

# Scenario for Pyramid Builders

## Read the following to the students:

On one occasion, the fulltime craftspeople who worked directly for the pharaoh went on strike for a few days. In this activity, you will role-play workers who are explaining to the vizier (and to each other) the work you do and the reasons why your work is so important.

### This is what has happened:

- The old pharaoh has died and been buried.
- The new young pharaoh is just beginning to plan his own pyramid.
- As the old pharaoh's tomb was being finished, the workers went on strike because food was often not being delivered (this was the first strike in history).

### This is what is now happening:

- You want to meet with the vizier to demand better wages and/or working conditions before you begin the next pyramid – a job that will take many the rest of their lives to build.
- You are being given an opportunity to explain to the vizier why you should get a raise in pay and/or a change in working conditions. During this meeting, you will explain what you do and the reasons why your work is so valuable to the whole process.


### There are several roles you can play:

- vizier: as the pharaoh's manager, you are in charge of the meeting (*This role could be played by the teacher.*)
- astrologer/priest
- engineer/architect
- doctor
- young male labourers
- unskilled labourers
- water carriers
- chisel sharpeners
- masons
- scribes
- limestone quarry workers
- bargemen (*to bring stone to pyramid site*)

- granite quarry workers
- overseers
- tax inspectors (to make sure farmers pay their share)
- farmers
- painters
- carvers
- wives of craftspeople
- breadmakers (female)
- beermakers (female)

**This is how you will prepare for your role:**

- You will draw a card for worker's job.

 Students can prepare individually, or work with another person, to prepare a case – depending upon class numbers.

- You can use the notes provided and any other knowledge you have.
- You may be quite militant, or, if you are a full-time employee of the pharaoh, you may want to flatter the vizier and say how much you like your job. You decide how to play your role.

## Role Cards

<b>vizier</b>	<b>engineer/architect</b>	<b>astrologer/priest</b>
<b>doctor</b>	<b>young male labourers</b>	<b>unskilled labourers</b>
<b>water carriers</b>	<b>chisel sharpeners</b>	<b>masons</b>
<b>scribes</b>	<b>limestone quarry workers</b>	<b>bargemen</b>
<b>granite quarry workers</b>	<b>overseers</b>	<b>tax inspectors</b>
<b>farmers</b>	<b>painters</b>	<b>carvers</b>
<b>wives of craftspeople</b>	<b>breadmakers</b>	<b>beermakers</b>

# The Lives of Pyramid Builders

My name is Bak. I am a farmer and also one of the 4000 *labourers* who offered to work on the pyramid for the time that the Nile floods. The Nile has flooded to about 7.5 m this year, so I cannot work on my own fields for a while. I might as well work for the pharaoh. However...

- *Tax inspectors* came to my fields this year and assessed my taxes by measuring the area I have allocated to each crop. I grow barley and wheat, beans and lentils. My neighbours grow leeks, cabbages, radishes, lettuce, and cucumbers. (Sometimes we can get melons, dates, and figs from the desert.) I also have a goat, a pig, and a couple of geese. I have to be careful with my money, because I have to pay taxes even if my crop is ruined. Those tax inspectors really assessed me high.

Workers are needed for the “official project” – building a new pyramid. I can work on it right up until my fields are clear. Although I really need a few days to spend repairing the canals for the pharaoh, those tax people have told me there is not time. They are never satisfied!

- When I work on the pyramids, I am considered an *unskilled labourer*. I have to haul big blocks of stone from the quarry. There are 20 of us in a team, and we have to haul the blocks (one at a time) higher and higher up the ramp as the pyramid gets higher.

There are about 35 teams working at a time, and there has to be a block delivered every two minutes or the *overseers* get nasty.

Hauling those blocks is hard work. We move the blocks on sledges with a temporary runway of logs on the ground. The sledges move more easily if they are muddy, so we keep pouring water on them.

Sometimes, we have to haul giant statues of the pharaoh. It takes 172 of us to haul a statue.

We work from dawn to sunset, with a short break at noon. At night, we eat and fall into bed. I am usually so tired that I do not even notice how crowded the barracks are. My barracks area is small, and no one has any space. I get tired of hauling, but some jobs are a lot worse!

Some of these young workers have never been away from home – they think it is great to be doing this work! One guy in my barracks is having a great time. It is obvious he has never done this before. About one man in ten is chosen, and he thinks it is an honour. He becomes part of a work gang that calls itself “The Strongest Gang.” Fools! They will soon find out that they have to haul the biggest blocks. At first, they even think that having every tenth day off is a great holiday. Wait until they have done this a bit longer. The tenth day takes forever to come!

