

# The Labors of Hercules

A Reading A-Z Level Z2 Leveled Book  
Word Count: 2,241

## Connections

### Writing and Art

Imagine that you are Hercules. Choose one labor and write a journal entry about completing that task, including how you accomplished it and how you felt about it.

### Social Studies

Research Greek mythology to learn about other Greek heroes, such as Achilles and Theseus. Write a short essay comparing their heroics to Hercules's labors.

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**Multi  
level  
X•Z<sup>1</sup>•Z<sup>2</sup>**

Adapted by Keith and Sarah Kortemartin  
Illustrated by Matthew Forsyth

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## Focus Question

Why was Hercules a hero? Which of his actions were heroic, and which were not?

## Words to Know

absolution	immortalized
adversaries	ingenuity
allure	nymphs
boon	pantheon
cunning	penance
demigod	precocious
feats	prudence
fortitude	pyre
guile	tenacity

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### Correlation

#### LEVEL Z2

Fountas & Pinnell	Y-Z
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+



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The Roman emperor Commodus appears in the guise of Hercules (left). Hercules was a popular subject of ancient Greek and Roman coins (right).

## Introduction

The legendary **feats** of Hercules were among the most beloved myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Hercules was **immortalized** in the art and literature of the period, and he was idolized as one of the greatest of heroes in the Greek and Roman **pantheon**. His adventures were depicted in sculpture and retold in poetry, and his likeness appeared on coins. What made his story so compelling? Perhaps part of this hero's **allure** lay in the intensity of the trials he had to overcome; the greatness of Hercules's accomplishments was matched only by the depth of his suffering.



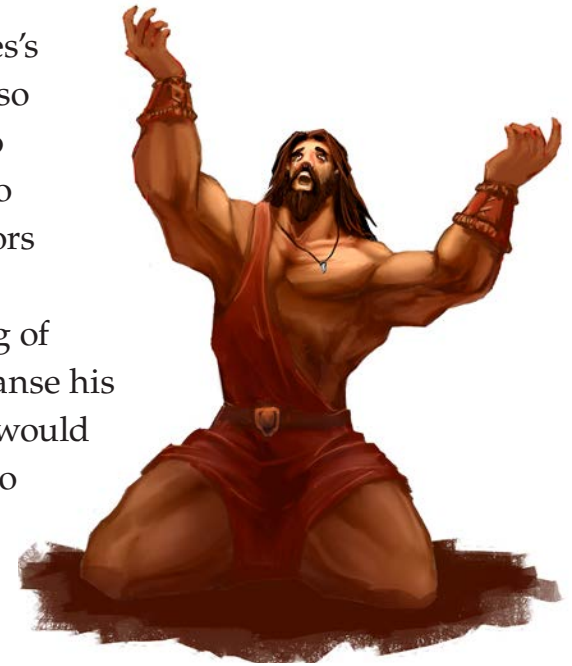
The goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, king of the gods, orchestrated much of Hercules's suffering because he was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman named Alcmene. When Hera discovered Zeus's infidelity, she swore revenge on both Alcmene and her child. Hera sent witches to torment Alcmene in childbirth. She also sent snakes to murder the infant Hercules in his crib. But Hercules, **precocious** and immensely strong even as a baby, strangled the snakes and survived.

Hera didn't relent, however. She watched Hercules jealously throughout his life, continually devising ways to cause him pain and suffering. When Hercules grew to manhood and married, Hera hit upon one of her cruelest stratagems: she sent Hercules into a fit of insanity, which caused him to murder his wife and children with his own hands.



When Hercules regained his senses, he saw the spectacle of his family lying dead on the floor around him. Grief-stricken, he pleaded with the god Apollo to grant him **absolution**.

Because Hercules's crime had been so grievous, Apollo sentenced him to perform ten labors for the tyrant Eurystheus, king of Mycenae. To cleanse his spirit, Hercules would need to submit to Eurystheus's commands and perform extraordinary feats of strength, perseverance, and intelligence. The stakes were high—if Hercules failed, he would have to live with the stain of his crime. If Hercules succeeded, however, he would gain forgiveness in his own eyes and those of the gods, and he could move forward with his life.



