



Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx

9_A

Introducing the Read-Aloud

10 minutes

What Have We Already Learned?

Using the Flip Book images for guidance, have students help you continue the Greek Myths Chart from previous lessons, adding the details for the myths about Hercules.

Using the table of contents for this anthology, make a list of all of the Greek myths students have heard thus far on a piece of chart paper, a chalkboard, or a whiteboard. Ask students a few riddles to help them review what they have already learned about Greek myths. The following are provided for you as examples.

- The ancient Greeks believed I created humans and that my brother created all of the other animals. Zeus later punished me for giving humans fire. Who am I? (Prometheus)
- In Greek mythology, I am the goddess of the harvest and the mother of Persephone. When Hades spirited her away to the Underworld, I grew very sad and crops stopped growing. Who am I? (Demeter)

You may wish to have students create some riddles about the myths they have already heard.

Essential Background Information or Terms

Meet the Characters

Note: You may wish to add to the Character Chart as you introduce the characters in this read-aloud.



← Show image 9A-2: Thebans hungry and afraid

Tell students that many of the people they will see in the images in today's read-aloud are people from the great Greek city of Thebes and they are called Thebans. Tell students they will hear about the Theban king, King Laius, who is no longer in the city of Thebes.



Point to the creature on the rocks and tell students that this is the Sphinx, a mythical beast.

← **Show image 9A-4: Sphinx and Oedipus talking**

Tell students that the person talking to the Sphinx in this image is the man Oedipus.

Remind students that a riddle is a puzzling question, to which people try to guess the answer. Tell students that riddles were popular among the ancient Greeks and that today's myth involves a riddle. Tell students that the title of today's myth is "Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx."

Purpose for Listening

Tell students to listen carefully to find out what the riddle is and explain that you will give them opportunities throughout the read-aloud to guess the answer to the riddle.



Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx

← Show image 9A-1: Sphinx perched on rock

- 1 What was the name of the beloved Greek poet who was from Thebes, whom we learned about during our study of *The Ancient Greek Civilization?* (Pindar)
- 2 Have you heard the word *sphinx* before? Where did you hear it and what was it?
- 3 [Point to these features in the illustration as you read about them.]
- 4 or presented

Long ago, one of the great Greek cities was called Thebes [theebz].¹ At one point in its long history, on a towering rock overlooking the various roads into Thebes, there lived a horrible monster called the Sphinx.² This Sphinx was not like the great stone statue in Egypt that stares out endlessly over the desert near the Great Pyramid. The Theban Sphinx, according to Greek myth, was no statue. She was a living beast. She did have a lion's body, like the Egyptian statue, but the Theban Sphinx had the face and neck of a human woman.³ She had wings so she could swoop down and attack anyone and could speak as humans do. It was she who **posed**⁴ the riddle.

Whenever a traveler tried to enter or leave Thebes, that person knew the Sphinx would be waiting on her high rock.

The monster would say, "I am going to eat you unless you can correctly answer this riddle: 'What is it that walks on four feet in the morning, on two feet at noon, and on three feet in the evening?'"⁵

The poor traveler was often too frightened to even speak, and the cruel beast would strike with her sharp claws and teeth. Even if some clever person tried to answer the riddle, the Sphinx would always listen and then exclaim, "You have guessed wrong! Now I will eat you."

- 5 What do you think the answer to this riddle is? [Repeat the riddle. Ask two or three students for suggestions.]



← Show image 9A-2: Thebans hungry and afraid

- 6 What do you think it means that the Sphinx insisted on posing a riddle?
- 7 or unexpectedly meeting

No one knew why this terrifying creature had chosen to live on a rock above the road to Thebes, or why she **insisted** on posing this particular riddle.⁶ They knew only that she ate every person she met. Not only that, but no one from the outside would bring fresh food to the city for fear of **encountering**⁷ the monster. "If someone does not solve this riddle," the people told one another, "we will starve."

