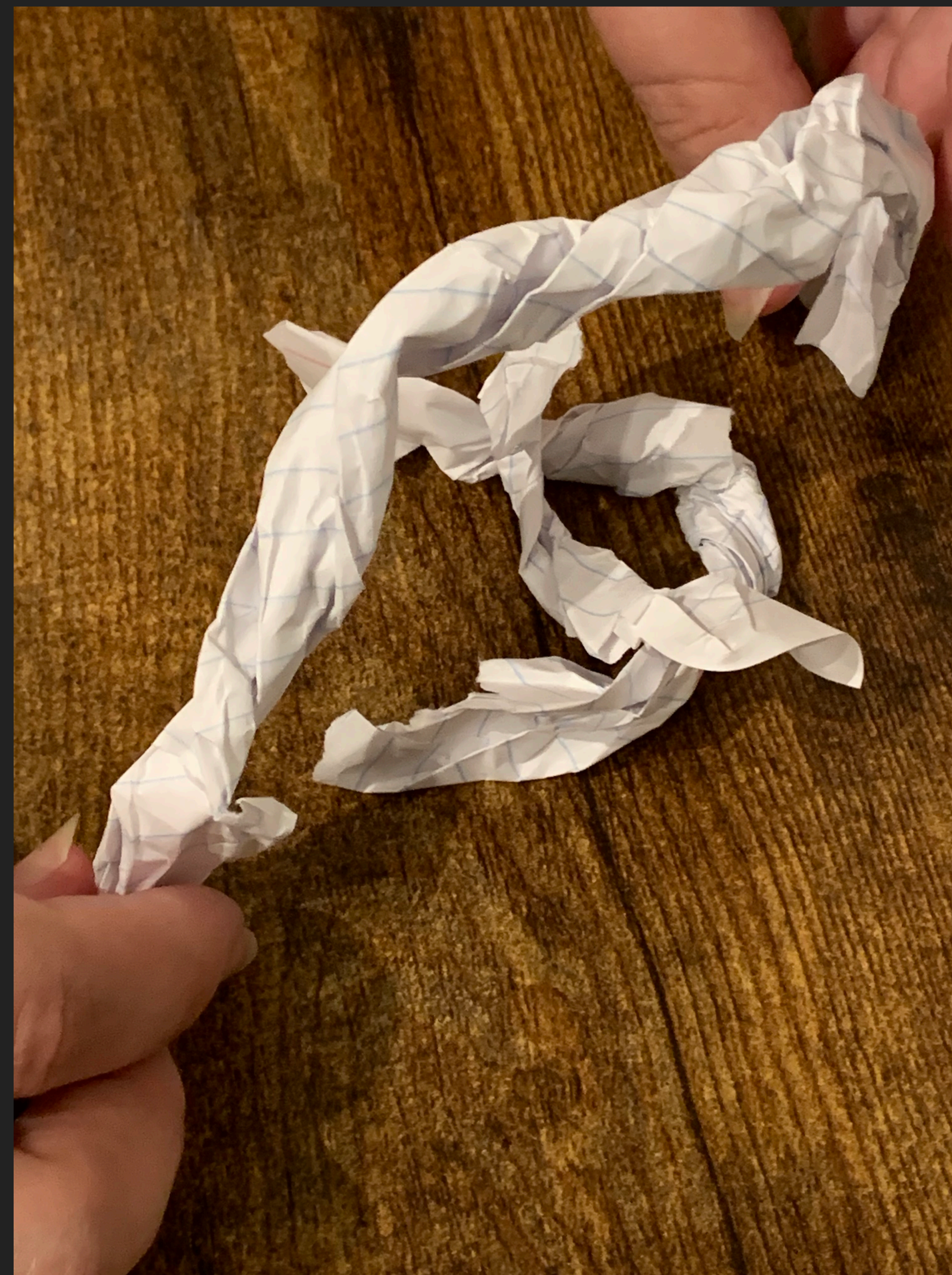
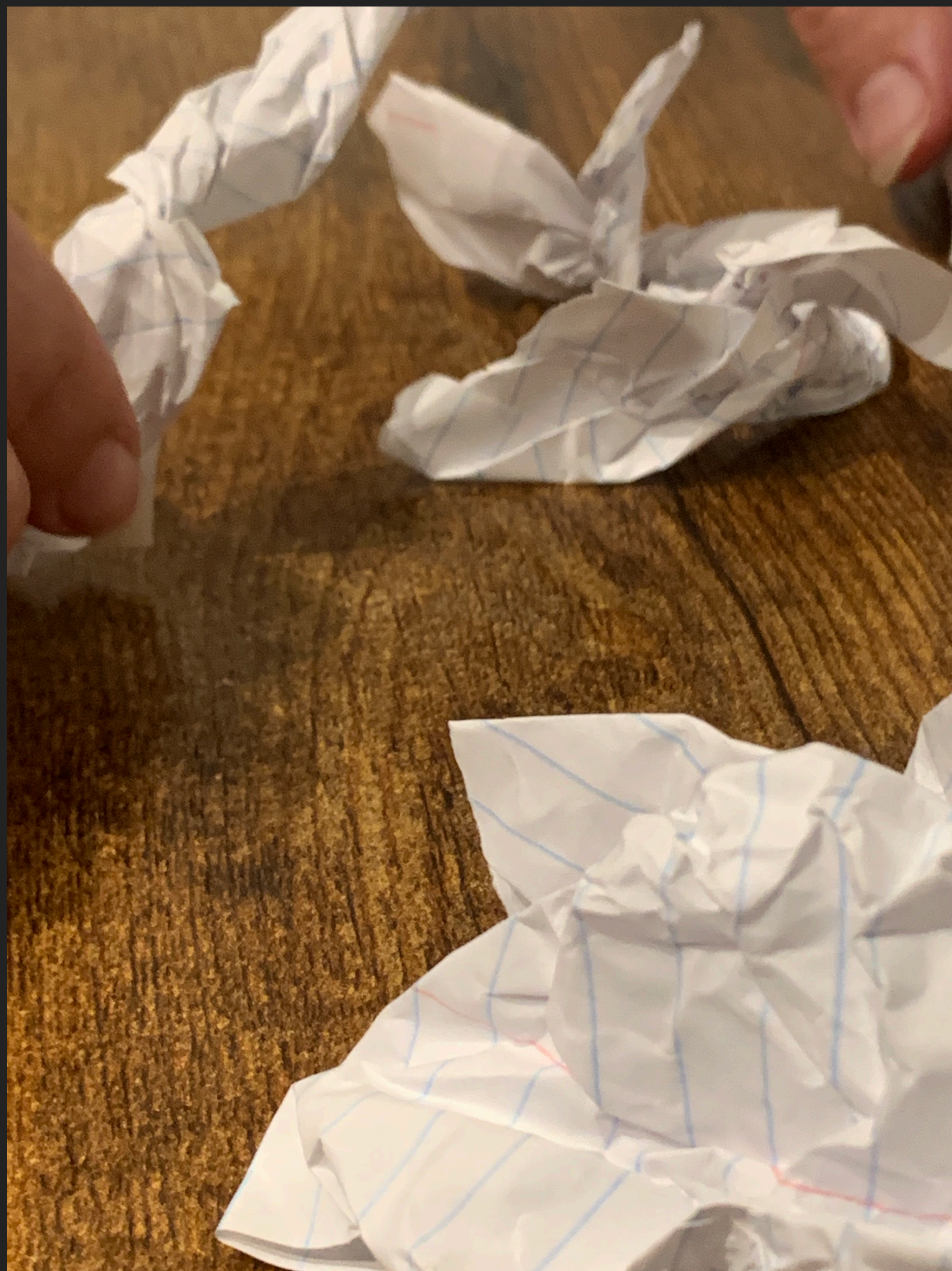


