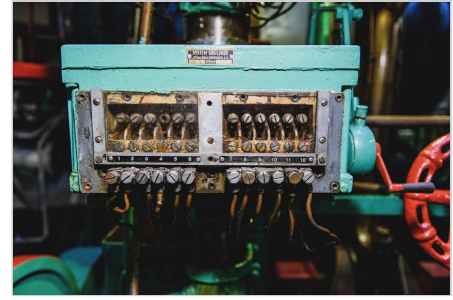


# Switchboard Operators

Reading Worksheet — Level F | [tahricteaches.com](http://tahricteaches.com)

Before automatic telephone systems existed, every phone call required human intervention. Switchboard operators were essential workers who physically connected calls by plugging cables between circuits. From the 1880s to the 1960s, millions of these operators worked at massive **telecommunications** boards with hundreds of jacks, manually routing conversations across cities and countries.



Telephone companies deliberately hired young, unmarried women for these positions. They believed women had more pleasant voices and greater patience than men, while also being willing to work for lower wages. The job became one of the first major opportunities for women to work outside domestic settings, offering **respectable** employment in the growing telecommunications industry.

The work itself was physically demanding and required exceptional skills. Operators sat at enormous boards filled with **circuits** and connection points, greeting callers with phrases like "Number please?" They had to quickly identify the correct jack, plug in cables, monitor conversations for technical problems, and handle emergencies. The job required excellent hearing, fast hand coordination, and the ability to reach across wide switchboards—some companies even had height requirements.

During peak usage hours, a skilled operator could handle dozens of calls simultaneously. They connected everything from casual conversations to critical emergency services and important business communications. Party lines, where multiple households shared telephone connections, required operators to manage complex routing and deal with customers who eavesdropped on their neighbors' conversations.

The decline began with automatic switching technology. Crossbar switches in the 1940s, followed by electronic switching systems and direct dial phones, gradually eliminated the need for human operators. By the 1980s, most switchboard positions had become **obsolete**. Today's call centers, virtual assistants, and AI phone systems represent the modern evolution of this once-critical profession.

## A. Vocabulary

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|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. telecommunications _____ | a. socially acceptable and proper                          |
| 2. circuits _____           | b. a type of automatic telephone switching system          |
| 3. manually _____           | c. happening at the exact same time                        |
| 4. intervention _____       | d. no longer used because something better exists          |
| 5. respectable _____        | e. communication over long distances using technology      |
| 6. coordination _____       | f. complete paths that electrical current follows          |
| 7. simultaneously _____     | g. done by hand rather than by machine                     |
| 8. eavesdropped _____       | h. action taken to help or change a situation              |
| 9. crossbar _____           | i. the ability to use different parts of the body together |
| 10. obsolete _____          | j. secretly listened to private conversations              |

## B. True or False

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1. Switchboard operators worked from the 1880s to the 1960s. \_\_\_\_
2. Men were preferred for switchboard operator jobs because of their stronger voices. \_\_\_\_
3. Operators needed excellent hearing and fast hands. \_\_\_\_
4. Every phone call required human intervention before automatic systems. \_\_\_\_
5. Party lines meant only one family could use a phone connection. \_\_\_\_
6. Some companies had height requirements for operators. \_\_\_\_
7. Crossbar switches helped eliminate the need for human operators. \_\_\_\_
8. Operators only handled casual personal conversations. \_\_\_\_
9. Modern call centers have no connection to the old switchboard system. \_\_\_\_

## C. Fill in the Blanks

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**Word Bank:** circuits, manually, obsolete, simultaneously, intervention, coordination, eavesdropped

1. Before automatic systems, every phone call required human \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Operators sat at boards with hundreds of electrical \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Skilled operators could handle dozens of calls \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The job became \_\_\_\_\_ when direct dial phones were invented.
5. Some customers \_\_\_\_\_ on their neighbors' conversations.

## D. Comprehension Questions

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1. Why did telephone companies prefer to hire women as switchboard operators?
2. What physical skills and abilities did operators need for their job?
3. How did party lines create additional challenges for operators?
4. What technologies eventually replaced human switchboard operators?
5. In what ways do modern call centers resemble the old switchboard operator profession?

## E. Discussion Questions

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1. Do you think it was fair that women were paid less than men for this work? Explain your reasoning.
2. What skills from switchboard operating might be useful in today's technology jobs?
3. How do you think the invention of direct dial phones changed people's relationship with telephone calls?

# Answer Key

*Switchboard Operators — Teacher Reference Only*

**A. Vocabulary:** 1-e, 2-f, 3-g, 4-h, 5-a, 6-i, 7-c, 8-j, 9-b, 10-d

**B. True/False:** 1-T, 2-F, 3-T, 4-T, 5-F, 6-T, 7-T, 8-F, 9-F

**C. Fill Blanks:** 1-intervention, 2-circuits, 3-simultaneously, 4-obsolete, 5-eavesdropped

**D. Comprehension:**

1. Companies believed women had more pleasant voices, greater patience, and were willing to work for lower wages than men.
2. Operators needed excellent hearing, clear speech, fast hand coordination, physical reach across wide boards, and patience with customers.
3. Party lines shared connections between households, so operators had to manage complex routing and deal with customers eavesdropping on neighbors.
4. Crossbar switches, electronic switching systems, and direct dial phones gradually replaced human operators.
5. Both involve connecting people through communication technology, handling multiple conversations, and providing customer service support.