

The Labors of Hercules

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,929

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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The Labors of Hercules



**Multi
level
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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

absolved	immortalized
adversaries	nymphs
allure	pantheon
boon	penance
compelling	prudence
demigod	pyre
feats	stratagems
guile	

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60



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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

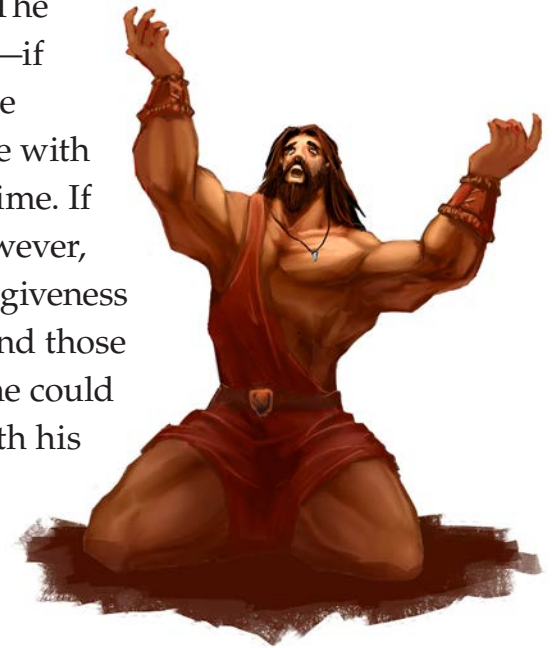
The legendary **feats** of Hercules were among the most beloved myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Hercules was **immortalized** in the art and literature of the period, idolized as one of the greatest of heroes in the Greek and Roman **pantheon**. His adventures were depicted in sculpture and retold 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 mother and child. Hera sent witches to torment Alcmene in childbirth. She also sent snakes to murder the infant Hercules in his crib. Immensely strong even as a baby, Hercules strangled the snakes and survived.



Hera did not give up, however. She continually searched for ways to cause Hercules pain and suffering throughout his life. When he grew to manhood and married, Hera hit upon one of her cruelest **stratagems**. She sent Hercules into a fit of insanity. When Hercules regained his senses, he saw his family lying dead on the floor around him. He had murdered his wife and children with his own hands!

Heartbroken, he pleaded with the god Apollo to cleanse his spirit. Apollo ordered Hercules to perform ten extraordinary labors for King Eurystheus of Mycenae. These deeds required strength, perseverance, and intelligence. The stakes were high—if Hercules failed, he would have to live with the stain of his crime. If he 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

Many different kinds of **adversaries** challenged Hercules. Some were mythical creatures with supernatural powers and the gift of immortality. Others were terribly strong and vicious beasts. Hercules used combinations of strength, courage, creativity, and skill to defeat them. His first labor was to overcome the Nemean lion.

After taking a young woman hostage, the lion used her as bait to draw warriors to her rescue. As the men approached, it would leap out and attack them. Hercules began his attack by firing arrows from afar straight at the lion's heart, but they only bounced off its hide. He tried throwing a spear, but again, the weapon did not penetrate.

Finally, Hercules picked up his club and chased the lion into a cave. He blocked off the opening so the lion could not escape. Then, running up to the lion, he jumped onto its back, dodging fierce claws and sharp teeth. Wrapping his powerful arms around the lion's neck, he choked it until the lion stopped moving. He tried to skin the dead lion, but 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 enemies' weapons against them—just as he had with the Nemean lion.

As Hercules performed labor after labor, demonstrating his superhuman strength, keen wits, and deep courage, Eurystheus grew progressively more afraid of him. Forbidding the warrior to enter his presence, the king issued all his commands through a messenger. Hera encouraged the king to make Hercules's trials as difficult as possible. She even insisted that he 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.

For the third labor, Eurystheus ordered

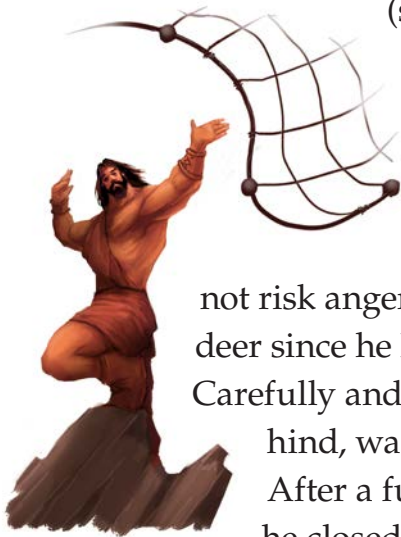
Hercules to bring him the Ceryneian (sair-i-NEE-uhn) Hind. The deer was the special pet of Artemis, goddess of the Moon, wild animals, and the hunt. Hercules knew that he could

not risk angering Artemis by killing the deer since he had already angered Hera.

Carefully and patiently he tracked the hind, waiting for the beast to tire.

After a full year of the hunt, he closed in as it was

sleeping. Cautiously, he threw a net over it, tied up its swift feet, hoisted it onto his shoulders, and set off for Mycenae.



When Artemis confronted Hercules, she was enraged at the capture of her pet. Hercules was honest with her, describing how he had been driven mad and had killed his family, how he had taken on his labors as **penance**, and how Eurystheus had demanded that he capture the hind. Artemis had compassion for the suffering hero. She allowed him to take the hind on the condition that he would return it to its native habitat after the labor was complete. Hercules kept his word to the goddess and indeed returned the animal.

