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Social Studies

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ANCIENT GREECE — AND — MODERN CULTURE



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Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graphic Sources• Compare and Contrast• Graphic Organizers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Captions• Diagram• Sidebars

Scott Foresman Reading Street 6.6.2



scottforesman.com

ISBN 0-328-13670-0



by Stephanie Sique





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Editorial Offices: Glenview, Illinois • Parsippany, New Jersey • New York, New York
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Philosophy

Studying Ancient Greece helps us answer questions that come up every day. Ancient Greece is often called the “birthplace of western civilization” because its people influenced the way we look at the world. They were curious. They questioned everything. They wanted to know the answers to questions that people have asked throughout time. They “invented” philosophy, the study of the meaning of life.

Socrates, the most famous Greek philosopher, questioned everything. He answered every question with another question. This forced his students to examine their own ideas and arrive at the truth for themselves.



The word *academy* is a synonym for school. It comes from Plato's Academy in Ancient Greece, named for a park outside of Athens.



Plato, a student of Socrates, built on Socrates' teachings. Plato started a school called the Academy. Here, his students studied every subject of the time. Plato's prize student was Aristotle, whose goal was to understand everything. Aristotle's ideas influenced all areas of Western thought including science, politics, and religion.

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Government

The Greeks thought of many ways to answer their questions about governing. About 510 B.C. the Greek city-state of Athens instituted a new way of governing called *demokratia*. Today we call it **democracy**. Democracy means "rule by the people."

Before it became a democracy, Athens was a monarchy, ruled by kings. Later, it became an oligarchy, meaning "ruled by a few." In an oligarchy, the people of power and wealth rule. The Greek city-state Sparta was an oligarchy for much of its history.

Although the Athenians gave us democratic government, democracies today are different from the ancient model. In ancient Athens, only men who had served in the military could vote. This meant that every free male over 18 years of age and of Athenian parentage was eligible. Rather than choose from a list of names on a ballot as we do, the Athenians chose government officials from the list of citizens by lottery. Then they set term limits, the number of years someone could stay in office.



Greek citizens met in an open forum (above) to discuss public policy. Today, we elect representatives who meet in the United States Congress (opposite).



Three groups of people couldn't vote at all in the elections, even though they made up a majority of the population. They were women, slaves, and non-Athenian residents. Slaves had no legal or political power and could not have families of their own or own property.

Each voting citizen could come to the Assembly and say what he had to say. Today, since most democratic governments are too large to allow every citizen a direct voice in the legislative process, the public elects representatives to speak for the group.





The Greeks also gave us the idea of trial by jury. In ancient Athens, a jury consisted of 400 to 500 people. During a trial, the jury listened as the plaintiff made a speech. Then the defendant had his turn. After all the witnesses had been heard, the jury voted on whether the defendant was guilty or innocent. The side that got the most votes won. After the jury heard speeches on what the punishment should be, they voted again. The punishment that got the most votes would be the one that was carried out.

Today some form of trial by jury exists in most democracies. The accused is allowed to have a lawyer and to have his or her “day in court.” A judge or a jury—often consisting of twelve people—hears the case and determines guilt or innocence. The jury or a judge then determines punishment.

Athenian democracy actually lasted less than 200 years, and it was another 2,000 years or so until—quite independently—it was “invented” all over again. Yet it is amazing that democracies throughout the world hold to principles so similar to those that were set down so long ago.



(Top) Socrates, the philosopher, was found guilty of treason by a jury of his peers in ancient Greece. (Bottom) A modern jury listens to a case.



Myths and Mythology

To answer their questions about how the world works, the Greeks developed myths. They told stories about the gods that influence human lives and about each god’s powers or achievements. There was a god of war, a god of the sea, a god of light, a god of music, and so on.



From among all the gods, the Greek poet Homer named twelve as the most important. He said they lived in an important place—on top of Mount Olympus.

A person could find the answer to any question about nature and life in Greek mythology. The Greeks offered up prayers and gifts to the gods, hoping to gain good luck, good health, success in business, or victory on the battlefield. They believed the gods determined what happened. As the Greeks were very religious, they held religious ceremonies everywhere—at home, at work, at government functions, and at sporting events.



