

What Am I?

Celebrating a commonplace item



Print a “What Am I?” [sign](#). Add a clue in the text box, print, and post on your bulletin board. Post a different clue every day or so and see who can identify the mystery item. Then plan a “What Am I?” discussion and other related activities.

Do you know what I am? Here are some clues:

1. I may have inspired the story of a monster from the Bible.
2. I was used as an instrument of war by ancient civilizations.
3. I have been used as a work animal for several thousand years.
4. I have a lifespan of 60–70 years.
5. I have been known to not only bury my deceased relatives, but to visit their gravesites years down the line.
6. The male of my species will either live alone or in small groups of other males.
7. There are three different species of me.
8. One of my species has been declared endangered due to loss of habitat and poaching.
9. Even though I am a giant creature, I can delicately open a peanut shell without damaging the peanut inside.
10. I usually live in family groups led by the oldest female.
11. I am native to both Asia and Africa.
12. Children of my species are called calves.
13. I have the longest pregnancy of any mammal, lasting a whopping 22 months.
14. I am a Hindu deity.
15. I am a symbol for the Buddha’s mother in Buddhism.

16. I am the main character of a famous Walt Disney animated movie.
17. I am a symbol for an American political party.
18. My most important body part is my very special nose.
19. Poachers often hunt me for my valuable tusks.
20. I am the largest land mammal on Earth.

Can you guess what I am? That's right—I am an elephant!



Print a copy of the [pictures](#) to pass around as you share and discuss the information with your group.

Introduction

The largest land mammal on Earth, the elephant has held humanity's imagination for millennia. Read on to discover more about these wonderful and intelligent creatures.

The Mighty Elephant

Elephants exist in three species: the African bush elephant, the African forest elephant, and the Asian elephant. Both species of African elephants tend to be larger than their Asian cousins and can be distinguished by their larger ears, which are shaped like the continent Africa. Other differences include the fact that while all African elephants have tusks, Asian elephants usually only have tusks if they are male.

All elephants are known for their distinctive noses, which are called trunks. An elephant's trunk is its most important body part. Made entirely of muscle, an elephant's trunk is used for breathing, smelling, noisemaking, and as a sort of arm for grasping and moving objects. An elephant's trunk is a precise and versatile instrument, used for actions as intense as wrestling and fighting other elephants or as delicate as cracking open a peanut shell with no damage to the peanut inside.

Female elephants tend to live in small family groups led by a matriarch, who is usually the oldest female in the group. These groups will sometimes band together to form larger clans. Family groups are usually made up of several mothers and their children, which are called calves. Giving birth only every 4 to 5 years, females endure a 22-month pregnancy, the longest of any mammal. Calves will stay with their mothers for several years. Upon reaching adulthood, females will remain with family groups while males will depart and either live solitary lives or join other males in very sociable groups and form long-term relationships, as long as they are not in competition for dominance or mates. Elephants live roughly 60 to 70 years and often show what appears to be concern when another elephant dies, with groups of elephants often attempting to bury their deceased and visiting their gravesites for years to come.

Discussion Starters

- An elephant's trunk is four times as sensitive as a bloodhound's nose. Can you think of any other animals with unique noses? (Possible answers may include armadillos, proboscis monkeys, or the aptly named elephant seal.)
- Elephants are the only surviving members of the order *Proboscidea*. Can you guess some of the extinct species that are related to the elephant in this order? (Answers include the woolly mammoth and the American mastodon.)
- Can you think of any other animals besides elephants that have tusks? (Possible answers include walrus, warthogs, boars, and narwhals.)

Man and Mammoth

Elephants and humans have had close interactions since the Bronze Age, especially on the Indian subcontinent. Elephants have been used as work animals for millennia, with the practice continuing today. In ancient times, elephants were often trained by humans to be instruments of war, with their huge size and strong, nimble trunks making them a formidable force on the battlefield. Perhaps the most famous use of war elephants took place in the third century BC, when the Carthaginian general Hannibal led a force of elephants through the Alps to attack the Roman Empire. Elephants are also famously displayed by circuses and zoos, although in recent years this has been the subject of controversy. Evidence of mistreatment and of elephants' high level of intelligence have caused activists to fight against elephants appearing in zoos and circuses, as they believe it to be animal cruelty.

