

Ancient Voices

Bringing the Greeks to Life in the Classroom for Students K-12



A Context for Educators Using the Language Worksheets

In 2016, I wrote an essay that was published in the book *Women Verses in Myth: Essays on Modern Poets*. In it, I give educators a context for using all the other downloadable worksheets offered on the Resources page on KateHovey.com. Here is an excerpt from that essay.

D.H. Lawrence called mythology “an attempt to narrate a whole human experience, of which the purpose is too deep, going too deep in the blood and soul, for mental explanation or description” (Lawrence and Mara Kalnins 49). With budget constraints, rigid curriculum requirements and assessment tests assailing them at every level, how can teachers effectively engage students in this complex, vital subject? One approach has proven to be adaptable in a variety of classroom settings: doing it the way the Greeks did thousands of years ago, using dramatic poetry and the ancient art of the mask.

Though no early examples have survived to modern times, the familiar Greco-Roman comic/tragic mask design with its distinctive, gaping mouth has remained a potent theatrical symbol throughout the ages. Ancient textual and pictorial evidence indicate that masks worn on the Greek stage were cumbersome, helmet-like devices made to fit over the actors’ heads, often resting on their shoulders. But authenticity was never the focus or aim of the mask project presented here. Rather, the idea began as an attempt to replicate quickly and inexpensively the large copper and leather hand-held masks used in my school performances.

My work as a mask maker, poet and visiting author in the schools affords me the opportunity to share ideas with educators across the country, testing in their classrooms the projects and methods presented in this chapter. The results confirm what the Greeks knew long ago: a mask is a playful yet deceptively powerful, transformative tool, giving voice to the heights and unspeakable depths of human experience—the wellspring, as Lawrence says, of all myth.

Versatility is a major hallmark of this hand-held mask design. It can be used in a wide range of classroom projects, from storytelling activities and simple plays in the lower grades to Readers Theater productions and the creation and performance of dramatic poetry, monologues and dialogues. The mask’s larger-than-life scale adds visual impact to every project,

enhancing student performance while providing a more nuanced experience of early Greek oral traditions.

Storytellers have played a key role in the transmission of Greek mythology since before the Bronze Age, and what better place to keep this ancient tradition alive than in the elementary school library and K-4 classroom? As the teacher or librarian narrates, small groups of students act out the stories. The mask provides an imaginative link to the storytelling process, allowing for a deeper understanding of the myths presented. Introverted children often find it comforting to “hide” behind the mask, which paradoxically encourages greater freedom of expression. Students of this nature who are typically reticent to participate also respond well to performing in a Greek-like chorus, reciting lines in unison with others at appropriate points during the narration. For new readers, bits of dialogue may be added. Short scripts attached directly to the backs of these large masks relieve the pressures of memorization. The addition of costumes further enhances the project; an authentic Greek *chiton* can be easily fashioned from two cloth rectangles pinned together at the shoulders and belted with simple cording.

Originally geared for older students, the mask instructions appearing at the conclusion of this chapter can be adapted for lower grades by making one simple change: instead of constructing the mask with the described raised facial features, younger students can draw faces directly onto the poster board using crayons and colored markers. In fact, most older students use a combination of raised and drawn features. No hard and fast rules apply; individual creativity and imaginative use of materials are important aspects of the project. Additional assistance and supervision when cutting out and shaping the masks will be required, but the bulk of remaining tasks—adding construction paper hair, pre-cut crowns, symbols, helmets and other embellishments—are well within the youngest student’s skill set.

Readers Theater offers students and teachers a break from the time-honored classroom tradition of silent reading and a powerful, innovative way to bring the characters of myth to life. Unlike a play, an RT performance requires neither sets nor elaborate staging, no props or costumes and no memorization. Essentially a reading exercise, students recite directly from a book or prepared script. It is still a performance, however, requiring varying degrees of individual and group preparation, the central idea being to build fluency by reading the same piece over and over.

