Many people have computers that fit on a desk, in a briefcase, or even in a pocket. They can carry their computers back and forth to work. They can also use their computers on buses and planes. They couldn't have done these things with the first computer.

The first computer was enormous! It weighed 30 tons, stood 18 feet high, and had 500 miles of wiring. Even its name was huge. It was the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer, called ENIAC for short.

This computer was built at the University of Pennsylvania. The United States government and the University of Pennsylvania developed ENIAC to figure out the course of bombs during the Second World War. Building it took almost four years. Finally, on Valentine's Day in 1946, the builders turned it on for the first time, starting the computer age.

The first computer solved problems faster than any person ever could. It could add 5,000 numbers in a second. It could multiply 300 numbers just as quickly.

As amazing as the first computer was, it can't compare to today's computers. The ENIAC could only store 200 digits. Today's computers can store 16 million digits. In addition, many of today's computers are 60,000 times faster than ENIAC was. Even some calculators that would fit in your pocket are more powerful than the gigantic ENIAC.

The massive machine was hard to use too. It didn't have a keyboard. Engineers had to rewire it for each new problem. It couldn't print numbers or letters either. Instead, it used flashing lights to signal its answers.

Even though modern computers are far better, they are based on ideas that started with ENIAC. Scientists used ENIAC for nine years. They retired the computer in 1955. Now, parts of the first computer are stored in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C.
The First Computer
Comprehension Questions

Identifying the main idea
1. What is the main idea of this story?
   a. The first computer is now in a museum.
   b. The first computer led to better computers.
   c. The first computer was a massive machine.

Connecting the author's and the reader's ideas
5. How was the ENIAC computer like modern computers?
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

Recalling a fact
2. Why was the first computer built?
   a. to solve problems very quickly
   b. to track bombs during World War II
   c. to add and multiply large numbers

Developing vocabulary
6. ENIAC was a very large machine. Write the four words from the story that are used to describe the large size of ENIAC.
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

Getting meaning from the context
3. What does course mean in this story?
   a. a class or area of study
   b. the direction taken
   c. a part of a meal

Attending to details
7. How many digits could the first computer store?
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

Making connections within the text
4. Why was ENIAC considered important enough to store in the Smithsonian Institute?
   a. ENIAC tracked the course of bombs in World War II.
   b. ENIAC led to the development of the modern computer.
   c. ENIAC could solve problems faster than a person.

Processing information
8. Why did scientists retire ENIAC?
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

Summarizing information
9. Write a summary statement about the following facts: Modern computers are faster than ENIAC.
   Modern computers can store more digits than ENIAC.
   Modern computers are smaller than ENIAC.
   Modern computers are easier to use than ENIAC.
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

Enrichment Activity
An acronym is a word formed from the first letters of several words. ENIAC is an acronym formed by the first letters of the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer. Look in a dictionary to find out the words used when forming these two acronyms: RADAR and SCUBA. Write the words next to the acronym.