The most important gods in Greek mythology were the Olympian gods. Most of these gods were handsome and beautiful with perfect bodies. They had plenty of human faults, however, as the poet Homer detailed in his epic poems. They could be jealous and mean, and they could play horrible tricks on each other or on others. As they were gods, however, they had one quality that people didn't have—they were immortal.



The pantheon, or entire collection, of Greek gods grew to include hundreds of gods.



Greek mythology wasn't just about religion and story telling. The myths were a way in which poets and minstrels could preserve history. And if storytellers sometimes embellished or even made up heroic acts to add to the well-known myths, this just helped the heroes claim mythical ancestors and add to their reputations.

Through the myths, the Greeks also promoted a moral code. In the stories, heroes could have faults—and often did—but they were always loyal to their families and friends and faithful to their gods. Those who were not often came to dreadful ends. Although few achieved this goal of perfect behavior, still, perfection was a goal that everyone could strive for. Centuries later, writers still sometimes include morals in their storytelling. They use myth making to create heroic characters in literature and in film.



(Top) Sculpture of Hercules, a hero from Greek mythology



(Bottom) Firefighter Faith Qualtieri at Point Reyes National Seashore, 1995.



Science

The Greeks contributed heavily to the fields of science, mathematics, literature, art, and **architecture**. Their advances in these fields showed the wide scope of their curiosity and skills.

The Greeks were considered the founders of modern science. They had a special interest in nature and were the first to use scientific principles. They studied and observed objects in nature to form general principles. They took what they knew and applied logic and reason to come to a conclusion about their questions. This led to important discoveries in fields such as astronomy and medicine.

Anaxagoras, one of the earliest astronomers, was the first to say that the sun was a white-hot rock. Before that, people thought the sun was a god. He also explained how eclipses take place. Other Greek astronomers explained how the Earth rotates on its axis and the rotation of the planets.

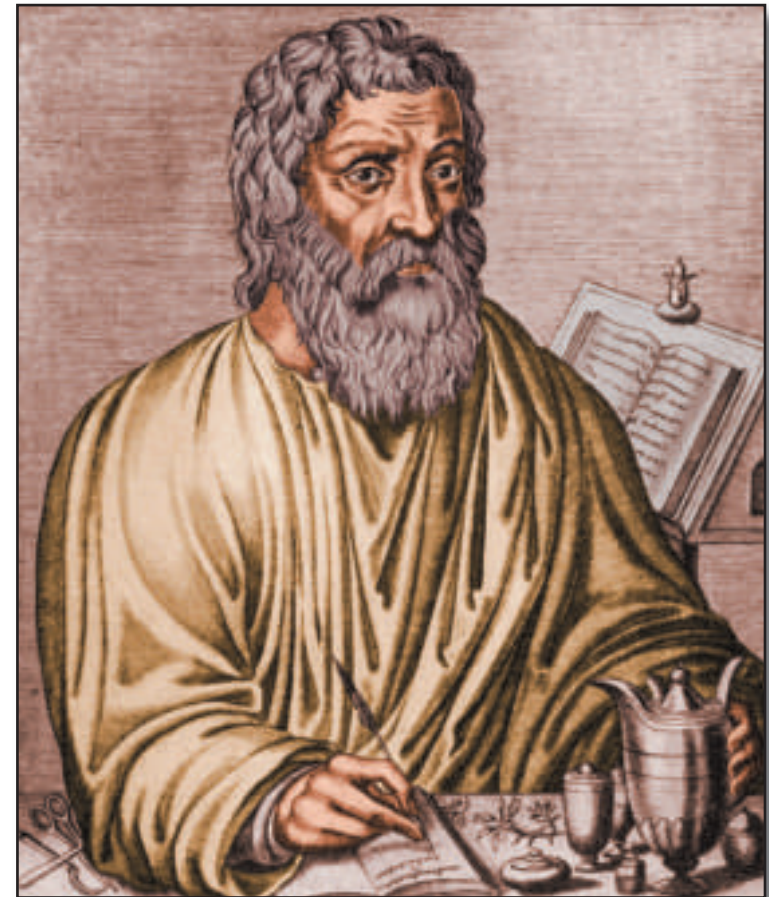


Hipparchus, who made astronomical observations on the island of Rhodes and in Alexandria, Egypt, calculated the length of the year.



