

# A Hardworking Holiday

Most Americans think of Labor Day as that random holiday weekend at the beginning of September that marks the unofficial end of summer. But have you ever wondered about the meaning behind this holiday that has *labor* in its name – also known as *work*? Labor Day may seem like one of America’s strangest holidays, but its purpose is to celebrate some of its most important people – workers.

Labor Day was born in 1882, during a period when the American workforce was undergoing some big changes. Millions of people had moved from farms to cities, coming to work in industrial settings like factories, mills, and plants. A new kind of work environment took shape, introducing a plethora of new problems for workers. The average American factory employee in the late 1800’s had to work six or seven days a week for 10-12 hours just to earn a basic living. Employers were not required to provide breaks. Child labor became increasingly common, and employees of all ages faced work conditions that were often unsafe and unsanitary. To push for solutions, groups of workers formed labor **unions**, using strength in numbers to organize strikes and demonstrations – hoping to force employers to increase pay and improve work conditions.

Eventually, these tactics did bring about important changes in labor laws, and as a **byproduct** of the growing labor movement, a new holiday was created – Labor Day. Matthew Maguire, a labor union secretary, and Peter McGuire, who helped found the American Federation of Labor, are both credited with suggesting a holiday to honor the American worker. No one knows for sure which man had the idea first, but it seems that both envisioned a dedicated day off for workers to be recognized for their contributions and enjoy some fun with their families.

Regardless of whose idea it was, workers in New York City held America’s first Labor Day parade on Tuesday, September 5, 1882. Over 10,000 people took the day off and marched proudly through the city streets, and afterward they gathered in a park to celebrate with food, music, and speeches in support of workers’ rights.

The new “working man’s holiday” soon caught on in other places. Oregon was the first state to declare Labor Day a state holiday, and other states soon followed suit. In 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a law making the first Monday in September a federal holiday to honor American workers. (September was chosen to break up the long stretch between July Fourth and Thanksgiving.)

To many modern Americans, Labor Day weekend is simply a fun time for barbecues, picnics, and sporting events. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia still hold annual Labor Day parades, and retailers advertise sales on everything from fall fashion to new automobiles. To other people, however, it’s just another day of work. Ironically, while many employers do grant people a paid day off on Labor Day, millions of American workers actually have to go to work on their own holiday!

Strict labor laws now regulate the number of days and hours people can be required to work, breaks are **mandated** after a certain number of hours, child labor is illegal, and work environments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are safer than ever. Still, it is no less important today to appreciate the hardworking cashiers, mechanics, factory workers, farmers, miners, soldiers, food service employees, construction workers, truck drivers, trash collectors, and employees of countless other industries who make up our nation’s **infrastructure** and provide the goods and services we use every day.

