ike a character speaking the words of a playwright, the Victorian age sang with the voice of Charles Dickens. You can learn the facts about life in the 19th century through the history books. But when you read Dickens’ work you feel what it was like to live during that time. More than the greatest novelist of the 19th century, Dickens gave his time a voice: rich, mysterious, grotesque, beautiful, booming, always theatrical, full of energy and shadows. After his death a friend wrote, “he was the man of his epoch and had the spirit-time throbbing within him.” What did he mean? After reading A Christmas Carol, and seeing the musical, do you agree?

Dickens’ life was often as exciting and emotional as the characters he wrote about. Learning more about Dickens’ life will give you a deeper experience when you see A Christmas Carol, especially since the creators of the musical have incorporated elements of Dickens life into the production.
Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England, on February 7th, 1812, to Elizabeth and John Dickens. Charles was the second in a family that would grow to eight children. His father was a clerk in a Navy Pay Office, his mother kept house and watched the children. Dickens' parents had no way of knowing that their son would grow into the greatest writer of his age, and a natural force that would help shape the new century.

Dickens' first years were full of childish joy. His parents encouraged in young Charles a lifelong love of reading. He loved using his imagination, creating little plays and songs. He would need this ability, for the Dickens family soon entered a dark period that would forever shape how he viewed the world.

As the Dickens family grew, John Dickens could not keep up with his financial demands. In 1822, the family was forced to move from their large house to a small 4-room house in London.

In 1824, Charles was 12 years old. Within a 2-week period, he was taken out of school, sent to work in a blacking factory (blacking was an early form of shoe polish), and his father, John, was put in prison for not paying his bills. As was the custom at the time, Dickens' mother and the other children went to live in prison with their father. Charles was left on his own. At the Factory, his job was to paste labels on bottles of blacking. His sense of betrayal and abandonment would stay with him his entire life. He later said, "It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age."

What was the worst part for Charles? Not going to school. Dickens loved to read, he loved learning; at the factory, he felt as if a golden opportunity had been taken away from him. He later said, "I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond."

This was the danger that he later wrote about in A Christmas Carol when he created the wretched children, Ignorance and Want. Dickens saw a natural link between poverty, ignorance, and crime. He had felt it in his own life.
small inheritance allowed John Dickens to leave prison and Charles to return to school. He spent some time as a clerk in a law office, but he ached to be a writer. When he was sixteen, he became a reporter, writing about cases in the London Law Courts. In 1832, when he was 20 years old, Dickens began writing about the Parliament, England's governing body. Dickens was in the right place at the right time; the Industrial Revolution had created incredible changes in England, and in 1832, Dickens was there to see passionate debates on reforms and regulations that would shape the country for a hundred years.

By 1834, he was a top reporter with the Morning Chronicle. He met George Hogarth, the music and drama critic on the Chronicle, and soon met and fell in love with Hogarth's daughter, Catherine. During this time he also used his skills as a reporter to write highly detailed (and very funny) semi-fictional stories about the people of London. These sketches were collected in an edition called Sketches by Boz. Boz was Dickens' pseudonym (a false name). Soon, all of London was talking about "Boz!"

The success of Sketches gave Dickens the confidence to leave the Chronicle in 1836 and marry Catherine. He had learned a great deal as a reporter, but now he wanted to write in a more intimate, personal way. Dickens had always taken great walks, sometimes for 10 or 15 miles at a time, taking in the sights, sounds and smells of London (he wrote, "If I couldn't walk fast and far, I should just explode and perish"). Now he wanted to share what he had learned with his readers.

The popularity of Sketches by Boz caught the eye of book publishers who asked Dickens to write a series of sketches to go along with the illustrations of comic artist Robert Seymour. These stories, released every month for a shilling a piece, became known as The Pickwick Papers.

London loved Pickwick. Every issue sold 40,000 copies. Merchants sold Pickwick cigars, hats and coats - some Londoners even named their pets after Pickwick characters!
In 1837, he wrote a short piece in the magazine Bentley’s Miscellany that later became the novel Oliver Twist. With this new story, he combined the humor of The Pickwick Papers with an outrage over the plight of the poor. He used this combination of light and dark in all his stories, including A Christmas Carol. A critic said of his work, "The surface of the stream seems bright, and cheerfully bubbling as it rushes on - but in its winding, you come ever and anon upon some place of depth, which is dark at top...he possesses in his sketches the power of Rembrandt had, of bringing out to stand forth visibly masses of dark by a few strokes of light." (Carlton Chronicle, no. 40, April 8, 1837:635)

A Song from the Heart

After the great successes of The Pickwick Papers and Oliver Twist, the public looked forward to a new book by Dickens nearly every year (see page 35 for a complete list of Dickens' work). In each of his stories, Dickens tried to expose injustice against the poor as well as providing vivid and unforgettable characters.

