

Advanced Placement Tool Box

Mythological Allusions –Classical (Greek), Roman, Norse – a short reference

- **Achilles** –the greatest warrior on the Greek side in the Trojan war whose mother tried to make immortal when as an infant she bathed him in magical river, but the heel by which she held him remained vulnerable.
- **Adonis** –an extremely beautiful boy who was loved by Aphrodite, the goddess of love. By extension, an “Adonis” is any handsome young man.
- **Aeneas** –a famous warrior, a leader in the Trojan War on the Trojan side; hero of the Aeneid by Virgil. Because he carried his elderly father out of the ruined city of Troy on his back, Aeneas represents filial devotion and duty. The doomed love of Aeneas and Dido has been a source for artistic creation since ancient times.
- **Aeolus** –god of the winds, ruler of a floating island, who extends hospitality to Odysseus on his long trip home
- **Agamemnon** –The king who led the Greeks against Troy. To gain favorable wind for the Greek sailing fleet to Troy, he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis, and so came under a curse. After he returned home victorious, he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.
- **Ajax** –a Greek warrior in the Trojan War who is described as being of colossal stature, second only to Achilles in courage and strength. He was however slow witted and excessively proud.
- **Amazons** –a nation of warrior women. The Amazons burned off their right breasts so that they could use a bow and arrow more efficiently in war. Figuratively an “Amazon” is a large, strong, aggressive woman.
- **ambrosia** –the food of the gods; those who ate it became immortal.
- **Amphitrite** –a goddess of the sea; daughter of Nereus and Doris; wife of Poseidon; and mother of Triton
- **Andromache** –wife of Trojan warrior Hector
- **Andromeda** –daughter of Cepheus, king of Ethiopia, and Cassiopeia, who boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids. Poseidon promptly retaliated by sending a sea monster to terrorize the country side. Andromeda was offered as a sacrifice to appease the monster. Chained to a rock, she was rescued by Perseus.
- **Antigone** –a daughter of King Oedipus who goes against the laws of King Creon and buries her brother who has been killed in a civil war, and who was branded a traitor and unworthy of burial. She is condemned to death for her crime.
- **Aphrodite** –goddess of love and beauty; the mother of Eros and Aeneas; thought to have born out of the foam of the sea, and is thus often pictured rising from the water. Roman-Venus
- **Apollo** –(Greek and Roman) god of poetry, prophecy, medicine, and light; represents all aspects of civilization and order; Zeus was his father and Artemis his sister.
- **apple of discord** –an apple thrown into a banquet of the gods and goddesses by the goddess Discord, who had not been invited. The apple had “For the Fairest” written on it. When three goddesses claimed it, the handsome Paris, prince of Troy had to decide which deserved it.
- **Ares** –god of war, brutal and bloodthirsty. He was the son of Zeus and Hera, and the father of the Amazons. Roman-Mars
- **Argonauts** –the companions of Jason in the quest for the Golden Fleece. Their ship was the Argo.
- **Argus** –a creature of 100 eyes; once a fairly common name for newspapers, suggesting that the paper was constantly on alert
- **Artemis** –the virgin goddess of the hunt and the moon; a daughter of Zeus and the sister of Apollo; also called Cynthia; Roman-Diana
- **Athena** –goddess of wisdom; sprang fully grown from the forehead of her father, Zeus; protector of Odysseus; guardian of the city of Athens; Roman-Minerva
- **Atlas** –a Titan famous for his strength; after the defeat of the Titans by Zeus, Atlas was condemned to support the earth and sky on his shoulders for eternity.
- **Augean stables** –stables that figured in the Greek myth of the Labors of Hercules; one of Hercules’ labors was to clean the stables of King Augeas who housed cattle there. To clean the “Augean stables” has come to mean to clean up a large amount of physical filth or moral corruption, or to accomplish any large, distasteful, and arduous job.