The Greek scientist Hippocrates is considered the father of medicine. Hippocrates and scientists who followed him determined that illness is the result of physical problems, not of evil spirits. He said people could control sickness through proper diet, exercise, and medicine.

Today, doctors still take an oath called the Hippocratic oath before they begin to practice medicine. In it, they promise to help the sick through scientific study and treatment. They also promise to use their knowledge for the good of their patients.



Hippocrates is considered the father of medicine. Medical students today take a Hippocratic oath.



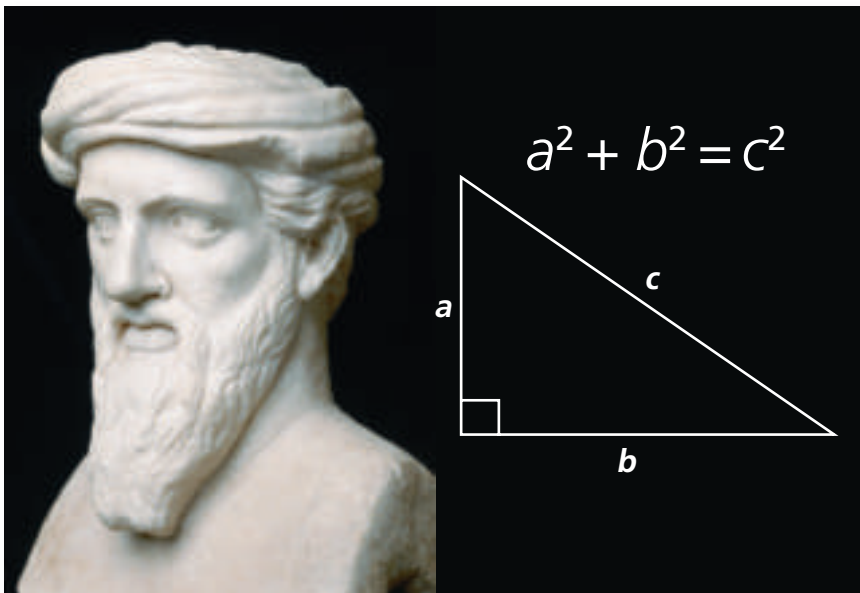


Mathematics

The Greeks also made important contributions in the field of mathematics. In fact, the studies of Pythagoras, a Greek philosopher and mathematician, became the foundation for modern mathematics. Pythagoras is responsible for much of what we know about odd and even numbers. His school also developed what is now called the Pythagorean theorem in geometry, stating that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

Euclid, another Greek mathematician, wrote *Elements*, a study of plane geometry, proportions, and the theory of numbers. Today, Euclid's *Elements* is still used as a basis of high school instruction in plane geometry.

Archimedes, another Greek mathematician, wrote about his investigations in geometry, arithmetic, and mechanics. He made important discoveries regarding curved and solid figures. In mechanics, he explained the principle of the lever and invented the pulley.



Greek scholars made many important contributions to our understanding of mathematics. They also invented many simple technical devices.



Art

The foundation of Western art also comes from the Greeks. The Greeks believed that “man is the measure of all things” and regarded the human body as an art form. Sculptors made statues of people and gods in relaxed and lifelike poses. Before, bodies had been portrayed in stiff and stylized ways. Now they showed movement and emotion. Sculptors also began to show human triumphs and suffering in their art work, instead of focusing only on the gods.

