

# Myth

LESSON PLANS



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# How To Teach Myths

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## What is a Myth?

Myths are the oldest and most powerful of all story forms. They often carry an important message for a culture or group. Myths are stories that give people a relationship with the universe, the passing of time, and with their environment. Some myths give the official view of creation, others are a way to explain natural events. Myths were passed on by spoken word, and their function was to explain, to teach lessons, and to entertain.

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## Using the Lesson Plans

This book has lesson plans for teaching mythology in the classroom, including creation myths, nature myths, fire myths, and hero myths. It includes activities, write-on tables, flow-charts and illustrations.

The following lesson plans are designed for teachers and students. For teachers there are suggested activities, definitions and book lists. For students there are worksheets containing charts, questions and stories.

For younger students the main emphasis when teaching is that myths are stories that explain life. The lessons on nature myths are especially suited to young students. Younger children will also enjoy myth characters. Reading for pleasure should be another main focus.

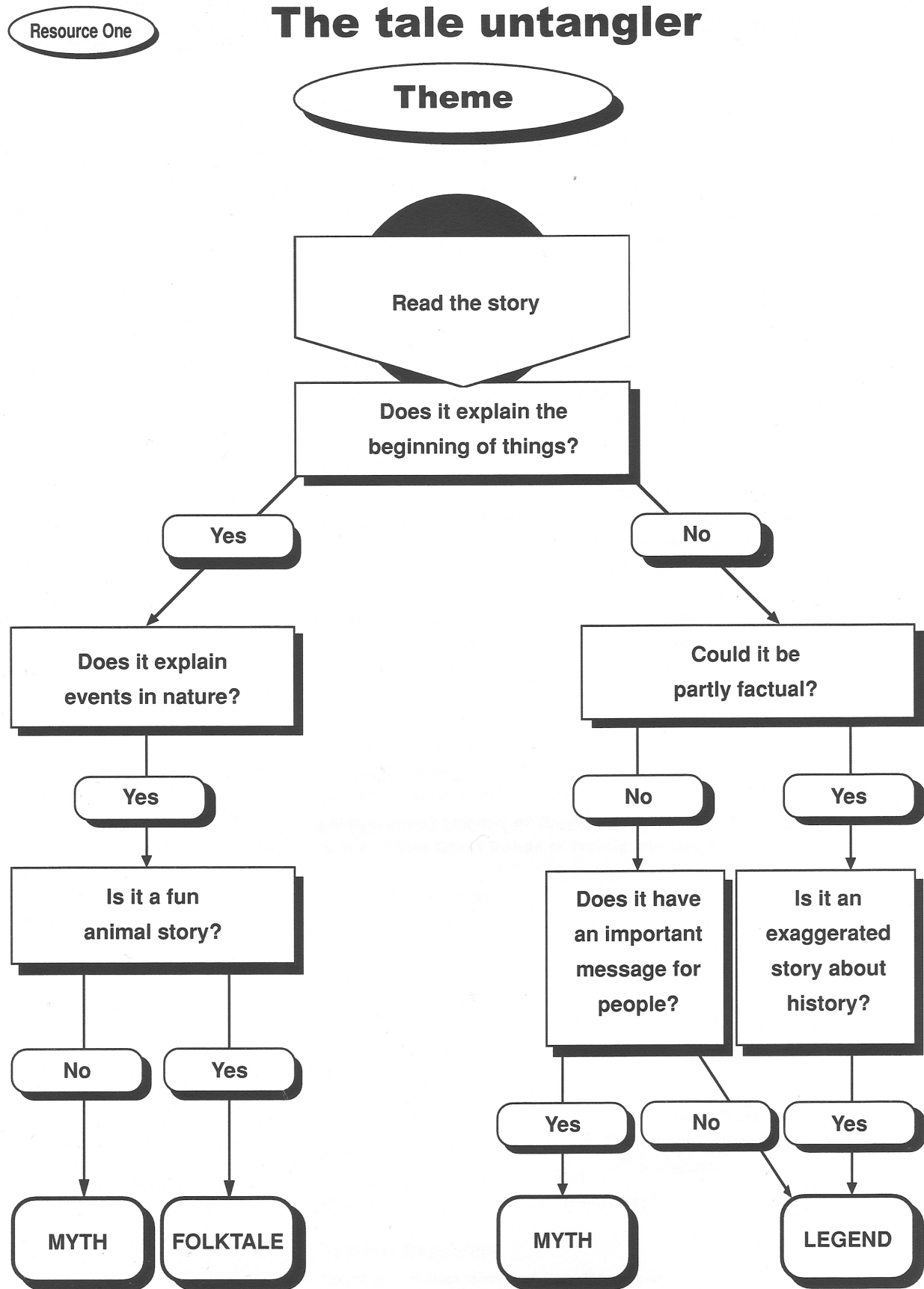
For older students the cultural identity embedded in myths becomes more important and myth meanings can be explored in greater depth. The discussion questions at the end of the lesson plans are most suited to older students.

