My Clothing: Origin and Fiber

Suggested Grade Level: 6-8

Time: 45 minutes

Subject: Science, Synthetic & Natural Materials, Family and Consumer Sciences, Consumer Awareness, Social Studies, Global Economy, Culture, English Language Arts, Informational Reading, Agriculture, Fiber Sources, Renewable vs. Nonrenewable Resources

Overview: This cross-curricular lesson combines Science, Agriculture, Family and Consumer Sciences, Social Studies, and English Language Arts as students investigate the origins of their clothing. They'll examine labels to identify fiber types, explore natural versus synthetic materials, and connect these insights to global trade, renewable resources, and consumer awareness. Along the way, students will discover careers in agriculture and the textile industry.

Objectives:

1. Identify the country of origin on clothing labels.
2. Explain how agricultural products are used to produce clothing.
3. Compare synthetic and natural fibers.

Background Information:

From traditional animal skins to high-tech synthetics, there are hundreds of types of fabrics available today. Almost all of our fabrics are made of fibers, including those used to make sheets, towels, curtains, and rugs. Fibers are thin threads. The hairs on your head are fibers. Like human hair, the fibers used to make fabric can be straight or curly, smooth or coarse. Most fibers can be lumped into two main types: natural and synthetic. Most natural fibers are the direct product of agriculture, while synthetic fibers are made by people.

Fiber is a word often used to describe something that should be in our diet. Many people think that farmers involved in the production of food and fiber are only producing the things we need to eat. Fiber is in our food, but when farmers and other agriculturists use the term, they are talking about the fiber used to make our clothes. Fiber is the raw material that is long, strong, and pliable enough to be spun into yarns and woven into fabrics. The characteristics of fabric are determined by the type of fiber used and the weave or the knitting technique used. The same weave made using a different fiber will create a different type of fabric. Nature provides many different kinds of fibers that can

be made into cloth. All the fibers gathered from plants and animals are called natural fibers. They have served people for centuries.

Natural Fibers

A variety of animals provide natural fibers. Wool comes from sheep. Llamas and their relatives, alpacas, guanacos, and vicuñas, also provide a fiber called wool. Angora rabbits provide angora fiber, and Angora goats provide mohair. Cashmere comes from Kashmir goats. The large white moth caterpillar, commonly called the silkworm, provides the finest silk. The fur and skins from animals such as mink, beaver, muskrats, and rabbits can also be found in clothing. Although leather is not a fiber, it is widely used as a fabric. Cattle hides are the source of most leather, but the hides of pigs are also extensively used in soft leather goods.

Plants provide us with natural fibers for fabric as well. The world's most important non-food crop is cotton. So many things are made of cotton that it would be hard to go through a day without using or wearing cotton cloth. Cotton has been found in tombs in India dating back to 3,000 BC. Linen, one of the world's oldest fabrics, is made from the fiber of the flax plant. Lesser-known natural fibers such as ramie, jute, and hemp have many uses, varying from finely woven fabrics to rope.

Synthetic Fibers

Since the late 1800s, people have had synthetic fiber options to choose from. These fibers are made by chemists, and they fall into two broad groups depending on their source. One group of fabrics is made from natural materials, such as cellulose, which are chemically converted into compounds that can be made into fiber. Most cellulose used for making synthetic fiber comes from softwoods or the short fibers sticking to cottonseeds. Rayon and acetate are cellulose-based fabrics.

The second group of synthetic fibers is formed solely from chemical compounds, most of which are by-products of the oil-refining process. These fibers can be woven into cloth and are often mixed with natural fibers. They are resilient, although some are easily damaged by high temperatures. Petroleum-based fabrics include Kevlar®, nylon, polyester, acrylic, polypropylene, olefin, and spandex.