Twisting



## ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

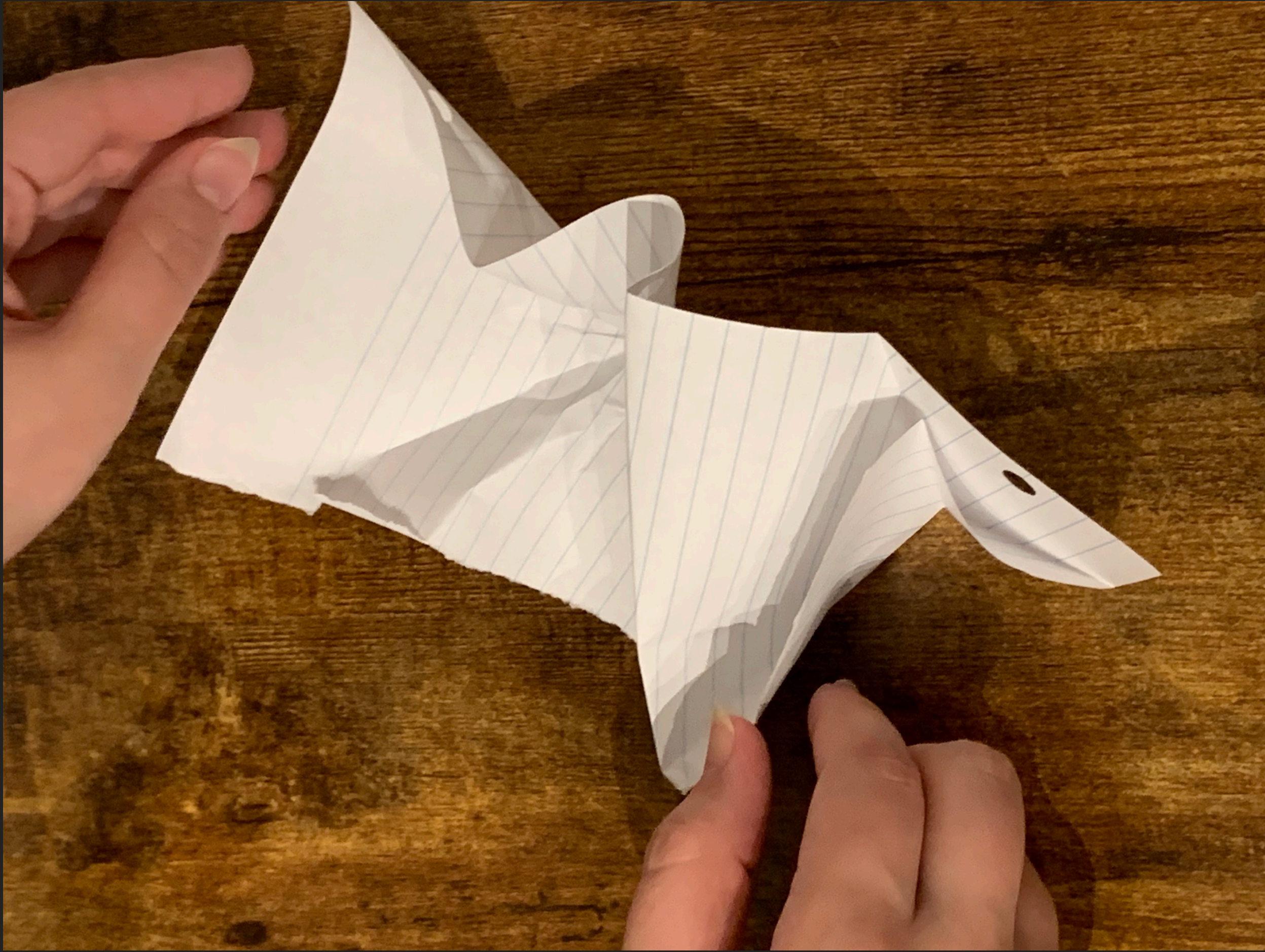
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Accumulating and Arranging