As bad as this was, it was not the only problem the Thebans faced. Their king, King Laius [LAY-us], never returned from a journey he had taken far from home. So the person the Thebans had usually turned to for help was not there in their hour of danger.



← **Show image 9A-3: Guards see a traveler approaching**

In this dreadful situation, you can imagine how surprised the guards were when they looked out from the city walls one day and saw a man nearing the main gate. They did not recognize him, but they could see that he was tall and richly dressed.⁸

8 Who do you think this man is? Do you think the Sphinx will pose her riddle to him?

The captain of the guards said, “Maybe he will make it. I do not see the Sphinx anywhere. Perhaps she is off watching another road.”



← **Show image 9A-4: Sphinx and Oedipus talking**

But just as the captain was about to order the gate thrown open, down came the Sphinx like an arrow shot from the clouds above. She settled on her rock and looked down at the stranger with cold, pitiless eyes.⁹ “Traveler,” said the monster, “today you have chosen the wrong road.”

9 or eyes that held no sympathy

The stranger boldly replied, “I choose my own roads and my own destinations. Today I will go to Thebes.”

Anger lit up the monster’s eyes as she said, “I alone decide who travels this road. If I say no one travels this path, so it shall be. You have one chance and one chance only. You must correctly answer my riddle. Tell me, foolish man, what is it that walks on four feet in the morning, on two feet at noon, and on three feet in the evening?”¹⁰

10 [Pause for more guesses from students.]



← **Show image 9A-5: Oedipus thinking**

The stranger sat down in the dust of the road to think. The Sphinx, sure Oedipus wouldn’t guess it, gazed down at him, her tail twitching with impatience. After some time, she stopped even that movement. For half an hour, the man sat thinking as the huge beast lay still atop its rock.

Meanwhile, the people of Thebes had rushed to the walls. They knew the man would probably not guess the riddle, but it had been so long since anyone had even tried, they had come to see him try. At last, the stranger rose to his feet.

“Have you an answer?” demanded the Sphinx.

In a strong, sure voice the man repeated the riddle: “What is it that walks on four feet in the morning, on two feet at noon, and on three feet in the evening?”



11 So what is the answer to the riddle? Here the word *cane* means a short stick that someone uses to help them walk. The word *cane* can also mean the hollow stem of a plant, such as bamboo, that is used to make furniture and baskets.

← **Show image 9A-6: Oedipus answering the riddle**

Then staring straight into the Sphinx’s eyes, he said, “The answer is man. As a baby in the morning of his life, he crawls on all fours. At the noon of his life, when he is grown-up and strong, he walks upright on two feet. In his old age, the evening of his time on the earth, he walks with the aid of a cane, as if on three feet.”¹¹



← **Show image 9A-7: Oedipus made king by happy Thebans**

The Sphinx’s eyes flew open in shock. The traveler had answered correctly. With a cry, the monster threw herself down from her high rock. The Sphinx was finally gone!

With shouts of joy, the people of Thebes rushed down from their walls, threw open the gates, and poured out onto the road. They lifted the stranger onto their shoulders and carried him into their city. There they asked, “Who are you, great hero? To whom do we owe our lives?”

“I am Oedipus,” (*ED-i-pus*) he answered.

“No,” they replied, “not just ‘Oedipus.’ You are now King Oedipus, Master of the Sphinx and King of Thebes!”

So that is the story of how Oedipus answered a riddle and became a king.

Comprehension Questions

10 minutes



← **Show image 9A-6: Oedipus answering the riddle**

1. *Literal* What riddle did you hear about in today's read-aloud? (What is it that walks on four feet in the morning, on two feet at noon, and on three feet in the evening?)

2. *Evaluative* What is the answer to this riddle? (man or human beings) How would you explain the answer? (As a baby "in the morning" of our lives, we crawl on all fours; at "the noon" or middle of our lives, we walk on two feet; in "the evening" or in our old age, we walk with the aid of a cane, as if on three feet.) [Encourage students to share this riddle with their families when they get home.]