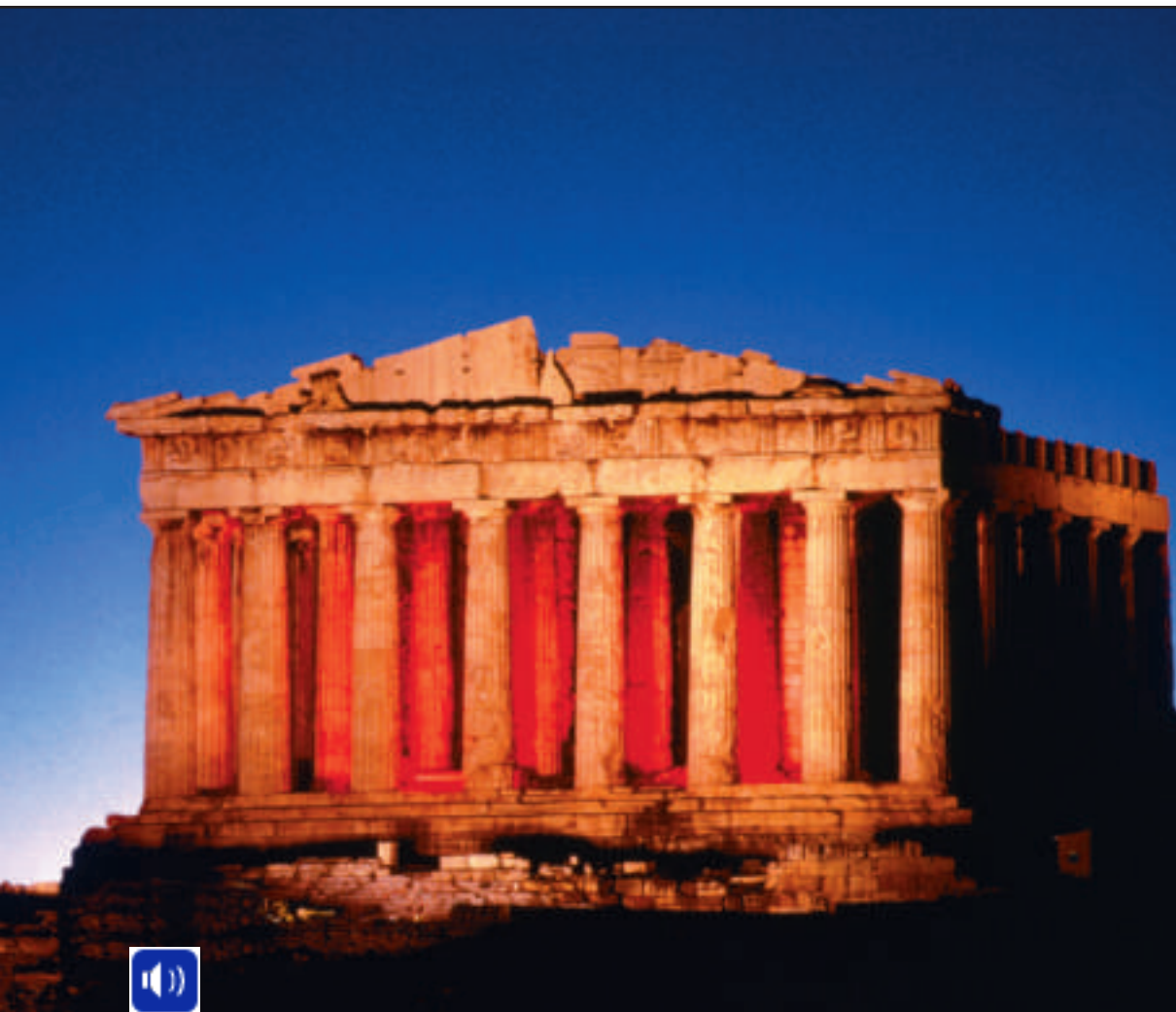
Painters also began creating realistic pictures of everyday life. Scenes painted on pottery showed people in their daily lives—working, cooking, playing, and observing religious practices. At the same time, objects used in daily life became works of art. Bowls, pitchers, cups, and vessels for holding water, oil, or food were painted and decorated by artists.





Architecture

In architecture, the Greeks developed a range of building types used for many different purposes: religious, civic, domestic, funerary, and recreational. They built temples, government and public buildings, private homes, funeral tombs and mausoleums, stadiums, theaters, concert halls, and gymnasiums. These basic kinds of architectural purposes continue to influence modern architecture today.



