

What sets the Homeric epics apart, even from later prose and poetry in the ancient world, is that they were composed and transmitted orally, possibly for hundreds of years, before being written down. They were not written but composed, in and for performance, and they were not treated as texts until hundreds of years later. Acknowledging what differentiates Homeric epic means neither “they’re superior” nor “they’re inferior.” Rather, acknowledging the epics’ unique composition, form, and history helps us approach them and explore their meanings and functions.

**A few points of some consensus about the epics:**

- The myths they contain likely had been circulating orally for hundreds of years before they were written down and been adapted to the specific audiences for and with whom they were performed. Consequently, there are no “definitive” versions of these myths, only the ones that have come down to us in text forms, not only in Homer but also in other ancient poetry, drama, and prose.
- The Homeric narratives that we have may include both traditional and new versions of these myths.
- The poems were composed orally in dactylic hexameter, which is also referred to as epic or Homeric verse, in a range of Greek dialects, some of which presented translation questions even in antiquity.
- The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may have collected, in one narrative, a range of poetic forms (e.g. lyric, epigram, lament, catalogue).
- The epics may have been composed sometime in the 8th century BC, around or after the adaptation of the Greek alphabet.
- The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that have come down to us from antiquity may have been put together in 6th century BC Athens, where they began to be recited at annual festivals to honor of the gods.
- Since that time, the epics have been experienced or read continuously up to the present.

**Topics of debate since antiquity:**

- Was there ever a single poet called Homer?
- If so, did this poet compose both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?
- Was (were) the poet(s) male or female?
- When were they first written down, why, and by whom?

**Storytelling exercises**

The goal is to stimulate students' experiential awareness of oral storytelling—how it differs from written story forms, its pervasiveness across time, its implicit force. As always, teachers are encouraged to adapt exercises to the needs and experiences of their particular student population.

**Option A**

Have students research and share a story that has been retold in their family or within their friend group. This could be a story they've heard their parents or grandparents tell, one they've heard a friend tell, or one they have repeatedly told themselves. Do they have different versions of the story that they tell to or have heard from different people? What details differ? What remain the same? Do the details matter, or is there an idea or image that they most want to communicate?

**Option B**

Tell the students a story about their school's history (if not the school's history, then some institution that they all have some personal experience of or stake in—a sport they all play, a subject they all study—something they have a shared experience of, in some way), then break them up into groups and have them reshape the story in different mediums.

Ground rules: They are allowed to embellish any details or remove others, as they deem necessary. They have to talk amongst themselves for at least 10 minutes before they're allowed to start writing, except for one group that is not allowed any writing implements.

One group can be asked to render the story as a short fiction story. Another group can tell the story in a poem or series of poems; they can also choose to write a song, in any style. Another can write a short play dramatizing the story. One group can discuss the story but is not allowed to write anything down; when it's time to share, they have to improvise their version of the story.

After everyone is given time to work on this (ideally, a few days or a week), they share their versions. After the sharing, discuss their decision processes and their impacts, e.g. why did they cut or embellish, in what ways did the form dictate their choices, what was most important to them to convey through their form, what stayed the same and what changed across the different versions, why do you think that is? etc.