THE POPOL VUH,  
Sacred History of the Maya  

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THE UCI CALIFORNIA HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCE PROJECT  
The California History-Social Science Project (CH-SSP) of the University of California, Irvine, is dedicated to working with history teachers in Orange County to develop innovative approaches to engaging students in the study of the past. Founded in 2000, the CH-SSP draws on the resources of the UCI Department of History and works closely with the UCI Department of Education. We believe that the history classroom can be a crucial arena not only for instruction in history but also for the improvement of student literacy and writing skills. Working together with the teachers of Orange County, it is our goal to develop history curricula that will convince students that history matters.

HUMANITIES OUT THERE  
Humanities Out There was founded in 1997 as an educational partnership between the School of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine and the Santa Ana Unified School District. HOT runs workshops in humanities classrooms in Santa Ana schools. Advanced graduate students in history and literature design curricular units in collaboration with host teachers, and conduct workshops that engage UCI undergraduates in classroom work. In the area of history, HOT works closely with the UCI History-Social Science Project in order to improve student literacy and writing skills in the history classroom, and to integrate the teaching of history, literature, and writing across the humanities. The K-12 classroom becomes a laboratory for developing innovative units that adapt university materials to the real needs and interests of California schools. By involving scholars, teachers, students, and staff from several institutions in collaborative teaching and research, we aim to transform educational practices, expectations, and horizons for all participants.

THE SANTA ANA PARTNERSHIP  
The Santa Ana Partnership was formed in 1983 as part of the Student and Teacher Educational Partnership (STEP) initiative at UC Irvine. Today it has evolved into a multi-faceted collaborative that brings institutions and organizations together in the greater Santa Ana area to advance the educational achievement of all students, and to help them enter and complete college. Co-directed at UC Irvine by the Center for Educational Partnerships, the collaborative is also strongly supported by Santa Ana College, the Santa Ana Unified School District, California State University, Fullerton and a number of community based organizations. Beginning in 2003-2004, HOT has contributed to the academic mission of the Santa Ana Partnership by placing its workshops in GEAR UP schools. This unit on The Popol Vuh, Sacred History of the Maya reflects the innovative collaboration among these institutions and programs. This unit also represents a collaboration with UC MEXUS (The University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States) [http://ucmexus.ucr.edu].

CONTENT COUNTS: A SPECIAL PROJECT OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES  
This is one in a series of publications under the series title Content Counts: Reading and Writing Across the Humanities, supported by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Content Counts units are designed by and for educators committed to promoting a deep, content-rich and knowledge-driven literacy in language arts and social studies classrooms. The units provide examples of "content reading"—primary and secondary sources, as well as charts, data, and visual documents—designed to supplement and integrate the study of history and literature.

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# NOTES ON THE PDF:  
1) Please note that in this pdf document the page numbers are two off from the printed curriculum. For example, page 2 in the printed curriculum is now page 4 in this pdf document.  
2) We apologize if some of the hyperlinks are no longer accurate. They were correct at the time of printing.  
3) Full-page versions of the images in this unit—some in color—can be found at the back of this pdf.  
4) You can easily navigate through the different parts of this document by using the “Bookmark” tab on the left side of your Acrobat window.
OF ORIGINS AND ENDS: 
THE CREATION OF A CURRICULAR UNIT

And here we shall take up the demonstration, revelation and account of how things were put into shadow and brought to light.

—From the *Popol Vuh*, the Maya Quiché story of creation.

This curriculum has been in development since the founding of Humanities Out There in 1997, where it has served as a crucial piece of our World Mythology track. Humanities Out There is an educational partnership between the School of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine and the schools and community organizations of Santa Ana, California. HOT also works closely with UCI’s Center for Educational Partnerships and the UCI California History-Social Science Project. At the core of HOT is a series of workshops for K-12 students on humanities topics taught by teams of graduate and undergraduate students in collaboration with host teachers. These workshops serve as laboratories for the development of curricular units like this one, which represents the energies and talents of many people from several institutions contributing to an evolving topic over a period of five years.

Like the process of creation narrated in the *Popol Vuh*, this unit has undergone many drafts and transformations. I began developing the original curriculum along with Tracy McNulty, then a Ph.D. student at UCI, in 1998 with students at Heninger Elementary School, Willard Intermediate School, and Santa Ana High School. Teachers Margaret Abend, Michael Haynes, Bonnie Wyner, Sharon Saxton, and Robert Hinman invited us into their classrooms in those early years, and contributed to the unit’s initial formulation. Since then, however, it has taken on a second life, passing through the hands of Dr. Omar Valerio-Jiménez, who taught history and Chicano-Latino Studies here at UCI in 2000-2001, and Mark Patrick, a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature who has worked with Omar to bring the curriculum into its current shape. I have studied world mythology with Mark for many years now, and I am pleased that he has agreed to do the final editing of the volume.

Sonia Velázquez helped shape this curriculum from its very beginnings in 1997, when she was a graduate student in Spanish at UCI and a member of HOT’s first World Mythology team. She had studied the *Popol Vuh* as an undergraduate at Princeton University, and she brought considerable knowledge and insight to our early uses of this material in school classrooms. Sonia later went on to teach English-Language Arts at Century High School in Santa Ana. I am delighted that she agreed to serve as Teacher Consultant on this unit.

Teachers from the UCI-Santa Ana Teachers Institute and UCI’s California History-Social Science Project provided additional feedback.

The final stages of this unit’s development took place under the auspices of a grant from UC MEXUS (The University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States).

This unit is also in line with the principles of Content Counts, a new series of HOT curricular units funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This grant, which goes into effect in September, 2003, supports curricular guides that combine literary and non-fictional forms of reading and writing, geared at English language learners. We hope this curriculum will become a model for the new series.

—Julia Reinhard Lupton
HOT Founding Director
Overview and Objectives

The centerpiece of the Mesoamerican unit of HOT’s World Mythology program is the *Popol Vuh*, a long creation story and epic narrative of the Maya Quiché people of Guatemala. Appropriately excerpted, the *Popol Vuh* gives students in grades six through twelve an opportunity to study, over several sessions, a complex and evocative creation myth that represents one of the great works of world literature. The work explores the relation between gods and humans, establishes the process of creation and creativity as a series of revisions, asserts the responsibility of humanity for nature, and confronts the finitude that characterizes the human condition.

In working through the curriculum, students will:
- explore in greater depth a creation narrative of length, substance and historical significance.
- develop vocabulary and thematic awareness.
- develop reading skills in content and literary expression.
- develop writing skills through both analytic and creative exercises.
- explore a vigesimal counting system and astronomical discoveries.
- consider the influence of mathematical and scientific achievements on a creation narrative.
- practice the use of textual evidence.
- explore the religious and social thought of Mesoamerica.
- practice visual interpretation and map-reading skills.

In working through the curriculum, students develop skills and acquire knowledge in preparation for a final writing assignment related either to the concept of poetic justice evident in the *Popol Vuh* creation story or to the creative process as represented in the myth’s successive stages of design and redesign: experimentation, failure, and revision.

The HOT Mesoamerican curriculum will help students master some of the English-Language Arts and History-Social Science Standards for California Public Schools. The curriculum uses excerpts from Virginia Hamilton’s “Maker and Feathered Serpent the Creators” in *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from around the World*, part of the California Recommended Reading List.

The HOT *Popol Vuh* curriculum for the intermediate level is intended to supplement either the grade seven History-Social Science Standard 7.7 (Mesoamerican civilizations) or to function more generally as a supplemental English-Language Arts curriculum for reading and writing. In both cases, it is designed to stimulate thought across curricula and between disciplines. By introducing students to informative readings, a map of the Maya region, images of archaeological sites and artifacts, and a primary historical document—the *Popol Vuh*—the curriculum encourages students to engage in a focused exploration of several aspects of Maya civilization. Students study the geography, agriculture, technology, archaeology and cosmology of the Mayas in conjunction with a sustained analysis of the creation episode from the Maya sacred history. Students are asked to synthesize their knowledge and their analysis of visual and verbal texts in order to draw informed conclusions regarding the Maya world view and to express those conclusions in developed English prose.

A more specific teacher’s guide precedes each reading and is designed to assist in preparing the lesson by providing a list of objectives, an overview of target skills, some preliminary activities, reading suggestions for enhancing student comprehension, and strategies for approaching the exercises and writing assignments.

An essay on the *Popol Vuh* appears at the end of this volume for teachers interested in more background.
Applicable Standards for Grade 7
English-Language Arts Curriculum

READING

1.0 WORD ANALYSIS, FLUENCY, AND SYSTEMATIC VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT
Students use their knowledge of word origins and word relationships, as well as historical and literary context clues, to determine the meaning of specialized vocabulary and to understand the precise meaning of grade-level-appropriate words.

VOCABULARY AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT:
1.3 Clarify word meanings through the use of definition, example, restatement, or contrast.

2.0 READING COMPREHENSION (FOCUS ON INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS)
Students read and understand grade-level-appropriate material. They describe and connect the essential ideas, arguments, and perspectives of the text by using their knowledge of text structure, organization, and purpose.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS:
2.1 Understand and analyze the differences in structure and purpose between various categories of informational materials.

3.0 LITERARY RESPONSE AND ANALYSIS
Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They conduct in-depth analyses of recurrent patterns and themes.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF GRADE-LEVEL-APPROPRIATE TEXT:
3.2 Identify events that advance the plot and determine how each event explains past or present action(s) or foreshadows future action(s).
3.3 Analyze characterization as delineated through a character's thoughts, words, speech patterns, and actions; the narrator's description; and the thoughts, words, and actions of other characters.
3.4 Identify and analyze recurring themes across works (e.g., the value of bravery, loyalty, and friendship; the effects of loneliness).