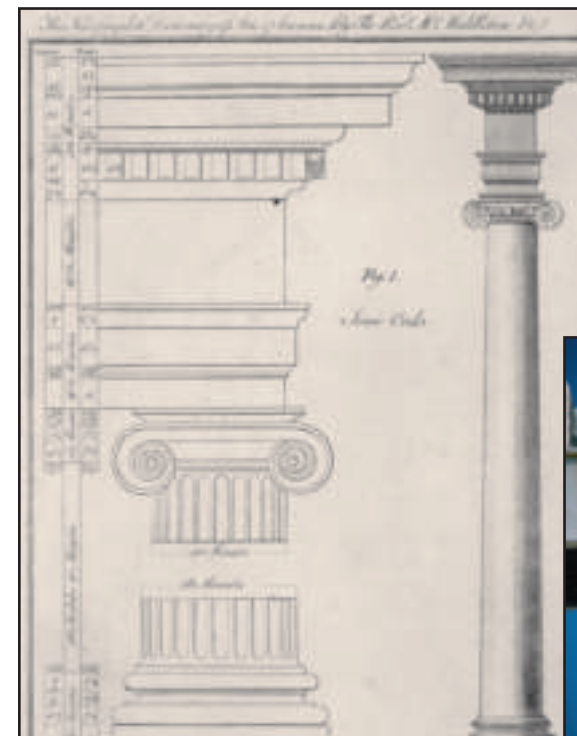
The Parthenon in Athens, Greece



Early Greek buildings sat on platforms. The roofs were supported by columns. The Greeks developed three major architectural styles that are easily recognizable: the Doric, the Ionic, and the Corinthian. One basic difference among them shows in the bases of the columns and the friezes, or ornamented bands, above the columns. In general, the Doric style is simple, while the Ionic is more decorative, and the Corinthian is quite elaborate.

Although buildings became larger and more ornate as Greek culture developed, the shape of structures remained the same. Many buildings had courtyards at the center and rooms around them, while some had balconies, where people could stand and watch activities in the open areas below.

Private homes also often had rooms arranged around an interior courtyard. The rich had homes with lavish features—marble entryways and columns. The floors were covered with intricate mosaics, and plaster on the walls was often painted to look like stonework.



The Doric column (below) was simple in style, while the Ionic column (left) was more decorative.





Literature and Drama

Homer was the great poet of the Greeks. His epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, tell the story of the Trojan War and its aftermath. Homer's stories of gods and heroes were told aloud for generations. The Greeks loved his vivid action scenes and emotional descriptions of victory and defeat.

As Greek civilization developed, two main forms of theater emerged: tragedy and comedy. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were the most famous authors of tragedies—plays with sad endings.

Greek tragedies were often based on myths or history and often raised difficult moral issues. Thousands of people packed into outdoor amphitheaters during the annual theater festivals. The performances lasted for hours and generated much praise and criticism.

In the comedies, Greek playwrights such as Aristophanes exercised their sense of the ridiculous. Like many comedy writers today, they satirized or made fun of leaders and other people in power.



Many of today's playwrights and screenwriters look to Greek drama for ideas. In fact, Greek plays are still performed today. The questions they raise about morality and justice still have significance for modern audiences.





Physical Fitness

In Ancient Greece, physical beauty, health, and strength were highly valued. Physical fitness was so important to the Greeks that they built public gymnasiums for training and stadiums for competitions.

Every city-state had a gymnasium. It contained a place to exercise, a running track, a bathing room, a lecture hall, and a park. Here, men and boys worked hard to keep their bodies in **ideal** condition. In the city-state of Sparta, girls also received physical training.

Most men and boys went to the gymnasium daily. Boys played ball games, ran, and learned to toss the javelin and throw the discus. They also learned to wrestle and box. Men had to stay in shape for military service. Since warfare consisted of hand-to-hand combat, they had to be strong.

At the gymnasium, sport was competitive and rough. There were no holds barred in wrestling matches, and boxing was more brutal than it is today. Men also took part in another competition that was a combination of wrestling, boxing, and kicking. The combatants fought until someone gave in.



Today, both men and women work out in gymnasiums to keep fit. In ancient times, men took physical training very seriously.





The Olympic Games

One of the lasting contributions of ancient Greece is the Olympic Games. The Games began around 776 B.C. and continued for the next thousand years. Even after the Romans conquered the Greeks, the Games continued for another 500 years or so. In 1896, the era of the modern Olympics began. It continues to this day.

The Games were held every four years in Olympia to honor Zeus. Each city-state sent a team of athletes. During the Games, the Greeks took a month-long holiday. Everything shut down. Thousands traveled to Olympia to compete or watch the events.

The pentathlon was the most important contest in the ancient Olympics. It included a footrace, the broad jump, the discus throw, the javelin throw, and wrestling. Other favorite competitions were boxing, horseback racing, and chariot racing.

The winner of a competition was crowned with a wreath of olive leaves. As in our own time, an Olympic champion became famous and was honored throughout the country.