In the upper grades, Readers Theater becomes the perfect vehicle for launching an exploration of both classical and contemporary dramatic poetry. Because students take the poems home and practice reading them aloud, they develop an ear for poetic language, its music, rhythms and cadences. A great part of the enjoyment of poetry is hearing it read aloud,

and the Greeks knew this—Greek poets gave birth to the spoken word performance and accompanied most of their poetry with the lyre. Excerpts from classical poems and plays, Homeric hymns and epics make terrific RT performance pieces, reacquainting high school students with mythological characters and themes while introducing them to Greece’s immortal poets. Myth-based persona poems by contemporary poets encourage students to view the gods, goddesses and heroes of old through a distinctly modern lens, and poetry anthologies such as *Orpheus and Company* and *After Ovid* contain a wealth of performance-ready material from which to choose.

Persona is the Latin word for “mask.” Though masks are not typically used in Readers Theater, these large hand-held versions work especially well in RT-style performances of persona poems and other forms of dramatic poetry. On a practical level, a poem can be printed out and attached to the back of the mask, thereby facilitating the dramatic reading. On a deeper level, the mask can act as a kind of portal or numinous link to the past, evoking the ancient drama and Greek oral tradition. Something happens when a student speaks through the mask; the performance becomes more than a mere recitation. Indeed, the mask-making project itself serves to enrich these performances, as throughout the process students acquire greater knowledge and understanding of the characters their masks represent.

Persona poems, both classical and contemporary, provide inspiring examples for students to follow in their exploration of the characters of Greek myth. The impulse to “put yourself in her shoes”—to transport oneself into another’s life, explore an alien psyche and see the world through entirely different eyes—is ancient in origin, and the mask has traditionally been the vehicle of choice through which this transformation occurs. When the ancients put on the mask of a god, goddess, hero or creature, they believed they were transformed by the power of the mask into whatever it represented. Putting on the mask was an act of extraordinary empathy and imagination; putting on the mask in a poem gives students that same opportunity, empowering them to fully inhabit these characters and experience the timeworn world of myth in a profoundly new way.

When I work with students on a persona poem project, I usually start with a timed idea-generating exercise. Students are asked to divide a page of notebook paper in half vertically, creating two columns. The left column is labeled “Facts and Observations” and the right, “Dreaming.” Starting with the left side, students are instructed to write down everything they know about the mythological characters they have chosen—only the verifiable facts and observations drawn from written sources and ancient art—within five to seven minutes, keeping in mind the following:

Facts and Observations: Things to Consider

1. What does your character look like (physical traits and distinguishing features, special clothing)?
2. What symbols and emblems belong to your character?
3. Who is related to your character (parents, siblings, husband/wife, daughters/sons)?
4. What stories/mythological facts are important to your character?

On the “Dreaming” side, students are instructed to write down any thoughts that arise about their chosen characters—no editing allowed—within seven to ten minutes. At the beginning of this stream-of-consciousness portion of the exercise, students are invited to close their eyes and imagine themselves as their characters, keeping in mind the following:

Dreaming Into Your Character: Things to Consider

1. Engaging the senses: What do you (as your character) see, taste, touch, smell, hear?
2. Environment: What impressions do you have of the immediate surroundings? The larger world?
3. Insights: What do you feel, think, dream about? What is your greatest joy or pleasure? Greatest fear?
5. Focusing on a particular event or the high or low point of a day in your character’s life, what do you (as your character) believe about the situation? What does the situation reveal about you?

These prompts remain on the white board or screen throughout the exercise, which concludes with a brief Q & A and discussion of the writing process. Students craft their poems by weaving together words and images from both sides of the exercise sheet. Before beginning, they are shown several contemporary persona poems representing different approaches or strategies. From the enigmatic, riddle-like approach of Donald Justice’s “The Thin Man” to the straightforward, declarative statement of the copper wire in Carl Sandburg’s “Under a Telephone Pole” and the invitation implicit in Walter de la Mare’s “Snowflake”—these and countless other highly inventive examples offer students a solid toehold on that treacherous slope all poets face: where to begin.

Resource Guide

Readers Theater Scripts Grades 5-12

1. Suzanne Barchers, *From Atalanta to Zeus: Readers Theatre from Greek* (Libraries Unlimited, 2001).
2. Gwen Bowers, *Read Aloud Plays: The Iliad, The Odyssey and the Aeneid* (Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2007).
3. Carol Pugliano-Martin, *Greek Myth Plays: 10 Readers Theater Scripts Based on Favorite Greek Myths That Students Can Read and Reread to Develop Their Fluency* (Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2008).