WRITING

1.0 WRITING STRATEGIES
Students write clear, coherent, and focused essays. The writing exhibits students' awareness of the audience and purpose. Essays contain formal introductions, supporting evidence, and conclusions. Students progress through the stages of the writing process as needed.

ORGANIZATION AND FOCUS:
1.1 Create an organizational structure that balances all aspects of the composition and uses effective transitions between sentences to unify important ideas.
1.2 Support all statements and claims with anecdotes, descriptions, facts and statistics, and specific examples.
1.3 Use strategies of notetaking, outlining, and summarizing to impose structure on composition drafts.

RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY:
1.4 Identify topics; ask and evaluate questions; and develop ideas leading to inquiry, investigation, and research.

EVALUATION AND REVISION:
1.7 Revise writing to improve organization and word choice after checking the logic of the ideas and the precision of the vocabulary.
2.0 WRITING APPLICATIONS (GENRES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS)
Students write narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive texts of at least 500 to 700 words in each genre. The writing demonstrates a command of standard American English and the research, organizational, and drafting strategies outlined in Writing Standard 1.0.

2.2 Write responses to literature:
   a. Develop interpretations exhibiting careful reading, understanding, and insight.
   b. Organize interpretations around several clear ideas, premises, or images from the literary work.
   c. Justify interpretations through sustained use of examples and textual evidence.

2.4 Write persuasive compositions:
   a. State a clear position or perspective in support of a proposition or proposal.
   b. Describe the points in support of the proposition, employing well-articulated evidence.
   c. Anticipate and address reader concerns and counterarguments.

2.5 Write summaries of reading materials:
   a. Include the main ideas and most significant details.
   b. Use the student's own words, except for quotations.
   c. Reflect underlying meaning, not just the superficial details.

Applicable Standards for Grade 7
History-Social Sciences Curriculum

WORLD HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY: MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN TIMES

Students in grade seven study the social, cultural, and technological changes that occurred in Europe, Africa, and Asia in the years A.D. 500-1789. After reviewing the ancient world and the ways in which archaeologists and historians uncover the past, students study the history and geography of great civilizations that were developing concurrently throughout the world during medieval and early modern times. They examine the growing economic interaction among civilizations as well as the exchange of ideas, beliefs, technologies, and commodities.

7.7 STUDENTS COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE GEOGRAPHIC, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF THE MESO-AMERICAN AND ANDEAN CIVILIZATIONS.

1. Study the locations, landforms, and climates of Mexico, Central America, and South America and their effects on Maya, Aztec, and Incan economies, trade, and development of urban societies.
2. Study the roles of people in each society, including class structures, family life, warfare, religious beliefs and practices, and slavery.
3. Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations.
4. Describe the Meso-American achievements in astronomy and mathematics, including the development of the calendar and the Meso-American knowledge of seasonal changes to the civilizations’ agricultural systems.
Lesson One: Meeting the Maya

TEACHER’S GUIDE

Objectives
Students will identify and explore the intimate connections between agriculture and many aspects of Maya culture (including astronomy, mathematics, literature, cosmology and religion). They will do so by:
- reading about the development of a corn-based agricultural society in Mesoamerica.
- locating archaeological sites on a map of the region.
- examining images of Maya deities related to seasons, fertility and agriculture.
- learning about Maya technology and the Maya vigesimal numeral system.
- engaging in close analysis and interpretation of text and images.

Preliminary Activity (10-15 minutes)
Before starting the reading, teachers may find it worthwhile to design a short activity that will help students focus on the topic of civilization formation while activating their prior knowledge and stimulating their curiosity. This can be accomplished in a brief, written journal entry or in a timed writing exercise conducted as homework or in class prior to reading.

For example, students could respond to the following prompt:

You have been selected to be one of 30 participants in a NASA experiment. Your task is to establish a new civilization on a distant planet where no other people exist. The planet is similar to Earth. Choose two of the following items to take with you to the new planet and give reasons for your choice.

- a credit card/money
- a book of your choice
- a variety of seeds
- a tool of your choice
- a microchip
- an animal of your choice

Allow students time to share their answers and then introduce the reading by situating the Maya civilization in place and time.

Reading Suggestions (30-35 minutes)
Students may be asked to read the texts aloud to keep them engaged. To help students monitor their understanding, ask them to write a brief sentence after each paragraph, summarizing its main idea. Remind them that the summary sentence does not need to be derived directly from the text. These sentences can help stimulate discussion and speculation during the exercises that follow.

Exercises
The exercises that accompany the reading can be completed in groups for the remainder of the period or selectively assigned for homework as time permits. It may be necessary to model a response to questions that require visual analysis.

TARGET SKILLS AND CONTENT STANDARDS
Students will practice the following skills in accordance with the California English-Language Arts or History-Social Science Standards:

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS:
Reading 1.0 (1.3)
Writing 1.0 (1.1; 1.3); Writing 2.0

HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCES:
World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times 7.7 (1, 2, 4 & 5)
The Popol Vuh, Reading 1A
A Brief History of Maya Agriculture

The Maya civilization began in approximately 2000 BC and reached its peak during the classic period between AD 300 and AD 900. Since then, Maya Indians have lived throughout the present-day areas of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. Today, most people of Maya ancestry reside in Guatemala, where they make up 60% of the population. They speak over 30 native languages.

Maize, or corn, was very important for the Mayas who were among the first people to cultivate maize.

The historical relationship between the Maya people and cultivated corn is an ancient one. Corn grew naturally in Central America long before people occupied the region, though it was a much smaller variety of grass with tiny grains. In Mexico, fossilized corn has been found that is at least 80,000 years old, but its cultivation by early Mayas began approximately 4,500 years ago.

ancestry: n. family origins

cultivate: v. to encourage growth
[a. cultivation b. culture c. agriculture]

fossil: n. remains of animals or plants that have been preserved through time

staple: n. something essential (usually a food)

crop: n. harvest

hybrid: adj. genetically mixed

jade: n. a bright green precious stone

drought: n. a dry season

sedentary: adj. settled, people who do not wander

IMAGE 2. “Map of the Maya Region.” Drawn by Mark Patrick
During the period of its development into a staple food crop, corn became so thoroughly hybrid that it was no longer able to survive in the wild, requiring the work of humans for its reproduction.

The cultivation of corn was a sacred duty for the ancient Mayas, who held elaborate planting rituals and harvest ceremonies. To the Mayas, corn was a gift of the gods and it played a central role in every aspect of Maya life and culture. As a primary food source, corn symbolized life itself and is prominent in Maya religion and mythology. The most sacred of Maya stones, jade, was used to represent corn in Maya art and sculpture. In such images, the young maize god is depicted as an innocent, beautiful being who can be hurt by rain, wind, drought and pests. His well-being depends, at least in part, on the protection of humans.

The success of agriculture meant that it was no longer necessary for early Mayas, who were hunters and gatherers, to move about in search of food. Because corn was a dependable crop, they were able to stay in one area, developing a sedentary lifestyle with an elaborate culture and civilization capable of creating the magnificent palaces, temples and ceremonial roads that remain visible today. The agricultural lifestyle also allowed the Mayas to develop the sophisticated systems of mathematics, astronomy and writing. Their mythology emphasizes the central role of the corn god (or maize god) and, in fact, relates how human beings themselves were made from corn.

**Popol Vuh: Historical Background**

Maya scribes of high birth probably wrote down the existing text of the *Popol Vuh* in the sixteenth century. It contains the Maya sacred history. In the first years of the eighteenth century, a friar named Francisco Ximénez transcribed this manuscript, now lost, into Spanish from the Maya. The original was likely in the form of a calendar, with extensive charts, tables, and pictures of gods, stars, and planets illustrating the course of the year. It was called *Popol Vuh* or “Council Book” because Maya Quiché leaders consulted it during periods of crisis. The story evident in this calendar may also have been the subject of extended public performances. The book was a “seeing instrument,” or *ilbál*, because it was designed to overcome the limits of human vision by offering insight into the future.
The Maya civilization had great achievements in astronomy, architecture, agriculture, and mathematics. Two related discoveries demonstrate their sophisticated scientific knowledge: the concept of zero and a vigesimal numbering system (base 20). They used three symbols: a stylized shell for zero, a dot for one, and a bar for five. These symbols were used in a numeral writing system that increased from bottom to top in vertical columns shown in the chart below.

By combining their mathematical and astronomical discoveries, the Mayas were able to create a calendar that was more accurate than any other until the invention of the Gregorian calendar (AD 325) that we use today.

The Mayas depended on the position of the moon, planets and stars to determine the seasons of the year. The planet Venus, brighter than any other object in the sky except the sun and moon, was especially important. By observing its movements, Maya farmers knew when to plant, irrigate and harvest their crops. In the sacred history of the Mayas, the Popol Vuh, the Hero Twins (Hunahpu and Xbalanque), descend into the Underworld to fight the Lords of the Night. The morning appearance of Venus followed by the rise of the sun symbolized the Hero Twins’ victory over the gods of the underworld. Venus represented Hunahpu, while the sun stood for the other twin, Xbalanque.

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THE POPOL VUH, EXERCISE 1
Meeting the Maya

1. ___________________________ is necessary for a nonsedentary people, such as hunters and gatherers, to become a sedentary people. The harvesting of ___________________________ helped the Mayas establish a civilization in Central America.