Fibers and Natural Resources

All fibers, whether natural or synthetic, have one thing in common. All are made from natural resources. Some natural resources are renewable because they are replenished by natural cycles. Fibers from trees, plants, and animals come from renewable natural resources. Even the synthetic fiber rayon is made from a renewable resource—the plant product cellulose. But not all natural resources can be regenerated or replaced naturally within a reasonable amount of time. It would take millions of years to replenish our oil and petroleum reserves—not a reasonable amount of time. Polyester, orlon, nylon,

polypropylene, and spandex are made from oil and petroleum—nonrenewable resources.

Textile Processing and Careers

It takes many steps and jobs to transform fiber into a fabric suitable for clothing. Wool, for example, is first sheared from sheep. Then it is sorted by type and quality before it goes to a mill. In the mill, the wool is cleaned to remove dirt and grease. When the wool is clean, it can be dyed if desired. It is then carded to remove tangles and any remaining dirt. Carding turns the wool into long, soft strands that are then spun into yarn. Wool yarn is woven on looms or knitted into fabric. For wool or any fabric to be made into clothing, the fabric is sold to a clothes manufacturer. Clothing is designed, and patterns are developed before the fabric is cut. The fabric is cut according to the pattern, sewn into a garment, and sold to stores. Finally, you, the consumer, buy the garment at the store—often after seeing some advertising. This process and the many careers involved make up the textile industry.

Jobs involved in producing and preparing clothing for the consumer may include agricultural producers (farmers and ranchers), plant and animal scientists, veterinarians, shearers, wool buyers, sorters, classers, carders, spinners, dyers, weavers, knitters, fabric designers, fabric buyers, clothes designers, pattern makers, seamstresses and tailors, advertising writers and artists, models and photographers, truckers, salesclerks, and more. There's no question that the journey from resources to you involves many jobs, businesses, and industries all over the world.

Cotton

Cotton grows best where it stays warm and sunny for at least half of the year. Large amounts are grown in the southern United States, China, and India. In the United States, cotton farmers plant cotton in the late spring. They use mechanical planters that can plant seeds in as many as eight rows at a time. During the growing season, scouts go out into the fields to count harmful insects. If there are too many, the farmer will use pesticides to control them.

About two months after planting, flower buds (called squares) appear on the plant. Three weeks later, the blossoms open. The petals change colors as they mature. First, they are creamy white. Then they turn yellow, then pink, and finally, dark red. After three days, the red flowers wither and fall, leaving green pods called cotton bolls.

The boll is shaped like a tiny football. Moist fibers grow and push out from the newly formed seeds. As the boll ripens, it turns brown. The fibers continue to expand in the warm sun. Finally, they split the boll apart, and the fluffy cotton bursts out. Cotton is harvested in the fall. Most cotton is harvested by machine. After the cotton is harvested, it is stored at the edge of the field in big mounds or loaded on trailers or trucks and carried to the cotton gin. At the cotton gin, powerful pipes suck the cotton into the

building and through cleaning machines that remove burs and leaf trash. Then, circular saws with small, sharp teeth pull the fiber from the seed. The ginned fiber is called lint. The lint is pressed into 480-pound bales that are about the size of a large refrigerator.

The bales are sold to cotton merchants who sell them to textile mills in the United States or in foreign countries. At the textile mills, huge machines spin the cotton fibers into cotton thread. The thread is then woven into cloth on looms. The rolls of cloth that come off the looms are called bolts. Clothing manufacturers buy bolts of cloth and cut jeans, shirts, dresses, and other items of clothing from them to sew.

Wool

Wool cloth is woven from yarn that is spun from the fibers grown as the thick fleece of sheep. Sheep wool comes in shades of black, white, and brown. There are several hundred breeds of sheep. (Generally, only hand spinners keep and raise colored sheep. Commercial wool producers discriminate against all but white sheep. Only white wool can be dyed.) Once a year, sheep have their fleeces cut off, a process known as shearing. An experienced shearer can shear a sheep in 1–4 minutes. Wool is like hair in that it grows back.

