

# “Jeans Nation” and “Rise of the Backpack”

## The fascinating histories of two iconic items

### About the Story

Lexile: 990L

For qualitative complexity factors,  
go to Scope Online.

**Learning Objective:** to synthesize  
information from two nonfiction texts

**Key Skills:** figurative language, key ideas  
and details, compare and contrast,  
synthesis

#### Essential Questions:

- What drives innovation?
- How does something become popular?
- What does fashion reflect about a culture?

#### Standards:

The article and lesson support these  
Common Core anchor standards:  
R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.5, R.6, R.7, R.9, W.2,  
W.4, SL.1, SL.2, L.4, L.5, L.6

For more standards information—  
including TEKS—go to Scope Online.

**JEANS NATION**

low did all of America end up wearing the same type of pants?

By Hilson Friedman

**Also See** How did jeans become popular?

hundreds of men roamed over the dusty hills of western Nevada. It was 1870, and they were all looking for the same thing: the glint of silver and gold. One day, they trudged through cramped and bunched-over shovels, searching. But as they dug and scraped and sifted dirt, many found a problem. It wasn't their aching backs or their red bladders. It was the mountains looming up the hills. The problem was that they kept tripping their

stronger pair of pants. Looking at the round metal pins he used on horse blankets, Davis was struck with an idea. Fasten the pins, called darts, onto the parts of the pants that tore most often—the pocket corners and the fly.

His idea was simple—and genius. The darts held the fabric together perfectly, making the pants virtually indestructible. Soon, every worker wanted a pair. More than 150 years later, Davis's riveted pants are still popular. In fact, you probably have a pair in your closet right now. You know them as jeans.

**Tough Pants**

Jeans may be credited with inventing modern jeans, but people in India, Italy, and France were wearing pants like jeans made of thick, coarse fabric as far back as 500 years ago. When Europeans began moving to the Americas in the 1500s, they brought one

of those fabrics, denim, with them. The heavy cloth was sturdy yet comfortable, making it ideal for work pants. To hide the grime that built up, the denim was often dyed blue.

But it wasn't until the 1870s, when Davis invented his super-sturdy pants, that denim started to become American wear. The new riveted jeans flew off shelves so fast that Davis couldn't keep up with all the orders. So he asked his fabric supplier, Levi Strauss, to go into business with him. Over the next 60 years, their riveted denim pants came to be worn by workers across America—for everything from farming and logging to manufacturing and construction.

**Fashion Choice**

So how did denim pants make their way into your life? It began in the 1930s, with movies called Westerns. People flocked to theaters to watch heroic cowboys gallop across dusty landscapes. And tucked into the cowboy's boot were jeans, of course. Kids begged their parents for a pair so they could dress up as cowboys, and wealthy Americans donated jeans to imitate their favorite movie stars.

"Companions making jeans realized, 'Wow, there are a lot of people who want to wear jeans just for fun,'" says James Sullivan, author of a book on the history of jeans. In other words, jeans were transforming from a strictly practical garment for physical work into a fashion item.

By the 1950s, blue jeans had become the ultimate symbol of cool, especially among young people. Rock star Elvis Presley shimmied onstage in his jeans. Actors like James Dean were there to play tough-kid roles. Many schools banned the pants, which were seen as the realm of troublemakers. But that only made jeans seem cooler.

Over the next few decades, jeans became increasingly popular in America—and in the world. Although the pants originated outside the U.S., they came to be seen as a classic piece of American culture, like a apple pie. Chances of new denim companies spring up to feed what was becoming a work blue jeans obsession.

**Just for You**

Today, 80 percent of Americans own a pair of jeans, and according to some estimates, one-half of all the people the planet wears jeans any given day. Maybe even have a pair from Strauss & Co., which still exists but is not as well known as it once was.

Jacob Davis would surely be amazed to see how far jeans have come since he added those first darts in 1870. There were the bell-bottoms of the 1970s and the high-waisted jeans of the 1980s. There was baggy, wide-legged styles of the 1990s and the skintight jeans of the 2000s. And while today's denim doesn't need the durability that Davis's rivets offered, many pairs still have them, as a decorative feature.

"Every generation finds a new way to wear jeans that they feel like their own," Sullivan says. "Give it anything you want to them to make them an expression of your individuality."

Perhaps that's the secret to their long-lasting popularity. Jeans have been around for more than 150 years. They're worn by everyone. But somehow your favorite pair feels like it was made just for you.

## Your Teaching Support Package

Find your full suite of support materials at [scope.scholastic.com](https://scope.scholastic.com).