2. Maya farmers needed to determine the length of the seasons in order to know when to plant, ___________________________, and ___________________________ corn.

3. Practice writing your grade in school, age, month of birth, and day of birth using the Maya vigesimal numbering system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARABIC NUMERALS</th>
<th>MAYA NUMERALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade in School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month of Birth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day of Birth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Examine the image of the Young Maize God statue (IMAGE 1). His hair looks like the ___________________________ of a corn plant. Archaeologists found the stone bust of the Young Maize God in Copán. Locate Copán on the map (Image 2) and determine in which country it is located.

5. How would you describe the position of the Young Maize God’s hands in relation to one another (IMAGE 1)?

6. Examine the image of the “Incensario” (IMAGE 3). The ear of corn under the figure’s arm is attached to his navel through a cord. From what you know about the importance of corn for the Maya, what can you say about the cultural message conveyed through this work of art?
7. **Writing Assignment:** Based on what you have learned about the Mayas, think about how much control they have over nature. Make a short list of the things they control and the things they simply observe. Next, write a short paragraph describing the difference between the kinds of things they learned to control and the kinds of things they learned to observe.
Objectives

Students will be able to explain the reasons behind the creation of humans as narrated in the *Popol Vuh* and to understand the hierarchical position of humans in the Maya creation story. They will do so by:

- practicing active reading strategies.
- examining the importance of astronomy and astrology in Maya culture through images of a major observatory.
- recognizing the use of sensory description.
- writing a coherent paragraph to explain the role of sound in the initial stages of creation.

Preliminary Activity

(10 minutes)

Students will be introduced to the importance of sound in the *Popol Vuh* creation story. Ask the students to consider the concept of zero and to apply this concept to the world of living things. By subtracting humans, animals, trees and vegetation, they might be able to imagine a world that is both empty and without sound. Encourage the use of descriptive language throughout the exercise.

To introduce sound, ask students to imagine wind moving across a grassy field and among trees and bushes and to consider how satisfying this might be to the creator gods. Ask students to prepare a list of sound words that describes the experience of creation and to include words from the actual reading that they find useful.

Students may be asked to think about the more developed and complex sounds that would occur with the creation of animals. Ask them to compare the noise of wind over a field to that of a field or forest alive with many kinds of birds and animals. Encourage them to consider whether this would be pleasing to the creator gods.

Because the gods are not satisfied with plants or beasts alone, they decide to shape a being who will please them with still more complex and pleasurable sound—that of praise. In order to help students imagine the gods’ need for recognition, ask them if they have ever felt a need to receive praise after creating or accomplishing something significant.

Help students see that the story not only explains how and why the animals were created, but justifies their place in the hierarchy of beings: animals are perceived as above the plants, but below humans. With a little prompting, students are likely to conclude that the myth serves to explain and justify the practice of domesticating and eating animals.

TARGET SKILLS AND CONTENT STANDARDS

Students will practice the following skills in accordance with the California English-Language Arts Standards:

- **ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS:**
  - Reading 1.0 (1.3); Reading 3.0 (3.2-3.4)
  - Writing 1.0 (1.1-1.4); Writing 2.0 (2.2 a-c; 2.5 a-c)

- **HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCES:**
  - World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times 7.7 (1, 2, 4 & 5)


Reading Suggestions
(40-45 minutes)

This lesson is composed of an account of both the initial creation and the creation of animals, and the former poses more difficulties than the latter. To help students overcome this difficulty, teachers may want to spend time during the reading prompting students to consider what they are learning.

As they read, students should pause periodically to respond to the following three questions:

- What is going on? (If students are unsure, have them take a guess.)
- If you could meet the author of this story, what question would you ask to help you better understand the reading? (Try to push students to ask specific questions rather than merely what it is about.)
- What do you notice that is interesting, surprising or beautiful about the reading? Does it remind you of other stories, songs, movies, or experiences you have had?

The instructor will probably need to model the process by reading a section aloud and then asking these questions.

Another exercise that will help students appreciate the poetic elements of the myth involves reading aloud by rows, pausing and changing readers after each mark of punctuation. In other words, Student A will read “The Word began long ago in a place called Quiché where the Quiché people lived.” and Student B will read “We shall tell how mysteries came out of shadows,” followed by Student C, who will read “out of the past.” and so on to the end of the narrative. This exercise will slow the reading down and underscore the unique phrasing and rhythm of the Popol Vuh.

Exercises

The exercises that accompany the reading can be completed in groups for the remainder of the period or selectively assigned for homework as time permits.

The final question is a writing prompt designed to generate a paragraph in which students describe the importance of sound in the Popol Vuh. Reminding students of the concept of zero in nature (emptiness) and the subsequent appearance of elements, plants and animals, should help them organize their thoughts for writing. The writing portion can be worked on in class and/or as homework.
THE POPOL VUH, READING 2
Maker and Feathered Serpent the Creators

The Word began long ago in a place called Quiché where the Quiché people lived. We shall tell how mysteries came out of shadows, out of the past. These things were brought to light by the Maker and Former, who had many names: Hunter Possum, Hunter Coyote, Feathered Serpent, Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth, Grandfather, Grandmother.

There was once the ancient Book of Wisdom, written a long, long time ago. It is a great story about the birth of heaven and earth. There were four creations. Here is the telling of all of these things.

The First Creation
There was no one, at first. There was not one animal, yet, and no bird, fish, or tree. There was no rock or forest, no canyon, no meadow.

There was sky separated from all things. The face of the earth was invisible. There was nothing that could make a sound.

There was the sea, so calm and all alone. There was dark and night and sea murmurings, rippings. Yet within the dark and night and sea, there was the Maker and there was the Feathered Serpent.

Maker and Feathered Serpent came together. They were in the calm water, and They were brilliant. They glittered with all light. They were there, wrapped in blue and green feathers.

They were the great thinkers. And so it is that there was sky and the Heart of Sky. Thus is God, and so He is called.

Behold the Heart of Sky and His three signs: Lightning Hurricane, New Lightning, and Blue-green Lightning.

And They, the three flashes who were the Heart of Sky, came to Feathered Serpent.

And came the word of God, spoken with Maker and Feathered Serpent. Together They thought and figured

murmur: v. to make steady, low sounds
ripple: v. to form very small waves

out. All of Them discussed what must be done to bring life and light. What would light be and dawn? Who would bring food? Who would provide?

And They brought Their words together, joined them with Their thoughts, planned creation. Their words and thoughts were so clear that whatever They said came to be.

“Let it be that water should go, be emptied,” They said. “There will then be the plate of earth to be made ready for sowing and brightening and warming.”

They created earth by saying it.

“Earth,” They said. “Earth!”

And there it was suddenly, forming out of dust and mist.

“Mountains and valleys,” They thought.

Their magic and power brought trees to cover the mountains.

“Pines!” They said, and pines came to be.

Feathered Serpent was pleased.

“I’m glad You have come, oh Heart of Sky,” It rejoiced, “Lightning Hurricane, New Lightning, and Blue-green Lightning, Heart of Sky, Maker, Feathered Serpent.”

But the deer and the birds, the panthers and serpents just rustled; they rattled and roared and howled and warbled. They just twittered and chattered; they could not talk like men, like humans. They would not. They all cried out in different sounds. There was no language.

Maker heard and said, “They can’t say Our names. They can’t praise Us. We are their makers, and We will have to begin again.”

So the God said to First Creation, “You do not speak, so We will change you and remake you.”

“As you are now, you are brought low. You will serve, you will not lead.

“You—bird, deer, you will stay where you are, where you sleep and eat, in the forests and canyons, among tree and bush. You will be eaten, you will kill and be killed. You will stay low and serve, since you cannot talk and praise your God.”

So it was tried again. The Word. And quickly, because the planting time was coming, the brightening time.

sow: v. to scatter seed
mutter: v. to make low, unclear sounds
warble: v. to whistle
1. How does the story begin? What seems to be its main purpose?

2. What is the situation at the moment of creation? Why are things so difficult to describe at this point? How does the speaker manage to describe them anyway?

3. Look closely at the way Maker and Feathered Serpent create things. In what order is the universe designed?

4. How do the gods create the earth? By what names are the gods called in the creation story? How did the Mayas use the natural world to explain the universe?

5. Why do the gods create the animals? What do the gods expect of this creation?

6. How do the gods react to the failure of the animals?

7. Why do you think the gods are in a hurry to attempt another creation before the time of planting? What does this information suggest about the dependence of Maya civilization on agriculture?

8. Examine the image of the pyramid called “El Castillo” at Chichén Itzá (IMAGE 4). In the foreground are a statue of Chac Mool (the Toltec name for the rain god) and a column of the Plumed Serpent (Kukulcán). Why would the Mayas erect statues and columns to these gods? Why might these two gods be worshipped with these physical structures?

9. **Writing Assignment**: What is the world like at the beginning of creation when there are only oceans, mountains and plants? What does it sound like? Circle all the words that describe the world before the creation of life. Then, write a paragraph describing the world at this initial stage of creation. Write a second paragraph describing what it would feel like to inhabit such a world, why the gods might want to create life, and why the animals disappoint them.
Lesson Three: Of Mud and Wood

TEACHER’S GUIDE

Objectives

Students will read the account of the gods’ first two attempts at creating humans in the Popol Vuh in order to understand the pattern of the creative process. They will explore this idea by:

- discussing the nature of the gods and creation.
- looking at Maya art.
- using a map.
- exploring the relationship between the events in the story and the definition of humankind.
- writing a short paragraph explaining the hierarchy of being.

