Hands On Learning
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Written Communication H63

Writing originally started with scratching letters and symbols into stone and advanced to writing with pen and ink. The first written communication developed around Egypt, Crete and Mesopotamia, with the use of symbols to represent words and objects. In Mycene the people used symbols to represent common sounds and put them together to make words. This early alphabet was further developed by the Phoenicians and the Greeks, whose alphabet was made up of 24 letters. The Romans took inspiration from the Greek alphabet and used it to create Latin. Middle and Far East cultures were widely untouched by these languages and developed their own alphabets.



Papyrus paper

Papyrus paper was made in Egypt from the *Cyperus Papyrus* plant, which grows around the Nile River. It is made by first peeling away strips from the plants stem then soaking them in water. It is dried out and laid out in vertical strips side by side. A second layer is placed horizontally on top of the first layer then pressed together to make a sheet of papyrus paper. To make a scroll, sheets of the paper are overlapped at the edge and pressed together then rolled up.



Papyrus paper making started in Egypt over 5000 years ago and lasted until the invention of paper in China in AD105. It was the most popular writing material in the ancient world and was used by the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Papyrus survives well in the Egyptian desert because of its dry conditions. Surviving scrolls include plays and poems, medical cures, speeches and histories.



Image of the Egyptian Book of the Dead scroll

Papyrus was not only used for paper. It was also use to make baskets, shoes, mats, fencing, rope and even boats. Bundles of reeds tied together would make a boat to travel along the Nile. The plant could also be used for food and medicine, and dried out it could be burned to make a fire.

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Roman stylus



The Romans used a variety of methods for writing. Their choice depended on where they were located (papyrus, for example, was used in Roman Egypt) or how wealthy the writer was (paper tended to be pricey). Many hundreds of small wooden tablets with ink writing have been found at Vindolanda, a small town close to Hadrian's Wall. The 'Vindolanda Tablets' are very famous and tell us about life as a Roman soldier.



Copy of Roman wax Cerae

Small wax tablets were a very common method for making short notes that could be erased later. These were usually bound together on a leather thong or arranged to fold together like modern book covers or like an accordion. The individual tablets were made of wood and had a raised edge, forming a shallow box. Into this box, molten wax was poured and allowed to cool with a smooth surface. This wax was usually a deep red or reddish brown in colour.

A metal or bone stylus was used to write upon the tablet. The pointed end wrote the letters and the flattened end smoothed over writing like an eraser. These folding tablets and styli were the standard writing materials for Roman schoolchildren. They went by many names. In Latin they were called *cerae* or *codices*.

Eighteenth century document



This scroll is written in an Indian language known as Sanskrit. It is a language that developed over 4000 years ago in India and Arabia. Sanskrit is a perfected manner of speaking. Knowledge of it marked your education and social class, it was mainly taught to the higher social class.

Scrolls are the oldest form of paper writing. They are rolled up sheets of papyrus or paper. The oldest scrolls were written on and horizontally, from side to side. This paper scroll is written on vertically, from top to bottom. Scrolls were developed centuries before books and could be several metres long. Eventually people found these long scrolls hard to use and the Romans developed the modern book. Thousands of these scrolls were copied and stored in the first libraries', the most famous was at Alexandria in Egypt.

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Written Communication H63

Stone Age bone point



The term 'Stone Age' is used by archaeologists to designate the vast prehistoric time period during which humans used stone for tool making. In 1865 John Lubbock subdivided the Stone Age into the Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods.

This object was used as a hunting tool. The end would have been sharpened to make it quite a deadly implement. Archaeologists think that they would have been launched towards the animal by means of a wooden throwing handle.

The really interesting features of this object are the carved linear marks. There is one line of marks forming a zigzag pattern, and one line of straight marks. We're not sure exactly why they were made. It is possible that they are decorative, or they may be more meaningful perhaps a means of recording or communicating information.

Ceramic inkwell

Inkwells were used to store ink for writing. A quill or pen would be dipped into the ink as needed and applied to the paper. These can be made from different materials. Ancient inkwells would have been made from clay whereas more modern examples are made from ceramics, metal or glass. Most have lids to keep the ink fresh.