Archaeologists have uncovered the ruins of the ancient Olympic stadium in Olympia, Greece.



The modern Olympic Games are both similar to and different from the ancient Games. Perhaps the biggest differences are that, today, people from around the world compete, and both men and women take part. (In ancient Greece, there were contests for women, but they were completely separate.)

Many sports that were important then are still important now. Track and field events—the backbone of the ancient Games—are still central to the modern Games. Sprinting and long-distance running as well as javelin and discus throwing are still Olympic events. So is the pentathlon, although the events are very different.

Many modern competitions—such as swimming and gymnastics—were not Olympic contests in ancient times. Likewise, some ancient competitions—such as chariot racing—are no longer Olympic sports.

There's another major difference. Today the Olympics are divided into Summer and Winter Games. In ancient times, there were only summer games.



Track and field events are still very popular in the modern Games, as they were in ancient Greece.



The tradition of lighting the Olympic torch commemorates the fire that once burned at the ancient games. The torch is lit at the ancient site of Olympia; then it is carried by air and sea, and on land, until it reaches the site of the Olympic Games. Various athletes pass the torch from hand to hand until it is used to light the giant Olympic flame. The flame burns throughout the Games.

In ancient times, athletes paraded through the streets on their way to make sacrifices at the temple of Zeus while crowds cheered. Today, the Olympic Flag is carried into the stadium followed by the parade of athletes. When Greece hosted the 2004 Olympics, athletes from 202 countries were represented.



The lighting of the Olympic flame has become a time-honored custom.



Contributions to Modern Civilization

When the Roman **Empire** conquered the Greeks, the Romans embraced many aspects of Greek culture, from art, literature, and architecture, to philosophy and political concepts. Romans learned to read and speak Greek. One of the first works of Roman literature was a translation of Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin, the language of the Romans.

During the Renaissance, European scientists and mathematicians also studied and learned from the Greeks. They studied the writings of the great Greek philosophers and historians.

Many will say that the Greeks' lasting contributions include the idea of reason and the principles of democracy. The Greek way of thinking became the basis of modern scientific reasoning—a process of questioning, collecting information, and formulating a conclusion. The Greeks also gave us the political idea of democracy. Today, throughout the world, people live by principles that the Greeks first put into practice many centuries ago—back when they were beginning to deal with life's pressing questions.



The achievements of Greek culture laid the groundwork for much of modern Western civilization.





Glossary

architecture *n.* the science or art of planning and designing buildings

democracy *n.* a form of government in which the people rule, either by voting directly or by electing representatives to manage the government and make the laws

empire *n.* a number of different nations or territories under a single ruler or government

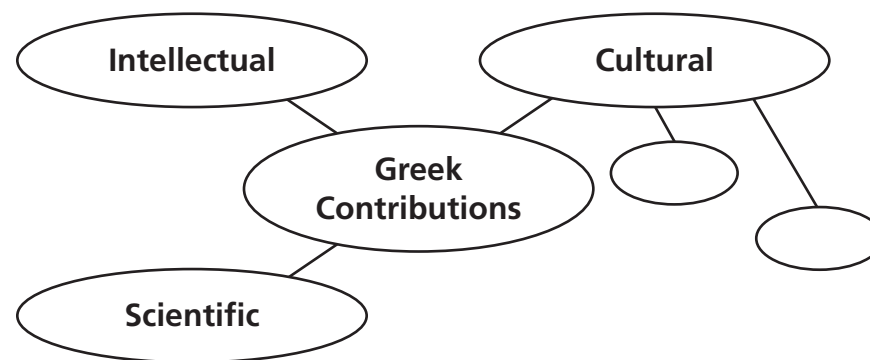
ideal *adj.* perfect or excellent

mythology *n.* a group of legends or stories that attempt to account for something in nature



Reader Response

1. Look at the drawing of the Ionic column on page 15. Why do you think there is a gap on the drawing between the top and bottom of the column?
2. Make a web like the one below to show ways in which the Greeks contributed to intellectual, cultural, and scientific areas of modern life. Add as many ovals as you need.



3. Using an advanced or unabridged dictionary, how many words can you find that are related to *ideal*? Use two of them in sentences.
4. Look at the pictures of ancient and modern heroes on page 9. How do you think modern heroes differ from ancient heroes? How do you think they are similar?

