

# The Wizard of Menlo Park

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

Thomas Alva Edison was born February 11, 1847, in a small, northern Ohio town. He was the last of seven children born to Sam and Nancy Edison. Al, the nickname his friends gave him, was a sickly child. He didn't even attend school until he was eight years old. Because of scarlet fever as a child, Al was left more than partially deaf. His illnesses did not stop his interest in nature. He asked questions that teachers didn't know how to answer: "Why is the sky blue?" or "How does fire work?" He was curious about everything and liked to figure out things on his own.



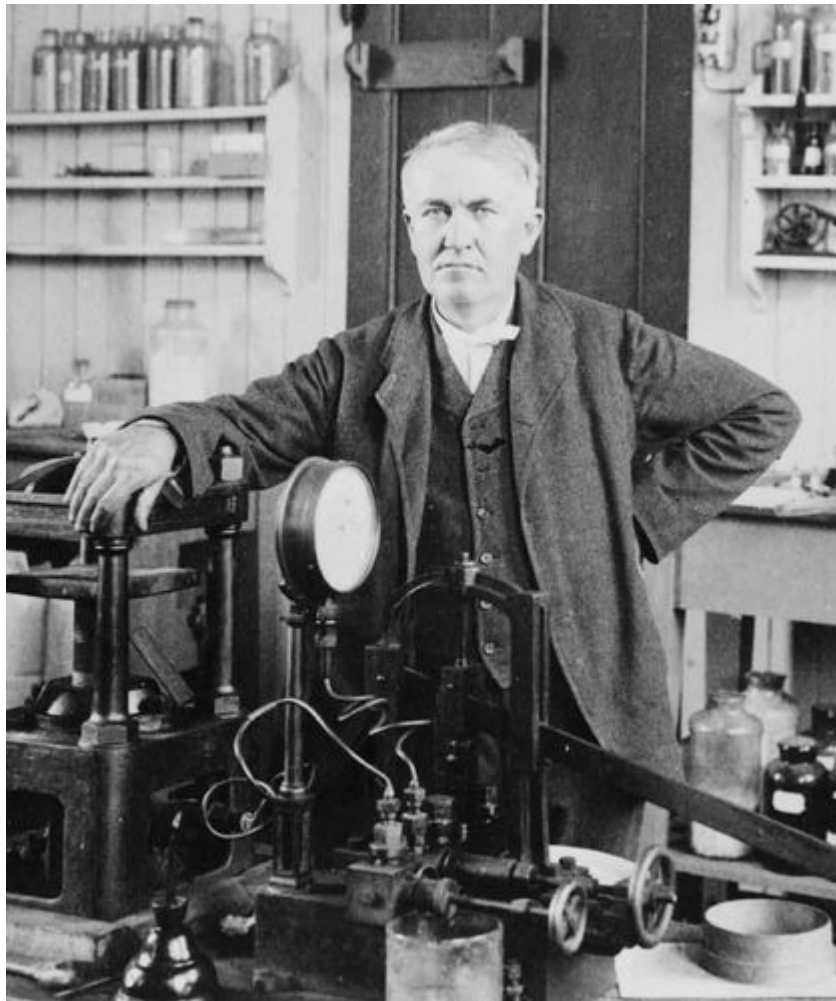
*A photograph of Thomas Edison*

At the age of 12, he worked selling newspapers on the railroad near his home. On the train, he heard people talking about many new ideas and inventions. He learned by listening to their

stories. At 15, Al landed a job working the telegraph machine. He became an expert telegraph operator over the next six years. Even though he was deaf, he could feel the vibration of the wire.

Al liked to work with electric machines. He found a way to make the telegraph faster and sold the idea to Western Union Telegraph Company for \$40,000. With the money he made from the sale, he set up his first lab to continue his experiments.

When the work Al was doing outgrew this lab, he built a bigger lab in Menlo Park, New Jersey. He hired some of the smartest scientists and engineers from around the world to work with him. Much of his early work was on sound. They called him the Wizard of Menlo Park because some of the inventions seemed magical.



*Edison in his lab at Menlo Park*

In this new lab, he discovered a way to make Alexander Graham Bell's new telephone louder.

He sold the patent for his new invention for \$100,000. That was a huge sum of money at the time.

His next invention was the phonograph. He was able to record sound on a cylinder wrapped in tinfoil. He played a version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" to his fellow scientists. This was the first time anyone was able to listen to recorded music.