## Hercules's Strength and Resourcefulness

Several of the **adversaries** Hercules overcame in his labors were terrible monsters that required courage and skill to defeat. Some, like the Hydra, were mythical creatures with supernatural powers and the gift of immortality. To defeat these, Hercules had to utilize resourcefulness and creativity as well as strength. Others, like the Nemean lion, the beast Hercules had to overcome in his first labor, were creatures of great viciousness and **cunning**. The Nemean lion combined vicious **tenacity** with near-human intelligence. It frequently took a young woman as a hostage and then used her as bait to draw warriors to the damsel's rescue.

As the men approached, the lion would leap out and devour them. Hercules used a different tactic. He began by firing arrows from afar, straight at the lion's heart, but they simply bounced off its hide. He tried throwing a spear, but the weapon did not penetrate. Finally, Hercules picked up his club and chased the lion into a cave. After he blocked off the entrance so the lion could not escape, he ran up to the lion and jumped onto its back, dodging fierce claws and sharp teeth. Then he wrapped his powerful arms around the lion's neck and began choking it, holding on until the lion ceased moving.

He attempted to skin the dead lion, but again, none of his tools would cut the hide. Finally, Hercules took one of the lion's own claws and used its razor-sharp edge to skin the animal.

In this adventure, Hercules demonstrated many of the qualities that would serve him well as he went on to defeat the Hydra (an enormous, many-headed snake), a powerful boar, and vicious, man-eating vultures. Hercules was forced to change his tactics each time he fought, using **guile** as well as strength, often turning his adversaries' weapons against them—just as he had with the Nemean lion.

Obedience to King Eurystheus was one of the subtlest features of Hercules's punishment. As Hercules performed labor after labor, demonstrating his superhuman strength, keen wits, and deep courage,



Eurystheus grew progressively more afraid of him. He was so terrified of Hercules that he forbade the warrior from being in his presence; instead, the king issued all his commands through a messenger. Hera encouraged the king to make Hercules's trials as difficult as possible, even insisting that Eurystheus increase the number of labors to twelve when they learned that Hercules had received payment for two of his labors.

### Hercules's Restraint and Prudence

However, not all of Hercules's labors could be accomplished through violence and bloodshed; in fact, Hercules also had to learn not to take needless risks. The qualities of restraint and **prudence** were clearly exhibited in his third labor. For this labor, Eurystheus decreed that Hercules had to bring him the Ceryneian (sair-i-NEE-uhn) Hind, the special pet deer of Artemis, goddess of the Moon, wild animals, and the hunt. Hercules knew that he could not simply kill the animal—he could not risk the anger of two goddesses. Carefully and patiently, he began to track the hind in the hills outside Ceryneia, waiting for the beast to tire.

After a full year he closed in on the hind as it was sleeping. Hercules cautiously threw a net over it and tied up its swift feet. He hoisted it onto his shoulders and set off for Mycenae.



When Artemis confronted Hercules, she was enraged at the capture of her pet, but Hercules was straightforward and honest with her. He recounted how he had been driven mad and had murdered his family, how he had taken on his labors as **penance** for what he had done, and how Eurystheus now required that he bring the hind to Mycenae. Artemis had compassion for the suffering hero and allowed him to take the hind on the condition that he return it to its native habitat after the labor was complete. Hercules kept his word to the goddess and won her favor through his mercy and honesty.



Hera, however, was merciless in her hatred of Hercules. When she saw how Hercules had successfully negotiated a peaceful resolution with Artemis, she became determined to use Hercules's qualities of prudence and restraint against him. She saw her opportunity in the ninth labor, the episode of the Belt of Hippolyte.



For this labor, Eurystheus instructed Hercules to travel to the land of the Amazons, a tribe of fierce female warriors. Hercules was ordered to bring back the belt of the Amazons' queen, Hippolyte.

Hercules knew that he could not fight Hippolyte and her warriors on his own, so he took an army of friends on board the ship that would sail to the country of the Amazons. Neither he nor his crew had any quarrel with the Amazons. They hoped not to clash with the Amazons at all, but rather to visit peacefully.