**Unions** – group to organize workers and protect their rights

**Byproduct** – result from an action meant to cause something else

**Mandated** – legally required

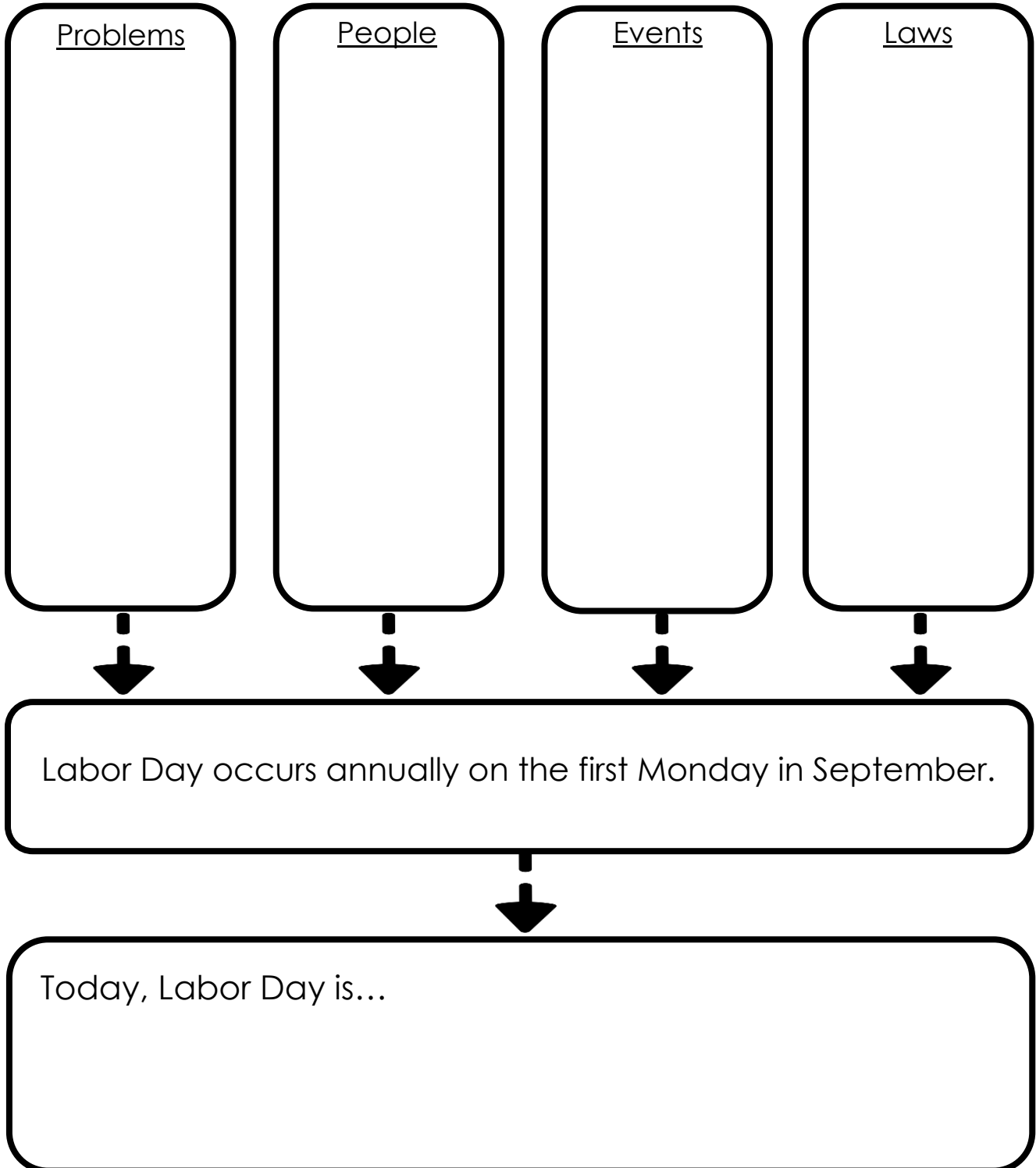
**Infrastructure** – basic ways a society operates

# Show Your Comprehension

1. What does *labor* mean? Who is Labor Day meant to honor?
2. What problems did industrial workers face during the late 1800's?
3. What did workers hope to achieve by joining labor unions?
4. What happened at the first Labor Day celebration in New York City?
5. In what ways are modern Labor Day celebrations similar to and different from the one in 1882?
6. Why do you think Labor Day caught on so quickly in other states and the federal government?
7. Why does the passage say it is ironic that many people go to work on Labor Day?
8. What legal protections for workers exist today?
9. In addition to those listed in the passage, what are some other types of workers who contribute to your community?

# Leading to Labor Day

After reading the informational passage, identify some problems, people, events, and laws that helped create Labor Day as we know it today.



# Labor Day Tic-tac-toe

Choose and respond thoughtfully to three prompts in a row – across, down, or diagonally. Explain each answer using several details from your life, your knowledge, and/or the article.

<p><b>1. Many things can be categorized as work. How can work benefit the one doing it as well as his/her community?</b></p>	<p>2. What are some meaningful ways to show appreciation to people who work in your community?</p>	<p><b>3. What is “strength in numbers”? When can it be helpful?</b></p>
<p>4. Millions of people moved to America’s cities during the Industrial Revolution. How do you think cities changed during this time?</p>	<p><b>5. Why are breaks and rest so important?</b></p>	<p>6. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance.” What do you think he meant?</p>
<p><b>7. What is one job or industry you might want to work in as an adult? How does this type of work help people?</b></p>	<p>8. How is working for an employer different from working at a family farm or business?</p>	<p><b>9. What makes something or someone special enough to deserve a dedicated holiday?</b></p>

