

The labours of Herakles



Comprehension

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Herakles (who we now often call Hercules) was a famous Greek hero, but even heroes had to do what the gods told them. Once, the gods told Hercules that he must work for the King of Tiryns for twelve years. In return, the gods would make Hercules immortal. For twelve years, Hercules had to do whatever the king asked him to do. The King of Tiryns gave Hercules eleven hard tasks (labours) to do. These were things like killing a lion and capturing a fierce bull. But Hercules managed them all because he was such a fearless hero.

So the King of Tiryns set Hercules a final labour that he thought was impossible. He told Hercules to go to the Underworld and bring back the monster Cerberus. Cerberus was a dog with three heads who belonged to Hades, the god of the Underworld. The creature guarded the Underworld to make sure the ghosts of the dead did not get out.

The problem for Hercules was that he was mortal, and mortals could not survive in the Underworld. But the goddess Athena helped Hercules. She showed him how to get to the Underworld through a cave, and she made sure he could get out again. When he was in the Underworld, Hercules went to Hades and asked him for Cerberus. Hades told Hercules he could have Cerberus so long as he captured him without weapons. Hades thought that no-one could do that, and so Cerberus would be safe.

But Hercules was a great hero, and he was not scared. He looked for Cerberus and found him near one of the rivers in the Underworld. Cerberus' three heads growled and snapped as Hercules went closer. Hercules could not use a sword to attack Cerberus, so he had to rely on his strength alone. But Hercules was the son of the god Zeus, so he was remarkably strong. Hercules wrestled Cerberus to the ground with his bare hands. Cerberus fought back, and bit Hercules. But Hercules held on tightly, and tied him up.

Hercules returned to Tiryns and showed Cerberus to the king. The king was shocked that Hercules had managed such a hard labour. What's more, the king was terrified of Cerberus, and he ordered Hercules to take him back to the Underworld. Hercules did just that, and so finally finished his labours.

Understanding words

Before we can understand a story we have to know what all of the words mean. Let's try one...

a Write the sentence in which you found the word 'shocked'.

b From that sentence, suggest what 'shocked' means.

c Write a new sentence using the word 'shocked'.

d Use a dictionary to find words with a similar meaning (synonyms) to 'shocked'.

e Draw a small picture showing what you think 'shocked' means.

Try this for other words, too. 

Finding key words

Next, we need to find the key words that tell us what the story is about...

Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list like the one below. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym). You don't have to use all the spaces, but you should not use more.

Key word	Synonym (similar word)
Example: fearless	brave

Sequencing

Sequencing means getting the events in the right order. Write these sentences in the correct order, so they make sense.

The King of Tiryns gave Hercules eleven labours, and Hercules completed them.

Hercules took Cerberus back to the king.

The goddess Athena helped Hercules to get to the Underworld.

For his twelfth labour, Hercules had to bring Cerberus from the Underworld to the king.

In the Underworld, Hercules defeated Cerberus using his superhuman strength.

Hercules had to work for the King of Tiryns for twelve years.

Get to the facts

1 Who did Hercules have to work for?

2 For how long did Hercules have to obey the king?

3 How many heads did Cerberus have?

4 Who was the god of the Underworld?

5 Where did Hercules find Cerberus?

Make a story...

When you read a description it often gives you ideas about how the event might be described differently.

The King of Tiryns

Imagine you are the King of Tiryns. You have set Hercules a labour that is nearly impossible. But he had returned to your palace carrying Cerberus. The monster is tied up, but you can still see his fangs and claws... (now complete the story)

Below is a plain text version for printing:

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- b From that sentence, suggest what 'shocked' means.
- c Write a new sentence using the word 'shocked'.
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Finding key words:

Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym).

For example:

Key word – fearless

Synonym – brave

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