After the wool of a sheep has been cut, or sheared, it is sent to the factory where it is washed, dyed, carded (brushed), and spun into yarn. Then it is ready to be knit, crocheted, or woven into a blanket, rug, sweater, pair of socks, or something else. People who weave cloth set up the warp threads first. The warp threads are the threads that go up and down. The weft threads are woven side to side through the warp threads. This action locks the threads together. Today, most weaving is done in factories by machines. The machines are faster than the old-fashioned wooden looms, and the patterns they create are more uniform.

Kansas Connections:

Kansas produces several natural fibers through both plant and animal agriculture. Cotton, while not a major crop in Kansas today, experienced a period of rapid expansion in the 1990s. Kansas now ranks 14th within the United States in upland cotton production (National Kansas). Cotton remains one of the most widely used natural fibers in the clothing industry, often blended with synthetic materials to enhance its strength and flexibility. Flax has been grown in Kansas since at least 1873, when the state reported 3,478 bushels harvested (Landon). Though not widely grown today, flax is still recognized for its use in producing linen, a durable natural textile. Sheep also contribute to Kansas's fiber resources. As of January 1, 2025, Kansas was home to approximately 80,000 sheep and lambs (National 2024). The wool produced from these animals is used in a variety of textiles, ranging from garments to insulation. Kansas currently ranks 19th in the United States for wool production. Beef cattle are Kansas's most prominent textile commodity. The state ranks 3rd nationally in total cattle and calves, making the cattle industry a primary economic driver. The hides from these animals are used to

produce leather, a durable natural material commonly used in footwear, accessories, and upholstery. Kansas is also active in row crop production. Kansas ranks 8th nationally in total corn production. Innovations in agricultural processing have led to the development of corn-based fibers, such as PLA (polylactic acid), which is produced by fermenting corn sugars to create biodegradable synthetic fibers. This fiber is used in clothing, packaging, and even 3D printing. Soybeans are another important crop for Kansas. The state ranks 13th nationally in soybean production (National). Soybeans are increasingly being used to develop bio-based plastics and textiles, such as soy protein fibers and soy polyols, which offer biodegradable alternatives to petroleum-based synthetics. In addition to these established crops, researchers and agricultural innovators are experimenting with alternative fiber crops. Possibilities include kenaf, hemp, and sunflowers, which may offer new sources of fiber for paper, fabric, or insulation. Although large-scale fiber processing is limited in Kansas, there are two small, active fiber mills:

- HLA Fiber Mill near Augusta, KS, processes wool, alpaca, yak, and other natural fibers into roving, yarn, and felt.
- MM Fiber Mill in La Cygne, KS (formerly Shepherd's Mill), also processes a wide range of natural fibers into finished products.

These mills play a crucial role in supporting local fiber producers and maintaining value-added processing within the state.

Materials:

- A suitcase of clothing with different fabrics and countries of origin on the labels.
- World Map
- Natural Fibers, Synthetic Fibers handout
- Clothing Investigations activity sheet
- Clothing Rack Consumer and Historian
- Answer Key (Clothing Rack Consumer and Historian)

Instructional Format:

1. Review background information
2. Conduct engagement exercise.
3. Complete the activity.
4. Conduct assessment exercise.

Engagement:

Show this video clip to the class. oren: The Incredibles - Family Suits scene https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-Ij7ElJnqM. In the clip, Edna describes the properties of the fabric for each supersuit. As a class, brainstorm different careers that could have contributed to the production of the supersuits. Consider the production of the fabric, the making of the supersuits. Tell students that you are now going to explore the materials used to make regular clothes and the careers involved in their production.

