What do your clothes have to do with a factory that collapsed in Asia?

It’s the first day of school, and you’re looking good. New shirt, new shoes, new jeans—and you didn’t have to empty your (or your parents’) bank account to get them. Thanks to all the back-to-school sales, your whole outfit cost just $50 . . . which means you can afford to cruise the mall again this weekend.

How can Walmart, H&M, Forever 21, and other retailers afford to sell clothes at such low prices? The answer is in the labels. About 98 percent of clothes sold in the U.S. today are made in other countries. Fifty years ago, almost all the clothes sold in the U.S. were made here. But in the 1970s, clothing companies—along with car, electronics, and many other manufacturers—started moving their factories to China, India, Bangladesh, Mexico, and other nations where labor and other costs are less expensive.
For example, it costs $3.72 to manufacture a denim shirt in Bangladesh. To make that same shirt in the U.S. costs $13.22. (See chart below.) Lower costs mean U.S. stores can sell clothes for less and still make a profit. For U.S. shoppers, it means more clothes in their closets and more money in their wallets to buy other things.

Most Americans didn’t think about where their clothes were made until recently. In April, a building in Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1,127 workers and injuring about 2,500 others. The tragedy in the small Asian nation was one of the world’s deadliest industrial disasters. The five factories in the building had been churning out clothes to sell in the U.S. and Europe. Investigators later discovered that the building’s owner had illegally added extra floors and allowed the companies inside to install heavy equipment that the building wasn’t strong enough to support.

After the collapse, Bangladesh’s government temporarily closed about 20 factories for safety violations. It also announced plans to raise the country’s minimum wage. Bangladesh has some of the lowest-paid workers in the world. Some clothing factory workers were making $40 a month at the time of the collapse—less than $2 a day.

That may not seem like a lot of money to Americans, but it’s enough to help people in the poor country escape complete poverty. Nearly 80 percent of garment workers in Bangladesh are women. Many are young, poorly educated, and from rural villages. Most put up with unsafe working conditions because they need their salaries to support their families.

Conditions are unlikely to improve dramatically for workers in Bangladesh anytime soon. Officials there warn that drastic changes could damage the country’s economy. Safety inspections take time and money. And raising workers’ pay any higher would increase costs, which might encourage manufacturers to move their operations to countries where people work for even less.

Bangladesh is a developing nation that is now one of the world’s largest exporters of clothes. Its 5,000 garment factories employ more than 4.5 million people.

“The garment industry is No. 1 for exports and dollars for the country,” explains Alonzo Suson, head of a labor-rights group in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital. “Any slowdown of that development is a national security issue,” he told The New York Times.

Global Gear

China is the world’s biggest ready-to-wear clothing producer, but it has lost business over the years as its workers’ paychecks have grown. The once-poor nation now has the fastest-growing middle class in the world. The average

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<tr>
<th>UNITED STATES</th>
<th>BANGLADESH</th>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing Fabric</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Labor Costs</td>
<td>$2.22 (22¢)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$13.22</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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SOURCE: CNN.COM
clothing factory worker in China now makes $1.26 an hour; in nearby Cambodia that same worker makes just 52 cents. That has led major retailers, including the Gap, Benetton, and Sears, to shift some of their business to Cambodia, Thailand, and other countries where clothing can be made for even less. The increased production has boosted the struggling economies of those countries by creating millions of jobs.

Who benefits the most from all of this low-paid factory work? The companies that sell the goods here in the U.S.—and American shoppers. Since 1990, clothing prices in the U.S. have increased just 10 percent, while food prices have soared 82 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That may explain how Americans manage to buy on average, per person, 68 pieces of clothing each year.

Taking Charge

The Bangladeshi factory collapse highlighted a downside of manufacturing in other countries. Many U.S. companies have little control over working conditions in the factories where their clothes are being made. Enforcement of safety regulations is usually the responsibility of local governments, some of which are often influenced by factory owners who don’t want safety costs to hurt their profits.

The shock of the factory collapse led many U.S. companies to take matters into their own hands. More than 30 major retailers, including H&M and Mango, recently agreed to spend $60 million to monitor safety in Bangladesh’s clothing factories.

Other retailers are trying to keep as much clothing manufacturing in the U.S. as possible. They say knowing that the workers are safe and well-paid is worth it, even if it means charging higher prices. True Religion produces its jeans in California. The company’s founder, Jeff Lubell, estimates the $300 jeans could sell for $40 if they were made in China.

That “made in the USA” focus may pay off, predicts Robert H. Frank, an economics professor at Cornell University. “There is evidence that consumers will pay higher prices when they believe companies are trying to provide products in a more humane way,” he tells JS.

Just how much more people would be willing to pay remains to be seen, however. Price will always be key to many shoppers, especially in tough economic times.

Katie Rowe, a sixth-grader from Fairfield, Connecticut, frequents Forever 21 and H&M. “Raising the prices would [mean] fewer customers,” she tells JS. “Companies should think of other ways to help factory workers be safe.”

—Laura Anastasia

Most workers put up with unsafe conditions because they need their salaries to support their families.
MADE IN ASIA
More than three quarters of all clothing imported into the U.S. in 2012 came from these Asian countries.

