Hands On Learning
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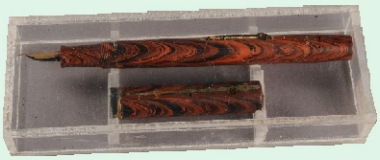
Written Communication H63A

Writing originally started with scratching letters and symbols into stone and advanced to writing with pen and ink on early.



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.

Fountain pen



The fountain pen replaced the relatively hard-to-use combination of the dip pen and blotting paper, previously used for writing. Using a dip pen was difficult and frustrating as the ink often flowed irregularly from the nib. The fountain pen, which began to be mass-produced in the 1880s solved this problem as it was supplied with ink from the reservoir in the barrel. This pen was refilled using the lever on the side. You would put the nib into the ink well or bottle and then pull the lever out and this would suck ink into the barrel.

Leather cased ink bottle



Usually ink was sold in large glass bottles, which would be really impractical to take with you while travelling. This item would be very useful in much the same way as travel sized bottles are useful to take on holiday today.

This example probably dates to the late nineteenth century. The outer case is made from tin, with a thin leather covering. Gently press the catch and you will see the tiny glass ink bottle inside, which still has traces of ink inside it. Originally it would have had a stopper but this has degraded over time.

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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 *Carae*

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*.

Burmese book



You might be surprised to know that this item is a book it doesn't look like one at first glance. It is from Burma in South East Asia, and is made of palm leaves with text written in ink. The paper we use to make books today is also made from plants, so it isn't all that different when you think about it. The main difference is that the wood we use to make paper has to be pulped into a fine consistency so it can be pressed out into thin sheets of paper. This process involves a lot of energy and machinery to make the paper, but the palm leaves are just dried out and written on straight away.

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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.

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.



Tablet of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

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 clay tablets like this one, but a lot of surviving examples are more everyday lists of commodities and business records.

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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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Pen wiper



Have you ever used a fountain pen? The ink can get all over your hands if you're not careful. When you finish writing with a fountain pen, you need to make sure that the nib is clean before putting the pen away. Pen wipers were often made out of scraps of fabric, but this one would be much easier to use, and probably less messy. The outer part is ceramic, and the bristles inside are held together with a piece of metal. The pen wiper would sit on the desk, and when the nib needed cleaning, it would be moved around on the bristles to remove the ink. You can see where the bristles have been worn away through repeated use.