Inventions: Changing the World

Did Thomas Edison invent the light bulb? Did Robert Fulton invent the steamboat? Did Samuel Morse invent the telegraph? Well, no. They built on the work of previous scientists and inventors. Often the person we call the inventor is someone who made a better version of the invention, especially a practical or commercially viable version. Assign students in pairs or small groups to answer the questions below for one or more items from the list provided. (The list is presented approximately in chronological order, considering the decades involved in the development of some inventions.) They will need to conduct research to find the answers. Then they will prepare a short presentation for the class, which should be more colorful than simply reading the list of answers. For example, they can create a mini documentary, act out a key scene, write and perform a readers theater, or film a video.

1. What is the history of this invention, including the ideas of different scientists and different models?
2. Who is usually credited with the invention, and why? Is there some controversy about who the inventor was? Is the inventor credited differently in different countries, such as the United States and the UK?
3. Who made the invention commercially viable, and how? Which version became most popular and useful, at least for a decade or two?
4. Why was the invention important? What, if anything, was used to accomplish the same purpose prior to this invention? How did the invention change the world, whether for governments and businesses or for ordinary people in their everyday lives?
5. Why were the 1800s and 1900s an era of so many important inventions? What particular inventions or processes made many of the other inventions possible?

Key Inventions (Late 1700s to 2000)

- Steam engine
- Power loom
- Steamboat
- Cotton gin
- Steam locomotive (train)
- Morse Code
- Photography
- Refrigerator
- Combine harvester
- Electric telegraph
- Incandescent light bulb
- Electric motor
- Typewriter
- Sewing machine
- Gas-powered internal combustion engine
- Submarine
- Dynamite
- Telephone
- Phonograph
- Electric power transmission/use
- Ballpoint pen
- Vacuum cleaner
- Car
- Radio transmission/wireless communication
- Film/movies (silent, later with sound)
- Powered airplane
- Tank
- Television
- Jet engine
- Microwave
- Computer (electromechanical)
- Videocassette recorder
- Computer game
- Manned spacecraft
- Silicon chip/microchip
- CD (compact disc)
- Email
- Cell phone
- World Wide Web and Internet
- DVD