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## The Tale Untangler Flow Charts

The first question about myths is usually 'How do you tell the difference between myths and legends? (Or between fairy tales and folktales). Use the Tale Untanglers (the flow-charts below) to classify the common story types. The Tale Untanglers are simple Yes/No flowcharts showing the main differences between types of traditional storytelling. Teach the students how to use them by reading a myth to the class and using the Tale Untanglers to classify it. Every story is unique and can't always be neatly defined, so be relaxed about classification.

**Flow-chart 1.** The Theme Untangler asks about the purpose of the story:

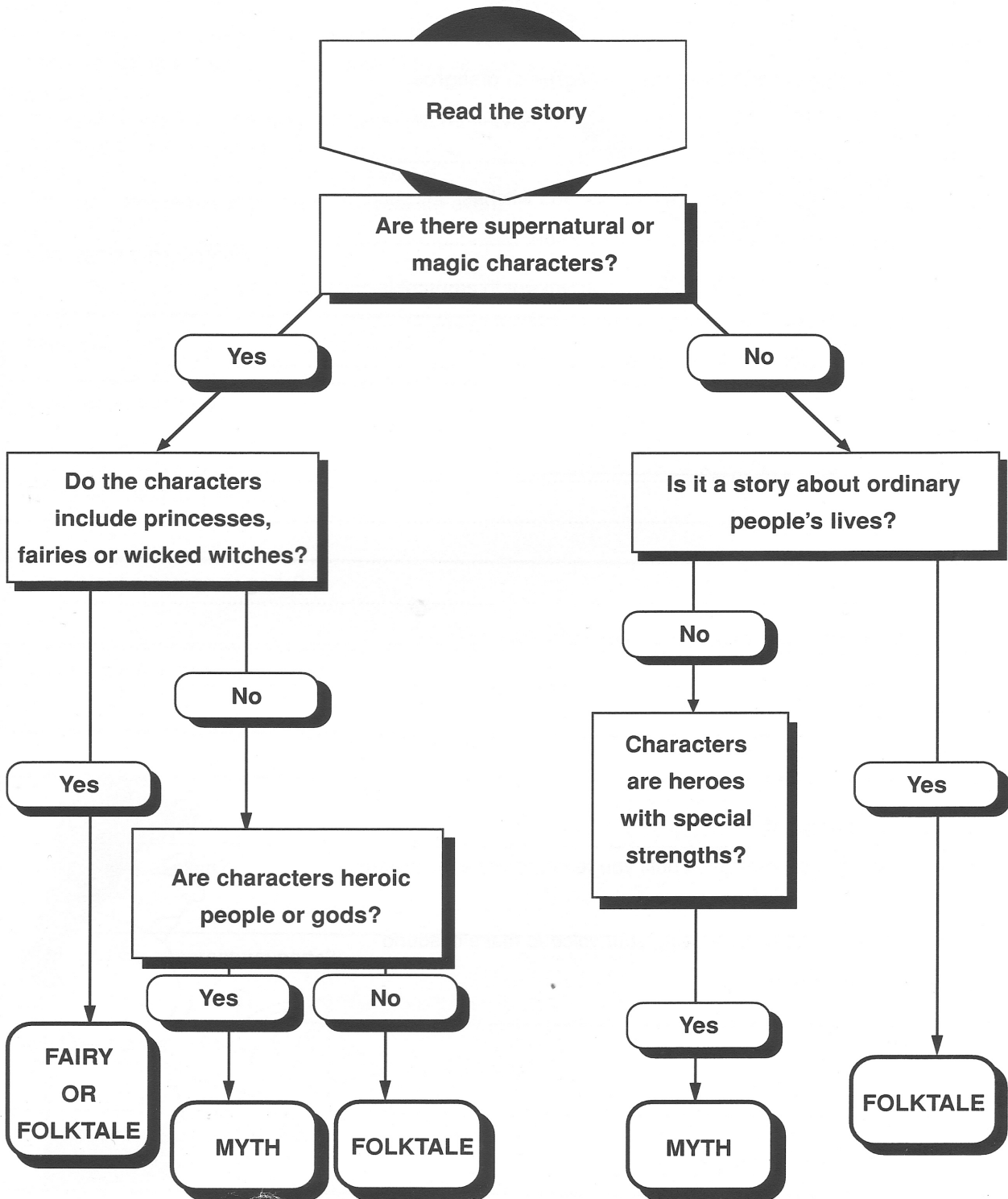


**Flow-chart 2:** The Character Untangler asks about the characters in the story:

Resource Two

# The tale untangler

## Characters



# Myth Lesson 1: What Do You Know?

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## Aim

To briefly assess students existing knowledge of mythology.

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## Writing

Answer these questions about myths:

1. What kind of story do you think a myth is?

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2. Name some myths that you know:

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3. What do you think are the differences between a myth, a folktale and a fairytale?

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4. Does the country you live in have special myths of its own? Name one:

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## Thinking About Myths

Agree or disagree?

Next to each statement on the following chart, tick whether you agree or disagree:

<b>Myths</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
A myth is a story that is not factual		
A myth is a story about princes, princesses, and witches		
A myth is an adventure story about a real person		
A myth may explain how things began		
Many groups of people have myths about a flood		
Myths are stories about ordinary people		
Most myth heroes are male		
Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster are myths		