Preliminary Activity (10-12 minutes)

Briefly review the events from the creation of the animals (lesson 2), touching specifically on how they were created (through the oral command of the gods), why they did not meet the gods’ expectations (they did not speak properly, but squawked and barked), and what happened to them (they were “brought lower” and transformed into lesser beings).

In order to get students thinking about how a creator might go about the task of creating human beings, it may prove beneficial to discuss two important questions that will be relevant to the creation account in the Popol Vuh. First, why would the gods want to create a thinking, speaking being in the first place? Second, having decided to do so, what materials would seem appropriate (in the historical place and time of the ancient Mayas) for shaping humans? Ask students to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the materials they might choose.

In introducing the concept of an imperfect creation, an instructor may want to emphasize the process of revision, using painting or music as an example of how perfection is often achieved by means of a gradual process.

Reading Suggestions (20-25 minutes)

Students will witness two very different problems encountered by the gods as they undertake the creation of humans. The first is the gods’ failure to choose sufficiently stable materials to form the bodies. The second is a failure of the created beings themselves to live up to the expectations of the gods. As students read, ask them to think of analogies from their own experience in trying to make things.

Either the teacher or a couple of strong student readers should do the reading aloud for this lesson. First, instruct students to read along, underlining three passages that appeal to them for some reason—passages of at least one sentence and no more than three. Then ask students to explain why they underlined these passages.

- What did I find appealing about this line? (the image it presented, the sound of the words, ‘it reminded me of...’)
- Why is my quotation important within the story? (how does it relate to what has happened before?).

Exercises

Read the writing prompt together to make sure everyone understands the assignment and then allow students to work with a partner to complete the rest of the hand-out. The exercises can be completed in groups for the remainder of the period or selectively assigned for homework as time permits. The writing assignment can be completed as homework if necessary.

TARGET SKILLS AND CONTENT STANDARDS

Students will practice the following skills in accordance with the California English-Language Arts or History-Social Science Standards:

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS:
Reading 1.0 (1.3); Reading 3.0 (3.2-3.4)
Writing 1.0 (1.1-1.4); Writing 2.0 (2.2 a-c; 2.5 a-c)

HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCES:
World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times 7.7 (1, 2, 4 & 5)
The Second Creation

Maker tried again to create a praisegiver and foodbringer.

This time the human form was made out of the wet earth, out of mud.

They who were God made the body, but it looked bad, not good. It fell apart, it was so damp and watery. It didn’t look at Them who made it. It had a face on one side of its head. It made no sense when it tried to speak.

“It can’t walk,” said Maker. “It can’t make more of itself. It won’t last, it will just get wetter.”

So They let Second Creation melt on the watery sea. Only the thought of it was left.

Then They made another plan to create man, so they could have praise and prayers.

This next man would be carved from wood.

“Find it, and carve it, and shape it. Fix it with corn and red bean. Make it carved of wood,” said Heart of Sky and Feathered Serpent.

The Third Creation

“See,” They said of the Third Creation, “It turns out nicely. It can speak.”

And so it was that men were made carved of wood. They were wood models. They looked as people look. They walked. They talked; they multiplied. The earth was full of them. There were sons and daughters.

But...

Their were no minds. Theirs were no hearts. Theirs were no memories of the Maker. They did not remember the Heart of Sky and Feathered Serpent.

But...

They were the first numbers of people covering the earth. They were as wood dummies. They were...
just the model, then, for humankind. Their arms and legs were too thin, too wooden.

So the Heart of Sky brought a flood down on them. It was a great flood made to destroy them. And they were broken up.

Into the houses of the wood ones, what was left of them, came the animals of the forest, the First Creation. All of them came, big and small. They turned on the carved ones. They gouged them and gnawed them and tore them and crunched them.

Their dogs told the wood ones, “You caused us pain, you ate us. Now we will eat what is left of you.”

And they did. Some of the wood ones escaped to the forest. You can see them still, living up in the trees. They are monkeys. That is why monkeys look so human. They are what is left of the wood dummies who could not think, could not walk straight, and were destroyed.

gouge: v. to scratch open

gnaw: v. to chew upon
1. The gods first tried to create human beings from ___________________________ and then from ___________________________. What makes each material a poor choice for creating humans?

2. Why do the gods want to create humans? Look closely at the reading to support your statement.

3. What becomes of the people of mud? Do the gods destroy them? What do the gods learn from this attempt at making humans?

4. Are the gods satisfied with the people of wood? What happens to these people? Judging from this, what do you think the Mayas believed the gods expected from people?

5. What is being explained by the end of the story?

6. Locate “El Caracol” on the map (IMAGE 2). Examine the image of “El Caracol” at Chichén Itzá (IMAGE 5). The structure of “El Caracol” is similar to an ___________________________ used by today’s scientists to look at stars and planets. Modern scholars believe the round structure of “El Caracol” and the Maya observation of Venus may have something to do with the practice of honoring the Feathered Serpent. Why might the winding, round structure be linked to the Feathered Serpent?

7. Maya scientists used this observatory to track the movement of the sun, moon, and Venus. Why do you think the Mayas believed it was important to determine the number of days it took for Venus to reappear in the exact same place in the sky?

8. Writing Assignment: The Popol Vuh places gods above humans, humans above animals, and animals above plants. Do the people of wood seem to understand this order of things?
Lesson Four: False Pride

TEACHER’S GUIDE

Objectives

Although this reading may seem digressive, it follows the actual progression of the Popol Vuh, which interrupts the creation narrative with an episode that focuses on false claims to godly power. In the narrative of the “Hero Twins,” students will have an opportunity to relate false humanity (people of wood) to false divinity (Seven Macaw). They will also see a second example of “poetic justice,” a concept central to the creation event (and evident in the fate of the wood people) recounted in the text. By reading the narrative, they will:

- perceive how mythological narratives serve to explain phenomena in the natural world (here, the origin of the macaw and its unusual appearance).
- examine visual representations of glyphs.
- understand the theme of “poetic justice.”
- consider the importance of point of view.

Preliminary Activity

(5-7 minutes)

The account of the hero twins introduces a reading that may at first seem hard to follow. Careful introduction of the characters may help, as will a discussion of why excessive pride might threaten or offend the creators. Have students discuss briefly their thoughts on the relationship between spiritual beings, perhaps by referring to the more familiar Biblical examples (God, angels, fallen angels, etc.).

Allow students time (3-5 minutes) for discussion before beginning the reading.

Work with students to arrive at a definition and example of poetic justice. A good definition to work with is, “The punishment fits the crime.”

The example of the wood people in lesson 3 should serve to illustrate the concept. There, because the manikins ate the dogs, they are in turn eaten by the dogs. Have students think of examples.

Reading Suggestions

(30-45 minutes)

Chronologically, this story takes place at the same time as the creation of the wood people. Students should keep this in mind during their reading. It may be useful to explain that the fall of Seven Macaw initiates the same storm that brings about the destruction of the wood people.

As students read, it may be helpful to explain the actors in the narrative and to keep them distinct from one another during the reading. The essential categories of actors are creator gods and their lesser counterparts (both good and bad demi-gods). Have students underline passages where they are not sure what is happening. Discuss these as a class.

Exercises

After the discussion of the reading, it should take students no more than 10-15 minutes to answer the questions in the exercises. When they are finished, read over the writing prompt as a class to make sure it is clear.

TARGET SKILLS AND CONTENT STANDARDS

Students will practice the following skills in accordance with the California English-Language Arts or History-Social Science Standards:

- ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS:
  Reading 1.0 (1.3); Reading 3.0 (3.2-3.4)
  Writing 1.0 (1.1-1.4); Writing 2.0 (2.2 a-c; 2.5 a-c)

- HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCES:
  World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times 7.7 (1, 2, 4 & 5)
This was a time when there was no sun. But there was one who had great pride; Seven Macaw was his name. His light provided a sign for the people who were flooded.

“I am great. My place is now higher than that of the human work, the human design. I am their sun and I am their light, and I am also their months. My light is great. My eyes are of metal. My teeth glitter with jewels and turquoise; they stand out blue with stones. And this nose of mine shines white into the distance like the moon. Since my nest is metal, it lights up the face of the earth. When I come forth from my nest, I am like the sun and moon,” said Seven Macaw.

It was not true that he was the sun, this seven Macaw, yet he boasted about himself, his wings, his metal. And so Seven Macaw puffed himself up like the sun and moon. He only wished for such greatness.

Two boys, the first named Hunahpu and the second named Xbalanque, saw evil in his pride.

And then came the shooting of Seven Macaw by the two boys. We shall explain the defeat of each one of those who engaged in self-magnification.

The great tree of Seven Macaw was
the nance, and it provided the food of Seven Macaw. In order to eat the fruit of the nance he went up the tree every day. Since Hunahpu and Xbalanque had seen where he fed, they were hiding beneath the tree of Seven Macaw.

And when Seven Macaw arrived, perching over his meal, it was then that he was shot by Hunahpu. The blowgun shot went right to his jaw, breaking his mouth. Then he went up over the tree and fell flat on the ground.

After that they approached the place where Seven Macaw lay.

“I beg you, please take pity on me! What medicines can you make?” asked Seven Macaw.

“We just pull the worms out of teeth, and we just cure eyes. We just set bones, your lordship,” they replied.

“Very well, please cure my teeth. They really ache, every day. It is too much to bear! I get no sleep because of them— and my eyes. They just shot me, those tricksters! Ever since it started I haven’t eaten because of it.”