- **Aurora** –Roman goddess of the dawn Greek-Eos
- **Bacchus** –god of wine and revelry; Greek-Dionysus
- **Bellerophon** –legendary hero of Corinth; slew the Chimaera with the help of Athena and Pegasus
- **Brynhild** –(Norse) a Valkyrie, or woman servant of Odin, loved the hero Siegfried. After she found out that he deceived her, she had him killed and committed suicide.
- **Calliope** –muse of epic poetry
- **Calypso** –the nymph who detains Odysseus for seven years on the island of Ogygia
- **Castor and Pollux** –the “heavenly” twins (Gemini), children of Leda and Zeus
- **Cassandra** –a prophetess in Troy during the Trojan War whose predictions, although true, were never believed by those around her. Apollo had given her the gift of prophecy but made it worthless after she refused his amorous advances. A “Cassandra” is someone who constantly predicts bad news.
- **centaurs** –creatures who were half human and half horse; the most famous, Chiron, wise and good, was Achilles’ tutor
- **Cerberus** –the three-headed dog who guarded the entrance to Hades.
- **Ceres** –goddess of agriculture Roman-Demeter
- **chimera** –monster who had the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon; figuratively a “chimera” is a creation of the imagination, especially a wild creation, “chimerical” is fictional or illusionary
- **Cimmerians** –a tribe placed by Homer in a gloomy, dark land just this side of Hades, a locale hardly distinguishable from the land of the dead
- **Circe** –a powerful sorceress who turned people who looked at her into pigs

- **Colossus of Rhodes** –a giant bronze statue of Helios the sun god, set up (292-280 BC) at the entrance to the harbor of Rhodes, an island in the Aegean Sea.
- **Cupid** –the god of love, Greek-Eros; In the story “Cupid and Psyche” he is a magnificently handsome young man. In art he is depicted as a small chubby male with wings and a bow and arrows.
- **Cyclopes** –one-eyed giants; The Cyclops Polyphemus imprisoned Odysseus and his crew in order to eat them. They escaped. Poseidon fathered the Cyclopes.
- **Daedalus** –an ingenious inventor, the designer of the Labyrinth, and one of the few to escape from it. He was the father of Icarus. A symbol of inventiveness and craftsmanship
- **Damon and Pythias** –two friends who were enormously loyal to each other.
- **Delphic oracle** –the most famous oracle in Greece, and the location of the Temple of Apollo; also known as the oracle at Delphi
- **Demeter** –goddess of grain, agriculture, and the harvest; the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone explains the cycle of the seasons. Roman-Ceres
- **Diana** –goddess of the hunt and the moon Greek-Artemis
- **Dido** –founder and queen of Carthage in North Africa. She committed suicide in grief over the departure of her lover, Aeneas.
- **Dionysus** –god of wine and revelry Roman-Bacchus
- **Electra** –daughter of Agamemnon who to avenge his murder, helped her brother Orestes, kill her mother and her lover. The “Electra complex” in psychology involves a girl’s or woman’s unconscious sexual feelings for her father.
- **Elysian Fields** –the place where the souls of the good went after death: a peaceful and beautiful region, full of meadows, groves, sunlight, and fresh air
- **Endymion** –a young and extremely handsome shepherd with whom the moon, Selene, fell passionately in love, and at that at her request Zeus granted him a wish. Wanting to remain perpetually young, Endymion asked for eternal sleep. Each night Selene came down to kiss him without his being aware of her presence.
- **Eos** –Greek goddess of the dawn Roman-Aurora
- **Eros** –god of love, son of Aphrodite Roman-Cupid
- **Fafnir** –
- **Fates** –also known as the Parcae or the Greek Moirae; three sister goddesses who preside over the birth, life and death of men. Clotho fabricated the thread of a man’s life at birth. Lachesis measured its length and determined its character and Atropos cut it off with her shears. These fates are unappeasable and inexorable.