In 1843, Dickens was 31 years old. He was on a tour of England’s "ragged schools," where poor children could receive a rudimentary education. He was horrified and saddened by the children's condition: "I have very seldom seen in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children."

On the trip back to London, he was struck by the idea of showing England’s wealthy the ravages of Ignorance and Want. He took a ghostly story from his own Pickwick Papers called "The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton," about a miserly drunkard taken on a ghostly flight by goblins, and adapted it for his new idea. He wrote the whole thing in six weeks; the story came out of him almost fully written. His friends later commented that he laughed and cried while writing it, sometimes leaping up and taking long walks, sometimes ten miles through the streets and suburbs of London. He thought of it as a song from his heart - a carol. He called it A Christmas Carol.
The response was wildly successful; by Christmas Eve that year, six thousand copies were sold. The book was such a hit that Dickens wrote a Christmas story every year from then on, but none were ever as popular or memorable as *A Christmas Carol*. It became the story most associated with Dickens' name. In 1870, when Charles Dickens died, a little girl in London said, "Mr. Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"
Charles Dickens loved the theatre. He loved spectacle and the music of language. As a young man walking through the streets of London, he was surrounded by puppet shows, circus acts, Punch and Judy shows, or balladeers singing the latest tunes. As you’ll see in *A Christmas Carol*, the streets of London were often very theatrical places!

The theatre of Dickens early days was a world away from the theatre we know today - imagine a small shop converted into a makeshift theatre for the evening. Lit only by candles and later by gaslight, rag-tag theatre companies presented anything and everything, from melodrama to Shakespeare. The audiences were often loud and crude; they thought nothing of shouting at the actors or loudly commenting on the action. These were the theatres Dickens visited as a young man: "I went to some theatre every night, with a very few exceptions, for at least 3 years: really studying the bills first, and going to see where there was the best acting."

Dickens thought seriously about becoming an actor, but later put his theatrical imagination to work in his novels. His daughter told the story of how she was once sitting in the room while he was writing. He would bound up from his chair and stare at his face in the mirror, contorting his face into different expressions and characters, muttering under his breath, as if giving his new character an "audition" before letting them up on Dickens' "stage." He said, "every writer of fiction, though he may not adapt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage." But writing alone wasn't enough for the boundless energy of Charles Dickens.

**Reading Out Loud**

Dickens had always read his works out loud, sometimes gathering an audience of friends to "audition" a new story. And, of course, being the theatrical person he was, Dickens would embellish his readings with different voices for the different characters. A friend once told him, "Charley, you carry a whole company of actors under your hat."
With this encouragement, and his boundless energy and need to try new things, Dickens decided to try a series of public readings of his work. He would start with his most beloved story: *A Christmas Carol*.

The first reading was in 1857. It was a great success. As Dickens began reading he was enfolded in "a perfect hurricane of applause." The large audience listened attentively; he wrote later, "they lost nothing, misinterpreted nothing, followed everything closely, laughed and cried with the most delightful earnestness." He would continue these readings until just before his death in 1870; *A Christmas Carol* was his most popular reading, and always his personal favorite.

Dickens welcomed reactions from his audience. He often told them to feel free to "give expression to any emotion, whether gay or grave." And they did. As word about the readings spread, they became more and more popular, and his audiences grew. His voice, without a microphone, held audiences of up to three thousand people. The Theater at Madison Square Garden, where you'll be seeing *A Christmas Carol*, seats a little more than that - 5,600. Still, imagine all of them listening in silence to one man!

Dickens threw his whole self into the readings, creating characters with his voice, his face and his hands. No two readings were ever alike; he would often spontaneously change a word or a phrase to please the audience. He said, "I got things
out of the old Carol - effects I mean - so entirely new and strong that I quite amazed myself and wondered where I was going next.” While describing the Fezziwig Christmas party, a newspaper said his hands “actually perform upon the table, as if it were the floor of Fezziwig’s room, and every finger were a leg belonging to one of the Fezziwig family.”