At the end of our work, we get paid with food, beer, oil, and linen. It is not bad pay, but we work hard. We trade what we do not need for other things. The young guys trade for presents to take home to their mothers and girlfriends. I remember doing that. I bet the young guys will go home and brag about what they have seen and the work they have done. I used to do that.

- I have a friend who works as an *underground quarry man*. The limestone found in these quarries is the best stone there is. It is much cooler working underground, but it is really boring. Workers chip blocks away at the top and sides and then try to split the blocks free at the base by using long wooden levers. The work is backbreaking, and it takes hours. There are snakes down there. Sometimes, chunks of stone break loose unexpectedly and kill workers.
- Working as a *granite quarry man* in southern Egypt has got to be the worst job. It is boiling hot there in the blazing sun. Workers have stone-headed hammers, wooden mallets, and copper chisels. It takes them hours to make a dent in the granite, and the stone tools get blunt and have to be sharpened over and over.
- Some people work as *water carriers*. It is not a bad job, but they really have to watch that their feet do not get in the way. Some workers have lost part of their legs, because they were not careful. The medics can fix a broken leg, but they cannot do much about a crushed leg.

Water carriers are constantly on the run carrying water to the workers. The temperature is very hot, and many people die because they do not get enough water. The quarry men really get thirsty, especially the ones who work in the granite quarries at Aswan.

- The *chisel sharpeners* are really important. We only have copper chisels, which get dull really quickly. Those poor chisel sharpeners are always being yelled at because they cannot work fast enough to keep up with the quarry workers and masons. What a job!
- The *bargemen* who take the granite from Aswan have a dangerous job, too. They have to be able to steer those barges on the Nile. If the river gods get angry and the granite shifts, the barges sink. If you don't drown in the Nile, the crocodiles get you! A bargeman died that way last week, and the overseer did not even care. He was angry, because the accident put him behind schedule!
- *Masons* are considered "skilled workers," and they put on airs because they are full-time employees of the pharaoh. They swagger around with their plumb lines and set-squares. You would think they were pharaohs themselves! They use wooden rods to lever the blocks into place, and every block has to fit. They have lots of chisel sharpeners to keep their equipment sharp. Sometimes a mason falls off the top of the pyramid. I saw one fall to his death the other day. It was awful.
- *Scribes* really keep track of us. They wander all over the place – writing, writing, writing. They keep a count of everything: the number of bricks delivered daily and the number that are laid, the tools issued every day and the number of tools handed back at night, the delivery of food supplies and the rations issued, the reason for an absence, and the reasons for an accident or a fight. Scribes know everything, and they report everything to the overseers who report to the department heads who report to the vizier who reports to the pharaoh. The pharaoh always knows about everything that is going on. I guess it is good to know how to write, but it must be awfully boring counting and writing all the time.
- I think that *painters* and *carvers* have really creepy jobs. Carvers go inside the tomb and enlarge the designs that have been made until they fill the wall. Then they carve some of the background so that the figures of the people and gods are slightly raised. The figures are then painted in the traditional colours by the painters. These workers have to be careful to get the gods and pharaohs standing just right and with the right gestures or they could bring down a curse on the tomb. Painters also paint the symbols and spells. If they get any of those wrong, the spells lose their magic power and the pharaoh will not have a good trip to the gods. These carvers and painters do not get a chance to be creative. Everybody is a critic! *Beginning painters* spend the whole day mixing the paint. They have to grind minerals into a fine powder and mix them with egg white or sticky tree resin.
- *Doctors* look after the tomb makers. I was talking to one doctor who thought that when he got a job with the pharaoh he would be looking after the royal family. No such luck! He has to look after all of the dirty and sweaty labourers like me who have stupid accidents. Doctors do not like it when workers crush a leg, because then the leg has to be cut off. Sometimes the worker recovers; sometimes he does not.

Sometimes workers get bitten by snakes and scorpions. These bites are bad, and often the workers die before the doctor has a chance to see them. Years ago, I got parasites from drinking polluted water. The doctor had a hard time getting rid of the parasite. Many people have eye infections, especially trachoma. That is what happened to a friend. The doctor cast a few magic spells, but my friend went blind anyway. They usually go blind. Workers are always getting desert sand and stone chips in their eyes, too. We are always complaining about "something in my eye" and "bad coughs." Some doctors think we are just making up excuses to get off work. Last week I had another tooth pulled, because I had a toothache. The doctor said toothaches are common because the flour is not ground very fine, and sometimes some of the grindstone gets into the flour.

- *Breadmakers* are always women. They make a tremendous number of loaves of bread every day. Every worker eats at least 10 standard-sized loaves a day. The kitchens are usually in the basement and have huge ovens. Wood is in short supply, so sheep or cattle dung is used as fuel. Every day, brickmakers (usually the junior workers) collect the manure, mix it with straw and water, and shape it into firebricks. The firebricks dry in the sun. When breadmakers have to start a new fire, they get a spark from a bow drill or a flint.