QUESTIONS
1. What was the dollar value of clothing exported from Bangladesh to the U.S. in 2012?
2. How much did Indonesia export to the U.S.?
3. Which country was the biggest exporter?
4. How much more did this country export than Vietnam, the country in second place?
5. Which country exported $3 billion of clothing?
6. Which major exporter is farthest west?
7. Which capital is nearest the Tropic of Cancer?
8. Which city, a major manufacturing center on the Tropic of Cancer, is close to Hong Kong?
9. Which city is at 40ºN, 116ºE? (See p. 14.)
10. About how many straight-line miles apart are the capitals of Pakistan and India?

SOURCE: American Apparel & Footwear Association
**INTERNATIONAL**

The Real Cost of Fashion (pp. 6-9)  *Lexile score: 1090L*

- **COMMON CORE QUESTIONS**
  - Why do some retailers manufacture clothes in Bangladesh? Do Americans benefit from this? Why or why not? (RI 7.1)
  - Student Katie Rowe says higher clothing prices might hurt sales. What facts from the article support or contradict her opinion? (RH 8)

- **FAST FACTS**
  - Americans buy a lot of clothing—averaging at least one new piece a week—but it doesn’t eat up their budgets. In 2011, just 3.5 percent of Americans’ annual expenditures went toward clothing and footwear.
  - Bangladesh is slightly smaller than Iowa, but it is the world’s eighth-most populous country, with about 163 million people. It has been plagued by political instability, poor infrastructure, and corruption since gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971. Bangladesh’s economy, however, has grown by nearly 6 percent a year since 1996, due in part to its growing clothing-export business.

- **WRITING PROMPT**
  What are basic rights factory workers deserve, in terms of pay, hours, and conditions? Write an argumentative essay outlining your ideas.

- **DEBATE TOPIC**
  How might having higher U.S. clothing prices help or hurt developing nations? Keeping those pros and cons in mind, should clothing retailers raise prices? Why?

- **EXTEND THE LESSON**
  Have students check the labels to see where their clothes were made. Then have them work in groups to tally types of clothing by country of origin. Each group should report: Which country was most prevalent? Were certain items mainly made in one place? If so, why might that be?

**WEB LINKS**

- A Short History of Ready-made Clothing: [museum.nist.gov/exhibits/apparel](http://museum.nist.gov/exhibits/apparel)

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**AMERICAN HISTORY**

Let Freedom Ring (pp. 10-13)  *Lexile score: 1160L*

- **COMMON CORE QUESTION**
  What can you tell about the March on Washington based on the photo on pp. 10-11? (RH 7)

- **FAST FACTS**
  - Martin Luther King Jr. was the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), one of several civil rights groups that helped organize the march. Others included the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Urban League, and the Negro American Labor Council.
  - The phrase “I have a dream” wasn’t included in the original draft of King’s speech. He began to improvise about three quarters of the way through. Although King had used the phrase in four previous speeches, most Americans heard it for the first time at the rally on the National Mall.

- **WRITING PROMPT**
  How did the March on Washington and King’s speech affect the civil rights movement? Write a one-page essay, using details from the article to support your answer.

- **DISCUSSION TOPIC**
  Have students watch a portion of King’s speech in this issue’s digital edition and read the full text of his remarks. (See the first link below.) Ask: What are some examples of figurative language in King’s speech? What rhetorical devices does he use? How do they enhance the overall impact of the speech?

- **EXTEND THE LESSON**
  In addition to King, nine other civil rights leaders delivered speeches during the march. View the official program at [ourdocuments.gov/doc_large_image.php?doc=96](http://ourdocuments.gov/doc_large_image.php?doc=96). Research and write a short biography of one of the other speakers.

**WEB LINKS**

- Martin Luther King Jr. [multimedia]: [history.com/topics/martin-luther-king-jr](http://history.com/topics/martin-luther-king-jr)
March 25, 1911: The paychecks had been handed out, the workers were gathering their belongings, and the closing bell was just about to chime. Then suddenly—fire! Flames and suffocating smoke swept through the Triangle Waist Company, housed on the top three floors of a 10-story building in New York City. Panicked, the 500 workers inside struggled to escape. Many crammed into elevators. Some slid down elevator cables. Others raced down a back staircase before it caught fire. But 146 of the workers didn’t make it out alive.

Most of the victims were poor female immigrants, and many were teens. The two youngest were only 14 years old.

Survivors recounted harrowing details: One of the two exits had been locked, the rusty fire escape collapsed, and the firefighters’ ladders could reach only as high as the sixth floor. The factory’s owners were put on trial. Angry families, workers, and local leaders demanded that factories improve safety, and more people joined unions. Being part of unions made factory workers more aware of their rights and gave them the power to secure safer conditions.

1. What did the factory fire in New York and the building collapse in Bangladesh have in common?
   A Both factories were located outside the U.S.
   B Neither could have been avoided.
   C The victims were low-paid factory workers.

2. How were workers in the fire and the building collapse alike?
   A Most were immigrants.
   B Most were union members.
   C Most were very poor.

3. Which was true of the Triangle Waist Company fire?
   A It had fewer deaths than the Bangladesh building collapse.
   B It happened 100 years after the Bangladesh building collapse.
   C It prompted major retailers to call for better working conditions.

4. What might have prevented the fire and the building collapse?
   A Higher pay for workers
   B Stricter building inspections
   C Wider hallways

5. What can you conclude about both tragedies?
   A The factory owners cared more about profits than workers.
   B The factory owners cared more about workers than profits.
   C More people should look for work in factories.

WRITING PROMPT
Why might a type of tragedy that happened so long ago in the U.S. have again occurred, in Bangladesh?