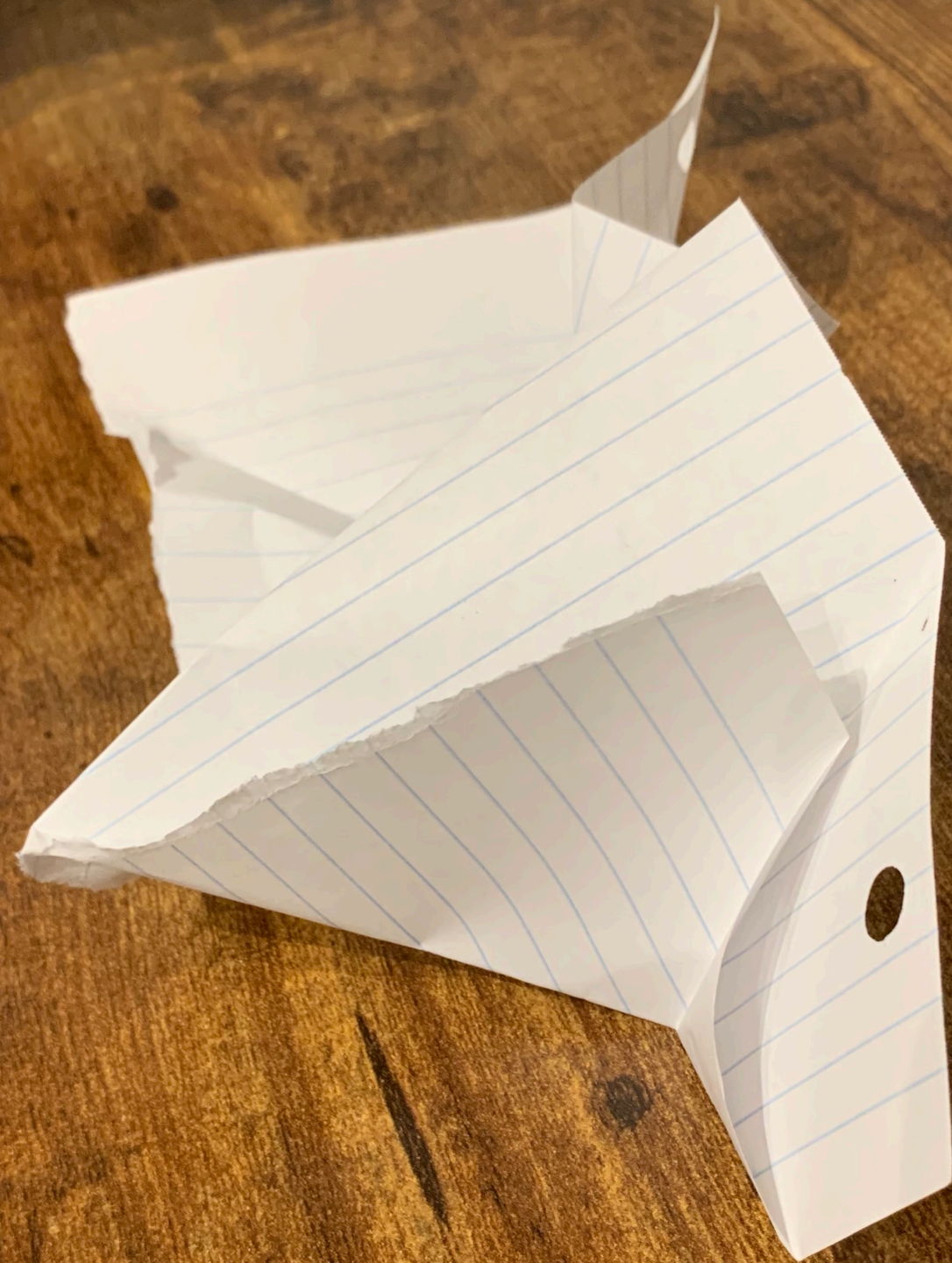
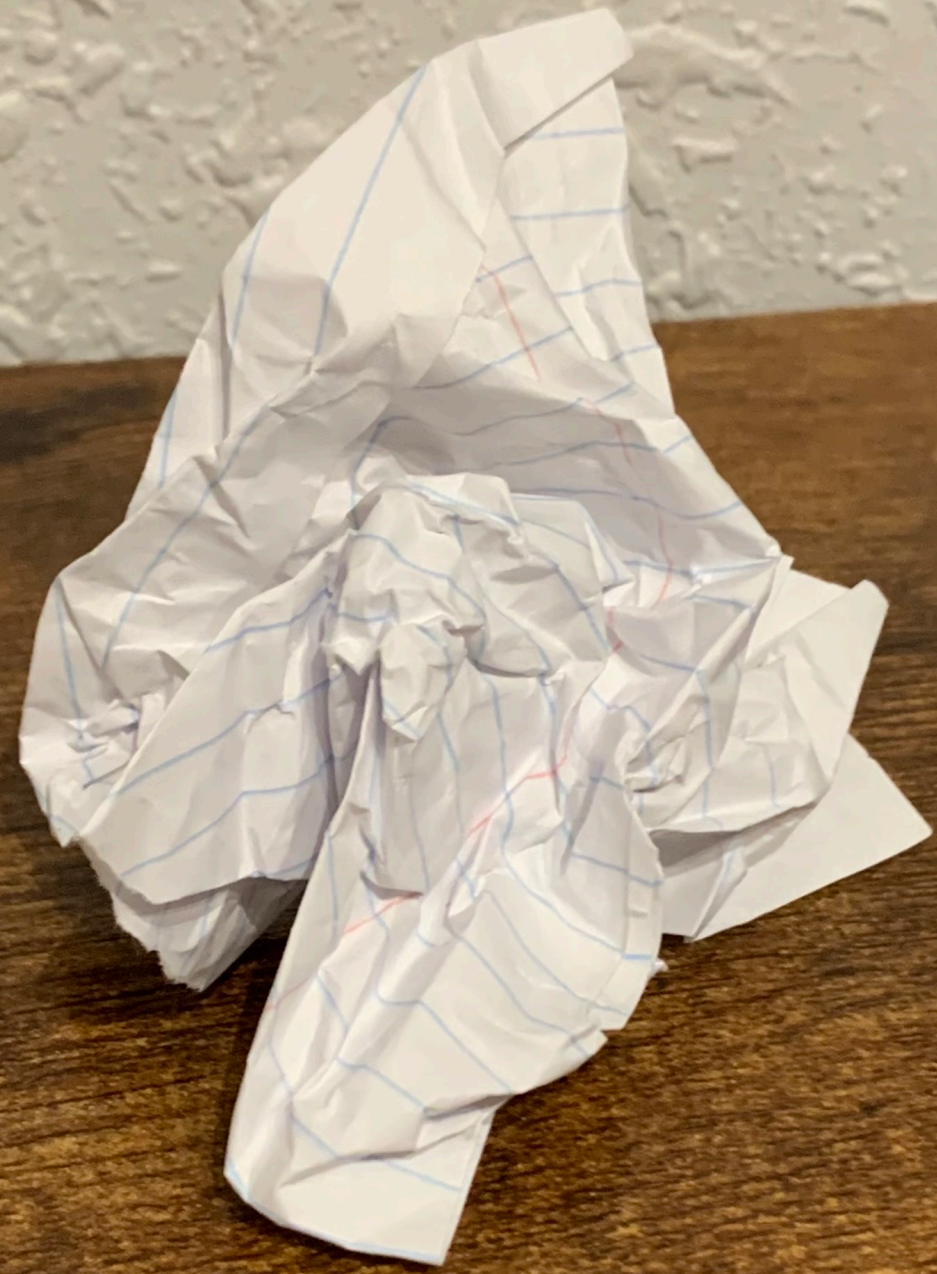
# ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