- **fauns** –creatures who were part man and part goat Greek-satyrs
- **Faunus** –a Roman god of nature and fertility, identified with the Greek god Pan
- **furies** –hideous female monsters who relentlessly pursued evildoers.
- **golden fleece** –fleece of a flying ram; Jason and the Argonauts made a quest for it. It was kept in a kingdom on the Black Sea.
- **Gorgons** –three extraordinarily ugly sisters: Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa. Their hair was laced with serpents, their hands were of brass, their bodies were covered with scales, their teeth like tusks.
- **Graces** –three daughters of Zeus: Euphrosyne (mirth), Aglaia (splendor), and Thalia (good cheer)
- **Hades** –god of the underworld and the ruler of the dead. Also called Dis. The underworld itself is also called Hades. Roman-Pluto
- **Harpies** –vicious winged beings often depicted as birds with women’s faces. Figuratively a “harp” is a shrewish woman.
- **Hector** –a prince of Troy and the bravest of the Trojan warriors. At the end of the Trojan War, Achilles killed Hector and then dragged his body around behind a chariot around the walls of Troy.
- **Helen of Troy** –the most beautiful woman in the world, a daughter of Zeus by Leda. Her abduction by Paris led to the Trojan War. Helen’s was “the face that launched a thousand ships.”
- **Hephaestus** –god of metalworking and fire Roman-Vulcan
- **Hera** –goddess who protected marriage; she was the wife of Zeus. She is best known for her jealousy and for her animosity toward many of the mortal women with whom her husband fell in love. Roman-Juno
- **Hercules** –one of the greatest heroes and the strongest man on earth; completed twelve impossible tasks –the Labors of Hercules. He was a son of Zeus. Any extraordinary effort may be called “herculean.”
- **Hermes** –messenger god; he traveled with great swiftness, aided by the wings he wore on his sandals and his cap. He was the son of Zeus and the father of Pan. Roman-Mercury; The **caduceus**, the wand of Hermes, is the traditional symbol of physicians. It is winged on top and entwined with serpents.
- **Hydra** –a many-headed dragon or monster slain by Hercules, each head of which when cut off was replaced by two others. A “hydra” is any multifarious evil not to be overcome by a single effort
- **Hymen** –god of the wedding feast
- **Icarus** –the son of Daedalus who died tragically while using artificial wings, invented by his father, to escape from the Labyrinth. When Icarus flew too close to the sun, it melted the wax that held the wings together, and he fell to earth.
- **Io** –one of the many maidens seduced by Zeus. When Hera discovered Zeus’ infidelity, Zeus turned Io into a white heifer, then Hera had Argus guard Io.
- **Iphigenia** –the eldest daughter of Agamemnon and the sister of Electra and Orestes, who was sacrificed to the goddess Artemis to obtain favorable winds to the battle in Troy.
- **Janus** –Roman god of doors and gateways, and hence of beginnings who is pictured with two faces looking in opposite directions, one young and one old.
- **Jason** –heir to the kingdom of Greece, but his cousin seized the throne. Jason sought the golden fleece in order to regain the throne. After many harrowing adventures and with the aid of the sorceress Medea, Jason brought back the fleece.

- **Judgment of Paris** –the incident that ultimately brought on the Trojan War. Paris of Troy was chosen to select the fairest of three goddesses: Hera, Aphrodite and Athena. Aphrodite promised Paris the most beautiful woman on earth if he chose her. Aphrodite then gave Paris, Helen. He carried her off to Troy, and her husband, Menelaus of Sparta, gathered any army to go to Troy and bring her back. Trojan civilization was destroyed in the process.
- **Juno** –goddess who protected marriage; wife of Jupiter; Greek-Hera/Zeus
- **Jupiter** –the most powerful of the gods; Greek-Zeus
- **Labyrinth** –a vast maze on the island of Crete created by Daedalus which housed the Minotaur. One of the few who escaped the Labyrinth was Theseus who killed the Minotaur.
