

# Lesson Plan: Journey to Sumeria - Gods, Scribes, and Ziggurats

**Subject:** Ancient History & Culture

**Grade Level:** 4th-5th Grade (Approx. age 10)

**Time Allotment:** 60 minutes

## Materials Needed

- Air-dry clay or modeling clay (a palm-sized piece)
- A tool for carving into clay (e.g., a chopstick, a wooden skewer, or a dull pencil)
- Paper (8.5x11" or larger)
- Drawing materials (pencils, colored pencils, markers)
- A printed or digital image of a Cuneiform alphabet chart (simplified versions are easily found online)
- A printed or digital image of a Ziggurat
- Optional: Building blocks (LEGOs, wooden blocks, etc.)

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

1. Explain the purpose of cuneiform and create a personal artifact using a similar method.
2. Describe the function of a ziggurat in Sumerian society and its connection to their gods.
3. Apply knowledge of Sumerian culture to design a creative project (a clay tablet and a ziggurat).

---

## Lesson Procedure

### Part 1: The First Scribes (25 minutes)

#### Introduction & The Hook (5 minutes)

Begin by setting the scene: "Let's travel back in time, over 5,000 years ago, to a land called Mesopotamia, the 'land between the rivers.' Here, the world's first cities are rising. This is the land of Sumer. Before paper or pencils, how do you think people kept track of important things, like how much grain they had or the stories of their heroes?"

Guide the student to the idea of writing on other materials. Introduce the Sumerians as the inventors of one of the first-ever writing systems, called **cuneiform**. Explain that it was made of wedge-shaped marks pressed into wet clay.

#### Activity: Create a Cuneiform Tablet (20 minutes)

1. Show the student the image of the cuneiform chart. Explain that scribes were highly respected people who went to special schools to learn this complex writing.

2. Provide the student with the piece of clay. Instruct them to flatten it into a small, pillow-shaped tablet, about the size of their palm.
3. Give them the carving tool (chopstick/skewer). Their mission is to become a Sumerian scribe and create their own tablet. They can choose one of the following creative tasks:
  - **Task A:** Write their name or initials using the simplified cuneiform alphabet.
  - **Task B:** Invent a simple "household law" and write it using 2-3 cuneiform symbols (e.g., symbols for 'family,' 'share,' 'food').
  - **Task C:** Create a pictograph story, drawing simple pictures in the clay that represent a daily task, like feeding a pet or watering a plant.
4. While they work, discuss how permanent these records were once they dried in the sun. This is why we know so much about the Sumerians today! Set the tablet aside to dry.

## Part 2: The Stairway to Heaven (25 minutes)

### Introduction to Ziggurats & Gods (5 minutes)

Transition to Sumerian spirituality. "Sumerians believed in many powerful gods and goddesses who controlled everything from the weather to the harvest. To honor them and feel closer to them, they built enormous temples. What do you think would be the best way to build a temple to reach toward the heavens where the gods lived?"

Show the image of the ziggurat. Explain that it was a massive, stepped temple at the center of every Sumerian city. It was not for the public, but for priests to perform rituals at the very top shrine, making it a sacred and exclusive place—a true 'stairway to heaven'.

### Activity: Design Your Own Ziggurat (20 minutes)

Tell the student they are now a Sumerian architect. Their task is to design a ziggurat for a specific purpose. They have a choice:

- **Option A (Architect's Blueprint):** Using paper and drawing materials, design a brand new ziggurat. They must:
  1. Give their ziggurat a name.
  2. Decide which Sumerian god it honors (e.g., Nanna, the moon god; Enki, the god of water and wisdom; Inanna, the goddess of love and battle).
  3. Add unique features, like grand staircases, gardens on the terraces, or carvings on the walls.
- **Option B (Master Builder):** Using building blocks, construct a physical model of a ziggurat. As they build, ask them to describe the function of each level and what the shrine at the top might look like.

## Part 3: Reflection & Connection (10 minutes)

### Wrap-Up & Storytelling (10 minutes)

Bring the student's creations (the tablet and the ziggurat design/model) together. Ask reflective questions to connect the activities:

- "Let's look at your tablet. If an archaeologist found this 5,000 years from now, what story would it tell them about you or our family?"
- "Look at your ziggurat. Imagine you are the high priest or priestess. What kind of offerings or ceremonies would take place at the very top to honor your god?"

- "The Sumerians told the world's first great adventure story, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Based on what you created today, what kind of hero or god would you invent a story about?"

Conclude by praising their creativity and reinforcing that the Sumerians weren't just historical facts, but real people who created laws, art, and stories that shaped the entire world.

---

## Assessment & Differentiation

- **Assessment:** Success is measured by the student's active participation and the thoughtful completion of their cuneiform tablet and ziggurat design. The key is their ability to explain the \*purpose\* behind what they created, connecting it back to Sumerian culture.
- **Differentiation for Support:** Provide a pre-flattened clay tablet. Use a cuneiform chart with only 5-6 simple pictograph symbols instead of a full alphabet. Offer a ziggurat template to color in instead of drawing from scratch.
- **Differentiation for Extension:** Challenge the student to write a full sentence on their tablet. Encourage them to write a short paragraph on the back of their ziggurat drawing describing a festival held there. Have them do a quick search online for a Sumerian god not mentioned in the lesson and design the ziggurat for them.