Procedures

Activity

1. Open a suitcase of various clothing items you have brought in.
2. Pass out a piece of clothing to each student or group of students.
3. Either project the Clothing Investigations activity sheet for the class to fill out or pass out a copy to each student.
4. Ask students how they can determine what their clothes are made out of and where they were made.
5. Project the World Map. Ask your students to read the clothing labels, and mark where each piece was made on the map.
6. Note on the Clothing Investigations activity sheet where each item was made.
7. Ask students to think more about the sources of these clothes: Where were most of the clothes made? Do they think the fibers were produced in the country where the article of clothing was made?
8. Discuss with students the differences between natural and synthetic fibers using the Natural Fibers, Synthetic Fibers handout.
9. Remind students of the difference between renewable and nonrenewable resources.
10. Ask students to determine how they would fill out the remaining columns on the *Clothing Investigations* activity sheet for their garments, and then ask them to share this information with the class.
11. Hand out the Clothing Rack Consumer and Historian information sheet and activity sheets. Have students read and complete them independently.

Vocabulary:

- **Fiber:** a thin thread of natural or artificial material that can be used to make yarn
- **Natural fiber:** fiber from a natural source, such as a plant or animal, that can be used to make yarn without chemical alteration
- **Nonrenewable resource:** a limited natural resource that cannot be replaced or reproduced within a generation and cannot be managed for renewal. Examples: oil, soil, mineral resources (lead, iron, cobalt, zinc, etc.)
- **Renewable resource:** a natural resource that can be replaced naturally or by human efforts at a sustainable rate. Ex: forests, fish, wildlife, agriculture, plants, animals
- **Synthetic fiber:** fiber that is manufactured; the original substance is chemically altered to form fiber that can be used to make yarn
- **Warp:** the set of lengthwise threads on a loom that are crossed at right angles by the weft
- **Weft:** thread or yarn that is drawn through the warp to create cloth

Assessment:
After conducting these activities, review and summarize the following key concepts:

- Natural fibers are produced by farmers and ranchers who raise fiber-producing plants and animals like cotton, flax, sheep, and alpacas.
- Clothing labels provide information on what the fabric is made from and where the clothing was made.
- Fiber can be made from renewable and nonrenewable resources.
- There are a wide variety of careers available related to the production of fiber and fabric (review the Career Information section below).

Career Information: Textile Technologist
A Textile Technologist researches, develops, tests, and oversees the production of fabrics made from both natural and synthetic fibers, ensuring they meet quality, durability, performance, and aesthetic standards across industries (e.g., fashion, home furnishings, automotive, industrial textiles). They typically hold a bachelor's degree in textile science, textile engineering, materials science, clothing technology, or a related field. Many roles also favor candidates with a master's degree or specialized industry experience. Common employers include textile and clothing manufacturers, industrial fabric firms, soft-furnishing producers, research and development organizations, and large retailers.

Kansas Standards
Next Generation Science Standards
Matter and Its Interactions
MS-PS1-3. Gather and make sense of information to describe that synthetic materials come from natural resources and impact society.

History, Government, and Social Studies
Standard 1: Choices have consequences.
1.2 The student will analyze the context and draw conclusions about choices and consequences.
1.3 The student will investigate and connect examples of choices and consequences with contemporary issues.
Standard 3: Societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups.
3.1 The student will recognize and evaluate how societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups.

3.3 The student will investigate and connect how societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups with contemporary issues.

Language Arts

6th Grade

Reading: Informational

Key Ideas and Details

RI.6.2 Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

RI.6.3 Analyze in detail how a key individual, event or idea is introduced, illustrated and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).

Craft and Structure

RI.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative and technical meanings.

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration

SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on sixth grade topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

7th Grade

Reading: Informational

Key Ideas and Details

RI.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.7.3 Analyze the interactions between individuals, events and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events or how individuals influence ideas or events).

Language in Reading: Informational

RI.7.11 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on seventh grade reading and content.

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration

SL.7.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on seventh grade topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

8th Grade

Reading: Informational

Key Ideas and Details

RI.8.3 Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies or categories).

