

Five Things You Should Know: Thomas Edison's Patent Application for the Incandescent Light Bulb (1879)

1. **WHAT A START:** When Edison was young, he saved the child of a station agent from being struck by a train. Out of gratitude, the station agent trained Edison as a telegraph operator, and efforts to improve the telegraph were the start of Edison's career as an inventor.

2. **VERY INVENTIVE:** Thomas Edison received 1,093 patents in the United States, as well as many others in Europe. He developed the first industrial research laboratory and was the first to apply the methods of mass production to the process of invention. Edison achieved fame and popularity not from the invention of the light bulb but from the invention of the phonograph. It could both record and reproduce sound.

3. **NEW AND IMPROVED:** While Edison did not invent the light bulb, his patent claimed an improvement in electric lamps covering “a carbon filament or strip coiled and connected ... to platina contact wires.” Edison actually discovered the best-performing carbonized vegetable growths after his patent issued—several species of bamboo. The carbonized bamboo filaments could be used to create incandescent light bulbs that would burn for 1,200 hours, far beyond the existing state of technology and other carbonized fibers.

4. **ALL AFLAME:** Edison made the first public demonstration of his light bulb in Menlo Park, New Jersey, on New Year's Eve 1879 and proclaimed, “We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles.”

5. **BURN, BABY, BURN:** Edison is appropriately credited with having “lit up the world.” The practical incandescent light bulb is one of the most transformative patented inventions of all time. Safe, effective lighting became generally affordable for widespread residential use for the first time. Business operations also changed dramatically as workers were able to work more easily at night, eventually leading to shifts that could operate around the clock.