Greek Myth-Related Poetry Anthologies Grades 9-12

Use poems from these collections in Readers Theater productions and as examples to jumpstart dramatic poetry projects.

1. Deborah Denicola, editor, *Orpheus and Company: Contemporary Poems on Greek Mythology* (University Press of New England, 1999).
2. Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, editors, *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).
3. Nina Kossman, editor, *Gods and Mortals: Modern Poems on Classical Myths* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Persona Poem Project Grades 5-12

Poems cited by the author in "Voice of the Mask" workshops:

1. Donald Justice, "The Thin Man," from *Collected Poems* (Knopf, 2004), 88.
2. Carl Sandburg, "Under a Telephone Pole," from *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 70.
3. Anthony Hecht, "Giant Tortoise," from *A Bestiary: Lithographs by Aubrey Schwartz and Poems by Anthony Hecht* (Plantin Press, 1962).
4. Thom Gunn, "Tamer and Hawk," from *Selected Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 4.

5. Michael Hannon, "What the Rose Said," "What the Crow Said" and "What the Cicada Said," from *Changing Light: A Collection of Myths, Poems, Prayers*, edited by J. Ruth Gendler (Harper Collins, 1991).
6. Walter de la Mare, "Snowflake," from *The 20th Century Children's Poetry Treasury*, edited by Jack Prelutsky (Knopf Books for Young Readers, 1999), 10.
7. Homer, "Song of the Sirens," from *The Odyssey*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Perennial Classics, 1999), Book XII, lines 184-191.
8. Margaret Atwood, "Siren Song," from *Collected Poems II* (Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
9. Louise Gluck, "Siren," from *Meadowlands* (Ecco, 1997).
10. H.D., "Oread," from *Collected Poems (New Directions, 1986)*, 55.

Hand-Held Mask Project

The mask-making project detailed below fulfills several important classroom criteria: affordability, widespread availability of materials, versatility and ease of construction.

Inexpensive poster board, the mask's main component, can be found at the nearest drug store in a wide variety of colors. Though any color may be used, a special dual-sided gold and silver board available at most craft and office supply stores is a favorite for this project. Students enjoy working with this lustrous material, which resembles the metallic finish of the original performance masks. Though it costs more than conventional poster board, it is still highly affordable and practical for classroom use. The current price for a standard 22" x 28" sheet is .99 cents; each sheet cut in half makes two 14" x 22" masks, keeping the cost for the entire project well below \$1.00 per student.

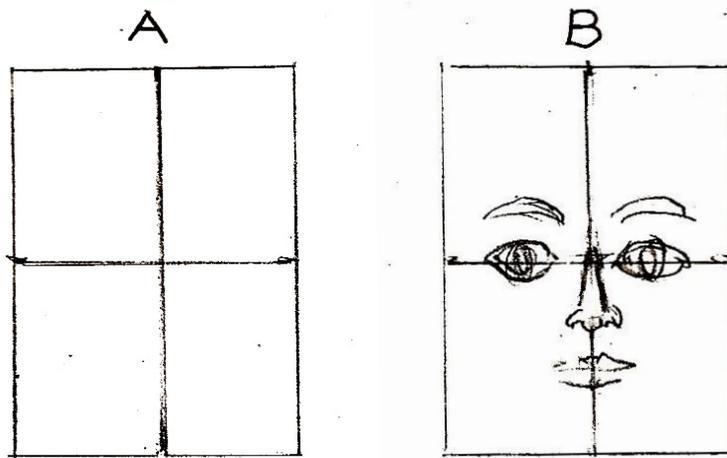
Materials and Tools

1. Poster board, dual metallic finish (gold/silver), standard size (22"x28") cut in half to make two 14"x22" masks (extra for helmets, crowns, etc.)
2. Colored construction paper (extra black, brown, yellow and red)
3. White craft glue and glue sticks
4. Scissors
5. Hand-held staplers
6. Cardboard rods from clothes hangers

7. Transparent tape
8. Pencils
9. Colored markers or crayons (extra black and brown)
10. Rulers
11. Super #77 spray adhesive (for optional backing, can be used instead of white glue)

