

How Kites Have Helped Shape the World

- Discover an example of how kites have helped shape the world. Read the information below to learn about Orville and Wilbur Wright and how they used kites to help design airplanes (we call them aeroplanes).
- After you have read the information you might want to do some further research to find out how kites helped Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Graham Bell and Leonardo da Vinci.

Family Life

Orville and Wilbur Wright were born four years apart. The Wright brothers grew up in a small wooden house in Dayton Ohio where they had no electricity, no running water and no telephone. What they did have was a large library of books about all kinds of subjects that helped the Wright children quench their thirst for knowledge from a very early age. They also had parents who engaged their curiosity about everything and encouraged them to read as widely as possible.



Fascination with Flight

Orville and Wilbur's fascination with flight began with a present their father gave them - a toy that flew with the help of rubber bands. The young boys (7 and 11) were thrilled to make the little toy fly across the room, so much so that they accidentally broke it. However, they remembered how it looked and promised each other that someday they would fly in the air, just like the little toy. The boys continued to be interested in mechanical things and flight. Orville sold kites at school to make money.

Education and Early Years

Though the boys were good students, neither graduated from high school. Near the end of his time in high school, Wilbur was accidentally hit in the mouth with a hockey stick. This made him retreat into his own home for almost three years. But, it was then that he started reading all he could about how birds flew and machines worked. Orville left high school and started a printing business. He was joined by his brother and the two later sold the printing business and opened a bicycle shop. They were both very good mechanics and could fix just about anything anyone asked them to fix. It was in the bicycle shop that the idea of the airplane was born.

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The Invention of the Airplane

The Wrights had made many kites, including very large ones. By 1900, they were making extremely large kites called gliders. Orville and Wilbur actually built one or two that were large enough for a person to ride in. In 1903 the Wright brothers succeeded in making the first free, controlled flight of a power-driven airplane. The flight took place at Kitty Hawk North Carolina on 14th December 1903. They chose Kitty Hawk because it had a hill, good breezes and was sandy, which would help soften the landings in case of a crash. The first flight lasted 12 seconds and they flew for 120 feet. Each brother made additional flights that day that were slightly longer. This wasn't a simple or task they had completed. They had worked and experimented for years with gliders, perfecting the wing design and controls. Then they had to learn how to make efficient propellers and a lightweight engine for the powered flight. There was a lot of technology, know-how and courage involved in making that first flight.

Success and Fame

The Wright plane wasn't a hit overnight. Their country, the reporters and the newspapers in their own hometown refused to believe the brothers' claims. Nobody took any interest except the French. A delegation of French military officers came all the way across the ocean to Dayton. The first flight before the public took place on 8th August 1908 at Le Monde, France. The world was astonished and the Wrights became huge celebrities instantly. The very next year they opened a business to make airplanes: the Wright Co. They found great fame and success making airplanes. Unfortunately, Wilbur died in 1912 of typhoid fever. Orville lived on and eventually sold his business and watched the dream he and his brother had made become a reality in the modern industrial age!