All of the flour has to be ground by hand on a stone quern. Once it is ground, the flour passes through a sieve. The flour is gritty. Some of the flour is mixed with water and salt to make unleavened bread (like a pita). This bread can be quickly cooked on a flat stone. However, most bread is made by adding yeast to the mixture and kneading it into dough. The breadmakers shape the dough into a mould and let it rise and then cook it in the oven. Most of our loaves are round or tall, pointed loaves. Bread baked for upper-class people often has spices or eggs added, but we get plain stuff.

In our hot climate, bread does not keep. It has to be made every day. I would not want to be a breadmaker. The temperature is often near 40°C outside and much hotter near the ovens. The breadmakers have an important job. Without them, we would not be able to do ours.

- *Beer*makers are also women. They make loads of beer every day. They use ground flour mixed with water, knead it into a stiff dough, add yeast, and lightly bake it in the oven. The loaf is then crumbled and placed in a fermenting jar with extra damp flour and more beer. When brewed, the beer is strained through a sieve into a jar. A tight stopper is put on the jar to stop the beer from fermenting. Sometimes dates are added to the recipe.

We are entitled to two jugs of beer per day. Sometimes we criticize the beermakers especially when the beer has too many “unidentified objects” in it. When that happens, we drink the beer through a reed to strain the objects out. With frequent sandstorms and so much dust from the tomb workers, it is little wonder that the beer has more ingredients than it is supposed to have. I should stop complaining. It is not the fault of the brewers that so much stuff ends up in the beer.

Everyone in Egypt drinks beer, including children. Even with “extra” ingredients, it is still safer to drink than the water.

- I am the *wife* of one of the craftsmen who work full-time for the pharaoh, so we live in the company town right next to the pyramid. It is not a bad life. We have a small, cramped mud-brick house with two rooms – a living room and a sleeping room. We also have a storeroom and an outside area for cooking. Our floors are made of beaten earth, and the windows are small and high up so the glare from the sun is not too bad. We do not have much furniture, just mats to sleep on and a low table for eating on. The desert sand is always blowing and gets into everything. Most people here have a cough that never goes away.

I keep a statue of the god Bes in our house to protect us, but the town is protected by a wall with a gate. The gate is guarded night and day, and at night the gate is shut.

The children and I have to haul water from a reservoir outside the town gate. The supplies have to be hauled to the reservoir by pack donkeys, because we live quite far from other towns. My husband is mostly paid in grain, oil, linen, and beer, so I often barter these things for other goods. My son is being trained in his father’s craft, so we will soon have another family wage earner. Our life is hard, but it is better than being a farmer. Farmers have to worry about so much – floods, dust storms, locusts, droughts, and all of those things. My daughter wants to have a *miw* (cat). She says that it will keep the mice away and make the goddess Bastet happy.

- *Astrologer/priests* have to decide when the stars are right before the pyramid for the new pharaoh is started. They have already positioned the pyramid in the right direction to ensure that everything goes well. Soon the pyramid will be built – as long as the workers do not refuse to work!

Many people also pay priests to pray for them. Sometimes, the priests meddle in politics and get into trouble. Most ordinary Egyptians are not too happy with the priests. We have to pay temple taxes as well as taxes to the pharaoh. Everything costs money!

- The *engineer/architect* is responsible for planning the pyramid structure. He has to make sure that it is stable and will last for a long time. He has great responsibility – if there are problems during the construction, he will be in trouble. So far, Egypt has had many great architects – their buildings are still standing.

My husband is meeting with the *vizier* in a couple of days. Like all the other workers, he wants to explain why his work is so valuable. The vizier is like a prime minister. He answers only to the pharaoh. He has a great deal of responsibility and will be in trouble with the pharaoh if anything goes wrong.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Preparing for a Role-Play

1. When is this event? \_\_\_\_\_ Where is it? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Who is your character? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Describe your character:

(a) Age \_\_\_\_\_ (b) Male/female? \_\_\_\_\_

(c) Approximate Height \_\_\_\_\_ Approximate Weight \_\_\_\_\_

(d) Hair colour \_\_\_\_\_ Eye colour \_\_\_\_\_ Skin colour \_\_\_\_\_

(e) Voice \_\_\_\_\_

(f) Posture (stooped, straight, shy, angry, other) \_\_\_\_\_

4. (a) Are you a powerful person in this situation (vizier, overseer, priest, other)?

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(b) When you imagine yourself in your role, what are your opinions/actions likely to be?

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(c) What kind of clothing or prop would help you to get into your role?

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