

## **Reading and Writing About the Scrub Environment Gopher Tortoises for Middle School Students**

### **Introduction**

No gopher tortoises presently live on the Wildflower Wayside Shrine Trail at South Florida Community College in Avon Park, Florida. However, at some point in the past, they were residents. Scientists recognize the gopher tortoise as a “keystone species” of the scrub environment. The “keystone” or center brick holds the other bricks in place to form an arch. Similarly, the tortoise creates a burrow that provides food and shelter to 250 different species, including the Florida mouse, indigo snake, and the gopher frog.

The gopher tortoise’s scientific name is *Gopherus polyphemus*. Gopherus was chosen because the tortoise digs a burrow like a gopher. Polyphemus is a character in the *Iliad* written by Homer in 800 B.C. He is a Cyclops, or one-eyed monster, who lives in a cave, which is like a burrow. More information about gopher tortoises, including a tortoise activity book which has a page comparing a tortoise and a turtle, can be found online at [www.gophertortoisecouncil.org](http://www.gophertortoisecouncil.org).

### **Literature for Reading**

“Why We Have Gophers” is a folk story collected by Zora Neale Hurston and published in her 1935 book *Mules and Men*. It is on pages 118-119 in a reprint published by Harper Perennial, in 1990. It can be found online at [xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapter7.html#8](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapter7.html#8). The story, because it is written in dialect, may be easier to understand if read aloud.

A rewritten version of this tale is available as “How the Gopher Tortoise Was Made” in *Uncle Monday and Other Florida Folk Tales* by Kristin G. Congdon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001: 27-30). More information about Hurston can be found online at [www.zoranealehurston.com](http://www.zoranealehurston.com)

### **Reading Process**

1. Folk stories are anonymous tales in the oral tradition.
  - They explain origins: why things exist or how they came to be.
  - They can also teach lessons, or explain how to change behavior.
  - Folktales can also preserve customs or cultural traditions.
  - Some legends are based on historical people or events.
  - One up-man-ship or “go one better” can make a folktale.
2. Explain which kind of folk story “Why We Have Gophers” is and why.
3. Folk stories have special characteristics.
  - The story has a simple plot, and repetition is important.
  - The tale almost always begins with the setting, the characters, and the conflict.
  - The characters are “flat” or “stock.”
  - Figurative language, imagery, and word play are often included in the story.
4. Outline the plot of “Why We Have Gophers” in five or six steps.
5. Identify the repetition, the setting, the characters, the conflict, and any figurative language, imagery, or word play.
6. Find unfamiliar words or phrases in the folk story, and explain their meanings as you understand it from the text.
7. Explain why the storyteller favors God or the devil, and use parts of the story to support your view.

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### **Sunshine State Standards**

- Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. RL 6.1, RL 7.1, RL 8.1
- Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes RL 6.3, RL 7.3, RL 8.3
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze specific word choice on meaning and tone. RL 6.4, RL 7.4, RL 8.4
- Explain how the author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text. RL 6.6, RL 7.6, RL 8.6

### **Writing Process: Writing a Folk Story That Explains the Origin of Something**

1. List some natural things to write about; for example, the North wind, a creek, sunflower, a grasshopper.
2. Choose one natural thing, and describe what it looks like (shape, size, and color), what its texture feels like, and any noise it makes.
3. Compare your natural thing to something else.
4. List several ways that natural thing came to be. Was it created? Did it transform from something else? Did it suddenly appear? Did some other natural process--like wind or wave--carve or build it?
5. Choose a process for how the natural thing was created, and list locations where it could have happened.
6. Choose one location, and describe. Then list times that the process could have happened.
7. Choose one time, and list the steps of the process.
8. Now, write a narrative explaining the origin of your natural thing. Start with the location and time, and follow your steps. Be sure to include some dialogue, vivid description of your natural thing, and how it compares to something else.
9. Conclude your story as an origin story (e.g., "so that's why we have gophers").

### **Sunshine State Standards**

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
  - Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
  - Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
  - Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence, signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another, and show the relationships among experiences and events.
  - Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.
  - Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences or events.

**W.6.3, W.7.3, W.8.3**