Common Themes/Motifs in Greek Mythology

Theme: a universal idea explored in a literary work; a statement about life
Motif: a recurring structure, object, or literary device in literature

Gods and Goddesses
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology embody human emotions.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology manifest human flaws and failings.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology meddled in human affairs, wars, etc.
- The gods/goddesses manipulate and use mortals for their own purposes.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology often deceived and/or abducted mortals.
- The schemes and plots of the gods and goddesses often entangled mortals.
- The gods/goddesses of Greek mythology had frequent affairs (with each other as well as with mortals).
- The gods/goddesses often engaged in strange behavior that would never be considered acceptable in humans.

Reward for Goodness & Retribution for Evil
- The gods/goddesses judge our moral actions and dispense justice accordingly.
- The gods punish pride, arrogance, and/or disobedience in mortals.
- Those who defy or challenge the gods are made to suffer.
- The morality of Greek mythology is not the same as Judeo-Christian morality.
- Many myths are "morality tales" that illustrate the value system of the culture.

Fate
- No human or god can escape fate.
  - Trying to change/defy fate only guarantees a prophecy comes to pass.

Personal Suffering and Struggle
- Progress comes through struggle.
- Mythological characters often had to overcome…
  - …loneliness.
  - …oppression.
  - …tyranny.
  - …violence.
- Conflicts in myths are often structured as…
  - …intellectual vs. animal.
  - …persuasive vs. brute.
  - …spiritual vs. violent.

Beauty
- Beautiful is better.
- The quest for beauty is the cause of much suffering.

Love
- Love is often unrequited.
- Love/Passion often leads to tragedy.
- Lovers are often abandoned or betrayed by those they love.
- Characters in Greek mythology often die for love.
- Love between gods and mortals seldom works out.
- Selfish love ends in suffering.
War
- War is an inescapable part of existence.
- The greatest warriors are proud and/or arrogant.
- It is an honor to die in battle.
- Gods/Goddesses involve themselves (and choose sides) in mortal conflicts.
- Bloodshed begets bloodshed.
- The gods avenge those who do not give proper burial rites to those who died in battle.

Cannibalism
- Cannibalism (frequently present in Greek mythology) is severely punished.

The Purposes of Mythology
- Mythology accounts for humanity’s existence. (Spiritual: Why are we here?)
- Mythology explains the world. (Scientific: Why/How does that happen?)
- Mythology supports a value system: Good behavior is rewarded; bad behavior is punished.

If your topic is any of the gods/goddesses, monsters, love stories, etc., of Greek mythology, you will need the information on this page to write a multi-paragraph, research-based, informational essay addressing this prompt:

How does the myth of this Greek god/goddess, monster, or love story illustrate some common themes in Greek mythology? In what other myths is this theme apparent?

The Heroic Cycle

If your topic is any of the heroes (heroines) of Greek mythology, you will need the information on this page to write a multi-paragraph, research-based, informational essay addressing this prompt:

How does the mythical adventure of this Greek hero/heroine illustrate the elements of the Heroic Cycle?