Unfortunately, man's unkind relationship with elephants does not end there. Elephants are often victimized by the ivory trade, with poachers killing elephants in order to harvest their tusks for the precious material. The ivory trade was banned internationally in 1990, but poachers maintain a black market for the material, with many hunters sneaking into wildlife preserves to kill elephants. The ivory trade as well as habitat destruction due to the spread of human populations have had a negative impact on the elephant. African elephants are considered a vulnerable species by international conservationist agencies, and the Asian elephant was officially declared an endangered species in 2008, with fewer than 50,000 remaining in the wild. Hopefully, conservation efforts and continued awareness will prevent any further damage to the elephant population so that these beautiful creatures will continue to be around for years to come.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever seen an elephant in a zoo or a circus? What was it like? Do you think it's cruel for elephants to be kept in captivity?
- What do you think of people using animals for work?
- What is your opinion on the ivory trade? Do you think it's okay to hunt elephants just for their tusks?



Elephants and Culture

In addition to being employed as a work animal, the elephant also holds a special place in the culture of many people around the world. In some forms of ancient Hinduism, it was written that the four corners of the world were held up and protected by the mythical World Elephants, and modern Hinduism features the elephant god Ganesh as one of its most important and revered deities. In some forms of Buddhism, it is said that the Buddha is a white elephant who was reincarnated as a human man, and the white elephant is often featured as a symbol of the Buddha's mother. Even Judeo-Christian religion has been influenced by the elephant, with the elephant serving as a possible source of inspiration for the massive creature called Behemoth from the Book of Job.

Elephants also feature prominently in modern pop culture. The elephant has served as the symbol of the Republican Party of the United States since it appeared in 1874 in a political cartoon by Thomas Nast. Elephants feature prominently in almost all media set in the jungle, with elephants playing major roles in several versions of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*. Perhaps the most famous and beloved pop culture elephant, however, is Dumbo, the protagonist of Walt Disney's 1941 film *Dumbo*, which tells the story of a young circus elephant who learns to fly thanks to his unusually large ears. Often seen as wise, responsible, and kind, the elephant has captured the human imagination for centuries and will likely continue to do so.

Discussion Starters

- “An elephant never forgets” is a common phrase about an elephant's supposed excellent memory. Can you think of any other turns of phrase involving elephants? (Examples may include *the elephant in the room*, *white elephant*, or *seeing pink elephants*.)
- Dumbo is a famous animated elephant, but he is not the only one. Can you think of any others? (Examples may include Horton from Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who* and the title character from the *Babar* series of children's books by Jean de Bruhoff.)
- The elephant has been used as the symbol of the Republican Party since 1874, but can you name the animal used as the symbol of the Democratic Party? (Answer: The donkey has been used as a symbol for the Democrats since 1870, in yet another political cartoon by Thomas Nast.)

Did you Know?

Read on to discover more fun trivia about elephants.

- **There is an elephant actress.**

Tai the Asian elephant is an animal actress owned by the company Have Trunk Will Travel, Inc. She has appeared in numerous films, including *Operation Dumbo Drop* (1995), *George of the Jungle* (1997), and *Water for Elephants* (2011).

- **There are also elephant artists.**

Elephants are among the animals known to be able to create abstract art. Using their trunks to manipulate paintbrushes, several elephants have created paintings that have been compared to abstract expressionists. It is not clear if these elephant artists assign any sort of meaning to their art, but at least one, an elephant named Ruby at the Phoenix Zoo, is known to have had a particular taste in the colors she selected for her work.



- **They use tools.**

Elephants have been known to take tree branches in their trunks to use as flyswatters. They have also been witnessed digging and then covering holes to find water and using logs and rock to disrupt or break electric fences.

- **They are kind.**

Elephants have been known to show concern for animals other than themselves. They have been seen to go out of their way to avoid hurting humans and other animals and will even guard injured people and caress them gently with their trunks.

- **There is an elephant who can “talk.”**

An elephant in South Korea named Koshik has been witnessed sticking his trunk inside his mouth and producing sounds nearly identical to several Korean words. His trainers believe that he does not actually understand or mean anything by these words but is in fact mimicking the sound of his trainers to become closer to them.

Additional Activities

1. Set up a viewing of a movie such as *Dumbo* (1941) or *Water for Elephants* (2011), which show elephants, both real and animated, in major roles.
2. Watch a quick video of elephants playing soccer in Thailand.
3. Visit the World Wildlife Fund’s website to see ways you can become involved in protecting elephants from poachers and other dangers to their existence.





