Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent
The Rise of Sumer

The Big Idea: The Sumerians developed the first civilization in Mesopotamia. The Sumerians developed the first advanced society.
The Appearance of Cities

Over time, Mesopotamia settlements grew in size and complexity. They gradually developed into cities between 4000 and 3000 BC. Even though most people were farmers, many people traded goods in the cities. The cities provided leaders with powerful bases. They were the political, religious, cultural, and economic centers of civilization.
An Advanced Society

In southern Mesopotamia, a people known as the Sumerians developed the world’s first civilization.

Around 3000 BC, several hundreds of thousands of Sumerians settled in Mesopotamia in a land they called Sumer. They created an advanced society.
The City-States of Sumer

Most people in Sumer were farmers, they lived mainly in rural, or countryside, areas.

The centers of Sumerian society were the urban, or city, areas.

Over time the cities grew. Historians believe that Sumer’s cities had more than 100,000 residents.
A city-state consisted of a city and all the countryside around it.

City-states in Sumer fought each other to gain more farmland. As a result, city-states set up strong armies.
Religion Shapes Society

Religion was very important in Sumerian society. It played a role in nearly every aspect of public and private life. In many ways religion was a basis for all Sumerian society.

The Sumerians practiced polytheism

**Polytheism** is a religion that worships many gods.

Among these gods were Enlil, lord of the air, Enki, god of wisdom; and Inanna the goddess of love and war. The sun and the moon were represented by the gods Utu and Nanna.
The Sumerians believed the gods had great powers. The gods could bring a good harvest or a disastrous flood. They could bring illness or good health. Sumerians felt in order to be successful they must please the gods. Every Sumerian had a duty to worship the gods.

**Priests** were people who performed religious ceremonies.

People relied on a good relationship with the priest in order to be in god’s favor. The priests made offerings to please the gods in religious ceremonies.
Sumerian Social Order

Social hierarchy is the division of a society by rank or class.

The highest level of people in Sumerian social hierarchy were the kings. The kings were chosen to rule by the gods. Below the kings were the priests. Below the priests were the skilled craftspeople, merchants, and traders.

Trade had a great impact on Sumerian society. Traders traveled from far away places and exchanged grain for gold, silver, copper, lumber, and precious stones. Below the traders were the working class people. These people were the farmers and laborers. At the bottom of the social hierarchy was the slaves.
Men and Women in Sumer

Sumerian men and women had different roles. Men held political power and made the laws, while women took care of the home and children.

Education was reserved for men, but some upper class women were educated as well. Some educated women were priestesses.
Sumerian Achievements

The Big Idea: The Sumerians made many advances that helped their society develop.
• They invented the first writing system.
• They invented many forms of art.

Essential Question: What inventions did the Sumerians create that changed civilizations forever?
The Invention of Writing

Sumerians made one of the greatest advances in history. They developed cuneiform. **Cuneiform is the world’s first system of writing.**

Pencils and paper were not invented yet so the Sumerians used sharp tools called **styluses** to make wedged-shaped symbols in clay tablets.
Earlier written communication used pictographs.

**Pictographs** were picture symbols.

Each picture represented an object, such as a tree or an animal. Cuneiform could also represent syllables or basic parts of words. Sumerians could represent more complex ideas in writing. Ideas such as “joy” or “powerful.” These ideas could be represented in cuneiform writing.
Sumerians used cuneiform first to keep business records.

A scribe, or writer, would be hired to keep track of items people traded.

The government used scribes to keep records. Becoming a scribe was a way to move up in social class. Sumerian students went to school to learn to read and write. In time Sumerians wrote works on history, law, grammar, and math. They also created works of literature. They wrote poems, proverbs, stories. Some were epics.

An epic is a long poem that tells a story of a hero.

Later, people used some of these poems to create The Epic of Gilgamesh, the story of a legendary Sumerian king.
The Arts of Sumer

The Sumerians were skilled in the field of art, metalwork, and architecture.

**Architecture** is the science of building.

The ruins of great buildings have provided us with examples of the Sumerian’s creativity.
Architecture

The Sumerian rulers lived in large palaces. Rich Sumerians lived in two story homes with as many as a dozen rooms. Most people, however, lived in smaller, one-story houses. These homes had six or seven rooms arranged around the small courtyard. Large and small houses stood along, narrow, unpaved streets of the city. Bricks made of mud were the houses’ main building blocks.
City centers were dominated by their temples, the largest most impressive buildings in Sumer.

A ziggurat, a pyramid-shaped temple tower, rose above the city.

Outdoor staircases led to a platform and a shrine at the top.
The Arts

Sumer sculptors produced many fine works. Among them were statues of the gods created for temples. Sumerian sculptors also sculpted small objects out of wood and ivory. Very few sculptures were works of beauty.

Jewelry was popular in Sumer. Many jewelers made fine pieces out of imported gold and silver.
Stone cylinder seals were probably the Sumerians most famous works of art.

Stone Cylinders rolled over clay to sign and seal documents or decorate other clay objects.

Some showed battle scenes or rituals. Some had hundredths of fine cut gems.
Sumerians enjoyed music. Kings and temples hired people to play on special occasions. Sumer musicians played reed pipes, drums, and tambourines.

Sumerians played stringed instruments called lyres.

Children learned songs in school. People sang hymns to the kings and gods. Music and dance provided entertainment in marketplaces and homes.
The End