Ink has been used for thousands of years. It has been used in China since 1900BC and in India since 500BC. It was originally made from natural material such as plants, bone and graphite, ground up and mixed with water. Before ink writing, people would use other surfaces to write on. Inscriptions on clay and stone were used to write down what people needed to know. Writing on clay and stone meant only a few people would be able to see it. Writing in ink appeared with the invention of better writing surfaces such as paper and allowed books to be bought, copied and seen by more people.

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Written Communication H63

Seal of Exeter



Today when we withdraw money from a bank or pay for goods at a supermarket using a plastic card we validate the transaction by typing a PIN number (Personal Identification Number) into a computer. Traditionally letters and bank cheques were authenticated by a signature. Another way of authenticating a document, which is as old as writing itself, was the seal, although this technique has long since disappeared from common use.

Perhaps one day even signatures will cease to be used and PIN numbers will be all that we have left!

Seals were used in the earliest civilisations. In ancient Mesopotamia seals were engraved on cylinders, which could be rolled to create an impression on clay. In ancient Egypt seals in the form of signet-rings of kings have been found. Seals were also used across the Roman world.

In medieval England seals were widely used by statesmen, nobles, judges, churchmen and even ordinary people. Often they were made using a signet ring - a ring with an individual design engraved on it. This was pressed into a blob of hot wax on a document and then allowed to harden.

Wax seals used to authenticate letters could not be removed or the seal would break. This stopped people from copying the seal. A broken seal on a letter or a parcel showed that it had been opened.

This is a copy of the seal of Exeter, a historic city in Devon. The original silver seal is the oldest example surviving from any of the towns and cities of England, and dates to around 1170 - 1200. The inscription on it reads 'SIGILLVM CIVITATIS EXONIE' which means 'the seal of the city of Exeter'. If you look carefully, you can just about make out the letters on this copy.

The image shows an elaborate building between a pair of towers. These are symbols of wealth and security, rather than depictions of any specific building. The seal was used to show that the city had given its authority to a transaction.

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Babylonian cuneiform tablet



Cuneiform script is one of the earliest known forms of written expression. It was a system of pictographs created by the Sumerians, who lived in what we now know as southern Iraq, around 4,000 BC. Over time, the pictorial representations became simplified and more abstract.

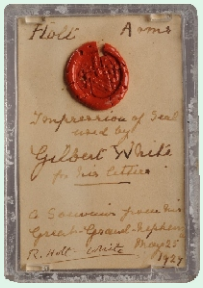
Cuneiform pictograms were drawn on clay tablets in vertical columns with a stylus made from a sharpened reed. Later, people began to write from left to right in horizontal rows and a new wedge-tipped stylus was used which was pushed into the clay, producing wedge-shaped signs. The word cuneiform comes from the Latin word cuneus, meaning wedge.

Cuneiform writing was adopted by a number of different civilizations including the Akkadians, Babylonians, Elamites, Hittites and Assyrians to write their own languages and was widely used in Mesopotamia for about 3000 years. One of the greatest works of imaginative literature, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, was written on a clay tablet. It is possibly the oldest story ever written. It is about the adventures of King Uruk, between 2750-2500BC. However, a lot of surviving examples are more everyday lists of commodities and business records. This is a cast of a Cuneiform table. You can see on the back the signature of George C. Boon who made the cast in 1952.



Tablet of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Seal of the Holt Family



This seal shows the Holt Family coat of arms. The coat of arms contains a crest used by the natural historian Gilbert White in his letters. Gilbert White (1720-1793) was a natural historian of the eighteenth century who is famous for his book *"The Natural History of Selborne"*. He was an ornithologist, a person who studies birds. He was born in Selborne and his book contains letters he wrote about his discoveries on local birds.

The item is a souvenir from his great-great-nephew Robert Holt-White. He published *"The Life and Letters of Gilbert White of Selborne"* in 1901. However, it is not clear who this souvenir seal was for.