The Sewing Revolution

Howe, Singer, and the Mechanization of the Stitch · 1846–1860

GUIDING QUESTION

Did the sewing machine free needleworkers or simply speed up their exploitation?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1846 to 1856, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 2 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Lockstitch, Shuttle, Patent pool, Installment plan, Outwork.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 4 (1800–1848), Period 5 (1844–1877)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)
5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions

Day 2 (50 minutes)
5 min · Key terms matching
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions

15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (2 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket

25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms
Lockstitch: B · Shuttle: A · Patent pool: E · Installment plan: D · Outwork: C

PART 1

Before you read

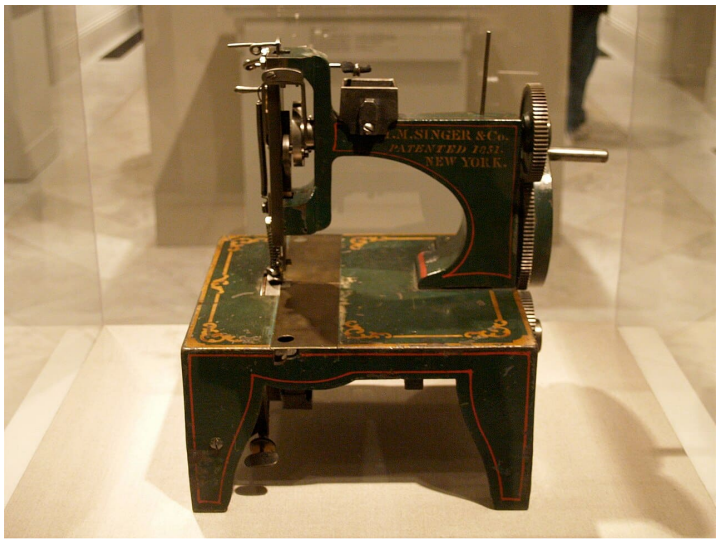
1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

The sewing machine was one of the most consequential technological leaps in the history of clothing. It moved the factory principle from the cloth to the garment—and helped build one of the first mass consumer-durables markets in American history.

For centuries every stitch of clothing was made by hand. Elias Howe's 1846 lockstitch patent, Isaac Singer's practical refinements of 1851, and improvements by Wheeler & Wilson and Grover & Baker turned hours of hand-sewing into minutes. The machine did not stay in the shop: it migrated into the parlor of the middle-class home, sold by agents on installment plans. The sewing machine became one of the first mass-marketed consumer durables and a pioneer of installment credit, and it accelerated the ready-to-wear clothing industry. For the tens of thousands of women who earned their living by the needle, it raised output without raising pay: the National Museum of American History notes that the machines did not greatly increase seamstresses' earnings.



Isaac Singer's 1854 patent model (U.S. Patent 10,975) for improvements to his sewing machine. takomabibelot, "Isaac Singer's 1854 Patent Model For Improvements To His Sewing Machine," photographed at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (2007). Flickr, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1846

Howe's Lockstitch Patent

Elias Howe receives patent No. 4,750 for a lockstitch machine combining an eye-pointed needle with a shuttle; he struggles to find buyers.

1851

Singer's Machine

Isaac Singer patents his own machine; Howe sues, and in 1854 the courts uphold Howe's claims, forcing Singer to pay royalties.

1856

Singer's Installment Plan

Singer's partner Edward Clark introduces installment buying, among the first such plans offered by a nationally distributed manufacturer.

1856

The Sewing Machine Combination

On October 24, Howe and three manufacturers pool their patents in the 'Albany Agreement'—the first patent pool in American industry.

PART 4

Key terms

Lockstitch (answer B)
A stitch made by two threads, one from a needle and one from a shuttle or bobbin, that interlock inside the fabric.

Shuttle (answer A)
A small boat-shaped holder that carries the lower thread back and forth beneath the cloth in a sewing machine.

Patent pool (answer E)
An agreement among inventors or companies to share their patents and split the royalties instead of suing each other.

Installment plan (answer D)
A way of buying an expensive item by paying a little at a time; Singer used it to sell sewing machines to households.

Outwork (answer C)
A system in which manufacturers sent cut cloth to workers' homes to be sewn and paid them by the piece.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

The Song of the Shirt

Thomas Hood, December 1843

> With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red, / A woman sat in unwomanly rags, / Plying her needle and thread— / Stitch! stitch! stitch! / In poverty, hunger, and dirt, / And still with a voice of dolorous pitch / She sang the "Song of the Shirt." ... "O, men, with sisters dear! / O, men, with mothers and wives! / It is not linen you're wearing out, / But human creatures' lives!"

Context: Hood wrote this poem after a London court case exposed a seamstress paid so little she pawned her employer's cloth to feed her children. Reprinted widely in Britain and the United States, it became the anthem of needlewomen's misery just as the sewing machine was being invented.

Source: Thomas Hood. The Song of the Shirt. Academy of American Poets (Poets.org). 1843-. https://poets.org/poem/song-shirt

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

U.S. Patent No. 4,750: Sewing-Machine

Elias Howe Jr., September 10, 1846

> In sewing a seam with my machine two threads are employed, one of which threads is carried through the cloth by means of a curved needle, the pointed end of which is to pass through said cloth. ... It will therefore be seen that a stitch is made at every back-and-forth movement of the shuttle.

Context: Howe's patent for a lockstitch machine combined an eye-pointed needle with a shuttle carrying a second thread. His lawsuits against Isaac Singer and others led to the 1856 "Sewing Machine Combination," a patent pool that let machines be mass-produced.

Source: Elias Howe Jr. United States Patent 4750. United States Patent Office (via Wikisource). 1846-. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/United_States_patent_4750

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

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Corroborate
Compare "The Song of the Shirt" (Thomas Hood, December 1843) with "U.S. Patent No. 4,750: Sewing-Machine" (Elias Howe Jr., September 10, 1846). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. In your own words, explain how Howe's machine forms a stitch using two threads.
2. Hood's poem appeared in the British humor magazine Punch at Christmas 1843, three years before Howe's patent. Why would a poet and an inventor describe sewing in such different language?
3. Machines made a shirt faster to sew. Using the chapter narrative, explain who captured the time and money that the machine saved: workers, manufacturers, or buyers?
4. Hood's lines "It is not linen you're wearing out, / But human creatures' lives!" could describe fast-fashion supply chains today. Is that comparison fair? Use evidence to support your answer.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

INNOVATION

The Sewing Machine Combination

The first patent pool in U.S. history, born of years of lawsuits.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/sewing-machine-combination

INNOVATION

Singer's Installment Plan

A turning point in American consumer credit.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/singer-installment-plan

IMPACT

The Seamstress and the Machine

An economic cost rarely written into the history of the machine.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/death-of-the-seamstress

Places: Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut

SOURCES AND CREDITS

1846—Elias Howe Jr.'s Sewing Machine Patent Model. Smithsonian National Museum of American History-. https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/nmah_630930

How Singer Won the Sewing Machine War. Smithsonian Magazine. 2015-. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-singer-won-sewing-machine-war-180955919/

History of Sweatshops: 1820–1880. Smithsonian National Museum of American History-. https://www.americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/sweatshops/online/history/1820-1880

Image: takomabibelot, "Isaac Singer's 1854 Patent Model For Improvements To His Sewing Machine," photographed at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (2007). Flickr, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/sewing-revolution. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.