

Clean Power Passes Coal (and Nobody Threw a Parade)



Built from *The Solar Century Arrives Quietly* by David Lee, Sustainability Editor

Grades 4–8 · About 45 minutes · ★ everyone · ★★ older readers

Name _____

Date _____

1. Before You Read

★ Where do you think the electricity in your home comes from? Write your best guess.

★ Some big changes happen so slowly that nobody notices on the day, like growing taller. Describe another change like that.

2. The Short Version

Read this first. Older readers: read the full article too.

Some big moments get a ceremony, with ribbons and cameras. This one got a spreadsheet. The yearly reviews of the world's electricity data showed that **renewable energy** has passed coal as the biggest source of electricity on Earth. In 2025, renewables made about a third of the world's electricity, just a little more than coal.

That is a big deal. Coal has powered the world's electricity since electricity began. In the past, new kinds of energy were simply added on top: oil joined coal, gas joined oil, and nothing actually shrank. This time, electricity from **fossil fuels** started to go down, even while the world used more electricity overall.

What caused it? Solar power got cheap. For twenty years it kept getting cheaper, until in most of the world it became the cheapest electricity people have ever made. David says this was won by factory engineers, by installers, and by contests where the lowest price won, not by speeches. A price, he writes, does not get tired.

There is fine print. Electricity is only about a fifth of the energy the world uses, and steel, cement, planes, ships and heating still mostly run on fossil fuels. The sun sets every night, so until batteries get cheaper, fossil plants still fill the gaps. And the world keeps using more electricity, so clean power has to keep racing to stay ahead.

3. Word Bank

Word	What it means
milestone	an important moment that marks how far something has come
renewable energy	power from sources that do not run out, like sunlight and wind
fossil fuels	coal, oil and gas, which are burned for energy and pollute the air
transition	a change from one way of doing things to another
demand	how much of something people want or use

★ Use **milestone** in a sentence of your own.

4. Check Your Understanding

★ 1. What milestone does the article report? Answer in one sentence.

★ 2. According to the article, about how much of the world's electricity did renewables make in 2025?

☐ about a tenth ☐ about a third ☐ about half ☐ almost all

★ 3. How was this change different from earlier energy "transitions," when oil joined coal and gas joined oil?

★ 4. According to the article, what was the main reason solar power grew so fast?

★★ 5. The author writes, "Electricity is not energy." What does he mean? Name two things the article says still run mostly on fossil fuels.

5. David's Audit

David has one rule for every new technology: audit it. He asks three questions: *Who builds it? Who pays for it? And who gets left off it?* Fill in the audit for the rise of solar power.

	Your answer
Who builds it? According to the article, whose everyday work made solar power win?	
Who pays for it? How did price decide which kind of power got built?	
Who gets left off it? What parts of the world's energy use, and what hours of the day, does this milestone not cover yet?	

6. Think Deeper

★ David predicts that today's kids may find it hard to believe the old way ever existed, "the way we squint at photographs of cities lit by gas lamps." What does he mean? What is something from today that you think kids in the future will find hard to believe?

★★ David writes that solar power "was not won by summits or slogans" but by a falling price, and that "a price does not get tired." Why might a falling price change the world more steadily than speeches do? Can you think of a reason people still need to make plans and rules, too?

7. Write Your Report

- **My answer:**
- **Reason 1 (from the article):**
- **Reason 2 (from the article):**
- **One thing the other side would say:**
- **My conclusion:**

For Teachers and Parents: Answer Key

Word bank sentence: Answers vary; check that the student uses milestone to mean an important moment that shows progress.

1. Renewable energy has overtaken coal as the largest source of electricity on Earth.
2. About a third.
3. In earlier transitions, new fuels were added on top of old ones and nothing actually declined. This time, fossil-fuel electricity began to go down even while total demand for electricity grew.
4. Solar power got cheap. It kept getting cheaper for two decades until, across most of the world, it became the cheapest electricity ever produced.
5. Electricity is only one part of the energy the world uses, about a fifth of it. Cleaning up the power grid is the easiest part; much of the rest still runs on fossil fuels. Things named in the article: steel, cement, planes, ships and heating.

Audit (sample answers): Who builds it: factory engineers who kept cutting the cost of panels, installers who learned to mount panels in hours instead of days, and countries that held auctions where the lowest bid won. Who pays: buyers chose the cheapest power, and in sunny countries the lowest bid kept being solar; as more solar was built, its price kept falling. Who gets left off: the four-fifths of energy that is not electricity, such as steel, cement, planes, ships and heating; and the nighttime hours, when the sun is down and fossil plants still fill the gap until batteries get cheaper. Also, growing demand from electric cars, heating, air conditioning and data centers means clean power has to keep up every year.

Think deeper: Open answers. For the first question, strong answers explain that just as gas-lit cities seem strange to us now, a world where most electricity came from burning coal may seem strange to future kids. For the second, strong answers explain that a low price keeps working whatever happens in politics, because people choose the cheaper option; reasons people still need plans and rules might include that the article says policy can speed the change up or slow it down by years, and that the fine print (energy beyond electricity, nighttime power, growing demand) still has to be solved.

Report: Look for a clear answer, two reasons taken from the article (for example: coal had powered electricity since it began; this is the first time a fuel has actually declined instead of just being added to; solar became the cheapest electricity ever), a fair statement of the other side (for example: electricity is only about a fifth of energy use; fossil plants still cover the hours when the sun is down; demand keeps rising), and a conclusion that matches the answer.