## Myth Lesson 2: What Is A Myth?

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### **Aim**

To classify myths and explore the special features of myths.

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### **Definition of a Myth**

The word myth comes from the Greek word 'mythos' which means 'to tell a story'. Myths are very old stories which were passed on by the spoken word (before books were invented). Every culture has its own myths that are centuries old. Myths differ from folktales and legends.

Myths are stories with a message. Groups of people (cultures) told myths to explain how life began and how the world of nature behaved.

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### **Special Features of a Myth**

Read a myth. Using the Tale Untangler flowcharts to check if it fits the myth classification.

Does the story have any of the following special features of a myth?

- It explains how life started, or explains natural events.
- It involves some supernatural power.
- It involves some supernatural power.
- The story is not about a real event.

Fill in the following chart to describe the special features of each myth you read:



Myth Title	Comments
What does it explain about the world?	
What are the supernatural parts?	
Who are the characters (eg. heroes or gods)?	
What are the important events?	

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## Storytelling

Myths are best spoken aloud.

Read a short myth several times until you remember the main parts.

Tell the myth to a small group, using your voice to make it as dramatic as possible.

## Discussion Topics

**1.** What is the difference between myths, legends, and folktales?

Legends are not true, but they are based on fact, such as a real person, a place or an event. The hero myths are the most like legends, but legendary heroes such as Robin Hood usually have historical roots, while mythical heroes don't. In legends the focus is also on the adventure plot rather than the message. Folktales tend to be about ordinary people and animals, and folktales are set in a particular time period. Nature myths can be a bit like folktales, but the purpose of folktales is more for entertainment.