“Very well, your lordship,” they said. “It’s merely a matter of taking the teeth out and putting in replacements, sir.”

“Very well. Yank them out! Give me some help here!” he replied.

And when the teeth of Seven Macaw came out, it was only white corn that the two boys put in as a replacement. He felt sorrow at once, he no longer looked like a lord. The last of his teeth came out, the jewels that had stood out blue from his mouth.

And they also took out the metal eyes of Seven Macaw. He felt no pain; he just looked on while the last of his greatness left him. It was just as Hunahpu and Xbalanque had intended.

Such was the loss of the riches of Seven Macaw: only the doctors got the jewels and gems that had made him so proud, here on the face of the earth.

Just as they had wished the death of Seven Macaw, so they brought it about. They had seen evil in his pride. After this the two boys went on again. What they did was simply the word of the creator.

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THE POPOL VUH, EXERCISE 4
False Pride

1. Why does Seven Macaw pretend to be the sun and moon?

2. What parts of his body does Seven Macaw think are most valuable? Why?

3. What characteristics of Seven Macaw do the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, dislike? Why do you think these particular things bother them?

4. Who obtains the riches of Seven Macaw after he is treated by the Hero Twins? What does his loss of jewels and gems teach us about his mistake? Did the boys take pride in their handling of Seven Macaw? Provide evidence from the text.

5. Examine the photograph of the ceremonial plate (IMAGE 8). The Maize God (Hun Hunahpu), shown in the middle, is emerging from the split in the earth (depicted as the back of a turtle). The two figures by the side are the Maize God’s twin sons, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who are pouring water to ensure that the corn sprouts from the earth. Hun Hunahpu’s ______________________________ and ______________________________ are similar to those found on stalks of corn.

6. Examine the image of the “Queen of Uxmal” (IMAGE 6). The structure (which looks like a “C”) around the head of the “Queen of Uxmal” is like a ______________________________.

7. Archaeologists found the ceremonial plate of the Maize God and the Hero Twins in the area near “El Mirador.” Locate the archaeological site “El Mirador” on the map (IMAGE 2) and determine in which country it is located.

8. Writing Assignment: Define poetic justice, and then give an example. Your example can be mythic, in the style of Popol Vuh.
Lesson Five: From Broken Place

TEACHER’S GUIDE

Objectives

Students will synthesize their previous readings and findings, activating their previous exploration of concepts such as the relationship between culture and agriculture, the importance of corn in Mesoamerica, the idea of poetic justice, and the place of humans in the universe. Students will achieve these objectives by:

- careful and active reading of the last installment from the Popol Vuh creation myth.
- reviewing visual representations of Maya deities.
- considering the nature of corn and the logic of using it as the material for human creation.
- discussing the need for the most perfect being (humankind) to be limited in power.
- writing a persuasive, coherent paragraph.

Preliminary Activity

(10 minutes)

Several of the students will probably be familiar with the biblical story of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace. The story of the Garden of Eden, which serves to explain the human limitations of labor, pain, and death, is not so different than that of the corn people in this regard. Both it and the Popol Vuh recount not only the creation of human beings and their elevation above other forms of life, but also the reasons for human finitude, an essential difference between them and their creator(s).

Prior to reading the story, ask students to consider the reasons both mud and wood failed to serve the needs of the creators. Ask them to imagine what materials they are familiar with that might actually resemble human beings. Prompt them to discuss how these items/materials resemble humans. Next, get them to think about how humans are like and unlike gods (compared to animals, wood or mud, for example).

The main purpose of this exercise is to reactivate the information and the ideas explored in previous lessons. This can be accomplished, in part, by a brief review of the graphics that accompany lesson 4. Have them look at the image of the Hero Twins and recall the earlier reading on the importance of corn in Mesoamerican culture. Moderate a discussion of the significance of corn and the relationship between Maya culture and Maya agriculture. Note: the relationship between culture and agriculture is elaborated in both the reading for lesson 1 and the “Teacher’s Guide to Popol Vuh Curricula.”

Reading Suggestions

(40 minutes)

As they read, be sure students are aware of the role of the animals, the steps in processing the corn, the unprecedented success in forming humans, their uncomfortable likeness to gods, and the gods’ response to this minor problem. Also make sure they notice that women are created last.

Exercises

Read the writing prompt together to make sure students understand that they are being asked to write a persuasive text. The instructor can take this opportunity to define persuasive writing. Emphasize the need for a clearly stated thesis supported with quotations and evidence from the text itself.

The exercises that follow the reading can be used to get students thinking about the text in preparation for the final writing assignment. They should take about 10 minutes to complete and can be done as a class. Ask students to take notes in the space provided and to use these notes for reference while writing their paragraphs.

TARGET SKILLS AND CONTENT STANDARDS

Students will practice the following skills in accordance with the California English-Language Arts or History-Social Science Standards:

- ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS:
  Reading 1.0 (1.3); Reading 3.0 (3.2-3.4)
  Writing 1.0 (1.1-1.4; 1.7); Writing 2.0 (2.2 a-c; 2.4 a-c; 2.5 a-c)

- HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCES:
  World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times 7.7 (1, 2, 4 & 5)
Here begins true man's beginning and the search for that which would make his body.

And Maker, Heart of Sky, and Feathered Serpent spoke.

"The dawn has come. Morning has come for people of the earth."

And here the thoughts of Maker came in light. The sun, moon, and stars were coming soon. And They, the All-God, pondered as to what should make human flesh, and where it should come from.

As they thought and thought, four animals came to them: mountain cat, coyote, little parrot, and crow. These four came from Broken Place, [Bitter Water Place], where yellow corn and white corn were plentiful. And these corns would be the human design, with water as blood. These would flesh out the formed and shaped people, the Final Creation.

The animals showed Them the way to get there.

Maker was joyful to find this mountain overflowing with yellow and white corn ears. And there were also honey and sweetest foods, fruit and vegetables. Small and great plants there, too.

The white and yellow corn was ground to fill many bushels, and with water there came human fat.

Maker and Feathered Serpent said: "Making the first mother and father, We use yellow corn with white corn to build the flesh. We use food for the legs and arms of humankind."

"These will be the first fathers, the original four who are men."

And these are the names of the first humans who were formed:

First is Jaguar Quiché
Next is Jaguar Night.
Third is Ma-hu-cutah.
Last is Wind Jaguar.

ponder: v. to think deeply
bushel: n. a large basket

These are the names of our forefathers. Formed and shaped, never born of a mother; had no father, they are themselves great ones. Formed by Maker and Feathered Serpent.

And they were human. The four humans. They talked; they saw. They heard and listened. They worked and walked.

They looked good, and they were good humans. They were handsome. They saw all at once. They knew everything under the heaven. As soon as they looked at the earth and sky, they knew all very deeply.

They could see through trees and rocks, they could see through people.

Oh, those four were the best and the first: Jaguar Quiché, Jaguar Night, Mahucutah, and Wind Jaguar.

Maker asked them, “Do you know? Do you look? How good is your speech?”

The four beings saw everything under the sky clearly and perfectly. They gave thanks to Maker.

“Praise be, thanks to You, having formed us, three times thanks to have made us. We see what is far and near, what is great and small, up and down. We have thoughts, and we can talk. Thank you, Grandmother, Grandfather.”

“Well, that isn’t good,” Maker said. “You understand too much. You don’t need to know everything perfectly.”

So Maker took back some of it, took off a little of the vision that could see everything so clearly.

“Let it become like this,” They, the All-God, said. “Since they are only Our designs, they shouldn’t know or see too much. They are not God, but men only. So let them see only what is right near them. Let them be satisfied with sowing, and reaping, and borning.

“We’ll take them apart somewhat. We’ll weaken their eyesight so that close-up will be clear, but they won’t see everything far away.”

And the four humans were made to lose their complete knowing of all things. They knew some and a little more. But not everything, not like the Heart of Sky knew as God.

So it was that the Final Creation was done. The forming and making of the first grandfathers and fathers by the Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth.

And the mates to man came; their wives came into being by God’s Word.

Sea House was the wife of Jaguar Quiché
Fish House was the wife of Jaguar Night.
Hummingbird House was the wife of Mahucutah.
Parrot House was the wife of Wind Jaguar.

These were the names of the wives, and they were noble. They gave birth to the tribes, great and small—all of them.

There you have the root of us.
We, who are the Quiché people.
1. Why is it especially interesting that the animals, who helped destroy the people of wood, find the corn that will be used to create new humans?

2. Take a moment to remember the destruction of the wood people. What kind of a place does “Broken Place, [Bitter Water Place]” seem to be? Why do you think the animals look here for materials to make new creatures?

3. What are the new beings like? Describe their intelligence and their ability to see the world around them.

4. How do the gods change their creation? How is this reaction like and unlike the previous ones? What ability of the new creation seems to trouble the gods the most? Why do you think this is so?

5. Does the gods’ treatment of the corn people seem fair? What have the gods learned from the actions of the wood people?

6. Why do you think the gods decide to create women? What do you think these women are like? Do the gods need to change them in any way?

7. **Writing Assignment:** How do you explain the gods’ treatment of the corn people who have finally given them the praise they desired? Write a paragraph defending the gods’ decision to blur the vision of their creation. Support your points with details from the story. You may want to refer to the events in earlier parts of the creation story as well.

8. **Writing Assignment (alternate):** On the first attempt, the Maya gods do not succeed in creating the beings they desire. Write a paragraph describing what the gods learn from each attempt and how we learn about the gods during this process of creation.

