

Anchor Text Guidance: Grade 6, Module 1

Greek Mythology

Text and author: *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan

Lexile®: 680L (below reader measures for Grade 6)

Text Overview

Trouble seems to follow misunderstood Percy Jackson, who has been expelled from multiple schools. But when his algebra teacher transforms into a winged monster, Percy realizes that trouble has quite literally been following him! As the son of the Greek god Poseidon, Percy has been targeted by the monsters of Tartarus. Worse yet, Zeus believes that Percy stole his powerful lightning bolt. Now, Percy and his demigod friends must go on a quest to discover the true lightning thief, battling monsters and volatile gods along the way.

EL Education’s Grade 6 Module 1 is designed to prompt consideration of these compelling questions:

- What is mythology, and what is the value of studying mythology from other cultures?
- Why have stories from Greek mythology remained popular?
- How does point of view change with experience?

Through the anchor text, *The Lightning Thief*, and many supplemental texts, including the original Greek myths referenced in the novel, students learn the role of mythology as a means of explaining the world and conveying the values of the culture from which the myths originate. Students learn firsthand how studying stories from other cultures can be a way to examine alternative perspectives and amplify their own worldview. Although this text centers specifically on Greek mythology, teachers are advised to recognize and include myths from other cultures and to reinforce these big ideas about the role of mythology.

Text Rationale

EL Education’s Language Arts modules are literacy-focused; at their core is a commitment to helping students become enthusiastic, critical, and effective readers of diverse texts. *The Lightning Thief* is the first story in a popular series about Percy Jackson and his fantastical (mis)adventures. As a twelve-year-old making sense of the world around him, Percy is a relatable figure for sixth-graders, who may find it easy to empathize with Percy’s internal struggles, his driving motivations, and his meaningful relationships with his friends. *The Lightning Thief*, with its compelling story, affords countless opportunities to nurture students’ enthusiasm.

The Lightning Thief contains perspectives that may be new to some students. Occasionally, students may find these perspectives in conflict with their own personal beliefs and attitudes. During collaborative in-class activities surrounding the text, students may also find that their classmates hold beliefs different from their own. Central to the design and learning of this module is an emphasis on guiding students to be ethical people. Due to its inclusion of alternative perspectives, this module facilitates regular opportunities for students to practice showing respect, empathy, and compassion for the attitudes and worldviews of their classmates.

Throughout the module, carefully designed and sequenced tasks equip students with the reading skills and strategies needed to comprehend the text. Using *The Lightning Thief* as practice, students learn to effectively unpack content and consider it carefully before responsibly and safely challenging its explicit and implicit messages.

Additional Considerations

Students are asked to pre-read each chapter of the novel for homework before analyzing a strategically selected excerpt of the text in class. Teaching notes throughout the module identify potentially troubling content in the excerpts and provide suggestions for teachers to guide students through this content with sensitivity. Many of these suggestions integrate skills and tasks that students are learning in this module (e.g., analyzing point of view, differentiating between literary and informational texts) and provide opportunities for students to concurrently practice what they are learning and be empowered readers of challenging topics.

EL Education recommends school leaders and teachers read the texts in advance, with the specific school community in mind, to become familiar with the issues presented so they can discuss them with students and families as needed.

Examples of the sensitive topics that teachers will be prepared to address are detailed here.

1. Presentation of Gods in Mythology

When redesigning this module for the second edition, EL Education was aware that the presentation of Greek gods in *The Lightning Thief* may be discordant with students' personal religious beliefs and practices. For example, certain passages in the text, like those that describe the mythological Underworld, may be confusing or challenging for students who may draw connections between depictions of the Underworld and depictions of hell. Mythology, like any cultural artifact, conveys embedded values that may conflict with (or reinforce) one's own values or orientation to the world. This module acknowledges the important role that the supernatural played in the lives of ancient Greeks, but rather than emphasize any religious implications, students are encouraged to approach these themes like quasi-anthropologists, examining texts, posing questions, and seeking to understand the perspectives of others without judgment.