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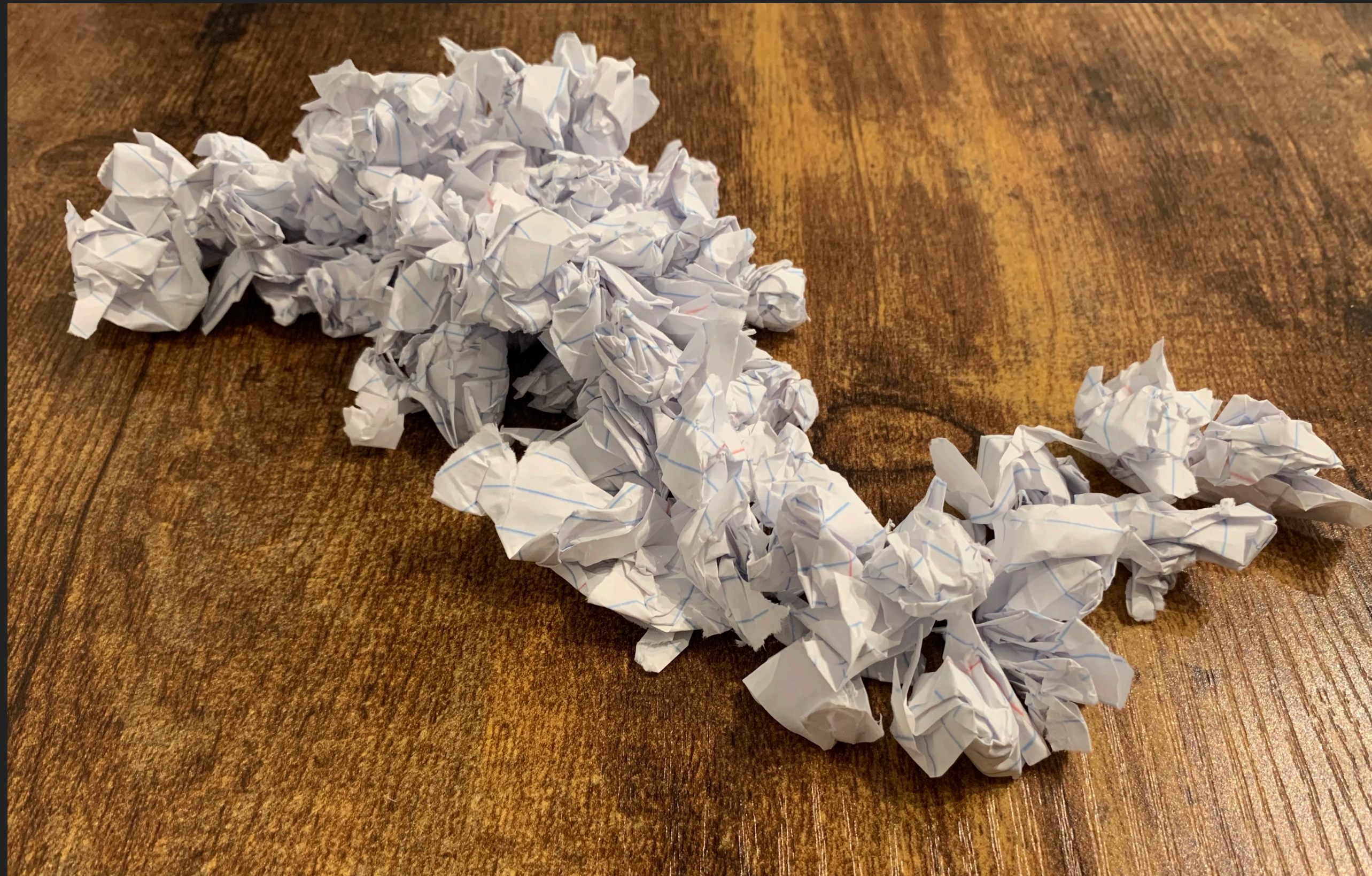
Smoothing and Folding

