## The Metric System



Cross-Curricular Focus: Mathematics

There are two basic systems of measurement: metric and customary. The U.S., Liberia and Myanmar are the only countries that still use the customary system. Interestingly, the United States was involved in world meetings on the metric system during the 18th century. U.S. representatives signed the 1875 Treaty of the Meter. Signing the treaty was a vote to recognize the meter as a standard of measurement. So where did the metric system come from, and why doesn't the U.S. use it very much?

In 1790, the French Revolution had just ended in France. The new French government commissioned the French Academy to develop a simpler system of measurement. They agreed that one *metre* would be equal to one ten-millionth of the distance between the north pole and the equator, measuring along the Paris meridian. It took almost ten years to complete the survey and finalize the metric system.

In 1800, America was much friendlier with France than with England. The American Revolution was a recent memory on both sides of the ocean. France had helped the U.S. during the war. President Thomas Jefferson enjoyed a good relationship with the French government. During Jefferson's presidency, the U.S. bought a huge area of land in North America belonging to France. The Louisiana Purchase greatly enlarged the territory of the U.S. However, despite its friendship with France, the U.S. failed to approve the new, simpler metric system at first.

Congress approved a move to the metric system in 1866. Then in 1875, the U.S. signed the Treaty of the Meter in 1875. However, the use of the customary system of measurement continued.

The U.S. increased the use of metric measurements in the 1960s. The U.S. is still working toward the goal of using only the metric system. Many medical, military and scientific measurements use the metric system already. However, customary units are still used in many situations, such as marking miles rather than **kilometers** on roads. The change is made more difficult by the lack of direct comparisons for some units. For example, one inch is exactly 2.54 **centimeters**. There is no direct comparison for the smaller metric unit, the **millimeter**. Name: \_

Answer the following questions based on the reading passage. Don't forget to go back to the passage whenever necessary to find or confirm your answers.

1) Which system of measurement do you prefer: metric or customary? Explain your answer.

2) What three countries still use customary measurements?

3) What treaty did the U.S. sign that recognized the metric system as a standard of measurement?

4) Name three professional areas in the U.S. that use the metric system.

5) What metric measurement is similar to a mile?

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## Actual wording of answers may vary.

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2) What three countries still use customary measurements?

Myanmar, Liberia and the U.S.

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4) Name three professional areas in the U.S. that use the metric system.

the military, science and medicine

5) What metric measurement is similar to a mile? **kilometer**