

Session I: Ancient Egypt — Due September 21

1. Read Ancient Egypt: Pyramids and Great Monuments
2. Have fun with optional extension activities from The Nile, Geography, and Daily Life, and Hieroglyphs and Egyptian Communication

Ancient Egypt: Pyramids and Great Monuments

Long before bulldozers or cranes existed, ancient Egyptians built some of the most massive stone structures the world has ever seen — and it didn't happen all at once. The very first pyramid wasn't the famous Great Pyramid at all, but a tomb called the Step Pyramid, built around 2650 BC at Saqqara for King Djoser by his brilliant architect, Imhotep. Instead of smooth sides, it looked like a giant staircase made of six stacked layers, because Egyptian builders were still experimenting with how to build in stone. This step pyramid was a success in the eyes of pharaoh because it kicked off centuries of pyramid-building experiments across Egypt.

One of the most fascinating experiments came a few decades later, when King Sneferu tried to build Egypt's first smooth-sided, "true" pyramid. His first attempt, now called the Bent Pyramid because its angle changes partway up, had to be adjusted mid-construction after engineers realized the original steep angle was too heavy and unstable for the ground beneath it. Rather than give up, Sneferu's builders tried again with a lower, safer angle and successfully completed the Red Pyramid — history's first true smooth-sided pyramid. These "failures" mattered enormously, because they taught Egyptian engineers exactly what they needed to know to build their masterpiece: the Great Pyramid of Giza, built around 2560 BC by King Khufu, Sneferu's son. (To see visual aids for the different pyramids, look at [The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt](#) on [Archive.org](#), pages 18-19.)

Right next to the Great Pyramid stands another astonishing monument: the Great Sphinx, a massive limestone statue with the body of a lion and the head of a king. Most Egyptologists believe the Sphinx was carved around 2500 BC during the reign of King Khafre, Khufu's son, since it lines up perfectly with Khafre's pyramid and its face resembles his statues. However, this isn't settled — some researchers think it may have actually been built earlier, under Khufu himself, or even by Khafre's brother. Mysteries like this are part of what makes studying ancient Egypt so exciting: even experts don't always agree!

For a long time, most people assumed enslaved people must have built these enormous monuments, since the project seems almost impossible without modern machinery. But archaeologists have since discovered the remains of a nearby workers' city, complete with a bakery and a hospital, which strongly suggests the pyramids were built by organized teams of paid, skilled craftsmen rather than by slaves — though a few researchers still debate this idea and think enslaved laborers may have lived there too. Beyond pyramids and the Sphinx, Egyptians also built enormous temples, like the giant Karnak temple complex, which took hundreds of years and many different pharaohs to build and expand.

The Temple of Karnak was so enormous that it took over 1,500 years and about thirty different pharaohs to build. Unlike a pyramid, which was mostly finished by one ruler, Karnak kept growing generation after generation, starting around 2000 BC and continuing all the way through the era when Egypt was ruled by Greek kings. It was dedicated mainly to the god Amun, and its most breathtaking section, the Great Hypostyle Hall, contains 134 massive stone columns so wide that several children holding hands could barely wrap around just one. Because ancient Egypt had no libraries, temples like Karnak also worked like giant stone history books — pharaohs carved their victories, laws, and religious beliefs directly onto the walls, so the building itself became a record of Egyptian history that has survived for thousands of years. (To see a picture

of the temple complex at Karnak, look at [The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt](#) on [Archive.org](#), pages 22-23.)

Farther south, carved directly into a sandstone cliff, sits one of Egypt's most dramatic monuments: the temples of Abu Simbel, built by Ramesses II around the 1200s BC. Four colossal seated statues of Ramesses, each about 66 feet tall, guard the entrance to the main temple, while a smaller nearby temple honors his queen, Nefertari — one of the only ancient Egyptian temples ever built to honor a queen as an equal to the king. Abu Simbel was designed with an incredible trick of engineering and astronomy: twice a year, sunlight travels all the way through the temple's long entrance hall to perfectly illuminate statues deep inside the sacred inner chamber. In the 1960s, when a new dam threatened to flood the site, engineers achieved another astonishing feat: they carefully cut the entire temple into more than a thousand giant blocks and reassembled it, statue by statue, on higher ground. (To read more about the 1960s move, look at [The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt](#) on [Archive.org](#), pages 11.)

Not every great Egyptian monument was built to be seen — some were built to be hidden. After the era of pyramid-building ended, pharaohs worried that enormous stone pyramids were too easy for thieves to spot and rob, so they began burying their kings secretly instead, inside a hidden desert valley near Thebes known today as the Valley of the Kings. For roughly 500 years, pharaohs were laid to rest in deep tombs carved into the mountainside, filled with treasures meant to accompany them into the afterlife. Most of these tombs were eventually discovered and robbed in ancient times, but one small, easy-to-miss tomb survived almost untouched for over 3,000 years: the tomb of the boy king Tutankhamun, discovered in 1922 by archaeologist Howard Carter, whose dazzling golden treasures gave the modern world one of its clearest windows into the glittering world of the pharaohs. (To read more about the discovery of King Tut, look at [The Usborne Internet-Linked Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt](#) on [Archive.org](#), pages 8-9.)

On September 21, students will have a chance to build their own pyramids in small groups with sugar cubes. We will explore more of the history of pyramids and great monuments in class with the continuing story of Senu and Meret. And we will have games and activities to help students remember what we discuss.

Extension Activities for The Nile, Geography, and Daily Life, and Hieroglyphs and Egyptian Communication

- Read the following pages in [Ancient Egypt by Miriam Stead](#) to reinforce concepts from this week: pages 4-5; 16-17; 20-21; and 24-25.
- [Watch Ancient Egypt for Kids by Learn Bright on YouTube](#)
- Draw a picture of a family living by the Nile — what they might eat, wear, and see.
- Make a simple 3-part flip book showing Akhet, Peret, and Shemu — one drawing per season showing what farmers were doing.
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of a farmer during Akhet, Peret, or Shemu, describing daily life and how they depend on the river.
- Watch [Egyptian Hieroglyphs and the Rosetta Stone: the Discovery of the Rosetta Stone for Kids by FreeSchool](#) on YouTube.
- Write a secret message in hieroglyphs for a family member to decode using the reference sheet, then swap and try decoding one back.