- **Laocoon** –a priest in Troy during the Trojan War who warned against bringing the Trojan horse into the city of Troy, remarking, “I am wary of Greeks even when they are bringing gifts.” The god Poseidon, who favored the Greeks, then sent two enormous sea snakes after Laocoon. The creatures coiled themselves around the priest and his two sons, crushing them to death. Laocoon’s remark has been adapted to read, “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.”
- **Leda and the swan** –a queen of Sparta who was raped by Zeus, who had taken the form of a swan. Helen of Troy was conceived as a result.
- **Lethe** –a river which flows through Hades. The souls of the dead were forced to drink of its waters, making them forget what they had done, said, and suffered when they were alive.
- **Mars** –god of war; Greek-Ares
- **Medea** –the sorceress who fell in love with Jason and helped him obtain the golden fleece.
- **Medusa** –one of the monster Gorgons; people who looked at her would turn to stone. A hero, Perseus, was able to kill Medusa by using her reflection in his shield to aim his sword.
- **Mercury** –the messenger of the gods; Greek-Hermes
- **Midas** –a king who was granted one wish by the god Dionysus. Greedy for riches, Midas wished that everything he touched would turn to gold. He soon regretted his wish as his food turned to gold and did his daughter. Dionysus reversed the effect of the wish when Midas washed in a river. A person who easily acquires riches is sometimes said to have the “Midas touch.”
- **Minerva** –the goddess of wisdom; Greek-Athena
- **Morpheus** –Roman god of sleep and dreams
- **Muses** –nine daughters of Zeus and the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, goddesses, who preside over learning and the arts. They are especially associated with poetry. They are: Clio, history; Calliope, epic poetry; Erato, love poetry; Euterpe, lyric poetry; Melpomene, tragedy; Polyhymnia, songs to the gods; Thalia, comedy; Terpsichore, the dance; Urania, astronomy.
- **Narcissus** –a beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. Because he was unable to tear himself from the image, he wasted away and died.
- **Nemesis** –goddess of vengeance; a “nemesis” is an avenger. One’s nemesis is one who potentially will bring on one’s downfall or destruction.
- **Neptune** –god of the sea who is frequently portrayed as a bearded giant with a fish’s scaly tail, holding a large three pronged spear, or trident. Greek-Poseidon
- **nymphs** –female spirits who lived in forests, bodies of water, and other places outdoors; a beautiful or seductive woman.
- **Odin** –Norse ruler of the gods, who was also the god of poetry wisdom, farming and war.
- **Odysseus** –Greek hero in the Trojan War who helped bring about the downfall of Troy by conceiving the ruse of the Trojan Horse. After Troy was destroyed he wandered for ten years trying to return home, having many adventures along the way. Archetypal hero
- **Oedipus** –a tragic king who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. The story of Oedipus is the subject of the play Oedipus Rex by Sophocles. The character of Oedipus gave his name to the “Oedipus complex” explored by the psychiatrist Freud.
- **Olympus, Mount** –legendary home of the Greek and Roman gods. It is an actual mountain in Greece.
- **Olympians** –the Greek gods
- **Orestes** –the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and brother of Electra. Agamemnon was killed by Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. To avenge the murder, Orestes and Electra killed them both.
- **Orpheus and Eurydice** –Orpheus was a great musician, and Eurydice was his wife. When Eurydice died Orpheus went to the underworld, played his lyre for Hades and asked that Eurydice be sent back to earth. The god was so moved by the music that he agreed on one condition: that Orpheus go ahead of her and not look back on her until they had reached the earth again. Orpheus almost accomplished this task, but Eurydice was sent back to the underworld. He spent the rest of his days wandering about, playing his lyre and singing. In the end, he was torn to pieces by crazed followers of Dionysus, the god of wine.