In his Christmas Carol reading he created 23 separate characters using only his voice and body.

Perhaps an Irish journalist said it best when he wrote, “It can honestly be said that Mr. Dickens is the greatest reader of the greatest writer of the age.”

All in all, Dickens gave 472 public readings, in England and America (where President Andrew Johnson and his family came every night!). Thousands of people would travel for miles to hear him. He was one of the highest paid performers of his time, making much more than the greatest stage actor.

After the popularity of A Christmas Carol, he translated some of his other works into readings. In 1868, he turned to one of his first books for his last reading, and used the harrowing death of the prostitute Nancy from Oliver Twist. Dickens put so much fire and passion into this last reading that many believe it hastened his death. An audience member said he “went through it with all the fire and vigour imaginable, only to fall into the waiting arms of his manager at the close.”

Months before his death in 1870, he retired from the readings. To a tearful audience he said, “from these garish lights I vanish now for ever more, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell.”
THE VICTORIAN AGE —
ENERGY, IGNORANCE AND WANT

n A Christmas Carol, the Ghost of Christmas Past says, "To understand the present, learn from the past." When Dickens wrote about the French Revolution with the famous first line of A Tale of Two Cities, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times," he could easily have been describing his own time, the reign of Queen Victoria of England, called the Victorian age. Just as A Christmas Carol describes how people can change their outlook, Dickens lived through a time of great change in the way people viewed society and themselves. American steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie said, "The conditions of human life have not only been greatly changed, but revolutionized within the past few hundred years."

This section will allow students to explore both the good and the bad of Dickens times and compare the Victorian era to their own quickly changing present.
Most historians believe that the Industrial Revolution began in England during the last half of the 18th century, as work became less centered on the farm and the home, and more on the machine and the factory. As the 19th century began, the growth of industry changed the face of England. After centuries of standing still, the world was moving forward with a restless, hungry energy. Bridges and roads were built, railways laid, great factories littered the countryside. England moved from an agricultural society to an industrial one in a very short time. When Charles Dickens was born, the aristocracy - the families who had owned the land for centuries - still ruled, but as the 19th century progressed, power transferred to a new kind of aristocrat - the industrialist.

The age of the factory pushed the population to the growing cities like London.

Small towns like Manchester or Lancashire became bustling, overcrowded cities, and London, the greatest city of them all, grew by leaps and bounds. During the 1840's, when Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, over a quarter of a million people moved to London from the countryside.

The Victorian age was also a time of energetic, new ideas. More than any other time, it was an era of self-examination. In reform, science, literature and religion, the questions were asked: who are we? What are we doing wrong? How can we be better?
Here are some positive aspects of The Victorian Era. In your research, can you add more items to the list?

- **POLITICS:** In 1886, the Parliamentary Reform Bill gives the vote to the middle classes. Reform acts in 1867 and 1884 gave even more people the vote.

- **AGRICULTURE:** The creation of artificial fertilizers, stronger steel and iron for plows, new reapers and threshers, all quickened the pace and production of farm work.

- **TRANSPORTATION:** The development of the steam engine created faster and stronger transportation over land and water. By 1840, England has 1,500 miles of railways, which carry 18 million people each year.

- **COMMUNICATION:** In 1837, the Electric Telegraph is invented. The telephone followed in 1876. The development of paper manufacturing from wood pulp made books and magazines much cheaper.

- **MEDICINE:** The first half of the 19th century saw more men becoming doctors than ever before. More than 70 special hospitals were built in England during this time, including facilities for children and cancer care. Many new drugs were isolated, including morphine, iodine and codeine.

- **QUALITY OF LIFE:** Mass production made expensive items, like shoes, blankets and clothing, more affordable for the middle and lower classes.
IGNORANCE AND WANT

Scrooge - Spirit, are they yours?
Ghost of Christmas Present -
They are Everyman's. This boy is Ignorance.
This girl is Want. Beware them both,
but most of all beware this boy,
for Ignorance shall be mankind's doom!
Scrooge - Have they no refuge, no resource?
Ghost of Christmas Present (mocking
an earlier statement by Scrooge) -
Are there no prions?
Are there no workhouses?

here was a dark side to the
19th century's great industrial
growth: the waves of the poor and homeless
who could not fit in the new industrial soci-
ety. In A Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge cruelly calls them "the surplus population."
The movement of people to cities and factory towns created overcrowding and dirty living
conditions. As Lord Ashley wrote, "Many of them retire for the night, if they retire at all,
under the dry arches of bridges and viaducts; under porticoes; sheds and carts; to outhouses;
in sawpits; on staircases..."