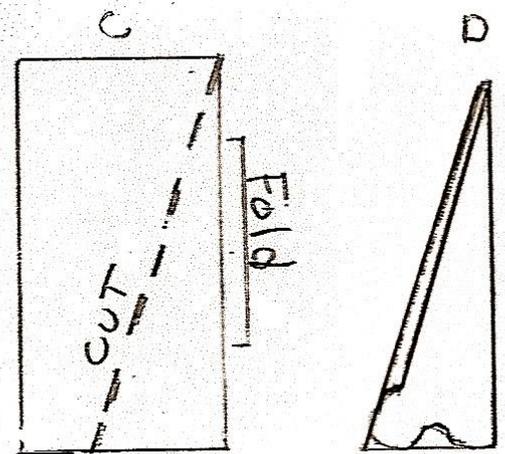
Using Guidelines

With pencil and ruler, lightly draw guidelines on poster board, dividing into four equal quadrants (see A.) Sketch features over guidelines, placing eyes, nose and mouth along the vertical and horizontal lines as shown in B. Make sure to draw lightly, as these lines will be erased later.



The Nose

To make the nose, cut a rectangular piece of poster board about ½ inch longer than the nose in your sketch, then fold piece in half lengthwise. Practice making noses with plain paper first, until you are happy with the results. The nose is basically a triangle; the broader the nose, the wider the base of your triangle. Determine the length of your triangle's base, then cut (away from the fold) in a straight line from the base to the top of the triangle (see C). Refine shape of nose to suggest nostrils as shown in D. Run a bead of glue along sides of nose and attach over sketched nose on poster board, taking care not to flatten it by pressing too hard.



Eyes

Eyes are made in layers, beginning with the white eyeball. Eyeballs are basically ovals with pointed ends; they can be narrow or wide, depending on how you want them to look. Eyes made from narrow ovals, for example, suggest slyness or suspicion; wide ones may give the face a look of surprise or innocence. Cut two eyeballs from a folded piece of white construction paper and glue over sketched eyes on poster board. To make the iris, fold a piece of colored construction paper in half and cut two circles—they should be slightly smaller in diameter than the height of the eyeball.

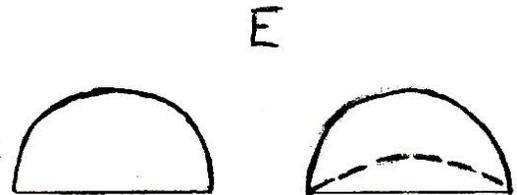
Glue each iris to the center of the eyeball. To make the pupil, cut out two smaller circles from a piece of folded black construction paper and glue to center of each iris. Alternatively, the iris and pupil can be drawn on the eyeball with colored crayons or markers.

Eyes can be finished in a number of ways. They could be outlined in dark crayon or marker to suggest lashes, or individual lashes could be drawn on. Lashes may also be fringe-cut from construction paper and glued to top and bottom of eyes. To give the eyes added detail and dimension, eyelids can be made.

Eyelids: An Optional Detail (but worth the extra effort)

To make eyelids, cut identical half-circles from a folded piece of poster-board or colored construction paper (the diameter of the half-circle should be a little longer than the eyeball.) To give the eyelid a more natural appearance, cut a soft arc in the half-circle's straight edge—the higher the arc, the more open the eye appears (see E.)

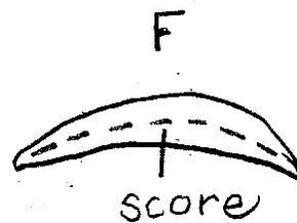
If desired, glue a fringe of lashes cut from construction paper to the underside of the bottom edge of eyelid. When glue is set, curl fringe up and over eyelid (lashes may be trimmed and feathered to look more natural.) Gently curl each eyelid between thumb and index finger, then apply bead of glue to curved edge and set above eye, holding in place until glue sets.



