Myths

Purpose:

To provide a fictional explanation for natural phenomena. Many cultures use myths to explain the world and its mysteries by handing them down from one generation to the next. Myths can also pass on cultural, religious or spiritual beliefs and traditions.

A table showing core elements and aspects of myths to support teaching and learning		
Generic structure	**Language features**	**Knowledge for the writer**
The plot is often based on a long and dangerous journey, a quest or a series of trials for the hero. The plot usually includes incredible or miraculous events, where characters behave in superhuman ways using unusual powers or with the help of superhuman beings. Myths are often much longer texts than other traditional stories (apart from some legends) especially in their original form. They provide a very useful contrast with shorter forms of traditional narrative such as fables.	Rich vocabulary evoking the power and splendour of the characters and settings: Hercules hurled the glittering spear with all the strength of a mighty army. Use of imagery to help the reader imagine. Simile is used widely to help convey grand settings and describe awe-inspiring characters: Thor's hammer was as heavy as a mountain. Vivid description of characters and settings. Fast-moving narration of action to keep the drama moving along. Myths tend to make less use of dialogue and repetition than some other types of traditional story. Myths often provide good examples of the use of symbols: Theseus unwinds a thread behind him in the Minotaur's den – a thread could be seen as a symbol of his link between the real world of humans and the supernatural world of the gods.	Make the characters larger than life by giving them supernatural powers or strong characteristics like courage and wisdom. Create a negative character who is the opposite of your hero: good and evil, brave and cowardly, strong and weak. Consider including a character who is a 'trickster' to add to the fun or to create twists in the plot. Choose a setting that gives a dramatic backdrop for the action: (a huge, dense forest, a mountain shrouded in icy fog or a wide, sun-baked desert).

Myths - more specific features

Purpose

The usual purpose of a myth is to provide an explanation for the origins of phenomena (thunder, day and night, winter) by telling the story of how they came to be. Most cultures used myths, handed down orally from generation to generation from an anonymous source, to explain the world and its mysteries, so mythology from different regions usually reflects the wonders that people saw around them in their own environment. Myths often provide narrative clues that help to build a picture of the beliefs, lifestyles and ideology of the people who first told them. There are many similarities between the myths of different cultures (Why the Crow is Black: Aboriginal Australian, Sioux and Dakota, Filipino and ancient Greek).

Themes

Myths are set in the past, usually a distant and non-specific past, and are presented (unlike fables) as something that actually happened. There is evidence that the content of some myths is based on real events and places that may have existed.

Myths explain why the world is the way it is and, for this reason, they reflect the basic principles of the religion or spirituality of the people. For example, Norse and Greek myths narrate what the gods did and how they interacted with humans. The most famous Hindu myths, The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, are epic tales that contain the teachings of Hindu sages told as exciting stories about the lives of people and gods. The social and religious status of myths varies from culture to culture but for some they continue to be sacred texts.

Opposites occur frequently in myths as themes, including:

- good and evil;
- night and day;
- calm and storm;
- wise and foolish;
- old and young;
- beautiful and ugly;
- mean and generous;

- just and unjust.

Like other traditional stories, myths use quests, journeys and trials as themes. The hero or heroine often has to undergo some kind of test (the trials of Hercules) or set off on a long and difficult journey where dangers arise at each stage (the Odyssey).

Plot and structure

The plot of a myth usually includes incredible or miraculous events, where characters behave in superhuman ways using unusual powers or with the help of superhuman beings.

Myths are often much longer texts than other traditional stories (apart from some legends) especially in their original form. They provide a very useful contrast with shorter forms of traditional narrative such as fables.

Characters

Characters typical of traditional stories appear in myths (talking animals, rich kings, foolish young men, clever villains) although the 'trickster' character is often a mischievous god (Loki, for example). The most notable character types in this sub-class are classic heroes and supernatural beings. Characterisation is an interesting focus for composition when children write their own myths or retell versions because the characters need to be awe-inspiring and larger-than-life.

Style

Rich, evocative vocabulary and use of imagery are typical but style is often more literary than other types of tales so that some versions offer a more challenging read for children. Myths often include very vivid description of characters and settings (dense, mysterious rainforest or icy, mist-shrouded mountain peaks) and fast-moving narration of action. They tend to make less use of dialogue and repetition than some other types of traditional story.

Simile is used widely to help convey grand settings and describe awe-inspiring characters. Myths also provide good examples of the use of symbols. For example, the thread that Theseus unwinds behind him in the Minotaur's den could be seen as a symbol of his link between the real world of humans and the supernatural world of the gods. The labyrinth itself could represent the confusion in his own life – he doesn't know 'which way to turn' to solve his problems. He feels 'lost'.