

**Lesson
One**

Introducing Myths and Folktales

Aims

By the end of this lesson you should know about:

- active verbs
- what myths and folktales are
- what makes a hero
- using adjectives to describe a person
- creation myths
- making up your own myths

Context

This lesson is about the earliest stories ever told. Some were told long before reading and writing were invented, and were passed down by storytellers for centuries before being written down. The lesson prepares you for looking in more detail at several myths and tales.



Oxford Home Schooling

Lesson Starter: Using Active Verbs

An important element in all myths and folktales is what the characters *do*. You may know that **nouns** are words for things – monster, tree, lion, etc. Words for what things *do* are called **verbs**.

Examples:

The monster *howls*. The tree *grows*. The lion *roars*.

You can make your own writing more exciting by choosing active verbs to express exactly what is being done. Look at the words below for different ways of going somewhere. Notice too, how the spellings change in the different tenses. For example, *hop* needs a double ‘p’ in *hopping*.

run	running	ran
sprint	sprinting	sprinted
limp	limping	limped
skip	skipping	skipped
hop	hopping	hopped
march	marching	marched
jump	jumping	jumped
dance	dancing	danced
crawl	crawling	crawled
creep	creeping	crept
tiptoe	tiptoe	tiptoed
float	floating	floated
stride	striding	strode
plod	plodding	plodded
stagger	staggering	staggered
scamper	scampering	scampered
hobble	hobbling	hobbled

**Activity
One**

Choose words from the list on the previous page to complete the following sentences.

1. The soldiers _____ on their bellies to avoid being spotted.
2. The farm worker _____ home after a long day's work.
3. The three mice _____ happily around their new cage.
4. He was _____ for the finishing line.
5. I _____ down the stairs so as not to wake my parents.
6. She _____ across the room, pleased to see her friend.
7. The giant _____ towards us, his club over his shoulder.
8. _____ under the weight, I could barely make it to the door.
9. I knew from the uneven footprints that the suspect was _____.

Suggested answers are given in the Parents' Guide for this particular activity but your own answers may well be far more imaginative!

What are Myths and Folktales?

What do you think a myth is? Before you read on, cover this page and try to put your explanation into words.

Many people use the word *myth* just to mean something that is widely believed but not actually true. Example: *It is a myth that eating cheese at bedtime gives you bad dreams.*

However, more accurately myths are old stories that have been passed down, often over thousands of years. They may have begun as magical rituals turned into stories, but no one knows for sure. What we do know is that they changed as they were passed on.

Myths are often about gods, monsters, talking animals, heroes and heroines, and trickery. Some people think that myths are like dreams, except that they come from a kind of shared unconscious mind. They seem to express some of our deepest desires and fears.

Folktales are like myths, but are often not so old. They also tend to be about ordinary people than gods and heroes – though they often also involve talking animals and magical beings.

What Makes a Hero?

Myths often feature a *hero*. Nowadays, we use this word for all sorts of people. It usually means someone brave, though it can also mean the main character of a novel or film, who may not always be brave. It can mean someone who achieves a personal goal, or who takes risks to save others, a sportsperson, or just someone we admire, like a pop star. What do you understand by the word *hero*?

Strictly speaking, a *hero* is male, and the female version is a *heroine*, though people sometimes use *hero* for both now – and we will in this lesson. Myths feature more heroes than heroines. This is partly because myths began in times when women had few opportunities to make a name for themselves. Do you think women now are just as likely to behave in a heroic way as men?

Activity Two

Look at the following list of 'heroes'. Think about (and, if possible, discuss) what claim each one has to be called a hero. If unsure, do some research to find out more about them. Then choose three and write about why each one is, in your view, heroic.