Eyebrows and Ridges

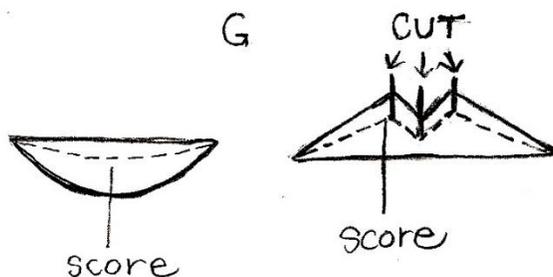
To make eyebrows, cut identical shapes from folded piece of poster board. Score each eyebrow as shown in F and bend along scored line. Scoring is a great way to give three-

dimensional qualities to a flat piece of paper. This is done by drawing a line across the paper with the point of the scissors. The line should be visibly incised, but the scissors should never cut all the way through the paper. Apply glue to edges of eyebrows and set in place. When dry, eyebrows can be colored in with marker or crayon. Color only the upper half, above the scored line—the lower half, below the scored line, represents the brow ridge and should remain the same color as the face



The Mouth

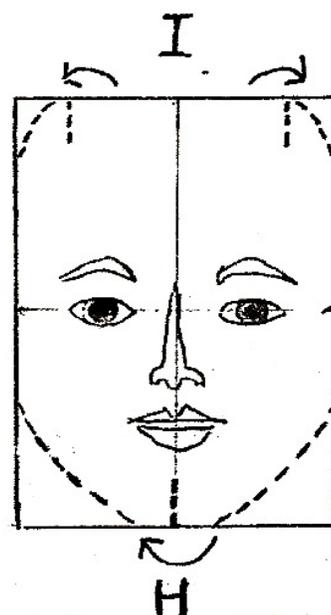
To make the mouth, cut upper and lower lips from poster board or construction paper. Score the upper and lower lips as shown in G and bend along scored line (make cuts in upper lip as shown before bending.) If the mouth is to appear slightly open, draw a thick line with a black marker where the interior of the mouth will show and glue the lips in place above and below this line, overlapping it slightly. Make teeth from white construction paper, if desired. Glue teeth in place first, and then glue lips in desired position over teeth. When gluing lower lip, take care not to flatten the scored edge by pressing down too hard.



interior of the mouth will show and glue the lips in place above and below this line, overlapping it slightly. Make teeth from white construction paper, if desired. Glue teeth in place first, and then glue lips in desired position over teeth. When gluing lower lip, take care not to flatten the scored edge by pressing down too hard.

Shaping the Face

The chin is formed by cutting an inch-long slit at the bottom of the poster board along the vertical guideline. Overlap the two sections and staple together (see H.) Use scissors to cut away the square edges of the poster board, creating the jaw line. If a more angular, masculine chin is desired, cut two inch-long slits equidistant from the vertical guideline but not wider apart than the corners of the mouth. Overlap the sections and staple together, using scissors to shape the jaw line. To shape the forehead and add rigidity to the mask, cut two inch-long slits at the top of the poster board about 4 1/2" on either side of the vertical guideline (see I.) Overlap the sections and staple together. Round the corners of the poster board with scissors and shape the head as desired.



Hair

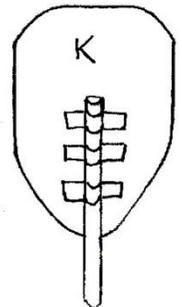
There are a variety of ways to make hair out of construction paper. Layers of fringed paper can be glued along the hairline and curled over a pencil, then trimmed and feathered to create the desired 'style'. Long curls can be made by cutting individual strips, curling around a pencil and gluing to the back of the mask along the hairline. Instead of paper, try using yarn or string; cut pieces of rope and unravel the strands. One student made frizzy gray hair using tufts of steel wool—brilliant! Indulge your creativity—the possibilities are endless.

Symbols and Emblems

The Olympian gods and goddesses were associated with a number of symbols and emblems. On poster board, design a headdress or crown using symbols appropriate to the god or goddess your mask represents. Cut out designs, score, bend and attach as desired. Again, creativity is the key; symbols can be displayed as tattoos, on earrings—even the iris of the eye can be used as a design space for lightning bolts, musical notes, flames, etc.

Finishing Touches

To complete the mask, attach the cardboard rod from a clothes hanger to the back with masking tape (see K.) Brush glue on large sheet of black construction paper and apply to the back of the mask, covering it entirely and concealing the rod and tape. This gives the mask a neat, finished appearance.



WORKS CITED

D. H. Lawrence and Mara Kalnins, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 49.