



What Catalogs Tell Us

Grade Level:

3rd - 5th Grade

Subject Areas:

Social Studies, Language
Arts, Math, Science

SD Standards:Social Studies:

4.E.1.1
4.OS.2.1
4.W.2.1

Reading/Language Arts:

4.L.1.1
4.L.2.1

Math:

4.M.1.1
4.M.1.2

Science:

4.SI.1.4
4.SI.2.1
4.S.1.1
4.S.1.2

Setting:

Classroom

Skills:

Observation, Research,
Writing, Analyzing,
Organizing, Applying

Objective: Using catalogues, students will explore everyday objects that were historically used in and around the home and compare how these objects have changed or stayed the same over the years.

Materials:

Paper & Pencils

Sears Roebuck and Co. Catalog (in Trunk)

Montgomery Wards Catalog (in Trunk)

Worksheets & Answer Keys (for both Sears & Wards catalogs)

Order Forms ([Sears](#) & [Montgomery Wards](#))

[Wage Sheets](#) - laminated

Background:

Catalogs can provide a wealth of information about the objects of everyday life found in many American homes. Catalogs illustrate prices, advertising methods, trends in purchasing and style, and can be used for actual object identification. In some cases catalogs show the length of time certain items were sold and used without changes in form. For example, almost identical irons are pictured in the Montgomery Ward catalog from 1872 until 1945. Old catalogs can also tell us about objects that are not available any more.

Catalogs from Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck & Co. made it possible for farm families to buy many things not available in the small towns near their farms. The earliest "catalogs" were just one or two sheets listing items for sale. They eventually grew into large books.

Farm families used an order blank from the catalog or wrote a letter to place their orders. At first, customers had to go into town to pick up their orders at the post office (often located in the general store or other establishment). After the U. S. Post Office began Rural Free Delivery in 1896 and added parcel post delivery to it in 1913, the postal carrier delivered the order to the house.

Aaron Montgomery Ward printed his first "catalog" (a single sheet) in 1872. By 1904 each catalog weighed 4 pounds. The first Sears Roebuck catalog featured only watches and jewelry in 1888; in 1896 the company distributed its first large general catalog.

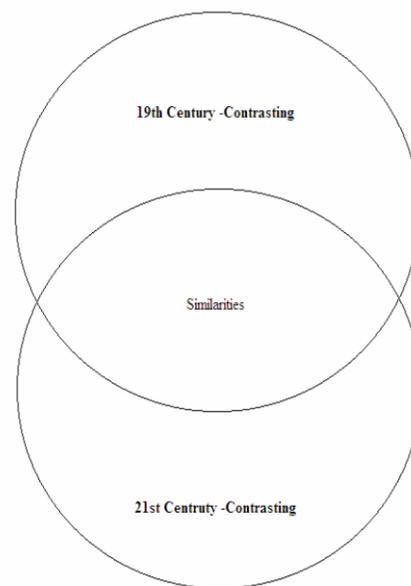
Procedure:

- Divide the class into groups and give each group a copy of a vintage catalog.
- Discuss features of the catalogs and allow the students time to page through them. Select several pages in the mail order catalog that depict household items, tools or toys. Together study the pages, reading the names, descriptions (if any) and prices of the many things available.
- Discuss: What items do you find that we still use today? Do you see anything that you don't recognize at all? Have students copy or draw pictures of items that interest them - and are still available today. Make a "then and now" display or bulletin board with the student's pictures and their prices paired with similar items of today.
- Make copies of the worksheets to hand out. Have each group complete the worksheets for the catalog they are using (either Sears or Wards). Then review the answers using the answer key provided.
- Hand out copies of the order forms. Have students place an order for three or four items from one of the catalogs.
- Using the wage sheets, assign students an occupation from the late 1800s or early 1900s and have them look up their wage and figure out how many hours, days, weeks etc. it would take them to earn enough money to buy items on their order form.
- Using the wage sheets, assign students an occupation from the 21st century. Have them find similar items still sold today and have them figure out how long it would take them to earn enough money to buy it now.

Extension:

- Using a Venn diagram compare the impact of catalogs in the late 19th century to the opportunity to shop and purchase goods online in the 21st century. In what ways are the opportunities and benefits similar? How are they different?
- Discuss items we need today that were not sold in the late 1800s.
- Discuss items that have not changed over time.
- Find objects that are no longer sold today and discuss reasons why that might be or why we don't need them anymore.
- Compare prices of items in the vintage catalogs to similar items sold today.

Catalogs - Then & Now



* Adapted from the Illinois State Museum *At Home in the Heartland* Online Exhibit.