**2.** Are myths true or false?

Begin by defining 'fact' and 'truth'. The popular definition of a myth is something that has been made-up. However, a myth is often believed to be true by the people who tell it. It may offend people to say a myth is false since some myths are the basis of beliefs and religions. Myths can contain wisdom which is as a kind of truth. A myth may also contain historical elements, especially the flood myths. There have been real floods and people have created stories to explain why they happened. Read 'The Bunyip of Berkeley Creek' by Jenny Wagner, about the truth in myths.



## Myth Lesson 3: Myths of Beginnings

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### Aim

To discuss the explanatory purpose of myths and what they meant to their audience.

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### Creation Myths

Myths of beginnings are often called creation myths. This type of myth tries to answer important questions about life and the universe. For example: How were people created? Where did the universe come from? Different cultures answer these questions in stories. Learning about creation myths is the study of cosmogony (the 'cosmos' is the universe).

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### Reading

Where did we come from? There are creation myths from many countries about a giant egg.

Here is a myth from China that answers the question about the origin of life:

#### The Cosmic Egg

"In the beginning there was a huge egg that held all the opposites — hot and cold, light and dark, wet and dry. Also inside was Phan Ku, a giant who was covered in hair. He had horns on his head and tusks sprang from his mouth.

Phan Ku broke out of the egg and separated the opposites through all the world. Every day he carved out the mountains and oceans with his chisel and mallet. And every day, for 18,000 years he grew three metres taller.

When Phan Ku died his skull became the sky, his breath, the wind, his flesh, soil, and his blood, rivers. The fleas in his hair became human beings."

## Timeline

Create an illustrated time-line about the myth 'The Cosmic Egg'. Your timeline should show the order of the main events in the story. Begin your timeline at zero. It will have to cover at least 18,000 years. Draw Phan Ku above the timeline.

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## Comparing

Creation myths help people know they have a special place in the universe. Read five different creation myths. Do they have a similar plot or structure? Record information about the structure of the myths on the following table:

Myth Title	Structure
Where is the myth from?	
What things are created in the myth?	
How are things created?	

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## Writing

Answer these questions about the origins of life.

Note to teacher: Respect all answers and don't grade them or evaluate them.

1. Where did the world come from?

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2. Where did humans come from?

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3. What creation story do you know that answers these questions?

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## Imagining a Creation Myth

Imagine you are part of a tribe that have a myth to explain where the world came from:

- What part of the world do you live in?
- What is the environment like?
- What is the name of your tribe or group?
- What kind of gods or God do you have?
- What is your culture like?

Make up a creation myth for your tribe. It should explain how your people or the world came to be.

Remember to include the special features of a myth.

### Group presentation

Chose one of your creation myths to present a a group.

You can use storytelling, art, drama and dance to tell your myth.

## Myths and Science

Myths and science both give explanations for the world around us.

For example, read this creation myth from India:

### The Tree of Life

"In the beginning there was only water. Life came from the water when a mighty tree emerged and grew up to the sky. But there was a worm inside the tree and it slowly devoured the tree from the inside out. The wood dust fell into the water and gradually formed into the world."

How does science explain the beginning of life on Earth?



# Myth Lesson 4: Nature Myths– Flood

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## Aim

To recognize the similar patterns in myths from different cultures.

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## The Pattern of Flood Myths

The myth of a disastrous and widespread flood is found in many cultures of the world. For example, the Hebrew story of Noah's Ark, and the Chinese story of a Great Flood.

Flood myths usually follow this pattern:

- **Cause:** The flood is humankind's punishment.
- **Size:** The flood covers the whole land or world.
- **Survivors:** A few people survive because they are good.
- **Signs:** There's a sign of hope, e.g., a rainbow, to show that life will go on.

Read three flood myths and see if they fit the pattern above. Fill in this chart for each story:

Flood Myths	Comments
Title	
Cause	
Size	
Survivors	
Signs	

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## Ark Myths

Flood myths often involve a rescue vessel or ark. Read this myth from the Aztec culture:

### The Aztec Ark

"When the people on Earth became wicked, the god of the rain, Tlaloc, became angry and made it rain heavily. But Tlaloc saw that there were two good people, named Tata and Nena. So he warned Tata and Nena that a great flood was on the way. He told them to make an ark by hollowing out a huge tree trunk. The rain got heavier and Tata and Nena worked quickly to make a hollow log. Just as the flood hit, they climbed inside and were swept away. Eventually the rain stopped and the land appeared again. The Aztec ark had saved Tata and Nena."