- **Pan** –Greek god of flocks, forests, meadows, and shepherds. He had the horns and feet of a goat. He played a reed pipe. According to legend, Pan was the source of scary noises in the wilderness at night. Panic=fear
- **Pandora’s Box** –box that Zeus gave to Pandora, the first woman, with strict instructions that she not open it. Pandora’s curiosity soon got the better of her, and she opened the box. All the evils and miseries of the world flew out to afflict mankind.
- **Paris** –a prince of Troy whose abduction of the Greek Queen of Sparta, Helen, caused the Trojan War. During the war Paris killed Achilles by piercing his heel with an arrow.
- **Parnassus** –a mountain in Greece where the Muses lived. The Delphic Oracle was on one of its slopes. Known as the mythological home of poetry and music.
- **Pegasus** –a winged horse, tamed by the hero Bellerophon with the help of a bridle given to him by Athena. As the flying horse of the Muses, Pegasus is a symbol of high-flying poetic imaginations.
- **Penelope** –wife of Odysseus who remained true to her marriage vows for the twenty years Odysseus was gone to fight the Trojan War. An image of fidelity and devotion.

- **Perseus** –a hero who killed the gorgon Medusa. The god Hermes and goddess Athena helped in this deed.
- **Pluto** –the Roman god of the underworld and ruler of the dead; Greek-Hades
- **Poseidon** –god of the sea; Roman-Neptune
- **Priam** –the king of Troy and father of Hector and Paris. The Greeks killed him when they sacked Troy.
- **Procrustes** –a Greek giant who was a thief and a murderer. He would capture travelers and tie them to an iron bed. If they were too tall for the bed he would hack off their limbs until they fit. If too short, he would stretch them to the right size. A “procrustean” operation is one that relentlessly tries to shape a person, an argument, or an idea to a predetermined pattern.
- **Prometheus** –the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. As punishment for the theft, Zeus ordered Prometheus chained to a rock, and sent a great eagle to gnaw at his liver. Despite his torment, Prometheus refused to submit to Zeus’ will. He was eventually rescued by Hercules. Prometheus has become a symbol of lonely and valiant resistance to authority. Aeschylus wrote a play, Prometheus Bound, and Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a long poem entitled “Prometheus Unbound.”
- **Proteus** –a god who served Poseidon. Proteus could change his shape at will. Someone or something that easily takes on several different forms may be called ‘protean.’
- **Psyche** –Roman a beautiful girl who was visited each night in the dark by cupid, who told her she must not try to see him. When she did try to see him as he slept, she accidentally dripped lamp oil on him, and he awoke and fled. After she had performed many harsh tasks set by Cupid’s mother, Venus, Jupiter made her immortal, and she and Cupid were married. Her name is Greek for soul and butterfly.
- **Pygmalion** –Roman a sculptor who at first hated women, but then fell in love with a statue he made of a woman. He prayed to Venus that she find him a woman like the statue. Instead, Venus made the statue come to life.
- **Romulus and Remus** –in Roman legend, twin brothers who were raised by a she-wolf and founded the city of Rome. They came from a city founded by the son of Aeneas. During the construction of Rome, Romulus became incensed at Remus and killed him. The Romans later made Romulus into a god.
- **Saturn** –the Roman name for one of the Titans, the father of Zeus, who fled Mount Olympus after Zeus defeated the Titans. He settled in Italy, and established a golden age in which all people were equal and harvests were plentiful.
- **satyrs** –creatures who were part man and part goat. Satyrs were famous for being constantly drunk and for chasing nymphs. They were companions of Dionysus. Roman-fauns
- **Scylla and Charybdis** –Scylla was a horrible six-headed monster who lived on a rock on one side of a narrow strait. Charybdis was a whirlpool on the other side. When ships passed close to Scylla’s rock in order to avoid Charybdis, she would seize and devour their sailors. Aeneas, Jason and Odysseus all had to pass between Scylla and Charybdis.
- To be caught between Scylla and Charybdis is to be caught between unpleasant options.
