# Nearpod Part 1: Introduction to Greek Theater

(pg. 468) In the fifth century B.C., when Greek drama was at its height, plays were performed in Athens at annual festivals honoring Dionysus, the god of wine. The performances were staged in an outdoor theater, which held thousands of spectators. There were no curtains or lighting; scenery and props were minimal. Actors wore outsized masks appropriate to the characters they played. Although violent events were often central to plots, no violence occurred on stage. Such events took place off-stage and were reported in dialogue.

1. When was Greek theater most popular?

2. What is the capital of Greece?

3. Who is Dionysus?

4. What were the costumes for actors?

5. If violence is “unseen” offstage, how does the audience know what happened?

Ancient Greek plays follow this consistent format:

* A prologue presents background and describes the conflict.
* Then, the chorus, or group of dancers, enters and sings a parados, or opening song.
* Choral songs, called odes, separate scenes. The odes are divided into alternating parts called strophe and antistrophe.

Greek tragedies took their plots from well-known myths and legends. For example, the audience in the fifth century B.C. would have known that the story of Oedipus involved a ruler who fulfilled a terrible destiny by killing his father and marrying his mother.

6. What is the purpose of the prologue?

7. Was the Greek audience worried about spoiler alerts?

(pg. 475) In Greek tragedies, the role of the chorus was central to the production and meaning of the play. The chorus consisted of 12 to 15 dancers called choreuts, who were young men about to enter the military. The chorus danced as it sang, moving from right to left during the strophe, then left to right during the antistrophe.

Originally, plays included only one actor in addition to the chorus. Thespis, from whom we derive the English word, thespian, or actor, is said to have been the first actor. The dramatist Aeschylus is said to have introduced the second actor, and Sophocles the third.

In most dramas, actors played several parts each. Their costumes were long, flowing garments and expressive, wide-mouthed masks, which they changed as they changed characters. The actors’ shoes were featured a high wooden sole called a cothurnus to make the individual look taller and more impressive and to heighten visibility in the vast theater.

8. How many people were in the chorus?

9. Who were the members of the chorus?

10. What is the word for actor?

11. What was the purpose of the cothurnus, or wooden platform shoes?

Let’s watch an educational video! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSRLK7SogvE> (6:03 minutes)

12. What is the difference in masks in a comedy compared to a tragedy (be specific)?

13. What is the effect of the wraparound seating in the theater?

14. What is a Satyr?

15. Describe the satyr play. (Notice the word we still use—satire or satirical.)

16. When is the festival honoring Dionysus? (Month or seasonal activity)

Even without reading the play yet, you should feel like an almost expert in the Greek culture of drama!