Language in Reading: Informational

RI.8.11 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words or phrases based on eighth grade reading and content.
Speaking and Listening
Comprehension and Collaboration
SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on eighth grade topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Family and Consumer Sciences
6.0 Analyze personal decisions regarding apparel and its role in meeting physical, social, and emotional needs.
61. Analyze needs met through apparel decisions.
6.3 Analyze factors in making wise apparel decisions.

National Ag Literacy Standards
Plants and Animals for Food, Fiber & Energy
- Identify renewable and nonrenewable energy sources (T2.6-8 d.)
- Identify where labeling indicates the origin of food and fiber (fabric or clothing) (T2.6-8 f.)

Food, Health & Lifestyle
- Identify where labeling indicates the origin of food and fiber (fabric or clothing) (T3.6-8 f.)

Culture, Society, Economy & Geography
- Identify agricultural products that are exported and imported (T3.6-8 g.)

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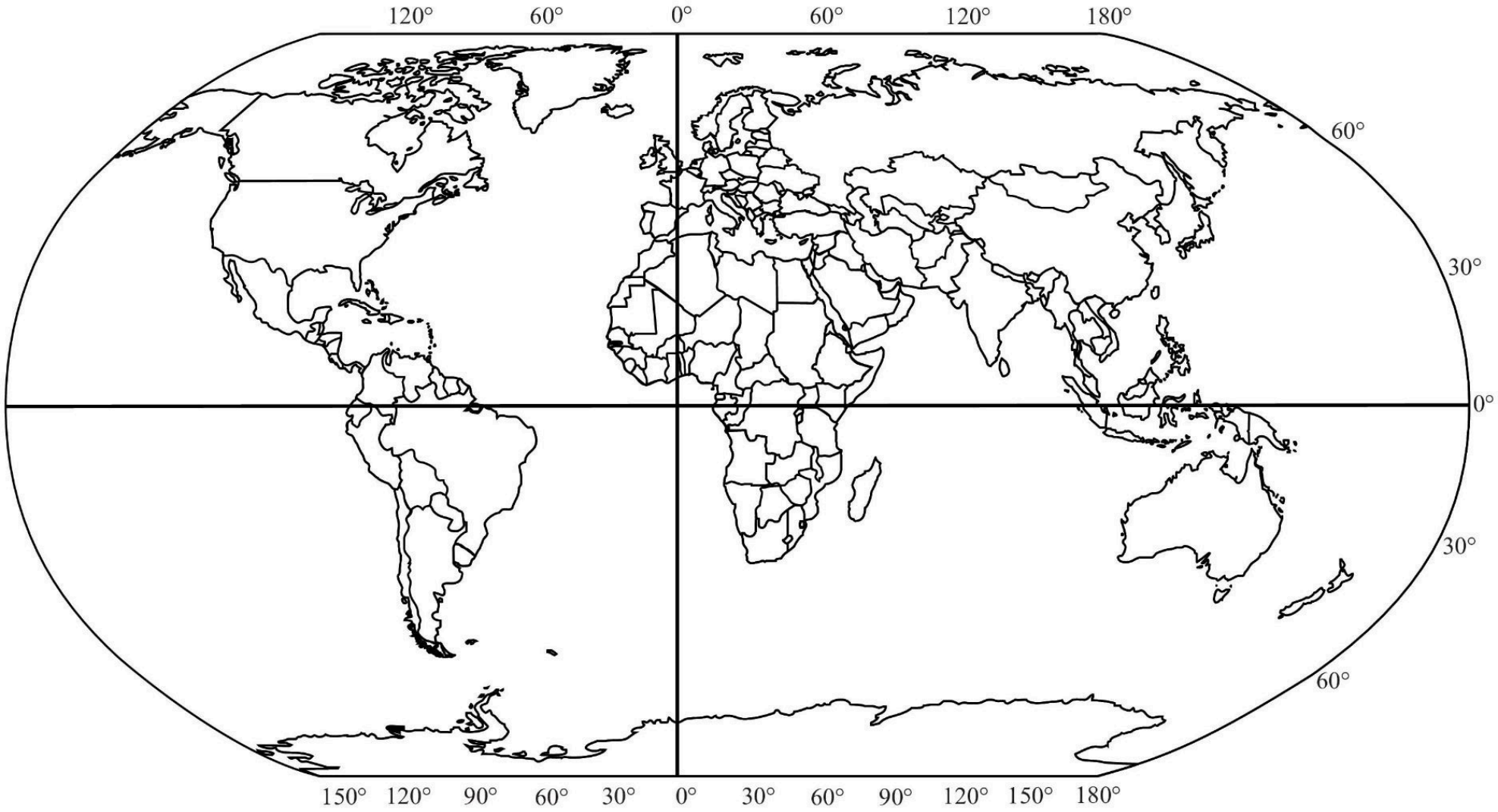
World Map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Natural Fibers