**Art**

Create a picture of an Ark and decorate it with symbols and designs from a culture.

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**Disaster Report**

Imagine you are a reporter (TV, internet, radio or newspaper) at the time of the flood. Write a script about what you see happening and interview some survivors. Ask them questions about the flood.

Remember the important questions about flood myths: what is the cause, the size, who survived and what signs were given?

**Write**

Invent a flood myth for the area you live in, following the pattern of the flood myth.

# Myth Lesson 5: Nature Myths – Fire

## Aim

To recognize the similar patterns in myths from different cultures.

## The Pattern of Fire Myths

Fire is very useful, but also very dangerous. Fire enabled early humans to cook food and to keep warm. Almost all cultures have a myth that explains how fire came into the world. For example, the New Zealand Maori tell how the hero, Maui, got fire for his people by tricking the fire goddess. Fire myths usually follow this pattern:

- The people have no fire.
- A hero gets fire from the gods, usually by a clever trick.
- People find that fire is very useful.
- But fire also brings evil with it.

## Reading

Read the following fire myth from Africa. Does it follow the pattern above?

### The Flying Pygmy

"At the beginning of time, God had fire and the pygmy people had none. God's mother sat by the fire all day while God went out and played in the jungle. One of the clever pygmies decided to steal fire from God. He made himself a pair of wings with a bird's feathers, flew to God's house and picked up fire. But God's mother woke up and cried out,

'Thief! Bring back fire or I'll freeze to death.'

God rushed home and chased the flying pygmy but couldn't catch him. The pygmy people used fire to keep warm and cook their food. When God returned home he found his mother dead. Since then the pygmies have also died."

**Summarize** the four main parts of the Flying Pygmy myth:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

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## Illustrated Book

**Read** some more fire myths. Make a picture book for younger readers retelling a fire myth. Use the pattern of fire myth in your story.

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## The Trickster Character

The trickster is a common character in myths, especially in fire myths. Read some trickster stories such as the Prometheus myth from Greece, the Anansi stories from Africa, and the Coyote stories from North America. Is a trickster a hero?

**Write** your own trickster tale about a naughty animal.



# Myth Lesson 6: Nature Myths – Honey Bees

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## Aim

To compare cultural messages.

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## Bee Mythology

About 20,000 years ago people started hunting for honey, then 3,000 years ago they made hives for bees to live in. The following ancient myths about honey bees are from different cultures. Each one explains something different about honey bees and beekeeping.

**Read** the following bee myths and after each one write what real life facts it explains and what message it conveys.

### 1. Brazil

"In the beginning, honey was found in huge pots on the ground, and people ate as much as they liked. The gods looked down and were greatly displeased. "Those humans are becoming fat and lazy," they said. The gods commanded the bees to build honey comb high in the tall jungle trees. Now people had to work hard to climb up and get the honey."

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Fact: Honey bees make their nests high up in hollow trees, and high on cliff faces.

### 2. Thailand

"Long, long ago, elephants did not have trunks. One day a terrible forest fire swept over the land. To escape the smoke, the honey bees hid inside the elephants' mouths. The elephants trumpeted angrily, but the bees would not come out. The elephants blew so hard, their mouths stretched out into trunks. In desperation, the elephants breathed in the stinging smoke and the bees finally buzzed off. Since then, bees have always built honeycomb in hollow trees, because it reminds them of elephant trunks."

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Fact: Smoke is used to control bees; and elephants are scared of bees.

### 3. Australia

"Two Numerji brothers went on walkabout. They came across some bees collecting the sweet nectar from flowers. The brothers wondered how they could follow the bees back to their nest. The older brother had a bright idea. He attached a thread of sticky spider web to a bee. This made the bee easy to follow, and the younger brother ran after it. He tracked the bee to a hollow tree. There he found a delicious honeycomb – or sugarbag as Aboriginal Australians still call it today."

