

The Odyssey: An Outline

The first four books of *The Odyssey* largely focus on Telémachus, the son of Odysseus. They are often called the *Telémachia*.

*****Book 1:** [Where our textbook begins.] Homer invokes the muse. He begins his story with Odysseus trapped on the island of Calypso, a nymph who wants to take Odysseus as her lover. Athena talks Zeus into pulling strings to set Odysseus free. Then Athena disguises herself to visit Odysseus's son, Telémachus in Ithaca. There, she finds out that Odysseus's house is overrun by greedy suitors who have infested the place. They are trying to woo Penelope, Odysseus's wife. Athena advises Telémachus to call a council and then travel to nearby islands and seek news of Odysseus's whereabouts.

Book 2: Telémachus calls the council and takes the speaker's staff. He denounces the suitors, but Antinoös blames Penelope for her delaying tactics. The gods send an omen of fighting eagles, which a soothsayer claims indicates Odysseus will soon come home. Eurymachus accuses this prophet of being bribed by Telémachus. He states the suitors won't leave until Penelope picks one. Telémachus proposes that he be given a ship and crew. He will sail out to seek news. If Odysseus is dead, Penelope will be available for marriage after the funeral is held.

Book 3: Telémachus sails to King Nestor at Pylos, who tells him stories of the Trojan War and when Odysseus was last seen. Telémachus takes a chariot to travel to Sparta to speak with Menelaus and find further clues.

Book 4: Telémachus visits King Menelaus. The King weeps because Telémachus resembles Odysseus so much, reminding Menelaus of his lost friend. He and Queen Helen tell more stories of Odysseus's exploits. Meanwhile, at Ithaca, the suitors are arranging to murder Telémachus so he won't be able to inherit the throne.

Book 5: The God Hermes, sent by Zeus in Book 1, arrives on Ogygia, where Calypso has trapped Odysseus. He finds Odysseus weeping on the beach, yearning for his family, and he orders Calypso to release him. Odysseus builds a raft from palm trees and sets sail. Poseidon spots Odysseus, and raises sea-storms to shipwreck him.

Book 6-8: Odysseus washes ashore among the Phaeacians. Princess Nausicaä finds him, and he is treated to a banquet, where he retells the story of how he came to this situation, filling in the details of his journey after he left King Menelaus.

*****Book 9:** [Our textbook includes this section.] Odysseus tells about his raid on Ismarus, his stop at the country of the Lotus-Eaters, his trip to the island of the Cyclopes and his quick-thinking in blinding the Cyclops (Polyphemus) and escaping his lair. He explains how this angered Poseidon.

Book 10: Odysseus tells about Aeolus's gift of a bag filled with winds and about how his curious sailors opened it too early, releasing a wind that blew them off course to Aeolia. His crew next barely escapes from the Island of the Laestrygonians, vicious cannibals. (The Laestrygonians destroy all his men and boats except the one boat Odysseus and a handful of his men are on). The survivors next land at Aea, where the witch Círcē lives. She lures the scouting party with her bewitching beauty, then uses a wand to transform them into pigs. Only Odysseus escapes because of his suspicious nature. The other crewmen are too terrified to help, but Odysseus uses the magical herb "Moly" to protect himself from magical transformation. When her spells don't affect Odysseus, he threatens her life until she relents and restores his men to human shape. Odysseus then uses his own charms to seduce Círcē so she will help him get past the sea-threats ahead. He and his men spend nearly a year with her on the island, and in the end Círcē agrees to help Odysseus get home.

Book 11: Círcē gives Odysseus directions on how to make a magical journey into Hades, the land of the dead, where he can learn from ancient spirits how to safely make it home. He sacrifices a ram and a black ewe, and he feeds the blood to the ghosts so they can take form and talk.

*****Book 12:** [Our book contains this section.] Following Círcē's advice, Odysseus succeeds in getting past the sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis. His starving crew, however, kill and eat sacred cows belong to Heliós (Hyperion or Apollo, the Greek Sun-God). The gods raise storms that drive the boat all the way back to Charybdis. There, Odysseus's ship sinks and his men drown. Only Odysseus thinks quickly enough to save himself, and he washes ashore on Ogygia, where Calypso enslaves him. [This spot is chronologically where Book 1 and Book 5 begin *in medias res*.]

Books 13-16: The generous Phaeacians help Odysseus get home even though this angers Poseidon. Odysseus arrives on Ithaca and disguises himself as a beggar to scout out the land. His kingdom is in shambles. One of his old servants, Eumaeus the swineherd, takes pity on the "bum" and takes him home for a meal. While Eumaeus is not around, Odysseus drops his disguise and reveals himself to Telémachus.

Book 17: Odysseus enters the main city. His disguise is so good Penelope and others do not recognize him. Only an aged, toothless, abandoned dog covered with sores, lying in a pile of dung, reacts to Odysseus by wagging its tail. Eumaeus explains that this wretched creature was Argus, once Odysseus's favorite hunting dog. The dog lifts its head, whimpers, and then dies--forcing Odysseus to hide his tears. At the palace, Antínoüs curses the "ragged beggar" and hits him with a footstool. Penelope rebukes Antínoüs and gives the beggar (Odysseus) permission to stay at the palace.

Book 18: Another beggar, Irus, gets enraged and tries to bully Odysseus for intruding in his favorite panhandling location. Antínoüs, bored and filled with bloodlust, arranges a boxing match between the two. They are surprised when the wiry Odysseus displays potent muscles by breaking Irus's jaw. Odysseus manages to find out that Melantho, one of the palace maidservants, has become the mistress of Eurymachus, and that the other maidservants are being abused by the suitors.

Book 19: Eurycleia, an aged nurse who cared for Odysseus as a child, sees through Odysseus's disguise. Odysseus barely prevents the truth from coming out. Penelope declares her decision: she will marry tomorrow whichever suitor can duplicate her husband's feat of shooting an arrow through twelve straight rows of axes after stringing his bow.

Book 20: That night, Odysseus and Penelope both toss and turn, worrying about the outcome of events. Penelope prays that she die before she is ever forced to marry one of the repugnant suitors. The suitors put in motion their plot to kill Telémachus.

*****Book 21:** [Our book contains this section.] The contest begins, and the suitors have trouble stringing the bow. In the meantime, Telémachus orders all the women in the household to stay in their quarters and out of sight. Eumaeus and Philoetius arrange to remove all weapons from the hall and lock all the doors. Odysseus takes the bow (while being mocked by the suitors) and successfully strings it and shoots through the rows of axes, dumbfounding those watching.

*****Book 22:** [Our book contains this section] While everyone is gaping, Odysseus enacts his plan and begins killing the suitors, shooting them like cardboard targets while they are unarmed and helpless. His son and the loyal servants help keep them trapped.

Book 23: Odysseus and Penelope are reunited. Athena arranges for the goddess Aurora (the Dawn) to take the morning off. The sun delays its rise for a full twenty-four hours so Odysseus and Penelope can have a truly epic night for their romantic reunion.

Book 24: In Hades, the dead spirits of old Greek warriors are surprised at the sudden incursion of so many young men all at once. Agamemnon is greatly impressed by stories of Odysseus's cunning and Penelope's fidelity. The kinsmen of the slain suitors are angry, and they try to revolt. The Ithacan civil war comes to a quick halt, however, when Zeus sends thunderbolts to strike down the rebels. Odysseus resumes his reign as king.