To Dickens, Ignorance and Want, the two ideas given the form of wretched children in
A Christmas Carol were the ultimate enemies of civilized life, and he spent his life fighting
them. He wrote, "Side by Side with Crime, Disease, and Misery in England, Ignorance is
always brooding, and is always certain to be found." For Dickens, Ignorance and Want were
like spirits haunting England.

During Dickens life, only a third of all children in England had any education at all.
Dickens knew that education, more than just giving life meaning, gave the young a way out of
the grinding cycle of poverty. But it wasn't only the ignorance of the poor that Dickens fought,
but the ignorance of the rich. How could the wealthy ignore the horrible conditions of the poor,
sometimes living in horrible conditions on the same block? Just as the Ghost of Christmas
Present shows Ebenezer how the Cratchits live, A Christmas Carol was Dickens' way of con-
fronting the wealthy classes with the conditions of the poor in England.
As we have seen, the Victorian era was a time of great change. Along with new ways of looking at the world, the age created a new way of looking at work itself. For centuries, men and women had worked the land for lords of the manor. Families would stay in one place for generations. Life was stagnant, but stable.

Now with the growth of the industrial system, life was faster, more uncertain. Working in factories often meant leaving home, leaving the stability you had known for years. If there was no work at the factory, or if you displeased your bosses, there was no place to turn. So great waves of homeless overran England. Many families starved.

As we’ve seen, Dickens’ life was a time of reforms, which were meant to control the chaotic changes of the Industrial Revolution. One of the most far-reaching reforms of the early 19th century was the New Poor Law of 1834, which was meant to remove from society those who could not, or would not, support themselves. They were refused any relief and were forced into workhouses. Wives were separated from husbands, parents from children. Meals consisted of gruel or broth, and had to be eaten in silence. “Work” most often consisted of menial jobs like grinding old bones in hand mills.

Many equated the workhouse with death and prison - in effect, the New Poor Law made it a crime to be poor. As an 80 year old beggar at the time said, “If I was to go into the House, I shouldn’t live three days. It’s not that I eat much - a very little is enough for me; but it’s the air I should miss: to be shut up like a thief; I shouldn’t live long, I know.” It was this system that Scrooge speaks of when he cruelly asks, “Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?”
Here are some negative aspects of The Victorian Era. From your research, can you add more items to the list?

- **MEDICAL** - Poor people living in overcrowded conditions often had no access to fresh water - they had to buy it from travelling water carts, which often produced disease. There were 4 epidemics of cholera within Dickens' life. The Victorian Era also knew deadly bouts of typhus, typhoid fever, dysentery, and smallpox. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that sanitary reform was begun.

- **LABOR** - Child labor at factories was widespread. Children under thirteen would often work more than 40 hours per week. Adults often worked up to 70 hours per week.

- **GREAT DEMAND, GREATER DANGER** - The great demand for coal to power steam engines creates an expansion in the mining industry. From 1800 to 1840, the British coal output increases from 11 million tons to 34 million tons. Conditions in the mines are very dangerous. Between 1799 and 1840, nearly 1500 miners are killed in the Newcastle coalfields.
CHANGE

Scrooge - I have seen a future full of darkness,
all the darkness of my heart!
At my door a world in need of kindness.
From man's kindness, I departed!
All the hours and days and years I've wasted!
All the joy and love I never tasted
All the errors of the past replaced with
something strange...
give me time to change!

Change. Transformation, metamorphosis, redemption. The Greeks called it metanoia
- a change of heart.

Do you think that people can change? In Charles Dickens' time, most people believed that
they couldn't: people were born into a certain class, and a certain personality, which would be
with them forever. Dickens saw this as one of his era's greatest dangers - he used the character
of Ebenezer Scrooge as a symbol for the wealthy and hard-hearted of his times. Dickens
thought that if people could actually see, as Scrooge does, the consequences of greed, their hearts
would be changed.

This section explores the concept of change: how Scrooge changes in A Christmas Carol, how
society has changed since Dickens' time, and how young people can see change in themselves.