A variety of animals provide natural fibers for cloth. Wool comes from sheep, llama, alpaca, guanaco, and vicuña. Angora rabbits provide angora fiber and Angora goats provide mohair. Cashmere comes from Kashmir goats. The large white moth caterpillar, commonly called the silkworm, provides the finest silk. The fur and skins from animals such as mink, beaver, muskrats, and rabbits can also be found in clothing. Although leather is not a fiber, it is widely used as a fabric. Cattle hides are the source of most leathers, but the hides of pigs are also extensively used in soft leather goods.

Plants give us natural fibers for fashion too. The world's most important non-food crop is cotton. So many things are made of cotton that it would be hard to go through a day without using or wearing cotton cloth. Cotton has been found in tombs in India dating back to 3,000 BC.

Linen, made from fibers of the flax plant, is one of the world's oldest fabrics. Lesser-known natural fibers such as ramie, jute, and hemp have many uses, varying from finely woven fabrics to rope.

Synthetic Fibers

Since the late 1800s, people have had synthetic fiber options to choose from. These fibers are made by chemists, and they fall into two broad groups depending on their source. One group of fabrics is made from natural materials, such as cellulose, which are chemically converted into compounds that can be made into fiber. Most cellulose used for making synthetic fiber comes from soft wood or the short fibers sticking to cottonseeds. Rayon and acetate are cellulose-based fabrics.

The second group of synthetic fibers are formed solely from chemical compounds, most of which are by-products of the oil-refining process. These fibers can be woven into cloth and are often mixed with natural fibers. They are resilient, although some are easily damaged by high temperatures. Petroleum-based fabrics include Kevlar®, nylon, polyester, acrylic, polypropylene, olefin, and spandex.

Clothing Investigations

Type of fabric	Country where garment was made	Wash and care instructions	Source of fiber (natural or synthetic)	Type of natural resource (renewable or nonrenewable)

Clothing Rack Historian

Read the information on the "Clothing Rack Consumer and Historian" Information sheet to answer the following questions.

1. Cotton was first used to make clothing in what five countries? Find these countries on the world map.

_____

_____

2. What invention helped make cotton more important than linen or wool as a material used to make clothing?

_____

_____

3. Find Switzerland on the world map. Archaeologists found ancient evidence of which fiber in Switzerland? How many years old do archaeologists think this material is?

_____

_____

4. Look up Mesopotamia in an encyclopedia. Name the country that is located where Mesopotamia was once located. Find that country on the world map. Archaeologists found ancient evidence of which fiber in Mesopotamia?

_____

_____

5. What were scientists trying to imitate when they first began developing synthetic fibers?

_____

_____

Clothing Rack Consumer

Read the information on the "Clothing Rack Consumer and Historian" Information sheet. Then match the words with the definitions by writing the correct number in the space provided.