9. **Writing Assignment (alternate):** Write your own myth explaining how people came to be limited (in their life span or in their ability to see things).
THE POPOL VUH
Final Writing Assignment A

Write an essay explaining the creative process by which the Maya gods finally make human beings. What substances do they use first? Why does each substance fail? What substance finally works? What kinds of things does the final episode tell us about the Maya civilization (their food, their religion, their science and technology?) Use quotations from the text to make your points. Below is the beginning of an outline. Fill it in with your own points.

I. Introduction
   a. Introduce the Popol Vuh to your reader
   b. What is your thesis or argument?

II. The Mud People
   a. What do the gods use first as a building material?
   b. What is wrong with this choice?

III. The Wood People
   a. How is wood a better choice than mud?
   b. What is wrong with the wood people?
   c. What happens to the wood people? Why?

IV. The Corn People
   a. What do the gods choose next?
   b. What is good about this final creation?

V. Why Corn?
   a. What was the role of corn in Mesoamerican life?
   b. Discuss corn in Maya religion.
   c. Pick out and develop a detail about corn and/or the corn people from the story.

VI. Conclusion
THE POPOL VUH
Final Writing Assignment B

Write your own creation myth, using the Popol Vuh as a model.

Prewriting:

Who are your god(s)? (names, relation to nature)

What substances do they choose to work with? (Choose three, two that don’t work and one that does.)

What do they learn from each stage of creation?
The Mayas: Historical Background

In about 2000 BC, the Maya civilization began, and during the preclassic period (from this point of origin to AD 300), the Mayas built spectacular pyramids and domesticated a considerable variety of animals and crops. Maya farmers used terraces, fertilizers, crop rotation, and household gardens to grow maize (corn), avocados, papayas, pineapples, and cacao (chocolate). The development of such an extensive agricultural system allowed the Mayas to become sedentary and to build large cities. Among the most spectacular of these were the settlements of Kaminaljuyú, Tikal, and El Mirador. Foremost among their crops was corn, the mainstay of the Maya diet and an important part of their religion. Agriculture and the ability to store food also allowed the Mayas to pursue scientific and leisure activities. Maya astronomers, for example, tracked the movement of the sun, moon, and planets (especially Venus) and developed two precise calendars (one based on a 365-day year and another on a 260-day almanac). And by the late preclassic period, the Mayas had developed a complex system of writing with hieroglyphs.

The Maya civilization reached its peak during the classic period from AD 300 to 900, building over sixty large cities. Among the most spectacular of these were the settlements of Kaminaljuyú, Tikal, and El Mirador. Foremost among their crops was corn, the mainstay of the Maya diet and an important part of their religion. Agriculture and the ability to store food also allowed the Mayas to pursue scientific and leisure activities. Maya astronomers, for example, tracked the movement of the sun, moon, and planets (especially Venus) and developed two precise calendars (one based on a 365-day year and another on a 260-day almanac). And by the late preclassic period, the Mayas had developed a complex system of writing with hieroglyphs.

The Maya civilization had great achievements in astronomy, architecture, agriculture, and mathematics. Two related discoveries demonstrate their sophisticated scientific knowledge: the concept of zero and a vigesimal numbering system (base 20) in which whole numbers acquired value according to their positional functions.

By combining their mathematical and astronomical discoveries, the Mayas were able to create a calendar that was more accurate than any other until the invention of the Gregorian calendar (AD 325). In addition to a precise calendar, the Mayas calculated with extraordinary precision the length of the tropical year, the astronomical revolution of Venus, and the lunaion periods.

According to Maya scholars, the gods were the bearers of time. Therefore, the Mayas created a hieroglyph, kinh, to represent the concept sun-day-time, which was a primary reality, divine, and limitless. Accordingly, they conceived of time itself as without limits—neither in the past nor in the future—a concept important to consider when teaching the Popol Vuh.

Popol Vuh: Historical Background

Maya scribes of high birth probably wrote down the existing text of the Popol Vuh in the sixteenth century. It contains the Maya sacred history, a series of narratives that preserves an ancient oral tradition, a tradition that itself recorded not only history, but a wealth of other aspects of the Maya world view, including myths, deities, religious practices and even migratory traditions. In the first years of the eighteenth century, a friar named Francisco Ximénez transcribed this manuscript, now lost, into Spanish from the Maya. The manuscript is currently housed in the Newberry Library in Chicago. The alphabetic transcriptions were based on an original text written in Maya script, a combination of hieroglyphs and phonetic signs, and the original was probably copiously illustrated. Although our current text is largely narrative, the original was likely in the form of a calendar, with extensive charts, tables, and pictures of gods, stars, and planets illustrating

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2 Maya scholars calculated the tropical year to an extraordinary level of precision, calculating its length at 365.2420, a figure that differs only slightly from the current calculation of 365.2422 days. Miguel León-Portilla, Time and Reality in the thought of the Maya. 2nd Edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 1-13.
the course of the year. It was called *Popol Vuh* or “Council Book” because Maya Quiché leaders consulted it during periods of deliberation and crisis. The story evident in this calendar may also have been the subject of extended public performances, not unlike the public recitation of national epics and creation narratives in other world civilizations. The book was a “seeing instrument,” or *ibidi*, because it was designed to overcome the finitude of human vision—a finitude explained in the creation story of the *Popol Vuh*—by offering insight into the future.³

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**Maya Mathematics**

The first lesson in the curriculum serves as an introduction to the complexity of Maya civilization and to the advanced level of sophistication for which it is famous. Because the creation story will emphasize and reinforce the importance of agriculture, specifically corn, to the development of the society, some introduction to this dependence and its logical relationship to advanced discoveries is necessary. The unit begins, then, with a discussion of the benefits to civilization of such a successful crop and its central role in Maya thought. Even the system of mathematics has relevance to corn, and the reading on the vigesimal number system will illustrate this intersection at many levels, introducing students to techniques for identifying corn species by calculating kernel numbers and observing kernel patterns and to the significance of Venus for the origin of agriculture and determining the planting season. Finally, the lesson introduces the *Popol Vuh* by referring to the Hero Twins, a story that ultimately leads not only to the appearance of agriculture but to that of human beings who, according to the Mayas, were created from corn itself.

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**The Invocation**

Like many epics in world literature, the *Popol Vuh* begins with an introduction that ties the work to ritual acts and indicates the religious and national importance (rather than purely literary value) of the text. “The Word began long ago in a place called Quiché where the Quiché people lived.” With these words, the authors locate the work in a particular place—the region of Guatemala inhabited by the Maya Quiché. The “ancient word” refers to the text of the original Council Book, which would likely have been consulted at key moments in the religious calendar or during periods of national need. From the beginning, the text is linked to the history and destiny of a people, the Maya Quiché. It is a cosmogony (or creation story) and a national epic, the story of one people’s journey. The full text of the *Popol Vuh*, which runs 135 pages, includes a history of the Maya Quiché up through the Spanish Conquest. The opening lines also suggest the post-Conquest transcription of the text, possibly influenced by the Book of Genesis and the Book of John from the Bible.

The prose beginning of the narrative is followed by a verse of poetry, once more indicating the religious and probably ritual origins of the work. This passage intones the names of the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, or Kukulcán, a primal god associated with the water or sea. Reference to the Maya gods in the *Popol Vuh* are irregular, since gods could have multiple names and multiple aspects (appearances) that could include one for each of the four geographical directions, one for each gender, an old and a young aspect, and in the case of the astronomical gods, an underworld aspect used by the god to pass through the underworld before re-emerging in the eastern sky in a new aspect. Consequently, a god may be referred to in the plural and may change names, gender, age or appearance as the narrative develops.

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**The Creation of the World**

Following the introduction, the authors give a sublime description of the world before creation. It is difficult to describe a world that does not yet exist, one characterized primarily by emptiness and stillness, and yet the absence of earth is conceivable for a society whose mathematicians created the concept of zero. The authors manage to evoke the sense of potential growth and energy stored in this scene of immense quiet by describing the scene negatively, subtracting features from common experience to expose a ground of pure potential beneath: “There was no one, at first. There was not one animal, yet, and no bird, fish, or tree. There was no rock or forest, no canyon, no meadow.” Another technique employed by the authors is the introduction of quiet, almost imperceptible sounds—“murmurings, ripplings”—and their visual equivalent—“they glittered with all light” The effect is one of both tranquility and expectation—ready to burst into the fullness of creation at the behest of the creator gods.

The two creator gods, Kukulcán and Hurucán (gods of the sky and storms) enter into dialogue in the next paragraphs.⁴ They agree to create humanity, and with it a world of trees, bushes, and “light and life” The first step is to draw water from off the face of the earth, “There will then be the plate of earth to be made ready for sowing and brightening and warming” which emphasizes, through a metaphor describing the earth as a plate, the Mayas relationship to the

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earth and its capacity for nourishment and sustenance.

Like the God of the Hebrew Bible, the Maya gods create the world out of their word: “And They brought Their words together, joined them with Their thoughts, planned creation. Their words and thoughts were so clear that whatever They said came to be.” Though this line can be attributed to cross-cultural influence, one must still ask the question: why might the writers have borrowed this feature of the Bible for their own reworked religious epic? The answer must have something to do with the compelling notion of a creative word and the power of articulate speech, of sound raised to the level of poetic praise, a theme stressed throughout the Popol Vuh and exemplified by the text’s own high level of verbal artistry.