For further support, EL Education provides opportunities throughout the module (e.g., through alternative assignments) for teachers, students, and families to safely process any themes that may arise in the text and be interpreted as having religious undertones. For example, the module's performance task—the celebration of learning at the end of the module—invites students to research a Greek god or goddess in preparation to rewrite a scene of *The Lightning Thief*, inserting a new character of their own creation. To maintain the first person point of view, students will rewrite the scene as if they are their new character, a child of a Greek god or goddess of their choosing. Students who are uncomfortable with this premise are offered the option of selecting a different historical or influential figure to research and base their character

upon. These figures could include superheroes, fictional protagonists from beloved novels, important figures in history, or religious figures from the student’s own tradition.

EL Education recommends teachers and/or school leaders meet with the families of students for whom *The Lightning Thief* is in direct conflict with religious beliefs to discuss the novel and the content of the module tasks. This discussion should determine whether it is appropriate for their students to participate in this module. If it is determined that students will not participate in this module, a text should be selected with the same qualitative and quantitative measures that address the same standards. This is critical in preparing students for the skills required in the next module.

2. Promotion of Western Ideals

The Lightning Thief presents predominantly Western European and American perspectives. Throughout the text, Western civilization is positioned as a singular paradigm; there is little acknowledgment of the contributions of other non-Western civilizations and histories. Teaching notes describe strategies teachers can employ to be sensitive and alert to the ways in which explicit promotion of Western civilization and American culture within the text could feel alienating for some students.

3. Explanation of ADHD and Dyslexia

The main character, Percy, is diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. The author explains these conditions as characteristics of his status as a demigod (e.g., Percy’s dyslexia is the consequence of his brain being meant to read ancient Greek). Although the intention of the author may have been to empower students with similar diagnoses, students’ reactions to the author’s depictions may vary. The module’s focus on point of view provides a useful means for students to engage with and analyze the text without endorsing its messages. Teaching notes encourage teachers to use point of view tasks to help students assign the text’s ideas about cognitive disorders to the author or to the narrator, rather than accept these ideas as facts. Specific problematic quotes are pointed out, helping teachers better anticipate students’ concerns or questions. For example, Unit 1, Lesson 8 contains the following teaching note:

- *Chapter 6 contains a discussion of the likely causes of Percy’s ADHD and dyslexia, respectively, as “battlefield reflexes” and a brain “hardwired for Greek.” This perspective, of course, goes against the science and research about these real cognitive conditions, and this reasoning may have implications for students who may have either or both of these conditions and who are not children of gods or goddesses; they may wonder what this means about the causes of their ADHD or dyslexia. . . . Use point of view as a way to remind students that the perspectives and experiences of characters may be distinct from ours or the author’s.*

4. Relationships between Adults and Children

Percy’s stepfather, Gabe, is depicted as brutish and emotionally abusive, and his cruel treatment of Percy and his mother may be upsetting or triggering for some students. Teachers are urged in teaching notes to allow students to process and share any connections and/or concerns they might have, which will help teachers more effectively monitor students’ relationships with the text throughout the module. Additionally, note that this module incorporates both literary and informational texts and helps students develop their ability to compare and contrast different texts they read. Emphasizing that Gabe is a fictional character in a literary novel and encouraging students to relate him to other fictional villains may help students contextualize and temper their reactions to Gabe’s behavior.

5. Death of a Parent

In chapter 4 of *The Lightning Thief*, Percy's mother is killed by a monster. Loss of a parent or loved one may be upsetting or triggering for some students. Teachers are urged in teaching notes to allow students to process and share any connections and/or concerns they might have to help teachers more effectively monitor students' relationships with the text throughout the module. Consider meeting with students and their families for whom there may be a direct connection in advance of reading to prepare them.