## **Answer Key – “Show Your Comprehension”**

1. Labor is work, so Labor Day honors workers.
2. Laborers worked 10-12 hours a day, 6-7 days per week in unsafe environments, often without breaks. Children worked in these conditions, too.
3. People who joined labor unions hoped to convince employers to increase their pay, reduce their hours, and improve work safety.
4. Over 10,000 workers marched in a parade through the city and gathered for a celebration that included food, music, and political speeches.
5. (possible answer) Modern Labor Day celebrations are similar because they often involve people gathering to eat outdoors with family and friends. Modern Labor Day celebrations are different because they usually aren't connected to political movements.
6. (possible answer) Workers are a vital part of every community around the country, so many people immediately saw the need to appreciate them and focus on improving conditions for them
7. It is ironic because Labor Day honors working people and was originally meant to give them a day off to celebrate with their families.
8. Child labor is illegal. Labor laws require breaks, limit the hours and days someone can be required to work, and ensure safe work conditions.
9. Many possible answers

## **Answer Key – “Leading to Labor Day”** (possible answers)

### Problems:

Workers in the late 1800's worked extremely long hours for little pay.  
Child labor was common.  
Conditions in factories and mills were often unsafe and unsanitary.  
Worker often weren't able to take breaks.

### People:

Matthew Maguire (labor union secretary)  
Peter McGuire (co-founder of the American Federation of Labor)  
10,000 workers in New York City (participants in the first Labor Day celebration)  
President Grover Cleveland (signed Labor Day law)

### Events:

Strikes and demonstrations by labor unions  
First Labor Day parade and park gathering in 1882

### Laws:

Oregon was the first state to declare a Labor Day holiday  
Federal Labor Day holiday - 1894

### Today, Labor Day is...

...a fun weekend for parties and outdoor events.  
...a day for parades in many American cities.  
...a popular weekend for retail sales.  
...just another day of work for many working people.

# Thanks for downloading!

## Using the Digital Version

If your students will access these activities through Google Classroom, you'll first need to make a copy by clicking this link:

[Labor Day Reading Passage and Activities](#)

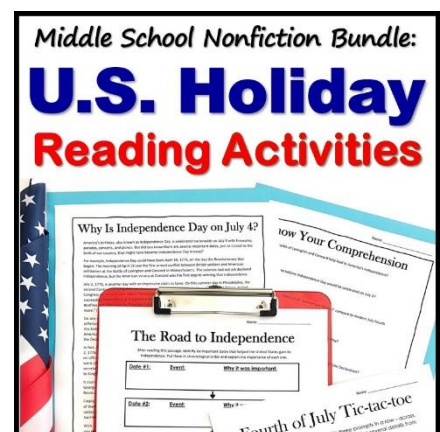
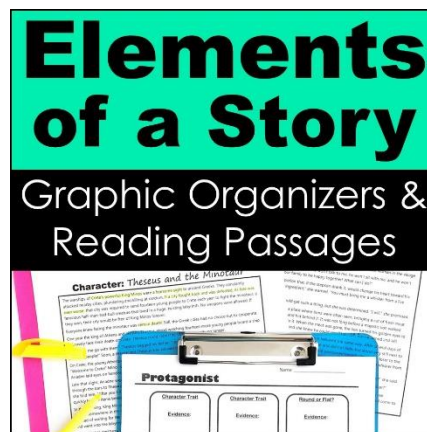
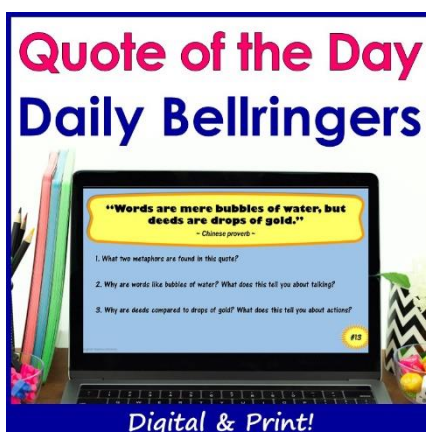
You will be prompted to make a copy of the resource, which will appear in your Google Drive for you to share with your students. Students can complete the activities by typing in the text boxes provided.



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