#### Audio:

- Article read-alouds
- Text-to-speech
- Vocabulary

#### Vocabulary Slideshow

#### Differentiated Article:

- Lower-Lexile version

#### Connected reading from the Scope archives:

- “Sneaker Nation”

#### Skill Building Activities to print, project, or share digitally:

- Writing Planner: The Mother of Invention
  - Vocabulary: Definitions
  - Close Reading and Critical Thinking
  - Choice Board
  - Quiz\*
  - Core Skills Workout: Text Evidence\*
  - Contest Entry Form
- \*Available on two levels

# Step-by-Step Lesson

Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

## 1. Preparing to Read

15 minutes

### Do Now: Consider a Saying (5 minutes)

- Write this saying on your whiteboard for students to reflect on as they come into your classroom: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Have students write down what they think it means. (It means something like “New ideas or ways of doing things are created when there is a problem that needs to be solved.”) Ask them if they agree with the saying. Then brainstorm some inventions that might have come to be out of necessity. *Note: The culminating writing prompt requires students to apply this saying to the two articles they read.*

### Preview Vocabulary (10 minutes)

- Project the **Vocabulary Slideshow** on your whiteboard. Review the definitions and complete the activity as a class. The audio pronunciations of the words and a read-aloud of the definitions are embedded on the slides. Highlighted words: *cumbersome, donned, indestructible, indispensable, ingenious, marketed, revolutionize, tinker.*

## 2. Reading and Discussing

45 minutes

### “Jeans Nation”

- Have a volunteer read the As You Read box that appears on page 18 of the magazine and at the top of the digital story page.
- Read the article through once as a class. Optionally, have students listen to author Allison Friedman read her article aloud while they follow along. The **audio read-aloud** is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- Have students reread the article silently to themselves.

### “Rise of the Backpack”

- Read the second article as a class. Optionally, have students listen to author Mackenzie Carro read the article aloud while they follow along. The **audio read-aloud** is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- As a class, discuss the following questions, which apply to both articles. Alternatively, after posing the questions to the class, have students share their thinking with a partner first, then expand the share into a whole-class discussion.

### Close-Reading Questions

(20 minutes)

*The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.*

1. **Author Allison Friedman writes, “But it wasn’t until the 1870s, when Davis invented his super-sturdy pants, that denim started to become America’s uniform.” What does she mean by “America’s uniform”? (figurative language)** *A uniform is special clothing worn by members of a particular group or organization—a sports team, workplace, school, army, etc.—to make the members of the group look the same as one another and distinct from others. In saying that denim started to become America’s uniform, Friedman means that jeans started to become the pants worn by almost all Americans.*
2. **Friedman explains that people have worn jean-like pants since as far back as 500 years ago. What change did Jacob Davis make to the jean-like pants that already existed and why? (key ideas and details)** *Jacob Davis attached the rivets to the pocket corners and flies of the denim pants workers were already wearing in order to make the pants more durable. By attaching the rivets to those areas of the pants, Davis solved the problem of the pants constantly ripping.*
3. **What change did Gerry Cunningham make to backpacks—and why? (key ideas and details)** *Cunningham created a pack that was more comfortable than the backpacks that existed at the time (which were called rucksacks) and that had an important new feature: zippers. The zippers made it possible to reach back and get something out of the pack without taking the whole thing off. Gerry made these changes because he found the backpacks that existed to be uncomfortable and cumbersome to use while rock climbing.*
4. **Who uses jeans and backpacks today? How has the use of these two items changed over time? (compare and contrast)** *Both items are used today by people around the world. Friedman explains that about half of all the people on the planet wear jeans on any given day. Carro explains that today, backpacks are everywhere and used by students of all ages. Originally, jeans were a practical garment worn only by those doing physical labor, but they became a fashion item worn by all. Similarly, backpacks were a practical bag for climbers, but now they are essential for anyone carrying anything, especially students carrying books.*

5. **How do the rise of jeans and the rise of the backpack differ?** (contrast) *At one time, the wearing of jeans was met with resistance and jeans were even banned in some places, while backpacks were never out of favor with the public. And while jeans were popularized by movie stars and musicians, backpacks were popularized by college students and the companies that tailored them to students' needs. Finally, jeans are seen as quintessentially "American," while backpacks are seen as quintessentially "student."*

### Critical-Thinking Questions

(5 minutes)

*The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.*

1. **Friedman quotes James Sullivan as saying "Every generation finds a new way to wear jeans so that they feel like their own. You can do anything you want to them to make them an expression of your individuality." Which lines from "Rise of the Backpack" express a similar idea? How do your own jeans, backpack, or other belongings express your individuality?** *The following lines from "Rise of the Backpack" express a similar idea to what James Sullivan says about jeans: "By the late 1980s, backpacks had become an indispensable part of the American student's life—and identity. After all, there were endless ways to make a backpack your own. You could choose a bold color or pattern, like race car red or tie-dye. You could deck it out with pins of your favorite bands or keychains of your favorite sports teams. Each back-to-school season, students selected their bags with the same care and passion as they did their sneakers and jeans." Answers to the second question will vary.*
2. **Carro writes, "... today's backpacks are not so different from those of the 1960s. Is that because the original design can't be rivaled?" How would you answer that question? If you could revolutionize the backpack once again, what improvements would you make?** *Answers will vary.*

## 3. Skill Building and Writing

20 minutes

- Have students complete **Writing Planner: The Mother of Invention**. This activity will help them organize their ideas in preparation for the prompt on page 21 in the printed magazine and at the bottom of the digital story page.
- Alternatively, have students choose a culminating task from the **Choice Board**, a menu of differentiated activities.



## Paired Texts, pages 18-21

Featured Skill: synthesis

### Connected reading from the *Scope* archives:

- Paired Texts: [“Sneaker Nation”](#) and [“Does He Have the Best Job Ever?”](#) (February 2021)