In Missouri, people made and used stone tools from about 13,000 to 200 years ago. Over the ages, many different kinds of tools were made. Different types of stone can be made into implements that dig, hammer, grind, chop, cut, scrape, whittle, wedge, punch, and drill. Stone tools and the debris left over from making them are among the most common items found on pre-contact Native American sites across the state.

Archaeologists classify stone tools into two broad categories according to manufacturing technique: chipped stone and ground stone. Chipped-stone tools were made from hard but brittle, siliceous stone such as chert or flint. The stone was shaped by applying force through either percussion (striking) or pressure flaking. Common kinds of chipped-stone tools include projectile points (arrowheads and spearheads), knives, scrapers, and drills. The manufacture of these kinds of stone tools leaves behind many sharp-edged chips called flakes; ancient camp sites and villages are usually littered with this kind of debris.

Ground-stone tools were often made of tougher, less brittle and coarser-grained rocks such as granite, diorite, basalt, and quartzite. These tools were made by a combination of pecking (battering away the surface with repeated blows), grinding, and polishing. Typical ground-stone tools include grooved axes, celts, atlatl weights (bannerstones), and food-grinding tools such as manos and metates and mortars and pestles.
The shapes and styles of stone tools changed considerably through time, and many particular types of stone tools are useful as time markers. This is especially true of projectile points. The earliest points found in Missouri, from the Paleo-Indian period, are leaf-shaped with a concave base and a characteristic flute on the lower half of the point. These fluted Clovis points date to around 12,000–13,000 years ago. Later Dalton points are somewhat similar to Clovis points but commonly have beveled and serrated (saw-toothed) blade edges.

During the following Archaic period, 10,000–3,000 years ago, a wide variety of distinctive leaf-shaped, stemmed, and notched points were made with certain forms being characteristic of the early, middle, and late parts of the period. Stemmed and notched points of differing shapes were made in the following Woodland period (ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 900).

Around 1,500–1,300 years ago, there was a dramatic shift in point design to small, light, thin forms. Though often called “bird points,” these small points actually represent the introduction of the bow and arrow into the state.

Other kinds of stone tools also appeared at certain times in the past. Grooved axes were the main wood-chopping tool during the middle and late part of the Archaic period. These were replaced by ungrooved celts in the following Woodland and Mississippian (A.D. 900–1550) periods. Notched hoe blades and spades are characteristic of the Mississippian period. Mississippian-period farmers in Missouri used stone hoes to till fields as well as to dig wall trenches for their wattle-and-daub houses.

Wear traces and residues on stone tools can give us clues about how the tools were used and the material they were used on. The mineral composition and fossil inclusions within some stone types can provide clues about the geological source. Raw-material analysis can help us understand settlement and trade patterns across a small region or the entire country. Stone tools are an important source of information about ancient societies.