- **Siegfried** –see Sigurd
- **Sigurd** –hero of the Volsunga Saga, slayer of the dragon Fafnir, and the beloved of Brynhild. In the Nibelungenlied, the Teutonic version of the myth, he is known as Siegfried; he is the hero of Richard Wagner’s cycle of operas called “The Ring of the Nibelungs.” In the 20th century the Nazi’s used him as the symbol of Aryan manhood and heroism.
- **Sirens** –evil creatures who lived on a rocky island, singing in beautiful voices in an effort to lure sailors to shipwreck and death. Odysseus ordered his crew to plug their ears with wax in order to escape the Siren’s fatal song.
- **Sisyphus** –a king who offended Zeus and was punished by being forced to roll an enormous boulder to the top of a steep hill. Every time the boulder neared the top, it would roll back down, and Sisyphus would have to start over. A difficult and futile task is often called a “labor of Sisyphus.”
- **Sphinx** –in the story of Oedipus, a winged monster with the head of a woman and then body of a lion. It waylaid travelers on the roads near the city of Thebes, and would kill any of them who could not answer this riddle: “What creatures walk on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?” Oedipus finally gave the correct answer: human beings, who go on all fours as infants, walk upright in maturity, and in old age rely on the “third leg” of a cane. The sphinx of Greek mythology resembles the sphinx of Egyptian mythology but is distinct from it in that the Egyptian sphinx has a man’s head.
- **Styx** –one of the rivers of Hades, across which Charon ferried the souls of the dead. The gods occasionally swore by the river Styx. When they did so, their oath was unbreakable.
- **Tantalus** –A king, who as punishment for offending the gods, was tortured with everlasting thirst and hunger in Hades. He stood up to his chin in water, but each time he bent to quench his thirst, the water receded. There were boughs heavy with fruit over his head, but each time he tried to pluck them, the wind blew them out of reach. Something is “tantalizing” if someone wants it but can not quite get it.
- **Theseus** –hero of the city of Athens who killed Procrustes and the Minotaur, and made war on the Amazons, subsequently killing their queen, Hippolyta.
- **Thor** –the god of thunder in Norse mythology who wielded a hammer.
- **Tiresias** –the blind prophet who revealed the truth of the crimes of Oedipus, and at another time advised Odysseus in The Land of the Dead as to his course back home; blinded by Juno.
- **Titans** –gods who ruled the universe until they were overthrown by Zeus; Atlas and Prometheus were Titans.
- **Trojan horse** –a large hollow horse planned by Odysseus and made by the Greeks to win the Trojan war.
- **Trojan War** –the great, ten year war fought between the Greeks and the Trojans in order to recover Helen, the beautiful wife of the Greek king Menelaus.
- **Ulysses** –the Roman name of the Greek hero Odysseus
- **Valhalla** –a dwelling in Asgard, the Norse heaven, reserved for the souls of those who died heroic deaths.
- **Valkyrie** –
- **Venus** –Roman name of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty
- **Vesta** –goddess of hearth and home; Roman and Greek cities were to keep a fire in a public hearth dedicated to Vesta burning constantly; in Rome the sacred hearth of Vesta was attended by six maidens, the Vestal virgins

- **Vulcan** –Roman god of metal working and fire; the blacksmith of the gods. He suffered bodily deformities, including lameness, a son of Zeus. Greek-Hephaestus
- **Zephyr** –Greek and Roman god of the west wind
- **Zeus** –the chief of the gods, who defeated the Titans to assume leadership of the universe. He lived atop Mount Olympus, from which he hurled thunderbolts to announce his anger. Despite his awesome power, he had a weakness for mortal women.

Adapted from:

Hirsch, E.D. Jr., Joseph F. Kett., and James Trefil., The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988.

Lass, Abraham H., David Kiremidjian, and Ruth M. Goldstein. The Facts on File Dictionary of Classical, Biblical, and Literary Allusions. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987.