

Exercise 1: The Value of an Open-Ended Question & VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies)

Image 1: Cuneiform Tablet, British Museum

Great Works Topic: The Epic of Gilgamesh

1. What do you see? What are the first things you notice?
2. How do you think Ancient Sumerian people might have used an object like this one?
3. [Show *Statue of Gudea* and *Stele of Naramsin* alongside the tablet] Can you see cuneiform on these objects? What might the symbols mean in this context?

Image 2: British Museum “Epic of Gilgamesh” Tablet

OBJECT INFO: The first cuneiform inscriptions are dated to around 3,100 BCE and are found in the Ancient Near East in Southern Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) near the cities of Uruk and Sumer.

- This may not be the earliest writing – we believe that Mesoamerica and China had very early writing forms too – but it is the earliest *surviving* writing because it was created on clay which baked hard and remained durable where other materials used for writing like bamboo did not.
- Why is it important? Well, writing marked the beginnings of civilization and culture as we know it today. Writing is the beginning of history. It marks the moment when people were able to settle down and make permanent relationships with their surroundings.
- What did the Ancient Sumerians choose to write about first? Beer! Accountancy! Very practical things. Southern Mesopotamia was a trading hub, and the people there had to keep track of what was coming and going.
- The cuneiform tablet at the British Museum kept track of beer payments that were made to employees.

STRATEGY INFO: USING INQUIRY/OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- We used three open-ended questions (above) to get a conversation started around the physical form writing took at the time the Epic of Gilgamesh was written.
- This helps students put a very ancient text in context – they can visualize how this might have been written.
- We didn’t give any information about the tablet or the other objects right away. We allowed space for wondering about them.
- Always start with an observational question, such as “What do you see?” or “What do you notice?” This helps students observe before they interpret. Then ask open-ended interpretive questions, some general and some about the theme we want to explore. Brainstorm several interpretive questions. You can eliminate some and sequence the rest later.
- Remember, open-ended questions don’t demand a particular answer, elicit yes/no answers, or contain answers in them.

You could, if you wanted, prep the students in advance by having them read one or both of Neil MacGregor’s entries on cuneiform tablets.

MAKING THE CONNECTION TO YOUR TEXT:**What are the themes you look at when you read the Epic of Gilgamesh?**

- The emergence of culture and civilization
- Human self-awareness and the balance of the different facets of self (moving from an unknowing state to a knowing state)
- Power and control

What kinds of open-ended discussion questions could you have your students respond to?

[Work on the model of “Think, pair, share”]

SPOKEN PROMPT: So, although the Epic of Gilgamesh wasn't the very first thing written (it was written about X years after the very earliest tablets have been dated), writing was still a relatively new human skill that showcased the human ability to adapt to and control their environment.

1) Why, then, do you think the Epic was written when it was? Put yourself in the place of the author, several millennia before the year zero, in southern Mesopotamia. Begin a short paragraph with the sentence, “I have written the Epic of Gilgamesh because.....”

OR

2) Early cuneiform recorded business transactions, and was an evolutionary tool that allowed humans to succeed in international trade. Do you think the excerpts you read of the Epic were about adaptation and control of human environment, or something different? Why? Explain your thoughts and reasoning in a short paragraph.

Discuss student responses.
Examine the text more closely.

Further images:

Cylinder seals

Ziggurat temple

Uruk Vase & Ishtar Gate

Images from the Iraq War & Saddam Hussein's Palace/rebuilding schemes

Info for cylinder seal:

- “In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Bull of Heaven was a mythical beast demanded by the goddess Ishtar to destroy the city of Uruk when her amorous advances towards its king, Gilgamesh, were rejected. Gilgamesh was king of Uruk ca. 2700 BC.
- The most complete version of the Gilgamesh legend survives in 12 fragmentary tablets which were discovered in the excavations of the library of King Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC) at Nineveh.
- The slaying of the Bull of Heaven episode is treated in tablet VI: “Gilgamesh, like an able slaughterer, strikes with his sword the Bull of Heaven forcefully and precisely between shoulders and neck”.
- Only about 5 cylinder seals with this motive survive.”