

Teaching guidance and suggestions

Teaching literacy and history through Greek myths

Greek myths are often the aspect of studying the ancient world that children enjoy and remember most. But myths are frequently seen as parallel, rather than integral, to children's work in history. The aim of this unit of work is to:

- develop children's literacy by using the power of storytelling to help them explore and enjoy the wealth of human imagination and experience the myths represent
- develop children's historical understanding by making the myths gateways to the world of the ancient Greeks through direct connections to the Key Stage 2 history programme of study on Ancient Greece, whether taught in its own right or through topic work.

Timing and structuring the unit of work

We recommend that this unit be taught over six weeks based on five hours of work per week divided about 2/3 on literacy and 1/3 on history. A final extra session will ideally be included at the end of the unit for the children to present the results of their historical enquiry. If you have more time for teaching the unit – great! The class' experience will be all the richer for it.

Each week the children will hear two stories from Greek mythology linked by a common theme. The stories are told by two of Britain's finest storytellers, Hugh Lupton and Daniel Morden, and are available as streaming downloads directly from this site.

We've designated a story each week as the 'lead story', intended as an ideal link to a historical topic on ancient Greece. The history materials offer ideas and additional resources to help teach that topic and to develop the children's historical understanding within the framework of a historical enquiry ([see below](#)).

These materials have been designed to work flexibly in your classroom. You needn't use all the history resources each week, or cover every aspect mentioned, if you have less time for teaching the unit. Feel free to select as many or as few ideas and resources as suit your timetable and your classroom. You may also want to continue to use your existing activities and resources where they have worked successfully.

The story at the centre

The key principle of our approach to learning is that the stories function in three ways:

1. as the motivating force that engages the children
2. as the initial resource for their exploration of human character, action and motive, and of language
3. as the initial evidence for investigating an aspect of the world of the ancient Greeks

The lead story is a good starting point for each new theme and topic, but it and the other story can also serve as 'anchors' for the children's learning, to which they can refer back periodically; "Now do you remember when...?"

To help you get started, we've produced a 'Guide for preparing the class to work with stories'. Here, we provide a variety of practical recommendations for strategies and techniques that will help you get fullest benefit from using storytelling in your classroom.

The literacy materials

Listening in a group creates a space to exchange, compare and extend personal responses. The literacy materials can help children to clarify their thinking by talking about characters, describing scenes, comparing emotions and imagining objects or events in the story.

The materials offer ideas to support the statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance in the programmes of study for comprehension, where there is considerable overlap between Years 3/4 and Years 5/6. We have not included tightly focused literacy activities at sentence and word level owing to the differences among statutory requirements across the four years of Key Stage 2. It's a good idea to devise such activities for the specific context in which you are using the unit of work.

For each story, we have provided:

- **transcripts:** of the story file, available to download as editable Word documents
- **starting-points:** possible discussion topics to explore before listening to the story
- **pause points:** places you might wish to pause, along with guide questions to encourage understanding of the story, stimulate reflection or encourage speculation
- **questions for discussion:** to prompt children's exploration of themes, characters, motives and action
- **suggested activities:** ideas to help children explore, represent and communicate aspects of the story and its language, along with examples of other resources, such as paintings, which could be used to extend children's discussion through comparison with the story

The history topics

The website provides materials for the study of seven aspects of ancient Greek culture, which have profoundly influenced the world we know today:

1. The Greek language
2. Greek theatre
3. Athletics and the Olympic Games
4. Greek myths
5. Greek philosophy and science
6. Greek architecture and art
7. Politics and democracy

Greek myths are combined explicitly with science and philosophy in Week 4, but they run through the whole unit because of the story-based approach.

The history materials

We are conscious that most teachers will have their own approaches and resources to teach many of these topics, so these materials were designed to fit around your existing practice. Our history materials can be used selectively to replace, enrich or supplement things you are doing already.

Regardless of how you use these materials, they are particularly effectively when used in combination with the historical enquiry and outcome focus outlined below.

The materials for each week's lead story include a summary of the main topic, key concepts and issues to address with the class, information about the Greeks for teachers, teaching ideas, additional resources, mainly visual, and some information and image sheets for children.

While each week's teaching ideas are broadly structured, we have not produced lesson plans or worksheets so you have the flexibility to use the materials in the way that suits you and your class.

Historical enquiry

The use of over-arching enquiry questions are now best practice in history classrooms. These questions help focus children's work and encourage the development of higher level skills and concepts of judgement and historical significance.

Our history materials work best when geared towards an enquiry question about the achievements of the ancient Greeks. Here are four possible versions of that question:

- What were the most important achievements of the ancient Greeks?
- What was important about the ancient Greeks?
- Why are the ancient Greeks still important today?
- Why do we still study the ancient Greeks today?

An enquiry outcome

Enquiry questions are best supported by a clear outcome task, which acts as a framework for the course as a whole. Here is one possible scenario using the seven topics listed above:

A TV channel has asked you to make a series of five programmes about the importance of the ancient Greeks plus a series trailer. Each programme must focus on one important aspect of the ancient Greeks. You will have to present your ideas to the TV channel. To do this you need to:

1. *choose the topic for each of the five programmes in your series*
2. *give reasons for why you have chosen these five topics*
3. *choose just one of the five topics for your trailer and give your reasons for choosing it*

The children do not have to plan the detailed content for the programmes or design or script them; they simply select the five topics according to how significant they think they are for the overall enquiry question. They will base their choices and reasons on the various activities and discussions from each week's topic.

Be sure to identify and introduce each week's topic prominently so the class understands they are being challenged to make a judgement in selecting five out of seven possible topics. An additional lesson at the end of the six weeks is an ideal way to allow the children to discuss and finalise their series and trailers and present them to the class.

Teaching the Greek gods

One of the main advantages of studying Greek gods and goddesses through stories is that discussion brings out the rich character of the divine world of the Greeks and the complex relationships between humans and gods. The simple tables of deities and their matching responsibilities found in many books oversimplify the situation. For this reason, we recommend building up the children's familiarity with the gods and other divine beings gradually over time using the stories as the basis for

understanding what they were like. We offer suggestions for this approach in [the materials for Week 1](#) and how to conclude the investigation in [the materials for Week 6](#).

Greek names

The ancient Romans devised a way of spelling Greek names that is still used commonly in English. For example, the god Dionusos in Greek became the Roman/Latin Dionysus; the playwright Aiskhulos, became Aeschylus. As we are using the myths to teach the history of the ancient Greeks, we have used a form of spelling that is closer to the Greek, but does not make the names too difficult to look up in reference books and online. For example, in these materials, Dionysus is spelled Dionysos and Aeschylus is spelled Aischylos. This will also make it easier for children to write the names in Greek letters if that is an activity you choose to do.

The storytellers use the common English pronunciation of Greek names which is based on the Latin spelling. We recommend that the children use the same pronunciation; in most cases, our spelling system makes little difference to the pronunciation and any cases where it does are not of great significance and should not affect the children's understanding.