Ancient Egypt had a highly organized society. Its structure began to emerge in the Old Dynasty with upper and lower classes of people. As this great kingdom developed, a middle class of craftsmen emerged. Throughout its history, it was difficult -- but not impossible -- to move between the classes. The separate classes of people remained consistent throughout ancient Egypt's history.

The royal family was the highest level of ancient Egyptian society. The pharaoh and his wives and children comprised the royalty of society. They lived in many palaces and enjoyed the finest of foods and clothing. Even within the royal family, there were levels of status. The ancient Egyptians believed their pharaoh was the incarnation of the god, Horus. This gave the pharaoh the highest status in society. One of his wives was favored, and she was often referred to as the "Great Royal Wife." Her children were the elite of the royal family, and her eldest son was successor to the position of pharaoh. Other male members of the royal family were given high-level positions in the government to help them retain their status in society.

The noblemen occupied the next level of society. They lived in close proximity to the palaces of the royal family. Their large, lavish estates provided them with wealth to give their families the best that life had to offer. There was always enough food, and they wore luxurious, finely constructed clothing. Noblemen held high-level government positions, the premier of which was the vizier (similar to prime minister). Noble boys were able to attend school, and the eldest son usually inherited his father's position. Younger sons were able to use their education to obtain other government positions or become scribes.

Scribes made up the next level of society. Scribes were educated men who had been trained in the art of hieroglyphics. This complicated way of writing was taught in the schools of Egypt. It took five years of training to master the seven hundred symbols used in hieroglyphics. Scribes were honored and respected, and they held to a high moral standard. A scribe was in a position of importance and supervised the work of others. Scribes were free from paying taxes and participating in manual labor. Some scribes became priests, minor officials in the government, or teachers.

Craftsmen were the middle class of ancient Egypt. Their work was very important in society. They were artisans and weavers. Craftsmen made bricks, pottery, and worked with metals. They were responsible for food preparation and brewed the beer, a favorite drink in ancient Egypt. Leather for sandals, baskets, jewelry, and woodworking were all made by craftsmen. Their lives were comfortable even though they were thought to be of a lower class. Craftsmen's sons could attend school and become scribes. Through apprenticeships with craftsmen, lower classes of people could move into a better life.

The lower classes in ancient Egypt consisted of household servants and farmers. Noble households needed many servants to keep them running efficiently. Cooks, gardeners, and porters worked under a butler to provide these necessary services. A household servant to a noble was the highest level in the lower class. The remainder of this class was farmers. They grew crops and raised livestock. They made up most of the population of ancient Egypt. Many farmers worked on the estates of the nobles. Most of these crops belonged to the noble landowners. Some farmers owned their property. Their crops were used to pay their taxes and trade for items they needed. Farmers and their families lived a simple life in small homes.

The lowest class of people in ancient Egypt was slaves. Many slaves were foreign captives. Others were peasants and convicted criminals. Their lives were spent in hard labor in the mines, fields, and on building projects of the government. They were, however, allowed to own property, marry, and raise families.

Ancient Egyptian society had many levels, each with its own responsibilities. A person's lifestyle was determined by his or her class level. This was true throughout the society's three-thousand-year history.
The Structure of Ancient Egyptian Society

Questions

1. What did ancient Egyptians call the favored wife of the pharaoh?

2. The pharaoh had the highest status in ancient Egyptian society because ______.

3. Who usually succeeded the pharaoh?
   A. his first son born to his favored wife
   B. his brother
   C. his first born son
   D. his first born child

4. Members of the middle class of ancient Egypt were ______.
   A. craftsmen
   B. former slaves
   C. farmers
   D. scribes

5. Which class of people were free from paying taxes and doing manual labor?

6. How long did it take a scribe to learn to use hieroglyphics?

7. An ancient Egyptian could easily move from a lower class to a higher class in society.
   A. false
   B. true

8. Slaves were allowed to marry, own property, and raise a family in ancient Egypt.
   A. false
   B. true

Write a letter to a craftsmen requesting to be his apprentice. Why did you choose this particular trade? Explain your father's trade. Explain why the craftsmen should take you on as an apprentice.
Research the lifestyle of one level of ancient Egyptian society. Write a newspaper article of your findings.