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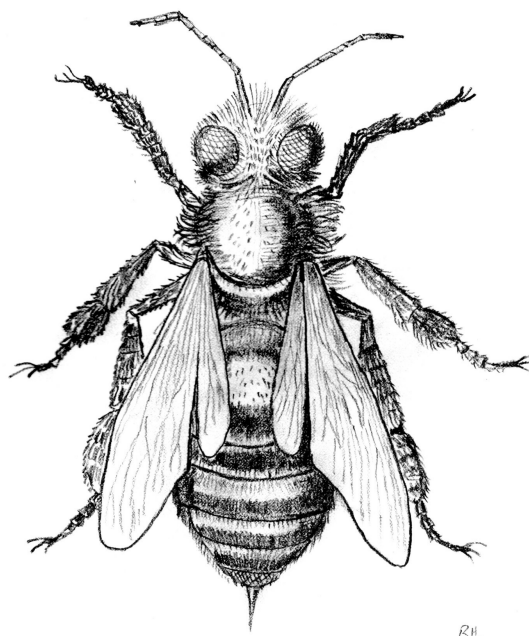
Fact: Honey hunters in Australia glued a small feather to a bee and followed it to the hive.

### 4. Africa

"Bee was a kindly creature. One night, Mantis needed to cross a great, flooded river to reach his family, and asked Bee for help. Bee offered to carry Mantis on her back. She flew over the raging waters but was beaten down by a strong wind. Bee was dangerously close to the waves when she saw a magnificent flower floating on the water. Bee dropped Mantis onto the flower, fell beside her, and died of exhaustion. When the sun rose, curled up on the flower was the first human being – bee's sacrifice."

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Fact: Honey bees live for about 40 days and then they die of exhaustion after so much flying.



# Myth Lesson 7: Hero Myths

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## Aim

To recognize patterns in hero myths and link them with comic and movie heroes.

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## The Pattern of Hero Myths

Most myths have a hero who is brave, clever or strong. Some examples are Perseus, Maui, Sigurd, Jason and Beowulf. The hero brings important gifts to his people (e.g. fire). He is a role model of right behavior and is greatly admired.

The life story of a mythical hero usually follows this pattern:

- He has a special birth.
- He has unusual skills as a child.
- He is tested as a young man.
- He goes on a journey or quest to find something.
- He has difficult tasks to do.
- He has one weakness.
- He is rewarded for his effort.
- He dies a special death.

**Read** a hero myth and see if you can find examples of each main event listed above.

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## Writing

Invent your own mythical hero.

Write a biography of your hero. Include all the main events in his life and draw a portrait of the hero.

Answer the following questions before writing about your hero:

<b>Hero Pattern</b>	<b>Your Hero</b>
Special skills as a child	
How is he tested?	
Where does he journey?	
What difficult tasks does he perform?	
What evil forces or monsters does he fight?	
What is his weakness?	
What is his reward?	

**Illustrate**

Create a comic strip or book about your hero. Use the style of Superman or The Avengers comics.

## Myth Lesson 8: Heroines

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### Aim

To imagine a modern myth with female characters.

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### Reading

Most of the heroines of myth come from Greece. Some are goddesses, such as Athena and Demeter; and others are human, such as Atalanta, Helen and Ariadne. Read some of their stories.

#### Atalanta and the Wild Boar

"When Atalanta was born, her father was disappointed the child was not a boy. Atalanta was taken into the mountains to die, but a she-bear looked after her.

Growing up in the wilds she became an expert hunter and a fast runner. There was a competition to kill a huge wild boar and Atalanta joined in the hunt. The boar ambushed the hunters, killing many of them, but Atalanta wounded it with an arrow. She won the skin of the boar for being the first to hit it.

She refused to marry anyone unless he could outrun her in a 100 meter race. Many young men tried until a Prince named Melanion beat her by throwing golden apples in front of her."

