



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



# ORIGIN STORIES

INTRODUCTION

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

All humans yearn to know  
where we came from  
and how our world began.  
We may have different  
stories, but they all serve  
a similar purpose.



Everywhere around the world people tell stories about how the world began. Different cultures tell different stories about how the Universe started and where humans came from. Scholars call these tales “creation myths” or “origin stories.”

Some origin stories are based on real people and events. Others, however, use a bit more imagination. Origin stories can contain powerful, emotional symbols. They can feature heroes and gods with great powers. They may tell deep truths about how humans relate to nature. But, they are not always based on facts.

In the United States, people grow up with stories about Santa Claus. Everyone, except young children, knows that he is not a real person. What he represents is a symbol. He’s generous and spreads love. Many cultures tell stories that seem strange to outsiders. Yet, to members of that culture they may have a deep meaning. They help explain where that culture came from and how it fits into the Universe.

When people in a culture learn to read, they write down their origin stories. But the stories frequently go back way before written records. Before a group of people could write they told stories to each other. Then they handed them down verbally to others. This is called an “oral tradition.” Multiple versions of each story often exist. As people retell them they may change them slightly. From group to group, and generation to generation, stories change. I have chosen to summarize five origin stories. They come from a wide number of places and eras. Feel free to tell them aloud to each other.

The sixth story I have written myself. It is a short version of Big History, told as a modern origin story. This one is based on scientific evidence, not oral tradition. It comes from knowledge gathered by humans on Earth.

# Origin stories comparison chart

Use this chart to highlight the differences — and any similarities — between the origin stories you read:

	Chinese	Greek	Iroquois	Judeo-Christian	Mayan	Modern Scientific
Source of the world						
Originator of the world						
How Earth formed						
Age of Earth						
First life forms						
How humans formed						
Relationship between humans & animals/plants						

# Image credits

An illustration of Zeus crowned by Victory

© Bettmann/CORBIS

An illustration of the Iroquois prayer of Thanksgiving

© National Geographic Society/CORBIS

Detail of God from *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo Buonarroti

© Alinari Archives/CORBIS

Planetary nebula NGC6210, in Hercules constellation

© ESA/Hubble and NASA

An illustration of Pan Gu from the *Sancai Tuhui*,  
public domain

*Creation* by Diego Rivera

© Christie's Images/CORBIS

Telling stories by the fire

© Gideon Mendel/CORBIS

## NEWSELA

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: <http://www.lexile.com/about-lexile/lexile-overview/>

To learn more about Newsela, visit [www.newsela.com/about](http://www.newsela.com/about).



### **The Lexile® Framework for Reading**

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at [www.Lexile.com](http://www.Lexile.com).