As their ship drew near the shore, Hercules exclaimed in a great voice, "Hippolyte! I have a **boon** to ask of you." The Amazonian warriors exchanged glances with one another, but their spears did not waver. Then, slowly, a woman emerged from the ranks. "I am Hippolyte," she announced to Hercules. "What is your errand?"

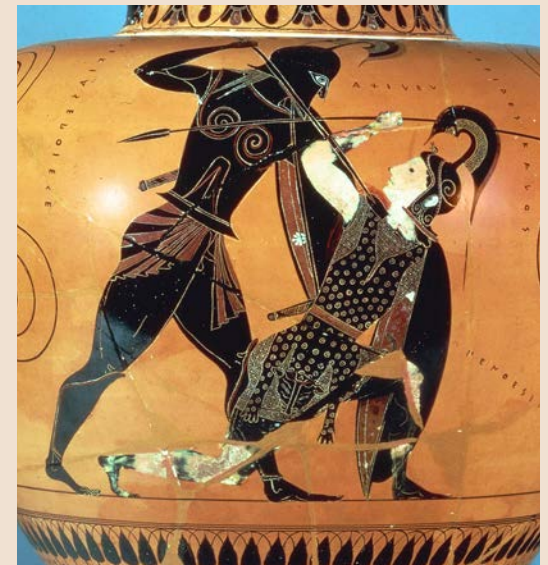
Hercules retold his story, just as he had done with Artemis. When she heard his tale, Hippolyte was sympathetic. She told Hercules that she would grant the belt to him of her own free will.



All seemed well, and Hercules and his army sat down to a feast with the Amazons. But Hera seized the opportunity to pass among the Amazons in disguise. She sowed rumors that Hercules was about to betray their trust and kidnap the queen. The warriors murmured among themselves, and then they began to don their armor. To avoid the risk of endangering himself and his men, Hercules felt forced to slay Hippolyte and take the belt from her. He escaped with his friends aboard his ship and returned to Mycenae with the belt—and a heavy heart.

## Amazing Amazons

The Amazons were a mythical tribe of fierce female warriors celebrated for their skills in horsemanship and archery. Shunning men, the Amazons created their own society exclusively for females. Greek and Roman poets and artists often featured famous heroes, such as Theseus and Achilles, in great battles against Amazonian queens. Amazons are often recognizable by their colorful, patterned clothing.



## Hercules's Ingenuity

The most decisive factor in Hercules's successful completion of the labors—the quality that enabled him to solve problems no mere mortal should have been able to overcome—was his **ingenuity**. He was consistently able to think his way through obstacles that seemed insurmountable.

When Eurystheus mandated that Hercules clean the stables of King Augeas, for example, Hercules came up with a particularly creative solution. King Augeas was one of the wealthiest men in Greece. He owned thousands of cattle, but he had not cleaned his stables in more than thirty years. The job was enormous—and filthy. Undaunted, Hercules set to work by smashing two large holes in the stable walls, one on each side, and then digging a canal from a nearby river to the stable. The river flowed into the canal, through the stable, and away, carrying years of accumulated filth with it.

Hercules was not above the use of trickery to accomplish his goals, either. He successfully outsmarted a number of adversaries in the course of his labors—including the god Atlas in his eleventh labor.

For this labor, Eurystheus demanded that Hercules fetch one of Zeus's golden apples. As Hercules journeyed in search of the apples, he learned that they were located in a garden no one was permitted to enter. The garden was guarded by a group of **nymphs** called the Hesperides. Only the nymphs' father, Atlas, could enter unharmed.

Hercules immediately set off to find Atlas and considered how he might persuade the god to help him. He wondered whether he should retell his story, hoping for Atlas's sympathy, or whether he should concoct a plausible lie instead.

Hercules found the god groaning under the weight of an unimaginable burden. It was Atlas's responsibility to hold the whole world on his shoulders. Atlas's giant shoulders cracked and strained under the weight, and his cries of pain were pitiful to hear.





Hercules asked, "Great Atlas, how would you reward me if I relieved you of your burden for a short while?"

Atlas replied, "No reward would be too great." He readily agreed to enter Zeus's garden and retrieve an apple while Hercules bore the weight of the world in his place. Atlas was so overjoyed to be free of his burden, in fact, that he did not want to take it up again when he returned. He told Hercules that he would take the apple to Eurystheus himself if Hercules would wait for him, sustaining the weight of the world on his shoulders.

