

## Short Greek Myth for Guided Practice

### And Zeus Said (Maybe) . . .

“Let there be games in my honor!” Zeus might have thundered from his palace in the clouds above Mt. Olympus, back in 776 BC. He was king of all the gods so he could have anything he wanted. It was a big family and everybody had a job. Zeus’s wife, Hera, was in charge of women, marriage, and family. His moody brother, Poseidon, ruled the ocean. Get him riled up, he could cause storms and make the whole earth shake. His older brother, Hades, was in charge of the underworld. Enough said about him. There was a god of love, a god of agriculture, a god of metalwork, a god of arts and music—you name it, the ancient Greeks had a god for it.

But the head god—the king over everybody—was Zeus. He was god of sky and weather and was said to throw bolts of lightning when he was upset. Mess with him, he might turn you into a constellation of stars and hang you in the night sky forever. So if he wanted to have games in his honor, why not?

All we know is that about 2,800 years ago *someone* got the idea of starting games in honor of Zeus. The early games weren’t as big as the ones we have today. They were mostly running, wrestling, fighting, javelin throwing, and racing horses and chariots. They were held on Mt. Olympus, the highest point in Greece, in a large, quiet area called a sanctuary, which was dedicated to Zeus. Athletes came from all parts of the Greek empire, hoping to win honor for their cities. Winners were rewarded with a crown woven from olive leaves that were thought to be sacred. Only men and boys could compete, and only males and unmarried women could come to watch. Married women were strictly forbidden. A married woman who sneaked in and got caught could be put to death. Besides, women had their own Olympic races anyway.

The Olympics began as a festival to honor Zeus, and religion was still an important part of it for much of the next one thousand years. Crowds of 40,000 or more came to watch and take part in the festival, which was held every four years.

Today we have Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics, and they are each held every four years so that they happen two years apart. Together they include about 40 sports in hundreds of events. More than 14,000 athletes from 200 nations come to compete as more than three billion people sit by their TVs and watch from around the world.

That old Greek god Zeus would be proud to know what has happened to the event that started in his honor. Best of all, he never had to throw a single lightning bolt to get his way.