The Creation of the Animals

Once the earth, sea, and sky have been situated with relation to each other and the earth populated by an initial outgrowth of plants, Kukulcán, rather than taking pleasure in his creation and calling it good, expresses irritation: “Why this pointless humming? Why should there merely be rustling beneath the trees and bushes?” The humming and rustling of wind in leaves is only a modest step forward from the sighs and murmurs of the world before creation; if anything, these new sounds are worse, since they irritate rather than soothe. Unlike the sounds of silence at the beginning of the world, these inarticulate noises do not seem pregnant with potential meaning and future development.

The gods respond to the situation by creating animals and appointing them “guardians” of the plants. But when the creators ask the animals to speak to them and praise them, their desires are once again frustrated: “They just twittered and chattered; they did not talk like men, like humans. They would not. They all cried out in different sounds. There was no language.” The epic’s sound vocabulary has taken a new turn: we now have animal sounds, more varied and distinctive, louder and more urgent than those of the silent world or the world of plants, yet still fundamentally lacking in meaning, and still unable to fill the gods’ need for praise. The animals are, therefore, demoted in the world of creation, made into food and domestic servants for the human race yet to be created: “You will be eaten, you will kill and be killed. You will stay low and serve, since you cannot talk and praise your God.”

The Creatures Made of Earth and Mud

Now the gods turn to another building material, mud, in their attempt to create creatures who will praise them. The mud body, however, is too wet and does not keep its shape. More importantly, perhaps, “It made no sense when it tried to speak.” Though it seems to be moving towards language, its words lack meaning, just as its shape lacks definition. It can sustain neither itself nor meaningful language, and the gods are likewise passive in their response, simply letting it dissolve: “Only the thought of it was left.”

Unlike the other attempts of the gods, this one leaves no visible trace in the created world: the mud people do not become lower creatures or any other inhabitant of the living world. And yet, by remaining “merely a thought,” they do seem to retain a place in the creative process itself. We can think of them as a kind of rough draft or sketch, as a clay model such as that used by artists to establish the general outline of a work before turning to a more substantial, valuable and resistant material such as marble for the finished work. With the mud people, the gods begin to approximate the form of human beings, even though they have not yet been successful.

In many creation traditions, including the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian ones, the gods are compared to potters or sculptors who mold human life out of earth, dust, or clay. The Hebrew name “Adam” is, in fact, derived from their word for earth—adamah. The Popol Vuh includes a version of this story among its repertory, but only as an initial stage in a sequence of drafts or experiments leading towards a final creation.

The Creatures of Wood

After their initial failure, the gods turn from the wet, crumbly, ever-dissolving substance of mud to a material that is hard, firm, dry and capable of holding any shape into which it is carved. The substance is wood, and the people formed of wood are able to retain their forms and to multiply. But while they satisfy the need for a lasting physical form, they are, like the substance from which they are made, mentally and spiritually empty: “Their were no minds. Theirs were no hearts. Theirs were no memories of the Maker.”

The gods decide to destroy the people of wood, and Hurucán undertakes the task by bringing on a great flood and tempest from the sky, a catastrophic violence represented in the form of vicious animals.

The flood creates a state of emergency throughout all of creation and leads to an inversion of the hierarchy of nature. Animals, previously in a position of servitude to people and things and properly the instruments of people, begin to take over the devastated land: “Their dogs told the wood ones, ‘You caused us pain, you ate us. Now we will eat what is left of you.’”

This inversion raises a question of justice, and students are often surprised by the violent treatment the wood people receive from their creators and from the creatures and objects of the world. The rationale for this treatment, though, is evident in the intended function of the human race. Although created to praise the gods, the humans of wood fail to recognize and observe their place in the cosmic hierarchy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gods</th>
<th>Humans</th>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>Plants</th>
<th>Objects</th>
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And this failure has, in turn, led to another: the wood people have not taken proper care of and responsibility
Hurucán, or Heart of Sky, is offended and his two sons, pretenders to lordly cycles, and their enemies are a father included here recounts the exploits of making the sky-earth a safer place about heroic gods whose adventures try to succeed. But the authors of the human beings, will need only one more nearly solved the problem of making their attention instead to stories making their way into mid-July) signal the beginning of the hurricane season. In chronological terms, this episode coincides with the story of the wooden people, since Seven Macaw serves as their source of celestial light and since his downfall sets theirs in motion. It was his first fall, brought on by the blowgun shot of Hunahpu, that opened the way for the great flood that would bring down the wooden people. Their fates, too, are parallel: just as Seven Macaw only pretended to be the sun and moon, so the wooden people only pretended to be human.

The Creatures of Corn

Finally, the gods turn to another substance, corn, for the molding of human beings. Corn is neither too wet (like mud), nor too dry (like wood), but “just right.” Combined with water, corn will form human flesh and blood, resulting in a creature capable of survival, multiplication, and language. Animals lead the gods to the corn—perhaps to atone for their previous role in the destruction of the wood people. The gods find the corn at a place called “Broken Place, Bitter Water.” The Mayas surviving today still associate the Broken Place of the Popol Vuh with a particular mountain near the Mexican border. The phrase “Broken Place” describes a cleft in the ground, an opening on a mountain from which corn sprouts. The cleft is a common motif in Mesoamerican art. Rain gods are usually featured with a cleft in their heads, sometimes empty, sometimes sprouting vegetation. Similar clefts also appear on the facades of buildings which are themselves often designed as masks of the gods. Commenting on this passage from the Popol Vuh, Roberta and Peter Markman write, “The creation of man is intimately connected here with the origins of agriculture, that is, with the ‘discovery’ of corn at Broken Place... symbolically the place at which man’s sustenance, the corn, emerges from the world of the spirit into the natural world... But corn, as Mesoamerica well knew, is a cultivated plant, not a wild one, and the import of the myth in this regard is clear. Man exists in culture, not as a wild animal; the animals find the corn, but man is formed from it. Only within the context of culture can man make use of plants and water, his symbolic flesh and blood, to sustain his individual life and the life of the community without which truly human life would be impossible.”

Here we see the fundamental link between culture and agriculture. Culture (etymologically linked to the “cultivation” of the earth) begins with the domestication of plants, and the creation of efficient staple crops such as corn allows for the diversification of human labor into activities beyond those necessary for subsistence. Corn, a cultivated crop that cannot survive in its present form without human intervention, also requires technology in order to be readily consumable: it must be ground, cooked, and subjected to “nixtomialization,” the softening of maize by cooking it with lime, a process

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5 Dennis Tedlock, Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 12.

which serves not only to balance its amino acids but to release its niacin for use by the human body.

By suggesting that human flesh was derived from corn, the myth links successful humanity with a subsequent cultivation of the earth and the surplus of leisure that makes advanced civilization possible.

In the final episode of creation, the first four human beings are the four parents from which the Maya Quiché trace their family trees. And here, the national and genealogical element apparent in the invocation reemerges. The original humans are described as “father-mothers,” both male and female, though more like men in appearance. They are physically handsome, but more importantly they possess intellectual skills that the previous experiments lacked—“They talked; they saw. They heard and listened.”—and they have extraordinary vision, capable of seeing everything on earth without obstruction. This vision, of course, gives them profound knowledge: “They saw all at once.”

“The four beings saw everything under the sky clearly and perfectly,” the humans sing a song of thanks, a feature of the narrative that suggests its liturgical function in a national epic. In their song of praise, they emphasize their joy in their own attributes: “We see what is far and near, what is great and small, up and down. We have thoughts, and we can talk.”

And although they express gratitude for these gifts, they do not praise the gods directly, emphasizing their own qualities rather than those of their creators.

It is perhaps for this reason that the gods are dissatisfied with the praise they have so long awaited, and they conclude: “You understand too much. You don’t need to know everything perfectly.” This time, the gods have succeeded too well in their efforts; they have made creatures so perfect that they resemble gods themselves. So the gods decide to “weaken their eyesight so that close-up will be clear, but they won’t see everything far away.”

One way to understand the gods’ actions is to look back at the example of the Wood People. Because the creatures of wood did not understand and properly ritualize their subordinate relation to the gods, they failed in their custodianship of nature and the world of objects. Throughout the creation story, the gods continue to “learn from their mistakes,” taking cues from their earlier works and designs, their rough sketches and first drafts. The people of corn do praise their creators, and for this reason they retain their position above animals and just below the gods in the cosmic order. But since their praise is self-directed and celebrates the godlike knowledge made possible by extraordinary vision, it represents a blurring of the distinction between humans and gods. For this reason, the gods increase that difference by forever limiting human vision. In the process, they hope to insure the smooth workings of the natural order at all its levels.

To compensate for their loss of “vision,” the gods give the first “father-mothers” four newly-created wives. In place of the godlike vision that has been taken from them, the creatures are given access to the quintessentially human realities of social relationships and domestic companionship.

The creation story concludes with a return to the genealogical focus of the epic: “There you have the root of us. We, who are the Quiché people.” Those who began their religious life by praising themselves are now “penitents and sacrificers,” aware of their distance from the deities who made them and ready to found a set of religious practices on that basis. If, in the course of the story, they have become less like gods, they are compensated by becoming more fully human in their relations to one another, in their relations to the forces above, and in their awareness of human limitations, the beginning of true knowledge.
Print Resources For Teachers

Comprehensive history of the Maya people, copiously illustrated in black and white; somewhat dry, and disappointing on questions of art and culture. Nonetheless, a definitive historical work.

A cultural history of food in Central and South America, pre- and post-Conquest. Fascinating discussions on current theories concerning the origins of maize and its cultivation. Includes black and white illustrations.