3. *Inferential* Which character poses this riddle? (the Sphinx) What is a Sphinx according to Greek mythology? (a beast with a lion's body, the face and neck of a human woman, and wings) Is the Sphinx that lived on a towering rock overlooking the road to Thebes a god, a hero, or a supernatural creature? (a supernatural creature)

4. *Evaluative* Why do you think the Sphinx insists on posing this particular riddle? (Answers may vary.)

5. *Literal* Which traveler to Thebes is able to answer her riddle? (Oedipus)



← **Show image 9A-7: Oedipus made king by happy Thebans**

6. *Inferential* Are the Thebans grateful to Oedipus? (yes) How do you know? (They cheered and made him king.)

[Please continue to model the *Question? Pair Share* process for students, as necessary, and scaffold students in their use of the process.]

7. *Evaluative* *What? Pair Share:* Asking questions after a read-aloud is one way to see how much everyone has learned. Think of a question you can ask your neighbor about the read-aloud that starts with the word *what*. For example, you could ask, "What kind of question did the Sphinx ask travelers?"

Turn to your neighbor and ask your *what* question. Listen to your neighbor's response. Then your neighbor will ask a new *what* question, and you will get a chance to respond. I will call on several of you to share your questions with the class.

8. After hearing today's read-aloud and questions and answers, do you have any remaining questions? [If time permits, you may wish to allow for individual, group, or class research of the text and/or other resources to answer these questions.]

Word Work: Insisted

5 minutes

1. In the read-aloud you heard, "No one knew why this terrifying creature [the Sphinx] had chosen to live on a rock above the road to Thebes, or why she *insisted* on posing this particular riddle."
2. Say the word *insisted* with me.
3. If you have insisted on something, you have continually ordered or demanded it.
4. My mother insisted I wash my hands before I eat lunch.
5. Have you ever insisted on something? Try to use the word *insisted* when you tell about it. [Ask two or three students. If necessary, guide and/or rephrase the students' responses: "I insisted on _____ once when . . ."]
6. What's the word we've been talking about?

Use a *Drawing/Writing* activity for follow-up. Directions: Quickly sketch something you have insisted should happen. [Explain that they may have insisted on having something, doing something, or having someone else do something. Have students write one sentence that explains the drawing and gives the reason why they insisted on what they did. As students share their pictures and sentences, make sure they use the word *insisted*.]



Complete Remainder of the Lesson Later in the Day



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Extensions

20 minutes

Greek Myths Journal (Instructional Master 9B-1)

Tell students that they will be continuing their journal to help them remember important information they learn in this domain about the Greek gods and Greek myths. Have students share which characters they heard about in today's read-aloud. (the Sphinx, Oedipus) Ask students if any of these characters were gods or goddesses. (no)

Show students Instructional Master 9B-1. Tell them that for today's journal entry, they should write "Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx" on the title blank. They should then write two to three sentences about one of the characters to help them remember who s/he is, what s/he does in today's myth, and why s/he might have been important to the ancient Greeks. After writing two to three sentences, students may also draw a picture in the rectangle to illustrate the information.

Writing a Greek Myth: Edit (Instructional Masters 8B-1 and 9B-2)

Tell students that they are going to edit the myths they have written. Explain that editing is what we do when we take a draft and try to make it better. Explain that this means they are going to read the story to check for any mistakes, and to make sure they have said everything they wanted or needed to say. Give each student a copy of their draft (Instructional Master 8B-1) and a copy of the editing checklist (Instructional Master 9B-2.) This checklist includes the basic items for students to review, such as using punctuation at the end of each sentence, commas between items in a list, and capital letters at the beginning of each sentence. In addition, the checklist includes additional lines on which you may also include specific writing concepts students are currently learning.

Explain that students are going to work with a partner to share and edit their myths. Allow students to share any mistakes they see, what they like about what has been written, and what changes they may suggest.

Finally, have students copy their drafts onto a clean piece of paper, incorporating all of the changes made on their draft. You may wish to allow time for students to share the final versions of their myths.