



## ASK THE EXPERT

# How to Build a Campfire

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Gawler, who doubles as assistant director of the outdoor programs office, has been building fires for a long time. Charged with overseeing the Moosilauke Ravine Lodge and various outdoor PE classes and clubs, the former competitive fire builder (yes, there is such a thing) started camping at age 9. “Fire has always fascinated me,” he says. “Once I started to learn about the science, that only increased my interest.” Here he outlines the do’s and don’ts of building a campfire—and why you should do so with caution. —*Marley Marius '17*

## BE SMART

Although the “leave no trace” philosophy discourages fire-building, when they are necessary, campfires should be started only where there has been some rain. If you build a fire pit, start by “digging away all of the organic material so you can get mineral soil, and then pile some rocks up around that to make a little ring. It’s very important you not get those rocks out of a river, because if they’ve been soaked with water and you then heat them up really hot, they can explode.”

## USE YOUR TONGUE

For tinder, start with pencil-sized pieces of wood. They provide “more surface-area-to-volume ratio, which means the tinder can heat up fast enough to combust before you lose the heat.” This wood can either be cut or collected from the ground, but make sure that it’s dry. Two good methods to test for this: See how easily the wood snaps—if it is rotten or too fresh, it will just bend—or stick your tongue on it. “If it’s dry, your tongue will stick to it a little bit. If it’s wet, it will feel cold.”

## PICK AN OPTION

“There are two old methods to building a fire: a teepee, where you’re making a cone-shaped thing with your tinder underneath it and the kindling on top; and a log cabin, where you put a pile of tinder in the middle and you alternate the kindling like Lincoln Logs on top.” Gawler suggests a combination of the two. “You need to make sure that the pile is spread out enough for air to flow in, but not so spread out that the heat doesn’t transmit between each different piece.” Then you can begin adding wood that is “thumb-thick,” then “wrist-thick.”

## ALWAYS EXTINGUISH

Gawler emphasizes the importance of putting your fire out thoroughly. “If you had a sizable fire, then the coals in the middle of that pile are really hot. What you need to do is dump water on it, wait a few minutes, come with your nice heavy boot, kick it around a little bit until you find the very bottom of that pit and pour more water on it until you have wood ash and water slush. It’s very possible for campfires to burn underneath the ground and then, after you leave, pop out and start a forest fire.”