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 did so in his ninth labor, the episode of the Belt of Hippolyte.

Hercules traveled to the land of the Amazons, a tribe of fierce female warriors to bring back the belt of the Amazons' queen, Hippolyte. Knowing that he couldn't fight Hippolyte and her warriors on his own, he took an army of friends with him. They hoped not to fight the Amazons, but rather to visit peacefully.

As their ship drew near to the shore, Hercules exclaimed in a great voice, "Hippolyte! I have a **boon** to ask of you."

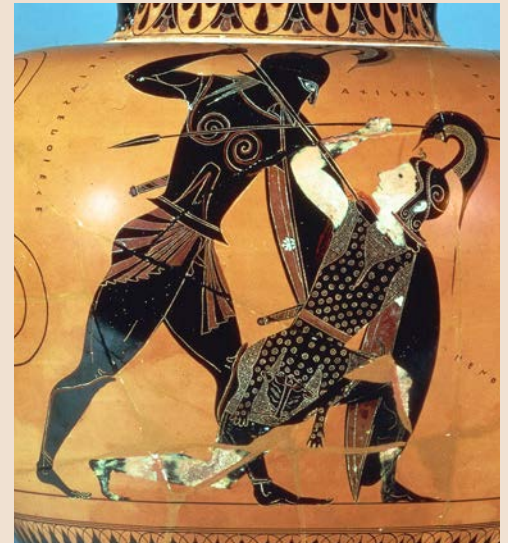
The Amazonian warriors looked at one another, but their spears did not waver. Then, slowly, a woman emerged from the ranks. "I am Hippolyte," she announced to Hercules. "What is your errand?"



When she heard his tale, Hippolyte was sympathetic. She said 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. Suddenly, the Amazons 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 who were known 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 Amazonian women in battle against male warriors.



Hercules's Ingenuity

Hercules was consistently able to think his way through obstacles that seemed insurmountable. For example, when Eurystheus commanded him to clean the stables of King Augeas, Hercules came up with a particularly creative solution. The king had not cleaned his stables, home to thousands of cattle, in more than thirty years. The job was enormous—and filthy. Hercules smashed two large holes in the stable walls, one on each side, and then dug 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. For the eleventh labor, Eurystheus demanded that Hercules fetch one of Zeus's golden apples. The apples were located in a garden that was guarded by **nymphs** called the Hesperides. Only the nymphs' father, Atlas, could enter unharmed.

Hercules immediately set off to find Atlas. He thought about how he should win over Atlas's trust. He wondered whether he should tell his story again, hoping for Atlas's sympathy, or whether he should come up with a plausible lie instead.

Hercules found the god groaning under an unimaginable burden. Atlas held the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. His giant shoulders cracked and strained, 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 eagerly agreed to enter Zeus's garden and retrieve an apple. In turn, Hercules agreed to bear the weight of the world in his place.



Atlas was overjoyed to be free of his burden. In fact, he did not want to take it up again when he returned from the garden. He told Hercules that he would take the apple to Eurystheus himself. In turn, Hercules would wait for him, holding up the world in his place.

But Hercules sensed a trap and laid his own. He agreed to wait for Atlas if Atlas would take up the weight again for just a moment while Hercules got into a more comfortable position. As soon as Atlas had lifted the world on his own shoulders again, however, Hercules took the apple and ran away. Hercules had once again used a combination of wits and strength to successfully complete a labor.

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.



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. He easily overpowered the monster. By completing his final task, Hercules had finally **absolved** himself of his murderous crime. Hercules earned forgiveness in his own eyes and those of the gods, and the opportunity to continue on with his life.



After the completion of his twelve labors, Hercules went on to accomplish numerous other heroic feats. He married a woman named Deianira, but this marriage was as ill-fated as his first marriage. When Hercules and his new wife were traveling, a centaur named



Nessos offered to carry Deianira across a deep river. Midway across, Nessos attacked 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. 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 grown apart, she remembered the cloak. She handed it to Hercules, who wrapped himself in it and was instantly seized with unendurable pain. Hercules was wild with agony, but unable to wash the poison from his skin. He commanded a large **pyre** to be built. The great hero 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, 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 agreed. After all, he was a son of Zeus, and he had proven 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

absolved (<i>v.</i>)	formally pardoned or forgave a person for wrongdoings (p. 16)
adversaries (<i>n.</i>)	enemies or opponents (p. 7)
allure (<i>n.</i>)	powerful appeal or attractiveness (p. 4)
boon (<i>n.</i>)	request or favor (p. 11)
compelling (<i>adj.</i>)	able to command attention or interest in a powerful way (p. 4)
demigod (<i>n.</i>)	a being from mythology who is part human and part god (p. 18)
feats (<i>n.</i>)	amazing actions or accomplishments (p. 4)
guile (<i>n.</i>)	clever and sly intelligence (p. 8)
immortalized (<i>v.</i>)	caused to be remembered forever (p. 4)
nymphs (<i>n.</i>)	in stories and myths, spirits in the shape of young women who live in mountains, forests, meadows, or water (p. 13)
pantheon (<i>n.</i>)	an ancient Greek word for the collection of gods and goddesses of a particular culture (p. 4)
penance (<i>n.</i>)	something a person does to show regret or atone for bad behavior (p. 10)
prudence (<i>n.</i>)	good judgment; foresight (p. 10)

pyre (*n.*)

a pile of wood used to burn a body or bodies (p. 18)

stratagems (*n.*)

schemes or plans, often complex and cunning (p. 6)

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