6. Characterization of Women

Female characters in *The Lightning Thief* are often described in ways that call attention to their physical attributes. For example, Clarisse, daughter of war god Ares, is introduced as "big and ugly and mean-looking." An eventful scene with Medusa later in the novel includes other physical descriptions that could be interpreted as insensitive. Teaching notes throughout the module locate problematic passages and prepare teachers to address them in class, if needed, such as in this example from Unit 1, Lesson 13:

- *As before, continue to be mindful about issues and characterizations that may be sensitive for students or with which some students may connect personally or deeply. In chapter 11, Medusa is depicted as a Middle Eastern woman wearing something similar to a niqab; the connection of Medusa's monstrosity with what seems to be a Muslim identity is a problematic comparison, as is using food to describe the color of her skin ("Her coffee-colored hands looked old").*

It is important to note that the strategic excerpting of chapters, though done with the goal of reducing students' in-class reading load, occasionally serves a secondary, incidental purpose: to de-emphasize passages that may cause unneeded distress to students. For example, the Medusa quotes outlined above are not included in the excerpt of that chapter that students analyze in class. These passages are still included in the teaching notes, however, to prepare teachers to support students in the independent prereading they complete before class. EL Education resists censorship of reading materials and believes that it is important to help students become critical, sensitive, and thoughtful readers even of materials with which they disagree. Students are still expected to read the entire chapter as homework before class, and teachers are equipped with tools to help students make sense of or challenge the material. Nonetheless, excluding this passage from the in-class excerpt sends the message to students that this problematic description of Medusa is in no way central to the plot of the story.

Finally, the protagonist of the story is male, though his story is intended to be relatable to all young readers. Teachers are encouraged to consider ways to interrupt the implicit message that books starring female characters are "for girls," while books starring male characters are "for everyone." One way to do this is by encouraging students to reimagine certain plotlines through the eyes of other (female) narrators. This remediation exercise invites empathy and uses skills similar to those required by the End of Unit 3 Assessment, in which students rewrite a scene from *The Lightning Thief* to feature the insertion of a new character. Using literacy tasks to remedy problematic issues with the text reinforces students' learning by establishing a relationship between reading skills and being an ethical person.

Tasks

Each unit of Module 1 features tasks that, intentionally or incidentally, mitigate possible concerns with the anchor text and support students' enthusiastic, informed, and safe reading.

Unit 1

Just before students begin reading the first chapter of *The Lightning Thief* in Lesson 2, they reflect on habits of character and use discussion protocols to share their ideas about what respect and empathy look and sound like. Students also speculate about the role of empathy in making one feel a sense of belonging in the classroom community. These exercises clearly delineate expectations of students' behavior toward one another and allow students to take ownership of the habits of character before tackling the novel and its potentially sensitive topics.

In Lesson 3, students begin analyzing the point of view of the author, narrator, and other characters throughout the unit. Introducing the idea of point of view so early in the module allows students ample opportunity to practice assigning the text's messages to specific characters or the author, creating a space for students to more easily disagree with or challenge things they read.

A Close Read and Language Dive in Lesson 5 guide students through an informational text titled "Why Ancient Greek Mythology Is Still Relevant Today." This text helps students better understand why mythological figures resonate with some people and also serves to more clearly differentiate mythology from more traditional religious doctrines.

In Lesson 12, students are introduced to the idea of theme. Analyzing theme helps students distill complicated plot events or mythological stories into simple, uncontroversial messages that are likely to resonate with students (e.g., *even heroes have flaws*).

Unit 2

In Lesson 1, students analyze a model summary to identify characteristics of an effective summary. In later lessons throughout the module, students craft their own summaries of texts they read, including chapters of *The Lightning Thief* and other Greek myths. These lessons make it explicit that summaries are meant to accurately express the meaning of the text without personal opinions or judgments. Writing objective summaries helps students practice discerning the point of a text before evaluating, criticizing, or attaching emotional significance to it.

Comparison and contrast tasks, which begin in Lesson 4 and continue across the module, invite students to notice similarities and differences across texts and/or videos. These tasks help students notice the many different ways one event, character, or mythological figure can be represented. Exposure to multiple texts that feature similar plot events or characters breaks down the idea that one presentation of events is more "correct" than another and helps students become more accommodating of difference.

Including Families

Families of students working through this module are invited to discuss concerns they may have with the text with their student. Teaching notes throughout the module recommend that teachers speak to families of students who may be particularly affected by the issues encountered in the text. For example, in Unit 1, Lesson 1 homework, students reflect on the module guiding questions and discuss them with their families. Students are invited to share their reflections at the start of Lesson 2, though they are not required to do so.