1. Admiral Lord Nelson, who led the British Navy against Napoleon's forces in the Napoleonic Wars. Nelson died at the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). He is commemorated by Nelson's Column, in Trafalgar Square, London.
2. Junko Tabei, the first woman to climb Mount Everest (1975).
3. David Beckham, former captain of England's national football team.
4. Florence Nightingale, who devoted her life to nursing and established nursing as a career. She campaigned for medical treatment for the poor, and took a team of nurses to the Crimean War (in Turkey) in 1854. Treating men with contagious diseases, she risked her life and greatly reduced the death rate in soldiers' hospitals.
5. Leona Lewis, UK singer who won *The X-Factor* and went on to make the fastest-selling ever debut album and a biggest-selling UK single of 2007.
6. Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa 1994–9. He was imprisoned by the white government in 1964 for his role in the African National Congress, which fought for black rights. He remained in prison until 1990.
7. Someone who risks his life by diving into a freezing river to save his dog.
8. Someone who refuses to give lunch money to bullies at school.
9. Someone with a terminal illness who faces their situation bravely.

Describing a Hero or Heroine

When writing about heroes, you need to use well-chosen **adjectives** to describe them, and active **verbs** to say what they do. In modern-day thinking and stories, heroes are not always strong, and they may be frightened sometimes – although they usually overcome their fears.

Activity Three

Circle the adjectives that you think could be used to describe one or all of the heroes you chose in Activity 2. Then write interesting sentences using at least six of them to describe your chosen heroes.

strong powerful athletic determined daring self-sacrificing feeble
 optimistic decisive patient skilful well-trained fit stupid clever
 resourceful stubborn caring scared uncomplaining patriotic rebellious
 fierce noble persistent mad beautiful talented ambitious bold

Creation myths

One special kind of myth which often contains a hero is the **creation myth**. These come from all over the world and try to explain how the universe, the world, people and animals all began.

One such myth is the Chinese story of Pangu – the First Man. Others begin with a First Woman, or a pair of gods.

Activity Four

Read the story of Pangu and then write your own creation myth explaining how the world and its life forms came into being.

Start by planning your myth. Think about –

- What is the very first thing that exists?
- Does your myth begin with a god or gods?
- Is the world created for a reason?
- Do human beings have a purpose?

You could illustrate your myth. You could even think of a way to perform it, with appropriate sound effects.

The story of Pangu

In the beginning there was only a great darkness. Within the darkness there grew an egg, and within the egg there grew a giant – Pangu. For millions of year, he did nothing but sleep and grow, inside the egg. When he had grown to an enormous size, he stretched his huge arms and legs, cracking open the egg. The light parts of the egg floated up and became the sky, and the heavy parts sank down, to become the earth.

Pangu was pleased, but he feared that sky and earth might get stuck together again, so he positioned himself between them, his head holding up the sky and his feet planted upon the earth. He carried on growing at a rate of ten feet a day for 18,000 years, until sky and earth were 30,000 miles apart. Then, exhausted, Pangu went back to sleep, never to wake up again.

Pangu died, and his body turned into the world and everything in it. His breath became the wind and clouds, his voice the thunder and lightning, his eyes the sun and moon, his arms and legs north, south, east and west, and the rest of his body the mountains. The soil and the trees growing out of it came from his flesh. Rivers flowed from his blood, while his veins turned into roads and pathways. His body hair and skin became the grass and vegetation, while gemstones and other minerals came from his teeth and bones. His sweat became the morning dew and the hair upon his head became stars. Human beings came last of all – made from the fleas on Pangu’s body!

Self- Assessment Test

This test is on what you understand by myths and folktales, heroes, and the language used to describe them.

1. The word *run* is one verb that can be used for a way of going somewhere. Write down five more and then use them in sentences.
2. What is the difference between the popular use of the word *myth* and how the word is used in stories of the gods?
3. One feature you might find in a myth is a hero fighting monsters. You probably wouldn’t find someone going to the supermarket. What other features might you find in a myth?
4. What do creation myths try to explain?
5. Write down five adjectives that might be used to describe a typical hero in a myth.