



The Circus

Fact Sheet for Adults



History of Circuses

- Circuses are travelling groups of entertainers such as clowns and acrobats. They often perform in large tents and travel from place to place to perform.
- Modern circuses were first developed by Philip Astley. Astley was a cavalry officer who displayed horse riding tricks in London in 1768. The show developed to include acrobats, rope dancers, jugglers and clowns too. These shows took place in an amphitheatre inside an arena or ring. This type of show became known as a circus.
- Throughout the 19th century, circuses developed to include re-enactments of battles and performances of tales such as myths and Bible stories. Ringmasters were also used to link different acts together. Some circuses also had menageries with them. These were collections of animals that could be shown to the public or sometimes used to perform tricks.
- During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, circuses often took place in custom-made circus buildings. These were sometimes temporary wooden structures but major cities sometimes had permanent circus buildings.
- Travelling circuses became popular in the USA during the in early 19th century. Instead of permanent buildings, circuses would be performed in large canvas tents, commonly known as 'big tops'. Circuses were often moved by rail and this gave rise to 'circus trains', which were used to transport equipment, animals and performers from place to place. Travelling circuses soon spread to other parts of the world and are still seen today. Today, they usually travel in large vehicles and set up in large parks or fields.
- During the 20th century, the focus of circus acts shifted from animals to people. Acrobats and gymnasts became the more popular acts.
- Contemporary circuses often feature acrobats, gymnasts and other acts that perform stunts, tricks and stories. They are popular in many places around the world.

Performers

- **Ringmasters:** Ringmasters are the hosts of a circus. They introduce acts to the crowd, engage the audience and direct the proceedings.
- **Clowns:** Clowns are comedic performers. They often wear colourful clothing and have elaborate hair and makeup. They usually do not speak during performances, relying on mimes and gestures to create humorous scenarios and stories.
- **Tightrope walkers:** Tightrope walking involves walking carefully along a thin wire or rope. Props such as umbrellas or canes are sometimes used to aid balance. High-wire acts walk along a tightrope at a great height.
- **Acrobats:** Acrobats perform feats of strength, balance, coordination and agility. These gymnasts often use props such as a trapeze, trampoline, suspended hoops or ropes to move, dance and entertain.
- **Jugglers:** Jugglers entertain by throwing and catching a number of objects, usually keeping one or more objects in the air at any one time. The most common props to use are balls, clubs and hoops.

Fun Facts

- The word 'circus' comes from the Latin word meaning 'circle' or 'ring'.
- A standard circus ring is 13m in diameter – a size determined by Philip Astley and still used today.
- At the base of the Blackpool Tower, in England, there is a permanent circus. It first opened in 1894 and shows continue to this day.
- Clowns are sometimes called 'Joeys' after a famous 19th-century clown called Joseph Grimaldi.

Take a look at our [Circus Fact Cards](#) within this [Circus Discovery Sack](#) for some more fun facts!