### Compare

Myths with female characters don't usually follow a pattern. Compare the story of Atalanta with the pattern of a hero myth. What are the differences?

Find another myth where the heroine defeats a monster.



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## Imagining a Modern Heroine

What would happen if a mythical heroine appeared in your town today?

1. What is her name? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What kind of person is she?  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What does she do that might upset some people?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. What do the news headlines say about her?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What TV shows and movies are made about her?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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## Discuss

Why are there fewer stories about mythical heroines than about heroes?

It is harder to find stories about women than men in mythology. Most ancient societies were patriarchal (male-dominated) and the men were story-tellers and leaders. However, in legends there are many more women (because they are more historical) and also in folktales. In mythology, the female characters are often goddesses.

# Myth Lesson 9: Mythical Creatures

## Aim

To advertise a mythical monster.

## Research

Heroes have to fight against evil, usually in the form of powerful monsters or supernatural creatures. For example, the hero Gilgamesh had to kill the monster Humbaba in his quest for life everlasting.

Find out about the following creatures and write a brief description of each one on the chart:

Mythical Monster	Description
Cyclops	
Hydra	
Harpies	
Gorgon	
Grendel	
Phoenix	
Minotaur	
Quetzalcoatl	
Chimaera	
Scylla	
Unicorn	

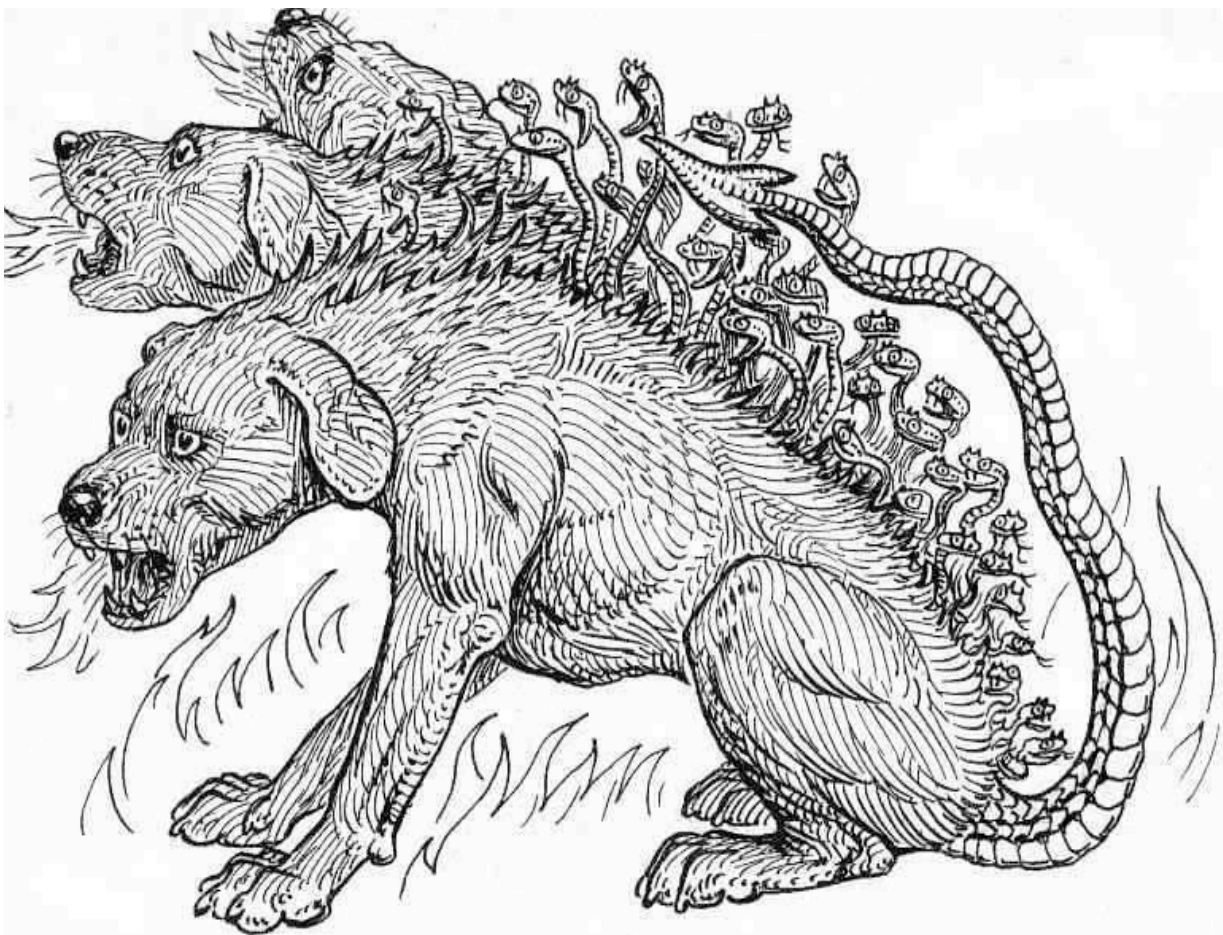
Find out which myths the monsters above come from and draw your own chart showing the information.