Documentary novel by a modern author from Uruguay.

Combines anthropology and art history in a philosophical analysis of Mesoamerican imagery that sometimes tends towards pop psychology, but remains illuminating and learned. Lots of illustrations, some in color.

Somewhat old-fashioned, this inexpensive paperback is nonetheless a good resource for information on Maya, Aztec and Inca mythology. Includes maps and (low-quality) photographs.

Transcribes stories from Mayas living today, interfiled with historic legends. The first episode, “Breath on the Mirror,” retells segments of the *Popol Vuh* within the contemporary Maya landscape.

Passages on creation of the world, animals, and humans form the centerpiece of HOT’s Mesoamerican curriculum.

Print Resources for Students


Includes a useful illustrated section on Mesoamerica.


**Web Resources for Teachers**

http://www.mayadiscovery.com
Spanish and English site with many links to information and images related to Maya cosmology, history, agriculture, codices and contact with Spanish explorers.

http://www.crystalinks.com/mayan.html
A site with information and images related to Maya art and architecture, astronomy, calendar, geography, deities, history, archaeological sites, religion, the Popol Vuh, society and codices.

http://pages.prodigy.com/GBonline/ancwrite.html
A site dedicated to ancient Mesoamerican writing systems and codices.

http://loremipsum.online.fr/html/maya/mayaethno/mayaland.html
Provides basic information on important aspects of Maya life. Also includes a bibliography of resources relevant to the Mayas.

http://www.jaguar-sun.com/gods.html
Information on Maya history, culture, religion, writing system, number system, calendar and links to other resources.

http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-4780.html
Social studies lesson plan in Maya civilization.

http://www.marc.ucsb.edu/elpilar/
Site for ongoing research at El Pilar. Classroom and tour resources available on-line.

http://www.hist.unt.edu/web_resources/anth_mayas.htm
Site providing many links to Maya resources.

http://www.maya-archaeology.org
Extensive resources for Maya archaeology, hieroglyphic writing, and the latest digital photography with links to museums and images. Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Belize.

http://www.princeton.edu/~marp/
Princeton University’s Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project.

**Web Resources for Students**

http://www.halfmoon.org/index.html
On-line guide to translating and composing in Maya language and hieroglyphs. Many games, books and activities related to the Mayas.

http://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/specex/maya/maya.htm
McLung Museum’s on-line Maya exhibit.

http://www.civilization.ca/civil/maya/mminteng.html
Canadian Museum of Civilization’s on-line Maya exhibit: “Mystery of the Maya”.

http://www.mayakids.com/mmkglossary/glossary_m.htm
Interactive site for children to learn about the Mayas.
**IMAGE 1**  “Young Maize God.” From Copán, Honduras. Credit: ©Justin Kerr. (page 9)
IMAGE 3  Incensario Lid: Seated Deity with Seed Pod. Maya Culture. Department of Esquintla, Guatemala. Late Classic- Early Post Classic Periods. Clay, Pigment. Note that the seed pod, probably representing an ear of corn, is connected via an umbilical-like cord to the deity's navel, indicating that the seeds ultimately derive their nourishment from the deity. Reprinted courtesy of The Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Santa Ana. (page 11)
“El Castillo at Chichén Itzá.” In the foreground are a statue of Chac Mool (the Toltec name for the rain god) and a column of the Plumed Serpent (Kukulcán). Credit: Carlos Blanco.* (page 17)

IMAGE 5  "El Caracol." Located at Chichén Itzá, Yucatán. Credit: Carlos Blanco.* (page 22)
“Queen of Uxmal.” Formerly located atop the Pyramid of the Magician. Credit: Jorge Pérez de Lara.* (page 26)
"Pyramid of the Magician." Located at Uxmal, Yucatán. Credit: Ignacio Guevara.* (page 26)
IMAGE 8  “Hunahpu and Xbalanque bring their father, the Maize God, back to life from a cracked-open turtleshell.” On the surface of codex-style plate. Credit: ©Justin Kerr, 1982. (page 27)
STUDENT WORK FROM THE HOT PROGRAM:
MESOAMERICAN MYTHOLOGY—POPOL VUH

Dr. Omar Valerio-Jiménez and graduate student Mark Patrick, left, look at images from Mesoamerica. Below, HOT students at Santa Ana High.

HOT tutor Esther Serrano, above, with students.
During Winter 2001, Jen Bierich and Kai Herklotz worked with eighth-grade students in Bonnie Wyner’s class at Willard Intermediate. After reading the Popol Vuh, students developed their own creation myths.

This student utilizes dialogue in the development of his myth.

**EARTHQUAKES**  
by Roberto Gonzalez, eighth grade

It was one cold night in El Salvador. Earthquakes were created because the gods wanted to kill Conquistadores that didn’t praise them. Los Conquistadores are the people. The sky was dark, pitch black because the gods were mad at Los Conquistadores. The gods created an earthquake by pushing two land pieces together and caused the land to shake. Since it was pitch black, the people didn’t know what was happening. Los Conquistadores thought that a big rock had fallen so they ignored it. Then Los Conquistadores realized it wasn’t stopping. Los Conquistadores were trying to contact the god named Earthquakes. The god had responded and Los Conquistadores asked, “What is happening?” Then the land started to shake harder and faster and then it stopped instantly. The god said, “If the Conquistadores don’t pray to Earthquakes the earthquakes won’t stop.” Los Conquistadores prayed to Earthquakes but the god of the land Juancho punished Earthquakes by locking him up in the land and whenever he tries to escape an earthquake happens.

This creation myth shows how the student connects the angry personality of the god, Hades, with the dramatic, violent quality of volcanoes.

**THE CREATION OF VOLCANOES**  
by Andrew Rodriguez, eighth grade

Once upon a time, the gods were all at peace with each other. Of course there is always one who tries to stand out of all the gods. This god was the god of the underground, Hades. He always caused trouble around everyone, including the humans. So the gods decided to do something about him. They tried to place him in certain areas where he would be unable to cause trouble around anyone. The first place was the forest, but the problem was that he would be causing fires. When he touched any plant, it would catch fire because he was the god of the underworld. Then the gods had another solution to this problem: place him in the ocean. Once they had placed him in the ocean, they noticed that he was beginning to lose all the fire on him and if the gods would leave him in any longer, he would die. So the gods had one more solution: place him underground where he belonged. The problem was solved. Hades wouldn’t be able to cause any trouble to anyone. But there was one problem. Every time he would get mad he would explode like a volcano. But if he was under a big mountain it would be an even bigger eruption. The gods didn’t know what to do about it. So the gods had one solution: just leave him there. The gods think that he’s not their responsibility. Until this day forward every time the volcanoes erupt, it’s the god Hades erupting out of anger from something, anything that doesn’t go his way.
Note how this student from Bonnie Wyner's eigth-grade class at Willard Intermediate organizes her essay in coherent paragraphs that help the reader to see the myth, step by step. It is clear that she has considered how introductions and conclusions might frame her focus.

THE CREATION AND ACTIVITY IN THE POPOL VUH
By Liz Garcia, eighth grade

The Popol Vuh is about the creation of humans. Many gods tried different kinds of materials and other sources to try and create humans, but they failed until they succeeded.

The gods first tried using mud to make people. The mud people were well built. Although they were well-designed, it didn’t work. Their invention didn’t work because the mud people wouldn’t praise them and they melted. The humans melted because they weren’t formed well. The creators then gave up and tried something new. The gods probably learned not to use anything that would melt.

Likewise, the creators then tried wood. They thought that this would work because wood was strong and it wouldn’t fall apart. This idea didn’t work either for the creators; “there was nothing in their hearts, and nothing in their minds, no memory of their builder,” said the creators. Their faces were dry and they hadn’t developed legs and arms yet. Therefore, the gods destroyed them when Hurricane devised a flood for them. In contrast, the gods learned again not to use something that can’t move and something that can’t love or have a heart.

Once the other two ideas didn’t work for the creators, they tried corn. I think that they chose corn because corn doesn’t melt and it won’t have a dry face, but will be able to develop legs and arms. The gods began to worry, “They will become as great as us. If they cease praising us, they will begin to abuse the creatures below them, just as the wood people did.” Corn people were very thoughtful and smart. They knew how and what to do with everything. The gods then learned that to try new things isn’t bad as long as you’re being considerate and fair.

After all that trouble, I think that the myth is trying to explain or give an idea of how humans were created. The myth tell us about how to recognize and/or realize what humans are all about. I believe that people tell stories or write myths to explain things because it is an easier way to write or say an event that happened.
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Book design by Susan Reese
The Popol Vuh is about the creation of humans. Many gods tried different kinds of materials and other sources to try and create humans, but they failed until they succeeded.
—Liz Garcia, eighth-grader
Willard Intermediate School, Santa Ana

The Popol Vuh is an astounding, foundational text of the Maya people. Touching on history, literature, anthropology, science, religion, and mythology, it has had lasting influences on major writers and thinkers from Latin America. I am delighted that this important work of world literature is being made available to middle and high school students and their teachers.
—Jacobo Sefami, Professor of Spanish and Portuguese
The University of California, Irvine

HOT’s Mesoamerican curriculum opened new ways for me to read and teach the Popol Vuh. The curriculum’s use of primary and secondary texts allows me to teach different modes of reading. The lessons make creative use of visuals to introduce concepts that will be encountered in the reading, allowing English Language Learners to take part in the kind of reading, writing, and thinking that usually happens in college preparatory classes.
—Sonia Velázquez, Teacher
Century High School, Santa Ana, California