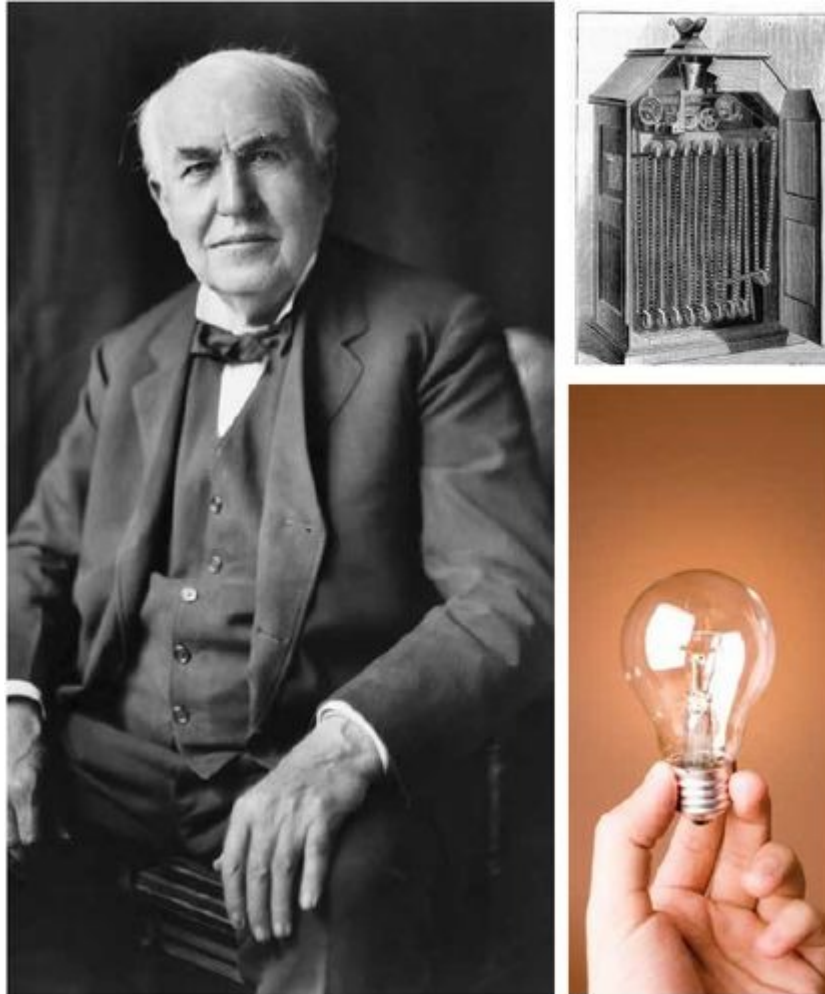
*Thomas Edison with a phonograph, 1878*

The invention that Edison is best known for came next. In 1879, he invented the first incandescent (glowing) electric light bulb. Three years later, he lit up 85 homes at once in New York City and the age of electric light began.

By the time Edison "retired," he had patents on over 1,000 inventions. They include the kinetoscope, which is a machine for showing movies, and the microphone.

What people sometimes forget is that many of Edison's experiments "failed" at first. He

caused explosions at his labs and was forced to start all over many times. However, he kept moving forward each time. He always had a positive attitude. He knew he was closer to his next success!



*Thomas Edison in 1928 and two of his inventions, the kinetoscope and the light bulb.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What invention is Thomas Edison best known for?

- A. a way to make the telegraph faster
- B. the phonograph
- C. the first incandescent electric light bulb
- D. the microphone

2. This text describes the sequence of Thomas Edison's inventions. What was his first invention?

- A. a way to make the telegraph faster
- B. the phonograph
- C. the first incandescent electric light bulb
- D. the microphone

3. Thomas Edison's inventions had an important effect on a lot of people. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. "He found a way to make the telegraph faster and sold the idea to Western Union Telegraph Company for \$40,000."
- B. "When the work Al was doing outgrew this lab, he built a bigger lab in Menlo Park, New Jersey. He hired some of the smartest scientists and engineers from around the world to work with him."
- C. "He was able to record sound on a cylinder wrapped in tinfoil. He played a version of 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' to his fellow scientists."
- D. "In 1879, he invented the first incandescent (glowing) electric light bulb. Three years later, he lit up 85 homes at once in New York City and the age of electric light began."

**4.** Read these sentences from the text.

He was curious about everything and liked to figure out things on his own.

[. . .]

What people sometimes forget is that many of Edison's experiments "failed" at first. . . . However, he kept moving forward each time.

Based on this evidence, what inference can be made about Thomas Edison as a person?

- A. He asked many questions and worked hard to answer them.
- B. He asked many questions and failed to answer them.
- C. He asked many questions but forgot about them.
- D. He didn't ask questions, but he worked hard.

**5.** What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Thomas Edison was called the Wizard of Menlo Park because his inventions seemed magical.
- B. Thomas Edison was a curious and determined inventor who made many important inventions.
- C. Thomas Edison was an expert telegraph operator even though he could not hear well.
- D. Many of Thomas Edison's experiments failed at first, but some of them succeeded.