## ACTIVITY EXAMPLES



Examples of Individual Components- Crumpling, Folding and Twisting

## ACTIVITY EXAMPLES



Example of Finished Sculpture using Crumpling and Aggregation

## ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

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- ▶ Click on the image to the left to watch a video of paper sculptures being made!
- ▶ Notice how action verbs like tearing, twisting, and crumpling emphasize the materiality of the paper and give it an entirely new feeling.

# REFLECTION

- ▶ Now that you have experimented and made your own sculptures using paper, reflect on each one and note the differences and similarities. How did using different gestures (for example, ripping, folding, twisting) affect how the final sculptures feel?
- ▶ Each one may look and feel completely different even though they are all made out of paper. Notice how each one plays differently with space, light and shadow.
- ▶ After making sculptures with paper consider the possibilities of using other materials. What might happen if you transform a different material or object?
- ▶ More suggestions of other everyday items you may have at home to experiment with:
- ▶ Tape (clear tape, packing tape, duct tape, blue tape, any kind will work!), foil, saran wrap, paper or plastic bags, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, felt, beads, cotton balls, cotton swabs, string, floss, paper plates cups or bowls, the list can go on forever!
- ▶ Use your imagination and creativity to think of other interesting materials you can transform!



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## CONTACT AND COPYRIGHT

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### Contact information:

[rosiegalanis.com](http://rosiegalanis.com)

[rosiegalanis@gmail.com](mailto:rosiegalanis@gmail.com)

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