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## Advertising

Read some myths that have creatures or monsters in them.

Imagine you are advertising a movie about a mythical creature. Design and publish a movie poster using one of the creatures from myths you have read.



# Extension Activities

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## Extension Activities

The following activities are designed to extend students:

1. Students find myths from different countries that explain the origins of death. How common is the idea of a soul or an afterlife in mythology?
2. Find out the mythological origins of these English words and sayings:
  - \* Achilles Heel
  - \* Labyrinth
  - \* Titanic
  - \* Panic
  - \* Tantalize
  - \* The Midas Touch
3. Find a nature myth that explains the formation of some geographical feature (for example, an island) and then find out the scientific explanation.
4. Create a Who's Who website of mythical characters and creatures.
5. Look for patterns in creation myths. For example, creation myths often begin with the world in chaos, covered in water, or inside an egg. Divide the myths into categories.
6. Debate this statement: 'Part of a myth is true.'
7. Read news reports to identify real life heroes and heroines. Why do these people inspire us?
8. Study the culture or religion behind a favorite myth.
9. Research the legends of Joan of Arc or Robin Hood. In what ways are their stories like myths? What are the historical elements of these stories?
10. Greeks and Romans had Gods with similar kingdoms but different names.

Find the Roman counterparts of the following Greek Gods:

- Zeus
- Poseidon
- Hades
- Hephaestus
- Hermes
- Hera
- Aphrodite
- Artemis
- Demeter

## Myth Book List

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### **Anthologies**

The Kingfisher Book of Mythology.

Farmer, P. Beginnings.

Johnson, M. The Greeks and Their Myths.

Alpers, A. Maori Myths and Tribal Legends.

Leeming, D. A Dictionary of Creation Myths.

Bishop, G. Weaving Earth and Sky.

### **Creation Myths**

Stewart, M and Base, G. Creation Stories.

Baynes, P. In the Beginning.

Johnson, J. The Creation.

Mayo, M. The Orchard Book of Creation Stories.

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## **Flood and Fire Myths**

Harrison, M. Noah's Ark.

Ganeri, A. Out of the Ark.

Krishnaswami, U. Stories of the Flood.

London, J. Fire Race.

Robinson, J. Coyote the Trickster.

Gosage, P. How Maui found the Secret of Fire.

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## **Hero and Heroine Myths**

Ingpen, R. Heroes and Heroines.

Geringer, L. Myth Men

Slane, C. Maui, Legend of the Outcast.

Saxby, M. The Great Deeds of Heroic Women.

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## **Monster Myths**

Mayo, M. Orchard Book of Mythical Birds and Beasts.

Ragache, C. Fabulous Beasts

Ganeri, A. Dragons and Monsters.

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## **About the Author**

[Raymond Huber](#) is a children's author, education writer and teacher. His books include the novels *Sting and Wings* (Walker Books); a picture book, *Flight of the Honey Bee* (Candlewick Press); English and Science books (ESA Publications); and the ebook, *Honey Bees, An Essential Guide*.

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