But Hercules, sensing a trap, laid his own. He agreed to wait for Atlas if only Atlas would take up the weight again for just a moment while Hercules arranged himself more comfortably. As soon as Atlas had lifted the world on his own

### Do You Know?

*Hercules* is a Latin name that was used by ancient Romans. Ancient Greeks called the same hero *Heracles*. In both languages, his name means "glory of Hera." In ancient Greek and Roman art, Hercules is almost always shown with two symbols: the Nemean lion's skin worn as a helmet and cape, and his wooden club.



shoulders again, Hercules took the apple and fled. Hercules had once again used a combination of his wits, **fortitude**, and brute strength to successfully complete a labor that should have been impossible for a mortal man.

### Hercules: The Immortal Hero

In his final task, the hero descended into the Underworld, the invisible land of the dead that the Greeks believed was located at the remote ends of the Earth. His mission was to capture Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the Underworld and kept the living separated from the dead. Hercules overpowered the beast easily, and by completing his final task, Hercules had finally absolved himself of his murderous crime. In his own eyes and those of the gods, Hercules earned forgiveness and the opportunity to continue on with his life—cleansed of his heinous offense.



After the conclusion of his twelve labors, Hercules went on to accomplish numerous other heroic feats. He remarried, this time to a woman named Deianira. However, this marriage was also ill-fated. When Hercules and his new wife were traveling, a centaur named Nessos offered to



transport Deianira across a deep river while Hercules made his own way. Midway across the river, Nessos began to assault Deianira. Upon hearing his wife's desperate and panicked screams, Hercules swiftly shot off an arrow that he had dipped into the poisonous blood of the Hydra, one of the monsters that he had conquered during

his labors. As Nessos bled to death, he rubbed his cloak into his blood, which had mixed with the poison. Offering his cloak to Deianira, he whispered, "In the future, if your husband ever wrongs you, give him this cloak, for it has been soaked in a special love potion."



Later, when Hercules and Deianira had become alienated from each other, she remembered the cloak. She gave it to Hercules, who wrapped himself in it, only to be instantly seized with unendurable pain. Wild with agony and unable to wash the poison from his skin, Hercules commanded a great **pyre** to be built and lay down in the midst of the flames, hoping to perish and end his torment.

Zeus looked down upon the pyre from his home on Mount Olympus and was deeply moved. Turning to his wife, Hera, he said, "Has he not suffered enough? Let your anger be stilled."

Hera bowed her great head and consented. After all, he was a son of Zeus, and he had demonstrated that he was mighty and courageous beyond human expectations. The gods raised Hercules up, and he ascended in a pillar of fire to Mount Olympus, where he lived as a **demigod** forevermore.



## Glossary

<b>absolution</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the act of formally pardoning or forgiving a person for wrongdoings (p. 6)
<b>adversaries</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	enemies or opponents (p. 7)
<b>allure</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	powerful appeal or attractiveness (p. 4)
<b>boon</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	request or favor (p. 11)
<b>cunning</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	cleverness or deceit used to trick others (p. 7)
<b>demigod</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a being from mythology who is part human and part god (p. 18)
<b>feats</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	amazing actions or accomplishments (p. 4)
<b>fortitude</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	mental strength; the courage to endure (p. 16)
<b>guile</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	clever and sly intelligence (p. 8)
<b>immortalized</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	caused to be remembered forever (p. 4)
<b>ingenuity</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	cleverness or skill in solving a problem or challenge (p. 13)
<b>nymphs</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	in stories and myths, spirits in the shape of young women who live in mountains, forests, meadows, or water (p. 14)

<b>pantheon</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an ancient Greek word for the collection of gods and goddesses of a particular culture (p. 4)
<b>penance</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	something a person does to show regret or atone for bad behavior (p. 10)
<b>precocious</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	having and demonstrating mature abilities as a child (p. 5)
<b>prudence</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	good judgment; foresight (p. 9)
<b>pyre</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a pile of wood used to burn a body or bodies (p. 18)
<b>tenacity</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	stubborn persistence; determination (p. 7)

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