1. Cotton Gin	___ Fibers obtained from plants or animals
2. Petrochemicals	___ Man-made fibers
3. Yarn	___ A plant grown in warm climates for the fiber surrounding its seeds
4. Rayon	___A machine that separates the seeds, seed hulls, and other small objects from the fibers of cotton
5. Natural Fibers	___ A woven fabric made from the fiber of a flax plant
6. Cotton	___ A plant grown for its fiber, used in making linen, and for its seed, used to make linseed oil
7. Textiles	___ A continuous strand of twisted threads of natural or synthetic materials
8. Spinneret	___ A synthetic fiber produced from wood pulp that has been chemically treated
9. Archaeologist	___ The fine, soft, wavy, protective coat of domestic sheep and certain other animals
10. Wool	___ The fine, soft, wavy, protective coat of domestic sheep and certain other animals
11. Alpaca	___ Chemicals made from petroleum products
12. Synthetic Fibers	___ A plate pierced with holes through which plastic material is pushed to produce synthetic fibers
13. Linen	___ Cloth made by interlocking yarns on a loom
14. Woven	___ Fabric that is woven or knitted
15. Cotton Boll	___ The rounded seed pod of the cotton plant
16. Flax	___ Someone who looks for and studies material evidence from past human life and culture

Clothing Rack Consumer and Historian

Your jeans, shirts, socks, and sweaters are all made from textiles. Textile is another word for a fabric that is woven or knitted. Textiles are made from fibers, thin threads of natural or artificial material that can be twisted into a continuous strand called yarn. Some textiles are made from the natural fibers of plants and animals. Cotton is made from fiber gathered from the seed pod or boll of the cotton plant.

Wool fabric is made from the wool of sheep or llamas. Mohair is made from the long hair of goats. Silk comes from the long threads that the silkworm produces when it weaves its cocoon. Other textiles are made from synthetic fibers. Synthetic fibers are made by people.

Before the 20th century, all textiles were made from natural fibers. Since natural fibers decompose over time, very little evidence has survived to show what kinds of clothing people wore many thousands of years ago. The earliest known textiles were linen. Linen is woven from the fiber of the flax plant. In Switzerland, archaeologists dug up bundles of flax fibers and yarn and pieces of woven linen fabric. They think these objects are about 7,000 years old. In Mesopotamia, wool fabrics were found that are estimated to be about 4,000 years old. Cotton was first used to make clothing in India, Egypt, China, Mexico, and Peru. Silk has been used in China for over 4,000 years.

Late in the 19th century, scientists started trying to imitate silkworms in order to create a fiber that was similar to silk. In 1884, the French inventor Hilaire de Chardonnay created rayon, the first synthetic fiber. Rayon is made from wood pulp that has been chemically treated.

Nylon was the first fiber made completely from chemicals. In the production of nylon and other synthetic fibers, certain by-products of oil refining are combined into a syrupy substance. This substance is forced through the tiny holes of a plate called a spinneret to create fibers that can be spun and then woven into fabric.

Today, textiles are made from both natural and synthetic fibers. Sometimes natural and synthetic fibers are blended together. The most commonly used plant fibers is cotton. Cotton is an important US crop grown on farms in the southern part of the country, from Georgia to southern California, where the climate is warm.

The short, fluffy fibers of the cotton boll must be separated from the seeds and seed hulls before they can be used. This was difficult until Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793. The cotton gin made it easier and faster to clean cotton after it had been picked. After that, people all over the United States and Europe began wearing clothes made from cotton.

Before the invention of the cotton gin, most people wore clothes made from wool or linen. Wool is still a popular fiber for making clothes. Sheep and alpacas are raised across the United States for their wool, but most of the wool used in the United States is imported from Australia. Alpacas are related to camels and provide very soft fiber. Linen is also still in use but is expensive because it is difficult to make.

Answer Key

Clothing Rack Consumer

1. 5	7. 3	12. 8
2. 12	8. 4	13. 14
3. 6	9. 10	14. 7
4. 1	10. 11	15. 15
5. 13	11. 2	16. 9
6. 16		

Clothing Rack Historian

1. India, Egypt, China, Mexico, and Peru
2. The cotton gin
3. Flax and linen, 7,000 years old
4. Iraq, wool
5. Silkworms